

Moonskin

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*We are the others,
the ones from under the lake
who stand silently beside your bed
with our heads of darkness.
We have come to cover you
with red wool,
with our tears and distant whippers.*
--from "Night Poem" by Margaret Atwood

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Chapter 1

With a bag of groceries in his left arm, Banner slouched against the lamppost in front of his great-uncle's vacation house and watched the burglar punch in a code on the front door panel. The woman was wearing a black thermal suit with a hood which covered her hair. Her glove covered fingers swept the keypad in quick ease. A second later, the door hissed open.

“Bravo,” Banner said, finally breaking the silence. “That took you about ten seconds.”

The woman paused and turned her head. The hood shadowed part of her face, but he could tell she had a burnished complexion and familiar eyes the color of twilight. “It would have taken two if you had not changed the code.” The voice wasn't so familiar. It had the texture of dark wind.

“I could ask you what you are doing here.” He straightened and walked forward. The woman didn't move, even when he stood toe to toe with her. “This is my home now.”

She regarded him solemnly. “In his will, Jorge Helado gave me an open invitation. I was under the impression that the new owner wasn't going to be here until a week from now.”

“Well, you're mistaken.” She seemed cool and collected, as if she wasn't perturbed at all that she had been caught breaking and entering. “I wasn't informed of this.”

“You can contact my lawyer if you want proof that I'm telling the truth.”

“I think I will.”

It was then that she moved back, but instinctively, he reached out to touch her elbow. She froze.

“What are you doing here?” This time, he wasn't referring to the reason that she had given before.

Her lips faintly thinned. “Perhaps you should invite me in.”

The last time he had met with Cimarron Tong-Radcliff had been almost fourteen years ago, at a party his great-uncle had thrown for him before he shipped off to his first job on Makemake. Ordinarily, he would not have noticed her as a gangly teenager except for her violet hair. It wasn't dyed, but it wasn't exactly natural either. Her parents, a renowned geneticist and an Alpha Centauran diplomat, had introduced her as their daughter. She had features from both her parents, but then again, there was something about her that came off as wrong. The hair color was just the tip of it.

Later, Uncle Jorge had casually mentioned that she had been altered beyond her or her parents' control by a now defunct biotechnology company that had stolen embryos to be used in an experimental project to produce “courtesans” for well-heeled businessmen. Her parents were attempting to raise her to overcome her unnatural genetics by enrolling her into science programs. Other than those terse facts, he didn't give specifics and Banner hadn't asked. But sometimes, his great-uncle would repeat rumors.

Banner motioned for her to precede him, and after he stepped through the threshold, the front door slid shut. With their presence, the interior lights brightened, revealing a hexagonal receiving room painted blue and sparsely decorated with solid white panels along the wall. Next to the door was a window facing the interior of Nowhere City's South Dome which was peppered with a row of utilitarian buildings.

The dome itself was invisible, allowing the distant sunlight to filter in.

Opposite of the front door was an archway to the interior of the house—a living room washed in beige merging with what looked like a metallic kitchen bay. Banner placed his bag of groceries on the counter in the kitchen before taking off his knit cap and unzipping his jacket. Cimarron slowly approached the living room and took off her hood before casually glancing around.

“You took his sculptures down?”

He leaned against the counter to watch her. “No. They weren't here when I got here.”

She crossed her arms. “Last I heard you got sent to Tartaros without a chance for parole.”

Banner took a deep breath and tried to unclench his hands which had latched themselves to the edge of the kitchen bay when she had mentioned the prison planet on Epsilon Eridanus.

“Well, someone got me out, out of the goodness of their hearts. So what are you doing here? Before I got dumped on that hell hole, I heard you were doing a doctorate in computer science at some swanky university and was engaged to some high-flying socialite.”

She shrugged. “My plans changed. I decided to ditch the university and the fiancé. And decided to do a stint at a Tibetan convent.”

“Huh.”

“So are you or aren't you going to contact my lawyer to see if what I'm saying is true?”

“Sure. But first, let's assume that Jorge did give you that open invitation. Why come here now?”

“Would you believe me if I said sentimental reasons?”

“Not really. But then again, I don't believe anyone anymore.” He turned and walked to the other side of the kitchen bay to give a command which opened a view screen on the opposite wall. He slanted her a glance. “Your lawyer's name?”

She readily gave up the information which he used to contact the lawyer. In a few moments, he had him on the line and confirmed what Cimarron had told him. After a few questions, he also confirmed that she had an open invitation despite the fact that he

was now the owner of his great-uncle's vacation house.

“Why am I not surprised that this all comes down to a loophole,” Banner said when he signed off the communication. “I suppose I'll have to resign myself that you'll be staying here.”

The corner of her mouth quirked upward, finally revealing some sort of emotion. “You don't have to worry about me imposing on you. I have a room reserved at the local hotel. I was merely visiting.”

“Breaking in, you mean. But I have a feeling the authorities will believe you more than they do me,” he replied cynically.

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Chapter 2

“You're looking for something.” Banner turned back to the kitchen bay without waiting for her reply. He went over to what looked like a blank wall and pressed an almost invisible seam to open the drawer to a storage cabinet. He took out some of the foodstuffs he had bought at the local store—mainly spices and dried foods that were a specialty grown in the Outer Colonies. He had not bothered to buy any of the vegetables and fruits as there was an indoor garden, mostly hydroponic, located on one of the lower levels of his great-uncle's house. “Did you leave something here the last time you visited?”

“Who said I was looking for anything?” He didn't hear her move, but suddenly she was there in the kitchen with him, looking curiously at the contents of the storage cabinet.

“Everybody's looking for something.”

“What's yaberia?”

At the query, Banner found himself throwing the rest of his new groceries into the cabinet and slamming the door closed. “You're not answering my question.”

“You want me gone.” Her voice was flat, sure of herself. “I want to see the hydroponic garden. Jorge did a lot of his teaching there.”

“Teaching?” He disposed of the grocery sack into the recycler. Jorge Helado had

been a microbiologist who had done his teaching in labs when he had done his stint at a university. Besides, Helado was no botanist. Not that he knew of anyway. “Did he suddenly take up a new field while I was gone? Plant diseases?”

“If he did, I didn't know either. He just did much of his lecturing in there while he was tending the plants.”

“Yeah, he was kind of old fashioned, wasn't he?” If it had been up to him, he would have let the gardening robots taken care of everything. He was only good with inanimate, structural things. Even talking to this long ago acquaintance made him tired. “Over here.”

“I know my way.”

He grunted in apathy about her knowledge about the house and took the lead anyway, down a flight of stairs that was hidden from immediate view from around the kitchen. The lights behind them faded as the lights in the areas they approached lit up. The stairs terminated into a long snaking hallway punctuated by doors. At the end, the last door slid open revealing a moist, green interior. Most of the plants closer to the doorway were decorative in nature, but further onward, water pipes and channels running along a white tiled ceiling erupted into fragrant bushes laden with fruit. A metal walkway wound around pools of inch deep water sprouting rice plants and modified vegetable plants. There were a few potted plants scattered here and there. From his stance a couple meters inside the doorway, he could see two gardening robots harvesting a fig tree, the plop of fruit into metal buckets a consistent ping against the backdrop of trickling water.

“Yaberia, you could say, is native to New Albany,” he finally said when she stepped into the hydroponic garden. It was parsley, originally engineered to grow on the planet's sandy, nutrient poor soil. It doesn't taste the same as the parent strain, though.”

“Nothing's the same as the parent strain,” he heard her murmur. She seemed interested in the plants up above. Her brow tilted in a slight frown. “Hm.”

“Those are grapes.”

“I know they're grapes.” She turned from him to watch the robots at work. “I don't know how much Jorge told you about me. He was my godfather.”

“Right.” He had half a mind to leave her in the garden to search for whatever she

wanted before letting herself out. But he had a suspicion that if old Jorge was still around, the old man would be glaring at him for his blatant disrespect for his goddaughter.

“When he used to live on Luna, I would quant over to his house every two weeks or so to help him out on some pet project of his. Like reconfiguring computers—since I was good at that. He repaid me with history lectures on microbiology. Frankly, I thought I got the raw end of the deal.”

“I know what you're talking about. He'd give me those too when I visited on school breaks.”

She didn't appear to hear him as she walked closer to the fig tree to observe the robots. “Now I'm not so sure. I had latched onto computers at that point. I studied nothing but that. Maybe he was his attempt at trying to make me more well rounded.” She reached into one of the buckets and pulled out a fruit. She put it to her nose. “Huh.”

“That's a fig. I assume it smells like a fig.”

“Not really. More like roses, actually.” She tossed the fruit back into the bucket, making a loud ping. The robots did not notice. “My mother made that for him as a birthday present. That tree is probably around, what, twenty years old now?”

He shrugged. “How should I know?”

She finally turned her gaze on him, and he was having the uncomfortable feeling that it was of pity. “Of course you don't know.”

Banner gritted his back teeth to keep himself from snapping at her. “Was that all?”

“I want to see...”

A distant him in the background coughed and the lights suddenly went out. Banner let out a surprised epithet as the backup generators ground to life and the emergency lights flickered on. The fruit buckets still stood at the foot of the fig tree, but the robots were nowhere to be found—presumably they had scattered off to see what the problem was.

Cimarron didn't seem perturbed at the sudden power loss, making him wonder if that defunct biotech company had engineered all the humanness out of her. “Well, I suppose this is a bad time.”

“I just got here three Terran days ago,” he found himself telling her. “And the main power has gone out perhaps about half a dozen times already. I've checked the power sources on the first two levels, but they seem to be working perfectly fine to me.”

“But you haven't checked the lower level main generators.”

“No. But I'm getting to it. The problem is, this is a pretty old house. Uncle Jorge had it remodeled when he first bought it, but some of the systematics in this place hadn't been updated since, well, since Triton was first colonized. Hell, this place was originally just some tin can serving as a storage depot—even more primitive than some twenty-first century outhouse.” He moved to the door and grabbed the emergency handle to manually open it. “Watch you step. The lights aren't going to be working.”

Her gloved hand reached into a pocket to withdraw a thin black tube. With a flick of her wrist, light streamed out from one end and spilled over into the darkened corridor. “There's no need to be unnecessarily careful.”

He glared at her for her preparedness. It was more evidence to file in the back of his mind that she was indeed trying to break into the house. No doubt, she would have done it even if he were inside sleeping, oblivious. Which begged the question, was she armed? “After you then.”

Once they reached the upper level, she said, “When it is more convenient for you, I wish to see Jorge's study.”

“How about next week?”

“Now you're being obnoxious. I could perhaps help you on this little glitch if you determine it to be a system error rather than something mechanical.”

“Sure, I'll get back to you on that.”

“I'll be off then. I'm staying at the Nowhere City Inn. Whenever you feel ready, just contact me. My schedule is pretty flexible.”

“I don't know. With your skills, you could get in here any time you wanted. The Tibetan convent cut you loose?”

“You could say that. I've discovered that my philosophy about some things aren't so compatible with theirs.” She tugged her hood back on, hiding her unusual colored locks. “Good bye.”

Underneath the initial euphoria of getting rid of her, he felt a sense of unease. At the moment, she was the only link he had with his great-uncle. “Wait. I'll walk you

back.”

“How kind of you. But unnecessary.”

“I’ll walk you back,” he repeated, more firmly.

She turned and walked out into the receiving room while Banner zipped his jacket back up and shoved his knit cap back onto his head. From an access panel in the kitchen, he quickly changed the code. He had no illusions that she wouldn’t be able to break this one too, but at least it would delay her a little. He made a mental note to order a more sophisticated security system.

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Chapter 3

Quiet, silent, cold. The domes that covered Nowhere City were triply insulated in case of an integrity failure, which actually happened more often than the city engineers liked to admit. The constant temperature of 273 Kelvin inside the domes was positively boiling compared to the average of 35 Kelvin on Triton’s surface. Banner liked it here. It was a far cry from the boiling mess of Tartaros where day in and day out, he would don an EV suit to toil out an endless penitence on the prison planet’s molten landscape with nothing but his own breathing and the radiation counter droning in an awkward frequency to keep him company.

The ground was covered with a slight dusting of frost which smeared every time their boots came in contact. For a moment, Banner looked out over past the dome, tracing the curving horizon of the frozen moon with his gaze.

Despite his reluctance at speaking, he found himself saying, “When, exactly, did you get here?”

Her voice was muffled by the hood. “I quanted over this morning.”

“So you haven’t had the chance to experience the charms of Nowhere City.”

“There are charms in the city?” She sounded doubtful. “I did read up a little on this place. Basically it’s just some former mining colony turned into a tourist trap at the fringes of the solar system. I haven’t seen very many other tourists, though.”

“I’ve been told it’s the off season,” he replied. “Most of the tourists arrive during

Founder's Day which is in the summer. Not that the temperature in this place really change all that much.”

A moving walkway started at the center of the South Dome. Banner and Cimarron stepped onto the conveyer belt which headed north to the Main Dome. They passed one other person, bundled up in furs, heading in the opposite direction.

The South Dome, a residential section of the city, was connected to the Main Dome by a clear tunnel made of sim-glass. To the east, the icy blue landscape abruptly stuttered downward into a crater that was twice the size of the largest dome in the city. The crater itself wasn't so unusual. Triton's atmosphere, or what there existed of it, was thin enough to allow any passing meteorite to make a lasting impression. As a result, the entire moon was periodically pock-marked by such craters. The only reason that they disappeared over time, however, was due to Triton's surprising geological activity.

The moving walkway emerged from the South-Main passage into the Main Dome before encircling the section of the city. They got off close to the main street and trudged toward a three story building with a mock Victorian façade of tan with beige trim. The Nowhere City Inn, however, wasn't alone in its faux early twentieth-century décor. The rest of the buildings lining Main Street and the Main Square had been remodeled in this fashion when the city officials had decided to bring in more revenue with tourism. They hoped that emulating the Old American mining towns on Earth would be an enticing gimmick for vacationers.

Banner personally thought that the attempts at imitation fell flat. It would have been more authentic if they had simply restored the buildings to their original condition. Sure, the stark utilitarian buildings weren't pretty to look at, but at least it was real. He had first hand experience that it wasn't some fantasy business that was more akin to play than toil.

He discovered that he had followed her into the hotel when she suddenly stopped in the lobby, nearly causing him to trip over himself.

“Thank you for accompanying me when it was completely unnecessary,” she said. “I will—“

“Ah, Ms. Tong-Radcliff!” called out the clerk at the counter. He was a short man with a thin, sculpted moustache, dressed in the hotel uniform of a pin stripe suit and boating hat. He walked around the counter to them. “I have some terrible news. A

bulletin came out about fifteen minutes ago concerning the transport station. The quant pads have broken down.”

“That’s not so bad,” Banner cut in before the clerk could take a breath. “There are shuttles out of this place. I heard there are supply ships that get in every couple of days or so.”

The clerk gave him an oily smile. “I’m not so sure of that. Once it’s the off season, the shuttle schedule is significantly curtailed since it used to be that quanting alone could satisfy the permanent residents’ supply needs.”

“If you’re so familiar with the transport schedule, when’s the next shuttle coming in?” said Banner.

“I don’t know that!”

“The problem can be easily solved if we contact the transport station directly,” Cimarron said smoothly, forestalling any further argument. She reached into one of her hidden pockets in her thermal suit and pulled out a square black comm.. She spoke some commands and a screen lit up. Banner fought the urge to look over her shoulder as she scanned a message. “It looks like the transport station is swamped with repairs right now. The quant pad is estimated to be repaired in about one Terran month due to a part that has been ordered from Earth. The earliest shuttle service out of here is in two weeks. But it’s going out to Sigma Pegasi.”

The clerk gave an abrupt, disturbing chuckle. “You’re free to stay here as long as you like, Ms. Tong-Radcliff.”

“I’m not sure I can afford to stay here longer than a couple of days,” she replied. “It’s actually cheaper to quant here when I need to.”

“Payment can be arranged,” the clerk wiggled his eyebrows.

Belatedly, Banner remembered Cimarron’s distinctive hair color. It might not mean anything much to the more progressive thinkers, but for some, it was still a signal popularized by twenty-second century sex engineers for the oldest profession.

Not liking the clerk’s growing leer as she pondered his remark, he blurted out, “You can save money and stay with me. I have more room at the house than I know what to do with.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re offering?”

“Yeah.” She’d search the house and then maybe do him in when he fell asleep,

but at least he'd know where she was, rather than worrying about any shadows tailing him.

"I'll get my things, then."

When she disappeared down a hallway to her room, the clerk stayed, looking up and down at him. Banner knew he looked disreputable and disheveled. For the past three weeks—ever since he got out of the prison hell hole—he hadn't bothered to trim his hair. And that morning, he hadn't bothered to comb it after getting out of the shower. And shaving? Since he got to Triton, it hadn't been on his mind at all. Because who the hell would care what he looked like on this out of the way moon?

"You're that convict who inherited Dr. Helado's bungalow, aren't you?" The clerk's hand inched up towards a breast pocket on his jacket. There was probably a comm in there. "You just watch what you're doing, you hear? Me and the sheriff, we're best buds." He crossed his fingers to emphasize his point.

"Oh yeah?"

"What he means," said Cimarron as she arrived with a small black suitcase in hand, "Is that they're lovers."

"That's none of your business!" the clerk yelled. With a trembling finger, he pointed at Banner. "If I hear anything, anything at all about a woman going missing, you will definitely be on the suspect list."

"Stop jumping to conclusions and overreacting like some wimpy grandmother," she said, bored. "We're childhood friends."

"Like I believe that." The clerk sneered at him. "I heard you were in for murder. But I'm not afraid of you."

Banner couldn't resist stepping forward suddenly and saying, "Boo!"

The clerk screamed.

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"That wasn't very nice of you."

"Whenever have I been nice?" Banner demanded.

They were standing outside of the hotel. Across Main Street was a small café and a stationary shop. No other person, however, was on the street. From their vantage point, the downtown appeared empty.

Instead of responding to the question directly, she said, "I think you're just

grumpy. With probably some rusty social skills. When was the last time you actually had a normal conversation?”

“Are you saying that what happened back there wasn’t normal?”

“Have you had dinner yet?” she countered.

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“Men seem to be more surly when they’re hungry.” She took off without seeing if he would follow. “I saw a restaurant on the next street over when I was coming over here.”

He strode after her and easily caught up in a couple of strides. “I admit, it is close to dinner time, but that doesn’t mean that you’ll soften me up through my stomach.”

He glimpsed a brief, sly smile before her impassive façade descended again. “Who said anything about softening you up?”

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Chapter 4

He woke suddenly, gasping, sweat trickling down his back. For the past couple of days, he had had a reprieve, but the dream had come again. There was no getting used to it—the slight claustrophobia of the EV suit, the penetrating heat that continually seeped inside, the straining breath. In reality, that EV suit had been soundproofed, but in those nocturnal terrors, there had been the roaring of the environment outside. He had been working, as usual, clearing out a small uranium pit. But then he had straightened up for a moment, squinted at the building sitting at the edge of a molten ridge, and had seen it—a humanoid looking shadow with unnatural proportions.

Banner shoved the blanket aside and got out of bed. He scrubbed a hand against his face, attempting to claw the images out.

“Shit.”

He didn't want to think about it, but it was always in the back of his mind. In his gut, he knew that Tartaros was no mere prison planet. Other things might have been on

it too, and they had probably attempted to erase his memories so that he wouldn't blab about any of the secrets that he had witnessed. With those images getting more vivid each time he relived each dream, he realized that the memory wipe had been imperfect—and in some respects, he figured it was a shame.

“Time?”

The computer's voice was neutral and soothing. “Oh four hundred.”

He went to the adjacent bathroom to splash cold water on his face. In the mirror, dark eyes rimmed from disturbed sleep glared back at him. He thought about going back to sleep. But a low, grating sound yawned in the background, giving warning that something was amiss. Gritting his teeth, he exited his bedroom and stood a moment in the hallway, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light that illuminated along the floor at his presence. The hallway was slightly cooler than the interior of his room, giving him pause. Perhaps he should have donned a robe over his boxer shorts. Or at least worn some slippers. But he owned neither of these two items of clothing.

The soft whoosh of air down the hallway behind him made him turn. A dark figure stood at the threshold to another room, pointing something at him. For a moment, his mind swept back to his dreams, to misshapen things roaming a blistering countryside.

“Oh, it's only you.”

Banner blinked, and he was back in the present realizing that the shadow in front of him was a woman in skimpy sleepwear. Wryly, he wondered if he was more damaged from his incarceration than he had originally thought if that fact had initially passed him by.

“Would you mind my asking why you were making so much noise at this time of the day?” Cimarron's hair was navy in the dark. She still held something in her hands, its end pointing towards him. It was a gun, he thought in amazement. A ray gun, a relic from five centuries ago.

“Isn't that supposed to be in a museum somewhere?” he said instead.

She gave a slight toss of her head in irritation, drawing his eye to the strands of hair that trailed past her right shoulder. “Well, you couldn't get a molecular disrupter past inspection before being quanted to your destination. This, why, it's just some artifact, a family heirloom.”

“Family heirlooms aren't supposed to kill people, are they?”

Her mouth thinned. “You didn't answer my question.”

“So you were going to kill me if I was the one who disturbed your sleep.”

“Maybe I will even if you didn't.”

“Look, I...”

The mechanical groaning erupted again, seemingly originating from beneath their feet. It reverberated through the hallway in a lingering echo.

“Okay, so it wasn't you.” Her stance was still alert, but the ray gun was now pointed off into a direction down the hallway. “That sounded bad. I thought you said that you had checked the lower level generators.”

“I said I would check the lower level generators. Not that I have recently. I had been thinking that it was something on the first or second floors.”

“Well, I can't sleep with that thing going on,” she said, waving her gun arm.

“Is the safety on?”

“What? You don't fancy a hole in your innards for your trouble?”

“Not particularly. Look, what you could do is just put in some earplugs and you'll get a nice night's sleep. I'll look at it in the morning.”

“No, you were up too.”

He crossed his arms. “You're not suggesting that I look at the lower level generators right now, are you?”

“Well, why not?”

“The hell I am.” Originally, he had thought about looking into it since it was rare that he was able to get back to sleep after a nightmare, but since she was here, bossing him around, his contrary nature reared its head. “I thought that noise was you making some sort of racket—perhaps attempting to blow this house up. I'm going back to bed.”

“Oh no you don't.” She reached out and grabbed his arm just as he was turning away.

Her bare palm seared him like hot iron, her fingers searing needles. Something black floated into the periphery of his vision. It was only an instant, but she snatched her hand away. He looked down at his arm, expecting charred flesh or at least reddened skin, but saw nothing unusual. He then looked up at her and there was something in her expression, a glimpse of horror.

“You're afraid of me,” he said.

“No!” The outburst surprised them both. But she quickly smoothed on her facade. “I think it should be the other way around,” she replied more calmly. “I should have never touched you.”

“You're keeping secrets, Cimarron. What the hell happened to you the past decade and a half?”

Down below, the machinery grated a third time.

“None of your business.”

He sighed. “I suppose I should get down there. Not that I'd be able to get back to sleep either.” He turned back to his room and grabbed an old t-shirt he had flung over a chair and shoved it over his head. When he went back out into the hallway, she was still there, although she had managed to tug on a robe and the ray gun that had been in her hand was now nowhere to be seen.

“I'm going down there with you.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself. If something does blow up, you can't blame me for forcing you to tag along.”

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Chapter 5

When the lift doors opened at the lower level, all he could see was the light from the lift spilling out into the blank eastern corridor and then fading to black. All he could hear was a persistent clicking sound periodically punctuated by something that sounded like squealing metal. He could feel his breath shallow. Were these signs of structural failure? Should he have heeded his own advice for not going down here? But he had checked and double checked the system diagnostics before coming down—and they had revealed nothing wrong. Could have there been something about the diagnostics themselves that was in error?

“You're the mechanical engineer,” Cimarron said behind him. “What's your assessment?”

“I'll have to take a closer look.” He stepped out into the corridor. “Computer,

lights.”

The computer did not respond to his command.

“I have a light.”

“How can I forget?” he replied as she took out her flashlight and turned it on.

“There's an emergency panel next to the lift on your right.”

She pivoted her light source and discovered the seam to an access panel. With a press of a finger, it slid open, revealing its contents. Banner moved closer to take a look and frowned. The innards consisted of several levers, their labels worn away. But in the first few days of his residence, he had experimented with similar levers on the upper floors whenever the main power had given way. Decisively, he reached in and pulled one. The corridor lights flickered to life, revealing gray walls.

At that moment, a small spherical robot covered in titanium and the size of a human head rolled passed them, clicking a warning.

“The diagnostics above were wrong,” he said nodding toward the machine as it rolled north. “That will probably lead us to the problem.”

“I can take a look at the upper level system for you,” she said as they trailed after the spherical robot. “There might be a program hiccup or failure somewhere. Although I strongly suspect the problem isn't a software one. Most likely a sensor connecting to the system has been disabled.”

“Great. Just what I need. All I wanted was some place quiet and Uncle Jorge has failed to do any maintenance in this place.”

“I don't think anyone's really been down here.” She kept pace with him down the corridor even though he didn't have the frame of mind to shorten his pace to accommodate her. “The living spaces are basically only the first two levels. Jorge only needed the first, really. And he was only here on some vacations.”

“I was only here once. And back then, I didn't think to ask him if he had anyone take care of this place when he was gone. The subject never came up.”

“Well, there are the household robots. He probably thought they were adequate.”

The corridor twisted to the left and terminated into a thick metal door. Three spherical robots, in addition to the one that they had followed, were working on a panel beside the door that had blown out. Upon closer inspection, Banner noticed that the components in the panel had flaked away. The robots were working in concert with

small retractable probes, attempting to piece the components back together.

Beyond the closed door, squealing metal crashed.

“There must be a manual switch around here somewhere,” said Cimarron as she aimed her flashlight along the wall, looking for seams.

“Well, there’s no need of that,” he replied as the robots finished patching up the panel and lined up to wait for the mechanism to work again.

The door opened, revealing a brief dark maw that was immediately illuminated once the first robot rolled into the room. Benches and panels lined a hexagonal lab area that appeared almost pristine except for the fine layer of dust coating the place.

Cimarron moved first, heading toward one of the benches to access a computer terminal. As she fiddled with that, Banner made his way inside, feeling drawn to one side of the room where three docking doors were gouged, as if a large claw had swiped through the metal. The robots were ignoring this damage, however. They headed toward a small corner where an access vent near the floor appeared to have exploded, leaving a charred residue rimming its entrance and the grate covering the vent a mangled mass a few meters away. As one of the robots stood by the access vent scanning the immediate vicinity, two others began to clean away the charred residue and the fourth opened up a compartment in its belly, releasing a miniature version of itself. The small probe rolled into the vent to diagnose the more internal problems.

“I wonder if Jorge knew that this was down here,” said Cimarron as he moved towards her to see what she was doing. “This is a lab of some sort. Quite old. This interface is at least two hundred years old, which took me a moment to figure out. I’m not sure what this room was used for, though.”

He glanced at the computer terminal which showed a map of the lower level. Other than the rooms, the map did not show what any of the purpose of any of the locations. However, he noticed something different that did not correspond to the upper levels.

“This map shows an entrance here,” he said, pointing it out on the screen. “And that’s impossible. This is underground. Couldn’t this possibly be a map of the first level?”

“I don’t think so.” She looked up and finally focused on the docking doors. “Those lead to storage rooms. But the doors are damaged.” She fiddled with the old

interface and pulled up some scanning logs. “Last time this place was opened was fifty years ago, but only for maintenance. Something happened in here recently though, but it has only registered as a malfunction.”

“A malfunction? It looks like something more crude and deliberate than that.”

She nodded. “Let me try to access the scanning diagnostics. Or perhaps there is visual surveillance in this place.” She tapped on a few controls. “Hm. This system really needs to be updated.”

“What? You can’t find the diagnostics?”

