

# THE LIBRARIAN

## Part I - Inception

My headspace has gotten crowded.

Until a few days ago, only two of me occupied the space between my ears. Myself and my alter ego, The Librarian. She's an absolute badass. Aloof, always in control, she thrived under pressure, unlike me. I'm the antithesis.

As owner, I rent headspace to The Librarian whenever I needed her to be the one in control. We both respected each other's boundaries and together we've been able to accomplish some remarkable things.

That was then. This is now.

Now there's a new iteration of me. She's barged in, smeared the boundaries, upset the balance and unlike The Librarian, this new me will not be ephemeral. She's here to stay. And it's this new version of me who's the cause of our problem.

We're all trapped because of her.

"As you well know," Mr. Soto said. "I'm not a patient man. I have given you my edict and you dishonor your oyabun with silence?"

Little has changed in the 10 years when first called to meet Mr. Soto and pressed to serve him. The head of the Yakamita Crime Family remained genteel, wise, and thoughtful. He speaks now as he did then, in a whispered voice. His tone has always been as soft and gentle as

a summer breeze, his words delivered at a poet's pace. Never rushed, they flow from his mouth smooth and easy, wafting into your ear and permeating your mind.

As the years have gone on, I've seen the other side of his gentility and witnessed the sheen of ruthlessness in his eyes, and know that behind each of his carefully chosen words lurks veiled threats and hidden agendas. He hadn't become head of the most powerful crime family by being nice and playing by the rules.

In a gesture of apology and respect, I bowed, then said, "My apologies, Mr. Soto. I was only showing the proper respect for the magnitude of that which you have asked of me."

It was what he'd asked that was the problem. Not a problem for The Librarian or myself, but a problem because of the new me.

Thanks to her, what Mr. Soto had asked was impossible. Sure, The Librarian could steal DNA sequences from Lifetronics and with those I could design and build the genomes to create his progeny at his behest, but because of the new me, it was impossible to be a surrogate as he'd ordered.

The new me was a mom.

"I can think of no one better, my dear Librarian," Mr. Soto said.

True, the name Librarian was not my creation, but was the title Mr. Soto had bestowed upon me on that day he'd pressed into his service. He'd said it was an homage to my photographic memory, my special ability of being able to see genetic code once and replicate it with perfect recall. The holographic gang tattoo on my wrist, the mark of ownership and being

owned, is of a Bible, opened to the book of Genesis. Mr. Soto had said The Librarian is the creator of life.

How could any of the me's admit the truth of our pregnancy to Mr. Soto when I hadn't yet shared the news with Sebastian?

One thing all of me could agree on was if we denied Mr. Soto's decree, we would sign not only our death sentence, but that of the life inside us. Just as true, if we agreed, we'd be signing our child's death sentence just the same.

Just a handful of weeks into pregnancy and because of my actions, I've put all of our lives at risk. Some mother I'll be. She begged The Librarian to take control of the situation, lest she or I said something stupid and got us all killed.

I felt the Librarian, cool and calculating, take over.

"I'm honored," was the last thing I heard The Librarian say in a voice that was mine, but not my own. She was now in control.

She shifted her position on the black zabuton cushion so she could bow to the proper depth.

Rising to meet his soulless eyes, The Librarian continued, "I'll need the usual type of information necessary to code your son to your specifications."

"Yes," he answered without hesitation. "I've already taken care of that."

With his right hand, he reached into the left sleeve of his black silk suit jacket and extracted an ancient thumb drive from a hidden pocket.

“Everything you need is contained within,” he said.

He held the flash drive in his palm as he leaned across the teak chabudai.

The Librarian reached to take it from him, but before she could, Mr. Soto closed his fist.

“It’s imperative you understand what’s at stake, Librarian,” he said. “What you create will be heir to all I have built. I will not tolerate failure or error of any kind. My son must be free of any defects.”

The Librarian bristled.

“Mr. Soto,” she replied, “I’ve been creating genome sequences and coding illegals for The Family for over 10 years. As you said yourself, you could think of nobody better and for good reason. My photographic memory has allowed a perfect coding record, raising no suspicions from my supervisors at Lifetronics or any of the agencies in charge of such matters.”

Mr. Soto smiled, but his fist remained closed.

“Coding is one thing,” he answered. “Of that, I have no doubts about your abilities. Your exemplary record speaks for itself. It’s the subsequent nine months as a surrogate that is cause for some alarm. It’s my job as oyabun of this family to remain in the know of all matters as it pertains to those who are in my employ. As such, I’m well aware of your desire to have a family of your own.”

Recognizing an opportunity to speak on behalf of everyone, the Librarian said, “Perhaps, then you’d be more comfortable finding a more suitable surrogate.”

Mr. Soto smiled, his lips as thin and sharp as a razor. His eyes became twin black holes that swallowed the light from the Lotus-shaped bamboo fixtures hanging from the ceiling.

“The Japanese have a saying,” he said. “If you do not enter the tiger’s cave, you will not catch its cub. You see, dear Librarian, there is no one more suitable than you to be the surrogate. In the most literal and figurative sense, you will have skin in the game and thus be less prone to do something that would be unbecoming a lady of your station. As such, we both are beneficiaries of the arrangement.”

The Librarian sat unflinching, unwilling to break eye contact. To do so would be weakness, interpreted as possessing a guilty conscious for a deed not yet acted upon, but planned.

They sat for several moments. Satisfied his words had not uncovered a hidden agenda, his black hole eyes disgorged the light they’d swallowed, radiating a brightness equal in luminosity as that he’d taken.

“There is an additional incentive I think you will find most favorable,” he continued. “Once you fulfill this decree, The Family will consider your debt paid in full and you’ll be free of any future obligations while enjoying a lifetime of protection while you raise a family of your own design.”

