

PROLOGUE

Planet Earth **Satipo, Peru**

Dr. Gabriel Vlachos leaned toward the closed-circuit television monitor, narrowing his gaze on Zoe, his new patient. On the screen, the teenager slept peacefully in a private room down the hall, blissfully unaware of his watchful eye.

As he observed her sleeping, a sense of satisfaction washed over Vlachos. All indications showed Zoe was a viable candidate. She had arrived three weeks earlier from an impoverished village in the Andean Highlands. After volunteering to undergo a comprehensive genetic screening process—as did every other fertile girl in the village—Zoe was the only female selected for a special medical procedure involving in vitro fertilization. If successfully impregnated and the embryo carried to full term, Zoe would receive 30,000 USD—roughly five years' wages in Peru—and return to her village safe and sound.

Zoe checked all the boxes for an ideal surrogate, and by all accounts, she was acclimating well to her new living arrangements at Mathias Industries. The last thing Dr. Vlachos wanted was to put undue stress on this mother-to-be. Miscarriages were common, so his staff went to great lengths to pamper Zoe. Fresh water, clean clothes, hot meals, and daily showers were just a few amenities now at her disposal; the spa treatments were her favorite.

Judging by how well Zoe was sleeping and eating, their efforts to make her feel comfortable were paying off. Despite the daily poking and prodding, Zoe counted herself lucky.

Yesterday, Vlachos heard her joke: *“I can’t believe they’re paying me for this!”*

Pleased with what he saw, Dr. Vlachos turned away from the CCTV and checked on the IVF incubator beside him. Using an embryoscope, Vlachos peered inside the incubator to a culture dish containing sixteen recently thawed human-cloned embryos. The embryoscope’s time-lapse camera allowed the doctor to view each embryo’s development in ten-minute intervals—at four hundred times magnification. Out of the sixteen candidates, one embryo stood out to him.

“Looking good, Number Four,” Vlachos thought aloud, throwing props to the embryo he felt had the best chance of surviving to live birth once transferred to Zoe’s uterus.

Hopes ran high that his team’s next attempt at human cloning would succeed where past attempts had failed. Last year, they hit an unexpected snag with accelerated cell degeneration, which caused premature aging and death. Then, in a public relations nightmare, Dr. Vlachos’s illegal experiments became public knowledge. Two cloned girls—and numerous dogs—were discovered at the Groom Lake facility in the United States. While his team had seamlessly shifted operations to Peru, pressure mounted from his employer, Edmund Mathias, to perfect the cloning process.

“Tomorrow,” Vlachos muttered with a slight grin.

The embryos and his surrogate were ready. Fingers crossed, the in vitro fertilization would work. If all went to plan, Zoe would be well into her first trimester by the time Mathias returned from his trip to Challenger Deep.

Vlachos yawned heavily, the toll of 18-hour workdays evident in his weary eyes. Since Luna arrived, his team had been buzzing with excitement. Access to male and female Aiwan DNA was like early Christmas for his researchers. Their force enhancement serum had resulted from splicing human DNA with Earth-dwelling mammals, but Aiwan DNA opened up an entirely new realm of possibilities.

Despite the thrilling prospects, Dr. Vlachos had to focus on Zoe. The success of their current project hinged on mastering the cloning of a human before they could hope to create copies of Luna and Kypa—or even something altogether new. This step was crucial; without perfecting human cloning, the potential of Aiwan DNA would remain untapped. His dreams of groundbreaking biological advancements depended on his team’s ability to navigate this delicate

yet critical phase.

Rubbing his tired eyes, Dr. Vlachos decided to call it a night. As he rose from his chair and unbent his aching back, the entire facility suddenly rumbled beneath him. Startled, he dropped back in his chair and instinctively gripped the table with both hands as the tremor shook the walls, rattled test tubes, and caused the overhead lights to flicker.

Within seconds, the chaos subsided, restoring calm. The tremor had passed, but Dr. Vlachos remained motionless, waiting for potential aftershocks. As adrenaline coursed through his veins, his heart pounded loudly in his chest—a stark contrast to the stillness around him.

