

Chapter 5

“Who are *you*?”

“My name’s Cara. You were very sick... so people have been taking turns sitting with you to help you recover.”

“Oh...” the young patient murmured, closing her eyes. “I’m at the base.” Her face relaxed as if she would fall asleep again, but then one eye popped open and inspected Cara. “Are you research or recon?”

Cara thought about that. “I’m here for training.”

“So, you’re new.”

Cara smiled. “Yes.”

This time, both eyes opened. “Who’s your instructor?” the girl asked.

“Yael.”

“Katrin’s my...” the girl spoke drowsily, “I’m... in trouble...” Then she fell back asleep.

The door to the hallway creaked open and a small girl peeped in.

“Hello there,” Cara greeted her. “Are you supposed to be here?”

“Yes,” the girl replied solemnly then gazed dolefully at the hospital bed. “Is she *still* asleep?”

Cara glanced down at the face on the pillow. “She was awake a few seconds ago, but-”

Before Cara could finish, the girl darted to the bed. “Eve! Are you awake?”

“*Nell*, you know you’re not allowed in the clinic,” spoke a warning voice from the doorway.

Pretending not to hear, she leaned closer to the sleeping girl’s ear and whispered, “Eve! Wake up!” until the nurse came and shooed her away.

Gwendolyn Hayes moved calmly around her patient, checking the fluid levels and tubing on the intravenous drips. When she felt the girl’s forehead, she looked triumphant. “Fever’s gone!

That’s big news, Nell!” Gwen exclaimed. “You should run and tell your friends. They’ll want to know. Go on, now.”

The girl sidled reluctantly towards the door as Gwen cheerily waved goodbye.

“Close the door behind you, please,” she called, then straightened and turned around. “Are you glued to that doorknob young lady? Off!”

Sighing effusively, the small girl finally let go of the door and left.

“Thanks for taking a turn watching her,” Gwen said to Cara. “I can set the computer to respond to a patient whenever they move or make a sound, but there’s evidence that live-person chaperoning speeds recovery.”

“Happy to help,” Cara said, stretching her limbs with a yawn. “It was very restful.”

“*There* you are!” Gwen said, noticing her patient’s eyes had opened. She touched her earpiece and spoke. “Hello. Room sixteen’s fever broke. She’s awake and alert. You’re welcome... out. No more forehead scans for you, young lady,” Gwen said, holding up a thermometer. “Under your tongue...that’s it. We’ll get a *good* reading this time.”

A moment later, a new measurement and its calculated mean appeared in the list of vitals projected onto the wall. “Oh, by the way,” Gwen said, “your escort’s in the hallway.”

“Already?” Cara glanced with surprise at the clock. “Shouldn’t I stay until the next chaperone arrives?”

“No need, they’ll be here soon,” Gwen assured her. “See you at dinner!”

Cara looked down at the pale face on the pillow. “Lots of people have stopped by to see you, Evelyn. Everyone hopes that you get well *soon*.”

“Thanks,” said the girl. “I’ll be out of here today.”
Cara grinned and Gwen cheered, “That’s the spirit!”
When Cara stepped into the hallway, she found Mason waiting for her.
“How’s the patient?” he asked.
“Awake and without a fever.”
“Really?” Mason said sounding relieved. He flicked his ear to activate his communicator.
“Katrin?” He waited. “Eve’s awake. Sure... out.”
“Is Evelyn the daughter of one of the researchers here?” asked Cara.
Mason chuckled. “I wish I could tell you who she is, just to see the look on your face. I *can* say, that she’s Katrin’s star pupil. Oh... we’re going this way,” he said, redirecting their path down a side hall.
“While I was with her, she mumbled something about being ‘in trouble,’” Cara told him.
“Did she?” Mason looked amused. “I imagine she’s dreading Katrin’s reprimand. Eve made some mistakes, but right now, we’re just glad she survived them. Plus... Katrin knows it’s her own fault for allowing her so much latitude. Eve can fool you. She talks like a forty-year-old with three PhDs but she’s still *just a kid*. Don’t worry she’ll be fine. Katrin’ll give her opportunities to amend her missteps and learn from them.”
“How?”
“Well... one thing is... Eve will be asked to teach martial arts to the children of the people who work here,” Mason replied. “The person who’s been in charge is leaving and it’s a perfect role for Eve. She’ll do it well with Katrin’s guidance. I think they also want to send her to some age-appropriate training to help her understand the difference between experienced operatives bending the rules and children *breaking them*. If she can’t learn that, she’ll be taken out of the field entirely.”
Cara stopped in her tracks. “I don’t understand. You use *children... in the field?*”
“If a child has requested it and their parents agree, children can act as ‘look outs’ in the safer, rural zones. They’re taught how to report what they see and hear, and are drilled in self-defense and evasive maneuvers. Katrin makes these decisions for Eve because... well, for many reasons, not the least of which is that Eve is effectively an orphan. When Eve was very young, her father was killed in the war and her mother was kidnapped by the DM.”
“So... Eve was sent to a Children’s Center?” Cara quizzed but Mason’s face grew ponderous. “I sense a change in subject,” she laughed.
“You’ll be happy to know,” he said with the hint of a smile, “that whenever *I* can’t give you an answer, I request that someone else provide you with one. It’s just that sometimes they say ‘no’.”
“Who tells you no?” she asked.
“You’re about to meet him.”
When next they went through a door into what appeared to be a newer section of the base, Cara was startled by the noticeable increase in security. Cameras were placed as if to capture every inch of the area and armed personnel stood outside every door. One more surprise awaited her at the end of the hall, when the guards on either side of the elevator saluted Mason.
Cara had read articles about an underground organization with trained soldiers. NetNews said they called themselves ‘the Resistance’. She guessed it was a waste of time to ask about it directly, so she tried digging for clues.
“A lot of extra security all of a sudden...” she noted mildly.
“Uh huh,” Mason answered absently as the elevator doors opened to another guard inside.

