

There are those in my audience whose precepts come into conflict with the events described here. This foreword is for those people, like the young man I overheard at the old drive-in theatre skeptically proclaiming that films are out of touch with reality, how even documentaries exaggerate a storyline featuring a brave heroine who always succeeds by a hair's breadth you never doubted, how good always triumphs over evil, how strange coincidences always stack up. He thinks all these stories are lies.

That young man has it backwards. The tellers are not falsifying information. Rather, they are selecting to share from a large set of truths only those of most interest to the reader, and that means excitement, action, deep passions, and yes, an appropriate victory. Never has any author lied to you; all his marketing was done at the initial stage where he chose the seed which blossomed into his work. It is a selection bias of the highest sort. And what is the probability, out of all the genomes you could have played host to, you were born as you? I think the answer is **1.0**.

The story of Carolyn Solon is only interesting because her experiment was a failure. Without blemish, if nothing had gone wrong, it is a different story I would choose to tell.

“Man cannot remake himself without suffering, for he is both the marble and the sculptor.” –Alexis Carrel

# SOLON

By Joseph Collard.  
Art still to come  
Draft edition 9/20/15

This is a finished draft of “Solon”.

Solon was originally planned to be a hybrid graphic novel, with comic style art aside the prose. For various reasons, this didn't work out.

I've converted the scripts for these illustrations into prose, so I apologize for the lack of detail in some of those places. They were intended to be conveyed efficiently by artwork.

One reason I decided to release this work as a free ebook is to build an audience for my future projects. If you're interested in staying in touch, visit [solonexperiment.com](http://solonexperiment.com) and add yourself to the newsletter list, or simply check back periodically for updates.

Enjoy.

*"...as Nikola Tesla wrote in 1900, claiming discovery of a new fundamental axiom from which he could theorize a true perpetual motion machine:*

*A departure from known methods – possibility of a "self-acting" engine or machine, inanimate, yet capable, like a living being, of deriving energy from the medium – the ideal way of obtaining motive power.*

*No working model was ever engineered, of course, but..."*

*"...sed nostros montis, quorum iuga celsa putantur,  
per bis sex ulnas imminet ille locus.  
hic Solis nemus est et consitus arbore multa  
lucus perpetuae frondis honore uirens.  
cum Phaethonteis flagrasset ab ignibus axis,  
ille locus flammis inuiolatus erat;  
et cum diluuium mersisset fluctibus orbem  
Deucalioneas exsuperauit aquas.  
non huc exsanguis Morbi, non aegra Senectus  
nec Mors crudelis nec Metus asper adest,  
nec Scelus infandum nec opum uesana Cupido  
aut Sitis aut ardens caedis amore Furor;  
Luctus acerbus abest et Egestas obsita pannis  
et Curae insomnes et uiolenta Fames..."*

--Lactantius, *The Phoenix*, lines 7-20

[Full text link \("But through twice...violent hunger"\)](#).

*It was resurrected by man...*

Carolyn Solon stood among a whirlwind of burnt pages, their tattered forms seeming to treat her as an intensifying focal point for the rare mild breeze which cut the heat of Cairo. She

stooped to pick up a leather bound old book, almost entire. She wished to inhale the scent of its pages, for the book was well over two hundred years old and had been well-preserved up to this point. Now, however, her nostrils only picked up the pervasive dark scent of the carbon smoke on the wind. Black clouds still rolled off the extinguished lumber and drifted lazily in the stirring air.

Carolyn snatched a few pages from the turmoil around her and glanced at them hastily. One was a fragment of a poem in Latin, and the other seemed to be the introduction to a physics textbook. She shoved them both into the leather volume anyway. She didn't know why she felt drawn to Egypt; it was a slim chance in a slow oppressive scorch, a glimmer of a revelation that might be nothing more than a mirage. But here was data to be collected, in the scattered remnants of a rich library burned by a different sort of heat. It was an arson, of course – times in Egypt were turbulent. Perhaps it had even been an accidental part of riots where vicious fiery cocktails flung their flame through the sky.

Volunteers had gathered to clean things up, hoping to recover the singed remains of the Institute's famed historical documents. Amongst the smoking pages was a detailed history of Egypt from the point of view of Bonaparte's best scholars. It connected many fields across the years and across the floodplains of the Nile: old arts, pioneer natural philosophy, linguistics, geography, mythological literature. It connected worlds, from the ancient Egyptian city sulking and sweating underneath the modern district of Ain Shams, the Eye of the Sun, to Alexandria, the chief port and cultural center of the wise Greeks.

Yet Carolyn was a microbiologist. She didn't volunteer in order to save Egypt's cultural history; she lived in New Mexico. Her only concession to the charcoal in the air was a dense lock of dark hair spread around her neck and across the lower part of her face as a filter. In fact, she rather liked the black dust of destruction. It smelled nice, like balsams and resins and campfire. She didn't wear her labcoat like the helpful Egyptian citizenry did; she wore loose breezy clothing in light grays so she wouldn't have to worry about the marring of charcoal.

Smoke still rose in places. Embers glowed. "*Hic Solis nemus est et,*" she muttered, quoting a shred of a poem she had recently scavenged. "Here, then, is the Grove of the Sun." A sarcastic comment, given the lack of enlightenment she expected to find.

Still, many of the documents she found scattered about were interesting, with that extra cultural flair of Egypt enhancing otherwise mundane literature easily available from her laptop or an American library. Photographs of runed obelisks flanked sheaves of chemical equations in an enriched mishmash. Carolyn had visited many great centers of learning recently, touring much of the world on the dime of her employer, conducting researches - but this burned-out hulk was secretly her favorite. She wished she could have the run of the place instead of furtively shoving crisped papers into the broad, flat pockets of her charcoal grey pants.

This was a good quest, but the rays of the unfiltered African sun had been making her irritably moody, queasy in the stomach, and a bit numb in the mind. Unusual, for Carolyn, and it was high time she gave up. Her illicit haul on virology and *in silico* genomic calculation was small but new to her collection. She stalked the distance back to her decrepit hostel, dodging the lunatic shouting about the resurrection foretold to him in a rotting pigeon claw, avoiding the sane demonstrators and their haunted looks, calmly permitting the pickpocket to make off with the decoy wallet she kept in her back pocket. Stone monuments to a time gone by, obelisks, tributes pointed skyward to the gods of the omnipresent Saharan sun, swept past Carolyn's reference frame. The scholar mumbled another passage: "*Protinus exsculpunt sacrato in marmore formam* – They carve her image on consecrated marble." Carolyn felt drawn to the phrasing of the ancient poet. It echoed in her mind like a chant.

She gained the gateway of a lodging optimized for compulsive tourists. Ain Shams was too famous to pass up; the only way to be any more steeped in the feel of ancient Egypt would be to camp in the shadow of the great pyramids instead of the ruins of Re-Atum's age-old temple.

An email on her laptop, connected to the networks of the world by expensive satellite service, asked confusedly why she had flown to do research at a destroyed college instead of an intact one. She set her boss straight, trying not to be nasty to the exec.

"A bit off on the order of events there, Aaron. I actually booked my flight to the Institut d'Égypte before the rioters burned it down, hoping its interesting history might have promoted some good insights into the problem at hand. The place is, or rather 'was', well networked to several hospitals, to the Desert Research Center, and to Helwan University, which I plan to visit next. The Institut was founded by Napoleon Bonaparte. Isn't he the one you always quote? I have essentially finished here (found some hints and a very useful compound formulation) and have already booked the next leg of my trip, the last before returning to NM. Will talk to you then for a more thorough report."

An answer came almost immediately. Aaron must have been sitting at his desktop, and Carolyn was too jetlagged to calculate the time difference. "Carolyn! You're always so formal, Miss Solon. Email updates are fine. The more I hear from you, the better!"

Aaron Shombs

Vice President, PlasmiCorp, NM HQ"

Miss Solon's mood had improved. The tension she'd been feeling had diminished slightly at a touch of moving air from her tabletop fan, even though Aaron never appreciated her abstract reasoning skills on their own merit. Aaron was a bigshot with no scientific background, but Carolyn had to admit a grudging admiration for his skill at corporate ladder climbing.

“Even if that is a completely useless skill,” she murmured, a bit sarcastically. Somehow, she couldn’t bring herself to hate him.

The next email out was to someone more uplifting, the young Henderson girl whose job was to take care of Carolyn’s hamster on the frequent business trips. Carolyn missed the little guy a lot – he was worth fighting jet lag for. Cairo was nine hours ahead of Pacific Time. If Carolyn stayed up a bit past midnight, maybe Henderson would be done with classes, check her email, and send an update. As Carolyn got older, those midnight hours got harder and harder to reach, where once she would literally have reveled in them.

The jet lag didn’t help. Time was the worst of all units of measure on a headache. It trundled forward automatically, constantly, while another dimension of time stretched spatially about the globe, changing only in discrete increments. Carolyn remembered one bedridden week with pneumonia as a child, memorizing all the time zones down to the last detail. Very, very few things took Carolyn a full week to memorize.

Carolyn stayed up long enough to receive her update on her pet, then yawned and dropped unceremoniously onto the bed. In the morning, she paid a short visit to the Helwan University in southern Cairo. Here, she had been able to plan well ahead and all the materials she had requested were available for her camera, notepad, and electronic translator. She bundled everything into black leather notebooks and hurried to the airport, anxious to get to her next stop at the Institut Roussy in France and eventually, finally, home.

Through security, layovers, and catnaps ten thousand feet above the ground, her mind flashed back to the many places and materials she’d seen on this trip. Her state was something more accessible than the dream-state process of cataloguing memories, but there were many parallels. It was an exquisite procedure, a work of art sculpted subconsciously. The Solon mind was adept at calculating conclusions from layers of data piled one on top of another like transparencies, each providing just a piece of a many-dimensional puzzle. When she shone the backlight of her consciousness through each stage in her journey, she could make out something of a finished picture.

Show a visualization of the thought process, with symbols of Ancient Egypt echoing the science of her expertise. Echo the powers she will receive later.

She remembered microscope slides from the AIDS Research Center in New York, lectures on viral oncology in London, algorithms marching across smooth-scented and charred paper in Cairo, early handwritten notes on evolutionary biology at Oxford, firm handshakes from the men responsible for returning obscure nucleotide arrangements to the realm of existence. All this for perhaps a three month lead on bringing the latest medicines into production before the competition. She was ready to get back to the lab and begin in earnest. Her subconscious mental machinations transitioned into an uncomfortable sleep.

The big plane touched down turbulently, a dusty taxi drove her home, streetlamps lit her way up the porch steps. The exhausted Dr. Solon dropped her heavy laptop bag on the porch and punched in the code to her apartment building, her short figure and the hulk of the building silhouetted darkly against the misty orange-tinted night. The bag she prodded inside with her foot. And maybe something watched her that night, at this first stage of relief from her labor, watched her knowing or hoping that time had once more brought just the right blend of aromatic events together again.

The headache was gone. New Mexico life was hot too, but Carolyn found her spirits oddly restored since boarding the plane from Cairo. She didn't feel prodded and pressured, or sweaty and anxious with curiosity about the microscopic world of life, about how the mathematical rigor of the Greeks beautifully mirrored today's core software development. She still sweated when she made the walk to work, but somehow it was a cleaner feeling.

Of course, at work there was Aaron to deal with. Though Carolyn got to work early, during the cool and sweet-scented dawn, she could see a light burning in the executive's office by the time she reached the enormous plastic sign announcing "PlasmiCorp HQ" in red letters. She slid her security badge through the reader and tripped up the stairs to her office, which connected to a lab reserved for her personal use. Sitting at her monitor, Carolyn noticed the cleaning staff had been in. The thin layer of dust was gone, replaced by a seam of soap residue. The metal stand still delivered a sharp static electric shock when she sat down at it. Carolyn had no family for family photos; the desk was decorated by obscure biology jokes and the background image on the computer was the hamster doing something cute.

Just as she began typing up her formal justification of expenditures on the luxuriously fast machine, she heard light footsteps on the carpeted floor outside the office. Aaron knocked, and she invited him in without getting up.

"Keep doing your thing, Carolyn. But could I get a quick verbal rundown of your progress? Just to get a feel of what you were up to...and of course, the chances of success in our upcoming venture."

Carolyn pulled a wheeled office chair closer to her with her foot, implicitly agreeing for him to be her audience. He took the seat backwards, straddling the chair. Carolyn noticed that he moved a bit oddly, keeping his back away from her, one arm trailing just a bit behind him, crooked toward his spine. It gave Carolyn the impression of a cripple, struggling to overcome or hide a deformity. At least the man had a talent for detecting the bubble of personal space that each person sketched out a little differently.

Carolyn got down to business, starting with a simple itinerary of time and place, ticking the days off on her fingers. "Universities in California and New York, then across the pond to England, France, Greece, Rome, and a dip south to Helwan in Egypt, not necessarily in that order. Then I also visited libraries in DC, Japan, and of course the razed one in Cairo." She gave the slightest lift of her thin eyebrows at this, teasing Aaron about his earlier misunderstanding, but her boss merely grinned. Maybe she didn't give him enough credit for his social skills, being able to tolerate her acerbity. "Altogether, I spent three weeks on the road, including fifteen days out of the country."

“And a lonely time it was without you. I missed you so much that I grabbed a gift for your return. Welcome back, Carolyn.” He uncurled his arm, and Carolyn saw he’d been hiding a small tastefully gift-wrapped package. The idea of the gesture, the personal courtesy of it, took Carolyn aback. She felt guilty about comparing him to a cripple. Carefully, she accepted the parcel. It had orange tissue paper protruding from the opening like flame, obscuring whatever was inside. Somehow, Carolyn didn’t think every employee got such treatment. She decided to feel honored.

“Want me to pause my report and open it now?” she asked.

“By all means. I’m on top of this. California, New York, England, France, Greece, Rome, Egypt, DC, Japan. All libraries standing when you left for them.” He grinned again. “Open it up, then we can get right back to the summary.” He shifted the chair just a bit closer. Carolyn glanced quickly at his smooth hands, now clasped around the spine of the chair, then up at his expectant face. She nodded and teased away the strands of fiery gift wrap from the hard object that nestled inside. Her thin fingers pulled out a polished strand of strung clay beads, culminating in three jewelry clasps. The first contained four larger versions of the reddish clay beads, clustered together like bubbles after a gentle collision in the air. From the next clasp swayed a single tiny bead on a fine silver chain. The third clasp was empty, missing its jewels. Yet aesthetic balance was maintained, a pattern she thought any viewer’s subconscious would appreciate automatically. A translated beauty.

She smiled gratefully at Aaron, appreciative enough not to point out that the thing was broken. Held up against her throat, she checked out her image in the reflection off the computer screen.

Carolyn Solon’s gaze narrowed, back to the necklace. The hands holding it dropped sharply back to her lap, the necklace silhouetted against gray slacks.

A riddle.

Aaron could see her head nodding briefly as she counted the beads on each clasp, considered the colors, examined the empty clasp for signs of stress or a breakage. Then her head snapped up again. “Radioactive decay emissions. A helium nucleus, a single electron...and there’s no particle in gamma radiation. Alpha particle, beta ray, gamma ray. Did I get it?”

He nodded, pleased. It was unusual for Aaron to actually make progress in brightening her day. Maybe if he’d provide more challenging conversational fare, like this riddle, rather than his usual flat, uninteresting speeches. “Very good,” he said, “but I’m not at all surprised you worked it out.”

She tucked the necklace away where people wouldn't see it and ask what it was supposed to be. "I'm not a physicist. My only knowledge of physics comes from what we were taught in high school." Aaron, who had barely managed to get through high school with C's and D's, chuckled.

"Yes. To be sure. Your knowledge isn't just a *part* of what we learned in Ms. Federspiel's class. It's a solid bet you remember *all* the physics you were taught in high school." Carolyn smiled. She'd been two years younger than him and the rest of the students, but what he said was nearly true.

"All the concepts. None of the phrasings," she responded. "And all the biased history lessons in elementary school, and all the times tables too."

"Well, my memory's improved since those high school days. Not that anyone'd know it, the way you scoff at my business degree." This time Carolyn didn't smile. "California, New York, England, France, Greece, Rome, Egypt, DC, Japan."

Carolyn glanced longingly at the keyboard where she'd been working. She liked being able to view her statements as they were forming. "Yup, you got it. And I learned a lot at each place. I have solid lines drawn from the resurrection of viruses out of the library of human genomes all the way to osteoporosis cures via the evolution of the human placenta. I'm quite confident this sequence will help us mimic stem cells, and it's a short leap from there to mimicking regeneration. I have connections between Greek natural philosophy and the *in silico* techniques we use today to lay out prehistoric recipes for life, in laboratories."

"I've even got a link between an ancient Egyptian mathematician, Hero, and the way imaginary numbers relate to probability functions, shifting –"

The executive cut her short. "Yes, I should have gotten you a Sherlock Holmes novel instead of a necklace. This is starting to sound like one of your reports. I just wanted to get you a stylish gift with a geeky nod to the medicine industry. The riddle of it all is a bonus. Tell me, when can we begin production on our next Big Thing in medicine?"

She stared at him, suddenly aghast. "Production? Wouldn't you like to ask when we can begin the development process? Or at least the *testing* process?" Oh yes. That was exactly why she resented his superior position in the company. *Because he didn't have a godforsaken clue.*

He swiveled the chair to drum on the desk with his fingers. "Look at the big picture, Carolyn." Her specialty, actually. "PlasmiCorp needs to jumpstart something, and soon. We have competitors, stockholders, and other people to please. Or, if that doesn't suit you, we have patients hoping for a second chance. People are dying. What can you offer them?"

"Pressure's on, huh? People are always dying. They'll always be dying. I'm doing what I can –"

“I know you are, Carolyn. I just want to hear a bottom line here. Can you answer my question?”

It was always the wrong question. Ignorant people with no contextual anchor were always digging away at questions that would never provoke a response with any bearing on reality. Aaron was a prime example of ignorance founded not merely on omitted facts, but on a missing awareness of the critical reasoning process. Garbage in, garbage out.

Aaron knew his teams planned to work on a suite of treatments for various bone diseases: osteoporosis, Stone Man Syndrome, osteogenesis imperfecta, neurofibromatosis, and so forth. A host of crippling diseases, to be sure. The basic idea was to mirror the process by which bone layers were formed from osteoid collagens, mineralizing into the bone matrix – a layer-by-layer process that started at birth and never truly ended. Since Aaron grasped this “basic idea,” he concluded that he was qualified to judge how long such a creation should take.

“That’s fine, Aaron. I have a great lead. It’s not going to produce results overnight. The bottom line is that it should give us a three month lead on any competitors who happen to be trying the same thing. That’s what I can buy you.” A three week trip, a three month head start. Aaron nodded approval and motioned for her to go on.

“My basic idea is a virus that can actually affect DNA with its own message. Usually it’s the other way around, DNA sending out a blueprint to be constructed by the cell. This certain class of viruses - retroviruses - is like an empty-skulled dropout chief of staff who builds a crappy building and makes a blueprint afterward to match his crappy result. With me so far?” Again the nod.

“Well, it turns out such viruses line the syncytium, which is like the baby human version of an eggshell. Retroviruses coat that ‘eggshell’ in basically every mammalian species. Viruses are good at docking onto other cells. Well, bone formation is similar. Soft things swelling up, taking on a shape, and hardening, layer by layer, dipping repeatedly into calcium ions like a candlemaker, nursed by marrow and fatty acids and protected inside our bodies. Joined together, rearranged through resorption.”

“Usually we use a bacterium to deliver the plasmid with our new instructions,” Carolyn began. She was watching Aaron’s face for cues that he understood. So far so good. Apparently, as an employee of Plasmicorp, he at least knew what a plasmid was: a short circle of DNA instructions.

“For this project, I thought we’d look to the retroviruses for inspiration. These past weeks of research are encouraging. Within the past fifteen years, two groups even brought back endogenous retroviruses from extinction, using the DNA record in everyone.”

“Two groups at once?” Aaron asked. He seemed to understand what she was saying, but had decided to clutch at that one statement, of all things.

“Yeah, well, lots of great inventions or breakthroughs follow the path of multiple discovery. Obvious but important things, like the discovery of platinum. Complex, insightful, or subtle things like relativity, bacteriophages, reverse transcriptase, and the Polio vaccine. It happens more often than you might think.”

Aaron wondered why someone who wore such drab colors knew anything about platinum, but what he said was, “So these multiple discoveries aren’t really competition?”

“Nah,” she answered. “One was for HIV research and the other was public sector. One team, led by a Thierry Heidman, called theirs the “Phoenix Virus” simply because it’s been brought back from the dead. It’s barely infectious. I didn’t hear a word of anyone barreling toward adamantine skeletons.”

“Great,” he said. “Sounds like you did a good job.” He stuck out a hand, and Carolyn found she was sweating as she shook it. As if she needed his approval.

Typing up her report at long last, Carolyn was struck by a mental impact with all the force of a rolling heat wave. With all her leads, her data, and brilliant insight seated deep within her comfort zone, was she herself asking the right questions? Profit was a poor dispersal agent for the organizing particles within her mind. Quality of life was better. But more than anything, the desire to know, to understand, and to remember motivated Carolyn’s powerful brain. She could ask herself how her weeks of research could result in a pill, for sales. Carolyn’s obligations to her employer would be met. Lives would be saved.

But sometimes, the means was *easy* and it was the choice of goal itself which determined success. The right minds could make a profit from anything new. But Carolyn’s self-actualization only ever occurred at the level of *earth-shattering*.

“What could this really be for?” Carolyn asked herself. “Viruses don’t write themselves back to life.” It was a lie, and she knew it: microbial life was subject to the same pressures of evolution that gave independent motive to human beings. The strongest survived, and some microbes could survive pretty much anything. No need for a Higher Power to push brilliant researchers into recalibrating old codes. Old life would practically be fighting for rebirth of its own accord.

Maybe something watched as Carolyn let her fingers type the report. The something wouldn’t need to take any action as her mind separated from the fingers and began to imagine solutions before the problem had been defined. Burning golden implications spiraled upward, connecting in a holocaust of understanding, influencing each other with iridescent webs of

dripping silver, representing artistically the trials of the scientist. The Solon mind did all that as a matter of course, with no help from any Watcher.

Carolyn hit “Print to attachment” and walked to her car. It was getting late, and New Mexico’s chilly night was settling in. Driving home through the quiet desert world, her mind still steamed away, boiling data for kinetic power. Just as the agave and saguaro hid small life of every kind under a still exterior, her forehead never so much as creased as she mused. Just as the smooth asphalt road can hypnotize any driver, Carolyn found this mental state relaxing; a relaxation only momentarily disrupted as she braked hard to avoid hitting a large roadrunner suddenly illumined in her headlights. Shaking off the brief burst of adrenaline, she stepped inside her house.

Some reasoning is best conducted at home, among one’s creature comforts and familiar surroundings, and far away from those who just cannot seem to see the connections. Encircled by the icons of her life, relaxing in a comfortable chair with her favorite drink, Carolyn felt closer to that state which would allow her to see beyond the motive of profit.

Then she turned on her laptop and found an email from her boss.

“Carolyn,” it began. “I’m trying to prepare a summary for Richard. The higher-ups want to know, in a sentence or two, a sort of press-release-style overview of how good this thing is and how it works. It’s mostly going to cure bone diseases, right? Get back to me when you get this. If you look up anything while preparing that summary, you’re thinking too hard.

Yours,  
--Aaron”

“There’s no escape,” Carolyn sighed.

Three panels. In the first, Carolyn has typed a longer explanation. Then she hits backspace, and we are left with the revised spiel.

“Our biotechnology will probably be mimicking what is called an ‘endogenous retrovirus’, or ‘ERV.’ The important thing about these is that they were instrumental in the development of the mammalian placenta, which provided armor at a critical life stage for further developments like advanced brain structure. There’s this link between the ERV and the healing properties of stem cells that we can capitalize on. These things are usually benign at this point in their evolutionary history and only a few hundred angstroms in size. The bone treatment I envision will virally trick certain bone marrow cells into developing a placenta-like membrane, which eventually hardens into strong, healthy bone.

The great thing about this technique is that it will also provide headway on related diseases, not just weak bones. We will be able to fix calcified tissues, missing tissues, or even tumors.

--Dr. Carolyn Solon"

After a little thought, she deleted all but the last three sentences as not truly vital. Execs would miss the point no matter what material they were given. To make it any more concise, she'd have to do more research.

As she worked on her osteoid retrovirus research in the coming months, she found herself coming back again and again to the question of why multiple paleovirologists were suddenly interested in the same string of code. "There's smoke. But is there fire?" she asked her reflection in the shiny metal wheeled table.

It wasn't just that Aaron had noticed, of course; he always picked strange things to wonder about, and Carolyn didn't necessarily value his opinion on matters of science. Nor should it have been suspicious. There were plenty of reasons for both to choose the same virus. The miracle-workers, in choosing a virus to resurrect, located a variety that appeared little infectious, common to humans, related to other researches, and easy for a computer program to identify.

This last was the true miracle; most of the human genome was made of 'pseudogenes' that coded for little to nothing, but meticulously kept the history of life's invasion by smaller life. This junk DNA, composed of shattered viral invaders embedded in the blueprints of life like meteorites, complicated the issue with a plethora of transcription errors. Only an advanced computer simulation to find the consensus blueprint could enable researchers to bring back a dead species. It worked, however, and paleovirology became a respected field, though not without its contentions of "It's not safe!" and "Man should not play gods!"

Carolyn liked it, though. She'd purchased a high-quality transcription of the electron-microscope's work while she was in France, and this she took out now. The drawing really spoke to something within her. The thing was the ancestor of an entire family of viruses, a patriarch of its kind. A progenitor. Its membrane was clearly evident. Often it held spikes; sometimes it was smooth. The researchers had proven it infectious, though not at a particularly fast rate.

She decided to get the scan enlarged and hang it on her wall. The microbiologist fed her hamster, cooing his name softly, then began scribbling some notes and calculations on the pad she kept near her favorite sitting spots. Finally, she drifted off to sleep midway through a dimensional analysis of the energy expended by the body in bone growth.

Egypt had changed Carolyn Solon. She went in to work every day just as before, but she found herself more passionate and focused to that perfect pitch between outright tension and loose mental freedom. Research advanced quickly. New Mexico heat never bothered her, even on the day when the AC broke and a repairman couldn't be had for thirty-six hours.

It was a Monday, and Dr. Solon was hauling a heavy case up the stairs to her lab. A cup of her favorite drink was in the hand that wasn't clutching the crate. Suddenly, Aaron appeared behind her, clearly heading upstairs as well.

Panting a bit, she said, "Sorry I'm in the way. Sixteen more steps and you can walk unimpeded."

"I don't mind, Miss Solon. It always smells like cinnamon around you. But let me take that case for you."

She wasn't sure what to make of that. "Sixteen more steps. One more floor. It's really no problem."

"You'll need steady hands, free from fatigue, for whatever mysterious titrations you're working on to—" With a cry, he dropped the box he had been taking from her hand, for it had emitted a loud chorus of squeaking.

"Lab mice. Don't worry, they're secured."

"I was just startled. I'm ready this time," he said, picking up the crate once more. "Are we testing the new drug?"

She shook her head at him. Cairo sunburn throbbed on her blushing cheeks as she shifted from confusion to surprise. "I've only been back for two weeks and you think I'm ready for drug testing? It takes years and years to produce any new drug. I'm not some magical genius, Aaron."

"You know exactly how many steps are between each floor," he reminded her.

She ignored that comment. "These mice are to replicate and confirm an experiment on the function of certain existing viruses. It's only a starting point. But since these viruses are present at birth, there's a lot to be learned about their relation to stem cells and healing, without actually needing any stem cells."

"Makes sense. You're modest, Miss Solon, but I hope you know that you do great work for this company. Join me for lunch break sometime? I'm running late for a meeting just now but you can send me an email. Later!" He jogged up the remaining stairs after setting the mice down gently outside the door to her lab and office.

She watched him run, then fixed her jet black hair back into its angular ponytail. "Then I want a raise," she concluded.

And maybe something watched the research fly by, saw that the sand of Egypt had given Carolyn's work new grit. Experiments began and experiments fulfilled their purpose over the course of several months. The drug, loosely based on the resurrected Phoenix Virus, started to become more than a dream. Then more than a model; testing began.

Summer heat faded into winter jacket weather. Time passed. Aaron invited Miss Solon to the company celebration of the midwinter Corn-and-Bean festival, which was an odd tradition strictly observed by most businesses and organizations in the immediate area. Carolyn, for her part, at first refused to go entirely, but eventually a group of coworkers persuaded her to attend. Of course, after explaining her profession, no one wanted to dance near the virologist in the black dress wearing too much eye shadow. She spent the event, and most of her time afterward, absorbed in her project, lost within her own mind.

The testing continued to go well, but it was evident that a few major tweaks were still necessary. Dr. Solon began to take her work home more and more frequently. Notebooks started to pile up. Then textbooks. Then Petri dishes and microscopes and glass slides disappeared from Plasmicorp's labs and ended up in Carolyn's living room. That was the price of progress. No time was safe from career's intrusion, except maybe time spent cuddling the hamster. The virus took on more and more of its final form, ready to deliver plasmids with instructions on how to build a better bone structure.

Ethics boards gave Carolyn nightmares. She was called as a witness at several minor scandal hearings involving Plasmicorp. Troubles cropped up even in her yard: one of her unkempt arbor vitae bushes played host to a large and curious roadrunner with unusual markings on its breast. It liked to pop out of the bush and scare her as it flapped clumsily away. Once she saw it eating a snake. "That can't be normal; can it?" Carolyn asked the hamster.

The local New Mexico wildlife was just one more thing to forget in the wake of the developing virus genome, which had begun to intrude upon her dreams. She pressed on, but solutions that had seemed near at hand now seemed impossibly far away.

Until one day, finally...

## *It's So Elementary...*

*"...Mass and energy are both but different manifestations of the same thing -- a somewhat unfamiliar conception for the average mind. Furthermore, the equation  $E$  is equal to  $m c$ -squared, in which energy is put equal to mass, multiplied by the square of the velocity of light, showed that very small amounts of mass may be converted into a very large amount of energy and vice versa."*

*--from a public speech by Albert Einstein*

It had been years since Carolyn Solon's Egypt visit. The enlarged photo of the original Phoenix Virus occupied wall space beside a printout of the genome of Carolyn's medical Osteoid Virus. This she expected to be the final prototype before mammalian testing. Human testing was a long way off, but somehow PlasmicCorp's enormous legal and ethics division had pulled through to achieve preliminary go-aheads.

By this point, Carolyn's house had been transformed into something of a miniature laboratory, and much of the real labor was performed at home. Equipment, notes, and associated clutter filled every available space; nature had left not a void.

Carolyn was satisfied.

And there was a celebratory dinner with Aaron scheduled, at a swanky new restaurant called the Bier. Carolyn had, at first, tried to turn him from the idea.

"I'm not sure it's time to celebrate just yet. Why don't you take me out once we've got pills for sale in some brightly-colored bottle?"

"Oh, Miss Solon. The thing seems like it'll work fine; everyone on the other teams agrees."

*"Esse quam videri."*

"I didn't know you spoke Latin," Aaron said. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know Latin. I just learned a book's worth of stock phrases from Ms. Schams, my eighth grade Literature teacher. It means 'To be, rather than seem to be.' No point in celebrating something that doesn't do its job, even if it looks good."

Aaron then gave her a look she didn't understand. "That is more relevant than you seem to realize, Miss Solon – and here we are, celebrating. How about 7:00 next Tuesday? Meet me at the Bier – my car is still in for repairs and probably won't be back to me yet."

In the end, she'd been forced to agree.

But maybe something watched her, and knew things weren't quite right.

The media was hailing PlasmiCorp as a miracle worker. Soon, they said, PlasmiCorp might become the most famous entry in the histories of medicine since the simultaneous discovery of endorphins in America and Scotland. Dr. Solon herself made the news several times, her virology being absolutely critical to the miracle drug. The public relations nightmare was not quite over, but the detractors were finally beginning to tire, and the drug had gone from vague idea to marketable product in record time, pending only a few final months of FDA paperwork.

Test results, the initial animal testing performed under-the-table between Carolyn's apartment and her official lab, had astounded everyone. It was just too perfect. In treating osteoporosis, for example, it had a 100% success rate across any number of mice anyone cared to supply. The competition was left in the dust. It was an idea whose time had come.

Even doctors were stunned by the efficacy of the newly programmed marrow cells in the wake of Solon's virus. Naturally, this led to cries of "Witchcraft!" and the like. Carolyn went on TV before a reporter to defend her drug. Ironically, she had to shoo the roadrunner away before the interview. Her present mystical, paranoid mindset immediately leapt to thoughts of familiars, black cats and owls and other strange beasts hiding the mind of a witch behind eyes glowing copper and gold in the night.