“It’s not that. They look damaged. But I can open those docking doors. It won’t tell us what happened in here—perhaps the repair robots can after they’re finished with their scans—but it might tell us what this place is about, assuming there’s anything in those storage rooms.”

“Before it was a house, this place was a storage depot,” Banner reminded her. “All right, open them. I don’t really expect anything other than some mining equipment.”

She pressed on one control and one of the storage doors slid upwards, revealing gleaming chrome peaking out from the interior. A smooth metal object, about half of Banner’s height and cylindrical in shape—flat on the bottom, domed on top—sat in the storage closet, inert. Banner walked over to it for closer inspection. Something tugged at the back of his mind, something that he had learned about in school when he was a boy. It was something that he had learned during history lessons. A throwaway fact that he hadn’t paid much attention to.

The top part of the object suddenly slid up, revealing a collar of blinking red lights.

Banner suddenly stepped backward. “What the hell?”

“Sorry,” Cimarron replied behind him, not at all sounding contrite. “I turned it on. I’ve managed to find the logs on that thing. It’s a device of some kind. A sub-zero mining device, or ‘Zim’, serial number SZM-154.”

“A mining robot.” Something finally clicked in his mind. “These were developed back in the old colonial days, when people started exploiting some of Saturn’s moons for materials. The old robotics corporation, Executive Robotics, that got started in the late twenty-first century, created most of them. The company, though, is now defunct. That

thing is a collector's item."

Cimarron raised a brow. "Collector's item? You collect robots?"

He frowned. "No. But my father did. Or still does, probably."

"Probably?"

"I haven't talked to him for a while." He turned back to examine the mining robot. "It's remotely controlled?"

"Seems like." She paused for a moment, then said, "Want to check the other storage rooms?"

"Sure."

The Zim shut down as the second and third docking doors opened. In the center revealed another mining robot, this one about one meter taller than him. The third storage bay appeared empty except for a panel at the back of the space with a blinking green light.

"The second storage room has the sub-zero excavation device," she supplied as she looked at the diagnostics for the machine on the computer terminal. "Or 'Zee', serial number SZE-77. The third did have several small sub-zero repair machines, but on the log, it looks like they had been taken out to be serviced about a century ago, but were never returned."

Banner took a few paces towards the third storage room and glanced inside. Aside from the blinking panel, the walls and floor were bare. He examined the panel which only showed basic diagnostics—such as the ambient temperature and humidity. The lights, he assumed, indicated that the current conditions were in the acceptable parameters. He accessed the main menu on the panel and mentally noted a strange entry at the bottom of the usual list. Access tunnels? That would make sense if they were in some sort of sub-base in a building, but the room itself appeared to be nothing but an entry room.

He accessed the entry for the tunnels and almost immediately, a list of gibberish scrolled down the panel's screen. Encrypted.

"You're still in the computer science field, aren't you?"

"I quit to find myself," she replied in a wry tone. "But I'd like to consider myself still up to date on some of the latest things." Cimarron walked to where he was standing and looked at the panel as well. "What's wrong?"

“I think this is encrypted.”

“Let me see.” He stepped aside and let her fiddle with the panel. With a few push of the buttons, the gibberish changed into recognizable words. “It's an old system like that terminal out there. You just have to know what sequence to push, otherwise you won't get anything sensible.”

“You mean it wasn't encrypted?”

“Hm.” She scanned the menu contents. “Looks like this place isn't totally unconnected. That map out there lied.” She punched a button and there was a grinding sound that made him cringe. “Voila. The access tunnels. I assume these go to the underground systems and foundation.”

The floor had looked unbroken to him before, but a door had slid to the side with Cimarron's manipulation of the controls. Stairs led down to the darkness.

“I don't think so,” said Banner. “The lower level generators wouldn't be hidden in such a place. If something were to go wrong, people would need fast and easy access to the generator.”

“Well, it couldn't hurt to go down there and take a look.”

“I suppose so. But we aren't particularly prepared, are we?” he said with a pointed look at her robe. The tie at her waist had somehow come loose and it was gaping open, flapping behind her, revealing skin. “Besides, I'd first like to look at the readings those repair robots are gathering. They might had more accurate information about whatever is damaged. Maybe we won't have to waste time and go into those tunnels after all.”

“You're just a prude,” she replied. She made no move to close her robe.

“Fine. If you want to go down into that black hole in your underwear, I'm not going to stop you.”

“You think I'm...”

An acute, loud roar of exploding metal permeated the air, cutting her off. Almost immediately, Banner took off out of the storage room and caught the glimpse of burnt metal being spit out of the vent that the small spherical robots had been attempting to repair.

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Chapter 6

“It was a sudden rise in methane that got ignited with the probe was trying to wield a fissure that it had discovered,” Banner said as he read the report on a hand-held terminal. The repair robots had transmitted all of their diagnostics data to the house computer where he had downloaded it from. Now that damage is being repaired as we speak—with some modifications now that we know the unpredictability of the conditions in the vent. Another probe has found that it was one of those sudden methane rises that contributed the the noise that woke us up. I wouldn't be surprised if this was the cause of all those blackouts that I had experienced since I got here.”

They had finally decided to let the robots do the repair work while they went back to the upper level kitchen to get breakfast. Actually, Banner was preoccupied with the diagnostics as he prepared coffee. As he let drip in an old-fashioned coffee pot that his great-uncle had gotten several decades before at an antique sale on Luna, he had gone straight to the nearest terminal to download the data. And despite her earlier eagerness at exploring the lower level tunnels, Cimarron seemed—at the moment—content with preparing her own breakfast with a bowl of corn flakes and milk imported from Earth and a grapefruit that had been grown in hydroponics and picked by the gardening robots.

“The repair robots have been going around the past fourteen days patching up the place,” Banner continued. “But judging from where all the damage is taking place, it looks like there might be some sort of geological upwelling on the eastern quadrant. I'm not familiar with the tectonics of this particular moon, but I can make some assumptions from some previous work that I've done.”

“You know how to solve the problem?” she said, after spooning up some of the grapefruit.

“I won't be actually going down there. Not unless I want to wear a EV suit.” Which he wasn't going to do unless it was absolutely necessary. He had had enough of EV suits to last several lifetimes. “I'll be programing some of the repair machines to rectify the problem. I might need some supplies delivered, though. So the earliest this could get fixed would be in about two days. Longer, if the supplies take time.”

“You're not going to stay here the entire time while this is going on?”

“Of course I am. I don't have any other place I want to go, even if the quant pads were working. And you don't have to worry either.” The thought of the clerk at the Nowhere City Inn made him grimace. “You don't have to go back to that inn. You're perfectly safe here. If the worst happens, we can always seal off the lower level.”

“That's entirely reassuring.”

“I think I'll get out today after breakfast and head off to the salvage yards and see if they have any of the materials I need before going to the supply docks. You can come with me, if you'd like.”

She was concentrating on her food rather than looking at him. “That's all right. I think I'll pass on that. I'm no engineer so I'd be of no use to you for picking the right materials. Besides, I have some correspondence I have to catch up on.”

“Fine,” he replied, trying to sound nonchalant. He found himself strangely disappointed that she didn't want to continue tagging along. *But that should be good*, he told himself. He didn't need someone hanging around. He had decided to come all the way out here to the boondocks to be by himself, didn't he?

The salvage yards was located in the Far North Dome, the farthest point of Nowhere City. The transportation station was located just south of the salvage yards; when he had passed by the place, he had noticed that there were four shuttles grounded close to the terminal. A team of workers was working on one of the shuttles, but from the look of all the parts that they were pulling out of the transport, it didn't look like it would be going anywhere any time soon.

A metal wall, twice his height, surrounded the salvage yards. A gate, facing south, was open and revealed a haphazard cemetery of ancient vehicles and appliances as well as scrape metal in unidentifiable forms. From the local information that he had accessed earlier, the salvage yards were open for seventy-two hours—the length of time that Triton was bathed in distant sunlight. It was closed during the three day long nights.

Banner entered the yards, but did not immediately spot the station where the yards would be manned. Instead, the salvage yards appeared to be a small city within a city because of its surrounding walls. A dead city within a city.

“Lookin' for something, sonny?”

He slowly turned toward the rheumy sounding voice and found an old man straightening up from his position from crouching next to what looked like a defunct hovercraft that would have been in the height of fashion about three decades ago. He was a short, stocky man with bright blue eyes and thinning hair. Judging from the wrinkles on his face, he was possibly close to eighty. The man held a diagnostics wand in his left hand which he tucked into the belt of his gray jumpsuit as he approached Banner.

“We've got practically everything here,” the old man continued, as he swept his arm to indicate his small metal kingdom. “Just this morning, some employees at the transportation station dumped off some used shuttle parts. They'll probably be as good as new if you have a bit of time to fix 'em. Unfortunately, those blokes are a lazy lot—they'd rather order the parts from elsewhere.” He said the word “order” as if it were another curse word.

“I'm just looking for some materials for home improvement,” he replied. “I'm Banner Wice.”

“Kelly Inago. But everyone calls me Meanie.” The old man shook his hand as he squinted up at him. “You're Dr. Helado's nephew, aren't you?”

“Great-nephew. How do you know?”

“Word gets around.” Meanie coughed. “They say you're an escaped convict. Said you looked like one too. And I heard someone say that you've got some woman with you at the house.”

“Huh.” He had been exonerated from all charges, but he supposed it couldn't hurt to have a dangerous reputation. “Sounds like someone has a flabby mouth.”

The salvage yard operator scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Well, I don't put much stock into gossips, usually. People who give out information so readily are a bit suspect if you ask me. So you said home repairs, huh? What sort? Dr. Helado had his house renovated when he first got here so I didn't think it would need repairs so soon.”

“The house has some geologically related damage. Methane bursts. I was thinking of using some nonreactive titanium alloy to patch up the place. But you've lived here longer. Have any suggestions?”

“Ah, those damn methane bursts. I'm not surprised. They come more often

when Mahilani is more active. I guess you haven't looked at the environmental reports lately, have you?" Meanie trudged towards the center of the scrap metal mini-city with Banner following and stopped at a large pile of metallic sheets, about five by five meters in width and length, and stacked about four meters high.

"No. I didn't think there was weather out here."

"Well, there isn't weather, but that doesn't mean that this frozen moon isn't changing." Meanie sighed. "Anyways, we do have a bit of titanium alloy. Sheet metal form."

"That sounds good." Banner gave the pile a critical eye and took out a small diagnostics recorder which he used to scan the metal. "I probably need about half a ton's worth."

"That's quite a bit."

"Yeah. I want to do some preventative measures too."

"Good idea." Meanie pulled out a small portable planner from the back of his pocket and checked his calendar. "I can get this delivered to you later today, around 1400. Does that work?"

Banner nodded. "Yes."

"Here's the quote for the materials and the shipment."

He looked at price on the planner that the salvage yard operator handed to him and quickly entered a code to transfer funds. "It looks reasonable." He handed the planner back as Meanie thanked him for his business. "I don't suppose this place has some sort of repair shop? I'm obviously new here and I haven't had a chance to look up the local businesses."

"What sort of repair shop?"

"Robotics. Some of the household robots were damaged while they were trying to do some repairs."

"That's too bad. Well, you might try going to Riverside's. It's an independent store run by an old friend of mine—Terrel Riverside. Tell him that I sent you. That'll calm him somewhat considering your reputation. He's a bit of a skittish sort."

"Sure."

"He's a really skittish sort," Meanie repeated at Banner's normal tone. "I've been out here since I was a young man—when this place was still pulling out the last bits of

rubidium from the mines. I've seen a lot of stuff. I'd assume that you've seen a lot of stuff in your experience.”

Banner stared hard at the old man, wondering where he was going. “Sometimes I think I've seen too much stuff,” he muttered.

“I've been friends with him since he's my cousin's brother-in-law. But Terrel lived a soft life as a robotics researcher on Mars. He's unaccustomed to violence. To everything, really. His phobia after he his lab got sabotaged after some industrial espionage gone wrong—well, that made him move out here. Small town, low crime rate, you know.”

“Small town, certainly.”

“Terrel's a good man. He'll help you. But he won't be of any use if he got spooked, you know.” Meanie's expression turned sly. “You could make it easier, though, if you took your girlfriend with you. He has a weakness for pretty women.”

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Chapter 7

Banner decided to take the long way home, by walking. Something about the salvage yard operator's last words bothered him. It also bothered him why he couldn't pinpoint why they disturbed him. There wasn't anything inherently wrong about suggesting that Cimarron accompany him to the robotics repair shop. The only major problem would be convincing her to accompany him in the first place. But then, if this Terrel Riverside was anything like the Nowhere City Inn clerk...

He fisted his hands in his jacket pocket as he trudged past the transportation station. No. He shouldn't care how other men looked at her. She was just an annoying guest staying at his house. He was just being gracious for offering her a place to stay. It would have pleased his great-uncle that he was making nice with his goddaughter.

The ground rung dully with the pounding of his footsteps. He looked resolutely ahead, welcoming the relative cold that seeped through his clothes. He didn't like her at all, he told himself. He was just being uncharacteristically nice. With that thought, he started swearing under his breath, as he called himself as being all sorts of idiot.

Past the transportation station, the North Corridor loomed. With no other choice, Banner stepped onto the moving walkway toward the North Dome. He looked passed the sim-glass to the moon's landscape. From the north, the crater in which the city hugged against, appeared even larger and desolate. Strange rivets zigzagged the terrain on this side, which he imagined would look like the tracts of dimples on the rind of a cantaloupe, if observed from space.

Something dark at the corner of his eye caught his attention. He moved his head slightly and looked more closely behind him at a figure dressed in a navy blue jumpsuit with a transportation logo pinned on his shoulder. The man had a cap over his head with flaps which covered his ears and a visor which cast a shadow over the features of his face. The transportation worker, however, was not looking at him at all, but at a hand-held planner.

Banner turned to look ahead again. He was just being paranoid.

He made his way back to the South Dome without further incident—due to the fact that he willfully ignored anyone else passing him by. When he entered the house, the entrance and kitchen appeared empty. Apparently, Cimarron had cleaned up the breakfast dishes after he had left earlier. Glancing at the clock, he pondered cooking lunch. After the cup of coffee earlier in the morning, he was feeling famished. But the thought of just grabbing a protein bar tasting of wood pulp made him mentally and physically rebel. For a year, he had been subjected to sensory deprivation of all sorts. Which made him hunger for and to appreciate the things which before he had taken for granted.

Opening one of the drawers in the kitchen, he found that the gardening robots had plucked several ripened tomatoes and some grapes in addition to the figs that he had seen the last time he had visited the hydroponics garden. After pulling out some other items that he had purchased earlier at the grocery store, he took out a pot and filled it with water before bringing it to a boil. He slid out a cutting board on the kitchen counter and began slicing out thin strips of synth veal.

When the imported pasta was put into a pot and the meat was ready for the skillet, his guest finally wandered out from the depths of the house. She had finally changed into a pair of denim pants and a cream colored sweater. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, emphasizing her high cheekbones. Banner saw her arrive at the

corner of his eye as he prepared the food, but pretended to not notice her as she came closer to the counter to see what he was doing.

“With all the repair robots running around this place, I expected that there would be a meal preparer as well,” she said. She reached out to poke at a tomato.

“Don’t touch that. You’ll bruise it.”

“Playing the gourmet chef, aren’t you?”

Banner laid the meat onto the skillet, pleased that the oil sizzled rather loudly.

“There is a meal preparer. But I decided not to use it.”

“Isn’t this too much work?”

He grunted. “I have all the time in the world.” He tested the pasta with a wooden spoon and then began chopping the tomatoes and some parsley to be cooked in a sauce pan. “I gather you did all your correspondence?”

“The necessary ones,” she replied enigmatically. She seemed focused on the knife in his hands. “Can I help with anything?”

“How about setting the table? The dishes are in that cupboard on your left.”

As she rummaged for some plates, she asked, “So how was your trip to the salvage yards? Did they have the materials?”

“Yeah. They’ll be delivered later today.” He paused briefly as he checked the synth-veal on the skillet. “I have a favor to ask of you.”

“What sort of favor?” Faint suspicion laced her voice.

“I need to have some of those robots repaired, of course, after that methane explosion down in the lower level. The operator at the salvage yard recommended someone to me, but warned me that I wouldn’t get anywhere unless I brought you with me.”

“What do I have to do about anything? I know little about robotics, except maybe the programming. But your robots need much more serious repair than simply rewriting some software.”

He stirred the tomato sauce, tasted it, and decided that it needed a bit of pepper. “Yes, but apparently the robot repairman has a weakness for women. You might be able to make him more complacent.”

She turned to him after she placed the plates on the dining table and regarded him thoughtfully. “I don’t know. I have the tendency to have the opposite effect on

some people.”

“Doesn’t matter. At least his attention will be on you, not me.”

“What’s wrong his attention on you?”

“Oh, I’m not sure. Maybe it has to do with the rumors floating around this place. Nowhere City isn’t that large, you know. It doesn’t take much for it to get around that an ex-criminal has settled down in this backwater town.” He smiled self-deprecatingly to himself. “I’m sure the authorities have this place discretely surrounded.”

“If they did, they would have noticed me yesterday trying to get in here.”

He shrugged. “Right. But they probably don’t care. After all, doesn’t someone like me deserve to be robbed anyway?”

Cimarron grabbed some silverware. “You don’t have much faith in the system to do what’s right.”

“Nope.” As he drained the pasta, he wondered how he let her sidestep his request and get onto the topic of himself—something that he particularly didn’t want to discuss.

* * *

After overseeing the delivery of the titanium alloy sheets from the salvage yard and going over the latest progress on the repairs happening on the lower level of his great-uncle’s vacation house, Banner had taken a brief dinner before announcing that he was turning in for the night. Cimarron had merely replied that she would be staying up for a couple more hours reading in the study which was located at the end of a hallway, past the kitchen. He hadn’t cared. For some reason, he was feeling strangely lethargic. Perhaps it was due to the early hour that he had gotten up. Hopefully, he would be so tired that he would sleep without dreams.

But when he opened the door to his bedroom, a sudden attack of wrongness assailed him. The lights had not turned on yet, so he couldn’t understand what made him frown even though he saw nothing.

“Computer, lights, level 2.”

The lights came on in a soft, muted intensity. His room was divided into a brief living area with couches, chairs, a desk. Then a narrow archway led to the area where his bed was. On first glance, everything appeared in their proper places.

A dull throb pulsed behind his head, making him blink. The headaches were nothing new—he had had them periodically since the age of eighteen. Doctors had

found nothing wrong with him and had simply told him it was probably the product of psychosomatic stress. But he doubted it had anything to do with stress. Because ever time one of those headaches would come on, he would make some sort of connection with what would happen or what had happened. Some would have called it old-fashioned intuition. But he was too often right for it to be some kind of random gut reaction. He preferred to call it insight.

His own bedroom used to be a guest room. He had not felt right taking over his great-uncle's master bedroom even though the entire place now belonged to him. Everything there seemed too personal. The guest room, however, was completely impersonal. He had not yet stayed long enough to accumulate anything that would have marked the room as his. As it was, there was little in the room that could have been moved at all. But something drew him toward the desk.

The desk was a curve of black panel on an arching support made of the same material. There was nothing on the desk to be moved, but Banner activated the controls and accessed the logs. The time it was last accessed coincided with the time that he had arrived on Triton. But something still nagged at the back of his mind. He scrolled through some other logs which showed when the times when he had entered his room. The logs showed no discrepancy. But if anyone was determined to get in undetected, he supposed it would be possible to doctor the logs.

He blew out a breath and rolled his shoulders. Or he could be acting paranoid again. He tilted his head back, trying to ease the muscles in his neck, when he saw it. An irregular, oily stain on the ceiling, the size of a thumbnail.

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Chapter 8

From the main street, he could see the sun, a wan yellow ball at the outer reaches of the solar system, setting on the east. Neptune, which had loomed fat and blue for the past two days, was now setting in the west. In about six hours, Triton would be plunged

into night. A night that would last for three earth days.

Banner had run a scan on the stain on the ceiling of his bedroom. It would have made sense if it had been the result of a leak of some sort. But it wasn't. The diagnostics on the stain showed that it was made of some kind of organic material—the composition of which matched the slime of Terran gastropods. It didn't make any sense, although he found it a strange coincidence that some time that day, the temperature of his room had dropped by two point seven degrees with no discernible cause.

He had decided to sleep elsewhere, in a room on the second level, trying to rationalize his decision as a whim. But he had only gotten about four hours of sleep when he had awoken, disturbed by dreams again. He had spent the rest of the night analyzing the reports from the repair robots and accessing the old databases from the lower level. He also noticed someone attempting to access some restricted log files from a terminal within the house. He wondered what his house guest was looking for.

“I don't see why I have to carry this,” said Cimarron. She was holding a clear plastic box with one of the spherical repair robots inside. On the surface, it looked fine, but yellow and red lights were blinking on its surface, indicating that its probe was irrevocably damaged. “This is your robot.”

“You're doing me a favor,” Banner replied. “Think of this as payment for your inevitably long stay.” They had checked up on the status of the transportation station that morning, and unfortunately, the projected fix date for the quant pads was still far off. And the next shuttle that was heading to the interior solar system wasn't scheduled until three and a half Terran weeks later.

“I can think of about half a dozen other types of 'payment' that would be more fun than this.”

Judging from her brief smirk, he decided not to tempt her by asking what those other types of payment that would be.

Riverside Robotics was located in an alleyway just off the main square in a small quaint looking building covered in a faux yellow clapboard and fronted by a whitewashed porch. It looked like a small Midwestern post office that had been transported in its entirety from the plains of Nebraska to the cold bleak surface of this distant moon. Beside the front door—which even had a screened front—was a wooden plaque with the words “Riverside Robotics” painted in red, cursive script.

Just as they stepped onto the porch, they heard a screech from within the building.

“Bad kitty! Stop that! You should be ashamed of yourself!”

The inner door of the shop swung open, revealing a naked mannequin with large, unreflective black eyes. The humanoid shaped robot was the beige edition of a butler-class android. The mannequin a motion towards the interior of the shop with a mitten-like hand. “Greetings! Welcome!” The static-y voice blared out from its unmoving lips. “Please come inside. Mr. Riverside will be right with you to take your order.”

“Yah! You miscreant! Come back here!”

A gray-black furry blur twice the size of a hover bike flew past the butler android's head. A second later, a middle-aged man in a plaid jumpsuit ran after it with his arms waving over his head.

Banner and Cimarron glanced at each other. “Maybe this is a bad time,” she remarked.

The butler android made another motion, inviting them in.

“I’ll be right with you!” someone called out, presumably the proprietor. “It’s just some brief technical difficulties. Hey! Give me that!”

“I think this will be the perfect time,” Banner murmured. “He’s distracted. He won’t notice me at all.”

“At all?” She made an exaggerated survey of him from head to toe. “You’re a little too big not to be noticed.”

He refused to be cowed by her skepticism. Instead, he stepped into the robotics store, giving her no choice but to follow him. The store had a brief parlor which led directly into a receiving room which was populated by a handful of chairs for customers and a few gleaming display robots—which ranged from an older, clunky maid model three decades out of date to the latest miniaturized vacuum devices which were the size of a fist. A counter stood on one side of the room in front of a wall decorated by diagnostic tools. On top of the counter crouched the large furry creature which looked like an over-sized cat. It was shredding a red cap into tiny bits of yard with malicious glee. The middle-aged man in plaid was scolding the beast and trying to shove it away. He was unsuccessful.

Finally, he turned to them with a sigh. “Sorry, folks. I got an unexpected delivery

last week that I can't get rid of. What can I do for you folks?" Then Riverside blinked as if he finally realized who was standing in front of him. He gave a startled shriek before grabbing at the large cat's neck and screeching, "Murderer! Sic him!"

The animal ignored his commands.

Banner crossed his arms, feeling amused.

His companion rolled her eyes. "He's not murdering anyone."

"Not right now, at any rate."

Cimarron ignored his comment. "If this is how you treat all your customers, we'll be taking our business elsewhere."

"I'm the only licensed robotics expert in these parts. The closest elsewhere would be Oberon Station." He slowly released the large cat's fur. Then his gaze slid to Cimarron. "Well." He drawled his word out. "What happens to be the matter, honey?"

"The probe on one of my repair robots got damaged during a methane mishap," said Banner.

Riverside studiously ignored looking at him. Instead, he fixed his attention on the woman. "Lemme take a look at it." He strolled over to her before she could put the plastic box down somewhere.

"So can you fix it?" she asked.

The robot repairman only gave the robot in the plastic bin a cursory glance. Most of his eyes were glued to her chest even though it was covered in a black thermal suit. She didn't appear to notice. She was either oblivious, didn't care, or actually liked the repairman's lecherous attentions. Banner felt his fists clenching.

"Sure, darlin'." He named a quote.

"How long do you think it will take, Mr. Riverside?"

"Just call me Terrel, sweetheart."

"How long will it take?" Banner repeated her question before she could reply.

Terrel Riverside reluctantly pulled his attention away from Cimarron to focus on him. He pursed his lips into a sour expression. "I know who you are."

"Doesn't everyone."

"Well, it won't take too long." Riverside tapped the side of his clean-shaven chin as he fixed him with a trembling beady stare. "In a week, I suppose. It's fortunate for you that I have the parts. Imports for pretty much everything has been suspended ever

since the quant pads broke down.”

“I heard. A week sounds good.” Banner pulled out his hand-held organizer to input the relevant information. “Put the repairs on my account. You can just notify me when the repairs have finished and I’ll pick it up.”

“You’ll pick it up?”

At the proprietor’s suddenly nervous voice, the large cat beast looked up from amidst its destruction of Riverside’s red cap, its ears pricked up in interest.

“Yes, I’ll pick it up. Personally. Do you have any problems with that?”

“It would be much easier if I had it delivered.”

“No, it won’t be any problems for me. I can just pick it up the same time I’m picking up my groceries.”

“Well. All right. Have it your way then.”

Banner narrowed his own eyes at the strange exchange. No one had ever questioned something so trivial. Or perhaps the salvage yard operator was right. Maybe this Riverside was nervous that he would have to encounter him alone.

“Let me set this down here,” said Cimarron as she moved toward the counter.

“Wait! You don’t know what that thing will do to you.”

“Your new pet?” She set the plastic bin with the damaged robot on the counter, which the large cat ignored. It looked at her in interest, though, but all it did was purr when she scratched its chin. “I’ve heard that pard-synths are all the rage in some of the colder Outer Colonies.”

“My mother used to have one while I was growing up,” Banner found himself saying as he reached out to scratch behind the cat’s ears. The beast tilted its head and licked his wrist with a rough tongue. “They’re usually quite well-behaved. And they’re pretty independent, needing minimal care.”

Riverside puffed up his cheeks in exasperation. “That thing has been nothing but trouble when it arrived. I was expecting a shipment of parts, but I got this instead. And now the quant pads have broken down and the shuttle schedule is so sporadic that I’m not sure when I can get rid of it. It’s in my way and has disrupted my work schedule.” His eyes flickered to Banner and his mouth curved into an unpleasant smile. “Since you’re such an expert on pard-synths, you could take care of it while I arrange for its transport.”

“What? Me?” He dropped his hand. Disappointed, the large cat butted at his chest, hoping for another pet. Cimarron covered her mouth—probably to stifle a snickering laugh.

“It’ll be a favor for me,” Riverside said, warming to his subject. “I’ll still need about a week to fix your robot, but I’ll give you a discount on the repairs.”

“Uh...”

“Great! I’ll let you know about your robot as soon as I’m finished with the repairs.” Riverside finally turned to Cimarron with a confiding grin. “He’ll have his hands full, but meanwhile, I know this place off the main street in the West Dome. I heard the food is great. Why don’t you and me...well, you can help me try out the place.”

She gave him a smile that made the robot repairman blink stupidly. “That’s very kind of you for asking, but as you’ve pointed out, Banner will have his hands full. He’ll probably need my help more.”

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Chapter 9

“How the hell did I end up in this situation?”

