

E.R. Sebastian

AMERICAN SHAMAN

Inhuman Treatment

American Shaman:
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KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT IS
HALF THE BATTLE…

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PART I: THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION

Community Saints Hospital, Missoula, MT

It wasn't that the sex was bad. On the contrary—sex was the tether that bound me to him. From the first tremors of adolescent sensuality, through a failed marriage and a handful of relationships, he lingered. That forbidden presence—his fingertips tracing my nerves like map lines to desire—wrapped every fantasy around me, stirred every impulse to life. Life without him felt unimaginable.

But now, in my forties, something inside me has changed. Maybe it was the heat, thick with longing and desperation, that compelled me to summon him—a stranger from the past. Or maybe my needs had simply ripened. Matured. Twisted into something more intimate than my current lover could offer. I wasn't sure what I needed, and that was the issue.

From the twelfth floor of my office, I watched the traffic swarm below. The influx of new arrivals unsettled me. This Montana city—they didn't understand its hold. The land here snares souls, entwines them like roots in clay. They'll learn soon enough.

Then, like a shadow slipping from sunlight into dusk, his black SUV crept into the lot. My heart seized, lungs paused. He was here.

I pressed my forehead to the glass, straining for a glimpse. Lips parted, tongue swept across them as anticipation shimmered through me. The door creaked. I climbed to the window ledge on my knees, balancing in the frame, desperate for the sight of him. My vision blurred. I blinked hard.

"Dr. Ouchi?" a voice shattered the stillness.

Gasping, I jolted as my chest expanded with breath once more.

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean to startle you. Your one o'clock is here."

I smiled at Kyle—sweet, delicate Kyle. "No problem, I was just daydreaming."

He handed me the file, fingers nervous, smile uncertain. I skimmed it quickly. Enough to get a sense of what I needed to do.

"They're bringing him in now," he said.

"Okay. Thanks."

From the corridor, guttural sounds scraped against the concrete walls, stripping paint like dried skin. Chains clanked and rattled, a brutal symphony announcing his arrival. Boots thundered in rhythm. Kyle paled, drained to ghostly white.

Poor Kyle. Such a gentle soul. He was never meant for this floor.

He disappeared, fleeing toward the safety of his office as the guards neared. To him, this was a monster in shackles. To me—just a person wounded by something deeper. Something unseen.

"Good morning," I said, voice calm and intentional. "Bring him in here," I gestured toward the padded therapy room.

Vinyl mats cushioned the space, just in case. No windows. No distractions. Only silence and sterile simplicity. A space built for surrender, not stimulation. A space to unravel the edges of what haunted him.

As the patient passed, his eyes avoided mine entirely. But I knew better—his silence didn't shield him. In this sparse, sterilized chamber, nothing remained hidden. His presence dragged a shadow behind the guards, thick with a malevolence that clung to the walls like smoke.

They chained him to the metal chair—bolted deep into the concrete floor, unmoving and cold.

"Want us to stay?" one of the guards asked.

"No, thank you." That was always enough. They didn't want to be in here anymore than my staff. The door clicked

shut behind them, leaving me alone with whatever inhabited this man's body.

He was a new arrival. Head bowed, eyes rising just enough to pierce through me with a duality—two souls, coiled inside one frame. He snarled, bucking against the restraints like a wild animal testing its cage.

"Take your time," I said coolly, sipping my coffee and flipping through the magazine I'd brought. "Let me know when you're ready to get down to business."

The struggle didn't stop. His movements were jarring—inhuman, even. He wasn't in control. That much was clear.

Still resisting communication, he revealed plenty through his body. Pale skin hinted at poor circulation. Hair hung in oily strands, distressed. Acne mottled his jawline—a hormonal imbalance, most likely. His midsection bulged, apple-shaped, despite the file noting a minimal appetite.

Sweat slid from his brow, stinging his eyes. He winced. I pulled out a strip of litmus paper, catching a droplet mid-descent. The color shifted to a deep red—acidic, around a 3.5. No wonder it burned.

From my coat pocket, I retrieved a small packet of tissues. I folded one neatly and pressed it gently to his eyes. He growled at the touch, but soon softened, sinking back into the chair.

I returned to my seat, restoring the professional distance. There was something physical at play—undeniably. But what troubled me most was what lingered beneath the symptoms.

"Would you like some water?" I offered, voice calm, bridging the gap

"No," he snapped, turning sharply away, his body beginning to rock—slow at first, then more erratic, like waves battling against an unseen tide.

