

LIMB AWAY 6: NEW BLOOD

by Paul Watson

Some days later, a small office, "The lab's good?" Marcia asks, pulling folders out of her briefcase, her jacket and blouse tailored to account for the extra two arms.

"It is...adequate." he looks at Marcia's face, "Alright, yes, it's quite impressive considering how fast it was set up. Have you decided how you're going to tell Angelica..."

"Nope. Not a clue. We'll deal with that when Angel...joins us. For now, let's go through your former students. You're sure they'll accept?"

"Hemmings will. There's more potential for money here. If he comes, that will mean Miss Henriquez will follow, unless something's changed radically there. James, well, he'll probably come. Mostly to protect Jennifer."

"Protect her from?"

"Hemmings. She follows him around like a lovesick puppy and he takes advantage of that.

Anyway...Foster might be the most problematic to attain, but..."

"Doc, there are..." she flips through the file, a smiling figure with even tan and swept back blonde hair smiling a perfectly aligned smile paper-clipped to the front, "...five pages of complaints against Hemmings. Why do we want him here?"

"Because he is very good. Also, without him, Miss Henriquez would almost certainly not come and she's a far superior contributor. Further...he's the most likely to try to blackmail us if he isn't involved."

"What a charmer."

"Oh, yes, he's definitely a charmer. Always with some other attractive or popular student body on his arm when he wasn't in the lab. He'll do very well in corporate management."

"That's quite an insult coming from you."

"I don't like the man, but he is necessary. Also he will undoubtedly discover something we don't."

"Oh, why?"

"He lacks any sense of ethics or personal responsibility. I am quite sure his latest conquest will enable him to uncover something we miss. And as he'll dump her after a fortnight at most, I doubt she'll learn too much."

"Sounds like quite a catch. Ok, fine, he's in. We'll have to keep him away from Angelica, though. He sounds like just the sort of jerk she just loves to break into little tiny pieces." she glances at the complaints, "Or maybe we don't have to keep them apart. It would certainly distract her... Right. Next." she pulls out the next folder, the photo of a round-faced Latina with long black hair and thick glasses over a tentative, shy smile, "Jennifer Henriquez...I've heard that name. Where have...she was the one who got transformed, wasn't she?"

"She was."

"And you're sure you weren't sleeping with her?"

"Miss Sriupathakan! I have made it quite clear that I was not in the habit of sleeping with any of my students. And even if I had been, Miss Henriquez would not have been high on my list of prospects."

"Because?"

His eyes narrow, "I see what you're trying to do. She was fawning over Hemmings. Totally one-sided but you do not get in the way of that kind of devotion."

"Well, the 'incident', let's call it the incident to be polite, doesn't seem to have hurt her academically. These are good comments from her current Professor."

"Oh, really?" he cranes to get a look, "Henderson? They gave Henderson my team?!"

"Problem?"

"The man's a blithering idiot. Well, at least that will make getting Foster easier. He'll be champing at the bit for some form of intellectual stimulation."

"Back to Jennifer. Reading between the lines, she's not very assertive, is she?"

"Not even slightly. She's a timid little mouse who'll do whatever she's told by a figure of authority, or Hemmings."

"Managing this team is already giving me a headache. And they haven't even accepted yet."

"I'm sure you'll manage, Miss...Marcia. You're good at that sort of thing." he reaches out to pat her nearest arm reassuringly.

"Ok, so those two are going to be a challenge. Are the other two at least vaguely simple?"

"I found them much less draining, certainly."

"Ok. Hank Foster." an unsmiling African-American man looks out of the photo, his hair clipped close to his head, his face pinched behind owlish glasses, hovering over his collar, "Good grades."

"Yes, Foster is probably the most brilliant of the four. Studious, dedicated, hard-working..."

"And still ended up in your lab."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you were doing strange stuff, Doc. The picture the notes paint of Foster doesn't explain why he wanted to work for you rather than someone more...conventional."

"I don't..."

"Doc, you were working on bio-transmutative chemistry. That is not a career-making field of science. The outside perception is that, forgive me, you're a bunch of perverts, freaks and weirdos. Especially given it's only contribution to the public mind is Dolly."

"Well, I..."

"Doc, what isn't in the reports?"

"What?"

"What hasn't Prof Henderson noticed? You know him. So you know why he wanted to work in the field. So why?"

"He has never told me precisely."

"Uh-huh. But?"

"But...I looked into his family history. He has a cousin. One of the early Dolly recipients."

"Oh."

"Not one of those who were permanently afflicted, but the early mixture still had...teething issues, as the lead called them. His cousin is currently confined to a wheelchair, possibly as a result of the Dolly process, possibly not."

"Right." she makes a note. "And that just leaves...Loretta James." she pulls out the last file, a square-face with purple lipstick and streaks of colour in long brown hair looks back.

"Loretta? I don't know any..."

Marcia hands him the file.

"Oh, I see. Yes, Dennis James..."

"Loretta now."

