

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *THE HAN AGENT*

“Amy Rogers's latest medical thriller, *The Han Agent*, is as exciting as it is frighteningly realistic. It could be tomorrow's headline. Here is a story fraught with tension, sudden explosive action, and threaded through with scientific accuracy and speculation that will leave you stunned. Read it...if only to prepare yourself for what might soon become true.”

—James Rollins, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Sigma Force*

“In a stunning ‘what-if’ author-scientist Amy Rogers resurrects the idea of Unit 731, Japan’s notorious wartime biological weapons division, weaving together a diabolical tale of science, genocide, and modern-day bio-terror. Sobering, suspenseful, and absolutely chilling.”—Barry Lancet, award-winning author of *The Spy Across the Table* and *Tokyo Kill*

PRAISE FOR PREVIOUS NOVELS BY AMY ROGERS

“Rogers artfully blends science and suspense in this top-notch thriller. Fans of Michael Palmer and Robin Cook novels will love this book.”

—Brian Andrews, author of *Beijing Red* and *Tier One*

“...takes readers on a wild ride across the frontiers of science. It’s a fun, frightening and memorable novel.”

—Mark Alpert, *Scientific American* editor and author of *Extinction*

“The science is a consistent presence, easy to understand, enriching the story. A smart, tightly written, scary science thriller.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“This is the best science thriller I’ve read this year. Maybe ever.” —*BookTrib*

“A great example of lab lit in what I think of as the Crichtonesque School of epic science disaster writing.” —*LabLit.com*

“Compellingly written, technically literate.”

—LA Starks, author of *The Pythagoras Conspiracy*

THE HAN AGENT

ALSO BY AMY ROGERS:

PETROPLAGUE
REVERSION

THE HAN AGENT



AMY ROGERS



SCIENCETHRILLERS MEDIA



SCIENCE**T**HRI**L**LERS **M**EDIA

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE HAN AGENT. Copyright ©2017 by Amy Rogers. All rights reserved. For information, contact ScienceThrillers Media, P.O. Box 601392, Sacramento, CA 95860-1392.

www.ScienceThrillersMedia.com
Publisher@ScienceThrillersMedia.com

First edition, 2017

Library of Congress Control Number 2017906108

FIC031040 FICTION/Thrillers/Medical
FIC028020 FICTION/Science Fiction/Hard Science Fiction
FIC028110 FICTION/Science Fiction/Genetic Engineering

ISBN 978-1-940419-15-2 (trade paperback)
ISBN 978-1-940419-16-9 (ebook)

Cover design by Xavier Comas, The Cover Kitchen www.coverkitchen.com

TO JASON

Han (*hän*): The Han Chinese, Han people or simply Han (漢族; pinyin: Hànzú) are an ethnic group native to East Asia. They constitute approximately 92% of the population of China, 95% of Taiwan (Han Taiwanese), 76% of Singapore, 23% of Malaysia and about 18% of the global population. Han Chinese are the world's largest ethnic group with over 1.3 billion people. — *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*



Prologue

AUGUST 9, 1945

IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY SECRET COMPLEX

HARBIN, MANCHURIA (NORTHEAST CHINA)

The logs were piled in rows four deep. They were stacked for burning in the stifling heat of the walled courtyard.

Smoke from the army's demolition work beyond the walls irritated his eyes. Major Masaji Ishii lit a cigarette anyway. Foul air at Pingfan was nothing new. After all these years, he barely noticed the stench. Excrement from the latrines. Singed fur from the incinerators. Formaldehyde from preserved tissues. Bacterial culture media, like sweet rotten meat. Bleach.

He kicked one of the logs and thought, what a terrible waste.

Unfortunately he had no choice. Three days ago, the Americans had attacked the home islands of Japan. Rumors said they had obliterated an entire city in one strike. Some kind of new explosive. A uranium bomb.

Masaji glared at the soldiers under his command as they flung more *maruta* onto the piles. Uranium, he grumbled. In the race to find the ultimate weapon and win the war, how did the American physicists beat the Japanese physicians?

He'd doubted the claims about the American bomb, but he could not ignore the urgent reports coming from the northern edge of Manchukuo. The Japanese Imperial Army had occupied the ethnically Chinese puppet state since 1931. Today, army scouts warned that the once-invincible military force was in full retreat.