When the elevator started to move, she could feel that it was going up, but the ride was too silent and smooth for Cara to judge the distance traveled. Then it came to a gentle, almost imperceptible stop and when the doors opened into a small conference room, they were greeted by two more guards, and a blast of hot air.

“Why is it *so much warmer* here?” Cara asked. Her question brought snickers from the guards and a groan from Mason.

“It gets worse,” he grumbled as he crossed the room to knock on a door.

“Come,” responded a voice inside.

Mason opened it and announced, “She’s here, Professor.”

“Superb! Show her in!”

As Cara stepped through the doorway, the sight that greeted her was a delight. The room was packed with plants growing under sunlamps and the combination of colorful flowers and sweet fragrances with the soothing hum of ventilation fans distracted her from seeing the older man sitting behind a desk to her far left.

“Can you tell I’m a budding botanist?” the man asked. He turned to Mason and said, “I’ll call you.”

“Yes sir,” Mason replied and after an encouraging nod to Cara, he left them.

The man motioned to the chair by his desk. “Please.”

As she moved closer to take the proffered seat, Cara couldn’t miss that he was staring at her as if she were an apparition. Then suddenly he stood up and said, “Where are my manners... Would you like some tea?”

“Please.”

“I’m sorry about the interrogation yesterday,” he said, setting the water to boil. “They call it an ‘*interview*’ but I like to say what things are.” He glanced back at her. “I hope it wasn’t too overwhelming.”

“Not my favorite experience,” Cara responded cautiously.

“But you couldn’t have been *too* surprised,” he proposed, “given that you did your graduate work in a military facility. I understand their vetting process is *similarly rigorous*.”

Cara frowned. “Being familiar with lie detector technology is not the same as being *comfortable* with it. I guess it could happen... that a person could get used to close-up cameras zooming in on their eyes to see if they’re lying, but not without training.”

“I’m afraid you’re right about that,” he conceded. “Cream or sugar?”

“No, thank you.”

“I *wonder*...” he said and handed her a steaming cup. “Can you guess where you are?”

“In a Resistance base in the northern United States or Canada.”

“Why those regions?” he asked, as he offered her a plate. “Cookie?”

“Thank you. During the trip here, I paid attention to the changing air temperature throughout the day, and to the sounds and smells of the quiet, wooded areas where we stopped for gas. As a botanist, I’m sure you understand that *the sounds and smells of forests* are distinct at different latitudes.”

The man threw his head back and laughed until tears spilled from his eyes and drove him to blow his nose. When he finally responded he said, “Mason told us you would never agree to traveling under sedation, so we had a decision to make about whether to risk your coming without it. And you’ve just *so eloquently* described why we can never permit it again!”

“Why did you allow *me*?”

He lifted his mug and drank some tea. “Because a *saint* told me you could be trusted, and now three lie detector systems and a panel of psychologists agree with him. *We’re* convinced, but what about you?” He peered at her above his cup. “Although I imagine it’s reassuring to see Gwen, you only knew her a few months before she disappeared, and though Rachel and Mason seem trustworthy, you’ve known them only a short while as well. *What if they’re being misled?* Isn’t that what you’re wondering?”

Cara didn’t answer. She didn’t even know this man’s name.

“Tell me... Is there *anything* that you *are* certain about?” he asked.

“My regional manager is maladjusted,” she answered, “and abuses are being committed in the division where I work.”

“But you’re still hoping that the cruelty you’ve witnessed is limited to a small portion of the Corporation, rather than running all through it,” he suggested.

“Yes.”

“*Of course* you would hope that,” he affirmed. “The Corporation has been held up as a stalwart institution for as long as you can remember. What we’re telling you conflicts with what you’ve heard from teachers, professors and prominent people in the news. You’ve been proud to work there. So... what do you need from us, what would convince you that the organization I represent *is who your new friends say we are?*”

Cara sat up straight. “If you allow me to see your research facility,” she said, “and talk to your scientists, I could determine if you’re actually equipped to develop a vaccine. Then at least I’d know you *might* be telling the truth about *that*.”

He nodded and was quiet a moment before he said, “I’m sorry if I was gaping when you walked in. I wasn’t prepared for how much you look like your parents. Pictures of you don’t do justice to the in-person resemblance.” He leaned forward as if to present his face more fully. “Do you recognize *me?*”

Her head tilted slightly. “Maybe. Have I seen you on the Net?”

He walked to a bookcase, removed three framed photos from a shelf and handed one to her.

“I’m the man in the middle.”

Cara drew in a long breath. The picture showed a younger version of him standing between her parents.

“I was your father’s and mother’s best friend, second only to the friendship they had with each other.”

His words lit a candle in a forgotten corner of her thoughts. “You’re... Cannon Brookes?”

He beamed. “Yes!” He handed her a second picture. “Have you ever seen *this* man?” In that photo, she saw a youthful image of her father, Cannon Brookes and someone else.

“His face is *vaguely* familiar...”

“*That is John Dyer*. Your father, Jack and I were boyhood friends.”

Cara felt a sudden chill and Brookes stepped back to study her face.

“You look surprised.”

“I don’t remember my parents ever even *mentioning* the CEO of the Corporation,” she spoke warily, “let alone, that he was a close friend.”

Brookes handed her another photo and pointed to a small boy in it. “This is also Jack Dyer,” he told her, “with your father and me when we were about ten-years-old. Come see these others.”

