

The Prophetess of Mars

Theric Jepson

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-or-

the Modern Prometheia

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a science-fictional romance

on a world bereft of men

The small office of Zina Rockwell, president of the Relief Society Scientific Expedition of 1905 and eventual sole surviving original member of either that or its Melchizedek counterparty, is filled with native Marsian flora. Specifically, not the most beautiful examples of the planet's living artistry, but the flowers and decorative stemwork most likely to remind one of Earth. Clagantall with its height and geometry of a clocktower, complete with round faces on all four sides of its tallest point; lynbrooke, remarkably akin to a sailing ship; holyhouse which, when one squints one's eyes, appears not that dissimilar to the Salt Lake Temple itself, the very edifice wherein Sister Zina had covenanted to plant the ensign of Zion on alien soil and preserve the faith through the works of science, and where, although she would not mention it for some years, she had been inspired to think of Mother Earth as the Father Planet, and to accept Mars as her new mother.

Of course, any of the dozens of species on display might just as easily be *lacertalba*, a toxic organism so adept at mimicry its members grew alongside the Saints' beans and Indian corn and sorghum, only to be unknowingly harvested and consumed. *Lacertalba* had killed them in their ignorance for months after that first harvest until Sister Zina's miraculous discoveries had identified and made identifiable this cuckoo of the plant world. By then, only thirty men were left, the plant's toxins affecting them more readily. Now, over twenty years later, after additional expeditions' arrivals, many accomplishments and disasters, and the end of communiques from the Father Planet, their population had waxed and waned many times. This day: 31 men, 24 boys, 255 women, 89 girls.

But here in the twenty-fourth year of their colonies, all the terrors of Mars seemed conquered. The men of Melchizedek, to celebrate victory, sent twenty-seven men out on desert to find suitable ground to build a temple to their God, the ultimate symbol of the Saints' victory over the red land they lived upon.

These were caught in a vicious blizzard.

The word blizzard, in a Marsian context, may be misleading. There is no snow (although occasional knives of ice two to seven meters may plummet from the sky) for the Marsian blizzard is less about precipitation and more about precipitous change in temperature. The Marsian expeditions defined “blizzard” as the sudden drop of at least 50° within an hour. Their early casualties taught the Saints well, and they were soon in possession of portable shelters that could be assembled in under ten minutes and heated with condensed methane. And when more than a short walk from the colonies, they wore suits warmed by gas. These advancements were believed to be sufficient. Then the Mother Planet surprised them with a 160° drop in twenty minutes.

Sister Zina woke with a fright and dressed. She rushed to her office, pulling her dark, gray-streaked hair into a quick bun. The lynbrooke were wilting, a sign that the male plants on the plains to which they were sympathetically connected were perishing under the cold—meaning temperatures below −120° at best—proof of her dream’s validity. She popped red cylinders into the pneumatic runners directed at her counselor’s living quarters, as well as those of Sisters Emily, Åndrea, Tonella, and Charlise. The red cylinders were heavy enough to open the runner doors themselves and crash into the brass collection bowls beneath with force enough to wake each sister. Within eight minutes, all were dressed—or at least berobed—and seated in a circle. Sister Zina looked at them. A single tear escaped her eye as she recognized what she must say.

“Sisters. The expedition is lost.”

They were silent. Sister Åndrea was the only woman among them married and with a living husband, and he was on the expedition. “How—how do you kn— Are you certain?”

Sister Zina turned to Sister Åndrea. She saw no doubt in her eyes, no denial. Just a pale hope. She nodded, and Sister Åndrea bowed her head. The women on each side of her took her into their arms. Sister Zina waited. A dozen minutes or more passed in silence as each sister considered the news. One wept, one sobbed. One, like Sister Zina, lost but a single tear. Sister Tonella looked steely. When the crying ended, she demanded, “What do we do? We will not survive with only four men.”

Sister Zina nodded. “This I know. But I have dreamed a dream and I do believe our temporal salvation will be provided for. I do not know how, of yet, but today we must preserve these lost men’s seed until we do. It will be an unpleasant task, but I must ask some of you to leave for the plains and recover their organs of seed before the thaw. We will recover their bodies later; now, speed is of the essence. I and Sister Charlise will stay to make a pneumatic chamber sufficient

to preserve ... these articles. I cannot demand any of you go. This task is dangerous and unpleasant and personal to a grotesque degree. But we must act and now. You need not all go. But you I trust to do this quietly until we understand just why we have been asked to engage in this ... action."

"Sister Zina." Sister Juanita's hands were clasped together as she stood and stepped to the floor between her seat and that of the prophetess. Sister Juanita was one of only a few women older than Sister Zina's 43 years. She had arrived as part of the second expedition, sent in year four. Its fiery demise in the atmosphere had left her scarred and hairless, but she alone had survived. Sister Zina had called Sister Juanita as a counselor in year seven and relied on her clarity and honesty.

"Yes, Sister Juanita? What is it?"

Sister Juanita looked toward the ceiling a moment. "I sustain you this morning as I always have, but I must question this revelation. It seems to me that, perhaps, if we are intended to reproduce, God would not be so destructive upon our men. And to the more part, is it not in some way unholy to take away the seed of dead men? To violate their bodies in this way? Is it not a form of theft or even rape? I must admit to discomfort."

Sister Zina looked about the circle. The faces she saw were willing to believe her, to trust her—but simultaneously they felt as Sister Juanita felt. She turned back to her counselor. "Had you, Juanita, brought this violent suggestion to me, I would feel the same. I am not excited or even comfortable to ask what I am asking. I would go myself and alone except that we must build a cryonic chamber with capacities we have never before attempted and, thus, I must stay. I am reminded of Mother Sariah who must not have been pleased with the Lord when she learned he had had her son kill a man. I think of her tender heart suffering in the wilderness and I cannot but forgive her weakness. But her descendants would have perished spiritually had they not obtained scripture through that murdered kinsman. And we will have no descendants at all save we preserve the seed of our deceased brethren. I am not at ease, I admit, to present this commandment. But I am certain it is divine. We were sent here to be mothers and to found a people. That first and great commandment given to our mother Eve is yet in force. We must proceed in faith."

Sister Juanita's eyes were closed, tears pushing out from behind her lids. The other sisters gathered courage; Sister Tonella spoke first:

"I will be ready to leave before twenty minutes pass. We must move quickly. I will bring scalpels and towels and ice bowls. We know the direction they left and we can arrive before dawn. Gas-suits should remain warm long enough for us to arrive and accomplish our work. We can then use their shelters until dawn or, if they yet have gas, refill and return immediately. The more of you

who come, the sooner we shall return. I have suits enough prepared for us all.” She stood and looked about.

Sister Andrea stood, shakily. “My husband was there. I’ll not allow another to do his work.”

Sister Tonella nodded. “It is well. Who else?”

Slowly, Sister Emily and the president’s second counselor, Sister Roberta, stood. Sister Tonella nodded again and said, “Very well—”

“Wait.” Sister Juanita raised her hand. “I cannot understand the Lord’s hand in this matter. But I suspect I never shall unless I act as his hand. I too will go.”

“Thank you, sister.” Sister Tonella’s voice cracked. “You know I— You know I am stronger with you. We shall leave immediately.”

Sister Zina stood and hugged them each. “Thank you. Thank you, sisters. This is a hard thing. Forgive me, but Sister Charlise and I must not wait.”

“Of course.”

“Sister Tonella, you are in charge of this practical expedition. If spiritual questions arise, Sister Juanita will address them. Now, Sister Charlise?”

Sister Zina, having never been married, was uncertain how large a chamber would need to be constructed to house, assuming all the victims were intact, fifty-four testes. Sister Charlise was also unmarried, at only age sixteen, but her genius at engineering had revealed itself only during a nursing apprenticeship, and thus she was well versed in the male anatomy, there being no Melchizedek doctors remaining after year seventeen. Like all native-born Marsians, she towered over Zina and could fetch tools and materials with a speed and ease the colonists themselves could never match.

Pneumatics on Mars had developed far beyond the technology of Earth. The lower air pressure and lessened gravity simplified certain aspects, and the native Marsian “bamboo” made manufactory almost simple. Unlike the Father Planet, Marsian bamboo was not a plant but seemed to be fungal or germic in nature, pulling metals from the soil and creating sturdy tube structures. By controlling sunlight and temperature and metallic qualities of the growth medium, Marsian engineers were able to convince the bamboo into any diameter and length desired. They were even now convincing it into nontubal shapes, which was Zina’s goal now: a perfect sphere with an opening just large enough to allow the seed organs to be inserted one at a time, which could then be sealed and protected by becircled tubes about the sphere in at least four layers, one of which could be refreshed with ice, the rest as vacuumed as possible. It was a new concept and so far only managed

over days in order to create something large enough for only a few peas as test subjects. Sister Zina and Sister Charlise began with a prayer to ask for guidance as they strove to do that which had not before been accomplished. Sister Zina had no doubt the Spirit would provide answers as the questions came. Charlise had no doubt that Sister Zina had no doubt. This was enough.

Sister Zina had never, in her twenty-five years as president of the Relief Society, referred to herself as prophetess. It was simply what others recognized in her.

As the sphere began to form, Sister Charlise watched it, barely breathing. It was one centimeter in diameter, and growth was slowing. She leapt backward as Sister Zina clanged a hammer into a brass bowl. “Sister Zina!”