"Can you tell me your name?" I asked, pen poised, notepad balanced on my knee.

"Isn't it on the file?" he snorted, rocking harder now.

"There's a name in the file, but it's not yours. What's *your* name?"

The room froze. Even the air seemed to lock in place, dense and unbreathable. I had trained for this, learned how to stretch my breath—two minutes and thirty seconds before discomfort set in. So I waited.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

My lungs convulsed but I didn't move. "Just hold out a little longer," I told myself.

Then, he lifted his face. Not fluidly. His movements were staccato, uncanny—like some haunted stop-motion creature out of a Ray Harryhausen film. A deliberate rejection of natural form.

"What is your name?" I asked again, this time on the edge of a gasp.

"I have no name," he hissed, the words bleeding through clenched teeth.

"So, you're new," I said evenly. "That'll make things easier."

The room buzzed—sharp and mechanical, shattering the sterile silence. I closed the file with authority and rolled away from the table.

"I'll see you next week."

Confusion flickered across his face. His eyes followed me as I tapped the signal for the door to open. The guards entered, prepared to haul him back to the depths of the secure ward.

"How'd it go?" one asked.

I shrugged. "We'll see."

I stepped into the safety zone as they removed the patient—one of the many shadows confined to the hospital's hidden wing, the one not listed in brochures. The place I called home. My life's work.

Back in my office, I began documenting the encounter just as Dr. Jean Baptiste, the man whose existence had captured my thoughts earlier, arrived in Human Resources

to meet the owner and CEO of Community Saints Hospital—Mr. Kermode.

Baptiste was visually arresting, though not in an obvious way. Average height and build, but his features were bold and defined, like someone had outlined his face in thick ink. His skin was the shade of strong coffee softened with a dash of cream. Long lashes, pronounced brows, and lips full and precise. His hair was cropped short, practical for long hours in labs and ORs. His style—elegant without being showy. A quiet luminescence pulsed beneath his skin. People were drawn to him, though he kept his energy folded inward.

The doors flew open and Kermode burst in. Towering. Broad. A bear of a man with generous proportions and a voice that rumbled low and gritty. Intimidating, until his eyes melted the edge with warmth.

"Dr. Baptiste, such a pleasure to finally meet you," he said, hand extended.

Baptiste stood and shook it, noting the sutured gash on Kermode's cheek, the fresh blood blooming on his coat, and a bruised eye darkening like a split avocado.

"Sorry for being late. We ran into an elk on the way in."

"Oh," Baptiste replied, hesitant. "Is everyone okay?"

"Craziest thing," Kermode chuckled. "We were coming around the mountain and boom—elk barreled right through us. Normally they steer clear. They've got a blind spot dead center in front of them. We ended up in it, and whammo!"

He roared with laughter and clapped Baptiste's back, steering him into the office. "So, how was the drive? Did you take 90?"

"Yes."

"Good. Sit, sit," he said, gesturing toward the leather chair before his desk.

Baptiste sat and scanned the room. Rustic. Masculine. Pure Montana—wood, metal, wildlife art. One painting caught his eye: a bear rendered in abstract, but layered with other images embedded in its body. The longer he looked, the more the figures revealed themselves.

Kermode cleared his throat, dragging Baptiste's gaze back.

"We're thrilled to have your research here. Like we said on the phone, we've got a strong cardiac program, but your work will elevate it—next-level stuff."

He shuffled through paperwork, muttering, "We swear this was all in order last night..."

Baptiste's brow furled. Kermode referred to himself in the plural. Odd. He kept his expression neutral and leaned back.

"Ah—here it is," Kermode said, passing him a thick orientation binder.

"This has everything—contacts, keys, codes. Your passkey, parking tag. You'll need this to access restricted areas and specialty equipment."

There was a pause. Kermode's fingers lingered on the desk. His voice lowered, curiosity seeping in.

"We know it's not really our place, but... why leave Chicago? Big fish, big pond. This place? It's quieter. Less prestigious. Not that I'm complaining."

Baptiste had anticipated this question. Chicago was fame, fortune, and function... but also missteps, burned bridges, and paths too dark to tread again.

"I thought I could do more good here," he replied, the rehearsed answer floating up.

Kermode seemed unconvinced but chose not to dig. He smiled.

"You certainly can. Let's take a tour and get you settled."

