

# LIFEBLOOD

## CHAPTER TWO

### SCENE 1

**STEPHANIE:** “Mr. Elwood’s office, please hold ... Mr. Elwood’s office, please hold ... Mr. Elwood’s— *oh!* Hi, Lisa! How are you? — Oh, I’m doing great, thanks for asking! How’s Rich...?”

**ELWOOD:** I’ll tell you something, folks, it’ll be a cold day in hell when I get a quiet day in the office. Hm? Yes, that’s right, I’m talking to *you*. What, you thought your little bumpkin protagonist was the only screwball out here who could narrate? G-d, I’m surrounded by morons. Let me make this nice and simple for you to understand. While Mr. Small Town Hero was off playing investigative journalist, the real movers and shakers of this town – namely, *me* – were getting some actual work done. “For the love of- this is just *not* my day, is it? Things can’t just go right, can they? No, no, of course not. That’d be too easy. And now I’m stuck here fielding ten-thousand emails and two dozen phone calls a minute all because a couple of moronic teenybopper had to go and– ... Ah, right on cue! – What? What, what do you want? Who’s this?”

**UNKNOWN SPEAKER:** “Have the runaways been located?”

**ELWOOD:** “Located? Oh, is *that* what I was supposed to be doing? I *knew* I was forgetting something! Silly me, I’d been out here singing Yankee-Doodle all morning with my thumb rammed up my—”

**UNKNOWN SPEAKER:** “You forget yourself, Elwood.”

**ELWOOD:** “Yes. Right. Sorry, ahh, just- *yes*, yes they have.”

**UNKNOWN SPEAKER:** “Where are they?”

**ELWOOD:** “I believe they’re being brought into the local police station for questioning.”

**UNKNOWN SPEAKER:** “That is ... unfortunate.”

**ELWOOD:** “It couldn’t be helped. But I sent Masterson in to start on damage control.”

**UNKNOWN SPEAKER:** “The man’s a buffoon.”

**ELWOOD:** “Just like the rest of this county’s population ... He’s good with the townies. And a reminder that Eos graduates can and do become well adjusted, contributing members of society. To some degree, anyway.”

**UNKNOWN SPEAKER:** “I’ll remind you, Elwood, this ... *experiment* was begun at your insistence. Anything that comes of it, including any financial gains or expenses or blemishes to the company’s reputation, will be considered by the partners as directly your doing. And you will be dealt with accordingly.”

**ELWOOD:** “Right, of course. Thank you for the, err, reminder.”

**UNKNOWN SPEAKER:** “Good day, Elwood.”

**ELWOOD:** “Son of a- when it rains, it pours ... Stephanie! Get Masterson on the line. I need to speak to that imbecile.”

**STEPHANIE:** “Yes, Mr. Elwood!”

**STEPHANIE:** “Hello? Hello, Mr. Masterson? ... I’m having some trouble hearing you. Are your windows down? ... I’m so sorry to have to ask, but would it be possible for you to perhaps pull over or roll up the- ... Yes, that’s right. Thank you, that’s much better. ... This is Stephanie, Mr. Elwood’s secretary. He’s asked me to- ... Oh, why, thank you, Mr. Masters- Yes. Yes, ‘Jimmy,’ of course. ... *(laughs)* Oh, how quaint! Yes, well, thank you, Mister- Uhm, *Jimmy*. ... Funny you mention it, actually. That’s why I called. Mr. Elwood would like to speak with you. ... Mh-hm, yes. Yes, that’s right. ... Thank you. Please hold ... He’s on line three, sir!”

**ELWOOD:** The trouble with shareholders is that they collectively have the memory capacity of a single, benzo-adedled, concussed goldfish. Sure, they want to lynch me for this mess, but they forget that *I’m* the one who launched this branch. The New Horizons center, and every *cent* the company has ever made from it in the last fifteen years, is thanks almost exclusively to me. Now, I’m a very humble man, but I’m also a goddamn financial genius! And I’ve got a nose for business that could out-sniff a bloodhound. And if these latest initiatives I’m looking into are even *half* as profitable as the center’s adolescent wards have been, than I deserve a damn medal, not getting my ass chewed out by the board of directors. And I— “Hm? Oh, yes—”

**ELWOOD (CON’T) :** “Thank you, Stephanie! ... Now, where was I...? “Masterson, you there?”

**JIMMY:** “Sure am! Man, you are *psychic!* I was just about to call you.”

**ELWOOD:** “Mh-hm, is that so?”

**JIMMY:** “That it is! Listen, the situation at Maguire’s? Taken care of. You’re welcome. I told the owner we’d have some flunkies come out and clean the place up for him. Should be plenty of time to sweep for any, ah, *undesirable* odds and ends the kiddies might’ve left behind.”