That said, Mr. Soto opened his hand. The Librarian took the flash drive from him, bowed slightly once more, got up from the zabuton and walked backward, careful not to show any dishonor by turning her back to him.

Reaching the closed shoji, she paused and bowed once more, keeping her head lowered until he spoke.

He said, “When you’ve reached the end of the second trimester, contact me as you normally would. I will provide you with the instructions and my expectations for the birthing process.”

“Yes, Mr. Soto,” the Librarian replied.

“You are dismissed, Librarian,” he said.

Her job complete, The Librarian slipped back into the inner recesses of my consciousness. One of Mr. Soto’s bodyguards opened the shoji behind me. Free of The Librarian, there was one last chance in which I or the mother within could divulge the truth, to plead on behalf of our unborn child.

We did nothing.

I stepped backwards across the threshold, waited until the shoji had been closed, and surrendered myself into the hands of Mr. Soto’s security detail. Instead of feeling confident I’d escaped immediate danger as I traced the outside of the flash drive with my fingers, I knew the danger was just beginning.

All I’d done was jump from the frying pan and into the fire.

Once they delivered me to the street, Mr. Soto's security detail turned and headed back into the confines of the safe house without uttering a word. Standing under the small portico, I looked around. The world had changed.

There had been the world before I'd entered the safe house and now there was the world after emerging from it. Where the world had possessed brightness and vibrancy, the energy electric and exciting, the world now was a singular cacophonous buzz. Colors, too, had turned into a blurred palette that lacked any definition or clarity. Both the sky and the cityscape had become muted and matte.

Walking toward the landing park, I cleaved through the throngs of Hedonists clogging the sidewalk. They were a faceless abstraction, not of individuals, but a conglomeration of humanity belonging to another class. Although they were lowly Hedonists, they still were representatives of a class that possessed freedom, a class that was unbound, free to go about their lives unrestrained, a class not constrained by an edict impossible to abide by.

Thanks to Mr. Soto, I was an Elite, but I knew it was only a label. I knew the truth, and the truth was I was an illegal. The lowest of the lows. Especially now.

The incoming call chirping in my auditory cortex interrupted my pity party. I resisted the urge to press my index finger behind my earlobe to connect the call, instead waiting until the third ring. If there was no fourth ring, I knew it was Sebastian calling from his antique phone.

Three rings, then nothing.

Extracting a 150-year-old flip phone, a gift from Sebastian, I dialed his number.

He picked up on the third ring, which was the confirmation code he was alone. If he ever picked up on anything but the third ring, I'd know he wasn't.

Although not forbidden by law, societal conventions frowned at a geneticist who dated an obstetrician. At the least, it was in poor form. At the most, it's seen as a fundamental failure to keep ourselves free from the ever-present conflict of interest cloud that hovered over everything Elites said or did.

This secretive mode of communication had, in the beginning, been exciting. Now it's annoying.

"Hey you," he said.

Although I'd expected his characteristic enthusiasm to come trumpeting through, I wanted him to sound morose, maybe somewhat disinterested, or at the very least, tired from his trip home. I hated whenever I had to pop his balloon, knowing I'd not be able to match his natural, upbeat disposition.

"Hey," I responded.

Like the surrounding colors, my voice lacked the vitality that would've accompanied a week-long absence because of the conference he'd attended in Los Angeles.

"Everything okay?" He asked.

He'd always been as inquisitive as he was enthusiastic. While it was one trait that I'd fallen in love with, I'd hoped he'd been able to sense my tone and let the information come to him instead of him smelting it from the ore he was dredging out of me.



“Can you come over to my place? Say in an hour?” I asked, careful not to answer his question.

“Shit,” he replied. “That bad? Yeah, sure. Do you need me to bring anything?”

Great, not only was he being enthusiastic and inquisitive, now he was being his sweet and thoughtful self. This is just gonna plain suck.

“No. Nothing. See you in an hour,” I said and disconnected the call before he could reply.

In the kaleidoscope of danger, this new twist of fate brought to bear the color of abandonment. The thought of Sebastian turning tail and running for the hills when he learned the truth burned a hole through my heart. How could he stand by me after learning all that I’d hidden? Still, fate beckoned me with its skeletal finger toward an uncertain future with a man I very much wanted to have a future with.

Placing a hand on my belly, the mother in me said, “How are we going to get out of this?”

Then, in an instant, an idea exploded in my mind.

I closed my eyes to focus on the thought, grabbing it before it could scurry away.

*Yes!* I said to myself. *It just might work!*

I ran through as many hypothetical scenarios as possible, tracing the cause and effect of each, comparing their possible outcomes. One thing both The Librarian and I had in common

was the ability to think in algorithms. Running through each step in a yes / no fashion, I saw a way out of this mess.

I opened my eyes. The sky remained more matte than prismatic, but there were hints of dappled light here and there. Although it was far from being bright, it was a start.

I ran toward my Veneer jump craft to get home so I could lay out as many details, eager to work them into something more coalesced.

*Yes, it could work*, I thought to myself.

The wind rushed past my ears, my legs burned with the effort when I felt the buzz within my mind whenever The Librarian woke from her subconscious slumber. I stopped dead in my tracks.

Huffing and puffing, I felt her take over, but this had nothing to do with her. She was unemotional, didn't care about feelings, didn't have time to deal with the mess that was emotion.

The next few hours with Sebastian were about life and death for me and our baby. While the details of executing my plan had everything to do with facts, logic, and solutions found in algorithms, the success of the plan hinged on truth, transparency, acceptance, and love.

I forced The Librarian back into the crevasses of my mind and focused on whether Sebastian would help me, help us, and ensure the survival of our family.

Convinced The Librarian would remain at bay, I hurried to the jump craft and rushed home and to an uncertain future.

