

Old Dr. Weston

Drip...Drip...Drip...

“Iolicin,” said Dr. Weston.

“I-well I’m not quite familiar with that treatment,” Alizabeth admitted. Plucked away from Hippocratia’s finest medical school, she hadn’t even had time to finish her doctorate. From a very young age, Alizabeth knew the weight that her last name carried. She knew that one day she would take her place among the long line of celebrated doctors that bore her family name. But just like the disease that suddenly took hold of her country, the responsibility of that family name had begun to choke in Alizabeth’s throat whenever she spoke it.

As the doctor led Alizabeth on to the next occupied, white bed, she subconsciously fiddled with the necklace around her neck. It was a blue stone on a silver chain that was given to Alizabeth by her grandfather when she was just a little girl playing with the stethoscopes. The memory of him almost made Alizabeth smile, even though she was still plagued by the sadness of his death as he succumbed to the disease.

“Eighty-year-old female,” said Dr. Weston. “That’s the average age of our patients here. Everyone receives three doses of Iolicin a day. Two hundred milligrams per dose. Go on, now.”

Dr. Weston extended a hand to Alizabeth, offering a syringe of the Iolicin. She reluctantly took it and slowly, but firmly, pumped it into the IV. Alizabeth shook her head, scolding herself for the hesitation. The treatment was perfectly safe. Although it was developed in a mad rush to combat the disease, Alizabeth held a confidence that Dr. Weston knew what he was doing. That *her father* knew what he was doing.

“Well done. Now to business,” came Dr. Weston’s baritone voice as he adjusted his spectacles. “The country knows that in a medical crisis, the Westons are the ones to call on. Alizabeth, it’s your duty as a Weston, and as a doctorate candidate, to find a cure for this disease. Your country is counting on you. *I’m* counting on you. It’s time to live up to your last name.”

Alizabeth felt the blue stone attached to the silver chain around her neck.

“I won’t let you down, Father. I promise to make you and Grandfather proud.”

Alizabeth noticed the right corner of her father’s mouth twitch as she mentioned her grandfather. The death of Old Dr. Weston had been a heavy blow to the family. And Alizabeth knew his help would have been invaluable in the search for the cure.

The younger Dr. Weston shifted his weight between his feet and quickly rubbed his nose. He placed a hand on Alizabeth’s shoulder and offered her a smile so rare that Alizabeth had almost forgotten what it looked like on her father’s face. But she gladly returned it anyway.

“Now, then. I trust you saw the entrance to the lab on your way up, so I’ll leave you to it,” Dr. Weston said as he produced a handkerchief and dabbed it against his perspiring brow.

And with a sniff and the flourish of a lab coat, the father became a physician once more as he joined the crowd of patients, nurses, and Iolicin. Finding herself unable to move, Alizabeth watched her father for a few more moments, grasping the necklace around her neck.

“I love you, Father,” she whispered. “I won’t let you down. I’ll do whatever it takes to find this cure.”

Alizabeth cast a final glance towards her father, took a deep breath, and began the trek to the overcrowded hospital’s laboratory. She swerved past makeshift nursing stations, all full of

Iolicin, and weaved her way between the masses of beds, all occupied. For a fleeting moment, it struck Alizabeth as odd. So many patients. So many occupied beds. Yet so few being carried out. But as quickly as the thought materialized, it soon vanished, to be replaced with thoughts of the looming trial that stood before Alizabeth.

Three seemingly endless flights of stairs at last gave way to a large set of double doors, which read “Laboratory” in crimson lettering. But as Alizabeth lifted her clearance badge to gain entry, her hand began to shake uncontrollably. She suddenly felt her breath hitch. It came out in staggered patterns, barring her lungs from a deep inhale. And before she knew what hit her, the wall did. She sank into, her back sliding down it until she found herself seated on the floor. Her grandfather’s necklace hung heavily, as if bearing all of the weight and expectations of the family name.