To her relief, the reporter at her door acted respectfully rather than confrontationally, asking about the possible success of the drug, and offering the virologist a chance to sum up the science behind the famously successful tests.

"Carolyn Solon, acclaimed technician at pharmaceutical giant PlasmiCorp, has agreed to talk to us at her quiet home on the outskirts of town. Dr. Solon played a fundamental part in developing what everyone is hailing as the next miracle drug. She says the design is patterned after an existing kind of *virus*, of all things. Dr. Solon, how successful is this thing going to get?"

"Well, we can only speak in terms of its efficacy. PlasmiCorp's drug has every potential to replace the current osteoporosis treatments: usually hormone therapy and biphosphates," explained Carolyn.

"And why is it so much better?"

“Side effects. It has no negative side effects whatsoever, while hormone therapy especially can have some pretty nasty ones. And we’re taking an entirely different track to modern classes of biphosphate drugs, which selectively kill bone marrow cells to ossify them – make them bonier, so to speak. That process makes bones dense, hard for an errant body to digest.”

“Ah, now we are approaching the part that makes people nervous, I think. Go ahead and explain, briefly, how your drug works.”

Oh yes, every explanation always had to be brief. Years of research and toil, boiled down to a few sentences. It was no wonder, Dr. Solon figured, that superstition ran rampant, especially in this folklore-ridden desert area of New Mexico. The gods of the Hopi and Pueblo, the weeping ghosts out of the south, the tales of a thousand immigrants and field workers and the graves of countless tortured lonely cowboys, the unexplored mysteries of deep caverns, buried cities beneath the ground – deserts were the last unexplored places of Earth. And perhaps each of these tales had a reason for existing, but boiling everything down to the language of hasty folk, to a few sentences, was insufficient for the killing of legends.

“Yes, as you said, it’s inspired by a virus, one humans are born with. Actually, we could in the future use a microbe similar to a virus to deliver the drug – a plasmid, a little circle of DNA. It reprograms your bone marrow – instead of telling it to die, the treatment tells osteoclasts to act like certain stem cells, growing into living fortresses. Under a microscope, it looks like the strength is coming out of nowhere, something innate and alive.”

“And that’s not dangerous?” the reporter queried.

“Not at all!” Carolyn exclaimed. “We’ve been safely able to treat genetics like Lego bricks for years. That technology has rapidly advanced a long way, to the point where we’re able to entrust tasks of important genetic restructuring even to viruses that have themselves been restructured to our purposes.”

“So some germ will be entering the body of a patient, and that microbe eliminates their osteoporosis, say.”

“Right. And if that still makes you nervous, I say this: Picture a 100% success rate. Have you ever seen one before? No genius gets every point on every test in their school career; no general never loses a man. My virus,” in her excitement, Carolyn often referred to the drug as hers alone, “never loses a man. It’s been literally 100% effective through every test we’ve thrown at it, and that’s unprecedented. Consider your skeleton saved.”

“Thanks for talking with us, Dr. Solon.” The reporter gave her signature sign off and signaled for the cameraman to cut. “I really do mean my gratitude, Dr. Solon. I have two close relatives with severe bone disease. It’s too late for their quality of life to go back to what it was,

but maybe you and PlasmiCorp can make nasty diseases that cage people up a thing of the past.” With that, she wrung Carolyn’s hand and started back to her van, before Carolyn could explain that “her drug” would even heal damaged bone.

“I’ve finally found that ‘free lunch,’ but it’s going to take a lot of miracles to get people to believe it,” Carolyn sighed.

She exchanged her interview clothes for a simple black dress she had at the front of her closet. In the past, that dress had often accompanied black lipstick, black eyeliner, black spikes and chains, and a dark Gothic humor. It still dropped low enough in the back to accentuate a black, spiked circle of a tattoo between her shoulderblades, an irremovable regret from a teenage rebellion. Carolyn still liked black – the quiet, clean branding of a lifestyle in which fashion became nothing but a simple thing, no longer adorned by pentacles and skulls. It compared nicely to the sterility of the labcoat.

“A labcoat,” Carolyn often told interns or technicians, “is not designed so much to physically keep your skin sterile, but to establish a reminder that YOU should keep your skin sterile. Branding, education, and habits keep our mad science from coming to bite us in the ass.”

Carolyn’s plan was to have her dinner with Aaron, then move on to the PlasmiCorp building, where her laptop and desktop together could speed things along. Though not a computer expert, Carolyn did have a reputation for good troubleshooting, for she never forgot a solution once she had learned it. She was always on the phone with tech support over some problem with a wiry mess she’d rigged up. Once, they asked her for the length of her monitor cable, and she’d said “The length of my cable is one fortieth of a cable length.” And it was, give or take, but tech support specialists are not true masters of dimensions and units, like Dr. Solon was.

So Carolyn slung her 15.6 inch, 23625x10400 pixel laptop over her shoulder and went to dinner with Aaron. He was as charming as he could be, but Carolyn’s mind was still on the interview and work. Aaron politely acted like he didn’t notice and pulled more than his weight in the conversation. Maybe, Carolyn thought, there was more than experimental significance to a 100% effective drug, in which both she and two other researchers found such promise. A virus resurrected after surviving in a junkyard of human DNA for millions of years since infecting its first embryo. Maybe, she thought, there was more to this Phoenix Virus than meets the microscope.

Coincidentally, Aaron was talking about something similar. He’d just read some motivational book that contrived to compare war to office management. “The Phoenix Effect,” he explained, “really saved the U.S. after the war. Rising from the psychological ashes as victors, you know?”

“Yes,” Carolyn breathed, “it’s really something special, all right.”

“I think PlasmiCorp might be able to do the same thing here, don’t you think? I mean, that PR nightmare...not sure what we did wrong there...”

“Indeed...Something not quite right...”

“So this author says corporations can experience the Phoenix Effect too. It doesn’t necessarily happen automatically, it’s not magic or anything, but with good managers...well, that’s where the magic happens.”

“No...not magic...science...”

“Yeah, I guess you could call it a science,” Aaron acceded. “Not like what you do, though, eh? PlasmiCorp’s labs are all about natural science. Managers are different; we don’t need the technical knowledge but we have our own deliverables, you know, we have to prove we understand people –“

“No! We’re no different, either! We’re the same!”

“Uh, pardon?”

“PlasmiCorp made the same mistake! Oh my! They got it wrong! Those researchers got it wrong! They missed, they resurrected the wrong genes! I’ve just - Hm, the culture environment would have precise needs...oh! Oh!”

At this point, Aaron could no longer see the relevance of anything Miss Solon was saying to what he, in all his wisdom, was saying. He tried a cliché: “Are you feeling OK, Miss Solon?”

“Yeah...yeah, I am, but I think I may have just figured something out. It all comes back to one crux...one point.”

He lifted his soup and pushed the paper tablemat over to Carolyn, and wrestled a pen from his suit pocket. He sighed, and gloomily watched Miss Solon while he ate the rest of his tasteless food in silence. She was lost with the paper and pen he had provided; their date (as he saw it) she had entirely forgotten.

Carefully, self-consciously, Carolyn simmered down. She pushed her passion to where she would not lose it but could let it escape in small bursts of steam, steam to power the mechanics of social contracts. She thanked Aaron as kindly as her excitement would allow, causing him to blush even though he knew it was a lie that she’d enjoyed the dinner. He paid hastily, before she could offer to pay, but she managed to cover the server’s tip. She grabbed her laptop and strode out, too preoccupied to offer so much as a “See you at work tomorrow.”

Once again, her great mind was at work. Images flickered like flames. Everything suddenly seemed connected; indeed, she knew it to be so, though she’d never be able to verbalize it. The single obelisk, all that remained of the ancient Temple of the Sun, became a slate on

which to write all the data of her travels anew. Sharp talons caught her thoughts and carried them off in a frenzy of intuition like she'd never known before. She could see each logical step for just a moment, blurred as though she passed high overhead at record speeds, back to the place where epiphany was born in the friction of neurotransmitter passage. Carolyn broke out in sweat and walked faster, muttering to herself, taking every dark shortcut she knew that might bring her to her lab faster.

“Endogenous retrovirus, so everyone carries it, and it has always been passed on...no, not possibly junk DNA, not even noncoding, I'd say...at least formerly it had a use...How easily it expressed the fortress effect! It must be a pseudogene expressor, that's the only explanation: It's unlocking something that we already had. And...Oh! *Scientia est lux lucis!* Knowledge is enlightenment - that makes it all click. It might be able to do more! It might be able to expand upon the very genes that brought us up from apes in the first place!”

There was a great deal more like this. Imagine the confused expression on the face of those who stalked her that night as she walked alone in her black dress through the alleys of a hot city.

But they were many, and she was few, and they knew these buildings and alleys, and they knew how to speed ahead. So she took a final step forward, far from any streetlight, to find herself surrounded by black shapes. Some leaned against the wall, some stood before her, and some planted themselves behind to cut off retreat. Each wore a scuffed three-piece suit and a black hat, but their faces were not visible – it seemed nothing more than white mist existed between their collars and headgear. Threatening murmurs came from this mist. One stepped forward and demanded in a scratchy voice, “Hand over everything you have. Wallet, purse, bag, and turn out your pockets.”

Carolyn saw that he was carrying a knife, which he handled as one confident in overwhelming odds and strength. She also saw that she was surrounded on all sides, and that various bits of garbage or containers would impede her escape.

“Slow down,” she said. “I'll play it easy.” She certainly didn't intend to risk her life over a hundred dollars. “Is this about money? I think I have a hundred bucks.”

As she reached for it, the voice growled, “This is bigger than profit, madam. Hurry it up. Don't make any funny moves.”

She thought it rude of him, and a bit stupid, to demand her cooperation after she had already promised it. A hot fury rose up in her, but she strove to put a lid on the flames and keep her cool, or at least to prevent the strange men from seeing the fire in her eyes. She stepped a bit closer to the bandit, sticking one hand into her pocketbook while nervously stroking her ponytail into its usual perfect order. She fancied she caught an air of amusement from the man, if man he

was, as if he took her for some trophy wife – an easy target, to be sure. This, too, fed the pyre of her anger, and she felt it must come to action, and soon. Another step forward.

The man moved his knife, locked into a better position to attack. Carolyn got the sudden feeling that he might use the knife even if she surrendered her pocketbook. A quick glance around showed her that things had gotten no better: she was still surrounded, help was still far away, and the alley was still dark and dank.

“Well, all my files are backed up,” she said. The faceless man cocked his head, a split second of confusion that Carolyn was ready for. With a grimace, she planted her left foot, pivoted, and swung the heavy, loaded laptop bag in a horizontal arc ending right in the thug’s groin.

She took off running over the fallen ruffian. The others moved to close the gap, but she was already just out of reach. The good doctor rarely wore high heels and tonight was no exception. A knife stuck quivering in the mortar where she had stood a moment before. Carolyn knocked over a tin trash can and sent it crashing loudly toward her pursuers. “Noise. Noise seems like a good idea right now,” mumbled Carolyn. As she dashed away she grabbed up a spar of fencing and smacked at each trash can or grating she passed.

In one dead end, a stack of trash cans stood like Egyptian obelisks, threatening to crumble. Solon shivered, backed away quickly, and took off again along another path.

Carolyn risked a glance over her shoulder. She seemed to be gaining distance, and as the noise level increased, the ruffians grew warier. Eventually, she heard one mumble “Let her go. Cops might get here soon. It is too late.”

The muggers fell back. Carolyn ran on until she was out of breath. When she finally slowed down, she did not continue on to the police station. Rather, she kept trudging toward Plasmicorp and her lab. She was too distracted even to give much thought to the assault. “They missed it. The whole universe pulling for their success, and they resurrected the wrong virus. It’s so elementary!”

And maybe something watched, and smiled.

## *It only works when I'm conscious ...*

Carolyn Solon didn't even make it to work the next day. Her pace was massively accelerated now; a warm drive filled her psyche. Leaving the office at lunchtime for the next week, sneaking computer time for her own project, she got enough work done to build a prototype.

She knew, without knowing exactly how, that it would work. It all came down to the culture in which her newly coded Phoenix Virus would have to be grown. The thing had unusual demands, notably massive amounts of dry calcium and a few more exotic things such as fresh cassia to stabilize the still-living ingredients.

"Really thinking like a witch now," Carolyn would whisper to her hamster friend as she checked off items for her solution. "Culturing a virus has never been easy. Living matter is a gross but necessary ingredient. The volume demands of the calcium alone mean I need something practically cauldron-sized. Plus this is becoming a unitless nightmare: I had to pull out all the old knowledge rattling around in my brain to get kilderkins of calcium on the same side of the decimal point as minims of viral plaque ingredients. Yes, my fuzzy friend, who will feed you when I'm burned at stake?"

And so it was that Carolyn decided to conduct her final test in Egypt. Egypt, where the climate was right, where mysticism was an accepted part of life above ancient sleeping cities, where space was more wide open and unrest might cover up any strange activities.

Aaron didn't understand, of course, but somehow Solon got him to approve her request for leave. At this point, she realized, she would have gone even if he had not. A less preoccupied woman might have noticed that Aaron would bend many rules for Miss Solon, but she herself was far away long before he signed her paperwork and handed it back to her.

Trip preparation took a while. There were many ingredients she needed, many in bulk, many that could be purchased only in Africa or Indonesia. Dangerous and fragile lab equipment had to be shipped separately, by water, as did the barrels of powdered calcium. The genetic building blocks for the virus, plus a stock of cultured cells to infect, had to go under the watchful eye of a Plasmicorp security guard to assure against corporate spying. Even moving files to a secure server on the Cloud was a hassle at which Carolyn rankled, wishing she could take off immediately.

"You're racking up a lot of expense, Miss Solon, but I'm more than willing to believe that you can make it worthwhile. Are you sure you don't want company? I could use a vacation too," said Aaron.

“Oh! I should bring the hamster!” Carolyn exclaimed, and turned away to make pet plans without even explicitly answering Aaron’s offer. “And then the Henderson girl can just stop by twice a week to make sure that sump pump hasn’t overflowed and that no one has broken into the house...she’ll be glad of the cash, and the wildlife’s been overactive lately anyway...”

On wings of steel, Carolyn touched down on blazing Cairo tarmac once more. Her rodent came with her in a little cage with a cloth over the transparent casing to keep him from getting nervous. A bonded travel agent had arranged housing in the suburbs of Al-Matariyyah, the very heart of mysticism in Egypt.

Two stories below the ground, inhabitants knew, slumbered the remains of the City of the Sun. Largely unexcavated, it was unknown when they might rise to see daylight again. Authenticated stones set by Ramesses II still dotted the landscape, and some abandoned lots were still bordered by ancient stone walls from the times of the pharaohs. At the location of the temple of Re-Atum, only a single obelisk remained aboveground to mark a 4000-year-old place of worship and wonder. Guides explained that the medieval city had been a place of great learning, visited by revolutionary thinkers from Greece – and great leaders like Alexander. The thought of secretive experiments conducted on this scientific holy ground made Carolyn shiver and sweat all the more.

Excitedly, she set up her lab (and her hamster). The lab took up most of the basement as well as the main floor of the flat. The science of garage biotech had been blossoming in recent years, but Carolyn was building no simple virus. She was resurrecting something powerful, a pseudogene initiator similar to a kind so successful it was still found to this day in every single human, from embryo onward.

Of course, that DNA record had undergone a fiery cataclysm of mistranscription and mutation, and was nothing more than “junk DNA” at present. But teams had decrypted and resurrected it before. They’d missed out on the powerful version Carolyn hoped to create, but she knew it could be made infectious at the very least.

“You see, little cheeseball,” she told the hamster, “this might make humans the way they were meant to be. It might restore barriers against old age itself! Really, medicine knows of no reason why we must be mortal: to sleep, to die. Not every species does that. I’m planning on building a revolutionary womb for mankind, a virus that grants new life! What do you think of that?”

The hamster stuffed kibbles into his cheeks and said nothing.

“If I’m right, my skull is holding the secrets to the very acme of gene therapy. And the greatest part is how automatic my translation has been. I think this virus is meant to be. Now it’s time to prove it!”

She labored for one day and one night without sleeping. She brewed up the viral plaque to observe its progress; she brewed up a culture of monkey cells to house it and multiply it. She built up a calcium solution to allow vital mineralization, a strange supplement required by this viral breed in addition to the usual protein coat and metabolism. Later, she would adapt the culture to her own cells, a laborious process in its own right. Finally, she placed the exotic biochemicals that would control the breeding population of the virus and allow all the necessary reactions. But all that was for the altered product.

Enzymes did all the dirty work for Dr. Solon. In a calcium chloride bath, proprietary Plasmicorp enzymes cut apart bacterial genomic sequences and rearranged them into little circles of code, which it cloned and adapted: plasmids. This process existed in nature, of course, and in bacteria that Plasmicorp had bioengineered for their own purposes in a tricky process long kept secret. A virus is nothing more than some code wrapped in a simple body of protein. To make a long story short, enzymes helped Carolyn code a virus the way she wanted it coded until it could handle the heavy lifting of cloning itself. Her base was, of course, the same string of human genes that led Heidmann's resurrection of the Phoenix Virus.

It took thousands of shots: little particles of pure gold, treated with plasmids, erupting into the bodies of the viral proto-organisms. Normally, only a very few plasmids managed to insert themselves into the host code. Today, Dr. Solon was supremely lucky. She felt the same thrill as when her 100% successful osteoid treatment drug did its work: an enormous percentage of the injectees sent up the signature flags she had arranged.

A little over 24 hours had passed. Solon swabbed out the cell-filled solution and began the tedious process of preparing the special copper and aluminum slides that would be the world's first look at a virus capable, in Dr. Solon's expectation, of activating age-old primate defenses against disease and death.

Time passed Carolyn by in fevered leaps. The laser powered down; the slide was complete. This she brought over to the electron-scanning microscope that filled an entire corner of the room all by itself. Her laptop provided the interface, and she let out a cheer as the software powered up.

There it was! That small spiky sphere of almost-life that was somewhere between gene and organism. Helpless as a baby, they could not do a thing without a cell to infect, but Carolyn expected them to be the savior of mankind. To the untrained eye, the image on Carolyn Solon's computer would have looked just like any other virus, but the virologist saw one unexpected difference at once. Each elegant coat, studded with spikes like fear or excitement, also had three graceful flowing sheaths separated by sixty-degree angles, each part as wide again as the diameter of the retrovirus.

She thought it was beautiful, and maybe something watching agreed.

Carefully, she checked the plaques, ensuring there was enough infected cell soup for further experiments. Eventually, perhaps, this virus would be exposed to every human being at birth, merge with their marrow cell membranes, and add its own genes to that of the marrow cells, or be passed on from generation to generation – every human now entitled to a lifetime free from bone cancer, osteoporosis, and the like. Perhaps mankind would be freed even of old age, creating a veritable immortality as the rebirth of the body's fundamental cells became limitless and adaptable.

Then a fire blazed before Carolyn's eyes, blurring her vision and clouding her mind with smoke. Something stirred strangely within her, and she was moved to fitful recklessness. Through the red, she saw the vial of perfect, infected solution glowing clear and golden. Taking it up, she carried it down the wooden stairs to the basement, stumbling on each step, cradling the mighty cargo close to her chest.

Carolyn Solon snatched up some white samite cloth and a syringe. She fell to her knees amidst the bundles of Arabian spices her brew had required. With trembling hands, she loaded the syringe and sank it deep into her burning, fevered skin. The terrible virus would make its way first to the bone marrow of her left arm. From there it would travel in the bloodstream to every bone in her body. Those bones, containing a drop from the identity of every Solon ancestor, also held the ancestry of this very virus Carolyn had daringly, stupidly, tested on herself before any other. And now Carolyn's every descendant would carry this model within its DNA, forever, from embryo until death; infectious at first, over the long march of evolutionary time the strange, doctored genes would find their way into the junk DNA to mark the virus' tomb until humankind met its fate in some distant fiery supernova.

An endogenous infection, for it would be passed on in the egg. A retrovirus, for it strewed its genomic sequence about like fine scents, injecting code to make cells its thralls; mindlessly, they turn to it and blindly follow its song, failing to look away from its blinding light.

So it was with Carolyn's marrow cells. The virus was irremovable now by any means human science could dish out. Antibiotics were useless. No later virus would be more powerful, able to supersede the hidden replicative code. Carolyn believed she had resurrected exactly the right string of code, which had been the height of parasitic evolution in its day, unsurpassable. Carolyn's brow erupted in sweat as the fire faded.

She felt deep fatigue in her arm, but it was not numb; it was afire. Spotting the little pinprick of blood welling from an artery and realizing the magnitude of what she had done, she cried a piercing cry and knew blackness.

When Carolyn Solon awoke, her thoughts flew straight to what she'd done. She was lying in the warm basement, cradled by spilled calcium and cassia. The wooden table nearby was split; one leg and two leaves had separated from the rest, which lay crookedly askew. The syringe lay immediately beside her hip. Surely, at this very moment, pseudogenes were being switched on within her that might have lain dormant since the dawn of civilization. How much time had passed? How far had the virus spread? Was it still possible to recant and undo what she'd done, at any cost? In that moment, Solon came very close to attempting a frenzied, desperate fix: she wished to chop off her infected arm and set it afire.

In the end curiosity and reason won out. It was almost certainly too late. Carolyn gingerly felt herself all over. Was it imagination, or did she feel stronger? Dr. Solon calculated that, had she been laying there long enough, perhaps the gene activation might have taken place already. She reached out a hand to the table to pull herself up. To her surprise, the wood burst neatly into flame at a touch.

Carolyn forced herself into action. The fire was still small, but growing rapidly. A gallon of distilled water stood nearby, and this Carolyn grabbed to douse the fire. It took several journeys from the faucet to the remnant pyre of the table, but the flames soon grew cold. The fire had harmed the room and Carolyn only minimally.

“What was that all about?” she wondered. She set about prodding the charred wood, wiped her fingers on a paper towel to see if there was any compound on them. “Well, that bears more examination,” she told herself, and decided to head upstairs to pick up some equipment.

No sooner had she thought this than she found herself flying into the air at a great velocity. The very air around her gave out a tortured screech as she flew rapidly upward, only to collide with the ceiling. She remembered a brief glimpse of a blossoming fireball and a blazing timber winging its way toward her, then she knew blackness once again.

Consciousness alighted. Carolyn was returned to the throne of her mind. She felt a stabbing pain from her foot and a pressure as of some great weight on her abdomen. Groaning, she tried to raise her head. She lay amidst a wide circle of charcoal dust surrounding the shattered stairwell. On her chest, her hamster scabbled about happily, digging for treats in her labcoat jacket pocket. He squeaked at her and showed her just how large he could expand his cheek pouches.

Further down her body, things were much worse. A charred timber lay across her lower body, too big to move alone. The flames had gone out, but Carolyn could feel the wood scratching her thighs, and assumed the legs of her pants were toast. In this way, she was trapped, and could not move to assess the damage done to her left foot. Something felt broken.

“Help,” Carolyn called feebly. She could hear traffic at a distance outside. Her senses felt fuzzy, but her mind felt sharp as though the solutions to a thousand problems were suddenly within its reach. No one came to assist her. “Help!” she managed again, a bit louder this time.

“If I can move...to a position with more leverage...” she gasped. “Another half a link...” Carolyn Solon felt a frenzied connection to something, something somewhere deep within her brain, but something willing to surface and maybe to expound upon a great mystery, to show her places she had never seen. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, trying to hold on to the feeling. Gradually, she became aware of a faint tingling all over her body. She opened her eyes.

There, shimmering faintly around her, she perceived a copper mist, barely visible but with a suggestion of blinding, powerful force. The heavy beam no longer exerted its massive downward force; indeed, it hung in the air just inches from Carolyn’s belly as if floating lightly on sweet, life-giving water.

The scientist rolled over a bit and inched her way out from under the beam. Pushing against it, her palms left faint char marks, and she felt it slide easily on the mist under her gentle pressure. As she wormed her way to freedom, Carolyn noticed a creaking in the toes and arch of her left foot. Pain stabbed upward toward her calf. The foot felt broken. But as Carolyn Solon stood, a mighty fire pulsed through her muscles and veins, unfolding like the spreading of pinions to soak up the sun. The mist moved where she moved, clinging close to her body.

On impulse, she made a subtle stamping motion with the broken foot. Lances of fire curved down along her ankle and splashed, solidified, upon the floor. The pavers buckled and broke. Her foot felt no pain from the action.

Quickly she hobbled to the windows and closed all the blinds. Clearly, something had changed within her, but this was far beyond anything she had imagined hidden pseudogenes being capable of. Carolyn decided to give herself more tests.

Dr. Solon sank two needles into her arm near where she had given herself the original injection of her new virus. That was her plan, at least. The first needle, a numbing medicine, wouldn’t penetrate the copper mist that still floated about her. The more she tried, wincing, the stronger and clearer the mist grew, until it had quite consolidated into a smooth semitransparent shield around the arm. With a deep breath, she willed the shield to part. Agonizingly, she pulled the mysterious energy back from the injection site. The needle flashed quickly down and she felt the numbness begin.

Strangely, wherever the numbness spread, Carolyn could not get her new shield to flow from her body. After much experimentation, she realized that the power needed to flow over her skin from the sides of the aperture she had created in the shield, rather than emanating from the

numb area. “It operates through consciousness,” she said breathlessly. “So it stands to reason that I cannot guide it through numbed tissue.”

It was time for the second needle, a hollow syringe designed for taking bone marrow samples. Peeling back the shield once more, she soon had her infected sample. This she laboriously prepared and slid into the electron microscope. The resulting image made little sense even to her trained eye. More analysis. Numbers scrolled past, sent themselves into a spreadsheet, and returned home with new meaning.

Carolyn had to break the silence that had settled over the small house. “It’s not dead?” she said at last. It was true. Every number indicated that the viral bodies, though not the marrow cells they lived amongst, had retained animus throughout all the harsh treatments of slide prep. Furthermore, the virus was doing something. And immense loads of energy were clearly the result.

“Well, now I’ve *really* done something different!” she told her hamster, who was running in his wheel in his broken cage. “This virus is probably doing something with my bone tissue, with minute amounts of my calcium. It can use the fatty acids of my marrow for activation energy and the result is...simply stunning. This thing has enough energy to live for months, yet it hasn’t consumed a detectable amount of my tissue. And I – I have somehow tapped into that *incredible* yield! Your mother,” she told the hamster, “is truly a genius.”

“I just hope I’m not insane,” she added quietly.

## *It flies on its own wings...*

Strange was the world in which Carolyn Solon now lived. Strange events scored the history of the earth; strange attitudes traced fiery paths in her mind. Winter came early to the eastern hemisphere, but Carolyn found that she could no longer feel cold. Only heat, fierceness, and longing. Her vacation time ended, and Carolyn found herself ready to travel. A fine Helwan doctor bandaged her aching foot and her plane tickets were ready.

And so different was this plane trip than that earlier flight! Before, she was linking datum to datum, graphing a story across bygone eras to create a modern convenience using a tenth the information anyone else would have needed. Now, she saw no puzzles flying into graphic coherence within her mind. She saw instead the lines of fire that connected her will to the infinite power reservoirs of the strange life form deep within her bones. Practice and calculation proved that these assets existed in unthinkable amounts, enough to fulfill Solon's every wish for her entire life, if she desired it. This was sustainable, clean energy at its finest; somehow, the virus went far beyond the efficiency of cold fusion.

"Left it in the dust," Carolyn muttered into the plane window with satisfaction. Calculating what she could do, according to limits she discovered behind drawn shades in her secluded low-rent basement, was no easy task. Carolyn was no physicist. Without her laptop and an Internet connection, Carolyn could not have traced even the crude estimates she now possessed. Her virus, she figured, worked at truly relativistic levels, somehow transforming mass into energy by a factor of the speed of light, *squared*, at what seemed to be 100% efficiency. She thanked the foresighted gods of mathematics for scientific notation. She did this aloud, and a passing stewardess gave her a strange look.

Out the window, Carolyn caught only glimpses of the beautiful phosphorescent Nile through dense, dark clouds suggesting a gathering storm. Wisps of vapor rolled by underneath her, plowing furrows into the skygarden. Dusk had fallen before Solon even passed through security, and now the lights of a city not yet ready for sleep diffused slowly through the low clouds, lining the ridges with fire.

"The captain has turned on the fasten seatbelt light, indicating that turbulence is expected. Please observe this and all other safety measures, and remain seated. If you have questions, press the green button above your seat and a flight attendant will be right with you."

The plane shuddered its way through the coastal storm system. A day of clear weather above the Atlantic took its place. Yet soon passengers were groaning as they spotted another line of storm clouds above North America's boundaries. The seatbelt light and safety message came again. Carolyn didn't care; her laptop purred happily over seatbelt and lap, spitting up mass-energy equivalence calculators and theories on demand. Some type of atom-smashing, it

suggested. Or maybe something to do with superstrings, perhaps, peculiar enzymes unraveling the strands of matter into their most fundamental soup for the use of the virus and its host.

Passengers began to murmur nervously, causing Solon to look up from her work. Outside she could see the wing flaps of the plane fluttering madly. She did not feel nervous, but she did grow impatient at an alarming rate these days. As apprehensive passengers quibbled with the crew about just how safe such a malfunction could be, tensions rose. Carolyn found herself fervently wishing that the flight could end *NOW*.

Things got steadily worse. The groaning of the aircraft had the definite roar and creak of a broken down machine now, disrupting Solon's thinking. She steadfastly refused to look out the window, but surreptitiously tightened her seatbelt. Inside, a knot of fear began to form. Still no message came from the cockpit, no word of warning or reassurance.

Suddenly a man stood up, shouted, "That's it. I'm going up there to see what's going on!" The stewardess tried to restrain him, but he shoved her aside and began to make his way up the aisle. A peculiar expression was on the stewardess' face, and her lips moved as if she was about to speak. A sudden eastward lurch threw the man into a window seat. He gazed in terror at the sun just beginning to rise above the horizon, its warm light scarcely peeking around the plane's main wing that pointed straight up toward the zenith.

The plane was spiraling down, one wing aimed toward the hail-clouds and the other striving for the heavens. Finally, Carolyn was moved to action, assurance strong in her voice as she cried "Stand aside!"

Rising from her molten seatbelt, she spread her arms like wings, and a gush of brilliant fire spread outward from them. The passengers and crew were pinned against the cabin walls by flames of force that did not burn, nor did they yield. Carolyn strode among the lines of energy doing the work of her will, among the human beings with frenzied faces distorted into expressions of redoubled terror. She strode straight to the locked cockpit door, which melted away at her approach.

Inside, she faced much what she had expected: a sabotaged control panel, the pilot and copilot both slumped in their chairs, motionless. Possibly dead, if the thick bruises on their foreheads were any sign. She had not expected, however, the two men who stepped smartly from out of a corner, expertly wielding crowbars. A tidy tap across her shins brought her to a sprawl before she thought to summon her shield of force.

From her position on the floor, she said, "I'm warning you – I think I might be able to do anything energy can do." It was then, looking up, that she noticed the men possessed the same featureless faces as the thugs she'd met in the alley. The parachute packs on their backs confirmed every suspicion as to their purposes aboard the plane.

But as powerful as Solon's new powers were, she had yet to develop her speed and reaction time. The crowbar lashed out again. Carolyn hoped repeated unconsciousness didn't become a habit. In fits and starts, she strove with the blackness.

It seemed the universe was pulling for Solon in the end. A shock of awareness washed over Solon like a heat wave. She felt the simple shield spring into existence again; to her eyes, it appeared as a burnished but transparent sphere of force. Somehow, the plane was burning fiercely, still falling. Perhaps that would alter the mysterious plans of the faceless thugs. Carolyn, still shielded, pulled herself to her feet just in time to witness the ground rushing upward to meet the plummeting fireball she rode.

Shielded, she stayed conscious. She stayed conscious through the terrible impact. She stayed conscious as the shockwave rippled through the body of the plane, throwing passengers violently about. She stayed conscious through the screaming of shattered, superheated metal; she stayed conscious through the spattering blood. Conscious, she had time only to watch from her invulnerable sphere as the plane and all within it became an infernal death pyre, all but wreckage and bone consumed by fire.

The crash made national headlines. Carolyn, the sole survivor, was asked time and time again for interviews, and though she accepted only a few, she found that people everywhere knew her name. Some said only an intercession of God could have saved this saint whose scientific work would improve the lives of millions. Feelings of guilt wormed within Carolyn's gut. Survivor's guilt. Guilt that maybe, somehow, her burgeoning powers had in some way caused the malfunction, or at least made her a target of the strange faceless men.

