

An Excerpt from: New Blood

by

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Artist's Statement

This is the first third of a full length novel called *New Blood*. The novel is light science fiction or might even be considered speculative fiction. While I do not emphasize the dystopian aspect of my world, the label of dystopian fiction would also not be inaccurate. I see this as eventually being a novel of about 400 pages. The basic premise is a medical advancement in cell therapy which renders natural death obsolete. The main character is skeptical of the widespread use of such treatment and offers the reader a relatable perspective on this future world. The novel will expand beyond the main character slightly but will mostly stay tightly focused on a few characters rather than giving a view of the whole world. The glimpses of the world beyond will come through the characters' limited viewpoints.

I have taken inspiration from a large variety of authors but Michael Crichton and Stephen King stand out to me the most. Crichton's scientific realism and King's focus on realistic character development drove many of my stylistic decisions.

Prologue

Even after we pushed the Right to Life Act through congress, some skepticism remained. Could citizens be forced to continue living? We reminded people that doctors have always been required to use the life-saving equipment they have available. Allowing a mislead patient to reject the available technology was illogical and immoral. With the act providing federal funds for those who could not afford the CRP (Cell Renewal Procedure) we helped people see that it was ethically reprehensible for physicians to not use it to save lives, even if they were only saving them from aging.

Some other opponents argued that overpopulation would become a problem again, but we pointed out that overpopulation was a third-world problem, and that the US population had been stagnant for decades, if not decreasing. In '45, when our genius scientists created the Lazarus Cell and subsequently developed cell renewal technology, we rebranded as Bionova and diverted medical funding away from most other, less effective, forms of medicine. Other medical research giants followed suit. As an unintended consequence, but further decreasing the risk of overpopulation, the average lifespan for those who could not afford the early, expensive procedure may have dropped slightly over the next eighteen years, until we passed the Act and secured funding in order to make CRP affordable for everyone. In addition to this, women did not regain fertility if they didn't have the foresight to seek early CRP and allowed themselves to go through menopause before completing their first round. As a result, only a portion of the population of newly young women were capable of procreating. If it will be a problem at all, overpopulation will be far off into the future. It certainly isn't an excuse to let people die now.

In the very early years after the passage of the Act, death cults popped up around the nation but, naturally, most eventually died out. Members tended to either outgrow the movement

or double down on their commitment and end their lives prematurely. Some fled to death-friendly countries and we didn't feel they were worth pursuing. Some cults we deemed to be dangerous were raided. These criminals were imprisoned and re-educated about the benefits of life. By 2070 death cults had dwindled into the background of national thought. Their influence was no longer apparent, but skepticism of CRP and Bionova's role in peoples' daily lives clearly still existed, and we were no longer able to play off the public fear of death cults to curry favor. Fortunately for us, we were soon given a golden opportunity to strengthen our place in American life and politics.

-Taken from the unpublished memoir of Dr. David Prazan, Associate Director of Bionova

Chapter One: The Wake

Till stepped out of the car and looked up at the massive house in front of him. Behind him, the door thudded shut and the autocab whined away. The house was an extravagant display of wealth that Kayden Rogers had built after Bionova investments had earned him his second billion dollars. That was back in '55, just a few years after Kayden's first Cell Renewal Procedure had given him his second chance at his thirties. Now, seven years out from the act in '63 mandating the CRP, Bionova, which was the main producer of high-end CRP chambers, or Arks, was doing extremely well. Looking down the long driveway at the multi-winged monstrosity, Till could see that Kayden Rogers was doing well, too. Tonight, Kayden would complete his five day CRP in his private, custom built Ark and he would awaken to hundreds of high profile guests gathered to celebrate his rebirth. Till was there, not because he was rich or important, but because Kayden Rogers was his uncle.

Till started up the driveway, pulling his coat collar up against the chill October wind. The sun had sunk below the trees that lined his uncle's property, laying long shadows across the lawn. Leaves blew past Till's feet and collected in ribbons against the outer fence. Till shivered and steeled himself for the crowds of his uncle's rich friends that he knew were milling around inside. He wouldn't know any of them and he doubted if his uncle really knew half of them. He pushed back his coat sleeve and 6:37 glowed above his watch until he dropped his arm and his cuff turned off the holographic display. Perhaps, he thought, his mother wouldn't notice how late he was.

He barely remembered his uncle's last wake, which had been the only other wake he had attended until his mother's wake four years ago. He had been six when his uncle had undergone

his first CRP. This was before the mansion and the private Ark. Till remembered a squat, stately building with a shiny, newly installed Ark in one of its rooms (a Bionova, of course). His mother had said the building used to be called a funeral home, before rebirth had become their main business. The only other thing Till remembered about that wake was that after, when Kayden was awake and dressed up so he could join the party, his uncle hadn't remembered him immediately. His uncle's eyes had been slightly glazed, and he seemed distant, although he hadn't touched the champagne yet. Till had approached him warily to congratulate him, as his mother had told him was proper, and his uncle had simply looked at him and smiled a blank smile. Till had mumbled something and hurried away, embarrassed. Till now knew that some temporary memory loss was common after the CRP, especially in those early days, but the whole experience had been memorably uncomfortable for him.

Now, he mounted the flight of steps and opened the oversized front door. Inside, it was warm at least, though the sight didn't cheer him much. As he had suspected, the dozens of faces he saw cramming shrimp and sipping cocktails were unfamiliar to him. Thankfully, most barely glanced over in his direction or ignored him entirely, but as he thumbed the tab for the coat closet and placed his coat on the hook that appeared out of the wall, he heard his name in a familiar tone.

"Till, you finally made it!"

Till turned to see his mother, a sixty two year old woman who looked about thirty. She wore a billowy tangle of black silky cloth around her shoulders and torso and black flowy slacks. Her short dark hair was starting to show strands of grey again.

Till greeted her and apologized. He tried thinking of an excuse but nothing believable came to him. Instead he changed the subject.

“Where’s Kayd?”

It was customary to view the body before the CRP was complete and his uncle was supposed to wake up at seven. His mother pointed him to the Ark room, which Till really couldn’t have missed. The entrance occupied a central location on the main floor and the general flow of people led directly into the yawning stairs that funneled down into the darkened room.

His mother pushed him gently, but firmly, towards the stairs. “Hurry, he’s going to wake up any minute now!”

“I have twen---fifteen minutes left,” he said as he paused to glance down at his wrist again, just to be contrary. Seeing the 6:47 that glowed brightly there, her gaze hardened a little and Till hurried off through the crowd, snagging a glass of champagne from a passing tray as soon as he had put a few dark suits and evening dresses between him and his mother’s disapproving glance. The crowd only thickened as he moved down the wide stairs that narrowed at the entrance to a grand room crammed with people. He weaved between guests until he reached the focal point of the room: a sleek and shiny black box set into the red marble floor behind a low silver railing. The box had silver trim and was about the size of a compact car. One clear panel allowed Till to see his uncle’s face, which looked fifteen or twenty years younger than when he had last seen him at one of his dinner parties the past summer. Alongside the panel, Till could see subdued lights, indicating that the Ark was operating correctly.

A loud chime ran through the room, startling Till. Champagne splashed over the top of his flute, splattering onto his dark grey jacket. Till wiped at the droplets that still clung there and

scowled at the glowing “10:00” that had appeared above the chamber. The holographic numbers started to count down and excited murmurs ran around the room. Waiters circulated with fresh trays of champagne and guests without a glass, or an empty glass, took one. Till drained what remained in his and replaced it with a new one.

The chime had run through the house and the stragglers from upstairs were filing into the room. Till suspected that his uncle had invited half the city. He thought he saw a CEO from Bionova that he had seen on a magazine cover once but the chamber had started to rise up out of its cavity now and blocked his view before he could get a good look. As it rose, the box tilted forward so that Till was nearly face to face with his uncle.

By the time the countdown reached “01:00” the room was uncomfortably full. Till was pressed forward and the railing jabbed his knee. New lights lit up around the window as the awakening process began. Suddenly aware of how close he was to his uncle’s face, Till tried to back up, but the crowd enclosed him. The crowd’s murmur turned into a hush and all eyes turned expectantly to the small window in the black box. The countdown reached “00:00” and disappeared as Kayden Rogers’ eyes blinked open. The crowd raised their glasses. Kayden smiled, a little blarily, and the crowd cheered. Brightly colored celebratory lights flashed around the room. Guests flung off their black jackets or rolled them down into loose belts, revealing brightly colored shirts underneath. Women waved hands over their dresses turning them from black to shimmering silver or to colorful floral patterns. Till’s mother undid a clasp and the elaborately tangled black cloth around her shoulders and torso fell, revealing another layer beneath it, this one printed with flowing swirls of lavender and white. The fabric from the top turned inside out as it fell, covering the black slacks and turning the whole outfit into a colorful

full length dress. Till watched the crowd, feeling a little like an atheist at a faith healing. He blinked as, in a matter of seconds, Till's mother and the roomful of people transformed from funeral to party. As she straightened her newly flamboyant dress, Till's mother caught his eye. Till sighed and unbuttoned one button of his dark jacket, revealing a sliver of his faded red shirt underneath.

The guests toasted and downed their champagne before heading back up the stairs to let Kayden orient himself after his week of unconsciousness and get dressed. As Till followed the crowd out he glanced back and saw the CRP recovery personnel enter from a side door that had been practically invisible before. The two serious-faced women in white medical coats headed toward the chamber, which was slowly lifting its lid to reveal his uncle's bare feet, then calves and knees. Steps had appeared from the box and descended over the railing. Till turned and walked upstairs to the party that was now in full swing.

He ordered a gin rickey at the bar and tried to find a quiet corner where he could drink in peace. No luck. Amazing, he thought, all this house and no quiet corners. If he designed a house, it would be made exclusively of quiet corners. Instead, he rested his drink on an empty table and alternated between searching for familiar faces and avoiding eye contact. By now, most people had found their place in the party and were carrying on loud conversations over the bland music that filled any gaps in the nearly constant din.

Scanning the crowd, the age demographics were impossible to guess. Till, being twenty-three, was just entering the age range into which everyone seemed to fall. Till couldn't tell who was truly his age and who was revisiting this age for a second, third, or even fourth time. The room was full of people who looked young and smooth faced like Till. Sometimes he

could tell ages by clothing or haircut, but here it seemed that everyone was trying their hardest to look alike. Till wondered if they could tell that he was a true twenty-three. Could they see the inexperience in his eyes, in his mannerisms?

He saw his mother pull away from a group to greet someone walking by in a tight, bright blue dress. He would have guessed the woman was half his mother's age, but realized with a start that his mother actually only looked maybe a year or two older. He tried to study his mother with an unfamiliar eye. When Till had been in high school she had looked much older, but then she had gone through CRP again and now she only looked a few years older than him, people might guess they were siblings instead of a mother and son who were thirty-nine years apart. Even though Till knew she looked younger now, her crows feet gone and her revitalized metabolism thinning her out, he still saw the mother he remembered. He remembered her eyes filling with tears when he hugged her after graduation and, to him, they were the same eyes that had watched him clamber over rocks on trips to the coast when he was little, and were the same eyes he saw now, engaged in polite surprise at whatever the woman in blue had just said. He tried to see her true age in the way she rested her hand on her collarbone or rolled her glass in her fingers. Till found it impossible to see anything other than his mother in these gestures. He was too close to the subject of study.

The woman his mother had greeted smiled and moved on to another group. Alone for a moment, his mother raised her drink to her mouth, almost taking a sip, as she looked around the room. Her eyes fell on Till and he raised his drink to her in greeting. She smiled and came over to him.

“Enjoying yourself fully, I see,” she said.

He rolled his eyes and looked around, “Not really my kind of party.”

“Well, it’s good that you came,” she said. Till didn’t say anything and they both looked around for a moment. His mother raised her glass to her lips again, actually taking a drink this time. She examined her drink for another moment before saying, “I think your uncle wants to talk to you about Bionova again.”

Till groaned and looked to the ceiling. “I’ve told him-”

“I know, I know,” she said quietly, “and you can do what makes you happy, you know that,” she set down her glass and looked at him. “But he’s never going to stop thinking that Bionova is the better option, so just let him say his bit. And don’t get into a big debate with him, just listen and then you can go home if you want.”

“I already know it’s a good option, it’s just not what I want to do, why can’t he accept that?” He was gripping his glass too tightly and he made himself set it down. “I don’t care if I make less money, I don’t have a love affair with CRP like him.”

“Don’t be rude. Just because someone doesn’t understand your aversion to CRP doesn’t mean they’re having a love affair,” she gave him a reproachful glance. “He means well, don’t antagonize him because he cares.”

Till was tempted to roll his eyes again but leaned over the table with his chin on his hands instead, his fist covering pursed lips. He didn’t care to get into this with his mother again, it wasn’t their fight anyway. He had his ideas about what his uncle truly cared about, but bringing that up would only hurt his mother unnecessarily. She didn’t see the difference between her and Kayden. She gave Kayden the benefit of the doubt because she assumed he had a good heart like she did. Not that Till thought Kayden was evil; arrogant and ignorant were the words that Till

would choose. He might throw in overly-enthusiastic if no one stopped him. But his mother remembered the brother she had grown up with before Bionova or CRP existed, when they were well-off but not extravagantly wealthy, and Kayden had been a protective and loving presence. She didn't think the money had changed him because the money hadn't changed her. Till had never really known Kayden Rogers when he hadn't been filthy rich, but he had pieced together some images from his mother's childhood stories. He knew there had been a Kayden who had been willing to let a little sister trail along with him when he went out with friends or even as a "chaperone" on dates sometimes. Till understood, however, that the Kayden he knew was probably there even then, secretly enjoying being the sage, the source of infinite wisdom, to an impressionable eleven year old who idolized him. It was also possible that some dates reacted well to a guy with a soft spot.

"Just listen to him, okay?" his mother asked, and he could see that the source of infinite wisdom was winding towards them through the crowd of people, accepting the congratulations and well-wishes of everyone on the way. "You can do whatever you want in the end, but just give him a chance," she continued, almost to herself, "he does have a point."

Till promised his mother he would do his best and finished off his drink. He attempted to head to the bar for another but his mother's hard eyes and unamused smile stopped him. He was trying to suck the last of the alcohol from the ice cubes when his uncle finally made his way to their table. He was a tall man wearing a white linen summer suit that almost made Till forget that it was a brisk forty-five degrees out. It was always summer in this mansion, he guessed.

"Till Pickle!" his uncle greeted him with his customary nickname that made Till grind his teeth.

“How are you feeling?” Till wanted simultaneously to linger on pleasantries forever and also to skip ahead to the lecture he knew was coming, just so it could be over.

“Never better, buddy, believe me,” his uncle said. Yep, over-enthusiastic was a good word, Till thought.

His uncle continued, “The Ark never fails to make me feel like myself again,” Kayden always managed to make “The Ark” sound like some holy ritual. “Actually, that’s one reason we’re trying to get it approved for more frequent therapeutic use. Why wait until you’re almost dead to have it done? I’d use it once a month if I could!”

