

door with a few slats. It won't be enough to hold her back for very long as long as she remains well and rational enough to use tools. But it will discourage anything as impaired as Ann has become. Whether that thing is trying to get out or trying to get in. God, how I hope I'm mad and this will all be over soon."

Dr. Pazzo began flicking light switches, consigning section after section of the lab to windowless dark. The animal room glowed pink and yellow, a smeared cathedral window into hell. A crack of gold outlined Dr. Schneider's kitchen and a thin path to the closet drew Dr. Pazzo down it toward his prison. Dr. Pazzo sobbed loudly when he reached the door. Nella felt something in her chest snap in sympathy for his loneliness.

"I don't know if I'll have the dexterity or intelligence to use the key once the disease truly takes hold," he said, and then rolled a shimmering key in his hand so that the camera picked up its light. "But I'm not going to take the chance." Dr. Pazzo placed the camera on the floor facing the doorway. For a long, long minute nothing happened. Nella could hear a low, drawn out moan as Dr. Pazzo wept. Then a shaking hand carefully placed the key in front of the camera. Nella felt pure, irrational panic reach up and choke her. The hand pushed the key, shooting it through the crack at the bottom of the door, off into the sea of darkness beyond.

Dr. Pazzo picked up the camera and spun it to face him. "That will do for this video I think. I will try to record more if I can, so that any future researchers will be able to track the symptoms of this disease." The screen went black.

Nella turned toward Mr. Courtlen. "How long were they like that?" she asked.

"Ironically, they were some of the first Infected to be Cured. But I think Dr. Pazzo said he and Ann were there about fourteen months. Their rescuers said both were very emaciated, to the point that a few days more might have meant they starved to death. Dr. Schneider escaped after only about two weeks after being confined and has never been seen again, that we know of."

"Funny," said Nella, "I could swear I've seen her face before, but I've wracked my brain and I can't place where or when."

"Maybe you knew her Before? I gather she was quite well known in scientific circles."

"Maybe," answered Nella doubtfully.

"If you *do* remember, the prosecutor would certainly like to speak with her."

"I'm sure most of the world would like a chance to speak with her. Maybe she just has one of those faces." Nella shook her head.

"It looks like there is only one video left. I know it's been a long day, but we should try to get through it." Mr. Courtlen looked for a moment and Nella's bandaged hand before continuing. "Should we stop for a minute and get you

some more painkillers?”

Nella's brain screamed an emphatic yes. Her hand was a pulsing, creeping fire. But she knew how precious each pill was, so she clenched her teeth and then said, “No, I'm okay.” Her smile was hardened plastic. “Besides, I wouldn't be able to drive home if I took anything.”

Mr. Courtlen hesitated and then nodded and started the last video.

Dr. Pazzo was propped against the closet wall. His beard was full and thick, but Nella could see large patches of hair on his head were missing. She wondered if it were part of the disease or simply stress.

“Um. I can't remember which video this is. My watch says it's been about ten days since I locked us away.”

He sounded slow, almost drunk, and he concentrated hard on every phrase. “My speech has been getting worse, though I didn't realize how much until now. My conversations to this point have been limited to a few words spoken through the wall to Dr. Schneider. She seems fine, but refuses to tell me if she is seeing symptoms in herself or not. I don't have much room in here to turn around, so testing the deterioration of my motor skills has been a little inconclusive. I do know they were deteriorating rather rapidly before I locked myself in here.”

Dr. Pazzo paused for a minute and Nella could see him blushing. At last he said, “I'm having considerable difficulty concentrating on the words in my books.” He turned the camera toward a pile of shredded paper. “As you can see, I became very frustrated yesterday. I don't even recall what finally set me off. I do, however, remember actually doing it. It was an exhilarating moment to just be ripping and tearing. I find that disturbing, but I'm not sure what I can do to stop it.”

He turned the camera back to his face. “I think I'll give up reading for a while,” he said with a rueful grin, “at least I'll have some toilet paper when I run out. If I'm still aware enough to want it. God knows Ann wasn't.” The grin turned into slow tears that Dr. Pazzo mopped at clumsily with one arm. He cleared his throat.

