



# SECTOR 612

BY JENNA PASHLEY SMITH

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In her four years as a lab technician for the Chicaganapolis health department, Mann had never seen an outbreak this bad.

"Which sectors are affected?" Leo asked.

Mann tapped the screen. Instead of enlarging, it froze. She rolled her eyes and restarted the machine. Although Chicago and Indianapolis merged over fifteen years ago, the understaffed public welfare departments were still waiting for the benefits of the consolidation to trickle down. Until then, they were stuck with technology fifty years behind the times.

"High bacterial levels in most of the 600 block, which is unusual," she summarized for her boss. "Sector 612 just had the standard preventative protocols added to the water supply two weeks ago. We haven't gotten a positive culture from the lab yet on which bacteria it is, though."

"It better not be a new mutation," Leo grumbled.

The screen came back to life. He squinted at the metrics it displayed.

"Vitamin D is down too. What is it with people skipping their five minutes of mandatory sun time?"

"Between the constant shadow in the lower sectors and subcutaneous sunblock, it's a wonder anyone gets even five minutes," Mann said. "But this is the part I wanted you to see. It looks like Sector 612 is already self-medicating. They're suspiciously high in urine levels of Vitamin C."

"Wretched vitamin peddlers," Leo grouched. "Screwing up my data."

"Our data is screwed up to begin with," Mann disagreed. "Testing waste is just part of the picture. I'm telling you, we need to expand our data sets, start examining people instead of just what comes out of them."

"You want to go down into the sectors? Be my guest," Leo said. "You're such a soft-heart, Mann, but be realistic. Our city's health analytics program is the gold standard for the country. Remember how successful our vaccination campaign in rock concerts was last year?"

"A Shot of Music. Yeah, I remember."

"And your suggestion to base the city cafeteria's meal plans on our waste evaluation data is having great results. Why not rest on those laurels for a bit instead of trying to be some kind of Superheroine of Health?"

She smiled.

"I'm a workaholic, I guess. My mother's been working down in the food deserts and we've been talking about that a lot recently."

Leo looked confused, so she explained.

"She's a tutor. They feed people that come in for literacy training. Did you know the 500 and 600 sectors share a single cafeteria and food distribution center? People end up at fueling stations for their meals. And you know those places sell nothing but caffeine and recycled plastic-based junk. We can't keep people healthy by simply supervitaminizing the water and analyzing the sewage. Can I please get a team to go out there and try some biofarming? I've been developing this new fung-"

He held up his hands.

"We've been over this. Chicaganapolis is not zoned for agriculture. Besides, good luck getting anyone to eat things that don't come sealed in a drone delivery. No soil grown food can possibly compete with food matched to your unique genetic predispositions."

"Have you even tasted a soil grown vegetable?" she asked.

They'd both been born after the Pacific Reclamation, when California and Florida all but disappeared and the United States' food production had to be redesigned from the ground up. Soil-grown was a luxury, but one she'd tasted a few times in her life.

"Nutrition doesn't have to be a science project."

"Says the woman whose job is to plan meals off of poop analysis," he shot back. "We've moved past those antiquated methods of cultivation. Time for you to join the twenty-second century, Mann Bercher."

He tapped the screen.

"Schedule antibiotics tonight on the evening news for all affected sectors. Actually, make that all adjacent ones too. We don't want an epidemic on our hands."

Mann fumed as she filled out the required forms. This still had to be done by hand, because the government oversight office insisted on a human signing off on all restricted medications. If the people there had access to actual food, Mann knew, they'd be healthier, better able to fight off viruses and constantly mutating bacteria. The vials in her backpack were the first step toward banishing the food deserts. She just needed permission to test them. Which Leo was never going to give.

After she left the office, Mann called her mother. When her hologram emerged from the smartring, Mann thought she looked paler than usual.

"Mom, when was the last time you hit a scanner? There's bacterial activity in the 600's. Leo ordered antibiotics but you're going to miss them. Again," Mann sighed.

Her mother had disconnected the integrated wall unit with 4D technology. And she refused to let them get a DocSystems home biosecurity subscription. It would have been so much simpler for the house to scan them every time they entered and make the appropriate medical choices. Instead, Mann was stuck using subpar, free apps.

"A scanner?" Her mother inhaled sharply. "I'm fine. Just tired. I'm going out tonight with the volunteers. That sector needs so much help. But you already know that," she said with a wry look. "Want to come tonight?"

"I can't. And neither should you." Mann pulled up the scanner app. "I'm running it right now. Please hold still."

Her mother stuck out her tongue. Mann couldn't tell if she was trying to assist in the reading or not. After a few seconds, the light pulsed orange and data popped up.

Mann frowned.

"You're registering a mild infection, Mom. Don't go out, okay? The prescription is already ordered. And please leave a tip for the drone this time. I'm tired of waiting for deliveries because you pissed off the artificial intelligence."