Till made a noncommittal noise and tried to hide his alarm at his uncle’s news behind his glass. The empty glass must have let some of it show through because his uncle started in quickly.

“Obviously, we’re not ready to use it that often, we’d have to shorten the process by about four days for that to be a reality and, of course, safety is the top priority,” he rattled on quickly. “Actually, we’ve got a really great team in charge of that,” he raised his glass in apparent toast to the safety team and said, casually, “I think there’s a place on that team for someone like you, you know. It would be a great fit for someone who really cares about the safety and the ethicality of what we’re doing. It’s a team of people with concerns like what you’ve brought up to me before. We really value their input.”

Till nodded serenely, trying to restrain himself lest his mother perceive the mocking nature of the gesture. This was certainly a new tactic from his uncle, playing on Till’s very reasons for not wanting to be involved with Bionova in the first place. He had to admit, his uncle was clever.

“It’s a place where you could really make a difference, work from the inside to make the changes you think are important.”

“I don’t think Bionova would like the changes I would make,” Till said, and his mother gave him a warning glance.

“Well, everything within reason, of course, but I think you’d be surprised,” Kayden said, smile as magnanimous as ever. “Think about it, Till, it’s a great opportunity. ‘Be the change you want to see’ and all that,” he looked around the crowded room. “You know, I actually think the head of the oversight team is here tonight,” he turned away saying, “Let me see if I can send Lee your way.”

Before Till could tell him he really did not need to talk to Lee, his uncle was on his way towards one of the bigger groups across the room.

“Wait here,” Kayden called back, “Lee is great!”

Till sighed and put his glass to his mouth again before he remembered it was empty. His mother was looking at him. He tipped the empty glass back anyway.

“What?” Till said into his glass. “I am not talking to another person about this, mom. You said, ‘listen to Kayd and go home,’ you said that!”

“I just think-” his mother started, then stopped. “What’s the harm in meeting this person? He can describe the team and the job to you in depth. You can make an informed decision.”

“Mom! I am informed! That’s why I don’t want the job,” he could feel angry heat rising in his chest and unbidden words spilled out of his mouth. “I get that CRP could have saved your husband but that doesn’t mean we should just ignore the consequences of it.”

His mother blinked and looked away. Till flushed and was immediately sorry he had brought up Austin. He had died of cancer just two years before the Lazarus Cell breakthrough made CRP possible. He and Adalee had been trying to have a child but hadn't been able to before he died. That hadn't extinguished Adalee's desire to have a child, though, and she had gone through CRP to reset her biological clock and increase her chances for a healthy pregnancy. She had chosen a sperm donor soon after and had raised Till alone. His mother liked to pretend that Austin was his father but Till had no genetic connection to him and had never met him, except through old videos.

“Mom, I-”

“I think *you* might be ignoring more consequences than you think,” his mother set her half-full glass down and turned away. “Do what you want, you suffered through talking to your uncle, I guess you can go home now.”

Till wanted to say more, to stop her, but he was still mad. He didn't really blame Kayden, as annoyed as he was by him. He felt he knew who Kayden was and what he wanted, but the subtle manipulations by his mother hurt. Sometimes he could pretend she was proud of the work he did, but at times like this it was clear that she thought he was wasting his talent and his life. The internship at Bionova had been set up for him from the day he chose his bioengineering major. And Till had been excited about that for a while; he knew it was a glamorous and lucrative career path. But, as he learned more about the science of CRP throughout his undergrad program, he began to have doubts.

Then he had met Morty and his unofficial group. They sometimes called themselves Life Cyclers or just Cyclers. They were unofficial because, although voicing opposition to CRP

wasn't illegal, associating yourself with a group that looked anything like a death cult was a good way to get put on a watchlist. The Cyclers had opened Till up to a whole new realm of doubts. They believed that there would be unintended long term practical and biological consequences to CRP but they were more focused on the philosophical side of it. They believed that the act of growing old and dying was essential to the human experience and that there was unimaginable cultural collateral damage in turning that cycle into a flat line. The group had read and discussed literature about death and about the search for eternal life and the consequences of eternal life. They read pre-CRP science-fiction and Hawthorne and Shakespeare and Plato. They watched old sci-fi and dystopian shows and movies from the first half of the 21st century and even some from the previous century if they could find them. They talked about how, yes, there was still death, an Ark couldn't save a person who couldn't be stabilized enough to endure the CRP prep, so people died in accidents all the time, but they argued that the *process* of death had been eliminated.

“There's no metaphor for life anymore,” Morty had said emphatically at one of their evening meetings in his apartment. “The whole Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter cycle is gone, there's no dawn, midday, twilight, and nightfall.”

There were no new metaphors to describe human life. Humans relied on cycles, they couldn't comprehend unending lines, he argued, it was like trying to comprehend God. He said people liked to imagine they were in an unending Summer, but that that was an inadequate metaphor. It *was* ending, but also being reset, and reset, and the resetting, the stagnation, would build up until humanity collapsed under its oppressive weight.

“And is it really the Summer of their life that they’re reliving?” Morty would cry.

“Physically, maybe, people are being reset to the beginning of their prime every few years, but their brains aren’t reset, are they?”

This was one of the aspects of CRP that was troublingly unclear. What exactly did happen to the mind during your time in the Ark? How did the Lazarus Cell decide which brain cells needed regenerating and which were healthy enough to be left alone? The short term amnesia was well documented but it wasn’t exactly clear what caused it or how it could be eliminated. These gaps in the knowledge about CRP were what troubled and interested Till. Morty and the other Life Cyclers were more interested in the effect an eternal stagnation might have on a person. Or on humanity.

Till didn’t get as excited about it as Morty had, but he thought about it, and it fed into his fears about the science of CRP. He knew how short the human trials of early CRP had been before it was used as a life-saving procedure in select hospitals around the nation. Although most short-term side effects had been cleared up quickly with better preparation beforehand, he knew there could be unforeseen consequences looming in the future. There could be side effects that didn’t show up for decades, or even centuries, which in the past hadn’t mattered much, but now might cause real trouble. They were still relatively close to the start of the CRP timeline. No one had undergone a fourth round of CRP yet and only a very small portion of people had gone through three rounds. He wondered how closely the process was being monitored by Bionova and what kind of data they were collecting on repeat CRP procedures. He had to admit he would love the access working for Bionova would give him. He might be able to answer a lot of questions by getting an inside look into their procedures for data monitoring and collection. He

wondered how much autonomy he would be given, though. He doubted Bionova would allow him to reach, or publish, conclusions that would damage their bottom line. If he could just get in and grab enough information and get out, he could spread it from outside the company. But now he was thinking like some kind of terrorist, he thought. Who knows what Bionova would be able to do to him for corporate espionage? His own uncle might not be able to save him, if he would even be willing to after his nephew attempted to ruin his beloved company.

No, it wasn't worth it, he decided. Bionova could easily write him off as a disgruntled employee, they could also make sure he never worked again. He was happy making his small, unglamorous contribution to the bioengineering world at Advanced Myoelectric Prosthetics. The small company designed prosthetic limbs that could be connected to the nervous system and controlled like a natural limb, although now most of their work was trying to find ways to make the myoelectric sensors compatible with CRP. Till was a little annoyed that even with AMP he couldn't avoid Bionova, but at least he could leave the fight up to someone else and just live his life. He sighed and swirled the melted ice around in his glass. Then he set it back down and checked the time. It wasn't eight yet but Till felt worn out from the whole night. The voices around him ran together into a drone that seemed to close in on him. He was alone at his table but the wall of bright colored clothing around him felt suffocating. Till tapped his watch to call a car and searched in vain for an open path to the door. He would have to forge his own way through.

Eventually he managed to push through the press of people and slipped into the empty foyer, the din of conversation and laughter following him. Till pushed his thumb against the tab outside the foyer closet and his coat slid out of the wall. He took it from the hanger and had one

arm in a sleeve when he saw a woman walking towards the door where he stood alone. Her hair alternated blonde and purple and the ends danced along her neck as she walked. She was wearing a dress that had probably been black before the wake, which she had since lightened to sun-behind-clouds grey. She had put her black “mourning” overcoat back on, making her stand out as a muted, somber presence among the silvers and pastels of the other party goers. Till guessed that she looked a few years older than him, although the conservative clothing might be making her seem older. She smiled at him as she walked up.

“Till Bardeux?”

Chapter Two: The Offer

“Yeah,” Till nodded, one arm still caught in his coat sleeve. The woman stuck her hand out. Till tried to push his hand the rest of the way through the twisted sleeve but it caught. He struggled with it for a second but finally gave up and pulled it back out. Embarrassed, he shook her hand.

“Uh, nice to meet you-”

“Presley Fowler,” she said. “You’re a bioengineer for Advanced Myoelectric Prosthetics, right? I’ve seen what you’re working on, impressive for a new guy,” she smiled and raised her eyebrows. The expression animated her face and made her seem younger.

“Oh, thank you,” Till tried not to stumble over his words. He hadn’t been a stranger to women in college, but he wasn’t used to them coming right up to him with compliments. Also, this woman seemed to know a lot about him. A suspicion started to dawn on him.

“Are you, uh... do you work with prosthetics too?” he asked, fairly certain that the answer would be no. She shook her head.

“No, not usually. I’m actually part of a team that monitors the cell renewal process for safety and ethical concerns at Bionova,” she said.

“Presley, does my uncle call you Lee?”

She shrugged, “Most people do,” Her smile tinged with mischievousness as she asked, “Why, who’s your uncle?”

Till gestured wide, his coat still dangling from one arm, “Just the man who brought us all together to his humble abode tonight.”

Lee laughed. It didn't sound like just a polite laugh either, Till noticed. She tilted her head to the ceiling and laughed loudly.

“Humble! That's not usually the word I use to describe Kayden Rogers.”

Till laughed despite himself. He couldn't help liking this woman. She seemed honest and open. Her laugh drew him in and made him feel at ease. The possibility that Kayden had coached her to use Till's distaste for him to win favor crossed Till's mind, but he didn't think the idea rang true. Or maybe he just hoped it didn't.

“So he sent you to recruit me to work for Bionova, huh?”

“He mentioned he has a gifted nephew who needs a better job and is skeptical of CRP,” she explained. “Skepticism is what our team is built on.”

“And Bionova happily pays top dollar to a team hostile towards their bread and butter?” Till asked.

“I didn't say hostile, but yes, they are willing to let us make sure their product is safe and ensure they won't get any bad press down the road,” she pushed her thumb against the closet tab and waited for her coat. “They let us run pretty free, but it's mostly up to them what they do with what we find or suggest.”

“So they can bury anything unpleasant,” he smiled sardonically. “That makes sense.”

“Kayden was right, you are not a fan of Bionova.” She took her coat from the hanger and the hanger slipped back into the wall. “What'd they do to you?” she laughed.

He opened his mouth and then closed it again. He pulled his coat on.

“They're a corporation and money is their top priority, but they're not evil, Till. If we discovered anything seriously wrong, they wouldn't ignore it.”

“But you haven’t discovered anything seriously wrong yet?” he asked.

She shrugged, pressing her thumb to the closet panel, “I guess that depends on your definition of seriously wrong, but so far they’ve been willing to work with us and listen to us about every issue we’ve encountered.”

She grabbed her coat as it slipped out of the wall and pulled it on. She stepped towards the entrance, “Come on, I want to show you something.”

“What?” Till looked at her blankly, “Where?”

“She opened the huge front door and gestured for him to go outside. Wind rushed in to meet them. “I have a car waiting, I want to show you our lab.”

“What? I – I already called...” he trailed off. At the bottom of the steps a car waited silently, its lights dimmed to conserve energy. The sleek black metal gleamed in the lights from the house. It had to have been a private car to drive right up to the house, the public use car he had called would have been waiting in the street.

“Doesn’t look like yours is here yet, let’s take mine,” she followed him through the door. “Unless you’re busy tonight?”

He shrugged helplessly. Lee made it seem reasonable, like he was just going on a little field trip. Besides, spending the evening with her sounded more interesting than sitting at home or staying at his uncle’s party.

“I guess I could reschedule some things,” he said.

They went down the steps together and the car doors opened for them. As they got in, Lee talked about how willingly Bionova funded the set up and running of their lab. Spending on

safety looked good on the PR side and, additionally, the lab had proven valuable to progressing the tech so to them it was a win-win.

The car hummed quietly down the long driveway and into the road. Presley told him about the five people who worked on the team already. They all worked with other branches but together they were the core of safety research for Bionova. They were looking to expand the team by at least two more within the next month. They were trying to fill out some specialized areas they were lacking right now.

“I already have a job, you know.”

“Well, you would actually keep your job if you worked for the team. You would just work a few days a week, basically as a consultant. You’d be our myoelectric sensor and prosthetics specialist.”

Till leaned back in his seat. Everything seemed to be taken care of. Kayden, or Lee, or Bionova, had carefully removed every obstacle in his way. He still had misgivings, but he was starting to realize that he was almost certain to take the job by the end of the night. He sat there, nodding, and wondered how much Suong, his current boss, already knew about the situation Bionova had so carefully engineered.

“Does my boss know about all this?”

Lee grinned sarcastically, “Yeah, she sent all your stuff over yesterday,” she shook her head, “No, we haven’t talked, but I’m sure we can work it out with Ms. Thank.”

Till didn’t doubt it. He expected that Suong would jump on the opportunity to partner with a giant like Bionova. It would lend her relatively small operation a lot of credibility and

attention. He turned to stare at the mostly darkened houses passing by outside and to take a moment to try to wrap his head around everything.

“They don’t mind us coming in this late?”

“The lab? No, we tend to work whenever we feel inspired. The cleaning crew probably hates us but it’s not unusual for one or two of us to stop by at night or on weekends. Scanlocks let us in whenever.”

“Well, it feels a little clandestine. Do I need to hide in a trunk or something?”

“Nah, we’ll sneak you in through the ventilation system.”

It was easy talking to Lee. He wondered what it would be like working with her. *If* everything felt right, he reminded himself. He relaxed as the car whisked them past the solar farms and into the sprawling suburbs, which grew denser until their car was sliding between the bases of immense towers, nearly brushing the other autonomous vehicles quietly navigating the city nightscape. The conversation turned to small talk until the car pulled up to a security gate and the gate opened automatically, allowing them onto Bionova’s sprawling campus. They passed by several glass office buildings with glowing Bionova logos displayed prominently on their fronts. A blue cell was dividing into two to form a friendly ‘B’. The cell had two glowing yellow centers behind a blue hex pattern, Bionova’s representation of JVICI-syn6.2, known popularly as the Lazarus Cell. Ahead of them the road was blocked by a heavy slatted gate. The window slid down and Lee pressed her hand against the screen waiting on a podium before the gate. The gate lifted and they continued into a maze-like compound of indistinguishable warehouses and cement buildings. Finally, the car stopped in front of a cement bunker of a building with no identification that Till could see.

