

1. Mr. Sanders' Planet

To them, his name was Greg Sanders. He was staring at the television monitor, gnawing at the cuticle of his little finger. *This can't be happening*, he thought. It can't, and yet it was.

He was watching the man sitting on the edge of a hospital bed. Unshaven, disheveled and bleary-eyed, the man held himself rigidly, almost as though his body had become fragile. His body wasn't fragile, of course; he was only thirty-four, and as healthy as he could be without interfering with Sanders' other purposes. Nonetheless, something was wrong. He was dying and he wasn't supposed to.

"Mr. Marston." Sanders spoke into a microphone which sat to the immediate left of the monitor. "Could you walk to the other side of the room and pour yourself a glass of water? You don't have to drink it if you don't want to." Sanders wanted to see if gait or station had been affected.

"Who *aare* you?" Marston's voice, halfway between a wheeze and a whine, was barely comprehensible, and little flecks of blood flew out his mouth as he spoke. Sanders could understand him, though, because he had heard nearly a dozen other nearly identical voices.

"I'm Dr. Sanders." Sanders could have afforded to tell Marston his real name – Marston would be dead by the end of the week – but to

Sanders one name was as good as another. “I’m trying to make you better.”

Sanders wasn’t lying about that. Sanders wanted desperately for Marston to recover. Afterwards, he would kill him and dissect him to find out how the virus had attacked his lungs and what his body had done to defeat it. That was his commission. He had never had one like it before in his life.

Usually, the contracting party wanted a biological agent which would kill the enemy’s healthy young males – its foot soldiers, its feed-and-breed stock. This contracting party seemed to want an agent which would kill only the enemy’s sick and weak – the ones who would be soonest to die anyway. The elderly. Those least likely to pick up a rifle in defense of the homeland.

It puzzled him.

No one else on his team had met the contracting party. But he had. Apparently this matter was so sensitive that she hadn’t dared to use underlings.

Sanders was amazed when he met her. He *knew* her. He had *seen her on TV*. He had been eating her Zesty Golden Mustard since he was a kid. She was less grandmotherly in person than she seemed on the tube.

“Mr. Marston? Could you walk to the other side of the room and pour yourself a glass of water?” Sanders repeated.

Gritting his teeth, Marston swung his legs over the side of the bed and pushed himself up. Was he always so docile, Sanders wondered, or had the disease affected his personality? Marston took a tentative step forward, wobbled slightly, and then suddenly pitched forward, landing with a sickening thud on his chin.

Balance gone, Sanders thought. He flipped a switch on the mike. “Marcus, Chris, Todd,” he said. “Marston’s down.”

He sat back. They were going to have to suit up, since the room was incredibly hot with virus. This was going to take a while.

Marston was twitching. He seemed unconscious. By now, Sanders thought, somebody would be asking around for Marston. Somebody at that actuarial firm will be wondering why the young statistician had missed two days of work in a row without calling in; will be calling home and getting no answer, getting the voice mail. Or perhaps the voice mail will be filled up. Though he doubted it, with Marston’s miserable social life. Point was, someone will be asking questions, getting worried, calling, eventually, the cops.

Can’t be helped. Sanders had tried to run the experiments with the forgotten and anonymous homeless of Phoenix’ streets and culverts – America’s Least Wanted – but it hadn’t worked out. They had all died, but their immune systems had already been compromised; their livers had gone haywire, before they were even exposed. Sanders wanted to

give the virus a fair test on a healthy young person who should, at least theoretically, be able to resist it.

They had picked Marston out with great care. He was young and healthy, but humorless and somewhat socially inept. He had a job, but no friends. They would notice his absence, but they wouldn't really miss him. At least not, Sanders hoped, until it was too late.

And his other great hope was that the virus, which up to this point had killed everyone who had been exposed to it, would be defeated by Marston's young antibodies. That was the result he needed; that was the result the contracting party expected.

It wasn't happening. Sanders watched as the sealed door opened and his three assistants, wearing what looked like white spacesuits, stepped into the room. The first one through the door – that would be Chris, Sanders thought – knelt down next to Marston and put her hand on his shoulder. Marston responded by vomiting a huge gout of bile-black blood on her chest.

"He's bleeding out, Dr. Sanders," she said, unnecessarily.

"Make him comfortable," Sanders said, and switched off the monitor. By this he meant that they should kill him. Greg Sanders was not unnecessarily cruel, and with the results of this experiment unmistakably clear, there was no further need for Marston to suffer.

Sanders stepped out into the merciless Arizona sun and lit a cigarette. The Gallois he smoked were the only clue that he may not

have come, as he said, from the plains of Southern Georgia. Sanders thought that it felt right to have a smoke out here, where everything seemed as though it might burst into flames at any moment.

Sanders worked in a low, circular building made of a highly reflective material. A sign in the front said, "Bosc Pears". The building was made of highly reflective material because it was important that the temperature inside be easy to control, and not subject to the rages of the torrid climate. It was circular because the inside of the building was composed of concentric circles, each one containing more lethal agents than the circle outside it. Sanders liked to work in the outside circle, conducting his experiments through computers and televisions and remote control.

Marston was in the innermost circle.

Sanders had done these kinds of projects for a long time, and had seen some astonishing things. He had once prepared a lethal brand of anthrax for mailing to U.S. Congressmen at the request of another government. Some novel-writing wannabe had been blamed for that, Sanders vaguely remembered.

He had developed a contagious agent which attacked the nerves controlling the bladder and bowels. Individuals infected with this virus lost the ability to control urination and defecation, forever. Sanders could not imagine how a society could operate if a large segment of its population was afflicted with this disease.

He had found a way to make Tourette's Syndrome contagious. Released in the enemy's parliament, you could soon reduce important legislative matters to an obscene babble. Or – how about this? The nation's opinion molders, their talking heads, unable to complete an editorial without talking about cocksucking motherfucking whores.

He had created a virus which robbed its victims of fifty points from their IQs.

Every time his work had yielded such an excellent result, it would go no further than the contracting party. This was because the horrible sickness he had brought into being could never simply be confined to the target country. The nature of a contagious disease is that it is *contagious* – that it goes not where you want it to go but where it is best for the virus to go; where there is warmth and food and protection. By the time Sanders' excellent results were presented, the contracting party has invariably lost his nerve or his job or his head.

It was why Sanders insisted on being paid up front.

But this time it was different. This time the commission was not to make the disease horrible, or to terrify. It was simply to make it efficient. And they were being careful – extremely careful – to make certain that there was effective natural resistance to the disease. And what's more, Sanders knew this about the contracting party. She doesn't lose her nerve. *She doesn't lose anything.*

They were going to let this one out.