

Or ever.”

“I doubt anyone would bring the test tubes in openly. And glass won’t set off the metal detector.”

“The only people who have been through here since you two took off were staff. Even Mr. Grant hasn’t been by. And if Dr. Pazzo has staff working for him, well, we might as well give up now.”

“What could they be hidden in?”

Officer Kembrey stood up. “Listen, Dr. Rider, let me work on that. It’s my job to find contraband, and to find it quietly. You can help by visiting that jeweler and by acting normal. We’re going to find those samples. The fewer people that know about it, the less panic we’ll cause and the less likely Dr. Pazzo- or *whoever* has them, is going to jump the gun. Are you sure he would keep them here?”

Nella stood up too. “Yes. Dr. Pazzo needs to be in control. Having them nearby would ensure that he could use them when and how he wanted without relying on outside help. It would also give him a sense of power even in here. Trust me, that stuff is *my* job.”

“Okay then. Let’s both get to work. I’ll find a reason to get into his cell and soon. If I find anything, if I even guess anything, you and Frank will be the first to know. If the jeweler tells you anything, you let *me* know.”

Nella shook his hand with her good one. “Thank you Officer Kembrey, it’s such a relief to have help.”

He put one hand on her good shoulder. “We’ll find them Dr. Rider. It’s going to be all right.”

She smiled at him through her worry.

Forever in a Place Like This

Nella passed the cafeteria on the way to the infirmary to discuss Ann’s medical results. The clatter of warming pans reminded her of something Dr. Schneider had said. The bacteria would have to be revived in some sort of broth and was it jello? No, gelatin. Nella wondered if it would matter if it were jello. She wheeled around and headed into the cafeteria. A few shiny faced ladies were joking good naturedly as they lowered steaming pans into the cafeteria bar.

“Excuse me,” Nella said, smiling.

The nearest lady looked up. “Hi honey, we’re running a little late today, we’ll be open in just a few minutes.”

“Oh! You’re fine, I’m not trying to hurry you,” said Nella, “I actually came by to see if you had a record of what the prisoners have been ordering for their

meals.”

The lady eyed her suspiciously. “You aren’t press are you?” she asked, “That’s not really information we give out.”

Nella stuck out her good hand. “I’m sorry, I haven’t even introduced myself. I’m Dr. Rider, I was sent by the court to make sure the prisoners are healthy enough for trial.”

The lady shook her hand, “Ah, well that’s different. You want to make sure they are eating, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Do you keep track of what they order and how much they send back?”

“Sure, but we’re about to get awfully busy. The staff lunch is about to start.”

“I can come back, say, an hour from now?”

“All right then, Doc. We’ll have the list for you. How far back do you want?”

Nella thought for a moment. It had taken a little over a month for the first Plague’s symptoms to begin. “Is six weeks ok? For Robert Pazzo and Ann Connelly and of course, Gerta Schneider from now on.” She thanked the lady and continued on to the infirmary. She tried not to wonder how Frank was doing, but in the hundred yards from the cafeteria to the infirmary she worried about him at least a half dozen times. She was distracted enough that she had forgotten why she had headed to the infirmary in the first place and spent several seconds trying to remember before anyone noticed her.

“Dr. Rider,” said a nurse pleasantly, his cool, crisp uniform almost an aura of order around him, “did you want me to check your dressing?”

Nella shook herself, “Oh, no thank you. I’m here to talk to the physician about Ann Connelly’s test results. Is he busy?”

The nurse’s polite smile stuttered. “I’ll grab him for you. But Mr. Grant let us know in no uncertain terms that he wanted to be present whenever Miss Connelly was discussed- especially if it was at your request.”

Nella sucked in a bitter breath. “Ah, I see. Well, I don’t want to make trouble, would you mind contacting both him and the physician? I will talk to them together at their convenience. In the mean time, I’m going to see my patient.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Rider.”

Nella shook her head and smiled. “Don’t be, it isn’t your fault. It’s perfectly all right.” She turned and walked down the hallway back toward the cell block. *It wasn’t all right. You’d think after the world fell to pieces that the jurisdictional bullshit would go away too. I guess if we only have one small city*

left to fight over, we're going to fight over every inch. Nella lightly rubbed her sore shoulder. *It would be one thing if Mr. Grant wanted to be present to protect his client. All he wants to know is how soon I'll pronounce her incompetent and he can get back to the golf course. Or whatever it is post-apocalyptic lawyers do in their spare time these days.* Nella stifled a perverse laugh as soon as she thought it. She approached the heavy metal door into the cell block and peeked through the mesh filled window while the door opened, hoping to see Frank at the conference table. It was empty. She couldn't decide if that was good or bad. Where would they be meeting if not in the block? Was he already finished? Did he know where the samples were? She took a deep breath and headed for Ann's cell. Frank was right. She did over-analyze everything.

Officer Wells met her at the cell door. "Hi Doc. Geez, what happened?"

Nella half panicked, not having prepared a story for her injury. No one else had cared enough to be curious, not even the infirmary staff. "Oh," she said, far more calmly than she felt, "it was a stupid accident. I was trying to fix the tiller I borrowed from a neighbor. I got a rock stuck in the blade and I sliced my shoulder pulling it out." She was shocked at the evenness of her own voice. Her brain remembered the actual injury in excruciating detail and sweat popped out on her forehead, but she kept her face cheerful. Wells winced. "Ouch Doc. You sure are accident prone. You have to be more careful."

Nella chuckled although she didn't feel like laughing it off. "You're telling me. Pain killers are hard to come by these days. Anyway, how's our Ann?"

"She seems much better now that we've taken her outside a few times. She had to be heavily sedated when she was sent for those tests, but she's been pretty calm since then."

"Good. The more consistent we can be, the better she'll do I think."

Wells squinted and Nella was alarmed to see that he was on the verge of tears. "She's not going to get better is she Doc?"

Nella set down the briefcase and patted his arm. "I'm sorry Wells, she has some pretty bad permanent damage. I'm afraid the best we can hope for is more good days than bad. The more you let her walk around outside or talk with her, even about little things, the better she'll do though. Pieces of her brain are missing, but it can rewire itself. I took her off the antibiotics the physician had her on. He thought they were helping, but they were actually making things worse. From now on, she should get better at things like walking and responding to people, even her speech should get better."

Wells swiped at his eyes with a sleeve. "But she's never going to get out of here is she? Or another place like here, even if the trial goes well."

"She's going to need to be in constant care for the rest of her life. She's

always going to have tics, like biting, and scratching. And when she gets emotional she'll probably always try to do herself some kind of harm. Those things just aren't in her control. She's never going to be able to cook a meal or drive a car- or even remember much about what happened after the onset of the Plague."

"That's what Johnson thought. We've been talking. We're both supposed to rotate out of here after the trial, that's actually why we both agreed to this post. It meant we could do something else after. But I think- we think, it might be best if we stay with Ann wherever she ends up. She's used to us and we understand her, most of the time. I mean, I know we'll have to get medical training-"

"Actually, I think you and Johnson have as much training as anyone else these days. I'm afraid medical training consists mostly of first aid and cpr now. And I'm sure you already know that much. I think it's an excellent idea. Ann couldn't ask for a better set of caregivers. Of course, I can't say for sure what the Judges' ruling will be, but I'm fairly confident that Ann will not pass her competency hearing. The Judges will decide where she should go, but I'll be able to make a recommendation. I'll certainly suggest that you two stick with her, if you're sure that's what you want."

Wells nodded. "We're sure. Thanks Doc."

Nella placed her briefcase beside the door with a smile. She began to pull the cell door open and turned back to Wells. "Brace yourself," she said, "Mr. Grant is on his way with the physician to discuss Ann's condition and treatment."

Wells groaned and Nella walked into the cell.

A Funeral that hasn't Happened Yet

Nella had a small migraine by the time she headed back to the cafeteria. She suppressed a sigh as she was handed the small novel that made up the meal record for Dr. Pazzo and Ann. She walked back toward the prison's reception area, giving Stan Kembrey a furtive glance on her way. Frank was not waiting for her, though more than two hours had passed since they'd split up. She couldn't decide if it was a good sign or a bad sign. Not seeing him and Dr. Pazzo on the cell block had caused a dull drumbeat of worry to start in her head and it had only grown since then. She sat in the chair closest to the door and began flipping through the list of prisoner meals. She tried to concentrate on what she read, but between her headache and growing anxiety, she couldn't decide what could be important and what was not.

At last she heard the quick, light clip of Frank's shoes on the hallway floor.

She heard him call a goodbye to Officer Kembrey. She snapped open her briefcase and slid the meal record in for later. She closed it and looked up as he collapsed into the hard seat next to her. He set his own case on the floor and leaned forward, his hands scrubbing his face. The reception area was empty except for the two of them and the florescent lights hummed cold and dismal above them like an echo of the aching space in Nella's head. She put a soft hand on his bony knee.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He straightened up and put a warm hand over hers, squeezing gently. He tilted the back of his head against the wall and turned to look at her. He smiled. "Let's go home."

He stood up, pulling her up with him and they pushed through the heavy glass door, out of the gray, changeless world of the prison into the mild sun of early spring. The world smelled green, even the steaming parking lot. The sound of birds was almost overwhelming. Nella winced in anticipation of a spike of pain. But her headache seemed to evaporate instead. For an instant Frank was a dark shadow against the bright sky. A thin, elongated icon, a cave painting. Just a memory of what men had been. Nella felt a strange sense of displacement, again realizing that the world would go on, was going on, almost without change. Even without humanity directing it. This time, though, the thought brought no comfort. Her eyes adjusted and Frank was solid flesh again, but her mind lingered in the same deep, panic worn rut.

The car was silent and hot, a breathless tomb that had lost the crisp linen smell of him. Instead the air was limp and stale and Nella felt herself drowning in the stillness. She rubbed away a few weak tears before Frank could see them. He slid into the car and rolled the windows down. The car idled with a muted thrum as he stared blankly at the low gray prison. At last he shifted the car into drive. His voice was gutteral and rough. "For the first time in my life," he said, "I sincerely hope that Hell is real."

The car lurched out of its spot and tore away from the prison lot. "It'll be a much shorter eternity if I know *he*'s burning alongside me."

Nella felt her eyes spark and pinch again. "Don't say that," she said quietly. "Sorry."

Nella watched the road turn rosy in the last light of the sun. She could hear the frogs singing loudly through the open window and the breeze was soft and smelled like crushed grass. She watched a sprinkling of lights turning on, like a string with too many burnt out bulbs. The car swerved and she looked back at Frank in alarm. He was wiping his eyes with one hand and trying to steer with the other. The car swerved into the soft, muddy shoulder and stopped. Nella

reached over and put the car into park before turning it off. She unbuckled as Frank doubled over, his head in his hands. He tried so hard to hold back that he shook and his chest was a collapsed, breathless cave. Nella wrapped her arms around him as well as she could without speaking. They stayed that way a long time. The fresh, clean breeze swirled through the car and the frog song an unearthly choir around them. She felt as if she were at a funeral that hadn't happened yet. She stroked the back of his neck with her warm fingers, but he was like a closed shell, a stone without cracks. She felt tears cooling on her own face, but she couldn't have said whether it was because of his grief or hers. She pressed her forehead gently against his cheek and at last he turned toward her. She pulled him further into her arms and he took a deep, ragged breath. She could feel the sobs shaking in his throat, but he kept them there after a struggle.

"What happened?" she whispered and held his face in her hands.

"I really didn't believe he had them. I thought he might, you know, when I realized that he hadn't really locked himself in, but I didn't really *believe* it. And then, when you said it out loud, I started to think I was wrong, but I still thought he wasn't really going to use them, I'd just talk to him and he'd hand them over. If he wanted to destroy the world, he would have done it long before I met him, wouldn't he?" His voice broke and his breath was a sharp, hot wind over her arms. "All I had to do was reason with him and he'd turn the samples over. Then everything would be all right. The world would be safe," he laughed a little and looked at her, though his eyes still streamed, "You'd be safe. I'd be a hero."

Instead of answering, she pulled his mouth to hers. She could feel the tiny explosions of breath against her lips as he tried to suppress his grief. She kissed him until his breath smoothed out.

"I promised you that I would find them. I promised you that everything would be all right, that this was just the beginning. But when I told him about Dr. Carton and about his lab and finding Dr. Schneider but not the samples- I would have known then, even if we hadn't figured it out before. He was so smug. He was like a snake closing in, tightening around all the time left in the world. And I knew before I even finished that he wasn't going to turn them over. I wanted to hit him," He shook his head, "No, that's not true. I wanted to kill him. Right there. With my own hands. I haven't felt that way since- in a long time."

He touched her shoulder gently, feeling the ragged scar through her shirt and bandage. "Everything is repeating. The world is still dying. I still can't protect what I love. And I'm still a monster. Nothing has gotten any better."

"You aren't a monster."

"Normal people don't think about killing other people unless it's to

survive."

Nella laughed. "Yes they do Frank. Especially these days. The sane ones just don't go through with it." She drew her fingertips down the hollow of his cheek. "You don't need to protect me. We *are* going to find the samples, and the world will go on and the sun will rise and the summer will come just as it has always done. But Frank, if we don't- if the worst happens, you don't need to protect me. Whatever comes, you don't have to shield me. This is lonely enough without that."

