

The beast was well secured to the table, unable to raise its head or bite. It was rolling its eyes, writhing in pain, twisted sounds exiting contorted lips. They had decided not to use anesthetics, to avoid risks to the precarious equilibrium of the fetus. In any case, as soon as the placenta was recovered, Bill would suppress it with an injection. The green sack was waiting on the floor, ready for the incinerator. They couldn't afford to leave any traces.

But they could have put a hood over its head. Or at least covered its eyes.

Shrouded in her cap, gown and mask, the neonatal nurse extended her trembling hands to receive the fruit of Gabriele's fundamental intuition and years of research. There would be no surprises. The intrauterine analyses and ultrasounds had already confirmed everything, even the twenty-inch length.

And it came out, with blood not its own streaking down the neonatal vernix. Bill dropped it slowly into the nurse's gloved hands. Male, white, delicate lines, thin light hair, cranium intact, spared the violence of a natural childbirth. And no brain. Gabriele smiled under his mask. They had just by-passed an obsolete God and his laws, but this was not the time to get sentimental.

The nurse hurriedly placed the small, limp body on the surface that would host it in the machine. She inserted the minuscule tubes of the respirator into its nose as a shiver coursed through the body and it opened its eyes for a brief unconscious look at the world. The nurse stiffened and looked at Gabriele, who backed up a step and turned to Bill.

"It's all right - Bill said - just mechanical reflexes."

The nurse bent over the body which was again motionless. The integrated survival system, its new artificial mother, swallowed it up in a dehumanizing tangle of wires and tubes.

Bill lowered his eyes and finished off the female. They were not totally wrong in calling him Bill the Butcher, like the gangster in the movie. He was the one who took care of the transgenic female chimpanzees when they were pregnant, in the lab they had dubbed the nursery, on the seventh floor below ground. At Biogas, Inc., poor taste was often the rule.

The party an hour later was supposed to be a surprise and exuded all the warmth of a train station waiting room. But for once it didn't matter to Gabriele, as he entered the conference room on the third floor above ground. The motif was Italian. Three large cans, once containing Bertolli olive oil, and two metal boxes of biscotti, also empty and adorned with a dark curly haired young girl, were prominently displayed on the table.

About fifteen people were present, only those who knew. Gabriele had worked with some of them, but was surprised to see several others. They clustered in small cliques, smiling nervously and strangely subdued.

Bill sipped from his can of Diet Coke. His hiking boots were no longer hidden by green shoe covers. Like the day they'd spent together two weeks earlier. They'd walked the coastal hills of Point Reyes and Bill had pointed out the plants and animals and filled Gabriele's head with a jumble of habitats and wing spans and scientific names. And for a few hours Gabriele hadn't thought about his work at Biogas. Now only Bill circulated among the groups. His scuffed boots shuffled noiselessly across the carpet and his eyes radiated light like those of a prophet heralding a new era.

Gabriele stood slightly apart, his arm resting on a large plastic provolone cheese. Toeger, his boss and director of research at Biogas, strode onto the dais, like a presidential candidate, but without the backdrop of an American flag. Amid chuckles from the small audience, he recalled the genius of Leonardo da Vinci and followed up with all the right words.

"Great success for Biogas... and for Gabriele... years of failed attempts... now Interceptor... investors' confidence... promising future..."

Toeger moved on to the reorganization of office space within Biogas. A room would be made available to Gabriele, on the third floor, where Toeger and all those who really counted in the company had their offices. "Long overdue," he proclaimed.

Someone handed Gabriele a small dish piled high with diced Gouda, strawberries, cherry tomatoes, black olives, seedless grapes and saltless saltines.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

Toeger was announcing that he'd already spoken to the Board of Directors and that there would soon be a pay raise for Gabriele, who joined in the applause.

"God Bless America," Toeger concluded, his right hand raised above the group. But when he stepped down to embrace Gabriele, the clasp was decidedly Soviet.

Gabriele leaned over the table and plunged a knife into the cake frosted with the red, white and green of the Italian flag. The group toasted the success of Biogas and he toasted himself, studying the strings of small bubbles rising from the California spumante in his plastic glass. When he looked up and met Debbie's eyes, he knew he'd made it.

Gabriele was the last to descend the zigzag stairs. The afternoon sun filled the concrete and glass foyer and shone on the fourth of the six elevators on the opposite wall. At Biogas, an elevator based hierarchy prevailed. Power and discretion dictated certain necessities and their elevators. It was not possible to mix official clients, who were taken to the thickly carpeted third floor, to talk about ecology and the future of the planet, with the true ones, who were whisked down to permitted areas on the underground floors. And even within the organization you were catalogued by the elevator you took and the floor or the level which you climbed or descended to.