Masaji knew what that meant.

The Soviets were coming.

And no matter what, the Soviets could not learn what Unit 731 had done at Pingfan.

A massive five-story building known as Ro block surrounded the barren grounds and concealed his soldiers' work. These remaining members of the deceptively named Kwantung Army Epidemic Prevention and Water Purification Unit, Number 731, wiped sweat from their brows as they dragged the last of the *maruta* from two small, windowless structures that cowered in the shadow of Ro block. Masaji moved into that shadow, pining for the dry wind that blew incessantly across the Manchurian plains on the other side. But inside Ro block, no person or thing was free, not even the wind.

His pencil hovered over his notebook, ready to document the exact number of *maruta* destroyed. For seven years he'd kept meticulous records of all the logs delivered to Pingfan—where the raw materials came from, the data they got from the logs, how the logs were disposed of when utterly used up. He was proud of the efficiencies he'd engineered in utilizing this scarce resource. With careful planning, they'd been able to recycle some of the *maruta* through multiple experiments. It was a shame to throw them away now, unspent, but his wise brother, General Shiro Ishii, had ordered the entire complex destroyed.

An explosion rocked the ground and crumbs of mortar fell from the walls of Ro block. Masaji Ishii realized he had lost count. Two hundred ten *maruta*? Two hundred eleven?

“Get the oil,” he shouted.

His soldiers grunted and rolled barrels toward an enormous pit dug in the center of the courtyard. He spat out the butt of his cigarette and ground it with his heel in frustration. Time was running out. The high standards he'd consistently set for himself and for the scientists around him were collapsing like the buildings on the periphery of Pingfan. He had to estimate the *maruta* tally. His final data entries would be imprecise. The tip of his pencil angrily carved the page.

A subordinate approached, saluted and bowed. “Sir. Blocks Seven and Eight are empty.”

Masaji searched the man's face and saw the usual combination of deep respect and fear. Like many of his fellow soldiers in Unit 731, this man was from the Ishiis' home village. The villagers shared a tribal loyalty not only

to the Emperor, but also to the privileged Ishii family. Masaji's brother had stuffed the garrison with men like this, men he could trust. Now, at the end of things, this foresight was paying off. Because the Ishii brothers demanded it, for the rest of their lives the villagers would remain silent about what really happened at Pingfan.

Masaji nodded. "The Soviets have crossed the border."

"Our army will hold them," the soldier said.

"They will not," Masaji replied, expressing no emotion about this simple tactical truth. "First the Chinese jackals, then the Soviets, will come here. It's only a question of when."

The soldier stood rigid and said nothing more.

Masaji put steel in his words. "When they come, they must not find anything. This is our secret of secrets."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"See that the task is completed swiftly. Other matters require my attention."

The soldier saluted, bowed, and turned, barking commands at the others who were now tossing the *maruta* into the pit with the oil.

Masaji walked briskly toward a fortified door leading into Ro block. On his way, he passed near the end of the stack of *maruta*.

One of the logs flexed an arm and groaned.

The major slackened his pace enough to draw his pistol and fire once into the *maruta's* skull.

No mistakes. No evidence.

The Soviets must find nothing but ashes.

Masaji emerged on the windowless outer side of Ro block, where the small military city of Pingfan sprawled across the desolate flats, ringed by earthen walls and barbed wire. In accordance with his brother's orders, the city was being razed. Only a few dozen buildings remained standing, including his private home, where his wife and four children—three of them born in Manchukuo—awaited evacuation.

A thick cloud of dust obscured the hot afternoon sun. Through the haze, Masaji surveyed the dismantling of his family's great achievement. Pingfan was his brother Shiro's brainchild, the crown jewel in Unit 731's extensive biological warfare research program in occupied China. Thousands of

Japanese scientists, physicians, soldiers and their families had lived here. Behind Pingfan's secrecy and security walls, Japanese women tended gardens. Japanese children went to school. There was a swimming pool, a bar, and other amenities that had made it a reasonably pleasant place to work during wartime.

Pleasant for the Japanese residents, that is.

