

SILO

NINE

by

S.J.Ford

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)

Chapter 1

Leslie Tatum's long-sleeved shirt hung heavy for a San Francisco Summer and she sweated inside it. That suited her fine so long as the messy scar on her forearm remained hidden; I'll lift my skirt and drop my pants in Market Street before I let anyone see that arm, especially this self-important bitch.

Her therapist continued, ignorant of Leslie's private disdain. "So, Leslie, you're still having dreams about your dead colleagues. That's normal. It's only been two years."

Leslie exhaled a short frustrated breath. "They weren't just colleagues. They were my team, my responsibility."

"Hostility won't make these sessions any easier."

Leslie fidgeted unable to find comfort on the therapist's sumptuous couch. "My court-martial says it's you or the psych-ward."

Her therapist smiled; in that glib way Leslie wanted to slap.

"Are you keeping up with your medication?"

Leslie struggled to contain her venom. "About that, it's been two years; you're giving me every kind of pill and yet, I still wake in the night – screaming and fucked-up."

Leslie's inner censor chided her; Why the 'F' bomb so much? You didn't used to talk like that.

Her right hand trembled, slight but persistent. She kept it hidden, jammed tight under her right buttock; Don't let her see this either.

The therapist said, "Let's just step back. Describe your -- what you remember."

"You wanted to say nightmares, didn't you? That's okay; tick the box and collect the Army's check. I won't rat you out; promise."

"Humor me. Has anything changed?"

"No, still the same; my last mission -- my team's hunting me -- trying to kill me."

"And why are they trying to kill you?"

"You can't possibly want to hear this again." Leslie dug fingernails so hard into the hide of the couch that, were it still attached to its original owner, the animal might squeal and buck.

Then she said, "Because they were infected -- by some modified-virus."

The therapist flipped through a sheaf of patient notes. "And this was at an Antarctic research facility operated by the Herbst Pharmaceutical Corporation."

She angled her gaze up and over the rims of her glasses, targeting Leslie's eyes

with a non-committal stare and said, "They claimed it was an accident with Anthrax spores."

"They lied."

From that point Leslie zoned-out and let the session drone to its conclusion. Afterward; while strolling back to an unloved job, she cursed, dropping another 'F' bomb in her mind, and wishing for release from court-mandated therapy.

#

A third of the globe away, on a different hemisphere and in a different time-zone, clocks said it was 06:30 AM. Dense fog barred dawn light from the battleship-gray ocean and the 300 foot vertical face of Sydney's North Head. Inward of the massif -- at sea-level beneath the outcrop known as *The Old Man's Hat* -- five unlikely figures negotiated scattered sandstone. Clawing winter damp penetrated layers of clothing but they endured its punishing cold, appreciating the fog's concealment value.

The old man took frequent breathers. Abrasive rocks cared naught for the wisdom of age. Two younger men supported him over the worst patches. One carried a satchel, the other an army-disposal duffel bag. Both sacks bulged with angular paraphernalia.

The grandmother experienced less discomfort. Her grief, still raw, inured her. She refused a revenge served cold and accepted no assistance. The men kept an eye out, didn't want her to overreach; No time for twisted ankles. Injury meant water-rescue: an ambulance, paramedics -- and questions.

The fifth, a teenager, scrambled across the rocks with the ease of youth. She accompanied the old man for a decade -- longer than the others -- after he snatched her from the chilly embrace of dead parents.

Corroded mesh sealed a tall crevice, the handiwork of authorities who feared the litigant's specter. Wire-cutters gutted the barrier and underfed frames slipped inside to where feeble morning-light played but a few feet. Beams from six-volt flashlights prodded the greater darkness beyond; a passage deep beneath the Sydney Harbour National Park. The fissure offered ample headroom but they remained wary of its irregular floor. It was no Hollywood sound stage and the rule of caution still applied.

After strenuous climbing their feet planted on a level plane; man-made, concrete, part of the dense and defunct military network built during the 1930s. A patina of dust and dank knew no human traffic for years. A rat fled the terror of torchlight and scuttled away towards the Pacific. Without ascribing meaning to signs or portents they followed the rodent. Twenty minutes negotiating the honeycomb of abandoned artillery galleries put them close to ground level, somewhere beneath the Scenic Drive or the Fairfax Walking Track. Ten minutes more and the claustrophobic passage stopped hard, terminated by crude brickwork; workmanship evidence of hasty construction.

With neither pause nor speech hands felt inside the duffel bag. A few breaths later short-handled sledgehammers assaulted decades-old masonry.

#

Above ground a 4x4 packed with a rowdy Gen-Y crew passed the Manly Hospital and pulled onto the North Head Scenic Drive. The driver noticed the sun starting to burn off the fog and didn't pay attention when he rounded the bend before North Fort Road and the Artillery Museum. Startled, he stomped the brake-pedal down and the 4x4 fetched up eight centimeters short of a trailer hauling a tracked excavator; the rear-guard of a snaking convoy.

This snake's lead vehicles pulled into an ample clearing in the heath at the furthest

extent of the drive; where it looped back on itself. The 4x4 slowed when it neared a stationary Mercedes-Benz; the convoy-snake's brain. Business suits huddled around a laptop computer opened on the Mercedes' hood.

As they decelerated to pass at cruising speed the young people in the 4x4 eyed the adults with that peculiar form of contempt only those under 25 can manifest when regarding their elders. They accelerated into the thinning fog and drove away.

Around the Mercedes all eyes tracked a blinking reticule across a sat-nav map on a laptop computer. The head suit, Nelson Dernier, cradled a satellite phone tight over his right ear. The sole female in his party, Rebecca Huston, looked out of place in glossy five-inch-heels.

Paul Turco, swarthy and mercurial, concentrated on the stationary reticule.

"It's been five minutes. They've not moved."

His faultless English lilted with the tinge of an accent. Rebecca suspected Italian. Dernier slung the satellite phone over to the third man, Terry Lutz.

Lutz wore his special-forces background like a loud shirt and Rebecca filed him as a possible ally; Sure, I'd dig my nails into those shoulders, if required.

A tracked excavator squealed off its trailer like a recalcitrant bull herded through a stockyard gate. Lutz competed with its diesel roar and yelled into the phone.

"Approach -- but stay hidden."

#

She could not hear it through meters of soil, sandstone and concrete, but beneath Rebecca's feet the sledge-hammers belted out a cacophony. Hands not busy swinging hammers protected eardrums. The five stepped back to avoid tumbling bricks, satisfied the resultant opening permitted entry.

In silence they stood like D-Day assault troops waiting for the ramp to drop. The older woman clutched a child's teddy bear. The teenager opened a locket with a picture; a happy child flanked by parents. The younger men rubbed keepsakes like talismans. The old man held a worn photograph of himself, much younger, embracing a woman. The Polaroid's vintage didn't diminish her beauty clad in a striking red dress.

Venturing through the breach flashlights illuminated a broad chamber. Raw-brick columns supported a vaulted roof. Crumbling waste and odd-sized boxes littered the floor amid discarded bits of lumber and myriad flotsam. Drawing a first breath they recoiled from a revolting odor; sweet decay.

Spreading out they merged torchlight and walked in line-abreast, scanning for a particular shape. They soon found it off to their left, behind a column. Unremarkable rectilinear carpentry was no gilded repose of dead nobility. To other eyes it may have been be a mere shabby old packing-crate.

A propane lamp replaced flashlights which freed hands to dole out the group's arcane equipment. The five functioned like a machine. They performed their rite rarely, yet they were rehearsed -- and driven. Brachial flexors tightened when one young man gripped the box's lid. The females wielded gleaming crucifixes; held them towards the box with arms at full extension. The old man brandished the host in one hand and a hip-flask of blessed water in the other. The other young man poised a sharpened wooden stake above the box and raised a mallet ready to deliver a plunging downward blow.

Behind them a human form rose to its feet. It had lain inert and silent camouflaged by dross and darkness. Its bare feet propelled it into the man with the stake. Thudding impact threw him off-balance, compression punching the wind from his lungs. The

teenager shrieked, her jarring report amplified to bell-ringing pitch by the vaulted ceiling. The man retained his grip on the stake and cudged his assailant's temple with its broad end. The attacker rebounded from the wild swipe, shaking off the blow.

In the diffuse propane light they made out the shape of a woman; feral, bound in ill-fitting gray skin. Her claggy teeth dangled from black gums. Clear liquid trickled from the fresh wound above her eye. Dark matted hair hadn't looked stylish for decades. Remnants of a dress hung in weathered tatters. Its stained browns and grays might once have been red. The garment failed to conceal a scored body riven with abrasions. Her dead eyes scanned the five living intruders.

Crucifixes came to bear but the old man intervened.

"They won't work. She's a reanimant."

The gray woman tilted her head when he spoke. Some remnant of personality found his voice familiar. He recognized her even as she snarled. He shied from eye contact. He needed her memory intact; as she had been forty years before, the day his faded Polaroid was snapped.

She focused on the old man; didn't notice a younger one's careful step to her flank. She paid no heed when a different implement was withdrawn from the duffel bag.

Jacking up her rage she lunged for the old man but before she covered half the intervening distance something glinted; whispered through the air. A decade's Ninjutsu training culminated in an effortless sword strike; the cut so clean through her neck it didn't interrupt forward momentum.

Her body continued into the old man before collapsing in spastic jerks. The head bounced once. A shortened Katana hung motionless in the young man's follow-through combat stance. Sticky ooze, from the woman's sheared neck, pooled around the old man's shoes.

Staring at the fleshy ruin his despair found vent in a mournful wail. Tremulous fingers extended towards the woman. But the remains shriveled to a husk while he watched. His companions enclosed him with comforting arms. Through strength of will, he regained his composure and bade them resume their business with the innocuous crate.

They took a single step, almost in unison, when their propane lamp erupted with a glassy pop. A skillful shot extinguished it without threat to its pressurized fuel can.

They heard an unfamiliar masculine timbre.

"Please remain still. We have weapons trained on you."

The eyes of the five struggled in the darkness. They blinked when laser-sights flashed. Tight clusters of triple red dots -- incandescent sprites -- danced about their chests.

"My name's Doctor Callum. We know why you're here."

Callum was in notional command but he was a scientist. The fifteen security operatives providing his muscle took their true instructions from Number Two; Jamal Edison, and he reported to the head of Tiryns security, Eric Lutz who commanded from the surface, a few feet above them. The woman's decapitation masked their entrance and night-vision visors gave them the advantage.

Fingers tightened over safety catches when the old man spoke.

"Whoever you are; you won't believe why we're here."

Callum said, "We know. You want to kill this specimen. But we need it for research."

The grandmother butted in, unable to contain her rage.

"Research, fuck you! These things murdered my --"

“Can I just stop you for a second,” Callum said, then he listened to his headset.
“Yes, I see, okay.”

He gave a curt nod to Edison who then barked.

“Purge.”

The teenager's keen ears heard safety catches click from *safe*, through *semi-automatic*, to *automatic*.

“RUN.”

She swiveled to flee but fifteen MP9s opened a shredding hail of nine-millimeter exposed steel core. The grandmother died trying to pry the box open: the first bullet exploded an eye before pulverizing her brain. The man with the short Katana stood his ground, a burst stitched across his chest. He was dead before he fell to his knees. His final thought – bliss, emotions at last silenced. The other young man fled but a bullet hit the base of his skull. He died as paralyzed limbs jellied beneath him. The teenager covered the most ground; four meters, before a tight burst left her prostrate, in shock and bleeding. The old man took 23 rounds in the chest before he dropped. He expired staring at the leathery face of his decapitated woman.

Operatives advanced, aiming their MP9s forward, according to strict, tactical doctrine. The teenager twitched, then shuddered for a final time when a burped ten rounds finished her. Edison picked up the old man's Polaroid photo.

#

Doctor Callum positioned a camera on a tripod; a USB cable ran from it to a computer. Night-vision visors were lifted to foreheads when the crate was blasted by a blistering halogen lamp atop a wobbly stand.

At ground level a new video window opened on the executive computer. Paul Turco saw the fresh bodies of the five.

“Was that necessary?”

“Religious fanatics; they were never gonna' see reason.” Rebecca took perverse pleasure in the bluntness of her answer.

“But to murder them; it's not like they could go to the police.”

“Police we can handle. I didn't want them going to Herbst.”

Callum's face filled the tiny streaming window and his voice sounded tinny from the laptop computer's speaker.

“I'm gonna' check this out. I hope it's what we came for.”

He trotted away from the camera and grabbed the crate's lid.

Turco leaned in to the screen.

“Is that wise?”

“Isn't it supposed to be sleeping?” Asked Callum.

“Wouldn't that much noise wake you?”

“Here.” 30 meters distant Lutz yelled to compete with the excavator's flatulent engine and squealing caterpillar-tracks. He stamped the ground and pointed downwards. A flatbed crane-truck approached carrying a substantial brushed-metal case on its rear tray. The case, four meters long, two wide and as many high, bore the Tiryns corporate logo and looked too glossy and precise for the dreamtime rock and shrubs of North Head.

#

Callum bent both knees and lifted the lid. Rusted hinges groaned before it flopped open throwing up a curl of dust. He squinted and stared into the dark interior of the crate.

“Hello.” Before his brain could decipher the data his eyes were importing a sooty

shadow billowed up from within and encircled him.

Edison watched the doctor's throat open, as if slashed by an invisible blade. He expected a gush of arterial spray but the swirling form absorbed the blood like a grotesque sponge. Edison aimed but held fire; couldn't shoot without hitting the doctor. Callum quivered in the malicious embrace of the dark mini-tornado. He looked comical, like the *Tasmanian Devil* from a *Bugs-Bunny* cartoon.

Engorged with the doctor's blood the cloud morphed from fine mist to a glistening sludge; a black chamois soaked in oil. It leaped away from Callum to splash against the nearest wall with a wet slap. Edison riddled the thing with nine-millimeter. Other operatives followed his lead. Blood and dust erupted from the wall.

The nebulous form snapped past their eyes as if a giant rubber band was pulled taut, then released. It obliterated the halogen lamp.

From India-ink black Edison howled a command.

“Night visors.”

He jerked his down and scanned for a threat axis. Coursing adrenalin spiked his pulse rate as he caught a shutter-speed glimpse of feet and legs lifted into the air; the operative's screams choked out by the loudness of grinding bone. A cut-string puppet body flopped onto the floor. Somebody fired at the ceiling. Edison tried to track the elusive form as it bounded from pillar to pillar.

It dropped onto an operative's head; twisted it off like a spinning top. A depressed trigger finger kept firing. Rounds, sprayed everywhere; missing the *thing* but hitting Edison. His Dragon-Skin body armor absorbed all but one bullet. The stray blew out his esophagus and a carotid artery.

The shape latched onto another operative; draining him fast. In less time than one could blink it bounced from operative to operative. It ceased absorbing blood; contenting itself with snapping spines and necks. Panicked survivors abandoned fire-discipline shooting at attacker and victim.

From the ceiling a probing needle of sunlight pierced the darkness, like a spotlight switched on. Night-vision lenses flared out and momentary blindness reigned. A chunk of vaulted ceiling thudded onto the floor. The steel teeth of an excavator took another bite at the roof. Operatives dived clear of dropping debris. Spears of sunlight widened into a phalanx.

Ra caught the slippery cloud. It screeched; burned like match-lit kerosene on water, then fled to its box. The lid whirled up and slammed shut.

The excavator's engine idled while its scoop hovered above the rude opening; an industrial raptor. The four executives stood at the edge peering down. Only three operatives remained alive; one wounded, all in shock. They staggered over a carpet of disjointed corpses. Callum's resembled a well-dressed Egyptian mummy.

Rebecca thought Callum clumsy and impatient; All this for a body in a box.

A containment team in hazmat suits rappelled through the jagged hole. Lutz orchestrated their actions while giving the crane-truck's driver directions via its rear-vision mirror.

“Okay fellas, sweeper teams can clean this up. You just get that crate squared away while there's sunlight.”

The glossy, metal case folded open ready to receive the wooden crate. The hazmat team bound it's planks in chains and hooked it up to the crane.

Nelson Dernier communed with the satellite phone.

“Yes, it's secure but, Callum's dead.” He listened for eleven more seconds then

said, "Got it. I'm on it."

Dernier hung up and, without lifting his gaze above Rebecca's high-heels, said to her, "Time for plan B. You're off to San Francisco. Recruit that woman; from the Antarctic."

"You serious?"

Dernier spun the phone in his hand and offered it to her.

"You want to argue with the old man?"

Rebecca tapped an impatient shoe then shook her head.

Dernier said, "Her name's Tatum, Captain Leslie Tatum."

Chapter 2

Leslie Tatum peered into her microscope and, without looking, reached for another biopsy sample. She fumbled: the glass sliver fell and shattered. She recoiled from the light snapping noise as if she touched a hot stove. Her chest tightened, breath shortened; Shit it's only a slide. Get a freakin' grip.

She glanced from beneath etched brows at her handbag hanging by the door; Your daytime pills; don't need them, not for this.

She felt a panic-attack germinate, pictured herself getting more anxious; It's fear of fear, God, is it a heart attack? Give in and take the damn pills. No don't, afterward you'll feel like shit.

Panic attacks controlled her life. The struggle to manage them was her life. She anthropomorphized the condition, visualized it as some grubby little demon perched on her shoulder baiting with a vicious harangue; They're dead and it's your fucking fault, you miserable cunt.

Squeezing her eyelids tight another flashback-splatter-movie screened in her mental-multiplex; Post-traumatic stress is such a bitch.

It's the Herbst Antarctic complex. It's bitter cold despite my bulky bio hazard suit. Curved corridors fly past in a shaky blur. No time to admire structural elegance while I'm running for my life.

Something scuttles above me and I glance over my shoulder. Oh Christ that's not possible. An infected team-member crawls along the ceiling. It's outstretched hand almost has me. I reach the domed laboratory just in time to lock the doors.

That's right, there's a cultured Englishman somewhere, broadcasting over the PA system.

“Fail-safe detonation imminent. Staff have eleven minutes to reach safe distance.”

Only a recording could be that calm.

I open the heavy door to the bio hazard storage room but, Kristin erupts from within. I shouldn't have favorites but Corporal Kristin Gillies is one. But this isn't my Kristen. This one is infected; has the complexion of death, sunken eyes and a homicidal bent -- all snarls and gnashing teeth.

Combat training kicks in. I deflect lashing arms; roll backwards with her momentum, plant my left foot in her abdomen and kick out. I scramble for the room, roll inside and use my full body weight to push the door shut. The latch almost closes but it

rebounds, knocks me to the floor. Kristen's in the doorway. She launches herself in spitting fury. I kick and punch in the same spirit but the aisle is too confined.

She rips the sleeve from my bio hazard suit. Vulnerable goose bumps bristle in the freezing air. We collide and toppled jars shatter. Noxious vapor -- God knows what's in it -- wafts over my naked forearm. It burns like a bitch: Kristin snaps like a crocodile; For Christ's sake don't let her bite you.

I grab the nearest jar and shatter it across her head. It's super-acid and her face dissolves like wax hit with a blowtorch. I feel a pang of remorse; for destroying once-delicate features, but I flee the chamber, drag the door closed behind me. No time to nurse injuries; the others are hammering at the outer door.

“Stop this shit.” Leslie spoke aloud and wrenched her mind free.

Her relentless right hand trembled against her thigh; Glad I'm alone in here.

She dragged her conscious mind back to the mundane and glanced down at her day's remaining work; So many prostates, so little time.

She searched for the backup sample of the slide she'd dropped and vowed to use her good hand; The supervisor won't be impressed if I lose both. Don't want to look unprofessional. Too many people have said that, too many times. No, this time I'm definitely using my good hand.

Her cell-phone rang and she shuddered; Got it bad today.

The caller ID read *Jessie*.

Before Leslie could speak Jessie opened with machine-gun teen babble.

“Hey sis! I can't believe you don't like texting. You are so lame sometimes.”

“You rang me at work to call me a Luddite?”

“A what? No. I really need your help. Mom and Dad are like the uber-nazi-parents from hell. They say I absolutely can't have a tattoo.”

“And you think I'll talk them into it.”

“You have to.”

“No, I don't. So what kind of ink you want?”

Jessie huffed and puffed; so incensed by her elder sibling's refusal she didn't, at first, hear Leslie's question.

Leslie said, “What kind of tattoo?”

“Oh, not some cheesy butterfly or flower, that's for sure. I wanna' bat.”

“Listen kiddo' how about we discuss this tonight.”

“But I--”

“Jessie, I'm up to my armpits in blood n' cancer.”

“Gross.”

“And you call yourself a Goth. Look, I'll call you tonight, okay.”

“But I really need to--”

“Tonight.”

“Okaaay.”

The disappointment trailing off in Jessie's final word was calculated to elicit the maximum guilt. Leslie was impressed but hung up anyway.

A mere second passed and the cell-phone bleated again; She's not gonna' let this go.

Leslie scoured her workspace for the elusive backup and answered without reference to caller ID.

“Jess', I said tonight.”

Silence hung on the line but when it broke the voice was not her teenage sister's.

“Captain Tatum, Leslie Tatum? My name's Huston, Doctor Rebecca Huston. Would it be possible to meet? I'd like to discuss your experience from two years ago, in Antarctica.”

Leslie felt onrushing fear then something else -- anger. She clenched her cellphone tight to her ear.

“Rebecca is it? First up, I'm not in the Army any more, so it's just plain Leslie, and second, I don't want to talk about it, ever.”

She hammered the *End* button and thought she'd crushed it. Her pulse raged and her right hand trembled worse than usual. She went straight to her handbag and rummaged inside for the daytime pills. After washing them down she tried to relax; They take twenty-minutes to work, remember.

She squatted on the floor and gritted her teeth so hard her jaw ached and her face turned the color of muscatel grapes.

#

After an unsatisfying day Leslie stepped onto the sidewalk. Her watch read 18.25; Girl, why do you persist with military time? It's not like they'll ever take you back. Jessie; that's right, must call Jessie. That's as good a reason as any to grab a pizza. Collect it on the way. Walk home; sure beats the bus.

Since leaving the military she hadn't kept active and eating habits also lost any semblance of discipline. She should have gained a ton of excess flab but she remained slim; if anything, thinner. Girlfriends, if she had any, would have been envious. She imagined conversations held behind her back; How does she stay so slim? She never exercises and will you look at that pizza -- bitch.

But Leslie's reality wasn't a breakfast cereal commercial. She never raised her leg in emulation of a large red consonant. After her last check-up her doctor requested a battery of specific tests. Leslie knew what she suspected. A few weeks later the letter arrived. It remained on her desk unopened. Two follow-up voice-mail messages confirmed her suspicions. The calls went unreturned.

Despite the numbing effects of medication, Leslie was aware of subtle changes in her body. Her periods were erratic: blood clotted in a manner which, in the argot of oncologists, wasn't wholesome. A curious sensation in her lower abdomen sometimes woke her in the night; if nightmares hadn't already done so. It wasn't pain but she had the sense that it too wasn't wholesome.

#

The white Mercedes Benz crawled along the outside lane shadowing Leslie. The two burly men in the front seat, imposing without being goons, took their cues from Rebecca Huston. She sat poised by the rear passenger-door like an exquisite predator.

“Pull over. I'll walk from here.”

Leslie ambled along the sidewalk clutching the pizza box like a waitress with a drinks tray. She saw her balcony on the second floor. Overlooking the street it afforded a better than ordinary view. Foliage from her solitary potted shrub, enfeebled by merciless heat, hung limp over the railing; Girl, you must water the damn plant.

“Doctor Tatum?”

Leslie, skittish like a gazelle on the African savannah, spun to see who called her name. Her first thought upon seeing Rebecca was; Wow, who is this glamor model and why is she talking to me? But it passed in a nanosecond and Leslie fell back on her comfortable, misanthropic suspicion of any stranger.

“I'm Rebecca Huston, Doctor Rebecca Huston. I'm sorry to intrude but I didn't explain myself well on the phone today.”

Leslie spotted the white Mercedes, parked at a discrete distance with its two Buddha-like occupants.

“Why can't you scumbags just leave me the fuck alone.”

“Please Doctor Tatum, I --”

“The Pentagon might've bought your bullshit; but don't think for one minute I don't know --”

“Leslie, I don't work for Herbst. That's not why I'm here.”

Leslie drew breath and stared at Rebecca. After the initial rush of memories and recriminations, she waited for the inevitable panic attack but, it didn't come. Instead she realized she was just plain angry; That's a revelation. Anger trumps fear.

“So what's on the pizza?” Rebecca asked.

“Pepperoni and mushroom; why?” The question took Leslie by surprise.

Rebecca dialed up the charm. “I figured you for a vegetarian, back to the Earth type.”

Leslie looked at Rebecca's immaculate corporate veneer then down at her own dowdy ensemble.

“I'm that badly dressed?”

Rebecca just smiled; a practiced, disarming grin.

Leslie had, for some time, ceased caring about trying to impress; Have I really let myself go that much?

She said, “You don't look like any doctor I've ever seen. What's your field, makeup?”

Rebecca laughed. “Close, biochemistry.”

“You're not from Herbst.” Leslie looked past Rebecca to the Mercedes. “And with that ride you're definitely not from the government. So who are you?”

“Could I persuade you to have a real sit-down dinner in a restaurant? I'm buying”

Neither Rebecca, her security detail nor Leslie, took any notice of the dreary apartment building across the street. They paid no attention to a window with closed venetian blinds angled open a crack. They didn't see the telephoto lens, the 12-Megapixel camera, or the clandestine photos it snapped of them. In seconds the images were uploaded.

#

After the waitress took their order and slipped away Rebecca opened her briefcase and produced a sheaf of documents.

“I read the transcript of the inquiry; your Antarctic mission, two years ago.”

Leslie leaned back in her chair looking unimpressed.

“You mean what the Herbst lawyers allowed to be published.”

“No, the original, unexpurgated text.”

“Not possible.” Leslie waved a dismissive hand.

Rebecca opened the sheaf and flipped around an early page. Leslie read a few lines and her mouth hung slack.

“How'd you get this?”

Rebecca had a satisfied smile. “Just 'cause they say something's sealed, doesn't mean someone with enough clout can't get to it. I work for the Tiryns Corporation, and it's war between us and Herbst. Why do you think those two brick walls follow me

everywhere?”

Rebecca's security entourage sat at the bar sipping Club-Soda, scanning the other patrons and keeping a subtle eye on the women. Rebecca took back the sheaf and flipped through page headings until she found a specific notation.

Rebecca read out aloud. “You claim to have seen an entirely new pathogen that; and this is part I like, *persists even in necrotized tissue, facilitating renewed brain and motor function.*”

She raised her eyes. “Sounds like the walking dead.”

“If you say so.” Leslie looked away.

“I can imagine what those Christian jar-heads at the Pentagon said.”

Leslie peered across the restaurant at a table for two by the window: a couple entwined fingers. The young woman lifted her wineglass and took a sip. Long hair fell and masked her face. The gold bracelet on her wrist stood out against the bluish gray of her dead flesh. Her date's hands also looked dead: blackened fingernails fondled her hair; That's odd, I wonder if the smell of rotting flesh will put people off their meals.

The couple turned and locked familiar eyes on Leslie. She recognized Corporals Kristen Gillies and Brett Mentone; But they're dead. I wonder what they ordered.

Kristin flicked back her hair revealing an awful gash along her throat; exposed sinews and torn blood vessels black with congealed clots. The pair smiled and lifted their wine glasses in a toast.

Leslie turned away when faint tears welled. Rebecca followed Leslie's eye-line, scanning for the cause of her distress. She saw only an innocuous young couple on a date.

Leslie said, “You know I'm a train-wreck. My psych-evaluation says I created a fantasy scenario as an emotional cushion; to deal with the trauma.”

“You don't believe that.”

“Don't I? I get my entire command wiped out yet somehow I survive. And what's my explanation? Sorry Sir, Herbst infected my people; turned them into crazed killers; like in some zombie movie.”

“Did forensics confirm any part of your story?”

Leslie laughed, “That's the supreme irony. I set off the fail-safe, obliterated everything. I destroyed every shred of proof, and my career with it.”

“Ouch.”

Leslie let out a weary sigh. “Dinner's nice, but can you get to the point.”

“Maybe we can help.”

Leslie's fingers tightened around the linen tablecloth. “I'm not going up against their mother-fucking lawyers again. They tried to get me thrown into Leavenworth for Christ's sake.”

“No lawyers; we'd like you to come and work for us.”

For the second time Leslie's incredulous mouth hung open.

Rebecca tapped the folder and said, “We recently acquired a new specimen and there are similarities with what you described in your debriefing.”

Leslie felt the sudden chill of apprehension; What the fuck does she mean new specimen?

Leslie also tapped the folder. “Read a bit further. It killed my entire team in less than a day. What does that? If it's turned up again, I don't wanna' know.”

Rebecca ignored Leslie's reluctance. “We've been trying to locate hard data on what Herbst were doing down there.”

Leslie pretended to pay attention, and ignore the tingling panic attack starting at

the base of her neck. The demon on her shoulder screamed; You don't want to hear this. Get out now, bitch.

Rebecca kept talking. "Our best people have come up with zip."

"That's interesting, but why tell me?"

Rebecca drummed her fingers on the folder. "According to this you read all their research. That makes you the only reference source. We'd like you to come to our research center in Australia, and compare what we have, with what you read."

"Australia, I don't think so. I haven't done so well in the Southern hemisphere."

"I thought you'd welcome a chance to get back in the game. You wanna' spend the rest of your life doing prostate biopsies?"

Leslie's visceral response to Rebecca's tone was anger. The upside, it damped down the fire of panic. She raised her right hand; until then kept hidden. It trembled; obvious, nervous. "See this. I'm out of the game for good. Besides, If I don't turn up for my therapy they'll send the MPs after me; even in Australia."

Rebecca waved her hand in a gentle curve. "We can make all that go away."

Leslie remembered her last session and how she wanted to be done with it; Careful what you wish for.

She shook her head. "Thanks, but no thanks. You're a huge corporation. You don't need me."

Rebecca leaned close. "You saw what Herbst had down there, and you're a biochemist. You can make sense of it. You know how dangerous it was."

She thumbed through pages with a deliberate, almost manic intensity, then pulled one leaf out and pinned it beneath splayed, manicured fingers, such that Leslie could not ignore it. "Here, you mention Subject-Three. According to this, the cadaver appeared necrotized, had its major organs removed, yet it still demonstrated residual motor function."

Rebecca fixed Leslie's eyes with her best *your country needs you* expression. "Whatever they were developing needs viable counter-measures. We -- I, could really use your help."

"I'm sorry."

Splayed fingers pounced to encompass Leslie's hand and Rebecca said, "You could get even: hurt them back."

Leslie jerked her hand free but Rebecca continued, "I said we couldn't get anything from Herbst; but that didn't mean we stopped looking. I believe the specimen we now have is the original source -- Patient Zero."

The demon screamed inside Leslie's head; Run!