He crossed the hall, nodded to the guards, and stood waiting before elevator number four. The sun began to warm his back as he thought of the chance nature of the sun alignment and his mind caressed the allegory of his descent into the abyss, leaving the sun behind. Gabriele inserted the pass, hit the code and pressed the button that would take him to the fifth level below ground. But his descent was not to the netherworld, as it was there that he had found his earthly paradise.

The doors remained shut for an extra half second, then opened slowly, creating a vertical shaft of light. She was at her desk, her face partially covered by hair flowing from her bowed head, as she repeated her usual ritual of pretending not to see him.

"Hi, Debbie," he said loudly.

Debbie flipped back strands of blond hair, raised two heavily laden blue eyelashes and pushed herself out from under the desk.

"Hi," she said, her smile a mile long, as Gabriele headed for the corridor leading to his office.

Debbie's tasks included the delicate one of welcoming and showing around the real clients of Biogas, the ones who knew of the project and believed in it enough to risk large sums of money. For the chosen few, the contemplation of the scenery was part of the tour: like primroses in spring fields, bright colored thongs invariably peeked out from under Debbie's miniskirts. This evening they were red.

Gabriele ran his tongue over his teeth and shrugged. Being a Scorpio, with Mars in ascendancy at the hour of his birth, he interpreted the red color as a good omen. Not that he believed in that stuff.

In his office, he slipped into a white lab coat and sat down at the desk in what would remain his laboratory. His gums still ached. After so many years in a country, where cavities are the bane of one's existence, he had adapted to six-month dental cleaning appointments. But the day before, Gabriele had gotten the worst of his dentist's technicians, a young Japanese hygienist, who must have had a kamikaze grandfather and, as his blood descendent, continued his mission in America. He tried to give her a historical perspective of Axis politics.

"You know, World War Two? Germany? Italy? Japan?" he said.

She nodded distractedly. "Open wide," she said and moved in close.

He was thinking about what to do with the little time remaining in his day, when the flashing light and the plastic buzz of his telephone tore him from thoughts of Debbie. It was the private line to the director.

"Yes?" he said warily.

"Doctor Paladeenow?" The voice was male, with a marked Southern accent.

His second yes was decidedly surprised, not by the moderate mispronunciation of the name - it was practically impossible to find someone who called him Palladino, with two "l's" and a final "o" - but because someone other than Toeger had accessed that line.

"Please excuse me if I disturb you in your office," the voice said to him. "My name is Joshua T. Carson. You don't know me, but I know you and your work and I'd very much like to discuss a job I think you may be interested in. Perhaps we could have dinner?"

"Look, I already have a..."

"Please consider, Doctor - said Carson, the words smooth and drawn out like rubber bands - the fact that I'm calling you on the internal line should be an indication of how much we are aware of the nature and the validity of your research at Biogas and should also be a guarantee of our sincerity and confidentiality..."

Gabriele took two seconds, then shook his head. He wasn't going to fall for it. He knew the risks that such a call might entail. If Joshua T. Carson were a journalist, not only could Gabriele's career and future earnings be in jeopardy, but the whole Biogas operation. The golden eggs were laid by a chicken that was pecking outside the law. And up to that moment nothing had leaked out. Or maybe it had, if this Joshua T. Carson was calling him now. Or maybe it was a trick by one of his colleagues, or even the boss himself. To test his sincerity and confidentiality.

Gabriele politely declined the invitation. He shut his eyes against the gaudy colors of the Matisse poster which decorated the windowless wall before him and held on to the receiver until he heard the click of the other phone. In a security obsessed company like Biogas, how had Carson pulled that one off?

He turned on the computer and opened the double-password protected file. It was time to get a start on his final report. But Joshua T. Carson's words still rang in his ears. Despite Gabriele's refusal, Carson had said he'd be in touch. And he'd seemed very sure of himself.

But Gabriele didn't need a new job. The future lay in that small incubator, two floors down. And if he played his cards right, he'd never have to worry about finances again. Not bad for the poor Italian immigrant who'd almost missed the boat.

But how much did Carson know?

When he got up a while later, he hardly glanced at the poster. Debbie was still at her desk in the reception area.

"How's it doing?" she asked.

"They keep saying it's stabilized."

Debbie gave him the thumbs up and Gabriele only let go of his smile when he was outside in the sun, looking out over the Pacific. Biogas occupied a building located half way up a hill on a small promontory, which afforded an endless view of the ocean. He had the sea in his blood and after all these years he still couldn't bring himself to call that vast stretch of water an ocean. For him it was always a sea, just like in Sardinia.