**ELWOOD:** “Hm. That’s not bad. Well done, Mr. Masterson. I must admit, you’re smarter than you look.”

**JIMMY:** “Awh, stop it, you talk like my mother.”

**ELWOOD:** “That’s unfortunate for you.”

**JIMMY:** “Yeah, tell me about it, *anyway!*, about the kids: they got some kind of therapist or whatever from the school going with them down to the station. Her name’s Jackie Adler.”

**ELWOOD:** “What? And you didn’t tell them that was unnecessary? An Eos representative will be there to see to their legal needs.”

**JIMMY:** “A’course I told them that, man! But you know how it goes with these bleeding heart types. They want to make sure yous aren’t just seeing to ‘company interests,’ so the gal’s got to be there. Making sure their rights don’t get trampled on and what not.”

**ELWOOD:** “I see. Very well. Anything else?”

**JIMMY:** “Well, sort of...”

**ELWOOD:** “Out with it, Masterson.”

**JIMMY:** “So there’s a slight wrinkle. This counselor, social worker, whatever? She knows one of the kids. Dax Kennedy was a student at the high school where she works.”

**ELWOOD:** “That’s hardly uncommon. Most of the patients at the center come from this or one of the neighboring townships.”

**JIMMY:** “Yeah, but apparently Dax used to go to Adler’s office *a lot*. Like I mean *a lot*, a lot. Bad home life this, gender dysphoria that, blah-blah-blah. Boo-hoo me, that sort of thing.”

**ELWOOD:** “I see.”

**JIMMY:** “So, eh, what do you want to do?”

**ELWOOD:** “Hm. Leave it to me, Masterson. I’ll take it from here.”

**JIMMY:** “Sure thing, boss man.”

**ELWOOD:** “Hm. Sounds like it’s time to start calling in some favors.”

**ELWOOD:** Huh? Oh. What are *you* still doing here? Can't you see I've got some important business to take care of? Go on, *scram!*

## SCENE 2

**WEATHER REPORT #3:** “We’re getting a wintry mix a little earlier than expected, with maybe some rain to the south-southeast. A winter storm watch has begun further north, and we’re looking at a possible winter alert, ourselves, over the next few hours. Our snowcast over the weekend is looking like snow and ice, possibly upwards of three inches of accumulation, though it's a bit too soon to be making any definitive statements about amounts—”

**DAX:** I... I can't remember what happened. Everything feels like a blur since my parents pulled me out of school. I remember the looks on their faces the night I told them everything. I talked about the research I'd been doing online, and some of the things we'd been taught about in our Wellness class this year, and the conversations I'd had with Ms. Adler. They hadn't yelled or screamed at me like I thought they might. Dad didn't say anything, in fact. And Mom she... well, it was almost worse than her yelling. She just kept saying how *scared* she was for me. How *worried* she was that I was about to make a decision I'd regret. And then they'd each sort of gotten... distant. Or more distant than they always were, anyway. For weeks, it was like no one in the house would even *look* at me. Then I came home from school on Friday, and saw the luggage in the living room. I asked where they were going, and when they told me it wasn't *them* going anywhere, I-... I wish I could remember what happened. I stared at my hands. They were all cut up and bandaged. Officer Peterson had been very nice when we got out of his car and went into the station. He helped me clean up all the cuts and took me to his desk to put a few bandaids on the really bad ones. He even took my handcuffs off.

**OFFICER PETERSON:** “There we go, kiddo! Good as new.”

**DAX:** “Thank you, officer.”

**OFFICER PETERSON:** “Call me Phil.”

**DAX:** He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. For a couple of seconds he just stared at me.

**OFFICER PETERSON:** “You know, you probably don't remember me, but we met before.”

**DAX:** “We did?”

**OFFICER PETERSON:** “Yeah, about a year and a half ago.”

**DAX:** “I- oh.”

**OFFICER PETERSON:** “Yeah. I was one of the officers dispatched when your- I don’t know, I guess it was your brother?”

**DAX:** “Half-brother.”

**OFFICER PETERSON:** “Right, right. When he... well, I won’t go opening up old wounds. But I remember you. You didn’t seem like the bad type to me then. And you still don’t, now.”