He headed for home. His first priority was to get the documents loaded and on their way. Then he and his family would leave Pingfan together.

A murky rivulet seeped from the edge of Ro block. Glancing toward the source, he saw a column of pitch-black smoke rising from the hidden courtyard. The *maruta* were burning. He could smell it now, too. Ro block was empty.

His eye caught movement near the ground. Something broad and low writhed over the bare dirt like a living blanket. The blanket spread with a scabbling, scratching sound and swept toward him. He leaped over the rivulet and turned to get out of the way.

Rats.

Escaped from one of Pingfan's austere research laboratories, the rodents were desperately seeking cover. Hundreds of them flowed past, a seething river of fur and long, bald tails. They splashed through the polluted stream, leaving a thousand paw-shaped puddles in their wake.

He swore aloud. He had no fear of the common rat, but these were no ordinary wild rats. They were infested with fleas that carried bubonic plague. General Ishii had ordered the rats released into a nearby Chinese city, not inside Pingfan. Someone had made a mistake.

The herd of rats disappeared into a pile of rubble. He resumed walking. He would waste no worry on the plague-carrying fleas. He and his family would soon be far away, and Unit 731's field trials in Ningbo and other Chinese cities had proved the plague-infested rats weren't as dangerous as hoped. The Black Death killed people, but it lacked the potency and immediacy of, say, a uranium bomb.

The American bomb, he thought. Was it true? Compared to that, the Ishii's project had failed completely.

Unit 731's goal was to create a living weapon using microorganisms, a germ weapon that would slay Japan's enemies and allow the island nation to conquer and rule all of East Asia and the Pacific. The military had given his

brilliant brother Shiro everything he asked for. Money. Secrecy. Exemption from any human laws. The Kempeitai secret police had supplied them with test subjects from the local Chinese population and prisoners of war, mostly Russians. Masaji and the unit's many other scientists had answered questions none had dared to even ask before. Questions about shrapnel wounds and burns and amputation. Questions about infectious disease and how to turn bacteria into weapons.

And yet a grand weapon, something like the Americans', remained beyond their grasp. If they only had more time...

Tires crunched gravel behind him. An armored truck passed him and came to a stop at his house, just ahead. The truck dwarfed the small Type 95 *Kurogane* scout car already parked there. Trucks like this one delivered *maruta*, rounded up from the streets and prisons of Harbin. Fittingly, the logs had been transformed into paper. Through Unit 731's effort, the *maruta* were now data, priceless information recorded in notebooks packed inside hundreds of crates. Data on everything from anthrax bombs to frostbite. It would take only one truck to haul away the distilled essence of thousands of *maruta*.

The driver climbed out of the truck. Like Masaji Ishii, he wore the insignia of a major in the army medical corps.

The colleagues bowed to each other.

"Kamei-san, you are no truck driver," Masaji said.

"We each do our duty," Kamei said. "Kitano-san took his share of the documents on the South Manchuria Railway to Korea."

"They will find their way to the home islands."

"Or he will burn them."

Masaji fingered the smooth, rounded cyanide capsule in his pocket. The elite group of couriers would not allow a single page to fall into the hands of the Soviets or the Chinese. Each would keep his secrets until he died, whether by his own hand or the hand of another.

"Are the records complete?" Kamei asked.

"Yes." He raised the final notebook he'd brought from Ro block. "Here, and in the boxes inside. Everything we learned is written down. Every experiment. Raw data. Observations. Analysis. Even today I did my duty." He gripped the notebook. "When the time is right, with this information we can resume the work."

Inside the house, a baby started to cry.

Kamei gripped Masaji's arm. "Unit 731 will endure. We will keep the data. We will find our weapon in biology, not physics."

A low droning sound drew both men's eyes skyward. An aircraft. Approaching Pingfan.

Kamei's expression darkened. Masaji squinted into the dry wind. "It is time to go."

He knew the Imperial Japanese Army Air Service was no longer flying over Manchukuo.

A curtain in the window shifted and a child's face appeared in the corner. Masaji leaped up two steps and threw open the door, scattering loose papers across a tatami mat floor. His wife kneeled, holding an infant. His other children emerged from behind stacks of wooden crates. Despite the summer heat, they each held a heavy winter coat.