Instances flashed from her memory; Herbst data on a computer screen: an Antarctic blizzard rages outside: *Pathogen XX-44 Intrinsically mutagenic - resistant to all known countermeasures.*

Leslie pushed her chair back and stood. "I said no and I meant it."

The security men were on their feet but Rebecca waved them down.

Leslie tightened like a constrictor until the men returned to their Club-Sodas.

"Thanks for dinner but don't call me again."

She bounded towards the exit.

"My men will give you a ride."

"No thanks."

Outside Leslie flagged down a taxi; I want to go home and down a bottle of tranquilizers.

#

In the drab apartment building opposite Leslie's the camera sat by the door, packed and ready to go, its task complete. Leslie Tatum's front entrance was glassed by a different lens, the telescopic sights of a bolt-action, Parker-Hale M85 sniper's rifle. Repeated time-tests confirmed the target, a woman, walked through the aiming zone for an average of six seconds; time only for two shots, maximum. But the marksman was sanguine. He needed only one.

His cell-phone rang; he held it to his ear without speaking; the final proximity warning. The target would arrive within fifteen minutes. He would wait until visual confirmation before slipping a round into the breach.

The sniper's plan went off its precision rails when the door broke inwards; splintered wood shattering low-lit calm. A burst of light hit his eyes, startling him for a critical microsecond. A laser dot found him reaching for his side-arm.

The intruder fired two rounds; double tap, into the upper torso. A third round hit the sniper just above the ear; the pistol-shots muted by a silencer. The sniper flopped backwards onto the nearby bed and lay still, looking like he was napping.

The Tiryns man's pulse raced but he felt the adrenalin rush subside. He was calming by the time he raised his cell-phone.

“Threat neutralized, send in the clean-up team.”

#

Leslie jolted upright quivering, straining to suck breath into surprised lungs. Drenched in sweat her singlet clung like a sodden towel while her saturated bedding smelled of body odor and exhausted deodorant. She ground knotted knuckles over sleepy eyes that squinted when stabbed by barbs of light, probing from somewhere outside; Where am I? Bedroom.

Street lamp. Its light infiltrated her blinds to cast parallel lines down the far wall. She recovered her faculties enough to rate the latest nightmare; Wow, that plumbed new depths and it seemed so real; something else I can thank Rebecca Huston for, dredging up all that stuff. Does she not know the sub-conscious buries traumatic memories for a reason?

Leslie reacted to a green blinking at the edge of her vision. Her cell-phone, conspicuous among a cornucopia of prescription drugs littering the night-stand, demanded attention. She checked the details of a missed call -- from Jessie; Oh shit. Jessie, I forgot.

She replayed the voice-mail.

“Sis' Where are you? It's ten-thirty. I thought you were gonna' call. I guess I'm not that important huh'. Anyway, I don't care what anyone says. I'm getting my tattoo.”

Jessie hung up with much noise, to emphasize a state of high dudgeon. The time flashed on the phone's tiny screen, 02.12 Hrs; Can't call back at this ungodly hour. But not calling is just plain bad manners. This is something else I can be pissed at Rebecca Huston for.

Leslie's inner voice felt deafened by a colliding mash-up of memories, fears and emotions; so she paced in front of her window. After fourteen circuits she happened to look through a gap in the blinds and caught a glimpse of something familiar; something white. The trembling fingers of her right hand parted the blades of the blind. On the far side of the street, at yet another discrete distance, stood Rebecca's Mercedes; Fuck. Can't that woman take *no* for an answer?

Questions rolled around in Leslie's head like loose change in a tumble dryer. Anger at this latest intrusion mounted. Then it happened again, she was so angry she forgot to have a panic attack; Wow, anger does trump fear.

Everything Rebecca said flooded to the front of her mind; where it couldn't be ignored; Damn.

She felt her hand's manic tremble and had an awful realization. Leslie clenched her fists and gritted her teeth.

“Shit.”

#

Leslie's dressing gown billowed like a spinnaker as she pounded across the asphalt in matching, fluffy, pink slippers; I must look a sight, but I could give a shit.

A few minutes prior, while wrestling with the demon on her shoulder, she had what she called an anti-epiphany; the realization she must confront something difficult and terrifying, especially terrifying; Something Rebecca said over dinner swirled around and blended with all my fucked-up memories. I saw Jessie bitten and infected by that damned Patient Zero. Rebecca couldn't control it. It spread from Australia all the way into my folks' home.

Despite the awful dread of it, Leslie knew she had to travel to Australia. Not for the benefit of mankind; though that was part of it, but, if she was going to be even approximately normal again she had to confront her life; Damn, shit, piss, I really don't want to do this. The little demon joined in; No, you don't. Stay here and die bitch.

Shut up you little turd. Leslie felt in no mood for his drivel.

In the front seat of the Mercedes a drowsy bodyguard shook his companion; They look like sideshow clowns with those dumb-ass open mouths. If only they'd rotate their heads.

“Tell your boss I'll have a look, just a look: that's all.”

Leslie didn't wait for a response. While she twirled away the bodyguard fidgeted for his cell-phone and, through bleary eyes, found Rebecca on speed-dial

Chapter 3

Rebecca Huston waited on the tarmac of Sydney airport's private jet-base. She tapped an impatient foot until Leslie's car arrived. Leslie sighted her in the same second and winced; Oh, man, does she always have to dress like she's going to an opening? With me looking like the white-trash cousin from Flyshit, South Dakota. I should've tried to dress better.

She clenched her right fist but even the demon on her shoulder had an opinion; Why bother, you'll always look like crap.

By the time Leslie was on her feet Rebecca's minions retrieved her luggage; a single suitcase and a shoulder bag. Her nostrils tingled when she breathed in chilly afternoon air, rich with the kerosene scent of aviation fuel.

Rebecca approached. "Welcome to Sydney. Hell of a flight; fourteen hours straight. How's the jet-lag?"

"All good. Your plane's decked out better than Air-Force One. I had my own state-room, slept most of the way."

She doesn't need to know my nightmares still woke me, even at thirty-thousand feet.

A jet-copter waited nearby. The Tiryns logo, emblazoned along its side, stood out bold against a shimmering white fuselage.

Rebecca walked while she talked. "Sorry there's no time for sightseeing, we still have another three hours travel plus, I've got a surprise for you."

Leslie was suspicious, her hand trembled the instant Rebecca said *surprise*. Since the Antarctic she maintained a level-headed dislike of the unknown. She caught a glimpse of the copter's open cargo hold. Next to her own luggage lay a suitcase and an army duffel bag; I just know that belongs to a man; Oh hell, not someone who knows my history. That's all I need; some judgmental prick looking down his nose at the psycho wash-out.

Leslie climbed onto the steps then balked. She tried to both hide and control her trembling hand; Fuck it. Just go.

A first image jumped at her, snakeskin cowboy boots under jeans; At least he's not in a dress uniform. But his eyes, when they met hers, were warm, friendly and -- familiar. She hadn't seen those perfect cheekbones since the day she marched out of the USAMRIID into civilian oblivion.

“Hi Cap', long time.”

Bo Greaves still used his trademark nick-name for Leslie that only he could get away with. Leslie felt thrilled and relieved.

“How come?”

Rebecca climbed in and brushed against Leslie. “You both worked together before. You need an assistant. I figured I'd put the band back together.”

Bo said, “Doctor Huston's boss pulled some strings and here I am, Down-under, but I still report to Major Arillo and the USAMRIID.”

Leslie glanced towards Rebecca without quite making eye contact. “Your boss must be connected.”

“You have no idea. Mister Murcat has lots of friends in the Military.”

“Of course he does. They're your biggest clients right?”

Rebecca's grin was answer enough.

Leslie recognized Bo's shock at how she'd changed. She'd seen that look often over the preceding two years. When acquaintances bumped into her on the street conversations usually went along similar lines. Hi, wow. Look at you.

But it was the eyes; the eyes always spoke the truth. What they meant was; What the fuck happened to you? Bo's eyes screamed the same question. But he had too high a regard for her to speak it aloud.

“Damn, Cap' I missed you. Why didn't you keep in touch?”

Leslie felt the uncomfortable lick of remorse; Of all the people I turned my back on, Bo deserved it least.

“Sorry, been a savage couple of years.”

The jet-copter lifted off and darted towards the sun, inclined forward like a creature shielding its eyes from the glare. Leslie and Bo spent the first hour catching up like they'd seen each other only the previous day. Rebecca pecked at her laptop computer and feigned disinterest but Leslie kept one eye on her; You don't fool me. You're taking in every word, especially Bo's. I wonder how long before you play the 'I'm incredibly sexy' card with him?

At the forty minute mark it began. Rebecca crossed her legs and dialed her come-to-bed eyes up to high-beam.

She said, “So, Bo, we're going to be working pretty close for the next few weeks. Tell me about yourself.”

“Not much to tell. It's all in my service record. Have you read it?”

Leslie got comfortable and waited to watch Rebecca's sexual battering-ram shatter to matchwood against Bo's impenetrable professionalism. Leslie knew Bo worked with one immutable rule; Fuck your colleagues, you fuck your career. Yeah, I've never seen him break that one.

Leslie anticipated Rebecca's next salvo but it didn't happen. Rebecca sat back, didn't press for more chit-chat. She accepted Bo's answer and returned to her laptop computer; What's she up to?

When the flight entered its third hour conversation dwindled and each took time for private contemplation. Leslie opened her computer and swiveled in her seat so no other eyes could see the search heading; *Ovarian Cancer - Symptoms and Treatment*. She scrolled through self-help blogs, bypassing much of the dross. One heading seemed stark in its assertion; *Most women aren't diagnosed until Stage-Three or Four*. She stared out the window; Wonder what stage I am?

From 15,000 feet Leslie and Bo studied the unfamiliar topography gliding beneath

them. Coastal greenery and vast expanses of undulating eucalypt forest gave way to irregular straw colored pasture; rough-brushed over a rusty base-coat of volcanic reds, dotted with occasional indications of human habitation, infinite roads, like Nazca lines but sparse, nothing like the United States. The ground shifted through shades of terracotta and dotted olive drab to become the endless ripples of Australia's red-center. When the jet-copter drifted over in a gentle bank Leslie saw only an orange speckled wilderness lined by the long shadows of dusk.

Rebecca sat upright and shifted in her seat. "Looks like we're there."

They experienced inertial lift when the jet-copter began its abrupt descent.

Leslie looked out the window.

"So this is Silo Nine."

Bo asked, "And what precisely is *Silo Nine*?"

Rebecca answered, "It was a joint Australian-US missile-site, unused since the Cold-War. It was perfect. We totally rebuilt it."

Leslie observed a substantial security fence encompassing a mighty expanse of parched crimson desert. The copter descended and an approaching white speck grew into the top of a bunker, painted with helicopter landing markings. Leslie remembered a wit once referring to these structures as concrete icebergs; Ninety-five percent's hidden underground.

Near the bunker a disc-like edifice -- 40 yards in diameter -- rose six feet above the ground. An unsealed road led away to a gate-post punctuating the distant perimeter fence.

They stepped onto the heliport as the chopper's rotors wound down. Despite the comfortable seats they felt better for standing and stretching. Rebecca led them down a flight of spare concrete steps.

"Let's go. Get away from the flies quick."

Within seconds of clearing the rotor's downdraft tiny bush-flies materialized from the ether to pester eyes, lips and nostrils. Rebecca hurried to an innocuous door. She opened it only as far as was necessary to permit entry.

"Don't let them in."

The door's seal broke with a soft hiss and cool air brushed their faces. Hurrying inside they felt, rather than heard, the hum of electrical equipment from deep beneath their feet. Rebecca stepped around a corner into a lobby of featureless concrete broken by a single recessed elevator door. She put her eye onto a retinal scanner and spoke into a wall-mounted microphone.

"Executive clearance, Huston, Rebecca, Hotel, Uniform, Sierra, Tango, Oscar, November, initial R for Romeo."

Beams scanned her eyeball, vertical, horizontal. A speaker crackled the uneven cadence of a computer-generated voice.

"Huston R, Silo Nine reception level, access granted."

Inside the elevator Rebecca pressed the single numberless button and the car descended. Leslie tried to judge how far by counting the seconds and estimating speed; settling on eleven floors before it slowed and their inertia caught up.

Rather than a modest vestibule Silo Nine's reception level was a vast surprise, a corporate cathedral rising nine floors. A hive of layered offices housed an army of workers, oblivious to the new arrivals. A formidable bullet-proof glass barrier isolated the elevator from the concourse. The single access point, a door and metal-detector, was manned by polite but heavily armed corporate guards.

Rebecca fast-tracked them through. It was apparent to Leslie that as soon as Rebecca emerged from the elevator the level of alertness, of tension, was ratcheted up several notches.

Rebecca's heels carried her at a brisk pace along polished floors towards another elevator.

“This is just the administrative level. The real work happens deep underground.”

Bo said, “I thought we were already deep underground.”

“There's way more.”

The next elevator's board listed thirty-six floors; the lowest ten locked off, requiring security clearance and retinal-scan access. Rebecca went through the ritual then spoke the destination out loud, “Twenty-Seven.”

By the time the computer voice repeated the destination the car was already descending.

“So we're more than forty floors underground?” Leslie asked, impressed by the immensity of the structure; But now I gotta' fight this creeping sense of claustrophobia; great.

“That's right. I told you. We totally rebuilt this place. Almost nothing of the original missile silo remains.”

Bo too seemed awed. “Must've cost a fortune.”

“It was worth it. Nobody has a facility like this.”

“By nobody you mean Herbst.” said Leslie.

The car stopped and in the microsecond before the doors parted Leslie imagined the subterranean labyrinth beyond, some hybrid mixture of Stargate Command and the Pentagon. But upon exiting she was confronted by a spectacular window through which a dramatic penthouse view of Manhattan's Central Park stunned and confused her. While her brain recast its bearings she become aware of lofty ceilings and bright walls boasting decorative art at a scale to match the space. Luxuriating plants thrived in ceramic pots softening the regularity of the architecture. Floors of polished wood and marble stretched before her, to left and right.

“Hang on, It's moving.” Leslie stepped closer to examine the Manhattan skyline. The vibrant High-definition LCD screen shimmered two feet behind the window's polished glass.

Rebecca said, “It gets everybody the first time. The windows are real and the screens are wider, set back, so it looks genuine.”

Leslie observed no corridor followed a straight line. Everything curved in concentric rings surrounding a central core. Rebecca led them to a T-junction. She turned left. But something grabbed Leslie's attention, out the corner of her right eye. Two orderlies in white coats and masks pushed a gurney. They opened a set of heavy doors and passed through towards another elevator. Leslie saw half a sign, *STEM*; It must be Stem Cell.

Rebecca said, “This way.”

Leslie's thoughts spiked; Yes we all know you're a control freak. But I'm not in the mood for doing as I'm told.

Leslie stood her ground long enough to be certain Rebecca was irritated.

#

The trio entered a well-appointed meeting room where wood paneling matched an oversized conference table. An acreage of flat-screen monitor towered over one end of

the room. In a display of old-school etiquette Nelson Dernier, Eric Lutz and Paul Turco stood to greet the new arrivals.

Dernier spoke first. "Doctor Tatum, welcome. I'm Nelson Dernier, department head."

"Call me Leslie."

Bo thrust out his hand. "Howdy, I'm Corporal Bo Greaves, of the USAMRIID."

Lutz was introduced as Head of Security. He nodded and shook hands as necessary. Leslie observed how he made no attempt to hide his cool indifference; He must set the tone for all Tiryns' security personnel. Neither she nor Bo failed to notice the Glock secure in its holster under his jacket.

Turco, by contrast, seemed warmer. Dernier introduced him with the title of *Father*.

Turco said, "It's just Paul. I left the priesthood a long time ago."

Dernier added that Turco was on board as a technical advisor which told Leslie nothing; What sort of advisor, a Jesuit, an academic? Why was he no longer a priest? Did he molest altar boys?

Leslie strove to reign in her anxiety about what was coming; I just want to face it, whatever *it* is.

"So, when do I see Patient Zero?"

"You don't waste time. I like that." Dernier exchanged a conspiratorial look with Rebecca. "Perhaps they should meet Doctor Callum first."

#

Rebecca led the six floor descent to the laboratory level.

"Doctor Callum's in the mortuary, off my lab."

Despite brilliant artificial views and lofty ceilings Leslie felt the oppression of rock, steel and concrete in suspension above her head. Her hand shook in her pocket and she clenched it tighter; Get a grip, girl.

She didn't have her daytime pills and heard the demon on her shoulder smack its lips, but she was resigned to follow through; Just keep walking, it'll pass.

Would her demon hold his tongue? She willed him to.

They passed laboratories boasting all manner of leading-edge equipment. Rebecca noticed Bo trying to see all the shiny new toys.

"One of those labs is reserved for you. If there's any other equipment you think you'll need -- just let me know."

Dernier added the next sentence like they were a tag-team. "And just 'cause we're in the middle of the Australian desert, it'll still get here within twenty-four hours. We have absolute priority."

Before broaching the final doors, into sterile surroundings, breathing masks and surgical gloves were distributed. The mortuary was larger than Leslie expected; with one wall mounting a dozen drawers; Do they ever have a full house?

Opposite the drawers a work bench ran the length of the room, replete with microscopes, monitors and the attendant implements of the dead. The room held three stainless-steel postmortem tables. Over the middle table a white sheet conformed to the unmistakable shape of a human body. A nearby drawer bore a hand-written label;

Callum.

Like a magician Rebecca pulled the sheet back revealing a mummified corpse. It was two years since the Antarctic but Leslie's memories remained vivid and there was a

chilling familiarity about this corpse. She kept her misgivings hidden as Rebecca spoke.

“What's your assessment of these remains?”

Leslie said, “Male, partially mummified, recently exhumed.”

That was the textbook observation but Leslie knew Rebecca wanted more.

Rebecca asked, “How long's he been dead? Best guess?”

Bo answered, “Hard to say; depends on how it's been stored. My estimate, somewhere between five and ten years.”

Rebecca waved a scalpel over the cadaver and extracted a small sample of necrotized skin. She slid it under the lens of a scanning electron microscope. A wall-mounted monitor flashed and displayed what the lens saw. Rebecca adjusted focus. Wriggling micro-organisms and blood cells enacted a jerky dance, like amorphous dodgem' cars jostling for their piece of microscopic track.

“Is that the same -- it looks like it's from a living subject?” Said Bo, leaning in and fascinated by the projection on screen.

Rebecca had another of those grins that annoyed Leslie; Just like my bitch therapist.

Rebecca said, “Doctor Callum was walking around in perfect health -- five days ago.” She turned to Leslie, “Is this what you saw two years ago?”

“Tell me it hasn't reached the general population. You saw how fast Swine Flu traveled.” Leslie's voice quavered betraying her terrible dread.

The last time she saw this was at the bottom of the Earth, thousands of miles from the nearest major human habitation; Now it's on a First-World continent of twenty-million, with flight routes around the globe.

Dernier raised a hand, “Don't panic. Ground Zero's been sterilized.”

Leslie wasn't reassured and her demeanor didn't improve when Rebecca replayed video footage. A man in a bio hazard suit gripped the lid of a decrepit wooden crate. The surroundings looked like an old cellar.

Leslie was alarmed by the sight of civilian bodies lying on the ground. “Who are they? Are they deceased? Were they infected?”

Dernier said, “They've been dealt with.”

“How? If this is the same pathogen it can mimic death. Where are those corpses now?”

“Cremated, okay. Now you need to see this.” Rebecca tapped another key.

Leslie didn't doubt the bodies had been cremated but she knew Rebecca wasn't telling the whole story. She made a mental note; That's another milestone on the inexorable road to our showdown.

For the moment she left her suspicions to simmer.

The video rolled and Rebecca narrated. “This was shot five days ago.”

Callum lifted the lid and stared into the crate. A black cloud leaped out; swirled around him.

Leslie felt her knees tremble and weaken; Not enough to stumble, please don't collapse, not now.

On the ghastly replay it was obvious to Leslie that Callum was drained of life. It took just seconds.

She tightened her quadriceps muscles and locked her knees in place.

“What the hell was that? I didn't see that two years ago.”

#

Descending to level 36 they passed under an innocuous department label; *Containment*. Turco spoke, for the obvious benefit of Leslie and Bo.

“Be on guard every minute. Don't get drawn into idle conversation. Give it the slightest opening; the slightest, it'll mess with your heads. Stick to what's necessary, nothing more.”

Bo frowned at Leslie.

“What is he talking about?”

Rebecca said, “Patient Zero.

Chapter 4

Bo marched a full pace ahead of Leslie and she detected in him an air of protectiveness towards her; He looks a touch older. Is it possible he's even more handsome? How's Rebecca gonna' keep her grubby hands off him? Maybe she's a lesbian? Nah' my gaydar would've pinged.

Striding alongside Bo reminded Leslie of a better time. She was a Captain in the USAMRIID and she envisaged a spectacular career; God, was I ever that confident?

Her little demon howled in her eardrum; We know how that worked out, you fucking failure.

The demon, her inner critic, initiated a stress-flashback and she imagined the walls of Silo Nine shunting towards her, like the trash compactor scene from the first Star Wars movie, *A New Hope*, from the seventies, not the awful *Phantom Menace*.

Her memory propelled her back two years to the corridors of the Antarctic, Bo's face on her laptop-computer, his features distorted by atmospheric interference, and a ferocious blizzard.

#

Antarctica

Leslie pictured herself standing in waist-deep snow watching her transport, a V-22 Osprey, lift into a tumult of sleet. Her last contact from Bo, at base operations in McMurdo, drifted from her memory with the halting scratchy quality of a failing transmitter.

“Cap', gotta' pull the chopper. The Australians want help tracking a Japanese whaler. You wanna' come with 'til the weather clears?”

“God no, we just got here.” Leslie knew she shouldn't scream but it was hell hearing herself over the banshee wind.

“Okay, you're the boss, out.”

She and her second in command, Sergeant Ernesto Ortega, took point and forced an entry into the first dome. Leslie zeroed onto a conspicuous icon across the doors -- a falling Autumn leaf -- the Herbst corporate logo. Once inside the reason they, [the USAMRIID] was called revealed itself.

Corpses lay twisted in grotesque contortions, as if caught in violent struggle at the instant of death. Congealed clots of blood mixed with smears of brown across floors and

walls in wild, finger-painted streaks.

“Watch yourselves. This is no place for a torn suit.”

Leslie's warning was unnecessary. The team edged forward, reluctant to touch anything despite layers of protective neoprene. At the heart of the facility a cluster of corpses lay piled against doors labeled; *Administration*. Some stared with cold shocked expressions, as if, before dying, they tried to break the door down. Ortega was powerfully built but it took his best kicks to drive in the doors. Something within fell with a heavy thud and a clatter; filing cabinet.

Leslie was first into the administration dome. She observed an absence of corpses but, stepping around the command console, nearly stumbled over a single set of remains. A woman's, in a torn lab coat crouching, with one tabetic arm outstretched. Leslie read the name tag; *Doctor M. Khullar*.

“Khullar, I know that name. Monica Khullar; she's a geneticist.”

Ortega said, “Why's a geneticist digging up ice-cores?”

Leslie examined the body. “She's infected, flees in here; hauls that cabinet against the doors. Disoriented, knows she's dying, but keeps crawling. Why? Then the pathogen, or whatever it is, finally wins, stops her mid-lunge.”

Khullar's desiccated finger extended toward an ominous looking red button under an open safety-housing. Yellow and black hazard-stripes and a computer monitor blinking a single word; *Sterilize*, betrayed the doctor's purpose.

Leslie co-opted a computer terminal to access the facility's data-base. She flipped through sequential screens showing schematics; a honeycomb of domes connected by tubular passageways. She paused on one, a reinforced concrete box beneath the sub-structure. Ortega recognized a ballistic-shape within. “Fail safe. She was trying to destroy the place.”

Leslie folded the safety cover over the red button. “A few more millimeters and we wouldn't be here.”

They exhaled.

Ortega glanced down at the corpse. “It's like it knew.”

“What knew?”

“The pathogen, it knew she was trying to kill it.”

#

That was the past; Leslie had to contend with the unknown of her present, Australia, the desert, Silo Nine and the faint odor of antiseptic -- Lavender. They followed the arc of a corridor and came upon the most formidable door yet encountered; *Biohazard Control - Authorized Personnel Only*. It led to the central core, around which all else revolved.

Nelson Dernier went through the ritual of retinal and vocal scanning. They felt gears mesh somewhere behind reinforced-concrete. The colossal door swung on massive hinges; a ramp slid forward. Leslie recalled the door to the gold repository at Fort Knox from a James Bond movie she saw on TV. She experienced another anti-epiphany, I'm the opposite of Ali-Baba. Dernier's just said *Open oh Sesame* and, instead of a cave full of riches we're entering the ninth circle of hell.

Her heart beat like an athlete's as she endured another silent terror -- straining to quell emergent panic. Her companions remained ignorant of the micro-war waged across the shell-cratered desolation of her mind.

The corridor appeared more Spartan than those outside, with their artwork and

potted plants. Visible aggregate within raw poured concrete had the unmistakable imprimatur of the military. Leslie guessed it was a surviving portion of the original missile silo. Another fifty feet brought them to a fresh door, less substantial, but still requiring keypad access; *Control Room*. Adjacent stood an elevator and a landing atop a flight of stairs winding down around the central core. How far down Leslie could not tell.

Rebecca tapped a code into the keypad. "You'll have your own codes by morning."

Leslie felt the clicking vibration of the lock release; So I'm finally at the business-end of Silo Nine.

They stepped into darkness that gave way as eyes adjusted and were met by an array of computers, electronics, monitors -- initial visual overload. A command console covered in Byzantine-looking sliders ran the full length of the curving inside wall. Under dim, indirect lighting the effect was some bizarre melding of nuclear-reactor and music recording studio. The inner wall, an expanse of reinforced-glass, ran from the top of the console to the ceiling. The potential view from this vast window was obstructed by hulking steel blast-shutters that hung like a battleship's armored belt a few centimeters beyond the pane.

An abundance of office-chairs waited in casual disarray behind the console. Behind them the room was overlooked by a modest, elevated gallery for observers. Leslie doubted Tiryns permitted many.

Rebecca depressed the master power-switch and a sea of LEDs bewitched the console in pinpricks of light. She tripped switches, depressed buttons and turned from time to time to confirm what materialized on monitors. In under a minute the control room pulsed as if sentient.

Bo and Leslie took chairs next to Rebecca. The others sat on the observation level. Dernier seemed happy to let Rebecca run things. Lutz remained cool, aloof. Leslie couldn't read his emotions at all. Turco had a constant look of concern like he knew something terrible was about to happen. Leslie wanted to tell him she felt it too; Whatever's down here, -- destroy it now, before it's too late.

With her hand poised over an innocuous button; *Flash Screens*, Rebecca tilted her head to glance back at Dernier. "Show time."

The instant the button depressed more powerful machinery engaged somewhere and baseball-sized steel bearings rolled in a huge brace. The towering blast-shutters slid apart as smoothly as a knob of butter glides across a searing griddle. In an involuntary moment of curiosity Leslie and Bo both stood for a better view.

The control-room overlooked the containment chamber, a concrete cylinder 35 yards across. Its floor sat ten feet below the level of the control room. Immense, sheer walls of the inner core ascended like a towering chimney. Bo stood back to take his bearings. "So that disc up on the surface, that's the opening to this."

Dernier was glad of any opportunity to sing the praises of *his* division. "That's right, forty-six flights straight up."

Leslie observed another imposing steel door out on the floor to her lower right. She made the connection with the stairs and elevator that descended from outside the control-room. Bo looked out at the flat circular slab, where once Titan and, later, Minute-Man missiles had waited for the call to Armageddon. Then it hit him. "Hang on, no launch site was ever this deep."

"Right again, we completely re-bored the whole thing." Dernier made no attempt to disguise his pride in the impressive engineering.

Leslie and Rebecca exchanged a fleeting look, the kind only women have when their men prattle on about hobbies, cars, power tools or sports. Leslie mused; Why are men obsessed with phallic symbolism? Who can build the tallest erect thing? But Silo-Nine's the opposite, an inversion, a vast hole in the ground. Does Lawrence Murcat want the world's deepest vagina? What are his issues? Leslie, don't go there.

She leaned towards the glass trying to see the opening at ground level but it was too distant. Rebecca hit another button and abrupt illumination forced all eyes to target the solitary item in the center of the chamber floor.

Lutz harbored a proprietary sense of ownership over the bulky, brushed metal container. He saw it from the flatbed truck in Sydney, then hauled onto a commercial jet-freighter and a Chinook helicopter. He drove the humble fork-lift himself that brought it to its final resting place, the bottom of Silo Nine.

To Leslie, it resembled an oversized, metal suitcase. A distinct seam bisected it, bound by solid clamps offering a reassuring sense it was locked tight. A small panel on one corner held blinking lights -- orange then green.

A large LCD monitor, obedient to Rebecca's keyboard strokes, ran an X-ray scan of the container.

Leslie observed the unmistakable details of its contents.; An empty wooden box.

A scroll of text rolled down the side of the screen; only one datum warranted a second look; *Contents --Soil: 12 centimeters Deep*. Leslie watched the CGI replay with numbing dread.

Bo said, "So where's the patient?"

Rebecca answered, "He's in there."

"There's a patient locked in that thing?"

Leslie clutched Bo's wrist. "That doesn't look like any clean-room I've ever seen. What are your infection-control measures?"

"More than adequate for what we have. But you already know that don't you."

Rebecca's tone sounded borderline dismissive.

Leslie declined to answer; she just stared at the container.

Lutz broke in, "Safety first Rebecca."

"Sure. Time to deploy satellites."

Leslie and Bo exchanged a questioning look and she knew they mentally mulled the same one-word sentence; Satellites?

#

In a high orbit, one of a series of Tiryns communications-satellites responded to a coded microwave transmission from Silo Nine. Tiny thrusters flared in staccato bursts and adjusted its orientation. The distinctive Australian landmass spread out thousands of feet below, visible through a sparse night-time cloud layer clinging to the coast.

The satellite's collecting dish boasted a sprayed-on coating of photovoltaic nanoparticles; the most efficient collector of solar radiation available. Tiryns Chemicals, and its Renewable-Energy division, was rightly proud of its achievement. The coating, applied like house paint, turned any surface into a solar-cell. Thus rendered, the dish rotated to direct its broad collecting-surface towards the next satellite in the chain. At the same time a down-link aimed itself Earthward, on a precise trajectory towards Silo Nine.

Another signal from Silo Nine's up-link pulsed skyward and the solar chain activated. Satellites numbered One and Two, occupying a geosynchronous orbit above the Central Australian Desert, had passed into the Earth's shadow; not so the third in the

chain. It had two hours of full exposure and instantaneous transmission to the next satellite.

It sent an invisible stream of refocused solar energy to satellite-number Two; which, in turn, passed it on to number One. With twenty-four satellites in the chain, when satellite number One, and by extension Silo Nine, was in darkness, sunlight was still available. Once number Twenty-Four passed behind the Earth number One was already into a new daylight cycle. At the speed of a microprocessor the down-link transponder fed sunlight into the continuous data stream and shot it away to Earth.