His breath hitched and heaved again and he closed his eyes, trying to calm himself. She pulled away from him slowly and got out of the car. She walked carefully over to his side, her shoes sinking in the soft spring mud, the gnats making a halo of fluttering gold around her. She opened his door. He unfolded himself and she was again reminded of a cave painting, a purple shadow of what had been rather than what was. He reached for her and they stood leaning against the warm car on the edge of the empty road as the last of the sun retreated and the City edged the horizon with a thin vein of light.

Midnight Mob

The packet of meal records slid from Nella's limp hand as she dozed in Frank's office. It slumped white on the dark carpet and the slight breeze on her legs woke her up. She leaned over and scooped up the papers. She started to straighten them into a neat pile and then gave up, tossing them haphazardly into her open briefcase beside her. She'd finished with them anyway. Nothing pure enough to revive the samples had been served in the past six weeks. All she had to show for her trouble was the return of a thumping headache. Nella switched off the light and walked carefully into the bedroom, trying not to bump anything in the unfamiliar dark. Frank's back was a dark mountain range gently eroded by the blankets into softer lines. She undressed and stretched her wounded shoulder carefully. She was relieved to be free of the sling and decided not to wear it again. It just caused more questions than she wanted to answer. The sheets were cold as she slid onto them, but she didn't want to wake him, so she left the space between them open. Her eyes slowly adjusted and she could make out the tired lines on Frank's face. He remained sad and exhausted, even asleep.

She resisted the urge to smooth the worry from his face with her hand. Surely, he had to have defended people he knew had committed a crime before. He may not like to lie, but she'd seen him do it without too much trouble before. Admittedly, there had probably never been this much at stake before. Nella closed her eyes. She ought to be worried about whether she would blow it

herself, rather than whether he would. Her thoughts fluttered like gray moths. Sadness for Frank, the strange visit of the jeweler, Wells's worried face. One by one they made their circuits and floated away.

A thunk and a chiming crash woke her with a start. She froze and sucked in a panicked breath. Frank's was already sitting up on one elbow. He brushed his fingers across her back, looking for glass. "Are you all right? Did it hit you?" he asked.

Nella was still disoriented. "What? I don't think so. What is it?"

"Fucking zombie!" floated up from the street, "Don't even have the decency to shoot the bastard when you're with him." The voice was oily and uneven.

"Drunk. Great, it's starting early." Frank stood up looking for his clothing in the dark. Nella sat up. "No," he whispered, "stay there. There's probably glass on your side. And this guy might have a gun or friends or something."

Nella grabbed his wrist. "Don't go," she hissed, "Just let them go away."

"I have to. I have to at least see who it is."

"No, why? They're all the same. What if there's more than one?"

"What if they want to burn the house down?"

"No Frank, don't—"

He leaned over and hugged her. "I have to. I'll be careful. Stay here, don't let them see you." He pulled his wrist gently out of her hand and padded into the hallway in only his shorts. Nella scrambled to find her clothes. She crept down the stairs after him as he closed the front door behind him. The pack from their trip was still sitting beside overstuffed chair in the living room. She felt around in the pockets and found one of the guns. She thought it was the pistol but couldn't be sure even by touch. She pulled the thick curtain an inch or two from the window and peered out into the dark street. The man was still yelling and the lights in the neighborhood were beginning to turn on, casting light onto the street in long, thick teeth of pallid gold. She could see the man half tilted over and holding a bottle by its neck. She couldn't see his face. Frank must have sensed she was there, because he moved in front of the window, blocking the man from her sight.

"Terry? Go home. I won't tell anyone you were here. Just go home and sleep it off." She heard Frank's voice as if it were far away, through water.

Terry? Wasn't that the new guard's name at the prison? She tried to peer around Frank's back, pulling the curtain a little farther from the window.

"You're a piece of work you know 'at? Your neighbors know what you done?" Terry stumbled in a half circle, facing the growing pool of window lights. His arm flailed upward with the almost empty bottle. Nella watched as Frank

walked calmly toward him.

“Ese your friends? Nah. Zombies ain’t got no friends. You eats each other ‘stead.”

Nella paced to the door and opened it just a crack so that she could hear as Frank told him firmly and quietly to get lost.

“HE ATE HIS WIFE. AND A KID. A KID,” Terry yelled. A baby down the street began to squall and Nella watched as a few men emerged from their front doors. Most were half dressed, their scars twisting like vines on their faces and legs and arms. Some were missing limbs. A few were carrying weapons. Bats, hockey sticks, golf clubs, tire irons, all shining like teeth in the light from the windows. She watched Terry recoil, their presence reaching through the thick haze of drunk and hate. “I see,” he said, nodding conspiratorially, “You’re all zombies.” He stumbled and Frank caught him before his face could hit the pavement. Terry shoved him off. “Ge’ off monser. James Grant tole me whatchu done. I know whatchu are. ‘ID YOU KNOW HE’S THE LAWYER FOR PATS-PAAAAAZ- FOR THE GUY WHAT DID THIS TO YOU? ‘ID YOU KNOW HE’S GOING TO HELP THE GUY GO FREE. ALL OUR LIVES IS RUINT BUT THOSE THAT DID IT, THEY GETS TO GO FREE. AN’ THIS ZOMBIE PROLLY GETS A SHITLOAD OF MONEY FOR IT. YOU BELIE’ THAT?”

The neighbors began descending from their stoops. Almost at the same time. Some hobbling, some smoothly sauntering, but all closing in on Frank and Terry. Nella held her breath and she checked the gun in the light filtering through the crack in the door. Ten or a dozen men formed a half circle around the two. Nella could see Frank’s posture change. He grew bigger, lengthening as his muscles tensed and straightened and his long hands clenched.

“Oh shit,” said Terry.

One very large man in the group of neighbors growled, “You’re awfully lost Immune. This is our home. You aren’t welcome here.”

“Can go where I want,” said Terry, puffing his chest out in false bravado.

Another man slapped a tire iron on his open palm as he closed the distance between the crowd and Terry. “Yeah? You know what we do to Immunes here?”

Terry shook his head. A reedy man circled around behind Terry while the one with the tire iron kept talking. Nella felt like shrinking away from the door to hide, but she remained still. “Well,” said the man with the tire iron, “When we get tired of taking chunks out of each other and an Immune wanders in . . .”

“We eats ‘em!” said the reedy man in a falsetto shriek and snapped his teeth together with a sharp click that even Nella could hear. Terry screeched and scrambled away from the group. He dropped the bottle as he ran back toward the City’s center, not even bothering to stop and pick it up. Nella heard the men

erupt in low chuckles and the lights in the windows slowly began winking out. But Frank still looked ready for a fight and she couldn't bring herself to quite relax. He turned toward the collapsing circle of neighbors and she could see the stress lines on his brow even in the half light. His scar pulsed and jittered as if he were grinding his teeth. She half opened the door, but the large man said easily, "You okay Frank?" and the reedy man clapped him on the shoulder.

"Yeah," said Frank and she watched him relax and uncoil. She decided not to move and stayed in the shadow of the open door. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring trouble to anyone but myself. I don't even know why I chose to do this anymore."

"No one could think ill of you if you decided to drop the case Frank," said the man with the tire iron, "God knows you've as much or more cause to hate Pazzo as the rest of us."

Frank glanced uneasily back at her. *Me? She thought, he's worried that I'll be upset if he drops the case?* "Even people we hate deserve to have their say. We've all done things we aren't happy about. Wouldn't we all want the same?" Frank asked, as if someone had argued with him. Nella suspected this had been a long and frequent discussion in the neighborhood.

"We know why you're doing it Frank," said the large man, "No one here's going to harass you about it."

"Thanks." She could hear the relief in his tone of voice.

"C'mon guys, it's late," yawned a neighbor. The others split gently, each shaking Frank's hand or slapping his back and calling "goodnight" over their shoulders.

"Go on," said the reedy man, pushing Frank back towards the house, "Your girl must be out-of-her-mind worried. And tell her I didn't mean any harm." He clicked his teeth together again, grinning.

"You shouldn't keep her cooped up like that Frank," said the big man, "It's not polite you know. My wife said she was a good Doc. Helped her a lot in the Cure camp."

Frank laughed, embarrassed, and Nella blushed behind the door. "Okay, we'll have a block party or something. We'll be more social I promise."

He padded easily back to the door and flipped on the light. "See, I told you they gossiped," he said, without commenting on the gun in her hand. She replaced it in the pack without apologizing for it.

"Are you okay?" she asked as he caught her around the waist.

"I'm okay. Are you?"

She nodded and blew out a shaky breath in relief.

"It won't be the last time you know," he brushed a loose length of hair

from her forehead. "It won't be Terry, I think I can safely guarantee that. But it'll be someone. Maybe not drunk next time. Maybe mean and sober."

"I know."

"Maybe I should take you home. You'll be safer there until the trial is over."

"Don't you dare. You want me to lie awake every night worrying that you got killed? I'll just drive down here and sleep in the car every night." She pulled him up the stairs so he wouldn't think of it any longer. They carefully cleaned the glass up together and Frank pushed the desk over to cover the broken pane.

Nella was exhausted. She had barely fallen asleep when Terry had thrown the rock through the window, and it had already been very late. She pressed her cheek against his chest. Her breath fell on him in a warm, curling mist. "Frank," she said, already more than half asleep, "I won't be upset if you want to give up the trial. I'll understand if you can't do it, knowing what you know now."

"I can do it. It's just going to be harder." Frank's voice was bitter and slow.

"We could find a boat. We could just disappear."

He stroked her hair with his fingertips. "Nella, would you really disappear with me? We might never come back."

Nella yawned. "I know."

"After the trial."

"Stan said we should go see the jeweler tomorrow. Say we're finding a ring. I think he knows I love you Frank . . ." She murmured, trailing off into sleep.

"What jeweler?" asked Frank, but she didn't hear him.

The Jeweler

"I don't like this plan," Sevita grumbled. Nella sighed and strained to see into the power plant's dark interior.

"You couldn't think of a better one," she said, giving up and turning back toward her friend. "Besides, what could happen? This guy is just a jeweler. Pazzo wouldn't have any co-conspirators. He's too controlling for that."

"Why couldn't I have gone instead of Christine?"

Nella laughed. "You're too well known. It would have been career suicide. If anyone, it should have been me and Christine that went."

"You're no good at lying. He would have seen right through you."

"I know, I know. This way no one gets caught."

"That's so boring," Sevita grumbled.

Nella laughed. Sevita tapped her fingers along her knee and Nella rolled the window down for some fresh air. “You’re sure that’s all he brought in with him?” Sevita asked.

“Hmm? Oh, Dr. Pazzo, yeah, three pens, an almost empty wallet and a dead cell phone.”

“Well did anyone check the lab where he was found?”

“Yeah, I asked Frank that too. He says they took everything apart inch by inch for the investigation.”

“What about weird places, like inside the vending machines or those tubes he pretended were feeding them?”

“You aren’t going to rest until you see it for yourself, are you?”

“Frank must have access to it, as part of the defense team.”

“Ask him.”

“Can’t you ask him for me? He’s more likely to say yes to you. He’ll say yes to anything you ask,” Sevita smiled slyly at her.

“I doubt anyone will need much persuading. Go to Judge Hawkins and ask. They want you to document the case right? That’s part of it I would assume.”

“No, I asked already,” Sevita pouted, “He said it would influence people’s opinions unfairly. Too much gore, it would inflame emotions or something.”

“Then don’t get Frank in trouble!”

“I’m not! I just think we should check to make sure Pazzo didn’t hide it there.”

“He would’ve expected the place to be searched. Besides, I know he wants to keep those samples near him. He can’t risk anyone finding them. But if you swear to me that nothing will get accidentally aired, I’ll ask Frank if we can look around.”

Sevita was satisfied and let Nella return to her worrying in peace. They didn’t have very long to wait. Christine was blushing on her way back to the car and wouldn’t meet their eyes. Nella was amused, thinking Frank must have kissed her to convince the guy. Frank was only a few steps behind and got into the car without saying anything. He looked nervous. Sevita leaned forward and picked up Christine’s hand.

“Chris, you dope, you had my ring on the whole time. How’s the guy going to believe you now?”

Christine glanced at Frank and he shook his head slightly. Nella just caught it. “We told him we wanted to upgrade,” said Christine still blushing.

“Well? What happened?” asked Sevita impatiently.

Nella leaned forward, forgetting Christine’s confusion and Frank’s warning. Frank started the car. “Dr. Pazzo was very specific about what he

wanted. He ordered gold plated fountain pens for the defense attorneys. Even Dr. Schneider's, although we hadn't found her yet," he said grimly.

Sevita glanced at her. Nella collapsed back into her seat, all the feeling draining into her feet. Sevita kept her voice low so Christine couldn't hear.
"That's it, isn't it?"

Nella nodded.

"Then why don't we just go get the pens from his cell? That must be where he's keeping them."

"What if they aren't there? Then he'll know we're looking for them. He might release it right there and then."

"Can anyone get into his cell without him knowing?"

"Not until he's in court. And then we've all got to be there."

"You don't, as long as you've already testified."