When no aftershocks came, he relaxed his grip on the table and turned to check on Zoe. Thankfully, she remained undisturbed. Dr. Vlachos dropped his shoulders and blew out a short exhale. Just as he started to collect his thoughts, the main power shut off, plunging the lab into complete darkness.

The backup generators kicked on immediately. Emergency lights flickered to life, and the computers began rebooting. For an instant, Dr. Vlachos believed they might be okay—until an ear-splitting alarm shattered the silence.

Darting a look at the CCTV screen, the doctor saw Zoe was awake, curled in a fetal position with ears covered and eyes squeezed shut.

“No, no, no!” Vlachos said in a panic.

He turned sharply to a nearby high-security blood storage refrigerator. Inside were a dozen glass vials that held the future of Mathias Industries. Six vials contained a yellowish compound known as Sampraviddha, meaning “enhanced” in Sanskrit. Mathias’s marketing department had yet to come up with a catchy trade name, so Dr. Vlachos’s team had adopted this temporary placeholder for their force enhancement serum.

The remaining six vials contained dark green blood samples from the Aiwans, Prince Kypa and Luna. These samples were critical to his research on their alien physiology.

Dr. Vlachos’s gaze lingered on the vials, knowing the immense potential—and peril—within those fragile containers. In that moment of indecision, he faced a critical choice: move the vials from the fridge to a temperature-controlled transport box or check on Zoe. He chose the girl.

Bolting from his seat, Dr. Vlachos sprinted across the lab and threw open the door. The alarm echoed throughout the sterile corridor, and red strobe lights flashed from the ceiling. He winced from the skull-rattling noise as he looked right, then left, searching for his team, but the hallway was empty. He was the only person working at this hour. Everyone else was asleep four floors

up, though they were surely awake now. Urgency gripped him; he needed to act swiftly to ensure Zoe's safety and secure their research.

Hurrying down the hall, Dr. Vlachos passed several windowless doors on either side. He ignored the pounding and shouting behind them as he made his way to Zoe's room. Sliding to a halt in front of her door, Vlachos quickly entered his security code on the keypad. The door unlocked, and he pushed it open to find Zoe still curled up on her bed in fright.

Despite the dimmed lighting, Zoe recognized Dr. Vlachos's silhouette in the doorway. Without hesitation, she leaped off the bed and crossed the room, thrusting her arms around his waist.

"Everything's alright," he soothed, gently patting her back while his mind raced to figure out their next move. With no time to waste, Vlachos said, "Hurry, put on your shoes."

Zoe retreated and quickly slid on her shoes. She then took the doctor's outstretched hand.

"¡Vamos!" Vlachos said, leading Zoe into the hallway.

They backtracked toward the lab. Zoe heard the unmistakable pounding and screaming while passing the other patients' rooms. Their pleas for help resonated through the heavy doors, sending chills down her spine. She pulled her hand free from Dr. Vlachos and slowed her pace, her expression filled with concern.

"What about them?" she asked, curious why they were not evacuating the others.

Dr. Vlachos stammered a reply, trying to mask his inner turmoil. The people behind those doors—if they could still be called that—were extremely dangerous and not to be set free under any circumstances, especially by an unarmed scientist in his late sixties and a teenage girl. It would take a team of guards to control just one of those test subjects.

Unfortunately, Dr. Vlachos had no time to explain this to Zoe. He knew the truth would only frighten her more and slow them down. Trying not to appear insensitive, the doctor put on his best poker face and lied through his teeth.

"It is best they stay in their rooms, at least for now," he attested, his voice as steady as he could manage. "I promise I will come back for them after I get you to safety."

Zoe hesitated, but the urgency in Dr. Vlachos's voice compelled her to move on.

As they resumed their hurried pace, the doctor silently prayed that the

situation would not deteriorate further. Reaching the lab, the nameplate on the door read FORCE ENHANCEMENT DIVISION—EMBRYOLOGY.

