

Conditional Love

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The new patient was five or six years old, male, Caucasian, John Doe as usual. Grace checked the vitals his bed sensors were feeding her board and concluded he was asleep. She eased the door of 408 open and stepped in.

The boy's head was tilted on his pillow, brown curls cluttering his forehead. Sleep had flushed his cheeks so he looked younger than the estimate. He seemed healthy, with no visible deformities, and if he had been opted for looks, it had worked—Grace would have described him as “cherubic.” He wouldn't have been dumped if nothing was wrong, so Grace found herself stepping softly, unwilling to disturb him and discover psychological conditions.

“Don't worry about waking him, he sleeps pretty deep.”

Grace started and turned to the other bed. “Hi, Minnie.”

The girl grimaced. “I go by my full name now, Dr. Steller.” Grace brought up her board to refresh her memory, but the girl said, “Minerva. Had you forgotten they're doubling up rooms?”

“Yep, you caught me.”

“Is the rise in numbers caused by a rise in opting? Or is it a rise in surrenders, or arrests of parents?”

“Lord, Minn—Minerva, I don't know. Planning to be a reporter when you grow up?”

“No, a scientist,” Minerva said and smiled, pleased to be asked.

“Why the scalpel-edged questions then?”

“Just curious if my campaign had had any effect,” Minerva said, nodding toward the window. The billboard across from the Gene-Engineered Pediatric In-patient Center flashed a smog warning, then a PSA about eye strain from computer visors, but Grace remembered when it had borne a static image: Minnie, one year old, a pink sundress exposing the stubs of her arms and legs. *Babies should be born, not made.* The ad had stayed up until Minnie was eight, three years after her parents turned her over to GEPIC, and apparently she had seen it. She was twelve now, with serious eyes

and a loose ponytail, dark blonde.

“You’re on incoming examinations now?” Minerva asked.

“Yes,” Grace said, eyes on the John Doe’s file.

“It’s a step down, isn’t it? Do you mind?”

“I’m fine,” Grace said. “I see the grow-baths are working.”

The girl allowed herself to be deflected. She held up her right arm, complete but ridged with scars. “One down, three to go.”

“Better than we ever thought we could do back when I was on your treatment team.”

Minerva shrugged. “They’re pretty excited. They say I’m a regulatory gene enigma. How my arm starts growing, then stops. How sometimes things grow that shouldn’t.” She lifted the left sleeve of her T-shirt, a dinosaur one from the Natural History Museum, a few sizes too big. That arm was submerged in murky gel up to the wrist, and from the crook of the elbow a thumb extended.

“I’m sure it will be over soon,” said Grace, and stroked the back of the girl’s right hand, baby-smooth skin between bulges of scar tissue.

Minerva lifted her face with a smile, then looked across the room and pursed her lips. “New boy waking up. You’ll love this.”

Grace turned and saw that the boy was indeed stirring, half-blocking the window’s light with a drowsy fist. His eyes flickered open, slashes of blue, then widened to cartoonish proportions. “Who are *you*?” he said, as if Grace was the Blue Fairy instead of a doctor who hadn’t had her coffee yet.

Grace gave the boy a warm, flattered smile, aware of Minerva watching. “I’m Dr. Steller, but most of the kids call me Dr. Grace,” she managed. “How are you feeling?”

“Good!”

“I’m here to check and make sure you stay that way, okay?”

He nodded and Grace went through the motions of taking his pulse, listening to his breath. Much of this ritual was obviated by the sensors in his hospital bed, yet it persisted. A way to comfort the patient, Grace thought, or the doctor. New admissions to GEPIC were often sullen, frightened, or locked into the neuroses created by their genes or families; many were sedated before she arrived to document their troubles. But this boy was something new. She couldn’t remember any other patient giggling at the touch of the stethoscope.

Grace gave the boy the standard exam and found nothing standard: none of the deformities, bruises and cuts she was used to finding on Does brought in from the streets. He had been admitted low on nutrients and fluids, but the IV had taken care of that. Nothing to photograph for a police file, nothing unusual even, except being friendly and above the mean for cuteness.

“You don’t know your name, huh?” Grace asked, ruffling his dark hair.

He shrugged, shoulders contracting inside the oversized pajama-top. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, honey." This wasn't her department, but she went on. "What do you remember?"