They were sitting in a picnic awning enclosed in synth-glass eating lunch. Cimarron sipped from a bowl of minestrone soup that she had ordered from a take out place on the east corner of the main square as she contemplated his grumbling. “If you didn’t want to be in this situation, you could have been more adamant about not taking in a pet.”

He grumbled some more as he took a bite out of his ham and cheese sandwich.

The large pard-synth had taken up a spot underneath their table, gnawing on some leftover steak that the take out place had been about to throw away. Occasionally, the big cat would raise his, Banner had checked the animal’s gender before leaving the robotics repair shop, head and sniff at the next table where a pair of city maintenance workers in dark coveralls were attempting to eat their own meals. Whenever the workers happened to glance their way, the pard-synth would growl in warning. In response, the workers would give them confused looks and go back to their own meal.

“I didn't know you had a pard-synth when you were a child,” she continued. “Jorge told me a lot about you while I was growing up. The genius boy who lived out in the Outer Colonies, whose parents met in a romantic Romeo and Juliet fashion.”

“Right.” Banner gave a resigned sigh. Was he surprised that she thought how his parents met was romantic? Everyone else said the same thing. “They were being young and stupid. They eloped and got into a whole lot of trouble and strained diplomatic relations between the Outer Colonies and the Terran government. My grandfather ended up disinheriting my mother.”

“Jorge told me that his brother regretted his mistake, but he was too hard-headed to take it back. It must have irked you that you were cheated out of inheriting the Helado winery empire.”

Banner set the rest of his sandwich down deliberately. “I'm a mechanical engineer. I have no interest in dabbling with the wine industry. Besides, that was the last generation's mess. I have enough trouble making my own blunders let alone involving myself in grudges perpetuated by other people.”

“That's easy enough for you to say. Unlike you, I'm the product of other people's messes. I can never get away from it.”

Startled, he asked, “What do you mean?”

She continued to calmly sip her soup. “So the pard-synth in your childhood. It must have been fun having a pet and being the son of a space pirate.”

“My father is not a space pirate. Or isn't any more. He's an interplanetary merchant.”

“I suppose that is more politically correct.”

“It's why I don't talk with him much these days. He claims he's just fighting for free trade, but I think he's just out for the adventure.”

“And you're a homebody.”

He glared at her. “I'm not some provincial hick who wants to get stuck in one place my entire life. But if you've grown up, constantly on the move, not knowing what will happen next, that sort of life will look pretty good in comparison. Anyways, it was my mother who got the pard-synth. It was just before I was born when my parents had visited New Gunnbjorn for some reason or other. An acquaintance of theirs owned a pard-synth who had just had a litter and the kitten was a gift.”

“That was nice of them. Pard-synths aren't cheap.”

“Eismitte was almost an albino—her fur was completely white. But her eyes were black. She was my companion and guardian while my parents were off swashbuckling their way towards free trade. Well, she was around until some government-sanctioned kidnapper with a happy trigger finger fried her when I was about ten.”

The soup spoon paused halfway to her mouth. “Good grief. That must have been traumatic.”

“Yeah.”

“Why did the government want to kidnap you?”

He shrugged. “They wanted to subdue a rebel leader. I was a convenient target at the time to ensure his cooperation.” He picked his sandwich back up and chewed thoughtfully. “I take it you haven't had any pets while growing up?”

“No.” She concentrated on her soup. “But I did move around a lot, although probably not as often as you.”

“Huh. That's right. Your father is a famous diplomat.”

“I'm not sure my father would like to be labeled as famous,” she said wryly. “He'd say that it was a dangerous thing to say. He likes to keep a low profile.”

“It's not so low if I've heard of him before Uncle Jorge said anything about him. And I don't pay much attention to politics in the first place.”

“Hm. Well, originally, my parents wanted me to do what they did—either go into genetics like my mother or into political science like my father. But I had shown interest in computers—which they were happy to nurture. They had expected me to go all the way. They had even picked out a nice young man for me to marry. And then I threw them for a loop when I said I wanted to find myself.”

“Ah yes. That Tibetan nunnery you mentioned. So did you? Find yourself, I mean.”

“I'm not sure. But I've discovered aspects of myself that I've never considered before,” she admitted grudgingly. “Aspects that my parents probably would be aghast to hear about.”

“Oh, I've got to hear this. Aghast about what? Have you turned into a criminal?”

“No.” She looked at him with narrow eyes. “You can't tell me that you haven't noticed anything unusual about me, compared to other people.”

“Well, to be frank, I thought you were all wrong when I first met you.”

“Wrong?” Her voiced lilted upwards in sudden outrage.

“Sure. Uncle Jorge told me all about it. But don't worry about it. There wasn't anything you could have done anyway.”

She slumped back in her chair. “Ah. Jorge and his big mouth. If he was still alive, I'd wring his neck.”

“Why?”

“People assume things of me. And even when they know the truth, they're always so,” she sighed, not finishing her thought. “I mean, you've been the exception.”

“What? What did I do?”

That sly grin briefly tilted the edge of her mouth again. “You're so clueless.”

“I suppose you're not going to enlighten me?”

“Nope.” She patted the pard-synth's head when the big cat batted at her knee. “We should give him a name.”

“Why? Riverside is going to send the beast back once the appropriate shuttle comes in.”

“Well, even a temporary name would be nice instead of just referring it as 'it' or 'pard-synth' or even 'kitty'. Besides, I've never gotten the chance to name a pet. What would you name him?”

Feeling in a contrary mood, he replied, “How about Spot?”

“Spot? How unoriginal is that,” she exclaimed.

“Well, it has spots, doesn't it? Spot fits.”

“We need something with more flare. How about Alexander?”

“I'm not calling an animal by a person's name.”

“All right. What about Minestrone.”

“You're calling the pard-synth after a soup?” said Banner dubiously. “Isn't that more ridiculous than Alexander?”

“We can't sit here and argue about names all day,” she pointed out. “I'm not so creative, so I'd say we stick with Minestrone. And if you have objections to that, you can call him Min. Or any other number of diminutives you could come up with.”

“I'm not sure why I even bother to give my opinion,” he muttered. “Everyone ends up having her own way anyway.”

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Chapter 10

Once he stepped inside the house, he was intent on going down to the lower level to check on the progress of the repairs. The newly named Minestrone had wandered inside and started sniffing every corner of his new home. But Cimarron stopped him with a wave of her hand toward the panel near the entrance.

“What is it?”

“He's been following us since our departure from Riverside Robotics.” She pressed a control and the panel lit up with a view from the side of the house. From the next building, he could make out a dark shadow leaning on the corner. An arm was bent. A hand held something. Perhaps a monitoring device.

“I noticed him, but I thought I was too paranoid,” Banner replied. “It was either that or the authorities here have decided to put a tail on me due to my background.”

“There are a lot better ways of monitoring people's activities,” said Cimarron. “Why, there could be a recording device in here for all we know.”

“You sound more paranoid than me. What do you know about recording devices?”

“Quite a bit, actually. You haven't done a sweep of the premises since you got here, have you?”

“I didn't think of it at all. I had other things on my mind at the time.” Like finding a place of his own. He didn't think that anyone cared that he was on this out of the way moon. “Are you suggesting that I should start sweeping the place for any hidden devices? That's not going to do any good if someone has hijacked the basic monitoring systems.”

“I might be able to help you there. I'm sure Jorge had installed some security software already into the systems, but who knows how out of date they are now.”

“Er, thanks for your offer.”

“You sound skeptical. Are you sure you don't mind someone taking a peek at you while you're in the bathroom?”

He grimaced. “Well, if you put invasion of privacy that way...”

“Anyways, I don't think it's a coincidence or the local authorities.” She manipulated the controls further and got a close-up of the man sent to watch their house. All they got was an unremarkable face with plain brown eyes. No one they could recognize. “Do you know anyone who could be after you?”

“Could be anyone, I suppose. I did do a stint on Tartaros, remember? I could have seen something on that damn planet that no one wants me to blab about. Although they did do a pretty good job at brain-wiping me before they let me go.”

“Did brain-wipe?”

“I keep having these dreams,” he sighed. “Never mind. It was just a metaphor. Maybe it's not me at all. I never noticed anyone following me in particular before. Maybe it's you.”

“I would have noticed.”

“Well, I'm not so sure. You didn't notice me initially when you were trying to get into the house.”

She didn't look at him as she fiddled with the controls. “That's true. Maybe I'm not as perceptive as I think I am. But why would anyone want to tail me? The last job I held was helping a bunch of nuns. I don't know anything of use to anyone.”

“Hm.”

“You know, if you let me work on these monitoring systems, you can go and work on whatever it is you're working on.”

At her flat tone, he got the distinct impression that she was vexed with him for not falling into her lies. But he shrugged that off. That was her problem. It wasn't his fault that he distrusted pretty much everything that came out of anybody's mouth. “I'll be on the lower level.” With that, he turned away and headed toward the lift. The fact that someone was watching the house was filed into the back of his mind. At the moment, he wasn't too worried—he wasn't planning on anything and he wasn't hiding anything.

Minestrone bounded after him and slithered into the lift with him. Banner frowned. “Out.”

The large cat ignored him.

He shook his head and decided to ignore the feline. If the pard-synth accidentally

wandered into a methane rich area and got himself blown up, that would serve the cat right for being so curious.

But as the lift doors opened to the corridor on the lower level, that something in the back of his mind suddenly made a connection. Insight, not intuition, he told himself. Because if the person watching the house wasn't looking for him or Cimarron—it was quite possible that someone was looking for something that Uncle Jorge had left behind.

Banner had given himself a brief tour of the other rooms on the lower level, but they had all appeared rather unremarkable—old labs that had not been used for quite a while. Some of them had contained some older diagnostic equipment that he had only seen as historical objects during the course of his studies as a younger man, but he did not see any other old robots in the other storage rooms.

He did find a hand held scanner which could perform a variety of environmental readings. It was of an ancient design, a rectangular bar with a slight curve to it which could fit easily into his hand. Besides a small output screen and a few touch controls, the thing was made of a cold, lightweight dark blue metal alloy. He had seen one in a museum on Mars once. It was made by one of the first technology firms that got started on the red planet, Nix Instruments. On the market, what he held in his hands would be worth millions. In fact, everything around him would fetch a pretty price on the antiques market. The entire lower level was a veritable treasure trove. He wondered if Uncle Jorge knew about any of this stuff when he willed the house to him.

Meanwhile, Minestrone poked his nose into every crack and cranny, but he always stopped what he was doing when Banner had finished exploring a particular room himself to follow him to the next.

In the end, Banner found himself wandering back into the first lab that he had entered the previous night. A few of the repair robots were still hovering over the vent where the initial explosion had taken place. After familiarizing himself with the controls of the old lab, he was able to access the newer diagnostics database from his location. Scanning the recent logs, and satisfying himself with the fact that the robots were making progress, Banner finally turned his attention to the storage rooms of this lab. But he wasn't entirely interested in the old robots at the moment.

He took out the old scanner that he had stashed in a pocket and turned it on. It was still half charged, and mentally he made a note to put it in the regeneration bin on the upper level when he was finished working on the place. But now, he aimed the device at the storage doors which were marked by the strange, vicious rips which had immediately drawn the pard-synth's attentions.

The device itself made no noises, but the data on its screen scrolled past furiously as it was analyzing the data. Banner frowned, feeling the inklings of worry beginning to gnaw at him. There was residue on those damaged doors. Organic residue which was very similar to something else that he had seen earlier.

His head ached.

He went back to the control panels and opened the last storage door which led into the empty alcove. He went over to the panel inside the alcove and pressed the same sequence of controls that he had seen Cimarron manipulate earlier to open the door on the floor. Before going down, he grabbed a light source from the collection of tools he had amassed from his forage of the other lab rooms. Minestrone gave an uneasy growl as he headed down into the access tunnels, but the pard-synth followed him anyway.

The stairs were carved out of rock rather than constructed out of the same material of the house. This was the bedrock, the foundation. The temperature was slightly cool, but no unusually so. And it was dry. The stairs went down through a narrow gallery before spilling out into a large cavern that was perhaps the size of four of the rooms in the house above. His light source only had a narrow beam, which showed only glimpses of the cavern—like the ceiling and the far wall. Minestrone continued growling.

As a test, he said out loud, "Computer, lights."

There was an audible click, which made the pard-synth yowl. But accompanying it was light from four corners of the cavern. Banner turned off his light source and looked at the scanner. It seemed like an ordinary empty cave, except for the fact that there was no methane present—very unusual for a methane rich moon. A stream ran along the back of the cave, emerging from a hole in the wall and flowing down another corridor to a connecting cavern. The scanner told him that the stream was pure water. Pure enough to drink. Strange.

Minestrone had wandered off for a few meters and was batting at the air as if

playing with invisible flies. Ordinarily, he would have ignored the antics of an obviously deranged animal, but Banner found himself walking over to the pard-synth and scanning the area. And apparently, something even stranger was the matter.

This time, it wasn't the organic smear on the ground that had his attention. No, it was the neutrino signature in the air. A signature that indicated that someone had recently quanted into or out of the cave.

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Chapter 11

He found her working in what used to be his great-uncle's study, analyzing the diagnostics.

“I've got bad news,” he announced.

“So do I,” she replied grimly. “Someone's placed a bug in the systems. I've been spending the last hour wiping up the damage and shoring up the defenses. I need a drink.”

“Well, considering that Uncle Jorge held a sizable chunk of Helado Wineries when he was still alive, he's kept this place pretty well stocked.”

She finally looked up from the monitor she had been studying and rubbed her eyes. “Stocked? I seem to recall something to that effect. Did all the stocks go to you to?”

“Yeah. And I thank my lucky stars that Uncle Grim hasn't yet called me to demand that I hand those stocks over to the legitimate side of the family.”

“Uncle Grim? Who's he? I don't think Jorge ever mentioned him to me.”

“Grimaldo Helado. You wouldn't have wanted to hear about him anyway. He's boring and straight-laced. He doesn't know anything about making wine—he leaves that to the experts that my grandfather and great-uncle had personally trained—but he is a shrewd businessman. He's my mother's brother. When my grandfather disinherited her, his half of the company was willed to him.”

“Surely your uncle would have the sense to see that Jorge's will is legally binding. He can't just force you to give him what is legally yours.”

“That's right. But Uncle Grim is a persistent shark with a sense of tactics. He's probably waiting for a couple more days so I can become a bit more complacent.”

“I don't see you becoming complacent. Now where's that wine cellar?”

“I think it's on the third level.” Banner headed out, with Minestrone at his heels. He turned toward the lift. “To be honest, I'm kind of nervous about raiding it.”

“What, you're scared of getting drunk?”

“The last time I sampled the wine in this place was pretty memorable,” he replied as she got into the lift and he directed it to the desired level. “It went down pretty smoothly. But I was ill two hours later.”

“Ah.” She looked sage. “You were puking like a dog. Then again, after that something changed. Jorge seemed quite pleased about it all. I told him it was cruel of him to do that to you, but he waved it off and told me you simply needed fortification for your life ahead.”

“I didn't asked to be drugged!” The lift arrived on the third level and they exited to a corridor and turned right. “Or at least I thought Uncle Jorge had put some sort of drug in there that reacted badly with my system. After that, to be honest, I wasn't quite the same. You knew what he put in that wine during my new job celebration?”

“I have some suspicions, but I'm not quite sure. When was the last time you had an in depth medical scan?”

“When I left Tartaros. But I think it was only a physical. Maybe it was when I took that job at New Caledonia. The doctors didn't find anything unusual though.”

“Maybe they didn't know where to look.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I'll tell you later once I've had that drink.” They arrived at a long cavernous hall lined with rows upon rows of bottles. Each shelf was labeled by year. “I doubt any of these bottles have been 'modified' though.”

“I certainly hope not!” Banner randomly picked an aisle and pulled out an old vintage from Luna. “I have no desire for vomiting when I just want to relax.”

“Well, if it helps to ease your mind any, if what I suspect what Jorge did to you back then is true, then you wouldn't be getting sick even if that bottle was altered.”

“What about you?”

She gave him a strange smile. “Oh, you don't have to worry about me. I'm just

weird that way.”

“So do you think anyone will try to hack into the house systems once they've discovered that their spying software has been disabled?” Near the front of the cellar were a rack of wine goblets. Banner took two of them down and scrounged in a drawer and came out with an old fashioned corkscrew. He started to pop the cork.

Cimarron watched him pour the light red alcoholic beverage into the glasses and took one to cradle in her hands. “Oh, I'm sure they'll try. But they'll find themselves tangled in an almost impenetrable jungle of booby traps. That will be the trip wire which will disconnect the network from any kind of outside connections. There will be a blackout for perhaps a second, which the traps reconfigure themselves.”

He sipped his own glass as he watched the pard-synth prowl in curiosity along the racks of bottles. “Wouldn't that second be a vulnerability?”

“That second will be staggered among different parts of the network in a random array,” she replied. “Even if the spies are very good decrypters, it'll take them about a day to figure things out. And that will give me enough time to come up with something different. Besides, judging from the damage that they have already done, it was a pretty crude job that even a not particularly bright child could have done with enough motivation.”

“So whoever was tapping into the system are probably not expert computer hackers.”

“Nope.” She finally took a sip and looked over her glass at him. “So what was your bad news?”

“Someone has managed to quant into the house.”

Her facial expression didn't change, but she slightly shifted her stance so that she was also observing the antics of the pard-synth. “You discovered a quant pad in the lower level? That means that I can go home early.”

“It's not so easy as that. I discovered a signature for teleportation, but there are no quant pads in this place. It seems impossible. Unless someone has finally developed a portable quant device.”

“The physicists say that it's quite possible to develop one,” Cimarron said, tapping her glass, “but there are a lot of practical and technical hurdles that aren't so easy to overcome. If they were, we would have had portable quant devices only a few years after

the quant pad was developed. There's some danger in transporting quant devices through quantum tunneling—something about molecular, temporal, and dimensional distortion. I'm not quite sure of the details since I'm no physicist. But I seem to recall stories of scientists attempting to create portable quant devices which resulted in spectacular failures like explosions and worse things which have been hushed up.”

“I've heard about the explosions. But what can be worse than an explosion?”

She shrugged. “Who knows? But if someone has indeed created a portable device and used it to get into this house...there's something about this house, isn't there?”

“How much of the house have you swept for bugs?” he asked lowly.

“Only,” she pointed toward the upper level.

“How much did we reveal while we were standing around here?” he said, thinking back to what she said about the booby traps that she had put into the house systems.

“Only the obvious.” She shrugged. “Let's go to the conservatory. It's facing east and we can see the sun set from there.”

Banner grabbed the opened wine bottle and headed back to the lift with Cimarron and Minestrone following. Once they were back up on the first level and ensconced in the conservatory—a wide glassed-in room filled with ferns and small trees in ceramic pots that faced the rest of the icy wastes of the moon—he set his goblet and the wine bottle on a small table and slumped into one of the padded chairs nearby. The smallish sun lingered on the horizon, casting wan rays across a blue-gray expanse.

Cimarron took another chair next to him and placed her glass on the table before curling her legs underneath her. Minestrone disappeared on one of his expeditions into the greenery. “Oh, there are booby traps in the system now,” she finally said. “They'll expect them. But that will make them feel complacent. That's when we can outsmart them. I have other traps and triggers of my own design in place that are almost impossible to detect. So about quanting. Is it true, that you did find traces?”

“Yes. But I've found other evidence that may complicate things.”

“What evidence?”

He pulled out the scanner he had tucked in a pocket and handed it to her. She glanced at the readings. She narrowed her brows in thought. “That's really strange.”

“Yeah. What do you think it is?”

“I have no idea. But Jorge might, since he was the microbiologist.”

“But he isn't around any more.”

“No.” She bit her bottom lip, thinking. “He might have left some clues that might help us though. It involves the house.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He did experiments here too, you know. He had a lab set up close to the cellar, probably. I'm sure if we can find any copy of his notes, it might tell us something.”

“You didn't come across any of his files when you were perusing the computer database or when you were searching his study?”

She shook her head. “But just think of it. If it was of any importance, he wouldn't just leave it lying around, would he?”

“I'm not sure. Even when I was in regular communication with him, Uncle Jorge rarely talked about his own work. All I knew was that he worked on new formulations for the wine company when he was home. And when he wasn't, he was off in the outer reaches somewhere doing research with a xenobiology team. I wouldn't be surprised either way if he had hidden his notes in some secret place or put it in some place so obvious we're overlooking it as we speak.”

“I can see your point. Jorge taught me much of the basics, but talked little about his own stuff, unless it pertained to me directly.”

“Pertained to you directly?”

“Hm. I see he didn't tell you everything about me. He never told you that I was also one of his experiments?”

“You are?” He turned to look at her. In the fading light, she looked like a mysterious sprite contemplating a disappearance. “I knew that your mother had Uncle Jorge at a mentor at one time, but I didn't think that he ever dabbled in genetics.”

“You're half right. He never dabbled much in eukaryotic genetics.”

The word 'much' sent off alarms in his brain. “But?”

“These readings are certainly weird,” she said, deflecting the conversation off of herself. “But the residues certainly aren't alive. Something else left them there. What, I cannot say. I don't have the background to.”

“But do you have any wild guesses?”

“Do you?” she countered.

At that moment, the sun disappeared below the horizon, plunging the moon into a darkness, punctuated by few stars. In the early night, her question echoed in his mind. And his thoughts turned to things that disturbed sleep.

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Chapter 12

As Banner dropped the last synth veal onto a plate and placed it on the floor for Minestrone, he made a mental note to go out for more groceries—particularly for cat food soon. He straightened when the pard-synth trotted toward his meal and began rummaging in the cupboards for breakfast. There was half a loaf of bread left—something else to get from the local bakery. He put a few slices into an ancient toaster and decided to speak to the computer to compose the grocery list before he forgot anything. Then he poured himself a mug of coffee and headed into the living room and turned on the monitor for the morning broadcast.

Technically, on Triton time, it was still early in the night. But the inhabitants of the moon were running on a twenty-four hour schedule, a holdover from old Earth time.

The anchor for Nowhere City News was a stout, balding man in a black blazer—the uniform all reporters adopted in transmissions. He droned onward about the repairs happening at the transport station and the upcoming elections for the city governor and some of the lower offices. Banner only half listened. Instead, he sipped his coffee drowsily, wondering if he could possibly try sleeping on a day schedule in an effort to eliminate his dreams.

Suddenly, the anchor faltered in his recitation of the usual news as a hand came up to cup at a hidden ear piece. Banner set his mug down and leaned forward as the anchor's eyes widened when he listened to the report in his ear.

“This just in, folks. There's been a murder on the Main Square. A body has been found near the town clock and the authorities are currently investigating.”

“Did he just say there had been a murder?”

Banner turned to see Cimarron standing behind him. She was wearing denim again, this time paired with a pink sweater that clashed horribly with her purple hair. “Yeah. There's coffee in the kitchen.”

“As terrible as it may sound, this is better than any coffee. Scoot over, Min.”

The pard-synth had taken over a couch for a morning nap after gorging himself on the synth veal, but gave only a disgruntled snort when she shoved his tail aside to perch on one side of the couch.

“Apparently, the authorities have yet to find any witnesses,” the anchor continued. “The victim was Sev Alderhan, the Western Block candidate running for the governor's seat. Details of Mr. Alderhan's death will be released pending notification of his family. The authorities have yet to release a list of suspects or persons of interest.”

“The Main Square is such a public place,” Cimarron said. “Surely someone could have witnessed someone getting killed.”

“This is a small city on an out of the way moon,” Banner reminded her. “People go back home pretty early in the day. Even by eighteen hundred, the place is pretty deserted. Or at least it is during the off season. When the tourists are here, who knows how late people stay up. Which is significant, really. Whoever murdered the candidate for governor sure picked a good time to do so.” He headed back into the kitchen to check on his toast.

“Will you mind if I turn off the broadcast and surf the network?” she called out to him. “It might have more detail than the official sources.”

“Sure, go ahead.” Banner concentrated on putting jam on two slices of bread before going back to the living room area. “Did you find anything?”

The monitor on the wall had been turned off, but she was looking at a smaller monitor propped up next to the couch. She was scrolling through a text article. “There's some pretty gory details out there since the authorities weren't able to cordon the Main Square off fast enough. Well, it's either that, or some reporter was able to sneak onto the scene. Mr. Alderhan had been severely eviscerated through his abdomen. And it appears that his internal gut organs are completely missing.”

He almost gagged on his bite of toast. “Missing?”

“You don't want to see the crime scene images. Pretty bloody,” she said, her voice almost monotone. “But I think the medical examiner was able to determine pretty

quickly that the victim wasn't killed in the square. His body was just dumped there. Actual time of death was about five hours ago.”

“Just after sunset.”

“Yes.”

“Do they have any suspects? Motives?”

“Well, Alderhan was a politician. I suspect he had many enemies besides just his obvious political opponents. If you're the unscrupulous sort of politician, you wouldn't think much about anyone you're stepping on while on your way to the top. Well, you wouldn't worry about them until they jump out and stab you in the back.”

“I only got to this place a few days before you did,” he replied. “I don't know anything about the political climate here let alone elsewhere. Maybe it's a grudge, as you say. Or quite possibly a random killing.” He winced. “It did sound pretty brutal though. It must have been quite a grudge.”

“You may be right.” She pondered the readout on the smaller monitor. “There's actually very little crime in Nowhere City. Compared to even Alpha Centauri which has a reputation for being law abiding and peaceful, this place is a utopia. Although, hm.” She frowned as she examined the articles further. “It does look like there are some people who claim that the local police force has been systematically trying to erase evidence that there is any crime here because they want to attract tourists. But all of these are ranked as minor articles. I wonder if anyone had even bothered to read them.”

“Well, if the inhabitants here are like the average citizens elsewhere, they probably never bothered to go past the headlines. Hell, you've seen how the people here react to me. They like listening to gossip and rumors.”

“And you're trying to say that in your case, they aren't true?”

“I can pontificate all I want about fact and fiction,” he replied, finishing off his toast. “It doesn't mean that anyone will listen to me.”

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Chapter 13

The lampposts ringing the Main Square cast small pools of yellow light which

merely looked like glowing dots in the darkened city. Banner surreptitiously tucked his chin into his jacket collar as he passed by the area, aware that a small crowd of onlookers had gathered at the scene of the crime—which had been cordoned off by a red forcefield. From his vantage point, he could see past the crowd to the area under the clock tower which had been blocked off. There was nothing that he could see. Not even bloodstains. The police had made quick work of moving out the body and scraping the place of all evidence.

There were a few police officers in their dark severe uniforms and helmets with opaque visors patrolling the perimeter of the crowd, while all of the patrol bots were circling the forcefield, preventing anyone from getting too close. He shifted his gaze away and quickened his pace by one fraction. He wasn't one to stand and gawk. Particular persons might get the wrong idea about him.

Banner moved off down the main street and turned west to a side street that terminated into a large building that had a mauve Victorian face framed by wrought iron lampposts and curling trellises but its bulk was a rather plain square construction with no windows. There was a sign in front of the building declaring itself the City Grocery with the front display showing the latest sales highlighted with old time handwritten signs. But once he opened the door, a chime announcing his entrance, he found himself in a rather sterile and modern store.

One side of the store held refrigerated bins filled with fresh food grown in Triton's greenhouses and enclosed livestock farms. The other side consisted solely of imported foods from off planet—the majority of which came from Earth. At a casual glance, it did not appear that the sudden cut off from the quant pads at the transportation station had any affect on how many units of the imported foodstuffs the store was able to move. Or perhaps it only appeared that way if the store had enough of it backlogged for the Tritonian winter.

He noticed a few other grocery patrons browsing the shelves, but there were no human employees about—only the helper robots restocking some shelves, and as usual, the self-checkout. A cart detached itself from the side of the store and followed him as he made his way toward the bakery.

He had never liked shopping before his incarceration. And after, he had always had a faint sense of paranoia as if someone was always watching him. It was like this in

any public place. Too many people made him nervous. But he had tried to convince himself that it was merely part of his own psychosis after his ordeal on Tartaros, and he forced himself to go about as if nothing was wrong in the belief that perhaps prolonged exposure would make him get used to it.