She also felt a burning desire to use her strange strength at every opportunity; yet this competed with a rational need for secrecy. Dr. Carolyn Solon decided to make no manifestation in public view unless utterly necessary – despite her apparent invulnerability and the inexhaustible resources of fire within her, she knew she had weaknesses. Furthermore, she saw herself as an experimental subject, one that required testing, and an opportunity that should not be shared with Earth until proven safe, reliable, and effective.

For these reasons, she decided to hunt down the faceless men and discover to what sinister purpose they owed allegiance. She would get a chance to release and practice her powers in stealth...and maybe to exact some vengeance and appease her guilt.

Carolyn was looking through the rubble of the wreck when they found her. Emergency services had seen the blazing fireball in the sky and come to investigate. Fortunately, the labor gave her thick smudges of charcoal and grime, disguising the fact that she was truly unharmed. She turned up no clues as to the identity of the men, but she did discover that the firefighters and

policemen could not see her shield – only any flames she created, giving off heat and light energy.

“So that was a dead end, little bean,” she told her hamster that night. “That leaves a few options: hang out in dark alleyways, check with the police like I was supposed to do after the first mugging, or see what the Internet can dish up.”

Unfortunately for Carolyn, even a top-of-the-line laptop is only as good as the files it can access. With a little basic hacking, she even trawled the deep web for clues secreted away on hidden servers, but she simply didn’t have enough concrete facts to know what exactly to look for.

Luck was not entirely against her, however, for the police station called her scant days later. They wanted to question her in regards to the ongoing investigation as to the crash’s cause. Up to this point, they had taken only preliminary statements from Carolyn. She had lied a bit in those reports, sharing that she’d seen two armed men, but not that she had pinned down all the passengers and confronted the thugs in the cockpit.

She made sure to arrive just before lunchtime. The questions in the interview were straightforward; Dr. Solon was not a suspect, but merely a potential source of information. As the officer led her out, she closed her eyes briefly and willed a small fire in the break room just before they reached it. It was then she discovered her mighty energies could only affect things she could see. Without a guiding signal from the chemicals in her brain, the products of the virus’ advanced chemical reaction could do nothing.

Though her specialty was the study of life rather than physics, Carolyn was a scientist through and through. So she tried an experiment, sending a rigging of force ending in a packet of heat down the uncarpeted hall and, turning it to the right, willed it in the known direction of the break room. Carefully, she extended the leg of energy only she could see as a faint golden glimmer. She was rewarded in short order by screams and shouted orders. As she’d hoped, the officer pointed to the exit and asked her to see herself out, then ran off to join in the commotion.

“With any luck, I’ve just lit someone’s expensive preppy coat on fire, and not their leg,” she said aloud as she hustled toward the intelligence room.

Glancing in the large window, she surveyed the room, deserted but for an array of computer monitors. All clear. She headed inside.

“First: a defense.”

With a thought, Carolyn dragged a tall file cabinet and a bookcase over to block the view from the window. Then, with the barest effort of will, she summoned such an unyielding wall of force to barricade the door that a tank could not have broken through. Then she sat down at the nearest computer and turned off the screensaver.

“Dram it; a password.”

Force and destructive energy would not help now. Perhaps three pounds of brains, a simple understanding of human nature, and a quick trick to multiply effort would suffice. Carolyn set about weaving her most finely detailed construction yet.

First, she summoned two phalanges of force an inch above one computer’s keyboard. These she connected to a central nexus by drawing a line of solid strength. Even when Carolyn connected each terminal in the room to the improvised force network, the formation ignored the cantilever effect of gravity entirely, floating unbent and solid just above the keyboards of every computer, curving gracefully around obstacles. A tether came down from the central nexus to wrap around Carolyn’s own pointer fingers; she channeled a bit of energy into the force scaffold. She took a deep breath and tried to remember PlasmiCorp’s employee training on choosing a good password, imagining the kind of people who would disregard it.

“p-a-s-s-w-o-r-d” she typed with two fingers. The faint sound of fifty keyboards tapped in synchrony clacked about the room. The levers of her energy construction undulated back and forth with her own movements, and the virtual fingers pressed gently down on the high-security keyboards. Fifty enter keys sank down and came back up, moved by a ramshackle construct no one but Solon could see.

A quick gaze about the room revealed that no computers had suddenly logged in. Some of them didn’t even have the username filled out, but most did. Good enough.

“1-2-3-4-5-6,” she tried. No luck. The counting numbers to 8 produced no results either.

“c-o-c-k-r-o-a-c-h-c-l-u-s-t-e-r.” Of course not.

“l-e-t-m-e-i-n.”

“a-b-c-1-2-3,” she hazarded. Login music began playing from a computer in the corner, and Carolyn quickly ran over to turn off the volume. She allowed her gadget to dissipate into heat energy, minutely warming the room temperature.

Hacking into one computer didn’t give Carolyn full access to every file on the station’s intranet, but she dragged a fair few likely looking files onto her flash drive, put it back in her pocket, and logged out. Then she took a peek out the window through a gap in the screening furniture.

“Looks like everyone’s still on lunch break,” she said to the empty room. Her personal shield absorbed the field with which she’d barricaded the door. Carolyn marveled at how quickly she’d picked up these skills so unfamiliar to anyone on Earth.

As Carolyn slipped out, she realized it was still possible that someone had tried the door, found it locked, and headed somewhere to report the matter. She left a little loop of power curled

around the deadbolt knob and fed it under the door, which she then closed. From the hallway, she could feed energy into her virtual structure and dexterously slide the bolt home from the inside. The bookshelf she left as it was.

Back at her apartment once again, Carolyn popped the flash drive into its slot. Her eyes immediately began scanning documents at rapid speed. Outside, she could hear the eldritch mourning coo of the roadrunner, which had been exceptionally noisy of late. When she began typing notes to herself, it seemed almost as if he was imitating her, clacking his beak rapidly as roadrunners will do around people.

Criminals commonly wore masks, of course. The police reports were full of them. However, only a few fit the clues Carolyn had of thugs who appeared faceless. Bit by bit, a pattern emerged.

The police must have known the criminal organization stemmed from a district a few miles south of the PlasmiCorp building. Anything from muggings, break-ins, or hackings could be traced to those who'd worn the misty mask. Some had been arrested, shadowed, or interrogated, but no one talked and no one had made it back to any sort of base.

The group had even made attacks against PlasmiCorp; Carolyn had not heard about a series of break-ins to janitorial outbuildings, but apparently that had been perpetrated by a small squad of faceless men who were never apprehended. Another defense was more successful: When someone hacked into PlasmiCorp's internal server, the corporation requested FBI help. Tech agents traced the attack back to a certain small house; a team arrested a man leaving the house with a bag containing a blackjack, a knife, a crowbar, and a misty white mask.

The Solon mind traced other evidence too. She felt no hint that a solution was inevitable in this instance: this was no idea whose time had come. Carolyn was on her own now, unassisted by fate, trying to find the people she held as responsible as herself for the fiery incineration of a hundred innocent passengers. Chemical testing showed that alcohol was present at every hit in some way. An image had begun to form, but it still appeared too hazy to make out what to do next. Carolyn decided she needed more data. She penned a memo to the airport asking security to keep an eye out for the masks and waited for the bright sun to go down.

That night, a fireball appeared in the sky, a shooting star that did not come down to rest. Instead, it streaked about, haphazardly at first, and then steadily smoother. The phenomenon repeated itself the next night, and the next. If you could get very close to it, and could see through the wings of fire and tail burning like that of a comet, you would see Carolyn Solon inside, flashing through the sky at great speeds, seemingly at her ease.

Carolyn found that little practice was necessary to control her powers. Time after time, she failed to reach any sort of limit to what she could accomplish. Whether workaround or direct

solution, she could always find a way for application of energy to achieve her goal. She had the right way of thinking, it seemed.

She was no physicist, but she found it easy to imagine a ballistic trajectory and find herself following it, cloaked in fire. Flying through the air took some finesse, but her very being raced along the learning curve as if she was a gifted pilot. It was a self-empowering effect, fueling accommodation automatically through the virus' strange connection to Carolyn's mighty mind. The whole process really did fly on its own wings, needing little further help from her.

As she had calculated while leaving Egypt, the cap on the amount of energy stored for the virus' mining efforts in her bones was vast, nearly incalculable, and entirely inconceivable within the human mind. In calcium alone, she had enough mass to power Santa Fe for about five millennia. It was truly stunning. Applying this energy was likewise unimpeded by the bounds of ordinary mortal possibility.

In about a week, she had learned to fly; she was a gorgeous coppery blaze in the nighttime air, with perfect maneuverability. Carolyn could fly at any altitude, dodge obstacles, and seek out treachery in the streets below.

She took to flying with a thin sheet of force in front of her and to the sides like a windshield against the biting wind. Any position, no matter how relaxed, did not impede her flight. She never felt cold anymore; fire ran in her very veins, coming to her like a gift from Ra through the folded protein coat of a rapidly multiplying virus. Within her cocoon she sparkled like a plasma beacon, overjoyed in the ease of power and science, shouting into the night in a battle cry amplified by might but echoing only within her personal envelope:

*“Alis volat propriis!”*

Always, she was on the lookout for the masked men. She had to work, too, had to spend time researching at the PlasmiCorp office, or manipulating microscope slides in thin air at home. Keeping up appearances while actively seeking vengeance presented many difficulties. She created several revolutionary chemical baths in the lab, but her heart was not really in it. A pay raise came her way, though she saw less and less of Aaron.

Her flights turned up nothing in a month's work, though she learned to tone down the fire exuding from her flight path to a mere throb of flames. It was a day she was running late for work, having spent too much time scribbling down a formula inspired by hamster food volumes of all things, that she finally found the hint she sought.

Carolyn took a shortcut to work. It was an isolated compulsion of hers to count distances as she traveled, using various measures, and she suddenly recognized her location. She looked up from her paces to see, in the arid dawn, that same alley in which she had suffered the nighttime attack before her fateful visit to Egypt. And to hear soft-booted footsteps approaching.

They came around corners from both directions. Somehow, the rising sun scattered on their strange cloth facemasks made them seem eerier. Because of the masks, Solon could not tell if they were all the same thugs from her earlier encounter, but they seemed more cautious this time, spreading themselves out in a high-coverage pattern.

“Ah,” one of the masks breathed, “it is the same mademoiselle who escaped our attentions months ago.” Each thug nodded in unison. “And this time, we are armed – aren’t we, friends?” Pistols appeared in each hand, and the soft click of hammers being drawn back echoed in the narrow alley. The mask who had spoken held a gun in each hand, twirling them idly and confidently. The noose of men tightened, sealing off the alley in both directions.

But fire sparked between Carolyn Solon’s fingertips, and the might of a sun beat in her chest. She actually suppressed a smile as they closed in. Carolyn had decided to gamble on a trap.

Carolyn, in her labcoat, wearing her laptop over her shoulder, again faced down the thugs.

“Uh...you have guns this time.”

“Yes... perhaps you’ll be more cooperative and respectful. Let’s start with your apology to those who hold your life in their hands.”

“Er. My files aren’t backed up this time. Sorry about that earlier misunderstanding. And improvised clubbing.”

“That’s better. Now maybe you should drop that case before you get another funny idea.”

“I just got a new warranty, though.”

The lead thug cocked his head to the side, lifting his guns a bit. Carolyn’s laptop bag unzipped of its own accord and the hard drive ejected itself directly into her hand. Fire raced along the strap to enfold the bag and a shield sprung up around Solon’s body. She swung it in a blazing arc of destruction. They opened fire immediately, bullets ricocheting off Carolyn’s shield. Carolyn configured her shield to increase the energy of incoming projectiles, and the bullets began to return on her attackers, taking one guy in the chest and another in the thigh.

“I need someone to run away,” Carolyn said quietly. A shockwave emanated from her body, pinning everyone to the nearest wall with visible flame, leaving only one man free. Carolyn fried the air between her fingertips and the man. The ray of red struck the wall next to his head, disintegrating bricks and mortar. “Oh look. I missed,” she smirked. The man took off running and Carolyn floated after him, darting in and out of cover.

Scenes of desert city blocks, ending in Hogshead Brewery.

“So this is their front. Makes sense, given the spatial data,” she thought.

She flew toward the business entrance to the brewery. “Broad daylight should provide all the cover I need against their guns,” she said. Unfortunately, bullets came ripping into the ground and walls around her; not abundantly enough for an automatic weapon, but powerful enough to tear chunks out of the street. She nabbed one with a tendril of power and sheathed it in a pocket for later investigation. A roadrunner took off down the street and around a corner, startled.

Carolyn could make out two men on the roof of the building. One lay hidden behind a barrel and some construction scaffolding, sighting in on her. The other was ducking behind a chimney after every shot. “So they were warned. And they’re not scared,” she told herself. “At least, they’re not scared yet.” She grinned and stepped forward into the path of the bullets. Sparks flew from her energy shield and it burst into furious flame.

Carolyn calmly walked up to the door of the business as if checking its hours. The barrage stopped. Carolyn stopped the shield from giving off heat energy, effectively rendering it invisible to all but her. She stepped in. An ordinary, unmasked man stood behind a counter. He squinted at her, perhaps wondering if this calm lady was the one he had been warned about; wondering if he could blow his cover.

“Hi! My name is Carolyn, and I was wondering if I could look into pricing? It’s my daughter’s 21<sup>st</sup> next month.”

“Uh, yeah, ale or mead or what?”

“You still make mead? Cool.”

“Uh, how much you want?”

“How much would it be to buy 3 aams of mead?”

Carolyn could tell by his face that no one had ever asked him that question before. He was still squinting at her, too; evaluating her.

“It’s about 120 gallons,” she explained. “Would that be enough for a party?”

“Uh, I’m gonna get a manager. You wait here,” the thick man told Carolyn. He ducked behind a wooden door and Carolyn heard him lock it. Approaching, she found she could hear something heavy scraping inside. She simply bored a small hole through the door and put her eye to it.

A huge, heavy-looking barrel was moving aside. The cashier had his finger on a button under a keypad, impatiently waiting for the barrel to reach its proper position. He slipped a key into a padlock under the barrel, then flipped open a trapdoor. Into this recess he descended. The barrel ground back into place.

“Ah. I would never have found that on my own,” she announced to the empty room. She hesitated before the door. “*Nec Temere, Nec Timide.*” She took a deep breath, then carefully cut through the hinges, hauled the heavy door out of the way, stepped through, and then hauled it back. “It’s no time to be timid, but no time to be incautious, either.” The door had a metal frame, so it was easily welded back into place. “You see nothing!” Carolyn quipped to any who might appear to inspect the door. “You will not gain entrance easily.”

She walked over to the huge hogshead barrel. She pushed at it. It must have been full of liquid, because it was indeed heavy. If it was a real hogshead, it must have weighed about a thousand pounds, plus whatever machinery resisted her. She glanced at the keypad.

“If the code isn’t ‘123,’ I’m resorting to brute force.”

That wasn’t it, so she began preparations. She wove a complex exoskeleton of energy and force around her limbs, connecting these vital parts to each other with a chassis of fire. Subtlety did not seem possible for much longer; intimidation sounded great. With amplified arms, she shoved the barrel screechingly aside and ripped up the trapdoor forcibly. No rain of bullets answered her, so she descended the dark stone stairs lit only by her fire. The trapdoor received its own welding treatment; she could break out in an instant if she had to.

Carolyn stepped into a dungeon network of corridors, floored with stone pavers and walled with expensive masonry. From this one point, she could already see five hallways leading in different directions. Doubtless, there were countless more just around the bend.

She held herself still, listening. Over the crackling of her armor she heard deep voices in one direction. She flew silently along a corridor pointing that way, dimming her fire to a dull glow. It seemed like she’d entered a big room; she could not see its boundaries or dimensions. Moans came from the darkness on either side.

The thug from behind the counter was speaking to a masked man by torchlight. “...like the right one,” he was saying. “Shoot her. In the leg, if you can, and put her in the cells with the others.” At this, the unfamiliar thug pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the darkness.

Cashier thug turned to look around uneasily, and Carolyn saw he had put on a white mask as well. “Can I take Chavarin with me?” he asked.

“I find it hard to believe that some chick could kick all your asses, but if it’s true, bring whoever you can find.”

Time for action. Solon made sure she was well-hidden behind something, then fired a lightning-fast curl of flame around the room. The effect was like a light flicking on and off, giving Carolyn a chance to take in its contents. She gasped involuntarily.

Iron cells studded the room, bounded by stone walls. Worse, ragged humans lay in many of the cells, usually chained to the wall. One man was even chained to the ceiling, hung by his wrists, head drooping despondently. Both thugs looked around immediately, snatching up torches from the desk and lighting them from the wall bracket.

Carolyn allowed her chassis to flare into fire, and doused their torches with a burst of force. She appeared the only feature of the room, a fiery demon surrounding a humanoid shadow. Guns, deadly automatics this time, pointed at her unsteadily in shaking fists. Making a gigantic fist of force, she grabbed both men and slammed them against the wall from fifty feet away. They slumped, barely conscious. One tried to point his gun at her again, favoring an injured arm.

“I’ll have questions for you later,” she told them. A single massive ethereal finger made a flicking motion, gently intercepting both skulls and knocking their owners unconscious. The nearest prisoner, richly dressed in an expensive dirty suit and displaying long, black, wavy hair, gaped at her display and dropped the ornate walking stick he’d been cradling.

Show the dark room. Something funny is ticking within most of the prisoners; you can see it in their faces. A puddle of water in the corner of the black haired man’s cell reflects the bars of the cage..

Now she let her light penetrate every corner of the room. One prisoner she recognized, a man from the military the newscasts had identified as missing this past month. The rest were strangers, but most surely didn’t deserve to be here. Maybe some of the rougher looking characters; they might be from rival gangs.

“Everyone, promise not to scream, please,” Carolyn Solon commanded. “You’re coming with me.” The jailer’s keyring burst apart, each key flying to cell after cell, looking for fits. She strode toward the first door that flew open, its inhabitant chained to the wall. Suddenly, a fit came over him, and he lunged forward with reckless effort. To Carolyn’s horror, his skin sloughed off at the wrist, leaving blood and flesh peeling around the manacles. On his next lunge, she heard the shattering of bone and the mangled hand came free of the handcuffs.

As this demon-possessed thing came springing at Carolyn, another slammed into her from the back. She winced, but the armor held easily. Turning quickly, she saw that four or five of the mindless men were readying themselves to engage more gunmen who came trooping into the room. Each of the wild prisoners looked normal enough, except for horrific injuries sustained in escaping before Carolyn’s keys had freed them. None seemed to mind the damage, nor did it impair their wild charge. A woman in one of the cells started to scream in terror. This contingency Carolyn was ready for, and a gag of force shoved its way into the frightened woman’s mouth, stifling all sound.

Only then did destructive energy arc out from Carolyn Solon, violently incapacitating all the attackers at once. She heard an appreciative gasp from the black-haired man, but he covered his own mouth with both hands when she turned angrily toward him. “Truly incredible,” he whispered seconds later. Carolyn wasn’t sure she liked the way he stared.

## *It gives you the fire and flight of the Phoenix...*

Carolyn Solon could hear slamming and yelling up above the mossy stone ceiling. “They’ll be getting in soon,” she announced to the prisoners that remained. “Unfortunately, I can’t trust you not to turn into zombies, so I’m afraid you will have to come along with me as captives for at least a bit longer.” So saying, she sent out grappling hooks to each of the former prisoners, soft but unrelenting. Their chains melted away and they came to float on tethers behind Carolyn like balloons. “You’ve slowed me down enough. No offense,” she said. The dark-haired man looked amused. Everyone else looked terrified.

“If you came here looking for information, perhaps I could help,” he said mildly.

“You know something about these pigs?” Carolyn asked.

“That is right. I was on their trail before they caused your plane to crash, Dr. Solon.” The man was perceptive to see through the layer of fire and heat wave that enveloped Carolyn.

“You are certainly well informed.”

“It is my business to know things, and my most important qualification to notice details. The Hogshead Brewery is a front for the most well-organized crime mob in the States. They call themselves the Hogshead Gang. They are currently under contract with a corporate rival of yours, Dr. Solon, whose name I cannot disclose for confidentiality reasons. It is my suspicion they had intended to gain possession of the invaluable documents in your briefcase on Plasmicorp’s osteoid virus. I also have reason to believe they attacked your airplane flight with much the same motives.”

“That’s enough to be getting on with, then,” said Carolyn, “unless you happen to know their private encryption key.” He shook his head in her grasp. He was certainly taking this calmly.

“Too bad. Time to leave before the party gets here.”

“I should warn you that their leader, Stormy Jackson, is an accomplished marksman, ballistics expert, and con man. He is no fool, to leave his back door unguarded.”

“Bullets aren’t a problem. Buckle up, everyone.” Protective domes of kinetic energy covered everyone’s heads obligingly, though they could not see it. Carolyn blazed down the corridor, a couple feet above the dungeon floor, flying in her usual relaxed position. Her refugees trailed slightly behind her, completely immobile and invulnerable. They’d be safe, shielded by the capacity of the most powerful fact of all physical law.

She flew back the way she had come. There was no way for the Hogshead Gang to know she was in that particular cell of their dungeon; with any luck, they would be looking for her along another corridor. Indeed, for a time her luck held. It held until she arrived at the stairs up to her trapdoor to freedom.

There, she found a fleet of thugs awaiting her. The closest of the faceless men cracked hamlike fists menacingly, while those further back held assault rifles. It appeared they felt no need for secret cautions this far underground.

On the highest step stood one man without a mask, his stance revealing every confidence. His head rose a bit shorter than the others. The lower half of his face was split by a gashlike cocky grin. He held a magnificent mahogany stocked crossbow, locked and loaded, aimed at the flaming specter that was Solon.

“What magician comes to visit our humble brewery?” he asked her, grinning even more broadly.

“No magic involved, sorry. Fundamental scientific principles only, I’m afraid. A little microbiology, a little theoretical physics.” Now was the time for a snappy code name by which to introduce herself, but Carolyn had no ideas. “I’m interested in, uh, medieval recreation.”

That made the man show all his teeth in the widest smile of all, if rather crooked. “Then I’m the man you seek. Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Dr. Stormy Jackson, and this,” he swept his arms expansively about him, “is my dungeon.”

“Looks more like a lair,” snapped Carolyn.

Stormy frowned. “It’s a dungeon, and your future home. Men, concentrate your fire!” A waterfall of tiny, high velocity bullets tore at Carolyn’s shield, but she simply smiled as the lead melted away without touching her. Stormy frowned again and lifted his crossbow.

Carolyn Solon was utterly unprepared for what happened next. She found herself slammed against the stone wall as if hit by a speeding freight train. Where did all that force come from? How was it carried even in that unusually thick quarrel? The crossbow bolt impacted her shield so powerfully she was caught off guard. Thought and movement fused together as everything happened at once. Her neck was uncradled for a brief moment, just long enough to whip her head back against the wall milliseconds after her shielded back struck. The shield flickered for perhaps a decisecond, but that was enough for vengeful automatic gunfire.

Pain blossomed like fire in Carolyn’s calf, bringing her instantly back to full consciousness. “What hellish inertics –” she began. Dr. Jackson grinned, already pulling back another crossbow bolt.

Carolyn grimaced and concentrated. Red spots swam before her vision. The shield snapped back into place, the prisoners snapped up onto their tethers again. The huge bullet popped out with a sucking sound audible to Carolyn and dropped to the floor, covered in her blood. She bit down on a small sphere of resistance and tried to keep control of herself as she cauterized the wound with a fiery thought.

To think was to act when Carolyn became so intimately connected with the viral action. With time and decision blurred into one, the entire battle took place in just under five seconds from the time Dr. Jackson spoke to the time Carolyn regained control of her rapidly spiraling temper.

The instant she felt better, Carolyn incinerated Stormy's next bow quarrel, taking care to get molten metal on the brilliant mechanical workings of the crossbow. Then she collapsed the solid stone stairs, burying the Gang in rubble and causing several shots to go awry. "Friendly fire is a great demoralizer," she told them. Then she lit their suits on fire and placed a dome of pressure over the whole area. This dome remained rayed to her by a fiery cord until she had flown out of sight.

The microbiologist raced through the air to a little park a mere block from the Plasmicorp building. The two surviving prisoners she dropped off apathetically outside the police station; someone would sort out whether they deserved to be free or not. The longhaired man, however, came with her to the park, which locals knew as Tailfeather Reserve. Solon dropped against a tree trunk and began examining her wound. When she looked up, the man who knew so much about the Hogshead Gang was watching her. Here in the daylight, he seemed surrounded by a million tiny floaters like miniscule afterimages of the sun.

"I don't think it hit anything vital. All major veins, arteries, and bones seem entire and unscathed," she told him. "But enough about me. Who are you?"

For answer, he reached into his suit and pulled out a shiny badge in a silk wallet.

"A plainclothes detective?"

He nodded. "FBI. I was investigating the Gang, but they experienced a stroke of good fortune and I was discovered."

"So tell me – I guess they don't really have anything personal against me, hm? But a contract against Plasmicorp..."

"Oh, Dr. Solon, I am afraid it will now be very personal."

"Jackson holds a grudge, does he?"

"Yes. You did no one any favors by sparing his life back there."

“I’m very sorry saving you from your jailers wasn’t enough for you,” Carolyn apologized wryly.

“Let us speak of that immediately,” said the man. “You have acquired mighty powers from somewhere.”

Carolyn hesitated. She did not really have any reason to trust this man, yet he already knew who she was and what she could do. In the end, what choice did she have? Had she saved him, aborting her mission early, only to necessitate his death when his curiosity crossed the line of her own secrets?

“Do you have a business card or something? Give me a way to contact you and I’ll think about sharing my story.”

He handed her an embossed card from yet another pocket in his coat. She barely glanced at it, but spoke again.

“That was just to make sure I know where you live. You’re traceable now. I’m going to allow you into my confidence, but if you ever tell *anyone*, I will hunt you down and kill you. Is that clear?”

He nodded, still not a bit unnerved.

“Ok. I’ve invented a virus while working at PlasmiCorp. It evolved from the osteoid virus, which in turn is based on one resurrected in France from human DNA junkyards. With this in my bones, I can convert calcium into pure energy with the full power of  $E=mc^2$ . Every tiny bit of matter contains massive amounts of energy, waiting to be unlocked.”

He laughed, a bit derisively. “You have a disease in you, and claim that it is what gives you the fire and flight of the Phoenix?”

“The fire and flight of the Phoenix! Yes, that’s an apt way of putting it. But if you scoff at my explanation, you scoff at the mighty *celeritas*, the speed of light, the *C*, the very highest and unsurpassable of velocities.”

“All right, all right, I believe you!” he laughed. “Another question: Are you not afraid that you will run out of power if you squander it on nightly romps through the sky as a comet?”

“I hope you’re the only one who notices that,” said Carolyn, chagrined. “I needed the practice. But to answer your question, ‘No.’ Not at all. Don’t you get it? Efficient mass-energy conversion is dram near unlimited power. The kilogram of calcium in my body alone is basically a star’s worth of cold nuclear fusion.”

She grinned, excited to explain to someone. “The smallest bone in my body...well, let me put it this way. I had to invent a new unit for that amount of energy. The smallest bone is the

stirrup, the *stapes* in the ear. The unit of energy is called a '*plethrostadion*.' Plethora, full, or plethron, the amount of land the Greeks could plow in a day. Huge. *Stadion*, a long length, used for measuring great journeys. I would have to move things around at light speed for weeks, constantly, to use up all this energy."

"I am impressed. Where do I sign up?"

"It's a private formula," she snapped. "It would take years of formulation to engineer the virus to tolerate another genome." This was not entirely truthful, though it had a grain of honesty in it – Carolyn had used her own body's specifications as the model for her miracle virus. The balance of fatty acids for secondary infection had to be just right. The bionic process required a precise mix of dense bone and cancellous, high-surface-area bone for bonding sites. "I have to grow it in a special formulation, given a sample of my tissue for adaptation."

"Can you use lab-grown bone tissue to feed the virus? What about bones just lying around?"

"No! The virus doesn't want dead tissue. It wants a host, in which it can live for years to come. It's got no processes for dealing with foreign immune systems. As for lab-grown bones, it'd be difficult to clone – I've found my own immune system grows more overreactive as the infection deepens. And today's lab tissue is not perfectly like the real thing anyway."

"Could you give me another demonstration? I do have a chronic limp; I need a walking stick – slice that limb off that oak over there."

"Holy hell, man!" she exploded. "I don't really have time to be your magical science babysitter. I've got to get to work. *Here* is your stupid walking stick." Her power sliced the branch cleanly from the tree and flicked it over to the man, who picked it up without taking his eyes from her.

"And remember..." she flipped his business card out and looked at it again, "Benjamin Ulysses Arcos...if you ever tell anyone anything you learned today, you will be hunted down and killed. By me. With the fire and flight of the Phoenix. Enjoy your day; nice to meet you."

"The pleasure was mine, Doctor Solon."

Work continued much as it ever had. Dr. Solon was still a bit of a celebrity, of course, especially among the younger lab techs. Perhaps Aaron felt a bit intimidated by her, too, for he kept his talk strictly business.

In fact, he wouldn't stop talking about business.

“Our stocks have never been so high, Miss Solon. Investors are flocking to anything with our company name now, not just your project. I’ve recommended you for a raise, of course. We’re looking into opening several more buildings, or at least hiring some new employees. I’ll want you on those interview boards, Miss Solon.” He then proceeded to detail exactly how the corporation would be shuffling all its assets around. Solon could hardly have cared less.

When she returned to her spacious office – spacious, yet cluttered with the refuse of a woman too focused to clean – she found a new note stuck to her monitor. A message was scribbled on the back of another of Arcos’ fancy business cards. It seemed the agent wanted to meet with her again. Well, he’d just have to wait. Solon had more important business.

She was almost certain someone had infiltrated her workplace. Strategic memos suddenly started to go missing. Crucial files disappeared from the databases entirely, and other systems showed evidence of unwarranted processing spikes. That could indicate snoopers of any sort. Worst of all, a newly hired lab tech had disappeared. No one knew where she was, and a police report had to be filed.

Carolyn had only one suspect: the Hogshead Gang. They’d pay for that last offense! New recruits held the future of scientific medicine in their hands. Solon viewed their station as a sacred one, one that should be removed from betrayal and violence. And after what she’d seen in the cellars of the Hogshead Brewery, she could put almost nothing past the Gang.

Scant days later, Dr. Solon had her case airtight. She’d stepped up security at the lab, gathered evidence, and found a backdoor way to plant the mystery in police hands via an anonymous call to a news station. Carolyn was gratified to see police en route to the Gang’s hideout that very same night.

But she had underestimated her enemies, and the news carried a very different story the next morning.

“Following an anonymous tip, city police investigated a local brewery last night. Police told us they found evidence of a harrowing story. A lone assailant apparently assaulted the brewery, currently under construction, armed only with a crossbow. The brewery’s owner, Stormy Jackson, says the assailant took off after Jackson fired several warning shots. Forensic evidence appears to bear out this story. Jackson says he did not report the incident, saying, quote: ‘I took care of things, right? This is the West. We take care of things personally; no need to get the cops involved.’”

“We’re dealing with a master, little buddy,” Carolyn said to the hamster. “Perhaps it’s time to talk to Arcos after all.”

They met at Tailfeather Reserve again, amidst the baked shrubs and tumbling newspapers. The day was a windy one. Arcos leaned heavily on his makeshift staff.

“You called the meeting. I’ll let you start,” Carolyn said.

“Indeed. I have been looking into some things. Discreetly, you understand.”

“Go on.”

“I did some extensive traveling in my early graduate days. In the Eastern Hemisphere. Particularly the Slavic countries, and all the way down to Egypt.”

“Yes, I thought you had a bit of a Russian look to you.”

“That is right. It is my ancestral homeland, you could say. Centuries ago. In tracing my roots, I dabbled in research into mysticism and mythology.”

“This had better be relevant to Stormy Jackson,” Carolyn said grumpily.

“No, I am afraid it was you I had in mind. Slavic folklore includes tales of the Firebird, a glowing bird that indicated both fortune and doom to whomsoever tamed it.”

“Wait just a minute, Benny!” Carolyn interrupted. “My ‘powers’ aren’t magic. They’re not something out of folklore. It’s science; a spin on something mankind has been trying to do for decades. A safe fusion energy source is supposed to be feasible in just a few years. From there it’s just a short leap of the imagination to something that can disassemble matter into energy. I’m thinking the molecules in the virus somehow activate the superstrings in calcium for metabolic fuel, though of course that’s not my area of exp-“

“Hear me out, Carolyn Solon!” Ben’s expression flickered suddenly dark and forbidding. “This is not a peasant’s tale. Surely it is not ludicrous that something else might possibly tap alternative ‘metabolic fuel,’ as you say?”

“That’s true,” Carolyn mused.

“And a virus must keep its host alive, am I not correct? Surely that is why it grants you a taste of its own fuel.”

“I agree,” admitted Carolyn, “though that is still a matter of biology and not of the supernatural.”