"I remember waking up. You were here."

Grace shook her head and took out a blood vial for the gene lab. "This will hurt a little," she warned.

"Okay," he said, and his smile ebbed as the needle went in.

"There you go, all done." She wrapped a purple bandage around his finger, at which he stared, enchanted.

"Dr. Steller?" the nurses' station called through the intercom. "If you're done with the 2147 exam, there's a visitor for you."

Grace checked her board to make sure this Doe was number 2147, and noticed there was a rush on the file. "Send 'em up." She turned to go, but her patient had her by the coat.

"Can I come?"

Grace unballied the soft hand and knelt, smiling. "Not right now, but I'll be back soon."

He nodded.

"Goodbye," the boy said as she opened the door.

"I'll come back."

"Goodbye, Dr. Grace," Minerva echoed.

Grace made her way down to the bank of elevators and started writing her John Doe 2147 report on her board, towing photos and stat-blocks into the text with her fingertip. The elevator pinged. She looked up to see a tall man with a familiar slump, dressed like an elongated GQ model. "Kafouri."

"Hi Grace. Where the hell am I? Never been up beyond the second floor."

"We're over capacity—squeezing new admits in up here with the chronics and long-term treatments."

"Shit! Nothing like a roomie with his skin falling off to put a fresh guppy at his ease."

"Bob, please don't."

"Right, no 'guppies'. Swearing's fine, though, right?" He chucked her between the shoulder blades. "Anyway, it's good to see you. Been a year or two, hasn't it?"

Grace glanced at him. He must remember their last encounter, over the Macauley case, but he seemed determined to be jovial. Silver hairs stood out among the black now, matching the smile- or squint-lines she'd always noticed by his eyes. She had a few grays herself. "Something like that. I thought you finally got depressed and transferred to homicide for your morale."

"No way, doc. One of these days I'm going to try for a lieutenant's pension, but

not 'til I can have 'hero cop' on my retirement headline."

"Isn't that usually on obits?"

"Ha ha. I know what I'm doing. Let me see my boy."

"I take it the rush order is yours," she said, starting back down the hallway.

Kafouri fell in step next to her. "Has psych been yet? What do they make of him?"

"No. Why? What do you expect from them?"

Kafouri stared. "You haven't noticed?"

"Don't be cryptic, Bob."

"Which room is it?"

"408. What's wrong with him?"

"I'll show you. Go ahead."

Grace scowled and pushed open the door.

The boy's chin dropped, displaying a mangled slice of peach. "Who are *you*?"

He was charmed, awed and beaming just as before, but Grace couldn't help feeling a stab at being forgotten. She turned away quickly as Kafouri entered, and Minerva met her eyes over a heavy tray of food.

The patient gaped at the detective. "What's *your* name?"

"You don't remember your friend Bob, Danny boy? Why am I not surprised?" He looked at the other bed long enough to raise an eyebrow at the mound of bacon and eggs on Minerva's tray, ringed with bowls of fruit salad.

"I think I'd remember meeting you," said the boy.

"Sure you would, Tiger. Hey, you know Dr. Steller?"

Grace brought a composed smile around to face them, and the blue eyes gazed at her. "No. Hello," he said with polite disinterest.

"Here, kiddo, got you something." Kafouri brought a small teddy bear out of his coat and snapped the price tag off its ear.

The boy grabbed the toy and crushed it close. "Thank you!"

"See you later, Danny." Kafouri held the door for Grace, who walked through without saying goodbye to the children. "Coffee?" he asked after the door clicked shut, and Grace nodded.

The boy's ready defection stung unexpectedly, but Grace smiled and lifted an eyebrow as they headed down the hall. "Teddy bears, Bob?"

"You saw the little guy. You wish you'd thought of it first."

"Why'd you call him Danny?"

"We tagged him Daniel back at the precinct. Seemed to suit him, but the hag in Admitting said a J.D. was a J.D. and we couldn't choose a name for him like he was a puppy."

"Instead we have a hospital full of Janes and Johns, like a doll factory with two models," Grace said as she opened the door to the fourth floor staff lounge with its

fragrant atmosphere of coffee. Kafouri threw his coat onto a ratty armchair and flopped down.