Nella leaned forward, speaking over the whipping breeze that filled the car.
"Frank, when is he supposed to deliver them? And where?"

"He said he was supposed to deliver them to court on verdict day. Those were Dr. Pazzo's express instructions." He paused and the despairing look he gave her in the rearview mirror made her heart ache. "That gives us about two weeks."

"That short?" asked Sevita.

"I can try to stall, but I can't do very much. The prosecution elected to skip survivor testimonies at the beginning of the process. The government thought it would be bad for morale to rehash what people had gone through, especially since we've all been through it. It isn't like other tribunals where the world needs to be educated about what happened. We all know too well. I thought I was doing the right thing by agreeing to skip that part. And then there is Ann's attorney, but I have a feeling Ann's case will be dismissed in short order, right Nella?"

"I filed a finding that she was incompetent and I haven't heard any protest from the prosecution's side, so it will be fast."

"That leaves Dr. Schneider's attorney. I don't know her, we've never met before. But I assume it's in her best interest to gloss over most of the evidence and concentrate on the work Dr. Schneider did on the Cure. So barring a sparring match between the two of us or between the prosecutor and Dr. Schneider's attorney, it will probably be pretty fast."

"I don't think Dr. Schneider is going to have it all her own way," Sevita said, "Ms Jacobsen and I had a long talk with Dr. Carton."

"Jesus," swore Frank, "You're lucky I'm not representing Dr. Schneider. I'm going back to manual labor after this. There's no way I can do this job with

you around.”

They pulled up in front of Christine’s apartment. Nella got out and Christine hugged her, pressing Nella’s keys into her hand.

“I’m glad I didn’t need to use these. Frank’s a wonderful person,” she blurted out and turned away, quickly climbing her stairs and disappearing inside.

“That was weird,” said Sevita. “Don’t worry, I’ll ferret it out of her before long.”

“Nella, would you mind driving?” Frank asked suddenly.

“Sure,” she said, stretching her bad arm to test it. She walked around to the driver’s side and got in. She glanced over, but Frank had walked away from the car and was talking earnestly to Sevita in front of the building. Sevita glanced nervously at her and looked away quickly. Nella was confused. Frank returned to the car.

“What was all that about?” Nella asked.

“Hmm?” he asked with a cheerful smile, “Oh that? I was just telling Sevita to remember that this was all a secret and to be careful who she told what.”

Nella didn’t believe him, but she held her tongue. He leaned back into the seat and brushed wind whipped hair off her face. “Let’s not think about it any more today. We can’t do anything else yet can we?”

Nella shook her head. “Then let’s pretend none of this is happening. Just for today. Let’s just be us.”

“Okay,” she said and flashed him a watery smile before turning the car off and getting out.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“We’re going to be us today. I thought we could walk to the Farm. Maybe see a guy about a boat.”

He stuck his hands into his pockets and kicked a stone into the road. “You know a guy with a boat?” he asked.

“Mmhmm.”

“And you settled for a guy like me?”

She laughed. “You have thicker, more luxuriant hair.”

Frank rubbed the soft skin of his head. “Yeah,” he sighed, “I’ve always been lucky that way.”

He kissed her in the warm spring sun and they headed down the crazy cracked pavement toward the transformed park that now fed the last city in the world.

Opening Statements

The crowd pressed in around Nella and Sevita, even more people packed into the large auditorium than there had been last time. Sevita reveled in it, but Nella could only think of how easy it would be to infect everyone at once with every steaming breath that rolled against her back and stuck to the windows. Someone sneezed off to the right and Nella recoiled.

“Sorry,” said an elderly man with an early tan. He held up a bright handkerchief. “Hay fever,” he confided to Nella. She smiled to show him she wasn’t worried about it.

Frank was sitting with Dr. Pazzo, trying to make calm and cheerful conversation. She could tell by the way he gripped the side of the table that he was uncomfortable and nervous. Dr. Pazzo, on the other hand, seemed completely at ease, leaning back in his chair and talking casually to Wells as Johnson kept a gentle hand on Ann’s shoulder. Ann was mildly sedated again, but the crowd was overwhelming anyway. She rocked slightly and chewed the bandages on her hands whenever Johnson was distracted. Mr. Grant completely ignored her. He was laughing with Dr. Schneider’s attorney, an attractive blonde who looked far too young to ever have finished law school. Nella knew better though. She had been a big name even when Nella had been in school. She wondered what Dr. Schneider had to trade to get her. Or maybe this lawyer did it just for the fame of defending the maker of the Cure. Nella looked over toward the prosecution. Ms Jacobsen looked exhausted and cranky. *Good thought Nella. Maybe she’ll contest the finding on Ann’s competency and buy me some time.* But Nella suspected it had more to do with the last minute addition of Dr. Carton to the witness list and Dr. Schneider to the defendant list.

The microphones turned on with a loud crack and the bailiff called for everyone to rise. The three judges walked out on to the dais and everyone returned to their seats with a rustle and then silence. The judges straightened their files and the bailiff talked with them in a low voice. There was a loud hacking cough somewhere in the crowd. Nella saw Frank look straight toward her as her own heart jumped out of its setting. He quickly looked back at his papers, but she saw his hand curl even tighter on the outer table edge. She couldn’t tell if Dr. Pazzo had noticed.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen,” said Judge Hawkins, “Ms Jacobsen, would you read the indictments please?”

Ms Jacobsen stood up and smoothed her jacket. She spoke clearly and loudly and was assisted by two sign language interpreters on either side of the room. The mass of people were utterly silent.

“Ann Connelly, Dr. Robert Pazzo and Dr. Gerta Schneider stand accused of violating the Geneva Biological Weapons Convention, the Nuremberg Code and

the United States Common Rule of research.

Each of the defendants participated in the development of the Recharge bacteria and after discovering its rapid rate of contagion and the dangerous effects the bacteria had on the human brain, failed both to contain it or to alert the proper authorities to its presence and symptoms. The citizens of the world were the unwitting and unfortunate de facto test subjects of the Recharge bacteria. Each defendant directly contributed to the death of millions of human beings through reckless disregard of proper handling, testing procedure and containment practices. Dr. Robert Pazzo also stands accused of the wrongful restraint of Dr. Gerta Schneider and neglecting to seek proper medical care for Ann Connelly. In addition, Dr. Gerta Schneider stands accused of theft, transportation of dangerous materials without precaution, and the kidnapping and enslavement of Dr. Michael Carton.”

The crowd erupted and even the two subsidiary judges looked shocked. Judge Hawkins called for calm. “Would the defendants please enter their plea?” he asked.

Dr. Schneider and Dr. Pazzo entered not guilty pleas in order. Mr. Grant stood up for Ann. “My client was directed to undergo a competency evaluation. I believe your Honors and Ms Jacobsen have the results in front of you.”

There was a quiet rustle as the prosecution and the panel found the paperwork. “Does the prosecution have any objection to the findings?”

Please say yes thought Nella.

Ms Jacobsen glanced up toward her with a worried expression, as if she were trying to disarm a bomb and wanted a hint. “No,” she said.

The judges turned off their microphones and discussed for a few moments between themselves. Nella glanced nervously back toward Frank and noticed Dr. Pazzo staring intently at the judges. He was leaning forward as if it would help him hear. She sat up straighter and watched him.

The microphones were turned back on. Judge Hawkins spoke for the panel. “It is the finding of this tribunal that Ann Connelly is incompetent to stand trial at this time. She is remanded to the state for ninety days so that she may be returned to competency. We can revisit this finding at that point if necessary.”

Ms Jacobsen broke in. “Your Honor, the military government has studied Dr. Rider’s recommendations. We feel it is best for all involved that this matter not be revisited on the strength of Dr. Rider’s findings that Miss Connelly will never regain the mental capacity for competence at trial.”

“Very well. Then Ann Connelly will be remanded to the state for the remainder of her life. I’m ordering her to be housed at Harbor Home when they can find space based on Dr. Rider’s recommendation. In the meantime, I

understand she is getting excellent care where she is. And I thank you for your fine service.” He nodded gravely at Wells who grinned and at Johnson who blushed.

“I object!” Dr. Pazzo was on his feet, his gargoyle face a pallid yellow with burning spots of red on his cheek and chin. His eyes glittered.

Judge Hawkins looked confused and Frank was trying to make Dr. Pazzo sit again, one hand over the microphone, the other pulling gently on the other man’s arm. “On what grounds?” Judge Hawkins asked.

“On the grounds that I should have a say in who cares for Ann,” shouted Dr. Pazzo. His voice was distant without the microphone but perfectly clear.

The other judges murmured behind Hawkins and he leaned back to talk with them. “Are you related in some way?” he asked at last.

Dr. Pazzo was breathing rapidly as if he’d just run a race. Frank gave up reasoning with him and sat down. Nella half rose from her own seat. “I’m the closest thing she has to a spouse or living relative,” Dr. Pazzo said, a little calmer now that the judge was speaking with him.

“I’m sorry Dr. Pazzo, but even if you were actually her spouse, this is not that type of competency hearing-” He broke off as Dr. Pazzo began screaming incoherently over him. The bailiffs came over to help Frank calm him down and Nella was already working her way down to the floor. Judge Hawkins banged the gavel as the crowd began its own dull roar. Nella followed the bailiffs out the door with the still shrieking Dr. Pazzo. She dimly heard Hawkins ordering a recess and Frank joined her in the holding cell with Dr. Pazzo. He waited until the bailiffs released his client and Pazzo dropped onto the hard bench without comment.

“What the hell was that about?” yelled Frank. He was angrier than she had ever seen him. Angrier than the situation seemed to warrant. “If you don’t calm down Judge Hawkins is going to have you removed from court. Not to mention charge you with contempt. I hardly need to tell you, you aren’t winning any friends out there and we haven’t even got to opening statements.” Frank ran a hand over his smooth head and Nella was close enough to see the sweat at his temple.

Dr. Pazzo ignored him and turned to Nella. “Is it true?” he asked, his face almost gentle, almost the young man she’d seen on the videos, “She won’t ever get better?” Nella felt Frank looking at her in confusion but she didn’t dare to break eye contact with Dr. Pazzo.

“You really care about her?” she asked, “This whole time you acted as if she were just a fling. And now you care?”

Dr. Pazzo gripped at his thinning hair and Nella was shocked to see his

eyes turning red and filling with tears. “I always cared. I always cared. But you never told me anything. Either of you.” He glared at them in turn. “You were supposed to be the best.” He spat it bitterly at Nella. “I refused to speak to four other perfectly capable doctors because I wanted *you* to see Ann. It took years. Years Dr. Rider.” He stood up and moved toward her. Frank instinctively stepped between them before Nella could stop him. Dr. Pazzo sneered at him as if they shared a nasty joke and Nella saw Frank’s long hand closing into a hard fist.

“What on earth are you talking about?” she asked, mostly so Frank wouldn’t hit him.

“You were supposed to bring her back. You were supposed to fix it. Fix it all. Why did she get damaged and I’m not?” Dr. Pazzo sobbed mournfully.

Nella paused and Frank shook his head in warning. She pushed forward anyway. “I don’t know Dr. Pazzo, why *did* she become so much more damaged than you?” She pulled the photos from the cat scan from her brief case and threw them at him. They slid glossy and bright and damning over the floor. “I’m not the one who created this thing. I can only fix what I understand. Why don’t you tell me?”

He slumped back onto the bench. Nella knelt down on one knee so that Dr. Pazzo could see her face. She picked up a photo. “This is what I understand, Robert,” she said holding it up to him. “See this dark empty void here? That’s where Ann lived. That’s where her memories of you were, all the memories of who she was meant to be. And see these small spots here? That one was where she was happy. And that one let her string together her thoughts so that I could understand what is happening in her brain, why she screams about teeth, why she can’t stop hurting herself.”

Dr. Pazzo took the photo and cradled it in one hand. “Can’t you fix it? You were supposed to fix it. You fixed others, worse off. I know. I read about it. I’ve been watching you for a very long time Dr. Rider.” He swiped at his eyes, so he didn’t see Nella pull Frank’s already swinging fist back with a sudden jerk. Frank paced to the other side of the cell and tried to breathe.

“I can’t fix what’s not there. Your bacteria ate away at her brain. She’s gone, just like everyone else who’d been exposed as long as her. The people I helped- they were still in early stages. The swelling in their brains was the problem. Not missing pieces. Not even if I had access to the best medicine and technology. Which I don’t, because the Plague took those too. Nobody this far gone can fully recover. Except you.” She waited for him to respond and Frank watched them, waiting for her to finish playing her hand. Dr. Pazzo was silent, the photo’s bright finish still flashing off of his hooded eyes. “Anything you want to tell me Robert?” Nella asked at last.

He straightened up and took a deep breath. He handed the photo back to her and she watched his face close into its severe lines again. “No,” he said. He looked at Frank, “Let’s get this over with. I’m looking forward to watching Gerta hang.”

Nella stood up. She didn’t dare to look at Frank so she busily repacked her briefcase as he and Dr. Pazzo filed back into the courtroom. She collapsed onto the bench as soon as the courtroom door closed behind them.

What have I done? She asked herself.