As Cara perused the pictures displayed on the shelves, she saw one she recognized; she’d seen it before on the wall of her parent’s study. Noticing the direction of her gaze, Brookes picked up the framed photograph and handed it to her.

“You’ve seen this high school photo before?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s your father, of course, front and center holding the trophy. I’m next to him here, and this is Dyer. Did you know your father was our team’s captain from his sophomore year on?”

“No.”

“Look at these faces. We’d just *won* the *national championship*! It’s a *joyous*, triumphant occasion... see how happy we all are? Now, look at Dyer.” He gave Cara a moment to inspect the image. “I can’t tell you why Jack looks like a bee just stung him, maybe one did. But the fact that every face in this photo is jubilant except *his* makes this picture *perfectly* symbolic of the life-long friendship between your father, Dyer, and myself. Your father was the born leader, I was his ever-reliable, wide receiver, and Dyer was the begrudging second-string player. I’m convinced that if Dyer had spent more time emulating your father instead of envying him, he’d have turned out much better.”

Cara examined Brookes in a sideways glance. “John Dyer is the CEO of the Corporation. How much better can you do than that?”

“Dyer’s a failure to himself and humanity,” Brookes answered mildly, and then impishly added, “I bet you never heard anyone on NetNews say *that!*”

“People have criticized him,” Cara remarked, as she handed back the photo.

“And where are they now? Can you find them when you search their names on the Net?” he challenged.

“Maybe they’re here,” she suggested.

“Yes, sometimes they’re lucky,” he replied absently, his gaze lingering on the image. “No one but Dyer questioned your father’s right to hold the trophy in this picture. I realized far too late that Jack was insatiably jealous... a *diseased mindset* that sprouted early in boyhood.”

Then he brightened. “I know what might help! I’ll dig up *everything I can find* that mentions your lovely parents and put it all in a box for you! Pictures and articles and anything they wrote. How does that sound?”

He waited in almost giddy anticipation of her response but when none came, he murmured, “Oh dear, I fear I’m being insensitive. You think my idea is shallow... a Band-Aid for your sorrow.” She shrugged. “Maybe... but mostly I’m struck by the inconsistencies in your story.”

“I see, and they are...”

“I don’t remember my parents ever mentioning a Jack Dyer and yet I heard your name all the time. I even saw pictures of your apartment in the UK.”

Brookes nodded. “That’s because, by that time, Jack’s behavior had already become a problem.

Our conversations about him took place behind closed doors... *definitely not* in front of a child.

The four of us were co-founders of the now extinct start-up company called MBD

Pharmaceuticals. We all had plenty of smarts, but our *quick* success was primarily due to your father’s guts and your mother’s ingenuity, a truth that Dyer to this day would be *loathe* to admit.” He scratched his head thoughtfully.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if Dyer’s still upset that the first initial of his surname was *third* in the acronym, even though we all agreed that ‘MBD’ rolled off-the-tongue the best. He’d always been a nuisance about trivial details of this kind but I didn’t understand it as a sign of a criminally disturbed mind. Your mother did. She said Jack was a ticking bomb.”

Brookes went to his computer and projected the image of an old newspaper article onto the wall.

“The McCarten AntiViral Therapy,” the title read, and the article went on to describe the clinical trial successes of the new antiviral drug produced by MBD Pharmaceuticals.

“Dyer went bonkers when he saw this article,” Brookes told her. “Just *lost his lid*. The newspaper wrote only about the discovery of the therapy, which was indeed the work of your mother and father. The article said nothing about the hard work of developing the marketable product, something that Dyer and I would have been credited with, along with your parents. It wasn’t your father’s fault that the author featured him and the discovery, nor was it his fault that because of this and similar news stories, the public believed he deserved all the credit. If anyone was going to feel insulted it should have been your *mother*, since they didn’t even *mention* her. But, as you know, people aren’t comfortable giving women getting credit for an achievement, even when they do half the work.”

“I’m used to it,” Cara said.

“Yes. It’s amazing how people can put up with almost anything if they think they have to.” He fell silent then, seemingly lost in thought. When finally he picked up the thread of the story again, he spoke slowly, as if he were watching a memory play out in his mind as he talked.

“Your mother understood that the reporter simply chose to write the article that way. But Dyer... I *really* should have seen it by *then* but I didn’t... I *brushed off* Dyer’s ridiculous over-reaction as an artifact of his having overworked himself, somehow forgetting that- oh, right! We’d *all overworked ourselves*- all the people in the lab, all of manufacturing, everyone! I remember... I was an exhausted *mess*; an over-wrought, wrung out dishrag, but somehow I saw the article *as great publicity for our company*, and Dyer saw *betrayal*, of all things. Who knows how he came upon that crazy, twisted understanding. Did he think your father made a deal with the press? No! No, he did not, because *he knew your parents would never do such a thing*. So how did he justify his accusations of betrayal, you might ask? The answer is, he *didn’t*. He didn’t *bother*. Because he didn’t care about the truth, or what’s right, or how he was affecting anyone else; he only cared about himself. What matters is what he has and doesn’t have. That’s who he was and now *he’s much worse*.”

While she listened, Cara tried to recall what she knew about Cannon Brookes. He’d been the top executive in the Corporation, second only to the CEO. Before the Corporation, Brookes had been a research professor at Oxford, a renowned science orator and her father’s lifelong friend. But then, about a decade ago, she’d heard the now curious news of his *sudden death*.

“I remember when they announced you’d been killed by terrorists,” she remarked.

“Ah yes,” he said with content amusement. “I guess I was *just dying* to join the Resistance.”

“You admit that’s your organization.”

“The Resistance is the name we leaked to the press,” Brookes explained, “and is often a convenient colloquialism to use among friends.”