Grace eyed the detective as she poured two mugs. “I sincerely hope that you didn’t put a rush on Daniel’s exam because you think he’s cute.”

“What do you mean *I* think he’s cute? I could hear your clock ticking from down the hall.”

Grace rolled her eyes and settled into the couch. “What’s up, and how does it advance your ‘hero cop’ daydreams?”

“All roads lead to Bob Kafouri, Hero Cop. You know I’ve been working the guppy-dump forever. Interviewing crazy or contorted toddlers, filing photos of cigarette burns, hoping somebody’s daddy does his first misdemeanor and gets his DNA in the computers...sometimes you catch some miserable parents. It’s a grind.”

“And it doesn’t get your name in the papers.”

“Right. Busting the labs will.”

“You’ve busted opt-docs before.”

“Sure, crappy opt-docs. The smart ones don’t give parents enough rope to tie the noose. And I want the smart ones, the guys designing the opts. I want Betty Crocker, not the guy baking the cake. I’m going for the industry.”

“You think it’s that organized, Bob? I thought it was every opt-doc for himself.”

“I’m pretty sure. Too much money for it to stay a cottage industry forever. Anyway, I’m afraid they might be branching into new markets.”

“You mean...what *do* you mean? New kinds of opts?”

“I mean not just selling to parents. That’s why I wanted you to examine Daniel right away. Did you find any signs of abuse?”

Grace blanched. “God—no, he’s fine as far as I can tell. Do you really think he was engineered for...”

“It’s just my guess, but if that weird memory thing of his was built in on purpose? It resets every time he sees somebody new. He can’t live a normal life like that, not even close.”

“But he wouldn’t remember enough to be frightened of the abuser. Christ.” Grace leaned forward, cupping her mug. “Bob, there’s no way to know. It could be a mistake—there are five floors of patients here to testify that genetic optimization is a gamble. He could be a pretty-opt with an unfortunate side effect, or a botched mental opt of some sort.”

“Could be. But it’ll happen sooner or later. It’s an ugly world.”

Grace put down her coffee. She was still trying to think of something to say when Dr. Langford put her head in at the door. She had only been at GEPIC for two years, a small woman with golden-brown skin and a stubborn set to her mouth.

“There you are, Steller—I just saw one of your admits, John Doe number...” the

neuropsychiatrist started to unlock her board, but Grace interrupted.

“Call him Daniel, it’s easier. You’re done with your evaluation already?”

Langford raised her elegant eyebrows. “Preliminary. There was a rush on the case.”

Kafouri gave her a charming smile. “That was me. We cops are an impatient bunch. Bob Kafouri.”

“Thea Langford.” She leaned against the counter next to the coffeemaker. “So, as far as I can tell, he’s imprinting.”

“Imprinting,” repeated Kafouri.

“The primal connection an animal makes when it first sees its mother.”

“Sure, ducklings. But this kid isn’t a duckling. Or a puppy, so I’ve been told.”

“It happens in other species. Monkeys, for one. But the point is it shouldn’t be happening. He’s not a duckling or an infant, but he seems to imprint every time he sees an adult, and each time it happens he loses his memory.”

“He remembers something.” Kafouri said. “Doesn’t seem blank.”

“He loses what we call ‘episodic memory.’ Semantic knowledge he retains: he knows what a window is, can be taught vocabulary. I can’t say much about procedural skills until I come back with props, but that’s another part of the brain so I’m guessing he’ll test out fine.”

“Could the memory problem be a misopt?” Grace asked.

“I don’t know development or gene-build, so I couldn’t say. Other than the fugue state, he seems normal, even above average in intelligence until he reimprints.”

“Completely normal?” asked Kafouri.

“Well, no. It’s not normal for a five-year-old, a more or less rational being, to imprint. You can take away his toys or his half-eaten food, and he doesn’t get mad. I would guess he’d even stay affectionate if you hit him.”

Kafouri gave Steller a look, and she replied, “It doesn’t prove anything. Maybe the imprinting was the ment-opt, but the memory problems were unintentional. You can’t tell me some of these lousy opting parents wouldn’t order up a kid who loves them unconditionally. Besides, if you’re right, why the hell would your slave traders dump him? The fugue and reimprinting would be too much for parents, but perfect for them.”