**DAX:** “Thank you.”

**OFFICER PETERSON:** “What happened to you last night, kid? Did that boy pressure you into breaking in there or something?”

**DAX:** “I- I don’t... I can’t-”

**JACKIE:** “Officer Peterson, I’m sorry, but we really can’t have you questioning Dax until their guardian or lawyer arrives.”

**DAX:** Ms. Adler walked over to us. I looked up and she gave me a small smile. She looked tired. And sad. And not just the kind of tired and sad that everybody said women looked like when they weren’t wearing makeup and smiling. I was used to adults looking at me like that. She was still wearing her coat and had her work bag slung over one shoulder. She’d ridden upfront in the passenger seat of the patrol car when Officer Peterson drove us all to the station, but had stopped outside to talk to the couple of reporters who were waiting out front. Brightridge was a small town, and there was never a whole lot going on. I bet every kid at school was going to be talking about this. About me ... Again.

**OFFICER PETERSON:** “I wasn’t questioning her. We were just chatting. Ain’t that right, Dax?”

**JACKIE:** “Phil...”

**OFFICER PETERSON:** “Alright, alright. Sure, I get it.”

**JACKIE:** “How about you come over here with me, Dax?”

**DAX:** “Okay.”

**OFFICER PETERSON:** “You take care, kid.”

**DAX:** “Thank you, uh, Phil.”

**JACKIE:** “You must be hungry. When’s the last time you ate?”

**DAX:** “I... I don’t remember. But I’m not very hungry.”

**JACKIE:** “Maybe just some water, then?”

**DAX:** “Okay.”

### SCENE 3

**HUGO:** “Come on, come on, come on, come on...” I stood in line at the grocery store, anxiously tapping my foot while trying to look up how long triple-A batteries last for in old lecture recorders. Of course, the public wifi at the strip mall was as overburdened as a public defender’s office on the Monday morning after Halloween, so I wasn’t getting anything. In aggravation I stuffed my phone back in my pocket and tried not to glare at the woman ahead of me in line, who seemed to be having trouble getting her rewards card to scan. “Jesus Christ, lady.”

**WOMAN SHOPPER:** “Excuse me?”

**HUGO:** “Uh, nothing, nothing. Sorry.”

**CASHIER:** “Thank you for your patronage. Have a wonderful rest of your day.”

**HUGO:** As I started unloading my cart onto the conveyor belt with the sort of rushed excitability a child had on Christmas morning, the cashier girl began scanning the items with all the passion of a reanimated corpse. No, seriously, you might think your hometown has it bad when it comes to vacant-eyed teen cashiers, but you’ve got nothing on our award-winning customer service standards here in Brightridge. Of course, the awards were for “Worst Possible Service,” but we left that part out of the brochures. You could always tell when someone was a recent Eos graduate. They had these hollowed out, lifeless expressions on their faces, with heavy bags under their eyes and pale skin that almost seemed to glow under the cheap, fluorescent lighting. *Damn*, I thought as I watched the total climb higher and higher with each item the girl lethargically scanned. Maybe this was the universe’s way of punishing myself for taking advantage of a friend. Most nights I just ate something at Maguire’s, which thankfully Sean never charged me for or took out of my pay. And on nights I was off, I was something of a TV dinner connoisseur. *Stouffer’s, Digiorno, Hungry-Man, Banquet*, you name it. I’d seen them all. I once considered starting a blog where I rated and reviewed them, but figured it’d be too depressing and rather than knocking back a bottle of Motrin just abandoned the idea altogether.

**CASHIER:** “Two twenty-four, seventy-five.”

**HUGO:** “Christ, I forgot how expensive a good meal actually costs.” The cashier had no response. Just stared at me vacantly as I took out my credit card and scanned it, praying it wouldn’t get denied, because wouldn’t that just figure. I’d have to do a little rebudgeting to make sure I could pay my rent on time this month, but it wouldn’t kill me. Anyway, at least it would be nice to eat something that wasn’t microwaved, for once. Not to mention spend some time with

Jackie, of course. We'd reconnected when she'd moved back to Brightridge to get her masters, but once she started working three jobs, we'd fallen off each others' radars for a while. As I loaded my bags back into my cart I looked at the cashier. "How long ago were you at the center?"