#

Inside the containment chamber the relative weakness of man-made lighting became apparent when forced to compete with pure sunlight shooting down the central core. Everybody except Bo shielded their eyes. He was fascinated by the monitor displaying a CG model of the satellite network.

“So there's a satellite directly above us and it's beaming sunlight all the way down here.”

Dernier said, “Not entirely, the satellites scramble the solar frequencies, so it's not weather dependent. Also, on the surface it's invisible. You probably didn't notice the ground station when you flew in. It unscrambles the solar frequencies. Turns 'em back into pure, visible sunlight. We can blanket that space with UV, twenty-four seven.”

Bo looked at the container, blasted under the equivalent of midday sun.

“Very cool. But, why?”

“And what's it to do with the *thing* that killed your Doctor Callum?” Leslie also wanted an answer.

Dernier pointed to the chamber, and the container. “He's out there.”

Bo said, “So he's dead already?”

Rebecca shook her head.

Bo smiled. “Five days -- sorry Madam, he's dead.”

Leslie saw Rebecca's expression; Don't do it, don't. Shit, she did, there's that fucking smug grin again.

Rebecca leaned over and held down a button labeled; *Microphone*. Out in the containment chamber her voice scratched from wall-mounted speakers.

“My name's Rebecca Huston. I'm speaking to the entity inside the box. If you can understand me make some sort of noise. Our microphones will pick it up. Do you understand?”

They looked out the window. Seconds ticked over and Bo turned to Leslie. He was about to voice his frustration when; *Boom*. The sound from the speakers echoed in the control room.

If Bo was speechless Leslie was just plain unnerved. She kept her right hand clenched tightly in her pocket. Rebecca was elated and again opened the microphone channel.

“If that's a *yes* please do it again.”

Nobody breathed. Every eye fixed on the container. When the boom shook the speakers it still made them jump.

Rebecca shared a tentative smile with Dernier then she opened the microphone channel a third time.

“We'd like to open a dialog with you. Your present location's exposed to direct sunlight, and we've seen how you feel about that. I'll shut it off if you promise to behave.”

Leslie felt a presence beside her; Turco. All three men had descended from the gallery, unfolding events too extraordinary for any to remain seated. Leslie had no idea where this was going. She reran in her mind some of the horrors of the Herbst Antarctic incident. Her thoughts were halted by another *Boom*, from the speakers.

Rebecca spoke for the benefit of Leslie and Bo.

“The subject presents with an ultra-sensitivity to UV radiation. The slightest exposure burns it. Now, we haven't tried feeding it yet but we believe its nutritional requirements are also a bit delicate. We have credible evidence suggesting it will only ingest whole blood, nothing else.”

“So you've got a vampire.” Bo's laugh rung with hollow disdain.

None of the others smiled as Rebecca whispered to Leslie, “This is what you're here for. Want to let it out?”

The color vanished from Leslie's pinched expression as Rebecca hit a separate red button and bold text streamed across a video monitor; *Containment Unit; Release.*

Chapter 5

Almost ten thousand miles from Silo Nine, at the top of the *Herbst International* building in Chicago, Belinda Nyles hurried to her boss's office. She usually acknowledged the underlings she passed, or paused to appreciate the view over Lake Michigan; but not this day. She reported directly to the Chief Executive Officer, Mister Liman Rothkirch and he insisted that all new information pertaining to Tiryns be brought instantly to his attention, sooner, if possible. Such resided on her computer and Belinda was nothing if not punctilious.

She was a veteran of the Herbst corporate milieu and, by dint of hard work and ability, had risen to become Rothkirch's PA, the conduit through which his edicts were passed down the corporate chain-of-command. Rothkirch assigned people to take care of details and it was Belinda's task to juggle them all. The arrangement left him free to concentrate on strategic planning, his *big picture*. She was satisfied with her lot; How many middle-aged mothers wield this kind of corporate power?

Liman Rothkirch liked Russian tea; so much so he kept an antique, wood-burning samovar in his private office and it was a constant irritation for building's management. Smoke detectors in his office were permanently disabled. Belinda knew his routine, knew he'd be sipping his third cup of the day when she knocked, a knock as distinctive as her DNA, and she never forgot to announce herself.

He said, "Come."

She entered and fixed him with her worried expression.

"It's Tiryns sir. They've recruited that woman, Leslie Tatum."

"As I predicted they would."

Rothkirch placed his tea-cup on his desk and it tinkled with that light resonance peculiar to delicate china. He believed the measure of an executive's power was how little they required on their workspace. He kept only a cup and saucer on his. But Belinda forced his exquisite tea setting to share the expanse of mahogany with her laptop computer. She spun it around to reveal surveillance-photos of Rebecca Huston speaking with Leslie Tatum outside her apartment building.

Belinda was even more obsessed with doing harm to Tiryns than Rothkirch. For two years she thought of little else.

Belinda's son, Patrick, was a promising student. Like Leslie Tatum, he studied molecular-biology. With her connection to Liman Rothkirch it was an easy thing for

Belinda to secure Patrick a research position with Herbst straight out of college. His first project; working with their lead researcher, Monica Khullar, at a new facility in the Antarctic. Patrick was thrilled and plowed into the work with the fearless enthusiasm of youth. He regaled his mother with frequent correspondence lauding their fantastic and ground-breaking endeavors. He was Belinda's youngest and hadn't made that final severing of the emotional umbilical.

After three months the first gush of enthusiasm faded and Belinda detected in his Emails a faint shift in attitude. Praise for the research lost its fulsome tone and his communication grew less regular. But Belinda didn't grow concerned until word filtered back to Chicago about a containment failure.

Khullar made the requisite noises. "Nothing to concern yourself with -- perfectly normal -- standard operating procedure -- highest safety protocols."

The litany of cliché platitudes grew tiresome but Belinda's maternal alarm didn't trip until the USAMRIID was asked to investigate. Belinda Googled the team's leader and discovered Leslie Tatum's fearsome reputation. She soothed herself, but cleaved to a demanding anxiety understood only by other parents.

Belinda's faith vanished the day Rothkirch received a bald Email from the Pentagon. Its sender had no idea Belinda read most of his correspondence first. There was no person to sit her down and break the news. First she read that something catastrophic occurred, a fail-safe device was detonated to prevent the spread of some contagion and, Leslie Tatum was injured and choppered out.

But it was three ordinary words in a subsequent sentence that pierced her heart as surely as if she'd been struck by a marksman's jacketed round; *No other survivors*. For Belinda, in that instance when she learned her youngest child was dead, the corporate enmity between Herbst and Tiryns mutated, became personal, and intractable. After two cold years the open emotional wound ripped wider when Leslie Tatum resurfaced.

"What action do you wish to take?"

Rothkirch closed his eyes, paused then said, "None, yet."

Belinda raised an eyebrow. "Sir, had we done as I suggested two years ago, she'd be dead and we wouldn't have this problem."

"Far too obvious. The finger of blame would have pointed only one way."

Belinda's rage had not cooled by a single degree but she knew better than to argue. She had her own plans in train.

"As for Silo Nine, communications are problematic. I can't guarantee constant updates."

Rothkirch said, "No matter. For the time being just have our operative in there observe, that's all."

#

Leslie stood rigid, locked in struggle with her quaking hand; For Christ's sake don't let them see it, you'll look like some crack-head.

She stared into the chamber, watching clamps along the seam on the container jolt open in staggered sequence like a zipper. Each gave way with a metallic *chunk*. Pressurized gas hissed from attenuation valves where pneumatic pistons pushed the container's halves open like some behemoth, rectilinear clam.

Rebecca reached past Leslie towards buttons and levers delineated by a red boundary line; *Solar Controls*. Leslie was intrigued by the most distinctive, a T-bar slider.

Rebecca depressed a plunger; *Shut-Off*. They again felt machinery grind overhead and sunlight in the chamber faded to naught. Artificial lights engaged, dim poor-cousins to the sun's brilliant gaze. The container's halves lay open, metal palms offering its contents -- the crude wooden crate from Sydney, its planks grayed with age.

Rebecca spoke into the microphone. "Okay, sunlight's gone. Stretch your legs."
Seconds passed and the anticipation was palpable.

Bo saw it first. "There."

They leaned forward by instinct, as if a few extra inches might reveal more. From a crack, where the wooden crate's lid met its sides, a fine mist drifted out possessed of that wispy quality like smoke from a cigarette, only dense and black. It issued forth in a continuous stream but, unlike smoke, failed to dissipate. Its undulations seemed deliberate.

Bo asked, "What's it doing?"

Leslie said, "Looking for a way out. Is that what killed your man Callum?"

Lutz answered, "That's it."

Upon the utterance of words the mist reacted. It changed direction, drifted towards the control room and floated upwards. Turco voiced what Leslie wondered.

"Can it hear us?"

"Of course it can." Rebecca's answer was deadpan as though she were ordering coffee.

Without deviation the mist flowed towards the window. About a yard short of the glass it halted like some vaporous mime-artist bumping against an invisible wall. Black smoky tendrils probed forward giving off sparks like branches touching power-lines. The mist retreated and hung in the air coiling in lazy convolutions.

Lutz broke the spell.

"So the water worked. Who woulda' guessed?"

Bo said, "Water, where?"

Rebecca spoke into the microphone.

"See that yellow line in front of you."

Leslie leaned forward and saw a cadmium line on the floor, a yard inside the wall, running the full circumference of the chamber.

Rebecca continued, "That line delineates water pipes, embedded in the floor. And it never stops flowing; unless we turn it off."

She tapped another area of buttons sectioned off on the console by a blue border, *On and Off*. Bo spied the accompanying monitor with a 3D CGI model showing the sub-floor of the chamber; circular pipes pumping water in and out and the attendant text: *Water Circulation - Active*.

Turco smiled. "He can't cross clear running water. We've done our homework."

For the first time Leslie saw Turco with something other than a frown.

Bo said, "Excuse me, what do you mean, he can't cross clear running water?"

Turco said, "It's no secret; it's in the folklore. You've not read Bram Stoker's *Dracula*?"

Bo shook his head and Turco continued, "Well, Chapter Eighteen of the book has just about the best primer on vampire lore you'll find anywhere. It says that *Dracula can only pass running water at the slack or the flood of the tide.*"

Bo thought then said, "So he can't cross running water except at full and low tides, that's what you're saying?"

Turco shook his head and raised a finger in caution.

“Dracula is a work of fiction. My research indicates that tides don't matter. Stoker probably found some obscure reference when he was researching. We think it's more a matter of proximity. He can fly over running water in a plane, for example, but he couldn't jump across a stream at ground level. It also seems he can be carried by others, but he can't initiate the movement with his own limbs or form.”

Rebecca grinned at Leslie. “We have you to thank for this, designed the system after reading your account of that room in the Antarctic.”

Leslie dredged up more dark, buried memories and her mind's eye took her back to the Herbst facility.

#

Antarctica

Leslie sent Ortega and the others on a sweep of the complex. Corporal Kristin Gillies came with her to explore the Research lab, another dome; The whole place was domes.

They entered and found samples and papers in disarray, hinting at some abrupt calamity. In the center of the space stood the most confronting specimen, a cadaver strapped to the rails of a stainless-steel plinth. Its trunk lay bare. Triangular flaps of dermis peeled away from a cruciform incision. Kristin took a keener look.

“Why restraints for an autopsy?”

The corpse was a locked contortion as if it struggled against the straps until the moment of death. The neck arched backwards its mouth gaping in a snapshot scream. Dead eyes stared like fruit that sat too long under a baking sun. A dried liver, like wafer, barely registered any weight on nearby scales. Hand-writing scrawled across the patient's chart read; *Subject Three*. Leslie sought out the matching toe-tag.

“I got a bad feeling this patient was alive when they started cutting.” Leslie shuddered. The room felt dirty, made her feel dirty.

She spied another more enticing label hanging above the heaviest door in the complex; *Danger - Hazardous materials - No Unauthorized Entry*. She leaned against it and only her entire weight forced it to give way. Inside they found a narrow aisle flanked by floor to ceiling metal shelves. Leslie took a mental snapshot of the cataloged names, a litany of toxins labeled in red; *Carcinogen, Teratogen, Extreme Biohazard*.

“Man, you have any idea how dangerous this room is?”

She uncovered a white canister labeled; VX.

“Nobody should have this in a facility so flimsy.”

She almost overlooked another innocuous label at the end of the chamber; *Pathogen XX-44 - Source Material*; Note to self, examine that later.

Her intercom buzzed; Ortega. “Captain, there's something you should see. We're about fifty meters from your position. Follow the corridor.”

“On my way.” Leslie shepherded Kristin outside the hazardous materials room. “Nobody else goes in there.”

They found Ortega in another dome. At its center lay a metal coffin, lid hanging open, the padded lining simple beige linen, its innards piled with dark gray ash. The dusty mound had unmistakable human proportions.

Ortega said, “Cremation?”

Leslie looked closer. “I don't see any scorch marks.”

Ortega's gloved hand brushed aside ash to expose a pristine lining. “You're right.

It was burnt somewhere, but not here.”

“So they toast a corpse; then lay the ashes out like this. This place just gets weirder and weirder.”

Leslie heard something and raised a hand. They fell silent, only the whistling blizzard audible over the creaks and groans of the dome; I was sure I heard it, rushing liquid, a rhythm transmitted through the soles of my boots.

“The floor.”

She and Ortega lifted rubberized sheets then plywood. A waft of steam erupted from exposed plumbing. Leslie's mask fogged over for seconds before pipes came into focus. Fed from the corridor one pipe's label read; *Water - Incoming*. Its circumvallation ringed the dome's circumference then rejoined the corridor with another label; *Water - Outgoing*; It was an enigma.

“They pump water in then out; no faucets, no outlets of any kind. Why?”

Kristin shook her head. “Like you said Captain, this place gets weirder and weirder.”

#

“Hello, Leslie.” Rebecca snapped her fingers and broke the spell of memory. Leslie was back in the present, in the containment chamber of Silo Nine.

“Sorry.” Leslie considered the bizarre mist churning beyond the glass. She knew one thing. Whatever it was, she hated it.

Rebecca grabbed the microphone and spoke in the self-important tone Leslie found so infuriating. “As you can see, escape is out of the question, but we don't wish you harm. There must be a way for us to communicate.”

The black mist swirled in place for several seconds then drifted towards the floor. It condensed, drew in upon itself. Becoming less amorphous it began to look familiar. They recognized distinct features, hands, hair, even clothing. The mist coalesced into -- a man.

The form planted solid feet on the floor. Arms and legs of flesh, bone and muscle stood upright, draped in contemporary attire. His features, tilted towards the floor, hid behind a shock of hair. In a smooth movement he looked up revealing a symmetrical face.

Leslie thought he looked handsome; That could be a trick. He can probably look like anything he wants. Why else wear clothes? It's for our benefit, our cultural need for modesty. Handsome features don't cut any mustard with me. If I can resist Bo Greaves then some guy whose nothing more than smoke isn't turning my head.

That notwithstanding she couldn't ignore his eyes. They pierced, emerald-green, almost iridescent.

From his vantage point on the chamber-floor the mirrored control room windows did not permit view of the humans within. But his stare found their eyes and darted from one person to the next. He looked around the chamber and up its towering walls, assessed his surroundings.

Lutz seemed the least impressed. “He looks like my cousin, Earl.”

The being snapped his attention toward Lutz.

“You were expecting Robert Pattinson?”

When the voice came through the speakers everyone felt an unsettling tingle. It could talk.

The being stood on its tip-toes then levitated, like it stepped on an invisible escalator. While ascending healthy skin shifted hue to a bruised and blotchy rotted-gray.

Ordinary finger-nails grew into gnarled talons. The charming smile became a grimace of stained yellow teeth capped by extended incisors. Garb transmuted into a tattered black cassock giving the appearance of a malevolent monk. But the eyes incited the greatest disquiet. The whites became sickly yellow like spoiled milk and the irises burned like pinpricks of flame. He hung in the air like he'd sprung from the dusty pages of some Gothic tome.

Leslie's pulse remained unsettled since viewing the video of Doctor Callum's death and the agent was this thing now in human guise; Is this its true form? She didn't like the word they were all thinking, didn't wish to utter it.

He lifted the sides of his decaying cassock, tilted his head and spoke.

"I only do this look at Halloween. It's *soooo* five centuries ago, don'tcha' think?"

While defying gravity he metamorphosed back into his agreeable human form then smiled, but his expression held a hint of contempt. The humans stared open-mouthed.

Bo broke the silence. "A million vampires and we get a standup comedian."

The vampire let out a slight chuckle.

Leslie was a roiling sea of conflicted emotions. More memories of Antarctica slammed into her conscious mind like cars in a freeway pile-up, each image more horrid than the last. Her right hand was numb she'd clenched it so tight for so long.

The vampire glided forward but not so far that he might touch the water's yellow threshold. He pointed a finger at Rebecca's precise location.

"For days now I've listened to you prattle on. I feel I know you already."

Then he stared at Leslie. Her eyes met his even through the mirrored one-way glass.

He said, "But where are your manners? Aren't you going to introduce Doctor Tatum, and her redoubtable assistant?"

His smile was pure mischief. Leslie was galled.

"How does he know my name? You told him about me?"

"No, not a word." This was Rebecca's fear; Leslie not coping.

The vampire sniffed the air in Leslie's direction.

"I like your scent. You don't reek of greed."

Leslie's breath came in sharp gasps. She felt her control slip away. The demon on her shoulder reemerged, and he was pissed, screaming in her ear; RUN.

Something in Leslie failed and she succumbed to a full-tilt panic attack. She bolted past the Tiryns men, fumbled with the door handle until it submitted, then fled into the corridor. Bo raced after her with Rebecca at his heel.

Leslie sprinted at the speed of fear covering the fifty-feet to the massive door like a gazelle. But no amount of will could compensate for not having an access-code. She hammered fists against indifferent steel. Bo caught up and grabbed her wrists before she shattered them against the door. Rebecca helped restrain her. Leslie twirled to face them, frantic: her eyes glazed like startled game caught at night in the beam of a shooter's spotlight.

Chapter 6

In the conference room Leslie and Bo sat across the broad table from Rebecca. Leslie regained her composure somewhat. Bo sat close. She liked that he was so protective; He'd been that way with all the women in the squad, but never suffocating like a jealous boyfriend. He was a steady, reassuring presence. Women felt safe with him.

In that moment Leslie had a realization that struck her like lightning. She'd been so myopic about her own issues she overlooked one fact. Bo was also a survivor. Her team were his comrades too. He must have grieved just as much. She never considered what he'd gone through in the previous two years; And there it is again; throbbing guilt, like a kick to the gut.

She wanted to talk to him; Let him know I never intended to just abandon him. But that thing, back in there. Have to deal with that first.

Rebecca wanted answers.

“Okay Leslie, our specimen is weird and dangerous, granted. But only someone with first hand experience gets that spooked. 'Fess up, what happened?”

“Watch your tone lady.” Bo adopted his default protector mode. Then he spoke to Leslie.

“Cap' say the word n' we're outta here.”

Leslie hung her head.

“No, she's right. I didn't tell the whole story.”

She saw his expression change, to a mix of surprise and disappointment. Leslie never imagined she'd see him look at her that way, “Everything in my debriefing was true, I swear. But there was also stuff I didn't tell anyone; eaten me up for two years.”

Rebecca sat back, folded her arms and could not have looked more pleased. Leslie gave her account without expression or emotion, like she was under hypnosis.

#

Antarctica

The blizzard whited out the sky and blacked out communications with McMurdo. Inside, we collected the Herbst corpses and stacked them in the infirmary, along from the dome with the coffin. The body count of thirty-eight, tallied with the roster of thirty-nine. I made a mental note to include the cremated ashes. Then it hit me, the ashes made forty. With thirty-nine names on the roster, thirty-eight bodies in the infirmary, plus Subject

Three, still strapped to its plinth, who did those ashes in the coffin belong to?

I was tantalized by the lure *Pathogen XX-44*. Its data cataloged a dangerous direction and reckless research. Monica Khullar's work was reprehensible, her moral-compass beyond repair. But she was meticulous. Couldn't fault her rigor

I slid Subject Three's blood under a scanning electron microscope. It was like staring at a fatal collision. Its notes read: *Cellular activity nil, decomposition advanced: Patient infected 22:00 HRS: Deceased 09:00 HRS. Incubation period, two to three hours: lethal, eight to ten hours.*

If the timings were correct it made Ebola look like the common cold. How could they deliberately infect a patient with that? The next line was really scary: *Pathogen intrinsically mutagenic: resistant to all treatment.*

I was eager to see it. A few adjustments and the image focused. At first, it looked like every other dead sample. Then I saw it. In the brilliance of a 24 inch LCD monitor it defied reason; a multitude of living cells wriggled. I checked the notes again, to be sure. They stated it was dead.

I was so focused I didn't hear Ortega on my intercom until he yelled, "Captain, it's --"

I was in such thrall I cut him off.

"Ernesto, we gotta' lock this place down."

"Captain, we got a medical emergency."

"What is it?"

"Suit-integrity-failure; Number Eight."

"On my way." That woke me up. Number eight was Kristen.

I found Ortega with Corporals Morrissey and Gladstone, kneeling over Kristin outside the coffin dome. Her suit was torn open at the neck. A jagged rip ran to her chest; her throat was a tangle of shredded skin and blood. She was awake, wide-eyed and panicky. I tried to calm her.

"It's okay Kristin. I'm here."

She mouthed silent words and kept staring into the room at the coffin. We looked, in a reflex action, but the room was empty. Ortega scoured the corridor. "It must've been an animal."

I was livid.

"Those Herbst fuckers said they didn't have live animal specimens."

I used my intercom.

"Listen up; there's an animal at large, and dangerous. Keep your eyes open and be careful."

When Kristin went limp I started frantic CPR and tried to maintain an outward semblance of calm, even though I was panicky as hell. Corporal Stollin arrived with a squeezable resuscitation bottle. Gladstone tore Kristin's headpiece off and put the mouthpiece over her airways. They squeezed in time with my CPR. I knew I might break ribs but I pounded anyway; till I was exhausted. She didn't respond.

Ortega turned away to conceal his tears. "What did you mean about locking this place down?"

"Whatever infected these people may not be entirely dormant."

"What's that mean?"

Before I could explain I was cut off by a shriek from the infirmary, and commotion like a brawl. Corporal Mentone had been standing in the doorway only seconds before.

I raced into the doorway with my sidearm already drawn. I expected to find a rabid rhesus monkey or a dog. The room was dark and it looked like Corporal Mentone was rolling about on the floor with one of the Herbst corpses. The thought flashed for an instant that the deceased's family might have grounds for serious legal action if things got strange. My only explanation was a psychotic incident in reaction to Kristin's death.

What I saw next is what I haven't dared tell anyone -- and I'm still not sure it really happened.

The corpse, not Mentone, tilted its head and looked at me. It stood up with blood dripping from its grimy teeth, but whose? Mentone clutched his shoulder and I saw blood seeping between his tight knit fingers. That's the moment reality shifted for me, and it's never come right since.

My head was still trying to process Mentone and the corpse when I heard Ortega howl in pain behind me. I didn't know where to look. Corporal Jane Lutrell bumped into me and gasped. I took my eye from the cadaver and saw Kristen. She was standing; she was alive. I was thrilled, then I saw what she was doing; biting into Ortega's shoulder. He pulled her taut by the hair and she tore away a mouthful of suit, clothing, skin and muscle.

In the confusion I'd forgotten about the Herbst corpse until it was almost on top of me. I spun to face it, aimed my pistol, but I knew ordering it to stop somehow wasn't an option. I fired point-blank into its torso; no effect. I put the next round through the middle of its forehead. The entry point was a half-inch dot but the exit wound was the size of a softball. Skull, scalp and minced brain splashed out the back of its head and plopped onto Mentone.

Ortega leaned against the curved corridor clutching his shoulder, shivering, deathly pale, trying to contain serious bleeding. But I fixed on Kristen just as she bit through Corporal Gladstone's suit. Blood stained her pale skin, from mouth to naval. I knew she was no longer my Kristin; I saw her move but those eyes were dead. She screeched, an ear splitting wail, then vanished around a curved companionway. I let her go. She was beyond help and it was the living who needed my attention.

Ortega toppled and began to convulse. He tore at his suit and ripped toughened neoprene like it was paper. When his mask came away we all stepped back in fright. His face bore the same feral expression as Kristen; Then I heard another shriek from the infirmary; saw Mentone snarl, spit then lunge for Corporal Lutrell. It happened to him too.

Whatever was infecting them must have originated from the Herbst cadavers. But what scared me; its incubation period wasn't hours, but minutes.

I had no choice; I aimed and fired. The single round went clean through Mentone's skull. Lutrell was paralyzed from fear. She soiled herself.

The neat stack of Herbst cadavers squirmed, stood then rushed the infirmary door. I shot until my ammo' was exhausted but they kept coming.

I dragged Lutrell into the corridor. Those not infected ran for their lives with me. I reckoned this same chaos must have engulfed the Herbst researchers who were now pounding after us. Lutrell roused from her stupor and screamed with all the wind in her lungs. I cast a glance behind. My mind had no way of processing what it saw. Three cadavers scurried on the ceiling like roaches, they defied gravity. Then they dropped and tackled us; all but me and Lutrell.

The Admin' dome lay ahead, doors that could be locked. It was only a few desperate strides, but a violent pull wrenched Lutrell from my grip. When I turned she

was already pinned under Ortega; her head pressed beneath his hips. He snarled and whipped forward scissoring his teeth into her thigh.

I tried to block out her screams while I closed and locked the Admin doors. I hauled a filing cabinet against them. Then the pounding began and the door frame shook from heavy impact. No surprise, Ortega or Gladstone could have demolished the door by themselves. There was a crash and the filing cabinet toppled. Forget minutes; I only had seconds.

I backed up against the console. I don't know why, but yellow and black hazard stripes were all my eyes registered -- the safety housing over the red button. The heading on the LCD screen still flashed: *Sterilize*. I drew breath and realized this was exactly where Doctor Khullar found herself, trapped and facing a terrifying death. Another thud snapped a door-hinge. No time to consider options; there weren't any. I flipped up the safety cover and pressed the red button.

Panicking, I ran and my heart pounded in my chest. A cultured English gentleman broadcast a pre-recorded warning.

“Sterilization protocol enacted. Staff have fifteen minutes to reach minimum safe distance.”

I'd seen enough science-fiction to know these countdown voices were always female. What was Herbst thinking? I fled as quickly; but more importantly, as quietly, as I could. I rounded a bend and saw Kristin's torn mask on the floor. I'd gone in a circle; was outside the room with the coffin. Then I heard them, scratchy noises and footsteps. Someone was in the room, but I had to get past. Going back was suicide; so was staying still. I was trapped; had to try and slip by without being detected. The noises grew louder. They were coming out. I decided to creep to the edge of the door, take one quick look, then bolt like hell.

I crouched low and peeked around the doorway, trying to make myself as small a target as possible. The coffin was held by six reanimated Herbst cadavers. They stood three a side, like pallbearers.

Then another impossible image burned itself onto my memory. The coffin lid opened and a young woman sat upright. She was naked, maybe twenty years old and gorgeous, but pale as death. And she was bald. I also noticed a dark tattoo on her upper left breast, near the clavicle, a sequence of vertical strokes like a bar code

She stared right at me; God, I'd been detected, time to get outta' Dodge. I didn't think after that; just sprang across the doorway and ran for my life. I can still hear her, laughing at me.

#

Leslie exhaled. The telling had been harrowing. She looked at Bo hoping not to see contempt.

Rebecca said, “Wow, keeping quiet was the smart thing.”

Bo nodded and said, “Damn straight.”

“But I withheld evidence.”

Rebecca said, “Maybe, but if you told that story you'd still be dribbling in a rubber room.”

Rebecca leaned forward and seemed to switch into sympathy and support mode. “Leslie, you said you wanted to confront your demons. Well, now's your chance. I'm no psychologist; it's not my field. But you and I both know if you run now that'll be it for the rest of your life.”

Bo took Leslie's hand. "Cap' think about it for a while. You don't have to go back in there yet."

"Yes I do." Leslie stared at the far wall avoiding eye contact, especially with Rebecca.

#

Dernier and Turco looked pleased when Leslie followed Bo and Rebecca back into the control room. Lutz maintained his usual indifference. Turco sounded genuine when he offered words of support.

"Don't beat yourself up. It's not every day you learn monsters really exist."

Leslie managed a sheepish smile and thought; Oh I knew alright. That's *why* I ran.

Rebecca resumed her place over the solar controls and pointed to the box. Lutz answered her questioning expression.

"He asked us to call if Leslie came back."

Rebecca grabbed the microphone. "Okay, shall we resume?"

All eyes focused on the wooden box when black mist drifted out again. The vampire materialized and leaned against his crate. He could have been a male-model posing for catalog photos. His piercing eyes stared up at the mirrored glass; at Leslie's precise location.

"Doctor Tatum, you're back, excellent. I'm so looking forward to playing with you, especially in this terrific sandbox they've given us. In fact, we're all going to have such a *nice* time together."

To Leslie, his emphasis on *nice* rang with menace.

Rebecca spoke, "Before we proceed I should acquaint you with our security measures and lay down some ground rules."

The vampire's expression betrayed complete indifference. Leslie thought; He looks bored. Can he even get bored? He's just spent five days locked inside that steel crate. What if he's claustrophobic? A claustrophobic vampire, don't be silly.

She stopped daydreaming when Rebecca manipulated the interesting T-bar. Bo couldn't hide his enthusiasm; Yeah for him this could be the challenge of a lifetime.

Leslie didn't begrudge him his glee. She understood he couldn't see things through the prism of her post-traumatic stress disorder; Good luck to him. I wouldn't wish this curse on him.

In the chamber a hard edge of bright light fell across one side of the floor in front of the massive steel entrance. Rebecca's harshness blared from the speakers.

"While we can flood your space with sunlight; we can also focus it. It's what we like to call a Solar-Curtain. It's pure sunlight but don't worry, it doesn't bleed peripheral light, like an open window would. You could stand right next to it with no danger."

The vampire smiled and seemed even a little amused. In the control room Bo was also impressed by the sophisticated technology.

"How come there's no leakage, over such a long focal distance?"

Dernier leapt at another opportunity to extol the virtues of Tiryns' engineering.

"It's a proprietary technology, built into the solar receiver up at ground level. It uses a radical new spherical-lens. You'd need to speak to the optics guys for technical specs. Rebecca, get it to move."

Rebecca fingered a slide controller located next to the T-bar. Bo and Leslie were fascinated when the solar-curtain crept across the floor, its advance slow but relentless.

Rebecca wanted the vampire to know she was in charge. Ever the control-freak,

she had a distinct ring of menace in her next admonition.

“This allows us to move you anywhere we want. So we can come down there and do anything we like.”

