

The idea of living forever is one that has persisted throughout time. Many have chased the possibilities, the rumors, and risked everything to no avail. Could technology provide the method for living forever where the Fountain of Youth has failed? But if you had that awesome power, who would you want to live forever?

[...The Enigma Chronicles](#)

*Several years before in a small town in Northern Europe***Prologue – Beware the dream chaser for he will sacrifice all, including you**

...The Enigma Chronicles

The waiter had seated her a few minutes before at a secluded table. It was a balmy day, and the abundance of flowers emitted a rich yet subtle scent of almost vanilla and cherry blossoms. She had tied her heavy dark hair into a simple chignon that accentuated her long neck which supported only a simple golden chain with a single teardrop pendant. Her creamy skin was accentuated by the red dress that displayed her lithe figure. Though not classically beautiful, she carried herself with confidence and frankly cared not for social ranking.

This meeting was likely doomed to end up like their prior discussions. The opportunity it presented her was worth one more attempt for the establishment of mutually achievable goals. He was brilliant but frustrated with the lack of total success. Like most geniuses, he was incapable of seeing past his current plan with its flaws or even able to see the possibilities when approached from a different perspective. As he walked toward the secluded table at the very end of the garden, he strode with confidence and was tall enough to command respect. The clothes were tailored, the fabric expensive though with subdued colors, and his brownish hair was neatly trimmed. As he paused to speak with the waiter, she saw his dark eyes and unwavering facial expression issue orders that would undoubtedly be followed.

He bowed toward her slightly before he took her hand and passed his warm breath across her skin. She smiled as he placed a single lavender orchid with white streaks in each of the petals in front of her as a token of friendly negotiations. His hands were well manicured and void of any signs of physical labor. She looked up with her dark eyes and almost smiled in an inscrutable

manner as she nodded her head in acknowledgement. He sat nearly across from her but angled to allow his legs additional stretching space.

Neither of them spoke as the waiter brought out a large tray laden with some wine and several food items that were placed on the table as if for sampling. The waiter placed a napkin in each of their laps as he also added a clean plate at each place. After he sampled the wine and nodded, the waiter finished pouring the wine. He turned and walked away without saying a word.

The gentleman's dark eyes took in every inch of her as he raised his glass and commented, "To our reaching agreement, madam."

Her eyes danced a bit as she chuckled and agreed, "Yes, that would be worth a toast, sir."

They each silently sipped their wine and sampled a bit of the fare. Though this was hardly their first meeting, they seemed to be sizing each other up as they each built the strategy for the discussion. After several minutes of observing the sensibilities of not rushing into a business discussion until the social pleasantries were completed, she picked up her napkin and delicately dabbed at her lips, knowing nothing was there to remove.

Looking down to the flower, she focused on it to collect her thoughts and then took one more sip of the exquisite wine, as she began. "I know that we do not always see eye-to-eye on this project of yours, sir. I also know that you asked for my help and viewpoint as you have respect for my experience and skills. I think that your goal is very short-sighted indeed, yet it can be achieved. It needs some time, some logic and some testing in a methodical, pre-defined sequence."

The gentleman's eyes flashed with anger as he interrupted, "Madam, this is not the way you suggested our conversation would go when we scheduled this meeting. You know that time is the enemy of us all. Time is the entire reason that I engaged with you at all. To shorten the

time between the two points. That is why I agreed to this meeting. That is what you promised, madam.”

She held up her hand, displayed her long slender fingers and trimmed but colorless nails, and quietly insisted, “When we started on your project, I had suggested that it would be at least a dozen years before we could explore clinical trials. I had been diligently working toward that goal when you made the decision to take a different path. Your path made no sense four months ago, and those poor results are my proof points.

“Your experimental procedure has always lacked the discipline necessary for the steps that need to be followed. There are few shortcuts in something that involves over three billion variables. I have worked on some bioinformatics programs that will help shorten the timeframe to arrive at a solution. To achieve your long term goal is going to require the multi-threaded approach, period.” Her face remained serene and emotionless, outside of a hint of a smile at his reaction.