Kafouri shrugged, and turned back to the waiting neuropsych. “Kid was a mess when we brought him in—found him crying his eyes out downtown. So you’re saying he was doing the duckling thing on every man and woman that walked by?”

“It seems likely. The crowds would be confusing for him.”

Grace cleared her throat. “What’s going to happen to him? You said yourself, he’s gifted.”

“Part of the time.”

“Still, are we just going to document and process, let the forensic genetics lab

have a look for the case file, and then throw him into long-term care?”

“I can’t recommend him for foster, Dr. Steller. There’s too much risk of exploitation or abduction for a child with his memory difficulties.”

“How is he with other children?”

“Judging from his roommate, normal enough. Minnie says he doesn’t forget anything until the next adult comes in.”

“Minerva,” Grace corrected, and the other woman stared at her. “She goes by Minerva now. Look, Langford, Daniel would be miserable in a perm-ward. You’d essentially be throwing a naïve boy into a group of disturbed, unpredictable kids for the first time every day. If not every hour...” Grace tapered off, and Langford didn’t reply. The two women regarded each other.

“C’mon, Grace, I like the little guy too, but there’s no lasting harm,” said Kafouri.

“Yeah, he’s self-cleaning,” Grace muttered, and stalked past Langford to empty her coffee into the sink with a splat. “Thanks for your time, Dr. Langford. Bob, I’ll go double-check the patient now that I know what you’re looking for.”

“You’d have seen the evidence if there was any,” he said, shrugging his coat on and adjusting his tie. “It’s up to the gene guys now.”



Grace stood at the door to 408, peering through the glass. She thumbed the monitor button and listened to the occasional clink of Minerva’s fork against her plate. Daniel wasn’t in view, but she thought she heard his feet slapping against the vinyl tile near the door.

“I wouldn’t,” Minerva said.

“I want to find Jimmy,” Daniel’s voice replied.

The girl pushed the visor back on her head. “You won’t. It’s a big hospital and they don’t like us guppies wandering around it.”

“What’s a guppy?”

“I am. You are. Toys someone made wrong.”

Daniel walked into Grace’s view and stood at the foot of Minerva’s bed. “What do you mean, toys?”

She picked at the edges of her mountain of beef stroganoff with her fork. “I’ve explained it to you before, but it took a long time and you forgot it anyway. Just learn the word ‘guppy’. It’s not nice, but it means us.”

The boy stood on tiptoe at the window, pink heels disappearing into the baggy pants.

“You can sit on my bed if you want. You’ll see better.”

Daniel glanced at the door, then climbed up and kneeled, looking out. “Will Jimmy come back?”

“Probably. He brings lunch and dinner, most days.”

“What will I do if he doesn’t come back?”

“I think you’ll recover.”

Grace opened the door and the monitor clicked off behind her. Daniel twisted around to see who’d come in, and his eager face turned blissful. “Hello! What’s your name?”

“Dr. Grace,” Grace said again, with a rueful smile.

“Back again?” said Minerva. “I thought his initial exam was filed.”

“My shift is over, but you’re very well-informed.”

The girl tapped her computer headset. “What else am I going to be?”

Grace looked at the walls around Minerva’s bed, covered with pictures cut out of hand-me-down magazines. A long poster of the stages of a cheetah’s lope was taped along the vent under the window and fluttered occasionally. National Geographic maps were stuck to the wall below her TV. Daniel’s side of the room, by contrast, was blank. He looked so new in his hospital-issue clothes under his hospital-issue blanket. He hadn’t touched his dinner. She tried to remember Brandon Macauley’s room, recalled a line of art postcards—Sargent, maybe—and photos of courtyards at the Alhambra, cathedral naves.

Minerva interrupted Grace’s thoughts. “Ever since you ordered Daniel’s IV out, he’s been trying to follow people out of the room.”

“I’ll set the door to auto-lock then, okay?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Would you mind if I read to him?”

“Go ahead. I’ll warn you, though, it loses its novelty appeal soon enough.”

“What’s ‘novelty’?” asked Daniel.

“Something new, unexpected. Everything, for you.”

Grace sat down, pulled out her board and cleared her throat. The boy flopped across his bed onto his elbows, the picture of attention. Minerva bent each earbud down and flipped her visor over her eyes. “This story is called *Charlotte’s Web*,” Grace began. Daniel kicked his bare feet together in the air as she read, forgot to close his mouth, looked like any kid absorbed in a story.