The knock on the door broke my concentration from the diagrams and sequencing codes scribbled on sheets of paper strewn about the dining room table. Pausing for a moment before opening the door, I allowed a thin veneer of The Librarian to slip a veiled façade of detachment over my natural inclinations to keep myself in check, to keep from leaping into Sebastian's arms.

"Hello," The Librarian said, stepping aside to allow Sebastian in.

He looked good. Then again, he always did. Although both his mother and father were Japanese, Sebastian was born with two of the most beautiful jade green eyes I'd ever known. A rarity, but they suited him.

"Hey," he replied. "How 'bout at a hug at least?"

The Librarian scoffed at the idea.

"Now's not the time. Please, come in and sit," she said.

Anxious, Sebastian walked toward the dining room, then saw the notes strewn everywhere. Looking at the notes, he seemed to relax.

Getting through the initial greeting was all I needed The Librarian for. I peeled her off and said what I guessed he'd been thinking since the abrupt end to my phone call.

"Whatever you may think is cause for my behavior, I can assure you, it's not."

Sebastian wasn't the insecure or suspicious type, but I wanted to ease him as much as possible and eliminate those thoughts from his mind.

He exhaled, ran his hands through his jet-black hair, and plopped down onto one of the dining room chairs.

“Okay, well then, what’s this all about, Mae?”

Up to this point, I’d been careful, and despite my natural inclination, I had rehearsed nothing. I did not know what I was going to say, nor how I was going to say it. Instead, I’d used my time to focus on solving the problem that was dividing and growing every minute inside my womb. Wanting the conversation to be organic, I plunged ahead unscripted.

“First,” I began, “I want you to know that whatever you decide to do after I tell you what I’m about to tell you, I will not judge you. It would come as no surprise, nor would I blame you, if you stormed out of here, never wanting to see me again. In addition, I would not fault you for turning me into the Authorities.”

He tilted his head to the right, which I saw as a good sign. When intrigued, he tilted to the right, when suspicious, to the left.

“Second,” I continued, “I need to you to understand that I love you, Sebastian. The fact I’ve kept things hidden from you is not a reflection of that. It’s my sincerest hope you won’t run out of here, but you’ll understand why I kept them secret and with that understanding, you’ll decide to stay and help me so we can get through this together.”

“Mae, what the hell is going on?” Sebastian asked.

I steeled myself for the final push and said, “There’s no simple way to say this, but…”

“Mae,” Sebastian interrupted, “whatever it is you have to say, it’s okay. I love you, too. We all have things in our past that are less than perfect.”

I gazed at him, saw the image of myself floating in the centers of his green eyes. I wished I could whisper the secrets into his mind and not have to give the truth volume or voice. Wished he possessed the ability to sense what needed to be said, or he could cross the void that separated us and would come to discover the truth on his own.

As sweet as his comment was, he didn't know what he didn't know. Although well intended, his comment was naïve. It'd be one thing to admit I had a secret addiction to couponing, or that I liked to steal ramekins from restaurants, but quite another thing to share what needed to be shared.

I plunged ahead for myself. Not as The Librarian. Not as the mother in me, but me, Mae Bradling.

“Sebastian, I lead a double life,” I said.

It was out, floating in the ether between us. I studied his reaction. There was none. No surprise, no shock, not a trace of bewilderment. He remained placid, calm, unaffected.

After several moments, he said, “What do you mean? A double life? How?”

His questions came at a clipped pace, the words staccato, as if there were a period after each word he spoke.

“I'm a member of and have been working for the Yakamita crime family for the last 10 plus years,” I answered.

The enormous pressure behind the dam of untruth broke through. Feeling the unrestrained tidal wave of explanation surge forth, I did nothing to stop it.

“I steal DNA code from Lifetronics and use that code to create illegal genome sequences. Those genomes are then used to create sons and daughters for whoever has the means to pay the Yakamita. It doesn't matter what zone they're from, doesn't make any difference if they're Hedonists or Elites, as long as they have the credits to pay for it, there is no discrimination. I provide the sequencing code, hand it off and they do whatever it is they do on their end.”

I paused, the road of conversation having arrived at a critical junction. Depending on how he responded, the conversation would either continue or it would lead to a dead end. It was up to him.

He sat back in the chair, placed his hands together, his two slender index fingers making a steeple. He took a deep breath, held it, then slowly exhaled.

“And?” he asked.

“And what?” I replied, thrilled he hadn't gotten up to leave, but unsure where he wanted to take the conversation next.

“I've known you for almost two years,” he replied. His voice was flat and devoid of emotion. “I know there's way more. I'm still sitting here, so go ahead.”

He was mad. He had every right to be. I can live with mad. What I couldn't live with was abandonment.

“You're right, there's much more,” I replied.

“Please, I'm all ears,” he said.

The way he'd said it made it sound like a dare.

“I’m not an Elite, Sebastian. I’m not even a Hedonist. I’m an illegal.”

He didn’t blink, didn’t arch his eyebrows, didn’t frown, did nothing.

Determined to get as much out before he decided he’d had enough, I continued, “My parents paid the Yakamita for the genome sequencing and the paperwork to get us into Elite controlled territory. As you know, and this part is true, my mother died during childbirth because of severe hemorrhaging, which, ironically, was why she’d been a Hedonist. Also true, my father died when the AI in his jump craft malfunctioned and crashed while on the way to the hospital from work to be with my mother for the birth.

“Obviously, I did not know any of this happened. However, once I was old enough to ask who my mom and dad were, the answers lacked any substance. When I got to an age where I could start finding answers on my own, I found that a record of them was almost nonexistent. No family histories, very little medical records. There was proof of life, but little proof we’d lived.

“I became obsessed with finding out who I was, where I came from, who my parents were, but as you know, the public cannot access DNA databases. That was the impetus that led me to become a geneticist.

