

Chapter 7

The darkest night of the month had arrived and they were closing in on the darkest hour. Cara was grateful for the commlink in her ear and to hear the quiet banter between the Jag and the GZ as they stood guard over the perimeter. She wondered how they could sound so calm.

“Why do they call it a new moon when there’s no moon?” one of them said.

“No idea.”

“There was a lunar eclipse two nights ago,” offered another.

“I didn’t see it.”

“You could see it in Africa. My buddy at the front said the moon was red.”

“Well, there’s no light show tonight. It’s blacker than sheht.”

"Sheht ain't always black. When I was in Africa, mine was green."

A new voice said, "Guys...tell me you're not going talk about poop all night."

Cara heard a round of chuckling in her earpiece.

"Ladies, ladies! We're discussing a natural, bodily function."

"Poop is the body's garbage. Do you talk about the color of garbage in your trash bin?"

"If poop came in pretty pastels, would you join the conversation?"

"I'll talk poop if you talk periods."

"You mean, about how you stick the pad-things in the bathroom trash and pretty soon it smells like the dog died?"

"At least we don't stink up alleys behind bars with pee."

"My pee doesn't stink."

Cara's role in the operation began to take shape the evening before when Katrin dyed her hair black and tinted her skin a darker shade.

"I studied fine art in Rome and costume design in Paris," Katrin said to her, "but I found my muse in the Théâtre Résistance."

Katrin's genius for disguises was more like plastic surgery without the knife. She could transform a person into someone else in minutes with makeup and props. Her most impressive creations were her doppelgängers, and for this mission, the subjects of Katrin's counterfeit were real-life furniture movers Beth and Joe Decker, with Cara and Kanuskatew serving as canvases for her artistry.

At four in the morning, Katrin altered Cara's facial features with body paint.

Once that dried, she fitted a commlink into her ear and secured a pair of sunglasses on her head with a strap. Next came a sweatband that hid the earpiece and, for the final touch, Katrin sprayed some kind of sealant all over Cara's head.

"I still have to check your make-up at sunup to see how it looks in natural light, but otherwise you're done. Kan!" Katrin called into the next room.

"You're next!"

Cara picked up the spray can to see what it was but the words were in Cyrillic.

"How do I get this mystery goo off my head after the Op?" Cara asked.

"They'll shave your head," Kan warned with a wink as he sat in the chair next to Cara.

Katrin muttered something in German then said, “Don’t listen to him, I have a soap for that.”

“She just called me a name in German,” he told Cara, “but it can’t be too bad since the last part was ‘*toyful*’.”

“Teufel,” Katrin corrected. “I called you a Tasmanian devil.”

Kan grinned and then stared in awe at Cara’s reflection in the mirror. “You look *exactly* like Beth. This never gets old. Katrin, you did it again.”

“It *is* a lot of fun,” Katrin admitted with satisfaction. “I just hope this holds...” she murmured, testing the sturdiness of the glasses. “I can’t say this enough: you *must* keep these glasses on all day. CCTV cameras run iris scans now, and because you did your graduate work in a military facility, they’ll still have all your identifying information in

their database. We *cannot* have someone investigating why a geneticist arrived in a *moving van* in the middle of our Op.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry,” Cara replied, touching her hair. “That spray hardens like cement. I’m pretty sure my head will fall off before the glasses do.”

“The sunglasses are unusual,” Kan remarked, pointing to the arm pieces.

“Yes, they’re hinged,” Katrin agreed.

“Whenever you step into the back of the van you can lift the front part up.”

“Outstanding,” Cara replied and flipped the lenses back. Looking in the mirror, she cocked her head to one side and said, “Hi. I’m Beth from Move America.”

Katrin smiled. “Hello Beth. Joe will be with you shortly.”