**CASHIER:** "What?"

**HUGO:** "Eos. You were there, right?"

**CASHIER:** "Yeah."

**HUGO:** "How long ago?" She shrugged. *Great, that's helpful.* "Just take a guess."

**CASHIER:** "Few months ago, maybe."

**HUGO:** "What was it like?"

**CASHIER:** "Boring."

**HUGO:** "What did you do?"

**MALE SHOPPER:** "Hey, pal, this ain't a singles' bar. She's like ten years too young for you, anyway. Keep it moving."

**HUGO:** "What? No, I wasn't- ugh, never mind."

**CASHIER:** "Thank you for your patronage. Have a wonderful rest of your day."

**HUGO:** "Yeah, I can really tell you mean it, too. Such conversationalists! How do they do it? Jeeze, would it kill you to throw a little emotion into it?"

## SCENE 4

**ELWOOD:** I'm going to let you in on a secret: no matter how much a system will try to protect certain assets, there are always parts that are poorly fortified. Take children, for example. You might think, given how they're *'the future,'* and all, that they would be almost universally difficult for unsavory characters to get a hold of. More trouble than they'd be worth, you might say. And you'd be right – to a certain extent. It's why Child Protective Services exists. It's why FBI background checks and certifications are required to work with them as teachers, counselors, tutors, and the like. But, if you find an industry that isn't taken seriously, that no one wants to bother thinking about long enough to properly regulate, *that's* your in. Which is why, technically, Eos Behavioral is a life coaching facility. Now, of course, there is still *some* additional headache when you go about involving minors in your corporate level get-rich-quick scheme, but grease

the right palms and kiss the right babies, and the world is yours. Just the same, it's always good business practice to *diversify, diversify, diversify!* Oh. Excuse me for just a moment.

**EOS EMPLOYEE 1:** "Good afternoon, Mr. Elwood."

**ELWOOD:** "Hm, yes, good afternoon. You wouldn't happen to know where Dr. Freeman is, would you?"

**EOS EMPLOYEE 1:** "Hmm. I believe at this time of day she would be in the main compound, supervising the Bleeding."

**ELWOOD:** "Ah, yes. Of course. Thank you."

**EOS EMPLOYEE 1:** "My pleasure."

**ELWOOD:** "As you were."

**ELWOOD:** As I was saying, children can make the life of an illegitimate business very difficult. For one of two reasons. Reason one is government oversight, as we just discussed. Reason two is the people you have to hire who actually want to work with the little buggers. *Those* people, by and large, have good hearts. They're empathetic, loving, morally upstanding, and care about the future of this great nation. It makes me sick. However, as any elementary schooler can tell you, there are two other varieties of child care professionals: the underachievers, and the nitwits. The underachievers are the kind whose mommies and daddies paid for their child to get their undergraduate education at a party school, and the teaching degree was the easiest to pass while hungover from the ragers the night before. And the nitwits are the brainless airheads who spent too much time during their own educational experiences huffing glue in the back of the class or smoking pot in the restrooms to have mentally evolved much past the age of their charges. The blind leading the blind, as it were. *Those* are the types of professionals who we hire here at Eos. People who don't care enough or are too stupid to ask questions. Who're happy to get their paycheck and babysit a group of shit-brained teens for a week during the second half of their treatment here at New Horizons, teaching a few bullshit 'skills' classes before kicking them to the curb, back to their parents' waiting arms, and starting all over again with the next round of cattle freshly rotated in. Rinse and repeat, en masse. It's a beautiful thing. Here, take a look at this one, for example.

**TEACHER:** "Now class, today we're going to be talking about *anger*. Show of hands, who here has ever felt *angry* before?"

**STUDENTS:**

"Mh-hm."

"Yeah."



“I guess.”

**TEACHER:** “Right! We *all* have at some point or another. And who can tell me if anger is *normal* or not? (*a pause as nobody answers*) Come on! Anybody, anybody! Just shout it out!”

**STUDENT 1:** “Uhh... no?”

**TEACHER:** “Correct! Anger is a terrible, horrible, useless emotion that only terrible, horrible, useless people feel. So, when we’re feeling angry, what should we do instead? Anybody?”

