

He clamped the pad shut and strode off the pedwalk into the building before him. The Central Offices. The original building had been adobe like all the new facilities, he had been told. Now it was a complicated reinforced plexiglas and native concrete structure, complete with UV and solar radiation protection shield.

What would happen if the new settlers weren't sufficiently shielded? he wondered.

Weng shrugged, dismissing the thought. His job at the moment was to make sure they had enough water to go around. And since much of the electricity in the Mars Colony was produced from water, this was more easily said than done.

Entering the Central Office lobby, he waved his ID at the receptionist. The robot nodded and gestured at the next door.

"Go ahead, Mr. Weng. The Overseer is waiting."

"Thanks."

Weng was sure the simulacrum was smirking. Not possible, he knew. The robot was programmed to respond to tens of thousands of combinations of external stimuli, but despite the human-like torso, arms, and face, it was still just a machine. A creepy half-body machine built into a desk.

That smile did look like a smirk, though. He shook his head and paused at the closed door. From the other side, he heard a raised voice. Martin seemed to be arguing with someone.

He touched a hand-size panel in the door, and a faint buzzing noise came from within the room.

There was a pause. Then, "Come!"

The door opened. Facing the door several meters away was a large off-white plastic desk, with Martin seated behind it. The desk had seen better days. Early Colony, Weng guessed, realizing with a start that his own desk looked much newer and likely had a much more recent computer set up as well. He felt slightly embarrassed.

"Ah, Sam, good to see you," the Overseer said, beaming. He gave no indication of having just finished a conversation.

"Over—Martin, I wanted to see you about—"

"Of course, of course," Martin responded, jumping to his feet. "Tea?"

Before Weng could respond, Martin had already placed the order. A series of buttons lined the left side of the desk. That

further dated it. *Buttons!* Just like the water reclamation plant room.

"Martin," Weng started again, "have you given any thought to my proposal?"

Martin nodded, then shook his head. "Yes, yes, I have."

Weng opened his mouth, but the Overseer forged on.

"And I have a counter proposal for you."

A buzzer sounded.

"Ah, that would be the tea. Come!"

They waited as a drone-server wheeled into the room, deposited two plain aluminium cups on the desk, and then wheeled backwards into the lobby area.

The door closed.

"How would you like to be the head of the water reclamation committee instead of just a member?"

Weng nearly dropped the cup but managed to bring it to his mouth. He took a careful sip.

Not bad. Upper management had its perks.

"Head?" he stammered. "Martin, you know that I'm more interested in—"

"Architectural redesigns of the settler units, yes, of course."

Martin raised his own cup and drained it without a glance.

"But," the Overseer continued, "before we can consider expenditures on superficial concerns — however noble and proper they may be, mind you! — there are more immediate, ah, considerations."

"Such as foodstuffs?" Weng cut in.

He bit a lip. That sounded too indignant.

Martin cocked an eyebrow.

"Water, Sam. Water."

"Martin, these people have no heat. No access to the Net. Their electrical grid set up is archaic. A good architectural redesign would alleviate—"

"Yes, I know. And you're absolutely correct. 100%." Martin paused. "But they need water. And we haven't got any."

Weng paused. "No water?"

"No water," Martin repeated. "Well, not literally no water, but we must start to ration, or we'll run out within a few weeks. Well, not to exaggerate. A few months, perhaps."

Weng slowly lowered the teacup to the plastic desk. The tea felt stale in his mouth now. How much water had they wasted making it just now?

"Electricity," he said. He looked up at the Overseer. "We're using too much on the generators."

Martin nodded sombrely. "Yes, exactly so. And that's what you need to tell the head of the settler delegations."

Weng laughed. "Me?"

"Yes, you."

Weng stared. The Overseer wasn't joking.

"Martin...you must...are you...me?"

"Look. It's all very simple."

Martin stood and draped an arm across his shoulders.

"You know these people already. You've been meeting with them, working with them. You've shared your concerns with them about their situation."

Weng winced at the Overseer's touch but allowed himself to be led behind the yellowing desk. An array of ancient computer monitors stared up at him.

The architect resisted the urge to curl a lip. First generation networking like this belonged in a museum, not the Office of the Martian Secretariat.

"Here," Martin gestured. "I've already got a meeting set up with several colonist delegates."