“It just occurred to me that the differences in sphere size has correlated to whether classes are occurring in the hall adjacent to this lab. Vibration. Bang this bowl.”

“For—how long?”

“Gates are generally all the Lord provides. We walk the path ourselves.”

As Sister Charlise struck the bowl, Sister Zina tossed aside her curved cylinders and started anew, whipping the new fragile cylinders like a whip—but instead of shattering or breaking, they split themselves into dozens of paper thin but individually intact cylinders.

“Sister Zina!”

The sphere had reached Sister Charlise’s suggested size, and in the clangless silence, Sister Zina walked over and carefully pressed her tiny cylinders against its surface. Before an hour could end, the sphere was surrounded by dozens and dozens of minuscule cylinders—mostly vacuumed, but roughly one in ten open for ice insertion. Sister Zina hoisted their creation and held it close to her chest. It was much lighter than she expected. “Thank you,” she said. Sister Charlise said amen and rushed to Sister Emily’s freezer for ice.

When she returned and was filling the open cylinders, Sister Zina said, “I’ll expect you to replicate these results and write up papers for both the sphere and the cylinders within two weeks. No doubt others will find such shapes useful.”

By the time Sister Tonella’s expedition returned, the sphere had been fully functional for almost two hours. The sisters reverently placed the men’s organs into the opening. Fifty-one, fifty-two ...

Sister Zina turned to Sister Andrea whose eyes again were filled with tears. She held out a hand to Sister Zina. “Can we not mark him in some way? To know that these were his?”

Sister Zina bit her lip. She listened, but felt nothing. “We will be bound in United Order as to this resource, I am sure. But ... very well.” She took a length of silk from a shelf and tied up a quick bag. “In here.”

Sister Andrea dropped them into the bag, tied it off, and carefully inserted it into the sphere. “Thank you.”

Sister Zina sealed the sphere. “Sister Juanita. We will keep this in your cryochamber. Call your daughters together immediately for consultation. Sister Emily. Choose your seven most reliable apprentices and put them on a rotation to re-ice half the sphere, alternating sides, every four hours. Do not tell them what is in here yet, but ensure their understanding of the task’s importance.”

“Of course. But visiting Sister Juanita’s will make that point even without words.”

“The rest of us must pray. Sister Juanita. Sister Roberta. We must speak now. Come.”

Sister Juanita kept but three apprentices in her lab at any one time. One she referred to as her lead. The lead was whichever apprentice had served longest and was generally ready to move into another established research lab or into a medical rotation, but had been kept to assist Sister Juanita in her studies and the training of the other two, younger assistants. One of these would be focused on lab-based research with the intention of later moving into another lab permanently and the other focused on patient-based work with the intention of moving into a physicianship, but both were expected to be entirely proficient in the other other’s expertise. Graduates of Sister Juanita’s lab were in high demand across the Saints’ four colonies and the life caves—in part because of their excellence and in part because of the infrequency of their availability. Some argued the reputation was undeserved given how few women had yet cycled through, but all Marsian institutions were young, and although only twelve may have yet left Sister Juanita’s tutelage, those who had were as well regarded among the community as anyone, outside Sister Zina herself.

Sister Juanita began their gathering with a brief prayer, tea made from the so-called Marsian sage, and friendly catching-up on the various projects and patients in which her intellectual progeny were engaged, each cracking one of the Mother Planet’s great mysteries. They joked of times gone past and their wistful intention to rename the planet after the mother of the Lord. When they had spoken enough to feel settled into their cushioned chairs, Sister Juanita spoke of the great wisdom of the prophetess of Mars. All nodded. By their close work with Sister Juanita, each had experienced the revelations of Sister Zina firsthand and knew of her vision, even when her words at first seemed absurd. Sister Juanita then apologized for her own weakness, her lack of faith, and her discomfort

with the current instructions the prophetess had presented and expressed her certainty that those present were doubtless better prepared spiritually and intellectually for the task at hand, and she begged them for their patience with her unbelief.

Humbled by the humility of their “mother,” the women were silent and waited without word or gesture. After a moment, Sister Juanita cleared her throat and nodded. Her current lead walked to a cryochamber in the room’s corner and removed a strange spherical object. The women’s eyebrows and curiosity raised as the lead walked it in a circle, allowing each a moment to hold and examine it in turn. When it was delivered to Sister Juanita, she asked, “Well?”

Sister Edith: “Is it some sort of ... pneumatic cryochamber?”

Sister Juanita: “Very good.”

Sister Edith: “But it’s so small! And—and round!”

Sister Juanita: “It was required yesterday and thus Sister Zina built it.”

Sister Lupe: “But—what was it required for?”

Sister Juanita: “I believe you know. I believe you all know.”

The room had seemed silent before, but now a true silence fell over them. They looked at one another and saw that they all did, in one respect, know. As Sister Lupe had asked the question, they all waited for her to provide the answer, as was Sister Juanita’s way.

“It—it is, in some manner, the continuation of the species. The Melchizedek deseret is lost.”

Sister Juanita closed her eyes. “Yes.” She opened them and scanned each woman’s face. She handed the sphere back to her lead, who put it away, then returned to her place, a cushion slightly inside the circle of women and to Sister Juanita’s right.

“Sister Zina has provided us with a form of temporal salvation. You have now all held, in turn, the seed organs of the twenty-seven men lost yesterday. Shortly before we convened, I was informed by tube that this morning we lost the remaining men to a banth as they were retrieving their brethren for dress and burial, even though Sister Zina had asked them to allow the Relief Society to at least bring the bodies home. This leaves twenty-three male children as potential Adams, none of whom is older than eleven years. Sister Zina fears if we allow an entire generation to pass without reproduction, we embrace our doom. Thus, we have been given the ... task ... of finding our way forward. Sister Zina has expressed her confidence that we, through the grace of God the Father and Mother, and their Son our Savior and Teacher, will find a path into a seemingly removed future.”

Sister Juanita looked about. The faces were cold with shock, but also, excitement brewed. She pointed first at Sister Mary, her first lead who had begun her studies in anatomy before joining the original cosmic flight to Mars.

“Thank you, Sister Juanita. I have recently and necessarily been striving to understand the sequence that leads from conjunction to pregnancy. My husband, of course, died four years past, now, but our several miscarriages inspired my curiosity and prepared me to ask the proper questions of samples collected since.”

Sister Juanita looked at those about her. “Have we all read Sister Mary’s papers?” A chorus of nods.

“Thank you, all,” said Sister Mary. “I don’t know the way forward, but I am certain my assistants and I are prepared to ask proper questions.”

“Very good, Daughter.”

Sister Patty raised her hand. “Mother Juanita. Although my apprentices’ investigations are preliminary, it appears miscarriage has become nearly universal through the life caves and most of the original settlements. We all are aware of the lack of male children these past several years. We may well have no children at all being born if these trends continue apace.”

“This is very serious, Daughter. How is it I have not heard this news?”

Sister Patty drew a long breath before speaking, yanking at a knot in an orange-blond curl escaped from the scarf she wore about her head. “I am ashamed of this, Mother. Obstetric records and numerical analyses were generally kept and performed by three talented amanuenses—all men—and since their passing six months ago, they have gone unreplaced. We each of us knew the tragedies befalling our own patients, but not until this past week did we come to discover how widespread the problem has become. Only this morning did my apprentices complete collecting the midwife collectives’ data and begin preparing a complete analysis for publication.”

A moan escaped the heart of Sister Juanita. “This is my fault. I have always said we should in some way publicly commiserate our lost fetuses. Now our small tragedies are become a tragedy of the entire Mother Planet.”

Sister Patty shook her head. “We all know mothers of lost children. We just could not imagine that no other type of mother would soon exist. Even had our men not perished, a similarly urgent conversation would have become necessary.”

The women looked about the circle into one another’s faces and sat some moments in silence.

Dr. Elizabeth Sessions—Sister Betty—stood in front of her lab’s longest table, absentmindedly stirring a beaker of steaming green fluid with one hand, her two-year-old daughter babbling on her opposite hip. As the steam slowed, the surface came into clearer view, a few bubbles sitting unpoped on the surface of the viscous slop. “Okay, Beebee, down we go.” She threw back her head and swallowed it in quick swallows as her daughter grunted and reached out. “Don’t worry, love. You’ll get it in a couple hours. But now ...” She sighed and adjusted the baby. Her hair was just getting long enough again to reach her eyes and she brushed it back, then, with a quick firming of her brow, she turned about and left the room.

In the anteroom connecting the seven labs of the Wells Complex, a bright young woman leapt to her feet. Unlike most Marsian women, she wore a long and broad dress in the Father Planet style, including a small cap with ornamental flora similar to the avian feathers of yore—a frivolity no doubt sported by her mother in some beloved photograph. “Sister Betty! I’m Thomasina Fletcher from the Historian’s Office.”

“You’re very punctual, Sister Thomasina.”

“Tommi, please.”

“Sister Tommi.”

The woman smiled, making her appear even younger, perhaps not even twenty. “Shall we sit here? If you’re engaged, I’m happy to chat while you work. Or perhaps a walk?”

Sister Betty exhaled through her nose a long, long time. “Let’s do it here. I can put the baby down.” So saying, she did so, and Beebee toddered off.

“My! She’s walking! But she’s so young!”

“Two, yes. Which, incidentally, would be rather late back on the Father Planet.”