“Unfortunately, I feel physically fine. We've made the strain both too resistant to be cured and too weak to cause any real damage until it is already well entrenched in the brain. It's never going to kill the host by itself. Hosts may kill each other due to hostility resulting from the bacteria's effect, but it's probably not going to burn itself out like other epidemics. It's not even going to show up in doctor's offices or hospitals until it is far too late. It's so mild until the end, that no one will seek medical attention for this. I can only pray that we caught it in time, that we are the only three who are infected. And if that's not the case, I hope that someone has a new antibiotic waiting in the wings that will work on

this superbug we have created-”

“Robert? Is that you?” The voice was muffled but Nella could understand what was said. Dr. Pazzo rolled his eyes without even looking at the camera.

“Yes, of course, who else would it be?” Nella was surprised by how snappish his response was.

“I have something I need to confess.”

“Are you finally admitting that you are sick?”

“What does it matter if I am or if I'm immune? I'm going to die here either way.”

Dr. Pazzo ran a hand through his thinning hair and closed his eyes. He gently knocked his head against the wall, thick tears leaking through his beard. He took a deep breath. “All right, what sordid thing did you do? I hope it's naughty,” he said with a faint smile.

“No Robert, this time I'm serious.”

The smile dropped from his face and he opened his eyes.

“Robert? Are you still listening?”

“Yeah, I'm here.”

“Remember how we discussed developing a strain with NDM plasmids?”

Dr. Pazzo sat straight up, his eyes flying wide. Nella watched his adam's apple jump and throb like an erratic heartbeat. “Gerta,” he called, his voice raised more now, “We said we weren't going to do that, that normal resistances were good enough. We said we weren't going to play with anything that dangerous.”

“I know we said that.”

Dr. Pazzo stood up, the camera in one hand. He leaned against the wall between him and Dr. Schneider, his ear resting on it. “Gerta, please don't tell me that you went ahead and tried it anyway.”

“It was supposed to be harmless, Robert. You said it would be harmless. It was controlled, only the one plasmid changed.”

“Jesus,” Nella whispered.

Mr. Courtlen paused the video. “What is it? What are they talking about?”

“It's been a long time since medical school but I believe they were talking about creating a strain of bacteria that is completely immune to all antibiotics.

Something for which there is no cure, there can be no cure, not even a miracle one like the one that saved us this time. And a different strain means even the Immunes wouldn't be safe this time.”

Nella could feel the sweat gathering at her hairline, but she shuddered and hugged herself.

Mr. Courtlen stared at her in shock. His face was so pale that his scar was like a shadow at midnight. “They couldn't have. He would have told me. He would have warned someone.”

“We have to know.” She grabbed the remote and started the video again.

“Good God. Why? Why would you do this? You didn't even finish the testing with this strain.”

“I thought we could test them at the same time, get both pushed through at once. I wanted to patent the stronger strain and have the weaker one as backup. It was supposed to be harmless, why would anyone need to cure it? If it could withstand everything, then everyone, even people with chronic illness could benefit from it.”

Dr. Pazzo was shaking. He stroked the wall with his free hand. “Please Gerta, please tell me you only thought about it. Please tell me we aren't infected with an NDM strain.”

“No, we are infected with your strain.”

“Thank God.”

“But I did create it. It's stored in a private laboratory. I didn't tell anyone about it. It's locked away, but I didn't expect this to happen. I don't know if it's safe, that's why I fought you on the quarantine.”

Dr. Pazzo started laughing.

“This isn't funny Robert.”

“What does it fucking matter? The disease we released needs a miracle cure. By the time anyone realizes it, all the labs, all the governments, they'll all have collapsed. There's no cure coming. The disease that lurks in your lab has no cure at all. What does it matter? The world is going to tear itself apart human by human.”

“Stop talking like that Robert. You're crazy.”

Dr. Pazzo stopped laughing. “*I'm crazy? I'm crazy? You delusional bitch. This whole thing is your fault. You're greedy and impatient. You couldn't wait to follow protocol so you purposely exposed Ann. Then you let her walk out into the world. You murdering bitch. You've killed us all for the sake of a few dollars.*”

Dr. Pazzo pounded on the wall with every sentence. Nella could see his face twisting into a bitter rage.

