

Phoenix Fire

Lawrence Logan

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Gina enjoyed her job, not because of the actual work involved, but because of the position it put her in. Without her and people like her, the problem left by the mysterious death of the carrion birds would be unmanageable.

No one was sure just what had happened, but slowly and inexorably ravens and buzzards were dying. Many while sitting on eggs which never hatched and others simply dropped out of the sky. None of them were seen to be sick or weak, the birds just died. No explanation was found for their disappearance and all attempts to save them failed.

After that, the dead animals and bodies started to pile up with no natural way to dispose of them but the flies that always survived and were plentiful wherever decay was present. The overlooked importance of the birds became increasingly clear and ways to compensate for their loss had to be found.

Everyone agreed that fire was the best method, but fuel could be expensive and hard to come by and truth be told no one really liked having to deal with the smell normally associated with it. Gina knew herself lucky not to have to deal with that aspect of the trade any more, but most people did not realize the advances in disposal that had occurred since the first Disposal Experts appeared on the field. Now, with the special liquid that they had developed, things were a lot easier and more efficient. It allowed for controlled fires with minimum residue.

There were many who wanted the formula so that they would not have to pay for the cost of disposal. Its properties made it ideal to deal with the situation in a way that could not be duplicated. A few bad experience with early burnings caused every one to forswear not using the Pyro's, as they called them, when it came to manage the animal waste. No one was forced to get one of them to take care of the problem in their area, but the

fumes and the inability to keep the fire from spreading made it almost a given that they would call and pay for their help. A few deadly fires was all that it took to even make it illegal in some communities for anyone else to do so, a fact well appreciated by Gina's company.

Many people resented the fact they had to rely on someone else to dispose of their local problems and had to pay whatever amount was asked, but that did not bother Gina. She knew what she did was a valuable service and despite their complaints no one else really wanted to deal with all the corpses lying around or let the swarms of flies live in the area. Gina had always been a sensible person and recognized right away how indispensable Disposal Experts had become. Being given the opportunity to become one was something that she would have been a fool to pass up. The work was not that bad really, even if everyone seemed to resent her. Her family was always polite, but she knew they did not quite approve of what she did even if they could find no rational reason why.

Gina was a mid level Disposer and as such did not know the secret of the fluid they used and had to account for every single drop she checked out of the company dispensary. Her track record was good and she knew that soon she would get a promotion to level 3 after which it would be only a year to becoming a top level specialist. Then she could start thinking of opening her own branch of the company where she could delegate work to others and set herself up nicely.

All of that was in the future and right now she had to focus on the job at hand. Gina adjusted her mask as she swept through the small community of EdgeWood for small rodents and pets. Using the special goggles she could find most of them and the rest flies would point to. Once she found each offending body she put it a special bag that she would later douse and then burn. Although it looked like plastic, it was in fact another invention of the company that was strong and flexible. Feeling it her hands she realized how much she did not know about her employers. Gina had no complaints though, even if the job could get distasteful, in general her colleagues were nice and the pay good.

It only took her about an hour to locate all the decomposing bodies, but she made a second sweep to be sure. This was her first call alone and

she wanted to make sure she got a good report. Most of the time Karl was with her when they went out on a call, but this time she was given a small assignment that did not require two Disposers and was deemed experienced enough to be able to handle it on her own. That is how she knew that soon she would be promoted. Only at level 3 where you allowed to answer calls by yourself. Karl was one of those who could take on any assignment and although no one actually said so, and there was no title to go with his name, Gina knew that he was a type of supervisor. They got along well and she was sure he was part of the reason for the solo assignment.

Having collected all the small bodies, Gina headed for her truck. Normally there would be a big burning that had to be done in the open air, but this community kept things rather tidy. She guessed that someone probably had an incinerator that they used for larger problems but smaller animals were harder to find and they called in experienced experts to handle that problem.

In the truck there was a small bowl like container that was below an open-able vent. It was designed for the small items they needed to burn. Even though they did not like to admit it, the company knew that their trade was not universally appreciated and in some cases scoffed so they had designed trucks that could handle limited amount of burning out of public view. Although the fluid ensured that no flames would damage the rest of the truck, the fumes could coat the interior of the vehicle so a vent was devised to eliminate the problem.

Gina put the bag carefully in the round container and took out a bottle of burning fluid. The refillable container was made of an opaque material that seemed like plastic, but was much harder and durable. It also had a mechanism that only allowed someone with a certain type of card to allow liquid to be squirted out, and yet another card that allowed the cap to come off completely so that it could be refilled. Gina did not have the access to do that action, she was given the necessary bottles at the company and returned them when empty. The precious liquid was a closely guarded secret that she would protect because she knew the success of her company and therefore her own job and prospects depended on it. Her zealously in keeping the secret did not stop her from wondering sometimes what it was

composed of and who made the initial discovery.

She squirted enough of the liquid on the bag to cover it with a slight wetness. Some Disposers put much more than was needed, but Gina prided herself in using just the right amount for the job. She did not know how much it cost to manufacture the liquid, but she would not be the one to waste it. Once she understood its properties, she was able to estimate accurately how much was needed for each job. The graduation on the bottle told her she had put slightly less than the recommended amount, but her experience told her it would be sufficient. Quickly, she took her flame less lighter and aimed it at a corner of the bag. A small laser beam left the device and started the bag on fire. In a matter of seconds the whole of it was engulfed and the heat pushed Gina back.

As she watched the flames rapidly consume the package she reflected that this was definitely the best part of the job. The dancing flames were mesmerizing, and even though the rest of the job could be onerous and uncomfortable at times, Gina still got a thrill watching the flames. Many disposers were no longer entranced by the bluish flame that sometimes produced a spark of green, or purple, but she still enjoyed the spectacle it produced. There was a danger that it could become addictive, she had heard, and that some disposers had gone on rampages burning everything they could. But as far as she knew that was only a rumor started by those jealous of the indispensable position that they had in the current society. Even if it was true, Gina was too practical to do something that would endanger her chances of success in the business. Yes it was her only moment where she let herself go free of concentration and into the changing realm the fire offered, but it was just a fancy and nothing more.

The fire gave off a pleasant aroma that was hard to describe. It seemed like different burnings had their own different smells, but something was the same about all of them. She guessed that something in the fluid gave off the smell, but since it always changed she could never be sure what it was. Soon the bag was totally consumed and the flames died out almost as quickly as they started. The ash residue was all that was left and few vestiges of smoke that were quickly dispersed by the fan in the roof vent. Gina pushed a button and the bottom of the burn receptacle open dumping

the contents into a plastic bag that was marked with the company insignia and the date and time. She removed the bag and exited the truck to go to the community office. Whenever a burning was done in the truck they had to account for it so as to prevent anyone from collecting on false pretenses. Some places were so mistrustful of the disposers that they would actually examine the bags before anything was burned to ensure that it contained carcasses. Large disposals of course did not need such scrutiny because they had to be done in a open area where anyone was free to watch.

Gina rang the doorbell and waited for someone to answer. It took a while for anyone to come to the door as they were all probably deciding who it was that would have the distasteful task of signing for the package. How foolish it was, she thought to herself. It was only ash and nothing more, and there was nothing really to fear. And she guessed they did some burning of their own, so they should not be afraid of dealing with the remains. There was nothing you could do about people's attitudes, so she just waited patiently. She had to collect the signature for her records before she left no matter how long the extra wait.

Finally someone came to the door, it was a young man probably designated for the task because he was the lowest in position. Nervously he took the package as if it contained toxic contents.

"I need you to sign here that you have taken possession and that the weight accounts for the bodies in the area" she said, and handed him a clipboard with markers where he signatures were needed.

"OK," he said somewhat nervously. The young man took the clipboard and dutifully signed.

"There is nothing to fear, it is just some ashes" Gina said. "And I don't bite."

"What?" he said and then tried to put on some bravado. "Of course it is nothing, I am not afraid, just trying not to make a mistake."

Gina knew he was lying but did not call him on it. "The weight of the package can be independently verified if you wish. You can write any complaints down about today's service on that form if you like. If you have any other problems or concerns, please contact the branch office listed on your copy of the receipt." He handed the clipboard back to her and she tore

off her copy and handed him his.

“Thank you for using Prometheus services, and have a nice day.” she said and headed towards her truck.

“You too,” the young man said somewhat weakly.

Gina smiled to herself, it was true that people reacted to her better than to some of the men. Being attractive had its advantages in the business, people tended to forget some of their distaste and contempt when faced with a brilliant smile. Now that she thought about it, most of the disposers she knew were good looking, perhaps it was a company policy of some kind. It did make sense to use people that would not cause revulsion. Gina wondered if that had always been the case, or even if it was true of all branch offices. Maybe it was just something particular to their manager? It was a good idea though and she would keep it in mind when she established a place of her own.

The drive back to the office was uneventful. No one sent any calls for her on the radio even though she wanted to do at least one more call before going back in. She did see one or two of the company trucks on the way back, but apparently they did not need any help. Eventually she was back in the office where she was surprised to be greeted by Karl.

“I thought you were on a call” Gina said when she saw him.

“Ha, that was just to throw you off. I actually was close to EdgeWood in case you needed help.”

“You mean in case I made a mistake,” she said somewhat angrily. “I didn't think I needed babysitting.”

“Don't look at me with those eyes, it's company policy when someone goes on their first loner, and you know that their policy is my duty. And you are right, you did not need watching, you did an excellent job just as I told them you would.”

“Thank you Karl” Gina said her anger fading. Once again her sensible side realizing the wisdom of having someone on stand by.

“Well, I never had any doubts about you. Just don't forget to turn in all the paperwork for the call to make it a perfect finish.”

“You know I won't, you are the one who always forgets. I've had to do it for you too many times to count.”

“Oh yeah, that's right” he said smiling. “I am so forgetful, what will I do now that I don't have you to look after me.”

“I am sure you will manage” Gina said smiling back. Somehow she knew he had “forgotten” all those times to give more training. She had heard some mentors were harsh and demanding, but Karl had always been fun to work with even if he was somewhat of a stickler of following every rule down to the letter. When he said that their policy was his duty, he really meant it. Whatever they asked of him, they would get. He was totally devoted to the company. Gina did not know if she would ever have that strong a sense of duty.

They walked to the recreation room talking about the day and the young man who finally answered the door. Karl kept teasing her that he was the one for her, and she kept countering that he loved the company too much to ever find anyone for himself. They found the room mostly empty, it was only at lunch time that you could find many people here watching television or playing video games. But noon had long since gone, and the only ones here were those waiting for calls, just like Gina and Karl. She sat in one of the sofa's and idly watched what was on, which was the news. Mac and Jerry were there, long time disposers that were inseparable while working. You would have thought them brothers the way they knew each other so well, but as far as she knew they had only met when they had joined the company. They were not roommates, nor did they live close to each other, but somehow they understood each other and were very efficient when partnered so no one ever thought of breaking the pair.

They both welcomed Gina and Karl with a nod as they sat. On the whole they were nice guys but would barely pay attention to anything other than the news when it was on. Gina also understood that they often got tough assignments that involved many carcasses or even human bodies that had to be disposed of. In truth she did not see them often, but they were the one curiosity that was pointed out to anyone who started work there. Talking to them could sometimes be confusing as they would often finish each others thoughts. Today, as was true whenever they were in the recreation room, they were absorbed by what they saw on the television screen.

Gina tried to pay attention to what was being said, but it did not seem very interesting. It was all about market strength and events happening to certain political figures that seemed only to be important to the person presenting it. Anything about the company was of course, important as she had to gage her future, but all of these figures where divorced from her reality. She was a top employee at a good company that specialized in a need that was not soon to go away. She would not say any of that out loud though, clearly the trouble brothers were into it and she was not going to make them change the channel. She glanced at Karl who also looked bored and headed towards the air hockey table. Why not? Gina thought, they were so intent in their watching that a little noise would not disturb them.

Karl and Gina had not been playing for long when Mac turned off the television. Karl was so stunned that he stopped guarding his goal allowing Gina to score easily. Almost at once Jerry and Mac stood up from the couch.

“Are we disturbing you?” Karl asked. “We can stop if the sound bothers you.”

“Not at all” Mac said.

“It is just that...” Jerry said.

“...we need to go” Mac added.

“No doubt about that” Mac concluded.

“Please continue to play” Jerry said.

“I am sure you will get a call soon enough” Mac said and headed toward the door.

“Oh, and congratulations” Jerry said as he moved towards the exit. And then they were gone.

“What was that all about?” Gina asked.

“I don't know, I've never known them to turn off the television even when they are done watching.”

“Maybe they where really disturbed by our noise” Gina mused.

“Clearly it was something else, they are always too absorbed to be disturbed.”

“I didn't hear a call come through, did you?”

“No, I heard nothing as well, and they do make it loud enough to

overcome all the noise in here.”

“Yeah, that was decidedly strange.”

“I agree, I've never seen them act that way, though you never know with them.”

“Well, I suppose there is nothing we can do about it so we might as well play some more.”

“That is what they told us to do, so why not?”

Gina and Karl resumed their air hockey game, but it soon became clear that he was still preoccupied with the strange behavior of the two men. He kept missing easy shots and Gina kept being able to score without much of a reaction from Karl. She did not mind too much as he was usually hard to beat. Still, after some time he finally gave up trying altogether.

“The more I think of it, the more odd it seems” Karl said. “Maybe we should see what they were watching.”

“Fine with me,” Gina said and walked over to the remote and turned on the television. As before it was the news and there did not seem to be any new breaking stories. “The news, as usual, but there is no telling what we missed.”

“Well, keep watching, and I will go to the front desk and see what I can find out.”

“It is really bothering you, isn't it?” Gina remarked.

“Very much so, I have known them for a number of years and they have never acted that way.”

“You experience with them is much longer than mine” Gina agreed. “So if you think it is worth checking out, go ahead. I will wait here and see if anything interesting comes up on the news.”

Karl left the room and Gina turned her attention to the television. The usual noise was on it. A market ticker over the top, some headlines on the bottom, and a newscaster talking about something or another. It seemed likely that whatever it was that Mac and Jerry saw was not anything that was currently being reported, so she scanned the headlines to see if she could detect anything that could have caused a reaction from the pair. There were some deaths reported as usual, and some politicians plan for a new highway, but nothing stood out to her. Maybe someone they knew had died? She was

still trying to figure out what could have caused such a reaction when Karl returned.

“Did you find out anything?” Gina asked.

Karl made a face and said “No, not really. But, uh... I think you should go home.”

Gina knew at once that he was not telling her the truth, but was too shocked to say anything. He had never been dishonest with her during the time they had partnered so something must have really rattled him.

“I'm not sure I understand, you want me to go home?”

“Yes.”

“But there is still a long time before it is time for my shift to be over.”

“Consider it a reward for having finished your first solo call. Go home early, and relax. Take a bath, read a book, whatever you want.”

“If you say so,” Gina said and then pressed again. “Are you sure everything is fine?”

“Yes, quite so. Don't worry about the trouble brothers they are just strange guys to begin with, who knows what goes on in their head.”

Gina knew it was useless to try to extract any more information from him. It was clear Karl was disturbed and it looked like he was not happy about lying to her either. He must have been told not to say anything to her about whatever it was that was happening. There was nothing she could do about his sense of duty and she did not want to put too much of a strain on their relationship. She knew that his duty came above anything else, so she went to the locker room, stripped off her uniform gathered her things and left. Evidently she was not the only one to be told to go home early, no matter what Karl had said about it being a reward. Gina saw someone else being told to go home as they turned in their paperwork for a call they had just completed. Well, there was nothing she could do about it, but follow the directive no matter what the reason was.

2

The company shuttle to the subway was mostly empty. She recognized two other mid level disposers and an entry level one along with one or two others who seemed to have just come off a long shift as they were yawning and dozing off. She was not sure about how the shifts worked, but it seemed clear that employees of her level and below were being sent home early. Whatever it was the trouble brothers had seen had shaken up the company in a big way, and only higher level personnel were privy to the information.

The trip home on the subway was uneventful. All during the ride she pondered what she knew about the company and its workings, trying to find some clue as to what could cause a shake up. Gina also watched the monitors in the subway car to see if they revealed any news that would shed some light on what they had seen. Unfortunately, it either was a different news channel, or what they had seen was only something someone at their level would pick up on. There were some interesting reports about some researcher doing a study on different viruses that linked them together so that one remedy would cure them all. That was something that would be useful when she had her own business because if it was cheap enough she could ensure that her employees were always healthy which meant no lost days because of illness. Gina was always able to see the business application of just about any invention or idea if there was one to be found. Even as she was pondering what had just happened, she considered how she would deal with a shakeup when she was in charge.

Another report talked about a battle somewhere over land and ethnicity, and she thought of how it would affect business. In times when things were down it seemed like people tended to tolerate a lot more than when they were feeling good. If everything was going well, they wanted no reminders of what was not actually working. That is why the young man

had found the job of signing for the package so distasteful, he did not want a reminder of all the animals that died in the area and had to be disposed of. A clean and clear community is what he envisioned. In truth she was not all that concerned with politics, but as she ascended the ranks Gina realized more and more how important they were in business.

No messages awaited her at her apartment, probably because most of her friends had not left work yet. Gina did not have many friends as often talking about her job drove people away. She understood how that might turn people off, even if it was foolish, so she tried not to refer to it during regular conversation and talk about more general topics. At the moment though, there was no one to call. It was not often that she was home before 15:00 as she was today. She felt restless because of what had happened, but not being able to find any clues by reading the news or watching the television she decided to take a walk to a nearby coffee shop and enjoy the afternoon.

It was wonderful to be outside, another benefit that her job had, and she enjoyed taking a slow walk to Cup of Joe the local coffee shop. The clouds that had promised rain did not let a drop loose, and the breeze that passed through the air was not a harsh chilling wind. Gina's neighborhood was nothing remarkable with its uniform buildings and occasional trees, but on a day like this she enjoyed seeing all the crevices and changes in the brick patterns. She never had noticed how some had painted the outside of their windows in different patterns and colors. One had a vine pattern that looked very realistic, while another was in a bright red and yellow. For the most part all of the windows looked the same like her unremarkable one that she could only pick out of the many others from experience.

She arrived at Cup of Joe feeling cheerful. Even though there was still a little worry in the back of her mind, she was beginning to enjoy the extra time off and the fact it was clear that she would soon be promoted. Gina had to admit to herself that she often got lost in her work and focusing on doing her job right, this was a break from that routine and she would make the best of it whatever came tomorrow.

Joe, the owner of the coffee shop recognized her right away as she came up to the counter and greeted her.

“Hello, Gina it's been a while, and aren't you supposed to be working?”

“I got off early today Joe, so I came here to relax.”

“Of course, no better place for it! Shall I make you the regular.”

“Yes, please,” she said and smiled at him. Everyone at Cup of Joe was nice but he was especially so. He was very much customer oriented and unlike other places where it felt like they were doing you a favor by giving you things that you payed for. Gina could not remember seeing him angry at a customer or be anything less than pleasant. Joe brought her a spiced coffee with just the right amount of cream. She paid for it and sat down in one of the several comfortable padded chairs that were placed around the shop.

As she sipped her coffee she looked out the window at the passers by. It was fun to try to guess their purpose by the way they walked. She could imagine where they were going and why, thought she was probably wrong in most cases. Gina vaguely remember playing a game with a friend long ago where they made up the most involved story possible for a particular person, but it always had to be believable and fit into context. That friend had since moved on to another city and they had not kept in touch as is often the case when you are children.

“You look like you are in the middle of a memory,” someone said to her.

Gina turned to see a man drop into a chair close to her. He was dressed in casual clothes, but had a very neat appearance. His t-shirt was tucked in and pulled tight and straight, and his jeans faded through but not ragged.

“Of course, I am told that I am always chasing one” he said with a smile. “I hope I am not disturbing you?”

Gina blinked to get her thoughts back to the present. “No, of course not. I am not doing any particularly important thinking at the moment.”

“Good,” he said. “Today is not a day for important thoughts. It is too nice out to darken it with complex thinking and deep ponderances. It is perfectly suited for remembrances and pleasant idyllic thinking.”

“Really? I think deep thoughts are probably better suited to bright

days when you can see everything in nature clearly.”

“Ah, but our senses can be deceiving. This much beauty and intense colors and sensations can easily distract the mind.”

“That may be true, but you can also focus it better than on a dreary day when everything looks the same.”

“I disagree, there is nothing particularly interesting about a overcast day. Nothing to catch the eye, so therefore nothing to keep you from your purpose.”

“But it might be more difficult to accomplish that purpose if the weather weighs on your mind.”

“That seems like a valid point, so I will concede it to you. You do make some convincing arguments. If I may ask, what do you do?”

“Nothing of consequence,” Gina replied. She was enjoying the conversation as much as the rest of the day so she was not going to bring it to an end just yet by revealing what she did.

“Interesting, interesting” he said. “I would believe that the nature of your work is related to your feelings about the weather. Of course this is only a conjecture since you wish to remain secretive about it. Which is your right, of course. But I will not debate you on the quality of the weather which is very good.”

“Quite true, nothing to debate on that, the facts speak for themselves.”

They both fell silent, and it did not feel uncomfortable. Everything that needed to be said had been and Gina did not feel like she had to start a new topic, and she sensed that he would do so or not at his discretion. It was a sign of a good mood that she did not feel uncomfortable with the silence. Often she found herself being polite, perhaps out of habit of dealing with customers, and simply making conversation that was awkward because it felt unnatural. For some reason she did not feel like she was not being nice by failing to start another topic between them. Gina simply continued to gaze out the window sipping her coffee as people on all kinds of different errands passed by.

“People are interesting, aren't they” the man finally said. “They make all kind of choices every minute of the day and some are rather

dreadful.”

“Oh? How do you mean?” Gina asked.

“Well, I am sure you could not fail to miss the man with the orange shirt and blue pants. That was definitely a poor choice.”

“Yes,” Gina laughed. “A bad decision, but at first I thought you were going to talk about something deeper than bad clothing decisions.”

“Didn't I tell you today was not a day for deep thoughts, of course I would only be thinking of the strange things people decide to wear.”

“True, and you should have known I would think you spoke of more weighty matters.”

“Yes, quite, and it makes for an amusing situation, don't you think?”

Gina simply smiled and really looked at him for the first time. There was something familiar about him though she knew she had not met him before. Probably he was also a regular but left about the time she usually arrived. He was perfectly at ease in the padded chair, and thought he was neatly dressed there were one or two touches of disarray in his clothes. His hair was a dark color, short and slightly tousled. For the first time she noticed how he was looking at her with scrutiny. It was not a lecherous look, she knew that one well no matter who it was giving it, but rather like that of someone trying to figure something out. Maybe his comment about choices was not just about people walking by, but something he saw in her. And even though he looked as if he was trying to solve a puzzle there was a trace of amusement or fun in his eyes as well. This was not an ordinary guy trying to get a date, though it probably was not far from his mind. Gina had not met any men who had no such intentions somewhere in the back of their mind when they approached her.

“You asked me what I did,” she said. “So I think it fair to ask you the same.”

“Ah, but you did not answer. You said nothing of consequence, so I believe I will use the same reply.”

“Fair enough, but that leaves us with little to talk about, doesn't it?”

“Well, I don't define myself by the type of work I do, so there is plenty we could discuss. Like for example, my name, which is Lake. Now wasn't that an interesting choice my parents made?”

“Lake? Really? Any one in particular, or just a general sense of them?” Gina said, and then added “My name is Gina by the way.”

“I’m not sure. My parents always said it was because I was very calm, but I think it might because of something else entirely, but I wouldn’t embarrass them by asking.”

“Some things you definitely are better not knowing about your parents. To be honest I don’t know too much about how mine were when they were younger and I like it that way.”

“Illusions are fun, aren’t they? And they can be comforting, but I was always too curious for that type of thing. Magicians always had a hard time with me because I always wanted to know how it worked. I fear I did not always realize their performance did not encourage audience participation and inquiry.”

“I can image that would be disruptive for them. I usually don’t go for those kind of performances anyway. They can be very impressive though.”

“Illusions can be amazing, but it is what they hide that is impressive in my opinion. The skill that is needed to carry them off is what really interests me as well as the ingenuity to find a way to fool the audience.”

“You really do analyze it don’t you. I think too much scrutiny could take away the fun and enjoyment from anything.”

“Ah, many people think that, but really it becomes even more interesting. Besides anything worthwhile should survive a careful analysis. Like you for example, I am not disappointed just because I now know you better, if only from your replies. You are clearly worth analyzing.”

“Was that a compliment?”

“It could be considered as much. The only that puzzles me is why you hide that you are a Pyro.”

Gina was shocked. How did he know she was disposer? No smell should linger on her clothes as she wasn’t wearing her uniform. Was it the way she talked, or something she said? She tried to rack her brain to find what clue it was he had picked up on.

“I am sorry,” Lake said. “I did not mean to offend you by using that word. I believe the proper term is Disposer?”

“Yes,” Gina finally said. “That is right, but how did you know?”

“Well there were a lot of clues really. The fact you think that good weather is something you see as helping thoughts pointed to the fact that you had a job that occurred outdoors which also explained why you did not like foul weather. Also your evasiveness about your job which is also characteristic of your trade since most people find it disturbing. The way you kept up the conversation also indicated that you had some experience dealing with irascible people which is particularly the case with your customers from what I understand. Of course I did not know for sure until just now when you confirmed it by your reaction.”

“What are you Lake, some kind of detective?”

“Nothing that glamorous, I am just a scientist. And just so you know I have no qualms about your job, it has its place in the current scheme of things.”

“A scientist can be glamorous enough. Though you don't really look one.”

“Well, we can't always go around wearing lab coats and carrying beakers, just a you can't go around burning stuff all the time.”

“That is not what I mean,” Gina said. “You just don't strike me as someone who is always immersed in calculations and experiments. You seem much more involved in reality and life.”

“I would guess that is a compliment as well. At least I will take to be such. There are of course many misconceptions about what I do, just as there are about your trade. We aren't all men who can't tell what day it is because we are so concerned about how clean a beaker is or how accurate a thermometer can be.”

“True, true. Do you find it irritating that people assume certain things about you because you are a scientist?”

“Well, not really. People are interesting and will think what they want, some of it will be accurate and some very strange and illogical. As long as it does not prevent me from doing anything I have to get done I don't mind the wrong assumptions.”

“My case is a little different though, you probably are thought to be boring, but in my case some people just look embarrassed and stop talking to me. I can't tell you how many times an interested man has all of a sudden

stammered a stupid excuse and left me alone.”