“Home,” Lee indicated towards the small door in the front. They exited the car and the doors clicked shut behind them. The car sat waiting for them to return, dimmed and dormant. Lee flipped open a pad next to the door and once again pressed her hand against the screen beneath. The door locks thunked solidly and the screen glowed green. Till followed Lee in to a short breezeway and another door slid up and out of sight. Lights blinked on beyond the door frame and Till was greeted by an open, inviting room. Plants and couches snaked around the space, occasionally forming natural pockets of privacy, where there were workstations for each scientist. Some had one, two, or three gleaming black screens, most of them had Ark parts lying out in various stages of dismantling.

Lee let him take it in for a moment before leading him to the right side of the room. “Here’s my office,” Lee indicated to a neat space nestled between low walls with several small trees growing from them. Two screens stood black and waiting, but Lee waved a hand over the center of her desk and a large holographic Bionova logo sprang into view. She moved her hand and the logo was replaced by a central object that Till thought might be some sort of cell surrounded by numbers and readouts and that Till didn’t understand. She poked at the pieces of the hologram to move them slightly and some of the numbers changed by a few decimals.

“What I’m working on currently. That’s a neuron sixteen hours into its sixth exposure to the Lazarus Cell.”

Till looked at her in shock. “Sixth exposure? I didn’t think anyone had done more than three,” his mother had been an early adopter of CRP and she still had only undergone the procedure twice.

Lee shook her head. “I should say, that’s a *theoretical* neuron sixteen hours into its sixth *theoretical* exposure to the Lazarus Cell,” she poked a part of the hologram and several numbers changed again. “Now we’re seeing it at eighteen hours,” she said, “You can just start to see the cell splitting now.”

“Splitting? That quickly?” From what Till had seen from searching for ways that his prosthetic sensors could survive the cell renewal process, the body’s cells didn’t start actually splitting and regenerating until almost fifty hours after being introduced to the Lazarus Cell.

“Yeah, according to our projections,” Lee explained that the main difference in successive CRPs was that the body’s cells reacted to the Lazarus Cell more quickly. Testing suggested that the sixth CRP should be complete in two days instead of the typical five days. Lee twisted her fingers on the hologram and the cell split the rest of the way, then those cells split, and repeated until the cells grew past the field of the hologram and disappeared. She pointed to a glowing ‘46 hrs’. “That’s the end of the process.”

“Amazing,” Till whispered. “Why is it faster?”

Lee raised her hand above the hologram and lowered it swiftly. The hologram shrunk and disappeared into the desk. “Well, we’re not sure exactly, but it seems that the body’s cells remember the process, to some extent. The Lazarus Cell’s whole purpose is to ‘teach’ the other cells to regenerate, and it seems the cells are slightly easier to teach each time.”

Till considered. He hadn’t heard anything about this. He supposed that if this was a relatively new discovery, Bionova wouldn’t go public until they felt they understood it more fully. He asked Lee what other differences there were in later CRPs.

“None, that we’ve found. The process looks the exact same first, second, and third time around, cellularly. Beyond that, it does seem that the side effects, like memory loss, lessen over multiple rounds.”

“Why is that?”

“Again, we don’t exactly know. We haven’t figured out why the memory loss happens in the first place. We know the memory games in prep eliminate most of the loss, so the working theory is that when the brain cells split and regenerate, some stagnant brain processes are lost, things you don’t think of or do often but you can normally recall with prompting. It could be that what is there to lose is lost the first time, reducing the risk of loss in multiple rounds.”

“But the memories come back, usually,” Till said, tilting his head.

Lee nodded, “Right, the brain creates multiple paths to things, so it’s usually just a case of the brain locating the paths that weren’t lost.”

“And if all the paths are lost?”

“Then the memory is lost, but that’s very rare, and like I said, it’s stagnation that seems to cause loss, so it’s never the significant memories, like parts of your identity, or how to walk or speak, for example.”

Till furrowed his brows, remembering his uncle’s glassy eyed look when he had greeted him at his first wake. “Huh, that’s good,” he said wryly.

Lee waved toward the back of the large room. “Want to see the interesting part of our lab?”

Till looked around the welcoming and tech crammed office, “So, this is the boring part?”

“Oh yeah. This is the work part. We keep the toys in the back.”

Till waved her forward, "Lead the way."

He followed her past two more workstations, each with a set-up and equipment unique to the person who worked there. She put her palm against a screen next to a metal door. Numbers appeared on the screen and she entered a code. The door slid to the side to reveal a large elevator. They entered and the door slid shut behind them. The elevator dropped silently for a moment before it stopped and another door slid open. This time Lee gestured for Till to step forward. When he did he saw that they were in a room probably double the size of the one above it, the industrial ceiling high above them. The air hummed with electrical efficiency and smelled of well oiled parts. The space was lined with screens and machinery, but the entire middle of the room was sunk about fifteen feet down and catwalks crisscrossed the open space. He walked up to the edge and looked down at dozens of Arks. Some were like his uncle's, but others were barely recognizable as CRP chambers. There were some no larger than a briefcase, while some were double the normal size. Some had extraneous tubing and wires snaking around them or had other machines hooked up to them.

"What are all these?" he asked in quiet awe.

"That bank there is all standard Ark units," Lee answered, coming up behind him and pointing at five black chambers to the far right, "and then the next one in, the big one, is Bertha, for larger animals."

Till must have looked confused because she continued, "You know, horses, cows, hippos, that kind of thing." She laughed as Till looked back to imagine a hippo in the elevator they had just stepped out of. "They have their own entrance, if that's what you're wondering."

That had only been part of Till's wonder. He also hadn't realized the chambers were tested on any animals other than rodents and primates.

Lee explained that several of the others were modified human chambers and the small ones were for chimps, rats, insects, and other small test animals.

The mention of modified human chambers caught Till's attention. "You use the modified ones on humans? Who?" Till asked.

"Volunteers. We put out ads for participants with certain features that we need to test on, and Bionova offers compensation. In addition to the free-of-charge CRP, obviously."

"What happens if something goes wrong?"

"They would be further compensated, depending on the severity of the issue. That is, if something ever went wrong. We test extensively before human trials are even thought about."

"Nothing has ever gone wrong?"

Lee hesitated, and looked Till in the eye. "I wouldn't say that, we've had failed modifications, but that either means the CRP is still mostly successful, or the participant leaves without getting CRP."

"How about failed animal tests?"

Lee nodded somberly, "Those have happened. I think the worst since I started here was an injured chimp who was beyond stabilization when we got him. We think he was caged up by a black market animal dealer and broke free."

She stopped walking along the catwalk and turned to Till.

"He got hit by a mag train and was basically dead when we got him. A vet had done what she could but there was no saving him. We saw it as an opportunity to try out a trauma therapy

modification Franz had been working on. The result wasn't pretty," she grimaced and shook her head.

Till hadn't heard that Bionova was even working on chambers that could treat physical trauma patients. Old medical techniques had to be used if someone was in an accident, and if those couldn't stabilize the person, the Ark couldn't save them.

"Wasn't pretty...how?" Till asked, both curious and afraid of the answer.

She looked him in the eye. "It's been classified by the corporation, but I want to be as honest with you as possible. This information has been reported to the authorities but has not been released to the public."

Till dropped his eyes under her gaze. "So you need to know if I agree to work here or not?"

She looked back down at the Arks. "No, I don't want to hold that over you. I'm hoping you'll see what you can do here and make the choice on your own. I just need you to know that if this information did get out, there would be consequences."

Her tone was still casual but Till thought she looked serious enough. "For me or for you?"

"Yes," she looked back at him and flashed a little smile. Then grew serious again. "It wasn't like we killed the poor guy, he was dead no matter what. The whole thing was a long shot anyway. But, the result was gruesome enough that Bionova didn't want such images connected to their name."

Till waited. "Okay, what happened?" he finally asked.

“We hoped the modification would regrow tissue that had been lost in the accident. And it did, but not well,” she ran a finger along her arm, from the inside of the elbow to about half way down to her wrist, “his arm had been sheared off here.”

Then she put her hands together into a diamond shape and placed them over her ribcage, “and he had a huge chunk out here, one leg was mangled pretty badly,” she trailed off, then continued, “the tissue started to regrow, but the modified Ark wasn’t able to get the specificity it was supposed to. Instead of an arm, the tissue that regrew was a mess, just a lumpy limb, or limb shape, going this way, another deformity growing out this way. Most of the tissue looked inside out and raw.”

“Jesus, why did you think the chamber would work?”

“Like I said, it was a long shot. Franz was still running a lot of pre-live tests on it, but when we got this chimp he wanted to try it. He was pretty disappointed. He ended up scrapping almost everything and starting back at square one. We wanted to make sure we never put an animal through anything like that again.”

“Shouldn’t new modifications be R and Ds job?” Till asked.

Lee shrugged and started walking along the railing. “Well, in a way, we’re a branch of R and D, but originally a development team came up with the mod and sent it along to Franz. He had already sent it back to them for retooling twice. He hoped the last fix they came up with was enough.”

They rounded the corner and Till could see through the clear panels of the standard Bionova Arks now. Four of them were empty and dark but the last one had several lights glowing dimly and he could just make out a bearded face behind the small rectangle of glass.

“Robert Hernandez,” Lee told him when he asked about the man, “Insisted on smoking those old style cigarettes until his lungs were mush but he couldn’t get government assistance for CRP until he was an inch from death, so he volunteered here.”

She explained how, when he woke up, they would keep him in a nearby facility for a week, conducting tests, then he had also agreed to come in monthly for follow up tests indefinitely.

“We are most interested in real long-term effects, so we are setting up a group of subjects who we can keep testing years after CRP, and after multiple CRPs,” she said, “We have a couple hundred who we’ve been keeping an eye on since the early days. Some of them as far back as ‘45.”

“The originals,” Till had to admit he was impressed with the lab, and with Lee. She had been open with him, and genuinely seemed to be working towards an end that Till could understand and respect. They continued talking until they had made a full revolution of the room. Bionova seemed to have spared no expense in furnishing the lab. Till didn’t see any of the out of date equipment that he and his coworkers at AMP dealt with.

As they got back into the elevator, Lee said, “I have to admit, a part of this is purely selfish for me.”

Till turned to look at her and waited for her to continue.

“I am deathly afraid of CRP. I have been since I was a kid. That’s basically how I became obsessed with it, I wanted to either prove for sure that it was absolutely safe, or I wanted to find evidence it wasn’t, so I’d never have to get it. Even now, I’m not sure which I way I want it to go.”

“You’ve never done CRP?”

The door slid open and the earthy green smell of the office plants replaced the oily metallic air of the basement. “Nope, I look my age, like you,” she stopped at her desk again. “In fact, my cell sample is part of our non-CRP control group. Maybe we can add yours to the pool once you start?” She nudged him playfully as she booted up her station.

“Wow, what a tempting sign-on bonus.”

Lee laughed her unselfconscious laugh again and said, “Come on, I’ll walk you out to the car, but I’m going to stay and get some work done tonight.”

Till gestured to her silver-grey dress. “So this is typical workplace attire? I’m not sure I have the wardrobe to work here.”

“I always have extra clothes in my locker,” she indicated to a door off to the side that Till hadn’t noticed before. “We keep it pretty casual here, usually.”

She walked him out the door and to the car that was still waiting. A light rain had started to fall in the chill air and condensation glistened on the windows. Till opened a door and raised his hand goodbye.

“We’ll call you, Till. I hope you’ll come work with us.”

“Yeah,” Till ducked into the car, “I mean, it...seems good.”

“Wait until you meet the rest of the crew,” she said. She reached past Till and pushed her hand against a screen on the dashboard of the car. Till caught himself looking at her ring finger before he realized it was her right hand. “There,” she said, pulling her head back out of the car, “that should get you back out through security.”

“Okay, well,” Till suddenly felt awkward and self-conscious. “Enjoy your exciting Friday night.”

“Oh, I will,” Presley smirked. Till smiled back as the door closed gently. The car turned around and Till watched Lee walk back into the building. She already seemed intent on getting back to work and she disappeared behind the door quickly. Till suspected her last comment hadn’t been entirely sarcastic. Meanwhile, the car whirred down the same path as an hour before. No, almost two hours, Till realized, activating his watch. He gestured subtly and the floating ‘10:16’ scattered into a blank bar.

“Presley Fowler,” he told it, “Bionova employee.”

Lee’s face appeared above his wrist along with her credentials and official title at Bionova. PhD in cellular biology from M.I.T., Head of Safe Cell Renewal (SCR), a prestigious team dedicated to continually making Bionova Cell Renewal Procedure Chambers safer and better! Till waved his hand across the image and saw several articles that mentioned Lee or her team, as well as a tab leading to her dissertation, which had apparently won some award. He was hesitating over the “Personal Life” tab when he looked up through his car’s rain spattered windshield and noticed a car heading towards him. The car had just pulled around a building on the other side of the security gate. Till frowned at it. Something struck him as off about the nondescript grey sedan but he couldn’t place it. There was no one in the car that Till could see, but this wasn’t exactly unusual. Till squinted at the oncoming car again, lit by his own car’s headlights, and realized that the other car’s lights were dimmed, as if it was in idle mode. Rather than idling, though, it was hurtling towards the security gate and showed no signs of slowing.

Alarmed, Till grabbed the wheel to activate manual piloting but nothing happened. The wheel continued to move gently under the car's guidance and the other car continued towards him.

"Car! There's a car!" he shouted at the car, hoping it would somehow figure out what he meant. Apparently unaware, the cars sped toward each other.

A spot light above the security gate switched on and bathed the oncoming car in harsh light. A guard shouted from a hidden alcove somewhere above the gate, but the car didn't slow. Rain splashed up from the tires and a cloud of mist trailed behind the empty car. Till struggled with the wheel in vain as his car continued toward the gate. As it approached, Till's car sensed the barrier and began to slow, but the other car did not. The unseen guard shouted again and Till heard a gunshot. The speeding car's windshield spiderwebbed around a small hole but it still didn't slow. Finally, Till's car sensed the oncoming collision and started to brake hard. Till lurched forward but kept his eyes on the strange car. The car veered slightly and smashed into the barrier off-center. The heavy gate crinkled slightly under the impact. Then, a moment later, Till watched the dark car fill with white, impossibly bright, light. The light, unable to be contained, pushed the doors, windshield, and hood outwards. The echo of the collision was drowned out by an all-consuming tearing sound. At last Till comprehended. "Bomb," he started to think, as the brightness reach his car. The windshield crinkled and a hot, stinging wave pushed him into darkness.

Chapter Three: The Gift

Lee heard the explosion from her workstation inside the SCR building. It was muffled and faint but still made her jump in alarm. She waved one of her screens on and opened a security map of the Bionova compound. Section A7, the zone surrounding the entrance they had come in two hours ago, had turned red and was flashing an emergency signal.

“What the hell...” she muttered under her breath, then, “Oh shit! Till!” She quickly locked up her station and spoke to the band on her wrist to call the security post in A7, but there was no response. The compound’s security system would have alerted police and fire already so she rushed out of the front door and ran across the narrow street to one of the enclosed carts that employees used to speed from building to building. The door opened as she approached and it whirred to life when she sat down. She cranked the wheel and squealed off towards the entrance.