"Fine, Loretta was in the lab. Capable, competent, not exceptional. Big brother type, protecting the rest of the team, or trying to. He and Hemmings got on like a mongoose and a cobra, but it never amounted to anything that I'm aware of."

"Well, big sister now."

"I suppose so. I must say, that is something of a surprise. I didn't see any indication when he was working for me."

"She."

"What?"

"When 'she' was working for you. You said 'he'."

"Right. 'She'. I'll have to get used to that."

"Then I guess we have our lab team. Assuming they agree."

"They will."

Days later, "Ok, time to get Angel...together for the meeting."

"Are you sure she'll appreciate that?"

"Oh, she'll hate it. Tough shit. We're doing this to allow her crazy perversions. She can suffer along with the rest of us."

Doctor Harrison opens the suitcase and lifts out what's left of Angelica. Marcia raises an eyebrow as she pulls on her gloves and starts to restore her. "It's been two days ahead...where am I?"

"Work."

"Work? What do you mean 'work'?"

"We're at the headquarters of Limb Away. You're talking to the CEO. Show some respect."

Angelica giggles, "Sure, Marcy, sure. Wait, you're serious?"

"Yes."

"How? Why?"

"Your Mom found out about all this. And we kind of got an ultimatum."

"Uh-huh. Sounds like Mom."

"So, I...bargained her down from grounding you for the next twenty years or cutting off your allowance or any of that shit..."

"Well, thanks for that, I guess, but how..."

"By persuading her we were going to make this into a business."

"We were what?!"

"It was the best I could think of on the spur of the moment! And you weren't exactly available to help."

"Well, yeah, I suppose, but that must have happened a while back for you to get this organis...how are we paying for this?"

"Angel investor."

"Uh-huh. Does that 'angel investor' happen to have the initials vee, dee and see by any chance?"

"No. I told her if it was VDC backing us, you'd throw a fit. She made leaving us alone contingent on me taking responsibility. Apparently, as it was my idea, I should get the chance to make it work. So I'm pulling my hair out a little already and if you fuck it up I'll do the same to you. Now, put this on," she thrusts a black business suit towards Angelica, "we're about to have a lab team to introduce."

"We do?"

"Apparently Harrison was using his old students to produce his stuff. Now they're going to be doing it here, under supervision."

"Doc, you agreed to all this?!"

"The alternative was further ostracisation, and possibly prison, so it seemed a better alternative."

"Ok, ok. You couldn't have got me something that looked good at least?"

"Professional and authoritative are what we're going for today, Angel, not showing off."

"I look like I'm in the Men in Black."

"Good." a knock comes on the thin door, "Yes?"

The door opens, a woman in a pale cream headscarf pokes in, "Ms Sriupathakan, ma'am. There's a Mr Foster to see you."

"Already? The meeting doesn't start for..."

"I'll deal with him. I expected him to be early. He always was. Can you put him in with Miss Henriquez for now, Kamala? I'll be down in a moment."

"Any other surprises for me?"

"Hemmings will be ten minutes late."

"How do you know?"

"Because I told him the meeting was twenty minutes ago and he likes to make a point on the first day."

"Great. We're already dysfunctional. Ok, Doc, you go and deal with them. Kamala, if a Ms James or Mr Hennings arrives, put them in with Doc and the others."

"Yes'm."

The door closes.

“What?” she asks sharply at Angelica's expression.

“Who was...”

“My PA.”

“You have a PA?!”

“Technically we have one, but Doc doesn't care and you're going to be 'busy' most of the time, so, she's practically mine.”

“That's...fair, actually. Where did you get her?”

“Well, about that...”

“She's from Mom, right?”

“Yes.”

“You know she's reporting back to the mothership, don't you?”

“Of course she is! Angel, the alternative was Marlo being involved!! If this was going to go ahead at all!! So I'll take a spy I know about to, I don't know, Marlo hiring PIs to follow us around!”

“Heh.”

“What now?!”

“It really isn't VDC paying for us, is it? If Mom was involved, Marlo would be all over this place. There'd probably be bugs in the water cooler. So, who is backing us?”

“They want to remain anonymous.”

“From your business partner?”

“You've got a reputation, Angel. They don't want their name...”

“Oh, please, the only person who'd put good money into this mad science perversion palace has a worse reputation than I do, but if Chloe Sinclair wants to keep it hush hush, my lips are sealed.” she draws her hands across her lips. “Unless you'd like to Away seal them?”

“No fun for you until after the meeting.”

“Oh, you're going to be that kind of boss, huh?”

“You'd better believe it.”

The spartan meeting room, really an office, a little cramped even before Marcia and Angelica enter. Around the white table, sit most of their team. Harrison has taken a prominent pace, a paper cup of black coffee steaming in his hand. Jennifer keeps looking at the clock, and the door, her fingers drumming nervously on the desk. Hank is looking at his phone, pursing his lips as his bony fingers stab onto the screen. Loretta is still settling in, putting her long coat onto the coat rack and pulling the plastic office chair out. Marcia and Angelica walk in, Marcia's arms folding and unfolding with nerves, Angelica striding in like she owns the place.