The darkness shrank with its edge withdrawing as the solar-curtain advanced toward the vampire. He stood impassive and appeared to dismiss the threat. The sunlight crept to within a yard of his box but he remained motionless, almost defiant. Feet became inches, yet he did not retreat. Rebecca seemed not to notice but it was obvious to Leslie; He's playing chicken.

The wall of sunlight stopped, almost at his nose. Everybody drew a hushed breath. Rebecca held the slider.

“Not afraid of the sun?”

The vampire's eyes tilted up.

“The sun, sure. But you don't frighten me, not one bit.”

The contempt in his calm, measured voice neutered Rebecca's authoritarian tone. He gestured to the surrounding walls.

“Take a look at this place; it's a city for Christ's sake. And let's not forget the price you paid just getting me here. Somebody wants me alive.”

Leslie's concern was the integrity of their containment protocols. She assumed this vampire was as dangerous as the young woman she saw in Antarctica. It also followed that the accompanying lethal pathogen might soon turn up as well. If it got out it was a danger to the entire world; to her family. She thought of her Mom and Dad, and Jessie. Leslie knew if she did only one thing in Silo Nine, it must be to keep this thing contained; Even if it means my life.

Leslie wished to speak with this being; to disabuse it of any delusions it harbored that she cared about Tiryns' corporate aspirations. She tried to make sense of the vast array of buttons on the console; but it was one thing to watch and another to do.

“How do I?”

Lutz guessed what she wanted and opened the microphone for her.

“Leslie Tatum here: it's only fair to warn you, my first concern is to limit the spread of any contagion. You may carry a pathogen that poses a significant public health risk. So try and breach containment and we'll flame you in a heartbeat.”

The vampire grinned.

“Flame, heartbeat, really? Let's see about that shall we.”

With no hesitation he stepped from darkness into the blistering light of the solar-curtain.

Chapter 7

Belinda Nyles scanned the Email from her sweeper team and she was furious; The one chance to take out Leslie Tatum with a clear justification, that might pass Rothkirch's scrutiny, and what happens? The shooter vanishes.

She directed her people to stop looking for the sniper; The assassin's certainly dead.

Belinda knew the body would never be recovered. She drew slim comfort from the knowledge no annoying detectives would turn up waving badges and asking for cooperation. Despite the Herbst-Tiryns hostility certain niceties were still observed. One was to never attract the unwanted attention of law-enforcement; Tiryns must have intercepted the hit. Yeah, we do the same.

But for Belinda, the question was how? How did Eric Lutz know about the hit? She sanctioned it with only five hours notice; It's a measure of how much Tiryns want Leslie Tatum. Lutz must have deployed a shepherding-team. Could Tiryns have a mole embedded at Herbst? Hardly surprising. Do I not have an agent at Silo Nine?

Belinda decided it was time for a pogrom; Bring in external specialists, conduct a security audit. It'll be surreptitious and, at its end, someone goes in a body bag.

#

“What the fuck is he doing?” Rebecca's emotional outburst sounded uncharacteristic.

In contrast, Turco betrayed predictable rusted-on Catholic ideas.

“Isn't it obvious? He's testing us.”

The instant he launched into the solar-curtain the vampire's skin sizzled and blackened to charcoal as if some mammoth, invisible blowtorch was poised above him. But he did not flinch. Instead, he struggled forward into the teeth of blistering pain.

Leslie was only concerned with his intended destination, the big door, and escape. With that thought foremost in her mind she couldn't believe it when Rebecca pulled the T-bar hard over. She looked like that sailor from *Titanic*, desperate to turn the ship's wheel to avoid the iceberg. Somewhere above them gears shifted. On the floor the solar-curtain stopped then reversed direction.

Leslie had only one thought; He'll break containment.

She grabbed the T-bar and took Rebecca by surprise.

“Leslie?”

The women wrestled over the device, pushing against each others shoulders and straining to maintain a grip. Neither gained the upper hand and the wall of sunlight continued its withdrawal.

“Leave... that... alone.” Rebecca tried to maintain her composure but shards of fury slipped through cracks in her corporate veneer.

“Not likely.” Was Leslie's determined answer.

Dernier and Turco had a momentary lapse captivated by that hoary chestnut of male fantasies, the girl-fight. Beneath them the vampire was a charred ruin. He fell to his knees but still crawled towards the door keeping inside the slowly moving solar-curtain.

“Doctor Tatum, please step away from the console.” Lutz spoke in a calm yet firm tone.

Leslie ignored him and remained locked in hostile embrace with Rebecca.

“Doctor Tatum!”

Leslie saw the muzzle of Lutz's Glock pointed at her face. Bo scowled and rose to intervene.

“Back off, boy.” Lutz never took his eye or aim from Leslie.

Leslie ignored the gun; she was winning the contest with Rebecca. But their struggle was rendered moot. The glaring solar curtain switched itself off. In the half-second it took to register the change both women realized how ludicrous they looked, and felt.

Under feeble artificial lights the vampire rolled onto his back and groaned.

In the control room they read a blinking line of gold text on a monitor; *Executive Override: Solar Curtain Disabled*. Lutz returned his Glock to its holster. Tension diminished and heads cooled apace with the vampire's skin.

He stood and dusted himself where smoky wisps drifted from his baked exterior. At first slow, but with steady rapidity, his flesh repaired itself. Burned tissue took on a healthy hue. He smiled at them with an expression of unadulterated glee. He was the victor in this first battle of wills -- and the humans knew it.

Leslie and Rebecca seemed welded to the spot; they still clung to the T-bar. Both were relieved when they saw the vampire recover but for different reasons.

Leslie asked, “What just happened?”

The vampire laughed, a deep-throated and sinister chortle.

“Isn't it obvious? Someone in a tailored suit and a corner office just decided you're all expendable.”

Rebecca shook herself free from Leslie and opened the microphone.

“How do you figure that?”

The smiling vampire shook his head and glared with eyes of pure mischief.

“You're humans; that's what you do.”

#

Dernier presided over the debriefing in the conference room. Turco distanced himself at the far end, content to listen, while Lutz and Rebecca faced off against Leslie and Bo. The men shared an unspoken sense they should keep the women separated, lest they rip each other to pieces.

Leslie directed the glistening embers of her gaze at Dernier while needling an accusing finger towards Rebecca.

“I just don't get it. You build this fortress and then your wunderkind here is happy to let that *thing* just breach containment.”

Rebecca spoke in her trademark dismissive tone, measured, almost soporific.

“Sometimes you have to bend rules.”

Leslie bristled.

“Bend rules; next you'll say you can't make omelets without breaking eggs. That's the same bullshit those Herbst assholes were peddling.”

Dernier broke in. “Enough! Was there an actual risk?”

“Nah', he was just friggin' around.” Lutz traced slow spirals on the tabletop with an index finger, not bothering to look up.

Turco said, “Get used to this. He'll test his limits, pit you against each other. He already has the ladies at each others throats.”

He had no inkling friction between the women was as certain as the tide coming in; had been the moment they met. That truth required no supernatural explanation. Leslie hoped they might at least get through the first day without the fur flying. But she was not willing to take a step backwards when it came to safety. It was Tiryns who asked her to come on board, not the other way round. She visualized the way things would play out. Resigned herself to being escorted from the facility; After I alert the media, the health authorities, Tiryns' lawyers will eviscerate me. Just like Herbst. Big deal -- Ernesto Ortega does that every other night in my dreams.

She said, “You're playing a dangerous game. I should have the CDC and the USAMRIID all over this place.”

“But you won't will you.”

Everybody in the room turned towards the source of the new, disembodied voice.

“Hi Leslie, Lawrence Murcat here.”

Murcat loomed over them from the oversized, flat-screen monitor at the end of the room. At his location he sat behind an imposing desk in a well appointed executive office.

“I didn't get a chance to welcome you and Bo earlier. You're all there on my dime. So what do you think of our vampire, pretty wild huh'? But more importantly Leslie, are you still *in*?”

Leslie thought hard and looked at Bo, knew he'd accept whatever decision she made; So it's down to this. You agreed to have a look. Well, you've looked and it's as frightening as you expected. And Rebecca's far too cavalier. Run away now and who provides responsible oversight, Tiryns? Not likely. Turco? He's not in charge. And what about your family? Can't protect them from outside.

Much weighed on her mind.

“Mister Murcat my natural inclination is to run as far and as fast as I can.” She paused and thought; Do I cross the Rubicon?

Then she said, “But you cowboys need somebody like me.”

That's it. Can't back out now, no matter what happens.

Her right hand trembled. She'd forgotten about that. Fighting with Rebecca made her angry and gave her a brief respite from panic.

Murcat clapped his hands. “Rockin' good news.”

He raised an avuncular finger. “Now I want you girls to kiss and make up.”

The women exchanged looks -- cool, silent, dripping malice.

Leslie wanted to slap Rebecca's smug, perfectly made-up face but she stopped brooding when she saw an opportunity.

“Mister Murcat, If I stay I want a complete review of all Silo Nine's containment protocols.”

Murcat's open-handed gesture indicated agreement.

“Sure.”

“And another thing, tell your people not to take any dangerous shortcuts.”

She stared at Rebecca who returned the look with daggers.

Leslie continued, “We have no idea what this thing's threat level is.”

Leslie thought; Murcat still seems agreeable. Ask for the moon, nothing to lose.

“And no more Executive Override.”

Murcat smiled. “Yeah, sorry 'bout that. But he represents a huge capital-outlay. Couldn't let him get all burned up before we even started. Now you do something for me little lady. This is a two-way street. You have to promise to protect my investment.”

Leslie conceded; I guess that's not unreasonable. But push the envelope anyway.

“Okay; but when we're in there it's me or Bo driving that solar-curtain, nobody else.”

Leslie saw Rebecca from the corner of her eye and knew that last request would rankle. Leslie didn't expect Murcat to agree, she only asked to annoy Rebecca but he nodded.

“Okay.”

Leslie knew Rebecca was fuming, and it felt great.

Murcat leaned forward to reclaim control of the conversation.

“I understand there's a risk. Hell, my whole career's been about risk. That's why I had the *Weapons* division come up with a fail-safe for Silo Nine.”

Murcat's office vanished from the screen -- replaced by a detailed three-dimensional computer generated image of Silo Nine.

He said, “The facility's been rigged with a Bio-Neutronic device. It's the absolute latest thing.”

The CGI changed to an elaborate depiction of a Bio-Neutronic detonation.

“Minimal blast-damage with almost zero residual radiation; but it will turn all bio-matter to dust. It's *the* clean-bomb.”

Bo did not conceal his skepticism.

“You call that clean?”

Murcat's tone altered, business-like, matter of fact. “Yes Mister Greaves, I do. In a world where a pandemic can skip around the globe in a few days this is the weapon of last-resort. Leslie, what's your worst-case scenario? Our vampire gets out, right.”

Leslie nodded.

Murcat continued, “Well this guarantees no organism escapes to the surface.”

The next CGI showed the detonation sequence. The Bio-Neutronic device performed its ballet of staggered detonations commencing at ground-level and proceeding downwards. On the glossy 3D model each level of Silo Nine glowed crimson as the blast-wave passed down to terminate at the containment chamber.

Leslie thought it looked so simple on screen, so clinical. She pictured the hundreds of staff in the many levels above them; Would they have time to evacuate, or would they be sacrificed to limit Tiryns' liability?

Murcat said, “I'm giving each of you a set of launch-command codes . Check now, they're probably already downloaded from the internal servers.”

Leslie folded open her laptop computer and saw an on-screen prompt; *New Update*. A single tap brought up the Bio-Neutronic command launch-pad.

Murcat said, “In the event of a catastrophic containment breach, any one of you can sterilize the entire site. Is that protection enough?”

Leslie felt the gravitas coil across her shoulders like an old python; After two years in obscurity am I up for this? I couldn't look after ten people then: how to cope now, responsible for hundreds of souls? He's waiting for an answer, fuck.

Leslie nodded then said, "I guess."

Murcat appeared flushed with success.

"Excellent, now there's another matter I want to discuss."

The big screen picture dissolved into a private hospital room. An array of monitoring equipment stood adjacent to a pristine bed. A boy, of nine or ten, sat in a wheelchair. The child's face remained hidden from view. He sat motionless, staring out a window across a sunny lake. The camera lingered on the boy and Murcat narrated.

"Meet Adam. This kid's had a really shitty deal. He's got some Godawful motor-neuron disease. He's already lost a lot of motor and cognitive-function. Doctors reckon, with his current rate of decline, he's got maybe two years at best."

The screen changed to a series of data tables charting the child's decline.

"His parents offered to sell a kidney each but they still couldn't afford even basic care. Long story short; I found out, offered to put the kid into one of our trial programs."

Murcat reappeared on screen behind his desk.

"They agreed to let us try anything; no surprise, they're desperate. You guys are the brightest and the best and you've got our entire organization behind you. I want a twenty-four carat, medical miracle. I'm willing to bet you'll find it in our vampire's blood. Go find out what makes him tick. Now my motives aren't completely selfless. This could be worth billions and it'll put us years ahead of Herbst."

Leslie's thoughts were with the boy in the hospital room.

"Mister Murcat, can I see his case notes?"

A broad smile opened across Murcat's face. "Hell, examine him for yourself? He's just a few floors above you."

#

Dernier led Leslie, Bo and Rebecca through doors labeled; *Private Care*. Leslie forecast a sterile expanse of antiseptic white and exiguous decoration reeking of bleach. When she stepped into a salubrious salon it didn't register they were entering a state-of-the-art intensive care ward. Absent was the suffocating, hygienic aura of an average hospital. Although fifteen floors underground it had spacious windows, with yet more LCD screens broadcasting grand panoramas that almost suspended Leslie's disbelief.

The duty nurse sat in front of a breathtaking vista. Leslie thought the lake looked familiar. With its speedboats and water-skiers frolicking near a distant shore, its quaint, architecture hugging the same water's edge, it wasn't anywhere in North America. A girl in a red swimsuit tumbled headlong, cascading into the water. The towing speedboat inscribed a swift arc to retrieve her.

Pastel curtains parted revealing the bed they'd seen on screen. Leslie found Adam, like a Rodin bronze, staring at his lake view; How long does this video last? How many times a day does he sit through that girl going into the water?

In a moment of amity Leslie and Rebecca together examined the boy's chart. Gone was the jostling to determine who would be the pride's Alpha-Bitch. Bo saw the germ of a possibility that the two women might overcome their colliding personalities and create a stable, working relationship.

Leslie felt genuine concern for the stricken youth. "Can you send all his notes to my lab?"

“Sure, it'll all be on the server by the time you're set up.” Rebecca's response sounded warm; That's a change.

Adam evinced no reaction to a pivotal discussion affecting the course of his remaining life.

#

Leslie was impressed with the laboratory she and Bo would share, a vast space, more lecture hall than two-person research room. The equipment arrayed along the walls and benches was formidable. In her estimation the cost ran to seven figures. Multiply that by the other comparable labs on their floor alone and she realized they were working in the equivalent of a university research department.

Rebecca trailed polished fingernails along gleaming, white work-tops.

“There's plenty of free space, in case you want more equipment. But you have everything you need to begin.”

Leslie asked, “About that; begin what exactly?”

Rebecca pointed an index finger towards a computer terminal.

“Our total information on the Herbst project, such as it is – is on the server. Go over it, as well as the samples from Callum. See what you can add.”

Leslie sat on a stool and shut her eyes, mentally compartmentalizing the space, while also thinking about the extraordinary day so far. She knew the key to the molecular enigma of the pathogen was the vampire, lying silent, still and brooding in his wooden box.

She said, “First up I want samples from our friend downstairs; blood, tissue, urine and stool.”

“Already on tomorrow's agenda.”

Bo said, “Urine, stool, does he even produce those?”

He wandered to the far end to investigate a large clear window.

“You're shittin' me. Is that a clean-room?”

Rebecca answered, “Yes, you'll no doubt be handling dangerous material. It seemed logical.”

The clean-room contained two dissection slabs and work benches on three sides. Double doors permitted access without compromising the outside environment. Leslie reckoned it was bigger than her entire lab back in San Francisco; Tiryns are nothing if not generous but, it is only money. Murcat stands to be repaid many times over if we discover anything useful.

She harbored no illusions about his ultimate motivation.

#

Leslie shut the door to her private quarters, relieved to be alone. While taking a moment to breathe and assess; the strange feeling in the pit of her stomach, the one her doctors called unwholesome, reasserted itself. She relegated it to an obscure corner at the back of her mind. There were other matters to contemplate; First, explore your room. You need a sanctuary in Silo Nine. This should do nicely.

It was spacious and stylish; I've seen five-star hotel rooms that weren't as nice. You'll be comfortable here. I'd have settled for bare concrete and a cot.

One entire wall was glass, replete with a full sized, LCD viewing window. With all the earlier excitement Leslie hadn't observed the intricacies of the window displays. Unlike the hallways, the private room windows had a tiny menu-pad incorporated into the apartment's environmental controls. The selection of views was immense and included

cities; Paris, Rome, Rio, New York, Sydney or landscapes. She settled on the same lake view enjoyed by Adam.

She took herself into the bathroom and was surrounded on three sides by Italian marble while luxuriating in the warmth of a massaging shower. But her mind drifted to darker, more sinister thoughts -- about the video of Callum and how the vampire drained him in seconds. She wondered how they planned on extracting blood and tissue; What if he doesn't want to be sampled?

Chapter 8

Their first real working day began when Leslie and Bo reached the Containment level, its security door and an opportunity to test shiny new access codes. To no one's surprise they worked, granting immediate ingress. Leslie felt a surge of sarcasm; Great, now we're part of the club. Wonder if we'll get matching badges.

It was a new day and everybody seemed imbued with a renewed sense of inquiry and purpose; Yeah, but appearances can be deceptive.

Each occupied their usual place in the control room. Rebecca, Leslie and Bo at the console; Dernier, Lutz and Turco seated behind, on the observation gallery.

Under Rebecca's tutelage Bo manned the solar controls.

“Okay, Bo, perhaps you'd like to switch off the sunlight.”

Bo was fearless with the controls and the vivid solar light faded. The vampire's box stood as expected, solitary and drab. Leslie thought she sensed the malice of the thing clinging to its decrepit planks like an invisible pall.

Rasping from the speakers Rebecca sounded like coarse sandpaper scratching on glass.

“Good morning, you know the drill; you can come out now.”

They watched and waited for black fog to ooze forth. After seven seconds Rebecca snatched the microphone again.

“The sunlight's gone. It's safe to come out.”

More time passed; Bo thought out loud.

“Wakey, wakey. Do vampire's sleep in? Is sleep even the right word. Maybe he's dead. -- Oh yeah, right.”

“So I guess we go down and wake him up.” Dernier too sounded anxious.

Turco said, “Remember Callum. Take precautions this time.”

Leslie said, “I'm going with you.”

Lutz said. “I don't think so.”

“I'm going; and that's all there is to it.” Leslie didn't want to; the thought made her hand tremble like she had Parkinson's. But she was in the game and her need for redemption outweighed her fear.

#

The solar-curtain advanced flooding half the chamber in blinding daylight. Its brilliant edge stopped a few feet from the decrepit box. Lutz and an armed team waited

inside the hermetically sealed decontamination ante-chamber. Its outer air-tight seal closed behind them. Sanitizing halon gas flooded the corridor. Leslie wasn't entirely reassured; Don't they look competent and fearsome - in their shiny new bio hazard suits.

Four carried large brass crucifixes. The remainder were armed in more secular fashion with MP9 sub-machine guns. Leslie hoped the vampire might wake. But looking over the shoulders of the operatives she saw the box unchanged; Okay, this roller-coaster's started. Nothing to do but grit your teeth and hang on.

Walking onto the floor she glanced up to her left at the mirrored glass of the control room windows. Lutz also saw the reflective surface and he engaged his two-way. "Turn off the opaque. He sees through it anyway."

In the control room Rebecca conferred with Dernier and Turco. Their opinions unanimous, the glass changed opacity permitting vision in both directions.

Leslie felt some comfort seeing Bo helm the solar controls. He smiled at her and raised a hand articulating silent tactical-signals; a private language used by the military when noise was to be avoided. The message was simple. He asked her to be careful and reassured her that he had her back.

Leslie saw what their world looked like from the vampire's perspective. The wall just inside the heavy door held all manner of safety apparatus, oxygen-tanks, masks, fire blankets, extinguishers even a fire-axe; What use is that down here? Everything's steel and concrete.

Lutz deployed most of his gun-armed people in the sunlight with clear fields of fire. The operatives wielding crucifixes took positions out of the sunlight at the four corners of the box. They brandished the religious symbols forward with both hands. Two remaining operatives slung their weapons and stood at either end of the box.

Lutz took care to place Leslie behind the firing line. He didn't want to risk her being hit by friendly-fire. He learned well from the disintegration of Callum's team in Sydney.

Two operatives pried the lid upwards. Nerves strained, eyes focused, and its creaking planks arced over. Ancient hinges squealed as the lid flopped open with a loud CRUMP. Everybody, even those in the control room, jumped a little. Leslie held her breath; Will he wake?

But the vampire didn't stir. He lay on his back, one arm across his chest the other at his side, asleep or dead. The closest operative peered in at the achromic features then glanced over his shoulder and shrugged, knew not what to do next.

The vampire's eyes flashed open, enlivened, darting about. Those wielding crucifixes stiffened and presented their icons with earnest zeal. A thought shot through Leslie's mind; I wonder how they feel aiming something that doesn't fire 9MM hollow-point Parabellum?

Before they drew breath the vampire was gone. Black motes whispered past them like a lover's breath. He reappeared at the front of the chamber below the control room. Every eye, muzzle and crucifix followed. But before human reflexes could reacquire him he again vanished. The shadowy blur so fast it seemed but a suggestion. He next stood at the rear of the chamber; having covered 30 yards in a blink. Human heads tried to track his movement like Wimbledon spectators might follow a tennis ball.

The four operatives with crucifixes spread out to cordon off the creature. They edged forward constricting his maneuver room. The vampire's eyes darted from man to man, then to Lutz, Leslie and finally, he looked back over his shoulder to the control room. His expression was contemptuous but he also carried a hint of playfulness when he

spoke.

“Morons.”

He leapt with inhuman speed upon the nearest operative and snapped both forearms while they still clasped the crucifix. The man dropped to his knees screaming. Bloodied tips of wrist bones jutted from torn sleeves. His eyes bulged from shock, terror and confusion.

The vampire seized the crucifix and strolled towards the control room. One-handed he crushed the brass cross-beam until it was no longer a recognizable religious talisman then flung it away to clatter like scrap on the floor.

Rebecca rounded on Turco.

“Great, so how do we control this guy?”

“Sorry, he didn't come with an operator's manual.”

The vampire vanished, reappeared, and grabbed another hapless operative with a crucifix. He hurled him through the air into the face-hardened, titanium door 25 yards distant. Lutz felt the eddy of displaced atmosphere and the impact sounded like the man fell from a high-rise onto pavement. None doubted its fatality.

Leslie observed Lutz staring at the spectacle; Do something.

She didn't pause to think, just ran and dived, sliding within reach of the vampire. She grabbed the man with the broken forearms, still immobile from shock. The vampire made no move to threaten her. He smiled, seemed amused by her nerve. She dragged the injured man into the light of the solar-curtain. While bent over and straining she saw the other two still wielding their ineffectual crosses and standing beyond the sanctuary of the sunlight.

She bellowed with a strength she'd not felt for two years.

“In the light, NOW.”

While the pair shook off their torpor and fled; another operative, unable to resist the urge to retaliate, opened a withering burst of gunfire into the vampire's upper body. Others joined her, the escalated volume from massed MP9s enough to obliterate a mortal torso. But 200 rounds passed without harm through the vampire to ricochet off the wall behind.

“Cease firing! Nobody told you to shoot.” Lutz sounded furious but when his operatives stopped he was also relieved by how ineffectual their fire proved to be.

The solar-curtain crawled forward. The vampire looked up at Rebecca and said, “Not this game again.”

He stepped over to his box, leaned against it and, in a theatrical show of bravado, examined his fingernails. He didn't acknowledge the solar-curtain. Instead, he fixed his gaze on Leslie. She didn't want to meet it and looked up to Bo. But something surprised her; My hand's not shaking. That's another revelation. Real danger also seems to trump fear.

It was another small victory and Leslie, amid the whirl and chaos about her, felt an infinitesimal thrill. That notwithstanding she still felt the vampire's eyes on her like a penetrating, tangible force. She wanted the solar-curtain to swallow him. She imagined herself pleading with Rebecca to reduce him to a pile of cinders; Is that so much to ask? No medical breakthrough is worth all this.

Her conscience bucked again. She remembered the boy, Adam, and her tacit agreement to help Murcat find his billion dollar medical miracle. Emotions barged their way from her sub-conscious right into the forefront of thought. She didn't want them clouding her judgment, not now. Her right hand resumed its tremulous pulse; only slight

but enough for her to rail against it; Fuck, fuck, FUCK, stop.

Events outside her mind came to the rescue. The solar-curtain inched towards the immovable vampire. He shifted his focus, staring straight at Rebecca. She tried to stare him down with her best power-pussy glint but, what worked on mere mortals failed to impress him. He neither looked away nor flinched. The solar-curtain came so close it might singe his arm -- then halted. Rebecca had reached past Bo to hold down the *Stop* button.

She said, "Okay, so what do you want?"

"Let's start with a little respect shall we."

Rebecca said, "Yeah well, we're on the clock."

"You wish my cooperation - then ask politely."

"Down here, you don't make demands." When Rebecca spoke the speakers so mangled her voice that even Leslie felt an involuntary tightening of her sphincter; I wonder if the noise offends the vampire too?

Rebecca continued, "Just remember we control the sunlight."

Before she uttered her last syllable the vampire dissolved and vanished. And at the speed of a thought he re-appeared at the back of the chamber.

The instant he regained corporeal form he spoke.

"But you don't control me."

Rebecca looked to Dernier. While they deliberated a silent gesture from Leslie attracted Bo's attention. She hand-signaled instructions pointing a slow circling index finger at the vampire; Come on Bo, figure it out.

He squinted, thought then grinned; Good man.

The vampire folded his arms and smiled at Rebecca.

She said, "Very well, point taken. So where do we go from here?"

Before the vampire responded motors above him engaged. The solar-curtain distended and warped forward. It wrapped around the vampire leaving only a circle of shadow, an island in a lake of sunlight. He looked down at his few square feet of safe floor but remained calm.

Leslie lifted the fire-axe from its mount by the door; Maybe this can be useful after all.

She strode to the vampire's box and lifted the axe high with both arms.

Rebecca rattled the speakers.

"Leslie, what are you doing?"

Leslie ignored her and swung down hard splitting the lid's center plank. She struck again leaving a gaping hole into which sunlight spilled. The vampire seemed the only being on the floor not unnerved by her behavior.

"Feeling a little premenstrual are we?"

Leslie let the axe head drop to the floor while she caught her breath.

"Like it or not, you're here to be studied. If we can't do it safely then this ends now. Bo."

"Say the word Cap', I'll torch his undead butt." Bo's fingers hovered over the solar controls.

The vampire looked Leslie up and down. Their eyes met and this time she knew she had to face him. If she was to have any authority there could be no turning away. To her surprise his expression was not hostile and his smile was disarming; I wonder how often he's charmed the unwary with that smile.

He surprised everyone by laughing -- not a disturbing, maniacal cackle, but

contagious and brimming with mirth.

When the vampire spoke it was to Leslie alone.

“Very well Doctor Tatum, I'll permit you to conduct your alchemy. I can't remember the last time I had the willing company of someone so charming.”

Then he pointed a dagger-like index finger toward Rebecca and said, “But mark you this, my invitation extends to Leslie alone. Should another stray too close; I promise, I'll hand them their head.”

Rebecca felt a rare tingle up her spine.

“We get the point. Now we should get down to --”

“I'm not done speaking.”

Rebecca's chagrin at having control of the conversation wrenched away shone like a beacon. The vampire rubbed a thumb against a forefinger and looked at the bare walls.

“This place you've constructed, Silo Nine is it? It's an engineering and technical marvel, to be sure. But aesthetically, it's just plain dreary. I've stayed in mausolea that had more appeal. And since I expect to be here for a while, I'd like a few creature-comforts; no pun intended.”

Rebecca raised an eyebrow then spoke, “Define creature comforts.”

The vampire paused. It was evident he wanted to savor the moment. Again he'd won the contest of wills. He responded with a cock of his head and a wicked grin.

Chapter 9

Serene music softened the containment chamber. The vampire's first request, a complete upgrade of the PA. Nobody who heard Rebecca bark through the old speakers objected. 5.1 Surround-Sound afforded optimal acoustic quality. The walls, transformed by a new coat of subdued pastel, provided a neutral backing for well-curated artwork. The color scheme complimented a new marble plinth supporting the vampire's archaic, wooden crate. Prominent on its lid was a patch covering the hole wrought by Leslie's fire-axe.

Transforming the stark containment chamber was the work of days and the results - dramatic. Leslie thought the vampire looked altogether too comfortable in what resembled a designer-magazine executive apartment. Operatives unpacked all manner of digital distraction; *X-Box 360*, *PlayStation*, *Blu-Ray* and a fully laden back-catalog of film titles. While activity proceeded around him the vampire pored over instruction manuals with the ardor of a scholar drinking in Aristotle. In the control room executive opinion on the vampire's tastes ran the gamut from mild amusement to downright disgust.

Bo said, "He's like every geek I knew in college."

Behind the vampire's wooden box operatives assembled a table. Its dimensions six feet by twelve. Lutz's people were elite specialists. None were accepted into Tiryns Security without an impressive military pedigree; SAS, Foreign Legion, Green Berets, Navy Seals, and all passed further rigorous testing before gaining full employment. Those who found themselves unpacking the vampire's amusements questioned why they trained so hard. Delicate, hand-painted war-gaming figures arrived courtesy of FedEx and operatives were instructed to handle them like live ordnance.

The vampire found the precise armies and terrain he desired after an exhaustive online search, followed by a harrowing auction process. Tiryns' deep pockets gave him the purchasing power to outbid all comers.

Lutz supervised the unpacking.

"You into model railways?"

The vampire looked up from his studies and said, "Hardly, it's tabletop war-gaming, strategy. It keeps one's mind sharp."

In the control room Paul Turco said, "A cynical person might say he's still testing you, seeing where he can push."

Rebecca wiggled expressive fingers. "I'll gladly trade any number of big-screen

TVs to learn how he does that black misty thing.”

Dernier overheard and said, “Oh yeah, imagine what Black Ops could do with that.”

Turco asked, “What will you do when he wants a human being?”

Rebecca said, “That’s already been taken care of.”

What disturbed Leslie was the off-hand way Rebecca answered the loaded question. She, Bo and Turco looked aghast. Rebecca saw the three expressions of alarm and confected the appearance of genuine hurt.

“Relax, we’ve got enough whole-blood stockpiled to feed an army of undead. Jeez’ what did you think I meant?”