As she careened around buildings she heard another explosion, farther away this time, and saw a distant gout of flame rise up from behind the buildings to her right. Seconds later another explosion thundered through the compound and she saw a glow in the rearview mirror of the cart. The flames looked like they could have come from the other two security gates. Jesus Christ, Lee thought, is this an attack? Before she pulled onto the street that lead out into the city she could see an ominous orange glow coming from between the buildings. The little cart’s tires skipped and chirped in protest as Lee nearly tipped the cart going around the last turn, but she slammed on the brakes as soon as she saw what was in front of her.

The car in which she had sent Till out was silhouetted against a wall of fire reaching towards the night sky. All the car’s windows were blown out. Another car, or what was left of it, was sitting where the gate had been, engulfed in flame. Bits of burning car and asphalt littered

the tarred surface around the two cars. The guard box above the gate had been almost entirely obliterated and Lee knew if the guard had been there he was almost certainly dead. The gate itself had disappeared but soot darkened shrapnel was scattered almost all the way to her cart.

What happened here? Lee jumped out of the cart and screamed Till's name as she ran toward the black Bionova escort car. She could feel the heat from the other car coming across the lot in waves. She coughed as oily smoke caught in her throat. Nearing the Bionova car she could see that the shatterproof windshield had largely remained intact, although it more closely resembled wrinkled cellophane than glass now, and was shrink-wrapped around the front seats. On the wheel side, where the airbag hung limp from the wheel, the glass was smeared with blood.

"Oh my God, Till!" Lee screamed, her voice catching on the smoke. She pulled off her baggy sweater, glad she had changed out of the evening dress as soon as Till had left, and used it to protect her hands as she tried to lift the windshield. Chunks of glass fell from the sheet as she pulled on it and it clung to the edges of the seats that the blast had pressed it against. She managed to fold the sheet of crushed glass back, and then fold it back again. As she pushed back the sheet, some chunks stayed behind, embedded in Till's face and body. She clamped her mouth tight as she took in the damage. It was hard to tell how bad it was, as most of Till was obscured by blood and debris. Blood flowed from gashes left behind when she lifted away the glass and he was webbed with lacerations. His jacket was in tatters. It seemed that the collision panel had at least protected the lower portion of his body, but blood from the dozens of cuts across his front was starting to pool in his lap and on the seat.

Lee could hear sirens in the distance as she tried to get her arms around Till's unconscious body. Every move she made seemed to make the blood pulse from the wounds faster but she was afraid that if the car's battery cells had caught fire Till could be breathing in toxic chemicals. She wrapped her sweater around his chest and under his armpits so she could pull him towards her. Stumbling back, she managed to tip and slide him out of the seat. Now his back rested on her legs and she scooted back, using her lower body as a stretcher, pulling him free of the car. She slid from beneath him to adjust her hold on him, then tried dragging him further. Now that he was on the ground, however, she realized he was too heavy for her to drag any farther, especially in his vulnerable state. She hoped they were far enough to avoid concentrated doses of any toxic smoke. Trying to put pressure on as many wounds as possible, she pressed against the sweater but pulled her hand away when something sharp snagged it. Beneath a remnant of jacket, something in the blood around Till's armpit glinted in the firelight. She pushed back his jacket and realized that a twisted piece of metal was jutting an inch or two out of the area where his arm met his chest. She was afraid to imagine how far it went into his body.

The safest thing to do was leave the shard there; in its current location it worked as a plug for what was probably a very deep puncture wound. She could hear the sirens, closer now, and hoped they would get here soon. Till didn't look like he could hold on much longer. He was still losing blood fast and his breathing was shallow and ragged. Blood trickled from his lips. Suddenly he gasped in a wheezing, scraping breath and his eyes shot open.

"Till! Help is coming," Lee attempted to sound calm and reassuring.

His head jerked up and she tried to push him back down gently.

“Just lie still. There was an explosion,” she said.

Till blinked and looked around wildly.

“You’re hurt but help is coming,” she hoped it would be coming quickly.

Till seemed not to hear. Instead he looked down at the shrapnel that stuck out of his armpit. His eyes were strikingly clear despite one being rimmed with blood. But she also saw something else in the clarity. There seemed to be a tinge of madness, or animal instinct, beyond thought. Before she could stop him, he reached up with his right hand and gripped the metal shaft, and in one swift jerk, ripped it from his body and flung it away, along with the bloody strips of cloth, and maybe something else, that clung to it. He screamed and stiffened as he did it, then promptly dropped back into unconsciousness. Now blood was pouring from the gaping wound that was left behind and Lee tried to move her makeshift bandage to cover this new leak. Till’s face, already pale, drained into a papery grey. Tracked with blood and lit by the flickering fires all around them it looked like the face of a sleeping demon.

Flames flashed from the wreck of the other car as another battery cell caught fire and exploded. Flaming debris spread across the entrance, blocking it almost entirely. Lee wasn’t sure the emergency personnel would even be able to get to them at this point, especially if she was right about the other two entrances being hit as well. Maybe they could drop down from a helo but with the buildings so close together that might be tricky. She needed to do something for Till, fast. She looked around frantically. She was surrounded by crackling fire, twisted debris, shattered glass, and flashing alarm lights. She looked to the cart she had driven here. If she could get Till on it she could bring Till into the cargo entrance of the lab and access the medical equipment there.

She twisted her wrist and glanced at the time. It had only been about seven minutes since the initial explosion and Till already seemed seconds away from death. She tried to peer through the flame and smoke that barricaded the entrance but the flames had risen and the smoke was dark and thick, the city around them blocking the fall breeze. She couldn't even tell if the police were here or not. She tried calling for help, her cry barely audible over the roar of flames. There was no answer except a weak moan from Till as his face reached a new shade of white.

Lee cursed in frustration and wrapped her sweater sleeves around her hands, using the sweater around Till's chest as a sort of litter. In this way, she could move him a few inches at a time, grunting and swearing loudly with each heave. Luckily, the cart was low to the ground and, backing into the rear seat, she was able to pull him in after her. She tucked his legs in and got him into as comfortable a position as she could in the cramped space. Collapsing into the driver's seat she glanced once more toward the entrance for any sign of emergency vehicles. Seeing nothing but fire, she pulled the cart around and retraced her crazed path back to the lab.

At the cargo entrance she pressed a bioscan panel that lit as she pulled up to it and the big door rolled up. She drove the cart into the bay and lights flicked on, glaring off shipments of equipment in barcoded metal containers that they had yet to unpack; the sensors, tools, and vials they had unpacked were organized on shelves lining the walls. Three partially disassembled Ark units stood along the back wall. A sturdy metal table sat against the wall next to them and Presley pulled aside it. She quickly realized that she would not be able to lift him up onto it and settled for stretching him out on the cement floor. She found a tarp and balled it up under his head in case he seized and then raced frantically along the shelves, collecting anything she thought might be useful. Kneeling beside Till, she carefully unwrapped her sweater. His wounds

were still pumping blood despite the amount of blood he had left in the parking lot and the back of the cart. She chose a canister with a short nozzle from the collection of equipment she had dumped on the floor next to Till. She sprayed the disinfectant and liquid bandage compound over his wounds, which covered most of his face and torso, careful to miss his eyes and airways. The wound near his armpit proved too large for the spray to hold and the blood continued to pour out. She ripped open a medpack that had hung on the wall and unwound a few feet of self-adhering gauze. She looped this around his armpit and shoulder. The blood instantly soaked the bandage but after applying several layers, the bleeding seemed to slow.

Now that she had treated the immediate threat, she wasn't sure what to do. Till was still unconscious, his breathing barely detectable. He hadn't stirred or made a noise since getting him out of the cart. She needed some more advanced help. She glanced at an Ark that stood in the corner. It was a highly modified unit that had a wide range of capabilities, but it was the standard medical sensors and stabilizers that Presley needed. Most importantly, it was the one unit that was assembled enough for its basic functions to run correctly. She ran to the unit and flung it open. She lowered the reclining bed until was horizontal, about a foot above the floor. She tucked the tarp under Till and dragged him to the bed. He slid much more easily over the smooth cement floor than he had on the asphalt outside. Getting him up onto the bed was more difficult but she managed to pull his head and torso up onto it with his legs draping on the floor, then pulled one leg up and then the other. She no longer heard or saw his breathing.

"Nonono, Till, breathe!" She quickly secured the clamps around his head, wrists, waist, thighs, and ankles and slid the bed back up into its inclined position.

The door closed on him and Presley heard the seal suck tight, Lights flashed on and numbers started scrolling beneath the glass panel that allowed her to see Till's bloodless face. The inner lights reflected off small glass shards still imbedded in his skin, turning his face into a patch of white starlit sky. A thin, unbroken line scrolled below the panel and the numbers dropped to zero. He had no heartbeat. Presley tried to use the Ark's defibrillator but the machine wouldn't allow it. It suggested CPR mode instead. Presley activated it and a mask lowered over Till's face. The machine engaged in a series of compressions and puffs of air into Till's inert lungs. Presley stood with her hands against the Ark, staring through the panel helplessly. The thin line continued, unbroken. Then, a small shake in the line. Followed by another. Gradually the little blips got stronger and more regular and the mask lifted away to allow Till to breathe on his own. Presley sighed in relief and let her forehead drop against the Ark. She closed her eyes and rested, listening to the now steady blips of Till's heartbeat. After a moment Presley leaned back again and studied the information panel. Presley frowned at one of the numbers and gestured at the panel to look at another readout. She flipped back to the first numbers and shook her head.

"What the hell?" she whispered to herself. She hadn't initiated the CRP at all, yet the readout indicated that Till was 17% complete with the process. They hadn't used this chamber in a few days but the last time they had, it had worked flawlessly. This was not a glitch that Presley had seen before, either. She scrolled sideways on the panel and tapped on it twice to bring up a microscopic view of several of Till's cells. Staring in bewilderment she shook her head slowly. She slid the view closer and had the chamber highlight and identify what she thought she was looking at. There, next to Till's normal cells, was the Lazarus Cell, manipulating and cajoling his

cells into regeneration. Presley put her fingers to her temples and pushed her hair back behind her ears, resting her hands on the back of her neck. She couldn't comprehend what was happening. The Lazarus Cell couldn't survive outside of an Ark, that was why the chamber was necessary. And while Till *was* in an Ark, she hadn't activated the process. Right now it was acting as nothing more than a glorified medscan.

“What...the hell,” she mumbled slowly. She gaped at Till's sleeping face. “What is this?”

In response, one of the shining bits of glass tumbled from where it had been stuck in Till's brow. Beneath was shiny pink skin, but no blood. Another piece of glass fell, then several more. Glass shards fell silently to the bottom of the chamber or caught in the folds of Till's clothing. Presley scrolled back to another screen on the information panel and saw that it indicated that Till was now 42% completed with the CRP.

Presley didn't know what the hell was going on but she knew this was unprecedented. Whatever was happening could change everything they knew about CRP. Shit, this could change the world. Why was the Lazarus Cell able to survive in Till's body without the chamber, why was the Lazarus Cell even present in the first place? How was the Lazarus Cell accomplishing in Till what it could not in the chimp: the regeneration of wounded tissue? Her head swam with questions. She slumped back against the hood of the cart and looked at the bloody tarp, the congealing blood in the backseat, and then back at the peacefully humming Ark. Till's face seemed peaceful now as well. She thought some color was returning and several trickles of blood were drying up. What was the Lazarus Cell doing in that blood? She stood up again and took a deep breath to settle her nerves. She looked back towards the outer door thoughtfully, then suddenly tapped at the control panel of Till's chamber. Two thin robotic arms extended towards

his neck. A needle slid out of one and drew blood and the other scraped a bit of tissue into an airtight capsule. Both left a drop of liquid bandage behind as they pulled away. *Probably unnecessary*, thought Presley. But she really didn't know. She suddenly felt like she didn't know anything anymore. None of this made sense and none of her experience with CRP helped her understand what was possible now.

Two capsules slid out of the side of the chamber and Presley grabbed them and placed them in a small pack she had pulled from a shelf. She tucked the pack into a pocket and took a quick, shaky breath. She had never felt this lost before, but she had also never felt such excitement. She was in uncharted territory and she knew whatever path she chose going forward would most likely alter the course of history. It was terrifying. A giddy laugh burst out before she squeezed her eyes shut and took another deep breath, a little steadier this time.

Chapter Four: The Awakening

Till was floating in a pool of water. The water that surrounded him was cool, cooler than the sun that beat down from directly above.

“That’s it! Keep your legs and stomach up and kick!” Till’s mother called from somewhere behind him. Till kicked erratically and his face sunk under the surface for a moment. He sputtered and reflexively lifted his face above the water, dropping his torso and butt.

“No, it’s okay. Keep your stomach up and your head will stay up too. Okay, now up and back with your arm. Now the other arm, that’s it.”

Till kicked and slowly windmilled his arms and his body started to move towards his mother’s voice behind him. He breathed in deep and puffed his chest and stomach up out of the water. Water dripped off his hand as it traveled above him and splashed him in the eye. The treated pool water burned and suddenly the sun blinked out and the burning spread around his eyeball and into his head, down his neck and from there it went all through his body. The splashing and his mother’s voice were gone, replaced by a silent burning void. Till couldn’t move. He was sinking, except there was no longer anything to sink into. The darkness faded to white light and realization faded in with it. One realization was that he itched maddeningly. He tried to raise his hands to scratch at something, anything, but his wrists stayed where they were, lost in white light. *I’m dead*, he thought. That made sense. He remembered the car now, the flash of light. He had said “bomb”, or he had thought it, and now he was dead. That wouldn’t be so bad except he was so damn *itchy*. And the pain. The burning. It was too much. Till screamed. The scream was deafening but he couldn’t stop now that he had let it out. He screamed until his throat caught and he started coughing.

Slowly, the blinding white light dimmed and Till started to be able to make out shapes in the light. There seemed to be a small window in front of him but he couldn't make out anything beyond it. He rolled his eyes around and saw walls inches away from him, lined with tubes, lights, and folded robotic arms with needles and other tools at the end of them. This concerned him. He looked down and saw his chest, covered in blood and bandages. This, too, concerned him. He looked at the window again. Shapes were starting to come into view beyond it. It was a window to... a warehouse? That didn't make sense.

Till blinked hard and his vision cleared a little. He blinked again and a woman's face appeared in the window. She looked scared and sweaty. Blonde and pink strands of hair clung to her face and Till was pretty sure he saw blood smears on her cheek. He looked down at his bloody torso. His blood?

“What's happening?” he rasped. “Where am I?”

She shook her head and Till saw her mouth move. She put her hand up to her ear and shook her head again. She couldn't hear him. He was in a sealed box with medical instruments in it. He remembered more now. He was at Bionova headquarters. The face belonged to Presley Fowler. Presley was head of safety and sanitation...no, that wasn't right. Safety and ethics for Bionova, she had access to...