The moving van arrived at the contractor's entrance at 6:45 AM, precisely fifteen minutes before the day shift replaced the nighttime guards. Cara rode with Kan and Katrin in the front of the cab, two Jags sat in the backseat, and the real Beth and Joe were in a concealed partition of the trailer with the rest of the Lynx. Even though Move America paid a yearly fee that exempted them from search and seizure, the DM was known to break faith on a whim. In anticipation of a search, everyone in the van wore coveralls with the company's ID chip sewn into the insignia and a set of quick stick fingerprints in one pocket. But their punctuality paid off because

the bleary-eyed night guard was so distracted by the arrival of the next shift, he simply scanned the tag on the windshield and opened wide the gate. The rest of the day was strangely serene. The warm summer sun and the refreshing breeze blowing up from the river made it a perfect day to move a family's furniture from one house to another within the base. There was something especially pleasant about taking apart the swing set and rebuilding it in the yard of the new home.

The general mood among them was easy. This was partly due to Kan's comedic parody of Joe's voice and mannerisms, but also because they'd been well trained in how to pack up and move the contents of the house. All Cara had to do was walk around

with a clipboard inspecting packed boxes and periodically step into the back of the van to switch places with her double.

Cara found comfort within the planned structure of the day. A busy schedule combined with physical exertion helped her focus her mind and ignore the weird, floating sensation she was having. Katrin had warned she might experience a kind of dreamlike state and not to worry, that it was just the body's way of conserving energy.

At 4:20 PM, Kan staged the vehicle breakdown and thirty minutes later, site security gave them clearance to leave the truck on the base overnight. From inside the trailer, Cara heard Beth on the street showering the security guards with praise and fervently promising to have the truck

off the base before rush hour the next morning. They heard the civilian shuttle bus arrive, and the Jags joking with Beth and Joe as they boarded. The pneumatic doors shut, and as the bus drove away, Cara heard the refrigerator in the cryo-resuscitation unit switch on and begin to hum. Cara ate her dinner watching the Lynx check their gear. A quiet murmur rose from the other end of the trailer where Katrin and Kan were in conversation with someone through their commlinks. Cara thought through her own part in the night maneuver once more and then followed Katrin's advice to get some rest. Wrapping herself in a blanket, she fell asleep listening to the sounds on the street fade away.

A quiet voice spoke close to her ear. "Your commlink is about to go live." When Cara's eyes opened, she saw Katrin's face. "In a few seconds, you'll have audio access to the GZ-Jag frequency and once the Op is underway, they'll switch you into the main frequency."

"OK," Cara responded groggily and a moment later voices were talking in her head.

She sat up and after taking a sip of water, began to notice the changes in her surroundings. Kan was sitting opposite her talking on another channel and though his voice was barely a whisper, the intensity of the conversation was palpable. Cara noticed a monitor that had been dark before she fell asleep was now live-streaming the lobby area inside the

target building. Two additional monitors had appeared out of nowhere and displayed the GZ-Jag perimeter from different angles. Cara checked her watch. Only twenty minutes until time zero, the point at which the Lynx would exit the truck. She had nothing to do until Katrin directed her to set up her workbench. To occupy her mind with something other than her own nervous thoughts, she turned up the volume on her earpiece to listen to the perimeter patrol.

“... a high voltage current sent through metal walls...” someone was saying.

“Wouldn’t that produce a lot of heat?”

“If the walls in a hallway can electrocute you, you’re not worried about heat.”

“No, I mean... the heat can’t be good for the frozen people, right?”

“The extra security isn’t there to protect the frozen food section; it’s to prevent takeout.”

“Why?”

“I guess there are some things the dead don’t want us to know.”

“Or things the living don’t want us to know about the dead.”

“Leo’s right, the heat’s a big deal but not for why you think. Some of the cryopods have heat-activated bombs attached to them; above a certain ambient temperature they explode.”

“What!”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“The engineers had a meeting about it. If the building’s alarm system is tripped, the electric current in the walls turns on and everything else shuts off,

including the air circulation and cooling systems. If the hallway gets too hot, the bombs go off."

"Explains the concrete outer walls and the crazy rat's nest of inner walls; it's to protect the base from the blast."

"So, it doesn't just look like a crypt, it is one."