What gnawed at Leslie was the suspicion that Rebecca would not hesitate to feed a living person to the vampire if it suited her ends. She mulled that thought in her mind while squirming inside her biohazard suit; Haven’t worn these since the Antarctic.

Like someone with a chronic fear of flying, Leslie had three days to stew before arriving at the point of departure. The decision was taken to wait the three days before starting any real work; let the vampire see evidence of their good faith.

For Leslie the 72 hours felt eternal. She distracted herself by rereading the sum of Tiryns’ data on the vampire, inadequate though it was. But exhaustive reading wasn’t enough to dull mounting anxiety. Now was the day; the tumbrel was rolling; the guillotine awaited. Leslie was the one to be stripped of the armor of sunlight,-- to stand face-to-face with the vampire.

“I’d better get down there.” When she spoke only Bo detected the slight nervous catch in her voice.

Rebecca was primped and preened to perfection as usual. The moment was unpropitious but again Leslie compared herself; in her inflated neoprene suit, to Rebecca’s high-heeled precision. Again she came up wanting, feeling herself to be some grotesque Sci-Fi avatar. Her hand trembled and she had no pocket in which to conceal it; Quick, lean against the console and grip.

Bo, ever sensitive, detected her angst. He offered a comforting hand.

“You still up for this?”

Implicit in his question was the knowledge that he would take her place in a heartbeat. Leslie demurred; No way I’ll put him at risk. The vampire was explicit. They all heard it; only Leslie had *access all areas*.

She said, “He’s just another infected patient; scarier than most, but still just a patient.”

Bo tapped the console by the solar controls. She appreciated his assurance and placed a nervous hand on his shoulder before heading for the stairs.

#

In the decontamination corridor Leslie waited for extractor fans to remove churning clouds of sterilizing gas. She rechecked instruments laid out on a wheeled trolley. The white sheet held needles and tubes plus multiple kits for extracting and cataloging blood samples. She grabbed one kit and it slipped from her hand; Damn, I must remember to use my good hand. Where’s Rebecca when I need someone to be pissed at? Anger trumps fear.

But Leslie wasn’t angry, just scared. She remembered the video of Callum; He died in seconds. The operative three days before died from being hurled into a titanium door. Then she remembered the beautiful girl in the coffin at the Antarctic. These things

are dangerous. You've got good reason to be scared.

About to punch in the access code for the inner security door, Leslie halted mid-stride. Kristin stood in front of the keypad; looked as ghastly as she had the last time she manifested. Leslie wanted to plead for forgiveness; It's pointless. How can I mollify a mirage, a metaphor for my own guilt?

Kristin, still a child in Leslie's memory, said nothing; just stared from cadaverous melted ice-cream eyes. Leslie steeled herself and reached through Kristin's chest. The phantom vanished and Leslie awaited the heavy door's opening.

Rebecca sighted Leslie and adjusted the solar-curtain, her voice sweeter through the new speakers. "Okay, playtime's over. We'll start with blood work."

"Bring on your lancets and leeches." The vampire muted his electronic gadgets.

Leslie wheeled her trolley to the edge of the sunlight. Her right hand quivered at the precise instant the vampire looked her up and down; He saw it, damn. Quick, put it behind your back. Too late. That horse has bolted.

She'd kept it hidden from everyone in Silo Nine, even Bo; Maybe the vampire doesn't understand its significance. She caught his slight smile; Shit, it's only been seconds and he knows.

Leslie knew she must take the first step forward but hesitated, felt like a child climbing for the first time to the topmost diving board. Her knees weakened grappling with a terrible urge to back away. She also sensed that to the vampire her inner turmoil was too tempting a morsel to resist.

He said, "You can come closer; I don't bite. Oh, wait; I do, don't I."

His hollow laugh both mocked and threatened. For Leslie the issue was whether this being could be trusted. She felt he was toying with them all, but especially her.

"Stepping into my parlor?" With his hands on his hips he smiled like a sideshow barker.

They locked eyes, his stare searing. She tried to swallow but her mouth was dry as parchment. She felt a panic attack building; God, I can't cope with that as well. Then she remembered -- Actual danger trumps fear. Fuck it. You can't live forever.

She grabbed a blood sampling kit and stepped out of the sunlight stopping almost nose-to-nose with the vampire. Still apprehensive she glanced sideways at Bo.

Bo also sat poised, like coiled sprung steel, ready to react.

The vampire said, "Relax Mister Greaves. Had I intended harm she'd be dead already."

When he smiled Leslie exhaled and the tension broke; So far so good. He's keeping his word, but for how long?

She felt safe enough to begin working and selected equipment from the trolley.

"Your arm please."

He extended it and she tied a tourniquet around his biceps. She pushed a needle into a bulging vein and slipped the collection vial over its end. While deep crimson gushed into the receptacle the vampire didn't shift his stare from Leslie.

He said, "You can dispense with that ungainly suit. It does nothing for your figure and I'm not contagious, not in the conventional sense anyway."

"I'll be the judge of that." She avoided his eyes and concentrated on completing her work; Neat, tidy, expeditious.

"Now tell me, do you like the new decor?" The vampire gestured with his free arm.

"What's not to like. I wish my place looked this good."

The vampire surprised her by radiating an unexpected, almost teenage, enthusiasm.

“Larry Murcat gave me his gold credit-card. I had no idea how much fun ordering online could be. I can see why people get addicted. Do you want something? I can have it delivered. What's your address?”

Turco's agitated voice bleated from the speakers, “No! Leslie, no personal information.”

“It's okay Paul; I'm a big girl.” Leslie had no intention of divulging her address.

The vampire's chameleon personality switched back to default and he offered a disdainful glance toward the control room. “You can take the man outta' the church.”

Turco wasn't his primary amusement. That role was reserved for Leslie and he again stared at her with his penetrating gaze.

“I'm glad you're not frightened of me, especially after the recent unpleasantness.”

Leslie recalled the dead operative; Did he have a family? How did Tiryns explain it? Did they say it was a fall? The injuries were consistent with such. Then there was the man whose arms were broken. He would spend a year in physical therapy and may never have their full use again.

She wondered how the vampire could refer to such acts as unpleasantness, but thought better of confrontation. “That was just a pissing contest. I understand you have to mark your territory.”

The vampire laughed and said, “Brava, I can see you and I are going to have fun.”

“Don't count on it.”

“Au contraire, I think we'll be good for each other.”

Leslie began to relax; He's not so scary.

But in the blinking of an eye she detected a subtle shift, as if he'd read her mind and didn't like her tone. He grabbed her right wrist and spun her to face him, all joviality gone from his expression.

“Fuck!” Bo saw the threat and gripped the solar control.

Without taking his eyes from Leslie the vampire needled a finger toward the control room. Bo hesitated, knew the vampire had time and strength enough to kill Leslie, even if blasted with sunlight.

The vampire leaned close so Leslie alone heard his faint whisper.

“Nothing that happened down there was your fault. You know it. Now tell your hand to stop this nonsense.”

Leslie felt, not fear, but white hot rage at this affront. Defiant, she wrenched her hand free. “Don't ever touch me.”

It was obvious she did so only because the vampire chose to release her. He smiled at her, not his usual contemptuous sneer, but an expression of genuine warmth; That was unexpected.

Leslie drew a deep breath then said, “The priest's right: you're gonna' mess with our heads if we let you.”

She wheeled the trolley to the exit; calling to Rebecca over the clatter of its wheels.

“He's all yours.”

She cast a furtive glance back at the vampire; Of course he's watching.

He blew a kiss. She rolled her eyes and waited for the security door's oversized clockwork mechanism to roll open. A moment later she was safe in the decontamination corridor and coping with the surging adrenalin rush of surviving her first one-on-one with

patient zero.

Now she thought, The real work can begin, research, study, clinical trials.

With so many ideas cramming her mind she'd forgotten about panic attacks. The demon on her shoulder stayed mute. She wondered when she'd next feel his oily tongue in her ear; Where's he hiding?

She was distracted and almost forgot about the vampire's words until an oblique awareness crept into view. Her right hand -- she held it up, splayed the fingers then clenched a fist. It didn't tremble, was rock steady; What is he?

Leslie exited the second corkscrew of the roller-coaster in one piece; Better than one piece, but this ride's got a ways to go yet.

Chapter 10

The solar-curtain provided maximum roaming area for the vampire while offering safety to those operatives detailing his lodgings. Leslie and Bo absented themselves to toil in their clean room.

Rebecca flicked open the microphone channel.

“I'm curious. Why do you want all this stuff? I thought you guys only needed blood.”

The vampire stroked the supple leather of his chair and said, “It's centuries since I've bothered with possessions. I'd forgotten what real furniture feels like. But I can be as venal as the next man; if the mood takes me.”

Turco asked, “Exactly how old are you?”

“Time doesn't mean much to me. I'd put it at about seven thousand years.”

“That's an impossible length of time. Were you always a--?”

“Vampire, you can say the word. It doesn't offend. And no. I was born human, like anybody else.”

“Where do you come from?”

“I was born on an island that once stood in the great sea, beyond the pillars of Hercules.” The vampire stared into an imaginary distance beyond the confines of time or Silo Nine.

“The what?” Rebecca raised a querying brow.

Lutz answered, “The straits of Gibraltar.”

The vampire nodded, acknowledging Lutz's command of classical geography.

“My original home vanished so long ago it's now just a myth. Most people don't believe it ever existed. You know it as Atlantis.”

“Bullshit.” Lutz narrowed his eyes.

“Why so skeptical Mister Lutz? I suppose you don't believe in vampires either.”

Leslie's voice crackled from the intercom's tiny speaker.

“Rebecca, there's something you should see.”

“So soon? We're pretty busy here.”

“You should see this now, and grab a suit on your way. We're in the clean room.” Leslie's insistence matched Rebecca's obstinacy.

Rebecca grimaced. Biohazard suits didn't work with high-heels. She'd have to change into flats. She didn't like being seen in anything but heels.

“On my way.”

While leaving she gestured towards the vampire and grumbled. “If he says or does anything make sure it's recorded.”

#

Rebecca marched into Leslie's lab wearing the detested biohazard suit. Leslie stood like a bulwark in front of the clean-room holding up a clear vial containing a dusty gray substance.

“Check this out.”

Rebecca took the vial and held it up to the light to better see a gray ash rolling within, “What is it?”

“Blood, his blood; from the samples I just extracted.”

Rebecca's eyes betrayed her incredulity.

Leslie continued, “By the time I got up here they were all like this.”

“What happened?”

“Near as I can tell, it's been reduced to pure carbon - dust.”

Rebecca thought then asked, “Could extreme age do this?”

Leslie too thought before answering: Where's she going with this?.

“I suppose, but it was extracted only moments ago?”

“He just told us he's seven thousand years old.”

“What, how can anything be that old and still live?”

While Rebecca shook the vial Leslie ran through in her mind possible explanations then she asked, “So what keeps him alive, a foreign agent, or -- something his body produces?”

Leslie brought up a microscope view on a large LCD screen. Magnified particles remained inert.

Rebecca said, “Something he needs to keep producing; can't store it.”

“Could tissue; blood for example, separated from the main organism and deprived of this agent revert to its true chronological state?”

Bo joined the discussion, “That would explain why Lucy didn't turn to dust.”

Both women regarded him as school-mistresses might a recalcitrant pupil.

Rebecca said, “Who the hell is Lucy? Have you encountered this before?”

Bo shook his head while rummaging through a backpack. “After I saw that clear running water stuff I thought I better read this.”

He held up his Kindle so they could identify the bold-face title: *Dracula, by Bram Stoker.*

“In the novel Dracula's first victim in England, Lucy, gets turned into a vampire and they kill her. But she didn't turn to dust; 'cause she'd only been dead for a week or two.”

Both women looked confused so Bo continued, “When Dracula finally gets it he crumbles to dust, because he was hundreds of years old.”

Leslie said, “So some of the folklore could be rooted in fact.”

“So what's that mean for us?” Rebecca sounded disappointed.

“It gives us another avenue of attack, something new to investigate. What if the pathogen is also the agent that prolongs life? Perhaps it lies dormant in a living host, only activating after death. Are carriers already in the population? What are the triggers? Decomposition, the release of enzymes, or the absence of oxygen? This could take years to research.”

Leslie held another vial up to the light and wondered what terrible genie they might release from Silo Nine's sinister lamp.

#

At full-aperture the solar-curtain was less a curtain and more a blanket, flooding the chamber with light. Bo maintained strict control over its deployment. He promised to watch Leslie's back and nothing would harm her while he had breath in his lungs.

He also tracked where the others sat around him. Rebecca was always on his left, near the microphone. She established herself as the spokesperson; liked to be the one talking to the vampire. Her clear need to be in control was not missed by Bo. Dernier and Turco sat behind in the observation gallery. They had no duties to perform and knew it was best to keep clear of the business-end of things.

Lutz sat to the right. Bo paid closest attention to him; had not forgiven him for pulling a gun on Leslie.

The person Bo feared least was the vampire. Out in the chamber, in his box, he slept; Was that even correct? Does he sleep or hibernate or go into standby mode?

There were so many questions. Bo knew they hadn't even scratched the surface.

He jumped when Rebecca snatched the microphone.

“Leslie, what are you doing?”

Bo's eyes followed Rebecca's then his level of alarm matched her's. He was galled to see Leslie walk across the chamber wearing a lab-coat and devoid of her biohazard suit. Her only concession to infection-control a face mask and surgical gloves, which she pulled on while walking.

Leslie's voice through the speakers was cool, confident and direct. Bo hadn't heard her sound so strong since she left the USAMRIID.

“Will you relax: There's no danger. Even if he has Ebola; once it leaves his body it's dust, right. It stands to reason; anything in his system must be modified by the agent from one nanosecond to the next. So even at a molecular level if it leaves his system it's toast.”

Dernier came down to the microphone.

“Considering your speech the other day about safety isn't this a little reckless?”

“I'll be fine. It's not like we're exchanging bodily fluids. Rubber gloves and a mask are more than adequate. Bo, shut off the sun?”

Bo hesitated. “I dunno' Cap'. You sure you shouldn't be in a suit?”

She halted before the closed box. Her stern expression let none doubt her resolve. For once, Bo and Rebecca seemed in agreement.

Rebecca said, “It's your funeral. Without a suit you're already compromised. If you're wrong there's nothing we can do.”

Leslie beat an obstinate fist against her chest.

“Look, I know I'm right. And if anyone's going to be a guinea pig it might as well be the resident train-wreck.”

Rebecca said, “Okay, have it your way. But we'll have to test your blood before you can come out.”

“You do what you gotta' do.”

Bo turned off the sunlight. Leslie strode to the vampire's box and rapped hard on its planked lid.

“Hello, you coming out?”

After an extended silence she drummed her knuckles on the dull wood. In the

control room they stood in nervous unison. Bo maintained a tight grip on the solar slider.

Leslie gripped the lid and flipped it open. When she saw the vampire she drew a sharp breath. He had aged; not by years but decades. His hair was gray, thin and receded. The skin was drawn, blotchy and sunken; the texture of crepe paper. The overall impression was that of a man in his nineties. From the control room the view wasn't clear.

Leslie pushed two fingers over a carotid artery, felt no pulse and bellowed.

“Defibrillator, Stat.”

Rebecca stood and carped into the clumsy microphone. “What's wrong?”

Commotion ensued; Rebecca howled at her minions, Operatives scrambled to find medical equipment. They failed to watch the vampire's box. Nobody saw a frail arm rise and fall across Leslie's shoulder.

“FUCK.” Leslie's jarring expletive demanded everyone's attention.

“I believe I require nourishment.” The vampire's eyes rolled up into their sockets. He wheezed like a patient at the dying stage of emphysema, then flopped back unconscious, or dead.

Chapter 11

The vampire lay strapped to a gurney next to his box. On a nearby stand a bag of whole-blood trailed plastic tubing into an intravenous drip. Dark maroon liquid ran to the bend of his arm. Seven exhausted blood bags lay on the lower shelf of Leslie's trolley. The vampire looked more wizened. Formerly gray hair was white and fell in clumps about his shoulders. Deep wrinkles cross-hatched ancient skin. Eyes were glazed and milky.

His voice, scratching from exhausted lungs, sounded like a blunt needle dropped onto a worn vinyl LP disc. "This won't work."

"Shut up and save your strength." Leslie changed out another bag of blood.

"I can't feed this way." He coughed blood and spluttered atomized gore that decayed into particulates.

Leslie took his pulse, counted then frowned. Blood seeped from the vampire's ears, his mouth, the corners of his eyes. It streamed down his face like tears. She saw a spreading stain around his groin. He hemorrhaged from every orifice.

The vampire strained to speak. "I can only take from the living."

"Hold that thought." She hurried out the door.

Several moments passed. In the control room Lutz said, "What is that woman doing?"

Bo leapt to his feet. "Her job, or maybe you'd like your precious specimen to shrivel up and die. I bet your boss would like that."

Lutz stepped forward with his own brand of belligerence. Their bellicose display reminded Rebecca of a Discovery Channel documentary; a juvenile lion challenges the primacy of the alpha-male for mating rights with the pride. As much as it might have amused her to see how their chest-thumping played out she was more concerned with the job at hand.

"Guys, stick 'em back in your pants. We have work to do."

Leslie reentered the chamber below and both men resumed their stations, their turf-war unresolved. It would have to wait for Leslie and her new trolley. On it a white sheet hid something lumpy. She threw it back but when the vampire saw the cargo his expression went beyond dismay. The trolley was covered in two dozen prone, white lab-rats.

Leslie said, "They're alive, just sedated."

Despite obvious pain the vampire laughed to the point of wincing.

“You can't be serious. Someone's been reading waaaay too much Anne Rice. Just so you know; I need to feed from a living human.”

“Well that's not gonna' happen.”

The vampire's smile vanished. “Wake up and smell the coffee. Why do you think we're here?”

“Just try the rats.”

“I'm a vampire, for fuck's sake. Do you imagine they never intended to observe me feeding, as I would *in the wild*?”

He directed his plea to the control room.

“Come on Rebecca, admit it. You're dying to watch me feed.”

He sniffed the air, as he did when he first saw Leslie. His movements were harsh, alert, animalistic and not as frail as his appearance suggested.

“Imagine, a real vampire draining someone right before your eyes. You know, in ancient Rome when gladiators killed each other in the coliseum, a lot of women in the audience worked themselves up to orgasm; the thrill so intense. I think that's how it'll be for you Rebecca. You're getting wet just thinking about it. I can smell you from here.”

Turco said to Rebecca, “Pay him no mind. He's just baiting you; to get his own way.”

But Rebecca wasn't insulted. She wondered if he really possessed mystical abilities, could read her mind, her memories?

#

Rebecca remembered being fourteen: how she matured early; how her looks drew the attention of boys; how even the senior girls resented her. The recollection cascaded into another archived memory; her most ardent teen admirer, Brad Yule. He burned for her since elementary-school. His fantasies had room only for Rebecca and all such fantasies held a singular premise; she was his girl and he would rescue her from peril.

When it came to IQ they sat at the extreme opposite ends of the bell-curve. The taunt of *retard* grew into his nick-name. Brad was the dullest tool in Rebecca's shed, though she didn't mind him hanging around; He did as he was told.

Rebecca also remembered Johnny Hackles; the dorky guy who managed his aunt's convenience store on weekends. Rebecca wanted an after-school job, any job. She needed an income. She thought Johnny might put in a good word for her. But a long queue of kids lined up to work at Hackles' -- the only convenience store in town.

Another obstacle was Johnny's cousin Paula; who hated Rebecca. It was a kindness to say merely that Paula was plain, and her jealousy of the effortless attention Rebecca garnered sparked early and abiding enmity. Rebecca spent her childhood on the outer with Paula's crowd; the daughters of the monied families.

Rebecca saw only one way to bypass the waiting-list. One Saturday morning she sought out Johnny Hackles at his aunt's store.

Brad Yule saw Rebecca -- his girl -- enter the store. She wore her yellow dress; he liked her in it. Even a slight breeze lifted it enough to glimpse the tops of her thighs or the greatest prize -- underpants.

Johnny closed the front door and hung up a sign; *Back in 5 Mins*. Brad was patient; waited and watched. Seven minutes later Paula Hackles cycled down the street and saw her mother's store closed. After a fruitless minute peering through the shop front Paula cycled around to the store's rear loading dock.

A moment later Johnny opened the front door and Rebecca appeared. She strolled down the main street then cut across the railroad tracks, to the trail through Hobson Park, and home. Brad followed and called after her wanting to know what she did in Hackles' store. She didn't mind him shadowing but told him to mind his own business.

The Hobson Park trail wound through a forested reserve; established as a Vietnam War memorial. At its center a picturesque footbridge crossed a small brook built with water diverted from the nearby Mill Stream. It was shallow, perhaps two feet deep. Not many people used the trail, preferring the new overpass above the railway tracks.

Brad saw Rebecca about to cross the footbridge when the clatter of bicycle wheels overtook him. Paula Hackles skidded to a halt in the center of the bridge barring Rebecca's way.

The girls spoke in machine-gun bursts. Paula yelled and mentioned her cousin Johnny a lot; then the store and something about a job. They both said the word job, or something else, then job. Paula turned her bike around all the time yelling that she would *tell*.

Rebecca grabbed Paula's arm and Paula slapped her face. Brad saw the welt; tiger-cam stripes across her cheek. He also saw a kind of pleading in her face. Rebecca only said one word.

"Brad."

He bounded past her and across the bridge. Paula couldn't pedal fast enough to outstrip him. He caught the back of her bicycle seat. When she almost fell across the handlebars she became hysterical; would not stop screaming.

What happened next seemed like a flickering slide-show; Brad picking up Paula and her bike; throwing them into the brook; him jumping the rail; standing on the bike; Paula's arms trying to reach around its frame; Paula with no chance; pinned under her own bicycle.

Rebecca stared down at the brutal scene. Brad looked up like a puppy seeking approval. She smiled back at him then looked into Paula's panicked, drowning eyes. Bubbles broke the surface of the clear water.

Rebecca felt a powerful sensation, of -- arousal. While Paula Hackles died Rebecca's knees went weak for an instant. Paula stopped struggling; dilated pupils stared upwards, the tongue protruded from a wide opened mouth. Brad didn't acknowledge her; hadn't taken his eyes from Rebecca.

She thought fast and reached under the yellow dress; ripped off her underpants and threw the torn hosiery into nearby grass. She stepped off the path; faced Brad and lifted up the front of her dress. She backed against a tree and spread her legs offering that which he coveted.

Although the elder, by two years, Brad was the virgin. Rebecca instructed him, insisting he thrust hard. It hurt; she wanted it to look forced. In bare moments his first, and last, act of heterosexual congress gushed to completion.

While his jeans lay around his ankles she pulled him into the middle of the path and did, what to his slow wit, was some sort of dance. Their feet shuffled in the dirt.

Rebecca knew he was confused when she pushed him on his rear. She knew he was yet more dumbfounded when she launched herself at the tree they fucked against. Rebecca, always calculating, tilted her head down so the impact broke skin above her hairline. She would permit no scar to mar her face. Her head stung but she was well-pleased with the result. Her blood stained the coarse bark. She recovered and smeared some onto her dress.

Rebecca bolted from Hobson Park. She remembered Brad yelling her name; how his calls were drowned out by her screams as she ran back across the train tracks and into the main street.

#

In the Silo Nine control room Rebecca ran a finger over the slight scar above her forehead, a camouflaged reminder of how Brad Yule was accused of her rape and the drowning murder of Paula Hackles.

On the chamber floor the vampire grabbed another comatose rat. He was reluctant but, to indulge Leslie, bit deep into its throat sucking the mammal dry in seconds. Lips pursed, like a child tasting castor oil, then he tossed the carcass away.

Leslie placed it with the other twenty-three, drained, dead and arrayed on the trolley.

“That wasn't so bad; was it?”

“Really? Then you eat them.”

Leslie said, “Well you've stopped bleeding and the aging appears to have slowed, for now. 'That which does not kill us'.”

The vampire tilted his head and raised a polemical eyebrow. Leslie read his critical expression and said, “What, I'm not allowed to quote Nietzsche?”

“I'm not certain I agree; nor, I suspect, would the sufferers of polio or meningococcal disease. They may survive but aren't always stronger for the experience. For me, Nietzsche's most popular quote fails to take into account the depth of our scars.”

The vampire looked first at her forearm and then at her abdomen. “Take you for example. Is that cancer making you stronger?”

The color drained from Leslie's face. She leaned close and whispered, “How do you know about that?”

“After seven thousand years I've learned a thing or two. I can sense things.”

“Really, then sense this.” She extended a stiff middle finger then packed up the trolley.

“Oh, Leslie, don't be that way. Friends should share, support each other.”

“We are not friends.” She managed to keep her cancer hidden; mostly from herself. But somebody had spoken the word; Damn, now I have to face it. Maybe not, he's not a person, not even human anymore. Hell, he just sucked twenty-four rats dry.

She pushed the trolley towards the door; kept glancing up to the control room; Not sure what they heard.

She looked back at the vampire. His eyes followed with their trademark piercing intensity; Damn, he could cut steel with that stare.

She left with his parting words repeating in her head.

“In this place, I'm about the best friend you've got.”

Chapter 12

Rebecca followed Dernier and Lutz from the elevator on Sub-Level 28. Beyond the vestibule they entered another laboratory. Dernier, uncharacteristic and casual, in a bomber-jacket rather than his usual suit and tie, gestured for Rebecca to enter. “Welcome to the second best-kept secret in the Tiryns Corporation.”

Rebecca hadn't paid much attention to the stem-cell wing, it wasn't within her purview. She imagined a lab the size of a corridor; not this generous space brimming with technology.

“Wow, it's like a whole new suburb. Why didn't you tell me about this place?”

Dernier deferred to Lutz who answered in his laconic fashion.

“Mister Murcat's orders; strict need-to-know. Until now, you didn't.”

Rebecca didn't like the fact that Dernier and Lutz knew something about Silo Nine that she didn't. She was even less impressed by the revelation that they kept it from her with such consummate ease. She decided it was time to seduce one of them. Which one doesn't matter, so long as he was a good talker. That made Dernier the front runner. She thought; Nelson, I'm gonna' fuck your brains out.

A woman greeted them. Rebecca made a quick assessment; About forty, ash blond hair; to hide creeping gray, glasses, lab-coat and black high-heels. The heels were a red flag. They spelled competition.

Dernier said, “Rebecca, this is Professor Debra Clarke.”

“Greetings.” Debra's smile didn't reach her eyes.

The women shook hands while Dernier continued.

“Debra heads our Stem-Cell division. Deb', you already know Eric Lutz.”

Lutz nodded. He and Debra seemed indifferent to each other. She resumed her place in front of a large curved console. It contained various small CCTV screens and an abundance of controls, as Byzantine to Rebecca as the vampire's control-room might be to a complete novice. Beyond the console stretched an empty space about twelve yards across. At its center a shiny disc lay embedded in the floor. Its brushed metal shimmered cool in the low light with a pink circle describing its outer edge.

Debra pushed something and the disc rose from the floor. After a few inches metal gave way to glass. The whole kept rising revealing a transparent cylinder with the flat metal disc being its lid. It extended like an oversized piston. The interior resisted inspection, obscured by dense blue-green gas. After rising to eight feet the cylinder

stopped.

Debra said, "That gas is completely inert. It keeps their environment free of contaminants without causing irritation."

Rebecca asked, "And who, or what, are *they*?"

Dernier and Debra shared a smile and she hit another button. The gas withdrew into the maw of an extractor fan. Through the thinning atmosphere Rebecca discerned a familiar shape -- human -- a naked young woman propped up inside the cylinder. Rebecca estimated her age at early-twenties. Bindings supported her weight without obstructing circulation. A breathing mask was strapped over the airways. Other tubes led to the floor of the cylinder from a waste removal unit clamped -- like an oversized gusset -- to the specimen's crotch. She appeared to be sleeping and was without hair. Rebecca thought; Either it's got alopecia or it's been shaved.

Rebecca noticed recent surgical scars on the subject's lower abdomen and beneath her ribs. "Stem cell huh?"

Dernier said, "Human cloning's still illegal; and we can't advertise."

"So she's a clone."

Debra said, "From our last crop."

She brought up a data screen.

Rebecca said, "And you're harvesting organs, right?"

"Sure are. We've already extracted a lung, a kidney and both ovaries from this one."

Text and numerical data were topped by a prominent bold heading: *Clone; Designation - November 21.*

"Is this all you have?"

"Goodness no." Debra brought up a live CCTV signal displaying a zoomed-in image; a dark chamber with a dozen more cylinders.

Rebecca hadn't noticed until that moment but the distant concave wall functioned as another towering control room window, an opposite to the vampire's convex and facing away from the central core. It too boasted steel blast-shutters. When they slid open the sight awed Rebecca; How did Murcat keep all this a secret?

Beyond the window stood an extensive incubation facility that seemed to go on forever. Rows of cylinders, filled with roiling gas, stretched to the distant back of an extensive gallery.

"And each one contains a clone?"

Debra nodded, "Equal numbers of males and females."

Rebecca restudied the neat grid of cylinders and another detail manifested. One half had pink rings on their lids and the other blue. She did a quick mental run-through of all she knew about cloning; recalled some of its absolutes proclaimed by the mainstream.

"Hang on; she's mature. You've bypassed the embryo stage."

Debra nodded, "That was the easy part. We can accelerate maturation but we can't reverse aging. Also we can't recreate intellect. There's no higher brain function, no cognitive ability. They're just walking limbic systems."

Rebecca smiled. "Sounds like you cloned every guy I ever dated."

"For now, they're merely high quality organ donors."

"Works for me." Rebecca extrapolated; how the Tiryns' clone program could solve her particular problem -- the feeding of their vampire.

#

Silo Nine staff, mostly security operatives, congregated after their shifts in the communal recreation room to drink beer and watch movies or sports. It held no attraction for Leslie and Bo who headed to their lab. Both expected to work deep into the night.

Bo extracted fluid samples from a dead rat. Leslie studied a video close-up of wounds on the throat of another. The vampire left two close incisions. They resembled the bite of a large spider or another rat; He's not the Hollywood stereotype. How does he make that bite; does he have retractable fangs?

Her thoughts scattered when Nelson Dernier's voice bled from the intercom. "Leslie, can you come up to intensive care, now? It's Adam."

"What is it?"

"He's having some sort of seizure."

"On my way." She almost dropped the rat carcass in her haste.

#

Leslie and Bo rushed into Adam's room where the young night-nurse restrained the convulsing boy. He shuddered, foam dribbled from the corner of his mouth and his eyes turned up in their sockets. The nurse held a tongue-depressor in place between his teeth.

Leslie slipped into emergency-response mode like she'd never left the USAMRIID; The kid caught a break. In all of Silo Nine Bo and I are probably best qualified to deal with this.

She cast a quick glance at his vital signs and Bo stepped in to take over from the nurse.

Leslie said, "This isn't typical of MND. When did it begin?"