“So...we’re friends, you and I?” asked Cara.

“From my perspective, yes, but I think *you* may have a few more questions.”

“An untold number,” she agreed.

“Ask them. Ask away.”

“Alright...” Cara sat forward in her chair. “At the time of your ‘death’ you were John Dyer’s top VP. That was quite a switch... from Corporation executive to terrorist,” she observed.

“What happened? What made you leave?”

His cheery expression vanished. “I joined the Resistance when I could no longer rationalize being part of a system that was responsible for *one thousand deaths a day* and endangering the lives of millions more... *for no good reason*.”

“There’s always a reason,” Cara baited.

“Disinterest in the pain you cause others because you’re consumed with *self*-interest fits the ‘*no-good-reason*’ category,” the professor murmured as he studied the inside of his cup. “We can *forgive* those who are deaf to reason, *but we don’t accept their destructive behavior.*” He put his cup down with a thump. “When people like Jack Dyer think they have the right to endanger others, society must find a way to stop them. Many people are allowed to be or taught to be *selfish* as children or become so for one reason or another, later as adults; they can’t *see*, let alone *operate outside of* what’s been imprinted. You could argue it’s not their fault because their minds were conditioned... but if you think that, then it’s your duty to help them find a way out, free them from their mental trap.”

“Then I hope you have the antidote to fear,” Cara warned, “because *that’s* the trap.”

“I think I might have the remedy *for Jack*,” he answered, “but his greedy comrades will have to swim to another shore.”

“I see. Well, if you’re planning something retaliatory, you can *count me out*,” Cara announced flatly.

The professor sat back in his chair with a puzzled expression. “Neither I nor any other leader in the Resistance has punitive intentions toward Dyer or the Corporation. Despite what NetNews tells you, people in the Resistance aren’t anarchists; we don’t and *won’t* perform foolish, destructive acts that could lead to a power vacuum. Our goal is to work cooperatively.”

Cara considered that. “Do you plan to approach the leaders of the Corporation using your vaccine as leverage?”

His eyebrows sunk into a frown. “I’m afraid we’ll need more than *one* bargaining chip to buy a seat at that table. The vaccine is certainly is an ‘ace up the sleeve’ but the Corporation holds *almost* all the other cards. Martial law has allowed them to take ownership of the manufacturing processes in this country and control the distribution of every product that’s made here and abroad. At the *beginning of the war* that didn’t seem so unreasonable, but now that *Corporation money* controls the government *and the military*, self-indulgence has displaced reason.

Fortunately, influence changes like the tides. The in-rushing tide can be intense and powerful, but inevitably, it *slips back into the sea*. Our job is to wait until they can’t deny their supremacy is slipping, and then present them with a palatable way out that is simultaneously *our way in.*”

Cara noticed she’d been tapping one foot and forced it to stop. “*I’d already agreed* to Rachel and Mason’s requests *before I came here*. The fact that you risked exposing your identity and this location can only mean one thing; you want something else. Something in addition.”

“Have you guessed what it is?” he asked.

“*I’m just a scientist*,” she reminded.

“Just?”

“As you *well know*, scientists take orders from the business side of the Corporation,” she said.

“We have no decision-making power; we can’t even protest the misuse of our research. If they distort our data to win a legal battle or promote a product, we can’t say a word because we’ve signed employment documents that state we *shall never sue the Corporation* and we *shall never go public with internal disputes*. When foolish people break these agreements, they go to jail.”

“Or disappear.”

Cara’s eyes narrowed angrily. “Tell me what you want, *all of it*, right now... or else my answer is preemptively ‘no.’”

“Very well,” said Brookes, sounding almost relieved. “Here it is, then. After you complete the assignments you’ve agreed to, you’ll need a safe place to land. We’d like you to come here and work with us... join our research team.”

Cara leaned back and crossed her arms. “Your *reticence* in making so fine an offer suggests there’s an *unpleasant* nonnegotiable attached.”

“There *is*,” he spoke tentatively, despite the frankness of his words. “All our operatives and researchers agree to take a drug the moment there’s even the slightest risk they’ll be questioned by the authorities. With this drug, we can selectively wipe out a few months, a year or a lifetime of memories, depending on the dose.”

Cara felt shocked but not completely surprised; the military had a similar drug. As Brookes went on to explain, she listened carefully.

“For twenty years we’ve done studies on men, women and yes, even children,” he said. “It sounds unethical to dose children, but sometimes it’s the only way to protect them.

We have charts that enable safe dosing based on age, weight, body-fat content, and sex. Taking the drug at any dose is a drastic measure, of course, because memories are precious; so the decision to administer the drug is done with careful deliberation.” His eyes locked onto hers.

“This is how we protect our people.”

Cara looked away. She was already convinced of the necessity of the precaution. She just wasn’t ready to admit it.

“Of course, you’re welcome to say no,” he added. “If you decline, your self-defense and mental preparedness training would proceed as promised, and you’d get to meet a *few* of the scientists who would answer *some* of your questions. However, if you want to enter the research facility and engage with the scientists fully, you must be willing to take the memory drug if and when your contact in the Corporation deems it necessary.” Brookes peered at his computer screen. “I see your primary contact is Rachel. Do you trust her?”

Cara’s shoulders raised into a non-committal shrug. “Do I trust anyone to wipe my memories? No, but... What happens if I agree to it?”

He gazed peacefully at his indoor garden. “You’ll get to tour the labs, meet all our scientists and they’ll answer all the technical questions that you-”

“I’ll do it.”