“But it is much in keeping with my own research into the very real occult. There were Proto-Slavic cults who seemed to worship the Firebird as an energy source. It seemed they had an altruistic relationship with their deity: they provided the rare habitat it specifically needed, and it provided light and sun in return. What is more, cultures all over the Northern Hemisphere

agree. They'd trade in phoenix feathers representing great sums of wealth, lighting up the homes of influential chieftains."

"I'm unconvinced," Carolyn stated. "Under your theory, why can't just anyone see the energy? Why just me?"

He looked her straight in the eyes. "I can see the energy."

She stared back at him. "You can?"

"I can only assume it is a result of my investigations in the occult. Those who deal with higher forces are touched forever by the interaction."

"Bullcrith. That's like saying studying microbiology lets you see viruses."

"Well, perhaps that is what is going on here. The virus grants you sharper eyes as part of its survival mechanism," Arcos said.

"That still wouldn't explain why you can see what I'm doing when I use the virus' energy. What shape am I making right now?" She wove a diagram of a benzene ring.

"A bit of a hexagon or snowflake," he guessed confidently. Solon nodded. "I would like to ask a question, if I may. Is your manipulation of the energy perfect?"

"Not exactly perfect. I couldn't hit the broad sign of a barn, for example." Benjamin Arcos gave her a blank look. "Where a barn is a unit of particle interaction equal to  $10^{-28}$  meters squared?"

"I see. So what are you planning next?"

"Another raid on the Hogshead Gang!" Carolyn swore. "That's why I agreed to meet with you. You said you knew more about them. Why did the police believe Jackson's stupid lies? He said I came at him with a crossbow, and he personally fired warning shots in self defense! But right off the bat two of his cronies were shooting at me from the rooftop! Jackson even fooled a forensics team!"

"I did tell you he was a master ballistics engineer. My guess is that he calculated everything out ahead of time, in case of a raid on his base. From my visit, for example, I discovered he has engineered every one of his guns to make identical bullet scratches upon firing. The result? It looks like every bullet fired by his gang comes from one legally registered firearm. That has to be how he made his cronies' work look like that of a lone gunman."

"And the crossbow attack?"

“I suppose he must have fired those bolts himself, determining exactly what would have happened if a single female maniac came at him with a crossbow. Though he lives a bit of a fantasy, he is very intelligent.”

“Well, he’s not as intelligent as me,” Carolyn said. “I’m going back in, and that’s that.”

“I suggest you wait just a bit longer. I will come in with you; you could use my knowledge, and I could use your magical shields. Give me one week to work on some more leads before you go scaring them off as a vigilante.”

“Magic is not involved in any way,” Carolyn sniffed, “but I’ll give you your week.”

*But the godly will flourish like the Phoenix and grow strong like the Cedars of Lebanon...*

“Authorities say 20 year old Alanna Solon never returned from a house party last night. She is presumed kidnapped. Witnesses say she stepped into a black Chevy at around 3am. Alanna was last seen wearing a gray T-shirt, jeans, and silver-and-black Reeboks. Those with information are asked to call 911 or the local authorities at...”

Carolyn Solon flipped the TV off. “I guess I did tell them I had a daughter, didn’t I,” she sighed. “I’m sure they’ll be regretting their lack of research soon enough.” She drummed her fingers thoughtlessly on the side table, leaving light scorch marks. “I thought this guy was supposed to be brilliant!” she said to the hamster accusingly. “They clearly remembered my name and who I was. But they hadn’t realized I don’t actually have a daughter?”

The weekend had arrived, so Dr. Solon had no responsibility to be at work. She felt guilty about the pain her careless lie might cause. Furthermore, the Gang was starting to know just a little too much about who exactly was levying fiery attacks against them. She saw no choice but to break her word to Arcos and go in six days early. She got out some graph paper and started doodling.

After a time, she had to bring out a ruler and a calculator.

The roadrunner outside her window could have seen her counting on her fingers and tilting her head from side to side as if reenacting something, but it did not know what to make of her.

\* \* \*

Carolyn Solon raged down out of the nighttime sky like a comet come to exact vengeance upon the ungodly, blazing with fire hot enough to melt stone. She wore her labcoat, as she expected to get a bit dirty. The branding effect no longer mattered to her – to the Hogshead gang, she would be out in the open.

She struck the earth with precision, hurling aside soil and stone in a carefully calculated location and continuing downward without slowing. A metal pipe burst, then melted shut again with a brief hiss of steam. Carolyn barreled into an underground chamber beneath her entry point, lined with stones. She ignored the chips of rock that bounced off her brightly glowing sphere of force and touched down gracefully upon the flagstone floor. By her own fiery light, she

could see familiar caged cells and iron manacles. Many were already melted into slag from her previous visit.

In the furthest cell, she found what she sought. A young adult sprawled hopelessly against the tight bars of a locked cage. She was slightly plump and had beautiful red hair. Carolyn vaulted toward the girl, liquefying everything in her way without effort. As she reached the girl's side, a pair of steel jaws like a gigantic bear trap snapped upward from the floor, only to puddle harmlessly on the ground in rapidly cooling metal dross. "What was that supposed to do? Nab me?" Carolyn laughed, glorying in her power.

"I had intended to get a blood sample," said a voice. Fireballs appeared in Carolyn's hands, ready to streak out in any direction. Stormy Jackson stepped out of a shadow, bearing a refurbished crossbow. Bricks slid out of place all over the room, revealing narrow slits, and Carolyn heard the click of armaments from behind the walls. "I did some remodeling. I hope you like it. We had expected you to arrive from the front door, Dr. Solon, but I suppose that was foolish."

"Yes, it was," was all Carolyn had to say. Jackson's confident look vanished briefly, only to return. Carolyn matched him grin for grin.

"At this moment, a team of more than a dozen snipers composed of the finest marksmen for hire have their automatic weaponry trained on young Mistress Solon. Are you willing to negotiate for your daughter's life, Dr. Solon?"

"I don't have a daughter, idiot," barked Carolyn. Weaponfire immediately ripped into the dank cell, but a shield had already sprung up around both women. She laughed as the bullets bounced off the hostage and herself. The girl gave a low moan of despair. "Doesn't look like there's any need to negotiate anyway. *Nemo me impune lacessit!* No one attacks me with impunity, as the Scottish say. But listen. I'm sick of games. You want me, you come get me, hear? No more involving innocent idiots without any connection to me. No going after people you think will work as hostages. I'm not afraid of you, and I am going to prove it with that blood sample you wanted."

Carolyn withdrew a cotton swab from her labcoat. She smiled for Stormy, then rubbed the swab on the roof of her mouth. It floated over to him on a wisp of kinetic energy and dropped into his open palm. Her confidence radiated from her like heat from warm asphalt. He simply stood there, stunned.

"I could bring this whole operation down in rubble around you!" she screamed. "I'm letting you live because I'm not a murderer, hear me?" She stabbed a finger at the thugs' leader. "But I'm not afraid to kill in self-defense, or to solve an overly persistent problem, alright? Now get...lost!" With that, she simultaneously wrenched every iron bar out of its housings and sent

them flying at the boltholes in the walls. Cursing and not a few groans issued forth. Stormy Jackson had ducked behind a desk; she could see him staring open-mouthed from behind it.

“Are you all right, Alanna?” The youth nodded weakly. “Great. We’re off. I advise you, Stormy, to relocate rather than sitting around on your angstrom doing research on my blood.” In a spray of molten metal and stone, Carolyn burst out of the Hogshead Gang’s secret hideout. “I’m sorry to say that your address was very easy to find on the Internet, Alanna. I’m going to drop you off a block from home. Your story is that some explosive went off down there and you took the opportunity to crawl out through the hole it made, understand? If you tell anyone about what I can do, I’ll put you right back where I rescued you from, and *sit tibi terra levis*, right? ‘May the earth rest lightly on you,’ ‘cause you’re dead. Is that understood?”

Alanna Solon could only dip her head. Carolyn set her down gently, as promised, and rose into the air again. “Oh. If ever you use the word ‘magic’ in describing this night, I’ll roast you alive myself instead of handing you over to the Hogshead Gang!” In a flash, Carolyn was airborne and out of sight.

\* \* \*

As expected, the Hogshead brewery closed down immediately after Carolyn’s invasion. A week later, a new owner had purchased the place, and some weeks after that it re-opened as a brewery again. Carolyn investigated, of course. She found the underground passage sealed tight and every trace of the jammed machinery removed. The Hogshead Gang had moved on.

This did little to ease Carolyn’s guilt. A hundred passengers had died simply because her research was on board and she had not done enough to save them. The leads were cold; even Arcos did not have any evidence to go on. Yes, the Hogshead Gang had moved on, but their legacy remained to haunt Carolyn Solon. Many nights she flew over the deserts and mountains to the southeast, a shooting star above blunt peaks.

She flew low this night, wreathed in copper flames, wrestling with the itch of restlessness and guilt. All this power, but what to do with it? She was no caped crusader. Vigilantism was not enough outlet for the plethrostadia of scarlet energy within her. This was the power to shape the world. Dust scattered beneath her, flocking in the displaced air. The domed teeth of the mountains on either side blocked out the light pollution of the cities – the silver light of the stars and the warm red of Solon’s passage were the only brightness to be seen against night-shadowed rose desert and azure sky. Just twenty feet below Solon, a roadrunner startled from a saltbush and pounded through the dust cloud. Incredibly, it kept up with Carolyn’s flight for a fantastic moment, a minute and a half of powerful strides before sliding back from her frame of reference. It stopped to look up at her as she vanished into the distance, and the saffron energy sparked between the peaks and the dust to surround the bird’s territory with a bower of crackling orange traces.

Dust and stone, centuries old, shifted and baked into new positions. The roadrunner cocked his head and gave a clicking call, then retreated toward safer ground. Miles away, underground, a vault of brilliant argent received the tiniest incidental dose of crimson power. New shadows bounded forth into the world, staring at the slow changes of a few millennia before fleeing the heat of the rising sun. The coolness of the desert night evaporated. Deep underground, a mighty crested silhouette arched suddenly against white cavern walls, then settled in to pace back and forth within its prison. {From this point onward, strange critters appear in the background of every scene}.

\* \* \*

“How is everything going, Miss Solon?” Aaron asked the next day at work. Truth be told, Carolyn was impatient and dissatisfied with her work, even though it was very important – she had to organize another batch of experimental evidence in preparation for further legal trials Plasmicorp’s lawyers expected.

“I’m fine, Aaron. Just a bit tired. Haven’t been sleeping well.” This had a grain of the truth in it – sleep came only with great difficulty these days. However, the extra energy provided by the virus to keep its host alive, healthy, and nigh omnipotent more than made up for the deficiency of rest.

“Glad to hear there’s nothing too serious. If you need a vacation, you just have to ask.” She shrugged. “What about a break from the same-old, then? The CEO just asked me to send someone to a week-long viral oncology symposium in Albuquerque. Someone had a breakthrough, and apparently they’ll be looking for potential buyers. They bill the technique as...hold on...” Aaron pulled out a memo and continued, “The Self-Evident HERV-K Progenitor technique. So check in on that, and any other exhibits that seem – here, are you ok, Carolyn?”

Carolyn had gone suddenly rigid. That name could easily be given to what she had discovered – a human endogenous retrovirus ancestor in the K family that, with a little tweaking, gave the user access to godlike amounts of energy. A gene sequence that seemed a little too obvious when you viewed human genetic code with Dr. Solon’s eyes. Even if they weren’t on track to discovering Carolyn’s virus, they would possibly be trespassing on Plasmicorp’s patent.

“Uh, sorry, Aaron,” she told the boss. “I guess you could say I’m just a bit surprised. You don’t know what that name implies, do you?”

“I’m afraid not? Is something wrong?”

“I’ll go to the conference. And I’ll need to bring our company lawyer with me.”

Carolyn drove to the symposium, the gas in her tank purchased by PlasmiCorp. It was a well-planned trip, with lodgings and agenda all arranged in advance. The lawyer had not come with her, but she had his cell phone number. He had a warning email from Carolyn.

She arrived, just a touch late. An electronic marquee flashed the name of the conference in fiery LED letters, but no one milled about in the parking lot. Carolyn stuck her notebook in the back pocket of her jeans and headed inside.

Immediately upon entering, one could tell something was wrong. The place was empty, not a receptionist or lab coat in sight. She turned to check the name of the building and felt the force of several burly bodies carry her forcefully to the ground. A dry voice whispered, "Don't move, Dr. Solon."

She complied, readying her thoughts for a shield should any gunfire begin. "I thought I told you to leave me alone, Jackson!"

"Yes, you did. Right before you arrogantly handed me a blood sample. A sample which happened to include your infamous virus, Dr. Solon. Allow me to introduce you to my newest firearm: the Virophage, designed to cancel the effects of any of your tricks!"

Carolyn turned her head to stare him down. Stormy Jackson grinned and fired.

The gun was a sleek piece of work, innovative and polished. He had painted it a discreet silvery-gray color. Aside from a thick wire leading to an extra cartridge behind the stock, it appeared much as a typical rifle. Stormy held it in only one hand, locking his wrist into position and squeezing the trigger to emit a faint pulse of unfamiliar energy which enveloped Solon's body. She could *see* it.

"If my experts are correct, that will last at least 72 hours," Jackson warned. "Please cooperate and you will not be harmed. After all, you have something I want, and it's locked up inside your fantastic brain."

Two thugs grabbed her under her arms and dragged her to a car she had seen in the parking lot when she arrived. They stuffed her unceremoniously into the trunk. Carolyn was not surprised that the trunk did not have a release on the interior. She felt the engine rev, felt the car accelerate. She immediately began counting seconds under her breath. The trip lasted a long time, until sweat poured down her body and the stuffiness burned her lungs. They stopped once to let some air into the trunk. Carolyn paused her counting: 12,994 seconds. They allowed her only a welcome glimpse of blue sky before sealing her in again, though they did drop a bottle of fruit punch Gatorade inside with her. She hated fruit punch.

The car decelerated to a stop and the engine shut off. Dr. Solon maintained her dignity, sipping the last of the sports drink and muttering "23,620 seconds. A bit over 6.5 hours." The trunk opened and she unfolded to an upright position, blinking in the warm light as the sun went

down. A huge faceless thug grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder. She caught a glimpse of the inhibitor gun peeking out of Stormy's suitcase as he walked a distance away from her.

After all that effort with the counting, they didn't even blindfold Solon. They did tie her wrists, however, and the ropes chafed. She supposed she could have correctly guessed their destination anyway – the band of thugs marched right up the front steps of the Hogshead Brewery. The panel to the secret door had reappeared, and once more the heavy barrel slid aside on hidden tracks to reveal the entrance to the dungeon.

“We really did abandon it,” Stormy told her. “But the new owner was nice enough to sell it back.”

“For someone who can rent an entire skyscraper just to give a private symposium to one microbiologist, I suppose money is no object,” Carolyn replied, upside down. Jackson only smiled.

The party trooped down the stairs and along the hallway, which had become a bit too familiar for Solon's tastes. However, they took a different turn, heading not toward the big prison room but to a smaller cell, into which Solon's captor threw her. Stormy took his leave, but a thug stayed nearby day and night. Each thug refused to answer any questions or even to make small talk. Solon suspected they kept the Virophage weapon within easy reach, though it was not visible.

“Firkin' thugs,” she cursed. She'd read that the loneliness was the worst thing about confinement, but Carolyn Solon was used to living alone. She was used to dim light, too. “They should have quit while they were ahead.” Her face twisted into a scowl that promised revenge.

Three days dragged slowly by, with occasional booster shots from the Virophage weapon. For food, she had paltry bread and water, and not enough of either. Then, at last, the demand came. Stormy Jackson entered the room with the weapon over his shoulder and a leer on his lips.

“I hope this experience has softened you up a bit, Dr. Solon. Ah, aren't those lows of life so much worse when you're coming down from the highest power trip? Exquisite. You're a goddess no longer, Dr. Solon. Please, my geeky Prometheus, share the fire of the gods, and I will let you go.”

“You want the formula for the virus, then?” Solon asked.

“Ah good. You know your mythology. Yes, that is precisely what I am after, Dr. Solon. Pen and paper will be provided for you.”

“Ha! I don't know who your bio-engineer on staff is, but he won't be able to recreate this virus from scratch from just my memory of its genetic sequence.”

“You forget that we already have the genetic sequence, Dr. Solon. Or are you forgetting about that blood sample you provided? Dr. Solon, I’m given to understand from your notes that there is a special solution which keys the virus to its host’s genome while the virus breeds. The virus itself does us no good – we need infection.”

“You’re right, Jackson. The first part of the virus’ life cycle, such as it is, requires a chemical bath. It’s very picky and I’m not sure it would be easy to replicate and adapt for a new host. You’re wasting your time and mine, Jackson.”

“Time?” he said. “I have no lack of time. My engineers will figure it out, given time.”

She scoffed and spat on the ground. He pushed a notebook, her notes that he’d taken from her, between the bars of her cage. One of the cronies began hooking her up to a device she recognized as a lie detector.

“Dr. Solon, this is exactly what you want. You see, my men and I are going to disappear. We will take your formula and vanish, leaving you alone just as you desire. We’ll be finished with you. You’ll be no danger to us; in fact, I expect you to leave us alone as well. When my gang reappears, we will be omnipotent, just as you were before this baby.” He patted the Virophage. “And you’ll be outnumbered.”

“You’re a fool, Stormy Jackson. I’m not putting this technology in your hands. You’d split the world in half trying to mount a bigger ballista on the moon. I’ve known people like you, people who use knowledge only as a route to power. And only power that serves only yourself, at that. You aren’t a ballistics engineer. You’re not a criminal mastermind. You’re a mad scientist whose only skill is calculus, whose only resource is money.”

“And I had hoped three days in solitary with the rats would be enough to make you appreciate my genius. Dr. Solon, I am *begging* you. Please, make this bargain with me, that I might spare your life.”

“Alright. I accept,” she said, catching Jackson by surprise. He blinked. She began writing.

“You do?”

“Yes, of course. We may have our differences, but for each of us there is a point at which the width of our finger is exactly equal to the English unit of the same name.”

Jackson looked confused for a bit, then recovered his poise. “Everyone has their price, Dr. Solon. Yours seems to be your own life. I am so sorry,” he smirked, “that my Virophage has caused you this inconvenience, but you see, I must become a god. The Virus is an idea whose time has come, Dr. Solon, and I must be a part of it.” He leaned against the wall while she finished writing. He looked over her work.

She told him, “The tricky part is host adaptation. I think maybe I got lucky, but maybe it was just time for this thing to arise, as you say. Here!”

A picture of a recipe in Solon’s confident handwriting:

- a culture of at least 10 grams of your own cells, mixed
- a quarter gallon of live oak tannin
- Tenth last (but not least), a few monkey cells
- 2 cubic inches of balsam (for benzoin resin, fixative) and frankincense (for humectant terpenes; allows for consistency)
- a drop of cardamom/amomum (allows controlled breakup of calcium)
- a chester of saffron (for crocin neuroprotection)
- 15 crystal minim of calcium chloride in bath
- 500 yarddashes of carnauba wax for base
- [1 shot of ponyhide]<sup>-1</sup> of calcium, any form, to be fed to the culture over one week's time
- My scruples on this are not fluid: add exactly 23/24 oz of hoar frost
- 1/18 kilderkin of cinnamon (for eugenol, population control and selection, neuroprotection), to be strewn around the culture
- 1/36 kilderkin gold particles, to bombard the virus for gene therapy
- 1 clove spikenard (activity control)

“Will your engineers know what to do with this?”

“They are the best in America,” said Stormy coldly, scanning the paper, “and your riddles will not deter them. I thank you for this gift, Dr. Solon. You will be moved to a higher security cell while we ensure you have really given us the solution.”

“Understandable,” said Solon. Stormy snapped his fingers and a troop of armed thugs arrived, their masks looking strangely misty in the dim light. One carried a flickering torch, giving off a resinous odor like perfume. Rough hands reached in to grab Carolyn and drag her along a series of narrow stone passages. They put her in a smaller cell, with an odor of mold and a thin layer of scum on all the surfaces. Jackson fired the Virophage in her direction once more, the torch retreated back along the hallway, and Carolyn was left in utter darkness. She listened for the sound of footsteps on stone to vanish.

A small globe of orange light appeared above Carolyn's head. She scrutinized several documents, a flash drive, and a set of keys. And, of course, her own notes, whose location she hadn't known. Carolyn Solon now held Stormy Jackson's driver's license, his concealed carry permit, several credit cards, some engineering documents, the business cards of associates, you name it. Trying a few keys, she realized none of them opened her cell. Shrugging, she prepared to just melt through the bars.

There was the sound of running feet. Carolyn hastily sat down, hiding the documents beneath her. Stormy trotted into view, waving the paper in one hand and a torch in the other. The Virophage hung carelessly across his back. "Solon! Every one of these measures is ambiguous. Every one!"

"Yup," said Solon carelessly, tracing circles in the dust beneath her orb of light.

"Some are riddles, some are synonymous with *other* archaic units, and some just seem meaningless! What the hell is a 'chester'? It doesn't even exist!"

"Chester is my hamster. A chester is a measure of the dry volume he eats in a day, within tolerance. It's about 4 ounces."

"And taking a unit to the negative po..." Suddenly, the Virophage was in Jackson's hands and he was screaming for guards. He had finally noticed the globe of fiery light. He fired again and again, but Solon wreathed herself in flames anyway. Gripping a pair of bars in her hands, she pulled the wall of her confinement inward like putty. She stepped out.

"Your idiotic Virophage doesn't do anything. Not. A. Damn. Thing. This isn't a movie, Jackson; you can't just slap some wires onto a pistol and expect it to be a ray gun." Rays of fire sliced the gun into molten slag. More leapt from Solon's hands to entwine about Jackson.

"How...why would you..." stuttered Jackson.

"How: I saw a huge increase in hits on a portion of my website that only someone with exclusive knowledge of my illicit virus would think to investigate. It aroused my suspicions, and a little digging showed that you were on the wrong track entirely. Honestly, I don't know if there is a right track.

Why: I just needed some files before I turned you into ashes, Stormy Jackson." She nudged the documents with her foot. "I said you'd burn, Jackson, and you'll burn." The fire sprang up around Solon, towering to the ceiling, scorching stone. A scarlet hand sprang out and punched Jackson in the face. He crashed to his knees, cradling a bloody nose. "That's for being a jerk. But your inner evil is what makes this self-defense, Stormy Jackson!"

The fire started at Stormy's feet. Just a few simmering flames. In an instant, they roared up to match Solon's own fiery shields. Even the rock above melted. Solon made it quick. Stormy Jackson died before he felt any pain other than fear. "You are no challenge to me," she growled.

Guards arrived, but she slammed them against the cold stone without a second thought. Then she flew through the tunnels at the highest speed she could maneuver, twisting around corners, bouncing freely off of walls, and smashing through doors. Whenever she found an exit, she melted whatever was available into a pinging slag heap to cover it. Finally, she burst out of the trapdoor under the brewery and jammed the covering barrel into the hole, heating the wood to make it pliable.

Her flames cooled. She walked calmly out the front door with a jug in her hand. She found Arcos arriving minutes later, a squad of agent cars behind him. He saw her walking and pulled up beside her. She noticed he'd recovered his original walking stick from the dungeons.

"You are in good health, Doctor Solon?" She nodded. "Your employer could not make contact with you. I decided to take a shortcut while the traditional police headed off to Albuquerque to investigate. They found that the symposium had not taken place at all, and that you were the only one invited."

"I, uh, managed to escape on my own, Arcos. Thanks for worrying about me though."

He gave her a measuring look, then winked. It looked odd on him.

"Also, uh, you can't really investigate the old hideout anymore..."

"I have a warrant."

"...but I did bring you this." She handed him the flash drive. "I'm sure it's encrypted and I don't have the skill to crack it."

He accepted it grimly. "What else can you tell me, Doctor Solon?"

"Your case is shot. Jackson was sunk by a case of vigilante justice. Sorry."

"Do not feel bad. That one, we have orders to shoot on sight. You do not have such permissions, of course, but you will not catch me telling anyone."

"Could you tell Aaron a story for me? Such as...a few witnesses arrived, spooking the gang, and I ran off into the desert and only just now hitchhiked back?"

"It needs work, Doctor Solon, but it is a start."

\* \* \*

Later, Carolyn streaked across the sky as dusk arrived, keeping her fires low. She flew fast, though it did not approach her top speed, which was a significant portion of *celeritas*. She smashed the top from a mountain and watched the pebbles rain down. Then she sat on the cleared space and hugged her knees to her chest, silhouetted against the sky like a fire with a shadowy heart.

“I’ve killed,” she said, “and one day I’ll surely be forced to kill again. I will not feel guilt. I will wallow in reason rather than emotion. I will assess each threat as carefully as I did this one, but I *will* find a way to utilize this energy, and I will preserve my being while doing it.”

The sun went fully down, and Carolyn sat alone. Things crawled over the mountain in the darkness, and something bestial and scaly raised its head to the starlight.

## *It conceives fire afar off from the light of heaven...*

A strange sound, a sort of rapid clicking, assaulted Carolyn Solon from every direction in a dream. Trancelike, she could not avoid it. It struck at her from the air, slowing her down, pulverizing her reaction time. Those invisible clicking blades whirred about her and she struggled to move. In desperation, she drew on her secret strength. Flames rose to counter the blades in her imagination. The clicking didn't cease, though she summoned enough heat to melt stone. Suddenly the floor dropped out from under her, and she was falling from the sky, a meteor destined to crash to the earth, annihilating itself and the human race at once. She snapped awake.

Ratt-t-t-t-r-r. Ratt-t-t-t-t-r-r. The soft clicking didn't end with the dream. Sunlight lanced down on Solon's face, warming her flesh. Rolling over, she noticed the bed sheets were smoldering.

"I've gone insane, Chester," she called to the hamster as she pounded at the embers. The ticking continued. She got up to close the blinds and noticed the sound grow louder at her approach. A large bird hopped onto the sill outside, staring directly into her eyes, beak clattering. Ratt-t-t-t-t-r-r-r! Solon noticed an unusual looping pattern on its breast. It was a roadrunner.

"Well hello there!" Carolyn told it. The roadrunner bowed deeply to her, unfurling its wings and spreading its beautiful tail. Then it dropped something from its beak onto the windowsill, bowed once more, and flew off. Carolyn opened the window to brush the thing, a dead lizard, to the ground. To her surprise, it skittered away from her hand, then leapt onto her arm. It was spiny, with beady black eyes and silver armor. The little lizard's claws dug into her bare arm; his tongue flickered out to taste the air. Despite appearing at first to be the roadrunner's prey, the little guy looked totally unharmed. After cocking its head up to look at her, he skittered down her leg and under the bed. She let him be.

Carolyn showered to remove the ashes and dressed nicely – she would be interviewing a prospective candidate at work today. She wolfed down some whole-wheat cheesy toast for breakfast and washed it down with three glasses of milk. Carolyn placed a hard-boiled egg in her purse, wrapped in a napkin, for the journey to Plasmicorp. Then came a knock upon the door. A bit startled, Solon snapped her fingers to produce a ball of fiery laser light, which she cradled in one hand, held in readiness at her side. She glanced out the blinds on the front window.

“Oh, it’s you, Arcos,” she said as she opened the door. She stepped aside to let him in.

“May I come in, Doctor Solon?” he asked politely.

“If you won’t be long,” she answered. “I’ve got to get to work.”

“I do not think you will be getting to work today,” Arcos said apologetically. “Something big is happening.”

Carolyn Solon stood with Benjamin Arcos on the roof of a high rise banking building. The lightning rods, industrial ducts, and neon signage offered plenty of screening from any curious observers below, but Solon and Arcos could see most of the city, and all the excitement it offered.

They stood atop a high building, overlooking the city. Solon’s angry face reflected in the mirrored skyscraper towering next to them, rising higher than their own. About them, panicked crowds surged about in the streets.

Arcos pointed a bony hand. There in the southeast quarter of the city, dust was rising. Suddenly, for no readily apparent reason, a four story building collapsed into charred splinters. The dust rose and shot forward. When it collided with a skyscraper, glass shattered as if it had exploded, and a corner of the masonry bulged inward before collapsing. Something large and shadowy moved in the center of the dust cloud. Carolyn could faintly hear the noise of groaning beams and falling bricks. Worse, she could see small shapes hurled from the building by concussive force, broken human bodies falling to the ground like the settling dust.

“I have an occult question, Doctor Solon,” Arcos said suddenly, eyes on the demonic activity in the distance. Carolyn, engaged in biting her nails in horror, shot him a glare.

“Right now, Arcos?”

“Yes, immediately. When you manipulate your...plethrostadia of energy... does it take any special mental effort to see it and bend it to your will?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so. I just think it and it happens. Like moving my arm. Only these arms are musclebound, unstoppable, and made of purest fire.”

“I see. Now, bearing in mind that I have studied the occult extensively, I need you to relax your mind. Picture a blank slate, if you will, with none of the distracting diagrams and equations for which you are so famous.”

“This has nothing to do with the occult, Arcos.”

“Now, when you have obtained clarity, snap back to focus. Focus on your inner rage, Doctor Solon, like what you felt when the Hogshead Gang threatened you. Finally, direct that feeling outward through your eyes toward...that building there, with about thirty floors and the ‘Lingua Franca LLC’ sign.”

“This is silly, Arcos. Why don’t you just tell me where to look, instead of going through this whole rigmarole?” she complained.

“Why not simply try what I suggest?” he challenged in return.

“*Nullius in verba...*” His composure, which was becoming so familiar, began to break. “Fine. You’re certainly making the angry part easier.” She... *threw* her gaze outward through a lens of mental perception and filtering she hadn’t realized she possessed. As she achieved this, an arc of silver energy leapt from the cloud of destruction and torched the building Arcos had pointed out. It leapt up into thirty stories of flame instantly, and was nothing but ash moments later. She thought she could see the fire and the heat wave radiating from the point of origin with her normal vision, but that core of silver energy she could see only with a special effort.

“Wha...did you do that?” she asked tremulously.

“It was not I, Doctor Solon,” he said. She thought she saw something gleam in his eyes, a tiny sunburst of anger or admiration. “It was the dragon.”

It rocketed out from the dust cloud, aerodynamic, perfectly maneuverable on wings that answered to a higher law of physics. The beast was pale silver-green, and long like a lizard, but armored from tail end to snarling face. Its twin crests were pinned back against its head, its tongue tasted the air, its sleek tail slashing back and forth, cutting debris in waves of destruction. As it pounced down to land for a moment, Carolyn saw that it had only two legs, in the rear. Its wings folded in a lightning movement to rest on clawed joints and serve as forelegs. There was something of the insect in its nature, in its movements. It shifted between poses just a bit faster than the eye could see. Yet it rested between vicious attacks, pausing like a lazy reptile. It held its head high like a king.

Solon loved it.

The wings shot out again and without any visible effort, the magnificent beast was airborne again. Argent fire leapt from its mouth like a stream to Elysium. The wailing of sirens snapped Solon out of her admiring reverie.

“People are dying,” she said flatly.

“Yes,” said Arcos. “People are always dying. This dragon though – he makes it a work of art.”

Carolyn squinted, then stretched out an elongated, extended tendril of her own copper power that spanned half the city. It split into a hundred wispy angels, snatching falling people out of the air as they leapt for safety, lifting fallen beams from groaning businessmen, spreading into thin shields against the fire of the dragon. The people she saved surely thought invisible wings upheld them. Yet they could see her flames wherever they sprouted, just as they could see the aftereffects of the dragonbreath, just as they could see the rampaging dragon itself. Solon’s face grew hard as she concentrated on managing so many independent applications of fire, pitting intelligent copper against bestial silver.

Arcos observed her intently while his radio squawked. Then he reported, “They’re calling in the National Guard for backup, Doctor Solon, but having trouble getting them to take this seriously, as you might imagine. It is not every day that a crowd spots a rampaging dragon. Our local police are almost there.”

“They’ll need me,” said Solon. A moment later, fire burst from every pore on her body, hiding her entirely behind a demonic guise. “Branding. How do I look?”

“Only someone who knew you very well would ever suspect a thing,” Arcos said, smiling. “If you could just drop me off gently at the base of the building?” Carolyn complied, then streaked toward the mayhem. Arcos started his car and disappeared.

Police cars and SWAT vans swerved into position. Officers hopped out bearing heavy rifles. The guns barked, but each bullet that struck the dragon glanced off with a spark of silver energy. It turned its gaze toward them, eyes flashing with that same sterling color against the light viridian of its skin. Mouth open, it confidently sighed a small javelin of bright power at the lead cop. He vanished. Those around him yelled into their radios as they immediately started retreating. Just for fun, the dragon smashed some cars with the physical might of its fifteen-foot tail. Police cowering behind the crushed vehicles screamed desperately into communicators that brought little response.