"But—"

"Just follow my lead," Martin said urgently. He eased into a smile. "They trust you. Let's play."

He toggled the console, and the row of monitors sprang to life. Weng found himself addressing no less than half a dozen delegates, all of whom wanted to speak simultaneously.

In fact, they appeared to have already begun discussing among themselves.

"—told you that the Indian government would never—"

"—*not* what we ordered! And where are the supplies we requested last—"

"Hasn't the Martian Secretariat been in—"

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Martin began, holding his hands up in surrender.

"*Women*," someone interrupted.

"Men and women," Martin corrected. "Delegates, we have been made aware of your food supply issues and—"

"What are you going to do about it? We've been waiting four days now!"

"Mr Mbutu, believe me, the needs of the CAA settlers are well known to us—"

“The EU has priority over African settlers! We arrived first, we have—”

The delegates raised their voices and general argument prevented Weng from understanding much. Martin smiled and raised his hands again.

“Delegates! Please, please! I have—”

The discussion continued for another minute or two. Martin turned to Weng and nodded.

Weng coughed into a fist before speaking.

“Excuse me,” he tried. Too soft. The delegates continued.

“—Persian Empire will make you regret any theft of property from—”

“Excuse me!” Weng fairly shouted at the screens.

The voices died down. The delegates looked at him.

Weng cleared his throat.

“Gentlemen, ladies. I have spoken to many of you these past few days, about your heat, your electricity—”

“Yes, yes,” huffed one delegate. “For all the good it did.”

Weng nodded in agreement.

“I’m afraid you are correct, Ms Pehrat. However, that has not prevented us from developing an amicable and mutually beneficial relationship, has it not?”

Silence greeted this response. Martin pinched his arm from behind. Evidently, an encouraging gesture.

“Look,” Weng went on. “I know that we are asking much of you and your constituencies. But we must ask you all to realize that our situation is quite dire at the moment.”

“Dire?” Mbutu asked. “How dire, exactly?”

Weng cleared his throat again.

“I am given to understand that, er, due to the rapid increase in the need for electricity to power new settlement districts we will need to begin water rationing.”

“Begin?” Pehrat cried. “We’re already rationing!”

Several delegates jumped in.

“Intolerable!”

“Outrageous!”

“Please! Please!” Martin tried to interrupt again.

The delegates shouted him down in a cacophonous paroxysm.

“Water,” Weng mused as the din rattled around him. “Water...wait!”

He grabbed the sides of the desk and shouted at the screens.

"Wait! Wait! There may be a way."

"The electrician speaks!" Mbutu laughed. But the other voices died down.

Martin interrupted. "Dr Weng," he said, emphasising the word 'doctor', "Dr Weng is the head of the Martian Colony Water Reclamation Project Team."

"Ah," Mbutu exclaimed.

"Thank you, Overseer," Weng said. He straightened and opened his hands. "Water is needed for producing electricity due to a lack of other energy sources."

"Yes, yes, we know," Mbutu commented. "And?"

"What if..." Weng began.

He paused. He raised a hand, stretched out his fingers as if to gesture, and paused again, thinking.

"I have two proposals," he suddenly announced. "First."

He stopped. He glanced at Martin. The Overseer maintained his politician's smile.

"First," Weng repeated, "We do have the capability to release more water into the water reclamation system. However, we do not presently have enough workers to dig up the regolith required for the process."

The delegates were silent for a moment.

"What you are suggesting," Pehrat offered, "would require many, many rounds of negotiations among our nations."

"We don't have time for that," Weng said. "I don't know the delicate nature of politics, but I do know the technical possibilities and necessities of our current situation."

Pehrat was silent, seemingly considering the truth of his statement.

"I do know," Weng continued, "that we all need each other. To cooperate, for mutual benefit."

He stopped and held up two fingers.

"Second."

Martin briefly dropped his smile but recovered.

"Second," Weng said heavily. "It seems likely that we may still not get the water reclamation process started in time to suit our immediate needs. I estimate two to three months before processing will be adequate."

Martin smoothly interposed. "In that case, what do you propose? Won't rationing be enough?"

"I'm afraid not," Weng said. "I propose that the United Mars Colonies—"

"The what?" Mbutu blurted.

"Dr. Weng, there's no such—" Martin began.