**STUDENT 2:** “Uhm ... *not* feel that way?”

**TEACHER:** “*Very good!* That’s *exactly* right. When you feel yourself starting to get angry, the best thing to do is to shut down immediately. And whatever you do, never, *ever* tell somebody else that you’re feeling angry. Because if you do, say it with me, class...”

**STUDENTS (ALL) :** “*Everyone will hate you and you’ll never be loved.*”

**TEACHER:** “**Very good! - Oh yes, in the back, you have a question?**”

**STUDENT 3:** “Uh, yeah, what do you do if you, like, can’t make yourself shut down and the anger doesn’t stop?”

**TEACHER:** “Oh, that’s a very good question! Class, does anybody have any ideas for your classmate here, who sounds like an absolutely *awful* human being with no redeeming qualities whatsoever? Does anyone have any recommendations for this useless, abominable-? Oh! Yes, up front. Go ahead.”

**STUDENT 1:** “Maybe they could just... feel something else instead?”

**TEACHER:** “Very good! That is an *excellent* suggestion! When we are feeling angry, we can try feeling something *else* instead. Marvelous, wonderful, fantastic job, class! You’re all doing *so* well! I am so proud of— *Oh!* Mr. Elwood! I’m sorry I didn’t see you there. Class, say hello to Mr. Elwood.”

**STUDENTS:** “*Hello, Mr. Elwood.*”

**TEACHER:** “Can we help you with something, sir?”

**ELWOOD:** “No, no. Just checking in on the operation. Carry on.”

**TEACHER:** “Very good ... Okay, class, that brings us to our next subject: *Grief*. Some of you might say that your anger only started showing up after you lost someone or something important to you. But remember that is a miserable excuse and you should under *no* circumstance feel that grief validates *or* normalizes your anger...”

**ELWOOD:** As I was saying, that wing is primarily for the second half of our patented, two-week program. Anytime some regulating body shows up at our door for a surprise inspection, *that's* where they're shown around. But, and this might surprise you, that's not where the real magic is made. No, our *real* secret is week one. And we keep the inspecting bodies *far* away from that part of the campus. Follow me, please.

**STUDENT 4:** "Please, please call my parents. I'm sure they'll take me home. *Please.*"

**STUDENT 5:** "Don't take me back there tonight. I don't want to go back there tonight!"

**STUDENT 6:** "I'll be good, I promise. I saw what happened to the others, you don't have to do that to me, *please!* I'll be good ... I'll be good..."

**STUDENT 7:** "I'm sorry, mom and dad. I'm so, so sorry. I'll never do anything bad ever again. Please - please tell them I'm sorry..."

**STUDENT 8:** "No! No, no, no, no, no, no..."

**EOS EMPLOYEE 2:** "Stop struggling, please. We've been over this. Struggling only makes it take longer."

**EOS EMPLOYEE 3:** "*Whining*, always the whining! When has whining ever gotten you anywhere anytime before?"

**ELWOOD:** *Ahhh!* I just love the sights and sounds of unscrupulous financial success!

## SCENE 5

**HUGO:** "Bah-bah-bah. Okay, that should do it for the seasoning. Bit of lemon. Check. Now let's see about those potatoes..." Everything was coming together beautifully for tonight. Of course, Dad was going to kill me when he saw I'd unpacked half the kitchen. That's not to say it was an elaborate meal I was making. On the contrary, in fact. But after we lost Mom, neither me or my dad were much in the way of chiefs. Still, I could make a serviceable pan-seared steak, and it probably maybe hopefully wouldn't even give either of us food poisoning. "Hang on, just a sec...! Hello?"

**JACKIE:** "Hey, Hughie."

**HUGO:** "Jackie! Hey, perfect timing! You done at the station?"

**JACKIE:** "Yeah. I'm just getting into my car, going to stop off at home and get changed and--"

**HUGO:** "-What? Oh, no, no! You've got to come *right* over."

**JACKIE:** “What?”

**HUGO:** “Yeah, the food’s going to get cold if you stop home first.”

**JACKIE:** “What, but I-”

**HUGO:** “Sorry, I, uh, I didn’t realize how long you were going to take at the precinct.”

**JACKIE:** “Hughie...”

**HUGO:** “I know, I know. I’m sorry. I should have asked first or texted you or something. You *are* still coming over though, right?”

