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## Without A Doubt

## Chapter 1

People were altering a planet, but this time it was intentional. Whether that would work better than the first try was anybody's guess, so there was lots of room for hope or fear, according to taste.

*Way too much room*, thought Corinna. She watched the huge empty wall display showing two scenes of space, each with its own dot circled in red. Those two innocent-looking dots would decide the fate of her one-woman bioengineering company. She told herself to breathe, but it didn't help. Working at breathing only made the ballooning emptiness of expectation grow bigger.

The two comets hung in space as if they weren't moving. They looked as unlikely to smash into each other as any of the polite tycoons gathered to watch them do it. Little red numbers showed speeds in the top left corner of the screen and they flicked by too fast to read, but they were the only sign of activity.

Nothing like it had ever been tried before. The collision was supposed to slow the comets down to a manageable speed so that the pair could eventually be landed on Mars and provide an ocean's worth of water. But if this first step didn't work and they didn't slow down, her company might not survive. The actual money she'd lose wouldn't keep the assembled financiers in socks, but it was all she had.

The worst of it was that in reality the disaster – or the success – had already happened. It was all over an hour ago. But that slowpoke, the speed of light, wasn't hurrying to let her know how it all came out in the end.

Corinna looked around to find Oziel in the crowd, then she could hold his hand and think about something besides worrying, which was why she was looking straight at little Petey when he charged into the room. He collided with the table holding the refreshments, grabbed at the tablecloth as he fell and started screaming. She stood there, frozen like everybody else by his brain-chilling shrieks, and all she could think was, *“Typical.”* You could always find Petey wherever the catastrophe was loudest. Leira Dicastillo might be one of the biggest billionaires in the world and this penthouse of hers might have a mass of servants to keep it perfect, but her small monster would find a way to break an Egyptian pyramid.

In that same split second, the tablecloth and all the dishes on it slid toward the floor and a crystal bowl of fruit splintered and—

—And Oziel stopped the slide with one hand and swept the kid up with the other. Then he stopped him from yowling by doing nothing more than putting one finger on his lips and shaking his head at him. The kid's nanny ran into the room thirty seconds late and stared in dismay at the butler picking up fruit and shards of glass.

Corinna had never seen anyone who could move as fast as Oziel. When she'd met him a year ago on Mars she hadn't noticed that at first. She hadn't noticed much at first except that he was tall and ridiculously good-looking. He worked in daycare at the research dome. What was there to notice? Luckily, his outlook had been less limited.

Oziel handed the boy back to his nanny with a smiling nod, shrugged “it's nothing” to the kid's horrified mother, and continued listening to the impeccable heiress who seemed to have cornered him.

Corinna liked to think of herself as a kind-hearted person, but she walked over to join Oziel partly just to see the expression on the heiress's face when she showed up.

But there was nothing to see. The carefully cultivated boredom might have solidified a fraction, but that was all. Oziel more than made up for it by his smile when he saw Corinna. It wasn't hard to understand what it meant. *About time you rescued me.*

Seeing herself in his black eyes, she could believe him when he said she was beautiful. Other mirrors said she was nothing but an average person with an average shape and an ordinary face that had cheekbones in the usual places, a straight nose, big brown eyes, and messy brown hair in ringlets going every which way. But what did mirrors know?

"Quite boring," said the lady.

Corinna remembered that she wasn't there to spend her time smiling at Oziel. She turned to the rich woman.

"Boring? What's boring?"

"This comet business." The lady inclined her head toward the wall display. "Nothing happens."

"Oh, I don't know," Corinna disagreed. "It feels almost too interesting if you've placed a bet. It's the same in some sports, I guess."

If the comet worked as advertised, her fledgling company stood to gain its single most-lucrative contract so far and she would be taking trips to Mars to oversee the use of the animal "antifreeze" she had invented.

"In this case," said Oziel to fill in the silence, "boring is good. Let's hope it stays that way."

"Everybody says that, but what could actually happen? It's out beyond Mars somewhere. So it blows up. So what?"

The lady seemed to like her excitements strong.

"You have to remember," Corinna pointed out, "that nothing is going to change the trajectories. The only thing that would have made a difference is if the comets had never been nudged onto this course to begin with. If we'd never found the two alien signals, if the space program was still optional, and so on through a hundred ifs. But once it's headed to Mars, that's where it'll go. If it's in a million pieces, it only means we'll have no control. It'll still hit the planet."

"Mars," said the heiress, shrugging her elegant shoulders. If it had been Earth, the slight motion suggested, it might be worth worrying about. Perhaps.

"Hey," said Corinna with a smile to make it sound less like *Hey, stupid*, "people live out there, you know."

Yes, said the heiress's tastefully arched eyebrows. People live everywhere.

"Most of the people in this room have business interests there," continued Corinna. "I bet if you looked, some of your stocks would have their dividends cut if this comet doesn't work as planned." It was a safe guess, considering the economic repercussions of not accelerating terraforming, not flying extra space ships, not assembling orbital stations, and not building kilometers of new domes. The lost fortunes of the magnates in this room alone would be measured in trillions.

The lady threw a longer, less bored glance at the wall display. It was true, she seemed to be thinking. She had heard that dividends didn't simply come from electronic transfers.

"Only a few more minutes," said a musical voice next to Corinna.

It was Leira Dicastillo herself, elfin, young, and just as breathtaking as always on these occasions. Her ice-blue eyes reflected the color of her aquamarine silk dress, accented with a long, cerulean embroidered scarf. Her obsidian hair was held up in a gleaming swirl by a large, silver Spanish comb set with aquamarines. She looked glad to see Corinna, hooked her hand through her arm as if they were two school friends, and steered her back closer to the screen. Oziel followed and so did the heiress. She seemed faintly incredulous that the scruffiest person in the gathering should be on such friendly terms with the major stockholder and Chairman of the Board of Clipper Transport Services.

Corinna tended to be a bit incredulous herself, although, as Oziel reminded her, it had been no small matter a year ago when she'd rescued Leira with the help of some of the scarier gangsters from his barrio. However, despite the fact that Oziel had a way of being right, Corinna felt that saving Leira from her unspeakable father wasn't really it. The nub of the matter was that she'd saved her unbearable son.

The head of CTS, in her infinitely well-bred way, looked as rapt as Corinna. In absolute terms, her megacorporation had more billions riding on the comets than anyone in the room.

If the collision went according to plan, one ball about a hundred kilometers across would result, and the rest was supposed to be routine. People had nudged comets before. An antimatter explosion here, another one there, twenty charges that had to go off just before it hit the

atmosphere, and the whole thing would settle around the north pole of Mars like outside thistledown. That was the theory. In six months time, everyone on Mars was slated either to leave for orbit or for the massive emergency shelter under Mt. Arsia, in case it landed more like a comet. The Mars for the Martians movement acquired crowds of new members for a while.

"Ah! Look," said Leira. "The comets are on one screen now."

Suddenly there was all the sense of motion anyone could want. Nothing ever moved visibly in the heavens, but these two dots did. It was an eerie feeling. Everyone at the party fell silent. It would all be over in seconds now.

Insets showed close-ups of the two lumpy, dirty balls floating through space, waiting for nothing. The view shifted to one of the telescopes out by Saturn and showed the bigger comet flying reassuringly away, toward the sun. In one heartbeat, the other comet shot toward it and the bright speck grew into a monstrous angry mass hurtling at everyone in the room. There was nothing to stop it. This close, it was obvious that the smaller one was going to glance off the bigger comet, just to the left.

Then, by the magic that moves mountains across space, the two comets touched, spewed out arcs of themselves, bulged, and reached for each other. They reached and smashed and kept smashing and crashing and jetting out plumes of bursting steam. They boiled and exploded, throwing out huge chunks which arced down in slow motion like liquid and fell back toward the main seething mass and caused new cataclysms. The violence, instead of diminishing, increased. It was no longer one comet, or two comets. It was a whole cloud of steam and liquid and rock, moving together, as if for some awful common purpose.

The calm voice of a newscaster could be heard.

"The first calculations show that the surface melted to a depth of about five kilometers. That is less than expected, which is good, according to our sources. The combined speed has slowed down exactly as calculated. The current trajectory is on track."

Cheers broke the silence. Leira's supremely professional butler popped a champagne cork at just this moment, and started pouring the wine into crystal flutes. Corinna exchanged a smile of triumph with Oziel and squeezed his hand.

"In three months," the voice continued, "the comet will be cool enough to place the twenty antimatter charges for the final explosion. If course corrections are needed, they will be done at the same time. We go now to the United Nations Planetary Bureau headquarters where the Director of the Terraforming Division is calling this a complete success."

There were more cheers, and wine glasses clinked, too.

"That's it?" said the heiress. "It didn't even blow up."

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A month later, Corinna leaned against Oziel, sitting behind her with his arms encircling her waist and his legs on either side of her. Their feet rested on the forest-green, contoured foam surfaces that were oriented every which way and covered the sitting areas of the ship's observation lounge. They sat rather than floated because the ship was decelerating, creating a counterfeit feeling of weight. When it first reached Mars, this area had been standing room only, but it took half a day to match orbits with the orbital transfer station and many people grew bored with a world after an hour or so.

Space was most spectacular when you weren't out in what was loosely described as the middle of it. Of course, everywhere was really the middle of it, but what people meant was those parts with no filling. In the middle of space, there wasn't even a feeling of motion, although the ship might be travelling a hundred thousand kilometers an hour. There were just immutable pinpricks of light and the sensation of being stuck in black amber, without hope of rescue by either time or change.

Close to a planet, however, there was color, immensity, and wonder. The vastness of a world could never be appreciated by someone who hadn't inched toward it, watching it turn from a dot to a disk to a sphere with markings, and then watched the markings turn into vast mountain ranges as the sphere swallowed most of space and overawed the mind.

“See,” she pointed suddenly toward a spot on the surface, “that’s another one of the new dome sites. We’ll be checking it out the day after tomorrow.”

“That’ll be a big job,” he said. “Looks like the dome will cover a planetary sector or two.” He repeated her excited gesture.

She snorted.

“Just you be careful, wise guy. I might start thinking that’s a great idea and put you in charge of building it.”

“I take it all back. It looks like a tiny dome.” He repeated the gesture again, but in miniature, moving no more than a centimeter.

“And, anyway, it’s not there. It’s over there, on the northwest side of Olympus.”

“Isn’t that all going to be under water after the comet lands?”

“Well, yes, but ‘after’ in this case is after more than a century. The comet ices won’t even start melting for years. By that time the little dome will be long gone.”

“Ey,” he said, pointing in a completely different direction toward black starry space, “isn’t that the transfer station?”

Corinna sat up straighter. It was barely a dot in the distance, but she could see the smaller dot of a shuttle leaving as she looked.

“Yep, that’s it. And the fact that we can see it means we’re less than fifteen kilometers away. We better scurry and get ready to leave.”

She and Oziel returned to the observation room with their flight packs, but most of the windows were rapidly filled with the complicated, but boring, exterior metal walls of the transfer station. An excessively pleasant voice on the PA system told everyone headed straight to the main spaceport to disembark via flextube G.

They transferred directly to the shuttle, which filled up with passengers and immediately began its fall toward the planet. Corinna saw Mt. Arsia give the illusion of moving toward them as the shuttle approached the spaceport on the flat caldera at the top. Twenty three kilometers further down at the foot of the vast mountain lay the main base, hidden under a pink blanket of tenuous atmosphere. Rich tourists’ clippers, shuttles to other Martian bases, to the moons, and to orbit, all moved in a complicated choreography of flight paths.

As soon as they entered the security concourse, Corinna began searching the people at the far end who’d come to meet the passengers. But there was something about the wall of faces when you came out of those cattle chutes that made it hard to recognize people. So she managed to miss her friend Momo, a fully tattooed Maori with the build of a sumo wrestler, until she saw him wave. Admittedly, he was standing at the back. She saw him speak to someone next to him, hidden by the crowd, and then saw the small hand of his Siberian wife reach up to wave too.

He ran the earthworm soil unit in Recycling, down in the bowels of Mt. Arsia, and Anicut ran the accounting department for the University of Mars. She was the accounting department for the University of Mars. She was also other things, which were not on her resumé and which had saved Corinna’s and Oziel’s lives not so long ago. Somebody like that was more than just a good friend, but Corinna forced herself to go slowly past all the Customs scanners for forbidden biologicals, drugs, weapons, explosives, excess currency, and whatever else had been put on the list since the last time she looked. There was no quicker way to spend hours explaining yourself to dreary officials than to walk too fast down a security concourse. Finally, more like a pile of puppies than four adults, everybody was hugging everybody at once.

When they’d all settled down a bit, Corinna said,

“By the way, I’m afraid we have to take a detour through the cargo zone before heading down to your place. I have to check to make sure the latest GP templates arrived.”

It felt vaguely ridiculous to go to a freight zone for twenty little tubes that could have fit in her cupped hands, but regulations were regulations. All engineered biomolecules had to arrive in special containment canisters and follow rigid processing protocols. After that nasty event in the astronomy base on the lunar far side and the forty nine casualties, which was one hundred percent of the occupants in those early days, people had only recently started trying to bend the rules again.

Clipper Transport Services had more than half the cargo bay to itself, since CTS was by far the largest company on Mars and since it did much more than service clippers or provide transport

these days. Most of the cargo containers were the usual hexagonal, gray-black, carbon-fiber boxes containing insensitive materials like machine parts or paper that could be shot from Earth by rail gun or take the slow, magsail route and all the radiation that entailed. Corinna spotted her titanium biocontainment canister inside its red-lined area, just as expected. What she did not expect was another six containment canisters each big enough to hold a baby.

She was still wondering about it as they all trooped off to the cable car due to take them down to the main base. Six maximum size canisters had to be for a huge project, but the inspection official had told her it was for someone named Diogenes Lasker. She'd never heard of any Diogenes Lasker, and she knew all the bioengineering scientists on Mars, at least by name. She was going to have to ask Leira to shake loose the company records and find out what it was all about. Six canisters was enough to cover the whole planet in a thin film of whatever was in there.

## Chapter 2

The top of Mt. Arsia reached so far above the surface, it might as well be in orbit. The twenty-kilometer cable car ride down the side of the mountain started in the black daytime skies of space, and only Olympus and other high peaks emerged in sharp airless focus from the rosy blanket of atmosphere. As the cable car descended, views of the whole planetary sector lay below them like a magical map, full of extraordinary detail that sharpened and enlarged as they looked at it. Then they sank into the tenuous air and the welcome fuzziness of shadows and edges that was never present in space. The cable car slid into the tunnel leading to the main base, and they were home. A few rides on elevators, a few walks through corridors, and Momo was opening the well-remembered door to his and Aniuťs tiny apartment, with the one central room, ringed with doors to their bedroom, the bathroom, the tiny kitchen, and the even tinier storage closet that was going to double as a guest room.

Just as it had in another lifetime when Corinna and Oziel had been hiding there.

“Drop your bags off in your room,” said Aniuť hospitably, as if the place belonged to them, “and come eat whenever you like. There will be a little something on the table starting from six or so.”

It was merely a room, Corinna told herself as she opened the door. There was no need for a lot of foolish sentimentality. She turned the light up a bit from night level, and noticed there were two foam pads now, instead of the one Aniuť had for them the last time they were here. As Corinna put her pack down inside, it became impossible not to measure how much the direction of her life had changed, how much the direction of her very self had changed.

She had been lying over there, on the one foam pad, and he’d been just about where he was now, folding blankets into the semblance of a mattress, studiously pretending she didn’t exist, giving her as much space as he knew how. And since there was so much space, she discovered she didn’t need all of it, and nothing had been the same since.

She felt Oziel looking at her and looked back.

“You’re having the same problem, aren’t you?” she said.

“I don’t know if it’s a problem, but it is huge.” He sat on one of the foam pads and reached up toward her. “Come here, *mí Corita*.”

She sat on the mattress-covered floor, once again inside the circle of his arms, but this time he held her as if she might become a dream if he loosened his grip. She found herself doing the same thing, one side of her face pressed to his chest as she listened to the loud, slow beat of his heart.

He spoke, but too quietly, to himself.

“I thought I remembered how things were, but I forgot how it felt. It was like living naked in a freezer, until you showed up and everything changed.”

“Well, not really. I was pretty much part of the freezer to start with, wasn’t I?”

She felt him shake his head.

“You said no first and asked questions later, but you cared. Most people don’t notice if anyone else lives or dies.”

He meant it literally. In the Caracas barrio where he’d grown up, about half an hour away from the Dicastillos’ penthouse as a crow might fly, he’d seen plenty of people not notice the dead or dying.

“Besides,” he added, with a smile she could hear in his voice, “you made the freezer such an interesting place, I didn’t notice the cold that much anymore.”

“Ey, Zio, it’s lucky you had warmth enough for two. I hate to think where I’d be now if you hadn’t interfered.”

“In a university, being an important molecular biologist,” he answered without any doubt in his

voice.

"Mm," she said. "My point precisely."

Instead, Oziel was running a neighborhood center for kids in his barrio, and she was consulting for a Venezuelan sequencer company and an increasing number of clients, when she wasn't helping him at the Center. There were no dull moments.

"Now you're an important molecular biologist outside a university. I didn't do a very good job of deflecting you, did I?"

"No more than I did with you. Luckily. And there's definitely no 'important' about it. Yet, anyway."

"You deflected me, *mí cielo*. Completely. That's what I felt when I walked in. That feeling of wanting you, of having no money, and nowhere to go. It's so different now, I'd forgotten how it was."

"Yeah," she said. "I'm looking forward to forgetting it again soon. Now is much more fun than then."

He took a deep breath, and she felt his low chuckle resonate in her own chest. They had, apparently, been tuned to each other by an expert hand.

He murmured in her ear.

"What do you mean, 'yeah'? If you had no money, you fooled me completely. And if you wanted me, what'd you make us wait for?"

"Money isn't important, remember? I wasn't talking about money. And at this point, I have no idea why I made us wait. It gives me the heebie-jeebies, remembering how divided against myself I was. Like having spastic paralysis of the spirit, with one half trying to fall in one direction, one half in another, and all of me going nowhere."

"Ey, Corita," His voice warmed her by sound alone. "I was joking. Mostly. I just want to hear you say you wouldn't even think of waiting now."

"You got that right," she murmured.

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They were a bit late to dinner, and Corinna apologized.

"Sorry. We came under the influence of the room."

As soon as the words were out, she thought *ohmygod, what am I saying?* There had been a time, before she'd somehow absorbed Oziel's straightforwardness, when she would have died of embarrassment before saying such things. Now? Oziel glowed, Aniot and Momo looked very cheerful about the whole thing, and, well, it wasn't like everybody hadn't already guessed.

Aniot's little eyes disappeared into horizontal commas.

"Yes, you can't find that in a hotel. We're very glad you took our invitation. Now why don't you start on a little something. There are *pil'meni*, these are dill pickles, here are some *piroshki*, this is a new fish analog that tastes nothing like fish, no matter what they say. And here are some crackers and pseudo-sour cream to go with the pseudo-fish."

Someone who didn't know Aniot might assume this was the whole meal and make a serious tactical error. The "little somethings" covering the table in the tiny kitchen were only the beginning. Soup would follow, then a main course with side dishes, and then, just to make sure nobody went away hungry, a couple of different desserts to choose from. And, knowing Aniot, they would be so delicious, Corinna would work on both. Happily, Oziel was quite strong enough to carry her to their room, should that prove necessary.

"So are you two," Corinna asked her friends, "staying on the planet for the comet landing?" The comet was almost the only thing anyone on Mars talked about.

"Nobody *has* to stay," said Momo, "but the powers-that-be made hopeful noises about the heads of life support-related units staying, to be on the spot in case of emergencies. So Aniot and I decided we'd wait it out on-planet."

Oziel shook his head and swallowed his spoonful of beet soup so he could object.

"Now I have to worry about you two. They keep talking about how this part is routine. *Qué vaina*. Some coconut sitting safely on Phobos says, 'I've got it all worked out on my abacus,' and

you get to prove he's right, here on the surface. What if it's a *norteamericano* who decides to use feet instead of meters? It has happened, you know. I can just hear him saying *Oops*."

Everybody else laughed, as if it could never be more than an imaginary disaster.

"The thing that annoys me," said Aniut, "is that we won't see the comet. We'll be right here, and we'll get it on monitors, no better than the people all the way on Earth. The lucky ones will be in orbit or on the moons."

"If you're serious, I'm sure Leira Dicastillo will be glad to let you ride on the courier. I'm coming back for three trips on this contract for CTS, and I wangled the last one to coincide with the comet landing."

"So you're going to be in orbit at the zero hour without having booked ten years in advance?" asked Momo, his tattoos amplifying the surprise on his face. "You must be the only person in the solar system."

"Me and Leira herself," said Corinna, with exaggerated smugness. "I'm trying to convince my responsible better half here to abandon the Center for the trip, but he keeps insisting this trip is the only one he should take time for."

"*Bozhe moi*," exclaimed Aniut. "It'll be the sight of a lifetime. You can't possibly miss it if you have a chance like that."

"Now, don't you start," said Oziel. "The best views will be on monitors anyway. It's not like they'll let us have front-row seats."

"Sure they will," argued Corinna. "It's nothing but a matter of filing the flight path, since it's a private courier."

Aniut pulled the main course out of the diminutive, regulation Mars-size oven and the heavenly smell filtering out of it took over the little kitchen. The pan was full of neat pillows of rolled golden-brown crepes, *blinchiki* she called them, stuffed with "meat" and vegetables, simmering in a clear brown sauce that looked good enough to form a meal by itself. How Aniut managed to take vat protein and turn it into something to die for was a mystery no one else on Mars had solved, at least in Corinna's experience.

"You know what really bothers me about that comet?" said Oziel. "It's how they have to blow it up at exactly the right microsecond, or there's a disaster."

"Not really," Aniut said. "There are twenty antimatter depth charges. *All* of them would have to fail for there to be a disaster."

"I know that," he said. "But think about it. The charges have to go off exactly before it hits the atmosphere, and they probably have to go off in a carefully timed sequence for the bits and pieces to fall neatly around the pole, right?"

Yes, that was right.

"So, the command has to come from a single location."

Yes, that was right too. Corinna could see where he was headed with this, and looked uncomfortably at her soup.

"Are you going to tell me you couldn't splice into that if you wanted to, Aniut?"

Corinna still remembered vividly the stupid feeling she'd had when he, the day care worker with a high school diploma, had patiently explained to her, the Ph. D., that no splicer bothered guessing prime number passwords or faking iris scans these days. You found the point where the computer believed it had a match for whatever gateway process it used and then you went on from there. That's why it was called splicing. She almost hadn't heard what he was saying, she'd been so busy boggling that he was a splicer. She'd assumed he worked in day care because, well, because he didn't know anything.

Then, just a few weeks later, Oziel's splicing skills had found another splicer on Mars who was willing to hide them. And it had turned out to be a small Siberian grannie who looked nothing like a desperado. When she and Corinna had been hiding under earthworm benches while a fight raged around them, Aniut explained why. She was just someone trying to get her family out of the Siberian War, like everyone else. So she'd had to learn enough splicing and accounting to get the money to do that by robbing banks.

"They have it very closely monitored, Oziel," answered Aniut. "Obviously, I haven't tried, so I don't know for sure, but I doubt very much it would be easy. Still, I see your point. We're all thinking in terms of accidental disasters. There are other kinds."



### Chapter 3

Doing work on a corporate budget was making Corinna feel important. In her academic life, even if she was working on the cure for brain diseases, it was always a matter of scrounging and begging and kludging equipment out of duct tape and hose clamps. Now she was working on cold tolerance in rabbits, and yet she had one of the solar system's zippiest clippers at her disposal as well as two – count 'em two! – competent terraformers as assistants. She'd zipped around four whole sites yesterday, something that would have taken weeks using the old rovers available to mere mortals.

Today she was going out to some of the same sites again, plus two new ones. She gazed out the huge window at the landscape scrolling by far below, and found herself thinking that corporate wealth had its drawbacks. On an ordinary clipper she'd be next to Oziel, but here the passengers were seated in splendid isolation, one to a window, and Oziel was some two meters away on the other side of the ship.

There was no reason, she decided, still grinning to herself, why she had to put up with this, being the de facto boss here. She crossed over to Oziel's seat and sat on his armrest. He looked up with a pleased smile, put one arm around her waist, and pointed out the window with his other hand.

"There's a rover out there, on some long trip, just like us a year ago."

She leaned over to look out and saw the little speck of an object, crawling along the reddish ground while the clipper winged by kilometers above them.

"They better not be *just* like us, or they'll get blown up by crooks. Which, just like us, wouldn't be at all difficult because you can see their track nice and clear, obviously coming from Arsia." She scanned back along the meandering, spidery trail and shook her head. "Must be a hopeless bunch of amateurs because it looks like they fell into a furrow back there and had to climb back out."

"I noticed that when we passed overhead, but I thought they must have done it on purpose because they left some silvery thing behind. At least, something reflected the sunlight."

"Left something behind? Was there a research site there?"

"I don't think so," said Oziel dubiously, "but I don't really know what to look for."

"Oh, jeeppers, I bet something fell off their rover when they waddled into that gully, and they'll find out they lost it when they're half way to the North Pole." She called over to the pilots, "Would it be easy to loop back, briefly?"

"Simplest thing in the world," said the one who looked like a Norse goddess, speaking a few commands and sending the clipper into a graceful, backward arc. "Just say where."

Corinna moved toward the control section, and the ship was already passing over the furrow by the time she could point it out.

"Zoom in on that as much as you can. If those yokels really lost something, it would be nice to radio them before they have too much further to backtrack."

Then she stared at the monitor in disbelief. The silvery thing looked, for all the world, like the top end of a biocontainment canister, one of the big ones, such as she'd seen six of yesterday, all together.

"They certainly lost something," said the other pilot. "Would you like me to radio them, Dr. Mansur?"

"It's not the sort of thing you lose," she muttered. Then, louder, "No. But note the position. We'll land there on the way back and check it out."

The clipper settled gently near a site slated to become a dome for Corinna's bioengineered rabbits. All wrong, she thought. The prevailing winds in the exposed location would sandblast the

dome. The two CTS terraformers, Bob Johnson and Mei-meï Shao, agreed with her, but pointed out that at this southerly latitude, frost pockets were a much bigger concern and that the new dome materials could withstand ten times more pounding than the old ones.

"Ten point eight seven times, to be precise," said Johnson, referring to his wristpad.

A protracted discussion of wind-friendly designs and dome skin materials ensued. Corinna became convinced the two terraformers had done their homework and that the site was likely to work as promised. The clipper took off for the next location. This one was already under construction, and the technical discussions became even more protracted and involved.

The third visit took them back to an active dome full of rabbits that she had inoculated with the new GP-18 antifreeze yesterday. She held her breath as she cycled through the lock, partly because of memories of the odor yesterday, when she'd been working in the sort of fug one might expect just hours before the weekly removal of organic waste, and partly because of anticipation. This was the first, full-scale field test, that perilous moment when she would discover if her simulations had been on target or if she had misplaced a decimal point somewhere.

She kept her suit on, since the rabbits tolerated colder, thinner air than she could. The inner door slid open. It was a small dome with six pens in it, arranged like pie slices in the circular enclosure, each pen separated by a hip-high barrier. There was none of the mad scampering of normal rabbits who rarely see people. They were all motionless. For an irrational moment she thought it odd that they should be asleep in such huddled positions. They weren't asleep. Their eyes were open. They were all dead.

Stunned, disbelieving, she moved out of the lock, walked to an enclosure, and leaned over to touch one of the little bodies, to convince herself that they wouldn't wake up. Like an automaton, she studied each pen, and tried to recover from her shock. The poor critters might just have been rabbits, but they'd been living and breathing yesterday ... and today they were dead forever.

The only possible cause was freezing. Unless somebody had come in here and poisoned them, it had to be either the cold or the lack of air. But death from asphyxiation would not look so sleep-like. If it had been a problem with food or water, telemetry at the main base would have shown it and there would have been plenty of time to come out here and save the animals.

Sensors, she said to herself. The log should show when this happened, and what, exactly, happened. Why hadn't anyone at the main base alerted her to this disaster before she arrived, come to think of it? She walked over to the control station by the door, tapped at a few keys for the relevant data, and scrolled through the display. Then she scrolled through it again, trying to believe she had missed something.

She hadn't. All the readings were normal. Even at the coldest time of the night, when the outside temperature was below  $-90^{\circ}\text{C}$ , inside it had been merely freezing. Her rabbits should have been able to withstand that easily. The only possible conclusion was that something about her GP-18 injections had reduced, instead of increased, their cold tolerance. Her carefully patented molecule was a dismal failure.

"Dr. Mansur?" came a voice on her suit radio. "Are you through the lock?"

"Mei-meï," she responded automatically, surprised at how normal her own voice sounded. "Yes. Yes, I am. But we have a problem."

First Mei-meï Shao, then Bob Johnson, and finally Oziel, cycled through the lock. The two terraformers immediately started on checklists to identify the source of the trouble. Oziel stood around, obviously so disappointed for Corinna she found herself reassuring him.

"These things happen," she was telling him, when it struck her that, no, they didn't. There should be enough physiological variation that some of the rabbits should have died sooner, others later or not at all. But these critters looked like they'd frozen in place, without even enough variation for some of them to have wound up on top of others. She should take samples from all of them, not just a subset. If time of death was the same in all of them, something other than her GP-18 must be at fault. She felt a small flutter of hope.

"This is strange," said Shao, studying the control console. "Did you see these temperature readings?"

"Yes," said Corinna, feeling despondent again. "Right around freezing. Shouldn't have been a problem."

"No, not 'right around.' All six sensors in the dome read exactly  $0^{\circ}\text{C}$ , which is strange in itself

since the two near the floor are usually colder, and all six had the same reading for hours. They should have been trending downward as the outside temperatures fell at night.”

“Maybe the outside temperatures were more constant than usual,” suggested Johnson from across the dome, where he was going through the heater’s functions.

“No,” said Shao. “I have the log right here, and they look normal, dropping after sunset until they start warming at sunrise.”

Corinna was trying to figure out how to extract hope from the strange sensor behavior. Oziel was looking at the rabbit corpses.

“Maybe they were sick,” he said. “Their pellets don’t look right.”

There were very few pellets, since the dome had been cleaned just before they all died, but as Corinna looked at the ones that there were, she saw that he was right. Instead of neat little brown ellipsoids, these were falling apart into crumbly bits. If the rabbits had been sick, they might have had diarrhea or constipation, but there was no disease she knew of that made them excrete dry dust. Nor would any glycoproteins do that. The only obvious cause was quick freezing and thawing, but it would require a much deeper cold than mere water ice. It would have to be something more like the cold outside, colder than dry ice. It hadn’t been much below zero in here.

Except all the sensors had identical, flat readings ... as if someone had purposely faked them. To cover a spike down to lethal temperatures, perhaps? Corinna let herself start hoping that none of this was her fault.

“Mei-me, Bob, how frozen would the pellets have to be to look like that?” she asked.

In a couple of minutes, they had decided it had to be a subtle act of sabotage, and Corinna was contemplating the irony of being glad a dome had been sabotaged.

“CTS needs to call the investigators to go over the whole dome. And we should take blood and tissue samples from all of the bodies right now.”

The lugubrious task of collecting and labelling samples took quite a while. When she was working on the fourth pen, she straightened and stretched her aching back.

“This is so senseless. Who could have done something like this?”

Mei-me Shao, taking samples next to her, said,

“Some of the more extreme elements in Mars for the Martians, perhaps. They’ve been up to some weird stuff lately.”

“If it is Mars for the Martians, the movement must have changed since I last paid any attention,” said Corinna. “Their motto was ‘all life is sacred.’ The last thing they would have done is kill a bunch of cute, furry rabbits.”

She looked sadly at the bodies strewn around the pens in the dome.

“Well, they were cute. Now they’re just furry.”

Bob Johnson was taking readings on the other side of the dome

“The MFM’ers have been doing all sorts of shenanigans lately. They dumped about a ton of hydroponics supplies. They tried to sneak some sulfide-producing bacteria into sewage treatment on the orbital station.”

“Jee-sus,” said Corinna. “What do they care about what’s in orbit? It’s not like the space station had native life we’ve destroyed.”

“What’s the point of sneaking bacteria *in* to sewage?” asked Oziel. “Not enough there already for them?”

“This kind isn’t normally part of the mix,” Corinna explained. “Sulfides are toxic in very low dosages. If the sabotage had been successful, the whole station might have had to be evacuated until the atmosphere scrubbers dealt with the problem.”

“Oh,” he said, “I see. That would have a lot more impact than messing with a base on the planet, even the spaceport.”

“That’s what I keep saying,” exclaimed Shao, “but I can’t get anyone to listen to me. The things they’ve been doing lately don’t make any sense except as disruption. It’s more like the terrorist attacks in the good old days than the sort of things Mars for the Martians used to do, like chaining themselves out on the surface to stop people putting up new domes. Recently there was even a rash of puerile threatening messages that were attributed to them, and I know some people who are actually thinking of moving back to Earth. It’s easy to feel vulnerable on Mars.”

“Weird,” stated Corinna. “Very weird.” She took a deep breath, which sounded loud in her

helmet and must be equally loud in everyone else's.

"Well, once the investigators have finished here, be sure to make a priority of setting this location up again. And, obviously, we won't be inoculating any of the new GP-18 until we're sure it wasn't the problem here."

It was a subdued group that headed back toward Arsia after completing the rounds to the remaining sites. They made the planned side trip to the strange rover's lost canister in silence.

The clipper landed some distance away from the gully, to avoid disturbing anything with its landing jets. Corinna suited up and cycled through the lock first, followed by Oziel and the two terraformers. She walked toward the strange canister slowly, as if a few extra minutes could give her enough time to puzzle out what the misplaced object meant.

The landscape around her was beyond empty; a dry, dusty void of reddish sand and brownish rocks on rolling plains as far as the eye could see. Yet this dead-seeming world hid life of its own, tiny bacterial life, in secret places. That fact always bowled her over whenever she thought about it. And there, just down the sloping side of the gully, was the silvery evidence of the activities of a very different kind of life.

She could hear Oziel's breathing grow louder in her suit radio as he caught up to her, and the fainter breathing of the two techs. Nice, that they had distance cues in suit radios these days.

It was definitely a biocontainment canister. What, in the name of anything sensible, was it doing out here? Nobody could open it here and use it for anything because any biological contents would get fried by the hard radiation drenching the surface. There were simpler ways to sterilize canisters than to drive them all over the planet. Were they perhaps hiding it for some reason?

She still couldn't tell whether it was one of the same ones she'd seen the day before. She didn't think so, but she was going to have to dig away some of the sand in which it was buried. This one had some sort of wires attached that the other ones didn't. A radio perhaps, to send data back to a lab. She reached out to brush sand away from the buried label –

"Corinna!" Oziel's shout was deafening inside her helmet. "Stop! Don't touch that thing!"

She drew her hand back, straightened up, and stared. He was urgently motioning her to step away from metal container. She did.

"What's wrong?"

"It looks a lot like something I saw once back home. One of our bad neighbors, I saw him once, making a bomb. It looked a lot like that." He pointed toward the curious arrangement of wires and half-buried little metal boxes stuck to one side of the canister.

"A bomb!" she mouthed, as the two techs came running up and the pilots' voices squawked over the suit radio.

## Chapter 4

The next day the clipper made the same, short trip to the gully holding the mystery canister, but this time there were temporary seats bolted to the center of the cabin to accommodate all the extra personnel: two bomb disposal experts, two biocontainment handlers, a communications specialist, a programming and an electronics specialist. It set down on top of the same starburst of dust it had generated when landing the day before. Everything else about this visit was different, though. Corinna was a mere bystander, shunted aside by other experts.

“Dr. Mansur?” came a voice over the suit frequencies.

“Yes?”

“Dora Buchhalter here. I’m the electronics specialist?”

The woman’s inflection made it a question, and Corinna grinned. That sort of thing always tickled her hyperactive sense of humor. She suppressed it.

“Yes, Dora?” she said.

“Sethi and Farida are saying that it’s a simple, homemade sort of bomb that will be easy to disarm, but one of the attached gadgets looks to me like a disturbance sensor. It’s going to take some extra time to deactivate that without setting it off.”

“Jee-sus. First bombs. Now burglar alarms. I’m really looking forward to finding out what it is they’re defending so carefully. Take all the time you need to disarm that thing.”

“Okay. Sethi and Farida are going to cool everything way down with liquid nitrogen. Once it’s all below operating temps, I’ll transfer the sensor and its transmitter to the fake canister.”

Corinna and Oziel watched the techs through the biggest window of the clipper. The dummy canister was ready, phony wires and all, to replace the sinister real thing she would soon be studying in the P6 containment lab at Arsia.

“It’s impressive, what one call to the majority shareholder of CTS accomplished,” she said to him pensively as she followed the activity outside. “I’m beginning to think you’re right about Leira being willing to do anything for us.”

“You’re the one who tells me I’m always right,” said Oziel with a one-sided grin. “Why are you surprised?”

“Surprised? Did I say I was surprised? No, seriously. One call, and we’ve got everything set up to plant fake canisters to replace all six, if we can find them, and to study what’s in them. And we know that the smugglers, whoever they are, are carefully laundering the source of those biologicals.”

“Not so carefully as all that,” Oziel disagreed. “Even I know there are no mass production biotech plants in the Seychelles. The first customs official who saw ‘Seychelles’ listed as the source country had to know something was wrong.”

“Yeah, there was a string of people asleep on their feet, especially at the Caracas spaceport. Funny, to think that it might be someone right in Quintón’s gang who’s paying off the relevant beak.”

Corinna opened her eyes wider.

“Now why didn’t I think of that sooner? Couldn’t we ask your youngest brother to find out what’s going on through his gang connections?”

Oziel said nothing for an increasingly noticeable length of time, staring out of the window at the experts making the slow, deliberate motions of people handling possible death.

“There are two problems with that, Corita,” he finally said. “One is that I hate to admit that the things he does could be useful. Some of them are, of course. The gang leaves the rest of us alone, for instance. But there’s a worse problem. The guy who runs that gang has *no* sense of humor. If

he heard that one of his men was talking to someone outside the gang, without going through him, he'd kill the guy. If he was lucky."

Corinna stared at Oziel, but he meant it. "He'd kill him" was not a figure of speech in this case.

"Jee-sus," she muttered. "Right. Forget that idea."

He gave her a small, sad smile and stroked her hair, and then they both spent some time staring out the window without speaking. The things that constituted kindness to someone living in another universe were so strange, and his cousin, whom he always called a brother, whom he'd taken care of as a boy, would never even recognize the gift.

"Anyway," Oziel said finally, "Quintón's gang isn't the biggest, so it's probably somebody else doing this stuff." He changed the subject, in his usual way of fending off unalterable realities. "Did you find out anything about Diogenes Lasker?"

"Supposedly, he works for Gryphon Engineering, which has one of the first private domes out on the 'frontier' near Gorgon. They've called it Årskand, because of a Norwegian connection, and they do hydroponics and crop bioengineering. That's why they're so close to the big water deposits. And supposedly that little dome is where all those enormous canisters are being stored." She made a face of exaggerated skepticism as she looked at the spacesuited figures working on one right in front of her, and he returned her wry look. "No explanation why a tiny company needs quantities of something sufficient to cover the planet, and Lasker himself is conveniently outward bound for Titan. It takes signals an hour just to reach his ship, where it was yesterday. He can't be reached, they said. I emailed the ship, but haven't heard back yet."

"I bet it turns out to be an identity theft," said Oziel. "He sounds like the perfect candidate because he really exists, and he really does travel around the solar system, but he's not here to notice the theft."

Corinna pointed out the window.

"Look, they've got the big, bad canister lifted out. Nobody would even realize anything was done, except for the fact that the ground looks like a herd of elephants passed through, looking for a water hole."

"They're nearly finished. I guess the police aren't going to be able to argue that CTS isn't investigating this fast enough."

"I don't think they're even trying to argue. You should have seen how relieved the planetary Director was – good old Singh himself – when he heard CTS volunteering to investigate. He was obviously seeing zillions going out of the budget with nothing but some VAT evader to show for it in the end. CTS, on the other hand, has a pretty big stake in making sure they're not being used by smugglers."

"I don't see how it could be a smuggler," said Oziel. "There aren't enough desperate people on Mars to make running drugs profitable. Pharmaceuticals, perhaps? But everyone here is insured. It doesn't make sense."

"How about stolen collagen rejuvenation factor, sold really cheap because it fell off the back of a spaceship? Everybody over forty takes the stuff, and you might only make a few euros per dose, but it would still add up."

"A few euros per dose might excite a legitimate businessman, Corita. I don't know any smugglers who think that way. I still say it doesn't make sense. If it was something minor, why are they protecting it with bombs?" He turned at the sound of the first returning tech cycling through the airlock.

"Maybe so they can destroy the evidence if anyone seems close to finding it. Under normal circumstances, nobody'd find it in a million years out there."

"Dr. Mansur," said Mei-mei Shao. She'd been the first one through the lock, and was shaking her hair out as she took her space suit off.

"Call me Corinna, okay? Please."

"Corinna," Mei-mei started over with a dimpled smile. "Did you see the investigator's report that just came in? About the vandalized dome?"

"No. Just a second." She checked her wristpad, and there, sure enough, was an invitation to sit in on the questioning of the first person whom UNPB had asked to help them in their inquiries, as the phrase went.

The report confirmed that the dome had been sabotaged. The investigators had found altered

programming for the thermostat and ventilation air flow. The thermostat had shut the heater down during the coldest part of the night, and the countercurrent air flow had been reversed. Instead of keeping heat inside the dome, it had dumped it into the cold night. Temperatures inside had matched the bone-cracking -85°C outside within about fifteen minutes. Half an hour later, which was quite long enough to kill everything in there, the programming reverted to normal, and the dome warmed back up to its normal level near freezing.

The investigators didn't know how the temperature sensors had been fooled, and were continuing to look into that. The altered programming was due to kick in after a time delay, which placed the sabotage right on the same day as her first visit to that dome. A clipper was listed as having been rented that day by a member of Mars for the Martians. Somehow, the perpetrator had sneaked in around her visit and that of the rover servicing the dome. The clipper didn't appear on traffic control logs, no doubt because all its transceivers were illegally turned off, nor did it appear on the half-hourly satellite photos of the area.

So, it definitely wasn't her GP-18 at fault. There was the unpleasant thought that someone was out to get her rabbits, and who knew when they might strike again, but on the whole she was so relieved that she lost track of what Mei-mei was saying.

"I'm sorry. I missed that."

"I was just asking what you'd prefer, now that the questioning is on the schedule. We should still have time to follow the rover's tracks and find the other canisters before you need to be back. Alternatively, we could drop you off at UNPB Investigations now, and then the rest of us can return to look for the other units."

Corinna checked her wristpad. "I have about four hours, which should be plenty of time, given how quickly you've dealt with this canister. Let's just go ahead."

"The part I don't understand," said Johnson, "is why the MFMers are here at all. You'd think they wouldn't want to be part of the problem."

Nobody offered any theories until Oziel said,

"Maybe they think it's worth being part of the problem to help with what they see as the solution."

Finding two more of the canisters was a simple matter of following the rover's tracks, but their luck ran out when the tracks did. They simply disappeared, as if the rover had been airlifted out. If it had been, Corinna did not like to think what that meant for the resources available to the smugglers involved. That sounded even less like Mars for the Martians than sulfides on a space station. MFM had always been an impoverished, idealistic group. After a few hopeful circles, trying to pick the tracks back up, Corinna said she had to get back. Three canisters should be plenty to incriminate the smugglers in any case.

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Sitting in as an observer during the investigator's questioning proved to be a waste of time of the type Corinna hated the most: the type preventing her from doing other, more interesting things. She could, for instance, be satisfying her curiosity about the contents of the canisters. The innermost containment vessels were waiting for her in the P6 lab, and if she didn't get there before closing time, Benson the Bureaucrat, who ran the lab, was hardly likely to let her work late. Nor could she, in good conscience, take too much more time for a tangential project. She'd probably have to wait for somebody else to get around to it, which would be at least as frustrating as sitting here, listening to the earnest young fellow on the monitor that showed her the conference room. He was the local head of MFM, and painfully sincere, as might be expected from someone with the stamina to fight losing battles and to do it day after day.

"We've voted on this as a group, ma'am," he kept saying to the investigator, nodding forcefully, making the light glint over the unevenness of his African hair. He obviously combed his hair once in the mornings and then had more important things to do. "We're determined to be non-violent. A few of our members are growing impatient, even desperate, because it's so difficult to get our point across. But we've voted repeatedly, as a group, not to be involved in anything against our principles. You can look at our computers any time. Something like what you describe would take

planning. I guarantee you won't find any evidence of that."

"I appreciate your willingness to cooperate, however, we don't have a warrant yet for a computer search."

"Ma'am, we all agree, as a group, that we don't care about that. We have nothing to hide. By all means, search. Please. We'd all like to get this behind us."

He seemed so eager to show the investigator the purity of MFM's files, even she, hardboiled, middle-aged investigator that she was, said,

"Certainly, if you'll be willing to sign a waiver."

Moments later, she'd turned up one reference to an unmanned agricultural dome in a member's private correspondence. The leader seemed very distressed and shook his head.

"Ma'am, some of the members, as I said, are very frustrated. Things are discussed which we would never do. Reiner mentioned that dome once as a target, but we all, as a group, agreed that was over the line. That was definitely not an MFM action, ma'am. If you look, you'll see we haven't paid for anything that could have been used in that action. Certainly not any clipper rentals. If we all pawned every last body suit, we wouldn't have enough to finance that."

"We'll look, Mr. Carpenter. We'll look. I'll also be questioning Reiner Wegenstand about it."

And that, mercifully, was that. Corinna couldn't believe someone who radiated sincerity with the force of a supernova could be lying, but that didn't mean he knew the truth. She didn't find it hard to imagine some of the more ruthless members taking advantage of his will to believe and doing things behind his back. It was going to be interesting to find out what Mr. Reiner had to say, but in the meantime, she should have just enough time to ID the stuff in the canisters, if she got on with it.

However, getting on with it, in any real sense of the words, turned out not to be an option. Swaddled in three layers of rip-proof synthetic clothing that made her waddle like a duck, and covered in a stupid, plastic helmet that cut off her peripheral vision, she sat in front of an isolation glove box in the P6 containment lab, almost ready to look at results from the first of the canisters.

Instead of looking at them, she was listening to her old nemesis, Benson, holding forth about safety procedures and bringing her frustration to a rolling boil. He was, if anything, even more of a nerd, stickler, and all-around bureaucrat than he had been when running the smaller P6 containment lab at Burbidge. He seemed to be awed by the weight of his promotion to the main P6 lab at Arsia, and was clearly going to make sure nobody was deprived of his sense of wonder. She was either going to have to kill him, she thought with black humor, or go mad herself. She had only a week to get everything done on Mars, this little project was just something she wanted to track down in her spare time out of curiosity, and she had not, in any case, budgeted hours for listening to things she'd already known in the womb.

He began lecturing her for starting the spectroscope to ID the stuff in the glove box before she had filled out the forms—

"I figured it could run *while* I filled out the forms," she had protested.

—and then he went on about all the safety procedures she'd already completed, triumphantly winding up with one she'd managed to forget.

"The radiation sterilizer always needs to be turned on and primed to function at a moment's notice." He flipped a switch carefully and deliberately.

To Corinna's inflamed senses it felt like the most ostentatious act since the launch of the first interstellar probe.

Then he looked around smugly, apparently feeling that the touch of the master had brought the situation under control, and directed her to fill out the missing forms.

Growling softly to herself, after turning her throat mic off, she waddled over to a workstation and poked at the oversized keyboard with her clumsy, gloved fingers. Everything took three times longer than it should have.

Finally done with the forms, she trekked back, each step marked with an irritating swishing sound, past rows of lab benches, to the isolation glove box. The canister contained only black stuff that looked like nothing she'd seen before, except maybe coal dust. The spectroscopy result suggested she could have dispensed with all the elaborate machinery and gone with her first guess. It said the black stuff was 95% carbon, with some silicon mixed in. She'd gone to all this

trouble for some graphite and sand? Was this an elaborate, practical joke?

None of the other instruments detected anything remotely like a biological macromolecule either. There was no DNA, RNA, prions, enzymes, or anything. The only odd thing was that re-checking the spectroscopy gave a reading of 94% carbon. She must have made some mistake in her rush to get as much done as possible before Benson sandbagged her, although she did think she was capable of doing a simple spectroscopy right.

As she stared, dispirited, at the three flasks inside the isolation box, she saw what looked like spots on the inside surface of one of the flasks. She stuck her hands into the long rubber gloves of the box, picked up the flask, turned it this way and that, but couldn't see clearly enough through the plastic of the box wall and her helmet. Using a remote control, she horsed a fiberoptic lens around until she could magnify one of the spots, and saw that the flask was pitted in several places.

Hah, she thought. So much for Benson and his damn safety lectures. There he was, carping about forms while his glassware was substandard.

She studied the other results and they all seemed to agree that the substance from the canister was nothing but long chains of carbon with silicon crystals mixed in. Except for an unusual, tubular-helical shape, the carbon was just a fullerene. Interestingly, the shortest tubes were about half the length of the longest ones, but that didn't seem like enough to explain why somebody was smuggling the stuff all the way from Earth and protecting it with bombs and burglar alarms.

Then she saw something that sent a chill down her spine, overdressed as she was in her layers of biocontainment suit. The spectroscope said the black stuff was 93% carbon.

This time she *knew* she'd measured the substance correctly.

She looked at one of the flasks and its nondescript black dust in complete puzzlement, and as she looked the queasy feeling grew on her that the flask was becoming more pitted than it had been. An explosion inside the flask could have pitted it, but these flasks didn't react chemically with anything under the sun. That's why they were in this lab. She looked at the pits magnified again. She couldn't shake the feeling that the edges of the pits were moving very slowly, like the minute hand on a clock. She held her finger on the screen, as a crude but effective way of marking the edge. Two minutes later she had her answer.

The pits were growing before her eyes. Somehow, the black stuff was dissolving the glass.

Then she noticed that a few of the pits in the leftmost flask had eaten right through the glass. The black dust, which seemed to have some sparkly bits she hadn't noticed before, was visible in a fine line, leaking out.

The spectroscope said it was 92% carbon.

It was absorbing glass and growing in some weird way.

She reached into one of the gloves to bring another flask toward the magnifier, and felt her heart leap into her throat when her thick, gloved hand pushed right through the rubber that now fell away in disintegrating pieces.

There was a greyish film clinging to the fingers of her glove.

With a strangled cry, she leaped toward the scissors atop the nearest lab bench, sliced away the top layer of the suit's glove, shook it off onto the isolation box without touching it, and retreated toward the furthest corner of the lab.

"Benson!" she called out. Nobody answered. Her throat mic was off. She hit the switch so hard she hurt her neck. "Dr. Benson!"

"Yes, Dr. Mansur?" he answered immediately.

"Dr. Benson, we have a problem."

Before he even asked her what it was, she heard seals hissing closed in the room around her.

She was in here with the stuff for the duration, and the duration might turn out to be a very much shorter life than she'd expected.

She took a deep breath.

"That stuff is not biological at all. It checks out as nothing but carbon with some included silicon. But it's *growing*. It must be some sort of nanomachine, with a few simple instructions encoded right in the atoms. I don't know how, I don't know why, but it's dissolving stuff: the flasks in the glove box, the rubber gloves, probably anything made of either carbon or silicon. It must be programmed to make more of itself. The titanium biocontainment unit obviously kept it

confined okay, though.”

She heard Benson let out a whistling breath and then say,

“Oh. Howdy doody.” A moment later he explained to her, “Mr. Garcia just came in.”

It would have been better if Oziel hadn’t come at all, she couldn’t help thinking. The next few hours were going to be hell.

“Okay,” Benson continued, after she explained that the carbon dust was limited to the area around the glove box. She hoped. “I’ll hit the whole lab with a blast of UV. Your suit will protect you, but the radiation should be strong enough to destroy exposed long-chain carbons. Close your eyes and turn toward the wall, just to be on the safe side.”

“Right,” she said. “I’ll hold my hands out though, just in case any of that stuff is still on them.”

A minute of silence followed, filled with the sound of her own breathing.

“Okay,” said Benson. “It should all be inactivated now. That was enough to fry fritterroos.”

Cautiously, she edged toward the contaminated end of the lab. The walls, she couldn’t help thinking, were a composite with carbon fiber elements. If the stuff wasn’t dead, it could eat right through them.

One peek at the glove box was enough to show her just what that would look like, and to send her running back to the far end of the lab.