"—that the United Mars Colonies send an envoy or envoys to Ceres for the purpose of procuring an emergency supply of water strictly for the drinking supply. Not to be used for electrical generation."

Martin grabbed Weng's arm, hissing, "We must talk."

Turning to the screens and smiling, he said, "Pardon us for a moment. Please hold."

He stabbed at a button on the desk, then turned back to Weng, furious.

"What on earth do you think you're doing?"

Weng regarded the Overseer calmly. "We're not 'on Earth'."

"For the love of—you know what I mean!"

The Overseer began to pace, waving his arms. "The Moon Treaty of 1979, the Outer Space Exploration Treaty of 1991, and the Mars Mining Treaty of 2031 all forbid any one nation to act on behalf of citizens of other sovereign nations working or living off-world!"

Weng blinked. "Meaning?"

Martin stopped.

"Meaning," he said heavily, "each group of settlers is bound by the laws of their countries, and we cannot speak for them as a group!"

"But," Weng said, "most of these recent settlers are obviously refugees, and their governments have either not contacted us or have been evasive and vague in our communications."

"True, all true," Martin retorted, agitated. "But I work for the UN. Not 'the United Mars Colonies,' whatever the hell that is."

He stopped pacing and frenetically ran his fingers through his hair.

"Martin," Weng said.

The politician looked over him and clasped his hands in front like a prayer.

"Weng, I have already had to agree to give each and every country its own territory, in stark contrast to existing UN directives. Separated each group by a minimum of 1.4 kilometers. Forbidden settlers from other nation-states to enter their territory without permission."

"And has that prevented settlers from communicating with each other?"

"Ah..."

"Or sharing their supplies, which they got from us?"

"Um. Not in so many words, no."

"And yet," Weng continued, "the UN has obliged us, as a central authority, to supply housing, food, water, power, communication facilities. All despite the fact these settler factions are supposed to be operating independently. Correct?"

"Yes, yes," Martin replied quickly.

Weng approached the near-panicked politician. He held out his hands to calm him down.

"Look, we need water, yes?"

Martin nodded, rubbing his palms together.

"And we need water from the asteroid reclamation plants on Ceres, because we can't get ours to produce enough water fast enough and we can't convince the UA to give us any of theirs. Again, correct?"

"Yes, that is essentially the situation."

"And we only have three months before we run out of drinking water?"

Martin swallowed and nodded again. "I believe those are the current estimates."

Weng smiled. Actually, he had no idea what the current estimates were. Nor how long it would take to produce more if the settler factions agreed to donate workers. Probably he was close to accurate. But that hardly mattered, to get what he wanted.

"Now," he continued, "if we were to ask Ceres for water, as per UN regulations, we would have to go through each country's delegation, then wait for an answer from their respective countries, then wait for the answer to, ah, filter back through the delegates."

Again, Martin nodded, this time with more certainty.

"So," Weng concluded. "If we approach Ceres not as the UN, beholden to separate, divided, bickering nations, but as a sort of united group of fellow outer space residents, wouldn't the mining community on Ceres treat us as a single entity? With slightly more respect?"

Martin looked dubious. "I'm not as confident as you on that issue," he said slowly. "However—"

“Good,” said Weng. He strode back to the ugly yellow desk. “I’ll convince the delegates that a temporary alliance and a united front will get us more water.”

“Wait!” Martin called out. “Let me, let me stand next to you. You talk, I’ll support.”

Weng shrugged. “Support” sounded like “use you,” but he supposed they, too, needed to show a united front.

In the end, I’ll get what I want, he thought, inwardly grinning. And it would only cost him an extra trip to Ceres to see Riss.

8 The Artemis

"Taking a new step, uttering a new word is what they fear most..."
Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment

Riss woke with a start. Something...no, somebody...it felt like somebody was calling her...

Unstrapping her sleeping harness, she slowly sat up in the dim cabin. The only light came from the faint glow of her pad, casting a barely discernible sheen out from its wall recharging socket. The doll cast an eerie shadow across the room.

"Artemis. Water," she croaked. No response.

She coughed. "Water," she repeated in a stronger voice. Her throat felt raw.

The refrigerator unit beeped and disengaged from its cubby beneath the rechargers. It slid on a magnetic track across the cabin and stopped arms-distance from her bunk.