The dragon had cornered a gaudily dressed woman against a smoking pile of rubbish. The woman wore jewelry at practically every spot jewelry could be worn. She screamed, and Solon accelerated. Faster than Carolyn Solon flew, the dragon’s neck shot out and bit at the woman. Its head drew back again, and the woman was missing her wrist and hand from the Rolex down. The dragon threw back its mighty head and swallowed with evident relish.

That’s when Solon, engulfed in dampening forces and blazing fire, broadsided the dragon. Together they rolled over in a mass of silver and orange flames. The monstrous dragon

dwarfed Carolyn, though flames a yard long surrounded her. The dragon snapped at her throat, but Solon knew her defenses were impenetrable. She took the moment to fire a lance of heat to cauterize the bystander's gushing wrist. Surprised at its failure, the dragon resorted to a contest of strength. Just a pace away from Solon, it pounced forward, checking her body to bring her prone. Determined to give no ground, she merely strengthened her shield. It held, but it was a close thing. She felt her left ankle grind ominously and shifted into a firm stance, the arcing prism of power emanating from her hands, refreshing again and again with lines of juice.

"What are you!" she screamed. She did not really expect an answer. "I could survive a meteor and you're pushing me around like a chess piece, *pari passu!*"

The regal dragon showed no sign of understanding. In response to her cries, it whipped its tail around too. The silver flagging on the tip glowed ethereally and sliced through her scarlet wall. Another pillar of red power clamped at the tail, but too late to stop a laceration from opening along Carolyn's left breast. Drops of potent blood fell on the hot asphalt and stained Solon's dress.

"No," breathed Solon. "Incredible." She stayed locked in the stalemate with the dragon. Her protection from external heat did not stop the sweat that dripped down her body. Steam rose from the mighty beast. They both increased their efforts steadily in a nuclear arms race, each striving to prove its superiority over the other. Carolyn pushed forward with both amplified arms, and the dragon flexed its feet to resist. The asphalt buckled and melted, smearing back into a wavy pile as Carolyn shoved the dragon backward a few feet. He retaliated in kind and angrily breathed silver fire uselessly against her shields. For a full hour, they moved back and forth in this way, neither backing down nor gaining any ground.

Those in the surrounding buildings all took the opportunity to evacuate. The astonished forces of the city stared in awe at the titans battling before them. They had given up on firing any shots and were instead assisting in the evacuation. One building seemed empty now, and Carolyn grabbed the much larger dragon by the throat in a surprise attack, and slammed its head against the building's side. She felt a crackle from its skin responding to the blow, and it shook itself free, seeming unfazed.

"You're a strong fellow," she panted. "What to do with you?" He responded with a blast of his breath that made the pavement bubble hotly beneath Solon. She was thankful that she always created her shields in three dimensions. She slammed back with a crimson flame of her own, raining power down upon the dragon. He ducked and weaved between the droplets of death, or sliced them with his tail, or countered them with his own breath weapon.

Then a human figure appeared behind the dragon, from its blindside. For a second Solon thought it was Arcos, but it was an unfamiliar businessman. He had a wild light in his eye, and he leapt at the dragon, sparing no thought for his own defenses. The dragon turned to bite at him. Man continued to pummel beast even after losing flesh down to the skull, the picture of mindless

violence. The dragon's tail swept forward for the killing blow. Solon, surprised, did nothing as the man expired.

Another blind helper sprang forward, distracting the dragon for a split second before dying as well. Then another. A stream of the idiot madmen ran from an alley, pulling haplessly on the dragon's tail and ineffectually striking the hard scales. Flesh burned and charred without a response from the lunatics. "No!" Carolyn cried. "Stop! Don't run in to die!" The pointless attacks continued. A score of the dead lay strewn about, but a score more had stepped into position to be killed for naught. "Don't run in to die!" she screamed again. No one gave any sign that they'd heard. Men and women both joined the fight with equal abandon. She realized the only way to stop their sacrifice was to take down the dragon, quickly. He found them easier to kill with every passing moment, no challenge to his authority. The fiery apparition was the enemy.

To think was to act, Carolyn told herself. The dragon turned his head one last time to meet the men scratching at milky translucent eyelids. Carolyn whipped power forward at the speed of light and pinned the dragon's bestial head against the ground. Its wild eyes turned to look at her instead of the men thrown backward by the attack.

She summoned every trickle of might that the virus fed her into one weave of energy. "*Fiat lux*, you bastard," Carolyn Solon whispered. Blinding light from her palms pierced the dragon's glaring eyes. Ra's fiercest power scored his reptilian retinas where he was most vulnerable; it was a cheap, unworthy attack.

The mighty dragon burst his bonds and sprang into the sky. Front legs unfurled into wings, and the mythical creature took off into the low southeastern clouds, turning only once to fuse a sandstone office building into glass with a line of dragonfire.

Carolyn pushed herself up on her hands and knees. Wiping sweat from her eyes, she looked around. No living examples of the wild men were within sight, though there were not as many dead as she'd expected to see. Perhaps the living had run off with the defeat of this mutual enemy.

Just before the dragon's silhouette disappeared from sight, Solon hurled a ball of tightly wound energy at his tail. It stuck there and began unraveling, floating where the dragon had passed. A pale path appeared in the sky where the dragon had passed.

Beneath, a rising cloud of dust and a small loping silhouette showed the course of the roadrunner in parallel.

"No one will miss me at work," she wheezed, and Carolyn Solon flew home to clean her wounds.

## *It's happened before...*

"I think my ankle is broken, Chester," said Carolyn Solon, grimacing. "Help me think of a lie to tell the doctor." She left for two hours, and returned with one foot in a stiff cast. She did not limp; rather, she floated just above the floor, making normal walking motions.

Tucking a missing strand of hair back into her ever-present ponytail, Carolyn began to lay out every piece of information she knew.

"Item one. The dragon is powerful enough to butt heads with me." She filled Chester's food bowl and retreated. He waddled over to it and began stuffing his cheeks.

"Two. It wasn't active before, or we'd have heard about it. Three: Arcos knew something about the dragon, and even knew how I could see its energy. And finally, I've got a trail on the dragon. Something I can follow, if that structure worked the way it ought. A trail heading south and east..."

Speaking with Arcos was the first step, she decided, but to do that she had to call Plasmicorp and tell them she'd broken her leg. Her excuse that she'd fallen down some stairs worked fine, especially as the secretary she spoke to had happened to notice Solon stumping around town in a cast. Carolyn put her cell phone away and skimmed off toward Arcos' office. He was outside, leaning against his official vehicle with its forbidding chrome tinted windows. Carolyn could see her hurried reflection in them.

"Ah, Doctor Solon. I was just on my way somewhere. If you wish to talk, would you mind accompanying me in my car?"

"Do you have a bug sweeper in there as well? I'd rather accompany you to your secure office."

Arcos blinked slowly. "I never told you I had a bug sweeper in my office."

"I guessed. Which way?"

He led her down the hall to his office, a large affair with a frosted glass window facing the corridor. It was otherwise rather featureless, with no personal decorations, windows, or even a clock. Arcos seated her in a comfortable chair and lounged in an expensive chair of his own. "I am ready when you are," he said.

"Great. Please start by telling me why you knew how to see the dragon's energy, when you can't see it yourself."

“Actually, I was rather surprised by that, Doctor Solon,” said Benjamin. “It was a mere suspicion. Yet when I reflected later on the nature of your powers, I saw no proof that anger would be anything but a distraction. I hope the skill was useful to you? A pity you didn’t kill it.”

“It felt like seeing the world through a new lens,” said Dr. Solon.

“That fits with my suspicions. Perhaps my suggestion merely provided a focus for your own style of magic,” Arcos replied.

“I had expected that it was probably something the virus rewired in me. Old genes, newly activated, coding for new proteins. A gradual increase in certain brain tissues. You know, a fish born in darkness never develops an ocular node in the brain. A superhero who works with a special wavelength of energy develops a special nervous system for that, too. Maybe some extra rods and cones, for all I know.”

“So now you are a superhero, Doctor Solon?”

“It’d be safe enough to say that, yes. Ben, I’ve put a tracer on the dragon, and I plan to follow it to its lair. I don’t want you to follow me, OK? If you do, I will resort to force to prevent you.”

The mood of the room changed. The corners of Arcos’ mouth turned down slightly, and he leaned forward intently. “I would really like you to take me, Doctor Solon,” he whispered. Solon could feel his attention like a stifling humidity. One sentence and a stare, that was all he offered, yet Solon felt inordinately pressured. The tension of this simple disagreement was so great that she felt her shield pop reflexively into place.

“No, Benjamin Arcos. You’ll stay here. I don’t want to spend resources defending you from a bloody dragon! And I…” She trailed off. She couldn’t say she didn’t appreciate being pressured. He’d simply said he’d like to come along and left it at that. “How’s this. I’ll leave a deadman’s switch on my computer, set for three days. If I don’t turn it off by the third day, it’ll update you with where I’ve gone. You can follow then and do with the knowledge what you will.”

Arcos finally leaned back. “Very well,” he replied, “but I think you are demonstrating an awful lot of hubris by traveling alone.”

“Scouting mission only,” said Carolyn.

He sighed. “Then my advice is not to be afraid of striking first, if it comes down to it,” he said. Solon nodded and left the office.

A bit off-put by her encounter with Arcos, she decided to see just how fast she could fly on her ‘scouting mission.’ She leapt high into the air above the rough, uneven land, taking a

moment to gaze at the landscape below speckled with desert plants. Carolyn Solon rotated in space, orienting herself along the curling thread, then struck out toward the speed of light.

Acceleration belonged to her at a level conceivable only with relativistic physics and unlimited amounts of energy. The world folded into a single point for Carolyn Solon. She was forced to send out tendrils to scout for her the consequences of each path she might take at such a deadly speed. Her shield snapped into rigidity, but ran like wax behind her, an egg protecting the precious mass within from being treated like the tortured clay of God. Strands of forces the microbiologist could not understand ran through her body, feeding Solon's sense of rightness to the shield so it could maintain her self-image though her mass be multiplied a hundredfold. Colors shifted, appearing bluer and cooler as Solon approached the speed of light.

She needed not a microsecond to reach her destination. A rare rain had touched the desert plants a few kilometers away, but as a few synapses connected in her brain and the command flew out to the factories of the Phoenix virus, the green merged with the sandy tan and Carolyn was there, looking haughtily down on a crevice in the mountainous ground. Power filled her head and flames curled from her rapidly cooling body. Visions danced about her as the slow Genii in her head still struggled to make sense of infinite sensation per second.

The crevice bore the marks of recent disturbance. Disorderly piles of sand lay everywhere, as if thrust outward by some sudden force. Abandoned walkways had been forcefully thrust aside or disintegrated finer than ash. Solon's flames lit the deep forbidding hole within the massive rock structure, and the earth opened endlessly to swallow the light. The tracing thread disappeared within. This had been the dragon's tomb for millennia, until mysterious forces compelled the beast to awaken once more. The tomb had become a lair.

Carolyn was not surprised to see the strange roadrunner sidling along the outskirts of the cavern entrance. He kept out of her way as she examined fragments of silver energy snapping along in a smooth circle surrounding the gash in the earth. It seemed to be the remnant foundation of a formation, possibly whatever the dragon had used to remain sealed away.

She returned to her computer and began outlining her deadman's switch.

Carolyn typed, "The dragon appears to make its lair somewhere within the Carlsbad Caverns."

Truth be told, Carolyn felt a little nervous. She planned to go on another scouting mission, this one a bit more invasive. She'd be flying right into the heart of the beast's lair. "Armed only with godlike powers of force, flight, and flame, I have to sneak in and out of a gigantic lizard's home," she told Chester as she filled his water bottle. She printed out some instructions on how to care for the hamster and stuck it under his cage. She checked her

deadman's switch again, and she added her lawyer as another recipient on the email it would send out. After a few moment's thought, she added Aaron, too, since he lived nearby.

"Am I sure I want to do this?" she asked aloud. Another moment of thinking, and a glowing scarlet force pulled the back window open. She flew through it with her courage as gathered as it could be.

A fiery torpedo streaked at a fraction of the speed of light toward the Guadalupe Mountains where the lair lay hidden. The cliffs rose above the level surrounding landscape like a dark lord's citadel city. Carolyn's thread had disappeared belowground at an old entrance to the Carlsbad Caverns network, no longer used by visitors. The cave system, one of the most extensive in the world, had never been fully explored, and the areas open to the public or to explorers were constantly shifting. Carolyn remembered childhood visits to several rooms in the Caverns like the Cave of Bats and the King's Palace. Mother Nature had given these rooms beautiful attractions; mankind had given them thematic, grandiose names.

Today, Carolyn was not sightseeing in the Bifrost Room, painted in minerals like a burning rainbow leading to the heavens. She didn't visit the Spirit World, populated with angelic white stalagmites. Technically, she flew through narrow caverns and tunnels that were not even part of the Carlsbad system. Carolyn slowed herself down, taking the time to move quietly, carefully moving bats out of the way with gentle winds of force.

Carolyn explored ever downward, swooping deeper into the hollows of the earth. Mud slides, bat caves, and unstable formations forced her at times to move parallel to the shining thread, or to seek out other detours. Many of these caverns, too high and fragile for climbers, were virgin witnesses to the torchlight of Carolyn's passage. Something changed, and Carolyn held still in the air.

In the distance she could see a beautiful silvery light, though she was far below the level to which moonlight might penetrate. She arced through the air for a short distance and landed gently on a large pillar, scattered with cave pearls, all formed lives and lives ago. A little ball of red light dropped from her hand, providing light as her flames died away. Her shadow flickered and danced in the two light sources, fleeing twin fires dressed in argent and scarlet.

The ubiquitous pale light contrasted with Carolyn's small, brilliant one, yet she could identify its source in the center of an awe-inspiring, sweeping crescent of stone marked with tongues of rock formed drop by drop over infinite revolutions of the Earth. As she peered into the glimmer, something stirred within it. The motion caught her eye. Larger motion pierced the mists and revealed their creator.

It turned its head about, not seeing her. She closed her eyes, taking in the scene. The dragon lay amid the crescent-shaped stone, head aloft, with precious metals all about: bracelets,

crowns, platinum wire, gold. Many are half-corroded as if their upper half was eaten away by acid.

Carolyn lit up in slow motion, rising into the air. The dragon immediately focused on her and leapt to its feet, wings first.

Carolyn said to herself, "I do believe you can see me all the way back here, can't you?" She flew a bit, experimentally, and the head tracked her lazily. Suddenly a tightly focused beam of fire shot from the dragon, launching 500 feet. Solon dodged it, barely, and a shield formed between her and the fire to stave off the whiplash. The cave *bubbled*, and Carolyn suddenly understood how the stone of the cave got its odd runny texture.

Then the dragon took to the air and winged after Carolyn. She dodged again, but took a heavy blow from its tail to the chest. She experienced a rush of immense pain, and knew that she had broken some ribs. The dragon turned on a dime and appeared right beside her. She took off down a different tunnel, with the dragon in pursuit.

They dodged behind and around pillars. Occasionally they'd blast right through a pillar, as either of them became encased in protective flames. They left the caves and took off faster than before as the ground blurs.

Carolyn sent an arcing missile of fiery aquiline energy after the beast. The dragon swerved to fight the energy instead of Carolyn Solon. She was surprised, then thoughtful. As the dragon passed too close, it snapped at her again and she flew away quickly again. The ground blurred beneath them as they traveled at supersonic speed between the southwestern states.

The dragon chased her through a shallow gorge, smashing through a natural stone bridge that had been decoratively carved and painted in Hopi designs – a thunderbird, a roadrunner, a lizard – then they were off again.

Carolyn was struggling to stay ahead. She quickly killed her fire and ducked behind something. A frightened Carolyn cowered while the dragon searched around in the area, tossing heavy boulders aside or turning them to dust.

The dragon reared back, blasting flame and thrashing its tail destructively. Carolyn cowered, flameless, hoping the dragon could not find her when she was not ablaze.

More destruction rained down on the landscape.

Carolyn could not see the dragon. She crept from boulder to boulder. Still no sign of the dragon. Then a pebble fell, making the slightest noise, and her shield instinctively formed around her. In an instant, the dragon is there, its head inches from her body. It slammed a talon through the thin shield in her arm. The piercing point put a great pressure on the thin shield, and she heard the bone snap in her arm. She bled grimly into the shield, where it pooled and bubbled.

There was a whirling of fiery crescents, then a big bubble pushed outward from Solon, pushing the dragon away. He took to the air and ineffectually rained down fire on her shield. She stared in wonder at something in her hand – a cleanly sliced talon.

Carolyn's body glowed and she disappeared from the bubble. Then she was raining dense fireballs on the dragon, fireballs with something of a gauntlet shape to them, as if she was hammering him with thrown rocks. Flames moved up her arms and her hair frizzed wildly as if she was touching a current. A splint of fire kept her wounded arm intact. Then in three enormous blows, she blasted him back toward a spire of rock and pinned him there by slamming a brace down on him. He breathed fire, but she put up a diagonal shield that reflected the fire upward no matter what he did. The rock beneath him began to melt. Carolyn pushed his immense body into the cliff side as though it were clay, but it did not halt his destructive spasms.

She summoned enormous tethers and yanked him back into the open. Angrily, she wrapped around him a cage of force like barbed wire. He realized he could get his head out, snapped at her, but came up just short as she stared him down without flinching. His eyes blazed angrily. He scratched at her, but she ignored the ineffectual attack. Gauntlets of fire appeared on her hands – then he shot an enormous cloud of fire at her, which she caught neatly with her fiery hands. The mighty dragon growled and showed its teeth.

Leaving the cage, powerful as a small sun, to sustain itself, Carolyn flew back to the caverns where the dragon had made its lair. In arms of fire, she carefully gathered an armload of the finest treasures from the dragon's lair. These she transported back to where the snarling dragon waited. She admired him again, captivated by his grace and presence. Dumping the small fortune to the ground, she stood astride it and faced the dragon, grown still.

Carolyn Solon moved her hands and a broadsword composed of fire erupted into existence between them. It threw her face into sharp relief. There in the gorge, triumphant and stern, surrounded by luxury and fantasy, she appeared like a mighty warrior queen. She delicately placed the blade's sharp edge atop the dragon's head.

"Yours will be the utmost of fidelity toward me, dragon, until my dying day!" she yelled, the sound echoing among the rocks of the gorge, exciting her own flames ever higher. "Do you hear me?" Immediately, the beast lay prostrate before her. Solon wondered at the sense of fantasy the beast implicitly awoke within her. She came closer. The dragon returned to its feet. Solon approached until she was directly before the cage. The dragon's head reached down to snarl in her ear, but nothing more.

Tentatively, she stepped between the bars of the cage, until she shared the dragon's space. It stayed still, only tilting its head to continue to watch her. She patted the sharp scales, hands cloaked in power to oppose the heat that rose from him. The dragon's energy-bound tail thrashed back and forth like a cat's. Warmth flowed outward from him, causing Solon's heart to leap in joy, even as pulses of pain came from her broken arm.

“I can’t have you play the proverbial terror of the countryside, dragon,” she said to him. “I will invest some of your hoard. In a short time you’ll have more than before. Platinum and gold are scarce on this world.” Standing before the beast of Merlin, it was easy to imagine other worlds, imagine impossible times. Carolyn clutched the piece of talon in her pocket reflectively.

Carolyn Solon pattered around the lab that had grown up within her apartment, her arm in a cast. The dragon was back in his lair. The deadman’s switch was disarmed, but Arcos still didn’t know she’d done more than scout. The sun was setting like a bead of sodium dropped into the pure water of the horizon – in times like these, Solon could feel an answering surge of fire in her heart and mind.

A timer went off, and Carolyn transferred a culture from a heat element to a centrifuge. A cup of her favorite drink stood dangerously close to the isolated analysis, so she sipped at it and moved it elsewhere. “There’s something about that dragon,” she told Chester as she moved him away from the glassware. “His blood’s not just lizard blood. It’s incredibly complex. There’s a lot more going on in there than in, say, your blood.”

The spinning centrifuge’s job was to identify the different parts present within the dragon’s blood. Dr. Solon finished the latest round and added eight more vials to the rack already stuffed with dozens of test tubes. “This needs bigger guns than a single borrowed electron imager,” she sighed. “Time to sneak into the office.”

Solon knew the locks on her own building so well that it took little effort to devise a series of forces that could open them. To get into the imaging room, however, she’d have to leave a record on the keycard usage logs. There was no avoiding it, unfortunately, so she swiped herself in. She put Chester in a small bubble of force, suppressing the heat with the same sort of shield she wore when flying at high speeds, and let him roll himself around.

She began the laborious process of feeding in a hundred metal-insulated slides of dragon blood factors. The largest did not need to be scanned with such an expensive machine for identification, but the smaller particles would need to be sliced thin and fed through the microscope.

Fortunately, Plasmicorp held technologies to make a biologist feel she’d died and gone to heaven. Their top-secret advantage was a thin-slicing machine the size of a small kitchen where a supercooled and overclocked computer system wielded a knife of laser-thin diamond to slice up microorganisms floating in a low-viscosity fluid. It was like a typical slide-preparer on steroids, a slicer and dicer for tiny organisms. The computer, with minimal input from a human, could manipulate specimens with an advanced electrophoretic field, the same technology used in e-readers and genetic sequencing.

The scanning itself took little time. In just a few hours, Carolyn had her images on an encrypted flash drive and some hard copies in a folder. She wiped the files from the work computer's memory and turned back for home, where she arranged each image up on a corkboard.

The Solon mind required carefully cultivated spatial organization. Carolyn Solon drew lines, made notations, and arranged things out of order until they took on the form she could feel in her mind. Distractions, factors common to all life, she discarded. There were plenty – the dragon was native to Earth. She added notes from her research to the corkboard, because they were becoming relevant. Thumbtacks pricked through infographics on the mammalian genome held them into the web. She flipped quickly through websites and books on the journey to live birth, guided by a viral ecology. Pictures of deserts and obelisks around the world went up on the board to remind her of points of natural history. Everything was connected, and Solon's fevered brain somehow always knew just how.

Everything was connected, but in the here and now, everything centered around a dozen images that told the three-dimensional story of a single organism. Barely considered life, it could not reproduce on its own. It had to invade the cells of something truly alive, leaching its unlife from the toil of God's Creation on Earth. It was nothing but a protein coat enveloping some simple instructions, but it could become so much more.

In Solon's mind, everything overlaps like transparency slides to produce a conclusion. Symbols of mythology and science swing about, forming patterns and attempting combinations. Soon, the answers to her questions were within her grasp.

Carolyn raised a trembling finger and counted the capsomeres and glycoproteins, little units that made up the protein coat of the virus on the bulletin board before her. She traced the spikes and lines of its form, the sweeping membranes. They were all familiar, and she felt sickness in her bones.

"It's happened before," she whispered. "The dragon hosts a Phoenix Virus just as Carolyn Solon does. Perhaps it appeared now seeking its kin."

She felt a burst of adrenaline, and leapt from her crouch before the corkboard. She tore it down, notes and all, and set it alight with a snap of her fingers. The ashes fell to the floor as she thought on the implications.

"Just as my copy feeds on tiny amounts of calcium and passes it along to keep the host alive...feeding on the energy...replicating by commandeering host cells...the dragon has a viral mutation for a relativistic factory that converts gold to dragonbreath! Gold, platinum, maybe silver...they should all work. And it's external! The dragon has only trace amounts of those minerals inside. He must leach them through the skin!"

She began to pant. Somehow, her lungs were not getting enough air. She'd almost forgotten about her broken ribs. The hospital staff had not even noticed, so firm a grip her energy held. Carolyn Solon forced herself to relax. Discoveries could never cease to astound her.

“But I resurrected the virus from genes endogenous to humans. The dragon has a pre-extinction version. Surely, his race is ages old – or is he an individual discoverer, like me? It doesn't matter. Somehow, that same virus, with only minor changes, found itself defunct and imbedded in the genome of *Homo sapiens*. Wise man!”

“For we have the blood of dragons.”

Arriving at work in the driving rain the next morning, Solon was surprised to discover the place ringed with cops. One strode over to her, and she recognized Benjamin Arcos.

“We are investigating a break-in last night, Doctor Solon. PlasmiCorp’s silent alarm went off. It appears the burglar did not make off with anything, nor did he damage the locks or doors in the least. He left not a scratch. Isn’t that odd?”

Carolyn cursed to herself, wiped rain from her brow. She hadn’t known about the silent alarm, but she supposed it made sense, even when you had the best locks money could buy. Of course a company like PlasmiCorp would have the clout and ambition to pull in the FBI within six hours. Intellectual secrecy was one of their specialties.

“Has the investigation turned up anything, Ben?”

“I can tell you there was more than one thief.”

Solon blinked.

“There was whoever broke into the building, and then there was the federal investigator who deleted data off of the keycard logs.” Arcos smiled crookedly. “Do you have a missing keycard to report?”

Ah. “The keycard logs bear no record of my keycard being used?”

“Correct,” Arcos agreed.

“My keycard is right here,” she said, showing him.

“So I thought. Care to give an update, Doctor Solon?”

“Yeah, OK. Where can we go?”

Arcos brought her to a hallway where policemen brought various employees in and out of several rooms. “We’re interviewing everyone, so it won’t look suspicious, and we’ll have privacy,” he explained.

“First, tell me why you’re protecting me, Arcos,” Carolyn demanded.

“What, you are not thankful?” he asked with a chuckle. “Doctor Solon, I *have* to know how your scouting mission went. Did you see the dragon? Was he where you looked?”

She nodded, opened her mouth to explain, and –

KRA-KOOM!!

A tremendous clap of thunder interrupted her. Annoyed, she began to weave a sound barrier around the little office, cursing the weather. As she passed the door, she noticed quiet movement in the shadows of the hallway.

“Arcos, is anyone supposed to be out there?”

“I doubt there is anyone out there, Doctor Solon, and if there is your ward should stop them.”

She looked at him. “It still surprises me that you can see the energy.”

He considered her for a moment, then made a vague motion with a ringed hand. “I can feel the energy it gives off, like sensing a mosquito’s passage before seeing or hearing it. I am...more sensitive than most.”

“You and your occult studies; I’d forgotten,” she sneered. “I’m going to make sure no one is listening at the door. A lurker would be suspicious that he couldn’t hear anything.”

“Doctor Solon, there are a dozen policemen moving in and out of this hallway. I somehow cannot imagine suspicious behavior being tolerated.”

“And we all know the cops are just so competent!” she gushed sarcastically, and then resumed a straight face. “Be right back.”

Sure enough, she could see tall shapes scampering away from the door as she opened it. She allowed a bright light to seep from the previously placed ward, and caught a glimpse of a pale, listless face looking over a slumped shoulder in a button up shirt. The man trotted heartlessly down the stairs as if he had not just been caught eavesdropping on an important conversation.

“Arcos, you’re an idiot,” she called to him. She felt him pull her firmly back into the room.

“There was truly someone out there? Then I will deal with them. You might as well go back to work; we shall talk later.” Carolyn watched him leave the room and walk down the stairs, where a cop stood guard. She turned toward her own office and heard Arcos faintly, saying, in his smooth voice, “I told you, do not bother me!” Laughing, she got back to her lab work.

However, she found that her mind wasn’t in it. It was too easy, and nothing compared to the thrill of research on the dragon. She wished she had some dragon samples and an assurance of a quiet moment to herself. Dr. Solon used a fractal web of force to get her lab samples done in record time, then jammed the door against any disturbances and remotely accessed her personal laptop to pore over the dragon’s data. Immersed in a world of such fantasy, she didn’t hear the frantic pounding at her thick, nearly-soundproof office door.

She logged off, hours later, to go get some lunch. She found the place still under tight security, with cops everywhere and several routes roped off with yellow crime scene tape. Carolyn looked everywhere, but could not find Arcos. Solon gazed reflectively at the out-of-bounds hallway, then set off a crashing sound around the corner. The cop guarding the hallway immediately took off running, hardly sparing a glance for someone in a labcoat carrying a sandwich. She flew quickly and carefully over the tape and down the hallway out of sight.

In her search for Benjamin Arcos, she began to see signs of some great difficulty in the hallways of PlasmiCorp, all behind the influence of the yellow tape. Doors hung loose from hinges or lacked altogether. Alarm units had been purposefully mangled. Experiments and equipment oozed or sparked in abandoned labs. Solon had not seen a sign of life since distracting the policeman at the mouth of the hallway, so the sound of scuffling feet caught her attention right away.

She landed just out of sight and crept cautiously closer on foot, supporting her injuries with invisible forces. A blur of motion launched itself at her, leaping six feet into the air and scratching at her face before she thought to get her defenses up. Fire raced along Solon's outline, thrusting the attacking form back against a filing cabinet with a crash. Thinking fast, she tipped the cabinet over to pin her attacker to the ground. As the flames cleared from before Solon's face, a voice came weakly from under the heavy furniture.

"Carolyn?" it whimpered. "Carolyn?"

She gaped, open-mouthed. One of the junior techs from the lab was there, pinned under the cabinet where the furious shape had been. Yes, moving at insane speeds, the technician and the malicious shape could have been one and the same. But Carolyn had known the technician, and known him as a docile, careful employee. She grasped for a name.

"You're...Oakley, right? What's going on?"

"Why'd you kill me, Carolyn?"

Her heart sank. The skin of Oakley's upper body had been badly charred by her impulsive defense. Technology, always bounded by the limits of human thought and capability. "You won't die, Oakley..." Carolyn Solon's breath came in short bursts, or not at all. She struggled for control of her panicked emotions. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I can still keep you alive, Oakley!" She began laying warm trusses of energy across Oakley's open wounds, keeping the skin and blood in place, strengthening broken bone with an invisible full body cast of power. The tech could feel the effect, and struggled against it. "Oakley, tell me what's going on! If you can, Oakley, try! Something strange is happening, and you were part of it!"

"You killed me, Carolyn. That's the last thing I remember...mind's a blank since wrapping up...then in the air, Carolyn below, killing me."

He died, there in the embrace of all Solon's power, heart giving out from stress.

The phone flew off the desk up to the side of Carolyn's head. The emergency number keys depressed of their own accord, and Carolyn spit out the situation, at least enough for emergency services to dispatch an ambulance. She couldn't bring herself to give her name.

All the while, Carolyn's fire tried to save the man, to shield his brain from damage. Precise, powerful, and untiring, Carolyn performed chest compressions with a force that fueled suns, flowing from a virus that hadn't been seen since dragons roamed the Earth. She kept Oakley's lungs inflating and deflating, prompted his body to resume function. Adrenaline kicked Solon's mind into high gear. Her attention focused, she could flee the scene and continue to delay tissue death. She toyed with the idea of attempting a shock to the heart with her power, but feared what her untrained manipulation might do.

"I'll find out why this happened, Oakley. You'll be back with us in no time."

"And I'll know how to stop it from happening again."

## *I have played God...*

Solon heard that Oakley's heart was beating today. The lab tech had been rushed to the hospital, as paramedics gaped wonderingly that his body was so well held together. Solon flew away from the ambulance, maintaining the link, awash in guilt like ash. His rescuers still did not know who had called them from a building in chaos. En route, Oakley's heart got the shock of life it needed; Carolyn could feel a difference through the lines of energy. She let go.

Later, she found a furious email from Arcos about calling another branch of law enforcement to the scene. She stared dully at the first accusatory line until the email deleted itself from her computer, set to self-destruct by the FBI agent.

"What a gratuitous display of power," she told the screen. "But I'm one to talk, aren't I?"

The mystery at PlasmiCorp occupied all her attention. Things were fuzzy: her superiors issued no statements. Unsure what she herself had seen that so needled her mind, she found opportunity to sneak into the room again. Someone had cleared away the broken cabinet and the room smelled like disinfectant. All the yellow tape in the building had disappeared, and security had relaxed to its normal state. Coworkers she thought had been involved in the ruckus turned out to be uninvolved. Those who hadn't been in the affected wings thought little of it, and Solon dared not describe the full extent of the disturbance. Their apathy worried her.

Her precise mind seemed to struggle to line up facts. The clarity of her thinking space felt cluttered and grubby with ashes. The normal picture wouldn't come together. Watching the news showed her that perhaps accounts of people putting themselves in danger were on the rise. She'd seen something come over Oakley. She'd seen men and women rush to throw themselves vainly upon the dragon. And she had a feeling...something making its way through the mud in her mind where a picture should already have formed.

And Oakley had died because of her power, and had lived because she had interceded in his dying.

"Maybe figuring this out shouldn't be my job," she told Chester. The hamster hated water, so she was cleaning him by carefully heating the surface of his skin and hair with finely calculated amounts of energy. Biology still came easily to her, though getting her other thoughts in order did not. "Maybe I should look for a cure, a cure for my self-inflicted disease. Return to normal life."