“Is that so? I was raised here myself, you know. The oldest of seven: five sisters and two ... two brothers.” Sister Tommi looked surprised by her emotion.

“I understand. In addition to my husband, I’ve lost two sons; my brother, who, like me, was born on the journey here with the final expedition; and ... numerous friends.”

Sister Tommi nodded and wiped at her eyes with a redhemp handkerchief. “I’ve always loved Earth and its stories and culture”—she waved at her clothing—“but I wonder if it’s not just the romance of—men that attracts me. I was five when my father died, and I’m from Colony Dusenberry, so ... you understand.”

Sister Betty reached out and placed a hand on the younger woman's knee. "Even I, who was living with a man only thirty months and seven days ago, can barely remember or imagine a world in which they walked among us. It feels like a dream. It's been a month now since the last seventeen male children perished, and we still don't know what took them."

Sister Tommi blew her nose into her handkerchief and gave Sister Betty an embarrassed smile. "I guess that's why I'm here." She gave a brief, cathartic laugh, wiped away the tears about to fall, and pulled back her shoulders. "Well! Sister Betty. Everyone in the scientific community is abuzz at your latest paper. Some, as always when you publish, say your lonely habits mean avenues of research you open are not followed quickly enough, while others accord the quality of your thought to its purity and individuality. This is not at all among the more urgent points for us to discuss, but I feel we should address and dispense, as it were, so you can be done with it."

"Whether those who disagree with my methods are right or not, I can only work as I work. We are, each of us, children individual of the Mother and Father. I would not change the way they made me. I have nothing else to say on this, frankly, inconsequential question."

"That is more than fair, Sister Betty. In fact, I found you quite elegant on the point. I don't know that it will change anyone's mind, but it ought at least to make anyone critical think twice afore griping."

"We can hope. Excuse me."

Beebee was pounding on one of the lab doors; Sister Betty strode over and lifted her up. She returned and sat the baby on her lap, though she squirmed until rereleased moments later.

"Will you train her in your lab?"

"Perhaps."

"So ... your results. I read your paper, but I admit I could not fully understand its implications. Before I took upon me the mantle of recording, I studied the geographical sciences primarily, and so I might be able to find you the various soil types you discuss, but I am unclear on how they affect *lacertalba*'s ability to mimic other plants or just why this should excite your peers to the degree it has."

Sister Betty shrugged and laughed. "To be honest, I don't find the paper terribly important. Might it lead to important discoveries later? Certainly. But I do not know what those are, nor, I imagine, does anyone else. The only reason my exceedingly short paper on preliminary work is under discussion at all is because Sister Zina has taken a liking to it. Her recommendation, after all, carries weight."

“Of course! She is the prophetess!”

“So we say, yes. But that alone does not mean a few tidbits about dirt that strike her fancy have significance. Perhaps my paper is important. Perhaps it is simply that Sister Zina is happy to see someone working with lacertalba again. I cannot say. But the sciences are a conversation. Perhaps my contribution will strike up new and passionate argument but today, well, you know today.”

“I’m not sure—”

“Today we are all desperate for a solution to what, to the objectively rational mind, must appear to be our inevitable extinction. It is not enough that we are isolated on an alien planet without the ability to hear or be heard from the rest of our species; now we must die literally as well. It is grave and unhappy, and so, if Sister Zina enjoys a paper about soil, everyone will grasp it with hope, as if it were a salvatory cipher descended from heaven. When in fact it may be nothing more than our prophetess still has whimsy in her soul, even when the rest of us are crying out in panic.”

Sister Tommi laughed uncomfortably. “I hardly think the rest of us are crying out, let alone in panic.”

“Of course not. I expect Sister Tommi of the Historian’s Office will be writing backdated articles regarding each of my little tracts on soil from the past several years.”

“I’m sorry, Sister Betty. I didn’t mean to upset y—”

Sister Betty laughed kindly. “I’m not upset, Sister Tommi. I enjoy action of the mind and I have a lovely little daughter to care for. True, I see little to suggest we will see another generation upon the Mother Planet—forget not that the ancient Romans named it after their God of War—but I see no reason my clear sight should prevent anyone else from seeing a future that cannot exist. I apologize for being so forthright.”

“No, no ...” Sister Tommi rubbed her lower lip and looked at Sister Betty. “Forthrightness is the most valuable thing you can give a recorder. I thank you. And I see your argument. But I cannot see value in your nihilism. We cannot, after all, know what is impossible—”

“Thus I shall never give up my hope of flight.”

“—and the prophetess would tell us had God decreed we should die.”

“A God that speaks to one may speak to any.”

“Is that an epigram, Sister Betty? Or are you making some kind of claim.”

“No. No claim.” Sister Betty swept Beebee up as she ran by and plopped back her onto her lap. “All I mean is we each know what we know. We each believe what we can believe. We each can

live no more cleanly nor straightforwardly than our understandings allow. I've no desire to pretend to more than I have been allotted. I have been allotted a daughter and a lab and the popularity of a moment. Someday I shall join my husband in death and then we will see what that allotment may be. But it is not a question for today. Today is a question for soil. And the answer soil has given us is that the ingenuity, if you'll allow an absurd personification, of *lacertalba* is dependent, in some part on the soil in which it finds itself."

"Do you mean you have defined certain limits for *lacertalba*?"

"Ah. Sister Tommi. That is an excellent question. And I can only with humility reply that I do not believe we can know with certainty of anything's limits. We may, after all, only be finding the limits of our own imagination."

Sister Nia Black bit her lips. As a child, this anxious habit would draw blood. Now, it was simply a brief moment of calm before engaging in particularly difficult tasks. She had been given access to the amplifying tube Sister Zina would use when the need to address all the colonies and life caves at once arose. She read over the message once more and then hurriedly unscrewed the brass cap and began speaking before she could think.

"Sisters. This is Sister Nia of the Samples Laboratory in Colony One. As part of the research to ensure future generations on the Mother Planet, we are collecting menstrual blood from the first six hours of menses only. When you begin your bleed, please come to your colony's sample lab immediately, or the Snow Lab if you are in the life caves, again, immediately, so we may capture the blood and put it to use before the expiry of your maternal temperature. We recognize the crudity of this request, but these urgent times call for urgent investigations. Direct questions to the labs. Together in sisterhood."

Sister Zina watched from the doorway of the Colony One Samples Lab as its director, Sister Kate Stout, directed her assistants and apprentices. A hive of business beyond the urgent processing of donations and preparing them for various experiments both in-lab and in other labs where the samples would be sent. She waited for Sister Kate to see her, then inquired as to the state of Sister Kate's own inquiries outside the many small papers the lab had published.

"That's really about everything, Sister Zina. We're sharing everything as quickly as we make any sense whatsoever of our data."

"Good. I'm glad. Continue."

“Thank you.”

“And please: publish an omnibus review immediately and biweekly hereafter. I don’t want anyone to miss something important because it was a single sheet.”

“Of course. A wise suggestion. I will put Sister Nia on that immediately.”

Sister Zina walked outside and sat on the natural stone bench that wrapped around the west end of her garden. A number of bunnies and rats were milling around the Earthian beans—fava, navy, negra. Perhaps the most successful of all the plants brought from the Father Planet.

The bunnies were stridently green, which Zina still did not understand, and contrasted starkly against the red Marsian soil. The rats, with their eight legs and long prehensile tails, less resembled their earthly counterparts. Zina sat still and watched.

It had been decided before Sister Zina was called as a last-minute replacement to the original expedition’s intended Relief Society president, that no animals would be carried on the voyage. The stated reason was a strict reading of the Word of Wisdom’s discouragement of meat consumption, but Sister Zina was quite sure the reasons were purely practical. The costs of feed and the room required on ship were simply not practical. No subsequent voyage brought animals either, and the Marsian beasts did not seem particularly disposed to domestication.

One of the rats scampered near to Zina, using its tail to lift small stones. It found something it liked and picked it up with its front paws. It leaned back on its tail and had begun to eat before it noticed Zina. “Godamitey! Godamitey!”

Zina smiled. “I see you have been sitting in with Sister Roberta.”

The rat regarded her with its multifaceted, unblinking eyes. It pushed the remainder of its victual into its mouth and scurried off. Zina watched it go, then pulled her cloak nearer around her. She cast her eyes heavenward. The thin air held little but a hazy shade of yellow-orange. It was full day, but almost directly above she could make out the bright dot that was the Father Planet. Piercing blue at night, it was a pale, near-invisible green now. Looking up at them. “Do you still wonder about us? Are you well? Perhaps you have crises as well. Perhaps your silence is not neglect but pain.”

She sighed and stretched out her feet, rotating them at the ankles. At the sudden motion, most of the animals froze, but, determining she was no threat, continued digging around her plants. They did not eat the beans but often knocked them down from chewing on the soil about their roots. No one had made time to study just why, but Sister Zina assumed it was the nitrogen.

“Oh, God,” said Sister Zina, “our Father and our Mother.”

Often, this was the only prayer Zina would make when she was troubled. Just a simple address, and then silent listening. Most days it was enough to calm her heart. But today she needed more than peace.

Sister Emily looked down from the window above Sister Zina’s garden and watched her speaking, as if to the sky. With her lab so situated, Sister Emily had often so seen the prophetess, but today—even though Sister Zina was as still as ever—there was a sense of agitation. Sister Emily opened her fingers wide enough to feel the webbing between them stretch, and turned away.