"Yeah, and if our people aren't careful, they could get buried in it."

"I don't get it. Why would anybody go to all this trouble to hide something about these dead people? Why wouldn't they just cremate them and destroy the evidence?"

"Money, my friend, money. The estates of some of these freeze pops dropped a billion bucks upfront and pay a huge yearly fee to keep them here."

"All for a front row seat at hell's revival."

"I bet when these rich people signed up, no one told them they could be blown to bits."

"Or that they'd be lying next to Typhoid Aunt Cara, 'cause they'd be like... there goes the freezer-hood."

"Well, I'm feeling a lot better about being posted outside the crypt. Wouldn't mind some coffee though... but forget the sucky biscuits."

"They're energy bars."

"They're sheht. They're so dry they stick to your throat. Last mission one of them almost killed me. I choked on a piece and when I finally coughed, the thing shot up my nose. It stayed stuck up there for a week. Rotting."

"Bullsheht."

"No, really, it started to smell bad. Then one day I sneezed and it shot out all covered in snot."

Guffaws and snorts took over the bandwidth.

“Oh good, we’re talking body fluids again...” another voice said. *“Nina, we’ve all spent so much time together lately, I bet our menstrual cycles are in-synch. I just started. You?”*

“Yesterday.”

“Yeah, me too. Anybody got an extra cup?”

There was a grumbling response but it halted abruptly at the sound Basil’s voice. *“What’s all the chatter?”* he hissed.

“Sorry sir. Just keeping it light.”

“Well keep it focused,” Basil snapped, and then barked, *“Check your watches. Everyone should be at zero hundred hours in...”* he paused, *“Three, two, one-clock it. Count down for the shield starts in two minutes.”*

Cara closed her eyes. A dog barked in the distance. Her breath was shallow and she felt tired, like she would fall asleep...

“Shield activation in sixty seconds.”

Her eyes popped open. The Lynx stood at the door ready to disembark with the dummy pod. Motionless and dressed in black, they looked like silhouettes of stone.

“Activation in ten, nine, eight-”

“Cara.”

She jumped, startled by the sound of a voice next to her instead of in her earpiece.

“You’re about to be patched into the mission frequency,” Katrin said, then crouched next to her and spoke in a whisper. “You’re a little jumpy, and that’s understandable. Do a few rounds of deep breathing.”

“Okay...I will.”

“What are you worried about?”

“That the sample isn’t fresh enough,” Cara admitted. “I think the bypass solution should’ve been made right *now*, not this afternoon. These tiny coolers don’t maintain the temperature perfectly and-”

Katrin put a calming hand on her shoulder. “I know you think ‘fresh’ means ‘five minutes before’. If that’s true, they’ll be back for more and we’ll have it ready. Once they clear the way to the vault, a freshly made batch can be run-in in seconds.”

Cara let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. “I know.”

“There’s nothing to fear,” Katrin insisted. “You simplified this process to just a few steps that need to be done at the last minute, everything else was

carefully prepared in advance. Plus, *you can do this kind of thing in your sleep!* Seriously, I think I could blindfold you and you'd get it right. Most importantly, *I'm right here.* I'm the one who's responsible for catching all nerve-induced mistakes, remember? So relax. You're covered." Cara heard a click and Born's voice saying, "Anna's in the security panel." "Where...?" Cara's head swiveled to where she'd just seen Born with the rest of the Lynx at the back of the truck. They were gone. They'd left with the pod so quietly she hadn't heard them.

"It started," Cara stammered.

Katrin nodded. "Could you hear Born just now?"

"Yes, clearly."

“Good,” Katrin said, standing up. “I’ll tell you when it’s time.”

Though the seconds were ticking away, the time between people speaking in Cara’s commlink felt immeasurable. Finally, someone’s voice filled the void.

“On our end,” said Anna, “it appears I’ve deactivated the sensors in the first hallway. Is that registering in the central computer?”

A voice responded, “Confirmed. The security software shows the alarm sensors are off in corridor one.”

A moment later, they heard Born’s voice again. “We’re entering the hallways.”