So when he felt the hairs on the back of his neck bristle as if a cold wind had suddenly gusted about him, he tried to ignore it. It was just a grocery store, not outside on Triton's bleak surface.

“Well, well, well, look what we have here.” The voice came from behind him, amused with a hint of cruelty.

He forced himself not to crush the loaf of bread in his hands. Instead, he gently placed it into the cart next to him and turned to see who was taunting him. A woman stood across the aisle, dressed in the severe cut that was used on police uniforms. Three silver stripes on her left shoulder denoted her rank as sheriff. Her black hair was pulled back tightly revealing penetrating green eyes and a mouth with a slight curl to it. She was beautiful, in a stark way, but Banner was more concerned about the small disruptor strapped to her waist. Her hand was quite close to it.

“Good day, sheriff.” He glanced over her shoulder and saw that her cart was being tended to by a shorter man with a mustache. The hotel clerk. The man seemed to be engrossed in looking at the products on the shelf, but he didn't not miss his brief sly glances his way or the smirk on the man's face.

The sheriff's lips pulled upward slightly, revealing the glint of her teeth. “I see you haven't seen the news yet, Mr. Wice.”

He wasn't surprised that she knew his name. She probably ran a full background check on him once he had arrived on the moon. “No,” he lied. He was pretty good at lying—as long as no one hooked him up to some machine. “What seems to be the problem, sheriff?”

“A lot of things, unfortunately.” She leaned closer to him. Physically, she was a head shorter than he was. But her presence loomed over him like an angry storm cloud. “Perhaps you should check the news more often, Mr. Wice. And I would be careful if I were you. Even the little things could be taken the wrong way.”

Banner found himself giving her an easy smile as he thought back to his encounter with the hotel clerk and his claim that he would sick the police chief on him if

he so much as blinked wrong. “Thank you for the advice. I'll see to it.”

“See that you do.” She swept him a cold glance. “Although you seem to be the sort who likes to seek out a bit of trouble.”

“You think I like being disciplined for my transgressions?”

She tilted her head and she licked her lips as if scenting prey. “You want to be disciplined?” There was a slight tint to her cheeks, indicating that she was entertaining a titillating thought that probably had nothing to do with arresting him—according to the law at any rate.

“Not if I can help it.” And he meant it.

“Too bad. But I'll be watching you.” She turned to walk back to the hotel clerk.

Banner turned his head so that he was mostly looking at the food on display in the bakery. But in the corner of his eye, he watched the sheriff say something to the clerk who seemed to be staring at her in rapt attention. Suddenly, she grasped something at his neck. A black collar.

“When I get home, worm, you're going to...”

He couldn't hear her next words as it was hissed almost unintelligibly. A second later, she suddenly released the clerk's collar and strode out of the grocery store. And then, ashamed of his brief humiliation at the hands of his mistress, the clerk scuttled away to the next aisle, his cart trailing behind him complacently.

* * *

When Banner got back home, no one was on the first level to greet him. Not even his newly acquired pet. He asked the computer to locate his house guest and the pard-synth. The computer replied that Minestrone was located in the study with vital signs showing that the large cat was sleeping. As for his house guest, the computer returned an error. Apparently, Cimarron had rigged the systems so she would be able to prowl the place without being detected. That didn't surprise him.

Quickly, he put the food away and then pulled up a stool to the kitchen counter where he activated a terminal to access the latest news. Other than what Cimarron had managed to dig up earlier, there was little detail on the death of the candidate for governor. The opposing candidate had sent his condolences to the murdered man's family, but still vowed to run on the same platform. The slain candidate's party was scrambling to put up a replacement candidate. The front runner for that position

appeared to be someone who would have been appointed lieutenant governor had Alderhan been elected.

A look at the statistics bore out what Cimarron had told him earlier as well. There was very little crime in Nowhere City. The last murder to take place had been a decade ago—and it had concerned a domestic dispute between some tourists. Deaths on Triton had all been attributed to natural causes, the leading causes curiously enough was early onset dementia accompanied by brain aneurysms, and to accidental causes.

Searching Alderhan's background, the candidate's biography appeared to be rather ordinary. Although the man was outspoken on political issues, he led a rather quiet life as a restaurateur in the West Dome. He had a wife, two kids, and a Labrador retriever that was a retired show dog from Earth. His neighbors, friends, and employees seemed to like him well enough and his party thought he was a sure bet. There was no hint of anything scandalous lurking in his background.

“I thought you were shopping today. Or even working down in the lower level.” Cimarron stood on the other side of the counter, trying to peer at his monitor. “Research, curiosity, or both?”

“Curiosity, mostly,” he replied. “I had a run in with the sheriff earlier.”

“You did? What did you do?”

“Getting some bread. I guess I was lucky she didn't arrest me then and there. I suppose the only thing stopping her was lack of evidence.”

“How did she recognize you?”

He shrugged. “Probably ran a background check on me once I landed in this place. Or the authorities notified her that an ex-criminal was heading into this little tourist town to settle down. I can see how robbing the tourists would be bad for business.”

“I'm not sure the sheriff was worried about you robbing tourists. Killing them, maybe.” She pulled up another stool. “So did you find anything of interest?”

“Nothing's turned up on the usual news sources. It looks like the authorities are keeping most of this under wraps. No announcements of suspects either. But I did find something a little odd.” He pointed out a line on the monitor. “What do you think of that?”

“Brain aneurysms and dementia, huh? That is a little strange.”

“Yeah. And it makes me worried a bit. I have had headaches recently.” Although they had been going off and on for most of his adult life, he admitted privately. And they were almost always accompanied by some sort of insight. Most likely it was a sign that his head was still working—not that something seriously was going on. But who knows. He was no neurosurgeon. “Maybe I should go to the doctor.”

“Wait.” She reached out to touch his wrist to prevent him from getting up. Again, there was a shock when her skin touched his, but this time, she appeared to be completely oblivious to it. “That might not be such a great idea.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you remember what I told you about Jorge and what he gave you during that party?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Sure. But that was just food poisoning, right? What does that have to do with anything?”

“A lot.” She paused for a moment. “How much do you know about Jorge's expeditions to Sinistra IV?”

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Chapter 14

Three decades ago, Jorge Helado was sent to Sinistra IV as one of the microbiology experts on a team whose mission was to survey the planet's feasibility for colonization. At the time, he was also accompanied by two of his students, Oliver Rakken and Jennifer Tong. Helado, Rakken, and Tong had discovered several unique microbial species that had evolved in the primordial soup of the planet—some of which were later harnessed for future industrial uses. But that was a minor footnote on the xenobiological survey. The team had concluded that Sinistra IV was fit for limited colonization—mainly for mining purposes—and a few companies who had set in some bids to the central government were given the go ahead for development. Other than that, the reports for Sinistra IV were buried into obscurity and the planet itself became an uninteresting way station on the maps of astrocartographers.

The mission to Sinistra IV was just one of the many missions to newly charted

planets that Jorge Helado joined. Oliver Rakken had accompanied Dr. Helado to three other missions before taking a post in the Galactic Institutes of Health for a few years studying the therapeutic uses for newly discovered microorganisms. Later, he had been recruited by the somewhat enigmatic bioengineering company Ribotech which was stationed in one of the Outer Colonies doing studies in on crop selection. Jennifer Tong had done one other mission with Helado before taking a position at Alpha Centauri University as a genetics researcher. There, she had met her future husband and had briefly gotten embroiled in uncovering a human bioengineering scandal of one of the companies based in that system.

After the recitation of facts, Banner had just shrugged. "Sure, Uncle Jorge had told me about the different places in which he had done exploratory work. But he never really told me what sort of findings he had. What sort of microbes did he and his team uncover? Other than a brief mention of some novel bacteria-like microorganism that produced some sort of protein-like substance that could conduct electricity far more efficiently than any metallorganic fiber that is currently in existence, I couldn't tell you."

"I can tell you that that microorganism was later used to help make some pretty sophisticated devices," Cimarron said. "Those devices are now used in a lot of computers that have been installed in quite a few local governments."

"That must have made the company that helped sponsor the expedition to Sinistra IV quite a tidy profit."

"True. But the company was also quite quick in discarding any findings that on first glance appeared useless. Jorge never told me this, but I did manage to piece it together from some of his cryptic comments to me while he was still alive as well as some of my mother's notes which I broke into."

"You broke into your mother's private writings?" said Banner, startled. "What made you do that? For all you knew, it could have been some private and sensitive correspondence to some important people. After all, she is married to a diplomat and has the acquaintance of some powerful people."

"There is that," she acknowledged. "But even if it was sensitive correspondence, it wouldn't have mattered much to me. I would have immediately dismissed it. But my mother was very evasive, especially when I had asked her numerous times about my origins. Her original story to me never did seem satisfying. It seemed too pat. Usually,

she is quite open in talking about her work.”

“So you went digging.”

“Exactly.”

“What if you had found something so shocking that you would have been better off not knowing about it? Maybe your mother was trying to protect you.”

“Perhaps she was. But I'd rather know the truth—even if it made me question myself—than go about in ignorance.”

“And you did question yourself. That's why you went off to that Tibetan nunnery.”

She leaned back on her stool and tilted her head so that she gave the impression that she was looking down on him. “I admit that it could have played a role in my self-questioning. But I was already doing that before I found out that facts.”

“So what did you find?” Banner asked. He was curious despite constantly telling himself that he shouldn't care what she was.

“My parents had some fertility problems,” she began in a matter of fact tone. “There are, of course, certain treatments available nowadays to alleviate that problem. They had planned for four children. But they didn't want them right away. So while they were of age, they had four embryos created and stored at the Alpha Centauri Reproductive Bank until they were ready. About one month after the embryos were put into storage, there was an unauthorized breach of security at the Bank.”

“You and your siblings were stolen.”

“By a black market biotech company,” she confirmed. “Jorge probably told you what happened next.”

“That biotech company wanted embryos with genetic material from famous people to create engineered persons as slaves for people who were rich enough and lacked ethics enough to want them.” Banner frowned in thought. “I had always thought that was terribly inefficient and risky, though. The technology is already there to create wholly synthetic beings from scratch. If they wanted engineered persons derived from the genetic material of famous or smart people, they could have just stolen their medical records and created clones.”

“Clones would be too obvious,” Cimarron replied. “I don't pretend to understand these people's motives, but as I have heard of it, there's this illicit thrill for some people

that the act of theft engenders. And the fact that they are stealing actual people and forcing them by genetic manipulation to become slaves. Or in my case, a courtesan.”

“And from what Uncle Jorge told me, your parents got wind of the theft somehow by one of your father's underground contacts and they got you out. Except they had modified you before they could do so.”

“Also true.” Her eyes which reminded him of twilight bored into him. He supposed that she was trying to look serious in her recitation of her origins, but he kept getting distracted with how her hair framed her face. “I was the only one that they had gotten out. My siblings had been destroyed during their imperfect process. They had been working on an experimental procedure, you see, and by fluke chance, that had gotten one right. But there were also many failures.”

“You were one of their successes then. Your parents were lucky that they hadn't completely compromised you.”

“Oh no, that isn't true. I'm actually a failure as well. I had a fundamental flaw.”

“Flaw? But you're perfect!” he blurted out.

Her smile was fleeting. “Careful what you say, Wice.”

“Well,” he amended, “if you look at it objectively, no one's perfect.”

“Anyways, I had a flaw. If you want to genetically engineer a person with a slave-like personality, you're going to have to mess around with their neural network. There are certain genes you can tweak. I don't pretend to understand any of it. My mother could give you a more detailed and exhaustive explanation. But they tried to tweak some of those genes in me. Unfortunately, their experimental methods were crude—and although at first glance it looked like they had a success, by modeling how those networks operated over time, it would severely destabilize.”

“So how are you here?”

“My mother had the foresight to run some modeling tests to see what effect the modifications that company had made to me would have on my survival. When she found the defects, she had to try to come up with something to fix it. It was possible to make more genetic modifications to compensate for the defects, but she wanted a solution that would be a bit more flexible—something that could help me cope with anything unforeseen. That's when she called up her old mentor for help.”

“Uncle Jorge.”

“Yes. And to make an already long story shorter, Jorge recalled that he and my mother had cataloged quite a few microorganisms on their expeditions. Jorge had stored stocks of all those specimens in a private lab in a system not so far from Alpha Centauri and had recalled that there were some specimens with unusual properties. Particularly ones that could act as symbionts.”

“Symbionts of what?”

“Well, originally, they had been bacteria-like parasites, living off the other microbes, like the one that produced that strange electricity conducting protein, like leeches. Or rather like that mythical creature called the vampire—by sucking out all the contents of its host. Jorge had tested the symbiont in cell culture and discovered something quite unusual. Instead of being parasites of human cells, these symbionts actually lived in harmony with the cells, in some cases, even enhancing their growth and giving them extra properties like magnetism.”

“That's really strange.”

“From what I understand, these symbionts inject their host with some sort of genetic material that has some non-canonical bases. The whole process is sort of like a virus or a transposon. But in the processes that we do know, this would get integrated into the host genome at random locations. Usually, this sort of random mutagenesis kills the cell if it integrates into an essential gene.”

“I'm following you so far.”

“But this genetic material from the symbionts has a bias. In human cells, it prefers to insert into sequences which regulate gene expression. The genetic material from the symbionts itself is also has some rather unusual properties outside of its non-canonical bases. It encodes an unusual xenoprotein that sort of reinforces the cell membrane of the host—don't ask me how it's done, I'm not a protein biologist either—which renders the host cell almost impenetrable against any sort of hostile environment.”

“All right, I get that,” he said. “But what does that have to do with you?”

“Jorge and my mother thought that these symbionts would be my salvation.”

He blinked. Not sure that he was hearing correctly. “Salvation?”

“In the early stages of development, I proceeded rather well. But when my neural system started to form, they introduced some modified symbionts which would only

target neurons. Those symbionts have been keeping my entire neural system in balance. And they still are.”

“That's...” Banner tried to find something succinct to express his astonishment at her unexpected reveal, but he came up blank. “I don't know what to say. I guess I never really thought about it. I thought all of what made you different was attributed to what that biotech company did to you. But if you have those symbionts—wouldn't the doctors immediately tell that something is wrong after even a routine checkup?”

“Ah, the doctors.” At that, Cimarron looked pensive. “That, I don't know, even after I read all of my mother's notes. I'm not sure if she even knows what's going on. And if Jorge knew, well he never told me. The doctors actually are ignorant of all this. All they've detected is a slightly elevated metal content in my blood and lymph, but those levels are just on the border of what is considered normal so they never gave it a second look. And the symbionts aren't detectable by any ordinary scan. They simply aren't constructed the same way as the microbes that have evolved on Earth. And no one so far has found any other alien microbe that has the same relationship with Terran cells, so why would the doctors bother to try to look for it in the first place?”

“Right. So now I know your life's history. But what does this have to do with the food poisoning that I got on the night that Uncle Jorge threw me a party to celebrate my first job?”

“I think he was trying to give you an advantage,” she replied. “And he seemed to be pleased about it after the fact, so he must have discovered somehow that whatever he did to you had worked. I think he had infected you.”

“What?” Banner nearly fell off his stool with that revelation. “If that's true, how the hell are we supposed to prove it?”

“While you were off shopping, I've been in Jorge's study. I've discovered some very interesting monitoring devices. One, of which, seems to test for the presence of non-Earth microbes. I know because I scanned myself.”

“I think your conclusions are wrong,” he said, even though there was a small nagging doubt at the back of his mind. “You might be the one with the symbionts, but I don't see why Uncle Jorge would want to experimentally infect me with them. I was perfectly fine before. Why would he want to try to improve me?”

“Who knows.” She got up and beckoned for him to follow her. Reluctantly, he

did so. “But there is another possibility. Perhaps he wanted to infect you with symbionts simply because he could.”

“That’s a serious breach of my autonomy,” Banner gritted out, feeling outraged. “If he did that, I can’t believe he did that without my permission. I thought he had more respect for me.”

She shrugged. “Sometimes, relatives do reprehensible things because they believe their way is best.” They reached the study—a beige room filled with monitors and abstract models. The pard-synth was sprawled on the largest couch, asleep. She went over to the desk at the corner of the room and picked up a palm-sized, black device that was the shape of a hexagon. She pressed a finger to one of the sides to activate it. “Stand a bit closer. This has a limited range.”

Banner obliged and felt his heart pounding as she raised her arm and swept the device around his head. He was close enough to smell the light floral scent of the shampoo which she used to wash her hair. He watched her mouth move silently as she examined the output of the device.

Her voice was neutral. “Take a look at this. It looks like Jorge was a bit more sophisticated when it came to you.”

She handed him the device. This time he also ignored the electric spark when her hand brushed his. Instead, he concentrated on the readings. What he saw made him want to throw the small device across the room.

“Fuck. I hope I’m not contagious.”

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Chapter 15

With the almost non-existent atmosphere, the stars in the firmament glittered in fixed, hard light. Outside, past the shield of the South Dome, it was Terra Incognita—the icy land a black, slithering shadow. Banner sat in the conservatory looking out on the moon’s landscape, surrounded by the silent sentinels of potted plants. He had ordered the computer not to turn on the light. He was in the mood to sit in the dark, brooding about the things that his great-uncle had put in his head. And the fact that if

he even managed to get rid of these things, he had already been permanently altered. What exactly was he anymore?

“Computer, lights.”

He suddenly sat up when the conservatory was flooded with illumination. “What the hell do you think you're doing?”

“Turning on the lights since I don't want to trip over something,” said Cimarron as she made her way towards him. In her hands was a tray. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“Yeah, I have a problem,” he told her. “I didn't want any light.”

“You've been sitting in here for the past two hours stewing like an angry bear. You need something else to think about.”

“Angry bear, huh?”

“Well, since you haven't shaving, you look like one.”

He growled.

“And sound like one too.”

He was not pleased with her assessment. “I do not! After what Uncle Jorge did to me, being a bear would be preferable. I'm some sort of alien hybrid freak.”

“If you're an alien hybrid freak, then so am I.”

“I didn't...” He glared at her. “Stop putting words in my mouth. What's on that tray?”

For the first time that he had known her, she seemed uncertain. “A snack. I think.”

“You think?” He finally examined the tray. There was a glass filled with fresh squeezed orange juice and a plate with a slice of what looked like chocolate cake.

“I've never baked a cake before,” she told him. “So I suppose you could try it on your own peril.” She set the tray down. “I just thought that maybe it would, um, cheer you up.”

“You think the way to my good graces is through my stomach?”

“You don't have to look at me as if I'm an idiot,” she sniffed. “But since you're dead set on moping about, I'll just leave you to it.” She turned to leave.

He had the urge to yell back at her that he was not moping about, but decided not to make her think that he was also childish for berating her with comebacks. Instead, he

picked up the fork on the tray and took a bite of the cake—expecting something foul-tasting.

* * *

The kitchen was unoccupied when he finally emerged from the conservatory with empty tray in hand. He set the tray in the recycler before spotting the stand with the rest of the chocolate cake. He ignored the small voice in the back of his mind telling him that another piece wouldn't hurt. Instead, he resolutely headed toward the lift, intent on doing more work on the lower levels.

Banner stepped into the lift and put in a command to go down to the lower level. A few seconds later, though, the lift abruptly stopped and something rocked it with a loud thump that seemed to reverberate outward.

“Computer, status?”

The system didn't respond.

Silently cursing that he did not have his diagnostics instruments with him, he popped a panel near the bottom, next to the door. He briefly examined the series of levers before decisively pulling on one. There was a hiss, as if the door wanted to open, but he saw no movement. He pulled another lever and an opening at the top of the lift appeared with another hiss of air. It was suddenly cold.

He found discrete hand holds on the wall of the lift which he made use of as he hauled himself up. Once he was on top of the lift, he looked up the dark shaft. Faint light spilled out, illuminating metal bar hand holds leading to the upper levels. Letting out a few more curses of resignation, he pulled himself up to the next level where the outer doors to the second level were located. He reached out with his left hand to fiddle with an emergency lever located inside the shaft which manually opened the doors. As the doors slowly opened, the lift below him groaned as if something was crushing the transport from the bottom.

The doors to the second level finally opened and a dark shadow loomed out.

“Banner?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” he growled.

There was another squeal as the metal below him twisted. Below the sound of the metal, something crackled like the breath of a flame, echoing from below the shaft.

“What the hell was that?” Banner demanded.

Cimarron didn't reply. Instead, he saw her arm move and there was a glint from her hand. She had pulled out her ray gun and aimed it past his head. There was one final screech of the metal before the lift suddenly dropped down the shaft. Banner was momentarily paralyzed before he made himself move. He pulled himself over the edge and rolled onto the floor of the second level as his house guest stepped back out of the doorway. Below the lift exploded and a fire ball raced up the shaft while bits of flame flickered out. Almost immediately, an alarm sounded and the doors on the second level slid shut. A muted hiss was heard as the emergency systems sprayed fire retardant into the lift shaft.

“You are one lucky bastard,” Cimarron told him.

Banner frowned as he got up. “How did you know that I was here?”

“I was in hydroponics. The alarms went off there that something in the house was malfunctioning. It was lucky for you that I had the foresight to ask the computer about your location.”

“Oh yeah?” He remembered that the last time that he had queried the house systems, it hadn't given away her position. “About locating a person's whereabouts...”

Metal squealed and a hard crash made the corridor vibrate. They stared at the closed doors to the lift.

“Did something just fall into the lift shaft?” she asked.

“It's quite possible that the roof...”

He was interrupted again by a bang against the lift doors. Then another bang—which left an indent that looked like a large claw.

“Good God.” She immediately pointed her weapon at the door.

“I've seen the afterlife and there is no god,” he replied sarcastically. “That thing wouldn't be able to make a dent.”

“How do you know?” she shot back. “You've only seen this in a museum.”

“The reasonable thing would be to get out of here and seal this area off.”

Whatever was on the other side of the lift doors smashed against it again. Metal stretched.

“We can't stand here around all night trying to decide what to do.”

She gave him a look. “You're the one arguing. I've made a decision already.”

“A dumb decision.”

The metal gave way in an ear-splitting squeal and something black and vaguely in the shape of a clawed hand reached out. From what looked like fingers, sharp gray metallic points glinted in the dim light of the corridor.

The dark thing trying to emerge from the lift doors like a bird breaking out of its shell made him freeze as it triggered a cascade of past dreams and possibly past memories.

Cimarron simply aimed and pressed the trigger to her ray gun.

A main pink energy beam ringed with six smaller violet energy beams erupted from the weapon and blasted the claw. What smelled like flesh sizzled and smoked. A shrill ear-piercing inhuman shriek erupted from within the lift shaft which made them reflexively cover their ears. The acrid smell made his nose itch and after a second he shook his head, the remainder of the nightmarish memories hesitantly flickered away. He finally noticed, after the smoke cleared away, that there was a large hole in the lift doors. Beyond the hole was an inky darkness.

“Okay, you've proved your machismo,” Banner managed to ground out. “Let's get out of here.”

A lamenting squeal responded to his comment from the depths of the lower levels.

“I have no machismo.” She tucked her ray gun back out of sight in a back pant pocket covered by her pink sweater. “Just an irritating tendency to do things without thinking. It's probably part of my flaw.”

“And you're saying that I just have to deal with your impulsiveness.” Banner finally made his feet move. From his brief glances at the house schematics, he knew that there were a flight of stairs towards the east end of the house. “I suppose in a way that's fair. You have to deal with my moods.”

“Moods? I didn't know you had any moods.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Absolutely not,” she said with a straight face. “You only have one mood, really.”

“And what mood is that?”

“Grumpy.”

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Chapter 16

Banner managed to drag himself away from the monitor on the kitchen counter toward the old fashioned coffee pot that dripped out liquid caffeinated sustenance. He dragged the back of his hand across his eyes and wondered, parenthetically, if he should take a shower. Or even if the shower even worked at this juncture.

He had been studying the systems the entire night, trying to seal off the lower level remotely. There were barricades put into place on the third level—a holdover from the old days when the storage depots on Triton also stored unstable and experimental mining machinery that could have exploded at any time. But still, he felt uneasy. Whatever that had infiltrated into the lower levels had also managed to penetrate the second level as they had witnessed earlier. Unfortunately, the house had been a storage depot so that the designers hadn't thought of having to seal the off the different floors of the place separately. In order to erect any effective barricade, he would have to go down into the depths of the house himself.

He sipped the coffee he had just poured into a mug and grimaced at the cold, muddy taste. The coffee pot had turned itself hours before when it had run out of water. He did not relish doing any of it himself. If only it could have been a simple plumbing problem. That would have been a brief, minor annoyance, but at least he could have just fixed it and gone back to whatever he had been doing on Triton.

Which had been moping and wallowing in self-pity after getting out of a prison planet. And not out of his own efforts either.

“What's the status on the lower levels?” Cimarron had emerged from a side hallway, this time dressed in black synth leather pants and a black long sleeved shirt. Her hair was loose and wet, an indication that she had just gotten out of the first floor bathroom. After the breach on the second level, they had decided to move their necessary things up to the first level where it was more secure.

“Other than the damage on the lift, the diagnostics shows that everything looks normal. There were elevated carbon dioxide levels in some of the rooms on the lowest

level, but the readings only differed by one percent from the norm, not enough to have the system to flag it as serious.”

“When did the carbon dioxide levels spike?”

“A little bit before the lift accident.”

“A very interesting coincidence.”

“Yes.” He threw the coffee out and opened some drawers, not sure what he was looking for. The fact that she was standing next to the counter, looking impassive rather than panicked, made him uneasy. Did she know something about his great-uncle's house that she was not telling him? She had tried to break in, after all, and he wasn't sure if she was able to find what she was looking for. “You have any idea what that thing was?”

“You asked me a similar question before.”

“And you didn't really answer me.”

“There is this saying,” she said. He was sure she was giving him a non-answer again, “that when you're trying to figure out what is happening, what other explanations that you discard, whatever is left—however improbable—must be the answer.”

“Sure, that narrows it down a lot.”

She sat down on a stool and turned the monitor on the counter so that it faced her. She glanced at the data displayed on the screen. “Hm, all of the environmental factors seem to be within parameters. There's always the possibility, though, that the sensors are on the fritz or are completely not working while the system is feeding us false data.”

“I thought you had already checked the system for bugs.”

“I did. But I'm not infallible.”

“Is there any way to try to test for bugs now?”

“I've already set a continuous period scan of the system. If it discovers anything, that program or set of programs will be effectively quarantined. But I don't think that's the most crucial thing we should put our efforts on. There's the problem of sealing the lower levels.”

“I've been working on that.”

“The entire night,” she added. “You haven't come up with anything, have you?”

“No.” He reached into the last cold drawer and pulled out a can. It was an old

beer of a well known Terran brand. He hated the taste of beer, but it was alcohol. He felt like he needed to get drunk after an all night analysis. He didn't want to think about the problems of his house. He had thought that the house that he had inherited from his great-uncle was supposed to be the end of all of his problems. Apparently the universe hated him. He popped the top and took a swig. It tasted dry and bitter, but it only made him even more determined to finish the drink.

“So there's no solution?”

“Oh, there's a solution.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The hair on his face scraped along the skin of his hand. Shaving, he thought. When had been the last time that he had done that? “But it involves quite a bit of, uh, field work.”

“You mean we actually have to go down to the lower level and barricade it manually.”

“Yeah.” He sighed, and tossed the empty beer can into the recycler. “It totally sucks.”

She finally looked up from the monitor and frowned at him. “You look terrible.”

“Why thank you very much.”

“You should probably get some sleep,” she replied. “I can work on this while you take a few hours.”

“How about you?” he demanded. “You've been up all night, too.”

“Actually, no. You've been pretty engrossed in performing triage on the house. I managed to get some sleep in while you were glued to this thing.”

He was sure that he wasn't that oblivious to his house guest, but he only shot her a dubious look and headed toward the hallway to the upper guest rooms. “I set an alarm on the system in case anything out of the ordinary happens again—in whatever place in the house. I've set the alarm to go off in any part of the house so I should be able to hear it from my room. Otherwise...”