Sister Åndrea slipped into the outer offices of the Wells Complex from an outer door. At this hour one might assume the building would be deserted, but who knew. Scientists were apt to follow a path of inquiry whenever it revealed itself, and with work as pressing as—

She shivered and looked around, sealing the doubling-door behind her to keep the air pressure and temperature intact. She slipped across the anteroom and into the small reading room. Drafts of papers under review or recently published were organized carefully by lab and date in the frontmost filing cabinet, and Åndrea took off her gas-suit and began pulling out those by Sisters Betty and Kate. From what she had heard Zina say, it seemed their research was most apt to bear fruit, as it were, and Åndrea was feeling anxious. Her husband had been dead nearly point-four of a year and no real action had taken place. She understood the reasoning behind Sister Zina’s calls for patience, but she also knew that her husband was waiting for her to continue their line. Son or daughter, she had decided, their first child would be named Pers, after its father. For some reason, she feared changing her mind on that point as the days marched on more than she feared the possibility of never becoming pregnant with his child. Sister Zina seemed confident children would come and so children would come. She was the prophetess.

Sister Betty’s paper was surprisingly short and its connection to children was not clear. It was simply a listing of soil phenotypes—a curious phrase—and how *lacertalba* interacts with each. But Sister Zina had said Sister Betty was making important progress, so Åndrea took the manuscript to the reproduction table and rolled on the phosphoretic fungal gelly. After letting it sit a moment, she placed fresh sheets of antegraphos over the originals and let them sit while she returned to the files.

Sister Kate’s paper, an omnibus, had a much clearer path to application. In test after test after test, she had uncovered new facts about menstrual blood and the conception environment it

presumably revealed. The pace of discovery was awesome, and Sister Åndrea felt a pain of regret for pursuing medicine over research.

One ongoing problem Sister Kate admitted was that the blood could not maintain conceptional properties sufficient to sustain male seed. Sister Åndrea closed her eyes and tried not to think of how much seed had been sacrificed in recording these persistent failures. Although it was not her specialty, Sister Åndrea was certain the womb itself could be made hospitable to artificially implanted seed, but how to place the seed precisely was just one more uncertainty. Certainly they could not replicate the wasteful manner of natural placement, and keeping but small amounts of seed alive through the womb's natural protective secretions without damaging the womb or the pathway thereunto appeared nigh impossible.

She set antegrados to Sister Kate's paper, then sat to wait. It would be an hour at minimum. She attempted to doze, but was too antsy. She stood and paced, then returned to the files of new papers. She flipped through them, reading titles, but none intrigued. "Anteliminary Reproduction in Marsian Fauna." Irrelevant. "Epidermic Mutations in Children Born During Volcanic Episodes in Life Cave #7." Only important if children continued to be born.

And so on.

Finally, bored and weary, she pulled several at random and returned to the room's sole chair to sit. She flipped a few pages and began to read. She was tired and the words did not press deeper than her eyeballs, until the phrase "vaginal insertion of household items" caught her eye.

"Wait," she said aloud.

She flipped back to the first page and read "Physical Manifestations of Some Untoward Fixations" by Åndrea Lyndberg.

"I haven't seen this in years. Why was it ..."

"Physical Manifestations" was Sister Åndrea's first publication while still studying under Sister Nelle Beth as one of that great woman's final protégé's. She had not thought of it in years. Whoever had placed it in the new-papers file would need to take more care in the future. Åndrea stood to file it properly when she stopped and returned to her third case study.

The woman who had engaged in that peculiar behavior was many years dead now, eaten with an illicit lover by a banth as they discussed matters most private against the outer wall of the lover's wife's clinic. Sister Zina often cautioned Sister Åndrea against reading divine vengeance into any death on their dangerous planet, but this circumstance had been most tempting.

The woman had not started an adulteress. Indeed, Åndrea could not be certain that her mania for filling herself with various tools and sundry led in any way to this later wickedness, but what was most remarkable about her violent self-intimacy was that she had never injured herself. Minor scrapes and bruising, certainly, but she could—

Sister Åndrea dropped her paper to the floor. She could see. She understood.

She rushed over and interrupted the nearly finished antegraphos. She refiled the originals and took with her the mostly complete copies. She wrapped them tightly and placed them in a runner tube, but she did not send it to her apartment. Instead she placed the tube inside the sleeve of the gas-suit which she put back on as she rushed from the room. The gauges at the outer door promised a sufficiently safe temperature, so she turned on the gas and rushed outside and home.

“Sister Zina. Sister Zina?”

Sister Zina heard the words seconds after they were uttered and pulled her face from her hands and sat back straight, rising above her desk. “I’m sorry, yes?”

“I’m Nia Black, Sister Zina. One of Sister Emily’s assistants.”

“Yes, I know. I apologize. I was ... deep in thought.” Sister Zina used the excuse to push the heels of her hands into her eyes. When she pulled them away, stars filled her vision, but she felt more present. “Did Sister Emily send you?”

“No. I was sent by Sister Juanita. She tubed us and said it’s very important and we should interrupt you.”

“Where is she?”

“Sister Åndrea’s home. Waiting to hear from you.”

“Thank you. Did you or she already redirect the tube appropriately?”

“Yes, Sister Juanita said she would.”

“Very well. Thank you. And thank you for all you’re doing, Sister Nia. Your lab is doing much of the less glamorous but utterly necessary work. I’m sure the heavens record your humility.”

Sister Nia blushed and shrugged and pulled back out of the door, shutting it behind her.

Sister Zina stood and walked across the room and back briskly. She sat again and unscrewed the tube opening. “Juanita?”

“Zina. Thank goodness.”

“What took you to Sister Åndrea’s?”

“I intended to invite her to my daughters’ evidence-review session. Her frustration with the process has been growing intrusive, and I felt she might like to participate a bit more closely.”

“And you are still there. Is she well?”

“She is not well, Sister Zina. Please come quickly. I have instructed my daughters Mary and Patty to meet you at the door to your garden. Please bring Roberta or anyone else you feel may be of use. I— I do not know what has happened.”

“Of course, Juanita. I’ll arrive as soon as possible.” Sister Juanita was not one for exclamations of uncertainty or abknowledgment. It was troubling. Sister Zina screwed the cap back on her tube and put on her outerclothes in a hurry. She stepped from her office into Sister Roberta’s adjoining space and together they rushed to where Sisters Mary and Patty awaited them. They had no additional details, but together they crossed the arch-covered corridors of the colony. When they opened the door, Sister Juanita stood there. Her face pale under the blood-red scars. “I have never,” she said, and neither had they.

Sister Åndrea lay on a bodylength cushion placed along the long counter on which she clearly had been engaged in some sort of experimentation. Papers and various implements stained with red powders and liquids were strewn across its surface in a much less tidy than usual manner. Not that Åndrea had a reputation for exquisite neatness, but neither would anyone have been likely to complain of her habits.

These details would not be noticed, however, until later. What attracted the women’s attention was Åndrea herself. Her face was pale, utterly drained of blood. Later, when Roberta would lift her briefly to check for livor mortis, they would find no indication of settled blood whatsoever. Her body had essentially been emptied by the time of their arrival.

She was nearly fully declothed, with nothing but a cotton shift, loose around her chest and falling just a few inches below her pubis. Or so it would have, had it not been pushed up her belly by the explosive, wet growth of strange ... things from her belly. They were plantlike in that they grew on a stalk with an enlarged flowerlike appendage at the top, but the colors and smell were utterly unplantlike. Glossy reds and purples, with slightly pulsing ... vasculature wrapping up the stalk and around the flower. None of the women standing there liked these terms—stalk, flower—but plant terminology was more the pleasant option.

The flower was roughly seven and a half by three and a half by three centimeters in size, although that may suggest a regularity that fails to capture its weird effect. Besides fleshy colors and smell, it had two horn-like swirls along its upper end covered in a white, fat-like substance. The main

body of the flower tapered slightly from top to bottom. The stalk attached to the flower's back, making its lowest point, apparently, its opening. The Mother Planet's lack of Earth-like pollinators made the purpose of this opening uncertain. Indeed, without touching it, one could not ascertain for certain whether that was in fact an opening or just a depression.

Sister Zina was standing between her counselors, and she grabbed onto their shoulders for support. "Åndrea," she said.

Her counselors, though slightly older than the prophetess, guided her to a chair and sat her down.

"Åndrea."

Sister Roberta sat on the chair's arm and pulled Sister Zina's head onto her bosom. They sat there in silence for many minutes. Finally, Sister Juanita said, "Let's dispense with our admissions that we have never seen the like and move straight to theorizing. Or, rather, so I wish to do, but I admit I am having difficulty seeing past the horror. This is ..."

Sister Roberta gave Zina a brief squeeze, then helped her straighten up. "Sister Zina, not to repeat what ..." She trailed off as her gaze again encountered the weird flowers. "God Almighty."

The three older women sat in silence, feeling an admixture of mourning and discomfiture and confusion. Rather than seek for answers themselves, they watched Sisters Mary and Patty whispering together as they, careful to avoid touching, measured the flowers, three in total they now realized, a smaller pair obscured by the larger in the original perspective. Sister Patty rifled through Åndrea's drawers, finding various tools to take small scrapings for later analysis. After about fifteen minutes, Zina instructed Sister Roberta to check for suggillation. After Sister Roberta walked off, Sister Zina stood and turned to Sister Juanita. "This is very serious."

