

Chapter 6

Cara looked up at the catwalk where she'd been the day before, and then at the spacecraft looming overhead. Even without the lower fuel containing stages, this part of the ship stood more than four stories high, *underground*. The vast cavern housing the space-engineering lab and its ship seemed an impossible sight, as improbable as stumbling upon a sleeping giant. Mason followed her gaze. "This is just the service module and payload of the prototype. We're building whole ships in other locations and *those* babies will *fly*. Oh... excuse me, I have a call," he said, and walked a short distance away to talk privately.

Devoid of people, the quiet of the cavernous space was ethereal. Cara wondered if this was how it felt in the great expanse beyond the exosphere. Suddenly a light switched on, calling attention to a person working nearby.

"Hello," Cara called.

He waved a wrench in response.

"I didn't expect to find anyone here at this hour," she said as she walked over to him.

"Someone's always here watchin' over the place and today that someone's me." He pointed his wrench at Mason. "You with that fella?"

"Yes," she allowed. "He's giving me a tour of the lab. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Shoot."

"What do *you* do here?"

"I'm the guy the PhDs run to when their stuff stops working. The kids call me Electricity Ed."

She laughed. "I'm Cara, nice to meet you Ed. The children of the scientists are allowed to come here?"

"On Sunday afternoons."

She nodded toward the ship. "Do they ask how you got this in here?"

He howled. "They *do*! And I tell 'em 'one piece at a time'. The older ones remember when we built it; they won't admit it *now*, but *back then*, all they cared about was, the big derrick we had in here. The thing was the size of a dinosaur."

"But there's no crane here now," Cara said, scanning the lab. "How do they work on the outside of the ship?"

"If you go 'round the other side, you'll see an elevator that goes to the top and can stop anywhere on the way. Each section has a horizontal ladder that goes 'round the perimeter, and from those ladders, they rappel out to any place they need to. Got a couple of ironworkers for that; no fear."

Cara pulled in a sharp breath at the thought of rappelling across the slick, outer surface. She turned to Ed. "May I ask how you ended up in the Resistance?"

"I came here after most everyone I knew died from the virus."

"Oh..." she stammered. "I'm *so* sorry."

"Damn plague. If it doesn't get you, the war will," he muttered and then disappeared behind an instrument panel.

A hush fell over them when words of solace could not be found. Cara listened to the hum of the machinery around her and thought about the labs she'd visited in the base. The work they were doing was nothing short of excellent... but her thoughts on the matter ended when Ed's face popped up from behind a panel.

"I can hear just fine back here," he said. "Got more questions?"

She chuckled. "Do most people here call the virus a 'plague'?"

"Nah, just me. I figure they'll call it that in a hundred years, why wait?"

"The Corporation takes offense to anyone labeling it that," warned Cara. "Aren't you afraid you might say it by mistake around the DM?"

"Nope. Don't care about snotty rich kids who get to stay home when all the other boys are sent to the front. Next question," he prompted affably.

"Uh..." Cara faltered, thrown by the stark truth in his statement. "Um, *yes*. Do you like working here?"

"Sure, I like helping out," he answered. "If you only look after yourself and your own stuff, that's all you'll ever have."

For some reason, Ed's words triggered a vivid recollection of her grandmother singing to her. The memory came so suddenly it made her dizzy, so she sat down on the footstool next to her.

"Hey Ed!" Mason hailed. "You met Cara?"

"Yes sir."

Mason squinted at her. "What's the matter? You're pale as a ghost."

"I've just seen one..."

"What?" Mason responded with a laugh.

"I just had a memory from when I was, I don't know... five years old? It came out of nowhere."

Mason turned over a crate and sat down next to her. "I find it best to look the past in the eye however it presents itself."

She shuffled her feet anxiously. "The Children's Center... I don't know why, but something about the place blotted out the past."

"Yeah," he agreed. "They were good at that."

"I was in college before I thought about my parents." She looked at him. "That's *very strange*, don't you think?"

"Not for people raised in a Children's Center," he answered.

She considered that as she gazed out over the lab. "Brookes suggested I look at more pictures..." then turned to see his response but was caught off guard when his attentiveness was unexpectedly intimate. She noticed too, how close he was sitting and how comfortable it felt to have him so near.

In a spasm of self-consciousness, she stood up. "So... tell me," she deflected, "What are you processing with all these high speed computers?"

"*You* changed the subject this time," he pointed out.

She smiled serenely. "Yes I did."

Mason grinned and stood up too. "Well... most of the electronic equipment *in this area* is for systems analysis. Whenever they make improvements to the prototype, for example, this row of equipment collects data to determine if the enhancement was achieved. In the *next row*, the computers are collecting data from various experiments and most of the third row is monitoring the prototype's operating systems."

Ed came out from behind one of the instrument panels. "You should tell her what you do here when you're not giving tours."

"Not now, Ed."

"He's a geothermal engineer," Ed revealed. "Did he tell you that?"

"He did *not*!" Cara exclaimed, feigning indignation. "What else should I know?"

“Oh, he can tell you the rest himself,” said Ed, and then disappeared again. Cara waited in amused anticipation for Mason to speak and he laughed at the unrelenting stare. “What else did you want to know?” he asked.

“How a teenage runaway became a military leader with an engineering specialty.”

They heard Ed chuckle and Mason called out, “We know you’re right there, Ed. We can hear you.”

Ed’s voice rose from behind the nearest panel. “Minding my own business.”

“Perhaps there’s someone else here who can answer my question,” Cara said, pretending to search the lab for people.

Mason shrugged. “It’s not a secret. Anyone who knows me can answer that question. I joined the Resistance right after I left the Orphan Center. Then Brookes, as my mentor, directed my education and about a year in, I was sent abroad for military training. Two years later, Brookes asked me to study electrical engineering at a university in Sweden. When I finished there, I went to Norway for a Sustainable Energy program, and then I came back here to help them build this base.”

“Mason designed our geothermal system,” Ed commented.

“Oh,” Cara said, somewhat surprised. “I know geothermal is used in western states but I didn’t know people could make use of it here.”

“We don’t have the necessary conditions for *large-scale* electricity generation like they have out West,”

Mason agreed, “but low-temperature geothermal resources for heating and cooling purposes, are more accessible than you’d think. Except for cooling the professor’s sunlamp nightmare, and warming people in *this* enormous space,” Mason said, pointing to a few infrared space heaters by way of illustration, “we manage the heating and the cooling of the entire base using the *heat energy* stored in the earth, and a few loops of underground piping to transfer that heat. If you understand heat transfer... you’ll understand what we have here, because the rest is pipes and pumps.”

“You should take her with you next time you do your maintenance rounds,” Ed suggested.

“That would be great,” Cara said. “I’d like to see it.”

“Sure,” Mason replied. “They chose geothermal sourced heating and cooling for the base because it’s cheaper. In three years, we made up all the installation costs in the money we saved by using geo instead of oil, gas or electric. Unlike with oil and gas,” he added, “we can’t run out of geothermal energy because all the work of producing the heat energy stored in the earth, is done for us *for free* by the sun.”

“Til the sun blows up,” stated Ed.

Mason raised an eyebrow. “We have time to solve that problem.”

“Five billion years is *short*, when you’re my age,” Ed informed him.

Mason chuckled. “Mankind will have moved to another solar system by then,” he said, glancing at his watch. “And, on *that* note, it’s time for Cara to meet the people who, along with Ed and his crew, are working to make travel beyond our solar system possible.”

“Did you show her the command capsule yet?” Ed asked him.

Cara’s jaw dropped. “Oh wow. Am I allowed to? I’ve seen pictures and videos of flight decks, but never been *inside* one.”

“Sure you can,” encouraged Ed.

“Guess that’s our next stop, then,” Mason said, eyeing Ed suspiciously. “You’re full of suggestions today, Ed. I’ve never seen you so talkative.”

“Yes, thank you so much,” Cara added.
Ed smiled. “Happy to help.”

“Ask us anything you want. You have the same security clearance as we do, so if there’s something you’re not allowed to know, we don’t know it either.”

Cara picked up the old news article sitting on the table. “Medical Researchers Lost in Plane Crash,” she read. “Renowned virologists Pamela Morales and Benjamin Rubin died yesterday when their plane crashed in the Andes Mountains.” She handed the article back to them and asked, “The Resistance helped you fake your deaths?”

“It’s your turn to tell it,” Pam said to her partner.

“Okay,” Ben agreed amiably, “but chime in if I forget something. What the article neglects to mention, Cara, is that one week before the crash, the *couple in question* uncovered the *lie* about the vaccine and turned to the Resistance for help.”

“Is this a regular occurrence... people faking their deaths then joining the Resistance?” Cara quizzed.

“Yes,” replied Pam. “Some faked deaths require elaborate planning but for others like us, the whole thing is *unnervingly* spur of the moment.”