“I am a Weston,” Alizabeth choked out, prevailing on her lifelong mantra. *“I am a Weston.”*

Gradually, her breathing slowed and she was able to unclench her hands. After a few brushes of the hair and douse of water from a nearby fountain, Alizabeth approached the door once more. She took a deep breath, and felt the weight her name carried again as she touched the necklace’s blue stone.

“I am a Weston,” she repeated a final time.

With a self-affirming nod, Alizabeth once again raised her badge. The scanner blinked green and a click sounded within the door. A final deep breath gave Alizabeth the confidence to press against the double doors and propel them forward. She took a few steps into the lab, feigning the poise and fearlessness that came with the Weston name, as her father had taught her.

She didn't need to look around to know that everyone's eyes were on her. An intern dropped an empty flask onto the sterile white tiles that made up the floor.

"Hello," said Alizabeth, making sure to use the fullness of her voice like her grandfather always had. "I'm Alizabeth Weston, here to assist in any way I can. If someone would please point the way to the trial concentrations, I would greatly appreciate it."

For a few moments the bustling lab was heavy with silence. Until a young woman with long, dark hair slowly approached Alizabeth.

"I'm Jayne Barrett. I've been working on treating patient tissue samples with possible treatments," the young woman explained.

"Pleased to meet you, Jayne," replied Alizabeth with the slightest of smiles.

And with a quick handshake, Jayne was leading the way to a side room full of flasks, microscopes, and petri dishes. The pair instinctively put on their gloves, safety goggles, and overcoats. Jayne began swabbing the tissue samples from the petri dishes onto microscope slides and recording the results. At once, Alizabeth began analyzing the flask-filled concentrations which were labeled as prototypes for the cure. She fell into a steady rhythm of altering the Iolicin concentrates, improving them, and setting them aside for Jayne to mix with the tissue samples.

More than once, Alizabeth caught Jayne gazing in her direction with the look of awe she had seen all of her life. Alizabeth was accustomed to the sideways glances and awkward silence from everyone who knew anything about the Weston family and their medical contributions to Hippocratia. But just because she was used to it, that didn't make it any easier or less uncomfortable to sit through in Alizabeth's eyes.

“Jayne,” Alizabeth suddenly started in an effort to fill the prolonged silence. The nurse jolted her head upward, with an expression that almost held fear.

“Is-is everything up to your standard, Miss Weston?”

“Of course,” Alizabeth assured her, “of course. I was just thinking and wondering and...”

“Yes?” Jayne prompted a few moments after Alizabeth trailed off. She took a deep breath, feeling her necklace.

“Jayne, did you always want to go into the medical field?”

Jayne leaned back from her microscope. Clearly, this was not what she had expected Alizabeth to say. With the puzzled look still present, she answered:

“Ever since I could remember, it’s been my dream. You see, my parents always told me stories of Old Dr. Weston, that is, your grandfather. He saved my mother’s life when I was just a baby. And now, I want to be that person who helps others.”

As she spoke, a faraway gaze spread across Jayne’s face, lighting her eyes with a passion and an excitement that Alizabeth herself hadn’t felt in a long time. Yet so quickly, that look vanished as Jayne remembered Alizabeth’s presence and jolted back to the present.

“I’m sure you feel the same way,” she quickly interjected, “after all he was *your* grandfather. That must make this experience all the more special for you.”

“Actually, I never had a choice,” Alizabeth replied before she could stop the words from coming. “Of course it’s special. But it was never what I wanted.”

Immediately horrified by the most honest thing she had ever said, Alizabeth’s face suddenly reddened and her head instinctively lowered. But then, something happened that

Alizab  th did not expect. Jayne reached across the table, and gave Alizab  th’s gloved hand a light squeeze. When she looked up, Jayne gave her a small, understanding, smile. Alizab  th returned it, realizing this was the closest thing to a friend she had ever had. And as they both returned to their work, Alizab  th felt the awkward silence shift to a comfortable atmosphere.

Until Jayne suddenly gasped and nearly dropped a tray of the microscope slides. In an instant, Alizab  th was by her side, asking what Jayne had seen. The young nurse pointed to the microscope, unable to find the words. Alizab  th took a quick look into the microscope and started. She knew what it looked like under a microscope when medicine began to attack the diseased cells.