Sudden laughter pounded their earpieces.

Kan frowned and said, “Care to share the *joke*?”

The laughter was muffled this time as Born replied, "Sorry sir. They must test the electric walls periodically... There're fried rats all along the corridor."

Kan rolled his eyes. "Don't stop for a snack."

More laughter followed and Born said, "Not how I like my meat, sir."

The silence held them hostage again. When Anna broke it, her voice had the cool, controlled intensity of a tiger crouched over its prey.

"I've shut down all the sensors in the target hallways," she said. "Control room, please verify."

"Confirmed," came the response. "All dominos are down. Your path to the vault is clear."

"MOVE!" Kan growled.

An eerie silence followed as if her commlink went dead. Cara looked around but no one seemed alarmed. Then she remembered the blackout zone, a point in the building where both WiFi and LiFi transmissions were blocked. The runners were now their only means of communicating with the engineers.

The next update they received came from Ghost. “They’ve reached the vault.”

“Get ready,” Katrin said, her eyes never leaving the screens surveilling the perimeter.

Cara unfolded a portable lab bench and put on a pair of surgical gloves. The smell of rubbing alcohol filled the air as she wiped down the surface. Next, she ripped open an autoclave bag containing a syringe and rubber

cord and placed them on the table. Opening a second sterile pouch, she removed the necessary lab supplies including a pipet and arranged them on the bench. Out of the cooler next to her, she pulled a rack of tubes half-filled with premade solutions and uncapped the first two rows. Onto each tube in the second row, she placed a tiny filter and then covered the rack with foil.

“Ready.”

When Katrin gave her a thumbs up, Cara changed her gloves and leaned against the wall of the truck to wait. Moments later, they heard an agitated voice speaking through the commlink. “The bypass solutions didn’t open the vault,” said Legs. “I’m en route to the truck for more.”

Katrin turned to Cara and said,
“Begin.”

Cara drew her own blood, then pipetted two hundred microliters of it into the first row of tubes. One by one, she vortexed each tube and pipetted the mixture onto the filter in the next row. Then the door to the truck slid open and a masked face appeared as she pipetted yet another solution onto each filter and slipped the tubes into the centrifuge. Perched on the edge of her seat, Cara watched intently for the rotor to finish the spin and come to its agonizingly gradual stop. *Click*. She pounced at the sound of the lid release, deftly removed the filters and tucked the softball-sized rotor into a cooler. Two gloved hands reached in from outside and once she'd made the

pass-off the hands and the cooler were gone.

“You just beat your best time! Give me five,” laughed Katrin and raised her palm to meet Cara’s.

“*Nice work GZ,*” Kan declared.

Cara was pleased with their praise but surprised by Kan’s words. *Does he see me as a GZ in training?* she wondered.

Does Katrin? It was an interesting idea... to be pondered another time.

“*Damn! You people are fast!*” one of the technicians exclaimed. “The cryo-vault security system has been *deactivated.*”

For a brief moment, Kan’s face was exultant, but then he warned them in a low voice, “Too soon to celebrate.”

“Mercury here. There was a bomb on the pod. Anna cut the wires and removed it.”

They heard someone curse and Kan tensed visibly. “Seth? What’s wrong?” “In sector C,” Seth said, “the count down to electrify the walls was initiated. I don’t understand what tripped it.”

“Well shut it down.”

“I tried...”

“Try harder.”

“Lynx unit, the walls are hot,” a technician announced. “Starting back-up generators now to route power to the AC.”

“Good,” Kan said. “Report the temperature every three minutes, starting now.”

“72 degrees Fahrenheit, twenty-two Celsius.”

“Lynx unit, report on your suits,” Kan commanded.

Two runners responded right away.

“Ghost suit OK.”

“Mercury suit OK, now tagging Legs.”

When Legs’ voice broke in, he sounded out of breath. “Legs in lobby.”

Kan scratched his head. “I can see that... What’s the matter with you?”

“My elbow grazed the wall and I got a little *buzz*... I’m fine. The insulation in the suit did its job.”