The day dragged on, mostly occupied by the prosecution’s opening statements and then motions by Dr. Schneider’s lawyers to suppress evidence from Dr. Carton. Nella was nervous and itchy, she wanted to fly back to the prison and search Dr. Pazzo’s cell. She was terrified by his reaction to her questioning. But it would be suspicious if she left court after Dr. Pazzo’s outburst. She’d have to wait. She tried to pretend she was taking notes. She didn’t know if Frank was angry with the delays or with something his client was goading him with or even with her, but his scar jumped and flared on his hollow cheek and his knuckles were as white as teeth as he gripped the side of the defense table. He didn’t look toward her for the rest of the day and Nella berated herself for acting rashly, for pushing Dr. Pazzo farther. But there were no more outbursts from Dr. Pazzo. He seemed calm and spoke to no one but Frank.

When the judge finally closed the day’s session, she found herself in the back of the massive crowd and it took her almost twenty minutes to make it into the parking lot. Sevita grabbed her arm and pulled her toward her towering cameras. “Sorry,” she hissed into Nella’s ear, “I have to. It would look odd after all that not to do an interview.”

Nella sighed but stood still.

“Dr. Rider, you’re the court appointed psychiatrist for the December Plague trial, is that correct?”

“Why yes, Ms. Das it is,” she said with an overly sweet smile. Nella scanned the parking lot both for Frank and the prison transport as Sevita asked her questions.

“Court was quite exciting today. You prepared the recommendation for Ann Connally’s competency trial is that right?”

Nella just nodded absently.

“And you found her incompetent to stand trial. The judge and the prosecution agreed with you. But upon hearing this decision, Dr. Pazzo had what I can only call an extreme outburst. Yet you found him competent to be tried. Do you intend to change your position?”

Nella looked at Sevita confused. “What? I mean, no. There is a difference

between a temporary outburst and Ann's condition. Ann can't understand what is going on around her and she is in no condition to aid in her own defense. In this case, there is no way she would get a fair trial. Dr. Pazzo simply had an emotional response to some disappointing news."

Dr. Schneider's lawyer walked up to Sevita's cameras and flashed a brilliant smile. "Uh thank you Dr. Rider," said Sevita quickly.

Nella slipped away as Sevita turned to the attractive blonde beside her. The white prison transport passed her, glowing in the early dusk. She hurried to Frank's car. He was leaning against it, his back to her, the rest of the lot empty even of gawkers.

She curled her fingers around his hand and leaned into his side. "Sorry," she said.

He smiled. "You? What are *you* sorry about?"

"I shouldn't have pushed him so hard. I thought I could make him change his mind, get some kind of confession or something."

"Don't be sorry. It was a good gamble. I would have done it too, if I'd known how he felt about Ann earlier. It just didn't work this time."

Nella looked around to make sure they were still alone. "I need to get into his cell. I need to find those samples."

"I know. I already called Stan. He'll be ready to help during court on Wednesday. After today's episode it would look odd if you weren't in court tomorrow. Give it one more day and things will calm down."

"You think no one will notice if I'm not there on Wednesday?"

Frank glanced at her quickly and then away. "Well- I did something that might be bad. I'm sorry, it was the only thing I could think of and I don't think it will cause any permanent harm. At least, that's what Johnson said."

"What did you do?"

"I asked Johnson to call you that morning before court. She and Wells are going to make it look like Ann is having an- an episode. Dr. Pazzo can't see into the cell and it's fairly well soundproofed, so he'll never know that she isn't having one."

"Did Johnson ask you why?"

"No. She said if it were you asking, there had to be a good reason. Anyway, it should give you plenty of time to search the prison at least. If you don't find it there- well I'm running out of ideas."

"I'll find it," she said.

Waiting

Tuesday dragged by in a dull gray blur filled with the voice of Dr. Schneider's lawyer. Nella and Frank tiptoed carefully around each other, not talking about Dr. Pazzo's outburst or the plan for Wednesday. It was a growing bubble of disease between them. Nella went to bed exhausted and sad, but couldn't relax. The wind threading in the broken window and around the desk was strong and cold. A book was lying open on it and Nella could hear the fluttering with every gust. It was driving her mad. She tried to concentrate on her breathing, or on Frank's, so that she could sleep, but she could sense him, stiff and moveless beside her and she knew he wasn't sleeping either.

She sighed. "What time is it?"

Frank fumbled with the bedside clock. "Early. Too early."

"Have you slept at all?"

"No."

She rolled on to her side to look at him. "Is it because of tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow and today and yesterday and all the yesterdays before that. I'm sorry I took a swing at Dr. Pazzo. Thank you for stopping me. That could have been bad." He rubbed his temple and then turned his head to face her. "The thought of him watching you all this time, planning this- it was too much. I've had clients I didn't like before. I've even had clients that I thought were guilty. I know Dr. Pazzo isn't guilty- at least, not of what he's accused of. But I hate him. I've always felt used after I met with him, even from the beginning. Even before you told me he was just trying to exert power over me. But it was okay before. It wasn't so different from what I had already been through. I thought that maybe I deserved it." He shifted onto his side and ran his fingers over her cheek. "But I can't watch him treat you that way, especially knowing what he's planning on doing."

She slid closer to him, folding into his chest. "Frank, I know you don't want to hear this, that you want to stay angry with him, but he did all this because he loved Ann. Because he wanted her to have her own happy life back. And because he wanted to hurt the person he thought had hurt her. He used me to help her. He used us, and presumably the samples of the resistant bacteria, to catch Dr. Schneider. If you had to do the same for- for Sarah, wouldn't you have done it?"

"If that's true, then why hold on to the samples still? He got what he wanted. Why didn't he just tell us where they were yesterday? You gave him a chance and he refused."

"Because I can't fix it. I can't bring her back. Nobody can. His only drive now is to see that the people responsible for her illness are punished. That means Schneider and Carton, that means himself too. And maybe the rest of the world."

Because why should anyone else be happy or healthy when she can never be either?"

"The whole world? Nella, I would do anything to keep you safe. Anything. But I wouldn't destroy the world if I failed."

"That's because you aren't a sociopath who becomes enraged when someone breaks his toy. I told you Frank, you don't need to feel inferior to anyone. It wasn't the Infected that were the monsters."

The whistle of the wind through the broken glass filled the room for a moment. Frank's warm palm pressed against her hip and he pushed her gently onto her back, propping himself up on his elbow over her. "You'll be careful won't you? Take precautions I mean?"

"Yes, of course."

The chilled breeze puffed over her bare skin and vibrated between them in little waves. The pads of his fingers were four molten stars dragging slowly down her throat and over her breast. She held her breath.

"I have a good poker face Nella. I've made a career out of knowing when to tell the truth and when to shut up." His fingers were featherlight on her thigh and his hand shook, as if it were afraid to touch her. "But he knows. I can't hide it. He knows that I love you. He taunts me with it every day because he can see how badly I want you every minute we're apart."

She cooled his face with a stroke of her hand. "Is that why you've been so angry?"

His hand tightened slowly around her thigh, his thumb sinking gently into the soft skin. A ripple of want shook her. "He said- it doesn't matter what he says."

Nella raised her face to his and kissed him. "No," she said as they parted, "it doesn't matter what he says. Because I'm here. You've got me, I'm yours."

Frank smiled, but it faded quickly and he closed his eyes. "He knows though. He knows how it would hurt me if anything happened. He makes a game of it-"

She shook her head. "Nothing will happen. I'll be careful, I promise. He doesn't know I'm going to search his cell, he doesn't even know that we are still looking for the samples. He's convinced he has us outsmarted. He's relaxed and smug now, waiting for the world to fall into his trap. It'll be okay."

His hand relaxed around her thigh and she felt somehow abandoned. He drew back from her a little. "Nella, do you really love me? You aren't here out of pity or until someone better comes along?"

"There's no one better in all the world, Frank. And if there were, I wouldn't want him." She pulled him down toward her and gently guided his

hands where she wanted to be touched.

He kissed her neck and she could feel his lips smiling. “Not even the old man with the boat?” he asked.

She laughed. “Well, it is a *nice* boat.”

Frank’s hands moved smoothly now, confident and powerful. “Yeah, but can he do this?” Frank asked with a wicked grin.

“Oh God,” Nella gasped and arced into him.

The Search

“I don’t like leaving you without your car. What if you need to go to the hospital?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “I won’t need to go to the hospital.”

“But if you find it and the vial is broken—”

“Then I won’t be going to the hospital. Sevita needed the car. It didn’t make sense to have it parked here all day.”

“Then drive me to the courthouse and take this one.”

The parking lot was cold and breezy, old leaves raking themselves across it and catching in the cracks like little flags. She straightened Frank’s tie even though it was already perfect. “It would look odd if I’m supposed to be treating Ann and I’m at the courthouse.”

“You’re so stubborn,” Frank sighed, “be careful.”

Nella squinted up at him, the bright morning sun splintering and bouncing from the waving spring leaves and sudden tears, blocking her sight with bright sparkles. “I will be. As much as I can.”

He leaned in and kissed her. “I’ll be back after court.”

“Okay. Good luck.”

“You too.” He got into the car and watched her walk across the lot to the prison. He was gone before she had opened the heavy glass door.

Yesterday had been torture. It had worn away grain by grain as she sat in the hot courtroom and listened to Dr. Schneider’s lawyer drone on in her opening statements. Frank had been testy and anxious all night too. He had been frantic, almost desperate and panicky when he touched her. Neither of them had slept well and Nella felt like it had been weeks since she’d had a quiet, full night’s rest. It was almost a relief not to be waiting any more. She tried to pretend that she wasn’t on edge, but everything seemed grating and sharp. The fluorescent bulbs buzzed like a colony of dying flies and the smell of bleach and floor cleaner was dizzying. She brushed it off as she walked to the metal detector.

Terry was slumped on a stool beside it. Shocked, Nella almost asked what he was doing there before she remembered that he hadn't seen her at Frank's house. He waved her through without concern. She hurried to Stan Kembrey's closet sized office. He was tapping a pen too quickly on the side of his knee and staring at the biohazard suits he'd hung from an upper locker.

"I don't like this," he said without greeting her, "I think we should let the military handle it."

"I understand. You go ahead and make a call to the Governor. I'll get started and he can catch up."

"It's not my fault it's gone on this long. You and Frank have been mighty close with all this."

Nella perched on the stool across from Stan. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap. I'm as nervous as you. But we don't have time to wait for the military. You didn't see that courthouse. It's packed to the gills. If the samples somehow end up there—"

Stan stood up and patted her shoulder. He grabbed one of the biosuits and handed it to her.

"I'll go alone if you like. I'll understand if you don't want to go in there," she said.

He pulled the other suit off the hook. "No way. Frank would have my head. Besides, I know all the good hiding places."

The suit was sticky and hot and the mask itched and scraped. Nella tried to adjust to it as they walked toward the cell block. "Did you clear the block?" she asked as loudly as she could. She had to strain to hear Stan's muffled response.

"Yeah, we moved Miss Connelly to the infirmary for now. The only staff in the block are lab techs to help, you know, if we find it. They are wearing suits too. Could it be in any other spot than his cell?"

"It's possible, but very unlikely."

Stan glanced around bending to peer down the hall. "As far as anyone knows, this is a routine drill. Let's try to keep it that way."

Nella nodded to show that she understood. Stan opened the dented metal door to the block. He started barking orders as they entered. "You and you, search the common area. You and you get Ann Connelly's cell. You two on Dr. Schneider's." Stan grabbed her arm. "You're with me." He called after the scattering teams. "Remember, treat this as a real biohazard event, not a drill. If you find the goods, don't handle them. Call me. Is that understood?"

A chorus of affirmatives echoed back at him. He looked at Nella and she could see the sweat rolling down his forehead. "God I hope you're right," he said.

“Me too.”

They walked into the small cell and closed the door behind them. There was barely room to pass by each other and Nella was grateful that she wasn’t claustrophobic. “You said they’d be in vials. Where should we start looking?”

“I think they are in the pens. The jeweler is making fountain pens for the defense lawyers and you said he came in with some. Maybe he’s replaced the cartridges with the vials.”

Stan nodded. “All right, you try on the table there and I’ll check the bookshelves here. As you go, make a neat pile of things you have checked to one side so we don’t repeat. Remember to check the spine of books and open them all, a lot of prisoners will hide things in the spine or cut small holes into the pages. We’ll empty out the whole place if we have to.”

Nella reached for the small cup of pens and pencils on the desk. She tried to keep her hands from shaking. Two of the three fountain pens were sitting in the cup. She gently picked up the first one. She slowly unscrewed the handle and pulled the cartridge out. Just ink. She clicked her suit’s small flash light on and checked the hollow where the cartridge had been and then the empty space in the handle. Both empty. She put the pen back together and placed it beside her on the window sill. She reached for the next one. The handle unscrewed easily but the cartridge was stuck. Nella clicked the flashlight on. She couldn’t see what it was stuck on. It looked like a normal cartridge. The suit was clinging in several places because she was sweating so profusely, but she felt a chill growl up her spine and bite the back of her skull. There was no help for it. She had to get it out. “Do you have tweezers Stan?” she asked.

“On the lab cart. One second.” He left the cell and Nella stood there praying that she wouldn’t break the cartridge. He hurried back, handing her the tweezers. “Did you find it?”