“Ha, that’s great that you have a good way to get rid of unwanted attention which I am sure comes your way quite often.”

“Not as often as you think” she said. And they continued to talk for what seemed like hours though it was only a few minutes. Lake was an intelligent man who was polite and interesting, and seemed to just enjoy a conversation for the sake of it. It was nearing five when Lake stood up.

“Much as I have enjoyed this conversation,” Lake said. “I must get going. Perhaps I will see you again here sometime. I hope you have a pleasant evening.”

“Wait,” Gina said. “I don’t think we have matching schedules, maybe we should exchange phone numbers?”

“I did not know I had managed to be interesting for a change” he said with a half smile. “Here is my card, I really have to go, so if you really want to, you can call me with your number. Once again, enjoy your evening.”

Gina was about to ask for a pen, but it was too late. Lake was already on his way to the door. He did not look hurried, but he was moving with a determined purpose so she did not try to stop him. She was a little surprised at her boldness, maybe it was because he had not been predictable and asked for her number. It was a little disappointing, but Lake must have been interested enough in her to warrant giving her his card.

Gina took time to look at it. It was emblazoned with a simple logo and his name: Lake G. Olinaf, PhD, along with his numbers. Clearly he was used to meeting people in his research to justify him carrying a card. It was likely that he was on his way to work, wherever PRI was, and so carried his business card as she would do when she was out answering calls.

She took a sip from her cup and realized it was empty. For how long had that been the case she wondered. Gina could not remember drinking anything while she was talking with Lake. Or was it Doctor Lake? It did not matter, she really had enjoyed the afternoon off, whatever the reason for it. She sat and thought for a while more and then decided it was time to go home and maybe relax watching a movie, or call some friends to go out. Well, she was not sure she would do that. She did have to work tomorrow after all.

Gina waved to Joe as she headed out the door and went back to her apartment. The sky began to darken as she walked giving the impression that a downpour would soon be coming. As she got farther from the coffee shop she began to feel like she was being watched. Gina quickened her pace, but the feeling still remained. Looking around she saw no strange cars or suspicious people, so she tried to dismiss it as effects from the change in the sky. Gloomy weather could lead to gloomy thoughts. The feeling remained all the way to her apartment, but she could not pinpoint any source, nor was there any reason why anyone would be looking for her. She was not anyone of importance nor did she have any powerful or influential friends, and as far as she knew, no enemies. It could be anyone she reminded herself, not everyone who lived in the city had honorable intentions.

Once in her apartment, Gina felt a lot better. Soon after, the skies did release all the water they were holding and it beat down heavily upon the windows. She dismissed her feelings, sank into her couch and turned on the television. She idly switched through the channels looking for something interesting to watch. It was rare that she had time to sit doing nothing so she had no idea what was good, or indeed when any show someone had mentioned was on. Gina finally settled on a news channel. Maybe whatever it was that the trouble brothers had seen would leap up at her.

After a moment she gave up since nothing of interest seemed to cross the screen. Gina headed to the kitchen and began to prepare her dinner. The sound of the television kept her company as she went about gathering ingredients. Unfortunately she was missing some spices she wanted to use which she had intended to get earlier in the week but had not had time. Since it was a vital ingredient of her intended creation she decided to walk to the corner store to get it.

As soon as she stepped out of the building into the rain that had somewhat abated she was once again overcome with the feeling of being watched. She walked quickly to the store because of the rain and her feelings, got what she wanted rapidly, paid and left. The whole way home she kept looking about trying to pinpoint who or what it was that she felt observing her. Even though she could not find any reason for the way she

felt, there was nothing that she was able to do to allay it, and Gina decided not to go out tonight with any of her friends. Perhaps she was simply being paranoid today, but she knew it would certainly make anything she did outside uncomfortable.

She had just entered the door when she saw Lake on the television. It finally hit home where she had seen him before. The report of the scientist developing some kind of cure that would affect all kinds of diseases with a simple application. He was wearing the same clothes she had seen when they met at the coffee shop and was being asked questions about his research. Gina forgot all about her cooking and sat down to watch the interview. From what transpired it was clear that he was at the top of the scientific community when it came to disease and biology, even though he had done research in other areas too. She guessed that being a scientist he did not have the same popular focus that other celebrities had and therefore did not have to worry about being assaulted at every minute by press and grasping fans. That is why he could go to Cup of Joe's without being worried or bothered by anyone there. Of course this interview would make a minor celebrity of him for the time being, still most people were only interested in what affected them directly, and she had to admit that she probably would not have watched the report if it wasn't that she had immediately recognized Lake.

Gina was not sure what to do. Obviously he had said she could call him, but she had never met anyone as important as he, and definitely not as casually as she just had today. Lake had given her his phone number without a thought, but she would not want to disturb him from his work. Finding cures for diseases was definitely important to the whole of humanity, and she was just one of the many people that it would affect if successful. Still, it was nice having adult conversations with a man, and he could provide that. A slight burning smell disturbed her thoughts, and she remembered her dinner. She dashed to the kitchen to find her food in the first stages of becoming a smoking pile of tasteless goo and was able to salvage most of it. She added the spices to her side dish, finished cooking it and sat down to eat.

Gina continued to watch the news, but this time to see if anything

else would be reported about Lake and his research. Unfortunately nothing more came up, and finally she decided that it was time for her to end her day, and she went to bed. The final image on the television was of a conflagration in some affluent neighborhood and she went to sleep thinking of the fires that she burned everyday as they filled her dreams throughout the night.

3

The next morning the weather had changed back again for the better. The streets were still wet and puddles had formed in all the usual places. The train ride in was uneventful, but before she got on the shuttle bus to work, they checked everyone's ID, something that was always supposed to happen but was cursory unless you were a new employee. As a result Gina could feel a tension on the bus as it drove down the streets to the office building. Many on the bus did not even talk to each other, being afraid of what it might mean for them or the people next to them.

When they finally arrived there was someone waiting for them at the entrance. As each person walked in their identity was checked and some were stopped and escorted somewhere else. Everyone was in a single file waiting to be checked and get in. Even with the added security, Gina was not worried about what would happen to her. She knew that she was in good standing and there was no reason to fear any problems. To her surprise she was stopped at the entrance and then escorted away.

"What is going?" she asked the man escorting her. "What did I do or not do?"

The man just ignored her completely and walked her down the wall past rows of nondescript doors. Gina was familiar with this part of the building because it was usually used for aptitude tests and interviews, though occasionally they used it for knowledge tests that were used to gauge who should be promoted or not. It had been a long time since she had been back here, and being brought to this place did not bode well. She also did not recognize the person escorting her, so that added to her discomfort. Gina once again reminded herself that she had never done anything to jeopardize her career so she should not worry, even so she could do nothing but think the worst.

They stopped at one of the many doors which the man unlocked and

ushered her in. “Stay here” is all he said and then left closing the door behind him. Gina was sure it was locked, that was always standard procedure for tests so that no cheating could occur. Prometheus was very careful in their employee selection and took all those matters seriously. There was nothing in the room but a table and two chairs. Gina took the one facing the door and waited anxiously for someone to come. What did they want with her? Why was the building on tight security? Had something happened to Mac and Jerry? What subtle clue was out there to explain the current state of matters? She was reminded of Lake and how he had deduced her occupation, something small would not have escaped his notice, it was his job to find out the mysteries of the world. There had to be something in her experience yesterday that would tell her what she needed to know.

Gina had been waiting for about fifteen minutes when the door finally opened and Karl entered the room by himself.

“Karl!” Gina exclaimed. “What is going on? Why am I here?”

“There has been a mistake Gina, you shouldn't be in here. So I came to get you.”

“Mistake? Well, that's a relief. I was worried that I had done something wrong.”

“Did you?” he asked looking at her intently. “Does your conscience bother you?”

“No, just I... You know me, why would you ask that question?”

“I'm sorry” Karl sighed. “I am just feeling a little stressed. And you are here for doing something wrong, not really wrong, an oversight really.”

“What? What did I do?”

“You forgot to turn in your paperwork yesterday,” Karl said. “Well, that's why you were flagged anyway. When I heard that you were taken here I explained that it was my fault for making you go home early. Since you have an excellent record they saw reason and sent me to get you. I'm sorry if you were worried.”

Gina was mad, and at the same time relieved. It was true that she had forgotten to turn everything yesterday in her rush to leave and elation at the compliments, and that was inexcusable. She was not upset at Karl for

being the cause of the misunderstanding this morning, but at herself for not following the procedure as she should have. This was a stern reminder to always make sure and do everything that was required when working.

“Come on. Let's go” Karl said. “We are going to be a bit short handed today and we need all the people we can get out there.”

Gina got up and surprised herself by giving Karl a hug. From the look on his face he was surprised too, though she could imagine not entirely displeased.

“Thank you” she said. “I really was beginning to be worried.”

“Nothing to be worried about girl,” he said gently. “You work with me, and everyone knows I got you in shape.”

“Well, I'm glad you think so. Can you tell me what is going on?”

Karl sighed. “I wish I could, I know you just had a scare, but I don't think it is allowed even so. Maybe I can by the end of the day, but you shouldn't expect it.”

Gina did not press him. Once again his duty to the company overrode everything else and she would just have to hope that whoever was in charge of the situation would let him tell her. She did feel extremely grateful to him for coming to get her as they walked towards the main office. Karl was a decent man though somewhat too playful sometimes. She realized how worried she must have been from the great feeling of relief she had at not still being in the small room awaiting whatever it was they had planned for her.

The main office was full of tension. Those not heading out for a call were clearly waiting anxiously. No one, it seemed, was in the recreation room, where normally there would be many while waiting for an assignment. Gina quickly walked pass the desk and headed down to the locker rooms to change into her uniform and prepare her gear. When she opened her locker she noticed that even though nothing was out of place, it was not exactly how she had left it the day before. Something major was going and she guessed it had to do with some kind of theft, but exactly what or how they knew what it had occurred, she did not know. Once again she berated herself for not turning her paperwork in as she had always done before. Had she done everything according to protocol she would have been

beyond scrutiny.

Gina blocked her mistake out of her mind and focused on getting ready. Karl had said that they were short handed and she had no reason to doubt him, so there was going to be a lot of work to do. Quickly she put on her uniform, checked her gear and headed up to wait with the others. Today she would put an extra effort into her work so that she could prove that she was a model employee worthy of trust. Even though Karl said that there was nothing to worry about, and it all had been a misunderstanding, she wanted to remove any doubt there might be about her..

The day went by rather quickly, Karl was had been right in how busy it was going to be and for most of the day she worked alone. Gina took that to be sign that she was still trusted and it helped her worry less. It seemed like every time she finished a call, she would be asked to go to another without returning to the office. Twice she had needed to refuse a call so that she could refill her supplies, and each time she did so, she made sure to turn in all her paperwork and follow all the equipment checks. The office was busy with what seemed like more phones needing answering by a smaller staff and more service trucks than usual sitting idle in the company parking lot. Whatever the reason for the shake up, Gina realized that those who had been stopped at the entrance were not being allowed to work today, and she was glad her truck was not simply using up spot in the lot.

Toward the end of the day Karl joined her in a call which was fortunate given the large number of animals to recover and dispose of. The rain the night before had increased the work throughout the day as people began to smell or discover problems they had simply not been aware of days before. His truck arrived at almost the same time as hers and they divided up the area to be covered and only met again at the burning area.

Having a burning area was not really necessary because of the way the consuming fluid worked, but some places had enough of a problem that they designated a spot for it to be done that was well away from the main buildings. That was the case here. The burning area was well behind the houses and buildings in an area where only a large block of concrete existed. Although there was no sign to say what it was, Gina was sure that everyone in the community knew and no one willingly came here. They placed all the

animals and bags in the center and Karl had her dispense the fluid and start the flames. Gina did everything exactly as required not wasting a drop and Karl smiled at her much like a proud parent seeing his child succeed. She did not think he had any children and had never been married. The company was his life and the people he trained were therefore his children.

It suddenly occurred to her that he was not here so much because she needed help but to check on her progress. As he did not take the initiative when it came to work, Gina thought that someone at headquarters still had some doubt as to her trustworthiness. She became a little irritated at having to prove again her loyalty and wondered what all the scrutiny was about. She had only failed to turn in her paperwork once, why was that so important? Karl would report that he had seen nothing wrong in what she did though, so she did not have to worry, but the fact her moves and deeds were being questioned began to make her angry.

It was a measure of her displeasure that she was not exactly courteous to Karl as they finished up. Gina did not do, or say anything mean, but she did not respond to him as she usually did, with a jovial reply or a funny quip. He did not seem to take any notice, but she regretted it after he had left to field another call, and she did the same. It was not his fault that his attitude in regards to company made him a trusted and useful tool. He would do what they asked and she should not take it out on him personally.

Her last of the call of the day made her forget her anger. Normally when she came upon dead animals there were a number of flies gorging themselves on the carcass that were quick to disperse as she approached. This time however there was an larger amount perched over one body she approached. It looked like it had been a raccoon in its previous life, but that in itself was not unusual for you could find all kinds of wildlife in the city and its suburbs. What stood out was the incredible number of flies feeding off of it. They were so thick around it looked like a small cloud of smoke coming from the body. Unlike her usual experience, they did not disperse as she approached and she had to use a spray to allow herself a clear passage to her goal. Even then it took several times to get them to disperse while still leaving a large number. To her eyes they looked like ordinary houseflies,

but were much more tenacious. Once the body was bagged they tried to get to it until all trace of it disappeared from their senses. Gina wondered what was so special about that animal that caused such a charge by the insects. In looking around she did not see any other places where the same phenomenon was occurring, everywhere else things were as they should be. She bagged a few more bodies and more flies tried to get at the raccoon body until she re closed the bag. Eventually she had collected everything and proceeded to do a disposal. The flames seemed to be strange as well, the color was a purple she had not seen before, but as always all that was left were ashes that were easily taken care of and had an uniform color and consistency.

When Gina returned to the main office, she realized how much repellent spray she had used and decided to make sure to make a note on her report about the incident. Lighter fluid was of course the most valuable commodity at Prometheus but overuse in any area was discouraged. A day after a rain probably did not warrant a special explanation of a lot of use, but the strangeness of the event and the general mood at the company determined her to ensure that it was recorded.

Although there was still some tension around the office, things had eased. By talking to several others and hearing the conversations around her, Gina found that she was not the only one who did not know what was going on. There were several rumors mentioned with various degrees of believability. Some said that because there had been a loss of productivity in the past month they were doing this to tighten things up and ensure everyone worked at their best. Others thought the company was in financial trouble and were deciding who was to stay and who was to go. There were those that suggested that Prometheus was being bought by another company, or that the head had died in a fire last night and the new boss thought things were too lax. None of them seemed plausible to Gina and she knew better than to listen to office rumors. If she did, she might have even believed that Karl and her were intimate and doing more than working on their calls together, despite her own experience to the contrary.

Gina finished up her paperwork for the last call and after making sure that she was not going to be called out again headed for the locker room

and the showers. Normally her work was not so distasteful that she felt the need to wash her body before she left work, but the incident with the flies and the general dampness that pervaded the calls made her want to feel clean as soon as possible. Apparently she was not the only one who felt that way as she had to wait before she could use a shower stall.

It was while she was in the shower that she noticed a bite on her arm that had not been there in the morning. It did not look like a mosquito bite and she did not think that it was a spider bite either. The only thing it could have been was a fly and she could guess when it happened, though normal ordinary flies did not bite. It was red and looked like it might be infected, or at least severely irritated. Perhaps she was allergic? She made sure she cleaned the area well and decided she would put some disinfectant and antibiotic cream on it as soon as she got home. This was turning into quite an unusual day, she just hoped she could relax at home with nothing more complex to think about than warming up leftovers for dinner.

Once she had showered and dressed she returned to the main office to see if she could find Karl and get him to reveal something about what was going on. There was still a sense of hurry and tension but there were less people about and things were slowly beginning to run at their usual pace. Gina did not see Karl around, but she knew he must be finishing his shift soon so she made to wait in the recreation room to unwind a little. Before she had gone far Mr. Parkeson from the front desk gestured to her.

“A moment Ms. Leavy,” he said. “I had a question about your last call.”

“Sure thing Mr. Parkeson,” Gina said. “What would you like to know.”

“You reported an unusual concentration of flies in the area. Are you sure it was not due to the weather we had yesterday?”

“Yes sir, it was definitely different from all the other calls I had today, and as I mentioned in the report it was only on one particular animal. All the other bodies were surrounded by the normal amount of insects.”

“You aren't just reporting an unusual amount of repellent used because of today's tensions?”

“No sir, I thought this significant enough that it should go on my

report.”

“I understand... Well we always appreciate your diligence. We will let you know if anyone else reports anything similar.”

“Thank you sir” she said and continued on her way to the recreation room. Gina had always wondered if they ever read anything but the basic details on reports. Now she knew the answer, everything was scrutinized, though perhaps today more than usual. She wondered if there could be some other use of the repellent that caused them to ask her. Gina had heard of people getting high of aerosol based cleaners and products and that kind of behavior by others could be what prompted the inquiry. No, she told herself, there was probably nothing behind the question other than wanting to confirm the unusual circumstances surrounding it. They wanted more information and the best way was to ask her directly. Gina then remembered the bite on her arm and almost turned back to report that as well in connection with the rest, but then decided not to. It was just a small thing and she could not be sure when she had received it or even if it was relevant.

The rec room had its usual set of people now that the day was coming to a close. Some were waiting for friends to come pick them up while others waited for the colleagues they rode in with to finish their last call. Even though things appeared normal, she felt a difference as soon as she entered that she could not identify. Although everyone was a little less relaxed than usual and many were too tired to do much more than sit and watch television, that was not what caused her pause. The day had been busy and strange for everyone who was on call so she expected the mood to be dampened. Finally she realized what it was that was different, Mac and Jerry where not in their usual spot watching the news. Although she would normally think that they were tackling some big problems because of the missing staff, after their attitude the previous day and the way things had happened during the day, Gina was not sure. Once again she told herself not to be paranoid, whatever problem had occurred or decision made, things were settling down and Gina was sure there was a simple explanation for what had occurred that was neither nefarious or mysterious. She could see that tomorrow, everything and everyone would be back to normal. The flow

of things around the office, although still tense, was regaining its usual course..

Gina did not have to wait long for Karl to return from his latest call. While she had been waiting Gina periodically glanced out of the rec room to see who was in the office. Thinking about the rumors that existed about her and him she guessed she was adding fuel to the stories. Probably there would be something about her anxiously waiting for him to come back because she was so in love with him or some other such nonsense. She did not care, let the rumors fly, she would continue to do what was necessary for her job and her continued success within it.

Karl appeared to be as weary as she felt when she saw him turning in his paperwork, but instead of heading for the locker room to change, it looked like he was only going to take a quick break before continuing to work. This worked well for Gina as he headed to the rec room to relax for a few moments. He caught sight of her in the hallway and walked up to her.

“Looks like you are all ready to go” he said. “and it looks like you should be going as well so it is a good thing you are.”

“You look like you should be getting out of that uniform yourself and go home.”

“Not as long as there is work to do, I have a duty to the company to be here.”

“I am sure they don't expect you to work yourself to death.”

“Well, not that far girl, but I am expected to be here in times of need for extra time.”

“I see,” Gina said. “But what exactly is the time of need the company has right now?”

“Come with me,” Karl said looking around. “Let's talk privately somewhere, OK?”

Gina was excite by his words, she knew that Karl was going to tell her what had been happening. She followed him quickly to a room away from the main desk where they could not be overheard, and could just imagine the rumors that they were starting! Gina would do her best to keep the encounter short as she did not want him to feel like he might be missing an assignment. Karl showed her in and then closed the door behind them.

“I was told it was O.K. to let you know what has been happening, especially since you are so close to a promotion and your record is impeccable. So here it is: the reason for the added security, the interviews and the special attention and scrutiny is because it seems like some disposal fluid has been stolen.”

“What?” Gina said shocked. “By whom?”

“We don't know for sure, and at this moment it might have all been a mistake, but now you understand why you were taken this morning. Your paperwork is where you mark how much you have used in a call, and when they found that you had not turned it in you were flagged. Of course a search of your truck quickly revealed that everything was in order as I told them it would, but I guess they had forgotten to tell the guards that you were in the clear.”

“But I saw quite a few people taken away for interviews, I am sure not that many forgot to turn in their work.”

“As you know Prometheus is an important company, and some people lie to be able to be hired. A close scrutiny was placed on everyone and some inconsistencies were found among a few. Some were cleared up, some were asked to leave the company. How many, I don't know, nor would I be able to tell you if I did.”

“I understand all the secrecy and security now. Thank you for letting me know Karl it helps me ignore the stupid rumors that are going around.”

“Even the one about us?” he said suddenly. “I wouldn't mind if it was true.”

Karl grinned at her, and she shared the look with him. The thought never crossed her mind, but she was not entirely sure it had not him. She turned to a more serious question to keep any ideas out of his head.

“How did they find out?”

Karl turned off his grin right away. “I can't tell you but I am sure you already know that the trouble brothers are the one ones who figured it out. And I am only telling you that because you saw what happened in the rec room yesterday, otherwise I would not even tell you that much.”

“OK, I won't press you further” she said. “Thanks for letting me in on the situation.”

“Just don't tell anyone” Karl said very seriously. “Some people might be able to figure it out, but I better not find out that it was because of you.”

“Of course not” Gina said looking directly into his eyes. “You can trust me, now I better go home before the rumors get too wild about us.”

Karl laughed. “Everyone needs a good rumor like the one we are causing right now” he said. “It might get their minds off of what a troubling day today has been. But you are right, I am sure I am needed, so we better not prolong this.”

They walked out of the room together and Gina saw someone down the hall and decided to give Karl a big hug. She knew what that would do to the rumor mill, but hoped Karl did not get too excited by being hugged twice in a day. Just in case she winked at him to let him in on the joke, and he grinned back at her. Maybe he also thought it would prevent anyone from asking exactly what they were doing in that secluded place. They both continued down the hall together and then went their separate ways.

The shuttle to the train looked a little empty and the realization that some people had been fired a first made her think that was the cause. Looking at the time thought she realized that she simply had missed some earlier ones by staying to talk to Karl, it also meant that she would have to take a later train which would further delay her arrival home. Nevertheless, Gina was glad to have an explanation that made sense for the days events and did not mind trading a little inconvenience for some peace of mind. Even though it was a comfort to know what had happened, she found it disturbing that they believed someone on the inside had leaked disposal fluid. Why would anyone do such a thing? Any company that would spring up as a result, would only be crushed by litigation as soon as it poked its head out for business. It was possible that there could be other uses for the fluid that she had not anticipated. But Gina believed most people were loyal because they saw that a continued quality product meant a stable job in a viable company. There was a lot to say about job security. Someone could have ulterior motives for undermining the company she supposed, but somehow that seemed improbable. Yes there were those who scoffed at what she did and found it to be a necessary evil, but she could not imagine

that anyone like that would take the time to join the company and perform those same duties they disliked thinking about.

One more thing she learned from the whole episode was that Karl was more important in the company than she had realized. Gina always knew that his position within it was higher than hers, but it was never clear to what level. He never showed much initiative but always did his job efficiently and had a good measure of experience even though he was not that much older than she was. Now it looked like he was a top level Disposer on the same level of the Trouble Brothers, and had some of the same ties. That would explain how he knew their habits so well and was quickly able to ascertain what it was that was happening. Gina gained a little more respect for him after her realization. He really did not look like someone who would be working with the top people in the company, but he did and did not choose to make a big deal about it. It also made her realize that her friendship with him had definite advantages and she should try to stay within his good graces. Gina was not one to go too far to advance her career, but there were many things she would do to make sure she was successful in the company. It did little good to make it to the top when everyone questioned your character, in fact she knew it could prevent you from getting very far if the people around you did not trust your motivations.

Even though her thoughts kept her going, Gina was so tired that she dozed off on the train and almost missed her stop. She just managed to get off before the doors closed and it took a some time to clear her groggy head on the platform. On the way home, it seemed like every step was a chore and she had trouble keeping focus because of how sleepy she was. There was no feeling of being watched this time as she approached her apartment building so whatever, or whomever it had been must have given up. Then again it could have been agents from Prometheus checking up on her given what Karl had said. Gina remembered the questioning and interview process she had to go through to get her job. The company was picky and scrutinized its employees very carefully. In truth she did not mind, she looked at it from a business perspective, they had important trade secrets that they needed to protect and after a certain level many people would gain access to them so it was a financially wise move to be careful in the

selection and monitoring of those they hired. Placed in the same situation, she would have probably adopted similar policies.

So lost in her thoughts and sleep, Gina walked passed the entrance to her apartment. She shook her head once again trying to dispel the vestiges of sleep that kept assailing her. When she finally made it to her apartment, though she saw the light blinking on her answering machine she just lay down on her bed and was soon asleep.

4

A stinging sensation in her arm awoke her. Puzzled as to what had awoken her she lay in bed for a moment before realizing that it must be the bite she received earlier in the day that was causing the pain. She quickly took off her shirt and headed for the closet where she kept her medical supplies. Her arm was swollen and tender in the area around the bite, which she knew was not a good sign. Taking some antiseptic and some antibacterial cream she went to the bathroom to clean the bite with soap and apply them on her arm along with a bandage. Cool water seemed to help alleviate the stinging sensation, but touching it hurt though the pain was not sharp. After applying the bandage she decided to see if she could get some type of allergy medicine. Gina knew from her training that what she had was probably simply an allergic reaction and nothing more. At Prometheus they taught you first aid not only for the treatment of burns, but also for pest and animal bites. The job required a certain degree of danger, thought she had not really had recourse to her training during most of her time there.

When she was fully dressed she finally looked at the clock and saw that it was quite late, and most stores would probably not be open. Though she did not relish it at this hour she would have to take a train to a pharmacy that was open 24 hours. For a moment she considered waiting until the next day, but the pain in her arm reminded her that it was best to take care of it right away. There was a possibility that it would require serious attention at a hospital but she ruled that out as unlikely. If she was truly allergic she would have had worse symptoms already and she disliked hospitals anyway. Gina was the type that only went when it was absolutely required because going meant losing time at work and at this point in her career she did not think she had the time to do so.

Once she was ready she reconsidered going by herself at this late hour. It was always safer to go with someone on the train even if it was not

far. She finally took the time to check her messages while she thought about who she could call to go with her.