“In Santiago, I contacted my brother because I knew he was with the Resistance,” Ben explained.

“He arranged for someone to take us into hiding after we gave our talk at the conference, and then he bribed a Chilean official to add our names to the passenger list of a plane that crashed the day we disappeared.”

“A terrible tragedy enabled our good fortune,” Pam murmured.

“No. The *tragedy* is *no vaccine*,” Ben stated. “Lack of a vaccine has caused problem after problem. In this case, the pilot of the plane that crashed was very ill with the virus but he flew anyway, for fear he’d lose his job if he didn’t. There’s this thing among the ruling class. The second they have so much as a sniffle, they run and get the best medical care money can buy, hide out until they’re better, and then act like it’s their godlike immune systems that keep them well. Their health is so well protected, they can claim they *never get sick* and when someone they don’t like is ill, they accuse them of being ‘weak’ and unfit for their job. People get fired all the time for being sick.”

“Why wasn’t the pilot taking antiviral?” Cara asked.

“There’s a shortage in South America,” Ben said. “The rich are hoarding, the criminals are scalping, and the working people are sick.”

Cara put down her glass with a thud and began rubbing her forehead. “I still don’t understand how the virus got out of control. It’s not like this was the first pandemic of the millennia and no one knew what to do.”

“Sounds like there’re a *few* missing pieces in the history you learned in school,” Pam proposed.

“Not your fault. Institutionalized denial is what happens when criminals run your institutions. Would you like us to tell you what we think you don’t know?”

Cara sighed with relief. “Please do.”

Pam leaned back comfortably in her chair. “Have at it, Ben,” she said.

“It just so happens that I *vividly* recall the purposely perpetrated holes,” Ben said, “the *gaps* in the revisionist history *shoved down our throats*.”

“Start in the early 21st century,” Pam suggested, “when it was rumored Iraq had stockpiled biological weapons.”

“Good idea,” he said. “Well... the US *did indeed* find a large collection of *pathogens* in an Iraqi facility. They also discovered that the collection had been cloned and sold... but the number of sets that were out in the world, and who had them, was unknown.”

Cara groaned. “Where did the pathogens come from?”

Ben rolled his eyes. “The conspiracy theories are very entertaining but the truth is, I don’t know. The part we’ve been able to ascertain is that various international heads of state met together in secret to discuss how to handle the situation and decided on this course of action: to keep the existence of the pathogens a secret from the public, to jointly study the degree of danger of each clone, and to handle the threat by gradually introducing all the virulence factors in *diminished potency* to the general population. The plan wasn’t a bad one, given that, *back then*, it took *years* to develop a new vaccine and antiviral pharma was in its infancy.”

“Even now,” interjected Pam, “with all the improved cocktails that we have, antivirals alone can’t combat a worldwide outbreak. One reason is the expense: only a privileged minority can afford to get the correct dose of antiviral every week. Another reason: people don’t like the side effects of antivirals, and routinely use *less* than the necessary dose... but of course, a lower dose won’t *stop viral replication completely*, so you end up selecting for the emergence of a resistant variant that could be *worse* than the one you started with. Then there’s the complication of having to get tested to know what bug you contracted, so they know what meds to give you. But you have to be tested *before you get too sick*, because antivirals only work if you administer them *before the infection peaks*. For all these reasons and *more*, to combat a pandemic you have to use antiviral meds in *combination* with vaccination. But *instead*,” Pam sputtered angrily, “our leaders thought it was a good idea to have everyone take an antiviral prophylactically and call it a *vaccine*.”

“You have to admit it’s made them very rich,” Ben remarked, “and everyone else is sick and poor and easy to control.”

Pam glared at no one in particular and then said, “Perhaps it’s best to get back to the chronology of events.”

Ben gave a nod and continued. “As I said, introducing weak forms of the pathogens into the population wasn’t a bad strategy given the medical solutions of the day.”

“Was every pathogen in the collection a virus?” Cara asked.

“No,” he said, “but once the DNA sequences were reviewed, the only organisms that had been genetically altered were the viruses. So, to speed things up, they decided to focus on the higher threat, the designer bugs, and ignore the unaltered organisms in the lineup.”

“Because the world population already had some immunity against them,” Cara said, “and there were treatments for the diseases they caused.”

“Right,” Ben acknowledged. “So, to handle the threat, various mob organizations were conscripted-”

Cara stopped him. “I’m sorry, *what did you say?*”

“The government,” Ben relayed, “paid organized crime bosses to use their people as human incubators to bring the pathogens into the population via human contact.”

Cara’s mouth dropped open.

“We’re not saying we agree with this method,” Pam explained. “We’re just telling you what happened.”

“The inducement, as you might imagine, was financial,” Ben reported. “I don’t know how much the bosses were paid for the promise of secrecy, but I know that the people injected with an attenuated virus were paid five hundred dollars a pop; and, if they were willing to follow a set of instructions about *when and where* to expose people... *to avoid over-saturating any one region, you see... those* people received an additional thousand dollars. Maybe that was a reasonable amount of money back then, given that the risk to the participants was small.”

Cara frowned skeptically. “How was the risk *small*?”

“All the participants started off healthy,” said Ben, “were given a *low* dose of a *weakened* strain and then were closely monitored until they recovered. Of *course* we should question the ethics, but the method was successful in that it effected the expected adaptation within the population.”

“Until...” Pam broke in ominously, then her voice trailed off.

“Until what?” Cara prompted.

“The mob organizations decided to develop *their own* pathogen collections to use as weapons of intimidation,” Ben answered.

“It gets worse,” Pam warned.

“These organizations were experiencing internal power struggles,” Ben continued, “the biggest problem being that the younger generations were refusing to follow orders. The most infamous act of defiance was committed by a grandson of a mob boss who, after deciding he deserved more money than he was getting, sold a virus strain to an African military leader in Equatorial Guinea.”

“Oh no.” Cara covered her eyes with her hand.

“The young man,” Pam recounted, “thought he was selling a virus he’d used before to punish a person who’d been uncooperative with his grandfather. But he made a mistake and sold a recently acquired strain, one that was extensively engineered and untested. A strain the world had never encountered.” Pam looked closely at Cara and then added, “I think you see where this is going...”

Cara’s hand remained over her eyes when she replied, “This happened while my great aunt was working in Equatorial Guinea.”

“Yes,” Pam answered softly. “I’m sorry.”

Cara sat up straight. “No, don’t be. It’s great to finally hear a story that fits the facts.”

“Good for you,” Ben rallied.

“Do you know how she *contracted* it?” Cara asked.

“We do,” Ben replied grimly. “In addition to being a despot, this African leader was a jealous spouse. He’d bought the pathogen to use against his political rivals, but in a fit of green-eyed rage, he gave it all to his wife and her lover. Both people became seriously ill and though the wife was successfully quarantined, the lover boarded a plane and sat next to your great aunt Cara on a fourteen-hour flight to New York.”

“And when they reached New York,” Cara guessed, “the passengers boarded connecting flights.”

“Yes,” Pam confirmed, “except for the six people who went to a meeting *at the United Nations*, a meeting with hundreds of people from around the world. In three days, the virus found its way to all the major airports in our country and had traveled with the UN dignitaries across the globe.”

They sat without speaking for a few moments.

“On the bright side,” Ben announced cheerily, “the crime organizations stopped feuding.”

“Why?” Cara asked.

“Partly because the pandemic knocked *everyone* on their asses, including the mob, but *mostly* because of the man who managed to unite all the mob organizations in this country under his leadership. But you knew that last bit.”

“No,” said Cara. “I had no idea. Does the Resistance know who he is?”

Pam looked puzzled. “Yes, he vetted you.”

Comprehension slowly dawned in Cara’s eyes. “Anthony?”

When Pam shot Ben a questioning look, he shrugged in response.

Cara spoke her next words slowly: “*And this organization is part of the Resistance?*”

“It is,” Ben answered carefully.

Right at that moment, Mason joined them. “Sorry I’m late,” he said, pulling up a chair.

Cara turned to face Mason squarely. “I just heard something interesting.”

Mason glanced at Pam and Ben and found wide eyes staring back at him.

“Yes,” said Cara. “I learned that Anthony is *the* mob boss who united *all* the mob organizations in this country. A *small* detail... I’m sure I just missed it when you told me.”

“Anthony’s not someone you need to fear,” Mason said quietly.

“Okay,” scoffed Cara.

Mason sighed. “Did you ever wonder why you didn’t have a terrible experience in your Orphan Center?”

“What?”

Mason tried again. “Everyone I know *except* you had a *terrible* experience in their Orphan Center, including myself. I’ve never met the kids you grew up with, but I’ve met many others.”

“What’re you trying to say?”

