

Blurb

The Price of Immortality

Professor Tessa Magnus is facing death, hastened by a horrible, terminal disease. Her only hope lies in the experimental Idun virus she developed for this exact purpose, a therapeutic hail mary which promises the potential of radical rejuvenation.

Adrian is Tessa's dedicated teaching assistant and nurse. Desperate to save his mentor and dear friend, he is willing to risk not only his career, but also his freedom, for a remote chance at a miracle.

When the Idun virus takes its hold of Tessa, Adrian is preparing to pay the price which her potential immortality exacts from them all.

Author's Note and Content Warnings

Thank you for choosing to read this novel. I'm still struggling with pinning down the genre, although I can definitely say that it is a medical thriller with themes of desperation, mortality, and an oh so ethically gray areas of scientific pursuit.

Generally speaking, this book touches on the topics of terminal diseases, death, and somewhat unethical behavior. There are also some intimate moments that might make some people squeamish.

If you find any of those topics triggering, I would suggest approaching this book with caution.

Again, thanks for reading this book. I do hope you'll enjoy it.

Chapter 1

"Ladies and gentlemen," Mina said, "our guest of honor, Professor Tessa Magnus!"

Adrian finished the long ascent up the steep, improvised ramp, reaching the backstage of the auditorium. Concealed from the crowd by the heavy curtains, he let go of Tessa's wheelchair's handles and wiped his sweaty palms on his pants. "There you go," he told Dawn who stood by him, her hands at the ready.

Dawn smiled, her face breaking into a delicate web of wrinkles. "Thank you, dear," she said as she gripped the handles and started walking the last few steps toward the podium. Despite her age, she walked as straight-backed as a young model on the catwalk, her legs elegantly swishing her dark evening gown. As she cleared the curtains the spotlight found Tessa, and stayed with her as Dawn slowly crossed the stage.

Adrian kept two respectful steps behind, keeping close in case either she or Tessa would want anything.

"Some gentleman," Tessa muttered loud enough for Adrian to hear. "Letting an old woman push an older woman, practically on death's door, so she'd embarrass herself in public."

Dawn finished the short walk next to the podium and leaned down. "Shush. I'm older than you. Besides, the only people in risk of embarrassment are your students in the audience. Just don't test their patience too much. Especially not hers," she added, nodding towards the front row.

Madeline Jackson, the director of the Cambridge Institute for Medical Research sat there, clapping politely, her famous fake smile clinging plastically to her perfectly made up face. Her eyes were sharp, and Adrian wondered if she guessed what was coming. It wouldn't surprise him.

Sitting next to her was the announcer and Madeline's right hand woman, the tiny Dr. Mina Shepherd. She was clad in her customary dark garbs, hands clasped together as if in prayer, nothing resembling a smile at her stark, plain face.

"She can suck on a lemon for all I care," Tessa whispered back and cleared her throat.

Adrian plucked the microphone from the podium and handed it over. "Please remember the script, professor," he reminded her one last time and backed away.

"Students, faculty, and actually contributing colleagues," Tessa started. The microphone, one of the many things Adrian worried about, worked marvelously, picking up Tessa's feeble voice.

"This lifetime award might have felt like an actual honor if not for the committee's urgency, driven by the very real fear that in the next opportunity it would be given posthumously."

Laughter rose from the crowd. Most people knew Tessa and her style, and expected no less.

"The committee is well within reason to assume that," she said. "Neither I nor the highly accomplished doctors in our own hospital expect me to pull a Steven Hawking. The disease is advancing far too fast in my case, and conservative estimations put my lifespan at two months at most, the reasonable ones at two weeks."

The crowd's laughter was snuffed away, and a low murmur of sorrow replaced it.

“Now now. Don’t be like that,” she chided them. “I led a good life. I was fortunate enough to have met my dear Dawn early on, so she’d keep me on the straight and narrow. Well, you know,” she patted Dawn’s hand on her shoulder. “Not exactly straight, but definitely narrow.”

The laughter returned.

“I’ve had an interesting and fruitful career,” she continued, “and while some people predicted that the recent discoveries made in my lab might earn me a Nobel prize, my journey has seemed to have been cut short, ironically enough, by a disease I dedicated over a decade researching.”

The crowd went quiet.

“We’ve made some significant strides, too,” she said, looking back. “I’m saying we, because I would have accomplished nothing without the help of my significant other in the lab, Dr. Adrian Pirth.”

Hesitant clapping rose in the crowd and Adrian nodded to Tessa.

“I have to admit I was skeptical at first, firmly believing that practitioners and researchers shouldn’t mix, but having in my lab a certified nurse with a Ph.D in biochemistry to boot allowed me to gain some of the insights I needed for my discoveries, as well as validate every single stereotype about Canadians.”

The crowd laughed again.

“Without Adrian, the Idun virus would never have come to existence. All the plans and theory would have remained in my faltering mind if he hadn’t scoured the globe, using his Canadian charm to get us access to equipment I didn’t even know existed.”

“You give me too much credit,” Adrian said softly, struggling to choke down his tears. He knew what was coming soon. To him, it felt like a goodbye.

“Poppycock,” Tessa said, and her voice carried loud and clear across the packed auditorium. “Also, those nursing skills sure came in handy. Dawn couldn’t be expected to take care of me on her own.”

He saw Dawn’s palm tighten on Tessa’s shoulder. Tessa seemed to straighten a little, as if drawn up by Dawn’s warm touch.

“If you take nothing else from this evening, take this,” Tessa deviated from her script again. “It takes a village. I never would have achieved anything without those two standing on the stage behind me. I could always count on their moral support, careful and compassionate treatment, and of course those fully functional muscles and motor skills.”

This time the laughter from the crowd was more polite.

Tessa looked at the plaque resting in her lap. “I’m not done, however,” she said. “Before I depart from this good Earth, there’s one more thing I want to give to the world. At least to try.”

Adrian swallowed. She was back on script. He saw Madeline sitting up straighter. Her face remained a frozen mask, but her lips tightened, and she elbowed Mina. Tessa was known for being capricious, almost as known as Madeline’s dislike of surprises.

Adrian himself, despite knowing exactly what's coming, felt his heart pounding in his chest.

"As most of you know," Tessa continued, "the challenges I've faced in the last year were more of a procedural nature. Despite proving that the Idun virus was not only beneficial, but perfectly safe for rats, we never got the approval to test it on larger mammals."

A murmur rose in the crowd. Most of the present knew about the Idun virus. Colleagues and students alike came to Tessa's lectures explaining about the virus, and its seemingly miraculous capability to attack only diseased and senescent cells, leaving behind undifferentiated stem cells to take their place.

"Millions of patients, maybe more, could benefit from the Idun virus today," Tessa said.

"Yesterday. But barriers made of red tape kept it from reaching the public. Of course, our brave director, Mrs. Jackson, fought them tooth and nail, but to no avail."

Madeline nodded, tapping her perfectly manicured fingers on the padded arm rests of her chair.

"Bureaucrats are small, narrow minded people," Tessa continued, steering off script again. There was heat in her voice, true anger. "Their lack of imagination comes at the expense of people suffering from ALS and other degenerative diseases. The treatment is here, and those people have no time to spare. They are dying in droves."

Mina whispered something in Madeline's ear.

"Personally, I have very little to lose," Tessa sighed. "My days are numbered as it is, and I'm already a heavy burden on my loved ones. This is not a fate I could accept."

Madeline stopped tapping the armrest and grabbed it so hard the tendons in her arms stood out. From his few encounters with her, Adrian knew that despite her superficial appearance, Madeline had a quick, analytical mind. He wondered if she was smart enough to catch a hint of what Tessa was about to spring on her. Maybe Mina was helping her connect the dots.

Anyway, it was far too late to do anything about it.

"Nor will I accept my fate," Tessa continued. "Not when I have this one final, last-ditch trick up my sleeve." She paused for a second, letting the hall settle in a moment of perfect silence.

"An hour ago," she said slowly, words Adrian heard her rehearse just now, words they carefully chose, trying to put any and all legal obligations on her. "I injected myself with a minimal effective dose of the Idun virus, a strain specifically engineered to my needs."

A coordinated gasp rose from the crowd. Madeline sat as still as a porcelain statue, her delicate features completely expressionless, not giving a single hint of reaction to the lie. Her ruby red lips, however, were the only feature of her face that didn't turn chalk white.

Her eyes suddenly shifted, just a bit, and settled on him. She must have seen through the deception. In the best of times, before the disease stole the steadiness of her hands, Tessa would struggle to find a vein. With her ALS now it was completely impossible. There was only one person in Tessa's close circle who could inject her with her version of the engineered virus, and Madeline probably figured it out.

Dawn suddenly swayed and used the podium for support. Adrian put his hand on her shoulder, stabilizing her. She knew about the plan well in advance, of course. Tessa wouldn't dream of going behind her back, but she wasn't there when the virus was introduced to Tessa's bloodstream. She must have harbored some hope they wouldn't follow through.

"I take full responsibility," Tessa plowed on, barely audible over the rising chaos in the crowd. "In a few days, maybe even a few hours, we'll know." She paused and smiled dryly, "We'll have the first human datapoint. Either it will kill me, or it will save me."

Dr. Mina Shepherd put her phone back in her many pocketed, heavy dress, and edged sideways out of her row. She bounded up the exit stairwell, no small feat, considering her attire, and conversed with someone before sprinting back climbing up to the stage.

"I want to thank every single one of you," Tessa continued, looking at Mina who strode over. "Students are the candles which—"

Mina snatched the microphone from Tessa's hand. "This ceremony is over," she said in her small voice, which carried an unreasonable amount of authority. "Feel free to deliver your bouquets and gifts to Professor Magnus's room in Addenbrooke's Hospital," she added, glancing down at Tessa, "where she'll be transported immediately."

Her dark, slightly slanted eyes flicked to either side. "Director Jackson and myself would like to take this opportunity to emphasize that we knew nothing of this flagrant display of misconduct," she said, "and we don't condone anything done without proper approval."

With that, she turned off the microphone, placed it carefully on the podium, and motioned to Dawn.

Dawn stepped away from the wheelchair. Stoically, Mina took Tessa's chair's handles and rolled her off the stage. Adrian quickly followed, and barely managed to hear Mina's urgent whisper in Tessa's ear, "Not here, but on the way over, we are going to have words."

Madeline was waiting at the foot of the ramp, and joined Adrian on the walk outside. "Mina is responsible," she said, staring daggers at him, "but you're accountable. Am I clear?"

Adrian nodded. He didn't need a reminder. For him, more than anyone, losing Tessa meant losing everything. Both of their lives were at stake.

He hurried after Mina to the ambulance that was waiting out in the driveway and joined Tessa inside, still intrigued by the cold, greedy glint that sparkled in Madeline's emerald eyes.

Chapter 2

If nothing else, Mina was efficient. In mere moments after their arrival, Tessa was already dressed in a blue hospital gown and lying in a state-of-the-art hospital bed with an IV line in her vein. Adrian sat on one side of the bed, Dawn on the other.

"If I go belly up, you could always flee from Madeline back to Canada," Tessa suggested. Despite the fear in her eyes, she was trying her hardest to cheer everyone up, so far with limited success.

"I have nothing waiting for me there," he replied.

She smiled with some effort. "Maybe you had nothing. Once the news of what we've done spreads out, universities will shower you with grants and luxurious positions for participating in the development of the Idun virus."

"Participating in a second degree homicide, you mean."

Dawn frowned at him. "Your horrible sense of humor is rubbing on him," she told Tessa. "You're staying right here with us," she told Adrian. "We'll get through it. Together. We're your family now."

Adrian sighed. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Where did Mina go?"

Adrian pointed outside of the room. "She's getting Dr. Paisley through the bureaucracy, so she could work here. Insurance and everything."

Dawn frowned. "Why do we need Elise? They have fine doctors here."

"The best. Still, besides being Professor Magnus's primary physician," Adrian explained, "she's also a prominent virologist. If anyone is equipped to handle the reactions to the Idun virus, it's her."

Dawn shifted uncomfortably when he referred to Tessa as Professor Magnus, as he knew she would. They've had that discussion many times, but old habits died hard, and sometimes not at all.

"So where is she?"

"On her way from London, I would imagine."

"Hear that love? Your—" Dawn stopped. Tessa's eyes were closed, and she was snoring softly. "Is she..?"

"Asleep," Adrian said, pointing at the monitor. "The virus is engineered for her. Its incubation time is negligible, so it must have already spread enough to weaken her. I would expect her temperature to rise fairly soon."

Tessa didn't even stir as Dawn took her hand in hers. "So what do we do now? Wait?"

Adrian nodded. "Maybe read something," he suggested, pulling out his phone.

They didn't wait long. In fifteen minutes, Tessa's temperature skyrocketed. Adrian ushered the ashen-faced Dawn out of the room as the medical staff rushed in. He was relieved to see Elise

among them, giving out orders while going through Tessa's chart. How she made the trip so fast he didn't know, or even care.

Through the open door Dawn and he watched the doctors and nurses busy themselves efficiently, feeding Tessa fluids, sedatives and medication intravenously, and when that failed to work, bringing in cooling blankets.

The maelstrom of activity died as suddenly as it started. "There's nothing much more we can do," Elise explained as she let them in. "We made her as comfortable as we could. Now all we can do is let her adjust." She looked sideways at Adrian. "In most cases I'd say we should let her immune system fight the virus, but I think this case is different."

The air in the room stank of antiseptics, and was chilled to the lowest settings of the air conditioning system, well below comfort.

"It is," Adrian agreed. "The virus interacts with her immune system, and they attack the damaged cells together. This is what's causing the fever. This phase shouldn't last long. It didn't with rodents, at least."

"I'll be down at the lab, catching up," Elise told them. "Call me if you need me, otherwise I'll see you during rounds," she added and left the room.

Adrian dragged the recliner, motioning to Dawn as he put it next to the bed. Dawn sat down and grasped Tessa's motionless hand.

Even unconscious, Tessa didn't stop shivering. Once in a while, her face twitched, as if she suffered micro-spasms of pain.

"You didn't tell me it would be like that," Dawn said.

Adrian wasn't sure who she talked to. Tessa, naturally, didn't reply, and neither did he.

"You know," Dawn turned her head toward him. Her cheeks were wet with tears. "We discussed going to Switzerland. Ending her suffering. Well, I discussed it. She rejected it outright."

He looked at the frail woman lying on the bed, burning up despite the best treatment modern medicine could offer. "She believed the Idun virus would work. At the very least, she had hope." He forced himself to look straight into Dawn's teary eyes. "I think you should too."

"I have hope," she said, looking back at Tessa. "What else do I have?"

Adrian couldn't answer.

They waited in the relative silence of the room. Hospital rooms are never truly silent, with the low hum of the air conditioning, Tessa's shallow breaths, the occasional shuffle of Dawn's feet, and the far too frequent beeping of the monitor.

Tessa's heart rate was rapid enough to worry Adrian. He saw it cross the hundred line more than once. He didn't believe she'll survive this level of stress for long. She didn't have the fortitude.

A few minutes later, Dr. Mina Shepherd came in through the door. Her long, neck-to-ankles dress swished with her urgent steps as she came up to Tessa. "How is she doing?" She asked Adrian.

"As well as can be expected," he replied.

"That doesn't really answer the question, does it?"

Adrian sighed. "She's a woman in her late seventies with an advanced case of ALS and a genetically engineered virus which was introduced straight into her bloodstream, prompting her immune system to attack all of her systems simultaneously. Are you asking for the prognosis?"

Mina nodded.

Adrian's eyes flicked to Dawn. She didn't seem to be listening, but he suspected she was. "Well, it's not good," he finally said. "Rats in the lab never had such a spike in body temperature, and that's all the data we had. We're waiting for her bloodwork, but barring surprises, it won't be within normal range."

"In what way?" Mina asked impassively.

"We should really wait for the results," Adrian urged her, glancing at Dawn again. She sat straight up, rigid, staring into space, fighting the terror he knew she experienced.

Mina followed his gaze and nodded again. She remained at Tessa's side and pulled her cowl over her head, casting her face into shadows. "I understand," she said. "I will stand vigil."

Adrian sat on the spare chair and took out his phone. He had quite a few papers to grade, and he guessed it would be a good way to pass the time. His thoughts, though, kept wandering back to Tessa, and how useless he was.

After he managed to barrel through, forcing himself to grade a few papers, he saw Elise glancing inside through the door, holding a clipboard. He tapped on Dawn's hand and pointed.

"Oh, thank God," Dawn said and rose to her feet.

"I'll stay here with her," Adrian said.

Dawn frowned at him. "You most certainly will not, young man," she said incredulously. "I won't be able to make sense of half of what that woman will say." She glanced at Tessa. "Thankfully she has Mina for company, and I suspect she'll stay put for a while. Come on." She strode out of the room without looking back, and Adrian followed.

"How do you do, Dr. Paisley," Dawn said, shaking the doctor's hand.

"Elise," Adrian said, nodding curtly.

Elise looked at Mina, who stood as rigid as a statue, shook her head in wonder and looked back at them. "Hi Dawn, Adrian," she said, her voice unusually quiet. "It's good that you're both here. It's..." She sighed. "The prognosis is not good. We got the results. We can see early signs of acute, probably terminal nephritis."

Dawn looked at Adrian.

"Kidney failure," he explained.

"Yes," Elise continued, "and my assumption is that unless something surprising happens her liver will follow shortly. Her body simply can't sustain this level of activity for this long. Twenty years ago, maybe. But now? Probably not."

"What can we do?" Dawn asked. She drew her shoulders in, as if steeling herself for the blows that might come next.

"Other than keeping her relatively comfortable? Nothing, really," Elise replied. "We can pump her full of cocktails that might target the virus, but they also might kill her. Sadly," she looked sideways at Adrian, "we have no protocols for this sort of thing. Adrian, other than her, you know that virus the best. What would you recommend?"

"I can't recommend anything," Adrian said, glancing at Dawn. "I'm sorry, we only have experience with rats so far, and it's not really transferable. They never had such a high fever, and certainly not for this long. They were also usually... Um... Rather healthy specimen, except for specifically induced diseases." He scratched the stubble on his cheek. "As you said, we have no protocols at all. None were required up until now."

Elise looked at Dawn. "So instead of those cocktails," she said softly, "we can pump her full of morphine. This way we'll know she won't suffer."

Dawn shook her head vehemently.

"Then I guess all we can do is pray," Elise said.

Dawn pursed her lips and peeked inside the room. "Mina is taking care of that, piously enough for all three of us," she said. "I was looking for more practical solutions. Something that might actually help her survive."

Elise took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Dawn. I know it's hard. Are there any relatives who would want to say their goodbyes? It might be their last chance."

Dawn shook her head. "She hates my family, and besides them we have none."

"Friends?" Elise asked.

Dawn grimaced. "You're talking to both of them," she replied.

"I'll go back to the lab and sit on her blood samples some more. Maybe we can come up with an idea, figure out a way we can slow the virus down while allowing it to work its magic," Elise said, "but I doubt there is one. Dawn, I don't see her surviving the night."

Dawn shuddered, as if stabbed by Elise's last words. "Can we get a second opinion?"

"Of course," Elise said. "I'll try to look for someone qualified. I've been consulting extensively with my colleagues all around the globe. Obviously this case has drawn a lot of attention. Maybe someone would want to step in." She bowed slightly and left.

"There is no one else," Adrian told Dawn as Elise vanished behind the corner. "Elise is being modest. She's been Tessa's primary physician for years mostly because they're in the same field. She's a world-renowned virologist. Experts come to her for advice."

Dawn tapped her lips. "I want to ask her something," she said. "Consult with her. I'll be right back." She followed Elise down the corridor, and Adrian went back inside.

Mina stood her vigil next to Tessa, with both her long-sleeved arms resting on the rails. Her eyes were shut, and her lips were moving in a silent prayer.

Adrian pulled the recliner away from the bed, sat down, and settled in, patiently waiting for Mina to finish. He bundled up in his jacket against the cold and let his eyes rest for a bit.

The alarm woke him up. The lights in the room were turned down, and Tessa's monitor was blaring and pulsing blood-red. Adrian jumped from his chair and burst out through the half closed door. "Someone!" he yelled. "In here! She's crashing!"

Still carrying the lethargy of sleep, it took him a few seconds to realize that Mina, Dawn, and Elise stood right outside. Dawn's face was drawn in, haggard, but frozen with resolve. Elise seemed ill at ease, and refused to meet his eyes.

Mina rushed into the room.

"I signed this form," Dawn said, holding out a clipboard with a shaky hand. "So they'll let her have a dignified death."

"DNACPR," Elise added slowly. "Adrian, it makes sense. There's no point in prolonging her suffering. There's no going back from what she's been through."

"Are you insane?" Adrian yelled. The nurse from the station bolted upright and stared at him. He couldn't care less. "She deserves a fighting chance!"

"She deserves a peaceful death," Elise said.

Adrian scowled at her. "You, of all people, should know better," he hissed at her. "There's no such thing as a peaceful death. To hell with your form." He sprinted into the room.

Mina was there, holding Tessa's hand in hers and muttering furiously as if trying to beat imaginary demons in a race for Tessa's soul. He vaguely remembered that Pentecostal Christians don't actually have last rites, so he wasn't sure what he was disrupting.

Adrian climbed on the bed and started administering CPR.

He heard Mina gasp, but didn't care. He leaned in.

"But..." she said.

"You can help me, or stay out of my way."

Tessa's ribs cracked like dry kindling under his weight, but Adrian persisted. Her flesh was disturbingly hot under his palms. After a few seconds, he delivered two rescue breaths. Tessa's lips were as dry as parchment, he noticed, and she already had the scent of death about her.

"Adrian! Stop!" He heard Dawn scream close behind him.

Adrian looked back, still applying chest compressions.

Dawn stood next to him, wild-eyed, holding the bed's rails so tightly her knuckles were white. Her face flashed blood-red with the monitor's desperate screams. "Someone stop him!" She screamed again.

The room flooded with light. Elise, standing at the door, seemed torn, and her jaw muscles worked as she glanced back and forth between the two.

"The virus is working! It's saving her! That's why her fever was up!" Adrian growled at her as he persisted in his efforts. "Help me. You're her doctor for crying out loud! You swore a fucking oath!" Despite the freezing cold, sweat collected on his brow. He stopped again, applied two breaths, and resumed compressions while trying to hold Elise's gaze.

Elise took one final look at the bewildered Dawn and rushed outside to return a moment later with a syringe-full of epinephrine which she stabbed directly into Tessa's arm. "Keep pushing," she told Adrian, pulling a mask from her white jacket's pocket and avoiding Dawn's withering glare. "I'll take care of her breathing."

Adrian was out of shape, and as the minutes dragged on, soreness spread through his limbs like poison. The pain was replaced with aching numbness. It didn't matter. He refused offers from the staff to replace him.

It was he who administered the virus, after all.

The half an hour dragged on like forever, but eventually the monitor showed a sine signal and stopped blaring. Elise put a hand on his arm. "Stop," she said. "Adrian, you can stop. She's breathing on her own."

Adrian eased off the bed. He looked at Dawn, bracing for her reaction.

She stood still all that time, as they revived Tessa. Frozen, like a fly trapped in amber. Then she caught on, the reality crashing into her. Dawn collapsed into the recliner, buried her face in her hands, and started crying.

Mina frowned at her. "Good for you," she told Adrian. "You did the right thing. It wasn't her time." She looked at Dawn and added, "I'm not sure about the legality, though. You two assumed some risk with that document already signed and sealed."

Elise remained silent, her face ashen.

"I just couldn't let her die," Adrian said. "Dawn," he said, kneeling in front of her, "I'm sorry. I know it's not what you wanted, but—"

Dawn grabbed him, her fingers digging into his flesh. "No," she gasped, like a fish out of water, "you don't dare apologize! Not for this!"

"But—"

"You saved her life!" She exclaimed. "I was stupid and selfish and weak to sign that thing!" The clipboard was on the floor, at the foot of the bed, and she looked at it with disgust. "You two saved my Tessa! You hung on to hope when," she suddenly lowered her head as if the burden of shame was too heavy. "When I failed her."

"It's allowed for a reason," he said. "You acted out of mercy. You wanted to end her suffering."

"It's a thing of evil," Mina spat. "Life is always precious. Not saving is—"

"Mina, for heavens' sake, show some compassion!" Adrian scolded her.

Mina sniffed and stormed out of the room.

Exhausted, Adrian dragged a chair near Dawn and slumped down. He looked at Tessa, who seemed to be breathing easier than before. Her pulse was also lowering, now hovering around the lower nineties.

"I could have lost her," Dawn whispered.

"We didn't," Adrian said. "And that's what matters now." The lump in his throat broke free. He reached out and hugged her, and she buried her face in his shoulder, sobbing freely.

"It's all that matters," he muttered, shedding tears of his own.

Chapter 3

"You should really go home," Adrian told Dawn.

With evident effort, she raised her bloodshot eyes and stared at him. "She would have stayed for me," she said stubbornly.

"I'd send her home, too, then. You need a good night's sleep."

Dawn twisted in the recliner. "This is fine."

"This is about as far from fine as it gets," he admonished her. "You're clearly exhausted. Just go home, get some sleep, and come back when you're refreshed."

Dawn looked at Tessa.

"She's stable," Adrian said patiently. "She didn't crash again, and her vital signs are getting better by the hour."

"Why won't she wake up, then?"

Adrian shrugged. "I don't know. It worries me too. But what I do know is that when she does wake up, she'd want to see you at your best."

"And what about you?" Dawn rounded on him, frowning. The anger faded from her face, replaced by embarrassment.

"I slept in the on-call room. On a real bed. I'm fine. They need me here."

She stuck out her chin. "Don't you have work to do?"

"I don't have anything more important than keeping an eye on her. Besides," he pointed at the makeshift office he jury-rigged, "I have everything I need right here." He sighed. "Go home, Dawn. Please. You're not doing anyone any favors remaining here, sleep-deprived, hungry and angry."

Her shoulders slumped. "Okay. Only for a little while." She rose, groaned as her bones creaked, and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Adrian. For everything. You're a true gift to us."

"It's the least I could do."

After all, he thought as Dawn limped to Tessa's bed, it was he who helped design the virus, and his hands that injected it into her veins.

Dawn took Tessa's flaccid hand in hers, and sighed. "Be well, my love," she told her, and motioned Adrian to join her. "She's still warm," she said as they walked downstairs.

"Her temperature is not back to normal," he agreed. "I don't know if it's her body still working extra hard, or it might be the new normal for her. A new baseline."

They reached the taxi station. "There's so much we don't know," Dawn said with despair.

"True. But given the stage of her disease, she had no other alternatives. Besides, right now, she's getting the best care in the world," Adrian reassured her. "She has the best fighting chance for someone in her situation."

He waited until the taxi was out of the gate, and walked back to the hospital, passing by a police car parked just outside the entrance.

Adrian was surprised to find Madeline in Tessa's room. She sat on the recliner and frowned at her golden laptop. "Oh, there you are," she said as he entered.

"Hello, Director, how—"

"Save the pleasantries for later," she cut him off as she slapped the laptop shut and stood up, tall enough to stare him straight in the eyes. "We don't have much time."

Adrian's eyes flicked to Tessa. She was still unconscious. "What is it?" he asked.

"Someone on the board decided you are too much of a liability," she said in a businesslike tone. "They ratted you out to the police for assisted suicide and..." She reopened her laptop and her eyes scanned the screen. "And for administering a noxious substance. Apparently, it's a criminal offense which you can get up to fourteen years for." She closed the laptop again. "In your case, I guess it would mean deportation as well."

Adrian felt his legs give way. He pulled a chair and sat down.

"Since you quite obviously saved Tessa's life yesterday," Madeline continued, "the police were kind enough to clear you of the assisted suicide charge. They are a bit more persistent with the other thing, administering a noxious substance."

"How do they—"

"We're not idiots!" Madeline snapped at him. "Tessa can barely hold a spoon straight, let alone inject herself with something!" Her frown softened. "I'm still negotiating with them. I told the police that you are the only expert on that virus of hers on the planet, and threatened them that removing you from the hospital puts Tessa's life at risk."

"Thank you. I'll—"

"Spare me your thanks!" She snarled. "They are waiting outside the entrance. Don't you dare leave. You'll be arrested, deported, and imprisoned."

Adrian felt anger bubble up like poisonous vapors. "Then who will stand in their way when they'll come for you?" He asked, standing up.

"What?" Madeline seemed surprised.

"Other than Professor Magnus, I'm the only person alive with minimal understanding of the Idun virus. Do you think Elise can save her on her own?" He pointed at Tessa, feeling his nostrils flare. "If I'm deported, or arrested, instead of a historical breakthrough you'll end up with one dead professor and a whole lot of questions to answer, which would be impossible without me."

Madeline narrowed her eyes. "You chose the worst possible moment to grow a spine. Very well. Use whatever trick you can think of. If all else fails, pray that she wakes up." She picked up her bag and went out, stopped at the door and turned to face him. "Right now, I'm standing in their way. I'll call on any help I can find. If Tessa survives, I might be able to force the police to back off. If she doesn't..."

Adrian stood staring at her.

Madeline shook her head sadly. "And of course, be smart for once, and keep this conversation to yourself." With a final resigned glare, she left, and Adrian was all alone, with only his worries to keep him company.

He stared into space, trying to think of something he could do. Anything.

The seconds trickled by, becoming long drawn minutes.

He had nothing.

It was bad enough that he was losing a dear friend and mentor. Now the situation has become much worse.

Adrian smiled to himself, a sad, resigned smile. Nothing has changed, really. He was going to do his very best to save Tessa anyway. It's just that now, if he failed, he faced imprisonment and exile.

So he can't fail. Tessa must live.

Adrian opened his laptop and tapped his touchpad. Hope was all he had left.

He had no new emails, and his calendar was empty. Mina has been very efficient. She canceled all of Tessa's lectures, and transferred his assignments to other teaching assistants.

Later that day, she dropped by him, making sure he had everything he needed, including chargers for his phone and laptop and a change of clothes he was sure weren't his but still were a perfect fit.

"What are you doing?" She asked a little later, after she was done with another of her mandatory daily prayers.

Adrian was filling a small vial with Tessa's blood. He looked at her quizzically. "I'm drawing blood," he said. "I thought it was obvious."

Mina smiled. "Well, yes," she said patiently, her hands clasped on her lap. "It is. I meant to ask why you're doing that. They already took blood this morning."

"I want to see how much the Idun virus has suffused her plasma," Adrian explained. "Maybe, if we're lucky, we might also catch a few rejuvenated cells."

"And why would that require luck?"

Adrian put the vial aside. "The Idun virus has a stochastic activation pattern, with a fixed spread half-life of just over six hours," Adrian explained. Seeing her confused expression, he elaborated, "we injected her with a few thousand FPU's, which translated to a few million viruses. This amounts to just under four hundred thousand cells per virus. Even if the density in the bloodstream is ten times more, it's still one per forty thousand cells. A needle in a haystack."

"But it had to reproduce quickly," Mina said. "Why else would her temperature rise so fast?"

"The temperature rise is a system-wide reaction. It has nothing to do with the suffusion. The Idun virus is programmed to weaponize immune cells to attack senescent cells. I'm not sure yet, but I suspect most of those affected early on were in the liver and kidneys - hence the organ failure within a couple of hours of the injection."

Mina shook her head. "It doesn't explain the temperature spike."

"So, again, we didn't see that in rodents," Adrian said. "We're not in the research world anymore, where we have samples and statistics and hypotheses to refute. This is the clinician's territory." He picked up Tessa's chart. "We're trying to save her life with only half-baked theories with zero backing to guide us. My guess is that her immune system reacted violently until the only surviving Idun viruses managed to masquerade as macrophages, and the immune response went down. It's just a guess though."

"Why macrophages?"

"That's one of the things Professor Magnus realized early on. The Idun virus packs a lot of functionality. It's huge for a virus, about a hundred times larger than the average one. The best disguise we found for it are macrophages. They're the largest white cells in the body."

He looked at Tessa, who seemed, at the very least, peaceful. "I have to gather more data," he said. "My working assumption is that there were very few senescent cells in the bloodstream. I'm looking for vagrants that got ejected from other organs. Probably from skeletal muscles."

Mina shifted closer. "So why not collect tissue samples from muscles?" she suggested.

Adrian considered it for a few seconds. "That's not a bad idea. I'll get a biopsy kit. Do you want to do it yourself?"

Mina smiled and held her palm out. "This is one of the reasons I left research. There are no vagrant cells in administration work. It's very... Orderly." She followed his gaze. "Tessa does look better, though. She was deathly pale before, and now the color is back in her cheeks. God willing, she might make a miraculous recovery."

"The plan is that the virus will make her recover," Adrian said, "rather than a miracle."

Mina frowned at him and this time he held his palm up. "That's not saying that I won't take whichever divine intervention I can get."

"The lord works through everything," the pious woman preached, "even through viruses. If he wills it, she'll recover."

Adrian didn't have the will or the energy to argue. "Amen," he said. "I'm going to drop the blood at the lab."

Satisfied, Mina sat by Tessa's bed, remaining there well after Adrian returned.

An hour later Elise entered the room, nodding her hello to the both of them.

"Dr. Paisley," Mina said, raising an eyebrow. "I thought you went back to London."

Elise picked up Tessa's chart. "This," she motioned at Tessa, "could be history in the making. I would be insane to simply walk away. Besides," she added, glancing sideways at Mina, "Tessa is a friend. There still might be something I could do to help."

"I told you," Adrian told Mina, "we're in the clinician's territory."

Elise frowned at the chart. "It doesn't make sense," she muttered.

"What's wrong?" Adrian asked.

"I hoped I missed something, but the data here matches what we have at the lab. It makes no sense. Everything seems to be normal. Better than normal, actually. According to the data, Tessa's liver and kidneys seem to have made full recovery, and are actually performing better than they had in years."

"So..."

Elise raised her eyes from the chart. "Why won't she wake up?" She asked, echoing Dawn's question from earlier that morning. "Her vital signs are great. Her bloodwork is fantastic. We're feeding her glucose enough to fatten an elephant." She pointed at the chart and offered it to Adrian. "She's been on sedatives a couple of days ago for half an hour. It explains nothing. She should be conscious."

Adrian looked at the table at the bottom of the chart. Other than a somewhat high white blood cell count and a small iron deficiency, everything was deep in the green.

"Dawn just asked me the same question," he said. "We must be missing something. Are there any other tests you'd like to run?"

Elise shook her head.

"Do you suspect brain damage?"

"Why would I?"

"We can run a brain scan," Adrian said, "see if there—"

Elise raised her hand, cutting him off. "As much as I hate it, we need to wait. She's been through enough. I don't want to torture her with tests, and I definitely don't want to irradiate her brain without a good reason."

Adrian felt his impatience getting the better of him. "We can't just wait."

"We can check her with ultrasound," Elise acquiesced, "but you won't find anything. You know that as well as I do. You have my permission, if you insist."

He insisted, if only to check one more assumption off their list. That afternoon they brought in an ultrasound machine and scanned Tessa's head. As Elise predicted, no abnormalities were found, and Adrian had to concede, despite his mounting frustration, that all they could do was to wait.

Waiting idly was hell.

He did all he could to pass the time, helping with other patients, carrying out other tasks for the staff. He finished grading all the papers his students submitted and would have offered his help to other teaching assistants if he was friendly with any of them, which he wasn't.

Dawn didn't come in the next morning. Mina did arrive, and was visibly upset with him.

"Madeline has been chewing my head all night," she said when he asked what's wrong. "She's getting a lot of angry calls."

"I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as you'll be when she decides you might serve her better as a sacrificial lamb."

“Me?”

“Who else?” Mina snapped at him. “Do you think firing Tessa for the stunt you two pulled would satisfy anyone? You’re next in line, and you might not be the only one.”

“Mina,” he said, facing her. “I need your help. What can I do?”

“Pray,” she said, the scowl never leaving her face. “Pray very hard. Maybe the Lord will hear you and Tessa will wake up. That might steer the conversation away from your impending termination.”

Adrian wasn’t the praying kind. Trusting the equipment to alert him if something went wrong, he wandered the halls of the hospital, steering clear from Mina’s accusing gaze. When his travels led him to the cafeteria, he found Dawn there, sitting in front of an untouched cup of tea, staring vacantly through the window.

He came closer, making sure to step hard enough on the vinyl floor for her to hear.

“This is for you,” she said when she noticed him, pointing at a thermal bag. To his delight, he found it contained the best of Olena’s cooking.

“Go on,” she said, offering him utensils from her bag. “Don’t let it get cold.”

Only when he started eating Adrian realized just how fed up he was with hospital food. “This is amazing!” He told her, still shoveling food in his mouth. “Please thank Olena for me. Are you coming up to her room?”

Dawn shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I can’t bear being there,” she said. “I keep thinking that without you... If you had listened to us, she’d be...” her voice cracked with guilt, and tears flooded her eyes.

Seeing her like this broke Adrian’s heart. “She’ll wake up any moment now,” he promised. “We’ll bring her home, and we can all forget that this ever happened.” He was careful not to mention what ‘this’ was.

“And what will I tell her?” Dawn asked, grim faced. “That I signed her death warrant?”

“You did no such thing!”

“Yes I did,” she said, nodding slowly. “I told them not to revive her.”

He swallowed. “Elise asked you, didn’t she? It was a valid choice.”

“Valid choice? She would be dead right now!”

Adrian scratched his neck. “She’s alive, isn’t she? At the end of the day, you did nothing wrong.”

“Nonsense,” she said, and shook her head. “I’m just being a coward, and I need to get over myself. It’s not about me now, is it? She needs me.”

“She does. Well, she will once she wakes up. Give yourself some space,” Adrian said, his mouth full. “It’s okay. Come up when you’re ready.”

Dawn nodded. She sipped her tea, grimaced with disgust, and put it away. “I just need to collect myself first, and then I’ll come up.”

She never did, though. She avoided Tessa's room like the plague.

Trying to avoid Mina's hard stares, Adrian took to touring the hospital. On occasion he would find Dawn in one of the courts, where she would feed the ducks while he devoured Olena's food.

He managed to make himself useful and kept himself busy, spending hours at the lab, examining Tessa's blood samples and biopsies. Aided by Elise, he managed to identify some instances of the Idun virus, floating innocently in Tessa's plasma, but the story they told was incomplete. The rejuvenated cells he found were far more interesting to the research, and he could confirm they seemed to have their full length telomeres. He put them in a sequencer, but it would be days before data would start coming in.

The only person who could make sense of it all, to assist him in the research, was comatose.

On the fourth day, just before Mina showed up, an ominous meeting with Madeline suddenly appeared in his calendar. It was titled 'Misconduct' and had no attached agenda, so he could only guess what it was about.

He haunted the hospital's hallways like a ghost until he found Dawn in her favorite spot. Sharing very few words, she watched him quietly as he ravenously devoured a full plate of Olena's cabbage rolls.

"You're very quiet today," she said at last.

"So are you."

"I'm still working up the courage to go to that room. Maybe if they'll move her somewhere else... You're barely listening!"

Adrian finished cleaning off his plate. "I think Madeline decided to kick me out."

"She wouldn't!"

"She would. Without batting an eye."

Dawn's distraught look was proof enough she agreed. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess the fates stopped smiling at us both."

She rose slowly to her feet. "I'll see if I can pull some strings. Don't worry. I'll be discreet."

Adrian walked her to her taxi, bid her farewell, and went up to Tessa's room. On his way he contemplated his next steps. They might offer him a job at the hospital, if he managed to stay out of jail. One way or another, joining Mina and taking up prayer remained high in his list.

As he entered Tessa's room, she turned her head towards him and blinked a few times, seemingly very much awake.

Chapter 4

Tessa whispered something unintelligible.

Adrian dropped everything he was holding and rushed to her side.

"Adrian?" Tessa asked, her voice little more than a croak.

"You're awake!"

"I'm thirsty," she whispered. "And famished. My throat hurts."

"Wait," he said. "Don't move." He ran out of the room, shaking his head at his stupidity. Of course she couldn't move, he thought. "Page Dr. Paisley," he told the attending nurse, pointing at Tessa's room. "Tell her Professor Magnus is awake!"

The nurse, picking none of his urgency, nodded lethargically and looked back to her phone.

"Now!"

The nurse's attention snapped to him. "Yeah, okay," she said while picking up the hospital phone.

He reached for his own phone. It wasn't in his pocket.

Adrian ran. He bounded down the stairs, two hops per flight, landing heavily but keeping the momentum until he reached the ground floor.

He saw Elise coming in a dead run from her makeshift office, her white lab coat flapping behind her. "Adrian!" She called when she saw him. "Is it true?"

"Yes," he replied between gasps. "She's awake. I have to get Dawn!"

She kept on running and went up the stairs he came down through.

Adrian sprinted out the doors, heading for the hospital gates, barely noticing a couple of pudgy uniformed police officers sitting on folding chairs and holding disposable paper cups.

"Hey, stop!" One of them rose to her feet, spilling some coffee on her hand. "Shit! Stop right there!"

Adrian didn't stop. He ran as hard as he could towards the gate.

Fortunately, Dawn's taxi was still stuck behind the barrier. The driver was leaning on his horn with his capped head sticking outside of his window. Thank God for lazy guards, Adrian thought, running up to the black car. "Circle back!" he shouted at the startled driver. "Prof... She woke up!" he added.

The police woman caught up with him, breathing heavily. "Stop!" she managed between gasps. "You can't leave!"

"Leave?" Adrian leaned on his knees. "I'm not leaving. I need to get back to the room," he explained when he caught his breath. "Professor Magnus is awake!"

The officer looked at him sideways. "Is that the woman you poisoned?"

"I didn't poison her!" He huffed and started marching back.

"You're not supposed to leave the hospital grounds!" She shouted after him. "Next time we'll arrest you!"

Adrian marched back and through the sliding doors, trying hard to ignore the other police officer who glowered at him. His legs were beginning to cramp when he got back to Tessa's room. She was surrounded by a human wall of residents. He elbowed two of them aside.

Elise stood near the bed, shining a light into Tessa's confused eyes.

"Good, you're here," she told Adrian and went ahead, taking the feebly protesting Tessa through a full battery of cognitive tests. All the while, nurses drew Tessa's blood, enough that Adrian began to worry she might lose consciousness again.

What might have kept Tessa going was a steady supply of sweetened tea Elise allowed her to sip with an orderly's assistance. If anything, her voice, while still weak, became more steady.

It took a while, and Elise took her time, taking suggestions from the excited staff surrounding Tessa. They conversed amongst themselves, pausing to poke Tessa here and ask her questions she would answer halfheartedly, obviously impatient for the entire ordeal to be over.

"As far as I can tell, she seems fine," Elise finally answered Adrian's unasked question. "Much better than fine, actually. Lucid. Understandably a bit confused. All her vital signs are in the green, and there's no indication of anything abnormal." She looked at Tessa, who seemed laser focused on the tea. "Even taking into account common sense and basic prudence, unless someone will insist otherwise, we'll release her as soon as possible, so she can rest at home."

"Shouldn't she stay under supervision for a while, until she's..." Adrian dragged on the sentence, not sure what to ask. "Until she's stable?"

"I suspected you'd be that someone," Elise said, smiling. "She's been under supervision for the last few days, and was nothing but stable. Right now, I don't see it any different than a serious case of the flu. I would suggest resting at home and drinking a lot of tea," the smile never left her face, "maybe with an overly concerned certified nurse close by, just to remain on the safe side."

Adrian nodded. She made perfect sense.

"Anyway, we'll see what the rest of the bloodworks will tell us," Elise said and herded all the residents out of the room. "Try to rest for a while," she added over her shoulder.

When they all cleared out, Dawn stood alone by the door. She hesitated for a moment and then trudged closer slowly, as if in a haze.

"All things considered, Elise says she's doing much better," Adrian told her. "You'll be able to take her home soon."

Dawn eased into the recliner and sat stiff-backed next to Tessa, taking her hands. "I'm so glad you returned to us," she told her decades-long partner, her eyes getting misty.

"I wasn't aware that I was away," Tessa whispered hoarsely back. "What happened?"

Dawn shook her head, unable to speak.

"You crashed," Adrian said. "The virus acted much faster than we anticipated. You ran a fever, and—" He stopped, catching Dawn's glare. "The only thing that matters is that you're better now."

Tessa swallowed hard and grimaced. "Come on, boy," she whispered. "Elise already gave me enough of that. I'm alive. I get it. Now let's look at the experiment. Do the results suggest that the virus worked?"

"Well, it's still working. it seems that the Idun virus is now widespread in your system," he continued, hoping it was the direction she meant him to take, "but we still don't see any major effects anywhere, just its presence in the bloodstream and gradual improvements in some health markers."

"Which markers?"

He picked up her chart and pointed at the results of the bloodwork.

"Good boy," Tessa muttered. "Now go get me some coffee, please."

"Absolutely not!" Dawn said.

"What? Why?" Adrian asked.

Dawn seemed confused at the question. "It can't be good for her, can it?"

"I don't see why," Adrian said. "Up until now, Elise couldn't detect anything wrong with her. Quite the contrary. If she could handle coffee before, she can handle it now."

Dawn blinked. She seemed disoriented, out of place. "Well," she started slowly, "if Elise says it's okay..."

As if summoned by mentioning her name, Elise came back into the room. If Dawn seemed like she aged a decade in a week, Elise now seemed like the weight of the world was lifted from her shoulders. She had a spring to her steps and a smile on her lips. "You already look better!" She told Tessa. "You gave us quite a scare, at the start, you know?"

"No, I don't know."

"Well, you did. You gave us both a run for our money. It doesn't matter. What matters is that you're okay now. I'm still waiting for your CMP, but from what I've seen so far, it seems like you made a full recovery."

"CMP?" Dawn whispered to Adrian.

"Comprehensive Metabolic Panel," he whispered back, capitalizing the words.

Tessa struggled to speak, took a sip of her sweetened tea, and tried again. "What do you mean by full recovery? Is the ALS in remission?"

"Can you move your legs?" Elise asked.

Tessa concentrated on her feet, but they remained completely still.

"I wouldn't jump to conclusions just yet," Elise said, glancing at Adrian. "The little I read about your virus suggests that even if it works, it will take some time to achieve measurable results."

Adrian nodded.

Elise laughed. “Anyway, I can’t imagine seeing you jumping off the bed anytime soon, but I’ll keep my fingers crossed. Otherwise, my medical opinion is that you’re fine now. Unless there are some nasty surprises hidden in your most recent blood tests, you’ll be out of here in no time.”

“Why would there be any surprises?” Tessa asked, her voice a bit stronger, but still barely above whisper. “I can tell you what you’ll probably find,” she continued, assuming some of her professorial tone. “Some indications of a viral infection that my body already handled. Maybe,” she added, grinning, “some markers suggesting I’m still an old, feeble woman. That’s it.”

“Why indeed,” Elise said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “It’s not like you injected an untested, barely understood virus straight into your bloodstream or something.”

“All right,” Tessa conceded the point. “Let’s wait and see.”

“All I’m saying is that we could have been a little less cavalier in our approach.”

“That,” Dawn said, after she unpursed her lips, “is the understatement of the century.” She rose to her feet. “I’m going to get Adrian and myself some dinner. I’ll get something light for Tessa. Elise, do you—” she stopped as Elise vigorously shook her head. “Okay then,” she said and left the room. She had far more strength and speed in her strides going out than she had coming in.

Adrian wondered whether it was anger or fear that gave her wings. “These last few days have been horrible for her,” he said softly, leaning closer to Tessa. “She endured through it all with grace, but I think—”

“I’m sure she did,” Tessa said. She fixed her eyes on him. “I did it for her sake, as well as mine, you know. I don’t want her to be alone.”

Adrian nodded.

“Did Madeline swing by?” Tessa asked.

Adrian nodded. “She did. She asked me not to tell anyone, but I’m under police investigation for poisoning you. She said someone on the board contacted the police.”

Tessa frowned. “Someone on the board,” she huffed. “It was probably her, that snake-in-the-grass. She and I will have some words.”

“She said she was holding the police off, that removing me would put you at risk.”

“Playing both sides against the middle,” Tessa said, grimacing. “Smart. What did she threaten you with?”

“Imprisonment. Deportation.”

“Did you tell Dawn? One phone call from the aristocracy and the police will drop all charges. Maybe they’ll even give you a medal.”

“No. She’s already under a lot of stress. It was... She really suffered these last few days. It’s hard enough for her as it is. I don’t want to pile my problems on top of hers.”

“Okay, boy. But keep in mind, she would do it in a heartbeat for you.”

"I know. But even if the police will back off, Madeline is still furious at us. I think she'll try to fire me. Mina suggested as much. She came over plenty of times, Mina. She prayed for you."

Tessa whizzed a short laugh. "I'm sure she did. I have divine intervention oozing out of my ears." She squinted at him. "If I didn't know better, boy, I'd say you seem much more worried than Elise."

Adrian shrugged, trying to feign a smile. He couldn't pull it off, not when his stomach kept turning.

"What's this frown about, boy? Do you think the panel will have bad news?"

"You know. I know how the sausage was made." He leaned closer. "It got rough, and I'm surprised it didn't get worse. Your body has been through an awful lot. We didn't know if you'll make it. I'm still not sure."

Tessa frowned at him. "That's old news. All of it. What else?"

"I just have this bad feeling—"

"Use your head, then. We don't rely on feelings. Are you ill?"

Adrian shook his head.

Tessa leaned back and closed her eyes, remaining quiet when Dawn returned with a sour-faced orderly pushing a cart at her heels. He gave each of them a tray of cafeteria food and left with the cart.