“Once I started working at Lifetronics, I had unrestricted access to my DNA sequence and compared it with the DNA that was on file for my mother. Obviously, they weren’t a match. My mother had been a surrogate. Therefore, I’m an illegal.”

Sebastian's brow furrowed and the corners of his mouth turn down.

“They loved me, Sebastian,” I said. “They risked an illegal pregnancy, risked living a life as Elites when they were anything but. Although they didn’t have time to live it, they risked a life where they’d always be looking over their shoulders. They did that just so they could have me.

“Even if I wasn’t a product of their biology, knowing the truth helped me to feel connected to something, the truth helped me feel connected to somebody. That connection led me to the Yakamita crime family.”

Sebastian sat up and moved to the edge of the chair. He intertwined all his fingers, his knuckles turning white. I could tell he was on the edge of giving up.

“Wait,” I said.

I’d come this far and needed him to hear everything.

“Please let me finish. Once I’m done, I’ll not stop you from leaving.”

Sebastian tilted his head to the left. He was suspicious. Not good.

“In my quest for the truth, I traced the transaction back to the Yakamita. It was they who had facilitated everything. The problem was, that same quest for information had torn holes in my history and I’d left quite a mess from all my digging.

“If I could uncover the truth, the Authorities could too. Hell, I’d done all the legwork. They would only need to follow the bread crumbs I’d left behind. Fearing discovery and a trip to the penal colony on Luna where I legally belong, I needed the Yakamita to clean up the mess I’d



made, to recreate the history I'd torn through. My intent was good, Sebastian. You have to believe that."

Several moments passed before Sebastian said, "Why are you telling me this now?"

It was a good question, one I would've asked had the roles been reversed. I wish I would've come up with a response beforehand.

Struggling to find an answer that dodged the question, I gave up and said, "To be fair, this is not information one talks about on a first date."

"You're avoiding. You didn't answer my question," he said.

"I'm getting to it," I replied.

He relaxed his fists and sat back in the chair.

I pulled out a chair of my own and sat down across from him.

"As a matter of good business practice, the Yakamita keeps tabs on all those they facilitate. Most of those they help don't turn out to be much, but I'd had an easy time with school and accelerated quickly, thanks to the photographic memory coded into me. They had watched my schooling and career with great interest and were pleased I'd sought them out, as they had plans of their own to contact me. Having somebody working on the inside, at a place like Lifetronics, was very desirable. All the infrastructure was already in place."

"Yes, I'm sure," Sebastian interrupted. "Just as desirable was the leverage they knew they could exert on you to get what they wanted."

“It’s funny,” I responded. “I’ve never felt threatened or mistreated. I’ve felt nothing but respect. They have given me what I want, and I have given them what they want. I have all I need to continue living as an Elite. Like any business transaction, there’s the desired item and the cost to possess said item. I was willing to pay the price.”

“Okay,” Sebastian said, “I get it. So, what’s the trouble now? Again, why are you telling me this?”

Unscripted and real. This was what I’d wanted. Although I’d come this far, the hard truth, the most difficult to hear, remained unsaid and unheard. I felt the buzz as The Librarian uncoiled. I wanted her to take over.

Now was not the time for facades and walls of protection. It was time for me to be vulnerable. Now was the time for me to put myself out there, even when there was the strong possibility of being hurt, even abandoned.

I leaned forward, reached for his hands, but he kept them to himself.

Undaunted, I said, “Mr. Soto is the oyabun, the head of the Yakamita. He has asked me to code his son, who will become heir to everything.”

Sebastian remained static, unemotional.

“That part is easy,” I said. “I don’t have any problem with that. He’s given me the traits he wants, and I can easily steal the DNA from Lifetronics as I have over the past 10 years. Once created, the genome and resulting blastocyst,” I paused, inhaled, held my breath, then slowly exhaled before I spoke the rest of the frightening truth, “I’m to implant it and carry it to birth.”

Sebastian's eyes widened. He stood up, opened his mouth to speak, but I held out my hands to stop him.

"Sebastian, stop! There's more. One last thing. Please."

"More?" he asked.

"Yes. While everything Mr. Soto has commanded is complicated, and while I can do the first and second part, carrying his child is impossible. I can't do it."

A look of relief came over his face as he sat back down.

"I'm relieved to hear you've decided against it," he said.

"It wasn't a decision that makes it impossible, Sebastian."

I reached out and grabbed his hands whether or not he wanted me to.

"Mr. Soto's command is impossible for me to fulfill because we're pregnant."

I let the statement hang, using the word 'we're' instead of 'I'm', hoping it would resonate. Several seconds ticked by. Sebastian sat frozen. Then his eyes blinked, slow at first, then as he realized the implications of all I'd said, his eyes fluttered. I sat still, letting him process.

"I can't," he said, then stopped. Several more seconds went by, his eyes welled with tears.

"I can't believe," he said again. His lips, like his eyes, quivered. "I can't believe we're pregnant. How far along are you?"

He'd said 'we'. I watched his tears transform his eyes into shimmering emeralds. I wondered if our child would have green eyes as well. Wondered if he or she would possess his enthusiasm, his energy, his effervescence, his zest for life, or instead would he or she be shy and withdrawn like me.

"I just found out," I said. "While you were attending your conference in L.A. I'm eight weeks."

"Wait," he said, withdrawing his hand from mine. "Are you with me, is this whole relationship predicated on the fact you need me to help you complete this..." at a loss for words, Sebastian looked around the room as if the word he was looking for was hiding behind the table or bookcase.

His implication shattered me. Pieces of my heart clattered into the pit of my stomach. Leaning closer to him, I peered into his eyes, pleading.

"No, Sebastian. Understand, I had no way of knowing we were pregnant, nor that Mr. Soto would ask this of me."