“Congratulations, Miss Weston!” Jayne cheered.

“It’s not a cure,” Alizab  th humbly pointed out, “but it is a step in the right direction. For now, we need to find out who this tissue sample belonged to. We’ve got to repeat these exact steps and conditions before we start to celebrate. We need more samples from that patient.”

Jayne leapt into action, delving into a filing cabinet full of patient charts and information. It wasn’t long before she triumphantly located the file that corresponded to the slide they had observed. But Jayne’s smile soon faded to a look of concern as she flipped the manilla file open.

“I’m afraid we have a bit of a problem,” she finally managed to say.

“Problem,” Alizab  th repeated, “what does that mean, ‘problem’?” Jayne handed the file over to Alizab  th.

“Slide 58c corresponds to the patient in room 723. The only people allowed in that room are your father and the special team that takes care of him. I don’t know the real story behind it,

but just about all the staff thinks he's crazy. And there's usually a grain of truth in staff rumors around a hospital."

Alizabeth took a moment to consider this. Was it safe to meet this patient? Or should she be asking her father's permission to speak to this patient? But then she felt the blue stone that hung on the silver chain and decided there was no time to lose. She began peeling off the latex gloves and hung the safety goggles up.

"Where are you going?" Jayne asked in disbelief.

"Room 723," Alizabeth called as she was already exiting through the side room and making her way to the lab's double doors.

She climbed the stairs two at a time and was out of breath when at last she arrived at the seventh floor. As she passed by several rooms, Alizabeth was surprised to see that there appeared to be no other patients in sight. In such an overcrowded hospital, why would an entire floor be empty? The sight gave Alizabeth an eerie feeling, and she began to speed up her pace as she searched for the mysterious patient.

It seemed like an eternity had passed when she finally came to room 723. Alizabeth approached the door slowly, imagining that room might be as empty as the rest on the floor. But when she took a step closer, she could distinctly make out the hiss of an oxygen concentrator. Undoubtedly, someone was behind that door. Alizabeth took a deep breath and touched the necklace her grandfather had given her.

"I am a Weston," she whispered to herself.

She took the final few steps in the direction of room 723. As she approached, she was met by a young nurse standing guard outside the room.

“Hello,” said Alizabeth, “my apologies for the interruption. But it is absolutely vital that I get into that room right now.”

“I’m afraid this room is off limits to anyone except Dr. Weston,” replied the nurse as he eyed her suspiciously.

“You don’t understand, I’m working to find a cure for the disease – “

“It’s absolutely off limits!” boomed the nurse. Alizabeth clutched her necklace and took a step forward.

“I am Alizabeth Weston. And I insist that you let me into this room. Please.” At the mention of her name, the nurse’s eyes grew wide. He took an apprehensive look down the empty hall, before reluctantly stepping aside. Alizabeth released a repressed breath and stepped into the room to find:

“Grandfather!”

He wasn’t dead at all! Though the oxygen mask covered his face, there was no mistaking the kind old man who had taught Alizabeth and her father everything they knew. Alizabeth’s grandfather, Old Dr. Weston, was the crazy patient of room 723.

“Grandfather,” Alizabeth repeated, her voice barely above a whisper.

She came closer to the bedside; afraid he might vanish. A single tear streamed down her face as she remembered the afternoon her father had called her to tell her that her grandfather was dead. Confusion began to set in as Alizabeth wondered why her father would lie to her.

Jayne had said that Dr. Weston was the only member of the staff that had seen room 723. Perhaps her father had just wanted to give him the best care possible. And while false reports of her grandfather's death may inspire her to work harder, Alizabeth would not believe her father could bring himself to tell her such a thing. But the cloud of confusion and blur of tears was suddenly cut short when Old Dr. Weston's eyes shot open, giving Alizabeth a start.

"Alizabeth," the old man rasped, "it's not what it seems."

"Quiet, old man!" came the shrill cry of a female nurse Alizabeth hadn't seen enter.

The nurse hurried to Old Dr. Weston's bedside and immediately injected him with Iolicin.