A ten-minute walk would take him to Residential Park, where staff members had their assigned housing. Off to the side of the path, a squirrel sat motionless among the fuchsias and nasturtiums and fleshy green tentacles of the ice plants. When he'd first arrived, he'd been the one to stop and observe the squirrels, but the novelty had soon worn off and now they only conjured up the Disney cartoons of his youth.

The squirrel nimbly scrambled up the twisted trunk of a Monterey cypress. It stopped midway and shook its bushy tail at Gabriele, before scurrying off.

Gabriele grabbed a handful of multicolored envelopes from the mailbox in front of his house and stepped aside to let a jogger pass. Thin wires ran up the front of his blue sweatshirt and fed into two

earpieces and his sweaty disconnected smile had a faraway look to it. The runner was vaguely familiar and obviously had clearance to be in the authorized housing area, but Gabriele couldn't remember what his function was at Biogas.

He slipped off his shoes in the small entrance and waited for his eyes to adapt to the darkened interior. After a quick glance at his mail, he threw the whole pile in the wastebasket, including two credit card offers. With a glass of Glenfiddich and ice, he went upstairs to his study. At his desk, he listened to the reassuring whisper that indicated the computer was turned on.

A picture of himself as a baby smiled down on him from the wall. He was barely a toddler in an ironed button down shirt and pair of shorts, clutching the hem of his mother's dress. His parents had taken him to Turin to visit his grandmother and they'd spent the afternoon at Valentino Park. The leaves and flowers evoked the brightness of that spring, though the colors in the photo were badly faded. His father had taken it a few years before his death.

He smiled back at the picture and at the nearness of the memory of his mother, though she too had died, years before. It would have taken some explaining, for her to understand, but then she would have been proud of him.

His phone beeped as the Cloning web site filled the screen. Gabriele adjusted his headset.

"Hey, Maestro." Debbie's voice sounded warm and a little breathless.

"Hey to you too."

Gabriele decided to play it slow, as he mentally confronted his policy of not getting involved with women at work.

"So, what are we doing to celebrate?" Debbie said.

The latest issue of Cloning, which had just come out, appeared on the screen and Gabriele clicked on the table of contents.

"What did you have in your mind?" he said.

"Oh, I have a lot of things in my mind. And have I ever told you how much I love your Italian accent? And your funny little way of talking."

Gabriele grimaced, as he picked up on his mistake, but Debbie had already launched into a description of a new pizza place, called Adolfo's, and their marvelous creations. He nodded at her gushing words and scrolled down the list of articles. Adolfo's. Why not? He deserved a celebration. Especially when the alternative was another night alone.

"It's all in the crust. I love the feel of it between my teeth, you know, all chewy..."

"You sound dangerous," he said. And froze.

Somewhere in his mind he heard the echo of Debbie's laughter, but his attention was locked on the title of an article, halfway down the screen: Poly-Interceptase and anencefalic primates' embryos. And the name next to it, Arnold B. Toeger.

"And they put these little red tomatoes on top..."

The other two authors were Laura, Toeger's third wife, and Thomas Park, his assistant. Gabriele clicked again and the text appeared.

"They've got this kind of resistant skin, but then you let them pop in your mouth, all hot and juicy..."

It filled two pages. The entire molecular structure of the prototype of Interceptor, was right there, before his eyes. The one he'd developed to produce the first anencefalic chimpanzees, before they moved on to pseudo-humans. But here it was all credited to Toeger and his cronies.

He slid back and grabbed the armrests of his chair. "You bastard," he said.

"I beg your pardon," she said still laughing. And, after a pause: "Gabriele, are you still there?"

"I've been screwed."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"Toeger's done it this time. He's broken the agreement. He's taken over my research."

"Gabriele." He heard her draw in a quick breath. "Gabriele, don't say another word. I'm coming right over."

Gabriele quickly ran through the pros and cons of having Debbie as a confidante. Her surprise seemed to be genuine but he had never really figured out who knew what at Biogas.

"Listen to me, Gabriele. The important thing is not to do anything rash. Anything that you'll regret, you know, careerwise. I'll just get my car keys and be there in two minutes."

"No," he said, but the line was already dead.

Gabriele held his hands tight against his face. Everyone who collaborated on the covert activities of Biogas knew that their individual ideas, if profitable, would be quietly remunerated. There was an intricate system of payments for analyses and consultations, which would appear to have been carried out for a clinic owned by a sister company in Palmera, in the Lower Antilles. Toeger was the one who, on a case by case basis, decided the time and mode for the publications by the researchers who worked on the fifth level. Results of the research were carefully filtered into the scientific community so that methods and products could be commercialized. But only when this would not endanger their final goal. And nothing authorized Toeger to claim the glory and reap the economic awards of other people's research.