#

Pattee Canyon, Missoula, Montana

Beyond the hospital's sterile walls, the city unfurled its own storylines. To the south, a scatter of apartment houses and bungalows from the 1960s and '70s clung to the mountain ridge—charming relics that marked the divide between civilization and the wilderness. Many still wore their kitschy flair like vintage brooches, flaunting oddball character and retro warmth. The neighborhood was hip, vibrant, beloved. But it was also a gateway. And gateways rarely lead somewhere good.

Just beyond, Pattee Canyon waited.

Back in the 1980s, when I was still a wide-eyed kid with scraped knees and bad dreams, the canyon whispered rumors darker than the timber it housed. Stories spread like wildfire—of satanic cults, blood sacrifices, and animal corpses strung up like grotesque ornaments hanging in twisted celebration. The media eventually snuffed the hysteria, declaring it all nonsense, a symptom of the era's *Satanic Panic*. But I remember differently. I remember dead birds swinging in branches and the eerie echo of chanting through the trees. Not everything fades into fiction.

Nowadays, the canyon draws in a different kind of pilgrim. Hipsters, too young to remember the shadows and too clueless to sense the lingering chill. They build with reclaimed wood and talk about "energy flow" while sipping turmeric lattes, oblivious to the buried rot beneath their foundations.

Still, buyers from older generations wander in, hopeful—and sometimes foolish. Like the Talbots, middle-aged and misguided, lured by curiosity and nostalgia. They know the stories. They've heard the warnings. But now, here they are, crawling up the mountain road, tires crunching over loose gravel, destined to awaken something best left sleeping.

#

The Talbots eased off the gravel road and pulled up beside a weathered "Lot for Sale" sign, its corners curled from mountain winds and time. Dust settled around them as the real estate agent arrived, her car kicking up loose rock. She stepped out stiffly, smoothing down her blazer, the escrow attorney trailing just behind—more composed, though something in his eyes suggested unease.

"Thanks for meeting us up here," the agent said with a thin, practiced smile that didn't quite hide her nerves. "The owner wanted to be sure you saw the land in person before signing. Just… to confirm this is truly the right place."

Alex and Dawn exchanged a look. They didn't need confirmation. They had waited over a decade for this particular parcel to surface. Their offers—generous and persistent—had always been declined without explanation. But everything changed last month, when they came across the former owner's obituary. His heirs, far less sentimental, were eager to liquidate. The Talbots pounced, offering above asking and acquiring all four adjoining lots in one swift stroke.

"We're sure," Alex said, his voice steady and resolute. He wrapped an arm around Dawn, pressing her to his side in quiet celebration. "I've loved this mountain since childhood. We can't wait to build here."

"Alright then," the agent said, her voice a notch higher, motioning to the attorney. He set the paperwork

across the hood of the Talbots' car, pointing to highlighted sections.

"If you'll read and sign here... and here," he instructed.

The Talbots signed without hesitation and handed over a sealed cashier's check. Alex glanced up, eyes eager. "So that's everything? It's ours now?"

"It's yours," the attorney confirmed. "I'll file the documents and send copies once everything's finalized."

"Perfect," Alex said, giving Dawn another squeeze.

The attorney shook their hands, offered a muttered "Good luck," and exchanged a knowing glance with the agent before retreating to his vehicle.

"Yes, good luck," the agent echoed, her grip lingering longer than necessary. She watched the couple disappear into the tree line, their laughter swallowed quickly by the tree line.

As the wind rustled through the canopy, moaning low like a warning, she glanced around, shoulders tense, eyes scanning the edges for movement.

"I always hated this damned place," she muttered under her breath, slipping into her car and locking the doors with practiced speed. She cast one final look over her shoulder. "Good riddance."

From the shade of the forest, Dawn watched the car rumble away, gravel crackling beneath the tires until it vanished down the path. Only then did she reach into her backpack, withdrawing a worn leather journal. She thumbed through brittle pages until she found the map—creased, marked, and unnervingly precise.

"It should be over there," she whispered, pointing southwest.

They moved in silence toward the quadrant. Nature held its breath. Signs of the past awaited them—blackened bones clustered around a stone altar, petroglyphs scorched into bedrock in the form of horned figures, and symbols etched deep, as if clawed from the earth itself.

Alex knelt beside the altar, brushing aside moss and ash. “Looks like we found it,” he said with a cocky edge.