That, and the clothes they wore, was all they could take with them. The *Kurogane* was designed to fit three men. His family of six would flee to the coast in it.

His wife silenced the baby by offering a finger to suck. She looked at him, awaiting instructions, her face a mask of deceptive calm. His five-year-old daughter Harumi coughed. It was odd that he even noticed. The frail girl coughed constantly, rendering him almost as deaf to the sound as she was. Of course, her deafness was physical, a consequence of one of her many bouts with sickness.

"Carry the boxes out," he said. "All of you. Give Harumi the baby."

Wordlessly they set down their coats and pushed boxes toward the door. His thirteen-year-old son Akihiro carried one on his own. Masaji stepped into the sooty air and helped Kamei arrange the truck's existing cargo to make room for the additional documents from his house. They both paused when a distant explosion rumbled over them.

"Demolition," Masaji assured him.

The men loaded the crates of documents into the truck, one by one. Only two boxes remained, on the ground, when Masaji heard aircraft again. He looked up.

He counted five planes, flying in formation, aiming toward Pingfan.

"Quickly," he said.

The high-pitched squeal of falling ordnance reached his ears. Explosions followed, the first ones seemingly remote. Then like the footfalls of a monstrous runner, the blasts stepped closer and closer. His heart pounded as he lifted a crate toward Kamei in the open back of the truck. A concussive wave knocked him off balance. The crate fell. Instinctively he rolled to the ground, to the far side of the vehicle. A bomb detonated and he curled up against the truck's huge tire and covered his head. He felt the opposite side of the truck lift as if hit by a giant fist, tilting against him, threatening to tip over and crush him. But it did not. Then the aerial bombers faded away to the north, taking the explosions with them. He rose to his feet.

Loose papers drifted like leaves in the swirling eddies of disturbed air. He lunged into the truck—had they lost the data?

No. Only the last crate was destroyed. The armored walls of the truck had protected the rest.

He examined himself and found no serious injury. He looked around and discovered the *Kurogane* had not fared as well. His family's escape car was a crumpled and smoking heap, sprinkled with the shattered glass of windows from his house.

The ringing in his ears faded and he realized the sounds of battle had not ended. Shouts of men and machine gun fire and motorcycles...

"They're coming," he said to Kamei. "Chinese, Soviets, Americans. Whoever. You must get this vehicle out of here."

Kamei gave a half-bow and scrambled into the driver's seat. Masaji slammed the rear door and locked it tight. He sprinted to the driver's window and leaned in Kamei's face. "You know what to do?"

"I will get through or I will die trying."

"If necessary, destroy the cargo first. The enemy *must not* get our work."

"*Hai, Ishii-san.*"

Kamei threw the truck into reverse, spinning the wheels and scattering shredded paper as he sped away. Masaji covered his face with his sleeve and staggered back into the house.

The five members of his family were there. Only Harumi was standing, biting her thin lower lip. Her scrawny fingers clung to a shabby doll. The other children clumped together against the windowless back wall with their mother, the baby screaming in her arms.

"Get up. We go."

His eldest son Akihiro ran to the door but stopped short when he saw the ruined car.

“Not that way,” Masaji said. “Out the back.” He yanked a bundle out of one of the children’s arms. “Leave the coats. Leave everything.”

His wife met his gaze for only an instant, but it was enough. She knew.

He hoped she also understood.

It wasn’t supposed to turn out this way. They were ahead of schedule. They thought they had days yet to evacuate Pingfan. How could the enemy be here already?

He herded them to the other side of the house and paused to grab his sword. They emerged outdoors into the reek and noise.

“We make for Building Six,” he said. Building Six was in the opposite direction of the fighting, and he’d seen cars there just yesterday.

He led them across the dusty plain, past rubble from the Japanese demolition crews and fresh destruction from the aerial bombardment. He spied rats, but they were the least of his concerns. Harumi stumbled and wheezed. Akihiro lifted her to her feet. The baby wailed. Fortunately they had no need for stealth. The noisy barrage of enemy fire drowned out all other sounds. Whoever the enemy was, they were getting closer.

The Ishii family scrambled through a gate in a wall. They’d reached Building Six.

He scanned the empty courtyard and fell to his knees. The cars were gone.