“I have to leave Robert. I have to undo this and see if I can stop the NDM bacteria from being discovered and released.”

“Don't you dare!” roared Dr. Pazzo, thumping the wall. “You will infect everyone you meet, you'll kill the world even faster.”

“I *have* to Robert. I can't stay here any more.” There was a splintering squeal of breaking wood.

“No! You can't leave! You can't do this!” Dr. Pazzo was banging and kicking the

wall, forgetting the camera in his hand. There was another crash from beyond the wall and Dr. Pazzo roared, no longer forming words. The camera bashed again and again into the wall and the guttural roar was unending. At last the camera's image shattered into bright white pixels and the video stopped.

Frank Courtlen

Nella could hear her blood pounding in her head like a giant helicopter rotor. She didn't dare to look around at Mr. Courtlen until it had faded into the background. She started to get up, but she shook so much that she thought she might shatter. She sat back down.

"What do we do?" she asked in a quiet, lost voice. All her training, all of her desire to remain professional and collected was stripped away. She could remember hearing almost the same news spilling out of the television in her university's lounge. The same vivid panic reached out of the memory and squeezed her chest with unbearable weight. She turned to look for Mr. Courtlen.

He was as lost as she, still staring at the blank screen. His face was yellow and waxy with sweat. He was motionless but his bones still seemed to want to leap forward without his skin and he was all angle and sharp corner. His terror made him hideous. Nella had time to realize that she didn't care, she was glad he was sitting with her. At last he passed a shaky hand over his face and then looked at her.

"Look, I know you aren't bound to hold anything said here in confidence, but I think we can both agree that until we find out more, the less said to strangers the better. Don't you think?"

Nella was silent for a moment. "But someone's got to find this lab and destroy the bacteria-" Nella's voice was shaky and rushed. Mr. Courtlen put up one hand.

"I know, I know. Dr. Rider I'm not asking you to keep this secret indefinitely," He leaned toward her and spoke low into her ear though the guards had all left with Dr. Pazzo, "but we don't know who would try to use this to their advantage. Like the government. Or who would go off the deep end and try to save the world in an ill fated blaze of glory. I know the soldiers here, they are all brave, they all want to be heroes. Hell, I'm thinking about doing it myself. But until we know where Dr. Schneider's lab is, or even Dr. Schneider herself, we can only make things worse by spreading panic."

He held her arm gently so she would look at him. "Can we agree on that?" he asked quietly.

Nella nodded. Of course, he was right. What good could they do with an unverified piece of information? They'd have to wait until morning to find out more.

“Will Dr. Pazzo know where her lab is?”

“Possibly, but I'm going to call in a favor with a friend in the military police headquarters. They've been able to pull up old addresses and driver's licenses for a little while now. He won't ask questions and I don't want to wait until my client feels like telling us.” His face was grim. He got up from the table, but turned back toward her. “Listen, don't leave all right? I mean, you're free to go where and when you like of course- I just, that is, I would appreciate it if you wait for me. I don't like the idea of walking out onto that dark parking lot alone just now.” He pulled the disc from the television and placed it in his jacket pocket.

“Sure,” she said, grateful that he felt the same way she did, “I'll check on Ann and meet you at the entrance.”

She was done with Ann far sooner than she expected and waited nervously near the heavy glass entrance door. The combination of the aching pain in her bitten hand and impotent terror made Nella rock on her heels and fight not to cry. Mr. Courtlen came up behind her and she tried to pull herself together.

He looked out at the parking lot and sighed. “I don't know about you Dr. Rider, but I've never needed a drink more than I do right now.” He smiled down at her.

“Thank God,” she said, venturing a shaky grin, “I hate drinking alone.”

He laughed and opened the door.

“Come on,” she said, “I think I have a bottle or two stashed at my apartment. And if it's okay with you, I'd rather not be sneaking into bootleg clubs today.”

“Sure, but we're taking my car.”

Nella shook her head, confused. “Why? I'm not drunk yet.”

“No,” he said and reached into his pocket as they walked toward the cars. He pulled out a bottle of aspirin, “but you desperately need these and don't pretend you don't, I could see you wincing all afternoon.”

Nella's eyes went wide. “Where did you?”