"Is she asleep?" Dawn asked.

Adrian shrugged.

They ate in silence.

Halfway through Elise arrived with a surprised look on her face.

"I compared it to your previous results," she told Tessa, not bothering to check if she's awake. "Just from two days ago. The results made me check your history in my clinic."

Tessa opened her eyes to slits.

"Your blood is squeaky clean. Enzyme levels are low. Compared to a decade of data, your liver functions significantly improved from your baseline. So did your kidney functions."

Tessa grinned. "The Idun virus must be working its magic. I bet inflammation markers are way down, too."

Elise nodded. "They actually are. It's a good sign."

"If we take a biopsy," Adrian said, covering his mouth, "I bet we'll find quite a few clumps of rejuvenated cells there. Lungs also, probably. We can do a spirometry test right now."

Dawn rose to her feet, scowling. "You will do no such thing!" she exclaimed. "She needs her rest!"

"My love," Tessa said, looking at her, "it's just me blowing air into a mouth-piece. Nothing that would hurt me."

Dawn sat down and looked around. "I couldn't have known that," she said indignantly.

"You could, however, have some faith in Adrian," Tessa said. "He knows my condition better than everyone, and would be the first one to protect me. He wouldn't suggest anything that will put me at risk."

Dawn gasped.

"What?" Tessa asked, alarmed. "What did I just say?"

"Nothing," Dawn replied. She dabbed at her lips with a paper napkin, put her tray aside, and rose stiffly. "Excuse me," she added and hustled out of the room.

Adrian rose to follow, and Tessa stopped him with a flick of her hand. "Leave her," she said. "Whatever's eating at her, either she'll say it out loud or work through it alone. There's no middle ground." She turned to Elise. "When did you say I could go back home?"

"As far as I'm concerned we can start releasing you right away," Elise said, holding up the tablet as evidence. "If you want, we can probably keep you for another day or two for observation, though."

"I want to get back to my lab as soon as possible..." She stopped as Elise shook her head.

"Out of the question."

"So I'll go home, then. We'll set up an office there, and I'll be able to get some work done."

"We should compile all the tests we should run," Adrian said, returning Elise's gaze. "If she's fine, there's no reason we can't take care of her at home."

"Okay. Compile away."

While Adrian was determined to leave no stone unturned, with Elise's help he realized there were not many tests they could run. Crossing out the ones that might hurt their ongoing experiment or carried some risk that couldn't be justified, they ended up with a precious few, and they proceeded immediately.

Tessa winced as Elise used a small hammer to test her reflexes, but with Tessa's age and the stage of her ALS, it surprised no one that tapping both the patellar tendon and the Achilles tendon got absolutely no response. Tapping the tendons on her biceps and triceps induces a weak, but noticeable twitch, more than Adrian hoped for.

"Well?" Tessa asked.

Elise looked at Adrian and shrugged. "I'm guessing we don't want to use an antiviral, right?"

Adrian laughed. "No, we don't," he said, when he realized she wasn't joking.

"Okay then," She said. "I guess we're good. I'll get those release forms and we'll get you out of here," She told Tessa and left.

"I'll go help her," Adrian said and followed Elise.

Chapter 5

When he returned, Tessa was sleeping, and a uniformed police sergeant with a peaked cap under his arm and chevrons on his sleeve stood by her bed.

"Mr. Pirth," he said as he saw him. "I was meaning to ask you some questions."

"Dr. Pirth," Adrian corrected him, the irritation clear in his voice. "You ask your questions, and then I'll ask mine."

"You know you're under investigation for administering a noxious substance."

"I find those accusations preposterous."

The sergeant glanced at Tessa and then at the pad he was holding. "Do you deny injecting this woman with some kind of poison?"

"Of course I do!" Adrian gesticulated, venting his frustration. "Does she seem poisoned to you?"

"I am not a medical doctor. I was told—"

"Neither am I," Adrian interjected, "but I can read a medical chart. Professor Magnus was injected with a cure, not a poison."

"Is she currently stable?"

"She is! We started—"

"So you being here is no longer required," the sergeant said, eyeing Adrian coldly. "Interrupt me again and we'll continue this conversation in a holding cell. Am I clear?"

Adrian swallowed and nodded.

"Good. As I was saying," he glanced at his pad again, "we were under the impression that you injected something dangerous directly into this woman's bloodstream. This is a serious crime."

Adrian waited patiently.

Tight lipped, the sergeant motioned for him to reply.

"I'm a licensed nurse, and I serve Professor Magnus in that capacity as well as being her teaching assistant. She was dying, and developed a cure that might save her. Obviously, she couldn't have administered it herself, so I did it for her."

The sergeant scowled at him. "So on your own volition, you injected an illicit substance into a frail, old woman's arm, and expected—"

"I asked him to do that," Tessa said. She groaned and continued, "I'm indeed old and frail, but I'm neither senile nor demented. It was my choice."

The sergeant smiled at her, a surprisingly warm smile. "The fact that you asked him to commit a crime doesn't lessen its severity one bit."

"Are you a clinician?" Tessa asked.

"No, Professor. I am not."

"Well, he is," Tessa said. "I was very sick. Adrian acted, and now I'm better. He deserves praise, not a police investigation."

The sergeant sighed and looked at them both. "To be perfectly honest, currently I find the evidence somewhat contradictory to the initial filing. This definitely doesn't look like," he looked at his pad again, "assisted suicide, and if you're saying," he glanced at Tessa, "that what he injected you with was a cure, I think we can suspend the investigation."

Adrian let out a sigh of relief.

"But I won't close it," the sergeant added. "Not yet. Not until I know for sure it was actually a cure. If the Professor's health would suddenly take a turn for the worse, you'll probably be hearing from me." He put on his cap, tapped it, and left the room, nodding to Madeline who stood at the doorway.

"As far as I'm concerned," she said, scowling at him, "this changes nothing. The board is still pissed, the government is breathing down my neck, so you're definitely not off the hook. If things go south, my head won't be the first to roll." With that, she stormed away.

"What a drama queen," Tessa said.

"She said my head will roll!"

"Forget about her," Tessa said dismissively. "She had a rough couple of days, and she's venting. You'll be fine."

Adrian knew better than to argue. He sat down at Tessa's side and waited.

It was less than ten minutes later when Elise returned, informing them Tessa was officially released. They waited patiently until the same sour-faced orderly arrived and helped Tessa into a wheelchair.

Adrian wasn't paying too much attention, but he thought he saw Tessa's bare feet twitch as they met the cold metal of the leg rest. Given the state of her nervous system, that didn't seem possible. "Did you see—"

"Only one escort through the elevators, please," the orderly deadpanned over his shoulder as he wheeled Tessa around.

"I'll go with her," Elise said, motioning with her hand for Adrian to stay back. When Tessa and the orderly were already out of the room, she added in hushed tones, "maybe you should check on Dawn."

Adrian retraced his usual route, searching through all the places Dawn frequented. As luck would have it, he found her in the last one, in the western court, as straight-backed as the wooden bench she was sitting on.

She stared at the pond, where a single large duck, a gadwall, was sailing in the still water. Its gray body left tiny ripples in the otherwise mirror smooth, undisturbed surface. Once in a while, it dipped its head in the water and flicked it around, sending a shower of glittering drops onto its back.

As was his habit these last few days, Adrian stomped on the gravel, making sure she would hear him approaching. "Can I join you?" He asked.

"Of course," Dawn replied and tapped the bench next to her.

As soon as Adrian sat, a drizzle started dotting the pond, and a cool breeze rose, raising goose bumps on his skin.

Despite wearing a light dress exposing her shoulders, Dawn didn't show the slightest hint of discomfort, and refused the offer of his jacket. "Are you here to lecture me?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't dream of it."

"Then to check on me?"

"Well, to tell you we're ready to leave," Adrian said. "Also... Yes. Okay. I wanted to tell you that you can't keep whatever's eating you bottled up inside. It's not healthy."

She glowered at him. "You know exactly what's eating me!" She huffed. "It keeps me awake at night! If it was up to me, instead of taking Tessa home, we'd be wrapping up her funeral arrangements. This isn't something I could simply gloss over."

"It was a lapse in judgment, born of despair," Adrian said, trying to placate her. "Elise suggested it, I suppose."

"So what? The decision was up to me!"

"You didn't have the context. You didn't know she'll recover," he continued. "No one did. I certainly didn't. And you didn't want her to suffer."

"But that's exactly the problem!" She cried. "We've suffered through so much already! She'd expect me to give her a fighting chance!"

"You were being compassionate," he retorted gently. "You had her best interest at heart. That's what matters."

"She won't see it this way," Dawn replied and pursed her lips. "Besides, she'd never give up on me."

Adrian kept his silence. He had nothing to say. Dawn was right, of course. Tessa was a fighter at heart. Giving up was never an option for her, and where Dawn was concerned, doubly so. She'd stop at nothing. Her main motivation for experimenting with the Idun virus, at least according to her, was to stop being a burden on Dawn.

"You're different people," he tried a different angle. "You did what you thought was right for her, and you did it out of love. That should be the end of it." He looked into her eyes, trying to seem more resolute than he felt. "She'll just have to accept it."

"Or," Dawn said, looking back at the lone duck, who was sailing peacefully on the pond, unbothered by the rain, "we can avoid that subject entirely. Forever. That's a better alternative, I think."

For no reason they could see, the duck took flight. It didn't go far, though, and just circled around the court.

"It's up to you, of course," Adrian said, "and I will respect any decision you make. But I don't think we should keep anything from her. It's never a good thing. It'll fester."

"If it's my decision, it is my decision," Dawn said stubbornly. "And I decided we would say nothing. Both of us. Okay?"

"Okay," Adrian replied.

His phone pinged. "Elise got us a ride in an ambulance," he told Dawn after seeing the message. "They're waiting for us in the emergency drop-off."

"I'm counting on you," Dawn said.

"Just bear in mind that—"

The duck above them suddenly quacked, dove down, skirted the water and sprinted away straight into the incoming thunderhead. Ripples spread in the pond where it touched, dwindling to nothing before they reached the water's edge.

"What should I bear in mind?" Dawn asked.

A single dark feather drifted down and landed in the pond. It remained floating, the only evidence of the vanishing duck.

"I wasn't alone in that room. There were other people."

Dawn took a deep breath and rose. "Let's go," she said and went into the hospital's gloomy entryway.

Adrian took another look at his phone. His meeting with Madeline disappeared from his calendar.

He followed Dawn, allowing himself to feel just a sliver of hope.

Chapter 6

For Adrian, the rain drenched drive home was short yet excruciating. He sighed with relief when the sturdy two-storied house came into view, and the ambulance slowed as it eased into the driveway.

Dawn sat by the door and stared outside the entire time, saying little, seemingly caught in her own world. Adrian, on the other hand, was trying to placate the rather bullish Tessa.

"It's all in the cloud," he repeated for what felt like the hundredth time, failing to keep his exasperation from his voice. "Data. Computing resources. We don't have to bring your entire office home. I already received your assigned laptop. It's brand new. Stronger than your desktop at the office. All you need is a keyboard and an extra screen."

"Why do you care so much?" Tessa kept on going, arguing passionately. She seemed to be making a rapid recovery, and was using her newfound energy to set her heels in the ground. "I like my office. I like the way it's set up. I'm comfortable there. Why can't we—"

"How about your home?" Dawn asked softly, drawing out her words. She kept her stare on the back window, and her face was swaddled in shadows. "Don't you feel comfortable at home?"

Adrian knew that tone of voice. Tessa also seemed to sense Dawn's pent up rage. "I didn't mean it like that," she said soothingly and put her hand on Dawn's hand. "Of course I'm comfortable at home."

"So let the boy do as he suggests!" Dawn demanded. "Let him set you up at home! Stop bossing him around and start listening to him!"

The ambulance came to a full stop, not a second too soon, as far as Adrian was concerned. He quickly opened the door and hopped outside.

"But it's not just that!" Tessa protested. "I have my desk, my chair, and my favorite pen... I need to get them all here."

The driver and paramedic pretended not to hear the two elderly women bickering as they got into the ambulance's cabin and started unbuckling Tessa.

The driveway was uncharacteristically clear of any debris and the gutters, lining the roof of the red-bricked Victorian house, have obviously been swept clean. Olena must have used her newly found free time to finally meet head-on the tasks that her daily chores always superseded.

"You will do no such thing!" As sharp as a whip, Dawn's voice snapped him back to reality. She stepped in front of Adrian, grabbing the chair's handles. "You," she continued, glowering as the paramedic eased Tessa into the chair, "are staying home until I hear, with my own ears, Dr. Paisley say otherwise, and I will hear no arguments!"

Tessa snaked her neck around and caught Adrian's eyes. "Boy, will you—"

"I'll take care of the luggage," he quickly said and hurried back to grab their bags.

"But..." Tessa's voice faded away as Dawn wheeled her onto the paved walkway circling around the house.

Adrian thanked the bemused driver and paramedic. He watched as the ambulance pulled out of the driveway and sped away, leaving behind some semblance of silence.

Finally alone, Adrian breathed out a sigh of relief. He could do with a bit of peace and quiet. The soft whisper of the light wind was the only sound he could hear, at least until the door swung open and Olena came out, scowling at him.

“Adrian!” She scolded, hoisted a suitcase, and started waddling toward the house, talking with her back to him. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re coming? I didn’t prepare anything!”

“I’m sorry,” he replied, following her with the other suitcase. They went through the open front door and struggled up the stairs. “We were just released, and I kind of expected Dawn to tell you. Umm, this goes in the Professor’s bedroom,” he added as Olena started carrying the suitcase to the guest room, where he was staying. “I’m carrying mine.”

She turned around, huffed, and shuffled into Dawn’s and Tessa’s large bedroom. Adrian went into the guest room, leaving the door open. He swung the suitcase on the bed and started unpacking. Soon enough, he heard the stairs creak with the weight of the wheelchair on the rails, accompanied by a disgruntled complaint. “I rested on the way over!” Tessa grumbled. “I just want to write down a few ideas!”

“Absolutely not,” Dawn replied flatly. “Shower, and go to bed, where you’ll eat and sleep. I’ll go get you some water.”

The smell of Olena’s cooking wafted up the stairs and into the room, making Adrian’s stomach grumble. Knowing her, he was sure she had enough fresh food in the fridge to feed a family of five, but she wouldn’t be satisfied with anything not made on the spot.

“Adrian?” He suddenly heard Tessa calling him. Popping his head into the corridor, he saw Tessa sitting in her wheelchair, and Dawn, with a stormy countenance, standing behind her.

“Can you please make sure my office is in working order? I want to go over my bloodwork tonight, if possible.”

“You absolutely will not,” Dawn said. She turned the chair around and wheeled it into their room.

“Okay,” Adrian said and went back to unpacking. He didn’t have much, so it was shortly after that he got down to the ground floor and opened the door to the dust-laden home office.

He sneezed a couple of times and went to work. It was just the time of day when the university IT staff is anxious to get home, so they might cut corners to get things over and done with.

On Madeline’s behest, Adrian’s requests were met with nothing but acquiescence. A few tense conversations later, the fiber-borne broadband was working, the virtual private network was set up, and Tessa’s remote account, whose tragic demise a few months earlier went unnoticed, was successfully resurrected. Adrian even made sure all the teaching and research resources were accessible, just in case she’d need anything.

While he connected the extra screen, as he promised, Olena passed by, looked at him blankly, and got back a minute later, just as the login screen blinked on. “I left a tray for you outside,” she said. “Go grab something to eat before it gets cold.”

Adrian’s stomach grumbled. He muttered his thanks and rushed out to the porch, where the bright deck lights flicked on with the motion sensors.

He eagerly took the cover off the tray.

Olena somehow found the time to conjure up fresh pea puree, pan-seared fillet steak with a red wine sauce, and a rich chocolate tort.

Adrian sat down to eat. He was ravenous, and had to force himself to slow down after the first few bites.

The sun just departed beyond the horizon, leaving muted orange and pink scattered among the clouds. At the pond across from the terrace, two mallards were peacefully preparing for their nightly stay.

He was halfway through his plate when he heard the weak squeaks of the wooden floor sagging under Tessa's heavy chair. He looked back to find her and Dawn arriving. "I thought you were going to bed," he said with his mouth full.

"I thought so too," Dawn replied coolly.

"I'm too jittery," Tessa said. "And too hungry. Besides, I stayed in bed for far too long."

Tessa reached for the chair's joystick controller.

"No engine in the house," Dawn rebuked her, and pushed the wheelchair up against the table. "She wouldn't eat otherwise," she told Adrian, as if describing a petulant child.

"Damn right I wouldn't!" Tessa said and carved a tiny portion of the tort. "Who eats in bed when you have such gorgeous sunsets?"

"Food first," Dawn commanded, and Tessa obediently picked up a spoon-full of puree. "The sun has already gone. Besides, there'll be a sunset tomorrow, and the next day, and then the next."

Tessa had a quick reply, but she seemed to bite her tongue, glancing at Adrian with the smile vanishing from her face. He could guess what was on her mind. Dawn didn't understand the risks. The sunset was sure to be there the next day. Tessa, not as much.

They ate in silence as the world outside the terrace plunged into darkness, the sky going from magenta, through metallic blue, to pitch black, a dark velvet cover pierced with tiny stars.

"I'd kill for a glass of amaretto," Tessa said suddenly.

"In your condition?" Dawn exclaimed. "Have you gone mad?"

"You tell her," Tessa demanded from Adrian.

He looked at Dawn. "She's fine, and her liver is healthier than... Well, since forever, I guess. She can handle a finger of amaretto."

Dawn glared at him.

"Just a little bit will do no harm. You have my word."

Dawn rose. "I'll get it then," She huffed and disappeared into the house.

"You need to take it easy," he told Tessa. "Your tests are good, but you're not out of the woods yet."

Making sure Dawn was gone from sight, Tessa took a bite of tort. "Come on, boy," she said while chewing, "we both know that tomorrow might not come for me, right?"

"Why? Do you feel sick?"

She looked at him, and her green eyes sparkled with joy. "Sick? I feel alive, boy! Like I had one foot inside death's door, but somehow I got pulled back." She turned her gaze toward the stars. "I don't just feel alive. For the first time in years, I feel hunger for life!"

Dawn returned with a small tray, holding two glasses of crimson red wine and an old-fashioned that Adrian thought empty at first, until he saw a bit of amaretto sloshing at the bottom.

"Thank you, my dear," Tessa said and sniffed at her liqueur.

Adrian took the glass Dawn offered him and breathed in, rewarded by the fruity scent. He settled back and sipped, enjoying the lingering taste.

As he closed his eyes, just for a split second, exhaustion hit him like a freight train. It wasn't just this day's toils. He didn't quite get sufficient rest for a week. He was tired through and through.

"Adrian!"

He snapped up. "Tessa was asking you about the office," Dawn said.

Tessa smiled sheepishly. With Dawn's confirmation, she put aside the remaining piece of steak and went back to the tort.

"Oh, I finished setting everything up," Adrian told her. "Your credentials are in paper notes next to the keyboard, and I linked your bloodwork on your desktop."

"How do you..?"

Adrian smiled. "Sorry, I meant I put a link on the computer's desktop. The screen you see when you log in?"

She smiled back at him. "You're a gem," she said as warmly as he had ever heard her. "I don't know where I'd be without you."

Dawn, who barely ate throughout dinner, shuddered and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. "Oh, I have a fairly good idea," she said, raising her glass of dark Barbaresco wine. "To Adrian, our savior, our knight in shining armor!"

Tessa raised her amaretto glass and sipped.

Adrian, quite embarrassed, joined with what remained in his own glass of wine. "You are far, far too kind," he said when he put it down.

"Not at all," Dawn said. "Quite the opposite. Tessa would be dead without you. Didn't you tell her how you saved her life?"

Tessa raised a questioning eyebrow.

"It never came up," Adrian explained, feeling the blood rushing to his cheeks. "I might have helped Elise with a bit of CPR when you crashed," He wondered what Dawn was doing, and was worried there's a line he shouldn't cross. "The team saved you."

Dawn inhaled deeply. "He's being way too modest," she said. "I watched the entire thing from outside the room. Adrian quite literally led the entire operation, single handedly saving your life."

"I would expect no less of him," Tessa said, examining Adrian. She turned to Dawn. "Whenever it seems that I don't appreciate our boy enough," she told her, "please smack me on the head."

Dawn smiled. "Your ears would never stop ringing."

"Coffee? Tea?" Olena shouted from the kitchen.

"I'll have coffee," Tessa tried to shout back, but her voice cracked under the strain, and all that remained was a faint whisper.

"No, you won't," Dawn said.

Olena, with a confused look on her face, came out of the house.

"She'll have herbal tea with a bit of honey," Adrian told her. "And so will I, thank you." He yawned. "You know, maybe I'll have some coffee. I need to—"

"What you need to do is to go to sleep," Dawn said. "You've been running around all day long. Enough is enough."

Adrian didn't have the strength or the will to argue. He bid them all good night, showered quickly, and fell asleep as soon as he closed his eyes.

Chapter 7

Olena must have started the day rather early, Adrian thought. The morning sun shone unhindered through the crystal clear, high windows of the study. Last night, when he finished his work, the window was opaque with dust on the inside and dirt on the outside.

Maybe Dawn asked her to, for fear of how the dust might affect Tessa, who survived the night and emerged stronger both in spirit and flesh.

Adrian glanced down as his phone beeped. "Mina is coming," he told Tessa who sat on the other side of the room, poring over the data he collected in the days of her unconsciousness. "She also mentioned that you're not answering her calls."

"I'm not answering anyone's calls, because my phone is not here," Tessa deadpanned. "Quite possibly, the one in the office might be ringing off the hook. Is she coming at her mistress's behest?" Just yesterday Adrian had to come closer to hear her, as her voice couldn't carry across this distance. A night of sound sleep worked wonders for her vocal cords.

Adrian shrugged, which did him no good given the piles of books and files blocking their line of sight. There was still a lot of tidying to be done. "You're not being fair," he said. "She prayed for you, after all. She stood vigil."

He heard the creaking of her chair as Tessa shifted to the side of her desk and stared at him. "Are you being sarcastic with me, boy?" she asked.

"I'd swear, but I'm afraid Mina wouldn't approve. Do you want to meet her here or outside?"

"Outside," she replied resolutely. "It's a total mess in here. Is she coming now?"

Adrian nodded. "Yes. She's on her way."

"So we shouldn't waste time. Where do you want to injure me today?"

"We need a new muscle sample. A thigh biopsy, I suppose." He put on a new pair of latex gloves and tore open a fresh biopsy set. "Let's get you nice and prepped," he said as he knelt by her side.

Tessa already hiked her white cotton dress up her thigh.

Adrian cleaned up the skin with an antiseptic wipe and said, "first the anesthetic. It might hurt just a bit."

"Liar. You always promise," Tessa said, grinning. "But you never—Ow!" She yelped.

Adrian froze, careful to not move the needle, which was already deep enough for him to push the plunger. "What happened?" He asked. "Did I hit something?"

"I'm sorry," Tessa said, seemingly embarrassed. "I was just surprised. It's just... It burns a bit? It never did."

"I must have pushed too fast, and—"

"No no, it's not you, boy," Tessa said, frowning at her leg. "You know how my diabetes made my legs go numb a while ago?"

Adrian nodded.

"Well, they're not so numb anymore, are they? Well, go on then."

"It's only going to hurt a bit longer," he said, carefully pushing the plunger all the way down.

Despite his best efforts, Tessa winced, and drew in a staggered breath through her teeth until the syringe was empty.

"You did fine. Really. I was caught off guard," she said reassuringly after he withdrew the needle and placed a disinfectant patch on the tiny red dot the syringe left behind. "It didn't hurt that much. I'm just not used to feeling anything at all."

"You know, maybe we're wasting our time with those biopsies," Adrian suggested. "If your nervous system is recovering so well, then—"

"Then we still need measurable results from under the microscope, rather than guesswork and gut feelings," she completed the sentence for him. "We might find some cells in the muscle that were affected by the Idun virus."

"I know. Of course, you're right. Hold the patch." He disposed of the syringe, glanced at his watch, and looked at her feet. She usually wore socks, but now she had slippers on. "Wait, did you try walking?"

"I did," she admitted. "But I can't. Not to say that I won't try again, but my legs are too weak."

"I think motor control is the issue, rather than lack of muscle strength," Adrian said. "Muscles can be built. Can you move your legs?"

As a response, Tessa leaned forward and pressed with her arms on the chair. Her right leg rose and hovered above its rest for just a second.

"You couldn't do that a month ago," Adrian half stated, half asked. "And you could, what, this morning?"

"No, I couldn't a month ago," Tessa confirmed. "And yes, this morning I could."

"And you couldn't be bothered to share that with me?"

Tessa must have noticed the edge in his voice. "That nothing has changed? That I still can't stand on my feet?" She protested indignantly.

Adrian could feel his eyebrows contracting, and with great effort he managed to relax his face.

"Do you understand how little we know? How important and precious is every single data point?"

"Of course! But what—"

"And do you realize how close my life came to complete and utter ruin?" His voice was gathering steam. "That I'm a hairbreadth away from being excommunicated not just from Cambridge, but from the entire research community?"

Tessa shrunk away from him. "I think you're blowing this way out of proportion. I've already talked to Madeline—"

Adrian scoffed and looked at his watch again. "Alright. Whatever. Your leg should be numb enough." He inserted the hollow needle and swiftly took a muscle sample. The anesthesia must have worked, because Tessa kept looking at him the entire time, not even flinching.

"There," he said and plastered a large bandage on the tiny, blood-welling wound, "all done."

"Are you still mad at me?" Tessa asked softly.

"Yes! Of course I am! You really should be more forthcoming with me. I think I earned it."

"Of course, boy," she said soothingly. "You're right. You deserve it and so much more." She put her hand on his. Her skin felt like heated parchment. "It wasn't intentional, just a momentary lapse in judgment, nothing more. It won't happen again."

He turned to go and Tessa held his hand. "Don't be angry with me," she pleaded. "Please. I can't bear that. Not now."

Adrian looked at her, grunted noncommittally, and forced himself to smile. "We should have measured your grip strength. Fine!" He pulled his hand away. "I'm not angry. Well, I won't be angry. But I still need to send it to the lab."

While he was still packing the tiny piece of flesh into a transport pack came a knock at the door, followed by Olena saying, "There's someone to see you."

"Ask her to take you outside," Adrian told Tessa. "I'm still not done with the sample."

Tessa rolled her chair to the door and turned around. "Don't sulk, boy," she said. "I said I will share everything with you, and I will. We're partners in this. We share the risk, and hopefully we'll share the rewards. Regardless, you saved my life at least twice. I will never forget that. Never." She then turned to the door. "It's open, Olena."

He watched as Olena entered and took Tessa out to the terrace.

The lab technicians came up with the delivery process. How the programming worked was beyond him, but there was always a tiny fleet, usually three or four, of small drones on the window sill ready for use. He secured the pack in a small compartment in the belly of one and pressed a button until it turned green.

The drone started buzzing and took off, making its way to the lab. Adrian's heart missed a beat as the drone seemed to be headed straight through a flock of ducks flying east. He breathed a sigh of relief when it leveled off well below them, passing safely.

Going out to the terrace, Adrian found Mina sitting across the table from Tessa, wearing her heavy high necked, long-sleeved black dress. She always wore the exact same type of dress, be it in the heat of summer or, augmented by a similarly dark overcoat, the freezing cold of winter.

Mina acknowledged his presence with a slight nod and continued her string of accusations. "You can imagine just how weak our case for the research ethics committee was," she said, patting the fat file in front of her. "I pulled every string I could think of, and even that was after Madeline kicked open some doors for me. If we didn't have some heavy hitters on our side, we probably

would have been thrown out immediately, and a criminal investigation would have been underway.”

“I truly appreciate your efforts on that matter,” Tessa said.

“It’s not my efforts I care about,” Mina snapped, and the pats on the file graduated to a single, resounding slap, “it’s my reputation! Our reputation! You put the entire institute in an impossible situation! You don’t get approval for primate tests, so you simply shove a needle in your arm and get it over with? That’s insane!”

Adrian took a seat next to Tessa, facing the yard. A couple of ducks swam in the pond, he noticed, keeping each other company.

“Well, you could have hung me out to dry,” Tessa said, “couldn’t you? You could say I went rogue.”

Mina smiled sardonically. She brought up her cup, sipped, and placed it down without a sound. “I’ll be perfectly honest with you,” she said, quietly composed again. “It was the first suggestion I made to Madeline. She refused.”

“Of course she did,” Tessa stated plainly. “The way the institute’s finances are, it could use a win. It needs a win. The Idun virus can be that win, and she knows it. Her name will be on the paper. There might even be an award in it for her.”

Mina took a deep breath. “Let’s not discuss Madeline and her decision making process,” she said. “She made the call, but she’s not sitting here. I am.”

Tessa reached out and patted Mina’s hand. “And you’re always welcome to my house,” she said. “Now that I understand the situation, how can I help you?”

“You can start by telling me what you’ve learned in the last few days,” Mina replied, staring back coldly. “Every single detail.”

“Adrian could do it far better.” She turned to him. “Would you be a dear and bring Mina up to speed?”

“Of course,” Adrian said. “Let’s start with the biopsies. We took a biopsy yesterday, and compared it to the one we took just before…” He paused and looked at Tessa, “before professor Magnus introduced the Idun virus to her system. The number of senescent cells in her thigh biopsy dropped almost by half, all probably,” he emphasized the word and repeated it, “probably replaced by rejuvenated cells.”

Mina’s eyes widened, and she leaned closer, putting the cup back on the table. “Half? In such a short time? Why are you measuring the senescent cells, rather than… What do you call them?”

“Rejuvenated cells. Basically differentiated stem cells, but with full length telomeres. We count senescent cells because, well, they’re much easier to count. We don’t have access to TRF analysis in our lab,” Adrian continued, “so—”

“What’s that?” Mina asked. “I’ve been out of research for a while now.”

"Sorry," Adrian apologized. "Terminal restriction fragment analysis. It's how you measure telomere length. We were able to run, however, QPCR, um, quantitative polymerase chain reaction analysis, so we know the average length increased by almost 400 base pairs."

"That doesn't tell me much. Is that significant?" Mina asked.

"The significance is that it grew," Tessa replied before Adrian could. "It's not supposed to. At all. Ever. The fact that the average rose means that some cells were replaced by new cells, the ones we call rejuvenated cells, which have full-length telomeres."

Mina settled back and tapped her lips, staring into the blank wall.

"It means that the virus is working as designed, Mina," Tessa said. "And so far it failed to kill me. Both are good things in my book."

Mina ignored the sarcasm. "Any other findings?" She asked, looking at Adrian.

"The extracellular matrix seems to be healthier," he replied, "which suggests that Tessa's fibroblasts are far more active. It would also explain the inflammation and—"

"Just the findings, please. No conclusions."

Adrian's shoulders slumped. "That's about it for the biopsies. We didn't prepare a test plan in the little time we had. We're... We're doing the best we can."

"And that's plenty," Mina reassured him. "Anything else?"

"There are the blood samples," Adrian replied, nodding. "The blood cell count increased somewhat, inflammatory markers went up, as I mentioned, but now they seem to get back down a bit down, liver enzymes are—"

"We can give you a full report," Tessa said, "colorful graphs and everything. Pages by the pound of collected data, but the evidence that the virus is working as expected keeps mounting up. Is that what you're here for?"

"First and foremost," Mina said indignantly, "I came here to see how you're doing. And you seem to be doing much better."

"Thank you," Tessa said. She smiled. "I truly appreciate it. I'm sorry if I'm getting a bit defensive. I've been fighting the bureaucracy for the last two years of my life, and my worst nightmare is getting shut down again."

"We're now on the same side, whether I like it or not," Mina said, and her smile seemed more genuine this time. "The only direction now is forward, right? Can you," she turned to Adrian, "please compile a one pager of preliminary summary? Include an appendix of those colorful graphs, and attach the..." she glanced at Tessa, "mounting corroborating evidence, as lab results?"

"Sure," he replied. "You'll have it by the end of the day."

"Well," Mina said and reached out to her files, "thank you for—"

"You'll be staying for tea, of course," Dawn said from the doorway. "We used to be better hosts, my dear."

Tessa looked back at Dawn sheepishly and started muttering something as Mina rose to her feet and smoothed down her dress. "I'm afraid I need to get going," she said. "There's—"

"I'll hear none of it," said Dawn. "Rome isn't burning. There's nothing that wouldn't wait for another fifteen minutes, is there?"

Mina looked at Tessa, who gestured at the chair.

"I'll have Olena bring us more tea and some biscuits in a couple of minutes," Dawn said and vanished into the darkness of the corridor.

Mina sat back down. "So," she said sweetly, tapping on the table with her fingertips, "how's life as a lab rat?"

"Painful. Surprisingly painful." Tessa looked at the patch on her leg and sighed.

Chapter 8

The rest of the day sped by. Tessa adjusted quickly to the new office, and compiled all the collected data into neat, useless files. Adrian made sure that those graphs she promised Mina seemed impressive enough despite being so sparse they were basically empty. He sent it all just before midnight and promptly went to bed.

He woke up by the break of dawn, too excited to keep sleeping. He tiptoed downstairs, and found the coffee pot gone from the kitchen.

Tessa and Dawn sat at the Terrace, holding hands. "Join us," Dawn suggested as she noticed him.

He did, and, before he could reach for the coffee, she poured him some tea. "Here you go, dear," she said.

"Thank you." He sipped from the cup. It was strong, but sweet. Just what he needed.

"Did you get some sleep?" Tessa asked.

Adrian nodded. "Not much, but enough, I think."

"Did you find anything interesting in the data?"

"Yes, very interesting," he said. He sipped some tea and continued, "you added at least five pounds of lean mass since last week. I suspect there's quite a lot of muscle mass there."

"So you think muscles are rebuilding themselves?"

Adrian shrugged. "We need more tests. You might be retaining water. Do you feel stronger?"

Tessa nodded. "I do. Let's see if I can stand up."

Dawn nearly choked on her tea.

"There's no harm in trying," Adrian said. "Maybe it would be better inside, on the carpet."

Dawn got her cough under control. "You're pushing yourself too hard," she protested. "What if you fall?"

"I'll catch her," Adrian promised.

Dawn frowned but nodded, prompting Adrian to roll Tessa's chair to the middle of the living room. The thick carpet would make it harder for Tessa to balance, but it would at least soften the blow if she fell.

He didn't believe she could stand, anyway. He stood in front of Tessa and offered his arms. "Ready?"

"More than ever," Tessa said and grabbed his forearms.

Dawn stood across the living room, transfixed. The early morning sun, coming through the open window at her back, made her wispy white hair glow golden red as it fluttered with the breeze.

"Easy," Adrian said, holding both of Tessa's hands. Despite the cool breeze still carrying the night's chill into the house, sweat collected on his brow.

Watching Tessa strain, it occurred to him that he might have been mistaken, and there might be quite a good deal of harm in trying.

She hissed, leaned forward and shifted her weight to her slippered feet, overbalanced and pushed him with the heels of her hands. Her entire body trembled, and her muscles, with the little definition they had, flexed under the forgotten burden of weight. She looked up at Adrian. "I'm not sure I can do it," she said.

Adrian forced a smile. "Of course you can!" he urged her on. "Push!"

"Maybe she really can't?" Dawn's voice quivered with the question, as if she was the one trying to stand.

Adrian never took his eyes off Tessa, who was wobbling as she shifted her weight back now. "Professor Magnus put on at least five pounds of lean mass, and the blood test showed heightened BAP." He quickly glanced at Dawn. "It means that her bones are rebuilding, not just the muscles. She can do it. Come on, professor!"

"Damn, boy!" Tessa protested. "It hurts!"

He now pulled, rather than pushed, as she leaned back again, with her weight on her heels. "Good!" He said, "your nervous system is recovering as well. Now stand up!"

Tessa inhaled through her teeth and shifted her weight forward, balancing like a bent over question mark.

She straightened her back, vertebra by vertebra, and looked up. Tears flowed freely through her squinted eyes, and her lips were pressed tightly together, completely bloodless and white. Through the obvious pain, and assisted by Adrian, she slowly stood up and started extending her legs. By the end of an excruciating minute, and for the first time in years, Tessa stood on her own two feet.

Dawn gasped, trotted closer and hugged Tessa. They stood there together, like a teetering tripod, for a few seconds. Adrian's arms, carrying most of Tessa's weight, started to tremble.

"Help me down," Tessa croaked.

Dawn backed away slowly, as if afraid Tessa's fragile legs would give way and buckle. Supporting her elbows, Adrian eased Tessa back into the chair. "How does doing the impossible feel like, professor?" He asked, wearing a wide grin, and wiped with the back of his hand the rivulets of sweat running down his face.

She looked up, and her eyes sparkled golden green, reflecting the morning sun. Tears streamed down her cheeks, wetting her trembling lips. "We're making a habit of it, or so it seems," she said. "Soon enough it will feel like a Tuesday."

Dawn came closer and cradled Tessa's head. "That was amazing," she said. "Don't pretend it was nothing." She looked down at Tessa. "We can have our walks again."

"One step at a time," Tessa said, wincing. "Literally."

The front door opened and Olena stepped in. As always, she was meticulously dressed. "You're up early today!" She exclaimed, obviously surprised. "Do you want breakfast? The sun is out again."

"I do believe I've earned it," Tessa said, her voice still strained from her recent effort.

Olena didn't seem to hear her and stood by the door.

"Yes please," Adrian said loud enough for her to hear. He waited for Tessa to put her feet back on their rest and then rolled her chair out of the house.

The sun, still low enough to slither under the awning, broke from the cover of clouds, but offered no real comfort or heat. Adrian placed Tessa at the large table and sat at her side.

The two ducks were sleeping in the pond, their beaks nestled under their wings. They rocked gently on the small eddies, but were otherwise motionless.

"You're shivering, dear," Dawn said, covering Tessa's hand.

"I'll get her something," Adrian said and hurried into the house. He got from Tessa's closet her favorite shawl, a heavily embroidered piece. She liked wearing it in the office when the winter, as she would phrase it, bit at her bones. He got back out and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"Thank you, boy," She said graciously.

"You're welcome." He said and sat down.

"I really didn't think it would work," Dawn said. "I guess..." She paused as Olena put a pot of steaming tea and another of french pressed coffee on the table.

"What would work?" Tessa asked and held out a cup.

Adrian filled the cup with coffee, earning a reproachful glare from Dawn, which he suffered with grace. "The virus," she told Tessa. "I mean, it got very scary at the hospital, and having you survived that, I thought it would be the end of it. I didn't expect more."

Tessa patted Dawn's hand. "That was the entire point, though. Not just surviving. Actually getting better."

Dawn managed a tired, tense smile. "I knew it was the point, but I didn't believe it would work." She poured tea for herself and sipped it carefully. "I thought it was just you being rebellious. Raging against the machine one final time."

"You should put more faith in me," Tessa said. She stared at her half empty cup, as if wondering where all the coffee went.

"I really should, and not just in you," Dawn said, looking at Adrian behind Tessa's back. "It makes a world of difference, having faith. What other surprises do you have lying in store?"

"I honestly don't know," Tessa replied. "No one does. We don't have any data to go on. We'll be surprised together."

"Oh, the fun we'll have," Dawn huffed. "How exhilarating."

"No need to get sarcastic," Tessa said, caressing Dawn's hand. "Now that the dangerous part is mostly behind us, things will only get better. I'm kind of excited."

Dawn turned her hand to clasp Tessa's palm. "I could do with a bit less excitement, if only for a while."

Adrian was struggling to contain himself. "Mostly behind us?" he whispered so only Tessa would hear.

She shushed him with her finger on her lips, and he decided to let it go.

They sat quietly, each sipping from their own cups. After Tessa's coffee ran dry, she held it up and motioned at Adrian. "A refill, please."

Adrian looked at Dawn, who shook her head vigorously. "Absolutely not!"

"Oh, come on!" Tessa said. "Last one!"

"I have given up on you," Dawn said, pouring tea for herself, "but not on him. There's still – Oh my God!" She exclaimed, nearly dropping the cup.

Startled, Adrian followed her gaze.

A lanky, raincoat wearing man came around the house, following the stone paved path. He walked in long, unsteady steps, as if testing the ground each time with his brown loafers.

Adrian rose and hurried across the terrace, blocking the man's way when he came halfway through.

"Archie Pluto, of The Lancet," the man said with a deep, cigarette charred voice, offering his hand. Adrian shook it politely, but stood his ground, staying in Pluto's path.

"I was wondering if I could have a few words with professor Magnus," Archie continued, speaking louder so his voice would carry to the terrace. He towered over Adrian, almost a head taller, his stubble covered skin was stretched hollow over his cheekbones, giving him an emaciated look, to the point of brittleness.

Adrian glanced back.

Still sitting at the table, Tessa shook her head vigorously. Next to her, Dawn was staring daggers at the man.

"The professor is not taking interview requests at the moment," Adrian told the journalist.

"Interview is such a big word," Archie said. His amicable smile exposed smoke yellowed teeth.

"You know, we don't really do interviews in The Lancet. However, a remarkable story came across my desk, and I just had to check it out. Maybe a couple of questions. Two minutes at most, and I'll be on my way."

"You can set up an appointment through the director of the Cambridge institute for Medical Research," Adrian said. "They will accommodate your needs. Until then..." He stopped as he noticed Dawn by his side.

"Until then, please leave my house," she picked up where Adrian left, glaring at the man.

"It would only—"

"Immediately!" Dawn stopped him. "Before I call the police."

"Of course, of course," Archie said and took a step back. "No need to get upset." He looked at Adrian. "The director's office you say? Well, if the professor changes her mind," he continued and offered Adrian a card he fished from his pocket. "Please let her know she can call me at any time, night and day."

Anxious to see the man leave, Adrian nodded silently and took the card.

As if lost, Archie looked around, nodded back and left the way he came. Adrian followed him through the gate, and watched him as the tall man waved without turning his head, got into his car and drove away.

Adrian got back to the table, which had dishes lined up in front of the two bickering women. "I don't want any reporters here," Dawn chastised Tessa, scowling at her.

"You know I don't chase publicity," Tessa placated Dawn, patting her hand. "I never have. I'm more than willing to let... Umm... What's her name..."

"Madeline?" Adrian suggested as he sat down. He reached out to a still steaming slice of sourdough bread.

"Yes," Tessa said, snapping her fingers, "exactly. Her. Let her take care of it."

"I'll tell Mina, then," Adrian said, already chewing. He took his phone out of his pocket and scanned the card. "I can give her his number. She'll decide what to do with it."

"Put that thing aside. You'll have breakfast first," Dawn said, pointing at the plates piled upon the table. "You can't live on coffee alone. That rude, nosy man can wait."

"It's The Lancet, not The Daily Express," Tessa told Dawn. "They're not interested in my love life, or our house and garden. They can't publish my research without reaching out for comments."

"So he said," Dawn replied, "and you swallowed it hook, line and sinker. Are you sure he's from The Lancet?"

Tessa bit down a fork-full of scrambled eggs. "You're being paranoid," she said after she swallowed. "He didn't seem dishonest to me."

"Or maybe you're being gullible."

Tessa squinted at Dawn, visibly struggling to bite down her reply. "It's good that it's Madeline's problem, then," she finally replied and went on eating.

Out of nowhere, a duck swooped down and crash landed clumsily in the pond, splashing water about as it stabilized itself.

Dawn smiled broadly. "You seemed to have regained your appetite," she said.

"And then some," Tessa said between bites. "I'm hungry all the time. I can't stop eating."

"Your body needs the protein," Adrian said. "Protein hunger is the worst hunger."

"Eat then," Dawn said. "Do we need to change her diet? Should I talk to Olena?" She asked Adrian.

Adrian nodded. "Leave it to me. I'll talk to her. Which reminds me," he told Tessa, "it's been long enough. We need to retest your EGF. Maybe it has something to do with your increased hunger."

"My what?" Tessa asked.

"EGF," Adrian repeated, and put a forkful of bacon in his mouth.

Tessa frowned. "What's that?" she asked.

Adrian glanced at her and swallowed. "What do you mean, what's that? Epidermal Growth Factor. What else?"

Tessa took another bite of the eggs and nodded slowly, looking rather sheepish.

"I know that face," Dawn said. "Was she supposed to know what this thing is?"

Adrian nodded, looking at Tessa thoughtfully. "Well, it plays a crucial role in stimulating cell growth and differentiation," he answered. "The Idun virus would be useless without it being abundant in her systems."

Tessa shrugged. "It slipped my mind," she said with her mouth full.

"You teach an entire lecture about it twice a year in your molecular biology course," Adrian said. "It couldn't have slipped your mind."

"Maybe," Dawn said, squinting at Tessa, "working yourself to death, day in and day out, is not such a great idea." She glanced at the coffee pot. "And hyper caffeinating yourself probably doesn't improve your sleep quality."

"I'm not—"

Dawn stood up. "You're taking the day off," she said. "Not another single minute of work, and I'll hear no arguments. Adrian, I will hold you responsible for any work she'll do today."

Adrian nodded, but couldn't ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. "You heard her," he told Tessa. "Today, I'll collect some samples and analyse them while you rest."

Tessa shrugged. "It suits me just fine," she muttered.

Dawn left with her plate barely touched.

"Do they still have senior yoga in the sports center?" Tessa suddenly asked.

"Why?" Adrian asked. "Do you want to try?"

"Yes. Let's see what these new muscles can do."

Another duck landed in the pond. This one was graceful, and perhaps out of respect to the other duck, made almost no splash at all.

"You just stood up for the first time today," Adrian said. "With assistance. Let's give it another day. Today you just rest. Take a nap. Read a book."

“But tomorrow, we will do Yoga!” She said, looked behind her, and downed the rest of her coffee.

Adrian shook his head and went on eating.

Chapter 9

Tessa was not one to idle. Whenever she wasn't eating, she kept fidgeting, making Adrian's sample taking tasks harder than necessary.

"Have you scheduled us for class tomorrow?" she asked as he was swabbing the inside of her cheek.

"I checked. There's no class tomorrow."

He put the sample in its designated case, alongside other samples, all catalogued and ready to be shipped for analysis.

"So the day after?"

"Listen," he snapped. His patience was running thin. "This is insane, It's far too soon. You need time to adjust."

"I don't think you appreciate the real rate in which I'm recovering," she argued back. "I need to build some muscle, and for that I need stimulation. I need to move."

"You just stood up, for the first time, a couple of hours ago. These processes take time."

Tessa shook her head vigorously. "They used to take time. Here, look," she said, and, with a bit of struggle, stood up on her own. There was none of the excruciating back contortions. She rose the same way he'd expect an old lady to stand up.

"See?" she said, her voice strained. "Not perfect. Not yet. It still hurts. But don't expect my progress to be at the same pace as other octogenarians. The Idun virus is working. We should optimize the environment for it. Are we on the same page?"

Adrian nodded.

"So let's not slow down its progress. My progress." She sat back in her chair and started pushing on the handrims.

When he rose to help her, Tessa said, "No. Thank you. I need to practice."

After a painstakingly slow minute, she left Adrian alone in the office.

She might have had a point, pushing herself to her limits, but Adrian suspected her real motive was somewhat different. She celebrated her newfound independence, and embraced her renewed mobility with child-like excitement.

By mid-morning, while he was still struggling with the processing pipeline for the vast amounts of data he was collecting, Tessa grew tired of remaining seated and started testing her ability to walk. Her resurgent strength barely allowed her a few baby steps at a time, and she slowly wandered around the office.

"You need to take it easy!" Adrian said as she leaned on her desk and hissed with pain.

"Nonsense, boy," she said, tears flowing down her cheeks. "The pain is completely manageable." She was smiling though, and her eyes glinted with delight.

By noon, analysis started flowing back from the lab. He got so immersed with the results he skipped lunch, and as the sun began to dip below the horizon and Dawn announced supper was served, he was dizzy with hunger.

Tessa led the way to the terrace, one hesitant step at a time, with Dawn ghosting her, ready to catch her if she'd suddenly topple.

"The rate of your protein synthesis is insane," he told Tessa as she sat down. "You're building muscle at an embryonic rate. I'm worried about your connective tissues, though. It would be a terrible setback now if you tear something."

Tessa smiled at him reassuringly. "I'm not lifting weights any time soon," she said. "Just walking. You worry too much."

"You listen to the boy," Dawn said. "If anything, he worries too little, and you don't worry enough."

"I need an ultrasound," Adrian told Tessa. "I could test your tendons this way."

She shrugged. "They're fine. Trust the science. The Idun virus is working on them too."

"He's making sense to me," Dawn said. She poured herself some tea, took a biscuit from the bowl, and examined it thoroughly before putting it back down.

She's still not eating well, Adrian noted. He wondered if he should discuss it with Tessa. He poured a few spoonfuls of scrambled eggs on Tessa's plate, which she eyed eagerly. No appetite problem there.

"Do you want some?" He asked Dawn, who shook her head.

"Have you eaten today?"

Dawn shrugged. "I don't remember," she said, and picked up the same biscuit again. "I'm not hungry, so I guess I did."

Tessa started devouring the eggs. When Olena came with a tray of grilled chicken legs, Tessa picked a piece and put it on her plate.

"Any meaningful progress?" Dawn asked Adrian.

He swallowed his eggs before answering, and washed them down with some water. "A lot of setup. We're using a different system to process the data, and it takes time. But the initial results are very promising."