His eyes flared then turned stormy as his face reddened with anger. He swallowed for control and then asked, “How long do you think it will take? How much more funding is required, though that is really not the issue, now is it?”

As she leaned back slightly in her seat and sighted the orchid again, she sipped her wine and replied, “I think five million should be enough to take me to the solution. I suspect it will take just over five years for completion. Value at even twice the price.

“Before you get upset, that is half the time I originally projected. And, before you started your rogue processes, you had speculated for a quarter of a century. I’m not proposing shortcuts, but instead a smarter approach. Though to a degree, it would be brute force testing.”

He looked at her in anger and yet respected her abilities more than he was willing to admit aloud. She was one of the best minds he had ever come across. She had no interest in him, per se, even though he had offered all his fortune and marriage. That was a discussion she had stopped on all fronts. It was clear that another male had claimed her heart and then left her in his death. The gentleman gathered his wits, mentally reviewed the alternatives and recognized that his options were limited.

He looked at her intensely and stated, “You will get your money. You can return to my labs with me and get started immediately. Anything and everything you need will be provided.”

Her temper almost showed, but she checked it as she retorted, “I will work in my own space, sir. I will not have you standing over me and pressuring me, as you are even attempting now. We tried that before, and your efforts failed. You went off in a snit and look what you accomplished

“If you place those sorts of constraints on me, I will do nothing, and you will die a painful death.” Her voice softened as she added, “If you let me work, I believe I can find a salvation for you as well as a long range solution. Your experimentation has resulted in two goals - with one being more critical now than the original.”

He looked almost beaten. She reached down to pick up the beautiful orchid, and as he resignedly nodded, he reached to take her hand. She extended her hand with the flower into his open palm, almost relieved that they’d actually reached agreement. He covered her hand with his other hand. Before she could react, she felt the hypodermic needle slide into her skin. Her eyes flew open, and she looked at him with pure hate as she yanked her hand away and dropped the flower. She inspected the puncture and blood that now glistened on her ivory skin. She stared at the orchid now, realizing it was an assassin’s weapon.

“You stupid, deranged man! What have you done?”

He gently picked up the flower and, as he studied it, said, “The orchid, how beautiful in life and how empty in death.” His face turned to stone as he continued, “Even though you have refused my offer of marriage and security, I feel as though our lives are already intertwined. We are on our way, you and me, towards a rich destiny that will be best shared together. I have given you my half of the solution, per our agreement, because I want you with me to the end of our days.

“I have infected you with the same treatment I took for myself. Now you have a personal, vested interest in succeeding in applying the mapping correctly. You can return to your home, your work, but I will be watching, and this is now in your best interest to resolve or you too will perish. And as you stated so plainly, it promises to be very painful, my partner in life or in death.”

The lady lay her napkin aside, collected her small clutch, and rose. Her eyes focused on him while her face was like a mask which displayed no emotion. Before she turned, she quietly demanded, “The waiter will hand you an envelope as you leave. Your payments are expected to be wired into the numbered account therein in monthly increments for the sum mentioned. I will provide periodic updates on the progress and contact you only if I have need of something. I will continue access to your system which I presume will be available via the same connection.”

Even though her stature was small, she looked as regal as any royal, on any continent. He was almost saddened by the events that had just unfolded, until she stopped and turned.

Her eyes blazed as she added, “Do not ever contact me directly again, even when this is solved, which I promise it will be.”

*Current day***Chapter 1 – The emotional demon lurks in all of us**

The mansion was quietly graceful, and the carpeted stairway was wide and elegant as befitted European designs. The colors were dark mahogany with light walls and paintings that, if one looked closely, would be identified as created by one of the older masters. Though Haddy had added her touches of color and updating throughout the mansion, the underlying old world elegance was clearly visible. There were three floors of living space. Below these, an expansive wine cellar and storage area which were all organized and optimized. Even with all the people currently in residence, the noise was associated only between the two women.