“Relax, I didn't steal them. The apartment I was given, it must have been a hypochondriac's house. They didn't clean anything out before they assigned it to me. She had literally hundreds of bottles of various drugs and cleaning products. I carry around one of the bottles because they are so useful for trading.”

He shook out a dose into her hand. She stopped and looked at the smooth, gleaming aspirin in her hand, like tiny teeth. “I don't like to owe anyone,” she

said doubtfully.

“Well, I think a bottle of something stashed in your apartment should cover it,” he laughed, “Don't worry about the car, I'll pick you up in the morning and drive you back. Besides, I want us both to be here as early as possible tomorrow. I don't like sitting on this secret. Not at all.”

“No, I'm not comfortable with it either. Is your friend going to get back to you soon?”

“He said the old address should be in the university's record, so he expects to have something for us tomorrow.” Mr. Courtlen opened the passenger side door for Nella. “No more about that today. Let's let the world take care of itself for one more day.” Nella swallowed the tiny tablets and slid into the dark car. It was cool after the warm prison and it smelled as clean as Mr. Courtlen had. Nella closed her eyes for a moment as Mr. Courtlen got in and started the car.

“You okay?” he asked, then quickly added, “I mean besides the obvious.”

She chuckled. “Sorry, I always do this for a second at the end of a long day.”

He smiled and took his hands off the wheel. He sat back and closed his eyes, crossing his long arms over his chest. She smiled and leaned back on the headrest, her face turned toward him. He took a deep breath and let it out.

“You're right,” he said, “That is much better.” He leaned forward and shifted into gear. “Now let's go get snookered. Don't fall asleep! You have to tell me how to get there.”

Nella laughed. She struggled to put the day out of her head and searched for something to distract them. “By the way,” she said, grinning, “We can't make rum out of pineapples and bananas. The best we can hope for is weak wine.”

“What? Not acceptable. One of us is going to have to switch our plans. We can't be wine runners after all.”

“You're going to want to turn here. We could be wine runners I suppose, but I think people would pay more for rum.” Her breath was light and easy again, and though she knew the aspirin couldn't have hit her that fast, her hand ached less.

Mr. Courtlen slowed to a crawl in front of a brightly lit mansion. “Woah, is that what I think it is?”

Nella was surprised. “You mean you've never been through here before? That's the house the government gave to Dr. Carton after he released the Cure.”

“Have you seen him?”

“No, no one has seen him. He's very private, never comes out at all.”

“I wonder what he does in there all day?”

Nella shook her head. “I don't know. It must be just as hard to be seen as

the savior of humanity as it is to be seen as its destroyer.”

Mr. Courtlen let the car pick up speed. “I wonder where either of them thought they would be by now.”

“I thought I'd be doing research at a lovely, well funded facility by now.”

“And I thought I would be representing divorcees with deep pockets. I barely finished law school though.”

“I never quite finished med school. I still had a few months of residency left. But since there are so few doctors left, I guess no one thought it mattered so much.”

They were silent a while, rolling down the empty streets.

“Is there a lot of demand for lawyers now? Do you do other cases?”

“I know there are some for looting or when someone gets out of hand in a fight. But mostly people seem to forgive small things. And no one seems interested in committing the big crimes anymore. Besides, those cases are all taken by more experienced lawyers than me.”

“Did Dr. Pazzo ask for you to represent him?”

Mr. Courtlen shook his head. “No. I was the only one willing to represent him. I wasn't even practicing law when the preparations for the trial began.”

“What were you doing?”

“Actually, I was assigned to repair power lines as the City expanded. The labor department thought I couldn't speak. I guess that it was a common thing with Cured, because they just threw me in the manual jobs pool without really worrying about it.”

“More common than you'd think,” Nella said grimly. “What made you decide to represent Dr. Pazzo?”

“I saw on the news that there was a long line of people vying for positions in the prosecution and that as of yet, Dr. Pazzo and Ann Connelly were not represented at all. I was very angry then, at what had happened. You have to remember that this trial has taken years to prepare for. I had just been Cured and I didn't think I could live much longer with what I had done. I was angry and I wanted to know why this had happened. I know enough about law to know that the prosecutor and the public were never going to know the whole truth. Never.” Mr. Courtlen held up one long finger. “But the defense *would*. As much as there was to be known, the defense lawyers would know. I thought if I knew why, then I could accept it. That it would make sense.”