Adrian expected Dawn to keep prodding, but she just nodded and looked at the pond. The ducks swam leisurely, without a care in the world, as the clouds faded from steel gray to black.

"We're still going to senior yoga tomorrow, right?" Tessa asked suddenly.

Adrian felt he should give it one last try before throwing the towel. "It's too soon. You might hurt yourself."

Tessa rose stiffly from her seat. "Here. See? Most people in class can't stand up that fast."

Adrian looked at her skeptically.

"I'll take it easy. I promise."

"She won't," Dawn deadpanned, still staring at the pond.

Adrian agreed with Dawn, for all the good it did him. With a heavy heart, he took out his phone and signed them both up for the next morning's class.

"It's early," he said. "Literally at sunrise."

Dawn snickered. "It's senior yoga. Those guys are already up and about at those hours."

Tessa laughed and squeezed Dawn's hand.

They dispersed and went to their respective beds.

Adrian expected he would have to wake Tessa up, and even harbored some hope she would abandon the yoga lesson for the comfort of her warm bed, but when he got down to the kitchen the coffee pot was fresh and half drained.

They weren't the first to arrive at the green, grassy park just outside the sports center. A group of seniors, most of them well into their golden years, had their mats ready on the lawn.

Adrian approached the instructor, a young woman who seemed to resist the morning chill with surprising grace, given her flimsy clothes. She was busy getting her brown bob into a high bun.

"Hello, Ann-Marie?"

"Yes, that would be me," she said. Her voice was melodious, with a slight accent Adrian didn't manage to place.

"Hi, this is professor Magnus," he said, pointing at Tessa. "She hadn't worked out for a while, and... what?" Her bemused look stopped him.

"And you are?"

"Oh. I'm Adrian."

She finished wrapping her hair bun, and they shook hands.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Adrian. What is your relation to professor Magnus?"

"I'm... I'm her teaching assistant."

Ann-Marie nodded, seemingly impressed. "That's admirable dedication. Will you be staying for the class as well?"

"I don't think I should," he said, looking at the brightening horizon. "I have a ton of work to catch up on."

"We all do. It would do you some good." She looked around. "We're few today. I would appreciate it if you stayed. If only to make sure I treat your professor well."

She winked, and Adrian realized he couldn't refuse. "Okay. I will," he said. "Now, regarding Professor—"

Ann-Marie put a warm hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. I'm a professional," she said. "I've worked with elderly people for years now. I'll give the two of you special attention, though." She glimpsed eastwards, over his shoulder. "Just grab a couple of mats. We're about to begin."

Despite some of the group rolling their eyes at the newcomers, Ann-Marie positioned Tessa and Adrian at the front of the class and patiently explained the options, providing up-close demonstrations.

As the sun broke the horizon, they started their sun salutations. To Adrian's relief, Tessa stuck to the easy options. To his surprise, though, despite being three decades younger than the group's average age, he wasn't the most flexible and often struggled through the movements.

Naturally, he always chose the advanced option.

After the lesson, despite the mounting pain in his muscles, he made sure to thank Ann-Marie.

"You were far too hard on yourself," she told him reproachfully. "You'll probably be sore today and tomorrow. Next time, go easy on yourself." She turned to Tessa. "How was it for you, Professor? Can I expect you back next week?"

Tessa was glowing with delight. "We absolutely would! It was amazing! So good!"

Ann-Marie smiled. Adrian found her smile quite charming.

"You should have asked her out," Tessa argued later, when he sat her in the cafeteria. "You'd make a great couple."

"Come on," Adrian protested. "The way she looks, new students probably hit on her twice on a bad day."

Tessa shook her head. "Men," she sighed. "All brains, no instincts. I'm glad I never had to deal with you daft lot. You're a catch, boy. She wasn't posing for my benefit the entire lesson."

"I'll think about it."

"Well, you'll have another chance next week."

Adrian kept considering the possibility as he went on pursuing his tasks on campus. He had several discussions with the technical staff, and was pleasantly surprised to realize some of the budget constraints have been lifted.

The image of Ann-Marie smiling broadly stuck with him. She really had a lovely smile.

Tessa was surrounded by a host of empty cappuccino cups when he picked her up just before noon. On the way home, Adrian's muscles already started signaling the onset of soreness. He went straight to the office to implement the agreed upon protocol, and remained mostly seated for a few hours.

Dawn came to call as the sun slanted down through the high window. "Join us for tea outside, will you?"

Adrian grunted as he stood up. Walking out was a painful chore, and he groaned sitting down.

"You seem to be suffering, boy," Tessa commented as he sat at the table, leaning heavily on his hands. "That's the price you pay for trying to impress the instructor."

"It's getting worse by the minute," Adrian complained.

"What is it I'm hearing?" Dawn asked. "Did our Adrian meet someone?"

Tessa smiled. "A painted-on pants wearing, very toned someone," she said, pouring him coffee. "She insisted he'd stay as close to her as possible during the lesson, too. Her downward-facing dog was close enough to sniff."

"Tessa!" Dawn exclaimed and swatted at Tessa's hand. "You're embarrassing the boy!"

Adrian suspected it was on purpose. "She probably stayed close to make sure I'll suffer from every single twist," he said.

"You don't seem to be in any kind of pain," Dawn told Tessa. "Didn't you participate?"

"I took it easy. I promised. Besides," Tessa patted her leg, "I'm used to the occasional stab of pain. Some muscle soreness doesn't trouble me. At least not much."

rain-bearing clouds blotted the sun, suddenly casting the world into gloom. Drizzle danced on the empty pond's clear water, slightly slanted by the easy breeze.

They drank the rest of the bitter tea enjoying the serene music of the outdoors. Adrian, who managed to forget his soreness in his legs for a short while, but his schedule was pressing, finished his second cup and rose with a grimace. "I have to finish interfacing with the lab," he said and started returning to the office.

"Wait," Tessa said. "Before we lose you to those, um, interfaces, I need your help with something that's been bothering me." She rose to her feet with grace that made Adrian jealous.

"Of course. Lead the way."

At her desk, Tessa sat down and pointed at a table on her screen, containing concentrations of various proteins. "This is so odd. I must have been drunk on painkillers writing this," she said. "Why are we testing if I'm breaking down lactose in my muscles?"

He leaned and looked closer. "We're not. That's not what we're testing for. We're testing for senescence associated beta-galactosidase, not the generic one. It's the correct marker."

Tessa looked up at him. "I don't get it. Are those different? How so?"

With the lab soon closing, Adrian's patience wore thin. "Is this a test?" he snapped. "Are you testing me? Are we back to first year biology classes? They obviously have different pH levels. What's this about?"

Tessa shook her head. She seemed lost. "I'm not testing you. I guess I got a bit foggy about it. Why are you getting so angry all of a sudden?"

Adrian deflated. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I know it's a poor excuse, but I'm tired, and I'm in so much pain I can't think straight."

"Go lie in bed," Tessa suggested.

"I have work—"

“Take your laptop with you.” She glimpsed outside. “I won’t tell Dawn. Your secret is safe with me.”

One of Dawn’s many rules was that work was forbidden in the bedrooms. Adrian considered it for a moment. “Dawn is right. I’ll text them. They’ll have everything ready tomorrow.”

“Do you want to use my wheelchair?” She quipped, trying to placate him. “I no longer need it. I can push you to the elevator and spare you those stairs.”

“No, thank you,” Adrian replied and left the office.

“Next time,” she shouted after him, “you should leave senior yoga to the actual seniors.”

She couldn’t have forgotten this, he thought as he hobbled to the stairs. Tessa always had a sharp memory, and no detail slipped her mind, definitely not this kind of triviality.

Adrian shuffled all the way up to his room, reconsidering his decision to forgo the elevator with every single step. Once upstairs, he filled his bathtub with warm water, and carefully stepped inside when it was half full.

He soaked, staring at the ceiling.

Tessa’s lapses of memory kept tugging at him. It slipped her mind. Some things shouldn’t slip your mind, especially not a sharp, yet untouched by age mind like Tessa’s.

As he closed his eyes, the image of Ann-Marie came unbidden to his mind, perfectly executing a sun salutation, just as close as Tessa described earlier.

It was a pleasant memory to hold on to.

Groaning once more, he massaged his legs, but it didn’t help. He let go, hoping and praying that the heat would take the pain away.

Chapter 10

Some of the pain went away, making room for hunger.

His stomach growled. Adrian accepted the inevitable and stepped out of the comfort of the bath into the coolness of his room. He dried himself down quickly and put on a robe. It was late enough for the house to be empty except for him, Dawn and Tessa.

Intent on raiding the refrigerator, Adrian's trek down was surprisingly agonising, with pricks of pain stabbing when and where he least expected.

"Thank God," he muttered when he finally found himself barefoot on the hallway carpet.

"Adrian? Is that you?" He heard Dawn call from the living room.

"Yes."

"Would you be a dear and join us for a bit?"

"Sure," he said and started waddling her way. Stumbling out of the doorway, he stopped short.

Next to Dawn, on the black leather couch, sat Madeline Jackson, the director of the Cambridge Institute for Medical Research. The jacket of her tan pantsuit was folded neatly on the couch's arm next to her, with a golden embroidered handbag resting on top of it.

Seeing her sitting there felt like getting kicked by a mule. They hadn't met since their confrontation in the hospital. With the threat of misconduct investigation hanging over his head, Adrian could only imagine why she was there. He tightened his robe's belt. "Hello, Director," Adrian said. He closed the distance and offered his hand.

Madeline rose, hand pressed to her white blouse as if holding a tie that wasn't there, and shook his hand, smiling broadly. "Come on, Adrian. 'Director' is such an ugly title. Besides, we bonded a bit lately, haven't we?" She asked with her deep, melodious voice. "You can call me Madeline."

"Of course," he said and swallowed. "I didn't know we were expecting you."

She sat down and waited for him to sit before she continued. "It's a surprise visit, I guess. A bit of controlled chaos. A sign of the times, I would say. We just rounded up a very eventful stress-filled board meeting, and you can imagine the burning topic on our plate. So afterwards, I was driving nearby and thought I'd come pay a visit and see how our albatross is doing."

Adrian swallowed.

Madeline leaned closer and frowned, leaving her forehead suspiciously smooth. "Tessa's crazy stunt caused quite a stir among the board members," she said. "A few of them pretend to be terribly upset, and use this scandalous opportunity to ruffle some of their gold laden feathers. That anonymous tip to the police, the one you got tangled with, was just the tip of the iceberg."

The residual torpor from the hot bath faded completely. If, as she just said, it was Tessa's stunt, he might be off the hook. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience we've caused," Adrian said, fully alert. "I hope the situation is now well at hand?"

Madeline pouted with her full, ruby lipsticked lips. "Inconvenience. Such a Canadian word. Unfortunately, the situation is about as chaotic as it could possibly be. Some board members have taken residence in Cambridge until the matter is fully resolved. Quite a few are asking for,

you know..." She tracked her index finger across her throat and made a sound Adrian would have been far more comfortable not hearing.

"And I would not go down quietly or alone," she added, examining her perfectly manicured fingers.

Dawn patted Adrian's thigh. "What can we do?" She asked.

"That depends on who's 'we'," Madeline looked at Dawn. "But that's certainly the attitude I'm looking for. I'm doing my part, keeping the wolves at bay by dangling the all mighty dollar in front of their greedy, beady eyes. But I can only promise a generous revenue stream if it's backed by," she glanced at Adrian, "you know. Results. So I repeat my question. How is Tessa doing?"

"The virus appears to have a wide scale, significant effect on professor Magnus's system," Adrian replied, looking outside, where darkness seemed to be descending on the peaceful pond. "We can see a constant decrease in senescent cells count, at least their markers, and—"

"Adrian, look at me," Madeline said.

He did.

"Save the scientific babble for the egg heads in the lab. At the moment, I couldn't care less about your analysis, the future of your research, or academic contribution," she continued. "I came here for straight answers. Short sentences. Simple terms. I want to know if that semi-suicidal stunt helped her in any way, shape, or form."

"She's walking again," Dawn said quietly.

Madeline's eyes snapped open and her eyebrows rose without creating the tiniest of creases on her smooth skin. "And you didn't lead with that?" she exclaimed, staring at Adrian. "That is fantastic!"

"Yes, it is," He agreed. "It's not just the nervous system. She's also building muscle at a remarkable rate, something we didn't anticipate. Still, the Idun virus might have some adverse side effects we haven't picked up on yet. We need to be cautious."

"You need to be cautious," she emphasized the pronoun. "I have necks to release from the noose. Building muscle, you said?"

"All we have at the moment is anecdotal evidence," Adrian said. "We can't get ahead of ourselves."

"Your anecdotal evidence is a woman with ALS who can now walk. Entire religions have been based on less."

"We might be putting the cart before the horses," Adrian said. "We can't sell anything before—"

"Oh, no, I need that cart rolling yesterday," Madeline said. "And I don't care about the horses. Leave the selling part to Mina and me. Some solid, if anecdotal evidence is enough to get us all the funding we need to get this medicine approved for human use. Tessa and you will be drowning in grants."

"That's an unappealing thought," Tessa said from the hallway, standing on her own two feet. She changed clothes, and now wore an oversized purple chemise that hung on her like a tent. Her long white hair was damp and clung to her shoulders.

"Just look at you!" Madeline said, and rose to give Tessa two kisses, leaving lip shaped red marks on her cheeks. "This is incredible! Unbelievable!"

Tessa grinned at her and slumped down into the soft cushions. "A semi-suicidal stunt can sometimes go a long way, I guess," she said. "And might make a good deal of money for quite a few people."

Madeline waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, it might prove a career booster to some, for sure. Like our dear Adrian here. But the most important thing is that you're alive and well."

"Of course," Tessa said, nodding.

"How are you feeling, anyway?" Madeline asked. "I tried Elise, but I couldn't get a straight answer. Adrian here has been stumbling over his tongue. I seem to be struggling to get a simple, direct answer from anyone."

"It's because there is no simple, direct answer," Tessa replied resolutely. "I'm definitely feeling better. I even did some yoga this morning, for the first time in over a decade. Evidently, I didn't keel over. However, I can't give you a direct answer and neither can Adrian or Elise because, to be perfectly honest, we just don't know yet."

Madeline frowned at her and was about to say something, but Tessa went on.

"The human body is a complicated machine, with different systems working in clockwork synchronization to keep everything going. We gave the gears in my own body a serious kick. It seems to be working fine, but despite the apparent success I might kick the bucket tomorrow, and Adrian will be left with the gory task of finding out why I suddenly dropped dead."

"Tessa!" Dawn exclaimed, putting her tea cup on the table. "Really!"

"Oh, I don't think it's likely," Tessa reached out and patted Dawn's hand. "However, Adrian is absolutely right. This is uncharted territory. We should all acknowledge our lack of understanding. Tragedies might still happen."

Madeline's smile never waned. "That's interesting. Say, when do you think you'll be able to present the current body of knowledge to the board?"

"Not anytime soon," Dawn said. "That is not negotiable. Tessa needs to rest and recover."

"We are out of easy options, Dawn," Madeline replied, staring back coldly. "And, believe me, everything is negotiable."

"Maybe Adrian could present it?" Tessa asked. "Dip his toe in the big boys' pool?"

Madeline shook her head. "You know I like you, Adrian," she told him, "and I trust you, but the board would expect a tenured professor to make the presentation."

Adrian knew nothing of that sort, and despite Madeline's reassuring smile, he was still halfway sure his termination letter was resting inside her embroidered handbag, ready to be pulled out.

"What about Robert?" Tessa suggested. "He's tenured and knows his way around microbiology. I can bring him up to speed in a couple of days."

"Robert?" Madeline asked. "Which Robert?"

"What do you mean, 'which Robert?'" Tessa asked, frowning. "The only Robert in my department. Robert Otis."

"Professor Otis?" Madeline's perfectly sculpted eyebrows rose slightly. "We can try, but I really don't think your virus would prove potent enough to resurrect the dead."

Tessa tilted her head, and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Darling, Robert died six months ago," Madeline said. "Have you forgotten? We went to his funeral together."

"Did he?" Tessa said, smiling apologetically. "In this case, maybe Mina would do it? If you could bully her to come here for a few days, I could probably bring her up to speed enough so she'd make a reasonable presentation to the board."

"She hasn't been teaching for a while now," Adrian said. "And definitely didn't conduct any kind of research. I don't think that—"

"Nonsense," Madeline cut him off. "I don't think I'd even have to twist her arm. It's just a presentation. She'll probably be delighted to help."

Dawn shifted uncomfortably. "Mina is always welcome at our house, of course," she said, "but we'll have to keep those sessions short enough, so Tessa could get her rest."

"Adrian will be bearing the brunt of the work anyway," Tessa said and winked at him, "as always."

"It's settled then," Madeline said and stood up. "I'll talk to Mina. Don't get up," she told Tessa as she struggled to rise. "Keep your strength. I just know that soon enough we'll be putting it to good use. Adrian," she turned to him, "would you mind walking me to my car?"

"Of course," Adrian said, although he did mind. He grimaced as he got up, and stiffly walked out as Madeline said her goodbyes.

As he held the door open, the cold breeze ruffled his robe, making him shiver.

Madeline caught up with him a moment later. "Something is not right with her," she told him, speaking quietly as they walked outside. "It's as clear as day. Do you know what it is?"

"I mean, I have my suspicions," Adrian said, "but I don't know for sure."

"So know for sure," she retorted. "Sooner rather than later. People don't forget their colleagues dying. She bawled her eyes out at his funeral, for crying out loud. They ate lunch together for years."

Stopping in front of her gaudy black Audi, Madeline clicked on her remote and the headlights flashed alive. "I trust you to get us through this," she said, resting her hand on his shoulder.

"You'll make sure that I'm always kept in the loop, and I'll make sure the police will get off your case."

Something about the way she said it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand.

"I'll also put your name on every single paper, grant, and prize, right next to Tessa's name," she added.

"I don't think Mina is the—"

"Oh, don't be silly," she cut him off. "Of course she won't. Tessa will present her remarkable research. The board won't settle for anyone else. She'll be up to it in a few days, won't she?"

Adrian nodded, shivering with the cold. His robe didn't seem to keep any of the bone chilling breeze at bay.

"Good." Madeline smiled her flawless smile, and her teeth shone bright white in the toneless led lights. "Dawn just needs to catch on, that's all. Promises aside, just to build up some trust," she added, her voice dripping with honey, "I'm meeting both the department chair and dean for dinner tomorrow. I might be able to push a tenure request through the fast lane, should one be submitted. Two years is less than usual, but I believe you've earned it."

Adrian's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Overall, he felt numb. The freezing cold, the unbearable thudding of his heart, his exhaustion and hunger were all getting to him.

Madeline entered the driver's seat, and the electric car played a joyful tune as the engine began to hum. "Make sure you submit that request," she said as the automatic car backed away from the house. "By tomorrow morning."

He was still looking as it sped away and vanished into the darkness, navigating the turns at a speed no driver in his right mind would.

"What's wrong with him?" he heard Dawn ask. He turned around and saw her, alongside Tessa, standing in the doorway.

"He thought he was a hotshot," Tessa said. "He tried to impress the attractive yoga instructor."

Adrian hobbled back inside. "Rest assured, a mistake I won't be making again any time soon," he muttered as he passed them by. "Or ever."

Followed by the echoes of their laughter, Adrian made the painful trek to the kitchen and took out some leftovers from the refrigerator.

He ate alone on the terrace, with only the sleeping ducks for company. Having sated his hunger, he laboured upstairs and flopped into his bed.

After a while, he decided he couldn't sleep. He picked up his phone, browsed the faculty's internal website and found the form for tenure.

He filled it, finished it, and by the time he submitted everything the house already quieted down.

Still, tossing and turning in his bed, he couldn't sleep. He felt somewhat guilty for not sharing his concerns with Dawn, and a little sneaky for not coming clean about Madeline's schemes with Tessa, but neither of those kept him awake.

It was the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that Madeline was right. That they're missing something. That Tessa was far from okay, and something had gone unexpectedly, horribly wrong.

Chapter 11

Plenty of paracetamol and a full night of sleep made a world of difference for Adrian. Other than some sporadic pangs of lingering pain the episode with the yoga class remained a thing of the past.

In the present, however, he had some pressing issues, problems which started plaguing him as soon as he opened his eyes.

One was Tessa's failing memory, and the second his supposed reversal of fortune with Madeline.

Adrian had to fix the first to address the second.

He splashed some cold water on his face, sneaked downstairs, and brewed himself some fresh coffee, doing it all as quietly as he could, careful not to disturb the utter silence in the house.

With the pot in one hand and a cup in the other, he tiptoed to the office.

It might have been an automatic process, but according to several email messages his request from last night was already a few rungs up in the ladder of approval, and currently in consideration by the dean.

It was really happening.

Adrian's excitement was tinged with dread, somehow making the situation worse. Now he also had a tenured position to lose, should he fail Madeline.

With renewed vigor, he poured over the data.

As the minutes crawled by, he sipped more and more of the fast cooling coffee, trying to figure out what went wrong. One uncomfortable hypothesis kept popping up. Of all the reasonable explanations to Tessa's condition, Occam's razor kept pointing him to the most obvious one, the most harrowing one.

The Idun virus was laying waste to Tessa's mind.

His phone pinged, informing him that Mina plans to drop by shortly. Looking back at the screen, he realized he had no clue what to do next. He needed Tessa to have her memory tested.

Adrian took the empty pot back to the kitchen and saw Olena there, laboring in front of the stove.

"Give me that," she told him, took the pot and put it in the sink. "Go outside. I'll get you breakfast."

He did as she suggested. The morning mists still clung to the surface of the pond, but Adrian imagined he could see the ducks there, gently bobbing on the smooth surface.

Too on edge to sit down, he started pacing back and forth. Before long, he saw Tessa, bleary eyed, grumpy, and disheveled in the same purple chemise she wore last night, coming over with sure footed, confident steps.

As soon as she reached him he said, with a heavy heart, "Professor, we need to discuss--"

Tessa cut him off, scowling at him. "Judging by your breath and level of energy, you must have had your morning coffee," she growled. "I, on the other hand, did not." She walked past him and sat at the table, facing the yard. "Whatever it is," she said, not looking back, "we'll discuss it after breakfast."

"New Coffee on the way!" Olena shouted from the kitchen.

"How did she know?" Adrian asked, but Tessa didn't answer. She just stared out into the void, seemingly deep in thought. The crisp coldness didn't appear to bother her much, if at all.

"We need to discuss something," he started again.

"Do you see an empty coffee cup on the table?"

"Come on, professor," Adrian persisted. "This is important."

Tessa's shoulders slumped. "Okay boy, let's hear it."

"So, did you notice that you started experiencing memory lapses?"

"No," she replied, drawing back. "I absolutely did not, at least, not to my recollection."

Adrian tried to figure out whether she was sarcastic, decided she wasn't, and shook his head. "I guess that's a part of the problem. It just makes it worse."

Olena came out carrying a couple of pots, and placed them on the table next to the cups.

"Thank you," Tessa said and hurriedly poured herself some coffee. Glancing at Adrian, she poured him some too. "Worse? You're making mountains out of molehills. Even if some stuff slipped my mind, it would be perfectly normal, given my recent traumatic experiences."

"It's not normal," Adrian pressed on. "You forgot that Robert Otis died. You forgot the bio markers for cancer. It's pretty far from normal."

"Need I remind you how old I am, boy?"

"It changes nothing. Two weeks ago your memory was perfect. Do we really need to ask Dawn?"

"Ask me what?" Dawn asked, coming out of the house. Unlike them both, she was meticulously attired and seemed ready to leave. She wore a dark green dress, an overcoat, and a shawl around her head and neck, ready for weather far colder than a spring morning would offer.

"Are you going somewhere?" Tessa asked.

"No, I was cold stepping out of our bed, so I dressed warmer," she said and sat down in front of them. "Ask me what?"

"Have you noticed me being extra forgetful these last few days?"

"Well," Dawn's eyes went up, as if replaying yesterday's events in the theater of her mind. "I don't know about extra forgetfulness, but there was the thing with Professor Otis yesterday, which was very strange, and Adrian here kept explaining things to you, which also seemed weird at the time." Seeing Tessa frown at her, she added, "you usually don't require this kind of explanation. You're pretty well versed in your... Stuff."

Tessa looked at Adrian reproachfully. "So I lose focus a couple of times, and suddenly it's pathological? Let it rest, boy. I was deathly sick, and a virus was restructuring a good portion of my body. You know as well as I do that short-term stress impacts our ability to form new memories and retrieve old ones" She turned to Dawn. "I want to walk around a little, before Olena brings us the food."

"You can walk just fine on your own," Adrian snapped, and it's not just—"

"Adrian!" Dawn frowned at him. "What's gotten into you?"

He could feel his nostrils flaring. "We can't just brush this aside, like it's a figment of my imagination!"

"Yes, but mind your manners!"

"Let him vent a little," Tessa said, patting Dawn's hand. "It's completely understandable. He's been in a pressure cooker for quite a few days now. It's a wonder he's still sane."

To Adrian's flabbergasted face she added, "I know I can walk, boy, but my dear Dawn asked me not to walk for a while without her, and I intend to respect her wishes."

"I'm sorry, dear," Dawn told him as she got up. "I guess we're all wound up a bit too tightly."

Adrian remained seated. He felt like a school boy who's been sent to the principal's office to be disciplined. Trying to control his temper, he breathed deeply a few times as the two women started circling the pond. They were too far to hear him unless he shouted, and that was out of the question, so he sulked and drank his coffee until they came close again.

"It's not just—" His phone pinged. "Mina is at the door. Excuse me." He rose. "I will most certainly not let it rest," he added indignantly. "This is serious."

Tessa nodded, which only served to fuel his fury. He bit down his next words and went to the front door.

"Good morning," he greeted Mina who stood outside patiently. Her hands were, as always, clasped in front of her. Adrian learned long ago not to offer her a handshake.

"Good morning, Adrian. Is everything all right?" She asked as she entered. "You seem upset."

"I'll be fine. Care for some breakfast? Or tea?"

She frowned disapprovingly. "I'm not sure we have time for breakfast. Tea would be lovely, though. A touch of cream and no sugar. Where is Tessa?"

"She's taking a walk with Dawn." He glanced at her. "She hasn't eaten yet, and needs to, so it might be a while."

"We should really hurry up," Mina said. "There's a lot of work to be done."

"I couldn't agree more, and still I'd consider it a miracle if you could get her to work before she's had her fill of breakfast. But you can certainly try."

Mina scowled but followed him as they crossed the house. When they got out, she stopped, clapped her hands and exclaimed, "Praise the lord and his mercies! This really is a miracle!"

Tessa was trudging on the other side of the pond, barefoot and unaided. Her steps were precariously unstable but quick, like a toddler rushing before the unavoidable stumble.

Dawn stayed close behind her, with her arms stretched forward so she almost touched Tessa's elbows. She had to hustle to keep up, and wore a horrified expression doing so.

"It is indeed!" Tessa cried. Her voice carried clear and strong across the backyard.

Mina sat at the table, her back not touching the backrest. "This is beyond anything I imagined."

Adrian joined her and poured her some tea. "We didn't know what to expect, too," he said, adding a touch of cream. "Her progress is very impressive."

"Thank you," Mina said and held her cup to her lips. Her eyes, wide with wonder, followed Tessa. "Isn't this dangerous?" She asked when Tessa, to Dawn's obvious horror, practically hopped her way closer.

Adrian stopped to think for a minute. "At the rate she's healing," he finally replied, "not so much. I suspect her bone density improved enough to withstand a standing fall."

"Suspect?"

"Yes. I'd like to scan her as soon as possible."

Mina smiled politely. "That's what I'm here for."

Olena came out of the house with heavily laden, steaming trays and put them on the table. She nodded to Mina. "I will bring you a plate," she said and hurried back inside.

"Enough, love," Dawn said as Tessa turned to start another trip around the pond. "I'm exhausted, and Mina is waiting."

Tessa frowned at her, but changed course and made her way back to the table. The sight of the trays put a smile on Tessa's face.

"I can't find the words," Mina said as Tessa sat down, pointing at Tessa's legs.

"The Idun virus is working," Tessa replied with a grin. "Just as I knew it would. It's that simple."

Adrian, who was just adding some cream to his coffee, frowned at her sharply.

"Go on," Mina said as she took out a small notebook.

"Okay," Tessa said with a pacifying gesture. "I mean, we don't know for sure."

She took the cup Adrian poured her and sipped. "But it's quite evident that it's working. The muscle mass increase is visually evident, but the most significant change is in motor control. We're trying to verify that exposure of the axons, rather than the nucleus, was enough to trigger the rejuvenation process. What we do know for sure is that the nervous system was massively affected in the first few days."

Mina scribbled in her notebook. "That's interesting. It might explain the initial response."

Tessa licked the thin mustache of foam on her upper lip. "What initial response?"

"If the nervous system recovered faster than the muscles, it might have created a signal the heart muscle couldn't handle," Mina explained. "That might have been the root cause of your cardiac arrest. I can see no other reason."

Dawn blanched, and Tessa seemed taken aback. "What?" she asked, tilting her head. "What do you mean? What cardiac arrest?"

"We told you. You crashed," Adrian said. "It was probably induced by the high fever and the cascade of systems failure we saw a few hours after the introduction of the Idun virus. But there's no way of knowing. Not now, certainly."

Tessa looked at him and furrowed her brows. "Maybe I should go through the hospital's records again," she said. "I don't remember the cardiac arrest part at all."

"We'll get to the memory issues soon enough," Adrian said, frowning back at her. "To the previous point," he continued, "the nervous system reacted more rapidly than the skeletal muscles, so while activation of the muscles was possible within days, they were not, and still are not strong enough."

"They're strong enough to walk now," Tessa said. "I'm not running yet, but don't be surprised if that will happen within the month."

"You should do a DXA scan first," Mina said, raising her eyes. "We don't want your legs to snap like twigs. Unless your bone density skyrocketed as well?"

"For bone strength," Adrian explained to Dawn. To Mina he said, "We'll be using quantitative ultrasound as early as possible. Even though it's safe, I want to keep radiation exposure to a minimum. Less confounding factors."

Mina nodded and jotted something in her notebook. "Do you have everything you need for your research?" She asked Tessa, but her eyes flicked at Adrian.

"So, we need an ultrasound machine as soon as possible. I'd love to have a QS scanner delivered from the hospital as well, if they could spare one for a few days," Adrian replied.

"I'll take care of it. What else?"

Adrian nodded. "I want to have daily tests for Alpha-Fetoprotein and Beta-hCG," he said, "I can keep sending the samples with drones, but we need a boatload of red-top tubes."

He lifted his cup and took a sip.

"That obviously shouldn't be a problem," Mina said. She wrote it down and then asked, "Why do you need Alpha-Fetoprotein levels? Tessa isn't pregnant, is she?"

That comment caught Adrian by surprise halfway through gulping a mouthful of the delicious coffee. He sputtered into a coughing fit.

Mina patted him on the back and turned to Tessa. "Well?" she asked. "What is it for?"

"Um," Tessa muttered, her eyes flickering between Adrian and Mina. "I... I don't remember," she admitted.

Adrian grabbed the glass Dawn held out and gulped the cold water greedily. Once his cough had subsided, he turned on Tessa. "What do you mean you don't remember? Alpha-Fetoprotein and Beta-hCG. What do we use them for?"

Tessa looked at him sheepishly and shrugged.

Adrian turned to Mina. "We use those markers for early indications of cancerous tumors," he said. "We want to make sure the Idun virus didn't cause mutations that made cell division run amok."

Mina looked blandly at Tessa for a second and turned back at Adrian. "I admit I expected much more exotic, maybe expensive requests," she said and closed her notebook. "You know what, just send me a list of the kits you need and I'll make sure you'll have a stock full of them. How..." she stopped and tapped her lips. "How worried should I be? For this... Lapse? Because I was about to say that I don't need to do the presentation at all. Tessa seems more than capable herself."

"We agreed she should rest!" Dawn protested.

"Anyways, it seems like a moot point," Mina continued. "Tessa is obviously incapable of defending a supply list, let alone an introduction of the Idun virus to the world."

"Of course I am capable!" Tessa said emphatically. "True, it seems that my mind hasn't fully recovered just yet, but I'm getting there!"

"For what it's worth," Adrian said, "I'm at least as concerned as you are. I think today we will go through some quizzes and exams and see how Professor Magnus is doing. We need data. Metrics. Then we could make an informed decision."

Tessa shrunk into her seat. "I think you're overreacting," she mumbled.

"Could it simply be lack of sleep? Or low sleep quality?" Mina asked him, ignoring Tessa's protests. "Maybe too much coffee before bed? I don't remember seeing her drinking coffee at all."

"We need to check out all of these and more," Adrian said slowly. "It might also be low glucose levels. I would be surprised though, if it's..."

He stopped, looking at Dawn. She was as white as a sheet, and stared at him with wide eyed terror. "We'll find what it is and fix it," he told her.

Tessa picked up a fat almond croissant and demonstrably took a big bite.

"Well, that sounds like a good plan," Mina said. "I'll inform Madeline that pending another assessment, Tessa will give the presentation. Can we get her ready in time?"

He looked at Dawn, expecting her to object, but she said nothing. With a palm on her chest, she faced the pond. Only one duck swam there. The other one was nowhere to be found.

"Of course," Adrian said. "If all is well. If not... I will let you know in any case."

"As soon as possible please." Mina rose, looked at Tessa and frowned. "It seems like the Lord's light shines on you bright and true. Let's hope you'll stay in his favor."

“You have nothing to worry about,” Tessa said with her mouth full. “I’m working on my glucose levels as we speak.”

Mina’s frown deepened. She nodded curtly to Dawn, muttered, “I’ll see myself out,” and left on the path around the house.

Adrian gave himself one more minute of terror and rose. “I’ll go find some tests,” he told Tessa. “I’m not really that hungry anyway.”

Chapter 12

"Can we take a break?" Tessa asked. Her voice quavered, reflecting none of the joy she expressed so freely just this morning.

Up close, and despite the cool breeze coming through the office window, Adrian could see the beads of sweat collecting on her brow, and the way her fingers shook as they hovered above the keyboard.

"Absolutely," he replied softly. "To be honest, I don't see any point in carrying on. You've been through enough, and I think we have our answers."

She nodded and leaned back in her chair.

It's been a harrowing hour, and Adrian felt they took enough punishment for now. He sat down and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Am I losing my mind?" Tessa asked. "Is this dementia?"

"I don't think so. You scored remarkably well on the Montreal cognitive assessment test. You're as sharp as ever, just..."

"Just forgetting everything," Tessa completed the sentence for him, her face drawn tight.

He cradled his forehead on his palms, feeling the pulse beating in his temples. "Yes. You're experiencing widespread memory loss. This is horrible. I honestly don't know what to do," he muttered. He drew a ragged breath and let it out slowly, as he felt Tessa's hand on his shoulder.

"You get five minutes of this, boy," she said.

"What?" Adrian said, raising his head.

Tessa looked at him, the corners of her mouth turned down with distaste. "You get five minutes of wallowing in despair, or whatever that is," she said, gesturing at him, "and then we need to figure out what's going on, so we can fix me."

"Assuming we can."

"Of course we can! I need you, boy, now more than ever. I can't have you giving up on me. Remember, we cheated death! We can do anything!"

"I'm not giving up!" He said emphatically. "It's just... Ah!" he leaned back again and threw his hands up. "It feels like we can't catch a break!"

His despair turned to amazement as Tessa rose smoothly from her chair and put her hand back on his shoulder. "I know, boy," she said. "I know. Nothing's easy. You know what, you get ten minutes, and then start thinking about causes and solutions."

She left the office.

As a nurse, Adrian had some experience with patients regaining motor functions. It took weeks, sometimes months, until they had full control of their limbs.

With Tessa there was none of that. No stiffness, or even the slight pause, the habit of waiting for the pang of pain to subside. She moved with certainty and grace. No professional in the medical

field could believe that less than a week ago her legs were useless dead weight to carry in a chair.

A wonder that will turn into disaster if she loses her memories, he thought. Both for him and for her. He gathered his strength and followed.

The house was eerily quiet, and Adrian found himself muting his steps. He saw some movement, and went into the kitchen.

Tessa stared ponderously at the new milk frother, one Olena brought in yesterday. "Do you know how to work that thing?" she asked, pointing at the small, shiny machine.

"I'll figure it out."

She picked out a couple of cups and the steaming pot. "Good," she said and left.

After pushing some buttons, the frother started doing its magic. While waiting, Adrian wondered where Dawn was, or Olena for that matter.

When the milk seemed ready he took the detachable jug to the terrace. The silence still bothered him, and he was grateful, as he stepped outside, for the loud, insistent quacking of the two ducks in the pond, which seemed to be engaged in an avian form of an argument.

He sat down and prepared a couple of cappuccinos, hoping they'd taste better than they looked. As Tessa raised her cup he begged, not for the first time, "Sip, don't gulp."

Just a couple of weeks ago, tea was their exclusive beverage of choice. Despite Dawn scrunching her nose at what she referred to as a 'brewed abomination', Tessa switched to coffee, and Adrian followed suit shortly after.

She frowned, but sipped.

"We need to track your caffeine consumption," Adrian said. "It might be keeping you up at night."

"I sleep like a log, but sure, we can track it." Absent-mindedly, Tessa scratched her forearm and looked under her fingernails in disgust. "I'm shedding skin like a snake," she said and rubbed her fingers together. Skin-flakes drifted down like snow and collected on the table.

"Don't-" Adrian said, but not fast enough. She blew on the tiny heap and it flew off, dispersing like dandelion seeds. "I wanted to test that," he said accusingly.

"It's just dead skin," Tessa said, looking out into the pond. "Don't worry, there's plenty more where that came from. I can scrape off as much as you'd like."

Adrian nodded.

The ducks in the pond circled one another, flapping their wings. Their debate seemed to have heated up too much and words, or quacks, made way to violence as they started snapping at each other.

"I'll get a sleep tracker," Tessa said after a while. "It might be that. Maybe I developed sleep apnea. Also, we should take hourly blood glucose."

"Alright. I'll requisition a tracker and a monitor from Mina."

One of the ducks must have had enough. It quacked its anger and flew away, not even pausing to look back, which was just as well, because the other one did not appear to be interested in following. It just swam there alone, serene and proud in its victory, its passage barely disturbing the water.

They kept sitting there as silence descended upon the house once more. Tessa kept sipping her coffee, while Adrian let his cool off first, admiring the way the steam rose into the cool air and dissipated into nothingness.

So much like Tessa's memories, he thought.

He was still staring through the vapor when the door-bell startled him. "I'll get it," he said, and hurried across the house to open the door. Mina stood outside in her usual severe garb, frowning at her phone.

"Hi, Adrian," she said, nodding at him. "Do you know of Mr. Pluto?"

"No," he replied and led her out to the terrace. "Please, come in. We're outside."

"He's a journalist," Mina explained, following him. "Dr. Pluto, actually, according to the credentials he's sent. Quite accomplished, too. From the Lancet. He's asking all sorts of questions regarding Tessa."

"Oh, right," Adrian said. "A tall, weird looking fellow. He came here unannounced. Dawn got quite upset with him. We sent him on his way."

Mina greeted Tessa and sat down, looking disapprovingly at the coffee. "Well, it could be a blessing in disguise," she said. "An opportunity, I mean. Madeline is keen on getting our narrative out there. We need to control the story before it gets out of hand."

"What are you talking about?" Tessa asked.

"Dr. Pluto of The Lancet," Mina replied. "Talking to him could be a good way for us to get your story out there. We just need to make sure the facts are told the right way. What were the test results? Good or bad, I need to know."

"The results were definitely not good," Tessa said with a sigh, "if I could say so myself."

"No opinions. The data please," Mina said, "if you don't mind."

"Data?" Adrian scoffed. "Professor Magnus failed freshmen quizzes. A whole lot of them. Unless something drastic changes, she probably won't be able to present her paper at this point."

"Our paper," Tessa muttered.

Mina's eyes grew wide. "That bad?"

"Worse," Adrian replied. "Her memory is in a terrible shape. She knew what Cas13 proteins are, but she didn't know their role in systems of archaea."

Mina's frown deepened. "I'm sorry, I've been out of research for a while now."

"Those are single-celled organisms, distinct from bacteria and eukaryotes," Adrian explained.

"But that's besides the point. Professor Magnus taught a course on those last semester. I was grading it for her."

"Sounds somewhat anecdotal."

"It was the main subject matter for an entire semester."

"Anything else?"

"She didn't know the length of non-coding RNAs, or how they interact with DNA and RNA," Adrian continued. "We used them extensively when we engineered the Idun virus. They were our primary tool."

"So if the journalist inquires about the way the virus operates?" Mina asked.

Tessa crossed her arms and leaned her elbows heavily on the table, with a pained expression on her face. "I'll defer to Adrian?" she suggested at last.

"I'll be able to answer those questions," he said.

"It's not good enough," Mina replied, shaking her head. "The narrative we're pushing is the brilliant scientist who used bleeding edge science to claw herself back to life. We need Tessa front and center."

Tessa straightened and took a deep, steadying breath. "I can do it," she said. "I've learned it before. The second time around is bound to be easier."

"We still don't know what the problem is," Adrian stated flatly. "It might prove impossible."

"It's not like we have a choice," Mina said. She turned to Tessa. "As Madeline keeps to anyone willing to hear, we're all in. All of us. I don't know if she shared with you this merry tidbit of information, but we've had people from the MHRA and GMC knocking on our doors. The agency is considering launching an official investigation. So far, no one seems eager to take on Madeline head on, but at any moment someone might grow a backbone and decide to pay you a visit anyway. A favorable publication might convince them to back off."

"The problem is," Adrian said, "that teaching Professor Magnus might be..."

"Like pouring water into a leaky bucket," Tessa completed the sentence. She turned to Mina and squared back her shoulders. "There are two plausible explanations to the memory loss," she told her, "both relying on the still unproven assumption that the Idun virus has somehow crossed the blood-brain-barrier."

She paused for a brief sip from her coffee. "The first is that it triggered some degenerative disease in my brain. In this case there's very little I can do but say my farewells while I still know who I'm talking to." She looked somberly at the pond, and then at Adrian. "The Lord knows I did that before."

Horror crept into Mina's stoic face. "I hope the other explanation is better."

"Well, it's far more optimistic," Tessa continued. "It is possible, even more likely in my opinion, that the Idun virus is only attacking the brain cells that show signs of senescence, and replaces them with new cells, severing their synaptic connections in the process. The damage could be extensive, but the bucket, so to speak, won't leak."

Mina pursed her lips and looked at Adrian.

"Both explanations make sense," he said, "in a very non-scientific guesswork kind of way."

"And?" she frowned at him.

"And what?" It took a second until her meaning dawned on him. "Oh, in this case, we might be able to close the gaps. There are quite a few of those. We'll have to be diligent."

"Do the two of you understand what's at stake?"

"I'm not sure I do." Tessa said.

"Putting the extensive damage to the institute aside," Mina iterated on her fingers, "the value of your life's work and your reputation will go down the drain, alongside Adrian's career and future prospects."

"That's more than enough motivation," Tessa said and rose swiftly to her feet. Her eyes held a ferocious glint. "Come, boy," she told Adrian. "Let's go about saving your career."

"Hold on a second," Mina said. "Where's Dawn?"

"I don't have a second," Tessa grumbled and turned away. "If you want her, go find her. She rambled on about smoothing things over with her family or something and went away!" With that, she vanished inside the house.

"What an unholy mess," Mina muttered. "I want to see a plan. And get daily updates," she told Adrian as he rose. "Make it twice a day. Mid-morning and afternoon. I want to know how it's going every single moment."

Adrian nodded.

"If Tessa doesn't ace that interview, someone in the MHRA will build their reputation on our bleeding backs," she said, still sitting and staring at him. "The collateral damage will include everyone involved."

She paused. "If it goes well, however, you'll be credited with the success. I... I feel dirty mentioning it," she continued, somewhat more muted, "but Madeline specifically asked me to remind you that she has your request to the department under review."

"I'm more worried about Professor Magnus."

Mina sighed. "Adrian. Be reasonable. She's been living on borrowed time for a while now. You have your entire life ahead of you."

"I'm not sure what you're saying."

She collected her dress around her and rose. "I'm saying you should be worried about yourself."

Adrian looked out at the pond. The lone, remaining duck must have had enough. It quacked a couple of angry quacks at the empty air, and flew away, the edges of his wings drawing lines of white foam in the otherwise still water.

"You can count on me to do my very best," Adrian said. "I can only pray it will be enough."

"God willing, it will!" Mina said. She sighed again and sat down. "You know, I'll stay here for a while, if that's okay. It's... It's calm here."

“Of course it’s okay. I’ll go get that plan ready,” Adrian said. He rose and followed in Tessa’s footsteps.

Chapter 13

Adrian awoke dead tired. He swatted blindly at his phone and hit it on the third try, thankfully stopping the annoying alarm. As soon as he sat up, the world swam sickeningly in front of his barely open eyes, before settling into a cold, unwelcoming morning.

He groaned and rolled off the bed, balled his toes on the rich carpet, and stretched.

According to his wristwatch, he stayed in bed long enough, and his sleep app was all congratulatory green, but his brains felt like a sponge soaked in cement. Itchy, termite ridden cement.

It was to be expected, though, given the grueling marathon Tessa and he ran in the last four days. He was tutoring her twelve hours a day, cramming an entire degree of molecular biology into her brain in less than a week.

He went to brush his teeth and bile rose in his throat.

Maybe it had more to do with the way they wrapped up their last four nights. At Olena's suggestion, they shared a night cup just before bed.

Tessa didn't remember what she liked, so she went through their liqueur cupboard, sampling all sorts of drinks. They were both somewhat surprised to find that amaretto was her favorite, a drink Adrian later remembered she used to like before.

There was a lesson there, he thought.

The days blended into each other in a blur. It took him three days to realize that Dawn didn't return from her trip to visit her family, and another day for it to start bothering him.

Four days without Dawn made the house feel vacant and soulless. While Olena kept everything clockwork efficient, the small mansion seemed to have lost at least some of its essence. In between tutelage sessions, he kept taking mental notes to check up on Dawn, recalling them only late at night, when it was far too late to call.

Adrian's phone sounded the alarm again. Grabbing it, he saw he snoozed it, and turned it off. Out of morbid curiosity, he checked the faculty's website. His request was stuck for two days in the same status, the amorphous final approval phase.

Adrian suspected he knew why, or rather who kept it there.

He dressed in haste, and went downstairs to the office. Without Dawn to keep them on the straight and narrow, they quickly devolved into the habit of having their meals there. They used the round, otherwise useless desk, under the tall window that let the sunlight in only when dusk approached.

The door was open. Tessa lounged on her couch, engrossed in a new copy of 'Molecular Biology of the Cell'. He used the sixth edition in his graduate studies, and this edition, the seventh, referenced a paper he published with Tessa, one she failed to remember writing.

On the table next to her was an empty cup, and a copy of 'The Cell: A Molecular Approach'. He used it yesterday when he found out Tessa remembered next to nothing about cell regulation.

"Come in, sleepy head," she said, without looking up from the book. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

Adrian shook his head and slumped next to her. "I don't know how you have so much energy so early in the morning."

"The drink of kings," she said, pointing at the empty cup. "Olena opened that foamer for me. I held off the second one just for you. It wasn't easy," she added and grinned at him.

Adrian stared, shocked into full alertness. He went over to the window and pulled the curtains all the way back, flooding the room with sunlight.

Still, the smile didn't crease her face at the least.

"What is it, boy?" She asked, squinting at the bright light. "Do I have something stuck in my teeth?"

"You..." he stammered. "You no longer have wrinkles! At all!"

"Oh, I know, but I wasn't sure you'd notice!" Tessa beamed at him. Despite her grin reaching her green, gleaming eyes, she had no crows feet, and as far as Adrian could see, no single blemish on her flawless, pearly white, pearly smooth skin.

"But it's impossible!" Adrian exclaimed. "It takes—" He paused as his teacher instincts kicked in. "What can you tell me about epidermal renewal?" He asked.

"Good question," she said, and closed the book she was holding, while keeping the page with her pinky. "It's the journey of a skin cell from the basal layer of the epidermis to the stratum corneum. For babies it takes around fourteen days, for adults around twenty eight, and for geezers it can take over eighty days. And as it turns out, for me it's less than a week!"

Adrian was impressed, but unsurprised. Their initial fears, the leaky bucket theory, didn't seem to apply to Tessa's memory. Quite the contrary. Once they relearned and practiced one field or another, Tessa seemed to remember it perfectly, down to the letter. Her grasp of statistics, probability, and calculus, while shaky at first, became quite sufficient with a minimal amount of practice.

In addition, she had a dangerous combination of fortitude and drive, dangerous because Adrian felt compelled to keep up, and that was pushing him fast from a manageable state of exhaustion to an impending collapse.

He had to pace himself, or his body would do it for him.

"Have you heard from our taskmaster?" Tessa asked, referencing Mina's moniker.

Adrian shook his head. "Not since yesterday morning, but there's nothing to tell her anyway. She's satisfied with the way things are going. Once we're done with this," he pointed at the book on the table, "we'll start mapping the mechanisms of the Idun virus. I think we'll need maybe three days to cover everything, and maybe another day to rehearse questions and answers."

"Amazing. Madeline would be proud of you," Tessa said and winked.

It must have been innocent, but her comment triggered a pang of guilt. His communication with Madeline was an unhealthy mix of promised rewards and threats. Not quite the altruistic environment their research warranted.