The young nurse checked her watch and the wall clock then said, "About twenty-two fifty."

Leslie cross-checked with her time; 23:08 Hrs. "Okay, not too long."

Dernier said, "It started when I was checking in on him."

"So you saw it first?"

"That's right; on my regular walk-through. I do it every night."

Leslie didn't see his hand tighten inside his bomber jacket around an empty hypodermic syringe. She had no idea of the care he took to avoid letting it rattle against the broken glass ampule also resting in his pocket. Neither Leslie nor Bo suspected the drug Rebecca provided had a short-term effect and was untraceable after a few hours.

#

Operatives carried Clone November 21 into the containment chamber stopping at the edge of the solar-curtain. They knew he rested in his wooden box and yet they maintained a healthy regard for the vampire's dictate that none but Leslie Tatum should venture onto his turf.

The clone stood unsupported on shaky legs, not comprehending her surroundings. Her breath labored, the sole remaining lung pressed into doing the work of two. She experienced no embarrassment when her loose lab-coat, an afterthought thrown across her shoulders, flapped open revealing bare flesh. A lack of cognitive function provided no modesty to offend. She didn't look about her. The stylish furnishings; the art, the gentle wash of light over pastel walls, all was lost on the clone.

Unit 21 of the N-for-November series returned five times her development costs from the sale of harvested organs. Debra Clarke delivered her into to Rebecca's care with no qualms. Rebecca considered November 21 to be the ideal source of nourishment for

Patient Zero; She's got a full quota of blood with no messy complications. She's unknown, she's disposable, she's perfect.

“Okay guys, I'll handle it from here.” Lutz spoke from the control room.

His operatives exited. When the door sealed Lutz and Rebecca were alone with November 21 and the vampire. This part of the research remained restricted to a cabal of Tiryns core staff that did not include Leslie, Bo or Turco.

Dernier played his part; kept Leslie and Bo busy upstairs with Adam. Turco retired for the evening and, as was his habit, would not surface until the following morning. Rebecca assumed he was surfing for porn; The only question is what kind, and do I even care?

Rebecca spoke into the microphone, “You said you needed a living human.”

The lid of the vampire's box lifted slowly; taut parchment skin pushed against dusty timber. Ancient sinew and decrepit flesh raised itself up. Unable to stand at full height the hunched form shuffled towards the oblivious clone, each step a painful exercise in willpower. November 21's eyes registered movement; optic nerves transmitted signals to a limbic system that processed the information. Her *gimped* mind discerned a shape creeping closer.

The vampire flopped upon her, hanging like a sodden towel. His open mouth sought the rhythmic invitation of the closest carotid artery.

Like voyeurs, Rebecca and Lutz watched. Rebecca pumped up the volume to hear the sound at maximum pitch. The vampire sounded like a wolf rending a fresh kill. The wet ripping of flesh overlaid the softer tones of November 21 gasping for life.

The clone felt the searing pain in her neck but had no comprehension of its cause, or consequence. Her body's primal, reptile brain urging for survival tried to retreat from the pain but the vampire clung fast like a limpet.

Rebecca's breath quickened. Only once before had she felt such arousal; when Paula Hackles glared at her from beneath clear running water. Rebecca remembered what the vampire said, about her wanting this; Fuck, he was right. How did he know? She thought about the Roman coliseum. She knew that if she'd been there watching the exquisite anguish, the blood, the pain, the fear, the death, she would have lain herself open to an entire legion.

The clone's unequal struggle ended the only way it could and the vampire released her limp corpse. He stood erect, his shoulders straight. Muscles regained volume, skin again vital. He shed the cloak of age.

Lutz said, “You realize what we have here; the fountain of friggin' youth.”

Rebecca was immersed in a stream of sexual energy, released through the agency of another murder; enacted as if staged for her sole gratification. She used sex as currency; never derived true pleasure from it. It was the handiest weapon in her arsenal; But this feels delicious.

She cast dreamy eyes at Lutz.

“I suppose a fuck's out of the question?”

While Lutz looked at her with a slack jaw the vampire tilted a rejuvenated face towards the control room. A trail of blood tracked down his chin and neck.

“Was it good for you too?”

#

For two hours after Adam lapsed into a deep sleep Leslie kept attentive eyes on his vital signs. She felt confounded; What caused the asymptomatic seizure and why did

it pass so quickly?

She queried the nurse. "Has there been any change in his treatment, any departure from normal procedure?"

"No, nothing."

The nurses rotated through eight-hour shifts; This kid's the most junior so she gets the graveyard shift. Still, that's no reason to doubt her competence.

"In the morning I'd like to run a CAT scan."

The nurse said, "No problem."

"I'd also like a full tox-screen. Let's get blood as soon as he wakes."

Dernier put an avuncular arm on the nurse's shoulder.

"How about I arrange that. You stay with the boy."

The nurse nodded, quick to agree. Dernier was free to ensure an old, clean sample was used.

#

In Rebecca's room her breathing was syncopated to Lutz's pelvic metronome. With each of his inward lunges her interrupted words ended with an exhaled 'ungh'.

"We're, gonna' be - so - fucking - rich." She approached orgasm; quivering, breathless, demonstrative.

Lutz, his ego bolstered, prepared for a lengthy bout of sexual gymnastics. Rebecca knew she was enjoying a one-off; Not the sex; I already decided on seduction. Had Dernier been in the control room it would be his fifty-year-old body sweating on top of me.

What she didn't expect was for the act to be as satisfying again. She did not often climax, didn't care about it either; Besides how many times can I witness a murder? That's what floats this girl's boat.

Lutz had no inkling of her thought processes and Rebecca intended things remain that way.

#

Paul Turco trawled through online news archives; his research heading: Leslie Tatum. Bold headings told Leslie's story: *USAMRIID Captain court-martialed: Herbst Pharmaceuticals seeks injunction against US Military: Civilian researchers killed in botched military exercise*. He saw a photo of a younger looking Leslie Tatum standing beside a more senior officer: *Major Raymond Arillo*.

The photo was unremarkable, but to the trained eye subtle truths were evident. Arillo stood slightly in front of Leslie in a protective stance; If the comments about her were true then an officer would be less inclined to shield her from righteous anger. Perhaps she isn't the fuck-up they painted her to be. But Leslie Tatum's guilt or innocence is not my concern.

A secure page loaded and he was prompted for his response: *Access; Turco 001; password *** ***

As soon as he was in he typed a message: *Priority Target 01 confirmed. Action possible next 48 Hrs. Request sanction.*

The wait cursor blinked slowly. Turco held his breath until his lungs felt they were on fire. He exhaled when the one-word response appeared: *Terminate.*

Chapter 13

The following morning the vampire amused himself at his war gaming table deploying brigades, divisions and corps, of tiny painted figures amid scaled topography; trees, buildings and roads. Blue Union forces formed a fish hook shaped line along the middle of the table. Grey confederates were massed in a phalanx encompassing the bend of the Union hook.

“Wow, lookin' good. So the rats worked after all.”

The vampire twisted in response to Leslie as she entered and said, “Yes, it seems so, just took a bit longer than usual.”

He looked at the control room, toward Rebecca and said, “Isn't that right?”

Rebecca was careful, cagey when she said, “Yes, remarkable; now we might get some usable blood samples.”

Leslie looked up at the window and asked, “How do you figure that?”

The vampire spoke first, “Rebecca has an interesting hypothesis. She thinks it's possible the blood hasn't been in my system long enough to be completely assimilated.”

“Okay let's see.” Leslie didn't waste a second; the tourniquet half way around his arm before she finished the sentence.

In the control room Rebecca and Lutz exchanged a conspiratorial sideways glance. Sitting behind them Turco's gaze narrowed.

Leslie felt renewed; Maybe working with vampires agrees with me. My hand hasn't trembled since he grabbed it and I don't feel at all intimidated by him. I've also not heard a peep from that noisy little demon for days. Where is the little shit?

While she drew another sample into a vial the vampire chanced at conversation.

“So, still angry with me?”

“Nope'; shouldn't have let you get under my skin in the first place. Don't worry. It won't happen again.”

“Is that a challenge?”

She ignored his verbal jab. Instead she packed up her trolley and walked over to his war game Two knobby hills sat near one end of the table. The larger was covered in model trees. The smaller sat closer to the Union line but no blue figures stood upon it.

She said, “I'd put a brigade on Little Round Top if I were you. Otherwise Hood's gonna' roll up your line.”

“You know this?” The vampire beamed with enthusiasm.

“West Point, three years - I know the second day of Gettysburg when I see it.”
“I'm impressed.” He grabbed a stand of miniatures and rubbed it with his fingers,
“We should have a match one day.”

“Maybe.”

She ambled from the table to his wooden box and pushed a finger deep into a rotten piece of wood. “How long you had this thing?”

The vampire looked at his box, the war game table, then back at the box, and said,
“Oddly enough, since the Eighteen-sixties, why?”

She blew wood dust from her gloved fingertip. “It needs an upgrade.”

#

Rebecca Huston was out of uniform; her designer business suit hidden beneath a blue surgical gown. Lacquered fingernails stretched the tips of her rubber gloves. She rechecked her lab was locked; This is no time for Leslie wandering in unannounced.

The open mortuary drawer next to Callum's displayed a hand-written label: *November 21*. Six-inch heels gave her more height to look down on the dissecting table, and the corpse of November 21 stretched across its chilly stainless steel. She placed the tip of a long-bladed number 70 scalpel above the breast and began a Y-shaped incision.

#

Leslie and Bo took delivery of mechanical equipment, power tools and a multitude of raw material. Eight trips by the fork-lift were required before all was in place but Bo seemed satisfied.

“Our vampire isn't the only one who can use Murcat's credit card. And no forms in triplicate, I just ask and Tiryns delivers.”

Leslie spread out a hand-drawn diagram on the far bench. Bo grabbed an orbital grinder. “I should get started.”

#

The vampire relaxed and stretched out on his lounge. Rebecca, Lutz, Dernier and Turco stood at the console watching him, like Dorothy, the Tin-man, Lion and Scarecrow, seeking knowledge from the Wizard. Rebecca maintained custody of the microphone.

Rebecca asked, “So is it true you can turn into a bat or a wolf?”

The vampire laughed. “That looks great in the movies but no; we leave shape-shifting to the werewolves.”

Turco was quietly alarmed when he heard the word werewolf; Were such creatures real? This thing mixes lies with truth. He asked, “can you be warded off? What about garlic, crosses, holy-water?”

“Superstitious idolatry. Sometimes a talisman might have a limited effect but we think it's more to do with the believer, not the object. We think it alters blood chemistry, but it's very rare.”

Turco asked, “So you're saying any religious symbol might work?”

“Use a plastic dog-turd if you believe in it enough. But religious trinkets have *never* worked on me.”

Rebecca said, “If I could bring us back to what's germane. I want to know why you don't age, or die.”

“Isn't it obvious? It's the blood; without it I wither. You've seen for yourself.”

“Why do you sleep on that moldy old dirt?”

He looked at the white-flecked layer of soil lining the bottom of his wooden box,

“That part of vampire lore is true, sort-of . We can only rest in the ground on which we died. I can't regenerate unless I'm on top of that soil. I can't leave home without it.”

Turco leaned over to the microphone and asked, “What about it needing to be unhallowed ground?”

The vampire laughed louder. “Oh yes, the suicide's grave, is that what you're referring to? Sorry that's bogus. Father, you need to forget about superstition. There's no such thing as hallowed ground. Just so you know; In seven thousand years I've seen every corner of this planet and I have *never* seen the slightest evidence of a God. In case you're wondering, we vampires are almost all atheists.”

Turco stood, ready to argue, but Rebecca butted in.

“Does everybody you bite turn into a vampire?”

“That's another myth. If it were true there'd be no people left. A person has to drink my blood. It must be ingested, in conjunction with the bite. Even now I don't fully understand the process. But there is one thing I should add; which you'll appreciate Father. They have to want it. There's never been a vampire who didn't choose the path of their own free will. Forget movies, and trashy novels; we *never* turn the unwilling.”

Lutz said, “You said *we*. Are there lots of you?”

The vampire shook his head. “Very few these days.”

“Would they try to spring you?”

“Hardly, we avoid each other. I did hear of one on board the Titanic. I guess she's still down there. Have no fear Mister Lutz: there's no *League of the Undead* plotting my escape.”

The vampire gestured with an expansive sweep of his arms and said, “If they got wind of this place they'd be lining up to get in.”

#

Bo kept himself busy for days. His side of the lab resembled a light engineering works. Leslie assisted when required but preferred working to her strengths so stayed close to her scanning electron microscopes. Blood samples from the vampire went quickly under the lens. She had a brief window before they decayed to dust; This is a hell of a way to get data.

She made digital recordings of the samples. What first became apparent were microbial forms possessing an unpleasant similarity to what she'd seen at the Herbst facility two years before. It evinced a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach; And it's not all my unwholesome cancer. The vampire might have banished that tremble but he can't wipe my mental memory-drives.

She accessed mental files on Kristen, Ortega and the others. She thought about lives not lived; Cut short because of this evil little micro-organism. I must know what it is, how it works, and how to kill the little fucker.

The clatter of small wheels on floor tiles pulled her from the eyepiece. Operatives wheeled in a gurney with a body under a sheet. Leslie gestured for them to leave Doctor Callum's cadaver behind her; Maybe there's something in human remains that has a longer shelf-life. A slim shot but worth checking.

#

Lutz and Rebecca looked at each other and nodded. They delayed asking the obvious question of the vampire but could procrastinate no longer. Lutz felt it came under his jurisdiction so leaned towards the microphone.

“How do we kill you?”

The vampire thought for some seconds then said, "You don't need to know."

"I could just try different things until I find something that works."

"But we both know you won't: don't we?"

Dernier interjected, "He's got you there Eric."

Turco opened a new line of questioning, "If I might come back to vampire lore. Is it true you can *command all the dead you come nigh to*? I read that in *Dracula*, and *Calmet*."

"You have done your homework; but it's not *all*, just those I choose to infect."

"I'm confused; I thought you said they have to want it." Turco's expression pleaded for explanation.

"This may be difficult for mortals to comprehend. I have a power, skill, whatever. It permits telekinetic manipulation, but only on the deceased, and only if I've introduced something from my blood."

"Is that like some sort of psychic remote control?"

"If you will. That's not a bad analogy, Father."

Rebecca sounded less credulous. "You're saying you can make dead people walk around, do your bidding. Please, that's too ridiculous."

The vampire grinned.

#

While the vampire endured interrogation, Leslie concentrated on unraveling the enigma of his blood. With batches crumbling fast what she gleaned was sparse, but over days a body of usable data began to form. The complexity of the revealed material tested her acumen. Toiling with such intensity, and under acute time pressure, was both compelling and draining. Leslie wore large cushioned headphones, cocooned herself in ersatz sensory-deprivation and was oblivious to all sound and movement about her.

Bo worked at the far end. Power tools, electrical cables, metal shavings and detritus littered his floor. The growls of grinders, or some other powerful implement, sometimes rose to a level that could damage unprotected eardrums.

The ears of the late Doctor Callum were past needing protection. Neither Leslie nor Bo heard the covering sheet slip off his corpse. Bo's frantic exertions masked the light touch of cold, bare feet on the floor beside the gurney. Callum's corpse stood, unobserved and without fuss. Leslie's analytical mind was focused on technical detail. When she turned to ask a question of Bo she had no preparation for what she saw; eyeball-to-eyeball with Doctor Callum's dead features. Leslie's knees were unable to shift shaking legs, the shock sudden and beyond reason.

The corpse ignored her, turned and loped out the door. Bo, by coincidence, spun around in time to see Callum stroll into the corridor. His immediate concern was Leslie.

"Cap'."

Leslie trembled; but not from of the shock of the new, she had seen the dead walk before; It's happening again.

A woman's shriek echoed along the hallway. The hackles rose on Leslie's neck. She overcame inertia and ran towards the shrill scream. While covering the few feet to the doorway a complete scenario of imagined terror flashed before her eyes; Callum bent over a Tiryns' employee, some poor soul going about their normal business dragged into a ghastly and grisly final moment.

In the corridor a nurse backed up flush and frightened against the wall. Mute from shock, she stood in a fresh pool of yellow liquid. Callum ignored her and strode along the

hall toward the elevator vestibule. Leslie followed at a cautious distance. Bo performed a brief assessment of the nurse. Apart from her dignity dribbling down her legs she seemed unharmed so he bolted after Leslie.

#

In the control room Rebecca and Turco debated the implications of the vampire's answers. Rebecca found Turco's insistence on a religious dimension tiresome. In opposition, Turco was frustrated by Tiryns' blinkered, secularist agenda.

About to launch into another scathing polemic, Rebecca was cut short by the insistent *BZZZT* of the intercom. Bo blurted his warning.

“Weird shit, heading your way - corridor.”

Lutz highlighted the only local CCTV screen showing movement. Expanding the image to full-screen they saw it was Callum; dead yet upright and walking. His cadaver moved past the camera's range then Leslie and Bo entered the picture like they had walk-on parts in a David Lynch movie.

In a corridor above them Callum's cadaver stepped into an elevator. Leslie and Bo didn't follow; neither wished to join it in such a confined space. They saw the *down* button illuminate and knew it was going to the containment chamber. Racing down the stairwell they emerged on the lower level in time to see the corpse shuffle towards the security door. Callum's withered fingers tapped on the keypad and the heavy door opened.

Rebecca saw them follow Callum and she activated the solar-curtain. Its vivid wall rolled forward stopping a few yards in front of the opening chamber door. Callum's corpse walked into the containment chamber. It halted next to the vampire.

Leslie grabbed Bo's shoulder, stopping him before he stepped out of the solar-curtain. She strode towards the vampire but remained wary of the cadaver.

“You did this?”

The vampire didn't speak yet Leslie knew the answer before she asked the question.

Rebecca, sounding less convinced, said, “This is bullshit -- some kinda' trick.”

The vampire sighed and said, “Is there none so blind?”

The vampire raised his right knee and stood on one leg. An instant later Callum's right leg also rose into an identical posture. The vampire lowered his leg but the corpse remained locked in the absurd pose. Bo articulated their collective awe. “I've heard of *Simon-says* but this is freakin' ridiculous.”

Leslie didn't share his amusement. Her eyes met the vampire's. She remembered Kristin lunging at her from out of the biohazard storeroom, Ortega's vicious snarl; and then there were the pallbearers. It confirmed what she suspected for two years. The beautiful, bald woman in the coffin manipulated the Herbst corpses; even those of her team. And in Silo Nine this vampire could do the same.

Chapter 14

Dernier chaired proceedings around the conference table. Rebecca and Lutz sat opposite Leslie and Bo with Turco again at a distance, a chair between him and Lutz. Leslie patched her laptop computer into the big monitor so all could see. She cycled through screen-grabs of micro-organisms and diagrams of molecular structures. More obtuse technicalities were meaningful only to Leslie, Rebecca and Bo.

She settled on something the others could understand.

“I've identified two distinct strains. The first I'm calling Type-A; not imaginative I know. I think it's what he used to control Callum's corpse; what Herbst's patient zero used two years ago. I've started examining its mitochondrial DNA. It is impressive.”

Rebecca said, “It means Herbst did have a vampire back then and they probably have at least a two-year lead on us.”

Video vision jump-cut to yet more images from a scanning-electron-microscope. Sub text read: *Neural pathways: Synaptic Activity*. An incomplete molecular diagram was followed by images of bizarre micro-organisms.

Leslie continued, “Now this is another distinct strain, and more elusive. Let's call it Type-B. It's much harder to isolate. It's dense, incredibly complex. Sometimes, at the molecular level, it appears to shift its form. It's like the individual molecules know I'm trying to pin them down.”

Rebecca said, “Sounds a bit paranoid Leslie. You think these bugs are out to get you?”

“Maybe, nothing surprises me any more. I think Type-B is what makes him a vampire.”

“Are you saying we've isolated the vampire virus?”

Leslie regarded Rebecca; Careful dear, your avarice is showing.

Then she waved a hand in caution. “It's excruciating working with source material that has such a short life. I can't give you definitive answers yet. There's enough here to keep an entire research department busy for years.”

Rebecca asked, “Did Herbst have this strain in their database two years ago?”

“Not that I saw.”

“Well that's something. We might still be ahead of them.”

Turco broke in. “Don't be too quick to quick to explain it away with pure science. I'm not convinced one can dismiss the spiritual dimension, out of hand.”

Rebecca said, "After what he did to your crucifixes the other day, I think we can."

Leslie said, "This pathogen has traits similar to viruses like Ebola. But it's a chameleon, obscure, perhaps incipient. Otherwise it would have been observed before now. One thing is certain, our vampire was infected by *something* and like any biological conundrum, there must be a solution."

Turco said, "If I've learned anything it's that things aren't always what they seem. There may be more at work here."

Leslie said, "Well you're welcome to work your side of the street. Meantime, I'm gonna' find out all I can about this Type-B strain."

#

Another project resided closer to Leslie's heart than the vampire. Some evenings she ventured into the intensive-care ward and sat with Adam. Reviewing his chart was a convenient cover for just being near the boy. His degeneration was not yet rapid but it was relentless. His electronic lake view shifted with the time of day, they looked upon a cool evening scene. She took his pulse and held his hand. For just a second she felt his grip tighten; That's encouraging. Somewhere in there a little boy is trying to make contact.

Before the Herbst incident she often thought about having kids. It wasn't a high priority, just one of those inevitable things, when she met the right man. But sometime, while trending downward, after her court-martial: she didn't recall the exact day or date, she realized it would never happen; What right man would be interested in an emotional minefield like me? You don't deserve a relationship anyway, and certainly not children. If you allowed so many young people under your charge to be killed, how then could you possibly care for an infant? An infant will become a child; a child will grow into a teenager; teenagers become young adults -- like Kristen.

Perhaps the cancer's a blessing. You've been absolved from making the decision.

"You think we can help him?" Bo surprised her. Light on his feet he entered without creating noise.

Leslie said, "If that Type-A strain can reanimate the dead; who knows what's possible?"

Bo sat in the other free chair by the electronic window. "Amen to that. What's possible indeed? If you said to me two weeks ago I'd be working with a real vampire, well..."

He hunched forward and looked around like a furtive high-school boy about to sneak a sly cigarette. Then he startled Leslie by standing on his chair and unplugging the output cable from the CCTV camera. Leslie was about to ask why when he placed a silent index-finger over his lips.

"Don't you think it's a little odd that Lawrence Murcat leaves us plebs in charge of his hot new Bio-Neutronic weapon?"

He opened his laptop computer and whispered, "I did a little checking on their servers."

"How?"

"I didn't spend all my time at MIT chasing frat parties and coeds. Anyway, those launch codes he gave us."

He showed her the launch-pad screen on his laptop computer, then spoke in his best California surfer voice, "They're like, totally bogus, dude."

He tapped the button titled: *Launch Sequence Initiate*.

Leslie stood up, alarmed; Has Bo gone mad? There's no time to evacuate the entire facility. Hundreds will die.

She expected a cultured English voice to begin a calm countdown to oblivion.

But nothing happened. Text on the screen flashed in orange: *Bio-Neutronic Device: LAUNCH FAILURE: Invalid activation code.*

Leslie pursed her lips then said, "Lying son-of-a-bitch."

But she wasn't surprised; Of course Murcat lied. He's not gonna' let someone like me blow up his billion-dollar playground.

Bo said, "I don't know about you, but I'd feel a whole lot better if we had genuine launch-codes."

"You can do that?"

"Given enough time."

"Take as much as you need."

#

The following morning Leslie pushed another trolley of sedated rats. She knew the clock was ticking and, if there was any chance of saving Adam, it was down to her to unlock the enigma of the vampire's blood. Bo sat at the solar controls along with the usual crew; Rebecca, Lutz, Dernier and Turco. When the solar-curtain retreated the vampire materialized before her as if from nowhere.

"Impressive, no black mist. How do you do that?"

He said, "It's nothing, and good morning to you too."

She realized he was being facetious; Still, that's no excuse for rudeness.

"Sorry, good morning."

"Now, Leslie, as you can see I like to surround myself with beautiful things."

"Yes, I keep tripping over all your beautiful things."

The chamber was cluttered. In the preceding week a constant stream of packages arrived at Silo Nine via multiple courier services. A statuette even blocked the Baltimore Pike on his Gettysburg war game

"You might want to give that credit-card a rest. You'll run out of room before Tiryns runs out of money." She handed him a rat. He maintained Rebecca's bogus feeding ritual and drained its living juices in a second.

"Space won't be a problem. Once I get tired of this lot I'll sell it all on *eBay*; give the proceeds to charity. Is there one near to your heart perhaps?"

Leslie looked nonplussed; I can see why the vampire, as an archetype, is so seductive.

In the control room Rebecca paid close attention to the vampire's interactions with Leslie.

"Look at them, like a married couple at the breakfast table."

Turco stubbornly refused to draw the domestic parallel. He said, "How many housewives serve rats for breakfast?"

"You'd be surprised."

Outside, the vampire held onto the next rat until Leslie's eyes met his.

"As I was saying, I like beautiful things. And in that spirit it's time we turned our attention to your wardrobe."

She watched his eyes scan down to her flat shoes and back up again. She knew he was undressing her with his eyes.

"What's wrong with my wardrobe? They're work clothes."

“Give me a break. There are work clothes, and there are work clothes.”

He looked to the control room then cast another critical eye over Leslie's utilitarian garb.

“Take Rebecca for example; she appreciates the importance of appearance. Those heels she gets around in may constitute a public nuisance, but man, they look hot.”

“And you like that?”

He put both arms akimbo, like a talk-show host doing an opening monologue. “I may be undead, but I can still appreciate a good looking woman. And you, my dear, could give her a serious run for her money.”

“Does it look like I care?”

“Clearly not.”

Leslie didn't like the direction the conversation had taken. She especially didn't like being rated against Rebecca. But the vampire would not be dissuaded.

“I understand you're wracked with guilt, don't feel you deserve the attention of men. But would a skirt and some lipstick kill you?”

“What's it to you? Are you a shrink or some kind of bullshit life-coach? Why do you even care?”

“I told you, friends take care of each other.”

The gold warning-light flashed and rotated near the door. The titanium disc rolled open.

“Speaking of that.” Leslie was glad for the distraction as a forklift, driven by a security operative, cruised slowly into the chamber.

It carried a streamlined metal-box; four feet wide, seven feet long, three feet high and buffed to a high shine. Matt-black strips and a small keypad punctuated its sleek top. Various black glass knobs in its center completed the curious package. Side-mounted hinges secured its lid. It resembled an oversized and oblong attache-case. The forklift stopped just short of the solar-curtain's limit. Leslie gave Bo a signal and he retracted the curtain once the fork-lift driver moved to a safe distance.

Leslie punched in an access code on the box's keypad.

“I said your coffin needed an upgrade.”

A seal broke and the lid lifted with a slight sucking sound. Then it folded open via a balanced pneumatic hinge.

The vampire said, “Is this for me?”

“Yep, it's stainless steel with a depleted uranium lining built around a titanium frame. Leslie waved her arms across the new coffin gesturing like a game-show hostess. “I know, it might seem like we went a little overboard.”

“A little.” Said Bo from the control room.

Leslie invited the vampire to step closer and review the plush interior; padded black, kid-leather with that new-car smell.

She continued, “I like to be thorough. I wanted to be sure no contaminants can get out, or in.”

In the control room Dernier smiled. “So that's what all that stuff was for. And I thought you were building a new piece of research-equipment.”

Bo said, “We didn't do this on a whim. It's a secure storage mechanism for a billion-dollar specimen; well worth the expense wouldn't you say?”

“Fair point.”

Out on the floor Leslie tapped another button inside the lip of the coffin and a broad flat drawer clicked open. It revealed a tray located beneath the floor of the case.

“This is for that old dirt of yours.”

The vampire shook his head, appearing amused and delighted.

Leslie continued, “Now, to avoid any mishaps with sunlight we've installed cameras here.”

She lifted the lid to clearly show him a nest of five shiny, black camera lenses mounted almost flush with the lid's surface.

“These provide a three-sixty-degree field of vision; so you can see the outside light conditions via this monitor.”

She pointed out instruments embedded in the inside lining of the lid and a small monitor mounted in the middle; at the approximate level of the head.

The vampire was enthralled. “A closed-circuit television, you're joking?”

“I never joke about my work Double-O-Seven.” She and the vampire laughed; a genuine giggle friends might share. It didn't go unnoticed; especially by Rebecca.

Leslie ran a hand along the black banding on the lid.

“These black strips are the same photovoltaic coating Tiryns have on their satellites.”

Leslie wanted to dazzle with the technical aspects of the new model coffin, “So not only can it run on a regular electrical outlet, it also has a rechargeable solar cell.”

The vampire smiled and said, “A vampire with a solar-powered coffin, now that's irony. Add wheels and it's Dracula's Winnebago.”

Chapter 15

At night the corridors of Silo Nine stood silent. Most off-duty staff relaxed in their rooms or the recreation lounge. Nobody went off-site; they were surrounded by wilderness on the most sparsely populated continent on Earth. As a matter of necessity Silo Nine provided its own entertainment.

In the *Security and Surveillance Center* the night-shift paid scant attention to CCTV screens monitoring the lower floors. The containment and stem-cell levels were the deepest in the complex and considered beyond infiltration.

On the vampire's level the dim control-room lay empty. The door opened for a few seconds then closed. Bare feet dropped onto the floor and flitted across cool tiles. Pale unmanicured fingers reached towards the console and the water circulation controls marked in blue. In another second text on a monitor changed wording and color; *Water Circulation: Interrupt*.

The vampire stood by his glittering new sarcophagus watching the control room -- pleased with the covert activities. His liberator stood at the console. The rigid corpse of November 21 waited, poised for her next telekinetic instruction. Down the front of her torso the autopsy-incision looked like a crude upper-case *Y* darned into her flesh with staples.

The vampire atomized into a veil of motes and trailed into an air-conditioning vent. Narrow ducts -- like veins in a living organism -- provided access throughout Silo Nine. As a fleeting wisp he passed like a ghost.

#

Nelson Dernier walked along a gently curving corridor and approached his office when he was overtaken by a sudden and curious sensation; like something moved near him. He stopped; had to make sure he was alone. He stood outside his office and checked the corridor again; in both directions. He was nervous for no apparent reason certain eyes were watching him.

#

Paul Turco sat alone in his room reading *The Vampire, His Kith and Kin* by Montague Summers. Nearby lay other titles; Dom Augustin Calmet's *Treatise on Vampires & Revenants* and, from 1733, *Dissertatio de Vampiros Serviensibus* by John Heinrich Zopfius. Turco -- steeped in Roman Catholic learning -- read with the focus of the zealot.

Like Dernier a few moments before he shuddered for no discernible reason. A *whoosh*; barely audible, more sensed than heard, prompted him to look up. He too experienced an unsettling sensation; like he passed too close to a store-mannequin. Afterward the feeling persisted -- that someone was standing behind him.