Yet, staring at the sun setting in red glory, she wanted nothing more than to fly.

When sunlight bathed the earth once more, she could fly without fear of standing out against the darkness, subject to curious eyes. She could scan the city, looking for anything

unusual. Yet days passed and she saw nothing to cause alarm. Carolyn could not say why this bothered her.

“Maybe I’ve got the hero syndrome,” she told Chester that evening. Carolyn scrolled through the news headlines on her laptop, occasionally bringing one up for a further look. “Maybe I’ve come to think of myself as a superhero, and - Wait a moment.” Carolyn reread a few paragraphs. Fine-toothed gears were meshing in her subconscious again at long last. “Listen to this, my hamster friend: ‘Record number of visitors to Carlsbad Caverns this summer.’ ‘Two visitors, out of bounds, turn violent. Drug involvement suspected.’ ‘Free-tailed bat behavior patterns disturbed.’ ‘The caves have become something of a Mecca for New Mexico residents.’ That feels right, Chester. That feels like a lead.”

Flying over the southeast corner of New Mexico that evening, she saw the news media was right. Highway traffic continued to spike even as she watched, and there was really only one reason to take Route 285 south of the small town of Artesia: Carlsbad Caverns, surrounded by desert. The automobile traffic changed to foot traffic on the canyon trails through the park. Solon was astounded by the volume of explorers all walking at high speed along the trails. And though these visitors made up the bulk of the group, Carolyn’s vantage point allowed her to see people scurrying hastily through the brush off the trails. She could only imagine what it was like inside the caverns, accessible primarily via elevator.

“That chokepoint is going to be hellish. The park closes in a half hour,” she observed. Then she saw it – a speeding shape in the brush, running in a crouch toward a gap in the rock. The shape matched something in Carolyn’s mindspace, something she’d been unconsciously looking for. The internal ash cleared away for a moment, allowing the Solon mind a perfect glimmer of understanding of what she’d noted in the brush.

“Oakley! That’s how Oakley acted right before...before I dropped a heavy piece of furniture on him,” she said aloud. Solon looked around, observing that there were no other people within sight of the stranger, then swooped in for a closer look.

He had a dull, expressionless face. He moved at a rapid pace, but his head turned back and forth constantly, looking for something. One hand occasionally dropped to earth to support the crouching, continuous movement. The whole effect struck Carolyn as sinister, unnatural. She felt the part of her mind that couldn’t see dragonfire reject the image, and she slipped into the frame of perception where power was visible and tangible. The man exuded small, dark patches of energy to cloud around his head, a stark contrast to Solon’s vivid light. She shivered.

The stranger’s casual, normal clothing and physically healthy, youthful appearance contrasted with his mindless, robotic search through the brush. There was something wrong about his face, as if his conscious mind took a backseat to something that drove him onward without rest, something giving him an unhealthy look despite his obviously healthy tissue.

“Is he after my dragon?” she wondered to herself. “Are they all after my dragon?” She leapt into the air like a rocket to gaze over the forty thousand acre park. Those caves and canyons extended for miles. Over everywhere an entrance could possibly be hidden, she saw men and women moving at that eerie shambling speed. “Park closes in fifteen minutes. Everybody out!” she muttered. She dropped back to earth behind another isolated creep, catching herself with talons of flame. A line of force sprang out to ensnare the middle-aged target.

Who dodged.

He leapt aside and continued hunting, moving faster than before. The blotches of black energy swiveled to a higher concentration in Solon’s direction.

“Fast zombies? Damn.” Solon fired a ball of energy into the air, where it dropped down hundreds of rays like a firework. Or like the bars of a cage, which shrank in to imprison the man. She whirled him to face her, erupting into a fiery disguise. He didn’t meet her eyes, nor look down in fear, but continued to stare at the same angle he’d begun with.

Solon cloaked her right arm in flaming blades and grabbed the man’s collar. “Tell me your name,” she commanded as his shirt began to singe. He did not react. She used a sphere of force to constrict his fingers painfully. “Who sent you here?” Nothing. “What are you looking for? Tell me!” The man did not even struggle, just hung limply. “Speak or die!” she roared, flaring up and hovering a few feet off the ground. The vegetation shriveled and died. Birds fled. The clay baked into a solid mass and cracked. Still the prisoner made no reaction.

She dropped him back into the snare, then rifled through his pockets. He had exactly what you’d expect to see on a tourist: camera (ruined), ID (Jason Trowl), some cash (a pair of five dollar bills). Carolyn put it back. She sighed and let the snare evaporate. Immediately Jason sped off in the direction he’d been going when captured, still seeking back and forth across the desert. “You’re all either a powerful search force, or one subtle distraction,” she told his back.

Atop a trail of fire she reached the heavens once more. Her heart sank as she surveyed the enormity of the problem before her. Single-minded imposter tourists spread out in all directions to search, she presumed, for her precious dragon.

That gave her an idea.

Only Solon knew the cave where the dragon slept. It called only to her, for she swam with an idea whose time had come, reaching out to a version long forgotten. The virus energy, like all energy, was a mutable flowing thing. It came from within, but she knew in her bones that the mighty particles shared a twist of cosmological fate with other vibrating specks set in motion centuries ago.

So she flew swiftly toward its lair. The creeps outside still had not located the hidden paths, though they were certainly as active within the caves as without. Besides, she had rolled a huge boulder in front of the passage, for the dragon spent most of its time sleeping. Unless it was for some reason enraged, of course.

She was just nearing the platinum-filled horde when she heard a noise. "More zombies," she growled. Carolyn flew silently over to investigate.

The sound filtered through stony walls decorated with modern graffiti and ancient pictographs. With perfect control, Solon silently moved aside some rubble and sand to observe the hated enemy. She saw two of them, a man and a woman, pacing down the gray underground passage without thought to their own safety. Suddenly, the floor's dusty surface gave out beneath the man, who plunged down into a dark pit. Before Solon knew what she was doing, tendrils of force had snatched the man away from a lethal fall. The zombie woman kept on running, heedless of her partner's fate.

The captive was struggling purposefully. Solon turned her attention to him and flung up an impenetrable, shock-absorbing shield around his hands just in time. The explosive he'd detonated went off. The C-4's light, its sound, and its destructive power were all contained by the nuclear-powered sphere of fire Solon had set around his hands. She watched as the detonating cap melted into liquid, watched as the soundless red fire expanded to fill her barrier's shimmering bubble. Carolyn Solon watched as the plastic explosive tore the man's hands to pieces of bone and shreds of flesh.

Shocked, Carolyn Solon watched the man stride away as if nothing had happened, dripping blood to stain the gray dust and stone of the floor. Then she shook herself and flew instantaneously to the female intruder, freezing the woman instantly in a skintight cage of heatless fire.

"You've got explosives too. I can't believe it. Is this the big plan? Excavate the Caverns? How many of you are armed?" Solon freed the woman's mouth, not really expecting an answer. She didn't receive one. "This has got to stop."

Carolyn Solon was at the dragon's boulder before she finished speaking, fiery afterimage streaking behind her. Her anger rolled it aside with the strength of a hundred strong men. Her beautiful dragon was already alert, already keyed to its master's anger. The nearest platinum artifacts were already melting at the touch of hard scales.

"I need you," said Carolyn. "Have fun, but stay underground, ok?"

C-4 explosives don't detonate from just a little dragonfire.

Fire flew in all directions above Carlsbad Caverns National Park. Beams splattered against rock faces and ricocheted to catch the legions of tourists who didn't seem to realize they were supposed to vacate the park twenty minutes ago. The park's rangers were out there too, and not to clean up the park. Copper lanced between them, herding the combatants. Slowly, a pattern emerged within Carolyn's chaos.

The loops and streaks of red energy wheeled around a central area, drawing the dozens of enemies into a manageable sphere. There, Carolyn frisked them down with her telekinetic power and stashed them in a cage of force. She'd already confiscated three units of plastic explosive, and a fourth had gone off before she could wrench it from its owner. Needless to say, that owner was no more. Collateral damage to the park from the entire fight was essentially nil when the news helicopters arrived.

The craft kept a safe distance, but flew close enough that Solon could see the station number emblazoned on the side. She knew cameras pointed at her, and at the melee below. Zombies struggled to escape or lay where they'd been pinned down. She also knew that some of her energies were visible to the naked eye, but most weren't. Carolyn Solon, though cloaked in fire, unrecognizable, was on TV.

She threw up a wall of fire well in front of a helicopter, forcing it to veer away. "I need to stop having so much fun," she muttered. All her captives were yanked together in a sudden output of force. The perimeter was clean. She tugged the whole bunch over to the parking lot and let them go a few at a time, watching their reactions. Some kept their blank expressions but began heading toward personal vehicles, driving away. Others seemed to snap out of it, as Oakley had done, and look around in wonder at the crowds about them and Solon above like a second Sun.

Then the dragon burst out from beneath the surface in a vent of silver fire.

The helicopters were back, apparently bearing especially fearless reporters. "Firefighters rush to put out flying, burning scientist," Solon told the faraway cameras, "and pet lizard."

She'd observed most of the underground zombies expressionlessly relocating above ground to escape the dragon, but she noted blood on its claws and teeth. Its tail lashed back and forth as it perched on someone's minivan. Then its claws crushed the vehicle as it launched back into the air to bake a straggling group with its fiery breath. Solon alone could see the silver energy arcing from the dragon's tail and wings, fueling its flight, fueled by anger and platinum and a clever virus. Never once did the dragon target a news helicopter or someone with a hint of expression on their face, but it tore into the zombies unmercifully. They seemed to bear it an especial hate. More than once, she watched the beast veer away from someone just as they snapped out of hypnosis.

Heedless of how it might look on camera, she appeared astride the dragon's back and hugged its neck with long blazing arms. "The big guns will be here soon, dragon," she whispered to its head. "Let us be gone." The zombie overmind, conserving its resources, seemed to relinquish control of the crowds en masse, and they ran screaming toward their cars or pulled out cell phones to make hysteric explanations to relatives. She would have to ask one of them if they remembered fighting her tooth and nail in a meaningless cause or watching their fellows dying to dragonfire in dark tunnels below.

Together they flew far into the desert, taking several hairpin turns in the air to shake off anyone who might have noted their direction. She settled the dragon down in a dune, then flew back inconspicuously to gather up the hoard. Hiding enough platinum to buy a nation, she retreated unseen back to the secret hollow in the sand slowly turning to glass around the dragon's hot belly. "Cops are everywhere around the Caverns," she told it. "I wonder if Arcos is there?"

"Either way, there'll be extra security tomorrow, you can count on it." She nuzzled sleepily against the warm dragon and shifted tons and tons of earth into a dunelike screen around them, a process that effortlessly used up enough nuclear power to run a city.

In the morning, the roadrunner had left tracks all over the dunes. "He really likes you, dragon, doesn't he?" she said. The dragon looked at her with silvery eyes older and wiser than forests. "We'll have to hide you again. Moving a fraction of the speed of light we can still get anywhere on Earth anytime we want to. You can fly as fast as I can, can't you?"

She took off, heading southeast, accelerating as rapidly as she dared. The dragon kept pace effortlessly, gliding on wings lined with energy, flapping only when changing course in a sort of graceful aerial dance. The planet became a blueshifted blur below them, bursting with aberrant flashes and curves, seeming compressed in front of her flight in impossible ways.

Solon didn't have the physics to correct or account for what she saw, nor did she know at what fraction of *celeritas* she traveled. The differences were negligible. Only acceleration took any time, and she was already decelerating as soon as she started off. She grew to love these flights in hundreds of circles around the planet with the dragon.

## *The spirit nourishes within...*

After some time with an encyclopedia, they settled down in a remote part of the Namibian desert, where no one ever came. Carolyn discovered she could make a sort of instant solar still by cooking the water out of sand hauled up from deeper in the earth. The dragon showed itself to be a proficient tunneler, and soon it had a miniature version of the Carlsbad Caverns beneath the southern African desert. These tunnels were so stable, compressed by the dragon's radiating forces, that Solon could walk freely among them or sit astride the dragon's back as he wandered about. He occasionally discovered bits of platinum ore; it seemed the beast could sniff them out with precision. He wasn't going back for a long sleep, that was for sure.

Solon had been making frequent trips back and forth between New Mexico and the Namib, even going to work most days for at least long enough to keep up appearances. Aaron, her boss, seemed to realize something had changed, but she put him off with ease. As often as not, she spent the time designing experiments to run on the dragon's DNA, or that of the strange HERV virus they both hosted. She was careful not to let any evidence touch a computer where it could be stolen and observed. All data she kept hidden in the Namibian desert.

One day a small tribe of naked aborigines discovered their hiding place. It was only a matter of time, given the extravagance of the dragon's presence. From the encyclopedia and some gesturing, she assumed they were some sort of native Nama population. Unsure at first, she had flashed to hide behind a rock. The dragon, with uncharacteristic boldness, did not hide, though despite his bulk he could disappear as instantaneously as Solon could. He allowed the tribesmen to approach him, even displaying a bit with his wings and crests and silver tongues of flame.

Carolyn Solon took advantage of the dragon's impression, and stepped out with her brow wreathed in vibrant fire. The energy glowed around her wrists and ankles and rippled up and down her frame. They muttered a word repeatedly; later, she found out it meant "ancestor." Eventually she was able to communicate her desire for secrecy to them, and they helped to ensure her sanctuary remained hidden.

She came to enjoy this double life, one of veneration and isolation, the other of immersive scientific study. She could bring back modern convenience at a moment's thought. Her control over the infusing energy had become very fine tuned indeed; she could make hairpin turns, almost teleporting from one place to another, and she could conjure up detailed images in fire. From New Mexico, she could keep an eye out for zombie outbreaks, as she called them, but those horrendous second personalities seemed to be laying low.

After a few weeks of this, the tribesmen came to her in supplication. She could make out that they needed the intervention of their fiery ancestor and her pet leviathan. Carolyn followed

the fire-keeper, the shaman, to crouch behind an outcropping of stone. He gestured that she should look out beyond the stones. There, she saw a tawny patch of the desert, moving. As it approached, she realized that it was a particularly large lion, half again as large as the huge lion at the Albuquerque City Zoo.

Scars crisscrossed its hide, healed over in tough hairless lines like barding. Its mane grew sparsely and close to its oversized head, while crooked teeth stabbed downward when it opened its mouth. Solon let it get close to the nomadic village, observing its reactions. "Probably a maneater, I'm sure," she decided. With the tribesmen watching, she walked within the lion's view.

From a distance, its dark eyes spotted her. It crouched low, ducking out of sight for a moment, then struck out at top speed for her position. As the gigantic beast sprinted silently in Carolyn's direction, sending a stream of sand and dust in its wake, she felt a moment of fear amid her confidence. The villagers stared stonily from behind cover. With a roar, the aberration attained striking distance and leapt for her throat.

Of course, it met with some resistance, in the form of a force shield. Carolyn blazed up in flames and moved in to grapple with the big cat. It raked at her but met with nothing it could tear. She got a flaming arm around its neck for a chokehold. Somehow, she chose a bad angle, and she grimaced as pain shot up her arm. She increased the arm's support and snapped the lion's neck with an audible crack. The corpse she left for the villagers.

Back at her sanctuary, she realized the pain in her arm was more serious than she'd thought. Bone grated, splintered, against other bone. She'd caused it a severe break. Feeling around carefully, Carolyn decided the ulna was shattered. "Perhaps I can whip up some sort of internal cast to keep it together," she mused, and got to work.

The end result was extremely comfortable. She felt no pain. The bones themselves were clamped together from the inside with ultra-thin tendrils of unbreakable strength. On the outside of her arm, she had woven the equivalent of a cast. Carolyn could move it without pain and even lift within her normal capacity. With the energy added to the equation, she could easily lift huge boulders without stressing the injured arm. "We'll just call the whole thing a success," she told the dragon.

\* \* \*

Solon touched down in a dense pillar of flame. The dry grass beneath her feet crackled as her feet echoed the heat of another day's New Mexico sun. The shockwave following her heavy landfall immediately smothered the singed grass of the large city park.

Benjamin Arcos looked up from the paper he was reading. He sat on a park bench, alone in the oppressive heat. “What a pleasure to see you again, Doctor Solon. I thought you were avoiding me.”

“I was,” Carolyn said. “But I really need more information. Facts from your so-called ‘occult studies.’ How much do you know about what’s happened to me?”

“Doctor Solon, I believe that some sort of supernatural cosmic force has chosen you for its champion, granting you a share of its characteristic power. There is a heavy symbolism behind the red flamelike manifestation of your mystic energies-“

“I’ve had some thoughts on that. Some of it is just normal fire, I think. Then there’s a theoretical type of red Cherenkov radiation-“

“Doctor Solon, why come to me for help if you wish only to disregard my theories?”

“I came for facts, Arcos, not mumbo-jumbo. No magic. This is all a direct result of my clumsy genetic engineering, and that is *science*. What if you told me what you know *without* reference to magic?”

“Very well. I will cast aside my research with the mysterious artificers of the Danubian Plain and present you only with the pragmatic effects of what I believe true. Firstly, it is clear through my researches that your control is achieved by a mental restructuring, which you would say is promoted by the virus. This brain-physiology structuring allows you to see the energy itself as if it were broadcasting within the visible spectrum.”

“Brains are very plastic, but that’d be rather a stretch without the intervention of the miracle virus. I had thought there was a link to calcium in this phenomenon. It’s an element cells use for some really complex signaling.”

“That is right. And you have already told me the energy itself comes from bone. As you said earlier, this process would not work on just any bone.”

“No, of course not. It’s a highly organic process. The virus has no incentive to colonize non-living bone, for example. And it would take some work to get the virus to form symbiosis with the genome of any other person, unless they were my twin.”

“I suspect that it would not even work on your twin, Doctor Solon, as a twin would have a separate soul. Do not scoff! The soul is a very real entity, reaching out from mankind toward the stars. If anyone knows this, it is I.”

“*Spiritus intus alit*. Arcos, why do you know all this?”

“A magician never reveals his secrets.”

“Very funny, Benny. Arcos, I know you have an...interesting... past. Yet I’m still willing to delay my distrust. You see, if this thing is some benevolent demigod in my soul, then why...Arcos, I think it might be hurting me.”

There was silence in the park. Benjamin Arcos and his unreadable face just looked at Carolyn quietly.

“I’ve broken too many bones since acquiring these powers. Something’s not right.” She pointed out the scars on her arm and ankle, a new chip in a tooth.

“Perhaps, Doctor Solon, this is simply due to the increased amount of danger you expose yourself to in pursuing this hero complex of yours.”

“I do *not* have a hero complex!”

“Oh, but it is obvious that you do, Doctor. The way you dove in to save those people from the dragon, the way you have kept all your findings to yourself-“

“You won’t guilt me into sharing, Arcos; I’ve got good reasons for secrecy-“

“-the way you act like you are heir to Athenian Solon, with your constant Latin catchphrases-“

“He would have spoken Greek-“

“The way you patrol the city looking for crimes. If that is not from a hero complex I do not know what is.”

“Well, Arcos, to be honest with you, I am not entirely convinced it’s something to do with my powers either. A chipped tooth and a few injuries half the population has sustained at one point or another...it’s not enough to make a solid case. Furthermore, the energy conversion of this virus is unbelievably efficient. That’s still not clear to you, is it? Unless I’m actually sending things at the speed of light, there’s no reason I should ever run out of energy at all, much less when I’m still in my youth.”

Arcos looked at her sympathetically. “Such powers often take a toll on the frail human form, Doctor Solon.”

She snorted.

“There is a scientific reason that lines up with the occult symbolism, Doctor Solon. Surely your use of energy should constantly give off vast waste? The heat and light of a sun! Sound. Electromagnetic waves. Nuclear particles. Even mass in hydrogen and helium. I know you are a microbiologist, and I admit I am no physicist of any sort, but did you know that even a

candle's flame gives off every form of carbon, from graphite to diamond? How much more scintillating mystery in the flames of the Sun-worshiper!"

"What does that have to do with anything?" she asked accusingly.

"Surely you would have to shield yourself and your environment from those effects. What I am getting at, Doctor Solon, is that at these levels every action has greater costs than you realize."

"Not large enough costs to offset the resources in a single gram of my skeleton, Arcos!"

"And what about this? Have you traveled at any appreciable fraction of the speed of light? That would subject your body's material to very violent explosions from collisions with the stationary air particles. It would make your mass effectively increase, so each ounce of acceleration would have exponentially higher energy costs. Your body would struggle to withstand acceleration without support. Through it all, your new brain structures are unconsciously routing power, shielding you from all of that."

Solon sat down on the bench, considering, all flames winking out. "That's just a theory," she said at last.

"Perhaps."

"I'll look into the rates of calcium consumption by the virus. Maybe there's something to be learned there."

"Again, it is a possibility."

"Arcos, tell me something. Are you a..."

"Am I what, Doctor Solon?"

"Never mind. Let me tell you a fairy tale:"

"The gods gave a young hero a gift, a magic unicorn horn that could open any lock. He went on an adventure to obtain a magic crown, heavily set with invaluable gems. Along the way, he came to a heavy oaken door. It would not budge, though he heaved his shoulder against it. Yet his gift from the gods opened it with ease. Then he came to a golden door, heavier than the first. It likewise opened at a touch from his unicorn horn. Finally, he came to an enormous iron door, covered in sharp spikes, covered in the blood of those who had come before. Still, with a lot of care, his magic unicorn horn gift worked, and he stepped inside to claim the crown. Was the gift designed for the terrain he'd have to pass through? Or does the author simply report the important, successful highlights of a wider story arc, with many unmentioned challenges? It's a sort of selection bias."

Arcos thought that over. “And you are that little boy with the unicorn horn?”

“No. *My* gift from the gods can do *anything*.”

She took off, her mind heavy with layer upon layer of thought, fitted together like rusty gears in a complex machine.

## *Through adversity to the stars...*

Carolyn Solon never slept anymore. The pain irritated her too much, fading in as her consciousness faded out.

“It’s an economy of attention,” she explained to Chester, who was not listening. “The scale of any problem is irrelevant. I could fight the biggest monster, fly as fast as a photon, shield a massive area from a massive missile. But as I encounter more and more problems all at once...well, my ability to multitask is limited. I hope that this is also true for the source of my zombie problem. Sometimes, someone I capture will fight me. Sometimes they’ll keep trying to do whatever they were doing when I arrived. And ever since the Carlsbad Caverns, subtlety has been their priority, I’m sure of it.”

Solon ran her hand along her legs, fire burning dimly at her fingertips, leaving trails that were extra smooth. “Shaving with flame is a wonderful convenience, Chester. I read it in a book somewhere.” She finished up, then flew to her chair. The remote flew into her hand, the button depressed itself, the TV flicked on. A mug of her favorite drink arranged itself and began to steam. This she clutched in one hand, sipping contentedly as she watched the news.

The broadcast gave no hints as to the motives of the zombie’s overmind. She hadn’t really expected it to. The anchors had taken to keeping a running tally of Carolyn’s fiery, disguised appearances, and today they had a fuzzy shot of a bright light that may or may not have been Solon. They never pieced together the common thread in all of Dr. Solon’s appearances: single-minded little groups of people, oblivious to all danger, their minds temporarily not their own. But there she was, as often as not, on the news cameras, captioned and elucidated. Each time, she managed to sheathe herself in fire, or hide behind a screen of bright light.

The cameras captured her containing explosions in bubbles of force, saving innocent lives. The cameras captured her slamming people to the ground with fire. The cameras captured her leaning in to whisper questions the cameramen could not hear, questions that fell on deaf ears, interpreted by mindless brains.

What they could never capture was Solon’s sense that she was just beating her head against a wall. She learned very little from her sleuthing. New Mexico’s new superhero saved a few lives, it was true, but she was not accomplishing her true objective of locating the zombies’ master. She knew there was one, somehow. She had her suspects. But she could not, no matter what she did, find a single degree of proof. And if there was one thing her scientific and ethical senses required, it was proof. Solon increasingly spent her time as a comet in the air, absorbed in a project the cameras must never discover.

The limelight began to sicken her, and she grew anxious about so much publicity. Carolyn took steps to conceal herself, but they hindered her efforts. After weeks of hunting, she

was reduced to a simple vigilante without a clue, striking only when an opportunity presented itself. The local news commented on this, but the national syndicates had already moved on, and soon the neighborhood press followed suit. The nation had forgotten about a powerhouse of splendor to rival the sun and turned back to its sleepy politics and cold wars.

Solon stalked a criminal down a moonlit alley, surrounded by skyscrapers brooding like silent obelisks. The perpetrator was no one much, no one glamorous, just a purse-snatcher and a known dealer of hard drugs. Carolyn Solon would take what action she could find, do what good she could accomplish.

Though Solon flew silently, never touching the ground, the thug had picked up some subconscious hint of danger and begun to feel uneasy. Carolyn, well-practiced now, could instantly flash behind cover if she thought she might be spotted. The man never caught more than a spark of her trail.

She let him pull ahead. He ducked nervously around a corner and she prepared to follow. Suddenly she wasn't so sure of herself; she found herself pulling back from the bend in accordance with some instinct. Was this a trap? Were more thugs waiting beyond the reach of streetlights? An idea occurred.

Carolyn erected an invisible shield around herself, just in case. Then she tossed a globe of energy in a high arc over the intervening building, sending a pulsing signal for it to glow brightly when it landed. There was a flash, and Carolyn saw three shadows thrown on the pavement in front of her. One must be the fleeing thug, now certain he had encountered the fiery being from the news stations. Two more shadows crouched in readiness, balanced gracefully on tiptoe, so bulky she scarcely recognized them as human. Then, incredibly, they leapt straight for her secret position.

Somehow, she found herself with no time to react. Her shield stayed up, but the forces were not properly calibrated to her environment. The unexpected attack slammed her, shield and all, backward into a wall. Her own force absorbed the entire impact with ease, and she turned to face her assailants, unharmed...

...but they were already upon her, both at once, each with one foot outstretched in a dramatic flying kick. Again, her power swept most of the damage aside, and again the attack spun her around. This time, she came crashing forcefully against her own shield with her arms flung back. She felt ribs pop out of place, felt choked for breath. Yet there was no time for pain, and her mind was ready now, focused on its task. A cocoon spun itself around her abdomen, within and without, keeping her ribcage in place where cartilage and bone failed. She threw out her hands, and bolts of fire leapt from red-hot palms to strike at the two attackers. With dexterity,

both leapt out of the way, but the fire was one with her will and veered to intersect their new courses.

The men landed, and she saw them clearly. They wore heavy, bulky furs around their shoulders, altering their outlines, a strange look in the heat of the desert city. One was barrel-chested and hulking beneath his furs, while the other was trim and small. Furthermore, both had iridescent, translucent disks floating in front of them like flat soap bubbles. These odd shields absorbed Carolyn Solon's mighty strokes. She floated there, her mind reeling, but part of her immediately began planning her next move.

"Who are you?" she asked. She thought it came out rather politely, given the circumstances. Instead of answering, they leapt into the air to the height of her forehead and aimed their forefingers downward. In the partial darkness, she could not see exactly what they did, but lightning of many colors came crackling out of their hands to ground upon her thickening armor. This time she stayed steady, response planned.

Solon stretched out a trademark fiery arm, tried to grab the burlier fighter by the throat with her empowered grasp. Still the man dodged, with surprising grace, and another conjured rainbow disk turned her blow aside before she could redirect it. Carolyn felt the reverberations from a hundred lightning-fast blows hammering on her shield, the other warrior seeking a weakness, little knowing that a source of boundless efficiency opposed him. He moved like a blur, leaping up to where Carolyn floated a meter off the ground and raining down several precise chops before alighting on the ground, only to rebound back up for a renewed offensive.

"Another virus?" Carolyn mused abstractedly. She felt almost perfectly safe now, with the element of surprise out of the equation. More lightning, focused from both of the strangers at once, arced off the shield. She responded in kind, her fireballs phasing through her own shield to splash uselessly against the shields of the robed figures. She threw a larger fireball to the same effect, then kept up a constant patter of them rebounding from all directions. Not a one found its mark, though she occasionally managed to singe a bulky robe as one of the men would dodge skillfully instead of block.

"This duel is too cat-and-mouse," said Solon, "and I'm increasingly unsure which I am." She lowered herself gradually to the ground, altering her bubble to envelop her directly, clinging closely yet just as impenetrable as before. With the slightest touch of her sneaker on pavement, a wave of seismic destruction erupted all about her.

The asphalt crumbled away like water down a drain, shuddering and cleaving into rubble, settling harshly at the bottom of a deep pit carved in the middle of the alley. Concentrating, Solon braced the nearby buildings until she was sure the remaining ground could support their weight. She casually shifted a skyscraper into a more stable position, then looked down into the pit she'd made.

The strange assailants kneeled at the bottom of the steep pit, still conscious. They were covered in black dust. As one, both lowered their heads to her and made a motion with one hand. Solon gallantly returned the nod. To her shock, the two men rose rapidly into the air, still in that kneeling position. They rose over her head, then levitated laterally a similar distance down the alley at a high speed, maintaining the same gesture all the while.

The scene was so surreal that Solon could only watch as the men landed on their feet and ran on into the darkness without a backward glance. A minute later, she had once again regained her composure and her desire to know what she was up against. “No one competes with direct mass-to-energy conversion,” she told the night. She leapt after them, going a hundred times faster than they, covering a hundred times more ground in a simple search pattern. Not even twenty seconds had passed before she made up her lost ground and her ignorance as to which direction they’d fled.

Carolyn Solon met the magicians high in the air between two closely adjacent skyscrapers. They leapt fearlessly from windowsill to wall and back again, gaining height each time. She saw that their hands and feet were callused and bare. When they reached the top of the office building, they proceeded to leap from rooftop to rooftop like a superhero in an old comic. With a running start, their range was an incredible jump of almost thirty feet. They spread their furred coverings to gain every advantage from the wind; they instinctively plotted course from height to low. Solon appeared in front of them, her disguise gone, but an invisible wall of force sweeping to her left and right. They would not continue their mad rush.

Though they could not see that Carolyn completely blocked their way forward, they skidded to a halt before her. She glared at them. “What do you mean by attacking me without the slightest provocation? Where are you from? Where did you learn to shoot lightning from your hands like a mad Faraday? Answer me or so help me I’ll summon a pillar of flame to roast you right through your pretty rainbow shields.”

The burlier man did nothing but smile politely. The smaller one answered, after some thought. “I know not what a Faraday is, my lady, but much as yourself, we are monks of an order dedicated to the precise magic a human body may unlock. Long have we searched for you, journeying long from the southern ice to your hot, dusty city.”

“Why? To kill me? I’ll throw you off a firkin’ building.”

“Fiery magician! Teach us your spells!” The two advanced toward her.

“Buzz off. You can’t learn what I do.”

“We will give you all the riches you desire. Gold. Rich spices and oils, acanthus and myrrh and balsam. Artifacts of dead civilizations. Share our knowledge of magic, as much as it pales beside your own.”

“I said you can’t learn what I do! It’s not a thing that can be learned.”

The small man paused, and the larger gentleman looked at the smaller. “I do not understand,” said the spokesman.

“Just leave me alone. I’ll transport you back to where you came from, just to get you off my back,” she offered. She thought the offer rather generous, given they had just tried to kill her.

“We can never give up, fiery magician, until we have learned your secrets. So very sorry.” He knelt once more, and Solon prepared to shoot him down from the sky if he levitated again in that eerie manner. Instead, she found herself flying backward despite the armor around her. She crashed into the wall of the building behind her, and kept going for several feet as the concrete crumbled.

“There’s no such thing as magic!” Solon howled as she got to her feet, unharmed.

The kneeling monk arrived through the hole she made in the wall. “You are mighty in magic! Our Shieldings do not allow us to crash through walls while Sliding and stand back up again.”

“Good to know,” said Solon. She pushed on him with a thought and sent him flying backward through the glass in the building opposite, where he lay still. His robe of thick fur went spiraling down through the empty air, falling hundreds of feet to the base of the tower.

The other, thicker monk appeared to take his place. When she pushed on him in turn, he dropped to a kneeling position and held stubbornly unmoving against her force. Her jaw dropped. She added enough velocity to push his mass across twenty city blocks. He did not move. Not a muscle twitched.

“If that’s the way it must be,” said Solon. She snapped a blunt piece of concrete from the ceiling above the monk, letting it fall to his head. Instead, it levitated upward through the hole Solon had made in the ceiling. The monk stood up, stepped aside, and let the rubble crash to the floor where he’d been standing moments before. Lightning arced from his hand. From this close, the lightning enveloped her shield and scorched the plaster behind her. She curiously pulled an office chair into the fray and watched it melt into a glob of plastic.

“Look. You can’t hurt me. I can’t teach you what you want to know. Call it a draw and head back to wherever you came from.”