Adrian turned around. There was a red blur in the corner of his eye, some movement he was halfway sure he saw. By the time he turned his head, there was nothing there, no one in the doorway.

"I'm..." He pointed at the corridor. "I'm hungry. I'm going to get breakfast. Do you want me to get you something?"

"No thanks. I already had something. I'm good," she replied and cracked open the book, immediately immersed in the text.

Adrian left the room with a tiny knot in his stomach. He got to the kitchen just as Olena put a kettle on the stove. "What do you need?" She snapped at him.

Adrian had no idea what she was upset about. "Some breakfast," he answered, reaching out to the refrigerator.

"No no," she said, pushing his hand away. "Go outside. I'll get you breakfast. Something warm, healthy, not from the fridge."

Adrian felt his eyebrows climbing. "I just want to grab something and get back to the office," he explained. "Professor Magnus is waiting."

"She can maybe wait a little longer," Olena said. She leaned in and whispered, "I don't want um, her, to be outside alone. It's not good for her, being alone. Now go!"

Quite puzzled, Adrian went out to the terrace, where he found Dawn sitting at the table. She was wrapped in a heavy blood-red shawl and looked out at the pond, where a single duck swam in wide circles. Her hair fluttered with the cold breeze, but she was otherwise as still as a statue.

"Oh, hello Dawn," Adrian said and sat next to her. "I didn't know you were back."

Dawn patted his hand. "I returned very late last night," she said, not looking at him. "You were already asleep, and I didn't want to risk waking you."

"I wouldn't mind," he said, "and I'm sure Professor Magnus wouldn't as well."

"Her I couldn't wake," Dawn said, her voice quivering. Her hand, still on his, shivered. "I just couldn't."

"That's very considerate of you, but she—"

Dawn whirled at him. Her eyes, so much like Tessa's, but somewhat brighter and bluer, were wide and terror-filled. "No, I couldn't even bring myself to come near her! Have you seen how she looks? At first I wasn't even sure it's her!"

Adrian's hackles rose. "I'm not sure what you mean by—"

"Sure you do," She scoffed. "She looks just like she did when we first met! Even younger! That was more than thirty years ago!"

"I was rather surprised as well. But, isn't that a good thing?" Adrian asked. "The virus is working its magic."

"Magic. Witchcraft. Dark sorcery, that's what this is. Seeing her nearly scared the life out of me!" Dawn said, pressing her palm to her chest. "It's like she transformed into a different person!"

As quiet as a ghost, Olena slipped on the table a tray laden with plates and cups in front of Adrian and Dawn. Before leaving, she looked at him sideways and frowned.

"Thank you..?" He said, unsure of what's happening.

Olena huffed and left.

Adrian shrugged, piled some steaming omelette on his plate and started nibbling at it, observing the drama unfolding in the pond, where a second duck landed, and the one already swimming beat its wings, as if preparing to fly, and settled down again.

Dawn took one of the cups, sniffed it, and sipped, her face momentarily hidden by mists floating above the tea.

Adrian took the other cup, made sure it was coffee, and sipped. It was smooth, delicious, and had a strangely soothing effect on him.

"You drink too much of that thing," Dawn commented.

"You're absolutely right," he admitted. "Those are trying times. We're cramming so much material into Professor Magnus's head, it's a miracle her brain doesn't explode."

Dawn frowned at him.

"Not really. It's just a figure of speech."

"I really can't tell any more," she muttered.

Olena returned and put some toasted bread in front of Dawn who glanced at it, grimaced, and picked up a slice.

"I'm not that hungry," she said.

She did look thinner, on the verge of being gaunt. "Are you okay?" Adrian asked.

"As if you need another person to care for," Dawn chuckled. "How's Tessa's memory? You had some suspicions, if I recall correctly."

"It's complicated. She forgot a lot of the material, even basic stuff, but she's relearning it with surprising speed. Whatever she learns stays there."

"So not complicated at all," Dawn commented and put back the piece of bread, still whole, on the plate.

"Come to think of it, maybe it isn't."

Dawn nodded and sipped her tea.

The drama in the pond abated. Adrian ate in silence as the ducks resumed circling the pond side by side. "Where have you been?" he asked between bites.

"I stayed with old friends, and visited some relatives." Dawn dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. "Tessa has been my entire life for too long." She smiled grimly. "Some people were surprised that I was still alive."

"Speaking of which, I should probably go and tell her you're here. She might want to—"

"Please don't!" Dawn interrupted. "I'm not ready to see her!"

"Ready? But..." Adrian bit down his words. Dawn's hand was trembling. He realized now, at a second glance, just how frail and brittle she seemed. Malnourished, at the very least. Perhaps worse. "Is it about what happened in the hospital?" He asked.

Dawn shook her head. "No. Well, maybe. Seeing her so young..." She trailed off, staring at the pond. "Trying times, like you said. Promise me!" She suddenly demanded, looking at him.

"Promise what?" Adrian asked, confused.

"That you won't tell her I'm here. Not until I say so."

Adrian nodded. "If that's what you want. Of course. I guess it means you won't be staying?"

"Not for long. Thanks, Adrian," Dawn said and patted his hand again. "Thanks for understanding me. You always do."

Adrian stood up and his vision blurred for a second. He leaned on the table and one of his slippers caught his chair's leg. As he tried to pull it free the chair toppled over with a resounding clang.

Startled, both ducks launched noisily into the air, quacking their objections. One climbed fast and flew to the east while the other one circled around the pond a few times and then headed north. Something must have changed its mind though, because a few seconds later it changed course and followed his friend towards the still rising sun, disappearing into the blindingly bright orb.

Chapter 14

"Who gave the virus the name Idun?" Tessa asked. It was early morning on the next day, and having covered the background material, they dove head first into the research that birthed the virus. Tessa seemed to be intrigued by the synopsis she herself had written several months ago.

"You did," Adrian answered, keeping his focus on the screen. He had to make sure his report was just right, so it wouldn't incur Madeline's ire. "You always liked Norse mythology."

"I don't remember any of it," Tessa said, pouting, "and more's the pity. I guess I would like it a lot if I'll find the time to catch up. Maybe when this interview thing is over. Or presentation." She scratched her neck, and flakes of skin drifted down. "I'm not sure."

She went back to her reading, and Adrian went back to staring at the screen. He reviewed his report one final time and sent it to Mina, knowing it would find its way to Madeline's desk within the hour.

All he had to do now was to find a good use for that hour, and he considered taking a short nap. Tessa's preference to read books allowed him to catch up on his sleep, but he already felt mostly well rested.

"Anything I can help you with?" He asked.

Tessa waved him off. She didn't require a lot of help, and went through their research paper without asking him a single question. Adrian took pride in how well he prepared her, but it had more to do with her perfect, crystal clear memory of the science she relearned, and her cognition prowess, which has risen at least to its former glory, possibly surpassing it.

Adrian glanced at his already cooling, second cup of coffee for the day. He put it aside after a few sips. Dawn had a solid point. They were drinking far too much of the stuff, and it was definitely ruining his sleep.

Dawn was gone again, vanished like the morning mists after their breakfast conversation. He kept his word and didn't mention her to her decades long partner, but Adrian was worried about her. She seemed to be letting herself go.

One of his many messengers chimed. Grateful for the distraction, Adrian clicked the bouncing icon, and a video call sprang into being.

"So, I hear there's terrific progress," Madeline said, her face plastered all over his screen. She appeared to be sitting in her office at the institute, although it might have been a virtual background. Adrian wasn't sure. He never set foot in the top floor where management sat, but he heard her office was gaudy to the extreme, designed mostly for form, not function. The lack of liquor bottles suggested the background wasn't real.

"Yes. Hi," he said and waved at the screen. "We've finished the preparation phase ahead of time. Now we're reviewing the research materials of the Idun virus itself."

"Good, good," Madeline said. She picked something small and nibbled at it, the small green pieces vanishing into the impossible red of her lips. "Just to make sure we're aligned. Mina said Tessa is doing well. We need to prepare her for an interview, and a presentation to the board a few days later. Is that what you're doing?"

Adrian nodded.

"Splendid. When will she be ready for the interview?" Madeline asked while still chewing.

Adrian looked at the pile of papers next to Tessa. She was going through them at a fantastic rate, and the recycle bin was getting refilled hourly.

"We're making good progress. At this pace," he said slowly, considering his words carefully, "I'd say in about three days?"

Madeline's eyebrows rose, creating a single crease between them. She paused her chewing and locked her stare at the camera. "If? Are you asking or saying?"

Adrian looked at Tessa, who nodded and raised her thumb. "I'm saying. Three days tops. We'll be ready."

"You have four," Madeline said, grinning widely. Her teeth were free of the green stuff she was eating, shining bright white. "I've scheduled the interview for Monday morning. Mr. Pluto will come by your house at nine o'clock."

"Any specific instructions?" Tessa asked, still looking at the papers in her hand.

"Oh, is Tessa there?" Madeline asked. "Let me talk to her, please."

"Just a second," Adrian said. He circled around Tessa's desk and placed his laptop so the camera would face her.

"Oh my God!" Madeline exclaimed. "Either you're using a freakishly powerful filter, or... Wow! You changed so much, I wouldn't have recognized you in the street!"

Tessa grinned. "Don't think for a moment this goes only skin deep," she said. "We ran a battery of tests, and the results show that the Idun virus has surpassed our initial expectations by a significant margin, both in speed and effectiveness."

"Well, I can clearly see that." Madeline tossed her hair back. "Mina told me there were some unwanted effects on your memory?"

"Mina was absolutely right. There were," Tessa agreed. "But now it's sharper than ever."

"Must be nice. So, circling back to your previous question, just one instruction," Madeline said and leaned closer to the camera. "Tessa, dear, nail it. You have to. The government people are itching to shut us down, and to make an example of you, dragging the entire institute along. I am holding them off with teeth and claws, but I need you to deliver the finishing blow. Get ready for the interview. Be sharp. Be charming. Knock him off his feet."

"Have I ever failed you?" Tessa asked innocently.

Madeline chuckled. "Don't get me started!"

"Well, this is the new me. I won't disappoint you this time," Tessa said. "Will the taskmistress be here?"

Madeline smiled, but the humor was gone from her face. "Of course Mina will come," she said, "but she'll stay in the shadows. She's only there for damage control." She tilted her head. "Have you been dyeing your hair?"

"No," Tessa said. "Never have."

Now that Madeline mentioned it, Adrian could spot a few threads of gold slowly spinning their way into Tessa's otherwise sheet white hair.

"Anyway, it looks lovely," Madeline said. She looked aside, suddenly distracted. "Well, I'll let you go back to your preparations."

"See you late—" Tessa stopped as the call was abruptly cut off.

"Well? What do you think?" She asked Adrian as he picked up the laptop.

"I think we have four days to prepare," He said and went back to his desk. "I'll go over some Lancet interviews and try to guess in advance what he'll ask, so we could practice. Let's see if they have specific, repeating questions."

"Good thinking, boy," Tessa said, and went back to reading.

It took him less than an hour to reach a conclusion. "They don't really do a lot of interviews," he told Tessa. "They mostly publish research. Good research. Besides, there are correspondence pieces, which seem to be mostly political opinions of sorts, and the editorials read like... Well, I would call it pseudo-scientific gossip."

"Gossip?"

Adrian sighed. "High fluted science adjacent virtue signaling."

Tessa raised her eyes from the paper, looked at him and snorted. "I take it you didn't enjoy reading it that much."

"I didn't," he admitted. "I also didn't find any actual interviews, although, to be honest, I just browsed a bit. I might have missed it. When I looked for interviews online, all the recent stuff I found is interviews of their own staff."

"Tooting their own horn? That's a bit odd, don't you think?" Tessa asked, putting the binder down. "Madeline specifically said it was an interview. What do you think it's about, then?"

"Maybe they have a process and a preliminary interview is a part of it?" Adrian suggested. "And maybe Madeline or Mina pushed too hard to get something out there and some wires got crossed."

"I don't think that's likely. Mr. Pluto did come to our house," Tessa pointed out. "Probably before either of them talked to him. And he did seem interested in a conversation. It might have originated organically. Our research is worth their attention. Someone in the hospital could have talked to someone else." She ran her fingers through her hair and wiggled them, letting a small cloud of wispy white hair spiral down to the floor. "Do you think Mina shared our draft outside the institute without telling us?" she asked.

Adrian leaned his forehead on his palm and sighed. "If she did, it's so full of holes, Pluto must have had a million questions. Maybe he came here looking for answers, assuming we have them."

"Do we?"

Adrian sighed again. "Not good ones, we don't. Not by a longshot."

"So this is what we need to do then," Tessa said resolutely. "Starting right now."

"What is?"

"Don't be dumb." Tessa stared at him incredulously. "Find good answers, of course."

"It's not like we haven't tried," Adrian protested. "We worked on it for over a year and there was a lot of stuff we just couldn't figure out. Do you really believe we'll suddenly succeed in just a few days?"

"I don't believe so, I know so," she replied. "Because of three reasons. The first and the second are that we have two distinct assets we were missing before - an extensive set of human test results, and my brain unburdened by age and disease."

Adrian felt the floor vanish beneath his feet. "You didn't even finish going through our research paper yet," he stammered. "We can't just..."

"That's the third reason. We don't have a choice. Unless," she looked at him sideways, "unless you have a better suggestion?"

Adrian considered it for a few seconds and came up with nothing. "Okay. We have to get to work then. I'll compile a list of open issues which we can go over together, while you finish your reading."

"Is there anything we can ask Madeline for?" Tessa asked.

"Some divine intervention wouldn't hurt, but I think it's more in Mina's domain."

Tessa wasn't listening anymore. She was already immersed once again in their paper. Adrian wondered if her newfound mental prowess was enough to get them through this, and was surprised to find within himself a glimmer of hope.

Chapter 15

Adrian typed relentlessly, deleting more code than he wrote. Programming was never his strong suit, but when it boiled to either him or Tessa training and running the models, he saw little choice in the matter. The difference wasn't in their aptitude but rather their attitude. While Tessa was still more amicable to pen and paper, Adrian embraced wholeheartedly the AI revolution, and let the smart machines write most of the code themselves.

Quality of code was less important, or impactful, than the new data. The samples Tessa provided resolved most of their previously unsolvable issues. Some hypotheses could be rejected outright, while for others, having a few data points could be enough to hint at the right directions.

He keyed in the parameters and pressed the Enter key. Somewhere, in a server farm, a runner came to life, loaded the model, and started executing the first iteration out of many.

Maybe this one will allow them to validate or eliminate some assumptions off their list.

They had a plethora of those. Assumptions were a dime a dozen, but predictions, key to their research, were another. His current blight, bringing him to the very edge of despair, was one completely contradicted by Tessa's samples.

Basing their assumptions on the yeast dataset, they predicted the likely vectors through which the Idun virus would spread through Tessa's body. The predictions, that the vanguard of viruses would focus on skeletal muscles, were completely wrong, and probably the primary driver for Tessa's high fever and cardiac arrest, which caught them off guard.

Having the samples perfectly fit the only living sample they had wouldn't have proven anything, but missing the mark on one hundred percent of the cohort was a catastrophic failure.

Adrian looked at the code again. The model they used simulated the suffusion of the virus based mostly on cell density, because the Idun virus was interacting with the cell's ribosomes. Other than liver cells, Adrian knew of no cells that are more dense with ribosomes than skeletal muscle cells, which was why they expected those to have the fastest cell replacement rate.

Biopsies and nonintrusive observations have proven, without a shadow of a doubt, that nerve cells, almost the least ribosome dense cells, were the quickest to be affected.

"Can you please stop doing that?" Tessa asked.

"Doing what?"

"You're tapping your foot," She complained. "I can't concentrate."

"I don't understand how you can even read like this," he fired back.

Tessa was in her new favorite position, lying on the couch and holding the paper above her.

"There's enough light, and I'm perfectly comfortable."

Adrian shrugged and crossed his legs, hoping it would keep his fidgeting to a bare minimum.

The remote server was working hard, and interim results started trickling in, one log line after the other. Soon after it became obvious that the results would be exactly the same.

"Damn it!" He threw his hands up in the air. "This makes no sense!"

"What?" Tessa asked.

"The Idun virus was supposed to affect the muscles first!"

"It could simply be a fluke. I might be one in a million. The odd case out."

"That's not how statistics work. Trillions upon trillions of cells in your body can't be unique. They should—"

It occurred to him that her comment made no sense. Adrian raised his eyes from the screen and saw her grinning at him. The utter smoothness of her skin and the absence of wrinkles gave her smile a sardonic, sarcastic quality that set his already frayed nerves on edge.

"You're mocking me!"

"The answer is right in front of your face," Tessa said, pointing at her laptop. "I was waiting for you to figure it out on your own, but you're just too stubborn to see it."

"Stubborn? Professor—"

"You know what, you really need to stop calling me that," Tessa stopped him. "We need some changes around here, and this is the first. You're no longer my assistant. We're colleagues. I'm Tessa. Now use your head."

The only way Adrian wanted to use his head was as a battering ram against the nearest wall. "I've been running simulations all day long!" he shouted, and immediately felt blood rushing to his face. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have raised my voice, it's just..."

"It's understandable. It's frustrating," she said. "We've been searching for a reasonable explanation for a while now. It's hard."

"And coming up with nothing!"

"Well, you came up with nothing," she said, still grinning. "You keep hoping the machine will figure it out for you. I came up with a testable hypothesis, one which I need you to try to refute."

"Which is..?" Adrian asked, trying to control his temper.

"You can find it yourself, if you'll just keep an open mind. What drives the Idun virus?" Tessa asked.

Adrian pointed at the board that he used to describe the virus just a couple of days ago.

"Ribosomes. We've been through that."

"No," Tessa shook her head. "You're still stuck in the structure of cells. Which molecules?"

"It seeks free radicals, but what does..." Adrian trailed off. His parameters were all wrong.

Tessa beamed at him. "Exactly," she said. "You get it, right? Nerve cells, with their constant mitochondrial activity, would have those all the time. In lesser quantities, sure, but it seems that the Idun virus is sensitive enough. If not the first generation, certainly the ones that followed."

"And muscle cells would generate enough antioxidants to remove them fast enough to stave off the virus's advancement," Adrian completed the thought, his eyes wide. "That's brilliant! How did you figure that out?"

"You literally forced me to read our research proposal three times, front to back!" She complained, scowling at him. "I have the mental model in my mind. How brain dead would I have to be not to see it?"

Adrian stared at her, now feeling the blood going the other way, draining from his face.

Tessa waved her hand. "Oh, you're not brain dead! I told you. You became hyperfixated on the structure hypothesis. You were blinded by your beliefs. I had the benefit of fresh eyes."

"I'm going to get us some tea," he said as he stood up, about to storm off.

Tessa pouted. "Don't be like that. I didn't mean it this way."

"Fine," he said. "Sure. It was supposed to be a roundabout compliment. I'll be back in a bit. If you understand the process so well, you might as well try to code the verification model yourself."

He left the office in a rush and entered the kitchen.

Olena stood there, glaring at him.

"I want tea," He explained.

"She has tea," she growled. "Biscuits too. Make sure she eats."

"What? Who?"

"Outside!" Olena softened a little. "I'll bring you muffins. They're fresh. Even coffee if you want. Just go."

Adrian went outside.

Dawn sat at the table, wearing a wide brimmed hat and an honest, reassuring smile. "Trouble in research paradise?" She asked. "I heard someone raising their voice."

Maybe it was just his imagination, but now, with Dawn's expression to compare to, it seemed to him that Tessa's gleeful smile lacked even the semblance of compassion, which made him even angrier.

"I..."

"You don't have to answer," she said and poured him some tea. "Here. It's chamomile. Have some."

Adrian sat next to her and drank. It was the perfect temperature for sipping, too hot to gulp, and served to soothe his nerves. "I don't know if it's me, it's her, or the pressure," he said, "but as time goes by, I find her more and more insufferably rude and offensive."

"Is this interview thing important?"

"According to Madeline it's the be-all and end-all. Professor Magnus doesn't seem to care about anything else, and... It's exhausting, that's what it is."

"So, not the best time to check on her?" Dawn asked.

Adrian shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "Too much tension in the air. Too much pressure. We need to rewrite a significant chunk of our research proposal, and we're almost out of time. Someone might have circulated an earlier draft, and it was full of holes."

"The last thing I want is to be in the way. Besides, I'm in no hurry," Dawn said, shrugged, and sipped. Adrian followed her gaze to the pond. The two ducks were back, and were swimming in opposite directions. They seemed to purposefully ignore one another as they passed each other by.

Adrian pointed at the untouched biscuits. "Are you eating those?"

"No, you can have them. Did..." Dawn turned to face him. "Did she... Inquire about me?"

Adrian shook his head. "Not that I recall. But to be fair, we're neck-deep in research work. If you want, I could..."

Dawn put her hand on his. "No need," she said softly. "All in good time."

He gulped down the tea, grimaced as it seared his throat, and stood up. "I need to get back," he said.

Dawn looked up at him. Her large eyes glittered with the progenitors of tears. "Could you maybe stay with me for just a little while longer?" She asked. "I would really appreciate the company."

"Oh. Of course!" Adrian said and sat down with haste. "Of course."

"I'm sorry. I don't want to be a burden, but..."

"You're anything but," Adrian said. "And I could definitely use the break."

"When was the last time you took an actual break?" Dawn asked. "A prolonged one?"

"A break from what?" Adrian asked.

Dawn rolled her eyes. "From work," she said. "From Tessa. You obviously haven't. Ever since you... She was injected with the virus, you've been hovering around her."

"We have a deadline to meet," Adrian replied flatly. "After we'll put our research in order, I'll take a break."

"You won't," Dawn accused, staring hard at him. "You're just like her. You'll just keep on slaving away, using every last bit of strength for that new dire need you're sure to find. And if you won't, Tessa will, or Madeline will."

Adrian swallowed. "I'm not so sure we're still talking about me."

Dawn laughed. It felt good to hear her laugh. "You know," she said, "I'm not so sure myself."

"I'm exhausted as it is," he said, smiling sadly. "It's unsustainable, the way we're going about fixing things. I'll either take a planned vacation soon, or I'll simply collapse and spend that time in bed. There's just so much to do!"

Olena rushed out of the house with a tray in her hand. "Sorry," she said breathlessly. "The oven caught fire, but I saved the muffins."

She put down the tray in front of Dawn. "Eat. It's fresh."

Adrian picked up one, a banana muffin, and took a bite. It was delicious, but had a trace scent of smoke. "Those are great," he told Dawn. "You really should try one."

"Of course I will," she said, took one, and put it on her plate next to the untouched biscuits. "So, when do you plan to take that mythical vacation?"

"After the interview. We'll take a couple of days off before the presentation to the board."

Dawn squinted. "We?" She asked. "Are you sure? Can you make Tessa take some time off?"

"Well, I can only speak for myself," he admitted, deflating a little, "but I'll definitely try. You're absolutely right, we are both working too hard, and it shows."

Dawn relaxed back into her seat. "Please forgive me if I got too pushy," She said. "But it's unhealthy. You two are cooped up in that office all day long like that."

Adrian nodded.

Dawn looked at his cup and refilled it with more tea.

"Do you want me to mention any of this to Tessa?" Adrian asked.

"Don't," she replied. "Please. I'm not ready."

"Okay. I can plant the idea of some time off in her mind. Maybe mention potential destinations."

Dawn nodded. "That's not a bad idea. I would suggest someplace warm. Sunny. Greece, maybe."

Adrian nodded back and pushed the tray closer to her. "You really should try the muffins."

She picked one and nibbled on its crunchy top. "Here. Satisfied?"

"Ecstatic," he deadpanned.

Humor aside, he sipped his tea slowly, biding his time, but he didn't see her take another bite. When his cup was empty, Adrian rose. "I really should go. Professor Magnus is probably staring at my code and cursing me."

"Okay," Dawn waved her hand and smiled sadly. "You did your part. Go, go! I kept you away long enough."

Adrian left. When he entered the office, Tessa was sitting in his chair, typing away. She raised her eyes from the screen and gestured triumphantly at him. "I think I'm practically done," she said and pressed the Enter key.

"Done with what?" He asked and circled around her. The console was still flashing rows of numbers, and when it was done a scatter plot appeared on the screen, with a logarithmic approximation line neatly following a set of sample points.

"Here you go," Tessa said, "median mitochondrial activity and Idun traces density."

"Did you code all that?" he asked with amazement.

Tessa grinned sheepishly at him. "Well, me and the helpful ghost in the machine," she said, pointing at the AI powered chat next to the code. "I just told it what I wanted, and tweaked a little what it gave me back. Those error messages are extremely informative."

Adrian scanned the code. It was clean, concise, and split into tiny modules. Probably too orderly. First year of computer science type of code.

"Nicely done!" Adrian said and kneeled next to her. "You never coded!"

"Well, in my defense, you young people always made it sound so hard!" Tessa protested, but immediately broke into a beaming smile. "Job security, that's all it was."

Adrian looked at the python code, searching for something he could have done better, something to comment on. He couldn't have written it better himself.

"That's very impressive," he admitted. "Not only for a first try."

"I meant what I said. I'm no longer burdened by an aged mind," Tessa said. Her smile was gone, and with it the last trace of emotion, leaving her porcelain like face expressionless and serene.

"Those useless brain cells were replaced by brand new, quite effective ones."

"I can see that." In a simple graph, the screen held the key to what kept them back. Now they could explain why the Idun virus spread the way it did. It wasn't proof, but it kept the possibilities open.

"I think this is all the confirmation I needed," Tessa said. "I'm actually looking forward to meeting this journalist," she added. "I feel ready."

Adrian didn't have a shadow of a doubt.

Chapter 16

Throughout Adrian's rollercoaster of a week, the one moment in his daily routine which consistently offered him a simple, highly anticipated satisfaction was his morning shower. The gas heated water was abundant and always at the right temperature. Despite the steam rising from the torrents massaging his flesh, somehow the mirror never fogged, allowing him a comfortable shave.

When he was finally done, the dry, fluffy mattress was welcomingly close to the shower enclosure, and the large towels were soft and comforting.

Adrian was just preparing to shave when he heard Dawn's shrill scream penetrating two closed doors. He dropped the towel from his waist, wrapped himself in a robe and rushed outside and down the staircase.

Dawn stood in the living room, her face ashen, her hands trembling by her sides. She was wrapped in a white linen dress and had a heavy gray shawl draped over her shaking shoulders.

Tessa stood in front of her with her hands held up defensively, her eyes wide with either horror or confusion, Adrian couldn't be sure. "Obviously, I said something I shouldn't have," she said cautiously, glancing at him, "but I'm not quite sure what it was."

Dawn turned around. She was as white as a sheet, and her slack jaw accentuated how sunken her cheeks got. "She... She called me ma'am," she finally said, her voice hoarse. "She's mocking me."

Adrian tightened the robe around him and rounded up on Tessa. "Is this your idea of a joke? It isn't funny!"

To his surprise, Tessa didn't display the slightest sign of amusement. "No!" she protested. "It's not a joke! I even apologized when she got upset! I was just trying to be polite, and asked her who she's visiting!"

Dawn grabbed Adrian's arm, her fingers digging into his flesh. "This is a nightmare," she whispered. "It has to be. I have to wake up. I must."

Tessa shuffled away from Dawn, putting Adrian between them. "Boy, who is this?" she asked.

"What do you mean, who is this?" he snapped at her. "Don't you..." He stopped, the chilling realization creeping through his veins. "Don't you remember?"

"This is real!" Dawn whispered hoarsely. "It's a nightmare, but it's real... She... She doesn't know who I am!" She shook her head while speaking, as if doubting her own words.

Tessa covered her mouth. "Oh," she said softly, "I'm terribly sorry. It must be my memory issues. I forgot quite a few things these last few days. Have we met before?"

Dawn spun, her dress swirling open. She glanced at the pictures hanging on the wall, just above the couch, reached out with trembling fingers and tore one off, sending its hook flying across the room.

"Yes!" She shouted, shoving the frame in Tessa's face. "We've fucking met!"

Tessa examined the picture. It used to be one of her favorites, and she gleefully reminisced on the moment it captured quite often, telling Adrian the story behind it time and time again. He

listened patiently, aware that back then it was old age, rather than the Idun virus, that ravaged her memory.

Maybe she just enjoyed reliving it with an audience.

It was taken about a decade ago, before Adrian met them. Dawn and Tessa felt the need to renew their vows. They held the ceremony in Dawn's selected location, under the glaring Mediterranean sun, standing on the fine white sand of Balos Beach in Crete. It was one of the rare occasions when Dawn's family, who persisted and doubled down on their initial disdain of Tessa, decided they could tolerate her enough to come to celebrate with them.

Tessa always told the story chortling with laughter, describing in great detail the contortions and pains those petty aristocrats put themselves through, pretending she wasn't there under the billowing makeshift canopy of white cloth while trying, with surprising honesty, to be happy for Dawn.

Those memories were crystal clear in her mind. She would go into the weeds, mentioning the fine points like the taste of the sweet wine and the way they grimaced while swallowing it like it was sour milk. She remembered how their eyes glossed over her as if she was a part of the scenery, one seashell out of many adorning the sandy beach. How Dawn's eldest daughter, Emily, so like her in looks and demeanor, tried to strike a conversation with her just to be pulled aside and be scolded harshly for her impropriety.

Tessa wasn't laughing now. She looked at the picture carefully, and her eyes were filled with wonder. Her image in it, taken ten years ago, could today be mistaken for her mother. "Is this me?" She asked Adrian.

"Of course it is," he said, nodding. "Don't you remember any of it?"

Tessa shook her head.

"What the hell happened?" Dawn demanded, squeezing Adrian's arm again. "How could she have forgotten this? Forgotten me?"

Adrian wasn't sure. "We knew her memories were damaged," he tried to explain, staring at Tessa, "but not like this. I didn't imagine—"

Dawn did not have patience for his dawdling. She whirled to face Tessa. "Don't you remember me at all?" She screamed at her lifelong partner.

"We..." Tessa whispered, still inspecting the picture, as if expecting it to change at any moment. "But... But we could catch up." She looked up at Dawn and swallowed hard. "You can tell me all about you," she suggested, her voice shaky. "Remind me. We can look at the pictures." She pointed at the wall. "There are plenty of those."

"Remind you? How about this?" Dawn tore another picture from the wall and hurled it at Tessa. "Do you remember that?" She tore another, larger one, and smashed it on the floor. "Maybe this one? You never liked it much, and now you got your wish! It's gone!"

"Dawn!" Adrian shouted. "Stop it!"

She glared at him. "Why?" she shouted.

"We can remind her of—"

"What's the point?" Dawn said. The fire in her was gone, making way to smoldering rage. "It's gone! It's all gone!" She spread her hands wide, her words lost to despair. "An entire lifetime erased."

"There might be a way to restore my memory—" Tessa started.

"She doesn't even sound like her," Dawn growled. She frowned at Tessa, as if she was seeing her for the first time, and her eyes hardened like diamonds. "Who the hell are you?" She demanded hoarsely. "You're not my Tessa! What are you? A ghoul, that's what you are!"

"Dawn," Adrian said resolutely, "I'll fix it. I promise."

"There's nothing to fix," Dawn said, staring at Tessa, her face a frozen mask of anger. "There's nothing there. This thing," she pointed accusingly, "is not my Tessa. My Tessa died in the hospital. You failed to save her. This thing... I don't know who or what this is." She whirled and stormed off.

"Listen, I'm really sorry," Tessa called, but Dawn didn't stop.

Adrian started following Dawn but Tessa grabbed hold of him. "I didn't know who she was," she said. Her voice quavered. "I didn't do it on purpose. I didn't mean to hurt her or anything. You have to believe me."

"I believe you," he said, "but you hurt her really bad. You have to understand that." He looked after Dawn. I really have to go get her before... Before she does something stupid."

Tessa frowned and didn't let go. "She called me a thing. A ghoul. You didn't care."

The front door slammed shut.

"It's not about you, damn it!" Adrian shouted. "Let go! I have to stop her!" he added and headed outside.

"I wouldn't chase her dressed like that," Tessa called after him.

Her words took one second to register, and another to make sense. Adrian was still only wearing his robe, and his hair was dripping wet. He couldn't care less, though. He sprinted and managed to open the door just in time to hear the tires spitting gravel and see Dawn's car exiting the garage and speeding away.

"Stop!" he shouted, running after her.

She kept gathering speed, following the road with blood curdling turns.

Adrian stood still, watching her vanishing into the distance. The pain in his feet was almost unbearable. He carefully made his way back to the house, where Tessa stood, looking questioningly at him.

"I need to get my phone," he told her and went upstairs.

"The interview—"

"The interview can go to hell!" he shouted.

Adrian got to his room. It took him an excruciating minute to find his phone.

Dawn didn't pick up. She didn't answer texts. He tried a few times, and then gave up. He had no idea where she was going, and had no one to ask.

Besides, the interview couldn't go to hell. Tessa had to ace it. There was a lot on the line.

He clicked on the shortcut on his phone which opened his browser on the status of his request. Still pending.

Dawn will calm down, and they'll have a rational discussion. The memories might be locked in Tessa's mind. It might be a retrieval problem. They can make it right again. They will. He had to focus on the here and the now. On the interview.

Adrian got dressed formally, choosing a navy blue suit, one he didn't wear for a while.

He was worried. Mina was uncharacteristically late, and given Tessa's emotional state the interview could prove disastrous, too much so for him to handle on his own. They still had time until midmorning, but something felt off.

Just as he was done with his tie, the doorbell rang.

Maybe Dawn was back.

Adrian quickly stuffed his feet in his loafers and ran down the stairs excitedly, hopping two at a time. He lost his enthusiasm, slowing his steps as he suddenly realised that Dawn wouldn't ring the bell but simply come in.

Maybe it was Mina.

From the corner of his eyes, Adrian saw Olena sweeping shards of glass with a broom. He dragged his feet the last few steps and slowly opened the door.

Instead of Mina he found Dr. Pluto examining the climbing vines surrounding the doorframe.

"Good morning, Mr. Pirth," Pluto greeted him, jovially offering his hand and taking off his hat with the other, allowing the draft crossing the house ruffle his thinning hair. "I trust this time my coming was heralded well in advance?"

"Yes," Adrian replied and took his hand. "Although—"

Dr. Pluto leaned closer. "Are you okay? Your hand is shaking like a leaf."

"I'm fine, thank you," Adrian replied and withdrew his hand. His response rang false in his own ears. "We weren't expecting you until later this morning. Dr. Shepherd is yet to arrive."

Archie Pluto's eyebrows rose, wrinkling his expansive forehead. "I'm terribly sorry. I must have read the invitation wrong. I do apologize." He looked back at the road. "I was driving from my hotel and a car came the other way, burning rubber like it's fleeing a crime scene," he said, smiling a crooked smile. "Anyway, I can come back later, if you'd rather I wait for Dr. Shepherd. There's no rush. There's always time for another coffee."

Adrian shook his head. "No, there's no need," he said. "Now would be fine. We can try to entertain you until she arrives. Please come in. I'll let Professor Magnus know you're already here."

When they entered, Olena walked past them with a dustpan loaded with shattered glass. She scowled at him but said nothing as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Tessa was waiting for them in the living room. Laid out in front of her on the table she had their research paper printed out with some handwritten scribbles in red ink. Next to it was a tray of refreshments and a pot of coffee.

In one hand she held a steaming cup, and in the other the photograph of her vows renewal ceremony.

She examined the picture closely. Her face, perfectly smooth, showed no emotion.

"Dr. Magnus," Pluto said and stepped closer. "How nice to see you again."

She rose and shook his hand. "The pleasure is mine, I'm sure," she said. It felt rehearsed. "Coffee? Tea?"

"Coffee please," Archie answered with a smile and a nod. "I've been looking forward to talking to you, Professor Magnus," he said as he sat down awkwardly, his knees on the opposite sides of the table's corner. "The wonders I've heard almost defy imagination, but simply looking at you confirms that what I believed were wild exaggerations barely scratch the surface of reality."

"It is science at its best," Tessa said, sitting down. Calm and composed, she placed the picture on the table with reverence, and straightened its corners. "Shall we begin?"

Chapter 17

During his time working together with Tessa, Adrian developed a well practiced routine of co-presenting their work to students, colleagues, and people Madeline sought to impress.

Tessa opened, starting by providing the lofty visions, the goals just within reach, and sparked the imagination of the listeners with abundant potential and endless possibilities, all built on the latest research results, of the science just within reach.

She brought the required gravitas. Her wealth of experience made her a font of anecdotal wonders. With skillful storytelling, she would draw parallels of their work with paragons of science and their monumental achievements, name-dropping some famous co-authors of her earlier work and weaving buzzwords in her speech to their full effect.

When the occasion was called for, and the mood was light enough, she shared some of her experiences among the middling levels of the aristocracy. Nothing entertained people better than a sneak peek into the lives of modern inheritors of dukes and barons.

She could carry this act for a while, mostly depending on her constitution. She had good days and bad days. Lately, the bad days have been getting worse.

Adrian would identify those breaking points when she got tired, or ran the clock too far. Then he would step in, offering his assistance. Tessa would take a gracious step back and let him handle the tedious stuff of presenting rigorous research and hard-earned evidence.

So he stood at the ready.

Dr. Pluto pulled a printed early version of their research, scribbled with ink blotted question marks and carrying suspicious splotches which Adrian theorized were salad dressing.

There was a slight shift in his posture. With his notes in his hand, Dr. Pluto's back straightened, and his face displayed focus that wasn't there before. "Let's start with the easy questions first, shall we?"

"By all means," Tessa replied.

Dr. Pluto started very lightly. He asked material, pertinent, yet easy questions about Tessa's own data, and how it matched the early rodent experiments. Seemingly satisfied with the first few answers, he leaned back and sipped his coffee.

"So your goal was basically to supercharge autophagy?"

"Not really," Tessa replied instantly. "Autophagy happens at a subcellular level. The body recycles damaged cell parts. Our goal was to operate on a cellular level. If a cell is not fully functional, the Idun virus grabs it," she made a choking motion with her hands, "and boom! You have a new, differentiated cell, ready to replace the old one."

"Sounds like magic."

Tessa smiled. "Decades of research, almost a decade of experimentation, and one successful guess. It might seem like magic, but it's science at its best."

"Very well." Dr. Pluto placed the cup back on the table. "So if you don't mind, there are quite a few things I can't seem to make sense of. They just don't add up."

Adrian was practiced enough with academic jargon. What Archie was saying is that the polite foreplay is over, and now he's going to point out obvious gaffs in their research. He tensed, ready to step in.

Pluto took about two minutes to iterate through those very discrepancies Tessa and Adrian slaved so hard to resolve in the last few days. He even came up with some issues Adrian now sorely regretted he thought were too minor to deal with.

Nothing prepared him for what came next.

"This is a very early draft," Tessa said, speaking as if to a misbehaving child. "I'm not even sure where you got it. It never should have reached circulation."

"I understand, but still..."

"Of course. Your points are valid, and thankfully can be easily addressed with our new data." She pulled out Adrian's laptop from under the table and opened it, logging in, to his amazement, with her account. "Let's start with the first thing you mentioned, the way the Idun virus survives in the human body..."

Tessa went through Pluto's questions one by one. She had complete command on the data, references, and chose more than once to plot the data in real time.

Adrian sat back and watched the show. After his second cup of coffee was fully, Adrian fully relaxed, realizing that he was not needed. Tessa had it in the bag.

He was so engrossed with Tessa's performance, he nearly jumped out of his seat when Olena tapped his shoulder, startling him.

"There's a man at the door, looking for you," she whispered. "A courier."

"Excuse me, it'll just be a minute," he muttered and rose to his feet, leaving as soon as Tessa acknowledged his departure with a quick nod.

Olena left the door open. A large man in a blue uniform was standing just outside, shifting his considerable girth from one leg to the other. He held a bright yellow helmet in one hand, and a large brown paper folder in the other.

"Are you Adrian Pirth?" the courier asked as soon as Adrian crossed the threshold and stepped outside.

"I am."

"I need you to sign this please," the large man said and offered him the folder, and a pen he pulled from his top pocket. "Just on the last page."

Adrian took the folder. There was a note pinned to the front page, held by the pen, and he easily identified Dawn's flowing handwriting, reading 'Dear Adrian, please sign this as soon as you possibly can, and reserve questions for later.'

Rifling through the folder, which didn't contain more than three pages, Adrian realized it was Dawn's last will and testament. The last page had a line with his name printed next to it, and above it, in Dawn's handwriting, 'The only person who has always stayed true and kind to me.'

Just under the line, there was a dark textured blotch on the paper, the traces of a vanished teardrop. Adrian's hands trembled as if the paper became heavier in his hands.

The courier shuffled his feet. "I need you to sign it," he said. "Now, if possible. I know they're waiting for it."

"I need..." He looked back at the house. After letting his friendships dissipate and his family drift away to their preferred seclusion, Adrian was left with no one to lean on. Olena will be of little help. Consulting with Tessa was out of the question, as well as with Mina or Madeline.

"Here," the courier said and pointed at the black line on the last page. "You can keep the pen."

It was an expensive pen. Not one of those disposable, plastic ones. It was heavy, made of dark green silicone, with a soft, firm grip and a bright logo that Adrian didn't recognize but somehow believed was pure silver. Adrian stared at the pen for a moment, and uncapped it, exposing the golden nib.

It's been a while since Adrian used a fountain pen, and he didn't want to mess the document with ink stains.

He also didn't want to sign Dawn's will.

"The folder has a rigid back," the courier urged him, misreading Adrian's concerns. "Don't worry. Just sign on the line with your name next to it."

Shaking off his guilt, Adrian signed.

"Thanks," the courier said and snatched the folder from Adrian's hands. He plucked off Dawn's note and gave it to Adrian. "I won't be needing this. Have a good day."

Pressing the note to his heart, Adrian watched the courier mount a scooter which was parked carelessly, blocking the driver's door of a rental which Adrian assumed was Pluto's.

He side stepped as the scooter spewed gravel, raised a cloud of dust and sped away. Adrian kept watching it as it sped unreasonably fast, leaning heavily into the twists and turns of the road. The sun was directly up above and reflected brightly from the courier's bright yellow helmet, making him easily visible as he traversed the winding road leading back to town.

Adrian held his breath as the courier, driving in the middle of the road, veered violently to the left and narrowly avoided a car coming the other way, swerving as the other driver slowed down and leaned on the horn.

As the car drew closer, Adrian identified Mina driving, leaning forward and gripping the wheel so hard her knuckles were bone white. "Did you see that... that insane person?" She asked as she got out of the car and glanced back, her mouth drawn in a tight line.

"I did," Adrian replied. "I even talked to him. It was an experience I wouldn't recommend to anyone."

Mina tilted her head birdlike. She did not seem in the best of moods. "What did he want?"

"He had me sign this document," he said, holding up the pen. "And he left me this."

"Seems expensive. Whose car is this?" She asked.

“Dr. Pluto’s, I guess. He’s been here for a while.”

Mina scowled. “What? He wasn’t supposed to be here so early. I wanted to have at least an hour to prepare. Is Tessa there all by herself with him?”

“I was with them for quite a long while. Professor Magnus is doing a fantastic job. We can both sit this one out. Our preparation really paid off.”

Mina’s mouth stretched mirthlessly. “Not good enough. Madeline is hyper-stressed,” she said. “She’d want me to chaperone Tessa anyway.”

“With all due respect,” Adrian said, waving his hand dismissively. “We will only get in the way. Professor Magnus has it under control. During all the time I was with them, she didn’t need any help at all, not even once.”

Mina’s eyes widened. “She’s that good?”

“Better. To be honest, I’ve never seen her like that. She was coding to make her points. Her command of every aspect of our research...”

“Well, you can take some credit,” Mina said, her hand hovering over his shoulder. “You’ve been preparing her for a few days. You did a good job.”

“I can take a lot of credit, but there’s much more to it than that.” He licked his lips. “She’s... She is smarter than before. Noticeably. She doesn’t forget a single detail, and she never needs more than one pass at anything. I never taught her how to write code. She picked it up on her own.”

“Very well. It makes it all simpler. I’ll just introduce myself then, and we can listen in. If I see we’re in the way, we can excuse ourselves and then you can walk me through the new research. We still need to have a presentation ready for the board.”

As they neared the door, Mina stopped. “By the way, I got a text message from Dawn,” she said reluctantly, struggling with herself. “I wouldn’t share it, since it’s rather personal, but I’m not sure what to make of it.”

Adrian felt chills climbing up his limbs. “Yes,” he said as calmly as he could. “I’m listening.”

“I called you earlier, to say I’m running late. We had some stuff in the institute to deal with. You didn’t answer. Tessa didn’t answer as well, which I didn’t expect anyway, so I called Dawn. She didn’t answer, but she sent me a message.” Mina frowned. “The message said, and I quote, ‘it was a mistake to revive her, and this mistake will haunt us.’”

“That’s a horrible thing to say,” Adrian said, taken aback. “But forgivable, I guess. She was terribly upset when she left.”

“I wanted to get some clarifications from Dawn. Is she home?”

Adrian shook his head. “She hasn’t come back yet.”

“When she does return, we’ll have a few words,” Mina said sternly. “I don’t know what she was thinking, but some things should not be said, let alone sent as a text message.” She tightened her mouth for a second and added, “we shall not mention it to anyone.”

Adrian nodded and showed her inside to the living room. Both Tessa and Pluto seemed to be in high spirits, and rose to their feet to greet them. "That was a pretty long minute," Tessa told Adrian. "We're practically done."

"I had to sign the... Never mind. Dr. Pluto, have you met Dr. Shepherd?"

"I did not have the pleasure yet," Pluto said. He rose and offered his hand, which she politely ignored. "How do you do?"

"I am well," Mina retorted coolly. "We did converse yesterday on the phone, though, and I thought we agreed that the interview would start at noon."

"We did," Pluto said and covered his thinning hair with his hat, "but the sun was shining, the birds chirped me awake, and I decided to tempt the fortunes and get an early start." He grinned, trying hard and failing miserably to break the ice.

"We agreed we might go out for lunch," Tessa said. "Dr. Pluto has an unused expense account to max out, or so he says."

"It will be a few minutes before I'm ready. I need to show Dr. Shepherd the materials for..." Adrian stopped, blushing as he realized he wasn't invited. "Um, sure. You can go right ahead. You can try the—"

"Splendid," Pluto said. "It was a pleasure meeting you both, and I'm already looking forward to the next time. There are a few details I still need to assimilate. It's quite a wonder, what you created, Dr. Pirth." He cleared his throat, looked at Tessa, and back at Adrian. "I'll have her back in a couple of hours, no more," he promised.

"Well, um, okay," Adrian replied, not sure what to say. "Two hours is good."

"I'll see you soon, boy," Tessa said, nodded to Mina, and let Archie Pluto open the door and close it gently behind her.

The house regained its uneasy silence.

"I don't like this at all," Mina muttered. "There's so much that could go wrong."

"Do you want to go after them?"

She looked at him as if he was dull. "And do what? Have lunch with them? Shall we make it a double date?"

"Okay, I get it. Not the brightest idea," he admitted. "There's no need for sarcasm."

Mina huffed. "You're right. I apologize. I'm... If this goes wrong, Madeline will have my hide."

"Let's use the time we have to go over our research, then," he suggested. "At the very least it will take our minds off their lunch date."

Mina smiled. "You're absolutely right. Lead the way."

Adrian showed her to the office. "I need to get my computer. Give me a minute."

He went to the living room and picked up his laptop. The walls seemed half naked. The discolored patches where the pictures used to hang stood out like scars.

Adrian sighed and went back to the office. One step at a time, he walked Mina through their latest findings, failing to shake off his deep, haunting sense of unease.

Chapter 18

“Look, I’m not an expert—” Mina started yet again. The sun, barely slanted through the west facing window of the office, suggested it was past noon. More than two hours since Pluto whisked Tessa away. Less than three since Dawn stormed out of the house in tears.

“Yes you are!” Adrian interrupted. “Stop saying that.”

“Not an expert in this field like you two are,” Mina continued unabated. “This is good enough for me, and it seemed like it was good enough for Dr. Pluto. The one thing I’m still unclear about is the blood-brain barrier issue. That I’d be hard pressed to explain, even to non-academics.”

Adrian looked at his watch and sighed. His stomach kept turning, and grinding through sore points only made it worse. “It was bad science on our part,” he admitted, and not for the first time. “We never tested the rats for memory functions.”

“And never took brain tissue samples?”

Adrian shook his head. “It’s so much easier to take muscle biopsies, and we were mostly focused on muscles and nerves.”

“That is not a good enough reason.” She shook her head, all but glowering at him. “This research could have used some additional supervision. I didn’t expect Tessa to take one step out of her comfort zone, but you could have asked me for help.”

“It had nothing to do with comfort zones,” he protested. “We were repeatedly wrapped in red tape. Any request we made had to be submitted multiple times, and we got rejected with rather flimsy excuses.”

“There’s a reason that we have a process in place,” Mina argued. “Another reviewer might have insisted on testing for memory, or on taking brain biopsies, or another way to identify this issue beforehand.”

Adrian stood his ground. “It was a race against the clock,” he explained emphatically. “Professor Magnus’s disease was already impacting her cognitive functions. She found herself struggling with basic science. Any additional bump against bureaucracy, as she would put it, was out of the question.”

“I wasn’t suggestion you should wait a month, but giving me a couple of weeks to sort—”

“For heavens’ sake, Mina! Have you considered the possibility that her acute response was so severe because it was already too late? Even second guessing us now, with the benefit of hindsight, seems quite unfair.”