#

Eric Lutz liked the fact that, late at night, he had the Silo Nine gym to himself. It was one level above the staff lounge so people rarely intruded on his late night workouts. Sweat dripped from his fit musculature as he pummeled a heavy bag.

Years of martial arts training gave him a sixth-sense when an attacker approached. He thought he felt the pad-pad of soft feet coming fast from behind. He swiveled expecting to fend off a subordinate wanting to spar. But there was no intruder. He had never experienced that tingle before without a person being present. He blinked and scanned the gym. Despite being the only person in the room he couldn't shake the feeling that eyes were watching him.

#

In the lab he shared with Leslie, Bo Greaves sat facing the door. He didn't want anyone looking over his shoulder while he hacked the Tiryns' servers.

He felt a breeze drift around his ankles. He thought he caught movement near the door; someone entering, maybe Leslie. It was the same slight, uncomfortable sensation one experiences when something seems to move at the edge of peripheral vision; and turns out to be nothing.

His laptop computer's screen flickered briefly and he shivered. He waited for someone to come through the door; but it didn't happen. He resumed his delicate, digital infiltration but he hunched closer to the screen, and couldn't quite fathom why.

#

In the stem-cell laboratory Debra Clarke waited while another clone's maturation cylinder rose from the floor. Before refilling the transparent cylinder with the inert greenish gas she inspected the clone for imperfections. She found none. The powerful male had the physique of an Adonis.

She thought how much she enjoyed her work when a sudden shiver made her think; Oops, someone just walked over my grave.

#

Rebecca Huston stretched on a mat in her executive room. She did yoga daily but not for any spiritual gratification. Combined with aerobic exercise and a strict dietary regimen she maintained her ideal weight. For her it was a matter of survival. After her mind; her body was her most important piece of equipment. Like a soldier kept his rifle clean; so she kept her figure in tip-top condition.

She felt a tingling around her waist. Her nipples hardened; as if an invisible tongue tickled them. She shuddered and stood up, her routine broken.

#

In the intensive-care ward Adam lay in his bed asleep. He was stretched out, prostrate. A wispy shape manifested over his bed for an instant, then vanished.

Adam's eyes snapped open and he stared upwards. For just a second they looked from side to side; cognizant, then he lapsed back into the arms of Morpheus, once more comatose.

#

Leslie Tatum sweated under a light sheet despite environmental control regulating the air to a constant, temperate mean. She tossed in violent fits, her sleep riven with turmoil.

Black motes spilled from an overhead vent and the vampire took corporeal form over her. She threw off her covering. Sleeping in underpants and a singlet she swung from sweating to shivering like a Malaria patient; curled into a fetal position trapped in a troubled nightmare.

The vampire leaned close to her face and slowly breathed in her scent, savoring her pheromones. He lay a gentle hand across her temple. The instant his palm touched her she calmed. Her sleep became serene, free of violent disturbance. He drew the sheet back over her and watched her for a moment. Then, at the speed of thought, he became ephemeral particulates and sped away through the vent.

#

The black, wispy mist flew out the air-conditioning vent and back onto the floor of the containment chamber. Without reverting to human form it filtered into the new coffin.

In the control room November 21 turned the flowing water back on. Then she walked to the door and turned the handle. When she pulled the door open; instead of walking out, she climbed up the wall on all-fours and scuttled out around the door's lintel, in movements more insect-like than human.

All CCTV cameras in Silo Nine angled downwards, providing ample view of persons walking on the floor. They missed the naked cadaver hugging the ceiling as it crawled back to its mortuary drawer.

Chapter 16

Leslie couldn't remember the last time she had a full night's sleep; one not broken by grisly nightmares. Instead of Ernesto Ortega trying to disembowel her she had a curious dream about the vampire. He visited her in the night but it wasn't a fright fest -- on the contrary -- it was erotic and filled with heady passion. She'd not felt anything approaching sexual desire for a long time. She laughed to herself; If any guy ever works his way into my pants again he'll find cobwebs.

While she dressed; pecked at a starling's breakfast and sipped coffee, she wondered why the first amorous dream she'd known for years featured the vampire, of all beings; There must be some psychoanalytical explanation, tied up with sex, death, guilt, who knows?

About to walk out the door she heard a tinkle from her cell-phone; an incoming text: *Hey Sis, call or text. I want to talk tattoo, Love Jessie.* Leslie thought; I must respond, as soon as I'm alone, whatever the hour.

#

She was surprised when she entered the vampire's chamber. The clutter was gone and the room had an almost vacant warehouse feel. Only his lounge, television, game consoles and war gaming table remained. She threw a questioning look at the control room and Rebecca grabbed the microphone.

“Don't ask. He just wanted to get rid of it all.”

Leslie didn't mind. She had an innate need for order. She spied two new items but they weren't intrusive; an Art Deco lamp and a chic folding screen, the kind people from another age stood behind to change clothes.

The vampire's shiny new case was closed. Leslie tapped it and waved to the nest of camera lenses embedded in the lid. “I'm glad you tidied this place up. It was getting out of control.”

“And your approval means a great deal to me.”

Leslie was startled to hear his voice already outside the case. He stepped from behind his new screen. She was also stunned by her reaction to seeing him. He didn't look at all threatening; In fact he looks positively scrumptious.

She had to look away he seemed so appealing. Leslie felt confused and excited. She hadn't looked at any man like that for years, even before the Antarctic; How could he have that effect? He's utterly impossible.

She feared he would sense her confusion. Hiding her feelings from Rebecca was one thing; but keeping them from this vampire's uncanny insight was something altogether different.

He broke the tension and spoke first, "I must congratulate you and mister Greaves for devising this splendid new domicile. You know you've ruined wooden coffins for me for all time."

He clicked his fingers at the control room; as a head waiter might summon a garcon. The large chamber-door opened and a squad of operatives entered; carrying a plethora of shopping bags and clothing boxes. Leslie spotted familiar labels: *Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman-Marcus, Bloomingdales* and others. They set the collection down at the edge of the sunlight and retreated.

Rebecca said, "This arrived overnight. He insisted we say nothing; wanted it to be a surprise."

Leslie could tell from her tone that Rebecca wasn't thrilled by this latest antic by the vampire. He gestured with fingers and the solar curtain backed off. As it retreated he reached for Leslie's hand like a nobleman might invite a courtesan to waltz. She felt unable to resist his invitation and without trepidation took his hand. He lead her like she was Cinderella.

"You said my coffin needed an upgrade. I didn't think so, but it turns out you were right. So, I thought I'd return the favor."

The first package she opened bore the label; *Saks Fifth Avenue*. Leslie lifted out an exquisite backless evening gown.

The vampire was enthusiastic and rummaged through other bags.

"There are shoes to go with that." He handed her a pair of matching Jimmy Choos, beautiful in their elegance and simplicity.

Leslie read the label and was stunned. "These are the most expensive shoes in the universe. I can't wear these."

"But I insist. No shoes; no research."

"I despise the whole fashion industry. It's obscene and self-indulgent. I just don't wear this stuff."

"My point exactly." He cast a disdainful sideways glance at her working flats.

"I intend to drag you out of the Walmart bargain-bins if it kills you. Now put this on." He stroked the satin dress draped across her arm.

Leslie felt embarrassed and self-conscious.

"Right now? You want me to strip and get changed, here?"

In the control room Lutz mumbled under his breath, "I'd pay to see that."

Bo overheard and turned, about to take issue, but Rebecca grabbed his shoulder and, without speaking or looking away, restrained him.

The vampire picked up an arm-load of bags and boxes.

"Not out here; behind this." He walked her to his new Art Deco screen.

Leslie looked at the control room where Bo grabbed the microphone. "Cap', you might as well indulge him. What's the worst that can happen?"

Leslie looked at another pair of shoes: Manolo Blahnik. They were gorgeous. She shrugged and stepped behind the screen to disrobe. The vampire piled garments on its top where she could reach them.

"How are the shoes? There's Ferragamo as well."

Leslie had not worn evening wear for so long she'd forgotten the drill. She slid the gown on but it took a moment to feel comfortable; to feel real. She saw herself in the full-

length mirror; Oh crap, under sheer black that underwear has to go.

The vampire stood close to the screen and whispered so only Leslie could hear, “Rebecca's positively green. It doesn't take ESP to tell she hates not being the focus of male attention.”

Leslie said nothing but was quietly pleased. She emerged from behind the screen looking breathtaking. All bar Paul Turco could not take their eyes from her.

In the control room Lutz let out a simple, “Hmmm.”

Rebecca whispered to him, “I agree. I'd fuck her myself.”

The impromptu fashion show lasted until Leslie tried on everything. The vampire was well pleased. Not all the clothes were of an exotic nature. He also selected casual and work-wear. It wasn't such an imposition for Leslie; she looked in the mirror and liked what she saw.

“I hate to admit it; but for an undead blood-drinking myth; you have fantastic taste.”

Lutz said, “He knows a lot about women's clothes and shoes; you suppose he's gay?”

Rebecca said, “Do they even have sexuality? He can be anything he wants, remember.”

The vampire's voice came through the speakers. They'd forgotten his auditory acuity but were reminded when he said, “In truth we're neither straight, gay nor bi. You could call us omnisexual.”

Paul Turco could not disguise his discomfort with the discussion. But Rebecca was without modesty. “What's that mean?”

“I thought it was self-explanatory. We fuck anything. And believe me; we possess ravenous libidos.”

While the humans contemplated the implications of his admission they had no idea why the vampire adopted a wistful smile; or that he cast his memory back to a time almost four decades earlier.

#

On a warm summer evening he and another vampire sat at either end of a bed. They breathed in the San Francisco night scape from behind white plantation shutters. A beautiful woman, in a red dress, stretched out between them.

The other vampire was a also female; distinctive with her bald head and curious tattoo above her left breast.

She lifted the red dress; pulled off matching underwear then let her tongue glide along the inside of the woman's thigh. Her mouth came to rest in the warm folds where the legs met. She proceeded to titillate and tease. The woman in red wriggled with delight. While his companion pleased her below, the vampire kissed the woman's mouth and neck. She succumbed to the skilled attentions of both tongues.

The vampires heard footsteps approach from the street. The woman in red heard nothing; wondering only why they stopped.

The door opened inward and a panting man stood silhouetted in the rectangle of light. Peter Hallicar looked as he did in the photo he carried the day he died. He glared at his wife who barely managed the effort to tilt her head.

“Don't stop. It's only my husband.”

Chapter 17

The vampire's impromptu runway show left Leslie's work schedule in disarray. She and Bo still conducted tests; extracting more blood and tissue, and under pressure to glean such knowledge as they could before the inevitable decay. The work taxed their abilities; was both draining and exhilarating. After they agreed they could no longer continue Leslie lumbered into her room and spied the wall-mounted clock; 01:06 AM. She surveyed the collection of clothing procured by the vampire; everything had been taken to her quarters and hung on racks. One side of her room looked like a Rodeo Drive boutique.

She wanted to unwind and figured nothing would relax like trying on expensive clothes and shoes, for her own pure pleasure without submission to another's critical eye; Of course I can't keep any of this but at least I can enjoy it while I'm here.

The Manolo Blahnik shoes felt delicious despite the height of their heels; or maybe because of them. After each dress, skirt or blouse they remained; Even without a stitch of clothing these shoes improve me.

Her laptop computer tinkled; an incoming message. She sat on her bed, flipped the top screen up, and saw a lo-res video attachment recorded by her sister. Jessie didn't pause for breath.

“Hey Sis' How are ya'? I haven't figured out this whole time-zone thing between here and Australia. Hey what's it like *Downunder*, are there lots of hot guys? You really should call me back. Listen Mom and Dad say I can't see *Uberhaus* with Billy Mazaryk; he's this guy from school: you'll love him. They think he looks like a criminal but he's not. And anyway, it's not like we're having sex or anything, yet. Did they ever give you this much grief? Hey, what do ya' think of these?”

Jessie stood away from the camera to reveal her latest Goth fashion acquisition. Her mouth filled the screen and she pulled back her lips to bare clenched teeth and a set of artificial vampire fangs.

“I bought 'em online with Mom's credit card. Man, was she pissed. Oh yeah, and this is the bat tattoo I want.”

Leslie caught a glimpse of a blurry drawing of a bat motif.

“Cute kid.” The vampire's voice was so close Leslie felt the pores of her neck constrict under his icy breath. Naked, except for \$12,000.00 shoes, she shivered from the sudden cold. She spun around and met his intense eyes. She had only one thought; How

did he get out?

Instead of alarm she felt complete ease. She expected the familiar, sparking panic-attack. Instead she cataloged another observation; Lust also trumps fear.

He cast a furtive glance at her nudity then fixed again on her eyes, "Did I mention how much I like those shoes on you?"

In the dim light she thought he was also naked, shrouded in shadow. One of his hands cupped her breast while the other wrapped around her waist. She fell back and his body seemed to float above her's. His tongue flected across a tightening nipple and tickled her neck. Leslie felt the thump-thump of arousal and closed her eyes to focus on sensate pleasure; A man's touch is so unfamiliar I must qualify as a reconstructed virgin.

She felt clumsy, unsure how to respond. He seemed to understand and his gentle fingertips dawdled across her flesh. Beneath the roar of sexual excitement a tiny voice shouted at her; it sounded like someone trying to be heard over breaking surf. It was the familiar demon on her shoulder; Hey bitch, he's a vampire, remember. What the fuck are you doing?

Leslie shook herself from her ecstasy and pushed the vampire off her neck. He reared back and she looked into the hideous Halloween form he'd shown them on her first day in Silo Nine. He opened his mouth revealing, not two fangs -- like Jessie's fakes -- but a phalanx; a great-white-shark mouth of incisors. The vampire snarled and lunged for her exposed throat.

Leslie sat up, too rattled to scream. The harrowing nightmare left her quivering from cold and fear. She clutched her throat and chest; realized she wore a singlet; wasn't naked, had been lying under a sheet. In the low light she could make out the Blahniks sitting on the shoe-rack, where she left them before going to bed. The clock on the wall read; 02:17 AM; Great, now I have this vampire in my nightmares too. Damn, and that one started so well.

Leslie heard a soft rapping at her door. She was still reeling from the nightmare and answered without thought.

Before she could react Paul Turco slipped inside and closed the door.

"Doctor Tatum, I've found something."

Only after he was inside did Leslie think about her attire, a singlet and the flimsiest underpants. Paul Turco may once have been a man of the cloth, but he was still a man; his eyes zeroed-in on erect nipples, obvious under tight cotton.

He averted his gaze the instant he saw, that she saw, where he was looking; You dirty old priest, she thought, as she rummaged for a sweatshirt and track-pants.

"What's so urgent? You know it's two in the morning?"

His appearance went beyond earnest, draped in black like some corporate ninja. "One moment."

He carried a black bag, invisible against his apparel. From it he pulled a laptop computer and typed a rapid progression of keystrokes. "Okay, they're between security patrols. We should be able to slip past the cameras. They don't watch the lower levels too closely."

Leslie questioned with a tilt of her head and twist of her mouth.

Turco said, "You need to see for yourself."

Leslie decided to indulge the priest; It's late and I'm too tired to argue with a crazy man.

She dressed quickly then they left; both focused on avoiding detection. They didn't notice a thin film of black particles drifting along the ceiling behind them.

Chapter 18

Three minutes later, after a covert elevator descent, Turco and Leslie slipped into the recondite Stem-Cell division. He motioned her to the control console. Leslie took a moment to assess her surroundings. Some of the equipment looked familiar as did the tenor of the laboratory.

Turco said, "This is kept under stricter lock and key than our vampire."

Leslie logged into the server and brought up a list of folders on a computer monitor.

"I don't know what I'm looking at, or for, but let's see what's in here." She accessed more documents some with attached images of micro-organisms. A screen-grab from an electron microscope showing rod shaped microbes. "That's plague bacilli; but not like any I've seen before. It's either a new strain or..."

Leslie's frown deepened with every new datum she read.

"...They're developing biological weapons and by the looks particularly nasty ones. I can't count how many international conventions this breaches."

Turco said, "There's more."

He tapped a button a button on another set of controls and motors activated under their feet. The circular plate in the floor slid up in a fluid action. Leslie was fascinated. In moments the cylinder reached its full height and revealed its contents, a male clone, inert yet pulsing with potential physical power. She walked around the cylinder, as impressed by the clone as Rebecca was when she first saw November 21.

Leslie was also curious about Paul Turco. "So what's your story, and why show me this?"

"Like me, you and your assistant aren't from Tiryns. From what I've observed your moral compass works just fine. I fear theirs is in serious need of adjustment. The cloning of man is a crime against nature and God. Look here." He pointed to another monitor with a wider framed view displaying many more cylinders.

Leslie noticed the wide blast shutters shielding the windows. A moment's searching found the opening switch. The shutters parted like the curtains in a multiplex. She wasn't prepared for the enormity of the incubation level; They're cloning on an industrial scale.

Stepping back to the console Leslie scanned the Tiryns' clone data. Much of the text amounted to dry technical notes but something caught her attention, a name. She

pored over a set of paragraphs; read and re-read, incredulous, incensed.

“Those fuckers.”

Turco looked over Leslie's slumped shoulders but saw only incomprehensible scientific jargon. Text was bolstered by photos of a boy child: as a baby, a toddler, an older child and pictures of a pair of adult clones, male and female.

Leslie said, “It's Adam. Those miserable sons-of-bitches.” Her voice was low, guttural, almost a growl.

One heading stood bold on screen, *Clone to clone Breeding Trials*.

“These cowboys have been cross-breeding human clones, like livestock.”

Turco said, “So let's be clear. You're saying that child was born here?”

“It's like Adam's a copy of a copy. But worse; from these notes it's obvious they knew what the result would be. He was deliberately engineered for suffering; just so they could experiment on him.”

Turco checked his watch. “Security will be around soon. We need to go.”

Leslie returned things to the way they found them. Her mind ran like an overclocked computer. She looked down at her right hand -- rock steady; That's good, white hot rage must also trump fear. I'm way too fucking angry to be afraid.

During their clandestine ascent Leslie spoke not a word. Her mind was busy formulating a plan.

#

Bo was abducted from luxurious sleep by a whispered argument, and tapping, outside his door. He recognized Leslie's voice and fumbled to open the latch. Leslie barged in with Turco in tow.

Bo said, “Hey Cap'. What time is it?”

“Three thirty.”

She and Turco resumed sparring; he trying to press a salient point. “All I'm saying is; once the media learns about him he's doomed. You won't be able to stop it.”

“He's obviously been infected, a long time ago sure, but he's a victim, as much as anyone, and there must be a cure. I'm sure I can cure him.”

A chill passed between them and Leslie thought she heard a slight whoosh near an air-conditioning vent.

Turco said, “A cure, how long will that take; years, decades?”

“So what. He's not dying of old-age.”

“What do you think will happen when the right-wing Christian lobby learns that Tiryns has a genuine vampire? His execution will be the Fox News event of the century.”

His words gave Leslie pause; Oh shit, that I can believe.

She thought hard before speaking.

“Okay, we just have to move him.”

Turco threw up his arms in frustration. “Where; you got another missile silo handy?”

Bo yawned and grabbed three mugs. “Coffee?”

#

A security guard opened the door to the control-room and scanned the dark space with torchlight. She looked out at the vampire's case. She accessed the lower restricted, levels using a special code provided by Mister Lutz. It told him which guards entered and when. The guard wasn't on a high enough pay grade to know the complete purpose of the containment level: it was just another room she checked, twice a night. Like those

monitoring the CCTV monitors upstairs, she didn't anticipate a security breach so deep in the complex. Her patrol was cursory at best.

She missed warning text: *Water Circulation; Interrupt*, and also failed to notice November 21, above her, clinging flat against the ceiling inside the door. Like the CCTV cameras, the security guard's focus didn't reach the ceilings of Silo Nine.

The instant the door shut a black mist shot out a vent above the chamber floor and a second later the vampire was safe inside his case. November 21 turned the water back on and climbed away unnoticed.

Chapter 19

Leslie felt the following day drag. She and Bo kept busy and neither spoke aloud of the previous night. They kept to their laboratory. Leslie avoided the containment chamber but she burned to see the vampire; Christ girl, you're shaking like a junkie.

Bo remained immersed in work and sometime after lunch emerged from behind his computer screen and said, "That data you requested; I just forwarded it."

"What data?" Leslie heard the familiar *incoming* tone when an encrypted file arrived on her laptop computer.

"That *data*; you know."

She opened the file with her personal access code and the Tiryns' Bio-Neutronic launch pad opened. Seven sets of four-digits.

"Oh, that, I remember now. And it's checked out?"

Bo glided over on his wheeled stool; close enough to whisper, "Checked and double-checked. I also put in a little sweetener. If we set this thing off it can only be deactivated with our personal codes; just yours and mine. Nobody shuts it off but us."

Leslie never appreciated Bo's talents as much as at that moment and her satisfied smile told him so.

She said, "Time to make the call."

He frowned while nodding to agree and tapped his laptop's keyboard. A USAMRIID launch screen opened. He was prompted for an access code. The progress bar sat beneath an armed forces crest and officious government text: *US Armed Forces; Secure Encryption; USAMRIID*. It took a few seconds for a blurry video-conference window to open.

Bo addressed it with deferential respect. "Hello Sir, sorry for the intrusion."

In the tiny video window Major Raymond Arillo rolled over to see the built-in camera on his iPad. He was in bed, had been sleeping. His wife stirred; a blanketed shape at the back of the screen.

Arillo rubbed his eyes. "Lieutenant Greaves, I guess it's important?"

Leslie stepped into view. "Hello Sir, remember me?"

Arillo squinted and reached across his night stand for his glasses. "Leslie Tatum? No word in two years; then you call at One-thirty in the morning."

"Sorry Sir."

His warm smile straightened. "This isn't a social call is it?"

Leslie frowned.

#

The vampire amused himself with video games for a time and finally settled on shifting stands of metal figures around his war gaming table. He left the humans to their machinations and waited to see what the night offered.

#

If Leslie thought the day seemed slow then dinner's pace felt glacial. Conversation was perfunctory and afterward they split up to pursue private activities: Lutz in the gym; Rebecca with yoga; Dernier attended to administration; Paul Turco sat alone with his books. Leslie wasn't sure how to feel once the appointed moment arrived.

The trio of Leslie, Bo and Turco rendezvoused at Leslie and Bo's lab. Leslie's plan was improvised but it was structured with military precision. To her, it felt like old times in the USAMRIID.

Turco was the last to arrive in the lab. They synchronized watches; 00:00 midnight.

Bo opened his laptop computer. "First I disable the cameras on the containment level, the heavy equipment room and the freight elevators at containment and reception. I'll feed back pre-recorded footage and let it loop. It won't survive close scrutiny but we only need it to work for a few minutes."

The screen displayed a single command prompt; *Initiate*.

"We all clear? Once I hit this, the clock is ticking."

Leslie and Turco nodded. Bo drew breath and made the keystroke. The upload progress-bar stepped across the screen. Leslie and Turco champed like greyhounds behind their barrier's until Bo raised a single thumb.

#

They proceeded to the corridor outside the control room then separated. Turco went -- with consummate stealth -- down to fetch a fork-lift from the heavy equipment room; the intention being to haul the vampire's case to the freight elevator. They were fortunate; Silo-Nine's fork-lifts were electric and almost silent. Leslie deactivated the solar controls and opened the big door.

Turco bounded back up to where Leslie stood ready. She felt the adrenalin course through her system; Good thing too, otherwise I'd be crippled with fear.

It was unspoken, but they both knew this was a one-way trip. Leslie had no illusions about the consequences if they were caught.

"Okay, Bo gets in on the laboratory level. Then it's an express run up to reception."

Turco said, "That still leaves ten floors before we hit the surface."

"Help will be waiting. My CO has arranged for the Australian authorities to take over Silo Nine."

"Then why not wait for the cavalry to come to us?"

She shook her head, "We have to be clean away before Murcat can throw up a bunch of legal obstacles. Also, my old boss has arranged for Silo Nine to undergo a rigorous decontamination. Nobody in here is gonna' see daylight for weeks."

Turco smiled.

They opened the door just a crack and eyeballed the control room. It was empty and they slid inside; Turco almost invisible in black against the dark surroundings. Leslie opened her laptop computer and quickly brought up Bo's face on screen.

She said, "Okay, we're in the control room. You got the way clear?"

"Sure thing Cap!. Camera's are off-line and doors are open."

Leslie grabbed the console microphone and whispered to the vampire, "Wake up."

Black mist issued from the vampire's case and in seconds he stood smiling at

Leslie.

She continued, "Okay there's a shit-storm about to hit this place. We're gonna' get you out; but there isn't much time. I need you to trust me."

"You're willing to risk censure; even a custodial sentence, for me. Leslie, I'm touched, but this isn't necessary..."

Leslie interrupted. "Just listen; the Australian SAS is gonna' be here soon and this place will be totally dismantled. I've arranged for you to be taken to a safe facility. They'll work out what's wrong with you."

The vampire laughed and said, "I already know what's wrong with me. I'm a vampire. And, I assure you, I am in no danger. But I fear the same can't be said for you."

Leslie didn't see Turco pull a small bottle and a palm-sized sponge from his bag. The first inkling she had of treachery was when the narcotic-soaked sponge wrapped tightly over her airways. A panicked breath later and she was beyond resistance. In four seconds she was rag-doll compliant: unconsciousness followed. While Turco lowered her inert form to the floor he heard the vampire's voice.

"I wondered when you'd break cover."

Turco stood with clenched fists then contemplated the controls. He tilted the microphone, not bothering to whisper. "Your time has come."

"I trust you haven't harmed her. That would really piss me off."

Motors engaged and sunlight blistered the vampire. With difficulty he struggled to climb inside his case and let its lid glide shut. Turco held the T-bar control full-open and noted with glee how the solar curtain sapped the vampire's strength, rendering him unable to change his form.

He snatched up his bag and danced out the control room and down the stairs to the chamber floor; his heart beating from the sweet excitement of a hunter who'd finally run down his quarry. Opening the vampire's case proved no obstacle. Turco had surreptitiously acquired the access code by replaying video footage of Leslie keying it in; recorded the day she handed the shiny box over.

The lid popped open and balanced hinges lifted it with ease. Sunlight scorched the layer of dirt and ash forcing the vampire to assume human form. He sizzled under ultra-violet assault.

Turco knew that unless he finished the job, utterly, the creature might recover. From his bag he took out a mallet and a short length of hewn oak; pared to a fine point. He placed the tip of the stake over the undead heart. A cindered hand tried to wrestle it away but the vampire had less strength than a kitten. Turco raised the mallet above and behind his head, anticipating a downward strike with maximum force.

The crackling of the vampire's skin was drowned out by the urgent hum of motors above. The sunlight blinked off and Turco was blinded for critical seconds while his eyes adjusted to the drop in light level. Three shadowy figures stood in the control room. He focused and discerned Rebecca, Lutz and Dernier.

Turco's wrist burned from instant, crushing pain and he yowled like a wounded dog. The vampire's grip had regained its power and he sat up; thumped the ex-priest in the chest, winding him and throwing him backwards onto the floor. Turco tried to push himself up but one wrist was broken and he had trouble breathing after the vampire's

blow. He staggered to his feet and tried to dash to the yellow line; the water barrier and sanctuary.

A black storm-cloud raced past him and the vampire materialized barring his exit. This cloud assumed the guise of the grotesque creature of folklore -- the rotting Halloween vampire. "So what's your story."

With the resignation of a condemned man Turco felt no need for further intrigue. "I'm still a priest: I never renounced my vows. I belong to a secret order of fighting monks. We've existed since the crusades, and we still hold a papal edict to destroy your kind."

The vampire's expression exceeded contempt. "Why has Rome got such a hard-on for me?"

Turco waved the stake with his unbroken hand and said, "You're known to us. Over the centuries many brothers have sought your destruction. Our duty is to combat the evil one, wherever he manifests."

"Same old dreary script. You clerics are all the same." With a violent swipe the vampire sent the stake spinning across the chamber. Then -- like a cobra -- he snapped forward sinking vulpine jaws firmly onto Turco's throat. While swallowing gushing crimson he thrust a claw into the priest's chest and out through his back, shattering spine and ribs on exit. The blow was so swift that only afterward did those in the control room see Turco's still-beating heart clutched in a gore-smearred talon.

The vampire flung Turco away like trash. He snapped a bite from the priest's heart -- as one might from a crisp apple -- then cast a stern look at the control room.

"You took your sweet time."

Chapter 20

Leslie woke and groaned. *Splitting*, as a descriptor, was not equal to her jack-hammer headache. She felt like an ice-pick was driving up through her right eye socket and twisting inside her skull. Turco's narcotic had no long-term effects but it kicked like a son-of-a-bitch. It took time for her eyes to focus. She didn't know where she was. It was dark and she lay on a cool hard surface; The floor, but where?

Leslie sat up and felt steel manacles binding her wrists; linked by a chain running to a D-ring in the floor In the containment chamber.

“Hi Cap'.”

Her joints ached and her neck was stiff. Turning fast made her throbbing head worse. She saw Bo ten feet away, also chained to the floor.

Operatives moved in the sunlit part of the chamber and caught her attention. Near them Turco's dead face peeped from within an unzipped body-bag.

Black wispy mist drifted from the vampire's case and solidified into his familiar form. Leslie felt something had changed between them. Turco's blood on the floor, and a full body-bag, reminded her that Patient Zero was not predictable; could be lethal. Leslie realized she was like the man with the whip training tigers in a circus. It would be unwise to turn her back. “Did you have to kill him?”

The vampire grabbed Turco's leather bag. “Leslie, there are three great lies: the check's in the mail, I wont' cum in your mouth, and...”

He upended the bag and its contents clattered across the concrete: a bone saw, a crucifix and a long bowie-knife. “...I'll help you save the vampire.”

Lawrence Murcat appeared on the vampire's flat-screen television. “Hi Leslie. So you found the clone lab. I guess the cat's outta' the bag.”

Adjacent to Murcat's face scrolled a raft of text; Paul Turco's dossier.

“I knew Herbst had a mole in Silo Nine. But I thought it was someone from within the organization. No matter; but as a precaution, Silo Nine is completely locked down. Nothing goes in or out except through Mister Lutz's terminal or via me.”

Dernier said, “So you'll have to get your porn the old-fashioned way; in brown-paper.”

Leslie said, “It doesn't matter. The Australian SAS are probably upstairs already. You can expect a visit from their Federal Police as well. It's over for you.”

Murcat's Cheshire-cat grin hinted secret knowledge. “Yeah, about that, Don't hold

your breath. I have friends in the State Department and the military; and they're waaay further up the food chain than your old CO.”

“You won't muzzle Major Arillo. He'll sound every alarm from Miami to Anchorage.”

“I don't think so.”

The television image changed to a cable-news update. Shaky footage shot from a helicopter showed soldiers, police and paramedics attending a shooting. A caption slid across the bottom of the screen: *BREAKING NEWS: Fort Detrick, Maryland, US Army Major goes on shooting spree: kills fifteen - turns gun on himself.*

“I guess the stress of the job became too much for the poor guy.”