#

Community Saints Hospital, Missoula, MT

The elevator doors parted, revealing a space that felt less like a hospital wing and more like a breach in reality. The lighting was unnaturally soft—dimmed to a muted glow, as if this floor existed in perpetual twilight. It gave the illusion of rest, yet what slumbered here wasn’t innocence, but torment. There was no dreaming, only nightmares.

Kermode swept his broad arm outward, gesturing for Baptiste to step forward.

“Here we are,” he said with an air of cheerful pride, as though bestowing a gift.

Baptiste didn’t share that sentiment. He lingered in the elevator, feet planted and pulse quickening. Something about the threshold felt absolute and unforgiving.

Kermode noted the hesitation. “It’s alright,” he offered with an amused tone. “Nothing bites… as long as you stay in the hallway.”

To coax momentum, Kermode turned and strolled down the corridor, his voice lifting back toward Baptiste with hospital lore and statistics. Eventually, Baptiste stepped out, drawn forward less by trust than by necessity.

“This is our special psychiatric ward,” Kermode explained.

“Special?” Baptiste asked, uncertain.

“Dr. Ouchi has a rare rapport with the criminally insane. She's had extraordinary success—not just treating their psychoses, but curing them.”

“A cure?” Baptiste repeated.

“Yes. Not a method. A result.”

They stepped into Kyle’s office, where the young assistant looked up from his screen. “She’s with a patient

right now. Should be done soon… You're welcome to wait in her office."

"Thank you," Kermode replied, leading the way.

Inside, the office exuded curated elegance—clinical but personal. Kermode surveyed the room with a grin. "You'll love Ouchi. She's one of a kind. Just like you."

Before Baptiste could respond, the building shook with a scream—raw and animalistic. The sound crawled under the skin. Baptiste's body reacted instinctively—tense, blood surging. Kermode gently placed a hand on his arm, grounding him.

"That's part of the process. Sounds like it's winding down."

The hallway stirred with the clatter of locks and footfalls. Baptiste leaned forward, peering past the doorway. All he could see were guards flanking a departing patient.

Then he heard her.

"Kermode. I didn't expect you today," came a voice—gentle, layered with warmth.

He turned to see her standing there, poised yet difficult to read. She seemed to observe him as thoroughly as he studied her. It wasn't a sexual gaze. It was scientific. Curious. Like two organisms assessing compatibility.

Kermode stepped in to bridge the silence. "Ouchi, this is Dr. Jean Baptiste—our new cardiac lead from Chicago."

"I recognized you from the zombie cell trials," I said, extending a hand. "Fascinating work. I'd love to hear more."

He took my hand, and in that moment, something passed between us. A ripple. An exchange. Energy flowed—not metaphorically, but tangibly. It circled through me and returned to him.

Another scream shattered the moment. Baptiste jerked back, bumping into a side table. A small ceramic figure fell and split.

"I'm so sorry," he said, gathering the pieces delicately. "Can I replace it?"

I reached out, brushing his palm with my fingertips as I retrieved the broken halves.

"No need. Just a hobby… Nothing valuable."

Outside the door, something moved. A shadow. Pacing. Watching. I knew we needed to move Baptiste out—now.

The lights dimmed further, as if something had stepped between the building and the sun. Baptiste glanced around, suddenly alert.

I caught Kermode's eye. He nodded.

"We should get you settled," he said quickly, ushering Baptiste out. They shook my hand once more and vanished behind the elevator doors.

Alone, I turned toward the long hallway. My fingers opening, revealing the ceramic's cut—blood pooled in my palm. The thirsty clay drank it greedily. I felt its edge pierce me again, drawing more life from me that what was first offered.

"Greedy bastard," I thought.

The shadow approached, slapped the shard from my skin, and retreated once more. I'll have to deal with that later, but I had other things to do right now. It wasn't going anywhere for the moment.

Steadying myself, I returned to the rhythm of routine. For now.

"Kyle?" I called.

"Yes, boss."

"There are some ceramic shards in the hallway. Would you mind sweeping them up?"

"On it."

"Thanks."

Kyle retrieved the small broom and dustpan from the supply cabinet and stepped into the corridor. Spotting the scattered pieces, he knelt, carefully sweeping them into a neat pile.

Just as he leaned forward to stand, a sudden pressure—unseen but undeniable—anchored him to the floor. Something heavy settled on his shoulders, like dread made tangible.

He paused mid-motion, breath caught, senses narrowing to the moment.