"I'm sorry," Mina said. "I didn't intend to sound so mean, and you're not the one I should criticize, if anyone at all. Are you... Are you okay?"

Adrian shook his head. "Far from it. I'm exhausted, I'm worried about Dawn, and that message she sent you doesn't make it any easier. Besides that, Professor Magnus should have been back by now."

"Why don't you get some rest, then?" Mina suggested. "We're practically done. I'll stay here, and let you know as soon as something happens."

"It's not just that. Working with professor Magnus has become... Nerve wrecking." He looked down at his feet, wondering whether he overstepped. "She seems to be unnecessarily cruel. Indifferent, at the very least, to other people's feelings."

"It makes a great deal of sense."

Adrian looked back up at her. "What? Why?"

Mina adjusted the tight collar of her dark dress. "Empathy is a learned skill. Children have to practice it a lot, otherwise they're just little monsters. Your plan to help her recover her professional knowledge covered just that." She pointed at the materials they just collected. "This suggests Tessa might have simply forgotten that particular skill, alongside anything she didn't repeatedly practice these last few days."

Adrian buried his face in his hands. "Did you know she didn't recognize Dawn this morning?" He muttered.

Mina's eyes widened. "You cannot be serious."

"I wish I was joking. It was... Tragic. Dawn flung pictures around. She was furious one moment, and..."

"You should have told me that sooner," Mina said, closed her laptop, and put it away. "This is horrible! How did Dawn take it? She must have been devastated!"

"She was. Worse than devastated. When she saw it wasn't an act, she seemed broken, like she gave up. I..." His mind went back to the document he just signed, but this time he thought better of saying anything.

Mina's face looked grimmer. "This gives some context to Dawn's message. Have you considered that she did it on purpose?"

"What?" Adrian was caught by surprise. "Who did what on purpose?"

“Tessa. Pretended not to know Dawn. To hurt her.”

Adrian frowned at her. “Now, why the hell would she do that?”

“For amusement. For laughs. For attention. Why do children pinch one another?”

“Mina, she’s not a child. She’s a biology professor whose memories have been damaged.”

“Say you.” Mina said. “I prayed on it. I meditated. What if it was simply her time to die? What if we intervened with the divine plan?”

Adrian swallowed his initial response. “She wasn’t destined to die. She had a disease. She probably still does, hidden deep in her tissues somewhere, but mitigated by the Idun virus. It had nothing to do with pre-determined destiny.”

Mina wove her fingers together. “I know this is how you see it,” she said patiently, “and it makes a lot of sense. But there are deeper meanings in the universe. Things science fails to explain and faith doesn’t. What if the Idun virus is an unholy creation? Did you ever consider that?”

“I can’t say I have,” Adrian answered honestly. “I’m not sure what I would do with it either way.”

Mina pressed her lips together. “It all makes sense to me now. You listen to me. For all intents and purposes, I no longer believe this is Tessa anymore. This is another being inhabiting her body.”

“That’s insane!” Adrian replied automatically. “Sorry,” he immediately added.

“It’s okay. I know it sounds insane.” She released her fingers and steeped them. “But I don’t mean like a religious fanatic would, like a demon took possession of her.” She smiled wryly. “I mean that the virus might have rewired her brain so much that she’s a completely different person now. Hardly even a human being.”

“I don’t think that—”

“Answer me this then. How many times was she downright mean to you before the virus?” Mina asked. “Wait, that’s too general. How many times did you see her being anything but kind and gentle to Dawn?”

Adrian paused for a second. “Not a single time,” he admitted.

“Neither have I. Then at the very least, you have to accept that she’s an utterly changed person.”

“Oh, I’ve seen the signs. For one thing,” Adrian replied tartly, “she can walk on her own.”

Mina took a deep breath. "Okay, I guess I deserved this. There's no need to get defensive, though. I'm not taking anything away from your amazing accomplishment. You two created something that seems nothing short of a miracle. I'm..." She took yet another deep breath. "I just think you jumped the gun. This," she pointed at Adrian's screen, where the paper's final result was still showing, and Tessa's bio-markers overlaid over the initial study, "was premature for an experiment on primates, let alone on humans. Testing it on Tessa opened all kinds of cans of worms."

Adrian was beginning to lose patience, which was not plentiful to begin with. "I told you, the clock was ticking," he explained. "Our goal was to save Professor Magnus's life, rather than conduct a clinical trial. Waiting for approval was signing her death warrant, and neither of us wanted that. We had to take a calculated risk, and we did."

"Adrian," Mina said patiently, "I'm not blaming you, or Tessa for that matter. We are all on the same team, and I'm the last person you need to lecture on the sanctity of life. But I need us to be on the same page, too. There's a lot riding on us presenting this research in a way which won't put you and Tessa both behind bars."

He put his hands on his hips. "And here I was, thinking that—"

The door of the study burst open, and Olena stood there breathing heavily. "Come quickly," she told Adrian between gasps. "Upstairs."

Adrian didn't need her prompting. With the door open, he could easily hear Tessa's shrill scream, strangely reminiscent of the way Dawn screamed just this morning.

He ran out of the room and sped up the staircase, taking three stairs in each stride.

Tessa stood outside of her bedroom, her face as white as a sheet. "That lady from this morning! She's in my bed!" she cried and pointed through the door as soon as Adrian cleared the stairs.

Adrian looked inside. Dawn, wearing a white summer dress, was lying on the sheets with her hands clasped over her heart. Her face was serene, and her eyes were shut. The room was completely still except for the hem of Dawn's dress, which fluttered at the gentle breeze coming from the open window.

"For heaven's sake!" he said, frowning at Tessa. "That's Dawn! Your—" The words caught in his throat. Dawn was motionless, as still as a statue. He rushed into the room and took her hand.

It was clammy and cool to the touch.

Up close, he noticed her eyes were open to a slit, and her eyelids fixed and unmoving.

Adrian pressed two fingers to Dawn's carotid artery. There was no pulse. Dawn wasn't breathing.

He looked at Tessa with tears welling in his eyes, barely believing the words as they came out of his mouth. "She's dead. Dawn is dead."

Chapter 19

“Murderer! You did this!”

Tessa was a small woman, but still towered over Mina’s tiny frame by at least three inches. That did not prevent Mina from rounding up on the taller woman with savage, righteous anger.

“You killed her!” She screamed in her face.

Tessa was visibly shocked. Her jaw remained slack, as if still screaming without a sound. Her eyes bounced madly between the dead woman lying in her bed and the tiny, darkly dressed one yelling at her.

Adrian stepped between them, forcing back the tempest of Mina’s fury. “Stop it,” he said in his calmest voice, which was still shaky, broken, and high pitched. “You’re making a bad situation worse.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Mina grabbed him, her arms trembling with rage. “This is what Dawn meant! She – This thing murdered her!”

“What? People should stop calling me a thing,” Tessa protested.

“You need to pull yourself together!” Adrian told Mina, shaking free of her grip. “There’s no way she’d kill Dawn. She was with Pluto, and you were at the office with me. You don’t know what happened.”

“Oh, I know. By the word of The Lord, I couldn’t be more sure,” Mina said and pulled out her phone, “and soon the entire world will know too. I’m calling the police.” She backtracked, retreating towards the stairwell, and held up her index finger. “Don’t you dare touch anything,” she warned and turned away.

“No one is going to touch anything, and by all means, call the police, but call an ambulance first,” Adrian called after her. He turned around to Tessa, leaned down, and softly asked in her ear, his voice barely above a whisper, “you didn’t have anything to do with that, did you?”

“What? Of course not!” Tessa protested as loud as he ever heard her. “I just returned from lunch with the nice Dr. Pluto and wanted to lie down for a bit.” She looked at Dawn lying in their bed. “Why would I even want to hurt her? Did she hurt me?”

“I couldn’t imagine why, but Mina seems fairly convinced you killed her.”

As if summoned, Mina turned back around and glowered at them. “The police are on their way,” she said. “Don’t you dare touch anything.”

“Listen, you ugly midget,” Tessa said, her nostrils flaring, “I wouldn’t set foot in this room for all the money in the world, let alone on my own volition. Just back the hell off.”

“I’m not moving an inch, you hellish fiend!” Mina shouted.

Adrian stepped again between the two feuding women. “This,” he said grimly, “has gone far enough. Prof–” He stopped. “Tessa, let’s go and get you something to drink.”

Tessa bounced over his shoulder and yelled, “You don’t scare me!”

Using his body to barricade Mina away, Adrian took Tessa to the kitchen. Olena was there, pouring a shot from a bottle of vodka. A half dried rivulet down the corner of her mouth

suggested it wasn't the first one. "Is it true?" She asked with a shaky voice as soon as they entered. "What the yelling woman said. Is Dawn really dead?"

"We can't say that," Adrian said. His throat was completely dry. "We don't know for sure. Let's just wait for the ambulance to arrive."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tessa asked. "You just said she was dead."

Adrian collapsed into a chair and buried his face in his hands, rocking back and forth.

"I'm not afraid of the police," Tessa said. Her voice was no longer shaky. "I have nothing to hide. I was with Archi the entire time. He's a nice man. He would vouch for me. I'm really worried about that lunatic though," she added. "Someone needs to bring her to heel."

Adrian looked up at her, staring through a veil of tears. "You're supposed to be worried about Dawn. You really should be."

"Maybe I should," Tessa said, looking at him impassively. "Please forgive me, but I don't, and I think that at this point she's beyond caring. We should focus our attention on the living, especially that menace upstairs."

"What the hell is wrong with you? Dawn is dead, and all—"

"I thought you said we don't know for sure," Olena interjected, slurring her words. "Which is it?"

Adrian was positive that the half empty bottle was full this morning, and admired the woman's capacity for reasoning under the influence. "She probably is," he admitted. "But we should let the police sort everything out."

"Do you want some?" Olena asked, offering an empty glass to Tessa, with the bottle of vodka already tilted above it.

Adrian intercepted the glass. "We need to keep our heads clear if we'll be interrogated," he said, shaking his head, "and they might want to test us for substance abuse."

"You're just making stuff up now," Tessa said, but withdrew her hand.

"Forgive me for having no experience in murder investigations, but chugging vodka shots while the sun is up is not a good idea on the best day, let alone now. Could you please," he asked Olena, "maybe get us some green tea?"

"Of course," she said, reaching out to the top shelf. "Oh, it was her favorite kind," she managed between sobs, picking an ornate jar. She embraced it, remained standing still in the middle of the kitchen, and cried.

Adrian rose from his chair and hugged her. Moments like there were when Dawn would step in, he thought. She would have known what to do. What was proper and humane.

Olena drew him close with one hand and hung on to the jar with the other. She wept on his shoulder, sobbing bitterly with tears running free. They were both crying when his phone rang.

It took a while to disentangle from Olena and lead her to a chair, and by the time he fished his phone from his pocket it went quiet. The number seemed familiar, but without a contact attached.

"I need to see who it was," Adrian excused himself, and went out into the hall. He blew his nose, dried his tears with the same wipe, and called back.

There was a strange, almost subsonic disturbance on the line, and the waiting tones sounded alien and strange, grating on his ears. He was grateful when the call got picked up. "I've already heard," Madeline said, skipping the pleasantries. "This is horrible!"

"Yes it is, but—"

"My condolences to Tessa," Madeline continued. "She must be heartbroken."

Adrian peeked into the kitchen. While Olena was crumpled on a chair, sobbing bitterly, Tessa was curiously examining the vodka bottle. She sniffed it. Her face betrayed no emotion.

"This..." Madeline paused, and the line went quiet, the static disturbance gone.

"Hello?"

"What a disaster!" She continued. "And," her tone dropped an octave, "Mina chose the worst possible moment to go bananas. She completely lost her mind. Adrian, are you there?"

"Yes. I saw—"

"You're the only one I can trust in that insane asylum. I'm... I'm out of the country. I'll return as soon as possible, but I need you to hold the fort. Do whatever it takes to stabilize the situation, okay? No more craziness! Don't let everything fall apart!"

Adrian nodded, and quickly added, "Yes, of course."

"Sure you will. You always do." She paused for a couple of seconds, and this time he waited. "I trust you, Adrian," she said. "I know you'll make things right. See you soon."

"How can I—" he said, but the line was already dead, and the disturbance was gone too, leaving only silence behind. Adrian stood there, dizzy with the pace of events, and took a deep, stabilizing breath.

"I spoke with Madeline," he said as he returned to the kitchen. "She's away, though. Let's hope she'll be here before things get out of hand."

Olena, still sitting, but with an empty shot glass in her hand, looked at him unsteadily. "In my opinion, you can already say that things are out of hand."

"More out of hand," he said, grimaced, and plucked a full chaser out of Tessa's hand. "None of that for you," he scolded her.

Tessa looked at him innocently. "I was just looking," she said.

Olena touched Adrian's arm. "You were right. Go to the porch," she said. "I'll get you some green tea, the one that..." Her voice broke. She sniffed and continued. "Good for the nerves, and okay with the police."

"Thank you," Adrian said and pulled the unresisting Tessa out to the terrace.

For some reason he expected the skies to be overcast, the day to be gloomy and gray, and the ducks to be gone. Instead, the sun shone brightly without the flimsiest wisp of cloud in the

cerulean sky. Both ducks swam in circles in the serene pond, keeping a respectful distance from one another. Their passage left tiny eddies in its wake, with crests glowing golden yellow under the glaring sun.

"You know," Tessa started, "I've had the most wonderful conversation with Dr. Pluto. He had—"

"I'm sorry," Adrian said. "I don't think I can... Not now, okay?"

Tessa frowned at him, but remained thankfully silent. She started fidgeting, and her legs kept bouncing when Olena arrived and served them tea, milk and biscuits. Either Olena forgot about the green tea or she decided to conserve it for later, because the tea she served was minty, aromatic and dark brown.

"Thank you," he told her and poured himself and Tessa a cup.

Olena withdrew, as quiet as a ghost.

The tea was heavy with bergamot and caffeine, and served to somewhat sooth his nerves.

Tessa added milk into her cup and sipped carefully. "Drinkable."

Adrian expected the house to soon be swarmed by the police, but, after a short while, only two uniformed officers appeared and asked someone to join them.

Tessa stayed outside while Adrian gave them a tour of the house.

They had a quick word with Olena, refused courteously anything she offered, and ensured no one plans to meddle with, as they called it, the crime scene.

Then they simply waited patiently by Dawn's bedroom door.

"Maybe we should go back to the office," Tessa suggested when Adrian returned to the terrace. She was as jittery as before, and her cup was empty. "We still have a presentation to prepare."

"For heaven's sake, she was your—" Adrian stopped abruptly when he realized little good would come of berating Tessa. Any memory she had of Dawn was scrubbed clean by the Idun virus.

He took a deep breath. "There's a dead woman in your bed," he continued calmly. "Do you really think you could concentrate on the presentation? Make some significant progress?"

Tessa shrugged. "From the tone of your voice, I guess you expect me to say I can't, but I really think I could. I definitely should give it a try. It's not like time stands still while you... Adjust."

"Well, I most certainly can't be of any help. And you need to stay here. So... Just..." he waved his hands. "Just stay put. I can get you something to read if you want."

"My laptop, if you can."

Adrian made his way to the office, feeling like a thief in Dawn's house. Crazy thoughts bounced around in his skull. Why does Tessa need a computer? Would she tamper with online evidence? Consult with an online AI on her legal defence?

It was insane. He was going insane.

He brought Tessa her computer and sat back down, filling his cup with steaming tea. She soon busied herself back in the research, and he had time alone with his thoughts.

The awning wasn't extended and the sun, uncharacteristically free of cloud cover, shone brightly. Adrian found the glare from the porcelain cups comfortably blinding, allowing him to detach himself from the horrible present.

Tessa pushed her chair back against the wall, protecting her screen from the sun.

Just after the kettle was empty, another policeman, wearing a rumpled brown suit, came around the bend of the house. Materializing out of the glare, he introduced himself as Detective Tristan while placing a large suitcase on the table.

"We've met before," he told Adrian, "although you didn't see me, in that mad dash of yours to the gate."

"Excuse me?"

"At Addenbrooke's hospital," Tristan explained. "You were a suspect, and you gave my constable a run for her money. I believe the case is still open."

Adrian remembered it well. It was when Tessa woke up, and he ran as fast as he could to catch Dawn before she left. He nodded. The memory of her surprised, delighted expression brought fresh tears to his eyes.

"Is there anything you want to tell me before I go in there?" Tristan asked and pointed inside the house.

Both shook their heads.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, maybe one thing," Adrian said and sniffed.

"There always is," Detective Tristan said, and took out his phone. "Yes?"

"This is professor Magnus," Adrian said, pointing at Tessa.

"Oh, a professor?" Tristan asked. "So young?"

"That's the thing," Adrian said, carefully choosing his words. "She isn't. Professor Magnus went through a medical experiment lately. She was the one I supposedly poisoned." He frowned. "It was a cure, you see? It's all well documented. You can find all the records in Addenbrooke's Hospital. Besides changing her appearance, making her seem far younger than her actual age, she's having... Memory issues."

"My memory is fine," Tessa said defiantly.

Adrian gave her an exasperated look. "She forgot a great deal of details from the past. Her memory is fine now. Dawn... The woman upstairs..."

"The dead woman?" Tristan suggested.

"Yes. She was Tessa's - Professor Magnus's partner for the last three decades, but all memories of hers are gone."

Detective Tristan frowned at Tessa. "Is it like a brain injury?"

"The Idun virus crossed—" Tessa started.

"You could say that," Adrian quickly said. "Except that as far as we understand it, there is no permanent damage, other than those memories being gone. As she just mentioned," he glanced sideways at Tessa who went back to typing on her laptop, "her memory of the last few days should be perfect."

"Well," Tristan said, looking at them both, "thanks for sharing that piece of information with me. I'm sure it will come in handy." He opened his suitcase, and pulled out a sealed bag. "I'll wear it next to the room so it won't be contaminated," he explained as he stood up.

He almost made it into the house when Adrian called after him, "Should, um, excuse me?"

The detective stopped and turned around.

"Do you need us there? Should we join you?"

Tristan shook his head. "Here is perfect. Stay here, please," he said, "I'll be back soon enough."

"But... Isn't someone going to guard us?" Tessa suddenly chirped.

Detective Tristan smiled at her, a surprisingly warm smile. "Despite the loud, overzealous demands to detain you I heard from a certain someone upstairs, you don't strike me as the fleeing kind, and I'm not under the impression you have any reason to. We are not in the habit of treating innocent people like criminals."

"Oh," Tessa still seemed a bit confused. "Thank you."

"However," he added, raising a finger, "if you do experience a sudden urge to leave, please come see me first. It could save us both a lot of hassle later on." With that, the detective turned and was swallowed by the gloom of the house.

Chapter 20

They remained on the terrace, sitting in silence, watching as translucent, sporadic clouds emerged and edged eastward, sailing through the sky while somehow evading the ever present sun. One cloud caught Adrian's attention in particular, one he could imagine shaped roughly like a winged man. It came close to the sun, almost blotting it, and when it came away, it had already lost its shape, looking like nothing but a huge mass of billowing mists.

"Could any of you," Tristan's voice startled him, "identify this handwriting?" He stood just behind them, holding in his hand a plastic bag with a piece of paper inside it.

After Tessa returned the detective's gaze with a blank one, Adrian reached out, and the detective handed him the bag.

For the second time today, Adrian encountered that flowing, perfect cursive. "It's clearly Dawn's handwriting," he said. "I read it earlier this morning. It's..." he stopped as the letters and words gained meaning, forming sentences in his mind. "It's a suicide note," he muttered, struggling to breathe.

"It certainly seems to be the case," Tristan agreed. "There were other documents in the room, signed by her lawyer earlier today. We verified it with him a few minutes ago. As far as we can tell, they're genuine."

Tessa looked up at him, her face flawlessly smooth and devoid of emotions. "So, does that mean she killed herself?"

Tristan shook his head. "It's too early to tell," he said. "For the sake of our professional conduct, we would like to keep the investigation open, at least for a while longer, but..." He paused, his attention drawn to the house by the sound of shuffling feet.

Mina stood at the door, glaring at Tessa with murderous rage.

"The documents tell the entire story. Suicide certainly seems like the most likely conclusion, at least for now," Tristan finished the sentence.

"The most likely conclusion," Mina spat, "is that Tessa murdered her. Dawn tried to warn us. If we only—"

"You're full of shit," Tessa said, locking eyes with her. "And you're clearly insane."

"I'll kill you!" Mina screamed and leapt at Tessa, arms stretched forward.

Detective Tristan, easily twice Mina's weight, plucked her out of the air and deposited her on the floor across from Tessa, with him in between. "You," he said, looking sternly and pointing a finger at her, "are neither a suspect nor a witness, and therefore you will leave this house now, or you will face the consequences. Anything you would want to contribute," he raised his open palm and held it to Mina's face as she opened her mouth, "anything at all, you can do so at the station in town. You will leave now!"

Ghost white, Mina whirled around, her dark dress swirling like the grim reaper's robes. She stomped off, and from all the way across the house, they heard the front door slam shut behind her.

"You two," Tristan continued, looking at Tessa and Adrian, "are still, technically, potential suspects. I would advise against taking any sudden trips abroad, or even out of town."

"Of course, detective," Adrian said, and Tessa nodded.

Tristan looked at them both, unsure who to address, and settled on Adrian. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said, tapped his wide brimmed hat and went back into the house.

"I'm going to get some more tea," Adrian said.

Tessa looked at him, her lips tightened shut.

"What?" He asked.

"Do you need some more time?"

"What?"

"Time," she said. "Do you need some more time to recover?"

"Recover from what? And to what purpose?"

"We need to get back to the office. I can't really work here. And I wanted to share something with you," Tessa said apologetically, "but I'm not sure that you're ready."

"I'm not sure either," Adrian replied flatly. "I'm probably not. Tell me anyway."

"Dr. Pluto gave me an idea," she repeated. "We had such a wonderful conversation. He's very creative. I think I know how to keep the Idun virus from crossing the blood-brain barrier. It might," she said softly, putting her hand on his arm, "give you something to focus on. It could take your mind off this horrible mess. It would do you good."

Adrian pulled his hand back. "And what if I don't want to take my mind off it?"

"I understand and respect that," Tessa said and stood up, "but I won't keep you company here just so you'd have a shoulder to cry on. There's exciting work to be done. A revolution waiting just for us. Join me in the study when you're ready." She left without saying another word.

Sitting alone, Adrian looked at the ducks for a long while. They circled the pond leisurely, basking in the glowing sun. Their lives were simple. They didn't have careers and viruses and murders to worry about. They just swam and ate stuff.

He was still wondering what ducks ate when an ambulance parked outside, sounding its sirens just to announce its presence. Adrian went to the front of the house and watched people take Dawn away in a black body bag.

Soon after the police officers followed, said their curt goodbyes and left the house, easing out of the driveway with their night blue car.

Adrian went to the living room, dropped on the couch, and wept. It felt like he cried before, but now it was different, more free. No one was watching.

After a while he calmed down, and the stream of tears stopped. Silence spread across the uncaring rooms of the house like an infectious disease. A flood of indifference.

Adrian grew uncomfortable. It wasn't just his loneliness. Tessa was concocting wonders at the office while he sat it out, feeling sorry for himself.

He got up, went to the kitchen, and brewed some fresh coffee. While the water heated, he washed his face and wiped it clean.

Who will berate us for drinking too much, he wondered. That should be the least of his worries. What happens to the house? Will they pay rent to Dawn's family? Or will they receive an eviction notice in the mail, telling them to get out in a week or else? What would become of Olena?

When the pot was ready, he foamed some milk, and prepared two cups. He put them on a tray, along with the still steaming pot, and brought it all to the office.

It was gloomy inside, despite the western window letting some slivers of light in.

As he entered, Tessa turned her head from the screen, looking at him. Her green eyes glowed, reflecting the screen's multicolored scintillating lights. "It should work," she said. "It might weaken the Idun virus, but it will keep it from entering the brain, or rather, make the efflux pumps flush it out."

"What are you talking about?"

"Come see. A picture is worth a thousand words."

"You haven't forgotten your idioms, have you?" Adrian asked bitterly as he circled around her desk, put down the cups, and looked at her screen. It took him a few seconds to analyse the complex molecular structures he was seeing, and a few seconds more to understand what the simulation she was running was all about. "You made it hydrophobic," he muttered after he made sense of the results. "How did you..."

"It's still a work in progress," Tessa said. "It's not perfect. Let's see if we can make it a reality, boy. We might have stumbled on the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

Staggering to his desk, Adrian missed a step, his mind still reeling from the endless possibilities Tessa's new approach presented, and a bit of foam flew out of his cup and floated gently to the carpet, where it dissipated to nothingness. He ignored it and sat down, his focus on his screen.

He logged into their production environment and watched Tessa's new model vomiting log lines, promising a solution beyond wonders.

Chapter 21

Adrian ended up leaving his coffee untouched. He felt it was the least he could do for Dawn.

Tessa, on the other hand, seemed to be fueled by cappuccinos as she raced through the theoretical basis of her hypothesis.

It was a good distraction for him, to get her one refill after another. Adrian couldn't focus at all. His thought kept wandering, gravitating around Dawn, and how her absence will upend everyone's life. She wasn't just the cornerstone of Tessa's life, she also made sure everything happened the proper way.

As dusk arrived, Adrian realized that he served no real purpose. It was an early enough stage when even a bouncing board was unnecessary and randomized simulations could take a hypothesis a long way. He left a pot of coffee on Tessa's table, excused himself and went to bed.

Sliding under the blanket, he wondered whether she had noticed he was gone. It was supposed to make him angry, but he was too numb to care.

Despite his reservations, he fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Adrian awoke when it was still cold and dark outside, with the residue of a dream sticking to his mind. In the dream, Dawn wandered alone through the house, seeking and calling for help that never came.

It took him a second to realize that his phone was buzzing. He sat up and stared groggily at the screen. It was an automatic reminder to go to the senior yoga class from the sports center app.

He tapped it. There were open spots.

Eager for a change of pace, Adrian signed up, prepared quickly and tip-toed downstairs.

He didn't arrange for a pickup, and now would be too late. He could cycle there, which would take a long time, but shouldn't be too bad.

He picked up his helmet and was about to take his key when he saw, in the same bowl, Dawn's car's remote, and his breath caught in his throat. He almost managed to suppress Dawn's suicide beneath the false urgency of hurrying to yoga class. Almost.

The remote seemed inviting, though. He could take her car. She would have allowed him to, had he asked. Of course she would have. In fact, she would have insisted.

Not taking it was stupid. What purpose would it serve? A sense of moral superiority that would sustain him for a thirty minute bicycle ride. He'd be just in time, or a little late, and already tired.

Adrian picked up the remote and went out to the garage. Dawn's car was plugged into the wall.

He stood there and stared. With the last seconds of her life slipping away, Dawn spent a precious moment so the next person using the car, well after her demise, would have a full battery.

Adrian opened the car and stepped in, his eyes misting over. It still had the scent of her favorite perfume. As soon as he unlocked the engine, the computer came alive and started playing Vivaldi's Autumn.

The road was dark and unfriendly. He drove slowly, weeping all the way over to Midsummer Common, and still arrived well before the elderly participants took their places.

"Oh, hello, um, you!" Ann-Marie greeted him, hopping over. She was barefoot, and wore shiny black tights under an oversized puffer jacket. "Is your professor coming also?"

"No," he replied gruffly. He realized, to his surprise, that he expected a warmer welcome, or at least that she'd remember his name. "She's still sleeping. It's just me."

"They usually wake up early at that age, don't they?" Ann-Marie asked, smiling disarmingly. "Anyway, you're more than enough. Find yourself a spot," she added, pointing at the rows of mats. "Somewhere close to me. We're about to begin."

Adrian pondered whether he should ignore her suggestion and stick to the back of the class. Despite his better judgment, he gravitated to the front, and ended up a few feet from the still stretching Ann-Marie.

The sun peeked above the horizon, a slice of orange above the green grass.

"Is everyone ready?" Ann-Marie asked. After the choir of murmured approvals, followed by a few coughs, she peeled off her coat and tossed it on the wet grass. "Let's begin," she said, and took them through the practice.

This time it all felt easier. Adrian was careful, cautious of over-extending himself, and often opted for the easier versions.

He honestly hoped those quick looks from Ann-Marie held appreciation for his restraint, rather than contempt for his lack of effort, or bemusement for when he momentarily lost his balance.

When the class was over, the seniors huddled to their parliaments. Adrian rolled his mat and was about to enter his car when he heard, "hey! Teaching assistant!"

Adrian turned around.

Ann-Marie walked over, carrying a backpack almost her size. Her coat's arms were tied around her slim waist, like it was hugging her for its dear life. "Fancy giving me a ride?" she asked. "It's pretty close, but this bag weighs a ton."

"Um..." He paused for a second. It was still early. Tessa wouldn't need him for a while. "Sure, no problem," he said and opened the backseat door.

She tossed her bag in and sat at the passenger's seat. "This is a really nice car," she said as she buckled up. "I guess teaching assistants have good salaries around here."

"I wish," he said, starting the car. "It belongs to a friend. Can you..?" he pointed into the car's touchscreen, and she put in the address.

It was still cold, and all Ann-Marie was wearing was her black sports bra and matching tights. "Do you want me to turn the heating on?"

"No," she chuckled. "I'm still steaming from class. Oh. Vivaldi. Nice," she added as the computer picked up the playlist, bringing the winter concerto to a close.

"Yes," Adrian agreed. He didn't know what else to say. Two minutes later the concerto was over, and Adrian drove in silence, following the computer's directions.

"Are you okay, teaching assistant?" Ann-Marie asked when the silence seemed. "I had you pinned as a chatterbox, but you barely said a word."

"Me? Chatterbox?"

"Yes. You seemed like the talking type to me." She examined him through the curtain of her dark hair. "At least that was my first impression. Was I wrong?"

"I can be, sometimes," he admitted. "But it has—"

"Here we are!" She tapped his knee, and pointed at a spot blocking a driveway. "Park there. You'll be blocking my roommate, but she won't leave until noon."

As soon as he pulled into the driveway, Ann-Marie hopped out and plucked her backpack out. Stopped by his window, waiting until he opened it.

"Okay," Adrian said, "have a—"

"There's a café just around the corner. Buy me an espresso and tell me all about it? You have a minute to decide."

She left in a rush, vanishing through a blue, dilapidated door into a plain offwhite house. Adrian was still contemplating what to do when she returned, still wearing her yoga pants and a white crop top over her sports bra.

"Well, that I didn't expect," Ann-Marie said, laughing. "I thought you'd probably leave, but I knew I didn't scare you too much. Staying in the car, though... Are you coming?"

Adrian got out of the car. "I guess I'm a bit slow today," he apologized.

"That's why we're getting coffee, right?"

Adrian nodded, and followed her as she started walking.

"You don't have to look so miserable, you know," Ann-Marie said after a while. "Going for a nice cup of coffee with a pretty girl is not supposed to be bad, definitely not the end of the world."

"It's not you, it's..."

"I didn't think for a second it was me. Here we are." She pointed at an open café, with dark wooden tables and matching long benches. "Take a seat. What are you drinking?"

The wall had a neat column of drink names scribbled on it with chalk. Each had an illustration, but there were no prices. "A cappuccino, I guess."

"I'll be right back."

His eyes followed her as Ann-Marie went to the counter, leaned all the way over it and kissed the cashier on the cheek. The cashier, a young blonde woman with a sharp nose, grabbed Ann-Marie's head and pulled her closer, kissing her on the lips.

If he would have contorted like Ann-Marie did, balancing on her palms with her stretched feet not touching the ground, he would have been bed ridden for a week.

She made it seem easy, though, perfectly balanced as if floating, her legs and body forming straight lines with an angle that—

Adrian froze as Ann-Marie caught his eyes, and he realized he was staring at her butt. He looked away,

The cashier said a few more words, looked at him a couple of times, and went to operate the coffee machine.

“Carla will bring us the drinks. So,” Ann-Marie said, sitting next to him. “What’s eating you up?”

Adrian sighed. “I don’t even know where to start…”

She snapped her fingers twice. “Make it interesting.”

“Interesting? That shouldn’t be a problem. Do you remember Tessa? The professor?”

“Ah ha,” Ann-Marie nodded, her brown bob bouncing with the movement.

“So a couple of weeks ago, she was dying. She had terminal ALS.”

“Ugh,” Ann-Marie stuck out her tongue. “I said interesting, not morbid.”

Adrian laughed. “Don’t worry. That’s the nice part of the story. She was in your yoga class, so she obviously got better.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll shut up.”

“We found a way to fix her. We developed a virus. It’s a bit complicated to explain. Basically, it finds dead or damaged cells in the body and replaces them with new, healthy cells. It didn’t just heal her ALS, it made her a lot better.”

Ann-Marie’s eyes seemed to zoom in on him. “A virus?”

“Yes. Engineered especially for her. And it worked. It replaced the damaged nerve cells, and then the muscle cells. There are signs it rebuilds her bones as well. In a week she should be able to run.”

“Wow! I was expecting a broken heart at most, and here you are with a life saving virus!”

Carla came over with a tray, putting a cup of cappuccino in front of him and two espresso shots in front of Ann-Marie.

“*Merci beaucoup, mon amour*,” Ann-Marie said and downed one of the shots.

Finally, her faint accent clicked into place.

Carla smiled at her. “*De rien*,” She replied and went back behind the counter.

On the saucer, next to his cup, was a small butterscotch cookie. Adrian picked it up and nibbled at it.

“You should try the coffee. Carla makes the best cappuccinos in Cambridge, and believe me, I tried.”

He sipped. It wasn’t bad.

“How is it?”

"It's good," Adrian said. He looked at her espresso shots skeptically. "How would you know, if--"

"So, your professor can walk," Ann-Marie said. "That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"A wonder onto itself, except that we really weren't supposed to do it."

"Do what?"

"Inject a virus into her veins willy-nilly. You're not supposed to conduct experiments on human beings. We did it completely unsupervised, and the word got out."

"Oh..." She covered her wide smile with her palm. "You were being naughty! Did you get caught?"

He sipped again from his cup. "What? Of course! You can't hide something like this!"

"So you're not very good criminals, are you?"

"We're not criminals at all," he huffed. "We didn't have a choice. Professor Magnus was the only one who understood how the virus was supposed to work. Waiting any longer was impossible. She would have died."

"Did you tell that to the police?"

Now was Adrian's turn to smile. "It's not the police that were after us. Not exactly. It's a governmental agency. Once the word got out, the director of the Cambridge Institute for Medical Research was furious. She was threatening to fire us both."

"Not a real threat to your professor, no?"

"But a very real one to me. I think that now that she understands the potential of the Idun virus she's more or less in our corner, and it's good. She's fierce. If anyone can fight the bureaucracy, it's her. She also suggested that if we succeed, she'll make me a full tenured professor."

"Okay," she put her palms up. "So you have the big boss watching your back, and the professor not dying and even doing yoga. All is pitchy, yes? Then why do you seem so down?"

"It's always like that, isn't it?" he asked. "You have a bit of success, you fly too close to the sun, and you lose your wings."

"Well?" She tapped the table impatiently.

Adrian looked away. He had no idea where to begin, and the words caught in his throat.

"Oh, no!" Ann-Marie exclaimed. "What did I say?"

"It's not you," he mumbled. "I'm just--"

"No, this time it is me! I made you think of something sad!"

Adrian sighed. "It's very fresh. I'm still grieving."

"Do you want to get it off your chest?" She asked. "Just spew it out. It might make you feel better."

He sipped some more of the coffee and started. "The virus had some side effects. It managed to slip past the blood-brain barrier, and while replacing damaged neurons, it seemed to have damaged, or maybe even severed, their synapses."

Ann-Marie's large eyes stared unblinking at him.

"It erased most of her memories."

"That's not a reason to be sad!" Ann-Marie protested. "Old people forget things all the time! Half of my students can't remember my name! She's alive! She can learn everything again!"

Avoiding the temptation of asking her for his name, Adrian continued. "That's what I thought at first," he paused and sipped the cooling coffee. "She forgot her partner. Her wife. Professor Magnus was married to Dawn Magnus."

"Oh!" Ann-Marie's eyes lit up. "I heard of her! She was something in fashion, right? A model maybe? She is so beautiful!"

"Was. Maybe she was a model when she was much younger. She did have that signature straight-backed walk, so I wouldn't be surprised. I do know for sure she was a magazine editor. I think she retired maybe five years ago? So the professor completely forgot who she was."

"Come on! That is easy to fix!"

"No, you don't see. I didn't either, not until it was too late." Adrian paused for a deep, heavy sigh. "They were together for thirty years, and it was all erased. Their first and second wedding, all their trips abroad, their moments of shared joy... And pain, I guess. It was all gone. She didn't even remember her name."

"Oh no! Poor editor!" Ann Marie covered Adrian's palm with hers. "She must have been devastated! Is this why you're sad?"

"Not exactly, no." He looked into her dark brown eyes. They seemed warm. Understanding. "She broke down. It must have been too much for her. Losing her wife over and over again. She killed herself yesterday."

Ann-Marie's face went blank. "Killed herself..?" She repeated.

Adrian nodded. His vision became blurry as his eyes filled with tears.

Ann-Marie got up, dragged her chair next to his, and hugged him. "This is why you're sad," she murmured in his ear. "You were close. I can see. It's horrible. It's right that you're sad."

She was sticky with dried sweat, but he didn't mind. He hugged her back.

"Did you have a good cry?" She asked. "One good cry. You should. It helps."

Adrian wasn't sure. He remembered crying alongside Olena, and later on the couch, but...

Ann-Marie's arms felt like a coat of armor protecting him, and her hair smelled like lavender. The tears started pouring out of him.

Soon after, Carla came over and placed a note and a box of tissues on the table.

"I'm sorry, but I need to go," Ann-Marie apologized and disentangled from him. "I have another class. Kids this time. You understand, right?"

Adrian nodded, picked out a wipe and blew his nose.

Ann-Marie grimaced as she downed the second espresso shot. "Umm... You'll take care of the bill for me? I'll take it the next time around."

He nodded again.

"This is how I make sure you come to class again, teaching assistant," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I want to hear the end of the story. A happy end, if possible, but any end would be good."

She rushed out of the coffeeshop, and loneliness crashed on Adrian once again. Even Carla was nowhere to be found. Looking around, he noticed the note she left had a sloppy ten scribbled on it.

He took a few minutes to compose himself, left a ten pound note and shuffled back to the car, dragging his feet on the damp sidewalk.

There was a paper bag on the retractable sun roof, inside it a red cupcake carefully laid out so the sugar sprinkled cream on top remained untouched. There was also a note reading 'I'M SORRY FOR YOUR LOSS' in large, scribbled capital letters.

On the way back, he nibbled at the muffin. It was fresh, smelled wonderful, and tasted better.

The sun was still low when he arrived, and his heart missed a beat when he saw detective Tristan's car parked in front of the house.

Chapter 22

Detective Tristan picked up his cup. He leaned his chin on his chest and blew on the hot tea. When he looked back up, and his crumpled, wide brimmed hat no longer concealed his face, Adrian saw his glasses were somewhat opaque, fogged out by steam.

He took out a flask from an inner pocket, and poured some brownish liquid into the cup.

"Are you supposed...?" Adrian asked, pointing at the flask as it vanished back into the coat.

"I'm not here in any official capacity," Tristan said. "It's a courtesy call. You seemed like decent enough people, too decent to be left out in the cold. I wanted to tell you in person that the case is closed. The previous one as well."

Adrian noticed he was tapping his foot and stopped. "I honestly don't know what to say," he said.

"You don't have to say anything. We acted on the first report, treating it as a murder case, but honestly, there wasn't much to follow up on, except for hearsay testimony from a woman that, between us, didn't seem all there." Tristan smiled, which made Adrian a bit more paranoid. "You, or Professor Magnus, are no longer suspects. Mrs. Magnus and her lawyer were meticulous in their efforts, and it is clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that she, Dawn, was under no duress and clear headed when she changed her will."

"So, there won't be any... Is the investigation done?"

Tristan tried the tea again. He managed to sip a bit, and put it back down. "Do you know of Mrs. Magnus's family?"

Adrian, trying the tea as well, returned the cup to the table, next to his phone, and nodded.

"Her family objected to an autopsy, or to any other line of inquiry. Vehemently." This time the detective managed a tiny sip, the short pause hanging heavy in the air. "When they found out about the poisoning investigation Ms. Jackson miraculously managed to suspend, they demanded we close it as well."

"Why?"

"No one told me. No one needs to. You see, they have friends in the force. Very senior friends, who unofficially insisted that I should drop the case. To go against their wishes, I would have to go around them and convince a judge to order me to pursue the case anyway. It would be difficult and messy. I'll probably fail, and it might cost me my job." He made a cutting motion with his hand, narrowly missing his cup. "So the case is closed. You're cleared of any wrongdoing."

"I'm a bit confused," Adrian said. "So why are you here?"

"As I said. Courtesy. Well," he tried the tea again, and this time managed a good gulp. "To be honest, I might have been told to leave no room for ambiguity. Besides, it's an intriguing story. I had a hard time believing you at first, so I went through the hospital records, which confirmed everything you said. I still find it almost inconceivable that the woman I saw, the one you supposedly poisoned, was almost eighty years old. I was hoping for—" His phone buzzed, and he glimpsed at it.

"But..." Adrian waved his hands as words failed him. "I mean, it looks bad, doesn't it? I mean, suddenly I'm wealthy, and—"

“Death is ugly and messy.” Tristan said and rose to his feet, looking sadly at his cup of tea. The sun’s rays bounced magnificently from the white floor of the terrace, making his face seem skeletal. Tristan narrowed his eyes, as if suspicious of something, before he held out his hand to block the glare.

“However,” he continued as he stood up, “you have nothing to worry about. Your newfound wealth doesn’t implicate you in any way. As far as the police force is concerned the case is officially closed. This is what I’ll tell my superiors I told you. There will be no further investigation efforts, unless something dramatic comes up,” he added and offered his hand.

Adrian stood up and shook it. A gust of wind, carrying fresh morning scents from the pond, blew up the detective’s coat tails like a pair of wings spread wide. The breeze went straight through Adrian’s sweater, raising goose bumps on his flesh.

“Thank you for the hospitality,” Tristan said, nodding at the tea, “and please convey my condolences to the widow.”

Adrian saw the detective out to the driveway. As Tristan got to his car, he waved goodbye, fumbled the keys and dropped them on the gravel.

He groaned as he picked them up, bending only at his right knee. The clinician in Adrian wondered if there’s an underlying medical condition, and whether it was knee or hip related, but he didn’t ask.

He stifled the need to inquire. He just wanted the detective gone. He wanted it to be over.

Tristan seemed to have pressed the wrong button on the remote. The lights in his black Ford Focus blinked, but the doors remained locked. He frowned, pressed the remote again, and his face broke into that familiar grin as the car beeped and the driver’s door slid open.

He might simply be drunk, Adrian thought, watching from the doorway as the detective entered the car and drove slowly away. He didn’t slur his words, though. Or maybe he was faking it for as a part of an elaborate ruse, but what purpose would that serve? The investigation was closed. Or so he said.

Adrian’s phone buzzed in his pocket, and he answered without looking, his eyes on the detective’s car driving away at a snail’s pace. “Hello—”

“I have some good news and some better news,” Madeline’s voice came through, crisp and clear as if she was standing right by him. “And I’m dying —” she paused and cleared her throat, “and I can’t wait to share it with you. Can I come over?”

“Of course. We’re in—”

“Good. I’ll be right over.” She hung up.

Adrian turned and stopped short of entering the house.

He got to the UK almost six years ago, with nothing but his grant and the promise of potential employment while he completed his Ph.D. He never expected to own anything by the time he returned home, let alone not a small Victorian mansion.

Now, through some cruel twists of fate, his fortunes significantly improved.

Once the papers will come through the machinery of governmental bureaucracy, lubricated by Dawn's lawyers, he will own the house and its surroundings, as well as a large sum of money Dawn left him.

Adrian doubted he'd feel like it's his. It should have been Tessa's.

He didn't know if Dawn left anything to Tessa, or even to anyone but him, which made meeting her family at the funeral even scarier.

He came into the office to find Tessa sitting in front of three screens, hard at work on several new strains of Idun viruses. Currently the runner up, the disdained strain as she called it, only existed as transient vectors in the memory banks of their server farms, but Tessa's work was pushing them to viable physical tests at an astonishing speed.

He walked up to her. Up close, he saw the strange discoloration of her hair. It was growing supernaturally fast, as expected, and many of the white wispy hairs had strands of gold as their roots, bringing back the curls Tessa lost ages ago.

At this rate it seemed that Tessa's last remnants of old age would be gone in a few days. Her skin was already stretched smoothly over her elfin thin face, bearing no signs of wrinkles. She didn't remember if she had scars or stretch marks, but if she did, those were gone as well.

"Came back to do some work, boy?" Tessa asked without turning, her voice completely free of the frailty of old age.

"You seem to be doing just fine without me."

"Just imagine," she said, swivelling in her chair to face him, "how well I'd do with your help. Where were you, anyway?"

Adrian pulled a chair and sat down. "I woke up early, so I went to the yoga class."

She squinted at him.

"The yoga class I took you last week."

"Oh," she said, still straining her memory. "Wasn't it really early? Sunrise early."

Adrian nodded.

"So what took you so long? Did you walk back home?"

"No, I sat with Ann-Marie for coffee, and when I got here detective Tristan was waiting in his car, so we had some tea at the terrace. He told me the case is closed. We're off the hook."

Tessa pouted at him. "I didn't realize we were on the hook," she said. "And it seems like you had a productive morning after all. Who's Ann-Marie?"

"The yoga instructor." He took a deep breath. "We have a busy day ahead of us. Madeline is coming over, and we have Dawn's funeral to attend."

"Yes, of course." Her lips pursed for a second. "Why did you have coffee with Ann-Marie? We have perfectly good coffee here."

"We..." The image of the yoga instructor perfectly balanced over the counter floated in his mind. "She needed a ride home, and we went to a café nearby."

She seemed lost. "I'm sorry, boy. There's just so much I don't remember. Is it customary to take the instructor home?"

"Not really, but... You know," he said indignantly, "it's getting weird that you keep calling me 'boy', given that you look so young now."

Tessa was taken aback. "I'm truly sorry," she said, and for once, seemed genuinely upset, the corners of her mouth dropping just a bit.

Adrian thought it was the first emotional expression he saw on her face in days.

"Force of habit," she continued. "I didn't realise how demeaning it must feel."

"It doesn't," Adrian said, trying to reassure her. "Not really. It's just a bit weird, that's all."

The expression vanished and her face was smooth again. "It is, isn't it? So that's it. No more 'boy'. So, you said you have a funeral to go to?"

"We both do."

"I wonder if I should come. I really have a lot to do here."

"Professor—"

Tessa raised her hand. "No more 'professor', remember? We're on a first name basis now."

Adrian repressed the urge to argue. "Tessa," he started again without missing a beat, "she was your wife for over three decades, whether you remember it or not. You have to come."

"Can I bring my laptop then? I want to process the results as soon as they arrive."

"Sure you can," he replied. "But we have to wait for Madeline. She's on her way."

Closing her eyes, Tessa leaned back in her chair. She kept wearing her old clothes, despite being a far cry of her former decrepit, almost skeletal form. She was eating well, and regained the weight of her youth, putting on both muscle and fat. Instead of hanging limply around her the shirt Tessa wore clung tightly to her frame.

To his embarrassment, Adrian noted that her habit of not wearing a bra also persisted.

"What does that hag want?" Tessa asked, oblivious to the train of thoughts running through Adrian's head.

"Who? Madeline? She said she had some good news and some better ones," he replied, forcing his eyes onto the screens.

"Let her come, then. Are you okay?" She asked and stood up. "You seem a little flushed."

"Yeah, I wonder why," he muttered, feeling the blood rushing to his cheeks.

"You're muttering, boy!"

Tessa met his frown with a broad, teasing grin. He sighed, went to his desk, and prayed for Madeline to arrive sooner rather than later.

As far as prayers go, this one was answered soon enough. Not five minutes later, Madeline's car rolled into the driveway, announced by two honks of a loud horn.

Adrian rushed out of the room and opened the front door just to have her storm inside, blowing him a kiss and leaving him whiplashed in a cloud of syrupy perfume.

"Olena, dear," Madeline said as she passed by the kitchen, "would you fix me some Irish coffee?"

She wasn't wearing one of her trademark power suits, but rather a flowing formal red dress, which she had to rearrange before she sat at the terrace. As he was about to sit, she looked at him questioningly.

"I should probably get Professor Magnus," Adrian told her and hurried back to the office, where Tessa sat, fully immersed in her research.

"We're waiting for you," he said.

Tessa frowned at him. "Can't I—"

"No. Come on."

She rose grumpily and followed him outside.

"Oh, wow! Look at you, dear!" Madeline said, ogling Tessa. "You're a living and breathing advertisement for your virus! You look so absolutely ravishing, you belong on the cover of a magazine!"

Tessa bowed, and sat down.

"Do you prance like that all day?" Madeline lowered her voice and asked.

"Like what?"

"You know..." Madeline twirled her finger at Tessa. "Half naked. Aren't you cold?"

"Quite the opposite," Tessa replied. "I'm hot most of the time. My body is in overdrive."

"Well, never mind," Madeline said dismissively. "Oh, thank you dear," she told Olena, who brought out a tray with a steaming mug, and a pot with a couple of cups.