His wife and children huddled against the wall to catch their breath. Not one of them had yet dared to speak.

Another earth-shaking blast, no further away than his house. Perhaps it *was* his house.

The major knew his duty. But now that it came to it, his resolution faltered.

He clung to the knowledge that he’d achieved the most important thing. The Unit’s records were safe, traveling to Japan. In the life of the Empire, his life did not matter. His duty, and the duty of his family, was to serve. To never reveal their story to the enemy.

He had personally done vivisections of Chinese women, men, and children. He knew how a sharp knife parted the soft skin of a baby’s belly. If the Chinese were coming, he had no reason to expect mercy.

His wife’s body tumbled to the side as the 8mm bullet he fired from his Nambu pistol ripped through her skull. He wanted to beg her forgiveness,

but reminded himself pardon was not necessary because he was doing the right thing.

The children, too stunned to move, were easy targets.

His heart crumpled in his chest. If only he had cyanide pills for everyone...

No, he'd seen cyanide deaths. A bullet was better.

Koneko. Eiko. Akiko. The semiautomatic worked fast. Their bodies piled up, like logs.

Then Akihiro, his eldest son, stood and spread his arms in front of little Harumi.

Masaji quailed. Akihiro had always been protective of his feeble sister.

His gun hand shook. "It is our duty," he said.

"Please," Akihiro said.

A typhoon of feelings unmanned him. He hesitated.

Then the wall exploded. Flying bricks pelted him. Overwhelming pain in his face and ribs erased his psychic anguish. He found himself on his back, crushed and in agony, looking at the sky through one barely functioning eye. He could not move his right arm and each breath was a knife in his torso.

Akihiro kneeled over him. His son's eyes were impossibly wide. He pointed his father's pistol at his father's head.

Masaji channeled all his will into the focus of his one eye.

"Duty," he pleaded.

The boy pulled the trigger.



NOVEMBER 8
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
KOSHLAND HALL

Shoulders aching from too many hours with her arms reaching into the isolation chamber, Amika Nakamura resisted the urge to scratch her nose. Violating biosafety level two precautions in the laboratory wouldn't kill her, but her research was at a critical phase and the last thing she needed was to get sick.

Cell incubators warmed the small, windowless room that smelled of yeast. The room was dark except for the garish fluorescent light that illuminated her workspace. An air filtration system ran constantly, filling her ears with a low roar that cut her off from the outside world. She wriggled her nose under the surgical mask to try to relieve the itch.

On a stainless steel counter inside the isolation cabinet in front of her sat a row of clear plastic petri dishes, each holding a quarter inch of urine-colored liquid. For the bird cells clinging to the bottom of those dishes, yellow was the color of death.

Time for resurrection.

With gloved hands she vacuumed the contaminated liquid away and replaced it with clean, pink fluid. She could almost imagine the cells sighing with relief as their little plastic prison went from fetid to fresh. Years ago, the ancestors of those cells had come from a real bird. That bird was long gone, and the cells were now a cancer growing in a dish. They lived a pampered, immortal life—at the cost of their freedom and identity.

Amika knew women who would make that kind of trade. She wasn't one of them.

The room's air pressure changed, making her ears pop. Someone had opened the door.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw her principal investigator (and employer) Professor Herberger, accompanied by a man she barely knew but recognized as Herberger's boss, the dean of the college.

Her muscles stiffened. Was the jig up?

The rumble of the air system was loud, but not that loud. She pretended not to hear them speak.

"Dr. Nakamura," the dean's stern voice repeated at higher volume, "put down the pipette."

She almost laughed. He said it like she was holding a gun.

Then again, considering what they probably suspected she was doing, comparing it to a lethal weapon wasn't a big leap.

She laid the small tool on the counter and turned slowly to face them. Her accusers. A couple of old men. Paunchy bellies. Six-figure salaries. Tenured. Two scientists who never put their hands on an actual experiment anymore. The dean had been out of the lab, working in administration for so long he'd have to go to a museum to find equipment he knew how to operate. These old men didn't understand how hard it was to launch a career in science these days. For anyone, but especially for a woman. They didn't understand how the competition was so fierce, you had to find a way to stand out. They were comfortable with the status quo and uncomfortable with risk.