“Do you need to sit this one out?”

“No sir.”

A minute later they heard, “Mercury here! Anna’s suit is *defective*. The coolant isn’t circulating and she’s heating up. Everyone else is OK.”

A technician spoke. “75 degrees Fahrenheit, twenty-four C.”

“Mission status,” Kan demanded.

“They’re charging the empty pod, sir,” Mercury answered.

Kan looked relieved. “Sil?”

“Streets are quiet,” Basil answered. Kan turned to Katrin and said, “Start it up.”

Katrin cleared a path to the hidden compartment and opened the doors wide. Once inside, she turned on the cryo-exchange instrument and ran it through the calibration cycle. Cara pulled on her cryo gloves and passed a pair to Kan, a precaution in the event they accidentally touched the exterior of the cryopod on its way to the back of the van.

“78 degrees Fahrenheit, twenty-six C,” a technician informed.

“Status report,” ordered Kan and Ghost answered, “They’re on their way back with the prize.”

“How’s Anna?” Kan asked.

“She’s closing the circuits in the target corridor,” Legs said.

“*How* is Anna?”

Legs seemed to hesitate. “She’s operating at a hundred percent right now but... it’s getting hot back there. Hotter than the readings indicate, I think.”

“Tech team, where’s the AC?” Kan pressed.

“Powered up,” a technician replied, “but it’s only slowing the rise in temperature, not stopping it. We’ve reached 82 degrees Fahrenheit, twenty-eight C.”

“There are bins of dry ice at the end of the corridors,” Katrin reminded.

“Yes!” Kan acknowledged. “Runners, open the dry ice bins in sector C to cool the air and place buckets of it along the walls. Do it *fast*.”

“There’re more buckets in the custodial closets,” added a technician.

Two runners responded with, “Copy that.”

Then another voice spoke. “Seth here. I don’t have the connectivity I need to close down the current. I *have* to go inside the building.”

Kan gave Katrin the thumbs up.

“Aliyah...” Katrin spoke through the commlink.

“Here.”

“Escort Seth inside; tactic five.”

“Tactic five, understood.”

A short while later, a technician said,

“Something’s not right...”

“Spit it out,” Kan demanded.

“The security sensors in the target corridor aren’t all coming back online, sir. Some are, others aren’t.”

Kan looked irritated. “How could that happen?”

"I don't know," the technician replied grimly. "But she'll have to start over."

"Mercury," Kan barked.

"Sir?"

"Go back and tell Anna to *deactivate all the sensors in the target corridor* and then reactivate them *one at a time...* not in sets. Do you understand the order?"

"Yes sir."

"Henry," Kan addressed one of the technicians. "How're your suits?"

"Working fine, sir."

"Good, then take Ruby," Kan instructed, "and go in with Mercury to help Anna. Make sure this sensor problem gets *fixed*."

"On our way."

"Sil, how's the shield holding?" quizzed Kan.

“Fully activated,” Basil answered.

“We’ve had no issues.”

“83 degrees Fahrenheit, twenty-eight C.”

The back of the truck opened quietly and two Jags leapt inside. In effortless unison, four Jags lifted the pod into the van and ran it to the back like a football in a running play.

Cara felt the chill as they passed. She thought about what was inside the pod, the freezing cold liquid nitrogen that could cause third degree burns... and her great aunt, whose body carried the virus that had stymied the globe and started the war.

Born and Degan jumped into the truck and rushed to the open compartment. They hooked the cryoliquid-exchange unit up to the pod and began running tests.

“Ready?” Katrin asked them.

“Yes, go ahead,” said Degan, and seeing Born nod in agreement, Katrin shut them in.

“Cara, help me hide the doors,” Katrin said and together they piled boxes from floor to ceiling and covered the boxes with tarps.

“84 degrees Fahrenheit, twenty-nine C,” a tense voice reported. “Still going up.”

They heard someone exclaim, “SIR!” then gulp to take in a breath.

“Ghost?”