**JACKIE:** “I... of course I am. I’ll just want to freshen up a bit when I get there.”

**HUGO:** “Awesome! Fine, yeah, of course, that’s no problem!”

**JACKIE:** “You said you’re at your parents’ place?”

**HUGO:** “Yeah, you need the address?”

**JACKIE:** “No, I remember. See you soon.”

**HUGO:** “You too. Bye.” Phew. That was close. If Jackie had stopped at home first there was no way she was going to keep that enormous work bag with her to come to mine. And then I’d never get to the bottom of all this. I still might not. “What time even is-? Oh, shoot!” I was going to have to double-time it if I wanted to make sure dinner was ready by the time she got here. “Where did I put the garlic and rosemary ... G-d damn it!”

## SCENE 6

**ELWOOD:** “Dr. Freeman! Dr. Free—!”

**DR. LUTHER:** “Not quite.”

**ELWOOD:** “—*Ah, sonofa-!* Ahem. Dr. Luther. You, uh, startled me.”

**DR. LUTHER:** “Come to see our lovely patron, have you?”

**ELWOOD:** “Not precisely...” Dr. Luthor was a brilliant beanstalk of a man, who, despite a perfectly polite presentation and unwavering loyalty to the project, never failed to give off the distinct impression that he would like nothing more than to strap you down to an operating table, dissect you alive, and then taxidermy your corpse to dress up in demeaning wardrobe to place in impolite poses around his home. I’d never been to the man’s house, personally, despite numerous, slightly-too-friendly invitations, so could not say for certain if this was or was not, in

fact, a hobby of his. It did not help his reputation that his supervisors kept going missing under increasingly suspicious circumstances. Luthor was technically the senior-most member of the R&D department at Eos, but given his utterly sociopathic nature and the general sense everyone got while in his presence that their body was suddenly covered in live insects, Dr. Freeman was brought on board about six years back to supervise the department and report back to both myself and the partners. She'd somehow managed to befriend the deranged doctor — something none of her predecessors could manage — and had as a result outlasted all of the New Horizons' previous chief science officers by a whopping seventy-one months and counting. That woman was a godsend! Or, well, whatever a morally-bankrupt version of a godsend would be called. "I was told Dr. Freeman would be here. I need to speak with her."

**LUTHOR:** "Oh, I'm afraid that's hardly possible. She's quite busy supervising the Bleeding."

**ELWOOD:** "Still? Ah yes, I suppose."

**LUTHOR:** "You are welcome to wait and observe from the observation deck, if you'd like."

**ELWOOD:** He said, pointing me towards a door on the left of the tiny lab, before returning to his work where he peered through a microscope with all the enthusiasm of a lecherous teenage boy at his first peep show. Now, to be frank, I'm really more of a big picture type. The ins and outs of the center's day to day affairs are something I generally don't over indulge in. A good leader knows how to delegate, after all. That, and, when it comes to the Bleeding I'm, eh, well, it's just kind of ... *gross*. Incredibly gross, as a point of fact. But I did need to talk to Dr. Freeman, so I went over to the side door, took hold of the knob, took a few deep breaths to steady myself, and stepped in. I stepped up to the reinforced glass and pressed one of the two small buttons on the side wall, making an active effort not to look down at the scene below in the process. The sounds of the operating theater were fed through the sound system, which crackled and sputtered something hideous.

**FREEMAN:** "—and keep an eye on the blood pressure and heart rate. We had some odd readings yesterday afternoon."

**FREEMAN'S ASSISTANT:** "Yes, doctor."

**FREEMAN:** "Good, good ... And good afternoon, Frank. I'm surprised to see you here. Come for a science lesson, have we? I'm afraid it's a *little* more complicated than a frog, this, but I do commend your enthusiasm."

**ELWOOD:** I reached out and touched the second button on the small panel. "Dr. Freeman — good afternoon."

**FREEMAN:** "I take it this isn't a social call?"

**ELWOOD:** "I'm afraid not."

**FREEMAN:** “A pity. Well, we’re just about done here. I’ll join you shortly.”

**ELWOOD:** “Very good.” I switched the intercom system back off and went back into the small lab adjoining the observation deck, where Luthor’s company just slightly won out as the preferable of the two possible stimuli to be subjected to while awaiting an audience with Dr. Freeman. I busied myself checking emails and avoiding answering Dr. Luthor’s numerous inquiries as to my hobbies, interests, or likelihood to be lost while out hiking without having told any loved ones my whereabouts. Eventually, I heard the door leading in from the operating theater being opened, and looked up to see Dr. Freeman stepping through.