Sebastian's eyes widened, a deep furrow cut across his brown in confusion, then his mouth turned down in anger.

"But," he said, "if we're pregnant and Mr. Soto wants you to implant his son, how?"

"I think I have a solution to save our future, if you still want to have one with me. If so, yes, as an obstetrician, I'll need your help."

Sebastian looked deep into my eyes, focus and determination taking the place of the confusion and anger. In response, I opened every inch of myself to him. I wanted him to see my vulnerability, how unafraid I was. I wanted to give him, for the first time in my life, unfettered access to all that I was.

I wanted him to see how his question had shattered me, wanted him to see the shards of reflection littering my soul.

Several moments passed. I held my breath. Everything that was, everything that could be hung in the balance. The Librarian was nowhere to be found. For the first time, it was me, all of me, there for the taking. If only he'd move, if only he'd do or say something, anything.

After an eternity, he reached across the void separating us, took my hands in his and asked, "What do you have in mind?"

Sebastian had spoken six words. With each one uttered, he'd destroyed one world and, in its place, built a far more beautiful one. With his six words, he'd removed the dark world of fear, secrecy, insecurity, uncertainty, anxiety and hopelessness and replaced it with the bright world of confidence, truth, security, certainty, calm and hope.

With his six words, he'd also provided a sun around which this new world orbited. A sun burning with acceptance and love. I basked in its warmth, relished in its heat that perfused every cell in my body, including those tiny cells that belonged to the both of us.

## Part II - First Trimester Week 11

Mirrors don't lie. It was clear fatigue had a grip that was squeezing the life out of me. Looking at my reflection, I saw the mask of exhaustion draped over my face. Leaning closer, my root beer brown eyes lacked their usual brightness, but when set against a bloodshot background, it's difficult to see anything but the physical manifestations the last three weeks have taken.

"It's been worth it," I said aloud.

Even my voice was tired.

After agreeing to stay, the next hurdle had been to convince Mr. Soto Sebastian should be the attending obstetrician. I should've known better. Mr. Soto was already aware of our illicit relationship and he saw Sebastian's involvement as further assurance all would go well.

As a bonus, Mr. Soto saw the act of going to him as the honorable thing to do. As a reward for being candid and showing him respect, he'd provided all the equipment necessary to monitor and check on the baby's progress from home. Doing so provided another layer of security. Going to Sebastian's office after hours would draw unwanted attention.

The last hurdle had been the procurement of the cryostorage where our child would remain while I played host to Mr. Soto's. We got lucky on that one. There was a discarded cryostorage unit in the basement of Sebastian's office. Although dated and not serviced in over two years, we didn't have any other choice.

Turning from the mirror, I opened the bathroom door. Before entering my master bedroom, I stopped at the threshold, marveling at the changes that had taken place. Gone were my Victorian four-post bed, antique nightstands and dresser with all the associated bric-à-brac.

My retreat had become a surgical theater. Where my bed had been, a gurney now sat.

“Are you ready?” I asked, moving toward the gurney.

“The equipment is as ready as it’s gonna be,” Sebastian said. “Are you ready?”

“Do I have a choice?” I replied.

I eased myself onto the gurney.

“The sooner we get this done, the better our chances for success, correct?” I asked.

Sebastian turned and walked toward me and took my hand. He flashed me his best bedside smile then said, “Mae, I’ve got this. An embryo extraction is as simple as it comes. I learned this procedure in the first year of my residency. There won’t be any pain, some pressure maybe, but no pain. I’ll extract the embryo of our child first and once I’ve made the transfer to the cryostorage, I’ll implant the blastocyst you created for Mr. Soto and from there, it just a waiting game.”

Despite the fog of exhaustion, I managed to smile back. I squeezed his hand, safe in the knowledge I’d be under the best care.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll let you do your thing. Is there anything you can give me to help me relax?”

“Sure,” he replied, “but the more I introduce into your system, the more exposure to our child’s system as well. What we’re attempting to do here is dangerous enough. Most birth defects occur during the first 11 weeks as the organs are still developing and thus at greater risk of exposure to drugs and other contaminants. Better you just tough it out.”

“Yeah, easy for you to say,” I said.

Knowing there was no suitable reply, he asked, “Ready?”

Less than an hour later, I stood clad in my terrycloth bathrobe, staring at the large cryostorage machine taking up the space where my oak chest of drawers had stood. Behind a small window, bathed in blue light, suspended in what amounted to my womb, was our child.

Coming up behind me, he handed me a cup of tea, then placed his hand on the small of my back.

“How you holding up?” he asked.

“Fine,” I answered. “You were right. I didn’t feel a thing. Hard to believe, though. You’d think I would.”

He began to rub my lower back.

“Although I felt nothing physically, I feel...detached.”

“I can only imagine.”

“What now?” I asked.

I knew the answer, but I wanted to hear him say it. Wanted to be reassured. Wanted somebody other than myself to tell me everything was going to be alright. Needed to hear a voice of calm, a voice of reason, a voice of logic to explain the plan.

“Well,” Sebastian began, “our child will continue to grow but at a much slower rate thanks to the cryostorage. Meanwhile, if all goes well, you’ll carry Mr. Soto’s child until you



have a healthy birth. After a sufficient recovery period, we'll reintroduce our child and have our family."

I smiled at the thought. When Sebastian said it, it sounded easy. Within our grasp. When I thought about it, it didn't sound easy. I thought of the multiple scenarios where anything and everything goes wrong. What if Mr. Soto paid us a visit? What if he saw the cryostorage? What if something went wrong with his son?

"You make it sound so easy," I said. Trying to shed my negative thoughts, I continued, "Do you think it will be that easy?"

Sebastian didn't answer immediately, a trait I appreciated. Although I was sure he'd arrived at an answer in a fraction of a second, he ruminated before answering me.