"Yes."

"Is this a new and ugly fate, or are we yet agents unto ourselves?"

"They call you the prophetess, Zina. Not me."

Sister Zina was silent. "Can it be common consent if I never agreed to the role?"

"We are in the wilderness. As I recall, the burning bush did not offer Moses opportunity to reject his call."

"I know you do not intend it humorously, Juanita, but I can't compare myself to Moses in any seriousness. After all, who has bound our people? We're rather short on Egyptians. Such a concrete villain we could rise heroically against."

Sister Roberta returned to report: “There is no sense of livor mortis at all. Do you have a ... theory, Zina?”

She shook her head. “No. No, I just— I look at those ... things ... and I think: they have eaten her blood, her very life. Though clearly not animate, that creature appears to be made of flesh. And how could this be save it stole ... corpus from Sister Åndrea?”

Sister Juanita nodded. “Then the primary question is this. Did this thing find Sister Åndrea of its own volition, if you will, or did she bring it unto herself? If the former, then this is a crisis of astonishing proportions and we should lock ourselves in this room and not use the tube without extensive screenings in place or the runners at all. We will, in other words, likely become the next victims of the—may I call it a beast?—the next victims of this beast, and must pray it is confined here. And when we are no more, this building must be destroyed by flames. However, if the latter, if this is something Åndrea somehow caused, then we are well to destroy the beast and put her to rest and return to our studies.”

“No,” said Sister Zina.

Everyone paused and looked to her, but she stood still for some minutes, thinking. “No,” she repeated. “If Åndrea did this to herself, then she must have had reason. Look about. She was working on something before her death. If she took this terrible risk, she must have believed it feasible there could be great benefit.”

Sister Juanita looked about and frowned. “I don’t know. I look about at the mess she left and see a distressed mind. I mourn that I did not fully recognize her suffering, but I am somewhat skeptical, Zina, that she was accomplishing anything of great importance.”

“You may be right. But we owe it to her, the consideration that perhaps she was.”

Sister Mary cleared her throat. “Sister Zina?”

“Yes?”

“Sister Patty and I have been discussing and although at first we just thought it an ugly irony, perhaps it is of importance, if, as you say, Sister Åndrea’s death may have been diagonal to discovery.”

Sister Patty thumped her paper pad against her fist. “If you look at the shape of these flowers, they should remind you of something. Specifically, they are very similar in appearance to the womb we each carry inside us. The larger specimen is even the dimensions one would expect of a healthy woman who is not with child.”

Sister Mary pointed at the larger one with her pencil, pointing out various details and how closely they approximated the womb. “Even the smell, you will admit, is a smell we all recognize from the surgery. Detached from its stalk and placed in formaldehyde, I imagine you could fool any apprentice and most practitioners. This is a womb.”

“Except,” growled Sister Roberta, “that it is not a womb.”

“Naturally,” agreed Sister Patty. Although now her voice was more animated. Mary seemed changed too, her face widening. They turned back to each other and began whispering and shouting in the bizarre shorthand of the Juanita labs. Sister Roberta looked to interrupt them, but Sister Zina placed a hand on her shoulder and led her to the table on which Sister Åndrea’s notes and materials were spread about.

“Sister Roberta. Help me examine these papers. Perhaps we could identify Åndrea’s materials without reading, but I do not desire to touch anything she touched just yet, outside paper.”

Sister Roberta picked up a few pages. “These are fresh antegraphos. They are still lightly damp.” She looked over them. “This is that new paper from Sister Betty Sessions you were telling me to read.”

“Is it. Well, that explains the soil. I was skeptical Sister Åndrea would just have dirt on her counters, but perhaps that is exactly correct.” She held up other papers. “These are also antegraphos and it’s Sister Kate’s new paper, which I believe you have read.”

“The omnibus with the new item about seed-of-the-male placement.”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” Sister Roberta turned to look at the corpse; Sister Zina watched her thinking. “I see ...”

“Do you, Sister Roberta? Because it is not quite clear to me.”

“No. Not clear. But like entering a room in darkest night, I am beginning to get a sense of its dimensions. What’s that over there?”

Sister Zina reached over and picked up the handwritten notes.

“Perhaps she laid out just what plans she was executing yestereve?”

Zina shook her head as she scanned the notes, page by page. “No ... These appear to be ... They are left over from some of her very earliest work. I remember how disturbed she was by this research. Do you remember Sister Minala Brown?”

“Aye. Unpleasant indeed.”

“Andrea interviewed her in some depth regarding her compulsions. In particular, at the time, although her final publications did not touch on this at all, she was curious how Sister Minala had kept from causing herself dire injury. She had imagined there might be medical application to the knowledge.”

“Optimistic, perhaps, but a laudable line of inquiry.”

“Certainly. But these are those notes, I mean to say.”

“You mean—?”

“I mean, whether we desire to follow Sister Andrea’s fraught thinking or not, these three papers suggest a rather clear line of thought.”

“Yes.”

“And we have soil and blood here on the counters, in case we doubt.”

Sister Roberta pursed her lips. “Yes. But—”

“Sister Zina!”

The two women turned to look at Sisters Mary and Patty who were waving at them, Sister Juanita at their side.

“Something is happening!”

They rushed over and joined the other three women already clustered around the womb-flowers. The smaller two were shivering, as if cold. The larger was heaving, like a carlot about to vomit. And then vomit it did. From its lower opening, a membrane-encased object slowly slid out. Sister Patty scrambled to grab some towels and caught the object before it could fall, trailed by a bloody string.

Mary gasped. “It’s an abortion!”

“Let’s not be hasty,” cautioned Sister Juanita.

Patty set it on the table and Mary took over, gently rubbing the membrane with another towel, peeling it away from the fetus, for fetus it was. All six women had seen enough premature death to recognize the creature as apparently human. Except it was not dead. Its tiny limbs jerked ever so slightly. And it unwound to a length longer than the bloom from which it had fallen.

“Keep it warm.” Sister Zina gestured for her to hurry as Sister Mary wrapped it back up and slipped it through the neck of her bodice and was holding it tight when she froze for a moment, then relaxed.

“I assume, Sister Zina, I will live?”

“We must act as if you will. Now, I suspect Sister Åndrea intentionally impregnated herself with this womb. Whether that makes the womb’s child hers, I am uncertain. I doubt not this child will perish and soon, but at least she will receive a woman’s care in her few moments of life. Her name is Pers, as Åndrea wished.”

“Wait.” Sister Roberta grabbed Sister Zina’s arm. “Sister Zina. There cannot be a child without seed. Does she have an organ of her husband here?”

They made a quick search. Sister Åndrea had no cryochamber, just an outerbox relying on the cool native temperature, but it was empty. They checked the other rooms briefly, then Sister Zina gathered them together.

“First, Sister Mary, how is Pers?”

“Still twitching. I can’t— It’s remarkable!”

“Indeed. First, we must tube for a heated palanquin to carry you to wherever you feel Pers’s needs can best be served. In fact, do that now while the rest of us plan.”

Mary scurried to the tube and unscrewed its brass top to make the request.

Zina pointed at Sister Juanita. “Take Sister Patty back to your little cabal and prepare a group to come here and care for the body until we know how best to care for it or if we should prepare it for burial. When you return, also plan to identify the exact soil and blood samples. Sister Roberta, you are answering the same question but from the opposite direction. You need to ascertain the source of these materials—by which I mean lab and person. I suspect Sister Åndrea asked for help. She was by no means an expert on our native soils. She may have walked into a lab and taken the blood, but we can’t know that yet. I suspect it will prove to be menstrual blood, so begin with Sister Kate, then, if necessary, move to the outer labs.”

Sister Zina looked them each in the face as they repeated their instructions. She nodded at the conclusion and said, “As for myself, I will return and visit Sister Emily to see if there was a breach with the seed. Then I will stay in my office and read and reread the notes and papers Sister Åndrea left us. I will expect you all to visit or tube or send a runner whenever you have additional information. I will compile and arrange all facts that we may puzzle out her final hours, both her successes and failures. With God our Father and Mother as my witnesses, Sister Åndrea will not have died in vain. She made more progress toward the salvation of our species in one night than the rest of us have in all the months since that calamitous blizzard. She may have been troubled, angry, or afraid when she made the decisions that led to her demise, but her goal was life, not death, and so shall be her legacy.”

The women nodded, tears in their eyes. They hugged and wept and gently touched the mound against Sister Mary's chest as they took turns at the tube and prepared to leave. Sister Zina said she would stay with Andrea's corpse until someone could be sent to watch over it, and then they were gone.

Sister Zina pulled a short stool over the floor, to where Andrea lay. She took her hand and watched the uterine blooms grow. In just this short time, the two smaller ones had achieved the size of the larger. She did not know how to tell if they were also with child. She did not know.

Sister Zina rubbed her thumb over the cold fingers and pushed the papers in her lap about with her other hand. It was clear that Sister Andrea had seen something of significance in Sister Betty's soils, but what? Sister Zina did not know herself why she had recommended this paper to so many people, only that she had felt it was important. Now she was proven correct, but the prophetess did not understand her own prophecy. What was the importance?

She carefully placed Sister Andrea's hands one over the other, then stood and walked to the tube. She asked for the library and listened to the slots falling into place.