He seemed uneasy with the suddenness of her response. “The risks are real,” he warned. “I wish I could say the Domestic Military would never take you into custody for questioning, but I can’t. If the DM suspected you were communicating with us, it could happen. In this case, we would have to dose the drug such that there would be no memory of your interacting with any of us. You would be physiologically unharmed in terms of secondary effects, but there would be a gap in your memory starting from about a week or so before Rachel made contact.”

Brookes projected a different document onto the wall. “These are the health-related facts for the memory drug, including the contraindications. I’ll make the studies available for you to review during your stay. You’ll see that the data reproducibly tells us the drug is quite safe within our dosing regimen. Aside from the memory loss and the confusion one feels as a result of it, there are no ill effects.”

“What if I’m arrested before Rachel can administer the drug?”

“We have a *small army* of people collecting intelligence at your work facility. We’ll anticipate any attempt to remove you,” Brookes assured her.

They stared at each other, neither one stating the obvious, that things don’t always go as planned.

“If I complete the assignments, what happens then?” Cara asked.

“We give you a new identity and escort you to one of our research facilities,” he answered.

“If I leave the Corporation for good, Rachel said they’d accuse me of traitorous acts. If ever I were caught and convicted...the wartime penalty for a traitor...”

“Death is death, my dear,” said Brookes. “What matters is how you’ve lived before it comes.” Cara’s eyes drifted to the pictures of her parents on the shelf. She wondered if other people in the Resistance had known them. “I agree to the new term,” she announced. “I’ll take the memory drug rather than risk exposing anyone.”

Brookes clapped his hands together in delight and declared, “Cara, I *promise* that you will *never regret* this choice.” He pressed the hollow just inside his ear and announced, “Inform everyone that Cara will be receiving the *grand tour*.” Then he pointed at his ear. “They inserted this new type of communication device *right in the tissue* of the concha cavum. Where will they put it next, my brain?”

The door to the conference room opened.

“Are we ready?” Brookes asked as Mason entered.

“Almost. She just needs to put this on.” Mason handed Cara a beautifully crafted lapel pin in the shape of an arc.

“There are security sensors throughout our tunnel system,” he explained. “Some sense body temperature, some detect sound and others see movement of anything larger than a rat. The pin will allow you to move freely between your living quarters and the cafeteria,” he told her, “but outside of those areas you’ll still need an escort to avoid setting off the alarms.”

“Which are *very loud*,” Brookes warned.

“Earsplitting,” agreed Mason and pointed to one end of the pin. “If you press here, it works as a commlink. It also has a tracking function—”

“In case you’re a *double agent*,” Brookes joked.

Cara grinned. “A *removable* pin to catch a spy?”

“It’s in case *you get lost*,” Mason patiently corrected. “The tunnel system is extensive and it’s easy to get turned around. At some point, if you’re willing, we’ll insert a communicator chip into your ear like the one the professor has.”

Brookes groaned. “Full disclosure, *just for you*, Cara. One of our engineers designs these dermal-layer commlinks and we’re his guinea pigs.”

“Then you should *also tell her* that the new commlinks have *vastly* improved our ability to communicate with one another,” Mason said, as he began to tie back vines and clear the way to a metal door. “These plants are out of control, professor. If you don’t cut them back, I will.”

“Now don’t go acting like these commlinks are perfect!” Brookes admonished. “I’ll admit, there’re no medical issues and that’s remarkable, but functionally there are *many* deficiencies. In the field, you have to set up an artificial barrier against interfering frequencies to prevent the DM from jamming or intercepting our conversations.”

Mason keyed a code into the access panel on the door. “*No link* is perfect,” he argued, pressing his fingertips to the screen. “Our technology works seamlessly inside a facility like this one and in places where we can set up a perimeter. Given those conditions, we can switch an earpiece on and off *remotely*, program it to specific channels, and pinpoint your location while we talk to you. I’d say that’s pretty good.” Mason used a cloth to clean the lens on the security pad.

“Are there limitations? Yes, of course there are,” Mason said, glancing back at Brookes. “*With any* generation-based telecommunications, *whether you’re using 5 or 15G*, you’re going to lose transmission if you go out of range, or get blocked by a big, *dense* object like a building or a mountain... and, yes as you point out, you can *also get jammed by interfering wavelengths* unless you set up a perimeter.”

Mason leaned closer to the security pad and allowed it to scan his eye. Then there was a whirring sound, followed by a *click*, announcing the release of the latch on the blast door.

“Come on in,” invited Mason as he swung open the door and went through it.

“I don’t know why you’re complaining about the vines,” Brookes retorted as he passed under the doorway. “They *conceal* this metal monstrosity. Think of it as added security. Camouflage.”

When Cara stepped through the door Mason grabbed her arm. “Stand still for a moment,” he cautioned, “till you get your bearings.”

“Whoa!” Cara exclaimed when she saw what he meant.

They were standing on a catwalk that was many stories above the floor of a cavernous space with only a railing between them and the drop downward. A huge rotunda monopolized the view at eye level and it took Cara a few seconds to recognize that she was staring at the mid section of a single, gargantuan object. She grabbed hold of the railing and looked down. Then she looked up.

“Is... this a *rocket*?”

Professor Brookes grinned. “It’s the payload module of a manned spacecraft. We’re experimenting on improvements that will make space travel safer, more economical.”

“In what way?” she asked as she continued to gaze in awe at the leviathan tower.

“One of our chemists has discovered a material that’s cheap to make yet blocks radiation more effectively than anything we’ve seen. Spacesuits and external tiles on ships made with this material limit radiation exposure so well, that life-long missions in space are now feasible for humans. We’ve also added an inexpensive fiber to the external tiles that strengthens them against collision with space debris. The chief enhancements, though, are related to changes in flight strategy but for details on *that*, you must talk with the experts down *there*.” He turned to Mason. “Arrange a time for her to meet some of the scientists developing the prototype.”

