



Orphan Veil

THE STRAY

Lucy Annette Nitz



Astral Alchemist

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Dedicated to my brother, Richard, who is just as strong and as protective as Barry.

And to my sister, Gabriella, who is just as loving, kind, and smart as Bonnie.

Chapter One

Containment Breach

“**M**aximilian, why are you dragging me down here?” the tall woman barked as she stepped from an elevator. Her voice held depth, exuding a naturally intimidating tone, enough to make even the snarkest people straighten their postures. Her mere presence was threatening. The halls even thrummed with the booming thuds of her heavy-footed steps.

“Level 6 is hardly a floor I’d visit for *fun*,” she growled. “Especially at three in the goddamn morning.”

“Come now, Diana,” the lanky man walking in front of her hummed with a slight chuckle. As he spoke, his arthritic fingers endlessly fiddled with his white mustache. “Have you no heart?” he cooed, stuffing his hands in his lab coat.

Diana squinted, irritated; he couldn’t get away with fibbing discouragement in front of her. “There’s nothing special about the sad children you’ve collected here,” she commented.

She then shot a sharp glance to her left at a smaller man with glasses who was silently following alongside them. With so little as a scowl and a judgmental glare into his pathetically submissive eyes, he almost immediately covered behind his clipboard. “And tell your creepy brat to stop staring at me.”

“Come now, he’s simply admiring you,” Maximilian spoke with a feigned plea. “And as for the girls, I’d beg to differ. What other orphanage possesses children capable of what they are?”

Diana muttered a curse beneath her breath before stating, “None. For good reason.”

“None indeed.” Maximilian grinned.

She watched as the smaller man retreated back toward Maximilian, almost using the doctor as a barrier between him and Diana, like a frightened puppy cowering between its mother’s legs. She dryly huffed before peeling her eyes from him.

She crossed her black-sleeved arms over her ballistic vest. Her right shoulder was embroidered with a strange, sterile-white symbol: a circle with a symmetrical cross in the center that stretched out to its edges. She looked like she was prepared for war, and working here, she felt obligated to be. A handgun was holstered on her hip and pouches of spare ammunition dotted the belt around it. Mace, handcuffs, a two-way radio, and a flashlight joined them on the opposing side. Despite all the gray, dark equipment, her hair greatly outmatched them: it was deep, dark, and black, almost devouring all the light that shined upon it. Most of it was tied into a meticulously well-kept bun just below the rear of her baseball cap. But apart from the bundle, one stray thin veil of hair rested against the right side of her face. It seemed as though the only color on this woman was her pale skin, and dull, heavy, tired blue eyes.

“Oh fear not, Wilson, she’s quite charming, albeit difficult to speak with,” Maximilian remarked, briefly stopping to place his hand on the shorter male’s shoulder.

Diana’s face twitched with sudden irritation at his words. His gall to act so ludicrously carefree while wasting her time on some *stroll* was twisting her

nerves. “Why are we down here!?” she fumed, frustratedly turning to face the man.

Maximilian cracked a sly grin and tilted his head slightly to the right. “For this, of course.” He chuckled, gesturing toward the door they were standing beside. It shared the same strange symbol as Diana’s shoulder, and below that was the number 19. “I figured this would be *someone* you’d like to see.”

Diana stopped and glanced at the door. Once she spotted the familiar number on its surface, her eyebrows furrowed. She quickly peered back at him, her face scrunching as his smug smile not once wavered and only continued to twist and stretch.

“Are you trying to get a rise out of me with this?” she accused. “Nineteen is *dead*.”

“She sure is,” Maximilian noted.

A key card was hooked at the end of a lanyard draped around his neck. The card was lined in purple, and in bold text, it read MAXIMILIAN FORD. He lightly pinched it, and with a swift flick of his wrist, he pressed the key-card against the terminal mounted beside the door. Almost immediately, the panel lit up with an affirming green glow and the door split apart.

“Ladies first,” he said, stepping aside.

Diana growled against her teeth, entirely unappreciative of the gesture. She slowly uncrossed her arms, heavily resisting every urge to bust his nose as she stomped past him.

“What are you trying to show me? A corpse dangling from the ceiling?” she jeered.

“That would be in bad taste.” Maximilian chuckled. “Even so, I appreciate your imagination.”

“It’s not far out of the realm of shit you’d pull,” Diana lowly grumbled, leering back at him over her shoulder.

Maximilian shrugged and snaked past Diana into the area with Wilson in tow. The door clamped shut behind them, and he made his way toward another on their left. This one had a manual lock. A third door similar to the one they had just entered was ahead of them.

Diana couldn't help but stare. The second door was unmarked, but the third was identical to the first, displaying the same number: 19.

"Commander," Maximilian called out to her, having unlocked the door. "The show is about to start. I wouldn't want you to miss it." He grinned.

Diana let out a discomfited exhale as she met Maximilian's gaze. She proceeded toward him in hesitance. Something wasn't right. He seemed all too excited to show her something, which almost never turned out in her favor. . . .

Maximilian pulled the door open, revealing a room filled to the brim with equipment. Monitors covered the walls, displaying countless diagnostics: everything from heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen intake, and even body temperature. The room was void of people. Aside from the equipment, the only other presence was three foldable chairs placed in front of a black sheet of glass on the wall.

The other cells aren't stuffed with nearly this much crap, Diana thought to herself. Her eyes uneasily darted about the room, scanning each monitor and tool for something unordinary. The problem was, to her, it was *all* unordinary.

"Would you care to take a seat in front of the window, Commander Gray?" Maximilian offered.

With a serrated exhale, she stepped up in front of the glass. "I'd rather stand, thank you." Diana scowled, diverting her frigid glare into the reflective obsidian pane. She took a good look at her own reflection, frustratedly grunting as she noticed a nigh unnoticeable error in her stance, which she corrected immediately.

“As you wish,” Maximilian relented and approached a desk placed just beside the window where much of the equipment was set up.

Wilson made his way past the two and sat in a chair beside her. With his back pressed against it, and his feet tucked beneath him, it almost seemed to her as though he was doing whatever he could to appear as invisible as possible.

Wilson quickly pulled a pen from his pocket, clicking it open in an instant as he sat in wait. He glanced to his side, looking up at Diana, only for her to immediately blast him with a frigid and unamused glare. Obviously frightened of her, he scooted his chair several feet away.

Maximilian snatched the microphone mounted to the desk via a flexible cable. Sliding his other hand down the cable, he palmed the circular base, and flicked a red switch protruding from it. A vibration from behind the black sheet could be heard as speakers boomed to life.

“Good morning,” he greeted.

His voice, mirrored by the speakers, bellowed through the walls, the bass of which reverberated through their chests.

The monitored heart rate grew more frequent in response to his words. Diana wouldn’t have noticed if Wilson wasn’t already fervently scribbling away on his clipboard. She squinted in an attempt to see *anything* in the dark room behind the glass. “Maximilian . . . ?” she slowly said, growing uneasy when she couldn’t even find a shape in the shadows.

Maximilian responded by only raising his free hand and extending his index finger to shush her.

Diana’s right eye twitched in response to such a childish gesture. Her growing frustration was tempered only by her curiosity. Much of her thoughts were geared toward figuring out what Maximilian was trying to accomplish. Whether this was a ruse to get on her nerves, or something more sinister, she couldn’t put her finger on it.

Maximilian sat patiently. When quiet but audible exhales proceeded to flow through the desk speakers, a sly grin tore across his lips.

“Hello . . . ?” the quivering voice of a young girl replied.

Diana flinched at the girl’s soft, trembling voice. She was able to put a face to it immediately, but that couldn’t be right.

“Hello, Samantha,” Maximilian hummed.

Despite the confirmation of a name she hadn’t heard in some time, Diana refused to give him attention, even as he peered over at her from the desk. She didn’t need to look; she could almost hear his irritating grin stretching across his soulless mug. Diana wouldn’t even blink—if there were even a slight chance of this being some cruel prank, she would cling to it until the last second.

“No!” the girl’s voice shrieked through the speakers. “Please—Please don’t!”

The monitors displayed a frenzy of alerts. The girl’s heart rate was further increasing, and her blood pressure skyrocketed. Her manic and fearful pleas continued to pour through, relentlessly begging to remain shrouded in darkness.

Diana’s nails dug into her palms, and if they hadn’t been trimmed, they’d have drawn blood. With each frightened cry that poured in from the other side of the glass, she found it harder to peel her eyes away. Disgust and confusion were bringing her to the cusp of losing her composure altogether.

She quickly faltered, unable to contain her discontent any longer. “What have you done?” she muttered, almost swallowing her own words. Her arms lowered themselves to her side. For a brief moment, she had been caught entirely off guard.

Maximilian reached toward the wall, pressing his finger against a thin switch. With a gentle motion of his hand, the switch flipped. A thud boomed

through the walls as enormous, bright halogen fixtures lit up the previously black void.

Diana partly seized up as her pupils suddenly narrowed. She almost couldn't process what she was staring at; it had to be impossible.

Just through the glass, a little girl with black hair was on her knees in the center of the cell. She let out multiple pathetic whimpers as she struggled, unable to move from her position. Her arms were restrained by tight chains connected to opposing walls.

After a few agonizing seconds of violent thrashing, the girl ceased, slumping forward against the tug of her restraints. Her tangled and messy black locks draped over her battered face as she relaxed. Her skin was covered in splits, scrapes, and bruises, showing clear signs of suffering and abuse. She let out a sharp exhale as she began to raise her head.

A sudden muscle spasm, likely due to her uncomfortable position, caused her neck muscles to constrict, forcing her to jerk forward. Protruding from her back were four lengthy metallic tendrils ending with scythe-like blades. They dragged against the concrete floor behind her, scraping unmercifully until they snagged against their own restraints.

"Maximilian . . ." Diana shallowly exhaled, balling up her left fist while instinctively hovering her right over her holstered sidearm.

"Yes?" He smugly grinned.

"This isn't possible," Diana snarled, eyeing the child in chains.

"What specifically?"

"You know what," she growled. "I killed that . . . *thing!*" She turned and swept her arm to the side, smashing her fist against one of the foldable chairs. It careened into the wall before clattering onto the floor. "Why is it still alive!?"

"Oh, *that.*" Maximilian ceased fiddling with his mustache. He then brought his hands behind his back and joined them together.

“She was too valuable of an asset to just . . . *terminate*,” he explained. “I had to make sure we could squeeze every last drop of data out of this cute little morsel.”

Diana was prepared to retort but turned back to the concrete cage in response to a sudden movement in her peripheral.

The girl had moved. She was now sitting on her ankles with her back straight and her head up.

Samantha’s nose twitched as her lamp-like eyes flickered inconsistently in color—from a gleaming, luminescent, and vibrant light blue, to a burning, carnage-thirsting scarlet red. With an unwavering gaze, she stared at the glass, almost as though she were looking past it.

Diana clenched her teeth and returned the glare, though her discomfort only grew the longer their apparent eye contact remained.

The child didn’t blink. She hardly even breathed. She just . . . stared.

“What’s wrong with it?” Diana questioned. “Can she see me?”

“Of course not,” Maximilian objected. “The glass is one way.” A devious hum escaped his lips as he held back a snicker.

Diana stepped to the left. Samantha’s eyes followed. “Then what’s the brat’s problem?”

“She appears to be locked on to your scent, ma’am,” the previously silent young man stammered, garnering the courage to insert himself into the conversation.

“Shit,” Diana sneered.

“You *were* the last voice poor little Samantha heard before she was torn apart by a shower of bullets,” Maximilian sinisterly gawked.

Diana held her ground, continuing to glare down at the child. She had never expected to see those eyes again, let alone stare back into them. She remembered that day all too well. How could she not? The alarms, the panic, and *those eyes*. There was no doubt in her mind that Samantha not only also

remembered but had been holding a grudge the entire time. Her blistering, vengeful glare made that abundantly clear.

Samantha's eyes ceased their flickering light show. Both colors now fought to control the same space, and in that brief turmoil, there was a split. In an instant, her lamps had bled entirely red, having succumbed to dim yet fervent blood thirst.

She lunged, snarling as the restraints hooked to her tendrils pulled against her spine. She gritted her teeth, seething as drool seeped over her lips and down her chin. Her teeth were sharp, glimmering with a metallic sheen, and clamped together with the force of a shark's jaws. Low predatorial growls rumbled through her throat with each breath, shaking spit from her chin.

Before long, she grew impatient and thrashed more violently. She parted her teeth, widened her jaw, and let loose a ravenous roar.

Diana finally broke a sweat though, visually, her only shift in demeanor was but a further tightening of her facial muscles. "She needs to be terminated. Immediately," she demanded.

"As I said, she's *too* valuable," Maximilian repeated himself, poorly hiding his twisted pleasure with a disingenuous sigh. "Which is why I was glad she was only incapacitated and not *dead* when she broke containment last time."

"She killed *everyone* that got in her way," Diana declared, regaining her composure and standing her ground. "She tore throats and flesh out of my men with her *teeth* like a fucking animal."

"Humans *do* regress when threatened," Maximilian remarked. "There's nothing more potent or raw than natural instinct."

"There's nothing *human* about her," Diana stepped back up to the glass, continuing to look down upon Samantha with her predetermined prejudices. "Not anymore."

She huffed, watching as Samantha bowed her head subtly to adjust her gaze with the commander's minor shift in position.

Maximilian shook his head. “While that may be so, there’s nothing we can do but learn from her now. Killing her would be a blow to our research.”

“It may surprise you to learn that I don’t give a *fuck* about your research,” Diana snapped at him. She finally broke eye contact, turning her full attention toward Maximilian. “I won’t debate this,” she snarled. “She *needs* to die.” But as she finished, he gave no response.

Maximilian’s purposeful silence dragged out for moments on end, his grin remaining affixed upon his lips and his eyes almost entirely unblinking.

Diana gulped, her patience thinning in the face of his unwavering stubbornness. She was growing jittery, her fingers twitching against her holster as she stared back at him. She knew she didn’t have the authority to issue an execution order without his clearance; his irritating smirk alone was enough for her to figure he knew that, as well.

Their stalemate was suddenly disrupted as the equipment around them began to softly rustle. She shot a quick glance back at Maximilian before the entire room started to subtly quake.

Diana looked down, feeling as though the vibrations of the facility had completely shifted. The belly of the bunker was groaning, and the inconsistent vibrations humming against her feet were an early warning sign.

“Maximilian—” she started. The lights flashed then grew brighter and dimmer at seemingly random intervals. Her anger faded, replaced almost entirely by concern as the vibrations became significantly more intense.

The loud whirring of the facility’s generators had significantly spiked in volume, until suddenly choking and sputtering before coming to a complete halt. And as the facility fell silent, the lights went out.

Shrouded in darkness, her anger slowly returned, festering and boiling as she nearly shivered with frustration. “*Doctor . . .*” she trailed off, growling against her teeth.

“This . . . isn’t my doing,” Maximilian responded within the shadows.

A much quieter series of metallic rumbles bellowed from beneath them, possibly a second set of smaller generators roaring to life. But even as they ignited, the lights did not return in full, as only the low-power emergency bulbs dotting the walls were aglow.

“Wilson,” Maximilian started, turning toward his assistant as the room filled with dim red light. “What the hell just happened!?”

Wilson was panicking, pacing the darkened room. “I-I don’t know, sir!”

“Why would the grid just *shut down* like that!?” Diana barked.

Wilson frantically sifted through his tablet, searching through diagnostics, system data, anything he could find to find an answer. But when he found it, he merely exhaled shakily and began to sweat.

“S-sir?” he softly stuttered.

“What is it?” Maximilian beckoned.

“The emergency systems are the *only* systems online.” He gulped, raising his head. “And that means . . .”

Diana watched as he turned his head to the window. Even in the low light, she could see him turn pale, his skin dotting with fear-stricken goosebumps. She turned slightly, leering at Maximilian while Wilson began to incoherently babble before the two then looked back at the window.

Almost immediately, she felt a knife run right along her nerves, playing them like a rusty violin. She was met again with the cold stare of the angry child, but it was much too close for comfort this time.

Samantha stood nearly against the glass. Her splintering red lamps cast the faintest of glows against her face. With each exhale from her nose, a temporary sheen of fog licked across the glass. Her breathing was tempered, albeit poorly, as boring into Diana’s eyes through the glass seemed to make her antsy and irritated.

Diana slowly peeled her vest an inch from her chest. She reached beneath it, pinched, and pulled out a small, folded handkerchief. She shook it loose, then spat into the cloth, balled it up with one hand, and tossed it to her left.

Samantha's eyes darted over, following the handkerchief, but quickly shifted back to Diana's position.

"She can *definitely* smell me," Diana hummed in grim confirmation.

"Her magnetic restraints must have deactivated!" Wilson explained, his voice bordering on cracking. "Though unless there's a backflow, the electronic locks should—"

He was cut off as the doors in the adjoining checkpoint hall simultaneously unlocked.

"—hold." He gulped.

"Kid, stop talking," Diana murmured, irked by his poor timing.

A hiss rang from the adjoining room as the doors depressurized. Slowly, the doors peeled apart, allowing the dim red glow of the emergency lights to seep into Samantha's dark cell.

She turned her head, no longer interested in Diana as the prospect of freedom became plausible. A hint of relief broke through her stoic expression.

"That's . . . not ideal," Maximilian mumbled, releasing an irritated scowl as he scratched his mustache out of habit.

A sudden shocked exhale fogged up the glass, and she moved toward the dimly lit doorway. As she stepped, the shaded silhouettes of her tendrils slithered behind her, twisting and swimming through the air as though they weaved against gravity's pull.

"No!" Diana growled, quickly shoving past Maximilian and rushing the door as Samantha moved out of sight. She instinctively reached for the handle but held herself back, knowing that if she opened that door, she'd be as good as dead. She stood impatiently in toxifying silence, listening for even the slightest bit of movement in the adjoining hall. She knew that little monster

had a golden ticket to run free again, and with each second that scraped by, Diana only grew more furious.

She dragged her constrained, twitching glare back to Maximilian. She didn't speak, but at this point, she hoped it was clear enough that she wouldn't take no for an answer.

Maximilian sighed and raised a hand to rub his forehead. "Very well," he relented. "Initiate termination protocols."

Diana's shoulders loosened slightly in relief, but now she had a job to do. "With pleasure," she sneered. She raised a hand, grasping at a small knob sticking out from the center of the door. She pulled it to the right, opening a speakeasy for her to peer through. Her eyes moved left and right, searching for any sign of Samantha beyond the door. She saw nothing but a dimly lit room.

Diana reached just above her chest, near her right shoulder, and grabbed hold of a palm-sized mic Velcroed to her vest. A spiral cable, connected to the base of the mic, had been fed beneath her vest all the way down to her belt, connecting to the input of her radio. She pushed down a switch, activating it, then held down a trigger on the side.

"All available squads mobilize, check in, and lock down the entire facility. There's been a blackout and one possible breach on Level 6, heard?"

A flurry of confirmations poured from the speaker, though she paid no mind to them—she had something more pressing to worry about.

She planted her left hand on the doorknob and drew her sidearm. She then shoved the door open and raised her gun, only to find the door to the hall wide open.

Samantha had escaped.

She grimaced and held down the trigger once again. "Be advised, we are operating under containment breach protocol. Chaincode PGF-A6. Proceed

with caution and live munitions. You're authorized to use deadly force on sight."

Diana removed her hand from her chest, placing it beneath the grip to stabilize her weapon. She stepped into the halls, squinting as she tried her best to see in the low light. Realizing that doing so would be nothing more than a hindrance, she snatched a flashlight from her belt. She ignited it and held it beneath her weapon.

The light almost immediately overpowered the weak emergency bulbs lining the hall. She glanced both ways, staring as far as her flashlight would illuminate. But she saw no signs of the girl.

However, on her left, just outside the door, she noticed something on the floor.

Diana knelt down. Upon shining her light on it, she realized it was a gash in the concrete.

"Her scythes," she muttered, glancing up through the blast doorway just ahead of her.

"Any squads in position on the eastern half of Containment Wing C?" Diana questioned, holding down the trigger with the hand in which she held the torch. She rose to her feet and stepped ahead through the arch of the blast doorway.

"Captain Garfield of Victor Squad reporting," a man's voice chirped through. "We're holding down the hall just outside of the generator stairwell."

Diana picked up her speed, moving quickly down the halls as she continued to check adjoining sections. She glanced to the wall, spotting a sign pointing toward a junction labeled POWER WING.

"Hold your position, Captain." She furrowed her eyebrows amid the darkness. "She might be headed your way!"

"We're in wait, ma'am!" Garfield replied through the radio.

“Roger that, I’m en route,” Diana said, removing her hand from her radio. But before she could continue onward, he came through again.

“Ma’am, I think she’s just outside of—wait . . . are those—” Garfield started, but cut off, likely fumbling his mic.

“Garfield?” Diana stated, coming to a halt. After a few seconds, she held the trigger back down and repeated herself. “Captain Garfield?”

A garble of static and white noise blared through the mic before a handful of words broke through. “—ntha! It’s—ineteen!”

“Captain!?” Diana yelled into the mic.

“—end help! Send he—” Garfield begged until the feed was cut again.

Diana gritted her teeth and burst into a full sprint down the halls. She took a left at the junction, entering a parallel hall. Though once she turned right to keep going, she stopped in her tracks. A sealed blast door blocked her path.

“Shit,” she muttered.

Diana’s head perked up as she heard a variety of muffled shrieks and gunfire reverberating through the steel door.

“Why is *this* closed!?” she shouted to no one in particular before stuffing her gun in her holster and planting her hands on the terminal beside the door. No matter how much she fiddled with it, the screen remained black and unresponsive.

“She’s tearing us apart! We need backup!” a more feminine voice shrieked over the radio feed.

Diana forced her hand into a small groove beneath the front plate then tore it open. *I have to open this thing manually!* she thought to herself, finding a keycard slot wired directly through the box. She pulled off her lanyard and stuck her badge in. No response.

“Dammit, these things are supposed to be wired to the emergency system!” she shouted, pulling her card out and slotting it in again.

Diana crouched, peering under the terminal. She ran her fingers along the backside, which hung just an inch from the wall. Her fingers rubbed right over a switch. She stopped and pressed it in immediately. She rose to her feet, looking at her card still embedded in the slot. Still no response.

“Come on!” She jerked it out and shoved it in one last time. The slot let loose a shrill beep, and a sudden burst of air hissed from the door as the locks detached.

Diana stepped to the left side of the frame and clamped her fingers around it. She pulled as hard as she could.

The door groaned as it was forced open, and once she got about a foot and a half of clearance, she wedged herself between the frame and the door. Pressing her feet against the frame, and her back against the door, she was able to shove it open completely.

The commander stumbled but swiftly pulled her firearm back out and reignited her torch.

The dim emergency lights continued to line the hall all the way down to an exposed doorway at the end of the hall. Diana raised her flashlight up above it, spotting a sign that read GENERATOR ACCESS. As she lowered the light, she spotted a damaged steel door lying on the floor nearby. The door seemed to have been torn off its hinges, the locks shattered and the metal shredded. It was crumpled like paper.

Diana then mouthed a curse as she noticed five bodies strewn about the room like blood-soaked party streamers. She stepped forward, slowly panning across the floor with her light as she hoped for survivors. Some were missing arms, some had holes in them, and some were hardly even recognizable as corpses, only giving off the appearance of a butcher’s scraps.

“Squads Foxtrot and Golf,” Diana gulped, “relocate to Generator Access, immediately,” she ordered into her mic.

As the confirmations echoed in, she knelt beside one of the gored bodies, which lay face down. She placed her flashlight on the floor next to her and reached for its neck. She had gone to check for a pulse but felt an immediate squelch against her fingers as she did so. In response, she grabbed their shoulder and forcibly rolled the body over.

Their throat was shredded, yet their eyes glazed over, frozen with terror.

Diana winced then let out a disappointed sigh. She curled a finger around their dog tag chain, popping it off what remained of their neck to verify their designation.

It was Victor Squadron alright.

Setting their tags back down against their chest, she leaned back down toward the mic. “Golf, continue ahead. Foxtrot, continue after securing a medical team. Victor—” she stopped, distracted as she heard a distant rustling. “—has been wiped out,” she finished.

She heard the subtle rustling once again and swiftly scooped her flashlight back up. She rose to her feet and raised her hands, illuminating the doorway with her torch. After a few moments of continued silence, she heard it once more and noticed it was coming from beside the door.

Her light revealed a man wedged against the corner. He wheezed at the sudden flash of light in his eyes, raising his hand to cover them.

Diana approached cautiously, lowering her gun slightly. She could hear his breathing. It was erratic, so much so that she could see his uniform quivering. “Identify yourself, soldier!” she barked.

The man may have jumped to his feet if he weren’t wounded. He raised his handgun at Diana and cried, “Get away from me!” His voice broke as he screamed.

“Garfield,” Diana partly gasped before raising her gun back up, “drop it!”

He was in a delirious state, she knew that, but if she had to put him down, she would. She already had more than enough to worry about.

He stared at her, looking for her face, but found it difficult as she was shrouded in darkness and he was blinded by the flashlight. Once he heard her voice, his entire body went stiff, and the gun practically slipped from his hands. “C-C-Commander!” he stuttered out, staring at her with bloodshot eyes.

“Compose yourself, Captain,” Diana spoke, lowering the torch and holstering her gun. She knelt down in front of him and made direct eye contact. “What happened?” she queried.

“Th-the Orphan—It. She—just charged us!” Garfield wheezed, barely maintaining eye contact with her.

He was rather chewed up. Several open wounds peeked out from beneath his torn vest and uniform, though there were likely more. Blood drained down his exposed skin, oozing from his countless cuts and holes with each breath. As he inhaled, he winced and crossed an arm over his chest, grabbing at one of his wounds as they stung unmercifully.

“It was—It was Nineteen!” he cried out, gagging as he coughed uncontrollably. “Why—She was. It—” He began to stammer and ramble, choking as stress tightened its fingers around his neck.

“We opened fire,” he stuttered, almost staring through Diana and at his butchered team. “It didn’t even take a minute. . . .”

Diana peered over her shoulder, viewing the carnage once more. Her stoic expression held firm, though her eyes weren’t so stone-cold. The walls were painted with uneven splatters of blood, but the floor had the worst of it. It was almost entirely covered in a soup of gore, with chunky bits of sinew, flesh, and bone mixed in. This could have been avoided if Maximilian had listened to her the first time.

Diana turned back and raised her right hand from her holster. She grasped Garfield’s shoulder and rekindled their previous eye contact.

He was fidgeting, entirely unable to control his fear. But as he looked at his superior, he could see she was calm, albeit a little frazzled. Her grip alone was enough to assert her commanding confidence, but the way she looked him in the eyes seemed to give him a small sense of hope.

“Try and relax. Help is on the way,” she assured.

“Yes . . . ma’am . . .” he choked.

Chapter Two

Rusted Catacombs

“She’s down there, is she?” Captain Gaius asked, his fingers wrapped around his assault rifle as though Samantha was expected to lunge from the dark at any moment.

Diana nodded from beside the older, bald man in response while shining her flashlight into the void of a doorway. In the illuminated darkness, an aging rusty staircase descended into the facility’s depths, where all the vital systems were operated and maintained.

“Flushing her out of there will be a challenge, especially without power. If we send anyone down there, she’ll just pick them off,” Gaius said, distressed by the thought of sending his men to die.

“Which is why *we* won’t send anyone,” Diana stated, clicking off the flashlight and slotting it into her belt. “You and I will go down by ourselves.”

“Ballsy. Less of a chance for her to take advantage of the tight space,” Gaius smirked.

“But more difficult to find her,” Diana grumbled, raising her hand and adjusting her cap. “I need a weapon fit for close quarters.”

“I can arrange that.” Gaius hummed, removing one hand from his weapon but refusing to remove the other. “Parker! Get over here, double time,” he shouted, cupping his mouth.

A woman with a ginger ponytail protruding from beneath her helmet marched over. In her arms was a sleek, freshly cleaned shotgun. “Yes, sir?” she questioned.

“Hand me your weapon, Lieutenant,” Gaius demanded, holding a hand out.

Parker held it out to him without hesitation.

Gaius released his own, letting it dangle against his chest by a strap. He grabbed the shotgun from Parker, and half-racked the pump, peering into the ejection port. He hummed approvingly and shoved the pump back toward the end of the barrel then held it out to Diana. “This should do the trick.”

Diana took it in her hands and reached to the underside of the barrel. She twisted a knob, adjusting the brightness of a mounted flashlight, before lowering it in front of herself. “Let’s hope so,” she mumbled.

“Parker, you’re in charge until I get back,” Gaius ordered. “Hold this position, and if the insect runs out, blow her to hell.”

“Understood!” Parker replied with a quick salute before drawing her sidearm. “Good hunting, sir.”

Gaius turned his attention back to the stairwell and ignited his rifle-mounted flashlight. He raised his rifle up, the beam illuminating the stairwell once again. He stepped inside, pressing his right boot down against the first metal step, causing the stairs to let out a rather otherworldly groan. They were stable, as they did not sway, though rust was plentiful, dotting both the steps and railings in inconsistent splotches.

Gaius glanced to his right, noticing a similar small wall-mounted cage like the ones lining the emergency lights in the halls. He pointed his rifle down and peered at a glittering substance on the second step. The man knelt down, removing his hand from the barrel of his firearm. He pinched some of the dust and raised it up to his face, proceeding to rub it between his fingers. “Glass,” he muttered. “The little bug smashed up the lights.”

Diana’s face partly dropped as she raised the shotgun, shining the light further into the stairwell. Countless shimmering shards littered each step, all the way down to the first landing. It was just another problem.

Once they reached the base of the stairwell, they entered the humid, damp underbelly of the facility. Scanning about with their flashlights, their light gleamed over several scattered pieces of equipment. Narrow halls brimming with pipes and wires surrounded them, each leading to various subsystems such as plumping, electrical, heating, and cooling. Unlike traditional systems, these needed their own subfloor entirely just to keep the massive bunker functioning.

Diana stepped along the right side of the main room, peering down the individual halls with her shotgun as she passed them. The light smothered and twisted around the steel beams, cables, and pipes. She eyed every unfolding detail as she carefully moved along. This was going to be harder than she thought.

A loud scraping sound, that of metal being forcibly dragged, shrieked out to Diana's left. She pivoted, aiming down the central concrete hall. Her flashlight's beam illuminated a lengthy row of dead generators. There were two sides of the hall, separated by even more pipes, panels, various equipment, and wiring fed down the center.

Further down were the tirelessly chugging backup generators. Each generator was borderline overheating; they were steaming, roaring, and vibrating, doing everything possible to keep the facility's vital systems online. Stemming from them were dozens of pipes and cables, running along the walls, ceiling, and floor toward the additional segmented halls.

Diana raised her left fist, and in response, Gaius froze in his tracks. After a few more moments of silent observations, she curled her fingers and pointed to the left. Gaius glanced to the hall and nodded.

Diana lowered her hand back down, tightly grasping the pump of her weapon. She stepped forward with the silence and grace of a ghost; her boots hardly made a sound.

As she approached the rightmost hall, her flashlight only proceeded to illuminate the room further, gleaming off the backup generators, panels, and piping. Additional light poured through the cracks in the hall-dividing mass as Gaius advanced in unison on the opposing side.

She took another step, reaching the halfway point to the rear of the room. She stopped, feeling glass crunch beneath her boots. Another light Samantha must have busted. She glanced down and squinted, a grimace coming over her face as she slightly lifted her boot from the debris. *I'll never understand how these things develop any instincts living in cages.*

Just before Diana went to kneel and inspect the glass, each individual hair on the back of her neck stuck up firmly. She sucked in a sharp breath of air as her fingers curled tighter around the shotgun.

She listened intently, her eyes darting back and forth as she refused to move even a muscle. Unfortunately, the roar of the backup generators drilled repeatedly into her ears, so she couldn't hear much else besides that. She peered forward, spotting Gaius's light having moved several meters ahead. The further he moved, the harder she focused, realizing that if he made it too far she might be dead in the water.

She cautiously raised a foot, prepared to continue on. But then, almost right in her ear, a faint yet shrill exhale practically sent a thunderbolt through her body.

Diana stomped her boot back down then pivoted to the left with glass scraping beneath her feet. She hastily took aim, shining her flashlight near the ceiling above the conjoined mass. She didn't see much amid the twisting shadows until four of the cables shifted, and one of the shadows opened its eyes.

The commander flinched and immediately pulled the trigger, sending out a sudden blast of concussive flak. In the flash, Samantha shifted and grew fully visible. Much of the flak sparked against her tendrils, penetrated the pipes,

and tore through wires. Enough hit her to throw her off balance, sending the child tumbling into the left half of the hall.

“Gaius, behind you!” Diana yelled as she began to run back toward the beginning of the split, hurrying to reach the other side.

Samantha’s back collided with the concrete, but she wasn’t about to stay down. She’d pushed herself up on her side with her elbow. Her tendrils spread apart and dug into the concrete to provide her with more leverage. With a forceful shove, Samantha launched herself up from the ground. Her right foot slammed against the floor, and with the bend of her knee, she burst into a charge at Gaius.

By the time he’d fully turned around, Samantha was practically in his face. He couldn’t even raise his rifle before she had spun and cracked her tendrils at him like a whip.

The gun was torn from his hand by the scythes, almost entirely shredded to pieces as it became tangled among her blades. Samantha didn’t stop there, and with ferocious momentum, she slammed all of her body weight into him, throwing him up against the back wall.

Gaius’s eyes widened as he felt the air instantaneously driven from his lungs. It was impossible, a child landing such a heavy hit. But to him, it was as if he’d been hit with the weight of a bus.

Before Samantha could throw another swing at him, another blast of skin-singeing flak tore into the girl’s back and screeched against the metal of her tendrils.

She staggered with a hiss and stepped back from Gaius. Dragging her bare feet against the glass-littered concrete, she turned to face her shooter.

Diana wasn’t much more than fifteen feet back and had already racked her next shot.

Upon spotting her, Samantha’s seething crimson eyes strained as her pupils receded to minuscule, bloodthirsty dots. Still embedded in Gaius’s

rifle, her tendrils jerked away from one another, ripping the weapon into its minuscule components.

Diana fired again but gasped as the flak missed entirely, striking the wall and pipes. Samantha had dropped to the floor, avoiding the shot completely. She took a panicked stagger back and racked another shell as Samantha proceeded to bolt toward her.

Samantha leaped mid-sprint and snagged a pipe with one of her hooks. Using it to increase her momentum, she flung through the darkness at her prey. With yet another spin, her tendrils snapped down at the commander.

By the time Diana was ready to expel her next shot, one of the sickles had just enough reach to slash her face. Within that split second, her face tore open from the cheekbone to the corner of her lip. The pain was far too overwhelming for her to maintain her aim. She pulled the trigger but fired into the floor, hitting nothing but concrete.

Instead of landing, Samantha slammed into Diana. They were both sent tumbling to the ground, the shotgun thrown from the commander's hands.

Diana, same as Gaius, felt the wind rip from her lungs as she collided with the floor. She desperately wheezed, fighting to replenish her lost air the moment it left her. *How is this possible!? Why is she so heavy!?* her mind raced. Why Samantha weighed almost as much if not *more* than a fully grown adult was the least of her concerns, though.

Diana thrashed about, freeing her hand only to swiftly bash her padded knuckles against Samantha's face.

Samantha snarled against her hand and spread open her serrated maw. She immediately chomped down on the thrown arm, clamping her jaws and sinking her teeth into Diana's flesh. The bite force was great enough that, after only a second, her forearm cracked.

Diana choked and shrieked, her eyes widening as the diverse cacophony of searing pain surged over her senses. She writhed around, screeching as she

kicked at the concrete and tried to jerk her arm from Samantha's bear trap of a mouth.

She threw another unsuccessful punch at Samantha's gut with her left hand, only to realize the only way out of this was to blast her. She frantically fumbled around at her side, searching for and eventually finding the pump. Before she could even try to rack a shell, Samantha's teeth sank deeper, forcing Diana's arm to release a squelching crunch.

With another gasp, she screamed her lungs dry and finally managed to jerk the pump back, loading a shell. She dropped the gun and shoved it slightly across the floor toward her legs to get access to the grip. She scooped it up, stuffed the barrel against Samantha's stomach, and pulled the trigger.

The ear-shattering blast blew a gargantuan hole straight through Samantha's gut. The impact sent her back, careening against an air duct on the wall. She ricocheted off the duct, knocking the vent cover loose and exposing the shaft. Just as she collapsed to the ground, chilling air rolled into the humid environment.

Diana almost immediately dropped the gun and grabbed at her gushing cheek with her hand. She began to painfully wheeze, regaining her lost air from her screams.

Unable to put much if any pressure on her mangled arm, she found herself unable to get back to her feet. She scuttled back from Samantha, pushing herself along the floor with her boots as she fruitlessly continued to try and get up. She wasn't about to get caught by that monster on the ground.

Gaius slid across the glass-covered floor on his boots and kneepads. He hooked his arm under Diana's good shoulder and jerked her to her feet.

Diana stumbled as they backed away, trying her best to stay upright as her vision began to fade from trauma and blood loss. She wasn't about to die down here, not in this facility, and certainly not because of that little bastard.

Gaius preemptively whipped out his sidearm as their combined exhausted, fear-riddled breaths permeated the air. But the more Samantha writhed on the ground, twisting and jerking around as though seemingly only pissed off by the gunshot, the more his grip faltered.

Samantha stopped moving for a moment and let out a whimper, the red hue emanating from her eyes dwindling, fading almost. As she curled her fingers against the concrete, scraping her nails across its surface, she started to push herself back up. Those wavering lamps were flickering between colors once again. While the blast had knocked her out of her frenzy, all it appeared to do in the long run was temporarily stun her.

She snarled, shaking as she raised her head and ground her dagger-mouth together. Her charcoal hair was partly draped over the left side of her face, leaving only a single stuttering crimson eye visible. She grimaced as she rose, not once breaking her glare on the two agents.

Diana pressed her fingers down, practically pinching the wound in a futile attempt to halt the rush of the sweet, coppery juice seeping between her teeth. Her awkward, wavering grip only caused her more trouble, as the stinging burn of her screeching nerves practically forced her teeth together. She was biting down on nothing in an effort to keep herself from screaming and blacking out.

Samantha contorted as she stood, twisting her limbs and popping her joints. Her flesh squealed as she jerked her torso to the side, as if snapping her entire spine back into place. The scrap abraded her skin and scarred her bones with each hammering jolt of her limbs.

Her breaths scraped the depths of her lungs with each drag, bordering the fine line of a gag as she exhaled with the coarseness of splitting tree bark. As she breathed out through her nose, she couldn't help but part her lips and release a scalding cough.

The base of her shirt was torn to shreds by the flak. But despite the plentiful staining of intense blood loss, her gut seemed only minorly damaged, as if it had been burned. The wound had seemingly stitched itself back together, though a small amount of scrap still visibly protruded from her skin.

“Holy shit . . .” Gaius gulped, tightening his hold on the commander.

How the fuck is she standing!? Diana internally panicked. *I blew a goddamn hole in her!*

Samantha hunched over slightly, dragging one of her feet back in preparation to charge again. But then her face softened, and her eyes slowly widened.

Diana grunted, unsure why she’d back down even for a second.

Samantha turned her head toward the open duct blowing a frigid draft over her backside.

Diana wasn’t the only one to notice, as Gaius fired a quick panic shot that slammed right into the Orphan’s shoulder.

Samantha recoiled, letting out a pained snarl. She pulled her injured shoulder back, swiftly jerking her body around and whipping her leftmost tendrils up at the man’s hand. Two of the blades made direct contact, one of them slashing up his wrist and the other doing significantly more damage to his hand. It tore through his gun’s barrel, shredding three of his fingers in the process. It split through the sinew and bones like they weren’t even there.

Gaius let out a shout and released Diana instantly. Another cry followed as he clutched his scourged hand to his chest while staggering up against the central mass of the room.

Diana nearly fell at the loss of support but forced herself to stay upright. She wasn’t about to take her eyes off Samantha, not even for a second.

As Samantha’s tendrils receded, their eyes locked for a brief moment. Diana held her breath, knowing full well that if Samantha wanted to, she could kill her right then and there. But escaping seemed to be more important, as she immediately turned and dove into the shaft. Her scythes dug through the

cheap aluminum as she scurried up into the system. The tearing of metal and thumping of her scythes grew distant with each sound.

Diana let her breath go and began to pant uncontrollably. The relief washing over her was only challenged by the searing pain of her split skin and crushed bone. Her muscles loosened, and she stumbled before collapsing back against some equipment.

She raised her damaged arm, wincing as she tried her best to grab hold of the mic on her chest. She struggled to flex her fingers, the damage making even the slightest movement sting like hell.

Once Diana was able to press it down, she immediately spat, “Gaius and I are down! GH—” She clenched her teeth, as speaking only made the pain of her torn cheek worse.

She kicked one of her legs against the air duct, causing it to thrum. She hissed, almost letting out a whimper of an exhale, trying her best to ignore the unending pain. “Epsilon, she’s headed your way!” She forced out, “*KILL IT!*”



“Copy that,” a woman with chin-length blonde hair spoke into her mic. She, too, wore a similar uniform to Diana and Gaius, the patch stitched over her flak vest reading E. PIERCE. She turned, stepping inward from a glass entryway. She entered a lobby resembling that of a hospital. It was sterile, clean, and welcoming. But every time she stepped inside, it gave her the shivers. She knew it was a facade, a front for the horrors trapped beneath the floors.

“Emma—Captain!” a young woman corrected herself as she stepped up. “What’re your orders?” she questioned, brandishing a breach launcher in her mitts.

“Fortify around the main shaft. Quickly!” Emma barked, drawing her sidearm as her men proceeded to scramble.

The rest of the squad scattered about the lobby. Though, regardless of location, they all aimed their weapons up at the large ventilation tunnel on the ceiling.

“Briars,” Emma stated, looking at the girl in front of her. “Load your launcher and blow the duct the moment you get a visual.”

“Are you sure, Captain?” the smaller woman responded, reluctantly loading a canister into the break-action weapon. “There won’t be much of a ceiling left,” she muttered, snapping the launcher shut.

“It doesn’t matter.” Emma grasped Briars by the shoulder. “We’re the last line between that Orphan and outside,” she stated grimly.

Briars nodded, albeit hesitantly, and quietly stepped off toward the reception desk. She knelt behind it and mounted her breach launcher on the edge, aiming it right at the vent cover.

“Once Briars blows the vent,” Emma started, pointing her free hand up at the shaft, “all of you, return fire immediately on the hostile. Confirm?”

“Copy,” the other four spread out men and women responded.

After about a half minute of silence, Emma flinched, noticing the vent had started quietly rumbling. Approaching slams accompanied by the shrill, screeching tear of metal roared through the tunnel, growing louder and louder by the second.

Emma swallowed and tightened her grip on her firearm. Something was off; it didn’t sound like any Orphan she knew of.

“Commander,” she said, tilting her head down at her shoulder, “*which* of the Orphans breached containment?”

Quiet static emanated from the radio but no answer. The slams grew ever more aggressive, speeding up the closer it got to the exit.

“*Commander*,” she nagged.

A faint and near inaudible response came from Diana: “Number Nineteen.”

Emma flinched and glanced down at her mic. *Did she just say . . .*

She swiftly turned and cupped the side of her mouth to shout. “Briars! Hold your f—”

Before the blonde could even finish her sentence, all four scythes impaled the metal around the grate, and Briars immediately blasted a grenade right into the ceiling.

Emma gasped, stepping back and shielding her eyes as the explosion rocked the entire floor. The lights flashed, and many busted. Damaged ceiling tiles, concrete, and wires then came cascading down along with a body.

Samantha had slammed right into the ground within the center of the destruction.

Emma took a step back and raised her arm as dust flew about the room. It filled the air and almost completely clouded the squad’s sight.

“Direct hit!” Briars shouted over the falling debris and sparking wires.

“Hold your goddamn fire!” Emma bellowed.

The frequent sparks of split wires illuminated Samantha’s silhouette as she stood among the rubble. Emma nervously kept her gun trained on her, assuming she was unfazed by the blast. But she almost immediately faltered as she heard shallow breathing come from the dark gray shroud of debris.

As the lights ceased flickering and the dust settled, Emma quickly found Samantha wasn’t stable. She was leaning a bit to the left. Her chest was quickly rising and falling with every quivering breath as she struggled to even stay upright. The blood splattered around her torso where she’d been shot just moments earlier had dried, but a fresh flow seeped from each of her limbs, soaking her clothes, staining her skin, and dribbling onto the floor.

It really is her . . . Emma thought as Samantha stumbled, nearly collapsing as she assumedly tried to remain intimidating. She seemed to maintain her footing through nothing but sheer spite.

“Boss, you said it yourself, we’re supposed to axe this bitch!” one of the men yapped from the side of the lobby.

In response, Samantha grunted a bit, letting out a soft growl as her fingers curled into fists. Her knees bent slightly as if she were prepared to pounce, but she swayed, nearly falling over from the minor shift in her balance.

“No!” Emma spat out. “No.” She then quickly holstered her gun. “She’s in no condition to keep moving.” She spoke sternly. “Eagle,” she whistled, “cuffs, now.”

One of the men uneasily lowered his weapon and reached behind his back, fetching a set of cuffs.

Emma turned her eyes back onto Samantha and raised her hands cautiously. “Easy, Sam—”

Samantha snarled again, taking a defensive half step back.

“It’s okay. It’s alright,” Emma pleaded, twisting her wrists to show there was nothing in her grasp. “I know you’re tired, I know you’re hurt. . . . They want you dead, but we’re not gonna let that happen, alright?” she whispered.

Samantha let out a throat-scraping breath, gritting her teeth as she glanced to her left. She saw Eagle approaching with a set of bolt cuffs—large rectangular cuffs made from titanium used to restrain others like her. She didn’t budge but kept her eye on him.

“All they *do* is hurt me,” Samantha whispered, her eyes beginning to flicker once again as she glanced back at Emma.

“I know. . . . I know.” Emma frowned.

“You don’t *know*,” Samantha seethed, her limbs quaking as her muscles stung from exhaustion. “Don’t lie to me,” she growled.

“I’m not lying, I promise,” Emma softly said. “We can fix this—”

“No, you can’t,” Samantha spat, her eyes widening partly. “They’ll just put me back in a box!” she shouted, straightening her posture as though her anger

brought about a second wind of surging adrenaline. "I'm not going back down there!"

She suddenly torqued her body to the side, bashing Eagle to the ground with the brunt of her tendrils before he got too close. The cuffs were thrown from his hands.

"Sam, no!" Emma shouted, reaching for her weapon. But by then, Samantha had bolted forward, tackling the captain to the ground.

Her teeth were clenched as she held Emma down by the shoulders. Her tendrils continued to weightlessly slither through the air behind her as she snarled, but she made no effort to strike, bite, or cut Emma. She just hesitantly stared.

"Open fire!" Eagle shouted from the ground.

"No!" Emma shrieked.

The roar of gunfire crackled through the air as the entire squad dumped their mags at Samantha. Most of the bullets collided with low-hanging tiles and debris, but a decent amount still smashed into her upper back.

Samantha's tendrils pulled inward to guard herself as she rolled forward off Emma. She tumbled across the floor before forcing herself back to her feet with the aid of her extra limbs. She forcibly scraped the blades against the concrete, kicking up another screen of dust to provide visual cover.

Samantha raised her battered fingers, desperately trying to force her hands between the panes of the sliding glass door. She tried to tug at it, though it refused to budge. Glancing down, she noticed cracks stemming from the stray bullets smashing into the glass.

She backed up about a foot before charging it. She twisted and rammed her shoulder into the pane, completely busting through it. The entire door shattered as she fell through, covering the ground with broken glass. She landed on her side, rolling over the dirt now covered in thousands of minuscule, jagged glass shards.

She scrambled to her feet, whimpering and bleeding from dozens of cuts varying in size as she burst into a sprint. Blood flew from her as it was thrown from her countless freshly draining gashes.