I take bigger risks than they've taken in the last year just walking home on University Avenue after another fourteen-hour day at the lab. This project was a gamble they couldn't possibly understand.

I don't ever want to be like them. Except for the tenured part.

"Yes?" she said, putting as much pudge in her voice as she thought she could get away with without being openly insolent.

Professor Herberger spoke. "Amika, we need to talk. Shut down the bio-safety cabinet, would you please?"

Pompous cowards. With exaggerated care she covered the dishes and returned them to an incubator. Then she sprayed disinfectant and wiped down the workspace. How long could she drag this out? Dr. Herberger

and the dean wouldn't dare to interrupt while she was following biosafety protocols.

Not if they thought a deadly flu virus was involved.

She wondered how long they would stand there, her professor resting his arm on a shoulder-tall tank of compressed gas, the dean rocking back and forth in his leather dress shoes. She fantasized about keeping her gloved hands inside the cabinet forever, doing the work that needed to be done, the work that would make her famous. Influenza virus—the flu—was her passion. The desire to understand its secrets had propelled her through her PhD years and into this post-doctoral fellowship at Cal. Answers to some of her most important questions about this life form were tantalizingly close.

The dean again. “Dr. Nakamura, I’m going to have to ask you to shut down now.”

The surgical mask flattened against her nose and mouth as she took a deep breath to subdue her anger. Her younger brother Shuu Nakamura, a US Army veteran, had taught her you could lose some battles but still win a war. This confrontation with the administration at the University of California was her battle. She had time yet to win her war. She was only twenty-seven years old. On average, winners of the Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine were forty-five years old when they did their prize-winning work.

“Yes sir,” she said and turned off the airflow. A heavy silence settled in its absence. She stripped off her latex gloves with a snap and tossed her face mask and paper gown into the trash.

“Let’s go to my office, shall we?” Dr. Herberger said.

He closed the door to the cell culture room behind them as they left. Amika had a sinking feeling she would not be allowed to pass through that door again.

When they reached his office, Herberger stood next to a tall, black swivel chair behind a desk covered with documents and drab technical journals. “Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to one of two small chairs on the other side.

Amika complied. The dean, in a typically male display of status, rolled the second chair away from her and over to the professor’s side. Herberger’s office wasn’t much larger than his desk, and the dean rattled the cheap Venetian blinds on the window as he squeezed in. Diplomas and a photo of Herberger with the surgeon general scowled at Amika from the walls.

Her rage-fueled, righteous indignation cooled as fear took over. These men had all the power. She might be smarter, bolder, a better scientist than they, but she owned nothing of the currency of their realm. No independent grant money, no committee appointments, no endowed chair. Surely Dr. Herberger had access to dozens, maybe hundreds, of applications from junior scientists like her, all clamoring for a job at the fabled UC campus. From her boss's point of view, she was utterly replaceable.

Dr. Herberger sat and rested his elbows on his desk. "Do you know why we're here, Amika?"

She couldn't help herself. "To congratulate me on being invited to speak at the Global Virus conference?"

Neither of them cracked a smile. She sensed her dreams slipping away.

"I'm surprised, Dr. Nakamura," the dean said. "By all accounts you're an intelligent young woman. Did you really think you could submit banned research to a prestigious conference and the university wouldn't notice?"

Well, the university wasn't clever enough to discover that I was actually doing the research, right under their noses.

She chose a guarded response, defending her work. "The 1918 influenza killed tens of millions of people. It's not a question of if, but when it will happen again. We need to be able to recognize a potential pandemic flu virus in the wild and prepare—"

Dr. Herberger held up his hand to cut her off. "This isn't about the validity of your work. It's about following the rules." He lifted a sheet of paper and pointed at the heading from the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. "We're under a moratorium for gain-of-function research."

"This university depends on millions of dollars in federal funding," the dean continued. "Your reckless work on influenza jeopardizes that."

"It's not only the money," Dr. Herberger added. "Mutating the virus to make it more infectious is *dangerous*."

If there was one thing she couldn't stand, it was hypocrisy. "Six months ago you thought it was a brilliant idea. You agreed that it could teach us the difference between harmless mutations and ones that pose a threat to human health."