“Got it. I'll come get you.”

He didn't bother to respond. He walked toward the resident rooms, intent on a shower and some unconscious time—even if it meant even more bad dreams.

His room was the second on the left of the hallway. He nearly stumbled in when he crossed the threshold, silently cursing either his low tolerance to beer, which was unlikely since he still had normal mobility even after a few glasses of wine, or his lack of

sleep. He could say one thing about his time on the prison planet—he did have sleep. Enough sleep so that his overseers could keep him working.

A hand suddenly clamped across his mouth, the contact of skin upon skin electrifying his mouth. A breath brushed across his right ear.

“Shh. She's not me.”

“Cimarron?”

“It's a thing out there.”

He didn't dare turn around. “How do I know that the situation is actually reversed, that you are actually an impostor and that my house guest isn't really out there?”

“You have some diagnostics still in your pocket. You still have that old device you filched from the lower levels. Use that on me.”

She suddenly released him from her clutch and he turned around quickly just as he took out a disruptor from his pocket. He pointed it at her. He could see that she had on the same exact clothing as what he had seen her, or what might have been a replicate of her, in the kitchen. Her dark eyes seemed to dart behind him and then focus back on his face.

“Scan me,” she said. “I won't show up on the diagnostics. But whatever that this is that is wearing my face is.”

Still keeping half an eye on her, he slowly took out his diagnostics pad from his other pocket with one hand and pressed its controls with a thumb. The small monitoring screen on the device lit up and the readings scrolled down with results indicating that he was reading thin air. But he knew she wasn't some sort of hologram. He had felt her. Then he slowly edged towards the wall of the room where the main interface for the computer was. Briefly, he turned to access the diagnostics from there. A living signature came from the study, but upon closer analysis, it was obvious that it was the pard-synth. There was another signature from the kitchen, but it was so strange that Banner had to check it again.

Something was out there. And she was right. It wasn't her.

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Chapter 17

“Tell me first,” he said, “why the diagnostics can't pick you up.”

“It was one of my own little alterations to the system that I did the first day I was here,” she told him. The edge of her mouth was the beginnings of a grim smile. “I have my own agenda, as you've probably noticed. I didn't want to be watched all the time. I have a thing for privacy.”

“Right. But if that thing back there isn't you—how long has it been wandering around in this house? How many times have I encountered it and had not known it was you?”

“Probably since last night,” she speculated. “I did distinctly remember meeting you down on the second level when the lift broke down. However, I noticed that something was not quite right when I was going to get a shower about twenty minutes ago. At first, I thought it was a lack of sleep.”

“Ah, so I was right—I wasn't that oblivious. You did stay up the entire night with me analyzing the systems.”

“Even as a guest, I couldn't let my host, no matter how reluctant, do all the work. At any rate, I noticed something was going on when I did my routine check in my room when I decided to refresh myself with a shower. Aside from all the accountable readings, there was something else that the sensors detected but really stumped me.”

“It's some sort of living signature, sure,” said Banner. “And it's really similar to that organic residue that I had detected down in the lower level before. It's also similar to the secretions of some of Earth's lower organisms, but I can't really figure out what it is. We never went back down to the second level to take the samples left by whatever it was in that lift shaft.”

“Right. But whatever it is, it can mimic other people quite well. While you were out there conversing with that thing, I was doing a more in depth scan of the systems. Apparently during the time when we were busy analyzing the lower levels, doing repairs, and shoring up our defenses, someone had managed to get in and hack my own program that I had added to the system.”

“Wow. That's fast and aggressive.”

“Yes. Unfortunately, whoever had hacked in had downloaded my bio signature,

or at least my physical features, which I had in the system to ignore. I think that whoever had my bio signature used it to make the copy. How the copy was made—I don't know. I don't know enough biology to say—although my mother could tell you.”

“A changeling. I thought that was only theoretical—in stories. Do you think that thing could copy anything else? What would be its natural form?”

“I would speculate that what little we saw down on the second level might have been its natural form. If that was it. I don't know if could change its current form very easily. You could very well be imitated. I'm sure the system also has your bio signature as well.”

“Great. Now there's now way to tell each other if we're real enough. How will we be able to neutralize it?”

“I admit I don't know that either.” She began pacing the room, the first time that he had seen her agitated. “We need to contact an expert.”

“We need to contact help,” he replied. “We should have done that hours ago. Except we didn't. Maybe we weren't thinking right after the lift accident. I noticed a smell...”

“There's no use for speculation,” she said. “We need answers now. I think that we need to contact a biologist of some sort. Or even a doctor. We could contact a doctor here in town.”

“No.” The gradually increasing headache behind his eyes made him certain of that. “I don't think we can trust anyone in Nowhere City. Or on the entirety of Triton for that matter.”

She suddenly stopped in her pacing and sighed. “My mother then.”

“What's wrong? I've met Dr. Tong back at that party and I thought she was quite approachable.”

“But she might not think that you're approachable.”

“Why?”

“For one thing, the inhabitants of this moon aren't the only ones who know that you're an ex-convict.”

“If you're so worried about introducing me to your mother, than don't introduce me at all.”

“That's kind of hard seeing that I'm living in your house.”

He fought a yawn. “Well, tell you what, I'm going to take a shower. You can contact your mother in the mean time and just tell her that I'm currently indisposed.”

“She might think something particularly bad has happened if she doesn't see you.”

“Like what?”

Cimarron nodded toward the diagnostics panel in the room. “She might think that whatever is out there has you. Or that I might be in bigger trouble than I have let on—such as the fact that the changeling might have your face and I can't tell you apart. But fortunately, for the moment, that thing only has my superficial features down. The differences in vital signs are still obvious.”

“Fine. Then call your mother when I come back out.”

Dr. Jennifer Tong was a youthful-looking woman in her fifties with faint laugh lines at the corners of her eyes. Otherwise, her fey like features were petite even with her dark, straight hair pulled back into a bun. But still, even though Jennifer Tong's face was delicate compared to her daughter's more sharp features, there was a strong resemblance between the two women, especially with their dark eyes. And despite after a fresh shower, and a belated shave, the well-known geneticist was staring down at him—even from the smaller monitor in the guest room—with what looked like disapproval.

“Mr. Wice. I see you've been released from your...obligations.”

“Dr. Tong.”

Her eyes lingered on him for a moment more, as if trying to divine what went on in his mind when she switched her attention back to her daughter. “Cimarron. I thought you were on Luna. With those Tibetan nuns. This has been unexpected.”

“My stint with the nuns finished a few days ago. I heard the news about Jorge, so I came here so see what was going on.”

“And you decided to stay with Mr. Wice?”

“He was kind enough to offer accommodations. Especially since the quant pads have broken down.”

“Broken down?” Dr. Tong's eyes narrowed slightly. “Couldn't you just take a shuttle back?”

“None of the shuttles are heading into the interior of the solar system and the

quant pads won't be repaired until a few weeks from now when the parts arrive for the local transport station.”

“But there must be shuttles heading out. You know you're always welcome back home.”

“I've already told you, mother,” she replied flatly. “I want to find my own way.”

There was a subtle tightening of Dr. Tong's lips, but she did not decide to answer her daughter's comment. Instead, she turned back to Banner. “I hope you're treating Cimarron well. But I get the impression that this isn't just some simple social call.”

“No,” Banner replied. “We're hoping that we could use your expertise.”

She arched her eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Something has infiltrated Mr. Wice's home,” said Cimarron. “Some sort of creature. We think it has the ability to change its appearance although it still retains its own unique bio signature.”

“Is it sentient?” Dr. Tong immediately asked.

“Possibly.”

“Do you have its bio signature?”

“Transmitting now.”

Her mother briefly focused her gaze to another monitor off screen to check the received data. They could see her lips move silently. Then she looked back up at them with a thoughtful expression. “This is really interesting. I can see at first glance that this thing is synthetic. I guess any trained geneticist can see this immediately. But there are possibly other anomalies that might reveal more information if I study this further. You will continue monitoring this life form?”

“Of course, mother.”

Dr. Tong nodded. “I look forward to your daily reports. Cimarron. Mr. Wice.”

When the transmission ended, Cimarron let out a breath. “Well, that went over better than I thought it would. She didn't seem particularly angry. And it seems like we've given her an interesting puzzle to work on.”

“I don't want to offend you,” said Banner, “but she seemed rather distant. For me, it's understandable. Any normal person would be wary about riff-raff from Tartaros. But she didn't seem particularly warm towards you.”

“It's been over, what, ten years since you've last seen my mother? I don't think

she's particularly changed, but I have. And she has expressed her disapproval of my choice to split from my previous direction in life. I think she's still the in the process of trying to accept my current choices. That was quite warm for her—compared to the time when I had finally decided to find myself. I think finding out that I'm here in Jorge's house had a bit of a thawing effect on her. And although you did do a stint on Tartaros, I think the fact that you are Jorge's great-nephew and that he still had the faith to will his house to you might mitigate any reservations she might have about you.”

“If you say so,” he replied dubiously.

“Well at least she was polite to you, mostly.”

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Chapter 18

The beeping was like a persistent water drop drilling into the back of his forehead. He wanted to screw his eyes shut and pull the covers over his head, but some habit—perhaps a holdover from his days on the prison planet, forced him to look up at the ceiling.

Because they were unsure how to get rid of the creature sitting out in the kitchen—except by the ray gun that Cimarron possessed and Banner's own disruptor—they were still stuck in the guest room. He had once suggested using the weapons but she had immediately nixed citing that if she was going to shoot at a sentient being, she definitely wasn't going to shoot at one that looked exactly like herself. To each her own, Banner had thought to himself somewhat amused. If the thing had his face, he wouldn't have any qualms about shooting it. Hell, there were points in his life where shooting himself with a disruptor would have been a whole lot better than just going on.

But instead of trying to argue what to do or what not to do, Banner had decided to crash on the couch and get some shut eye. Even by objective standards, lack of sleep lowered brain functioning and lowered the clearheadedness that would be required for decision making. He'd done a lot of stupid things in his life. He didn't want to add to that list. But even deciding where to sleep was almost an argument. Cimarron had offered to take the couch and let him take the bed since she was smaller, but some latent

chivalrous streak had made him void that idea.

“Do you drink tea?”

He hated tea. He mumbled something, but it probably sounded incoherent to anyone listening. He shoved the blanket down even though he didn't remember that he had pulled one over himself. In a repetitive gesture, he rubbed a palm over his eyes and then his hair. He made his way to a table in the living room and barely noticed with a hand came to the edge of his vision, bearing a mug of some hot liquid. Uncaring, he took the mug up and took a large swallow.

“It's tea!”

“Of course it's tea.” Cimarron took the seat across from him. She was wearing a robe over pajamas the color of soft teal. But despite the rather cozy look, her hair was tied back in a pony tail and her eyes were hard and awake. “The changeling is gone.”

“We've gotten to the point of calling it that, have we? Not just some thing?”

“Well, since you're sentient, or presumably so, you wouldn't want to be called a thing yourself, would you?”

“You've got far too much ethics. It must have been those nuns.” He set the mug down on the table and contemplated it with disgust. Tea, to him, tasted like water and detergent. But the lure of caffeine was strong indeed.

“Actually, my parents instilled a sense of ethics into me way before I got involved with the nuns. So I wouldn't say that religion has anything to do with what I believe.” She took a sip from her own mug. “I didn't go to a Tibetan nunnery to be converted to any religion. I had a different purpose. Which the nuns, fortunately, respected.”

“Huh.”

“Besides, I can be as ruthless as anyone.” She gave him a cold, close-lipped smile. Her merciless facade both made him shiver in dread and something else that he was hesitant to name. “I followed the progress of the changeling. It had stayed in the kitchen looking through the monitor. Perhaps it was reading the information that you had put on it. But it did nothing to access any of the other files. Whatever the case, we'll have to assume that everything that we had worked on before is compromised.”

“You were awake the entire time?” he asked, surprised. “I thought you said that you were going to catch some sleep as well after we had locked the door with only access to our bio signatures.”

“I did. But I also had the systems monitor the movements of the changeling. It stayed in the kitchen for a while—perhaps thinking that you were going to be asleep for a couple of hours. And then approximately four hours later, it started to move. It headed here.”

Despite his distaste for the beverage, he drank some more of it, hoping that it would instill some fortification into his sleepy system. “While we were both asleep? Did it try to get in?”

“Yes. I don't think it had any trouble with any of the other doors since none of them were keyed into any specific person. The only thing that probably saved us was our foresight in getting this particular door keyed. So this room is safe for now.”

“What about the pard-synth?”

“It didn't go into the study where Minestrone was staying. So the large cat is safe enough. But that doesn't mean that it hasn't gotten the bio signature of him as well. We're going to have to be careful. But I think the place—or at least the first level—is clear at the moment. After unsuccessfully trying to get in, it went back to the lower levels. It changed form—I think one of the video feeds was able to catch it in the act—before crawling down the lift tunnel. And after the lower level, it just disappeared. Which I don't understand. There aren't even any traces of quanting according to the readings.”

“There are lower access tunnels under the lower level labs, remember?” said Banner. “I think this is the opportunity for us to check those tunnels and see if there is a sign of recent quanting. If that place is where the creature is quanting into the house, then all we need to do is to seal those tunnels.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“Well, it could be if that's the answer to our problems.” He accessed the monitor on that table and manipulated some of the controls. “It looks like we do have video feeds of the changeling's progression. Here's a segment when it entered the lift shaft on level two.”

The monitor itself scrolled passed some data and opened a window which showed a recorded feed of the darkened corridor on level two. A figure which looked like Cimarron walked down the hallway. But with each step, its coherence was slowly loosing stability until once it reached the trashed opening of the lift doors, it was

nothing but a dark humanoid mass. It reached a hand out to grasp the edges of the damaged door, giving a clear view of its clawed hands—not as large as the one they had witnessed tearing apart the door, but similar in shape—and then hurtled itself downward, stretching its body like a bungee cord. Only fifteen seconds later did the creature's feet finally leave the floor of the second level corridor.

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Chapter 19

“It's a shame that I didn't kill it in the first go around,” Cimarron said as they headed down to the lower level via the emergency stairs. “It was obvious that I injured it initially, but it appeared to be completely whole when it encountered you. Perhaps it healed quite quickly.”

“There's another quite obvious conclusion we could make from recent events,” Banner replied. He had originally set the system to light the place dimly in order to conserve energy—after all, what did a bachelor like him need a huge house for—but had left it at this setting even due to the circumstances. Due to her accuracy which she demonstrated when she had encountered the creature, they had decided that she would handle the weapons. He would scan the area using his diagnostic instruments to make sure that the creature wasn't in their vicinity in the first place. “It could have been two creatures. Sure, the changeling's apparent natural form looked like what we had seen first, but do we really know that it was the same being? The diagnostics so far do not indicate that it's that sophisticated on something so different.”

“Alien?”

“No, I'm not so sure it's an alien. Its chemistry is still very similar to ours, in a manner of speaking. It appears to be carbon-based. And so far, no one has really found aliens of that sort of mass sophistication.”

“But from Jorge's expeditions, we do know that there is alien life out there—abet microbial ones. So who's to say that there aren't any aliens that are our size as well?”

“It seems somewhat improbable to me. I mean, this system is already protected by a bunch of satellites. Anything that would have tried to get in would be detected

almost immediately. Of course, an alien might have enough technological sophistication to get through our systems. Hackers of our own species routinely get through them, at any rate.”

“That's true.” She kept her gaze focused ahead in the darkened corridors of the house. It looked like anything could have lurked around the corner, waiting to surprise them, but Banner felt confident enough in the sensors to feel that they were simply being cautious. Cimarron turned briefly to look at him. “In our particular case, it would argue for sophistication. If indeed it was an alien, it was able to mimic my features and to communicate well enough with you that you did not suspect that it was not me.”

“Yes. But the other evidence—the evidence that argues for a terrestrial origin—indicates that it was man made. Your mother even told at first glance that she thought the creature was synthetic. I think it is most likely that it is someone's genetic experiment that has been put to use. If it had been wholly destructive—as we had first seen—then it would have tried to kill me the first chance it got. Except it didn't. Instead, it conversed to me.”

“It might have been tasked to find information rather than to kill us. Perhaps the information was more important. But whoever had tasked the changeling to take out the information was doing it in a rather haphazard way. It would have been more subtle and easier to simply employ a hacker to gain the information from this computer's systems. Even if someone wanted to gain information from Jorge instead of us, the hacker route would be the way to go. All of this points to either incompetence or something else entirely. And I'm not ready to accept the simpler explanation that this is just the result of incompetence.”

Banner visually scanned the readout of one of his other devices. “I agree with you there. There must be something else that they are after. It does seem that someone might be in control of using these creatures into breaking into this house. I was thinking of another possibility—that these genetic experiments are being tested on us. But the subtly, as you've said, is not there. We could blab about the existence of these things to the rest of the universe and it wouldn't be a secret any more.”

“I thought we already agreed that we couldn't trust anyone on this moon with this information so far. I'm sure the authorities would not believe us—or rather you since you have a history with the law—and would dismiss this case out of hand.”

“I remember. But we have told someone on the outside. Dr. Tong.”

She gave him a cool smile. “My mother isn't the type of person to blab, as you put it. In fact, that would be the last thing she would think about in this case. With the feeds that we are sending her, she's going to keep the data analysis in house. Her first priority would be new discoveries. If this is a potential for one, she wouldn't want to sully the initial research with speculations from the outside media.”

“That's another thing about his mother,” he said, as a thought occurred to him. “I found it rather odd that she immediately jumped to the conclusion that this creature was sentient. Wasn't that her first question? If I were a biologist, that wouldn't be the first question I would be asking. I'd be asking what it looked like. She didn't even do that.”

Cimarron was a silent for a moment as they took another flight of stairs to the third level. There was a slightly more oppressive atmosphere in this level than the one above. Perhaps the atmospheric control levels were somehow altered. Banner fiddled with the controls on one of his devices and frowned over the slightly different atmospheric control levels. Apparently they had been changed—by some outside agent that had managed to hack into the system right before Cimarron was able to patch up any of the holes.

“I don't know,” Cimarron said finally. “You and I are not biologists. I'm not sure if what you just said really could be identified as the first kind of question a trained biologist would answer. But I also admit that you are right. The question about sentience was somewhat out of left field. I wonder if my mother already had an inkling about what is happening on Triton—especially from her connection with Jorge. I wonder if that changeling was really maybe one of Jorge's secret.”

“If that's the case, it's a pretty big secret,” Banner replied. “And it seems like something completely out of her expertise. Who who knows what Jorge knew. He never really told me about his own background aside the microbiological aspects of it.”

They both pondered the inexplicableness of the older generation's secrets and their affects on others as they continued down into the depths of the house. The rest of the house did not appear to have altered—at least in that respect, what the sensors told them on the first floor was correct. Perhaps all the damage did only confine itself to the lift.

On the lower level, they immediately headed to the lab that had contained the mining robots. The atmosphere in this particular section of the house still had elevated carbon dioxide levels and a trace of sulfuric gas lingering in the air still. The sensors in this area, otherwise, had occurred no change except for the passage of the changeling as a slick black blur. They had also thought to look at the visual recordings during the hour before the lift accident and had seen another, similar black blur recording. Whatever the case, it appeared that the origin of the changeling came from this room even though there were no obvious entrances and exits from the outside world.

Otherwise, the room itself was little touched. The creature had not been interested in anything in the lab and had left its centuries old controls and the robots alone. That left the access tunnels. This time, they proceeded down the hidden stairs in the final storage room, with Cimarron leading the way with her somewhat effective ray gun. For some reason, this sort of arrangement did not sit well with Banner. He couldn't exactly articulate the reasons why he felt this way—since it felt somewhat irrational—but he was uneasy with letting his house guest take the lead. Was it because he wasn't a good host? He never bothered much with etiquette before. After some of his experiences, he thought it unnecessary. Was it some other reason? Well, whatever reason it was, the thought of some monster taking a swipe at her made him feel slightly queasy.

“Computer, lights.”

Illumination flooded the cavern. It appeared as he had first visited it although an acrid scent still hung in the air. But this was the first time that Cimarron had been here—or at least he assumed so since there was quite some time that he had not accounted for her presence. She had stopped at the entrance of the cavern and had made a visual glance around.

“It looks clear,” she told him.

“The instruments concur,” he said. “Here, I'll show you where I first detected the signature that someone or something had quanted in and out of here.” He went past her to the spot near the back of the cavern where the clear stream of water ran. He easily found the greasy organic smudge that he had originally discovered. This time, the smudge was larger—but from recent events, this did not surprise him.

Cimarron glanced past his shoulder to look at the spot and then to the readings

on the diagnostics that he held out for her inspection. She made a noise in the back of her throat and nodded. "I see."

"I wonder if we need to talk to a transport specialist. It's quite possible that we're misinterpreting these readings," said Banner. "It's a small possibility considering what we know about the creature's movements, but who knows what may be happening? All of this is irregular."

"I don't know any transport specialists," she said. "I went to school with computer engineers. I never really met any physicists, other than in contexts negotiated by my parents."

"Well, I do. I went to an engineering school that had a rather large range of majors considering the type of institution it was. I do have some transport specialists in mind. Of course, if any of them would deign to talk with me now, that would be another problem."

"They might."

He finally looked up from his instruments to stare at her in surprise. "Why would you say that? You already told me that I looked like a bear. Apparently you think I don't look particularly civilized."

Her expression was amused. "I'm beginning to rethink my assessment. Perhaps you had a more rugged quality than a bear. And with all of that stubble that began to look like a beard shaved off, you seem almost polished. I've seen some holovids of your father on the news before. Despite is unpopularity with the central government, a lot of civilians thought him sort of dashing. You look a lot like him."

"Hell. That's the first time anyone thought my parentage had any sort of a positive affect on me. I'm almost shocked by that compliment."

"Your looks say nothing about your behavior," she warned him. "And frankly, it's somewhat anti-social and abmoinable."

"Sure, Ms. Tong-Radcliff. I'll be on my best behavior," he said, mimicking an obedient school boy. "Look, we'll either get the opinion or not. It doesn't matter at the moment, because even if it's true, there's no way we can prevent anyone from quanting into here. The best policy is to seal this place up. I have an idea about how to use those mining robots up there that will help this tremendously."

"I think I know where you're going with this," she said. "So we'll seal this place

up. But that doesn't mean that there aren't other access tunnels running underneath any of the other lab rooms. We might want to seal off each individual room as well and then seal off the lower level. We don't want to make it too easy for the changeling to get through. Besides, this cavern itself looks like it's also leading off to somewhere else too.”

“You want to explore?”

“Wanting isn't the same as needing, is it? No. I think our time is best served if we work on barricading off this section instead. Once we get the results back from my mother about the changeling and after we obtain advice from a transportation expert somewhere, then we could probably make a more informed decision.”

“Right. So...” He paused as the device in his hand began to go off loudly with alarms that he had programmed into it. “Shit. Something is coming through. Our quanting theory was right.”

Something shimmered in the place of that greasy spot. Something dark and misshapen—nothing natural.

Cimarron didn't even wait for a decision. She raised her gun hand and blasted the thing that was trying to quant into the cavern.

Weird unnatural screams reverberated along the stone ceiling and walls. And whatever that had been trying to quant into the lower access tunnels burst into a shower of shimmering, effervescent dark fragments which dissipated in the air a moment later. It took another moment for Banner to loosen his grip on his instruments. Cimarron only reluctantly lowered her gun arm.

“I think you killed it,” he finally said. “It looked like it just blew up in transport.”

She just shook her head. “There's just the probability that I did so. If someone has developed the technology to quant to places without the use of quant pads, if someone had overcome that technological barrier—it's also not so far fetched that someone had cracked the secret of buffer patterning and had saved the bio signature of that thing so they could re-transport it back to its place of origin.”

“If that's the case, then what did we just see exploding before our eyes?”

“A quantum twin, perhaps. I seem to recall that in some of my basic physics classes. But the theory might have been disproved for all I know. A little talk with the transportation specialist might solve that mystery for us.”

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Chapter 20

The pard-synth had found its own way to the hydroponics garden and was sitting curled around a potted lemon tree. Currently, it was playing with the small hovering harvesting robots who were trying to do their jobs. With no chance to retaliate, the little robots were forced to buzz around the constantly batting paws and waving tail. Occasionally, the pard-synth would hit one and the struck harvesting robot would wheel around the air in disorientation before finally righting itself.

Banner had discovered the cat in the garden when he had gone in during the “morning” to check if any damage had been dealt to it. Once he had ascertained that the garden had been untouched, he went over to some of the fruit trees to harvest some apples and peaches. The pard-synth had glanced at him for a moment, but had turned his attention back to his newest electronic play toys. Amused, he had watched the antics of the large cat for a moment before exiting the hydroponics garden and heading back up to the kitchen to slice up his harvest for a breakfast fruit salad.

The previous day, after possibly destroying whatever creature was trying to get into the lower levels of the house, he and Cimarron had decided to seal off the lower levels before contacting anyone—expert or no—for their opinions on what might have been happening. It was fortunate for them that quite a few places on the lower level, despite not being renovated since before Jorge had bought the property, had emergency manual barricade doors that they could close themselves. Unfortunately, these would not have resisted a significant physical force or even any sufficiently powerful weapons with blasting capability, but they were of more durable material than they could have resisted what the lift doors on level two had endured, let alone minor fires.

They had also decided to activate the mining robots, the Zee and the smaller version, the Zim. They had directed these machines to remove some of the excess materials from some of the storage bunkers on the lower level and to place it as barricade material against the crucial ports to the underground access tunnels. Besides

the first one that Banner had initially discovered, there were three other access tunnels in the whole underground facility that they had to plug up. Their last task was to seal off the main entrance to the lower level, both at the lift point and the stairs. They set Zee and Zim just outside the barricade to the main entrance to the lower level at the point of the stairs. Repair robots that had been originally working on the damaged lift were reprogrammed to guard the lift entrance. But since their capabilities involved diagnostics and not offense, they were employed merely as an early warning system for anything unusual that might try to get through the barriers.

They had left the sensors on the lower level activated so that they could be notified at any time if there was a breach. Cimarron had also mentioned to him that she had made some other type of modification to the diagnostics systems, but he did not ask for details as he had assumed it probably involved patching up the lower systems so that they would be less vulnerable to hackers.

By the time that they had finished with all the necessary work—which had also involved quite a bit of physical work that the Zee and Zim couldn't do—Banner had been exhausted and had fallen asleep on the couch in the guest room without another word to his house guest.

Banner arrived back at the kitchen, thinking that this particular room had become the focal point of pretty much every part of his life that had wanted some place to relax. Food was a neutral and unassuming topic and as he had considered the events of the past few days, if food was the only topic he knew about for the rest of his days, he was fine with that.

Cimarron was dressed in beige slacks and a black sweater. Her hair was pulled up again in a pony tail and she was mixing a bowl of pancake batter. Her back was turned toward him as she worked in the kitchen. He saw her setting the bowl aside for the moment as she prepared a griddle and then spooned some of the batter onto the sizzling iron. After a moment, with a twist of the wrist, she made the pancake flip with a spatula and waited again.

He remembered the chocolate cake that she had made for him earlier and wondered how much was practice and how much was raw talent. He finally walked to the kitchen counter top next to her and began pulling out the equipment to make a fruit salad. “While you were still trying to find yourself, did you ever consider becoming a

chef?”

She flipped another pancake and then put it on an increasing pile on a nearby plate before considering his question. “Actually, no. It never crossed my mind. Cooking for me is just like any other household chore, I suppose. While I was at the Tibetan nunnery, some of the nuns actually taught me how to make some types of food. The preparation was easy for me—it's most just mixing things together after all—and the nuns never really made any remark about how good or bad I was doing it. I'm just glad I'm not burning these things now.”

“No, you're doing great,” he told her gruffly, feeling unused to giving others compliments, even though he thought she probably deserved far more praise than he was comfortable with. “If that was your first time at making a chocolate cake, you aced it. You seem to have a natural knack for this kind of thing.”