“Anna got trapped in a hallway. Emergency containment doors at both ends of one hall shut her in.”

Cara was stunned and froze mid movement but Kan and Katrin remained unfazed.

“Where’re the others?” Kan asked.

“On the other side of the door trying to open it.”

“Control room, can you open the containment doors?” Kan queried.

“I’m... no... normally yes but the software’s not responding,” reported a technician. “I’ll send the manual override instructions to Henry and Ruby, but they need to fall back to where they have LiFi to receive it. Right now they’re in the dead zone.”

“I’ll *go tell them*,” Ghost said, her voice dropping off as she passed into the blackout zone.

Kan looked stressed but his words were calm. “What’s the temperature where Anna is?”

A voice came through as a mumble. Kan bowed his head and cupped his hand over his earpiece. “Speak up!”

“I don’t know. The temperature sensors are located at the hallway intersections and Anna is separated from those points.”

Suddenly everything around Cara felt unnatural, like she was in an artificial world... a CGI character trapped in an AniGame.

The same technician spoke again.

“The main computer now says the *doors are open-*”

“Legs here!” a voice interrupted, gasping for breath. “They opened... the doors with the instructions,” he panted. “Deactivation of the security sensors is again underway.”

“How’s Anna?” asked Kan.

“Her head’s still in the game, but she’s heat stressed,” Legs replied. “Red as a beet. I’d start an IV for her. Soon as

she's done, Mercury'll throw her over his shoulder and run 'er out."

Kan leaned his head back and looked up at the ceiling. "Seth, report."

Katrin grabbed a bag of rags, ripped open a five-liter carton of yesterday's coffee and shoved in the rags to soak. Then she set up an IV drip, popped open a rehydration bag, and sat down by the door to wait.

"85 degrees Fahrenheit, twenty-nine C."

Kan cursed under his breath. "*Seth, REPORT.*"

"Done!" Seth's voice exploded through Cara's earpiece. "The electric field's shut down!"

"Confirmed," the control room technician said, his voice shaky but relieved. "Current in the walls is effectively zero."

Aliyah spoke next. "When should I take Seth back to the perimeter?"

"As soon as he knows what went wrong so it can't happen again," Katrin replied.

"I do know, ma'am," said Seth. "I've taken care of it."

"Prima. Escort him back."

Kan spoke quietly, "You did it, Seth."

"Yes sir."

"Well done."

"Sir," Legs broke in, "we completed our part of the clean up except for one thing that's not in our protocol..."

"What?" Kan asked.

"Refried rats."

Laughter flooded the channel and Kan smiled. "You got this one, Henry?" he asked.

"Yes sir. No problem."

“Runners, assist Anna’s work,” ordered Kan, “then get her to the truck.”

“On it,” said Legs.

The quiet that followed felt eternal, as if time had dug its heels into the earth and would not move. Finally, a technician announced,

“Temperature’s dropping! 84 degrees Fahrenheit, twenty-nine C.”

Another voice said, “Mercury here. Security sensors should be back online. Control room, can you verify?”

“Confirmed,” a technician replied.

“Software indicates that all sensors are active.”

“Great,” said Kan. “Lynx, *get out of the building*. Staff, give me a scrub report.”

“We’re already halfway through,” a technician replied. “We’ve begun the data wipe-and-replace for the

instruments and computer logs.

Security cams are next.”

“Excellent,” Kan commended. “Ruby, when you’ve completed the checklist, I want a virtual tour of the building.”

“Will do, sir.”

“83 degrees Fahrenheit, twenty-eight C.”

The back of the van opened and Anna flopped inside like a hooked fish onto the deck of a boat. She zipped open the protective suit, yanked her sweat-drenched arms free of the sleeves, and then fell back to the floor in exhaustion.

“Could somebody get this *effin* thing off me?”

Katrin and Cara dragged Anna onto a tarp, peeled off the suit and covered her with rags soaked in lukewarm coffee. Propping her up slightly, Cara

put the straw of the rehydration fluid to her lips and helped her drink. By the time Anna's temperature was close to normal, the whole truck reeked of sour coffee.