Her accusers exchanged a glance. The dean said, "Sometimes we get a little carried away by our ideas, don't we? Look, we're not here to argue about whether something important could be learned from your work. The point

is, there are risks and I think it's wise for us to pause until we've had time to examine whether we can do it safely. And right now, the federal government says we must."

She wanted to say, *I can do it safely*. The elephant in the room was the *reason* the Feds called a halt to this type of research on disease-causing viruses and bacteria. There'd been some incidents of astonishing carelessness. Somebody at the National Institutes of Health had recently stumbled on a cornucopia of deadly germs in an old freezer, 327 vials in all, including smallpox, for cripe's sake. They'd been stashed and forgotten. Then the Centers for Disease Control had screwed up with anthrax, shipping live bacteria to labs that thought they were getting inactivated material. Thank God nobody died, but the lesson was clear: you couldn't trust scientists to manage their stuff.

So even though Amika was meticulous to a fault, and felt she was perfectly capable of keeping her viruses contained and properly labeled, those clowns at NIH and CDC had ruined things for everyone. Because of them, she was supposed to abandon her important work on flu.

But she hadn't abandoned it. And she'd made some breakthroughs in understanding the genetic differences between run-of-the-mill seasonal influenza and new flu viruses that could wipe out several percent of the world's population. This knowledge was valuable to humanity, and frankly, it was valuable to her career. She had decided to submit her work to the prestigious Global Virus meeting, in hopes they'd invite her to give a lecture.

I got invited for a lecture, all right. I'm getting it now.

"You broke the rules, Amika," Dr. Herberger said.

"The rules are wrong," she growled.

The men communicated silently yet again. She was ready to argue—nothing left to lose—but they apparently had this whole thing choreographed in advance. Discussion was not part of the dance. The dean dredged a legal-sized manila envelope out of a messenger bag and laid its contents on the desk. The paper was covered with text. Several red tabs labeled "Sign Here" stuck out from one side.

"This terminates your employment at the University of California," the dean said. "It applies to all campuses, not just Berkeley."

His words were like a gut punch. The genius of her work meant nothing. They were actually going to *fire* her. From the whole UC system. Her

connections at UCSE, where she went to graduate school, were worthless. Speech failed as she forced herself to keep breathing. No tears, she vowed. No tears.

“It also mandates your cooperation in identifying and destroying any samples of genetically modified influenza virus in your possession,” he continued. “Because your data on virulence could be misused, the University demands that you delete all gene sequence files derived from the prohibited research. You further agree not to store, transmit, or publish your data in any form.”

Wait a minute. Asking her to destroy her data was pointless. You can’t suppress genetic information. It comes from the natural world. The DNA was out there, just waiting for somebody to decode it. Even if she didn’t publish her results, there was about a one hundred percent chance that another, less repressed scientist would do it in the near future. And she would get no credit for the discovery. This was punitive. They had no right to do that.

Galvanized, she wondered what would happen if she refused to sign the papers.

The dean must have read her mind. “Obviously we can’t force you to sign. Should you refuse, however, the University will take legal action against you.” His expression softened. “You made a mistake. Don’t make it any harder on yourself.”

A mistake? He was the one making a mistake.

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Herberger said.

He wasn’t sorry. She would make him sorry someday when she accepted her Nobel Prize, and people were talking about how stupid he was to let her go. She shook her head to hide the blinking of her eyes.

Do not touch your face. Do not let them see you cry.

The papers lay there, the red type violent against the bland backdrop of legalese printed in a small font. The air felt hot and thick. How was she going to tell Shuu that his big sister, who’d bailed him out of trouble more times than anyone could count, wasn’t so perfect after all?

They’re wrong.

Her lip started to quiver. Any verbal rebuttal died in her throat. With as much dignity as she could muster, she snatched the documents and marched out of the room. The second the office door closed behind her, she ran. Away, down the empty corridor. Thankfully no one saw her like this, distraught and weak as she slipped into the women’s restroom.

She splashed water on her face. *This will not be the end.* She recalled that Marie Curie, winner of not one but two Nobel Prizes, was forbidden to attend university in her home country of Poland. *She left. If I must, I will too. I will find a way.*