Tessa leaned closer to Adrian. "What is she talking about?" She asked. "I'm not half naked."

"You might want to consider some pants," he whispered back.

"We've all had some hectic days for sure," Madeline said, ignoring their muted conversation, "but I've been slaving away trying to set the records straight." She glanced at Tessa. "It's been twice as hard," she continued, "with Mina steering us into disaster rather than helping to paddle. I'm not practiced with having such resistance in my own house."

Tessa frowned, but Adrian nodded. "That's hardly surprising with the way she reacted here. She blamed Prof – Tessa for Dawn's death."

"You don't need to convince me she's insane," Madeline said sourly. "She's been hard at work doing just that. Mina keeps accusing me of Dawn's murder. She thinks I'm complicit because I keep Tessa on the payroll."

"I'm sorry," Tessa interjected, "who are we talking about?"

Madeline's eyes rounded for a moment. "Well, we have the forgive and forget part right off the bat, don't we. We're talking about Mina, dear. The woman who threw a fit, saying you murdered Dawn. I've sent her home a couple of times, but it solved nothing. She comes back the next day as nasty as ever."

She sipped from her coffee, her frown melting away as she paused, sighed, and sipped some more.

In the pond, the ducks were at their best behavior, swimming the perimeter of the pond, completely ignoring the greylag goose that stood at the edge of the pond and wet its beak.

"You said something about good news?" Adrian prodded.

"Ah, yes," Madeline put down her cup, and tossed back her platinum hair, letting it bounce on her exposed shoulder. "I was finally able to push through your request. You are now officially Associate Professor Pirth. Congratulations!"

Adrian's mouth hung open, and Tessa, grinning, reached out with her index finger and pushed it shut. "Congratulations!" She said, her eyes glittering with droll amusement. "Now you could finally afford paying rent!"

"Ugh," Madeline scowled and shook her head. "Tessa, that's horrible. It's far too soon. Stop making Mina's points for her. By the way, when is the funeral?"

"This afternoon," Tessa replied, frowning at Madeline. "I wasn't being—"

"You need to treat this with the proper respect," Madeline plowed over her, with steam in her voice. "It's a funeral, for heaven's sake. None of this quirky new you shit. If not for you, then for her poor family."

"I was told that you have even better news," Tessa said coldly.

"Yes," Madeline nodded, "I have—"

"Thank you!" Adrian finally blurted. "That is amazing news! How did that come about?"

Madeline's smile was wider now, and seemed far more genuine. "Better late than never, I suppose. It has something to do with the better news. You know how you've been sucking our cloud account dry with all your experiments in the last few days? IT said they have never seen so many jobs run in parallel ever."

"I actually don't know," Adrian muttered and glanced sideways at Tessa. "I wasn't the one running those jobs."

"Well, following up on Tessa's promise to create a strain of the Idun virus which skips the sieve-like memory part, the board finally agreed to allocate all the funds we need to push this to commercialization."

"How could you promise such a thing?" Adrian snapped at Tessa. "How can you even—"

"We understand," Madeline quickly interjected, "that more research is required. But those additional funds made it easier for me to secure your new position."

Adrian pursed his lips and remained quiet.

"Now," Madeline continued, "would you mind explaining the science behind this wonder? Help me deal with my buyer's remorse."

As Tessa's explanation unfolded, Adrian realised just how profound and far reaching were the changes she made, and how much of the work was done without him. If the Idun virus was Tessa's Mona Lisa, the new virus was her Sistine Chapel. She drew upon the farthest reaches of modern science, balancing everything on the width of a single engineered protein molecule, and yet was on her way to prove its efficacy.

Madeline kept sipping her Irish coffee, nodding and muttering approvingly whenever Tessa paused for questions. Every once in a while a cool breeze from the pond tossed a lock of her golden hair out of place, and she absent-mindedly brushed it back, eyes fixed on Tessa. When the cup was emptied she put it down. "I've heard enough," she said. "I'm confident we've made the right choice."

Tessa beamed at her, her foul mood all but gone. "I'll go make the magic happen, then." With Madeleine's nod she vanished into the house.

Madeline turned to Adrian, fixing him with her gaze. "Congratulations, Professor. If we stay the course and not fall astray, there might be a Nobel prize in your very near future."

She leaned ever so slightly towards him. "There are many pitfalls, though. We have the human aspect to consider here. For the time being, while Tessa is flying high, you're my eyes on the ground." Her smile diminished to nothingness. "Speaking of which, she's not grounded, is she? That memory loss thing? There's far more to it. You can see that, can't you?"

Adrian nodded grimly.

"Don't let matters get out of hand," she continued, "and whatever you do, don't let them catch me off kilter."

The large goose hopped into a graceful glide, swooped over the ducks and sped away. They made no sign they've noticed.

Madeline stood up and started on the path around the house, her blond head swathed in sunlight as she stepped out of the protective shadows of the terrace. She suddenly stopped, and turned around. "For the love of God," she told Adrian, "make sure she wears a black dress. If she doesn't have one, take her shopping, and do it now."

Chapter 23

Tessa didn't own any black dresses, at least not some who could fit her. Raiding Dawn's closet felt like grave robbing and proved useless anyway, since Dawn was almost a foot taller.

For the first time in his life, and under a tight schedule, Adrian found himself dress shopping.

He expected Tessa to argue, complain about missing research work, or at least throw a resentful comment, but she seemed very malleable, and hopped into the passenger's seat of Dawn's car with absolute delight. It was, she realized, an adventure for her, a new experience to be had and enjoyed.

She sat up with her face glued to the window, drinking in the scenery as it sped by. Given the state of her memories, she might have felt like it was her first time in the countryside, and soon her first trip to Cambridge proper.

Madeline's warning began to resonate with him. This might be more than memory loss.

He parked at the Grand Arcade car park, and they went to the Lilac Rose, the first place on his quickly assembled list. The atmosphere, however, was too cheerful and Tessa couldn't find anything she liked, at least nothing somber enough for a funeral. After browsing for a few minutes they left.

They took the short walk to Whistles, the fallback Adrian had sense enough to plan.

Tessa suddenly stopped. "Maybe there's something here," she said, pointing at the window of a Lululemon store.

"Here? We won't find anything here for a funeral."

"Well, obviously. But as long as we're here, would it hurt to take a look? Maybe we'll find something nice."

"Something nice for what?" Adrian asked, confused.

Tessa frowned at him. "You complained that I don't wear pants in the house. So I need comfortable ones." Her frown deepened. "Besides, maybe if I'll wear yoga clothes, like your Ann-Marie does, you might bring me along with you next time you go to a yoga class instead of leaving me stranded at home."

"What?" Adrian was surprised by the venom in her voice. "Listen, I'm sorry, it was a spur of the moment decision, and I knew you were burning the midnight oil, so—"

"I was what?"

"You were still working when I went to sleep. I didn't want to wake you up,"

"Next time wake me up," she said resolutely. "And I still want yoga clothes."

"On the way back," he suggested. "If we'll have time."

It must have been enough for Tessa, because she resumed walking, staring ahead as if she forgot all about it. She was lost in thoughts, and moved her head back and forth, as if having an internal conversation. After a while, Adrian became concerned.

"What's on your mind?" He asked.

"It's not that I'm not enjoying myself," she replied. "It's a nice day, and walking is surprisingly pleasant, but maybe we're wasting our time. Maybe I should simply skip the funeral. It's not that anyone will miss me there, and I have so much to do."

"I will miss you, for starters," Adrian said, frowning at her. "It will be nice to have someone in my corner."

Tessa halted for a second, and caught up to him with a few quick steps. "Why do you need someone in your corner?" She asked.

"Dawn's family will be there. They might be a little sore about her decision to leave me the house."

"That's strange," Tessa replied. "I thought I should be the one sore about that."

Adrian swallowed and looked at her. There was no malice on her face, but he was no longer sure he could read her expressions "Are you?"

"I probably should be, shouldn't I?" Tessa asked cheerfully. "Even if I don't remember any of it, we did spend a few decades together, and all it took was one bad week to throw me under the bus."

"I wouldn't call it a bad week," Adrian said, "but I can see your point. Maybe we should—"

"We shouldn't do anything about it. I'm not sore at all, not should I be," Tessa said. "I have far more important things on my mind. Unless you plan to throw me out, I have everything I need, and more."

They arrived at the stairs leading to the shop. "That's good to hear," Adrian said and opened the door, "because I won't, but we have to go to the funeral. Both of us. You don't get to abandon me."

Tessa nodded and went inside.

While the selection was more down to earth, and far more fitting to the occasion, they soon ran into some new problems. Tessa knew nothing about her measurements, and Adrian was completely useless. Fortunately, the shop's assistant was incredibly helpful. After using a measurement tape and asking a few questions, Tessa found herself ushered to the dressing room with a small pile of worthy candidates.

"Boy, can you come in for a second?" She called after a short while.

Grumbling objections, Adrian shouldered through the curtain and immediately regretted it. Tessa stood in front of the mirror, wearing nothing but panties. Her arms were spread wide, one holding a halter, and the other a dress. "I can't figure out how I put this on," she said, turning to face him. "I have a Ph.D in molecular biology and I can't figure out how to try on a dress."

Adrian barely heard her over the rush of blood in his ear. The scientist in him noticed that there were no stretch marks, or any marks at all, on her perfectly smooth skin, not even those tiny poke marks from the daily biopsy. He also noticed his intuition from before, about her filling out, was spot on.

There was no trace left of the elderly woman he injected the virus into just a couple of weeks ago. This woman, perfectly proportioned and glowing with the vitality and beauty of youth has replaced her. They shared the same –

The gentleman in him kicked into gear half a second later and Adrian fled the booth. “She needs help to put on stuff,” he told the startled assistant and went out to get some fresh air, the store suddenly feeling a bit too hot and stuffy.

He was still sitting on the stairs and catching his breath when Tessa, wearing the black dress she held before, stepped outside the store. “Here you are,” she said and sat next to him, the thigh high slit exposing her knee. “I was looking all over the place for you. Why did you leave?”

“Are you seriously asking?” Adrian replied, frowning. “You were practically naked!”

“So?” Tessa frowned back. “You take my biopsies all the time. You were never squeamish about it.”

“It’s not the same!”

Tessa inched closer. “Listen,” she said, her frown deepening, “you of all people should understand what I’m going through. You analysed my condition. I’ve lost most of my life’s memories, alongside the social norms and behaviors that are very clear to you and anyone else.”

She was far too close for comfort, her breath hot on his face.

“But I’m neither stupid nor demented,” Tessa continued, studying him with confusion in her eyes. “If I did something wrong, I need you to explain it to me, so I won’t repeat the same mistake. Explain it once, do it well, and it should be enough.”

He looked back at his feet. “I’m not even sure I’m well equipped to explain it,” he said. “It’s not appropriate for me to see you in your underwear.”

“But the assistant had no problem with it.”

“Because she’s a woman, and it’s her job, so she has to. It makes it more appropriate.” He drew in a deep breath, trying to settle himself. “When a man sees you naked, or partially naked, it suggests a more intimate relationship.”

Tessa moved closer until their shoulders brushed together. “I can’t think of a single person in the whole wide world I have a more intimate relationship with.”

Adrian looked at her again. The dress the assistant suggested was a perfect fit, but far too revealing for a cathedral. Despite his best intentions, his gaze drifted down her cleavage. He pulled back and said, rather breathlessly, “It’s not this kind of intimacy!”

“Please explain,” Tessa demanded.

“We worked closely for a long while, so we have our own intimacy, but I was referring to a different one. One that people share with a single partner. Like the one you had with Dawn.”

That seemed to confuse Tessa even more. “But you said a more intimate relationship is with a man. Dawn was a woman, right?”

"Yes, of course she was!" Adrian was getting flustered. He was way out of his depth, and felt like he was wading into even deeper water. "For some people it's different. You, for example, preferred women to men. That's why you chose to be with Dawn."

"Oh... So why would I care if you see me naked? It wouldn't suggest that kind of intimacy for me, would it?"

Adrian didn't like the only good answer he had, but he gave it anyway. "No, but I would care. I was uncomfortable."

Tessa furrowed her brows, wearing the same look of deep concentration she did as she tackled the hardest issues with their research. "This is what I fail to understand," she said. "Why would you be uncomfortable?"

"Me seeing you nearly naked... If I was comfortable, that would imply that intimacy we talked about. I think we're going in circles."

Tessa put her hand on his leg. "No, we're not. I think I got it. I like women, but so do you, so for you to be with me in this situation is awkward."

"Precisely."

"So this is what we need to fix. I like you," Tessa said, shaking her head. "It shouldn't be awkward to you. Right now, you're the only person in the world I'm comfortable with. So I need you to like me back."

Adrian struggled to his feet. "This isn't how it works. To be honest, I'm probably not the best person for you to have this conversation with. Maybe Madeline could get you some counseling—"

Tessa grabbed his arm and pulled herself up. "Boy," she said softly, capturing his eyes, "I don't want to talk to a stranger. I have no one else to have this conversation with. I have only you."

"I'm not very good at this," he said.

Tessa smiled. "Sounds like you're the one who needs counseling."

Adrian smiled back. "Okay," he said, "but now we have a funeral to go to. We'll pick this up later, with or without professional help. If you'll remember, that is," he added with a wink.

Tessa elbowed him in the ribs. "Oh, I'll remember," she said and went back into the store, saying over her shoulder, "and I'm sure you will too".

"Like you remember you promised to stop calling me boy?" he muttered when he followed her in. Her snicker suggested she overheard.

They ended up picking this dress, which Tessa took particular fancy for, and another, more funeral appropriate. Adrian paid for them both, using the expense account attached credit card Madeline provided.

"Can we go to the Lululemon store?" Tessa asked when they left.

"No! We're already late!" Adrian said and let her go. "We'll walk. It's only a few minutes through St Edward's Passage"

“Okay, but I want to get some yoga clothes later. I bet they looked good on Ann-Marie.”

“We need to figure out how your memory operates,” Adrian said. Then, with a heavy heart, he led them to King's College Chapel.

Chapter 24

They were indeed late. Even as they crossed the lawn, they could hear the choir's singing, a mournful dirge that twisted Adrian's insides into knots.

He never did get to mourn Dawn's death, he realized. Not really. Even when the opportunity presented itself, he fled to one distraction or another, choosing to avoid her death rather than to accept it.

Soon, Adrian thought as they entered the cathedral, he would have to face the stone cold reality of her passing.

As they ambled forward, careful not to make a sound, Adrian was amazed to see Dawn's casket by the altar. It was open, and Dawn's face was just visible above the rim. By the time they got to their seats, tears already gathered in the corners of his eyes.

Adrian remembered just enough of his latin to recognize the requiem's language. The girl who sang, standing in front of the choir, had some of Dawn's features. For all Adrian knew, she could have been her granddaughter. Her voice filled the chapel, surrounding him with sorrow, resonating with the insides of his soul.

After a short while, she ended on a high, heart piercing note, bowed, and joined the family that was gathered next to the stairs.

"What's happening now?" Tessa whispered.

"I don't know. Maybe it's time for the eulogies," he whispered back.

A tall, regal woman walked slowly to the pew, proving him right.

"My mother," she started, "lived her life freely, invariably following her heart."

Adrian wasn't surprised that she was Dawn's daughter. She was her spitting image. Tall, willowy, and radiating strength. The dress she wore was black, tight fitting, and the way it swallowed light suggested it was designed for funerals, same as the complementing hat she wore, which darkened the top half of her face under a heavy translucent veil.

She continued to describe Dawn's youth, her multiple journalistic accomplishments, and the close, loving connection she shared with her family. The last part, as Adrian knew perfectly well, was a complete fabrication. For the last few decades of her life, Dawn, having been shunned for those exact same choices her daughter just praised, had minimal contact with her family and could spend years without talking to them, let alone meeting them.

Tessa, who was the wedge driven between Dawn and her family, was never mentioned or even alluded to.

Adrian's thoughts wandered to the last few weeks, before the Idun virus upended their lives.

Tessa was no fool. While being fully invested with the Idun virus as her last resort, she also understood and accepted that her life was probably coming to an end, and used every opportunity to spend time with Dawn.

On her part, Dawn was always at the epicenter of everything, making sure that Tessa was comfortable and cared for, and that Adrian's needs were all met. In all of their late night conversations, sipping tea on the terrace, she never mentioned her family once.

Dawn often expressed interest in Adrian's family though, and they discussed it in length. He described his academic, cold, distant parents, his estranged brother and his sister that he liked but lived on the farthest spot on the globe, having fled from the family at the first chance she had. "Family is the people you don't choose," Dawn said dismissively more than once, and Adrian wondered what she meant.

He wanted to ask her, but he never did.

The eulogy ended abruptly, and black suited ushers swooped in from the wings and quietly herded the mourners to form a straight line.

Tessa stopped examining the ceiling. "Should I..?" she asked.

Adrian shook his head. "You'd better not. I'll be right back," he added and hurried to join the queue. The mourners soon started shuffling slowly, the first among them already passing Dawn's coffin. Her family stood nearby, accepting condolences and muttering thanks.

The choir started singing again, scratching and scraping at the unhealed scabs over Adrian's heart. Their young voices filled the chapel's sheer volume with unbearable sadness, the slow beat of the music matching the rhythm of the mourners' feet as they plodded along, bumping occasionally into one another.

The thought of saying his last farewells to Dawn choked Adrian with tears. He barely managed to force his feet to keep moving, the world blurring around him as his eyes finally released their torrent of tears.

Dawn deserved better, he thought. She earned a nicer death. She was a good person.

He dabbed at his eyes, and, following the black suited gentleman in front of him, turned down the aisle. Closer, he could now see Dawn's features. She seemed serene, as if fast asleep.

Adrian had a hand in this. It was the Idun virus that started the chain of events leading them here, with him crying, Tessa bored out of her wits, and Dawn serving as a corpse on display.

The man in front of him paused, muttered something, and proceeded at a much faster pace, leaving Adrian feeling exposed in front of the watchful family.

He stopped next to the coffin. Dawn was fully visible, as beautiful and composed as she was in life. He knew the dress she was wearing, a green velvety piece she wore less than a week ago. It was one of her favorites. It must have been her choice. She always cared so much. Too much.

He couldn't take it anymore. The world tilted over, and Adrian found himself leaning his hands on his knees, bent over in front of the coffin.

"Sir," someone behind him scolded, and a hand tapped his shoulder. "You're holding the line."

"Wait," Dawn said. "Give him a second. I think I know who he is."

Blinking the tears from his eyes, Adrian raised his head.

Dawn remained in her coffin, undisturbed and extremely dead. Dawn's daughter, the one who gave the eulogy, climbed down the dais' stairs towards him, assisted by a stern-faced older man. "You're the one she left her house to, right?" She asked.

Adrian nodded. "I am. I'm so sorry for—" his voice broke. He coughed into his elbow and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry for your loss," he finally finished the sentence, forcing the words out.

"I'll be right back," She told the man who helped her down the stairs. "I was looking forward to this conversation," she told Adrian. "Come with me, please."

While he was still considering her offer, Dawn's daughter hooked her arm into his and led him outside, earning a curious look from Tessa as they walked by.

"Ah, there," the daughter said and pointed at the Fellows' Garden. "Let's go there."

"What is this about?" Adrian asked. Detective Tristan's words, warning him about Dawn's family, seemed a good enough reason to steer clear from them. Being alone with her daughter felt dangerous beyond reason, but with their arms entwined, he had no choice but to follow as she started strolling down one of the garden's winding paths.

"I expected someone else," she said after a while, when they reached the cover of trees. "A sleazy con man with a gold watch, a fake smile and an expensive suit. You don't look sleazy at all."

Adrian dabbed again at his teary eyes. "Um, thank you?"

The way her laughter sounded twisted Adrian's insides even further. "You sound exactly like your mother," he said.

"I know. She always told me," she added, looking at him, "that it was weird seeing me growing up. That it was like watching a young version of her present self, if that makes sense. I'm Emily, by the way."

"Pleased to meet you," Adrian said as courtly as he could. "I wish it was under different circumstances. I'm Adrian."

"Oh, I know who you are. We heard quite a bit about you. The son she never had. I also know you're quite wealthy now."

Adrian turned to face her, but she kept her pace, peacefully strolling, as if he just imagined the jab. She even walked like Dawn. Deliberate, slow, spine as straight as a pole, as inevitable as an avalanche.

"I never asked for it," he said hotly, "for any of it. And I'd give it all in a heartbeat, just to have her back again."

Emily patted his arm. "It's okay. I believe you," she said. "I suspected as much, but I had to see it with my own eyes. Mother wasn't the easily conned kind."

Adrian had the distinct feeling referring to Tessa as Professor Magnus would sour the mood even further. "I thought she'd leave everything to Tessa," he said. His vision was finally cleared, as the rising wind dried up his tears. He caught the flicker in Emily's eyes, and a twitch of her mouth, just shy of a smile.

"I think it was her last attempt to make amends with us," she said, glancing at him. "Tessa wasn't popular with our family, to put it mildly." She narrowed her eyes. "Maybe she knew we'd

challenge the will in court. We have some weight to throw around, if the situation calls for such a thing.”

Adrian nodded.

“You know,” Emily continued, “I had the weirdest conversation with mother, just before she...” She stopped, bringing him to a halt. “She took her own life,” she asked, facing him, “didn’t she?”

Adrian nodded. “I don’t know for sure, but I believe she did.”

“It sounded like she was hallucinating,” Emily said, tilting her head so the muscles on her long neck stretched taut, and tapped them with her fingertips. Adrian remembered Dawn doing the exact same thing.

“She said that she lost Tessa. That she is gone,” she continued, her eyes burrowing into him, “a hollowed out husk, to use her own words, and that she’s leaving you the house because... Because she feels guilty. She said she didn’t let Tessa die, and now she’s abandoning you to deal with the consequences.”

“She didn’t really abandon me, or let Tessa die, for that matter,” he protested, “it was far more complicated than that. She...” he shrugged, lost for words.

“What did she mean, that Tessa is gone? Didn’t I see her sitting with you?”

“It was her, but at the same time it wasn’t.” He shrugged. “I told you. It’s complicated. She lost a significant part of her memories. I think she doesn’t even remember Dawn anymore.”

Emily glanced at him again. “Like Alzheimer’s disease? I heard she had a neurodegenerative disorder.”

“She had, but not anymore. And what she has now is different.”

“Different how?” The tone she used brought memories of his dissertation defense. “Be more specific.”

“She’s...” Under her intense scrutiny, Adrian fought the urge to fidget. “The disorder, which took a chunk of her memories, is gone. She doesn’t deteriorate any further. Quite the opposite. If anything, Tessa’s cognitive skills are stronger now. Her mind is sharper than ever.”

“And mother couldn’t handle it?”

“She could handle anything, had she put her mind to it, I don’t think she wanted to, though. We didn’t really discuss it, but —”

“Are you always like this?” Emily asked, the smile taking the barb out of her words. “Get to the point!”

“I think she felt guilty for giving up on Tessa and instructing the hospital staff not to resuscitate her, and she couldn’t discuss it with anyone. It was an open sore that wouldn’t heal. The realization that Tessa forgot her must have been too much for her to bear. I guess that was when she had given up.”

“Let’s go and sit,” Emily announced, pointing at a nearby bench. “I’ve been standing up all day. My feet hurt.”

The wind refrained from rising, remaining at a respectful breeze, just enough to rustle the leaves of the trees blocking the sun. The day would have been perfect for a garden stroll, Adrian thought, if not for the very reason they were there.

Reaching the bench, Emily sat down and motioned for him to join her before taking off her black lacquered shoes. "These were not made for hours of standing, that's for sure," she said and massaged her foot. "Tell me something I don't know about my mother."

Adrian thought for a minute. "When I just got to Cambridge, to study with Tessa, I mainly stayed at the dorms. Tessa was still walking then, but she preferred her home office, since commuting was already getting painful for her, especially when it was raining."

"So practically every day," Emily said.

"More or less. I was grateful. The work was very rewarding, but Dawn somehow noticed that it was taking its toll on me, both physically and emotionally."

"How so?"

"Well, physically, since I didn't own a car and couldn't afford the daily taxi rides, I rode on bicycle there and back to the dorm. It was exhausting. Emotionally," he paused and sighed, "see, I had no one here. My family and friends are in my home town, across the Atlantic Ocean. They were not such a supportive lot to begin with, and the distance kind of gave them an excuse to stop calling."

"American? You don't have an accent."

"Canadian." He grinned. "We sound basically the same. Anyway, I was all alone, and the loneliness was eating at me. One day, she waited for me at the front door with a key and showed me to the guest room. She then declared, in no uncertain terms, that from that moment on it was my room."

Emily smiled. "It sounds so much like her."

"I suggested I'll pay for lodging, or at least for my food, and she was deeply offended. 'It's a guest room, not a hotel room,' she said. 'You're our guest. Guests don't pay for lodging.'"

"And?"

"And that was that," Adrian sniffed. "They were looking for a nurse for Tessa at the time, and because of my professional background, I could fill that void. It solved a lot of—"

"What background?"

"I was a nurse before going into academic research." He tried to smile, but it was too hard. "Not really a practitioner, but I had the trade nailed down more or less. I was always much better at research tasks though, which was why I decided to get my doctorate. With Tessa, given her state, I got to practice quite a bit. I think I got somewhat better."

He glanced at Emily. Her face was an unreadable mask. She wasn't looking at him, but rather staring at the trees on the other side of the empty lawn. The wind rose and gently shook their limbs but their leaves, despite the season, stubbornly held on.

"She was the kindest, most gentle soul I have ever met," Adrian concluded. "She took me in like a family would." He turned to look at Emily. "She's only gone for a couple of days, and I miss her dearly."

"We'll have to return shortly," Emily said as she turned to face him. "I want you to know, I was approached by Ms. Shepherd," she said. "She suggested, rather forcefully, that Tessa murdered mother, but brought no real evidence except for her intuition. I guess she heard on the grapevine that we all hated Tessa. She asked me, rather straight forward, to use our influence to pressure the police to keep the investigation open."

"I don't know what made her go off like this," Adrian said with a heavy heart.

"She seemed to have a few screws loose, if you know what I mean," Emily said with a wry smirk. "The way she kept going on and on about Tessa doing the devil's work. We had to chase her out of the house."

She rose suddenly. "We really must head back," she said and offered her hand.

They walked back in silence, taking the direct route this time. "I'm glad she left you the house," Emily said shortly after, as they reached the entrance of the chapel. "It was a smart decision, solving a lot of issues before they even arise."

"She was a smart lady."

Over the constant hum, light footsteps reverberated from within the chapel, coming near, but his eyes couldn't penetrate the gloom inside.

"Yes she was," Emily replied, suddenly as cold as a marble statue. "Very smart. Goodbye, Adrian," she added and glided inside.

Tessa emerged almost immediately, sidestepping to avoid Emily. She looked at him and squinted, using her hand to shelter her eyes from the glare of the sun. "Where have you been?"

"I spoke with Dawn's daughter. Emily. Didn't you see her?"

"Of course I saw her. She almost ran me over," Tessa said, looking up at him curiously. "I'm sure it was a delightful conversation. Did she say anything interesting?"

Adrian started to answer, swallowed his words and smiled. "No. Nothing at all. Come on, let's go get you some yoga clothes."

Chapter 25

Despite being dead tired and deprived of coffee since lunch, Adrian couldn't fall asleep. While being emotionally exhausting, shopping with Tessa didn't tax him much, and his thoughts always ended up coming full circle, returning to Dawn.

He found himself staring at the ceiling well past midnight, disturbed by the oppressive silence of the house. When sleep finally came, it was overlaid with guilt ridden dreams of Dawn wandering wordlessly around the house, reaching out for her lost love.

He woke up mid-morning, drenched in sweat and burdened by a mild headache he attributed to early caffeine withdrawal. Determined to grab the day by the horns, Adrian drank some water and took a scalding hot shower, which seemed to reset him somehow, washing away the sorrows of the previous day.

The headache faded away. Ready to resume his work on their research, Adrian dressed up quickly and grabbed his phone. It was silenced, and there were a couple of missed calls from Madeline.

He went downstairs looking for Tessa.

"Some breakfast?" Olena asked from the kitchen. "You can join them outside."

The simple question gave Adrian pause. The day before, he went through the stacks of papers sent by Dawn's lawyer, but he still wasn't sure whether he's now officially Olena's employer or not. "Yes, please," he said, smiled, and hurried outside.

Madeline sat there with Tessa, a few still steaming trays of food between them. She was back to her power suits, this one strikingly red over a white blouse that Adrian imagined was extremely expensive. "Hello dear," she greeted him. "So nice of you to join us."

As Adrian sat down, Tessa poured him a cup of coffee, and added foamed milk from a new implement, at least one he never saw before, smiling triumphantly as she formed a white heart of the foam.

"Have you settled into your new role?" Madeline asked and bit off the head of a small muffin. On her index finger was a gaudy ring which Adrian never saw before, the huge green gemstone glinting in the morning sun.

"Which role would that be?" He asked and sipped. The coffee was delicious, perfectly hot despite the added milk.

"The lord of the manor, of course," Madeline answered with her mouth full. "Or your new professorial position, although you didn't resume teaching, have you?"

"Of course not. With all that's going on—"

"So much!" Madeline exclaimed. "You're the new rising star of the institute!"

Tessa followed the exchange curiously, and kept peeling off her boiled egg.

"It's..." Adrian shrugged. "There's nothing to it, really. Dawn took care of everything. I don't even pay anyone's wages," he glanced back into the house and added, "as far as I can tell. There's a lot I'm not sure of."

"Forget the management side of things," Madeline said. "You're quite literally out of the rat race!"

"Maybe I'm missing something," Adrian said cautiously, "but to me it feels like I'm in the same place, doing the exact same things."

Madeline rolled her eyes. "You're no fun. Tessa, dear, how are you doing? Please provide a somewhat more entertaining answer."

Tessa put her coffee cup back on the coaster. "Speaking of racing rodents, the new Idun virus is basically flying through the animal trials. The rats are doing marvellously well. We're also testing them for memory loss now, and they seem to be able to remember their way through the maze just fine." She frowned. "I still think it's inferior. Not only that it's somewhat slower, it's..." Her frown deepened to a scowl. "The fact that it doesn't cross the blood-brain barrier, it's... It's not a feature, it's a bug! The virus won't heal the brain!" She shook her head, and added, "I mean, do people look forward to dementia?"

"Most people would like to retain their life's memories, my dear," Madeline replied patiently. "It's an easier sell."

"I had a neurodegenerative disease," Tessa argued. "It might have made the Idun virus more aggressive. We don't know that other people will suffer from the same symptoms. You know," she paused, "I'm not even sure 'suffer' is the correct word. Forgetting can be a blessing sometimes."

Madeline sighed. "Most people won't. It's the sum of our experiences that makes us human, some would say. But anyway, I wasn't asking about the research. Adrian keeps me informed on a daily basis," she raised her glass to him, "for which I'm so grateful, by the way."

She sipped the dark liquid, which was dark and opaque, like black coffee or strong tea, probably fortified with something potent. "I'm asking about you, dear," She said, turning toward Tessa.

Tessa was taken aback. "Me? What do you mean? What about me?"

"You seem to be getting much fitter for starters," Madeline said. "You look amazing."

She was. As someone who took her measurements daily, Adrian knew Tessa's body was still in constant flux without showing any signs of slowing down. Despite being bullied to wear the bras that Madeline provided, Tessa still insisted on wearing her old clothes. The off-white patternless T-shirt she wore, which hung loose on her a mere month ago, was now stretched to the point of translucency across her chest, shoulders and arms. The yoga pants they bought the day before showcased her well defined calves.

"We're focusing on protein synthesis responses," Tessa explained without missing a beat, "so I'm shoveling protein, fats and carbs down my throat," she pointed at the boiled egg and pouted. "Adrian is fattening me up, but has also built me a nice exercise routine. The combination seems to be working nicely."

"There might be more than science reasoning to this," Madeline said, glancing sideways at Adrian, smiling crookedly. "A bit of an ulterior motive."

He put down his cup. It was already almost empty, and Tessa quickly refilled it. "What do you mean?" He asked.

"Oh, you know." Madeline gestured at Tessa, who started struggling with another egg. "She's not that hard on the eyes, and not a tiny bit shy about it, too. Just making an observation," she added quickly. "It's all allowed. We're all adults."

Tessa looked at her curiously but said nothing.

"We're seeing amazing results," Adrian said, trying to change the subject. "Tessa is building muscle at a rate that would make bodybuilders jealous."

"Is that so?" Madeline asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Again, there's the decrepit state I was in to consider," Tessa said. "I doubt that a healthy adult would enjoy such stellar results. Maybe it would double the rate of protein synthesis, no more."

"Double..." Madeline eased into her famous million dollars, Hollywood smile. "This virus is the gift that keeps on giving. You're going to make us very rich. First longevity, maybe eternal youth, and now a foothold in the fitness space. When we get to mass production, these viruses are going to fly off the shelf like cupcakes in a keto conference."

"They can't—" Adrian stopped when Madeline raised her hand.

"A figure of speech, my dear," she huffed. "You don't have to rain on my parade every chance you get. Mina does that well and often enough."

"What has she done this time?"

Madeline sighed. "She's completed her transformation and gone full blown fundamentalist on the Idun virus. She organized her church group into an action pack, as she calls it, and they discussed the virus and its implications. Shockingly enough they decided it's the work of the devil and has to be stopped. Honestly, I couldn't be bothered by this nonsense, except for her interference with the board."

"Can't you simply remove her?" Tessa asked. "You know... Dismiss her?"

"Fire her?" Madeline asked. "I could never do that. She's just so incredibly good at what she does. She makes all the paperwork go away. I'll just put other projects on her plate to keep her busy. The Lord knows we have enough of those."

"Aren't you worried she'll sabotage our research?" Adrian asked.

Madeline shrugged, and the jacket slipped down her shoulder. "Sabotage how?" she asked, pulling at her collar. "Hack into your servers? Contaminate your samples? Poison your rats?"

Adrian shrugged back. "She seems extremely motivated. She... She spoke with Dawn's family and tried to convince them to insist on the murder investigation."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

"Fortunately, they did exactly the opposite. Dawn's daughter, Emily, said they had to chase her out of the house."

Madeline sighed. "Well, you know the saying about danger and highly motivated idiots. Still, let me worry about her," she added resolutely and put her now empty cup down. "You'll worry about making a good impression tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Tessa asked. "What happens tomorrow?"

"You have a presentation with the board," Madeline answered, frowning. "Please tell me you prepared something."

"I've been working on a draft for the last few days," Adrian said. "While Tessa was preparing for the interview."

Tessa looked at him questioningly.

Madeline laughed. "Well, it seems like you have some catching up to do. I'll leave you to it." She stood up. "I'm sure you'll nail it. No question about it."

Tessa yawned and stretched.

"Tessa, honey," Madeline said, eyeballing her, "it's just occurred to me that you're dressing up like my daughter. Nothing ever fits. Everything is either far too tight or as loose as a tent. It's fine when you're a rebelling teenager, less so when you're a professor. Go find yourself some new clothes." She glanced at Adrian, and a hint of a smile danced across her rouge colored lips. "You're giving our young friend here a hard time."

Adrian blushed as red as a beet as Tessa's eyebrows shot up. "What? Why are my clothes a problem?" She asked.

"It's not your clothes," Madeline responded dryly, "but rather what's underneath that's not getting a decent amount of cover. Forget it," she waved her hand and sighed, "I'll take care of it. I'll send you a new wardrobe and write it off somehow. Adrian dear, please send me her measurements as early as convenient." She lowered her chin, and added, wearing a bemused smile, "I trust that you have them, and expect that she doesn't."

She took off, and Adrian nibbled at his scrambled eggs, keeping his eyes glued to his plate.

"If there's something wrong with my clothes, or the way I dress," Tessa broke the silence, "I expect you to tell me. You're my only friend. I need you to be honest with me."

Adrian's swallowed. "There's nothing wrong with your clothes, per se," he said, still looking at the plate. "True, they've grown a bit too tight, but... You seem comfortable... I didn't want to say anything. It wasn't my place."

"Still," she kept on scolding, "you have to remember the situation I'm in. I lost so many memories, I don't really know what people expect of me. I need you in my corner just like you needed me."

"Maybe we should ask Madeline to get you someone..."

Tessa tapped the back of his palm, and he raised his eyes. "I don't trust any of them," she said. "I can only trust you."

Adrian nodded.

Tessa tilted her head, looking at him curiously. "Maybe... Maybe I'm missing something else. Maybe Madeline was right. Maybe you didn't say anything because you actually prefer me dressed like this?"

Adrian swallowed nervously.

"Do you enjoy looking at my body?" She stretched the flimsy shirt back, making it as transparent as white cloth could be. "Do you find my fuller form pleasing?"

"Can you please stop?" Adrian asked quietly. "It's not funny. You're making me uncomfortable."

"I will not stop. I need you to answer me," she prodded him. "It's not a joke. I'm not trying to be funny. I need to understand what's going on, and I'm obviously missing something that Madeline caught on to."

He swallowed again. "This is exactly what I meant the other day, about being inappropriate."

A duck crash landed on the pond, splashing and startling the other duck into flailing his wings and paddling away. Tessa's gaze went to the bright, foamy water, and right back to Adrian.

"Well, I didn't understand yesterday, and I still don't understand now. You said seeing me naked was appropriate if we were intimate." Tessa put her hand on his. It was warmer than he expected. "Is that what it means? Does seeing me like that make you want to be intimate with me?"

"It doesn't work like that!" He snapped at her.

"So explain it to me!"

He pulled his hands away. "I already told you! You are not like that! You like women! You were with Dawn!"

"That sounds like an excuse," she said, drawing nearer. She had a scent that Adrian couldn't place, but it was throwing him off kilter. "Do you find me attractive?"

"Yes! Of course I do!" He shouted.

"I also find you attractive," she murmured, smiling.

"Stop it."

"I mean it," she said and took his hand again. "I really do."

Adrian searched her eyes, her face, for signs of malice and found only innocence. "Okay. I believe you."

"Good." She studied him back just as intently. "I gave it some thought, and I think we should be intimate. I want us to be intimate." The wind picked up a strand of her hair, and Tessa, almost childishly, tucked it behind her ear. "What happens now?" she asked. "If we were intimate, what would we do?"

Adrian wasn't listening. He felt as if the blinds were removed from his eyes and he was seeing Tessa for the first time for what she truly was. It was like she was a butterfly, but he insisted on imagining her as a caterpillar long after she came out of her cocoon.

So many things seemed unnatural about her. Her eyes were perfectly clear, and her skin was so perfectly smooth it seemed unreal.

Adrian raised her hand and looked at her fingernails. They were cleared of their former pits, and had no hint of discoloration.

"What are you doing? Are we being intimate?"

Still not answering, Adrian looked at her lips. They showed none of the dryness that made Tessa religiously apply balm three times a day, and they filled up. Not quite plump, but almost. They were moist, and parted just slightly.

They were right, he realized. All of them. Mina was right, and Madeline was right, and Tessa was right. She was a different person, and a superior one, in every single way he could think of, every way that mattered. He needed to let go.

Tessa shifted closer, until their shoulders touched. "Do you find my lips interesting?"

He nodded.

"For research? Or for something else?"

"For something else," he answered, his voice cracking.

"Like what? Intimacy? Show me."

Adrian held the nape of her neck and kissed her.

They broke off after a long while, and her eyes bore holes into him, burning with anticipation.

"And now what?" She demanded. "Are we being intimate?"

A slew of sluggish thoughts rose and died in Adrian's mind, drowned by emotions.

"Yes," he said hoarsely. He stood up and took her hand.

No, not by emotions, he realized as he herded her into the house.

Lust. Pure lust. He was feverish with it.

He pushed her ahead of him up the stairs, his hands molding her backside. In a split second decision he decided on his bedroom rather than hers, and wondered if such a distinction would persist afterwards.

He didn't care. He got her inside and closed the door.

Tessa just stood in front of him, her elfin face devoid of expression like a perfectly designed porcelain doll. Her breath came short and fast, and her eyes glinted with curious excitement.

He undressed her, leaving her wearing nothing, nothing but flawless beauty and the newly engineered innocence of youth.

Chapter 26

The rest of the day passed in a dizzying, surreal haze. After the first time they did the deed, Tessa immediately hurried him out of bed and right back to work, in a way that made him question his performance.

"Did you enjoy it?" He managed to blurt.

"Yes, it was very nice," she answered, obviously impatient. "Why do you need to ask that? And why aren't you getting dressed?"

"Well, you see..."

"Whatever this is," she stopped him, gesturing at his direction, "we don't have time for that, or for anything else for that matter. I still haven't seen that presentation you've been working on, and I need to present it tomorrow."

"When you say it like that, it suggests that..." Adrian complained, but Tessa was already gone. He swallowed his wounded pride, got dressed, and followed her to the office.

"Is this the presentation?" She asked as he came in, pointing at a slide on her screen.

"Yes."

"Okay," Tessa said and began reading.

Adrian sat in his chair. If the last few days were any indication, she won't ask him anything, just make a few corrections which will prove to be right should he challenge her. So instead he went through the simulations she was running and tried to figure out what she was going for.

He didn't get far until his phone beeped with a message from Madeline. 'Reminder' She wrote. He knew what she meant.

Adrian opened the drawer and took out the measuring tape. "I need you to stand up for me," he told Tessa.

"Why?"

"I need to take your measurements for your new wardrobe. We can't use the data from two days ago. At the rate you're growing, it could be outdated."

She frowned at him as she stood up. "So what's the point then? Won't today's numbers be outdated in a couple of days?"

"There will be some changes for sure," he said as he circled her hips with the tape. "But I believe they won't be significant. Arms up."

Tessa raised her arms obediently. "I guess you wouldn't mind it a bit tight," she said with a smirk.

He wasn't sure who got distracted and who did the distracting, but someone's hand slipped, and he barely managed to send the numbers to Madeline before Tessa dragged him upstairs again, cutting her study session unfortunately short.

This time, while they were hard at it, Tessa lost an incisor. He froze, balanced on a wobbly elbow, worried that he might have hurt her somehow.

Tessa laughed at his shock. "What," she said after spitting the tooth out. "You didn't notice? I'm growing a new set of dentures. The old ones were bound to fall off. Go on. Finish up. We're short on time. That presentation won't write itself."

Not the pillow talk he hoped for, but to be honest, he didn't require much prodding.

He was in love before, and he knew this was different. This, as far as his limited self analysis went, was limerence. Fascination coupled with raw passion. There was something in Tessa's behavior, the combination of innocence, curiosity and the abject absence of restraint that was hypnotically irresistible. The lack of social skills and even the semblance of empathy were the cherry on top.

But she cared, and she was learning. This time, when they were done, Tessa told him how good it felt, and how great he was.

Adrian couldn't help himself and started laughing. Yet he had to admit that despite being so obviously disingenuous, it did provide the necessary boost to his male ego.

Men are simple creatures, he thought as he followed her downstairs. One fake compliment and we're floating on clouds, wounded pride all mended. "I'll get us some coffee," he suggested as she entered the office.

"Okay."

Tessa took only a couple of hours to read and edit his draft, adding a few more slides with new data that he wasn't even aware of. She didn't give him a lot of recovery time, though.

She was insatiable. Whether it was the novelty or the thirst for new experiences, Adrian wasn't sure. Tessa had energies he couldn't hope to match, and was eager to try different positions, paces, voracious in her experimentation. Whenever the excuse presented itself, be it a simulation running, or digesting lunch, she hauled him upstairs to, as she called it, be more intimate.

When they were ready to retire for the night, satisfied with the state of the presentation, his room was a terrible mess. In the hopes Olena will replace his beddings, they went to sleep in Tessa's room, and that was where Adrian woke up.

The sunlight, somewhat subdued by the double curtains, was strong enough to suggest early morning had long passed. Adrian's heart skipped a beat and he grabbed his phone, checking the time. It was still early, at least an hour until they had to leave.

He rolled off the bed and tiptoed to the door, almost making it before Tessa's sleepy voice caught him.

"Up so early? Come back to bed."

Adrian cursed himself for not bringing even a pair of shorts. "We need to get ready," he said without turning around.

"There's plenty of time. Why won't you look at me?"

Adrian covered his genitals and turned around. "We need to eat something, shower, and head over to the... What's wrong?"

Tessa sat up, unbothered as the blanket slid off her body. "Why do you cover yourself like that?" She asked, furrowing her brows. "I've already seen you naked. I even touched you naked. We were intimate. You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"It's... Never mind! We have to get ready."

"Okay," she said and gracefully slid out of bed. "It just makes no sense, that's all."

Adrian cracked open the door and glimpsed outside.

"Are you also afraid Olena will see you?"

"Yes!" He hissed back. "Not afraid." He glanced at her. "Again, it's inappropriate. Never mind."

The corridor seemed empty, so he threw open the door and sprinted to his room, stopping to close the other door behind him, unintentionally slamming it shut with a loud bang.

"Is everything okay up there?" Olena shouted from below.

Adrian cracked open the door. "Pitchy!" He yelled back.

"There are boxes outside!"

These must have been the clothes Madeline promised. "Bring them in," he shouted and closed his door.

Catching his breath, Adrian rested his back against the door. The way his heart raced in his chest might have simply been due to his short sprint, but probably not just. He tried to compose himself, forcing his breath to slow down, to deepen.

He's been living in fight or flight mode for days now. He had to relax. A shower and a shave would serve to calm his nerves, he decided. And some quiet time. Alone.

His plan worked surprisingly well. When he went downstairs, wearing a suit and a tie, he was fully composed. The boxes Olena mentioned before were scattered in the living room, all open. There were quite a few dresses in them.

He went outside. Tessa was already there, sitting in front of a few trays of food. She wore a new dress, one more suited for a gala than a research presentation. It was a velvety crimson piece, knee long and short sleeved. It fit Tessa so well Adrian suspected it was custom-made, and Madeline made a good and expedited use of the measurements he shared.

"I think I might be a little underdressed," Tessa commented on his clothes.

"Oh, no, you're fine," he said, waving his hand. "More than fine."

"Okay" Tessa replied. "I'll take 'fine'."

This was not the first time Adrian had struggled to decide whether she was being sarcastic or not. He opted to let it go and eat in peace, which seemed to sit well with Tessa. She poured him a cup of coffee, painted a heart shape with the foamed milk, and returned to her prescribed protein-rich breakfast.

Whenever he looked, she seemed to be lost in thought, chewing and sipping quietly.

Across the lawn, the pond was quiet. The ducks were gone, and the wind was too weak to raise but the tiniest of eddies.

Their peaceful morning came to a sudden end when Madeline appeared, balancing on stiletto heels as she carefully walked the stone path surrounding the house. She remained standing, and Adrian wondered if she could sit given how tight her bell gown was.

"Your chauffeur is here," she announced. "Let's go."

"Why do we need a chauffeur?" Tessa protested. "Adrian has a car. And you're early. I wouldn't be late to my own show."

Madeline froze at that, and narrowed her eyes. "See, that's what worries me the most," she said icily, "and what we need to make perfectly clear. You're the one on stage, true, but it's my show, and I can't have you messing up anything."

"Your show, my show. I don't care! Why is everyone always so concerned?" Tessa complained. "I was more than ready even before Adrian forced... Well, coerced me to rehearse giving the presentation."

"Good boy," Madeline muttered. She walked a few steps to the table and, to Adrian's surprise, managed to sit down in one smooth sweep, exposing a thigh high slit in her dress. "I'm concerned," she explained, "for two reasons. One, I bet the barn on that virus of yours, and securing the funds for commercialisation became my primary concern for this fiscal year. Second, and more relevant to you, Mina is going to be there, and she's probably going to stir some trouble. At the very least, she'll ask very tough questions. You will have to answer her politely and to the point."

Tessa sighed. "Whatever that woman has against me," she said, "I can assure you it's one sided. As long as the questions are fair, I will answer in kind."

"And if they're not fair, I'll step in," Madeline said. "Now let's go. I want to be early."

"I need to hit my macros," Tessa shoveled another spoonful of scrambled eggs. "Also," she added apologetically, "I'm hungry."

Madeline frowned. She ended up having Olena pack some food for Tessa and, as soon as it was ready, ushered them both to her car. It was a different one than the one Adrian previously saw, and probably the only non-electric Mercedes SUV in the Cambridge area.

"Get in," she said. "You took your time. We're running late."

Chapter 27

Madeline didn't wait for them to buckle in and started driving as soon as their doors were closed. To Tessa's delight and Adrian's horror, Madeline used her brakes sparingly, and the gas lavishly. Still, when she parked in her designated spot, screeching wheels and all, the auditorium was already crowded with milling academics, a few board members, and even fewer journalists.

Tessa was overjoyed to see Dr. Pluto in the audience. He seemed surprised as she waved at him, squinted at her, and waved back as recognition, or realization, seemed to sink in.

Adrian wasn't as thrilled to see detective Tristan sitting quietly in the back row. He nodded towards him, and received no discernible response. The detective was wearing his wide brimmed hat indoors, and his face was steeped in shadows. He wasn't moving, and might have been fast asleep, but Adrian suspected he wasn't.

As soon as they entered, Madeline attempted to make a beeline to the elevated stage, but that proved impossible. The gravitational pull of her presence spread through the room like a shockwave, drawing all the sycophants from the crowd as if they were moths and her platinum hairdo was a seductive flame they couldn't resist. Madeline blew them off quickly, hastily allowing the metaphorical ring-kissing before she climbed onto the stage and stood at the podium, waiting.