Then, from behind, a voice hissed through the quiet: "Don't move."

#

CHAPTER 2: BEATING HEART SURGERY

Static crackled around Kyle, wrapping him in invisible barbed wire. Cold air swept through the corridor, unnatural and biting, raising goosebumps across his arms and stiffening every hair. He remained crouched, paralyzed, eyes locked on the floor—refusing to search for the voice that had rooted him in terror.

The hallway dimmed shade by shade, as though some prehistoric sludge was seeping through the light itself. The air thickened, congealing into something solid. Even sound felt burdened, dropping to the tiles like ash, unwilling to trespass further.

From my office window, I saw it unraveling.

I rushed to Kyle, grabbing him beneath his shoulders and yanking him upright. "Get in my office!" I ordered, shoving him toward safety.

But Kyle resisted, feet planted firmly to the tile like he'd sprouted roots. He turned toward me slowly, his eyes hollowed by fear. "It told me not to move."

I gripped him tighter, steadying the tremble in his chest. "Don't listen to it. Listen to me. This is just like the drills. You remember them, don't you?"

Training clawed its way back into his thoughts, rooting out the paralysis. "Yes… right. Of course."

He bolted for my office and retrieved the thick emergency binder from the shelf.

"Did you find it?" I shouted, scanning the corridor for movement.

"One sec," he called back, flipping through the laminated pages with shaking fingers.

And then I saw it.

It crept along the mortar seams in the wall—shadow clinging to shadow—sliding toward the elevator with calculated precision.

"Kyle! The blue tab. Now!"

The creature halted at the sound of my voice. Then, slowly, deliberately, it peeled itself from the wall and turned. It had the rough outline of a man at first, just over six feet tall. But the moment it shifted to face me, its form warped, stretched, branched. Tendrils emerged. A body split into something unspeakable.

"Oh, shit…" I whispered. Then louder—"Kyle, light it up! Kyle!"

The floodlights detonated, washing the hallway in blinding brilliance. The air snapped with ozone, metallic and electric.

And then came the roar.

Visceral. Bellowing. Too primal to be human.

#

Ten floors below, the hum of Community Saints Hospital persisted as if nothing unusual stirred a hundred feet above. Daily routines unfolded. Monitors beeped. Coffee brewed. No one paused to consider the frayed edge of reality being tugged elsewhere in the building.

Meanwhile, Kermode guided Baptiste through the rest of the tour, introducing him to key staff along the way.

"And finally," Kermode said with theatrical flourish, "your new office."

They stepped into a spacious, tastefully decorated room. A wide desk anchored the space, flanked by bookshelves already stocked with medical texts and journals. Caribbean-made furniture, vibrant yet understated artwork, and warm wood accents gave the space its personality. Baptiste took it all in.

Kermode gestured to the desk. "Go ahead—try it out."

Baptiste settled behind the desk while Kermode collapsed comfortably into a plush armchair off to the side.

"So," Kermode asked, his eyes gleaming, "what do you think? Will it work?"

Baptiste glanced around. Unlike Kermode's own office—with its rustic, bear-cave grandeur—this space had been designed with Baptiste in mind. Subtle nods to his heritage wove through the décor: Haitian textiles, carved dark wood, even the scent had something earthy and familiar.

"It's different," Baptiste said slowly, his voice measured.

"We try to reflect our team's background. Your family's Haitian, right?" Kermode asked, leaning forward slightly, not just curious—hungry for information.

"Yes. My parents emigrated from Haiti in the seventies. I was born in Chicago, shortly after."

Kermode studied him. There was a barrier forming in Baptiste's posture—controlled, calculated. The kind of line you draw when you've buried more than you're ready to share.

Kermode pivoted.

"So... thoughts on Dr. Ouchi?"

Baptiste's eyes flickered. Memories of their encounter danced briefly across his expression. "She's... interesting," he replied, keeping his tone neutral.

Kermode chuckled. "She's more than interesting. There's something about her, isn't there? Calming. Hypnotic. If you've ever got a demon gnawing at your heels, she's the one to see."

He winked with a grin that was half mischief, half suggestion.

"Well," he said, clapping his hands once and leaning forward, "shall we get down to business?"

#

Back in my wing of the hospital, I confronted the fallout from the escape. The patient—no longer entirely human—cowered in a corner, recoiling from the soft blaze

of the overhead lights. Its body curled inward, desperate to escape illumination, as if purity itself burned.