“All that did, Dr. Benson, was give it enough energy to really take off. It’s corroding the plastic hull of the isolation box as if it’s an acid. It’s – it’s all over the place at that end.”

“How about your hands?” he asked.

“My hands? Oh, yes, my hands.” She looked at them. They were just fat, white, biocontainment suit hands. No sign of any black-limned pits spreading outward. Not yet.

“I don’t seem to have it on me,” she said. “So far.”

“Okay, we’re going to have to slow down its ability to react, which means getting it as cold as we can in there. I’ll flood the lab with liquid nitrogen. You have your own air supply, so you’ll be peachy keen as far as that goes. The suit will protect you from the cold a bit, but depending how long it takes the surfaces in the lab to freeze down to a depth of a centimeter or so, it could get pretty ugly. Once it’s cold, I’ll drench that half of the lab in hard x-rays. No matter what that stuff is, once it’s inactive *and* being hit with hard x-rays, it’ll get smashed to smithereens.”

Yes, thought Corinna. I might, too, if too many of them hit me.

“All right,” she said. “Go for it.”

Nitrogen started pouring into the lab from ceiling-level vents in beautiful soft cascades. There was something about the way it fell that told you this liquid was not water. It turned to mist about halfway down and filled the lab. Corinna sat on top of a lab bench, which put her as high and as warm as she could manage, and wedged herself into a nest of two big metal ultracold freezers and a centrifuge, hoping that would be enough to shield her from reflected x-rays. She leaned her head onto the plastic of the helmet resting on the puffy cloth around her knees. This was it. She’d either survive, or she wouldn’t.

Oziel’s voice came over the speaker, sounding warm and gentle. Somebody must have filled him in on the situation.

“Ey, *mí* Corita, I can’t leave you alone for a minute, can I? I’ve known toddlers who are less trouble than you. So what did you get into now?”

She smiled to herself inside her helmet. The words sounded like a parent, but his voice sounded like he was murmuring in her ear while they were making love. She didn’t know how he managed to make her feel better at a time like this, but he did.

“What I got into was the canisters. Inside are some kind of nanomachines. I’m not sure where they get their energy, maybe straight from light and radiation, and then they grab any available carbon to grow. That’s all they do. After they reach a certain length, they must break in half and start over. They can also use silicon, which makes sense, since it’s a four-valence atom, like carbon.”

“Ah,” said Oziel. “And now tell me, my scientist, what that means to a guy who’s just one of the heap. And please, remember, I don’t need to know how many mean standard deviants are involved.”

She actually burst out laughing at that.

“Standard deviations from the mean, Zio,” she muttered automatically, chuckling. He knew

perfectly well what he was saying. He was the guy who could remember strings of hexadecimal numbers when it suited him. "Seriously, it's programmed to eat through anything made of carbon or silicon. That means it'll kill every living thing, destroy the silicon parts of computers, eat through glass and plastic, and chew up silicates, like sand, wherever it finds them."

"*Dios santo*," she heard him breathe. "You're in there with that? And they're shipping it through Caracas?"

"Yes and yes, Zio. If and when I get out of here, we'll be going back there, what's more. But it doesn't really matter whether it's Caracas or Cairngorm. If it gets out anywhere on Earth, that'll be the end of life as we know it."

"*Dios santo*," he said again.

The nitrogen filled the lab with a thick fog at this point. Corinna could barely see her hand if she stretched her arm straight out. Already, the cold was seeping into her fingers and frost was forming on the inside of her plastic helmet. She tried to wipe off patches with her forehead, so she could see something, but managed mainly to smear the plastic. There was nothing outside the helmet except fog, but her blindness bothered her intensely anyway.

"Tell me," said Oziel after a long pause, "the three canisters we found, weren't they all upwind of domes or bases?"

She thought about it, folding her arms between her knees and her chest, and trying to wedge her hands under her armpits.

"You know, I think you're right. It needs to be mapped out, but I think you're right. Why in hell would they want to kill all life on Mars? I mean, this would get the poor, carbon-based native bacteria just as much as all us nasty Earth imports."

"Ye-es," he said slowly.

"Say, Dr. Benson?" said Corinna, raising her voice slightly, as if she and Oziel were having a private conversation, which was far from the case. "I think we should contact UNPB about putting out a full scale search for those remaining canisters. And they should alert Earth to be on the lookout."

"Absolutely," agreed Benson. "I did that already when you said the contents were growing."

"And, um, how is the cooling in here progressing?"

"We're about ten percent of the way there. You hangin' on?"

"Um, yeah, I guess so."

For the first time, she wished that biocontainment suits were bulkier, or that she had a good, old space suit, which had heater circuits and would allow her to draw her hands and feet toward her torso. Ten percent, and her feet were already cold. Her air was self-contained, supplied by a rebreather tank on her back, and had no way of dealing with frost. Frost was way outside the design parameters, so the stuff inside her helmet was defrosting where it was warmest, near her neck, and starting to drip in the coldest, subtlest water torture she could imagine.

"What's the air temperature?" she asked.

"It's only about -70C. Another hundred degrees to go. Can you pull on through?"

No, she thought.

"Yes," she said.

Oziel, as usual, heard the meaning behind the words. He asked her how she'd figured out what was happening. He asked her how things looked in the lab. With all the fog, the security cameras couldn't see any more than she could. He asked her for details of how she felt. He did everything anyone could to keep her talking.

As she described the events to him, it occurred to her that filling out Benson's forms was what had slowed her down enough to notice the pitting. He'd also been right about having the hard radiation ready to go.

She would have laughed at the irony of it all, but it was too cold. She couldn't even lean her head on her knees because she was shivering too hard and the helmet was so frosted it was like using ice for a pillow. Oziel said something that she missed, while she struggled to find a tolerable way to sit. The discomfort would eventually become unbearable, she knew, and yet there would be nothing she could do but bear it.

Of course, she could take the stupid suit off. Then things would be over pretty quickly. Somehow, that made her feel better, even though part of her still knew that irrational thoughts

were a symptom, not a solution.

“Get me a private connection,” she heard Oziel say.

Yes, the thought misted through her and enveloped her. He knew. He was never one to back away from the truth.

“Mr. Garcia,” she heard a voice protest feebly, “there’s no need for that yet. We’ve a long way to go before that.”

Why did people always pretend they were a long way from *that*?

Oziel repeated,

“Get me a private connection, please.”

Despite the “please,” it was not a request. She’d never seen anyone disregard him when he used that voice, not three year-olds, not his head-of-the-family uncle. Sure enough, moments later, there was a faint click and he came back on, sounding as warm as summer.

“Ey, Corita, they tell me this is private, and it had better be, because I want you to think back to this morning.”

“This morning?” she said, bewildered. The morning had been pretty hectic, what with getting ready for the trip to the fateful canisters and –

“Yes, it’s probably hard to remember when you’re all wrapped up in one of those moon suits you hate so much, but I’m thinking of when you were much less wrapped, and me too. Just after the alarm went off, when you almost made us late by not getting up.”

“Oh, you mean first thing this morning. Oh. Yes.” She felt a laugh bubble up inside her, which turned out to be strong enough to reach the surface.

“Ah,” he said. “So you do remember. Even in a moon suit. Well, remember what you said about how good I look kneeling? And then, when—”

Yes, *then*. The frost and fog before her eyes vanished into memories more powerful than reality. She felt a flare of warmth between her legs that flowed out to her toes in a wave, and, once he started reminding her of what she’d been doing with her hands, it engulfed her fingers, too.

She laughed quietly again, and the thought flitted through her mind that she might be the first person truly to die laughing. And he, though his heart had to be breaking, would hold her hand the whole way.

Her shivering finally slowed down, which wasn’t good, she knew, but it certainly felt better. And the cold made her drowsy, but she didn’t really feel it. His words kept her too occupied with the warmest of thoughts. When she fell asleep, it was to the sound of his voice.

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When she woke, it was also to the sound of his voice. However, it was not at all caressing now. Downright forceful and argumentative, if anything.

“Her core temperature is at 33°C. Look at that readout there. You said she’d be conscious around 32° at the latest. You said –”

“Hey, Zio,” she murmured, “stop bugging that poor nurse.”

“Corita,” he breathed, and the next moment he enveloped her in a hug as big as he was. “Corita, Corita, Corita.”

His embrace felt strange, and that was when she noticed she was wrapped in a squashy body suit of heat gel.

“Good to see you back with us,” said the nurse with a big smile. “I’ll go get the doctor.”

Oziel didn’t let her go until the silver-haired doctor came into the little cubicle, looking like the quintessential physician from a story book. It occurred to Corinna that if you were male and had been a doctor long enough to become white on top, you could hardly avoid looking like that. He studied her vital signs on his handheld, palpated her nose and ears, then her fingers and toes.

“You have extraordinarily good peripheral circulation,” he noted. “There won’t be any permanent damage. There’s still no substitute for youth, even if the genetic engineers have us all living to one hundred and twenty, and some of us working on Mars.”

Corinna muttered, “Oh, I don’t know,” because she wasn’t sure how to say *There’s no substitute for Oziel* without explanations she didn’t want to make.

"I assume Benson got the stuff under control?" she said instead.

"Yes," said Oziel. "The minute he could, he popped the door open and had two medics carry you out of there. All the clothes were left in the containment lock, and everything's been under observation since then, but there's no sign of those horrible black spots."

"Whew. But three of the units are still out there somewhere," – what a grim thought – "plus wherever they're making the stuff on Earth. And no way to find it. There aren't any sensors for plain carbon or silicon, since practically everything contains one or the other." She stared at nothing for a while. "Earth," she repeated. But it felt too depressing to express the obvious hope that nothing happened.

Then there was Årskand. What was going on at that dome, if these awful canisters were supposed to be stored there? With the resources and powers at their disposal, it was to be hoped the investigators would be able to deal with that soon. Instantly, even.

"Do they have any leads on who might have designed that stuff?" she asked. "The designer had to have incorporated a dead man switch somewhere. Unless he's insane. Or she's insane."

"Right now they're mainly invisible. The last I heard from Benson, there were no leads at all."

As the doctor finished up his diagnostics, he said,

"Well, you certainly fit the pattern of our usual patients. This facility was intended for people who froze in the great outdoors, and instead we get lab accidents."

Corinna stiffened at the implication that she was inept enough to spill liquid nitrogen on herself.

"The freezing wasn't exactly accidental," she pointed out.

"Well," he said with raised eyebrows, "if you were trying to test how fast you could freeze solid, you were going about it the right way."

"How much did Benson actually tell you about what happened?"

"Practically nothing. He said there'd been a liquid nitrogen accident – worst case I ever saw, to tell you the truth – and to let him know immediately if any black moles or ulcers showed up. But that's Benson. The one other time he had to send someone over here, he was even huffier about confidentiality."

Confidentiality! If UNPB had classified everything so that even doctors weren't told what to watch for, that was plain stupid. It wouldn't be the first time an organization was stupid. She was wondering whether to let him know before anyone could tell her not to, when he gave a final, decisive tap to his handheld.

"We should have you out of here by tomorrow. A pleasure meeting you, Dr. Mansur, and you, Mr. Garcia."

He shook hands and left them. Oziel, sitting next to her on the high, regulation hospital bed, lost no time in encircling her in another hug.

"You realize," she whispered to him, "as soon as I'm out of here, we're going to have to see whether you're just all talk."

He buried his face in her hair and murmured, "*O mí Corita, mí cielo.*" Then a chuckle crept back into his voice. "What? You've decided past performance is no guarantee of future results?"

## Chapter 5

It had been reassuring when their ship approached Earth to see the one perfect world still blue and white and flawless. Then the horrible thought came to Corinna that it would look just the same if the whole surface was sterilized by nanites. They did nothing to water. It was ridiculous to imagine such a thing happening without any news of it leaking out, but she couldn't help feeling relieved when the ship was close enough for the green of forests to become visible through the blue of air.

She and Oziel had been back on Earth for all of two days. Corinna wasn't over her jet lag, nor had she heard from the United Nations Planetary Bureau about debriefing them on the canisters. Even the wonderfully prompt CTS terraformers had not yet responded to her final instructions regarding the new domes. She'd barely begun dreaming up schemes to contact the local gangsters for information about their smuggling activities, when the gangsters found her instead.

She'd spent the morning at Oziel's neighborhood Center, catching up on email and messages for her clients before her first appointments tomorrow. When it was way past time for a break, and with that sort of work breaks were all she wanted, she went hunting for Oziel through all three floors of the building to see if he wanted some coffee. She finally saw him standing at the front door. Opposite him, not being invited in, stood a lean man of average height, neither young nor old, dressed in a white shirt and blue jeans. Corinna stopped in her tracks. What was the local gang leader doing here? It was obviously not a social call.

He was just the same as when she had met him briefly, a year ago. His thin black hair was slicked back without mercy. He still had the same two-day shadow on his face, expressing darkness. And then, closer up, the same eyes, which *were* darkness.

Oziel looked like he was barely restraining himself from throwing the smaller man through the doorway and into the street. The gangster's smile, showing his eyeteeth filed down to points, gloated at Oziel's conflict.

Corinna walked up and for the first time since she'd known him, Oziel did not look glad to see her. But it wasn't because of her.

"Last time, I hoped there was no point introducing him, because you'd never see him again. However, since he keeps showing up where nobody wants him ... Porfirio Aguilar."

She noticed Oziel did not introduce her with equivalent formality, a studied insult, but one the gangster was unlikely to recognize. Then she found out there were more layers of insults.

The man showed his disconcerting teeth again and said,

"Tiro is what people call me." His voice was as rough as rusty nails. His vocal cords could have been barbed wire. "He likes using the name the government gave me because he knows it annoys me, which is so unusual, it amuses me. So far."

"Mm," said Corinna noncommittally. "I assume you're here under some sort of truce or we wouldn't be standing, right?"

The chilling grin expanded and he gave her a barely perceptible nod.

"Well, then," she said, "why don't you come in and we'll discuss whatever it is over some coffee."

He looked, poker-faced, from her to Oziel and back again, but the fact that he said nothing showed how surprised he was.

"You have just contradicted *El Jefe* here." He seemed to be looking forward to more conflict.

This might not be a good time to say *oh, nonsense, come on in*.

"I see," said Corinna. She turned to Oziel. "It's up to you, of course."

He gave her an inscrutable look.

"Anyone you invite is welcome here," he said.

Everybody was in full formal mode.

So they proceeded to the room with five tables where people usually ate lunch. It was empty at this midmorning time. Corinna unlocked a cupboard, took out good coffee, and put water on to boil. Tiro sat with his back to the wall, facing the door. Oziel sat opposite. She took the chair between them. She was close enough to the gangster to notice his odd metallic scent, as if only his shape was human and something quite different lay beneath.

She wanted to ask him, point blank, about smuggling biocontainment units, but one look at him was enough to realize that then she would never find out anything.

A boy came bounding into the room, perhaps for a drink of water, saw the man by the wall, and ran right out again.

"Everyone knows you, I take it?" was Corinna's dry comment.

He just looked at her, somehow conveying an arrogant *of course*.

She wanted to ask *Do you like having children run at the sight of you?*, but thought that perhaps she better not.

"So, what brings you here?"

"Your Spanish is very good, Señora," he said instead. "Where did you learn it?"

"I started in college, but mostly I learned here."

"You learn fast then. You have been here less than a year."

Was this supposed to be a compliment? Or to let her know that he kept tabs on her?

The water boiled, and she went over to start the coffee dripping through the filter. She brought over cream and sugar and spoons, then the coffee, which she poured. Something in Oziel's manner told her he wasn't about to drink anything with any damn gangster, so she looked at him a fraction of a second longer than she otherwise would have. He took the full cup from her. Luckily he was good at picking up cues. She sat back down. Señor Porfirio took four heaping teaspoons of sugar in black coffee. Man, no wonder he was crazy. However, she said nothing.

Nobody said anything. When the gangster was good and ready, he might answer Corinna's question. Minutes oozed by. She stirred her coffee, uncomfortably conscious of the tinkling sound of the spoon.

Oziel was the one who finally spoke.

"What brings him here, Corinna, is that this highly practical man, who thinks he runs what he calls a business, doesn't like me 'recruiting' in his territory." He glared at Tiro while he said this.

Decoding the strange terminology took Corinna a second. It must mean giving children an alternative to the gang. No wonder Oziel had looked ready to slaughter him. She felt like slaughtering him herself.

"Crap," said Tiro, staring as fixedly back at Oziel. "Recruiting is fine. Kids can be good for business. But" – the cold stare felt lethal – "not when some *comemierda* decides one of my boys isn't good enough for him."

"Send another one," said Oziel, "and I won't just throw him out. I'll make him bounce."

For a moment, Corinna thought Tiro meant a son of his, but now she understood. Oziel had thrown out one of Tiro's drug dealers or gang recruiters. The boy had probably landed on the sidewalk on the other side of the street.

Before Tiro could say what he'd do if a gang member bounced, a promise he would no doubt have to keep, Corinna interjected,

"Just out of curiosity, when Oziel was in a gang years ago, was it yours or someone else's?"

Tiro seemed to have forgotten she was there, judging by his surprise when she spoke. He looked at her before answering, as if trying to find a hidden reason for the question. His eyes could be frozen black tar for all the feeling in them, and they froze the life out of whatever they rested on, including her. Especially her. But she refused to feel fear. His whole life, she told herself, was probably an attempt to overcome the horror of having been named Porfirio.

"It was not my gang at the time," he said at last, "but it was the same one."

"And I'll bet," said Corinna with sudden insight, "you weren't too sorry to see him go."

The gangster's thin lips peeled back from his horrible teeth again.

"You bet right." The grin disappeared. He was talking at Oziel again. "That *vergatudo* would have been bossing brothers before he got his first tattoo. Just getting rid of him was worth it. I'm a

practical man. I wouldn't waste energy on him if he minded his own business. But now that he's messed with me...."

"'Practical,' shit," spat Oziel. "You're getting even. Admit it."

"Don't tempt me," said Tiro in a hoarse whisper. "I'm telling you one last time. I don't care if you're family of a brother. I don't care if you're everyone's Blue Prince and you can get fifty guys behind you. We'll make jerky out of you if you ever interfere with one of my guys again. You understand me? I'm not having it. I'll put Durote up front when we come to get you."

It took the flash of despair from Oziel for Corinna to understand. Durote must be his youngest brother's gang name. This monster they were talking to could make Oziel choose between killing his brother or being killed.

Corinna's resolution not to feel fear vanished into an ocean of terror – which she walled off before it could reach her face.

Desperate to blunt the razor edges of the stand-off, she said,

"Could I ask you about something you said earlier?"

The gangster turned to her, surprised again at her existence.

"You mentioned recruiting, but have fewer kids been interested in joining the gang since we started this center?"

He stared at her for a while, and answered when the look had no effect.

"No."

"Well, I come from a rather different background, of course, but that's what I would have guessed." She knew she was babbling, but babbling was better than instant death. "Ninety nine students go into business and law for every poor dingbat who is crazy enough to go into science. Or, even crazier, the arts."

Tiro looked at her with something besides death in his eyes. He seemed to be wondering why anyone had let her out of the padded cell.

She clarified.

"Most people are interested in money and power. A few rooms with some books, computers, and basketballs can't be serious competition for what you have to offer."

Now that he saw what she meant, he gave an ugly, grating laugh.

"I have never been compared to the law before. So are you suggesting, Señorita, that I just give up and let you continue?"

Corinna looked straight at the flat, plutonian glare of his eyes and said,

"Yes."

He smiled his dreadful smile. He could have been thinking that she'd look cute in a padded cell.

"And when everyone decides to ignore the rules? You'll bring them all back into line for me?"

"I'm only suggesting that since we have no impact on you, you can save your resources for people who really are a threat."

"He drew you into his orbit without any trouble," said the gangster in a quiet, hoarse voice. "He does that with everybody. And you say he's no threat?"

This probably wasn't the time to go into just how much trouble Oziel had taken.

Instead, she said, "He has no control over what the kids do when they're not here. If they want to be in your gang, he's not going to stop them." She knew that wasn't true. He'd shake the stuffing out of them, figuratively speaking, trying to stop them, but he wouldn't use the kind of threats the gangster had at his disposal. In Tiro's terms, Oziel wouldn't stop them.

She could see she was having zero effect on him. So she went on talking before he could tell her to go to hell, and make sure she got there.

"He just wants to live and let live. You can use that to your advantage."

"Really. How?"

Yeah, she thought. How? She had no ideas beyond getting him to leave Oziel alone, and the strain of staring at the hell reflected in his eyes was wearing her down. If she did have any ideas, they'd wilt in that atmosphere like crocuses in an ice storm.

"I don't know," she said, studying her coffee to avoid looking at him, trying to hang on to a shred of hope. "Imagine a world where people let each other *live*. If it was easier to live in your territory, people in, say, Pedro's area would hand him over to you, bound and gagged." That was the biggest mobster around. Getting him would have to be the coup of all time here.

Tiro looked struck by the pleasant thought. But after a moment of contemplating the implausible picture, he said to Oziel,

“So where’d you find this crazy lady?”

Oziel sat straight suddenly, and looked ready to throttle him.

Tiro laughed his harsh laugh and put his hands up in a pacifying gesture.

“All right, *niño*, don’t go radioactive. It was a joke.”

Corinna felt the familiar amazement at the twists of life here. You might kill men, women, and children, but you could not, you simply could *not*, insult a man’s wife in front of him in what amounted to her own house, especially when you were drinking her coffee.

“It may be crazy, Tiro,” she said, before he and Oziel could get at each others’ throats again, “but it’s not hard to see that giving people a better deal means they’ll be on your side. That makes it a cheaper, faster, better way to operate. You don’t have to expend resources forcing them to cooperate. On the contrary, they’ll probably fight to become part of your territory.”

For the first time, she seemed to have said something he considered worth listening to. Briefly, he contemplated the rosy scenario, but then he came back to his version of reality.

“You’re saying I let you do whatever you want, and then everybody is so impressed with how nice I am that they all start flying my colors?” He seemed to think this was the best joke he’d heard in years.

She waited for the flare of anger at his ridicule to fade. She poured him some more coffee. Since he was a four teaspoon man, she found the sweetest cookies they had in the unlocked cupboard. He seemed quite taken with them and thanked her with one of his tigerish grins.

“I’m suggesting,” she continued, “that you let people be. Not just us. Everybody. I’m suggesting a whole different world, one where you winning doesn’t have to mean everyone else losing.” The last of her hope sublimated away, as she felt how preposterous the idea would sound to him.

“I have not seen that work, in my life.”

“Have you seen it tried, in your life?”

“No,” he said, “because it wouldn’t work. Pedro would wipe me out long before enough of the scum joined. You think he’d sit back and watch my gang grow?”

“Join? What do you mean, ‘join’? You don’t have to join a gang, and the whole nine yards, to want a better life.”

“*Coño*,” Tiro swore hoarsely, and then said to Oziel, “don’t you tell her anything? Listen, *Señorita*. In simple words. What do you think happens to somebody who is nobody who attacks one of us?”

“So, protect them,” she said. “Have them wear *ke yehs* or masks or something so nobody even knows who they are. Your men provide the weapons and the combat experience. Women and children and grandparents can use their phones to provide intelligence about the other side’s movements. You mobilize them overnight, or as fast as you can, and Pedro has no time to get up to no good.”

Tiro sat there, apparently contemplating her out-of-his-world loopiness with what passed for amusement in him.

“You may have enough crazy courage for that, *Señorita*. You probably wouldn’t be following him around if you didn’t. But if the scum had the guts to fight us, none of us would be here. ‘Mobilize them.’” He almost laughed again. “The cowards wouldn’t crawl out of their holes even if you put a gun to their heads.”

“So don’t put a gun to their heads,” she said, continuing the hopeless conversation only because the alternative was unthinkable. “Put a better life to their heads.” She didn’t understand what was so difficult about this concept. “People fight for a better life all the time.”

He leaned back and studied her. His slitted, sooty expression covered her with contempt. She forced herself to look back steadily, wondering whether it was possible to acclimatize to the deep-space cold and dark of his eyes so that it ceased to matter in fact as well as in pretense.

“And what are you going to do when Pedro decides I’ve gone soft in the head and kills everyone? You’ll build everything back up for me?”

No, she would grab Oziel and as much of his family as she could and move back to the US ... which was not an option for the other hundreds of thousands of people hanging on to life here. Maybe suggesting war was not such a bright idea.

She felt blank and hopeless, yet it was essential to keep talking. So, if not war, then what?

Peace? That was too laughable even for her to suggest. However, out in the great wide world, among those more systematized gangs known as governments, people usually tried negotiation to avoid war.

"You could talk to him first. Come to some sort of agreement instead of fighting."

For a moment, Tiro's eyes opened wide in unfiltered amazement.

"Talk?" he said. "To *Pedro*?" He was so incredulous she could have been saying the earth was flat.

"Why not? If there's a seething ferment of discontent in his territory, he could be willing to talk."

"*Pedro*?" Tiro repeated, as if she'd removed every last doubt about belonging in a padded cell.

She didn't know this Pedro, of course, but she didn't see why Tiro thought it was that silly. Most people had points where levers could be applied.

"Well, what does Pedro want? What does he care about? Do you know?"

The gangster said nothing.

It was Oziel who answered her.

"Little boys, as far as anyone can tell."

Corinna's eyes widened. He meant it.

Maybe she didn't know anything about this Pedro. She had no further ideas about what to say, and she knew once the talk stopped, it would be the end.

The gangster was still silent. She didn't want to look at him for fear that would be enough to start something, but she couldn't help it.

He was staring off into space. Thinking.

What the hell was he thinking?

Ten whole minutes passed by the wall clock over the sink. Suddenly his lips pulled back and he laughed his grating, hideous laugh again. The suddenness of the noise almost made her twitch, but she managed to suppress it. Now what?

"So what does *el mandón* say about it? Or does she carry the stick around here?"

Corinna watched the flare of pure hatred in Oziel's eyes and was glad there weren't many people he hated. All he said was,

"You understand nothing."

What the gangster didn't seem to realize was that Oziel spoke volumes by sitting there without strangling him.

Tiro was still amused about something.

"So, I'm supposed to let everyone run. I can see how that'll be nice for you and the rest and everyone who doesn't matter in the neighborhood." His deadly eyes flicked to Corinna and then back to Oziel. "What do I get out of it? Now. Not in the future."

Nothing, she wanted to yell at him. You just bloody leave people alone. Oziel wasn't saying anything either. It was not a good idea to leave such a loud, unspoken *Nothing* hanging in the air.

If they were dead meat anyway, it hardly mattered what came next. So, while he and Oziel glared at each other, she said,

"I could get him to stop quoting your ID card."

At that, the bastard laughed a real laugh, not one merely for effect. It was an absolutely awful sound anyway. Corinna wished he would stop.

"If you can get him to do anything, you're the only person in the universe."

"Let me rephrase that. I can't get him to do anything either. I ask."

She didn't know how she could tell what he was thinking, but luckily, with Oziel sitting there, he didn't say *yes, I bet you can ask very nicely indeed*.

"Okay," said Tiro. "I'll do it."

There was silence.

Corinna listened for ordinary sounds to make sure her ears were functioning. The coffee, still dripping through its filter, made a gentle *plink* as a late drop hit the surface of the liquid. The tiny refrigerator on the counter was humming. She noticed that there were none of the sounds of kids playing and shouting, which was odd. A bus honked in the street outside.

Everything felt wrong. What was he up to?

"My price," the gangster continued into the thick, deaf silence, "is that you let everyone know

what a good deal you're getting. Azo here knows everyone. You just let them know. Especially if they're in Pedro's territory."

"All right, Tiro," said Oziel, looking straight at him. "I will."

The evil grin reappeared at this first use of his name by his old enemy.

A frightening thought suddenly came to Corinna, and she piped up.

"Um, if word gets around that I'm being a consultant to gangsters, I'll be dead in seconds. Could you, uh, kind of keep this to yourself?"

"Consultant to gangsters?" he repeated, clearly feeling a deficiency of respect. However, for whatever reason, he didn't pursue it. "They better not dare to touch you on my ground. I'm the only one who kills people here."

Great, she thought.

"But I mostly don't tell people more than they need to know, Señora, so I can do that for you." He seemed to find this amusing, which was not reassuring. After staring at her some more, a process she hoped would soon be over, he added, "We can shake hands on this agreement, but then I should know who I'm agreeing with. We call you *la gringa d'Azo*, you know."

Oziel answered before she did.

"Doctora Mansur."

The gangster looked at him slowly, narrow-eyed, although he was supposedly talking at Corinna.

"I don't think your *huevo* here is going to be naming his first son after me."

No, she didn't think so either. She looked at Oziel.

He looked back for a while.

"But you can let him call you what you like."

"My name," she said to Tiro, who had stood up to leave, "is Corinna Mansur. I guess, if you're not destroying my life, you can call me Corinna."

The three of them filed out to the front door. Tiro extended his hand to Oziel, and they shook hands. He repeated the process with Corinna. His hand was so hard, he didn't feel any more human than he smelled. She almost wiped her own hand on her left sleeve afterward, but managed to stop herself in time. It occurred to her that he was purposely doing this in full view of the street and whatever henchmen he had out there. Then he walked off, looking from the back like a lean, unremarkable man of medium height.

Two men joined him across the street, none of them visibly armed, and the three of them rounded a corner and disappeared from view.

Then, and only then, did Corinna feel like a puppet whose strings had been cut. She moved to close the door, stumbled, and felt Oziel catch her around the waist. She regained her balance and straightened up, still holding on to him. Except for the sense of calm she drew from him, her knees would have started to shake as the reaction set in.

He looked at her, understanding dawning on his face.

"*Dios santo*, Corita, you were terrified. Even I had no idea. How did you do that?"

He steered her back to the lunch room, sat her down, poured her another cup of coffee.

"Cream," she said, "but no sugar."

His smile winked at her while he added the cream.

"How did you do that? *Mierda*, I can't hide that I'm afraid of that rat-slime and he knows it, but you hid it so even I couldn't tell."

"I may make up for it by the size of the funk I fall into now," she said. "And I'm going to have nightmares about his eyes for days. Weeks. Years."

They both sipped coffee for a while.

"Why did he change his mind all of a sudden? I thought for sure he was going to ki –"

A face peered around the door. It was the boy who'd wanted a drink of water.

"Is he gone?"

His voice was much too quiet for a frightened child. He sounded like he dreaded counting the corpses.

Oziel waved him in and gave him his own cup of coffee. Corinna had long since abandoned the project of pointing out that strong caffeine was bad for receptor formation in growing brains.

"It's okay, *chico*," said Oziel. "He just came to talk. He shook hands when he left. I think we'll

live.”

“Actually,” said Corinna, “where is everybody? It’s nearly one o’clock, for chrissake.”

“With Tiro in the room? You think people are going to come in and eat like the children of God?”

“Well, maybe you better call a meeting and reassure everybody,” suggested Corinna.

“A good idea,” Oziel agreed. “Pablo, can you find where they’re all hiding and tell them to come here?”

“You – you’ll save my coffee?”

Oziel nodded and smiled reassuringly, and the kid zoomed off like a shot.

“What’s this ‘Azo’ business, by the way?” she asked him. “Why would they call you ‘nitrogen’?”

“‘Nitrogen’? What do you mean?”

“Well, that’s what ‘azo-’ means. Nitrogen compounds.”

“Not here. It was my gang name. Azote. He uses it because he knows it annoys me.” His lips curled in sarcasm.

She answered with a similar, humorless smile and stroked his hand to say, *To hell with him, who cares.*

“So what do you think made him change his mind? First he’s full of how crazy it is, then he thinks for a few minutes, and suddenly he says okay. It seems weird.”

“It’s very weird, *mí cielo*. I’ve never seen him change his mind about anything. That’s why it stinks as bad as it does. The only thing that made sense was the way he liked the ideas about shit-stirring in Pedro’s territory. And that may not be so good.”

*Yeah. No question that Tiro was doing his own thing. Whatever it was.* But she couldn’t help feeling peeved that Oziel wasn’t more impressed with how things had gone. *Dammit, you weren’t doing so great either.*

“Don’t get me wrong, Corita. It’s amazing what you did. I think you saved my life. And you certainly saved the Center, for now. As for Tiro, we’ll worry about what he gets up to when he gets up to it.”

## Chapter 6

Saturdays were always bedlam at Oziel's neighborhood Center. Older kids who already had jobs after school would show up, and you could say what you wanted about shrieking toddlers, but packs of teenagers bouncing off the walls and bellowing or squealing, according to gender, filled any space they occupied to bursting. Oziel didn't seem to mind, or even notice it. He swam through the chaos like it was normal, but Corinna felt the need for a breather now and again.

She'd been working on client-related kerfuffles and tried to take a rest from that by taking another shot at looking up the world's brilliant nanotechnologists. UNPB was doing the real search, of course, but it couldn't hurt to poke around. You never knew. She might stumble on something.

What she stumbled on were university profs teaching seminars on geometries of pure carbon compounds, and industrial chemists patenting the latest, greatest nanotech zipper. How would anyone go from that to destroying the space program or trying to wipe out humanity?

Now she was so frustrated, she needed a breather from her breather. She went to sit out on the Center's front steps, and enjoy the peace and quiet of the street full of traffic and people. The Center had been a large, residential house once, an impressive, three-story stone building, with five, broad stone steps leading up to the front door. She sat on the topmost step, above the fray as it were, feeling surprised and gratified how many people she already knew to wave to and kid around with.

A small woman threaded her way along the sidewalk, a woman who, in this plain and shabby street, drew everyone's eyes like a shooting star. It was Leira Dicastillo herself, in a simple black silk jumpsuit, coming over for a visit after spending her morning volunteering at Miguel Sanderas's clinic. Unlike her father, who would never have come to a place like this without a phalanx of armed bodyguards, she seemed to feel it was just another street in her home town. Which it was, of course, but it also wasn't. Corinna watched her approach, ready to leap into motion at the first sign of a pickpocket or worse.

"Corinna," came Leira's musical voice as she walked up, "so nice to see you. I was hoping I would find you here. I need to talk to you."

"Good to see you, too," said Corinna with a smile, wondering what it could be about. Leira had bankrolled the Center for its first year, so when she said she "needed to talk," it was hard not to go on red alert.

"It's pretty crazy in there," said Corinna, tipping her head toward the shouts echoing from inside the Center, "but maybe between the two of us, we can shoo enough kids aside to have a cup of coffee."

Emptying out the little lunch room was a simple matter of walking in. Barrio children didn't hang about when the high and mighty showed up, legitimate or otherwise.

As the two of them made themselves comfortable in the suddenly quiet room, Leira commented,

"You seem to be doing very well here." She glanced around at the clean, if somewhat disarranged, lunch room, and implied the whole building with a gesture.

Funding was now coming in from several sources, thanks to Corinna's grant-writing and Leira's connections, but it was still reassuring to hear her say so.

"I don't know how Oziel does it," said Corinna. "He has some of the kids on regular janitor shifts. You'd think they'd never come back after the first time he handed them a mop, but he just does it. I'm beginning to think authority is like playing the piano: you're a lot better at it if you start practicing by the age of six. And with four younger kids in his family, he started even

earlier.”

Leira nodded in amused agreement.

“I know just what you mean. He’s the same with Petey. I’ve never seen my little rascal even begin to listen to anyone else.”

*Little rascal* had to be the euphemism of all time, thought Corinna. She couldn’t help remembering some of Oziel’s stories about when he’d been hired to take care of that unholy terror, but she hoped no trace of her thoughts reached her face.

“Half the noise you’re hearing,” she said, tipping her head toward the door, “is coming from the gym we added on at the back with the funding from Barrios Benditos. Thanks for putting in a word with that one trustee of theirs,” she added with a conspiratorial smile.

Leira waved it away to say it was nothing.

“If the Center wasn’t good, my words would mean nothing.”

Corinna wasn’t so sure of that.

“The next big project,” she continued, “is to get some major funds in the US to build a computer room.”

“What a good idea. That could also serve to teach the children skills, as well as keep them off the street.”

“Actually, Oziel seems to approach pretty much everything here that way. I mean, Christ, even something like mopping. One of the kids found a job as a janitor based on experience here.”

At this point, Oziel himself came in, no doubt having heard the buzz about their illustrious visitor.

“Señora,” he greeted her with that smile of his for important people, warm and formal, both at once. He poured himself a cup of coffee and joined them.

The conversation turned to their last trip to Mars and the nanites, which Leira knew all about as the head of CTS. Even UNPB wasn’t going to try to tell her that she was a member of the general public without the need to know. Corinna was telling her some personal impressions of how CTS terraforming operations were proceeding when Leira said,

“I wanted to ask you about that. What exactly happened at the dome where there was the accident?”

*Was this what she’d come to talk about? It wasn’t about the Center at all?*

Corinna described how excited she’d been about the first field trial of GP-18, and the crashing disappointment of finding dead rabbits instead.

“Could it have been something during your visit the day before that caused the problem?” asked Leira.

“*Our* visit?” Corinna was incredulous. “I don’t see how. The investigators didn’t point out anything like that either. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know much about thermostats,” said Leira, without answering her question, “but could something have short-circuited it and made it turn the heaters off? Maybe you hooked up some equipment, or something like that, which you didn’t realize would cause a problem?”

This was beyond strange.

“No, Leira, nothing like that. There’s a great deal I don’t know about thermostats and programming too, but I didn’t even look at the thermostat. You couldn’t short circuit it the way you’re thinking, and if you did, telemetry at the main base would show it. That’s the sort of thing the investigators would have noticed in a second, in any case.”

“The reason I ask,” she said, “is this,” and she pulled a printout from her bag and put it on the table.

Corinna and Oziel both bent over it. It began without any salutation.

I feel CTS has the right to the full story behind AG-117. The investigators are ignoring the facts. I saw what the main scientist was doing. She was at the control console for a long time. She’s the one who altered the programming. If the investigators were doing their jobs, they’d see that the time delay they’re talking about was faked. The real one takes it right back to her. She knows her experiment is not working, and she got rid of the evidence before CTS could find out. I’ve seen scientists do strange things

before when their funding is at stake.

It closed without any signature.

"What the *hell?*" Corinna finally breathed. She turned to Leira. "It's a pure lie. A pure and complete lie. I mean, yes, I spent a lot of time at the control console. There were all sorts of parameters I had to look at to make sure everything agreed with the experimental protocol. But I certainly didn't fuss with the thermostat. They can check the command log."

Leira nodded slowly, gracefully.

"This came to Abel Guzmán."

"My old boss on the algae-counting job?" Even in her funk, Corinna was curious about him. "How's he doing?"

"Well, you said he seemed too competent to be working for the government when you recommended him, and I would have to agree with you. He's the operations manager of closed-system agriculture for the whole company now, which is why this crossed his desk first. The first thing he did was request the investigators' full report. He sent the message to his boss with a note attached saying, 'I know this person. This is poop.' He used a stronger term, of course."

"Jee-sus," said Corinna. "What it means to have friends in high places."

She was trying to keep it light, but in fact she felt weak with relief that she did have friends in high places. And that those friends had enough spine to stand up for her. That included Leira herself, who could have called Corinna to the office for some unspecified, nerve-racking reason. Oziel was right that she was a friend.

Leira was talking with him while Corinna tried to get a grip on herself.

"What do you think is going on?" Leira asked her after a while. "I thought your enemies on Mars were all in jail."

Corinna let out a small, sardonic snort.

"The old ones are. As for the new ones, there's MFM, who might be annoyed enough about the dome issue to want revenge. And then there's whoever is messing with those terrible nanites. But I have no clue who was in a position to do this. The message says they could 'see' what I was doing. Well, it's certainly not Johnson or Shao. The only other people who could plausibly pretend they knew anything about it would be at the security consoles in the main base or tracking the telemetry and command inputs."

"If Señor Guzmán looked at the command log," said Oziel, "he could see exactly what you did at the console, and that should have been the end of that."

"Yes," said Leira, "it should have been. But the relevant day had been erased."

"Erased! Jee-sus. Somebody's really trying to set me up. The local MFM group there seemed pretty upset that one of them could be killing things, even if it was just rabbits, but one of their members is being held without bail while UNPB investigates."

Leira put the printout back in her bag.

"Even with CTS resources, we couldn't find out who sent this. It came from a workstation generally used by MFM members."

"I guess Reiner Wegenstand might be upset enough to want to frame me, but he's in jail. He'd have to be an outrageous splicer to accomplish that from a security cell."

"Whoever's running that nanite operation has to be very unhappy with you, Corita," said Oziel.

"But they don't even know who I am. UNPB is so terrified of starting a panic, they're not even talking to themselves about nanites, as far as I can tell. I asked them whether they'd found anything at Årskand, and the investigator went all professional and official on me."

"Nobody at Årskand admitted to being remotely associated with MFM or anything else," said Leira. She obviously felt it was silly not to talk to Corinna about it. "One of the vice-presidents donates a lot of money to the SETI decoding effort on the two alien signals, which seems about as harmless as it is possible to get. UNPB informed CTS that the next shipment to Årskand should be allowed to proceed in the hope that we can find out who's lying."

Corinna shuddered. "It makes sense, but it's horrible to think of those canisters being allowed to be anywhere. And I must admit, on some level I hope it's all a mistake about Årskand. It seems to be nothing more than a small struggling company, being used as an excuse by some horrible people." After a pause, she added, "That's neither here nor there, though. The problem is that

without any solid leads there's no way to track down this garbage...unless...." She looked at Leira questioningly.

"Yes?"

"Well, using CTS resources, we might be able to follow the money trail on some of this stuff. I mean, the person who vandalized the dome is supposed to have used a clipper. Who paid for that? How much did they pay? And so on."

"I gather the investigators looked into that already, but CTS can certainly look into it too. We're still part of the official investigation, even now that the police have decided it's important enough for them to be involved. We'll be discussing details, though, so we should use a secure connection. My flitter is parked behind Miguel's clinic. If you can take the time right now, we can go to my house and check from there, or you can let me know when is convenient."

"Now would be fine," said Corinna, and Oziel said he would ask Esmeralda to keep an eye on things and come too.

A scant fifteen minutes later, they stepped out of the flitter on the roof of the CTS skyscraper downtown. One whole end of the roof seemed to be covered in small trees. They lived in pots in the garden behind the low stone wall surrounding Leira's penthouse. A glass wall slid noiselessly aside to let them into a living room, and, as usual, Corinna found her breath taken away by the place even though she'd visited many times by now. There was something about ivory silk upholstery, Persian carpets the size of swimming pools, and tessellated marble floors. The view, which started closer to the clouds than the ground, looked out over all of Caracas and on to the ends of the world, as if it was Odin's tower. Unlike the king of the gods, though, ordinary mortals who stood near the edge could fall too far and too fast.

She tried not to trip over anything as she followed Leira into the study. It took more than one push of a button, even at this rarefied corporate level, to reach the head of accounting because it was Saturday. However, in fewer minutes than Corinna would have believed possible, the phone's large screen showed a quintessential corporate woman, perfectly groomed but in casual clothes. At this level, that meant a Laval T-shirt. Corinna could see the tiny, silver oak leaf logo at her left shoulder.

"Señora Dicastillo," she said. "How may I assist you?"

Politely apologizing for having called her to duty on a weekend, but not actually hesitating to do so, Corinna noticed, Leira explained the situation and the long hunt started. CTS had access to the UNPB files in the case – it had provided most of them – and the Chief Financial Officer latched on to the mysterious clipper rental by Reiner Wegenstand. The investigators on Mars had decided the rental was not significant since it had been cancelled and there was no indication the ship had been used.

"It's not impossible," Corinna interjected, "for someone who knew exactly when the satellite was photographing, to land a clipper, run in and out, and take off without appearing on any image. There's about half an hour between images at that location. And flying with every transceiver and ID turned off, they could be missed by traffic control."

The head of accounting looked aside, no doubt making a note.

"The clipper's odometer should show the extra kilometers. Those are hard to tamper with, since so many servicing issues depend on amount of usage. I will request that information from Mars once we contact them. However, regardless whether it flew or not, a rental which is that expensive would need a guarantor, unless Mr. Wegenstand works because he prefers to. I'll see whether the UNPB files have that information." She looked off to the side again and started working on another screen.

That was a good point. Even millionaires would think twice before renting a clipper, and Wegenstand was a mere mechanic. Martian pay scales notwithstanding, his was not a clipper-renting salary.

UNPB did not have the information, so the CFO began the process of calling Mars. At the current orbital positions, her queries would take fifteen minutes to reach her CTS counterpart at the spaceport on Arsia. Then it would take at least fifteen minutes for the answers to come back, assuming the answers could be found immediately. Corinna tried to force herself not to drum her fingers for at least five minutes.

It was Saturday throughout the solar system, so the answer took longer than half an hour to

arrive. Corinna knew how that went. The local head of accounting had to be located, had to find a secure connection, and had to access the necessary data. Thirty five minutes were going on forty, when the air was split by such loud squealing and clattering that it seemed to come from everywhere. It was, of course, Petey come to greet his favorite person.

“Tata Oziel!” he shrieked, on an attack run as far as Corinna could tell.

Well, she could have told him he didn’t have a chance. Oziel swept him up and said,

“Oy, Pedrito,” grinning as if was glad to see him.

Maybe he was. He really did like kids. They didn’t have to be well-behaved for him to feel kindly toward them.

“You’ve grown, Pedro, my man. For a moment there, I thought it was some little kid saying hello. You want to say hello like a big person?”

Oziel was still holding him up, at big-person level, two meters off the floor, and Corinna thought a normal kid might simmer down, given that new viewpoint. No wonder Oziel was so good with kids. He cheated.

“How are you, Señor Garcia?” said Petey very politely.

Oziel laughed and swung him down.

“Well, maybe not quite that big. I’m doing fine, *’mano*. How about you?” He bent down to shake hands solemnly.

Petey greeted Corinna with so much decorum after that, she had to admit to being amused. He stayed quiet for five whole minutes, until he forgot that he was now officially a big person.

In the interval of blessed peace, the response from Mars finally started coming through.

“The clipper does not seem to show the excess mileage one would expect from a trip to AG 117,” the accountant on Mars was saying, “but some elements of its machine-based log were unclear. Tampering is not out of the question. The black box will need to be accessed and checked. I have already put in the request. The guarantor on the rental is a complicated issue too. The difficulty —”

“Tata Oziel! You wanna see my new game? It’s super! 3D *and* color! Ta —”

“In a while, Pedrito. We were doing this first, so you should let us finish.”

That held him for a moment.

“—is that the guarantor was not an individual. The account —”

“You wanna come see my painting prize?” Corinna could see him pulling on Oziel’s wrist. “I won it last week! You —”

“I said, in a while, Pedrito. When we are done here.”

“— belongs to a corporation that —”

The screen went blank. The sound died. What the —?

Petey surfaced from behind the large screen.

“Okay. We’re done! You wanna come see my —”

“*Petey!*” shrieked his mother. “Did you just turn off my phone?”

“We’re done!” reiterated Petey at a volume not unlike his mother’s. “You wanna —”

Corinna consciously unballled her hands from the fists they’d become, and took a deep breath. Don’t say anything, she told herself. Do not say a thing.

Oziel, she noticed, was not saying a thing either.

Leira was saying plenty of things, enough for all three of them, but all at that hysterical volume kids never listen to. The nanny, alerted to the problem over the intercom, came running in, took charge of Petey, paused to be berated for having let him out of the nursery, and disappeared with him still yelling at the top of his lungs.

Restarting secure equipment after a crash was always a lengthy process. While Leira was pushing the necessary buttons, Corinna couldn’t help wondering if hours with this kid in the close confines of a courier ship, even to see a once-in-a-lifetime comet, was going to be worth it. There’d be no Oziel there to distract him.

“I bet Petey’s looking forward to the comet trip,” she said to Leira.

“I’ve had to cancel that,” said Leira, as she blinked at the iris scanner before the secure connection was reestablished.

“Oh, h — *dear*,” cried Corinna, surprised at how disappointed she was. “I’d been rather looking forward to it myself.”

“No, the courier is still going, of course. You’re quite welcome to go, regardless. The problem was that Petey had his heart set on a flight plan close to the comet, and it turns out they won’t allow passenger ships in that zone. So we’ll be watching it from the control room on Phobos.”

“I – I see,” said Corinna. She hoped any saboteurs had not wasted much time on elaborate schemes against the comet. With Petey in the control room, Mars was as good as lost.

The CFO reappeared. It turned out she’d been recording the whole thing, so they didn’t have to go through another half hour of reaching Mars all over again. She had the account number and was already searching for the responsible corporation.

She also had the information that the rental was cancelled *after* the clipper had been signed out. Reiner himself had an alibi, it seemed, since he was on the base that day in some five separate security vids. His story was that he’d made plans to damage the dome, but had never liked the idea, and had changed his mind about cooperating at the last minute. He refused to name his contact.

“I’m having real trouble with this account, Señora Dicastillo,” said the CFO as she worked. “The corporation involved, Hiram Processing, is one of those legal entities established largely for tax purposes. There’s an office address, but not much else. No actual individuals. It’s owned by a holding company. That is part-owned by three other corporations, who are themselves owned by various other companies. Any specific person involved in these companies will be able to disclaim knowledge and responsibility.”

“Do you think that’s intentional?” asked Corinna.

“Hard to see what else it could be, Doctora Mansur,” said the accountant. “This is a classic pattern for some quite sophisticated money laundering. I’m afraid I’ve gone as far as I can. After this you need search warrants to proceed. At this level, I can’t find who was actually behind that guarantee.”

And that was where they had to leave it.

“Sheesh,” muttered Corinna. “MFM has either grown very complex while I wasn’t looking, or we’re not really dealing with MFM here.”

Oziel suggested they go look at Petey’s prizes, now that he’d waited, albeit involuntarily. It occurred to Corinna that maybe there was another reason Oziel was good with kids. He didn’t cheat.

In the midst of all Petey’s squealing and zipping about in the nursery, Corinna couldn’t stop thinking about whoever was targeting her. They had enough resources to rent clippers and send anonymous communications, and probably would continue targeting her until they got her. It made her want, very badly, to get them first. UNPB didn’t seem to be moving fast enough to do her any good. After all, this attempt to frame her had come *after* Reiner Wegenstand’s arrest, so that definitely had not ended the matter. What she could do as a private citizen was limited, but surely she could use her insignificance to advantage. After the paralyzing discussion with Tiro, she hadn’t pursued her project of mining the local gangsters for clues. However, she might be able to make contacts and hear information, as a small person trying to ship a few chemicals to Mars. People might let things slip that they wouldn’t mention around uniforms.

She asked Oziel about the idea as they took a flitter taxi home.

“I don’t think so, Corita,” he said. “It’s very risky, you don’t look like much of a smuggler, and you have no way of knowing who to contact or whether you’ll find anything for all the trouble.”

## Chapter 7

Corinna pressed the doorbell outside the battered door to the cheap-looking, three story building, and began having doubts about the wisdom of coming here by herself to find nuggets of information. Judging by the cheerless air of this place, it might be the last thing she found before becoming the object of a search herself.

She'd sort of imagined innocently asking questions and hearing answers people might be reluctant to volunteer to the police. Then, once she had something useful, she would give the information to the professional investigators. What she'd forgotten was that criminals are, well, criminal. She'd gone down a descending scale of unsavoriness into what now looked like downright danger.

She pressed the doorbell again. If nobody answered this time, she would take it as a sign that she really should be listening to her better judgment and leave.

That first customs officer, the one who'd probably passed the six canisters, had been bad enough with his leer and insinuating manner and suggestions that "just for her" he'd be glad to settle for a "special price." Corinna had decided that men with fat lips should either grow mustaches big enough to cover their mouths entirely, or they shouldn't smile. She'd wrung a name out of him, someone who turned out to be a little weasel of a man with shifty eyes, pencil mustache, cheek tattoo, and a very gold wristpad that suggested dubious morals all by itself. Up to that point, the men – why were they always men? – had been repugnant, but Weasel passed her on to someone who introduced her to a new level of nastiness. Her discomfort flickered into real fear at the edges. There hadn't been any obvious reason for fear: he look like a standard issue businessman in a suit and a tie and a shiny office, but it had felt like sitting within arm's reach of a human-sized snake. He seemed to feel nothing but contempt for the idea of shipping some research chemicals to Mars without a lot of paperwork, but he said if the boss was willing to take it on, he'd deal with it. She had to talk to the boss first. So here she was, looking up and down the empty street, trying to decide whether to push the doorbell yet another time or to get out while the getting was good.

"Who sent you?" said a sudden voice at her elbow, making her jump.

The door had opened soundlessly and now framed a slab of muscle who could get work as a bouncer if he ever grew tired of his current job.

For a split second, Corinna contemplated pretending she was out looking for her friend, Victoria, and had pressed the wrong bell, but then she pulled herself together. It had to be possible to smuggle stuff without getting killed. The MFMers had done it, so she could too. Once she found her voice, she answered him,

"Señor Calaveras."