“Gabriel!” came a woman’s voice.

Dr. Vlachos rounded to find his colleague, Dr. Martin, approaching at a brisk jog.

“Sophia, thank God,” Vlachos exclaimed, catching his breath and feeling a surge of relief at the sight of a familiar face. “What’s happening?”

“I overheard the guards,” Sophia replied, her voice laced with panic. “There’s been an explosion in the east wing—everything is on fire.”

Vlachos was stunned. The blast must have been massive to reach this far underground. And if the fire was as severe as it sounded, the lab and their research could be at risk.

Dr. Martin, meanwhile, exchanged a quick glance with Zoe and managed a reassuring smile. While they were not strangers, Sophia knew Zoe primarily as IVF-C122, the unique subject identifier assigned to Zoe upon her arrival. Out of instinct, Dr. Martin scanned Zoe for injuries and found none, a wave of relief washing over her. She had come specifically for Zoe, but seeing her safe with Dr. Vlachos was a significant comfort. Sophia, like Vlachos, understood the crucial role Zoe played in their work and shared in their collective sense of urgency to protect her.

“Sophia, you take Zoe topside,” Dr. Vlachos instructed firmly. “I’ll grab the vials and meet up with you shortly.”

Dr. Martin nodded reluctantly, then took Zoe’s hand. She tried to steer the girl away, but Zoe refused to let go of Dr. Vlachos.

“It’s okay,” Vlachos said, running his hand over her head and smiling warmly. “You will be safe with Dr. Martin. Now go. I will see you soon.”

Zoe complied and took Sophia’s hand. As soon as they departed, Dr. Vlachos entered his lab and went straight to the storage room. He retrieved a sturdy blood transport container from a shelf. The blue polyethylene container resembled the coolers used at youth sports events, but this one had a compressor that allowed it to keep temperature-sensitive products cool while on the go.

Hustling back to the lab, Dr. Vlachos unlocked the refrigerator using a keypad and carefully transferred the vials to the mobile container. Once finished, he closed the fridge and, for a split second, he considered removing the embryos from the incubator as well. Dr. Vlachos quickly discarded the notion. The embryos were fragile, and exposing them unnecessarily to contaminants in the air could do more harm than good. It was better to leave them alone and hope they remained undisturbed. He could always get more embryos. It was

Zoe and the DNA specimens that mattered most.

Sealing the container shut with a decisive click, Dr. Vlachos slung the shoulder strap over his head and made for the door. Outside, the corridor stretched eerily empty. The polished floors reflected the harsh red glare of the emergency lights, while the blaring alarm was a piercing reminder of the chaos that had erupted. Yet beyond it, he could still hear the desperate pounding of fists against reinforced steel doors. The test subjects screamed for release, their voices hoarse and raw with fear.

A sharp pang of guilt gnawed at him, but Dr. Vlachos knew there was no turning back. He could not afford to falter now, not with everything at stake. The mission had to succeed, even if it meant leaving the test subjects behind. Quieting his inner conflict, he hurried to the stairwell at the end of the hallway. His hand trembled slightly as he brought his ID badge to the scanner, the green light flashing an all-clear. The lock disengaged with a metallic clunk, and he pushed the door open. Without wasting another second, he began his ascent, the echo of his footsteps mingling with the distant cries below.

As Dr. Vlachos reached the exit to Sub-Level One, the door suddenly swung open, and a guard burst through, pistol drawn and eyes wide with adrenaline. Both men froze instantly, caught off-guard by the unexpected encounter before recognition dawned on them. There was no need for words; their tense silence spoke volumes. Dr. Vlachos stepped aside, his heart pounding, and allowed the guard to pass.

The guard double-timed his pace, racing up the steps to the main level. Dr. Vlachos followed at a distance, the sound of the guard's boots echoing off the cold, concrete walls. As he ascended, Vlachos picked up snippets of garbled radio chatter on the guard's shoulder-mounted radio.

"All units to the south wall. Repeat, all units to the south wall. We're under attack!"