“Hello Gina, Rich here. I was hoping to catch you tonight, but it seems like you are working late. If you get a chance I was wondering if you were interested in seeing the latest film by Tim Wolfe. I have tickets at the nouveau theater. Give me a call.”

“Hi chile, how are you doing? Hope your day's been great. I was thinking of going out tomorrow to the Fallen Angel and I was wondering if you were up to it too. Let me know, you can't always stay at home you know.”

Now that was someone she could call, Melanie. “Hey Gina, Joyce. I was wondering if you are still planning to go to the medieval fair two weeks from now.” She only lived a block away and was usually up late anyway. “I have a costume that will have men falling all over you, and it really will be a lot of fun. I know you are busy, but if I am going to make the costume you need to stop by so that I can measure you.” She was a nice woman if somewhat flighty at times, but always fun to be around and was relaxed about most things. “I will wait to hear from you before I do anything. Bye.”

“Greetings Gina, Lake here.” She had been paying little attention to the last messages, but this one made her stop short all of her other thoughts. “It was a pleasure meeting yesterday and I apologize for leaving so abruptly. If you are wondering how I got your phone number, Joe at the coffee shop provided it. I hope that was not a problem. I think you know by now that Joe is trustworthy guy, but I can forget the number if you like. I hope you are having a good evening and I was serious about having you call me some time. I would enjoy it.”

It was unmistakably the man she had seen on the television. If Gina had thought that his “celebrity” status had made him forget her, she had been mistaken. The voice and intonation was the same and now she had proof that she had met him. It was silly thinking in those terms since probably no one knew who he was, but somehow she felt a little special because she knew someone world famous if only in a certain realm.

That decided it. She would call Melanie, who was always interested in the famous and talking about men. If only for that reason, she would

choose to accompany Gina this late at night. She knew that Melanie would come if she asked, but giving her extra motivation would not hurt either. She dialed the number and waited for a reply.

“Hello chile,” Melanie said as soon as she picked up. “I was beginning to think you were abducted by aliens.”

“No such luck, Melanie. I wasn't so I don't have any kinky tales about it.”

“Aww, that's no fun. They probably have some great discos in outer space. What's going then?”

“Well, I met a guy” Gina said.

“No? Really? And not a creepy one that works with you? Because I don't know if I could trust a guy that deals with corpses and burns stuff all day. No offense.”

“I've told you a million times that the guys at the company are not creepy, but you never listen. Anyway, it's not someone from work.”

“Well, in that case I can't believe you went out and didn't take me with you. So what's the deal? Is he cute?”

“Why don't you come with me to the Pharmco, and I will tell you all about it.”

“Sure thing, I will be there in a moment.”

Gina hung up the phone got dressed and got herself ready to go out. She knew it would be at least 15 minutes before Melanie arrived so she could relax. The pain in her arm had abated somewhat so perhaps the antiseptic was working. She still felt it necessary to get some type of allergy medicine so she was not going to cancel her date with Melanie. And it was also true that she wanted to talk about Lake, it was rather bold of him to try to find her number, but she had also been forward by asking for his. Joe, she knew was a good guy and must know Lake well enough for him to give out her phone number. Still, she was not sure how she felt about him divulging that information. Of course it was true that just knowing her last name would have been enough for someone to find the number, and this way there was someone to blame if things went badly.

Melanie arrived ten minutes after Gina had finished getting ready. They headed out the door talking about Gina's encounter with Lake with

Melanie alternatively dispensing advice and asking for more details. Once they got to the Pharmco, they had not reached any firm conclusions. It took Gina a while to find exactly what she was looking for because she was distracted by talking with Melanie, but finally she found the medicine that probably would to the most good, and she also got some over the counter pain killers that would not conflict with the allergy medicine. She did have some things in her medicine cabinet at home, but she could not remember what ingredients they contained. The pain in her arm persisted, but she had barely noticed while discussing things with Melanie, and only felt it acutely again when she was actually buying the medicine. Gina also became aware of how hungry she was. It had been a rough day and she had not had anything to eat for supper. There was a restaurant nearby that had decent food and opened until late, so they went there to continue their discussion.

They were able to find a spot away from the bar which seemed to be the only reason the place was open so late as most everyone gathered around it while the rest of the restaurant remained empty. Melanie had already eaten so she did not order anything, and besides she was too interested in talking about Gina's "new man." It was true that Gina did not go out on dates often, as she preferred to hang out with a group of friends when she did have a night free, but Melanie really was making too big a deal about it.

"Well, chile, I definitely think you should call him. I think the phone message is almost like him begging for you to call him."

"I don't know Melanie. I still think he was being polite, maybe he just thought he was rude when he left."

"Oh come on. Men are clueless about subtleties, he probably has never seen a real woman like you before that would talk to him. How could he not be interested in you?"

"Now you are just being silly Melanie, I did tell you he was handsome and well dressed. I am sure he has met plenty of women."

"But none of them are like you, and you did say he appeared on television that evening so maybe he was dressed for that. Scientists aren't really the type that go out often you know."

"I don't know about that. He was fun to talk to..."

“Well, if you thought that then there is something in the air between you because he not only called you, he worked to get your phone number.”

“True, but he is an important man in his field, maybe even a minor celebrity. I'm just a girl after all...”

“Stop that nonsense, chile. You are beautiful intelligent woman, and if you went out more often with me, you would have men pinning for you outside your door every day.”

“Well let's not exaggerate, but you are right. He did extend the invitation to call him so I will. Maybe tomorrow night.”

“Definitely tomorrow night! I don't think he will call again if you don't make a move. He will get so involved in his work that in less than a week he won't remember what day it is. You have to take your chances while they are present. Promise me you will call him tomorrow.”

“All right. I will call him tomorrow.”

“Good, and make sure you call me as soon as you are done talking to him. I don't care if you wake me, because if you don't I might call and wake you.”

Gina had to agree to that too, if she was going to get any peace while she ate. The food was good and she took some of the allergy medicine along with it. Towards the end of her meal the tensions and labor from the day caught up to her again and whatever energy she had gained from her previous nap excursion to the drug store vanished and she once again felt very tired. They did not talk much on the way home as Gina was having trouble staying awake so any conversation would have been rather one sided. Gina was also pondering what she would do tomorrow night when she called Lake. Melanie had convinced her to do it, but she was anxious about it. She felt foolish for worrying about it so far ahead of it actually happening, and even though she had not had trouble talking to him at Cup of Joe's, doing so on the phone seemed like a daunting task. There was, of course, no backing out as far as Melanie was concerned. Gina knew that she would call her if she did not hear about it first, and she would ask tricky questions to make sure she wasn't making anything up. She had tried to get Gina involved with more than one man in the past so this was of great interest to her. Now that a decision had been made Gina felt more

conflicted over it than before. She thought about how things could seem great at first only to be nothing of interest under close examination. Perhaps the same would happen here. Fortunately she was now feeling too drowsy to think about it or anything else.

She had no strange dreams or thoughts that night. Her sleep was deep and instant when her head touched the pillow. If her arm bothered her that night she did not notice. Despite the deep sleep, the next morning she did not feel well. Gina was rocked by a wave of dizziness when she slid out of bed and felt extremely sleepy, more than she usually experienced in the morning. Since she knew that she was not suffering the after effects of too much drinking she hoped that once she got moving things would go better.

Standing up made her feel nauseous. There could no longer be any doubt as to her state of health. Gina did her best to prepare for work but she had to give up as the dizziness and the nausea did not go away. Although she did not want to miss work, she knew that she would never be able to handle a day's load the way she felt. Feeling terrible about it, she called work and told them she was not feeling well. The dispatcher did not sound frantic and there was not a lot of background noise, so it seemed things were much calmer today. Gina said she would try to come in the afternoon if she felt better but was told not to worry, things were under control.

After ending the call she got something to drink and simply crashed back into bed to sleep whatever it was off. Perhaps they had eaten bad food or some combination of what she had last night was making her feel ill. Rest should help her recover and whatever was in her system run its course. Gina fully intended to go to work in the afternoon if possible, so she set her alarm for 11 and hoped that everything would be fine by then. She was awoken sooner than that by a phone call from Karl.

"Hello girl," he said. "Everything fine?"

"Not really," she replied. "Otherwise I would be there keeping you in line."

"Yeah, I have already gotten in trouble three times because you weren't there to make me toe the line. But seriously, how are you feeling?"

"Dizzy when I move and nauseous when I stand up, and more than a little tired. I was thinking about coming in later and maybe work half a

shift, but I don't know if I will feel well enough to do so.”

“Don't do it. Even if you feel better it will take you longer to fully recover if you start working right away. Besides, if you do more people will think you are having morning sickness.”

“What?”

“Yeah, funny isn't it? Someone asked me if you were pregnant with my child! I'm sure he didn't think of it himself, someone must have told him and I think the current rumor is that last night you told me and today you are feeling sick because of it.”

Gina just laughed. The rumors must have gone out of control after yesterday if Karl was hearing them. He usually knew some, but generally was oblivious them as they were nothing to him but stories that had nothing to do with anything important. She realized that to some, scandalous stories had to be true, because somebody's life could not be as boring as it seemed. Gina understood the need for entertainment and intrigue, but wished they did not use her life to fulfill that desire.

“Some people need to learn the difference between imagination and real life. But I will follow your advice and stay home. Are you sure you will be able to handle all the work?”

“Yeah, I think we will be fine, though we can always use help. Yesterday was worse because of the rain and everything else. But everyone seems to have settled back into the regular work routine. So don't worry about us and get some sleep. I wouldn't want there to be complications when you have our child.”

“Stop that, you don't know who is listening. I am sure I will be fine by Monday so I will see you then. Thank you for calling.”

“Not a problem girl. I can't having you wimping out on me and leaving me lonely. Take care and get some sleep.”

Gina hung up and turned off the ringer on her phone. It seemed like she was not going to be needed so she should put her day to good use by sleeping and getting better like Karl had suggested. Knowing that they could handle all the work without her put her at ease because it also meant there would be no repercussions for missing a day. She lay down thinking whether she should gain some weight to add to the rumor of being pregnant

with Karl's child. Now that might be fun.

It was close to 3 in the afternoon when she woke again. She felt somewhat better, but the dizziness and the nausea were still there. She was very thirsty so she got up and made herself tea like her parents used to when she was sick. The hot liquid and pleasing aroma felt good as she drank and she felt a little more relief from her symptoms. Gina tried to figure out what they meant as she had never felt quite this way before. Maybe it was related to the bite she received on her arm? She decided to remove her bandage and clean the area once again.

Upon inspection it did not look like there was much of anything wrong. The redness around the bite had almost totally disappeared and it no longer felt tender or irritated when she touched it. There was still a mark where the bite had been and she wondered if it would become a scar. It did not seem like that would cause her to feel as ill as she did. Perhaps it was just the combination of the food and the allergy medicine she took last night, though she had never heard of something knocking you out as badly as this seemed to have. Still, it was true that a lot of new medications had strong side-effects on certain people. Gina decided to note the brand and the ingredients so that she would not go through the same thing again. After doing a few more things around the apartment she decided to sleep some more. Though she was hungry, she did not think she could stomach eating anything for a while longer.

Gina woke again around six feeling quite better. Whatever it was that had been affecting her system had worked its way out. She had put an extra blanket on the bed to make her warmer and it seemed like the sweat combined with the sleep seemed to have helped. There was still a trace of dizziness if she moved too fast, but for the most part she did not feel it. The nausea seemed to have gone as well, but just to be safe she made some soup to feed her hungry stomach. She sat down and ate which made her feel much better physically and improved her spirits. Tomorrow she would rest some more since it was her day off that week and be ready for work on Monday. Although it seemed like bad luck getting sick the day after all the commotion at the office it was good she had an extra day to recover instead

of pushing too hard by going to work right away.

Gina looked at the clock and remembered she was supposed to call Lake tonight. It was nearing seven and if she did not make a move soon Melanie would be on the phone berating her for giving up opportunities that only came once in a lifetime. Gina had never been very successful in the companion department mainly because most men seemed to be upset that she was so devoted to advancing her career. It did not help that her chosen field was one that was distasteful to most people either. Men could be so foolish, as she often told Melanie, who always responded that was the reason that made them fun. Gina was not anxious to deal with the foolishness though it would be nice to have someone to confide in. She had her rules though, her priority was her career and any man who could not understand that was out of the question, which eliminated just about everyone she met no matter how promising they seemed at first. Melanie had a knack for setting her up with men that looked the part, but failed it miserably after close examination.

Melanie was always the one with high hopes about getting Gina partnered up with someone of worth. It seemed like her only goal in life was to see her happily married with some guy. Perhaps she did not think of it in those terms, but it did seem like she was looking after her in that manner. Gina did not really mind. It was nice that someone thought of her, thought it did not have to be only in one area of her life.

For some reason Gina felt it inappropriate to call Lake without having showered and brushed. True, he could not see her, but she would feel more comfortable and refreshed. Or maybe she was trying to put it off. In any case, she had sweat a lot and quick shower would be welcome.

Gina did feel refreshed and renewed after she took the shower. It was almost without nervousness that she found Lake's phone number and made herself comfortable for the conversation she was to have. Once she started dialing though, she began to feel anxious again while she told herself there was nothing to worry about. It seemed to her like it took a long time after she dialed for anyone to answer on the other end.

"Hello, PRI" a voice said.

"Hello, may I speak with Lake Olinaf please?" Gina said a touch

nervously.

“May I ask who is calling please?”

“Gina Leavy.”

“Gina! How are you? It's good to hear from you. I thought I might have been a little too bold calling you, when you had not given me your number.”

“Oh, it's you. Your voice sounds a little different on the phone.”

“Well, I do try to disguise it a bit when people call. Reporters can be a nuisance especially of late.”

“I can imagine that is a problem right now. I saw you on television the other night, you did not tell me you were famous.”

“You saw that? I hope that is not why you decided to call.”

“Not at all. If you want to know the truth, a friend of mine would pester me if I didn't call you so this is my way to get out of a serious talking to.”

“Somehow I cannot imagine someone being able to get away with that around you. But perhaps you play the meek lamb at times.”

“Actually, it is just to prevent her from reminding me about it for the next few weeks or so.”

“I see, so you called me to avert a potential bothersome friend. Quite well planned I must say. So why don't we make this a long enough conversation to dispel any doubt from her mind that you failed in your assigned task.”

“I would really like that Lake, but do you always answer the phone by giving your company name, or are you at work? I don't want to disturb you if you are busy.”

“Not to worry, I am always busy. Or at least so it seems. I am at work but not doing anything that would not be well served by taking a break. And your phone call will prevent me from having to answer any pestering by my colleagues. I will endeavor to make a serious face so as to put off anyone who might want to come into my office this late in the day. How about you, do you have some plan for not being interrupted, or any plans that will need attending to soon?”

“I just took a shower and already had dinner, so except for a call

from my friend trying to confirm that I called you, which I will ignore, nothing to interrupt on my end unless my apartment should catch on fire.”

“Is that likely to happen?”

“What?”

“That your apartment catch on fire.”

“No,” Gina laughed. “I keep all my fires strictly at work.”

“Oh, yes. That’s right the whole trade secret and everything. I imagine use of your incendiaries is tightly controlled.”

“Very much so. We have to account for every drop we use as well as other supplies, though those are not as tightly monitored. People joining the company are closely screened and you need to reach a certain level within the company before you are allowed to work by yourself.”

“The same is true here, believe it or not. I am sure we are not as tightly controlled as at your work, but the use of germs and viruses is not allowed by just anyone for obvious reasons. A certain level of trust is required which can only be done after years of research.”

“So you might catch some disease while at work? It sounds like a high risk environment.”

“Well,” Lake said. “It is really not that dangerous, everything is carefully controlled and there are plenty of preventive measures as well procedures that must be followed. I am probably less likely of getting a dangerous disease in my job than you are in yours even with the different strains of bacteria and viruses that we have.”

“You know,” Gina said. “It is funny you mention that because I am currently feeling a little sick and it might be because of my job, though I am not sure.”

“I am sorry to hear that, nothing serious I hope.”

“No, not at all. I was dizzy and nauseous this morning but it seems to have subsided. I can’t say for sure what was wrong with me or why it happened but I think it was because of some allergy medicine I took.”

“Oh? Those are not common side-effects, at least not in that combination. Why did you take the medicine anyway? I would not expect and outdoor person like yourself to be prone to allergies. Me, in my tightly controlled indoor environment without sunlight and real air on the other

hand should find the outside world uncomfortable.”

“Do you?”

“No, not really. I like the outdoors probably just as well as anyone else and maybe more than others. I hope I did not offend by making assumptions as to whether you were allergic or not.”

“Of course you didn't, you were right, as usual in thinking that I did not have allergies. I just received a fly bite yesterday that caused me unusual irritation and pain. At least that is what I think it was. I did not deal with any other insects during the day.”

“A fly bite?” Lake said sounding thoughtful. “Interesting, except for certain species they are not renowned for their bites though it does happen. Don't you wear any type of gear when you are out working. I seem to remember some uniform worn by people in your line of work.”

“Yes, we do, but it somehow managed to do so through the uniform. I know it was not a mosquito bite because those I recognize. I encountered a swarm of flies that was really aggressive yesterday and did not easily move away from the carcass of a dead animal.”

For a moment Gina thought she had overstepped some bound by relating to her job too graphically. When he did not say anything for a while, she thought he must be making up some excuse for not continuing the conversation.

“Hmm...” he finally said. “That is very interesting, most flies in this area do not show aggressive behavior like you describe. I would have said all, except for what you mention and some recent news I have received. Perhaps we are experiencing a migration... I wonder...” and he fell silent again.

Gina felt foolish. Of course he would not be dismayed by something like the description of flies over a rotting corpse, he dealt with disease every day and he would research the causes and carriers of them as a result. So far Lake had not a superficial man that was easily deterred by simple things, so she should have not been surprised.

Finally she broke the silence. “What are you thinking about Lake? Are you still there?”

“I am terribly sorry,” he said. “I was pondering what it could all

mean. What you just described to me is of some note because there have been some scattered reports about flies and some strange behavior. Well, maybe one report and not very complete or detailed. With the abundance of flies in the world if they carry some disease like the tsetse fly does there could be problems.”

“You don't think that I am in any danger?” Gina said concerned.

“No, not really, as your symptoms seem to have subsided. Though I would like to examine you with your permission, for professional reasons of course.”

“If I didn't know better I would say that you were using a scientist pick up line.”

“Ha,” Lake laughed. “That would indeed be a good one. I am quite serious though. If you would not mind, I really am interested in finding out what it was that happened to you. As I said, I only had one report and it may be nothing so I would like a little more data.”

“Well, you know I am a busy woman. I don't know when it could be set up.”

“Any time you want. And then it would be followed by dinner afterwards. See, I do know how to ask for a date.”

“Not very well, though” she said laughing. “You are supposed to propose a time and a date.”

“Well, I didn't want to make you feel uncomfortable the first time by setting all the rules. But since you insist, I suggest that we meet during the day tomorrow at my office, that way there will be more people around.”

“That doesn't sound particularly romantic.”

“Well, I seem not to be able to do anything without my assistants, but I will see what I can do. Is three in the afternoon too early for you?”

“No, not at all. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I think you should ask yourself that much more than I. After all you would be giving up rather personal information. To me it is of scientific interest, and as you pointed it out gives me a reason to see you again. You on the other hand do not know what I might do with whatever health information you will provide.”

“I see it this way. I trust you for some reason, but more importantly I

know that you would not jeopardize the standing of your company and your position by doing questionable things.”

“Ah! Very well thought out. I will arrange everything for tomorrow, and if you want I can send someone to pick you up.”

“That's not necessary, your address is on this card. I think I can find it without trouble.”

“Great, then I will see you at three.”

“It's a deal.”

“Have a great evening and thanks for calling!”

“You too, see you tomorrow.”

Gina hung up the phone feeling somewhat conflicted. What he had said was true, why should she trust him? But she did, for whatever reason. It was true that he would probably not do anything that would endanger his company, though she did not know if Lake had the same sense of duty that Karl had. Perhaps there was some latitude there? Whatever rational reasons she came up with, the overriding fact was a feeling that was strong within her that he would not do anything to hurt her.

At the same time she wondered if now he just saw her as a mystery to be solved. Gina was not sure if he was serious about dinner afterwards or not. Whatever his motivation, she did not hesitate as to whether she would go or not. If nothing else it would be interesting to visit an important company and see the workings and organization of a business that relied on research and other intangibles to produce income. She also admitted to herself that she did want to see Lake and talk to him again. It was strange because she had not felt like doing so after they first met. The phone conversation as plain as it was, had not made a negative impression on her but seemed to reinforce a connection she must have felt before. Maybe it was just that she did not have to hide what she did from him or even tone it down because it did not bother him. There was no need to censor herself or skillfully avoid certain subjects until a certain point was reached in the relationship. From the beginning it was interesting and noncommittal with no pressure. Maybe it was something else altogether. After all, Lake was handsome...

Gina's thoughts were interrupted by a phone call from Melanie.

After explaining that they just had not had a long conversation and she had not forgotten or decided not to call, she spent the next thirty minutes going over the details of the call with her. Melanie was at last satisfied and they talked about various things and she gave advice as to what to wear tomorrow thought she thought the reason she was going to meet him quite unconventional and rather boring. This was repeated various times in different ways as well as some other thoughts on the matter. But through it all, Gina could tell that Melanie was excited for her, and she herself was feeling a touch of it as well. But that was how it always was with the beginning of relationships.

The next day, feeling much better, Gina dressed in a casual but conservative style. She thought Lake would make good on his promise of dinner, but she did not want to dress up too much. After all, being busy as he claimed might mean they might go to a place that served fast food. She had looked up the address for PRI which she had found to stand for Pathological Research Institute and knew how long it would take to get there and tried to plan her travel so that she would not get there too early.

It was easy to find the place once she got off the train as it was a large group of buildings with a central plaza . Gina had found that PRI was quite successful and well known, though she herself had not heard about it before. The building where Lake worked seemed to be the main one for the company since it had a large entrance and an impressive lobby, while the others she had seen were nondescript with only functional doors. The design of the the area was such that you were naturally drawn to the center building underscoring its importance.

As she entered, feeling very small and insignificant among all those buildings Gina began to feel nervous. This was unlike where she worked, though she guessed the headquarters of Prometheus was probably just as impressive. She was not sure what she was doing going to meet a man who had some standing in a place like this. Maybe when she had her own company to manage she would be of interest to him, but Lake must deal with powerful people every day and she could not hope to compete with that.

When she entered the building she found Lake waiting for her in the main lobby. He was much like she remembered him, being casually dressed yet elegant. His shirt was of a nice material and enhanced his appearance just above being completely informal. He smiled at her as she came in and looked genuinely pleased to see her. The guard behind the front desk made a motion to Gina to approach, but was waved off by Lake as he came walked up to meet her. Whatever protocol was normally required would not be asked of her.

“It’s great to see you again” Lake said. “I am glad you found the place, let’s hurry and get the unpleasantness over with so that we can go on to enjoy the rest of the evening.”

Gina smiled at him and nodded. She was embarrassed internally at not knowing what to say. She thought she could see a genuine interest in her in his eyes, or at least she hoped it that she was seeing it, and that hope surprised her. Gina barely knew Lake but she felt she could trust him and perhaps more. It was too early to tell, she reminded herself, but the feeling would not go away.

They walked together through mostly empty halls exchanging pleasantries. Gina did not want to feel awed by the place, but it was impressive. There were several labs she noticed as well as many offices. Lake explained that a lot of research on curing and classifying diseases happened here as well though it was limited to illnesses. Allergies were also studied as well as testing the effect of medicine and other chemicals. All of this was useful data to governments, hospitals and companies so PRI was well funded and kept growing. They did not produce much other than data, but they did have a certification program that was sought out by drug companies. The government had its own approval process, but PRI certified the rate of effectiveness. There was also a lot of money being given to fund research on an universal cure for disease which was of interest to many people..

A short while later they arrived at lab one which was where they would doing the tests. As in all places in the building Lake used a key pass to open the door and walk in. The place was clean and neat as would be expected, with very few instruments visible. There where two people

waiting for them, a man and woman both wearing white lab coats with the PRI logo emblazoned on them.

“Hello director” the woman said. “Everything is ready as you requested.”

“Great” Lake said. “This here is... Lucy, at least for all of your documentation anyway. These are two of my assistants Jennifer and Matt. Jennifer will take some blood samples and Matt will take some pictures of your arm. So if you could, please have a seat right here” he indicated a chair near a table. “We can get started.”

Gina rolled up her sleeves and took off the bandage. The area where the bite had occurred showed only a very slight redness and she positioned her arm on the table next to a ruler. Jennifer swabbed her other arm, tied a band around it and very gently inserted a needle. Gina was not very fond of injections but she could endure them. She kept her eyes on Lake who was doing his best to be reassuring while perhaps being excited at the prospect of a new mystery to solve. He smiled at her and she responded in kind..

It was quickly over. They did not draw a lot of blood and Matt took pictures while the procedure was being done. Lake's assistants were both very efficient so and did not need to reposition her or try several times to find the right vein. Both were mostly silent during the whole thing, and made no comments as to what they saw or thought they saw. Gina still found it odd that they referred to Lake as director, but that must be his title. She wondered what exactly he was a director. As in most companies there were probably several research and development departments and she wondered which ones he was in charge of.

Once it was done, the two assistants put everything away, labeled the blood samples and downloaded the pictures. Lake gave them instructions to share the data only with him, thanked them for coming in and dismissed them.

“Would you like to see my office?” Lake asked. “It has a nice view and we can look at the pictures we just took if you like.”

“Sure, why not?” Gina answered. “And am I to be called Lucy until we get there?”

“I am sorry about that,” he said. “I should have mentioned that I

would do that, though I did not decide on Lucy until just now. We usually keep our patients anonymous by giving them different names so that there is no bias. Sometimes we give male patients female names and vice versa. Most people don't like thinking that someone has a blood sample or other biological data on them stored somewhere that anyone could perhaps retrieve. It is standard practice around here.”

“I forgive you then, but what prompted you on Lucy? Do I look like someone with that name?”

“If you think you remind me of the pratfalls of the famous comedienne” he said smiling. “You are entirely mistaken. Well, here it is.” They had taken the elevator to the fifth floor and had finally arrived at an office. It was like Lake himself, organized with only a few places of disarray. There were sheets of paper in stacks as well as shelves stocked with books and file folders. The desk was not particularly big but it was functional. His office truly looked like a place where someone worked rather than a place to receive people. Gina thought that the reason it was so organized was due to the fact that he probably only used it to analyze data while most of his work was done in the lab.