“I don’t think so. But I have to make sure. Maybe you should- step out for a minute.”

Stan tapped his mask. “That’s what these are for. I’m not leaving you alone in here, not for anything.”

Nella nodded. The seal over the nose piece slid and her eyepieces fogged. With a shaky hand she pressed the seal down on her sweaty nose and waited for the lenses to clear. She poked the tweezers into the pen and grasped the cartridge, trying not to squeeze too tightly. She tried to wiggle the cartridge but it didn’t come loose. She hesitated for a moment and then yanked. *Please don’t break, please don’t break, please don’t break.* The cartridge came free. Just ink. Nella realized she’d been holding her breath and let it out in a rush. She saw Stan watching her and shook her head. She reassembled the pen and put it next

to the other one. One by one she checked each of the ball points, just in case, and then the cup. She moved on to the small pile of books as Stan quickly and thoroughly emptied the shelf. By the time she had finished what was on the table, he was already removing the mattress to search it. They found the last fountain pen under the bed, but it was filled with ink as well. Discouraged, they continued on, checking hollows in the little bit of furniture, the air vents, the plumbing. It took them almost two hours to search and put the room back together. The other teams were already finished. Stan sat wearily on the bunk and looked up at her. "You're sure the jeweler didn't take any cartridges or vials with him?"

"Frank got him to show him the pens without any problem. He wouldn't have been that open about it if he had. Frank said they were hollow, ready for cartridges but not filled." Nella sat on the other end of the bunk. "Maybe Dr. Pazzo keeps them on him all the time."

Stan shook his head. "I don't see how. They are searched pretty thoroughly when they leave the prison and again at the courthouse and then again when they come back."

Nella sat silent in disappointment.

"What I don't get," said Stan suddenly, "is why he would go to all this trouble."

"What do you mean?"

Stan got up and checked the door, making sure the other teams weren't listening. "Well, you said this bacteria is even worse than the first one, right? And that every last one of us was probably going to get it, Immunes and all."

"That's right, as far as Dr. Carton explained it."

Stan scratched his head through the suit's plastic cover. "Well, it's not like Dr. Pazzo is going to escape it then right?"

"Not unless he finds a bunker somewhere. I don't think he wants to escape it anyway. He'd want a front row seat to watch the world fall apart. It's revenge for him."

"Why bother with trying to secretly transport vials in pens or body cavities or whatever then?"

"I don't follow."

"Why set an elaborate trap when he could be the trap himself? Why not infect himself and then just walk into court and talk to as many folks as possible, shake as many hands as possible, heck, even testify and cough a bit? You said the courthouse was packed. How often do that many people get together any more?"

Nella felt the bottom of the world fall away. "Oh God."

The New Plague

Stan stood up when he saw her reach for the table for support. He helped her up. “Don’t panic Dr. Rider. It’s weeks to the verdict, he won’t have done it yet. We just have to find the vials. It’s not like he can just pop ‘em open and swallow ‘em right?”

She regained her balance. “No, he needs some special ingredients to revive the bacteria. But I don’t think he’ll wait very long.” She pushed past him into the common room where the other teams were waiting. “Is there a lab tech here? Someone that knows how to do a culture? Anyone who knows how to grow specific bacteria?”

“Sure,” came a muffled voice, “Kevin was studying microbiology before the Plague.”

“Where is he?” asked Stan.

“Right here, sir.” One of the biohazard suits stepped forward. Nella walked up to him. He squinted at her through a crack in his thick glasses. “Sir, is she—”

“She’s cleared to be here, you can answer her questions,” said Stan.

“Kevin, if you know the answer, I’ll spend every last ration I have to get you a pair of glasses without a crack. Did you ever revive frozen samples in school? Or have to speed up cultures without contaminating them with other strains?”

“Sure. We don’t have many incubators anymore and power’s at a premium anyway. We find ways to speed up cultures all the time in the infirmary.”

“What do you need to do that?”

Kevin squinted at her. “What do *I* need or what could a prisoner use to do it?” The others closed in, suddenly interested. Nella glanced at Stan. He looked worried, but she decided to risk it.

“What could a prisoner use?”

“Well, it’d have to be sterile, so nothing could contaminate the sample. But if he could get his hands on bleach or alcohol or even vinegar he could do it if he was careful. And then he’d need a growth medium. We usually use agar, but he wouldn’t have access to that. Gelatin would work or even beef broth but you need meat for that and that’s mighty scarce these days. The cafeteria still serve the old kid’s stuff?”

One of the others chuckled. Stan shook his head. “Haven’t seen any in years. All got used up in soldiers’ mess kits for quick protein fixes.”

Kevin tried to push his glasses up with one hand and hit the lenses of his

mask instead. He shrugged. "A potato would do it pretty well I think."

Stan was already talking to the cafeteria on the intercom. "How fast would it grow?" Nella asked.

"Enough to do what?"

"To infect someone with that strain."

Kevin glanced at the others. She could see them shifting uncomfortably as if they were ready to run out the door. "Well, it depends on the bacteria, but it could be a day, maybe two."

She saw Stan casually pull out the service gun he wore on the belt outside the biohazard suit. He was standing behind the group so that they couldn't see him. She smiled brightly at Kevin, willing them all not to panic. "Okay, Kevin, last question pays for all. If this theoretical prisoner's bacteria was primed and ready, how long from being infected would a person be contagious, say, through casual contact or breathing on others?"

Kevin shrugged and tried to sound casual, but his voice cracked in the middle. "Depends on the bacteria. Worst case scenario? A few hours to a day."

Nella heard running footsteps outside the door. Her companions turned toward it. "Sir?" asked one of them.

Stan held the gun at his side, pointed toward the ground but clearly visible to everyone. "This isn't a drill, is it?" asked Kevin.

"I'm afraid not. I'm sorry boys. I ought to have told you, but I really didn't think there was anything to it. But we've all trained for this and we've got our suits, so everyone just sit tight and I'm sure we'll be decontaminated and released quickly."

A few of the soldiers relaxed and sat down at the picnic tables scattered over the common area. Stan put the weapon away when he saw that no one was going to bolt. He spoke through the intercom again. Nella walked up to him and Kevin trailed behind her. Stan turned toward her. "Sorry Doc, that means you too."

"How long ago did he break the vials?"

"The Warden said Dr. Pazzo requested permission to start a small vegetable patch in the yard sometime last week. He got seed potatoes from the cafeteria. And Sunday night he reported that he was sick and requested cleaning materials for his cell but refused the guards' offer of help and also turned down a visit to the infirmary."

"Bleach?" asked Kevin.

Stan sighed and nodded.

Kevin tried to push his glasses up again, hitting the eyepieces of his mask. "Sunday. Where are the potatoes? And where are the vials?"

“Who knows? Flushed maybe? They weren’t important after he’d infected himself. And they might have led to his getting caught.”

Nella grabbed Stan’s arm, her glove slipping on the smooth plastic of his suit. “Stan, that means he could be contagious right now! All those people at court- Frank-” She started for the door but Stan held her back.

“You can’t go out there Dr. Rider.”

“Someone has to stop him and warn them. What if he’s not contagious yet? He wouldn’t have done it until the night before last, after he found out about Ann’s condition. What if there’s still time? More than half the City is in that courthouse right now Stan-”

“I know. I already notified the Warden. He’s calling the Governor right now. I’m sure the courthouse will be cleared in a matter of minutes.”

“But he needs to be isolated-”

Stan firmly pushed her onto a bench. “Everything that can be done is already happening. There’s nothing we can do without risking even more people.”

Nella’s eyepieces were misting up and she couldn’t tell if she were crying or sweating or both. Stan sat down beside her. “He’s going to be okay. Frank’s harder than he seems. I’ve known him a long time Nella,” he patted her knee and the plastic crinkled, “He’s going to be mad with worry about you, but he’s going to be okay.”

“We can’t just sit here Stan-”

“We didn’t just sit here. We caught him. If you and Frank hadn’t figured this out when you did,” Stan sucked in a whistling breath through the mask, “Well, now we still have a chance. A *good* chance that we got ahead of Pazzo. And, please don’t take this the wrong way Dr. Rider, now it’s time to let people who know better what we’re dealing with take over and do their jobs. We’ve done our part and then some. Just try to relax and I’m sure we’ll be playing cards with Frank in light quarantine by the end of the day.”

“Um, sorry to interrupt sir . . .” Kevin was still standing near them and he shifted his weight to one foot nervously.

“That’s okay, Kevin wasn’t it? What’s on your mind?”

“It’s just that- well, if we’re going to get sick, we were sort of wondering what we might be infected with. Some of us are Cured sir, and we just want to know what to expect this time.”

Stan patted Nella’s knee again. “I’ll handle this,” he stood up, “You just stay quiet.”

“But some of them may-” Nella began.

Stan shook his head. “They won’t. And if they look like they’re going to,

“well, you can jump in then.” He walked over to the soldiers. “Listen up boys,” he yelled.

Containment

Nella didn’t know how long it was before they were sent through the decontamination shower, but it felt like years. The plastic suit was scratchy and slimy with sweat and her hair was sticking to her skin. Even her breath felt sluggish and thick, like she was in a sauna and she had to fight the urge to rip the face mask off more than once. She could tell the others were having trouble too. But at last another group of soldiers in biohazard suits, a different color, led them out of the cell block and into the parking lot where the chemical shower and a large bus were waiting. As soon as they were through the shower, the suits were allowed to come off and Nella heard audible sighs of relief around her as her group removed the hot plastic. The cool afternoon breeze made her feel like a hollow reed. They piled onto the bus and were driven to the City’s unused hospital. Her heart raced in her chest as the bus pulled up to the defunct ambulance entrance. There were a number of other buses sitting in the street. The exterior lights had been turned on and large barriers in orange and red made a ring around the building, as if it were a pustule about to burst and flood the City with illness. Soldiers in plastic suits scurried in and out or stood at the barrier with conspicuous guns.

A masked soldier shouted a muffled order at them. Stan led them into the hospital. The floor they were taken to was empty and Nella’s heart sank. She’d hoped to find Frank or Christine and Sevita at least. The masked soldier stood on the counter at the nurses’ station. “Folks,” he shouted, “Thank you for your patience. I understand you’ve all been briefed on the situation—”

One of the group shouted, “We were the ones that discovered the situation!”

The masked soldier continued, “Yes. Then you know how grave it really is. At the moment we’re hopeful that none of you have been exposed. You are free to roam this floor as long as you stay on it. The general populace has been informed of the situation through the news network, but I understand some of you may wish to contact loved ones. The phones in the patient rooms have been turned on. However, there are several hundred people on the other levels of the hospital who came from the courthouse and as you know, our phone system is limited at best. Please have some patience when you’re trying to get through to your family. I understand you folks haven’t had chow since breakfast. Someone

will be around with dinner shortly. Later on several doctors will be coming around to assess the chance of your exposure. Please cooperate with them. We don't want you to have to be here any longer than necessary.”

“How long is that exactly?” asked Stan.

“Best case scenario, a week.” The men around Nella groaned and she felt her own chest tighten with panic. The soldier raised an arm for quiet. “I know it's not ideal. But the last thing any of us wants is to carry this out into the City, back to the people we care about. We all know how serious this is. From what I understand, there's no hope for a Cure this time. Our only recourse is to contain it. I know I don't need to tell you, of all people, the extremes we will take to keep it contained if we have to. Please cooperate and we'll all get through this together.”

The soldier hopped down and headed to the elevator. The small knot of soldiers broke apart, some headed for bed, others for the television set. Nella felt lost, unmoored, bored and terrified at once. She wandered into a patient room. They'd been hastily set up with an army cot and a folding chair, the old furniture scavenged long ago. She sat on the cot and stared out the broad window into the bright spring sparkle of the City. The trees were waving in the breeze but the windows were sealed shut. She snapped on the air conditioner. A phone rang distantly down the hallway.

“Dr. Rider?” someone shouted, “Nella Rider?”

Nella walked out into the hall. “Yes? Here I am.”

A man down the hall waved a phone receiver at her. “What room number are you in? Someone's looking for you.”

She peered back at her door. “312.”

The man nodded and put the receiver back to his ear. Nella ran back into her room and picked up the phone halfway through the first ring.

“Frank?” she asked.

“Sorry, Nella, it's me.”

“Sevita are you okay? Is Christine with you?”

“Yes, we're fine. But Frank isn't with us. He and all the rest of the people on the floor were taken away separately. I think he's upstairs but I can't find a soldier who can tell me. Are you all right? Are you infected? Someone said you found the broken vials.”

“No, we didn't find anything. It was Stan Kembrey that figured out Dr. Pazzo had infected himself.”

“The metal detector guy?”

“I think he's responsible for a lot more than the metal detector.”

“You think they'd let me have an interview with him?”

"A phone interview maybe. We aren't going anywhere for at least a week."

"Us either. One of the soldiers said that the people on the floor were going to have to be isolation at least a month. They had a greater chance of getting infected and they won't be symptomatic until then."

Nella sighed. "At least the interior phones are working."

"Yeah, outside lines are tied up but I should be able to talk to anyone inside. At least I'm where the action is." Sevita's voice broke and Nella was shocked to realize that her friend was truly scared.

"Hey, there's a guy down here, one of the techs. He thinks we caught it in time."