The words sent a chill down Dr. Vlachos's spine. His mind reeled, struggling to comprehend the gravity of the situation. Who would do such a thing? Industrial espionage to steal trade secrets was one thing, but a full-scale attack to destroy the facility? It seemed unthinkable, yet the panic in the guard's movements told him this was no ordinary breach.

A sudden, icy fear gripped him. Whoever orchestrated this attack may be coming for the very specimens he carried. Dr. Vlachos knew he was in immediate danger, whether the perpetrators intended to steal or destroy the vials. The thought of losing his research and years of painstaking work sent a wave of nausea through him. Then it occurred to him: what if they wanted to

capture or kill him because of his work? That idea made his feet move faster.

Reaching the main level, Dr. Vlachos stumbled into a scene of utter chaos. Terrified workers, many still in their night clothes, were herded out of the building and driven forward by security personnel. Local firefighters, their gear clanking with every step, pushed past him, making their way to the facility's east side.

Vlachos paused, trying to catch his breath amidst the commotion. His thoughts were a whirlwind of fear and uncertainty. He pushed through the crowds in the lobby and slipped out into the night.

Pausing at the base of the steps, he looked eastward, where a thick plume of black smoke billowed into the midnight sky. The acrid scent of burning chemicals and debris hung heavy in the air, stinging his nostrils and throat. Below the swirling smoke, red-orange flames licked hungrily at the dark night. The situation was worse than he had feared; the fire was out of control and spreading rapidly.

A fit of coughing overtook him, the rancid smoke clawing at his lungs. Instinctively, Dr. Vlachos tightened his grip on the storage container. With renewed urgency, he turned toward the main gate and joined the frightened crowd already surging in that direction.

Nearing the gate, the mass of people suddenly ground to a halt, the flow of movement stopping so abruptly that Dr. Vlachos nearly collided with the person in front of him. The crowd began to murmur, confusion and fear rippling through them like an electric current.

"Step aside!" came a harsh, commanding voice from behind. "Make a hole!"

Dr. Vlachos turned to see two guards muscling their way through the crowd as it parted reluctantly. Their faces were set with grim determination, and rifles held at the ready; muzzles pointed skyward.

Reaching the main gate, the guards lowered their weapons and took aim at something beyond. The night air exploded with the loud crack of gunfire, the sharp reports echoing off the surrounding buildings.

Dr. Vlachos flinched at the sound, his heart pounding in his chest. He watched in stunned silence, his mind racing as he tried to piece together what was happening. Was this another assault on the facility? Or had the attackers managed to breach the perimeter? The explosion, the gunfire, the chaos—it was all spiraling out of control, and for the first time, Dr. Vlachos wondered if he would make it out alive.

Panic swept through the crowd like wildfire. They instinctively recoiled at the sound of automatic weapons and reversed direction in a frantic rush away

from the gate. Bodies jostled and shoved, desperate to escape the imminent danger, as cries of fear and confusion filled the air.

The crowd surged back toward the main building in a chaotic search for shelter, but something held Dr. Vlachos back, a morbid curiosity that rooted him in place even as the tide of humanity flowed around him. His instincts screamed at him to follow the crowd, to seek refuge from the madness, but he could not tear himself away. He had to know what was happening—who was responsible for this brazen attack and why they had chosen this night to strike.

Instead of joining the frantic retreat, Dr. Vlachos ducked behind a nearby golf cart, the vehicle offering scant but sufficient cover. Crouching low, he peered cautiously over the seats, his breath quick and unsteady. What he saw was beyond comprehension.

One vehicle?

Dr. Vlachos blinked twice, his round spectacles glinting in the flickering light. The guards were unloading round after round into a lone SUV—a Land Cruiser—that had somehow breached the compound's defenses and now sat vulnerable in the open field. The steady barrage of gunfire seemed disproportionate, almost absurd, against a single vehicle.

How could one vehicle cause so much chaos? Vlachos wondered.