“You waste your speech. Adom does not know English,” said a voice. Carolyn saw the smaller monk climb back into the office room. Blood stained his clothes in many places, and bits of glass stuck into his skin, hair, and clothes. “Let us bargain.”

They stood to either side of her, on the tallest building around, where she had brought them. There was nothing they could smash her into. Thanks to the open view, she would see an ambush of more monks coming, though she was assured that only the two of them had come to learn her “spells.”

“I’m telling you, there can’t be a bargain. It is physically impossible for me to teach you magic. This is not a skill; it’s just biology. I don’t even believe in magic.”

“This is magic, fiery caster woman,” said the little monk, dressed once more in his thick fur. He summoned the gleaming shield again. “Shielding.” He pointed to the lightning rod, which snapped off and flew a ways toward him before falling to the ground. “Sliding.” Energy crackled from his palm and melted the lightning rod. “Sparking!”

“That’s cute,” she said. “Your spells alliterate.”

“Alliterate?”

“They all start with the same letter,” Carolyn explained.

“They do not alliterate in Greek,” he replied.

“You’re from Greece, then?” she asked.

“We speak mainly Greek and Arabic. My people are originally from Egypt, actually, two millennia ago. My name is Crimson Altair.”

“You are a magical monk, and you know only three spells.”

“Yes. Until now, my order believed there were only four portable spells known in all the world. Until we received a radio broadcast about the magician in America who could do more, who could fly freely in any direction and appear to be engulfed in flames, unharmed.”

“I’ve seen you fly, Mr. Altair.”

“Sliding is not flying. I can only move something a set distance at a time, and only parallel to the crust of the Earth, or perpendicular to it. I explain our understanding of magic to you, Carolyn, that you might be able to explain yours in similar terms. Observe!” he said, overriding her protests. “These are training blocks that a novice would use.”

Crimson sprinkled several cubes of various materials on the rooftop. “Each contains a different amount of mass.” He knelt in the now-familiar position. One by one, the blocks slid smoothly across the rooftop, never tumbling or jerking from their alignment. Each ended up exactly the same distance from its starting point as all the others. “Sliding is the most complex skill, and the last that we master. Shielding the simplest, Sparking somewhere in between.”

Carolyn swept the blocks into a diagonal line, then pulled one to her from afar. Crimson Altair appeared impressed at this simple manifestation of Solon's power. "Even your Sliding is cast differently than ours," he told her. "It must be a different spell altogether. Perhaps it will be useful. But teach me of your Shield first! Ours is cast like so." He cocked one wrist slightly and made an odd movement with it, while the rest of his body struck a pose that was apparently second nature to him. He muttered something, and his Shield appeared. Adom kicked the training blocks at him, and the Shield turned them aside.

"Your so-called magic is tied to movement? That's ridiculous. I'd put money down that it's just superstition. You could probably do it just fine standing still."

"Oh no. It is all tied to very, very precise movement. It is not easy to learn such control over one's muscles. That is why it takes years and years before a novice learns even the simple Shielding spell. The smallest mistake and nothing will happen."

"What if the wind rustles your hair? What if your arm is too long? How can an effect be tied to a contortionist act like that? Such magic is for children's stories. *All* magic is for stories, but magic with silly rules like that especially!"

"I will explain, Carolyn. These three spells are not tied to hair. Shielding is tied to the angle of the right wrist, the right ring finger, the left thumb, a muscle in the chest...I do not know the English name..."

"Ok, ok. So there are set components. Why do they work?"

"I am glad to hear you listening so intently, Carolyn. I can see you are good at understanding. I believe this will make you an excellent teacher as well. Our founder, Nesbitt of Actium, believed that his original Shield spell was a small case within the rules of natural philosophy. A detailed exception to the laws of physics, maybe, but included within the laws of physics. With his own skill in glassblowing and engineering, and the inventions of a man you would know as Heron of Alexandria, Nesbitt was able to create a vast array of devices which could experiment within the bounds of human expression. Sliding we discovered a mere hundred years ago; a whirling, steam-powered machine, new in its complexity, happened to take on the correct kneeling posture and correct hand-like gesture. Monks were on scene to record the incident, of course. I believe several were killed in the incident. Similar processes have been ongoing for almost two thousand years."

"You've been working for *two thousand years* and you only have *three spells*?"

"Not precisely. As you might imagine, there are many spells that only work in particular locations, at particular times, or under particular circumstances. We have the most accurate timekeeping devices available. For some reason, Adom is the only one who can cast what he

calls ‘Scaling.’ This makes him very respected. Our mightiest spell, which slows the aging process, may be cast only from our base in Antarctica. Others –“

“Your base is in *Antarctica*?”

“The barren places of the world are often full of unexpected life and might, Carolyn.”

“Sheesh. Well, gentlemen, this is very curious. Perhaps with enough time a large enough panel of scientists might explain it. I don’t have the knowledge to understand your strange exceptions to the laws of physics. I don’t have the ability to teach you mine. I’ll take you back to your base in Antarctica and you can go on exploring on your own, taking centuries to learn the simplest thing, and you’ll have to live with that.”

“*Tora*,” said Crimson. Carolyn turned sharply, her shield snapping into place, as she noticed that Adom had crept behind her. Both monks kneeled, equidistant from her. She laughed, seeing that they still did not understand that she was mightier than they. Then, still kneeling, they began to rise into the air. She felt herself rise up between them; she blasted sideways. Nothing happened. She could not wriggle in any direction, despite all the resources at her disposal. In jerky fits and starts, the trio moved down toward the ground with a complete lack of grace.

They Slid along alleys, always moving the same distance before a brief pause, then a renewal of travel, as Carolyn tried to work out exactly what happened. She could still move a bit, could still summon energies, but they were blocked at the source. She reasoned they must be pushing on her from both sides with the same amount of force. Sliding her forward and backward at the same time, in a way. “Perhaps if I can manage to create an imbalance...”

Solon extended a cautious bubble in the direction of Crimson. She did not know what Scaling was, but if Adom could do it while Crimson could not, it probably behooved her to experiment on Crimson instead. She couldn’t get her shield to protrude, though, against the unstoppable force of Sliding.

“Are there limits on the amount of weight one can Slide?” she asked aloud. Crimson did not answer, which made her suspect there were. Solon could not create more mass than she started out with, of course. Yet, thanks to the *other* theory of relativity, the one she *hadn’t* been using, she could indeed create weight.

“Weight is a matter of acceleration,” she said casually to Crimson, and instantly she was dipping toward the ground. At the moment, she estimated her effective weight to be roughly that of a pachyderm. Crimson sweated and tried to meet Adom’s eyes without breaking posture, and Solon felt the confines of the Sliding affect her again.

But Carolyn Solon was far from the limits of her power, as far as the Sun was far from distant galaxies. She doubled her apparent weight, pushing herself straight downward, then tripled it. She could feel Adom continuing to Slide her toward Crimson, but Crimson was

definitely faltering. He soon reached his breaking point, and Carolyn was thrust directly into him. Immediately her fire reached out from either side to grasp them both in a pincer grasp, and she threw up thick shields around them for good measure. They both responded with lightning, and Solon noticed the Sparking followed a particular pattern before terminating against the spacious shield bubbles.

“You wanted a bargain? Well, it’s my term to dictate terms. We’ll start by going roughly halfway to the South Pole, shall we?”

The monks glared at her.

“Too bad, we’re already there,” she told them. “Welcome to my desert Antarctica, where I am master, where I make the rules.”

Something huge and blazingly warm rose up behind them.

“This is my dragon.”

Carolyn explained everything she knew so far about the zombies, trying to reach a fair bargain. “I need more men on the ground, observing more enemies at once. I want irrefutable proof of who is controlling them...before I destroy him in flames. How many monks are at the base in Antarctica? Do you think they could be convinced to join my cause for the opportunity to study a ‘magician’ and a dragon?”

“As an order, they would probably wish to keep at least a skeleton staff to watch the more promising experiments. However, since they sent us to seek you out, I think many would agree to come. Your bargain may work.”

“What about your abilities? How can you be useful in scouting? Can you Slide around the streets as fast as I can fly myself? The problem is that perception is undependable when I fly so fast.”

“Sliding and Sparking only work at certain scales. In any circumstance, something is Slid approximately four meters, precisely the same distance every single time. No one has ever managed to move something less, and only Adom can Scale to move something multiples of four meters in one effort, one casting of a spell. Sparking is similar, always taking on the same shape, unless it is Scaled by Adom,” Crimson Altair explained.

“This sounds like the design for the best boardgame ever,” said Carolyn. “The playing field: a 3D map of the entire city and surrounding regions. The pieces: A passel of monks, one scientist, and a dragon. Each move exactly twelve feet, each attack filling a precise cone on the battle grid. Can all the monks climb skyscrapers like you?”

“A similar exercise is part of our rigorous musculature training,” replied Crimson.

“Good. As duly appointed ambassador and representative of the Antarctic monks, how does this sound? I’ll fly your troops to New Mexico for two weeks. We have that long to gather the evidence I require and hinder the zombie troops when we can. I’ll provide food, lodging, and transportation. I’m in charge of goals and stuff, but you can choose whatever squad leaders you like and dictate your own strategy in fulfillment of my goals. Then, when two weeks is up, your order may bombard me with as many questions and demonstrations as you like.”

“I am unsure, Carolyn. My order has not marched to combat in the two millennia of our existence.”

“Well, you can back out if you find you’re in over your heads. I don’t see why they’d be a danger to you who can hide behind impenetrable shields and shoot lightning from your fingertips.”

Carolyn stroked the dragon’s scaly head, then swung herself up onto its back. “Travel only takes a second or two. How will you be most comfortable? Will flying in an invisible bubble of force bother you?”

It did not, so moments later the monks, the dragon, and Carolyn Solon had left the desert, blazing a fiery trail across the atmosphere. Carolyn hovered for a minute above the South Pole, letting Crimson direct her toward the monk’s base deep within the continent.

They gave Carolyn a tour of the base. Power and climate control came from using Sparking to boil water in glass vessels and steam-power giant aeolipile arrays, watched constantly by monks on duty. They also watched the experiment rooms where steam powered body-emulators, researching new spells. There was a library, full of collected books. The monks studied language, physics, art, and the sciences. They hunted seal and petrel and Adelie penguins and had recently added algae to their diet. They needed to eat very little because of what Solon called “Saving,” a local-only spell that extended their lifespan and improved the efficiency of their metabolism.”

“Truth is the DNA of the universe,” Solon argued with the leader at one point. “There is only one code which defines what is real, but different codons and snippets may be relevant at certain times.”

## *You've burned me to ash, now guide me through fire...*

Carolyn Solon stayed up with the monks all through the short Antarctic night, planning. She flashed back to New Mexico for some supplies, such as her laptop and a special toothbrush her dentist had recommended. While at home she downloaded large blocks of spatial data for southeastern New Mexico to her hard drive, along with some other information she might need.

Back in Antarctica at the speed of thought, she sent a tendril of energy from her own power supplies into the battery of the computer. For some reason this shortened the battery's useful life to about three weeks; she was going through them rather rapidly, but it was better than risking the computer itself.

"Crimson, tell them I'm going to transport them, all at once, to various places of strategic import. We'll be visiting several locations in search of dirt on my main suspect – who, as it happens, unfortunately knows that I have a conscience. The monks are not to let their presence be known. I'll be stationing a group here..." she pointed to her computer screen, then panned over, "and here...oh, I'll be right back."

Carolyn reappeared sixty seconds later with a printout and a big red marker. She proceeded to draw out the recon plan. "The whole plan revolves around my thought of an attention economy, the idea that this black energy can only send so many complex instructions at once. Feel free to report other tells, too, but the distraction combats here and here are designed to elicit a reaction from the controller that the recon groups will be able to observe." She passed the paper to Crimson, who nodded.

"We can certainly do this. But I do not understand why you seek more proof, if you already know who is doing it."

"I don't know. I just have a guess," she responded.

"You hold all the cards. Capture him and force the answer from him."

"The man knows me. He's worked with me. He knows I can't torture him."

"So you need the evidence to satisfy your conscience. That is admirable."

"And also to ensure I've succeeded, rather than lynching some scapegoat. Such a man – or woman – could only be brought down through death. Imprison him in stone, and he still perceives the world through the eyes and ears of others. Their hands become his hands. His motives become their motives. And finally," she concluded, "he tried to kill my dragon."

Anyone outside the base would have seen the dragon hunting Antarctic life, penguins and seals, as the monks looked on.

They dropped from the sky, silently, with little fuss. Each man or group of men had a predetermined position in Carolyn's city or nearby Albuquerque, and they slipped neatly into place. Carolyn hung back in the sky, directing landings and overseeing everything, for only she could rush from place to place in the smallest instant. Monks touched down around Plasmicorp, around Solon's house, near the banks, government buildings, and important businesses. Each held a cheap prepaid cell phone in a pocket of their furs, with which they could report important observations or request help. Even Carolyn Solon could not be everywhere at once, not quite.

Crimson Altair had the least demanding route. His real job was to organize and translate everything that was said.

"Compass Bank area reports high Mindless sightings."

"All combat groups report that they are ready."

"Plasmicorp North position is delayed."

"Sunrise in one hour."

Carolyn flew down to check on the Compass Bank position. Indeed, she could see that the black motes of the evil energy flew thicker here. It might be a good place to stage an additional distraction.

"All observation groups are in position," Altair reported.

"Then let's go," Solon answered. She appeared next to the dragon and signaled to it. Together they took off toward the tall bank building in Albuquerque, flying in stealth, a brightness draped about them.

"I'm ready to – OW!" Carolyn suddenly shouted into the phone, her voice burning with pain. Her arm, the same arm that she'd broken while fighting the monstrous lion, was hanging suddenly useless at her side. Power snapped into place to brace it once more. She felt herself gag, and she blanched at the abruptness of the pain and damage.

"Hold on a sec, I've just...I've injured myself. I've broken my arm, in fact. I'm not sure how I managed that. I've got it splinted now, but it still hurts like hell. Crimson?"

"Carolyn?"

It must have healed improperly only to shatter again now. From her research into the skeletal system, she knew that arm fractures were notorious for remission, but this was just unbelievable. “I’ll be all right, Crimson. Let’s continue.”

“We can retreat for a short time. We can retreat for long enough to bandage your arm. My people have good knowledge of healing.”

“No, Crimson. Tell everyone to move forward with things.”

“Yes, Carolyn.”

Now a more valuable variety of data started to come in. One of Carolyn’s most unlikely suspects was eliminated from the list entirely, for the Mindless swarmed right over him to counter attacks from the monks. Carolyn and Crimson pieced together an idea of where the zombies were, where they were likely to attack, where to defend, where to retreat. Occasionally, a group of the Mindless would snap back to acting like humans, presumably to allay suspicion on the parts of the unaffected crowds.

It was time to bring in the dragon.

Carolyn guided the dragon along on a narrow leash stronger than steel. His position in combat could not help but draw attention. The controller of the Mindless would have no opportunity for moderation: it was fight or flight, come out into the open or lose ground.

The groups closed in battle. The police showed up, armed with military-grade weapons, acting far outside the realm of their authority. The dragon swooped from location to location, turning the tide of battle wherever it went. There was a huge contrast between the intelligent police and the mindless waves of zombies.

A call came in on Solon's cheap phone. “Our #1 is definitely acting funny,” came the voice of the monk, translating.

Moments later, Solon was bursting into Benjamin Arcos’ small mansion. Hordes of zombies followed, converging on the house. He waved them back, and they obeyed.

Carolyn burst forcefully into the room, confronting Arcos where he sat, painfully aware that power held her body together more than bone. Still, she felt the warm heat of confidence in her might.

“How do you gain such control over them, Arcos?”

“I will give you a hint, Doctor Solon. Just as your virus is fueled by calcium, and the dragon is fueled by platinum, the virus within me is fueled by digesting *iron*. The iron in human blood, in fact. I am a vampire, Doctor Solon.”

She scoffed. “I know you’re a vampire. I’ve always known. I did not, however, know for a fact that all vampires are innately evil. I just wanted to be sure before I bring you down.”

“Before you kill me, you mean. How did you know?”

Carolyn scoffed. “Ben U. Arcos? Bennu, the Egyptian firebird. Arcos, a Greek term signifying mastery. Phoenix Master? That was pridefully clumsy, though it could have been an extraordinary coincidence. It made me suspicious. I learned more and more about your past. After all, strange life and might can be found in the deserts of the world, can’t it? There are places in Russia, Romania, and the Ukraine that certainly qualify. You spend your days behind windows tinted against the sun. Most importantly, *you never have a reflection.*”

She paused. “And I’m not sure I’ve ever tipped my hand on this, but I learned to see the black energy as it enslaves your followers. And now, in the heat of battle, I finally get to see it dripping from your pores like crude oil. Is that just for blocking sunlight from frying you to a crisp?” She scattered the motes of darkness and illusion that floated about him. What she saw shocked her.

Arcos’ features took on a sharper look, though his eyes bugged out from his face dully, with no detail in them, just an opaque look. She could see fangs ringing his mouth, still stained with blood. His torso ended in a pair of thick, spiny insect legs, and his ever-present walking stick was topped with a demonic wolf idol.

“That is right, Doctor Solon. I use the same ‘power of *celeritas*’ you spoke of earlier, the same conversion of matter to unlimited energy - yet my strength is concerned with my relation to others. The mind is a far greater resource than the forces you control, and dare I say more challenging to tame? I never run out of fuel, as you have, for I burn the blood of others in the hot furnaces of my species. I am a shepherd of men.”

“I note that you dare to compare yourself to Christ. I suppose you do not fear the cross.” She summoned a fiery crucifix between them, but he did not flinch. “What do you and your evil, hungry god want here in this city?”

“It is you who worships an evil god, Doctor Solon. You sing worship to the sun, which creates life only to hasten it toward death.”

“I knew you were a vampire, but I refused to judge you on your race alone. I could kill you with a thought, Arcos, but you see I mercifully spare you to stand just trial, and not by fire.”

“This? A trial? Justice? You presume much to judge me alone and call it justice. Where is the jury? Where the witnesses that justice be served? You have no right to judge me.”

Solon made an apologetic shrug, and a dozen monks in thick furs floated into the room, every muscle taut in obeisance to the most minor laws of the universe. “These are my jury, my witnesses. No judge would ever listen without me there to keep your mind from touching his, so this will surely do. Speak.”

Arcos spoke, and Crimson Altair translated to his companions.

“I am here respecting a certain prophecy, passed down by my race from each long generation to the next. Lilith, my ancient progenitor, was there as a spy from the very start. You can find portions of it in the Talmud, references in the book of Job, codes hidden in the holy texts of a hundred bloody religions...and artifacts such as this.” He brought out a clay disc, inscribed with runes and decorated with wings. It reminded her of the thunderbird, or perhaps more of her virus under magnification. Runes along the edges glowed the color of blood.

“This is the *chol*, the Phoenix of the Sands, a myth born again and again, our ancient enemy who worships the sun. We knew it would manifest in the deserts, but whether in ancient Africa or industrialized New Mexico we knew not. The Native Americans detailed a complex legend of their Thunderbird. Cave paintings in the Carlsbad Caverns showed that two types of Thunderbird would arise as enemies here: the Dragon, and you, Doctor Solon. When my spies spotted the Dragon Herald, the Roadrunner, that’s when I knew for certain.”

“So you rose to a position of power and waited for me here? By the way, using your influence with the police just now really gave you away. I understand they might want to shoot at some magicians of their own volition, but the same holds true for Mindless zombies running around in rampant hordes.”

“I admit that I waited for you here, choosing this as the most likely desert for your coming. Really, it happened in Egypt, but this turned out as good a place to wait. Where did you find your escort? Could they be a fourth manifestation of the virus?”

“They claim they’re magicians. In other circumstances, you might get along rather well. Now, you say the virus loves deserts. Yet your background says you are from Connecticut.”

“I was born in the Ukraine area, centuries ago, in the Oleshky Sands. There I discovered the ability to affect minds, and my mother admitted that the father I never knew had been considered a vampire. There is a racial memory within our kind, you see, hidden within the virus just as the virus was hidden within man’s DNA. The time had come for it to surface within me, and there was no hiding it, no denying my destiny. And for me to complete my great work, you and that dragon had to die.”

“Your great work? All I’ve ever seen you actually accomplish is messing around with my files in PlasmiCorp, harassing my dragon, and ordering a bunch of cops around on meaningless business.”

“You are all about *celeritas*, about speed and flight. I am all about *thumos*, though the word is Greek rather than Latin. It means an association between blood and greatness. I would remake this horrid, divided world into a unified, peaceful one, where any thought can be shared, where the leader, the Master, would really know what his people think. And I would demand only a little blood in return. Doctor Solon, do not stop me.”

“You tried to kill my dragon, Arcos. You organized that raid on PlasmiCorp just to get at my research on the dragon, didn’t you. You even tried to manipulate me into killing him for you, from the very beginning!”

“He was destined to destroy me.”

“You put far too much stock in destiny! And that’s my biggest problem with this scheme of yours. You can’t help people by taking away their free will. That’s something a deranged megalomaniac would do, and I think that’s just what you are!”

Flame billowed from Carolyn’s upper body, and Benjamin Arcos shrunk back cautiously. But her fire was aimed upward, cutting an angry hole in the roof of Arcos’ fine house. Sunlight beamed through, surrounding Solon in its warm glow as the section of roof crashed down beside her.

“Choose how you will die, Arcos. Do this jury and I concentrate our power on you, killing you instantly, or do I hold you in the sunlight, wipe away your eldritch black sunscreen, and let you fry?”

“Let me conduct my social experiment, I implore you! You could send me back to Romania or Ukraine to attempt my utopia there. I could consider my mission a success, for I met the enemy, talked to her, and encouraged her to call me friend.”

“That’s not good enough for me. Europeans are people too, you scum, and deserve their free will, not the damnation of your energy trickling through their brains. Does the jury agree?”

Crimson discussed it briefly with his friends, and nodded.

“Then I choose the mercy of a quick death,” said Arcos simply, calmly.

“Adom can Scale his Sparking. He will contribute more than any of us to a quick death,” Crimson suggested. Adom stepped forward and took up his stance.

“I will help too. You won’t feel a thing, Benjamin. I am sorry it has to be like this, though I was sure it would. I will allow you the usual boon of saying some last words.”

“A virus does not want its host destroyed, Carolyn.” There came a scuffling sound behind Carolyn. A gunshot went off. Hands clutched at Solon and the monks from behind. Arcos’ own fist came up in a vicious attack, swerving at Solon’s pursed lips. But the fist never connected, the bullet was deflected, and no zombie hand ever touched any of Solon’s allies.

“I never let my guard down anymore, Arcos. My being isn’t spread out across a thousand infected, festering, enslaved extended minds like yours. The attention economy is on my side.”

“You are dying, Solon. You do not know what you are doing. You do not know enough about these forces to do anything safely; you are a danger to yourself. I curse you, I curse you, I curse you!”

Solon smiled grimly, and spit out a decaying tooth on the ground at his feet. “That’s for your curse. I’ll find a way. I can shore up my own weakness, for a time, and find myself a cure. Bone can be synthesized. I’ll have all sorts of free time, since I’ll have dispatched the world’s greatest enemy.”

“There is always another villain, Solon. That is the curse. The other side of *thumos* is anger, you know. Anger and blood. Goodbye.” Arcos put his hands above his head and waved his black splotches of energy away. They floated up through the hole in the roof like smoke.

Solon lowered all the Mindless back out into the streets, where they would be less confused. Then she started a countdown. “Five, four, three...” At three, she nodded to Adom, and together they fired forces more deadly and quick than any firing squad in history. She thought she heard a voice from outside mumble “A virus does not want its host...” Arcos dropped, a network of lightning scars lining his flesh. Solon turned the body to ashes and scooped them into the ornamental fireplace, then set about cleaning the room and fixing the ceiling.

“Crimson, call everyone, get them to stand down. Then I’ll take you back to the mountains, answer all your questions, let you study me.” She disappeared to collect the dragon from across the street, where she’d had him waiting in case things went sour.

“The threat is over.”

## *While I breathe, I hope...*

Solon's coworkers visited her in the hospital. The lab techs she had personally mentored spent more time at her bedside than anyone. Somehow, they knew just the right gifts to bring: puzzles to keep her mind active, stories to keep her imagination fulfilled, research journals, and fresh notebooks to keep her hope alive.

Every notebook stayed empty.

Carolyn Solon didn't know how to reverse her severe bone loss. She had invented incredible treatments for osteoporosis, for all the worst bone diseases, but she could not cure the one she had afflicted upon herself. But she grinned through a mouthful of rotting teeth at coworkers who promised to implement any idea she had, no matter how long a shot.

Indeed, PlasmiCorp put all its resources at the disposal of those who worked to save its top scientist. "You're irreplaceable, Carolyn," Aaron told her after bringing her the expensive gift of a brand new top-of-the-line laptop. "God smiles on you. The hospital staff say you're ten times as strong as have any right to be."

This, of course, was due to a network of scarlet energy running through her body, supporting rib function, allowing her lungs to expand, keeping her brain in place. None of the doctor's machines were capable of noticing these energy signatures, and Solon was past the point of caring anyway.

"Ideas come in their own time, Aaron. Maybe it is out of my control. Maybe the time *will* come, like it came for Salk and Sabin when they developed the polio vaccine. That's all miracles are, Aaron, just ideas whose time has come."

Her hearing was not what it had been two weeks ago. Looking at some diagrams, she'd fashioned the right skeletal structures to support her ailing hearing, but all her internal efforts burned even more fuel. Furthermore, nothing she did could replace the function of calcium itself within her body's chemistry. The sclera of her eyes turned slowly from white to blue until she could not help but make Dune references whenever she looked in the mirror.

Movement was easy, however. Each night she snuck out to check on the dragon, supporting all her thin bones with conservative webs of force. Eventually she moved the dragon from the emptiness of Africa back to Carlsbad Caverns to save energy. "To save energy" was a phrase she had never expected to utter since her life-changing discovery. She spent increasing amounts of time riding her dragon, letting him use his platinum-fueled speed and flight rather than her own internal batteries she'd once considered limitless.

“The plethrostadion is a myth,” she wrote in one of her journals. “No energy is limitless, even the energy that fuels the sun. My kilogram of matter will not be enough. Perhaps the energy of the mind will triumph, just as it did when Einstein first came up with the idea that supported all my potential reservoirs of energy. Perhaps, like Einstein, I will struggle with these important questions on my deathbed. But maybe I will find a way to burn external calcium, or adapt the virus to take carbon gases from the atmosphere, and keep myself alive.”

One of the cleverer lab techs brought in a gift basket full of unit-themed snacks. Solon pulled out Fig *Newtons*, Gummy *Jewels*, various candies that came in *ropes* or *sticks* or *bars*, gum *drops*, *shakes*, pretzel *knots*, chocolate surprise *ergs*, honey *coombs*. Crimson had also brought a vase full of wildflowers, the spikenard blooming spectacularly.

She flew in Crimson Altair to visit her one day. Together they rode the dragon in a trail of silver across the sky back to the sterile hospital room, and the dragon retreated to Carlsbad alone.

“Crimson, you mentioned something about a ‘spell’ called ‘Saving.’ A spell that extends life. How does it work?”

“I am sorry, Carolyn,” he said, eyes glistening a bit. “It only slows the effects of aging. It cannot cure so much as a head cold.”

She sat up, assisted by the sacrifice of a mere trillionth of a gram’s bone mass. “But bone loss is one effect of aging. Tell me all you can about how it works.”

“As far as we know, it only prolongs the lifespan well beyond normal. It keeps us spry, preserves our memory, but doesn’t heal broken bones or stop pneumonia.”

“Pneumonia. Another thing I’ve added to my charts, according to the nurse. As if I wasn’t on enough antibiotics.”

On cue, the nurse came in to administer Solon’s calcium gluconate injection. “Dr. Solon, you always have a visitor,” she smiled. “You are lucky to have so many great friends.”

“Yes. I am indeed,” was Solon’s reply, and she smiled too. But she was depressed, her brain slow to function. Depression, memory loss, and even hallucinations were expected symptoms of a life without calcium. Cataracts, too, but that didn’t explain the cloudiness in her mind’s eye. In fact...

“Nurse, how much longer will you be?” Carolyn asked sweetly.

“Why, I’m just packing up, Dr. Solon. Do you need anything?”

“Oh, I think I’m ready for a nap. Could you tell the doctors not to disturb me for the next couple hours unless it’s an emergency?”

“Of course, Dr. Solon. Keep your strength up. This machine,” she pointed, “will let us know if you have any trouble breathing, pumping blood, or anything like that at all! When you wake, I’ll tell you about a new application someone built out of your famous virus!”

“All right. Thank you.”

The nurse left, and Crimson turned to go as well.

“What, you gonna walk back to the South Pole?”

“If I have to, Carolyn. But I had actually intended to find or build lodging more nearby.”

“That’s fine. I’ll help, or the dragon will. But I’m not actually going to take a nap. I just wanted to talk to you in private. Listen, you haven’t heard anything about any Mindless activity, have you? Or anything about Arcos?”

“Arcos? He’s dead, remember?”

“But he’s a vampire. How do you kill a vampire? Sunlight, wooden stake to the heart, chop off its head? We didn’t do any of those things.”

“Those are myths, Carolyn. They aren’t supposed to convert the blood’s iron into psychic control, either. You turned the body to ashes.”

“For all I know he doesn’t need a body. Keep an ear to the ground, will you?”

“Whatever you say, Carolyn.”

“Stop treating me like a dying woman. I’ll be fine, dammit.”

“I actually believe that. What brought this whole Arcos thing up again?”

“A cloudiness in my thoughts. It’s happened before. He doesn’t have to fight me to make me dead. He just has to keep me from the discovery that will cure me. I’ve been killing myself all along. Maybe I am the only one capable of stopping it, or maybe he’s affecting the Plasmicorp people too. I’ll ask them next time they come visit. You can patrol the streets for me, Crimson; that’s no place for a dragonrider.”

“Just as you say, Carolyn.”

“You’re a firkin, Crimson.”

Though his garb was strange, Crimson stalked unnoticed through nighttime streets. Sometimes, a paranoid Carolyn Solon watched him. She would float desperately, weakly, above him, fearing that a revenant Arcos might have effected his strange hypnosis even upon those

close to her. She remembered stories of possession and exorcism, and she shuddered. Her bones were weak, and she trembled. Her brain was kept cushioned by a bath of red power that held it properly in place, a task her skull was not up to. Still her might did not wane, for every microgram of bone held the power to hurl boulders. But her office friends wondered if she was still the same Solon she had been before retiring to the hospital.

Though his special skills did not rival Solon's, Crimson had access to resources that the other inhabitants in the city only dreamed about. He used them for mobility, for protection, for uncovering clues that might be beneath or above or behind other objects.

Though his English was clipped and accented, Crimson asked whatever questions he thought might lead to knowledge of Arcos. He brought all data or leads as fuel for the foggy furnace of Solon's mind. Her insistence that Arcos was out there somewhere could not be dampened; in fact, it grew daily as her body grew weaker and weaker. She reasoned that if she could be kept alive and able by constant expenditure of power, then so could Benjamin Arcos.

"After all, that is what vampires are known for, isn't it?" she told Crimson Altair, spurring him on. "Vampires drink blood to sustain themselves beyond death. Arcos turns hemoglobin into energy directly with some hugely efficient numbers that probably compete with mine."

"You speak with conviction, Carolyn, but I do not see the same wealth of evidence that you seem to see," he replied. This upset her so much that he took his leave after reassuring her that he still trusted in her powers of perspective. Soon, nurses were rushing in to administer to their favorite miracle patient.

"Nurse, what do you know about the skeletal system?" Solon asked. The nurse who had entered was one she hadn't seen before, and it occurred to Carolyn that she'd been neglecting a potential resource in the medical professionals who surrounded her.

"Uh, a bit of whatever I might need to know from a practical standpoint," answered the nurse, taken aback.

"Sure. I have a vested interest in bones. Especially given the circumstances." Solon grinned politely, showing a terrifying rictus of missing and rotting teeth, as if a diminutive miner had gotten lost in her mouth. Some teeth were so full of holes that they crunched grittily when she bit down or let her jaw close.

"I can see why you would, Miss Solon." The nurse reddened. "Uh, I didn't mean any offense."

"None taken. I'm a virologist. We're not exactly social animals. So, do you think a virus could live in bare bone? Outside of a body, I mean? I think it would need to be fresh enough to

contain the marrow, for energy molecules, and the cancellous tissue, for surface area. Really, the virus wouldn't want to access dead tissue. Why would it? Can you see any way it would work?"

"Um. I don't know. Clone some other cells over it? I'm not aware that a virus is very selective."

Solon's virus was. "Well, in my line of work, we're usually designing viruses for a specific purpose, so details matter. In fact, I designed a drug that is just starting to be used on things like osteoporosis. It was one of the first things I sent for, of course, when I ended up here."