Kan left his monitor and sat next to her on a crate. "How do you feel now?" he asked.

"Smashing," she answered and held up one of the wet rags. "Care for some coffee?"

He grinned.

Katrin took a scan of Anna's forehead and said, "Temperature's normal. Time for dry clothes."

"I chose to let you make the calls in there," Kan said to Anna. "I'm still not certain it was the right choice. This was a close one."

"I was fine," Anna assured him. "We had to complete the Op."

A question invaded Cara's thoughts like an unwelcome weed. "No one has said..." she began. "What temperature would have set off the bombs? How close did we come?"

Anna, Kan, and Katrin all turned and looked at her but only Katrin replied. "You don't want to know."

When later Cara tried to recall the events that immediately followed, she could only remember a few. She found some dry clothes for Anna, heard the countdown to shut down the shield, her earpiece went silent, and Katrin told her to get some sleep.

When Cara awoke, the van was moving and Anna was sitting next to her wrapped in a mound of tarps. “Good morning!” Anna greeted her. Cara smiled. The only part of Anna that was visible was the top half of her face.

“We’re headed to the contractor’s gate to exit the base,” Anna told her, then attempted to fluff up the stiff tarps piled around her. “I’m going to make a dress out of this and start a new clothing line. I’ll call it... The Tarp.” Cara chuckled. “I’ll definitely come to your opening show. How are you feeling?”

Anna rolled her eyes. “Pissed off. The only suit with defective wiring was on the *electrical engineer*.” Anna showed her the suit where she’d cut the fabric

back to expose an area where the circuitry was discolored.

“Probably the nanowire. Crappy wire, no power. No power, no coolant flow. Next time, I wire the gear myself.”

“How are they doing in *there*?” Cara asked, pointing to the compartment behind the wall of boxes.

“So far, so good,” Anna answered, handing Cara an earpiece. “This is yours. Katrin removed it while you were sleeping so you’d sleep as long as possible.”

“Oh.” Cara touched her ear where the commlink had been.

“You and I are tuned into the GZ-Jag channel. Basil’s driving... he’s posing as the person who came in to fix the truck and the real Beth from Move America is riding with him in the cab.” She paused to listen to her commlink,

then said, “Beth said we’re five minutes from the gate.”

Cara noticed that the voices on the other side of a drawn curtain had quieted down. The curtain parted slightly and Katrin looked in. “The rest of us are about to join you back here,” she announced. “Cara, got your ears in?”

“No. I’ll put it in now,” Cara answered, and started to, but Anna stopped her arm midway.

“Don’t laugh too loud,” she warned and put her index finger to her lips.

“What?” Cara fitted the commlink in her ear and heard Basil singing off key at the top of his lungs. She put her hand over her mouth and started laughing, then Anna started and the two sat shaking in silent laughter until tears streamed down their cheeks.

When Kan and two Jags entered, they gave Anna and Cara a questioning look.

“She just put in her commlink,” Katrin explained.

The Jags began to chuckle.

“He’s creating noise cover for us,” Kan said.

“So... he’s singing out of tune on purpose?” Cara asked.

“No,” Kan and the Jags all said in unison, and then laughed.

“It’s a good song, though,” Anna commented. “It’s by an Irish scald band-” but she stopped speaking when the van abruptly accelerated.

“That’s our signal,” Katrin said. “Get in your places under the tarps. Do it quickly and be quiet.”

They felt a long, graceful slowing before the truck screeched to a halt.

Basil continued singing loudly right up until he yelled, "Hello, hello!" The truck motor turned off. They heard an unfamiliar voice speaking, but couldn't make out the words, and then the truck started again as Basil hollered, "Goodbye, goodbye!"

"I'm going to rendezvous..." Basil caterwauled as the truck picked up speed, *"with you... I'm going to rendezvous with you tonight..."*

Kan chuckled. "Basil, you're about to be switched to the off-base channel."

"Bye, bye Basil," said Katrin.