Haddy assisted Petra up the stairs, being careful not to offer too much help. Ever since the battering she had received in Argentina on her last assignment, Petra had been moody and withdrawn from almost everyone. Otto and Haddy had offered to secure a full time physical therapist, but Petra was having trouble just facing her own mother, Haddy, so an outsider was refused out of hand. Ever since she'd run away from Zurich, the operations area for the R-Group, to her childhood home, she had continued to become more depressed. She wasn't even in email connection with her love interest, Jacob, let alone her other team members. The brutal encounter with Sönders had taken its toll on her, both physically and psychologically.

Petra was the brilliant encryption expert, recognized globally, who was called upon by customers that needed help to decrypt or break a mathematical cypher problem. Her customers were primarily a part of the family business known internally as the R-Group. The core business had been created during World War II with a charter to preserve individuals' wealth and protect them from governmental tyrants. The original financial side of the operations had begun with the use of the Enigma Machine that had been spirited away as the families fled from Poland. Petra

was a descendant from the original family founders. Her father Otto had held a key role in the organization but was working toward turning that responsibility over to Petra and Jacob.

Jacob's grandfather, Wolfgang, was a second key person in the group and was focused on the financial aspects of this family business. As with each of the founders, all the descendants were highly educated and had each decided on a focus that could be leveraged by the family business. Jacob had been raised in the United States by Wolfgang's now deceased wife and their daughter, Jacob's mother. Wolfgang had been on a path to groom Jacob as a replacement for him at some point, before that path had been interrupted by the Argentina incident.

Jacob, a talented programmer and security specialist, had been brought into the business after his mother had been murdered. He and Petra had fallen in love and seemed destined to spend their life together before the horrible beating Petra had suffered in Argentina. After what had seemed like the road to recovery for Petra with Jacob in Zurich, Petra had left a note as she departed to her childhood home. Jacob was crushed by her leaving and had then left without a word of explanation to the family.

The third key voter in the family business was Dr. Quinton Watcowski, better known as Quip, who had taken the reins a little over a year ago from his grandfather. Quip specialized in building leading-edge technology and maintained his creation, the Immersive Collaborative Associative Binary Override Deterministic system, or ICABOD, as it was fondly called. Quip was also considered the project manager for problem projects that the business worked.

Otto's other daughter, Julie, or JAC as she was called when she worked, was a cyber-assassin specialist. Recently married, she and her husband Juan had started a business that incorporated all of the original cyber-assassin activities that Julie performed, along with monitoring specific people of interests to the various projects they routinely and non-routinely

worked. Julie and Juan ran the operation known as CAT, Cyber-Assassin Team, with their recently vetted staff. Julie wanted to continue in the family business and was the primary interface with the rest of the family operations in order to maintain its anonymity. She had also wanted to stay close to her husband and their recently born twins.

Juan, a pilot and martial arts expert, worked with the CAT staff to provide the fulfillment of field-level intelligence gathering, identity cloaking, and acquisition. Julie and Juan were currently in resident in the Luxemburg family home. They were settling into being a family, as they also worked their fledgling business. Business was good, due to referrals from the family business.

Everyone had tried to help ease the circumstances of Petra's injuries, Jacob most of all. The only one who wouldn't help in the recovery was Petra. She withdrew from everyone and sequestered herself away from her work, her team, and her love. Even being close to her sister Julie and the adorable twins had not brought Petra out of her depression. The hope was that, given enough time, she would heal and return to her rightful role with the R-Group. However as the days turned into weeks, everyone began to wonder if she might be gone for good.

Once Petra and Haddy arrived onto the landing, Petra pulled her arm back, determined to accept as little help as possible in going into her room. Her arm was now out of the cast, and she was slowly relearning how to use it. Her walk, no longer the graceful gait of a powerful young female, was more of a healing limp with irregular steps similar to that of an older woman. As they entered her room, she turned, as was her habit, to view herself in the hallway mirror, only to see her disfigured face, no longer swollen, but still quite red. Her jaw was still wired internally, with a modest change that had permitted recent improvements to her speech, but she was still humiliated by a pronounced lisp.