Riss opened the door and withdrew a plastic drink sleeve. It seemed a good idea at the time. Six days into the return trip to Zedra point, she'd decided that each crew member would benefit from a few new packs of water, freshly squeezed from the rock fragment safely stowed in the cargo hold. They'd already used some in the hydroponic lab, after all.

"Return," she ordered, and the boxy robot rolled back to its wall nook.

Hindsight was foresight, she mused, but now it seemed prescient. The ship's normal water recycling system had a glitch which would have made things more than uncomfortable without the new water source.

Squeezed, she thought, plucking back the drink tab and drawing out the straw for a sip. *More like reconsti—*

She gasped and nearly dropped the pack. Cold. *So cold!*

It was as if she could feel icy vapours sublimating as the water turned directly into gas inside her. She coughed, and coughed, almost a dry cough despite the water.

Now her entire body felt icy cold. She barely managed to lower the pack to her bedside table as the cold sensation spread to every extremity. She lay back and forced her eyes to stay open, focusing on the ceiling.

Heavy. So heavy.

The cold feeling began to dissipate, leaving her with a tingling in fingertips and toes. She tried to lift her head, but instantly dizzy. She closed her eyes, then opened them again.

Objects on the captain's desk seemed to glow. No, that must be the portable...no, it wasn't. She stared. The darkness of the cabin seemed strange, out of place. Not true darkness, but the darkness left by the absence of light rather than true darkness.

Layer upon layer of semi-transparent, translucent geometric patterns assaulted her vision. Some were colourful, like spinning pieces of stained glass.

Riss closed her eyes. She could still see the patterns. Random. She opened her eyes again. It was as if she could see the room...*through* the patterns. As if the patterns were real and the room a mere reflection.

The patterns. Were they in her head?

She heard a soft buzzing noise. No, a squeezing noise. As if her head were being squeezed. Like the water from the rock.

No, she thought, detached. Not squeezed. Released—

The ceiling blew up. Fragments flew away and the rushing darkness enveloped her.

She stared up at a vast, limitless height.

Space was a machine. A living, endless machine, filled and surrounded and controlled by patterns.

She felt the patterns shifting, colliding, rotating around a core she couldn't quite grasp but could sense.

Heavy. She felt heavy.

A gravity well...sinking, sinking, sinking through the patterns back...back...

She closed her eyes. An odd sensation filled her.

Blue sky. Grass. The feel of mild wind and warm sunlight caressed her face. The scents of a beach...a Luna beach!

She smiled, content, floating...

A feeling of detachment, separated from herself yet part of herself. Part of something much larger. Infinite.

She opened her eyes. Back seated on her bed.

The patterns in the darkness slowly faded; she reached to a hand, as if she could touch them, alter them, change the way they interacted. She sat up, stretching her fingers—

No.

No, the patterns were gone.

Or were they?

Riss let her hand drop. She stared at her hand, then at the water pack on the table. Nothing out of the ordinary. Still, she could swear she still felt something. Some kind of new awareness of things around her.

Riss picked up the water pack and looked at the straw.

Did she dare?

Carefully, slowly, as if the pack were a fragile flower, she touched the straw to her lips and took the tiniest of sips.

Water. Slightly tangy and metallic, but otherwise.

She sipped more. Just water.

Shaking her head, Riss stood and arched her back. Suddenly she felt incredibly refreshed. How long she slept?

She pulled the pad from the charging socket and swiped it on. The time. She rubbed her eyes and looked again. Almost an entire day? That couldn't be.

No wonder she felt refreshed.

Yanking her boots on, Riss shoved the pad into a shoulder carrier. She'd better check up on the crew. Should she mention her dream? If it had been a dream.

She paused before the door. No. She'd first stop by tactical. Autopilot or not, she trusted only herself.

She touched a panel and entered the corridor.

The Artemis was quiet. Or rather should have been quiet. As Riss walked down the narrow corridor connecting the living quarters and tactical, she thought she felt something...different. A mild humming in the bulkheads. Barely perceptible vibrations, like the Artemis were trying to soothe her, comfort her.

Ahead, she heard voices. She couldn't quite make out the words, but the tone was pleading. A woman and a man. But not her crew.

Then a sniffling noise, followed by a loud thump.

Sanvi?

"Is anyone here?" Riss called. She stepped into the room and made for the navigator's console.