He nodded. "Go on up." He indicated a battered staircase that matched the door.

Go on up? Go on up *where*? However, nothing about the man's aspect invited questions, so she started up the stairs. He followed close enough behind her to touch her, which she didn't like at all.

At the top of the stairs, he said, "Left." At the end of the passage, he said, "Right."

There was one open door at the end of that corridor, and she went in. The bouncer stood by the door. There was a dusty glass partition in the large room, and on the other side of it was a man behind a desk talking on a phone. This was, apparently, "the boss." Was she supposed to wait out here? Probably. The kind of phone conversations he had, listeners must be less than welcome.

The boss ignored her and went on talking.

And went on. And on. He was middle-aged, trying to pretend he wasn't going bald by shaving a

head that needed as much hair to hide it as possible. He had a gold pinky ring on the hand holding the phone.

He disconnected, continued ignoring her, and began tapping away at a second phone on his desk. Corinna had been through this sort of thing often enough in an academic environment that it had the perverse effect of making her feel at home. There was nowhere to sit in the antechamber, so she stood and stolidly stared out a grimy window at a dead tree and a blank wall until the big shot was good and ready to talk to her.

He must have become bored with her stoic attitude because he called her in at last.

"So, what do you want?" he asked without any greeting or other politeness.

Corinna repeated her cover story for the fourth time, feeling something wear off its plausibility with each repetition.

The nasty piece of work on the other side of the desk seemed to feel it, too.

"And what is this stuff?" He couldn't be said to sound suspicious, given how carefully he cultivated an absence of expression, but he certainly didn't sound pleased at the prospect of her business.

"Well, the material is a proprietary substance. That's the reason my client prefers not to go through all the paperwork on this."

She thought about adding that there was nothing harmful involved, but decided there was no point. The concept of harmlessness didn't exist in his universe.

"How much?" he asked.

"A little bit under five hundred grams worth. Just one of the larger biocontainment units."

He flicked a fatigued look at her, as if she was a more than usually obtuse cockroach that had wandered in off the street.

"How much *money*?"

Oh, money. Her plan to vaguely say "millions" when this came up no longer felt safe, to say nothing of serious.

"There could be ten thousand in it for you," she finally offered.

She appeared to tumble another few rungs down the evolutionary ladder in his eyes.

"Ten thousand," he stated with an actual expression for a change, an expression of contempt. "Next you'll tell me you're talking in bolivars. What do you think this is? Manuel's Pawn and Can Recycling?"

Corinna swallowed, conscious of every movement of her throat muscles. What did people like him do to a customer who wasted their time?

"I was talking in dollars," she said, trying to sound offended instead of afraid. "And the research project is ongoing. We'll need more, and larger, shipments down the road, if we're happy with your assistance."

" 'Larger shipments,' " he repeated, still with infinite contempt. "I've about had it with you *manazas* and your large shipments. You another one of these *gafo* greenies?"

Corinna's breath stopped. She forced herself to act as normal as she could. Was there any way to draw him out about idiot environmentalists without being obvious?

"Well, no. Even at best, we're not going to need shipments that big. Mars for the Martians has a whole planet to do. We've just got one research project. But it is lucrative," she added quickly.

"Oh, so you're in on that. They friends of yours?" he asked, staring at nothing in particular about a meter above her head.

She felt a surge of triumph at extracting the information of his connection to MFM, but something in the way he said it suggested "No" would be an intelligent answer.

"Good, Señora." He nodded slowly, still staring at the wall, with an expression on his face that bore the same relation to a smile as an crocodile's does. "I would hate to think of such an attractive young lady in such bad company."

"Bad company?" she said, trying not to squeak. Had he known what was *inside* the nanite canisters? At least she had something for the investigators, if she ever got out of here.

"Very bad. They're trying to stiff us. An intelligent lady like you should be able to work out how bad that kind of company is."

"Of course," she said, this time with an unmistakable squeak. What kind of idiots would run afoul of a soulless mobster?

The same kind, perhaps, as would prattle information to the police that could easily be traced back to her. Maybe, Corinna thought, it would be best not to dangle large shipments in front of him.

“So, anyway, back to my client, I guess you’re not interested in helping us at the level we can afford.”

“Señora, I wouldn’t do it for everyone, but if you’re looking for a small retailer, I’ll give you a name to call.” He said this without expression, staring again at the space somewhere over her head. “They’re number two. Or three. They try harder. Although I should warn you that they’re the guys who sent MFM on to us. *El chingón* who runs that group was too smart to touch those *ahuevados* with a tree trunk.”

Corinna tried to sound genuine by being interested in contacting Number Two. She left, closely followed by the slab of muscle, with a contact to call.

After the door shut noiselessly behind her and she was finally alone, she walked up the street, trying to control the shakes in her legs until she reached the metro station and she could sit down on a bench and wait for a train.

Well, she had survived. She even knew who’d run the canisters through. Maybe Number Two would be number two in fearsomeness as well, and she could somehow find out who, exactly, among the MFMs had contacted him.

The longer she sat there, and the calmer she convinced herself she was becoming, the more this seemed like a logical course of action. She went from thinking that UNPB could do its own work from now on, to thinking that there couldn’t be any harm in seeing what Number Two was like. Who knew? It might crack the whole case open. And given what those nanites could do, it wasn’t like anyone could afford to waste any time tracking the perps down.

She called “Number Two.” After going through the equivalent of a couple of layers of secretaries, a man with a small vocabulary came on the line.

“Who sent ya?”

“He said to say Jorge. The place was in Santa Maria.”

“Ah.”

There was silence at the other end. It seemed to be up to her to keep the conversation going.

“He said you might be able to help us.”

“We might.”

Silence closed in again.

“Well, can you?”

“I dunno.”

Corinna began to think that if she really did have something to smuggle, this was the last outfit she’d use. This guy sounded like he might have trouble filling in his name on the forms when he was arrested. Yet he was one of the higher-ups. Maybe he just acted like an ox. It certainly had a way of forcing her to keep talking.

“Is there perhaps someone there who does know?”

“You’ll have to talk to the boss.”

Anyone but you, my good man, she thought.

“I’ll be glad to.”

“Will you?” said the thick voice. “I don’t think so,” and he chuckled, as if she’d said something funny. “You wanna talk to him though, you’re in luck. If he wants to, he can find you at Café Arbol in an hour.”

She checked the time. The famous café was only about eight stops away.

“Yes, I can be there by then easily. How will I recognize him?”

The voice at the other end let out another subnormal chuckle.

“You won’t. He’ll recognize you.”

Anything for a quiet life, thought Corinna.

“Well, I’m kind of average. Average height, average weight, brown curly hair. I’m about thirty and I’m wearing a blue jumpsuit.”

“And you’re a gringa.”

“Yes. And I’m a gringa.”

“Okay. If he wants to talk to ya, he will.”

The connection clicked closed.

She stared at her wristpad for a moment. All she could think was that from now on she never wanted to deal with anyone but normal people. People who were polite, and said hello, please, thank you, and goodbye in all the right places, and didn't spend their time trying to humiliate or terrify or manipulate her.

Of course, people like that were in short supply even when she wasn't dealing with the dregs of humanity.

A short while later, she sat in Café Arbol, watching the minutes turn over so torpidly she began to fear she'd fallen into an alternate universe with different physical constants. She sipped her coffee, checked her wristpad, and waited. The appointed hour came and went. The minutes trickled by more slowly still. She continued sitting because she wasn't sure what to do next, not because she had any real hope that Number Two would show up, whoever he was.

And then a well-remembered voice spoke behind her and made her heart jump into her throat.

"Corinna. Does Azo know what you get up to while he works?"

It was Tiro, smiling his evil smile at what he considered a joke.

Her voice refused to function. All the opening lines she'd counted on were so much useless fluff. Now more than ever it was essential to make her cover story convincing, now that it was totally hopeless. She had no choice but to play the hand she had dealt herself.

"I get up to my work, Tiro. I have a client who needs some material shipped with a minimum of paperwork."

"Does he," said Tiro, slit-eyed. "And this is all part of the service, ey?"

Her story sounded so thin, even to her own ears, she could have read the newspaper through it. She was also getting tired of this constant assumption of maleness.

"He's a she, actually," Corinna said.

Tiro asked all the same questions about where the "material" was going and how much money was involved, not taking his flat, black eyes off her for an instant. She could feel their stare making the skin prickle on that side of her face.

He leaned back.

"Azo let you go out with this crazy scheme, talking to any old *cholo* in this town? They're not all as nice as I am, you know."

She fought down irritation.

"Azo, as you call him, has nothing to do with it. This is something I need to arrange for a client of mine." She certainly wasn't telling him that Oziel had called it a dumb idea, in his own polite way.

"Listen. Corinna." He flung her name down as if it meant "stupid," but at least he took his stare off her and looked at the street. "Lying to me is unhealthy. Or you have to be a lot better at it. Now, you're a neighbor. You're even family of a brother. You're not just some idiot foreigner. I'll overlook it this time. But," his stare came back to her suddenly, before she could look away, "don't try it again."

He stood up and left, and only then, when three men followed him, did Corinna notice that his bodyguards had been posted on the perimeter the whole time.

She sat motionless, trying to ease the rock-hard tension in her neck and the jelly-like feeling in her legs. She had never looked into the empty sockets of Death's eyes on a dark night, but she couldn't imagine it would be much worse. Her original notion of extracting nuggets of information with a few clever questions looked as laughable as using a tornado to run a pinwheel.

She shifted position, then stood up to go home. It was strange that the threat of personal destruction focused the mind so overwhelmingly, when the much vaster threat contained in the nanites ought to be more terrifying. Yet she had already decided, without even having to think about it, that she would say nothing to the cops about this particular microdot of information. She could walk into hell and demand answers, but if she was killed for it, and if it wasn't enough to avert disaster, she would have done nothing but die sooner rather than later. And dying later, when you came right down to it, was one of the main goals in life.



## Chapter 8

Two short weeks after running a gauntlet of gangsters, and with no noticeable results coming out of UNPB, Corinna sat at the spaceport and held onto Oziel's hand, not sure how she was going to force herself to let him go. Precisely because UNPB had no results, and therefore wanted to maintain perfect secrecy and silence in the interest of raising neither suspicions nor panics, life had to go on as if it was normal. She'd be gone for a month, the first long month without him since she'd found out he was part of her. She'd be pretending to pay attention to rabbits while she spent the whole time crazy for reassurance that no nanites had escaped on Earth. Because once the nanites escaped – well, perhaps she could be wildly optimistic and say *if* they did – traffic to and from Earth would stop. Suddenly, dying wasn't the worst of it. The worst was dying with him on Earth and her on Mars.

Yet, because of UNPB's stodgy approach, she was booked to rocket off and look at rabbits. Rabbits! She could not, just now, envision herself keeping her mind on a rabbit for more than a second or two.

Oziel, without letting go of her hand, used his other arm to embrace her.

"Come, *mí cielo*, it's time to go. There's a CTS pilot headed toward us. It'll be okay, *mí amor*. I know it will. And I'm always right, remember?"

She hugged him so hard, she would have been afraid of hurting a less solidly built person.

"Forget how much it costs and call ... constantly, okay?" she asked for the fourth time.

"*Sí, mí cielo*. And I'll email. It'll be all right. I know it will."

"Don't forget me, Zio."

"Ey, Corita, how can someone who's so smart be so stupid, hm?" It had become a joke between them.

She could feel him trying to let go, and knew the CTS pilot was probably dithering from foot to foot somewhere in the background.

How it happened, she was never quite sure, but a few moments later she was walking down the security concourse with the pilot, and glancing back at Oziel no oftener than every few seconds until he disappeared when they turned a corner. The only good thing was that since she could piggyback on a private CTS courier flight boosting almost one G the whole way, the trip would take even less time than the last one, and that had been a speedy first class ship.

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It was a relief to arrive on Mars. With Anlut and Momo to talk to, she could do something besides fend off brooding by reading technical papers.

"There's a simulation on tonight," Anlut said when Corinna came by the tiny apartment after dropping her things at her hotel. "Actually it's a rehearsal of the real thing, but they're letting the public watch, as if it was a simulation."

"A simulation of what?"

"Seeding the comet impact sector with methanogen bacteria."

"Some of the low pressure varieties? That'll speed up the warming effect by decades. Aren't the MFMers going ballistic?" asked Corinna.

"Yes, they're rocketing about a bit," said Momo. "They're particularly unhappy because it's not simply a naturally tolerant variety. It's also been engineered with rhodopsin, so it's dark-colored and it can use the sun's energy directly to grow."

"Jeepers. I'll bet they're rocketing about. So, is it a 3D simulation?"

Aniut nodded.

"Ooh, I love those. When are we going?"

"As soon as you're done with dinner," said Aniut, her eyes in little horizontal commas as she watched Corinna digging shamelessly into one of her special casseroles of vat protein.

"Hah. Tough choice," said Corinna as soon as her mouth wasn't full for a moment. "Anything further on those canisters? I'd like to think I would have heard if they'd found any more, but then again, I don't think UNPB sees me as one of the need-to-know people. The only thing I know, at this point, is that Lasker's identity was stolen, because the real one answered my email. An extremely polite gent who's a hydroponics flow processes specialist. He's agreed to keep a low profile and let UNPB track any use of his ID, so the perps won't realize we know about it."

"Well, the police haven't found any canisters as far as I know. Did they tell you about the fellow who delivered the organics from that vandalized dome?" asked Momo.

"No. What fellow?"

"He was the one who removed waste between your first and second visits to that dome. That would normally have been Jason, but he'd been out sick and another worker named Zeke Fidel had taken his place. He told the police everything seemed normal when he was at the dome, and there seemed to be no reason to doubt him. He's done dozens of rover runs, although never to that particular dome, and he's always been a good, reliable worker. The load of rabbit droppings he trucked in needed twenty five point four extra liters of water before they reached optimum moisture for composting, which implied he'd been careless about sealing the bins, but it wasn't his regular route."

"Or it implies he spent more time at the dome than he said," Corinna pointed out.

"That's what occurred to me later. I was keeping my eyes open for anything connected with that dome, and about two weeks after that, I noticed that Jason had 'replace cracked temp sensor' on his work list. I'd never heard of one of those things cracking, so I asked him about it. He brought in the pieces. Water had gotten into it, frozen, and cracked it."

"Water! Nobody told me about condensation or humidity problems. That could foster disease organisms. I'll have to talk to Johnson and Shao about that."

"There weren't any problems. I asked. There was just this one sensor with too much water in it, and the load Zeke trucked in that didn't have enough. I thought that was so strange, I let the cops know about it."

"And what did they say?"

"They wouldn't have said anything, except everyone knows everyone here so I heard about it. Apparently that was how the sensors were fooled into ignoring the down-spike in temperature. Blocks of ice were frozen in the right shape and hung onto the sensor housings."

"Oh, for...."

Momo nodded. "Exactly. The sensor had water ice around it which didn't go much below zero and which buffered it from the air temperature when that plummeted. Then when it warmed back up over freezing, the ice melted and everything looked normal. Except that it dripped into one of the housings and caused a problem later."

"The readings stood at zero for hours, but that started well after I'd been there, which would put it at the time the dome was cleaned. Which implies this Zeke person is the vandal."

"It implies that," agreed Momo. "Unfortunately, it doesn't prove it. The dome temperature is normally around zero at that time of day. It might have been done later, during a clandestine clipper stop, for instance. Zeke Fidel, of course, insists he knows nothing about anything."

"What about the time delay on the thermostat programming? I thought that indicated it had been done in the morning."

"Well, now that's really interesting. You remember how it took the investigators no time to realize the programming had been altered and a time delay added? Buried ten layers down, so it took UNPB's best computer detective on Mars, it became obvious the time delay was faked. There may not have been any real delay at all if the vandal was there at three in the morning, arriving by clandestine clipper. But it's rather clear that the investigators were supposed to find the altered programming, and realize that the problem was sabotage instead of an accident. They were *not* supposed to discover who really did it. Somebody is trying to frame someone else."

"The interesting question is why," said Corinna. "That should lead us straight to who. When they tried to put it on me, I assumed it was MFM trying to take the heat off themselves. But if it's someone trying to frame MFM ... then, what for? And if it's this Zeke character, why in hell would he want to do that?"

"That's exactly it," agreed Momo. "His denials sound unlikely, except that he has no conceivable motive. There's nothing in his background that allows it to make sense."

As the guy's boss, Momo could look at Zeke's personal data in considerable detail.

"He arrived about two months ago and started working as a rover driver while studying at the University for certification as a transportation engineer. He's a model student, there's nothing unusual in any part of his background. He changed his name about five years ago, but there's nothing illegal in that."

He stood up, his huge frame filling the tiny kitchen in an effect Corinna was growing accustomed to. He walked over to a terminal in the central room, and called up the relevant files.

"Changed his name?" Corinna repeated with raised eyebrows, as she followed him over. "I hate to think what it was before, if Zeke Fidel is an improvement."

"I don't remember, exactly, but it was an ordinary Anglo-Saxon-type name like John Smith or something."

"And he changed it to Zeke Fidel? Well, to each his own, I guess."

The picture in Momo's personnel files showed a young man in his early twenties, who would have been handsome if he had been less aware of how handsome he was. He had the carefully self-conscious face of a fashion model.

"Looks as if he doesn't like having his picture taken, doesn't he?" was Momo's comment.

"That, or he's practicing to have it taken often," said Corinna.

A short while later, she had the opportunity to see the original in the flesh, because Zeke was at the simulation. He had arrived with a bright, blonde, chatty girl who seemed determined to take a delighted view of everything. The two of them were cordial enough to each other, but like two students in the same class, not even like friends. Corinna noticed that the bright girl wore just one earring, a small gold circle bisected by a wavy line, which was somehow more noticeable because it was unpaired.

MFM was there, of course. The earnest leader smiled and waved to Corinna, looking more sincere than ever under a placard reading "Marsforming, Not Terraforming." The other two members were also carrying placards. "No More Polluted Planets." "Use Protection. Keep Mars Beautiful." It seemed that the movement was receding from the goal of a pristine Mars and approaching one of contained development.

The room lights darkened, the projection area in front of the group of onlookers lightened. A reddish, rocky plain of low, undulating hills extended right to their feet, as if they stood on the surface and breathed an atmosphere that didn't exist. The view zoomed rapidly up toward orbital altitudes as the terraformers panned around for their first site, then plummeted back down again. Corinna loved it. It was the closest she was likely to get to being an eagle, but she could hear Aniut next to her saying,

"If they do too much of that, I should have taken my motion sickness pills."

They leaped from point to point around the north pole as only a planet-sized ballerina could have done. They landed on the edges of the comet's expected main debris field, with simulated chunks of ice, some the size of hills, which there would be, and with a tiny simulated ice climber driving pitons into a sheer face and waving, which there wouldn't be.

"Sheesh," murmured Corinna, "you forget the size these things are going to be until you see something like that."

The two terraformers were arguing near an open microphone about which programmer had played that trick.

"No, not Angela. She does little green bug-eyed men."

"Well, with Bruno it's all HAL, all the time, so who else is there?"

"This, by the way, folks," announced one of the terraformers as he returned to a public-sounding voice, "will be part of the area focused by the space mirror during orbital passes. Temperatures well above 0°C will be common, and may reach over 20°C on occasion. That'll speed up melting both directly and indirectly by increasing the activity of the methanogens. That'll also

increase volatilization and atmosphere formation, although it won't begin to be oxygenated until the blue-green algae start surviving in large numbers, probably about fifty years from now."

"Oxygen is nice," murmured Momo under his breath to Aniut and Corinna, "but can you imagine the planet being covered in black slime to do it? Almost enough to become an MFM sympathizer."

Apparently, the MFM leader had spotted the same opening, and pointed out that the simulation shouldn't be a propaganda piece for the pretty parts of the process. It should show what the algae would look like. One of the terraformers said, "Sure, whatever." The other pointed out that sims of this complexity weren't run in real time. It would take hours of processing to add five minutes of views of algae.

"Then run ours," said the leader, who had come armed with a memory card.

"Sure. Whatever," said the one terraformer again. He took the card. The scene switched to 2D, shifting the whole audience to a palpable feeling of flatness, which was rapidly followed by an even less welcome feeling of ugliness as some black-smudged scenes of Mars were displayed. Everybody, except the MFMs no doubt, wanted to get back to the breathtaking 3D visions.

This, Corinna couldn't help thinking, was more like the MFM she'd always known. Not the death-dealing organization they seemed to have become. Them and their shell corporations.

The official sim returned and the viewpoint leaped, soared, and came down in a region of towering rock formations and gorges. Spires standing much too tall faced into winds too thin to topple them. However, this whole chasm would turn into a river during melt phases, and it took very little imagination to see the spires falling, dissolving, and never returning.

Another leap and pirouette brought the view to a rock-strewn field stretching to the horizon. Prevailing winds were strong here, and could help disperse the gradually released methogens over a wide area of the cometary debris.

The simulation continued for another twelve sites in what was the grandest tour of the planet Corinna had ever seen. She could have sat there the rest of the night, watching Mars in as much comfort as if it was Earth, sad to think of the alien landscapes destroyed, yet vastly curious about a new world with gravity so light that people could fly if there was enough of an atmosphere. Nor was she the only one riveted to the panorama. The girl with one earring was not only looking delighted, she was actually taking notes. She must be a student at the University, fulfilling an assignment. Zeke was also thoroughly engrossed, although the expression on his face didn't look like wonder. Of course, he seemed the sort of person who might consider wonder beneath his dignity.

The session came to an end. With a promise to Aniut to come by for breakfast, Corinna headed back to the hotel. Initially, she stared at the floor as she walked along, envisioning all too clearly Aniut's little storage room where she would not be staying, and Oziel, with whom she would not be sharing it. She shook her head and looked up to find something to distract her attention, and thus managed to avoid bumping into Zeke who had stopped ahead of her to let somebody pass out of a doorway. Then he went in. Gym, it said. Corinna decided a workout would be a good idea. It would sweat the cobwebs out of her mind, and it would remind her of Oziel, who never let her slack off on exercising when he was around.

Zeke, she couldn't help noticing as she worked away on the mountain-climbing machine, was topless, lifting weights in front of a mirror, in the classic pose of a guy quite taken with himself. And then she looked more closely. He had a dim, homemade tattoo on his left pectoral, a circle with a squiggly line through it.

Well, she thought as she pulled on levers with her arms and climbed with her legs, that implied he and the girl were partners, if he had her earring design tattooed on his chest. Or maybe it was some new fad she'd never heard of, sweeping the younger set. The thought made her feel old.

She tried to concentrate on going through the motions when she noticed the tattooed fellow walking toward her, currently shirted, not to say downright shirtless.

"What were you staring at?" he wanted to know, sounding belligerent.

Corinna cared neither for his tone nor for the implication that she was hankering after him. As she looked at his carefully vacuous face, she decided that the correct answer was,

"Nothing."

He made a noncommittal, skeptical noise, muttered something about being fed up with all the

tracking, and walked off, leaving Corinna with a festering resentment and even more cobwebs than when she'd started. She tried to concentrate on physical motion again, to empty her mind of distractions, but unanswerable metaphysical questions insisted on bubbling up, such as why the world was full of jerks.

It occurred to her, once she started thinking, that his comment could mean he thought she was connected with the police, following him around on the chance of finding something relevant to the CTS dome. If only.

And then she began to think about a question with an easy answer. Should she call Oziel and feel herself unkind at the first sound of his soul-warming *Ey, Corita?* One look at her wristpad showed it was three in the morning there and that the answer was no.

She returned to her room, having barely dented her sense of frustration. The Zeke fellow was not only obnoxious, he had hauled freeze-dried rabbit pellets out of a dome with iced sensors, and the police had nothing on him. It wasn't right. Would the police even know what to ask about his activities among the rabbits? Not likely. She should insist on questioning him herself, and then see whether his answers rang true.

That, she decided, was precisely what she would do. She composed a message then and there to the Chief of Investigations, requesting a meeting. Maybe she was doing it for no better reason than a dislike of the guy and a desire to get back at him. Maybe a nice person would have left him alone. But she was tired and frustrated, and she pushed the "send" button.

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The next day passed much better than she had expected. The Chief of Investigations was very receptive to her suggestion of some additional questions, going so far as to say that he himself had been dissatisfied with the trend of answers during the interview with "Mr. Fidel," as he referred to him. Then she had spent the day pleasantly enough, checking on rabbits, which she was glad to find she could concentrate on, and flitting from dome to dome, issuing edicts about the next phase of the study. She would have liked to stop herself from scanning at every opportunity for the reflected glint of half-buried canisters, but she couldn't, so she tried to ignore herself. The hopelessness of finding anything that way only made it all the harder.

Now, sitting at a large screen showing a view of the small, grey police conference room, she watched Zeke being shown in. She suddenly understood that his normally vacuous expression was a form of self-defense, because with increased defensiveness it became even emptier. She could hear everything that took place and could speak to the investigator's ear bud over the microphone in front of her. That way, if Zeke's answers suggested further questions, she could provide them.

After the usual polite preliminaries, and Zeke's renewed avowal that he had no desire at all for legal counsel, the tall, thin, melancholy-looking male investigator said they had a few further questions, in addition to the ones Zeke had already answered. First he asked about the illness of the regular driver, the reason Zeke had been driving that day in the first place.

"I'm not sure," said Zeke. "He didn't come in and I filled in for him."

"When we spoke to the regular driver, he noted that you and he had been at Paolo's Pizza the previous night. His 'illness,' he says, was a hangover."

"Really? I guess I didn't notice how many beers he had."

"A glass of beer at Paolo's is ten euros. He had nine. The restaurant records show you paid the bill. You didn't notice an extra ninety euros on the bill?" The investigator projected enough skepticism to cover the US national debt.

"I'd had a couple myself. I don't think I examined the bill. I just authorized the charge."

If he stuck to the story, there was nothing anyone could prove, but it certainly sounded like a set-up to Corinna. The investigator moved on to the first of Corinna's questions.

"I know you don't normally clean out rabbit domes as part of your work in Recycling, so I realize it would take you longer than the regular workers to deal with them. However, try to remember how long it took you to complete the actual mucking out part of the visit to the dome in question."

Zeke's expression did not change.

"It's been so long. I don't know. It's all there in my log of that trip."

The investigator put the relevant section of the log up on a screen.

"Yes, but that only reports your total time at the dome. My question is how long the cleaning part took. Not water tank refilling, or food provision, for instance."

"Well, gosh, I don't know. I don't remember it taking particularly long. Why does it matter?"

"Just answer the question, please," said the questioner, looking a shade more melancholy at having to state the obvious.

"Well, the whole time there was a bit under half an hour." He glanced up at the log as he said this, no doubt checking to make sure he didn't contradict himself. "The actual solid waste disposal was probably around ten minutes, maybe a bit less."

Bingo! thought Corinna. The automated system dumped the pellets from the layer under the hutches and pens onto a holding bin, which emptied it into the big transport bins. The holding bin would handle no more than twenty kilos at a time, and given how much that dome had needed cleaning, that process alone should have taken over fifteen minutes, not ten. Nor could it be allowed to proceed on its own since the Prime Directive of the holding bin was Murphy's Law, and it always spilled pellets or jammed as soon as it wasn't being watched. He had to have stood over it and had some idea how long it took, not least because it was so tedious. Mr. Zeke was merely trying to fill in expected answers, which meant the entire log was probably fake.

The next question involved a minor point of procedure. The last thing one did before leaving the dome was laboriously count every rabbit and make sure none of them were outside the pens, and that each of them had stayed in the right pen. Machinery could have done this, but supercomputers were not standard equipment in ag domes. So one had to flash count the rabbits in each pen with the digitizer three times, hoping like heck that the numbers stayed the same through each repetition. If they didn't, the rest of the day could be spent hunting for stray rabbits. Corinna had pointed out that the numbers were stored to facilitate error-checking until they were pushed off the top of the stack. Working backward to Zeke's numbers, she had found six improbably perfect groups of three.

"How would you describe the flash-counting process at the end?" asked the investigator.

Zeke looked puzzled.

"Well, I don't know. You point the device at a group of rabbits and it counts them."

"You had no difficulty with any part of the process?"

"Well, no. What's to have difficulty with? You point and read off the number."

Even veterans like herself sweated blood trying to make sure they counted all the critters once and only once. A beginner should have noticed a problem or two. Zeke was trying so hard to make his log look normal that to anyone who knew anything about it, he'd made it obvious it was fake.

The guy was lying through his teeth about what he did at the dome.

Corinna spoke quietly into the microphone.

"He's obviously into something up to his eyeballs. Ask to speak to all his friends. Whatever it takes. Something is going on here."

The detective was a professional. He betrayed not the slightest twitch at having voices in his ear.

"I'd like to thank you for your assistance," he said to Zeke. "We'd like to speak to the people with whom you are in regular contact, as well. Could you give me their names?" The detective pushed a digitizer tablet toward Zeke.

With a minute downward crease to his mouth and a little, vertical furrow that appeared between his eyebrows, Zeke, the cooperative worker, wrote down several names. Corinna could see as they appeared on the screen that they were all male.

"Is one of these your partner?" asked the detective with the obvious intention of starting with the closest connection.

"Absolutely not," Zeke spat out, in the first flare of any real feeling Corinna had seen in him. He seemed positively revolted, which was an odd reaction if these people were supposed to be his friends.

She wondered if they would all have the same tattoo, or if that was just something he shared

with his girlfriend ... who wasn't included in his list, she noticed.

Then again, maybe she wasn't his girlfriend. It would be interesting to know what that tattoo meant.

"Just for the hell of it," she said to the detective, "ask him about the significance of the tattoo on the left side of his chest."

"According to our information," said the detective smoothly, "you have a tattoo. However, this is not listed in your file under distinguishing marks. Why not?"

Oh, wow, thought Corinna. Now the cops had caught him committing sins of omission on forms. Now he was really in trouble.

"Tattoo?" said Zeke, obviously unsure how to proceed. "Oh, that. I probably just forgot."

"I see. Well, let's fill it in now. Location?"

"Top left chest," Zeke muttered.

"May we record the design digitally, or would you rather describe it?"

Zeke unzipped the top of his jumpsuit and the bodyskin beneath it, and let the fiberoptic lens of a camera zoom in on the tattoo.

"Any significance?" asked the detective.

"Not really. It was a club I belonged to as a kid."

There was a hesitation to how he said it that made Corinna wonder what it could have been, but, knowing Zeke, it was probably some little boys' group whose only reason for existence was to exclude girls.

"Well, thank you very much, Mr. Fidel. You've been very helpful."

Corinna had better things to do than worry about Zeke's club affiliations because she had the next hour booked to call Earth. She spent it feeling downright happy, slowly conversing with Oziel across the light minutes. Then she lingered over another superlative dinner at Anicut and Momo's. She was puttering around her hotel room, knowing perfectly well she was trying to put off the moment of climbing into an empty bed, when she suddenly thought Zeke's tattoo couldn't refer to some boys' club because the bright chatty girl had the same design. Maybe there would be something about it on the net. She began puttering on the desk terminal in the room.

A fuzzy search on her drawing of the logo, which was on the fuzzy side itself, yielded a surprising number of companies, organizations and references that used circles with squiggly lines through them. When the line ran horizontally, it was, in one instance, the logo of a cookie company. Vertically, it was used by an organization of goat's wool hand spinners. Zeke didn't seem like the type to get mussed up messing with goats. Nor could she envision anyone being so fond of a brand of cookie as to tattoo the logo on his chest. She scanned down the list with a tired eye, telling herself she was just wasting time. However, she kept scanning. She might be tired, but she wasn't sleepy.

The simplest thing would be to search on the fellow's name, but that gave the surprising result of no publicly accessible net references to him. He had no personal page, nor was he on the page of any friends, schools or organizations. That took some doing and was interesting in itself. It implied he didn't want people looking up anything about him.

She started searching with more interest for information on the logo. After six screens' worth of obvious misses, she found a group called Defenders of the Faith. Following the link produced a page with pictures of a contented prayer group of clean-cut young people, looking like Zeke's and the bright girl's brothers and sisters. The earnest teenagers looked so wholesome, Corinna couldn't help wondering what went on inside their heads in the small hours of the night. The thought occurred to her that maybe Zeke had changed his name because that made it Ezekiel the Faithful. She felt the glow of satisfaction that comes of growing certainty that a wild goose chase has ended in unexpected success. However, she wasn't sure where it got her, exactly. So the fellow belonged to a prayer group. So what?

One thing, of course, was that for some reason he had not wanted to tell the police about this group. Judging by their web site, they were slightly nuts, in a medieval sort of way, but there was no law against that. They were an offshoot from the Lambs of Faith, dedicated toward an even higher level of clean living, clean thinking and a generally antiseptic attitude than the parent organization. She wondered casually whether a more appropriate name for the developed version of the group should not have been Sheep of Conviction. There was a link labelled "science," which

she followed, curious to see how the Defenders handled all the sex and messiness in biology.

Not very well, as it turned out. She had never paid much attention to the smaller religious groups, or to the larger ones, for that matter. Beyond a vague notion that as late as the 1800s there had existed people who believed the Earth to be a few thousand years old – or flat, she could never remember which – she had not been aware of current trends in literalist thought. The Defenders didn't mention the Earth being flat, although they were wonderfully precise about where life was created, right down to the day of the week and the specific location in the Middle East. The creation of people was right there too, as simple as throwing a pot. Of sex there was not a trace.

She grinned to see her suspicions borne out. They had screens and screens worth of polemics about life. God had created it on Earth – there was a link to the page saying where on Earth – and it was a travesty to assume it could exist anywhere else. They explained the two alien signals received so far by noting that they were obviously messages from God, indecipherable to a fallen humanity, which would become clear once people deserved to understand them. They had a link to donate money to the SETI decoding effort.

What, she wondered, bemused, were people like Zeke doing, cluttering up other planets, if they felt Earth was the only God-sanctioned place for them?

Then her sense of mild, tired amusement morphed into a creeping sense of disbelieving dismay. In a weird sort of logic, the Defenders' ideas about where life belonged dovetailed with those of Mars for the Martians. Were their agendas close enough to turn them into strange bedfellows? Were the Defenders, perhaps, one of the elusive sources of funds for MFM's schemes? She studied their site again, looking for evidence of wealth, but, except for a demure request for donations on the home page, money was as invisible as sex. They certainly had a number of attractive retreats in excellent locations, though. Their finances were definitely something it would be handy to have a good splicer look into.

There was also *someone* out there with plans for those dreadful nanites. She had a hard time imagining any human being who didn't have two heads and three eyes inflicting those on anyone, but it was nonetheless true that both MFM and a couple of Defenders were at the sim that showed the best places to deposit dusts for dispersal. Those sites were not secret in any case. Spreading methanogens was a scientific project, not a military one, and the dispersal areas could be looked up on the terraforming web site. Maybe those areas ought to be checked carefully for the presence of the three remaining canisters.

Then she told herself she was jumping to conclusions, and she couldn't go suggesting something as costly as planet-wide searches based on nothing but her disdain for a bunch of flat-earthers.

Then again, if it was a silly idea, and UNPB found nothing, only time and money would have been wasted. If, on the other hand, they did find something, disaster would be averted. She sent another late-night message to the Chief of Investigations, suggesting a search flight.

At dawn on Arsia the next day, she sat in a police clipper with a metal detector cobbled together in the space docks to her specifications. Unlike any ordinary detector, this one was tuned to titanium, the main metal in biocontainment units, and was set to detect trash can-sized lumps of it as far underground as the sensors could penetrate.

Flying low and slow over the first methanogen site, the clipper traced a pattern of widening circles. There was nothing there, at least not within two meters of the surface. Nor was there anything at the second site. The third site seemed set to yield nothing as well, but on the last pass, about a kilometer out from the center, behind a small rise, was an area of disturbed ground. Careful overflights pinpointed a spot that set off the detector.

The clipper landed. The excavators, electronics specialists, and bomb disposal experts got busy. One hour later, Corinna had the pleasure of sharing a ship with one of the ghastly canisters. One of the fakes made weeks earlier nestled in the ground below. Ideally, the people responsible would have no clue anyone was aware of them, and would not start hiding even more effectively than they already did.

The police examined all fifteen sites and found one more canister.

Defenders of Faith joined MFM on UNPB watch lists. Which, thought Corinna, is all very well and good, but there is still one canister out there. And, worse yet, there was a fabrication lab

somewhere on Earth, as well as all sorts of shipping and storing that would end in disaster the very first time one nanite leaked out.

The days passed, the initial euphoria of finding a potentially new angle on the problem faded. The solution might be just around the corner, but the corner went on forever, like those treks where each bend in the road shows only another bend in the road, and no destination in sight. Corinna wrapped up her consultations regarding CTS's engineered rabbits. Anitut spliced into several servers in the hope of finding out more about the Defenders' finances, but found only that she couldn't do much from Mars.

"Have Oziel try it from Earth," she said. "Then you're bound to find it, if there's anything to find. But why don't you wait till you can talk to him about it. You're leaving late tomorrow. It's only a delay of a week, and you don't know whether the people behind the nanites don't have someone like me of their own. If they find out you're looking for them, God only knows what someone like that might try."

"Mm," muttered Corinna. "I have to hope the people vandalizing domes and the people trying to spread nanites are different, because everyone knows I called the cops about the dome. On the other hand, practically nobody knows about me and the nanites."

"Keep it to nobody, is my suggestion," said Anitut.

But that, Corinna realized the following day, was not entirely up to her. She'd finished her last task on the surface – rigging up an experimental laser scanner in one of the domes to read the rabbits' physiologies without embedded chips – and was due to fly directly to the spaceport on the CTS clipper with the same two pilots she'd grown to know quite well. She had a couple of hours to spare, Elke Vahtinen and Reza Shebbaz were perfectly happy to spend more time flying, so she suggested they return via a circuitous route to take another look at as many of the methanogen sites as they could. What she thought she was going to see from the air without the necessary equipment, she wasn't sure.

What she did see was the starburst of another landing at one of the two sites where canisters had been found. The scattered sand lay on top of the marks of her previous trip, so it was definitely a later visit. While Vahtinen circled slowly, Corinna called the UNPB Investigations Unit.

No, they told her, no authorized return visits had been made to the site. Satellite images had no record of a ship, so landing and take-off took less than an hour.

Yes, they would fly out to investigate.

The clipper continued on toward the spaceport, and all Corinna could think about was Anitut saying *keep it to nobody*. They were now aware that somebody knew about their canisters.

Would they guess that she was one of the somebodies?

The information about Zeke's tattoo had to come from somewhere, and he could easily guess she'd seen it.

## Chapter 9

The courier ship made the best time current technology allowed, yet all Corinna could think was *faster, faster*. She had let Oziel know exactly when the orbital shuttle was due to touch down. She'd laughed at herself, but she'd even estimated the number of minutes she'd probably take to reach the end of the security concourse. But the interminable trip was suddenly and mercifully abbreviated when the CTS courier received an orbital transfer slot a full twelve hours early. There had been a cancellation due to technical problems, and the courier was the only ship in range capable of altering its speed enough to take advantage of it.

She'd be home before eleven pm. It seemed a waste to have him come all the way out meet her, and it would be fun to surprise him.

Of course, as usual with that sort of plan, it turned out it wasn't fun because he wasn't there. He must be catching up on work, since he wasn't expecting her to be home yet, so she dropped off her cabin bag and headed toward the Center.

It was past eleven when her iris pattern opened the door and let her into the darkened hallways of the Center. There were no lights at the front of the building indicating where he might be. He had to be here. If he wasn't at home and he wasn't here, then he might be at his mother's, or Marco's, or one of his sisters', or Miguel's ... or just about anywhere, in fact. She'd have to call him and dispense with surprise. Or maybe not. There was light spilling from the gym at the back of the building and she quickened her pace.

Corinna stopped suddenly in the doorway to the gym. He was standing on the other side of the room with his back to her. And a very young, very beautiful woman was wound around him like ivy.

Her name was Trella, if Corinna remembered right. He had his hands on her waist and was saying something to her. Corinna couldn't see his face, but judging by the rapt expression on what she could see of hers, he must be saying something rather special.

She stood stock still in the dark of the hallway, paralyzed except for the pounding in her chest.

He had given her no inkling of anything like this. She had always thought she'd be the first to know. He had always seemed the soul of truth.

So much so, actually, that what she was seeing made no sense. Could there be some explanation? No doubt, she found herself thinking sourly, they were rehearsing for the school play. Believing in Oziel, at this rate, required her to disbelieve the clear and convincing evidence of her eyes.

He was still saying something to the girl, and she was wrapping herself around him even tighter.

What was going on here? What should she do? The classic option in this most classic of situations would be to cough and let them know she was there. Corinna could just see the shocked expressions and consequences of coughing right now. If there really was some explanation, maybe a better way to handle it would be to return home, wait for him to get there, and then discuss it under conditions where the truth, whatever it was, wouldn't be right out there for anyone to see.

As she sat at the station, waiting for a train, she thought of calling him from there, but then decided against it. She couldn't sound like her normal self without feeling like she was lying, and she couldn't ask him what he was up to over the phone. It would have to wait till she saw him.

And then she did see him. She saw him together with Trella, an arm around her shoulders, coming in to the station to take the train. Corinna sat, dumbfounded, waiting to be noticed, but they didn't see her. They walked up the platform a ways, Oziel still speaking earnestly to the girl.

What in the name of God and all Her saints was going on here? Corinna couldn't believe he was planning on taking Trella back to their apartment. It just wasn't possible.

Was it?

The train rumbled in at that point, and she could see them get in a couple of cars away. She could see them sit down through the glass end doors. He kept his arm around her.

Her mind continued boggling at the impossibility of it all, even as her heart began pounding in her chest again. Apparently, her body was starting to believe her eyes.

It was to be expected, she supposed, surrounded continually by young women as he was, that sooner or later something like this would happen. She had always known she couldn't keep him if he didn't want to stay. However, he would have let her know. He would have. She was sure of it.

They were still on the train, and there was no way Corinna was going home if that was where they were going. It would be beyond embarrassing to all meet up at the front door. She saw them stand up when her station approached.

This was looking bad. Very bad. Extremely bad. She decided to continue back to the spaceport and call from there, as if she'd just arrived. She'd try to sound normal somehow. She just had to make a wall out of reminders that he would have let her know and she had to shut out the evidence. There had to be an explanation. She felt her belly cramp with the desperate hope that there really was an explanation. It cramped worse when she couldn't stop the thought that maybe ... there wasn't.

When she reached the spaceport, she didn't call immediately. She wanted some more time for the project of sounding normal on the phone. And to get ready for what she might hear. Besides, her stomach was letting her know that her last meal had been at the transfer station in orbit. She'd eat something first. Then call. It would be midnight, but he hadn't looked like he was going to sleep.

She passed the Flying Burrito Brothers and the Armadillo Cafe. Further up the concourse, the fast food joints didn't look any more appealing. She went and stood in line at a place called Alice's Restaurant. This particular chain's idea of decor included bright, clashing colors of magenta, chartreuse, pink, and yellow, done in eye-popping swirls. She wondered what the big idea was. The food couldn't clash as badly as the decor, or the place would have been shut down by the health authorities.

The woman in line in front of her wore an earring of a circle with a wavy line through it.

It was funny how often it happened that after seeing something once, suddenly it popped up everywhere. There was the time in first grade when someone had showed up with an arm ring, and when she asked about it, been told that "everybody" had them. And then the time when she'd first heard the word "plethora" and then seen it in every newscast and book for the next few weeks. She'd never even heard of these Defenders before a couple of weeks ago, and now she was seeing them everywhere.

The woman, she suddenly realized, was looking at her as she stared stupidly at her earring.

"Hi," said Corinna mechanically. "I was just noticing your earring."

"I've worn it every day since the Anointing," said the woman with a smile of such brilliance, Corinna had no trouble hearing the capital letter. "I can tell you all about it. It's the most beautiful thing --."

Corinna's part of the line had finally reached the food, and she made noncommittal noises while the woman bubbled on. Were all female Defenders bright and chatty? It would be interesting to find out, purely from a scientific standpoint, if this happened because happy, chatty women became Defenders, or because the Defenders put them through a brightness training program.

The woman waited for Corinna at the checkout, as if they were friends who were going to eat together, and then joined her at the table when she sat down. Apparently, Corinna was going to have her ear talked off about being covered in oil, or whatever it was. It was probably just as well. It would be a distraction. There had to be an explanation. Oziel had never lied about anything. He would have let her know. It was, she noticed, easier to believe that when her eyes weren't faced with evidence to the contrary.

"I was wondering," said Corinna, coming out of her preoccupation with the vague sense that she had interrupted the woman, "how the younger people deal with all the clean living in your --." She stopped. What did you call it? Your group? Your movement? Your sect?

"In our faith?" completed the woman. "We dedicate ourselves to our mission. Our mission is our life. Other thoughts should never intrude if your soul is properly centered on your mission."

"Yes, well, that's what I mean. That little word 'should.' When I was eighteen or twenty, I would have had real trouble sticking to the program, at least as outlined on the web site." Even now, at thirty, she and Oziel —. She stopped. She was going to have to make that phone call soon.

The woman was carrying on about the forgiveness of sins.

Corinna tried to concentrate on what she was saying.

"I thought there was something about repenting. *Then* sins are forgiven. You can't just do ... stuff and expect to be forgiven and race off and do it all over again, can you?"

"Of course not. The repentance has to be sincere. But there is no limit to the love of God." This with another brilliant smile.

It sounded awfully convenient to Corinna. Do your thing, get your conscience scrubbed, accumulate the next load. Maybe the idea would make more sense to her if she weren't so preoccupied with one of the cardinal sins.

"I met a couple of Defenders on Mars," she said, trying to convince herself she wanted to finish her singularly tasteless ravioli. "But as I understand it the idea is that life belongs on Earth. So isn't it a sin to be living on Mars? By choice, no less. It's not like anyone is forced to live there."

"The Lord has work for us in many places."

"And what sort of work does God have for the Defenders on Mars?" Nothing to do with making sure life stayed where it belonged, and then coming back and having their sins forgiven, she hoped.

"There are souls to be saved everywhere," said the bright-eyed young woman.

Well, that was certainly true, Corinna thought sadly.

"So, is that what you're doing here? Catching a flight to work on your mission to save souls?"

"Exactly," beamed the woman. "I'm only going to Australia, to a place called King's Cross in Sydney. But the ones more grounded in God's work will be taking the sacrament and spreading it to the Lost People."

Again, Corinna could hear the capital letters.

"Those being the people off-Earth?"

"Yes," beamed the woman again. "You seem like a person ready for the Word. Would you like to come to one of our meetings?"

Meetings, thought Corinna. She could just see herself saying, *Hi. My name is Corinna and I have been meeting-free all my life. Until now.*

"Um, thanks, I'll think about it," she said instead. "I hope you have a good trip," she added as she stood up. The woman had better understand that as *goodbye* and not come nestling next to her wherever she went to sit.

It seemed to work. The woman smiled at her, looking a bit disappointed, but did not follow her as she recycled the remaining ravioli into the "animal feed" bin. Travel was said to broaden the mind, so maybe it was just as well that the Defenders were gadding about the galaxy like this. Always assuming that all they were spreading was words. By the sound of this young woman, though, it was hard to imagine them doing anything else.

Yet Zeke was definitely involved in something on Mars. Of course, there was a long road between killing a dome's worth of rabbits because you thought you were doing God's work, and killing every living thing on a whole planet.

The sardonic thought came to her that she felt better thinking about the nanites than one small phone call. She just had to be careful to stick with the easy topics, like the annihilation of life. Taking a deep breath, she began tapping in Oziel's address. She couldn't put it off forever.

"Corita!"

He sounded surprised, but at least he answered. She'd half-expected to be leaving a message.

"Uh, yeah. I got back early. I'm out at the spaceport." Nothing untrue in any of that.

"Out at the spaceport...." He sounded scattered and confused, but then his voice grew more certain. "I know. I can call Renaldo. He can take over. I'll be there in twenty minutes, *mí cielo*, okay?"

It was her turn to be confused. Renaldo? Could take over doing *what*? This was becoming very strange.

“Corita?”

“Uh, yeah. That’ll be fine, I guess. Or I could just head home.”

“I’m almost there. I’m halfway to downtown as it is. We can ride back together. You need someone to carry your bag, after Mars.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll wait in the observation lounge.” After the connection closed, she remembered that she’d already dropped her bag off at home. Maybe he’d been too occupied to notice it. What did he mean, “halfway to downtown”? As a lie, it seemed useless, and as truth it made no sense.

The observation lounge was a darkened area of scattered seats that overlooked the spaceport through an huge wall of windows. She took a seat close to the window-wall and watched cargo vans outside, shuttling back and forth, back and forth. Why, she thought, isn’t it forth and back? Doesn’t everyone generally go forth first, and back afterwards?

The next jetway over was being serviced during the night time lull in traffic. People in blue coveralls were doing something rather spectacular with an arc welder. It meant the passengers using that gate had to board one of those ponderous buses and be chauffeured out to their clippers or shuttles or whatever. A bus pulled away from the lower level, brimming with young people. A college group, Corinna decided, and then she recognized the woman from Alice’s Restaurant through the forward window of the bus.

That, thought Corinna, is the big advantage of a group. You didn’t have to think about things and you had umpteen other people not to think about them with.

The bus rounded a corner and disappeared. She went back to watching the cargo handlers maneuvering back and forth ... unless it was forth and back.

“Corita!” called Oziel, and she turned her head to see him crossing the lounge in long strides. He seemed delighted to see her. He enveloped her in a hug before she’d said a word—

—but in a moment he backed off and asked,

“What’s wrong?”

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. Where could she begin? The rush of feeling when she saw him had taken her voice away.

Instead of anything coherent, she asked him why he’d been halfway to downtown.

Everything about him was just the same. If she hadn’t seen him in the gym, she’d think he was the same person he always had been. Maybe he *was* the same person he always had been.

He sat down in the chair next to hers, ignored the intervening armrest, and put his arm around her shoulders.

“Ey, don’t even get me started. Nobody lives in the barrio without having bad days, but this one was right down there with the worst. You don’t need all that on top of whatever it is that’s already so wrong. What is it, *mí Corita*?”

“Tell me what sort of day you had,” she said. “I’d like to know.”

She could feel him hesitate. Very few things made him hesitate, and the sinking feeling she’d been fighting for hours tugged at her.

“If that is what you want, *mí cielo*. It was bad, though. I was so screwed over by it, that even if you hadn’t called, I was planning on just coming out here to wait for your flight. I couldn’t stand to go home to empty rooms after that.”

Screwed over. Interesting choice of words, she thought.

“Do you remember Trella?”

She stared at him, nodded, then looked away. Apparently, he was going to tell her the truth. If so, why was he calling it the worst day of his life?

“Do you know what happened to her a year ago?”

Corinna hadn’t even been here a year ago. She shook her head, staring fixedly out the window.

“Her older sister does drugs. She was on some kind of rampage, so Trella went off somewhere to wait it out. She ran into a bunch of thugs and, well —”

The tension of his arm around her shoulder was now that of someone thinking about throwing a skull-crushing punch.

“— She was really messed up. Miguel was the one who took her to a hospital and they even kept her there, some little no-name from the barrio, they kept her there overnight.”

“A year ago,” said Corinna in spite of herself. “Hell, she was a *kid* then.”

Oziel nodded, once.

"She really needs counseling, some kind of help that none of us knows how to give her."

Wait a minute. Surely he didn't think that help included –

"Ever since then she's been throwing herself at just about anyone who pisses standing."

But, for God's sake, the kid wasn't – *couldn't* be – herself. Surely, Oziel, of all people, wouldn't –

"She's looking for affection or recognition. You can feel it."

*Can* you, she thought, rendered completely speechless by him telling the truth.

"It can be hard to get her off you. I'm petrified of hurting her feelings, and I wish I knew whether it would be better to tell her *no*, and get it over with, or whether that would destroy any remaining sense of being worthwhile that she has. Anyway, it's all a mess, and this has been going on for months."

"*What*, exactly, has been going on for months?" asked Corinna. He was discussing it so openly, even he, straightforward as he was, couldn't be talking about sex. She started to have the odd sensation of being in a spaceship when the gravity warning came on, but she wasn't sure which side would be down.

"She'll come to whoever she's after, smiling like a love goddess, and start wrapping herself around you. I just try to slowly detach her while I tell her that I'm old enough to be her father – I am, if I'd started a family at fifteen – and that a beautiful, wonderful girl like her will find a nice fellow in no time. I don't know if I'm just making her problems worse, or not, by doing that."