Her bruised feet slapped against the pavement as she ran, lightly squelching and crunching as the glass embedded in her soles forced itself further into her skin. Her throat was dry, her lungs burned, and her heart was beating so hard it may very well have been prepared to blow through her ribs.

An ear-splitting horn went off overhead, almost knocking her over with its sheer volume. Samantha grabbed at her head, crying out as her eyes flickered sporadically. Her ears felt as though they were being torn off as the facility's alarms roared.

Though she was heavily disoriented, she pressed on. Just ahead, through the mix of smaller connecting buildings and a parking lot, she saw a split in the chain-link fencing surrounding the perimeter. It was the entrance; it was her only chance at freedom.

Samantha's tendrils retreated toward her body. The arms slithered along her core and tightly curled around her gut, resembling a corset made from thick metal cables. Her blades, despite being so sharp, nestled gently within the gaps, nearly hiding in plain sight.

She couldn't stop now. She could see it, the open road just beyond the gate. Samantha pushed herself further even as every muscle in her body cried out for her to stop. The stinging singe of her burning muscles echoed from her toes to her fingertips with every step. At any given moment, she could collapse, and she knew it.

As she leaped over the boom barrier, a temporary spurt of euphoria struck her. She'd made it. She was outside.

Though it was short-lived, as the moment her feet made contact with the asphalt, her legs gave way. Face first, she slammed into the road, further scraping up her forehead and nose.

She looked a mess. She was unable to stand, let alone move. Her clothes had become shredded rags. Her skin was lined with bruises, protruding debris, glass, and bullet holes. Her countless wounds continued oozing blood, only further staining and soaking the scraps of her clothing.

Samantha let out several sporadic breaths as she desperately tried to regain her stamina and maintain consciousness. She forced herself up to her knees, her arms quivering beneath her weight.

Her overwhelmed senses bombarded her body, striking and stealing every ounce of energy she had to keep her vital systems online. She couldn't even think as the horns continued to drown out her mental voice. Her vision flickered; she was beginning to lose her sight, as well. Her eyesight was reduced to pinholes, and her ears could make nothing out besides the alarm.

One thing snapped her from her daze: a new horn, unlike the ones shrieking overhead.

As Samantha blinked, she thought she'd be unable to even open her eyes. They felt too heavy and were only getting heavier. The longer they stayed closed, the more she drifted toward blacking out. The new horn roared once again, this time even louder.

Samantha forced her eyes back open and found herself bathed in a gleaming shroud of light. It shined brilliantly, almost like the sun, and only grew brighter with each passing moment. She raised her head, seeking the source, and quickly found her delirium shattered just as she was smashed by a truck.

Chapter Three

The Stray

As far as the eye could see stretched nearly endless fields of grain. The tips rustled gently as the cool autumn breeze blew over them. The glistening warm hue of the sun washed over the hills with a comforting blanket of diminishing light.

A yellow school bus drove along a road that cut through the fields, bobbing up and down as the poorly maintained road rocked its chassis. It began to slow down as it approached a lone white farmhouse in the center of the vast fields. The brakes squealed, and the lemon-tinted behemoth ground to a steady halt.

The doors swung open with a gentle bounce as they wiggled about their loose hinges. Out stepped its only remaining passenger: a fourteen-year-old girl with short, wavy brown hair and an unbuttoned red and black flannel. She exited with a stagger, struggling to maintain balance due to the heavy book bag on her back.

“Willow, are you home now?” a voice questioned, stemming from a cell phone she held in her left hand.

The girl pushed her hair back over her ear on the right side of her face. She turned partly to the side and glanced back at the bus. With her free hand, she waved to the driver while the doors closed. Soon after, she was left alone in the driveway.

“Yes, Roxy, I’m home.” Willow sighed, glancing down at her device. “You don’t *always* have to call me on my way home from school.”

“I can’t help it. . . . I wish I could see you get off the bus in person.”

“Will you *actually* be home for dinner tonight?” Willow questioned with slight disdain, already prepared for the disappointment she knew was coming long before Roxanne even called her.

After some time, the woman on the other end sighed before giving her answer. “No. . . . I’m sorry, I need to work late again.”

Willow stuffed her hand in the pocket of her skinny jeans and let out a whiney groan as she lightly kicked at the dirt with her studded boots. This happened entirely too often. “You promised!”

“I know. I know,” the woman said, sounding genuinely remorseful over her broken word. “I’ll make it up to you. I swear. Just order a pizza, the number is in the kitchen, and there should be enough money in the change jar.”

“Do you swear on Dad’s grave?” Willow pressed.

There was a reluctant grumble from the other line, followed by another guilt-riddled sigh. “Yeah. Listen, I gotta get back to work.”

“Alright. . . .” Willow nodded to herself, frowning in dismay. Though, despite wallowing in frustration, she couldn’t stay mad at her big sister for long. A soft smile came about her lips, and in a tender, sweet tone, she said, “I love you, Roxy.”

“I love you, too,” Roxanne responded before hanging up.

As the screen went dark, she raised her head, looking over her familiar surroundings. With a lengthy, irritated exhale, she scanned the landscape of grain rustling around the modest homestead. It was quiet, as it always was when she got home. Nothing and no one but her and her thoughts.

Her illusion of loneliness was nearly immediately shattered as a sudden clatter of what sounded like paint cans and tools thundered from within the barn. Jumping at the sudden invasion of her solitude, her eyes were immediately drawn to the side of the road, just beside a mailbox.

There was a prominent section of torn up dirt, as if a tire had gotten stuck in the grass. The shredded earth led toward a trail of flattened grass and freshly scraped-up sod. Most notably, though, blood was scattered about the lawn in trace amounts, staining individual blades of grass with dotted ink-like blots.

“Did another deer get plowed?” Willow queried, thinking out loud.

She knelt to better survey the scene. Something made her uneasy about the blood dribbling down the grass; it seemed relatively fresh. Usually, when the hit was strong enough to show blood, the deer wasn’t . . . whole. But her better nature made her optimistic. Maybe it was okay.

“I better check on it before heading inside,” she hummed. “Poor thing could be hurt.”

Willow slowly walked along the edge of the driveway, following the strange path that led straight into the barn.

“What would a deer be dragging with it?” she commented, peering at the long strips of scraped-up sod. Her suspicions only continued to mount as she noticed a total of four lines carved into the dirt alongside the path leading into the depths of the barn.

As she entered, she slid her bag off her shoulders and held it by one of the straps with her right hand. Not that it would do much, but if she were attacked, she at least had something to fight back with.

The path continued to stretch toward the back. It led behind several rusty cars and a few shelves, one of which had been entirely knocked over and was leaning against another partly tilted rack.

The further she trekked, the darker it grew as the toll of the lowering autumn sunset reared its head. Willow squinted, glancing into the darkness in an attempt to find what she presumed was an injured animal. As she rounded the shelves, she saw the trail led just a bit further, stopping right up against the back wall.

As her eyes better adjusted to the low lighting, she finally spotted it: a hunched over silhouette, subtly rising and falling as if it were barely breathing.

“Hey, buddy,” Willow softly cooed as a caring smile stretched across her lips. She steadied her approach in an attempt not to frighten it, whatever it was.

The figure abruptly seized up despite the soft greeting. Four long slithering shadows attempted to snake up through the air but quickly wilted and slumped down against the dirt.

She knew something wasn’t right. It certainly wasn’t a deer, and Roxanne had told her a million times to ignore roadkill, but she couldn’t stave off her curiosity. She took another step forward, slowly reaching her hand out before muttering, “Are you okay?”

Whatever it was opened its eyes, revealing dimly glowing red orbs staring right at her.

That was enough to spook her, causing her to spring back and shriek. She threw her bag at the figure as hard as she could before she fell back on her rear. She kicked at the dirt and pushed herself along the ground until she backed up against the downed shelf.

Willow’s lips sputtered, and her breaths became thin. As though she’d climbed to the highest peak, her lungs simply couldn’t get enough air. Desperately, she fumbled around in her pockets for something, and almost immediately whipped out an inhaler, stuck it in her mouth, and sucked in a puff of the medication. While lowering it, she was wheezing and dizzy, but at the very least she was stable.

The bag had slammed into the figure, throwing it roughly into the wall. The impact split the shoddy wooden panels, and as they fell, the evening sunlight filled in the dark blanks. The silhouette wasn’t a deer or some freakish animal. It was just a girl, with black hair, covered from head to toe in open wounds.

With all her might, Samantha shoved the book bag off her chest. Her tendrils slithered along her sides, and though quivering and barely moving, provided enough leverage for her to sit back up. Her eyes were flickering gently beneath her messy locks as she quietly swayed back and forth. They shined with little luminosity, like a flashlight running on decade-old batteries.

With each trembling breath, Samantha's lips parted, revealing her shimmering teeth to the farm girl. They were sharp, like miniature daggers lining her jaw. However, they didn't seem intrusive. They appeared as though they were natural, designed to fit perfectly in her mouth. Not as replacements but as substitutes.

Regardless of their intended use, Willow gulped a bit, whimpering, as the sight of a flesh-shredding maw was enough to put her on edge. That and the tendrils made her want to run, but her better nature argued against it. She couldn't just walk away, as she could see plain as day not only glass but sharp scraps of shrapnel protruding from the girl's flesh. She was a mess—anywhere she looked revealed a new cut, bruise, or gash. *What happened to this girl?*

Samantha palmed the dirt and attempted to climb to her feet, though she only managed to rise to her knees. She raised her bruised hands, as if ready to defend herself. Though if she couldn't even use her tendrils, let alone stand, her hands weren't going to do her any good.

Her nose perked up suddenly as the fresh scent of some sort of berry tickled her senses. She sniffed, then stared right at the zipped-up book bag. She hesitantly reached for it and grabbed hold of it on opposite ends. She tugged at it, attempting to open it like a chip bag. The longer she failed, the more frustrated she got. All she wanted was the berry. She quickly grew visibly teary-eyed, upset that she didn't understand what she was doing.

"H-hey," Willow sputtered, leaning forward to grab the girl's attention.

Samantha snarled, snapping her jaws and baring her teeth in defense of her space.

Willow squeaked and slumped right back on her rear. “You gotta—” She made a pinching motion with her fingers. “—pull the tab. It’ll open it.”

Samantha blinked away the tears and unclenched her jaw. She squinted down at the little metal tab and pinched it as instructed. She nearly jumped as the zipper ripped, stopping dead in her tracks to stare at it like it’d hurt her. But quickly after realizing it was of no threat, she continued pulling.

Once it was open, she shoved her hands inside. She threw books and papers away haphazardly as she searched for the source of the scent. She didn’t care for books anyway; they didn’t taste very good. But she eventually slowed as she pulled out a small paper bag. She eyed it from every angle she could before sniffing it. She’d found the scent. She slowly stuck her hand inside and then suddenly chirped as she felt something soft yet gritty against her hand.

She pulled out a sugar-coated blueberry muffin, eyeing it in confusion like she had no idea what it was. But once she sniffed it, she began to drool, assumedly able to make out the flavors contained within.

“G-go ahead,” Willow stammered, egging on the strange girl. “I was saving it for my si—it doesn’t matter. You can eat it if you wa—”

Before Willow could even finish her sentence, Samantha’s blade-lined maw spread and tore the muffin to shreds. She devoured the entire thing in only two bites. Before Willow even knew what had happened, it was swallowed, and Samantha let out a gentle, mechanical whine, akin to a cat’s pleased purr. She twisted, popping her bones as she stretched out her sore, bleeding limbs.

Any other day, Willow would have dwelled on the brutal dismemberment of the muffin. But her concerns lay elsewhere, namely on Samantha’s uncountable flesh wounds. Some of them seemed to quiver, and before long,

several large shards of glass were forcing their way out of the girl's skin. They were almost stitching themselves together!

Willow cautiously rose to her feet, prompting a distrustful growl on Samantha's end.

She squeaked and rapidly waved her hands. "No, no! I'm not gonna hurt you! I—" She gulped. "Y-you're hungry, right? I'm gonna go make you something nice to eat . . . o-okay?"

Samantha's eyes didn't budge, but her growling ceased. She faltered, slumping back down against her rear. But as she sat, she couldn't help but break eye contact. Her sore muscles and stinging wounds relentlessly clawed and burned.

Willow saw her chance to run, and she took it.

She sprinted across the yard as fast as her legs would allow. Even so, she was almost unable to keep up with herself, nearly tripping several times.

Upon reaching the house, she swiftly bounded up the rickety old steps. Each slam of her feet sent a cavalcade of groaning creaks throughout the aging frame of the porch. She quickly turned and shoved her back up against the door so that she could face the barn. She was practically drenched with sweat. She was not only stressed, but absolutely lost and unsure where to even *start*. Should she call somebody? Even if she did, who? Roxanne? The cops?

Willow's nerves cooled as she gulped. "No . . ." she mumbled, reaching behind her as she fumbled for the doorknob. She'd seen enough movies to realize that this seemed like the type of situation where someone would come take that girl away.

She sighed, letting her heart steady as the autumn wind danced around her. It ruffled her hair and blew just enough out of her face for the sun to blindsides her. She squinted and raised her hand to shield herself from the light before turning to face it.

Peering through her fingers, she uncomfortably whimpered. The sun was setting; it would be dark any minute now.

“Stupid . . . early setting sun,” she muttered as her other hand continued to search for the knob. Her fingers desperately ran up and down against the old wooden frame. Before long she found it, and with an eager twist, jerked the door open.

Willow reluctantly turned to face the entrance. But she almost immediately regretted it as the nauseating feeling of danger assailed her. She twisted back around and took a sudden half step inside, expecting to see that girl standing behind her. But she didn't. There was nothing but a dark, quiet barn.

Willow stepped back about a foot, just enough to clear the door, then slammed it shut. She pressed her back against it and slid down to the floor. Resting her arms on her knees, she slowed her breaths as best she could to avoid another asthma attack. She was inside now. The house was safe. No one could hurt her inside.

She raised her head, putting herself at peace. She forced herself to recall some calming memories. She eyed the old stairs where her father would frequently chase her and Roxy when they'd play tag. The beautiful railings he'd assembled himself were her favorite things to slide down, even if he'd chastised her for it. She sighed and rose before reaching up and jerking on a dangling pull string. The light just above the foyer flickered and buzzed to life, illuminating the space.

“What would you do, Dad?” Willow softly murmured, glancing at the coat rack beside the door. The two furthest hooks from the door were the only ones with jackets on them, though they were caked in dust.

She slid off her flannel and tossed it against one of the vacant hooks. Realizing her band shirt had crept up her midriff, she pulled it down as she began to walk off.

“Oh,” she squeaked, perking up as she realized she’d forgotten something. She reached into the pockets of her flannel, fishing until she found her inhaler, before quickly stuffing it in her back pocket.

She glanced off through an adjoining doorway, staring right into the kitchen. A wide smile stretched over her lips as she yanked a hair tie off her wrist. “I know exactly what he’d do,” she mumbled to herself before affixing her hair in a messy bun.

Willow stepped into the kitchen and pulled on yet another cord. The room buzzed to life, and despite being small, it was packed to the brim. A well-worn wooden table surrounded by chairs sat in the center, and against the wall just behind it was a sink. Gently sandwiched between it and a stovetop oven was a microwave, the only thing she knew how to cook with.

As her lungs continued to crackle, tickling the back of her throat and beckoning her to cough, she took a shallow breath. “Whatever the hell she is . . .” she wheezed and cleared her throat. “She needs help,” she said, stepping up to the counter and peering out the window. She could just barely see the shadow-shrouded entrance of the barn.

“She’s just a little girl,” Willow frowned, resting a hand against her chest in an effort to stop it from quaking. “I think . . .”



Gravel cracked beneath the wheels of a rusty old station wagon as it pulled into the driveway. It circled until the rear of the vehicle faced the closed garage door. After a few seconds, the door rose and the car slowly backed inside. The engine sputtered to a quiet halt as the key was pulled. As the driver’s door swung open, the rusted metal of the ancient vehicle cried out with age.

A woman wearing a knee-length black coat stepped from it, quivering in the cold as she let out a misty exhale into the freezing air. The warm autumn day had been devoured by a frigid night.

She nudged the door shut with her hip and stepped out of the garage. She pushed down on a remote in her hand and then shoved it in her pocket as the garage door began to close. With each step, the large gold hoops dangling from her ears jingled about. But as she approached the porch, they weren't the only things that glittered in the light. The heels adding extra inches to her height shimmered brighter than anything else she wore, as though she were wearing disco balls on her feet.

She somewhat resembled Willow but was significantly older and almost a foot and a half taller.

Just when she went to ascend the flimsy steps, the front door flew open as Willow came jettisoning down the steps past her. Her studded boots clobbered against the porch then the dirt as she ran past. "Hi Roxy! Bye Roxy!" she shouted with a full plate of what seemed like complete chaos and a dirty apron flopping at her side.

Roxanne blinked, repeatedly turning her head to the door and back to her sister. Willow *never* cooked anything but microwaveable frozen food.

"Wha—hey! Willow!?" Roxanne called out as her younger sister zoomed into the barn. "What are you—" she started, but by the time she could even ask anything, Willow had already disappeared.

"Ah," Roxanne sighed and lowered her hands back to her side. "I'm too tired for this," she muttered, shaking her head as she proceeded to rub her eyes. She slowly entered and curiously made her way into the kitchen to see just what Willow, of all people, had been doing in there.

She nearly fainted.

The kitchen was damn near destroyed. It looked as though a tornado had blown through it, followed by a torrent of hand grenades. There were count-

less dishes piled in the sink, burnt food in the trash, and spilled cooking oil mixed with seasonings all over the countertop.

“What . . . the . . . fuck! Willow!” Roxanne shrieked. She stomped out as quickly as she could in her heels to chase after her sibling.



“Hey, kid!” Willow called out as she rounded the shelves. “I brought you some—”

She gasped and nearly dropped the plate. The girl was gone.

“W-what!?” Willow cried, stomping over to the spot where she’d left the girl. “I know I’m not crazy!” she whined, tightening her fingers against the plate. The wood was still cracked, her book bag was still emptied, but the girl was missing.

She squeaked as a moist, warm breath suddenly rolled over the back of her neck. She quickly pivoted and turned around, only to meet eyes with her visitor.

Samantha was dangling upside down, hanging like a bat on one of the wall-mounted racks. She swayed slightly, suspended by her two lowermost tendrils while the upper two drooped down, the blades just barely hovering over the ground.

Willow quivered, staring into the girl’s freshly luminous eyes. That muffin must have recharged her batteries at least somewhat. She gulped, pinching the plate tightly as Samantha’s draping locks softly billowed from the incoming draft. She couldn’t get a read on her, there was no emotion, just a blank stare . . . like she was being observed.

Willow shakily raised her hand, waving gently in a feeble attempt to hide her fear. “H-hi,” she choked out, trying her hardest not to slip into another

asthma attack. “I brought you something to . . . eat?” She shuddered, stepping back and holding out the plate of mismatched food.

Samantha glared at the plate. It contained carrots, broccoli, chicken, and poorly skinned potatoes, all covered in half-melted shredded cheese. She sniffed the air, assessing the various aromas emanating from the dish. It looked a mess, but the drool dripping from her mouth suggested she wasn’t about to be picky.

“This is for . . . me?” Samantha asked in disbelief, speaking for the first time in hours. Her voice was raspy and coarse; she sounded just as exhausted as she looked.

“Yeah?” Willow said curiously, easing up after finally hearing the girl speak. “I said I’d get you something. I know it’s probably not that good. I’ve never *actually* cooked anything before, but—”

Samantha kicked her legs back, hurling herself to an upright position. Once steady, she twisted to face Willow and her tendrils released their hold on the shelf. She dropped to her feet, hitting the ground crouched with the girth of an engine.

She cautiously rose, eyeing Willow the entire time, though that only made the farm girl more nervous. She retreated inward, pulling her shoulders close and looking away. Though the girl was small, she made Willow feel smaller.

Samantha’s shoulders slumped ever so slightly as she witnessed the terror stemming from Willow. She seemed almost disappointed by it. But nonetheless, she lifted her bloody fingers and grabbed hold of the plate, no doubt feeling Willow’s trembles transferring through the porcelain.

Samantha quietly pulled the plate from Willow’s grasp and backed into a corner. She dropped to her rear and crossed her legs, before analyzing the plate once more. She held it up, and her eyes cascaded a thick red haze over the contents. The discoloring crimson made it more difficult for her to dis-

cern what was what, but what she did know was that even if it was utterly horrendous, it was still sustenance that she desperately needed.

One of her tendrils slithered from beneath her arm and held a blade just over the plate. The tip of its sickle sunk into one of the carrots, clicking against the porcelain as it poked through. It twisted, raising the carrot up for her to individually inspect it. She sniffed it then parted her serrated maw once again. Though instead of shredding it to pieces, her jaw flexed, and with a pop, the sharp row of teeth immediately receded.

Willow stared in astonishment as Samantha's perfectly straightened, pearly white teeth revealed themselves. They were nearly flawless and had been hidden the entire time behind such a frightening set of blades.

Samantha knit her brows and exhaled sharply before giving Willow an irritated, "What?"

"Nothing! Nothing." Willow waved her hands defensively, trying her best not to stare.

Samantha huffed and parted her lips once more. She placed the carrot in her mouth and closed her lips around the blade before slowly dragging the tip of the scythe out. She bit down, and after feeling the softened vegetable split in half between her teeth, she swallowed. That seemed to be all the confirmation she needed.

Two more of her tendrils snuck their way over her shoulders and proceeded to pierce and scoop up more of the food. She shoveled it into her mouth, tearing through the questionable dish like a starving dog. Despite her voracious appetite, she didn't get much of it, if any, on her.

Willow cautiously sat down only a few feet from Samantha.

In response, Samantha stopped chewing and swallowed her large mouthful in a single gulp. She uneasily eyed Willow, wanting to maintain her own space. But seeing as the farm girl wasn't getting any closer, she quickly returned to feasting.

“You’re eating like you haven’t had anything in weeks,” Willow noted.

“That’s because I haven’t,” Samantha spat, mid-mouthful. She swallowed a second time and let out a deeply pleased sigh. She set the empty plate on the dirt and proceeded to grind her teeth together as she closed her eyes. She let out a series of discomforted groans as her muscles began to subtly twitch.

“What’s wrong?” Willow asked softly, frowning as she raised her hands, itching to reach out and help. “I didn’t make you sick, did I?”

Samantha didn’t answer and merely stuck out her left arm. Two of her tendrils slithered around then tightly jerked the arm back. A nasty pop followed as a massive piece of flak and several shards of glass almost launched from her shoulder. She growled from the irritation and released her arm before slamming it against the wall. More of the old wood snapped off almost instantly from the impact, so aged that likely a gust of wind too strong would send the whole wall tumbling down.

Willow jumped at the outburst but quickly realized that wasn’t the only thing rising from beneath Samantha’s skin. As the minuscule yet countless shards fell from her body, small traces of blood followed, drawing thin lines down her skin until the microscopic wounds pulled shut.

“How are you doing that?” Willow asked curiously.

“Food helps,” Samantha tiredly murmured. She went to rub her eyes with her bruised and scraped fingers, but decided against it, having spotted even more glass embedded within her hands. She then held her right hand off to the side and clenched her teeth together. She must’ve known it was going to hurt.

She tightly squeezed her hand into a fist and let out a hissing cry as her skin squelched. Several flesh-rending crunches followed as the glass was forced out of her fingers, palm, and knuckles. It tore through her and hurt as though she’d just stuck her hand in a furnace. The glass crinkled into a fine dust as it fell to the ground, leaving the hand clean but bloody. She shook her hand

slightly as if trying to wave away the stinging echoes the act had left behind. But after only a moment, she held out her opposing hand and repeated the process.

“K-kid, how’d you take . . . *this* much damage,” Willow inquired, looking up to avoid seeing Samantha’s bloodied hands.

“*Samantha*,” Samantha hissed before leaning back against the crumbling wall. “My name is *Samantha*,” she reiterated, finally able to rub her eyes with her stained fingers.

“I-I’m sorry. I should have asked,” Willow stammered, frightened at the prospect of upsetting the blade-clad child.

Samantha noted Willow’s fear a second time and backed off. She looked down at her lap, softly rubbing her fingers together in a vain attempt to clean them. “I escaped. That’s how,” she said.

“What?” Willow sat up straight. “Escaped from who!?” She pried, “Is it the people who . . .” She glanced at Samantha’s back, staring at the metallic tendrils stemming from beneath her shredded shirt.

“Turned me into *this*?” Samantha huffed, shifting deeper into the corner in a feeble attempt to hide her tendrils. “Yeah. And they did *everything* they could to keep me there,” she stated while bending her left arm to reveal a large piece of shrapnel embedded within her elbow.

Willow grimaced in disgust as she spotted the grotesque protrusion. She couldn’t help but frown as she watched Samantha struggle to pull it out. “Let me help,” Willow hastily offered.

Samantha shifted, a bit apprehensive at the prospect, though her suspicions were dashed once she met Willow’s eyes. She had suspected it, but there was truly no malice or anger in Willow. All that shined through was her concern and a genuine willingness to help.

As her guard was chipped at, she released her slippery grip on the protrusion and raised her elbow up higher. "Please just yank it out as fast as you can."

Willow nodded and gently grabbed hold of Samantha's arm with her soft hands. One slid down to her elbow and pinched the least jagged edge of the protrusion. She then glanced up as if waiting for some kind of signal from the girl.

Samantha had already gritted her teeth, preparing for the inevitable pain that ripping it out would cause. "Just do it," she seethed.

Willow noticed that Samantha had begun trembling. A gentle smile appeared back on her lips, and she felt all her fears wash away. If Samantha was just as easily scared, she couldn't be all that bad. "Don't tense up like that."

Samantha's face scrunched as Willow spoke. She then peeled one eye open and stared at Willow in confusion. "Huh?"

"Eyes on me, Sam," Willow's voice strummed like a lute. She released her hold on Samantha's arm and raised that hand to cup her dirt-smeared cheek. "Deep breaths," she whispered.

Samantha's guard deteriorated as if Willow had punched a hole straight through it. Her jaw eased up, and her eyes fully opened. She appeared more confused by the gesture than anything, but it was enough of a distraction to provide a momentary abatement from the pain. Her lamps shimmered, and before long, the aggressive crimson strangling her eyes faded. They quickly returned to their natural, beautiful sky blue color, and for a moment, she felt at peace.

A sharp, sudden twinge pinched her elbow, making her wince and jerk back her arm. As Samantha glanced down, a shocked puff of air blew past her lips. The shrapnel was gone.

Willow removed her hand from Samantha's cheek, and with the other, she held up the flak. "Right here," she said, flaunting the scrap between her

fingers. She rolled it against her palm and flicked it with her middle finger, launching it off into the darkness of the barn. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Samantha’s instincts almost beckoned her to shove Willow away. The concern and care of another individual was as alien to her as everything else she’d encountered that morning. But she relented, her face scrunching as she glanced off before murmuring, “No . . . it wasn’t.”

Her temporary moment of relaxation, however, was almost immediately undone as every muscle in Samantha’s body seemed to jolt in response to a semi-distant shriek.

Roxanne had come to investigate Willow’s strange behavior and chastise her for obliterating the kitchen but instead had unintentionally stumbled across the pair. She was terrified, shaking in her heels, and clutching a broom to her chest. “Willow! G-get away f-from it,” she stammered fearfully. Her fingers curled around the handle even tighter as she made a poor attempt to appear threatening by brandishing it.

Unfortunately, Samantha obviously felt threatened, snarling as she rose to a knee. Her face twitched slightly and down descended her daggermouth, clamping over and hiding away her pearly whites. She’d just gotten out of one corner and wasn’t about to get backed into another.

“Roxy, stop!” Willow cried out. She scrambled to her feet and stepped between them, sticking her arms out protectively.

“What . . . the hell . . . is that!?” Roxanne wheezed, shaking as she clung to the broom.

“She’s—” Willow glanced back, watching as Samantha struggled to stay upright. She could feel her concern. Having been abandoned before in her time of need, Willow wasn’t about to inflict that on anyone. “She’s my friend, and you’re scaring her!” she cried out.

“S-scaring her? I have a broom and she has . . .” Roxanne’s face grew pale as she spotted the blades fastened to the ends of the twisting tendrils. “I don’t even know what those are!” Roxanne cried out, pointing at her.

“Roxanne!” Willow barked in an attempt to fully snag her sister’s attention.

The woman held her breath, and her grip loosened partly. Willow had never spoken to her like that before.

Willow’s eyes softened and her shoulders slumped forward. She gestured back at Samantha while frowning at her sister. “She’s just a kid. . . .”

Roxanne’s eyes reluctantly darted between the pair. Each time she viewed Samantha, another layer was stripped away, until all she saw was a frightened little girl covered in cuts, scrapes, and bruises who was barely able to keep herself upright.

“She’s . . . bleeding,” Roxanne relented.

“Please, Roxy, she needs our help,” Willow begged.

“Well,” Roxanne squirmed slightly at Willow’s plea and set the broom aside. “Fuck,” she sighed and cleared her throat. She continued trembling, mulling over her options as she felt Willow’s beady eyes beat down on her. She turned away and sighed before fully giving in. “Bring her inside.”

Willow’s demanding facade crumbled at Roxanne’s sudden turn-around. “I—Really?”

“Yes,” Roxanne said reluctantly, “but don’t let her touch anything, okay? I’m going to run a bath for her. She’s far from clean.” She huffed. “*And that doesn’t* excuse the mess you made in the kitchen!” She declared, “Bring her inside and clean that up before I have a nervous breakdown.”

“T-thank you, Roxy! I’ll clean it up right away!” Willow beamed, her intoxicating smile returning to her lips.

Roxanne gave a tired smile to her sister, and a hesitant, cautious stare toward Samantha, before stepping back toward the house.

Once Roxanne was gone, Samantha immediately crumpled and fell back against the wall.

Willow quickly turned and hurried over, crouching down to Samantha's level and latching onto her. "Are you okay?"

"Tired," Samantha mumbled as her jaw popped and her teeth retracted.

"Well let's get you inside and cleaned up, alright?"

Samantha nodded before slightly snickering and meeting Willow's gaze. "Your sister's outfit looks ridiculous."

Willow couldn't help but smile. "That we can both agree on."

Chapter Four

Bonnie Saturn

“I can’t believe this!” Diana roared as she slammed her undamaged fist against the boardroom table, causing pens and papers to shift about its surface. She then slumped back into her chair and pulled her arm back before resting her head against her palm.

A frustrated groan left her lips as her shouting strained the stitches holding together her cheek. The fingers of her bandaged arm twitched slightly as remnant shocks of its breakage surged throughout it despite the high dosage of morphine she’d taken earlier.

Standing beside the commander, Emma flinched at her outburst, though she didn’t find it unreasonable. As far as they both knew, Samantha had been dead, at least until that morning. “I don’t understand it either, ma’am,” she said with confliction as she placed her hand upon her superior’s shoulder.

“She died. I saw it,” Diana snarled, shooting a sideways glance at Emma. “We *both* saw it.”

Emma hesitantly nodded.

“Last *fucking* October,” Diana spat as angry as her uniform was mangled. She had taken her vest and her cap off and laid them on the table. Her shirt was wrinkled and untucked, and her sleeves were torn and bloody. “That little monster was filled with enough holes to sink a boat,” she lamented, staring down at the mahogany surface.

Emma gulped, recalling the day clear as a bell. She could fully understand Diana's frustration. No matter how much she thought it over, she couldn't find a single loophole for how Samantha could have *possibly* survived.

"And yet," Diana growled, "we lost even *more* men to a threat that shouldn't have even been alive!"

"It's . . ." Emma swallowed, choosing her next words carefully, "not the child's fault, Diana."

"I know," Diana muttered, "it's *his*."

Emma gasped as though Diana's words alone had shoved her off balance. She rapidly glanced around then leaned in over Diana before tightly squeezing her shoulder. "K-keep your voice down," she frightfully whispered, unsure if anyone was listening through the camera mounted just above the entrance.

"This depressing little zoo he fosters only exists to cause problems," Diana declared and swatted Emma's hand away. "I don't care what he hears. He knows damn well how I feel about this place."

Emma gulped, grimacing as she stood in silence.

"And now, we have to clean up the mess. *His* mess." The commander sighed, leaning back into the groaning leather and closing her tired eyes. "Have you alerted them?" she inquired.

"The squads you requested? Yes, ma'am," Emma confirmed, glancing down at her watch. "They're due in a few minutes."

"Good. We need to move quickly if we're going to find her before any real damage is done," Diana noted. "Otherwise our job will be ten times harder."

Emma was fully opposed to what they were doing, struggling to even keep a straight face as she thought of *hunting* a child. There was no way it would end well for anyone, but she either couldn't or *wouldn't* express that. There had to be some way she could intervene. But maybe she needed *someone else's* help.

“What if . . .” she started, swiftly raising her head. “What if I could get Bonnie to help us?”

Diana blinked in disbelief, sitting back up and twisting in her chair. “Number Seventeen?” she questioned with a raised brow. “So you want to release *more* of his pets?” she grumbled, placing her hand on the table and pushing herself to her feet.

“You know firsthand just how smart she is. She’s not violent, relatively speaking, and she was the only one that could reign in Sam *and* Barricade!” Emma proclaimed.

Diana slumped her shoulders and sighed. “What’s your point?”

“She could help us find her, maybe without any more bloodshed!” Emma argued, walking to the left side of the table, which was nearest to the door.

“And release a *second* problem.”

“She’s the Orphan who’s caused us the least amount of problems, in fact, I don’t think she’s *ever* caused us issues!” Emma exclaimed, planting her hands on the table. “I’ll keep her cuffed to myself if I have to,” she confidently stated. “We don’t have many options, Commander,” she declared, staring headstrong at Diana.

Diana turned back to face the table as she thought it over. “Okay,” she reluctantly stated. “But,” she bellowed, “you keep her on a *tight* fucking leash, understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Emma nodded, pleased that her wish had been granted.

“Inform her and get her ready. I’ll let Maximilian know.”

“Thank you,” Emma beamed, sloppily saluting her commander before exiting the room.

Not long after the blonde stepped away, the boardroom began to fill with chattering yet stern-faced agents.

Diana sighed, straightening her posture and placing her uninjured arm behind her back as she watched them file in. As much as she would have

wanted to rest, the debriefing was more important. Sleep was a luxury that would likely remain elusive in the coming days.



Emma hastily glided through the halls of metal and concrete. Each room she passed was housed in modular hall segments, separated on either end by large, inactive blast doors. But with each doorway she stepped through, she gradually slowed as a thought that had been quietly nagging her grew louder. She stopped and turned back as a sudden and confusing revelation struck her.

The captain stepped a few paces back into one of the hallway segments. She stopped right before the door that led into Samantha's cell. It was strange how she nor any of the other agents had noticed her having ever been returned to the cell after being gunned down. In fact, to her, there were a lot of strange things about the whole situation.

Emma curiously looked back and forth between the segment's blast doorways. She approached the one to her right, the one that led down to the junction in which the generator wing lay. Pressing her hand against the frame, she ran her fingers along the frigid, smooth steel while looking for anything that was obviously amiss. After finding nothing, she peeked into the splits lining the door jamb that the panels tucked away into. None of it was damaged; it was like Samantha had just walked right through the empty doorway. "Why didn't these stop her?" she said, voicing her thoughts out loud.

She reached under her arm, grabbing the incident file she'd kept tucked beneath it before peeling it open. She then sifted through it until she came across a damage report. She slid her finger over it until reaching the bullet points detailing the property damage. The Hallway 19 blast doors weren't on that list. In fact, *nothing* in Hallway 19 had been damaged.

She looked up from the notes and inspected the frame. There wasn't even a scratch on it. Samantha truly had just . . . walked through. "They . . . didn't go off."

Emma's thoughts were abruptly interrupted as radio chatter spouted from her chest. She listened for a moment but quickly sighed and rolled her eyes as it was merely some of the lower-rank squads announcing an ongoing shift change.

Shrugging off her suspicions, she made her way through two more hall segments. She came to a door with the number 17 on its surface. She grasped her lanyard from around her neck and plunged it into the entrance terminal until it illuminated a bright green.

"Every time, every damn time!" an aqua-haired woman with a pixie cut ranted from within just as the door pulled open.

"Dear, you've *never* beaten her at chess. In fact, you've never even come close. Why would it be different this time?" a well-endowed blonde with rectangular red glasses chirped.

"I thought I figured her out! I thought I had the strategy!" the pixie cut whined.

"Eryn—" the blonde snickered. "You've said that a dozen times."

"And every time she sees through it, Kelly!" Eryn groaned, angrily crossing her arms and leaning against the wall.

"Yes, but—" Kelly started, noticing Emma standing in the doorway. With a gentle smile, she waved the hand not clinging to her clipboard. "Hello, Ms. Pierce."

"What happened?" Emma smirked. "Did Eryn get whacked in Chess by Bonnie again?"

"I, uh," Eryn froze. She then crossed her arms in a huff and stuck her nose in the air. "It was a tight match! I could have won if—"

"It was a landslide," Kelly chuckled. "Bonnie didn't even lose a pawn."

Eryn flinched, as though her partner may have just as well shot her. “You’re supposed to back me up!” she cried.

“That’d be lying, Eryn,” Kelly retorted, adjusting her glasses.

“Yeah, but lying for your wife isn’t lying, it’s . . . stretching the truth,” Eryn said.

“That’s still lying,” Emma chimed.

“*You*—” Eryn snapped and bit her lip while fiddling with her several black hoop earrings. She exhaled, calming herself before leering at Emma. “What do you want anyway?”

“I’m here to see Bonnie,” Emma explained.

“Ah, of course you are.” Eryn laughed before smugly grinning. “My Bonnie is, obviously, the best out of *all* the other Orphans. I can *see* why you’d want to . . .” She trailed off as Kelly jabbed her in the side.

“What for?” Kelly pried.

Emma then ground her teeth together and averted her gaze. It looked like the small talk was already over. “It’s . . . because of last night’s *incident*.”

“Incident?” Kelly cocked a brow. “The Orphan that escaped last night?”

“Yes . . .” Emma said.

“Must’ve been one tough little bastard,” Eryn commented while cracking her knuckles. “Tore through Victor Squad like they were nothing from what I read in the report.”

“Yes, though . . .” Kelly spoke, peering down and lifting a few pages up off her clipboard, “they omitted the Orphan’s designation . . . so, do we not even know who it was?”

“That’s . . . the thing,” Emma said reluctantly. “We do, but . . .” She cleared her throat. “You might want to sit down for this one, Kelly.”

“Why?” Kelly cocked an eyebrow.

“Because you might not . . . take it all that well.”

“Spill the beans, muscle queen,” Eryn jeered. “Who was it?”

“Number Nineteen,” Emma grumbled.

Eryn’s smugness was immediately wiped off her face at the mere mention. “B-but that’s,” she began to stammer as she looked toward her wife.

Kelly stared ahead as her bright emerald eyes shimmered. “That’s . . . Sam’s number,” she mumbled, lowering her head. She began to shake slightly, growing pale as she nervously fiddled with her wedding ring.

After noticing her wife’s distress, Eryn stepped up beside Kelly and protectively draped her arms around the slightly taller woman. “That’s not funny, Emma,” she spat, leering at Emma again.

“It’s . . .” Emma sighed, “anything but a joke. I saw her myself. She was standing right in front of me.”

“Bullshit!” Eryn blurted. “We all know that Samantha—” she started, prepared to spout off, however, she managed to briefly throttle herself. Likely to avoid upsetting Kelly, who had begun breathing shallowly while staring at the floor, like she was barely even holding it together.

Eryn swallowed dryly and lowered her voice. “We all know she isn’t . . . *around* anymore.”

Emma flipped open her folder. She pulled a printed photograph from beneath a paperclip and held it out to them. “This . . . was one of many taken from the security feed.” She sighed, “It’s her . . .”

Kelly let out a solemn whimper of disbelief as she took the photo. Clear as day stood Number Nineteen, her Orphan, her Samantha. She looked angry, frightened, and completely alone.

She ran her fingers over the image. “S-Sam . . .” she stammered out, looking over Samantha’s newly metallic features. “What did he do to you?”

“Why weren’t these in the report?” Eryn grumbled, trying her best not to stare at the photo.

“Maximilian only placed them in the reports that Diana’s handing out at the F.T.F. meeting about now.”

“He *would* try to hide this,” Eryn grumbled before glancing back up at Emma, “Wait . . .” she started, “that doesn’t explain why you’re here for Bonnie.” She took a step forward. “*What do you want with her?*” she hissed, prodding Emma’s chest just below her collarbone.

“We need her help,” Emma winced. “We’re under direct orders to locate and terminate Number Nineteen.”

“What!?” Eryn barked, flicking her finger up from Emma’s chest and pointing in her face. “You can’t just—I swear to—” she fumed, practically blowing smoke out of her ears.

Emma provided no response and merely shook her head with the slightest movement. Her eyes were sorrowful but determined. Her words didn’t match her frown in the slightest.

Eryn relented and chewed at her lip, glancing behind Emma at the entrance camera. She slowly nodded, seeming to understand. “Whatever,” she remarked, clearing her throat. “Take her if you need her . . .”

“Please don’t hurt her,” Kelly whimpered before being guided to her desk by her wife.

Emma’s legs wobbled as she stepped up to the door. Hiding her confliction was taxing and difficult. She grew increasingly paranoid, hoping that the pair had picked up on her signals, but also hoping that no one else had.

She took a deep breath and shakily crammed her keycard into the terminal, waiting an ever-increasing eternity for it to open. The longer she stood in silence listening to Kelly’s distraught whimpers, the further the blaze in her belly burned with purpose. She couldn’t let Samantha die. She *wouldn’t* let Samantha die.

She quickly slipped through the door into a narrow hall as it opened. Once inside, the door sealed behind her and a second just ahead of her pulled open.

Emma raised her mitts beside her mouth, cupping it as she stepped into the cell. “Bonnie!” she called out, forcing a smile to her lips.

A blonde girl draped in a poncho the tinge of diluted tangerines sat snugly on a dilapidated metal bed. She was scouring the vanilla-fragrant pages of one of many aged books that surrounded her, all neatly stacked and organized by size and length.

Bonnie starkly contrasted the drab, stone-gray cell with her stocky blonde hair and grape-colored hoodie peeking from beneath the poncho. She raised her head with an inquisitive eye before a beaming grin shone across her lips upon spotting the captain.

She slammed the dusty text shut and, like magic, vanished in a transient blur.

Emma partly reeled at the sudden disappearance of the teen, her eyes darting around the concrete cage in a fruitless effort to locate her. She suddenly flinched as the gentle flick of a finger struck the back of her head. She then pivoted, finding the blonde standing just behind her.

Bonnie's posture was nearly perfect. It was straight, the type acquired from rigorous self-discipline. "You used to be able to predict my movements much better than *that*," she teased.

Emma grinned and raised a hand, placing it on Bonnie's head. "You're an adult now. The difference is night and day." She shimmied her hand around, ruffling the girl's chin-length golden locks. "I heard how you decimated Eryn in chess. *Again*."

"To be honest, it's really not that hard," Bonnie snickered, glancing at a table beside them, which appeared to be haphazardly constructed from a roughly cut sheet of metal. On its surface was a chess board, freshly played and left at checkmate.

Emma snickered. She'd half expected it to be flipped.

"Every time she's about to make a move that she thinks will tip the game in her favor, she gets a big dumb grin on her face, among other things. She has

far too many tells,” Bonnie explained, folding her hands together in front of her chest. “And it helps that she’s just . . . *really* bad at chess.”

“I’m impressed.” Emma hummed, releasing a proud chuckle. “Even *with* Eryn’s constant boasting, you always seem to exceed my expectations. I don’t think she understands just how good that noggin of yours she brags about is.”

Bonnie’s eyes may very well have rolled onto the floor as she released an amused sigh. “Her heart is in the right place. She just wants something to show off. Which is fine. But it’s not like I’m smart because I’m *here*. I just apply myself.”

“If your abilities were based around your intelligence, you might’ve damn well become the smartest person on the planet, for better or worse.” Emma beamed.

“Eh,” Bonnie grimaced. “I couldn’t imagine a greater hell.”

Emma glanced around and cracked a sly smirk. She then covered her mouth before quietly saying, “I thought *this* place was supposed to be hell.”

“It can be, at times. But I’ve got . . . most of what I need to be happy. Books keep me busy.” Bonnie grinned in response.

“So,” she started, having vanished before appearing on the opposite side of the table. In a flash, the chessboard had been reset and placed on the floor, leaving the tabletop barren. “What was the big commotion yesterday?” Bonnie lowered herself down in the seat, crossing her legs once she sat.

Emma’s throat clogged back up as yet another minimal moment of respite quickly passed. “That’s . . . actually why I’m here.” She dragged a chair out, the legs individually screeching as they scraped against the coarse concrete floor.

“Must’ve been bad. I think I heard the generators blow out,” Bonnie stated and then tilted her head to the side, causing her blonde strands to bounce.

“But I don’t really get why you’d bother talking to me about it. Aren’t we supposed to know as little about the facility as possible?” she inquired.

“Sam isn’t dead,” Emma blurted out, uncomfortably shifting in the seat as she avoided eye contact with Bonnie.

Bonnie’s glowing smile steadily wilted, falling into a shocked parting of the lips as her face flushed white. Her pupils chillingly contracted as she leaned forward, pressing her palms against the table. She curled her fingers, scraping her nails against the metal surface before hissing, “*Don’t* lie to me.”

Emma quietly shook her head and met Bonnie’s gaze. Her stare was affirming but remorseful.

“Oh god . . .” Bonnie exhaled. Her perfect posture rapidly crumbled as she sank into her chair. “She,” she clicked her tongue and swallowed, “died. Barry and I— We both saw—”

Emma pulled out the folder, which was proving to be rather useful, and dropped it on the table. “Last night, the facility had a critical power failure. There was a backflow, and Sam’s magnetic restraints . . . deactivated.” She slid the folder across the table. “Her cell was the only one affected by the surge.”

“That’s . . . not possible.” Bonnie’s finger hooked the edge of the folder. “If there was an actual backflow, it would have affected more than—”

She rashly tore the paper-clipped photos from the folder and held them up to her face. She rapidly glanced between them only to grow mortified, laying them out and watching them spill due to the sheer number of them.

Bonnie rested her elbows against the table. “She tried to get away . . .”

“She *did* get away.” Emma sighed, nabbing one of the photos and flipping it over. She pulled a pen from her pocket and proceeded to write on the back of the image. “The reason I’m here is our job.” She slid the photo back over toward Bonnie face down. “We’re tasked with tracking then terminating Samantha.”

Bonnie squinted and glanced down at the minuscule inky scribbles.

YOU AND ME. WE'RE GOING TO HELP HER.

Bonnie sat in silence. She seemed to be fighting the itching urge to nod, to smile, to blink, to give anything away that she even received a message. She cleared her throat and glanced to the side. Pinching the photo between her fingers, she flipped it back over and softly said, "I understand."

"Good. I'll be back later. You'll be coming with Epsilon and me." Emma rose to her feet. She slid the photos back into the folder before scooping it up in her arms. As she went to raise her head, Bonnie suddenly collided with her, having leaned over the table to embrace her.

Emma slowly reciprocated the hug, tightly wrapping her arms around the blonde. "We'll make it right," she whispered.



"There's no use wasting my breath with semantics. The longer we wait, the longer we dick around, the more of a problem we're going to have." Diana sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose as she turned to face the group. "Don't assume this assignment is some ridiculous wild goose chase. It isn't."

"What . . . *exactly* happened, ma'am?" the Captain of Omicron, Danica Carter, queried.

"Number Nineteen is alive, and she broke containment last night."

The air began to perforate with skeptical murmurs of disbelief.

"If you have any doubts about what I've said, and will continue to say," Diana began as she slowly raised her damaged arm. She grimaced as she flexed her fingers to point at her facial stitches. "She slashed my face open, and almost tore my fucking arm off."

Diana quickly palmed the table with her opposing hand as singeing bolts shot down her arm. She began to twitch, holding in sharp curses and angry

shouts. The pain would take some getting used to. “As you’ll find in the damage reports I’ve provided you . . .” she seethed, raising her head back up. “We lost *five* men this morning. Victor Squad was almost entirely wiped out.”