“Fern couldn’t take her eyes off the tiny pig,” Grace was reading when the door clicked and swept inward. She and the boy both glanced up, but all they could see was the airplane-patterned sleeve of Nurse Biggs’s scrubs as he stood behind the door. “Oh, *look* at him! He’s absolutely perfect,” Grace continued over the murmur of voices in the hall.

“No, Dr. Das said two more days,” the nurse said loudly.

Daniel didn't look away from Grace's face, and she smiled as she read, "She closed the carton carefully. First she kissed her father, then she kissed her mother. Then she opened the lid again—"

"So get her some ointment!" Nurse Biggs said and bustled into the room, letting the door swing shut behind him and tearing the backing off a drug patch. The boy looked up and beamed into Biggs's face. Grace paused with her finger at her place in the text, watching Daniel gaze across the room at the man.

"You'll have to start over, of course," said Minerva as Biggs lifted her sleeve and applied the patch, moving carefully so he wouldn't jostle her arm out of the grow solution. "I read him a whole chapter of that book after lunch."

Grace locked the board and stood. "I have to get going. Have a good afternoon, both of you." She paused in the doorway.

Daniel clambered off his bed and padded over to Biggs. He tugged on the man's scrubs and Minerva sighed at the inevitable. "Who are *you*?"



A few days later, Grace was alone in the women's dressing room. She leaned her forehead against the cool metal of her locker and hauled on the ends of her ceremonial stethoscope, feeling it taut against the knots in her neck.

The door squeaked, and she raised her head to see Langford, early for a night shift. "Tough day?" she asked, and Grace nodded. "Too bad, it was beautiful. Summer-bright but not summer-hot."

"Saw it out the window a few times."

"Sorry for bringing it up."

"Have you ever noticed we get more voluntary surrenders when it's nice out? I figure the opters look outside and think of all the fun they'd be having if they didn't have to take care of this kid."

"That's pretty harsh," said Langford, stowing her bag in her locker.

"Opters are usually the worst kind of people to parent a kid who needs special care. They wouldn't have sprung for illegal opts if they didn't cut corners, if they could accept what life gave them."

"There are other reasons why people have a made baby."

Grace suppressed a grimace over the phrase. "Sure. Besides the perfectionists, there are stage parents trying to live out their thwarted dreams."

Langford watched Grace. "You sound so bitter."

"I've been here eleven years, Langford. That's enough to make anyone bitter." She stood up, opened her locker and started pulling off her scrubs. "Or maybe it only takes

one day like today, when a couple brings in their optimized baby for voluntary surrender because she's 'not right' and it turns out the opt was perfect, they just gave her brain damage shaking her when she cried." Grace yanked her shoelaces loose, avoiding Langford's eyes. She sighed. "Can we talk about the other day, Thea? I feel like I came on too strong about Daniel."

"You noticed that too?"

"Yeah. Maybe I owe you a mocha to apologize. I just want to make sure somebody takes care of him."

"He'll get taken care of wherever he ends up."

"A kiddy ward may keep him healthy, but they won't try to accommodate him, give him a life."

Langford gathered her braids back and looped them into a bun. "He'd be a good subject for a grant, and it might get him his own environment, special care."

Grace looked up, dangling one sneaker.

"I can ask around my department, try to get someone interested. Research is the best way to leverage your way out of here, after all." Langford closed her locker and stood with her hand on the latch. "You know, in this place, you have to know when to care, Grace. And how much." She pushed open the door and disappeared into the hallway. "Be well," Grace thought she heard her call. She wondered if Langford would report her, if she already had. They'd listen to a psych specialist, and there was no room in her file for another administrative intervention.

She finished changing and looked down at her clothes—tailored trousers with well-placed cargo pockets, button-up shirt—and wondered who she was pretending to be, every night and day on the train, what this Grace did on days off. She headed for the exit, but on impulse opened the stairwell door and headed up to Floor 4, alone with her labored breath. 408 was quiet and there was only one bed.

"The perm-ward bus came today," said Minerva. "Don't worry, I don't mean they took him. Some spots opened up on 2, that's all."

"I came to see you, anyway," Grace lied.

Minerva shoved her headset mike and visor up over her head. "You can sit down."