“Some things are too terrible to make sense,” said Nella sadly, “Some things just are and have no reason or sense behind them.”

“So I am slowly discovering,” Mr. Courtlen sighed.

They were quiet until they arrived at Nella's apartment building. She led

him up the narrow staircase past all the silent doors that she'd never even knocked on. She sighed with relief as they walked into her apartment. He stood a little self consciously just inside the doorway.

"Look," she said smiling and turning on a few lamps, "We're both exhausted. Don't stand on ceremony, just get comfortable, because I'm not going to wait on you."

He laughed and she immediately felt better. "Oh all right, I guess I'll make you dinner, but only because I'm hungry too." She pulled a bottle of amaretto and a half bottle of rum down onto the counter. "Well, you look like a scotch man, but unfortunately, beggars at the end of the world can't be choosers."

"It's better than anything I have," he said, already opening cupboards in search of glasses, "I'll just close my eyes and pretend I'm taste testing in New Guinea."

Nella pulled a box of produce from the refrigerator. The Farm had a good harvest week so she had plenty. She did pine for premade meals from time to time, and today was definitely one of those days.

Nella felt the stiff collar of her shirt scrape across her neck and realized how much the combination of pain and stress had made her sweat. "Uh- Mr. Courtlen, excuse me for a minute, I'll be back in a minute."

"All right," he said amiably, "but if we're going to be drinking buddies you might want to start calling me Frank."

She flashed him a startled smile. "Well, then you'd better call me Nella. Enough with the Dr. Rider crap."

"Well, especially since I now know you played hooky in med school."

She laughed and went to change. When she returned, clean and refreshed, Frank was flipping pages in a cookbook. "How many of these do you have?" he asked.

Nella blushed. "It's kind of a hobby. I like to collect them."

He looked up at her. "Books or cookbooks?"

"Cookbooks. It's rare to find a recipe I have all the ingredients for these days, but I like to remember when I used to." She blushed more deeply. "I look through the recipes and imagine cooking a huge feast someday for my friends with exotic dishes."

"Like tropical fruit."

She smiled. "Like tropical fruit yes, but also things like chocolate and cake with finely milled flour instead of the stuff with pebbles in it like we have now."

"It's so odd to think that just a few thousand survivors have run out of those things so quickly isn't it?"

"Oh," she replied, "I think there is more out there, probably just a few

miles away, but it is in the Infected zone and even the best scavenger teams aren't allowed past the military's cleared points."

He looked steadily at her. "You know it's going to get better right?" he asked, "The world's going to get better. The Infected zones are going to get smaller and the people that are left will pick up again and go forward."

She felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. She laughed at herself. "Well, if all I have to worry about is a few luxuries, then things can't be that bad right?"

He closed the book in his hand. "That's not what I meant."

"I know," she said, "But I think you were right this morning. No one is going to come along and put the world back together the way it was," she picked up a glass and poured it half full with alcohol. "I think people expect this trial to do just that. They are expecting to find someone to blame, something to make sense of the whole thing. But I think the world is just too broken for that to work. Sometimes there's no real explanation, no justification for things that happen."

"Some things just are?"

She nodded.

"I still think people need some sort of attempt at an explanation."

"But we've just seen the closest thing to an entire explanation that there is. I don't feel any better, do you?" She really was crying now, and though she tried to stop, it just kept coming. Before she could wipe her eyes again to see, Frank had crossed the bright kitchen and folded his long arms around her in a hug. She didn't try to push him away.

"No," he said, "I feel worse. But it's a relief to know anyway. Don't you think?"

She felt a fast hitch start in his chest and realized he was trying not to cry as well. She reached her arms out to hug him back. They stood there like that for several minutes, two almost-strangers aching for the world that was lost in the gnashing jaws of disease and worrying for the world that was found on the other side of it. At last, when she felt his breath warm and calm again, she stepped back, wiped her eyes, and said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to make you feel worse."

He cleared his throat. "You didn't. I feel calmer than I have all day." He reached for her hand and pulled her toward the kitchen. "Come on, I'm starving. And I think I found a recipe we can actually make."

A Setback