"Yeah?"

"He says Dr. Pazzo could have been infected in the time he had, but he probably isn't contagious yet." She heard Sevita blow out a shaky sigh.

"That's good. Christine will be so relieved." She paused for a minute. "Listen Nell, I don't want to hang up, but they're here to check our vitals and take blood tests and stuff."

"I'm okay Sevita. I'm going to try to find Frank though, so if I don't answer for a while—" Nella trailed off, unable to speak past the panic choking her throat.

"Okay, Nella. I'm sure he's fine. I'll try to find out which room he's in too. If I hear anything, I'll call. Chris and I are in 517 if you need us. Talk to you later."

"Yeah, all right." Nella hung up the phone. She walked down to the elevator where there were two guards posted.

"Can I help you ma'am?" One of them shouted over his mask.

"One of my friends was on the floor of the courthouse. I'd like to call him. Could you find out which room he's in?"

The guard shifted his weight. "They're awfully busy up there ma'am. I can try to reach someone, but it will probably be a while before we hear back."

Nella summoned a charming smile. "That's okay, I can try each room on the floor if you just tell me the floor number."

"Sure, I think they are up on seven."

She thanked the guard and tried to walk calmly back to her room. She noted the room numbers as she passed. 333 was the last number on this hall. She hoped the seventh floor had fewer. Nella closed the door to her room. She sat on her cot and held the heavy phone. What if she got Dr. Pazzo instead? She decided she didn't care. She dialed 701 and held her breath.

"Hello?" It was a woman's voice. Nella hoped it wasn't Dr. Schneider but she couldn't tell.

"I'm looking for Frank Courtlen. Do you know which room he's in? Can you see him?"

"No, they have us in separate cells."

"Cells?"

"They're all glassed in. I can't see down the hall, just the room across from me. Do you know what's happening?"

"They didn't tell you?"

"No. Court was going on as usual and all of a sudden a large group of soldiers burst in and started yelling. That defendant, Robert Pazzo flew past me and kissed the other defendant square on the mouth. And then all hell broke loose."

"Who did he kiss? Ann Connelly?"

"That sweet girl they found incompetent yesterday? No she wasn't there. That Schneider woman. Jake- that's the other bailiff and I, we jumped up to stop him but the soldiers already had their weapons out and they bundled us all into a bus, except for Pazzo, he went separate and brought us here. They told us someone would be by to talk to us, but it's been hours. What's going on? Is it a coup or something?"

Nella tried not to scare her as she explained, but the woman was in tears by the time she finished. "I'm sorry," Nella said, "I just wanted to find my friend." She hung up. Then she remembered that she hadn't asked the woman what the room number across from her was. Nella swore. She walked to the nurses' station and scrounged for a pen and clipboard. She tried to avoid looking at the patient files that had been abandoned during the outbreak of the Plague. They still lay scattered on the desk and underfoot. The dusty footprints of scavenger teams and the soldiers here now obscured most of the information, but Nella felt like it was an invasion of privacy anyway. She found an old takeout menu in a drawer. She wrote down 701 in the wide margin and returned to her room. She tried 702. The other bailiff. She kept her answers perfunctory, trying to keep the man from panicking. He hadn't seen Frank since the bus either. Dr. Schneider's lawyer was across from him in 712. She thanked him and hung up. 703 was Judge Hawkins. He managed to flag down a soldier for her. He sounded sad and frightened and angry at the same time.

"We think we caught it in time," she offered.

"Really?" he asked, "How soon will we know?"

"I guess when Dr. Pazzo starts showing symptoms. I think they are going to let everyone down here go in a week if our tests are clear. We had far less risk of exposure. I know- I know that doesn't really help you, but I thought you might like to know."

“No, no, that’s a big relief. I know I was reluctant to let you and Frank pursue this- I thought the military would handle it better. I just wanted to say that I don’t think anyone but you two would have followed it this long or found it in time.”

“I wish we’d found it sooner. I wish I hadn’t been searching for an elaborate plot and just paid attention to what was staring me plain in the face.”

“I guess I can say this now, because I don’t think we’re going to be seeing Robert Pazzo return to the trial, if there is a trial after this. He had most people fooled Dr. Rider. I confess, I watched that footage that Mr. Courtlen left with me. I wasn’t supposed to, it could have tainted the case, but I was so worried about what you two were up against and whether I’d made the right decision, so I watched it. And I was convinced right along with you. I don’t know how you figured it out. Maybe someday after this, when I’m retired or Mr. Courtlen’s decided to get out of the lawyer trade, we’ll all have a drink and you can tell me about it.”

“That would be nice, Your Honor.”

“Now though, you must be itching to talk to Frank. This fine young gentlemen tells me he is in 708. Don’t be a stranger Dr. Rider. It’s going to be a long month and I have a feeling we’re all going to need your services up here before the end.”

“I’ll check in with you often, I promise.”

Nella hung up and dialed Frank’s room.

Finding Frank

“Hello?” His voice was liquid warmth sliding into her chest.

“Frank,” she said and then her voice failed.

“Nella? Is that you? Thank goodness. I’ve been trying to reach the prison for hours. Please tell me you wore masks- Dr. Pazzo has already released it. I don’t know how, but he did. I’m at the hospital-”

“I know Frank. I’m just a few floors below you. Stan was the one that figured it out. The pens, they were just like the lock. There for show, so we wouldn’t pay attention to what he was really doing. He infected himself. Did you shake his hand today? Did he cough on you?”

“No. He seemed nervous and I was still angry with him so I didn’t try to get him to talk. It was my turn for opening statements anyway so I was standing for most of the session. When the soldiers came in he bolted across the room and kissed Dr. Schneider though. He must have wanted to make sure. How did you know I was here? Are they going to let you come upstairs if you wear a suit?”

"No, not yet anyway. I'm in quarantine too, at least for a week. They don't know if the cell block was contaminated."

"But you wore a mask, didn't you?"

"Yes, a whole biohazard suit. But they want to be sure. The rest of the court is here too, somewhere upstairs from me." Nella heard a hoarse yell through the receiver. "What's that? Is everything all right?"

"Yeah, it's Dr. Pazzo. He hasn't stopped screaming since they grabbed him. He's in the room next door right near me and Dr. Schneider. They must think we're the highest risk." She could hear Frank nervously tapping the phone cord.

"There's a guy here, a microbiologist. He thinks it's going to be okay. Maybe not for Dr. Schneider, but for everyone else. He doesn't think Dr. Pazzo is contagious yet."

"That's good news."

"Frank, I'll come visit you as soon as they let me. And we can talk as much as we want on the phone until then."

"Don't come up here. I don't want you to be exposed."

"I won't be, I'll wear a suit and all of the rooms are contained I think."

"Maybe- maybe you shouldn't come up here anyway." She heard another yell from Dr. Pazzo and Frank's breath shook in her ear. There was a soft thud as Frank's forehead gently struck the glass wall of his room.

"You aren't going to get it Frank. It's going to be a long couple of weeks because I'll miss you, but I'll talk to you or see you every day—"

"If I- I can't turn into that again. You can't see me that way."

"It's not going to happen. We caught it in time. You'll see, a month from now we'll be walking out of here together—"

Frank sobbed. "I have to go. There's tests. I have to go." He hung up.

Nella put the receiver back into its cradle. She curled up on the cot, her back to the bright afternoon and cried herself to sleep.

She woke to a knock on her door. It was Stan with a tray of food and a doctor in a biohazard suit.

"Sorry," Stan said, "I didn't want to wake you, but Dr. Corey needed to evaluate you."

Nella sat up. "Hi," she said to the blank mask. The eyepieces were opaque unlike hers had been, so she couldn't see the person inside. Dr. Corey pulled up the folding chair.

"Officer Kembrey has given me a rundown of events, so I will just need to ask a few questions and take some blood samples." Nella was surprised to hear a woman's voice float out from the mask. She had expected a man. Stan backed out of the room and two more soldiers in plastic suits entered the room holding

large guns. "I trust that won't be a problem?" Dr. Corey continued pointedly.

"Of course," said Nella, bewildered.

Dr. Corey started pulling supplies out of her suit pocket and laying them on the cot beside her. "Officer Kembrey tells me you and Mr. Courtlen first discovered Robert Pazzo's plan some time ago. Why didn't you notify authorities?"

"We only had hunches. And we were afraid if we reported it and Dr. Pazzo found out, he'd release the bacteria early and we wouldn't have a chance to find it."

"I see, and you thought you and Mr. Courtlen were qualified to find this bacteria? Mr. Courtlen has had no medical training and you—" she snapped her gloved fingers and one of the guards handed her a folder. She flipped through it. "You've had basic microbiology and some general biology courses in college and medical school?"

"It wasn't a matter of being qualified or not being qualified. Someone had to do something and we were the only ones that knew about it. We're what was available."

Dr. Corey opened an alcohol swab. The smell stung Nella's nose and made her feel chill before it even touched her. The doctor was so rough that Nella's arm was sore even before the needle. She gripped her wounded shoulder as Dr. Corey pulled on her arm.

"That's not true though. Various people knew about the bacteria at different points in time, isn't that correct? The trial judges, the prosecutor, a prison official, even a reporter. Yet none of you contacted authorities."

The needle bit into her. Nella ignored it. "I told you. We had to keep it quiet so Dr. Pazzo didn't realize we were suspicious. We did the best we could, but we had to involve other people to move forward."

Dr. Corey switched vials and drew another. Nella wished she could see the woman's expression. After four vials, the doctor handed Nella cottonball and a bandage. Nella closed her elbow around the cottonball. Dr. Corey stood up. "I understand you were bitten on your trip to Dr. Carton's lab."

"Yes, but what does that have to do with—"

"I'll need to examine it. Please remove your blouse."

Nella glanced at the guards. "Very well, but do I have to do it in front of them?"

Dr. Corey waved her hand at the guards and they left, closing the door behind them. Nella slid out of her shirt.

"I understand you have more than a professional relationship with Mr. Courtlen." Dr. Corey probed Nella's shoulder with two rough fingers. Nella tried

not to wince.

“Was that a question?”

“Have you had sexual relations with him?”

“I really don’t think that’s any—”

Dr. Corey blew an exasperated sigh through her mask. “Dr. Pazzo could have been infected anytime between Sunday night and today. Mr. Courtlen may have been infected during Monday or Tuesday’s court session. Therefore, we need to know if you and he had intercourse between then and now to assess your risk.”

Nella blushed. “Yes.”

“Put your shirt back on please. Do you have any personal effects here?”

“No, why?” Nella pulled her shirt on again.

“Come with me please.”

Dr. Corey led her into the hallway after pocketing the lab vials. She handed Nella a thin respirator mask. “Put this on please.” She thumbed her radio as Nella obliged. “Would you please add one more to the meals for the seventh floor?” Dr. Corey said into it. Nella caught Stan’s eye and the look he gave her was a mix of pity and fear. The guards grabbed her arms and propelled her forward to the elevator. Nella was too startled to struggle. Dr. Corey joined them and selected the floor button. Stan was yelling, “Wait, where are you—” as the silver door slid closed. Nella felt sweat stand out on her face and on her arms where the guards were holding her. She began to hyperventilate.

“It’s okay, just breathe normally, the mask is just to block disease, not oxygen. Calm down and take slow breaths,” One of the guards said beside her. Dr. Corey and the other guard ignored them. Nella tried to concentrate and slow down her breathing. “That’s right,” said the guard, “If you breathe so rapidly you’ll get dizzy. Feel better?” Nella nodded. The elevator chimed and they walked down a long hallway. All the rooms were fronted with thick glass and Nella could see people sitting or sleeping against the far walls.

“Please,” she said, “Is there a room near Mr. Courtlen.” The friendly guard looked down at her and then at Dr. Corey.

“I don’t care,” said the doctor, “put her where you think she’ll be the least trouble.”

“Be nice now,” said the guard, “and I’ll put you across from him. That room is empty.”

Nella nodded and the other guard released her arm. The friendly guard led her gently down the hall. She could hear Dr. Pazzo yelling, but she couldn’t make out what he was saying. The guard unlocked the glass door and held it open. She obediently walked inside. He closed the door and said, “You can take

off the mask now if you want, you're safe in there. I know you missed dinner, I'll make sure they bring you something later."

"Thank you!" she called after him. Frank was on his cot, his back to her. His legs were too long to fit and they trailed off the end. She decided to let him sleep. She was relieved to be near him. She tried to pull her cot closer to the glass wall, but it had been bolted to the floor. Were they preparing for the day the patients went feral or was it just to prevent blocking the door? Nella lay on the floor next to the glass to be closer to Frank. She was asleep in moments.

Dr. Pazzo Snaps

The phone jarred her awake. She sat up. Frank was sitting cross legged across the way, watching her. He was holding the receiver to his ear. She reached for the phone.

"You can't hear much through these walls. Just Dr. Pazzo's yelling. What are you doing here?"

"The doctor- knew about us. I don't know how. Stan maybe. She said you might have been infected yesterday in court, so I could be infected because of last night."

"But I thought we caught it in time. I thought you said he wasn't contagious yet."

"I think they are just being cautious. At least I'm with you now."