Till's eyes widened and he shook against his restraints and screamed again.

“What did you do to me?” he screamed. “Get me out!”

Presley raised a finger and disappeared for a moment. When she reappeared, Till's box made a hiss and a pop and the wall in front of him started lifting away to the side.

“Till, stay still, you’re injured,” she said as Till immediately tried to free himself. “I’ll let you loose if you stay still. What do you remember?”

“What did you do to me? Why am I in an Ark?” Till said with a calm he didn’t feel. His body still burned but it was either less intense now or he was getting used to it.

“You were dying, I had to do something. All the entrances were blocked, there were three bombs, they wouldn’t have gotten to you in time, except-” she blurted out then stopped short.

“So you put me through CRP? How did that not kill me?” Till asked, his false calm subsiding and his voice rising.

“No! I just needed the medical readouts, I never started the process, but, Till-” she stopped short again. Then she reached out and pulled away the bloody bandage wrapped around Till’s shoulder and armpit.

“Look,” Lee said. Till looked down. She gently tore away the blood soaked gauze and underneath was a pink puckered scar. In the middle of it a small trickle of blood flowed out. Presley dabbed at it with a clean end of gauze and new blood oozed as she dabbed once, twice, but by the third time the trickle of blood slowed. Dab, dab, the trickle was replaced by pink new skin. The wound was a completely healed scar.

“Till, this was a hole, almost all the way through you, five minutes ago. It should have killed you,” she paused, “it...it may have killed you.”

Till stared at her. “What’s going on? What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything! I tried to stop the bleeding, I tried to bandage you up. I...” she was stumbling over her words, starting and stopping, and restarting sentences. “You woke up back by the car and ripped the shrapnel out of your chest. You were basically dead!” Presley was talking

fast now, her face flushed exertion and excitement. “I just put you in the Ark to see if I could get a heart rate, maybe use the defibrillator, but then...” she stopped short again. She looked up at him and chewed the inside of her lip. Till couldn’t decipher the look on her face. Was she...afraid?

Finally, she spoke, softly, like a doctor delivering an unwelcome diagnosis. “You have the Lazarus Cell in you. The Ark detected it and didn’t know what to do since it hadn’t initiated the process.”

Till shook his head. That wasn’t possible. The Lazarus Cell couldn’t survive without the chamber, and it was the chamber that introduced the cell into the body.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what I mean, I don’t know what any of this means. I just know you have the Lazarus Cell in you and it healed you!” She pointed at his pink scar then gestured vaguely at his face and the rest of his body.

“Let me out,” Till said, suddenly feeling claustrophobic and overwhelmed.

“Okay, just hold still. And take it easy. You were dead five minutes ago,” she loosened the head clamp first and Till stretched his neck. She undid the other clamps and raised her arm up to him so he could grab it for balance. He ignored it and pushed against the sides of the chamber. He stepped down onto concrete floor that was smeared with drying blood. He looked around. He wasn’t dizzy. Actually, he thought, he felt very good now that the burning and itching was fading away. He looked over at the shelves of equipment and the cart with pints of his blood ruining the back seat and floor. He squinted, was his vision sharper? He rolled his shoulders and swung his arms. He was a little stiff but he felt strong, fresh. He remembered his

uncle saying how good he felt after going through CRP. He tore at the bandages around his body and discovered, beneath the tattered remains of his shirt, countless tiny pink scars across his chest and stomach. As he watched a small pink line faded and disappeared into the normal flesh of his side. Even the scars were fading quickly.

“Got a shirt I can borrow?” Till smiled weakly.

“What?” Presley stared, then laughed shakily. “Yeah, I do,” she paused, listening to the sirens in the distance. “Then we need to get out of here,” she said, serious again.

Till frowned, confused, but nodded. The smell of blood in this place was unpleasant, the knowledge that it was all his blood was unsettling.

“Just...wait here. Are you okay?” Presley put a hand on his shoulder, then backed away towards a door. Till nodded again and she disappeared through the door. Till touched the scar at his armpit, then prodded it. It didn't hurt at all. He closed his eyes and let out a breath.

Lee came back a moment later with a black t-shirt, a sweatshirt, and sweatpants, all with the Bionova 'B' on them. She was also carrying a jacket for herself.

“Here, these are clean at least,” she said, handing them over. “You can change in the hallway behind that door if you want.”

“Is there a shower?” Till asked, looking down at the dried blood that still stained his body.

“No time, just change and let's go,” now that she was sure Till was fine, physically at least, Presley seemed almost frantic.

“What's the matter? Are we being attacked?” Till asked as he picked off his rags and pulled the t-shirt on. “What's going on?”

Presley shoved the jacket on and looked at Till. “I don’t know what’s going on out there. But do you want Bionova to know that your body may contain the secret to Ark-less everlasting life?”

Till stopped, one arm caught in a sleeve in front of Presley for the second time tonight. Realization started to sink in. A miracle had just happened. In people's eyes, *he* would be a miracle. What would he be in Bionova’s eyes? Money? The future? He pulled the shirt on. An experiment?

“So you don’t trust them completely?”

“Of course not,” Presley snapped, “And even if I did, do you? It’s your body. And, no one has seen anything like this, who knows what anyone will do?” She flung her arms up. Her eyes were wide but she looked tired. “Go! Get dressed.”

Till nodded and stepped into the hallway. The door closed behind him and he pulled off his jeans, which were stiff with blood. His shoes were stained but he didn’t have any others so he put them back on after he pulled on the sweatpants. He picked up the sweatshirt and glanced at his watch. It was cracked and unresponsive but the release mechanism was stuck so he left it on his wrist. He donned the sweatshirt and looked around. The hallway went in both directions and the walls were dotted with several doors. Did he trust Presley? She seemed genuinely freaked out, but he had also just met her a few hours ago. However, he also didn’t feel like he had much of a choice. Most of these doors were probably locked and he didn’t know where they led. He would just have to rely on her to get him out of here, then he could make his own decisions once he was in the city. What those decisions would be, he had no idea. He stepped back through the door into the warehouse.

Presley was standing impatiently by the door of the cart.

“Get in, what took you so long?”

“I was contemplating running away, but I decided I’d be lost without you,” Till jogged to the passenger side and got in beside Presley. She looked over as she started the cart.

“You’re taking this well.”

“I’ll have a meltdown later, when I have a second,” he threw his bloody and tattered clothes into the backseat.

“Good call,” she gunned the little electric engine and the big warehouse door swung open. As she pulled out into the street Till could see helos circling above the buildings off in the distance and sirens echoed all around them.

“Shit,” Presley said through gritted teeth, and swung into a narrow alley as searchlights swung by them.

“Where are you going?” Till asked.

“I’m pretty sure all three main entrances were bombed and will be swarming with people. We’ll have to get out using an unofficial entrance,” Presley swerved around a dumpster and shot down another narrow street. They heard a helo getting closer and she pulled over to the side and killed the lights as it came into view around a tall building. The searchlight swung down the alley ahead of them and rested on another electric cart for a moment.

“Get down!” Till whispered, and they slumped in their seats, ducking their heads behind the low dashboard. They huddled there, staring at the blood in the backseat. Till hoped they couldn’t see that from the helo. The searchlight flooded the cart with light and Presley cringed and tried to shrink down more. Luckily, they both mostly fit into the foot wells of the cart.

“Till!” Presley hissed, “Your clothes!”

Till looked with dismay at the blood stained shirt, jacket, and jeans but before he could do anything Presley had stretched out of her spot, snagged the crumpled pile of clothes and pulled them onto the floor, then returned to her spot beneath the steering wheel. The searchlight shifted, lighting up the backseat for a moment, then swung away down the street. They sat for a few seconds, breathing loudly.

“Is it safe?” Presley whispered.

“You know, they probably can’t hear us from their helos,” Till whispered back.

Presley climbed back into her seat, hitting her back on the steering wheel.

“Ouch, shut up, lets go,” she took off as Till continued to struggle to get back into his seat.

“So you know a secret entrance we can use?” Till asked when he finally got settled back into his seat.

“Not exactly,” Presley said as she checked her mirrors for any signs of pursuit. “It’s more just...not an entrance,” she opened the middle console of the cart and pulled out a metallic rod with a claw on one end.

“Pneumatic wire clipper, I grabbed it from the warehouse,” Presley said. She drove between two taller buildings and after a hundred feet or so a chain-link fence came into view in front of them. It was only about ten feet from the buildings here and there were pockets of shadow along the base of the fence. Presley parked the cart in the alley and looked up as she got out.

“We’re pretty far from any of the main entrances and I’m hoping that’s where their attention is focused,” Presley said. “Once we get on the other side of the fence we’ll have to walk until we feel like we’re far enough away to call a car. I hope there’s some cover,” she looked skeptically at the empty streets and long, flat warehouses and office buildings. She put the trimmers to a link in the fence in front of her and pulled the trigger. A muffled blast of air sank into the darkness around them. Presley repeated the motion until Till could pull back the fence enough for them to crawl through.

“Let’s stick to the dark side of that warehouse,” Presley nodded toward a nearby corrugated steel building. Instinctively they ducked and ran for the shadows. There was a painfully large and bare gravel yard that was well-lit by lamps high above them. They could hear the helo getting louder behind them but neither of them looked back, they just ran faster until they could crouch down in the shadows of the warehouse. Panting against the wall, Presley lifted her watch and selected an option that popped up with a wave of her finger.

“Okay, Till, I’m going to call a friend. Franz, I mentioned him. I trust him, okay? More importantly he likes to drive cars so he can get us out of here without us having to call a car.”

“Franz? The one who killed the monkey?”

Instead of answering Presley turned back to her watch where the mustached face of a surprisingly old man appeared. It was hard to tell in the hologram but his mustache looked to be greying, although his hair was still dark. Presley spoke quietly to her watch.

“Franz, hey, you have a car still, right?”

“Jesus christ, Lee, what’s going on? Are you okay? You’re not at Bionova are you?” He squinted at her. “It’s dark, I can’t see you at all,” Till thought he heard a slight European accent.

“Yeah, yes, I’m fine, and I am here, or nearby. You still have that old car? Can you pick us up?”

“Of course! Who are you with?”

“I was giving a tour to a potential hire, he needs to get out of here.”

“What happened down there? The news is showing three explosions, they think several people are dead. They’re talking about Death Cult terrorists.”

Presley shook her head, “I’ll explain later. Right now, no more questions, just get down here.”

“Okay, uh, it’s not picking up your location.”

“I turned it off, just come to...” she looked around for a street sign, “Franklin and Venter.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine for now, just don’t talk to anybody yet. And you’re not wearing a watch, right?”

“No...,” he paused, “Fine, I’m on my way. I’ll see you soon. Be safe.”

“Actually, I have to go back to Bionova, you’re going to pick up a guy in a black Bionova sweatshirt.”

Franz’s bushy eyebrows flung up as he started protesting.

“No questions yet,” Presley cut him off, “Just trust me, this kid needs our help, okay?”

Franz’s greying mustache couldn’t hide the concern and confusion on his face but he nodded.

“Franklin and Venter, okay.”

“Thank you, I’ll come to your house as soon as I can,” Presley cancelled the call.

“You’re going back in? Are you insane?” Till whispered loudly.

“I have to, they know I was there tonight. There’s going to be a thorough investigation, it will be suspicious if I somehow disappear during all of this,” she glanced back at the cart behind the fence. “Besides, I have some cleaning to do. Go up that way two blocks to Franklin street and Venter. Franz will be the one driving a car. You can trust him, you can tell him whatever he wants to know-”

“I don’t know anything!” Till almost yelled. Presley shushed him and waved his anger away.

“He’s going to have questions, but you don’t have to answer them if you don’t want to. He won’t pressure you,” her face softened and she wiped a strand of hair from her eyes. “I’m going to help you, Till. I know this has to be crazy for you but Franz will help, we’ll figure this out.”

“Let’s go,” Presley pulled her collar up and turned away. “Oh, I think it’s broken but don’t try to use your watch. Ditch it if you can. You have to stay out of sight for a while. Don’t make any calls at Franz’s either. Not yet anyway. We’ll figure out a way to talk your family later.”

Till nodded and watched as she turned and ran back to the fence. She wriggled through and disappeared into darkness on the other side. He blinked hard and pressed his palms against his brow. He couldn’t think. This was entirely too much to process in one evening. Had he been arguing with his mother a few hours ago. Till had no idea what time it was now but it seemed like that had happened in another life. What was left of that life? He looked at the helos circling

over the Bionova compound. He didn't have time to think about that, he just needed to decide what to do now. He was free now, out in the open streets. He could go where he wanted. He would have to walk there though. Till wondered how long it would take for the helos to start circling wider than the compound. Three explosions, Franz had said terrorists were suspected. This was going to be a huge investigation. He needed to be far away, fast. Presley's way seemed like the best way. Besides, she seemed capable and competent but more importantly, real. The care in her face seemed genuine. All paths of his own were nothing more than imagination. In his gut he trusted her, he realized. He also remembered reading that humans were wired to trust good looking people more readily.

“Well, fuck it,” he said under his breath, “maybe I'm not even human.”

He waited a block down from the intersection where he was supposed to meet Franz, watching carefully. Till wasn't sure what he was watching for but he felt better taking this extra precaution. He could at least get a look at Franz before he jumped in the stranger's car. There had been no traffic out here, which wasn't surprising since it was all warehouses and industrial buildings. He couldn't tell how much time had passed but he was almost ready to just start walking when a dark blue coup rolled silently to the intersection and stopped. It was an outdated style but looked well cared for. The man from the holocall stepped cautiously out of the car, looking around the dark street. One of his hands rested on the open door and the other was flat against the low roof of the car. Till walked forward with his hands in front of him. Franz looked as jumpy as Till felt and he didn't want to startle him.

“Franz?” Till called in a low voice as he stepped into a circle of light from a dim solar lamp above him.

Franz jumped a little but tried to hide it. He squinted at Till.

“Yeah, Franz Muller, who are you?”

Till hesitated. Presley could tell Franz who he was any time she wanted, he supposed he would just have to trust Franz. Before he could tell him his name, Franz stiffened and said, “Till Bardeux. Stop there,” he commanded sharply. Till complied, confused. How could Franz possibly recognize him on sight? He had never met this man before. Till didn’t think he was particularly famous. Maybe they had gone over his profile as a whole team before Presley had met with him tonight. But why his sudden change in demeanor?

A mix of emotions were flashing across Franz’s mustached face. He furrowed his brows and looked at his car, then Till, then up at the solar lamps above. Finally, he squeezed his eyes shut and slapped his hand against the roof of his car.

“Damnit, Lee,” he growled to himself. To Till he said, “Get in, we have to go.”

Till walked quickly toward the car.

“How do you know me?”

“Shut up and get in the car,” Franz glanced around and ducked into the drivers seat. The passenger door popped open and Till bent over and looked in. Franz was staring straight ahead. Till hesitated and Franz turned to him.