Haddy watched with sadness every time Petra stopped to look in the mirror. Petra couldn't bear the sight, yet continued in the self-torture. Haddy had suggested that only the mirror in the bathroom remain, but Petra had been adamant. It was heartbreaking.

Trembling, Petra reached for the mirror and turned around to gaze into it from various angles but saw the same result. Tears started to stream down her face as Petra asked, "Will anyone ever be able to stand the sight of me again?" Slowly she turned from the mirror as she shuddered with sobs of emotional pain.

The scene tore at Haddy, but she refused to not find a bright spot. She swallowed hard and with conviction insisted, "There, you see, my precious daughter! You didn't think you would ever have your jaw mobile and be able to speak again. You have sustained significant physical damage, but you are turning the corner. Look at your progress!

"You have command of your arms again, and you can now hurl insults at inanimate objects! You are now even eating real foods again. Do not forget how far you've come! If you were still where you were eight weeks ago, I would be joining you with tears, but you are improved! Do not despair and never, ever give up! You only lose when you give up, young lady! Allow me to retain a physical therapist so that we can increase the progress. All the Internet routines you found have helped, but there may be more that can be done to speed your recovery.

"As far as looking at you again or always, your family has no issue. Jacob had no issue or complaint. Those darling babies in this house coo at you just fine, smiling when you enter the room or they hear your voice. However, you need to spend more time with them before they discover you don't know them. Come, rejoin humanity and do not despair, because you have overcome so much!"

Petra shook her head and softly asked, “Despair? What do you know of despair, mother? I’m the one who has lost everything.”

Haddy became really irked by her daughter’s comment and barked, “What do I know of despair? I’ll tell you of despair! Despair is seeing my daughter wishing she was dead rather than celebrating her survival! Despair is seeing my daughter withdraw from her team and her father like they were some nobodies at a bus stop! Despair is seeing you push Jacob away and become a recluse because you enjoy wallowing in self-pity! You dare suggest that I have no idea of despair!

“You might consider other’s feelings before you shove all of us out of your life. We all love you too much. Real despair is watching that loved one spiral in emotionally! Despair is not being able to help you because for some unexplained reason you enjoy punishing yourself and you want us to watch!

“Despair is also my not being able to watch you being destroyed any longer, while being unable to look away because I care so much about you! You let me know if there is anything else I need to explain to you!”

Haddy turned to leave, but Petra, her eyes now streaming with tears, gathered her mother into a hug, and the two stood there quietly holding one another as they cried on each other’s shoulder.

After a few moments, Petra asked, “What am I going to do? I simply cannot bear seeing the disappointment and sorrow in their faces as everyone looks at me! I cannot face them or stand their shocked looks as they see all this ugliness.”

Haddy said nothing but let Petra’s thoughts hang there momentarily. Then Petra quietly asked, “Have you heard from him?”

Haddy had trouble containing her emotions but explained, “He left not long after he found your note. We can find him if we need to. Frankly, we were trying to give him space, just as we are doing for you. But, no, we have not heard from him.”

Petra started crying anew and rushed into her bedroom and closed the door.

## Chapter 2 – Don't you know me from somewhere?

Zara protested, “What do you mean, you can't buy them? I'm no diamond expert, but even though they are a little rough and not as nicely polished as they should be, I can tell they are of a great value! They should bring a small fortune! Okay, a large fortune! What is the big deal?”

The elderly gentleman looked over his spectacles and in a very paternal way stated, “Young lady, without a bill of sale or authenticated provenance, these are tainted diamonds. Here in the New York Diamond District we do not support the trafficking of ...”

Zara finished his statement. “Yeah, I heard it before, blood diamonds! I keep hearing that from every one of you little old squirrely men trying to get my diamonds on the cheap! I'm from Russia, not Sierra Leone, for God's sake! My diamonds are from Russia! These are family heirlooms, and great grandmother passed them down. There was no provenance or bill of sale. Why would there be? Where can I go to deal with someone who knows the value of diamonds, since you obviously don't?”

