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“Breaking news!” crows the presenter. “A company calling itself the Mars Games Consortium has announced plans for a new tournament. Let’s cross live to find out more.”

The view changes to a packed stadium. A woman in a suit stands behind a podium, her back turned. The company boss, I assume. She talks into the ear of a large man wearing sunglasses – her bodyguard, obviously.

It’s not until the woman turns to the audience that I *really* take notice.

She’s wearing thick glasses, and her hair’s bleached blonde – but I know who that is: Mirtha Dare-Sweetly, the criminal scientist who froze her colleague at ToppLabs to stop him from protesting against her brother’s tour business – the same business that was going to destroy Mars’s precious cave ecosystem. Mirtha Dare-Sweetly, the criminal scientist I thought I’d put behind bars for twenty-five years.

How had she escaped?

Mirtha adjusts her microphone and fills her glass of water. At last, she takes a deep breath. She beams. “Hello, everyone! My name is Bertha Dare-Sweetly.”

Wait. Bertha?

“I know my family is unpopular here on Mars,” she continues, “but I assure you, I never work with my half-brother, Dario Dare, or my twin sister, Mirtha.”

Interesting!

“My consortium is planning the solar system’s first-ever low-gravity games,” she says. “Imagine! High jump, long jump, judo, javelin ... all in low gravity. Sports fans on Earth will flock to our planet to watch!”

I wonder if Bertha can be trusted any more than Mirtha, but before I can think further, a red-masked figure runs on-stage and shoves Bertha aside.

“Don’t listen!” the masked figure cries. “The games will destroy a precious environment: Valles Marineris. It’s the biggest canyon in our solar system – a natural wonder – yet Bertha wants to build a games village right inside it!”



Bertha's bodyguard lunges at the protester – and his sunglasses fall off. The few seconds he takes to get them back on is enough time for the protester to vanish.

Bertha recovers herself. "Goodness. What nonsense. Yes, the games will be in Valles Marineris. Gravity is especially low there ..."

The bodyguard coughs. Bertha tries to go on, but he coughs harder.

"Excuse me," Bertha says. She hands her bodyguard the glass of water. He manages one sip before turning white. Then he collapses.

Bertha yells for help, and paramedics appear with a stretcher. I grab my phone. "Chief! The Mars games announcement ... are you watching?"

"Yes," she says. "What's up with that bodyguard?"

"What's *up* is that Bertha's water has been poisoned! Only the wrong person drank it."

"Goodness, Minnie. For once, I think your imagination's working in overdrive. He's merely fainted."

"No, Chief –"

"You've been looking tired lately. Take a few days off." The chief hangs up.

I'm stunned. But a detective is still a detective, even when they're off-duty ...

Hospital reception, one hour later. I flash my Red Planet Police card and ask for directions to Bertha Dare-Sweetly's bodyguard. His name, I'm told, is Rio.

Rio's out cold. He's attached to a beeping machine, still wearing his sunglasses. I notice that his fingernails are green. Odd.

On one side of him sits a nurse. On the other – Bertha.

I introduce myself. Then I say, "I believe that Rio was poisoned. Furthermore, I believe that poison was meant for you, Bertha."