"Ahoy?"

"This is Sister Zina Rockwell. Can you please arrange for antegraphos of all papers on soil composition written by Sister Elizabeth Sessions to be delivered to my office as soon as possible?"

"Oh, of course, Sister Zina! With pleasure! As soon as possible!"

"Thank you." She screwed the cap back on with a quick turn of her wrist and turned to look once more at Sister Andrea. Her skin had that lightness to it that those who had never lived on the Father Planet enjoyed. A certain youthfulness. The eldest of the native-born were only in their early twenties now, but somehow it was already clear that they would appear youthful for much longer than those who had labored under Earth's harsher sunlight. Sister Zina wondered if she and Juanita and Roberta and the rest of them would be the only old-seeming old ladies the Mother Planet would ever know, as their replacements proved to be ever-young Amazons. Perhaps, without poison and weather and violence—perhaps these women could live much longer than the people left behind would imagine possible.

"If so, Sister Andrea, you may have sacrificed more than you realize to teach us this lesson." She sighed and shook her head. "Of course, you have also retaught us the lesson so often emphasized, never to work utterly alone. Unless you are Betty Sessions, of course."

She sat deep in silence, watching, listening, thinking, and did not hear the knock upon the door or notice anyone enter until the whispering figures of Sister Patty and two of Sister Juanita's

current apprentices passed between her and Sister Åndrea. When they realized she had seen them, they apologized, but she waved it off and excused herself. As she walked to the apartment's door, she paused, opened the drapery concealing a small closet containing a gas-suit. She looked at it. Listened. Then removed it and pulled herself inside. She opened the apartment door, stepped out, closed it behind her, and walked down the covered corridor and through an outer door and away from the colony.

Sister Theodata clutched the antegraphos carefully to her chest. Of course she had seen and even spoken with Sister Zina many times about the colony, but never before had she come to her office—where she spoke with God!—and these papers were clearly important and Sister Theodata herself was the one to deliver them! Of course, Sister Zina had not implied that she expected Sister Theodata to deliver them herself—Sister Theodata may have just been, ah, excited. It may have been only that. Maybe. But now here she was, outside the prophetess's own door! She knocked. No answer.

“Sister Zina?”

She knocked again, then carefully pushed it open. It was a simpler room than she had expected. Small. Not austere, but plain—just some fancy plants, a desk. Of course, she realized, that's just as it should be. What else would one expect. Honestly.

But regardless of appearance, one thing was certain: Sister Zina was not here. A side door seemed to be muffling voices so Sister Theodata walked over and opened it.

“Yes?”

“H-hello. I'm ... Sister Theodata? From the library? Sister— Sister Zina asked me to bring these.” She held out the antegraphos. But she ... she's not in her office.”

“No, she's been out most of the day. When did she ask you to bring them?”

“Almost three hours ago. I'm very sorry. But even at the library we can only make antegraphos so fast.”

“Three hours? Well, then she contacted you from somewhere other than here. Was it the tube or did she send a runner?”

“Tube. I didn't think to ask where she was. Should I have done that? I didn't think—”

“It's fine, Sister ...”

“Theodata. After an ancestor who crossed the Earth ocean to start a colony in a place called Hampshire. My mother named me that because I would be buried in a new land as well. That is, I mean—”

“Sister Theodata. I’m sure the business she is on has just delayed her.”

“But she said it was urgent. She said to bring these papers to her at her office as soon as possible. As soon as possible! She’s expecting me!”

The other woman was silent. Sister Theodata knew the look. It meant she was becoming frantic again, hysterical. She was embarrassing herself and all those associated with her. The library! The entire library would be blemished because Silly Sister Seo was at it again.

“Three hours ago she said as soon as possible?”

“Yes?”

The woman turned away from Sister Theodata and paced the room. “Forgive me, but I must think aloud. Sister Zina told this young woman to bring documents. As soon as possible. That means she wanted them immediately. They were of the utmost importance. She said to bring them here. It is unlikely she forgot. Sister Juanita has been sending messages and so she does not know where she is. She’s gone.”

She turned and looked at Sister Theodata. “Sister Zina is gone.”

“Is that—usual?”

“Unusual, my dear. To be sure. Very unusual. Very unusual indeed.”

Sister Roberta looked at the tube in stupefaction. “God Almighty,” she whispered. “So you mean to say, Jonnie, that while we have been duly confirming the identity and sources of Sister Åndrea’s materials, Sister Zina has been ... missing? Of all the words in the language, missing would be your most accurate option?”

The hollow sound of Sister Juanita’s voice came through the tube with undertones of exasperation and worry. “Look, Roberta. We can’t throw the colonies into a panic, but it’s clear that this is worrisome. When was the last time you can remember Sister Zina wandering off when there were papers to be studied?”

“They checked her garden?”

“They tell me they checked her garden.”

“But where would she go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sister Patty was there. What did she say?”

“You know Patty. She was working. She didn’t see anything.”

“I’ll tube her. She is still at Åndrea’s?”

“And will be for some time.”

Sister Juanita was right. Sister Patty and her crew had not seen anything. But Sister Roberta was not one to take the first answer. She grilled them. Did Sister Zina take the papers with her? Yes. Had they looked for them? No. Look for them. Did you find them? No. Where did you look? The table. Where else? Where else would we look? The washroom, the bedroom, the closets. Everywhere. Yes, Sister Roberta. Did you find them? No. What else is missing?

And so on. By the time she was finished, the three women had relayed to Sister Roberta every detail of the apartment. Sister Roberta sat and thought. Sister Patty returned to work, leaving one of the apprentices at the tube, waiting.

“May I put the screw back on now, Sister Roberta?”

“A moment. I’m thinking.”

“Of what? It’s a very standard living space, Sister Roberta.”

“Hush.”

Sister Roberta thought through everything they had said. It was, indeed, a very standard living space, except for the long table where she had mixed the soil and blood. The bedroom was entirely normal with entirely normal accoutrements. Same with the washroom. The only peculiar detail was the closet by the outer door—entirely empty. Why no coat or cloak? Even if she had left one outer garment somewhere, it seemed unlikely she would own only one. So where—

“You said there were two coats in the bedroom closet?”

“Yes, Sister Roberta.”

“Were they housecoats or for wearing outside?”

“Outside.”

“Outside-the-colony outside?”

“On a warm day. Certainly not for deseretng, if that’s what you mean.”

“Deseretng ...” Sister Roberta rolled the world about in her mind. It picked up various thoughts like dust. One, Sister Åndrea had little reason to ever travel outside the walls of the colony. Two, but she assisted in the seed-organ retrieval. Her husband having been there. Three, we wore gas-suits on that journey. Four, gas-suits are large. Five, when we returned, I sent Sister Åndrea—

“Sister, are you still there?”

“Of course, Sister Roberta. May I return to work now?”

“Perhaps shortly. Return to the closet aside the apartment door and decide when and how it was last utilized.”

“How will I know that?”

“You are a scientist. You work in the finest lab on this planet. You are capable of this inquiry.”

“Yes, Sister Roberta.”

Sister Roberta could hear the apprentice complain about the task to the others, but how would Sister Roberta recognize herself if someone were not complaining about her manner or her demands? She waited. Finally:

“Sister Roberta?”

“What did you find?”

“Well, I’m not certain of the answer, but I would estimate it was last accessed recently, within a day or so, and whatever had been in there was large and bulky. It ... was large. And ... bulky ...” The apprentice trailed off.

“Tell me. When you say large and bulky, do you mean more like a rolled rug, like a calot, like a gas-suit, like a—”

“A gas-suit, yes. That must have been what it was. That makes total sense. That is your answer, Sister Roberta. That closet is missing a— Oh no.”

“God Almighty.”

“Sister Zina.”

“Relay this information to Sister Juanita. Tell her I will bring Zina back.”

“But, Sister Roberta—”

“Sister Zina is many things, but she is not a deserter. She thinks and she listens. She will not have gone far. Quite possibly I will be able to see her as soon as I leave the colony. Do not worry.”

The apprentice laughed without mirth. “I’ll put the cap back on, then?”

“No. I will. Tute Sister Juanita without delay.”

Sister Juanita and Sister Tonella fitted the gas-suits to their bodies. Invented and built by Melchizedek for deserting, they never had quite fit right. Sister Tonella had also invited two young, strong women to join them. Sister Astrid and Sister Hatia were native-born-Marsian tall, and thus the suits misfit them in other ways. But they each had broad shoulders and strong arms and legs.

Sister Roberta knew them from several heat-redirection projects in the life caves. They were tireless women, and she approved heartily of their accompanying.

Suited, they exited the colony at the nearest outer door and walked around the colony to the door nearest Sister Åndrea's apartment. Sister Roberta assumed Sister Zina would not carry the suit about, and therefore she would have dressed and left as swiftly as possible. Sister Zina was not in view, but they milled about looking for footsteps or other signs in the rocky ground.

"Here!" Sister Astrid was pointing to the ground. The others joined her and saw a clear gas-suit footprint. It was pointed west and together they trudged off.

Sister Zina stood at the foot of an enormous cliff wondering why she had come. This rock wall seemed an appropriate metaphor of a destination. She placed her hands against the cliff and pressed. The Mother Planet, she suspected, was aware in some fundamental way of their presence. And the Mother Planet's slow release of her secrets to the Relief Society's scientific inquiries had always seemed reasonable to her, but now—

"Oh, God."