“Anthony... made sure that you were looked after in your Center,” Mason explained. “I’m not saying I think your experience was pleasant, just that it could have been worse.”

Pam leaned closer to Ben and whispered, “*Did you know that?*”

“Nope.”

Pam waved to the waiter. “A round of drinks for this table, please. Strongest you’ve got.”

Cara sat very still. “Why would he do that?”

“He and Brookes both knew your parents,” Mason replied. “I can’t tell you more than that, but if you like, I’ll let him know you’re wondering.”

“I think it’s time to change the subject,” said Ben.

It’s morning somewhere, Cara thought as she followed her guide through the dimly lit tunnel.

The underground Resistance base was a maze of interconnecting passageways designed to confuse and entrap intruders. In the living and office areas, the halls had drywall and paint but outside that central zone, the tunnels were mud-colored cement and maddeningly the same.

Even if an infiltrator evaded the security sensors, they’d never distinguish the thoroughways from the countless dead ends. They’d be forced to choose between freezing to death and turning themselves in because the tunnels were wet and cold enough for a person to die of exposure every day of the year.

“NetNews says we’re ‘extremists’,” Aliyah was saying, “when all we want is an end to this debilitating illness.”

“Is that why you help the Resistance?” Cara asked. “To eradicate the virus?”

"I joined the R because I was terrified of the virus. Completely paralyzed with fear," she said. "The Resistance pulled me out of that."

"How?" Cara asked.

"I'm someone who needs..." Aliyah tilted her head to one side as she struggled to find her next words. "I need something that's more important than the things I fear... bigger, than my fears. When I fill my day with work that leads to something meaningful... something that makes life better not just for me but for others as well, hope replaces fear. I don't know why that is, I just know it happens."

"Do you think the Resistance will make things better for people?" Cara asked.

"Yes," she answered, "I'm not saying they're the only way to a better world. I'm sure there are other, equally legitimate groups working toward similar goals, I just have never encountered them."

"Legitimate?" Cara spoke doubtfully. "We're on our way to a meeting to discuss how to *illegally* enter a military base and then break into one of the buildings."

"The proprietorship of your great aunt was willed to you," Aliyah reminded. "*You* have the legal right to revive her. But if you tried to openly exercise that right, you'd be stopped. Obstructing your rights... is *that* legitimate? I call it breaking the law."

"So... *two wrongs* will make everything right?" Cara asked.

"It's not about the number of wrongs, though we certainly could take a tally and come to the same conclusion. This is about a grotesque imbalance of power. Consider the CEO of the Corporation in our simple scenario. He owns the cryostasis building your great aunt is in, and his privately owned, million-dollar cryostasis enterprise is secured within a military base paid for by *our tax dollars*. I can't buy a building and have the military guard it for me, *for free*. Can you? But the CEO, a private citizen just like you and me, says what he wants *even if it's a lie*, does what he wants *even if it's wrong* and the military protects his 'right' to do so. *Their* column on the balance sheet of wrongs runs on and on, the pages never stop. So...what do we do? How do you balance the scale of wrongs? *You exercise your rights*."

The lights suddenly went out in the tunnel and they stood in darkness. A moment later, the way forward was visible again as Aliyah turned up the brightness on her electro-luminescent gloves.

"We lost electric in the west end corridor," Aliyah spoke into her commlink. "Thank you."

Cara laughed. "I have no sense of east versus west down here. How can you tell where we are?"

"Memory," she answered. "I had to learn the tunnels inside and out as part of my apprenticeship with the GZ."

Cara had learned about some of the groups within the Resistance from Gwen, including the one to which Aliyah belonged that only allowed women in its ranks. The GegenZeit had sprung from a number of women's organizations in Europe and Israel that had been providing aid to women in developing countries. When the New World War broke out, the organizations merged their resources to rescue people from the war zone in Africa. The groups united under one name, the GegenZeit, when they joined the European arm of the Resistance.

"What does 'GegenZeit' mean?" Cara asked.

"*Against the Times*," Aliyah answered, "against the tide of events threatening to sweep us away."

"What are you 'for'?"

"Same as the Resistance. A world where people aren't *shackled* to a fictional vaccine," Aliyah declared. "The Corporation has the technology to develop a vaccine for this virus, but they won't because our dependency on the antiviral makes them rich. If we want to end this pandemic and the war, we need to end the Corporation's stranglehold on the world economy."

“You want to put an end to the Corporation?”

“No,” Aliyah objected. “That would be suicide. *We’re* the ones who want a vaccine so people will *live*, remember?”

“You mean to tell me,” Cara challenged, “that the Resistance has *no intention* of trying to overthrow the Corporation, the military, or the government... *ever*?”

“That’s right...” Aliyah answered, “because they’re not stupid! Interfering with any of those organizations would disrupt antiviral production and distribution and then slow... maybe even *stop*, essential supply lines for food and fuel in this country. Only the very rich could survive that! Of course, *if it were up to me, I’d eliminate* all the selfish babies and power addicts who caused this mess... a desire most likely motivated by that punitive, *run-of-the-mill* human failing, perfectionism. Fortunately, I’m not in charge here. The Resistance isn’t chasing after the illusion of perfection, but they do insist on *improvement*, starting with people’s health. New people such as yourself must look at us and feel frustrated by how little the Resistance has accomplished. Our progress is slow because our efforts, by necessity, must be carefully *tuned* to bring about change sensibly... humanely.”

For a time, they walked along in peaceful silence. Cara listened to the sound of water drops falling from the ceiling to the tunnel floor. They reminded her of walking in the rain one afternoon with Rachel, and something Rachel said.

“Someone told me,” Cara said to Aliyah, “that human progress is a ‘*two-steps-forward, one-step-backwards*’ process.”

“Well, we must be in the one-step-backwards phase,” Aliyah observed wryly. “Can’t blame anybody though; we did this ourselves. We prized money and ‘pretty’ over everything else. Being entertained was more important than knowing the truth. Even me and my own family... we lived this way without realizing it. We aren’t bad people. We just got lost.

If a society values the things that money can buy more than they value honesty and kindness, so *will their leaders*, and in just a few generations you’ll get a country full of selfish babies, self-medicating escapists, and terrified gerbils chained to their work wheels. When the greedy are in charge and the good people run scared, the wolves aren’t howling in the distance stealing a few sheep at night; they’re running the show.”

“The wolves would argue they’re a necessary part of the food chain,” said Cara.

“*Wolves* are,” Aliyah agreed, “but wolf-*people* are a throwback. If people act like animals for too long, well... even the wolves are losing out now.”

Cara shook her head. “Even if we could turn this ship around, set a new course, what would we do about the damage done?”

“The past is inescapable,” Aliyah said. “It never goes away and the people who run from it are just wasting time. You face your past or it comes and hits you in the face. That’s how it is. But the future is changeable. Always.”

The tunnel lights sprang on for a second and then went out again.

“Ha!” Aliyah laughed. “Why did they bother to put electric in these tunnels? ‘*Public service announcement*’,” she proclaimed waving her hands, “the meeting room has a generator and it’s nice and warm!”

Cara rubbed her gloved hands together. “That’s good news,” she agreed.

“I’m supposed to meet Katrin today,” Cara revealed. “Can you tell me a little about her?”

“She’s the leader of the GZ in North America, but don’t let that intimidate you. She’s a real person. You probably know her second-in-command, Yael, since she’s in charge of the martial

arts training here. Like Yael, Katrin's professional but is able to tune into people. Great combo in a leader."

"I know Yael," acknowledged Cara. "I've had combat training with her every day since I arrived and it's *killing* me! The motto on the wall may say: *Resistance without retaliation requires discipline*," Cara quoted. "But I know that means, *no pain no gain*."

Aliyah laughed heartily and the sound echoed through the tunnel.

"Oh," Cara said, coming to a halt. "Do I hear voices up ahead?"

"Yup!"

They made a right turn at a branch point in the tunnel and at the end of the corridor, they could see people milling around an area filled with light. Just out of curiosity, Cara turned around and looked behind her. The way they had come was blacker than the darkest night.

Aliyah glanced back too and said, "Think you can find your way back on your own?" Then she burst into a laugh. "You should see your face," she snorted.

"Yeah, very funny."

When they reached the crowd outside the meeting room, a person called to Aliyah.

"I have to talk to this person," Aliyah explained. "Go on in and get a seat before they're all taken. I'll come find you after."

"Sounds good," Cara agreed, as Aliyah headed off.

Cara inched forward through the crowd. She could see the top of the arched doorway from where the light was emanating but nothing else because of all the bodies in front of her.

"Good thing it's a big room," she heard someone say.

When she finally made it to the archway, she stopped and gaped at the marvel in front of her.

The meeting room was a cave whose walls were covered with ancient art. LEDs lit up the oblong space, highlighting the reddish brown and dark blue outlines of animals in a forest scene.