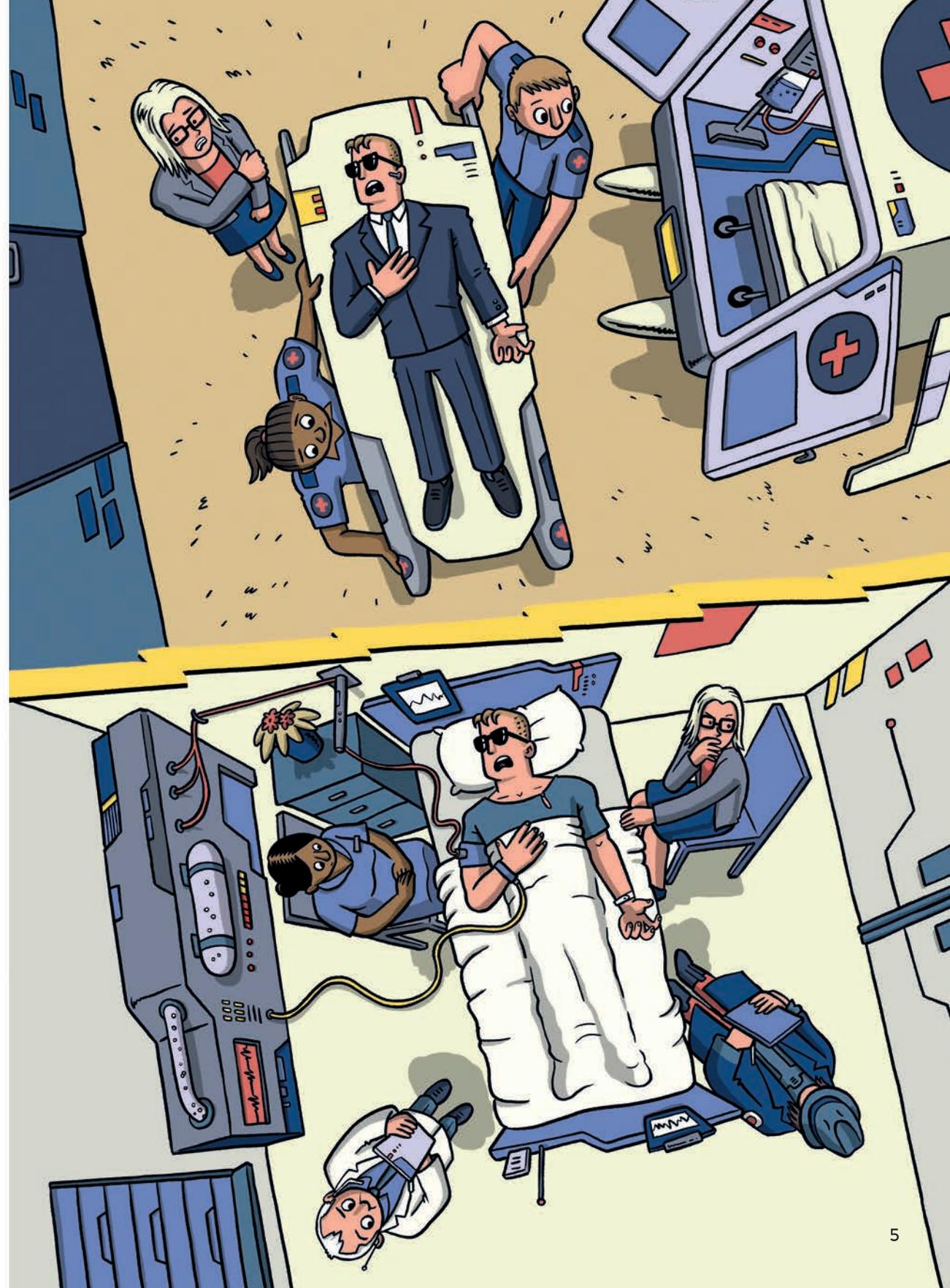
"What?" she gasps. "Why?"

A very good question, but before I have time to answer, a doctor enters.

"We have test results. Rio's body is under attack from a strange, new bacteria."

Strange, new bacteria?

I say I'll be back. If anyone on Mars knows about strange, new bacteria, it's my contacts at ToppLabs. Martian bacteria is their speciality. Luckily, scientists always work late.





Doctor Topp's in her office. She looks up, startled. "Minnie!"

"Did you see the Mars games announcement?"

She hesitates.

I tell her everything, including Rio's green fingernails. "Could any bacteria cause that?" I ask.

Doctor Topp looks concerned. "Yes. We discovered a new bacteria in a Martian cave three years ago. When we realised how dangerous the bacteria was, we had it sealed in a vault. Only two of us had the key: me and –"

"Mirtha?" I supply.