“I'll keep that in mind. Maybe I'll open up a restaurant as a backup plan.”

“What's your plan now?”

“Figure out what's happening here, for one. And then getting off this moon as soon as possible.”

“You hate this place so much?”

“Hm.” She slanted him a glance before turning back to her cooking. “What was it that you said on the first day that we met? Ah, there are some charms to this city. I'm beginning to see that there are some charms in Nowhere City, even if it is hard to spot at first.”

He began cutting up the apples that he had collected, feeling unsure of her meaning. He didn't feel like asking her to clarify. He'd just ignore the comment and as a result avoid any bumbling that he might do by providing false interpretations to her thoughts.

Taran Shimizu was the first transport specialist that Banner had decided to contact. He had been one of his friends during his university days and had remained his friend even through the volatile scandal that had rocked the company that he had been employed at before he had been charged, tried, and arrested. Shimizu was a thin, pale man with intense eyes. He had been a genius in his field, but only because he had chosen to go into quanting and transport. Otherwise, he would have been some hot shot

scientist in some other field. Like physics. And would have probably gone on to earn some sort of prize.

But he had a smile when the transmission finally got through to Makemake. “Wice! Long time, no see! What's up, man? Last I heard, they had put you away for life. I was rooting for you. Trying to make them see sense.”

“Hey, Shimizu. Really, thanks for your support. And maybe your efforts weren't wasted. When I got out, they didn't tell me much, but I did hear that someone—something--had lobbied for my release by bringing the real perpetrators to justice. And because I was innocent of the crime, I guess they had to release me.”

“Yeah. Justice and all that. Geez. I can't imagine what you've gone through. You're a stronger man than me, Wice. I've heard stories about Tartaros.”

“Me too. And for all I know, they could be all true. It seems like a blur to me.” He chuckled to himself self-deprecatingly. “I can hardly remember some parts, you know?”

“They did a brain wipe?” On the transmission screen, Shimizu had an incredulous expression. “Isn't that kind of illegal?”

Banner shrugged. “I don't know. But I do get glimpses of things that might have been. Let's just say that my sleep isn't too pleasant.”

“Too bad.”

“So how are you? I see you're still on Makemake. You and Heather still doing okay?”

“We're doing great!” Shimizu beamed. “She's expecting. The little Shimizu will be here in, oh, approximately three Terran months.”

“I thought you had sworn off the twentieth-century proverb of 'wife, two point five kids, a dog, and a house with a white picket fence'.”

His friend laughed. “Oh, I don't know about the point five kid or the white picket fence, but apparently, it is getting quite close to that reality, isn't it? We're only on Makemake for about six more months. The company has decided to transfer me to a more executive position on Alpha Centauri's major transport hub. That will be really busy, but probably very rewarding too. And who knows about the white picket fence. Heather might get it into her head that it's the latest fashion in household décor.”

“I can imagine.”

“So how are you going?” Shimizu asked. “I see you've inherited your Great Uncle Jorge's house on Triton.”

“The usual. Getting myself back together. But I probably will never be to the point where you are, Shimizu. I'm too damaged.”

Shimizu's eyes narrowed at his remark. “Oh, I don't know. What was it your father said? A motto of his? That a Wice always bounces back? I know after your experiences, you won't ever be the same, but that doesn't mean that you'll never get back to the point of feeling normal again, you know?”

“Whatever you say. You're the genius,” Banner replied, feeling uncomfortable. His friend was more right than he knew. About the not being the same again part, at any rate. “Look. I'm sure you're sort of wondering why I'm calling. I won't lie. I would have probably called you much later when I would be less of a mess. But this is sort of important.”

His friend nodded. “Of course. You know I'm always there for you. After that time in New Caledonia...”

Banner reflexively groaned. “Don't remind me. That was nothing, Shimizu. Anyone could have done that.”

“Not anyone, Wice. I still need to repay you. And don't tell me that the stuff I did at your trial counts. That was just stupid cheerleading.”

“Okay, so here's the deal. We have some readings from part of the house. Your expert opinion would be appreciated.”

“We? House? Who is this we and why aren't you asking a building inspector instead? Hell, you're the mechanical engineer.”

“We means me. And a house guest. And I'm asking your opinion as a transport specialist.”

Shimizu chuckled. “All right, whatever you say about me being a specialist. Just send me the readings and I'll try to get back to you in a few days. As for the house guest, who is she?”

“What do you mean, who is she? It could be a man.”

“Oh, I don't think so.” His friend gave him a knowing look. “You wouldn't be so evasive if it was. So really, who is she?”

Banner felt himself frowning. Shimizu was happily married. And a friend. He

shouldn't feel threatened. But he did. “My house guest is Cimarron Tong-Radcliff.”

His friend whistled, impressed. “You don't do things by half measures, do you? Then again, why should I be surprised? You're the son of a space pirate who kidnapped a wealthy heiress just for kicks. And then decided to marry her. Ms. Tong-Radcliff has been rumored to be aggressively recruited by quite a few university computer science programs let alone the technology companies in the business sector. And her parents are pretty high up on the academic and political ladders too. You have aspirations?”

“I'm not getting married,” Banner barked, feeling suddenly panicked. “They know my great uncle, that's all. And I have no aspirations. Nada. Zilch. I couldn't, especially with my background.”

“Well, you could always become a space pirate like your old man,” Shimizu grinned, enjoying his friend's discomfort. “What was it that those old sea dogs in seventeenth or eighteenth century Earth say? Wine, women, and song? Hell, you've managed to inherit part of a winery empire from your great uncle. You've got a hot babe living under your roof. All you need now is probably some karaoke tapes. I have some that I can loan you.”

Banner glared at him through the monitor. “Shimizu, I've tolerated a lot of your antics. We've played pranks on professors and dressed in drag just for the hell of it. But I draw a line when it comes to karaoke. Keep your damn tapes away from me and send me the results of your analysis once you're done.”

Shimizu laughed. “Oh, you've got it bad,” he said enigmatically. “I don't really think your problem is about recovering about your 'ordeal' at all. Feeling inadequate is for wusses. Give your house guest a big hello from me and Heather. We met at some fund raiser three months ago. I'll get the analysis to you, no worries.”

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Chapter 21

Adjacent to his great-uncle's study was a library. But Banner only knew it existed because his great-uncle had showed him the room on a previous visit—when he had still been a teenager. The entrance to the library itself was concealed in the study. At first

glance, there were no doors into or out of the study except the obvious one leading to the main hallway of the house. Even upon close inspection, the study did not appear to have any other doors. The walls were entirely smooth and the furniture seemed self contained.

But this was only true if one looked around and not under. The carpeting was a uniform beige-gray, the fibers long enough to conceal any break. The break in the carpeting was not on the open floor either. The seam coincided with the along the wall behind the desk.

Banner only had to take a few steps behind the desk and crouched down to examine the seam. There was no dust to indicate that it had or had not been disturbed recently since the cleaning robots regularly made their rounds wiping down any surfaces within reach. With one hand he took hold of the edge and peeled the carpeting back revealing a hard dull metallic floor with a visible crack—a door leading down to a room on the second level. With his fingertips, he pried open the door which gave way with little sound. It was darkness down there, but he was not disturbed. He reached down, feeling the ledge and turned on a switch. A ladder led down a tunnel.

He climbed down and emerged into a cavernous room filled with shelves of ancient documents printed on a type of media that was now obsolete—paper. This was his great-uncle's collection of books. Or part of it, at any rate. The majority of Great Uncle Jorge's collection resided in his main house that had been reverted into the possession of the “legitimate” Helados. But these books weren't just merely a general subset of the main collection. These books were specifically historical—about the development of microbiology through the twenty-third century. Then, in one corner, was a work station of ancient import which could read old data disks which contained information up until fifty years before the present. The rest of the information until the present, Banner had supposed, could be easily accessed by the main house computers.

But this wasn't just ordinary data. This was occult and obscure stuff—a lot of which as his great uncle had told him, was mostly disproved quite a while ago.

While all of this was very interesting and the collection of books in themselves was quite valuable despite their defunct knowledge, that wasn't the thing that Banner had been interested in. No, there was something else about the library that would have been of interest to him—or anyone else who wanted to find out more than a superficial

knowledge of Jorge Helado's collecting habits. Because Jorge Helado had hidden something in this library.

Banner moved through the stacks with purpose, ignoring the musty and yellowing tomes that would have fetched millions of credits on the open market, possibly even more on the black market. It didn't even occur to him that the existence of the library meant that his great uncle made him a very rich man. No, he made his way to the back of the library, to the corner opposite to where the work station was located. This corner appeared very unremarkable. There was a catercorner of bookshelves dominated by an entire set of bound journals with blue vinyl covers. Deliberately, Banner pulled out the volume labeled “42” on the third shelf. The book itself did not come out all the way, but in response to its movement, a grinding sound was heard elsewhere in the library, not far from where he was standing.

The bookshelves were made of a hard, varnished wood—the origin of which Banner had no idea of. But the shelves and stands were thick. Thick enough that someone could have carved some sort of secret compartment into them. This was what Banner found two shelves over, next to a set of reference books from the twenty-first century. A small door in the shelving had swung open, revealing a narrow cubbyhole, large enough for a hand. Banner reached in and closed his fingers around a small object.

Something was odd about it.

He took his hand out and examined the object. The last time he had observed it was the day that his great uncle had thrown a celebration part for him for nabbing his first job. Jorge had taken him down into the library and had shown him how to open the cubbyhole and had shown him what was stored inside it.

“This is a data chip of great import, my boy,” his great uncle had told him. “It contains much of what I know. There are others I have, scattered elsewhere in this room and elsewhere in this house. And elsewhere. Just to be safe, you know. But only a few will know how to access the data.”

“What's so important about the data?” he had asked. “Why are you keeping it hidden and why are you telling me this? I'm not anyone important.”

His great uncle had then given him a glare as if he had shouted something monumentally stupid. “Banner, there might be a time when you will have to examine

this data. You will know what it is when you see it.”

But regardless of whether or not he was going to see it and regardless of whatever the data was about, he became very sure of something the longer he held the data chip in his hand.

Something had disturbed it fairly recently. In the past couple of days, in fact.

How he was able to know this, he was not quite sure although he was starting to get some hunches after his discussion with Cimarron about what really happened during that party back when he was still a young man. Whatever that his Uncle Jorge had given him to irrevocably alter him was the same thing that gave him these insights.

Slowly, he turned over in his mind of the possibilities for the data chip's disturbance. The only person he knew who also knew about the location of the library was his great uncle. But that didn't mean there were others. And the only person who had been near the house in the past couple of days who had even a remote acquaintance to his great uncle was Cimarron—who seemed to have a close relationship to him before he died. Which meant that he had to question her.

He was not particularly perturbed by that thought. She would either tell him the truth or lie. But one way or the other, he would try to get the true purpose of her visit to this remote tourist city out into the open. For he had a strong suspicion that it had almost nothing to do with the fact that she was trying to get over her grief over Jorge's death by visiting his former home.

He sighed and looked up. There were tiles on top of the library ceiling—laid out in colorful patterns like a mosaic. This was not just unique to this particular room. There were other rooms in the house that had similar layouts. Off the top of his head, he recalled a large guest bathroom located on the second level also was tiled (although the tiles had extended to the walls and floor as well). Another tiled room was on the third level in a little used recreation room. And still another room was a storage room that had been converted into a formal dining parlor on the first level. He had not bothered to go into any of those rooms once he had arrived—he had seen no reason to—but that something in the back of his mind was nagging him into paying attention.

Banner tucked the data chip into his pocket and manually slid the cubbyhole door closed with two fingers. At any rate, whoever wanted to access the data chip again would have a surprise when they looked at that opening again. And if they had deduced

that he had the chip, they would have to get through him first to get it. He sauntered back to the library's entrance and put one foot on the ladder. He looked back. And thought he sensed something change in the air.

“Computer. Atmospheric status of the library.”

“Atmospheric levels are within acceptable parameters,” a tinny voice responded.

“What about the study?”

“Carbon dioxide levels have increased by point oh two percent.”

“Shit.”

Something was up there. And he had not bothered at all to close the library door behind him when he had climbed down. But fortunately, there was another exit. He ran toward the back corner of the library where the old work station sat. On the control panel, there was an unobtrusive button that was labeled “shift”. Banner pressed it and the entire work station swung wide revealing a narrow access tunnel. He crawled into the darkness and pulled the work station door closed behind him. Before it completely closed, he saw the light in the library wink out.

Fortunately, he wasn't in completely darkness. Emergency lights had turned on once the area had sensed his presence. He crawled further into the access tunnel until his saw a number printed on the side of the tunnel wall. He paused momentarily to catch his breath and to take a communications device out of his pocket. He could have used the house computer to send his message, but at this rate, he and Cimarron had decided not to trust it. They had rigged up an independent communications system that would be much more difficult to track.

“Cimarron?”

There was a pause before she responded. “Banner? What are you doing up? I thought you were going to take a nap.”

“Where are you right now?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“The barricade didn't work.”

Another pause. “I see. Well, at this juncture, I don't think it would be safe for me to tell you my location over communications. And don't tell me yours. Where should we meet?”

He thought back to before breakfast. “Where the lemon tree grows. It's not

precisely safe, but I have a feeling that that would be a place that would be initially ignored.”

“Fine. I'll see you there.”

“Be careful.”

“You be careful. You haven't proven to me yet that you have any sort of aim.”

“I'm not some hothead who shoots first before thinking.”

“Are you calling me a hothead?”

“Never mind. I'll meet you there first.” Banner killed the communications and began crawling through the tunnel again. He knew there was an access vent a couple meters down that would lead into the corridor of the second level. From there, it would just be a matter of walking through the actual corridor to the hydroponics garden. Which would be a piece of cake if he didn't have to worry about random intruders.

“Computer, atmospheric levels of my current location.”

“They are within acceptable parameters.”

“Are the levels changing at all?”

“There are small fluctuations in oxygen and carbon dioxide levels that are non inconsistent with the presence of a living person.”

“Is anyone in the library?”

“Negative.”

“Any change in the carbon dioxide levels in the library?”

“Negative.”

Banner paused to ponder that as he continued to crawl. That was strange. He could swear that there had been someone in the study. If they did any sort of cursory look, they would have discovered the entrance to the library right away.

“Are there any other kinds of changes in the library?”

The computer didn't answer him right away.

“Computer? What was the answer to my question?”

“There are changes.” The computer's voice was becoming faint and static. “There is a point zero zero eight decrease in inert gases overall which is still within parameters. Water vapor content is increasing by ten billionths of a percent every two point five seconds and will exceed threshold levels in...” The computer's voice suddenly cut off.

Banner cursed again and quickened his pace. In five more seconds, he reached

the entrance to the corridor. He pushed open the portal of the access tunnel and tumbled out into the darkened hallway, the only illumination from the small diodes lining the floor in periodic levels. The hallway was completely silent. He heard nothing—not even the hum of equipment. He didn't know if it was always this silent, but the lack of noise—except of his breathing—began to unnerve him.

He shut the door to the access tunnel—a futile effort, perhaps, to create another barrier to whatever the thing was that had appeared in the study. Then, he made his way purposefully through the corridor, even before his vision began to adjust to the lower level of light. It was incautious, he knew, to walk blindly through the place, but he didn't want to stay a sitting target either. Luckily, he made it to the doors of the hydroponics garden without further incident and entered the place.

Cimarron had gotten to the room before him, but she was standing still, staring ahead of her in some sort of paralyzed shock. Her ray gun was clutched in one hand, but it lay slack by her side. The pard-synth crouched protectively around her feet as it barred its teeth against what it perceived as a threat.

Banner looked.

At the far end of the hydroponics garden, a crack had opened in the wall revealing something that made his gorge roil. Black wires spilled out of the crack and they wound around a body as if they had been once animated—or more likely something had used all the wires as rope. The body was of a familiar looking man—his eyes torn out, blood trickling down what was left of his nose and mouth. A hat swung precariously at the tip of the dead man's boot.

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Chapter 22

“I...I think I'm going to be sick.”

Banner had pulled Cimarron back out into the hallway. Minestrone had plodded after them with no protest. He didn't know what other place in the house was safe, although he supposed that the little space right outside of the hydroponics garden was as safe as any other.

The sight was gruesome, he agreed, but there was something inside him—a pessimistic part of him—that also said in a small voice that he had seen worse. In his nightmares. He tried to push that thought aside. It was disturbing enough that his subconscious was twisted enough to conjure up terrible images. It was even more disturbing that he might have been remembering repressed memories of real events.

His house guest had slumped onto the floor and had drawn her knees up to her chest. Her head was resting on her knees and she was breathing shallowly. He sat down beside her and put a hand on her back, rubbing in circles in a soothing gesture.

“Shh,” he murmured.

“You must think I’m some sort of sissy,” she replied, her voice slightly muffled by her knees.

“No.”

“Yes,” she contradicted. “I admit I’m a sheltered person. I’ve seen a lot of computer crimes, but that’s something that you can remove yourself from. I haven’t really seen actual physical violence except on holovids.”

“You were quite cool under pressure the last time. You shot that thing that came out of the lift shaft without even blinking your eyes.”

“That was different. It was some sort of...creature. That was a man in there.” Her voice slightly cracked, but it also seemed a shade more steady than initially. “And not just any man. It was someone I recognized.”

“You knew him?” his voice was slightly sharper than he had intended.

She didn’t seem to notice his change in tone. “Sure. He was the same guy who was lurking around the house. I was monitoring him since he seemed a bit suspicious. More than a little suspicious in fact. I had this little theory that this guy was behind all the stuff that was happening in this house. But with that,” she shuddered, “that theory is blown out of the water. Whatever that is happening is something totally different.”

“To be honest, I hadn’t been thinking about that spy at all when I became wrapped up with the unusual phenomena on the lower levels. My mind was on more wilder ideas.”

“Which probably seem more plausible now after that.” She finally raised her head. Even in the darkened corridor, her eyes still seemed clear. Privately, Banner breathed a sigh of relief. He had little idea on how to deal with weepy people. “So what

made you think the barrier had failed?”

“You could say it was intuition,” he replied wryly. “I had the computer check the atmospheric levels in the study. The diagnostics can't tell if anyone was present in the room, but I had a hunch from the changing gas levels that something was in there. I wouldn't be surprised if something had teleported into there as well.”

“That's bad. I suppose we should have expected it. If something could quant into the lower levels without using a quant pad, then nothing would stop them from going elsewhere as well. With a dead man in there, I think it's time to call the authorities.”

“No.”

“No?” She seemed startled at his sudden vehemence.

“Call it my intuition again. I think that whatever is wrong with this house, whatever is drawing those things here, is not just something that is limited to this house.”

“Then what do you propose we do? Go knock on the neighbors' doors and ask if they have dead people lying around too?” Her eyes narrowed. “This doesn't have anything to do with your conviction, does it?”

“Maybe it does,” he said. “But I'm claiming this time that this has nothing to do with my own experiences. What we're going to do is to let some of the household robots clean up the mess and save as much evidence as possible. I want to get that guy's ID before we decide on our course of action. But first, we have to deal with whatever that's decided to come through.”

“The changeling,” she said grimly. “And if it's not that, it's something that has to do with it.”

Something clattered in the distance of the corridor. Minestrone pricked up his ears and emitted a low, challenging growl.

Cimarron formed a fist with her right hand. Her expression was grim as she finally stood back up. “We have to get out of here. Either that or try to block whatever it is from quanting into this house.”

“We have to figure out first what it wants, although preventing anything from quanting into here would be a good idea too.” After another growl from the pard-synth, he stood up as well. “I take it that the big cat thinks that that sound wasn't anything coincidental.”

“No. I've had the chance to explore the house a bit when I visited Jorge when I was younger.” They began walking. Cimarron seemed self-assured of her direction, so Banner decided to just go where she was going. “There's a room on this level that is sort of like a shelter. There's communications there and an escape hatch.”

“You mean access tunnels?”

“Yeah. Sort of like that. But unlike some of the other access tunnels, this one doesn't appear on the house schematics. It leads up to the upper level to one of the unused guest rooms that Jorge had used for storage.”

A couple more twists down the hallway, they came to a series of identical doors which looked like entrances to actual storage rooms. Cimarron took the door to the end and opened it. The lights immediately flashed on revealing what looked like the cramped quarters of a pod ship. One side of the room was filled with communications panels and a wide view screen. On the other was a miniature kitchen, some drawers for storage, and four bunks. What looked like a small closet was in fact a bathroom. Banner turned around to look back out into the darkened corridor. He heard nothing, but that didn't mean that anything was out there. He pressed a manual switch to close the door and programmed a panel to lock the place against anyone—in case whatever out there was the changeling trying to get in by mimicking one of them.

Minestrone seemed to forget whatever threat was out there as he paced around the room, getting his bearings by sniffing the equipment, and then crawling underneath one of the bunks to take one of his numerous naps.

Cimarron was already seated in front of one of the communications diagnostics terminals and analyzing the incoming data. Her face was carefully blank although her posture—which seemed more stiff than usual—told him that she was trying to push the recent trauma from her head. Instead of calling her on it, Banner took a seat at a terminal across from hers and initiated a scan of the premises.

“There's something out there all right,” she said. “It's not tripping any of the alarms that I had recently programmed into the house security system, but that in itself is not quite surprising if we consider the changeling's capabilities. Although what I'm puzzled at is how whatever that had happened in the hydroponics garden didn't set off any alarms.”

“The hydroponics garden might be a security blind spot,” Banner replied. “If the

diagnostics is set to detect life forms, it might have been turned off in that room because of the plant life. Jorge might not have bothered to upgrade to a system that could distinguish between plant and animal. After all, it's in the middle of the house. And if anyone had bothered to break in, theoretically, they would have been detected long before they reached that part of the house.”

“If that's the case, then why didn't the house system detect that human spy before he got in?”

Banner briefly pondered that problem as he eyed the data on his screen with half of his attention. After a while, he said, “Maybe he was killed before he got in. Perhaps he is a warning.”

“A warning about what? I don't think we've actually done anything to make anyone mad. Unless you actually count visiting this moon.”

“Or my background,” he added. “Look, I don't think it has to be anything that we had to have done. It might be as you said before—that whatever is invading this house is looking for something that Jorge might have stored or done here. I, for one, don't have any idea what Jorge could have done—except maybe something having to do with his research.”

She frowned and then turned away from her terminal screen to look at him. At her movement, he looked up and found her expression to be serious. “I think that has to be it.”

“His research? It was mostly on microbes, right? I don't know much about it, although assuming from the potential applications, all I can think about is that it might have to do with some sort of industrial or military applications. Maybe he developed some sort of bioweapon.”

“That's a possibility, but it also seems a little obvious to me. Besides, if Jorge had come up with something like that, he would have completely destroyed his research in an attempt to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands. But whoever is looking for it might not know that.”

“Sometimes obvious might be the correct answer.” Banner leaned back into his seat and ran his hands through his hair, feeling nervous and frustrated. On the ceiling, he noticed, was a mosaic mural depicting a pastoral scene from Earth. It seemed a little odd in this bunker to have something that looked like it would better fit into an art

museum. But he was too distracted with other thoughts to pursue that curiosity with any seriousness. “I didn't communicate with Jorge very often, especially in his later years. But you probably did. You might have more of an idea of what Uncle Jorge might have been working on.”

“No. If I had pursued a biological science or if I was interested in those planetary expeditions that Jorge often had been involved in, then yes, he might have told me. All I have is a hunch with some enigmatic directions he gave me from his will.”

Banner leaned forward at this new admission. “He gave you directions as his inheritance?”

“Part of it.” She seemed suddenly irritated and turned back to her terminal screen as if she was now limiting her attention span on the conversation. “He said that some of his important data was located in this house. I have yet to find it.”

He contemplated about telling her his secrets. And decided it would do little harm, even if she was more than she appeared to be—which was very likely. “Uncle Jorge found those symbionts which now live inside each of us. Who knows what else he found on his missions that could harbor even more devastating properties. He never hinted at any of his discoveries in his missions—he only told me in general about the places that he had visited. But he did reveal to me once about a secret archive that he kept in this house.”

Finally, he had her attention on him again. Her dark, twilight eyes regarded him warily. “He told you about a secret archive?”

“It's actually a library, located underneath his study. At first, I thought it was just his collection of old books. You know how wealthy people are—they like collecting ancient objects that have little practical value. But now that you tell me that he had hidden some sort of information in this house, maybe the place has other significance as well.”

“But you say it's just some old collection.”

Banner reached into a pocket and took out the data chip that he had removed from the cubbyhole hidden in the library. He placed it on the table top between them. She stared at it, but made no move to touch it.

“I was in the library when something quanted into the study. So I don't think it's such a wise idea to go there now and start searching. But Uncle Jorge did show me a

hiding place in the library. Maybe it's one of many hiding places that we will eventually have to comb through. But in this one, he kept that. I noticed that it had been disturbed recently and I had thought that maybe you had access to it previously.”

“I’ve never seen that in my life. Someone else must have gotten into the house and looked at it. What sort of data does that thing have?”

“I have no idea. But Uncle Jorge had once told me that I would know when the time is right.”

“Do you think it's the right time?”

“Who knows. But there's only one way to find out.” He took the data chip up again and plugged it into his terminal. After a few commands, he had the data that was being accessed appear on the shared large screen on the side of the wall.

Numbers and letters appeared in no discernible order. Cimarron frowned. “Now this looks encrypted.” She looked back at her own terminal and began to work furiously. The numbers and letters continued to scroll downward on the screen, but the order began to change. Something readable began to emerge.

IF YOU ARE NOT IN THE CONSERVATORY, GET THERE NOW.

Banner gaped at the message. “What the hell?”

The security panel at the entrance to the bunker began beeping wildly. On the other side, something screeched. Metal groaned as something heavy rammed into the door.

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Chapter 23

The pard-synth immediately woke up at the noise and pounced to the door, attempting to roar back at the intruder in challenge. Cimarron jumped up from her chair and headed toward a section in the room between the communications panels and the miniature kitchen. Her hand hit some hidden switch and a hole appeared in the wall as a portal opened.

Banner grabbed the data chip, but did not bother to turn off the terminals. “How secure is this place?” he yelled above the noise.

“I think the door is supposed to be resistant to even the power of a plasma explosion, but judging from what happened to the door on the second level lift, I wouldn't bank on it being secure against everything. Come on, we have to get out of here. Minestrone!”

The pard-synth gave one last roar at the bunker door before bounding back toward Cimarron's voice. She pointed toward the portal and the large cat simply bounded in without a complaint. She scrambled in after the animal. Banner looked dubiously at the escape hatch, but when he looked back at the bunker door, it was shuddering from repeated impacts. He wasn't sure that he was actually imagining the dents that were beginning to be made in the door. So he followed.

“How do you close the thing?” he said as he plunged into the darkness. He could not see anything ahead, but he could sense that his house guest was not too far away.

“There's a switch at the bottom, near the entrance. It's a little obscured by some wiring, but if you hunt around...”

Banner was already feeling for the switch. The tip of his finger hit something near the bottom of the hatch and the entrance puckered closed, leaving them in complete darkness. Something clicked and light flickered in. Cimarron had her portable light source.

The hatch itself was narrow—enough for people to only go in single file—and short so they could only crouch. It was claustrophobic, and it seemed as if the pard-synth had only realized this belatedly as it bounded ahead, yowling in displeasure. Cimarron seemed unconcerned about the tight space as she swung her light ahead.

“The hatch is going to stop in a couple of meters,” she said, “and then there will be a vertical shaft going up. We'll have to climb up a ladder.”

“I see. Well, I suppose we're lucky we have a pard-synth with us then,” Banner replied. “They can climb trees. Ladders aren't much of a problem for them. Unlike tortoises.”

Cimarron gave a sharp bark of laughter at his comment, but it was a restrained kind of laughter, revealing her tension. “Right. So the shaft will lead up to an unused guest room. But I assume it's not quite safe there.”

“Yeah. We'll have to find our way to the conservatory. Which really seems like any other ordinary room. Unless you know something about it that I don't.”

