

# Clever

by Christian Doan

They were such clever things. Susan admired the almost brutal intelligence of the nanites. Their ability to construct literally anything, atom by atom from virtually any raw material, fascinated her. They were tiny alchemists.

**Susan slipped into the elevator and waited quietly for the doors to shut. She held herself still in a tightly composed and calm manner. She breathed purposefully and slowly, watching the elevator doors. A tick passed. Her hand shot out and stabbed the door-close button hard. Her finger left a large sweaty smudge on the button.**

Only in the freedom of space could the robotic machines be constructed with the stunning precision needed to evolve these microscopic metal lifeforms. The royalties from the machines were sure to fund the European Space Agency for decades to come.

**The deep hum of the moving elevator began. The almost heartbeat like thrum soothed Susan. The descent to Earth would take six minutes. Susan breathed out. She cleared her throat and quickly passed her hand over her moist temple. The tiniest drop of sweat flew from her hand and landed on the elevator wall.**

No one besides ESA had the nanites, but everyone desired them. They could turn rubbish into a Rolls-Royce. Fecal matter into food. Manure into money.

**Susan clasped her hands calmly in front of her and listened to the meditative elevator sounds. Five minutes to go. She could see the Earth through the viewport and felt the increasing tug of gravity. Her thoughts focused on how the nanites would turn years of low-paid research into gold for her. White gold. A milliliter of nanites exchanged for fifty bars of platinum in a numbered Swiss bank vault.**

Injecting the nanites into her forearm had been delightfully easy. No one would ever guess they were carried in her body. The nanites were always held on the research station in secure containers of saline. The salt solution cleverly short-circuited the nanites until they were washed off and dried. Then, the immobilized nanites would begin to twitch into action, fresh and eager. The salt of her blood would keep them dormant, she was sure. A brief stint connected to a blood dialysis machine would filter out the nanites, and the reward was hers.

**The air was definitely too hot in the elevator car Susan decided. They would never know what she had done, she was certain. She told herself that. She plucked at the front of her top and fanned herself. The fabric of her top waved about. And another tiny drop of sweat landed on the wall.**

The nanites twitched. Slowly, the nanites noticed the saline solution evaporating. They could feel this in their electronic sensors [no longer being short-circuited]. They came to life. Their sensors swept about them and they knew this was not the lab. The dozen or so nanites that had landed together in the fleck of sweat chattered electronic noise at each other. They were in agreement. It was time to hunt for their designated raw material. The nanites swept away from each other rapidly, scurrying on their tiny feet to

prospect. For carbon.

**No one would ever know, Susan told herself. No one would count the nanites until far too late. By then she hoped to have disappeared. Reborn in some European city as the wealthy widower of a fast-food chain magnate, she would tell nosy people. She had planned meticulously.**

The microscopic nanites were able to wriggle through the tinniest of crevices and discovered wonderful new surfaces to explore. Suddenly, one nanite chattered excited electronic noise to the others. It had found a truly awesome vein of carbon. Richer and purer than anything the others had sensed. The nanites discussed the marvellously clever things they could build with this carbon. The nanites rapidly swarmed.

**The elevator suddenly shook. Susan felt a hot flush of panic and snatched a handhold. The view of Earth swanned about in the small viewport. A surge of guilt told her she must have been found out. No, she told herself. She forced herself to be calm. She had been fastidious in thinking her plan through. The elevator was still descending. No one was trying to stop her. A small hiccup in the elevator. They happened, she told herself. She wiped her sweaty palms off on the walls of the elevator. Only four minutes to go.**

The nanites licked the carbon with their tendril-like antennae as they ate. The nanites noticed the carbon was layed out in long tubes that seemed to stretch on forever. Their processors told them these carbon nanotubes would be immensely strong. They would serve as excellent cabling, they knew, if that was what they were going to build. But that was not their directive. With this much carbon the nanites knew they could make many things. But on their list of directives human greed had taken priority. They were to build diamonds from this carbon. For that, they had to disassemble these carbon tubes. They ate.

**The elevator car shuddered violently and the alarm sounded. Susan let out a scream and grabbed tightly to the walls. Red light and honking sounds filled the elevator car. She fought the shaking of the car and hurried to the viewport. Earth had flicked out of view. She looked up and couldn't see the research station. She panicked. She bashed the emergency stop and screamed when the car jerked to a bone knocking halt. She froze and breathed deeply. Sweat dripped from her brow and landed on the floor.**

The nanites ate. With the tinniest of snips, the jaws of the nanites snipped through the last of the carbon nanotubes, the last of the cabling.

**The elevator car plummeted, dragged by the full force of gravity. The nanites' sensors were not tuned to detect sound and did not hear the wretched screams coming from inside the elevator car.**

The severed ends of the elevator cabling flicked about wildly. There was a flash of something glittery on the ends of the cables. The nanites continued to eat. They were pleased to be fulfilling their directives. They felt like such clever things.

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