Most of the room went quiet, but several pockets of animated conversation persisted until she tapped the microphone with her carefully manicured fingernails.

"Please take your seats," she said and waited graciously as everyone scurried to their assigned places.

Adrian had a strong sense of déjà-vu. It wasn't that long ago, in another, fairly near auditorium, when Dawn pushed Tessa's wheelchair through a set of heavy curtains to a similar dais. He was panicking then, having just administered a dose of the virus that saved Tessa's life and in a roundabout way ended Dawn's.

Back then, it was Mina who presented Tessa, taking the audience through the long list of her academic achievements. Pulled back to the present, he focused on Madeline's introduction to Tessa. With as many embellishments she could muster, she described her early academic career, her move to Cambridge, her many contributions to the institute and gradual descent from grace following the onset of her horrible disease.

He scanned the room, finding many familiar faces in the crowd, academics from their field who probably came to hear about the initial results of their insane experiment. Some nodded back respectfully as they caught his eye, especially after the prolonged credit Madeline gave him, both for his assistance in the research and for saving Tessa's life, making sure to sprinkle the word 'Professor' several times.

Madeline finished strong, describing using the Idun virus as a brave contribution to science, rather than a criminally negligent act of disobedience. How easily one's perspectives shift, Adrian thought. How quickly convenience took precedence.

Tessa, sitting next to him, remained still. Adrian saw no reaction on her face throughout the introduction. It suddenly occurred to Adrian that she must have forgotten many of those facts

and she was learning her personal history. Her expressionless face suggested she was not impressed.

"Please welcome today's main speaker, Professor Tessa Magnus!" Madeline concluded her introduction.

Tessa smiled at him reassuringly, rose from her seat, and sauntered to the stairs.

Her steps seemed forced, and Adrian wondered if her tight dress was restricting her movements when he suddenly realized, to his horror, that she left her notes under her chair. "Your notes!" he whispered urgently.

Whether she heard him or not, Tessa didn't so much as pause. There was a brief discussion as she reached the dais. Madeline covered the microphone and whispered, pointing at their feet, and Tessa stepped up on a retractable platform, putting her mouth in line with the microphone.

Before she even said a word, a soft surf of murmur went through the crowd. Those who knew her must have found Tessa's new appearance confusing at the very least.

"Thank you, director Jackson," she said, her voice carrying clear and strong across the auditorium, "for your kind words. Before I start, I would like to reiterate your special thanks to my dear colleague and intimate friend, Professor Pirth. Professor, without you I wouldn't have been alive today, let alone speaking here, presenting this important leap of science. Professor Pirth, please stand up."

Embarrassed, Adrian stood to the wave of polite clapping, and sat down as soon as it started to wind down.

He waited, with bated breath, to see what comes next.

Two minutes into the presentation Adrian started to relax. Tessa was following the presentation as planned. She obviously memorized the slides verbatim, and proceeded through it all without a hitch. Quite often, she referenced the data she presented without even stealing a glance at the screen behind her.

At Madeline's suggestion, Tessa often paused for questions. On one such occasion, after iterating through the multiple benefits of the Idun virus, Dr. Pluto raised his hand. "This is all fascinating, and I thank you for this wonderful presentation," he said, "but how much of it will be transferable for the general population? Are you seeing a generic solution, or will it remain a custom-tailored treatment for the influential or ultra rich?"

Madeline gave him a dirty look.

"Marketing questions are outside of my domain of expertise, and I suggest asking the director those," Tessa replied, "but building on the infrastructure Professor Pirth laid out, the processing power required to generate a model for a custom-tailored virus is not that significant, definitely within reach of..." She paused. "Fabrication requires the machines we have in the institute, and honestly, they're not that expensive. Putting financials aside, I would expect the entire process, from mapping a person's genome to administering the virus, to take no more than a day with the type of equipment we're using today. My colleague, Professor Pirth, could elaborate."

Looking back at Dr. Pluto, Adrian saw Madeline standing next to him, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder. "That answers my question perfectly," Pluto said. "Thank you."

Tessa nodded and proceeded with the presentation, which was concluded a few minutes later to the microscopic video of the Idun virus destroying senescent cells in vitro.

"You see," Tessa explained as the virus extended its pods, "it is designed after our own macrophage cells, and uses the same phagocytosis process, except that it leaves in its wake a new cell which will specialize in vivo much faster than in vitro." She looked around the room, seemingly embarrassed. "This is one of the few things we can't really explain, only observe. But we're getting there, closing more and more gaps every day."

The clip ended, and Madeline, back in her seat, led a seemingly sincere round of applause.

"Any further questions?" Tessa asked.

Mina raised her hand.

"Dr. Shepherd?"

Mina stood up. "Thank you. First of all I would like to commend you for this research effort. It bears the hallmarks of the best scientific research has to offer. The amalgamation of so many different disciplines into a single result is mind boggling. However, as an experimentalist myself, I was wondering if the rodent studies showed any evidence of damage to the amygdala?"

Tessa shook her head. "No, although there might have been some damage we didn't see. Initial studies were very limited. However, now we're brain scanning the rats using MRI and ultrasound, and we found no indication of any damage at all."

"How interesting," Mina said, her words sounding rehearsed. "Did you monitor serotonin or dopamine levels?"

"Yes, we're using microdialysis. But we had no behavioral indications before of any potential changes."

"Oh. Did you find any changes in the function of the prefrontal cortex?"

"We had no indication of that either," Tessa frowned, "Although it should be obvious it would be extremely difficult to detect without those behavioral changes that, as I said, are not there. What is it you're trying to ask?"

Mina's severe face tightened. Her eyes were sunken and had dark rings under them. With her sharper cheekbones, coupled with her flowing long, black garbs, she had the appearance of a tiny grim reaper. "I'm looking for biological causes for such an obvious decline in moral judgment and impulse control," she spat out.

"Oh, Mina, really," Madeline said as she turned around from her seat at the first row, staring daggers at her assistant. "That's quite enough. Are there any material questions?"

"I'm just wondering," Mina persisted, "if the experiments with the original strain produced such perfect results, what redirected the research to a newer, less aggressive version of the virus?"

"The weaker version," Tessa answered before Madeline could, "is safer to use while still retaining most of the longevity promoting features. We proved it wouldn't affect the brain of the

subject. Personally, I—" she stopped as she caught Madeline's beheading gesture, accompanied by a scolding frown.

"Thank you, Dr. Shepherd," Madeline said, glaring at Mina. "The newer strain has some patent work pending, so it's still a trade secret. Rest assured, we will answer those questions extensively, but in a private setting. Any other questions from other people?"

Mina sat down and sulked silently.

There were a few questions, all simple, asked by faculty members and visiting academics, all easily answered by the hidden slides Adrian prepared in advance. He suspected those were prompted by Madeline, who had a preview of an earlier draft of the presentation.

Using a brief lull after Tessa finished answering a question and was waiting for the next, Madeline climbed up to the stage. "Thank you, Professor Magnus," she said into the microphone, "that was absolutely fascinating," and then turned to the crowd. "And thank you all so much for coming. The refreshments are waiting outside in the hall."

There was one final round of applause. Tessa, looking less like a professor delivering a presentation and more like a debutant at her first recital, waved at the crowd and turned to Madeline.

Adrian, hurrying up on the stage, joined them just in time to hear Madeline murmur, "That was spectacular. I hardly expect any problems with securing the board's approval. No problems at all."

"I hope no one noticed," Tessa smiled at Adrian and offered him a small, white object. It was her second incisor, and looking at her grin he noticed both teeth were missing, although a new one was peeking out of the pink flesh of her gums.

Adrian pocketed the tooth. "I certainly didn't. That was beautifully done."

"It was," Madeline agreed. "Now go and mingle, and I'll make sure those financial faucets will stay open."

"How would that affect us?" Adrian asked. "Practically speaking."

"Practically, you tell me," Madeline answered. "If you want experienced research assistants, hordes of rodents or monkeys to test on, just say so. I'll make it happen. And of course, as many grant financed grad students as you can handle. I expect them to be banging on my door as we speak."

"We can use the monkeys, but assistants and grad students will only slow us down," Tessa said, beating Adrian to a response. "We have our well designed system in place, and it works. We just need enough computing power."

"Then you'll have it," Madeline said. She glanced backwards and her face darkened, "naturally, I'll assign another project manager and they'll take it from there. It's high time I'd send Mina home. She caused enough harm for today." She smiled suddenly, erasing all traces of moroseness from her face. "Now go out there, mingle, and wear your best smile."

Refreshments was an understatement for the gala Madeline put together. Suddenly Tessa's formal dress seemed more in place, and Adrian's suit was barely sufficient. The cloth covered tables were stocked with all kinds of pastry, cold meats, and hard cheeses. White suited waiters milled around the guests carrying platters of smoked and grilled meat and wine flutes on towel covered trays.

Being the star of the show, Tessa was soon surrounded by Madeline's sycophants, curious academics and snoopy journalists. She found the situation distressful, stifling, and unpleasant to the extreme.

Adrian identified the potential for disaster. The old Tessa was horrible in those events. She never saw the point of platitudes and therefore preferred to skip small talk, or any other kind of talk.

The new Tessa didn't fare any better. Having lost all skill at listening to streams of meaningless pleasantries, she missed all the social cues and failed to push the conversations with artificial appreciation and feigned interest. Her lack of self confidence made it all so much worse.

Eventually Adrian excused them both. They found a remote corner of the room, and Tessa, fortified behind the high furniture, sent Adrian to bring her samples of whatever he could find on the tables, while she remained safe and secure in her concealment.

After he finished piling food in front of her, Adrian got them drinks, which Tessa delighted in. "This is amazing!" she told him, her eyes glittering.

He drank from a similar flute. "It's bubbly white wine. Too sweet for my taste."

"Seems expensive."

"It's probably real champagne," he agreed. Everything seemed exquisitely fine, and they went through it all, fetching various morsels and drinks for Tessa who refused to let anything go untasted. The things she liked she kept on her plate, relishing every bite or sip, and the ones she didn't, especially the drinks, she passed on to Adrian.

By the time Tessa, holding a glass of Amaretto, announced that Olena was right and this is the best of the lot, Adrian could barely see straight and slurred his words as he said, "It'sh probably a good time for ush to go home. We have a..." He hiccuped. "A lot of work to do."

"You're being ridiculous," Tessa insisted, "the party has only started!"

"Thish ish not being ridiculous," he insisted. "Thish ish being reshponshible."

"Why are you speaking like that?" Tessa asked.

His head was spinning. Adrian didn't have the strength to form a sentence. He was feeling sick.

"Answer me!"

"Oh, leave the poor boy alone," he heard Madeline say. "He's obviously drunk. I'll take care of him. You stay here," she added, walking him to a comfortable chair. "We'll be back in a bit."

Adrian slumped and rested his head on the table in front of him. They didn't go far, and he could hear Madeline introduce Tessa to some board members who, just like her, seemed to be in very high spirits.

A glass of water appeared near his hand, and he drank it slowly. It was replaced by a full one and he drank again, praying it would make his head stop spinning, or at the very least slow it down.

He was grateful beyond words when a while later Madeline returned and walked him out to a waiting taxi with Tessa droning ceaselessly as she supported his other arm.

The door closed, and the next thing he knew Olena was helping into the house and up the stairs. She left him sprawled spread-eagle on his bed.

Doggedly, he dragged himself to the bathroom and battled through brushing his teeth. Then, proud of his success, still fully dressed, he stumbled into bed and fell asleep.

Later that night, he had brief flashes of wakefulness in which Tessa managed to undress him, but failed to coax any desire out of him other than the desire to sleep.

Eventually, she gave up, and the night finally gained some semblance of peace.

Chapter 28

Adrian awoke with a metallic taste in his mouth and a dull, thudding headache. He sidled out of bed, and felt his way to the darkness shrouded bathroom, where he found and choked down a couple of Advils before returning to bed.

When he woke again, gray tendrils of dawn were already slithering into the room. He was startled to see Tessa leaning on her elbow, looking at him.

"Are you upset with me?" She asked. "Have I done something wrong?"

"What? No." Adrian rubbed his eyes. "Why are you asking that?"

"You ignored me," She said, frowning. "You didn't want to be intimate."

"I was drunk. intoxicated. I had too much alcohol."

"Okay," she nodded thoughtfully. "That makes sense. So you didn't grow tired of being intimate with me?"

"No!" he protested. "I was exhausted, and –"

"Oh, thank God," Tessa said and mounted him. "I thought you were broken."

A few minutes later, with a final peck of a kiss, she rolled off him onto her back.

"I picked a name for the new virus," she said. "Are you listening?"

Adrian grunted. He still felt a bit queasy, and bile rose in his throat, but he sensed sharing that might cause some problems.

Tessa leaned on her side and caressed his chest. "It's called the Pair Dadeni virus."

"Is it another mythological reference?"

"Yes. I was looking for a name and that was a perfect fit. I think it's Welsh," she smirked. "It's a really nice story."

"Are you going to tell me what it means?"

"You can Google it if you want," she said and glanced outside. "I think the sun is about to rise. Do you want to do our sun salutations now? Or do you want to be intimate some more?"

Adrian couldn't figure out her new obsession with yoga. The new Tessa seemed far too cynical to even try a spiritual exercise, let alone practice it diligently, but somehow she decided, and remained resolute that they should start every day with sun salutations, at least forty eight of them. She used a more complicated, quite challenging sequence than he was familiar with.

A small part of him wondered if it was to keep him away from Ann-Marie.

"Are you giving me the silent treatment?" Tessa teased, and he realized his thoughts wandered off.

"No. Let's do some yoga."

She hopped out of bed and put on her yoga clothes. Adrian followed with less zeal, dressing with whatever would be comfortable yet keep him warm enough to get started.

They did their sun salutations, all forty eight of them, without a single ray of sunshine breaking through the heavy cover of clouds. When they finished Adrian was sweating profusely, while Tessa, perhaps due to her far lighter clothing, didn't break a sweat.

"I'll get us some coffee," she said and vanished into the house. Adrian collapsed on a chair and breathed. It might have been the alcohol still poisoning his systems. He felt hot, with vapors rising from his head, but chilled to the bone with each gust of wind. His chest muscles shivered, throbbing with dull pain.

The clouds painted everything muted gray, like a stifling blanket draining the world of color.

Tessa returned with the foamer and a fresh pot. She made them both cappuccinos and sat next to him, saying nothing. The repetitive flow of sun salutations put her in a meditative mood. After they finished the practice she didn't assault him with her usual stream-of-thought prattling outpour. That morning, with the Advils barely keeping the hangover at bay, he was particularly grateful for that.

While they had their morning coffee, Adrian heard the front door open and close. Soon after, Olena brought them breakfast, looking at them sideways and not saying a word. They ate in silence, and when his plate was clean, he showered again. His showers became his sanctuary, his escape. With the hot water running down his face, he wondered what it was he needed to escape from.

It was already late morning when he got to the office. Tessa, still in her scant yoga clothes, was staring intently at her screen. "I just can't figure out how to generalize it," she said out loud, not looking up. "We will still need to synthesize some of Pair Dadeni individually to make it work. There's a strand of DNA that has to be bespoke. Per person."

"Why does that bother you?" Adrian asked as he sat down. "The Idun virus was exactly the same way."

She looked up, frowning at him. "I was old and feeble when I - we engineered it. My faculties were impaired by age. I expected to be able to solve it by now."

"You can't find solutions for unsolvable problems," he replied, "even with your superior intellect."

Her annoyance went away, replaced by obvious confusion. "Are you being serious? Or are you mocking me?"

"A super-intelligent person could figure that out without asking me," he said and winked.

"Ah," she said triumphantly and leaned forward in her seat, cradling her chin on her palms.

"You're mocking me! So you don't think I can solve it."

"You could, if you approach it differently. You're treating it as an analytical problem, looking for the correct answer."

"Should I look for the wrong answer?"

For the first time in a long while, Adrian believed he saw something Tessa was missing, and he found it exhilarating. "It's not a matter of right and wrong," he said. "You're trying to calculate an exact solution."

“And?”

“What if no such solution exists?” Adrian asked. He had some time to ponder this, even since Madeline started mentioning mass production. The solution he found was slippery, and he had no idea if it could work, but it was the best one he had, and he hoped Tessa could engineer it into a reality.

“Every problem can be solved,” she said. “It’s not theoretical physics we’re talking about. I just haven’t figured out how to make it work just yet.”

Adrian crossed his arms. “It’s because you assume the solution has to be perfect.”

Tessa squinted at him.

“If you have an agent that would purge almost all the pathogens from a person, leaving about one percent intact, would that be considered a good treatment?”

“Of course,” she said. “In most cases, the immune system will be able to take care of the rest. Even if it won’t, repeated use will render it harmless. But, what does that have to do with the Pair Dadeni virus?”

Adrian was enjoying himself immensely. “The virus has a cell replacement capability, right? Try to maximize it. Or rather,” he paused and thought for a moment, formalizing his thoughts.

“Define the distance between the optimal sequence and a generic sequence while retaining efficacy. Then solve the minimization problem.”

Tessa nodded while listening.

Adrian felt a surge of doubt, fearful that she might reject his suggestion outright.

“Of course!” Tessa suddenly grinned as her eyes lit up. “That’s brilliant! I knew there was a reason you’re here!” Her fingers started tapping the keyboard.

Adrian wanted to protest but an email at the top of his inbox, one he was about to delete, caught his eye. It was from Mina, probably from her personal email. It was short, and contained a phone number, which made their system flag it as spam.

“I’ll be right back,” he excused himself and went outside. The sun remained hidden behind a thick layer of clouds, and drizzle dotted the pond with hundreds of dancing splashes.

Adrian wasn’t sure how he felt about Mina. Despite her determined efforts to earn his animosity, he couldn’t fault her for her choices. These were crazy times.

He called the number.

“Hello?” Mina answered hesitantly.

“Hi. It’s Adrian. You wanted to talk?”

“Oh. Hello Adrian, how are you?”

“I’m fine. What do you need?”

“We have to talk,” Mina replied. “But in person, please. It would be better.”

Adrian looked at the pond. The ducks were making their usual rounds, undisturbed by the rain. "Is everything okay?" He asked. "Are you okay?"

"Sort of. I need to talk to you. Face to face."

"You probably shouldn't come here. Madeline will be upset with me."

"Obviously. I wasn't planning on doing something so foolish. Can you meet me at the Fellows' Garden? At noon?"

"Why there? It's —" The two ducks, probably startled because he raised his voice, took flight. They swooped closer to the house and then circled away, their gray blending with the broiling clouds.

"All right," he said as the commotion was over. "But it might be a while before I can get there. I need to drop off some samples, and they're not ready."

"There's no urgency. Just text me when," Mina said and hung up.

Adrian went back to the office, intent on cleaning his inbox one task at a time. There was, as he mentioned, a delivery for the labs at the institute, one he couldn't trust to the drones. He also had to catalogue everything first, and then fill out a new budget form. It wasn't a complete waste of time, but it was tedious and exhausting.

When he finally finished the digital paperwork, he went over to his cloud dashboard, to make sure there were no issues.

Tessa was making heavy use of their resources, running multiple processes in parallel. She devised some way to track them all in a spreadsheet of hers, and he just wanted to make sure no job was stuck, or running amok with unrestrained consumption.

Out of the jobs he scanned, two stood out, consuming between them more than half of the allocated resources, and maxing out the computing capacity of their cluster.

The data they pointed to was the old dataset, using mostly Tessa's biopsies.

"Are you still working on the Idun virus?" He asked.

Tessa raised her eyes from the screen, slowly and deliberately. "I wouldn't call it work," she said, her eyebrows bunching together. "It's a labor of love. Work, the tedious, frustrating kind, is reserved for Pair Dadeni, the idiot virus."

"You should have told me. We need to allocate more resources for our research before it all breaks down," Adrian said. "You can't simply expect—"

"What I expect," she said sharply, "simply or not, is to conduct my own research in any way I see fit, without having to explain myself."

"It's not about explaining yourself, it's about planning—"

Tessa waved her hand. "Then just double the resources. No, quadruple it. I'll be using an order of magnitude more once I finish this batch."

"They'll be idle—"

Tessa stood up. "Adrian, stop bothering me with trifles. You have a historical role now. We both do. You shouldn't care about the number of servers, idle or not. We're paving the human race's path to immortality, not grading a term sheet. It's time to get some historical perspective." She tightened her lips for a second. "But until you do, simply allocate four times as much as you expected and stop pestering me with this stuff."

Despite the venom of her words, her tone never shifted and her face remained perfectly smooth. She seemed and sounded as serene as she would have been lecturing students in a classroom.

Her indifference only made Adrian feel worse. Furious, he got up and left.

"What? What did I say?" She called from the office.

Adrian halted, giving her a few seconds to come after him.

She didn't, so he moved on, going to the kitchen to pick up the blood samples he put in the refrigerator. He had to be careful not to shake or even tilt the tubes, so the clots won't be disturbed until he gets to the lab.

Adrian texted Mina he's on his way, and then walked as if on egg shells to Dawn's car. After he set down the samples in the passenger's seat, he drove as slowly as he could to the institute. No technicians were there, and Adrian dropped off the samples without saying a word to anyone.

Despite the slow ride, he was early. He didn't mind waiting at the Fellows' Garden, though. He found the perfect spot to blow out some steam and sat, still fuming over Tessa's behavior.

He couldn't relax, as much as he tried. The bench he found was surrounded by serene beauty, and the only sounds he heard were the muttering of the breeze through the leaves. But the heavy air had a disquieting, electric stillness which heralded a turn for the worse.

Adrian had a sudden desire for a warm cup of coffee in his hand, which led him to wonder if Tessa and him took the habit too far. Maybe far enough to be considered an addiction.

The day darkened, and the thick clouds started dripping, a light, slanted drizzle which Adrian found particularly annoying. He stood up to face away from the coming needle drops and saw Mina coming from around the bend in the path. It was the same path Emily led him to, just minutes after he parted with her mother for the last time.

They couldn't look more different, the two women. Emily was the poster child of cold, aristocratic beauty, tall and slender, her face a well made mask, ivory punctured by green and framed by gold.

Mina, marching his way, was clad in her customary dark dress, with a heavy black cowl guarding her head from the elements and casting her face into shadows. Coming closer, he could see she lost some weight, as her cheeks were hollowed. Her sunken dark eyes, however, burned with the same intensity as ever.

"Would you rather walk or sit?" She asked, and her voice was even tighter than it was over the phone.

"I don't care."

Mina gave him a disapproving glare. "Choose."

"I've been sitting too much lately. Let's walk."

Mina continued on the same path, and Adrian followed her, matching his steps to her shorter ones.

"I hope you're not mad at me," she said after a while.

"Mad? I'm tired. Frustrated. But not mad, definitely not at you. Why would I be mad?"

"Because I tried to shut down your project."

Adrian looked at her sideways. "You did? I didn't know that. I mean, I knew you went after Tessa, but our research project?"

"Yes," Mina said bitterly, "I did, but nothing stands in the way of the mighty dollar. Not in Madeline's house."

"Or science. Or progress. Or plain old common sense! Why would you do that?"

"You know exactly why!" she spat.

"No, I really don't."

They went around a bend in the path. The grayed out light of the sun made the shadows melt across her sharp features, smoothing them down. "I prayed," she said. "I fasted. I consulted with my congregation." She glanced at him from under her cowl. "We all agree. Tessa is not human anymore. Not really. I think that deep down, you already knew that."

Adrian sighed. "Mina, do you hear yourself speaking? You must realize just how insane you sound."

"Dawn was the love of her life, and she killed her."

"For f— Heaven's sakes!" Adrian frowned at Mina, but she avoided his eyes, staring dead ahead. "She didn't kill her!"

"The police dropped the case in a single day. Far too early to reach any kind of conclusion," Mina insisted. "If they would only look—"

"I know all about how you tried to force their hands," Adrian countered. "There was no evidence pointing towards Tessa. None whatsoever."

"Even if she didn't kill her directly," Mina insisted, "and that's debatable, it's immaterial. She didn't bat an eye when she died. She didn't shed a single tear."

"That doesn't make her a murderer. It makes her a shitty person," Adrian said impatiently. "She didn't even know who Dawn was." He huffed. "Look, I'm not going to make excuses for Tessa. I don't have to. Her behavior was affected by the Idun virus for sure, and you understand the reasons and the science at least as well as I do."

"I do, but I also see other things, things you seem to gloss over on a daily basis. I watched her," Mina continued, full of conviction. "Believe me, it goes beyond science. The way she treats other people, it's monstrous."

"She lost her memories."

"She lost her humanity."

"You told me yourself they were linked." Adrian sighed. "Mina, what are you trying to say?"

"I'm not sure you're listening. I prayed on it, and my prayers were answered, granting me full clarity." She looked up at him. "You have to believe me. This virus is an instrument of the devil, serving its dark purpose. You can help me expose it. Bring it to the light."

Adrian shook his head. "All this talk... I don't know how to deal with that. Angels and devils are outside of my domain of expertise. I do science."

The day darkened even further as thicker and thicker storm clouds rushed in and flocked to the sun. The wind rose, cold enough to force Adrian to pull his jacket closed.

"You keep protesting, yet I see in your eyes it resonates with you," Mina said, showing no signs of discomfort. "In your heart, you know I'm right, but you're still struggling with the truth. You're clinging to the memories of the old Tessa. Or, perhaps," she looked at him sideways, "enamored with the new one."

"Mina," Adrian said patiently. "Of late, it seems that every day produces yet another challenge to struggle with, but the devil's evil meddling is not one of those things. Tessa's mute emotional responses are not a mystery, and can be easily explained with science, not mysticism. Empathy is learned. You said so yourself. She has lost the experiences that made her empathic. She no longer understands people. In that sense, emotionally, she's like a toddler."

"Well, not exactly like a toddler. At least I hope, for your sake."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Mina hunched her shoulders. "You don't strike me as the kind of person who will have sex with an emotional child."

"What?" Adrian shouted at her. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you spying on us?"

"No, nothing of the sort," Mina protested, and had the decency to blush hard. "I came over a couple of days ago. I wanted to talk to you in person. I heard... Through the open window..."

"Who I sleep with is none of your business. We're both mature adults."

"No, you are a mature adult," Mina insisted. "That's what I'm trying to say. Adrian, I'm trying to save your soul."

He exhaled, trying to control his temper. "Stay out of our bedroom. That's non-negotiable."

Mina frowned and looked away. "You're right," she said after they went around another turn. "That was crude and mean and I apologize."

Lightning flashed on the horizon, far enough so the thunder rolled in later, barely a murmur. The drizzle became fatter, peppering the path in splotches of gray.

"This virus," Mina started again, "it reconstructed her. She's not the same person."

"She's healthy. She's brilliant. She's better in any way I can think of."

Mina scoffed. "I'm a woman of faith. I have a somewhat different perspective than you about what would be considered better."

"You know what," he said, looking at her, "I don't think I want to hear it."

A flock of ducks flew low, right over their heads, keeping an orderly 'V' formation. On the left leg, one laggard drifted apart from his fellow birds, far enough to seem to be flying alone.

"Okay. That's fair. Then let me ask you a question," Mina said. "What percentage of cells in Tessa's body has already been replaced? How much would be enough for you to admit that the person that was Tessa is no longer there, replaced by an abomination created by the Idun virus?"

Adrian remained silent. He knew a large portion of skeletal muscles were replaced. More to the point, the nervous system was widely affected.

"No memories, not the same behavioral patterns, definitely not the same hormonal activation," Mina continued. "Who is this person? Why is it there? If I were you, I'd try my hardest to figure it out, and sooner rather than later."

She was preying on his fears, Adrian realized, which only rekindled his fury. "Fortunately for us both, you're not me, Mina," he said. "I don't let blind hatred cloud my judgment. I use reason."

"Blind hatred?" Mina responded from the dark recess of her cowl. "Oh, Adrian. You don't understand me at all."

The trail ended as they reached the garden's boundary. She stepped out into the concrete paving slabs and turned toward him, her face wet with the pouring rain. "Talking about sins, how about lust? Do you let lust cloud your judgment? She's quite fetching these days."

Adrian remained silent.

"A word of friendly advice, then. If you mention this to Tessa, I would be extremely careful broaching the subject of her humanity. She might become extremely defensive. The devil would prefer to remain hidden."

Mina turned and left, the wind whipping the hem of her dark dress into frenzy.

Reluctant to return home, Adrian went into town. After a short walk he found Carla's café.

Carla was inside, sheltering from the fierce storm.

Adrian realized he wanted Ann-Marie to be there, and now he was glad she wasn't. He ordered a large cappuccino and sat outside, just him and his thoughts, listening to the rain pounding fiercely on the heavy cloth canopy.

Chapter 29

Mina wasn't really replaced in her role. Madeline took over. It was far too important, as she explained to Adrian, to delegate to one of the other project managers. None had Mina's skills.

Adrian suspected it wasn't that. Madeline really did bet the barn on the Idun virus, or its weaker progeny, and no person in the world had enough skill or experience for her to trust enough and let go. There was simply too much at stake.

Her decision had its merits. Madeline wasn't exactly detail oriented. She was more of a big picture person, and didn't sweat the minutiae such as access rights and security clearances, at least not for people she trusted.

That was how he found himself on a train wreck of an email chain, the context of which long divorced from the original title.

Through it, he found that Madeline employed the shock-and-awe approach when it came to the MHRA, unleashing the full power of the institute at the agency. Like ants following a pheromone trail, board members made the pilgrimage to London and reported back to Cambridge with incremental results, each chipping away another piece of the inherent resistance offered by the bureaucratic machinery.

The board hired an expensive expert, one of those few who phrased the Saatchi Act, but there was no need. Approval for human trials, with a chilling cap of life expectancy clause, came more quickly than Adrian expected or even imagined was possible.

That was how he was informed of all that, with a forwarded message ordering him to get the whole thing going. Completely unprepared, Adrian found himself curating a long list of hopeful candidates for a treatment that might save their foregone lives.

There was a heart breaking abundance of those. Even after narrowing the scope to maximize the likelihood of success, Adrian had a few dozen of under thirty terminally ill candidates, all bed-ridden and dying from degenerative diseases.

A lab was set up in an empty wing of the hospital and special machinery was purchased and assembled under Adrian's watchful eyes, while the top ten candidates were wheeled into a special ward.

Getting Tessa to work in the hospital was a challenge unto itself. He swung by the office in one of his few visits back home, and explained, in no uncertain terms, that their work will continue in the hospital.

"But I trust the simulations!" she protested, hiding behind her screen. "I'm perfectly comfortable here!"

"I trust them too," he replied patiently, "but it would allow for shorter test cycles on live tissue, and the hospital already has all the facilities we need in place."

"I hate hospitals!" she declared, as if it should settle the argument.

He half expected her to stomp her feet. "You'll be at the lab. It feels more like a university than a hospital."

"But what if I suddenly need something?" Tessa pouted.

Adrian's patience was wearing thin. It's been a long day of arguing with overconfident technicians and overdue delivery drivers, abated only by short breaks for terrible hospital cafeteria coffee. "The candidates are there, their families are there, and so should we." He put a hand on her shoulder. "I'll make sure you'll have anything you need, as soon as you need it."

Placated, Tessa looked up at him and grinned. "Money will make sure, you mean."

"Yes, yes," Adrian agreed wryly. Madeline's tendency to toss copious amounts of cash at anything Tessa asked for earned her the moniker 'Money'. "She'll meet your demands and double it, just in case," he added.

Adrian ended up compiling a list of Tessa's complaints and converted those to requisition form. Then he went back to the hospital, while Tessa insisted on staying at home until her demands were fully accommodated by Madeline.

It took a couple of days of back and forth to get Tessa settled in. Adrian worked with a team from the institute to get all the additional equipment set up, while Madeline took care of Tessa comforts and needs, first and foremost furnishing the lab with a state-of-the-art espresso machine that would have made all the cafés in town green with envy.

Tessa came to call the lab 'Camelot'. Adrian was sure that was a clever reference to the mythological castle, maybe even a pun, but he was tired of asking.

As the afternoon shift was coming to a close, on Tessa's second day in the hospital, Adrian found himself detained outside the machine-packed lab, debriefing the incoming staff.

"Absolutely no disruptions," he explained, pointing at Tessa. She was barely visible, sitting in the corner of the room, hidden behind a couple of screens. "If anyone wants to talk to professor Magnus, they have to go through me. No exceptions. Not even the families."

He glimpsed back.

"Especially the families."

His decision to place her workstation as far from the door as possible was a direct result of their short and frustrating discussion about bedside mannerism. It went even worse than he expected, despite initially setting an extremely low bar. His appeals for compassion slid off her like water from a duck's wings, and he was assigned, with everyone's supporting approval, to handle the communication with the candidates and their parties.

Those candidates were all barely alive, ranging between those constantly resuscitated and those clinging to life's last straws on their own, defying death by sheer force of will. Most were entombed in plastic bubbles, their immune system defeated long ago by their various ailments. Those who were not, remained unconscious, just comatose flesh waiting for their last exhale to be released alongside their souls.

When Adrian said families, he specifically meant the parents. The candidates were young enough, without a single exception, to have their parents at their sides. They were almost as lifeless as their children, with all but the tiniest traces of hope gone from their bloodshot, sleep-deprived eyes.

They deserved support and empathy, and therefore, Adrian decided, they did not deserve Tessa.

It was perfectly fine with her. Once the complementary self-cleaning frother arrived Tessa stopped having requests. She mastered the operation of the new machines and oversaw the synthesis process of the virus, insisting on having three separate production lines, which were delivered on the same day.

As Adrian dismissed the staff, Madeline rose from her seat behind the dispersing nurses and doctors. "Spoken like a true leader," she said. "Churchill couldn't have said it better. Do you have everything you need?"

"I do what I can. Yes, I guess we do."

All Madeline had to do was frown slightly, creasing her Botox-smoothed forehead.

"Yes, we have everything we need," he corrected himself.

"Good. Is there anything personal you want? Anything at all? I don't want you distracted."

"No," he shook his head. "I really do have everything."

"And if I'll ask Tessa?"

He looked into the lab. Nothing has changed. Nothing will stop Madeline's goose from laying those golden eggs.

"You'll get the same answer. But you should ask her yourself."

"I will. Where are you going?"

Adrian pointed upstairs. "I'm going to collect the last batch of biopsies. Given all the precautions we're taking, it's a bit of work. Do you want to join?"

"Unfortunately, my schedule is a little tight, so I'll have to skip that delightful experience," she said, sat back down and flipped open a gold-colored laptop. "I'll be waiting right here."

She still sat there, scrolling through reports, when he returned with his hard-earned prize, each sample in its own sealed case.

"Did you go in?" he asked.

Madeline shook her head. "As time goes by, I find myself more and more in need of translation dealing with Tessa. I'd rather wait a few more minutes than pay the price of miscommunication."

Adrian suspected it was something else. Madeline developed a habit of always coming to him for final confirmations, even when complex science wasn't involved. Perhaps, before she was ousted, Mina still managed to sow the seeds of distrust. Perhaps Tessa earned it herself somehow.

"Let's go, then," he said and escorted her into the lab. "Please, after you."

They navigated the maze of machinery until they reached the office at the far end.

As they neared her, Tessa hopped from her seat. "One sample in each ingress tray, please."

She invented her own terminology which made little sense to Adrian, but it made even less sense to argue.

“Are they labeled the way I wanted?” She asked as he started unpacking the samples.

“Of course.” He raised a container with a large QR code on each side.

“Fabulous! Hello, Madeline!” Tessa waved cheerfully. “Welcome to Camelot!”

“Hi Tessa,” Madeline replied. “Can you please explain to me what you’re doing here? In layman’s terms?”

“Absolutely!” Tessa said as she squeezed between the tightly spaced machines. “You see what Adrian is doing? He’s putting some samples, which will be dissected, analyzed, and sequenced, all within this mechanical miracle,” she pointed at a large machine. “Once we have the output, it’s streamed into the processing center at the institute, where we perform the computational part. Once those are done, the genetic sequence is dumped into this protein cutter,” she pointed at a larger machine, “which synthesizes the virus. It’s like a LEGO machine, but on the molecular level.”

Madeline looked uncertainly at her. “So…”

“We use the tissue samples to create a custom-made virus,” Adrian explained.

“Just like that?” Madeline asked. She seemed like she’s struggling not to squint. “You build viruses like small children build LEGO cars?”

“It’s not that simple. We already have the viruses in a pre-prepared state, and these machines here fabricate the missing parts for a specific host and then graft them onto the viruses.” He cast a sideways glance at Tessa. “It’s more like having the child build the steering wheel for a fully functional race car we already manufactured.”

“Okay.” Madeline looked around, completely lost. “Is there any output we can see? Actual vials I can take pictures of?”

Adrian pointed to a short refrigerator next to Tessa’s work station. “Sure, if they were not disposed of.”

“And… Does it work?”

“We haven’t tried yet on living, human hosts, have we?” Tessa replied. “In vitro it works perfectly.” She looked back at Adrian. “Well, some work better than others. We don’t have all the answers yet. I think you can start picking the first candidate, though. Any of the initial batch will do. For them it would certainly work.”

“Do you have anyone in mind?”

Adrian nodded. He had no doubt who that candidate would be. Three floors up a young comatose girl called Emma lay motionless in her bed. She had a severe case of cystic fibrosis, one which resisted each and every of the attempted conventional treatments. Her parents volunteered, rather than her, since she was continuously sedated long before she came to the hospital. Adrian took turns with the nursing team in draining her lungs from the fluids she was

slowly drowning in, but without an extreme intervention, she wasn't expected to see her upcoming, thirteenth birthday.

"Ah, the extra credit one," Tessa said as if reading his mind. "The little girl. It wasn't simple. Not at all."

"What wasn't?" Madeline asked. "I thought it was like LEGO."

"The usual repair mechanism of the virus won't be enough," Tessa explained. "We isolated the Cystic Fibrosis Transmembrane Conductance Regulator. The Pair Dadeni virus, in addition to doing its replacement work, will rewrite this gene in its healthy version."

"It's a genetic condition," Adrian explained to Madeline, who still seemed unsure. "In addition to removing all the infected tissue from her lungs, we expect the new cells not to carry the disease."

"Very well done. The girl is a perfect choice," Madeline said. "Did her parents sign all the consent papers? We have to cover our asses in case something goes wrong."

Adrian shuddered. "They did," he replied.

"How did it go?"

It was one of the hardest conversations he's ever had. Emma's father, Tom, a bald, burly man in his late forties, was bawling his eyes out, and wasn't able to string more than a couple of words together. His wife, Jenna, younger, smaller, and seemingly made of sterner stuff, signed everything Adrian gave her without sparing it a single glance.

"As well as could be expected. They..." Adrian tried to think of a humane way of phrasing it. "It's not like they've given up, but in their hearts they've already said their goodbyes. Giving them hope is a double edged sword."

Tessa made the short trip to the refrigeration unit and extracted a small metallic box. "That's not a sword," she said, opening it for Madeline to see. "It's a heavy, dumb ax."

Inside, quickly fogging in the warmer, more humid air, was a vial containing clear fluid.

"And this ax will chop down her cystic fibrosis, I have zero doubt," Tessa grinned. "Nurse Pirth, will you administer the cure?"

Adrian put on latex gloves, muttering a scolding reproach to Tessa under his breath, and closed the box. It was cold to the touch and very light.

"Professor Pirth," Madeline accentuated the honorific, eyes transfixed on the metallic box. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"You can, but remember, it's a sterile clinical environment. There are risks involved. The less people the better." He looked up from the box. "We have three cameras set up and recording the procedure."

"There's something about seeing history being made with your own eyes," Madeline said. "I'll stay out of the room, and keep my fingers crossed for the poor girl."

"No finger crossing is needed. Success is all but guaranteed," Tessa said, sat at her workstation, and started tapping, as if they've already departed.

Adrian motioned Madeline to join him and left.

Emma's parents waited outside of her room. At his request, they were both prepared, wearing masks, gloves and a disposable layer of clothes. When Adrian invited them inside, in a reversal of roles, Jenna refused quietly, just shaking her head. Tom muttered something unintelligible under his thick mustache, squeezed his shivering wife with a bear hug and followed Adrian into the room, shuffling his hospital loafers on the green vinyl floor.

Adrian finished donning and doffing, and when Madeline changed her mind and decided to come in, he had the team help her prepare. "Don't touch anything, please," he cautioned, and walked inside.

The room was brightly lit, easily large enough to accommodate several patients, had there not been so many machines dwarfing the tiny Emma, keeping her alive.

Tom stopped next to her canopied bed, looked at Adrian for confirmation, and took her hand in his own. He said nothing, but tears flowed freely down his cheeks, matting his thick mustache.

There was no call for ceremony, and no reason to prolong anyone's suffering. Adrian waited a moment until Madeline got into the room and stopped as she caught herself in the camera's feed. Then he adjusted the venflon adapter, connected the syringe, and injected the virus.

"There," he told the weeping father. "All done."

"What happens now?" Tom asked.

Adrian fought his instincts to answer truthfully, that they simply didn't know, that the data wasn't there. Tom couldn't hear that.

"The healing process starts. We're not sure exactly when, but at first there would be a violent response of the immune system. Call it an adjustment period." Adrian looked back at the comatose girl. "Then the virus will do its work, fixing your daughter's lungs one cell at a time."

"How violent?" Tom asked, staring at his daughter through curtains of tears.

"She might need our support to survive it. But we're ready. We have a team outside, see?" Adrian asked, pointing at the staff waiting outside. "They're top tier professionals, trained to keep your daughter alive. She's in the best hands in the world."

"How long will it take?"

They didn't wait long. It wasn't quite twenty minutes after the injection when Emma's skin reddened, and the monitor squealed as her temperature spiked dangerously high. Adrian ushered the grieving father outside of the room as the intensive care unit rushed to her side.

A very busy hour after that, and as Adrian expected, Emma crashed, and he joined in the resuscitation efforts. She was frail, even worse than Tessa was when she took the virus, and navigating the rituals keeping her alive was complicated. But he wasn't just paying lip service. The team was one of the best in the world. They were well prepared, with a protocol in place

and their roles perfectly rehearsed. Still, he was grateful when Elise took charge of the situation, and all he had to worry about was Emma's next breath.

Tessa went home, stopping by just to try to get him to come with, which he obviously and promptly refused. He was no longer a researcher, but a clinician, a nurse, with a dying girl being a patient in his care. Leaving her side was simply out of the question.

Just before the break of dawn, Emma's vitals stabilized, and Adrian afforded himself a few hours of sleep, confident that the worst is behind them.

He was shaken awake before noon. "Doctor," Tom said. "Emma is awake." He grinned widely, and Adrian noticed that despite knowing the man for days, it was the first time he saw him smile.

Adrian didn't bother to correct him. "I'll be right there," he said, and went to brush his teeth.

He smiled just the same, even wider, seeing Emma blinking her eyes, as if trying to transmit her thoughts in morse code.

Abandoning his nursing career and diving headfirst into an academic career, Adrian never expected to save any more lives, and never expected his research work to save any lives but Tessa's.

The second chance this young girl got brought tears of joy to his eyes.

Jenna, Emma's mother, never left her side, and kept whispering in her ear.

Adrian excused himself and dropped by the lab, which was noisy with the hum of machines but otherwise empty. He took a cup of coffee and went back up. With Elise's help he orchestrated the series of trials they prepared in advance. Emma was still intubated and couldn't talk, but she already seemed to fare far better. She regained her motor functions and was able to answer questions by scribbling on a notepad.

Not that she had much to say. She was confused, disoriented, and visibly stressed. A mental health expert was rushed in, consulting the parents first and then Emma herself.

As evening came and the sun disappeared below the horizon, leaving orange clouds in its wake, Emma's fever receded, her markers improved, and the staff agreed that she's on the path to a full recovery.

They stood there with bated breath as an elderly respiratory therapist, one who treated her for years, took out Emma's intubation.

Emma breathed, and the entire world let out a sigh of relief.

Adrian went down to the lab, to share the news with Tessa, but she wasn't there. Madeline however sat just outside, looking haggard, as if she didn't sleep, and it added decades to her age.

"Well?" She asked as soon as he came back out of the lab, squeezing between the humming machines. "And spare me the academic jargon. A simple straight answer please."

"My best guess is that she'll be healthy in a matter of weeks. We don't have too much data to go on, but I'd be extremely surprised if there's a sudden remission. Tessa did it. She healed the girl."

"You two did it," Madeline corrected him. "Don't sell yourself short. You deserve a lot of the credit. Some would say most of it." She paused. "Is it too soon to send a publicity crew over? I need to feed the carrion crawlers. Urgently."

"Yes, it's too soon," Adrian replied. "She's barely out of danger. Maybe tomorrow. I asked Elise to look after her. She's her primary now."

Madeline rose stiffly. "I'll talk to her then. Go home. Get some rest. You deserve it." She patted his shoulder and went to the elevators.

Adrian harbored a suspicion Elise will soon find herself under immense pressure, and that news crews will soon flood the hospital's corridors. He was too tired to care, though. He picked up his things and went home.

Chapter 30

The house was disappointingly empty. Adrian was looking forward to spending some time with Tessa away from the hospital. Her curious courting tactics have grown on him. Putting her abrasiveness aside, he was enjoying her company.

Or, he thought wryly as he was taking a much needed shower, it might be his hormones, and he's simply very horny.

Shattering his hopes, Tessa didn't suddenly appear once he was finished.

He had no way to track her down. He couldn't call her. She didn't even own a phone, let alone carry one on her person.

It's for the best, he decided. He was exhausted through and through, and could use one solid night of uninterrupted sleep.

He got into Tessa's bed and stared at the ceiling. Despite being exhausted, his brain refused to yield consciousness to sleep. His train of thoughts kept barreling through the day's events, refusing even the semblance of control. Some of it was the excitement of success, and some missing Tessa's warm body by his side. The string of cappuccinos he knocked every time he got back to the lab probably didn't help.

After ten minutes of tossing and turning, he went to the bathroom and raided Dawn's medicine drawer. He found a pack of Imovane, popped a couple and went back to bed.

Wondering whether they'll do him any good, he went out like a candle.

Late morning, he awoke with a sudden gasp, his consciousness flooding his mind violently, washing away the fragmented memories of his sordid dreams. Tessa, sound asleep by his side, was the star of those dreams, acting out his desires.

As usual, she hugged her pillow, and her cheek was kissing the mattress.

Adrian felt emotions flooding him. He was angry, upset, disappointed, and concerned, all at the same time. The lust that yesterday drove him home was strangely gone now. He snuck out of bed and noticed he was sticky with sweat, and his boxers were twisted sideways. He kicked them off, showered quickly and went downstairs.

Olena was nowhere in sight. He might have been derelict in his duties as the master of the house, he thought as he cooked himself some breakfast, but those duties would have to wait. Tessa was right. He had a historical role to play.

He took a tray out to the terrace. The air outside was dead and unmoving, dry as dust and crackling with static. The pond was empty and unnervingly still.

Adrian took a bite of the burnt toast and started going through his messages.

Much earlier that morning, Madeline had sent a few links to some major publications. It seemed that after a peaceful night, Emma had now managed to say a few words of gratitude to the people who saved her life. Alongside Tessa, his face was plastered all over their home pages under flattering headlines crediting them with a miracle.

Shaking his head at the convenient omissions and intentional inaccuracies, Adrian finished his coffee and poured another cup from the pot. He stared at the pond for a moment, hoping for a sign of life and finding none. He went back to his phone.

He started with the missed calls. A couple, pre-dawn, were from Madeline. Maybe she wanted some rubber-stamp approval of the press release.

Other calls, quite a few, were from acquaintances, none of which he ever called friends. Perhaps they were trying to be polite, but most probably they saw an opportunity, and were hopeful they could hitch a ride on his fifteen minutes of glory.

He didn't expect his family to call, so he wasn't disappointed.

At the very bottom of the list, there was a missed call from Mina's new phone.

He didn't need to call Mina back to know what was on her mind. Deleting many texts suggesting he could catch up with someone, he reached her string of strange messages soon enough. It was heavily laden with biblical references and warnings bordering on outright threats not to mess up God's plan, blaming him for sullyng the poor girl's soul.

He called back Madeline, and was grateful when it went to voice mail.

For the first time in days, he realized just how much he yearned for some silence. The walls he built around him, the roles he played, everything came tumbling down, perhaps to be replaced by something far grander.

He was no longer a teaching assistant but a professor, and he didn't have an ailing mentor, but a strange, insatiable lover. It all changed so fast, he didn't have time to breathe, let alone process.

It was because they were so unprepared. They were so focused on that insurmountable hill, saving Tessa's life, it never occurred to them to plan for the mountain up ahead.

Adrian sighed. He had to ground himself.

He sipped from his coffee and read through his text messages, which kept on coming. One was from Tom, Emma's father. He apologized, confessed that he got Adrian's number from Elise only to thank Adrian for saving his daughter and wish him further success in healing humanity. Each person is an entire world unto themselves, he wrote, and saving many is a great privilege few human beings were entrusted with. He hoped Adrian would keep doing good.

So much for grounding.

But Tom had a point. Emma was merely the harbinger, a forerunner of her suffering ilk. Even prior to full productization, they proved they can save thousands suffering from that same accursed disease, with the current price tag expected to drop to mere hundreds per patient.

With similar treatments, they will heal tens, if not hundreds of millions all over the globe. This success will make the polio vaccine pale in comparison.

The mere thought was overwhelming. He never expected it to go any further than –

"A penny for your thoughts?" Tessa asked from the doorway. She wore one of the sets Madeline sent her, an embroidered purple thing, under a wide open terry cloth robe.