Carolyn coughed violently, sending the nurse scrambling for a linen hand towel. When the nurse removed it from near Solon's mouth, there were red specks on it.

"My ribs, isn't it," Carolyn coughed weakly. "Difficult to breathe properly, at the worst of times." Carolyn Solon, though strong of will, was not immune to the attention economy problem she ascribed to Benjamin Arcos. At these times, she felt the pain coursing through her body intensify as her power failed to support the weight of her flesh, and she knew with grim certainty that any moment could be her last. Then she would regain control, and her perception of pain would subside to a miserable, tortuous ache.

This time was different. As she snapped back to the proper frame of mind, she thought she sensed new weavings of fine scarlet energy form into physical being in a sphere around her head. She groaned and fed a little more energy into this phenomena, and sighed in delight as a wave of mental clarity settled on her soul.

"I'm fetching the doctor," said the nurse.

"Just push the call button. I'll be fine. And I have something I need you to write down, quickly, before the inspiration fades." The nurse complied without further protest. Solon expected the dark motes of Arcos' energy to pour through the vents at any moment and extinguish her line of thought. She felt like a woman on the brink of going mad.

"I think in chains. Write down as much of this as you can get. Anything you can interpret later is fine, like shorthand or abbreviations. Ready? Bones are calcium and phosphorus. I'm picturing white phosphorous because it glows like dragonfire. Ah, if they could see it! But white phosphorous would kill you. Anyway, that balance is what the virus might key in on. Part of it, anyway. Surface area is really important in terms of consumption, and that's what matters. Cancellous tissue. Like a honeycomb. Then the marrow or the ATP in the marrow provides just enough energy to get the gears turning."

She turned her head without physical effort, checking to see that the nurse was still scribbling, but even the small effort made her imagine she could feel her joints falling to dust.

“I’ve been thinking, this whole time, about designing something that mimics living bone. Lab-grown bone is still too far from normal bone. If I had a couple years... But maybe what I need is something that mimics the function of calcium, instead. Most abundant metal in the human body! I’ll need a real chemist. Write down ‘cellular signaling’ and circle it. I need to trick the virus somehow into thinking it is in a real host, and that might do it better than mere mimicry. I don’t know enough about the role of growth factor in bones. I’ll have to look that up. Make sure my laptop is handy, please. Then I’ve got to deal with the fact that the virus is coded to my immune system specifically. That needs to be mimicked. You would think that was easy for a plasmid surgeon, but I don’t think it will be. And...”

“Um, I got all that. You make it sound like this isn’t hypothetical? There’s a specific virus? I’ll let him know to do some pathogen tests, if you like.” The nurse did not inform Solon that the physician would also hear about mumblings of ‘dragonfire’.

The doctor came in. The nurse left. Solon lapsed into conjecture. Was she fooling herself, or had something changed with the weaving of the invisible fishbowl bubble? Had she, in fact, blocked some mental attack from Arcos? That could be proof! But she hadn’t seen any of his dark, vile energy. “It could be proof of a delusional mind,” muttered Solon. The doctor heard, and took down a mental note before he, too, left the room.

No sooner had the door closed than Crimson crept inside through the window, out of breath. “I found something. Before I show it to you, I want to remind you that it is not proof. He could have dropped it before he died, or hidden it with an associate, or any number of things.” Here Crimson paused to catch enough air to speak onward.

“Crimson! Just show me what you found!” Wordlessly, he reached into his furs and pulled out the two halves of a clay disc. Familiar wings stuck out from its sides. It was the *chol* on which Arcos’ prophecy was etched.

Solon sat bolt upright. “He lives. I knew it. I must survive long enough to see him dead. Crimson, there’s a scrap of paper on the nightstand. Bring it here. I will make a list of people, materials, and books that you must bring me ASAP. I have an idea to try. You’ll basically have to move my lab here.”

“Carolyn! Take it slower. Think for a moment. Why would this thing show up if Arcos is alive? It is broken, too. He would keep it safe, if he were living; he wouldn’t drop it in the middle of an alley somewhere, wouldn’t allow it to be found. Someone probably found it, then abandoned it. Or he stashed it before we destroyed him, and it became broken in the meantime.”

“No! I bet it’s a trap for me. Bait. Bait I will take. This is his sort of devious reasoning. He knows I’m weak; he’s always known more about the energy than I have. Arcos wants a rematch, Crimson!”

She slumped, suddenly defeated. “Ugh! You’re probably right. I’m projecting my certainty. I’m biased and I’m weary. It’s proof that Arcos is dead, is no longer caring for his stuff. Arcos is dead, and I will follow him soon.” Footsteps fell in the hall outside Solon’s door. “I’ll still ask you for those materials I want, though I won’t ask you to rush. The world doesn’t need me and my superhero syndrome.”

Crimson turned to look at her seriously. “Maybe they don’t. I do.” He quickly memorized the list and retreated. The doctor opened the door just in time to catch Crimson Altair leaping casually through a ten story window.

“Don’t worry. He knows parkour,” said Solon, trying to sound sane. “Fantastic man,” she added, smiling.

It rained and rained. A gloomy day went by without a word from Crimson.

“I’m afraid I have bad news, Dr. Solon,” said her physician, who had watched Crimson Altair slow himself against the sheer side of the hospital building moments away from splattering into a Crimson smear.

“I have a fatal condition. I’m preserved only by a miracle. I should be comatose today and dead tomorrow. What harm can you do me?”

“Well, that’s a pessimistic view! My bad news does relate to your condition, however. We’ve been graphing your condition’s progress, and we think we can now draw a conclusion with some conviction. It’s just basic statistics, mind you, and could easily be wrong.”

“Go ahead; I’m ready.”

“The miraculous nature of your survival makes it difficult to say anything for sure. You could recover entirely, for all I know. We’ve certainly set it up so you have as much calcium intake as humanly possible. However, the data shows that, if everything continues at this rate...you have days, not weeks, to live.”

Carolyn sat stonily for a few heartbeats. Then she asked, “What’s your best estimate?”

“Your ribs must let your chest expand or your lungs will not function. Your brain is similarly a weak point. Four to seven days. Nine days, and you won’t have a drop of calcium or ounce of bone structure in your body.” Solon could barely hear the man through the weakened ear bones she had once boasted could power a city.

“Nine days,” Carolyn repeated. She could have burned any tears to vapor, erased their meaning, kept her face as rocklike as a sculptor’s rendering. She heard her doom pronounced as

sure as prophecy by a mortal man who had never seen dragonfire, yet she did not even start to cry.

“I...I’ll leave you alone, shall I? We can call anyone you need for support, ok? Try to keep...I’ve been wrong before when I was a lot more confident, ok?” He eased himself out backward and shut the door.

Only then did Carolyn feel like weeping. As her grimace turned into a frown, her eyes burned but no tears fell. Her vision swam, and she felt the pressure of her mortality pouring into her mind like a headache. “While I breathe...I hope,” she whispered. She drew a breath, then another. She felt the gloom from outside seep into the room, matching her mood. A single tear trickled down her cheek. Carolyn let it fall. She thought of resolve, but felt her scarlet willpower ebb away to be replaced by murk.

Through teary eyes, she gazed out the window. The rain flowed down the window in sheets, though she could hardly hear its patter. She squeezed her eyes shut, opened them again to stare at the storm. The rain seemed to seep like corruption into the porous concrete around the sash. And amidst the slow stream of water oozed little black motes of evil power.

## *Memento Mori...*

Solon dreamed of vulgar ebony droplets, seeping into her soul. Wounds blossomed on her body. Benjamin Arcos pressed his lips over her throat to lap up the blood, blood that could not clot without vital, life-giving calcium. A chattering noise made Solon struggle to turn her head. In the distant darkness, she saw the calm eyes of the roadrunner. Deep within them, she saw a glint of silver dragonflame. The roadrunner's plumage echoed the fractals of a fire. Night emanated from Arcos' body, trying to blind Solon to the roadrunner's message. Or was he a dragon? Or a phoenix, reborn in black fire? Claws sunk into Solon's mind – claws she was sure belonged to Arcos and not to the bird.

The roadrunner was eclipsed by the murk. Only his eyes remained visible. Those shining avian orbs tried to tell her something. She struggled toward consciousness.

In the harsh reality of the hospital room, Carolyn's mental shield snapped into place, her subconscious attention returned to matters of defense. It was something that went beyond the simple physics that a Solon could understand; it was a force that blocked a power of the mind. She smiled in her half-sleep. Someone stood over her, leaning in toward her face.

"Wake up, Carolyn," the figure whispered.

Full consciousness dawned. She blinked, and felt the plates of her skull grate against each other. Automatically, she reinforced her body's integrity with energy. One night within the next nine days, she thought. One night my defenses will be down while I sleep, and I will die.

Crimson stood beside her bed. "There are no hiding places in your room, Carolyn," he said. "But I have brought all the equipment you requested. I expect the personnel to visit this afternoon."

"I'll be starting work at once," she said. Crimson Altair could see a light of hope in her eyes. Solon was finally faced with a problem she could combat. Ribbons of energy reached out to unpack heaps of notepads, textbooks, chemicals, and sterile containers. "Perfect, perfect," she muttered. "I need twice this amount of calcium chloride, if you can scrounge it. Otherwise, I'm set to go. Assuming my new colleagues cooperate, of course. Thank you so much, Crimson! You're a lifesaver. Or so I hope."

Though Crimson knew Carolyn appreciated him, he saw in her an abrupt transformation between thankful pleasantries and a Solon focused on research. In this second Solon, he saw all chance of her survival.

"Stay right there! I want you to hear this...as soon as I can look up a few figures..." Carolyn scribbled furiously, leafing through the books he'd brought for her. In a stunningly short amount of time, her genius had provided the answer. "Yes. Yes! My idea for a fuel that mimics

the function of bone without the form of bone should work! I can have the first infusion grown in about two weeks!” She smiled at him.

He thanked his gods that she had been granted reprieve; he smiled back at her. “I’ll leave you to it, Carolyn. Call my prepaid phone if you need anything.” He launched away.

“Nine days,” she whispered under her breath.

Things progressed about as she’d predicted, with only minor delays and minimal changes in the intellectuals and academics she had asked to help her out. Sometimes, Solon spent whole hours just looking out of the window. Her mind was always racing, her pen always scribbling. She didn’t always think about her own disease, her own mortality. She thought about the world, or about microbiology, or physics. She devised hypotheses about the powers of the monks. And most of all, she made up suggestions for Crimson to counter Arcos.

On the third day, Arcos tipped his hand.

Crimson Altair came bounding in. She could see his iridescent shield aimed out the window. Sparks in all colors of the rainbow glanced off it at certain points. Solon had seen that effect before: the shield was deflecting gunfire. “Mindless ones!” he called. “Or perhaps that isn’t the right word. They can certainly use tools. But they don’t respond to pain, that’s for sure. Have a look at this, if you’re able. I’ll Shield.”

Solon moved her body up into a sitting position as if she were mounted on a hydraulic jack. Out the window, she saw a small crowd of people. Many bore the singe marks of recent close calls with Sparking. One man was missing a leg, cauterized at the stump, but obviously a recent injury. He sagged forward on his good knee, supported himself on one arm. With the other he gripped a pistol, which he fired at Crimson with astonishing precision. Two others in the crowd carried long rifles. As she watched, one got a shot past the Shield, directly into the room. A light fizzed out in a shower of sparks and broken glass. Somewhere in the building, an alarm sounded. She winced, and threw up her own shield where it could protect her while remaining out of sight of the zombie folk.

“Two suggestions, Crimson. One: Head for a few other hospital windows that you know to be empty, so they don’t assume you’re visiting me in this one. Two: Grab me one of those rifles, if it is safe to do so. I have a bad feeling about Arcos’ plans here.”

“On it!” He moved the position of his Shielding to cover his egress and flowed flawlessly into the stance of Sliding. Crimson Slid upward, ducking into a few more hospital rooms as though he was taking cover from the firefight.

On his last visit, he chose poorly. There was a sharp retort from one of the high powered rifles, loud enough to penetrate even Solon's fuzzy hearing. Outside, glass fell to the pavement from a broken window, and there was a sharp gasp in a lonely hospital room. Between sterile blue curtains, Crimson saw a stranger die, blood blossoming red across the front of his hospital gown.

Crimson turned white, and glared out the window at the small mob. Someone wandered up to the crowd curiously; her expression suddenly slackened and she simply merged into the group. More people gathered at the sound of gunshot. Eventually they became too many, and all the armed men slipped away for cover.

He saw his chance, and leapt without magic from building to building until he was pressed against a wall just above one of the men with a rifle. Crimson dropped, sliding the man forward into a barrier as he did so. The man did not so much as groan, still mindlessly immune to pain. He turned to level the gun directly at Crimson, point blank.

There was no time for a Shield. Crimson struck toward the heavens with both feet in a powerful kick, hurling his hands back to brace against the cold ground. His soles kicked the gun aside, sending a slug deep into a concrete wall. From his handstand position, Crimson flung himself back at the man without breaking rhythm. His legs wrapped around the stranger's neck and they both fell to the ground.

The monk was up again immediately. He fell into the Sparking stance and aimed his fists at the man's head. The man stared blearily at him. "Who the hell are you?"

"Your ally. Sorry," explained Crimson. He dropped his hands. "It's best if you expect the whole thing was a dream. Is this your rifle?" The monk kicked the gun up into his own grasp.

"Not mine. Maybe I should call the police."

"Good idea. At least, I don't think they'll make it worse. You dropped your cell phone about fifty feet that way." Crimson pointed. When the man turned, Crimson levitated up to a handy window and disappeared.

Solon and Crimson held a council of war. "Somehow I knew it," she said. "This is the sort of rifle produced by Stormy Jackson, former chief of the Hogshead Gang. Before I collapsed a roof on his head. They're untraceable, and he's outfitted them with more power than an untrained civilian should have."

"You're one to talk, Carolyn."

“Good point. So, Arcos got his hands on the late Stormy Jackson’s weapon stocks, probably one of the few portable weapons that could threaten your men. What do we do about it?”

“Attack?”

“Well, obviously.”

Crimson dashed in front of the ranks of rifle-wielding men and women, dodging slugs or casually letting his Shield take a few. It was 2:00 am.

“They’re following,” he said into his prepaid cell phone.

“Copy that,” said the voice of Dr. Solon over the speaker. “What’s your ETA?”

“What is an ETA?” Crimson asked. “Wait,” he added. Something was arcing over his head. It wasn’t moving like a bullet. “They’ve got ballistics!” he shouted, snapping his Shield in front of him. This exposed him to the shots from the crowd, but he ducked and crawled sideways to minimize his profile. The missile exploded and he felt himself thrown aside like a ragdoll. Crimson slid upward into the air before he hit the ground and clung to a downspout. He swiveled around this axis to face the crowd and braced himself to take up a stance.

Bullets sleeted toward him like a storm. Crimson aligned his body in keeping with some para-fundamental law of the universe that caused lightning to leap from his hands. Angry bolts licked up the lead pellets, detonating any missiles among the flurry and melting the metal into slag. He spun and ran onward.

“Five minutes,” he panted into the phone.

“Ah! There we go!” Solon responded.

Carolyn Solon never wasted any time these days. While she waited for the assault to come together, she was taking notes on the load of calcium she was heating in the microwave. Samples of her own blood ringed the bowl, which occasionally sent off scarlet sparks. She nodded approvingly and made a mark in her notepad.

Then came a call on the phone, bearing the worst news an Antarctic monk could bear.

“I’m hit. No more fancy stuff.” One who practices a system based on the finest precision cannot function with a bullet lodged in the necessary muscle groups.

“How bad is it? Do you need backup? I’ve got plenty of juice to come right over.”

“A bullet in the calf. I can Slide, but I can’t Spark or Shield. Lucky I’m heading for a hospital right now.”

“See you shortly,” Carolyn told him. Shuddering, she drew another blood sample from her own limp arm. “I’m nothing but a marionette,” she said to herself. “Operated by the same strings that hold me together.”

Solon looked out the window, staring hard. Every movement was a costly effort of will, draining her desire to live, consuming her vital bones like a horde of rats gnawing at her basic fibers. She turned her neck to face the window, and soon saw Crimson Altair Sliding full speed just above the street, in a kneeling position. A fragment of his coarse garment was knotted just above his left ankle. As he grew closer, she could see blood staining his simple leggings. She readied her resources.

She whistled for the dragon, but the dragon did not come. She stared aghast at her two fingers, inserted them between her rotting teeth again, gave the call one more time. There was no response.

Behind Crimson tore a packed horde of human beings made malignant by the loss of their will. They brandished long rifles with all the improvements Stormy Jackson had been able to muster. Solon could feel the difference in the way they were controlled now – ‘mindless’ was no longer the right word. Their will was not their own, but their actions were finely orchestrated, as if someone had given them a command they were helpless to resist and caused them to give their all in its fulfillment.

The scales at which Solon operated allowed all distance to be as one distance. When the streetlights illumined the last of Arcos’ minions, Solon acted. Fiery lightning erupted from her tiny cell and streaked down the street faster than the eye could see. Instantaneously, forces plucked each gun from clutching hands and vaporized them. The horde she swept into a pond, a pond inside the same park where she had once met with Benjamin Arcos. Soon they would revert to their old selves, bewildered but unharmed.

“As soon as you are well, I need you back on the streets. The most important task is to locate someone in time to observe them enter the armory where these guns are stored. Then we can remove most of the danger in one swift blow.”

“They always come from different directions, Solon. They form the mobs directly from whoever is nearby, I’m sure of it. Maybe the guns are already deployed, secreted away in houses, buried under blankets and cradles, ready for the call of the vampire but hidden from their owners’ perception.”

“You may be right. I think searching for a store could also produce other leads, though, so it’s still the best idea I have right now.”

Abruptly, Crimson changed the subject. “How is your project coming along? Is the new culture on track?”

“It should be done in nine days!” she said. “One day ahead of schedule. Most of what work remains it is not possible to accelerate. Cultures must develop.”

“I read something in the monastery which might be able to help. Some of the modern physicists believe that an object travelling at close to light speed would be suspended in time. You can appear anywhere on the earth in an instant. Can you not reach these ‘relativistic speeds’?”

“I daresay I could. But where do you think the energy for that would come from? The very bones I sought to protect. Crimson, they say that as an object approaches the speed of light, its mass increases, and it takes more energy to accelerate the new mass. You’ve already turned some of that mass into energy; you’re not netting any energy, but you are facing a steeper task. Arcos once implied that was part of the reason I’ve burnt out so fast. My plethrostadia calculations allowed for vast amounts of energy, but not for vast accelerations.”

Crimson gave her a calculating look, a look full of sympathy. “Nine days until your cure is finished,” he said.

“A viable prototype, yes,” she replied.

“But how long until you’ve burnt yourself out? I think you put on a strong face for us, Carolyn, but even I can sense that you’re in immense pain. Your replica of your skeletal system isn’t perfect.”

“I knew if anyone noticed that, it would be you,” she sighed. “I’ll make it. I can use early prototypes to prolong my lifespan. I’ve already switched to a conservative lattice system within myself, to save on energy consumption. It’s funny,” she choked, “but the closer I come to the death of all this, the more impressive my control becomes.” Carolyn focused on making the ruins of her ribcage rise and fall, letting her lungs fill up with sweet air. Crimson strode to her bedside and gently gripped her hand in his. It felt coarse and callused, but she thought he put exactly the right amount of pressure on it, precise to within a nanodyne.

She didn’t know that the monk’s keen hearing heard her mouth “Four days” as she fell asleep.

The next day, all Carolyn’s lab assistants worked as if driven by the whips of Hell. They had set up their lab days before in Solon’s wing of the hospital, to the consternation of the doctors and nurses. Such was Solon’s fame that no one ever managed to kick them all out. Some patients in less critical care had even been moved to other wards, making more room for the

increasingly-arcane equipment set up to save Carolyn's life from the fires within her. She was astounded at how much progress they made, even decreasing her estimate by half a day after only twenty-four hours' effort.

As fast as Carolyn's chances improved, the vampire sought to strike them down again. Crimson came to visit her the next day with a story.

"I stalked a suspicious character to a warehouse, Carolyn. I swear he never noticed me. This new splint is doing wonders..."

"I hope you're taking plenty of painkillers, Crimson."

"Can't. They interfere with my precision even more than pain itself. Anyway, this heavysset man moves an iron lattice aside and crawls in through a window. When he crawled out again a moment later, his coat was bulging. I'm quite certain it was one of those rifles. I passed through the portal when he was out of sight. It was very dark in there, but I thought I saw the gleam of some creature's eyes in the night. I heard a rustling and a scraping, like bone on bone. Or like that stuff insects are made of."

"Chitin," Solon interjected. "Exoskeletons are made of chitin."

"Whatever it was, it must have heard me somehow. That's when I first started to feel fear, for no prey has ever heard me coming since I was young. I made myself as small as I could and prepared for Shielding, though I feared the light of magic would give me away. The eyes disappeared, and I heard nothing more."

"You saw Arcos?" said Solon in disbelief. "That's incredible progress! Maybe there's hope yet!"

"The story doesn't end there. You know I have been practicing with my perception of magic. I opened the entryway again, and saw those black motes streaming away from a crack in the masonry!"

"Arcos. Disembodied," said Solon wearily. "He must be able to transport his being...his soul, as he would call it...on the energy he gets from blood. Dammit, I wonder what his limits are?"

"I'll find him, Carolyn. I'll cut his head off with a Spark to the throat and a Spark to the heart for good measure. Then I'll stake him. Then..."

"If you try enough methods, yeah, maybe one will work. You call me as soon as possible though, you hear me? I have evidence that my energy can directly counter his. We may need to put up some mind shields around some cops or something...No, he has more mundane ways to control the cops, never mind. But I'll definitely need to hem the building in. I'll crush him in a power he can't escape, Crimson!"

The nurse wandered in, and Carolyn changed topics. “Will this gloomy weather ever let up?” she said. Crimson shrugged. He had become a fixture in the hospital room, and often slept in his furs at the foot of Solon’s bed.

“What do you think, nurse? Bring me a weather report, if you would.” The nurse made no answer, continued to prepare the hypodermics that would test the rate of Solon’s doom.

“Do you like the rain? Some people do. Normally I don’t mind...” Carolyn faltered, for the nurse made no reaction. Carolyn was too tired to keep up the lighthearted pace of conversation. Every cheerful word felt like cold needles in her heart and gut, tempted her to stoke her inner fire to the point of cataclysm and end it all. To finally be warm. Warm was good. Warm was safe.

“Damn you, woman, can’t you say something back?” cried Crimson, in a rare display of frustration. “It’s the least you could do for someone in your care!”

Still she made no answer, and immediately Solon began to feel worried. That needle was about to plunge into her clotless veins, deliver some fatal poison in the guise of salvation. “If you put that needle in me without showing me your ID and saying your name in a clear voice,” Carolyn told her carefully, “I will kill you.” The needle plunged desperately, well off course for the tests. Solon was faster. The needle burned first, drenching the bedsheets in some boiling liquid. Then the flesh burnt from the imposter’s hand, leaving only bone.

Before Crimson could cry out, say that the nurse was surely possessed, Solon had reduced her to a pile of dust. She panted hoarsely, both fists clenched and muscles knotted, connected to beams of power where bone belonged. “I won’t let them take my last days from me!” she spat, and her voice guttered like a dying flame. Crimson stared at his feet, began to clean up the mess, not making eye contact. Solon lapsed into a dark sleep. Crimson cut away a square of the poison-stained sheets for later analysis, and kept loyal watch.

Carolyn Solon’s mind lit up with signals. She snapped awake. Crimson was hissing loudly in her ear, demanding that she wake up. She used her power to lift the clock to a position where she could read it; it was easier than dragging her exhausted body around like a puppet. Only fifteen minutes had passed.

“They’re here! In the hospital!” Crimson hissed. “More gather in the streets! My Shield won’t be big enough for the weaponry they hold!” She gazed at him blankly. Connections fired in her brain and came to horrific conclusions on mentality, morality... mortality. “I’m a corpse,” she told Crimson. “Bury me, please.”

“Not yet, you’re not,” he said grimly. “Delirium! Why must you visit us now?”

“Corpses can’t feel delirium,” she informed him. “Bury me.”

“Close off the room, Carolyn.”

“Bury me!” she insisted.

“Start with your head! Put up that mind shield! Then seal off everything within sight! They’re coming for you, in numbers I cannot shield you from!” Indeed, Solon could feel hundreds of footsteps, racing heavily up the stairs. Their numbers vibrated the whole room. She hooked up replicas of the ossicles in her ear; *stapes* and *incus* and *malleus*, until her hearing sharpened. The minute task restored something of her to herself.

“How much of me is left?” she wondered aloud. “I may not suffice. There must be hundreds converging on us in the hospital.”

“Yes,” barked Crimson, “and more in the streets. They do not fear the law. They cart huge weapons. I should have gone to clear out that warehouse.”

“You wouldn’t have had time,” breathed Carolyn. “I may not be enough either.” There was a dull retort in the street, and some weapon ripped away the façade of Solon’s cell. She barely brought up a wall of her own before a blast could destroy the room’s contents. Through the hole, through the hazy saffron wall of force, she could observe the numbers Arcos had sent to see her safely dead.

“I’ll kill him with my dying breath,” she muttered. “Tell me where that warehouse is. I’ll blast it first. I’ll lance all our best guesses. He’s worth so many innocents dead. His death is worth it. The pain he wants to bring!” Carolyn groaned, her hair waving in a sudden breeze, her pale and sunken flesh thrown into sharp relief by her flames.

“Concentrate on the task at hand,” Crimson snapped.

“Concentrate on our hopeless survival, got it,” Carolyn quipped, and a shadow of her old self bled through. “If Arcos planned this, he’ll succeed. He’ll go all the way. He must know it will succeed, for he will be unmasked by this effort.”

The first wave of zombies beat against the locked door. She threw up a wall of force to replace it. “I’ll try not to do any more killing,” she mumbled. “That was a mistake. Believe me, and forgive me.”

“I do, Carolyn,” said Crimson. “All is right between us. And I believe that you’ll earn a place in history. Remember that you’re a hero.”

“Heroes always go down fighting,” she said, grim-faced. She raised herself with a mortal effort, and aimed slowly at one of the many weapons outside.

Her golden attack hacked hopelessly at the vast company on the street. Unexpectedly, meters away from impact, her force suddenly mingled with a blinding silver flame, and engulfed the array of missiles, consumed even the explosion.

Silver and golden sparks flew everywhere as the dragon came in for a landing. Iridescent disks lined his back. The shields moved aside, and two dozen men and women leapt from dragonback to chop at the necks of those wielding the remaining big guns. Crimson jumped to the edge of the building in surprise, then gave an uncharacteristic whoop of pleasure.

“My compatriots! They arrive, unannounced and uninvited, in the nick of time! Up here!” he called in his native tongue. “Some of you are needed up here!” Half the monks detached from the fight and Slid directly upward in discrete increments. He reached down to pull them, two at a time, into the room, welcoming them in their language.

Outside the battle raged. Solon helped where she could. With small amounts of energy, she could provide a tremendous complement to the abilities of her allies. The dragon was the strongest, and had a great range to his attacks, and casualties mounted up around him. Adom fought off waves and waves of them alone. It seemed he would go on fighting them all at once, indefinitely, unscathed. The monks were extraordinarily precise, could often disable without killing, and there were many of them. Yet the mindless waves of Arcos outnumbered them ten to one. A well-aimed Spark could fell ten or more of the tightly packed enemies, though the monks appeared hesitant to use this power.

The monks fought in phalanxes, with shields above their heads. They fought with coordination and grace, pairs of them back to back to take full advantage of Shielding. Adom was always there, Scaling the abilities of other monks to take full advantage of the whole battlefield. Occasionally a warrior would spring into the air and Slide upward to gain a tactical view of the battlegrounds.

It was a long fight, as battles go, and made longer by the monks’ reluctance to kill strangers who in normal wars would have been innocent bystanders. Finally, Solon could no longer see aggressors in the streets. A monk came in and reported to Crimson, who translated that the hospital was likewise clear.

“How many dead?” she croaked.

“About a hundred dead. Half again as many disabled. The remainder fled.”

“How many of ours?” she insisted.

“One.”

“One!” Only one monk had died in her service. But he had died defending exactly one life. “You shouldn’t have allowed him, Crimson. I should have surrendered.”

“I have no rank within the order, Carolyn. I...”

“No one should have died defending me!” she raged. “How can you say my life is above his, is worth his service?”

“If Arcos wins this war, nations upon nations lose their being, Solon. That is why they answered the summons of the dragon.”

Carolyn sagged in the sterile bed. “I have no time left, Crimson. Two days remain to me at the most. The solution won’t be ready. That monk died for nothing, for two days spent useless on a hospital cot hooked up to a dozen machines. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“I know, Carolyn. I knew. Feel no guilt. You take the responsibility of the world on your fiery pauldrons. That makes you feel the weight of ego; you take blame onto yourself for what did not concern you personally. That monk died for a cause. It is I who serve the woman Carolyn Solon. And there’s still time to make progress and let you live. Everyone has agreed to stay. With that much pressure on Arcos, he’ll leave your mind alone. All your energies can be dedicated to this one problem. You can survive, Carolyn.”

This did not prove entirely true. Though she enjoyed an increase in time she could dedicate to her final research project, Solon knew that the vampire survived. There were missions. She sent the dragon to destroy the warehouse of weapons, not caring what the law might think of the destruction. Clues found at the warehouse led her to send the dragon and a few monks to Europe in search of more holdouts. They reported back to her on international cell phones, for Solon spared no expense on any of her last projects.

Convinced that the whole thing was a trap, Crimson patrolled the streets around the hospital unceasingly. For 24 hours, he went without sleep or rest until Carolyn feared he would not find the discipline to evoke his magic or combat capabilities. Carolyn did not share Crimson’s belief that Arcos had arranged for the dragon to be sent away. Things had happened too fast for him to react, for once, and even his cunning mind could not keep up with all the different factions moving in different directions.

Still, she was wary of cops, and made sure to engage each nurse in conversation until her body could no longer meet its respiratory needs without a machine’s aid. Her ribs had finally dissolved, and the doctors installed metal braces in an unprecedented procedure. She remained in a coma. Carolyn Solon had no more than a day to live. The one and only chance at a solution was almost ready.

Crimson rested. The dragon flew carefully over Eastern Europe. The intellectuals Solon had hired worked in double-time to complete the osseous replica to sate the mad hunger of the virus. Benjamin Arcos did not show his face, but Crimson still saw signs that he was at work with his fingers on the pulse of the city, or worse.

The dragon flapped his wings lazily, then transitioned into a glide. Silver power sparked along his smooth membranes, empowering him to a soaring height that would drive an eagle mad with jealousy. More power reinforced his scales against the acceleration, wind, and weather, and further served to keep the monks safe upon his mighty back.

Suddenly the dragon banked sharply, facing the West, and he roared an angry roar with all his strength. The riders looked about, but could see nothing out of the ordinary. They did not understand, and he shook them off to fall hundreds of feet to the ground. The dragon launched westward, racing the golden sunlight in the thin air.

In the shattered hospital room, fenced off from the cold winds by a clear sheet of plastic, a machine beeped alarmingly. Carolyn lay misshapen and unmoving in the same hospital bed. She had too few bone structures to give her form and being. Physicians rushed in, nurses wheeling more life support machines behind the doctors. Carolyn's doctor looked at the heart rate monitor, which displayed a red line indicating only the weakest pulse. As he watched, it pinged pathetically and flatlined. The brain scanner showed one burst of neural activity, as if Solon experienced a fervent dream, and one last spark of fire burned in eyes that stared sightlessly at the fluorescent lights. Once those eyes had shown an unmatched brand of intelligence, but now her brain went as still as her heartbeat. Carolyn Solon died.

The entire city heard an unearthly roaring from the skies above, conveying the spiky frustrated pain of a deep bond now shattered. The dragon jetted overhead like a comet, sending off waves of silver heat in the visible spectrum. Rooftops burst into flame with the passion of his proximity.

He wheeled over the hospital, circled three times. Through the clouds and smog, the dragon opened his mouth wide and breathed a colossal pillar of argent fire down upon the tall hospital building. Immediately the flame became tinted with red tongues, cascading like fireworks in fractal towers of destruction. The immolation lasted only moments. Molten metal flowed to the ground and threatened to flood the street. Timbers burned to ash immediately and concrete chunks exploded outward or blew to atoms. The dragon circled again in salute to his mistress and flapped away.

The neighborhood blazed. The hospital remnants smoked, sending aromas into the air. A charred lot and some melted bits and pieces became Carolyn Solon's funeral pyre. In the heavens, fiery letters tracing their way across the overcast sky shouted Solon's final message.

“Slay Benjamin Arcos!”