In the small amount of light, he caught her shaking her head. “No. I never thought much about the conservatory. The first time I’ve been in that room was during that party that Jorge had held for you way back when. And I didn’t notice anything unusual about it then either. Jorge never mentioned anything about it to me. Which makes me suspicious about that message on that data chip that we were looking at. What does the conservatory mean? Maybe it’s an additional layer of code.”

“We’ll ponder that once we get out of this location.” They had reached the vertical shaft. Without any hesitation, the pard-synth leaped up the rungs as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Cimarron stashed her light source into a belt loop in her pants and started up. She and Banner followed the pard-synth at a more slower pace. “We can’t just stand around debating puzzles while something is after us.”

“True.”

At the top, the pard-synth paused since the door was closed. Cimarron maneuvered her way around the large cat and pulled a lever which made the second hatch slide open. The pard-synth climbed up first. Hearing nothing from Minestrone, Cimarron cautiously followed along with Banner.

It looked like an ordinary guest room except for the open hatch in the corner. A single bed took up the opposite corner as well as a single bureau. There were a couple doors which Banner immediately checked. One led to an empty closet, the second led to a bathroom, and the third to the outside corridor on the first level. The room itself, other than the few pieces of furniture, would have been bare were it not for half a dozen metal containers stacked up on one side of the room. Cimarron had gravitated to the diagnostics panel to the room.

“It says that they’re storage bins for some twenty-third century artifacts,” she said as she read off the panel. “They’re probably part of Jorge’s collection. More books, perhaps?”

“Paper books were already being phased out by the middle of the twenty-first century,” Banner replied, recalling some of his history lessons. “They were being replaced by something called e-readers. Which was a more primitive form of a hand-held communications device. Those might be in those bins rather than paper books.”

“I’m not sure we have any time to check.” She was scrutinizing the panel again, but this time it was a schematic of the first level. “The shortest route to the conservatory

from here will be down the corridor right outside and then a right once the corridor branches off. That's assuming we don't encounter any obstacles. Otherwise, we'll have to go the opposite direction and make a loop around some other guest rooms.”

“Fine. Let's go and check out the conservatory.”

The corridor on the first level appeared undisturbed as they stepped foot onto it. If they weren't aware of how things were otherwise, the house would have seemed quite normal. They arrived at the conservatory without further incident. Banner began inspecting the room as Cimarron began programming the locking mechanism to the conservatory door.

Other than the usual diagnostics panel which controlled the atmosphere of the room and gave access to the house computer, Banner didn't find anything else that might be construed as a computer terminal or as a communications panel. There were plants and tables and chairs scattered throughout the place—something tranquil for entertaining guests. And one side of the conservatory was completely covered in synth-glass so that the occupants could look out over the environment of the icy moon. At this point, it was still dark and the outside terrain was completely shadowed, but there was a faint light coming over the horizon. It was almost time for the Tritonian dawn.

“So did you find anything that might indicate that this room might help us?” she asked as she finished putting on the finishing touches on the door's computer lock.

“No. Not unless there are any trap doors to the place. I have this old diagnostics device with me, but I don't think it'll be so helpful in detecting these hidden entrances.”

“I have the feeling that Jorge didn't leave a notice to go to the conservatory because it had hidden entrances or exits,” Cimarron replied. “Otherwise, he would have just left a message for us to get out of the house entirely. Which now that I think about it, isn't such a bad idea.”

“I don't want to abandon the house,” he said. “Uncle Jorge willed it to me. I'm not going to just give it up because some intruders, no matter how monstrous, have invaded this place.”

“You can't be so hardheaded about it. You have to realize that there will come a point where you will have to abandon this place because it won't be salvageable. I don't think your life is worth defending some place.”

He gave her a cynical smile. “If there's one thing that I've learned during my time

on that prison planet, it's this: my life isn't worth beans, sweetheart. I might as well go out in a blaze of glory defending the property that belonged to the only person who thought I could be something greater than what everyone else thought I could be.”

She crossed her arms, staring at him. “You really don't have much of a view of yourself, do you?”

He shrugged. “It doesn't matter. And don't psychoanalyze me. I'm too damaged to be much good for anyone now, but that doesn't mean that I can't try.”

Cimarron snorted at that comment. “Some effort.”

He ignored her derision. “I'm going to figure out a way to salvage this house. And as soon as the transport is available, you're going to get out of here. You don't belong in this place. You don't need to get stuck with my problems.”

“I don't think you understand. This is my problem too. Jorge wasn't too clear about his directions, but I think he was obtuse deliberately. I need to be here, to understand what is happening. He left something here that I need to get.”

“Sure. Then go ahead and tear this house apart with your searches. But only once we've figured out this problem.” Banner went over to the room's only access panel and plugged in the data chip.

She followed and worked on it for a few seconds to decode the data. Again, the warning about getting to the conservatory appeared. Then, the small screen on the access panel flickered to a directory that seemed enigmatic with its list of files named with peculiar titles. As they looked through it, one file caught his eye. A familiar headache began roiling up from the depths of his mind.

“Stop.”

“What?”

“Go back. To that file labeled SUNSHINE.”

She gave him a small odd glance. “All right. I'll open it.”

The file contained data. At first, it looked like the atmospheric data of Triton. Only two columns of the data was marked for special interest.”

“Hm.” Her eyes were narrowed. “This looks like the night and day period of the moon. Which doesn't seem so odd. Anyone can obtain that data. But then there's this parallel column that's labeled ACT. The numbers seem to correlate with the days and nights, with the nights having positive ACT readings while nothing appears under ACT

for the days. I have no idea what ACT stands for, though, so it could mean anything.”

“Right. It means that whatever ACT is, it only happens during the night. Yeah, you're right. It could mean anything though. Maybe we should look at one of the other files.”

The pard-synth's growl was the only thing that alerted them that something was now amiss in the conservatory. In response, Cimarron muttered under her breath about the ineffectiveness of the house security system. Again, there was a roar and the pounding on the door that indicated that something was trying to get in.

Banner took up his disruptor. Cimarron already had her ray gun in hand, aiming towards the door.

“Any bets on how long it will take?”

She glanced at the access panel. “According to the house timer, it took that thing about ten minutes to get through the bunker door, through the hatch and up to this level. It won't be long. Come to think of it, we've only used this,” she waved her ray gun briefly, “to hit it. Maybe your disruptor has more of an effect.”

“Maybe. But it doesn't have the same settings as a military grade weapon. The most it can do is stun a person.”

“Well, that thing isn't a person. So it might not have any effect. This baby, though, has a high setting for 'implode.' I'm not sure what that exactly means though. Will it make its target implode or itself implode?”

“Are we desperate enough at the moment to test either possibility?”

“If nothing else works, I'll set it for that setting and use it like a grenade.”

“And probably take out two-thirds of the house with it,” he commented. “There goes all of Uncle Jorge's efforts to renovate the place.”

“I think in this case, your great uncle will forgive you,” she replied. “Being alive is more important than a house, no matter what you may think.”

The conservatory door was suddenly ripped open and something exploded into the room. The pard-synth yowled in surprise and skidded backwards before turning tail and running toward the opposite side of the room. Something black and oozing filled the doorway. Three arm-like projections with claws sprouting at the tips like spikes on a mace reached outward sensing and searching. Banner took aim first.

The blue disruptor beam glanced harmlessly off the targeted arm. The arm

sensed that something had hit it, though, and it began wriggling in the air towards them.

“Shit.”

“No kidding,” Cimarron replied. She pulled the trigger on the ray gun. She was also on target and this time the arm smoked. This stopped the arm temporarily as it writhed in place, but it was soon joined by the other arms and all three began their trek across the room even more relentlessly, claws glittering.

Banner tried the disruptor again just as Cimarron shot the second time. More smoke and the creature which had slid into the conservatory on its haunches screamed from an opening in its oily body. Something on its surface flickered. Several somethings flickered revealing yellow. They might have been eyes.

Cimarron shot a third time, but the smoke did not deter the arms much. The arms swung and knocked over tables, chairs, several plants, intending to latch on to them and the two of them dodged and ran to the opposite side of the wall where it met the synth-glass.

Dawn spilled over the horizon and the light chased the shadows away on the icy landscape. Sunlight spilled into the conservatory filtered into a strong yellow through the synth-glass and the creature screamed. The arms immediately withdrew back into the main body and the thing began to melt through the floor as it flickered in the midst of quanting.

With the start of a new day, they looked down at the spot where the creature had been standing and saw only a dark, oily, smear.

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Chapter 24

Banner had his hands around a mug of coffee as he sat on a couch in the receiving room of the first level. He felt exhausted, a wreck. Cimarron had told him that he could go take a nap, but he didn't dare close his eyes. Something had dislodged from his

hidden memories, making him privately worry that any dream he would have now would be even worse than before.

The synth-pard seemed to have no trouble sleeping. The large cat was sprawled on the floor of the receiving room, lightly snoring. Cimarron was perched on an arm chair, listening to the report that her mother was giving on the communications screen. The only indication that she was sleep deprived were the dark circles under her eyes. But otherwise, she denied her own exhaustion even when he asked.

“The data for those samples that you sent me was fascinating,” Dr. Jennifer Tong was saying. Her message had come through just as they had made their way from the kitchen after making a celebratory pot of coffee. While Banner had just held his—his mind had not made it to the point of actually taking a sip yet—Cimarron's own cup was standing forgotten at a nearby table. Jennifer Tong had only made a cursory greeting to them before launching head first into the report with suppressed excitement.

“There's some sort of genetic code to the thing which isn't like our genetic code at all. In fact, it reminds me of one of the microorganisms that Jorge Helado had discovered on one of his missions and had briefly told me about. Did this creature that you were talking about come from his lab out there on Triton?”

“Yeah,” Banner lied before Cimarron could say anything. “I was planning on some clean up when I moved in. I found some odd samples and Cimarron suggested to ask you about it before I did anything with it. I didn't want to screw anything up.”

There was an odd expression on the geneticist's face when she regarded him. “I have a feeling that you rarely screw up. Anyways, it is a mix of organic material that has some unusual properties. All of it has a sensitivity to photons at a certain wavelength. If it's exposed to it, it begins to rapidly degrade. But that's not the most interesting thing about it. Everything degrades at one point or another.”

“So what's the most important thing?”

“It changes.”

Banner and Cimarron briefly exchanged looks before turning their attention back to her mother. “It changes?” she prompted.

“You know that I mentioned that the genetic code wasn't very similar? Well, I ran it through an analysis with my hunch that it was similar to that organism that Jorge had studied and the results were very interesting. The genetic code itself is different from

our code, let's say, but what it encodes for its basic metabolism is very similar to us. That in itself is not particularly surprising. Even in quite divergent habitats on Earth, we have quite a bit in similar to, say, microorganisms living in underwater volcanic vents. But unlike us, whatever products that this organism makes have rapid turnover. The enzymes that are produced are amazing in their capacity to catalyze reactions.”

Banner rubbed his forehead. “So what exactly are you trying to say, doctor?”

“It changes,” she repeats. “Really changes. If the readings are correct and that the genetic material is part of an organism and not just synthesized in vitro for biochemical and molecular experiments, this organism has the ability to rapidly change its form. Life that has derived from Earth do contain incredibly efficient enzymes that makes one appreciate how fast things can go, but these hypothetical enzymes can blow the ability of Terran derived ones out of the water. If Jorge was working on this, do you know how many practical applications this could spawn?”

“Is it enough that someone might try killing for it?” Cimarron asked.

Jennifer scoffed at the notion. “Maybe you've been reading too many twentieth century crime novels,” she replied. “I'm sure that Jorge was trying to make something that would help in that winery empire that his brother owned. I'm sure there are a lot of industrial applications that could be developed—which could naturally lead to the thought of industrial espionage—but that sort of thing is so sophisticated nowadays. As you probably know, Cimarron, it's all done through computer systems. The only thing that gets killed are security programs.”

Banner frowned. “That's a rather naive view, doctor. People do get killed for the smallest things. Humans aren't perfect, intellectual beings.”

“Of course not.” Jennifer Tong gave him an unsettling smile. “But as I recall, you say that these samples came from a life form. A sentient one. And if it can change—well, that could mean a number of things. The first thing to come to mind is that the rapidity of the change is fueled by a fast developmental cycle. The second possibility is that it uses its ability to change to adapt to rapidly changing environments. The second possibility, though, I think has a very low probability of being true.”

“Why do you say that?” Cimarron said.

“For that to happen, an organism has to first evolve to a point where they are able to adapt to rapidly changing environments. Yet I cannot think of a situation that would

warrant the change to happen this fast. If we could extrapolate on this organism's life from how fast its enzymes work, the environment would have to have macro changes on a minute, even second scale. And aside from certain spacial anomalies that a physicist might tell you about, I cannot think of a natural environment that would do that and allow any such life to come to existence in the first place.”

“I have a feeling that a fast development cycle isn't really what's in this life form's nature,” said Banner.

Jennifer Tong narrowed her eyes. “What makes you say that?”

“Let's just call it intuition,” he responded. “You said before that this life form was created synthetically. Couldn't this fast change also be engineered?”

“Now there's a thought. But everything that has been engineered must have a basis on something. Perhaps this changeling is now using its abilities to mimic things. But that doesn't mean that it wasn't originally used for something else. Most genetic engineers only tinker with what they want to change. Everything else, they leave because it has no effect on their goal. This is probably why these things degrade after being exposed to a certain light spectrum.”

“Hm.” Cimarron appeared thoughtful. “So what you mean is that if people are sloppy about their work, there's going to be some sort of flaw. Kind of like me, now that you mention it.”

Something flickered in her mother's eyes. “Sure, there are flaws. More often than not, people can use those flaws to exploit their target. Other times, those flaws can be corrected.”

Chapter 25

“You aren't flawed.”

Cimarron did not look up at his comment. Instead, she focused on the disassembled ray gun on the kitchen counter as she manually realigned a series of ancient diodes. “I am. I already told you that I would not have survived past infancy if Jorge and my mother hadn't made certain modifications.”

“I didn't have the impression that that was what you meant when we had just

talked to your mother.” Banner had long finished adjusting his disruptor to a frequency of five seven two point five, the frequency that it would take to disintegrate the changeling creature, should they encounter it again. And if it didn't learn to adapt to its weaknesses. The ray gun, however, was older technology and less precise. So Cimarron had to take the time to adjust it manually.

“And what was the impression that you had when we talked to my mother?” She aligned one more diode and then picked up a thin diagnostic tool to check that it was in place. Then she repeated the entire process again with another diode.

“You're trying to dodge the point.” He leaned against the counter looking at her rather than at the disassembled ray gun. “I think you were trying to refer to the fact that you had disappointed your mother by making the choices that you have.”

“Of course my choices have disappointed her. She wanted me to become a famous computer scientist. Or at least a competent one. And now, I'm here.”

“I think you're trying to imply that there's something wrong with being here. That there's something wrong with being here with me. That there's something wrong with me.”

She finally looked up. Her eyes were narrowed and her dark twilight eyes held a dangerous sparkle. “Do you think that I think there's something wrong with you?”

Grinning evilly, now that he had gotten a rise out of her, he said, “I mean, what isn't wrong with me? I'm a very bad boy. I just got out of prison. I came to this place. The house used to be my great-uncle's, of course, but I'm from a questionable branch of my family tree. The locals have their suspicions of me. I live here alone. And now, I have a house guest—which is also somewhat questionable for some people.”

She looked back at her ray gun. “You're conflating things. Besides, I think you just enjoy appearing to be a bad boy. I haven't heard you trying to refute anyone's suspicions. You just let people think the worst of you.”

“And maybe all of its true.”

“Hm.” She aligned the last diode and ran the final diagnostics before putting the casing back onto the weapon. There was a click as she took off the safety. “I think this is ready for action. Should I test it on something?”

“If you're dying to test it, don't test it in here. This house has already taken quite a beating.” He queried the computer on the time. It responded with a prompt 'ten

hundred'. "Well, it's still pretty early. And I think from what we've learned, we could probably rig a response system that could automatically go on the defensive if the changeling happens to quant in here again. But I have a feeling that it wouldn't be necessary. Not since it's day time now."

"And I have a feeling that there's a pretty good chance that any modifications we make on the security system won't work," she replied. "Remember? We tried to rig an alarm before, but it didn't work. Maybe it's the changeling itself that is going below the limit of detection. But perhaps there's someone else involved who is messing with the computer systems."

"But I thought you were the expert on computer systems."

"I'd be the first to admit that I'm not the person who's the most up-to-date on this stuff. I was at a Tibetan nunnery before I came here. Computer system sabotage wasn't one of the main things they studied up there."

"You have a point."

"Besides, if the person or persons behind the computer system sabotage was here before me, it's quite possible that they've put in some sort of controlling subroutine that I couldn't find. We'd have to go on assuming that the house system is compromised."

"It's not particularly convenient relying on hand-held devices all the time."

"No. But we can still use the house computer for nonessential things."

"Sure. So whatever the case, I still have the feeling that the changeling won't try to quant during the day time. It's probably safe enough to take a brief nap."

"I don't feel particularly sleepy," she told him. "And after that little show down in the conservatory, I don't think I'd be able to get to sleep even if I tried. Are you tired?"

"No." He looked around the kitchen. The place wasn't damaged compared to other parts of the house, but who knew what the next day would bring. "I think we should get out of this place for a little while. Besides, I need to get to the scrap yards to get some more material to repair all the damage that this house has taken. And maybe the local hardware store if the scrap yard doesn't have what we need."

She put the safety back onto the ray gun and put it into a hidden pocket at the back of her pants. "That sounds like a good idea. I had good memories of this place when I visited Jorge, but lately, it's been feeling a little claustrophobic."

"I know exactly what you mean."

* * *

Banner had the strong urge to shake the owner of the Nowhere City salvage yards until his teeth rattled. But he told himself that it would be barbaric behavior and that it would endear himself to no one, least of all his house guest.

Meanie, the old man who owned the said salvage yards, was expounding to Cimarron about his latest shipment of nickel alloy from some business in the West Dome that was remodeling. He was creeping closer and closer to her a millimeter at a time with each of his words. She was looking out over the salvage yards, perhaps mentally cataloging its contents, so she did not notice the old man's leer.

“Do you still have any of the titanium alloy that I had ordered from you earlier?” Banner interrupted loudly.

“Eh, sure,” Meanie responded without looking at him. “Now look over there, miss. We've got some prime examples of some old shuttle coils...” He reached out with a hand in an intent to grope.

She finally moved away from him, leaving him with a fistful of air. “We're not looking for shuttle coils, Mr. Inago.” She turned to look at him, and there was something about her expression which made the old man freeze on his feet as if someone had stunned him with a disruptor. “We're looking for some building materials to repair his house.”

Meanie finally swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously. “Eh, sure miss. This salvage yard has pretty much any kind of metal alloy you'll need to repair a house. Just tell me what you want and I'll have it delivered.” He paused for one second, and then added, “From the grapevine, I heard you were just Mr. Wice's house guest. I didn't know that you had moved in with him.”

“One could make that mistake, especially in light of the quant troubles that the transportation station has been having lately,” she replied.

“Yes, yes of course.”

“If you don't mind, I'm just going to look around.”

When Cimarron turned away to walk through the salvage yards herself, Meanie gave her a last ogle before turning to Banner with a scowl. “I'd heard that your girlfriend was pretty, but no one said that she looked like one of those courtesan class slave girls.”

Feeling contrary, Banner said, "Oh, she does? I never noticed."

"Never noticed? Are you blind?"

"Technically, no. Although I strongly suspect that if you voiced your opinions directly to her, she'd shoot your balls off."

"To say the least." Meanie softly whistled when Cimarron bent over to examine something closer. "You lucky bastard. How's she staying with you and not some rich thug on some more sophisticated planet? I mean, you're definitely not some prime catch."

He shrugged. "Maybe she likes bad boys."

With a conspirator's wink, Meanie nudged him with an elbow. "I know her personality leaves a lot to be desired. Too independent to be a true courtesan class slave girl, I'd tell you, but what's she like?"

Banner blinked and pretended ignorance. "Like?"

"You know, in bed."

"Why the hell should I tell you that?" Finally fed up with the salvage yard owner's not so subtle innuendos, he stalked off to find Cimarron.

Chapter 26

Unlike the grocery store on Nowhere City, the hardware store was cluttered, dusty, and dark. Banner had decided to stop by the place after they discovered that the salvage yards didn't have everything that they needed. At the moment, he was rummaging through a bin that contained a variety of metal hinges and wishing that the store had been organized a bit better. At the rate he was going, he was going to finish shopping in the next millennium.

"You know, ever since we left the salvage yards, you've been in a terrible mood," Cimarron remarked as she examined a multitasking tool in another bin. She pressed a button and a corkscrew popped out. She frowned and tossed it back into the bin before picking up another one. "Did Mr. Inago say something objectionable to you?"

"You could say that."

"What did he say? Or is it too objectionable to repeat in front of polite company?"

Banner grumbled something incoherently as he dug through some more hinges.

“I take it that the answer is yes. Although I have to point out that I've heard quite a few objectionable things in my time, so I doubt anything he said would have surprised me.”

“Well, maybe it won't surprise you, but it embarrasses me.”

“Embarrasses you? You don't seem like the type of guy who would be embarrassed by anything.”

“Sure. After living on a prison planet hell hole for a year, I also doubt anything would really phase me. But even I could be surprised. Now can we change the subject?”

Cimarron threw the gadget she had in her hands back into the bin without another cursory glance. Instead, she turned her attention on him. Banner was aware of her stare, but resolutely continued to do what he was doing, hoping that by ignoring her, she would lose interest. But he was wrong.

“No. Now I'm really curious. What did that man say to you?”

“Haven't you ever heard of the saying that curiosity killed the cat?”

“That's an old saying. But I doubt whatever it was would give me a heart attack.”

Banner finally stopped rummaging to glare at her. “Fine. He asked me what you were like in bed. Are you happy now?” He felt his face getting hot and quickly he turned back to the bin lest she notice that he was blushing.

“Well, I think 'happy' would be quite the wrong word to describe how I'm feeling,” she replied after a pause. “I'm not surprised that the old man said that. He was leering at me the entire time that we were there. But I am surprised that you're acting like such a prudish aunt about it all.” She crouched down beside him. “You're blushing.”

“I know I'm blushing,” he said defensively. “You don't have to broadcast the fact to the entire store.” “There's no one in the store except the robot working the cashier.”

Banner finally gave up sorting. He wasn't going to get anything done if she was breathing down his neck. “It's the principle of the matter, damn it! I think people should have the right to keep their own conversations to themselves.”

“I don't think that's what's wrong.”

“Of course that's what's wrong! Everyone has their own little idiosyncrasies. You think you're flawed when you're not. I like to keep conversations to myself.”

She tilted her head at his outburst. “No, I disagree. I think you're all worked up

about it because you're also wondering what I'm like in bed. And you don't like thinking it because this sort of thing crosses some sort of invisible boundary that you've set up in your head.”

“Why the hell are we even talking about this?” He sighed and tried moving to another aisle, but he wasn't surprised that she followed. “Are you going to try to make me feel guilty for whatever it is that's going on inside my brain?”

“No. But I do think that this conversation is a bit intriguing. I mean, there's something between us.”

“There's always been something between us. But that doesn't mean that we have to admit it.”

“I think we just did.”

Banner stopped in the middle of the aisle and ground his teeth. “Damn it!”

“You think that's a bad thing?”

“It complicates things, that's what. And with everything that's happening, don't you think it's a bad idea to have this sort of conversation in the first place?”

“Hm, you do have a point there.” She finally took a few steps away from him to look at some tools that had caught her eye. “So, you were thinking it too. Why are you so immediately defensive about it anyway?”

He turned away to pretend to look at some of the merchandise. It was after a moment of trying to get his thoughts together when he said bluntly, “Well, wouldn't you be defensive about it too if you thought that you had no chance in hell of finding out?”

“No chance in hell?” she replied. “I think that point of view is a little too pessimistic, don't you?”

* * *

Banner wondered if he should administer some kind of self diagnostic soon, because he was sure that his blood pressure was going up to dangerous levels every time that he ended up talking to Cimarron about a personal topic. She, on the other hand, appeared as relaxed as if she had done nothing more strenuous than talking about Triton's non-existent weather.

About an hour after scrounging around at the hardware store, Banner had found

a few specialized tools and building materials to help repair the house. He took the materials to the front of the store where a dusty cashier robot which mostly blended into its surroundings scanned in the items. As they were being tallied and packaged, something in his pocket beeped a warning. After paying for the items, Cimarron took the package as he brought out the secured communications device from his pocket.

“Hey Banner, it's me,” came Taran Shimizu's voice. “I've got the analysis done and boy, it's a doozy. Do you have a secure line?”

He glanced around the hardware store. As Cimarron had pointed out earlier, there wasn't anyone else in the place, but that didn't mean that there weren't other listening devices and bugs. “Why don't I call you back a little later? I'm doing a bit of shopping.”

“Shopping? Shopping?!” There was laughter on the other side and Banner felt his face twisting into a scowl. “Don't tell me that you're shopping for widgets and you've managed to drag your poor house guest along with you.”

“Well, in fact, she is with me. And we are shopping for widgets—to fix the house.”

“Ooo, doing home improvements together. How romantic. Well, I'll sign off for now. I'm looking forward to your call.”

Banner shoved the communications device back into his pocket and motioned for Cimarron to proceed him.

“So who was that?” she asked.

“Shimizu. My friend from way back when. The transportation expert I told you about.”

“Ah. Do I get to talk to him too?”

“Well, I suppose you can listen in. The devices for communication are secure, but we'll have to find a secure place first.” They had exited the hardware store and were standing on the front steps, overlooking a street that ran on the western edge of the main dome. The street itself was lined with other buildings, all of them in the faux Victorian veneer that characterized the more well visited buildings in the Main Square. The tower clock from the Main Square, however, could be seen from anywhere in the main dome. At the moment, its old fashioned hands were pointing to the noon hour.

“I'd suggest going to the Main Square,” Cimarron said, “since it does have quite a bit of open space, but with the recent murder there, I doubt it's the best place to go right

now.”

“I agree.” Banner looked out over the buildings and spotted a small park-like opening to the east. “How about that small square over there? It looks fairly open and empty of people at the moment.”

“Of course, with our luck, the place will be crowded once we get there.”

He sent her an amused glance. “And you thought I was the pessimistic one.”

Chapter 27

“There's something really strange going on with the readings that you sent me,” Shimizu said in their communications. On the device's viewscreen, his expression was pained as he said it.

They had found a relatively isolated bench on the small square in the midst of a few stores that appeared to specialize in tourist souvenirs. There were a few people walking about, but they all seemed to be heading to a cafe sitting at the northeast corner of the square. None of these people paid any attention to them as they sat down on the bench and huddled over the small communications device.

“On first glance, they appear to be like any other ordinary quanting signature. But upon closer examination, some of it doesn't make any sense.”

“What do you mean it doesn't make any sense?” asked Banner. “What's weird about it?”

“The numbers.” Shimizu shook his head. “It's really esoteric stuff. I could explain it too you, but it'll take too long. Unless you want the long explanation. Do you have a couple days to a week?”

“Not really. But you've intrigued me enough that I'd be willing to sit through the long explanation once I've got that chunk of a time. So right now, give me the short version.”

His friend glanced from him and to Cimarron. “You sure you want her to hear this too?”

“Of course I want to hear this,” she said.

“I'm not asking you, Ms. Tong-Radcliffe, although I have a suspicion you

probably don't need the long explanation.”

“Well maybe I do. I was only trained in computer science.”

“Huh.”

Banner sighed at the byplay. “Fine. Whatever. What you say to me, you can say to her too since I guess I trust her.”

“Hey, big admission, Wice,” Shimizu grinned briefly, but his expression turned serious again. “Well, here's the short explanation. The numbers indicate that the subatomic particles and energy that's being given off in the quanting signature is what we would expect for a normal quanting procedure. Well, the total numbers at any rate. But if we look at the individual numbers for all the particle subclasses, something different emerges. There's some serious asymmetry going on. The kind of asymmetry going on at the edge of black holes.”