Adrian already grew accustomed to her shamelessness. In that aspect she was, as Mina said, like a toddler. She'd run around the house naked if he'd let her. With Olena away, he had no need to bring it up. "I'm... This is amazing!" He said, showing the headline on his phone. "Emma is cured!"

Tessa sat down. "Emma? Who's Emma? I can't be expected to keep track of everyone."

"The girl with Cystic Fibrosis? Remember?"

"Oh." She took his coffee cup and sipped. "Her. Yes, it's nice. Did you expect it not to work? The science behind it was sound, and it worked ninety nine out of a hundred simulations. We re-engineered Pair Dadeni to fix her, and it did."

"It didn't fix her. It healed her."

Tessa shrugged. "I don't understand the nuance. Her life expectancy was in days, and now it's in years."

"Doesn't that make you happy?"

"Oh." Tessa sipped from his cup again. "It doesn't disappoint me, if that's what you mean. It's an experiment. Both success and failure brings us closer to an improved virus. However, we did sentence her for an eternity of stupidity."

Adrian eyed the cup, and Tessa handed it over. "Because we didn't use the Idun virus?" He asked and sipped the coffee.

"Of course! She'll be a perfectly healthy, yet drooling centenarian idiot."

"Giving her a few weeks of life would have been a significant achievement," Adrian said slowly, measuring his words. "Giving her a few years would have been amazing." He stared deep into her eyes, studying her reactions. "We gave her an entire lifetime. Even more. I'm struggling to wrap my mind around it."

"But..." Tessa was obviously confused. "I thought we were in agreement, that we have a historical role to play. We really should stop worrying about trivial matters."

"Saving Emma's life is not a trivial matter!"

Tessa put her hand on his. As usual, it was warm to the touch. "Of course it isn't," she said. "Not for her."

"Or her parents!"

"Or her parents," She agreed. "We achieved a great deal by saving her, but we could have achieved more. We could have given her multiple lifetimes, with a clear, sharp, capable mind. Turn those decades to centuries."

He had no good response, so he kept silent, watching the empty, motionless pond.

Tessa drew closer. In the still, statically charged air, Adrian felt the heat radiating from her body. "Come to bed," she said. "I missed you last night."

Adrian grinned. "One moment you talk about eternity, and the other about having sex."

"Isn't this what normal couples do?" she asked, her hand caressing his thigh. "Live their lives, celebrate their accomplishments, and still be intimate once in a while?"

"I don't know. I don't think I ever made a normal couple, whenever I had a girlfriend."

"I think normal couples do. Let's be normal."

The offer resonated deeply within him, his desire for normalcy becoming an unquenchable thirst. He was surprised though, that Tessa would aim for normal.

He rose and followed as she led him up the stairs to her bedroom, dropping the robe along the way.

Something about the way it dropped triggered a memory. "I think I dreamt about you," he said.

"Oh?" She glanced back over her shoulder. "Was it interesting?"

"I don't remember much," he replied, undressing before he got into bed. "It's funny. I usually don't remember my dreams, but I do remember vividly a part in which we were... Intimate. But in a way we never tried before."

Tessa froze, standing still in the middle of the bedroom, her underwear hanging from her hand. By the meager light the drawn curtains allowed, he saw her blush for the first time since her miraculous recovery. "It wasn't necessarily a dream," she said.

"What do you mean?"

Adrian found it odd how she was perfectly comfortable standing naked in front of him, yet too embarrassed to offer an explanation.

"I won't be mad," he promised. "What is it?"

"Um..." She sat next to him on the bed. "You know, in the last couple of days, when you were busy with the girl..."

"Emma."

"Yes, Emma. So, I made some kind of a breakthrough. Do you know what my DNA and Emma's DNA have in common?"

Adrian shrugged, unsure if the question was rhetorical.

"We don't have a Y chromosome."

She looked at him as if the implications were obvious.

"And..." Adrian prodded her on.

"It makes it so much easier!" She said, smiling. "I ran a few simulations, and they were promising, but I needed a sample—" she suddenly stopped, looking sheepish.

"What did you do?" Adrian asked, trying to keep his voice as neutral as possible.

"I... Well... I thought I was boring you while we were being intimate. You seemed disinterested the last few days..." She looked back and to the sides, as if looking for a hiding place.

"I was busy! We were busy saving lives!"

“Still. You didn’t exhibit any...” Tessa looked at her feet. “Desire for intimacy. So I thought I should try some new things. Maybe learn some new techniques...”

Adrian grinned. As weird as it was, this felt more of a familiar ground. “What kind of techniques?”

Tessa rolled into bed and covered herself with the blanket. “It was something...” she said from her makeshift shelter. “With my mouth...”

The image of Tessa sitting in her workstation and watching porn for research made Adrian even hornier. He decided to put her out of her misery. “Did it work?” he asked as he got under the blanket next to her.

“You don’t remember?”

“Remember what?”

“I tried it tonight. You were drowsy. You wouldn’t talk to me, and didn’t cooperate, but you didn’t resist anything either, so I figured I’ll have a go.”

“I took some sleeping pills.” Adrian said.

“Well, some parts of you were wide awake,” she said, sounding a bit more confident. “Let’s say I got more than enough sample material.”

Adrian nuzzled her, trying to keep up, but getting distracted by her scent.

“Anyway,” she continued, “generating a virus strain took four hours. Four hours!”

That made Adrian pause. Their process so far took roughly seventy two hours. What she just described was an improvement by an order of magnitude. “Wow,” was all he managed to say.

“Yes. Now I have a nice experimental virus just for you,” she grinned, “if you feel like being a guinea pig. It’s so much better! There are so many other improvements! I added – ”

He didn’t want to be a guinea pig. Adrian had no interest in the virus engineered for him, or in the implications of Tessa’s discovery. He simply didn’t want to think, and her scent was driving him insane.

He pushed Tessa on her back and indulged in some mindless pleasure.

A few minutes later, his phone rang. Adrian’s head snapped to the side. Tessa, beneath him, her arms around his neck, moaned in his ear, “Are... You... Going... To get... That?”

Adrian grunted and shut her mouth with a long, hard kiss.

It wasn’t that much later that he rolled off her and lay on his back, gasping for air.

Tessa gave him the mandatory moment of peace, then sidled onto her side and grinned at him. “It’s good I can’t get pregnant,” she said and blew a damp curl from her forehead. “You were very good,” she added, following her ceremony. “It was very nice.”

After he didn’t respond, she scoffed, rolled over Adrian and brought him his phone. “Oh, look. It’s Money, You’d better call her back.”

Adrian was still enjoying his moment of thoughtless bliss. “No.”

Tessa shrugged. "I'll call her then."

He groaned. "Put it on speaker."

Madeline answered immediately. "I just got word from the hospital," she said. "Elise says that Emma is off her meds. She doesn't need them anymore."

Adrian glanced at Tessa. "Well, we expected it to work."

"That fast? Tessa was under for a week. This girl got the virus less than two days ago, and, according to the... Wait a second... The MRI scans and the pulmonary function tests," Madeline sounded as if reading aloud, "she is well on her way to a full recovery."

"I saw the posts. Are you sure she said that? It's way too early to tell," Adrian replied. "We still need to run some—"

"Elise agreed to this wording," she cut him off, and there was an edge of steel to her voice. "The board is convening in town tonight to discuss possible outcomes. We're also entertaining some guests with very deep pockets, representing some of the largest pharma companies in the world. I would like to celebrate our success by tomorrow night. No ifs and no buts."

Adrian held back the 'but' on the tip of his tongue, imagining the pressure applied to Elise so she would agree to such phrasing.

"If you want," Tessa said, startling him, "we can host a party in our garden. If the lord of the manor agrees, of course."

"Oh, hi Tessa dear!" Madeline replied. "I didn't know you're there. What a splendid idea, to have the party at the very house of the heroes of the hour! I'll set up everything. Catering and all. You two just dress nice and be your charming selves."

Tessa looked at Adrian expectantly. "Yes, what an amazing idea," he deadpanned.

"Great. See you tomorrow," Madeline said and hung up.

Adrian eyed her curiously. "Are you sure you're okay with all that?"

Tessa tossed the phone on the dresser. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You used to hate parties, for starters." He paused for a second and added, "and it's premature. Very much so. I expected you to flag that."

"Why?" Tessa asked. She sat up on the bed. "Elise signed on. The girl is fixed."

Adrian frowned. "Here you go, using that word again. She's a person. A human being. She is healed. Recovered."

"Semantics," Tessa said dismissively, in a way that invoked echoes of his conversation with Mina.

"Not really," he protested, sitting up beside her. The sweat on his back dried, and the headboard was uncomfortably cold against his damp, sticky skin. "Words have meanings. You shouldn't refer to people like they're processes or objects. They're people."

"Obviously, but they're also test subjects, aren't they?"

"No!" Adrian shouted. "They're human beings, not lab rats!"

"Okay. I get it." Tessa looked at him curiously. "They're human beings, and the girl is healed, not fixed. You're usually not this irritable after we were being intimate. Was it bad? Did I do something wrong?"

"I'm sorry," he said and sighed. "It's not you. I spoke with Mina the other day. The things she said... I can't shake them off."

"What did that lunatic say?"

Now it was Adrian's turn to squirm uncomfortably. "She harped on how much you've changed."

Tessa smiled. "I sure did, didn't I? And for the better! And you wouldn't have it any other way."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You wouldn't be intimate with the shriveled, paraplegic old me, would you?"

"That's not the point she was making!"

"That's the point I'm making, and it's good enough for now," she said with finality in her voice.

"We shouldn't spend a single second discussing what that mad woman said. It's simply a waste of time."

"I don't know if it's a waste—"

"It is. Besides, now that you're not sedated, maybe I can show you that technique I learned. It would take your mind off this nonsense, and you could give me your honest opinion."

"It's too soon! I'm not ready for a second round," he complained.

"Oh, yes you are. I bet I can make your toes curl again."

As it turned out, he was, she could, and she did.

Chapter 31

Despite being alone in their spacious home office, it felt cramped. At Madeline's decree, Adrian was put in charge of determining the order the candidates will receive treatment. It was completely fine by Tessa who vanished hours ago, muttering something about needing to reset the machines in the lab before leaving him alone with his horrible burden.

And the burden got heavier with each passing second. Success seemed to have bred demand. Adrian's personal phone number somehow got circulated among friends and families of other candidates, and they all started lobbying for their loved ones.

By early noon, already nursing one cappuccino too many, he stopped answering calls. For one sad moment, Adrian considered switching phone numbers. He'd have no one but Madeline to update. Everyone else can go to voice mail.

He was painfully aware he was using those calls as a distraction from his real job, determining who the next candidate was. He had their data, everything he needed to know, printed and stacked neatly next to him, and he went over them one by one, trying to set some success criteria by which he could score them.

It could have been so much easier to feed it all to the lab's artificial intelligence and let it sort everything out. It would only take a couple of minutes at most.

But that would have been the coward's way out, though. This was a life and death decision, which couldn't be outsourced to a machine. It needed to be made by a person, made of flesh and blood.

He took the papers and went outside. The pond was empty. The ducks were gone. He was completely alone.

Adrian drank some more coffee and read through the papers again, letting his phone buzz ceaselessly on the table, letting the darkness of night drink the gray light of day.

Around midnight Tessa returned. Adrian was already lying in bed, but having refused to use sedatives again, he stared at the bright bars the taxi's headlights drew on the ceiling as it arrived, and listened to the muted squeaks of the stairs as she came up..

"So how was your day?" she asked as she got into bed.

"Horrible."

"Well, mine was very productive. I tested the Idun virus I created for you on some bits of, um, leftover samples. You wouldn't believe how potent it is!"

Adrian felt terrible for not caring. His mind was overcrowded with figures of life expectancy and chances of success. "Tell me all about it tomorrow?" he suggested.

"No need, it's all good," Tessa murmured, turned away and curled for him to spoon her. Judging by her breathing, she fell asleep in a matter of seconds, leaving him alone with his thoughts once more.

He didn't know when he finally fell asleep, but when the commotion of arriving trucks woke him up, the sun was already well on its way toward zenith.

Tessa's side of the bed was cold and empty.

By the time he came down, the house was overtaken by a whole production crew. Caterers and chefs shooed the indignant Olena out of her kitchen, and the commotion grew so loud Adrian's head started pounding in tandem with the sledge hammering in the yard.

He found Tessa on the terrace, having coffee and watching the milling workers raising a pavilion. The ducks kept landing on the pond and flying away, seemingly caught in an unending cycle of confusion.

"I'm tired all the time," Adrian complained, sitting down. "I wake up tired and I go to bed exhausted."

"You didn't have your morning coffee yet, silly," Tessa argued while pouring him a cup. "It'll get better."

He looked at the offered coffee sideways. "I don't think I need more caffeine. I probably need less."

"You're stressing over everything. You're too uptight. Relax."

"I can't relax," Adrian protested. "I still have to decide who's next in line for treatment. Three candidates are so sick, they won't make it through next week."

"And you get to save one," she said. "Maybe more. It's something to celebrate, not to stress about."

He picked up the cup of coffee. He wasn't ready for this kind of discussion. "Saving one is good, but the other two will die!"

Tessa nibbled on a biscuit. "They would have died anyway. You didn't make them sick, you just have a chance to cure them. How is it your fault?"

"It isn't! But I'm the one who needs to face their families. I will be the one telling them their loved ones won't make it."

"Seems like a self-inflicted wound to me," Tessa replied. "Just let someone else do it. Or send an email or something."

Adrian gulped the remainder of his coffee. "That's not how responsibility works."

"The problem," Tessa said, still looking at the workers as they hauled in metal trusses and wooden beams, "is that you assume too much responsibility. Of course you're stressed. Learn to say no. Madeline would manage. Besides," she turned, looking at him, "since I'm using the Y chromosome, we now have a faster process for male candidates. Did you prioritize men?"

"How can you even suggest that?" Adrian put his cup down. "Just because—"

"We can save ten male candidates," Tessa interjected, frowning at him, "at a time it would take us to save a single female one. Do male lives matter so little to you, that you would sacrifice nine of them?"

"It doesn't work like that! It isn't fair!"

"It's sub-optimal," she agreed. "Focusing on male specimens will decrease the diversity of our samples. But I thought you wanted to focus on saving more lives."

"I do!" Adrian massaged his temples. "And don't call them specimens. They're human beings."

"And to my point?"

Adrian scowled at her. "We don't do what's expedient. We do what's right. We have women in the cohort. Young girls. Their lives matter just as much."

"I agree. Their lives matter just as much. Not more, and not less."

Adrian frowned at her. Her logic, despite its discrimination against females, was perfectly sound. "You're right," he conceded. "Of course we should save as many lives as possible."

Tessa leaned back, smiling smugly.

"But, you have to see that it's not fair, do you?"

She scratched her head. "No, not really, I don't. Your gender has advantages and disadvantages. Men are stronger. Women live longer. This is just another temporary advantage to being male. Besides," she patted his hand, "I'm sure we'll soon find a better process. Maybe it will favor females. Will that be better?"

Adrian sighed. Navigating the arithmetics of human lives was nerve-racking enough without Tessa asking the tough questions neither he, nor anyone else could really answer. "I should really get to the hospital," he said.

"Why?"

"I need to make sure we have enough people on the teams, so we can accelerate—"

"So you can complain you're stressed even more?" Tessa frowned at him. "You have Madeline managing everything. You have Elise to help you at the hospital. Stop doing everything yourself!"

"The patients need me," he said stubbornly.

"I need you, and the research needs you. Future patients need you." She caressed his cheek. "Just try. Ask Madeline to help."

"Okay, but not here," he said. The noise the workers created, driving another pole into the ground, was splitting his skull. "Let's go to the office."

He called Madeline, who orchestrated everything with the hospital, the institute, and teams from all over the country which, as she described it, were clambering for front row seats to see history being made. Three video chats later, it was all done, and the rotations were adjusted to accommodate the faster pace.

"See?" Tessa said. "I told you."

"You did," he agreed. His stomach grumbled. "Is there any food?" he asked. "I think Olena left."

"There's nothing but food in the house." Tessa led him to the kitchen, where chilled boxes were lined against the wall and stacked as high as Adrian's nose. When he sniffed inside one, a thin, anxious looking woman wearing a suit came into the kitchen.

"Staff meals are outside," she barked and left.

They went out. A long buffet table stretched across the backyard, opposite the pavilion. It carried disposable plates and utensils on one end and an endless line of dishes on the other. The few people who weren't working were either piling food on their plates or sitting on their haunches in the meager shadow the pavilion provided, unloading similar plates into their mouths.

With the scents wafting their way, Adrian's stomach grumbled louder. He followed Tessa and together they cobbled a brunch worthy of kings, a plethora of pastries, meats, and cheeses. They took it all to the terrace, and Tessa snuck into the kitchen to pick up a pot of coffee.

As soon as they sat down, Adrian got up again. "I just remembered," he explained, "we didn't start the fabrication process."

"Sure I did," Tessa said. "Maybe ten minutes ago. I told you, you don't have to do everything yourself. Relax."

"But when it ends—"

"Elise knows what to do. She'll administer it. Stop worrying and eat."

The pounding sounds have ceased, leaving room for the soft whispering sounds the pavilion made, as the soft breeze rustled its folds.

Adrian attacked the food ravenously, devouring within minutes every crumb from his plate.

"We can go for seconds," Tessa suggested. "If you want."

He leaned back and burped quietly. With the hunger gone and the food laying heavy in his belly he was getting drowsy. "I think I could use a nap first. We still have a bit of time until the fabrication ends."

Tessa pointed at the coffee pot.

"I think I need to cut down on coffee," he said, shaking his head. "I'm constantly tired, and it's getting worse."

"Well, I don't have any problems with coffee," Tessa winked and poured herself some. "Maybe you should consider that strain of Idun virus I created for you. It would do you wonders."

Adrian groaned as he got up. "A short nap sounds less risky and might suffice."

"I'll join you in a few minutes."

The way she leered at him gave him pause. "I really need to rest," he said.

"You're no fun," she pouted.

Adrian was too tired to argue. He went upstairs and got into bed, falling asleep immediately.

He woke up after darkness fell. Tessa sat an arm's distance away, using her brand new tablet to scroll through the spreadsheet he shared with her earlier on. Her hair was damp and she was clad in a robe. As soon as he blinked, she looked at him.

"Your selection of candidates doesn't make sense," she said. "We need more diversity in our data."

Adrian rubbed his eyes. He slept more than he intended, and he felt dead tired, as if he didn't sleep at all. "Diversity? What do you—"

"Each Pair Dadeni strain provides us with a different sample vector." She showed him a scatter plot which meant nothing. "See? If we want to find a better solution for everyone, it makes no sense to have three similar vectors."

"They're not vectors. They're people." Adrian sat up. "We can save those people. We can give them long, healthy lives. They have the best chance for success."

"Success in what? Growing senile?" She wasn't even looking at him. "Since we're creating future idiots, we might as well benefit from the experiments."

"Are we back to this again?" Adrian scoffed. "We're potentially giving them decades of healthy lives. So what if they might become senile a century away? Doesn't one century count? Won't we have the technology then to solve the brain issue?"

"It's just a stupid compromise." Tessa put the tablet away and crossed her arms. "We could have given them better lives, or at least the option to choose."

Adrian hated the way she made sense. "So you want to give them a choice between the Idun virus and the Pair Dadeni virus?"

"It's not a real choice at all." She nodded. "The Idun virus would have kept their minds sharp through the ages. We could have truly healed them."

The tablet closed, and darkness swallowed them, allowing him to barely make out her silhouette.

"And risk losing their memories?" He asked quietly. "Forgetting all their friends? Their families?"

He sensed, more than saw, the way she turned, facing him. "What's so terrible about losing some memories? People forget all the time."

"What would have happened if by the end of next month Emma's parents were total strangers? People she won't recognize in pictures?"

"She'll remember them," Tessa said softly, "if they would take care of her. If they would show her love."

"What does that—"

"I never forgot you," Tessa stopped him. "Have I?"

"Are you..." The words caught in his throat. "Are you blaming Dawn for what happened? Because she did love you. Of course she—"

"How can I blame her for anything? I barely know who she was."

Light suddenly flooded the room, blinding him momentarily. Tessa unlocked the tablet and resumed reading.

"The virus really has changed you," Adrian started again.

Tessa put down the tablet and looked at him.

"It's like you forgot how to be human," he continued.

"What is this about? Did you decide today is the day we have our first real fight?"

"You're being mean to everyone," Adrian said stubbornly, disappointed at his childish tone of voice. "You're being mean to me."

"By not solving three similar cases at once? Or by not celebrating what we inflicted on that poor girl?"

"We saved her!"

"We cured her temporarily," Tessa corrected him. "We could have actually saved her. Remind me again, why didn't we?"

Adrian scoffed. "That's exactly what I'm saying, but you're not listening!"

"Okay," she said patiently. "I'm sorry. I'm listening now."

Adrian paused for a few seconds, carefully choosing his words. "You look nothing like the Tessa I knew. You behave nothing like her. You're completely different. I... I'm not sure who you are anymore. Maybe that's because we went one step too far."

Tessa reached out to the bedside lamp, and the soft light that blossomed outlined her in golden yellow. "I don't understand what you are trying to say, and believe me, I listened."

"The Tessa I once knew is long gone." Adrian felt anger bubbling inside him. "It's like she died in bits and pieces, vanishing slowly, and making room for you. She would never be mean to anyone. She was kind, gentle, and loved everyone, especially Dawn! The Idun virus made you pee her out!"

Tessa's lips tightened. "So you think I shouldn't have taken the Idun virus?"

Adrian threw his hands up. "I don't know!"

"Seriously? You don't know?" Tessa asked. She shook her head slowly and sighed. "You're a stupid man, Adrian. A small, stupid man."

Adrian's eyes widened, and his breath caught in his throat.

"Don't get me wrong," Tessa continued, looking back at him. "You're fixable. I love you, despite your stupidity. You show potential."

"You..." Adrian stammered. His mouth hung open, and he couldn't close it.

"What?" She asked, rising from the bed. "I'm what? I shouldn't have used the Idun virus? Well, consider the alternative. What would have happened if you hadn't put that needle in my vein and injected the virus?"

Adrian couldn't answer.

"Come on! It's super easy!" She said, pacing the bedroom as if she's in a lecture hall, nudging along a struggling student. "Had my disease progressed naturally, I would be..?"

It must have been the time for the party to start, and guests were arriving in droves. Their cars crunched the gravel in the driveway, and their headlights threw sharp lines on the ceiling.

"I'll tell you what I would be," Tessa said, throwing her arms in the air, "I would be six feet under, pushing up the daisies, right next to where your precious Dawn currently resides! As dead as a doornail! Not in... How did you phrase it? Bits and pieces. One dumb dead body."

She tossed off her robe and twirled naked in the bedroom, the stray beams of headlights dancing on her flawless skin. "But look at me now! Full of life! I'm a dream come true!"

Disgusted by them both, Adrian looked away.

Without looking, he heard her soft padding on the wooden floor as she came closer, and smelled her breath as she spoke. "Don't fret. I'm not angry, despite the ugly things you've said. Look at me."

He stared straight into her emerald eyes, using every ounce of willpower to keep staring. "You are not angry?" he asked incredulously.

"I understand," she said softly. "I had a lot of time to think about it. Time to adjust. We were all brought up as mortals. We grew up expecting old age to decimate us to drooling fools in our last decades. Suddenly, the guard rails were removed, and the petty people started to panic. You're still living in that old world. You haven't adjusted. Not yet."

Her eyes narrowed. "It's that demented woman, Mina. She planted that thought in your head."

Adrian nodded. It was hard to concentrate.

"Think of it this way, then." She sat on the bed next to him, her body radiating its strange heat. "Think of being alive as a spectrum. Maybe dying in bits and pieces means that I'm also always fully alive, or at least much more than most people."

She paused and put her hand on his thigh. "You could too. We can—"

There was a knock at the door. "Ms. Madeline has asked for your presence," someone he didn't recognize shouted.

"We'll be right there," Tessa shouted back and stood up. To Adrian she said, "Money is calling. Let's put this stupid fight behind us, okay?"

Adrian nodded again.

She kissed his forehead. "I'm sorry if I was a little rough, but I'm not mad at you at all. Not anymore."

"You did call me stupid," Adrian said weakly. "And small."

"I also said that I love you," Tessa said, "and you haven't said it back, have you?"

For the third time, Adrian nodded.

"So get dressed."

Adrian insisted on having a short shower, and then put on a night blue suit. Tessa wore a white, low cut dress, something a bride would wear, and a golden necklace with a green gemstone that seemed to glow on its own.

"Where did you get that necklace?" Adrian asked as he fixed his tie, facing the mirror.

“A gift. From a secret admirer.”

He whirled around and frowned at her.

“I love it when you’re jealous,” Tessa said, batting her eyelids at him. “Ready?”

He took her arm. Together, they climbed down the stairs.

Chapter 32

During the time they were upstairs the small manor was completely transformed, its insides organized as something resembling an industrial kitchen.

That change paled in comparison to what they saw stepping outside. Adrian expected an extravagant gala, but was flabbergasted by the event's sheer grandiosity. The staff were at least as numerous as the guests, constantly weaving invisibly between them, stopping only to hover nearby and offer drinks and refreshments.

A lattice of dark lacquered wooden platforms covered the yard end to end. Just inside the pavilion, on an elevated stage, a tuxedo wearing pianist was skillfully playing something Adrian didn't recognize, modern sounding and inoffensive to conversations.

On a closer look, Adrian saw that the multiple waiters followed a trail made of thick, red felt. It went from the open pavilion into the house and back, gently lit by brightly burning tiki torches. Like busy ants venturing into the wild to feed their queen, they went into the house empty handed and returned with plates full of delicious seeming foodstuff or trays of high fluted glasses, filled with what couldn't be anything other than very expensive champagne.

Tessa plucked off a glass, sipped, and waded into the milling human mass, leading the way into the pavilion with Adrian at her footsteps.

He stopped before entering. "Tom and Jenna are here," he said, pointing at the couple who were standing at the end of the pond. Tom held a tray in his hands, while Jenna occasionally tossed some very expensive bread for the ducks to nibble on.

"Who?" Tessa asked, standing on her toes.

"You wouldn't know them," he said, realizing they've never met. "Emma's parents."

Tessa shrugged and moved on.

Inside the pavilion, they rubbed shoulders with the creme de la creme of society, men and women wearing designer dresses and suits, sporting jewellery that would set Adrian back a year's worth of his salary. They smiled, drank, spoke in hushed tones, and occasionally broke their small circles to admit a newcomer in or graciously accept another drink.

At the center of the tent, they found Madeline. "Tessa! My dear!" she exclaimed as she glided closer, disentangling herself from two elderly tuxedoed gentlemen who seemed disappointed as their pudgy palms detached from her waist.

"You look absolutely ravishing!" she told Tessa, putting a hand on her arm. "And this pendant is amazing! And very strategically placed."

Tessa beamed back at her. "Thank you! You look quite stunning yourself!"

Madeline's million dollar smile widened and she twirled around, making her revealing crimson dress flare at its bottom. Her lips wore bodacious ruby red, and her wrists bore a pair of gaudy golden bracelets. "All part of the show," she told Tessa, leaning down. "You'd be amazed how one could..."

"Excuse me for a second," Adrian said as Madeline went on, and made his way out, looking for Emma's parents.

His eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the monochromatic gloom where the tiki lights couldn't reach. He spotted them, still standing at the edge of the pond. As he made his way over, the world became mostly shadows, and the piano's music grew muted and distant.

"How's Emma?" He asked them.

Jenna opened her mouth and Tom hurriedly patted her hand. She bit down her response. "She's making a great recovery, doctor," he told Adrian. "I read her one of her favorite stories. She enjoyed it very much."

"This is wonderful," Adrian said. "I hope—"

"We should be by her side," Jenna said sternly. "But Ms. Jackson asked us to come. For publicity. She said it would mean the world to you. How could we refuse? You saved our girl, after all."

"Your house is lovely," Tom added hastily, glaring at his wife. "It is your house, isn't it? Someone told us that."

Jenna stuck out her chin, but remained silent.

"It is. You are right, though. You should probably be by her side. How long will you stay?"

"As long as it is helpful." Tom faced him fully, and his round face shone like a full moon in a dark night. "We are grateful for the opportunity to help. To give back, if only a little."

"You've been through enough," Adrian said, feeling a lump in his throat. "Stay with her as much as you can. In the coming weeks. Both of you. Be there for her. There..." He paused, trying to walk a fine line. "You shouldn't worry. Elise is a superb physician, one of the best in her field. Emma is not in any danger, as far as we know. Still, I would suggest having as much familial contact as possible. Let her see familiar faces, hear familiar voices."

"Would it help her heal?" Jenna asked. Her face was shrouded in darkness, but what little he could make of her expression suggested hope.

"Once the disease is defeated, nothing would be better for her than love, warmth, and human connection. But... But it's not just for her sake. It's for yours as well. It will help you all heal. As a family."

She nodded. "Then this is exactly what we'll do."

Tom turned around, watching the pond again. "Thank you, doctor," he said. "Thank you for your advice, and for saving our girl."

"You're welcome. It's been my privilege. You..." He looked back at the pavilion. "You should go back to Emma. I will tell Madeline I sent you away."

"And miss all the wonderful food?" Tom asked. "This is really something else. We will stay just a while longer," he added when Jenna pulled at his sleeve. "Then we'll go."

"Doctor?" Jenna said as he turned to leave.

"Yes?"

"You're a good man. I can see that." She took a deep breath, staring at the dark depths of the pond. "It's rarer than people believe. We need more of you."

"Thank you," Adrian said, swallowing uncomfortably. "Um, I need to head back. You have a pleasant evening, then," he said and made a hasty retreat back to the party, feeling ill at ease.

He found Tessa sitting on a high chair, her feet dangling above the ground. She held a tray filled with pastries, all bitten at least once. "You have to try some," she said as she saw him, her mouth still full with the last experiment.

"Yes," Madeline, standing beside her, chimed in. "Come on, Adrian. Try something. Live a little." She held a half full flute in one hand and a napkin in the other.

Adrian forced a smile. "I intend to live a lot," he said. "What's good?"

"It's all amazing!" Tessa said. "There's smoked salmon, roasted pork, seared scallops, this," she pointed at a deep fried pastry, sprinkled with sugar, "whatever it is. Just try it!"

Adrian sampled it all. It was all delightful, but to him it tasted like ash. He suspected that in his current mood, everything would. "Is the board okay with this? Isn't it a little too expensive?"

Madeline laughed, her pristine white teeth shining in the light of the torches. "You don't seem to appreciate the torrents of money we're drowning in," she replied. "I've been hounded all day by people trying to shove investment capital down my throat, as long as it would guarantee a first row seat for this show." She waved her hand dismissively. "All this won't even amount to a rounding error. Look there, near your feet."

There were some ribboned packages on the ground.

"It's yet another attempt to bribe us. One should have your name on it," Madeline continued. "Those unimaginative accountants probably got you a Grandmaster Chime."

"A what?" he asked, browsing through the pile of boxes.

Madeline emptied her flute and carelessly placed it on a passing by waiter's tray. "An expensive watch."

"I got a ring, and a couple of earrings I can't wear." Tessa said dryly.

"I already promised you, we'll get your ears pierced, Tessa dear," Madeline said, and probably not for the first time. "It was worth doing anyway."

Adrian found his packaged gift. It was indeed a watch, and it seemed very expensive. For some reason he thought of Dawn, and how she wouldn't approve of this gauche display of wealth, how she would have brought it to an abrupt end.

"I need a drink," he said.

A mostly full flute stood on the table, deserted by Tessa. It held a blood-red liquid, which was a bit too sour, but Adrian decided it would serve its purpose. At the very least, it was a good start.

"Look how far we came in such a short time," Madeline swiped a fresh glass from a passing waiter, an old fashioned with lime on the rim, and raised it to Adrian's own. "A few weeks ago you were facing the threat of incarceration, I was about to lose the institute, and Tessa was

about to depart this good Earth. Instead now Tessa is healthier than most people, you're a tenured professor, and I have to fight off investors."

"We've only just begun," Tessa said, raising her own glass.

"Really? What would be the next step going forward?" Madeline asked. "Some in the board suggested selling the patent, to cash in quickly, but I think we can solo it."

Tessa, who just emptied her glass down her throat, shook her head vigorously.

"We can easily replicate the process," Adrian said, glancing sideways at Tessa. "If we bring in more machines and build more labs in the hospital, we can go up to treating as many as ten patients a day. Maybe even more."

"No no no," Tessa twisted her face. "The scale you're thinking about is far too small," she said, slightly slurring the words. "I'm thinking about Pair Dadeni in a pill. We'll reach millions."

"We can't engineer—"

"A generic strand? Of course we can't." Tessa cut him off. "But what about putting ten generic strands in a pill? How about a hundred? They will take a few more days to reach efficacy. Maybe weeks. But who cares?"

"I can't see how that would work," Adrian said, "especially as the ones not fitting might develop to be a dangerous disease. People might die, or suffer permanent damage."

"We can put a warning label," Tessa suggested. "Like any prescription drug. Let the physicians assume responsibility. Besides, most will suffer a mild cold at most, just to survive and gain decades of lives."

"This sounds very dangerous," Adrian argued. "I don't know how effective it will be."

Tessa shrugged. "It won't be as effective as the Idun virus anyway."

Adrian looked at Madeline for help, but her gaze was unfocused and turned away. She kept sipping her drink as if uninterested in the conversation taking place. He had the distinct feeling she was calculating profits in her mind.

A waiter walked by, and Adrian picked off another glass, this one pink and bubbly. "Okay, I agree, it can be done," he admitted, "but why not focus on the terminally ill?"

"They're a horrible market," Madeline said. Her eyes suddenly snapped into focus. "Oh, don't worry. We'll take good care of them too, of course," she assured him. "But they're our pro-bonos, not our bread and butter."

Adrian's stomach turned. Maybe this was what's been bothering him. He was pretending it was about helping people, while it was actually about money. Only money. And he was expected to go along with it.

"You two are my partners in this," Madeline continued, looking intently at Adrian. "Rest assured I won't make any meaningful decision without consulting with you. So you have no need for concern." She looked around. "Not now, certainly. Now, we all need to enjoy the party."

Tessa scratched her tongue on her front teeth, a weird, snake like gesture. "Concern is the last thing on my mind," she said, slurring the words. "The world is our oyster." She looked at Adrian, rather unsteadily. "Did I say it right?" She asked.

"You said it perfectly, dear." Madeline answered for him.

Adrian finished his bubbly rosé. He should get drunk, he decided.

In a stroke of serendipity, a waiter, the first one Adrian saw who was not clean shaven, drifted by. "Amaretto for the lady?" he asked, offering his tray to Tessa.

Sadly, he had nothing else on his tray.

Tessa took the cup, sniffed it, and sampled it with her tongue while the waiter drifted away. "Ugh, that tastes weird," she said and put it on the table.

"Maybe you should pace yourself a bit, dear," Madeline suggested. "Honestly, at the rate you're drinking, I'm amazed you're still standing. Oh no," she added as her eyes drifted to three elderly gentlemen, stumbling their way over. She leaned over and whispered something in Tessa's ear.

Adrian didn't care. He didn't want to be a part of the conversation, or any conversation for that matter. He wanted to get off the hamster wheel, and booze seemed the right way to go. "Excuse me, ladies," he said, downed the Amaretto and returned the empty glass on the table, turning to go.

"No!" They heard a cry from the gloomy perimeter of the pavilion. Mina rushed in, dressed in a sous-chef's clothing. She stared at Adrian, horrified, and then at the glass. "Spit it out!" She yelled at him. "Stick a finger down your throat!"

"Spit what...?" He asked, and the world suddenly started spinning.

"We need to get him to the hospital!" Mina shouted at Madeline. "Now!"

Adrian's knees buckled. He leaned on the table with all his weight, but his arms suddenly turned to jello. He flopped on the chair and tumbled over, not even feeling the blow as his head hit the wooden floor.

Chapter 33

Adrian woke up in a dark room. He was cold, shivering, and drenched in sweat. His heart beat in his chest so fast he wondered for a moment if he's suffering from atrial fibrillation, and then all thoughts were gone, vaporised by a splitting headache.

"Don't try to get up," someone said.

Opening his eyes was a painful mistake. A monitor above him emitted strobing red lights that pierced through his pupils like hot needles.

"I asked Elise if I should give you morphine," the blurry figure said. "She said that I can if I want, but it doesn't matter much. The nurse outside showed me how. Personally, I would prefer you to remain perfectly lucid. You have an important decision to make, and little time to make it. It's up to you."

"Can't... Think... Give... Morphine..." he croaked through dry vocal cords.

His eyes focused, barely enough to see a small syringe inserted into the venflon adapter, and its plunger pressed all the way.

The effect was immediate. A cool wave washed through him, reducing the pain to tolerable levels. The room grew brighter, and he realized it wasn't dark to begin with, his eyes were almost shut.

"She told me it's not too much for you. Just enough to make most of the pain go away."

Adrian guessed his thoughts were pretty sluggish well before the morphine, but he wasn't sure. If anything, as the pounding in his temples eased, things became a little clearer.

"Are you listening?"

He nodded, or at least tried to. His muscles were barely responding.

The figure leaned closer. He was quite sure it was Tessa, though she was still blurred, and outlined with scintillating light.

"Unless we'll do something quick and dramatic about it," she said, "you're going to die very soon."

So much for bedside manners, Adrian thought. With great effort, he forced his eyes to shift their focus on her. Still wearing the same white dress, Tessa hovered over him with her new medallion swinging freely from her plunging neckline. He was grateful for the latex gloves on her hands.

"The bitch tried to poison me, but you ended up drinking the entire thing." Tessa paused, her mouth drawn in a tight line. "She really wanted me dead, though, so she mixed a lot of poisons in. Organophosphate she must have gotten from the lab, and cyanide for good measure, but other stuff as well. A real work of art, worthy of her Ph.D."

"The bitch?" Talking hurt, like each word was torn out of his chest. The clinician in him tried to analyse the situation. It felt like chemical burns in his oesophagus, and probably in his throat. Maybe he vomited as soon as his stomach sensed something was wrong. He probably did, multiple times.

"Yes. You know. That small crazy woman, Mina. The one who accused me of murdering that other woman, Dawn. She tried to kill me." She shook her head. "It's not a mystery. She confessed then and there, and told us what was in that nefarious cocktail. You're lucky that there was an EMT team outside who pumped you full of Atropine. Still, if we didn't get you to the hospital in time, and they also happened to have hydroxocobalamin, you'd be as dead as a rock right now."

He blinked, which proved to be surprisingly painful. Even his eyelids hurt.

"It was a generous amount too," Tessa continued. "Enough to kill an elephant. She really wanted me dead, Idun virus or not." She stopped and sighed. "The problem is you drank it instead. As things currently stand, according to Elise, odds are you'd be dead in two hours. She said that besides the toxins buildup in your brain, your organs are failing one after the other. There's already extensive damage to your heart, which in turn harms your lungs and kidneys for reasons I don't understand."

In his previous life, working as a nurse, Adrian had seen his share of victims of poisoning. He understood the mechanism through which cyanide worked, and the effects of organophosphate. More than anything else, he understood the devastation combining poisons could inflict on the human body, and how quickly the cascading effects become compounding effects, leading to vital organs failure.

"ECMO?" He whispered, forcing the word through unresponsive lips.

"I have no idea what you just said, but according to Elise there are no conventional treatments available. It doesn't matter! Stop! Listen to me!" She added as he tried to explain. "With complete bed rest and all the support we could provide, you would have survived longer," she said, "maybe a few more hours, but I gave you some cortisol. That left you with the life expectancy of an adult mayfly."

Adrian spasmed, seized and coughed. After a few seconds, when he caught his breath, he asked, "why?"

"I needed you conscious. After that tongue lashing you gave me earlier, I needed you to make a choice. Look, they're useless," she waved her hand back. "Elise. The hospital staff. The doctors. They might as well be neanderthals, waving smoking brands over your body. They have nothing. They can't help you."

"So why..."

"I can. I can give you a fighting chance," she said. "I don't know how well your brain still works. If you remember, a couple of days ago I synthesized viruses for you. It was just an experiment, to see if we can use the Y chromosome. Both Pair Dadeni and Idun viruses. They came out the strongest strains I've ever created. In vitro performance like you wouldn't believe, quite literally reviving dead cells. They'll be able to fix you, while the machines keep you alive."

Adrian coughed. His phlegm felt like lava rising in his throat. Maybe it was bile. Some dripped from the corner of his mouth.

"The toxins are already accumulating in your brain," Tessa continued. A clinician would have wiped his chin but she wasn't one, to his detriment. "The organophosphate already crossed

through your blood-brain barrier, and the Pair Dadeni can't chase it there. Only the Idun virus can. But... But there will be extensive damage. You'll probably forget quite a bit."

As if to prove her point, she was suddenly engulfed in a rainbow-colored halo. Adrian realized he was hallucinating. It was the beginning of the end, the collapse of his cerebral cortex, his thinking mind.

"It's your choice, really," Tessa said. "I have to be honest here. The Pair Dadeni will fix the rest of your body just fine. But the overactivated neurons in your brain will die, and won't be replaced with new ones by any process I know of. Elise says that her best guess is that you'll be a vegetable, but you might pull through. You might get lucky."

She looked at the corner of his mouth, grabbed a tissue paper from behind her and wiped his face clean.

Maybe he was judging her too harshly, Adrian thought.

"You need to decide," she continued. "I wouldn't dream of doing anything like this without your consent. We can let the hospital staff do its best, which will probably fall short of saving you. You'll die in a couple of hours. We can give you the Pair Dadeni virus and hope your body manages to save enough of your brain on its own. Odds are you'll end up in a coma, and spend a long time, years on end, without a single thought in your damaged brain."

She leaned closer and raised her eyebrows just slightly. "Or," she continued carefully, "you can choose the Idun virus and have it fix your brain, knowing that in the process, it might erase most of your memories."

Adrian tried to speak and found that he couldn't. He managed to push air from his lungs, but his vocal cords stopped working. For a terrifying moment, he thought that Tessa would just wait forever for an answer, and then realized just how absurd it was, how his thoughts already became muddled and confused.

"Elise said she can't go along with any of this, that no sane medical doctor ever would. Such a coward... But I'm not a medical doctor, am I?" She grinned for a second, then the smile vanished from her face. "We're running out of time, aren't we?"

Adrian couldn't reply.

Tessa leaned closer, and her face became blurred. "Why aren't you answering me?"

He blinked rapidly, hoping that she would catch on.

She took his hand. "Are you still with me?"

Adrian did his best to squeeze her hand, and realization flooded her face.

"Oh, you can't talk," she said. "Okay, let's do it this way. Squeeze once for the normal treatment, twice for the Pair Dadeni virus, three times for the Idun virus, and four times for something else."

He squeezed her hand the first time.

"Okay," Tessa said. "That's one."

Even the best modern medicine could offer can't save him now. That much he knew for sure. He needed a miracle, the miracle of those viruses.

He squeezed her hand a second time.

"That's two."

He would be intubated soon, and he was already given atropine, so he wasn't too worried about hypoxia. The staff will manage to keep his oxygen high. The buildup of acetylcholine was a real threat, however. There was a very real chance that excitotoxicity would kill his hippocampus and his entire cerebral cortex.

The thought of lying in a coma for years terrified him even more than dying. It's stupid, he knew. He wouldn't suffer. He wouldn't feel anything. For him, the conscious Adrian, it would mean dying in exactly the same way, and time would trickle by without him aware of it, exactly as if he was dead.

But not with the Idun virus. It could heal his brain.

He squeezed her hand a third time.

"That's three," Tessa said. "Are you sure, though? It has to be your choice. I don't want you to hate me afterwards."

Her halo was gone. She leaned even closer, and her face floated into focus. Sharp, yet smooth, devoid of any expression, like a porcelain doll.

"Doesn't it bother you that, how you said it, you would die daily? Die by bits and pieces?"

Her breath was both hot and cold on his face, pin pricks of pain.

Adrian relaxed his hand, letting it drop completely limp.

"I think I got the hint," Tessa said. She raised her hand, and a large syringe came into view, full of liquid. "This is it. It's better than mine. Way better. For what it's worth, I think your chances of survival are fantastic."

She removed the smaller syringe and stabbed the valve with the large one. "I don't remember if this part hurts or not. I hope it doesn't."

Adrian watched as she pushed the plunger slowly and deliberately until the syringe was completely empty. The translucent fluid made its way through the tubing and into his vein, carrying millions upon millions of eager Idun viruses, searching for cells to devour and convert.

It felt nothing like morphine. He felt nothing at all.

Tessa peeled off her gloves and tossed them in the trash. "I'll call Elise in a few minutes. She's on standby. Don't worry, she'll take care of everything. Well," she glanced at the syringe, "she'll take care of all that's left." She smiled. "I'm proud of you. You made the right choice. You're already somewhat of a hero for the people here in the hospital. We can't just let you die."

She frowned at him and leaned closer. "I mean, did you believe I would actually let you die? Forget about everyone else, how could I? I need you."

Weirdly enough, Adrian could smell the alcohol on her breath. He flinched, or tried to, as she caressed his face. He expected pain, but her palm felt surprisingly cool and soft.

Maybe because he was already running a fever. She didn't tell him how fast-acting the virus was.

It was mere seconds. Of course he wasn't running a fever. His thoughts ceased to make sense.

"I didn't sign any stupid, go fuck yourself form, like your dead Dawn did," Tessa went on, her voice full of resolve. "I never would. I'll fight for you with everything I've got, the same way you fought for me. And if you'll die..." she sighed. "If you'll die, I'll make damn sure you live again, stronger and better."

She looked at the monitor. His heart rate was steadily climbing.

It was too soon. He must have lost his sense of time. He tried to focus on the here and now.

"Just imagine all the things we'll be able to accomplish," Tessa was saying. "With the garbage out of your head, you'll be twice as smart. Twice as strong. Free, forever unencumbered by age and disease."

The beeps on the monitor ramped up their pace, reaching a crescendo when an alarm started to blare.

"Let me get Elise," She said and walked out of the room, seemingly in slow motion, swimming in the swampy air.

Adrian was left alone with his thoughts.

He imagined his blood vessels carrying the Idun virus into his brain, crossing over the pounding pain in his temples, sneaking in and seeking synapses to disconnect.

He was tired, but fear suddenly gripped him. If he'd close his eyes, he would sleep, and when he'll wake up, he won't be him anymore. He would be someone else. Someone that the Idun virus created by weaving neurons together in his brain.

He forced his eyes to open as wide as he could.

The thought of Dawn hit him like lightning.

He must remember Dawn.

Adrian tried to envision her the way she was the first time they met, standing at the door of the house. Her house at the time. His house now.

The image he conjured was of Ann-Marie in a downward-facing dog pose on a dark mat made of lava.

He blinked, trying to reign in his uncooperative mind, to force it to think of Dawn.

In the theater of his mind, Ann-Marie flowed to an upward-facing dog pose, and her flesh flowed as well. The long, dark pants disappeared, and she became Tessa practicing sun salutations while facing an empty pond under a grey, cloud smothered sky.

Adrian blinked furiously, ignoring the burning pain. He needed to imagine Dawn!

The only image he managed to conjure, vivid and strong, was of Dawn's daughter Emily, standing over Dawn's coffin and looking down at him.

Maybe the virus was already destroying memories. Maybe Dawn was already deleted from his mind.

Adrian realized his eyes closed and he snapped them open.

He mustn't forget Dawn.

He blinked once, just once, and then his eyes slammed shut like a coffin's lid and the world sunk into darkness.

Yet Another Author's Note

That's it.

You've finished the book.

I humbly thank you for the time you took to read it, and I would appreciate any kind of feedback. Even negative.

To be honest, negative feedback is the best kind. It's how we grow.

"But," you might think to yourself. "There's an Epilogue."

You're absolutely correct. There is. It's just that I'm under the impression that this story doesn't need an epilogue.

However, it turns out that some people need closure, and for them I put the words on the last pages of the book.

Just remember - it's optional.

(Again, thanks for reading.)

Epilogue

At a certain point in time, he noticed he was conscious. There were no senses. No sight, no smell, not even the sense of touch, only an awareness of the passage of time.

He existed. Of that he was sure, because he thought that he was, and some philosophers considered it quite enough.

After a while his name came to him. He was called Adrian.

An image came unbidden to his mind, summoned by a sudden urge. It was an image of an elderly lady. She looked regal, with deep green eyes, a kind, wrinkled face, and a halo of silky white hair.

Despite her aristocratic sharp nose and sharper cheekbones, there was a quality of benevolence about her.

He wondered who she was, why he saw her, and why in such great detail.

He wondered that for a long while.

An unpleasant sensation bubbled up his awareness, a pressure at the sides of his head. It kept increasing, as if he was caught in a vise. Soon after, it broke down into pulses of pain.

He might have cried out. He didn't feel his throat, his mouth, or his lungs, but this kind of agony couldn't be borne in silence.

The pain shifted and split into separate parts, as if becoming multidimensional.

It wasn't pain, he realised.

Those were words screamed so loud they could have fractured his skull.

Adrian tried to concentrate. To listen, and suddenly the words made sense.

"He's waking up! Call Elise! Now!"

He didn't want to wake up. It was painful. He wanted to be alone with the elderly lady.

Dawn, her name came to him in a flash, just as light bubbled through his eyelids.

The kind lady. Her name was Dawn.