

**CHAPTER 5:**

**POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS, INCORPORATED**

The building, PP, on the Positsoc corporate campus, stood squat and stolid under a preserved red rock outcropping pouring out a cataract of reclaimed water.

He had called Katy to see if she could help him access an engineer to examine his artifacts. He knew of Positsoc's deep relationships with military intelligence.

A squirrel scampered across the footpath before them.

Katy kicked at it, sending it rattling with enraged wounded chirps off into a sage bush.

"Ooh, I hate those things. They're worse than rats."

Mateo smiled sheepishly. He likewise felt kicked but with a sudden assault of recognition. He now saw shades of Consuela in her, the girl days before he'd found so sweet and warm.

Now he saw her for the uncaring unmoved technocrat she most likely was. *It was weird*, thought Mateo. *I am starting to see things so much more clearly. And so strange, too!*

Mateo looked to the dark orifice in the shrub where the poor squirrel nursed his injured pride.

*Probably don't need to piss her off*, thought Mateo.

They entered the secure building. Katy applied her thumb to a plate which opened the glass front door. A security guard sat behind a massive shale-stone desk. He handed Mateo a clipboard. "What's in the bag?" he grumbled.

"Oh, just a couple of shrunken heads, some Navajo blankets, stuff like that."

The guard turned to Katy unimpressed. "Level 1 Clearance for visitors. With suspicious bags, definitely Level 1."

"Oh, come on," protested Katy, giving him a wily look.

The guard turned his gaze back towards Mateo but stopped short, as if he were mesmerized by an invisible sign only he could read, and which Mateo had supplied: "Level 1 Clearance, That's it! You evil squirrel-killing bitch."

Katy looked at Mateo. "Do you just want me to take them?" she asked.

Mateo shook his head. "No, I would prefer not to part with them."

Katy turned to the guard. "Is Trent here?"

The guard reviewed his panel of monitors. He saw a figure obscured behind a hail of sparks in the viewscreen. "He's busy welding right now."

"Page him please."

The guard looked at Mateo again, and if there was a neon sign crawling its ticker across this head, it might have read, if Mateo had supplied it, "Look at me. I'm up to no good, and a liar to boot."

Minutes later, Trent emerged out of an elevator bank in the center of the atrium. He wore a white painter's suit and possessed crazy dark sunken eyes--and hair--hair which seemed to rise as if from electrically charged follicles. He also had a noticeable scab from nicking himself shaving that morning. He likewise sized up Mateo.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"He won't let us into Special Projects," pleaded Katy. Trent stared at the guard now. The neon sign on his forehead must have been scrawling: "I don't remember the

last time someone fucked with me, but it didn't end well. That I do remember."

The guard looked warily and awestrickenly at Trent. He explained. "He would need clearance from way up for Special Projects."

Trent's eyes quietly smoldered.

"Give him your ID," he told Mateo. Now he looked at the guard. "Get it going. I'll have Captain Hurley wire you the clearance up from the lab, then you can activate his badge."

"This could be my job, Trent."

They disappeared around the corner for a second, but both soon emerged in better humors. The issue had been resolved.

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Mateo, Katy, and Trent walked down the pristine white tiled floors of the B-3 level labs. The corridors were long and shiny, antiseptic, punctuated periodically by glass-encased gas masks and chemical suits.

They went through a series of blowers which scoured them for microscopic contaminants. Then they entered an office, beyond which was an enormous steel door. Trent went to speak with his director, Captain Hurley, then came back out shortly.

"It's gonna be a couple minutes. Let me see the relics... Come on, I don't have all day."

Mateo was loath to give them up, but this had kind of been the point.

Mateo handed him the knapsack.

"Thank you. Some county bureaucrat has to sign off on your credentials."

Mateo was sweating. He had used Alberto's college ID with the guard to keep up the deception with Katy, and to not experience more issues with the Mexican driver's license.

"What's the matter?" asked Katy. It seemed only fair to tell her now. "I gave him my brother's ID."

"Who's your brother?" she asked.

"Alberto."

"Alberto. Isn't that your name? Wait a minute. Who the fuck are you?" *Wait a minute. Who the fuck did I sleep with the other day?*

"My name is Mateo."

"Why did you say your name was Alberto?"

"Technically, I didn't. I just let you go on believing it."

She was seething.

"Why?"

Trent, acting with unconscious tact, or gleeful scadenfreude, disappeared through the door now with the relics.

"I didn't mean to lie to you."

"But you did." *Typical.*

They stood in stony silence for nearly twenty minutes before Trent reemerged. She hadn't even looked Mateo's way. Instead she had nervously clattered her nails against a nearby steel table-top and stewed in frosty contempt. Trent had an exhilarated glow in his eyes.