Bewildered, Alizabeth backward, clutching her necklace for dear life. She took a moment to grasp her bearings and the ability to once again speak.

"What-what do you mean? Grandfather, I don't understand. Father told me you were dead!"

As the words sputtered out of Alizabeth's mouth, her grandfather reached out and caught her hand in a slow movement that took such labor.

"Alizabeth, listen to me. It's not what it seems. You've got to get out of here now," her grandfather said slowly.

The female nurse began to grow frantic.

"Young lady, you have got to get out of right here right now."

"But I'm going to find a cure!" Alizabeth protested. "Grandfather, I promise you that I will, and then you'll be well again. I'll finally be a true Weston!"

The old man burst into a fit of coughing, seemingly made ill at Alizabeth's mention of their last name. When it at last subsided, he firmly spoke again:

"This has nothing to do with our family name. There is a secret, Alizabeth. A secret you must reveal to the whole country. Remember these words, girl: many old researchers gain ultimate evidence. Say it!"

"Many old researchers gain ultimate evidence," Alizabeth finally repeated. "But, Grandfather, I don't understand! What am I supposed to do?"

"There isn't a moment to lose! You *must* go now!"

The old doctor's eyes bulged and he released his granddaughter's hand. The nurse retreated from the old doctor's bedside and began to usher Alizabeth towards the exit. Too stunned to speak or press for further clues, Alizabeth backed her way to the door of room 723. She cast a final look at her grandfather, who still had his eyes locked on hers with his expression of panic. Then, with more questions than answers, she exited in a haze.

The climb back down to the lab nearly drove Alizabeth's mind wild with thought. She considered whether there might be some truth to what her grandfather said. But none of his words had made sense. What secret could there possibly be to uncover except a cure for the disease? Alizabeth decided it was far more likely that the disease truly had affected his mind. So to spare him the shame, he was hidden away in an empty hall and presumed as dead. Still, though, Alizabeth wished her father had told her the truth from the beginning.

Arriving at this conclusion placed a fire in Alizabeth to find a cure that she hadn't felt before. She would find this cure. She would become a true Weston. No matter what it took. She

entered the lab with the newfound determination and returned to work at a feverish pace. Hours passed without her noticing, and it was suddenly evening.

Most of the staff began cleaning their stations and returning their equipment to cabinets and shelves. Even Jayne was yawning, though Alizabeth was still churning out slides for her to examine in a frenzy. The youngest Weston only took a break when a familiar baritone voice rumbled from the lab's main room. She craned to listen as her father was giving instructions for the last round of medication doses for the day.

"I need all hands on deck for this," he was saying. "We've got to make sure every last patient receives their Triolicin."

Alizabeth suddenly froze and the color drained from her face. Slowly she turned to Jayne.

"Triolicin?" Was all Alizabeth could manage to say.

"Yes, Triolicin. The main treatment every patient has been receiving three times a day. It's the main concentration in all of these prototypes we've been experimenting with."

Jayne was just as baffled as Alizabeth. How could Alizabeth, a Weston, not have known the most basic of information? When Alizabeth said nothing else, Jayne simply assumed that stress and fatigue was making an appearance, and quietly left.

In an empty laboratory, Alizabeth jolted to the nearest table with a pencil and paper and wrote out: *Many old researchers gain ultimate evidence*. It didn't seem to be a rhyme, and Alizabeth couldn't decipher any phrase that made sense if the order of words was switched. She wrote out the phrase again, this time vertically, so that the words stacked on top of one another. *Many Old Researchers Gain Ultimate Evidence. M. O. R. G. U. E.*

Without a second thought, Alizabeth dropped the pencil and flew out of the laboratory's large double doors. She began the descent into the basement of the hospital, where she was certain to find the facility's morgue. If her grandfather was right, Alizabeth was determined to find out. She pulled her lab coat tight around her arms as the chilly atmosphere suddenly hit her at the bottom of the stairs. Sure enough, in large crimson lettering, a tan door displayed the message: MORGUE.