Frank shook his head. She could see the lines on his face draw down in sharp angles. There were dark patches under his eyes and sweat marks on his shirt. "So now you can watch me turn back into one of those things. I can't do it, Nella. I'll die first."

"It's not going to happen. To either of us."

"If it does- will you find a way to- will you ask them to shoot me?"

Nella nodded, not trusting her voice. Frank cleared his throat. "You said Sevita is here with Christine?"

"Yes. Everyone who was in the courtroom or on the cell block is downstairs."

"She must be going crazy. She's in the middle of the biggest story, maybe of all time and she can't report it."

"Don't count on it. I bet she'll get some coverage somehow. Her camera guys are still with her. And if everything goes well, they'll be out in a week."

"And us?"

Nella shrugged. "A few more weeks? Until Dr. Pazzo gets sick maybe."

Frank groaned. "Have we even made it through one day yet?"

"It was early evening when I came upstairs. I wish there was a window."

He scratched his chin. "Well unless they start giving us toiletries we'll be able to measure by beard length. Or clothes deterioration." He grinned and Nella was relieved.

"I hope you know some good jokes," he said, "Or this is going to be a very long month."

"Let's plan our trip. When they bring us food, we can ask for paper and pens. We can make lists of what we need and where we'll stop."

Frank laughed. "I think we're both unemployed Nella. How are we going to buy a boat?"

Nella shrugged. "I have my ways. I've been saving for a while. Little things, matches and sterno, decent cloth, jewelry and several good pairs of shoes. Things people traded me for sessions. And there's—" Nella leaned her head against the glass and looked down the hallway. Empty. She put her hand in front of her face and whispered, "there's the guns and the car too."

"You'd really trade all that just to sail around the world with me?"

"In a heartbeat."

They stayed that way, talking in front of their glass walls until Nella drifted off again, listening to Frank making plans and trailing into sleep himself. When she woke up, the receiver had made an imprint on her cheek. Frank was rolling up his sleeve for a doctor in a plastic suit. A soldier knocked on the glass and Nella backed up, startled.

"I'm bringing you a meal and some new clothes. After you put on the new stuff, put the old stuff into the bag. Make sure you take any possessions out of the pockets. Your old clothes will be burned."

Nella nodded. The soldier opened the door and another brought in the clothing and a tray of food. The doctor closed Frank's door and discarded her gloves. She walked over to Nella's room.

"We should probably get this all done at once."

Nella was not pleased to hear Dr. Corey's voice. Nella held out her arm and was silent while the doctor took her vials and then departed with the guards. She turned back to her cot and picked up the clothes. They looked like a prison uniform. She hoped they were warmer than they looked. She pulled off her shirt and then realized the wall behind her was glass. She held her shirt in front of her chest and peered down the hallway. The phone rang and she jumped.

"I'll watch for you. Hang up the phone. If someone is coming it'll ring." Frank waved at her.

"What about you?"

"I won't peek. Eyes on the hallway."

“Yes you will.”

Frank grinned. “Yes. I will.”

They measured the time that way, by meals and clothing changes. Sevita called them until it was time for her to go. She promised to visit and Nella told her not to, that they’d see her when they were released, so she said she’d call when she could. The hall was quiet, even Dr. Pazzo having quit his frustrated rage within a day. Only the soldiers and the doctor wandered by on occasion, faceless and silent in their suits. Nella tried to keep Frank’s spirits up, but even she was struggling by the end of the second week. One day, during the third week Nella thought, a much older looking Judge Hawkins stopped in front of their rooms. He sat in the middle of the hallway so he could see them both. They were releasing the rest of the court, he said, all but Dr. Schneider, Dr. Pazzo and the two of them. They were highest risk. He said the military government was convening a hearing about the whole affair, but he promised to stand by the decision to keep the bacteria secret. He said he’d see them in a week, but he looked troubled as he walked away. Nella was becoming nervous, though she kept it quiet so that Frank wouldn’t worry. There was even less bustle on the hall now. She thought most of the staff must have left with the rest of the people in quarantine. She began to feel forgotten and it frightened her. She spent hours watching the guard at the end of the hall, making sure he was still there and hadn’t abandoned them.

The phone’s harsh ring woke her one night. She looked across the hall, but Frank’s light was off. It continued to ring, so she picked it up. “Hello?” she asked.

“You know, last time I saw symptoms every time I moved or spoke or tried to work out a problem. But I think it was just exhaustion. It was hard to convince myself I wasn’t sick. Especially after performing for Gerta.” His voice was slurred and depressed. If Nella didn’t know better, she would have assumed he was drunk.

“I’m not here to make house calls Dr. Pazzo.”

He laughed and Nella shuddered at the hollow sound trickling into her ear. “But don’t you want to know why I did it Nella? Don’t you want to hear the whole grand scheme? Every sordid little detail? That’s what we always want in the end, isn’t it? We don’t want the villains to get away, because we want to know why they do what they do. It’s like asking a magician how. But a good villain never tells.”

“You don’t need to tell me why, Dr. Pazzo.”

“Because you know everything, right?” She could hear the sneer in his

voice. “The great Nella Rider always knows. Except you can’t help one poor, innocent girl. And you couldn’t keep up with me either.”

“No. It’s not because I already know why you did this. I can take a guess, but I’m not even sure *you* entirely know why you did this. I don’t want to know why, because I don’t care. Your ‘grand scheme’ was just a mistake, Dr. Pazzo. You messed up. There was no master plan. Sure, you covered your tracks afterward and trapped Dr. Schneider into admitting what you already knew on camera. Maybe when you went after her you meant to keep the samples only as evidence. Maybe you thought it would help you find a cure for Ann. Maybe you wanted to destroy them but couldn’t find the time because Ann needed to eat all the time and you couldn’t risk being away from her for long. But you didn’t *do* anything. You just sat in the lab and watched the world deteriorate around you. Watched Ann die. Tell me, Dr. Pazzo, how many times did you think about killing her and being done with it? How many times did you walk out of the lab intending never to come back? You don’t love Ann. You never did. You may be overwhelmed with guilt by what your research did to her, but you don’t love her, not if you could bring yourself to do what you’ve done.”

She heard him sobbing into the phone and begin to pound on the glass wall. “You wanted me to undo what you did, so you wouldn’t have to feel guilty any more. As if fixing one girl would make the world what it was. You show the world this penitent face, even I believed you for a while. But if you were really so remorseful, if you really felt the weight of the billions of deaths you are responsible for, you would have turned over the samples either when you were caught or to Frank when he was preparing your case or even when we returned with Dr. Schneider. We gave you what you wanted. All you had to do was give us the vials.”

“I gave the world what it DESERVED!” His shout rang in her ear and she winced. Frank’s light turned on and he pressed an ear against the glass. Dr. Pazzo continued shouting and she pulled the receiver a few inches from her ear. “I only did what the world would have done to me. What we already do to each other. No one wants the villain to escape Nella. I *told* you that. I *told* you we were all villains. That’s all that’s left.”

She watched Frank jump as he heard Dr. Pazzo yelling her name. He looked up at her startled. Dr. Pazzo’s voice dropped to almost a whisper and she pulled the phone back so she could hear. “But I knew how to take care of it. All those people going home from the court to their happy little undeserved lives. They’re going to kiss their babies and make love to their spouses and shake hands with their friends. For a few weeks now, everything’s been ordinary. But now, now they’re going to start showing their true selves. We’re all murderers

anyway, Nella, even you.” Nella shuddered thinking of Martin in the Cure camp.

“You failed, Dr. Pazzo. There’s no one infected but you. We caught it in time.”

Dr. Pazzo snarled and shrieked. “Liar! I can see Dr. Schneider across from me. She’s slipping, Nella. She bangs her head on the glass and bites her own flesh. She’s pulled almost all the hair out of her head. And then there’s Frank next to me. You know, he thinks he’s in love with you. I told him you’d never let a monster like him touch you.” She heard a clunk as the receiver was dropped. Dr. Pazzo began banging on the glass wall. “Frank! Frank, are you still sane? Having any cravings yet?” he yelled through the glass. Frank’s face was red but he didn’t turn his head toward Dr. Pazzo’s cell. He was watching her. Dr. Pazzo picked up the phone again.

“But I was wrong about that, wasn’t I? You like that mangled behemoth don’t you? But underneath that cool, polished face he’s just like me Nella. He’s angry at the whole world. If I hadn’t done it, someone like Frank would have. Has he snapped yet? I assume it would be harder to resist the urge the second time. He already knows what it feels like to tear into a woman’s fragile skin with his teeth. And he’s wanted yours for such a long, long time . . . You’re so soft and you smell so good, Dr. Rider. His jaw must ache just thinking about it. I wonder if he’ll get to you before you get sick. You better hope that guard doesn’t let him out Nella.”

“He’s not sick,” Nella whispered, “You were too late. You didn’t infect him.”

Dr. Pazzo just laughed. Nella hung up the phone. She could still hear Dr. Pazzo laughing through the glass. She told herself he was mad, that he had sprung his trap too late. But dread began to creep up and gather in her chest.

The phone rang. She looked over and Frank tapped on the glass, the receiver in his hand. She picked up the phone.

“Did we miss something? Could he have infected someone else without us knowing? Or left a vial somewhere?”

“Nella, it’s okay. We checked everything.” She wanted to relax into the warm calm of his voice, but Dr. Pazzo had shaken her badly.

“We didn’t check his lab.”

“Other people did. Very thoroughly. If it had been there it would have been found. Think like a psychiatrist Nella. You told me he couldn’t bear to have it out of his control, that he’d have to have it nearby where *he* could decide when and how to use it. He used it. He failed. It’s over. The only people that may be sick are right here.”

She sat on the cold floor in front of the glass. “Don’t be sick, Frank.”

He smiled at her. “What was it you said? ‘The world will keep going’ even if I am.”

“What if I don’t want it to?”

“Even if you don’t want it to and even if Dr. Pazzo doesn’t want it to.”

Dr. Schneider Snaps

Another week crawled by. Nella told Frank every dirty joke she could remember. Frank made up a few more. They persuaded the guard to bring them dry erase markers and played hangman on the glass wall. Frank drew a sailing route on his. Nella was persuading him to add a stop on the coast of Africa when they heard a commotion. Nella leaned her head against the glass.

“What is it?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know,” Nella said into the receiver. “It’s Dr. Schneider’s cell I think.”

The doctor hurried by with a first aid kit. “What-”

“Listen,” said Nella pressing her other ear to the glass.

“How did this happen?” snapped Dr. Corey.

“I don’t know,” said the guard, “I heard a thump and came over and there she was on the floor.”

“Did she say anything?”

“I couldn’t understand her, it’s like she was drunk.”

There were a few moments of silence. Nella glanced at Frank. He had backed away from the glass and his face was ashen in the cold light of his room.

“Just a sprain,” said Dr. Corey, “Dr. Schneider, I want you to take it easy now. Try not to move around too much.”

Nella retreated from the glass. Frank had hung up the phone. He was pacing the small room at a frantic pace, his long hands raking his head over and over. Nella dialed his room. He didn’t answer and she hung up so that he could have some peace. Dr. Pazzo began banging his head on the glass about half an hour later. She watched it shake with the impact. Frank curled up next to the glass and covered his ears with his hands. She sat down opposite of him, her heart a high tension wire thrumming between panic for Frank and worry at Pazzo’s frantic bashing.

The banging continued into the night. Nella lay in the half dark, pressed against the glass, trying to see into Frank’s dim room. They hadn’t spoken since that morning. Dr. Schneider began yelling, a high shriek. Nella squeezed her eyes closed as Dr. Pazzo grunted and continued slamming himself against the glass. The phone rang.

“I can’t do this Nella. I’m sorry.”

“Yes you can Frank.” She sat up. “It’s okay. We knew this was going to happen. They were bound to get like this eventually. But we’re not sick.”

“I must be. If he infected Dr. Schneider then he must have infected me too.”

“No, Frank, He kissed her, he put his mouth right on her. He didn’t touch you.”

Frank sobbed and she thought she could see him rocking back and forth in the corner.

“Turn the light on.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m going to show you we’re not sick. Turn on the light.” Nella flipped hers on at the same time. “Good. Now take your marker and draw a line on the floor.” Nella put the receiver down and streaked a line across the tile floor. She picked up the receiver. “Okay Frank, you first. Walk toe to toe down the line without falling or stepping off.”

“It’s not straight.”

“It doesn’t matter. If you’re sick you’ll fall over.”

Frank walked slowly on the line. He picked up the receiver. Dr. Pazzo banged again and Dr. Schneider shrieked in response. Nella flinched.

“Now you do it,” Frank said. She walked smoothly down the line.

“Okay, balance on one foot for as long as you can, say thirty seconds if you can. We’ll do it together.”

She put down the receiver and picked one foot off the floor. She watched Frank do the same. There was a loud crash from another cell and Nella jumped and ran to the glass. Dr. Schneider had ripped the cot out of the floor and was hurling it against the glass. Dr. Corey came running with one of the guards. Nella looked wide eyed at Frank. He watched the doctor enter the cell. Nella pressed her ear against the glass.