The pilot was holding a pad in both hands and her shoulders were shaking. Abruptly the voices cut off. Sanvi stood, wiping her eyes with a sleeve.

"Riss, it's...sorry, I..."

Riss stopped. She'd never seen Sanvi like this before. The woman appeared on the verge of a completely breakdown.

"Those voices..." Riss began. She stopped, wondering what to say. Then took a guess. "Your family?"

Sanvi nodded. She held the pad in front of her with hands, staring at the empty screen.

"My parents," she replied. "Their last vidmess before I joined up."

She lay the pad down on her console and closed her eyes.

"I haven't spoken to them since."

Riss crossed her arms and sat in the captain's chair. "They were against your joining the crew?"

"They were against me leaving Lunar Base," Sanvi replied, snapping her eyes open. Riss was quiet. This defiant look wasn't something she'd seen in her pilot before. *Something terrible must have happened, she thought. Just like...*

"Sanvi," she said softly, "is there anything you want to talk about?"

Sanvi started to shake her head, then looked at the pad again.

"I saw them," she said flatly.

"Saw them?"

"I saw my parents," Sanvi said. "A dream. At least, I think it was a dream. Pretty sure, anyway. I could see them, but they couldn't see me. I, I just wondered if they were alright, you know."

Riss waited.

Sanvi sat down, her hands in her lap. She seemed lost, if Riss hadn't known better.

"I had a strange dream, too," Riss said suddenly.

Sanvi looked up at her in surprise. Riss was surprised somewhat herself. Why had she said that?

"I, uh." She wasn't sure how to continue.

"You saw your parents?" Sanvi asked.

Riss shook her head. "No. No, I've never—"

She stopped and bit her lip.

"I haven't seen them in my dreams for, uh, several years now."

A lie.

"Then, what?"

Riss hesitated, then, "It was nothing, just an odd dream about the rock. That's all."

Sanvi sighed, then snorted.

"If I didn't know any better," she said, slightly sarcastic, "I'd think you were holding out on me."

Now it was Riss's turn to snort.

"Well, then, you do know better," she retorted, with a slight grin. "Maybe I'll have another, stranger dream tomorrow to tell you."

She stood and stretched her back.

"In the meantime, I think I'd better go down to the hold and check on things."

Sanvi nodded. "Want me to stay here?"

"Nah. Nothing to check here, so long as the auto is working as it should."

Sanvi glanced at the console and shrugged. "So far."

The ship's internal comm clicked on.

"Hey, is anybody there? Anyone driving this thing?"

The geist. Riss touched a panel on the captain's chair.

"Coop. We're here."

"I, I think you may want to come to the hold."

Riss caught her voice in her throat. Had he found something he'd missed before? The rock—was it actually special?

"Be right there."

She motioned to Sanvi, who calmly picked up her pad and followed her into the corridor.

On the way, they ran into Enoch, floating outside his room holding a mag boot in each hand. He looked disheveled, as if he had just jumped out of bed.

"Guys, hey, I had this most amazing dream," he said happily.

"You mean you actually do sleep sometimes?" Sanvi said with a smirk.

"It was like—man, it was like, like I was flying. No, like I was the plane, flying by myself."

Riss almost stopped to ask him about it but changed her mind and kept walking.

"Follow us," she said.

He looked a little surprised. "Uh."

"You can tell us all about it later."

"Okay, but I don't have my mag boots on yet."

The navigator looked at Sanvi, but she simply shook her hand and motioned for him to come along. They walked. Enoch started swimming.

"Hey, wait up!" Enoch shouted, trying to yank his boots on mid-air.

After a few minutes they reached the hold. As they entered, Riss called out, "Coop, what's going on? Did you fi—"

She stopped abruptly. Sanvi and Enoch bumped into each other and then squeezed into the room behind her.

The rock was glowing.

It still lay carefully within its "cage" of polystyrene cables, strapped in the corner of the hold across from the Hopper port. Cooper was standing at the console, gazing intently at the screen and flicking the surface with his fingers.

"Cap—Riss," he said, turning around.

"It's glowing," she said.

"Yeah. I kinda noticed that."

"The rock," she repeated, more urgently. "It's glowing!"

Cooper spread his hands. "Now, don't panic. I know it's glowing. I'm still checking things out."