"No," he said, "but I feel we're as prepared to deal with anything that may arise. While it's impossible to control all the avenues nature can take, we can limit its choices and I think we've done all we can in that regard."

"I hope so," I replied, leaning into him.

"If something goes wrong," he said, "something my father taught me comes to mind. It's a Japanese proverb that says a frog in a well does not know the great sea. People judge things by their own narrow experience, Mae. They never know the world outside that experience.

"What we've been able to accomplish here, what we've been able to do these last three weeks, extracting ourselves from the narrow well we were living in, we have now dipped our toes into the great sea. Whatever may happen, if this doesn't work out, we can always try again. And again. And again. This has proven how resilient we are."

Staring through the window of the cryostorage, suspended in a nutrient rich solution, separated by technology and circumstance, a longing I knew I could not satiate until reunited with our child gnawed.

Our child, not the one nesting inside me.

I wanted to apologize to our child, say how sorry I was for putting somebody else first, sorry for the all the risk I'd exposed us to, sorry that through my own foolish and selfish pursuits, I'd managed to snare us all in a world of deception and risk.

Guilt and self-disgust ate at the confidence Sebastian had imbued.

“What ‘cha thinking about?” Sebastian asked.

Snuggling into him, I wanted to tell him how tiny I felt, how insignificant I was, how sorry I felt.

Instead, I said, “I just hope you’re right.”

### **Part III - Second Trimester Week 15**

Gone was Sebastian’s usual enthusiasm. Even when he’d tried to be my doctor and put aside his personal feelings, I could see his enthusiasm percolating from the depths of his professionalism.

Not today.

Instead, bleak concentration, worry, and apprehension stretched his skin taut, creasing the corners of his mouth.

“This is gonna be cold,” he said.

His voice was void of inflection. He placed the ultrasound wand on my belly, situated the monitor so I couldn't see it, then donned a pair of headphones.

I laid back, stared at the ceiling fan, wishing it had the power to carry me anywhere but here. The mother in me already knew what the machine was going to find, or rather, not find. She'd felt it days ago. The Librarian had dismissed her with her usual cold detachment.

He moved the wand slowly back and forth, pressing hard here and there, pausing every now and again. After twenty minutes, he turned the machine off, gently wiped the jelly using with a warm washcloth, all the while avoiding eye contact.

“Sebastian,” I prompted.

“The baby's dead, Mae. We must do a surgical evacuation of the fetus,” he said.

The light and zest had disappeared from his eyes. Only the clinician remained.

“Normally,” he continued, “this would be something that needs to be done in a proper surgical theater, but we must do it here and hope your body's clotting remains intact.”

“What are we going to do, Sebastian?” I asked.

Lost, directionless, without a stationary point to align to, I drifted along the currents of meaninglessness. Although I'd carried a life inside me, there was never a sense of connection, only a sense of providing habitation, but even that was gone.

“My only concern at this point is to evacuate him and keep you alive for us to even ponder the next step.”

“Sebastian,” I said, reached my hand out to hold his. “I need for you to not be a clinician right now. I need you to tell me what we’re going to do.”

“I’m not sure, I suppose...”

The sound of the front door chime interrupted Sebastian’s reply. Other than Sebastian, I never had people pay me a visit.

“Who could this be?” I said.

“Shh,” he replied. “Just lie still.”

He reached for the small monitor that sat on the utility table next to the gurney and powered it on. The screen showed the view from the camera above the front door of my condo. Mr. Soto, along with two of his bodyguards, stood in the hallway.

The device that had been monitoring my heart rate during the procedure alarmed as my pulse skyrocketed. This was the nightmare scenario I’d feared might happen. Of all the times to pay a visit, why now?

“Lie still and try to stay calm,” Sebastian said, turning off the device keeping tabs on my vitals. “I’ll be right back.”

I watched the door monitor, waiting to see Sebastian open it. I could tell Mr. Soto was becoming impatient. The door opened and without missing a beat, the two bodyguards slid by Mr. Soto as easily as water around a rock in a river. I saw, then heard, the slam of the door as they forced their way in. I heard Sebastian’s voice yell in protest, then silence.

I watched as Mr. Soto slowly walked into the entryway, his image disappearing from the monitor. I reached over and turned it off, hearing the footfalls of their shoes on my wood plank flooring, felt the pressure wave of their presence compressing the atmosphere as they moved down the hall toward me.

The first bodyguard entered the room, followed by Mr. Soto, then the second bodyguard. Sebastian, buckled over and holding his stomach, staggered in last.

“Hello dear Librarian,” Mr. Soto said. “It seems my timing is impeccable. I thought it might be a good idea to check on your progress and see how things are coming along.”

Within seconds, The Librarian woke and slid over my fragile countenance.

“Indeed,” she said. “While I welcome you, it’s quite unlike the Japanese to call unannounced. At best, it’s considered impolite. At worst, it’s considered rude.”

Over Mr. Soto’s shoulder, The Librarian saw the look of surprise on Sebastian’s face upon hearing those words come out of her mouth in the icy manner they did, but he was smart enough to wipe the shocked look away.

After a brief pause, Mr. Soto bowed slightly. “You’re most correct, and I offer my sincerest apology. However, I’ve not heard anything from you since your last request to have doctor Busano be your obstetrician.”

“I was unaware of your request for frequent progress reports,” The Librarian said. “If I remember correctly, your instruction was to contact you at the end of the second trimester.”

With no hint of contempt or annoyance, Mr. Soto answered, “Again, you’re correct. But I also made it quite clear that there was no room for error or failure. I’m here to reassure myself that all is going as planned.”

Sebastian spoke up and said, “Your timing is indeed impeccable. I’ve just completed an ultrasound to ensure all is well and I can report that your son is healthy and is developing normally.”