His confusion deepened until his gaze shifted beyond the SUV. There, in the field, lay the smoldering wreckage of a military helicopter, its twisted metal frame partially engulfed in flames. Whoever had launched this attack was far more prepared and dangerous than he had initially realized.

Dr. Vlachos squinted, searching for any identifying marks on the helicopter's charred fuselage, but there were none. The lack of insignia only deepened his unease. It did not belong to the Peruvian Armed Forces or the national police—neither would dare operate this deep in cartel territory. Given Mathias's recent legal entanglements, this had to be the work of foreigners, likely the Americans.

But that still did not explain the lone vehicle.

Whoever was inside that SUV had to be incredibly brave or utterly desperate. The question gnawed at him, adding to the growing list of mysteries surrounding the night's events.

As the guards continued their relentless assault on the vehicle, Dr. Vlachos watched the escaping Land Cruiser serpentine its way across the wet field, up a nearby hill, and disappear onto the road leading to the airport. Once the mystery SUV was out of range, the sound of gunfire petered off, and an eerie silence filled the compound.

Dr. Vlachos remained crouched behind the golf cart. He could feel the tension in the air, thick and oppressive as if the very night held its breath alongside him. Nearby, the guards swept the area with the muzzles of their weapons, their movements cautious and deliberate, scanning every shadow for potential threats.

Moments stretched into eternity, and the silence was almost unbearable. Finally, with no immediate danger in sight, one of the guards lowered his weapon slightly and pressed a hand to the lapel mic of his tactical radio, his voice a low murmur as he communicated with whoever was on the other end.

“Control, this is Mike-Six,” he said with a heavy German accent. “Main gate is clear, over.”

More units around the facility followed suit, each reporting with the same message—no signs of enemy contact. The tension that had gripped the compound began to ease, and soon after, the all-clear signal cracked over the radios. The guards visibly relaxed, their rigid postures softening as they flipped the selector switches on their weapons to safe. The threat, it seemed, had passed.

Dr. Vlachos felt relief wash over him, the weight of fear momentarily lifting from his shoulders. He exhaled heavily, his breath coming out in a long, shaky sigh. Rising from his crouch, he allowed himself to believe, however briefly, that the danger was over. His eyes drifted back to the burning wreckage of the helicopter, now nothing more than a twisted mass of metal and flames. The sight was both horrifying and mesmerizing.

He squinted, trying to discern any further details in the wreckage that might explain who had attacked them and why. But before he could make sense of it, a voice cut through the haze of his thoughts, sharp and urgent.

“Dr. Vlachos!”

He turned around to find Sophia and Zoe running toward him, their expressions a mix of fear and relief. He broke into a hurried stride to meet them halfway.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

Dr. Martin nodded vigorously. “We’re fine. Could you see what was happening? Who were they shooting at?”

Dr. Vlachos shook his head, exchanging an unspoken understanding with Sophia not to discuss it further in front of Zoe. As he glanced past his colleague, he noticed the entrance to the main building had cleared.

“It seems to be over now,” Vlachos said. “Stay here with the others while I go inside to make sure the labs are safe.”

Sophia nodded in agreement, her arm linked with Zoe’s in a comforting

yet secure embrace.

Adjusting the container strap across his chest, Dr. Vlachos re-entered the facility through the main doors. The lobby was undamaged, but an eerie darkness permeated the space, with only the soft glow of emergency lighting cutting through the shadows.

Navigating the dimly lit area, the doctor nearly tripped over two fire hoses, which he followed down the adjacent corridor. In the distance, he spotted firefighters battling a blaze. As he ventured closer, two guards suddenly emerged from a side room and stepped into the hallway.

The lead guard, a burly man with a shaved head, reacted immediately. Keeping his MP4 at a low, ready position, he thrust out his arm to block Vlachos's path.

"Hold up, Doc," he said, recognizing Dr. Vlachos from previous encounters. "It's not safe here. You need to go back and wait outside."

Vlachos stopped, but curiosity drove him to peer past the guards, trying to steal a glance at the efforts to fight the fire. "But what happened?" he asked. "Who attacked us?"