I slipped my necklace free, letting the amethyst crystal dangle in the air. Rubbing it rhythmically between my fingers, I built a charge—static laced with will. Then I pressed the stone toward the creature, letting the energy flow from flesh to crystal. The hallway buzzed as its essence was pulled inward. The darkness receded. Not entirely—this place never knew peace—but it returned to its usual hum of dread. Oppressive, yes. Familiar, tolerable.

"I'm not finished with you," I murmured, sealing the entity within the crystal's shell, its consciousness now contained—but barely.

Kyle peeked from the doorway, his face still pale but searching for calm. "Everything all right now?"

Clutching the necklace tight, I pivoted and headed back toward my office. "It's fine," I said smoothly, almost absently. "What's next on my schedule?"

And just like that, order resumed—at least, on the surface.

#

While I settled back into routine, Kermode was busy christening the new recruit with blood.

He led Baptiste down the corridor, practically bounding with enthusiasm as he rattled off the stats of the case like a proud chef describing a rare cut of meat.

"The victim—male, 28—got into it with a homeless man under the Higgins Street bridge," he reported, voice low but electric. "Six stab wounds, one straight through the heart. Paramedics say it's a miracle he's still alive."

They reached the surgical bay, where the team stood poised, the patient prepped for something miraculous.

Kermode clapped Baptiste on the shoulder, eyes gleaming. “Alright, show us what you’ve got.”

#

Surgery was a dance—both brutal and balletic—and Baptiste was its undisputed lead. He stood at the center of the dance, arms outstretched, and the performance began around him. Gowned, gloved, masked. In costume. Ready.

The operating room buzzed with kinetic energy. Clanking metal. Rapid chatter. The hum of motion as bodies rushed, collided, adjusted. But it was the high-pitched squeal of gurney wheels that stole Baptiste’s attention. His ears twitched. His eyes locked on the hallway.

The doors burst open, paramedics slicing through the chaos to deliver the wounded. Baptiste didn’t move. He simply watched, absorbing the static around the body—the whispers of trauma, the echoes of violence.

They transferred the patient to the table, revealing a young man, mangled and hemorrhaging. Baptiste approached silently, hands held tight to his chest, refusing contact.

“Strip it back,” he said.

As layers of blood-soaked gauze and shredded clothing were peeled away, the body emerged: meat ground through trauma. Flaps of torn skin twisted over one another in grotesque patterns. Blood pulsed from the chest like a fountain. The pericardium was torn open, exposing the bare muscle—beating, bleeding, panicked.

Baptiste closed his eyes. He could hear it. Not the rhythm of a heart, but a plea. A scream. A call for help.

He began to move.

Fitch, the assisting surgeon, worked quickly—sawing through the sternum, inserting a rib spreader. The operating room reverberated commands and movement. Baptiste tuned it out.

"Doctor?" someone called. "Doctor?"

Baptiste opened his eyes and stepped in. The heart trembled in his gloved hand. A laceration gaped across its surface. A nurse called out for sutures. But Baptiste didn't answer. The heart wasn't responding to medicine. It was terrified.

"Stop," he ordered. "Step back. Quiet down. You're scaring him."

Fitch blinked. "He's sedated."

"I'm not talking about him. I mean his heart."

The monitor shrieked—a warning cry as the rate spiked.

"He's crashing!"

"Trust me," Baptiste said softly. "Everyone, just breathe."

He cradled the heart gently. Whispered to it. Sang to it.

Low, rhythmic, soothing.

The alarm silenced.

A nurse leaned in. "Need a suture?"

"No. I don't use sutures."

Confused glances darted around the room. But Kermode, watching from the gallery above, leaned into the glass, transfixed. Through the intercom, he heard the chant. Felt the vibration of Baptiste's voice.

He zoomed in on the heart, searching for proof.

And there it was—cellular movement. The "zombie cell" protocol. Baptiste's voice activated the healthy tissue surrounding the damage, sparking regeneration. Cells accelerated. The tear closed. The injury bridged. Baptiste's fingers guided the repair like a conductor with strings of flesh.

"Saline," he said.

A nurse flushed the cavity. He scanned the bubbles.

"Suction."

The fluid vanished, leaving a clean, healed chest. Baptiste smoothed the pericardium back into place—soft,

steady strokes, like pressing wet paper against a balloon. The heart pulsed beneath his palm, no longer afraid.

He tested the seal, confirmed stability, then stepped back.

The dance was done.

#