**FREEMAN:** “What a pleasant surprise! I can count the number of times you’ve visited the main lab on one hand. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

**ELWOOD:** “You’ve heard about the incident in town?”

**FREEMAN:** “Naturally.”

**ELWOOD:** “So the procedure was a failure, I take it?”

**FREEMAN:** “That remains to be seen.”

**ELWOOD:** “How’s that?” Dr. Freeman put her hands behind her back and paced the room with an almost wistful elegance as she considered the question. It was like watching storm clouds gather.

**FREEMAN:** “Just because an experiment failed to disprove its null hypothesis does not make it a failure.”

**ELWOOD:** “Isn’t that the literal definition of an experiment failing? You just used the word ‘fail’ twice in that last sentence.”

**FREEMAN:** “Really you should try not to be so narrow-minded, Frank. If every failure were *only* a failure and nothing more, then there would be no successes in the world.”

**ELWOOD:** “I don’t understand.”

**FREEMAN:** “No, of course you don’t. Let me see. Failure is inevitable, yes? I mean, on some level. We all agree to that, don’t we? Supposition one. Be it while learning to walk, or while solving a complicated mathematical proof, or when learning to fly an airplane or tame lions - though on those latter two you’re liable to perhaps only experience it once. But amidst all, mistakes are likely - if not outright *necessary* - to happen. Not all together and certainly not all at once, also often not even by the same people. In fact, I wager it would be very unusual indeed to find somebody whose failed at all of them, though I suppose that with the right hereditary predisposition to risk-taking behaviors it might align in such a way to actually *increase* one’s chances to both attempt, and therefore possibly fail, at both pilotry and lion taming. And then of

course I've done all four. Though that's really beside the point and I do wish you wouldn't go about sidetracking me."

**ELWOOD:** "I didn—"

**FREEMAN:** "Very good, apology accepted. Now, as I was saying: success, on the other hand, very much *unlike* failure, is *never* a guarantee. That being supposition two. Therefore, for an improbable thing to occur, or even just a thing that is not absolutely certain to happen, it follows that inevitable things would have had to have taken place at some point along its process. Do you understand now?"

**ELWOOD:** With one glance at the look on my face, which was surely about as stupid as a shoe sale at a paraplegic convention, Dr. Freeman had her answer and scoffed in resignation.

**FREEMAN:** "We've been at this for how many years now? Six?"

**ELWOOD:** "Fifteen," I corrected, happy to finally be contributing something of value to the conversation with any level of authority, as the basic concept of time was, thankfully, something with which I had at least a passing familiarity. "You've been here six years but the center has been here for fifteen. Nearly sixteen, in fact."

**FREEMAN:** "Yes, precisely! And yet in all that time, near nothing's changed, and we still hardly know anything more than we did when I first arrived, despite heaven's only knows how many things we've stuck under microscopes and stared at quizzically!"

**ELWOOD:** Luthor looked the smallest bit offended at that one, and clutched the head of his favorite microscope possessively.

**FREEMAN:** "It was about time we got a little more proactive. These are just growing pains, you see? A necessary part of the scientific method. Look, I assume you're working to have the subjects collected and returned to us, yes?"

**ELWOOD:** "Of course."

**FREEMAN:** "Then I imagine a thorough study of them each at that time will prove *most* enlightening, and we can move forward from there, adjusting our course accordingly."

**ELWOOD:** "That's assuming we're given an opportunity," I said, admittedly a bit self-pityingly. "There's still an awful lot of damage control to be done."

**FREEMAN:** "Ah, yes, right, of course. Unfortunate."

**LUTHOR:** "If *I* may?"

**FREEMAN:** "By all means, Dr. Luthor."

**ELWOOD:** He turned to me with a wild excitement in his eyes.

**LUTHOR:** “Exhibition of extreme strength and resistance to alcohol with increased impulsivity can all be easily explained away. All that’s needed would be to have test results from their blood work or urine samples that will no doubt be collected at the precinct to come back positive for something one of them might have been able to slip into the center upon their admission. Alpha-PVP, perhaps?”