“Hurry, I’m not the only one who knows you, so let’s go.”

Till was filled with questions but he held them in for now. He sat down and the door closed behind him. Till was pushed against the seat as Franz accelerated more quickly than anything Till had experienced in an automated car.

“Why is Lee helping you?” His voice was low and gravelly. That and his mustache reminded Till of a stoic 20th century movie cowboy.

“Is she?” Till asked.

“She’s putting everything on the line for you, including me, so yeah, I guess she is.”

Till half expected him to end with, “you ungrateful punk” but he just looked back at the street and drove on.

“Look,” Franz said, still staring at the dark road ahead, but he waved a hand toward the screen in between him and Till. The screen flashed to life and filled with scrolling text, and a video of a woman talking with flashing lights and smoke roiling behind her. What drew Till’s attention, however, was a picture of his face near the top corner, with a caption reading “Man Sought for Questioning in Connection to Bionova Bombings.”

“What is this?” Till looked at Franz, as if he could provide answers. “How do they even know I was there?”

Franz shrugged and gave Till a sideways glance. “Security footage, I suppose. I’m surprised they got it this quickly though. You’d think the place would be in chaos.”

“You knew I was a suspect when you picked me up.”

“I trust Lee to know what she’s doing. At least I hope she does.”

Till leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. “I’m not the bomber, Presley just brought me there to recruit me to your team. She was showing me around, I was on my way out when a car came up to the gate and exploded.”

Franz nodded. “They’re not saying you are the bomber, they just want you for questioning. It makes sense since you were probably the only non-employee in the place,” Franz

accelerated onto a highway and gave Till another sideways glance. He eyed the dried blood on his face and neck. “Why not just talk to them? It looks like you were caught in the blast, it shouldn’t be too hard to show you’re innocent.”

Till looked down at his hands. All signs of the cuts that had criss crossed the backs of them were faded to nothing now. “Presley didn’t think it was a good idea. The circumstance...” he trailed off and looked over the city lights, “is complicated,” he eventually finished, lamely.

Franz grunted, “Right, no questions.”

Till wanted to explain everything to this man but he realized he wasn’t even sure where to start. He didn’t understand what had happened himself. He had been in an explosion and woken up screaming in an Ark with Presley telling him the Lazarus Cell was miraculously healing him. Then he had seen it with his own eyes. He remembered the burning and the hole in his armpit that had sealed up in front of his eyes like a timelapse video. Presley had said she didn’t put him through CRP, besides CRP didn’t work that fast and he had watched the cuts heal after he was out of the chamber. This all defied everything he knew about CRP and the Lazarus Cell.

Till looked down at his battered watch. Presley had told him to dump it. He worked at it until he could get the crumpled band to unlatch. He slid the window down and flung the band out into the cold wind slicing by the car. He slid the window back up and laid his head back against the seat. His wrist felt bare. He’d been wearing some sort of device since he was eight.

Till’s eyes had closed in thought but they suddenly flung open again. This healing ability. Had he always had it or had something activated it? He tried to think back to injuries in his past. He had never had any really serious ones so he had never paid attention to them. He had gotten

scrapes and bruises as a kid but couldn't think if they had healed any faster than usual. He had never broken a bone. He wondered what would happen if he did. What if it healed before it could be reset? He had no idea what the limits of this...thing, were. What if his brain were damaged, what if he lost an appendage, drowned? The road thumped rhythmically beneath the car wheels as they left the city behind. The ribbon of highway stretched into the horizon behind and before them. Could he die? Was it even possible for him to die at all?

“Oh my god,” Till groaned and put his palms to his eyes.

Franz looked forward and said nothing.

Chapter Five: The Aftermath

Franz owned a small home on a secluded lot outside of the city. It was back from the road and the headlights of his old car lit up uneven rows of trees all along the long driveway. He parked his car in the garage and closed the garage door behind them.

“Don’t call anyone until we talk to Lee again,” he opened the door to the house and walked in ahead of Till. “You can get cleaned up in the bathroom on the main floor and you can use the guest room to rest if you need to,” to the eager grey dog that was nuzzling Till happily he said, “Down, Roland. Good boy.”

“Thanks,” Till let Roland sniff his hands and looked earnestly at Franz, “really, thank you.”

Franz only rubbed his late night stubble that covered his chin. “We’ll figure this all out when Lee gets back here, but that might be a while. I imagine she’s going to have to answer some questions before she can get out of there.”

Franz didn’t know the half of it, Till thought. He hoped she was able to clean everything up in time. He didn’t know what she was going to do about that cart covered in his blood.

Inside, Franz’s house was surprisingly cozy and well furnished for what Till assumed was a bachelor pad. Franz pointed Till to the bathroom and started rummaging around the kitchen. Till turned the water on hot and threw his borrowed Bionova clothing on the floor. He stared at the logo and thought of the news caption with his smiling face above it. He looked up at his face in the mirror and scraped a flake of blood off his cheek. Raising his arm he gently prodded the place near his armpit where he thought the stab wound had been. It was smooth and white. The bizarreness of the evening struck him and he grinned into the mirror. He grinned at himself until

he felt a little crazy, then took a deep breath and his grin melted into a slack jawed stare as his mind raced over everything again. Eventually he realized that he could no longer see his face through the steam on the mirror. He blinked hard and stepped into the shower. The water was scalding hot and for a moment he was distracted from his thoughts.

When Till had towelled off and discovered the clothes Franz had left him on the guest bed, sweatpants and a t-shirt, this time with no Bionova logo, he wandered out into the kitchen where he had left Franz and Roland. There was pre-made meal sitting on the counter, cooling. Franz was picking at his own food and watching the news. Roland sat on a chair on the other side of the table, watching Franz and his food. The wall screen showed a helo view of the Bionova facility in which three separate rings of emergency vehicles surrounded a smoldering wreck at each entrance to the area. At the moment Till's face wasn't up on the screen.

"Anything new?" Till asked as he brought the food to the table. Roland cocked his head to watch Till and his food instead.

"A death cult has taken responsibility for the bombings, apparently. They made some statement about the symbolic nature of blowing up the locked gates of Bionova."

"Death cult terrorists? I haven't heard anything about them since I was a teenager. I didn't think there were any around anymore."

"Me neither. We used to be warned about them in the early 60s but everyone seemed to have forgotten about them the last couple years. Bionova didn't seem concerned as far as I could tell."

"Maybe they managed to go underground successfully?" Till chewed thoughtfully on a piece of faux pork.

Franz grunted noncommittally and put down his fork. “They’re still saying you are a suspect,” he looked over at Till and said carefully, “it seems to have gotten more serious than just ‘wanted for questioning,’ you’re going to have to lay low for a while.”

Till’s heart raced. He had almost forgotten about being blamed as a terrorist in the midst of his panic and confusion over his miraculous healing. He felt like he had gone from wading through the knee deep water of his normal life to being blindfolded in a hurricane a hundred miles off shore. He had been pretty confident in his old life. He had a handle on his job, he was respected. If he was being perfectly honest, life had been pretty easy for him. Now he didn’t have a clue what to do. Nothing in his life had prepared him for what to do when you are suddenly a wanted terrorist with a powerful corporation after you. Plus you have a secret super power.

“Christ,” was all Till said.

“No kidding,” Franz agreed, as Till’s picture, this time a newer one from his AMP employee badge, appeared on the wall.

“Anyone with information about Till Alan Bardeux is asked to come forward,” a young man in front of a backdrop of flashing lights was saying. “Bionova is offering compensation for information leading to Mr. Bardeux’s arrest.”

The screen split and another man sitting behind a desk said, “Thank you, Tom. Police believe this man was there tonight and somehow caused the explosion?”

“Well, the police have not said much officially, however, we have talked to a few people on the ground here and it is believed that the cars were hacked into by the death cult taking responsibility for these attacks and may have been guided remotely by this man, Till Bardeux, from inside the facility.”

“And do they know how he got inside of the facility? The compound is locked and guarded, correct?”

“I haven’t heard any speculation of that nature yet-”

Franz made a motion and the volume dropped. “This is going to get worse before it gets better, especially if you can’t talk to the police to provide an alibi.”

Till shook his head. “This is crazy. I don’t know what’s going on or what’s going to happen.”

“How do you think I feel?” Franz snorted. “Lee better call soon.”

Till looked at the screen and found the time. It was almost two in the morning now. Presley had surely been found and was being questioned. Till’s stomach clenched thinking of her trying to come up with a good story for the police and Bionova. How much did they know? If they knew he was in the compound, did they know Presley brought him back to her lab after the explosion? Did security cams capture their flight out of there? He hoped Presley had thought of that at the time but she had seemed about as freaked out as him. He hated that all he could do was sit here and worry. He had no idea if Presley had sold him out or if they had caught her in a lie. Were the police on their way here now?

“You want some tea? It’ll relax you. Maybe you can get some sleep before she checks in,” Franz got up and headed for the kitchen. Roland, giving up on Till, hopped down and followed.

“Sure, thanks,” Till said, appreciating Franz’s ability to sense what his guest needed. Till was a guest, right? Not a prisoner? Till didn’t feel like testing what Franz would do if he made a run for it. Besides, Franz was right, he was exhausted but wired. He needed sleep.

Till watched the helos circle the Bionova compound and listened to the talking heads speculate on something they knew nothing about without hearing them. Franz came back from the kitchen with two steaming mugs and set one in front of Till.

“My wife used to drink a cup of this before bed. It works well,” Franz sipped his tea and dabbed it off his mustache with the back of his thumb. Till smiled weakly and thanked him before taking a tentative sip. Till had never been a tea drinker but he figured he needed something to relax him. It was bitter but hot and smooth. He sipped it quickly. He wanted to ask about Franz’s wife but it was obvious she wasn’t around anymore. He wasn’t sure how to tactfully ask about her. Franz beat Till to the question.

“You have family?” Franz grunted from under his wet mustache.

“Just my mom, and my uncle. He’s actually a Bionova board member.”

“That’s good, maybe he can help you out of this mess,” Franz gave Till a hard look, “Not yet, though, got it? You might want to call them and let them know you’re okay, but we don’t know if that’s safe yet. They might already be taken in for questioning and have their watches set to locate. We can’t risk it.”

Till nodded but felt his stomach clench tighter. He hadn’t thought about his mom being taken for questioning. Of course they would. They would want to ask the mother where her terrorist son was. Franz had a good point though, maybe eventually Kayden would be able to help them. Till hated to rely on him, but it was the first time Till had seen any light at the end of this extremely dark tunnel.

When they finished the tea Franz rinsed out the cups and said, “I’m going to go lay down, if Lee calls I’ll wake you.” As he set the mugs in the dishwasher he asked, “You need anything else?”

Till shook his head and said goodnight. Franz made a noise from inside his mustache and Till walked into the guest bedroom. He didn’t think he would be able to sleep but by the time he had taken off his shirt he already felt too tired to finish undressing. His head heavy and warm from the tea, he laid down on top of the covers and slept.

Till woke suddenly and looked around the unfamiliar room. He squinted in confusion and looked down to his watch. Which wasn’t there. Why would he not be wearing his watch? Why was he in this room? There was a wall screen with the time floating around in it. 7:16 AM. Well, it was Saturday so he wasn’t late for work. Had he gotten drunk last night? He had had a couple drinks at Kayden’s wake and then...

“Oh. Oh shit,” Till said to the crumpled pile of clothes on the floor. The Bionova logo blazed up at him. A swelling wave of panic was threatening to suffocate him. He didn’t just have a drunken night, he was wanted by the police for a terrorist attack on the Bionova facility. Also, he was immortal. Or something.

“Oh shit,” he said again, sitting up in the bed. He was fully awake now, more awake than he thought he had ever been. His breath was coming in quick ragged bursts and dots were starting to appear at the edges of his vision.

“Till, you okay? Can I come in?” Franz knocked gently on the door, but opened it and peered in before Till could answer.

“I’m freaking out,” Till said matter of factly, but blinked away the spots and leaned his head against the wall.

“Try to relax. Everything is okay for now. Here,” Franz tossed him the shirt Till had managed to remove before falling asleep. Till sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the shirt over his head. “Lee called, she’s okay, she said-”

“She did? When? Is she coming here?”

“Uh, they let her go home around six. She called me on her way home-”

Till turned to face Franz, indignation on his face, “You said you’d wake me!”

Franz looked at the floor and mumbled into his mustache, “I didn’t think the sedatives I gave you would have worn off yet.” Franz looked at the time on the wall. “Should’ve been asleep until eight, at least.”

Till narrowed his eyes, “That explains how I fell asleep so fast.”

Franz sat on the other side of the bed, “Yeah, sorry. I figured you might have trouble sleeping, and I couldn’t sleep with you awake in my house, so... sorry.”

Till was too eager to hear about Presley’s call to be upset at Franz for drugging him right now. “It’s fine, what did Presley say?”

Franz shifted to face Till, “She wouldn’t say much over the phone, she said she’s okay, she got ‘cleaned up’ fine, and she told them she sent you off in the car and heard the explosions a little later, thought you had gotten out.”

“And they bought it, didn’t they wonder where I was, how I got out?”

Franz shrugged, “That’s all she said about that. She said there’s two dead, assuming you aren’t dead, which is what they seem to be assuming. Two guards died in their posts, I guess one guard left to go check on something so he wasn’t there when the bomb blew up his post.”

“Are we going to meet up with her? What’s next?” Till was too agitated to sit so he got up and started pacing.

“She’s going home first and then she’ll head over here. It shouldn’t be too suspicious for her to visit a coworker after our place of employment is attacked.”

“Would it be safer to meet somewhere else? Would they follow her?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think we can risk bringing you out in public. Your face is everywhere right now.”

Till tapped the wall screen and said, “News.” The screen was immediately filled with video of the fires being put out and security footage of the car exploding. The security footage was dramatic but seemed useless. From the video, Till couldn’t even tell that the exploding car had been empty. It was dark so the fire appeared as white spots on a black background. The video slid into the corner and the main part of the screen was filled with pictures of Till, including a render of what he would look like with a beard and sunglasses.

“Maybe not the time to try a beard for the winter,” Franz’s mustache moved in what Till guessed was a smile.

Till gave a half smile back, “They really overestimated my ability to grow facial hair,” he watched as a terrorism expert came on and started breaking down Till’s life. “Jesus Christ,” he said, turning off the screen, “When will Presley be here?”

“I told her you’d be sleeping until eight,” Franz said nodding his head toward Till and the bed he had expected Till to be passed out in, “So I guess she’ll be here soon. Maybe an hour.”

Till nodded. Franz got up but stopped at the door. “What did she really mean about cleaning up?”

Till hesitated, “I was hurt in the blast. There was some blood in places it shouldn’t be for her story to work.”

Franz eyed Till’s seemingly intact body but nodded slowly. He turned and walked into the living area.

“Want some breakfast, kid?”

Till’s stomach didn’t feel like it would unclench enough to accept any food, but he called out “Sure,” to the empty doorway.

Chapter Six: The Company

Presley called out as she entered the front door.