Grace did, easing herself onto the long empty foot of the bed, spread with a charity quilt. "I remember when your headset was held on with bobby pins."

"Yes, I much prefer having hands."

"How's number two doing?"

Minerva jerked a velcro strap open to free her left arm. She shook it off to display a glistening, fully formed palm with five budding digits as well as the existing thumb in the crux of her elbow.

"Congratulations!"

"Almost done." Minerva's smile was brief and tight as she sank her hand back

into the viscous liquid.

“Aren’t you pleased?”

“Yes, mostly. I’ve always dreamed of having hands, but they want me to have legs, too.”

“That surprises you?”

“I don’t want to do it. It took me two years to grow these. Eating huge meals *and* running an IV, lying with my stumps in goo and having minor operations every week.” She lifted her right hand. “As far as I’m concerned, this is it. Two of these is all I need to pick things up, press buttons, lever myself out of a chair.”

“But think of everything you’ll be able to do. Walk, run, play games...”

“It’s not worth it.” Minerva snaked her hand into Grace’s. “It hurts, growing limbs. Growing bone is the worst. I can barely sleep. Sometimes I get phantom limb pain, which I never have without the grow bath. And then there are the missteps, the amputations, the feedings—I had to gain over 15 pounds for this arm, you know. I can’t spend more years this way. I have to get out of this room.” She squeezed the woman’s fingers, and there was appeal in her eyes.

Grace wondered who Minerva’s new wellness lead was, if any of her current team had asked her what she wanted. She looked at the child’s hand, the skin lined with scars from stops and starts, the fingers already callused from computer controls.

“You used to read me that story, *Charlotte’s Web*. Do you remember?”

“After you were surrendered, sure.”

“A funny story to read to a guppy. Do you know why I cried, back then?”

“I thought you missed your parents.”

“A little. But mostly it was because I understood. I was five, but I understood—my parents took the guilty plea and the fine when I was two so they could get government assistance. They did the PSAs to get most of the fine waived. Then they waited. If you take the home care deal and give it a ‘good faith effort,’ you can surrender the kid to the government without the larger fine. A ‘good faith effort’ is three years. They turned me over at three years and one day.”

“You were already smart at five.”

“The ment-opt was the part that worked.”

The two stared out the window at the train, lights bright against the dusk, pulling out of the Rapid station.

“I’ve missed you,” the girl said.



Grace slipped her ID lanyard over her head as she walked by the “Cleveland

Regional Gene-Engineered Pediatric Inpatient Center” sign. She shoved the thick plastic card into a jacket pocket and zipped it closed, then hurried across the square to the Rapid stop to take a seat.

Most of her colleagues didn’t mind being asked about their work. Some seemed to relish the opportunity for dramatic anecdotes. But Grace changed out of scrubs and avoided walking out of the Center within sight of her train, so that no commuters would ask. In theory, GEPIC employees were supposed to welcome the chance to educate the public about the dangers of illegal gene-engineering. But knowing they were supposed to cheerfully embrace outreach didn’t make the ghoulish questions—“What was your worst case?” “Do many of them die?” “Do you have the boy with two mouths there? The one from the ads?”—any easier to endure. She had applied for the job the same way she had volunteered to work at a free clinic in Mexico after medical school: full of shining hope. Even after eleven years, it was hard to listen to people’s tabloid fantasies about it with equanimity.

Grace read the *Plain Dealer* on her board. She found herself searching the local crime section for signs of a ring of kid-traffickers, amateur-detective style. She blanked the board and stared out the scratched window for the three remaining stops between GEPIC and her building.

Her apartment was on the sixth floor, with an unappreciated sliver of lake view. She slumped her bag by the door, levered off her shoes. The dent in her couch accepted her again as she hugged her legs, stared around for something to occupy her. There was dust on the books she’d already read, travel books and memoirs of teachers, humanitarians, biologists. There was a pile of dirty dishes blocking the screen of the entertainment set, and more attracting fruit flies in the kitchen.

Her eye settled on an end table cluttered with gifts from her patients. She picked up a clumsy origami crane and an intriguing little abstract in clay, fingered a few loops of wooden beads that slumped against the bulletin board behind, the layered photos and crayon drawings. What good had she done them? She wondered if Daniel would draw her something, if he stayed with her for long enough. The Steller family mantel clock began to chime, and her stomach stirred in response. She unfolded herself and made for the kitchen without looking at the framed photo, at Brandon Macauley’s uneven smile, or behind it at his sketch of her, done in short sure lines between waves of pain.