**ELWOOD:** “What, like bath salts? Flakka?”

**LUTHOR:** “The very same.”

**ELWOOD:** “Hmm... very interesting. Yes, you might be onto something there.”

**LUTHOR:** “Of course.”

**ELWOOD:** “Mh-hm. And Dr. Freeman, what are your thoughts about—? ... What in the-?”

**FREEMAN:** “Ugh! It’s that damned winter storm! Must’ve downed a transmission line further north towards the city.”

**FREEMAN:** “Is The Source secure?”

**ASSISTANT:** “Yes ma’am.”

**FREEMAN:** “Is it stable?”

**ASSISTANT:** “It appears so.”

**FREEMAN:** “Good. Get the backup power running from the hydrogen fuel cells. I need the operating theater powered up immediately. We cannot risk a breach in containment.”

**ASSISTANT:** “Like you have to tell me! I’m the one down here with the thing!”

**FREEMAN:** “I’m sorry to cut your visit short, Frank, but—”

**ELWOOD:** “No, no. I understand. Carry on.”

**FREEMAN:** “I’ll keep you informed.”

**ELWOOD:** “Please do.” Dr. Freeman exited to go and help her assistant, leaving Luthor and I in the powered down lab. I moved towards the exit and was surprised when he didn’t follow. “Dr. Luthor?”

**LUTHOR:** “Yes, Mr. Elwood?”

**ELWOOD:** “Are you... just going to stand there?”

**LUTHOR:** “Why, yes, sir. The power is out, after all, and it would be quite ridiculous for me to attempt to work in the dark. Though I thank you for asking.”

**ELWOOD:** “Well, yes, but couldn’t you- I mean- (*frustrated*) Ah, never mind! I’ll... leave you to matters here.”

**LUTHOR:** “Very good, sir.”

**ELWOOD:** Another unsettling detail about Dr. Luther was the fact that no one quite knew for certain what exactly it was he *did* at Eos, though he always went about doing it with such passion and dedication that and it was simply taken for granted that it must’ve been important, whatever it was, and so everyone went about just letting him go on and continue doing it. As I, too, was about to do precisely that, a thought occurred to me. And, as much as it pained me to do so, I turned back around and asked, “Luthor?”

**LUTHOR:** “Yes?”

**ELWOOD:** “Who informed you of the details at Maguire’s?”

**LUTHOR:** “Sir?”

**ELWOOD:** “The excessive drinking and extreme strength. I was only just made aware of those particulars, myself.”

**LUTHOR:** “Oh, one hears things. The ... *trees* have ears and the *fields* have eyes, yes?”

**ELWOOD:** *Odd*, I thought to myself. I’d never heard Luthor use an idiom before. As I was about to inquire further, the lights around the lab came back on, and computer monitors lit, though both duller than usual.

**LUTHOR:** “It seems they were able to switch to the backup generators. Good.”

**ELWOOD:** “Yes, that is a relief.”

**LUTHOR:** “While not what you may have expected initially, there is promise to these reactions, as well, wouldn’t you agree?”

**ELWOOD:** “What, with the power?”

**LUTHOR:** “With the test subjects.”

**ELWOOD:** “How do you figure?”

**LUTHOR:** “The children. Their unusual behaviors in town.”

**ELWOOD:** “Those changes are hardly useful in our upcoming efforts to expand with an adult rehabilitation wing.”



**LUTHOR:** “Then I invite you to expand *your* horizons, Mr. Elwood. No, eh, *pun* intended. Think of the benefits to such a serum, especially should it prove true that the children have retained their base personalities.”

**ELWOOD:** “We’re *not* doing pharmaceuticals.”

**LUTHOR:** “No, no, of course not. But even just for internal or personal use, the possibilities would be... near limitless.”

**ELWOOD:** “Hm. Interesting, interesting. Yes ... Uh, Luthor?”

**LUTHOR:** “Yes, Mr. Elwood?”

**ELWOOD:** “Could you, uhm, have Dr. Freeman keep out a few vials worth of the- the uh-...”

**LUTHOR:** “*Ichor*, sir?”

**ELWOOD:** “Err, yes. And have her get someone to deliver it to my office?”

**LUTHOR:** “Of course, sir.”

**ELWOOD:** “Thank you, Dr. Luthor.”

**LUTHOR:** “It is my *absolute* pleasure, sir.”

**ELWOOD:** There were the insects again. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to make a call ... Sandford. There’s been a, uh, *development*. I need you to do something for me. You’re still at the police station, correct? (*brief pause*) Good, good. Now, listen carefully...”

END CHAPTER TWO