“What about Captain Garfield?” a woman queried.

“What *about* him?” Diana asked.

“He survived . . . right?”

Diana glanced at her, recognizing the girl’s red hair and eyes. It was the Golf member Parker, the girl who’d handed over her shotgun. “As far as you need to be concerned, Evan Garfield doesn’t exist.”

“But . . .” Parker nervously frowned. “He’s my friend! He’s our friend. We want to know what—” She quickly shut up once she noticed Diana’s displeased glare.

Parker’s unprofessionalism wasn’t amusing to Diana, especially now. But at the very least, her concern was understandable. “He was far too traumatized, and injured, to return to service.” She explained, “He was given a high dosage of Mem-Narcs, returned to his family, and fed a cover story. He has no memory of his time here.” She knit her brows together. “He has no memory of *you*.”

Parker’s eyes widened a bit in shock. She obviously wanted to contest the commander’s words, but she knew in those decisions she nor anyone else in the room had any jurisdiction to complain. So she merely swallowed, lowered her head, and decided to stay quiet.

Once satisfied with the silence, Diana continued on. “That’s not our only problem,” she muttered, sighing as she sank back into her chair. “Captain Gaius is stable but in critical condition. His dominant hand has been made effectively useless. He will not be joining us in the hunt.”

The members of Golf then looked at one another before a young man among them spoke up: “Then who will lead Golf, Commander?”

“Until further notice . . .” Diana regretfully leered at Parker. “She will be your captain.”

“Me!?” Parker squeaked, suddenly sitting up in her chair with nearly enough force to knock it over.

“*But*,” Diana asserted, “don’t get a big head. I haven’t got many other options at the moment. You still follow orders. Regardless of what the order is, you *will* execute it.”

Parker gulped as she repressed her urge to gloat.

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Parker nodded.

Diana exhaled as she leaned back in the chair once again. “Epsilon . . .” she sighed.

Denise Briars perked up. She sat at the end of the table with her squad-mates. Her eyes darted about the other four as if she hoped one of them would answer, though it seemed none of them were in a rush to do so. The seconds of waiting irked Diana, which Briars seemed to pick up on, immediately blurting out, “Yes?”

“Orphan Number Seventeen will be joining you for the duration of this assignment,” Diana stated.

The wail of rubbing leather filled the air as the entire room seemed to reel in their seats. Before any of them spoke, Diana raised her hand, and as if she’d grabbed each of them by the throats, none of them said a word.

“Captain Pierce will be keeping her close. If Number Seventeen takes even a single step out of line, *kill* her,” she coldly ordered.

Briars twitched as her throat grew sandy. Her lips separated as she went to speak, likely finding the order to be a bit cruel, but found no confidence to voice it.

“That won’t be a problem, ma’am,” Eagle boomed from beside Briars. He eyed her almost as if she were prey, bullying her quiet nature with only his glare.

“That’s everything then,” Diana said and rose to her feet. “If there are no other questions, you’re all dismissed.”

“I have one.” The nerve-tingling voice of the man cloaked in white rang from the doorway.

Diana cocked her head to the side, spotting Maximilian. He leaned against the doorframe with the sly confidence of a thief, grinning ear to ear as he met the commander’s eyes. “What do you want, Ford?” she growled.

“Oh, my dear darling commander . . . my question is simple: How do you know what you’re up against?” the doctor inquired.

“We did! Until you brought her back, and made her stronger, without *any* of us knowing!” Diana roared, slamming her knuckles into the mahogany tabletop.

The entire room nervously held their breaths as they watched their commander practically spit at their boss.

Maximilian’s mustache curled and he erupted into laughter. He held his chest and shook his head on a swivel as his laughter persisted. “You have me there. I’ve placed you lot in quite the cleanup assignment, haven’t I?”

“It’s not funny, Doc,” Diana lowly spat.

“On the contrary, it’s quite hilarious.” Maximilian chuckled. “But, it’s in my best interest to keep you all alive. It’s quite expensive to replace staff.” He then snapped his fingers behind his back.

Wilson snuck in past Maximilian like a pet trained to his call. He was nervously clutching a clipboard to his chest as he eyed the room filled to the brim with disgruntled soldiers.

“Tell our dear friends what they’re up against, Wilson,” Maximilian chimed, smiling at the boy.

Wilson raised his board, making a conscious effort to avoid eye contact with anyone in the room. “Number Nineteen, or as some of you know her, Samantha, is an Orphan possessing four scythe-tipped appendages which we refer to as tendrils. These tendrils have a variety of applications, such as allowing her to scale walls, move at a significantly enhanced pace, and—”

Wilson stopped and gulped as Diana’s shadow enshrouded him. He glanced up, meeting her predatory gaze which radiated irritation and anger.

“Is this a joke to you?” Diana accused, peering from the boy up toward Maximilian.

“Far from it, my dear.” Maximilian hummed. “The basics are just as important.”

Diana grabbed Wilson by the collar of his shirt, nearly lifting him up by it. “Tell us what we need to know and *stop* wasting our time,” she ordered, leaning down and drilling her displeased gaze into his skull.

Wilson nodded sheepishly as Diana released him. He retreated partly behind Maximilian, who’d done nothing to intervene. He’d simply watched, as though amused by the festering animosity building in the room.

“Her skeletal structure . . . It’s no longer composed of any bone, apart from her natural set of teeth and nails.”

“Natural set?” Diana blinked, raising her right arm. “Then what the hell did she tear my arm up with?”

“A retractable lining of metallic fangs,” Wilson replied.

“Great . . .” Diana muttered.

“Tell them the good news, boy,” Maximilian interjected.

“R-right. My apologies, sir.” Wilson gulped. “Due to her— As a result of—” he stammered. “She’s weaker,” he blurted out.

“How is that even possible?” Danica questioned. “We were able to stop her in the previous breach, but this time she managed to get out.”

“The blast doors didn’t go off this time,” a voice spoke up from the hall.

Maximilian turned his head to the side, grinning as he spotted Emma Pierce standing behind him. “Astute observation, Captain,” he taunted.

“What?” Briars squeaked from the end of the table. “Captain . . . are you sure?”

“One did, though,” Emma said while glaring at the doctor. “The one that sealed Victor Squad in to die.”

“Are you making an accusation?” Maximilian leaned in, grinning ear to ear as his stare slithered beneath Emma’s skin.

Emma swallowed her fear and stood her ground. But she’d be lying to herself if she said she wasn’t near trembling.

“Pierce!” Diana barked.

“No, it’s quite alright.” Maximilian hummed, leaning back up. “It’s an understandable concern.”

“The backflow scrambled the mainframe,” Wilson explained. “The sensors outside of Number Nineteen’s chamber were temporarily deactivated, and once she reached the Power Wing, *those* sensors detected a threat and . . .”

“Locked them in to die,” Emma snarled, repeating herself.

Maximilian sneered and firmly grabbed Emma’s shoulder. “These things unfortunately happen. Little accidents can be avoided, but not entirely circumvented.” His bony fingers curled, pinching her shoulder as they dug into her uniform. “It’s best that you focus on the task at hand, Captain Pierce.”

Emma jerked her shoulder from his grasp and broke eye contact. She couldn’t continue looking into his frigid, disassociated eyes without making herself sick. “Yes, sir,” she muttered.

“Good.” Maximilian smiled, placing his hands behind his back. “Come, Wilson, we best leave them be. After all, they have a job to do.”

The room remained silent, even long after the two had left.

Diana squinted, glaring at her subordinate, who seemingly refused to look her in the face after the altercation. “You were way out of line,” Diana eventually snarled.

“Something’s not right,” Emma said.

“About *what*?”

Emma continued to stare at the floor. “It’s nothing . . . ma’am . . .”



“Sir, where are we going?” Wilson inquired, struggling to keep up with Maximilian’s long spider-like legs. “This isn’t the way to the elevators.”

“Correct.” Maximilian beamed. “I have little faith our forces alone will be able to accomplish the task at hand.”

“I’m . . . sorry?”

“Samantha is beyond a force to be reckoned with, dear boy.” Maximilian explained, “Even with her strength and stamina reduced from what it once was, her newfound durability will prove . . . troublesome. Not to mention her . . . *temper*.”

“What do you suggest, sir?”

“Nothing major. They’ll just need a little *extra* help is all.” The doctor smirked, coming to a halt. “It’s best that they don’t know, for now. It will only add to their stress.” He snickered, staring headlong at a cell door.

Wilson glanced up and grunted. “Sir . . . you can’t be serious,” he hesitantly spoke.

“Quite the interesting little proposition, no?” Maximilian placed his hand upon the door, running his fingers along the door’s own embroidered number 18.

“How . . . how would you even get her to comply!?” Wilson asked.

“Oh, that’s simple!” Maximilian chuckled. “*We lie.*”

Chapter Five

Fractured Soul

With amazement radiating from her eyes, Willow was sitting at the kitchen table watching Samantha shovel in her third bag of potato chips. It had been torn apart like the carcass of a wild animal, with Samantha feasting on its crunchy potato-filled innards.

Samantha sucked a quick breath through her nostrils as she swallowed down her last bite. She exhaled, pressing her back against the chair as she ran her wrist over her mouth. “Still hungry . . .” she muttered as crumbs dribbled from her lips.

A surprised puff tumbled from Roxanne’s lips upon setting foot in the kitchen. “How . . .” she trailed off, noticing the three eviscerated family-sized chip bags. “Doesn’t matter,” she said while shaking her head. “Miss . . . what was it?”

“Samantha!” Willow piped up, grinning ear to ear as she paraded her new friend’s name.

Samantha’s tendrils nearly knotted as they suddenly tightened around her gut. She was wary, perhaps too wary, viewing kindness of any form as a red flag. Despite that, she couldn’t help but stare at Willow, wide-eyed and surprised.

“Alright then, *Samantha*, I’ll throw together something . . . large. But in the meantime, you’re incredibly filthy. So, I’ve run you a bath.”

“A . . . bath?” Samantha gulped as if choking on glass. Surprised by the gesture, she pointed at herself, perhaps thinking she’d heard incorrectly. “For me?”

“Of course.” Roxanne beamed. “A proper lady needs to stay clean.” She lectured, then pivoted before pointing out toward the main entrance. “Just up the stairs, first door on the left.”

Samantha uncomfortably stared. She was curious but still cautious. Roxanne’s shift in demeanor significantly bothered her in more ways than one. It almost made her skin crawl, reminding her of Maximilian’s craning grins as he gifted her rare amenities, all of which almost always predated rigorous, body-shattering trials. . . . Then again, what didn’t remind her of him?

“It’s alright,” Willow affirmed, noting the girl’s arising skepticism as she receded into her chair.

Samantha hesitantly nodded and rose at a sloth’s pace. She held her arms out to her sides as if sneaking up on a wild animal. She took short cautious steps as she approached Roxanne before snaking past and bursting up the stairs.

Once she heard Samantha’s heavy feet stomp up the stairs, Roxanne’s shoulders slumped with the release of an extra lengthy exhale. She then fixated on her little sister with nothing more than a gaze of concern.

Willow leaned back in her chair, avoiding eye contact and crossing her legs. That was always the look she’d get before an earful. “I know what you’re gonna say,” she sighed, “so just go on and say it.”

“I can see it in her eyes,” Roxanne said as she peered back over her shoulder toward the foyer.

Willow blinked and slowly raised a brow. “See what?”

“She’s . . .” Roxanne frowned. “Not *just* broken, Willow. . . .”

“What do you mean?”

“You wouldn’t understand it too well, you’re too young. . . . But I see it in some of the other dancers,” Roxanne explained, glancing back at her sister. “She’s *shattered*. She doesn’t trust anybody.”

“You’re . . .” Willow cocked her head to the side. “Not . . . afraid of her?”

“I . . . was at first. But looking like a monster doesn’t make you one,” Roxanne proclaimed. “Your actions make or break you. Which is why I’m terrified of whoever did this to her. . . . They might come looking for her.” She sighed, running her now-shivering hands through her brown hair in an effort to calm herself. “I want to keep you safe. Above all else, you’re my number-one priority, Willow.”

“Roxy,” Willow sneered. “It’s not like I’m going anywhere,” she said with a smile.

“I just . . . worry that if we help, we’ll be biting off more than we can chew,” Roxanne said as she began to pace. “I *could* be a cold, heartless bitch. I could just tell her to leave, then never hear anything about her again,” she rambled before her eyes turned as sharp as her incoming words, “but I’m not that type of person. I’m *not* Mom.”

Willow’s blood ran cold at the mere mention of the woman. She uncomfortably held her sides, as if hugging herself to null the sting of memory. “Roxy . . .”

“That’s what she’d have done. She’d have thrown that girl out the moment she saw her, maybe called the cops, do anything possible to make it someone else’s problem.” Roxanne snarled, “I’ll never do anything close to something she’d do.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to talk about her,” Willow lamented.

“We aren’t. And this is why. . . .” Roxanne turned her head and stomped over to the fridge. She tore it open and practically dived in, tossing ingredients to the side as if they were to blame for her frustrations. “You’re right about what

you said,” she stated, dumping the ingredients she’d gathered onto the table before kicking the door shut. “She’s just a kid, and she’s scared.”

“Of what?” Willow quietly murmured.

“I don’t want to find out.” Roxanne shakily exhaled as she pulled open a cupboard. “Let’s just focus on getting her well . . . okay?”

Willow’s infectious smile quickly grew back. “I’m glad to hear that. I know we’re doing the right thing.”

Roxanne snatched a pan from the cabinet and practically slammed it against the stovetop. After switching on the burner, she dumped some diced beef into the pan and began to sear it. But in her sloppy haste fueled by blatant irritation, some chunks flew out onto the counter and beneath the grates of the stovetop.

Willow’s shining grin faded just as quickly as it had returned. She knew this would happen. Roxanne was almost impossible to calm down after their mother was brought into the conversation. She looked down at the table, fiddling with her fingers as she listened to her sister’s frustrated grunts, muffled cursing, and angry huffs.

“Roxy . . .” Willow sighed, “why are you so angry at her?”

Roxanne released the pan, letting it clatter upon the stovetop as she grasped the counter’s edge with both her hands. She leaned over the stove, staring into the pan at the sizzling meat as she tried to steady her breathing. Though it did nothing to calm her down as her fingers curled and her knuckles turned white. “When I came home that day, after Dad passed, she was gone . . . and his money was gone . . .” she stammered out, practically hissing. “I’d never felt that kind of anger before, and I’ve only held onto it because it makes me want to do better than her.”

Roxanne grimaced. “I never told you the details. . . . You were too little.” She released the counter and slowly turned to face her younger sibling. “Too young to understand.” She stepped up to the table and sluggishly pulled a

chair out before practically falling into it. “That night, I came home to find my little sister crying, and alone, the day after our father was gone. There was no money, the car was gone, and we had no food.”

Willow’s heart beat with a sting in her chest as she met Roxanne’s sorrowful stare.

“The reason I hate her, the reason I’ll never forgive her, and never want to see her fucking face again . . . is because she ruined my life,” Roxanne growled. She then reached over the table and tightly gripped her sister’s hands. “Any chance I had of making something of myself was gone, right then and there. I knew I’d never get the chance to go to college. I knew I didn’t have time to make a career. We needed money, and we needed it badly.”

Roxanne lowered her head and closed her eyes before solemnly exhaling through her nose. “Do you have any idea how . . . *degrading* my job is?”

Willow nodded, looking down at their linked fingers. She felt her throat dry up the more she thought about it.

“Night after night. The same crappy songs, the same stupid dances, the same perverts just *staring* at me,” Roxanne murmured. “I can’t even look at myself in the mirror anymore, Willow.”

“J-just ‘cause you’re a stripper doesn’t mean you’re any less my sister, or any less important to me!” Willow cried out, tightening her hold on her sibling’s hands.

Roxanne wanted to pull away, almost ashamed to even touch her sister. She sniffled, her eyes glittering as she forced a smile, though the corner of her lips were quivering. “Thank you, Willow.”



Samantha had poorly hidden herself behind the rungs of the stairway banister, watching their discussion from the shrouded darkness of the upper floor.

“They want . . . to help me?” she said to herself. “Why . . .” She frowned, subconsciously running her fingers along her metallic corset. The tendrils stirred as if flinching at her touch. Her mind raced with many thoughts, but none more than that of the mother she never met. She’d been in foster care her whole life until the Foundation scooped her up. Yet they knew theirs, and their own mother had betrayed them. While hers hadn’t directly done as such, she certainly felt that way.

Maybe they were more alike than she thought.



Roxanne proceeded to set the table. She wiped the dozens of crumbs from the tablecloth before placing down three plates, each packed to the edge with a proper meal of beef. However, as she went to lay down the silverware, she hesitated and shot a glance at Willow. “Does she even know how to use these?”

Willow extended an index finger as if prepared to answer, but she stopped and retracted her hand. “I . . . don’t know. I didn’t bring her any earlier.”

Roxanne exhaled and rolled her eyes, unsurprised by Willow’s forgetfulness. She then brandished a knife and fork over Samantha’s plate.

“What are you doing?”

“She ate three bags of chips in the time it took me to run a bath.” Roxanne lowered her hands and proceeded to slice the beef chunks in half. “She’s going to choke if she tries to eat this all at once.”

“Yeah . . . good point.” Willow giggled. She leaned back in her chair to peer through the doorway and up the stairs. The bathroom door was still shut just beyond the railing. “She’s been up there for a while.”

“Go check on her. And hurry! Dinner’s getting cold!” Roxanne ordered, setting the silverware beside Samantha’s plate.

“I will!” Willow rose from the table then shot into the foyer and up the stairs. Once she reached the bathroom door, she raised her hand and gently bat her knuckles against it. “Sam, are you okay in there?”

No response.

She pressed her ear against the door and cocked an eyebrow as she heard a soft rustling, almost like the sound grain made when she plucked it out of boredom.

“Sam?” Willow called out, turning the doorknob. As she pushed the door open, she stared for a moment before her lips curved back up into a smile.

Samantha was poorly wrapped up in a towel and attempting to brush her hair while staring into the mirror. Her tendrils were loosely dangling toward the floor, the upper two hanging over the towel and the lower two hiding beneath it. Not a muscle in her body even twitched as Willow entered, as if she were entirely relaxed, more relaxed than Willow had seen so far.

Her skin was smooth and bright, completely free of the scrapes and blemishes that had scarred its surface less than an hour prior. Her hair, thanks to the brushing, was now soft and significantly less matted. It was almost straight due to the moisture but still held a natural wave to it. She looked normal, minus the four additional appendages and subtly glowing eyes.

Samantha glanced over. Her face quickly warped with confusion, as if puzzled by Willow’s sudden smile. “What?” she softly questioned, setting down the hairbrush. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You’re cute!” Willow beamed.

Samantha flinched as the compliment struck her like a bolt of lightning, splitting through her bones and right into her vulnerable heart. “H-huh?” she stammered, her clean skin flushing a sheepish pink.

“What’s wrong?” Willow asked, tilting her head slightly. “Are you alright?”

“I’m—” Samantha hummed and glanced back at herself in the mirror. She winced at the reflection and averted her gaze, staring down into the sink. “Not used to that.”

“Compliments?” Willow inquired.

Samantha nodded.

Willow fought off a confused frown and instead sought an immediate answer to Samantha’s distress. She peered behind the girl at her torn, dirty clothes and an idea quickly came to mind. “You know what,” she beamed, stepping up to Samantha. “Let’s get you some new clothes!” she declared, grabbing both of Samantha’s hands.

Samantha glanced over her shoulder at the torn rags she called clothes. Her face scrunched, and she slowly nodded.

“C’mon!” Willow cried, leading Samantha out of the bathroom and down the hall. “I’m sure you’ll fit in some of my older clothes.”

Willow released Samantha’s hands and pushed her door open. “Come in! I’m sure I have something in here that’ll fit you . . . somewhere.”

Samantha’s pupils stretched out, widening at the sudden stimulation of such a well-filled room, a *private* room. Though the room for Willow was nothing more than that, she noticed Samantha’s shock manifest as an unworthy grimace. It was like she didn’t even feel welcome to set foot inside.

“This is . . . yours?” Samantha softly asked.

“Yep!” Willow beamed, beckoning the girl to follow her in as she stepped toward her closet. “It’s not very big but, I like it, it’s comfortable.”

“I didn’t know you could have . . . things,” Samantha remarked, looking over the band posters, books, and DVDs that littered the space.

“Well, you’re about to have some!” Willow chirped assuredly before opening the closet and getting on her knees. She began to dig through several small cardboard boxes near the floor. They were hidden just below the dangling curtains consisting of her hung-up shirts.

“What do you mean?” Samantha softly asked as she approached the bed. She went to sit but hesitated, as if even that were taboo.

Willow grabbed one of the boxes and slowly dragged it out into the open. She dug through it, sifting through dozens of old articles of clothing. “I have old clothes I don’t need anymore, and you certainly need some new ones.”

Upon finding a suitable set, she rose and turned to face the little Orphan. “This oughta do. Here.” Willow beamed and placed the folded articles and a pair of shoes onto Samantha’s lap. “Go ahead and put ’em on!” She then hastily covered her eyes and spun back around on her heels. “I promise I won’t peek!”

Samantha watched as Willow turned around before glancing down at her lap. She ran her fingers over the clothing before grabbing the plain white T-shirt on top and unfolding it. Despite its used condition, it was soft and bright. It appeared much newer than anything she’d ever worn. She set the shirt aside, along with the shorts that hid beneath it, and rose.

She hesitated before dropping the towel, double-checking to ensure Willow wasn’t peeping. Once satisfied with her privacy, she let the towel fall to the floor and began to slide on the clothes. Willow was right about her size; they fit quite snugly, almost perfectly.

“All done?” Willow questioned.

Samantha hummed assuredly in response.

Willow quickly turned around and her face lit up like a shining firework. “You look adorable!” she cheered, softly clapping her hands in praise.

Samantha looked herself over and felt a smile creep over her face. She rather liked her new clothes, though her bliss ceased as she went to move her tendrils, finding them bound beneath the fabric.

“Is something wrong?” Willow asked.

Samantha turned to the side slightly, revealing her tendrils drooping down from beneath the shirt.

“Oh, that’s an easy fix!” Willow assured, pulling open the drawer of a nearby desk. She snatched a pair of scissors and then crawled up onto the bed. “Sit down. I’ll take care of it.”

Samantha slowly lowered herself onto the bedding, her tendrils slithering off to the side to avoid being sat on.

Willow spread the blades apart and swiftly snipped circular holes above the stem of each tendril. After a few moments of trial and error, she snapped the scissors shut and set them aside. “Alright, try that!”

Samantha began to squirm as her tendrils curled and slithered beneath the shirt, attempting to find the holes on their own. She was trying her hardest not to let the blades even graze the fabric. Knowing how sharp they were, she didn’t want to risk slashing up her new shirt. Once one sprouted through its hole, the others followed, all emerging comfortably out her backside.

She raised her arms high above her head, almost purring as she stretched. Her excess limbs each slowly sauntered beneath her arms then tightly bound back around her waist.

“Better?” Willow asked.

“Much better . . .” Samantha softly smiled, staring down at the floor. “Thank you,” she mumbled, almost inaudibly.



Roxanne was settled in her chair, batting vegetables around her plate with a fork. She clicked the nails of her opposing hand against the table until she heard the pitter-patter of Willow beginning to descend the stairs, followed by Samantha's heavy thuds.

As they entered the kitchen, she glanced over and cracked a grin. "Well well, someone looks clean and comfy."

"I gave her some of my old summer clothes," Willow explained. She gestured her hands back at Samantha as her sun-bright eyes met with her sibling's. "Doesn't she look great?"

Samantha held her arms close to her chest and teetered back and forth on the balls of her feet. The fresh, rosy tint of embarrassment was still covering her face.

"Yep, maybe even just a little cuter than you." Roxanne snickered. "Now come on and sit. Dinner's been ready for a few minutes now."

Willow eagerly tore a chair from beneath the table and practically threw herself into it. She raised her utensils and proceeded to both slice up and devour the meal. Not with the same ferocity as Samantha had earlier, but with almost the same amount of energy.

Samantha curiously eyed Willow's hands. *Silverware* . . . She internally hummed, gulping as she looked down at her plate. She hadn't used such utensils since . . . she couldn't even remember the last time. It was something so basic, yet, she had no clue where to start.

Willow swallowed down a mouthful of food before peering to her side at Samantha. "Sam? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Samantha said. *It can't be that hard, right?* she thought, narrowing her eyes as she stared at her fork.

She reached for it and grabbed it with each of her fingers, clamping her fist around it. She awkwardly stabbed a piece of meat, but only with half of the prongs, and lifted it up to her mouth. Unfortunately, the piece slid right off

the fork. Samantha let out a whine, fully admitting defeat as her hand landed against the table. She had no idea what she was doing.

A sudden frown began to bend Willow's smile, but it didn't last for long as, like a bungee cord, it snapped back into place. "Don't feel bad," she cooed, setting her utensils aside and scooting her chair closer to Samantha. "Here, let me help," she said as she gently plucked the fork from the girl's hand.

"Help . . . how?" Samantha questioned.

"Like this." Willow stabbed one of the meat chunks then raised the fork up to Samantha's lips. "Open up."

The gesture pierced her heart as her face only further reddened. She parted her lips, almost without noticing, to which Willow moved in, gently placing the chunk in Samantha's mouth.

She gripped it with her teeth and pulled it off the fork. She stared at the table for a moment before her eyes slightly widened in response to the cavalcade of new and strange flavors that washed over her tongue. As she swallowed, she looked at the plate, then to Willow, and finally across the table toward Roxanne.

"I know it's not my best work," Roxanne nervously chuckled, scratching the back of her head. "If I had more time, then maybe I could've—"

"It's amazing," Samantha blurted out before turning her attention back to Willow. She proceeded to silently beckon for more with her shimmering stare. Her tendrils began to itch as she fought against her urges to shovel the entire plate in her mouth with her scythes.

"I—" Roxanne stammered. She cleared her throat, feeling her lips curl up into a smile. "Thank you, Sam."



Long after dinner, the dishes were stacked in the sink, the lights were off, and the kitchen had been abandoned. Roxanne lay sprawled across the couch in their living room with the television gleaming over her. But she had long since fallen asleep, drained by her job and the newest member of the household.

Meanwhile, Willow had led Samantha back upstairs and was preparing them both for bed.

“For now, this will be your room!” Willow declared, pulling open the door to the spare room just across from her own.

“A room . . . for me?” Samantha murmured, pressing her fingers together.

“Yep!”

Samantha stepped inside and felt a sudden comfort wrap around her unlike any other. There was a bed, a closet, and a window . . . for her. “I-I’ve never had my own room before . . .” she stammered, turning back to Willow. The glow behind her eyes seemed to shine more vibrantly.

“Well, you do now,” Willow declared. “Would you like a pair of my old pajamas?” she inquired, leaning against the doorway.

“Thank you, b-but you’ve already given me so much . . .” Samantha hummed, playing with the ends of her shirt.

“You don’t need to thank me, Sam,” Willow assured. “You deserve some rest.” She then grabbed the door handle. “Well . . . goodnight, Samantha.” She waved, pulling the door open.

“G-goodnight,” Samantha stuttered, waving back before the door soon shut with Willow’s leave.

Samantha backed up to the bed and collapsed against the silky-smooth sheets. She rolled onto her side, taking a deep whiff of the mint-scented linens. It was clean. Everything was clean.

Her eyelids grew heavy as she sank deep into the hold of the mattress.

She nestled against the bedding. The warmth tricked her into imagining something she’d consider alien, slumbering beside another person, specif-

ically Willow. She wasn't sure what it was. Maybe it was her smile or her patience . . . but *something* about her made Samantha feel . . .

Her eyes flashed as they beat open, almost as though she was trying to swat away the thought. Perhaps she felt it was wrong.

But *something* was different about Willow, something she hadn't felt about the Orphans she'd come to know. Maybe it was that she was normal, or perhaps just kind.

She sighed, curling up, warm and comfortable. There was no use pondering something she didn't understand, so she let her thoughts wander back to that of her friends.

When was the last time she'd seen them? She couldn't remember. In fact, the more she thought about it, she could hardly remember their faces, and their names clawed at the back of her mind as she drew blanks on what they were.

Her smile faded.

Before long, she remembered. Not their names, but roughly the last time she'd seen them. It was certainly before *the metal*. She hadn't seen much of anything after it.

The second changes, so painful . . . An unfathomable amount of burning, skin-peeling, and muscle-tearing pain. *That* was something she could remember.

Massive, singeing halogen lamps, illuminating to start the day and going dark after those horrid tests. Though none of it even compared to that awful voice that, every single morning, uttered:

"Hello, Samantha."

Her eyes flared up as she sprang from the sheets, throwing herself off of the bed. Her feet planted on the floor, her fingers dangled just over the ground, and her tendrils unfurled. She rapidly glanced around the room, turning and twisting as though she'd heard those words whispered right in her ear. She

took a conscious breath, only to find that she was trembling, nearly hyperventilating. The sweat dripping from her skin was so abundant that it trickled against the floorboards.

“Leave me alone,” Samantha whined, realizing the physical absence of her personal devil. Her tendrils limply fell, scraping against the floor just before her knees buckled. She fell to them and grabbed at her ears before beginning to cry.

It was the silence, the torturous silence. The wind rolling against the house’s old frame was no different than the whirl of the generators endlessly chugging beneath her feet. Solitude and safety could only do so much when silence alone was all the same.

Samantha snuck into the hall, albeit poorly, as the wooden boards creaked beneath her dense skeleton. She stepped over to and leaned against the frame of Willow’s room, peeking inside.

She was wrapped up in her bed, temporarily unaware of Samantha’s presence. Her ears were plugged with small white earbuds, and her attention was mostly stolen by her cell phone. Perhaps she was listening to the music of the bands plastered over her walls.

Much to her dismay, Samantha didn’t stay hidden forever. Perhaps it was her silhouette, or possibly her illuminated gaze, but Willow noticed her almost immediately. As she glanced over her phone, Samantha retreated instinctively, hiding more of herself behind the frame.

Willow laid her phone down in her lap and raised her hands, carefully removing the earbuds. “Sam? Is something the matter?” she questioned gently.

Samantha glanced downward. Subconsciously, she didn’t want to seem foolish, so she kept her eyes to the floor, sinking further against the doorjamb before sheepishly peering back at Willow.

Willow hoped for a reply, but when she didn't get one, sat puzzled for a few moments. But before long, it clicked, "Ohh, you don't want to sleep alone, do you?"

Samantha shook her head.

"Are you afraid of the dark?"

Samantha nodded.

"Well, there's plenty of room over here." Willow beamed, setting her phone and earbuds on her nightstand. She peeled back the covers and scooted over before rapidly patting the side of her bed, as if beckoning a cat. "You can sleep with me tonight, if you'd like."

She was once again reluctant to step over, even though directly invited in. Upon building enough courage to step inside, her tendrils slid back around her waist, and she nervously approached the bed. She made brief eye contact with Willow, just for extra confirmation.

"It's alright." Willow softly chuckled. "I won't bite. I'm worried you might, though," she teased.

The comment amused her enough to put her somewhat at ease. She found herself able to crawl up beside Willow, though she remained on her hands and knees as if examining the bed.

Samantha shakily exhaled, eyeing Willow to ensure there was no malicious intent in her actions. She found none and sighed before lowering herself down next to the girl.

"Is there anything else you need, Sam?" Willow softly asked, gently dragging the blanket over them.

"Don't turn the light off . . . please . . ." Samantha whispered, curling up slightly.

Willow glanced over, peering at the shining desk lamp beside her bed. She smiled and then nodded. "I won't," she assured before sliding down against her pillow and smiling at the smaller girl. "Goodnight, Samantha."

Samantha nervously gulped and wearily smiled at her. “G-goodnight.”

Chapter Six

Steel Knuckles

“I . . . don’t understand,” the navy blue-haired man said while chewing on his bottom lip and repeatedly clicking the butt of his pen.

“Oh?” Maximilian hummed, staring through the blinders of the office window out into the busy hallway populated with the Foundation’s bustling staff. “What do you not get?” he asked, raising his hands and twisting the blinds shut.

“Her being alive, it’s . . .”

“Impossible?” Maximilian snickered. “Inconceivable?” He turned, facing Doctor Michael Mordecai. “*Immoral?*” He grinned, staring right through the man.

“All of the above . . . sir,” Mordecai muttered, shuddering at the casting of Maximilian’s gaze.

“I’m sure you of all people understand the importance of life, Michael,” Maximilian stated, stepping from the shadows and into the light of Mordecai’s desk lamp.

“And you do?”

“I believe in the importance of *meaningful* life,” Maximilian declared.

“Physicians don’t separate it into categories. We just help people, sir,” Mordecai gulped, uncomfortably lacing his fingers as the doctor drew nearer.

“And that’s why you’re *just* a physician,” Maximilian lowly remarked as he placed his palms against the mahogany desk. He leaned inward, forcing

Mordecai to retreat from discomfort as the man got in his face. “And not in control.”

Mordecai gulped and broke eye contact. “Yes, sir,” he murmured, adjusting his glasses. “Is there something you needed?”

“Not necessarily,” Maximilian stated with a hum. He leaned back up, placing his hands behind his back. “But I figured, as her supervising doctor, you’d like to know that Number Eighteen is being released for a task.”

Mordecai twitched, “What—Barry?” He gulped. “What kind of . . . task?”

“Samantha’s termination has been, and will continue to be . . . *difficult*,” Maximilian admitted, though he appeared to be stifling a grin. “If anyone’s capable of killing her, it’s Barricade.”

“Now hold on just a minute!” Mordecai shouted, slamming his fists against his desk and rising to his feet. “You can’t expect Barry to willingly try and *kill* Samantha! They were friends! They cared about each other!”

“I wasn’t asking you, Doctor.” Maximilian’s eyes narrowed. “I’m *telling* you what will transpire. And if she doesn’t comply,” he sneered, “perhaps all I need is a little leverage.”

Mordecai gulped. He knew he should have kept his mouth shut.

Maximilian’s stern expression quickly faded as he began to chortle. “You should see the look on your face.” He chuckled then shook his head. “Rest easy, Doctor. I have a simple yet effective way to ensure her compliance.” He turned, beginning to step toward the door.

“What . . . would that be?” Mordecai hesitantly questioned.

Maximilian didn’t answer. He simply pulled open the door and left.

Once he was gone, Mordecai felt as though the room grew warmer, as if Maximilian’s frigid presence even frightened the air.

Mordecai sighed, pressing his elbows against the desk as he sunk his face into his hands. His soft fingers rubbed against his forehead. He wasn’t worried about what Maximilian would do. He was worried about what *she’d* do.

“Barry . . . please do the right thing . . .”



When was the last time I had a smoke, she mused to herself. “When was the last time I did anything outside of this room?” she spoke, cocking one of her ghost-white eyebrows as she glanced around the frustratingly cramped and familiar space.

“When was the last time I did *anything*?” she murmured to herself, looking down at her lap. If she weren’t restrained with bolt cuffs, escape wouldn’t be a question of if, only when. Her face twitched slightly as she attempted to twist her wrists and pull them apart, but they didn’t budge.

She winced in irritation before letting her hands fall to her lap. It was just like the last dozen times she tried. Aside from the cuffs, the black cloth covering the entirety of her arms and hands was the problem. If she could just get it off . . .

“No . . .” She sighed and leaned back against the wall. “Already tried that.” She grumbled with a forced smile.

The solitary nature of her cell was practically torture. She’d rather they shiv her daily than keep her bound up in this pit. The silence only made her angry. It made her want to hit something, and the inability to do so only made her angrier.

A muffled buzzer rumbled through the walls, prompting her to sit up and glance around the dimly lit room. “Huh?” She gasped before looking at the metal door. Her eyes curiously narrowed. Something tickled her ears . . . approaching footsteps.

The door opened, and light filled the dim space. She tried to shield her sensitive eyes but couldn’t reach high enough with her bound hands.

“Erika, Erika, Erika . . .” Maximilian trailed off, stepping inside.

Her nerves were struck with the subtlety of stomping on a landmine. She curled her fingers and frustratedly tugged against her restraints. She exhaled through her teeth as her vision returned to her. She focused and stared ahead, spotting *him*. . . .

“Don’t. Fucking. Call me that,” she snarled, raising her arms together and pointing at him with a sole finger.

Maximilian smirked, staring down at the teenager. “My apologies, *Barry*,” he said, halfheartedly correcting himself.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, *Max*,” Barry inquired, grinning smugly despite her vengeful glare.

“That’s *Doctor* to you,” Wilson snapped as if he were personally insulted on his boss’s behalf.

“Oh, I’m so *frightened*. Is that your new pet chihuahua, *Maxie*?” she teased. “He’s so *cute*,” Barry cooed, curling her fingers yet again.

“Calm yourself, Wilson.” Maximilian lightly hummed in a singsong tone.

Wilson’s face burned with frustrated embarrassment as he obediently obliged. He stepped back and looked down at his clipboard, steam practically rolling out of his ears.

“I came to offer you something,” Maximilian continued.

“Yeah, what?” Barry questioned then fired a quick burst of air from her lips to blow stray, snowy strands of hair from her face.

“A job.”

“Ooh, *do tell*.” Barry leaned forward, firmly clenching both of her wrapped fists. “What could it possibly be that the good doctor wants with little ol’ me?” She lowly snarled. “Especially after locking me in here with *bolt cuffs on!*” she shouted, thrusting up her pinned wrists.

She then pursed her lips together and spat on the concrete floor between them. “Whatever it is, I’m not interested.” She pointed once again with a single finger. “You can go fuck yourself.”

“Ah, I should have expected such bombastic defiance from you.” The doctor shrugged. “Very well. If you don’t wish to hear my offer, there’s not much else that can be done.”

He turned his back to her as if prepared to leave the cell, but he didn’t step away.

“I figured you of all people would want to preserve Samantha’s memory. I suppose I was wrong.”

Barry winced, staggering as though she’d just taken a punch to the gut. Her face turned pale as she reached out to him, spreading her fingers. “Wait,” she said coarsely before releasing a quivering exhale. “What . . . What did you say?”

“The opportunity, my dear.” Maximilian turned back to face Barry. “We made a little . . . *error* after Samantha’s death. I shan’t go into details, darling, but the long and short of it is, we made a husk.”

“A—husk?” Barry gulped and tilted her head. “C’mon, Doc, you gotta work with me here. I don’t understand.”

“In simpleton terms, a zombie.”

Barry stared in silence for a moment. She looked almost dumbfounded, almost insulted. But the color soon returned to her face. She sucked in her lips slightly as she fought a grin before snickering and bursting into a laughing fit.

The white-haired girl plopped back down on her bed and leaned the back of her head against the wall. “Good story, Doc!” She chuckled, then pointed toward herself with a thumb. “Of all the whacked-up shit we can do, Orphans *can’t* come back from the dead! Do you really think I’m *that* stupid?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Maximilian hummed.

“Ha-ha, Doc.” She huffed, squinting at the insult to her intelligence that she’d walked into.

“Ha-ha, indeed. Though I can assure you that I’m far from joking, Barricade.” Maximilian snapped his fingers and then held his hand out toward Wilson. “Dear boy, the photos.”

“Oh! Uh,” Wilson pushed his glasses up his nose and pulled a small file from beneath his arm. “Here you are, sir,” he announced, laying it in Maximilian’s palm.

Maximilian snatched the folder. “I’m sure you remember what she looked like, it hasn’t been very long since—”

“Since what?” Barry squinted and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “She was *murdered* by your goons?”

“I wouldn’t put it so black and white, but yes.” Maximilian cleared his throat and peeled the folder open. “Bone tendrils, sharp teeth . . .” he listed before twisting his wrist and holding the folder out in the air. “Does that look like the girl you knew?”

Barry’s heart sank a second time. Her smug facade had been fully stripped away as she laid eyes on her supposedly dead friend. The sight of the metal twisted her gut into a tight knot. “What . . .” She exhaled, her throat gurgling in disgust. “What did you . . .”

“As I *said*. That isn’t her, at least anymore,” Maximilian stated sorrowfully despite continuing to grin. “You can see that clear as day, can’t you? I’m sure even with your low intelligence you can figure that one out.”

“She never had any metal. . . .” Barry’s voice cracked.

She stared hopelessly at the photographs. The longer she looked, the more she could feel a hurricane of adrenaline and rage pulse through her heart. Was that really Samantha? Was she even human anymore?

“You son of a bitch . . .” She growled, launching to her feet. She stomped over and grabbed fistfuls of Maximilian’s lab coat. “You killed her, and now, she can’t even rest!?”

“You hardly need to worry, Barricade.” Maximilian chuckled. “It’s just her body. She no longer inhabits it.”

“And that’s better!?” she spat with her teeth gritted so intensely they weren’t far from cracking. Due to the awkward position in which the cuffs pinned her wrists, her grip was loose. Pins and needles ran across her skin as she began to shake, physically seething at the thought. “How is that even possible—”

“A little mental programming is all you really need to mimic human behavior,” Maximilian explained, tapping the side of his head.

“You . . . what!?” Barry roared.

“I admit, it was quite an oversight—”

“An oversight!?” Barry yelled, beginning to grind her teeth together. She wanted nothing more than to tear his head off. “You murdered my best friend, played god with her body, and it’s just an oversight!?”

Maximilian’s smirk didn’t once waver. His silence sickened Barry, and his grin told her he was nothing but satisfied with all of this. Her fingers grew numb, and she released her hold on his coat. She lowered her head in defeat and slumped back down against her bed.

“It appears I have your full attention, mazel tov.” Maximilian hummed. He held the folder back out to Wilson, which he immediately took and tucked away.

“Now then, about my offer . . .” the doctor said. He crouched down, getting on the teen’s level.

“What is it?” Barry asked, entirely avoiding his eyes by staring down into the concrete.

“*You* can be the one to preserve her memory by taking care of my little problem.”

“What?” Barry uneasily gasped. “You expect me to— But— If it looks like her, how am I supposed to . . .”

“Either you do it. Or my men do it.” Maximilian shrugged. “She can either be remembered as your little friend . . . or something my men scrape off the pavement.”

Barry gulped at the thought.

“She’s out there, likely attempting to blend in, and killing without thought,” Maximilian stated, fibbing to the girl’s face. “I need a decision, and I need it now.”

Barry’s thoughts ground to a halt. As if she were a child shoved on the playground, all she could feel was blind anger and gloom.

“I’m waiting.”

“I’ll . . . do it,” Barricade muttered without raising her head.

“Oh?” Maximilian hummed. “Splendid news.”

“Yeah, I bet . . .”

“In exchange for your help, I have a little gift for you,” Maximilian said.

“Huh?” Barry cocked an eyebrow and raised her head just enough to look at his shoes. “What would that be?”

“Wilson,” Maximilian called out, turning his head to the side.

“Yes, sir?”

“Take down a list of any and all items little Barricade here desires to complete her mission, and we’ll supply them to her. Relevance or importance doesn’t matter,” Maximilian ordered.

Wilson seemed almost puzzled as he glanced between the two. “Sir . . . anything?”

“That *is* what I said, isn’t it?” Maximilian inquired.

“Y-yes, sir,” Wilson stammered, stepping over toward Barry.

She raised her eyes but not her head. “Get that pen ready, tiny.”



“Where is Number Seventeen?” Diana questioned, standing at the head of the packed boardroom with Emma.

“Eryn is preparing her for temporary release. You know, like cell tidying and the sorts,” Emma explained, resting her hands on her hips.

“For a commander, you sure don’t have much spatial awareness,” Bonnie teased, poking Diana in the side.

Diana’s nose twitched, though she didn’t react much beyond that. “Weren’t you to be escorted here by guards?” she asked, leaning over her shoulder at the blonde.

“I was. But it was much faster to come at my own pace.” Bonnie smiled.

The air turned stagnant as each officer held their breath when the Orphan appeared out of thin air.

“C-Commander,” one of the two males from the Golf Squad stammered out.

“What is it?” Diana raised a brow at him.

“Isn’t that *thing* dangerous?” the man said, pointing at Bonnie.

“I dunno, you tell me.” Bonnie shrugged and vanished in yet another swift blur. “Lieutenant Mitchel Roman,” she read aloud, suddenly standing behind the man with a sly grin on her face. She placed her hand on his shoulder and underhanded something onto the table.

Roman glanced at the table and swallowed down a frightened squeal. It was his badge.

Bonnie snickered and released her gentle hold on him before stepping away.

“She’s only on the job as an informant. Having a previous relationship with the target makes Number Seventeen *essential* to tracking her down,” Diana explained.

“You could just call me by my name,” Bonnie teased as she stepped back up beside the commander.

Diana responded with a quiet grunt.

“I’m sure we’ll have no problem taking her down, ma’am. It’s been done before, we can do it again,” Eagle piped up.

“Eagle, you can’t be serious. She wiped out Victor Squad in *seconds!*” Briars countered.

“Victor was full of rookies with barely any service under their belts. They were dead before she even looked at them,” he coldly huffed.

“Eagle! That’s enough!” Emma barked.

Diana squinted at the man. Bravado was a scourge she wouldn’t allow to contaminate her unit. “You seem rather confident, Lieutenant,” she noted.

“It’s just some brat, nothing I can’t handle,” Eagle boasted with a shrug.

“Really?” Diana hummed before tossing a piece of scrap metal onto the table. It split in two upon making contact with the surface, though it was hardly held together in the first place. “You know what this is, don’t you?”

Eagle emotionlessly glanced at it while the rest at the table grew nervous at the sight. It wasn’t just scrap. It was a ballistic plate, the one from their vests, meant for blocking bullets and absorbing blows. . . . It had been torn in half.

“She’s not a helpless little girl who’s going to go down in one shot. She’s not some lost, scared child who’s going to be easy to catch,” Diana declared, pointing at the plate. “That was the *only* plate we recovered.”

“What do you mean . . . the *only* plate, ma’am?” Parker gulped.

“The rest suffered a similar fate to the squad wearing them, unrecognizable and in pieces,” Diana remarked. “Do you understand, Eagle?” She inquired. “Do *all* of you understand?”

The F.T.F. agents all nodded.

“That’s what I thought,” Diana stated. “Suit up, we leave in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am!” The room reverberated as they all rose to their feet, filling with the bustling of papers being tucked away and footsteps exiting through the door, until only the commander, Emma, Bonnie, and Parker remained.

“Captain?” Diana spoke, spotting the sole captain standing in the doorway. “Did you need something?”

“My apologies if this is out of line, ma’am.” Parker swallowed and sheepishly pointed toward Diana’s arm. “Are you sure you’re fit for combat?”

Diana knit her brows at Parker’s comment. Injuries hadn’t stopped her when she was serving in Afghanistan, and they wouldn’t stop her from hunting Samantha. “Don’t concern yourself with it,” she stated, flexing her fingers. “Get your squad ready.”

Parker nodded. “Understood,” she said before exiting.

Bonnie stood against the wall with her arms crossed. She stared Emma down, fighting the need to tap her feet out of impatience.

Emma stood in silence for a moment before noticing that Bonnie had been quietly staring at her for some time. *Right*. She cleared her throat. “Commander, I should probably prepare Bonnie for the operation.”

“You’re fine, go,” Diana said, attempting to scoop her papers up from the table. The lack of strength in her arm made it nearly impossible, causing her to mutter out a series of frustrated curses when she couldn’t even close her fist.

Emma hesitated on leaving, as though wanting to help, but seemed to decide against it. “Come on, Bonnie,” she stated, placing her hand on the blonde’s shoulder, and escorting her toward the door.

As the door slammed shut behind them, Bonnie gripped her chin and began to pace the width of the hall. “That’s a problem.”

“What is?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Bonnie asked. “Almost every single active agent on Site 9 was in that room.”

“Shit . . .” Emma exhaled. “You’re right . . .”

“They aren’t pulling any punches; they *really* want Sam dead.” Bonnie sighed. “She’s in more danger than we thought.”