“Yes sir.”

Brookes pointed to a tripod with a pair of binoculars. “Help yourself,” he offered. “There’s plenty to see.”

After directing the viewfinder and pressing the autofocus, Cara saw a platform of instrument panels with their back-end electronics fully exposed. Panning the room, she found row after row of people at computers and many more leaning over tables covered with circuit boards and e-devices. A solar array and parts to a propulsion system, including a massive engine, occupied much of the floor space. She zoomed in on the solar array and could see the interior electronics in sections where the protective panels had been removed. She wondered how this intricate mesh of machinery *that looked so delicate*... could endure the rigors of space.

“What’s the big unit to the left of the solar array?” she asked.

The professor increased the magnification of his prescription eyeglasses and looked down at the cavern floor. “That’s the beta version of the science module for this ship.”

Cara whistled in amazement and turned to look at Brookes. “*Where* did you get the *funding* for all this?”

His eyes twinkled. “We have *many interested donors*.”

“Who invests in terrorist groups?” she asked. “If the government found out, they’d take everything they had.”

“The commercial space sector knows how to funnel money discreetly,” Brookes assured.

“What do *you* have that they want?”

“Our work is different,” he said, “in that we’re preparing for long-term exploration.”

“The donors are interested in the engineering advancements in the prototype spacecraft,” Mason explained, “*and all our software*, including the flight-simulations we use to train astronauts.”

“You give flight training? Where do you do *that*?” Cara asked.

“They start here,” Mason began. “This is where they receive their academic instruction and are drilled in physical fitness and survival tactics; the zero G, robotics, and extra-vehicular training is done at another location.” Mason pointed past the spaceship monopolizing their view. “You can’t see it from here but, on the other side of the payload, there’s a replica of the command capsule...”

As Mason went on to describe their space program, Cara compared what he said with what she already knew.

Every child across the country played Astronauts and Aliens and dreamed of being a space explorer. Since the beginning of the New World War, NetNews had filled children’s imaginations with the pictures and personal stories of all the astronauts in the Western Hemisphere. They called them the ‘star people’ and ‘our gladiators in space,’ spreading glamorous digitals of them around the globe. NetNews boosted wartime morale with stories of heroism in space but behind the dramatization, there was a grim reality. Astronauts rarely made it home.

Cara had just turned thirteen when war broke out above the mesosphere. An atmospheric disruptor was deployed against the eastern seaboard of the United States initiating a four day ice storm. The attack locked the land in glistening stillness, shutting down water, electricity, communications, and transportation from Georgia to Maine. The cause was quickly confirmed: enemy satellites in the thermosphere had detonated bombs on drones flown into a fast-moving Nor’easter. But there were so many satellites delivering enemy signals that hurricanes struck the west coast and tornados touched down on open plains before all the drones over North America could be neutralized.

The United States first answered the attack by activating a weapons system that protected friendly satellites but blocked enemy transmissions and a second system that prevented new, unsanctioned satellites from entering orbit. But the new weapons systems had difficulty communicating with the older defense components already in space, necessitating hands-on maintenance to ensure uninterrupted connectivity between the old and the new. When attempts to do this with robotics failed, they manned the space stations with live personnel charged with protecting and repairing the weapons systems in orbit.

To meet the challenge of staffing the space stations so that work could be done around the clock, the government launched a rigorous recruiting campaign. Overnight, propaganda films flooded the Net and romanticized life in space. Commercials popped up on every Netpage, advertising Space Duty as twice the pay for similar positions on earth *plus ‘full family benefits’*, awarding free healthcare to the earthbound spouse and children, and life insurance for the astronaut.

The campaign was so successful in popularizing the position that in just three months, the first technical specialty unit was rocketed to one of the space stations and six months later, another unit joined them to replace the ones that died. NetNews turned the deceased into military martyrs, but another narrative traveled by word-of-mouth and gradually turned into lore.

People said the mechanics in space called themselves the ‘journeymen’ and they’d created their own code of conduct that was separate from the military’s rules of governance. Public perception was that the ‘journeys’ could do as they pleased as long as they kept the weapon

systems working. Journey worship spun out of escapist fantasies in Americans who resented their lack of self-determination, and revered anyone who risked their life to get it.

There was also the popular notion that the journeymen lived in a blissful state of disinterested detachment about earth and its problems. But Cara had read about life in space and knew that the people orbiting the planet had to put everything... every second of every day, every thought, every calorie of energy... *everything* went into survival. The lucky ones lived through the day and dreamed about earth at night.

Private sector exploration of the solar system flourished in parallel with the expansion of military operations in space. In two years, the lunar landscape morphed from a mining site into a way station to Mars, and although no one considered Mars a realistic candidate for full terraformation, the red planet had become a terraforming test lab in the race to own the mineral and chemical resources in space.

Hundreds of satellites collecting data and running experiments now orbited Mars. The surface was dotted with compressors converting carbon dioxide to rocket fuel and MarBots mining elements and ore. The ability to mine natural resources in space was a necessary first step toward humans living off-earth, and now that remotely controlled robots were gainfully doing so, the next step toward colonizing was to send people to build way stations like stepping-stones across the solar system.

As unappealing as living in space was to most people, the war had depleted the earth's resources to such an extreme that space colonization was starting to look good to the public, but private financiers had *only just begun* to recoup the money they'd sunk into mining the moon. Investors were no longer willing to back what the military called 'protective expansion into space' unless there were short-term profits to be gained.

"The military considers you a terrorist group..." Cara pondered aloud. "How do you plan to launch your ships? You'd never make it past *our* weapons, never mind the enemy's."