“Do it! Fucking give her the sedative Corey,” the guard was shouting. Nella heard a shriek and Dr. Schneider came hurtling out of the room and toward Nella and Frank. Her mouth was streaming with blood and something poked out between her teeth. Most of her hair was gone, pulled out, leaving great purple scabs and she’d chewed most of the skin from her hands. She slammed against Nella’s glass wall, her fingers scrabbling at the smooth door. Dr. Schneider screamed in rage and bashed her forehead against the glass. Nella could hear Frank yelling for help and pounding on the glass wall. A gloved hand pulled Dr. Schneider’s forehead from the glass and another slid around her neck with a knife and made a bright bubbling line across her throat. The shrieking ended and

what was left of Dr. Schneider slumped to the ground. Nella vomited in the corner. The soldier knocked on her wall. "You okay?" It was the friendly one. "Then get on the line and tell your friend to stop yelling or I'll have to assume he's sick."

Nella picked up the receiver with a shaky hand. "It's okay Frank, I'm okay."

He stopped pounding on the glass. The soldier walked down to the last cell. His buddy stumbled out. "That bitch bit me," he said. The other soldier raised his gun.

"Dan, no, it's okay. It'll be okay, it barely broke through the suit." The wounded soldier held up his hands. Nella could see his arm dripping blood onto the floor. It sounded like a leaky faucet in the quiet, even through the glass.

"Sorry man, I have to. It's better this way. Trust me," said Dan and fired. He stepped farther into the cell. Nella heard a groan and then another shot. Dan walked out of the room and up to Dr. Pazzo's door. It was smeared with oil and feces and blood so that he couldn't see through it. Nella watched him take a deep breath. He flung open the door and fired. Nella was shaking. She whispered into the receiver, "I love you Frank."

She could see the sparkle of tears on his cheek. "I love you too," he said.

Dan was talking into his radio as he walked toward them. "I need a cleanup at St. Helena's, full biohazard suits." He stopped in front of Nella's cell and looked at her for a long minute. She shut her eyes. "I also need a new doctor down here. I have two quarantined that need to be cleared asap." He walked farther down the hall and disappeared into the elevator.

Nella heard Frank start breathing again. She cried until she fell asleep still holding the receiver.

The Military Governor

The cleanup took a while, but soon the hall was silent and clean, as if Dr. Pazzo and Dr. Schneider had never been there. Nella and Frank waited through another four days of the same routine, blood tests, meals and new hospital clothes. At last a doctor in normal scrubs walked up to them. "Where's your mask?" Frank asked. The doctor grinned.

"Don't need it. Will you open the door Dan?"

The soldier appeared and Nella was mildly surprised to see his face. He was middle aged and a great scar raked across his face and neck. He opened Frank's cell first.

"Dan? It was you?" Frank shook his hand and the larger man pulled him

into a hug. Frank looked over at Nella. "Thank you for- for everything."

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything, but if I'd had to shoot you-" the soldier swiped at his eyes. He walked over to Nella's door. "I told Frank he should be more social and that he didn't need to hide you away." He swung the glass door open. "Yet here we are, meeting for the first time. Sort of." He stuck out his hand and Nella shook it. This was the large man that had helped defend Frank the night Terry had gotten nasty. "My wife was so upset when she heard you were in quarantine. She wasn't the only one. I'm so glad you and Frank are okay." He pulled her into a hug.

"Come on Dan, I've been waiting a month to kiss her," laughed Frank.

"You and everyone else," growled Dan and then released her.

The doctor cleared his throat. "You are healthy and free to go. I understand if you need a minute, but there's some people who are pretty anxious to see you downstairs." He clapped Dan on the back. "Let's give these folks some space."

They walked down the hall toward the elevator. Frank and Nella were alone on the floor. No glass wall to separate them, no doomsday hanging over them.

"You want to stay another night? I hear the food is first rate here."

Frank grinned and walked toward her. "Eh, I give it three stars. The beds are too hard. But the view is excellent."

"You peeked." She wrapped her arms around him.

"I did," he said.

"I missed you." Her chest was too tight and she felt her breath catch inside and swirl as gravity flipped.

Frank didn't stop to answer, kissing her mouth, her neck, her cheek. She could feel the hum in his chest sing its old familiar, yearning tune as he hugged her.

The phone in Nella's room began ringing. Nella pulled back an inch. Frank reached behind her and pushed the glass door closed. "Don't even think about it," he said.

"It's probably Sevita," Nella said.

"I don't care if it's the Governor himself. It can wait," said Frank and kissed her shoulder, backing her into the glass.

"She'll just come up here if we don't go down." Nella pushed him gently away.

Frank laughed and gave in, letting her loose. "Okay, okay," he looked around the hallway and Nella watched a shudder ripple through him. He took her hand again. "Let's go home."

They stepped off of the elevator and it took Nella's eyes a moment to

adjust to the bright summer light pouring into the windows. For a second all she saw was a shadow of Frank lost in a halo of sun. A great roar like an ocean wave and a sudden downpour of pattering rain hit her at the same time. She threw up an arm in front of her face and blinked. Her eyes adjusted and she saw the lobby filled with people applauding. Sevita was poking her cameraman. Frank nudged her with an elbow, "Look," he whispered, "It was the Governor."

Sure enough, the Military Governor surrounded by a cadre of grim looking soldiers stood in the center of the lobby. "Do you think we're getting arrested?" Nella asked.

"Good thing you know an excellent lawyer," Frank grinned, pulling her farther into the crowd. Cheers came from all sides and people reached out to touch her, to shake hands with Frank, to clap them both on the back.

They reached the center of the lobby, the crowd separating and making a ring around them and the Governor. "Dr. Rider, Mr. Courtlen," he said, "It's taken a while, and interviews with a surprising number of people, but I believe I have now heard almost the whole story regarding the New December Plague and your role in preventing it. As head of the provisional government, I cannot condone your decision not to notify the authorities. However, as someone who has lived through the same harrowing events over the last decade that the rest of you have," the Governor looked around at the crowd and Nella was pleased to see both Immunes and Cured comfortably mixed, "I can understand why you acted the way that you did and why you feared tipping your hand too early. Without the heroic actions of you and your friends, today would have dawned on a terrified and violent City. You have safeguarded one of the last safe zones in the world. And for that, we honor and thank you." The Governor paused as an explosion of applause engulfed them. "There is nothing we can offer you that would even approach what we owe to you. But I understand from some of your friends—" the Governor nodded at Christine who was blushing in the back of the crowd, "You've been planning an exploring expedition to the lost parts of the world. And that you intend not to return. I can't allow it."

He stared intently at Frank. Nella felt Frank's hand tighten around hers. The Governor continued. "This City needs you. It needs to realize that we all need to work and live together, Immunes and Cured. And you exemplify that. So you must return. Therefore, I am appointing the two of you as ambassadors for us. To contact other surviving communities and to distribute the Cure to anyone that still needs it. To set up trade routes and peaceful interaction between us and, if that fails, to explore and rediscover the regions that have been lost to us.

In the harbor there is a sailboat, outfitted by the military and supplied with doses of the Cure, our own provisions from the Farm and a wide variety of trade

goods provided by the people around you. You are free to leave when you choose and to return when you choose. But I and the people of the City, hope you will return quickly and often.” The Governor shook their hands and departed, riding a whirlwind of cheers. The lobby slowly emptied after dozens of well wishes and hand shakes, until only Sevita and Christine remained behind.

Sevita hugged Nella. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” she said, “But I’m going to miss you. You have to come back and see the baby.” Nella was surprised to see Sevita crying.

“You’re getting soft,” she said, “Don’t worry, it will be a few days, we’ve got to pack after all.”

Sevita shook her head and smiled. “No, we did that for you.”

Nella laughed. “Here’s your hat, what’s your hurry?”

A step behind Sevita, Christine spoke up. “There is one more thing to do before you go.” She handed a small envelope to Frank. “I thought I better pick it up from the jeweler, since you were- indisposed.”

Frank grinned and thanked her. He glanced around. “Not here though. And definitely not in hospital pajamas.”

“We thought you’d say that. And we thought you might be tired of hospital food,” said Sevita, “so we’ll meet you on the boat in an hour.” Christine put her arm around Sevita’s waist and gently pulled her away. They walked out of the hospital into the bright, bustling afternoon.

“What was that about?”

“You’ll see,” said Frank with a grin.

The Boat

Sevita and Christine drove her to the docks to meet Frank. Nella had the windows open, enjoying the first fresh air she’d breathed in months. The day was warm and bright and more people than normal wandered the streets on errands. Sevita drove slowly, afraid to hit anyone and unwilling to part with Nella any earlier than she had to. When they puttered past Dr. Carton’s mansion, Nella sat up. The house was dark, as it had been when they had snuck in, but the front door was hanging open as well.

“Sevita, did Dr. Carton move?” Nella asked.

Sevita glanced back at her in the mirror. “Ms. Jacobsen and I decided he would be better off with someone to take care of him. I know that’s your area Nella, but you were so wrapped up in this whole mess- he had a stroke. For now he’s at the prison, just because the medical care there is better than the hospital’s. He’ll go with Ann to Harbor House when she goes.”

Nella nodded and let Dr. Carton and the mansion drop out of her thoughts as it disappeared behind them.

She shifted the flimsy fabric of her dress over the jagged red scar on her shoulder. Nella hadn't worn a dress this impractical since college. Still, it felt nice, like she was floating in the warm breeze of the docks. Christine had insisted that she wear it, just for this once. The short sleeve kept slipping and exposing her old wound and Nella was self conscious. She heard Frank's quick, light step behind her and hurried to cover the scar again.

"Don't," he said and kissed the rough raised skin. "You look beautiful."

Nella blushed and turned around. "It's a nice boat Frank."

He looked up at it, hung with little lanterns and flying a bright white flag. "It's more than I ever thought we'd be able to find."

Sevita appeared at the top of the ramp and waved.

Frank slid an arm around her waist and walked beside her. He was transformed; happy and easy and utterly beautiful. He looked down at her. "I didn't think I'd ever be standing here you know."

"Are you sure you want to go? It could be years before we come back."

He looked back toward the City and the black shell of the Barrier closing it in. "There's things I'll miss, but I'm sure. But if you aren't ready—"

"No, I'm ready," Nella said, "When I walked here from the university, the City seemed so big. And so empty. You'd think it would seem the same after a month locked in a room. But it doesn't. It feels tiny and vulnerable and ancient. Like there's too much shared memory to really start over. It's time to spread out. To be explorers again."

Christine and Sevita were waiting for them on the deck. An impossibly full table was sitting in the center, a lit lantern flickering just a little in the breeze. Sevita was busy filling glasses. "Welcome home," said Christine smiling.

Frank turned to face Nella. "So, is my boat nicer than the other guy's?"

"Definitely," laughed Nella.

"Do you think I have a chance?"

Nella looked at him, confused. "A chance at what?"

Frank reached into his pocket. "Sevita warned me that I'd better do this properly. So, almost-Dr. Nella Rider," Frank knelt on the wooden deck and held out a glittering thing, but Nella's eyes were too blurry to see what it was, "will you marry me?"

"Oh! Yes." And she didn't know if the ship were rocking or she was as he lifted her off her feet to kiss her. "Yes, Frank Courtlen, esquire—"

"Esquire-as-was," he interrupted.

"As-was," she laughed, "I'll marry you. I never want to us to be apart again."

Ned Glist wiped his face as he left the hot parking lot and entered the cool cement prison. He walked up to the young guard slouching next to the metal detector.

"Look," he said gruffly, "I been all over town. Someone told me that Dr. Carton was here. I've got a delivery for him."

"Yeah, he's here, in the infirmary. Go down the hall and make a left after the door," said the guard.

"Well, don't you want to wand me or check it or anything?"

The guard shook his head. "No prisoners here anymore. Just waiting on orders for my next rotation. No need for security anymore. You can go."

Ned shrugged and loped down the blue hall. He wasn't a curious man and he didn't stop to gawk at the empty cells. It only took him a few minutes to find the infirmary where a lone nurse sat at a badly lit desk.

"Do you know where Dr. Carton is?" he asked.

"Sure, he's in the far bed. Are you family?"

"No, just delivering something that was commissioned for him."

"I see. I'm sorry, but I don't think he's going to be able to accept it. He hasn't been able to speak at all since his stroke and he seems not to be very aware of what's going on around him."

Ned puffed out his cheeks in a sigh. "Look, it's nothing big and I promised I'd deliver it. Do you think you could take it and keep it for him, just in case?"

"I don't see the harm," said the nurse, "what is it?"

"Just a fancy gold fountain pen. It was commissioned weeks ago by someone here actually." Ned pulled the shining pen out of his shirt pocket.

"That's a strange coincidence," said the nurse.

Ned shrugged and handed her the pen. "Say, do you mind signing for it? I just want to have proof that I delivered it in case someone asks."

The nurse smiled and took the delivery scrip. "Sure." She pawed around her desk for an ink pen but only found pencils. Shrugging, she used the gold fountain pen and signed her name. "That's funny," she said, shaking it, "no ink."

Ned squinted at the pen. "But I put the cartridge in myself, it was a special glass one instead of plastic."

"Eh," said the nurse, picking up a pencil and signing the scrip, "You know how these special pens are, sometimes takes a while for the nib to start

working.” She glanced over at Dr. Carton. “Between you and me, I doubt he’ll ever get to use it anyway.”