"I don't see why AI needs tips," her mother grumbled. "I'd rather give my money to actual people."

"Shh, Mom. Don't offend the tech. Plug in the prescription when it comes and you'll probably be better by dinner."

Hopefully, the pharmadrone delivered its spray of eucalyptus, spearmint and antibiotic meds before midnight this time.

Her mother changed the subject.

"By the way, if you're ordering things, the refrigerator is out of antioxidant cartridges."

"Do you want me to order an heirloom variety this time?" Mann asked. "I could splurge on a box of strawberries too. They've got a new version that people say tastes like it came from a French field in 2018."

"I'd rather eat something that grew in an actual field today," her mother said.

"I'm working on it," Mann said. "Take care of yourself, Mom."

After the hologram disappeared, Mann raked her fingers over the scanner for an evaluation. Just to make sure she wasn't coming down with something herself. The light turned green. Good to go.

She didn't realize until she was on the transport that her mother hadn't promised to stay home.

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Mann had never been to sector 612 before. She rarely set foot outside the Hospimall complexes. They had everything: state-of-the-art medispas, restaurants, apartment complexes. But the sectors might as well have been located in a different universe. Drone footage on the news made the shantytowns look like war zones.

Mann knew they weren't, because her mother went here every week, helping plug the cracks in the public school system. But just because it wasn't a war zone didn't mean it was safe. Mann upped her pace, stepping over broken concrete, walking past graffiti that had never seen the scrubbing power of streetcleaning robots, joining the throngs of people returning to their homes after long days of renting brainpower to bitcoin farmers or voicing holospammers.

She walked with purpose, like she belonged there. After all, Mann wasn't lost. She was on a mission. Her mother was not going to be happy when she found out Mann tracked her through her smartring, but desperate times called for-

"Hey!"

A scrawny kid ran into her, knocking her bag out of her hands. They both reached for it and missed. The bag hit the concrete sidewalk with the crunch of broken glass. A puff of dust escaped out the top. Spores. Her heart sank.

The boy grabbed for it, shaking more spores loose. He froze, wide-eyed in terror, as a thin cloud enveloped him.

"Poison?" he whispered.

She shook her head.

"No, but please don't move or breathe too deeply. Wait for it to settle."

There went her project. Four years of research and development dumped in a dank alley that hardly saw the sun. Mann wasn't sure what to do. Cry? Call enforcement? Run away?

She tapped her ring. There was only one person who could help her here.

"Mom? I have a little problem. I'm in sector 612 and-"

"-I see you've met Po," said Mom.

Her mother's voice was clear. Too clear for a hologram. Mann whirled around to see her mother standing in the alley.

"You've been following me. I suppose that means you'd like to help with tutoring tonight?"

Mann shrugged. The boy named Po pushed himself up on scraped elbows and gave a weak smile.

"Who're you?" he asked, looking at Mann.

"I'm with her," she said, pointing to her mother. "And since we just accidentally planted an illegal garden in Sector 612, I think we ought to sit down and have a talk."

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"What do you eat most days?" Mann asked Po when he finished his plate. The kid had inhaled the food the tutors brought.

He bit his lip.

"Half a can of ration. Mebbe a juicy bar if I'm lucky. Chips from the fuel station. I eat good when Teacher is here," he jerked his chin towards her mother. "But that's not too often," he pouted.

"Ration?" she asked.

Her mother went to the kitchen and brought one out. Mann turned the can over in her hands. An import from Arizona, it had expired two months ago. The mix of lab-created carbohydrates and protein smelled like what she used to clean her floors.

"This stuff probably isn't even legal in the Midwestern States," she said. "Does everyone eat these?"

He nodded. Mann slipped the can into her bag, to take to the lab later.

"I'm afraid to ask, but what's a juicy bar?"

"You don't want to know," her mother grimaced.

"Veggies," Po answered proudly. He pulled a metallic wrapper out of his pocket. "Got grape in it."

"The wrapper might have grapes on it," Mom said, "but advertising is sneaky. We've talked about that before, remember?"

Po just shrugged. Mann read off the ingredient list.

"Inert beet sugar, food coloring, recycled fibrous material," she cringed. "There are no grapes in here, Po."

"Tastes grapey," he retorted.

The women shook their heads with a sigh.

"Po, two questions. One: do you think you can find some people who would do work for food?" Mann asked. "Even if it might be a little bit against the law?"

He bobbed his head.

"Yup!"

She hoped his enthusiasm would be catching.

"And two: where do people go to watch the vids around here?" she asked. "We're all going to need to watch the news tonight. I have no desire to take a bacterial infection to work tomorrow."

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"The antibiotics aren't working," Leo said when Mann showed up on Monday.