The phone rang shrill, the ID flashing *Kafouri, R.*

“Good news in our little cherub’s case.”

“Daniel? What is it? Did you find the parents?”

“No parents, but there’s a distinctive pattern in the junk pairs—not seen in nature, as they say. Might be a byproduct of this lab’s technique, and the boys think it might match up with some other high-end stuff.”

“What does that mean for Daniel?”

“He might be part of the nation’s first high-end lab bust! Listen, I’ll give you a call if we get any closer—so you can be sure and read that headline.”

He didn’t wait to see what she would say before hanging up. The phone went dark and Grace replaced it slowly, fighting the urge to throw it. She picked up the book next to it, a turgid historical novel that had seemed more promising in the shop, and sat down, trying to slow her breathing, focus on the page. She stared through the words for a minute or ten. With a jerk she pitched the book, which skidded to a halt on the kitchen threshold. It lay splayed and rumpled, and Grace watched without satisfaction as it settled its pages into creases, subsiding under its own weight as if with a sigh.



The next week, Minerva was wheeling around a light wheelchair in iridescent gold, tracing the long scuffmarks on the vinyl where Daniel’s bed had been. “Did you pick the color?” Grace asked.

“What?”

“The chair.”

Minerva shook her head. “Got ten digits though, and no extras.” She raised her left hand high so it caught the light off the building opposite and held the five new fingers wide. Their skin was red from rubbing the chair’s hand rim, and her elbow sported a dressing. “I heard you came to see me yesterday. Walked in on my laser ablation?”

“Didn’t see the warning light.”

“Did they make you go to the ophthalmoscope?”

“I checked out.”

“I had to go under the ‘scope myself once, years ago. They gave me too little anesthesia, and I woke up in the middle of one of the ablations. I went from a queasy dream to a bed ringed by adults in scarlet plastic hoods. I guess I was so terrified I failed to look down at the laser cauterizer working on my stub.”

“So your eyes were okay then?”

“Yeah. I kept telling them at the time that I felt fine, my eyes didn’t hurt. I didn’t believe them when they told me I could have a retinal burn without knowing, that there are no nerves on the back of your eye. I still thought my nerves were on my side.”

“So this is it,” Grace said. “This is all you wanted?”

“Ten fingers and a chair, yup.”

“And they’re not going to stop?”

Minerva scooted into place next to her, facing the window. Pink-white fluff rolled

up against the benches and shelter posts—there must be cherry trees nearby losing their blooms. “Some days I think they want the update piece in the news: ‘Whatever happened to the limbless baby?’ When I’m not being unkind, I think they want to feel they’ve done all they can.”

Grace let down her ponytail and shook her hair out. “What do you want to do when you grow up? You said a scientist, but what kind? Don’t you think you’ll want, or even need, to walk?”

“I want to clean and study dinosaur bones. In a lab. I’ve seen them do it, they sit the whole time.” She laughed.

“How can you be sure? You seem so certain that this will mean a better life for you, but what if you’re wrong?”

Minerva’s face set. “You believed Brandon Macauley.” Grace’s hands froze halfway to her hair. “How could you be sure his life wouldn’t have gotten better? That they wouldn’t have developed a miracle cure? But you let him make his own decision. You trusted him.”

The doctor stared, and her voice came out too high. “I—I didn’t do that. I was cleared.”

“Sure. You ‘made a mistake’ about his dosage on a new drug. But you did believe him that he wanted to die. When he said that, you believed him.”

Grace glanced over her shoulder. “Yes. I did.”

“All I’m saying is I don’t want legs.” Minerva’s smile was wan and almost lopsided.

“He was older than you.”

“I read at a college-senior level.”

“That’s—I don’t know, Minerva.”

“I want a life, not a patienthood.”

Grace looked out the window for a time, jaw tight, and finally kneeled beside Minerva’s chair and embraced her. Minerva wrapped her arms around the doctor’s back and squeezed, closing her eyes.

“Is that what you came to talk to me about?” she whispered.