"Oh," said Corinna. If she was understanding this right, the girl had done all the embracing, had done nothing but embracing, and he had merely tolerated her. For the first time since she'd seen him in the gym, she began to feel like something other than a fool for trying to refuse to believe her eyes.

"Anyway," he continued, "that was all long ago. Tonight, José volunteered to work late and lock up, but his little sister is sick, so I said I'd stay, since you weren't home. I noticed Trella just sitting in a corner of the gym. An hour later she was still there. I got most of the kids to leave, and she was still there. It was past eight by then, and the part of the barrio where she lives, you don't want to be walking around after nine or so. I was afraid maybe she'd wrapped herself around the wrong guy and gotten in bad trouble again, but when I asked was she leaving, she just threw herself on me and started sobbing."

He took a deep breath.

"Turned out her older sister, in some kind of drug fit, had gone and killed her younger brother, and she'd been right there, unable to stop her, apparently she tried, and...*O Dios santo*," he whispered. "Anyway, it took me about an hour to get her calmed down. Once she started doing her love goddess thing again, I figured I could get her to the all-night clinic where they could give her some tranquilizers. Then I called the police, went over to her shack, saw that the body was picked up, got the address we'd need to call when the police were done with it and it was time to make funeral arrangements, and talked to one of her neighbors about getting her shack cleaned up. Then I picked Trella up from the clinic and took her back to the Center while I found her a place to stay for the night so she didn't have to go back to her crazy sister, who's still loose, and the *rancho* where her little brother just got killed."

He fell silent, and Corinna did nothing but breathe for a while. Under the circumstances, the only thing he could have done was to let the girl embrace him.

"She's got nobody now. Her mother died years ago." He closed his eyes and gave his head a shake, as if he could shake off an awful universe that way. "Anyway, you see, *mí cielo*," he continued, massaging her shoulder slowly, "why I was saying you don't want the barrio's troubles on top of your own?"

She nodded and asked,

"So she's staying at our place?"

He looked at her in complete puzzlement.

"No. If I started on that, we could have the whole barrio living with us. What gave you that idea?"

"The barrio's troubles gave me the idea. I came back early, over two hours ago. I couldn't wait to see you, so, when you weren't at the apartment, I went to the Center. I saw you, I guess after you'd found Trella a place for the night."

He sat next to her, staring at her dumbstruck, his hand frozen on her shoulder.

"God help me." He formed the words without making a sound.

"It didn't seem like a good time to show up, so I thought I'd ask you what was going on when you got home. Then when I was at the train station, it looked like you were taking her home, and, well, at the time, that didn't seem like a good situation either, so I decided to start over by coming back here."

"God help me," he whispered again. He looked at her, eyes wide. "I ... I was so wrapped up in the trouble, I never thought how it might look. I—I'm sorry." He leaned over the intervening armrest to put both arms around her and bury his face in the curve of her neck. She leaned her head toward him, savoring his wonderful scent that she'd thought she might never breathe again.

She felt him shake his head as he nuzzled her neck.

"You know, even if you hadn't seen me, you would have heard about it from somebody. Probably tomorrow. You'll hear about it from twenty people who saw me with her at the station."

"So, what were you doing with her on the metro?"

"I'd found her a place to stay for the night. Santa Paula's." When she looked blank, he added, "The church about five blocks away from us. They run a shelter for kids and they were the closest to our Center when I called around looking for beds. Then when we arrived, it was full and I had to take her about ten stops further down the line. That was when you called."

And he'd had his arm around Trella because any human being with a heart would have done the same. Nor had he sent her on alone, in her condition.

Corinna rubbed her cheek along his silky hair. She slipped her arm over the armrest, between the chair and his back, and around him. He felt large and lean and solid, and a warmth like laughter travelled up her arm from him, putting life back into her. She hadn't realized how frozen she'd forced herself to be, waiting to find out whether she could believe her eyes. Well, now she knew. She could believe them just as soon as she'd figured out what they were telling her.

He leaned over again and started kissing her. The feeling of him spread through her, as if she'd never been frozen at all, and she pulled him closer, glad to be home at last. It didn't take long before she became quite annoyed with the armrest.

"I should tell you," he said between nuzzles, "that the barrio's troubles go further than ruining your return home."

"Oh? How so?"

"Quintón actually came to Mami's house last Friday, even though he knew I was there, to warn us all that the gangs are going to be fighting. Something is going on between Tiro's and Pedro's groups. Besides leaving the Center alone, Tiro stopped charging protection money from the little guys. It's set the town on fire." He made a wry face.

"Oh, Christ. So what does a warning do for us?"

"You try not to be home. Failing that, you try to make sure you have some place to hide if the bullets start flying on your street, and your biggest fellows and your biggest guns, if you have any, get ready to defend what they can." He grinned sadly at her.

"Don't even think of it," she said.

"*Si, Señora,*" he replied with a smile only partly joking.

"We'll pack your whole family in our apartment, if that's what it takes." She leaned back toward him. "Jee-sus, it's always everything at once, isn't it? Nanites, the idiot gangsters, and I already have my most useless client leaving messages. All we need next is cops on the take. Then I'll probably start shooting someone."

"Don't even think of it," he said.

"I wouldn't actually know how to fire a gun, so it doesn't matter what I'm thinking." After a pause, she added less glumly, "Nanites. That reminds me, I need you to do some splicing about those nanites."

"Then should we think about heading home? I can't do that here."

"As well as other, more important, things we can't do here," she said, standing up without letting go of him.



## Chapter 10

As far as Corinna was concerned, the hardest thing to get used to about looming disaster was how little effect it had on day-to-day life. There was still a living to be made and clients to take care of. She had to visit Washington D. C. for a couple of days to press the flesh at the funding agency handling her grant application for Oziel's Center. Everything trundled on as if the future was assured and there was no danger of dissolving into a slick of black slime or being blown away by random bullets. She received word that her rabbits were doing even better than expected in their new domes, and a contract came her way to train a group at the University on how to use the new DNA readers. Through her growing contacts at the University, she found a slot for Trella to get counselling for free as part of a certification course for psychologists. Although, as she dropped the girl off for her first appointment and saw the clueless, well-intentioned woman who would be speaking to her, she sent up a fervent, silent prayer that counselling wouldn't merely make things worse.

Once Corinna was in front of her class, she did her best to focus on showing the roomful of postdocs and grad students how to simulate quantum-level interactions of DNA in solution. But even something as simple as that managed to be frustrating. The demo trundled so slowly it must be competing for computer time with God running a simulation of Creation. Then, when she checked running processes to see whether she should just try it later, the admin page didn't report any unusual use of resources. So it had to be some stupid denial-of-service pranksters who thought they could get away with it by covering their tracks. Well, she'd show them what it meant to interfere with her work. She'd get Oziel to look at it, and then report the blighters to the University of Wisconsin, which ran the site. Meanwhile, apologetically, she moved on to the next topic she needed to cover.

Corinna picked Trella up on her way back to the barrio. Not much good could happen in one session. Maybe not much bad had happened either and Trella would be willing to continue. She seemed just the same, mumbling a greeting and averting her eyes. She'd always been like that with Corinna, and Corinna had assumed it was because she, a weird, educated foreigner, intimidated the girl. Now she knew better, but she didn't know whether it would help or hurt to bring it out into the open. She smiled faintly to herself at the thought that in this respect she was just like Oziel.

She dropped her off at the Center and went to find him.

"If you have a few minutes, there's something I'd like you to do for me before the ratbags have disappeared."

"Ratbags?" he said with a small smile. "Point at them, and they'll be grease spots."

"It's not actually a matter of grease spots." She explained the problem, and he nodded and led the way to his tiny office.

It took more than a few minutes. He kept tapping and tapping, doing interminable and inscrutable things, like a ticket agent booking a space flight.

"It's not a simple denial of service," he finally said. "You're right that something is going on, because there's a command for the system software to ignore a varying proportion of the usage. If this is some high school kid, he's good."

"Why does it have to be a he?" objected Corinna.

He gave her a sidelong grin and looked back at the screen.

"What's even stranger is the problem is much bigger than just that one site. The same program is piggybacking on the distributed SETI processing."

"The program to decode the two alien signals?"

He nodded.

“That’s *millions* of computers. Why hasn’t anyone noticed? Everybody’s work must be stuck in slo-mo!”

“Whatever this thing is, it uses varying proportions of time, to make it less noticeable. The SETI worm uses only between one and five percent. That’s small enough so people will assume it’s a random fluctuation. Same thing with the UW site. Huge jobs pass through that site now and again, so it was set to fluctuate between fifty percent and one percent. It just made the mistake of taking fifty percent when a grumpy Corita needed the system and wasn’t going to take no for an answer.”

“Trying to stay unnoticed doesn’t sound like a denial of service attack at all. Can you see who’s running it? That might take us to why.”

He started doing interminable and inscrutable things again. Corinna grew bored and left to find dinner. When she came back with two *arepas*, he was leaning back, looking disgusted.

“Nothing. Except that a lot of it is going through the same ISP in Washington, D. C. that the Defenders mainly use. So that narrows it down to about fifty million people.” He looked more disgusted.

“Did you ever find anything on those Defenders, by the way?”

“No. Except for the fact that their security is run by a clown with no sense of humor – their accounting files use *passwords* and the word is *GodisSupreme!!!* – complete *manazas* – the only obvious thing was that they have more money than they know what to do with.”

“More’ being defined how?” she asked. His definition of untold wealth could easily be a few thousand euros.

“Hundreds of millions of dollars.”

“Oh.” That really was a lot. “Just sitting there?”

“The only things they spend money on is their network of retreats and sending some students off-planet to save souls. No forklift loads of cash going to nanotechnologists or anything.”

“Who gives them all that money?”

“Sí. I wondered the same thing, but you don’t even have to be a splicer to figure that out. It’s right on their main web site. To become a member, you have to give them at least ten percent of the value of everything you own.”

“Jeee-sus. All for the privilege of living in a spiritual autoclave. Such a deal. Anyway,” she continued, “back to the thing taking up computer time. What does it actually do? That should point toward who’s doing it.”

He shook his head.

“The program is so big, I can’t find any meaningful commands in all that mess, except the one about varying the load on resources which is in the first couple of lines. Everything else is billions of repetitions of strings that all have the same pattern, but they don’t seem to do anything. The whole thing is completely fried.”

As he spoke, he tapped away and the screen filled up with an endless scrolling list of mind-numbing masses of gibberish.

“No matter what I try, I’ve tried decompiling every way I know how, and none of it makes any sense. It’s just an endless string of nonsense.”

“Hm.” She sat a while in thought. “Maybe it really is nonsense, if it’s just a prank where someone’s waiting to see how long it will take anyone to notice.”

“Then they’d just repeat something, like ‘hello world,’ or use a random number generator. This isn’t random. It has subtle patterns to it.”

“If there’s a pattern, can’t it be decoded?”

“I’ve tried. It doesn’t make any sense as text, image, or numbers. Look at this, for instance. Pretend everything is normal, use ordinary hex, convert to text, and this is what you get.”

It was alphabet soup.

“You’ll notice these would all be relatively high on an ascii table –”

She’d noticed no such thing, but she was willing to take his word for it.

– “so I looked for a way to convert it to lower on the table. A quasi-logarithmic conversion turns it all into numbers, which is nice, but still gets us nowhere.”

The screen obediently filled up with numbers.

It reminded her of the feeling she'd had long, long ago, when she'd started out as a molecular biologist and looked at her first sequences of DNA with their endlessly repeating ACTGs in patterns that never quite formed and always teased the eye.

"It's sort of like DNA," she said, "if numbers were used as symbols instead of letters."

"DNA repeats in groups of three, I thought you said. This repeats in twelves, with subsets of either three or four. That's the only thing this stuff does and there's not a numbering system or an alphabet in the world that works in multiples of twelve. Except time, of course, in a sense."

"DNA doesn't repeat in groups of three," she corrected absently. "Three bases code for.... Groups of twelve?" she said suddenly, staring at the display more than ever.

"Yes. See, the set starts here, ends here, repeats in a similar pattern three or four times, then here the whole group starts over, and there are twelve of the big sets – I counted them in about ten different places – and then the same general pattern starts over."

"How do you see these things?" she mumbled. "Twelve. You know what else repeats in twelves?" She looked at him. "The nanites. They're helices of carbon with twelve...how to describe it?...rosette patterns of carbon atoms per turn."

She dug her laptop out of her bag, fired up the files she'd saved of nanite data.

She heard him say, "Two arepas isn't even a snack."

She was surprised when he tapped her on the shoulder and she noticed it was dark outside. He had two bags with gazpacho in jars, and two fat burritos and two containers of flan for dessert.

"Much better," she said.

"Someone has to make sure you eat properly."

She smiled, thinking back to their first days together, and how many weeks it had taken him to train her into eating regular meals instead of working continuously, like postdocs do.

"This is just a side issue I was following up," she said, making disgraceful slurping noises as she gulped the excellent gazpacho. The smell of food had suddenly made her feel she was starving.

"I was trying to see whether there was a conformation with the right kinetic energy to break into threes rather than twos because then, of course, they'd multiply to the power of three, not two, and it would be worse."

"I don't understand a word, except that it's worse. Don't expect me to congratulate you."

She gave a little snort of agreement.

"No, it isn't worse. Yet, anyway. I don't think a three-part break is possible, which is why the things are programmed to break in half. So now we know how the designers are designing the nanites. I should have thought about all the processing power that kind of simulation requires. Do you think you can figure out where the original command comes from now?"

"Before, I was searching for parts of those repeats, which got me nowhere. Now that we know what they mean, I can search for something performing an operation on a meaningful unit of the repeat and maybe find some commands that way. What sort of commands would they be using? Do you know?"

"Presumably they're using the simulation to test growth parameters, or radiation effects, or the like. If this was modelling a DNA synthesis, it would have ... let me see ... well, at the very least, there would have to be the occasional empty electron orbit being filled, which is usually expressed like this."

She began scribbling on a pad of paper on his desk, and after a while handed him something that didn't look a lot better than the stuff on the screen.

He sat back down at his desk, studied her scribbles, and began tapping away.

"Hey, shouldn't I be making sure you eat?" but he didn't seem to hear anything.

Eventually she left to help José round kids up, shepherd them out, and lock the doors.

When she came back, Oziel was no longer tapping. He was leaning back, staring at the display.

"So? No result? You don't look happy."

He reached out an arm toward her, implying she should sit on his lap instead of the desk.

"I'm unhappy, *mí Corita*, because I'm tired of seeing people trying to do each other down. You know, long ago, I had this idea that once I got out of the barrio, I'd be safe. I think the worst thing about working for and with rich people was finding out that everyone, everywhere is the same."

"Not everyone, luckily," she said, nibbling on his earlobe.

"No," he said softly, holding her tighter. "Not everyone. Like these Defenders say all over their site, God is merciful. Crawling over their servers is what has me depressed. There's all this talk about God and Love and Truth, but they may be into the nanite shit up to their eyeballs."

"Oh?"

"Their server that I'd already broken into was one of the first to come up when I looked for the binary strings. I recognized the IP. So I went over that thing bit by bit, and down near machine level is where the program was hidden."

"They're giving MFM an awful lot of aid and comfort, if they're running the nanite sim for them."

"I'm not sure who's doing what for who. The problem with programs buried that deep is they might have been planted by someone else. The Defenders might not even know the programs are running. Or they may be the ringleaders. I found a couple of other things that make me wonder." He reached around her to tap at a few keys. "This is a screen shot I saved. See anything?"

"Hiram Processing! Do you think the Defenders are the ones behind all those shell corporations?"

"It looks like it. Once I found the server running the sim, I couldn't find much else directly connected to it. I waded through endless emails about God and Love and Truth and Anointing and sacraments and so on and on. So I looked for the accounts with the highest rates of encrypted messages on that server, figuring that they'd be the likeliest to be involved in funny business. There's not much need for secrecy if all you're talking about is God and the rest. Well, they're using a simple-minded encryption – it's obviously not being handled by the splicer of that nanite sim – which was easy to crack. Then I searched those accounts for a few key terms, and authorizations for payments through Hiram Processing popped up."

"How bizarre," mused Corinna. "It's hard to see how vandalizing a dome full of rabbits fits with their agenda. Unless maybe they view it as a small installment on limiting life to Earth."

"Very small," he agreed. "Too small to bother with, I think, given the trouble it could get them into. Maybe it was something MFM wanted them to fund, but without some sort of blackmail, it's hard to see why they would do it. There were a couple more things, too. One was an authorization to pay a company that sounded like one of the lab supply places you deal with, not at all like their usual contacts. I looked at the transaction details, and it was payment for a set of something called *Desulfovibrio desulfuricans*. I thought that might be significant."

"Jeez! You're damn right it's significant. So they were the money behind the sulfide bacteria incident! I guess that makes a bit more sense from their perspective: chase everyone back to Earth with stinkbombs."

He shook his head.

"Not everyone. The same person authorized millions of dollars worth of payments through an ordinary Defender account, not Hiram, to send students to Mars and the moon. It seemed like too many people for an anti-space organization, and when I cross-checked some of the people still seem to be on Earth. That may be why nobody can find visible payments to a nanotechnologist. They're laundering it via these student accounts."

"Jee-sus. And, at least in the US, as a non-profit, they can take a tax deduction for those expenses. Which means my taxes have been helping fund these monsters."

"Could be, but if they're smart, they aren't doing anything the government might decide to audit or investigate, so maybe not."

"Well, at the very least, they're in this up to their eyeballs, as you say."

"The last thing I found out," he said with the air of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, "is the physical location of one of the servers."

"Wow. How did you manage that? Don't the privacy laws make that impossible?"

He smiled, but all he did was hand her a printout of a map of greater Washington, D. C. with an address in a place called Seat Pleasant.

"Seat Pleasant? Are you sure? No place could really be called Seat Pleasant."

"I thought so too, but there's the map. The really interesting thing is that judging by usage, it's a Defender server, but the building isn't owned or rented by them or by MFM."

"Hah." She looked at the printout in her hand. "The owner is a Mr. Dalglish, Auto Processing and Prep. Whatever that means, it doesn't sound like either MFM or the Defenders. I assume you

didn't find his name on any of their lists?"

He shook his head.

"So we still don't know who the ringleaders are."

He shook his head again.

"No. They may be cooperating. One side might be using the other. I started a spider crawling the whole net, to see if anyone else is involved, but that'll take all night. Then again, only a few people show up repeatedly, so the organizations as a whole may not be involved. Although some of the ones on the Defender side also show up in lists of the leadership. They tend to have funny names like Moses and Bethlehem, so they're easy to recognize."

"I wonder how the higher ups square the commandments about telling the truth with lying to their membership."

"That's easy," said Oziel, disgusted. "It's in a good cause."

"Hey," said Corinna, who'd been perusing the map while they talked, "there's Glassmanor, only about fifteen kilometers away from Seat Pleasant. Glassmanor is where I get to go and talk to Santa Claus about giving us money for the Center. At least, I hope they'll feel like Santa Claus. I'll be right next door. I could go to Seat Pleasant and snoop around and diddle the computer. Or, better yet, we can go together and *you* can diddle the computer."

"How do you plan to do it?" he asked with a grin. "You walk up to Mr. Dalgliesh's front door and say, 'Oh by the way, I'd like to look at the binaries on your server.'"

"Sure," she said, grinning back. "You don't think he'd *object*, do you?"

"Can't see why. But, seriously, Corita. I can do that from here, but I don't think it would be a good idea. Whoever piggybacked that nanite simulation is a phenomenal splicer. Plain snooping is easy enough to hide, but if I did anything active ... I don't know. If I was that good, the chances I'd find me would be excellent."

"I see." She simmered down. "We certainly don't want them to know how close behind them we are ... until UNPB gets off its duff and starts arresting them."

Oziel stared thoughtfully at the screen.

"I was thinking about that. UNPB, I mean. I'd just as soon they didn't know I spliced, if we can avoid it."

"Mm," she said. "Yes."

They both thought for a while.

"All they really need to have handed to them is the fact of a huge nanite simulation running secretly. Couldn't I say I looked at memory usage on the UW site when my work was slowed down?"

"How would you know it was the nanite sim?"

"Well, I wouldn't, but I could try saying, 'Gee, what if that's the sim? They have to be running it somewhere.' It's not that hard to decode, once you have the right framework."

"Sounds like a story. But it's probably the best we can do. Once they know about the sim, the rest is pretty easy. A high school kid who's any good can track it down. ... So it all depends on whether they have any high school kids working for them. With their resources, they should be able to find the physical address of every server involved."

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Every time Corinna returned to the United States, the country seemed stranger to her. The careless wealth of the place leaped out at her. It wasn't just the number of flitters buzzing around between the monumental buildings of the capital. It was simple things, like the number of objects made of metal, and how many of them were trash. Metallic trash was picked up before it hit the ground in Caracas. The citizens here were as carelessly wealthy as the country, and as oblivious to it. Being rich was one thing. But somewhere along the line, Corinna had absorbed the sense that wealth put a person under an obligation to appreciate it.

Of course, she thought sardonically, any time she wanted to feel right at home all she had to do was get off at the wrong stop on the metro – the subway, that is. And, as she made the connection to take her to Glassmanor, she thought they could be as careless as they wanted about

throwing wealth, so long as it landed on her. She put on the bright, pleased face of an enthusiastic idealist, and set off to do battle with the National Endowment for Social Services, International Programs, Caribbean Department.

Some hours later, having expended enough brightness to feel the need for a nice, relaxing scowl by herself, Corinna took a seat in a coffee shop near the subway station. She picked up a copy of the local doings-about-town free newspaper, and settled down with a promising cafe latte to recover from having overextended her politeness muscles.

After one sip, she found herself staring at the coffee rather like Oziel stared at gringo brews. The stuff really wasn't up to it, once you grew used to the real thing. She chuckled at the thought that she was gradually changing color to match her new surroundings in Venezuela, yet she knew she would always be a stranger there. And now she was a stranger here.

At least her visit had gone well. She'd even managed to buttonhole the relevant Program Officer who had the direct responsibility for handling her application. Since he decided who to send it to for review, he, in effect, could make sure it was funded by sending it to people he knew would react favorably. He'd been particularly impressed with the amount of local support the Center received, and Corinna didn't elaborate on the level of personal gratitude that made Leira Dicastillo happy to drop hints to her rich and powerful friends. In a world where merit mattered, the Center was good enough to receive every support, and in a world where it didn't, you did what you could. She dared to hope that the money was as good as in the bag.

Leafing through the local paper, her eye fell on a small article about Mars for the Martians and she began to read it. It was the first time she'd seen anything about them in any news format on Earth. They were peripheral on Mars, with settlement and terraforming proceeding as if they didn't exist, but on Earth they were invisible. Maintaining the purity of some other planet had about as much appeal as the all-grain diet. The article concerned a simulation MFM would be showing, making clear the devastation terraforming would bring to a pristine world.

Well, already not that pristine, thought Corinna. She wondered whether it was an expanded version of the simple little sim she'd seen on Mars. Abruptly, all other thoughts were expunged from her mind by the address of the place. Seat Pleasant, it said, on the very street and in the very building as the mystery server.

She could go to see the sim as an interested nobody. And then she could quite anonymously look around. If Defenders hid behind every door, that would tell her something by itself. She could cover her too-curly hair with a bandanna, put on makeup, and say her name was Veronica Pruitt. That should be enough to disguise her as a member of the general public and keep her out of trouble. It wasn't as if either MFM or the Defenders was aware of how much she knew.

The simulation was tonight. She had plenty of time to eat dinner before catching a train.

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The problem with having plenty of time and nobody to share it with was that Corinna arrived in Seat Pleasant with more than an hour to spare. She walked slowly to the mystery building. The neighborhood was a cheap, depressing series of strip malls with streets wide enough for trucks and parking lots big enough for crowds of shoppers who only too clearly never came. Seedy buildings adrift behind the vast spaces tried to put on a brave front with garish signs and lighting.

She checked the address again and hunted for apparently non-existent street numbers. How did new postal workers ever figure out which letters went where? Her goal turned out to be a three-story prefab mistakenly painted ochre. It had to be a mistake. Nobody would intentionally paint something to look like an attack of diarrhea.

The door stood open, but Corinna dithered before marching in. She didn't see anyone around and she wasn't sure –

"You here for the sim?" asked a pleasant, tenor voice behind her.

She turned to see a reedy, stooped young fellow with a friendly expression approaching her.

"Yes."

"Come on in. Alan Wisbeach," he said, extending his hand.

She shook it, but didn't volunteer a name. Time enough to present aliases if they were

necessary.

"How long a sim is it?" she asked.

"About half an hour. We have the data to carry it about twice as far into the future, but we can't find anyone willing to give us the processing power to do it."

That didn't sound like an organization that had quietly taken over millions of CPUs. Or maybe they didn't like to raise suspicions by overdoing it on nonessential activities.

Wisbeach led the way into the building. Indoors, the place was still cheap, but with the hopeful poverty of people living on ideas. Posters fought for wall space with lists of things to do: "Demonstration outside Capitol. Monday, 3 PM sharp. Be there. The media will be." "Bernard, don't forget to code next month's mailing!!!!" "Gaia study group moved to Tuesday night." It looked like nothing but MFM activities. They also looked like they'd been here a while.

"When was the last time they did a sim here?" she asked her guide.

"Actually, we just rented this space a couple of weeks ago, so this is the first one. I know they were sweating all the equipment and connections because it's the first run through. Becky Farnsworth is even coming out just in case the software acts up."

"Who's she?"

"She's our sysop. She put most of the sim together."

That was a name to remember. The sysop had to know the nanite simulation was all over her server. Besides, if she put other types of sims together, maybe she was more directly involved in the nanite one.

Then Corinna nearly tripped over her feet. Wisbeach had just walked into a large room, but on a poster outside the door she recognized herself, minus bandanna and makeup. Some ten other faces shared the sheet with her under the heading, "Watch out for these people."

Why was she on a Wanted poster? Police informer? Terraforming perpetrator? If it was something to do with the nanites, she should get out while she could. There was no way to ask without drawing attention to the resemblance between herself and the face in the poster. She pulled herself together to hurry after the stooped young man.

"What part of Mars are you showing in the sim?" she asked as she joined him inside the room. The projection equipment occupied the far corner where three people fiddled with it.

"You're familiar with the geography?"

"Yes. Some."

"We're using Mariner's Canyon since most people are familiar with that. I'd love to see it for real before they trash it, but I don't have a snowball's chance in hell of that."

"Well, if you folks are successful, they never will trash it," said Corinna, pointing this out as a simple statement of fact. It was a rather big "if," of course.

The young man seemed to feel it, too.

"Yeah," he smiled sadly. "Mars has about as much hope as a candy cane in a kindergarten. That doesn't mean you don't have to fight for what's right anyway, though."

This matched Corinna's own philosophy closely enough to make her smile, although Martian bacteria were expendable in her concept of what was right.

"I guess my big question is why a few bacteria should be significant enough to stop – I don't know how to put it, exactly – to stop a huge adventure like settling another planet."

"It's not just the bacteria," said Wisbeach earnestly. "Not at all. That's a whole world. It would have been nice if we could have refrained from totally screwing over this world. There's not a square meter of it that doesn't show the effects of something we've done. And we're going to do this all over the universe? This is good?"

"Well, I have to admit, there is a splendor to lonely places that disappears once people start leaving graffiti on them." At least, these days, there were laws against excreting ads everywhere. "But I'm also kind of excited by terraforming. I guess you could say I'm conflicted about it all."

"If ter – Hey, there's Becky. I'll introduce you."

And before Corinna could find a plausible excuse why no introduction was needed, he'd waved over a tall woman with straight, thin, mouse-colored hair and a somewhat severe expression. She didn't seem to be any happier being introduced than Corinna did. However, after a perfunctory, "Glad you could make it to this sim, Veronica," she immediately left to help the projectionists and Corinna breathed a sigh of relief. She sat down, tried to act as much like a member of the general

public as she could, and listened to Wisbeach discussing the problems of terraforming.

So far, she'd seen no sign of any people who had the typical clean-cut, bright-eyed look of Defenders, nor any of their earrings, or any bibles.

By the time the lights were dimmed and the sim projector began to hum about ten people had trickled into the room. The vid was 3D, but miniaturized to reduce required graphics power. With a thrill, Corinna realized she knew that very spot in the Canyon. She'd driven a rover through there, and even recognized a specific, pig-shaped boulder because without avoidance sensors, she would have bumped into it while gawking at the Canyon's heights. It was funny. If someone had told her to recall the trip, she never would have remembered the boulder, yet when she saw it again like this, it was as familiar as the traffic light at the bottom of the hill where her parents lived.

The sim began at the hypothetical point when blue-green algae could survive unprotected on the surface. Corinna knew that level of engineering hadn't been achieved yet, but the sim glossed over it. Puddles of meltwater acquired slimy, black edges. Anyone who'd seen a longstanding puddle of water on Earth knew what that looked like.

The edges grew. She couldn't help thinking that it looked very similar, on a visible scale, to the way the nanites' microscopic pits grew.

Increased humidity in the Martian atmosphere made it possible for the blue-greens to grow on many surfaces, not just the edges of ponds, and soon the huge, magnificent Canyon began to look dirty, as if dust from an invisible coal mine had settled on it. It made her want to get in there with a dust wipe. The sim was about the right size for that.

Gradually the scum deepened and coalesced, turning the whole view into garbage. She remembered Momo saying, "Can you imagine the whole planet covered in black slime?" It wasn't a pretty sight.

Becky Farnsworth seemed to spend most of the time tapping on her wristpad, but if she'd helped put the presentation together, it wouldn't be that interesting for her. There was also a whole crew of people, some four or five, who came in late and flooded the room with light from the hall, washing out the crucial part where the "clean" Canyon was overlaid on the "dirty" one. Some people had all the sense of a chimpanzee at a tea ceremony.

The sim shut down and switched to a 2D rendition of the next phase: earthmovers mixing the organics into the soil in selected areas, grinding up whole valleys. Corinna wondered how all this would strike someone who didn't come to it in favor of terraforming. It was having a bad enough effect on her.

The lights came back on and Corinna saw the serious-looking woman walk toward her. Unfortunately, the room was too small to allow her to make a quick but inconspicuous exit, especially since people were milling around at the door, discussing terraforming.

Perhaps attack would be the best defense.

"That was a very well done sim," said Corinna before Farnsworth could get started on any questions.

"I'm glad you liked it," said the woman, not showing any actual gladness. "I have some more material I could show you that we had to cut from the final version."

"Oh, that's very nice of you, but I really have to be getting back. I'm staying miles away and I don't want to get lost on the trains late at night."

"It's only a few minutes' worth. I thought you'd be interested ... if you're really interested in the issues here."

Corinna felt compelled to say she'd love to see the extra material. But she absolutely had to leave with everyone else. Almost all the visitors were gone, although the late arrivals and the projectionists were still milling around. She also absolutely had to preserve her cover. Maybe it would really only take a few minutes.

"That's very kind of you," said Corinna, watching yet another visitor trickle away.

"It's all set up in my office," said Farnsworth, leading the way out of the room.

Hell. Corinna definitely didn't want to spend an indefinite amount of time with her alone, liable to be recognized any minute.

As she followed her reluctantly, just before they started up the flight of stairs to the third floor, Corinna noticed that two of the late arrivals were casually headed in her direction, yet they

stopped when she turned.

She must have been recognized, and by a rather sinister bunch of people at that. The neighborhood had been quiet when she arrived. It had to be deserted now. She'd been a fool to come here. All she'd found was a newly established MFM office with some earnest anti-terraformers in it. The three projectionists were putting on coats and leaving.

"Before we start," she called to Becky, half way up the stairs, "could you point me towards the bathroom?"

"Oh, sure." She bent down to see under the ceiling of the second floor. "Down there and to the right. You can't miss it."

"Thanks. I'll find you upstairs."

"I'll wait here."

Corinna wasn't surprised. She saw the bathroom right where Becky had indicated, and noticed that the woman was looking to make sure Corinna found it.

With the door locked behind her, she thanked her luck that the building was small. The bathroom had an outside window. She opened it and looked down. The back of the building opened onto a wide alley of dumpsters and loading zones. The first floor extended out at the back. She could climb onto the roof, and from there it was only about a ten foot drop to the ground. Definitely do-able.

With her heart pounding, she flushed the toilet, wormed through the window and tried to touch the roof as lightly as a butterfly.

She missed by about fifty five kilos, but that couldn't be helped. She ran to the edge and would have lowered herself over it and hung down to reduce the drop, but she didn't know how to do that quickly and quietly. Best to jump. So she did.

The ground was amazingly hard and she would have spent more time massaging her ankles if she hadn't seen that the roof had covered a loading bay.

The loading bay was full of biocontainment canisters. There had to be twenty of the things there.

Her heart, she found out, had not been pounding before. *Now* it was pounding.

Were the canisters full? Empty? If full, full of what? Where were they going?

She definitely had to get out of here as fast as her feet would carry her, but she stole a glance at the closest labels before running. Three of them said nothing, but one said Caracas. She didn't dare take the time to photograph more than one of the labels with her wristpad, but at least she got one.

She fled toward a dumpster and tried to find a corner to turn, anything to screen her from view of the MFM building. Unfortunately, it was one floor taller than most of its neighbors, and there was no good cover here. Should she hide and hope they couldn't find her? Or should she keep trying to put distance between her and them?

She had to work her way back around to the subway station. On the other hand, they would probably expect that and might be in wait for her there.

She couldn't bear to sit still. Running off in a random direction was the best she could do. There was ominous silence behind her. No shouts, no lights, no whines of cars starting. They weren't going to wait forever for her to come out of the bathroom. They must be following her already, and she couldn't hear them. She ran faster, breathing like a bellows. Thank God, Oziel made her exercise.

After running what had to be a mile, she came across a strip mall that was not locked down for the night. A bar of lethal-looking seediness stood next to a game arcade blaring music into the unreceptive night. She ducked behind a row of game machines, and tried to catch her breath. There were three people in the same row of machines, boys in skin-tight leggings, each fixated on his own machine. She continued catching her breath.

Then she keyed in an address UNPB had given her to call when she needed to reach an investigator fast. It was far after hours. She reached voicemail.

Cursing quietly to herself, she called the emergency number for the regular police. They were just going to have to pass her up to someone on duty at the UNPB Special Investigations unit.

Her problems started right with the dispatcher. UNPB itself had sternly ordered Corinna not to discuss nanites with anyone, so she couldn't tell this gum-chewing woman the scope of the

problem, and without that the dispatcher plainly considered her hysterical. The woman pointed out that she was calling from a game parlor on 71<sup>st</sup>, with the clear implication that if she wasn't hysterical, she was a prankster. Corinna icily demanded to be connected to her supervisor.

That took forever. Corinna peered out periodically from behind the row of machines, expecting any moment to see a car pull up from which she would have to escape. Not so easy here, come to think of it. The arcade owner didn't want people sliding out the back door, so there was only the one large front entrance. It occurred to her that she could be on hold in the comfort of a taxi just as well as standing in a game arcade. She had more or less lost the extravagant habit of taking taxis, but maybe this was the time to make an exception, even if a fifteen kilometer ride would cost as much as her hotel for the night.

Putting the line which had her on hold on a hold of her own, she reached a taxi company, ordered a car, waited for it, and climbed into it, all before the supervisor surfaced. By the time she reached her hotel, she was finally talking to Special Investigations. They said they'd send someone right out.

It was a bit late, she thought, to call it "right out." However, she didn't say that. She said only "goodbye."

It was way past time for her to be calling Oziel and telling him how her search for money had gone. He'd be worried, but she didn't know how much to explain about why there had been a delay. She could just hear his quiet rumble as he said, "Ey, Corita, I can't leave you alone for a minute, can I?" So, when she called, she said only that she had lots to tell him after he met her clipper in Caracas tomorrow.

The next morning, when she called in to find out what the canisters had contained, she heard the police had found none. None at all.

No doubt, the MFMers had been busy hauling them away instead of chasing her. And now, also without a doubt, she'd really be down on their watch list. Every time this woman shows up, it would say, we have the cops after us.

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It was impossible to be exasperated as she boarded the clipper to Caracas. It was even more impossible a couple of hours later when she had to concentrate her whole mind on not running down the security concourse to Oziel, who stood near the end of it, smiling at the sight of her. But once she started telling him the full version of the previous night's events, the annoyance crept back.

"Can you believe those dingdongs? Can you?"

He shook his head.

"We have to hope these idiots looking for a new world order have their own problems with stupidity."

"Sheesh." She shook her head, too. "To think we have to rely on stupidity to save the world. Anyway, I thought I'd pretend I had to check one of my shipments through CTS and see what I could see. The nanite canisters were shipped via CTS the first time, so who knows?"

"It's worth a try," he said, following her into the labyrinthine passageways of the port's cargo section.

A series of inquiries brought her to the same greaseball of a custom's agent she'd spoken to several weeks ago. She knew UNPB hadn't made any arrests yet to lull suspicions about surveillance, but it was a shame they couldn't have made an exception for this piece of smeg. As she watched the greaseball's improved demeanor, now that Oziel stood at her back, she had to suppress an urge to ask her large lover to beat the pudgy little blot into pulp. Why his previous insulting behavior was rendered even worse by disappearing in the presence of a man, she wasn't sure, but it was, and it would have been intensely satisfying to see him reduced to a stain. She tried to collect her thoughts to ask neutral questions about a canister of hers being shipped from Seat Pleasant, USA.

Apparently the questions were too complicated, because he said he had to go back to check

something.

"He's fishing for a bribe," murmured Oziel, with the unerring instinct of a poor man dealing with a bureaucrat.

The customs agent came back, accompanied by a thin, handsome official with more stripes on his jacket and a mustache that was clearly the love of his life. Corinna suppressed a groan.

The agent didn't seem happy either. Whoever this adhesive superior was, the agent didn't want him.

"The larger size biocontainment units are supposed to receive their final approval from me, although, of course, Officer Gardenas," he nodded toward his junior, "does the initial processing. What did you say the problem was?"

Corinna repeated the fiction about an apparently mis-shipped canister and how important it was, and how Señora Dicastillo herself would be upset if it was not found. Corinna suggested she look at whatever they had in the loading bays, because she thought she'd be able to recognize the unit itself, even if it had been mislabelled.

This was highly irregular. Did she have the requisite security clearance? No, she did not, but after dropping the Dicastillo name a few more times, Mustache Man seemed to get over it. Did she have the requisite biocontainment clearance? That she did have, as they could see as soon as they searched for it on the chip embedded in her passport card. Oziel had no clearances at all and couldn't go in. She wasn't sure she wanted to let him out of her sight, but how much could they do with him waiting right there, instantly able to call the police if she didn't come back soon enough?

She followed the thin official with the many stripes and the single mustache through a doorway and into a secured area.

She tried to suppress a gulp at the sight of three canisters from Seat Pleasant sitting in their own glassed-in containment cell.

"When did these arrive?" she asked, trying for nonchalance.

"This afternoon, Doctora," answered the official. "I am quite sure none of them can be yours."

Why was he so aware of those particular canisters? Was he the one who'd been paid off to pass them through, instead of Mr. Greasy Gardenas outside? Or, now that he'd gotten wind of this lucrative sideline, was he horning in on his junior's extracurricular earning opportunities?

"No," agreed Corinna, "mine should have arrived earlier than that. This is dreadful. That canister has to be found. There is over five hundred thousand dollars' worth in that one canister alone."

"We will certainly be on the alert for a unit matching your description of the label. It was probably lost in the US, and inquiries there may be more fruitful."

Sure. The Americans would say it had been lost in Caracas. There was something about the way he said it, the excessive smoothness perhaps, that suggested he didn't believe in her canister, which must be raising the worst suspicions in his mind.

It didn't matter. This time she was going to have UNPB swarming over this place before the night was out.

She didn't go through channels. It was Friday night, and she now knew what happened when the channels were closed. Instead she called Leira and found out the personal phone address of the local UNPB bigwig. He was only too happy to get rid of her by giving her his subordinate's direct contact information. She was coming to appreciate the smaller, more individual scale of government here, especially because she had a lever or two on it. Once she explained the situation to Investigator Rodriguez, he thanked her for the tip.

"We've been watching a whole group of customs agents at the port, but either we have a leak among our own people, or the smugglers are very clever, because we can't seem to get them with the goods. Let me get started on this, Doctora. Maybe this time we can move fast enough to trap them."

"I've also already told the US arm of UNPB about Farnsworth, She's definitely someone to keep an eye on, too."

He said goodbye, and, while the metro rumbled on, Corinna leaned back into Oziel's encircling arm with the hope that things might at last move in the right direction.

"Hey, what's all this?" she asked as they walked into their apartment to drop her bag off. There was a box of funny hats and silly spray and those humorous squeakers that uncurl and biff people

in the face when you blow on them. There was also a case of beer and wine.

"It's for the big festival on Second Christmas Day, next Sunday, in our neighborhood. You forgot?"

"Why, so I did. That's the first one of these huge block parties I get to see, since I've managed to miss Dia de la Raza this year and last." She smiled in anticipation, picked up one of the whistles, and made sure it was okay. It was. It emitted an earsplitting squeal.

Luckily, they were headed right out again, to his mother's in Petare and the big family dinner she always did on Fridays. That meant the elevator door was closing when they heard other doors opening and peeved voices inquiring what all the noise was about.

They walked across the main plaza in front of the Petare train station, where the doves, as usual, were working late, as did so many other inhabitants in the neighborhood. Life in the barrio never slowed down. There were strolling couples in the square, whole strolling families, single strolling prostitutes, and the occasional clutches of tourists curious about the real world. One of them, a goofy-looking blond gringo, stuck out like a sore thumb. He stared back at her as she glanced at him.

She and Oziel were in the warren of tracks leading to his mother's house when there was a yell followed by abrupt silence behind them. It was the goofy gringo. He'd been set upon by two gangsters, one of whom had a forearm across the fellow's windpipe and the guy's arms twisted up his back.

"Oh, Christ. Is – is there any way we can help him?" asked Corinna dubiously. She wasn't sure what they could do. Why had the turkey been wandering around by himself in these tracks? Without a local friend, it was an insane thing to do. There was zero point calling the cops for help against a hold-up deep in the barrio.

"Those are two of Tiro's higher-ups, Corita. We could get killed. Is he worth it?"

"Logically, I guess, no."

"What we ought to be doing, logically, is getting the hell out."

They both headed back down the track toward the unfriendly group of three.

"Um, pardon me." Without any difficulty, Corinna made her voice unthreatening and timid, not to say squeaky. "I gather he speaks English. If there's been some misunderstanding, maybe I could help...?"

The gangsters stared at her as if, perhaps, her hair had all turned into snakes. One of them gave Oziel a stream of barrio slang over her head, in all senses of the phrase.

The gringo, meanwhile, struggling violently the moment he saw her, broke loose enough to start yelling.

"Jezebel! Jezebel! *Jezebel!*"

He seemed wild, not to say lunatic. He was probably a tourist who had come to the barrio for exotic adventures, taken a load of mixed drugs, and now needed speedy detox before his brain bubbled.

"Look," she started to say, "will you let me call an ambul—"

The blond guy broke in.

"Jezebel!" he screamed. "The Jezebel shall be cast down. In the name of —"

The gangster's arm closed on his windpipe again and the fellow's eyes bugged out. Corinna winced.

"Look —"

This time it was Oziel who interrupted her. He put his arm around her shoulder and drew her back.

"Come on, Corita. There's no point. They say they told him to leave and he attacked them. They're never going to stand for that. Just forget it, okay?"

He was speaking very softly in Spanish, to avoid raising the gangsters' suspicions, and moving back, taking her with him, keeping the gangsters in view.

The thug with the job of holding on to the guy grew tired of the effort required and struck him hard with the butt end of a huge, black pistol. The guy went limp, and the gangsters headed off, dragging him down a side track.

"Oziel. Christ. Shouldn't we *do* something? Where are they taking him? What are they going to do?"

She glanced away from the hapless lunatic to see why Oziel wasn't answering her question, and was shocked by the blackness of his stare.

"Do?" he said absently. "Sure. We can do something. I can go and help those guys kill him."

She made an inarticulate gargle, then found her voice enough to say,

"What?"

He looked as capable of murder as the two goons who'd just left and he scared the hell out of her.

"Did you understand any of what he said?" he asked in a strange, tight, even voice as he continued to watch the guy being dragged away and disappear around a corner.

"Sounded like a fruit loop to me."

"Jezebel was a woman in the Bible who was lynched in some righteous cause or other. It's one of too many horrible Bible stories I've tried to forget that I heard as a kid. That 'fruit loop' thinks he's righteous and he was looking at you while he was foaming at the mouth. He was carrying a gun."

"Gun? I didn't see a gun. Not on him, that is." The gangsters had had several each.

"That little thing Rico had stuck in his belt was one of those cheap things you get from Manuel's Pawn and Can. Gangsters don't carry shit like that, so they took that off him. He came here to kill you, Corinna."

## Chapter 11

Life was a series of ironies, each of which would be funnier than the last from a safe distance. There was Tiro, scaring the piss out of Corinna with the statement that he decided who to kill in his territory, and here she was now, relieved and glad that he frowned on freelancers. She was safer in the barrio – this particular barrio – than she would have been in New York. Oziel had pointed this out during dinner, and she'd been thinking along the same lines herself. The result was that they had simply stayed on at his mother's after dinner. Security at their apartment wasn't anywhere near as good as a bunch of thugs protecting their turf.

She left a message with Investigator Rodriguez about the apparently attempted murder. Then, although she and Oziel went to bed, they didn't go to sleep. It was easier to spend half the night discussing what the attack meant, lying spooned together in his mother's tiny spare room. This small bedroom, his mother's equally small one on the other side of the wall, and the larger kitchen-living-dining room was her whole house. Corinna worried they might be keeping her awake with the murmur of their voices, but Oziel just laughed at the idea. Anyone who was that light a sleeper, he said, didn't live long around there.

He was convinced the murder attempt meant the Defenders were behind the whole nanite project, but it refused to make sense to Corinna.

"I *know* he was a religious nut, Zio. You've made that abundantly clear. And I'd be at least as upset if someone went after you. But don't you think that's exactly it? Aren't you letting your feelings color your thinking? It makes no sense for a religious nut to be killing people. Isn't the very first commandment about not killing people?"

"*Mi cielo*, I have to keep asking myself how someone who is so smart can be so stupid. ... It's the fifth commandment."

He was chuckling at his joke and nibbling her ear while he said it, but, stupid or not, she really didn't understand.

"Besides, why not try to get me in the US? I was by myself there, and much easier to get at. Oh," she interrupted herself. "Somebody did try to get me there. That whole business with Farnsworth. But she called up a whole pack, and this was just some single guy who seemed to be a rank amateur. Why didn't they send a whole pack here as well? This has to have been some nut case who was stoked on drugs."

"They probably thought it would be easy here and they didn't need a pack. And he probably thought the police wouldn't catch him in a barrio."

That did make sense, she thought.

"He was right about there not being any police, wasn't he?"

She was starting to feel tired enough in the small hours, and safe enough, inside Oziel's arms, to fall asleep.

There might be some advantages to living in the barrio, but there were, of course, disadvantages as well. Corinna had long since grown accustomed to the rather aggressive aroma of the place, and had learned to stop identifying the components of the dirt underfoot. That was no longer the problem. But when Investigator Rodriguez called in the middle of the morning the next day and asked if she had a secure connection, he didn't believe her when she said she did. She'd installed encryption software on her wristpad over a year ago, even though she hated the stuff. It was always popping up asking whether she wanted its services. No, it would have to be told, "Hi, Mom," does not need encryption. *Are you sure?* it would insist. Now she was lucky to have it. There were no secure connections here. Except illegal ones.

"It doesn't sound secure," said Rodriguez. "I hear voices."

News travelled with the speed of small children in the barrio, so family members started arriving before breakfast, wanting to know the whys and wherefores of the attack the previous night, the prognosis, and much other information only a clairvoyant could have provided. With some ten relatives thronging the room she sat in, she wasn't surprised the Investigator was hearing voices. Corinna went out into the street for enough peace and quiet to talk to Rodriguez.

"This is Petare, Investigator. People live rather close together here. I'll speak quietly and in general terms, in case anyone is close enough to overhear me, but the connection itself should be secure. What can I do for you?" She assumed he was calling about the attack, but it was more than that.

"It's not a case a doing anything for us. This information must definitely not get around, but you need to know for your own safety." He hesitated before continuing. "First, though, I wanted to thank you for the information on the canisters. We finally intercepted a shipment. We instantly contacted the US branch, they went out to the transshipment point. Unfortunately, they were too late in more ways than one. They found a body."

"A *body!*" exclaimed Corinna, breaking her promise to speak softly.

"Yes. We learned later that there was some kind of payment dispute between MFM and the Defenders. The crime boss who wasn't getting paid sent a hit man to make them hurry up with the cash."

"Jee-sus. Do you know who was killed?"

There was a pause as Rodriguez probably referred to his notes. "Someone named Wisbeach. Unfortunately, they found nothing else," he continued, oblivious to Corinna's shock.

Wisbeach! The nice, stooped young man earnestly discussing terraforming. He was the last person at fault for any of it. How utterly senseless. How horribly —. The investigator seemed to be speaking.

"I'm sorry," she interrupted. "I missed that. You were saying...?"

"That there was nothing in their computers or files of any use."

"Oh ... heck. Nothing?"

"Nothing. This is the same problem we've had in this case all along. As soon as we start getting close, everything is re-routed and they shift operations to another cell. And, of course, we must be in a position to move everywhere at once or the likelihood of non-accidental releases is too great."

"Yes," said Corinna. "There is that. And still no indication where they're making the stuff?"

"Nothing."

"Well," she said, trying to look on the bright side, "at least that means they're good at containment." Or that someone, somewhere, had a cure for the things.

A sardonic puff of laughter was the only response.

"How about the other two spaceports?" she asked. "I assume they're all being watched?"

"Yes, but Caracas seems to be the likeliest chokepoint. Now that we know what to look for, it has become evident that a number of key operatives are here. Which is actually the reason for my call."

Corinna waited for him to proceed.

"Once we had the information on Farnsworth, we were able to follow several leads that had gone nowhere before. Even though the Seat Pleasant operations had been moved, we were able to track the person through iris scans and find the MFM perpetrators before they could disappear again. From information obtained after that, it is now clear that the nanite project is something instigated and carried out by the Defender leadership. The Defenders have done several actions to deflect suspicion toward MFM. The actions were carried out by a few MFMs who thought the Defenders were helping them in a rather extreme agenda. However, the leadership and most of the membership is not involved. You need to be particularly careful of anyone with Defender affiliations."

"So that attack wasn't just a lone lunatic?" *Oziel was right, as usual.*

"Our specialist on religious issues tells us the Defenders have something they call a commination ceremony. Apparently, it is similar to excommunication, only more so, and can be applied to non-members as well. It implies you are beyond saving, which means ... whatever it means to them."

"It seems to mean they can kill you."

"It would seem so."

Rodriguez's calm agreement was not what Corinna had been hoping for. What she wanted was something more reassuring.

He was continuing. "You're leaving for Mars shortly according to our information."

"Yes, January third."

"Well, you seem to be reasonably safe in Petare. And you should be reasonably safe on Mars. I can download visuals of people you should watch for there. The Defenders have a surprising number of people on Mars. Over fifteen. One of them, you already know, I gather. Ezekiel Fidel."

"Yeah," said Corinna, still trying to adjust her mind to being "reasonably" safe. She was going to call irony to her rescue and make a facetious comment about the sanctity of life, when suddenly even gallows humor drained right out of her.

Tiro had appeared at the bottom of the track. He was surrounded by a sea of thugs. They were armed not quite to their teeth. To their chins, maybe. They had submachine guns, automatics, ammunition belts, knives, chains, nunjaks, and that was just the visible stuff. Tiro was headed straight at her.

"Um, I have to hang up. Something just came up."

In another world that no longer mattered, she heard the investigator say goodbye and the connection click closed.

God help us, was all she could think. Now what? The barrio had been so nice and quiet. She'd convinced herself Quintón's warning had been for nothing. This sure didn't look like it.

The street was emptying out even as she stood there stupidly dithering. She moved toward Yoana's house and saw that Oziel was coming out. How did he know the gang was on the move, right through a brick wall?

He stood beside her as Tiro walked up.

"Señora. Azote," he said in full formal mode.

Then it transpired that she was being drafted into the "discussion" between the two leaders of the fighting gangs.

"I need your help, negotiating," said Tiro with his awful smile, and his even more awful gangsters flanking him.

That sounded ... unlikely, given the company he was in. However, Tiro didn't make requests. This was an order and she was going no matter what she thought. And what she thought was so far beyond fear, she preserved a frozen face with less difficulty than she expected.