“We’ll have to—” Emma stuttered, glancing around before grabbing Bonnie by the arm. She leaned in, her eyes darting about once more before she whispered, “We’re going to have to split off a lot faster than we initially planned.”

Bonnie nodded. She broke the hold on her arm by vanishing and appearing just ahead. She walked herself down the hall toward the armory. “Let’s keep playing along for now,” she said.

“Right,” Emma said, clearing her throat and following along behind the girl in orange.



“Sir, these items are, I must say, bordering on ridiculous,” Wilson stated. “A *pack of cigarettes, a lighter, a leather jacket, a bag of beef jerky?*”

“Sounds reasonable to me. Protein is their main source of energy,” Maximilian replied.

“Yes . . . sir, the jerky, but . . . the others?” Wilson pressed while skimming over the basket of items placed on Barry’s bed. “What do the others have to do with anything!?”

“Is there a problem, short stack?” Barry spoke from the other side of the room. “I thought I was told their relevance wasn’t important.”

“Correct you are. Wilson, unlock her cuffs,” Maximilian ordered.

Wilson turned pale as he looked back at his boss. “E-excuse me . . . sir?” he stammered.

“Unlock the bolt cuffs. She must be extremely uncomfortable,” Maximilian explained.

“Oh-ho . . .” Barry twitched. “You have no idea,” she growled, squeezing her fingers tightly into her palms.

“S-sir, I don’t think it’s wise to—” Wilson started but relented when he was met with Maximilian’s cold, heart-crushing stare. “As you . . . s-say, sir.” He stumbled forward, fishing in his pockets for a ring of keys.

“Relax, string bean,” Barry whispered, leering down at him as he approached. “I *probably* won’t break your arm.” She grinned.

He held up the ring and shakily slid the keys around before pinching one in the center. He didn’t take his eyes off Barry as his quivering hands struggled to insert the key into the lock. With a twist of his wrist, the cuffs snapped open. Each pin and bolt released from their pressurized state with a hiss of air before the heavy cuffs slammed against the floor.

“T-there,” Wilson gulped. “It’s d—”

Barry abruptly grabbed him by the throat and hoisted him into the air with ease. She reeled her other arm back, as if ready to strike him, but held off. For a moment, she merely tightened her fingers and watched him struggle.

Wilson kicked and wheezed, thrashing about in Barry’s grip as he choked. Her grip was vice-like, almost as if his throat was caught in an iron clamp. He frantically reached out for Maximilian, physically begging for aid as his words were inaccessible.

But Maximilian didn’t budge. The man didn’t even stand up straight. He just leaned against the doorframe, with the same aged, sickening grin on his face as always.

Barry exhaled and tempered herself before she did something completely reckless. “Relax,” she snarled, releasing her grip.

Wilson gasped, feeling tears well up in his eyes as he fell to his knees, coughing and gagging. His panicked, death-fearing cries filled the air as he clutched his throat while crawling away from Barry.

A sigh escaped her as she shook her head. "It's not like I was going to kill you." She turned, facing the bed. "You big baby."

Barry went to reach inside the basket but stopped and eyed the wrapping still covering her arms. Just as she went to tear it off . . .

"I'd keep those arms of yours hidden until you find the target," Maximilian stated, still watching Wilson helplessly writhe around on his hands and knees. "Unless you *want* attention drawn to yourself."

Barry grumbled in agreement, albeit reluctantly, as if agreeing with him in any way made her want to put a hole in the wall. "Fine," she spat, snatching the jacket from the basket. A slight smirk came across her face as she looked it over. It was black, with silver buttons and zippers, and it was quite obviously obscenely expensive.

"Pleased?" Maximilian inquired.

"Sure," Barry huffed, stifling her smirk as she slid on the jacket. Following it, she pinched the neck of a pair of boots from within and set them on the floor beside her. She slid her foot against one, narrowing her eyes. It was her exact size.

Wilson staggered to his feet, still wheezing but able to breathe. He wiped his eyes while rubbing his red, bruised neck with the other hand. "S-sir, why didn't—"

Without facing the boy, Maximilian audibly shushed Wilson by placing his index finger against his lips.

Wilson was taken aback by the gesture but did as he was told. He held his neck, kept silent, and looked back at the floor.

Barry pulled from the basket a small handheld mirror and a hair comb. She then shook her head, throwing her hair about. Raising the mirror, she began

to comb it, swooping it over and to the left. It already naturally rested this way, though now appeared less matted and was thoroughly combed through.

“Looking rather dashing already, I see,” Maximilian hollered.

“Can it,” Barry barked, dropping the items onto the bed. She then stuffed the jerky in one of her pockets and carefully popped the cardboard box of cigarettes open to pull one out. As she popped it in her mouth, she flicked the lighter open and cupped her lips. With the jerk of her thumb, a dim flame erupted and singed the end of the death stick, causing a thin line of smoke to begin climbing through the air.

Barry took a deep breath. “That’s good . . .” she murmured, slumping her shoulders as the nicotine quickly soothed her weary nerves.

“The only information we have is that she was struck by a semi-truck just outside of our facility, which we’ve identified and tracked the route of,” Maximilian explained. “She could have fallen from it at any point.”

“Nearest town?” Barry questioned, sucking in another puff of ash. She bent down and began to put on the new pair of boots.

“The city of Woodstock, that’s where the truck stopped for repairs. But there’s plenty of areas such as farms, gas stations, or even the woods where she may have fled—”

“Woodstock it is then,” Barry said, standing back up. She plucked the cigarette from her lips and stepped up beside Maximilian. “Can I go?” she hissed, firing a sideways glance at him.

“Will you need transportation?”

“No,” Barry snarled.

“Very well,” Maximilian stepped to the side, gesturing toward the hall.

Barry huffed and placed the cig back on her lip. “Don’t wait up,” she muttered, stepping past him.

“Oh, and Barricade,” Maximilian called out.

Barry sighed. She sharply breathed out a plume of smoke and then glanced back over her shoulder. “What?”

“Don’t hesitate . . . or you may wind up dead,” Maximilian declared.

Barry frustratedly sucked on the cigarette. She could feel his stupid smirk almost branding the back of her neck. “That’d be a real shame, wouldn’t it.”



“You’re *certain* this will work?” Diana questioned, relatively concerned at the prospect of literally squishing her bones back together. “This sounds ridiculous and painful.”

“I assure you. It . . .” Kelly began to look through her notes and nodded, “*should* work.”

Diana stared blankly ahead. “That doesn’t fill me with confidence.”

Kelly knelt beside Diana, adjusting some of the dozens of pins sticking out from a strange, black, metallic sleeve she’d slid over the commander’s busted arm. “If all of Eryn’s math is right—” She rolled her eyes. “Which it is,” she mumbled, “the sleeve will not only decrease the time it takes your arm to heal, but it will also strengthen it significantly. It’ll be like you never broke it.”

“That sounds too good to be true.”

“A lot of things we do here are too good to be true,” Kelly commented before ceasing her fiddling with the brace. “Commander, may I ask you a question?” she inquired, glancing up to Diana.

Diana hummed in acknowledgment, still staring straight ahead.

“I . . . understand you have a job to do. I understand the things that can happen if you don’t follow through with . . . your duties . . .”

“What are you driving at, Eleanor?” Diana thrummed as she called Kelly by her first name.

“I—” Kelly swallowed and took a breath, mustering up the courage to rise to her feet and reluctantly meet Diana’s gaze. “Does Samantha . . . really need to die?”

Diana’s eyes narrowed at the question.

“She’s just . . . She’s a little girl, and—”

Diana didn’t budge.

“I . . .” Kelly gulped. “N-nevermind . . .” she mumbled, stepping back to Diana’s side before proceeding to continue silently fiddling with the pins.

Diana’s eyes lowered. Kelly’s heart was in the right place; she’d always seemed a bit too soft for this line of work. Diana’s sense of duty conflicted with her sense of morality, and what burned brighter than both was her hatred for everything Maximilian had built.

“Eleanor,” she softly muttered.

Kelly’s eyes lit up hopefully. “Yes?”

“Are you almost done?”

Kelly’s face dropped almost immediately. “Oh. . . .” She sighed, looking down at the brace. “Yes, just a moment,” she said while affixing the final pin in place. “Done. Now to activate the brace,” she stated, walking about a foot back with what appeared to be a remote control in her hand. “Diana, I must warn you.”

“About?”

“This is . . . *probably* going to hurt.” Kelly winced. “Like, a lot.”

“Honestly, after the entirety of my life, including yesterday morning, I couldn’t care less,” Diana stated. “Get on with it.”

“Alright . . .” Kelly took a deep breath. “Three . . . two . . . one!” She squeaked, wincing as she pressed down on the switch.

Each pin simultaneously fired into Diana’s arm, piercing her flesh and shoving the shattered fragments of her ulna and radius back together.

Her eyes nearly blew out of their sockets. She stamped her feet against the floor, shoving the chair back nearly enough to tip it over. She wheezed and sucked in a breath through her clamped teeth, barely holding herself together as she stopped a shriek of unbridled agony from escaping her lips.

Following the pins, the brace itself clamped down to hold them in place.

The second wave of nerve-splitting pain was the worst, causing her to shoot up from the chair. Her muscles tightened as she stumbled to her side, right into Kelly's tool tray, scattering scalpels and extra pins all over the floor. She held herself back with every fiber of her being, forcing herself not to reach over and try to rip the thing off. She reached back for the chair but slipped and fell to a knee. She held her shrieking arm to her chest and locked her jaw, the strain so severe it threatened to burst her stitches.

"D-Diana!" Kelly called out, rushing to her side. "I-I'm sorry! I should have given you painkillers!"

"I—refused them—for a reason," Diana retorted, wheezing as trauma-riddled breaths rolled in and out of her lips. As the pain gradually faded, she pressed her left hand against the ground and closed her eyes, fighting a near-losing battle against her waning consciousness. Forcing her eyes back open, sweat poured from her face, dribbling against the floor like cascading bullet shells.

Diana dragged a foot forward and attempted to stand before slipping a second time. She threw an arm out, tightly grabbing hold of the chair as she stopped herself from faceplanting into the floor. She took several shallow, trembling breaths and began to finally hoist herself back up.

Kelly's body turned rigid and stiff, her eyes wide and staring as the commander rose. "It worked," she said, sounding entirely gobsmacked.

Diana glanced over, unsure of what Kelly meant at first as she focused on recovering from the bursts of pain. That was, until she realized the arm supporting her weight and holding onto the chair was her damaged one.

She slowly released the chair and eyed the brace, twisting her wrist as she analyzed it. The previously bulky, pin-dotted bracer now appeared as a sleek, tight sleeve wrapped around her entire forearm. “Impressive . . .”

“E-Eryn handled the mathematics. I just designed it,” Kelly stuttered, fiddling with her red plastic glasses.

“You have my thanks,” Diana stated, bending over and grabbing a towel that she’d knocked to the floor along with Kelly’s tools. She then proceeded to wipe the copious amount of glistening sweat from her face.

“Don’t mention it,” Kelly beamed as the commander steadily proceeded toward the door. “Ma’am . . . are you sure you don’t need anything?”

“The pain’s either already subsided, or I’m numb, so yes,” Diana answered, coming up to the door.

“Diana . . .” Kelly softly called.

Diana froze and hovered her hand over the handle. She exhaled, lowering her eyes as the conversation was inevitably steered back to Kelly’s request. “What?”

“Whatever you end up doing. Please, remember, beneath all of it . . . she’s just a child. . . .”

Diana squeezed her hovering hand into a fist. Her throat dried with pity, as she knew just how fond Kelly had grown of the little Orphan she’d fostered. But she knew she couldn’t let herself dwell on it. Hoping her silence would be enough of an answer, she grabbed the door handle and swiftly exited the lab.

“Just get this over with, Diana,” she softly said to herself before adjusting her posture and beginning to make her way down the hall.



Bonnie was restlessly pacing the empty armory. She was deep in thought, analyzing their predicament over and over again, however, each time she came to Samantha, it was like she hit a wall. She couldn't quite tell if it was a mental block or if it was a hunch that something was off.

"Something on your mind?" Emma asked, closing her locker and sitting back against an aluminum bench.

"A lot of things, actually," Bonnie said, stopping just in front of Emma.

"Well?" Emma queried, twisting her hand as if to coax the information out of Bonnie.

"Sam's patterns are *significantly* different," the blonde began. "She's far more direct. She gunned it for an exit the moment she got out."

"So . . . she's smarter?"

"More like . . . *focused*. She used to react like a cornered predator, and to a degree she still does, but before . . . it was more like an aggressive, internal hunger for dominance. It's why she and Barry butted heads *so much*."

"It's also what got her, y'know . . ." Emma gulped.

"Killed." Bonnie exhaled. "Yeah. It's not her fault . . ." The Orphan frowned. "She was never really able to control her instincts. Every time her eyes changed, I'd have to break up some sort of fight before somebody got themselves killed."

"Wait . . . her eyes?" Emma prodded.

"Yes. Our eyes, when they shift in color?"

"No, no, I know *that*." Emma scoffed. "When I saw Samantha, they weren't solid."

"What?"

Emma placed a finger beside her eye. "They kept . . . *flickering*."

Bonnie blinked. "You're serious?"

Emma nodded.

Bonnie nibbled on her lip, looking down as she took a moment to collect her thoughts. She never knew Samantha to fight against her instincts, especially when she was desperate. Perhaps something was different, possibly better, or terribly wrong.

“Bonnie? Are you alright?” Emma asked, leaning forward to try and meet Bonnie’s blank stare.

“Hm?” Bonnie hummed, glancing back up. “I’m fine.” She beamed. “Just processing is all.”

Their conversation was cut short as the entrance to the armory suddenly pulled open. There stood Diana, curiously eyeing the pair before stepping in and approaching her locker. “Is everyone prepped?”

“Yes, ma’am. They’re loading up the Humvees,” Emma replied.

“Good,” Diana said, reaching for her locker. “Why aren’t you with them?” She shot a sideways glance at Emma.

Emma winced and avoided her gaze. “No . . . reason, ma’am. Just needed time to think.”

“Don’t we all . . .” Diana mumbled to herself.

Bonnie watched as the commander pulled open her locker and quickly noticed that, as she began to pull out and adorn her newly replaced gear, she seemed to be going to great lengths to avoid looking at the door. The blonde leaned in to take a peek and smiled as she spotted a photograph taped to the door just under the magnetic mirror.

It was a photograph of Diana. Within it, she appeared much younger, possibly even over a decade younger. She looked noticeably pregnant and was holding a much smaller, shy-looking man. With identical rings and big smiles on their faces, they seemed like a typical happy couple.

“You two look excited,” Bonnie commented.

Diana stiffened upon noticing Bonnie's smile and nosey gaze. She glanced at the photo and sighed out her nose. As she finished pulling on her vest, her shoulders slumped slightly, and she reached up to grab the door.

"What did you two name . . ." Bonnie started but hit her brakes as she noticed something missing from Diana's hand—the ring. ". . . it."

"You talk *far* too much," Diana stated, punctuating her words by slamming the locker door shut.

Bonnie winced at the loud clatter of cheap metal but wasn't about to back down. "Maybe . . . but, I'm genuine," she assured. "We're all people at the end of the day, aren't we?"

"We're divorced," Diana answered bluntly, though Bonnie easily picked up on how close her voice was to cracking. It was as though merely mentioning it started to reopen old wounds.

Did she have a miscarriage? Was there some sort of accident? Bonnie mused, entirely unsure. But instead of prying any further, she fought against her own curiosity and decided to stay quiet.

"Hurry your asses up and get outside," Diana coldly ordered before stepping past Bonnie and heading back out through the entrance.

Once they were alone, Emma uneasily sighed and scratched the back of her head. "You . . . really shouldn't ever pry into Diana's private life."

"You don't say . . ." Bonnie muttered, still staring at the door as she continued to picture what might have happened. "She certainly seems sensitive about it."

"She's *incredibly* sensitive about it," Emma noted. "If you don't want the barrel of her gun in your face, I wouldn't bring it up again."

Bonnie frowned, as she wasn't usually one to deny her own curiosity. "But—" she started, turning to face the captain.

"Nuh-uh," Emma interjected, raising her hand and extending a finger to shush the other blonde. "No buts."

Bonnie's face reddened a bit, both in embarrassment and light frustration, but she knew well enough it wasn't her place to start digging.

Chapter Seven

Overdue Innocence

Over the evening, the frigid autumn air had practically magnetized the girls to one another. They'd have been shivering were it not for the warmth they shared in their embrace.

Samantha had fully sunk into Willow's arms, and as far as she knew, the little Orphan was entirely at peace. While Willow had woken up at least twice, Samantha seemed to not so much as stir once the entire evening.

Sometime in the early morning, Willow awoke for a third time. She purred partly as the cold air tickled her nose. It made her shiver slightly, though she moved little underneath Samantha's surprising weight.

She exhaled with a subtle grunt, a bit sore from Samantha lying directly on top of her, but she didn't seem to mind. She smiled loosely and pulled her hand up to pat the girl on the head. "What a big scary monster you are," she softly whispered with a snicker.

Willow slid to the side of her bed, out from underneath her newfound friend. She quietly stood and peered out her window. The morning was still young, and the yellow of the sun had yet to even graze the horizon. That fact gave her an ingenious idea.

Samantha finally began to squirm in discomfort. She didn't appreciate having her heat source thieved away. The longer she was left by her lonesome, the more she shivered and stirred. It wasn't long before her listless eyes peeled open and sent forth a soft blue glow over the sheets. She released a whine, appearing to have an inability to sleep without a companion.

“Look who’s awake,” Willow’s soft voice cooed, noticing the glow. She slid her flannel on and knelt beside the bed to meet Samantha’s tired eyes. “You slept like a rock.” She giggled. “I have a surprise for you . . . but I’m gonna have to cover your eyes until we get to it, alright?”

“Wha—” Samantha started, before cutting herself off with a yawn. Her tendrils curled up and around the headboard before slowly dragging her up to a sitting position. “Can’t we sleep some more?” she murmured, lethargically rubbing her eyes.

“You’ll really like it,” Willow whispered. “I promise,” she assured with a wink.

Samantha’s fingers tingled, and she sheepishly nodded. Doing as she was told, she moved off the bed to her feet. “You won’t let me bump into anything, w-will you?” she stammered.

Willow snickered, “Of course not.”

She reached down, softly grasping one of Samantha’s hands. Her other arm then slid over her shoulder before her hand blocked the Orphan’s view. “C’mon. It’s a bit of a walk.”

The two quietly trekked down the stairs and out the door. Despite the fact that her eyes were covered, Samantha could tell it was still dark out, mostly due to the excess chill in the air. She was confused and unsure of what could be so fascinating outside in the shadows.

“Are we there yet?” Samantha asked as they came to a halt, tightening her fingers around Willow’s hand.

“Yes. Just a little longer though until you can see it,” Willow declared, impatiently rocking back and forth in the grass.

The grass . . .

It took Samantha some time to register what it actually was. She could feel it snaking between and clinging to her toes, hugging the sides of her feet and tickling her soles.

Samantha's attention was stolen a second time by a sudden heat that draped over her body. She perked up, turning her head around a bit with Willow's hand still held over her eyes. The warmth was unlike that of the bed, heating her front yet not even grazing her back. It was familiar, but at the same time so . . . *foreign*.

"Alright." Willow beamed, slowly pulling her hand away from Samantha's face. "Take a look."

Samantha rapidly bat her lashes as a sudden influx of light assaulted her eyes. She quickly raised her hand, blocking the source to give herself time to adjust. As her vision returned to her, she slowly lowered her hand then suddenly gasped. She felt as though energy had beamed directly through her skin, stripping away the circles beneath her eyes and the lethargy plaguing her body.

A burning mass of pinks, yellows, and oranges illuminated the horizon, gleaming across the clouds and coating the farm in a dazzling spectacle of light.

"A . . . s-s . . . sunrise?" she stammered, refusing to blink as she stared at the vista before her.

"I figured you'd like to see one," Willow smiled and softly rubbed the back of Samantha's hand with her thumb.

The Orphan's words were completely stolen. Though she'd already spoken little, the glory of the early morning sun made her wish to speak even less. Nothing else made her realize how truly alone she'd been in those walls. Of all the things she'd missed, this was by far the greatest.

She fell onto her rear in the grass and continued to watch as the sun rose. She hardly noticed time slip past her, as seconds turned to minutes. Before she knew it, the sun had climbed even higher, though not high enough to burn her eyes.

“Where I’m,” Samantha gulped. “Where *we’re* from . . .” She exhaled, leaning her head back and gazing at the clouds painted in soothing pinks. “There’s no sun . . . no grass, no one who . . .” She choked, quivering as she pushed out the last word, “cares.”

“I care.” Willow smiled, placing her other hand over their linked fingers. “I care more than you think.”

“Why?” Samantha sniveled, using little strength to pull her hand away from Willow.

Willow frowned curiously, as though she’d never been asked something so simple before. “*Why*,” she repeated, facing the sun and placing her palms behind herself on the grass. “To be honest . . . I don’t think I really know.”

Samantha hugged her knees to her chest and peered sideways at Willow through small gaps in her hair.

“Maybe it’s ’cause I just like helping people. . . .” Willow softly speculated, a smile returning just as quickly as it had left. “Maybe it’s because aiding in other people’s happiness makes me feel good.”

“What about . . . your own?” Samantha asked.

“Am I not happy right now?” Willow giggled, looking back toward Samantha. The smile on her face shone nearly as radiantly as the sunrise illuminating them both.

Samantha eased up and released her legs. She hesitantly placed her palms on the grass, mimicking Willow’s position, and looked back toward the glorious morning sun.

“I know Roxy is afraid that people will come looking for you. But, even if they do, I won’t have regretted a thing.”

“You . . . won’t?” Samantha mumbled.

Willow gently slid her hand across the grass, lightly touching Samantha’s fingers with her own. As their young eyes met, she tilted her head and whispered, “Of course not.”



Roxanne rolled onto her side, still stuck in the alluring trance of a deep slumber. She'd finally managed to stay asleep after an almost endlessly restless night. Several times, she'd shot up in a cold sweat, stampeding up the stairs to check on her sister, only to find two young girls each time, sleeping quietly in each other's embrace.

The nightmares were almost the same each time: some horrid fate befalling Willow at Samantha's hand, and sometimes someone else's. Despite panicking each time, she was able to calm herself after checking on the pair.

It perplexed her beyond reasoning. How could something look so monstrous, yet be so harmless? But after the fifth or so time she'd woken up, she began to realize . . . Samantha's fangs and tendrils were about as important as the songs she'd be dancing to the coming evening.

Roxanne jittered before jerking awake once more, though not at the fault of her nightmares. The television was emitting a shrill, ear-shredding shriek as a line of text ran across the center.

The Orphanage Foundation approves this message. Do not turn off your device.

She grumbled to herself, squinting at the black screen and white text. This wasn't like any emergency alert she'd seen, especially considering they had just gotten through tornado season.

"Orphanage . . . Foundation?" She hummed curiously, reading the text aloud as it scrolled for a third time. She noticed a symbol in the background, a circle with a cross. It was simple, yet something about it made her spine tingle in unease.

As the graphics changed, a Bitcrushed voice began to accompany the text appearing on the screen.

The Orphanage Foundation has been permitted to issue this alert on behalf of the Massachusetts State Government. Please stand by.

“Willow!?” Roxanne called out, leaning against the couch and looking back through the kitchen. She waited a moment. No response. They were probably still asleep.

Do not be alarmed. We are an organization dedicated to your safety. Police presence in the area has been reduced, and Foundation personnel are being deployed to contain a breach. If you encounter any strange females between the ages of thirteen and eighteen who bear abnormal physical features, contact your local police immediately, and you will be redirected to our temporary phone line.

Roxanne then glanced at a nearby landline on her coffee table and, for a moment, considered picking it up.

These are not children. They are highly dangerous anomalous entities and will kill on sight. Do not engage with them in any capacity, be it speech or eye contact. If they attempt to approach you, or speak to you, run as far as you can and contact us immediately. Foundation personnel will respond accordingly.

The broadcast concluded with the same large hollow white circle that had been in the background. It was flickering in the center of the screen, with a white cross fading into view inside of it. The symbol held for about half a minute before cutting to static rather than whatever must’ve been playing before.

Roxanne was numb. Not only were there people looking for Samantha, but they just lied to the entire county. At least . . . she was pretty sure they had lied. How could she believe a word of what they said when Samantha hadn’t even shown a hint of aggression so far?

She rose up, quickly looking around the room for *something* to distract herself before she had a full-blown panic attack. “What if they aren’t lying?” She wheezed, glancing toward the landline once again. “What if . . . What if Willow’s in danger!?”

She began to pace with no specific direction in mind, and just as her stress began to reach its peak, she stopped behind the couch right before a large bay window. She planted her hands against the glass, staring out into the lawn.

Samantha and Willow were out there sitting together, leaning on each other and just watching the sunrise.

Roxanne stepped back. “She’s harmless,” she murmured, lowering her hands to her side. A soft whimper escaped her lips. She didn’t know what to do. . . .



“Hey, Sam?”

Samantha had lost herself in the moment, having completely melted into Willow’s side. “Huh?” She hummed, peering up past the girl’s shoulder.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Samantha sat up straight. “A-anything,” she stammered, nodding quickly while holding her hands to her chest.

“Why do your eyes do that . . . thing?” Willow curiously inquired, though she avoided directly looking at Samantha, possibly realizing the question was likely personal.

Samantha’s face scrunched, perplexed as to why it mattered. “Glow?”

“N-no,” Willow stuttered. “I mean, yes! But—”

“But?” Samantha said, raising a brow.

“What I meant was why do they . . . flicker?” Willow questioned with a tilt of her head.

“Oh . . .” Samantha dug her nails into her palms. “That. I don’t know much about it, but . . .” she mumbled. “I don’t even like thinking about it. I worry that it’ll . . .”

“It’ll . . . what?”

“I don’t . . . I don’t know,” Samantha whimpered. “When they change, I feel like I’m just being dragged along. It’s like I’m just . . . moving without thinking. Like everything I’m doing, in that moment, is to protect myself. But I’m not the one doing it.” She gulped, quivering at the bodily disconnect she so vividly recalled. “I almost can’t even breathe when it’s happening. It’s like I’m being controlled by another . . . *me*. I get so violent, a-and defensive,” Samantha stammered, her tendrils tightly constricting around her waist, the same tendrils that so easily swept their blades through flesh as if merely parting melted butter.

Willow seemed to be speechless, as though she’d begun to piece together what Samantha had done by her words alone. But it didn’t seem to bother her, as she scooted across the grass to close the distance between them.

“I’m scared of myself,” Samantha suddenly whimpered, glancing over to Willow. “I don’t want to hurt anybody. . . .”

The farm girl then scooped up Samantha’s cheeks in her hands. “Shh,” she cooed. “No one is going to make you hurt anyone.”

Samantha held her breath. Her cheeks began to burn ever so slightly in embarrassment as she was forced to look Willow directly in the eyes.

“Roxanne and I will make *sure* that nobody finds you,” Willow explained. “We’ll keep you safe, I promise,” she assured, gently wiping the misty bags beneath Samantha’s eyes with her thumbs. “Okay?”

Samantha sniffled and nodded. “I wasn’t always like this,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Willow asked.

Samantha glanced downward as her tendrils uneasily shifted.

“I mean . . . I kind of figured you weren’t born that way.” Willow chuckled.

“Well . . .” Samantha smiled, almost snickering at the tease. “No . . . I wasn’t, but I mean—” She ran her fingers against the cables. “All . . . *metal-like*.”

“What were you like before?”

“Boney,” Samantha recalled.

“*Boney?*”

“My skeleton and all four of *these* were at one point. Now all that I’ve got left is . . .” Samantha hooked the corner of her lip with her finger, briefly showing off her pearly whites along with her fingernails.

“Nothing else?” Willow frowned.

Samantha plucked her finger from her mouth and shook her head.

“What happened?” Willow asked hesitantly.

“I don’t remember much . . .” Samantha sighed. “But I remember *her*. . . I remember what she smelled like, even amid the stench of gunpowder.” She growled.

“Her?”

“*Diana*.” Samantha snarled, her hot breath seeping through her teeth. She held her eyes shut in an attempt to calm herself, lest her eyes begin to shift again.

“What did she do?”

“She’s the reason I didn’t escape the first time.” Samantha grimaced. “I remember her shouting. I remember the flash of their guns. Then the next time I woke up, I . . .” She opened her eyes. If she kept them closed, she’d start to visualize it.

“Pins, everywhere, poking me all over. I couldn’t breathe. . . . I couldn’t see myself, or my body, but I felt like I was just . . . falling apart.”

“Oh my god,” Willow softly gasped, covering her mouth in shock.

Samantha sat quietly, calming down after her frightening recollections. She was looking off toward the sun as it now hung rather high, the beautiful pinks of its rise now gone. She slumped back against Willow and nestled her head into her side before mumbling, “Willow?”

“Yeah?”

“Am I . . . scary?” she asked.

“Scary?”

“Are you afraid of me?” Samantha whimpered.

“Absolutely not,” Willow stated confidently. “If anything, you remind me of a reaper!”

Samantha whined a bit, “Is that bad? It *sounds* scary. . . .”

“No, no! It’s not! Reapers are . . . like, big skeleton guys in black cloaks with a scythe! Like the ones you have on your . . . tentacles?” Willow hummed, almost unsure of what to call them.

“Oh . . .” Samantha frowned.

“Some people are afraid of them, but I think they look cool!” Willow beamed, grabbing Samantha’s hands. “Just like I think you look cool!”

Samantha’s eyes twinkled slightly. Did Willow really mean that? “You think I look . . . c-cool?”

“Cooler than anyone I’ve ever met,” Willow said, curling her fingers against Samantha’s.

“Can you,” Samantha gulped, “show me what a reaper looks like?”

Willow giggled and rose to her feet, practically dragging Samantha up with her. “I’m going to show you a lot of things.”



As the two walked into the foyer, hand in hand, it didn’t take long for Willow to notice Roxanne’s footsteps upstairs. “Roxy?”

“Yeah?” Roxanne bellowed from up the steps in her own bedroom.

“Are you going to sleep some more?” Willow asked.

“Probably,” Roxanne replied, walking out to the banister. She’d finally changed her outfit from last night, having put on a brown flannel and jeans. “Though . . . not for very long. I’m picking up a lunch shift today at work.”

“Lunch shift? Why?” Willow asked, almost dumbfounded as to why a strip club would even be *open* for lunch.

“Drunk horny businessmen, that’s why. It’s Friday, they get a little too excited for the weekend and—” Roxanne cut herself off and knit her brows while staring down at Willow. “Why am I telling you this? Shouldn’t you be getting ready for school, young lady?”

“But who will look after Sam?” Willow feverishly questioned.

“I don’t want to be alone. . . .” Samantha muttered, lowering her head and tightening her grip on Willow’s hand.

Roxanne sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose as she accepted Willow’s begging almost immediately. She didn’t have the time, nor the patience, to argue. “I’ll call the school and tell them you’re sick. But you gotta get Sam ready over the weekend to be on her own! You *can’t* miss any more school, got it?”

“Yes, Roxy!” Willow beamed. “Thank you, thank you!” She giggled, squeezing Samantha’s hand, prepared to drag her off to the living room. But before she could, Roxanne released a shrill whistle to maintain her sister’s attention.

“One more thing! *Don’t* take her outside during the day. Got it?” Roxanne ordered without a hint of flexibility in her tone.

“I . . . But—” Willow whined, but stopped, recognizing the seriousness in Roxanne’s tone. “I understand.”

Roxanne nodded. “Good . . .” With a sigh, she turned and listlessly stepped back toward her room.

“I’m gonna be on my own?” Samantha questioned with a growing frown.

“On Monday, probably,” Willow admitted, beginning to haul Samantha through the kitchen and to the living room. “Unless I can convince Roxy to let me take one more day off.” She snickered. “But I’ll make sure you’re ready either way!”

“I-I don’t know if I’m ready to be on my own again. . . .”

“It’s okay. School only lasts into the afternoon anyway. By three, I’ll be back here with you.” Willow reassuringly explained, releasing Samantha’s hand and rounding the couch. “But for now,” she plopped down on the seat, “we’ve got a whole weekend!”

“What do you do on a . . . *weekend?*” Samantha slurred, as if never once uttering the word.

“A lot of the time I just kinda futz around on my phone, y’know?”

“What’s a phone?” Samantha asked, cocking her head to the side.

Willow reached into her pocket and pulled out a sleek black cellphone in a squishy gray case. She held it in front of Samantha just after the girl sat down then clicked the power button. The sudden flash of the screen startled Samantha at first, but she quickly became intrigued.

“Is it a light?” Samantha questioned before raising her hand up and quickly poking at the screen. “Oh,” she squeaked as the background faded and a keypad came up. She proceeded to press the number one four times until the phone buzzed that it was the incorrect combination.

“This is to keep people from getting into it, but I’ll show you how,” Willow radiated before pressing the numbers zero, one, two, and two. “See!” she cheered before turning the phone off and holding it out in front of the reaper. “Try it out.”

Samantha watched as the screen lit up once again, but as she reached to touch it, she stopped and stared at the background. It was a picture of the farm during a sunset. “What’s with the picture?” she asked quietly.

“Huh?” Willow hummed and glanced down at the phone. “Oh! That’s just a background. You can make it any picture you want!”

“Any picture?” Samantha inquired, almost in awe.

“Sure! Here, watch,” Willow said as she unlocked her phone. She pulled up her camera and then held it out in front of them both. She then placed her arm firmly around Samantha’s shoulders. “Smile, Sam!”

Samantha couldn't help but grow flustered at being suddenly grabbed. Before she knew what was happening, the photo had been taken.

Willow proceeded to pull up the image and set it to both her lock and home screen backgrounds. "Look!" She beamed, pressing the home button to exit the app.

Samantha's eyes lit up. She thought she looked a bit silly being so red in the photo. But she couldn't remember a time, if any, that she'd ever even *been* in one aside from Foundation mugshots.

"Do you like it?" Willow asked, prodding Samantha's shoulder.

Samantha sheepishly nodded.

Willow smiled brightly then proceeded to stuff her phone away. "Now then, I could just search up a picture of a reaper . . . or I could show you the one on my posters!"

"There's one on those?" Samantha asked, slightly surprised that she hadn't noticed it before.

"Do you want me to show you later?" Willow softly inquired. "For now, we can just sit here and watch TV!"

"T . . . V?" Samantha said as she watched Willow scoop up an odd black rectangle. She stared curiously as Willow pressed a button, and the strange black box across the room illuminated. She leaned back against the couch once she realized it looked like Willow's phone.

Before she even knew it, she'd been fully captivated by the nature program playing, and minutes had flown by. But she was suddenly caught off guard as it was interrupted by . . . pizza?

"What happened to the animals?" Samantha softly whined.

"Huh?" Willow glanced back at Samantha then off toward the television. "Oh," she gestured toward it with the remote, "that's just a commercial."

"A . . . co-mmer-shal?" Samantha mouthed, squinting at it. "What's that?"

“Companies make them to try and get people watching to buy their stuff,” Willow explained.

Samantha huffed. “But I don’t care.”

“No one ever does.” Willow snickered.

Following several more excruciating minutes of infomercials, Samantha’s happiness was restored as the footage of tigers and lions returned to the screen.



After roughly a half hour, the program concluded. Willow was noticeably antsy, and upon the completion of the show, began showing Samantha around the house while educating her on her daily activities. From how to microwave a bag of popcorn, to doing laundry, no matter how mundane the task, Samantha watched with eager eyes, and after hours of wandering the house, they ended up back in Willow’s room. The two were standing before some of her posters, notably one of a band featuring a boney grim reaper as their mascot.

Willow, proud of her posters, eagerly sought Samantha’s reaction to them. But she quickly found that Samantha seemed more unnerved than anything.

“That’s . . . what I remind you of?” Samantha murmured, staring uncomfortably into its soulless black eyes.

“Not literally.” Willow snickered, before pointing right at the reaper’s scythe. “That mostly!”

Samantha’s upper-right tendril steadily slithered over her shoulder, before laying its blade in her hands. She slowly ran her fingers along its sharp edge. “And they . . . don’t make you uncomfortable?”

Willow grinned ear to ear. “Not in the slightest.”

“You . . .” Her cheeks flushed as she recalled Willow’s earlier words. “Really think I’m cool?”

“Cooler than anyone I’ve ever met.” Willow maintained. “I’ve never met a girl like you, Sam.”

Samantha’s fingers tightened around her tendril’s fixed blade. She almost hugged it to her chest. She could feel her pulse through her fingers against the cold metal as her heart rippled from her newfound friend’s kind words. Staring down at it, for the first time, it wasn’t an eyesore. Maybe her looks weren’t so bad after all. . . .

Chapter Eight

Contact

Another chilling evening, another long-held embrace to conserve the limited warmth beneath their covers. Samantha could easily get used to this. To her, Willow's arms acted almost like a dream catcher, strangling the evil thoughts and fears that tried to assail her in the night. If this was what sleeping beside someone granted, she never wanted to let go of it.

Just as the day before, Willow had awoken early. But this time before leaving, she ensured Samantha was warm and snug with an extra blanket and a pillow to snuggle.

Willow then trekked down the stairs and greeted her groggy, frizzy-haired sister before they both began to work on breakfast. After roughly an hour, the two had produced a plentiful amount of food. But as much as she wanted to dive right in, she figured it'd be best to make sure Samantha was awake.

She wandered back upstairs and into her room, only to find that Samantha must've been up for some time. She was not only awake but stretching on top of the bed with the flexibility of a feline. She was face down against the sheets, pushing herself along the length of the mattress with her hands. Her legs were spread apart, nearing a full split. If her feet went any further, she'd slide right off the bed.

Samantha firmly palmed the sheets and began to lower her waist while pushing her front upward. Her back crackled as she began to arch it, which only egged her to bend herself further. A relieved groan slipped past her lips as years' worth of tension dissipated like dumbbells rolling off her shoulders.

Caught up in her stretch, she didn't immediately notice Willow observing her. But upon spotting the farm girl, she froze mid-contortion.

"Willow!" Samantha gulped, a blush wiping across her face as though she'd been slapped with a paintbrush. "I was j-just—"

"I didn't know a person could bend like that," Willow admired, setting her phone on a nearby dresser. "I can't even touch my toes." She snickered.

Samantha's tendrils slithered back around her hips, and she lowered her head, using her thick black hair as a shield to hide the grief of embarrassment. "I've always been able to."

"I was just checking to see if you were awake. You were sleeping like a baby," Willow teased.

"I-is that bad?" Samantha whimpered.

"No, not at all!" Willow exclaimed. "You looked so cute! All bundled up in those blankets."

Samantha couldn't handle Willow's gushing; it was making her all tingly and confused. "Well . . ." she whined, "the bed was warm . . ."

"There's no shame in enjoying cuddling, Sam." Willow snickered. "When I was little and got too old to snuggle with Roxanne, she was very upset. She used to call me her little blanket heater, hehe."

Samantha peered up through her hair. "Cuddling?" she quietly asked. "That's what cuddling is?"

Willow nodded.

Samantha swallowed nervously. "I like it. . . ."

"Just don't tell Roxanne I'm letting you snuggle me. She'll get jealous," Willow joked. "Oh!" She hummed and placed her hands on her hips. "Breakfast is getting cold! Roxanne and I made a lot of food in consideration of your appetite. You're hungry, ain'tcha?"

Samantha's tendrils tightened around her gut as her stomach softly groaned at the mere mention of food. "I-I guess."

Then suddenly, like a housecat skittish to any change in its environment, Samantha seized at the sudden shriek of an unfamiliar chime. Her tendrils quickly unfurled as she rolled forward off the bed and onto her feet. “What was that!?” she hissed, her cheek twitching as her eyes began to thirst, desiring to shift their hue. In an attempt to stop it, she raised her hand and lightly smacked the side of her head with her wrist.

“C-calm down,” Willow stammered out. “That’s just the doorbell.” She hummed as the chime echoed throughout the house again.

“Something’s wrong. . . .” Samantha wheezed, her skin quickly prickling in alarm. She was staring wide-eyed past Willow and out toward the stairway banister, which was barely visible from the doorway.

“It’s alright!” Willow proclaimed. “I’ll go check it, okay?” She cooed and gently waved her hands in a feeble attempt to ease Samantha’s nerves. “Take a deep breath. . . . Everything is fine, it’s probably just the mailman—”

“No, Willow!” Samantha called out, reaching for her, but by then Willow had already stepped out of the room and down the stairs.

Samantha ran after her and slid down to her knees in front of the banister. She peered down the flight, grabbing hold of the rails as she watched Willow make her way to the door.

“Sam,” Willow sighed, smiling back up the staircase in an attempt to ease the girl’s uncertainty. “I promise. It’ll be alright.”

As the chime rang yet a third time, Roxanne stomped over from the kitchen, gunning straight for the door. “Jesus Christ!” she shouted out, grabbing the door handle. “Stop ringing my goddamn doorbell!” She tore the door open, only to find her vitriol to be smacked away and replaced with soul-crushing anxiety.

Samantha lowered herself extremely cautiously and proceeded to slide backward against the floor, as if trying to slither out of sight. The three individuals standing at the door were none other than F.T.F. agents, though she

didn't recognize any of them. Despite that, the red-headed woman standing between the two men rubbed her the wrong way, as if her smile were disingenuous.



"Can I help you?" Roxanne snarled, practically spitting venom as she tried to simultaneously gulp down her concern.

"Roxanne? Who's at the door?" Willow called out, approaching her sister.

"Willow. Go upstairs," Roxanne ordered.

"Hello," the redhead hummed, smiling as she met Willow's eyes. "I'm Captain Annette Parker. My friends and I just have a few questions for the both of you."

"Anything you have to ask, *I* can answer," Roxanne barked, physically stepping between them. "Willow," she stated, peering over her shoulder. "Go. Upstairs," she spat out a second time.

Willow backed up, but once Roxanne turned back to the door, her curiosity caused her to stay put.

"There's no need to be hostile," Parker assured, raising both her hands possibly as a display of friendliness, but Roxanne saw it for what it was . . . a ruse.

"I can think of a few reasons," Roxanne hissed, eyeing the firearms Parker's companions were carrying.

"We don't mean any harm. We're just here to ask some questions."

"Like what?"

"We're looking for a young girl—"

"Yeah, I saw the emergency alert," Roxanne remarked, crossing her arms and leaning against the doorframe.

“Yes . . .” Parker winced. “It’s pertinent that we find her before anyone gets hurt.”

“So you can ‘*terminate*’ her, as your guys put it?” Roxanne took a step forward to purposely invade Parker’s space, forcing the captain to lean back a bit. “This community doesn’t particularly like it when a *child* is demonized on television.”

“So I’ve noticed . . .” Parker sighed, lowering her hands. “The situation is much more complicated than you’d think. We don’t want to waste any of your time, or ours. If you answer our questions, we’ll be out of your hair.”

“Fine,” Roxanne huffed, frustratedly digging her nails into her forearms. “Shoot.”

“Have you seen a young girl with black hair and . . . *noticeable* extra appendages?” Parker inquired.

Willow nervously gulped.

“No,” Roxanne said without even batting an eye.

“Do you have any idea what tore up all that grass near your driveway?”

“Tired truckers veer off and rip it up with their tires all the time. It’s really annoying, actually,” Roxanne murmured. “Could’ve been a deer getting plowed. I don’t know, I was working.”

“I see. . .” Parker hummed. “So you’re *sure* you haven’t seen anything strange around here?”

“Yes,” Roxanne seethed, pinching her arms with her fingers so hard she’d begun to scratch herself. “Would you mind getting off of my property now?”

“Yes, yes,” Parker waved. “If you see anything, contact your local authorities, and they’ll alert us.” She placed her hands on her hips and turned to the side as if about to step away. “Our target is *dangerous*. We’re only trying to protect the citizens of this county. I hope you can understand that.”

“She’s not dangerous!” Willow shrieked from behind Roxanne, likely having had enough of their lies but not realizing that she’d just swung the door open.

Roxanne felt horror bolt through her chest. Her face went pale and her lips tightly pursed. She avoided eye contact with Parker as she stepped back toward the door, staring blankly over her shoulder and out into the lawn.

“Come again, kid?” Parker inquired, glaring past Roxanne at the teenager.

Willow held her breath in regret, finally realizing her mistake, albeit far too late.

Parker stood still for a moment as a sudden hush of silence befell them. She was staring, as if sizing up the two while processing Willow’s words. She slightly leaned back and then ordered over her shoulder to the men behind her: “She’s here. Cuff them both.”

Roxanne immediately bounded forward, shoving Parker back into her men before shrieking over her shoulder, “Willow, run!”

It did little to stop them as the other two stomped in past Parker after she steadied herself. One of them roughly grabbed Roxanne by the arm. She protested, trying to push him off, but his broad physique made it almost impossible for Roxanne to even put a dent in his stance.

“R-Roxy!” Willow cried, reaching out and taking a step forward. “Leave her alone!” But once the second man locked eyes with her, her muscles locked up. Her mind was screaming to run, but her body wouldn’t budge an inch.

As he began to approach, Roxanne watched as her sister’s legs practically liquefied into helpless, fear-stricken jelly. “Don’t touch her!” Roxanne screamed, thrashing around in the other man’s grip before he ended up pinning her arms behind her back.

“S-s-stay away from me!” Willow shrieked before wobbling and falling to her knees.

Roxanne began to panic, taking in labored breaths, helpless to come to her sister's aid. She had to do something. *Someone* had to do something.

Before any of them could even blink, Samantha had shot down the stairs and hammered her weighty fist into the man's core. Her small but dense and callused knuckles bashed a dent into his chest, folding his armored vest as though it were mere construction paper.

His throat tightened as he was forced to spit up the air from his lungs. Thrown from his feet, he helplessly tumbled against the withering floorboards, landing nearly hard enough to go through the floor itself. He writhed for but a moment, gasping as he clutched his chest. The inwardly crumpled plate made it difficult to replace his lost air, and in a few seconds, his eyes rolled back and he lost consciousness.

Parker stumbled back with a frightened gasp. "Roman!" she cried out before quickly reaching for her mic and screaming into it: "Number Nineteen is here!"

Samantha carried her momentum forward, now rampaging toward Roxanne's attacker. With a swift twist of her torso, one of her tendrils swung down and tore into the man's shoulder. She jerked him away from the woman and snapped two other tendrils upward, cracking him across the face with them.

Parker's heart dropped to her stomach before rebounding back up into her chest, reminding her not to let herself falter to fear. She snatched her sidearm off her hip and quickly trained it on Samantha. "You little—"

"You want me!" Samantha yelled, holding her arms and tendrils out in defense of the siblings. "Leave. Them. *Alone.*"

"Sam, don't!" Willow cried. But before she could even move, Roxanne clasped a hand over her lips.

Roxanne was trembling at the possibility of a fire starting in her house. With her eyes wider than full circles, she stared down at Willow and tight-

ened her grip. She was wrought with thoughts of her worst nightmare: *losing Willow*. The only thing she had on her mind was to *protect* the only thing she had left.

“Get in the car, now,” she whispered.

Parker’s trigger finger began to grow antsy. “Anyone found harboring *you* is considered a threat and will be treated the same.”

“You can’t be serious!” Samantha yapped.

“If you really cared about them, you wouldn’t have dragged them into this!” Parker shouted.

Samantha clamped her jaw and her secondary set of teeth shot out like a collection of switchblades. “If you touch a hair on their heads . . .”

“You’ll kill me? Like you did Evan’s entire squad!?”

Samantha’s nose twitched and she rolled her shoulders back. Willow already had some idea, but Roxanne didn’t. . . . She likely didn’t want them to find out what she’d done this way, but there was no stuffing that cat back in the bag now.

She slowly balled her clammy hands into fists. “I . . .”

“You could have incapacitated them.” Parker scowled. “You could have just run past, but you didn’t, and you turned them into butcher’s scrap! And now,” she shouted, waving her gun in the air, “because of *you*, Evan doesn’t remember anything!”

“What?” Samantha squinted in confusion. She didn’t know who Evan was let alone how his memory was any of her concern.