“Splendid,” Mr. Soto replied.

He walked around the room, inspecting all the various pieces of equipment before stopping in front of the cryostorage and peering into the small window that offered a view my gelatinous pseudo-womb.

The Librarian held her breath.

“Would you like to hear your son’s heartbeat?” Sebastian asked.

Turning from the cryostorage, Mr. Soto smiled.

“Please stand aside, and I’ll be more than happy to accommodate you. I must say, your son’s heartbeat is quite strong,” Sebastian continued.

Walking away from the cryostorage, Mr. Soto moved toward the side of the gurney with Sebastian taking his place next to me. Sebastian turned on the ultrasound machine, made a few adjustments, grabbed the wand and the tube of jelly, then turned to The Librarian.

Powerless to do anything but lie there and wait, The Librarian closed her eyes. If Mr. Soto came to know the truth, she’d need to be ready.

She felt the coolness of the jelly, heard the static that came with the roller ball being moved over her, then clear and loud the whoosh and swish of a heart beat burst from the speaker.

Confused, The Librarian opened her eyes and looked toward Sebastian, who gave her a subtle wink.

“It is quite strong, isn’t it?” Mr. Soto said.

“Yes, sir, it is,” Sebastian responded. “One of the strongest I’ve ever heard. She has coded you a son with a heart superior to any other I’ve heard at this point in its development.”

He removed the wand from her belly and turned the machine off.

Mr. Soto, still smiling, bowed deeply, then said, “Again, my apologies for my intrusion. You’ve done well. How long until birth?”

“25 weeks, give or take,” Sebastian answered.

Mr. Soto considered this for a moment, then said, “Very well. I shall intrude no further. I will make preparations at my residence and will await your call. In the meantime, if you’ll be so kind, please keep me apprised of any developments.”

“If you don’t hear from us,” The Librarian spoke, “all is going according to plan and we’ll see you in about 25 weeks.”

Bowing again, Mr. Soto turned and left with his two bodyguards in tow.

I turned the monitor back on and watched until they’d walked down the hallway and out of view of the camera. Once they were gone, so too was The Librarian.

I looked at Sebastian, who wore a Cheshire smile a mile wide.

“What the hell was that?” I asked. “Is that thing inside me dead or alive, Sebastian?”

Not expecting the outburst, his smile disappeared.

“It’s dead,” he answered. “I’d made a recording of his heartbeat during the previous ultrasound so I could use it as a baseline to compare future ultrasounds to pick up on any irregularities. I just played back the recording for Mr. Soto.”

I grappled with the information, the roller coaster of emotion now back on the descent.

“Besides,” he continued, “when he was looking at our child in the cryostorage, I was afraid he’d realize that was one piece of equipment he’d not requisitioned and the gig would’ve been up. I did the first thing that came to my mind.”

As he spoke, I saw not the man I’d fallen in love with, not the obstetrician taking care of me and our child, but I saw him as a father protecting his child from danger. Overwhelmed with gratitude for having him by my side, tears pooled in my eyes.

The moment was short-lived. Like thunder following lightning, one realization flashed and its implication rumbled across the prairie of my already worn soul.

“What are we going to do, Sebastian?”

He paused and considered his answer for several minutes before answering.

“We’ve talked about this, Mae. The only choice we have. Once you’ve sufficiently recovered, we’ll re-introduce our...”



He stopped and looked away.

“Sebastian, do you know the sex of our baby?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

Knowing my hunger for motherhood, which had become ravenous these past weeks, would remain unsatiated, a darkness that had no bounds consumed me. Realizing our son would be a part of me only long enough to be given away, destined to live the life under the head of the Yakamita, a son who would share nothing more than adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine and nothing more, I couldn't keep my eyes open. After closing them, the darkness within me was complete.

Every moment that had transpired to this soul-crushing point rushed into the void within me. All the trouble, all the pain, all the difficulty, from having to reveal the truth to Sebastian, to the elation I'd felt upon his acceptance, from the joy that lifted me at his willingness to stand by me, to the love he'd offered, all of it crashed upon the shores of my exposed soul.

Reeling and fractured, I rolled onto my side. With my back to Sebastian, I let myself go.

Unfettered, I wept.

#### **Part IV - 3<sup>rd</sup> Trimester Week 40**

“Sebastian, it's time,” The Librarian said.

Sebastian looked up from the tablet he was reading.

With no inflection of emotion, The Librarian continued, “Please let Mr. Soto know we'll be inbound and he'll need to have everything ready upon our arrival.”

Over the past 25 weeks, The Librarian had been ever-present. Gone was Mae, gone was the word or idea of motherhood and all that it embodied. The Librarian had taken over, holding the other two hostage.

“Yep, I’m on it. Do you need help to the jump craft?” He asked.

“Did I need help yesterday when we went for Chinese food?”

“I’ll get your things,” Sebastian replied. He’d learned the hard way to not take things personally. The Librarian was not one to be warm and fuzzy.

Once en route, The Librarian could tell Sebastian was looking at her, but she kept her steel gaze straight ahead.

“Mr. Soto has everything ready. He’ll be there for the delivery,” Sebastian said.

“Yes, I would think so,” The Librarian replied.

“Mae,” Sebastian said, then because of a loss for words or nerves, there was a long silence before he said, “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Sebastian, don’t,” The Librarian interrupted. “I know what we’re up against. Even if we get away with this, which I doubt we will, but if we do, we will still not have our son. Ever.”

Deciding it was better not to press his luck, Sebastian fell silent.

The evening sky over San Francisco was spectacular. An orange hued blanket of fog was making its way from the Pacific, curling around the spires of the Golden Gate bridge, its wispy tendrils enveloping Alcatraz Island.