No name appeared but Leslie knew it was Major Arillo. “You set him up, because of me?”

She stared at the unraveling of Arillo's life on the TV screen and thought; God, I've done it again; he's dead because I fucked up.

Unexpected guilt hit her like a bare-knuckled right-cross. She became dizzy. All the confidence she acquired in recent days deserted her. She wanted to bawl like a baby. Then it started; a tingling sensation at the base of her neck -- a panic attack. The demon on her shoulder licked his lips.

The vampire saw Leslie's right hand tremble. He leaned close, gently encompassed it with his own and whispered, “This is no time to fall back into bad habits.”

He held her by the chin and compelled her to focus on his ardent stare. “Don't give them the satisfaction.”

Her trembling hand stilled and she regained her composure; except for the few tears she could not conceal. She was distracted when smooth metal bearings heralded the opening of the big door; That sound is just wrong. Something so imposing needs to grind and protest when it opens.

The steel wheels of a gurney rolled in then boots stepped after it. Eric Lutz entered and said, “Meals on wheels calling.”

Leslie looked aghast at the clone on the gurney, a male strapped at the wrists, the waist and the ankles. For an instant she had a mental picture of Subject Three; in the Antarctic, snarling at her from a similar gurney. Lutz's clone was inanimate, in a vegetative state. A stand rose from one end and a bag of whole blood trailed a fine tube into the clone's arm. Lutz gestured from the bag to the intro-venous needle. “You'll appreciate this. Fresh blood goes in there; and Dracula sucks it out here.”

Lutz tilted the clone's head to expose a succession of bruised bite marks in the skin. He pushed the gurney out of the solar-curtain into the shadowy space.

The vampire smiled at Leslie and said, “Nobody dies and they can study me to their hearts' content.”

The vampire drank from the clone. He didn't kill the young male; only taking enough to satisfy his need. He looked up and -- in a departure from the Hollywood norm -- didn't have a single drop of blood on his lips. “So can we dispense with those revolting rats?”

More wheels rolled through the doorway; a wheelchair. The sight of Rebecca pushing the boy, Adam, sent Leslie into a paroxysm of anger. “Why is he here?”

Rebecca declined to answer merely pushing the chair past the solar-curtain allowing it to roll within the vampire's reach. The chair was just beyond the edge of the sunlight and Leslie wanted to will it back from the dark space. The vampire stepped

behind the chair and pushed. Leslie thought; No, not that way. Now the sunlight's even further away.

He brought the chair close to Leslie. "I wanted a playmate; and you're always busy in your lab. So Larry Murcat was good enough to oblige."

Murcat said, "It's alright. The breeding program didn't pan out so there's no loss. Let the vampire have him. At Tiryns we believe in recycling."

Leslie spoke with a halting catch in her voice. "You're giving him a living child?"

Lutz said, "The kid's brain-dead anyway."

"Really?" The vampire searched the boy's eyes then snapped his fingers. A single second drifted into two, then Adam blinked. There was recognition, cognizance. He smiled at the vampire.

Leslie had a sudden awful realization; The child will see what's happening -- will experience fear.

Her protective instincts took command. "Stop! He's better off not knowing."

The vampire rounded on her with sudden venom. "You'd rather they give me someone else, you perhaps?"

Angry and fearless, Leslie met him eyeball to eyeball. "If it means you let the kid go."

She was prepared to accept any fate and readied for it. But the vampire smiled and stroked gentle fingers down her cheek. "Compassion and courage."

Leslie flinched at his touch; she felt hurt when he directed his rage towards her -- even if it was for only a second. Then she remembered what he was; Shouldn't have let him in, girl. Time to raise the barriers around those emotions again.

Rebecca said, "Touching, a real *'Hallmark Moment'*. Now can we move on. Finish off the kid so we can do the autopsy."

"What!" Leslie's face broadcast unabashed alarm.

The vampire answered Rebecca. "I know you want to see me drink this child dry. But that was never my intention, sorry to disappoint."

He guided the wheel-chair to his game console and handed the boy a controller. They locked eyes for a moment then the boy examined the controller; appeared to understand, and began playing.

"When I said I wanted a playmate I wasn't joking. And nobody understands games like a child."

Leslie's agitation subsided. "So you never had any intention of harming him?"

"Do you think I'm some kind of monster?" The vampire laughed through a wicked grin.

Leslie had no idea how he might behave; For the moment Adam's safe and that's enough.

She looked at Murcat. "So what happens now?"

"That depends on you. I'd like you to resume your work. I still want a return on my investment -- and I can't just let you walk out the door."

Rebecca said, "I could use her help refining that *Type-B* serum. It'll take ages getting someone new up to speed."

Leslie mustered her best belligerent voice and said, "I'm not helping you make biological-weapons."

From the control room, Dernier said, "They're not going to play ball. Just feed them to the vampire and be done with it."

Leslie saw the vampire react with a faint sneer. She sensed that subtle battle-lines

were being drawn; Could we be allies?

Rebecca appeared to take pleasure from sounding threatening.

“Leslie, we can make you cooperate.”

“Go screw yourself.” Leslie was past fear; the contempt in her response so unmistakable it made the vampire chuckle.

Murcat sighed then said, “Time to play the trump card. Rebecca, how did serum number *Two*, work out?”

“We haven't tried it yet, but I sure hope it's better than number *One*.” Rebecca reached into the pocket of her lab coat and brought out a small hypodermic syringe and a serum vial.

The television jump-cut from Murcat's office to CCTV footage from Rebecca's lab. In the top corner time-code advanced in micro-seconds next to a text heading: *SERUM #01 - TEST INJECTION 08*. The camera focused on a gurney where a healthy clone lay prostrate. Intro-venous tubes led from its arms. Rebecca stepped into frame and injected a clear liquid into the clone's bloodstream. The clone started shaking. The convulsion went on for minutes becoming so violent it blurred. Then it ceased and the spasm came to a jerky halt. The clone lay shriveled, reduced to a wafer husk.

Murcat reappeared on screen and Rebecca waved a finger to Dernier. The solar-curtain advanced forcing the vampire away from Adam. Lutz held the child's arm while Rebecca slipped a rubber tourniquet around his biceps. In seconds a blue vein bulged at the boy's inner elbow. She removed the cover from the syringe and extracted 50cc of the clear *Number-Two* serum from the vial.

“You bitch.” Leslie pulled against her chains until they bit into her wrists.

The vampire said, “Larry this isn't part of our agreement.”

Murcat said, “I'm changing our agreement. This is more important. Okay Leslie, what's it gonna' be?”

Chapter 21

Belinda Nyles was more agitated than usual. After the requisite loud knock and pause for an invitation she hurried into Liman Rothkirch's office. "Something's up at Silo Nine. It's locked down like they hosted the Attica riot."

Rothkirch closed his eyes and said, "So no word from our mole?"

She shook her head. "Did you know that Paul Turco is still a priest, still working for the church?"

"That explains a lot; why things went so wrong at our Antarctic facility. I wonder what game Turco's playing with Tiryns."

"And who he's really working for? You think it's compromised our plans?"

He thought, exhaled and said, "Let's wait and see."

#

While Rebecca held the tip of the needle microns from Adam's waiting vein Murcat said, "Rebecca's good but that serum is untested. You want to risk seeing him die, or would you prefer to refine that into something that might provide real help?"

Leslie looked at Adam, the vampire, Bo and then Murcat. Seconds ticked over in silence.

She expelled a disconsolate sigh. "Let him go and I'll do what you want."

Rebecca hesitated and Leslie screamed.

"Let him go you FUCKING BITCH."

"Okay." Rebecca smiled, unmoved by the outburst, but she withdrew the needle tip.

Leslie felt despondent. She knew she'd just made a deal with the devil; It's only a matter of *when* Murcat's gonna' fuck me over. Nothing is surer.

Lutz strutted like an overseer toward Leslie; keys dangling on a chain from his belt. He disconnected her from the D-ring and dragged her behind him with a rude tug that scraped her wrists.

Bo snapped. "She's not a piece of livestock. Undo her wrists."

"When I'm good and ready, boy."

Lutz knelt down and made a deliberate point of undoing Bo's manacles first, while still holding Leslie on a tight leash. Bo rubbed his raw skin as Lutz turned and jerked Leslie towards him.

Bo said, "Hey mutha-fucker."

Lutz turned to the source of the insult and Bo delivered a lip-splitting right jab followed by a left hook that connected over Lutz's right eye. The impact caused an instantaneous white flash and momentary blindness; the classic *seeing stars*, familiar to anyone whose been struck in like fashion.

Leslie sensed that Bo knew exactly what he'd done; knew it was a dirty blow. But she saw he was angry beyond reason, angry not just at Lutz, but at Murcat, Rebecca and the whole Tiryns corporation. Leslie felt her own boiling grief, at the death of Arillo, find brief vent in Bo's double-punch, and it was ecstasy.

Lutz went down like the proverbial sack of shit. Even as he toppled he remembered his time in black-ops -- in Afghanistan -- and what his friends in the Australian SAS called that type of blow. He'd been *king-hit*. But he was a combat veteran and knew better than to nurse an injury while still within an opponent's striking range.

Nobody expected the speed of his riposte. He kicked Bo's legs from under him with a surprise sweep. Before Bo regained balance Lutz sprang up and kicked him twice in the ribs. Steel-capped shoes did brutal work; at least one rib fractured. Lutz dropped a knee on Bo's wind-pipe, the force just short of lethal.

“ENOUGH.” Leslie's scream was ignored.

Lutz was red-blind with a howling temper; he swung left and right pummeling the stricken face. “Not so fucking tough now are ya', you little shit.”

Lutz's eye swelled to the size and color of an aubergine and blood splashed over Bo from his split and bleeding lip. Leslie reacted by instinct; grabbed her dangling chain and swung it around Lutz's neck then pulled back, straining every sinew through gritted teeth and extreme exertion. Lutz gasped and stumbled backwards.

But the security chief's wrath had not cooled and he pried the chain away from his throat. He whirled around and struck Leslie with a shocking backhand that made her squeal. He followed up with a targeted punch to the jaw that knocked her across the threshold of the solar-curtain.

Mute operatives looked on. The deliberate striking of a slender woman by a powerful man was a social taboo that could still weaken some knees. Leslie's jaw hurt right up into her ear; Fuck, it's been dislocated.

She crawled away from Lutz who prowled after her. The vampire stepped over Leslie and stood at the edge of the solar-curtain. He looked Lutz straight in the eye, his intention obvious. If Lutz wanted to do her more harm he'd have to go through the vampire. Leslie thought it ironic that she felt safer out of the sun; in the vampire's domain.

“If you're quite finished.” The vampire sounded cool but commanding.

Bo didn't move. He lay on his back then lolled over and saw Leslie, “Hey Cap' how you doin'?”

She crawled to him and had another uncomfortable moment of clarity as she nursed his head in her lap; his battered eyes and cheeks already swollen. They both resembled prize-fighters after a grueling bout. “Oh shit, I'm sorry I landed you in all this.”

Bo whispered; so softly nobody but the vampire heard. “Don't sweat it. I wouldn't have missed this for the world. But right now; let's just survive. We can come back later; and take these scumbags apart with pliers and a blowtorch.”

They both laughed. Despite her injuries, Leslie couldn't deny that Bo always made her feel better.

Chapter 22

A guard stood outside Leslie's quarters. A twenty-four hour roster was drawn up for her and, as soon as Bo came down from hospital, one would be posted for him also. They'd be permitted to work and have the usual freedoms but would be under constant scrutiny; not too oppressive, but evident.

Leslie curled into a fetal position on her bed. The gel-pack on her eye had thawed hours before; had warmed to her body temperature. It was past midnight but sleep was impossible. Her thoughts churned and she replayed the previous day in an endless loop. She was so distracted by Silo Nine she paid no attention to events inside her own body. In this moment of reflection; the first she'd enjoyed for a long time, her head wasn't her only source of pain. She knew the ovarian cancer was feeding off the tremendous emotional stress; knew it was compounded by the real threat of personal danger.

The movement of a dark spot on the ceiling drew her attention; a tiny black spider prowled for prey; Good luck pal, it's slim pickings in here, and how the hell did you get all the way down the silo anyway?

The spider became a statue when a wisp trickled from an adjacent vent. Leslie mused that from the spider's perspective it must have felt like a tornado. The wisp evolved into a trail of motes she'd grown accustomed to; Not this again. It doesn't feel like I'm dreaming.

When the vampire materialized she was relieved to see he had no fearsome fangs or rotting skin. He looked urbane and appealing, just the way she liked him. He sat on the edge of the bed close enough for her toes to touch him.

He whispered, "How's the head, slugger?"

She tried to sit up but he extended a calming hand. She was happy to stay reclined then realization rattled her like too near thunder; I'm awake. This is no dream.

He smiled and appeared non-threatening. "Relax, I'm not here to hurt you."

"How the hell did you get out?"

"I've played this game before, and with much nastier people than Larry Murcat. The Nazis had a place not dissimilar to this; just for me. Fun times."

Leslie settled. She couldn't explain why, but he had a calming effect on her. "If you can cross their water barrier then why haven't you escaped already?"

"And leave you to the tender mercies of the Tiryns Corporation; I think not. I told you, friends look out for each other. That was no small thing, trying to rescue me.

Courage like that is rare. Besides, why deprive myself of your company.”

She rolled her eyes; knew he was just messin' with her. But she let him continue.

“Apart from the fact that I now need to take that splendid new case with me wherever I go; I overheard you mention a cure. After so many centuries do you have any idea how tired I am? I'd like to live out a normal, finite life; get a tan. Believe me, immortality aint' what it's cracked up to be.”

“Living so long, I thought you'd know so much; be so wise.”

“Living? My existence can in no way be described as living.”

Leslie could not hide the reflex wince from sharp pain in her lower abdomen and the vampire noticed.

“Your cancer's taken hold; no wonder with all that guilt you're carrying. I told you; the Antarctic wasn't your fault. I know how these people work. The dice were stacked against you the minute you set foot down there.”

Leslie would not be convinced. She didn't want to be let off the hook. “Doesn't matter; doesn't excuse me. I should've conducted a proper recon; should have listened when Bo wanted to send a Marine fire-team with me.”

She pictured Kristin ripping the arm off her suit and the carcinogenic vapor biting vulnerable skin. “I guess it's only fair that Herbst gave me cancer.”

The vampire fixed her with his stare and said, “Let me guess; you can't drown out that voice in your head, the one that keeps screaming; it's your fault, you killed them.”

She looked away; his eyes were too seductive. “You sense all that?”

“That's guilt talking. I know that voice well.”

She said, “It's a little demon and he sits on the end of my shoulder.”

“Oh, that guy; yeah I know him. Say *Hi'* for me.”

“Will he ever go away?”

“No, but live long enough and you'll become firm friends.”

Leslie laughed, her first for days. “Since we're sharing; what put him in your head?”

He leaned against the wall and his eyes had a dreamy far-away glaze. She could tell he was drawing from a deep well of memories; how deep she couldn't guess. Then he told his story.

#

I remember my last night as a human. I was draped in gilded raiment, from neck to heel; a high priest. It was my thirty-ninth summer and came as the culmination of a life's devotion. I'd been born into the priestly class; raised to serve the gods from boyhood. I hated to admit it but I was more excited than when my sons emerged into the light of the world. I didn't dare confess such a thought to my woman. Still, it would be a lie to deny it.

I still see the temple precinct, its carnival of color; its architecture reminiscent of other cities from antiquity; Ur, Sumer, Akkad. I remember ascending the stairs to the temple courtyard; the formidable sentinels flanking its broad entrance. Their flamboyant garb was ceremonial but their weapons were lethal. A balanced khopesh could cleave a person's neck with a gentle swipe. For them I was about to fulfill a sacred duty; commune with our gods. They would die before permitting any mortal to interfere.

A ring of pillars surrounded the outer courtyard; aligned according to the seasons and cycles of sun and moon. They bore an uncanny similarity to the great sarsen megaliths of Stonehenge. But those were still centuries in the future. The whole lay open

to the night sky. The moon was full; followed me like the curious eye of a titan.

I crossed the courtyard to the portal leading to the inner sanctum. Then I passed the threshold and down through many levels. Lamps became less frequent and, by degree, light less evident. Soon absolute darkness submerged me but it mattered not. I'd been in temple service since I could walk; could make that journey with my eyes closed. I reached the altar chamber and waited. My pulse raced and my chest heaved with apprehension and exhilaration in equal measure.

Scholars from a later time; when science could calculate such things by the relative positions of stars, would place the date in the year 4,867 BC and students of pre-history might rail against such a datum; It's not possible, an anachronism. No Neolithic civilization was so advanced.

Menes was still fifteen hundred years from uniting upper and lower Egypt. Stonehenge wasn't yet a dirt mound. On the Indian sub continent the second Mehrgarh period had not yet lapsed. And yet I was there, serene and awaiting my destiny.

My eyes adjusted to a sudden intrusion of low light. I discerned the shape of the altar; a block of marble topped by a great slab of metal. The sacred artifact was the last remnant of the great chariot that carried the gods to Earth from heaven. It glistened. Rows of sparkling beads cast a diffuse green glow about the intimate chamber.

I strained to see into the dark space beyond. Then I became aware of the presence of the others. There were three.

A feminine voice spoke; it was familiar. I'd heard her in my prayers many times when I'd invited her into my consciousness. I heard the other voices, masculine, more distant. Humbled, I dropped to my knees.

Three swirling clouds of motes, lit by the fulgent glow of the altar, took on human form; draped in hooded cassocks. The closest threw off its garb and stepped forward.

It was the feminine entity I'd known since childhood. I had never seen her in human guise before. She was naked, with no trace of hair on either scalp or body. But she didn't look like the women of our city. They had olive skin and dark eyes; even my wife. This was a goddess, supernatural -- her skin an alabaster white that seemed to glow. Her eyes shone with points of fire. I couldn't miss the striped marks beneath her left shoulder but I was swift in averting my gaze, afraid to seem too bold.

The goddess took my face in her hands. I felt rather than heard her words. "War is coming; war between gods. We shall build an army. You and yours have been chosen."

She cupped her right breast with her right hand, then reached across with her left index finger. It distended, became a talon. She sliced into her own flesh. The blade-like nail sliced right through her nipple. Her blood, black in the dim light, flowed like wine from an amphora. I shook with apprehension. She gripped the back of my head. She had the strength of fifty. I knew it would be futile to struggle even had I wished too.

I didn't hear the word *drink* but knew what she meant. She pushed my mouth over the open wound and I suckled like a baby. It was a grotesque parody of breast-feeding. I'd never imbibed blood before so I had no term of reference; didn't know how it should taste. But did think it should be warm. Her's was cold.

I gagged. There was so much I could barely swallow. You know after all these millennia I still hate the taste of blood; my only sustenance and I detest it.

It seemed like she held me there for an age. In reality it was but moments then she pulled my head back and lowered her arms. I was caked in her blood.

I couldn't help looking at the incision across her breast. In the time it took to draw a single breath the wound healed itself. She wiped away the blood. I saw her skin was

blemish free; no scar. She again had the breasts of a nubile.

In that instant something began within me; a sharp tightening in the pit of my stomach. It was only the beginning of an indescribable transition. I felt my reality spiral away from me.

The three of them stood above me. I knew they were smiling by the glistening of their teeth; pointy like rats. Despite the roaring in my head I could hear them laughing. Sometimes I can still hear it.

#

Leslie was in thrall to his voice and he continued. "It didn't take long. I awoke and the three of them were waiting. At first I had no understanding of the change the female wrought: I didn't know what I'd become. But I did know what I wasn't: I wasn't a god. That part was a lie. They'd deceived us for centuries."

Leslie had so many questions; Where did the original three come from? They must have been made somehow. Who, or what, was the source of vampirism? Was it an evolutionary anomaly?

But she sensed it would be wrong to break the spell of his narrative.

"Like all religion ours too was based on a fundamental lie. They masqueraded as deities and we fed our most precious treasure to them. But they wanted more from me; my wife and my children."

He stopped and stared at the opposite wall. Leslie could tell by his voice the memory still held immense power.

He spoke of stealing back to his palatial home; a home he'd never again dwell in. His beautiful wife greeted him. He saw the excitement in her eyes. After all, he'd just reached the pinnacle of a lifetime's devotion; something they both coveted. In the pale light she didn't see his undead eyes; his deathly pallor. Behind a muslin drape his two infant boys slept.

The three deities approached fast on his heels expecting to bring them all into the fold. Their numbers had swollen; the temple guards were new foot-soldiers in their undead army.

Leslie couldn't help interrupting. "So your wife, your children. They're vampires too?"

"That part didn't work out so well. I had a khopesh concealed in my robe. I didn't want my wife to know any fear. I was swift; also with the children. They never woke."

He snapped out of his own spell and smiled at her. Leslie knew he'd said as much as he was going to.

"Enough of my maudlin reminiscing. That was a long time ago. Right now we should direct our attentions to your predicament. I suggest not provoking Lawrence Murcat. He's another megalomaniac whose used to getting his own way. I know you don't want to be part of this..." He turned his palms up indicating their surroundings. "...I expect you'd destroy it all if you could."

"I'd like to do just that." Leslie nodded slowly.

"I urge caution. Sometimes doing the right thing isn't always the smart thing."

"That's a bit glib. You sound like Rebecca."

"Ouch." He brought his hands together to plunge an imaginary stake into his heart and then said, "All I'm suggesting is, for the time being, you should play along. Who knows, you may even find something interesting. Anyway, you don't have a choice."

"Everybody has a choice."

“I don't.”

He transformed into vapor and vanished into a vent. Leslie found herself alone with her tortured speculation about the future and a little demon on her shoulder.

Chapter 23

Leslie experimented with the vampire's blood. She remembered what Herbst derived from theirs and it was obvious both corporations were racing for the same prize -- a panacea; Potential earnings could run to the billions of dollars; ample cause for ferocious competition.

Bo recovered upstairs. Leslie knew he was in good hands. The night-nurse pulled double-shifts to give him personal attention. Her attraction was apparent, and not unexpected. Leslie was more surprised when he didn't have that effect on women and his recent injuries made him irresistible.

Leslie's blackened eye and swollen jaw subsided, to an extent, but she still felt like battered trailer-trash. She was even more conscious of the fact when Rebecca strode into the lab. Dernier and Lutz trailed after her. Lutz waited at the door and struck up a conversation with the operative he'd posted outside. That suited Leslie. She had no wish to speak to him.

Leslie listened without emotion while Rebecca spoke, "Time for an update. Got anything to show us?"

"There is one item. I saw something similar in Herbst's Antarctic notes." Leslie's tone was flat, cool, bereft of all amity. She saw the immaculate Rebecca hang on her next word; You can wait, bitch.

Staring into the microscope's eyepiece she sensed Rebecca's impatience, and delaying felt exquisite.

Leslie finally said, "I wondered why the original Herbst pathogen was so virulent."

Leslie paused again for effect.

Rebecca said, "And?"

But Leslie tired of the game. "That's what threw me at first and it's probably why Herbst were also stumped. It's not virulent; it's voracious. This explains much about Type-B."

"Virulent, voracious, what do you mean?"

"Type-B doesn't spread at all. It's extremely fragile outside a host; even more than HIV. Like our vampire said; he has to introduce it. One can't catch it through casual exposure. What's interesting is what it does once it's established in a host."

Leslie flipped a switch and a monitor showed the Type-B pathogen. "It's unlike

any virus I've ever seen. Usually a virus invades and replicates. But this is different. It attaches to them, so they take on the properties of Type-B. It's like this Type-B virus acts as a remote-control commanding the cells and enhancing them. That's why his tissue turns to dust and burns under sunlight. Type-B makes a profound; and permanent change.”

She changed the display to a screen illustrating Type-B interacting with another micro-organism.

“This is an example of Type-B attacking the Ebola virus. And note: it's replaying in real-time...”

Multiple Ebola microbes surrounded a single Type-B specimen. In the space of a micro-second the Type-B multiplied and clamped onto the Ebola samples, altering them while the original Type-B sample remained pristine.

“In case you missed that; here it is again a bit slower.”

Leslie replayed the scene at half-speed and said, “No wonder vampires are immune to everything. The instant any foreign pathogen is introduced this Type-B neutralizes it, in nanoseconds.”

Rebecca sounded excited. “So we were right to think his blood might produce the ultimate wonder-drug.”

Leslie saw the light-bulb go on in Dernier's eyes also. He said, “Do you know what people will pay for that? It's a license to print money.”

Lutz walked into the lab, being careful to draw no attention to himself. But he spun around, like a burglar caught mid-entry, when Bo spoke from behind him.

“That's all that matters, isn't it, a way to milk even more money from sick people.” Bo was supported by the night-nurse. He had lost weight and his pajamas looked two sizes too big. His unbuttoned top hung open revealing ribs still encased in tight bindings. He moved slowly, the discomfort obvious. Leslie was pleased to see him. Like her; his bruising had subsided and looked nowhere near as alarming.

Lutz cast a sneering grin at him. “Speaking of sick people.”

“Fuck you.” Even though Bo came off worst in their last encounter he seemed not at all intimidated by Lutz.

Dernier stepped between them.

“Guys, dial it down. We don't have time for any more bullshit.”

The animosity between them had not diminished and Leslie feared Lutz might reopen hostilities. She motioned for the nurse to quickly help Bo onto a stool.

Leslie remembered how, on TV and in movies, two characters often start out disliking each other so much they have a knock-down drag-out fight and it acts as a bonding moment. Afterward they become the best of friends; Yeah well that won't ever happen with this pair.

Rebecca sent the nurse away, assuring her that Bo was in capable hands. The nurse was reluctant but couldn't refuse a directive from Rebecca. Leslie saw her cast an affectionate look Bo's way before vanishing upstairs.

Leslie frowned at Bo. “Why aren't you resting?”

“Good to see you too Cap'.”

“That rib isn't going to heal itself.”

Bo cocked his head and grinned.

Leslie thought about her words. “Oh, right, you know what I mean.”

Bo looked at the monitor and typed something on the keyboard. “I've been thinking about our friend downstairs and his Type-B pathogen. I think it does more than

just kill infection.”

The image changed to CCTV footage taken on the second day. Alpha-Team operatives shoot a blizzard of automatic gunfire into the vampire with no effect. Bo ran the footage again in slow-motion, zooming in on the bullet impacts, “I think it heals tissue damage, so fast there's no time for any deleterious effect. That's the real property of Type-B we should be investigating. Murcat wants a medical miracle. This could be it. Imagine a vaccine that could give us *instant healing*.”

Rebecca said to Leslie, “You think you can isolate that property?”

Leslie hated to admit it but she knew she could. “Yes, given time and unlimited resources.”

Rebecca lapsed into her superior voice. “You know Leslie, I'm glad we didn't kill you.”

She shared a conspiratorial smile with Dernier. “We're going to leave Herbst choking in our dust.”

#

The vampire faced Adam across the war gaming table engrossed in the tactical problems of mid-nineteenth-century linear warfare. Despite the lateness of the hour; almost midnight, Adam was wide awake. Under the vampire's influence the boy exhibited a remarkable improvement. He dispensed with his wheelchair; stood unaided. He couldn't perform wind-sprints but the change was dramatic.

The vampire completed his die-rolls and the initiative passed to Adam. He moved stands belonging to his point-brigade across the micro-battlefield. The boy was yet to speak but that fact didn't prevent him and the vampire communicating.

The vampire's hand rested on a defending brigade when his heightened senses detected a violent burst of emotion, emanating from someone in Silo-Nine: fear, exhilaration and something else -- murderous intent. Senses, attenuated over centuries, alerted him to looming peril somewhere close. While Adam maneuvered his divisions the vampire closed his eyes and focused his faculties.

#

An unobserved figure stole into Leslie's empty lab. CCTV cameras were deactivated without the knowledge of security personnel. A pair of trained eyes focused on racks of samples and a bank of hard-drives; the accumulated knowledge pertaining to the vampire. Leslie's lab was the mother lode.

A thorough demolition followed. Whatever resembled useful material; samples or data, the intruder destroyed, erased or rendered unusable. Backup servers were wiped. A billion dollars worth of research was reduced to a scattering of useless dross. In the space of seventeen furious minutes the stealthy vandal destroyed everything achieved thus far.

But Tiryns still retained one card up its corporate sleeve; Leslie Tatum's memory. She alone would be the linchpin of any attempt to resurrect the program and she'd have to start over from square one.

#

The guard posted outside Leslie's room was bored. He was eighty minutes into his shift and he'd already finished his magazine.

He was surprised when the stealthy vandal strolled into view and came directly towards him. He wondered why; so late in the night, but didn't question when he was given leave to take an unscheduled break. It was a chance to grab a coffee and maybe something else to read. He scurried away without hesitation.

#

Leslie supported herself with both palms flat against the Italian marble of her shower stall. Soothing water massaged her scalp and trickled in a languid stream to her toes. She wondered if she wasn't turning a little *Pontius Pilate* since agreeing to resume work for Murcat. It seemed no matter how often she showered she still felt dirty. She was tired but couldn't sleep. She also wondered if the vampire might deign to make another nocturnal visit; secretly hoped he would.

She didn't hear the first knock at her door. It was soft and couldn't compete with the noise of the shower. Eventually she did hear the determined tap-tapping and donned a white toweling bath-robe; Does nobody sleep in this Goddamn' place?

She opened the door a crack, grimaced at her unwelcome visitor and said, "Hang on."

She closed the door and went to her wardrobe, ignoring the vampire's designer clothes. She wanted something casual. She didn't hear the door gently open, then close, or the stealthy vandal's footfalls.

Leslie spun around with shorts in one hand, a tee-shirt in the other and her robe hanging open. Infuriated by the effrontery, she snapped her robe closed. "Get out!"

A knife-blade flashed. Leslie saw its glint but was taken by surprise and; with both hands holding garments, wasn't fast enough to block. Drop-forged steel plunged deep into her abdomen. A second thrust passed through toweling then between her ribs. A soaking, scarlet stain spread across fluffed white cotton.

In immediate shock, Leslie dropped her shorts to grip the nearby clothing rack. She tried to swing it between her and the attacker but the blade struck again. Leslie fell flat against the wall then slid to her knees; white knuckles tightened. Blood spatter ruined thousands of dollars worth of designer clothing.

Nelson Dernier stood over her. Leslie's blood dripped from his knife onto the carpet. He looked calm; not the caricature lunatic. "I'm sorry about this, believe me it's nothing personal. But I can't have you making more progress. If you weren't so good at your job I wouldn't be here but damn, you're on fire."

With a lung punctured Leslie struggled for short shallow breaths. She knew the salty taste in her mouth was her own blood, knew she was bleeding internally. Dernier knelt down to deliver the killing strike - to her throat. "Try to relax. I'll be quick."

He thrust the tip forward with maximum force; intending to sever a jugular and a carotid with a final stab.

End Sample Chapters