"I'm not going anywhere without Oziel," she stated. She wasn't, either. They'd have to carry her there, dead. Although, looking at all the brutal faces, she knew perfectly well they could carry her anywhere they wanted to, in any condition that suited them.

"Yes, Corinna. That is understood."

Oh. Good.

They walked between apparently deserted shacks. Tiro's presence by itself made people attempt invisibility. Accompanied as they were by a dozen armed thugs, the tracks emptied out ahead of them. When Corinna glanced back, she could see people filter in again beyond the range of pistol fire. Oziel walked just behind her on her right, silent, in a position to see any move anyone might try to make against her.

"I need another few weeks," Tiro said as they walked, "but Pedro got wind of it and I have to strike now."

Strike! What did he need her for, if he was going to fight?

"Your fried ideas delivered results, in a way. People are begging to be in my territory." His mouth stretched in a peculiar smile to himself. "Very strange. Very, very strange. But, shit, whatever works."

"So what are you going to do now?" She kept her eyes on the messy mud underfoot, not looking at the armed thugs whose function she was trying not to guess.

"Talk, of course," said Tiro, his evil grin at its maximum width. "Like you said."

It had been no part of her scenario for Tiro to look like a cannibal reaching for the salt shaker.

"So, what are you going to talk to him about?"

"What you said, of course."

The evil grin had not abated.

"I'll point out to him that his own scum will attack his back if he tries anything against me. Mainly, I'll make sure his men hear that. They're the ones who need to think about what that means for them."

"How come it took Pedro even this long to get wind of it?"

"We started carefully, of course. The families who've lost boys won't talk. But eventually, as things grow, you're going to hit some rats."

"Well, how about dangling some carrots as well as sticks?"

"To Pedro?" he said with that same infinite skepticism as before. "And what do you suggest, *Consultora*?" he asked, looking down at her with his eyes half-closed. He was only a few centimeters taller than she was, but he gave her the feeling of having to look a long way down.

"Well, if he lets a more safe and sensible system operate, he'll be better off too."

"He will? How?"

"That would attract business from all over the place. There'll be more money floating around for you guys to get a part of."

"Señorita, in order to lie effectively, you have to believe it yourself. I'll let you do the talking."

*God, no –.*

His evil smile broke into a rasping laugh as he saw her shock.

"It was a joke. He," he tipped his head toward Oziel, "says you have a sense of humor."

"Mrmf," she said.

Ahead, there were a couple of armed men who did not disappear. Pedro's advance guard, no doubt. The meeting was at the border of the two territories, on a small empty knoll, outside. Corinna wasn't sure why she was surprised. Somehow, she had expected a smoke-filled room.

Pedro was there already. He looked like a middle-aged, balding shopkeeper: paunchy, ordinary, unterrifying. Yet he was a much bigger gangster than Tiro, both more feared and more rich. Life, Corinna thought, is very strange. Of course, maybe by the time Tiro was that old he'd own all of Caracas.

When they came closer and Corinna could see Pedro's face more clearly, she revised her opinion. There was a softness to his eyes that was somehow repellent, possibly because it had no right to be there, in the face of a man who killed with no pain. He saw her and smiled. Leered, would be more accurate. He was obviously one of those middle-aged shopkeepers who mentally undresses every female in a lower weight class than himself.

A child, incongruously young for this meeting of murderers, scrambled up the slope carrying a basket of *arepas* that smelled heavenly when their aroma wafted toward her. He laid them out, and began pouring coffee from thermoses that were already there.

Except for the submachine guns and sidearms on the men in the outer ring, it could have been a bunch of guys on a picnic who planned to dust off decks of cards afterwards and play a leisurely game of *truco*. A gentle breeze blew from the east and puffy clouds scudded across the sun. The gunmen sat far enough back not to hear anything spoken in a low voice, and close enough to kill anyone who tried anything. The four of them in the innermost circle were ostensibly unarmed, but Pedro had enough fat to hide an arsenal, and Tiro ... Tiro probably kept his fingernails sharpened in case he couldn't reach a knife in time.

Oziel was looking at the child, and, with a shock, Corinna suddenly really saw the boy. She saw the constraint in his every move, the blank eyes like broken glass. She saw Pedro transfer his leer to the boy for a moment, and bent her head down, and was nearly sick.

The terror inspired by Tiro was a good, clean emotion by comparison.

Children *could* run from him. That, she now realized, was also good.

The meeting got under way. Pedro was perfectly aware of how many peasants had pitchforks. He seemed to feel the whole effort was kind of cute. He was not remotely interested in any reasoning that involved a smaller share of a larger pie.

"What did you bring her for?" asked Pedro in his comfortable, friendly voice. "Not that I'm complaining. Much more decorative than your usual lieutenants."

"You will see what I brought her for when this is all over," said Tiro as if there was some threat involved. Corinna wondered whether all his threats were as empty. They couldn't be. You couldn't run a gang on pure illusion, could you?

On the other hand, what else could you run it on?

"I'll look forward to that," said Pedro, his leer now evidently gloating over a gang rape, putting Corinna again within one swallow of being sick. She could feel Oziel's flare of rage beside her, although he didn't move a muscle.

Tiro talked some more, Corinna wasn't sure why, except that he did loudly make the point several times about armed citizens backing him. Pedro's men in the outer ring were so demonstratively unconcerned, Corinna was pretty sure they didn't like the idea. But it was useless.

"I'll say it one last time, *chico*," said Pedro. Even his vocabulary was civilized. "Quit messing around or I'll have your liver for breakfast."

He probably meant it literally. He'd probably force that poor boy to share it.

Everyone stood up to leave. No food had been eaten, although some of the coffee was gone. It was all a waste.

As they turned away, Tiro asked Corinna in a hoarse undertone,

"Well? What do you think of talking to Pedro?"

She looked at him, looked at the dead black ice of his eyes without hatred for once, and said,

"He won't go to hell because Satan wouldn't have him."

"Ah," said Tiro, without any change of expression. "Leave that way," he said to Oziel, pointing toward a track through some shacks. Pedro's men were still on the hill, dividing up the *arepas*. "And you," to Corinna, "try not to be such a *professora*."

What the hell did he mean?

Oziel took a quick glance around.

"You rat-bastard. But we'll do better than that for you. Come on, Corita. We have to be quick."

He took her hand and pulled her in the indicated direction. She saw Tiro make a tiny motion with his head to his retreating gang.

Oziel had his arm around her and was stroking her hip. In a second, he was going to be stroking her butt at the rate he was going, in full view of the assembled thugs.

"What the hell is going on?" she asked.

They were almost to the shacks.

"Trust me, Corita. You want to do this. Hug me, okay? Pretend you want to kiss me."

She did as he asked. He had his hands on her ass. There were catcalls from the hill behind her, which was hardly surprising. She tensed even more. What the hell was Oziel —?

A strangled yell rang out, cut off in the middle, and a sudden burst of deafening gunfire.

She slewed around and saw a scene that froze her mind.

Tiro had grabbed Pedro from behind and slit his neck right through. Two jets of blood pulsed a meter into the air from the gaping cleft. One of Pedro's men was covered in blood. Tiro's gangsters had fired at their opposite numbers while the idiots had looked, however briefly, at her and Oziel. Some of Pedro's men were down, some were running, some had dropped their guns.

In the split second she saw this, Oziel grabbed her wrist and pulled her at top speed in between the shacks, down the track, and away.

Corinna stifled a scream in the same moment.

"Never look back," muttered Oziel as they ran.

He wasn't even breathing hard. This was top speed only for her.

More gunfire erupted, muted by distance.

After running forever, for her whole life it felt, they reached their building. Corinna sank onto the front steps and panted, her throat dry and tight. She swallowed and kept swallowing between painful gasps. Oziel sat beside her, still not breathing hard. She didn't want to go inside, because if somebody showed up to shoot them, there was no point having kids shot too. Nothing stood between anyone and sudden death.

Buses and mopeds whined and rattled along the street as if this was a normal day. Pedestrians bought things in shops. The occasional dog meandered about. There was even a totally irrelevant pair of policemen taking the air for reasons known only to themselves. They certainly weren't doing anything useful.

She had just seen someone murdered. She had talked to him not twenty minutes ago, and now he was dead. Just like that. It was so simple, so easy. The sky didn't darken, nothing changed, there was no rumble of distant thunder. She had just seen someone murdered.

"Tiro killed him during a parley," she said at last. "Isn't that against some kind of code?"

"It wasn't during. It was just barely after. Which is one of the reasons they weren't really on their guard."

"He wanted me along for a decoy the whole time, didn't he? He must have had it all planned out."

"He had it all planned, certainly," agreed Oziel. He sat so close, their bodies touched from leg to shoulder, and he had his arm around her, gently massaging her back. He must know she was sliding close to passing out from shock, in the clinical sense of the word.

"What the hell did he need me for? One of his floozies could have done a much more spectacular job."

"Floozy?" said Oziel, amused. It was obviously a new word for him. "Because those guys have seen a thousand floozies. Besides, they'd assume she was doing it for show and they'd be on their guard. But you," he rubbed her back and stared across the street meditatively, "who sat in the inner circle and doesn't look like she does anything for show, that would be worth watching. Tiro always did know what he was doing." After a pause, he added, "So much for me being so smart. I didn't guess he was letting out the leash just so he had an excuse to get close enough to Pedro to kill him."

"You figure Tiro will clamp down again, now that he doesn't need to make people think he's a nice guy?"

"On us? No. You gave him what he thinks is a good idea, even if you didn't mean to, and gangsters usually take their allies seriously. On other people? I don't know. Maybe not. If I had to guess, he's probably pretty pleased with how far he got, working 'cheaper, faster, and better.'

"Shall we go in?" he asked after a while. "You can have something warm to drink. I don't think anyone is going to come after us. Our biggest worry till tomorrow is going to be avoiding the victory parade."

He was solid as a rock. Was she going to be that way after thirty years of this? Somehow, she doubted it.

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Constant gunfire prevented sleep as they lay curled together in Yoana's spare room. When it started, Corinna looked at Oziel with wide eyes in the dark. Now what?

He had made a wry face.

"Victory parade. It's going to be like a war zone." When she continued puzzled, he explained further. "They're shooting into the air because they're happy, but the falling bullets kill people. I don't know how people get so stupid. Do you know how people get so stupid?"

She smiled faintly and shook her head.

The next morning, sporadic gunfire still erupted from celebrants all over the slum. As they passed a square on the way toward the Center, they saw who some of the diehards were: Tiro and a select few of his top lieutenants. They were easy to spot because, aside from miscellaneous fish-netted and feathered females, they had an empty zone around them.

"*Mierda*. He'll be higher than a buzzard if he's been at it all night. Let's hope he doesn't notice us."

However, Tiro did, almost instantly. He might have spent all night drunk, stoned, and screwing, but he still missed nothing. He stood up and walked toward them.

"Oh, hell," muttered Corinna. "Why can't he crawl under a rock somewhere and leave us *alone*?"

Oziel gave an answering mumble of agreement without taking his eyes off the approaching gangster.

Tiro's pupils were so dilated, Corinna noticed it while he was still several steps away.

"Azote. Señora," he said without a hint of slurring and with a smile that was apparently intended to be friendly.

Corinna found him more frightening in this new guise than any that had gone before. When a man threatened death with every breath he breathed, it made sense that he was terrifying. But now he was happy, and he still wasn't human. His face smiled, which looked as wrong as a merry-go-round on a minefield. His eyes remained a flat, sooty darkness that gave nothing away.

"I came to invite you, but you were gone already," he said, and Oziel nodded a grave acknowledgement as if this was a very serious thing. "I let everyone know you were invited." Oziel nodded again.

Tiro studied Corinna for a moment and laughed, a sound like rusty metal files scraping against each other.

"You understand nothing, do you? That's all right. He will explain it to you. As well as this," and he handed Oziel a piece of paper. Then he gave her a salute-like wave and finally turned away, guns blazing into the air.

"What the hell was that all about?" she asked when she had finished rubbing her ears to stop the ringing in them.

"Inviting us to his personal victory party means we're his friends. If anyone makes any move against us from now on, he'll kill them."

"Jee-sus," breathed Corinna. "Do we get to let him know whether we actually want them killed or not?"

Oziel let out a small laugh with no laughter in it.

"Good question. He didn't say. And what's this?" He examined the piece of paper he was still holding.

It was some sort of business card. He handed it to her.

It read: "*Corinna Mansur. La Segunda. para Tiro de Petare.*"

Corinna stared at Oziel with wide eyes.

"Jeez. I wonder whether the second to the King of Petare can have her consulting fees paid in information?"

## Chapter 12

Corinna looked over her shoulder at the dissipated group littering the benches in the square.

“He’s right there,” she muttered to Oziel. “Why not just ask him whether he knows anything about any canisters now?”

Oziel didn’t even look back.

“Does he look like he wants to answer detailed questions about his current inventory?”

Tiro stood behind one of the benches. The woman sitting on it leaned back so her head nestled at his crotch. His gun was still in his right hand, dangling down, as if he’d forgotten he was holding it – disquieting thought – and another woman, who didn’t seem to be wearing much except spangles, hung on his left arm. He was laughing. Tiro. Laughing. No, Oziel was right. This was not a good time.

But neither did any other time appear good. It was essential to find the man in an expansive mood, yet the whole concept of Tiro feeling free and easy seemed ridiculous. And if she made some sort of appointment, he’d be all business, which didn’t bear thinking about.

“What is the point of being a kingmaker,” she grouched to Oziel a couple of days later as they ate breakfast at his mother’s house, “if I can’t even demand favors in return?” She was joking – even she knew that her status wouldn’t get her anything Tiro didn’t already want to give – but only partly.

“The point, *mí cielo*, is that for the first time in my life, I’m living here and I don’t have to be afraid of anything. It’s a strange feeling. And you’re not likely to need any of that streetfighting self-defense I tried to teach you.”

“‘Tried’ to teach me! What do you mean, *tried* to teach me?”

He put his hands up in mock surrender.

“*Ya lo creo, lo creo*. Don’t start showing me how much you learned.”

He went back to his breakfast and smiled at her pensively.

“It’s funny how things work, isn’t it? In New York, you assumed you’d be supporting us, and instead, I did. Here, I assumed I’d have to be very careful about protecting you, and instead, you’re protecting me.”

“Oh, Zio,” she said, and went to sit on his lap and twine her arms around the wonderful warm solidity of him. “All I did was follow your lead during that horrible Pedro thing. I’d have been worse than useless by myself.” He started kissing her, and she’d long since gotten over being embarrassed about doing things like that with umpteen relatives swirling around. As Oziel had said the first time she’d objected in mortified tones about what people would think, “They’ll think we love each other. Why? What else could they think?”

Then Christmas preparations intervened in a major way and to hell with the nanites, she thought. She hoped they’d have the common decency to stay out of the way. These were, after all, high holy days and the Defenders, of all people, should be concentrating on that. Of course, it was also a good opportunity to smuggle things through while everyone was otherwise occupied, but it wasn’t like she could guard the spaceport all by herself anyway. So she joined the crowd and became occupied herself.

Christmas with the Garcia and Vasquez clans was something else again. Not only were there local relatives, there were flocks of out-of-towners who’d come in for the occasion. Several of those were camped at Oziel and Corinna’s apartment while they took up space at his mother’s. And then there were some, like Trella, who seemed to be there because they didn’t have a family, not because they did. The whole mob went to midnight mass, one of the two times a year they went to church, the other being Easter. In the small hours of Christmas morning, they had a feast,

a minor, preparatory feast as it turned out. Then people went to sleep for as long as it suited them, some went to yet another mass in the morning, and then there was Christmas dinner, one of those traditional Garcia events after which nobody moved much. Presents weren't a big factor.

Early on the second day of Christmas, she and Oziel made a cautious foray back to their apartment and picked up the supplies for the festival. When they returned to Petare after an uneventful trip, loaded down with boxes and bags, they were completely defenseless against all the people already celebrating with both hands free. By dint of fighting the good fight, and especially by Oziel acting like an icebreaker, they managed to win through to his mother's house and set all the supplies down. Taking one shoulder bag each with provisions, they joined the crowd swirling right outside the door.

There was a steel drum band playing something so catchy, Corinna felt her feet start twitching. Although, if someone asked her under normal circumstances, she'd say she never danced. Many people were dressed in their Sunday best, the women wearing full skirts embroidered in rainbows of color, the men in dark suits, embroidered likewise. The day was gloriously sunny, with a light steady trade wind bringing fresh air and blowing away the barrio's usual regrettable smells. Corinna and Oziel, her arm around his waist, his around her shoulders, were carried along in the throng of people, except that Oziel created an obstruction every few steps as he stopped to talk to friends and neighbors and kids who came to the Center. For the latter, he'd reach into his bag and bring out whistles or treats, and when his bag was empty, he switched bags with Corinna.

Everyone was there. She even spotted Tiro, lacking the usual zone of emptiness around him, walking among his neighbors as if he belonged there. With something of a start, she realized he did belong in ways she never would. The problem with spotting Tiro was that he sensed observation like a spider. He looked straight back at Corinna and walked over.

She noticed that even without bodyguards, or at least visible bodyguards, he passed through the crowd like a knife through butter. Whatever truce was understood to be in effect during the festivities did not extend to getting in Tiro's way. She found herself sufficiently infected by the mood to be merely wary as he came up. His pupils, she noticed, were dilated, and there was an undefinable relaxation in his stance that made her wonder what mix of chemicals was sluicing through his brain this time.

"Azote. Corinna," he greeted them. "Come and take a breath with me."

What the hell? she thought.

"Diluted," said Oziel, with an edge on his smile and a tightening of his grip on her.

It must be a drink, she thought. He didn't mean a breath. He meant a Breath.

That turned out to be right. The full name was Breath of the Virgin, and it included rum, sugar, spices, and a kick like a virgin who taught mixed martial arts.

It was an odd feeling, trying to help Tiro make small talk as they sat at a little round table in an impromptu sidewalk cafe that had appeared for the festivities. It was even odder to be dealing with him when he wasn't trying to put one over on her. It occurred to Corinna that she was probably one of the few people who would talk to him without trying anything herself ... except a discussion of current inventory. If only she could figure out how to bring it up. It wasn't the sort of thing you could spring lightly on the conversation. Tiro was saying he favored the chances of an underdog team in the traditional ball game that afternoon, and she could just see herself responding, "Speaking of teams, I wanted to talk to you about any biologicals you're smuggling."

She realized he'd turned his cold, black stare on her while her mind had wandered, but he was just looking, he wasn't trying to freeze her into submission.

"Tell me," he said, sounding merely hoarse, not inhuman, "what would the Doctora say of me with my three years of school if she was not afraid of me?"

Corinna looked back, startled. Now what? This sounded like one of those questions where the wrong answer could lead to an abrupt end of the small talk.

"It's not the three grades that matter, Tiro," she answered carefully.

"And what does that mean?"

"You're smarter than most of the scientists I've known, with their twenty years."

She had never seen him look flattered before, and now that she had, she wasn't sure she wanted to see it again. However, the weird smile vanished from his face like mist from a mirror. Corinna tried to wipe any vestige of repulsion from her features, assuming the change in him was

her fault, but then she noticed he was looking through her at something on the other side of the street. She glanced back to see what was going on. One of the men in the clean, white shirts was there.

He crossed over to Tiro, stood on the far side of him, and they talked in urgent undertones obviously intended to be indecipherable. It certainly was to her. It was going to take years before she learned all the strange and fast barrio slang. Then Tiro stood up and they moved a few meters away, still talking. She turned back to Oziel and saw him staring into his empty glass with a peculiar, dark expression.

"What?" she asked.

He looked up.

"I never thought I'd see the day when you're giving Tiro compliments."

She looked back, feeling incredulous.

"You know how I feel about him, Zio. It wasn't a compliment. It's the plain truth." She paused, and added softly, "What is it with you and him, anyway?"

He didn't answer. He went back to staring at his glass.

Well, if he didn't want to talk about it, that was up to him. She opened her mouth to change the subject to the ball game, when he spoke.

"I remember Tiro when I was still small enough to be picked up by a dog. I wasn't going to school yet, and I don't think Marco had been born, so I was maybe three or four. Tiro might have been fourteen. Nobody knows how old he is. He was a street kid. You'd see him around with his little sister. My mother said she'd seen him taking care of his little sister ever since she'd known him. He'd carry her around when he was six and begging or stealing whatever he could. By the time I saw him, he'd learned how to make really good knives, also throwing knives, from scrap metal. That's how he made his living."

"Jee-sus." Corinna glanced over her shoulder at the man himself, standing a few meters away, listening to his agitated-looking subordinate.

"He fended for himself *and* took care of his little sister since he was knee-high to a grasshopper? Man oh man. And he survived? Then he worked his way up to selling knives? That's pretty amazing. What turned him toward a life of real crime?"

Oziel gave her one of his inscrutable looks.

"There are other ways to make a living with knives than selling them, Corita. I don't know when he started killing people, but by the time my mother told me to watch out for him, he was already known to be good at it."

"Oh," she said.

"Men with guns were afraid of him. Then, a few years later, his sister was killed. Horribly." He paused, looked down at his glass again, then continued so quietly, Corinna could barely hear him over the music and shouts of the festival.

"He hunted down every single one of those guys. And probably a couple extra, just in case. He was already in the gang at the time, but that was when his reputation really started."

"Man oh man," said Corinna again. "The things you don't know about people."

"Okay, so that's Tiro. Then we get to me at seventeen, big man about town, girls hanging off each arm. I wasn't doing much in the gang yet. I was in training, so to speak. Dealing drugs, hanging around being decorative when the higher-ups needed an honor guard. But I learn fast, and, believe me, there's a lot you can learn in a gang.

"My mother doesn't miss much, and she could see me learning it. I was bigger than she was by then, but she got so mad.... One time she slapped me so hard I thought she'd broken my jaw."

"Christ. So what did you do?" Even as she asked, she wasn't sure she wanted to know. He'd be too easy to be afraid of if she ever started down that road.

"Do? Nothing, of course. I wasn't going to have her pushing me around. I was seventeen. I stayed right in the gang."

He hadn't understood her question, but she didn't explain. On second thought, his kind of understanding was better.

"So then she pulled out the big guns. Tío Rafael came over and talked to me. He was bigger than I was then, and much stronger. He could have thrown me right at the wall. Of course, that would have probably brought the whole *rancho* down, but, still, he could have. He didn't. He

talked about my father, his brother. He told me what my father would have thought of me. He told me I was killing my mother, and what my father would have thought of that. He told me I was destroying my father's children, meaning me, and the others as time went by. And he told me to think about it.

"It would have been easier if he had thrown me against the wall.

"So, even at that idiotic age, I started thinking that maybe the gang wasn't such a good idea. I mean," he glanced at Corinna quickly, "obviously it's not a good idea. On some level, that was always clear. I'm not totally stupid. But you get so tired of being poor, I can't tell you. It seems like a way out.

"So, I started thinking. Well, the *cabron* who ran the gang at the time didn't like that. He figured he'd straighten me out by sending Tiro to talk to me."

"Jee-sus," muttered Corinna.

"Tiro came in threatening me with his stupid knife before he even said anything."

Corinna started to say *He was going to kill you?* and then snapped it shut before any more dumb questions came out.

"He's showing his fancy teeth, saying he'd love to slice me up, piece by piece, but the boss told him to just do my kneecaps. Unless I straighten out real fast. Wrong approach entirely. I told him I'd jam his knife sideways up his ass —"

"You don't *sound* afraid of him," muttered Corinna.

"I was seventeen," he repeated, as if that explained everything. "No *chorro de mierda de cucaracha* was gonna tell me what to do."

His lips thinned and his knuckles whitened as he held the glass between his hands.

*Not just when you were seventeen*, thought Corinna. *You're still allergic to shit from cockroaches.*

"I saw his eyes start to flick to target his throw, except I knocked the knife out of his hand before he even saw me move. Then I punched him so hard he had a concussion. Weeks, it took him, to get off his back. Skinned my knuckles, that did, for which I've never forgiven him. And I never went back."

"You must've been something at seventeen, Zio," mused Corinna. "I might've gone for you even then."

He'd been frowning at his glass, grasped between his hands as he leaned forward, tense. But at that his grip loosened, he leaned back, and his face lit in an incandescent smile.

"Why didn't he just shoot you, come to think of it? Although it sounds like a knife is at least as bad as a gun, in his hands."

"The gangs around here don't use guns on brothers."

"Oh," she said. "I see. And after all that, you still helped him when he needed you."

"Well, *mierda*, that was against *Pedro*."

"So then what?" she asked. "They decided that since you'd sustained serious knuckle injuries, they'd call it quits?"

He shook his head. "The normal procedure —"

She never found out what the normal procedure would have been because he stopped speaking suddenly and started listening intently. She had the impression he'd been listening before, but what he was picking out of the swirl of shouts, music, and laughter surrounding them, she couldn't imagine.

Then he stood up and joined the two gangsters. He towered over them, stronger, faster, and smarter. Corinna had watched him speak to eleven year-olds and felt less sense of glaring disparity. It had to be an intentional effect. He was saying something about the spaceport and wasting something. Or was it someone? She didn't want to know.

She was trying to decide how to fill the time until he was done with whatever he was doing. If she wandered off by herself she wouldn't find him again until she returned to Yoana's that night, nor was she likely to have a better chance of talking to Tiro, if she could only figure out how to start. Then all three men sat down, looking at her, Oziel and Tiro on either side of her, as before. The thickset man in the clean white shirt sat opposite.

"Corita, they have a biocontainment problem." Oziel pointed his head toward the two gangsters. *Oh-h shit.*

"Go on," Oziel told the white-shirted subordinate. "Tell her."

The henchman said nothing and found himself on the receiving end of Tiro's slit-eyed, freezing stare. Corinna could see the man swallow. He seemed tongue-tied and embarrassed, as if he'd been asked to dance with a dog. She'd spoken once to a cleric from one of the densely male religions who had seemed similarly handicapped.

He cleared his throat.

"We have one of the cans with a hole in it. We need to know how bad that is."

"It depends," said Corinna. She had to keep reminding herself that most canisters did not contain nanites, and that these guys could be smuggling something harmless, like aphrodisiacs. "It could be anything from the end of life as we know it to something like spilling sugar. What's in it?"

There was one of those silences that occur when a dreadfully indelicate question has been asked. She waited for them to get over it.

"Answer her," came Tiro's rasping voice.

After a bit of reluctant mumbling, it transpired that the gangster didn't know.

She kept her impatience limited to a curl of her lip.

"Well, where's it going?"

"Arsia," the gangster muttered, looking around as if someone might have sneaked up to hear him.

"Arsia! On Mars?" She didn't know why she bothered with the question. She felt a nightmarish inevitability to the answers from now on.

This time the stony silence lasted even longer.

"Look," she said, "we have to know what's in it. This could be deathly serious. How bad is the breach? Who's sending this stuff?"

The silence stretched on. Finally, Tiro pointed out,

"If they wanted to answer so many questions, they wouldn't use our help for shipping."

"Somebody has to know how bad the breach is or you wouldn't be here. Is it right through the innermost vessel?"

Apparently, the subordinate didn't even know that.

Corinna let out an exasperated breath.

"Let me get this straight. You're smuggling you don't know what for you don't know who, and you've just broken it into you don't know how many pieces."

It seemed like nobody in the small circle would ever speak again.

Then Tiro activated his wristpad and talked in monosyllables to what sounded like several different people.

"Okay," he said to Corinna. "I'm talking to the guy standing there. What do you need to ask?"

"Can he see a core of metal? What kind of breach is it?"

Apparently he could see metal. The bullet that had made the hole was lodged in one of the inner casings. He didn't know whether it was the innermost layer or not.

Oh shit, thought Corinna. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.

"Ask him," she said, while someone in another universe blew a pennywhistle near her ear, "whether he sees any little black dots or pits on his clothes, his skin, the floor, anywhere."

"Black dots or pits? No," she could hear the voice on Tiro's wristpad, "I don't think so."

"How long has it been since the unit was shot?"

"Several hours, he says," Tiro told her. "With all this going on, it took them a while to get through to me."

Several hours and no pits. Maybe hope was not a ridiculous emotion. She took a few gulps of air.

"Okay, so it's going to Mars. Who's the recipient?"

Tiro relayed the question and then answered.

"Diogenes Lasker."

He pronounced it Deeo-hay-ness, but Corinna had no trouble understanding. There was no question now what those canisters were. So why were they still there? Why hadn't UNPB snagged them? The investigator had implied that they were lying in wait for another shipment that they could successfully track back to its source.

"Were you in the same room with the breached container?" she asked the white-shirted

gangster, unable to keep herself from leaning away from him slightly.

Even he could work out what it meant to be treated like a leper by an expert. Mutely, he shook his head.

She took a few more breaths. Okay. Containment first. Then check for contamination. Slag the whole damn spaceport with satellite microwave lasers, if the nanites were out. If not, take several deep breaths and thank the gods of all the major religions.

She turned to Oziel and said in English, in an undertone,

“ ‘Himself’ over there is the one I need to talk to, probably without his henchman around. What’s the best way to do that?”

“You don’t care what dogs think,” Oziel murmured back. “Tell him to piss off.”

Corinna suppressed a grin as she contemplated the implications of her position, apparently one that allowed her to order Tiro’s lieutenants around. She spoke to the awkward man in the white shirt.

“Okay, we’ve got the information now. I’m sure he,” she indicated Tiro, “will let you know if he needs you for anything after I’ve discussed the options with him.”

It was so clearly a dismissal from such an unexpected quarter, the awkward man became positively paralyzed. The beginning of a stare from Tiro was all it took to galvanize him into scrambling out of range.

“Tiro,” Corinna began, focusing all her urgency on him, “it is essential to get someone in there who knows what they’re doing. This is potentially an end-of-life-as-we-know-it situation. I’m not joking. You absolutely have to turn this over to the authorities.”

She knew she’d made a mistake as soon as the words were out of her mouth. Nobody told Tiro he absolutely had to do anything.

“Do I,” he said tightly, as a singing party of people cavorted past, dancing the cancan. Tiro’s version of good fellowship had vanished. It was the old Tiro who sat there, as uninterested in her problems as a cobra.

Corinna closed her eyes, then opened them again.

“Tiro, I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean that unless you do what’s right in this case, everything on Earth will die.”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sure it will.”

He didn’t believe a word she said. Convincing him to renege on a deal felt as hopeless as convincing a mother to give away her child, and both felt as hopeless as getting effective action from the powers-that-be in the few seconds she would have without Tiro’s cooperation. She had to get cooperation from him. It was not optional.

Well, she’d just finished telling him how smart he was. Maybe he’d be smart enough to understand the facts if she gave them to him. To hell with UNPB and their instructions not to talk.

“Tiro, listen, this is totally classified because it could start a panic. Can I ... can I trust you —” a ridiculous idea just minutes ago, but there was no other hope now — “to keep this completely to yourself?”

“Yes, Corinna,” he answered with that odd formality of his.

She took a deep breath and plunged in.

“Oziel was there and saw all this too. I found one of those canisters on Mars and looked inside it. It nearly killed me. The stuff in there eats any kind of life — microbes, plants, people — as well as anything made of silicon, so it destroys glass, critical parts of computers, and so on. If it gets out on this planet, the only people left alive will be out in space.”

He said nothing, but for the very first time, Corinna saw him consider changing his mind.

“You say you saw this yourself?”

“I was the one who found out what the stuff was.”

He looked at her, and she looked steadily back. It wasn’t even difficult this time, because there was no death he could threaten her with that was worse than what those canisters held.

He stared off into space, still saying nothing, calculating.

Then he spoke into his wristpad again. He was telling someone to get out of there.

“NO —” said Oziel.

“No,” said Corinna in the same moment. “Quick!” she added. “Tell him to stay there.”

Tiro gave her a look that said his patience, always measured in millimeters, was wearing even thinner, but he did as she said.

The gang leader took care of his own, Corinna had to admit, but this was not the way to do it.

“Tiro, if he’s been infected, he’ll die unless he gets decontaminated. It’s like I said. It’s essential to get someone in there who knows what he or she is doing. The authorities have to handle this.”

He thought for a while again, his eyes resting on the boss of the café arguing with a customer about a bill.

Corinna could not resist trying to convince him to move in the right direction. She opened her mouth to –

She felt Oziel’s hand close on her wrist. He gave her the slightest shake of his head when she glanced at him.

She shut her mouth.

“This whole trouble started,” rasped Tiro, “because some ... idiot has been calling the police on these shipments, which got all sorts of assholes involved, including some guys from Francisco’s little bunch of *gafos*. That wasn’t you putting the blueflies on us, was it?”

“Probably. But the whole trouble is not just a little gunfight over some smuggling. The whole problem is the end of life as we know it. That’s what’s at stake. You want me to describe for you what that stuff does?” She didn’t wait for him to say yes. “It starts dissolving anything it lands on. It eats into it, making more of itself. Your skin would get spreading black ulcers. You’d die from a million bleeding holes in your body. The only thing left of the *ranchos* would be the metal roofs. Everything else would be a pile of black dust. All the food would turn into black dust. Your guns would be fine, except the explosive charge itself, which would turn into –”

“Black dust. Yes, I get the idea, thank you.”

“So, for the love of God, hurry up and *do* something,” she ground out between clenched teeth.

He looked at Oziel, who stared back blackly.

“You saw all this, too?” Tiro asked Oziel.

“I did more than see it,” he said quietly, somehow cutting through the noise of four boys yelling to each other right near them. His hand still lay on her wrist and suddenly his grip tightened to the point where she began to worry about bruises. “She almost died. I saw that too. And I am not going to see it again till it happens in God’s time, you understand me?”

Tiro didn’t ask the obvious question. What Oziel could do to him, besides fall on him right now and kill him, Corinna couldn’t imagine, but apparently Oziel’s madness in threatening him, or the way his knuckles stood out white on his brown skin, carried conviction.

Tiro looked at his wristpad, then at Corinna.

“I can’t just squeal to the cops. My name would be shit.”

Oziel’s grip loosened.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s shit with these people, Tiro,” Corinna pleaded. “I thought what’s-his-name said you were too smart to get involved with them in the first place.” She felt a sudden shift in attention from Oziel and realized she was going to be answering questions about how she knew that. He missed nothing.

“Yes,” growled Tiro. “I inherited the job with a lot of other garbage from Pedro.”

“Well, these are *not* repeat customers, Tiro. There will be nothing to repeat, anywhere, if they do their thing. Look, aren’t there any cops you want to have in your debt? Give the job of finding this mess to one of them. They can hand it to UNPB. They’ll probably get a medal out of it. Even a promotion.”

“There’s a couple of blueflies who wouldn’t notice the guns my men have.”

“And your men could be the concerned citizens who called them in,” said Corinna, expanding on her rosy scenario.

Tiro found that sufficiently funny to smile.

“Well, I’ve got these cops by the balls, so they’d probably be willing to play along even with that.”

“Before you go, Tiro,” she said as he stood up, “tell me, will you help me find everything there is to find about these people? Please? Now that you know what it means?”

He looked down at her, with a strange expression, unlike any she’d seen on him before. She didn’t know what it meant, but it struck no fear in her. Coming from him, it was weird beyond

belief.

"I will do that," he said in his oddly formal mode. "Tomorrow." And he walked away, talking into his wristpad to get cops and men lined up. Four bodyguards, she now saw, moved through the crowd with him.

She leaned back in her chair, deflated, as the noise of the festival rushed back into her consciousness.

"Oof," she said. "Hard man to stay in the party spirit with."

"Impossible," agreed Oziel. He stood up. "Come. Let's go back to Mami's place for a while, talk to some normal people. Then we can go to the ball game."

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Tiro arrived before noon the next morning, as good as his word. Corinna supposed he had to be. His whole little world ran on nothing but his word, so it had better be reliable. It reminded her of that marvelous, multi-layered line: to live outside the law, you must be honest.

He didn't stay more than five minutes. He downloaded one datastream to her wristpad and left.

"I don't care how you say you found that information," was the only thing he growled, "but never let on any of it came from me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Tiro. Um ... what would you like me to say, Tiro?"

"I don't care. Tell them a little bird told you. Tell them someone's laptop fell off the back of a truck." And he was gone.

She scrolled through the priceless information. Pedro's men had handled all the shipments into as well as out of Caracas. Every nanite transshipment point was listed. Nothing to or from the Seychelles, of course. Instead, empty canisters seemed to go through a town appropriately named Waco, and full ones came back.

"You're not going to believe this," she muttered to Oziel as she looked further into that nugget of data. "The stuff comes from some place in Texas. Jesus Christ. That probably means the entire US is contaminated. I wonder if it also means that's where they'll finally find the designer. Well, if the UNPB can't get the lot of them with this, they never will." She began keying in the address for Investigator Rodriguez. "The third day of Christmas. He's going to love me."

## Chapter 13

Once more Corinna was faced with a trip to Mars while Oziel remained on Earth. This time it was not a question of worrying about mere possibilities. She had filtered Tiro's information to the UNPB, sticking to the story that it had come from an investigative journalist who had found it "somewhere" and recognized its significance. UNPB had not given her so much as a burp of feedback. However, Inspector Rodriguez now considered her one of the team, in complete disregard for the official payroll, and that was the only reason she knew UNPB was putting its forces into place for simultaneous raids on every root, branch, and tendril of the nanite operation. Interplanetary travel was bound to be shut down for some days at the very least, which meant disruptions for months as the cancellations caused repercussions in the whole intricate choreography of space flight. That was the best case scenario. In the anything-less-than-best case, accidental or intentional releases might shut down travel for years, or, if there was nothing left to come back to, forever.

She'd put this case to Oziel once already and watched him feel torn. He needed less sense of responsibility toward the Center. They'd be safer on Mars, at least short term. Unfortunately, she couldn't very well say that he needed more irresponsibility toward his family. Or she toward her own, for that matter. And yet, she couldn't rid herself of the feeling that they'd be better off holed up on Mars, and he should hole up with her, and somebody else could take care of the Center.

"It could be the rest of our lives, Zio," she said for the second time in as many days. It was New Year's Day. They'd taken the train down to Macuto and sat on the wiry grass under the coconut palms behind the beach, gazing out to sea.

"I know, *mí Corita*, I know," he said softly. "But what if it's not? What if it's just a month, and all I've done is create a big problem for everyone by going off on what looks like a vacation?"

"It's not going to look like a vacation once they shut down space travel."

"No. Then it's just going to look selfish."

There was that. However, she wasn't giving up. Not this time.

"Well," she said, "I guess I'd rather be selfish."

His smile winked at her.

"Like I said long ago, it's one of the things I love about you. You never try to bullshit anyone." He put his arm around her and continued, "If we're being selfish for each other, though, the other way to do it is for you to forget your obligations and just stay here."

She'd sort of been hoping he wouldn't mention that.

"If you're here, it might be 'forever,' as you say, but we'd still be on the same planet."

"Well, I think we'd be together on the same planet for longer if it was Mars. It's easier to keep the stuff isolated there." She was mumbling ... because it was stupid. She knew that. Who would want to stave off death under those circumstances? He was going to point that out in a second.

Except that he didn't. He sat there, oddly hesitant. He wasn't the hesitant type.

"What?" she asked. "Just spit it out."

As she waited for his answer, she realized that if he insisted on staying, that's what they would do. Giving up on going to Mars was easy compared to giving up on life with him.

"I'll stay here, if that's what it takes. What I'm not doing is going off to another planet without you with all this hanging over our heads."

"*Ey, mí cielo*," he whispered, tightening his arm around her. "It's not that. I was just thinking, I want as long as possible. I'd go to Titan, if it meant we had enough time ... because ... but anyway, that's completely senseless. You couldn't do that to another human being."

"Zio," she said. "You're making no sense. You couldn't do what to another human being? I've

already made it as plain as I can: I'll do anything for you. We'll stay here, if that's what you have your heart set on."

"Anything?" He gave her another brief smile. "You need to be careful saying things like that. I could ask for the rest of your life."

"You already have that, Zio. You couldn't get rid of me with a crowbar."

His smile reached all the way to a small chuckle that time and his arm tightened around her again, but he repeated,

"It's not that."

"Well, what is it then?"

"It's.... All this talk of death is what started me on it, but if you're right and the world comes to an end, well, that's definitely no time to have children."

Children!

"Children?"

He took his gaze from the far horizon to glance at her.

"Yes, *mí Corita*. Children. You know, they're smallish, but otherwise a lot like us, and people often have them around the house."

"Children."

He nodded.

"Well, I mean, yeah, I guess, children at some point, but, as you say, if the world is going to end, it's out of the question. And if it isn't, we've got, like, thirty more years to decide when. What's the rush?"

He looked taken aback. Then he took her hand and stroked her fingers and seemed to lose the thread of his thoughts.

"What did I say, Zio? I don't mean to make you sad."

He breathed a long sigh.

"It's different for you, isn't it? In my world, we have another few years. After that, it takes help, and there's not a lot of that here. In your world, you have half a lifetime."

It's *our* world now, she thought, at least as far as medicine goes. Besides, it wasn't half. It was one quarter of a lifetime.

She felt how time hemmed him in, like straps binding her. Death could happen any day. Old age happened decades before it should. Children had to be brought to light early and fast or not at all. It explained some of the coiled energy she could feel under the surface of the barrio, like a sprout cracking pavement.

It didn't seem fair that life itself could be bought.

As she looked at him, eyes fixed on her fingers as he held them, it occurred to her it must seem even more unfair to those who couldn't afford the price.

"I love kids, Corita. I was taking care of them before I knew how they were made. Since I found you, I've wanted my own so bad, sometimes it hurts. And now it might never happen."

"Zio, why didn't you say something? I don't want you to hurt."

He sighed again, staring at the sand and then back out at the horizon, as if he could see a whole new world out there and he wanted to escape to it.

"You hate being pushed. The quickest way to get you to say no to anything is to apply any pressure." A faint grin appeared on his face. "I'd always heard that women were more interested in having children than men, so I thought if I waited, you might mention it, and then I wouldn't have to worry about you feeling pushed. I'd do anything, except run the risk of you saying no, if it meant we could have kids. I'd wait twenty years. Go to Titan. Whatever it takes. I guess that's really why I want to stay on Earth. I'd imagined myself here, under these palms, swinging my little Corita up in the air and showing her how to build sand castles."

"Jeez, Zio, you make it sound like fun. My general impression was that kids up close are kind of smelly and loud." She was joking, but she also wasn't joking.

He laughed, all hesitation lost for a moment.

"As usual, you're right. But it doesn't matter so much when they're your own."

"Oh?" she said. "And how would you know?"

"Oy," he exclaimed, making his eyes wide in pretend shock. "I gave myself away, didn't I?" Then, more seriously, "Of course I don't know, not in that sense. But I changed diapers on Graciela and

Quintón when I was a kid, and, believe me, I know just how a mother hen feels when someone gets too close to her chicks. *Nobody* was allowed to say or do anything I didn't like to those two."

She smiled. She could just see it.

"Well, Zio, with an expert like you around, even I should be able to learn how to deal with babies. If the world doesn't end, give me a couple of years to get used to the idea of a family, and we'll have our implants removed whenever you want. How's that?"

He didn't answer in words. He put both arms around her and pulled her down onto the grass. For a while there, Corinna wasn't sure he remembered that they were in a public park and that they still had implants and that there wouldn't be any point trying to make babies at this very moment, but she didn't mention it. She definitely didn't want to distract him from what he was doing. However, apparently he hadn't forgotten, because he came up for air after one of the kisses and said,

"That's what I call a New Year's resolution."

"Let's hope, unlike most of those resolutions, we'll be able to keep it."

That brought both of them back to less welcome topics.

"That means," he said, as if in answer to a statement of hers, "that I have one day to get everything arranged so I can go with you. It's lucky we're going on the CTS courier. Imagine trying to get added to the passenger list of a regular ship on one day's notice."

"I thought we were staying."

"Corita, I told you. What I really want is for neither of us to leave and for the world to be a different place, but that's not going to happen this month. And other than that, what I want is you. Not the Center. Not even these palm trees. I guess I'm refusing to believe everything could end, because if it did, and we were on different planets...." He shook his head with finality, rejecting a whole universe of horrible possibilities.

"You were right the other time," Corinna pointed out in fairness. "Everything was okay."

"Lucky guess," he muttered. Then, in a firmer voice, he went on, "The Center will be fine for a month, now that Tiro won't try to take it apart."

"And I suppose we can ask Leira to make sure the cops don't try anything from their end either."

He nodded with a sardonic smile.

"It's amazing how much difference having friends in high places makes." The smile faded, leaving nothing but desolation behind. "Selena should have had such friends."

Selena, who had died because she had tried to help her neighbors learn to read. The woman who had been the first love of his life. Corinna didn't know what to do, except to put her hand on his and say nothing.

He covered her hand with his large, brown one and shook his head.

"So, anyway, the Center seems well-defended, and as for the day-to-day running of it, I can put Esmeralda and José in charge, and have my mother keep an eye on it. It'll be in better shape than when I left. But there's nobody except you who can do what you do."

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During the long trip to Mars, news filtered in day by day of coordinated strikes against an interplanetary ring of "smugglers." By the time Corinna and Oziel arrived two weeks later, the whole operation was over. The story had been relegated to screen three. Nanites weren't mentioned.

Corinna felt this was a mistake. Nine billion pairs of eyes looking out for black pits was the right amount, she thought. But UNPB thought otherwise.

Oziel was telling Aniu and Momo about it as the four of them lingered over desserts of trifle and ginger cake.

"So we arrived at the spaceport hours early and Corinna looked over the section with the Seat Pleasant biocontainment units in it. The UNPB agents wanted her to check it, since she's the only person, besides Benson, who's seen the nanite pitting in real life. No pitting. So far, so good. No leaks yet. She asked them if they're making any progress finding the designer, since, presumably,

he'd have some idea how to stop the things. The short answer is no, but while they were talking about it they pulled up some of the simulations on the display, and a screenful of hex went by with something I thought I recognized in the middle of it. I asked to have another look at it, without thinking. Then, of course, he asked me why."

"Och, *bozhe moi*," Aniut breathed.

Becoming known as a splicer was not a healthy career move. Anyone knew that.

Corinna said, "Luckily, he thinks fast. As smooth as you please, he said he thought he saw a friend's name."

"Then he tells me, 'Señor, this is hex. The letters symbolize numbers, and they aren't really letters. Any resemblance to a name is pure chance.'"

Aniut burst into cascades of laughter, and everyone else chuckled.

"So then," said Corinna, still grinning, "Oziel says, 'Ah. Really? How interesting.'"

"He finally showed us the screen, to satisfy my curiosity, and there it was: 'Beam me up'."

Aniut's eyes grew wide. "Och, not...."

"I was about to let them know I could read it and what it meant, but I was hesitating, not knowing how to start, when my clever Doctora here saw something was bothering me and said, all business-like, 'Hex can be converted to text. What does it say in text?'"

"Yeah, and then there it was, plain as day. Beam me up. I was thinking *what the hell?* when Oziel said again 'How interesting. How about searching on that to see what it means?' Well, the computerista said it was just an expression left over from decades ago that splicers used to mean 'Give up,' but I could see Oziel shake his head about two millimeters. I looked it up on my wristpad while the geek is telling me it means nothing, and right there it says it means all kinds of things, primarily *get out of here before I blow this place up.*"

Aniut nodded.

"Oi," said Momo.

"Yeah," agreed Corinna. "'Oi' is what I thought, too. But I couldn't convince anyone else. Both Oziel and I tried to make them understand this had to mean the conspirators were implementing a fallback strategy, but all UNPB said was 'We have them under close observation and we are quite prepared for anything they may try.' And then they basically told me to run along and catch my flight and leave everything in the hands of the professionals who knew what they were doing."

"The same professionals," said Oziel, "who, under the excuse of preventing panic or preserving security or something, don't seem very concerned that at least one of the canisters is loose on Mars somewhere."

"I saw on the news," said Momo, "that this so-called smuggling ring had outposts on every off-Earth facility: the Moon, L5, Phobos, here, Titan, Europa, *everywhere*. Maybe on that scale, one little canister doesn't seem like much."

"Well, it's a big canister. And one loose molecule would turn into much. The world's top three nanotechnologists are working on how to stop the stuff from making more of itself, and they haven't figured it out yet. I have to hand it to the designer. He or she," she glanced at Oziel and he glinted back, "is a genius."

"There didn't seem to be incidents in Earth orbit," Aniut noted. "I thought that was odd, considering their prejudices against space."

"One of the public areas of their web site has a big discussion group about Earth orbit," said Oziel. "I saw it when I was checking them out. About whether Earth orbit is Earth, and okay for mere mortals, or whether it is part of heaven and has to be left alone. One school of thought says satellites are so useful for spreading the word, it has to be okay."

"The last people you would suspect of situational ethics," murmured Aniut.

"So you think they're arguing about whether to destroy the satellites, too?" asked Momo.

"It would be nice to think so," said Oziel. "But I've been checking their server quietly whenever I can, and there's no sign of any real splits in the group or – and this is the good news – any more 'beam me ups' either."

"How did you manage to check from the space craft?" Aniut wanted to know.

"We came over on the CTS courier. They didn't have the same kind of security as an ordinary ship."

Her eyes disappeared into little smiling horizontal commas.

"Ah. You cheated. For a moment, I was afraid you were getting ahead of me."

"Ey, I'm bound to catch up some day," he said, grinning, as he helped himself to a third slice of her ginger cake.

"Nonsense. I'll stay twenty years ahead of you whether I want to or not. So, is it long enough since the last time you looked to be worth looking again?"

"It's always worth looking."

All four of them, with Oziel at the keyboard, clustered around the large screen of the living room terminal.

"You see," he said, after a binary-level search ran its course, "Still no beam-me-ups. Some of them are obviously unhappy about the arrests thinning out their membership, because there are more messages back and forth about how God will be smiting the infidel."

"No specifics about how God plans to do this, by any chance?" asked Anicut.

"I didn't see any. I think it's mainly people hoping that God does *something* because they feel powerless."

"Our Zeke is one of them, as it happens," Corinna put in.

"He's been under surveillance ever since the dome incident," said Momo. "One of the UNPB cops calls me periodically for reports on him. However, no arrests, so I guess they must not have anything solid yet. I've been watching him like a hawk myself, and, except for the fact that he's developed a real taste for the Gorgon run, I can't find anything on him either."

"What do you mean, 'a taste for the Gorgon run'?" asked Corinna.

"He keeps swapping with people so he can do the drive to the water plants in Gorgonum."

"Årskand is not too far out of the way, if you go in that direction," said Corinna.

"I thought he had to be up to something, so I've kept track of his rover logs, but everything seems to be okay."

"The machine-generated datastream or his personal logs?"

"Machine-generated."

"Those are hard to fake," Corinna acknowledged.

Oziel looked more dubious. "You're sure none of his runs are duplicates?"

"Duplicates?"

"He could record all the data on a legitimate run, then use that to cover his tracks when he goes on a side trip."

"I don't think so," said Momo slowly, "but I didn't really look for that. Let me at that keyboard."

Momo sat down, tapped away, called up a series of files, and compared them.

Two out of five were almost identical, but different enough to fool error-checking software.

"Now," said Momo, his tattooed face set in fearsome grimness, "if they can't get him for vandalizing that dome, at the very least they can get him for faking a rover log. Let's see," he called up another series of files. "The second trip has to be the fake, so let's look at some actual satellite imagery of the track to Årskand on December 29th."

With magnification, the tiny speck of a rover was obvious, travelling on a freelance trajectory to the microdot of Årskand.

"Kind of gives you the feeling," Corinna mused, looking at the screen, "that once disaster struck Plan A, they started implementing Plan B, doesn't it?"

"I wonder what Plan B is?" she continued after a silence.

After another silence, Momo said,

"Let me see where that footrotter is right now. Then I'll call the cops and have them pick him up."

"With the right mix of pharmaceuticals, he can tell us what Plan B is." Corinna said with a twisted smile, thinking how glad she'd be to help out on that project.

The only hitch in the otherwise excellent plan was that Zeke seemed to have vanished off the face of Mars.

With a feeling of inevitability, Corinna watched Momo check for signed out rovers. None of them had been taken by anyone named Fidel, but Momo started tracking down every person on the list. The fifth one was in the hospital, having run into an unseen mugger on the lowest level of the base.

"He'll have quite a charge sheet, that young man," was all Momo said as he called up current satellite images.

There was the rover, methodically creeping toward Årskand.

"Bloody hell," said Momo. "He's only about an hour away at this point."

"What is out there?" Corinna exclaimed. "They searched the place, didn't they? Way back when?"

"Yes," said Momo. "Very carefully. There was nothing there except what you would expect for a company doing hydroponics and a certain amount of aggie bioengineering." As he talked, he tapped in a phone address. "The woman who runs their organics recycling isn't answering."