"Not surprising."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She handed him the ration can.

"I think we should test this. When I was in 612 last night, it seemed like this was what everyone was eating."

"So what? Wait... you were in 612? Why?"

"I've got a hunch this might be the source of the contamination. Remember Arizona had a big food recall a few months back? What if

someone decided to make a little extra by selling off the product they were supposed to incinerate?"

"You and your theories about food! Give it to the lab if you want, then. I'll bet you a banana they won't find anything."

"I can't afford bananas!" she laughed. "I'll bet you a mushroom."

Leo made a face.

"Yuck, but you've got a deal."

He turned to leave.

"Uh, Leo?"

She bit the inside of her cheek. He turned around.

"I may have accidentally started a small biological experiment in a sector not regulated for agricultural production."

"What? We talked about this!"

"Actually," she said, "you told me to 'go ahead' and visit a sector. I just happened to be carrying vials of a mushroom spore I've been working on, and my bag fell to the ground. The vials broke and... well... oops?"

"Don't get cute with me," Leo huffed. "You're explaining this to the Ministry of Agriculture. Alone."

Mann closed her eyes. That's what she was afraid he was going to say.

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The Ministry of Agriculture behaved exactly as Mann had expected. They sent a biocontainment team to the site, harvested some samples, and closed off the whole alley. She was put on probation, banned from the location, and ordered to do two weeks of community service.

But without the regular presence of authorities, the alley was back to normal within the week. She got updates from her mother, who was still tutoring.

"Interesting mushrooms," her mother said. "They're growing really well. Shade suits this area, you know."



"How do they taste?"

"Earthy," laughed her mother. "Po has been trying to claim ownership of the whole plot, even charging an entry fee and developing a stellar soup recipe. We'll harvest a few more and bring them up to you before the Ministry comes back. I hear they're planning a visit next week."

"Make sure to save one for Leo," Mann said. "Turns out those ration cans were the source of the epidemic. Salmonella. Can you believe it? I thought that had been eradicated in the 30's!"

"When is your sentencing?"

The hologram wavered, and Mann couldn't quite see her mother's expression.

"After the Ministry harvest. Wish me luck."

From behind her mother's hologram, Po's arm snuck out, fingers crossed. Mann smiled.

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*Two weeks later...*

Mann took a deep breath as she approached the camera. The Ministry of Agriculture had tested her biofungus and determined it to be "adequate for human consumption and an excellent source of Vitamin D."

Convincing the council not to levy punishment for her "reckless disregard for agricultural regulations" was going to be a different matter.

She steadied her hands and read her statement, which would be broadcasted to the various members.

"As you know, esteemed Councilors, an altered biofungus was accidentally released into sector 612 six months ago. Although the area receives insignificant amounts of sunlight and has high levels of street detritus, these are excellent growing conditions for fungus. As a result, in spite of containment efforts, four alleys in the sector bloomed. After harvesting and testing, the mushrooms were found to be edible and a good source of essential nutrients, particularly vitamin D."

Mann stood a little straighter and pulled her shoulders back. She wasn't going to pretend not to be proud of her findings.

"The local populace is severely deficient in vitamin D, and preliminary data suggests that this food product could be grown in similarly underdeveloped areas to provide supplemental nutrition. In addition, air quality in the area has improved 18%, suggesting that the fungus provide some filtering effects. Many research studies indicate that the human body responds better to minerals and vitamins found in biological sources. Agricultural products which can be grown in proximity to human habitations offer a more economical way to feed our growing population in an ecologically friendly manner."

She paused, stared directly into the camera, and concluded.

"Urban production may be the answer to food deserts in our modern supercities. Together with sewage analysis and comprehensive nutrition programs, gardening can provide a way to improve public health. I hope you'll agree and invest in the future of food production in our urban centers."

Through the speakers, she could hear the clattering of dishes and the faint sound of... slurping? Her spirits rose. Leo must be on her side. Unless she was mistaken, the council was getting a little taste of Po's mushroom soup. If that didn't win them over, she was going to lose a lot more than a bet.

Mann smiled bravely into the lens and waited.

**THE END**



## Jenna Pashley Smith

Jenna Pashley Smith is a writer, translator, artist and teacher. After a childhood spent roaming the magical cornfields of Indiana, she moved to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil where she lived for nearly a decade before adopting Texas as her home. Jenna's poems have been published by the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, *The Binnacle*, *The Texas Poetry Calendar*, and many other online and print anthologies. She is currently working on her third novel. She is a member of SCBWI, several poetry societies, a weekly critique group and serves as the Editor for the Poetry Society of Texas. When not writing, Jenna raises chickens and children in the suburbs and dabbles in myriad artistic endeavors. Jenna blogs at [www.olimoo.com](http://www.olimoo.com) and follow her on Twitter: @hoosiercarioca.