"You'll know when we know," the guard replied, though uncertainty tinged his voice. "Now, please, go back the way you came and wait for further instructions."

Undeterred, Vlachos persisted. "What about the fire? Is it spreading to the lower levels?"

"It's under control," the guard said, impatience cutting through his tone. "The fire chief says it's contained to the east wing. Now, you need to leave." He punctuated his words by raising the muzzle of his weapon toward the ceiling, a clear reminder of his authority.

The guard's gesture and finality in his words made it clear that Vlachos was not to argue further. He sighed in frustration and began to turn away. But as he moved, his gaze drifted through the open door to his right. There, Vlachos caught sight of Mr. Renzo's lifeless body, sprawled on a bloodied sparring mat.

The attack was inside the facility, too!

Curiosity got the better of him, and he inched toward the open doorway to take a closer look. The guard reacted swiftly, blocking Vlachos with his thick arm.

"Whoa, Doc, you need to leave," he said sternly. "I mean it."

Startled by the guard's forceful nature, Vlachos raised his arms in surrender. "I—I can help him," he stammered, pointing to Renzo.

Given the situation's urgency, the guard's patience was as thin as his

tact. His gaze shifted to the metal container Dr. Vlachos carried. “What’s in the case?”

Dr. Vlachos tightened his grip ever so slightly on the strap. “Nothing dangerous,” he replied. “Just research samples.”

The guard, first on the scene and still visibly affected by the discovery of Mr. Renzo’s corpse, had spent several futile minutes attempting to revive the Chachapoyan. Eventually conceding to the inevitable, he notified his superiors of Renzo’s passing. Though the prospect of resuming CPR seemed futile, a glimmer of hope flickered in his eyes.

After a tense moment, the guard relented and lowered his arm.

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt,” he conceded reluctantly, gesturing inside. “See what you can do.”

“Thank you,” Vlachos replied, straightening his lab coat.

Dr. Vlachos entered the darkened dojo; his thoughts focused on Renzo. The faint glow from the emergency lights in the hallway barely penetrated the shadows, leaving Vlachos blinded to his surroundings. Suddenly, his foot collided with something heavy on the floor. Startled, he looked down to discover a second corpse with vacant eyes staring blankly at the ceiling.

Vlachos grimaced at the sight of the dead man, but then his expression softened as he recognized him—Lalo, one of the facility’s maintenance workers. He had a broken nose, and his face was smeared with dried blood. The puddle beside Lalo suggested that he had fallen face-first, likely dead before he hit the ground. The guards must have turned the body over.

As Vlachos scanned the corpse, something caught his eye—an object embedded in Lalo’s neck. His curiosity piqued, he knelt beside the body, his brow knitted.

“Give me your light,” he told the guard, waving him over urgently.

The guard complied, handing over his flashlight. Vlachos directed the beam onto the wound, revealing a small dart lodged in Lalo’s neck. Carefully, he removed it and held it up for closer inspection. The skin around the wound was decaying, a clear sign that the dart had delivered a fast-acting toxin.

“That was Mr. Renzo’s handiwork,” the guard offered with a hint of admiration. “We think Lalo set off the explosion and was helping the prisoners escape.”

Vlachos twisted around to look up at the guard. “What prisoners?”

The guard hesitated, realizing he had let slip more than he should have. Quickly, he redirected the conversation back to Renzo. “That’s not your concern. Now, what can you do for him?”

Vlachos was smart enough to drop the subject. Yet, it was clear now that his research and the labs were not the primary target of the attack. The helicopters had come for someone, not something.

Luna was the obvious answer. Every government and entrepreneur on the planet would kill to possess an Aiwan, making an all-out assault on Mathias's compound more plausible. Yet, any reputable intelligence organization would have known Luna left with Mathias yesterday and canceled the mission.

Unless they came for someone else, Vlachos mused.