“No Hemmings yet?”

Harrison glances at his watch. “Another few minutes.”

“Fine, He can miss the introductions. Hi, I'm Marcy, Marcia. I'm running this thing. Doc Harrison you all know, and he'll be running the lab day to day. This is just an introduction to...yes?” she looks over as Loretta raises her hand.

“Can I just ask one question? Is no one going to mention the four arms?”

“We'll come to that.”

“Ok. But it had to be raised.”

“Yes, thank you, anyway. Here's how this works. Doc Harrison is the technical lead and your immediate supervisor. This is Angelica van Dyne who is our corporate spokesperson and head of our marketing operation. When we get one.”

“Gee, thanks, Marcy.”

“As I was...” the door opens and Brad walks in, a cocky smile on his face.

“Didn't keep you, did I?” he saunters towards his seat.

“Not at all, Mr Hemmings. We just started without you. You can catch up later.”

“Sure thing, Doc.”

"Right. Anyway, as I was saying, I'm Marcia and I'm running Limb Away, the business. Doc Harrison is tech lead and in day to day charge of you in the lab. And Angelica is spokesperson. Yes, Loretta?"

"If Doc is in charge of us and we have a problem with him, who do we go to?"

Doc folds his arms with a harrumph.

"Well..."

"That's easy. First you come to me. I won't always be spokespersoning, and that frees up Marcy's time. I'm the nice one." she smiles evilly.

"Hey!"

"You're the boss. That automatically makes you the bad guy."

"What?"

"Name me the last good CEO you saw?"

"Your Mom's a CEO!"

"Not really arguing against me there..."

"Awwww, Mommy and Mommy are fighting." Brad applauds slowly. Both women stop.

"So, anyway, that's the procedure. And if you have a problem with me, go to Doc. And if you have that big a problem with both of us, this may not be the place for you."

"Can I ask a question? What are we doing here? I mean, it's obviously to do with Doctor Harrison's research. But why are we here?" he circles his fingers around the table.

"Didn't Doc explain that to you, Hank?"

"I want to hear what the business thinks we do."

"Right on, Brother. Fight the power."

Hank glowers along the table at Brad.

"Ok. Well, first, which circles back to Loretta's question, we discovered that Limb Ahoy has more properties than just restoring Awayed limbs." she spreads all her hands, "So we need smart people to find out what else it does that we didn't know about. Ideally *before* some customer discovers them and complains. Secondly, we need to improve the application options. Dipping fingers into a pot of stuff doesn't feel good. We're thinking brushes, sponges, pad, same as you'd use for cosmetics, but we'll take ideas. Three, obviously we need improved and streamlined production. What works purely in the lab and for a cottage production isn't fast enough if we have a hit on our hands."

"You said customers. What are we selling it as?"

Looks pass between Angelica, Marcia and Harrison.

"Right now? It's a kinky sex thing."

"Angelical!"

"What? It is. If you can solve that particular brick problem and figure out other uses, great. But right now, we're in the same business area as glow-in-the-dark condoms."

"I see." he pushes his glasses back up his nose. "And how do you expect us to...investigate this?"

"Doc? This is more your area."

"Self-testing. There will be safety protocols, naturally. Miss Sriupathakan has been modified for some time, but we would be expecting any changes to be overnight at worse. Certainly any changes resulting in loss of communication or movement would be shorter."

"So no making Pussy a pussy?"

Jennifer looks down at the table, blushing, hands twisting in her lap.

"Correct, Mr Hemmings. Or rather not for a long period of time. There are waiver forms for you to sign. If you intend to experiment on anyone outside the company, we expect them to sign them as well. And for your results to be documented."

"Homework. I love homework."

"Well, Mr Hemmings, to sweeten the arduous work I'm sure you'll be putting in, a small supply of both Limb Away and Limb Ahoy will be available for each of you outside the lab."

"So we get to play and pretend it's work? All in the name of science, of course."

"If that's how you want to look at it.."

“Do we...do we have to? I mean...”

“It's ok, Pussy. I'm sure they won't force you to take work home with you. Can I get her quota?”

“We won't do that, Jennifer. And no, Hemmings, you absolutely can not. And we'll be monitoring it in case anyone decides to set up business for themselves.”

“I'm hurt, hurt, by this unfounded accusation.” he smiles, fingers splayed on his chest, “And I promise I'll wrap up my backstreet suppliers as soon as possible.”

“Very funny, Mr Hemmings.”

“I thought so, Doc.”

“You always do.”

“Enough.” Angelica claps, “Is there anything else you need from this meeting, Marcy? Any questions the rest of you have? No? Good. Time to get to work.”

The ex-students leave the meeting room, Brad's arm around Jennifer's shoulder, Loretta rolling her eyes as Hank studiously ignores the whole thing.

“Well, this is going to be fun. For a very specific and fetishy value of fun.”

Marcia sighs, walking out the door.

“What? What did I say?”