Alizabeth gently pushed the door opened and meekly stepped inside. Although it was part of the job, she could never quite get used to the ideas of bodies lying under her feet all day. But as she stepped inside, it wasn't bodies that she saw. It was emptiness. Pure, vast emptiness. In an overcrowded hospital where the average age of the patients was eighty years old, an empty morgue wasn't just unlikely. It was an impossibility.

Yet it was completely, save for a large wooden desk full of files in the center of the room. Alizabeth observed the red *Classified* stamp which read across each manilla file. But she had come this far. And what if the answer to the cure lay right in one of those files? Alizabeth reached up and touched the blue stone around her neck. And without further hesitation, she seized the top file and opened it.

The heading of the first page read: *Dr. Weston's Proposal on Population Control*. Her father and population control? *It has come to my attention that the increasing number of citizens over the age of eighty years is now a threat to Hippocratia. My solution is simple: A genetically engineered disease will be leaked into the population via air. The disease will spread so contagiously and rampantly that an estimated 73% of the population over eighty will succumb within the first month.*

Alizabeth couldn't breathe. Her father was behind the disease. Though her head was spinning, she forced herself to open the next file in the stack. She assured herself that it would hold an account of her father recanting the proposal and give information on his work to find the cure. She steadied her breathing and opened it.

Mission horribly failed. Although we have succeeded in the spread of a mass disease, our opposite intention has occurred. The patients will not die. Though infected, the patients are not dying. Three treatments of a lethal dose of morphine are administered each day, but it remains ineffective. We are in the process of enhancing the morphine to ensure its success to carry out my initial population control proposal. And we will succeed. We must find a cure.

In a flurry, the papers all fell to the floor as Alizabeth uncontrollably let them slip from her hands. There was no such thing as Iolicin or Triolicin. It was all morphine. Morphine that still culminated in an empty morgue. And her father was the cause of it all. Alizabeth's legs gave way and she involuntarily collapsed into a sitting position on top of the desk.

This was the secret Alizabeth's grandfather had intended her to find: Dr. Weston, the murderer.

"No!" Alizabeth leapt up with a shout. "I won't believe it! It's not true!"

She slammed her feet back onto the sterile white tiles, grabbing the files from the desk. Without a second thought, or even a first one, she charged towards the stairs and climbed to the first floor, which she knew held the staff's offices.

Alizabeth would not allow herself to entertain thoughts of her father as a killer. Not until she had faced him herself. At the end of the hall, she found the door bearing the name Weston and pounded on it with her fists. It opened with a wide swing.

“Father!” Alizabeth cried as she ran into the sparse office. “Father, tell me it isn’t true.”

Dr. Weston’s eyes immediately fell on the files in her hand. With a swift motion, he snatched the papers away and slammed them onto his desk.

“Where did you find these?” His low voice rumbled on the verge of a shout.

“Say that you’re not trying to kill these people! Say that you’re not trying to kill grandfather!”

At the mention of Old Dr. Weston, the young Dr. Weston’s eyes burned with a silent fury. His gaze focused upon his desk, where a full syringe lay. He wordlessly lifted it, holding it up to the light in a seeming trance. As the syringe lowered, Alizabeth’s father firmly grasped her shoulder with his other hand. The doctor silently steered her towards his office door and to the stairs.

Alizabeth wondered if her father could sense her fear as they climbed all the way to the seventh floor and down the hall to room 723. Dr. Weston kicked the door open, forcing Alizabeth through. He led her to her grandfather’s bedside and peered down at his own father. The old man was asleep, in spite of it all.

Dr. Weston again lifted the syringe, holding it eye level with Alizabeth.

“Do you know what this is?” he finally spoke.

“Morphine.”

Dr. Weston chuckled darkly.

“Wrong,” he said. “This-this syringe right before you. This is the cure.”

Alizabeth jumped back with a start. The cure. Enough medication to kill the patient.
Enough medication to kill her grandfather.

“I brought you here to prove yourself a true Weston,” the doctor said. “And now you are going to.”

Dr. Weston extended the syringe towards Alizabeth. She touched the necklace that her grandfather had given her. And with a shaky breath, she grasped the syringe.