

Chapter Seven.

June 15, 2030.

A pair of dark-clothed figures crouched near the fence at the perimeter of Matusaki Industries in Los Angeles, CA.

All that could be seen under the black hood of the tallest figure were the eyes of Apollo Skulnik.

"Listen, as soon as we cut through the fence, I'm going to have a ten minute window to get in, find it, and get back. Be ready for me!"

The other figure nodded.

In a minute, Apollo had cut through the chain-linked fence.

"Go! Go!" whispered the other man. They crossed the long grassy field toward the building and disappeared into a low spot for a few seconds as they surveyed the scene. They zipped across another open space and dived for the shadows beside a building as a jeep came into view along the road that encircled the property.

As soon as the vehicle was out of view, Skulnik tossed his backpack to the grass in front of the building's exterior wall, which was a series of glass squares stretching across and upward for hundreds of feet. He removed a gun-like instrument from one of the pockets and pressed it against four metal grommets trimming the edges of the backpack. After four muffled shots, the pack was bolted to the ground. He unzipped it and yanked upward on a flex-ladder. The ladder continued to extend upward as Skulnik pulled until it was 16' tall and leaning against the window on the second floor.

His partner steadied the flex-ladder as Skulnik ascended with a glass cutting torch in his hand. Three quick cuts and a kick forced a triangular piece of thick window onto the floor of an office. Skulnik crawled through the opening and immediately compared the digital clock on the wall with wristwatch.

Shit. The clock on the wall was a minute fast.

Skulnik donned his infra-red glasses and moved through the dark room like it was fully lit. He did a quick peek through the door's window into the hall and then glanced at the guard schedule which was taped to his right sleeve. He held his breath as he disabled the door's status alarm. He pulled it open and looked at the status indicator on the wall. It said the door was closed. He smiled and slipped into the hall.

He moved as quickly as he could through the halls. He checked the schematic attached to his left wrist. Just right and then left a few hundred feet. Skulnik found the bio-lab. Not a guard in sight.

It seemed that Sophia was right about the guard's rounds.

Sophia.

That had been a year-long project in itself. First, Skulnik had to arrange for the 'accidental meeting' at the coffee shop. Then it was a long series of dates and a hundred other stupid activities designed to gain her trust and ... maybe even love. Too bad for her.

But his secretive employer had determined that she was the weak link in Matusaki's top-notch security. A lowly lab assistant. A lowly, lonely, lab assistant.

Finally, after twelve months, he was able to extract the information that he needed from her.

One time he had asked Sophia if the security guards ever came into her office to try and hit on her when she worked late at night. She'd said that they only had a few minutes between their rounds every quarter hour. That was helpful.

Then Skulnik had probed a bit too much because she finally said, "You seem like you're more interested in Matusaki Industries than me."

Too bad. She had been a nice woman. He made sure that her body wouldn't be found. That meant that, if everything went off as planned, that he'd have until Monday morning before she'd be noticed missing. By then he'd be gone a long time.

A long time. Apollo smiled to himself at the pun.

Getting into the bio-lab was not a problem. But the revolutionary genetic samples that had just been developed by Matusaki Industries were in the live cultures section behind the quarantine glass.

There they were: three vials of colored liquid. A clear flexi-tube was suspended above each vial. The tubes extended upward to containers that were shrouded by an opaque cloth covering. Small droplets of the colored fluids slowly eased down the tubes to drip into the vials below. At the rate that they were dripping down, it must have taken a month to fill them.

Skulnik couldn't break the glass because, as soon as the sensors noticed a change in the room pressure, the alarms would blare and then it would be game over. His employer would not accept his failure and it would mean his death.

Do or die, right then and there.

But he didn't have to remove the vials to get access to their contents.

He removed his jacket and his long sleeved shirt. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass divider. His muscular arms seemed to bust through the sleeves of his undershirt. He placed an arm into the long rubber manipulator gloves attached to the glass divider. He could handle the vials without fear of contamination.

He wondered if the employees of Matusaki Industries realized the significance of what they'd created. Maybe so. Maybe that's why these were the only samples yet created. Fear. Fear of too much power. That stopped a lot of people. It stopped people with moral scruples. Fortunately, Apollo Skulnik didn't have to worry about that limitation.

His gloved hands reached for the small test tube rack that held the three vials. He pulled them close so that he could read the labels. "Chronicity Chromosome Mutagens. CAUTION. LIVE SAMPLES."

His gloved right hand retrieved an empty syringe with a long, sharp needle. He yanked the plastic drip-tube from the first vial, which held a yellow puss-colored fluid. It looked like something that had drained out of someone's festering wound. He brought it close to the glass. The label read, "Quantum Chronesthesia Enzyme."

His life in a bottle.

What part of his sad, neglected childhood would he ever want to re-live? Just one thing. He thought about what his father had done to his mother as he forced the syringe needle into the vial and extracted the syrupy contents.

He stared at the syringe. He'd been paid extremely well. Was it worth it? It was a moot

point at the moment. He jammed the syringe down into the rubber sleeve protecting his left arm. The needle pierced the rubber and then his skin. He thumbed the plunger home and sent the seering fluid into his veins.

Skulnik paused for a second until the pain subsided. He extracted the needle from his arm, but let it hang in the rubber sleeve, keeping the hole sealed.