Lake had started up his computer and brought the images of her arm on line. Some of them were quite magnified and he explained to her what kind of bite could be deduced. They also came up with a picture of her smiling, evidently Matt had zoomed out too much. Lake was quick to say that he would definitely keep that picture and saved it to his local machine. They went through them rather quickly and it seemed he was satisfied with what he saw.

“Good,” he said. “Matt did a good job, and Jennifer should have something for me in a few hours and then hopefully I can tell you something useful. But now that you have had the grand tour, let's go get something to eat.”

They went back down the elevator and out of the building talking amiably and into the nice weather. It seemed that their destination could be arrived at by walking, so Lake took her by the most scenic route possible. There was a park near the building that they walked through and he pointed out various things he knew about the area. It was lovely day for a walk and

Gina thoroughly enjoyed it especially in the company of Lake, who was charming and witty. Whatever notion she had about how a researcher was supposed to act and talk had been shattered, as he did not fit what was typically thought of scientists.

Lake led Gina to a bench that he said was especially good for seeing birds and the sky. He was right. As they sat there many different species could be seen in the nearby trees that were spaced with enough distance between to give a clear view of the sky. The sounds of nature intermingled with faint sounds of modern life while the animals added to beauty of the sky with their flight. Gina was so taken by the environment that she almost snuggled up to him so she could feel him put his arm around her. Lake made her feel relaxed and nervous at same time, and she was sure to make him uncomfortable by being too forward no matter right it felt at the moment.

After spending a quiet moment on the bench they continued their leisurely walk to the restaurant. It was a nice place where Lake was evidently known by the way he was greeted. To Gina's relief it was not so elegant a place that she was woefully under dressed. On the contrary the restaurant had a pleasant atmosphere and the food and service was good. The company was excellent. Lake was a very good conversationalist as she knew from their talk at the coffee shop, and he knew when not to pry and how to keep things interesting. Gina felt like he was listening closely to her whenever she had anything to say. Even so, there were times she felt like what she had to say was of little or no importance and that he would be disappointed by her lack of knowledge. It was clear that he was a highly intelligent man who was also very perceptive. There were no awkward pauses in the conversation or embarrassing moments and he seemed to be genuinely interested in her and her life. After some time and a few glasses of wine, Gina let herself relax, she could see that he was doing his best to make her comfortable, so she should do her best to become so. Soon she was captivated by the moment and truly enjoying an evening like she had not in done so in a long time.

After dinner he offered to drive her home, but she refused. Gina feared that she liked him too much already and was afraid of what that might lead to. The fear of disappointment was still in her thoughts, since it had

happened so many times before. She did want to see him again so she mentioned the one event she could think of at the time, the medieval fair. Lake thought it was great idea, he had never attended one and he would see to it that he was free that weekend. Lake accompanied her to the train stop and gave her a hug good bye, it was so warm an touching that she kept the feeling with her the whole way home. She called Joyce as soon as she got home and set up a meeting so they could work on her costume. She did not care if any other men ogled her as long as there was one man that was particularly interested.

5

Gina woke the next morning ready for work. Not only did she feel much better physically, she was also in very good spirits. There was a message on her machine from Lake asking if she had gotten home safe. Gina realized she had forgotten to turn the ringer back on the phone in her room, and hesitated to call back so early, but she was sure that he would check the voice mail on his work phone so she went ahead and dialed. To her surprise he was already in the office and she had to watch herself so she would not be late for work. She ended the conversation with a promise to call him that night and Lake gave her his personal number. Feeling lighthearted she dressed and headed out to the train.

The day breezed by. Once again she answered most of the calls on her own except for a few with Karl. She was not officially a level three Disposer, but unofficially she was something above mid-level and therefore had a little more responsibility and prestige. In a few more weeks she would be promoted, Karl told her, but first paperwork had to be processed and a few more people had to be convinced. Level three was an important promotion that was not done lightly, Gina fulfilled all the requirements so there would be no trouble, but even so there was some bureaucracy to go through before she received it.

Her good mood was noticed by everyone and she was sure there were even more whispers about what was happening with her. Karl of course was mostly oblivious even though he could tell that she was happy. He did not ask why and probably credited it to the fact that the stress of the pass days was over and would soon be promoted. Gina noticed that there were a few people missing in the locker room and the halls of the office. Most of them were low level Disposers but there was one at least that she knew had been mid-level one. She also failed to see the trouble brothers again something that was not exactly odd, but not the norm. In any case she did not give any

of the oddities or moods much heed. Everything seemed to be the way it should and she did her work quickly and efficiently without even being bothered by the occasionally rude or mistrustful customers.

Since nothing at work dampened her mood, she was feeling good when she got home. It seemed like the rest and the previous evening had re-energized her, making her see everything in a good light. Although tired, she still had plenty of energy and thought about going out with Melanie so she could relate everything that had happened the previous night.

When she entered the apartment there where several messages waiting for her; one of them was from Lake:

“Hello, Gina. I really need to talk to you as soon as possible. Please call me at work when you get a chance”

Gina was happy but worried. She had never heard such a serious tone in his voice. She wondered what could be wrong, or what he felt he needed to tell her. Maybe he felt that she had overstepped a boundary by calling him that morning or wanted to confess to having a girlfriend or wife. Whatever the case, she called his work number right away though she dreaded the result.

“Hello Lake, this is Gina” she said.

“Gina, I really need to talk to you in person, but I don't want to intrude by coming to your apartment. Would you mind coming over to the office?”

“Is something wrong?”

“Well, not exactly” he replied. “But it is important that I see you, and if you haven't eaten yet. I would not mind taking you out again.”

“You are starting to worry me, can't you tell me anything?”

“I don't want to say much, but it has to do with yesterday if you understand me?”

Gina could not understand why he was being so mysterious, but it was obvious that it had to do with the tests they ran. “I will be there as soon as I can” she said and ended the call.

What had Lake discovered, she wondered as she quickly changed clothes. It must be something significant if he felt the need to tell her face to face, though she hoped he just wanted to see her in person again. Whatever

the cause she still felt that unexplainable trust from him and did not suspect anything nefarious on his part. Gina headed out the door finally banishing her fearful thoughts as to what could be waiting. She realized that getting anguished about it was pointless as perhaps what he saw as being serious was something that she would find ordinary. After all he did not know her whole health history, and perhaps it was something that was simply out of the ordinary but had no dangerous consequences. Even though Gina was no longer thinking it was anything bad, she could not help thinking about what he was so keen to reveal..

This time Lake was not waiting for her in the lobby when she arrived and Gina had to give her name to the guard who then called him. He arrived quickly after being called and though Lake smiled when they met, his look was very serious. The worries she had put to rest on the way resurged immediately. They went directly to his office where he had her sit down and offered her a drink.

“What is that you need to tell me?” she asked finally. “And why couldn't you tell me on the phone?”

“I am really sorry to worry you,” Lake said. “It is pleasure to see you again, but there are things about your examination yesterday that bother me. As for not talking over the phone, there people in this business who try to steal information so that they can develop their own remedies before we do and then sell them for a higher price. Being the director of research my conversations have been taped before.”

“I see, I can understand that. Our company is also given to secrecy and protection of information. But what is wrong with me?”

“Actually, that is the problem. Nothing is, yet there should be. I found that you had been infected with a peculiar strain of *Supra exatulus* which in all known cases causes death.”

“What?”

“Yes it is hard to believe. First that a dangerous virus of this kind could be carried by any type of creature since it uniformly causes death making those who carry it poor transmitters. Second that you could become infected by something like a fly, and Third that you have survived. It is quite a puzzle.”

“Are you sure I am fine?” Gina asked worried.

“Oh yes, you are healthy and your body has taken care of infection quite thoroughly, but the antibody count was above normal in the sample we took and there were still some traces of the virus. My assistant Jennifer was shocked to find it and I myself spent time going over the data and samples to confirm her findings.”

“Well that is a relief. But I don't understand why you couldn't tell me over the phone. Telling me I was well does not seem like something you need to do in person.”

“I did want to see you again too, but more to the point, that you were even infected is significant. It is unusual because this virus previously could only be transmitted directly into test subjects in a lab. The strain that infected you solved the problem of transmission by an organic creature even if it was a somewhat weakened version. That and the other case I mentioned of someone having the same symptoms you had means that somehow someone has set loose a dangerous virus and it seems that they are working on making it easily transmittable.”

Gina did not say anything so Lake continued.

“The fact that you survived means that your blood could be used to create a vaccine. The other reported case, as far as I know, did not. Whoever worked on this, did it deliberately and you hold the key to the cure of the very thing they are trying to do. The fact that your body was able to counter the sickness seems to indicate that the modification of the virus was not completely successful but it is certainly closer to anything before it. In all probability the next version will be a complete success and the world could be held hostage to whoever provided the cure. That is the reason that I could not tell you all this on the phone. I don't know who modified the virus, but they must be involved in the same type of research I am, which means possibly a competitor, and many of those do not play fair when it comes to acquiring information that might help them. So it pays to be cautious with communications, especially in this case.”

“Who would do such a thing? And how do you know about this *Supra exatulus virus* to begin with?”

“Well the second question is much easier than the first. The first

strain of that particular virus was created years ago for research purposes. A lot of people in the scientific community know about it because although highly dangerous it was great because it could not be transmitted outside of a lab. It was used to see how viruses reproduced as well as how they would react under certain conditions. The idea was to have something that had all the properties of a perfect virus so that study of it could be universally applied to other transmittable diseases. And as to who would modify it to be dangerous to general population, that I don't know."

"This is pretty serious business."

"Yes it is, very serious. If it can be transmitted by something as prevalent as a common house fly, it would be almost impossible to stop. Fortunately it has not yet begun, otherwise we would have a pandemic on our hands right now."

Gina thought about the whole situation trying to understand how it could be possible. There was no indication that Lake was the type to make things up and she was sure that if she asked he would provide the results and documentation. It was too much to believe though, who would think up of such a scheme, and for what purpose? Financially, she could see exactly what this could lead to. Whoever held the cure could hold the world hostage in a similar way that Prometheus did, but in the case of her company there was no pressing danger posed by not using them to dispose of corpses. This virus would change everything and have people scrambling to pay whatever it was to protect themselves from a disease that would surely end their life.

"Someone plans to make a lot of money from this," Gina said.

"Someone who already has the cure, there is no other reason to unleash it."

"I hadn't thought of that," Lake said. "I only thought of it as a mad design of a rouge scientist."

"Think about it Lake, you said yourself that there have been only a few cases, which means to me that they want it localized. Probably so no one realizes the danger right away. Whoever it is can quietly start selling the cure and then as it spreads they gain more of a hold, all without making such a big splash that they can become a target for competitors and governments. In the end they will control the world share of disease prevention making them the biggest global company."

“You may be right Gina, and someone needs to put a stop to it and I think that someone should be us. I could synthesize a cure from what we already know, but it would be best to stop it before it starts.”

“You want to use me to further your goals and your company?” Gina said angrily.

“Only if you would permit me, of course. Gina, if I had wanted to I could have divulged your personal information to quite a number of people by now. But no one here even knows your real name, and though it pained me to do so, I removed the picture I had of your face. The only physical evidence that you were ever here are the pictures of your arm and the blood samples. I did not give any details to my assistants so even they would have trouble tracking you down. In any case, that is not the means to overcome the situation, a patch is only a temporary solution at best, and I don't want to let a pandemic erupt if I can help it.”

“Aren't there any authorities we can contact about this? Surely a case could be presented to someone.”

“I suppose it could be, but of what, and against whom? The persons who did this are highly skilled so any 'noise' we create about this might be immediately detected especially since we do not know who or exactly what and where. It might also cause them to dump what they have or accelerate the process.”

“You are right Lake. We can't make accusations without evidence, and so far no one even knows that we have evidence and the big question is who.”

“Exactly, then we can work on the why, though you might have figured that out. The how, well that is not quite that important at the moment, since we know part of the story. So how do we find the who?”

“I still remember the area where I answered the strange call, but I have been working a lot lately so it might be best if I check the logs a work, then I can check out the area and see if there is anything interesting.”

“No, I don't think you should revisit the area. I know you are not supposed to divulge client information, but I would prefer you give me the location than have you follow up on it. I am worried about what might happen to you if anyone finds out what I have. I can always claim I am

researching something and let someone go in my stead. If you appear more than once, suspicions might be raised and at this point we don't know what those we are pursuing are capable of..”

“I can agree to that. Is there anything you can do here to investigate?”

“Well, I do know some people that might be able to provide information, but I doubt there will be much out there for me to find.”

“So there is not much we can do now is there?”

“Well, nothing I can think of. If you are not sure as to where you were bit it is best we don't pursue false trails. In the meantime though, we could go to dinner to think of other things” Lake said with a smile.

“That sounds good to me” Gina answered with a smile of her own. Her mind was absorbing everything that had been said and it would be good to have some relaxing time to settle her thoughts and emotions. Looking at him her emotions surged, but they were not of fear or uncertainty, but trust and love? No, she did not think it could be the case, she had only met him a few days ago, it took time for strong bonds to form. It could not be happening so soon.

Dinner was at another place nearby and they did their best to talk about things other than their recent discoveries. Still it was clearly on both their minds. Lake never asked if he could make use her blood for a cure, and Gina was grateful for that the question went unsaid. She was not squeamish or selfish, but somehow she could not believe herself being the key to countering a deadly illness. The thought of potentially being disseminated through thousands of different people also disturbed her as well of that she might simply be a solution to a problem for Lake. She wanted to believe that she was more significant to him than that..

Their conversation centered on their own lives as they tried to get to know each other better, but speaking on what a normal day was led to the present and awkward silences. Gina was interested to find that he had been the son of a diplomat and so had the opportunity to travel a lot when he was child, though he did not remember most of it. As the age for him to enter school approached his parents found work that would keep them in one place so as not to disrupt his education. As an adult he had once again many

opportunities to travel which he enjoyed to some degree, but it was generally only on business with not much time for anything else. Gina on the other hand had only traveled outside the country twice. Once after her high school graduation and another time with some people from work. Her focus in life had always been business so she did not spend much time going different places or visiting people.

Once they had finished eating they did not spend as much time talking as they had before, both of them realizing that tomorrow could be a crucial day and staying out late would not make things easier. Regretfully they cut things shorter than Gina would have liked. She did feel somewhat comforted from the food and pleasant conversation, which she knew meant a good night of rest was guaranteed. This time she allowed Lake to driver her to her apartment building though she did not plan to invite him up.

Lake had a fashionable car with all the refinements. It was neat and clean and looked like it had been recently washed. Gina was not big on cars so she did not know if it was particularly expensive, but it was in keeping with what was current and did not seem out of step with what she was familiar with. Gina guessed that it was provided by the company for business and good first impressions were as important there as in the rest of life.

They said their good byes at the entrance and she was touched by his solicitude for her well being. Lake had her promise that she would not do anything to draw attention to herself both at work or elsewhere. The look on his face showed that he was really concerned about her. As last time, he gave her a warm hug, but it felt like he squeezed her more tightly this time. Lake did not try to kiss her, much to Gina's disappointment, but he was always so polite that perhaps he had some mental rule about that. They promised to be in touch the next day and he waited to see her walk in before he drove away.

Gina did not sleep badly, but she did not wake as refreshed as she had expected. No nightmares had assailed her through the night, but the events of the previous evening were surely what kept her from a completely peaceful sleep. She went to work feeling a little as if she was a step behind

in everything she did. Fortunately she managed to keep her thoughts and actions under control so as not to arouse any suspicions. She also had to admit to having somewhat of a guilty conscience though she was not going to do anything that was necessarily wrong or harmful. It was not that unusual for Disposers to go over their own logs to find things that were in common or remember the situations they had to deal with and make notes for others. Not many people did it either. And the main reason why they didn't was because in order to do so it was necessary to ask Mr. Parkeson and some people saw him as an ogre, though really he was not really that monstrous. Another reason, Gina suspected, was that they thought it was a sign of weakness, uncertainty, or inattention to the job.

When she asked for access to her logs, Mr. Parkeson was a little surprised, but did not say anything. It was probably only the third time she had done so during the whole time she had worked there. Hopefully he would think it was just because of the recent change in her status that she wanted to make sure everything was going well. Whatever thoughts went through his mind, he allowed her access to a terminal and gave her a five hour window to look over them in case she had to go on a job while she was still reviewing them which was exactly what happened. She had just found the log where she reported the unusual amount of repellent used, when a call came through for her and Karl.

They responded to that one and several others in quick succession making Gina more and more anxious about returning to the office so that she could finish her research. If Karl noticed any impatience on her part he did not show it, or tease her about it. He seemed fairly preoccupied himself, though he never revealed the reason. They were still somewhat understaffed, though it was not bad since there were always those able to work extra hours and multiple shifts given enough notice. Gina knew Karl was one of those to do so regularly and on occasion she had taken on additional work on as well, though being sick placed her on the do not call list for the next few days. There was a good possibility that he was simply tired and wanted to focus only on the task at hand and nothing else.

It was on their third call that Karl finally told her what was on his mind. They had gathered everything to the burn area and were watching

the blue flame consume the carcasses when he changed his tone from playful to serious, which he hardly ever did when talking to her. He had been so quiet during the other calls that she almost did not hear him when he first spoke.

“You really enjoy watching the flames don't you?” Karl said.

“Yes,” Gina replied after a moment. “It is fascinating and mesmerizing, don't you think?”

“I guess so, though I don't find myself that enthralled. I have always liked that about you, you are good and you manage to keep enjoying the work. I will miss it.”

“You will miss it? What are you talking about Karl?”

He looked at her directly “I never realized how much I enjoyed working with you. Even when you were starting out you always did good work though you didn't know all the procedures. And after all this time you still maintain a great demeanor and attitude. You have been a great partner, and I will miss that.”

“Why? Why will you miss me? Is something wrong? Am I under suspicion again?”

Karl sighed. “No, there is nothing wrong with you, it is just that soon we won't be working together. Once you are promoted, you will be on your own for the most part, and I will be assigned to someone else.”

“Oh, come on Karl. It won't be that bad, we will still see each other at the office and I am sure I can get you on a call if I need you.”

“Sure, that is what everyone thinks. It just won't be the same. I am going on leave for a week, and by the time I get back you will be on your own.”

“So you are saying this is our last day working together?” Gina asked.

“Yes, probably. You are right, I will still see you in the office, but I have always been a trainer so I don't get to choose who I work with. You have been the best person I have had the pleasure of training.”

“Thanks Karl. I appreciate it” and then to lighten the mood. “I guess the rumors about us will stop.”

“Ha,” he smiled. “They probably will say that you dumped me.”

“I don't know, since I am pregnant maybe you ended the relationship.”

“I would never do that.”

“I know Karl, I know.”

They kept watching the fire as it disposed of the last of the mound they had assembled. Gina felt a little sad and understood his feelings. Karl had been a good person to learn from and it was going to be different not having him around for at least a few calls every day. They had worked together well and he had taught her a lot of tricks of the trade. She did not feel any doubt about handling the job on her own because he had done a good job at leaving her with no questions as to how to do the job, and do it well. Gina realized that he had also been a comforting presence throughout the duration and she would miss him. True, she would be able to talk to Karl in the halls and such, but since they would not be working together it would make it much more difficult to see him.

There was also the possibility of meeting someone else with whom she could work well now that she was no longer being trained. Perhaps she would form a relationship like the one the Mac and Jerry had, and if it was with female disposer they could be dubbed the trouble sisters. That last was an encouraging thought, but it reminded her that she had not seen those two in a while. There were certain fixtures of the company that you expected to see, and she had not see that one for a few days. Gina almost asked Karl about it, but it was clear that he had other things on his mind. She also realized that this was the first time she heard of him taking time off. She seemed to remember that the company required that everyone take some, so perhaps it was mandatory that he go away somewhere, otherwise, she was sure, he would never take a vacation.

Gina was so deep in her thoughts as she returned to the office that she almost forgot to continue checking her logs. She was actually headed to the recreation room to relax when Mr. Parkeson asked her if she still wanted access. In a flash she remembered what her original purpose of the day and went back to the terminal. When she started reading again it seemed like the selected entry was no longer the one she had been reviewing when the first call had come through. Maybe someone else had looked at her logs? Well,

she could not be sure this terminal was not used by someone else while she was gone, nor did she remember if she had deliberately changed to another entry before leaving. There was no sense in being paranoid, how could anyone in the office know what happened, or what it was she was thinking?

Since she had found the place in her logs before, it was a much quicker process to retrieve it again. She noted the address down and then decided to make some other notes on a few other places as well. Although she felt guilty about what she was doing, Gina was not so stupid as to leave as soon as she found what she was after. She did her best to look at some others even though they did not interest her until she arrived to the current day's entries. Then, she switched off the terminal and thanked Mr. Parkeson for giving her access. There was one thing that had troubled her about the one report though, it had an additional note in it that she had not placed in her log. The letters "INV" was at the end, and she was sure she had not put that down. Who had marked it and why she was able to see it were a bit of a mystery. It occurred to her that it might simply mean Inventory because of the reported loss of repellent. Feeling good that she had been able to get the needed information without a problem she continued on her day with only a slight touch of guilt.

Once her shift was over she headed out to her friend Joyce's house. Gina knew that Lake was waiting to hear, but she wanted to get this out of the way as soon as possible. The logs had shown that her encounter with the flies was near by giving her extra motivation to go. Even though she had promised to stay away, she felt that since she was going to be close by on another errand, there would do no harm in taking quick look.

6

Joyce had been right about the costume for the medieval fair. It was certainly one to make men's eyes pop out. The garment was not revealing but it enhanced her bust and the other attributes of her body. Apparently she was supposed to be some type of female pirate, which seemed like an anachronism for the time but apparently was not totally impossible, and she was told that you had some leeway in the way you created a story for your character. Joyce had even managed to procure a saber for the occasion and Gina had to admit that she did look quite good in the costume. There were a few adjustments that needed to be made, so her friend took a few measurements. Gina was not nearly into the medieval scene as Joyce was, but she enjoyed the occasional romp in costume. She also knew that her friend was under no illusions as to how serious Gina took it, so would not press her to be perfect with her diction or mode of speech. After they had finished the fitting and spent some time talking, Gina left smiling with the thought of how Lake would react when he saw her in costume next weekend.

Instead of taking her usual route home she took the bus toward Tale Valley which she could board a few minutes away from Joyce's house and would leave her near a train station. Gina intended to only look through the window at the area she knew to be where she had her strange encounter, but decided at the last minute to get off at a nearby stop. There was nothing terribly unusual around and she did not see any trace of the flies that had assailed her. It seemed a neighborhood like any other with a few townhouses, some average sized single houses and one or two mansions. Why would there be a strange disease in the area? Gina wondered if anyone else had gotten the same illness, or experienced some unexplained symptoms.

"What are you doing here?" someone asked her startling her.

“Just walking around,” she said turning to see a man in a windbreaker and jeans. “It is a nice area.”

“You aren’t from around here,” the man said harshly. “And this place isn’t nicer than any other.”

“But I have seen it many times, I have a friend who lives nearby. It looks like a good place to live.”

“There aren’t any houses for sale here at the moment.”

“I guess I was misinformed” Gina said quickly and started off towards the bus stop. She was not sure what the man wanted but it was clear that it was not pleasant. Now that she had drawn attention to herself she was trying to think of what she could say if she needed to give more answers.

“Wait!” the man said. But she ignored him and kept on walking while doing her best not to make her pace any faster. If she ran she was sure to make an impression and she wanted to avoid that at all costs. “I’m not done talking to you,” she heard him say with the sounds of footsteps approaching her. Gina focused on the bus stop hoping that there was one due soon so she could get away. At least she would be in the open if she reached it and where people could see her. Maybe he was just a grumpy neighbor, but he could also be searching for same thing she was.

Gina made it to the bus stop and she heard someone approach behind her. Then the man grabbed her arm and she tried to jerk away.

“What are you doing? Let go of me!” she screamed and much to her relief a bus pulled up just then. She pulled away once more and this time was able to get out of his grasp and onto the bus. The man did not follow her on, but she was certain he noted the route. The driver looked at her a little quizzically but did not say a word. Maybe he thought it was some type of relationship problem and did not want to get involved. Gina watched the man as the bus pulled away and for the first time realized the danger she might be in. Why had he acted the way he had if it wasn’t because he suspected something or had some knowledge of what had happened in the area? Gina could not think of any explanation that could make his actions anything but those of someone with a sinister ulterior motive. Could he have known she was there earlier in the week as a disposer? That, at least

she knew, was not likely. Most people only saw the uniform and not the face that went with it. Now though, she might have to avoid taking any calls that were in the area, though perhaps he was not someone who lived there.

Gina arrived home feeling shaken. She did what she thought would keep anyone following, to be loose of her, but in truth she did not know if any of it had helped. She had switched trains more times than was necessary and walked home by a different route. The one she had taken when she had first moved and did not know the best way to get to her apartment. When she walked in she was almost expected for someone to be waiting for her, but no one was there and none of her things had been disturbed. She felt foolish checking for signs of a break-in and trying to lose someone who she did not even know had been following. What did she know about those things except for what she had seen in film?

Finally she settled down, though in the back of her mind there were still some thoughts that things were not right. She noticed the voice mail light blinking on her phone and remembered Lake instantly. He probably was worried, so she did not even bother to listen to the message and called his work number. Gina knew he usually worked late, or went into work late, so he should be there. Instead she was surprised to get his voice mail. She hung up without leaving a message and decided to listen to hers instead.

“Hi, Chile. You never did call me to talk about your date with the man. I am anxious to know all about it, so don't leave me hanging. Talk to you later.”

“Hello Love. I tried calling earlier but you were not home. I hope everything is fine, and I am looking forward to talking to you soon. I'm afraid I have a dinner meeting with a visiting researcher this evening so I will not be available talk for some time this evening. I will be going directly home afterwards, so please give me a call there.”

Gina recognized Lake's voice instantly and he had called her “Love.” Maybe it was just his manner of speech, though she was fairly certain that he had never said that before. And did she detect a change in tone when he had said it? Gina was not sure so she replayed the message, but it was inconclusive. She knew that she could be hearing more than was really there, so any weight she gave it was likely just in her mind. Nonetheless, it

thrilled her to hear it. She could no longer deny that she was attracted to him and he seemed to reciprocate. But could she be sure? In any case, now she knew the reason why she was unable to reach him at work. There was no question of what to do next. Melanie could wait for a report, Gina was certainly going to try to reach Lake first.