“Yes and no. I wanted to talk about Daniel. I’ve just been visiting him.”

Minerva nodded slowly. “He’s a nice kid. I like him, when he’s himself for a while.”

“You’ve never been to the perm-wards, have you?”

“Psych? No. But from what I hear, I wouldn’t want to.”

“It’s a warehouse. That’s all it is. A—” She paused, sighed. “I bought a car.” She saw Minerva’s eyebrows jump. “Haven’t had one for years.”

“I’m glad.” The girl smiled at her with a sort of reckless joy, and the new hand grasped hers, surprisingly strong under its smooth skin. “I can help.”

Grace inhaled sharply. “What do you—“ She looked again toward the door, at the microphone and camera she knew were there.

Minerva drew her into another hug and whispered, “I can read maps. I could keep an eye on the news. I’m great with computers, I can find things out...”

“I’ll be fine,” Grace replied. “Don’t worry about me.” She pulled back and stood up. “My shift’s about to start.”

“I know it is. 3:15.”

“How do you know that?”

“The crypto on staff schedules is perfunctory. Like I said, I’m great with computers.” She half-smiled.

Grace turned, but Minerva wheeled after her and caught her lab coat with one hand.

“Minerva—”

“Come to see me tomorrow. The nurses don’t like me getting down into the chair by myself because it gives my spine a jolt, but I can do it already. Anyway, you get off work at three, when they’re changing shifts, giving each other reports. I can meet you at the elevators.” She grinned. “I can get out of this room.”

Minerva’s gaze held Grace’s, hazel eyes to tired gray, and the fingers slackened, dropped from the coat. The woman leaned over and kissed the child’s pale forehead. “Goodbye, Minerva.”

Minerva turned away. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Dr. Grace.”



Grace pulled over as the sky deepened toward indigo over the treetops. She had turned down an open service road in the Kentucky forest, and now when she rolled down the window and stopped the car, she could hear nothing but the woods and the pops and sighs of the engine.

She got out, listened again, felt the chill of oncoming night raise the hairs on the back of her hands. Trees stooped, graceful and so green in the dusky light that they strained the eye. The occasional pink of a blossoming redbud glowed out of the shadows. She could smell leaves, earth, other aromas once familiar. She wondered if Minerva had ever been to a forest, smelled this kind of air.

As she had since she drove away from GEPIC, she tried to smooth away the thought of Minerva that caught again and again at her growing sense of peace. Now she failed, and as she leaned against the dusty car she could see the girl alone in her room, circling in her chair. Or perhaps she wasn’t by herself—perhaps security had heard her strange offer, perhaps she was answering questions.

Grace felt a sick downward pressure in her chest, as if her lungs were empty. Had Minerva waited for Grace? Had she truly wanted to run away? She must know she stood out, that she'd been a poster child and wouldn't be forgotten, that it was a horrible risk. GEPIC offered her a future—had she thought Grace would take her away from that? She was far too smart to expect it. But would all her intelligence keep her from wanting it?

Grace let out a long breath. She was squandering light.

The trunk opened quietly when she pressed the button, and Daniel didn't even stir. The sedative should be wearing off, but Minerva had been right—he was a deep sleeper. He was nestled into a fort of cushions, with bungees protecting him from boxes of cash and clothing, everything they would need to start a life somewhere.

She bent to listen to his breathing, the remnants of her guilt and confusion melting away. “David,” she whispered, “wake up.” She smoothed the hair back from his forehead and jiggled his hand. “David.”

The child turned in his sleep, then opened his eyes and smiled. “I feel sleepy.”

“I know, and you can sleep again soon, but I need you awake right now.”

Daniel, now David, sat up and yawned. She cupped his chin and dribbled dilating drops into his eyes. He giggled as she put on a red plastic hood.

“There's going to be a bright light. I need you to look right at it for me, okay?”

“Okay.” His bright blue irises were crowded aside by black. He reached out and felt around for her hand, which now, unshaking, gripped GEPIC's portable laser cauterizer. “Who are you?”

Grace caught sight of her reflection in the rear window and started. Who was she, faceless and impartial like the figures in Minerva's waking nightmare? She blinked to clear her scarlet-tinted vision. “I'm your mother.” She thumbed the laser on and thought, *I'm the last person you're ever going to see, honey.*