She craned her head back, attempting to see the top of the cliff.

"Our Father and our Mother."

She turned around, and sat in the dirt, which she lifted and let sift through her gloved fingers. The small mercury gauge just below her face dropped suddenly, and Sister Zina fiddled with the gas in an attempt to warm the suit. She realized that this suit had probably been nearly exhausted after Sister Åndrea used it last during the salvation mission, and thus she herself could well die without a hurried return. Somehow, the notion did not worry her, and she continued to let the dirt run between her fingers, individual bits bouncing off her gas-suited legs.

She dug a finger into the dirt and met very little resistance. She dug deeper, then began pulling out fistfuls of dirt. After ten or fifteen centimeters, she realized she was also pulling out small, four-leafed, purple plants with long, hairy roots trailing. She took one and examined it. A new species. An underground species.

Unless.

Unless it is just *lacertalba*. A few new species they thought they had discovered over the years had been long since overcome and utterly replaced by *lacertalba*, and who knew but this was one as well. She crushed its leaves under her fingers and tried to see if the almost microscopic spore characteristic of *lacertalba* were revealed, but the lighting was inadequate. Autumn on Mars. Thus,

she realized, the sun would be setting earlier than the day before, and wisdom again dictated a hurried return to the colony.

Again she did not move.

She kneeled and attempted to remove the largest possible unbroken plant. It needed a name in order for her to think of it. The name she gave it would determine how she thought of it. Subterranean clover emphasized one aspect, while purple shamrocks another—and felt more lighthearted to boot. As she extracted, she was forced to expand her hole. It was difficult to determine if all this were one large plant reaching out through the Marsian earth or if it were numerous small plants connected tightly, root system to root system.

“I’m very sorry, my dear plant,” she said, as she tore the roots apart and lifted out a section roughly a meter square, a thin layer of the purple leaves atop roots reaching below from one to three centimeters—long, she saw now, horizontally, intertwined until torn apart. She laid it upside down upon the ground and lay flat beside it, lowering her face as closely as she could without crossed eyes. Her gas-suited fingers were not as nimble as she may have liked, but she gently pulled at the roots, prying them apart, trying to determine if it were one plant or legion.

Minutes passed. Tens of minutes. Perhaps an hour. The meter square of plant was slowly and systematically being disassembled as Sister Zina patiently looked and waited for sufficient evidence to answer her own question as the light dimmed and the cool evening wind began to howl over the clifftop above.

“Oh. Oh, I see. Thank you.” She stood up, her body a bit sore after so long flat upon her belly on the earth, but she had an answer to her question and a hint as to larger answers. She was mid-reverie, thinking her prayer of gratitude, when a strong hand clapped her shoulder.

“Sister Zina! God Almighty, what are you doing?”

Sister Roberta turned her around and revealed not only her own worried face but those of Sister Tonella and two younger women Sister Zina recognized but in her excitement could not place. “Quick,” she said. “Please pick up what’s left of that purple plant and let’s rush back to the colony. We have work to do.”

Sister Roberta and Sister Tonella, respectively, rolled their eyes and sighed, but the younger women laughed—this was exactly how they assumed Sister Zina would be in unguarded moments, more concerned about the work—strange and esoteric—than practical matters like not freezing to death at sunfall. They were already refilling her suit with gas and warming her before Sister Zina managed to take the first step toward home.

No one slept at her own home. Sister Juanita had arranged for futons to be brought in, and her former apprentices—and their own apprentices—slept in her lab to interrupt their work as little as possible. Three were sleeping now, with masks to block the light and noise covering all the face but the undersides of their noses.

Since Sister Zina had brought in the purple motherplant for analysis, little had been done except study its reproductive mechanisms. They had managed to get the second expedition's samples to survive in laboratory, and several remarkable traits were soon confirmed. One, the motherplant's offspring grew from her roots. Two, these were in fact children and not clones. Three, although lacertalba spores were present in the motherplant, she was not lacertalba. Neither was she a relative. Instead, she was co-opting the imitative capacity of lacertalba within her own body to grow her children within herself. This itself prompted great debate among Sister Juanita's daughters as to whether a complete reconsideration of lacertalba's imitative mechanism would now be required, but what mattered yesterday, today, and every tomorrow until their own reproduction recommenced, was how this related to Sister Andrea's self-immolation. They all felt it must. Had not Sister Patty found lacertalba spore in the womb flowers? Had not Sister Zina tempted death to discover the motherplant? They were scientists, yes, but they would be fools not to pursue meaning in these concurrent occurrences.

What was clear so far is that, as Sister Betty had discovered, some soils encouraged lacertalba's imitative powers while others inhibited it. What was also known was that Sister Andrea had removed day-old menstrual blood collected by Sister Kate's lab and ten grams of lacertalba spore from Sister Zina's. She had also convinced one of Sister Emily's apprentices to give her five or so minutes with one of her husband's testicles, then gently returned it.

The rest was rather mysterious. Clearly Sister Andrea had combined the soil, source unknown, and blood. Probably the spore also, although that was not entirely certain. It was not present in the dirt near her pudendum, but neither was blood. Clearly her experiment engaged several steps, but she had not left anything akin to clear notes, and so whatever insights she had had were lost except to imperfect reconstruction.

Somehow, they agreed, she had realized something about lacertalba's capacity for servitude. And while her experiment may have failed in key aspects, it revealed many important facts. Just what those facts were, however, was not easy to ascertain. But that was why the motherplant mattered. It

too bridled lacertalba, turning it into a reproductive engine but without killing the motherplant in the process. If she would tell them her secrets, the motherplant would be their mother as well.

Two of Sister Patty's apprentices, the twins, Sisters Carlia and Clorinda, were switching places regularly, one of them in Sister Juanita's labs while the other was with Sister Mary in the neonatary of Life Cave Smith helping care for the now four living miscarriages the womb flowers had produced. It had been nine days and still they lived. No one imagined they could continue much longer, but each hour was a celebrated miracle, even if it frustrated the twins who were prepared to perform necropsies and who hoped to provide some of the missing understanding that could lead to returned motherhood.

Sister Zina was a frequent visitor to the lab, but she had asked not to be spoken to. She simply moved from station to station observing. She watched and she listened and then she left. Elsetimes, she was at her desk or in her garden, silent. Always silent.

Since her presentation on the motherplant, she had not spoken more than a dozen words a day.

Sister Tommi was officially allowed to enter any space if on recorder business, but she made it a point never to enter an active zone of scientific inquiry without explicit permission. And now Sister Juanita was looking at her, considering the request.

"What we are doing, Sister, is clearly important. It is just as clearly unfinished. Documentation of process is really more for the scientist. Documentation of success or failure and the initial assignation of significance are for the recorder." She rubbed a hand over her face, her fingertips catching briefly upon the scars. "I am not, understand, opposed to your entrance. I am opposed to your mistaking questions for conclusions or miscovering meaning in uncertainty."

"Are you that unsettled, then?"

"It's less a matter of settling and more a matter of closing as many gates as possible in order to find that gate which opens upon the strait and narrow path that will lead to temporal salvation. If you choose to record us while we are poking our faces through the wrong gate, will that recording be the proper recording? I do not know."

Sister Tommi smiled and nodded, the ridiculous "feather" on her hat bobbing. Sister Juanita could not understand the emerging popularity of old Father Planet fashions. "I understand. Indeed, I'm here today less with hopes of recording and more with hopes of preparing myself for the

eventual recording. Anything I write today is purely preliminary, preparatory to my recording your final accomplishments.”

Sister Juanita snorted. “No accomplishment is final in science, my daughter. But come in.”

In the six months since Sister Zina had brought the motherplant to the lab, futons had been brought in then out, then cots, and now those women still working daily at the lab returned to their own apartments between shifts. The never-pausing research, however, continued apace. Sisters Carlia and Clorinda had carefully dissected and preserved the only so-called miracle abortion to so far pass. The fetus was uninfected with lacertalba spore and appeared essentially human in every respect. He appeared to be not a clone of his mother, and not just because he was male. Although it was difficult to separate objective measurement from subjective appearance, the lab generally agreed that Pers 2 favored his father.

The three daughters, Pers 1, Pers 3, and Pers 4, were approaching the size of traditionally newborn children. They appeared healthy and normal, although none had yet exited the artificial womb the neonatary team had built them. Debate was well begun as to when and how that removal should occur. As it was, however, the near-infants were handled daily by means of curiously constructed bunny-leather gloves that provided access from outside the womb. Sister Tommi had been to see the babies several times and was most interested today in their brother. After a short tour of the other stations, she returned to Sister Clorinda and asked to see the brother again.

“Did it die because it is male?”

“A very good question. We do not think so but cannot prove as much. We certainly hope not, or we will be left with the problem of a finite amount of seed. Nothing eleven centimeters long can be a father.”

Sister Tommi looked at the poor thing, splayed and emptied, only slightly reminiscent of its sisters in the neonatary. A chill passed over her, and she suddenly realized why she was here, the question she had been desperate to ask someone. “Sister Clorinda, I wonder— That is, if the only way to bear children is to perish in the way Sister Andrea did, would you accept that role?”

Sister Clorinda did not answer. She looked down upon Pers 2, who was dead, who would never offer his seed to a beloved. She pressed hard upon her hips, suddenly wracked with an unexpected emotion. She opened her mouth to speak but had no voice, so she merely shook her head.