“Black holes?” said Banner. “What does quanting have to do with black holes? I thought they were two totally different phenomena. Or did all of my physics courses lie to me?”

“I don't think you really got any of those physics courses.” Shimizu seemed amused. “I think you just went through the motions so you could get a good grade. Everything in physics is connected, Wice. Why do you think scientists are still trying to pursue the grand theory of everything? Evidence is continually pointing to the fact that everything is connected. But back on point, that isn't the most interesting thing about this asymmetry.”

“I seem to recall that there is some asymmetry going on with wormholes too since they're a relative of black holes,” said Cimarron. “But aren't wormholes still theoretical?”

“As far as I know, yes, they're still theoretical,” Shimizu agreed. “But I'm not talking about wormholes. It's even weirder than that. After some calculations, it looks like the asymmetry is going on because something is coming from a different universe. Or a different dimension. I can't tell for sure at the moment. I still have to do some more calculations to be positive.”

“What? A different universe or dimension? That's impossible, isn't it?”

“Improbable,” Shimizu corrected him. “There's a difference. There is a theory that this isn't the only universe or dimension—that the universe that we inhabit is just one of an infinite number of universes and dimensions. I think that from those readings you

gave me, something is leaking from another universe or dimension into ours. One would think that this kind of asymmetry would become unstable—think of it as a needle puncturing a balloon—but somehow, it's not. So there must be something else counterbalancing that. Such as something from our universe going into that universe.”

“So would you speculate that it there isn't any quanting going on at all?” said Banner. “That all of this is just about one universe intruding upon another?”

“I didn't say that. I think there is quanting going on. Just not the sort of quanting that we usually think about. All of this is speculation, of course. The kind of speculation that could have me labeled as a crackpot.” Shimizu chuckled, but it wasn't a humorous one. “What I think might be happening is that someone on our side is attempting to quant something to another location in this universe. But somehow, the transmission is getting redirected to the other universe and response, there is some sort of distortion before it actually gets to its real destination.”

“I think what he's trying to say is that it's like sending something through a completely different medium before it gets to its destination,” said Cimarron. “And something gets changed in the interim, right? It isn't the same when it finally comes back out. The other universe or dimension probably has different physics so something is irrevocably altered.”

“That makes sense,” Banner replied. “And it could explain that other stuff that we sent your mother.”

“What the hell are you two talking about?” Shimizu demanded. “Now you're talking over my head. What's this about things being irrevocably altered and things that you've sent to Dr. Tong?”

“Other information that you don't know about,” Banner said smoothly. “But don't worry about it.”

“I don't like how you said that,” Shimizu complained. “That sounds ominous. What the heck is going on over there, Wice? Have you two stumbled onto some sort of secret lab in your great-uncle's basement?”

“Not exactly. Look Shimizu, you've been a great help, but I'll let you know if there's any further developments.”

His friend looked dubious. “Further developments. Ha! I have my suspicions that you've accidentally gotten yourself into some mess. If I don't hear back from you in

about a week, I'm going send someone over there to check on you.”

“He sounded serious,” she remarked as they got up from the bench. “Is he really going to send reinforcements to look for you if you don't call him back?”

“I wouldn't be surprised. I don't really deserve him as a friend. He's loyal and he watches your back. When I got convicted, he all but helped stage a protest during my sentencing. Not that it did any good. The only thing that actually got me out was someone with serious backing who was determined to bring down his enemy. Getting me out was just some side thing.”

“So who was it who eventually got you out?”

Banner shrugged. “I have no idea, actually. I asked, but no one would tell me anything. At this point, I'm sort of afraid of finding out. If whoever it was could bring down the organization who framed me—which was admittedly a pretty powerful one in the first place—they or it would be even more powerful. I mean, that's the beauty of staying in this out of the way place. I'd be easily forgotten everywhere else.”

They had walked toward the cafe that everyone else had gravitated to. The front was covered by a shingled awning and whitewashed. Besides the door, there was one large window looking into the interior of the restaurant. Judging from the number of people inside, the place was fairly crowded. When they entered, there was already a small line of customers waiting for tables.

A few people glanced at them—a percentage doing a double take at Banner, no doubt recognizing him as the convict who took up residence on Dr. Helado's vacation home. Cimarron shifted the package of tools and materials under her arm.

“Here, let me take that.”

She gave him an odd look as she finally handed him the package. “Chivalrous, aren't you?”

He grunted. “I'm no knight in shining armor. I'm probably more like the evil dragon. I'm just being practical.”

Cimarron rolled her eyes at his melodramatic statement.

The other cafe patrons in line had gone back to their conversations after a brief glance at their arrival. Banner could not help but overhear the latest gossip and news. Apparently, aside from the big murder of the candidate who was running for Nowhere City's top office, there had been several crimes reported during the intervening

Tritonian night. Some of the customers expressed resignation about the increased crime rates during the night. Others said that it seemed somewhat ironic that they were still wishing for the old days when the only crimes during the night had been those of theft and robbery rather than the more gruesome crimes that the authorities had to deal with these days.

“More gruesome crimes?” Cimarron whispered. He could see the flicker behind her gaze as she remembered what had happened back in the house. They had programmed some of the house cleaning robots to take care of the mess—to take recordings of the evidence before everything was preserved. Banner was still trying to find out the identity of the man who had been brutally murdered in the hydroponic garden before finally deciding what to ultimately do with everything. Cimarron had argued for the opposite—that they take all the evidence to the authorities so that they wouldn't have to deal with it, but Banner's suspicious nature had overruled that possibility.

“Could be anything,” he replied as he tried to strain his ears at the same time.

Apparently the gruesome crimes were all murders, as one of the customers soon revealed. The Nowhere City police force was inundated with such cases—all of them involving people who lived alone and whose bodies appeared to be mauled by some great beast. Or shredded by some maniac who had an unhealthy obsession with large knives. The grapevine said that although the police had not officially put forth any theories to the killings, they had believed that all of the murders were done by one person due to the similarity of all the murders.

“You know, I don't feel particularly hungry all of a sudden.”

Banner glanced at her, noticing that her skin seemed a little paler than usual. “Is all this talk disturbing you? We could go elsewhere.”

“Maybe I should skip...”

“Skipping meals isn't such a great idea,” he replied.

She frowned. “It's not like I'm trying to starve myself.”

“Good. Then we'll just...”

Something exploded near the back of the cafe and the patrons who were already seated at tables or in the middle of their meals screamed and jumped out of their chairs like an undulating mob, ready to run out of the building. Alarms blared and there was a

rush of panicked people as they headed out the door.

Banner and Cimarron had already sprinted out the door and back onto the small square. Once they reached the opposite side—standing in front of a tacky souvenir shop that had various knickknacks with the town logo embossed on them being displayed in the window—they paused to catch their breaths. People were spilling out of the cafe and there was smoke spiraling upward from behind the building. The fire brigade in their hovering, red vehicles were already on the scene, dosing a fire retardant chemical onto the blaze from above. Soon afterwards, the police cruisers came along with two ambulances.

“What was that?” Cimarron asked once she got her breathing back to normal.

“An accident in the kitchens, probably,” Banner replied. His head ached, but he knew that he did not breathe in any of the smoke. They were too close to the door for that. “However, I have the suspicion that that was not all there was too it.”

“What do you mean?”

He shook his head. “Or maybe all that talk about crime is making me think weird things. Let's get out of here. We can probably find some other restaurant to get lunch at.”

She gave him a knowing look when she caught his eyes skittering towards the hovering police cruisers and the officers already efficiently fencing off the perimeter so that no one could act on their impulses to go back into the burning building. “You're nervous about the authorities. Which is understandable. I suppose if you're still hungry after this, we should go try finding elsewhere.”

“Like this place?” The sly, tenor voice came from behind them. Slowly, they both turned and observed a man in an old fashioned pin-striped suit—pink and green—with a straw boater, lean casually on the railing lining the stairs to the tacky souvenir shop. His eyes were a strange bright blue and dark curls peaked out from under his hat. The man's features reminded Banner of those classically handsome heroes on the popular action holovids he had watched as a kid. The kind of guy who would make their female fans swoon.

Self-consciously, Banner rubbed a hand along his jaw. He had managed to shave that morning, but he could already feel the stubble. He glanced briefly at Cimarron, but she didn't seem surprised at the appearance of the man on the steps. Or perhaps she hid

her surprise very well.

“This place?” said Banner deliberately. “It looks like it sells tourist junk.”

“Oh no, it's an eatery, I can assure you of that. This place has been rated with five stars in the Nowhere Tribune.” The man's eyes glittered as he first swept an assessing glance at Banner and then lingered on Cimarron. The man's mouth quirked upward.

“The Galactic Tea House doesn't just serve tea.”

“If it's five stars,” said Cimarron, deadpan, “then it must be good, right?”

“Why are you advertising this hole in the wall to us?” He kept his attention on the man in the boater although in the background, he could still sense the chaos of the cafe fire behind him.

“I'm like any other businessman. I can't miss a chance to advertise.” The man's eyes flickered to the scene behind them. “It is too bad that you weren't able to experience that place before this little accident. It is quite good. But I did overhear that you were still looking for another place for lunch?”

“Who are you? The owner?” Banner demanded.

“Oh, you could say that. I'm Maximilian. You can just call me Max. And I'll be honored if you decided to patronize my establishment.” And without looking back at them, he disappeared back into the Galactic Tea House, apparently unconcerned whether or not they would decide to follow him.

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Chapter 28

“I can't get that place out of my mind,” Cimarron said as they were both sitting at a lab bench in one of the rooms on the lower level. “It's like that man put some sort of subliminal messaging in my mind. I hate it.”

Banner looked up from his work at one of the terminals and observed her for a moment. She finished the small task she was on and looked up back at him. She didn't flinch when they stared at each other.

They had decided to go to a different cafe the previous day—a rather ordinary restaurant located on the far south side of the main dome and that had served innocuous fare that didn't surprise anyone. It was as if they had both simultaneously decided that this Max character was way too weird for them. Not that either of them hadn't encountered weird things before. But, Cimarron was right. There was something about that strange Galactic Tea House that looked like a tacky souvenir shop that stuck in the mind. Although, if he were to be honest with himself, it was the man's eyes that seemed to pop into Banner's head whenever he least expected it. Strange. He had never gone for men before.

“If he's hypnotized me, he's going to have another thing coming to him,” Cimarron continued as she watched him. Something flickered in her eyes. Almost feral. But he wasn't exactly afraid of her even though intellectually, he knew that she had been modified with who knows what abilities. And he knew there were abilities that she was hiding from him. He didn't disbelieve his own gut instincts.

“Well, at least you're angry with him, not me.”

She sighed. “You're thinking about that place too.”

“Yeah.” He frowned. “You're not thinking about going out there today, are you? If it is subliminal messaging, going there would make it worse. Especially if there are reinforcements.”

“We can always do some sort of brain scan. But that's what's bothering me, really. If we're both affected, then why? Why bother with the mind tricks, one on one—to us of all people—when there are more efficient ways to lure a whole horde of customers to your door?”

“Who knows. Maybe that guy just gets a kick out of harassing people on the street and messing with their heads.” He looked back on the terminal screen and did not feel like getting back to work. The house robots had already finished securing the hydroponics garden as well as the damaged lift shaft in the house. Other robots that had ordinarily been used to dust the corridors and unused rooms in the house were pressed into service to repair other minor parts of the house. One of the large mining robots had been reprogrammed to stand guard in one of the underground access tunnels, ready to send out an alert if anything managed to try to get through that way again—assuming, of course, that something wouldn't disable its sensor systems first. With everything back

on track with fixing the house and with the next project of teasing apart the security systems on his mental list, he shouldn't be thinking about the previous day. But he was.

“The news bulletin did say it was a kitchen fire. No foul play. Just someone being careless,” his house guest mused. “I wonder if that place has opened up again.”

Banner gave a short laugh with no humor. “What a flimsy excuse to go to that part of town again. I can see that you can't be dissuaded from going back there. Then fine, you go back there and check out that tea house. But I'm going with you.”

She replied with a knowing smile. “And I suppose that's your excuse for going back there as well.”

The mysterious Max was no present when they dropped by the Galactic Tea House. Instead, a short, humpbacked man was there, taking them to their table, handing out menus, and taking their orders. The strange waiter was efficient, but did not smile. He called himself Igor and disappeared into the back to get a pot of tea when Banner finally sat back to absorb his surroundings.

The place was small and filled with scarred, but clean wooden tables and chairs. The place was somewhat dim and intimate—which reminded one of romantic restaurants—but that illusion was shattered if one looked at the walls of the restaurant. There were heads of beasts from various planets on the walls—all of them in various expressions of the death throes. Banner noticed that Cimarron kept her gaze solidly on the clear plastic salt and pepper shakers on the table while a hand fiddled with a butter knife.

“This place desperately needs a new interior decorator,” Banner said.

“Oh, so you're an expert on fashion, now?”

He shrugged. “Maybe I am. I've thought about interior decorating much until this place. I guess when it becomes unbearably awful, you sort of have to notice it.”

That brought a chuckle out of her. “I suppose so. This reminds me of a museum I once went to on Earth. It was an archaeological museum which had quite a few displays of ancient dwellings. They had one exhibit that was of an old twentieth century hunting lodge. It had quite a few animal trophies on the walls too—but somehow it was different. Probably because I knew that those animal heads were all fake. This place, well who knows?”

“Who knows, indeed?”

“I mean, it's not really about the physical evidence.” She finally looked up around her in a deliberate way, but she did not give any indication that she was disgusted. “As you know, I've seen a lot worse. But it's really the psychological aspect.”

“Head games again?” Banner linked his fingers on the table and tried to examine her. “How can this be head games? It's just bad design.”

“Probably. Maybe I'm just reading too much into this. I just keep thinking about the personality behind wanting to put heads on the walls. It's not too far from the idea of some sort of horror house.”

“A haunted house,” he automatically corrected her. “Yeah, I guess I can see where you're going with that. It's a thin line between this and a bunch of human heads.”

Igor finally came back out with a tray containing a clay pot with steam swirling out of the spout and two matching tea cups. The waiter poured out the black tea and announced that their sandwiches would be out soon before disappearing back into the back. Banner glanced around him again, noting the empty tables.

“Doesn't it strike you as strange that we're the only ones here?”

“It has crossed my mind.” Cimarron took a sip of the tea and then put the teacup down. But her fingers remained wrapped around the cup. “But usually, this entire city isn't that bustling. And it's not tourist season.”

“No.”

“Ah! You came!”

Cimarron raised a brow at the voice. Banner slid a glance to the side and saw the owner of the tea house emerge from the back like an actor pushing aside the stage curtains to take his final bows. The man was wearing a blue and gray pinstriped suit this time and his head was bare of the hat. This left his longish hair free to curl behind his ears in glossy locks. He went straight to their table in a subtle swagger that spoke of a man who knew what he wanted and had little trouble getting it.

“We finally decided to try the place,” Cimarron said. “After all what have we got to lose?”

“What indeed?” Max pulled up a chair and flipped it backwards to straddle it. Banner privately thought that the man was being a little too forward and assuming as he invaded their table. “So how do you like the tea?”

Finally, Banner decided to take a sip. It was hot and slightly bitter, but almost

immediately after it touched his tongue, his head seem to clear and he could pick up the scent of the tea, pungent, a bit alluring. His first thought was that he had been poisoned, but he kept his expression carefully blank. Tea always tasted that way to him. That's why he disliked it intensely. Something sparkled in Cimarron's eyes when he looked at her. She knew he hated it. And she was probably dying to hear him lie about it. "It's good."

"I made it myself, you know," Max gushed. He was looking full on at Banner now, his blue eyes seeming to glow in the dim room. Banner blinked and felt like a small animal caught full on in someone's floodlights. "It's a special blend. Most of it is traditional black tea from the traditional tea fields in Polynesia. That's on Earth you know."

"I know," he replied without thinking. "I'm not that ignorant about Earth geography."

"Of course not. Big muscles doesn't imply that you don't have a brain."

"What?" Reflexively, he looked down at himself. He was wearing dark pants and a dark long-sleeved shirt. He was quite sure that he was completely covered. And he was quite sure that he was no body building maniac. Maybe this Max was just insulting him for the hell of it.

Cimarron seemed suddenly amused. "Poor Banner. I'm afraid he's totally unaware. Not that I'm surprised."

Max turned briefly to her and flashed a smile. "Apparently. Anyways, it's mostly black tea. But I've also mixed some herbs from New Caledonia and Hestia Prime. They give off a slightly milder taste—I always compare it to dark oak, like a smooth finish on a particularly good vintage of wine."

That made Banner scowl. He knew all about wine tasting. After all, his grandfather had started an entire wine empire. And he also knew that even though he had no experience with the finer aspects of tea culture, tea tasted nothing like wine. "Are you mad?"

"Aw, you look so cute when you're irate," Max replied. "There's no need to be defensive because you're ignorant about the finer points of the tea plant. If you wanted to, I could give you a few pointers."

Banner was forced to shrug. If he answered truthfully, he'd sound like an uncultured boor. And if he said yes, it would open up a whole new conversation that he

did not want to have.

“Well, I am so glad that you came to my establishment. I'm sure Igor will be out shortly. Ah, here he is. I'll let the two of you to enjoy the rest of your meal.”

The hunchbacked waiter came out with the sandwiches and perfunctorily placed them onto the table. Igor politely informed them that if they needed him, that they were just to call out his name. But when he turned to head into the background, he gave a strange glance at the restaurant owner who had now stood up from his chair. If the light had been better, he would have been sure that Igor was giving a not so subtle indication that he thought his boss was nuts.

Chapter 29

The sandwiches were unremarkable fare while the conversation mostly centered on the work that they were doing back on the house. Earlier that morning, Banner had decided to contact his friend to ask about any possibilities about blocking quanting into a place. Shimizu had hesitated about his request, but something about Banner's manner had convinced Shimizu to tell him that there were experimental plans currently being implemented by some transportation scientists about a quanting shield. He would try to get more information about it before contacting him later that day.

Meanwhile, Dr. Tong had sent a cryptic data file to her daughter. Cimarron had not made head or tails of the data—which she assumed was biological in nature—and had still been trying to crack it when they had decided to go to the Galactic Tea House for lunch. Banner followed his instinct again and suggested that she compare the data that her mother sent her with the data on Jorge Helado's data chip.

After the sandwiches were consumed and most of the tea drunk, Cimarron briefly excused herself to use the facilities. Banner sat back and looked at the walls of the tea house, but he was not examining any of the taxidermy. Instead, his thoughts wandered back to the conundrum of his great-uncle's house and the possibility that there might be more information hidden somewhere.

The scrape of a chair leg against the floor brought him back to his present

location. He looked beside him to find that the restaurant owner had taken up a seat beside the table again. For a moment, Max stared at him. Fascinated, Banner watched as a slight blush crept up the man's neck and cheeks, but that did not prevent the restaurant owner from looking away from him.

“So, how did you find lunch?”

“Good.”

Max grinned. “A man of few words, I see. I hope you'll be able to come back soon.”

“Hm. That's really weird. Most people would tell me not to come back.”

“Why?” Max scooted his chair so that now they were toe to toe. He put a hand on the table, his long fingers close to Banner's teacup. In a detached sort of way, Banner wondered why he wasn't trying to put distance between him and the man. “That doesn't sound like good business sense. You can't make a living scaring customers away.”

“Sure. But I think that they were afraid that I'll scare their other customers away. What's one person compared to many?”

“Why would anyone be scared of you?”

Banner blinked. “You haven't heard the stories about me?”

“Oh, I've heard.” Max waved a hand in the air as if it didn't matter. “But everyone on Triton's got something about them that's somewhat unsavory. But you, you've got an air of danger and excitement about you. There's something quite appealing about a survivor from Tartaros.”

“You must be out of your mind,” Banner suddenly growled. “Being on that hell hole is not some frou-frou summer camp for wannabe bad boys. If I had the choice, I wouldn't have been there in the first place.”

“Ooo! Do it again.”

“Do what again?”

“That growl. I knew I was right about you. Possibly both of you.”

Banner looked at him warily as Max unbuttoned his coat. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Max leaned even closer. “Tell me, is your girlfriend really a courtesan class slave girl? She definitely looks like one. And so polite too!”

“Cimarron is not a courtesan class slave girl. I ought to sock you in the jaw.”

“Then do it.”

Banner looked at his suspiciously bright eyes and quickly reined in his impulses. “What the hell do you want? Are you some sort of masochist who enjoys taunting his customers just so they can hit you?”

Max's lips twitched. “Maybe I am. What do you think?”

He snorted in disgust. “She was right. You are playing mind games.”

“And what if I am?”

“If you are, I might be the one to hit you.” Cimarron had returned. She remained standing as she stared down at Max. The owner of the restaurant stared back up at her and seemed entranced by the banked anger in her gaze. “And it wouldn't be the sort of hit for some perversity of yours. Oh no, you'll be in a world of pain.”

“That's nice,” Max said dreamily.

Banner finally stood up and called for Igor who came scurrying out with a credit transfer pad. Max finally seemed to snap out of his daze and stood up, smoothing down his jacket. After finishing the transaction, Banner said curtly to the restaurant owner, “I think you have us pegged as the wrong people.”

As he and Cimarron turned to leave the Galactic Tea House, Max called out something that made them stop briefly in their tracks.

“Oh, I know exactly who you two are, Banner Wice and Cimarron Tong-Radcliff. Jorge Helado told me all about you two. I know all your hopes and dreams. And nightmares. If you know what's good for you, you'll be coming right back here.”

At that, Banner spun around, ignoring the dangerous rise in his temper. He stalked back towards Max and grabbed the collar of his shirt. They were literally nose to nose as he sneered back at the restaurant owner who wasn't perturbed at all about the violence. In fact, he was smirking.

Cimarron stumbled behind him as she turned back as well. “Banner! What do you think you're doing?”

“Getting information,” he replied without taking his eyes off of Max. “Now,” he said to his captive, “Tell me exactly how you know my great-uncle and why he would tell you about me.”

Chapter 30

Max ordered Igor to fetch another pot of tea. Resigned about his boss's antics, the waiter went back to retrieve the drinks. Only slowly did Banner release his grip on the tea house owner. Max didn't bother to smooth down his rumpled suit as he sat back down. He motioned for Banner and Cimarron to also take their seats as well. Banner did this slowly with Cimarron following, not as hesitantly.

“Jorge Helado came to this place often the last two years of his life.”

Banner did not trust himself to say anything to that comment. He was still trying to get his temper to simmer down. Cimarron, however, did not have this problem. “He did? Jorge and I were close. He never told me this when he was alive.”

“He might not have thought it was all that important at the time,” Max said. “After all, you were visiting him. Why would he take his goddaughter out to some place like this when it would be much nicer to entertain her in some fancier place? Besides, I don't think we were destined to meet each other yet.”

“Destined?” Cimarron's voice held a slight edge. “There is no such thing as destiny. The future is what we make of it. It's all a coincidence, really. If that cafe had not caught on fire, we would never have met you.”

“That's not quite true,” Max murmured, mostly to himself. “But that doesn't matter. We're here now. You know, I used to go on those expeditions. I was assigned to a few teams. The last three was with Dr. Helado.”

“You went on a xenobiological expedition?” Banner finally said. “That's a little hard to believe. You're a restaurant owner.”

“I wasn't always a restaurant owner. I originally trained as a hunter. Hence all of my decorations.”

“You killed all of these?”

Max simply grinned at the sound of amazement in Cimarron's comment. “What? I don't look like a hunter?”

“You look like some pretty boy...”

“Glad you noticed, Banner.” The restaurant owner turned his smile on him. Or was that a leer?

“Who hasn't been out in the wilderness let alone outside of a cubicle,” Banner finished. “But that doesn't matter. You haven't really answered my questions. There were a lot of people who have been on expeditions with my great-uncle. What were you doing on those expeditions and how close were you to him? And do you have any proof of your connection with him, other than the fact that you two have lived in the same city for a few years?”

“We'll get to the proof in a little while,” Max responded. “I knew your great-uncle for quite a few years. I was a biochemist at one of Luna's universities for a while doing the whole academic route. I was quite brilliant at my work, if I do say so myself, but I was getting seriously burnt out. One of my friends at the university is a psychologist and he saw the signs. He thought the cure would be for me to get into something different, that was different from the pressures of academic life. So he called an acquaintance who somehow got in touch with Dr. Helado.”

“So your friend thought that sending you out on an expedition would help you out of your burnout?” Cimarron shook her head. “Remind me not to have friends like those. I've heard about the stresses of expedition work from my mother. It's not that dissimilar to that of academic work.”

Max nodded. “Oh, I soon found that out. But at the time, I was very young and I didn't know any better. Dr. Helado came out and talked to me without me knowing that I was on some sort of interview and then in a sort of whirlwind transfer, got me into some work involving analyzing data collected from his numerous expeditions. And then, I finally graduated into actually doing some expedition work. But even after three, I decided that was not for me either. So I opened the Galactic Tea House and put my expertise into making tea blends. And I've found that I'm much happier here.”

“How great for you,” Banner said.

“Hm.” Max only raised his eyebrows at his sarcasm. “Well, an added bonus was that I got to keep in touch with Dr. Helado since he often came here on his vacations. And I wasn't completely out of the look on expedition work. Occasionally, I would do some consulting work. And then, there was his visit just before his last expedition.”

“You saw him right before he died?” Cimarron asked.

Max shrugged. “I suppose. Close to it. The meeting itself was really quite ordinary. At first, I didn't think much of it. As always, he would talk about how his

family was doing, how you two were doing—he seemed quite pleased that you finally got out of your sentence, he had always believed that you were innocent, and that those Tibetan nuns had messaged him saying that Cimarron was almost ready to leave her stay.”

“What? The nuns said that?” she said surprised. “I left on my own. They never said anything about wanting me to leave.”

“I don't think it was that. Maybe nuns have their own ways of sensing things,” Max said, amused by her expression. “At any rate, he did tell me a little about his last expedition. He said something cryptic—about data that he was about to confirm and that could be used for purposes that he didn't approve of. He also said something about his house not being as safe as it could be.” With that remark, the tea house owner gave them a significant look.

Banner and Cimarron glanced at each other. It was Banner who spoke. “What do you know about the house?”

“I don't know much,” Max admitted. “I only know that Dr. Helado told me that even the most updated security measures might not be enough for some things. I don't know what those things are. But he did give me a data chip to give to you, in the case that I find both of you together.”

“Then why didn't you just drop by the house and give it to us?” Banner demanded.

Max blushed at that remark. “Well.” He tried clearing his throat. “Well, I was a bit intimidated.”

Cimarron had a curious expression on her face. “Intimidated? Why? You'd only be dropping off a data chip.”

“You make it sound so easy. But I would have to stay and explain why I had it in the first place.” For the first time, they saw Max slump in his chair, his easy confidence deserting him. “I'd just be a stuttering fool like I am now.”

Banner narrowed his eyes. “You certainly seem far from it.”

“It's all bravado. Besides, you're on my turf now. I feel comfortable here.”

Cimarron raised her eyes to the severed animal heads on the walls. “I can see. Your décor leaves a lot to be desired. It would make anyone else have second thoughts.”

“Yes. Well, it's all there for a reason. Besides, I'd hate to be just another generic

cafe. They're all the same. And no one remembers you. Unless the food is great.” Max tapped his chin as Igor came back out with another pot of tea. “This one is on me,” Max declared. He poured out three cups and raised his to take a sip.

“What about that data chip?” Banner asked, as he reluctantly sipped the hot beverage. Cimarron didn't seem to have any qualms as she took a healthy swallow. This time, it was slightly sweet, as if someone had put in a dollop of honey. Darkness flickered into his vision. Damn it, the tea definitely was poisoned.

Max had drunk his own cup before replying in a slightly slurred voice. “Sure, I'll get it right...”

Before he completely blacked out, Banner saw Cimarron and their host fall unconsciously to the floor.