"We better tell the police," said Aniu, but Momo was already tapping the emergency button.

"Jeez, I hope we don't find out what Plan B is by watching it happen," muttered Corinna, just before a uniformed woman appeared on the screen.

The investigator listened politely to Momo.

"The problem, Mr. Taranaki, is that our resources are stretched very thin just now with some high priority items. This is an unauthorized rover run by a person or persons unknown. We'll see to that as soon as we can."

"Kamala isn't answering her phone, though. The whole setup looks bad. And the Årskand dome was implicated early in that whole, so-called smuggling incident."

The woman didn't seem to feel alarmed.

"That dome was searched thoroughly, and we've been tracking everyone who works there. Whatever part it was playing early on, there's nothing out there now. And the rover can't get there in less than an hour. We'll be out as quickly as we can."

"Ma'am," Corinna broke in, "if it's connected with the 'smuggling' incidents, I don't really see how you can have a higher priority."

"There's nothing connected with any of that out there, Dr. Mansur."

"Well, maybe this rover is bringing something."

"Yes, maybe." The officer was starting to sound very patient. "We'll be out there as soon as we can."

"And so will Zeke," was Corinna's verdict after the woman's image disappeared. There was glum agreement all around. "Person or persons unknown' indeed."

Corinna called Vahtinen and asked her how soon she could have the CTS clipper ready to go and how long it would take to get to Årskand. The answer was just over an hour.

"Reza has been on duty an excess number of hours in the last twenty four, so it would just be me. We'd have to go out without backup."

"It's not far," said Corinna. "No problem."

She wondered whether she should warn her that this was potentially a hazardous trip, but Vahtinen signed off before she could say anything. The pilot would be safe in the clipper, so it wasn't an issue, Corinna decided.

Then there were Aniu and Momo. Should she have told the pilot to have suits for them on board, too?

"We're mainly going to make sure he can't do much before the cops finally get there, so Oziel and I should be able to handle one Zeke, if he needs handling. It'll probably be just a matter of waiting things out, so I don't know if it makes sense for you to disrupt everything to go too."

Aniu and Momo looked torn. That was the problem with having a job to do when the world needed saving.

"I guess we'll stay," said Momo, after looking at Aniu for a while and apparently communicating telepathically.

"Ey, Corita," came Oziel's quiet voice. "You don't think Señora Dicastillo might like to be consulted about non-business use of her clipper?"

"Oh. Ahem. Yes, of course."



## Chapter 14

Vahtinen pushed the clipper to its top speed, but by the time they were stirring up dust, landing a few hundred meters away from the small, whitish dome of Årskand, the rover was already parked by one of the two entrances. Of police clippers there was no sign. Zeke, and perhaps others, were inside the dome, and going after them required spending critical minutes of vulnerability in the airlock.

"I hadn't thought about that when I raced out here," said Corinna dubiously. "I was so sure we'd get here first. Meanwhile, God only knows what they're doing in there."

"The simplest thing is to disable the rover," said Oziel. "Then we can try waiting them out. If you can do it from outside, it won't even matter if they were smart enough to have somebody stay inside the rover to guard it."

"Good idea," said Corinna, "but disabling the rover isn't that simple. Those things are designed not to fall apart."

"The wheels must come off," he suggested.

Corinna looked at him speculatively. An image rose in her mind's eye of him, in an earlier lifetime, removing the lug nuts from someone's ground car, and then standing back and laughing himself silly over the result. And all this from a man who hadn't known how to drive till a few months ago. Some things seemed to be on the Y chromosome, which was useful in this situation.

She began pointing out all the difficulties.

"There are fourteen bolts holding those huge cone-shaped wheels, eight on the outside under the cover, six near the axle, so you'd have to crawl under the rover without any guarantees it won't start moving. They're tightened with power tools, so who knows if it's even possible to loosen them by hand. And then there are six wheels."

"You only really need to get one of the corner ones. Is the front or back easier to get at?"

"The front. Those wheels carry more weight, so they're closer to the front edge. What do we have for tools?" she asked Vahtinen.

A perusal of the emergency locker yielded wrenches in all the standard sizes for anything from heavy-duty, engine-holding bolts to the tiny jewelry-sized ones found on some circuit boards. Vahtinen pointed out that at least on clippers, bolts weren't torqued down to more than forty kilos to make manual field repairs as feasible as possible.

"I would imagine rovers will be the same. They just put more bolts on if more strength is needed."

"Forty kilos," muttered Oziel. "Too easy. We should take the short-handled wrenches."

"Show off," muttered Corinna, as they both suited up.

They turned off their suit radios to avoid broadcasting their presence to every suit in range, and cycled through the clipper's airlock. As they stood on the boulder-strewn, dusty red-ochre ground with just one small hill between them and the rover, Oziel held up one arm to tell Corinna to stop. Then he walked forward a ways, picked up a pumpkin-sized boulder, and threw it at the clear dome of the control section on top of the rover's front end. He sprinted and crouched behind a bigger boulder to hide from anyone in the rover.

Hearing the rock smash into the dome would certainly make anyone in there pop up like a jack-in-the-box.

Corinna peered out from her hiding place.

Nobody popped.

There was no sign of life from the rover.

Oziel approached the right front wheel, and stared at it. The meter-high wheel, which was the

broad base of the sideways oriented cone tapering toward the axle, appeared to be a seamless part of the vehicle. She scurried over and popped the cover off. You had to know that the little dimples were finger pressure points or you'd never figure out how it came off. He fitted the wrench to the first nut and whirled it off. Six of the eight came off like that. The seventh wouldn't budge. There was always one, and unfortunately loosening wheels could not be done by majority rule. She watched him throw his weight on it, and it didn't move. Of course, on Mars he had only about thirty five kilos to throw instead of the nearly ninety he weighed on Earth. She kept one eye on the dome's entrance, waiting for the airlock light to glow red, showing someone was coming out.

Minutes went by, and the wretched nut refused to shift. She wondered if more weight might help. She walked up to him, put her helmet against his to let the sound carry through the plastic where it touched, and said,

"I could try hanging on to you, piggyback, if you think the extra weight might help."

He nodded. He looked like he was getting downright sweaty in there.

Suits were very hard to hang on to. There wasn't any neck where the clear dome of the helmet mounted to the suit, and there wasn't any waist to the boxy torso section. Corinna did her best to hold on and promptly found herself flying through the air from the force of the jolt when his forward motion stopped suddenly at the recalcitrant nut.

"You all right?" she could see him saying. She nodded, stood up, and indicated they should try again.

That time they both fell as the nut exacted its final revenge by cooperating.

He left the last nut on, they both wormed their way under the front end, she pointed out what he had to loosen at the axle end, and he took all six of those nuts off with only minor struggles on the innermost ones. Then he loosened the last outside one, dumped all the nuts into one of the suit's external holders, and she put the wheel cover back on. There was nothing to show that the rover was going to capsize on the first bump.

So, thought Corinna, they had cut off escape. That was good. What was the next step?

She still had no desire to spend seconds in an airlock, giving anyone on the inside plenty of time to prepare for her. She and Oziel were slowly approaching the airlock, each occupied with their own thoughts, until he leaned his helmet toward hers.

"Isn't there an emergency procedure to pass straight through a lock?"

She nodded.

"Sets off alarms everywhere. They'd know we were coming in before we could open the second door and we'd have no time to take cover. Certainly not in a dome that small."

They were standing to one side of the outer door of the lock, away from the vidcam trained on that area.

"Why don't we make the lock cycle with nobody in it?" he suggested. "They'll come running out to see what's going on."

"That's an idea. But we better be out of camera range no matter how much it pans around."

She moved her helmet away from his and looked at the relation between the vidcam and the skin of the dome –

– and then looked again at the skin of the dome. There were fingerprints on it, as if a greasy mechanic with large, suit-sized hands had lost his balance and leaned against the dome. She'd never seen anything like that on Mars. Why hadn't it trapped an ochre layer of dust? She stepped closer, whereupon fine traceries of a deeper black became visible, like edges scorching in an unseen flame.

She let out a stifled shriek, no good to anyone since only she could hear it, turned to Oziel to start running and tried to push him to run toward the clipper.

For a split second it was like trying to push a groundcar before it starts moving, but luckily he had better reflexes than a car and ran with her before she lost traction.

She stopped abruptly, well before reaching the clipper. The clipper was not safety. The clipper was a way to spread nanites if she or Oziel had picked up any.

He had stopped with her and was looking at her intently.

He was waiting patiently, as always, for an explanation. She leaned her helmet to his.

"That hand print was someone who had nanites on their suit. That whole dome is contaminated. Who knows what else around here is contaminated. We might have them on us.

Time will tell.”

His mouth compressed into a line, but that was the only sign he gave of fear.

“Should we look around for other black smudges?”

“It’s black only in its carbon phase. If it’s using silicon – and all this sand is primarily silicon – it’ll form something like glass that would be impossible to see at this stage. Once it made heaps with sparkly bits in it, well, then....”

They both looked down at their feet.

“The suits are metal, except for the plastic of the helmet and the carbon fiber of the gloves.” She looked narrowly at his helmet. “I don’t see anything on yours. Yet. How about mine?”

He examined hers.

“Looks clear and smooth.”

“Okay. Gloves.” She examined the fat white suit gloves smudged with rover lubricant. It was a rather disgusting ochre color. She didn’t see any black dots. Yet. “We have to keep checking all the time.” He nodded. “Okay.” She realized she was breathing hard, as if she’d been running, but there was nowhere to run to. “Now we call Vahtinen and to hell with who can hear us.”

He put a warning hand up as she moved toward the switch inside her suit.

“We can at least go behind that rise over there. Then when they come out, they won’t immediately know where we are.”

It was a good idea. It was also a good idea to get further away from the dome, miles away from it preferably. Then, if she and Oziel were not contaminated, they wouldn’t have to be part of the incineration of that whole area.

“Mansur here. Calling Vahtinen.”

“Elke. Receiving you.”

“Elke. We have a situation. The nanites have contaminated that whole dome. I don’t know who’s alive in there, except Zeke, who must be because he only just arrived. Call the cops. Tell them to get Benson and figure out how to sterilize the whole place. We’ll stay out here in case we’re contaminated. Pits should be visible in a few hours at the latest if we are. Tell them also to see if anyone who passed through Årskand since December 29th has arrived at any other bases. Have you got all that?”

“Message received. Calling now. I will leave the line open so you can add anything you need to.”

Corinna could hear her polite, unflappable pilot’s voice begin stating the facts to someone out in the great, wide and, she hoped, uncontaminated world.

Oziel, who was peering over the rise, suddenly spoke.

“Somebody in a suit just jumped out the airlock. They’re looking around to see who’s spotted them. Now they’re running to the rover.”

Vahtinen added this new information to her report.

“They’re inside.”

There was silence for some seconds, filled only with the sound of Vahtinen’s subdued voice calmly discussing disaster.

Corinna poked her head up over the rise, too. She was just in time to see the rover lurch forward as whoever was inside completed the start-up sequence. The wheels spun sand, dust, and gravel into the air as maximum acceleration was applied from a standstill.

Rovers couldn’t be treated that way in the best of times. At this rate, it wouldn’t –.

The huge, conical wheel began working its way out from under the rover, wobbling slightly, then wobbling a lot, and finally wobbling wildly, all in the space of about ten meters.

The driver was good, but not good enough to stop the massive machine before the cone set off on its own and the right front end settled into the sand and tried to keep going, as if it had ambitions of becoming a great, big mining drone.

The back wheels spun uselessly in the air.

“Nice driving,” was Vahtinen’s comment. She’d obviously been watching through one of the clipper’s viewports.

There was still no sound from the rover’s would-be driver. No expletive about the remarks on his driving, no cursing, not even any labored breathing.

It had to be Zeke in there. He’d obviously heard her voice on his suit radio immediately, so his was set to receive, if not to send.

“Zeke,” said Corinna, in the forlorn hope of talking sense to the man, “I don’t know how much you know about the nanites. Årskand is contaminated with them. Last I heard, the prognosis was still not too good, but people on Earth may have come up with something in the meantime. You can help us help you by telling us how things looked in there and what you touched.”

Silence met her words.

She saw Oziel turn off his suit radio and lean towards her. She turned off hers.

“Corita, he wants to kill the world, not save it. Make him believe he can succeed, not fail, if you want him to talk to you.”

It was obvious, when he put it that way.

She thought fast and then turned her radio back on.

“Zeke, we’re asking for assistance from Earth right now. It’ll take a while. In the meantime, there’s a special hospital clipper on it’s way. It’ll take you to the main base. We’ll hope they can get a handle on it there, but if not, the best facility is on the moon, so they’ll send you there if the problem persists.” It was amazing how much you could invent on the fly if you gave your mind to it. She only hoped he did not have a good knowledge of lunar medical facilities, or of those on Phobos or L5 or any other stations on the grand tour of space that she was going to suggest.

There was still no sound from the rover.

“Unfortunately, Zeke, if you don’t let us help you, the prognosis is not good. They’re going to have to sterilize this area, and that’ll be the end of it.” She hoped he would understand *the end of your chances to spread nanites*.

Silence.

“Zeke, they have the best nanotechnologists on Earth working on the nanites. Unfortunately, they can’t find a cure, but we’ll do everything we can to help you. We’ll take you to Earth, if –”

“No!” said a sudden voice. “Not to Earth.”

Corinna exchanged a significant glance with Oziel.

“As I said, the best facility is on the moon. We’ll take you there.”

“Are you the bitch who damaged my rover?” demanded the voice, apparently not wanting to discuss the moon.

“I noticed the wheel fell off. They don’t seem to be maintaining these things to very high standards these days.”

“You think I don’t know when a rover is driveable? You think I’m an idiot?”

Yes, thought Corinna.

“The hospital clipper is coming up over the horizon,” she said instead. It resolved itself into two clippers.

In a minute, he’d see the police markings, at which point he might do anything. His best option for spreading the nanites far and wide was to blow the rover up by short circuiting the hydrogen and oxygen feed lines. Maybe he wouldn’t think of that.

“That’s the cops!” shouted the voice, but it seemed to calm right down. “Doesn’t matter either way. All I need is the clipper.”

Once again, Corinna found herself in agreement with him. A clipper could take him wherever he was going much faster than a rover. The police had to be alerted to how dangerous he was without giving him any more ideas on the subject than he already had.

Unfortunately, he didn’t seem to need any help from her to get ideas. The police, preempting all frequencies, ordered him to give himself up quietly and to follow their instructions to the letter, but they might as well have said nothing for all the notice he took of them.

“I’ve wired this rover to explode. The pilot will get out of that civilian clipper and leave it set to accept commands from any pilot. If anyone interferes with me at any point, I’ll detonate this rover, either from here or remotely. I want to see that pilot climbing out of the clipper in two minutes, or I detonate.”

Corinna gulped quietly to herself. So much for her pilot being safe in her clipper.

Vahtinen said nothing. No doubt part of a pilot’s training was to leave these things to the professionals.

The police negotiator appeared unfazed. A calm, reasonable voice said,

“You realize, you’re not giving us a lot to work with here. You’re contaminated. If you go anywhere, we all die. If you detonate the rover, we all die. Why should we care whether you get

the clipper or not?"

After some silence during which Zeke had to be doing something, he answered.

"If I leave in a clipper, you buy yourself a few more days. If not, you die now."

"Not exactly," said the reasonable voice. "Either scenario has enough uncertainty to –"

"I don't see that pilot coming out," Zeke's voice cut in. "You have fifteen more seconds."

"She had to open up voice control," noted the police negotiator, "and suit up. Since this is now a contaminated area, she may have to spend hours or days outside, so she needs to load the suit with long term supplies. Given the complexity of the preparations, you need to give her more time to do that."

"Forget – Oh," said Zeke, as if someone had just said something unexpected. After a brief pause he changed his demand.

"You have three more minutes."

It sounded as if he'd somehow, silently and magically, communicated with someone else, heard something surprising, and then returned to his old agenda.

Something about the way he allowed another three minutes gave Corinna the impression that it wasn't Elke Vahtinen's welfare he was worrying about. Corinna's suit chose that moment to develop a distracting droning sound, almost like an electrical hum. She hoped the thing wasn't about to break down or blow up or – and then she realized the noise was growing louder and coming from outside the suit.

A heavy-lift clipper was approaching at maximum speed.

Was this reinforcements for the police? Something to enable them to contain an exploding rover? It slowed suddenly over the rover, hovered, and began to descend, extending its grapplers.

The police clipper began positioning a targeting laser at the same moment. The heavy-lifter obviously wasn't one of theirs.

Then the police retracted their laser. Corinna had no trouble imagining Benson's shrill yammer as he described nanites blown into the atmosphere.

The heavy lift clipper was within meters of the rover, hovering, matching its canted position. The superheated air from its jets was directed away from the rover and the grapplers slowly lengthened to make contact.

And nobody could do a thing. Any explosions or laser bursts would only lead to contamination sooner rather than later. She kneeled on the sand, balling her gloved hands into useless fists ... and noticed that Oziel was no longer beside her. He was running in huge leaps at the descending ship.

The world froze into one, eternal instant. There was nothing but him moving toward jets of white-hot air. She didn't know what the limits of his courage were because she'd never seen them. God only knew what risk he would run now.

In one swooping motion, he picked up and threw an enormous rock at an extending grappler. Unfortunately, he missed.

He picked up another and threw again. That one hit, bounced off, and kept rolling with the force of the throw after it hit the ground. He was throwing another. It missed. And another, which hit.

The clipper began maneuvering to turn its white-hot air on him. Corinna could see his head turn, tracking it. He threw one last rock, which hit again, and ran behind the rover.

The clipper gave up on trying to fry him and went back to locking on to the rover. Two of the four grappling tips couldn't seem to make proper contact, and Corinna, even in the midst of knowing she might be witnessing the beginning of the end of the world, almost laughed. Space suits, lasers, and all the ultimate science and technology surrounding them, it all gave way before something a chimpanzee could have done five million years ago. Although the trick to throwing rocks, as the old joke said, was knowing *where*.

After three more frantic attempts, the clipper seemed to give up and begin to move off. However it stopped at the side of the rover, still hovering. The rover's lock opened, the clipper's lock opened, and Corinna's breath stopped when she saw a spacesuited figure passed between the two vehicles.

She turned on her suit radio, not caring who heard.

"There was nobody conscious in that rover earlier, and we've only seen Zeke go in. That might be a prisoner, or a hostage, or someone who's dying of nanite poisoning."

She heard the police negotiator say,  
“Thank you for that information.”

At the same time she saw a police sharpshooter, suited up, come bursting out of the police clipper’s airlock and run toward the rover and its accomplice.

The police had obviously decided that throwing things was a good idea, and that they had better tools than mere rocks for that.

He or she, probably she judging by the size of the suit, reached the rover just as Zeke was catching hold of a pole extended from the clipper. There was a faint sound like a pebble striking wood, which Corinna realized was a gunshot heard through the thin air. There were three more of the pebble sounds, and the clipper was climbing for the sky with Zeke, for a moment, still hanging on to the pole. Then he fell.

Gases were boiling out of a dot in the right side of his suit, but he scrambled to his feet almost immediately.

He and the sharpshooter stared at each other, she obviously wanting to be on the other side of the solar system. One of the arms of Zeke’s space suit seemed useless.

Oziel appeared from behind the rover, and at the sight of him whatever else Zeke might have planned, he abandoned. He threw himself toward the rover, pulled himself into the lock with one arm, and disappeared inside. The outer lock door closed.

## Chapter 15

For the first moment since she'd seen the dire hand print on the Årskand dome, Corinna felt time slow down from the breathless speed of crisis. Everybody seemed to be feeling it. Silence became loud in her suit, with only her breathing to keep her company. Police suits used their own frequencies. Then Oziel must have turned his radio back on because his breathing joined her own. She knew it was his. She hadn't realized till then that she recognized it.

Benson's nasal, pedantic voice cut both the silence and the relief.

"We now have a likely nanite case in the clipper, but the ship is being tracked and will be brought to land as soon as that can be done safely. Gases were vented here that could be carrying the molecules. Extreme caution is advised for those of you outside —"

Right, thought Corinna. What was she supposed to do? Turn on her x-ray vision and run when she saw a nanite?

"—but it could have been worse. Before these regrettable events, Officer Whitby was going to detail a procedure we received from Earth just hours ago. Simulations and one subsequent lab test indicate it should stop growth in the molecules, at least temporarily. This will be the first, we hope the only, field test. We'll consider it successful if we can avoid the worst, at least to the extent of allowing us to evacuate people."

She'd known that the only containment option, if there was no way to stop the nanites, was to incinerate everything, animal, vegetable, and mineral. Benson was definitely the man to call if you wanted to be sure containment was the highest priority, not any misguided weakness regarding human beings. Judging by the different background noise, he was speaking from the other ship. She could quite easily see him arriving in his own ship to reduce his chances of contamination, although she had to admit that he did have a point. If the primary expert on biocontainment had to be incinerated, it would complicate things even more than they already were.

Benson continued lecturing. He seemed to have two modes. He was either saying things like "howdy doody," or he lectured.

"The difficulty with discovering how to alter the nanites' programming lies precisely in the fact that it is so simple. Once the molecules have become active, there are only two points where instructions are needed: changes in conformation to incorporate carbon or silicon, and the changes necessary to split in two. These two instructions can be altered on excitation by tuned lasers not varying by even one nanometer. The calculations required to figure out the exact wavelengths of 457 and 491 nanometers were—"

Benson was the only person Corinna knew who could make saving the world sound boring.

The police officer, meanwhile, had climbed onto the back of the rover, behind the dome covering the control section. The hydrogen and oxygen feed lines passed through there, and breaking those would eliminate the rover's ability to blow up, but that was easier said than done. They were made to be indestructible.

Another one of the faint popping noises reminded Corinna that gunshots were outside the design parameters. Hydrogen jetted out. In the opposite corner and facing away, another pop holed the oxygen line. Gases burst out with horrifying violence. The roar could be heard over the transmitter inside the rover, as well as other confused noises. It almost sounded like drunken singing. This was Zeke's last chance to blow up the rover, while he still had enough oxygen in the tanks to sustain an explosion. Oziel, walking back toward her, would catch the shrapnel.

*Run!* she wanted to scream at him.

But the rover did not blow up. Maybe Zeke was too incapacitated to push the button.

Oziel rejoined her, and she took his hand, partly because of the welcoming rush of gladness she

felt, and partly so he couldn't go haring off again without her knowing.

His smile lit the hill when he saw her face.

Benson droned on.

"The dome will be covered in a layer of soil to prevent any nanites being lofted by the heat. The earthmovers are coming up from Gorgonum as we speak. Then the whole area will be gradually heated to glassification temperatures by two microwave powersats currently being positioned."

Meanwhile, the nanites were merrily multiplying.

"Dr. Benson," said Corinna. "What would you like us to do?"

"Ah. Yes. To do," he said, sounding embarrassed.

His lecture, Corinna realized, had covered nervousness as well as information. He probably had to ask them to get their hands dirty, and in this particular case, there might be no way to get them clean again.

"To do," he repeated. "The problem is, anything we do requires the people doing it to expose themselves to the nanites, and, uh, UNPB wants to keep exposure limited."

In other words, the pool of volunteers should stay limited to those currently exposed, all three of them.

"But," came Benson's voice, "we do have a hydrofluoric acid tank on its way. You'll step into it in your suit, and —"

The man was babbling, Corinna decided.

"Come on, Dr. Benson. We're out here already." She looked a question at Oziel and he nodded. "We'll do it." And out of the kindness of her heart, she didn't even ask Benson whether he'd filled out all the necessary forms for this highly irregular experiment.

The sharpshooter, walking back over to the police clipper, stopped, perhaps realizing the significance of rinsing off in a solution of hydrofluoric acid.

"Count me in," said a woman's voice.

"Officer Whitby, that's very good of you," said Benson. Whitby must have switched her radio to general suit frequencies. "But all I really need you to do is let us practice the rinse on you. They were putting the tank together and kludging a quasi-nanite detector when I left, so the clipper with all the equipment should be here soon. It may take us a few tries to work out the best method."

"Just tell me when you need me," said Whitby, sitting down upwind of the Årskand dome and the disabled rover, still madly jetting off gases.

"Okey-dokey. Dr. Mansur," continued Benson. "This is going to get pretty tricky."

Aiming the lasers, bolted to the police clipper in an obviously improvised fashion, was simple. Targeting the blackish hand print on the dome was also easy. The difficult part was imaging the results in a way that could prove whether the nanites had been halted. An atomic scale microscope was the proper tool, but they didn't make those big enough to fit domes.

"Mr. Garcia," said Benson, after he'd discussed imaging methods with Corinna for about five minutes, "the clipper with the tank will arrive in a jif. Since some scientific background is helpful for this phase, you or Officer Whitby —"

"I'm staying with Corinna," she heard him say in his don't-even-think-of-arguing-with-me tone. "She'll need someone to hold things."

She wasn't sure she did, but she didn't argue either.

"It's up to you. Assuming this works, then we can try to help any contaminated people, including the ... him ... in the rover." Benson did not sound happy about the prospect of helping "him." "If it doesn't work, we're going to have to ask all the people with probable contamination to stay in their suits and well upwind of the dome. We'll find some way of dealing with these things soon, sure as sure."

And if they didn't, was she going to spend the rest of her life in a suit? Or be "sterilized" along with all the other unwelcome carbon around here? Benson, Corinna decided, should stick to what he did best, which was nervousness. Attempted reassurance, from him, made her about as comfortable as itching powder.

He finally gave the go-ahead to start, and the fiberoptic imager, the tripod, and the other equipment appeared in the airlock of the police clipper. Corinna and Oziel walked over to pick it up and saw there were also two pairs of metal gloves that fit over their suit gloves. Now that, she

thought, was a *really* bright idea.

"I like the gloves," she said.

"They are standard equipment for handling certain corrosives," came Benson's voice.

She and Oziel put the gloves on before touching anything else. Everything became very difficult to do, but the difficulty consisted of more tedium and less danger, which was a good trade. She set up the tripod near the hand print, aimed the fiberoptic lens at it, found the focus at maximum magnification, and carefully took a "before" picture. They waited ten exact minutes, during which time a clipper landed and Officer Whitby, with a relieved sigh everyone could hear over the radio, climbed into the sarcophagus-shaped tank of HF and began swishing through a wash cycle. The rover's two plumes of hydrogen and oxygen slowed to silent wisps.

After ten minutes, Corinna took the second "before" picture showing how much the nanites had grown. She had achieved a thousandfold magnification and at that scale the growth in the identical field of view was overwhelming. One spot of black had now filled ninety two percent of the field. Benson gave her this precise figure when the computer to which the image was piped had calculated the relative areas.

The laser moved to target the hand print, glowed a breathtaking cobalt blue like a pure, twilight sky, and then switched to turquoise for an equally brief period. And that was it. There was no noise, no effort. It didn't seem like it could have done anything at all.

Once again, Corinna took a picture of the leading edge of nanites. Magnified, the line looked just as coal-black, just as deadly. It would have been gratifying to see it fade to gray and fall off. Another slow ten minutes went by. Officer Whitby was on the rinse cycle.

Corinna kept peering at the image display and found her metal-gloved hand closing around Oziel's with a grip like a lobster. The black line was not moving. Unless it managed a sudden spurt in the last couple of minutes, it was tamed at last.

The computer's calculation of areas showed zero percent increase. None. Only time would tell whether the nanites were merely quiescent or whether they could reactivate, but at least now people had a way to buy themselves time when dealing with the deadly things.

"Well, jiminy Christmas," said Benson, "What do you know? We did it. We actually did it. ... This means we can try to treat infected people. Which brings us to the hard part. We need to get the contaminated people into isolation tanks where we can start treatment."

"So I need to check the dome." Corinna completed the thought when he hesitated.

"If – If you feel you can."

"When will Whitby be out of that tank?"

"Not for another ten minutes, at least."

"Ten more minutes!" came Whitby's protesting squawk. "This is hydrofluoric acid, for the love of Mike! My helmet's already etched so bad I can hardly see through it."

"We're running the rinse fluid past carbon and silicon detectors," said Benson, once again falling back on information as a tranquilizer. "Since aqueous hydrofluoric acid is one of the few solvents with neither element, it's one of the few we can use. Even when neither is detected in the rinse, you may still have nanites in crevices of the suit, but that's the best we can do. I'm going to have you step out of your suit and into the lock, and we'll leave the suit right here."

"Great," was Whitby's comment at the prospect of facing Mars unprotected. "Whatever you say, boss."

"The last rinse had about one hundred molecules per cc, and the rate of reduction with each pass is such that I estimate ten minutes, but it remains to be seen."

"The reason I asked," said Corinna, "is that I'll get quite contaminated in the dome, so it would be nice to dive straight into that tank when I come out. And then the other question is, who do we deal with first? I mean, we don't know what's going on in the dome, but we do know that Zeke is in a bad way in the rover, and now that we have a handle on the nanites...."

She didn't finish her thought and there was silence on the radio. Like herself, everybody must be struggling with the concept of giving assistance first to someone who was part of the problem instead of the solution.

The voice of the negotiator came on.

"I think he lost consciousness about five minutes ago, because that's when everything became silent in there. He stopped singing ten minutes ago."

"I thought I heard singing," exclaimed Corinna.

"Onward Christian Soldiers, mainly. The doctor at the main base says the unconsciousness must be due to blood loss, not nanites, given how quickly it occurred, and that there is no way to tell how long he's got without knowing how badly he's bleeding. The dome sounds silent on every frequency I can access."

The choice was even worse than Corinna had feared. There might be no one to save in the dome, and Zeke might die while she was in there, not saving them.

"I'll deal with Zeke," said Oziel. "You do the dome."

He'd been so silent, Corinna almost jumped at the sudden sound of his voice. She frowned. It was one solution, she supposed, but she didn't like it. There was no way to avoid getting coated in nanites, going in to Zeke's rover.

Benson also objected.

"It's better to do it sequentially. If there are any unforeseen events, we may not have enough equipment out here to deal with multiple problems."

"It would really be better," said Corinna, "if I do both. Then only one person is going to need the pot scrubber cycle in that thing." She nodded toward the tank.

Oziel looked at her like she wasn't thinking.

"Can you pick Zeke up in one hand and hold him away from you?"

No, she thought, she couldn't, not even in Mars gravity.

"I'll deal with Zeke," Oziel repeated. "The helmet is the only non-metal part, so you," he was talking to Benson, "can give me some of that nice colored light when I'm done. Corinna goes in that tank after she comes out of the dome, and I'll go in after her."

She'd already opened her mouth to protest when he looked at her. She closed it again.

"Let's get going," she said.

They picked up evidence cameras from the airlock, trying not to touch any part of the ship in the process, and mounted them on each other's shoulders. Oziel went to position the biocontainment treatment capsule right in front of the rover's airlock. He was going to lift Zeke out, after trying to tourniquet or bandage the wound as best he could in metal-gloved hands, and shove him into the capsule right out of the rover, not messing about with suits to do it. Then he'd close the clear lid, pressurize the capsule, and they'd start the lasers on the patient before the nanites could eat their way into the clear plastic top half.

Although she still didn't like the thought of Oziel doing any of this, she had to admit there was one other advantage. If Zeke was conscious and didn't want to cooperate, for whatever reason, he wouldn't have any choice about it.

She tapped away at the contaminated airlock access pad – she could see the black pits when she looked for them close up – took a deep breath, squared her shoulders inside the suit, and stepped into the opening lock.

She waited for the lock to cycle, waited for the inner door to open, and looked into the large central area of the dome full of long, shallow hydroponics tanks on lab benches with interspersed workstations. Smaller rooms ringed the periphery.

There was – had been – a person in the central area. He or she had been sitting in a chair at a workstation. Now there was a lumpy black mound melting toward the floor. In one, horrible, delayed second she realized that a roundish black lump on the floor had been the head, which fell off when the thinner neck decayed right through.

Corinna closed her eyes and blindly reached out her hand to find a wall to lean against. *Don't get sick in a suit*, she told herself, swallowing. *Don't get sick in a suit. Don't get sick in a suit.*

She heard an "Oh my God" on her radio as the camera transmitted images to the police clipper. Carefully not looking toward the workstation or the chair or that whole half of the universe, she started to open doors into the smaller rooms. The first one was a lab with an occupant. Corinna decided it was even worse when the decay hadn't yet destroyed all traces of humanity. There were still cheekbones and teeth and – she looked away again and moved toward the next room.

Then she stopped. Why were the people so much more decayed than everything else? There were certainly black splotches everywhere, giving the whole building a diseased appearance, but even the worst of them were no deeper than about a centimeter. Necks were a lot thicker than a few centimeters.

She started to speak, and found she had to clear her throat before any sound came out.

"The level of decay in the people compared to the building implies they were infected with nanites on purpose, before the stuff got ... loose."

"That's what the doctor was just saying," said the calm voice from the police clipper. "She also noted that the dissolution was worst in the torso of the second body, which implies the molecules were breathed in or eaten, rather than applied externally."

By now, Corinna had found a third corpse and could confirm the pattern in one more case.

"Jee-sus," she breathed. "So what did these guys do? Come out here on the 29th and give everyone nanites so they could operate freely once all the people were dead? Why not be nice and just kill everyone? It couldn't be that hard."

Her breathing was growing ragged and she had to lean against the wall again. She found a fourth corpse which was nothing but a pile of greasy black dust on the floor. Winking up, unblemished, from the putrid mess was a gold earring of a circle with a wavy line through it.

"Keep at it, Corita," she heard Oziel's voice. The world steadied around her and she moved on toward the next room. Only five people had worked here. There couldn't be too many more corpses.

"Zeke was easy. He'd passed out. The bullet hit his ribcage and his arm wasn't hurt. He'd pulled it in to hold the wound closed. I taped him up. He boiled a bit on his way into the tank, of course, but it looks like the bleeding has slowed down again with the air pressure in there. An ambulance is coming out for him."

"You're waiting for me to come out?" she asked.

He must know where she was headed with this because he didn't answer immediately.

"Look," she continued, "will you, *please*, for my sake, get into that HF tank? I'm still going to be a little while in here. We want to be sure I don't miss any obvious evidence, and so far I haven't seen any signs of what the hell they were doing out here, except letting it snow nanites."

"Whatever you say, *mí cielo*."

A few moments later she heard the gurgling sound of flowing water, the one sound nobody ever heard on Mars, as it swished around his helmet, loaded with an acid that would kill him in a heartbeat if it penetrated into his suit.

Two bodies later, she stood in the next to last, blessedly empty office, turning slowly to give the camera on her shoulder a view of this room before leaving it.

"What's that?" said one of the police suddenly, not the calm negotiator.

"What's what?"

"That metal thingy on the table. The one with the flange. See if you can push that onto the metal plate beneath it."

She stepped closer, careful to give the camera a clear field of view, and pushed as directed. The flange bent with a nicely springy feel. She pushed it experimentally a few more times.

"It's a damn Morse code generator!" yipped the excited voice. "My uncle had one, together with a rotary phone and a CD player and all kinds of antiques. He collected 'em. See what it's connected to. So that's how they communicated without us ever being able to find their frequencies. This dome was probably their central command and control the last couple of weeks."

So much, thought Corinna, for "nothing" being out here, as stated by the officer at headquarters. Wires ran from the metallic Morse code device to a box.

"There's an optonics company's logo on the box. Could they have been transferring the Morse code to laser pulses?"

"It's the only possibility. And you'd only need a thrift store telescope to receive signals, if you knew where and when to look. And if you didn't, like us, your chance of intercepting the signals is close to nil. It's not like you can see a laser beam from the side in space."

"Could they have communicated between the heavy-lifter and Zeke's rover that way?" asked Corinna.

"Must have done, though that would take some rigging up, bouncing signals off god-knows-where. We wouldn't necessarily notice it if we weren't looking for it, which we're certainly going to start doing now."

There was one last office, and one last corpse in it. That made two excess bodies, and only one

of the seven had been in remotely recognizable condition. Her foray had not been very successful, but at least now Benson could slag the place without worrying about killing a dying victim. She made her way toward the airlock, trying, unsuccessfully, not to look in fascinated horror at the disintegrating pile facing the workstation. There was even a piece of paper near the black splotched desk phone, as if the thing in the chair was a ghoul and was still working. Corinna felt her stomach turn and cramp at the image of it calmly extending black feelers to pick up the paper and reading it with nonexistent eyes.

And then she stopped in her tracks. How could there be a whole piece of paper in the midst of this diseased world? Paper was full of carbon. It was carbon in a thin, vulnerable sheet.

She forced herself to approach the workstation and its nightmare corpse. She looked at the paper, which had black smudges and scorch marks on it, but was far more whole than anything a fraction of a millimeter thick had a right to be. It was a regulation A4 sheet, covered in the careless crooked writing and doodles of someone who'd been talking on the phone.

Had someone – Zeke? – stood here, next to the thing in the chair, talking on the phone and doodling?

Apparently so. There was a crudely drawn picture of a baseball, with little lines flying out of it to show how fast it was going, and a fountain or two coming out of circles. There were quite a few badly drawn circles. One of them had an equation next to it that Corinna recognized with a shock as the one describing orbital velocities.

She began reading the sheet as if it was more than idle pencil marks. Orbital mechanics had never been her strong suit, but much of this was similar to the basic equations she dimly remembered from her undergraduate physics classes. The sheet showed calculations of comet orbits and likely impact force at different velocities.

She took a detailed picture of the paper. In a daze, she exited through the lock. She waited a few minutes for Oziel to be done rinsing off. There was a strange whistling noise on her radio as he walked slowly toward the lock on the police clipper. She was going back via that clipper too, so that if they carried any contamination, only one clipper would have to be cleaned or destroyed.

“What’s the whistle?” she asked.

“Escaping gases,” answered Benson. “The hydrofluoric acid weakens the seals enough to make them useless once you’re back out in the low pressure atmosphere.”

“Oh.” That implied that Benson was cutting the time people spent in that vat pretty fine. Just a little bit more, and the seals would be weak enough to let the acid in as well as let the suit’s air out. And she was bound to be more contaminated than either of the other two. “So when I see bubbles coming out the seals, I’ll know it’s time to start cranking up the pressure inside the suit.” That would hold off the HF for a little while.

Oziel, in the meantime, had reached the lock, opened his suit, stepped out of it, grabbed the handhold, swung himself into the lock, and disappeared, as smoothly as if he did this every day.

“It’s better than having the HF rust everything closed,” Oziel said from inside, “which is what Benson was afraid of before Whitby went through it, although you’ll notice he didn’t tell us.”

Corinna knew Oziel well enough to know he was far from being mad, but she heard Benson on his ship make a feeble sound of protest.

She climbed into the HF tank and saw the acid swirling around her and wasn’t even worried. The images of what Plan B involved were far more corrosive. The ... Defenders seemed like the wrong name ... had hoped to use Årskand to spread nanites far and wide. They were hoping to crash the comet into Mars with planet-destroying force. God smites the infidel, indeed. That idea had been around for a while. If she’d been thinking, she would have recognized the reference immediately. Planetary evacuation had better gear up to lift a couple of hundred more people. Especially Aniu and Momo.

She supposed the Defenders were settling for second best. Their nanite scheme to sterilize the solar system might not work, but they planned to get Mars with the comet, and no doubt work on other space settlements in time. Continuous defense against sabotage would be a hassle, but compared to what the nanites could do, it almost felt like a happy ending. The other happy ending was Benson’s nasal voice telling her she was done rinsing.

Air whistled out of her now-leaky suit with a nerve-racking whine. It made her desperate to run to the safety of the clipper, but an operation like that was the last thing that could be rushed. To

begin with, she couldn't see well enough through the etched helmet to run. The police clipper was a dark shape to the left. She positioned herself in front of the open lock. Peering closely, she could see that the handhold was *there*. She knew she was going to close her eyes against the cold airlessness of Mars. She wouldn't be able to keep them open if she wanted to. So if she missed or fell and had to feel her way, the edge of the clipper was *there* and the handhold just up from that.

She took a breath, forced it not to be too deep, loosened the helmet catch with her left hand, the more complicated torso catch with her right, suppressed a wild gasp of alien air cutting her like knives, and flailed for the handhold, forcing herself to breathe out slowly at the same time.

Her hand closed around the handhold. She pulled herself out of the suit and kicked it away, like Benson had told her too, and launched herself, eyes still shut tight, toward what she hoped was the inner wall of the lock.

Judging by all the hard equipment that dug itself into her shoulder with downright personal viciousness, she had succeeded. She heard the door hiss closed, the air vent hiss open. Moments later, when her ears stopped feeling set to burst with pain, she tried to breathe again and open her eyes, both successfully.

If she hadn't carried in any nanites, she was safe.

And then she found out she wasn't. Once inside the clipper, with Oziel's arm firmly around her, as hers was around him, she heard all the news that hadn't been retailed over the suit radio.

They showed her the images, caught by the tracking ship, of the heavy lift clipper trying to flee. Cargo ships were not built for speed, and Corinna grinned a bit.

"Looks like you got them with no difficulty."

"Not exactly. Just keep watching. You'll see what happened when they realized they weren't going to get anywhere."

The image showed the heavy-lifter throwing out a spacesuited person. Corinna gasped. But then the "person" blew apart into a blizzard of twirling pieces of metal, followed by secondary explosions blowing everything into crashing storms of shrapnel.

"One of those," explained the negotiator, "was the innermost canister of a containment vessel \_"

"Oh, no."

"—but the detectors lost track of it in all the other metal. There are bits and pieces spread over ten kilometers, and they made sure the bits were all titanium."

"Oh, no," she said again.

"Well, it's better than the alternative they were obviously planning. Every indication is that they were planning to dribble nanites through the whole atmosphere out of an open container. Now we have exactly one week to comb that area and find the container, because if the comet does *not* break up, the area is close enough to the impact zone to loft nanites all over the planet, and into orbit, and probably all the way to escape velocity."

"But can't we figure the trajectory of the inner unit from its last known position?" asked Corinna, after she'd had a moment to think.

"Yes, but they know that, too. That's what those secondary explosions were for. Now we can't."

"Jee-sus. And if nanites do get lofted right into space, over time, nobody would ever know when one of the things settled onto space stations or ships or lunar settlements or ... or whatever, until it started leaking air and ... oh, hell. It would shut down everything in space."

A tuneless hymn quavered over the speakers. Corinna made out something about "consecrated to the Lord." Zeke must be feeling better.

"There was some trouble at the beginning," said the negotiator, commenting on Zeke with a nod of his head to the speakers. "He tried to open the safety catch inside the containment unit, but he couldn't and he hasn't tried much else, except for the musical accompaniment."

Oziel shook his head with a skeptical look.

"The only time I ever saw him cooperate was when he was unconscious."

"This is Dr. Vorobyeva at the main base," said a woman's voice over the speaker. "I'm using the NMR built into the unit to image the patient's wound. Since I can't aim that, I'm getting that whole section of his thorax. I had understood you to say only one bullet struck him."

"That's right," said Whitby.

"He appears to have two, one of which is lodged in his abdomen. This ought to be very serious,

but I don't see signs of internal hemorrhage, and he should have collapsed from blood loss long before he did, if he had an abdominal injury. Do you know how this could have happened?"

"I only shot at him once," protested Whitby. "And I hit right where I aimed. I was trying hard as hell not to kill the bastard. I wouldn't shoot him in the stomach unless I meant to."

"How ... strange," said the doctor. "Maybe it's an old injury and a retained bullet. I'll pipe the image to you. Perhaps you can tell me what type of gun it could come from, so I can try to figure out what we're dealing with here."

A white oblong appeared, looking bright and solid against the shadowier outlines of living tissue.

"That's no bullet," declared Whitby, without even having to think about it. "It's the wrong shape. Since it's in his stomach – you did say it was in his stomach?"

"No, I said his abdomen, but it is inside his stomach, as it happens."

"Well, couldn't it be something he swallowed?"

"It's metal. Why would he be swallowing metal?"

Corinna felt a horrible thought grow in her mind, and looked at Oziel to see if she was crazy. Nobody would really do what she was thinking. Would they?

He was looking at her, with the same calculating expression she must have on her face. He thought so, too. She wasn't crazy.

"Metal will contain the nanites," she said out loud, to everyone in the police clipper cabin and connected to its radios. "That thing isn't hollow, by any chance?"

There was a thick silence, broken only by the voice of the doctor saying, "Let me see." It didn't take long before she said,

"Yes."

"God help us," Corinna breathed. "How thick is the metal? How long before his stomach acids destroy it? How long before he turns into a walking nanite disperser?"

"Och," said the doctor, "one thing at a time, ah? First priority is to get him here and pump his stomach under contained conditions. We'll have him take an acid neutralizer to slow things down."

However, when the capsule was passed through the food lock on Zeke's unit, he did no such thing. After demanding to know what it was and being told, he ignored it and continued singing hymns. Reasoning with him achieved nothing.

"I am consecrated to the work of the Lord," he said at one point. "No unbeliever of a doctor can deprive me of my mission."

"You're not going to tell us that spreading nanites is some kind of holy mission," Corinna spat out in disgust before she could stop herself.

"Infidels are powerless against the Tools of God," said Zeke in the singsong voice of an amateur preacher. "The only Hope for Infidels who work against God is the Sacrament of Change. The Tools of God are at hand to give Hope, nor shall they be slow to carry out the Work of God."

Corinna looked at the others sharing the clipper cabin with her, trying not to understand what he was saying. Judging by the expressions of congealing horror, everyone understood it all too well.

"*Bozhe moi*," they heard the doctor say over the radio, as well as Vahtinen's musical Finnish curse, and Benson's "Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle."

"They turned those poor people in the dome into black slime to save their so—" Corinna stopped. "Oh, man. I'm going to be sick."

Somebody handed her a nausea bag, assuming she meant it, but she swallowed about five times instead.

"It would be a good idea," said Oziel carefully, "to check the Defender web site and perhaps their correspondence for discussions about sacraments. I looked at their site once, and they spent a lot of time on sacraments. I didn't realize what it could mean at the time."

"And the woman at the spaceport..." Corinna whispered to herself. "She couldn't possibly have...? We haven't had the answer staring at us the whole time, have we?"

The police negotiator nodded at Oziel and made a note, then spoke into his microphone as pleasantly as ever,

"I'm sorry to have to do this, but you are hereby denied standing to reject treatment." He

leaned toward the iris scanner to confirm his identity and make Zeke's new status official. And then he muttered to himself in a thoroughly unpleasant and disgusted voice, "Mission or no mission, you're not 'saving' any more souls, my boy."

Zeke broke off in the middle of a hymn upon hearing this to say,

"It matters nothing what you do to me. The Army of God marches on."

The Defenders were turning out to be literalists in more ways than one, thought Corinna. What, exactly, did he mean by 'Army'? How *big* was this Army? She hoped it was an instance of the legendary Army of One.

Zeke's containment unit was loaded into yet another clipper that landed for the sole purpose of ferrying him out. The police clipper took off to bring everyone on board to an isolation ward at the Arsia spaceport. Benson had decreed that they were "unlikely" to be contaminated, but should stay under observation at least six days. Two days was how long his calculations said a single molecule would take to create a noticeable pit, and he wanted to be on the safe side. In this case, Corinna found herself sharing his feelings. Besides, she and Oziel would be out one day ahead of the comet and still be able to take their front-row seats on the CTS courier. Benson himself stayed behind to oversee operations at the Årskand site.

Just before they were all bundled into containment suits, preparatory to disembarking at Arsia and transferring to their new homes in the isolation ward, the police negotiator turned off his terminal with finality.

"They've only started looking at the perps' emails. Indications are they have several walking nanite bombs, possibly as many as twenty. If everybody else's capsules are like that Zeke's, then we only have a couple of days to find them all. I wouldn't even know how to start. What do we do? Mass NMR screenings?" He was still shaking his head as he attached the helmet of his biocontainment suit.

As Oziel and Corinna made ready to attach the helmets of their own moon suits, he said to her quietly,

"And that, I guess, was Plan B."

## Chapter 16

Benson was unhappy. Corinna could see that right through the three layers of biocontainment suit and the plastic helmet he wore while inspecting the facilities cobbled together at the Arsia spaceport for people in trouble with nanites. Those with known infections, like Zeke, were in their own individual isolation wards. That, she presumed, had to be okay because it followed standard procedure. Then there were the folks with likely infections, few enough in number, as yet, so they had almost-standard isolation. And then there was the rapidly increasing number of people unlikely to have infections who had to be kept under observation. She and Oziel were among those and Benson was shaking his head over them. He wanted every single person even remotely capable of carrying a nanite to be in his or her own personal biocontainment unit, and there simply were not enough to go around. Compromises had to be made, and the “unlikely” were all in a mob together in an infectious diseases isolation ward. Benson never compromised, but now he had no choice, and so he was unhappy. He finally took himself off to be unhappy somewhere else.

It was a curious crowd thrown together in the ward. There were the stoics, like Officer Eleanor Whitby, who didn’t complain, worked at things on their wristpads or the available workstations, amused themselves, and participated attentively in the repeated drills of looking for evidence of contamination. There were the people whose idea of amusement was to talk to others, whether the others wanted conversation or not. There was one woman in particular who hadn’t stopped yakking since she came in. Corinna was going to kill her sooner or later. The other person in line for being terminated with extreme prejudice was a Defender who kept singing. She was, not unexpectedly, bright and chatty. When she wasn’t talking about the true path to anyone who would listen – and there were fewer and fewer anyones as time went by – she filled her time singing hymns. Three days now, she had been singing hymns.

There was also a kid – a teenage boy who would probably be offended if he could hear Corinna thinking of him as a kid – who was the son of a pair of Defenders in the “likely” ward. The father had been on the heavy-lift clipper when it was taken into custody. He refused, like Zeke and the other three people in the clipper, to be in any way helpful regarding the location of the dumped canister. Given what they’d done, it was entirely possible even they didn’t know where it had fallen.

The canister would continue to hide in the Martian landscape, like a dreadful egg, until every cubic meter of soil in the whole area had been sifted in the search for titanium bits. The comet had better land as softly as it was supposed to. If it didn’t, and if every meter had not been sifted in time, that wretched canister would make the comet landing a deadline in the literal sense of the word. One of the charge nurses had told Corinna during a conversation that the hardest thing about taking care of the Defenders in the contaminated wards was listening to them singing hymns, praying for the worst possible outcome.

The boy’s mother had been taken to biocontainment at the same time as her husband because she had insisted that if he was likely to be infected, she must be, too. Yet, thought Corinna, they were still parents. Whatever they were up to with the nanites, at least they’d had the decency to try to shield their son from it. That meant that he was here and they were there.

He was gangling, awkward, reticent, and embarrassed, as only an adolescent can be. It didn’t help, no doubt, that he owned a plentiful crop of pimples. He had retreated to a computer station within minutes of being admitted and had been there ever since, playing at something. He didn’t seem particularly worried about his parents being infected, or himself for that matter. Except for his own, obviously deeply embarrassing shortcomings, he didn’t seem worried about anything in a

worrisome world. Corinna saw Oziel sit down at another station and start doing something which she suspected involved interfering with the kid. Splicers' humor. Well, it was something to do. All she needed was to find something to do herself.

However, it was too hard to concentrate with "Rock of the Ages" infiltrating her brain on one side, a monologue on the other side about how difficult it was to find anything on sale at Christmas on Mars, and the general bedlam of being cooped up with some twenty people in one hallway and common room and ten sleeping rooms. She saw Oziel grin and shake his head over something, and then tap away at the keyboard again. She walked up to him.

"You playing against that kid?" she murmured to him, squatting down next to his chair.

"Trying to. He's damn good. At this rate, he's going to figure out it's me any minute." He tapped away with an amused glint. "I'm buying myself some time by keeping him occupied trying to track me down, but —"

"You're not bad for an old guy," came a flat, nasal voice behind them.

Corinna and Oziel both turned at once. The kid was standing there, his brown oily hair falling into his eyes, and his mouth open.

Oziel stood up with the inevitable result of towering over the youngster, and said with a smile, "Who you calling old, *chico*?"

The boy did not seem to be any more fazed by this threat looming over him than any of the others.

"You," he said simply. "That wasn't bad going, for a while there."

Oziel started chuckling.

"Well, your going was even less bad. You had me fooled thinking you were still at it. How'd you do that?"

"Just a standard Turing machine. With a few additions I programmed in."

"I'd like to see those 'few additions,' if you don't mind showing me some time. Where'd you learn this? Summer camp?"

Corinna could see Oziel wondering how a well-to-do anglo boy, without the peculiar advantages of the barrio, had become so interested in splicing.

"Nah." His eyes had been fixed on Oziel's workstation during the conversation. Apparently, it was more interesting than the people he was talking to, or it let him avoid looking at them, or possibly both. "See," he said, reaching over to the keyboard and tapping in a short command, "if you'd tried this instead, you would have caught it."