Parking that thought for later, he turned his attention to Renzo. Vlachos swept the shoulder strap over his head, slipped his arm free, and crawled to the Chachapoyan's side on all fours. He found the corpse as bloodied and bruised as Lalo. However, his first instinct told him Renzo had not died of a gunshot or knife wound; otherwise, he would be lying in a pool of blood. He also ruled out a poisonous dart, which led Dr. Vlachos to one conclusion: asphyxiation. Considering how Renzo's eyes bugged out, the Chachapoyan most likely had the life choked out of him.

Dr. Vlachos dropped his shoulders with a deep sigh. Renzo looked like a lost cause, but crazier things had happened. Seventeen hours was the world record for reviving a clinically dead person without any signs of brain damage.

"How long has he been like this?" Vlachos asked.

"We found him about thirty minutes ago," the guard replied. "He was non-responsive to CPR."

Vlachos nodded. "Out in the hallway is an AED and oxygen kit. Grab them," he instructed, pointing to the door.

The guard responded without question and hurried out the door. Meanwhile, Vlachos set the flashlight aside and unbuttoned Renzo's Wing Chung jacket, exposing his bare chest. Just as he finished, the guard returned toting a black, hard-shell case.

"Set it down," Vlachos instructed, then handed back the flashlight.

Opening the AED case, he removed a handheld Jumbo D oxygen tank and a clear plastic mask. After checking that the tank was full, Vlachos placed the mask over Renzo's nose and mouth. He then opened the valve to allow oxygen to flow.

Next, he retrieved the automated external defibrillator from the case. He placed both electrode pads on Renzo's chest and waited for the AED to analyze the Chachapoyan's heart rhythm. Sensing the patient was in cardiac arrest, the AED prompted Dr. Vlachos to press the delivery button.

"Clear!" Vlachos called out before delivering the first shock.

Renzo's body convulsed, but his heart did not respond. Wasting no time, Dr. Vlachos began CPR for the next two minutes. As soon as he finished counting off in his head, he rechecked the AED. The readout determined a second shock was needed. Dr. Vlachos delivered another, but still no response. He went back to administering CPR and repeated the process two more times. Before administering the fourth shock, he told himself this would be the last.

The final shock was delivered, but Renzo remained unresponsive.

Dr. Vlachos sighed, settling back onto his knees in quiet defeat. His gaze lingered on the lifeless body before him, but a small measure of solace softened the ache; he had upheld his Hippocratic Oath to the very end. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Vlachos's hand accidentally brushed against the case containing vials of force enhancement serum. He raised his eyebrows as inspiration struck. The serum might revive Renzo but could cause more harm than good in the long run. The rabid test subjects imprisoned in his lab were a grim reminder of that risk. Yet, it might give Renzo a fighting chance until Vlachos could perfect his formula.

"You did your best," the guard said. "You want us to dump the bodies in the jungle or send them to the crematorium?"

Vlachos ignored the question and sprang into action. He opened his carrying case, the yellow vials of force enhancement serum glistening under the guard's flashlight. He removed the black foam cushion from the lid, revealing a hidden compartment. Vlachos unzipped the pocket, retrieving the longest of three portable syringes, and clamped it between his teeth. With steady hands, he picked up a vial of serum.

Holding the vial in one hand and the syringe in the other, Vlachos bit off the needle's clear cap and spat it over his shoulder. He double-checked the beveled side of the needle's tip faced upward, then pressed it into the vial's rubber stopper. Like a skilled nurse, he knew this technique would prevent tiny rubber fragments from entering the syringe or contaminating the vial.

Vlachos extracted 0.25mL of serum from the vial and safely tucked it back into the case. Holding the syringe up to the light, he tapped it to bring any air bubbles to the surface.

The guard eyed the yellow substance warily. "What is that?"

"Not your concern," Vlachos retorted with a measure of satisfaction.

Next came the tricky part. Although intracardiac injections were nothing new to Vlachos, they were always nerve-racking. In his line of work, test subjects often flatlined during human trials, forcing him to administer heart injections with atropine. However, this was his first time using the serum in this manner,

making him both cautious and morbidly curious.

