

Thicker Than Water

“Good morning.”

When the boy looks up, I resist the urge to flinch when his cyan irises meet mine. If the station had a blackout, I’m sure those two rings would’ve pierced right through the darkness.

The rest of him is just as striking: satin gold hair that curtains a chiselled face, sun-kissed skin, and a specimen of a physical build. And his circumstance is certainly unique: facial scans showed no records on any database.

“Good morning, ma’am.”

A smile crosses my face. “You can call me Ms Liz.”

His unnerving gaze follows me as I sit down in the metal chair across from him and extend my hand. “What’s your name?”

The light in his eyes flickers for a moment, then he shakes my hand. “Leopius Delta Ackerman. You can call me Leo.”

Ackerman... he definitely is a spitting image of him.

“Nice to meet you, Leo. I assume your father is Magnus Ackerman?”

His eyes finally break contact, grazing along the one-way glass panel on my left, though there’s no one behind it. “He’s not... yes.”

“That’s alright, Leo. We don’t have to talk about him right now if you don’t want to. How about you tell me a bit more about yourself? Where do you live?” “I lived in the Infinitive Mansion with Magnus Ackerman, Coach, Doc, and Mei Hua.” “Could you tell me more about these people?” I ask.

“Magnus Ackerman... well, I don’t suppose I need to explain who he is.” He doesn’t.

Trillionaire, two-forty-IQ genius, philanthropist -- everyone knows who the CEO of Ackerman Industries is. My house, my kompak, and even the standard-issue XZ-24 sonic pistol in my holster only exist because of that man.

“As for Coach and Doc, they monitored my body and made sure it was in peak biological condition.”

I frown. “Do you know their names?”

“No. They weren’t allowed to tell me any personal information.” “What about Mei Hua, then? Is that her real name?”

“It is. She wasn’t supposed to tell me, either, but I found out when she dropped her ID card..”

“Is she a nanny?”

He immediately shakes his head. “I was supposed to call her ‘Teacher’, but she did so much more than that. She is- was... the only friend I had -- the only actual parent, too. Coach and Doc cared about me, but I knew I ultimately was just a job to them. But Mei Hua, she loved me. Which is why I- I couldn’t just...” His voice squeezes as teardrops start flowing out of his eyes, making them sparkle under the light.

“It’s OK,” I say gently. “You don’t need to talk about it if-”

“No.” He blinks back his tears, and the sparkle crystallises into diamond-hard anger. “People need to know what happened.

“It started last September on my 18th birthday. It was an extra special birthday because dad- because *Ackerman* showed up.”

He smiles wryly. “At first, I actually thought he came to celebrate with me for once. But the real reason why he came was so Doc could transfuse 450ml of the plasma in my blood into his body.

“Ackerman told me the fluids from my healthy, young body would slow down the aging of his -- maybe even reverse it. Either way, I was extending his life.” “Were you OK with this?”

“I was happy to give it to him. He only visited a few times a year, but when he did, he’d always remind me that I had a purpose, that I couldn’t leave the mansion because one day I’d make the world a better place. And I believed him. Although I hardly saw him in person, I saw him all the time on the news: all the awards he received, the inventions he created, the people he donated to. By giving him my blood, I was allowing him to create more inventions, help more people. It made me feel important. Needed.”

“But it didn’t stop with him. During last month’s transfusion session, he asked me to give my blood to Alexander Maxwell.”

“Maxwell?”

“Yeah. *That* Maxwell. Apparently my blood can help anyone who shares my blood type, though not as effectively as it does for Ackerman. I was so happy when I found out and immediately asked Ackerman if I could give Mei Hua some. She always tried to hide it or brushed it off when I asked, she there was something wrong with her heart. But Ackerman...”

I can see his jaw bones bulge out of the sides of his cheek.

“I’ll never forget the anger on his face. He shouted at me, demanding how I could even think about wasting my blood on a 'plebian like her'. He said only changemakers -- exceptional individuals like himself and Maxwell -- deserved extra time. If he shared this technology with the world, only the rich would be able to afford it, and all they’d do with the extra years is continue wasting the resources of this long-overcrowded planet.

“I didn't care. He *owed* her! She’d been there for me my whole life when he hadn’t. She was the one who taught me to be kind, who made me want to help others. Maybe her death wouldn’t make headlines, maybe she’d never cure cancer or win a Nobel prize, but she *did* make the world a better place in her own, small ways.”

He shakes his head. "But that man refused. So I decided to do the transfusion myself.

"I snuck into the lab with her last night and started accessing the system. I'd seen Doc do it so many times before.

“That's... when I found out what I really am. Project LEOPIUS:

“Longevity-Extending Organic Plasma Independent Uni-receipient Supplier.” He snorts.

“Ackerman always told me my mother died during children and that she gave me my name. But she was just a healthy body he paid to give birth to me and keep her mouth shut. That’s when I found out my”- he laughs hollowly -“*middle name*: Delta. Alpha, Beta, and Gamma were all... unsuccessful. Apparently, he was impatient and grew them in pods so their bodies were ready for donating within a year. But their blood made him age *faster* instead of slower. That’s why he chose to cultivate me in a more... traditional way.” I shift in my seat. “What happened to them?”

A darkness clouds his eyes. “I don’t know. The files didn't say. All I know is that project LEOPIUS was never meant to see the light of day.”

"Then how did you escape?"

"Ackerman and his security droids found us before I could start the transfusion. But I grabbed a syringe, and by the time they got the door open I had 0.5CCs of disinfectant alcohol ready to be pumped straight into heart if they didn't let us go. He didn't have a choice: if I died, he'd have to wait another 18 years for a new blood bag. "We made it all the way to the front gate. But then he suddenly gave a command, and before I could do anything his droid..."

His hands ball into tight fists as he breathes raggedly, his body rising and falling like a wave.

When he speaks again, it's almost a whisper. "He killed her. Mei Hua died... so that I could escape. The world needs to know what he did to her, to me, to all the boys he treated as bloodbags."

There's a brief silence as I consider everything. Then I make up my mind. "I'm very sorry for your loss, Leo. But these are serious allegations against one of the most reputable men on earth."

He places a drive on the table. "It's all in here."

I stand up, staring at the evidence -- then I draw my pistol and obliterate it with a shatter-shot.

He erupts from his chair, towering above me. "YOU--"

Too late. My stun-shot hits him square in the chest, disabling his nervous system as the blast echoes through the room. He plummets to the floor, conscious but unable to move a muscle. I walk around the table to be met by his twin pools of cyan digging deep into me, as if trying to drown me in them.

This was a mistake; I should've stunned him the moment I entered the room instead of getting to know him.

"I'm sorry, Leo. I really am," I tell him -- maybe just to make myself feel even a little bit better. "You remind me a lot of my son... But my father doesn't have much time left. He's not just a brilliant scientist. He's a good person, too -- just like your Mei Hua was. I can't- I *won't* let him die. Not when there's something I can do to save him."

I check the message on my kompak. "Your father will be here soon. If it makes you feel any better, soon you won't be alone. You're going to have a brother: Leopius Alpha Maxwell."