A phone call to his residence yielded no results either. Gina was not sure what kind of message to leave so did not say anything. If he had caller ID he would know she called, so it was still possible that he would call back when he got home. For a moment she pondered where he might live. Was it a penthouse apartment? Or a town house somewhere, it seemed that PRI was well funded and he was high up in its hierarchy, and from what she knew of him, he probably had a nicely furnished house with all the amenities anyone could want.

Gina took the time to fix and eat supper without trying to call again. She definitely did not want to make him feel like she was desperate or grasping especially since she was still a little unsure about her feelings. Maybe she would suddenly see a side of him that she found extremely annoying. Instead of watching television while she ate, she wanted to be alone with her thoughts, so she gazed out the window to nearby apartments and the street.

Some people always had their curtains drawn or blinds down no matter the time of day or night, but others where not as careful, or perhaps not so discreet, so she could make out some of the scenes going on in the neighborhood. At a few places the flickering of television screens revealed people watching a movie or a show. Two of those windows that had the same exact flicker, though not with the same intensity, which usually meant they were both watching the news especially given the hour. Another place was having seemed like party with people gathered in groups while others were walking around, Gina was sure that if she opened her window she probably would be able to hear some of the sounds they made. The street itself was fairly quiet with only a few people walking by and cabs dropping people off. Most everyone here did not have a car as there was limited parking and the lots in the area tended to be rather expensive.

Gina looked up to catch two people looking out at the night from a

balcony. The noises of the city she was sure would be diminished there so it would be a good place to enjoy a quiet moment even with all the buildings around. They were soon joined by someone else and looked up at the sky. Maybe someone was pointing out the constellations? With all the other lights around it would be hard to see any stars clearly. Maybe if she had a balcony she would be able to do the same, it was something to consider when she decided to move.

She looked down towards the street again and saw essentially the same scene she had moments before. In fact it was unusual because it repeated itself in exactly the same way. A dark red car drove by that looked exactly like one she had seen earlier. It was not one to catch the eye because it was not fancy or flashy with some of the additional lights people liked to adorn their cars with. Its simple design was not remarkable at all and watching it as it drove by convinced Gina that it was exactly the same car that had passed earlier.

Immediately her calm vanished and her earlier fears resurfaced. She did not know what could be seen from the vantage point of the car, but there was no point in making herself more visible. She quickly backed away from the window and drew the shade. Hopefully that had not been noticed. Should she turn off the light, she wondered. No, she thought to herself, maybe they were waiting for her to go to sleep. Gina considered that she was just being paranoid again. It could simply be someone who was lost and had to circle the block a few times trying to find a place to park,. Somehow though she sensed that it the was being driven in too regular and too measured a way to be someone looking for a particular street. It could just be her imagination, but after her encounter earlier, she did not want to take a chance. Uncertain, she called Lake once more but he was still not at home or at his office.

She finally left a message at his home trying not to sound panicked, though she was not sure how successful she was at doing so. Gina tried to think of who else she could call or who she could tell, but no one came to mind. She felt like Lake was already involved and contacting him was just an extension of the situation. Her friends were not a part of whatever was going on, and she did not want them to experience any problems from what

could occur. So she waited for a call all the while thinking as to what to do and how she could meet Lake without trouble.

Gina did not have to wait long for a phone call from him. He had checked his messages before he left the restaurant and was calling from his car. Gina was not sure what should or should not be said, so she simply told him that she wanted to meet him at a mall that was fairly close to her. Lake knew exactly where it was and said he would drive there directly. Gina wondered how far out of the way it was for him, but he did not say how long it would take him to get there. Feeling like a spy she also said they should meet at a place that reminded them of their first meeting. Either Lake understood, or he did not, but he did not make an indication either way. Perhaps he was concentrating on his driving because during the whole conversation he had maintained a fairly even in tone. Fearing to say more, Gina simply said “see you soon” and ended the call.

Now she had to decide how to get out of the apartment unnoticed. It was fortunate that there was delivery entrance to her building which opened out on an alley that was not very big and a place she would not want to get caught in. It was almost never used during the evening nor during the day unless someone was moving in. Even so, there was a chance that was using it, and that could play to her advantage, so she decided to go that route.

Along with leaving by an unusual route Gina also put on some of her more comfortable and baggy clothes, things that would be less likely to draw attention. She put on a hat she rarely wore to hide her hair length and made sure wear shoes that were comfortable for running. When she looked in the mirror Gina saw a different version of herself than she was used to and she hoped it was enough to fool someone in the dark. The thought of having Lake see her in less than suitable clothing bothered her, but if he thought her foolish for taking measures against a threat that could be imaginary what she wore would make little difference. Just before she walked out the door she thought about doing something to it that would let her know if anyone entered her apartment while she was gone but no good ideas on how to do it came to mind.

Once in the hall, Gina was impatient to leave the building and decided to take the stairs rather than wait for the elevator. She made it to the

ground floor without seeing anyone below, or hearing any movements above. Just before heading to the service entrance, she decided to take a look though the front door to see if she could see the car she was suspicious of. If she timed it right anyone watching would not be aware of her she left by another route before they came back around. Although there was a chance of being seen, if she did see the car it would confirm that her actions so far were not incredibly foolish.

There was a small empty area not too far from the door that Gina though must have been used as a guard post or reception desk of some kind before they installed the electronic systems in the building. Now it was used by people who were waiting for someone because it did not block the door, while giving a good view of the street. It was perfect for what Gina was thinking so she did her best not to be in direct sight as she moved into it. She felt like ducking down, but decided she could see enough by staying close to the wall and looking through the window.

A few cars went by and she began to wonder if she had imagined what she had seen before. At last the dark red car drove up slowly and stopped. Had they seen her? Gina held her breath and watched to see if anyone got out and approached the building. The windows of the car were tinted and all she could make out were two shapes, but there was no way to tell if it was just an outline of the seats or if it was actually two people.

Finally the car moved on without having let anyone out, at about the same speed it had arrived. Gina gave a sigh of relief and headed toward the back door. Once again she did not encounter anyone in the hall which surprised her some, but did not worry her. When she arrived at the rear entrance she found some young men were there, though none of them were actually unloading. They were drinking and talking loudly about whatever seemed to cross their mind. She knew at least one of them lived in the building so they were not complete strangers. Gina was grateful that they were there though they were a bit obnoxious.

After dealing with a few comments and taking a look around she made her way through them and down the alley. So far things had gone well, and she was almost onto the street when she thought she saw someone at the other end of the alley past the men. She hurried her pace and quickly

made the turn. She tried not to run, but it was hard to keep herself from doing so. She knew her pace was faster than usual, and then remembered to hunch down some so it would be harder for someone to recognize her. The people on the street did not seem to notice anything as she rushed passed them, and she hoped that was true of anyone watching. She only glanced behind once and thought she saw someone following, but could not be sure. Focus, she kept telling herself, keep each step even. Don't panic.

Gina made it to the station at a very fast pace, but she was careful not to bump into people or cause any kind of commotion. She could not help feeling that someone must have noticed her strange behavior though there was no indication that was the case. She thought someone had followed her, but she could not be sure. The station was lightly crowded and she went through the turnstiles quickly and onto a train. Her timing was perfect as the train doors closed and left almost as soon as she walked on. Feeling satisfied with her efforts Gina finally began to relax though she felt oddly tired. It had never occurred to her that leaving the apartment could be so stressful or cause her to expend so much energy.

No one seemed to be watching her when she finally got off the train a while later, nor did anyone appear to be following the few blocks it took to walk to the mall. Gina remembered how a few days earlier she had felt like someone was watching, even though she never had been able to confirm it. Now, the same sense did not bother her and as she arrived her destination feeling quite good about being clever enough to foil those who were after her.

There were several restaurants at the mall, but only one coffee shop. Even if Lake did not know exactly where it was, it would be easy enough for him to look it up on one of those large directory maps that were present at the entrance. Although certain of its location, Gina did not go there immediately, but instead took some time to browse items in a few stores, just in case she had been wrong about no longer being followed. Although that was the reason she gave herself, in truth she was starting to feel relaxed and calm and looking forward to seeing Lake. Finally, after spending several minutes in several shops she made her way to Flavors of Java. The coffee shop was not as welcoming as Cup of Joe's and she did not visit often

which meant it was unlikely anyone would recognize her. Finally feeling completely comfortable she entered Flavors of Java, order an iced cappuccino and sat down to wait.

As soon as she picked a place to sit Lake sat down directly across from her. He was well dressed and also holding a drink of some kind. Gina could tell that whoever he had met must have been important because he was wearing a tie and suit and looked impeccable. He must have been there before she arrived but she had totally failed to see him because of how focused she had been on getting there.

“You are finally here,” Lake said. “I hope there is a good reason you asked me to come.”

Gina was surprised to see him irritated. Had she gone too far, or been too vague?

“I am sorry to have bothered you,” she said. “But I think I am being followed, or at least my apartment is being watched.”

“Really?” he said. “I can understand why you would be so vague on the phone, though you don’t have to worry when calling my home number. It is, as far as I know, secure. Are you sure about this? I didn’t mean to put images in your head with what we talked about before.”

“Well maybe I am just being paranoid. I am sure you have more experience being followed!”

“I’m sorry Gina,” Lake apologized. “I didn’t mean to doubt you, or get irritated, I just have not had a particularly productive day today and I had been waiting for word from you since morning. Please, tell me, what is that you saw and experienced?”

She was instantly sorry for what she had said. She had been deliberately vague when she called him and he could not know what she had gone through. Still he should have understood that something was wrong and that she would not call him with a sense of urgency if it were not important. Briefly she explained about the car circling the apartment and the man she thought had tried to follow down the alley, but she thought she had lost. The more she said the more a concerned look overtook his face, he listened very attentively and did not interrupt at any point.

“You acted rather cleverly, I must say” Lake told her. “I don’t know

if you could really hide all that beauty underneath those clothes, but probably some people would be fooled. But I am still puzzled to find out how anyone could know where you live. I am confident that I did not have that information anywhere that it could be stolen by someone, even if they wished to."

Gina blushed at the compliment and also at the embarrassing admission she now had to express.

"I'm afraid it is my fault," she said. "I investigated the place where I was bitten. It happened to be near a friend's house so I thought it would do no harm to simply stop by. Unfortunately, I think someone spotted me." And she explained the whole incident that had happened earlier in the day.

"I was afraid of that" Lake said. "You were right in being concerned. It does not seem like a savory character at all and it looks like they are well organized or coordinated. You have raised some alarm bells and I don't know what will quiet them."

"So what should we do?"

"Well, it is clear that there is no question about you returning to that place again. With the address I can send some discreet people and get information that might be useful. I guess the best thing would be to try make it so that you have nothing of value to them as far as information. There is no way I can think that anyone would know that you were bitten. However, it seems like you were just suspicious enough to catch their attention."

"How can you be sure that they don't know anything? For all we know they were bugging my phone as well as yours."

"I don't believe so, if they knew what I know about you, chances are that you would not be here, but would find yourself in some lab where no one could reach you."

"Oh, come now," Gina said. "I am worried already, you don't have to make it worse by exaggerating."

"I wish I was," Lake said very seriously. "There are some rumors about who and might be involved and I believe they might be capable of it."

"Who? What have you found?"

"I don't know for sure anything yet, I just talked to someone who

answered my questions with caution. Once I give him the information you retrieved from your work I think he can find out more. With what you are telling me, I don't think I want to send any of my people to investigate. And you would not really have to worry about your phone being tapped, those things take time. I doubt they could have identified who you are so quickly."

"You seem to know a lot about secret plots and nefarious workings" Gina said. "Are you sure you are just a researcher?"

"Well, I have had to deal with some unsavory characters from time to time. Some diseases are not readily available by legal means. If your goal is to study everything, you need to get your hands on a little of everything to do so."

"OK, I will buy that explanation for now. But you better not all of a sudden be sporting an army tattoo."

"Ha! They wouldn't take me even if I had wanted to, I'm too spindly."

"You are just fine," Gina said and blushed immediately afterwards. Lake looked into her eyes and she sensed once again the connection between them. Was she being foolish, or was it a real emotion she was sharing with him? He looked about to say something, but stopped himself. Then after a few more moments of silence began again, and the shared moment ended.

"We have to assume that they suspect something, otherwise they would not be following you. Whoever we are dealing with realizes that the virus or something of the kind was released close to where you found it and is closely monitoring the area. I think that means it was accidental that it got out before time. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, that make sense" Gina said getting back into the reality of the situation. "If they were looking for victims, they would be monitoring hospitals not the infection site."

"Quite right. So maybe you just happened to come upon someone who was sent to look for evidence, or destroy it. Though I believe you did that originally when you burned what probably was the carrier animal."

"Do you think that is the case?"

"Well, I have a theory but..." Lake said and trailed off. "I am starting

to think this is not a good place to talk.”

“Did you see something?” Gina asked quietly. “I haven't seen anyone in particular from my viewpoint.”

“I don't know” Lake said in the same tone. “But I think people in public areas tend to be listening to what we say. Even if none of them has ulterior motives someone could find out what we talked about by asking a few questions.”

“You are right. This is a good place to meet, not a really good place to talk. Shall we go to your office?”

“I think it is clear that your apartment is out of the question, but if someone did manage to follow you here, my office is not a place we would want them to know you had gone to either. So I suggest my house if that is acceptable to you.”

“Wouldn't that raise suspicions as well? You are after all well known as someone who researches disease.”

“True, but why would I meet someone at my house if it had anything to do with research. I certainly don't have a lab there. I can have normal guests during a course of an evening so I don't think it would raise suspicions or put anyone on the track to finding anything out.”

“I hadn't thought of that” Gina said. She did like the idea, and it did make sense, but she had wanted to at least try to raise an objection before committing to such a step. In her mind she tried to think of alternative places they could talk that could not be overheard, but she did not give anything too much thought. Gina did want to see where Lake lived and he probably had a security system for his house that would prevent them from being surprised. So she agreed to go with him. Lake then suggested that they meet on the street right outside one of the major retail stores. He did not like it that she would be out of his sight, but he felt that if anyone were following they should not leave the coffee shop together. He would go get his car and pick her up right outside to give them a quicker way out.

Gina left first and once again walked around looking at items in windows and occasionally slipped into a store. She still could not tell if someone was following or not, but at least she knew that someone did not think her crazy by being cautious. The fact that Lake believed her stopped

her from thinking she was paranoid anymore. It also increased her sense of danger, but at least she knew it was not a baseless emotion. What she could not be sure of though was his feelings toward her. Did he really like her? She knew her feelings for him were growing stronger, could it be same for him? She did not let herself speculate too much, she could only hope that the current situation would not make things go sour prematurely. They had met easily enough but things had progressed differently since then.

Everything happened just as planned. After being in the department store for a while she went outside and immediately Lake was there to pick her up. The thought crossed her mind again that perhaps they were being too cautious, but she didn't care. This was turning into an interesting evening in what had sometimes been a rather bland life, and even though she was afraid of the unknown of the situation, she realized she actually liked the adventure.

They drove off quickly though Lake had to back track somewhat to get to exit he wanted. Apparently he had taken the quickest route to in though it wasn't the best to get to his house. Lake was quiet during the drive, either thinking or being attentive to what was ahead or, more probably, what was behind. Gina did not mind as she had her own thoughts to occupy her. She wondered if it was safe to go back to her apartment later in the evening, or if she would have to spend the night with Lake and go to work the next morning from there. Should she call in sick, or go in? This was a crucial time in her career and she did not want to jeopardize it when she was so close to an important promotion. There were a lot of things to consider as well as the larger issues that related to the rest of the world, but she did not want to deal with those at the moment.

"Hello" Lake said and Gina turned to see that he was talking on his phone. "Yes, I know what time it is... Oh come now, you just probably woke up and are feeling grumpy..." Lake was silent for a moment and then laughed. "Well, that explains that then. Look, I have some more information. All confidential of course, so don't even think of asking me how I got it... Yes it is related to what we talked about before..." and he told whoever it was what she had said without any details except for the location and the name of the person who she dealt with when responding to

the call. “Yes, I am not sure if that man is relevant or not, but he might be so please let me know if you find anything... Great, I will call you back soon then... That's fine too, enjoy the rest of the evening,” Lake finally said and disconnected.

“Who was that?” Gina asked.

“Just the person I talked to before about what we knew. I think he has some idea as to who might be responsible. Hopefully what you gave me today will confirm it. He works mostly at night, so we might know something before long. It depends on what else he is involved in though, so we will see.”

They both remained silent again. Soon Gina was feeling drowsy and shortly after fell asleep. When she woke they were pulling up to a small house and the garage door was opening to let them in. She did not have much time to see the exterior before they pulled in, so she did not have any sense of where they were. The garage itself was bare with no tools or shelves of things. The door closed behind them quietly and Lake showed Gina into his house.

They emerged directly in the hall of the house and there were stairs nearby. Lake led her to the living room which was simply functional. It had a small sofa, an easy chair and a coffee table. Gina could tell right away that he was a bachelor and not used to entertaining people in his house. Looking around briefly, she could not see a dinning room table, so he must eat out, or here in the living room. Everything was clean as far she could see and from what she knew of him, he probably worked late most of the time so she could not be sure if he was the one who cleaned or if he hired someone else to do so.

“Can I get something for you to drink?” Lake asked. “I have water, some fruit juice and maybe a beer or two. I can also make some coffee if you like as well.”

“Whatever is easiest for you,” she said. “Don't worry about me.”

“I think that means coffee” he said with a smile and he left to go make it.

Gina sat down on the sofa and took some time to take in her surroundings. Lake had a large television, but she could not tell if he had

any kind of player for music. There was a set of windowed doors that went to the outside, though since they were not lit, she could not tell if they opened onto a deck, or simply to a fenced yard. Their positioning in the room suggested a dining area, but it was bare. Lake had disappeared around corner to go to what she imagined must be the Kitchen. There was not a lot of decoration in the house only a few pictures and some paintings, nothing that indicated any family or specific interests. She did not get the feeling of it being a home, but rather simply a place to live. It did not feel cold exactly but she wondered if he had lived there long, or had moved in recently. She could see no clear indication as to which it was true.

Lake quickly returned and offered to give her a brief tour of the house while the coffee brewed. Gina accepted readily and he took her upstairs which echoed the bare feeling of the rest of the house. All the furniture he had was tastefully chosen and elegant but like the first floor, sparse. His study had the most furniture as it was filled with bookshelves and books. There was also a work area in the room, which had a computer and some equipment she did not recognize. It was the only place in the house that was somewhat disorganized, and even then it seemed to have a pattern. Everything else, including the bedroom, was very neat which made her think someone must come to clean. Lake clearly lived very simply and had just enough things for himself to relax. Gina worried because she did not see anything that came to her mind as being a hobby or interest outside of his work. She wondered if he was just one-dimensional, but she realized that among the many books he had, quite a few were not of a technical nature.

The tour ended with the kitchen which was neat as well. There was a spice rack as well as knife set visible, which could indicate that he really liked cooking; however, everything else seemed to have been safely stowed in the cabinets. The coffee was ready when they got there. He poured two cups and they moved back to the living room to talk.

“So,” Lake said. “How do you like the house?”

“It’s nice” Gina answered. “Have you lived here long?”

“A few years, but I know why you are asking. I know I don’t have a lot of furniture, I just never find the time to get any more than what I

originally bought. I don't bring a lot of people here either so I do not feel the need for anything additional. Some find it to be a bit austere, but to me, it is just right.”

“You could put some shelves down here though, it would make things a little less stark” Gina suggested.

“That is a good idea, though never really thought of this area as being stark, just bare. I will have to consider it, I am running out of room for books” he mused. “But I did not invite you over so we could discuss furniture” Lake said taking a serious tone. “I should tell you what my theory regarding the situation at this point. Is your coffee fine?”

“Oh it's great, thanks. What were you about to say?”

“Well, I think what has happened is this. Whatever animal it was you bur... I mean disposed of, had the virus, but it was not supposed to be there. I think the reason the strain you received was not full strength is because it actually came from the animal itself and passed through the flies instead of them being the originators. Whoever did this was experimenting on whatever creature you found, which somehow escaped. That is probably why they were in the same area you were today instead looking at hospitals. If it was a planned distribution of the virus, then they would have gone to the places where these things are reported, but you are the only one who has had a case of anything similar in this area. Whoever did this must have gotten careless which is lucky for the rest of the us, but bad for them. If we can only figure out where the animal came from then we would be able to find the originators.”

“But what about the flies? They were more aggressive than usual, is it possible that they where a different variety than usual? I don't think I have ever encounter anything like that as well.”

“That is a good point. They may different since their behavior was atypical. It could be that whoever is involved is also doing some genetic manipulation which requires a lot of money to pull off. It is too bad that the only evidence of all of it no longer exists.”

“There was never anything in our manuals about special circumstances for disposals, otherwise I might have considered it. At the time though I thought the flies were strange not the animal itself.”

“Maybe that's something you could suggest at your work. I am sure for certain types of investigations it might be important that all the animals in the area are preserved.”

Gina laughed. “I don't have that kind of influence, it would take a politician or extremely rich person of some kind to make Prometheus change any policy. They are very rigid about those things.”

The phone rang and Lake left the room to answer it. Gina did not hear what he was saying, but it was brief, and when he came back he had concerned look on his face.

“That was my friend,” Lake said. “And I don't think it would be a good idea for you to spend the night at your apartment tonight.”

“Why? What did he tell you?”

“It seems that Phola Vera is behind this, and I am sure I don't need to tell you how powerful they are.”

Gina was silent. Phola Vera was a large industrial company of which there were many rumor that had so far being unproven. Among them was a story of a man who was ruined along with his whole family for going against the company. There were also stories of people who all of a sudden were silenced or disappeared when a legal case was brought against them. Phola Vera had its own private security force that most considered to be more of an army than a simple organization for guarding their facilities and ties with a number of governments and important people. Gina did knowledge of the company was superficial, though like everyone else she had heard the rumors.

“So your friend thinks they are following me?”

“Well, as I said. I have had to deal with unsavory people, and he is one of them. He knows more about their secret dealings than most anyone. If he is worried, then there is something to think about. It still was a stretch for him to find out this information because it seems it is even hidden at deeper levels than normal within the company, which by the way no one seems to know who owns it or leads it.”

“Is he sure it is them?”

“The information I gave him an hour ago merely confirmed it. One of their properties is in the area, as well as a scientist in their employ. The

name of the person you dealt with gave no hits, thought it could also be someone who works for them. He also had found that a number of people were trying to buy information on the health disaster plans that different countries and municipalities have put in place ,though those who did so were, in his words somewhat amateurish. They left enough tracks for a blind man to follow, once again, according to him. All of which lead to Phola Vera.”

“So what can we do? These are very powerful people we are dealing with. How do you know that you aren't being observed?”

“You are right, I don't know that. I am leading a team of people looking at how to cure common diseases. Perhaps they think they will be able to do something before I have a chance to develop a cure. And they would be right. Once the problem of transmission is solved, if I myself was not protected, I could die from the disease as easily as anyone else and people could simply call it a lab accident or something of the sort. I don't believe I pose a significant threat, but you do. You hold a key that could undo their whole plan.”

Gina looked at him without saying a word. She was not sure what to think. She had never seen herself as someone who could change the world or even be significant in her own company but appeared that she was someone who could potentially derail the plans of a major company. It was almost too incredible to believe, but the reality of the situation was all too clear. With the offices that Phola Vera had all over the world it could easily do any amount of irreversible damage. People disappeared every day without anyone's knowledge of the event and unexpected accidents happened with no one behind them. It would be easy to stage such a thing without alerting anyone.

“Do you hold any hope of stopping their plan?” she finally said.

“I don't know Gina. I don't know. Alerting the authorities probably will not do anything but inform them of more voices they need to silence. And who would believe it anyway?”

“I am ready to give my blood to help develop a cure. I realize how important this is now.”

“I didn't ask,” Lake said. “It would still only be a patch, not a cure,

and it might not work.”

“It doesn't matter. I will do it. I know you have wanted to be able to make a serum to further your research. Your super cure. I will give it to you.”

“But I...” he stammered. “How could we even know it would work? Won't you feel used? There is so much more to you than being a cure, but if you do this no one will know.”

“It is my decision Lake” she said. “I would give you anything you asked.”

“Anything?” he asked seemingly surprised.

“Anything” she said looking directly into his eyes. For a moment neither said anything and then Lake leaned in close and gave her a kiss on the lips. At that moment Gina felt her emotions surge as she returned his kiss with vigor. There was no denying anymore that she loved this man. Their embrace caused a thrill through her body that seemed to last forever, but he broke it off.

“I am sorry” Lake said backing away. “I did not mean for that to happen. I don't know what came over me. We have more important things to discuss.”

“It's all right” Gina said. “I didn't mind.” She hesitated a moment and then said “I enjoyed it.” He did not have an answer to that. At the same time she was feeling elated even though the moment had been brief. She knew her feelings now, and thought she knew his. Though maybe Lake wasn't as clear about it as she was, men tended to be obtuse in that way. She was about to move closer to him, but something in his demeanor told her not to. The moment had passed, but she would make sure it came again.

“I apologize, that was not right. You are vulnerable right now... But I was serious about the effectiveness of anything I produce using your blood. With everything else I have samples to test against, but in your case the virus is not one that I can get, at least not the variant that you were infected with. We would have to obtain a sample from the source itself.”

So she had been right, he was back to business. She could deal with that. “Then of course we need to get it, and you said you were certain of where it was. Can't you have your friend get it?”

“My friend specializes in information, not in highly dangerous robberies, I think in this instance he would be useless. Besides we are talking about something that would not only difficult to find but also dangerous if mishandled and accidentally released so whoever goes in needs to be extremely careful.”

“Then I should do it. You said that I am immune, and you can't create something that will work for anyone else as long as you don't have a clean sample to test with. I would have to do it.”

“I would not want you to put your life in danger like that. It is simply not a good idea.”

“Are there any better ones? I don't want anything to happen to you either, and if we don't find a solution, then you would be at risk too. We have to do it, and I have to be the one to go in.”

Lake must have realized that she was not about to be dissuaded so said nothing. Gina thought that it made complete sense. Yes, he knew more about diseases and viruses, but he would not survive outside the controlled environment of the lab. No one else could be as qualified that was not already involved. With coaching she was sure that she could accomplish any task given to her, and now she was sure she wanted to do her part. In her mind she had not realized as clearly what the consequences of her actions could have been. Before it had all seemed like an abstract threat that might not materialize, but the events of the day, as mild as they had been, had made her decision clear. The realization that Lake could die if she simply did nothing brought the whole situation into personal terms that she had to deal with.