The diamond merchant let the insult roll off of him as he responded, “Madam, two Presidents have issued executive orders forbidding trafficking in blood or conflict diamonds in this country, which, without the proper documentation, these are classified as such. You can go to your *local fence* who will not know what to do with these potentially nice stones or go to another country where ethics are not so scrupulously observed.

“I recognize their value. However I cannot deal with you for them as it will cost me my business and my freedom. I treasure both, having come from a Nazi concentration camp where human rights meant nothing. In this country, they do. Therefore, I am not inclined to subsidize regimes without honor. I understand that there are underground people in South Africa that could

remove them from the setting and essentially change all their characteristics. Enjoy your travels. Good day, madam.”

Zara was furious. She recognized she was wasting her time as she packed up her hard won booty that couldn't be brokered through the normal channels and stormed to the door. As a parting gesture of animosity, the shop keeper didn't release the door lock as she went to leave. The result was her piling into the glass door and unexpectedly bumping her nose up against it.

The shopkeeper smiled and innocently apologized, “Oops! Gracious me! Should have unlocked the door sooner. As my grandson would say, my bad!” The shopkeeper chuckled loud enough for Zara to hear until the door closed and the sounds of the city intervened.

Out on the street Zara surveyed the district and realized that she was going to hear the same story from each of them. She knew the ones who wouldn't tell her, who would try to take her diamonds for a song so they could be re-cut for a profit she would never see.

*“Just great,” she thought. “Here I am with five million Euros in stolen diamonds, but I'm still starving! I didn't count on not being able to sell the damn things! Okay, well, it's time for plan B. Now that I think of it, I don't have a plan B.*

*“Self, we need to conserve what little cash we have so we can better plan our next move. As much as I hate to admit it, I need to con some dense male into taking me in so I have a safe place to rest. I guess I should use the helpless but proud female routine number three to get a place to stay. Now all I need is a mark to ...”*

Zara didn't get a chance to finish her thought as she collided with what might be her best option. As she watched, this attractive male admired her lines and eyed her from head to toe from his juxtaposition on the ground.

Feinting a little disorientation from the human collision, Zara grouched, “My, people come and go so quickly here! If you’re hurt, let me help you up, sir. Of course, I will do that as soon as I see where I have landed. I didn’t think I would run, quite literally, into such a powerful male in my travels. Are you what they call, in professional football, a linebacker?”

The flattery worked its charm, and the dashing male paused to offer all means of assistance to the fallen lady. She smiled at him and straightened her garments in a very provocative manner that he couldn’t help but appreciate.

Once she was back on steady legs, he offered, “Madam, a thousand pardons and endless apologies for my coarse actions. May a gentleman offer a lady such as yourself some refreshment to help ease your fallen condition? I have been accused of being ill-mannered but not without compassion for someone suffering from my poor conduct. May I know your name so that I may properly apologize?”

Zara smiled at her potential new mark with his polished manners and very expensive clothing. Perhaps he had some useful connections that would be worth cultivating. She wanted to cloak her name under one of her many aliases for the time being. As the head of the United States branch of the Dteam, she had ten aliases that she could switch among. For the time being she was trying to stay under the radar of her Russian boss, so she decided on the newest one as she accepted, “Oh, kind sir, I am grateful to meet one so generous in manner, strength, and looks! I was warned that New Yorkers had no compassion for other travelers, so I am pleased to see there are exceptions! My name is Daria Plovia, kind sir. And you are?”

The male inclined his head slightly and offered, “My name is Arthur Buswald. All my friends call me Buzz.”

Zara knew she captured the male's imagination with her long legs, striking facial structure, dark eyes, and full lips. She wrapped herself into the new characterization of Daria that she had just created and smiled her well-practiced seduction smile. "I am very pleased to meet you, Buzz. Now, I think you made some reference to refreshment? I have a thirst that may not be quenched with just a single simple libation."