"That'll be sorted out in time," said Brookes. "For now, our focus is on getting a vaccine. Lack of a vaccine, besides being a *disaster* for earth, is an impediment to space travel. People in the space stations are tethered to earth, to the *Corporation*, through their need for antiviral. If that were no longer true, space exploration would explode! But without it, there's too much uncertainty. Would *you* fund a trip to another planet if there were a major possibility you'd infect the new world with a deadly disease?"

Cara was stunned. "*That's* what you're planning? An expedition to the nearest earth-class planet?"

"Ultimately, yes," revealed Brookes, "but as you can imagine, such a goal must be approached in stages."

"Your financiers will have passed on by the time the travelers reach the planet," noted Cara.

"Do they expect to get cash returns on new technologies that surface along the way?"

"You're *right on the money*," quipped Brookes.

"The astronauts tasked with maintaining the earth's satellites have generated lucrative technology," Mason explained. "Our sponsors anticipate reaping similar rewards by sending people deeper into space."

Brookes nodded. "Our clients want a front row seat to the engineering magic show. They know that, in space, the *unexpected* will *inevitably* occur, that problems will arise *the likes of which have never been seen*, requiring technical solutions as yet *unimagined*."

"Dr. Brookes!" called a man from the end of the catwalk.

Brookes glanced at his watch. “Oh, me. It appears I’ve lost track of time. On my way!” he called in response. “Cara, please excuse me.”

“Of course.”

Brookes turned to Mason. “Introduce her to as many people as you can today, so she gets a proper overview. Be sure she talks to the biosphere people in the terraforming lab. They’re keen on having a geneticist on one of their projects.”

“Yes sir.”

“And...” Brookes paused mid step. “I wonder if she should join us for the mission briefing this week. What do you think?”

“It would make things easier,” Mason agreed.

“That’s in two days... Until then Cara!” Brookes said and waved as he descended a metal staircase to the laboratory below.

“After you,” Mason said, nodding toward the door to the professor’s office.

“Where to?” she asked.

“The genetics lab, so they’ll stop pestering me.” He showed her his phone and thirteen messages from one sender. “They’ll be *no end* to the grief if I don’t introduce you to them first.”

Gwen and Cara took their drinks to a quiet corner, away from the commotion in the dining hall. They sat down next to a water sculpture with dozens of miniature waterfalls splashing over stone.

“I think the last time I saw you *at work*,” Gwen said, “was the day I found out that the investigation was rigged.”

“Yes,” agreed Cara. “What happened to you after that?”

“I went to my office and found a posse waiting for me: one HR rep with four security guards. Four! Can you believe that?” Gwen laughed.

“What did they want?” asked Cara.

“The rep informed me that I had to take a leave of absence or lose my job,” Gwen answered, “and when I asked *why*, she said ‘for your mental health’. Then I asked, *for how long?* And she told me that a Corporation psychiatrist would determine when I was fit to return to work.” Gwen grumbled something inaudible, then said. “Well, I already knew how *that game* worked because of what happened to other people.”

“*What* happened?” asked Cara.

“They only let you come back if you agree to take anti-anxiety meds. They don’t actually care if you *take them*, they just want it on your record that you’re a mess.”

“*That can’t be legal*,” Cara said.

“Legality is irrelevant, remember? The Corporation protects its liars.” Gwen leaned back and sighed. “Actually, the posse helped me understand I had to get out of there and AI made it possible. Just goes to show that you should never give up; you have to keep looking for a way forward. Oh! I have good news! They’ve asked me to continue on and study *medicine* after I finish the nursing program.”

“Wow!” Cara exclaimed. “That’s great! You’ll make a *fantastic* doctor!”

Gwen grinned. “Thanks. There aren’t enough of them, that’s for sure.” Her smile turned to a grimace. “Medical students are sent to the front before they finish their degree. One of the *many*

things NetNews doesn't tell you... Which reminds me, I *did* ask around about Shirley and the two other women you named. No one knows anything."

"Oh," Cara's face fell.

"I'm really sorry," Gwen murmured. "I didn't know Marta or Angelique but I worked with Shirley for years. She wasn't crazy."

"Are you *sure*?" Cara asked. "She said some crazy things."

"She was *angry* and because she had nowhere to take it, she talked it. Hopefully, she decided to vote with her feet and left."

Cara sighed. "I don't know. In the conversation I overheard, it didn't sound like Shirley had the capacity to make an informed choice."

"Whenever I don't know what has happened to someone," Gwen said, "I choose to hope and pray for the best, because it's all I can give them. Let's hope that Shirley and your friends went somewhere else... some place where they can *make better use of their talents*, with people who deserve them."

"Does the Resistance deserve *you*?" Cara asked.

"Yes."

"Why?" she prodded.

"Because they give a damn," Gwen answered. She stared at the water cascading over terraced stone. "I watch them, every day. I listen to what they worry about. I see how hard they work to help desperate people who have nothing to give in return. I put them back together after they're carted into the clinic in *pieces*, and when they recover, they're not disillusioned. Instead, the people in their life matter even more. So... I believe it when they say the state of the world matters to them because I see the things that matter to them from day to day." She put down her drink. "But that's not how things are in the Corporation. People can act innocent *but you are what you do*. Like Nancy."

Cara looked confused. "The RM's personal assistant?"

"Yeah," Gwen laughed. "You wouldn't think *anything* bad about her, right? Well, she's the only one with admin rights to all the computers in your division and, *I don't know how she does it*, but she gets around the records retention rules and keeps information the RM wants her to keep. Data's only supposed to be kept on *the division cloud* for a certain period depending on the type of information it is; then it gets archived. No one's allowed to transfer it to a computer hard drive and keep it, that's a firing offense, but sweet little Nancy manages to keep information for years past the retention date."