"Hang on," Enoch said. "Didn't we chip off some stuff and put it in our drinking supply?"

"Yes," Riss replied. "I helped him do it."

"You!" Sanvi hissed. She stepped forward and grabbed him by the shirt collar. "What have you done to us? Poisoned? You some sort of spy?"

He frantically batted at her arm and sputtered. "Wha—what on earth are you talking about?"

"Sanvi," Riss interposed. "Let go."

Sanvi shoved the geologist back and glared. "You'd better explain yourself, geist," she huffed.

"Yes," Riss agreed.

Cooper quickly backed away, glaring at Sanvi. He stood behind the console and placed his hands on top of it, swallowing a retort.

Riss took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Well? What's making this, ah, glow?"

Cooper gestured to the console.

"You can see for yourself," he said.

Enoch cut in. "Just explain it, bro. We don't have all day."

"Ryan," Riss said sharply.

She looked down at the monitor. It was filled with lines of chemical symbols and numbers. She scrolled and images of various molecular chains appeared.

"This," she asked haltingly, "this shows, ah..."

"Carbon," Cooper said. "Hydrocarbon."

"We already knew that, geist," Sanvi cut in. "So what?"

The geologist took a deep breath.

"Not just any hydrocarbon. There are signs of—I don't know exactly if it's nucleic acids, or some simple polymeric—"

"Coop!"

"RNA," he said bluntly. "Maybe."

Riss narrowed her eyes and glanced at the screen again.

"Life?"

Both Sanvi and Enoch lurched across the console and grabbed the geologist. A brief scuffle followed, with Riss in the middle, vainly trying to separate them.

"What the f—!"

"Damn you!"

"Stop! Let him go!" Riss ordered, trying to control her temper.

Cooper fairly fled to the asteroid chunk. "The filter system still says it's just water!" he shouted at them from across the cargo hold. "The computer didn't even notice anything until I made it run a more detailed analysis!"

The pilot and navigator made as if to rush after him, but Riss held their arms.

"Sanvi! Enoch! As you were!" she demanded.

They both stopped and looked at each other, then at Riss. Enoch seemed to be sulking, but Sanvi shuddered and closed her eyes.

Riss had expected the navigator to lose his cool, but Sanvi's reaction surprised her. It almost looked as if she was trying to meditate.

"Cooper," Riss called out to the geologist. He looked like a trapped animal, ready to bare his teeth. "Brady. Nobody's accusing you of anything."

She looked back at Sanvi and Enoch. "Nobody is accusing him of anything," she repeated. "Got it?"

Enoch nodded curtly. Sanvi breathed out and opened her

eyes, then followed suit. *Good*, Riss thought. This was not the time to lose their collective cool.

"Coop, is there any precedent for hydrocarbon-rich asteroids containing nucleic acids?"

The geologist rubbed a hand on one arm. Where Sanvi had grabbed him, Riss realized. She slowly walked toward him, and he toward her.

"Yes," he said carefully. He looked at her with a strange expression. Like he was trying to figure out if she was serious, she guessed. "Japanese scientists discovered amino acids in several near-Earth asteroids in the early 21st century. It's widely believed that this is how life was first introduced to Earth. By asteroid or comet bombardment."

He stopped. "If..."

He turned to the rock.

"Why is it glowing?" Riss said quietly.

The geologist shook his head.

"I don't know. I'm an astrogeologist, not an exobiologist."

"Speculate."

"Well," he said, rubbing his arm again, "I suppose it's possible that, if there were any RNA, the ribose could have completely hydrolyzed, so that it bonded with any freely available compounds in the rock, such as phosphorous or sulphur."

"O-kay," Riss said. "And if it's not RNA?"

"It could be some other kind of enantiomer whose chiral features—"

"All right, slow down," she interrupted. "I followed the phosphorus bit, but what on earth are you talking about?"

"Um. Sugar. Basically."

"Sugar?"

"Yeah. Hydrocarbons have, uh, carbon, right? So, that means carbohydrates. Starches and sugars. But molecules sometimes come in pairs. Mirror images of each other. So when one of the pair affects you one way, the other might affect you another way."

"Meaning?"

Cooper looked at Sanvi with a frightened expression.

"Drugs."

Sanvi opened her eyes wide and took a step forward.

"Coop," Riss said, placing herself between the two, "you had better explain yourself."