Vlachos removed the AED pad over Renzo's heart, then walked his fingertips along the man's sternum until he located the fourth intercostal space between Renzo's ribs. Unlike in Hollywood movies, where the needle is dramatically slammed into the victim's chest, Dr. Vlachos was more surgical in his approach. Choosing his spot, he pressed the needle slowly into Renzo's chest and injected the serum.

Behind him, the guard winced as Vlachos withdrew the needle. He half-expected Renzo to bolt upright, but there was no reaction.

"Nothing happened," the guard remarked, stating the obvious.

"Not yet," Vlachos muttered, his voice edged with concern.

Replacing the AED pad over Renzo's heart, Vlachos activated the device. Prompted by the signal, he announced, "Clear!" and pressed the delivery button.

Renzo's body convulsed, his back arching as electricity ran through his body, then went slack.

Vlachos wiped his brow, watching and waiting for signs of life. When none came, he checked his watch, noting the time of death.

"Did he have family?" Vlachos asked the guard.

The guard shrugged when suddenly the AED beeped, detecting a heartbeat. Vlachos and the guard turned sharply in disbelief toward Renzo. Vlachos quickly leaned in and pressed his fingers to Renzo's neck, checking for a pulse. His brow arched with excitement as he felt a faint but undeniable rhythm—Renzo's heart was beating again.

"I don't friggin' believe it, Doc. You did it!" the guard nearly shouted.

Vlachos was also stunned by his success. Looking down at Renzo, he noticed the oxygen mask fog with each breath the Chachapoyan took. The doctor then jostled his patient and asked in a loud voice, "Mr. Renzo, can you hear me?"

Vlachos continued shaking Renzo, attempting to stir him from his death-defying slumber.

"Mr. Renzo, if you can hear me, I need you to open your eyes," Vlachos said firmly. "Mr. Renzo!"

Renzo's eyes suddenly shot open, and he gasped deeply behind his mask, startling Vlachos and the guard. His gaze darted in a blind panic, and he instinctively tried to sit up.

"Easy," Vlachos soothed, pressing his hands gently on Renzo's shoulders to keep him still. "You're alive."

He then waved irritably at the guard, signaling him to move his flashlight

out of Renzo's face. Flustered, the guard redirected the beam, but this did little to calm Renzo. With a burst of adrenaline, Renzo pushed Vlachos away and sat up sharply. Vlachos recoiled, raising his hands in a gesture of peace.

Renzo blinked repeatedly, his vision clearing as he struggled to gather his bearings. Vlachos and the guard held their breath, watching intently to see what Renzo would do next.

Breathing deeply into the mask, Renzo locked eyes with Dr. Vlachos, searching for answers.

"It's okay," Vlachos said in a calming voice. "You're safe now."

Renzo glanced between Vlachos and the guard, each staring back at him with expressions of relief and amazement. Recognition dawned slowly; the vague familiarity of their faces had a calming effect, and the wildness in the Chachapoyan's eyes began to fade. He then turned his attention to his surroundings, a wave of relief washing over him as he realized he was in his dojo.

But then he saw Lalo's dead body a few feet away.

Traitor!

The events of the past hour flooded back. Renzo remembered delivering the poison dart that killed the maintenance worker. His gaze sharpened as he turned his head toward the door. He spotted the case holding his blowgun in the shadows, exactly where he had left it.

Then came the memory of his brutal brawl with the ex-North Korean operative, Choi Min-jun. Renzo stared unseeing into the distance, recalling their savage fight. Both had fought with relentless ferocity, exchanging blows without mercy. But in the end, Renzo had no memory of how the battle ended.

Jumping back to the present, he frantically scanned the room, searching for any sign of his opponent. But there was none.

In a flash of rage, Renzo tore the oxygen mask off his face. "Where?" he croaked in a raspy voice, then coughed. "Where is he?"

Dr. Vlachos gave him a curious look. "Who, señor?"

Renzo's eyes flared with a vengeful intensity, the name searing through his mind like a fiery brand. His muscles tightened, every fiber of his being trembling with rage. Through gritted teeth, he growled, "Min!"