"How do you know?"

"Because documents from *years passed* get thrown in people's faces when the RM wants to intimidate them. *Nancy's the only one with access*. Somehow, she manages to keep these little tidbits for blackmail."

A split second recall, a mere flash of a memory broke through the surface of Cara's thoughts. "I saw a strange thing one day," she recounted. "I came into work very early and I just happened to see Nancy disappear into a room I'd never noticed before. She'd left the door open an inch, and out of curiosity I peaked in."

Gwen grabbed the arm of her chair. "Did she see you?"

"No."

"What was in there?"

“The room was jam-packed with boxes,” Cara said. “She had one of the boxes open and why I remember it so clearly is because the box was full of *paper* files! I didn’t know anyone kept paper records anymore.”

Gwen spoke grimly. “You need to tell Rachel about that room. Don’t wait until you get back. Do it right away.”

Cara nodded. “I’ll have Mason contact her.”

“Nancy’s like a shape-shifter,” Gwen warned. “She twists herself into whatever the RM needs.”

“I thought that was Roger’s job,” Cara remarked dryly.

“It is but Roger doesn’t have to change himself to do it, that’s who he is. Nancy’s actually a decent person. Why can’t she see what she’s doing is wrong?”

Cara winced. “Because she needs her job... and her husband’s Corporation pension. People are ridiculous about who they say is to blame for the country’s problems because they can’t afford to pin the blame where it belongs.”

“Cara, I know the Resistance needs you to stay at work and do something for them,” Gwen said.

“Whatever it is, do it *fast*, and get the hell out of there.”

Mason waved a fork at Cara from across the table. “Are you going to eat the rest of your breakfast?”

She looked up from her plate. “Sorry?”

“Damn. How much did you two drink last night?”

“It’s not the alcohol that’s bothering me,” Cara said. “Gwen told me that most of the people who ‘disappear’ end up in work camps. Is that true?”

Mason’s sunny expression changed to chagrin and he put down his fork. “We have reason to believe that’s *true* but we don’t know *for sure* because the work camps change people’s names before they arrive. If there’s a list of their real names in a database somewhere, we haven’t found it yet. But, from my perspective, if it’s true that the kidnapped are sent to work camps, then that’s a good thing, because it means *they may still be alive*.”

Cara’s voice was barely a whisper. “Gwen said it’s mostly women who disappear.”

“Some men are kidnapped too.”

“How many more are women?”

Mason leaned back in his chair. His posture was open and artless, but his expression was somber. “Eighty percent of the people who disappear are women,” he said.

Cara swallowed. “Why so many more than men?”

Mason hesitated and Cara waited. Finally, he answered, “The government doesn’t care what happens to women or female children; that’s clear from all their policies. So when that part of the population disappears, there’re no consequences.”

Cara recoiled. “Women and girls are not *part* of the population. We’re the majority!”

“I’m not saying it makes sense,” he retorted. “I’m saying it’s *fact*; in this society, women are left to their own devices. Employers will *work* you and *pay* you if you follow the rules, but if a woman’s in conflict with a man, forget it, the authorities won’t help her.”

Cara stared at him wordlessly.

“You know this, you just haven’t thought it through. Men are socialized within the political-economic system from boyhood,” he reminded. “As boys we’re taught what’s safe to say and do

from other boys and men, but women are socialized outside the system and, not knowing the rules, often make costly mistakes.” He paused, then said, “You *know* this is true.”

Cara jumped to her feet and began pacing. “I didn’t know that meant I could be sent to a work camp!”

“I’m not trying to scare you,” Mason said, his gaze unwavering. “I just think you deserve the truth. People disappear if they say or do something that threatens a man with leverage in the DM, the Corporation or the government. The people who speak up are predominantly women, but some men do, and they disappear too.”

Cara pulled in a deep breath and sat back down. “Do you try to help them like Rachel helped me... and Gwen?”

“Yes, if we think we can risk exposing ourselves. Of course, we don’t always know when someone’s opposing the system. Wives of Corporation men frequently disappear, but because conflict in those homes is kept so secret, no one knows until the woman is gone. Our biggest effort to stop the kidnapping is within the Corporation itself. We have hundreds of people there who, like yourself, are gathering evidence.”

“How will proof help,” Cara asked, “if the Corporation leadership is condoning it? Where will you take your proof?”

He looked apologetic.

“Don’t you dare change the subject!”

“What I *can* tell you is this,” he said. “The split second we can name the top people in your management who are responsible for the kidnappings at your facility, Rachel will pull you out. Then you can come here and work to your heart’s content.”

Her eyes narrowed skeptically. “That breezy scenario sounds about as achievable as your plan to steal my great-aunt. From a military base, no less! When are you planning *that little excursion?*”

“That’s what the briefing’s about tomorrow. So... are you going to eat the rest of that, or not?”

“No... I don’t seem to have an appetite.”

Mason swept her plate off the table and placed it on the floor, calling, “Winston!” A tan-colored mastiff, as tall as the table, instantly appeared and began gobbling up the food.

“HEY!” a voice hollered from the kitchen.

“Oops,” Mason laughed. “The cook’s here early today. *Time to go.*”

“Dogs eat out of *dog bowls*,” the man yelled. “I see that again, Mason, you’re doin’ dishes for a week!”

“Sorry, Kevin!” Mason called over his shoulder then to Cara he whispered, “*Do not mess with the chef.*”

“DO NOT MESS WITH THE CHEF!” boomed the cook. Cara started laughing and Mason grinned as he grabbed two snack bars before hurrying her out of the hall.