The first ring of the bell jolted him out of his thoughts. With the second and third ring, every neuron in his brain directed him to the door, but something else held him back.

After several minutes the doorbell grew silent and the telephone began ringing. Gabriele threw off his earphone and waited, imagining Debbie outside, her cell phone pressed against her ear. She didn't call out. She wouldn't risk that; not in the secure area.

The car door slammed a moment later and the engine turned over. He went to the window and pushed aside the edge of the curtain. White swirls of evening fog dipped to the ground as Debbie's Nissan slowly pulled away from the curb and started down the silent street.

It was late, when he sat in his bed and waited for the pill to take effect. He glanced at the book that lay across his knees. Girolamo Savonarola, the fifteenth century monk, was depicted in profile on the cover. His enormous hooked nose, the one visible eye, bulging defiantly, and his thin lips, drawn together in a frown, all communicated his sense of mission, his fanaticism.

The Medicis and other rich and noble families fled Florence for safer places, but those who stayed, even the wealthy, converted to the words of Savonarola. The unarmed prophet, as he was called, preached his holy war against the corruption of the church and the papacy and the lords of this world, and thousands flocked to the piazze and cast their paintings, books and elegant clothes into the bonfires of the vanities. Gabriele had reached the sermons of that Lent, as Savonarola, before his packed church, calmly proclaimed his readiness to die. But he couldn't have known that only three years later the pope would be victorious and the acrid smell of his own and his disciples' burned flesh would fill the streets of Florence.

Gabriele too was a believer, in his own way. His pseudo-humans would provide an immense service, an almost limitless supply of organs to replace diseased or decrepit ones, and without the danger of rejection. And if both he and Biogas stood to make an enormous amount of money from the vast and hungry market, so what? Money fueled research in a market economy, nobody disputed that.

But now he didn't see the sense of his being pushed aside, in spite of the official rhetoric, the new office and the pay raise. Just as the company was finally on the brink of turning a profit, an incredible profit, why risk having an unhappy employee, especially one who had been so instrumental in making it all possible? And one who knew so much.

He thought of the party, the speeches and Toeger's rigid embrace. At least, in Giotto's frescoes of Jesus' arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, Judas was obvious. Among all the other disciples, he was the one with no halo.

The next morning the New York Times carried a first page article about the brainless monkey that had been cloned in California. The controversies would soon follow, but in the meantime Toeger's academic prestige would shoot as high as the company shares. Gabriele reached for the Excedrin bottle.

At Biogas he walked straight up to the third floor. Toeger's secretary stood up, raising a manicured hand: "I'm sorry, Dr Palladino, but..."

Gabriele sidestepped her and marched into Toeger's office, with the copy of the article in his hand.

Toeger was semi-reclined in his upholstered leather armchair. He caressed his coffee mug, his head leaning into the telephone cradled on his shoulder. His eyes met Gabriele's for a second and he gestured for him to sit down.

"What I wish to emphasize here is that this is a team effort..."

Toeger's smile seemed to bite into the receiver. Under his white lab coat, his broad shoulders filled out his tailored gray suit.

"Yes, the initial idea was mine, but without the collaboration of the whole group..."

Gabriele leaned against the wall, his hands heavy at his side, and shot another glance at Toeger. No horns or goat feet, but one of his black Italian leather shoes, shined to a mirror finish, was beating a rhythm against the carpet. The Devil. He turned the image over several times in his mind. The Devil, shod by Bruno Magli.

"What makes us different is our ability to work together toward a common objective. Just like a family. I am firmly convinced this has enabled us to succeed where others have failed."

Family values. He'd already heard it a hundred times. It always made a good finale to an interview, in harmony with the times and the values of a society that believes in great ideals.

Toeger put down the receiver with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Gabriele, tchow. What an honor. I don't think I've seen you in my office three times in three years."

"Did you write this stuff?"

Toeger's answering smile would have swallowed up even Gabriele's family, if he'd had one.

"Well now, if I signed it..."

"But Interceptor's mine." He felt his voice rise out of the tightness in his chest.

Toeger's foot didn't miss a beat on the beige carpet. "Don't tell me you're not happy with us? Or maybe you're not making enough money?"

When Gabriele passed through her office, Toeger's secretary was still standing at her desk. She had a green folder clutched tight against her chest and her grayish brown hair was slightly askew. Gabriele crumpled the article into a hard ball, pitched it into the wastebasket next to her chair and left.

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