Basil responded with a new song.

"There's nothing you can do, to make me leave you-" and then his voice cut out.

"Gott sei dank. Truck number two?"

Katrin queried.

“Here Ma’am,” a Jag responded.

“We’re ready for departure in... two minutes.”

“Very good,” Katrin replied. “Truck number three?”

“Ready for departure in twelve.”

Based on the sounds outside the van, Cara could tell they were in early morning traffic. The city held its own brand of peril in that, under the aegis of the Domestic Military, the City Police had the authority to stop and search any vehicle without a warrant. She felt the van slow and veer right. They were either being pulled over or were pulling onto a highway ramp, she couldn’t tell which.

“We’re okay,” Katrin murmured. “Sit tight.”

A few seconds later, Cara felt the truck speeding up and heard cars whizzing

by them on the highway. Anna laughed aloud under the tarp next to her and said, “*And... we’re off!*” as the truck pulled onto the interstate. A GZ’s voice spoke in their commlinks. “Truck two nearing the gate, Ma’am.” A moment later they heard her say, “Why are they stopping us?” “I don’t know,” the driver replied. “I set the speed alert so it can’t be...” Then he cursed and the GZ interjected, “Ma’am, the computer log shows we went over the speed limit. We didn’t hear the warning signal.” “It’s fine,” Katrin said, her voice sending a Zen-like calm over the channel. “Is the guard male or female?” “Male,” said the GZ. “I’ll start.” They could just barely hear the security guard’s voice say, “Sir, the

speed limit is twenty miles per hour and you were going twenty five. I need to see your ID.”

“We’re *so sorry* officer,” the GZ’s voice crooned, “I was supposed to set the speed alarm and I *forgot*. It’s not his fault.”

“ID please,” the guard repeated.

“Sure,” said the driver.

“I’m *sorry*, Kenny!” the GZ whined.

“Please don’t blame him officer, it’s all my fault.”

“Barb,” growled the driver, “let the man do his job.”

They heard the beep of an ID scanner.

“Everything seems to be in order,” the guard told them, “but I have to call your company. That’s the rule.”

The GZ let out a wail. “Ohhhhhhhh!

Please sir, don’t call them. They’ll fire me! Ohhhh!” The GZ began to sob. “I

have a baby at home and if I lose this job I won't be able to feed my baby! My mother takes care of him when I'm at work, but she's *sick*, and I need my job to buy her medicine-

"Shut it, Barb," said the driver. "Sorry officer, she gets like this."

"*Please...*" wailed the GZ.

"All right, all right," the guard said irritably. "Just don't let me catch you speeding here again."

"That won't *ever* happen, sir, *never*. Thank you, oh *thank you* sir!"

Inside the moving van, Anna's eyes were wide with mirth. "*Barbie and Ken? Oh... those* names are gonna *stick*."

Relieved laughter spilled over the channel. "*We're outta there!*" whooped the GZ. "Switching to the off-base frequency now, ma'am. Over and out."

Kan spoke into his commlink. "Henry, what's your status?"

"The temperature in the building is normal. Data replacement's complete and... well, you toured the building so you know that's clean. We swept the grounds for signal jammers and footprints. No sign of you... nothing. Now we're just waiting for the day shift to arrive, two of which are our people. They'll provide you with a report after their shift."

"Amazing work, Henry," Kan praised.

"Your team pulled us through."

"Thank you sir, but I believe the success was due to good planning and skilled leadership."

Kan smiled. "We'll speak soon."

"How's my third truck?" Katrin probed.

“Looks like we’re going to breeze through, Ma’am, without anyone stopping us.”

A few minutes later, they heard cheering on the commlink.

“We just *flew* the coop! See you in the mountains folks. R&R... *here we come.*”

Cara gazed happily at the people celebrating around her. Joy filled the confines of the trailer and spread through the wavelengths to people beyond. Their hearts are true, she thought, because they brave the truth. Without that, a person isn’t quite real. The life she’d been leading was plastic. She was a wax doll, made to melt unless she conformed.