The sketches were of birds and bears, fish and deer, snakes and wolves and something that she guessed was a beaver. Most of the animals had distinct lines and edges but some merged into others, making a fish the foot of a bear, a bird the antler of a buck, a snake the tail of a wolf...

Plant life was interspersed throughout the animal figures so elegantly, that it seemed as if the forest had been transported inside. Trees spanned the height of the space and others rose beyond that, their branches and leaves spilling out and across the ceiling. Though overwhelming in number, the paintings formed a harmonious whole, melting together into a collage that wrapped around the room.

An oak table, engraved with shapes reminiscent of the flora on the walls, ran the length of the space and there at the far end of it, was a second arched doorway. Cara made her way across the room, examining the pictures as she went, and when she reached the other arch, again she stood in astonishment.

The room of paintings was an antechamber to a vast, dark cavern where arrangements of rocks were artistically featured with lights. The part that drew her eyes first were two walkways lit by lanterns that lead far into the darkness, beckoning one to follow... but in between the paths was something impossible. An array of stalactites and stalagmites, huge monoliths of nature, were spectacularly displayed in amber lighting. She climbed down the stone steps into the cavern hoping to get close enough to touch them, but the area was cordoned off.

"They're manmade," a familiar voice spoke behind her. Mason stood in the arched doorway against a backdrop of light streaming from the meeting room.

"They look *real*!" Cara exclaimed. "But to get formations like this, you'd have to be in an area with lots of limestone, and we're not."

He smiled and shook his head. "It's paper Mache. Along the footpaths there are smaller sculptures made of the rock you'd expect, metamorphic and igneous. Well, not *sculptures* exactly... more like artistically piled rocks."

Cara peered down one of the paths into the darkness. "So... is this a playground for the local Gargantuan children?"

"Ha! Yes, that's exactly what it is, *now*. This site was originally intended for the engineering lab, until the excavation hit water. To ever remind us of our folly, there's a freezing cold pool of water down at the end of the paths."

"And the cave behind you?" Cara asked.

"A fabrication painted by one of the GZ," he answered. "Never underestimate what creative people can do when they're stuck underground for too long."

Cara looked back at the amber-lit formations. "Unbelievable."

"Wait till you see the fish," he called.

"The what?" but when she turned around, he'd disappeared into the conference room.

Ascending to the top of the steps, Cara gently tapped the muraled wall and smiled at the hollow sound. She noticed Brookes waving to her and pointing at an empty seat next to him. By the time she made her way there and sat down, every seat in the room was filled.

Mason stepped up to the podium to sync his earpiece with the computer as if he were going to lead the meeting. She felt a little unnerved by that and asked herself why. *Because he was so young?* Then she smiled. *Because he was so good looking?* Or...*was it because she'd dreamt about him last night...* The sound of Brookes saying her name dragged her from her reverie.

"Sorry?" she said.

"It's very convincing as ancient cave art," Brookes repeated. "Don't you think?"

"Yes!"

The professor glanced from Cara to Mason and then back to Cara again. His expression was inquisitive as if he were about to ask her a question, but a man stopped in front of him and engaged him in conversation. Cara breathed a sigh of relief. She'd had the terrible feeling he'd been about to ask her something personal in this very public forum. But now she was left to wonder what he'd meant to inquire.

The room was overflowing with people who all seemed to know each other. A person sat in every chair and more were standing in the doorways. Based on what they wore and how they comported themselves, Cara guessed that the majority had military backgrounds and the rest were scientists.

At breakfast, Aliyah had told her that in every mission, people were assigned to 'units' with specific responsibilities and that most of the people had been training with their units for months. The purpose of the briefing was to instruct the groups how to work together to carry out the goals of the mission and to discuss the types of difficulties they could encounter.

"I purposely put us on the far end of the room," Brookes said in a low voice, "in case you wanted to ask questions during the meeting."

"Thanks, I appreciate that," she acknowledged.

He looked around. "Do you have questions about who's gathered here?"

Cara took a few moments to study the room. One person that stood out was a woman she guessed was Katrin, partly based on Gwen's physical description of her but also because of the demeanor of deference in the people speaking to her. In the Corporation, Cara had only seen deference when it was tainted with obsequiousness, and it impressed her that the respect toward

Katrin looked genuine. Two other people in the room had a similar air of self-confidence. Two men.

“Who’s the man standing in the doorway there, on the left?” she asked Brookes.

“That is the leader of the Lynx unit,” he answered. “His code name is Kan short for Kanuskatew.”

“The security people told me I didn’t need a code name,” she told him, “that it was acceptable for me to use my first name but not reveal my last.”

Brookes nodded. “Code names are required for Resistance members who are public figures ‘on the outside.’ People in politics, entertainment... anyone whose face could end up on NetNews gets a new name.”

“What can you tell me about the Lynx?” she asked.

“They’re a special Ops group; they joined the Resistance over a decade ago. Their membership consists of people who are the descendants of Indigenous Americans.”

“Is this common... for groups within the Resistance to have these exclusive membership requirements?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s sad that our society is so fractured that people only trust ‘their own kind’ to watch their backs. One day maybe things will be different, but I find it encouraging that at least here, in the Resistance, groups of people from different cultures work together quite cooperatively. That’s a start.”

“Is Mason in the Resistance or a member of the Lynx?” asked Cara.

“Both.”

“How does *that* work?” she asked.

“Very well, I think. Depending on the assignment, sometimes he reports to a person in the Resistance and other times he reports to Kan. Groups like the Lynx maintain their autonomy in case they disagree with a Resistance decision. They might even refuse to participate in a particular mission. Mason, I imagine, likes the wide variety of assignments he can have in the Resistance but sometimes prefers to work in small groups of highly skilled people. I think today’s meeting will clarify this for you.”

“Who’s the man on the other side of the room talking to Aliyah?” she asked.

Brookes’ eyes twinkled with amusement. “You have a knack for picking out leaders,” he observed. “That’s Basil, commander of the flash-assault unit for this mission.”

“Oh, right. Aliyah called them ‘the Jag’, short for jaguar,” said Cara. “What can you tell me about Basil?”

“Originally from Cameroon, his family fled to France at the start of the New World War and then relocated to the US. At age fifteen, Basil was leading a street gang in Baltimore when he was arrested and sent to the African front.”

Cara frowned. “That can’t be. The age of conscription is *sixteen*.”

“Contrary to what you learned on NetNews, boys as young as thirteen years of age are frequently shipped off to the front. When it comes to inner city boys, they look at size and toughness, not age.”

Cara didn’t like it, but she knew he was right. All of what she knew regarding politically sensitive topics came from the Net. She had no other sources of information and no firsthand knowledge about how life was for most people.

He was squinting at her as if assessing something. “The real world,” he said, “is a shock to you because our leaders have concealed it. No one faults you for not knowing what’s been hidden from you. It was all quite a jolt for me too, in the beginning.”

She gave a quiet smile of appreciation and he smiled too. Then he said, "Come on now, I know you're wondering how Basil ended up with *us*."

"Yes," she admitted.

"Once Basil arrived at the African front and realized he was cannon fodder, he left—"

"He deserted from the *front*?" Cara interrupted. "I didn't think that was possible!"

"Well, it is," Brookes replied, "but given they'd be shot if discovered, escapees from the front tend not to advertise their good fortune, and since the military's not allowed to make mistakes, it's all very *hush hush*."

"But he took a *huge* risk by deserting," Cara declared.

Brookes shook his head. "The ground war in Africa is a bloodbath; *staying* was certain death, by coming over to us, at least he had a chance."

Cara struggled to hide the shiver that shot up her spine. Dropping her voice to a whisper, she asked the question that had been hounding her for days. "John Dyer is a powerful man with a lot of reach... The security systems protecting the things he cares about are the best there is. What are the chances you'll pull off this Op without anyone getting caught?"

Brookes looked surprised. "Very high. Dyer is human like the rest of us and it just so happens I know him very well. For example, his ego requires that he surround himself with sycophants but he doesn't understand that kiss-asses are cowards, and that cowards can be bought. And don't forget, Dyer's my age. He has jackals all around him, waiting for the opportune moment to take a big bite out of his aging rumpus. If one day his back is against the wall and his only choices are to accept help from the Resistance or be *eaten alive*, I think he'll choose us."

"We have a call to order," announced a woman sitting to Mason's right. The lights dimmed as she activated a holographic projector from the console in front of her. When a hologram of the planet earth appeared just above the center of the table, Brookes explained in a whisper, "All our communications here are secure. When you're far below the surface of the earth, *shielded by a thick layer of solid rock*, no one can intercept your transmissions. The whole base is signal opaque."

"Commander Sheridan, sir," said the woman, "you have the floor."

Cara whispered, "Who's he?"

"British Resistance," Brookes answered.