“Your life will be in real danger” Lake said trying to convince her again. “Right now, they don't know what you know or anything about what you represent. Once you take this step, you will be directly in their cross hairs as a target and obstacle that needs to be eliminated.”

“I get the picture Lake” she said. “And it won't stop me, someone has to do something and that someone will be me. Now you just have to deal with it and help me accomplish it.”

“Maybe you should think about it overnight. It is getting late in the evening and it is best to make decisions in the morning. Can you at least

wait that long?”

“It won't make a difference but, I will do it if you agree not to try to stop me once I have made it.”

Lake grimaced but nodded. Clearly he did not like the idea of putting her in danger and Gina was happy about that was the case though she did not let her face show it. This was a serious moment that she did not want to mar with a sign of joviality.

“Well,” Lake said. “I should take you back home.”

“Didn't you say it was dangerous to do so?” Gina asked. “We don't know what those people were looking for, or planning.”

“That's right, but I think perhaps I was exaggerating the danger. I don't see how they could possibly know what you represent. Nor is there anyway they can really find that out. I think it is safe to say that as long as they have not found anything suspicious about you, which they could if there was anything to find, probably they will leave you alone.”

7

That proved to not be true, at least on the surface. Gina had agreed with him that the danger had passed, at least for the moment, but when they returned to the apartment, though the red car had indeed disappeared, her apartment had been ransacked. Everything was a out of place, overturned and or on the floor. Someone had been in her apartment and wanted her to know it and or wanted to cover some other activity by simulating a break-in. Whatever the intent, the scene disturbed Gina. She tried to think of what they could have possibly found, or if there was anything that pointed to her being anything more than a disposer. There was nothing that she could think of that would give any indication of anything more, though she could not be absolutely sure.

After looking around Gina did not find anything missing. On, Lake's advice she called the police. He said it would look suspicious to whoever did this if she didn't and they did not want to raise any more flags by not doing anything. They came in due time and she reported that she had come back to find her apartment in disarray, but made no mention of the red car, nor who both her and Lake thought was behind it and why. The police, understandably reassured Gina that it was simply an act of vandalism since nothing was missing, and dusted for fingerprints, though it looked like they would not find any that would give them any leads.

Once the officers had left the reality of her ransacked apartment hit Gina. Someone had come and violated her personal space, and merely because she had become a blip on the radar that had proved interesting. She had never experienced a break in before and even though nothing had been taken it had broken her peace of mind and place of rest. The idea of her apartment being a safe place against the world was shattered and just the thought of spending the night was frightening. She asked Lake to take her back to his house, she would spend the night there.

Lake looked surprised, but did not say anything. Gina could see that he did not want to make any decisions for her at the moment. He probably was still thinking about her offer to try to retrieve the experimental virus so that he could synthesize a cure. She could see that he was also upset about what had happened to her apartment and would probably agreed to anything that made her feel better. Gina felt his concern for her and emotions surged within her once again. He was a truly wonderful man, who was trying his best to handle his emotions sensibly so as not to take advantage of her. Gina knew that she was vulnerable at the moment, and that anything she was feeling could be a reaction to it. But she did not care, she knew that their first meeting at Cup of Joe's had come under normal circumstances, and she had not imagined the attraction and the good time they had had together.

Gina gathered some clothes and personal items and after performing the seemingly futile gesture of locking the apartment, they headed back to Lake's house. There he proved once again to be the perfect gentleman. She knew there was only one bed in the house and he, as expected, offered it to her. The sofa, he said, was quite comfortable, and he fallen asleep on it a number of times. Lake reassured her that he would sleep well and he pointed out that she was the one who had undergone strong emotional experiences during the course of the day and needed to rest comfortably. Gina knew that he had his mind set on making her comfortable so she decided not to contradict him. He gave her some towels, told her to go ahead and shower and while he would figure out how long it took to get to her office from his house. She agreed to that suggestion as well. A shower would feel good after all of the days events as she felt it would somehow wash off all the bad things and strong emotions she had experienced. The water certainly felt good on her body as it washed over her and Gina emerged feeling very refreshed and comfortable even though she was not in her own house. A touch nervously she chose what she had decide to wear to sleep that night. She had a robe, but underneath she wore something sexier than she would have normally worn.

Gina found Lake in his study where he was using the computer to research different routes to her work. He was completely absorbed in what he was doing so when she walked in he did not immediately look away from

the screen to look at her.

“It looks like it will take a little more than half an hour to get to your office from here” he said. “What time would you like to...” he stopped in mid sentence when he finally caught sight of her and what she was wearing.

Gina was satisfied with the effect she had produced. She had deliberately left her robe partially open so that he would catch a glimpse of what was underneath. Then, as if she had just noticed, she pulled her robe tightly around herself ending the display. She was surprised at herself for being so bold so quickly, but she had not been joking when she had said that she would give him anything she asked.

“... wake up tomorrow?” Lake finally finished once she had covered up. It was so much fun messing with men's minds, Gina thought to herself. She felt a little guilty about doing so to Lake who had been so kind to her, but seeing him off kilter for just a moment was worth it. Most men would probably said something suggestive, but she knew he would not and it would not lead automatically to sex as it had in past with others. Though if it had, would she have minded?

“Well, I need to be there at work at 7:30 so between 6 and 6:30 would work for me. I have to change into a uniform at work, so I don't need a lot preparation before arriving.”

“That sounds reasonable” Lake said. “I will wake you then and we can figure out what to do in the morning. I took the alarm out of the bedroom so that I can use it, I hope you don't mind.”

“You didn't have to do that Lake. If you slept in your own bed that would not be necessary.”

“But then where would you sleep? I think we agreed that you need to sleep well tonight, and as comfortable the sofa is, the bed is much better for getting good rest.”

“No one has to sleep on the couch” Gina said to which Lake had no immediate answer. She was sure he knew what she was suggesting. In her mind she was not sure exactly what she wanted to happen at this point. Did she really want what she was sure he understood she was suggesting? Did she want to make love, or simply a warm body to make her feel secure? Both were appealing options.

“I don't see that as being possible” he finally said. “I really don't like sleeping on the floor. You have no idea how many germs there are on any floor, even one as clean as mine” he concluded and then smiled. Lake was doing his best to disarm the situation. Gina had expected no less, somehow, if he had accepted her offer, he would have lowered himself in her eyes. Though she longed for his warmth, she also did not want to lose the image she had of him.

“Good night Lake” she said. “I hope you sleep well.”

“Knowing you are safe will definitely help. You make sure you rest, and wake well in the morning.”

Gina went to the bedroom to sleep. She had to admit that it was a comfortable bed and although the room was somewhat austere, she felt comfortable in it. The thought of where she was, despite the reason, made her feel relaxed and safe. The world could go on its own course during the night while she slept in the home of the man she loved.

Men were chasing her, wherever she went. Down the alley, and to the train. No matter what she did to lose them, there was one behind her looking over her shoulder. Gina found herself in the woods running and trying to remember all that she knew about trees and places she could find shelter. Suddenly she came to a clearing and there was a gray building spewing smoke that she was sure was polluting the area and the whole world. Worst of all was that there was nowhere to hide. She could hear people moving through the woods coming towards her.

Gina ran toward the building hoping maybe there was a place to hide there despite its noxious appearance. Maybe if she could find an entrance she would be able to get away from the men that were chasing. The building must have been incredibly big because no matter how hard she ran it did not seem to be any closer, but those chasing her were. She suddenly fell as something hit her hard in the back, she could only imagine it was the weight of someone tackling her.

To where and how she was dragged, she was not sure, but despite her best efforts she could not get free. Then she was strapped to a chair in a room with menacing instruments and a man that looked at her with what she

knew were evil intentions. He was holding a syringe, and something else as well. He approached her and began to poke and probe her while extracting something from her body.

Gina awoke from the nightmare shaking. Her breath was rapid and she was surprised she was not sweating, it seemed that after all that running she should be soaked, but she reminded herself it was just a dream. The images were still vivid and she wondered if it was the future she was seeing. Clearly there was more going on in her mind than she realized, and though she told herself it was just her subconscious preparing her for what might come, not what would come, she could not calm her mind. Gina knew she would not be able to get to sleep again easily. She decided to see if she could find something to drink that would help her sleep.

When she went downstairs, she found Lake sound asleep on the sofa. He was only partially covered by a blanket and wearing a t-shirt and perhaps shorts. Though the sofa did not look like it was made to fit him, he did seem to be comfortable and completely at rest. Gina was a little angry that he could sleep so well when so many things were happening, but the peace and calm on his face actually made her smile. She decided to not disturb him though her mind was still far from being settled and tried to walk softly past him.

It did not work. Lake woke as she neared the kitchen.

“Something wrong?” Lake said.

“Nothing,” Gina said embarrassed. “It was just a nightmare. I was looking for something to help me sleep better.”

“Hold on,” he said. “I will make you some tea with milk. It has no caffeine and I find it to be quite good. If you want I can bring it up to your room.”

“If you don't mind, I would rather not go up there quite yet. I would like to stay here with you for a while” Gina said still feeling shaken. She could almost believe she was still being pursued though her surroundings were different from the dream.

Lake turned up the lights in the living room and proceeded to the kitchen to make her tea. Gina followed him not wanting to be alone. She

knew it was foolish to be afraid of a dream, but seeing and talking to someone always helped dispel the lingering fears.

“So what was your dream about?” Lake said while he prepared her tea.

“Oh, nothing really” she said. “Just a regular nightmare you know, always seems more menacing while you experience it.”

“You aren’t worried about the hasty decision you made last night?” Lake asked. Gina knew he would be close to the mark. He was no fool and had seen clearly even though she had tried to disguise it.

“No,” she said deliberately. “I still believe it to be the right decision.”

They remained silent while he finished brewing the tea and then proceeded into the next room to drink it. It was quite good, and Lake had been correct in saying it was soothing. The smell and the taste of it reminded her of a warm bed during a stormy night. Gina thought that somehow it must be the kind of tea her mother made or something from her childhood for it to be so comforting. She felt much better after drinking it.

“So is this sofa as comfortable as you say it is?” Gina asked.

“Well, I do manage to sleep on it fine. But comfort is a matter of taste I guess, so maybe what I find to be good is quite different from the norm.”

“You did seem to be sleeping quite well when I came down” she said.

“Then that answers that, doesn’t it? My hypothesis has been proved conclusively to be true. But what about you, are you feeling better? Good enough to sleep in the comfortable bed?”

Faced with the idea of returning to sleep Gina lost some of the calm she had re-established. It seemed like the nightmare was returning as soon as she thought about going back to sleep. Maybe a few more moments were all she needed.

“Hold me” she said, and he gently took her into his arms. Feeling the warmth of his body comforted her and without realizing what she was doing she fell asleep. Whatever nightmares had assailed her before did not bother her again and all she felt was warmth and security.

When the alarm sounded the next morning it took her a moment to regain her orientation. Light was barely entering the room from the sun streaming through the glass doors. Two arms encircled her and Gina remembered with a smile where she was and who she was with. It had been a long time since she had been able to wake in such a way and she loved the feeling.

“Good morning” she said suppressing a yawn.

“Did you sleep well?” Lake asked from behind her.

“I slept great. Your arms are very comfortable, much better than your bed no matter what you say. I could sleep this way forever.”

“Good,” he said. “I am glad you were able to rest. I apologize for the alarm, I’m afraid I was not able to change the settings before you fell asleep so it is probably a little early. Let me go make breakfast, and you can sleep some more if you like.”

“It is not a problem. I feel so rested waking up a little earlier doesn’t bother me.”

Gina got out of his embrace and off the couch and stretched luxuriously. She felt like she had not slept that well in ages. There was something about the comfort of another human body that made one sleep better. A shower felt like a good idea as well, not only to wake her up but put a nice finishing touch on the night and good beginning to the day. All of a sudden she realized that she was probably showing more than was proper by stretching and made a move to cover herself up and close her robe. But there was no real need, Lake was not even looking in her direction at the moment. He was busy resetting the alarm he had placed near the sofa before he got up to stretch as well.

In looking at him she realized he had not slept at all. His eyes looked tired, his face looked worn, and he had the disheveled look of someone who had been up all night. Maybe he had been assailed by bad dreams as well, but somehow she knew that it was not the case, something else weighed on his mind while she slept. Gina decided not to ask and let him go about cooking breakfast. She told him she would go up to take a shower and left him alone with his thoughts.

While Gina bathed she tried to think of how to show her resolve. Lake had agreed to give her a night to think about what she wanted to do and it had only served to convince her that she needed to do what was necessary to keep him and her friends alive. Just the manner in which she woke reminded her of the importance of those shared moments with friends throughout life that she had to admit were some of her most cherished memories. Gina had given up a lot in order to advance her career, but her friends had kept her centered and solid throughout. The human and caring element in her life was not something she could give up. She also knew that Lake was an intelligent man and might be able to dissuade her. Maybe he had not been able to sleep because he had been thinking of convincing arguments, so she had to be determined in what she said so as to leave no room for argument.

Gina emerged from the shower feeling quite good. The night before had not been as enchanting as the first time they went out, but being able to fall asleep in his arms more than made up for that. Once again, in as many days, she was in good spirits despite what might lay ahead. She descended the stairs to meet the smell of coffee, bacon and fried eggs. Apparently Lake did go shopping frequently enough to have fresh eggs something she knew most single men did not do unless they were expecting company.

Looking quite tired Lake was putting down a plate with food and a cup of coffee down on the table in the living room. He apologized for not staying to eat with her, but excused himself saying he needed to shower and dress. Lake showed her how to turn on the television in case she wanted to watch the morning news and left her once again to her own devices. It would have been nice to have breakfast with him as well, but she knew that these were not ordinary circumstances and they both had to work. She would just enjoy the food he had prepared and the additional time she had to strengthen her resolve.

While she waited for him to shower she did eventually turn on the television to see what the weather was going to be like. Since most of her work was outside sometimes she could make decisions as to how to prepare for the day ahead once she got to work. The weather did not determine so much how she dressed on her way to and from work, but it did play on what

kind of equipment she would need once she got there. Gina had always been a minimalist when it came to her job so she tried to make sure she only needed the necessary equipment and nothing more. It had served her well in the past because there was less chance of forgetting to turn something in or having something in bad repair.

The weather could take a turn for the worse according to several forecasts, but it was not certain. That was the kind of information she did not like to hear because it made it almost impossible to predict what it was she should use or be prepared for. There had not been enough sun the last few days to make it necessary to wear a mask, but a little rain could change things. Unfortunately today looked like one of those days where no matter what she prepared for, it would turn out completely different from what she expected.

Gina idly paid attention to the news, but as usual did not focus too much on them. After all, she only was watching for the weather, and was not too interested in the rest that was offered. Nothing she saw struck her as being significant, but it did remind her of the trouble brothers who spent all their spare time watching the happenings of the world and local events.

Lake joined her soon after she had finished eating breakfast. He looked refreshed, but she could tell he was still tired. Unlike the night before, he was not wearing a suit, but a simple shirt and pants, apparently what he usually wore to work. Gina turned off the television as he came into the room so they could talk.

“Thank you for breakfast” she said. “It was very good.”

“I am glad you liked it,” Lake replied. “I don’t cook breakfast often during the week as I tend to rush out the door.”

“I understand the feeling, sometimes when I forget to set the alarm the same happens to me.”

“Well today, I had extra time, and since things have gone smoothly this morning we do not need to leave for a while longer. So why don’t talk before I take you to work.”

“I know that you are going to try to do Lake, and whatever it is will not work. My decision is still the same as yesterday. I will do what I can to get that virus. I know you don’t like it, but I am the only person who can do

it safely not matter what precautions you or anyone else take.”

“Do you realize the danger?”

“Yes, I do but I won't stand back and let these things happen. You said that what you develop, might or might not work, but I don't want to take that chance with my friends or with you. Let's stop this before it happens.”

“I was afraid you would say that” Lake said making a grimace. “But I understand your feeling, so I won't try to stop you. I did spend a lot of last night thinking while you slept.”

“I know. I can tell you didn't spend a lot of time sleeping. You must have been coming up with a lot of excuses to dissuade me.”

“Well, no. I could not sleep for another reason altogether, but I did come up with a plan of sorts. I know this will again put you in trouble with your work, but I think we will need some of that special fluid of yours.”

“What?” Gina exclaimed. “No, don't even ask. It is something that is so controlled that it would be impossible to get, even if I decided to do so.”

“Please listen to my reasoning first. It really would not be enough create a good anti-virus but destroying the mutated virus as well would ensure that it could not be further modified beyond curing. I don't know how much knowledge Phola Vera has but if they are not careful they could create something that even they could not control. We need to disable the source so that does not happen.”

“But how could we prevent them from getting it again? You said researchers knew about this virus.”

“That does not make it any easier to obtain, and by then if we manage to perfect a cure it would cause them to face difficult obstacles to perpetuate the same design. Perhaps enough that they would not deem it worth it to do so.”

“So how does this have to do with getting disposal fluid?”

“To destroy the virus, of course. The way it breaks things down when ignited make it the ideal to be used as an agent to eliminate it from their grasp. If you could obtain a sample of the virus and then eliminate their source one, then it would be a great coup against whatever Phola Vera has planned. From what I understand, you usually have to use only a small amount to burn a small area. When we are talking about viruses we are

talking about something very small indeed, so all you would need is a little. And their design goes up in smoke.”

“I see your point. I take it you have found a way for me to get in, wherever it is?”

“Well, no. Not until I talk to some people, then we can devise a plan for that. But that is inconsequential if we don't have a plan of action once we are inside, that is why I make the request.”

“I'm sorry if I overreacted a bit Lake, it is just something unheard of. In fact there was an inquiry and several people fired recently because some disposal liquid was missing. What you are asking is in simple terms, treason.”

“Is it really? I am not asking for the formula, and I am not interested in finding out the chemical details or its composition. I just need some for the task we have set for ourselves. Even then, I have no qualms not even seeing or handling the fluid, you are after all the one who will use it.”

“You are right, it is not what they are worried about. Still finding a way to get some will be a problem. I was not joking about it being tightly controlled.”

“I am sure you will think of something, but don't take any unnecessary risks. I only want you taking one, and I am not too happy about that one either.”

“I know,” she said and smiled at him. Gina knew she could trust him with her life. She felt an urge to kiss him once again, but sensed the moment was not right. He had deep feelings for her about her but also had a sense of purpose that called him to make hard decisions about those he cared about. She wondered if he had any close friends, or only spent time with the colleagues that he worked with. Lake was articulate and interesting and so it seemed unlikely that he would always be alone, but so far he had not shown any evidence of having much of a life outside his work. She reflected that the same could said about her.

They made their final preparations for work and left the house. In the light of day Gina could see that Lake lived in a quiet neighborhood bordered by woods. It was toward the nice side, but not overly so. There were no big house or mansions with large yards. It seemed like a corner of

the city that was not affected by much in the way of traffic or noise though Lake told her there were sometimes some wild parties as most of the people in the area were single. It was a place that catered to working professionals who valued their sleep and a nice environment that was low maintenance.

Lake's house itself had clean design with a little of a twist, which probably was what made him purchase it. Gina was surprised as to how close it was to her work, and thinking ahead she asked him to let her off some way from the office so no one would know he took her in. He did not question her, for which she was grateful and then drove away by another route.

Once at work she performed her duties as usual while trying to think of how she could do as Lake asked. They were not tightly controlled coming into the building to being work or when they left since all their paperwork had to be filed before they left and and their fluid containers checked in. A slight suspicion though was all that was needed for someone to be searched, especially after the recent events. Gina's conscience bothered her as she thought about what she was going to attempt, as did the thought that it could cause her career to come to a sudden halt. She had to remind herself that she had made a decision to carry through with this venture and she would do it at whatever cost necessary for her own good and everyone else that was dear to her.

During her first call Gina realized that stealing disposal fluid might be easier than she thought. Gina had always been good at using just the right amount of fluid so it often fell underneath what was required by the company guidelines. If she was careful one or two times to save the extra fluid, no one would know the difference. She could only do so when she was actually using it for a disposal as the container recorded the time as well as the amount used, but it could be done. She just had to find a proper container to put it in, and some way to smuggle it out.

Gina had nervously been successful in secreting out some of the disposal fluid during a call and had just returned to the office when Mr. Parkeson called her over. Her first instinct was to panic. She was sure it had to be about the disposal fluid. Somehow, even though she had been careful they had been able to detect that she had diverted some for other

purposes. Although that was not the reason, what he wanted to ask about was equally worrying. Someone had been making inquiries about her and the Tale Valley property. He was going to tell her about it earlier, but since she did not take shuttle to work as she normally did, the bus driver who was to give her the message did not deliver it. Gina was not sure what she could say or he had been told, so she gave the same answer she had used the previous day. That of having a friend nearby and it looked like a good place to live. Mr. Parkeson smiled and told her not to waste her coming promotion in a place like that. Almost as an afterthought he did ask her if that wasn't the place where she had reported unusual fly activity. Gina tried to be nonchalant about it and said that she did not remember since there were so many places she had made calls on that day. She hoped that he had not detected the lie, though perhaps there was a trace of doubt in his mind. Gina ended the conversation as quickly as was polite and left for another call.

She was relieved that her subterfuge with the disposal liquid had not been discovered but disconcerted that Phola Vera now knew who she was. It was likely that they believed her original story more now than before because if she had been to that area before on a call, it was possible that she had really liked it. It was not unheard of someone moving to a place they frequented while working. However, it also meant that they could be watching her while she was answering calls and could at any time cause her trouble. Gina had to depend on the her employment by Prometheus for her safety. It was a company that rivaled Phola Vera in reach, though it was not as politically associated, nor, she believed, involved in illegal and suspect activities. The disappearance of a disposer was serious business and she hope that would protect her from anything happening during work.

Even so, she kept watching her mirrors and scrutinizing the people around her for any actions that might be even remotely suspicious. No one approached her, she appeared not to be followed and Gina did not feel, as she had so recently had, that she was being watched. That unaccountable feeling was something that she had almost forgotten and might have with all the events that had happened since. At the time she had not had any reason to be fearful and the it had been such a real sensation that she could not

simply dismiss it as just her imagination. Perhaps she would talk to Lake about it once work was over.

Although she had started the day in good spirits, watching everyone closely and the pangs of guilt she felt had dampened her mood and left her feeling more tired than usual by the time she had finished her work. Gina was grateful that she had not been partnered with anyone during the whole day and therefore did not have to explain what could have been seen as strange behavior. The lack of a partner also meant that in the next day or two she would be promoted. It was strange to go a whole day without working with Karl, nor seeing him at the office, but the way she was feeling now it was probably best that she not encounter him.

Gina gave a real sigh or relief when she was finally to be able to leave. Never before had she been so happy to be done with a days work. All the thoughts and emotions of the previous days had kept her from focusing well on her tasks. The knowledge that a resolution was not soon to come had also bothered her and the fear of being caught had preyed heavily on her mind as she smuggled out a few drops of the disposal liquid. No one seemed to have noticed how closely she carried her drink on her way out the building, and she did not have to submit to a random inspection. It was good to be trusted, but she also felt dirty for having to abuse that trust.

The shuttle driver almost made her run when she stopped Gina as she was about to get off. But once again, it was nothing. The driver was finally relaying the message she had been given by Mr. Parkeson. It was not until she had boarded the train to her apartment that she finally was able to briefly relax before she once again was suspicious of everyone and everything. Gina realized that she could not continue to live with this constant mistrust and fear, whatever they did had to be done soon before she became completely paranoid.

It was not until about halfway to her apartment that she realized she was missing her keys. She did not remember leaving them at work, though that could be the only place she would have misplaced them. Perhaps in her haste to leave she had dropped them? It was too late to turn back, and if she had not raised suspicions before, she would definitely do so if she returned. Besides, Gina definitely did not think she could handle the strain of going

through the whole charade again. There was not turning back as far as she could see. Lake and her had decided that it would be best for her to follow her normal routine until they could meet in case she was still under scrutiny. But now, she would have to call him to come get her, unless she managed to get into her apartment somehow, and anyone watching would see him come in.

When she arrived at her apartment door, she experimentally tried simply opening the door in hopes she had forgotten to lock it when they had left last night, though she was sure she had done so. Surprisingly the door opened easily and there was a light on. Gina walked in to see most everything back in its place with a few things arranged differently from what she would normally have done. And in the middle of all of it was Lake.

“What are you doing here?” she asked surprised and relieved.

“You left your keys at my house” he answered. “I thought you might need them back, and I did a little cleaning while I waited. Don't worry, I remembered your story well from the night before and managed to come in through the back entrance.”

“Anything suspicious around here that you noticed?”

“No, at least I did not see any red cars parked outside, but I must admit that I did my best not to be seen. That is why I only have one light on in here, more would have given away that someone was here. Though you could have boyfriend that has keys to your place.”

“I think I do” she said with a smile. “And though he surprised me, I think it was sweet he tried to clean up.”

Lake was not sure what to say to that. Gina gave him a hug and then turned on other lights in the apartment to look more closely at what he had done. For never having been there before, Lake had done remarkably well putting things back in place. His keen sense of observation and attention to detail was once again on display though she knew that it was not his goal to impress her.

Once Gina had stored away the disposal liquid she felt like a burden had been lifted from her shoulders. She still felt exhausted from the emotions that had assailed her during the day and the secrecy still needed to be endured. Though she wanted to tidy up what Lake had missed, she just

lay on the couch and told Lake how her day had gone.

He was glad that she had been able to get disposal fluid but very concerned about the inquiries that had been made about her work. It seemed possible that they knew that she had gone to see him as well, though there was no official record of her visit. This meant that he could not take her to his lab as planned to work on creating a cure. They could still be safe being seen as a couple, but if they were observed going to his office too often it might cause more questions that they did not want answered.

That was the big “if” of course. Lake was not certain she was being observed because every inquiry would point to her made up story being true. Maybe they had no reason to be worried, but caution was still important though Gina was impatient and wanted to know how long they had to maintain secrecy. Lake said it would have to be until he could create a cure. Once that done, he could ensure it was distributed quickly enough that Phola Vera could not destroy it. Their resources were big, but PRI was in the business of getting ahead of their competitors quickly so they had safeguards that even Phola Vera would have trouble overcoming. Lake also had his own personal resources and contacts that could be used in the effort.