“They had to give him a massive dosage of the second-highest grade Mem-Narc we *have*,” Parker mewled, her grip loosening in grief. “He doesn’t remember anything about his service. But it’s not like that matters to you!” she shrieked.

Samantha’s fangs sparked as she ground them while listening to the attacks on her character. Perhaps it was that she didn’t want to be painted in

a bad light before her two new friends, or that she was tired of being pushed around. “What would you have rather I done!?” she barked back, snapping her maw.

Her sudden confidence seemed to startle Parker enough for her to take another step back.

“Give up!? Let them take me back to that concrete box!?” Samantha loudly lashed out.

“At least then no one would have gotten hurt! But you . . .” Parker snarled, emphasizing her words by retightening her grip. “You had to be *selfish*.”

“You’d better get off of that high horse before I smack you down myself!” Roxanne suddenly shouted, stomping up just beside Samantha.

Parker winced and turned, now unsure of who to train her weapon on. “Excuse you—”

“Excuse *me*?” Roxanne rebutted. “Do you not have mirrors in that fucked-up world of yours!?”

Samantha quickly glanced over, looking up at Roxanne as the woman stood at her side. A soft breath slipped past her lips as her jaw loosened, as though shocked that Roxanne would defend her after that revelation.

“You obviously haven’t looked at yourself in a *long* time if you can stare a child in the eyes and tell her *she’s* selfish for wanting to be rid of you maniacs,” Roxanne accused.

“She’s a murderer!”

“She’s a *child!*” Roxanne fumed, almost itching to step forward and punch the woman if she wasn’t brandishing a weapon. “And you’re the *real* monster.”



“Roger that, Commander, I’ll alert Captain Pierce,” Briars replied, before clipping the handheld mic back onto their Humvee’s radio unit. She slid herself from the seat and out the open door of the vehicle before stepping off toward the others.

The squad lay in wait at a gas station, awaiting the word to move, which Briars had just received. Eagle was refueling the vehicle, and the other three sat at a picnic bench just outside the minimart.

The jingle of a small bell mounted over the door rang as Emma pushed it open from the inside. Out she stepped with Bonnie, both wielding hotdogs slathered with an unnecessary amount of toppings.

“Thank you again!” Emma said, waving to the store clerk as the door closed. “*Nothing* like a good ol’ Chicago dog, kid. . . . Can’t find this stuff out here in Massachusetts! This is the only place,” she boasted as though declaring the location of a buried fortune.

Bonnie snickered, raising it in an attempt to inspect the odd meat hidden beneath a mound of onions, relish, and peppers. “Chicago? That’s where you’re from?”

“Born and raised!” Emma beamed, shining with pride. “Though it’s . . . kinda gone downhill.” She grimaced but quickly shook her head to dispel thoughts of home. “Go on, try it, you’ll like it!”

If Bonnie could roll her eyes down her throat, she would have. But it was time for her to taste this strange . . . *concoction*. She parted her lips, and after taking a nip out of the dog, each distinct flavor steamrolled over her tongue. She couldn’t tell if it was disgusting or delicious. The pickled relish argued with the heat of the peppers, but both conflicted with the saltiness of the meat itself.

“So what do you think?” Emma inquired, eyeing the frozen blonde staring at the hot dog. “Good, right?”

Bonnie lowered the hot dog and eyed it with an almost innocent smile. “Emma, you know, even though Dad hated me, he always kept my sister and I well-fed. He had the money, after all. Though after being forced to eat the slop the Foundation calls ‘*food*’ for so long . . .” She cringed, almost shivering at the thought of ever eating dry, lumpy mashed potatoes again. “I think I prefer fast food. It’s a good middle ground.”

“I mean, if it wasn’t good, it wouldn’t sell so well,” Emma commented.

“Oh, sure.” Bonnie slid a smug glance Emma’s way. “That’s why there’s so many Chicago-style restaurants out here.”

Emma peered at her beast of a hotdog and shrugged before biting it almost in half. “It’s an acquired taste,” she spat with a mouthful of half-chewed mush.

“Can’t argue with that.” Bonnie chuckled, taking another nibble out of hers. It wasn’t bad by any means, it was just . . . odd. She liked her food to be simple and to the point. Too many toppings meant messy food and greasy fingers.

“Boss!” Briars called out, jogging over with a stoic Eagle in tow.

“Hm?” Emma hummed, turning her head. Once she spotted Eagle and Briars approaching, she forced down her mouthful and gagged, nearly choking. She straightened her posture and lifted her fist, coughing against the backside of her glove. “What is it, Briars?” she queried.

“We’ve got a positive ID on Number Nineteen’s location. Golf made contact,” Briars relayed.

Shit, Emma mused, her fingers curling into the bun of her hotdog. “That was fast. . . . Are you sure, Lieutenant?”

“Commander Gray was the one who sent out the message,” Briars nodded. “I’m sure.”

Bonnie swallowed and the hotdog vanished from her hand. She peered up at Emma, who reciprocated her gaze. She then nodded, her blonde hair lightly bouncing in response.

“I was hoping I’d have more time. . . .” Emma sighed, tossing away her scraps.

That was enough of a signal for Bonnie. She stepped back and zipped off in a blur.

“Wha—” Eagle twitched then quickly reached for his gun. “That brat! I knew she’d try to ditch the moment we—”

“Stop,” Emma stated, holding her hands up slightly in an attempt to temper him. “She’s not running off.”

“What do you mean?” Briars questioned.

The captain gulped and placed her hands on their shoulders. “Epsilon . . .”

“Yes . . . ma’am?” Eagle cocked a brow, glancing down at the hand planted on him.

“This is wrong,” Emma declared.

“Pardon?” Briars blinked.

“This. All of this.” Emma unnervingly chuckled, shaking her head as she released her grip. “It’s so fuckin’ wrong. I wanted more time. I wanted to try and get you two on board without just dropping this on you, but,” she sighed, “I haven’t got a choice now.”

“W-what is it?” Briars squeaked. “If something is wrong, Captain, we can help!” she cried, grabbing hold of Emma’s vest.

“She’s asking us to turn on the Foundation,” Eagle said, eyeing Emma closely.

Emma’s brow slowly moistened with sweat. She could see he never stopped reaching for his gun. His hand was resting on top of it. When he realized she noticed, his fingers twitched.

“What—” Briars sputtered, releasing her grip. “Captain, you . . . you can’t be serious. T-they’d come after us!”

“If I cared about that, I wouldn’t even dream of doing something this stupid.” Emma snickered painfully. “But I just have too big a conscience, I guess.”

“I don’t understand . . .” Briars whined.

“I’m going to do everything in my power to save Sam’s life,” Emma explained.

“And you’re asking us to come with?” Eagle accused.

“It’s your choice,” Emma said before taking a half step back, prepared to draw her weapon if needed. “But if you try to stop me . . . it won’t end well.”

Briars released a tremor of a breath, like she was frightened by the prospect of a confrontation. But maybe she was just more afraid of losing Emma. . . .

“What you’re asking for is treason,” Eagle snarled. “We *swore* our loyalty to the Foundation, and by extension, our country.”

“And you don’t see *anything* wrong with that?” Emma stated, stepping up and getting in his face. “You don’t see anything wrong with guarding stolen children so they can be poked, cut, killed, and herded like lab rats!?”

“What I think doesn’t matter.” Eagle leered.

Emma winced as she felt something press against her vest. She knew exactly what it was: his gun. “It does matter. There’s right and there’s wrong, Lieutenant.”

“We follow orders and do as we’re told.” He then pulled back the hammer. “We don’t decide right and wrong.”

“Daniel!” Briars cried, spitting out his first name. “Stop!”

“What, are you a traitor, too!?” Eagle snapped, twisting and bearing his gaze down on the smaller female.

Emma suddenly swatted at the side of the gun, pushing the barrel toward the ground. Out of reflex, he pulled the trigger, and the bullet sparked against the concrete.

She then quickly reeled her fist back and cracked her knuckles against Eagle's nose. She felt it snap against her fingers before contact was lost, and he was sent sprawling to the ground. Almost immediately, he lost consciousness as his head slammed back against the concrete.

In a panic, Briars drew her own weapon. But upon raising it at her captain, she found herself quivering like the scared little girl she was.

Emma sighed and raised her hands. "You don't have to stay, Lieutenant," she frowned.

"I-I do! I can't . . . I can't leave," Briars stammered. "Please don't leave me all alone," she begged, her eyes watering as her finger wiggled against the trigger. "Please stay. . . ."

"You know I can't do that," Emma said.

"Please!" Briars choked out. "They'll come after you. They'll make *me* come after you! I don't want to!"

"Then come with me, dammit!" Emma begged.

Briars jumped, spooked by Emma's bellowing. It only worsened her trembling. She couldn't hold the gun straight anymore. If she fired, who knows what she'd hit? "T-then they'll come after me, too. . . . There's no winning against them, Captain!" Briars cried out. "There's nothing we could do even if I—" She gulped and lowered her voice as if even speaking the hypothetical would get her in trouble, "even if I did come . . ."

Just then, Bonnie suddenly appeared beside Briars and grabbed her wrist before stuffing her hands up in the air. She didn't move, just stared Briars down, which seemed to be enough to completely break the girl's spirit. Once the firearm slipped from her grasp and clattered to the ground, Bonnie released her and vanished before reappearing at Emma's side.

Briars's knees then failed her and buckled, causing her to collapse to the ground. She palmed the concrete with her gloved hands and hung her head low. Her eyes began to grow misty, but she couldn't even bring herself to look up at the captain she'd just lost.

Emma's frown didn't leave her. She felt an itch to shoot out her arm, reach, and continue pressuring Briars to come with them. But she couldn't bring herself to say another word to the sobbing brunette. Emma knew Briars wouldn't be able to handle it, as that poor girl had always been too innocent for this line of work. She cared a great deal for her second-in-command, but if hurting her meant doing the right thing . . .

"Emma," Bonnie suddenly spoke up.

"Yeah?"

Bonnie placed a hand on her hip and gestured toward the Humvee with her opposing thumb.

"Did you take care of the other three?" Emma asked.

"Are they shooting at you?" Bonnie huffed and cocked a brow. "I followed the plan. They're out cold and alive."

Emma peered behind them toward the picnic table. True to Bonnie's word, all three of them were unconscious. One was still in his seat, and the other two were on the ground, having likely stood to try and fight Bonnie. It didn't seem to have gone their way.

"We should go," Emma noted. She reluctantly stepped past Briars, doing her best to ignore the stifled sobs coming from the fragile soldier's lips.

Bonnie bent over and scooped up Eagle's handgun. She flicked the safety on then pulled up her poncho and stuffed it into the waistband of her shorts. "I can't imagine they've got her cornered already. . . . We'll have to lay low until we hear something else, then make our move."

"Yeah," Emma affirmed as they came up to the vehicle. She hesitantly peered back, ensuring none of her squad was back on their feet. They were

all still out cold, save for Briars, who had hunched over further and begun to bawl her eyes out. “I’m sorry, Denise,” she whispered remorsefully before pulling the door open and climbing inside.



The stalemate between Parker and the girls continued to painfully drag on. The captain’s psyche was waning, especially after Roxanne’s continued barrage of insults and accusations.

“I have no idea how you sleep at night knowing *this* is what you do,” Roxanne condemned.

Parker’s trigger finger itched. “I’m just doing my job.”

“Right,” Roxanne scoffed. “Look the other way, I get it,” she remarked with a shrug. “Because right and wrong only matters when it affects *you*.”

“Shut up . . .” Parker trembled.

“I deal with your kind every day,” the stripper scowled, flaring her nostrils. “Happy to follow the big dogs, and as long as you get a pat on the head, and are told you did a good job, you’re content,” she accused before mockingly tilting her head. “The skeletons in the closet don’t bother you as long as they aren’t yours.”

Samantha worriedly glanced over her shoulder at Willow, having heard the subtle puff of her inhaler. She gulped, turning back to face Parker. This couldn’t go on much longer. She knew full well more would be on their way within minutes. “Parker, please—”

“If you talk any more, I swear to god,” Parker hissed.

“Captain! Do you need assistance?” one of the men from out by her squad’s Humvee called.

Parker didn’t answer him.

“Don’t make it personal . . .” Samantha frowned. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“You did!” Parker barked.

“And will killing me really make you feel any better about it!?” Samantha snapped back.

Parker faltered and let loose a heavy, uncertain breath.

Seeing their window, Samantha glanced at Roxanne and gently murmured, “Go.”

“Are you sure?” Roxanne asked, meeting her gaze.

Samantha nodded. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“Don’t you dare move!” Parker shouted, taking a step forward.

Ignoring her shouts, Roxanne quickly turned and grabbed her sister. “Get to the car,” she ordered before gunning for the stairs.

Willow nervously bobbed and, without question, made a run for the garage.

“I said, don’t move!” the captain roared again, this time taking aim at Roxanne’s backside as she ascended the stairs.

But just as she pulled the trigger, Samantha snapped a tendril overhead, splitting the shot midair with her blade. Before the sparks from the shot colliding with the metal had even dissipated, Samantha bounded forward and twisted, ramming her foot right into the captain’s chest. Parker was thrown from her feet, her weapon thrown, too, from her hands. She was sent straight out the open door, through the brittle porch railing, and onto the lawn.

As Parker tumbled against the beige grass before her squad, one of the men frantically shouted out, “The captain’s down!”

Samantha quickly ducked from the doorway as the crack of gunshots began to rapidly ring out. Each *thump* reverberated from the walls into her back as the bullets tore into the home. “Automatics,” she hissed, grunting as a handful of shots broke through the weak wood and struck her legs.

Forced down to her knees, she kept low, waiting for the men, or at least one of them, to reload. But it seemed like their volley was endless. She rapidly eyed the items and furniture in the foyer, looking for anything she could throw or use as a shield. That was until the muffled rev of an engine derailed her thoughts.

The men stopped firing at her, if only for a brief moment, and began to scramble as the rusty station wagon crashed through the garage door. Despite her dripping bullet wounds, she quickly rose with concern once she realized Willow must've been the one driving.

The car smashed against the Humvee, slightly shoving it and lightly crumpling the station wagon's hood.

Samantha burst out of the house, bounding over Parker as she sprinted toward the crash. The men had taken their eyes off her and had begun to aim at the car. She hadn't counted their shots and had no idea how many they had left, but she wasn't prepared to let Willow get hurt for taking a reckless risk for *her*.

Samantha jumped, flying up into the air before landing perched right on one of the men's shoulders. Her tendrils tore his rifle from his mitts, and she slammed her right elbow down against his scalp, knocking him out instantly. As he began to buckle, and the other noticed her, she leaped up onto the roof of the Humvee.

Her tendrils whipped the weapon she'd stolen at the second man, giving her enough time to pounce and tackle him against the ground. She rolled over him, allowing her appendages to tightly fasten around his limbs before she rose and threw him face-first into a tree.

The third and final agent was given just enough time to fire approximately three shots into Samantha's back. By the time she'd turned around, he'd pulled the trigger again, sending a high-caliber round right into her sternum. She gasped as the thundering blows of the bullets threw her off balance and

stole her breath. But she realized quickly that he was still pulling the trigger. The only problem was that he'd run out of ammo.

Samantha's breath returned with an angry hiss. Her eyes flickered between their current passive state and an incredibly furious red. In an instant, she'd lashed her tendrils at him, slicing up the firearm and gouging into his hands. Before he could scream, she silenced him with a solid kick to the face.

She let loose a guilt-riddled exhale, only realizing the damage she'd done to him once he was already down.

Samantha's sickles passively whipped themselves free of blood, and her eyes ceased their flickering instability. However, once the adrenaline left her, all that remained was soreness and singeing pain. *That's right.*

She winced and glanced down, spotting a small bloody hole in the front of her shirt and a handful of wounds dotting her legs. The blood streaks crawling down her thighs and calves had already dried, but the wounds were still fresh, as she'd yet to force the lead from her flesh. She hadn't even realized that she *had* been shot.

"Sam!" Willow cried out, shoving open the driver's door of the car. She was pale and quivering after watching the violence unfold but seemed to be more concerned about Samantha's plentiful wounds than anything else. "Y-you've been hit!" she stuttered, grabbing hold of Samantha's shoulders.

"Y-yeah, a few times," Samantha muttered before frowning slightly. "Sorry, I got the shirt you gave me dirty. . . ."

"I don't care about that, you're hurt!" Willow whined.

"Don't move. . . ." Parker ordered suddenly. She'd crawled to her weapon and forced herself back up during the scuffle. She looked just as irritated as before, albeit more ragged.

"B-but," Willow stammered, "she's bleeding!"

"Please," Parker scoffed, "as if a few bullet wounds can stop this mutant."

Samantha swayed partly but stood her ground and defensively pushed Willow behind her.

“Now that I have you two little brats right where I want you—”

The crank of a lever abruptly rang out behind the captain, interrupting her mid-sentence.

“I’d choose your next words *very* carefully if I were you,” Roxanne advised, pressing the barrel of her father’s lever-action rifle against Parker’s back.

Parker grunted, her shaky grip yet again returning as she realized she’d completely lost.

“Put it down, or I’ll blow a hole through your spine,” Roxanne ordered, coldly delivering her ultimatum with a poke to the back.

Parker squinted and slowly lowered her gun before dropping it in the grass. Maintaining eye contact with Samantha, she said, “You can’t run from us forever.”

“Watch me,” Samantha huffed.

“Thanks, sweetie,” Roxanne cooed, before thwacking Parker upside the head with the butt of the rifle.

Parker collapsed face-first right beside the weapon she’d just dropped.

“Was that . . . really necessary?” Willow frowned over at her sister.

“They were *shooting* at us, and you’re asking if *I* went overboard?” Roxanne cocked an eyebrow.

“We have to go,” Samantha mumbled, gritting her teeth and quickly hiding away her chompers. It didn’t take her long to start wobbling. She slumped to the side, grabbing onto the car for balance.

“Sam!” Willow cried, grabbing onto her in an effort to keep her stable.

“Willow, get her in the car,” Roxanne ordered, stepping over the captain’s body. She approached the trunk and jerked it open, then stuffed the rifle in the back under some blankets.

“B-but Roxy, she’s hurt!”

“And these guys could wake up any minute!” Roxanne snapped back. “Do as I say,” she snarled, slamming the trunk shut, “and get in the goddamn car!”



Once she awoke, Parker was met with the stinging throb of a pulsing welt upside her head. She groaned loudly and grabbed at the spot with both of her hands. She stirred uncomfortably as she struggled to put a finger on what *exactly* had happened. That was, until she heard the squeal of tires on the street as the three sped off.

“I’m not a failure . . .” Parker wheezed as she struggled to her feet. She stumbled off toward the Humvee and, upon reaching it, collapsed against the hood.

She sharply inhaled, tensing up as a sudden realization struck her. Her men? Were they alright!?

She peered down at the three scattered about the ground. All of them were down, but only one was bloody. She feared the worst—that Samantha had wiped another squad—until she noticed the bloodied one’s chest rise.

“They’re not dead?” Parker relented, slumping her shoulders as they continued to breathe. They were just unconscious.

Relieved, she staggered to the passenger door and jerked it open. She crawled sluggishly inside and grasped the mic off the dashboard.

“C-Captain Parker reporting,” Parker denoted, wincing as the pulsations from her bruise refused to relent. She rested her head against the dash, fighting the urge to barf with each thrashing throb.

“Go ahead,” Diana replied from the other end.

“The subject,” Parker groaned, balling up her free hand as she struggled to even speak. “She got away. Nineteen got away.”

“Dammit . . . What’s the status of Golf?”

“Incapacitated,” Parker murmured, “but no fatalities.”

“And yourself?”

“I’m fine,” Parker hissed, lying through her teeth.

“Do you know where she went?”

“Northbound in a small station wagon, accompanied by a teenager and an adult female,” Parker stated.

“Roger that. I’ll send Epsilon to intercept. Hang tight, a medical unit is on their way.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Parker affirmed before angrily slamming the radio down against the passenger seat, though her weakened state made it appear rather pitiful. “Shit . . .” she wheezed, lowering her head against the seat and closing her eyes.



“Woodstock, huh?” Barry hummed against the ash stick in her lips. She raised her wrapped fingers and plucked it from her mouth. “I guessed right then.”

The snowy-haired girl exhaled some smog from her nose and crammed the end of the cigarette against her wrist. It singed her wraps but lost its light almost immediately. She then rolled it within her palm before flicking it off into the dirt.

Barry peered past a street sign just ahead of her, staring into the bustling downtown hotspot of Woodstock. People were shopping, eating out, enjoying their minimalistic lives, and simply living in the moment . . . despite the alert that had gone out. Maybe they figured it was a prank.

Barry shook her head; she envied the ability to live a carefree, *normal* life. Maybe for the moment, she was, but in the coming hours . . .

She gulped.

She knew what she had to do.

Her eyelashes fluttered as something moist struck her right eye. She wiped her face with her fist and glimpsed upward. *Rain?*

She could've sworn it had been sunny just an hour ago.

“How fitting . . .” Barry muttered, looking away from the storm brewing overhead. She already had one to worry about surging on the ground.

Chapter Nine

Woodstock

Samantha frustratedly growled and slammed her back up against the bench seat. Her skin had begun to twist and pinch the bullets, forcing them from her flesh with relative ease albeit not without pain.

Willow was wobbling in the seat beside Samantha as if waning in consciousness. Her breaths were just as irregular as her previous attack, though this time it seemed as though she was struggling to bring her inhaler to her lips. She'd spent too much time worrying about Samantha's injuries that she'd neglected her own condition. Finally managing to purse her lips around it, she sucked in a puff then closed her eyes and laid back against the door.

Roxanne, on the other hand, seemed far more stressed than either of them. She could hardly keep her hands planted on the steering wheel and was shaking so viciously that the car was occasionally swerving. Staring ahead, down the road and into the rain past the whipping wipers, god only knows what she must've been thinking.

But Samantha had far more pressing concerns to worry about, as the only scrap of lead that hadn't yet fallen to the floormats was the single shot that had struck her thigh.

Not this crap again. She wheezed, glancing down before beginning to helplessly mewl in agony. The bullet didn't budge an inch. If anything, her rapid healing only made it worse. Like a hangnail, her body was harming itself without even realizing it. The skin of her leg further reddened, causing a spurt

of blood to quickly gush from her thigh onto the cloth seat, and in response, Samantha let loose a helpless howl of pain.

“S-Sam?” Willow gasped, leaning up from the door. “What’s wrong!?” she prodded and crawled across the seat.

“There’s,” Samantha seethed, her lips sputtering as she held down the urge to scream, “one stuck in my leg!” She hunched over and palmed the wound before scrunching her fingers and pinching at the skin. But her efforts quickly proved futile; it was wedged far too deep for her fingers to do the job alone.

“Oh my god!” Willow gasped, practically hovering over her. “S-Sam, what can I do!?”

“Nothing!” Samantha blurted through gritted teeth while dragging her foot up into her lap. She’d known Willow would react that way, likely assuming she’d never have a problem with her own accelerated healing. But sometimes . . . Samantha had to get a bit extreme. She just wished Willow didn’t have to see it.

She leered at the sputtering bullet hole as her lower right tendril slithered under her arm. She almost immediately sunk its scythe into her thigh, only to sough in further anguish.

“What are you doing!?” Willow cried.

She dragged the blade back, tearing into her flesh to create an opening just wide enough for her fingers to fit in. Once enough clearance had been provided, she crammed two fingers in and finally managed to pinch the round and rip it from her muscles.

An exasperated yet relieved exhale jumped from her lungs as she plucked the blade from her leg. She slumped back against the seat, taking deep breaths and trying to blink away the water that had built up in her eyes. The pain faded as the wound began to finally stitch itself back up. Her hand fell to her side, releasing the bullet and allowing it to join the rest on the floor. Despite all of that, she hadn’t actually cried at all from the pain.

Even with her eyes closed, she could tell Willow was staring at her. Whether it was out of horror, or concern . . . it didn't matter. . . . She knew no matter what that the last thirty minutes must have completely shaped Willow's perception of her. While she may have been innocent in regards to the aspects of day-to-day life, she was clearly versed in violence.

"How many times have you had to do that?" Willow questioned.

"Too . . . many . . ." Samantha heavily panted.

"Are both of you alright?" Roxanne lowly asked from the front.

"Yeah . . ." Samantha groaned, raising a hand to her bruised chest and scrunching her fingers over it as it began to ache.

Willow sheepishly nodded while sitting back down. She had purposefully neglected to buckle her seatbelt, likely to remain as close to Samantha as possible.

Roxanne sighed in partial relief, though her trembly white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel didn't wane. There was something else she had to know.

"Samantha?"

Samantha gulped, keeping her head low. She knew what was coming. "Yeah?"

"About . . . what that woman said . . ."

"I—" Samantha whimpered, further curling her fingers against her shirt. "I didn't want to, but they—"

"No, stop," Roxanne spat. "I don't . . . I don't want to know what happened."

Samantha raised her head just enough that she could meet Roxanne's gaze in the rearview mirror.

"I just need to know. . . . Were you telling the truth?"

"What?"

"Did you have a choice?" Roxanne coldly asked.

Samantha frowned and leaned back against the seat. She almost didn't even know anymore, especially after Parker's words. The thing she feared

most was just how they'd perceive her. No matter the answer she conceived, the possible responses only scared her further. All she could mewl out was a soft and gentle, "No. . . ."

In the silence following her answer, she couldn't help but wonder: Did they see her as the monster she *knew* she was now?

"Let *me* ask you *both* something now . . ." she quietly chimed, looking at the floormat as she listened to the rain spatter against the sunroof hanging over her and Willow in the backseat.

"Go ahead," Roxanne responded.

"Why are you doing this?" Samantha inquired.

"What, exactly?" Willow hummed.

"Risking everything," Samantha proclaimed, seeking an answer to the pair's apparent altruism. "You have *no idea* what you're up against."

"Well . . ." Roxanne murmured, "why did you defend us?"

Samantha blinked and looked up, meeting Roxanne's eyes in the rearview mirror.

"You could've run right out the back and left us to them. But you jumped in. You protected us," Roxanne recounted.

"I don't . . . I don't know." Samantha hummed uncomfortably.

"Your actions are much louder than their words. Even when presented with the opportunity to kill any of them, you didn't. Not even the one that took a shot at me." Roxanne smiled, albeit barely. "You aren't what they say you are."

Samantha grimaced. "I don't understand . . ."

Willow slowly scooped up Samantha's hands. She squeezed them to get her attention, and when Samantha turned, she was met with a bright smile, though she could feel Willow still lightly trembling from the altercation. "You're more than what's on the outside."

Samantha sat in silence, even as Willow leaned in and snuggled up against her side. She felt her tendrils almost act on their own, sliding over Willow and

tugging her close as if hugging the girl. Even if *she* didn't fully believe what they said, it was nice to have *someone* believe in her.



"It's the truth, ma'am, down to the last detail," Eagle pleaded, standing in the doorway of the dingy hotel room.

Diana was hunched over a foldable table set up at the foot of the bed. She clicked her fingers against its surface as she carefully mulled over his words. "And she took Number Seventeen with her?"

Eagle nodded. "Yes, ma'am." He subtly winced as his swollen nose throbbed against the splint fastened to it. "She begged us to join her," he said before narrowing his eyes, "but *I'm* no traitor."

Diana stood quietly for a moment, though she was fuming under the hood. Her patience was thinning by the second. Every time she turned her back, it seemed like things only got worse.

"Get out," Diana ordered, not even bothering to look back at the bald man.

Eagle gulped and stepped out, shutting the door behind him.

Once the door clicked shut and she was left with the sound of rain pelting the roof, she straightened her posture and slowly sucked in a deep breath. She then shouted in a sudden frustrated bout of rage and sent her reinforced fist through the surface of the cheap table. She stood still, breathing heavily in an attempt to cool off. But upon realizing she'd need some help, she ripped her fist from the table and stomped over to the entertainment center situated across from the bed.

She tore open one of the cabinet doors, revealing a somewhat hidden mini-fridge. She quickly opened it, swiped a large bottle of bourbon from inside, then slammed it shut. She nabbed a rocks glass from the counter,

kicked the cabinet closed, then slumped into a chair placed nearby beside a smaller worktable.

She plucked two cubes from the ice bucket in the center and dropped them into the glass before proceeding to fill it to the brim with hard liquor. She then took an almost desperate sip as she leaned her elbow against the table. Once the sweetness of the bourbon hit her sinuses and the alcohol began to surge through her blood, she gradually calmed down.

She set down the glass and slowly laid her head in her hands. She rubbed her eyes and softly groaned as her head pounded from the incessant volley of bad news. She was almost fully convinced that she was the only one taking this seriously.

She wished things could be different, *vastly* different. This job was nothing but a headache . . . and every day in this personal hell of hers, she was reminded of why she never should have signed that contract in the first place.

Everything she'd done in the last thirteen years was to distance herself from the *one* choice she'd made after being locked into the Foundation. To bury herself in her service, even if it was under a man she couldn't stand.

"Everything . . ." she softly muttered, raising her head just enough to get a look at her fingers, specifically her barren ring finger.

Her solitude was interrupted as the doorknob jiggled. Then as if her problems weren't already irritating her beyond measure, in walked the salt on her wounds: Maximilian and his pet.

"How unfortunate . . ." Maximilian hummed, handing a report off to Wilson. Diana's fingers twitched almost the moment she heard his voice. "Captain Pierce was always a kind soul. Perhaps too kind for her own good."

"You don't know the *meaning* of the word," Diana growled, peering at Maximilian as she raised her head further. "Every minute that passes, this situation spirals further out of control! I have a wiped-out squad, a squad

with a deserted leader, a squad that's injured, and now, another goddamn Orphan loose!" she bellowed, slamming her hands against the table.

"Yes. It's becoming trickier, though I'm developing a solution to our little problem," Maximilian assured. "It shouldn't be much longer until it's ready. In the meantime, though, my dear, I've deployed a . . . short-term solution." He grinned.

Diana twisted her head to the side, leering at him from across the room. His smirk said it all. "No. No, not another one . . ." she groaned while quickly ascending from her seat. "Tell me you didn't release *another* one!"

Maximilian only laughed and shook his head from side to side. "And what of it? It's just Barricade, after all."

"Number Eighteen?" Diana's shoulders slumped as she stared him down. She couldn't believe it, that he'd be so careless and just chuck another wrench into their predicament. "Is this just some kind of demented game of 'who can fuck things up the worst' to you!?"

"She was easy to manipulate, you know. That girl has the processing power of a gnat." Maximilian snickered.

"I can't believe this," Diana groaned, slumping in defeat back into the armchair.

"You think far too hard about the role of pawns, my dear." Maximilian sighed, stepping before the window and peering out into the lot.

"You think far too little," Diana replied, scooping her glass back up.

"It's a shame, really." Maximilian lamented, scratching his mustache with a finger while he held his other hand behind his back. "These events could have well been avoided."

"Yeah," she mumbled, staring at the twin cubes in her glass. "If the site's safety measures *actually* worked like they were supposed to," she scoffed before lifting the glass to her lips.

“Well, that.” He turned, letting her enjoy her drink for a moment as he joined his hands together behind his back. “And the fact that if you hadn’t tried to *hide your child from me*, things could have turned out differently.”

Diana instantly choked and spat a mouthful of liquor across the room. She quickly clasped a hand over her mouth, wheezing as she cleared her throat. His words stretched around her neck, sinking their claws into and strangling her with the sudden revelation. The fear of him finding out was always in the back of her mind, but now that she knew . . . it was so much worse. Smothered in dread, she didn’t dare look at him, and with each quivering breath, her grip on the glass continued to loosen. As she began to shiver, the cubes clattered against the sides, filling the silent room with the sole sound of isolated panic.

Just how long had he known?

“Pregnant only a short while after your return from such a heroic tour of duty,” Maximilian declared. “A lovely story. A husband and a wife, finally able to settle down and start a family. That was . . . until you learned of your contract’s little . . . *secret*.” He chuckled. “Had you come to me, perhaps we could have come to an agreement, and possibly even nullified the clause.” He snickered. “If that was the case, perhaps you wouldn’t have suffered such a painful divorce. You could have raised your daughter to be the woman you envisioned, and who knows, you may not have ended up as bitter.”

He leered at Diana. “But instead . . . you thought you’d be able to sneak it by me?”

The cubes began to clatter more fervently.

“H-how . . .” Diana stammered, almost stopped by her own fear.

“Speak up, dear.” Maximilian grinned, peering back through the window.

“How did you know?” she shuddered, staring off into space.

“I figured someone as smart as you would have been able to figure that out.” He retorted. “You’d already signed on by that point . . .”

“My . . . medical records,” Diana quivered.

“Every physical, mammogram . . .” Maximilian turned again, sinisterly casting his smirk over the room like a veneer of umbral shade. “Every ultrasound. Of course . . . I wasn’t going to let a perfectly good child go to waste. Especially not one signed over to the Foundation,” he divulged.

“What?” Diana gulped, finally mustering the courage to peer over at him.

“We couldn’t snatch her right off the bat. . . . We had to wait until she was older, or her uniquely frail little body likely wouldn’t have survived the procedure,” Maximilian explained as their gazes met. “When the time came, we paid off the foster agency, for very little, need I mention. She was just as worthless to them as she must have felt to *you*.”

Diana’s ribs rattled from the beat of her aching heart. “What did you do?” She shakily exhaled, though her grip on the glass was beginning to return.

“It should be obvious by now, Diana.” Maximilian chuckled. He raised his hand and slowly tapped beside his left eye with his index finger. “Blue eyes, *black hair* . . .” he grinned, “stubborn as a mule . . .”

“No,” Diana denied, wheezing as the seams of her heart began to split.

The devil’s grin only widened, as though he fed off of the suffering of her broken, wounded soul. “Number Nineteen, *Samantha Gray*, is your daughter,” he so uncaringly revealed.

Diana’s grip stiffened, and the glass cracked in sync with the heartbroken fissure gouging through her chest. She began to grind her teeth and exhale shakily through them. The grinding slowed the further she locked her jaw. Her stitches even started to strain, growing dangerously close to snapping. Those years of being without her child were for *nothing*.

Maximilian couldn’t help but watch her seethe, licking up every last drop of agony dripping from her body. Though he seemed almost disappointed, perhaps hoping for tears, or at least a wail.

But to his surprise, it appeared he'd miscalculated. In Diana's ever-growing fury, she crushed the glass in her mitts. The shards of shattered glass tumbled against the table along with what liquor was left.

"You . . ." Diana fumed, rising to her feet with haste. She didn't just shove the chair but threw it across the floor toward Wilson.

Before Maximilian could continue speaking, or even back away, Diana closed the mere five-foot distance and socked him across the face. She gave him no time to reel, as she then immediately grabbed hold of his collar with both hands and slammed him against the wall. "Sick piece of shit!" she shrieked, dragging him up the wall.

"S-sir!" the previously quiet Wilson cried out while wisely backing away from the enraged mother.

"Th-think about what you're doing, Diana," Maximilian grunted, planting his old hands on her wrists.

"All this time, she was right under my fucking nose!?" Diana howled, pulling him back and bashing him against the wall so hard she dented the drywall. "Give me *one* reason not to beat you to death while your little rat watches!"

"You can't help her. She's already too far gone!" he retorted, flinching as he was slammed against the wall for a second time.

"Because of you . . ." Diana hoarsely condemned, tightening her grasp. "Because of *everything* you've done to her!"

"What of what *you've* done to her, Diana!?" the man spat. "Need I remind you, you're the reason she's the way that she is now!?"

"How!?" she barked back.

"The breach, last October!" Maximilian bellowed. "You're the one who put out the kill order! *You're the one that almost caused her death.*"

The realization kicked her in the chest like a mule, but even with her adrenaline beginning to waver, she pressed even further. "And you turned her into a monster who went on a *second* rampage!"

"If I hadn't done what I did," Maximilian squinted, glaring down into her eyes, "your precious daughter would have died that day, *because of you.*"

Diana faltered and her grip began to loosen. He was right. . . .

That day, she mused before beginning to shake again. She suddenly released him, letting him fall back to his feet. Her order had torn that child to pieces. She'd watched it happen, with no idea that Samantha was *hers*.

"Your anger is understandable," Maximilian stated, clearing his throat as he fixed his collar. "But, as you said yourself, there's nothing human about her, not anymore."

Diana wheezed as a fragile squeak unbecoming of her appearance slipped past her lips. The longer she was left to dwell, the worse the toll she took. *My . . . baby girl . . .* she mouthed.

"Hasn't the girl been through enough, Diana?" Maximilian inquired, planting his hand on her shoulder. "Once the solution I've arranged for arrives, you can lay her to rest on your own terms." He then gently pat her shoulder and stepped past her, seeming to pay extra mind not to bump into or even graze her arm. "Think of it as . . . mercy."

Wilson could only stare silently as his master approached. Regardless of his own moral standings on what Maximilian had done, he was wise to keep his mouth shut.

"Come, Wilson." Maximilian chuckled, leering over his shoulder at the damaged woman left in his wake. "I'm sure the commander needs a moment to herself."

Once the two had left, the lid held on by spite containing each emotion she'd bottled up for the last thirteen years finally burst. Her breathing turned shallow. Her arms slowly crossed as she hugged herself in a vain attempt

to stop what was coming. Every hope she'd ever had of her daughter living a good life had just been obliterated, and every doubt she'd ever had about giving her baby up had been affirmed.

"It's . . . all my fault . . ." Diana whispered to herself, beginning to heave heavily. Droplets of tears dribbled down her cheeks as she struggled to stay upright. She staggered a bit before completely collapsing to her knees. She palmed the carpet and began to dig her nails into it in a last-ditch effort to distract herself, to fend off her emotions just a tad longer, but it was far too late for that.

With a choke, the tears became steady streams. Not only did they drip onto the carpet, but they soaked her stitches, the stitches holding together a wound given to her by the daughter she'd blown a hole through.

"S-Sam . . ." Diana quietly whined. It was a name she hadn't chosen, but one that had begun to root itself in her heart.

She couldn't hold it in anymore, and she slid one of her hands onto her gut. The little girl she carried inside her for so long, then gave away. . . . The little girl she one day wished to see smile, get married, and live a happy life of her own without any ties to this horrid business.

"*Sam* . . ." She wept, repeating the girl's name as a sudden dryness struck her throat. "What kind of mother am I . . ." She sobbed before raising and fully spilling her sorrows into her hands.



The car was silent for a good ten minutes as they continued ahead toward Woodstock.

Samantha didn't dare budge, worried she'd disturb Willow's peaceful and comfortable position at her side. Just being near one another seemed to calm each of them.

Despite that seemingly blissful serenity, Samantha could hardly draw her mind from the danger trailing them. It was nice that *somebody* wanted to stick with her, but if they got hurt . . .

"I'd be responsible . . ." She gulped, unintentionally thinking aloud.

"Hm?" Roxanne hummed, looking up at the mirror from the road. She, too, had since calmed down, but similarly to the Orphan, was still quite on edge.

"Did you say something, Sam?"

Samantha quickly shook her head and glanced back out the car window. "N-no . . . it's nothing."

"Hey . . ." Roxanne said, tapping her fingers against the steering wheel. "I know something that'll make us all feel better. We didn't get to eat that breakfast we made so . . . how does barbeque sound?"

Samantha blinked and sent back a confused glance as though she'd just heard utter nonsense. "Barba-what?"

Willow's eyes shot open, appearing to instantly wake up at the mere mention. "Clint's? We're going to Clint's!?"

Samantha jumped, taken aback by Willow's sudden shouting. "What . . . is that?"

"Barbecue!" Willow squealed, turning to face Samantha before scooping up her hands and squeezing them tightly. "Y'know, like burgers, steaks, ribs, pork . . ." She was practically drooling.

Samantha blinked, lightly smiling from Willow's incredible excitement. "Well . . ." She hummed, her stomach grumbling at the thought of a juicy slab of beef. "I do like meat."

"You're gonna love it!" Willow exclaimed, giddily wiggling about. "They have *HUGE* steaks!"

Samantha couldn't help but softly giggle in response to Willow's babbling. "Huge steaks?" she inquired.

Willow leaned in a bit, getting in Samantha's face before excitedly stating, "Bigger than your head!"

"You're kidding . . . right?" Samantha asked before glancing back to the front. "She's kidding, right?"

Roxanne snickered and shook her head. "Nope. I don't eat much so I hardly ever go, but Willow always finds a way to drag me out—"

"How far away are we?" Willow eagerly prodded.

Roxanne giggled. "Just a few minutes, relax."

Willow seemed practically over the moon, but her radiance was suddenly choked as she winced upon looking back at Samantha.

"What is it?" Samantha curiously blinked.

"Roxy?" Willow called.

"What is it?"

"Do we have any napkins in here or something?" Willow asked, beginning to peek into the back pocket of the passenger seat.

"There's some up here," Roxanne replied, pulling a handful of paper napkins out of the door pocket. "Why?" she questioned, handing it over her shoulder to her sister.

"Sam needs a little cleanup before we go anywhere." Willow rolled down the window and stuck the napkins out in the rain. Once they were sufficiently wet, she pulled her arm back in and rolled the window up. "Put your legs in my lap." She beckoned, patting her thighs.

Samantha cocked a brow at the odd request, but upon glancing down at herself . . . she realized she was an utter mess. Deciding to oblige, she twisted in the seat and pressed her back against the door. She then raised her feet and hesitantly plopped them down right on Willow's lap.

Willow grabbed hold of Samantha's ankle for support and began to rub off the dried blood with the soggy napkins. Even after seeing it in action twice now, she seemed to be looking in astonishment at Samantha's perfectly healed skin. It was almost like she had never been shot. Even more impressive, the spot on her leg she'd gouged open just moments prior hadn't even left a scar in its wake.

"I-I could do that myself, you know . . ." Samantha nervously chortled, rather unsure of how she felt about being cleaned by someone other than herself.

"I want to help in any way I can." Willow glowed. "You're the only reason we got out of there," she lamented, going back to her scrubbing. "They were going to arrest us."

"Yeah, because of *me*," Samantha sighed.

"Saying you weren't the reason they were there would be a lie," Roxanne chimed in.

Samantha frowned and stared down at her hands. She knew it was true.

"*But*," Roxanne started, "that doesn't mean it's your fault. The people who tortured you and turned you into what you are, *they're* the ones hunting you. If it's anyone's fault, it's *theirs*."

"I don't blame them. . . . They're afraid," Samantha softly commented.

Willow perked up and ceased her scrubbing. "Of . . . what?" she asked.

Before Samantha could answer, Roxanne declared, "We're here!" and pulled into an empty parking space. "Now then, we should make it quick," she expressed, cranking up the parking brake and turning around. She looked over Samantha's stained shirt and the tendrils curled around her gut. "We . . . need a way to cover you up."

Willow nodded in agreement. "I think people will have some questions if they see a young girl with tentacles and a blood-stained shirt."

“Ideas?” Roxanne asked. “There’s a blanket in the trunk, but that would draw more attention than it would stave.”

Willow chewed on her lip, appearing to be in deep thought. But when she looked down at herself, she brightened back up almost instantly. “Of course!” She giggled then began to slide off her flannel. “Put this on!” She beamed, holding it out in front of Samantha.

“B-but,” Samantha stammered as she hesitantly placed her hands on it, “but it’s yours—”

“It’s okay! I don’t mind lending it to you.” Willow giggled. “You can give it back after we eat.”

Willow’s smile was sweeter than a big dollop of fresh honey and hadn’t yet failed to make Samantha blush. This instance was no exception, as upon accepting the temporary gift, her cheeks had reddened to the point where they nearly matched the fabric. Without further protest, she slid the flannel over her shoulders, and once she buttoned it up, it fully covered her stained shirt and spare appendages.

“Ohh!” Willow gushed, bringing her hands to her face as her grin stretched. “You look adorable! I might just let you keep it for being so cute!” she squealed.

Samantha clung to the shirt as she crossed her arms. She didn’t particularly mind the idea of keeping something of Willow’s, especially if it was gifted to her. She had a hard time understanding just what all of this unending kindness was doing to her. Her chest was tight, and her heart seemed like it was crawling up her throat. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think she was sick. But . . . when was the last time she *was* sick?

“Alright you two,” Roxanne called out from the front while zipping up her jacket. “Let’s try not to dilly-dally. This rain is gonna suck.”

As the three rushed out of the car, they were indeed met with the onslaught of heavy falling rain. It was so intense, they could hardly see and practically

had to find the entrance by the wafting smell of grilled meat. Even though their venture to the door only took a few seconds, by the time they arrived, they were nearly fully soaked.

“That was . . . so much worse without my flannel,” Willow shivered, shaking out her sopping wet locks like a dog. “Are you okay, Sam?” she asked.

Samantha’s hair had straightened out quite a bit from the excess moisture and had thus draped over her face. She responded with a simple puff of air, blowing some strands up just enough to temporarily reveal her face.

Roxanne grabbed her ponytail and twisted it, forcing an almost endless stream of water to cascade from her hair.

“Wet enough for you?” the hostess chuckled from behind a podium.

“Har-har,” Roxanne murmured in response.

The hostess smiled and bent down, picking up some menus. “Three of you?”

“Last I checked,” Roxanne replied.

“Right this way.” The woman beamed.

As they were being shown to their table, Samantha pulled apart her hair like curtains in order to peek about the room. She was immediately overrun by sights, sounds, and smells she’d never even imagined before. The scent of meat and barbecue sauce being carried from the kitchen through the air had grabbed her full attention. But even so, she couldn’t help but stare at families laughing together as they enjoyed their lunches, employees doing their best to serve each customer’s needs, and the warm, cozy decor lining the walls.

“Sam? You’re drooling,” Willow teased.

“I-I am?” Samantha squeaked and quickly rubbed her chin with her wrist, only to freeze up at the touch of her own spit. “S-sorry . . .” she stammered in embarrassment. “Something just smells *really* good.”

“I was the same way my first time in here.” Willow snickered, whispering into Samantha’s ear as though it was some terrible secret.

“Alright, here we are,” the hostess announced, setting the menus down on the table of a booth. “Your waiter will be with you shortly!”

“Thanks,” Roxanne said before taking a seat.

Samantha slid in, and Willow soon followed. Once seated, she could hardly keep still. Her wondrously innocent curiosity was near that of a small child visiting a museum; she felt the urge to touch *everything*. She nudged the salt and pepper shakers, curiously eyed the pictureless menu, and even bounced on the seat once or twice to get a feel for its plush texture.

Roxanne raised an eyebrow and peered over her menu at Samantha from across the table. “Sam, have you never been to a restaurant before?” Roxanne inquired from across the booth.

Samantha shook her head, paying little attention to Roxanne as she continued her own little adventure. “My foster homes spent very little on me,” she softly said.

“Well, pick whatever you want!” Willow chirped from beside Samantha, tapping the menu before her. “Don’t worry about it! Just choose whatever you think will make you the happiest.”

Samantha’s eyes scoured the page, analyzing each individual item with haste while imagining them vividly in her mind. Large juicy steaks, condiment-smothered burgers, smokey sauce-slathered ribs. Every last option made her more excited than the last.

“She . . . does know how to read . . . right?” Roxanne asked.

“I don’t think she’d be drooling again if she couldn’t. There’s no pictures,” Willow noted, pinching a napkin and raising it to Samantha’s lips.

Samantha’s trance was broken once she felt the napkin rub against her mouth. “A-again?” she whined.

“It’s alright,” Willow chuckled. “I’m just happy to see you so excited over something.”

"I . . ." Samantha gulped, looking back at the menu. "I am . . . but I have no idea what to choose. There's just so much . . ."

"Why don't we pick for you?" Roxanne offered.

"I like that idea." Samantha sighed, relieved that the choice was no longer her responsibility.

"What do you think, Willow? Should we get her a double cheeseburger?"

"Yeah, I'm sure she'll like that!" Willow exclaimed. "I think a normal one wouldn't fill her up nearly enough."

Samantha's unparalleled excitement didn't last for too long, as a stir in the building caused her nerves to twist. She wasn't sure if it was a smell or just a feeling, but there was a presence she didn't like. She slowly crawled up against the back of the seat, peering around before she spotted two men in blue uniforms. Were they some sort of special operatives the Foundation had sent after her? She'd never seen F.T.F. agents in *blue* uniforms before. . . .