He reached for the next vial which contained a translucent blue liquid. The label on the vial read, "Hippocampal Theta-Rhythm Booster." Apollo wondered briefly what would happen to his body once his mind had departed. He forced the thought aside, like so many abandoned regrets. He sucked the fluid into the syringe and then jammed that one down into his left arm also. The fluid burned through his veins. He flexed his left wrist trying to coax the blue ooze through his body. He was forced to wait for several seconds, feeling as if he were about to pass out.

One more.

He extended a gloved hand for the last vial. It read, "Telomerase Reverse Transcriptase (hTERT)." He considered that life-extension was only valuable to people who liked their lives. But he was just making a delivery. He pierced the syringe needle into his left arm, beside the other two. He hit his vein and pumped in the stolen fluid.

All three syringes wiggled precariously in their rubber perch. He was about to pull his hands free to make his escape when he decided to see what these tubes were dripping from. He stretched his gloved right arm forward until he was able to knock off the dark cloth that blocked his view of the source of these liquids.

Suspended in the piss-colored liquid of the three jars were the shriveled, grotesque forms of three embryos. Their bulging eyes were open and seemed to be staring right at Skulnik. He was so shocked that he pulled his hands back with a start.

Were they moving?

He yanked his arms from the gloves. He wanted to run. But he couldn't. Was it because of the new foreign substances that Skulnik had just forced into his veins, or was it the shock of the floating globs of miniature humans? Whatever the reason, he became disoriented. Suddenly he caught a vision of himself as seen by one of the embryos. He could see his own face distorted by the refraction of light through round jars of yellowed liquid.

And then he knew things. He knew the names of the med-techs that took care of him every day while he lived in a bottle--

What was he saying?

Then he knew. One of these living embryos was psychic. And now that he had their blood, or genetic essence in him, he was picking up its thoughts.

Skulnik was used to unpleasant things, and had done a lot of unpleasant things to other people. But he was getting the 'willies' and shuddered at the freaky sensation.

Then it seemed as if one of the embryos moved. Yes, its eyes moved and tracked Skulnik. Then another one twitched, and then the other. They all became agitated and twitched like fish in a fisherman's bucket.

Skulnik suddenly realized what was wrong. Having pulled the plastic tubes from the rubber corks sealing the vials, they had begun to drain into the base of the live cultures compartment. Yes, the tops of the the embryo's heads were now clearly above the liquid level. As if they could sense the danger, the embryos flopped and twitched in fear. But they had no real mobility and

their thin translucent limbs were still useless appendages. Or so Skulnik thought.

As he stared in horror, one of the embryos reached a small fingered hand upward as if it were a fly in a glass soup bowl trying to crawl out.

Skulnik wanted to run and leave this gruesome death scene, but he couldn't. His own will power seemed to have drained away like the yellow, blue and red puss flowing from the bottles.

The mouths of the three embryos were open, and when the liquid drained below their mouths, their formerly silent screams gurgled into the air. It was the sound of three claws dragging fingernails across the old-time blackboards.

Skulnik clamped his hands over his ears and stumbled against the controls for the rubber gloves. He pressed his head against the glass and squeezed his eyes shut trying to block out the sound. But he still couldn't run. It was as if one of the mighty minds encased in these tiny bodies was reaching out and grasping his will power, putting it under its control.

He felt nauseous, like he was dying along with them. And then it stopped.

Skulnik straightened his body, as his head slid upward against the glass. Finally, he opened his eyes.

They were dead. Their shriveled bodies had sunk to the bottom of their glass coffins.

Skulnik took a deep breath. He smelled something.

Suddenly very alert, he looked toward the left rubber sleeve. Two syringes still hung in the top of it. But there was a tiny hole in the rubber sleeve where the third syringe had been.

The hissing sound filled him with fear.

An alarm began to blare.

Time to run.

Apollo Skulnik was through the lab's exit in a second, and heading up the hall, when the double doors at the end of the corridor banged open and two guards exploded toward him. He changed direction and ran up the hall passing the bio-lab he'd just escaped from. A three-foot door in the corridor wall flipped open and a guard-bot rolled out.

Skulnik skidded to a stop and considered his options: the taser-talons of the bot or the pistols of the human guards.

The guard-bot, with its silver canister form, seemed more like an angry vacuum cleaner than a real security guard. Skulnik estimated that he could scurry along the wall and stay out of reach of the taser-talons.

He was wrong.

Just as he ran past and seemed to be in the clear, he felt a jolt of electricity jump through his body. As he fell to the floor and twisted, he saw the thin wires extending from the guard-bot to the barbs of the taser which had been shot into his back, penetrating the thin cloth of his undershirt. He twitched and writhed uncontrollably. A million thoughts and memories filled his head at once.

He knew that he was caught, had failed his mission, and was going to prison again. He thought of his mother and was thankful that she was dead and didn't have to see her failure-of-a-son behind bars.

He remembered her face, her blonde hair that she was always brushing out of her eyes. He felt like he was actually seeing her, alive and young, like when he was a teen-ager.

She smiled at him. "Apollo, you silly kid. I said, 'blow out the candles!'"

Apollo blinked. The fuzzy-flickering light in front of him resolved and focused into an image of candles on a birthday cake. He was in his boyhood home in south Chicago. Several neighborhood boys and mothers were standing around their dining room table staring at him. It was his seventeenth birthday, December 31st 1999.

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