Gina understood why things had to be that way, but she found the situation irritating. Once she had gotten over her initial shock and scare, there was a moment when she had thought it would be fun. Now, however, she could not wait for it to be over. The only good thing to come out of it was spending more time with Lake. If it had not been for that, Gina was sure that she would be snapping uncontrollably at everyone she came in contact with.

Lake had not forgotten about food while he cleaned and waited for her to arrive, and once she had said her piece, he produced supper. It was take out that he had modified a little to give it a unique flavor, and proved to be delicious.

While they ate Gina asked him about his day. Lake told her that he had only had a few things to attend to in the morning and was therefore able to contact people about what kind of research facilities Phola Vera had and who they employed. It was not difficult for him to do so as being researcher himself it was expected that he be interested in current trends and people

around the world. It seemed likely that the person who was in charge of the project was Dr. Unger O. Kalu as he headed their biological research arm. No new reports or articles had been issued by him in a long time, so most people believed that he simply was kept on staff because of seniority. Lake believed it was because of his most recent delving into the realm of viruses that he had been quiescent. From what he could find, Dr. Kalu had been rather sporadic in his previous research as well, but it all had been very interesting. Lake had also given the Doctor's name to a few people outside the realm of science to see if there was anything else to be found.

As for research facilities, everything that he found was already well known so it was unlikely that secret research was occurring at any of those since they would be easily accessible to the public. In any case, they only had one building listed where biological research and development occurred and it was located outside the country which meant that it was unlikely Gina could have been infected by something from there. That meant that it must be a facility that was listed as used for some other purpose. Lake had confirmed with the source he had talked to the night before that there was a property owned by Phola Vera in the Tale Valley area, but had been surprised to find that it was a house. When he had first heard about it, he had assumed it was a factory or warehouse in the area, but instead he found that it was actually a large mansion. From that information Lake guessed that it was Dr. Kalu's personal residence and research center.

“Now all I am waiting for is more details on which house and a blueprint of the property. Then I will have to see if I can find anything about security and some way to get in. I usually can find out about things easily enough but anything more complex will be troublesome. That might take several days.”

“I thought this would be over quickly” Gina said. “When you asked me for the disposal fluid I thought for certain we would be moving soon.”

“I am sorry if I gave that impression. I assumed it would be difficult to get and might take several days. I have to admit that you surprised me by being able to do so so quickly, and I had hoped for a quick resolution as well. But it should be a matter of days, not weeks.”

“At least we have that” Gina said. “And what about making a cure?”

“That also will take time” Lake sighed. “First I will need another sample of blood from you and I can't do it at the office so I will have to do it myself in the next few days. As you know it can't be perfected without a clean sample of the virus, but the process needs to begin before then. But don't worry, I don't have any other requests of you. So you can just proceed with your life as usual.”

“Except for being careful and secretive” Gina added.

“Yes, except for that unfortunately.”

“And you probably won't want to be seen with me either.”

“Look Gina,” Lake said irritated. “I know this is hard on you, and it is on me too. Though I am used to have my life scrutinized to some degree because of my position, I don't like hiding what I do, or who I see. I want this over as much as you do, probably more because you are putting your life in danger and there is not much I can do about it. Last night we were a little careless and I hope nothing bad comes of it, and though I don't regret it, I don't feel it is wise to do it again.”

Gina was about to reply acidly but realized just how tired Lake was. Clearly the situation bothered him as much as it did her and he did not have the benefit of having slept the night before. In her mind she knew she should just let it go, but she could not. She was not angry at him, but at the situation, and at the moment it seemed like the same thing.

“Are you sure I am not just a quick way to reach your goals Lake? A way to make sure your name goes down as a great researcher?”

“Oh please, don't flatter yourself” Lake retorted. “You are just one missing piece of a puzzle that I have been assembling for years. Even had I not come across you, I am sure I would have eventually solved it. The only reason I am hurrying is because of the greater danger to the rest of the world population. You know that, and you also should remember that I did not ask you to do anything, you volunteered. I would never ask you to do anything, or take anything from you that you did not offer. Why do you think I did not sleep last night?”

That gave her pause. Gina had assumed that it was because he was thinking of solutions to the problem that he had stayed awake, which clearly he had. But it had never crossed her mind that it might be because of her

directly. It was clear now that he had not wanted to take advantage of her while she slept. That is what had kept him from sleep. It must have taken a lot of self control especially since she had offered herself to him earlier in the evening and he had refused. Lake had done what he thought was right and it had cost him. How could she not love this man?

“I am sorry” Lake said. “I did not mean that. I do need you and I am more interested in who you are than what you might represent for my research. The reality of the situation makes me doubt what you think of me, and doesn't allow us to behave normally.”

“But I...” Gina began.

“Don't say it” Lake interrupted. “I won't believe you. Things are such that I believe you might regret what you say, or force yourself to believe once everything is over. So please, don't say it.”

Gina had to respect that. There must be something in his past that prevented him from fully trusting the situation. Perhaps he had experienced the same thing with one of his subjects? She had heard that patient doctor relationships always needed to be professional for just this reason. So either it had happened to him personally, or he was just being mindful of his training. It did not matter. Gina would have plenty of time to prove to him that she was serious if everything went right.

One thing they both agreed on was that they were tired and should get some rest. After deciding to meet at her apartment the next night so that he could take some blood samples for his work, they hugged and Lake left. Gina felt a measure of sadness at his departure because the tension between them had not completely dissipated, but she was too tired to make the effort of calling him. Gina decided to leave cleaning the rest of her apartment for the morning and simply went to bed.

8

The next few days everything seemed almost normal. Gina was more careful about what she did and said to her friends and colleagues, though this caused endless frustration to Melanie who always wanted to know the most intimate details. Gina was not prepared to say that she had ended the relationship with Lake because it would make things even more complicated when they could date openly again. At work, of course, no one knew of the relationship so she did not have to explain anything about it. There were rumors about her and Karl as they had both predicted especially since he was on leave and she was not. Gina considered secreting some more disposal fluid, but was always partnered up with someone for at least part of every day. She did not feel immediately comfortable with any of them right away, but she did not have any conflicts with them either. One of them did think it odd that Gina was being so careful about her surroundings and the people around, but she explained it as making sure that no one got hurt. Her change in behavior was not really commented upon since she had mainly worked with Karl and he was the only one who knew her methods well enough to know if something was out of the ordinary.

Lake saw her only once and it was to take blood samples. They had a good conversation afterwards and ate together. Since by then they both had rested and were back to feeling normal the tension, though still present, was manageable. Gina called him on the phone occasionally, but their conversations were short and he almost always had to tell her in one way or another to be patient. It was not until the end of the week that he called her and said that everything was ready asking when and where they could meet. There had been no unusual activity around her apartment that Gina could detect, but it was still safer to meet somewhere that neither frequented. She suddenly remembered the medieval fair which she realized was that very weekend. There would be many people around, so leaving it unnoticed

should be easy, it also was unusual enough an event that if she went off with Lake no one would suspect there was any ulterior reason for doing so. They agreed to meet there by their own separate means and then go to Lake's house to discuss the next steps.

Gina called up Joyce to set a time to meet. The costume she was to wear, Joyce told her, was ready and looking good. She also told Gina that several of her friends would be going along and all of them would wearing costumes that would attract stares, They set a meeting time of eight in the morning, which Gina felt was rather early, but she did not debate it. If Joyce wanted to be there for the whole day, so be it. She knew that the same was not expected of her so she would be able to leave at any time without attracting notice.

Saturday night Gina was restless as she slept. Not only was she going to meet Lake the next day, but a new and more dangerous chapter of their whole situation would begin. She also had to admit feeling nervous as to how he would react to her costume. Although it was flattering to her figure, he might simply object to the idea of dressing up. Added to those thoughts was the feeling of inevitability as things moved closer to a resolution, not only to their current situation but her relationship with Karl.

The next morning she rose before the alarm sounded and decided not try to grab a little more rest because it probably would be spent simply lying in her bed worrying. Gina gathered a few things in a small bag which she knew would not be remarked since she was expected to change into a costume. She could not take a lot, but if she had to spend the night at Lake's house again she would be prepared. She also took out the disposal liquid she had from the place she had hidden it. Lake had not mentioned it on the phone, but they had been trying to keep their conversations vague. Gina had decided that it was best not to take the chance of leaving it, especially after her apartment had been ransacked. No one would know what it was where she went, and since it was in an already opened bottle, she was not too worried that someone would try to drink it.

Trying not to give in to her nervous energy Gina headed out the door earlier than needed to reach Joyce's house. She made no attempt to disguise

her exit nor try to lose anyone who might follow her. That would come at the medieval fair where more people were around. Still, she did look around to see if she could see anyone following and was relieved that there appeared to be no one paying her particular attention. By the end of her trip, Gina felt at ease since she was confident she would have noticed someone following this early in the morning when there were so few people around.

Joyce was happy to see Gina arrive early. She was already dressed in costume as were most of her friends that were going. She accompanied Gina to another room and helped her put on her outfit. It had several layers that had to fit just right, and laces that needed to be tied which made it difficult to manage by yourself if you were not experienced. Once the change of clothes complete, Gina looked into the mirror and was delighted with what she saw. Her normal attributes enhanced by the costume made for a fabulous look that would have men ogling as her friend had predicted. Joyce was a very skilled seamstress and knew exactly how to flatter a figure, though she claimed not to have needed to do much with Gina.

When she walked out to meet the others she received enough compliments to make her blush. How Lake will be surprised, she thought. They had never gone out to a high end restaurant and at their meetings she had always been wearing something casual. Gina could not wait to see the effect the costume would have on him.

As soon as the last of the group arrived, they headed to the fair. Gina felt a little uncomfortable being the only one carrying her bag until she saw that several others carried something as well. In their case though, they were weapons that could not be displayed until they got to the fair. If she remembered correctly, one of them would be for her.

The fair was already full of people at an early hour and nearly all of them in costume. Gina was not the only one to be wearing something to make mens eyes wander and heads turn. Some of what she saw was bordering on violating decency laws. The men too had costumes that enhanced their beauty, although none where ever as revealing as those the women wore. There was an area close to the entrance where lockers were available for those who chose to change at the fair and since they had arrived early plenty were still free and she was able to put her things

securely away. The bag that contained the weapons was not put in a locker after it was emptied but given to someone at a drink stand who was someone they knew that had already been there for several days. Gina was given a saber and wondered how she was to give it back when she decided to leave. Joyce trusted her with the costume because it was made specifically for her, but the saber was another matter.

Everyone seemed to have their own favorite place at the fair, so soon they had split it up to enjoy what it had to offer. Gina spend her time with Joyce because she did not know any of the other people there. The weather was cloudy and a little cold, but the quality and the fit of the costume kept her warm. Gina could not imagine how much she would be sweating if the sun had actually been out.

There was a lot to see, but none of it really kept her interest. She did her best to enjoy it though she kept thinking about, and waiting for, Lake. They had agreed to meet some time in the afternoon and every hour seemed to be longer than the next especially since there were no clocks on display and almost no one wore a watch. The displays and shows were fun to watch, and she did like the attention she was getting from the men and some of the women. Joyce was an especially good companion for events like this because she knew what was good to eat and who was skilled at what, and also how to respond in the right manner. This was only Gina's second medieval fair and she regretted not being able enjoy it as much as she should.

After it seemed like the whole day had passed she was finally able to spot Lake. He was at a display of some type of doctor with all kinds of ancient "medical" constructions. No doubt he was disputing the historical validity of some. Gina managed to pull away from Joyce and headed towards him.

"Hi there" Gina said in a suave voice. "I am looking for new sailors on my ship, are you interested?"

Lake's reaction as he turned around was priceless. Clearly he never expected to see her dressed as she was. He glanced up and down trying not to be too obvious about it, but failing miserably. Gina was very satisfied with the impression she had made.

“You look spectacular” Lake said. “When you told me you would be a pirate, I expected an eye-patch and a hook.”

“I would never let that happen” Gina laughed. “I see you found your way here fine?”

“There aren't that many of these fairs in the area, so it would have not been difficult even without your directions. This does seem like a lot fun.”

“Oh, you are only saying that because of all the cleavage on display today.”

“I can see how some might find that to be the main attraction” he grinned. “But really it must be good to totally divorce yourself from the world for a time. These contraptions here are quite inventive and took a lot of skill to produce like I imagine most of the costumes.”

“My friend Joyce spent a lot of time working on what I am wearing. Am I to tell her that she was successful?”

“Very much so. Quite well done, and it suits you. Now, then, are you ready to board my ship?”

“With pleasure, but I need to return the saber. Why don't I meet you at the entrance?”

“Just outside the south one would be ideal. I am parked nearby.”

“See you soon” Gina said and walked away doing her best not to look behind and see if he was trailing her with his eyes. Thinking of that reminded her that she should also be on the look out for people scrutinizing her, but it seemed like a wasted caution at this point.

Gina made her excuses to Joyce and returned the saber. She found her bag just as she had left it and verified the bottle containing disposal liquid had not leaked or been tampered with. No one, it seemed, had tried to touch anything. Lake met her a little way outside the entrance and they walked briskly to his car. He had been lucky to find a good spot close to the entrance that was quickly filled almost before they finished vacating it.

Lake drove a little crazily on their way out, and Gina was not sure if it was because he thought he was being followed or, as she hoped, because of her costume. They of what had been happening in their lives as he drove but made no mention about the reason they were meeting which was fine

with Gina. There would be time enough for serious talk later and it felt like they had not talked about anything other than the situation they were in over the phone. Gina hoped that maybe Lake would finally realize that there was more to their relationship than one vulnerable person clasp on to someone with a solution. The way they talked so comfortably, how could it not be more?

They arrived at Lake's house without much delay. The light Sunday traffic on the roads had made for an easy ride. As they neared the house their conversation tapered off in anticipation of what was ahead. Once inside Lake asked Gina if she wanted to change into more comfortable clothes, but she replied by saying it would be difficult and time consuming to remove her costume did not mind wearing it until after they had talked. That was not the true reason she did not change her clothes. Gina had liked the effect she had on Lake earlier and even though it felt odd to be in ancient clothes without being surrounded by other people doing the same, she had decided to stay in costume. Although she knew could not replicate the effect it had first made on Lake, if nothing else, it should help ease the tension as they looked at what needed to be done.

Lake disappeared briefly to bring some beer from the fridge and the blueprint of a house. He told her he was finally able to obtain the plans of the mansion, as well as some specialized equipment from some people he knew though did not completely trust. While he gathered all of those things he had also been able to synthesize a potential cure from her blood samples. He had a whole series of possibilities but did not know which one would be effective until he had the real virus. Lake had also come up with a plan to infiltrate the house which hinged on there not being much of anything in the way of armed guards. Gina though the idea rather naive, given that Phola Vera was protecting what was sure to be a great secret. Lake explained that exactly for that reason there was a chance that there were not many guards. The more secretive the less attention they would want to draw to it, and having to hide a large amount of people in a urban neighborhood would be difficult to do.

Gina and Lake kept on talking and planning for hours and did not stop until they started to get hungry and a bit silly. Gina had drunk a few

more beers than she should have, and she though Lake was starting to show signs of the same. She found herself several times saying how she was proud of him for gathering all these things, which he tried to pass off as being nothing. She knew it had to have involved a lot of work and it helped her think of her task as one that would be similar in effort and importance.

Instead of cooking, Lake ordered pizza. He told her that he did not have what he needed to fix a proper meal, so they would have to do with junk food instead. It was quick to arrive and once they settled down to eat Gina started to feel a little less tipsy and little more focused which was important because the plan called for her to be in action the following night. Lake had actually bought a camouflage suit that he thought would fit her, and though she was ready to strip down right there and try it on, he thankfully stopped her. Gina realized she really was not as sober as she thought and making an idiot of herself as well. She took it easy from then on and finally was able to settle down.

Simplicity was the key to the plan. From what he had found they could disable the alarm system, or cause a distraction. The first was more complicated but more desirable so they would attempt that first. Lake had also got some wireless communicators so that they could talk at a distance. Gina once again wondered what kind of background he had that had prepared him for things like this. At last they had gone over everything as often as was possible. Any more and they would both be so nervous that nothing would get done. Gina questioned the need for Lake to be present since he would be putting himself at risk for infection. He shrugged it off as just being something that needed to be done.

It was dark when they had finished, and Lake offered to take her home, but she refused. If they were to do this thing, it was best if they moved around as little as possible. Taking her home only gave more people a chance to see their movements she reasoned. And then added mischievously that this probably was not the first time he had met a pretty girl and taken her to his house for the night. Lake did not reply and looked at her thoughtfully, and maybe a touch appreciatively. Gina could not resist and set herself in a provocative pose. Lake excused himself immediately and said he must leave a message at work so that they would not expect him

in the morning.

That night she slept much better than the last time she was there. No nightmares assailed her, though she would not have minded being in Lake's arms again. Once again he had refused her invitation and she did not press him understanding his reasons. She almost chided him for being too noble, but realized that it was one of the qualities that made him so attractive to her. Well rested she woke the next morning prepared for the challenges ahead.

Either Lake had gone shopping or he had somehow found something to make a "proper meal" because breakfast was ready when she got up. This time he had also slept well and was in reasonably good spirits. He asked her several times if she was sure she wanted to do go ahead with the plan, to which she always replied yes, or asked what other alternative there was. That generally silenced him for a time but it did not keep from asking again a few moments later.

The rest of the day was a tense because there was nothing to distract them from what was ahead. Lake was very worried about her well being and went over everything more than she felt was necessary. His concern was touching, but it became too much over the course of the day and she finally snapped at him. She was instantly sorry, but it did stop him from asking her about each detail over and over again.

Night finally came and they found themselves in a van, much like the one she drove for her work, near Tale Valley. Gina was dressed in the camouflage suit and wearing the transmitter he had given her. Inside she was a full of nervous energy and showed it no matter how she tried to keep a calm exterior. Lake on the other hand looked cool and confident, but he had often seemed that way to her. She was not sure how he kept calm, but she guessed that it was because of being in his element when it came to viruses, though she could not rule out a mysterious past. Gina realized she was just giving herself a fanciful thought to encourage herself. If he did have some past that involved dangerous missions in a foreign country perhaps their chances were not as bad as they would be otherwise. Deep within her she knew it was not true, but it was something to hold on to.

The weather had continued to be cloudy which made for a deep

darkness that would make it easier for her to be unseen, and they both knew they needed as much help as they could if they were going to be able to accomplish this task. The forecast predicted that the skies would clear sometime after midnight so she would try to be in and out before then. Although they were both hesitant to begin there was no use in putting off what she was to do any longer. Lake handed her the last pieces of equipment and she kissed him. He did not resist or minimize the gesture but returned it with strength and after wishing her good luck drove off to another position. If she was unable to disable the alarm he was going to be the one to cause the distraction.

“Are you ready” she heard in her ear.

“Yes, I am ready.”

“You know, it is still not too late to reconsider” Lake said.

“I’ve made up my mind Lake, so lets do it.”

“Go ahead then. I’m in position.”

Gina walked slowly through the woods. Every step she took sounded loud in her ears though she was doing her best to be silent. It was fortunate for them that in hiding the facility from the public Phola Vera had chosen a home that was at least partially surrounded by trees. There also was a secret entrance in that section of the house that they were sure had been designed to keep some of the visits to the house out of public view. It had been constructed some time after the purchase of the home, so even in the neighborhood no one knew of its existence. There had been quite a few secret changes to the mansion that were not generally known, probably done under the guise of remodeling or some other type of home improvement project. Gina had done her best to memorize the plans and not have to rely on Lake to guide her if she got lost.

The hidden entrance was protected by a clever form of camouflage that involved mirrors around it. Gina knew approximately where it was, but would have to carefully feel her way by touch once she arrived in the vicinity. An exaggerated motion would trigger some of the alarms and they would have to give up there and then and hope no one changed anything before their next attempt. Thoughtfully she picked up a branch and decided to use that to feel her way. It was conceivable that like so many things the

alarm was set off by heat and a dead branch would give her some advantage.

After making her way through the dark, she was finally able to arrive at a wall. She realized right away that she had wandered off course because of the proximity of the spotlights that lit up the front of the house. Gina carefully backed back into the woods and approached the wall a little further down. Now came the difficult part of finding the door.

There was enough of a break between the trees and the wall that she felt like she could be seen by anyone who just glanced in her direction. Even so, she had to proceed slowly and not let the panic rising in her take hold. She could hear the sound of her own heart pounding in her ears and wondered if Lake could hear it too through her ear-piece. Focus, she told herself. One foot at the time, move carefully.

A sound behind her caused her to stop. Afraid to look around Gina tried to sense what kind of creature had made the noise. She was familiar enough with woodland animals to know how they sounded and she hoped that is all that it would prove to be. But the sound repeated itself in a deliberate almost careless fashion, the way a man would walk. Gina did not know what to do. If she tried to contact Lake it might give away her position and the same was true if she moved, so though she wanted to run she commanded herself to be still and did her best not to even think.

Whoever it was appeared not to be tracking her because slowly the sounds became less and less. Perhaps it was someone leaving by the hidden entrance? She could only hope that was the case and that she had not overshot her goal again. Relieved she continued feeling her way against the wall using the branch she picked up as a probe. Finally the branch sank deeper than it should have and Gina knew she had found the entrance. She used the branch again to get an idea of the dimensions so that she could find the operating mechanism that she needed to fool into letting her in. Several times she paused so as not to activate any of the sensors and managed to find what she was looking for without setting anything off. Lake had mentioned that there might be silent alarms at any number of places, but Gina had decided not think about that possibility. It was a better not to, if she wanted to be able to function at all.

Gina removed a device from within her clothing that was supposed

to give her access. It was an oddly shaped plastic block that was supposed to activate the door in some way though exactly how was unclear. She pressed it against what she thought was the right place she waited for something to happen. A low glow appeared in a section of the wall that revealed a door behind it. At least that much had worked. She walked in taking her key with her and found herself in a hall that had no immediate exits. Once she was had gone a certain distance from the door she called up Lake.

"I'm in" she simply said.

"Good," Lake said. "Have you disabled the lower level security system yet?"

"Not yet. I just made it past the door and no alarms seem to have been raised. I am making my way there now."

"I hear you. I will wait for your signal if something doesn't work."

They resumed silence something they had agreed on for her protection, any unnecessary talking while comforting could easily result in her detection by someone who happened to be nearby. Gina hurried down the hall until she made it to an intersection. Although the hidden entrance gave her a relatively easy way in to the house, it was devoid of any places to hide making her easily visible by anyone passing through that section. After a little hesitation she took the right side corridor which should take her past another hall and then close to the room which accessed the lower level. Gina hurried along knowing that if anyone spotted her it would be clear that she did not belong there, so going slowly would not help. Even though a quick pace was needed she had to suppress her inclination to run since the noise if not the movement would be sure to raise alarms.

She made it to the appropriate room without incident and carefully opened the door. In it there were a number of controls, one of which opened the air sealed door. Getting in to the room was relatively simple, but that was only half of what they needed. The security system needed to be disabled so that she could get out, and the fire alarms deactivated so that she could start a fire. Gina have been given two other devices to accomplish these task. One was supposed to connect to a port on the main terminal, and the other needed to be placed above the main control panel. For a moment

she forgot how the first device was supposed to fit and almost dropped it trying to get it correctly attached. A few tries later it was on and the other device correctly positioned above the control panel.

Gina waited a few moments for the devices to activate and although the one connected to the port turned on, the other one did nothing. She tried repositioning it a little differently and still nothing happened. She put it back the way she had before and nothing happened. There was no time for this, she had to get it right!

“Lake,” she finally said. “I can't get the control system deactivated.”

“Are you sure you have placed the device correctly?”

“Yes, I've done it several times and it still indicates nothing.”

“I was warned this might happen” he said. “I know we are short on time so please do this exactly as I tell you.”

“I'm listening.”

“There is a switch on the side of the device. Slide it to the second position.”

“Done.”

“Now press on the right side of the display.”

“Fine, now what?”

“Replace it where you had originally.”

“It is there, but still nothing.”

“On the control panel press the button marked release.”

“Are you sure about that? I don't want to touch the actual equipment, it might trigger an alarm.”

“That is true, it might do that.”

“But you still want me to press it.”

“Yes, and then if you want, pray.”

Gina nervously did as she was told and it worked. The device lit up as it was supposed to and now she could proceed down to the lower level.

“If you thought this might happen, why didn't you tell before?” Gina asked.

“Why trouble you when it might not?”

“Is there anything else that might happen that I need to know about.”

“No, that was the only one.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Quite. Good luck on the next part. Remember what I told you about handling the virus.”

“I will.”

Gina went through the door and proceeded to take the stairs to the lower level. At this point she was no longer able to communicate with Lake. The place was built as a chemical and biological lab with walls that would protect those outside from what was housed inside and as such it caused wireless signals to be lost. Whatever help he could provide was in her head and she would have to rely totally on herself to accomplish her goals. That was something she had done her whole life, she reminded herself, so she should be able to manage. Even despite that reassurance this situation was different from anything else she had experienced and she did not completely quell her fear or nervousness.

Since she was not expecting to find anyone down at this time of night she almost walked into a man looking at something on a computer. Whoever it was so absorbed in what he was doing that he did not hear her coming. Gina managed to catch herself from actually screeching to a halt on the tile floor and backed away as quietly as she could.

He was wearing a protective germ suit though without the mask which she could see was laying on a nearby table. He was reading data on the screen, and taking notes on a pad. From where she was, Gina could not tell what it was he was reading or writing, but she knew that it probably would not hold his attention enough to keep him from noticing her as she passed by not once, but twice. The entrance to the lab was shielded by two air locks and she was sure if nothing else the noise of those opening would alert the man to her presence. Somehow she had to get rid of him.

Looking around she saw something that would do the trick. There was some type of mechanical grip that was on doubt used to handle items out reach during experiments. Gina walked over to it quietly and picked it up finding it to weigh more than she had thought, it would be perfect for what she had in mind. She approached the man with as much stealth as she could and swung the grip at the back of his head.

The man let out a gasp as he fell out of the chair and onto the floor

hitting his head against it. Gina quickly checked his vital signs and found to her relief that he was still alive. She had not been sure how hard to hit, or exactly where and even now was not sure if it was the fall against the table that knocked him unconscious or her blow. Whichever it was, her goal had been achieved.