"Sam? What's wrong?" Willow asked, placing her hand on Samantha's back.

Roxanne took notice of the men and quickly spoke up. "It's okay, it's okay—relax, Sam. They're just cops."

Samantha's eyes flickered and buzzed as she continued to watch the men get seated. "Cops?"

"They're not anything like the people who came looking for you. I promise," Roxanne assured her.

Samantha slowly sank back down in the booth. Trusting Roxanne's words, she peeled her gaze away from the two men, though she certainly didn't want to. While they made her nervous, she wasn't entirely sure if it was *them* who were giving her an off feeling.



How the hell am I supposed to do this? Barry mused, seated on the second level of the restaurant. She peered down through the balcony's railing, right across the main floor at Samantha.

"What would you do right now, Bon?" she mumbled, impatiently stirring her drink with a straw. In her opposing hand, she fiddled with her lighter, flicking it open and closed in an attempt to keep herself focused. But as she watched the three laugh and smile, she found it increasingly difficult to stay on task.

We used to be that close. . . . Barry frowned, recalling the days in the Foundation cafeteria when she was permitted to see Samantha and Bonnie. It was the highlight of her day. They were always an odd group, a mismatched trio of misfits. Then again, what Orphan wasn't a misfit?

Was she jealous? Was she angry? Or was she just looking for an excuse to crush one of Maximilian's projects? She didn't know. She was never the best at thinking, having always left the hard parts to Bonnie. In fact, if it had nothing to do with a fight, she could swear she almost didn't think much at all.

Barry released the straw and placed the lighter on the table. She sunk against the surface, burying her face in her bandage-wrapped hands as she struggled to come to a solid conclusion.

Did he tell me the truth? Was he lying? She groaned, curling her fingers into her hair.

No, that wasn't possible. Samantha *had* to be dead. She'd seen it with her own two eyes. But was she some sort of zombie, or just a puppet designed to piss her off?

Barry continued quietly muttering confused utterances to herself. There were too many questions and possibilities. She could only process so much.

"Ma'am, are you alright?" the waiter asked, bending slightly over the table to check on the teenager.

"Eh?" Barry hummed, partly raising her head. "Not particularly."

“Is there anything else I can get for you?”

“No . . . I just needed something to drink,” Barry murmured, rifling around in her jacket before pulling out a partly crumpled five-dollar bill. “Don’t worry about change.”

“Thank you kindly. I hope you have a good day,” the waiter said with a smile before stepping away.

“Tch,” Barry scoffed as she rose to her feet. She glanced over the railing back at the booth. The three must’ve left already, as the booth was barren. “Good days . . .”



“That was great, wasn’t it? What’d you think?” Willow eagerly beckoned, likely anxious to hear another’s thoughts on her favorite restaurant.

Samantha didn’t possess the energy to reply right away. She seemed almost comatose as she staggered alongside them. “I ate too much,” she groaned, her eyes lethargically half open.

Roxanne snickered as she watched Samantha stumble around. “The food’s good enough to have thirds before you even think about seconds.”

“I’m glad you liked it!” Willow cheered.

Samantha forced a groggy smile. Willow’s contagious happiness was starting to become her own. Every time the girl smiled, she couldn’t help but follow suit.

She abruptly stopped in her tracks and exhaled a sharp puff out her nose. She was feeling the same odd presence from earlier, only this time, it felt familiar. Her eyes opened fully, and she began to glance around. Her skin was beginning to prickle with goosebumps as she sought an answer to the disturbance.

“Sam?” Willow asked over the rain, noticing she’d frozen up behind them. “Are you alright?”

Samantha quickly pivoted and yanked the flannel off then threw it onto Willow. Her tendrils unfurled, and with a sweeping motion, she shoved Willow out of the way. But even that swift motion didn’t give her enough time to block the knuckles that then bashed into her cheek.

“Sam!” Willow cried out as Samantha was thrown back across the sidewalk.

Samantha rolled for a moment but managed to negate her momentum by scraping her blades against the concrete. She sprung back to her feet but remained somewhat low to the ground. She massaged her freshly tenderized jaw before raising her eyes up to peer at her attacker. She partly gasped. She knew *exactly* who it was, but the fact that they attacked her completely unprovoked . . .

Something was incredibly wrong.

Chapter Ten

Knuckles and Blades

“**B**-Barry!?” Samantha stammered.

The white-haired girl flicked her wrist as if shaking the reverberations from her fist. It seemed as though it'd been quite a while since she'd struck something. Some of the wraps covering her hand had loosened from the punch, drooping from her fingers as a result.

Samantha gulped. Whenever Barry looked this serious, it was almost never good. She knew it almost always meant an absence of thought or reasoning. She couldn't take risks with a loose cannon like her, beginning to preemptively position her tendrils in the air around herself. “Why are you— *How* are you here!?” she called out. “Why'd you hit me!?”

“Don't listen to it. . . . Don't listen to it,” Barry repeated under her breath as her fists began to shake. It was as though she were trying to block out Samantha's voice.

Roxanne hoisted her sister up from the ground. She clung to Willow's arms, refusing to let the girl take even a step away from her.

“W-who is that!?” Willow jittered.

Roxanne gulped as an uneasy breath escaped her lips. “Another one . . .”

“Barry!” Samantha barked out, noticing she was being ignored.

“Shut up!” Barry roared. “I've made up my mind!” She reached inside her sleeves and tightly grabbed hold of the wraps covering her arms. “You're

just—” She winced, looking away, as if she wouldn’t dare look Samantha in the eyes. “You’re just a fake. I saw you die!”

Samantha stepped back and frowned. She could hear the pain seeping from her friend’s trembling, heartbroken words. “I . . .”

“Maximilian . . . using your body like a toy . . .” Barry snarled, halfheartedly tugging at her wraps. They didn’t seem to budge much.

“What?” Samantha winced, slightly taken aback by such a ridiculous assumption. “Barry, it’s me!”

“No, it’s not!” Barry shrieked and jerked her hands from her sleeves. The second attempt proved much more fruitful as the wraps were torn to shreds, revealing her long, sequestered arms. They weren’t of flesh and blood, but instead were composed of an almost organic steel—the same steel composing Samantha’s tendrils.

“What the hell,” Roxanne gasped, staring at Barry’s shimmering fists.

They’re uncovered. That’s gonna be a problem. . . . Samantha tensed up and curled her lip, nervously nibbling on it.

Barry growled as she stared the reaper down, pushing beyond her discomfort. The only thing stronger than her crippling self-doubt was her smoldering rage at the possibility of truth to Maximilian’s words. It was just enough for her to abandon reason.

Samantha held her breath as she adjusted her stance. Her tendrils slithered and swam through the falling rain until the tips of her scythes were pointed in Barry’s direction.

It didn’t take long for Barry to grow impatient and bolt at Samantha, only to throw another blindingly fast right hook at the girl’s face.

Samantha’s lower left tendril twisted, interrupting the swing and taking the brunt of the blow. She pulled back and then whipped her upper right tendril down over her shoulder in an attempt to smack Barry back.

But the attempt was pointless, as Barry's left hand snatched the length of the cable mid-arc. Her metal fingers tightly curled around it, almost crushing it in her grasp. Every ounce of momentum it carried had been sucked dry.

Samantha gasped and tugged against Barry's grip. A lump in her throat formed the moment she realized she couldn't move. "Oh, crap," she blurted.

Barry jerked her fist back, and a pressurized pulse boomed from that arm, causing the rainwater soaking her to momentarily jolt from her body. She yanked Samantha off her feet by the tendril she still held, and with the force of a point-blank shotgun blast, smashed her opposing fist against Samantha's chest.

Samantha practically felt her soul catapult from her body before it was violently knocked back in as she skidded across the pavement. The next thing she knew, she'd caved in the door of a car, only able to deduce that by the alarm blaring in her ears.

Samantha breathlessly wheezed, desperately trying to catch her breath after such a sudden blow. The sound barrier was shattered, and if her bones weren't made of steel, her ribs would have followed.

"What's happening!?" Willow cried out, hiding her face in Roxanne's side as she held her hands over her head.

Roxanne raised her head back up and could hardly hear anything amid her ringing ears, as the shockwave was almost strong enough to blow out her eardrums. But it was sure as hell strong enough near the point of impact to shatter several windows and crack up the sidewalk.

"S-Sam!" Roxanne cried out, finally spotting the girl sunk into the crumpled frame of a demolished car.

"I was right," Barry snarled, stepping over the shattered concrete and into the street. "You can't be Sam. Not the one I knew." She huffed, coming to a halt just before the shriveled vehicle. She stared Samantha down with the merciless ferocity of an owl, wide-eyed and unblinking. "She wasn't stupid

enough to fall for that!” Barry howled before pulling her fist back again, taking a step forward, and smashing it into Samantha.

A cacophony of shrieks arose from the rending metal as Samantha careened through it, tearing the entire car in half like cheap aluminum. She tumbled out against the sidewalk, littered with a vast array of fresh scrapes and bruises.

“No!” Willow screamed as she witnessed Samantha thrown like a ragdoll for a second time. “Roxy, we have to help her!” she declared, scrambling to her feet and preparing to charge in even though she didn’t have a plan.

Roxanne wasn’t having it and immediately grabbed Willow by the arm. “Stay put!” she barked.

“But Roxy!” Willow begged, tugging against her sister’s grasp.

“Did you *not* just see that!?” Roxanne shouted in her sister’s face. “They’re treating cars like they’re made of paper! What the hell do you think you’re going to do to get them to stop, ask nicely!?”

“Barry . . .” Samantha wheezed, trembling as she managed to rise up to her knees. She winced and hunched over slightly as the loose pain of a dislocated joint twisted and cramped the muscles in her back. Her tendrils slithered from the ground back into the air, all except one.

“Tch,” she hissed, peeking over her shoulder. Her lower right tendril flopped with the panic of a beached fish as it was desperately trying to regain mobility. She didn’t even know those *could* dislocate.

She wasn’t sure if it was her injured state or just Barry’s innate indecisiveness that caused the brawler to stop dead in her tracks and stare. But it gave Samantha just enough time to recover.

The tendrils adjacent to the one knocked out of place speedily wrapped around it, before attempting to jerk it back into place. The first attempt failed; it just felt as though she was prodding a nerveless flesh pocket. Though on the second attempt, the overwhelming pain of her artificial joint snapping back into place shot painful jitters straight up her spine.

Samantha gasped and slumped forward, palming the concrete as wet clumps of hair draped over her face. “I don’t . . . want to fight you . . .” She huffed. “You said I’m not dumb enough to fall for that hit,” she croaked, “but you’re dumb enough . . . to listen to him?”

Barry flinched as though the insult struck her like a knife to the ribs.

“I know that you’re smarter than that,” Samantha scoffed, struggling to raise her head. She leaned to the side to create a peephole between her sopping hair. She then stared up at Barry with only one of her shimmering blue eyes. “*Bonnie* knows you’re smarter than that.”

Barry’s arms shuddered, causing the buttons and zippers on her jacket to clatter against one another. “Stop trying to mess with me!” she bel-lowed. “I’ve made up my mind!” she screamed, whipping her fist back in the rain to go for a third hit.

Samantha, now on only one knee, kicked the concrete to shove herself back from the swing. Barry’s fist narrowly missed her, smashing into the concrete, just as Samantha had hoped. She’d left her sickles embedded within the concrete in her absence and used them to whip her whole body back at Barry. Utilizing every ounce of strength in her body, she bashed her metal skull right upside the brawler’s forehead.

Barry’s fist was plucked from the concrete as she was thrown to her feet. She staggered back between the two halves of the severed car, taking quick backward steps as she struggled to preserve her balance. She was on the verge of collapsing as her head throbbed and her vision inconsistently faded. “*Fuck!*” Barry shrieked, her voice squeaking as she covered her eyes with her hands in pain.

Samantha panted, her forehead stinging from the strike, though she could tell Barry was suffering the worst from that hit. She knew that headbutt was enough to kill somebody normally, but despite that, she also knew that for

Barry, at best it'd give her a concussion. Though at worst . . . it'd only buy her a few seconds.



“It’s been a long time since I last saw and heard rain,” Bonnie sighed serenely, leaning up against the passenger door. “I’d almost forgotten how peaceful it is.”

Her eyes continuously tracked individual droplets dribbling down the window, and when that bored her, she shifted her attention to the light-thieving gray sky. Something about the dim neutrality of storms was . . . *alluring* to her.

Emma shrugged. “Most people complain about it.”

“Most people don’t live in a box,” Bonnie scoffed.

“Yeah . . .”

Bonnie let loose a long, nasally exhale then shot a glance back at the captain. “Emma?”

“What’s up?”

Bonnie pushed back some of her blonde hair behind her ear and continued to stare out into nothingness. She didn’t want to look at Emma as she asked this question; she hardly even wanted to peek out of her peripheral. But . . . she had to know. “What did they do to her?”

Emma’s grip on the steering wheel partly loosened. “Huh?” She hummed, turning her head to the side.

“Sam.”

“Right . . .” Emma sighed and slowly turned her attention back to the road. “You didn’t hear what Diana said in the boardroom,” she mumbled, as though it made her just as uncomfortable as it did Bonnie to even think about.

“There’s no specifics, but,” she gulped, “there’s a lot more metal inside than out.”

“They literally had to put her back together . . .” Bonnie muttered, resting her elbow against the door and sinking her cheek into her palm. “Oh, Sam . . .” She frowned, imagining the worst of the horrors Samantha may have endured.

“I doubt Kelly was involved . . .” Bonnie quietly assumed.

“She was Sam’s supervising doctor,” Emma scoffed. “She must’ve been involved *somehow*.”

“You spoke with her before you entered my cell, right?” Bonnie inquired, turning away from the window.

“Well . . . yeah, but—”

“Did she *look* like she knew?” Bonnie cocked a brow.

Emma sat in silence for a moment then lowered her eyes a hair. “No.”

“She *loved* Sam. She took care of her like a niece,” Bonnie explained. “Every time I’ve spoken with the woman, she seemed to be on the verge of a mental breakdown, like she was being forced to do something she didn’t *want* to do. Eryn, on the other hand, never did nor was ever forced to do anything unpleasant to me,” she explained, joining her hands together in her lap. “She was proud of her work, and I can’t blame her. But with Kelly . . .” She sighed. “What I saw in her eyes was anything *but* pride.”

“Hm . . .” Emma hummed in acknowledgment while continuing to stare blankly ahead.

Bonnie looked over, noticing that Emma seemed a tad disconnected as if her thoughts were elsewhere. She had to know where. “Is something else on your mind?”

“This whole fucking situation is on my mind,” Emma grumbled.

“You think something’s off, don’t you?” Bonnie questioned.

Emma cleared her throat and slowly nodded. “Yeah.”

“Well, I’m all ears.”

“Alright.” Emma sharply exhaled. “He’s got a *big* hand in what’s going, that’s what I’m thinking,” she divulged.

“That wouldn’t surprise me, but, what’s your theory?” Bonnie asked.

“I . . . I don’t have one.” Emma sighed. “But I know he’s got something to do with it! He has to!” she declared, smacking her hand against the steering wheel. “The surge only affecting her cell, the blast doors outside it not going off, and Victor Squad being trapped in the Power Wing . . .”

“It’s suspicious, for sure,” Bonnie agreed.

“I just hope we aren’t the only ones who noticed.”

Suddenly, a loud *beep* erupted from the dashboard. “All units come in, this is Captain Annette Parker.” The captain’s voice suddenly spouted off. “Number Nineteen is confirmed to have been spotted in the downtown portion of Woodstock.”

“Ah shit, we’re going the wrong way!” Emma jerked the wheel to the side and slammed on the brakes. The car skidded in a half circle, and once it fully faced the opposing direction, she slammed her foot back down on the gas and they launched off down the road. She turned her attention back to the dash and reached over to twist up the volume knob.

“Number Eighteen has already made contact. We have authorization from Administrator Ford to terminate them both.”

“What!?” Bonnie shot up in her seat, turning pale with disbelief. She looked at Emma, listening as the message was repeated a second time.

“Oh god . . .” She gulped.

“Eighteen?” Emma exhaled, “But that’s—”

“That’s Barry!” Bonnie gasped. “Why the hell is Barry out!?”

Emma tightly squeezed the steering wheel. “Another coin in the jar,” she growled.

“Emma, step on it!” Bonnie ordered, “If they’re fighting, they’re *going* to kill each other!”



Samantha cautiously rose as her old friend continued reeling from her brutal headshot. “Please!” she pleaded, her words almost inaudible as thunder roared overhead. “We don’t have to do this!” she said while pushing her sopping wet hair out of her face and over her shoulders. Her heart ached, but with the heavy rain, she wasn’t sure whether or not she was crying. “It’s *just* me, Barry.”

Barry’s fingers scrunched against her face as her vision gradually returned. The bridge of her nose had split open, and blood was flowing through her fingers only to be swept away by the rainwater. She removed her hand and shook her head, flinging some of the excess water from her hair. “How many times do I have to tell you . . .” she snarled, clenching her fists and going for a quick right hook. “Shut up!”

One of Samantha’s tendrils swiftly whipped up and parried Barry’s knuckles with the brunt of its blade. Using that opening, she threw her elbow into Barry’s chest to knock her off balance. She then twisted and fired her heel back toward Barry’s chest only for her ankle to be snagged right out of the air.

Samantha gasped as she locked eyes with Barry, realizing that she’d recovered from her first jab almost instantly. The next thing she knew, she was ripped off her feet and slammed back into one of the halves of the car, only to then be thrown back into the street.

With nothing to slam into but the ground this time, Samantha continued to tumble and scrape against the asphalt until she lost all momentum. Lying face down against the road, she released a whimpering groan as every single

limb began to sting. She palmed the street and pushed with all her might, raising herself back up just enough to see her blood drain away beneath her in the rain.

She took a deep breath and curled her fingers against the asphalt. The might of her blows wasn't even comparable to Barry's vicious strength. It only seemed to be getting worse, as the longer this went on, the angrier Barry became.

"You're a bad fake!" Barry shouted, her boots softly clicking against and road and squelching from the water. "The Sam I knew was stronger! She was stronger than *me!*" she declared, slamming her fist against her chest and stopping only about five feet from Samantha. "But whatever *you* are," she said, raising her hand and pointing at the reaper with her index finger, "you're weaker."

Samantha bowed her head just enough that the tips of her hair brushed against the street. *She's right* . . . Samantha mused, staring at the injuries on her hands but focusing on the pain of her other limbs. She *was* weaker; she'd known that for some time. But simultaneously, Barry seemed *exponentially* stronger than the last time they clashed. Maybe it was the significant decrease in her endurance. . . . Perhaps Barry had been training. But whatever it was, she knew full well she was in trouble.

"I'm just going to get this over with, and treat it like a bad dream," Barry mumbled, cracking her knuckles and raising her arms. "Then maybe you can finally rest."

Samantha's eyes narrowed. She wasn't about to let herself go down so easily, and if she had to beat Barry into the ground to prove that she was herself . . . then so be it.

"Barry . . ." She wheezed.

The brawler halted and stood still for a moment in the rain, listening closely as another rolling growl of thunder bellowed over their heads.

“If you want to do it like that . . .” Samantha huffed, slowly raising her head back up and staring with a piercing gaze at the opposing Orphan.

Barry gasped and took a half step back.

Samantha’s eyes were burning a blistering, frustrated red.

“Fine!” she shrieked and abruptly burrowed the tips of her scythes into the road. She then twisted and scraped the blades in a half circle against the asphalt, shredding the road and kicking up debris that she whipped right into Barry’s face.

Barry swatted at the barrage, but her attempt to wave away the dust failed almost immediately as it splashed against her eyes. “Ah!” she cried out, grabbing at her eyes while defensively holding up her other fist. “Dammit!” she bellowed.

Samantha didn’t hesitate to take advantage of the opening, cramming her heel right into Barry’s stomach. Barry immediately staggered back, gagging and gasping from the blow while keeping her eyes squeezed shut. But Samantha was far from done, pinching her shoulder blades as her tendrils slithered and craned over her head. She then slumped down on all fours, whipping her blades down at Barry as they torqued her body to the ground.

The brawler anticipated them but was still unable to see, raising her arms in defense of her head and neck. Two of the sickles tore through her left sleeve and scraped against her arm, and the third missed entirely. But the fourth tore right into Barry’s chest, just above her left pec.

Barry’s bloodshot eyes flashed open from the pain. Despite the dirt peppering her retinas, she stared Samantha down and immediately retaliated, smashing her right fist into Samantha’s chest with enough force to have pulverized a standard rib cage. Samantha was practically dribbled down into the asphalt, slamming into it only to rebound up and be struck a second time with an uppercut, sending her back against the road.

The blows were strong enough to split the skin on her scalp and break open her lip, but it wasn't enough to keep her down. Her tendrils whipped beneath her as she landed on her back, scraping against the street and launching her back to her feet.

She landed right into a charge, knowing that while Barry was busy rubbing the dirt out of her eyes, it was the best time to get in another slash. One tendril slithered over her shoulder and launched ahead, and just as Barry moved her hand and spotted Samantha rushing her again, the curved blade gashed her nose open horizontally, right over the already split cartilage.

Barry firmly bit down on her lip to distract herself from the pain in her chest and nose. She spotted the tendril that had cut her snaking along the ground. It had yet to return to Samantha. She immediately stopped it by swiftly jerking up her boot and stomping down on the cable.

Like an animal frozen by being grabbed by the tail, Samantha's entire body seized, and the next thing she knew, Barry delivered a skull-busting sucker punch right to her face. She gagged as blood spurt out her nose, clogging it and forcing her to take a breath from her mouth.

She continued to tug desperately against Barry's foot, and not wanting to get punched again, she realized there was only one way out of this. It was a long shot, but she had to try it. With no other options, she leaped and threw all of her weight forward, flipping and kicking her foot back and up in the air.

Barry was momentarily perplexed by the odd move, only to realize what Samantha was doing a split second too late. The front flip wasn't just for show, as Samantha's steel-hard heel rammed down against her skull.

A croaking squeak of distress burst from Barry's throat as she was slammed face-first against the asphalt. Her eyes partly rolled back, and her grip grew limp and weak. The two ridiculous blows to her skull made her head throb worse than anything.

Samantha's now freed tendril slithered back like it was distressed, practically hiding under her arm as though it were sentient. Standing with her foot against Barry's head, her breaths were sharp and rapid. With little stamina remaining, she knew full well she'd reached her limit and was glad that it looked like the fight was finally over.

"O-oh my god . . ." Willow murmured from the sidewalk, watching with wide eyes as the sound of rain returned instead of the thunderous crack of high-powered blows. "Oh my god! She did it!"

Roxanne winced and tightened her grip on her sister, as though she didn't truly believe it was over.

Sure enough, Barry began to weakly struggle against Samantha's foot, trying to force her head up against it.

"Knock it off!" Samantha shouted, applying further pressure with her foot. "We're done!" she barked, her eyes flickering and her muscles twitching as she fought against the urge to stamp Barry's skull into the pavement a second time.

Barry began to hiss, only for it to blend into an angry growl through her teeth. She pushed her knuckles against the ground and shoved back harder against Samantha's foot. She'd managed to shift her head just enough to glare up at the reaper. Her eyes, too, had finally shifted, matching Samantha's bloodlust and possibly even surpassing their rage.

Samantha exhaled in sudden panic as she felt an intense pulse reverberate through her foot. She'd totally forgotten. How could she forget!? She was just feeding Barry this entire time! She jerked her leg back to get into a more defensive position, knowing full well that the surge of energy churning through Barry's body was on a level of intensity she'd never felt before.

But it was already too late, as the moment Barry was free, she shoved herself up to her knees with one hand, while the other shot upward in an arc. Her knuckles crashed right into Samantha's jaw at immeasurable speeds, sending

a shockwave so powerful through the streets that every window around them instantaneously exploded into dust.

Samantha was launched right into a streetlamp, striking it so roughly that it bent and nearly fully crumpled. Quickly losing momentum from the collision, she began to fall, only to slam right through the roof of an already damaged vehicle, flattening it into the appearance of a junked convertible with its top down.

Roxanne couldn't bring herself to utter a word or even squeak out a noise. She was truly speechless toward the display of unbridled power before her. The road hardly resembled one anymore, torn to shreds with jagged chunks of asphalt protruding from its surface. None of the shops surrounding them had windows left, signs were flattered, and large fissures had formed in the walls of multiple buildings. By this point, she was sure she was deaf, as it was either that or the endless car alarms blaring making her ears ring.

Willow felt a helpless sob squeak past her lips. She pulled her hands up, covering her mouth after she witnessed Samantha tumble back onto the street from the wreckage. Her body went numb, and her heart grew heavy as nearly all her hopes were incinerated in an instant. "B-but . . . she was winning," she choked.

Barry exhaled, taking methodical breaths as the scarlet in her eyes gradually faded away. She touched her nose, wincing as it stung, still fresh. She then reached to her chest and prodded at the spot where Samantha had stabbed her, it was already sealing up. "Looks like you really aren't *you*," Barry muttered, "One good stab like that from the old you would've taken me down right away . . . but it looks like the well's all dried up," she declared, stepping over to and stopping before the bested Orphan. "You're right about one thing, though . . . we're done," she stated, repeating Samantha's own words.

Samantha didn't process what Barry had said, as she was more focused on the damage she'd taken in such a short moment. She tasted blood, she

couldn't move or think, and didn't even have the strength to open her eyes. She could feel her muscle fibers sluggishly pulling back together, the repairing of two cracked molars, and the halting of nigh-endless internal bleeding. But it wasn't fast enough to get her back in the fight. She couldn't even sit up, let alone stand.

Barry ran her metal thumb over her lips, wiping the blood from them that she'd drawn with her own teeth. "It's over . . ." she murmured, clenching her hand into a fist and slowly reeling it back in the rain, preparing to deliver one final blow to end it.



Bonnie's shoes slapped against the damp pavement as she hastily ran through the almost fully empty downtown streets. She'd vanish while turning corners and vaulting obstructions, only to appear further down her path in an attempt to save even a sliver of time. She had to get to them before one of them killed the other. Her desperation to find them was pushing her well beyond her own physical limits. She could hardly keep up with her own feet, nearly tripping every other step, and whether she was sweating, or simply soaked in rainwater, she wasn't sure.

Stumbling around a street corner, she noticed a panicked crowd had begun gathering out on a sidewalk in front of a restaurant. She quickly made her way over, trying to see if they were watching the fight or just confused by all the noise. She tried to force her way through but quickly found herself sandwiched between bodies and unable to move.

"Excuse me," Bonnie called out, attempting to continue to finagle her way through the gathering. Noticing that no one was paying any mind to her, she

quickly grew frustrated. "Excuse me!" she repeated, attempting to shout over both the rain and blabbering crowd.

But any attention she tried to garner with the shout was lost as a roaring boom abruptly blew through the streets. The crowd let loose a cacophony of frightened shrieks and began to shove one another, scattering back into local businesses.

Bonnie was almost pushed over as they dispersed but managed to stand her ground, vanishing and reappearing to avoid individuals of the startled mob.

Even after the crowd had gone, she could still feel the echo of the blast reverberating in her chest. She would have assumed it was a lightning strike had she not felt that exact power before.

Distant car alarms blared over the thunderstorm. She'd already begun to look for some clues as to what direction exactly it had come from, but the rain was making it rather difficult. That was . . . until she peered into an alleyway across the street and through a chain-link fence.

Barry was towering over Samantha, who was lying on the pavement. . . .

"No," Bonnie gasped, stumbling forward a half step. "No, no, no!" She continued ahead, picking up the pace as she began to fear that she was too late. "Stop!" she shrieked, her voice beaten down by the incessant clatter of the rain. She soon came up to the fence, grabbing hold of it as she continued to scream. "I said stop it!"

It was no use. Barry couldn't hear her from that far away.

Bonnie hurriedly scaled the fence and threw herself over it. There wasn't a moment to waste.

The very instant her shoes touched the ground, she curled her fingers and clutched the very temper of reality. As she squeezed her fingers into her palms, the sounds around her began to slow and stretch until they didn't even hum. She then threw her arms out, releasing a surge from her body that snagged

and jerked the threads of existence to their limit; the thick veil of pressure she'd exerted had ensnared the world in a rigid state of sudden, unmoving silence.

Bonnie had stopped time.

She gasped, barely able to suck in a full breath of the motionless air. She glanced up, noting that the source of the dense, frozen reverberations in her chest was a halted thunderbolt hanging in the sky.

Despite the fact that her lungs were essentially compressed and burning with extreme intensity, she pressed on. She didn't have the time to catch her breath, and to her, her comfort wasn't worth letting Samantha die over. Even as her body cried in agony for her to release her grasp on time, she pushed herself to sprint toward her friends. Each puddle she stomped in shot up a quick spurt of water, which almost immediately froze after she bounded past.

She could feel her grip slipping. If she didn't release it soon, she was going to black out from the strain. She knew she had to do something to get Barry away from Samantha, to snap her out of it, and she had to do it fast. With few other options, she jerked her arm back and released her stranglehold while throwing a desperate punch, and just as the slapping of the rain against the pavement resumed, she decked Barry right across the face.

The frozen lightning was finally free to scatter across the sky. As it crackled overhead, Bonnie staggered back and wheezed in exhaustion. While every muscle in her body burned, it didn't stop her from shakily holding her arms out to the side and protectively standing over the reaper. Even while fatigued, she wasn't about to falter now that she was glaring right into Barry's soul with her surging violet eyes.

Barry nearly slipped and fell as a result of the unexpected strike. A short burst of anger filled her face until she realized Bonnie was the one who had struck her. "B-Bon!?" she choked, freezing up like a startled child.

Bonnie's right eye twitched and she began to growl. Her fingers curled back into her palms, and her nails dug into her skin with enough pressure that she drew blood. "You *IDIOT!*" she shrieked while taking a step forward and roughly shoving Barry.

"Wha—" Barry gasped, stumbling back several steps. "What are you doing here!?"

"What am *I* doing here?" Bonnie shouted before shoving her finger in Barry's face. "What are *you* doing here!?"

"Dealing with a puppet!" Barry retorted.

"Pu—" Bonnie's face dropped as she processed the word. She glanced back at Samantha, who had only regained enough strength to lever herself up on her elbows. "Puppet? . . . Puppet!?" she confusedly repeated. "Barry, are you seriously that fucking stupid!?"

"But—" Barry stubbornly denied, "Look! That's *not* Sam!" she argued, pointing past Bonnie at the reaper, who was continuing her fruitless struggle to sit up.

"What—" Bonnie's face twitched. Barry's words made no sense. She didn't even need to look back to be sure it was her. "What the hell are you talking about!?"

"He told me what he did!" Barry shouted back, stepping back up to Bonnie. "Besides . . . she's not even close to how strong Sam was! She doesn't even have her toxins anymore!"

Bonnie stared at her in utter disbelief as images of Samantha's supposed execution flashed through her mind. Of course things would be missing, of course she'd be weaker, she likely had to be rebuilt!

The blonde's face grew red, burning with irritation as she saw not even an ounce of doubt in Barry's eyes. Her boiling anger then surfaced fully with a sudden open palm smack across Barry's face.

Barry gasped and took two steps back in quick succession. Her eyes tremored and widened after being struck by her friend for a second time. Her lips began to quiver, but she gulped as if swallowing down her hurt only to then leer back at the blonde.

“You believed that *snake* because she’s weaker!?” Bonnie shrieked, stomping back up to her, as she refused to let Barry escape her critical lapse in judgment. “*That’s* your reason!? She’s *weaker*!?” She snarled, “She’s weaker because she almost fucking died, dumbass!”

Barry cowered slightly, holding her bruised cheek as the sting of the slap still freshly echoed across her nerves. She held it as though it had damaged her more than the cuts and gashes that littered her skin. She slowly averted her eyes, staring beyond Bonnie again and back toward the reaper she’d left a bloody mess on the pavement.

Willow had broken free from Roxanne and ran to Samantha’s aid. She was doing her best to help her sit up. Despite the density of Samantha’s skeleton, Willow managed to get her upright and somewhat stable. She seemed to pay no mind to the blonde or Barry and merely went about checking Samantha’s wounds.

Samantha stared blankly at nothing in particular; her vision likely still hadn’t returned. She only leaned into Willow’s grasp, quietly breathing as her body slowly pulled itself back together after the beating she’d suffered. Her temporarily sightless eyes dwelled in heartache, as if still unable to fathom *why* Barry would’ve done what she did, and upon noticing that, Barry’s lips began to tremble.

“If you actually used that brain in your head, *Erika*,” Bonnie snarled, unaware that she’d even deadnamed Barry while prodding at her forehead with a finger. “I’m pretty sure even someone as *stupid* as you could figure out you were sent to kill one of your own friends! But you didn’t think, did you!? You just did what you were told!”

Barry sniffled and took another half step back. She tightly squeezed her lips together and stared at the ground, the gravity of her actions finally weighing her down.

Bonnie's face softened as she witnessed how quickly Barry crumbled. An uneasy frown came over her lips as she realized that she'd done far more damage than necessary. Her anger was no excuse for letting Barry's deadname slip from her lips.

"Barry . . . I-I didn't mean . . ."

A sudden distant whistle then stole her attention and she turned to see Emma running toward them from down the street.

"Work it out later!" Emma shouted, sliding to a halt on the wet pavement. "You guys made a *massive* commotion. They know where we are." She glanced at her wristwatch. "We got about five minutes to get out of here before they swarm the place!"

Roxanne had since made her way over to Willow and Samantha's side. But upon the spotting of a third face that she did not recognize, she shrieked out, "Enough!"

Emma glanced over to the two girls holding up Samantha. "Who are you?" she squinted.

Roxanne grunted, as though taken aback by the audacity of such a question. "Who am I? Who are you!? Why do more of you people keep showing up!?"

"Yeah, not important." Emma hummed, sliding a bag off her shoulder and down her arm. "I promise, I'll explain once we get out of here," she assured them before pulling out a small handheld device with a single button on it.

Bonnie immediately winced. Of course Emma would rig something like that. "Don't tell me that's—"

"A detonator," Emma confirmed, pushing down the switch as she finished. Not too far in the distance, a plume of smoke shot into the sky as an explosion

rocked the already startled small town. Before long, the sirens of approaching emergency vehicles previously headed to investigate the fight now had a new problem to deal with.

“What was that!?” Roxanne shouted, tightening her hold around Willow and Samantha.

“Our Humvee,” Emma replied. “That should buy us some time.”

“Ahh . . .” Bonnie exhaled, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Ponytail, do you—”

“My *name* is Roxanne,” she grumbled back.

“Fine! Roxanne, do you have a car!?” Emma barked.

“Yes, a station wagon! Why does it matter!?” Roxanne defensively snapped.

“Because we’re running out of time to actually make it out of this in one piece! So get it!”

Roxanne squinted in distrust then eyed her little sister. The urgency in Emma’s voice seemed to be enough for her to rise up, nod, then run off to retrieve the vehicle.

“Flannel kid,” Emma called out after Roxanne left.

Willow didn’t verbally respond and simply tightened her frightened hold on Samantha.

“Get in the front with your sister,” Emma ordered. “Bonnie, in the middle with Sam, get her patched up.” She then gazed to her right at the white-haired girl who was just quietly standing still and staring at the asphalt. “You’re in the back with me, Barricade.”



Maximilian stood only a dozen yards from the burning wreckage. He stared into the deceitful crackling flames snapping as rainwater poured over them.

To think he'd be fooled so easily by something so simple. "A *diversion*." He chuckled. "Adorable."

"Sir," Parker began, her boots sloshing in the flooded street as she approached him. "Omicron checked the town's surveillance systems. Nineteen and Eighteen were locked in combat about two blocks from here, just as the scouts said."

"And?" he inquired, watching the wreckage as firefighters desperately attempted to put it out.

"Seventeen arrived and stopped the fight altogether," Parker reported.

"Did she now?" Maximilian hummed, raising a hand to his face. He stroked his mustache, an amused smile coming across his face as he realized the three had reunited. "This may be problematic. Though, in a way, it's poetic."

"Pardon . . . sir?" Parker cocked a brow.

"They once fought together." Maximilian glanced over his shoulder. "And now, they'll all die together."

His smile turned into a grin as Parker almost immediately avoided his gaze. He then stared back into the fire, unbothered by the apparently dire circumstances. There was nothing for him to worry about. Barricade was released on his order, and Bonnie with Emma on his approval. It was only a matter of time before the three found each other. While things were moving a tad quicker than he'd hoped, with Diana's newly accrued knowledge, and Samantha's growing party . . . his perceived finale was shaping up to be *glorious*.



"What's our next move?" Diana spoke up from beside Maximilian. Parker had wandered off, and in her place stood the commander, though just like Parker, she didn't dare look his way.

Maximilian carelessly shrugged. “We play our cards close to the chest,” he explained. “But, I’ll admit, we’re currently in the red.” He sighed, reaching up and subconsciously scratching at his mustache. “United, they’re a dangerous trio, it’s how they were developed. Though I have my doubts that they’ll be willing to forgive Number Eighteen so easily after she almost *killed* Samantha.”

Diana’s face scrunched and her fingers twitched. The mere mention of her daughter’s name was now enough to nearly send her into a rage, but she managed to temper herself. She knew, at that point, he’d no longer even consider using Samantha’s designation, that he must’ve been looking for her to lash out. As she calmed herself, she let loose a deep nasal exhale. She wouldn’t allow him that satisfaction.

“We need to gain some . . . *leverage*.” Maximilian sneered.

“Leverage?”

As the responders began to suffocate the blaze, Maximilian slowly turned away and stepped off, sharing no additional words with Diana as he left her alone in the rain.

Diana winced, tightening the grip on her hands that she held behind her back. She sniffed the air; the scent of smoke had been replaced with that of the fire retardant’s subtle sweetness. Her daughter had been roaming these streets just minutes ago . . . but what would she have done if she were to face her again?

Chapter Eleven

The Somber Six

Aside from the endless rain beating down on the windshield, and the squeaky wipers scurrying across its surface, the only other noises in the car were the engine and Samantha's quiet wheezing.

Willow was propped up on her knees and peering over the edge of her seat. She cautiously watched as Bonnie meticulously nursed Samantha's cuts and bruises. The blonde was doing the best she could with the small first aid kit supplied to her by Emma, although she was quickly running out of materials.

Emma was in the back staring out the window. She was paying no mind to any of them, especially Barry, who sat right beside her.

Barry was hunched over, hiding her face in her hands. She wallowed in a mental hell of her own creation, sickened by the fact that she'd taken anything that lying snake said at face value. After countless years of lies and isolation, she'd believed his word on a whim!

She softly, yet barely audibly, sniffled.

Bonnie was right. . . . How could she be that stupid?

She knew just how close she'd been to ending Samantha's life, and that dreadful guilt hung silently around her neck like a ghostly noose.

"I want answers," Roxanne suddenly demanded, tightening her grip on the steering wheel. She had been staring at the blonde through the rearview mirror with darkened eyes brimming with stress. "*Now.*"

"I'm not sure what good it'll do you," Bonnie said, pulling an alcohol swab away from Samantha's cheek. Samantha slightly winced. "But I suppose it's

only fair, even though I don't know who you are, or why you're even *with* Sam."

"Who *I* am doesn't matter," Roxanne growled. "My entire life has been upended and I don't even know *why*." Her eyes narrowed. "So the least you could do is tell me who you are and what the hell is going on."

"I . . . see." Bonnie cleared her throat and placed a hand against her chest. "I'm Bonnie, and that's," she swallowed, "Barry."

Roxanne squinted, peering beyond Bonnie's reflection at the hunched-over brawler in the back. "Hm . . ." She huffed, then averted her attention to the captain. "And that one?"

"I *was* the captain of F.T.F. Epsilon," Emma started, turning to meet Roxanne's mirrored gaze. "But now, I'm just Emma Pierce."

"F.T.F.?" Willow curiously inquired. "What's that stand for?"

"Foundation Task Force," Emma answered. "We're what they use to keep the Orphans contained . . . among other things."

"And you just . . . defected?" Roxanne asked. "How do I know you're not just a wolf in wool?"

Emma scoffed and gestured in the direction of the blonde in a poncho. "If I was, why the hell would I have brought Bonnie?" she sarcastically sneered.

"Fair point." Roxanne huffed.

"As for what's going on . . . In short, the Orphanage Foundation placed a kill order on Samantha. And considering we're all involved at this point, that order extends to the rest of us now," Emma uneasily relayed, leaning back into the bench seat and crossing her arms under her breasts.

"Holy shit. . . ." Roxanne exhaled, her grip on the wheel partly loosening.

"I won't lie, shit's pretty grim . . ." Emma grumbled. "But considering we literally have *three* Orphans at our disposal, I think we can withstand almost anything they throw at us."

Willow seemed more curious than scared, as though she didn't yet fully grasp the encroaching threat looming over them. In her eyes, Samantha was surely enough to protect her. "Miss . . . Pierce?"

"Hm?" Emma hummed, cocking an eyebrow.

"If you don't mind me asking . . . what exactly *is* an Orphan?"

"Well, they're a lot more than just a parentless child," Emma scoffed.

"By definition, that's essentially what we are," Bonnie chimed in, pulling a needle and thread through Samantha's arm, stitching up a rather large gash to assist with its rapid healing.

"Don't be a smartass, Bonnie."

Bonnie playfully shrugged and went back to focusing on Samantha.

"Orphans are the entire reason the Foundation exists," Emma explained. "The Orphanage Foundation operates under the guise that they're protecting the public from them." She then knit her brows. "In reality, they're the ones making them."

"They're . . . made?" Willow inquired.

"From a slew of abducted children, yes. As far as I know, there's only two requirements: they have to be female and no older than seventeen, and if they aren't . . ." Emma winced, "they don't survive the procedure."

Willow nervously gulped and lightly shuddered from Emma's words as a chill ran down her back.

"Even if they do meet the criteria, very few actually make it," Bonnie murmured, snipping the thread. She'd finally finished up both cleaning and tending to Samantha's wounds. "Those that do survive are immediately given Mem-Narcs and put in a cell for observation."

"Mem . . . what?" Roxanne mouthed, having calmed down enough to reinsert herself into the conversation.

"Memory-Alerting-Narcotics," Emma defined. "The Foundation's favorite toy."

“Yeah,” Bonnie sighed. “And because of those, we don’t know how the procedure actually works. The only thing we know is the criteria, and that they call it The Process.”

“That’s incredibly vague,” Roxanne grumbled.

“Story of my fuckin’ life,” Emma huffed. “Those that *do* make it through are augmented, some very slightly, and some significantly. If you can believe it, Samantha’s only in the middle in terms of how odd the transformations can get. There’s literally a girl made of plants.”

“The only real odd thing about Samantha, to us at least, is that she’s still alive,” Bonnie stated, leaning back against the seat.

“Why? Because *that one* almost beat her to death?” Roxanne sneered.

Barry uncomfortably curled her fingers into her hair and sank lower into her lap.

“No . . .” Bonnie frowned, “because we thought she died.”

Roxanne blinked. “You thought she what?”

Willow sank against her seat, likely recalling their discussion out on the lawn as she eyed the resting reaper. That must’ve been what she’d been referring to.

“We were all present for it,” Emma started. “Last October . . . there was a *massive* containment breach. We were barely able to stop it, and during that chaos, Samantha lost complete control of herself sheerly out of self-preservation. Bonnie and Barry tried to calm her down, but . . .”

“We were subdued . . .” Bonnie gulped. “And Sam was gunned down. Back then, she couldn’t take bullets like she can now. She was literally torn apart, and we all had to watch . . .”

“The weirdest part is that she’s alive *with* a brand-new coat of paint,” Emma said. “There’s *literally* only one way she could’ve possibly survived that.”

“What’s that?” Willow softly questioned.

“Undergoing The Process a second time,” Bonnie stated. “As far as we know, *no one* has ever been put through it twice.”

“And what does that mean?” Roxanne asked.

Emma halfheartedly shrugged. “I couldn’t tell you. I don’t even know what The Process is, let alone what a second go-around would do to an Orphan.”

“Right . . .” Roxanne hummed, then suddenly perked up and peered over her shoulder. “Wait a minute, back up to the Mem-Narcs,” she exclaimed. “They put out an emergency alert, the whole county knows by now. How do they expect to drug an entire populous and keep any information from leaking?”

Emma solemnly snickered and shook her head. “Where do you think the cops are?”

“What do you mean? We saw two earlier,” Roxanne recalled.

“Off duty, maybe. The rest of them have set up a perimeter thirty miles outside the county. No one’s allowed in, or out,” Emma explained. “And as for information leaking? Good luck doing that with a two-way radio.”

“But . . . can’t people just go online?” Roxanne proposed.

Emma shook her head. “Check your phone.”

“I’m driving, and even if I wanted to, I left it at the house,” Roxanne confessed, glancing at her sister.

Willow frowned. “I left mine on my dresser.”

“Even if you had them, they’d be useless,” Emma declared while pulling out her own. “The Foundation plans for these things. The moment that emergency alert went live, the perimeter was erected, and all outside communication was cut.” She pressed the power button and her phone screen lit up. Sure enough, she had zero bars.

“So there’s . . . no help coming . . .” Roxanne gulped.

“None at all. We’re it,” Emma declared.

“*We’re it . . .*” Roxanne softly repeated, slumping back against her seat and sliding her hands partway down the steering wheel.

Samantha stirred, her heavy eyes fluttering as she released a sore groan.

Hearing Samantha's audible discomfort, Roxanne peered back over her shoulder to check on the girl. She was still bruised and somewhat bloody, but a majority of the damage had already begun healing thanks to Bonnie's added efforts.

Roxanne knit her brows together. She wasn't about to drop what happened just because Samantha was okay.

"And how do I know I can trust you or Bonnie?" Roxanne asked, glaring back up into her mirror at Emma. "Especially when you brought *her* into my car."

"Barry had a lapse in judgment," Bonnie stated, "albeit a large one."

"A lapse in judgment?" Roxanne scoffed.

"Her actions may have been *extremely* rash and ill-informed, but there's almost no one who cares about Sam more than she does."

"By almost killing her? That's a *really* fuckin' weird way to show affection," Roxanne growled.

Willow shot a judgmental leer at her sister. "Roxy!"

"What!?" Roxanne barked back. "We're expected to trust her just because her heart was in the right place? Well, I'm sorry, I can't and won't trust somebody *that* slow in the head when our *lives* are on the line."

Samantha's lips curled slightly as she continued to stir. Roxanne's comments about her friend seemed to be bugging her, despite the circumstances.

After a few moments of silence, Barry softly murmured into her hands, "She's right."

Samantha's tired eyes peeled open.

"Barry . . ." Bonnie frowned.

"No. *She's right*," Barry repeated, squeaking in broken agreement. She raised her head and dropped her hands to her lap. Her face was stained with streaks of the tears she'd been shedding in silence. "I let myself be lied to by

a man who's lied to us for years. . . ." With her eyes dropping to the floor, she balled up her fists, tugging at her pants as she choked on her tears. "I'm a fuckin' *moron*," she croaked.

"That's not true."

Barry raised her head, noticing Samantha's sky-blue orbs peeking over the seat and staring right at her.

"S-Sam," Bonnie stammered, turning toward the smaller girl. "You should save your energy—"

Samantha only slightly glanced at the blonde, but it was enough to make Bonnie relent in her pursuit.

"But . . . Sam . . ." Barry protested.

"It's not true," Samantha reiterated, wheezing as she did. Even though speaking strained her at the moment, she wouldn't allow Barry to speak ill of herself, even after everything she'd done.

"If it were . . . you wouldn't have h-hesitated," Samantha spoke before stopping short. She then gagged and twisted, coughing profusely into her palms.

The coughs only made Barry feel worse. A sob spilled out her lips and she quickly covered them. She then tightly closed her eyes, squeezing out further tears before quietly mumbling, "I'm sorry . . ."

"Stop it . . ." Samantha immediately retorted in a dulcet tone. The sounds of the brawler's guilt made her heart ache. Knowing her all too well, she could tell those sobs weren't fake.