"Thank you Ryan," the man said as he stood up to address the room. "I have to fly home today, and though I won't be staying to hear every word, I have no concerns. That's because the leaders of this operation have already proven themselves in so many missions... I've lost count. But I wanted to be here at the opening to say this: You are about to embark on a delicate mission of acquisition, and *when you succeed*, I can confidently tell you that a high-efficacy vaccine will be ready for mass production and distribution *nine* months later. Once we've done that, we've achieved our most precious intention, reducing suffering and saving lives, and *that* triumph is what will speed us toward our long-term goals in space.

You know the objective: to enter, extract the asset, and exit without leaving a trace. You also know the risks. If you are caught before you have erased your own memory, they will force you to reveal all, and that will be the end of our most expedient means of reaching our goals. It doesn't mean we won't ever reach our goals, because we know we would *persevere*, but it might mean that we would not see an end to the tyranny of disease in our lifetime...

Most of you joined the Resistance expressly to bring better health to yourselves and others. So, as you carry out this mission, remember you are making a sacrifice for the people you love, the

people you have lost, and the children of the world who deserve a better future.” He raised his fist. “*A better future!*”

A roar rose up and reverberated throughout the room. They cheered and pounded the table until Mason stepped up to the podium and called for quiet. He replaced the hologram of the earth with a three dimensional image of the plainest, most unobtrusive building Cara had ever seen. Everyone in the room remained silently confounded until one person broke the spell.

“Is it a breadbox?”

Laughter spread in a ripple around the room and Mason smiled.

“It would be easy to underestimate the impenetrability of this structure from the image,” Mason said, “but *don’t*.” He pointed at the outer edge of the building. “These walls are eight feet thick, made of solid concrete. No windows.” A two dimensional schematic of the same building appeared on the ceiling above the hologram and Mason directed the dot of an LED laser pointer to a place inside it. “Except for the computer control room *here* and the lobby next to it, all of the building’s interior walls consist of an *additional* four inches of concrete, paneled with one quarter-inch-thick aluminum alloy,” he said, and highlighted the inside walls of the diagram in blue. “Even if we wanted to, there’s no way to ‘blast and run’.”

Cara frowned at the illustration on the ceiling. Though it only consisted of lines in a white rectangle against a black background, the complexity of passageways created by the lines was so great, nothing was decipherable except the two squiggles marked ENTRANCE on opposite ends of the building. She decided to treat the meshwork of hallways like a maze game, and began to trace a visual path through the meandering corridors. One route after the other led to a dead end or back to the same entrance. She tried starting from the other entrance, but again lost her way in the labyrinth. She blinked a few times, and then looked around to see if anyone else thought the schematic was odd.

“Your eyes are not mistaken,” Mason assured his audience, and as he spoke, colored lines began to appear in the diagram, tracing paths down one passage after another from the entrances. “This maze of halls and cryo-chambers has two entry points and every hallway from them leads to a dead end or around in a circle... but *never* to the other entrance.” He looked around the room.

“Our way in is our only way out.”

The room was very still until one person called out, “There have to be emergency exits. It’s building code.”

“There are many emergency exits,” Mason acknowledged, “and since all of them lead to a tunnel that brings you to the on-site Domestic Military building, we won’t be using them.”

A blinking arrow appeared on the diagram at one of the entrances. “We will enter *here*,” Mason continued, “and follow this path...” The blinking arrow began to move very slowly through passageways in the maze, and after tracing a tortuous path of turns like switchbacks on a mountain, a blazing X appeared. “And arrive at the cryo-chamber of interest, *here*.”

Side conversations sprung up all over the room. Cara heard someone say, “That’s a lot of frozen bodies,” and another said, “It’s a death trap.”

One man raised his hand.

“Hello Seth,” Mason said to him. “Glad you could make it today.”

“Thanks,” Seth said and then pointed to the diagram. “If the walls are eight feet wide on the perimeter and the internal walls are four inches thick... That’s a *large* building which means the distance you just traced is substantial.”

“Your point?” Mason asked.

“Given the level of security that has to be manually disarmed at each juncture, it would take at least an hour to reach the target and that same amount of time or more to get back. *Two plus* hours with no escape route? That’s a lot of time for things to go wrong.”

“You’re right to question it, Seth,” Mason replied, “but you’ll be happy to know that the alarms don’t have to be deactivated one at a time. The type of sensors installed in this building can be disarmed in groups of ten, and then reactivated with the press of a button on the way out. Reaching the target will take less than thirty minutes, retreat should only take fifteen.” Seth looked unconvinced. “What about security alarms? Deactivating the sensors will alert the DM.”

“The alarm signals are wireless. To silence them, we will set up a shield to block all out-going transmissions. Preventing signals from escaping the premises is Basil’s responsibility. Completing the swoop in less than an hour,” he glanced at Kanuskatew standing in the archway, “is Kan’s.”

Mason turned to the woman who’d opened the meeting. “Ryan?”

“All finished, sir.”

“Thank you,” Mason said, then addressed the room. “Your plan-of-action has been sent to you, including the maps and diagrams we think you’ll need. Talk to Ryan if you would like something more. As most of you know... the documents for this mission are time coded. You must memorize your instructions before Sunday noon, because after that time all the words and images will transform into unreadable mush and the channel used to send you this information will be deactivated. The same will happen as you pass through any exit on the base no matter what day it is. Understood?”

A murmur of assent passed through the room.

“The internal walls are covered with aluminum alloy...” Katrin mused aloud. “Are the walls electrified?”

The good humor drained from Mason’s face. “Yes,” he said, “which is why Seth is here. His job is to turn off the electric current for the duration of the Op.” He looked at Seth. “The current’s controlled by a computer in the DM’s Central Computing building on the other side of the base. We need you to gain access to the software through the DMCloud.”

“Okay,” Seth replied, and immediately leaned over his computer and began typing.

Cara scowled at Brookes when she heard him chuckling. “*What’s to laugh about?*” she whispered.

“Piece of cake for Seth,” Brookes explained. “He’ll solve this problem by tomorrow morning.”

Cara craned her neck in an attempt to read Seth’s computer screen, until she realized Mason had moved on to the next topic.

“-and our entrance and exit,” Mason was saying, “will be assisted by Resistance operatives who’ve been working undercover in the cryo-stasis building for years: two security guards and three technicians.” The images of five faces appeared on the ceiling.

“Their job during this mission is multifaceted. While making it look like they’re working a normal shift, they’ll be monitoring *this* building’s systems computer *and* the site’s central computers, alerting us to anything that could interfere with the mission. They’ll also run the final check to make sure there’s no sign of us ever having been there.

Much of their work for us has already been completed. For example, to make it look like it’s just another day, a recording from every camera along our route through the building has been copied from a previous month. During the mission, those cams will be off and once we’ve left the building, the pre-recordings will be spliced in to replace the blank feeds. To make sure the

replacement footage goes unnoticed, our team in the facility has been following a strict routine for months now, to ensure that recordings for any given night look almost exactly alike.”

“Do they have access to the cryochambers?” asked one woman.

“No,” Mason answered. “Our technicians have clearance to access everything in the building except the cryopods and the chambers housing them. Kan?” Mason said, redirecting the question to Kanuskatew. “Did you want to explain further?”

“Sure,” Kan replied. “Every chamber is different, and has whatever security the cryo-patient paid for in advance. The security for the target chamber requires that no one can enter the vault without the iris scan of the present CEO of the Corporation... or, so he thinks.” A hint of a smile appeared on his face. “In fact, the person who designed the security for this chamber and pod added an emergency bypass option that recognizes the DNA of his only child.”

Cara’s eyes darted from the diagram to Kan’s face, but found his expression inscrutable.

“*Who could that be*, I wonder?” Brookes murmured facetiously.

Cara glanced about the room, wondering who, besides the leadership, knew what Kan was talking about. Aliyah was the only person looking her way, and she met Cara’s gaze with an encouraging wink.

“We know the formulation of the solution to inject into the bypass port,” Kan told them, “and we’re following it faithfully, including the use of a *fresh* sample of DNA instead of lyophilized... or *freeze dried* DNA. To provide this sample, the qualifying person will accompany us to the base.”

A man spoke up. “What if the bypass solution fails to open the chamber?”

“We’ll deactivate and remove the scanner,” Mason said, fielding the question, “then replace it with a new one once we’re finished in the vault.”

“You’ll force the vault open?” asked the man.

“Essentially,” Mason conceded.

Discontented grumbling arose in response, but Mason seemed unperturbed. “Kan,” Mason called over the chatter, “how long would it take your team to remove the scanner, open the vault and replace the device?”

The room quieted to hear the answer.

“Five minutes, including touch ups.”

Brookes leaned toward Cara and whispered, “Do you remember when your father was designing the security for this vault?”