Buzz, now thoroughly smitten, suggested, "Then of course, let's just see how thirsty you are, madam!"

Zara grabbed up her bag and hastily searched for the diamond necklace to reassure herself that it was still there.

Buzz couldn't help but notice the refracted bling and commented, "My goodness, so many diamonds, but none gracing your creamy neckline!"

Zara smirked as they walked on and replied, "Bubi, goodness had nothing to do with them being in my possession!" She chuckled and added, "Sadly, just an old family heirloom of valueless crystals. All I have, really."

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Buzz swung the door open to his flat, placed his hand on the small of her back and ushered her in. "Welcome to Castle Buzz! Home sweet home! As we agreed, this is just until you can get back on your feet again. I'm still amazed that you made a journey so far from your homeland with so little baggage. You remind me of one of those characters in a TV series that is on the lam and only has the clothes on their back, but no toothbrush. By the way, I have an extra toothbrush if you need it. I'm real fussy about my toothbrush, so you should know that I'm not sharing. You can take that other room over there and set it up as your own."

Zara studied Buzz a second and then asked, “All this hospitality to a stranger and you do not insist I share your bed? Don’t tell me I found both a gentleman and a kind stranger in this harsh city.”

Buzz chuckled as he responded, “Hey, I’m not going to discourage you from warming my bed, but it would be your choice, not a requirement. Besides, all this is new to me as well. Let’s take our time and get to know one another, then we can see where things stand.”

Zara wandered into the other room. As she inspected the closet and the top of the dresser, she noticed right away the belongings of another female. She turned and strode back out to Buzz. “I can’t help but notice another female’s trappings in the room and closet. What am I to say when this other female comes back to her room for her possessions? Were you looking for a team exercise rather than just a partner?”

Almost immediately, Buzz grew very dark. It took several seconds for him to regain his composure before he quietly remarked, “She won’t be coming back for her things, Daria. She was murdered by a Russian mobster.

“I simply can’t bring myself to remove Patty’s things. I haven’t been in that room in quite some time. It didn’t occur to me that you might take offense at her belongings being there. I try not to think about her belongings or what happened. If it will make you feel better you can put them into bags, so you don’t have to look at them. I can’t touch them. Too many memories. All of them painful.”

Zara smirked internally to herself and thought, *‘What a great con line! Maybe I can use that some time. However, I’d better play the ‘I’m-so-sorry-card to make him think I’m touched by his emotional whatever.’* Zara then commiserated, “Oh my! You poor thing! How awful for you and of course for her too! Yes, of course, I understand about her things. Did they ever catch

the killer? Oh, I'm sorry, what a rude thing to ask. Is my being Russian going to be a problem with such a dreadful event having been in your life?"

Buzz was slightly melancholy with divulging the history, yet not anxious to let her leave. He commented, "Oh, you mustn't think that way! I don't hold all Russians personally responsible for one murderous psychotic! You have needs that I can accommodate. Somehow that seems right to me, regardless of your nationality. Anyway, the wretched little murderer, Sergei, got all that was coming to him. The police had me identify his body and his ugly silver front tooth."

Zara barely contained her astonishment as her insides roiled on hearing the name Sergei. She immediately flashed on how she had come to work in the Dteam group in New York City. She recalled with disgust his greasy appearance, the big silver front tooth, and his offensive stares after she had been offered the job. She had all but forgotten about Sergei, until Buzz had revived the buried memory. To meet a man in a city of millions only to have a common crossing was fate at its worst, or perhaps it worked in her favor.

She remembered when Sergei had disappeared, but every time that she inquired after him Grigory told her to drop the subject, so she'd let it go. She didn't care a bit about Sergei yet was somehow relieved that he would never sneak up on her. She obviously needed to do some additional research on her new target. Perhaps there was more to this man than she had considered.

Trying to regain his original upbeat attitude before reliving his bad days, Buzz suggested, "Hey, enough about my downer story! Why don't you settle in and then let's see about something to eat, shall we? I bet after a short rest and a nice meal we can talk about your next steps. Agreed?"