Doctor Topp nods.

It's starting to make sense. Mirtha stole and hid the bacteria while she worked here. Then, from her prison cell on Earth, she hired someone to poison Bertha. Mirtha's in jail, after all, while her sister runs a successful business. A classic case of sibling jealousy! But whom did she hire?

"Doctor Topp, could I use your transmitter to call Earth?"

An officer at the Interplanetary Corrections Department answers my call.

I explain I need the identity of every person who has visited Mirtha Dare-Sweetly in prison.

I hold while she consults their database.

As I wait, I spot something in Doctor Topp's rubbish bin. The red mask.

Incriminating evidence if ever I saw it.

I go over and fish the mask from the bin. "Doctor Topp, an explanation, please."

Doctor Topp groans.

"You were the masked protester," I say.

"I was," she admits. "Someone had to do something! Someone has to protect this planet – but I'm a respected scientist. I had to disguise myself."

"So just how radical was this protest?" I ask. "You have access to the toxic bacteria. And you got very close to Bertha's water ..."

Doctor Topp looks shocked. "Minnie! You can't be suggesting ...?"

The visitor photos start flashing across the transmitter's screen. Bertha is in one. Interesting. And a man I'm sure I've seen before – but where?

I recall the on-stage tussle between Rio and the protester, when Rio's sunglasses fell off. Just for a moment, I saw his eyes.

I zoom in on the face. It's definitely him. But the name under the photo?

Dario Dare.

None of this is making sense. Now my imagination is failing. Maybe the chief is right. I've been working too hard. I need a break. I should go on holiday, see my family ...

Family. That's it!

"Doctor Topp, is there a bacteria that causes instant coughing?"

"Absolutely."

Topp's answer changes everything. We need to get to the hospital – fast!



In Rio's room, the scene I feared is unfolding. The nurse dozes while Bertha stands over Rio, ready to unplug his life-support machine.

"Stop!" I yell.

Bertha whirls. The nurse wakes.

"Bertha Dare-Sweetly," I say. "I charge you with poisoning your bodyguard, Rio ... or should I say your half-brother, *Da-rio*."

Bertha gasps.

"You and Dario run the Mars Games Consortium *together*. You knew everyone on Mars distrusted him, so you pretended to be the sole boss while he disguised himself as your bodyguard. But Dario didn't know your secret. Mirtha despised him for letting her take the blame in the ToppLabs case, so you, her twin sister, promised public revenge. A classic case of sibling loyalty!"

Bertha snorts. "I don't think so," she says.

This I ignore. "Mirtha gave you *two* kinds of bacteria she'd stolen while working at ToppLabs," I continue. "You tipped one onto Dario, just after the protester's attack, to make him cough. The other more toxic bacteria you put in your water. Eventually, you knew he'd need a sip."

Bertha looks impressed, then deeply irritated. It's like watching the sun go behind a cloud. "Fine! You're right – but you'll never catch me!" She leaps for the door.

Doctor Topp dives after her and throws powder in her face. Bertha collapses, coughing.

"Thought that might come in handy," Doctor Topp says happily.



An hour later, the chief is marching Bertha away. "See you in the morning, Minnie," she calls. "Your leave's cancelled."

Doctor Topp returns from a meeting with Rio's medical team. She's been explaining how to use the bacteria's antidote – but it's clear something else is on her mind. I make eye contact. Doctor Topp blushes.

"Thanks for keeping my secret," she says.

I assure her it's no problem. I imagine we'll be seeing more of the red-masked protester.

illustrations by Toby Morris



Dangerous Games

by Johanna Knox

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Published 2018 by the Ministry of Education,
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 467 9 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



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SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 NOVEMBER 2018

Curriculum learning area	English
Reading year level	Year 6
Keywords	bacteria, crime noir, deduction, detectives, environment, fantasy, future, humour, Mars, Minnie Sharp, mystery, science fiction, sequels, whodunnit