Sister Tommi reached out and took Sister Clorinda’s hand. “I don’t know, either.”

“No,” whispered Sister Clorinda. “It’s that I would. I would.”

Zina slipped into a gas-suit and sat outside on her garden bench. Winter had arrived and even broad daylight could be fatally cold—it wouldn't take a blizzard to kill a body. Most of the Earthian plants were fully dead now, the fava bean corpses towering above everything else. She had not been diligent at harvesting them this season, and their pods had split open, many of the beans fallen to the ground. "Saving me the trouble of planting next year. Thank you."

Speaking clouded the glass portion of the gas-suit's face. Having the world fade away to light and shadows felt calming, so she opened her mouth and prayed her customary prayer, "Oh, God, our Father and our Mother," then exhaled slowly, filling her mask with her wet breath and hiding away the world.

She knew she was still looking towards the towering, dead fava beans, but she could not see them. The last time she had paid them much mind was when there had been a rat quoting Sister Roberta as others dug around the beans' roots for nitrogen—

That's never been tested. Just because beans are nitrogen fixers does not mean the Marsian animals are attracted to them for that reason. In fact . . .

Sister Emily's daughter, ten-year-old Emillesse, was visiting her mother today and sitting by the window overlooking Sister Zina's garden. She watched now as Sister Zina, in a gas-suit, kneeled down in a pile of dead plants and started pulling some tall, standing ones out of the ground. She laid them down in parallel and then—she did not move.

Sister Emily came by and looked out the window over her daughter's shoulder. "What is she doing, Emillesse?"

"Nothing, Mama. She's been like that for, la, ten minutes? Not moving!"

Sister Emily nodded. "That's not nothing though. She is thinking, waiting. Listening. Sister Zina is Sister Zina because she listens."

The next time Sister Zina visited Sister Juanita, she did not come to listen. She was carrying a sheaf of fava bean stalks. She asked Sister Juanita to invite those sisters focused on the soil aspect of the Åndrean mystery to join them. Sister Juanita called over her current lead, and Sister Lupe and her two assistants. Sister Zina untied the stalks and pushed them apart.

"These are from my garden. Right next to the colony wall. The soil is what Sister Betty termed Type 1a. Very typical. Unremarkable. Not encouraging to Marsian flora, though we assume very friendly to lacertalba given the amount of spore generally found therein. It has also been quite

friendly to the seed we brought with us, the combination of which with *lacertalba* led to many deaths early in our colonies' history."

Sister Zina looked each woman in the face. The youngest three women were rapt, certain she was about to share some great insight. Sister Juanita was simply waiting. Sister Lupe, however, looked puzzled. Sister Zina raised an eyebrow at her.

"Yes." Sister Lupe smiled unhappily. "Thank you, Sister Zina. You are suggesting that soil most agreeable to *lacertalba* is also most agreeable to Earth life? And perhaps for more than just your beans? Perhaps more, even, than Kingdom Plantae?"

Sister Zina smiled. "To be honest, Sister Lupe, I—

"Do you remember, Sister Lupe, when you first came to Sister Juanita's lab? And you had this notion of preventing *lacertalba* from mimicking our crops by planting a false crop shortly before the real crop to confuse it?"

Sister Lupe blushed. "It seemed as likely as anything else."

"And you could never get it to work, but failure has always been the great teacher of scientists. And, as I was saying before, I cannot honestly say just why I have brought these bean plants to you today. I can't provide you with a satisfactory answer. I know Sister Andrea did not use 1a. But what I feel confident of is this: The roots you see here are behaving peculiarly. I am very close to seeing with clarity, but what I am certain of is that I am not the one who will see. You all have been struggling with these questions for months now, and thus you have the preparatory understanding necessary to see what I do not. I stand before you like Mother Emma, touching the gift of God through a cloth, and waiting for someone else—someone prepared—to tell me what this gift will mean. Whereas you, Sister Lupe, I am certain, shall actually see."

Sister Lupe frowned. Just a child when her expedition landed, she was not as tall as a native-born Marsian but she shared their ageless skin, and her frown barely creased her face. "Of course, Sister Zina. I do not now, but if you say we shall—"

"Sister Lupe, sisters, I am going to tell you how I came to bring you these beans. This will include some information you already know. I'm not certain why I am saying what I am saying other than it will explain my own thought processes. You will have to find the explanation."

Sister Juanita sighed and waved a hand. "Yes, yes. Please go on, Sister Zina."

Sister Zina ribbed a bit of dirt off some roots. "A few months ago, I was in my garden. Some bunnies and rats were digging about these roots. Although we have never given these animals much scrutiny, I have always assumed this habit was nitrogen-related. We plant beans, after all, to

prepare the soil for other crops from home. From the Father Planet, I mean. Once the beans have fixed enough nitrogen into the soil, it becomes useful to other plants. In the case of my garden, I largely grow beans because when I fail to harvest them, they replant themselves. And, of course, as my early studies of *lacertalba* were focused on its interactions with fabaceaic crops, allowing these beans to grow year after year in my garden allows me to—rather casually, I admit—engage in longitudinal study. On days when I need to think, I may go into my garden and test for *lacertalba*. It has been seven years since any has appeared, even though the spore is as plentiful as ever.

“I have not been publishing these results. I know I should have, but it didn’t seem the sort of thing that would interest another outside myself, and no *lacertalba* seems no interesting, if you’ll excuse the phrasing. I realize now I was wrong. I also realize that the bunnies and rats were almost certainly not digging for nitrogen. It seems likely that they are engaged symbiotically, somehow, with these plants. Perhaps—almost like a pollinator, only not quite that at all, of course. But this relationship, whatever it is, is part of the reason *lacertalba* has not been growing in mimicry of these plants. Even though, as I said, the ground is yet laden with its spore.”

Sister Juanita cleared her throat. “This seems rather ... assumptive, Sister Zina.”

“I agree. I agree. I will say nothing more. But, Sister Lupe, think on these things.”

Sister Lupe nodded but did not speak. She gestured at her assistants to take the fava bean plants away, then walked off herself in another direction entirely.

Sister Carlia was sitting perched on a stool, looking down at her notes, trying to puzzle them into a publishable shape. The perished abortion would not yield new answers without new questions, and she and her sister felt the only way to new questions was publishing what they had not yet published, holes and all. Someone had once joked to her that fabric was merely artfully arranged holes, but Sister Carlia had always been better at seeing the threads.

“Sister Carlia?”

Sister Lupe was standing on the other side of the narrow table.

“Sister Lupe. Having better luck, I hope?”

“I hope our luck may better together. You have access to the womb blooms. I know the children are without evident *lacertalba*, but the wombs, however, were rife, yes? What of Sister Andrea’s body?”

Sister Carlia stood up. She was significantly taller than Sister Lupe, but her youthful posture counteracted any superior effect. “Yes. You are correct about the wombs, just loaded with spore,

yes. Although not in the cells as one might expect, only within the blood vessel-like organs and various secretions.”

“So the fetuses were encased in the spore prior to their expulsion.”

“Yes. And Sister Åndrea’s body, at least within her own womb and birth canal, had some spore. The latest I read suggests that they were the spore she had placed inside her body only and were not successfully used in ... whatever fashion it was she intended to use them.”

“Yes, yes ... I read that too ...” Sister Lupe pinched her lower lip and thought for a moment. “It’s clearly connected to the motherplant.”

“I agree.”

“And so ...” Sister Lupe’s head popped up, her eyes wide. “Thank you, Sister Carlia. Excuse me.”

Sister Carlia watched her hurry across the room to another table. Sister Lupe spoke for a few minutes then rushed through the room to another table. Within an hour, she had spoken to nearly everyone. Then she returned to her own space. Sister Carlia sighed and cleaned up her papers. The three girl fetuses were to be birthed that evening, and that was something she would not miss.

All three of Sister Åndrea’s daughters were born and healthy and, three weeks since leaving the artificial womb, normal human children.

They had been renamed Pers and Persal and Persha. They had three hundred fifty-two aunts, all but the very youngest of whom were eager to see them and to hold them and to witness their reality.

Living children from predeceased parents! Beautiful. Impossible. True.

Only miraculous was sufficient to describe the paradox they embodied.

The wombs from which they had sprung had long since shriveled and been studied, then cremated with their mother’s body. Theories surrounded them—theories largely untested or even untestable. Did the brother die because he was the second-born from a womb, and the sisters were all firstborns? Did he die because even through this peculiar Marsian method, the men could not survive? Was his death a blessing to him and, if so, did that imply the greater crisis on Mars was a curse?

The prophetess had allowed Sister Lupe to dig up her entire garden, ending its self-propagation. The papers that followed did not seem particularly relevant to the motherplant line of

inquiry or to provide information about soil radically unsaid by Sister Betty. But if she felt anxious about the seeming lack of progress, Sister Zina breathed through it.

The girls, after all, would grow up. They would grow up knowing they were miracles, purchased with their mother's blood. They would be trained and instructed as well as every other woman on the Mother Planet. They would be tall and smooth-faced. They would represent hope all their lives, no matter who saw them, no matter how little hope was justified. And through hope they would continue to search and to find.

Wonder was what brought us to the Mother Planet all those years ago. And now, oh, God, our Father and our Mother, we are still here. Remember us.

~*~

Bio bio bio bio