Zara smiled amicably. “Agreed.”

As an afterthought, Buzz remarked, “Oh yeah! Let me get some plastic bags. If you’ll bag all of her stuff up, I’ll see that it gets donated to the battered women’s shelter down the way. It seems like this is a good time to break with the past, don’t you think?”

As Buzz scampered off, Zara thought, *but first, Bubi, I will pick through her clothes before bagging them up. I could use some new clothes, and it seems a shame to let clothes from a dead female be donated so carelessly. After all I’m needy too.*

As she sorted through the things, she found many items she could utilize. Then she became almost nostalgic when she came across some erotic leather goods in one of the drawers. They reminded her of her past, when she was at the top of her game as a dominatrix. Zara considered that perhaps this arrangement could have some longevity.

## Chapter 3 – What if being saved means trusting in yourself? ...The Enigma Chronicles

As he stood there, he stared out one of the few windows in the massive laboratory and data center. Winter had not yet released its grip on the frozen landscape. For some unknown reason, he never seemed to notice nature, the world around him, or the changing seasons. Being located in Finland meant using the snow and ice from the environment to cool down the horrific heat generation driven by the massive supercomputer driving his project. So long as the temperatures were low and snow fell, the data center would run the heat exchangers far more cheaply than alternative electricity. He smiled at the cynical thought of bragging on the *greenness* of their project, located in a climate that leveraged more natural cooling than most other supercomputer sites.

His musings were interrupted by his faithful assistant who entered and stated, “Xavier, I think I may have found the candidate for our next round of testing. You had asked me to continue correspondence with our volunteer until we were ready, but she quietly fell off the grid. After digging and searching, she came back on the grid only to flat disappear until this week. As it turns out, her assistant gave me some clues to her disappearance, and now we can piece together what may have happened.”

Dr. Xavier Pekoni slowly turned his gaze and stared dispassionately at his assistant. He adjusted his spectacles and tossed his shoulder length silver pony tail back over his collar before he reprimanded, “Leroy, our *forever code* project is designed to intercept the degenerative tissue problems in human beings, as well as refresh the body’s DNA encoding, so the life force of the individual can allow living for a thousand years. Since we are still unable to make it work to my satisfaction yet, and time on this planet is still so precious, I don’t want to waste any of it

listening to how your day went. Can you simply get to the point and outline our next steps? I'm in a hurry and expect you to be on the same schedule with me! Our all-important time continuum is collapsing to a finite point, so don't waste any of it!"

Leroy recognized that tone and, swallowing hard, he offered, "Apologies, Dr. Pekoni. Your missing test subject has been located, but her care giver is unwilling to allow me access to her. So I am exploring other options, for both regular channels and otherwise, to determine how best to reintroduce her into our program time line."

Xavier nodded approvingly and agreed, "That's better. We have successfully completed our preliminary testing with organs in animals, but we must see how we succeed or perhaps stumble with a human subject. The regenerative process on lost neural pathways in the brain will be our next milestone, and I don't want to miss our time line. Do you understand?"

Leroy, now somewhat intimidated, responded, "Yes, Dr. Pekoni, I understand. But in any case, whether we use legitimate means to extract her or otherwise, we cannot risk activity that would generate high exposure and attention to your project. The setback we incurred in exiting the U.S. operations was a good but unfortunate lesson in what not to do or who to trust. Therefore, we will need to extract her quietly and leave no trace of her to be followed. Those were your instructions, and I have not forgotten."

Xavier almost smiled as he reminded, "As I have pointed out, our time is running out. I want answers for the *forever code* before the squeamish, bleeding hearts show up again and say you can't test with humans! Once we have the right formula, no one will care how we got there because they will all be pushing and shoving while standing in line to buy our service for a tenfold life span boost. So, you're right, we must be quiet about who and where we are."

Leroy concurred, "Yes, Dr. Pekoni."

Then with a renewed seriousness, Xavier asked, “When is the unscheduled field trip for the former Master Po to be arranged?”