She placed her small hands against the seat and began to hoist herself up over it. She grunted, as despite how minor of an exertion it was, her muscles were burning from it.

Barry's teary eyes opened as Samantha weakly grabbed at her wrist.

"I forgive you," Samantha whispered as a weak, exhausted smile came over her lips. "It's not your fault that he lied to you."

Barry sniffled. "I can't forgive *myself*."

"Then just know that I'm not angry . . ." Samantha softly squeezed Barry's wrist. "I could *never* be mad at you."

Barry softly nodded and loosely grabbed hold of Samantha's smaller hand. "O-okay." She gulped.

"I missed the two of you more than anything," Samantha revealed, gripping Barry's hand with all her weakened might.

"Jesus, Sam . . ." Barry snickered, wiping her eyes with her wrist. She couldn't help herself anymore and released Samantha's hand before leaning up and hugging the small one as tightly as she could. "I really missed you, too."

Samantha squeaked at being squeezed so suddenly, but she couldn't help but hug her back, as such an embrace was long overdue. There was nothing Barry could ever do to her that would get her to forsake their friendship, for better or worse.

Not wanting to interrupt the two, Bonnie decided to lean up between the front seats to ask Roxanne, "So, are you driving anywhere in particular? Or—"

Roxanne leered back past Bonnie at the two girls embracing. She still *definitely* didn't like Barry but seemed to be willing to pipe down for Samantha's sake. "We need somewhere to lay low for the night. I've got a spot in mind," she quietly divulged.

"Where?" Willow curiously prodded.

"Remember Uncle Dennis?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm taking us to his old place," Roxanne said, turning onto a dirt road. "Since he died, his family's just kinda let it sit. We'll be safe there . . . at least for the night."

Samantha sat back down. She had mostly recovered by this point, though still looked an absolute mess. But without any cleaning supplies on hand,

there wasn't much that could be done about it. Plus, at the moment, she figured if she was just going to keep getting into fights, there wasn't really much of a point in cleaning herself up anyway.

Barry, on the other hand, had stopped tearing up, and while she was still clearly dwelling on her actions, Samantha's forgiveness seemed to put her somewhat at ease.

"Is that it?" Bonnie asked, pointing at a lone, dark property down the road.

Roxanne nodded.

"Wow . . ." Willow mumbled, looking over how dilapidated the entire area was. Junk and scrap littered the lawn to the point that it looked like a junkyard. "They really haven't taken care of this place."

"How often did you guys come by here? When he was alive, I mean," Bonnie inquired.

"All the time when I was little." Willow beamed. "Our father and Uncle Dennis were really close."

"Yeah, but once Dad passed, Dennis followed soon after, and well . . ." Roxanne sighed, pulling into the barn, as the door had been carelessly left ajar. "Memories of a bygone era."

She stopped right about in the center of the old building. "Okay," she started, pulling out her keys. "Let's get set up."



"Eleanor, you must calm yourself." Maximilian hummed. He was sitting in the booth of a small diner directly across from his assistant. Though usually empty at this time of night, he and the entire pursuing force had filled the diner to the brim.

“I’ll do *nothing* of the sort, Ford!” Kelly barked through the speakers of Maximilian’s laptop. The two had been going at it for several minutes.

“My dear, Samantha’s termination is not up for debate,” Maximilian said, sipping on a mug of coffee as he blankly stared into the webcam.

“But it was before!? I’ve had enough of your shit!” Kelly snarled. “You could have let her rest, or better yet, not killed her in the first place!”

“Eleanor, she murdered several—”

“That wasn’t her fault, and you know it!” Kelly shrieked, visibly fuming as the hairs loose from her bun fell down over her face. “And if that was the reason, why would you bring her back!?”

Maximilian chuckled. He leaned back in the booth, continuing to purposefully sip his coffee at the pace of a sickly elder.

“She never should have been subjected to *any* of this,” Kelly grimaced, visibly fighting against having another mental breakdown after the several she’d already suffered through. “You’ve been playing with fire long enough, I hope it *finally* burns you.”

As the screen went dark, Maximilian raised his eyes to scour the diner while continuing his prolonged sip. He looked over the many tables of Orphanage personnel talking among themselves, then his eyes met with Diana’s. She sat still and alone, with her elbows on the table and her fingers tightly linked. A cup of untouched, cold coffee and an uneaten sandwich lay before her. All she’d done for the last hour was stare him down.

“Sir, why did you allow Doctor Kelly to speak to you in such an . . . *unprofessional* manner?” Wilson piped up, wondering why his boss didn’t shut her down even once.

The doctor chuckled as he set down the mug. “There’s no harm in doing so, son. I am a firm believer in freedom of speech.”

“Then . . .” Wilson squinted, looking down at his half-eaten plate of spaghetti. “Sir, if I may inquire?”

“What about?” Maximilian beckoned.

“I’ve . . . loyally stood by your side for years, sir. I respect you with every fiber of my being, but I . . .” Wilson chewed at his bottom lip.

“Speak your mind, my boy,” Maximilian egged him on, continuing to stare beyond his assistant and at Diana, holding a stalemate of glares.

“I simply don’t understand something,” Wilson sighed, resting his hands in his lap. “I understand the Foundation’s mission, it’s for science, it’s to experiment. But I don’t understand the . . . *unnecessary* steps we’ve taken.”

“Do specify, Wilson.”

“Why . . . *allow* the doctors and Orphans to form attachments to one another?” Wilson asked. “Why fool them, and lie to them? Why willingly release more Orphans to only further complicate our mission and irritate our men?”

Noticing Maximilian’s fervent stare, he slowly turned his head to peek over his shoulder. “Why go out of your way to take her only child?”

Diana shifted her glance just slightly enough to let Wilson know she disapproved of his gaze. He quickly turned back, keeping his eyes on his plate and not daring to raise them.

The brief break of eye contact was enough for Maximilian to be satisfied, as though he’d won some sort of frivolous contest. He peered down at Wilson stirring in discomfort, which seemed to just give him another reason to smirk. “*Why*, you ask?” he muttered, raising his mug yet again. “I needn’t explain it, as you’ve already seen *why*, Wilson.”

“Sir, I . . . I have?” Wilson murmured, unconvinced. What could Maximilian possibly gain from not just pulling, but tangling, so many strings? Hardly anything is to be gained from confusion, disorganization, or . . . suffering. Unless it were satisfaction . . . Unless Maximilian’s reasoning was . . .

“Chaos?” Wilson softly hummed, glancing up from his plate.

Maximilian grinned down at his assistant. He took a moment to drink, then set down his cup and leaned against the table. “You’re in the ballpark,” he said.

“But . . . but sir . . .” Wilson’s shoulders slumped.

“Commander Gray’s stare was enough to make you look away,” Maximilian stated, peeking over toward her again. She hadn’t ceased staring his way. “Her explosion of confused and cluttered emotions when she learned the truth?” He further widened his sly grin at the commander from across the diner. “Her sickened reaction when she realized she was the one who ordered the execution of her own child just a year prior?” Maximilian returned his cold eyes to Wilson. “Unquestionably . . . *priceless*. It’s all about perspective, dear boy. My duty, of course, is to the wondrous Foundation I’ve created. To the creations, discoveries, and fascinating data we’ve procured.” He chuckled. “But do I enjoy the side effects of such heinous work?” His grin was sickening, so much so that Wilson couldn’t bear to look him in the eyes without his stomach twisting. “Absolutely.”

Wilson couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He pondered on if this was a test. Perhaps one of the cognitive Orphans had affected his mind, or maybe he was sick. No matter the excuse Wilson procured, each had its own faults. But one thing was for sure, Maximilian had never spoken so . . . *genuinely* before. There was only one explanation to Wilson that needed no justification.

He swallowed dryly.

For once . . . he could sense Maximilian was simply telling the truth.

Chapter Twelve

Moonlit Serenity

“Alright,” Emma denoted while tugging the girthy, rickety barn doors shut. She stepped over to the group and then dropped the duffle bag she’d been carrying around onto the dirt. “This may not be the tastiest shit you’ve ever eaten.” She knelt down and began fishing through it before pulling out a thick stack of slim brown packages. “But they’ll do.”

“Where did you get MREs?” Bonnie questioned. She was attempting to construct a fire, rubbing a stick between her hands against a pile of aged barn wood and twigs that she’d decided to use as kindling.

“The Humvee. We keep at least a week’s worth of these in them at all times,” Emma explained as she began to toss them around. “I snatched them and a few other things before I torched it.”

“What else did you grab?” Willow asked curiously.

“Not much . . .” Emma peeled the bag open. “A lot of ammunition, that’s for sure. A couple of flashbangs, some frag grenades—”

Roxanne’s head instantly shot up. “You had bombs in my car!?” she cried.

Emma squinted. “Yeah, like grenades in a car full of guns and three teenagers with what are *essentially* superpowers is the thing you should be concerned about.”

Roxanne grumbled in hesitant agreement, then proceeded to search for instructions on the package she’d been given.

“So . . . Orphans . . . Orphanage . . .” Willow began, scratching the back of her neck as she eyed Emma. “You guys mentioned there being a reason for that naming scheme, right?”

“It’s because we were *all* unwanted children,” Bonnie stated. She looked rather pleased with herself as sparks cracked to life beneath her stick, and the kindling began to smoke. Once it was burning, she filled a tin can with water for their MREs and laid it on one of the boards near the edge.

“All of you?” Willow frowned.

Samantha nodded from beside her. She was barely paying attention, mostly focused on her fruitless struggle to tear open her MRE.

“Unwanted doesn’t even scratch the surface,” Barry scoffed, ripping the bag open with ease. As the fire Bonnie had been tending to fully burst to life, she seemed a little . . . surprised. “You know I have a lighter, right?”

Bonnie slowly turned to leer at Barry. “And . . . you’re just telling me *now*?”

“I didn’t know you were starting a fire.”

“Barry, why else would I be rubbing a stick between my hands?” Bonnie asked.

Barry scoffed and began to snicker. “Well—”

“No, shut up,” Bonnie snapped back, whipping a stick at Barry, which she narrowly avoided. “Don’t answer that.”

Willow looked to her sister only to notice a seeming lack of interest. It didn’t really surprise her, as family was always a sore subject for them both. But if Roxanne didn’t want to talk about it, she didn’t mind. “Roxy and I weren’t exactly unwanted, at least until our dad died. . . .” She sighed, laying her pouch on the ground. She’d never really spoken about their situation to anyone besides Roxanne, and even then, their discussions were always extremely brief.

“Our dad loved us. He’d take us fishing, show us how the farm equipment worked and such. . . . He was very hands-on, but I don’t really remember much

about him. I was so little that sometimes I can't even remember his face." She somberly chuckled, placing her arms over her knees.

"We always knew our mom kept to herself and didn't want to be bothered much . . . but . . ." Willow frowned. "When Dad died, she didn't even say goodbye. . . . She took every penny we had and *left*. Like she was just waiting for it to happen."

"Sounds like a real piece of work," Emma sympathized.

"I wanted to cry all the time. . . . I wanted her to come back, but it didn't take me too long to figure out that wasn't going to happen," Willow lamented though a bright smile ended up forcing its way back onto her lips. "And if I didn't have Roxanne, I probably wouldn't even be alive right now."

Roxanne ceased fiddling with her MRE for a moment and raised her head. She was leaning up against the car a few feet from the group, just far enough to keep everyone in her sights.

"She's given up so much . . . all just to protect *me* and give *me* a better life," Willow gloated on her sister's behalf. "She's more of a mother to me than our real one ever was."

Roxanne's eyes glistened as she looked back down at the directions she'd been reading. She couldn't help but smile at her sister's kind words.

"I . . ." Samantha hummed, defeatedly cradling her mangled pouch in her lap. "I never met my parents."

"You're not missing much," Barry said, staring into the flames of their campfire.

Bonnie thwacked the stick she was using to stoke the coals upside Barry's shin.

"Ah! What!?" Barry winced, grabbing at her leg.

Bonnie huffed and nudged her head in Samantha's direction. Upon looking over, Barry noticed Samantha's somber demeanor and reluctantly decided to keep her mouth shut.

“Foster home to foster home . . .” Samantha murmured, tightening her grip on the MRE. “Each one was the same. . . . Disinterested stares and the knowledge that—” She closed her eyes and sucked in a breath just as a whimper began to escape her lips. “The knowledge that I’d eventually just be sent somewhere else . . .”

Willow scooted up against Samantha’s side. In an effort to comfort her, she pressed her head against the girl’s shoulder, gently nuzzling against it. She empathized but hadn’t a clue how to make Samantha feel any better, as she hadn’t even figured that out for herself yet.

But for Samantha, Willow’s simple act of affection was enough to make her lips partly curl into a smile.

“Since we’re all sharing . . .” Bonnie sighed, laying the stoker down beside the fire. She plopped down and leaned back against a worn, rusting shelf that must have fallen over a great many years ago. “I . . . honestly don’t even know how my father felt about me.”

“He was a dick enough to *willingly* sell you to Max and the Orphanage,” Barry stated, picking up the scalding tin of boiling water with her bare hands. “So that should give you a pretty good idea,” she said while pouring the water to the fill line of her pouch, unfazed by the heat due to her steely skin.

“Wait . . .” Roxanne squinted. “Your dad *sold* you?”

“Fifty grand,” Bonnie said while crossing her arms. “It wasn’t me he wanted gone, though. It was my sister. He didn’t care about her one bit. I offered to go in her place, and—” She scoffed. “I don’t know if he was disappointed, relieved, or both. . . . But he didn’t say a word, and I was taken the next day.”

“Jesus Christ . . .”

“I never really got it. . . . It’s not like he needed the money, and he rarely saw us anyway.” Bonnie shrugged.

“How rich does a guy have to be to—” Roxanne stopped. She stared across at Bonnie’s vibrant, unique violet eyes. Her blonde hair and good looks were one thing, but those . . . eyes . . . “Bonnie?”

“Yeah?” The blonde glanced up over the fire.

“What’s your last name?”

“Saturn?”

“Holy shit,” Roxanne gulped, nearly dropping her pouch.

“What is it?” Willow inquired, still leaning up against Samantha.

“You’re . . .” Roxanne shivered, raising her hand up to shield her eyes from the glaring flames and get a better look at the blonde. “You’re William Saturn’s kid!?”

Bonnie chuckled, unsurprised that her father’s name was so commonly known. “Only by blood . . .”

“Who’s that?” Willow curiously asked.

“One of the Foundation’s contributors,” Emma sneered. “But the public, of course, doesn’t know that. On the surface, he’s just some billionaire asshole that runs the largest international company on the planet. But beneath that . . . he’s just one of the guys that fund the Orphanage.”

“Are you serious?” Roxanne said.

“I haven’t got any proof . . . but—”

“You don’t need any,” Bonnie chuckled in heartache, well aware of the skeletons in her family’s closet. “He’s been involved with shit like that since before I was born.”

“My . . . god . . .” Roxanne mumbled.

“What about you, Barry?” Emma inquired, shifting her attention to the brawler.

Barry’s face dropped a bit, as though she dreaded it being her turn to share. She sharply exhaled through her nose and shoveled a quick forkful of

what appeared to be beef into her mouth. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she mouthed.

Emma’s eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

Barry swallowed down her mouthful. “Is it any of your business?” she snarled, glaring daggers at the captain. “Why don’t *you* share instead, hm?”

The captain shrugged. “Fine,” she said, leaning back on her palms. “Not much to tell, my family and I don’t have any problems. I was born and raised in Chicago, but I moved out here when the Foundation offered me a job after my first tour of duty.”

Barry grumbled to herself and looked off into the shadows before taking in another forkful.

“See Barry?” Emma sarcastically sneered. “It wasn’t that hard.”

“Well aren’t you just so special,” Barry muttered, tightening her pincerlike grip on the plastic fork.

Bonnie peered over her shoulder. “Barry, what’s wrong?” she calmly asked.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it,” Barry quietly replied.

Emma raised a brow. “There’s no need to get defensive, just relax—”

“Oh piss off,” Barry scoffed, tossing her now empty pouch into the fire and shooting to her feet. “Who do you think you are, my mom?” she barked. “Just gonna poke me then act like you didn’t? Pretend it’s my fault!?”

Emma grunted and leaned back a bit further from the outburst. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to strike a nerve—”

“Yeah, right.” Barry stuffed her hands into her pockets. “I’ll be outside,” she declared while stomping off into the dark.

“Barry, wait!” Bonnie cried, scrambling to her feet. But by the time she was up, the barn doors had slammed shut and Barry was gone.

Emma sighed before noticing that Bonnie was glaring over at her. “What?”

“She’s sensitive,” Bonnie declared.

“How was I supposed to know that!?” Emma bellowed.

“Her, sensitive, yeah right,” Roxanne scoffed, only to receive a similar glare from her little sister.

Bonnie balled up her fists and lightly grumbled.

“Talking to her is like talking to a wall,” the captain divulged.

Bonnie huffed. “Yeah, one without any support.”



Outside, alone and frustrated, Barry stood sucking on a freshly lit smoke. She knew full well she'd lost her temper and hoped the frigid autumn air and nicotine would calm her down. But even as she stared up at the star-dotted, quiet evening sky, she couldn't cool off. It wasn't Emma's fault. She was used to a little jeering. It was the subject matter itself. She couldn't help but wonder how the others could talk about their families without feeling anything but an itch to hit something.

“Barry . . . What's wrong?” Bonnie murmured as the rickety barn doors clattered shut behind her. “I haven't seen you blow up like that in a while.” She stepped beside her, gazing up at the twinkling diamonds that hung over their heads.

Barry's rigid shoulders fell subtly. “I just . . . wanted to be alone for a minute, I guess.” She plucked the cigarette from her lips and rubbed her eyes while agitation-laced smoke poured out of her mouth. “I got too heated.”

Bonnie took a half step closer and gently laid her hand against the girl's arm. “Would you like me to stay for a little while?” she inquired.

Barry softly nodded while pinching her lips back around the ash stick. “I'd appreciate that.”

Bonnie's shiny blonde locks bounced as she nodded, too. “Okay.”

She found Bonnie's presence both soothing and unnerving. She felt a need to speak her mind, and if anyone were going to listen, Bonnie would. . . . But speaking her mind always got her into trouble. If the metal that made up her arms had been loose, it would be rattling from how badly she'd begun to shake. Cigarettes couldn't stave her anxiety forever, and before long, she was unable to stomach more silence.

"Sometimes . . . I think it would've been better for all of us if I was shot down instead."

Bonnie blinked, possibly unsure if she'd heard those words correctly. "What?" she whispered, turning her head from the stars.

"She didn't deserve it," Barry whispered, letting her cigarette fall from her lips with the last bit of ash she'd inhaled. It wasn't doing much for her anyway. "She certainly didn't deserve to get the shit beaten out of her by me either," she said as her throat began to fill with words of remorse, nearly enough for her to choke on. "I don't ever think . . . I just—I do! And all that comes from it is disappointment. . . . So what fuckin' good am I?"

Bonnie frowned. "I don't like it when you talk this way."

"Hmph." Barry closed her eyes and lowered her head. "And I don't like it when I fuck up *all the time*."

"You're too hard on yourself, Barry," Bonnie sighed, gently rubbing her shoulder. "You don't always—"

"Don't pretend, Bon!" Barry shouted, jerking away to deny herself any sympathy. "You know it, that Roxanne chick knows it! What I did was the fault of my own ignorance—my own stupidity! If it weren't, you wouldn't have—"

"I didn't mean to call you by your deadname!" Bonnie interjected, forcefully grabbing Barry by the bicep.

Barry froze up from the sudden apology and locked eyes with Bonnie.

"I'm sorry," Bonnie gulped regretfully.

Her confused blue eyes began to quiver in the face of an apology she knew she didn't deserve.

"I was angry, and I was just trying to hurt you. . . . I thought of the worst thing I could say and I . . ." Bonnie broke eye contact out of shame. "I'm sorry."

Barry softly cleared her throat. "It's . . . It's fine . . . I shouldn't even be upset by it, you know? It's not like I deserve a new name just for hating my mom."

"You don't need *anyone's* permission but your own to choose your name," Bonnie affirmed. "You don't even need to have a reason. You can do anything you want."

Barry smiled slightly. No matter what happened, Bonnie always knew just what to say. "It must be nice . . ." she halfheartedly snickered. "Y'know, being perfect?"

Bonnie cocked a brow, confused at first until she realized that Barry meant her. A little smile cracked over her lips, and it didn't take much more than a soft snicker before she was sent into a complete laughing fit.

Barry tensed up a bit and nervously chuckled, eyeing the blonde as she reeled in bemusement. "What's so funny?"

"Me?" Bonnie wheezed, catching her breath as she clutched her sides. "Barry," she sniffed, "you can't be serious."

"I am!" Barry cried, clenching her fists together as her cheeks began to singe red.

"Barry, I make just as many mistakes as anyone. I'm no better than you or anybody else—"

"No!" Barry shouted, wanting her statement to be taken seriously. "You're absolutely *brilliant*, Bon!" she proclaimed, suddenly grabbing the blonde by the arms. "I wish I could be like you, dammit! You're *so* smart! You always know what to say. No one I've ever met has been nearly as nice or as beautiful as you are!"

Bonnie stiffened in Barry's grasp. As the cold wind blew through her hair, she stared at the brawler like a deer in headlights. "W-what?"

"I—" Barry's face burned as she noticed the surprised twinkle in Bonnie's eyes. There was no playing this one off. "I didn't mean—"

"Did you just—"

"No!" Barry defensively cried, releasing Bonnie and taking a half step back. "I . . . I mean, yes, but—" She covered her eyes out of embarrassment and leaned her head back, groaning out into the air. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that . . ."

"Oh, stop it." Bonnie snickered, reaching up and pressing a slender finger against Barry's lips. "Don't apologize for being who you are."

Barry partly recoiled from Bonnie's touch, her mind turning fuzzy as she began to stammer. "I-I'm n-not—"

"You're used to apologizing for things out of your control, aren't you?"

Barry swallowed, her fingers nervously tingling as the topic of her feelings finally became unavoidable. "You egghead," she snickered, looking at the ground, "reading me like a book."

"I know you don't want to talk about it, but you've stowed so much anger in your heart . . ." Bonnie took a step, closing the gap between them. "You haven't had time to heal, and all you've done is bleed."

Barry curled her quivering fingers into her palms. Even thinking about it was hard, but Bonnie was right. She was done avoiding it. "They were terrible."

"Oh, Barry," Bonnie cooed and cupped the brawler's cheeks. She lifted Barry's chin and stared into her eyes with her wondrously calming violet gaze. "I know a thing or two about being neglected. Please, just get it off your chest . . ." Her smile was faint but present. "No one's here to judge."

She could have kept it bottled up for another ten years if she had to, but what would that do to her? She wasn't too keen on finding out, and she felt

in her gut that somehow Bonnie was even more concerned than she was. The blonde just had *that* look in her eyes; she wouldn't be satisfied until Barry let it all out.

"My mom was a fuckin' liar and a cheat long before I was even born," Barry muttered, glancing away from Bonnie. "The only reason I was born was that she . . ." She gulped. "The whole family was blonde." She abruptly exhaled. "And I . . . I'm not."

Bonnie frowned. "She was faithless."

"And guess who suffered for *her* mistake?" Barry lightly snickered, prodding her chest with a thumb. "Me . . . Good old Erika. Dad . . . Well, *their* dad left, all because of something our mom did," she recalled, clearing her throat as she pulled away from Bonnie again, this time not as rough. "All three of my sisters, and my mom, blamed *me*. . . . Not a day went by that they didn't remind me that I was the reason *their* family was torn to pieces."

"They didn't consider you a part of it? Not even a little?"

"Not in the slightest . . ." Barry frowned, "but it didn't stop 'em from forcing me to compete in sports alongside them just so they could try and humiliate me. But to be honest, my sisters blew ass at it," she softly chuckled. "But even though I outshined them so blatantly . . . it didn't matter."

"What do you mean?" Bonnie inquired.

"It didn't matter how many trophies, fights, or races I won. Or how many times I outperformed those bitches. I was the bottom rung, the welcome mat, always getting stomped on." She growled, spitefully spitting into the dirt.

"They'd come to my meets just to shit on me when I messed up, then sit in silence whenever I excelled." Barry's teeth began to grind like sandpaper against a stone, the bad habit causing her own nerves to shriek for her to stop with stinging bolts of pain through her gums. "There was no point in trying to argue my case. And if I *dared* implicate my mother as the one responsible for her own actions, they'd beat the snot out of me."

As she recollected the engrams of abuse that had been branded into her psyche, she trembled with an increasing tempo. She didn't shake out of pain, just anger and ferocious rage. That urge to hit something had resurfaced with a vengeance, and she immediately fed into it by shouting and smashing her foot against a rusty bucket lying in the dirt. It careened across the yard, kissing the tips of the overgrown grass as it flew before crashing into a decrepit fence that nearly crumpled on impact.

"They were so adamant on maintaining her innocence that the rest of my fucking family doesn't even know that I was born." With a heartbroken snicker, her arms fell to her side, and tears began to well up against the corners of her eyes. "Turns out it's really easy to hide a kid who doesn't have a room or anything of their own. And holy shit . . ." Barry squeaked, her voice crackling as she forced a smile riddled with hurt. "When they found out I liked chicks?"

"No," Bonnie sputtered, her pupils shrinking as she stared in disbelief at the brawler. "They didn't . . ."

Barry nodded, dragging her fist over her eyes in an attempt to hide and wipe away her welling tears. "They stopped calling me by my name, and in its place . . ." she croaked, unable to bring herself to repeat or even ponder their scathing words. "Every day until I was taken . . ."

Bonnie let loose a puff through her nose and yet again grabbed hold of the girl. This time, Barry wasn't getting away, as Bonnie clamped her arms around her in a vicelike grip. One hand slithered up her back and palmed the back of her head, pulling Barry's face into her shoulder.

The security of Bonnie's arms made her weak but not vulnerable. She drew a breath through the blonde's poncho before hesitantly yet fully dumping every ounce of encumbering sorrow she'd been carrying.

Bonnie curled her fingers into the leather of Barry's jacket. She closed her eyes, softly humming in the girl's ear as she wailed between raspy sobs. All

she wanted was to unscrew the cap and let Barry pour it all out. She got her wish.



Diana stood alone in the shadows at the edge of the motel parking lot. A bag was slung over one shoulder and a large rifle over the other. In her hands, she clung to a well-worn, wrinkled piece of paper. It was something she'd never actually looked at, something she'd simply forgotten and tucked away: a birth certificate.

She hadn't read it, not once, not even when she'd signed it. Allowing her husband to choose the name, she alienated herself from the act of abandoning her own blood. What was the use of knowing her name if she had to give her up? She'd never felt worthy enough to learn it.

But as much as she wished it weren't so, there it was. Clear as day, written just over the line in her ex-husband's handwriting.

"Samantha Gray . . ." Diana murmured, shamefully blinking away the dew collecting on her eyelashes.

Poorly paperclipped to the sheet was a Polaroid photograph the nurse had taken out of courtesy. Diana was present, and though she appeared to be hardly conscious, there was a soft smile on her face. And in her arms, wrapped in a blanket, was a baby girl with a partial head of jet-black hair.

It was so obvious. . . . After all, how many Koreans had blue eyes and black hair? But even then, she wasn't sure. She'd seen at least one other person like her that she *definitely* knew she had no relation to . . .

It couldn't have been this simple. She couldn't believe that all she'd had to do to know was read the damn certificate to connect the dots. If that was truly all that had stood in her way, what kind of mother was she?

“Commander?” a voice called out from behind her.

Diana turned stiff and quickly folded up the sheet before tucking it back beneath her vest. She raised her head and looked over her shoulder, peering across the dimly lit motel parking lot. Parker had come to bother her. “What?”

“Where are you . . .” Parker squinted, having spotted the bag and rifle. “*What* are you doing?”

“I need to see something for myself,” Diana declared, beginning to step away onto the road.

“See . . . what? Commander, it’s the middle of the night.” Parker huffed.

“A scout from F.T.F. Foxtrot spotted the target taking refuge in an old barn about three miles east,” Diana explained, motioning toward the field on the opposite side of the road. “It’s less than an hour’s walk.”

“Then why aren’t we attacking them now?” Parker impatiently inquired, jogging after Diana. “We could hit ’em while they’re sleeping!”

Diana grumbled something under her breath. She didn’t want to launch such an attack, not yet anyway. She couldn’t let it end like this, not without knowing *for sure*. Even if her hands were tied, even if she couldn’t stall it forever . . . she had to at least know. “The scout hasn’t even gone in for a closer look. I’m going to do it myself.”

“And . . . the rifle?”

“It’s in case I get a clean shot,” Diana lied, grass and leaves crunching beneath her feet as she reached the bank at the other end of the street.

“I see . . . Would you like me to accompany you, ma’am?” Parker asked, almost eagerly.

Diana sighed, knowing the refusal of such an injunction would invoke suspicion. Besides, Parker’s heart was in the right place. There’d be no point in denying a request from someone who clearly just wanted to make themselves useful. “Fine,” she groaned, “just stay close, and quiet.”

“Not a peep,” Parker whispered, eagerly nodding as she stepped alongside her commander.

Diana let Parker wander ahead of her, stopping to peer back at the motel. She didn’t buy the umbral silence, not even for a second. Something in her bones told her he was watching, that he knew what she was doing. It almost always seemed that way. . . . Was it from a window on the upper floor, a car in the shadows, or just within her own imagination?



Roxanne looked through the flames at Emma. They’d been left alone, as Willow and Samantha had wandered off somewhere. Without the presence of teenagers, the pressure of keeping her tongue tied seemed to be alleviated. Now that it was just them, she felt she could finally ask for the *rougher* details. “How many are there?”

Emma blinked and glanced up. She’d been lost in thought, staring into the embers. “I’m . . . sorry?” she inquired with a tilt of her head.

“How many kids?” she murmured, leering through the flames.

“How many Orphans are there, or . . . how many have died?” Emma asked.

“Both . . .” Roxanne reluctantly gulped.

“Tch,” she scoffed, “I don’t have an answer for either. I’m sure even Maximilian’s lost track, not that he gave a shit to begin with.”

“Maximilian?” Roxanne prodded. This was the first time she’d heard that name.

Emma’s face scrunched. “Samantha never mentioned anything about him?”

Roxanne shook her head. “If she has . . . not . . . directly.”

Emma hummed in solemnity. “I should’ve figured . . .”

“Who is he?” Roxanne inquired. “Is he the man Bonnie was shouting about when she confronted Barry in the street?”

“Most likely,” Emma replied and uncomfortably crossed her arms then leaned back against the fallen shelf. “He’s the sole reason the Orphanage Foundation exists.”

“I thought you said it was government-backed?”

“Backed,” Emma stated, “not *owned*.”

Roxanne slowly rounded the fire to better hear Emma’s words.

“He’s one slippery son of a bitch. . . . There are so many other classified sites that even *if* we manage to walk away from this victorious, I’m not sure it’ll even make a dent.” Emma sighed.

“What has to be done?” Roxanne asked, sitting beside the captain.

“He needs to die,” Emma grimly grumbled, glancing at Roxanne. “If we’re going to make any headway, he has to go.”

Roxanne nodded in understanding. “I have another question.”

“Shoot.” Emma hummed, looking back into the crackling flames.

“I know you said they have to be female but . . . are there any boys?” Roxanne asked curiously.

“No,” Emma swiftly answered.

“Why?”

Emma’s face scrunched as though the thought had never even crossed her mind before. “I don’t know. . . . But considering The Process is so picky, it might have a hand in it. That, or Maximilian gets some sick joy out of exclusively tormenting girls.”

Roxanne gulped uncomfortably at the prospect, but she couldn’t stop herself from asking to know more. It was as if she *had* to know. The more justification she had for what they were doing, the better. “Is there . . . *anything* else about it you can tell me? Anything you didn’t want to say in front of the kids?”

Emma slowly shook her head. “I’ve got nothing. At this point, you know just as much as anyone else there does. Not even their assigned doctors know.”

“Assigned doctors?”

“They’re more or less caregivers. They oversee the kids to make sure they’re healthy and document their abilities. But all in all, they’re good people,” Emma declared.

“How can good people participate in something like that?” Roxanne scoffed.

Emma sighed and gently shook her head. “Have you ever applied for a job, and after getting it, been forced to do things that weren’t in the description?”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of that with my line of work.” Roxanne frowned. “Why?”

“Kidnapping and experimenting on kids? Those are just some of the things we weren’t fuckin’ told.” Emma snarled. “The docs were being recruited for their ‘accomplishments’ and ‘talents.’ The task forces were recruited for military-grade security,” she explained, linking her hands together. “None of us knew and, shocker, none of us were comfortable with it when we found out.”

“Then why doesn’t everyone resign, or rebel?” Roxanne said. “If none of you were okay with it, why are you the only one fighting back!?”

Emma glanced around once more to ensure the other four weren’t around. Upon clearing the room, she narrowed her eyes toward Roxanne. “It’s because of *him*.”

“That . . . Max guy?”

Emma nodded. “He controls a lot more than just the Foundation. He controls people.”

“Through what?” Roxanne snarked.

“Fear,” Emma declared plainly. “No one has the courage to stand up properly, because they can be snuffed out—” she snapped her fingers “—like that. It’s a fragile system that can be broken easily by cutting off the head of the

dragon. But when no one's strong enough to lift the sword?" Emma hummed, looking back down into the gradually cooling embers of the now-dying flames. "Nothing changes."

Roxanne sat quietly, as the more she pondered Emma's descriptors of the Foundation's sly methods, the more she thought of her own job. . . . Having seen so many young women come through, bright and hopeful, only to leave depressed and ashamed of themselves. No one was strong enough to draw the line, not even Roxanne. But at least with her job, they could *leave* if they wanted.

"Which is why that changes with us," Emma stated.

"Right," Roxanne said, watching the coals crackle.

"Well . . ." Emma sighed, placing a hand on her knee. "Don't feel like you need to stick around. Things are about to get ugly, *real* ugly."

Roxanne had considered it—several times, in fact. But by this point, she figured they were in *way* too deep to walk away. "We stay."

"Are you *absolutely* sure?" Emma shot a sharp glare at Roxanne. "I'm not saying our situation is hopeless, but it's going to be rough. I need to know you understand that."

"Even if I could walk away from this with no strings attached, my conscience wouldn't let me. Some people might be content with letting shit like this go down . . ." Roxanne furrowed her eyebrows, glaring back at Emma with the same determined ferocity. "I'm not. *We stay*," she repeated.

Emma nodded and slowly leaned back against the shelf. "Alright."



Samantha and Willow sat together before a glassless window near the peak of the barn. They overlooked the darkened countryside, which was illumi-

nated by the soft gleam of a full moon. The dreary canvas of clouds from the afternoon had since dissipated, and in their place, countless twinkling stars dotted the night sky.

“This was my favorite spot when Roxy and I would visit our uncle,” Willow recalled, eyeing the glittering dew left over on the grass and grain by the earlier storm. “I’d sneak off at night and climb up here, just to look at the stars.”

In a rare moment of solace, Samantha found herself grinning from ear to ear at the unimaginable sights of a simple evening. Her heartbeat had steadied, her muscles grew lax, and her tendrils even loosened their hold on her waist. She was infatuated with the luminous bodies aglow in the sky that almost seemed to dance around the moon.

Unfortunately, she was so engrossed in the tapestry before her that she was entirely unaware that Willow was slowly crumbling beside her. While Samantha was fully aware of the danger that followed them, it appeared Willow was only just beginning to grasp it.

A soft gasp broke Samantha’s trance. Upon looking over, she was met with the sight of Willow covering her mouth and squeezing her eyes shut, with moonlit tears of fright dribbling down over her fingers. Unfortunately, it looked as though the memories this place held for her weren’t enough to help her deteriorating confidence.

“Willow?” Samantha worriedly whispered, almost unable to believe that the girl she saw as a shining beacon of radiance was burning out.

“H-ho-w,” Willow sputtered, almost entirely unable to speak as she choked. Her asthma had begun to strangle her, yet again. But Samantha wasn’t about to wait for her to fetch the inhaler and quickly brought it to Willow’s lips herself.

Willow sucked in as much of the formula as she could with a dry heave, which appeared to grant her some reprieve though it did little to calm her stomach-churning nerves.

“Willow, what’s wrong?” Samantha pressed, setting the inhaler down.

“I c-can’t do it anymore . . .” Willow stammered, then slumped right up against Samantha.

Samantha raised her arms, startled by Willow’s sudden dive into her side. She was entirely unsure of what to do. Was she supposed to hug her? Pet her? She’d never had the duty of calming someone down before. “Do . . . what?”

“B-be strong!” Willow cried out, pressing her face against Samantha’s ribs. “P-people with guns came to my house! We were almost arrested. You were shot!” she wailed.

“I’ve . . .” Samantha swallowed. “I’ve been shot before. I’m used to it.”

“You shouldn’t be! This isn’t okay, none of this is okay!” She groaned. “How are you even able t—”

Samantha quickly, albeit loosely, wrapped her arms around Willow. She nearly cringed at the act, as it was even more alien to her than the use of silverware. She wasn’t even sure if she was doing it right, but upon noticing that Willow had stopped her shaking, she instinctively tightened her embrace without even realizing it.

“How . . .” Willow hummed, lowering her voice and sinking into Samantha’s grasp. “How do you take it?”

“Take . . . what?”

“All of it,” she whimpered. “When I found you, you were so . . . skittish. *You* were scared, not me.” She took another sniveling breath and peered up at Samantha, dragging her face against the bloodstained shirt. “You were too afraid to even sleep by yourself but . . . then . . . when those people came and tried to take us away . . .”

Samantha looked down at her, the moonlight and dim glow of her eyes softly illuminating Willow's face. "I . . ." she muttered, finding herself distracted by Willow's beauty, accentuated by the soft light. Even when she was upset . . . she was cute. Samantha gulped as a sudden, foreign sense of duty began to root itself in her heart. She no longer feared holding Willow. She feared letting go, as though releasing the farm girl out from her arms for a moment would result in her safety being compromised.

"I have a hard time expressing myself," Samantha murmured, glancing away to collect her thoughts. "But I've *always* been afraid, always lashed out in an attempt to keep myself safe . . . even if it wasn't . . . *me*. I've never had someone other than myself to protect before," Samantha divulged.

"Barry and Bonnie have always been more than capable of protecting themselves. But now that you're here, when there's danger, I just want to keep you safe. I want to be *there*. You make me feel . . . so . . ." She glanced back at her for a moment, only to find Willow's adorable auburn eyes staring right back at her. Her emotions were almost . . . indescribable, and looking at Willow only made her feel even fuzzier.

"Aghh," Samantha huffed in confusion, curling her fingers into Willow's flannel and quickly looking back off at the sky.

Samantha continued to stare off into the sparkling void, almost thoughtless until she homed in on the moon. She blinked and sat still for a moment, only to slowly raise up a hand and point it up at the sky.

Willow cocked a brow and peered beyond Samantha's hand. "Y-yeah . . . It's the night sky?"

"That," Samantha stated confidently.

"Huh?"

"You make me feel . . ." Samantha adjusted her hand's positioning, tracing over the stars until she pointed directly at the full moon. "Like that."

Willow only squinted. She wasn't getting it.

“When I’m with you, I . . .” Samantha’s skin tingled as a sudden set of goosebumps radiated across it. Her chest and throat tightened in tandem. “I have time to think . . . The noise, and fear in my head— It just—” She lowered her hand. “It goes away. The last two nights when I slept in your bed with you . . . I was still, quiet, and undisturbed.” Samantha limply smiled. “Just like the moon.”

Samantha comfortably hummed, looking back down at Willow, whose face had grown hot and was practically steaming red. Even though they were emotions she could barely understand . . . maybe Willow would. “Nothing has ever made me feel like this. . . . I want to do whatever I can to make sure it never goes away.”

“S-Sam, do you . . . *love* me?” Willow softly whispered, slowly sitting up and wiping her eyes.

Samantha’s heart burned as she took the word in and Willow towered over her. She gulped, having never heard it before. It felt taboo and odd, but it sounded right. “What’s . . . that?”

A smile that glittered brighter than the stars finally came back across Willow’s face as she stared into Samantha’s absolutely clueless eyes. “This,” she whispered, cupping Samantha’s cheeks.

Before Samantha even knew what was happening, their lips touched. Her eyes widened and a shocked exhale shot from her nose. Her arms seized and her tendrils abruptly unfurled, twisting in the air behind her. But as the kiss extended, she eased up and closed her eyes before slowly leaning back into it.



Diana laid chest down in the dirt, peering through the scope of her rifle with the barrel poking through the thick veneer of grain she hid within. She’d had

her eye trained on the window for some time, watching Samantha and Willow speak to each other. She went to reach for her vest, wanting to compare what she was seeing with the photograph, but she stopped herself. It wasn't worth gambling on Parker growing suspicious.

But, truthfully, she didn't even need the photograph. She could see Samantha's hair, and her eyes . . . her beautiful sky-blue eyes. At this point, she didn't even notice or pay any mind to Samantha's augments. All she saw was her little girl just as she'd envisioned, blissful and calm. She couldn't even piece together if her mental image of her baby was any different, as though it had never been wrong.

Diana shifted slightly as she noticed Samantha move, and her heart almost halted entirely. Her eye widened as she took in the sight of her daughter's first kiss. She blinked and wiped her eyes before peering through the scope again, ensuring that what she was seeing was real. A soft puff left her lips and her shoulders lightly slumped; it was something she never thought she'd get the chance to see. She couldn't believe it.

She smiled despite the stress it put on her stitches. It felt wrong to do so, not just due to her injury, but due to how long it had been since she'd *genuinely* smiled. She could remember the exact moment, too. The first time she'd laid eyes on her little Samantha.

The commander's throat dried and she quietly croaked, "My baby . . ."

"Say something, Commander?" Parker perked up from the brush just a handful of yards away.

Diana cleared her throat and quickly dragged her glove over her eyes, wiping away her faintly gathering tears. "I said I can't—" She hesitated, before relinquishing her finger from the trigger. Regardless, the safety had never been switched off. "I can't get a shot."

"Rats . . ." Parker snarled, flopping on her behind with an irritated huff. "Do you want to inform the scout then head back?"

Diana sat still for a moment, wanting to look at Samantha for as long as she could, just in case this was the last time. . . . She then hesitantly pulled back and pushed herself up to a knee, the rifle raising along with her by the sling. “Parker,” she said, still staring off at the barn with her naked eye.

“Yes, ma’am?” Parker cocked a brow, leaning back against her palms on the ground.

Diana slowly rose to her feet and slid the rifle over her back. “You’re a good kid . . .” she noted, turning to face the red-headed rookie.

Parker blinked with a confused grimace. “Thank . . . you?”

“I mean it, Annette,” Diana boomed, seeming to throw Parker off with the use of her first name. But before the captain could even question it, Diana had knelt down and abruptly grabbed her by the shoulders. While their eye contact was uncomfortable, she wouldn’t break it, hoping that Parker would get some sense of the unbridled emotion surging beneath her surface.

“Commander?”

“Just keep your head down and follow orders,” Diana mumbled, narrowing her eyes.

“What?”

“Just do what I said,” Diana lowly commanded. “And *promise* me, that no matter what, you’ll just do what you’re told.”

“M-ma’am, I don’t understand . . .” Parker frowned.

“*Promise me*,” she growled.

Parker slowly nodded and gulped. “What are you going to do?”

Diana’s eyes lowered to the dirt. Not even she knew at this point. Perhaps she’d already said too much. Without anyone to talk to, she could swear she was going insane. In moments like these, she’d always had her husband to turn to . . . but she’d long since pushed him away. As she glanced back up, she could see nothing but fragrant concern in the face of her subordinate.

Could she . . . trust her?

“Nothing.”

Chapter Thirteen

Roundabout

Bonnie sat beside the ashy, flameless firepit, fiddling with the handgun she'd stolen after she and Emma had dispatched Epsilon. She knew exactly how it functioned, that part wasn't difficult to understand. But whether or not she could use it effectively remained to be seen.

"No way," Roxanne sneered from across the barn.

Bonnie cocked a brow and glanced over, only to stare in partial disbelief. Roxanne and Barry had been . . . talking to each other?

"You cannot expect me to believe you know how to drive one of these," the defensive girl with the ponytail spouted as she palmed the roof of her station wagon.

"I know how to drive all kinds of shit," Barry snickered, placing her steely hands on her hips and grinning smugly as per usual.

"But— You're only what, seventeen or eighteen?"

"Eh, more or less. I've lost track," Barry shrugged.

"And what were you when . . ."

"Fourteen."

"I see . . ." Roxanne's eyes narrowed as she crossed her arms. "So you mean to tell me, that below the age of fourteen, you learned how to drive?"

"It's not like it's very hard, Roxanne, Jesus," Barry groaned and rolled her eyes.

"Oh yeah? Gimme a rundown of the car then," Roxanne huffed.

"Gladly!"

“As much as I’d love to hear Barry prattle on and on about how a clutch works,” Bonnie interrupted while loading her firearm. She was wearing only her shorts and dark purple hoodie, having removed her poncho to use as a blanket during the night. “Have either of you seen Emma?”

“Not since last night, why?” Barry inquired.

“We need to talk about where we go from here,” Bonnie explained.

“She’s out back teaching Willow how to shoot,” Roxanne replied while leaning up against the car.

“Psh, what for?” Barry smirked before raising and flexing her arms. “I’ve got guns to spare.”

Bonnie immediately rolled her eyes.

“Tch,” Roxanne scoffed. “But apparently not any *brains* to spare.”

Barry grumbled while crossing her arms in a huff. As she turned away, she peered about the room for the one other body they were short. “If Willow’s out there, where’s Sam?”

“Up top,” Bonnie stated, stuffing the pistol into her waistband. She then scooped up her poncho from the dirt and rose to her feet.

“Up top?” Barry pressed.

“There’s a loft near the peak of the barn. She and Willow were up there all night,” Bonnie explained, whipping the poncho free of dust before sliding it on over her head.

“Doing . . . what?” Barry questioned.

“I don’t know if I should say,” Bonnie nervously mumbled. “I probably shouldn’t have been spying on them in the first place, but . . .” She peered up to the rafters, making sure that Samantha wasn’t awake and listening. Once the coast was clear, she waved the two closer with her hand. “I saw them kiss,” she whispered once they closed in.

“*Whaaaaat!?*” Barry squealed, leaning back on the heels of her boots. “Sam’s gay?”

“Barry!” Bonnie hissed. She quickly halted time and lunged forward just close enough to whack the idiot upside the head after exiting. “Would you keep your voice down!?”

“Hey, I’m excited! I thought I was the only one!” Barry whined, rubbing the side of her head.

“They . . . kissed?” Roxanne muttered, appearing rather distraught, as though she hadn’t noticed their blatant affinity for one another. “They’ve only known each other for four days. . . .”

“Of the many things I’d consider myself knowledgeable in, romance is *not* one of them. But I can make an educated guess as to how it happened,” Bonnie murmured, scratching at her chin. “Perhaps Willow is attracted to Samantha’s . . . *significant* departure from ‘normal.’ And Samantha likely—”

“I think you’re reading too far into it, Ms. Nosey,” Barry snickered, gently flicking her on the nose.

“Hrmm . . .” Bonnie hummed, blushing in embarrassment. It was, after all, rather silly of her. “You can’t blame me for being curious,” she huffed, crossing her arms over her poncho.

“You can’t *analyze* something like that, egghead,” Barry stated as she turned her head, peering up toward the loft where Samantha was still sleeping. “It just kinda . . . happens,” she said as a smile crept over her face.

“You can analyze anything. That’s kind of the point,” Bonnie retorted.

“Stop ruining the moment,” Barry jeered.

Bonnie huffed and looked off toward Roxanne, wondering if she had any input. But she almost appeared . . . dazed. She’d slumped back against the station wagon and was seemingly staring off into nowhere. “Roxanne?”

“Hey, you good, ponytail?” Barry questioned, glancing at her.

“I’m . . . just . . . taking it in.” Roxanne gulped.