Ten minutes later, after setting down on a private landing deck atop Mr. Soto's private residence, The Librarian and Sebastian were led down into what amounted to a delivery room. Mr. Soto had spared no expense. All the equipment looked to be brand new.

Sebastian left the Librarian with the nurses while he went to get scrubbed and prepped.

Once laid onto the delivery table, the nurses hooked The Librarian to all the various machines. Then, parting like the Red Sea before Moses, the nurses stepped aside and Mr. Soto appeared above her.

"It's good to see you, Librarian," he said. "A bit late, but far better to be late than never."

"Agreed," the Librarian replied. "After all, you can't put a time limit on perfection."

"Let's hope so, for both of our sakes," he said.

Entering the room, Sebastian took control.

"Alright everybody out. We've got work to do. Is everything ready?"

"Yes, doctor," the head nurse replied.

"Okay then. Mr. Soto, if you please," Sebastian said, showing him the door. "You may observe from the deck above or wait outside and watch via video monitor."

Mr. Soto gazed at Sebastian for several seconds, then said, "Dear boy. You underestimate my position and overestimate my hospitality. I will not be ordered by anyone in my home. I will remain where I am and you would do well to remember your place."

Instead of replying, Sebastian turned from him and got to work.

“Are you ready?” he asked The Librarian.

“Absolutely,” she replied.

“Okay, then. Nurse, please hand me the ultrasound. Let’s get a peek and see where we are, shall we?”

Placing the wand on her belly, the entire room was filled with the whoosh and swish of the baby’s heartbeat. Hearing it for the first time, The Librarian inhaled with the effort required to keep the tidal wave of emotions in check. She knew the others she held captive would be swept away at hearing the life within them.

Sebastian moved the wand up and toward her left side, the resulting silence punctuating the fact that life could be there one moment, and could be gone the next.

Continuing to move the wand slowly up and to the left side of her belly, the room flooded with the sound of a second heartbeat.

“What is that?” Mr. Soto asked from the corner of the room. “Is that normal?”

“Yes, quite normal,” Sebastian answered. “Especially when you’re carrying twins.”

The words punctured through The Librarian like rocks thrown through wet tissue paper. I heard the words, but couldn’t comprehend their meaning. The mother in me basked in the revelation.

Could it be true? Thinking back over the previous weeks, other than reporting on the continued well-being of our child, Sebastian hadn’t been as forthcoming with any of the usual

information. Uncharacteristically, he'd not been as enthusiastic as he normally was and he'd been clever in always wearing headphones when using the sonogram.

The Librarian appreciated his cold and distant bedside manner, not allowing any room for me or the mother in me to regard his actions as a way a father, knowing he was going to have to give up his own son, was coping with it while trying to protect me.

Yet he'd known I'd been carrying twins and had said nothing.

"Twins?" Mr. Soto said.

"Yes, twins," Sebastian answered. "Mr. Soto, you are to have the firstborn of these identical twins, which, per Japanese law, is the eldest. That first right belongs to you."

Stepping forward, Mr. Soto regarded me for a long moment. I, not The Librarian, met his gaze. I was ready to move on. If I was to be a mother after all, it was high time I needed to face things head on, regardless of how difficult they may be.

Almost a full minute passed before he finally said, "Librarian, you're a kite that has bread a hawk."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," I said.

"I must admit," Mr. Soto answered, "I did not see this as a potential outcome. As I stated from the outset, I knew of your desire to start your own family and was afraid my decree would be problematic, but I now see you're a very clever girl indeed.

“If all is well with the first, you may keep the second. I will consider your debt paid and you’ll be free of obligation as agreed upon. Well done, Librarian. Your cunning has been rewarded.”

“Okay,” Sebastian cut in, "we need to get moving here."

Time seemed to stand still until the moment I felt my first son leave me. His birth marked The Librarian’s death. In that singular moment, now exorcised of my first-born son and the alter ego that had served me so well, I wept.

Ensnared in the pain of loss and of death, I didn’t hear the cries from my first-born son, didn’t see as they handed him off to a nurse, cleaned, swaddled and given to Mr. Soto.

It wasn’t until I heard Sebastian encouraging me to push that I came back into the present moment. I’d felt my second son leave me, felt the resulting void within my belly, then heard his cries. I was both empty and filled in the same moment.

I reached out to him and saw his beautiful face for the first time, a completeness I’d not known possible overtook me. The tears that streamed down my face had stopped being tears of sadness, but tears of overwhelming joy.

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The lights of the San Francisco skyline lit the upper layer of the fog bank in electric blues and purples as we flew home. Cradled in my arms, Hisui slept. We’d decided on the name, the Japanese name for Jade, after seeing the color of his eyes. Like father like son.

“You knew about the twins all along, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Yes,” Sebastian answered.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Two reasons,” he replied. “If something had gone wrong, and believe me, the risks were there, I didn’t think you’d be able to take it. It would’ve broken you.”

He wasn’t wrong, yet hearing him vocalize doubt in me, even if true, stung.

“And second,” I prompted.

“I figure now we’re even,” he answered.

I looked at Sebastian, the totality of his statement hitting home. Instead of condemnation or revenge, his words carried acceptance and love. With his words, the stress, anxiety, fear, pain and loss that had consumed us now seemed to be the stuff that strengthened us, had become the fuel that made this moment burn with a brighter intensity.

Even the empty part of my heart that would never be filled, the void that would forever belong to my first-born, the son that I’ll never know, was illuminated. Even in the knowledge there will always be a perpetual sorrow for what I had to give up, we’d been a part of one another for 9 months, and nobody could ever take that away.

I looked outside the jump craft window. The world had changed.

My headspace is still crowded.

But gone are the warring factions and the lines of demarcations. Now, there is but one unifying force.

I looked at Sebastian, then at the beautiful product of our two lives sleeping softly in my arms and feel the unifying force of love pervade my soul.

The End