“Hey, you guys okay?”

Roland rushed to greet her and she bent down to hug him and rub his face. Franz was rinsing the egg off his plate. Till was shoveling his fourth egg in between bites of toast. Once he had started eating he had realized how hungry he was and Franz’s breakfast skills had clearly been honed by a life of bachelorhood. Till’s mouth was full so Franz answered.

“We’re okay, I think. What about you? You look exhausted.”

Presley sat heavily on an open dining chair. “You have no idea. I was with police and some Bionova security guys all night. Got some eggs for me?” she asked, looking up at Franz. He grabbed a couple out of a basket on the counter and washed them off before cracking them open into the pan.

“Till, they had a lot of questions about you,” Presley continued, “they seem to think you were injured in the blast but managed to get out in the confusion. I told them it doesn’t really make sense that you would be involved in the bombing, since you had no idea you were even going to be there that night.”

Franz checked the eggs and asked, “That’s what I don’t get, why can’t the kid just speak for himself and explain what happened? It seems straightforward.”

Presley looked at Till and the back at Franz. “Unfortunately, it’s not. You haven’t told him anything, Till?” When Till shook his head she continued. “We’re going to need his help, I think Franz has to know.”

Till shrugged. “Okay. Franz, I’m a miracle chimp.”

Franz stared levelly but his mustache shifted slightly. His eyes slid towards Presley.

“He was pretty badly injured in the blast. When I showed up he was trapped in the burning car. Cuts all over his face and chest. Glass and shrapnel all over. I managed to get him out but he was bleeding to death so I took him back to the lab,” Presley paused and took a deep breath. “I don’t really know what’s going on but when I put him in an Ark to check his vitals, he... he was dead at first. But his heart started up again and the machine detected the presence of the Lazarus Cell. It indicated he was going through CRP,” Franz still stared at her, silent. “I watched his body regenerating itself. I watched fatal injuries heal up in front of my eyes, Franz.”

Finally, Franz seemed to jerk to life. “What? Slow down. Which Ark? It healed him? How?” The eggs sizzled behind him, forgotten.

“No, that’s the thing, it wasn’t the Ark. It was only operating as a medscan, and CPR machine. It’s Till. Somehow his body has harboured and fully integrated the Lazarus Cell.”

Franz looked slowly back and forth between Till and Presley. He turned back to the eggs and pulled the pan off the burner. He stared at the eggs. “It healed him entirely? No abnormalities?”

“Not that I could tell. Even the scars were fading. It happened more rapidly than any Ark CRP too.”

Till nodded. “There’s no evidence of that wound by my armpit. It’s completely smoothed out.”

“Broken bones?”

“No, luckily. Who knows how his body would handle that.”

Franz grunted and handed the plate of eggs to Presley. He sat down and eyed Till.

“So you thought it best Bionova not know about this,” his eyes were still on Till but somehow it was clear he was addressing Presley. Till wondered if it was the tilt of the mustache.

Presley swallowed a bite of eggs. “No, not yet, at least. And they would have run med tests on him, especially if he showed up completely unscathed. I wanted Till to have a chance to think about all of it before the world knows what...” she stopped to consider her word choice.

“What he can do.”

“Well, what do you think?” Franz asked Till.

Till shook his head. He sensed that they wanted answers from him. They hoped he could share some puzzle piece that would make the jumbled picture click into place but he felt like he knew less than they did. His knowledge of how CRP or the Lazarus Cell worked was maybe a hair above the average layman’s but right now that felt like more of a disadvantage than an advantage.

“I don’t know,” he looked at his hands on the table in front of him and studied them. They were smooth and clean except for a bit of bacon grease on the fingers of his left hand. “Nothing like this has happened before, but I’ve also never been severely injured before. Until last night I thought I was just your average human, as susceptible to death and injury as anyone else. Now I’m...” Till was at a loss for words. He looked up from his hands. “A bit of an anomaly?”

Presley barked a laugh. “Yeah, that sums it up. You’ve never noticed this before? You haven’t cut your finger and noticed there was no mark an hour later?” She sounded skeptical.

“No! I mean, yeah, I’ve had little superficial injuries but I never paid attention to how long they took to heal. I know I’ve had cuts for more than a few hours though. I remember

having scabs a day or so later when I was a kid. My mom never seemed to notice anything weird.”

Presley chewed her egg and thought. “It was just you and your mom growing up?”

“Yeah, my dad... well, my mom’s husband died before I was born. They had been trying to have a child and my mom was determined for that to still happen. So she got CRP and went to a fertility clinic. I was in-vitro from a sperm donor.”

Presley frowned in thought. “So do you know who your biological father is?”

“No,” Till shook his head, “my mom liked to pretend Austin was my father. Never really talked about me being from a donor and I guess I never cared enough to try to look it up.”

“I think we should look that up, this could be something genetic,” Presley turned to Franz, “can we look that up discreetly somehow? We probably shouldn’t demonstrate too much of an interest in Till right now, with a national manhunt going on.”

Franz nodded thoughtfully and Till said nothing. Presley spun her plate awkwardly then said, “I think you’ll be all right here, for a while at least. From what I could tell when they were interviewing me, they have nothing to track you here. Your watch was destroyed in the explosion and stopped transmitting your info and Franz’s old car doesn’t have a GPS tracker,” she yawned and stretched. “It didn’t sound like they caught you on any street cameras.” She rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I don’t know. I need sleep, then maybe I can think in more than five second bursts.”

Till wanted to hear more about her questioning but knew she had had a long, stressful night.

“They didn’t search the cart? Or the lab I was in?” All that blood would have been a give away that I didn’t just crawl out the front gate.”

“I don’t think they did, but I’m sure they will eventually. I stripped the cart out and got everything cleaned up pretty well though. Well enough that they’re not going to be crawling over everything for a DNA sample, I’m hoping.”

Presley raised her hands in front of her and said, “I had to make up a story about a spill in the lab to explain why my hands reeked of cleaner but they didn’t seem concerned about that.”

She picked up her plate and brought it over to the kitchen. Till did the same, then asked, “So what now? Have you heard anything about my mom? Or Kayden?”

Presley shook her head. “Sorry, I didn’t hear anything from the police or Bionova security and I didn’t think it would be wise to ask too much about you,” she dried her hands on a little towel near the sink and said, “I didn’t hear any mention of them on the news either.”

“They’ll be questioned eventually,” Franz spoke up. Till noticed that he mostly sat in silence. He had to have a multitude of questions but he pondered quietly instead. “Unfortunately, I think it would be best to let them be questioned before they know anything about you. That will be easier for them and you, but it means you won’t be able to let your mom know you’re okay for a little while yet.”

Till thought about his mother. She would have seen the news by now, if the police hadn’t called her in last night. He could imagine how distraught she would be. There hadn’t been many periods of time in Till’s life when his mother hadn’t known exactly where he was. She had always kept him close when he was young, then he had gone to college in the city, and now he worked and lived within a fifteen minute autocab ride of her house. Till had no reason to believe

she was taking this well. He wished he could reassure her but he also had no idea what he would say. He was alive, but he was far from okay. Was his mother locked in a room somewhere, being asked if she knew her son was a part of a terrorist cell? Or if she was involved? Till pressed his fingers against the pressure building in his brow and rubbed. She would angrily defend him to the end, Till knew. At least she wouldn't believe their accusations for a moment but she would be angry and worried, and Till didn't know when it would be safe to reach out to her.

"How long should I wait?" Till asked, "A couple days? Weeks?"

Franz stood up and gestured towards wall screen that was blank at the moment. "I think we'll have to play it by ear, see what changes in the news. Maybe a week, maybe more."

Till nodded. He'd expected the answer but was still disappointed.

Presley scooted her chair back and stood up. "I'm going to lay down, see if I can get some sleep," she turned and looked at Till, "We'll talk more this afternoon, ok?"

"Sure, yeah," Till lowered his eyes under her slightly bloodshot gaze. "Sorry the bed's a mess, I didn't clean up after myself."

"That's fine," Presley gave a tired smile, "I just need soft and quiet," she disappeared into the bedroom and shut the door.

Franz cleared his throat. "Well, you'll be stuck here for a while. Anything you need? I'm going to go out while Lee sleeps."

Till couldn't think of anything at all so he just shook his head.

"Alright, well, make yourself at home," Franz rubbed his neck. "Probably stay inside for now though, sorry. We're secluded here but better to be safe, yeah?"

Till agreed and Fanz walked out to his car. The car disappeared into the trees that lined the driveway and Till sat back down at the kitchen table. He motioned the wall screen on and lowered the volume so it wouldn't disturb Presley. Flipping through news channels. He saw that most of them were still covering the Bionova explosions in some way. Till searched the web and found a little more information on the attacks than the video news was offering, but still no significant differences. He found an interview with a Bionova representative talking about how they would increase security nationwide in the light of these attacks. They didn't know if more attacks were planned, or when and where they might happen, he said. Bionova had branches in almost every major city and many of them were less protected than the Boston one had been. He spoke vaguely of counter-terrorism measures to be implemented with approval from congress.

He looked solemnly into the camera and said, "We want to make sure our employees are safe, first of all, but also our investors want to know that their investments are safe, and Americans want to know that their futures are safe. Because, ultimately, that's what's at stake here. These terrorists hate what Bionova is all about; continued, improved life for Americans. Bionova is about preserving Americans' futures, these terrorists, for some reason, hate that! They want to cut Americans' futures short."

The interviewer nodded seriously and asked another question but Till's mind slipped away from the screen. *What absolutely shitty luck*, he thought. *What was I doing at Bionova, in the middle of the night, on the night of a random terrorist attack on that exact facility?* Even all of that, he realized, wouldn't have been complicated at all. If that was all that was wrong, he would simply be dead, having bled out as a Bionova ark dutifully collected his diminishing vital signs. But instead, he was here, in a strangers house, probably healthier than he had been twenty

four hours ago, with Bionova's flagship technology, the Lazarus Cell, apparently coursing through his body. For the millionth time he asked, *how?* And again, the same answer came back.

Dunno, quite the mystery ain't it?

Till walked into the kitchen and stood in front of Franz's knife block. He pulled a medium sized straight edged knife out of its slot. It ground against the self-sharpeners as it exited the block and the edge shone with a metallic glint. Till stood over the sink and tried not to think about what he was doing. He put the knife against his palm, then the back of a finger, then the back of his forearm. In the end he decided to go with a finger prick. He put the knife point against the tip of his middle finger and gave a quick, jerky push. His shaking hand slipped and the knife point sliced through tissue easily, leaving a thin, bloody line across his finger tip. Till clenched his teeth and set the knife down on the counter. He grabbed a tissue and dabbed at the cut. He counted ten seconds, then dabbed the cut again. The bleeding was slowing when he lifted the tissue the fourth time. When he pulled it away the sixth time, no blood had soaked into the soft white surface. He stopped dabbing but continued counting seconds. He was thinking about two minutes had passed since he made the cut when he noticed that he couldn't find the cut anymore. He lifted the finger to his face and squinted. He could maybe just make out the ghost of a line but then his eyes started blurring. He blinked and refocused but he couldn't find the line again.

That was fast, Till thought. He lifted the knife again and ran it across his thumbnail. It bite into the nail and left behind a shallow crevice. He waited a few minutes but the crevice remained unchanged. He couldn't remember if fingernails were living tissue or not. Perhaps

damage to that tissue didn't activate the Lazarus Cell? Maybe if the whole nail was ripped off...but Till wasn't interested in testing that theory.

He thought about the unfortunate chimpanzee that Franz had tried to repair using his modified Ark. The problem there had been regrowing tissue that had been lost. The Lazarus Cell had not been able to tell the chimp's cells how to regrow an arm. Till didn't exactly know the extent of his injuries from the explosion but he thought the puncture wound to the chest had been the worst. He wasn't sure how much the Lazarus Cell had actually accomplished in his body that it had not in the chimp's. Could he regrow limbs? Till considered his fingers and decided that was another theory he was not interested in testing.

He dropped the knife into the dishwasher and walked back into the dining room. An explosives expert was on the screen now, analyzing the bomb blasts. Till watched him describe the explosion that he had witnessed first person last night. The explosives were hard to trace, the expert said, and common enough that they might not yield any clues about the attackers. A moment later another expert, this time on autocars, was on screen explaining how the auto-driving system had probably been hacked.

"Fifty years ago," the anchor was saying, "this kind of attack would have required a person, a suicide bomber, to drive the car to the location."

At least terrorism has gotten safer, Till thought.

Till shut down the dining room wall screen and wandered into the living room. There was a tall bookshelf filled with scuffed paper books against a wall. A middle shelf was emptied of books and a printed and framed picture sat there instead. Till picked it up. It was a wedding photo, presumably of Franz and his wife. Franz's face was smooth and tan, with no facial hair at

all. Till thought he looked to be about the same age as Till was now, but the photo was faded and the styles of the dress and suit were foreign to Till. He guessed the picture might have been taken in the '20s, maybe even earlier. No wonder Franz looked so old. He might have even been born in the 20th century. Many people from the last century had not opted to use CRP and some had died before it became mandatory. Even after '63 some of the elderly qualified to opt out, and often did. Till didn't know many people that were as old as Franz, and even less who actually looked as old as he did. His uncle, Kayden, had gone through two CRPs and wasn't even seventy yet. Till guessed that Franz might have been in his sixties before he had his first CRP.

Till set the picture down and moved his attention to the shelves of books. Franz had an eclectic collection that didn't seem to follow any theme or pattern. Till slid one out that he thought he had read in high school. He flipped through it absentmindedly. It was about the second Iraq war, and he remembered enjoying it when he had read it for school but it didn't hold his interest now. One of the soldiers took shrapnel from an IED and Till's thoughts went back to the rigged car speeding towards him, the light bursting out of it and rushing towards him impossibly fast. The darkness and dream followed by the itching pain. Waking up in that Bionova coffin. He felt a throb in his left armpit and set the book down, but then the pain was gone as if it had never been there.

Till shook his head. Imagine if Bionova could make soldiers like him, he thought. Drones, exo-suits, and armor kept soldiers pretty safe, but if Bionova could harness whatever was in Till, soldiers might become invincible, and, if it could be administered through a simple shot or an hour in an Ark, much cheaper. Bionova would do it, too, Till thought. If they figured out how to weaponize him, they would be pumping out Lazarus soldiers by next year,

consequences be damned. Who would argue against keeping soldiers safe? Traitors and terrorists, probably, according to the Bionova representatives that would undoubtedly fill the news screens.

Till looked around the cozy, low ceilinged room. It felt strange to be imagining these things in this simple, old-fashioned house. The chair and sofa were bulky and soft, the large front window filled the room with a warm glow. The sun shone strongly through the thinning trees and laid a happy rectangle of light on the carpet, where Roland lay sleeping, apparently oblivious to the possibility of super soldiers or danger. The dog exhaled loudly and stretched his belly in the sun to illustrate the point.

Till put the book away and began rubbing Roland's belly instead.