Cara closed her eyes and answered, “Yes.” A key turned; a memory was unlocked.

‘Cara,’ her father said to her, ‘I want you to do something for me and for Aunt Cara. I need to draw some of your blood for an experiment. Will you let me do that?’

‘OK.’

The needle was tiny and painless. She’d watched the blood spill into the chamber of the syringe and then it was done.

‘Don’t tell anyone except your mom. Here’s why. I want you to have access to Aunt Cara. She would want that.’ Then he pulled a box from a shelf in the lab and opened it. Inside were brightly colored books of all sizes and an antique clock that opened at the base with a key.

‘These were Aunt Cara’s. They’re yours now. I’m going to keep them in a safe place for you.’ Then he gave her a piece of paper that was filled with handwriting. ‘This is an important recipe, so important, I wrote it out by hand.’ He pointed to the base of the clock. ‘I want you to put it in here and that’s where it will stay until you take it out.’ Cara tucked it inside and turned the key.

'There's only one person in the whole world who has a copy of this recipe.'
'Mommy?'
'No, but it's a person I trust, a person you can trust too.'

The memory melted away, replaced by the voices in the room.

"We have people who've been working on the base for ten years," she heard Mason say, "and in our target building for five years. They've painstakingly researched the design and construction of the security technology in the building and throughout the base.

They believe that if we open the vault the way the inventor intended, we invite the least amount of risk; that's why it's plan A. If the bypass solution doesn't work, we enact plan B and everything will look exactly as it did before we arrived after a little fabricator glue and touch-up paint."

Mason waited as if expecting more argument, but when none arose, he nodded to Katrin and sat down.

"Thank you, Mason," Katrin said stepping up to the podium. "We're leaving no stone unturned in preparing for this assignment... because we *can't*. If we want to develop an effective vaccine, our mission *has to succeed*, and our success depends on an *impenetrable* veil of secrecy.

Stealth is the quintessential ingredient of this operation. *If the Corporation ever finds out this building was compromised and learns what was removed*, it will take them five seconds to understand why someone would want this particular, cryonic patient. *Immediately*, they will suspect we're close to having a viable vaccine... and the Corporation will embark on a ruthless campaign to hunt us down and crush our efforts. You all know what that looks like."

The intensity of the silence that followed was stifling until Mason spoke to them again.

"It may seem like there're a *lot* of people in this room," he said, "but *we need every one of you*. A winning strategy requires redundant systems and, to that end, we've planned alternate routes and multiple options at every stage of the operation. Three safe houses have to be manned and readied to receive the cryopod. Two are decoys, but which house gets the pod depends on the exit strategy we choose that day.

Some of you will be stationed on the base in advance. You'll prepare the way for the event and act as the onsite eyes and ears before, during, and for two days after the operation. The unit performing the heist will enter the military base in a moving van the day before the Op.

Those who will enter the base include a Lynx unit guided by Kan, two Jag units led by Basil and a larger GZ reconnaissance team under Katrin. The rest of us are off site either preparing the safe houses for the arrival of the pod or assisting with communications and security.

The security detail consists of multiple emergency assistance crews and a ground support team that's in charge of the equipment and vehicles. One emergency crew will enter the base if something goes wrong. Two crews will provide intel and diversion tactics to the moving van carrying the prize and a fourth crew will provide the same to the rest of the operatives departing the site.

And... that's the *general* overview. If you have administrative questions, see Ryan. For mission-related suggestions or concerns, come to me, and I'll relay them to Commander Sheridan. Any questions before we move on to Basil?"

Cara suddenly felt completely overwhelmed. She leaned toward Brookes and whispered, "I'm the only inexperienced person here, aren't I?"

"Every person in this room is either highly capable or irreplaceable," he assured.

"Basil," Mason said, "you're up."

The image of the 2D diagram on the ceiling zoomed out to show a view of the entire Domestic Military base and Basil pointed to a building outlined in red. “Although each building on site has a stand-alone security system, all DM bases also have a Main Security building like this one. *Every two hours*, Main Security pings our target building...” he paused and smiled charmingly, “the *Breadbox*... and when they do, all the data collected in that time period is transferred from the *Breadbox* to the Main Security computers. *If Security pings and receives no response*, they’ll send someone to investigate. To address this unfortunate possibility, we’ll have transponders outside our signal shield ready to send them fake data, but the goal is to clean up the data feeds and clear out of the building before the two-hour interval is up.”

Then Basil redirected their attention to the hologram of the target building, where a dome gradually spread over the three dimensional image. “My team will maintain a signal shield over our area of operation, allowing us to communicate covertly within its boundaries and stop errant alarm transmissions from escaping.

To ready the shield for operation, three people disguised as an HVAC crew will place signal jammers on the roof, the morning of the mission. Later in the day, our people disguised as landscapers will encircle the building with additional jammers. Then, after nightfall, GZ and Jag units will be posted to protect this perimeter and ensure the shield is functioning optimally throughout the mission.”

As the image on the ceiling zoomed in to show a close-up of one of the entrances, Basil ceremoniously proffered the laser pointer to Kan. “And *now* Kan will take you *inside* the Breadbox.”

Kan raised an amused eyebrow and remarked, “Basil’s so nice this side of an Op.”

Some people in the room burst into laughter.

“Isn’t he?” Kan queried the people who were laughing. “For those of you who *haven’t* been commanded by Basil on an Op, you should understand that he’s not this nice.”

“But always charming,” Basil added with a mischievous smile.

Kan grinned. “Thank you, Sil... And while I’m on the subject of thanking people, I want to commend the members of the Resistance who work in the target building, because it’s due to their painstaking efforts that we will *walk past* all the security at this entrance shown here. To give you an idea of what a break this is for us, normally to enter, you’d have to pass through a guard station with three separate security scanners: a dermal chip scan, a facial recognition camera and a retinal scan.”

Groans were audible all over the room.

“That’s right,” Kan agreed, as he displayed the pictures of the building staff once more. “So if ever your paths cross, be sure to tell them how great they are.”

“YEAH!” someone called out as others whistled and clapped. Kan smiled and waited for the cheering to subside.

“A Lynx unit,” Kan started in, “consisting of three engineers and three runners, will enter the building with a replacement cryopod that’s identical to the one they’ll be carting out. Five of the six will enter the hallways leaving one of the runners at the entrance.”

Kan pointed at the path highlighted in red leading from the lobby to the target chamber. “Our electrical engineer will deactivate the sensors in the halls and reactivate them on the way out. She’ll also handle the electronics involved in: accessing the vault, separating the cryopod from the building’s electrical grid, and powering up the replacement pod.

Once the pod’s off the grid, our chemical engineer will activate and supervise the resuscitation cycle from start to finish and will charge the replacement cryopod with nitrogen. Our medical

engineer has two responsibilities: injecting the bypass solution into the scanner to open the vault, and facilitating the cryopatient's transition from dormancy to normal, tissue-organ function. Our engineers have been training together for over a year to be interchangeable in this Op. That is, each could perform the other's function if needed. They are Degan, Anna, and Born."

Three people stood up, gave a nod and sat back down.

"Once the pod is released from the wall locks, the resuscitation cycle begins and a ten-hour clock starts ticking... *ten hours* to get the body to the medical unit." Kan paused as if to allow that to sink in before continuing. "Due to the inflexibility of the timeframe, we have four exit plans all with the goal of delivering the cryopatient to a safe house on schedule. Katrin will go over the departure from the military base very generally today but detailing each of those exit strategies is the subject of tomorrow's meeting."

Kan turned back to the diagram. "The runners will be stationed at equidistant intervals between the cryochamber and the main entrance. Runners?" Three people stood up and waved. "Most of you know Legs, Mercury, and Ghost."

Cara smiled. She'd seen them training together in the martial arts room so it was easy to guess who they were based on the code names. One of the men had the longest legs she'd ever seen on a person, and though it didn't seem possible to have legs that long and be able to run *at all*, he was remarkably coordinated in every way and sprinted like a gazelle. The second man wasn't just a fast runner he was a gymnast, and every gyration was quick and smooth, like quicksilver. "Is she 'ghost' because she runs spooky fast?" Cara asked.

Brookes laughed. "She's not just fast, she's soundless, and seems to *appear out of nowhere*."

"But they're not just fast runners, are they?" Cara remarked. "I watched them climb the ropes and do acrobatic tricks like circus performers. Are they aerialists?"

"They're professional contortionists," Brookes said. "They perform both onstage and in the air."

"The runners," Kan explained, "will perform three critical roles. The first, is to race the cryopod containing the patient from the cryochamber to the entrance, and then help load it onto the truck. Second, the runners will maintain the communication link between the engineering team and the moving van while the team is in the LiFi blackout zone. If for any reason, we lose contact with someone long enough to jeopardize the mission... a runner will be sent to find them and report what's going on. Third, the runners will race DNA solution on dry ice from the entrance to the vault in the event more is needed." Kan paused unexpectedly. "Aliyah, why the look? Do you have a question?"