Corinna hadn't seen Oziel impressed very often, but he was now. She saw him glance at the boy with a very searching, speculative look.

"Church, mostly," he continued, and Corinna realized that he was answering the question about where he'd learned splicing.

"Church," repeated Oziel, looking as puzzled as Corinna felt. "I thought your parents were Defenders. This," he pointed at his workstation, "would have to be out of the Assembly of the Latter Day Binaries, or something."

That actually raised a brief, toothy grin on a face Corinna had assumed didn't do any expression except defensive embarrassment. He glanced at Oziel with a rather searching flash of his own, and asked,

"You wouldn't rat on me?"

"Do I look like a rat?"

There was another brief, toothy grin.

"You gotta do something in all that church time." He made a faint gesture with his arm, and Corinna noticed that he had a wristpad to end all wristpads.

"Don't they notice you tapping away?" she asked.

"Nah. I got my head down in the pews. They think I'm praying. Sometimes I am," he added quickly, with a return to defensiveness. She'd obviously been painted on the backdrop until she drew attention to herself, and now it was equally obvious she wasn't quite in Oziel's class when it came to trustworthiness.

"Praying you can find the splice point?" said Oziel with spreading amusement. "How about you show me the Turing you were using?"

"It's actually quite simple." He tapped at his wristpad, strings of gibberish appeared on the

screen as he beamed something over, and he and Oziel began pointing at it and speaking a language that bore only a passing resemblance to English.

*Simple!* thought Corinna, but she didn't draw attention to herself again. The strains of God is my Anchor started in the background, and when she thought "strains," she meant it. Enough, already. She walked over to the woman.

"Excuse me," she began. The singing stopped and the woman looked at her. "I know you don't mean it that way, but we are all here for days, and some of us ... well, I just wanted to say I'd really appreciate it if you cut the singing for a while. Or do it in your sleeping room," she hastened to add, in case it was part of some religious observance the woman had to follow.

"Those who love God, enjoy His worship," she pronounced.

"Um, yes. Certainly. I'm just asking if you wouldn't mind enjoying it by yourself. We've all got enough to contend with without added...." Irritants, she'd been going to say, but trailed off into what she hoped was politer silence instead.

"Believers flock to His worship," said the woman, still with that tone of reading a sermon to a backslider. "Unbelievers may be touched by the Grace of God, if He gives them ears to hear."

Corinna bit back a smart remark about having ears being the problem. She tried to patiently repeat her request yet another time, but it gradually became clear that the woman felt she was performing a service by providing uplift. She clearly had every intention of continuing to sing until they all got the message. There were laws against in-your-face advertising, but she must feel they didn't apply when the cause was good. Maybe if she was asked by a group of people, it would have more effect. Corinna had seen several people rolling their eyes or wincing. The police negotiator might be able to give her pointers about how to ask.

Oziel and the kid were still bent over the workstation, in a world of their own.

Half an hour later, Corinna tried again with a group of five people, including the negotiator, to second her. The woman, whose name turned out to be Miriam, seemed to slot this into the category of heathens who presented a challenge to the missionary. Appeals to reason and mercy both turned out to be futile. The unexpected refusal of the request added resentment to the irritation, and without the negotiator's skills the atmosphere would have grown strained indeed. It did not help that she launched into He Shed His Blood For Thee almost before they'd finished speaking.

Corinna crossed back over to Oziel and his new unlikely friend. Oziel looked up with his usual pleased smile when she rejoined them, took a second look, and said,

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing. I was just trying to ask her to stop singing, but she won't."

"She won't?" said Oziel incredulously.

"They never do," muttered the boy as he tapped at the keyboard, not incredulous at all.

Corinna felt her mouth quirk up in a smile.

"Yikes. I would have thought that was a *do not try this at home* type of thing."

The kid looked shocked.

"I haven't tried it at home. Of course not." He went back to mumbling. "Some of the kids are more into it than some of the other kids. We used to chase Joey around the playground by making pentagrams at him."

"Pentagrams?"

He gave her one of his fleeting, embarrassed, upward glances.

"Well, I know it's really bad, but ... he didn't just sing. He sang the same thing all the time. I Go Armed Into The Valley Of Sinners. It got real old."

"Yes, but what do you mean, pentagrams? What's a pentagram?"

"Well, you know. A pentagram. That, and some of the other signs of Evil." Now he looked shifty and furtive, as well as embarrassed.

When she continued to look blank, he traced out a five-pointed star on the surface of the table, looking shiftier and more furtive than ever. He couldn't have looked guiltier if he'd been trying to peddle filthy pictures to his mother.

"A star?" said Corinna. "That's a sign of evil? I don't get it. The US flag is covered in those."

"Gosh," said the boy, taking his eyes off the screen for a second. "I never thought of that." He

looked like this opened a whole realm of possibilities and maybe explained many puzzling things.

"So how does it work?" she persisted. "You make this sign in the air and everyone flees?"

"You're not supposed to see evil, or hear evil, or anything else. So, yeah, if there's evil around, you're supposed to get out."

"I see," she said slowly, the beginnings of a wicked grin appearing on her face. "I guess it fits. If hearing hymns saves your soul, it makes sense that hearing curses ... curses it." She stood up. "I'm going to go and explain to her that her freedom of speech ends where my freedom not to listen begins."

"Sounds like a good cause," said Oziel, standing up, too. "I'll be back soon," he said to his now dubious-looking friend.

Corinna rounded up a few of the other, more exasperated people, and together they herded Miriam toward her own room in minutes. Oziel, in seven feet tall mode, pointed out pleasantly that they'd be glad to stop being in her face if she stopped being in theirs. She stopped singing.

She returned to the common room, although all she did there was watch the teenager's every move. Her former brightness had changed into disapproval of his fascination with the tall unbeliever ... who was associated with the shorter unbeliever ringleading the heathens.

Peace and quiet were short-lived, however, because a bell chimed a jaunty melody and everybody groaned. Time for the afternoon contamination check. After only three days and six sweeps for nanites, Corinna felt that she had the surfaces of their entire ward memorized. Like pasta, which is the same thing in different shapes, so it was with interior decorating on Mars. It was all plastic in different shapes. The table tops were smooth and cream-colored, the floor a blue-speckled ceramic-looking tile, the chairs covered in green, white, and dark rose satin-smooth fabric, but really, it was all plastic.

Luckily, even the corners where dust accumulated showed no evidence of black-lined pits. Nobody's clothes showed evidence. The sexes separated to check each others' backs and scalps, but everyone's skin was still clear. The stoics suppressed their sighs of relief, the chatty woman improved morale by pointing out that it was just a matter of time until something showed up. Miriam, having observed the boy following Oziel around during the sweep, could be seen lecturing him. Corinna caught the name Abraham, and something about associating with the forces of darkness. He, in the manner of adolescents, said nothing, looked sullen, and kept right on associating.

Corinna continued catching up on the part of her work with the CTS rabbit domes that could be done by remote. But before she even reached the second file, somebody said, "Bloody hell," and turned on a public address display without requesting general permission in the normal manner. When the images scrolled across the screen, she understood why.

Nanite contamination had been found on Earth.

Everyone stared transfixed at the screen, except Abraham. Corinna noticed that he kept studying his own monitor as if nothing else mattered.

The aerial view showed an endless plain with a little pile of buildings adrift in the vast ochre sea. The newscaster identified it as Dumas, in north Texas, a town she'd never heard of. The deceptively peaceful town grew larger, ringed with trucks, satellite dishes, and lasers oriented toward it, as if the buildings were cubes of sugar recently discovered by a squarish race of ants. A grey ring of rolled razor wire formed a filmy-looking barricade around the whole town. Improvised guard towers stood at regular intervals along its whole length. A red X marked the farm house on the northern outskirts of town where nanites had been fabricated and shipped out. The newscaster said UNPB had been searching the area for contamination very carefully because they were afraid of leaks there. Too many untrained people had handled too many nanite containers for there *not* to be a leak.

They'd been right. Evidence of contamination had surfaced at the farm house and the supermarket where the residents did their shopping. If the supermarket was contaminated, any of its customers and employees could be, too.

"That's stupid," muttered Corinna. "People must drive in from miles around to shop there. Why cordon off only the town? Did they run out of razor wire?"

It was obviously yet another case where people were doing senseless things out of fear. It made no sense on other levels, as well. If this was a fabrication point, nanites must have been loose

there for months, because no amateur with less-than-Bensonian concepts of containment could keep the stuff under control.

The fact that there had been no deaths or other obvious disasters meant that somebody there had some way of controlling the things. The Defenders were now on the run and unable to maintain whatever they had used to control them. That was the only thing that had changed. The designer must have been in that farm house. Corinna assumed UNPB had figured that out too.

The scene shifted to the ground. Rolls of razor wire surrounded buildings whose flat roofs barely came above the hazy grey barricade. Big round, blond tumbleweeds were stuck in the barbed wire on one side, with more blown in by a vicious wind even as Corinna watched. The view approached a barred, chain-link gate and a dry, dusty collection of buildings that looked poised to be scoured off the flat ochre land any minute, like so many bigger tumbleweeds.

People were mobbing the chain-link gate set in a rolled razor wire wall. Their desperation grabbed Corinna by the throat: their white staring eyes, and the occasional edged shrieks caught by distant microphones. They would kill to escape this newest of plagues, but they didn't have the option. On the camera's side of the barred gate stood alien-looking guards in moon suits, five of them, with rifles pointed at the people – not over them, not beside them, *at* them. The white-clothed, helmeted, faceless guards were the visible shape of the fear outside the razor wire. The plague, said their pointed rifles, was going to be contained, if they had to incinerate the town and everyone in it.

The newscaster was talking about a second incident in Dallas, where a nanite capsule carrier had been stopped. The capsule was intact, and the carrier was currently under observation, so the authorities saw no need to quarantine Dallas.

Hah, thought Corinna. I'll bet they see no need. If they ran out of razor wire around tiny Dumas, they were probably sweating lead at the thought of keeping Dallas under control.

UNPB, the newscaster continued, kept a continuously updated list of nanite locations on its web site. The address scrolled across the bottom of the screen. Everyone was urgently requested to stay alert and report any possible contaminations to that address.

So, UNPB had come round to her point of view on the value of having nine billion pairs of eyes. Too little, too late, she couldn't help thinking. The only hope was that the laser light could slow the horrible things down for long enough to enable people to sterilize every place where they were found. What could be done for contaminated *people*, she had no idea.

## Chapter 17

It was a subdued group that turned in for the night. Corinna and Oziel had one of the rooms to themselves, which was very nice, except that a hospital's concept of beds stopped at the single person size. They'd solved that problem by nestling on one of them like two spoons. They woke each other up a lot that way, but it was better than staring at one another across a great gulf of floor space. The loose hospital issue pyjamas didn't help either. They kept tangling her and waking her up. She quite liked sleeping naked, ever since she'd had Oziel to sleep naked with, but it wasn't an option when an alarm might have her scurrying around with twenty people on a moment's notice.

"That's a very, *very* strange boy," said Oziel in her ear as he lay curled around her back.

"The Defender fellow?"

"Yes. He's like some of the street kids I've known. Nothing touches him. Did you see him when the news about Earth came on?"

"Yeah. He seems to wall off everything around him by reflex."

"He's completely fearless," Oziel continued. "I don't mean courageous. I mean fearless. Like one of those island birds that walks straight up to a guy with a gun."

"I guess you would be fearless, if nothing concerned you."

"And he's totally wrapped up in computers. He's fifteen. I tried him on girls and he wouldn't touch the subject. Forget the real thing. So I tried him on boys, and he seemed to be violently insulted. There's something very wrong with him."

"Church," said Corinna.

She heard Oziel's chuckle behind her and felt it resonate in her own chest along their touching bodies.

"Boredom, maybe," he said. "That boy is way too smart to live in a box all his life, but that's where they put him. He's enlarged the box using nothing but his mind, but I don't know what it's done to him." After a silence, during which Corinna started dropping off to sleep, he added,

"His parents are pretty high up the Defender tree. I recognized the name from all the server crawling I did."

She woke all the way back up to respond,

"Well, he seems to have taken to you like a desert to spring rain. Maybe that can give us a way to find out what his dingball parents are up to."

He rolled over onto his back and she rolled over too, so that she lay on her side, pressed against him.

"Corita," he finally said, "the kid *trusts* me. It would feel ... all wrong to use him to rat on his parents."

She put her arm across his chest and one leg over his and kissed him goodnight. She was thinking that maybe there was a reason why the boy didn't feel she was in Oziel's class for trustworthiness.

Another slow day passed with its two searches for nanite contamination, its hospital meals, and its conversationalist discussing the pros and cons of different brands of high-traction flooring. Corinna tried to work, and Abraham and Oziel did something with computers most of the day.

The next morning, after yet another tedious contamination check – tedious being good in this case – she managed to complete a data search for one of Shao's and Johnson's projects before lunch. With a feeling of a job well done that she hadn't had in days, she joined Oziel at one of the cream-colored tables. Lunch was a bland chipped-vat-protein-on-toast affair that he would politely not comment on. The better she knew him, the louder she could hear him not commenting.

Abraham was there, speaking computerese with what could only be described as animation. Even Corinna, who'd been a teenager but otherwise lacked wide experience of the breed, could recognize hero worship when shown such a serious case of it. Oziel, with his usual patience, made no attempt to scrape off this human limpet, and Corinna, although initially annoyed that she couldn't eat her lunch in peace, felt sorry for the boy when Miriam showed up.

"Have you said grace, Abraham?"

He fell silent and stared at the white stuff covering chunks of vat protein.

"Zachary and Rebecca would be very disappointed in you. You've had as much misleading influence as you need." She was looking at Corinna while she said this, even though it was Oziel he'd been hanging around with. "You will come and eat with me."

Corinna almost signed something quite dreadful at her, but restrained herself. The woman would probably take it out on the boy. She had no sense of humor.

Once she'd left with Abraham in tow, Corinna said,

"So, have you two broken into the CIA yet?"

She looked up when Oziel didn't answer. He was staring at the salt shaker fixedly.

"What?" she asked.

"Corita, I need you to promise you'll let me decide what to do."

"Can I pester you to pieces if I don't like what you decide?"

"With anyone else, I'd say yes," he answered slowly and deliberately, "but you're too effective. Please don't."

"Well, can I pester you somewhat? To chunks, shall we say?"

"Corita, this is serious. That boy broke into the comet explosion control program like the safeguards weren't even there."

"What?" she whispered.

"I wanted to see how much he could really do, so I started boasting. You can get most people to do anything if you can get them proving how great they are. Certainly teenage boys. He started topping my boasts. In half an hour, he was saying, 'take a look at *this*'."

"Jee-sus. So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Corita. I really don't know. I kept cool and said, 'You realize if you change one comma in this, even by accident, people are going to die?' He looked really hurt that I could think he was so stupid as to change anything by accident. The boy's a real splicer. He just wants to see what he can do and be the best. He's not trying to hurt anyone. ... That doesn't mean he won't. *Dios*, he's only fifteen and he's lived in a box all his life."

"You're thinking if you tell on him, they'll walk all over him and he hasn't actually done anything. Yet."

Oziel nodded.

"On the other hand, imagine if anything went wrong. Even if it wasn't his fault, we'd never know. If we were around to worry about things like not knowing."

It didn't bear thinking about.

"That's not all. I asked him some questions to see how careful he'd been to make sure he hadn't left a trail in any command logs. His response was more or less, 'Yeah, yeah, whatever. But look at *this*.' Cleaning up command logs is housekeeping. Breaking in is the fun part."

"That would be good, wouldn't it? The comet people have probably found him already."

"No. He broke in from that terminal just hours ago. But what if he's left tracks all over some other computer? One where he doesn't think anyone knows, like at his home, for instance?"

"Well, it's unlikely he'd be caught that way, but that's a problem for us, not him. I don't get it."

"You don't have to know much to follow a recipe. If he has the steps all laid out, someone who's not a splicer and has a very different agenda, can follow them quite easily."

"Oh ... my ... God," she whispered. "Some of those crazy Defenders certainly want the comet to hit as hard as possible." She looked at the congealing chipped "beef" on her plate. It was really going to deserve one of Oziel's looks when it was cold. "Zio, we *have* to tell them about this. It's not optional. Maybe we could frame it in some sort of general terms so that it doesn't implicate him."

He shook his head.

"The people running the comet program aren't stupid either. I thought about saying it was

something I'd worked out, but I don't really feel so altruistic that I want to fall on a sword for some teenager."

"I should hope not," said Corinna. "I *definitely* don't feel altruistic enough for you to do that."

He gave her a faint smile.

"I thought you might feel that way about it."

"So what are you going to do?" she asked again.

He sat and studied the salt shaker some more.

"I don't know. The first thing to do is to try to get him to see the light. But I'll just land him in trouble if I talk to him."

Corinna's mouth quirked in a not-so-humorous smile.

"Jeez. The poor kid. His whole life, everybody's trying to make him see the light. Besides," she added more seriously, "don't you think he'd be a hopeless case, even if you could talk to him? He seems immune to all that."

"Ey, if it worked on Tiro, nobody's hopeless."

*True*, she thought. *True*.

"Well, talk to him via computer," she said. "He'll probably be more interested that way, in any case."

"Good idea."

She turned her attention to her plate.

"I guess we better carry this dreadful stuff over to the microwave."

All afternoon, whenever she glanced up from her work, she saw Oziel at one workstation and Abraham at another. Miriam was also at a workstation, and whatever she was doing, the screen seemed to be covered in strings of gibberish worthy of some of Oziel's efforts. Corinna was surprised, although she knew it was silly to assume a hymn-singer was a computer phobe. Miriam glanced over at Abraham periodically, but he was in front of a computer rather than a backsliding, misleading person, so she didn't seem to feel the need to lecture him.

The now familiar hiss of the containment lock ended when a squadron of four moon-suited men marched in. One of them pointed to Miriam's workstation, the other three marched up, and before anyone was ready for it, she was taken to her room and the door closed.

Corinna and Oziel exchanged raised-eyebrow glances, but Abraham, true to form, didn't even look away from his screen. About an hour later, the four moon-suits came out, one of them told Abraham that Miriam wished to speak to him, and then the four of them left.

Corinna brought a couple of cups of coffee over to Oziel and said, "I wonder what all that was about?"

"Well, she is a Defender. Maybe they found something on her."

"But they left without her."

"She's in quarantine, so they couldn't take her away, could they?"

"No, that's true. I guess this place is at least as effective a confinement as any jail. I wonder what she wants the kid for."

Oziel smiled crookedly. "Reading him the riot act about something, probably. I had the impression as he and I were going back and forth that somebody, perhaps her, was trying to break in to it. If she realized we were talking, that's enough right there to get him in trouble. If she knew that the comet – Oy, he's coming back. Talk about nothing for a while."

Corinna smiled at Abraham as he approached.

"We're just having a bit of a break. Would you like something to drink?"

Of Miriam there was no sign, and he was joining them quite openly.

He seemed surprised to be asked.

"Uh, yeah. A Jax, if there are any left."

There weren't, but Corinna called the charge nurse, and a new case came sliding through the sterilization lock in minutes.

She sat down on the other side of Oziel from the teenager, to make sure he didn't feel crowded.

"So, how's it going?" she asked, as generally as possible.

"You want to ask her about the laser chemistry, Ramiro?"

"Ramiro?" she asked.

"He doesn't care much for the name they gave him, so I suggested Avramo, which sounds like

Ramo, which turned into Ramiro, and that's a perfectly good name, so we decided to use it. Didn't we?" They exchanged a glance of understanding, looking like two conspirators working out a code.

"About the chemistry...", Oziel prodded again.

The boy didn't look at her. He seemed to be talking to the keyboard, but at least he talked.

"I want to major in laser chemistry in college, but all they do at my school is a general earth sciences class. I've been using the net to learn things, but all I've got on my transcript is ninth grade earth sciences from a Lambs of Faith high school. That's not going to count for squat." He gave the keyboard a dark look.

"If you've been taking courses on the net, why aren't they on your transcript?"

His scowl at the keyboard deepened.

"I'm not registered. Obviously. That takes money. Your parents have to sign things."

"So you've been splicing in to other people's classes?"

He flicked a brief, upward glance at her that said "obviously" again.

"Well, you still have lots of time. If you're in ninth grade now –"

"I'm not in ninth grade. I'm in eleventh. I start applying to colleges next fall and I've got nothing to show them."

"You're in eleventh? At fifteen?"

"Yeah." He said it sullenly, as if admitting to a nameless crime.

"Christ, there must be about a hundred gifted programs that would take you."

"But," interjected Oziel, "your parents have to sign things."

"Oh. Right."

She'd never thought about a situation with Abra–Ramiro's complications. Crazy parents and no money, and no way out.

"Is the biggest problem the money or the signatures? I mean, which is the most impossible?"

"The signatures, I guess. I could steal the money."

"You want to avoid that," said Corinna.

"Don't even think of it," said Oziel.

"Is there anyone you could beg or borrow the money from?" she asked.

"Yeah. Maybe. My high school science teacher."

"Well, you don't have time to go to court about your crazy parents – oh, sorry."

But the boy only flicked up a glance at her, almost a glance of understanding.

"Anyway, just forge their stupid signatures. If you get in trouble over it, then take them to court for interfering with your freedoms of speech, thought, and assembly. You'll win in the end. It's not like you're objecting to being deprived of porn."

"You didn't hear her suggesting a life of crime," said Oziel in an undertone, with a one-sided smile.

"Hear what?" said the boy, and they exchanged another masonic glance.

Corinna was desperately curious to find out what was going on with Miriam, but thought she better follow Oziel's lead and not say anything to spook A– Ramiro.

Oziel began slowly, gently, edging the conversation toward the comet, now that a level of comfort had been achieved. After some general remarks didn't cause bad reactions, he said,

"Ramiro was telling me that something's bound to go wrong with that comet, no matter what he does." He said this with the briefest, significant look at Corinna. The boy, fixated on his screen, didn't see it.

"That's not what matters," said Corinna. "The important thing is not to be part of the problem yourself."

The boy looked up, startled, and Oziel smiled.

"That's exactly what I said."

"Almost exactly," Ramiro corrected, going back to the keyboard.

"It's more difficult to break in and be noticed but leave no trace, than it is to be completely invisible, so Ramiro figured that was the thing to do."

She barely had time to appreciate how he made the boy feel it was his idea and presented the thing as a splicer's challenge when Oziel continued.

"He's a real splicer. Wants to be the best."

She could see the kid growing before her eyes to fill the shoes Oziel gave him. She found her mind, however, rushing to the next problem. If he was this good, what about the nanite program? A world-class splicer had piggybacked that onto programs all over Earth. If that was him, he must know who the designer was, or be able to find out. If he knew that one piece of information, he was the most important person in the solar system. She had to try to get him to cough it up.

“Speaking of really good splicing,” she began, “there’s a program piggybacking on other machines on Earth. Have you come across that?”

“No.”

He’d come back with that answer very quickly and definitely. Nor did he seem to need to ask what program.

“Are you – how should I put this – sure?” she said.

The boy seemed to be freezing in place. If she had to guess, she would have said he was terrified. He’d been nervous talking about the comet program, knowing she was aware of his activities, but nothing like this. This was panic.

Oziel started speaking quietly.

“You know the program she means. You couldn’t be as good a splicer as you are and not hear about it. Do you know what it does?”

The boy’s terror deepened. He must know. She could see him want to deny it, but not at the price of lying to Oziel.

“So, you can understand.” Oziel’s voice felt as warm and calm as summer sun. “If you know anything about that, you can understand that it’s really important to help people. It’s really important, if you know anything, to tell us.”

The boy glanced up at Oziel, and then couldn’t hide his eyes again. He stared into Oziel’s direct, clear gaze and finally formed the words,

“I can’t.”

Corinna wanted to demand *why not?*, but Oziel said,

“That’s okay. If you can’t, you can’t. Can you tell us why that is?”

In a furtive whisper, looking back down, he answered,

“I – I can’t. It’d be interfering with God’s work.”

Corinna couldn’t restrain herself.

“Look, I’m sorry, I obviously don’t get it, but why not interfere? Seems like a pretty clearcut case of needing interference.”

He stared at her.

“People who interfere with the Lord’s work get killed.”

It was her turn to stare at him.

“What? You mean ... they’d kill *you*? You’re one of the group!”

He was staring at the keyboard again.

“Has that ever really happened?” asked Corinna.

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “They make sure everyone hears about it when it’s done, so we can all, uh, learn from it.”

“So who would kill you? Your parents?” She was incredulous.

“Any Defender of the Faith who could. You’re declared apostate, and anyone can kill you.”

It made a horrible sort of sense. If they had a death penalty for being wrong, even worse than a wrong outsider must be a wrong insider, who should know better. It was easy to see how that would keep a teenager in line. It would keep just about anyone in line.

“That’s bloody child abuse, just to start with,” she said.

The boy’s face drew in at the word “child,” insulted.

“She’s right,” said Oziel so gently, the terrible words sounded comforting. “You don’t have to put up with that. You can get protection, you know.”

“Me,” said Ramiro with no sound, sighing the word out, voiceless.

“Yes, you. I run a center for kids back home. I know all about restraining orders and foster care and, as my Corita would say, the whole nine yards. I can help you.”

“You can help me,” he sighed the words out the same way.

“Yes, I can help you. You think you’re the only kid in the world who ever had trouble? There’s thousands like you and there’s all sorts of things we can do.”

Ramiro sat there, saying nothing. Corinna felt that any rational person would run screaming for the exit as soon as it was pointed out to him, but now she could see, looking at him, what a vast step they were suggesting. Abandon your whole world, they were telling him. Abandon everything you've believed and known. Abandon every person who took care of you. And do it all at fifteen.

"Take your time," said Oziel. "If you want to talk about it some more, you can find me any time. And remember, nobody can touch you in here. Too many witnesses." He gave the boy a crooked smile, which seemed to help him.

Ramiro blurted out suddenly,

"I'll, I'll try to find out who's dealing with that stuff for them. The last time I looked, it was Efraim Jericho, but it may have changed."

That was definitely not a name that Corinna had seen on any list of brilliant nanotechnologists.

"Who's he?" she asked. "I mean, what does he know about nanotech? I've never heard of him."

"I'd never heard of you either," Ramiro pointed out to Corinna with teenage tact. "He works for Putnam."

That was certainly a big enough name in nanotech to make it more plausible. The man must be an overlooked genius, trundling along as a technician, and probably festering with resentment.

Oziel made no obvious move. He said,

"Thanks, bro'," with that smile of his that could warm rocks. Apparently, Ramiro was not immune, because he lost some of his panic and stood straighter.

"Well," Oziel went on, "I smell dinner." He made a face, not one of anticipation.

"I'll go get our trays," said Corinna. And call UNPB to turn the solar system upside down looking for an Efraim Jericho. She tapped at her wristpad the second she could do so without being obvious. Oziel clearly didn't want the kid to feel like the direct line to his parents' enemies.

When she returned with the trays, Oziel joked,

"This means Miriam's probably on her way. Better not let her see you fraternizing with the enemy."

The boy didn't seem to think that was at all funny. He froze again.

"So, what's the story with her?" asked Oziel, still with that tone like audible sunshine. "What did all those suits want?"

The boy froze further.

Corinna tried to be invisible. She knew that if Oziel looked at you long enough, you'd wind up answering his questions to fill the perfect vacuum of silence he knew how to make. She heard the boy start muttering.

"Somebody was bound to look for where the break-in came from. And – and ... . *hell*, I was sick and tired of her trailing me. There was never any chance she had nanites. She just said that so she could keep an eye on me here. To ... *hell* with that."

The only thing Corinna was sure of was that it cost him a lot to say "hell," but other than that, he wasn't making much sense. Oziel seemed to be trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, too. He studied the boy carefully, and said,

"Are you saying that you made it look like *she* was the person breaking into the comet program?"

Ramiro nodded once, looking at nobody. Because he wasn't looking, he couldn't see Oziel's faint flicker of reluctant admiration.

"Remind me," said Oziel, "not to make you mad. Do you have any idea how much trouble you've gotten her into?"

"Nah. She'll be okay. They'll ask her a few questions and they'll realize she doesn't know near enough to do that."

"Don't be so sure," said Oziel. "They'd expect her to hide her abilities."

"Besides," said Corinna, deciding to come out of the shadows, "what's to stop her blaming it on you?"

The boy shook his head, quite definite.

"She can't do that."

"Well, for all you know, she's doing it. She hasn't showed up for dinner. Or is she under some sort of room arrest?"

Then again, maybe it was going to be more than room arrest. The lock hissed and once again

admitted four suited figures.

"Jeepers," muttered Corinna, "if they've come to haul her off to jail, we've got to do something. This isn't fair."

However, the suits didn't head down the hallway. They marched over to Corinna instead.

"Hi. I'm Dr. Zembrowski," said one of them. "We'd appreciate your help with some nanite isolation procedures, and Dr. Benson suggested we ask you, because he's so busy right now."

She'd heard of Zembrowski, a materials nanotechnologist, although she'd had the vague impression he was older.

"Biocontainment isn't really my area of expertise," she warned them.

"Benson mentioned that you'd had direct experience, though."

That was certainly true, although Benson must be undergoing a psychological reformation if experience without certification meant anything to him. Emergencies could do that to people.

"I'll be glad to look at whatever it is. If it's something simple, I can certainly help you out, and if it isn't, then we can always call Benson at that point."

She stood up, preparatory to going through the long, tedious process of suiting up so she didn't break the quarantine. The nanites weren't stopped by the carbon fiber suits, but it took them time to chew through them, and the black pits were very obvious on the white fiber, so the suits provided temporary protection. In her case, it was the world outside being protected, not her.

"Save dinner for me, okay?" she asked Oziel. "I'll eat when I get back."

He nodded, looking at the four moon suits without much friendliness. He always objected to people interfering with her eating proper meals at proper mealtimes.

She obtained permission to leave from the charge nurse, put on a suit in the lock, then they took off theirs, and she and the four men hiked through the hallways to a part of the spaceport Corinna had never seen. She attracted no attention on the way, which was a sad statement in itself, she reflected. People in biocontainment suits were a familiar sight these days. The five of them finally entered a suite of offices that didn't look either like a lab or a medical facility. She glanced around, puzzled.

Zembrowski spoke to the receptionist.

"Tell Hillel we're here."

"Right away, s—"

She had to stop to cough. A nasty, hacking cough, of the kind euphemistically known as "productive" in medical circles. Corinna had the satisfaction of thinking that inside her containment suit, she didn't have to worry about catching whatever it was. The receptionist reached for a tissue. Before Corinna looked away, she saw the tissue look dark as the woman wadded it up to throw away.

The woman had coughed up blood.

People didn't cough blood unless they were at death's door. Surely, if this woman had tuberculosis, or God-only-knew-what, the medical authorities wouldn't have her running around loose in a spaceport. If it wasn't some normal, fatal disease, it had to be something abnormal. Nanites, for instance. Corinna, hoping her moon suit was enough protection, swished her way the few steps to the woman while she was paging Hillel, and said,

"I couldn't help noticing the blood. You should get medical attention immediately."

The receptionist jerked her head toward Corinna.

"Oh, that's nothing. I've been getting nosebleeds. The altitude, you know."

The comment about altitude was so absurd, Corinna stood momentarily speechless while her brain tried to decide whether anyone could be that bad a liar or it was a colossal insult to her intelligence. Nobody was living in the near-vacuum of the great outdoors. Without the spaceport's comfortably pressurized air, there would be a lot more to worry about than mere nosebleeds.

There was definitely a cover-up here, and some twit coughing nanites into the vents was the last thing the spaceport needed. Corinna reached over and pushed the speaker button on the receptionist's desk phone. The throat mic in her suit networked automatically with room speakers.

"Emergency medical service to this location, please," she said. "Pulmonary hemorrhage of unknown — HEY!"

She'd been suddenly tackled by Zembrowski. As she fell, she saw the three other men move

toward her too. For a heartbeat, she couldn't believe it, and then reflexes took over. For a microsecond she was surprised that a few lessons should have improved her reflexes so much, but then she was too busy using them to think about anything else. She rolled away, didn't try to stand, and kicked at the crotch of the closest attacker. He doubled up in a satisfying way – satisfying to her, that is. She rolled to a standing crouch.

The door opened. Yet another man walked in. She was outnumbered enough before he'd joined them. He put something down on the receptionist's table. With the strange, clear sight of adrenalin overload, Corinna noticed it was a metal bottle.

Now he had both hands free and was joining the rush at her. She kicked wildly and felt the springiness of a rib cage under her foot. She drove her swaddled elbow at a face, too cushioned to do much damage. Hands closed on her upper arm. She whirled around and smashed someone into the wall. She hadn't realized she was this close to a wall. She noticed a door. Someone plunged toward her, driving her closer to the door.

Doors could work both ways. She was free for a split second and used it to dive for the door and slam it closed behind her. There was a wild yowl. Someone's fingers were caught in the door. She opened it a crack, the fingers were yanked back, then she slammed it shut again and hung onto the handle with both her fat, white-gloved, slippery hands and all her strength. They were trying to pull it open from the other side, and once they got coordinated, they would definitely have more strength than she did.

Still, she couldn't believe how well she had done. She'd obviously surprised them. Hell, she'd surprised herself. While training with Oziel, she'd absorbed the notion that she was weak as water. But that was only compared to him. Anyone was weak as water compared to him. Compared to the weird men on the other side of the door, she wasn't weak at all. They'd almost succeeded in pulling it open when she heard new voices.

"All right. You folks just simmer down or we'll have to tranq—. Calling security services. Assistance, please. Immediately. I *said*, simmer down."

The pull on the door vanished. There were confused noises, then the unmistakable bark of security guards with stunners. The noises became unconfused. People were being taken into custody, and one of the medtechs was asking,

"Okay, so which of you athletes has the pulmonary hemorrhage?"

Corinna stepped carefully out.

It took some garbled moments to sort out that she had made the original call and to elucidate the reasons why she was in a utility closet.

"I don't know. That one says he's Dr. Zembrowski, but I'm starting to doubt that. He attacked me. She," Corinna pointed to the horrified-looking receptionist, "was coughing blood."

Corinna stared at the metal bottle on the table, and suddenly everything fell into place.

"Don't touch anything," she added. "That woman probably breathed in nanites, which caused the bleeding. Worst case scenario: the whole spaceport is contaminated. Have there been many cases of unexplained bleeding?"

The stunned silence was broken by an overwrought security guard shooting a tranquilizer dose into one of the prisoners who'd thought to use the sudden lull to escape.

Corinna reminded herself that she was the closest thing to a biocontainment expert here.

"These people are going to have to go into the full biocontainment units, assuming there are enough once we've rounded up all of them. Everyone who's here is going to have to be under observation for a week, at least."

Including me, she thought with a sinking heart. With the nanite levels spread around by the receptionist, and maybe others, there was no way Benson would consider Corinna fit for the "unlikely" category. No front row comet-watching seats for her, despite her best efforts. Even worse, she'd have to be in a different ward than Oziel. Hell. And damnation.

"We can reduce our chances of contamination by moving as little as possible until the experts arrive," she continued. "I'm the best protected, so, if any of them need to be touched, I'll volunteer." She saw the security guard who'd been doing the handcuffing look at his fingers fearfully.

"But you didn't answer my question," she said to one of the medtechs. "How many cases of unexplained bleeding have you been seeing?"

"I don't think," the medtech said hesitantly, "that there's a current reporting requirement for all cases of hemorrhage. We report anything that carries a suspicion of being related to nanites, but that doesn't include all bleeding."

"Well," said Corinna grimly, "if I might make a suggestion, broaden the damn requirement. Call your boss, call UNPB, call *everybody*, but find out who's bleeding and where. God only knows how many more like her," she nodded toward the receptionist, "are out there."

The medtech started calling immediately. When it came to nanites, people became wonderfully focused.

Corinna moved gingerly toward the metal bottle. It was a common, lab-grade container, with a precision-fitting screw top. She unscrewed it. Inside was a single capsule, composed of two halves, like those gelatin capsules some vitamins came in. Only this one wasn't clear. It was made of thin metal, of a size to be swallowed.

She forced her hands not to shake while she screwed the metal top back on as far as it would go.

"This," she said, as calmly as she could, "contains a capsule full of nanites. I was brought here under false pretences. The man carrying this was called in after they had me here. I have every reason to believe they intended to kill me by making me swallow this capsule."

Except to them it was a sacrament. They were saving her soul through the unimportant medium of killing her body.

She had to lean against the table, whether it was contaminated or not.

After an eternity of standing, waiting, watching the prisoners who were watching them, the full biocontainment panoply finally arrived. Benson himself was there in a double set of moon suits.

The only good news, and it was enough to make up for many things, was that Benson didn't see why she couldn't go back to her usual ward.

"You were in that suit all the time, right?"

"Yes."

"Then it's certainly contaminated, but you should be no worse off inside it than when you put it on. You'll take it off in the lock we've set up here, undergo decon, put on a new Station issue jumpsuit and a new containment suit, and you can walk back to your ward, as good as tiddlywinks."

In that moment Corinna could have kissed the old nitpicker, although he would have freaked out worse than Ramiro. He was saved by the fact that they were both in moon suits.

## Chapter 18

It was well after nine when she heard the lock hiss open letting her into “her” ward. Oziel stood waiting.

“That must have been a complicated problem they had,” he said.

He was the same as always, solid as a rock in a world of weirdness. She just rushed into his arms and buried her face in his chest.

“Ey?” he said.

She hung on to him, wrapping herself in his air of calm.

“I had the problem, Zio, not them. At least, not to begin with.”

As she wound up her story, she saw him suppress black fury and try to lighten things up for her sake.

“I swear, every time I let you out of my sight, you get up to something. Sounds like you made good use of my lessons in that fight. I wish I’d seen it.” He grinned at her.

“I’m sure the whole thing is on a security vid somewhere.”

His grin widened and then faded.

“And I thought life in the barrio was dangerous. Life with the clean, safe rich is way worse.”

“Not that clean. The irony of it all is that this ward is currently the least likely place in the whole spaceport to have nanites. Once they started carefully tracking hemorrhages, they had to seal off about eighty percent of the whole spaceport. At least flights can still go in and out. But who knows what the story is going to be at other bases and stations. The big problem is that there’s no direct way to check for nanites. They’re carbon, we’re largely carbon, so there’s no way to distinguish them. The only way to be sure is to centrifuge a sample, draw off the relevant layer where you can expect to find them, and then search that visually, micrometer by micrometer, under an atomic scale microscope, until you see a nanite.”

“Working on metal the whole time, right?”

She nodded, and started eating her much-delayed dinner that he’d warmed up for her. It was a UFO, an unidentified fried object, and it was a measure of her hunger that she ate it without even trying to guess what it was pretending to be.

“So where’s the boy wonder and his duenna?” she asked.

“He’s over there,” Oziel nodded toward a workstation, and now that he pointed it out, she could see a corner of a loose hospital T-shirt around the side of it. “I haven’t seen her at all.”

“She didn’t come out for dinner? So she is under some sort of room arrest.”

“Ramiro says she isn’t. In a way, it’s lucky she didn’t come out because he ate with me, which would have put him in trouble if she’d seen it.”

“I wonder if somebody brought some dinner to her in her room? If not, she must be pretty hungry. Maybe we should bring her something.”

“Ramiro should know. Let’s ask him.”

But Ramiro didn’t know. “I dunno,” he said, not taking his eyes off the screen until Corinna said,

“Well, I’ll take her a tray then. If she doesn’t want it, she can always say so.”

“No!” said the boy, actually turning around and looking at her. He looked quickly down at the floor. “I mean, no. She’s okay. I think she just decided to skip dinner.”

“And she seems to have decided to stop keeping watch on you,” said Oziel thoughtfully. “That doesn’t seem like her either. We should check on her.”

“She’s all right!” insisted Ramiro. “Really.”

Corinna studied him studying the keyboard and wondered how big the cloud of unspoken thoughts around him would be if there was some way to see it. The spaceport would probably

need to be enlarged.

"There's something you're not telling us," she said, as gently as she could.

He stared at the ever-fascinating keyboard, looking like a poster boy for The Teenager Saying Nothing Under Torture.

"Ramiro," said Oziel, putting a hand on his arm, "that was a serious thing you did there, putting that comet break-in on her. If she's panicked over that, she might be in a bad way. I know she wouldn't appreciate it if she thought you sent us, but you haven't. It's nothing to do with you."

If it had been anyone but Oziel, laying hands on him, Corinna was sure he would have gone straight up in the air like a rocketing pheasant, never to be seen again.

"It's okay," she said, still trying for the soothing effect and knowing she was missing by a mile. "Miriam already figures I've got it in for her. I'll go check on her and it won't be your fault. Don't worry. And if she starts in on you, I'll come over and *tell* her it was all my fault."

She left the boy to Oziel to calm down, and went and knocked on the door of Miriam's room. There was no answer. She knocked again. Still nothing.

"Miriam," she called through the door. "We were wondering, did you want some dinner?"

No answer.

She opened the door a crack.

"Miriam? Um, sorry to bother you. We just thought maybe you want dinner?"

The room had the curious, empty feeling of lacking a living soul. She opened the door wider, afraid of finding a corpse on the floor.

There was nobody in it. There was nobody hiding behind the door. She walked all the way in. There was nobody in the attached bathroom. She even looked under the beds.

She tapped at her wristpad to access the ward station outside the isolation area.

"Could you page Miriam Galilee for me? I can't seem to find her. This is Corinna Mansur."

"Sure thing," said a man's voice, and a moment later she heard the page.

People started searching the ward. The charge nurse had the idea of combining it with a late nanite check, so it became a very thorough search indeed.

No Miriam. She had somehow floated out of a ward from which even air couldn't escape without going through a filter.

The more terrifying question was why she had escaped. What part of Plan B was hers to carry out?

Oziel must have been thinking along the same lines because Corinna could see him at the other end of the hallway put one hand on each of Ramiro's shoulders and say something while the boy looked at the floor. She could see Oziel say "Look at me" and he looked up.

She'd felt that power in Oziel herself on a few occasions and knew it had nothing to do with strength or physical intimidation. It was something much older than that. It was how snakes hypnotized small birds, with the big difference that somehow he let you know he was doing it for you, not against you. Possibly, it felt that way because that's the way it really was.

He was walking toward her with the boy, who looked filleted.

"Corita, he says she escaped before dinner."

The boy hadn't stopped staring at the floor since Corinna had joined them. She wished she knew how to make her voice sound like safety and velvet, the way Oziel could.

"Please, Ramiro. Please. Tell us how she got out. They'll find her eventually, but by then we may all be in quarantine till hell freezes over. It'll be such a mess. Please help us."

His hunted glance flicked up to her and back down.

"They'll kill me," he whispered.

"No they won't," said Corinna. "Not with him around." Even though the boy was staring at the floor, she was sure he knew who she meant. "He'll kill them first."

Ramiro looked up at Oziel, seven feet tall, as Corinna liked to say, and three feet across.

"Do you know how to kill people, too?" The way he said it, it sounded like the capstone on a long list of accomplishments worthy of worldwide recognition.

"I've never killed anyone," said Oziel quietly and seriously, then added with a glint, "but I'm sure I could learn."

A flicker of amusement lit the boy's panicked face for a heartbeat.

"She hid in the trash," he whispered.

"Trash!" said Corinna. "What trash?"

"The food trash. After lunch."

"Oh my God. Does she know what they do with that?"

The only good thing was, nobody had to worry about her carrying out Plan B. Or anything else, for that matter.

"Take it out somewhere and throw it out?" He was obviously beginning to doubt his assumptions because of Corinna's horrified expression.

"We're in a *containment* ward here, for chrissakes! They don't throw out the trash. They incinerate it, right in the container, at two thousand degrees. The only thing they throw out is ashes." She moved to start tapping at her wristpad when she heard Ramiro's strangled whisper,

"Can you leave me out of this? They'll kill me. I mean it. They'll kill me."

Corinna thought a moment.

"What did she do with the food trash that was already in there?"

"Hid it in some other trash bins."

"We don't have the time to go looking through every bin to pretend we found the evidence. She may be ashed already. She may have minutes." She moved again to start tapping on her wristpad.

"I – I hid it. I can show you where."

She looked at him and it was his luck that he was looking back instead of at the floor. There was no way she could deliver someone as scared as him to his fate. Whatever Oziel had done to him, he'd stopped being fearless.

"You hid it? She made you help her?"

He nodded, like a condemned criminal.

*How?* she wondered. *How could she force you to help her?*

"Okay. Let's go," she said.

In the utility area by the one door that led into and out of the ward, he pointed to two bins standing with the empty ones. The switch would have been discovered the next day when they needed to use them, but Miriam would definitely have been incinerated by then. Corinna marched over but the lids were locked down.

"How'd you get into that?"

"It's just a catch." He leaned over, fiddled with a pattern on the lid that was almost as complicated as a combination lock, and it opened.

"I wonder how she got out," said Corinna to herself, looking with distaste at the jumbled plastic trays and dishes covered in various kinds of glop. "Okay, you two. Disappear. I'll call this in like I discovered it."

The can with Miriam in it was found trundling on its automated track already inside the incineration facility, minutes away from the laser focus, just like in the vids. The difference, though, was that she was dead anyway. She had suffocated inside the sealed container.

Corinna, as the person who'd started it all, followed events over a comm link, and had been perched on the edge of her chair as the searchers zeroed in on the likeliest can. Now she sat back, deflated. Miriam had probably died before she ever left the ward. If she'd had somebody helping her besides a maximally gormless teenager, he would have hung around long enough to hear her trying to get out of the can.

Of course, then she might have been able to proceed with whatever she'd planned on doing.

Corinna could hear Benson ordering the incineration to proceed, because there was no way to guarantee an absence of nanites on the body.

"Wait," said Corinna. "We still have no idea what she was trying to accomplish by breaking quarantine. Couldn't somebody at least see what she had in her pockets first?"

Benson allowed that it might be a good idea, and started the complicated process of examining potentially contaminated remains.

Ramiro was hanging around just behind Corinna's field of view in a way that made her want to shout at him. *Stand still where I can see you!* Now he dithered forward in an agony of apprehension about something.

"They can't do that," he muttered.

"They bloody well can," said Corinna. "They have to. Unless," she added, "you happen to know what she was up to and can save us all the trouble."

"I don't know," he muttered defensively. "I don't *know*. They're not going to tell *me*. I'm not talking about that. What I mean is they can't burn her. If they burn her, on top of me messing up her mission, and then she's not even buried.... You have to be buried. Otherwise it's no good."

"What's no good?" asked Corinna.

"Yes, I remember," said Oziel suddenly. "The Catholics have the same thing. For the Second Coming, right?"

The boy nodded. Corinna was still fogged on many levels. What about all those hideous, unburied bodies in the dome, in that case? But it didn't seem like the time for obtaining detailed information. She tried to reassure him instead.

"For what it's worth, you didn't interfere with her mission. She, by sheer, dunderheaded—" Corinna suddenly remembered she was speaking of the dead. "Anyway, she interfered with her own mission. Sealing herself inside an isolation ward trash bin! You'd have to call it suicide if she'd had any – anyway, you didn't interfere with her mission."

Corinna couldn't stand to go to bed, knowing nothing. Not what Miriam had been up to, not whether UNPB had located Efraim Jericho, not whether they were any closer to finding the lost canister on Mars, not how many of the dozens of nanite carriers they'd stopped on Earth. Nothing. Oziel stayed up with her, and Ramiro couldn't stand to go to bed at all, it looked like. He followed Oziel like a lost puppy. Corinna was beginning to worry that he was going to crawl between the sheets of what had become the spare bed in their room.

After midnight, while Oziel was trying to get Ramiro back to what passed for normal by playing splicing games with him, she huffed,

"I wonder if Benson plans on getting any results soon? At the rate he goes, he'll still be trundling through precautionary procedures while we all turn black and disintegrate."

Maybe, she thought, there was at least some good news about the nanite designer. She pinged a query to Rodriguez on Earth, figuring that seven in the morning was late enough for him to be up, and he would actually answer her questions. Sure enough, half an hour later, a message came trundling back, but the news was not good. Efraim Jericho had, indeed, been at the contaminated farmhouse. He had left for the main lunar base six weeks ago. There were records of his arrival and whereabouts for over two weeks after that, and then he disappeared.

"Puts it right at the time we had the information to start shutting them down," Rodriguez's note said. "Jericho's hotel room, and the last place he was seen, the physics department of the Lunar University, both subsequently proved to be contaminated. We're very worried that he was himself contaminated, and once he went on the run, he could no longer apply treatments to control his condition. He may be dead by now. We're turning the moon upside down, hoping we can find him in time at least to save others."

Corinna leaned back, feeling deflated. It was too late at night for bad news. The blue and turquoise lasers forced the nanites to quiescence, but only for a time. Then they had to be treated again. If a real cure couldn't be found, everyone on Earth and in space was going to be fighting this forever ... and that was the best case scenario.

Midnight became one AM. One was working on turning into two when Benson finally called.

"Well, you were right," he began.

Of course, I'm right, she thought irritably. I knew that. Tell me something I don't know. However, she restrained herself from saying it, although it was a near thing at that time of night and at her stage of nerves and tiredness.

"She was carrying a chip," said Benson.

"A chip! How in hell did she manage to hide a chip through all the decontaminations and everything?"

"Well, uh, being a Defender, they checked her background and so on pretty carefully. There was no evidence of any connection to criminal activities, so, uh, anyway, they never did a body cavity search."

At that hour of the night and stage of sleepiness, it took Corinna a second to figure out what he was not saying.

"You mean she hid it *vaginally*?"

"Uh, yes."

"Sheesh. So what was it?"

"We don't know yet. The doctors only found it about an hour ago, and then we all had to decon. They're waking a couple of computer experts to look at the chip as we speak."

"I can't stand to even *hear* about people being woken up. I'm going to sleep. I'll call tomorrow – I mean today – before we leave for the courier, and find out from you then."

"Some beddy-bye is strictly in order," agreed Benson as his connection clicked closed.

Once Corinna headed toward their room, Oziel stood up and said he was calling it a night, too. Ramiro curled up on one of the couches rather than go back to the room he'd shared with Miriam.

With his parents stuck in the "likely contamination" ward, he might as well be an orphan on Mars, and she and Oziel seemed to have inherited him. She couldn't help thinking that if she had to have a kid, she would have preferred one with more sparkle and less greasy hair.

"You're sure having kids is a good idea," she muttered, as she and Oziel lay spooned together before falling asleep. She was joking, of course. Sort of.

"*Ey, mí cielo,*" he said, "any child of yours wouldn't have pimples."

"Hah. Shows how much you know."

The next day brought the last nanite check and, when it turned out mercifully negative yet again, the last breakfast together for this, the first cohort of people to brush up against the newest of plagues. There wouldn't have been any point letting them out, when everywhere else had more chance of being contaminated than their ward, but everyone who could be was being evacuated ahead of the comet.

Ramiro was eating with Corinna and Oziel, but staring at his plate as if at least one of them was Miriam, back from the dead. Oziel talked to him anyway.

"Who will you be staying with?"

The boy had to answer a direct question. Corinna saw him lick his lips and swallow.

"The Moses folks."

Oziel studied him for a moment.

"They're pretty high up in your Church, aren't they? Like your parents are."

Ramiro nodded, but produced no sound.

"Look, you haven't done anything for them to be mad about. You've been loyal. Loyal enough for Tiro." His expression turned sardonic, but the kid was staring at his cereal and didn't see. Nor did he look reassured.

"You're really afraid they'll kill you?" asked Oziel.

Ramiro looked up, such pain and fear and anguish stamped on his face it made Corinna remember how it felt not to know that bad times can end.

"You got no idea," he whispered.

"You'd be surprised how much of an idea I have," said Oziel. "If it's that bad, let me help you get protection."

The boy hesitated for a second, then shook his head.

"It doesn't matter. I'll manage. There's no other way now."

They silently ate breakfast for a while. That is, Corinna and Oziel ate while Ramiro pushed cereal around in a bowl. She could see Oziel studying him the whole time.

"You mean," said Oziel, as if there had been no pause, "you'll kill yourself."

The boy's head whipped up so suddenly, his hair flew off his forehead. Corinna realized by the shocked look on his face that Oziel had scored yet one more bullseye.

"Do you have any idea how stupid that is?" asked Oziel.

Ramiro didn't look back down. He kept staring into Oziel's eyes. Suddenly, he leaned forward. His whole body changed, unfroze, although he was still rigid.

"Take me with you."

Oh, Jesus, thought Corinna. Here we go. They were going to wind up having to adopt the geek.

Oziel looked back at him steadily.