Presley woke up to a darkened room. When she got up and walked into the living room she saw that it was still light out but the afternoon sun was sinking behind the trees in Franz's front yard. She walked to the kitchen to get a glass of water and found Franz and Till sitting in silence, watching the screen by the table.

"Sorry I slept so long," she said, filling a glass with tap water and taking several gulps. The two were eager to hear what she had gone through the night before. She sat down at the table with them and summarized her hectic and long night. Till was amazed she had managed to clean up his blood so quickly.

“I’ll have to go back and scour everything again at some point, but right now I don’t think they have any reason to look through the warehouse,” Lee explained. She had told the investigators about bringing Till into the offices and the Ark room so she thought they would focus their search there.

“Let’s just hope you didn’t leave any clues behind there,” Lee said. “So, what’d you guys do all day?”

Till told them he had poked himself with a knife to see the process for himself. He had healed, fast. He showed them a cut on his thumbnail that had not.

Lee nodded and Franz said, “That’s consistent with the way the Laz Cell works. Kind of like cutting your hair, it won’t regrow it, although it might make it grow faster or thicker. Pay attention to how fast the cut moves down the nail. It might be sped up.”

“Can I see?” Lee asked.

“See? Me cut myself?” Till guessed. “Sure, anything for science,” he said with a dry laugh.

“That’s the spirit, kid,” Lee said, wacking him on the arm as she followed him into the kitchen. Till picked up a knife from the block.

“Should I worry about infections?” he asked them.

Franz cocked his head. “It’s unlikely the Laz Cell would allow foreign cells to spread, at least if it operates like in an ark.”

Till slid the knife along his palm, opening a bright red line across the soft tissue. He held his hand over the sink and it bled freely. The thick stream of blood quickly obscured the cut until he turned on the faucet and pushed his palm under the flowing water. As he held it there, the

water ran red, then pink, and after a few seconds, clear. Lee kept time and after a minute the deep cut had already started to fade. It happened so fast Lee thought she could almost see the flesh knitting itself back together. Till stopped the water, dried his hand, and showed them his palm. The wound was now a thin white line.

“Jesus, it’s even faster than last night,” Lee said, both a little excited and frightened. She turned to Franz. “Is it speeding up like in our simulations?”

“Could be,” he pulled at his mustache. “If his body goes through CRP everytime he heals, it might be accelerating the process, like we have seen with multiple CRPs. Maybe faster, since his body seems to have integrated the Cell so completely.”

“And who knows how many times he’s actually done it, it might be happening in the background without him even noticing,” Lee sank back into thought as Till washed off the knife. She wished they knew more about how the Lazarus Cell worked and why it sped up after multiple CRPs. The Cell didn’t have any known purpose other than to cause other cells to regenerate themselves, according to the old knowledge, it couldn’t exist outside of the carefully curated conditions of the ark, and it wasn’t naturally occurring, it was created in a lab first, and now it was created by the arks. If it did come from Till’s biological father, how did that man get it? Did he have the same ability as Till? If so how had he kept that hidden? Lee’s thoughts swirled chaotically and unhelpfully.

Franz’s thoughts apparently turned to food because he had opened the fridge and asked, “Anybody hungry?” Then he gestured to a six pack of beer on the bottom shelf. “Thirsty?”

They continued talking as they ate Franz’s prepackaged meals and drank his beer. The six pack went fast so he got down a bottle of whiskey and three glasses from a cupboard. Franz

didn't add anything except a couple ice cubes, which was how Lee preferred her whiskey, but Till grimaced and coughed as he sipped his.

“Go easy,” Franz grinned, “It’s not soda. Just enough to coat your tongue,” he took a drink to demonstrate. Till sipped tentatively. He grimaced without coughing this time. By the bottom of the glass Till almost looked like he was enjoying the liquor.

By their third glass, they were all enjoying the liquor and they talked freely. Lee felt relief from the stress of the past twenty four hours. She felt safe in Franz’s quaint little house, at least for the moment. She had only been here a couple of times before but it had a way of feeling like home. Like Franz, the house was unassuming and accommodating.

Their talk meandered from topic to topic until eventually Franz began to talk about his wife. His gaze jumped excitedly around his house as if finding her there engaged in her usual activities. Lee had heard him talk of her before. Franz and Vanessa had met and married when they were relatively older, both already established in successful medical technology careers. Their respective companies had merged in 2016 and they had been married the next year. They had finished their careers together and retired in 2039. Then, just as they were planning a retirement trip to Franz’s birthplace in Germany, Vanessa was diagnosed with brain cancer. They put the trip on hold, dedicating everything to her treatment, but it hadn’t made a difference. Two years later Franz was alone and purposeless. Whenever Franz talked about this part of his life his eyes fixed downward and his face set hard. Now, Lee watched him take a drink and forge ahead, seeming to force himself forward, out of a time period that had almost broken him.

“I had a lot of bad years,” he said. He contemplated his glass of whiskey for a moment and said, “a lot of this stuff.”

He smiled sadly. “I had to do something or I would have died,” he said, “and sometimes that sounded too tempting, but I knew I had to keep going. I knew Vanessa expected me to be strong,” he lifted his eyes from the table again and stared at the early Autumn darkness that was outside the window now. “So I got back into med tech, started reading about this new cell research. At first it was just a hobby, learning as much as I could about CRP, but eventually I went and got it done myself and decided if I was going to be young again I might as well start working again,” his sad smile brightened a little. “That was in two-thousand and fifty-seven. On my eightieth birthday I woke up in an Ark looking and feeling younger than I had twenty-five, thirty years before, and I was working at Bionova by the end of the year.”

Lee could see the surprise at Franz’s age on Till’s face and suddenly remembered something. She checked her watch.

“In exactly twelve minutes,” she announced to Till, “it will be one day from your ‘death.’”

Till rocked back in his chair, taking in the information.

“Well, I think it was actually 10:34 to 10:37, so I guess you can decide if you want to celebrate the death or the born again part.”

“Well, here’s to keeping that down to only once!” Till laughed and raised his glass, “or twice, I guess. Eventually, you know,” he lowered his glass and his laugh faded. “*Will* I die? Eventually?”

Lee started to laugh and was about to throw out a flippant, “who knows?” until she saw the vulnerability on Till’s face. Just a moment ago his eyes had been soft and unfocused from too

much whiskey. Now they were sharp and she thought she saw terror lurking around the edges.

She swallowed her laugh and shook her head instead.

“I don’t know, Till. But we’ll figure it out.”

Chapter Seven: The Move

A week passed. Presley and Franz had gone back to work that Tuesday, the same day the new terrorist protocol was introduced. Bionova security was boosted and given some necessary law enforcement and military privileges, the news stations reported. By Friday, Presley and Franz decided it was no longer safe to keep Till at the house.

“They’re watching us too closely,” Franz explained. “I don’t think there’s any guarantee they won’t show up at my doorstep for an impromptu ‘safety check.’”

“They won’t need to,” Presley cut in, looking up from the holodoc she was reading on her watch. She wiggled her wrist and the holodoc wavered above her wrist. “Starting Monday, Bionova will have access to the mics in our watches any time they deem it necessary. Part of the new ‘employee safety’ protocol.”

Franz looked at the band encircling his wrist with distaste.

“I suppose that’s why they’ve gotten so strict about us wearing them now. I’ve always hated these things.”

Till’s watch had been broken and gone for a week now and he barely missed it anymore. It had been with him almost constantly since before he could remember. He didn’t know you could live without it until his was gone.

“They only have access to employee watches?”

“Supposedly, yes, for now. But with Bionova working so closely with police now it wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to expand the ‘protection’ to all citizens,” Presley said.

Till was skeptical. “People wouldn’t take that well.”

Franz shook his head and muttered into his mustache. "People can get used to anything. I remember a time before watches, before cell phones even. People might get upset at first, but soon it will feel like Bionova always had access to your watch."

Till shivered. "Well, where do I go now?"

Franz rubbed his neck. "I've been around a while now. I think I know someone who knows people who might help."

Concern took over Presley's face. "Be careful contacting people. Anyone on a watchlist is probably being, you know, watched."

"I know, I think this guy is safe to contact. We don't have much choice anyway, Till has to get out of here before they tap into our watches."

"So no talking to my mom yet, I suppose," Till said.

They both shook their heads. Presley laid a hand on Till's arm. "I'm sorry, Till. It's just way too dangerous. There is no way they are not watching her. They would use her as a trap for you."

Till knew that, but it was still frustrating. He didn't see any way out of this mess. Every avenue seemed thoroughly blocked by Bionova and police. Normal life was like a dream that faded into incoherence upon waking.

"What's this guy going to do for me?" Till asked Franz.

"I hope that he can get you to some people who won't mind harboring a fugitive wanted for crimes against a Bionova facility."

"Cultists?" Till said skeptically. Franz shot him a look.

"Wanted terrorists don't get to be choosy about their friends, Till."

Till's hopeless feeling was not getting any better. He looked at Presley.

“What about you guys? I won't be able to contact you once I'm gone...” Till was starting to feel the extent of his isolation. While he hadn't been able to contact anyone all week, he had talked to Franz every day, and Franz had updated him on Presley and the outside world. After that first night, Franz had already felt like an old friend. Being exiled wasn't so bad if he could stay with Franz but now he would be with complete strangers again, and have no way to talk to Franz or Presley. All three of them stared silently at Franz's dining table. Roland whined.

The next day Till was sitting in Franz's passenger seat with a small pack on his lap. The pack had a few clothes and other daily living items Franz had bought for him. He looked out the window at the park where Franz's contact had set up a meeting with the people who wouldn't mind harboring a terrorist. It was a sunny and warm late October day and families were having picnics while children ran through leaves and clambored around on an old fashioned farm themed playground. Till pulled his hat low over his face and Franz drove deeper into the park, where trees started to outnumber people. There were still some trees with brilliant orange, red, and yellow leaves clinging to their branches but Till stared at his lap and thought about the knot in his stomach. Camping sites were laid out along the single lane road and Franz drove until he reached the site labeled fifty-three. There was already a large RV parked there. It was old, but seemed well taken care for. All the blinds were drawn and no one was in sight except one woman sitting on the picnic bench by the fire pit. She was reading a book but looking out over it

regularly. Franz pulled into the space behind the RV and stepped out of the car. He said a few words to the woman on the bench and motioned Till to join them.

The woman introduced herself as Thea. She looked like she could be in her forties and had undyed greying brown hair. Before Franz or Till could say much more, she suggested they move inside the RV. They followed her up the fold out stairs and into a cramped space. There were two slide out panels but they were both retracted, leaving hardly any room to walk. In the driver's seat a man sat tapping at a tablet. He briefly acknowledged them and resumed his tapping. Thea directed them to sit at the flimsy booth style dining table. Thea sat across from Franz and Till and started talking quickly.

“First off, we're not a death cult and we're not terrorists,” she said, “we're just skeptical of Bionova and their agenda.”

She shifted her gaze from Franz to Till. “We're not interested in harboring terrorists either, but I understand Bionova has their information wrong and you had nothing to do with the bombings. We're inclined to believe that because we know who did the bombings.”

“Oh?” Till rocked back in surprise. “Seriously? How? Who?”

Thea explained that their anti-Bionova group had split about seven months ago. “Some new people came in with a lot of aggressive ideas. These ideas were attractive to some of our group who felt we were only talking and not accomplishing anything,” she looked like she was about to say something but adjusted the bookmark in her book instead. “Anyway, the rest of us saw the danger of going down that path and cut our ties, but this only allowed that group to grow more radical.”

“And that’s the group that claimed responsibility for the attacks last Friday,” Franz concluded.

“Yes, and from the limited contact a few of our members have with them, that is probably true. Even before we split, violence and terrorism seemed to be the inevitable outcome of the new rhetoric. Now it’s no longer theoretical. People are dead, and it sounds like you were almost one of them,” she gestured to Till.

“Yeah,” Till said, and stopped. Franz and Presley had both agreed that it would be better if the people taking him in just thought he was a wanted fugitive. Trying to explain Till’s strange ability would only cause complications.

Thea continued, “We may already be in Bionova’s crosshairs because of our past connections to the group but we want to keep you safe from Bionova. We believe they are using you to spread fear. Giving the public a face to connect to the attacks.”

She had taken on a clipped, business-like tone now. She sounded like she preferred action over talking as well.

“We have been keeping underground for years now, since the crackdown on the death cults in the sixties made it a necessity. We have a network and safe houses that should be able to keep you out of sight for a long time. A year, maybe even more, depending on if Bionova can keep attention on the attacks for that long.”

A year. Till felt a rush in his head and a cold stone sinking from his chest to the pit of his stomach. Thea’s no nonsense way of speaking made this all seem real in a way that it hadn’t in Franz’s living room. Till realized he had been holding out hope that this would all blow over, that Bionova might decide it was all a big misunderstanding and Till would go back to his

normal life. Of course, there would still be the Lazarus Cell lurking in his body but he would just have ignored that as much as possible. Thea didn't seem to think normal was a possibility, and she seemed to know what she was talking about.

Franz shifted his gaze to Till next to him on the bench seat. "I think this is the best option for you. I can't keep you hidden for any longer, and they have more resources than Lee or I do."

"We'll keep you safe, Till," Thea said. She looked at him and after a second or two she took a breath. "We have tried contacting your family already. We have been unsuccessful."

Till looked up, surprised. "What do you mean? What does that mean?" He said. He had been able to somewhat keep thoughts of his mother hidden behind everything else this past week but this news brought all the concern and fear back to the front.

"Our guess is it means they are in custody right now, police or Bionova security force. Probably Bionova. They have been successfully privatizing as much of this investigation as they can. We will keep trying to find out more about them but, unfortunately, I don't have any good news for you right now."

Thea stood up quickly. "We should get going in case you were followed here," she turned to the man in the driver's seat. "Ritter, get ready to move."

Ritter nodded curtly and set his tablet in its dock on the dashboard. Franz stepped toward the door and then turned back to Till. He shook Till's hand a moment, then clapped him lightly on his shoulder.

"Keep your head up, yeah?" He said. Till's throat caught so he just nodded. He had only known the man a week but now that he was walking out the door Till felt a sense of safety leaving with him. Franz stepped down and walked to his car.

Thea made Till get in the back where the bedroom window had its blinds closed tightly. He laid down with the comforting weight of the pack on his chest. The RV jerked into motion and the gravel crunched beneath the bed. For a moment Till was ten again, in the back of a car with no knowledge or care of the destination, just listening to the sound of motion, the sound of passively being moved from one place to another. He would recede into his mind until his mother parked the car and they got out to get the groceries or meet someone for dinner. The crunching gravel stopped and was replaced with the hum of tar on rubber. Till tried to hold onto the innocent memory but it was slipping away. The memories of the past week were sliding in and battering the calm and peaceful feelings aside. It wasn't his mother choosing the unknown destination, it was these people Till didn't know. Silent Ritter was in the driver's seat driving him away from the only people who had offered him any comfort since his life had been violently dislodged from its comfortable path. Till rolled on his side and curled around his pack.