"Why would you need to run in more DNA? Can't you just bring in multiple samples at time zero?"

"We will," Kan answered. "This is a back up plan for the unlikely, worst case scenario that we need to run more in. Remember, the safest way to leave no trace of entry is to bypass the scanner as designed, but the biochemistry of the solution for the port is... *finicky*. Professor Brookes, would you elaborate on this point?"

"Happy to," Brookes answered cheerfully. "But engineers be warned: *bio-lingo lies ahead*."

A number of people in the room began to chuckle and some pretended to cover their ears.

"You see?" said Brookes. "They still have nightmares about their biology classes. Too many words, too few equations..." Then the professor rolled up his sleeves with comic bravado and walked with a swagger to the podium. "My *friends*, the security access pad looks like a normal device that performs thumb print and iris scans." He pointed to an image of it on the ceiling.

"But it's unique, in that it has multiple syringe holes, or '*ports*' as we're calling them, which are

hidden under a panel on the right side of the pad. Each port is a mini HPLC column made of an inert material that, once given a little rinse, will perform as if they were made yesterday.

The ‘finicky’ solution that will open the vault when injected into a port includes a very *odd* DNA extraction and purification process that I won’t go into... but at least *that step* can be performed in the van and run into the building on dry ice. The final step, an enzyme digestion of the purified DNA, must be performed just seconds before it’s injected into the port with three, genetically engineered endonucleases-”

“That’s crazy complicated,” Aliyah interrupted. “You’ve got a replacement scanner. Just pull the damn thing off the wall.”

“Aliyah,” Mason spoke up, “the solution chemistry is complicated on purpose. The inventor designed it so that the people he trusted,” his eyes briefly lighted on Cara, “and *only* those people, could access the vault *covertly*.”

“Sir,” another one of the GegenZeit had raised her hand, “you said we’re bringing in a ‘replacement cryopod’. Is there a person in it?”

“Thanks for asking that,” Mason responded. “No. It contains a dummy made of a foam material which contracts, but is otherwise stable down to minus one hundred degrees Celsius. We can use this material because the sensors on these cryochambers only indicate that something is there, they can’t tell you what it is.” Mason then addressed the entire room. “Are there more questions on what’s been discussed so far?” He waited. “No? Okay... Kan, finish up.”

“The post Op cleanup,” Kan told them, “is quick but thorough. The Lynx team will scrub the hallways of any sign of our presence on their way out. The building security staff will scrub all physical evidence of the mission from the hallway to the vehicle and then double-check the halls once we’re all in the van. Meanwhile, the building technicians will complete their data scrub, erasing undesired electronic footprints.”

“What electronic footprints have to be scrubbed, besides the data feeds on the cameras?” one person asked.

“They have a whole long list of data logs to check,” answered Kan. “For example, the house nitrogen pressure will look unusual during the period when one pod is removed and the replacement pod is filled. They’ll swap irregularities in the log with data from a previous night.” The man’s face lit up. “Gotcha.”

“When the technicians are done the cleanup,” Mason summarized, “all the data feeds connected to the vault and the dummy pod will reflect an ordinary night at the cryohouse.”

Cara felt Brookes elbowing her and when she looked where he was indicating, she saw Seth had raised his hand.

“Seth?” Mason called on him.

“In my orders here,” Seth pointed to his computer, “it says that you expect me to work *outside* the shield, but I don’t know if that’s possible. But I’m sure I can do what you’re asking if I’m in the building’s computer room.”

“You’re not trained to go inside the building, Seth,” Katrin said firmly.

“It’s added risk,” Kan agreed. “Better to avoid it if we can.”

Mason turned to Basil. “What do you think Sil?”

Basil shrugged. “We could work out a play to bring him inside the shield.” He looked at Seth.

“Can you gain virtual control of the building computers if you’re inside the shield but outside the building?”

Seth grumbled to himself then shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “I’m pretty sure I have to be inside the building.”

Katrin crossed her legs coolly and Kan remained unmoved.

Realizing they'd reached an impasse, Mason said to Seth, "I'll let you know what we decide by tomorrow," and to everyone else he said, "Let's take a twenty minute break."

Outside in the tunnel, Cara was standing with Aliyah at the snack table when Katrin approached and introduced herself. "If you don't mind, I'd like to speak with you privately for a few minutes, Cara."

"Of course," Cara answered, but wished she had a chair to sink into or a bed with covers to pull over her head.

Aliyah grabbed a chocolate cookie from the table and handed it to Cara. "This will help. See ya after."

Katrin led Cara a few steps away from the crowd. "I can imagine that what you're hearing this morning is... frightening, but it's *nothing* compared to what you will experience during the Op. When you're on this mission, it will feel very scary to you. Chaotic. You have no combat experience and no special Ops training, so no matter how much we try to prepare you, when you're in the Op, you'll have no way to distinguish between normal and abnormal. But what you *can* do, is not pay *any* attention to how you *feel*. That may sound counter productive and in normal life it *would* be, but it's what you will need to do during this Op. Your job is to attend to your role, think only about what you're supposed to be doing, and *accept* that all the rest is in our capable hands. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes," Cara answered and then she laughed. "It's a *relief* to know that you understand how utterly unprepared I am!"

"There's still time for you to change your mind," Katrin offered. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes," Cara answered. "I do."

Mason joined them in that moment.

"Cara, I need to talk to you about something as soon as this meeting is over. Do you have anything else scheduled today?"

"Not that I know of," she answered, wondering what the unnamed topic was.

"Are we meeting tonight to discuss Seth's request?" Katrin asked him.

Mason nodded. "Right after dinner."

Then Ryan appeared and said, "I'm about to call everyone back in."

"Thanks," Mason said. "Cara... I'll see you after?"

"I'll be here," she replied.

"Great," he added and the three of them went inside.

That's all I need is another mystery, Cara grumbled to herself as she made her way back to her seat. All she could think about was how exhausted she felt. When Brookes took his place next to her, Cara noticed that he was so excited it was annoying. Then he handed her a cup of coffee. "You *have* to try this. One sip and you'll feel like you've been transported to Istanbul."

Cara tasted the warm brew. "Oh *wow*!"

"*Yeah!*" Brookes agreed. "I'm not sure which kicks harder, the coffee or the sugar."

As Cara continued sipping, she realized Mason had begun talking but at first, she didn't register a word he said. Instead, she found herself noticing how attractive he was, his shoulders in particular. Then when he turned to face her side of the room, she felt dumbstruck, mesmerized by his gaze. *He's probably got fifteen women chasing him*, she reminded herself, and then took a big gulp of coffee in the hope that it would help her focus.

It worked, because she heard Mason say, "...Katrin will walk us through the last part of the briefing."

"Late in the afternoon before the Op," Katrin began, "the moving van will have phony engine trouble and 'break down' here," she pointed at a location across the street from the target building. "The time of the break down will ensure that it's too late in the day for anyone to bother to tow it." She looked around the room. "Next, we set up for the Op, and then we *wait*. At time zero, we run the op, secure the cargo, clean up... and then, once again, *we wait*. Early the next morning, a Jag will enter the military facility with a replacement battery, pretend to install it, after which the van with its precious cargo will drive off the base."

The schematic panned out to show the whole base with three locations highlighted. "The DM base has three contractor entrances. Entering the base involves a protocol that was sent to you. You've also received various site departure strategies that we'll describe in detail tomorrow, but Departure Plan A is simple so I'll outline it for you now:

The moving van will leave the base at exit number 1. Ten minutes later truck number 2 with a group of Jag and GZ will depart from the second exit and after twenty minutes more, the last truck will exit through the third gate, leaving two GZ behind to collect post Op intel. At that hour of the morning, usually only the overhead cameras and automatic license plate scanner is used on vehicles exiting. In other words, it's very likely that all three trucks will drive straight past the guard house and out the gate."

"If the unexpected occurs and you get stopped," Basil interjected, "you know the drill.

Distraction is always your first strategy: one person plays 'good' cop, while a 'bad' cop throws in a point of contention, and together you confuse and wear out the opponent."

"Right," Katrin agreed. "Thank you. You'll find sample scripts to use as distraction strategies in the documentation that was sent to you... What happens once you're through the gate depends on the departure strategy chosen on the day, but in general, it'll go like this: You'll drive from the base to your first set of coordinates, switch license plates, switch drivers, and change disguises as per your individual instructions. The truck containing the pod, in addition to a new plate, will have new advertisements pasted over the sides and a new logo on the cab.

You'll drive to your second set of coordinates, switch license plates or vehicles again and from there, the moving van, *now frozen-foods truck*, will proceed to one of the Biohazard Level-Four safe houses. The teams in the other two trucks will be driven to their small group drop-off locations and from there, each person will follow their individual exit plan.