"You got any more of these things?" he asked.

Mateo shook his head.

"They're wild. Can I keep them here overnight?"

"What is it?"

"I don't know yet exactly, but they're giving off massive radiation signatures and the rats are freaking out."

Katy came out of her anger for a second to shudder with revulsion at this mental image.

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The clearance came through and Mateo was finally able to enter the lab. Trent had the helmet in one rat cage and the **dreamcatcher** in another.

"What's happening?" asked Mateo.

"They're talking to each other," said Trent laughing. It was true. A rat ran across his floor of wood shavings in one cage, and was synchronously mimicked by the rat in the other cage with the other relic in it.

"What are they saying?" asked Mateo amazed.

"Who cares? They're fucking rats." Katy was standing apart bemused.

Trent ignored her. "They're saying do what I do. *Let's be one.*"

Katy and Mateo exchanged looks briefly then quickly turned away from one another.

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Trent did a few more tests. He scanned the relics with a microwave frequency detector. Then he put the helmet on his head, and tried to speak with Mateo who was holding the dreamcatcher near his ear. They tried to communicate using only their minds.

Mateo had to confess he only heard a low droning musical tone but couldn't even be sure of that.

Trent was puzzled. Mateo could see this even though Trent was still wearing the helmet.

"That's weird."

"What?" replied Trent.

"Are you confused or something?"

"What?"

"Were you just thinking, that's strange, that we can't communicate with our thoughts."

"Yeah, I was. What am I thinking now?"

"I don't know. Are you thinking about nothing?"

"Yeah, I am. Cool. How'd you know?"

Katy shook her head in pity.

Trent took off the helmet. "We'll have to come up with a better test for telepathy later."

"That's weird."

"What?" replied Mateo.

"Shut up for god's sake. Stop screwing off," said Katy, petulant.

"No, I'm serious," said Trent. He was looking at his face in a mirror. "I had a cut on my cheek from shaving this morning. But it's gone now. As if it spontaneously healed--just since I put on the helmet."

He felt the relic's heft ponderously in his hands. After a second of internal deliberation, he grabbed out a rat from one of the cages and wrapped it in a thin plastic sheet. He left open a patch of fur which he cut open with an Exacto knife. Katy looked on with gruesome awe.

The rat, twitching with fear, squealed in pain. Dark burgundy blood oozed down the rat's belly flank. Trent

wrapped the bleeding rat up all the way now and deposited the bundle inside the helmet where it squealed and squirmed, slowly suffocating. Mateo looked away.

"Look!" shouted Katy, enthralled. Before their very eyes the wound papered over and closed up, leaving no seam or evidence that it had ever been there. Mateo gasped.

"Cell repair," said Trent, "This shit ain't from around here, lady and gents. I wonder what else these babies can do."

They wouldn't have time to find out. At that moment, all the lights went out then came on dimmer. A low droning klaxon blared from the ceiling intercom system.

"Lockdown," said Trent, puzzled. His badge would not open the great steel door: their only exit. Katy was nervous. "Do you think it's a spill?" she asked.

"Nah, I would still be able to get out if that were the case. This feels like a security lockdown." He looked at Mateo. "Fake ID, eh, Cassanova?"

Mateo looked around in a panic, gathering the relics back in his knapsack. "Is there any way other out?"

Trent seemed unconcerned. "Oh, there's always a way. Give me a couple minutes." He went to the chemical closet, and came out with a few beakers and started pouring solutions. The steel door was literally opening as Trent

lit the fuse hanging out of one of the beakers in the apparatus he had rigged near the door's inward span radius.

As the raiders stormed through the aperture, the apparatus detonated in phosphorus, causing a chorus of screams to erupt. "I sure hope that wasn't my boss," said Trent. "Might get a bad performance review for that one."

They rushed out the door past a couple of blinded deputies, staggering around like headless poultry. "Here," he said, handing Katy his card. "This will get you out the rest of the way. I'll take care of the alarm code. Bastards," he said, knocking each of the blind shrieking deputies out cold, one by one.

Trent was as good as his word. Katy and Mateo escaped through a back stairwell, and darted in the direction of Katy's car in the FF parking lot. Mateo curled in the space between the front and back seats as a line of flashing siren-wailing patrol cars shot past them. After a fiercely determined SWAT team finally succeeded in subduing Trent and drawing him out of his lab—shortly after he'd depleted his bag of tricks, in fact--Mateo and Katy were long gone.

They drove straight to Katy's apartment. In retrospect, this may have been a bad decision.

***End Fifth Installment...***