She rummaged around the room to see what could be used to tie him up and found some tape. First she taped his mouth and then his arms and legs. Finally in a flash of inspiration, she placed his head gear on, and taped the covering so that he would not be able to see out when he regained consciousness. It was not until she was putting the finishing touches on binding the man that she recognized him. This was Dr. Kalu that she had knocked out and restrained. Lake had shown her a photograph, but this man was much older and looked different enough to make him difficult to recognize, which was probably the point. Gina wondered if it would be worth it to try to extract him as well as the virus from the facility, but reminded herself that he was here voluntarily and would cause trouble as they left.

Out of idle curiosity she looked at what the doctor had been reading when she attacked him. Time was short, but maybe what she found would be helpful to Lake. The screen was displaying notes about the contagion rate and death of something. Perhaps a successful experiment somewhere? Gina scrolled up a few screens to see to what it referred to because the figures themselves were unintelligible without the proper context.

What she found shocked her. The title was experiment twenty-six: avian modification. And from the first few lines she could see that they had done tests on carrion birds. The rates of contagion and death all referred to those. Here was the cause of the deaths of all those birds! Gina checked the date listed just to be sure she was not jumping too quickly to an erroneous conclusion and noted that it coincided with the mysterious deaths of the birds. They had been working on this experiment for years and their first test had either gotten out of control or perhaps in their view had been wildly successful. She wished she had some way to download the data, but everything she had was to erase information, not to make copies.

But before taking time to think of a way to safeguard the information

her first task need to be accomplished that of extracting the virus. Gina donned a protective suit, but did not bother with setting the oxygen mask. The virus was not normally carried through the air, and the only reason she wore anything at all was so protect others from an infection that she herself was immune to. The airlock opened easily and she was showered by some type of chemical disinfectant spray. Once she had passed that she recognized the setup that Lake said would be typical of germ laboratories. There were several cultures of bacteria which she recognized from descriptions she had been given. They were unprotected which meant they were benign in nature. Toward the center of all the apparatus was what she was looking for. A main center for experimentation. Also in the room was a temperature controlled chamber where the original virus needed to be kept, but that was her last objective.

Carefully she handled the container Lake had given her to carry the prototype virus. There was a system by which things could be introduced into the sterile chamber and fortunately the equipment he had given her was standard so she had no trouble placing the container in the same chamber as the virus. Getting a sample on the other hand proved tricky. She was not used to using something other than her own arms to get things done and even though the controls were very responsive, it took her a few tries to get them to work right. Finally she was able to get a sample into the container and seal it. Once she had removed it from the chamber she did her best to upset everything within it. Then she placed a trace of disposal fluid within so that it would be ready to light as soon as she left. The air inside the chamber was pure which meant everything would ignite quickly once she gave it a spark.

Having secured the prototype virus, she proceeded to the storage chamber where the original virus was kept. Interestingly enough it still had the label from the facility it came from. She did not recognize the name, but memorized it so that they could research it later. She used a low level irradiator on the virus sample effectively destroying it. There were other samples as well, and she took some time to destroy those with the irradiations though she did not know how relevant they were to the current experiment. Gina had not managed to get a lot of disposal fluid so though

she wanted to be able to ignite this chamber it would not be possible. She left the door open and changed the temperature controls to the maximum heat setting hoping that would take care of anything she might have missed.

Before she ignited the mixture in the main experimentation chamber she did a quick survey of the room. Gina was surprised at how calm she was. Although she realized that time was short and Lake must be getting impatient, she did not rush or panic. She was very deliberate with what she did and made sure she did everything as she thought it should be done. Never before had she experienced a situation as stressful as this, but once she was in the thick of things she realized she could handle it. After she was sure there was nothing else to be done she ignited the chamber.

A blue flame began right away where the fluid had been spread, effectively engulfing the containers with the virus. It quickly flared up and heat could be felt outside the chamber. Gina had to pull herself away from the mesmerizing scene to complete the final portion of her mission, data erasure. As she stepped out of the airlock back into the entrance of the lab she heard a pop and saw on the monitor that the experimentation chamber had burst and the fire was extending further out. Now not only time, but fire was against her. They had disabled the fire alarm system so that the initial chamber could be burned but it looked like more than anticipated would be engulfed in flames.

Gina took off the protective suit and faced the console once again. She had hoped that while she did everything else a thought would come to her as to how to capture the data she wanted. The system in use here was similar to the one at her work. It provided no easy way to acquire data that was displayed. And though she probably could find something to write with, it would not really constitute proof. There had to be a way to get the information, as she could not imagine that Dr. Kalu was always in his lab when he needed data. It was sensitive information though, so it possible that it was only accessible here. Finally she found something that would do, there was digital camera in a cabinet that looked like it had not been used in a long time.

The fire was getting fiercer in the other room and it would not be long before more things would break down because of the heat. Gina turned

on the camera and saw that it barely had any battery strength left, and would turn itself off a few moments after it was powered up. She had little time to set up for each shot. It was turn on the camera take a picture and then repeat as each time it would shut itself down immediately. In the corner of her eye she kept an eye on the fire as she tried to get as much information as possible. Whatever memory the camera had was soon used and since she could not verify the pictures she had no idea if any of it would be of any use. There was not much else she could do and the flames where approaching the air locked doors where the heat might burst the chemical tanks and engulf the rest of the lab.

Gina took out the last bit of equipment she had been given. She was not sure what it did exactly, but it was guaranteed to wipe the memory of a system thoroughly. It came with a number of adapters so that it could be plugged in virtually anywhere to start its corruption. She was able to find a suitable connection and turned it on. Once the console started flashing figures and letters, she knew that it was working and took that as a cue to leave. There was no guarantee it would finish its process before the fire reached the machine, but between the two of them the data should be erased quite handily.

Gina made it up the stairs and was startled to hear Lake's voice in her ear as she neared the top.

"...are you there? If I don't hear back in 15 more seconds I will start the distraction... 10 seconds..."

"I'm here and out of the lab" she quickly replied. "And I am fine, I just need to make my way back outside to join you."

"You got everything?"

"Yes, and more. I will tell you as soon as we meet."

"Good, I was starting to get worried. I will be here if you have problems."

"I think, I will be fine... Damn, I almost forgot."

"What, what is it?"

"Dr. Kalu. He was in the lab and I knocked him out. The fire is spreading and he won't be able to get away. I have to go get him."

"Gina, wait we can..." was the last thing she heard from Lake as she

scrambled back down the stairs. Whatever breaking into this facility made her, she was not a murderer. Gina was not about to let the man die because of her inaction, no matter how justified it might be.

As she approached the lower level she could feel the heat from the fire. In entering the room she saw that she had been right in thinking the tanks would burst. Whatever systems she had disabled had eliminated all the fail safes and nothing but lack of combustible material would stop the fire. Gina kept low to keep from inhaling toxic fumes and smoke even though the flames had not quite made it past the air lock. There was a burnt smell as well as some smoke and she did not know how soon the whole lower level would be unbreathable.

Dr. Kalu was writhing where she had placed him, clearly conscious, feeling the heat, but being ineffective at freeing himself. There was no doubt that he should remain bound, even if he were grateful for being saved from imminent death she did not want him running away or fingering her for the powerful resources of Phola Vera. The best she could do was put him out of harms way, Gina hoped he would not be too heavy to drag up the stairs.

The doctor proved to be helpful in getting himself out of the situation. She did not say a word, but when she lifted his head to get underneath his shoulders he recognized that someone was coming to his aid and did not resist but tried to use his legs to push. They passed the flashing console in that manner with him giving as much support as he could. Gina was glad for the help especially when it came to negotiating the stairs, she would have unbound his legs if she thought it wise, but fear of being caught in the huge web of the company stopped her. The fire finally broke through with a rush through the airlock and the added heat made him try harder. She wondered if he had any ideas as to why he had not been unbound, but perhaps the emergency of the situation had overcome his thoughts.

Gina made it up the stairs and into the hallway outside the access room to the lower level with the doctor. At that point she let him lie and left to find her way out. She realized she had left another door open, but it was too late to go back. There was sure to be someone coming down the hall at some point and she wanted to be sure she was not there when that happened.

Leaving the wriggling doctor, she moved as quickly as possible down the hall trying once again to stop herself from going too fast. She felt elated at having accomplished so much that was different from her own experience but it was not over yet, she reminded herself and it would not pay to be careless.

“Gina,” Lake's voice came through her ear piece. “Are you there?”

“Yes, this time I am really on my way out.”

“Good, because there seems to be some activity happening at the front of the house. I think someone is planning a visit, you need to leave now.”

“Got it.”

Gina focused on the way ahead and making sure she did not miss a turn. As she was approaching an intersection she saw someone coming from the other side. Quickly she took the first opening on her right so that if they saw anything it would be at most a shadow. She walked quickly and then found an unlocked door that opened to a bedroom.

The room looked clean but unused, and there was no way to tell if it had been recently cleaned to receive a guest. Gina hoped whoever it was coming to visit the house was not someone expected to spend the night or she might have to hide in a closet. She stood near the door and counted slowly to twenty before peeking outside the room. The corridor was clear and there was no sign of activity as she emerged from the room cautiously. She walked down the corridor and came to another intersection and realized that it did not look familiar at all. By avoiding the other person she had gotten herself lost. Gina stopped immediately and did not attempt to find her way, if no one had been alerted to her presence by now it would certainly happen soon and she did not have time to think her way back to the hidden door.

“Lake,” she said. “I need your help.”

“I hear you, what can I do for you?” he said sounding calm.

“I took a wrong turn and now I am not sure of the way out.”

“Let me look at the blueprint. Where are you now?”

Gina described her location and waited for him to tell her which direction to go in.

“OK, I have identified your location. Go down the hall to your right.”

“Got it” she said and began to move. Then she saw some movement ahead and stopped. “I can't go there there is someone coming.”

“Then go back and take your first left.”

Gina did so and glanced behind her to see someone was indeed approaching her from the other direction. “I think they are still following me.”

“I see. Here's what we are going to do, I will give you one instruction, once you arrive where it takes you say 'there' and I will feed you the next one. Understood?”

“Got it” Gina said increasing her speed to almost a jog. Whoever it was had finally caught sight of her but did not seem to be pursuing, yet.

“Go until you reach the second door on your right.”

Gina did so and said: “There.”

“Go in and go straight until you reach an intersection.”

Gina followed his directions and turned to see that a man had begun to pursue her. Clearly he realized she did not belong there. Gina gave up all hope of stealth and started running.

“I'm being followed, I need to get out before they sound a general alarm!”

“Just follow my voice and you will be fine.”

“There” she said and immediately he issued another instruction. Gina kept on running. She realized that she was putting her whole life and the future of millions in his hands. It became more clear than ever what she had known subconsciously for some time, she completely trusted Lake. Whatever failings he had, she knew that he would not harm her, or allow her to be harmed if he could do anything to prevent it. Running through the halls was easy with his voice as a guide because she did not have to think or make any decisions, just follow the directions. It was how partnerships should work, by completely trusting your partner to do his part.

The man behind her was running as well. Gina was not sure if he was calling anyone else in to help since she could only see him in glances. She kept expecting to see someone walk out of a door or emerge from a

hallway to join in the pursuit, but so far that had not happened. She started to recognize where she was, but continued to follow the directions without question. Soon she would be out in the open air.

Gina took a turn and sure enough there was the hallway to the hidden entrance. The sounds of pursuit were close behind and she could not be sure, but it sounded like more than one person was coming after her. There was no time to look back to confirm though, her focus was only on the exit ahead. She reached the door at a run and struggled for a moment to find the opening mechanism. Finally she got it open and dashed outside into the night.

After running a few steps in a crazy pattern she finally took the time to look behind her. Gina could see two men emerging from the door and then there was the sound of sirens, like those of a fire-truck. Had she failed at disabling the alarm? Whatever the case, the two men stopped their pursuit and one went back in while the other one went after her. She did her best to disappear among the trees and was soon on her way to the meeting point with Lake. If he was still talking to her, she did not hear it, the blood pounding in her ears was much louder than anything else.

Lake was exactly where expected with the motor running and the passenger door open. She jumped into the van and closed the door behind her and without saying a word as they drove off. Gina saw someone emerge from the woods behind her but soon they were out of sight. Then she noticed the flashing lights close to where the house was.

“What is going on?” Gina asked.

“I called the fire department” Lake answered as they reached a main street. “There fire alarm system would have never alerted them to the fire, and it provided an additional distraction to help you escape.”

Gina smiled and finally let herself relax. She started to take off some of the gear as they headed into the city. She took off her mask and the ear-piece underneath. This certainly had been an adventure and she had to admit to having enjoyed it as dangerous and frightening it had been. There were still things to take care of, but her part was over. Lake glanced at her and she smiled at him.

“Thank you for leading me out,” she said. “I don't think I would

have made it without your help.”

“I don't doubt you would have made it out somehow” he said. “But I was worried nonetheless.”

Gina appreciated the compliment and the fact that he worried. Since they had began this phase, he had appeared to be totally calm and in control. Knowing that underneath he was just as concerned as she was made her feel better.

They were headed towards PRI where he would be able to do his part of the job. Lake was not exactly driving fast, but she could tell that he was concentrating very hard on all the details of the trip. Gina got out of her seat and into the back of the van to change out of camouflage and secure the items she had taken. Although she had been disinfected in the house, she put all her outer clothing in a plastic bag and sealed it. They would dispose of it later along with any other traces of what they had done. It was not until she had finished disposing of the suit that she really felt like it was over for her. Whatever happened next depended on Lake's skill as a scientist and though she would support him as best she could, there was not much aid she could give.

By the time they arrived Gina was in comfortable clothes sitting next to him in the cabin. Although the dangerous part of their adventure had finished and there was no sign of pursuit, Lake had remained silent during the rest of the drive. Gina sensed that he must be thinking of all the procedures he had to do and was going over in his mind the exact methodology needed. He had explained to her that time was of the essence in the procedure because anything that took too long was sure to alert Phola Vera to what was going on. Certain equipment had to be regularly calibrated and monitored by the government to make sure it was in compliance and not being used for other purposes. There was no way to avoid the inspection especially when you weren't trying to hide anything. While PRI kept a lot of secrets it was a publicly known company that was more dedicated to helping people than making a profit so its network of information was not as secure. Of course with something as major as this, there would be whispers that could not be silenced. Lake had told her that he was sure there was not much left to do once he had the virus though there

was always the chance of something unexpected.

Once at PRI they parked the van in the upper level of the garage to ensure that it could not be easily seen. The halls were empty when they entered the building and Gina did not see any activity in any of the rooms they passed. They walked without saying a word towards the Lake's personal lab. Upon entering it Gina was reminded of the one that she had just set on fire and also felt she was entering a whole different world from the one in which she belonged. This was where Lake worked long hours, more of a home to him than his own house. Like his house, it was neat and austere with no pictures or any kind of decoration, which made her wonder how could someone with such a varied experience have nothing to show for it in either his work place or home.

Lake put on some gloves and took the sealed container from Gina. Her sense of relief was such that she wanted to kiss and hug him, but she could sense that his mind was totally focused on the task ahead. Gina let him be, what he was doing was important and it would be best not to distract him, or take away from his time. Still it bothered her that he did not show more emotion. Lake was polite to her, but not exactly warm. Was it because he was afraid she would no longer need him once this was over? Whatever the cause, she found herself alone in the outer room as he put on a safety suit and worked with the sample of the virus they had acquired.

The excitement was over and she started to feel tired and impatient. Lake had offered to take her home as soon as they retrieved the virus, but she had refused. Now she was not sure if it had been a good decision. As she sat on a couch relaxing she suddenly remembered the digital camera and headed back to the van to get it. In her hurry to leave she had forgotten to even mention it to Lake. Maybe she could find some way to recharge the batteries while she waited for him to be done.

Gina had no problem finding the van and she propped the door open so that she could get back in the building. The camera was where she left it and nothing had been touched but once again the feeling of being watched came over her. Although she could not see or hear anything unusual, she dashed back into the building and secured the door behind her. She ran through the building certain that someone was soon to follow. She had to

warn Lake.

She made it to the lab door out of breath and went in without stopping. Lake looked like he was just finishing something at as he was typing several entries into the computer. Gina did not immediately see a way to communicate from the outer chamber to the inside so she simply banged on the glass trying to get his attention. Lake did not look up from what he was doing, so she banged on the window harder while looking around for the a speaker or microphone of some kind.

Finally as he backed away from the computer and was moving back to the sample he saw her. Lake immediately stopped what he was doing, pressed something on his suit and soon she heard his voice through a speaker in the room.

“Gina, is something wrong?”

Gina tried to mouth words to him, but he evidently could not make out what she was saying.

“Push the button next to the window. It will allow me to hear you.”

Gina saw the button and pressed it. “I think there is someone coming.”

“Are you sure?” Lake asked.

“Yes, I forgot something in the van and went to get it. I had a strong feeling of being watched. I made sure the door was closed behind me and ran here as fast as I could.”

“I guess I better hurry then. This lab, as just about every lab in this building has redundant power supplies. So we aren't in danger of losing power. I need to activate the security system though, and I can't do it from here. You will have to do it while I work. It probably will not stop anyone determined, but it will give me time to finish and send out the results.”

“I can do that. What do I need to do?”

“There is a panic button on every level of the building. It is supposed to be used when there is an unexpected breach of a lab, and it will seal off this portion of the building. The one on this floor is a little past the entrance to this lab. It should be easy to recognize, be sure you hit it instead of the fire alarm.”

“Got it, I'll be right back.”

Gina dashed out of the room quickly, found the button and pressed it. She saw that a door was opening down the hall, but whoever it was would not be able to come through as metal doors dropped from the ceiling sealing the area off and alarms sounded throughout the building. They were now trapped in this section of the building without any easy way to get out but anyone outside the safety curtains would have trouble getting in.

When she returned to the lab Lake was once again at the computer working on something quickly and furiously. No sirens were going off in both sections of the lab but red lights flashed. There was also something odd, but she could not exactly figure it out. Then it struck her, Lake was not wearing his mask any more. Had he found a solution at last?

"Lake," she said. "You aren't wearing a mask, have you found a cure?"

"I hope so," he said barely looking up. "I forgot to turn off the silent alarm in here when you pushed the button. The sirens startled me and I'm afraid I infected myself with the virus."

"What?" Gina exclaimed shocked. "You are just joking, right?"

"No, I am not. I am absolutely sure I am infected. Sometimes all precautions you take are not enough. But I think I am very close to finding a cure and I need to keep transmitting before someone cuts off access."

Gina did not know what to say. She could only watch as he did whatever calculations or designs needed to make an effective vaccine. The silence of the room made her aware of his breathing through the speakers. It sounded calm, but his manner on the other side of the glass showed great anxiety. Gina just stood silently not knowing what to do or say. Nothing seemed adequate and it would all serve to distract what was now a race for his life.

"You know" he said breaking the silence. "Even if I find a cure it might be too late for me. You will have to make sure what I learn is shared with the world."

"Don't say that" she said. "You will find a way. You have to."

The lights flickered momentarily and the sounds of the sirens lowered in volume. Gina knew that meant someone had cut the main power to the building and now everything was running off of generators. How

soon it would be until they were able to disable the lock down she did not know, and did not dare ask Lake.

Gina felt truly helpless, a feeling she was not used to. She had spent her life making decisions about her future, her family and friends. Her sense of capability had even increased with her success at the raid earlier. Now she could not do anything to help Lake, nor anything to hinder the progress of those who wanted to do them harm and it scared her and made her uncomfortable. Surely there was something she could do. Nothing came to mind as she watched Lake working on a cure. Gina would not allow her mind to even think of the possibility of him falling sick and dying. She had just met him and was only beginning to find out how wonderful he was and how much she loved him. It could not be that he would be gone so soon after she had discovered him. She had to have faith that he was smart enough to do what was needed.

To her surprise she found that she was crying. Gina checked the flow of her tears and hoped they had been inaudible, she could not afford distract Lake any more. Knowing that she could not control herself much longer, she pushed the communication button off and let her emotions pour out. It was not fair, she thought to herself as she cried. She wished she had never met him, had never worked for Prometheus, and did not like coffee. Gina knew she was being irrational, but all her sorrow poured out. She really would not have traded anything that had happened to her in the last few weeks for anything else in the world. Her life had been ordinary and meeting him had transformed it and broadened her horizons.

Lake must have noticed there was no sound coming from the other room because he looked up from what he was doing and turned towards her. A look of concentration was quickly replaced by a sad smile.

“I am sorry to have bothered you” he said. “I should not have let you stay with me, but I love you. You are a brave, intelligent woman Gina, and I am sorry to have dragged you into this. Please don't cry about me, I think I have found a cure and hope remains.”

Gina stifled her tears and pushed the communication button activating the microphones on her side once again. She was already thinking how foolish it had been to overreact when there was still a chance

that everything would be fine.

“I love you too” was the first thing she said. “Are you sure about the cure?”

“Yes, it will effectively combat the virus and any other variations of similar viruses out there. Will it work on me? That, I am not certain about, but there is no reason to despair. I have inoculated myself soon after infection so there is a good chance I will be fine.”

“What about the power outage? Won't that affect your transmission of information?”

“It shouldn't as we just had a new wireless system installed. It is not used everywhere, but I am transmitting off site. So unless they blocked that as well, the data for the cure is out there.”

Suddenly they heard a whirring sound and what sounded like scrapping. Lake reacted to it immediately.

“Something is happening out there, what do you think that sound is?” he asked.

“I am not sure but it sounds like metal being cut.”

“Someone is trying to get through the safety curtain. Obviously they do not have the lock down codes. We need to hide you. Put on a suit and get in here.”

Gina quickly complied. Once again she donned a protective suit and stepped through a chemical shower to get to a lab. Completely sterile she hugged Lake tightly as soon as she stepped out of the airlock. He embraced her warmly as well but all too soon broke it off. There was no time to waste.

“I will be safe enough” he told her. “Because of my position and my public visibility, even after this is over there are some advantages to notoriety. You need to hide so they cannot know that you were the piece I needed to finish the puzzle. Take this air tank and hide in there.”

Lake ushered her to another subdivision of the lab that could not be seen from the outside. He adjusted her communication settings of the suit so that she could hear what was being said in the rooms but would not transmit. Then he led her into a large cabinet that was used to store various containers.

“See you soon,” he said and closed the door. It was almost totally dark inside and there was no opening big enough for her to see. Gina tried to focus on keeping her breathing calm and even. She was not normally claustrophobic, but being in this confined space while Lake was out there alone made her uncomfortable. There was no way to know exactly what was happening outside except for what she could hear through her helmet.

Focusing on the sounds outside she could still hear the sound of metal being drilled. At once she understood why Lake could not pinpoint what the sound was as it did not come through as clearly through the headphones in her suit as it would to the human ear. The sound continued for a short while and then there was the sound of a crash or explosion. Gina tried to listen to see if she could detect anything that Lake was preparing or doing, but it was either too faint, or he was not moving. There was a long silence after the crash during which she wondered what was taking them so long to make a move. At last she heard the sound of what she guessed was the door opening, but she had trouble telling how many people, if any had entered the room though she was sure it had to be more than one.

“What are you doing here?” she heard Lake ask. “Can't you see this is a locked down biological facility? You are putting the whole city at risk.” There was no answer from the other side and all Gina could detect was the sound of a little movement. Whoever it was ignoring him. “Whatever you are planning,” Lake said. “It will not work, we have very effective ways of destroying any biological materials you might be planning to steal.” Still there was no answer but a regular beeping sound came through her helmet. She thought it might be a battery indicator of some kind, but then the sound quickened and she heard a loud bang followed by glass shattering. They had breached the lab. Gina listened intently for any sign that Lake was hurt, but her ears rang from the sound of the explosion and she had trouble hearing anything.

When her hearing finally returned she could hear the sound of glass crunching as well as another more indistinct sound. It sounded like fire, something in the lab had caught on fire. Soon it was followed by the sound of water falling and what she could only guess was because an alarm had been set off. None of the noises gave her a clue to what was happening to

Lake, or if he was even conscious, once again other sounds interfered with her hearing and she was at a loss to know what occurred in the other room. All she could do was sit and wait in the dark until something gave her a clue as to what to do. She knew that anything she did could put Lake in greater danger. Though they might have had totally forgotten who she was after not finding anything in her background, if they knew he was hiding someone his pretense at not knowing who they were or what they were about would disappear.

Gina waited barely breathing for what was to come next. She could not distinguish any sounds other than the sirens and it seemed like there was no more movement coming from the lab or the adjoining room. Perhaps it was safe to come out and see what there was to be seen? She decided to count slowly to twenty before making a move. As she was reaching fifteen, taking a deep breath every time, she did hear something. The sound was faint with all the other noise going on but it sounded like footsteps. Someone trying to be quiet as they walked? The sound, whatever it had been, faded or stopped, Gina was not sure which. Maybe someone had come back for her? She decided to be prepared to fight, run, or both depending on the opportunity that presented itself.

Almost without warning the cabinet doors began to open and Gina sprung forward though she really could not see. The light outside felt bright in her eyes and it blinded her to what was outside. She did manage to knock someone down though. She heard a grunt and a body landing on the floor as her eyes adjusted. Quickly she looked around to see who else was there and saw what a mess the lab was. The main work area was burnt and there was water standing in anything that could contain it. There were shards of glass strewn about from the view window as well as from some other equipment. There was no one to be seen though, so whoever had caused the damage had left. That gave her pause enough to actually look at the figure she had knocked over. It was Lake and he was not looking well.

“You are quite fierce when cornered,” he said weakly. “I should have warned you it was me. It is quite safe to come out now, police, hazmat crews and firemen are all here.”

“I'm sorry Lake” she said bending over him. “I did not know what to

expect and I could not see because of the lights.”

“It's fine, don't worry about it. I would forgive you anything anyway. But would you mind helping me up, I am feeling quite dizzy and the room is spinning.”

“I didn't...” Gina began.

“No, I was feeling that way before I came to find you.”

“You are feeling sick” Gina exclaimed and it fell into place. Lake was infected by the virus and it was working on him quickly. The symptoms were those she had experienced herself but to a stronger degree. He had assured her that he would be fine, but the road ahead would be difficult for him, and for her too. No matter what Lake said, or how sick he became she would never leave him. And maybe by the end he would realize that Gina truly loved him. Not because of a need, or sense of vulnerability, but because of who he was. Just as she knew he saw her more than just a solution to his years of research. It was her turn to take care of him and his needs. Gina knew she wanted to, for as long as his illness lasted and beyond.