One final detail... everyone who enters the base will be in disguise. Some of you will only have fake IDs and a change of hair color; others will be cosmetically altered. Ryan will provide you with IDs and information about your false identities. And..." she said with a big smile, "that's it!"

"Thank you, Katrin," Mason said. "I see skepticism in some faces. That's good, because any problem you can think of, can happen." He placed his forearms on the table and leaned forward.

"So tell me, what could go wrong?"

The meeting had adjourned and the crowd was slowly dispersing. While Cara waited for Mason, she tried to look as if she were calmly appreciating the art on the walls, but the impatient tapping of her foot gave her away. *I should have asked him what he wanted to talk about*, she thought. Even though he'd requested to speak with her casually enough, she'd sensed urgency in the

delivery, as if something unexpected had come up. Finally, Mason came over and sat down next to her.

"I received this last night," he said, handing her an envelope. "Anthony told me to give it to you after the meeting."

Cara noticed that the envelope was the old kind that sealed when the glue on the flap was moistened. But it appeared never to have been sealed and when she lifted the paper from it, she sucked-in an involuntary breath. Not only had she seen the stationery before, she had remembered it earlier that same day. The paper was a yellowed replica of the document her father had given her as a child, the one she'd placed inside the old clock. As if to banish all doubt, at the bottom of the page there was a personal note signed by her father.

Anthony,

If something happens to us, take care of our daughter. Give her this copy of the prep so she'll understand who you are.

Matthew McCarten

Basil happened by right then and gave Mason a friendly whack on the back. "Good job today; see ya after dinner," he said, and as Basil headed off, Aliyah showed up. She took a long look at Cara staring at the paper and said to Mason, "Are you going to take her back?"

"Yes," he answered and Aliyah left without another word.

Cara glanced up from the document, and said, "These are the instructions for the solution that opens the cryovault."

He grinned unexpectedly. "And *you're* an ingredient." He pointed to a place on the page.

"NILE DNA. Nile's your middle name backwards."

She grunted a laugh. "Yeah, he liked saying words backwards... arac nile." Cara paused. "I'd completely forgotten that."

"Did he give you the original?"

"Yes. He did."

Mason's tone turned serious. "*Is it in a safe place?*"

She closed her eyes; it helped her think. "It's in a safety deposit box... inside a clock..."

"Do you have the key to the deposit box?" he asked.

"The key..." Her eyes flew open. "There are *two* keys; my mother and I buried them!"

"Where?"

"In the backyard," she said, and looked at Mason, "with my dead mouse, Ned."

They burst into laughter.

"You're parents must have been something," Mason said.

Cara grinned. "My dad called my mom Dr. Lovelace, after the mathematician, and she called him Dr. Seuss." Cara slipped the paper into the envelope and handed it back to him. "You should keep this."

He nodded and tucked it into his coat pocket. "I have to ask you *not* to go to the safety deposit box or retrieve the buried keys until you've finished your assignment at the Corporation. We can't risk someone following you."

"Sure. I understand," she said.

They sat together in silence for a while. Soon they were the only ones left in the meeting room.

"Do you..." he began, "believe in an afterlife?"

The question completely caught her off guard. "I... think so," she said. "Why? Do you?"

“Yes, but I suspect it’s because I feel a need to know the family I never met,” he answered. She turned to him in surprise. “You’d mentioned that you lost your father. Is your mother gone too?”

“I don’t know. My brother says that our mother was a Dutch reporter. She met my father while she was doing a story about the living conditions on the reservation. Soon after I was born, my father was conscripted and when he left, they kidnapped her. Apparently she wrote an article the Corporation didn’t like.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know...”

“There is the hope,” he said, “that she’s still alive in a work camp somewhere. The hope...” Suddenly Mason jumped to his feet and stood by the doorway to the cavern. “Cara, there’s something in here you’ve *got* to see.”

“Okay...” Cara said uncertainly. She followed him down the steps, past the faux monoliths and then down one of the paths. After a short distance, the only lights were the LEDs that lined the footpath, and though she could see what lay at her feet, everything else was pitch black. In spite of the darkness or perhaps because of it, she sensed a *vast* open space above her.

“Don’t you have a flashlight?” she asked.

“Yes, but that would ruin it. Just go slowly,” he urged. “It’s not far.”

As they walked, the sound of running water grew more distinct, interrupted only by the quiet whir of an occasional bat. When the path wound around a large boulder, he came to a stop.

“Stand right here,” he said, “and look straight in front of you.”

She blinked. He laughed.

“Oh my,” she murmured. There was a slow moving stream a few feet away and it sparkled with blue green bioluminescence. Swimming within the shimmering water were fish that luminesced in a variety of colors.

“One of the scientists is raising bioluminescent plankton, engineered to live in fresh water.”

“But... they need sunlight,” she said, still not trusting her eyes.

“We have sunlamps that provide light from midnight till six in the morning, enough to allow the plant life to grow and keep the fish healthy.”

“What kind of fish?” she asked. “Don’t tell me... rainbow trout?”

He chuckled. “You biologist must have the same sense of humor... There are three kinds of trout in here and, *yes*, the *rainbow* trout was engineered to luminesce in different colors. We eat the regular trout and the luminescent species help us track the health of the pond.” Then he said, “Watch this.” He swirled his hand in the water and a shimmer of red light appeared in the wake. “Ooooh...”

Cara crouched next to him and began swirling the water too. “Wow, this water’s *freezing!*”

“I should warn, there’s a nasty species of lamprey-”

“Ugh!” She yanked her hand out. “Are you kidding?”

“Yes I am. Quick reflexes, though,” he told her.

“Jerk,” she laughed and punched his arm.

Cara looked across the water’s surface to the opposite side but it was barely in view. “It’s wide.”

“And deep. Fifty feet in some places.”

Mason glanced over his shoulder, back towards the way they’d come. She followed his gaze and could see the light from the meeting room in the distance.

“Guess we should be heading back,” she ventured, standing up. But then he stood up and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around him and drew him closer. The kiss was long and warm, expressing thoughts that had gone unspoken.

Then he rested his cheek on her head.

"I want a lot more of that," he admitted.

She laughed, feeling elated. "Fine by me." She tilted her head back and looked up at him. "Was this planned?"

"Nope." He picked up a strand of her hair and held it between his fingers. "Putting keratinase on this beautiful red hair is blasphemy."

They sat down and leaned against a rock. The bioluminescent light, together with the quiet sound of the stream, was hypnotizing. She'd never felt so comfortable with another person. She felt like she was melting into him, like they were melting together.

But then an unwelcome thought disturbed her peace. "Isn't this against some kind of fraternization rule?"

"It *really* is," he confessed. "But we're ok *because they already know*. It seems that others saw this coming before I did."

"Who knows?" She sat up straight and looked at him. "Brookes?"

"Oh, he's not the only one." He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. "It does change things... Once the heist to retrieve your great aunt is over, I'll have a different assignment and Rachel will be reporting to someone else. You don't have to worry though. I was able to recommend the person who will replace me. You'll be safe. And, even though you won't see me as regularly, I'll stay informed. I promise you that."

"Work seems like a far away place right now... even though, if all goes well with this mission I'll be back to work in ten days." She turned her face to him. "Is anyone worried, besides *me*, that I might mess this up for you all?"

He snorted. "No. Katrin won't let you mess up. Just get comfortable with being on a short leash, because it's the safest place for you to be." His face grew somber. "I know Katrin and Brookes have asked you this, but I need to know too. Do really want to do this?"

"The mission or the relationship?" she teased.

"Both."

"Yes to both," she answered.

"Why? The mission, I mean."

"This is my contribution towards a better world," Cara answered. "I thought that's what I was doing by working for the Corporation, but now I see that no good can come from a company whose leaders are only out for themselves."

"You don't have to take part in this maneuver to make a contribution. You're a good person, and every day a good person walks the earth, the world is better for it. That's all anyone ever has to contribute."

She squeezed his hand. "That's nice, and I agree, but by that logic you wouldn't have to go on the mission either."

He grinned and kissed her head. "You win." Then he groaned unhappily. "I hate to say this... but I have a meeting in an hour."

"Then let's go!" She jumped up and pulled on his arm. "There's a dog-horse waiting for part of your dinner," she reminded.

"No, *your* dinner."

In sharp contrast to the luminescent colors behind them, the bright light from Mason's gloves exhibited a stark landscape of gray stone and shadow that moved with the slight swing of his arms as he walked. They took the other path back. It too had motion-sensing lights that showed the path just ahead. The same lights revealed rock sculptures adorning the way, mini altars to the

power that had formed them and as the soothing sound of running water faded, it was replaced by the crunch of boots on the gravel.