"If you don't mind living in a barrio for a while, once we're back on Earth, I can take care of you till we're sure you're safe. But it's not just me. Anything I do, touches her." He nodded toward Corinna. "So you need to ask her as well."

Ramiro didn't. He forced himself to turn to her, but he couldn't seem to begin to shape a word, after opening his mouth to start.

Faced with such bottomless fear, she found herself saying,  
“It’s okay. But we’re going straight to the courier from here, so we need to be sure they have the supplies for an extra person.”

She tapped at her wristpad and heard Ramiro gulp.

“You’ll do it?” she heard him saying. “You’ll really do it? I –”

She moved away so she could talk to the pilot of the courier and Leira Dicastillo in peace.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” she said when she returned. “Emergency regulations require an extra pallet of water to add to what they have if there’s one more person, but I’ll take care of that, as well as a space suit in your size. I guess the sooner we start on the bureaucracy, the sooner we can board the ship.”

Hours passed while Oziel slogged through the child protection bureaucracy, Ramiro firmly in tow. Corinna sat in waiting rooms with him while Oziel talked patiently to officials and filled out forms. It was easier to make the case for protection than usual, since the Defenders did not have a particularly good reputation at that point, and Corinna could personally attest to the fact that they took their commination ceremonies literally. Ramiro’s obvious terror was even useful. It carried a conviction all its own.

A message from Rodriguez surfaced on Corinna’s wristpad, but once she read it, she wished she hadn’t. A space suit full of nothing but nanites had been found stuck in one of the big ventilation pipes on the lunar base. Efraim Jericho was the last person to have touched the outside of it, judging by fingerprints. The suit had been rigged to crack open once a signal was received by an unusual device taped to the outside of it. They didn’t know yet what the device was supposed to do. The good news was they had removed and slagged the suit before the base was contaminated beyond hope. Minor leaks had penetrated the failing seals, but lasers were keeping those nests of nanites under control so far.

Corinna took the extreme step of turning off her wristpad entirely. She didn’t want any more news from anyone. But she couldn’t stop her mind from following the implications. Unless somebody found the man’s notes on some well-hidden server somewhere, the world was going to wait until science found a solution. It would be found eventually, of course. Eventually, however, wasn’t good enough. The nanites weren’t going to slow down and give people the time to prepare for them.

Growing more and more depressed about the visions in her head, she looked around to see what progress Oziel was making. He was still conversing earnestly with a functionary at a desk about ten meters away. Now would be a good time for him to be done, so she could talk to him and distract her mind from its horrible thoughts. Looking at Ramiro fidgeting beside her, she smiled to herself at the thought that they were a pair, as far as that went.

Oziel finally stood up, gave the two of them a reassuring nod, and they all moved on to the next stop.

“Only two to go,” he said. “This is as smooth and flat as it gets.”

“Sheesh,” said Corinna.

“Really, believe me, this is easy. This usually takes weeks, and that’s when everything is perfect. Just getting parental rights revoked.... But right now it’s as simple as filling out the forms. They’re agreeing to everything, and I don’t have to deal with peons because they’ve all been evacuated already. The bureaucrats will make sure we can leave in plenty of time.”

“Couldn’t we do this online?” muttered Ramiro. “Can’t we just go? Get on the ship and go?”

It was perhaps the tenth time he’d made the suggestion.

Oziel stopped in the middle of the hallway, making both of them stop too. When he had Ramiro’s full attention, he said, very deliberately,

“Do you have any idea how much trouble I’d get into if I was charged with kidnapping a minor?”

Ramiro looked thunderstruck by the new concept.

“All right,” said Oziel with finality.

The boy visibly simmered down, and Corinna thought, *Yup. One more person added to the army who would do anything for Oziel.*

“So what was it you wanted to tell me, Corita?”

She hadn’t said anything about that, but he could see it, as usual.

"They found Jericho," she said. "What was left of him."

The boy froze up at the mention of the name, and Oziel scowled as she gave him the details.

"So, unless you" she concluded, nodding toward Ramiro, "know someone else who was on the project, or someone who knows where the designer kept his notes, we're in for a rough ride."

The boy stared at the floor.

"Do you know that, Ramiro?" asked Oziel. "Could you find out?"

The boy glanced up with a hunted look along the corridor, as if somebody might manifest themselves through the wall and get him.

"I – I could look for it. Later."

The next sentence, "Once I'm safe," resonated so clearly, he didn't need to say it.

"Okay," said Oziel. "Two more stops."

And yet another waiting room. In desperation, Corinna turned her wristpad back on so she could play games on it. The stupid thing had a message to call Benson. It was a curious thing about messages. So long as she didn't know they were there, she could ignore them even though she knew they must be accumulating, but when she could see the silly, blinking envelope, she had to open it. It better not be more bad news, was all she could think.

"Howdy doody," came Benson's nasal voice, rendered even more so by the wristpad's microspeaker.

Corinna almost said *Howdy* herself, in some sort of nervous imitation reflex.

"What news?" she said instead.

"That thing was something they call a 'crash' chip."

Out of the corner of her eye, Corinna saw Ramiro look shocked.

"Apparently," Benson continued, "if you slot one of those into a computer, it's like getting a hundred different, fatal viruses all at once. The programming on this one indicated it was intended for the server running the comet explosion control program. Apparently, once she was prevented from splicing into it, that's when she decided to try to insert the actual chip. I understand the last thing she was doing before all this happened, was splicing in to the comet control program from the containment ward."

"Oh," said Corinna, throwing a glance at Ramiro. "I see. Hm. Yeah." She finally got a hold of herself. "Thanks for keeping me posted, Dr. Benson. I guess if she'd been successful, there would have been no way to fix the program in time for the comet, is that right?"

"That's what the chip expert was saying. Unfortunately, it may not have been the only one. It was a home-programmed chip and it had a '3' scratched into the surface. That implies it's one of a series."

"Oh, Jee-sus. So I hope there are guards *draped* over the comet server and every associated machine."

"Yep. They're doing things with that server even the military doesn't bother to do."

"Well, good. Thanks again for keeping me posted. Are you evacuating up to Phobos?"

"No, I'm staying. Essential emergency personnel, you know."

"Yes," she said. "I can see that. Let's hope contamination isn't a bigger problem after the comet lands. See you when this is over."

"Okey-dokey."

She sat in silence for a moment, knowing Ramiro had heard everything.

"It seems," she finally said, "that in planting that splice on Miriam, you weren't doing anything she hadn't already done."

"A crash chip is a lot simpler than that particular splice," he muttered sullenly.

Corinna felt a sardonic smile coming on.

"I mean that she was perfectly willing to kill people, let alone do a bit of splicing. You didn't pin any *crime* on her that she hadn't already committed fifty times over. I didn't mean she was in your class as a splicer."

"Oh," said the boy, a slightly mollified look making it all the way to the surface. "You know," he added, uncharacteristically volunteering information, "that '3' doesn't necessarily mean anything. Homemade chips are hard to do, if they're complicated, and that might be the only one of the series that worked."

"We can hope," she said.

She filled in the time by calling people as they waited for Oziel at the last bureaucrat's office. She gave Leira one last call on Phobos. She could hear Petey in the background, "Ooh, ooh, is it going to crash? Can they make it crash? Huh, Mami? Can they make it crash?"

No matter what happened next, she thought, at least she wasn't going to have to spend several hours of her life cooped up on a courier with Petey.

She called Aniut and Momo and found out they weren't evacuating, even after these new threats to the comet. They'd volunteered for emergency service, Momo because of his knowhow and strength, Aniut because she could get and keep computers running when nobody else could. Corinna said goodbye to them cheerfully, promising to meet for a major dinner before heading back to Earth, but that was only because there was absolutely no point saying *For God's sake, stay safe!*

When they were finally boarding the courier, she wasn't looking forward to seeing the comet, as she'd imagined she would. She spent all her time hoping Ramiro was right about the crash chip, and that there weren't any more, and if there were, that security was tight enough to keep them out.

## Chapter 19

The pilot spoke in those even tones pilots always used, whether asking traffic control for permission to dock or telling them that they were about to hit an asteroid.

“This is Shebbaz-two, CTS-1071. Visual sighting of a ship on apparent course toward comet. Does not answer on ship-to-ship frequencies. Does this ship require assistance?”

There was no response for an increasingly noticeable length of time, until finally a voice filled the cabin.

“No record of a vessel on approach vector to comet, Shebbaz-two. Can you provide visuals?”

“Sending now,” said the pilot. Corinna noticed the maximally magnified view of the ID on the nose of the ship.

“No record of any such vessel,” came the voice. “You are the only ship in range. You are hereby required to pursue and keep them in sight. Scrambling pursuit ships now to take them in tow.”

“Changing vector and pursuing,” said Shebbaz, as if he was reporting on nothing more than the status of his landing lights. “I was a Lieutenant Commander in UNPB Enforcement before mustering out. I have the training to do more than pursue, if that is useful.”

“Very useful,” said the relieved voice. “Head them off their present vector, if possible. They are on a collision course with the comet.”

“Front row seats,” murmured Oziel, quoting Corinna. “Looks like we’re going to be up on stage.”

“I bet it’s just like a movie. If you get too close, you don’t see nearly as well.”

Any ship that could be spotted visually was no more than some ten kilometers away, and the CTS courier was on top of it within minutes. It still didn’t respond. Shebbaz shone the landing lights through the heavily shielded, black-looking pilot’s viewport. In Morse code, he flashed,

“Collision. Evade.”

Nothing. The strange ship plowed on as if everyone inside was dead. Maybe they were.

“Only one thing left to do,” he said. “We carefully match velocities, contact the hull without breaking anything, and push them away. Are you all strapped down? There may be some jolting.”

Or, if the ship changed course suddenly while they were trying to settle against it, fiery crashes. Corinna didn’t like having to strap down. The lizard part of her brain wanted to be free to escape. She gave herself a small, sardonic snort, and tried to concentrate on the ship in her viewport.

“Hah,” she said, “the show’s going to be on my side.”

But only Oziel craned his neck to see. Ramiro was playing a game on the vid terminal in his seat, as far as she could tell. Or he might be splicing in to the ship’s controls, for all she knew.

Shebbaz was either a very good pilot, or lucky on his first try. He touched the hull of the other ship between the airlock hatch and two of the docking clamps, so the courier didn’t simply bounce off. To Corinna it felt as if they’d been bumped by a slow shopping cart, nothing more. She could hear the engine hum intensify as he added power to start pushing. The eerie glow of plasma flared on the other ship as it pushed back.

They weren’t all dead in there. And they didn’t want help.

“Oh, Jee-sus.” She held her breath. The plasma, at over a million degrees, could slag their ship in seconds. It was magnetically contained, as was their own, but magnetic fields of thousands of gauss did not play well together. She had to start breathing again, but it felt like a formality. There didn’t seem to be any air.

The courier had stronger engines than the mystery ship and began to nudge it successfully off course. With no sound except the high-tension hum of their engine, and with motion so slow she wanted to get out and push, the star field began to shift. She began to feel that maybe the cabin

did have some air in it, after all. She could hear Shebbaz communicating with the two pilots on pursuit ships.

"Now what?" she heard Shebbaz mutter.

"What?" she asked.

"That ship has just released something that looks like a solar sail package, of all things." He tapped a few controls, and put an image of an ellipsoid pancake on the main viewer, which the passengers could see. "Who knows what's actually inside there. It's not transmitting on any frequencies, which is unusual. And illegal."

"Could it have somehow come loose from that ship?" asked Corinna. "When we bumped it?"

"If that was enough to dislodge it, it was held on with chewing gum. No, I don't think so. It seems to be under power, too. The vector doesn't look right for something that should be travelling with the parent ship." He tapped a few more controls. "It's headed back toward the comet, and something is definitely pushing it. It was released out of that ship, on the side away from us."

"What the hell is the point of that?" wondered Corinna. "Unless it's loaded with an antimatter bomb." But that made no sense either. The sabotage so far had all been directed toward crashing the comet with maximum force, not toward blowing it up early.

Oziel looked at her with raised eyebrows. The thing was a few hundred meters away, which, if something that size was loaded with antimatter, might as well be right in their pockets.

The pancake opened four petals, slowly, gracefully, like a flower caught on fast-forward. A wrinkled mass, which looked like a standard, folded solar sail, moved out from the interior and began its deliberate expansion. A fluid gradually infused lengthening ribs. In the ribs, it expanded to an aerogel and then hardened in the ultraviolet light sleeting through space.

"I guess it's not a bomb," said Corinna dubiously. "How weird."

"When a sail that size is fully unfolded," said Shebbaz, looking at something on his control panel, "it's three kilometers across. It's heading puts it between the comet and the control station on Phobos."

"Which will stop any signals coming from Phobos," Corinna completed the thought.

"Yes."

"Ramiro," said Oziel.

The boy's head jerked up as if pulled on a string.

"Do you know anything about this?"

The boy shook his head vigorously. He didn't ask what it was all about. Maybe he was less occupied with his game than he seemed to be.

"Really," he added, when Oziel kept looking at him.

The bad guys were bound to have a Plan C, Corinna supposed. If the good guys managed to foil this, would they also have a Plan D? And then a Plan E? Was she going to spend the rest of her life worrying about these turkeys? And how long would that be?

"Couldn't we just nip over there and fry it with our exhaust?" she asked.

"That would only knock a hole in it three meters across. The reaction ions are at a million degrees, but heat doesn't spread in space, so the rest of that thing will keep right on going. Even if we shred it, we have no way to control the trajectories of the bits and pieces, and I sure as hell don't want to depend on luck for that signal to get through."

"So what's the procedure?"

"Under normal circumstances? A crew goes out there, carefully grabs the tips of the ribs with their hands, and tows it back to its correct trajectory by flying together. Anything else tears it. It's only been done a few times, and once, even that tore it."

"Skilled labor, huh?" was Corinna's comment. "But we don't care if it tears. Couldn't we just tow it after hooking a tether onto it somehow from the ship?"

"It's designed for low mass, not strength. If you tried to tow that whole sheet from a single point, it would just rip through the rib."

"So," said Oziel, undoing his five-point belt and standing up, "we go out there. We don't have skilled labor. We have us." He moved toward the suit locker.

"Zio," said Corinna.

He stopped.

"Have you ever been out, untethered?"

"I've never been out, tethered, Corita."

"Then it's totally stupid for you to even think about doing that. I don't know how to describe it, but, believe me, when you're out there with nothing but a suit between you and infinity, and you feel like you're falling into it forever.... This would not be a good time to discover that you don't react well to that.

"Now," she continued after taking a breath, trying to keep the fear out of her voice, "I did it once for my space suit safety training. I can do a corner, and one corner may be enough." She looked dubiously at the image of the sail unfolding and expanding with the soft grace of a butterfly using its wings the first time. This would have been a good time for Vahtinen to be there with Shebbaz, but CTS had sent her to ferry last-minute evacuees to Phobos.

Shebbaz did some rapid calculations.

"It's already almost a kilometer across. And the other problem is that it has some sort of engine on the underside, where we can't see it. Something is actually pushing it right now, and you need to counteract that, too. The power from one suit probably wouldn't be enough."

"So what do we need to do?"

"Four points is probably a minimum," said Shebbaz unhappily. "I could get close to the edge and you could loop a tether through the film and around the outer rim, then attach it to the ship. Together with you, that would give us two points."

"I've done suit flight in sims lots of times," said Ramiro.

Everyone looked at him. Reza Shebbaz turned all the way around from his controls to look at him. It was the first sentence the boy had spoken during the whole flight.

"Sims are different from reality," said Corinna.

"Tell me about it," he muttered. Then he added, louder, "At least I know how to do it. If I freak, I freak."

He didn't seem particularly worried. Corinna decided his normal mode was to see reality as just another game, unless someone like Oziel got to him. She was trying to figure out how to tactfully say they couldn't ask a kid to risk his life, when Oziel got over it for her.

"That's three points," stated Oziel, as if it was settled. "Do you think I could be useful if I stayed tethered?"

"Well, sure," said Corinna, still trying to adjust her mind to the thought of a vid-playing teenager jetting about on his own. "Then if you do get spooked, Reza can reel you back in. Just do everything real slow."

"All right," he said. "That's four. I'll get as far from the ship as I can on the tether. Let's go."

Corinna suited up and went first. The ship matched velocities with the sail. She pressed on a circle drawn on the hull and a metal loop popped up. She clipped one end of the tether to it, fought the rest of it as it tried to float in unruly loops and coils like a live thing, put it around the outer rim of the sail, and clipped the other end to the ship. She concentrated tensely on the ship and the tether and the sail to avoid noticing the depth of space and how infinitesimal her place in it was.

She saw Ramiro come out of the ship while she worked, and pointed toward a distant part of the rim. He gave her a quasi-salute and rocketed off with no hesitation. He was so far from freaked out, she was worried. She hadn't seen his face through the heavily darkened helmet, but there was a fizziness to his movements she'd never seen on the un-suited Ramiro. He zoomed over to the indicated point, dumped momentum like a pro, and maintained his position at the rim, apparently effortlessly. She had to admit to feeling jealous. Her own progress was going to look like an old lady's. However, the important thing was to do it right, not to one-up Ramiro.

As she finished up, Oziel came out, took the hand Corinna stretched out to him, and she could see the dim outline of his head move to look out. She opened her mouth to tell him, quick, not to do that, when she heard him breathe an awed,

*"Dios mío."*

Not frightened. Awed. She was starting to feel like the only person in the world who had to keep a careful hold of herself not to panic.

Moving slowly, their jets on the lowest settings with Corinna steering both of them, they floated a couple of hundred meters. They had an awkward moment counteracting their

momentum at the end, but Oziel's tether stopped them in no uncertain terms. He attached himself gently to the rim, and it was up to her to get across the now two kilometer expanse of sail to her own position.

Ramiro's voice suddenly shouted,  
"Hey!"

And then there was a lot of breathing.

Corinna whipped her head around, trying to locate him in this world without directions, and finally saw him.

He was struggling with a spacesuited figure.

"What the —?"

She saw Oziel's hand move toward his tether and knew what the next step would be.

"You," she told him, "don't even think of taking that tether off and trying to help." His strength worked against him in zero G.

"*Sí, Señora Capitán,*" he said with a smile she could hear and feel.

She started making her way over to Ramiro, wondering what-the-hell the whole time. This sudden person had to have come from the mystery ship. He — it was a he judging by the size of the spacesuit — must have abandoned his ship when it became obvious the courier was going to push him off course. He'd grabbed the sail and planned to position it using suit power alone. That was a suicide mission. Maybe even with the ship, it had been a suicide mission. Then, once he noticed that they were now worrying his sail, he'd obviously decided to pick off the interlopers, one by one.

He'd have been less outnumbered starting with the pair, her and Oziel. Ramiro was running rings around the unexpected person, in an almost literal sense. Ramiro had put a spin on him that the stranger was obviously desperately trying to stop. Corinna could see puffs of condensing gas emanating from maneuvering jets all over the suit. That, of course, added tumbling to the spin. She could hear a "Take that," mumbled in her suit radio, and Ramiro kicked him off into the wild black yonder. It wasn't really a kick. It must have required excellent control of the thrusters, but it looked like a kick. The suit sim games must be quite something. She hoped whoever was in that suit had extra anti-nausea medication packed in the first aid compartment.

"We can pick him up later," said Ramiro nonchalantly.

"If anyone can find him," said Shebbaz. "He doesn't answer hails. I've given the pursuit ships the current vector. We'll have to hope for the best because that sail has priority. The first signal in the detonation program is due to be sent in half an hour."

Corinna managed to reach her point on the rim not too gracelessly.

"Okay, I'm latched on. On your count, Reza."

They didn't start with perfect simultaneity, but the resultant wobble was not enough to tear the sail. Then, in a minute, it was all over. The sail had a new trajectory and there was nothing to do but get back in the courier.

On her way in, Corinna saw one of the pursuit ships arrive and start a search pattern for the missing person. It had better equipment than the courier to locate a single spacesuit tumbling through the universe on its own.

The three passengers took seats on the comet side of the courier, strapped in, and settled down to watch the approach.

The courier was much closer to the comet's path than originally planned. The thing had been visible as a distant, brightening star for a while. Now it had a noticeable disk the size of a pinhead. Her mind could tell her that anything visible at that distance was enormous, but it was impossible to feel it. The thing looked like an inconsequential speck.

In some ways, the process resembled approaching a planet. It felt equally unlikely that anything so small could transform to world-filling dimensions. The resemblance stopped, however, at the gradually growing sense of motion. Planets might fill the world, but they stayed put, or seemed to, which was just as good. This thing, a hundred kilometers across, was now obviously moving toward them, gathering momentum, rushing at them like a bullet used by gods. It was easily the most terrifying thing Corinna had ever seen. It didn't matter that her mind knew her ship was outside the thing's path. In seconds, it went from the size of a car, to a flying iceberg, to a hurtling mountain, and then to something inconceivable, a vast misshapen ball of rock flying

above them, at them, ready to destroy them.

In an instant, it rushed past without a sound. The silence was the eeriest thing. It just didn't feel right, no matter what her mind told her.

The starfield slewed around. They'd been close enough to be touched by the monster's gravity.

Mars hung in space, giving no sign of waiting to receive another world. The comet was so close to the planet, it was dwarfed by it. It was so close, it looked ready to smash into the North pole in a second. It should have exploded. The charges must not have gone off. Corinna gripped the armrests of her chair. Had they failed after all? Had there been a Plan D? Was...?

The comet shattered into a fountain of pieces, and fell.

The chunks landed so softly, in astronomical terms, that there was nothing to see from their distance. No gouts of debris, no craters. Just a spreading whiteness splotching the whole north as the frozen ices covered the ground.

Sounds of jubilation came over the pilot's radio, and he switched the video feed onto the main viewer.

"Feel free to take off your seat belts and move around the cabin," he said, making fun of the old, old phrase.

Corinna unclicked her seatbelt in the same instant Oziel undid his, leaped up, and hugged him.

"We did it! We did it! We did it!" she kept saying as he swung her around, laughing.

In her exuberance, she even hugged Ramiro, who seemed shocked but not catatonic from the experience. He hadn't entirely lost the fizziness he'd had ever since his momentous space walk. He even sat straighter and his hair didn't fall in his eyes quite as much.

"The news from Earth is not as good," said the newsfeed.

Corinna stopped jumping around the cabin. Now what?

"The infectious diseases unit of UNPB issued reporting requirements for unexplained bleeding just over two days ago," said the blow-dried, brown-haired male newscaster calmly.

Any remnant desire to jump drained out of Corinna. She didn't want to know where this was headed. Not now. Not when they were winning. Surely the lasers could at least keep the horrible nanites in check.

"Confirmed nanite cases are concentrated in the United States —"

*Where* in the US? In New York? It took these wretched newsheads forever to get to the point.

"— but confirmation is very hard to get. Our medical editor —"

And he was off, blathering with the medical editor about the difficulty of finding a specific form of carbon in a body that was made of carbon. Apparently, just one careless carrier with a prematurely ruptured capsule had caused the disaster, because he'd been passing through airports and spaceports. Other people had picked up the molecules and spread them everywhere.

Corinna wondered whether any Defenders were pausing for thought at how their scheme to annihilate some life might result in the end of all life. It was always so hard to draw the line.

Ramiro, she noticed, was back to looking deflated and closed.

"You know, Ramiro," she found herself saying, "if there's anything you know about how to find the notes or anything of the guy who designed those things, now would be a good time to say so."

She could feel herself not reaching him, not touching him in any way.

"There might be something that would help. He *has* to have designed the things with some kind of dead man switch. And the nanites are clearly spreading faster than the lasers can slow them down." She nodded toward the screen, which was showing a stomach-turning close-up of a nanite ulcer, to help people identify the symptoms.

"Everybody's gonna die, right?" said Ramiro with no particular expression.

It irritated her so much, she wasn't able to restrain herself.

"Yes, Ramiro. Everybody's going to die. This is not some stupid computer game."

"Well, at least the designer — died, too."

She didn't respond. Explaining to a teenager that going to hell was not the point would take too long because, at last, a map had appeared on the viewer. The map looked diseased, with red pimples breaking out on it. The red dots were proportional to the number of cases. North Texas had a rash. New York, miraculously, was still clear, but there was no chance it would stay that way for long. Caracas had red on it. As the globe turned, dots appeared in Norway and Italy, Egypt

and India and Japan. Australia and New Zealand were still clear. The map then transformed to the solar system, and dots appeared at every space-based facility. The courier was practically the only thing out there unmarked by a red dot.

“Countries without infections have closed their borders. But new cases keep turning up and the experts say closing borders won’t work. They say the important thing is for everyone to be alert for new cases. We all need to follow quarantine procedures exactly. And the most important thing is not to panic. We have ways of controlling the problem. If everyone cooperates, the experts say we should be able to handle this.”

*If everyone cooperates. He might as well pronounce sentence of death and have done with it.*

“We go now to Sheila Goldstein, reporting from St. Louis where the latest new cases were found. How are people handling it there, Sheila?”

“Not so well, John.”

Sheila stood against a background of a surging sea of humanity. Shrieks, shouts, and bellows rose out of a bone-chilling roar of sound. It took Corinna a second to realize it was thousands of people screaming. It made fear in her body without having to go through her brain.

Sheila’s hair was whipping around – the cyclone of panic around her would have been enough to account for that – and it was obviously taking every last shred of her will to look at the camera instead of behind her.

“Not so well, John. Demonstrations against the quarantine are taking place.”

Demonstrations! Riots was the word she was looking for.

“Our sources tell us if they break through the barricade, the police forces outside will use incendiary weapons. Our news ’copter is covering the worst area and, to tell you the truth, John, I’m hoping they won’t have anything to report.”

The situation was so bad, a professional was letting her emotions right into the newscast.

The scene switched to an aerial view, zoomed so that individual people could still be distinguished. A tidal wave of humanity surged forward. Unfortunately, the barricade held.

The reporter’s “Oh my God” joined Corinna’s inside the cabin of the courier.

People were standing on people. They were clawing their way onto people. They were pushing and shoving and fighting and people were falling, disappearing, ground down under thousands of feet. Screams unlike anything Corinna had heard before cut through the roar of the crowd and maddened the mob to blinder frenzy.

“Oh God,” gasped Corinna. “Turn it off. Please. Turn it off.”

They didn’t need to hear any more to know that they’d saved Mars, and lost Earth.

She turned away, turned to Oziel, buried her face in his chest, and couldn’t even cry. She heard Ramiro ask,

“Was there someone you knew on that newscast?”

She lifted her head, glaring, ready to kill him for his lack of feeling, for his adolescent self-centeredness, for everything, but she couldn’t find the words for her outrage.

“Yes,” said Oziel. “There was someone I knew. A small girl with curly hair, carrying a bucket full of sand. Didn’t you see her?”

His longing for everything that was lost filled the space, including those parts of it occupied by other souls. Corinna could feel it dragging her own heart like a black hole.

“Well,” said the boy whose name had been Abraham, “it’s actually quite simple. They’re on the right track with the 457 and 491 nanometer lasers. Three hundred thirty one nanometers, pulsed at the right frequency, reprograms it to try to incorporate silicon when it has carbon, and vice versa, and makes it fall apart.”

Dead silence filled the cabin and pressed against the walls. The engines and machines hummed, but they were embedded in a thick amber silence.

“You,” Corinna finally whispered. “You designed the nanites?”

The space filled with the deader silence of consent.

“You!” she said, louder. If she’d been patting a kitten, only to find that the furry thing was a tarantula, she couldn’t have been more aghast. That was why he’d had a Defender trailing him everywhere. That was why Miriam couldn’t point a finger at him. “Good God! You’ve been watching people dying. You’ve been –”

“Corinna. Don’t.”

The words stopped in her throat, turned off at the source.

Oziel let go of her and stepped closer to the kid.

“Three hundred thirty one will kill it, you say, Ramiro?”

The boy looked at him, and kept looking at him, as if there was no other hope in the universe.

“It couldn’t,” said Corinna. “He’s lying. That’s in the ultraviolet. I saw what UV does to those things. They grew fifty times as fast.”

Oziel looked at the boy, waiting for an explanation.

He gave it.

“They use most kinds of radiant energy to the extent there are bonds that can absorb that frequency. But 331 exactly, not 330, not 332, destroys them if you pulse it.”

Oziel looked at Corinna to see whether this made sense to her. It did, so she nodded.

“They could at least test it out.”

“Come sit here.” Oziel indicated the co-pilot’s chair to the boy. “We’re going to help as many people as we can, Ramiro. If you’ve helped as many people as you can, nobody’s going to kill you. Come on now. I owe you an apology. You were right. I had no idea. Come sit over here, and we’ll let people know, so they can start getting things under control. You need to tell people how to do it. Nobody’s going to kill you.” He kept talking soothingly, quietly.

The boy took a step, and another step. He sat down in the chair, Oziel’s hand rested on his shoulder.

Slowly, the news spread everywhere. Lasers were adjusted, tuned, distributed. Truck-sized lasers hanging from blimps irradiated whole towns. People who stayed outdoors, against instructions, acquired sudden, faint tans. Tiny lasers, pumping light through fiberoptic wires, illuminated lungs and livers and hearts and brains of infected people, threaded through any duct or hollow the doctors could find. It would cause excess cases of cancer – the statisticians were figuring out how many even as the blimps flew by – but cancer could be dealt with.

Hours went by. They ate. When Corinna could make her voice normal while she spoke to the boy, she finally asked,

“Why did you do it?”

He shrugged. He hadn’t spoken to anyone, except Oziel. He hadn’t moved more than a meter away from him. When Oziel had to go somewhere, to the bathroom, or to get a cup of coffee, he waited till he came back as if the air had left the cabin.

She and Oziel were definitely going to find him nestled in the sheets tonight, in which case she was going to put him through an airlock without the benefit of a spacesuit.

“Answer her,” said Oziel. He said it quietly, he said it kindly, but it was an order.

“I was just playing with a sim,” he mumbled.

“With a few additions you programmed,” Oziel filled in when he stopped at that point.

“Uh ... yeah. It was kind of interesting, in the beginning. I made up an automaton game of sims of different nanites. The winner was the kind that survived the most. I evolved them that way. It was really fun.”

Then he clammed up again, realizing no doubt what Corinna’s reaction was likely to be to that statement.

She carefully suppressed the reaction.

“That doesn’t make sense. The rules evolve in those games, but the automatons themselves are just black boxes. They die or survive, but they don’t change.”

“Oh, I programmed them from the carbon up. Bond strengths, atomic arrangements, overall conformation, everything could change.”

“But that’s ... so you hijacked computers all over the world to run it, huh?”

“Only for a few months. I was going to take it off, but Jericho said he needed it, so....”

“You did all that, bond strengths and conformations and the whole nine yards, but you couldn’t be bothered to tell people about the dead man switch?”

What Corinna really wanted to do was take three steps across the intervening space, grab the young man by his sagging T-shirt, and shake the stuffing out of him.

“It, uh, didn’t actually have a dead man switch. It was just a sim,” he added defensively. “I programmed in potential zones of weakness in all the nanites, so the other ones had a chance of killing them, but I didn’t have any rules that stopped them evolving away from that. After a few

iterations, I didn't necessarily know what the weaknesses of any given nanite were."

"But it wasn't just a sim!" Corinna exploded. "How could you take it beyond a sim and not have a way of stopping it, you —." He wasn't an idiot. That was the problem. And yet, he was.

"Okay." She forced herself to sound calmer. "You found a winner-takes-all sim. Then what happened?"

"That was right before my Second Baptism ceremony. I was supposed to be working on my catechism. But . . . *hell*, that stuff is so boring. I got sidetracked with my games. I tried to cram for the catechism, but I'd put it off too long, and, well, anyway, I flunked. My parents know I don't flunk things, so they looked into it, found out what I'd been doing, and they just went crazy.

"It was only about the millionth time I got in trouble over computers. They kept cutting off my net access, because they kept catching me in all the bad stuff out there. That's how I first started splicing. I had to get around the blocks. By the time I was nine, they used a professional to put in custom blocks. Didn't do them any good." There was a definite note of pride in his voice. "So, anyway. They found my nanite sim. Dad wanted to know if that could really work, or if it was just a game. I said I thought it could work, but you never knew with these things till you tried them.

"Months went by. I got through my Second Baptism. I started tenth grade, this was about a year and a half ago. Dad showed up with a nanofabricator and told me to try it. You seen one of those things?"

Corinna nodded, but Oziel said, "I haven't."

"It uses lasers to manipulate individual atoms. You can put them exactly where you want them. So I wrote a building game, played it through about ten iterations, at which point the program had learned how to do it, babysat it through a few more iterations, and it was easy to tell when it was done a couple of hours later. The molecules started chewing through the fabricator. I freaked. I started screaming that they had to get it into metal immediately, before it ate through to the outside. I mean, in a sim, that would have been the end of the game. Nothing else left. It was the only thing I could think of to do. They'd never seen me like that, I guess, so for once they did what I said. Then they hauled the whole thing off somewhere.

"I got kind of worried. I mean, I want to — wanted to be a chemist so I learned about it, but Mom and Dad were, like, 'Carbon? We have carbon? Whatever.' I bugged them about it a few times, but I'd get in trouble and have to do penances whenever I did, so I kept quiet mostly. Then the first guy died. I only found out because they asked me how to handle the body. I told them they couldn't handle the body. They were made of carbon. *Carbon*, I kept telling them. It was awful. I didn't know what was happening. They had no clue what to do. I kept saying they had to get a real nanotechnologist and a real biocontainment expert, and they kept telling me to shut up."

"Wait a minute," said Corinna. "This man died when you were in tenth grade? Over a year ago? What did they do with the body?"

"Bodies. They had to do last rites. They touched him and they all wound up dying. They finally believed me about doing everything with metal and using biocontainment units. They buried them in biocontainers. It got real expensive."

"They buried them! Oh shit. Ohshitohshit. Where? That's another whole area—. Quick! Where?"

He pointed out the burial sites north of Dumas on a map, and another round of frantic communications with Earth started.

It was a few hours later and well past everyone's bed time, when Corinna returned to her questions. The courier didn't have a docking slot for another three hours, she wasn't going to be able to sleep anyway, and she didn't see anyone else calling it a night either.

"Look, your Dad's a monster. Not you. Except for one thing. You knew people were dying over a year ago and you just *sat* there?"

"I figured out how to use lasers to control it. There was a series of vulnerabilities I had in the program, and I thought something in the series had to work. Actually, it didn't, because they'd already evolved away from all that, but since I knew the starting points, I finally found something. I told my parents how to do it, at least according to my sims. I'd never tested it. I'd never tested any of it. People died anyway." He shrugged again. "Sometimes it seemed like they wanted to die."

"You mean because they were so careless?" asked Oziel.

"Yeah."

"Lasers!" Corinna spat out. "Of course they died, for chrissakes! What were you thinking? You make these damn nanites, and there's no way to deal with them underground or inside people or in animals or in a billion other places. Lasers!"

The kid sat, looking down, looking at nothing.

She tried to remember he was only fifteen – fourteen when he'd made the simulation. He probably thought you could beam a cure at people with a protoplaser, like in some science fiction vid.

She took a deep breath.

"Okay. It's good you told them about lasers. Why the hell didn't you run screaming to the police? To your neighbors? Anyone!"

He sat there, shoulders hunched, brown, oily hair falling forward to hide his eyes.

"Answer her," said Oziel.

"When the first people started dying, and Mom and Dad weren't listening to me, and I was freaking, I threatened to go to the police. We never do that, you know. That's a really bad thing to do. But I was desperate to make them listen to me, so I said I would. They told me I'd be interfering with God's work. I don't know about Mom, but Dad really meant it, and what Dad says pretty much goes. I got scared in a whole different way. I didn't know what to do. I heard about people dying. But there were also a lot of people not dying. I didn't know what to do."

"Interfering with God's work? In other words, he threatened to kill you? Your own father threatened to kill you?"

If she ever met that lump of scum, she'd tear him limb from limb. And then she'd get nanites all over herself.

"Well," she went on more mildly, "what about when the whole thing got completely out of hand? What about, say, a week ago? I mean, at some point, it doesn't matter what they threaten you with."

"I thought that long before a week ago. I was going to run away from home and ask for asylum or something. I'd spliced into messages between Moses, Galilee, and my Dad and found out about the space program. I didn't know how people got asylum, but I was going to try. I got as far as the bus station when they picked me back up.

"Dad told me I was crazy. He said all the Unbelievers would be out for my blood if they ever found out what I'd done."

"You'd done!" interrupted Corinna.

"He said they'd kill me, and him, and Mom, and everyone I knew. He said I had to keep quiet and pray as hard as I knew how that the Lord's work could be done, because that was my only hope. He said it was everyone's only hope."

There was silence between the three of them, until Corinna finally breathed out,

"Man, oh man, your parents are going to get a whole category beyond child abuse, all to themselves."

Oziel said nothing, black fury in his eyes, and nodded.

After that there was silence for what felt like a couple of hours.

Oziel shifted position and looked straight at the boy.

"Ramiro, I won't lie to you. You're in a lot of trouble. People really will be out for your blood, but remember through it all that you're a minor and the law won't let them do much to you. If you keep your head, don't make excuses for yourself, say you're sorry about fifteen times a day, do what you can to help deal with the damage, and never, ever, get angry at a judge or anyone with a camera, you'll come through it in a few years. That sounds like forever now, but you will come through it. You're already a laser chemist, and you'll be an official one some day. No need to give up on that. I'll help you in whatever way I can."

"What – , what can they legally do to me?"

"The worst? Put you in rehab until you're twenty one."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"But Dad said they would kill me."

"If you haven't figured out by now," said Corinna, "that your Dad is full of shit, you're not as smart as you think you are."

For the first time, something she'd said earned one of the boy's fleeting smiles.

"Rehab is a lot of people telling you exactly what to do, isn't it?"

"Pretty much. They try to make sure you don't enjoy it."

"I'll feel right at home," said Ramiro, in what Corinna felt sure must be the first joke of his young life.

## Chapter 20

"I seem to do nothing but visit jails," muttered Oziel.

He was taking the whole visit to Ramiro in detention rather hard. It reminded him too much of visiting Quintón, Corinna guessed. He better get used to it. The kid had asked to be placed in a Venezuelan facility at his sentencing, so they were going to be doing this for the next six years.

There was also the safety issue. Oziel hadn't had the heart to tell the boy, "Look, you probably weigh forty kilos soaking wet. How are you going to deal with someone who's been working out since he was two?"

"Ramiro," he had said, "it's not as bad as it used to be here. At least the guards themselves aren't a problem these days. But you'll be much safer in a US facility."

"You couldn't visit."

"I could. Not very often, that's true."

He'd been determined to serve his time in Venezuela. Quite a few people were sympathetic toward him, because he'd taken to heart Oziel's advice about apologizing fifteen times a day. Investigator Rodriguez, who'd been promoted up some five grades at once and now apparently hobnobbed with presidents and judges, supported the boy's request and that had been that.

Corinna had suggested later that Tiro could make sure he was protected.

"I can't go begging Tiro for things," protested Oziel. "Besides, then the kid will decide the gang is wonderful and we'll really be in trouble."

So Corinna had quietly asked Tiro herself. Could you make sure he's not harmed *and* that he's not allowed to join any gang? she had said. Tiro had laughed his horrible laugh and said, "Is there anything else you'd like? The brothers digging shithouses, perhaps?" Then, unexpectedly, he had added, "Whatever you say, Corinna, as always."

She knew that except for the "Corinna" part, that was a stock oath of obedience in the gang. She hadn't dared to ask whether he was being entirely sarcastic or not. They'd find out in a minute when they saw Ramiro.

The flitter taxi touched down at the parking lot outside the gates. Oziel paid the driver, they climbed down the three steps to the ground, and stared up at the grey, cheerless building with too much wall per window. The high, barred gate was of a size to let trucks through and to make people feel like insignificant insects. They passed iris scanners at the gate and again at a grimy window just before the security concourse leading to an abused waiting room. This, Corinna happened to know, was the newest juvenile jail in the country, but obviously a lot could happen in ten years.

The visiting hour was just ready to start. Corinna and Oziel joined some twenty people and followed a guard up a flight of stairs to a large room. Tables and chairs were scattered around for the inmates and their visitors. The system was both low-budget and low security for the subset of boys with no record of physical violence. Looking at a few of the hulking teenagers, Corinna had her doubts, but presumably the government psychiatrists had some clue what they were doing.

She finally saw Ramiro at one of the tables when he stood up, having seen the two of them. He gave the impression of straining at a nonexistent leash. She could have sworn he was taller than the last time she'd seen him, a month ago, but boys at fifteen had a way of starting to grow with the speed of a sunrise.

It was strangely familiar to meet like this, in a room full of other babbling people. Except for the shabbier surroundings, it was reminiscent of quarantine.

"So, how's it going?" asked Oziel, having given the boy a complicated handshake that Corinna suspected him of having invented on the spot.

"Not bad," said Ramiro. "See, I registered for a laser physics class and two chemistry classes on the net." He pushed a printout toward Oziel. "They have to pay for any classes I take. It's really great. And the head warden signs anything. I'd signed up for another two math classes, but a counselor came and lectured me about spreading myself too thin and leaving enough time for World Literature."

The jail might have been a spa of some kind, thought Corinna, the kid was so animated.

"You don't think much of World Literature?" asked Oziel, with a one-sided smile at the boy's expression.

"Bo-o-oring," was his verdict. "Now, if I could have taken the math classes —."

"So the counselor made you drop them?"

"Well, it was so-called voluntary, but he was obviously going to come and talk at me like one of the Elders until I dropped it, so I saved us all the trouble and just did it."

"Really?" asked Oziel.

Ramiro lowered his voice.

"Well, I splice in now and again, but only so I can be on top of the game when I take them for real. But you haven't noticed the best."

The kid was practically bouncing, pointing at his printout. Corinna leaned over to look too. There, embedded in the ordinary high school and college classes, it said "Independent Study, Carbon Geometries" and the instructor was listed as —

"Dr. Swensen!" exclaimed Corinna. "Jee-sus. Didn't he win the Nobel Prize in chemistry last year for something to do with fullerenes?"

Ramiro nodded, a smile of such wattage illuminating his face that she suddenly realized he was going to be quite good-looking, given time.

"We're working on designing a control nanite. The really hard part is finding a failsafe that the sim nanites can't defeat. But once we've got it, the control nanite will be able to get into all the same sorts of places as the other ones, and it'll be a lot easier to get rid of them. It's counting toward my community service. And Dr. Swensen, *Dr. Swensen* said I'd solved a problem in programming nanotubes that had been puzzling people for years. Dr. Swensen —."

The boy was rolling, and no mistake. The situation reminded Corinna of a mathematician she'd known in grad school whose idea of fun was giving his buddies insanely difficult problems which he pretended were easy. "This is one I solved during lunch break," he'd say. "See if you can get it." And, more often than not, they did. The only difference was that Swensen hadn't given Ramiro this particular problem, but Ramiro had solved it anyway because he didn't know it was impossible.

After some time, Oziel interrupted with a growing grin,

"Ey, you realize I don't understand a word, don't you?"

That stopped the flood.

"But just because I don't understand," Oziel continued with the same pleased and amused glint, "doesn't mean I'm not impressed." The boy glowed. "So, do you spend all your time studying?"

"Nah. Except for the work with Dr. Swensen, all that stuff's pretty easy. I've done a lot of it before, without registering. I've been" — he hesitated, glanced at Oziel with a return to his old embarrassed manner — "working out. Camao over there has been showing me what he does."

Corinna looked over her shoulder at the indicated plugugly, and wondered.

Oziel frowned.

"That's a gang name. Who is this guy?"

"I dunno. Just a guy. He seems nice. He comes from Petare, too."

Oziel was frowning more than ever and Ramiro was starting to look downright taken aback. Corinna thought maybe it was time to say something.

"He's just worried, Ramiro. His youngest brother got into a gang — and never got out."

"Ooh," said the boy, "your brother's a gangster? That's max."

Oziel radiated a burst of tension like a frayed electrical cable, and Corinna sensed that in the next microsecond he might stand up and grab the kid by his prison-issue shirt. She put her hand on Oziel's arm. He stayed sitting down.

"Zio, he's just trying to be complimentary about your relatives."

Oziel waited a few heartbeats, counting carefully to ten perhaps, and said, so quietly it felt like

a threat,

"It is not 'max,' you idiot. It is never 'max.' "

"Yes, sir," said the boy in a tiny voice.

That, thought Corinna, was probably how he had spoken to his insane father.

"It's okay, Ramiro," she said. "It's okay. I've never seen Oziel hurt anyone. Except a few security guards who were trying to hurt us."

Oziel shook his head and visibly tried to get a hold of himself.

"The point isn't 'yes' or 'no.' The point is that I don't want you admiring gangs."

"Okay."

The boy's instant acquiescence bothered Oziel, she could see that. He wanted understanding, not obedience.

"So," said Oziel, unclenching his teeth to do it, "have you joined yet?"

"Joined what?"

There was another burst of tension, so Corinna filled in.

"He means have you joined Camao's gang?"

"Uh, no. It's not like he's talked about it. I didn't even know he was in a gang. And I wouldn't want to join anyway." His glance at Oziel was so desperate for his hero's approval, it wrung Corinna's heart. "I'm not much of a joiner."

"He hasn't talked about it?" A calculating look appeared in Oziel's eyes, and then a searching glance at Corinna.

"You talked to Tiro?"

She nodded, after waiting as long as she could.

Oziel sank his head on his hands and Ramiro said,

"What?"

Oziel lifted his head.

"Listen to me, Ramiro. You have to understand how things work, so I am going to tell you. Most people are good sometimes. Usually, you don't get to see that. Do you have any idea why that Camao protects you instead of taking you apart? Because she talked to the gangster who runs my whole town and got him to make sure someone took care of you. Without protection, you'd be jerky. That's what gangs are."

Ramiro looked at Corinna, boggled, scared, not knowing what to say, and then back at Oziel.

One point was getting lost in Oziel's anger, thought Corinna.

"Ramiro, just because Camao started out under orders, doesn't mean he's continuing because of it. He could protect you without being nice about it. So, if he's friendly, it's because he wants to be."

The boy seemed to be absorbing the idea, faintly reassured.

"I've been helping him with his homework."

Oziel leaned back with a sardonic snort of laughter.

"In that case, it's more than a fair trade, although I'd be amazed if that guy realizes it."

"Does he learn anything?" asked Corinna, raising her eyebrows in disbelief. Then, when it was too late, she thought of better ways to put that, ways that didn't tell Ramiro he was stupid to waste his time.

"Actually, he's pretty good. He really likes math. He was just kind of on the wrong track with some of the basic stuff, but he's been getting into it."

Suddenly, Corinna had a thought of maximum irony. This joining business might work two ways. Tiro would have her head on a plate if, by doing her a favor, he lost a promising intern.

Oziel seemed to have caught the same idea, because he changed the subject.

"Well, that's good," was all he said about Camao's budding math skills. "Have you heard from your parents?"

"Dad won't speak to me, which is kind of nice. Mom said they're settling in on 9971C and are starting to get the hang of the mining equipment." In a very subdued voice, he added, "I still don't really understand why they didn't all get executed."

"Because," said Oziel, "civilized people don't kill people. That's the whole point. There needs to be some difference between us and criminals."

Corinna knew the two of them had had this conversation several times before.

“Think about it, Ramiro,” she added. “If the authorities say it’s okay to kill people, for whatever reason, then it’s okay. They’re setting a powerful example. How are you going to make a really strong case that it’s okay for some people, but not for others? Next thing you know, we would have been back to the escalating violence of the good old days.”

Although, especially early on, there had been a number of people insisting that all Defenders, contaminated or not, culpable or not, should be incinerated, preferably alive. People could be very scary. It took images of stunned Defenders, hearing sentence passed of exile to an asteroid, before most people finally simmered down.

They’d been treated before being shipped off, another unnecessary charity according to some of the more rabid avengers, and provided with visible light lasers to control any subsequent problems. But although a 331 nanometer UV laser orbited the asteroid, killing any escaped nanites on the surface, the exiles weren’t given one. UV lasers could be used as weapons against electronics, and people saw no reason why the ships arriving with supplies or ferrying away the metals excavated by mining drones should have to run any risks.

“How are they adjusting to the whole business of living off-Earth?” asked Corinna.

“I dunno. Mom’s always kind of upbeat about stuff. She seems to think things are going pretty well. She included an attachment from one of the Elders talking about how any place where the Lord had work for them was consecrated. Next she’ll be wanting me to move out there.” He made a face.

But something about the way he said it was almost wistful.

“You don’t miss all that stuff, do you?” she asked, incredulous.

“No, of course not,” he answered, too quickly.

Oziel, leaning back, the tension apparently gone, studied him.

“You want to talk to Defenders now and then?”

He said it as if it was a perfectly normal thing to want, so the boy answered,

“Sometimes I wish I could talk to Larry.”

Corinna knew his best friend, his only friend as far as she could tell, was named Lazarus Galilee. Even more quietly, Ramiro added,

“I actually went to church last Sunday.”

Corinna just barely managed to stop herself from rolling her eyes. The boy had to be pretty lonely, so she supposed it made sense.

“There’s nothing wrong with going to church, Ramiro,” Oziel was saying. “You don’t have to apologize for it. They don’t have anything but a Catholic service here, do they?”

“Yeah. I kinda liked the incense.”

“I’ll talk to the priest,” said Oziel. “She should be able to arrange for somebody from your church to come by at least sometimes. And I’ll talk to your counselor about contact with Larry.”

Ramiro was sitting there in an obvious and gargantuan conceptual struggle. It wasn’t hard to guess what the problem was. Corinna had the same questions, but Oziel answered them.

“There’s nothing wrong with the Defenders, Ramiro.” With a sidelong glance at Corinna, he added, “There isn’t even anything wrong with making up silly stories about biology. Anything that makes it easier to be a kind person is good, Ramiro. That’s all that matters. The people on that asteroid are there because they killed people, not because they were Defenders, even if that was *their* justification.”

She wasn’t so sure about that, especially the bit about biology, but she was glad she hadn’t said anything.

She changed the subject.

“I wanted to tell you, what we did in helping that comet land safely turns out to have saved a lot more than just Mars. They finally found that last canister on the edge of the crash zone, and it had a screamer beacon attached. They’ve found five other canisters on other facilities in space, as well as the suit that used to be Efraim Jericho’s, that all had receptors for that beacon. A comet strike would have set the beacon off, which would have caused the simultaneous release of nanites all over the solar system.”

“They would have got them under control eventually, though, right?” said Ramiro, looking down at the table. He tended to revert to his locked down state whenever the subject of nanites came up.

“Probably. But you saw what people do when they panic. There would have been thousands of deaths, at least.”

He was looking at the table more than ever.

“Ramiro,” she said, “the point isn’t that your sim made nanites. The point is that you saved an awful lot of people from what your father did with them.”

“Oh,” he said, brightening. “Yeah.”

Most people, she could hear Oziel saying, are good some of the time. If only there was a way to channel all their bad moments into video games, and leave their good moments for reality.

## Glossary of foreign words

**Terms of endearment or affection**

mí cielo	my sky
mí amor	my love
'mano	short for hermano, or brother

**Exclamations**

Dios santo	holy God
válgame Dios	God protect me, God defend me
Oy, Ey	interjections, like "oh"
Bozhe moi	my God
Ya lo creo	Okay! I believe it!

**Food**

arepa	unleavened fried and baked bread made from maize, eaten with or without filling
empanada	a baked or fried patty with sweet or savory filling, also used figuratively to mean mixed up or confused
pupusa	pancake-like patty, filled or not, usually fried.
pil'meni	Siberian (Russian) meat-filled dumplings, like won-tons, cooked in broth with dill.
piroshki	baked or fried, meat- or cabbage-filled pastries

**Terms of annoyance or anger, or derogatory terms**

qué vaina	what nonsense
mierda	shit
cabrón	approx. equiv. to son of a bitch, (lit. goat)
huevonadas	bullshit, (lit. testicles)
ahuevados	idiots
comemierda	shit-eater, with implications of pompous ass
vergatudo	big dick
coño	cunt

el mandón	the boss, the big shot
gringo, -a	person from the US
chingón	screwed, but can also mean sharp, competent
cholo	gangster or gangster-like
manazas	klutz
gafo	goofy

**Various**

niño	little boy
el jefe	the boss
norteamericano (-a)	North American, usually meaning from the US
chico	kid, kiddo
rancho	Venezuelan term for barrio shacks
truco	a card game

**Abbreviations**

VAT	Value-Added Tax (Similar to a sales tax, but levied at several stages of the production. Levied in, e. g. Europe.)
UNPB	United Nations Planetary Bureau
CTS	Clipper Transport Services
G	Gravity. One G is the force of gravity at the Earth's surface.
MFM	Mars for the Martians
DOF	Defenders of the Faith