Bonnie raised an eyebrow. “Is something about it bothering you?”

“You homophobic or somethin’?” Barry accused. “I mean, with you grow-ing up in the boonies, I kinda expect it—”

“No, you idiot,” Roxanne growled.

“Are you *sure*?” Barry squinted.

“Yes!” Roxanne snapped back.

“Is the danger bothering you?” Bonnie inquired.

Roxanne glanced away from Fists-for-Brains for a moment. She knitted her brows together in thought, then nodded with a gentle sigh.

“Are you afraid Sam will hurt her?” Barry prodded.

“No . . . I know Sam couldn’t and *wouldn’t* hurt her just from how I’ve seen them interact. But it’s . . . it’s complicated,” Roxanne mumbled, crossing her arms beneath her breasts.

“Is it the Foundation?” Bonnie inquired.

Roxanne uneasily shifted. “Yeah . . .”

“Well, you ain’t got anything to worry about!” Barry proudly boasted and slammed her fists together. “With the three of us together, there’s literally nothing that can stop us.”

Bonnie softly snickered; they were a good team but not *that* good of a team. “That, but also that Willow is entirely safe in Samantha’s hands.”

“Are you sure?” Roxanne mewled.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen her calmer and more convicted than she is when she’s with her,” Bonnie explained. “I’m sure.”

A bit of a goofy grin came over Roxanne’s face as she appeared to be put somewhat at ease, though her eyes still rattled with thoughts of worry. It was understandable, as Bonnie knew that Roxanne was aware that the danger wasn’t going to subside any time soon . . .



“Do we really have to do it this early?” Willow softly yawned, rubbing her eyes and squinting in an attempt to avoid the glare of the half-risen sun. She didn’t particularly appreciate having her cuddle session with Samantha so abruptly interrupted, but Emma insisted she get up.

“Yeah, and I’m sorry for pulling you away from your . . .” Emma snickered, “*intimate* snuggling.” She then cracked a sly grin. “Kind of an odd time to be all lovey-dovey, but I support it.”

Willow lit up like a firework and began to stammer. “I-I— We didn’t—”

“There’s no need to be embarrassed, especially in front of me,” Emma said while arranging some rusty tin cans on a rotting fence post. “I’m . . . *basically* committing treason. The last thing I’m worried about is two teenagers crush-ing on one another. Now then!” Emma called, cramming a magazine into her sidearm as she stepped beside Willow. “Since you’re a lot smaller than I am, you can’t really freehand one of these.”

“I’m not weak just ’cause I’m small,” Willow huffed.

“Yeah, but *air* is your arch-nemesis.” Emma snickered.

Willow’s cheeks burned at the teasing of her asthma.

“Besides, you *shouldn’t* freehand a gun anyway. You lose a lot of accuracy and you look like a jackass.” Emma pulled the slide back. “Now, I’m gonna show you a little secret.”

“A secret?”

“A lot of people don’t know this.” Emma raised the gun up, freehanding it, directly contradicting the advice she’d just given. “But, if you point the gun in the direction you want the bullets to go . . .” She pulled the trigger and blasted one of the tin cans off the fencepost. “That’s where the bullets will go.”

Willow could almost taste the sarcasm. “You said people who freehand look like jackasses.”

“Yeah, if you don’t hit your target.” Emma grinned and holstered her sidearm, then placed her hands on her hips. “Okay, now try it with yours.”

Willow took a deep breath and shakily brandished the gun. Despite what she'd said, she could hardly even hold it. To her, the pistol felt like it weighed a million pounds.

"Here goes nothing . . ." Willow gulped. She held her breath, closed her eyes, and pulled the trigger, but it didn't budge. She opened an eye in confusion, tugging on the trigger over and over. No matter how many times she tried, it remained rigid. "Why won't it go?"

Emma placed her hand overtop the gun. She flicked a small switch, grinning slyly at her before removing her hand. "The safety, kid."

"Oh . . ." Willow nervously gulped. "Right—" The gun suddenly went off, firing an entirely accidental shot. She hadn't removed her finger from the last attempted trigger pull. Her hands trembled, loosening to the point where she nearly dropped the gun. She stuttered uncontrollably, unable to fix her grip nor calm herself. She'd never felt something so powerful, in her own hands no less. That power *terrified* her.

"Hey, hey. It's nothing to be afraid of," Emma cooed, lightly grabbing Willow by the shoulder. "Take a deep breath."

"S-so scary . . . powerful . . . and loud . . ." Willow whimpered. She could hardly even force the words out and took the early warning sign to search for her inhaler. She held the gun toward the ground in her off hand while the other began to dig through her pockets. About to start wheezing, she yanked it out and sucked in a quick puff.

"It's both of those things. But in the hands of somebody with a good heart, like you, it can be used for good. Okay?" Emma smiled reassuringly. "As long as you know how it works, the gun itself won't make you hurt anyone you don't want to," she assured.

Willow steadied her breath, drawing out an exhale as Emma's assurance put her somewhat at ease. She raised the gun back up, but after such a scare, it only felt heavier. Her grip was far from steady.

“Alright,” Emma began, positioning herself behind the girl and reaching over her shoulders. “Stare straight down the sight, aim at the middle can, and blow the sucker right off that fence,” she instructed, cupping Willow’s hands to support her grip.

With Emma’s aid, Willow’s confidence grew, but only partly. She was still trembling but was now able to keep her sight trained on the can. If the situation were different, she’d drop it and run as far as she could. But she wanted to make good on her promise to Samantha more than anything. Even if Samantha was stronger than her, she wanted to be able to help her somehow.

“C’mon, kid,” Emma softly whispered in encouragement, lightly squeezing her hands. “It’s a bad guy, that can. You’re putting down a bad guy who’s about to hurt Sam—”

Willow suddenly squinted, and without closing her eyes this time, pulled the trigger. Her hands jolted up from the shot, still unfamiliar with the recoil, but much to her surprise, the bullet slammed right into the can. “I-I hit it!” she cried out as it was blown off the post.

“Holy crap, you did!” Emma cheered, pulling her hands back and planting one on Willow’s shoulder. “Good stuff!” she chuckled.

“I-I didn’t think it would work,” Willow stammered, turning with a surprised smile.

“At least now you know *how* it works. Though we should call it here. Gunfire is a . . . pretty distinct noise,” Emma grumbled. “Anyway! Go ahead and clear it, like I taught you earlier.”

Willow nodded and released the magazine. She almost dropped it but managed to catch it just before it tumbled from her hands to the dirt. After handing it off to Emma, she struggled for a few seconds to jerk the slide back but eventually managed.

“Good work,” Emma affirmed, snatching the unfired round that flew from the chamber. “Who knows, with a first-timer’s instinct like yours, you might make a great assassin,” she teased.

“I don’t think that’s in my future, hehe,” Willow snickered before noticing a sudden shift in Emma’s demeanor. She was staring off into the field of wavy grain, her eyebrows knitted, and her eyes seemed to be scanning for something.

Willow glanced over her shoulder, looking to see if something was obviously amiss. But she didn’t spot a thing. “Is everything alright?” she prodded, holding the gun out for Emma to take.

“Everything’s . . . fine,” Emma mumbled, carefully grabbing the pistol. “Go on inside. I’ll clean up here.”

“O-okay,” Willow stammered, taking a half step back as she watched Emma lay the unloaded handgun against a rusty old oil drum, but she didn’t once take her eyes off the field. Growing uneasy, Willow quickly made her way toward the barn’s rear doors. She didn’t want to find out what Emma was looking at, even if it was nothing in particular.



As Willow stepped over to the group, she perked up hearing Barry suddenly call out to her. “Hey, pipsqueak!” Barry closed the distance rather quickly and playfully slung her arm around Willow’s neck. “So c’mon, tell me *everything*,” she nagged.

Willow grimaced in confusion. What on Earth was she talking about? “T-tell you what?”

“Don’t play dumb, c’mon! You know . . . You and Sam uhhh—” Barry grinned widely and pinched the fingers on each of her hands together before pressing them against each other to mimic kissing.

Willow’s face flushed red so quickly she thought she was going to immediately black out.

“Wha- Yo- Barry!” Bonnie shouted out from beside Roxanne. “Is your fucking brain on airplane mode!?”

“Whaaaat!? *You can’t blame me for being curious,*” Barry chuckled, her smug grin widening as she locked eyes with Bonnie, who seemed to reel back a bit, embarrassed by her own words.

“H-how d-do you guys know about that!?” Willow stammered, beginning to squirm under Barry’s arm. “Who told you!?” she whimpered.

Barry grinned, swaying side to side as Willow thrashed. “I wonder who.”

Bonnie reddened and shamefully held a hand over her eyes, shielding herself from their gazes.

“Willow,” her big sister lightly cooed as she began to step over. “You don’t have to be embarrassed.”

Willow gulped, almost unnerved by her sister’s sudden . . . calmness. “You’re not mad?” she asked, leering in suspicion.

“I’m not thrilled, no.” Roxanne sighed, though she seemed unable or unwilling to shake the smile from her lips. “I worry about the danger . . . but if anyone is capable of keeping you safe, it’s Samantha. If this is what you want, I’m in no place to tell you otherwise.”

Willow’s eyes glimmered as she stared up at Roxanne. She didn’t expect such understanding and respect to come from her, but then again, with how little they’d been around one another as of late . . . she’d never really given Roxanne the chance to show how she *would* react to something like this.

A smile crept across her lips, and she broke free from Barry's semi-chokehold. "Thank you, Roxy!" she squealed, diving against and clinging to her big sister.

Unfortunately, the tenderness was disrupted almost immediately as Emma suddenly kicked open the back door. "Break it up!" she roared, stomping in with something in tow. Willow's eyes widened as she realized Emma was dragging a body.

"Grab *everything* and start the car. We need to get the fuck out of here!"

Barry turned on a swivel and snarled, "Who the hell are you dragging!?"

"A scout," Emma said, dropping the woman she'd cuffed and gagged. "She's been here all night!"

"What!?" Bonnie cried out. "How did they find us!?"

Emma drew her knife and sliced the shoulder strap of her vest. She then tore it off, flipped it over, and jammed the blade into the padding. She tore at it until she successfully removed a square-shaped device roughly an inch in size.

"What is that?" Barry cluelessly inquired.

"A tracking chip . . ." Bonnie replied.

"Yeah, it's news to me. They're embedded within every single F.T.F. agent's armor!" Emma barked, kicking the bound-up woman, who let out an uncomfortable grunt. "This little rat from Delta told me."

"What do we do!?" Roxanne stammered, still holding onto her sister.

"I already told you—" Emma growled while scooping up her duffle bag. "Grab everything, get in the car, and let's go!"

Willow loudly squealed, startled by something heavy suddenly slamming into the ground beside her. She quickly turned, gasping as she spotted Samantha, who must've just jumped down from the rafters.

"What's wrong!?" Samantha inquired, her tendrils unfurling as she cautiously looked around the barn.

“Someone followed us!” Willow cried, grabbing onto Samantha’s sleeve.

“Barry, drive. Bonnie, Roxanne, in the back!” Emma ordered, jerking the car door open and throwing the duffle bag in.

“But I haven’t even seen her drive!” Roxanne argued.

“Don’t care. I need capable shots in the back!” Emma retorted. “We only have a few minutes before they radio in to check on the scout. When she doesn’t answer, they’re going to light up the barn!”

“Oh my god,” Roxanne gulped, beginning to dig through her pockets. She jerked out the keys and quickly underhanded them Barry’s way. They were caught with ease.

Willow squeaked, partly startled as Samantha’s tendrils slithered around her and pulled her up against the reaper’s side.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Samantha commanded with a defensive whisper.

Willow gulped and nodded. She certainly didn’t plan on it. She then blinked and looked around as a sudden sound filled the air. She wasn’t quite sure what it was, but it sure was distinct: a volley of *clinks* and *clanks* that provoked sudden reactions from almost the entire group.

Samantha tightened her grip as she turned her head.

Barry closed her eyes and plugged her ears.

Bonnie vanished from sight.

Before Willow even had time to process the noises, Emma shrieked, “Hit the deck!” Her words were immediately followed by a cacophonous flurry of blinding white flashes, ear-splitting blasts, and thick, noxious clouds of gas.



Samantha had been flash-banged one too many times *not* to notice but prioritized covering Willow’s eyes over her own. The roar of the grenades nearly

tore her ears apart, and the flashes practically blinded her. She squeezed her eyes shut, jerking her head around to try and shake her senses back into focus. But just as she thought she'd begin to recover, the tear gas started to *burn*.

She immediately slid her hands from Willow's eyes over her mouth and nose. "Don't," she gagged, "breathe!" She knew full well she couldn't allow Willow to breathe even a smidgen of the gas. It was bad enough for her, but with Willow's asthma, she didn't even want to think about what it could do.

Samantha then grunted and stumbled as someone shoved her. Assuming it was one of the others, she initially thought nothing of it. That was until she felt Willow get torn from her arms.

Samantha's bloodshot eyes ripped open, burning with frenzied crimson rage in her already heavily agitated state. The inky blots left in her vision by the flashes were torn away as she sought the fleeing agent who dared lay their hands on Willow. She didn't spare a moment. Upon spotting them, she immediately twisted and smashed her heel into the person's chest.

They regurgitated the contents of their lungs into the gas mask they were wearing, gagging and wheezing as they were forced to release Willow. It didn't take long for them to collapse to the ground.

Samantha slightly gasped as her eyes returned cerulean with her next blink. Not caring or ignoring that she'd just felt someone's ribs crumple beneath her foot, she grabbed hold of Willow, only focused on maintaining her safety. But even though the space between them and the car was only a handful of feet, traversing the gas felt like navigating a bog.

Upon reaching it, she jerked one of the rear doors open and forcibly shoved Willow inside. "Use . . . your inhaler . . . now!" Samantha wheezed, coughing as she struggled against the gas. "Barry!" she shouted, slamming the car door shut. "Start it!"

“Graahh!” Barry bellowed out from beside the driver’s door, rubbing her fists against her face. It appeared that she’d dropped the keys in the commotion. “I will *murder* whoever threw tear gas at us!”

“Get in the car, Barry!” Emma coughed out from the other side, firing off rounds into the smoke as she fumbled for the passenger door handle.

Barry rubbed her eyes even harder until abruptly stopping and forcing her watering eyes open against the acrid gas. “Fuck this!” she shrieked, suddenly turning and grabbing hold of the hitch of a rusty old trailer. Her fingers sank into the metal, and with every bit of energy she’d stored up until then, she torqued her body and threw it.

Samantha gasped and flinched as she watched it fly overhead, clearing the station wagon and soaring through the smog. As it struck the barn doors, the entire wall nearly collapsed as the aged wood practically disintegrated from the impact.

As the trailer tumbled out into the dirt driveway and the agents outside scattered, Barry slid down to her knees in search of the keys.

Samantha then glanced around, looking for Roxanne as the smoke began to clear. But upon turning back to the car, she was briefly startled to see her already inside with her hands over her ears. Bonnie must have moved her.

Samantha quickly slid inside, followed by Barry up in the front, but Bonnie was nowhere to be seen.

“Get that rifle ready!” Samantha shouted at Roxanne, causing the woman to jump in surprise, likely at finding herself in the car.

“Where’s Bonnie!?” Emma called out, loading a fresh magazine as Barry quickly jammed in the key.

“We don’t need to wait for her. Trust me!” Barry replied, cutting the wheel to the right as the engine turned over. She stomped on the clutch, shifted into first, and floored the gas. The engine roared as they careened through the smoke and out the front, right toward a blockade of Foundation vehicles.

“We’re surrounded!” Emma hollered.

The next thing Samantha knew, she had been thrown up against Willow and they both slammed into the side door. Barry had jerked up the parking brake and cut left, only to release it almost immediately and stomp back down on the gas, sending them straight into the grain fields.

“Easy!” Emma cried.

“If I go easy, we’ll get shot!” Barry snapped back.

A sudden thud on the roof slightly rocked the car and captured the entire group’s attention.

“What the hell is that now!?” Emma growled, rolling the window down. She leaned out, brandishing her pistol, only to see a familiar face crouching on top of the car. “Bonnie!?”

“Thanks for waiting,” Bonnie snickered, giving a half-sarcastic smirk. She was on her knees with a palm on the roof to keep herself steady. “Get ready, they’re already following us!” she shouted over the flapping air, her blonde hair flailing with further intensity as they gained more speed.

Roxanne bent over the back of her seat and grabbed her rifle from the trunk. She leaned back, resting the barrel against the seat.

“Oy, Bon!” Barry shouted, batting her fist against the roof. “Do you see anything up there!?” she bellowed out toward the open window.

“Not a thing! The grain’s too thick and I can hardly even kneel!” Bonnie replied.

Barry grumbled inaudibly and tightly squeezed the wheel.

“They’re going to try and surround us. Don’t let off that gas for a second,” Emma ordered, constantly twisting back and forth to try to spot them.

Barry glanced over, spotting a large black silhouette rapidly approaching them from the side. “They’re trying to ram us!” she shouted.

“Keep steady!” Bonnie ordered. She then held her breath and slammed her palm down against the car. She scrunched her fingers and time froze to a halt.

She quickly pushed her poncho out of the way and drew the handgun from her waistband. She readied it and squinted before firing three shots at the Humvee's rear tire. After leaving the barrel, the bullets too came to a halt, no longer unaffected by frozen time after leaving contact with her body.

She lowered herself back down, bracing as she exhaled and released her hold. The back tire of the Humvee was blown wide open, and the car immediately swerved as the now tireless wheel hub tore into the dirt. The swerving grew more erratic until the vehicle made a sudden veer in the direction of the mangled tire and flipped.

Bonnie tucked the gun back into her waistband and looked over her shoulder. She could see the roofs of several other vehicles snaking toward them through the field. She glanced ahead, noticing a road several hundred feet ahead of them. That was their ticket out. She leaned down, hunching over the side and quickly knocking on the window of a rear door.

Once Samantha rolled it down, Bonnie halted time again just long enough to climb inside and situate herself beside Roxanne in the back. "There's a road in about two hundred feet!" Bonnie barked after releasing it.

"Barry, get ready to cut it!" Emma ordered, turning in the seat and leaning just her head and arms out the window. "Willow, Sam, keep your heads down!"

"Got it, just hang on!" Barry howled, leaning into the wheel with anticipation.

Bonnie gulped as she and Roxanne shared a sideways glance. They could hear and feel the engines of the approaching vehicles roar. It had grown so loud that the station wagon's pitiful putter was no longer audible. They were practically right on top of them.

Without the upcoming road, they'd be sitting ducks.

Just as they careened through the grain, Barry slammed down the clutch, jerked up the parking brake, and cut the wheel to the left. The tires shredded the muddy bank as they slid up and onto the road.

Barry immediately threw down the brake and downshifted before flooring the gas, launching them down the street at high speed.

The convoy's lack of foresight proved detrimental to the proximity of the chase, as the Humvees scrambled not to careen off the other end of the road or slam into one another as they turned. But, unfortunately for the girls, their lead was temporary, as several of the vehicles began to gain on them once again.

"Forgive me for doubting you, but we need a new plan!" Roxanne called out, then began firing shots through the back windshield as fast as she could chamber them.

"Our shots won't do much from this range, but we do *not* want them to get close!" Bonnie replied.

Barry tightened her grasp and peered ahead, spotting a large bridge stretching over a river. It was their best shot. "I've got a plan, but you may not like it!"

"Spit it out then!" Emma nagged.

"No time, just trust me on this one!" Barry pleaded. "But I'm going to need you to do something, Emma!"

"What is it?"

"Slide over and take the wheel the *moment* I start to pull this off!" Barry ordered, pulling on the door handle as they zoomed right onto the bridge.

"What!?" Emma cried. "What are you going to do!?"

"Something *really* fucking dumb," Barry murmured before turning and shoving the door open. "Now!" she roared.

Still oblivious to her intentions, Emma leaned over and grabbed hold of the steering wheel while staring ahead to ensure they maintained a somewhat straight trajectory.

Barry unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned out of the car. She slammed her fingers into the asphalt, tearing it up as they continued to bolt across the bridge. The friction, heat, and sheer power building up was so plentiful it tried to escape up through her shoulder, causing her entire arm to buzz and twitch. With her newfound instability, her balance was thrown off, and she plummeted from the car to the road.

“Wha—Barry!” Emma called out as Barry tumbled out against the asphalt. She quickly slid over and took full control of the car. Just as they jettisoned off the bridge onto the other side of the river, she pulled the handbrake and cut the wheel to turn them around. But as they came to a stop, they could see Barry rising to her feet at the end of the fifty-foot strip of asphalt she’d torn up.

“What was that!? What’s she doing!?” Willow cried out, peeking over the seatback.

Barry staggered and gripped her left shoulder. The increasingly unstable energy caged up in her body practically rattled around, forcing her to twitch and wobble. “Dammit, this is a lot.” She winced with a snicker. “Face-planting in the street doesn’t help either.”

She straightened her back and stumbled a half step to the side. She took a slow breath, syncing it with the pulse of unstable and volatile momentum that surged through her body as naturally as her own blood. She then dragged her foot back and pulled her hand away from her shoulder. She clenched her fist, and as though she’d focused her heart to beat every ounce of blood into her right arm, the energy was pulled, honed, and constricted into it.

“She’s not going to take out the cars . . .” Samantha muttered.

“She’s going to knock out the entire bridge!” Bonnie denoted, pressing her hands up against the window.

Barry wanted to buy them as much time as possible and take out as much of the convoy as she could. But as they began to roll over the bridge and open fire, she realized she didn’t have that luxury. Already struggling to stay standing, the bullets colliding with her legs and torso only made things more difficult. She couldn’t wait any longer.

Barry jerked her fist back, the overflowing energy now arcing and cracking along her steely fists and against the sleeve of her jacket. She dropped to a knee, then threw her fist into the ground with everything she had. The power pulsed through her arm and blew out of her knuckles in a spectacular blast of raw strength. The ground quaked and the asphalt instantly fissured. The subsequent shockwave bore into the frame, followed by the crack of snapping bolts and groan of splitting girders permeating the air. The blast made its way through to the foundation, shredding the columns and finally splitting through to the riverbed.

The backblast threw Barry up to her feet. She could hardly breathe; her lungs had been sucked dry and her stamina was sapped. She stumbled several steps back and away from the shrieking bridge, watching her handiwork in a speechless stupor.

The entire structure let loose a bellowing crunch before it slipped and sank right into the river. Plumes of water erupted from either side as if the river had been biblically parted, followed by smaller columns of water spouting up from the Humvees raining down into it. Many vehicles had fallen, but many more remained on the other side as a majority of the convoy hadn’t even reached the bridge yet.

“Barry!” Bonnie called out, vanishing from inside the car and appearing just outside with the door swaying behind her. She sprinted off, with the others soon following behind.

Barry turned to face her friends and grinned before slowly raising her hand and giving a wobbly thumbs-up. “Boom.” But she quickly winced, grunted, and slipped down to her knees as her entire body ached from the exertion. “Ugh . . .” she groaned, loosely grabbing at her temporarily limp arm.

“Barry! Are you alright!?” Bonnie cried out, sliding to her knees and grabbing her by the face.

“I’m . . . fine,” Barry murmured, giving a weak smirk. She always kind of enjoyed it when Bonnie was worried about her. “Just a couple of bullet holes and no energy left.”

“Holy shit . . .” Emma mouthed, staring at the harbor and the crumbled remnants of a bridge that had stood only moments ago.

“How did you even do that!?” Roxanne pressed from beside Emma.

“I’ve *never* seen you exert that much power,” Samantha remarked, kneeling beside the two.

“As you can . . . tell,” Barry flinched as her right arm lightly spasmed. She slumped a bit into Bonnie’s embrace and groaned from her stinging muscles. She wished she was just looking for an excuse for Bonnie to hold her. “I’m not used to doing that.” She snickered but quickly groaned as the pain worsened, shooting up and down her arm. “Oh, man . . .”

“Th-they’re leaving!” Willow squeaked, pointing across the bay at the fleeing convoy.

“Good, we need to go, now,” Emma ordered, then hastily stepped off toward the car.

“C’mon, Barry.” Bonnie softly hummed. She turned and pressed up against Barry’s side, slinging her steely arm over her shoulder.

Samantha joined in on Barry’s opposing side, and together the pair helped her to her feet.

Emma stopped before the car, staring at it with apparent confusion. Barry raised her head up a bit. It was completely quiet; the engine must have stopped.

Emma slid into the driver's seat and began twisting the key, but the car gave no response. No matter how many times she tried, it simply wouldn't turn over. "No way."

"What? What's wrong?" Roxanne asked, approaching the door.

"We're out of *fucking* gas!" Emma shouted and slammed her hands against the wheel.

"W-what!?" Willow cried.

"You've gotta be kidding," Roxanne scoffed, leaning down and over Emma to check the gauge. The tank was bone dry. "That's just great," she sighed.

"When did you last fill it!?"

"Does that really matter right now?" Roxanne leered.

"We don't have time to worry about it," Bonnie said bluntly. "Barry, are you good to walk?"

"Yeah . . ." Barry nodded, clearing her throat as she lifted her arms off her friends. She stumbled a bit but managed to stay stable as she dug through her jacket. "I've got food in here somewhere. Should bring my strength back up."

"Wait . . ." Emma mumbled, glancing back down the road and across the bay. Her eyes traced the route the convoy must have taken as they fled. Her eyes slightly widened, and as she exited the vehicle, she gently moved Roxanne out of her way. "Oh god . . ."

"You alright, Cap?" Barry asked, stuffing her mouth with the jerky she'd found.

"It's that way . . ." Emma murmured, raising her hand and pointing into the woods to their right.

"What is?" Bonnie wondered, glancing in that direction.

"Site 9."

Barry's entire body seized as she nearly choked on the jerky. "Wh-amt!?" she hummed with a full mouth.

"It's secluded in the woods. There's a gated road that splits off and leads to a fork. That leads toward the road where Roxanne's farm is," Emma explained, tracing the route with her finger in the air. "Then down that road is Woodstock . . . and finally that other barn we rested at. All in one big stupid circle. Dammit!" she shouted as she slammed the car door shut. "No wonder they pulled back; they're circling around!"

"You can't be serious . . ." Samantha gulped.

"I am. We've got about thirty minutes till they make it all the way around," Emma explained, quickly moving to the other side of the car. "We need to pick a direction and go."

"Is there anything on this side of the bridge?" Bonnie questioned. "Anywhere we can hide?"

"Nowhere to hide but the site and a hospital." Emma sighed, pulling the passenger door open. "And I'd rather not start a shootout in a sick-bay." She snagged the strap of her duffle bag with her arm and slung it over her shoulder before walking back around the vehicle.

"B-but . . ." Willow stuttered, "what if we go let out the other Orphans? Th-they could help us, right!?" she cried.

"They'd know we were coming before we even got close," Emma grumbled while fishing through her bag. She whipped out the spare handgun, loaded it, and held it out to Willow. "Take it. All of us need to be armed."

Barry cocked an eyebrow. Target practice was one thing, but she couldn't expect the kid to just use it against other people.

As Willow stared at it, her face began to flush, and she looked as though she'd be sick. "I don't w-want it!" she cried, pushing it away.

"*Willow*," Emma growled, irritated.

"I-I don't need it! I have Sam!" Willow expressed, tightly clinging to Samantha's arm and sinking by her side.

"Willow!" Emma barked, pushing the gun sideways up against her chest. "This isn't up for debate!"

"Hey! Back off!" Roxanne roared, shoving Emma back as she stepped between them.

Emma stumbled but quickly regained her footing and shouted back, "She needs it!"

"She said she doesn't want the damn thing!" Roxanne retorted.

"Enough!" Bonnie shouted, appearing between them and pushing them both apart. "We can't waste any more time!"

Roxanne furrowed her eyebrows and nodded in reluctant agreement. She stepped around Bonnie and snatched the gun out of Emma's hand. "I'll take it. I haven't got any shots for the rifle left anyway," she murmured, holding it down at her side. "C'mon, Willow," she ordered, purposely bumping Emma with her shoulder as she stepped toward the woods.

"O-okay . . ." Willow whimpered, though she didn't move an inch until Samantha began to lead her along.

Bonnie lowered her hands and sighed. "You could have handled that *much* better," she commented.

"Yeah," Barry snickered, swallowing down a mouthful of jerky. "You *really* pinched a nerve there."

"We haven't got the *time* to let personal reservations get in the way," Emma grumbled.

"Why?" Bonnie huffed, crossing her arms. "So we can do exactly what they're doing? Act without regard for others?"

"That's not what I meant," Emma argued.

"They're people, too, Emma."

“I know!” Emma yelled, “but it’s getting to the point where we don’t have a choice.”

“Just because you can hurt people doesn’t mean Willow can,” Bonnie insinuated.

Barry gulped down another mouthful and glanced at Emma, who seemed to take the accusation to heart.

Emma sighed and brought her hand to her face. “We haven’t *got* options, Bonnie.”

“Then we’ll *make* options,” Bonnie assured, raising a hand and grabbing Emma by the shoulder. “Fighting each other won’t help anything. We can’t let fear and pressure push us into being sloppy *or* doing something we can’t come back from.”

“And if we run out?”

Bonnie winced with uncertainty but confidently tightened her grip. “Then we’ll cross that bridge when we have to.”

Chapter Fourteen

Cornered

Willow's grip on Samantha's hand was loose and slick. Her palms were clammy, and she seemed on the verge of giving up with each step she took.

Once she recognized how much Willow was quivering, Samantha's tendrils contorted through the air toward her. They snaked along her back, which at first startled her, until the tendrils firmly pulled her closely into Samantha's side. "Are you . . . okay?" she quietly asked.

Willow slowly shook her head.

Samantha gulped as if her throat had closed. Just as before, she couldn't find the words to give. All she could do was continue to walk in uneasy silence.

"I won't lie to you, Barry," Bonnie muttered, walking along some ways behind the pair. "We haven't got the best odds."

"Yeah, no," Barry uneasily snickered. "We're totally screwed."

Bonnie grumbled, scratching the side of her face as though deep in thought. "We need a plan. We need to manipulate our predicament to make the outcome more . . . favorable."

"I'm not very good for thinking, Bon . . ." Barry frowned.

"And I . . ." Bonnie groaned, letting her arms dangle freely at her sides. "I don't have anything . . ."

"B-but Bonnie . . ." Barry gulped, "If you don't have a plan, then what do we do?"

"I don't know. . . ."

Barry frustratedly batted her knuckles upside a tree. “What am I supposed to do, just knock down trees and hope it does something!?”

Bonnie blinked and quickly glanced up. “What’d you just say?”

“Huh?”

“Say it again . . .” she softly mumbled.

“Knock down trees and hope it . . . does something?” Barry curiously hummed and cocked a brow.

“Barry,” Bonnie stopped and grabbed the snow-haired girl by the face. “You’re a *genius*,” she whispered in Barry’s face.

“I . . . am?” Barry squeaked cluelessly.

Bonnie smiled nearly as bright as the hair on her head shined. “If you do that, you could make us cover and split them up!” she cried.

“Y-yeah,” Barry nervously grinned. “I totally . . . meant that—”

“I know you didn’t,” Bonnie snickered, gently poking Barry’s nose with her index finger before backing off. “But your utilization of the environment will provide us with a vast advantage they don’t have access to. As they struggle to figure out what we’re doing, we can pick them off easily. But if I were to guess . . . they’ll attempt to surround us.”

Barry gulped. “Your big words scare me sometimes, Bon.”

Samantha suddenly stiffened as the hairs on her neck stood erect; there was a shrill whistle echoing throughout the woods. It must’ve been Emma, as she’d stayed farther back to keep an eye out for any incoming waves. “That’s Emma? Already?”

“Those assholes really don’t waste any time.” Barry sighed.

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” Bonnie scoffed. “Get to a good position and be ready.” She then took a step back before vanishing from Barry’s side and reappearing just in front of Samantha.

“They’re here already?” Samantha pressed, tightening the curl of her fingers around Willow’s hand.

“More than likely, which means they got here *much* faster than we’d assumed,” Bonnie commented.

“W-what do we do?” Willow cried out, beginning to quiver as she pressed up against Samantha. “We can’t just stand around waiting for them!”

“*You* are going to hide,” Roxanne ordered, glancing around in an attempt to locate a spot for her sister to hole up. “As for the rest of us . . .”

“B-but I don’t want to be by myself!” Willow whined in a pitiful sputter.

Samantha gulped nervously as Willow clung to her like a frightened toddler. She looked as though she were ready to burst into tears at any moment. “Willow, it’s not safe,” she said, glancing down at the farm girl who was turning into a sniveling mess.

“P-please!” Willow begged, tightening her grip even further.

“I promise I’ll stay close . . .” Samantha whispered, her tendrils briefly tightening around Willow as they pulled her in. She gently pulled apart their hands, and despite her unfamiliarity with the gesture, raised her arms and tightly hugged Willow.

Willow burrowed her face against Samantha’s shoulder, sputtering and quivering from the stress. But it seemed as though the longer Samantha held her, the calmer she became, and even though it was hardly noticeable, Samantha could tell.

“Please . . .” Samantha hummed, “hide.”

Willow sniffled and nodded, dragging her face up and down Samantha’s shirt. Even after Samantha had relinquished her, it took Willow a few moments to pry herself away. But as soon as she mustered the courage, she pulled away and quickly burst off toward a thicket. Many of the leaves had yellowed and fallen, but it still provided somewhat adequate camouflage.

“Alright . . .” Samantha sighed. “The plan, what is it?” she asked, knitting her brows and glancing at Bonnie.

“Spread out. Barry’s taking care of the main part. Just lay low until the silence is broken,” Bonnie explained, and as per usual, she was gone on her last word.

Samantha looked over toward Roxanne, who gave her a nod. She then quickly pounced up against the trunk of a nearby tree, her tendrils scraping and carving into its surface. Utilizing all four, she quickly scaled the tree and scurried up into the tree line.

One of her scythes hooked over a thick branch, and with a single jerk of that tendril, she threw herself up and onto it. The branch shook and creaked from her weight, sending a cascade of prematurely fallen orange leaves down toward the warmly smothered forest floor.

She must’ve ascended at least a hundred feet, but the height didn’t bother her. If she fell, at worst it would just hurt, and she’d walk away with some bruising. She was focused on the ground, watching over it like a leering predator waiting for its prey. Despite being hunted, she felt solace to be the one lying in wait for a change.



Barry carefully peered over a bush as she heard gentle approaching footsteps. She spotted a group of six slowly making their way across the forest floor with their guns at the ready. She glanced to her right, looking at the massive, old oak tree that stood beside her. Palming it, she grinned, noting that it was sturdy and tough with age. She knew it would make *plenty* of noise.

Once the squad stepped slightly too close for comfort, Barry pulled her hand from the bark and quickly stood. Before the men could even turn at the sound of her boots scraping against the leaves, she smashed her knuckles upside the trunk. The spot she’d struck disintegrated into a flurry of splin-

ters, followed by massive fissures gouging up across the length of the tree. It bellowed and roared as if in pain before its final connections to the stump snapped and it came crashing down toward the unit.

They hastily scattered, diving out of the way of the tree. They were paying little mind to where they were going besides where the tree *wasn't*. And as a result, their squad had been segmented in two.

As she sprinted for them, Barry noticed Bonnie reappear amid the scattered men on their side. In the blink of an eye, she'd delivered quick, underpowered jabs, throwing the men off balance. She then jumped away and turned her back, seemingly uninterested as she dusted off her poncho. But Barry knew it was quite the opposite; the blonde expected her to clean up the scraps, and she happily obliged.

The men didn't even have a second to recover or breathe before Barry slammed her shoulder right into the chest of the nearest one, throwing him off his feet and against the fallen tree. She then stamped her foot into the ground and quickly swung, bashing the second's face in so hard the straps of his helmet snapped and it flew from his head.

The last one standing had enough time to raise his rifle, but not enough to fire before Barry palmed the barrel. The bullet smashed into her palm, flattening almost instantly into a coin-like circle. Once Barry saw panic in his face, she smirked and crushed the barrel in her mitts. She then ripped it from his hands and threw out her arm, grabbing at his vest. She stepped back and pulled, slamming his face into a protruding branch.

"Do you think I hit them too hard?" Barry chuckled, wiping her steely hands as the man slumped back into the leaves.

"Are they still breathing?" Bonnie asked.

Barry glanced around at the men she'd knocked down, and, noting their chests still rising, replied, "I think so?"

"Then no."

However, there was still another half of the squad to take care of, and Samantha was already on the scene. While diving down from the forest canopy, she'd jerked her foot up over her head and then slammed her sole down against one of the agent's helmets, sending their face straight into the mud.

Before the nearest agent could ready himself, she swept his legs out from underneath him with her tendrils. But the third had enough time to fire a panic shot right into her face.

She winced, and as the flattened bullet fell from her cheek, an irritated growl rumbled in her throat. It seemingly did little but piss her off.

He fired twice more before her lower right blade scraped across the ground and swung up, hooking into his vest. She yanked him close and met him with a fierce headbutt. She didn't even wait to watch him flop back against the ground before dropping and throwing her heel back at the man she'd tripped in an effort to stop him before he got up.

A loud snap cracked through the air as she struck his chin, dislocating his jaw and sending him back down.

"Oy!" Barry shouted, climbing up onto the fallen tree. She didn't want to miss the rest of the action, but upon seeing everyone was already out cold, she huffed in disappointment. "I was going to ask if you were good but—"

"We're fine," Roxanne replied, stepping up with her gun in hand. She hadn't even gotten a chance to fire it. "You could have left some for me, kiddo."

"I didn't expect there to be so few . . ." Samantha exhaled, turning her head side to side as she surveyed the area.

"Yeah . . . that couldn't have been all of them," Bonnie said, appearing up on the log beside Barry.

"Willow, all clear!" Roxanne cried out.

Willow cautiously shambled out of the thicket and steadily made her way over toward the group. Once she reached them, she near immediately magnetized back up against Samantha's side.

The crunch of approaching footsteps suddenly caught the attention of all five of them, but they just as quickly breathed a sigh of relief as it was just Emma catching up to them. "You guys sure took care of that quickly." She said, only to stop and eye the three men on the ground. "How many did you guys see?"

"Six." Bonnie hummed, appearing on top of the log right beside Barry.

"Six . . ." Emma grumbled, kneeling down beside one of them and grabbing at their tags. "And that's it? Literally just these guys?"

"Yeah . . ." Roxanne murmured, "Why?"

"What the hell did they send Theta for . . ." Emma grumbled, resting her elbow on her knee as she glanced around at the other downed men. "This can't be it."

Bonnie abruptly turned her head as if noticing something out of her peripheral. She stared off into the thick tapestry of endless branches, almost like she was looking for something.

Barry took notice of her friend's sudden shift but simply chalked it up to Bonnie being the paranoid type. "Does it really matter?" she snickered, leaning back on her palms. "It's not like this'd be the first time Max ordered something that made *zero* sense."

"Throwing squads at us one by one isn't going to do anything, he *knows* that," Emma retorted.

"Wait a minute . . ." Bonnie squinted, mumbling to herself, leaning in the direction she'd stared so endlessly in.

Barry raised a brow again at Bonnie's strange behavior but was distracted again, this time by Emma's continued words.

“It just doesn’t make any sense. Surely, he’d know a scouting squad would get decimated,” Emma explained, glancing up at the rest of them in search of agreement toward her suspicions. But Bonnie’s inquisitive gaze only seemed to heighten her concerns. “Unless . . .”

Emma’s face scrunched and her throat suddenly tightened. “Unless that was the plan!” she shouted, shooting up to her feet.

A sudden, distant flash from the direction Bonnie was staring fully snagged Barry’s attention. But by the time she’d looked, Bonnie had already grabbed her and shrieked, “Get down!” before throwing Barry and herself down into the dirt.

The rest of the group didn’t even get a chance to raise their heads before the thunderous roar of a heavy gunshot bellowed throughout the woods. Just as it hit their ears, a bullet struck Roxanne in the back and blew straight out her gut. She immediately staggered as the blast sprayed the leafy forest floor, blotting it with a thick crimson wash of her blood. She choked, overwhelmed by the shock from her shredded nerves. She froze up as her eyes fluttered and her lips trembled. But just as quickly as she’d been shot, and without even uttering a pained cry, her eyes rolled back and she collapsed face-first against the scarlet-stained leaves.

Willow almost fell over as her legs practically melted into the ground. Her little eyes peeled wide open, and her stomach practically inverted itself. All she could do was shriek, “Roxanne!”

Emma didn’t hesitate for a moment and quickly slid down to her knees. She flipped Roxanne over, scooped her up, and burst off in the direction opposite the shot. “Go!” she shouted.

Samantha’s tendrils swiftly wrapped around and pulled Willow along as she ran. Without even realizing Willow had practically become dead weight, Samantha’s excess limbs hoisted the girl up on her back, allowing her to run as fast as her feet could hit the ground.

Bonnie followed suit, vanishing, as per usual.

Barry, on the other hand, lagged slightly behind. She was still following closely but was trying to buy them some time by smashing down every tree she passed.

Emma didn't show any signs of slowing down as she continued to barrel through the woods. She was, however, grimacing, as the apparently endless torrent of warm blood was soaking her uniform and causing it to cling to her skin. She gulped, realizing that Roxanne had already lost an obscene amount of blood, and she could only pray that it wasn't too much.

Emma abruptly stopped, digging her heels into the dirt and dropping to her knees. She laid Roxanne down and leaned over her, gulping in distress. Hardly being able to see the wound amid an ever-flowing sea of gore, she ripped a knife from her boot and quickly sliced open the front of Roxanne's shirt. *Is that the entry or the exit!?* she pondered in a panic while quickly pushing the stripper onto her side to get a look at her backside. She knew she couldn't waste a moment; Roxanne was running out of time.

"R-R-Roxy!" Willow screeched, practically throwing herself off Samantha's back as she arrived with the other three. She slipped against the leaves, but it did little to stop her from crawling up to her wounded sister's side.

"What the hell was that!?" Barry yelled out in befuddlement as she jogged up beside them.

"A sniper," Bonnie growled, popping in right beside Barry. She peered back into the path of brutalized trees, which made for excellent cover but terrible visibility. "That must've been the plan from the start. To catch us off guard. Theta was *meant* to be expendable."

"Emma, you have to help her!" Willow begged, digging her fingers into her injured sister's shirt.

"I'm working on it, alright!?" Emma frustratedly snapped, laying Roxanne back down. She quickly wiped away the pooling blood on the woman's gut

and hoarsely gasped as she realized just exactly *where* Roxanne had been shot. “Shit . . . *Shit!*” she hissed.

“What’s wrong!?” Samantha pressed, taking a knee beside her.

“The gunshot severed her spinal column, and she’s hemorrhaging *badly!*” Emma frantically revealed.

“What!?” Bonnie grunted. “That could paralyze her!”

“Never mind that. It could kill her!” Emma shouted, ripping off her uniform’s top, revealing a now blood-soaked white tank top underneath. “I need to stop the bleeding and I need to stop it now!” she shouted, beginning to tear and slice up the shirt into strips. But she froze up, spotting something far more unsettling to her than the blood. Roxanne’s chest wasn’t moving.

“W-what? What’s wrong!?” Willow cried.

Emma dropped the knife and fabric to the dirt, then swiftly leaned down. She pressed her ear against the woman’s chest and quickly came to realize: “She’s not breathing. . . . Her heart stopped!”

“What!?” Willow shrieked.

“The shock from the spinal fissure,” Bonnie gulped. “It must’ve caused some form of cardiac arrest!”

“Move!” Barry barked, shoving Willow to the side as she knelt over Roxanne. She leaned down, repeating Emma’s action of listening for a heartbeat or a breath. It was no surprise to Emma when Barry’s face reciprocated the same shock.

“Oh god, she’s *super* fucked up!” Barry cried, leaning back up.

“Roxanne . . .” Samantha defeatedly gulped.

“I don’t have a defibrillator in the bag. I’ll have to do CPR!” Emma spat out, not even realizing that in scooping up Roxanne moments ago, she’d dropped the bag.

“Do something!” Willow desperately squealed.

Emma glanced up to shout at Willow again, stressed out enough as is. But she caught sight of Samantha in the process . . . and she wasn't looking good. Her skin had grown tense and vascular. She was breathing heavily, sweltering in rage as she stared off in the wake of splinters and cracked branches.

"Sam?" Emma gulped.

Samantha's muscles twitched and strained, forcing her joints to viscerally pop. The noises were followed by something Emma didn't want to see: her eyes were flickering.

Samantha's alternative row of gnashers clamped together over her natural set of teeth and her eyes locked scarlet. She then burst off, seemingly without a second thought, running in the direction of their assailants.

"Sam!" Barry shouted, moving to stand up, but she seemed torn as she glanced back hesitantly at Roxanne.

"Wait, come back!" Willow cried, quickly scampering to her feet and running off after the reaper.

"No, Willow!" Emma called out, but by then, she had already disappeared into the maze of downed trunks.

"Dammit! It's like they're built the same!" Barry growled, kneeling back down beside Roxanne. She then hastily placed her palm directly in the center of the woman's sternum before Emma could position herself.

"W-what are you doing!?" Emma exclaimed. "CPR requires both hands!"

"It's a good thing that's not what I'm doing then. Worry about stopping the flow!" Barry commanded.

Emma was hesitant. For her, trusting Barry with anything was a long shot. But she didn't exactly have a choice. Just as she went to tend to the hole, Barry rolled her shoulder up, then flexed her palm and fingers to be as flat as possible. She drew a slow, arduous breath, then threw her weight down into her arm and blasted an excessive amount of force into Roxanne's chest. She'd

compressed her chest with more than enough force, in a fraction of a second, to restart her heart.

Roxanne's entire upper body jolted as she let out a sudden desperate gasp for air. Her eyes shot open, and she gagged, spitting up more blood that dripped down her chin.

"Holy shit, I can't believe that worked," Bonnie said in amazement.

"Y-you did it!" Emma exclaimed in disbelief. "Hang on, Roxanne," she prattled, grabbing at her torn uniform and rolling the woman back onto her side. "She's still bleeding, but good work, Barry! Do what you can while I take care of her from here!"

Barry rose to her feet, looking at her hand in bewilderment. Bonnie wasn't the only one who hadn't expected that to work. She then grunted and quickly turned around as gunshots echoed in the distance.

"Dammit! Samantha's already engaged, and Willow's out there with her!" Bonnie huffed, balling up her fists as she looked back toward Emma. "You're sure you can handle her alone!?"

"I've got it! Go, before those two get themselves killed!" Emma shouted, lifting Roxanne's hips as she tucked some of the scraps beneath her.

"Alright, Bon," Barry said, bashing her knuckles into her palm and cracking them. "Let's put these guys in the hospital."



Samantha took to the ground and lunged like a panther, tackling an agent into the leaves. She rolled over him just as soon as they'd touched down, her scythes latching onto his clothing only to throw him over her head once she'd risen back to her feet. She paid no mind to the number of assailants, their firepower, their designations, or who they even were. She had entered a nigh

unbreakable state of tunnel vision, so much so that she was entirely unaware that almost six entire squads had arrived.

They tried their best to pin her down, firing ceaseless barrages of bullets at her. Her movement made it almost impossible to hit her, and the shots that did land seemed to have no effect, only skimming her flesh and flattening against her bones.

Upon being abruptly surrounded, she spread her tendrils out to her sides and sporadically spun. She'd whipped her body around, lashing carelessly at the men and women with her blades. Even as those around her reeled from being struck, slashed, and gouged, she granted them no reprieve.

Her tendrils almost acted on their own, slicing barrels, slashing wrists, splitting fingers, and sweeping legs. She fought almost entirely autonomously, enabled by the knowledge in the back of her mind that Willow was safe and back with the group. Or so she thought.

Samantha's lower left blade tore into one of the women's shoulders and whipped her upside the trunk of a nearby tree. Before she even crumpled, Samantha's tendrils thrust out toward her, pinning her to the tree. She jerked her fist back, ready to knock her out cold, then—

"Sam!" Willow shrieked, emerging from the mass wreckage of fallen trees.

Samantha's concentration burst so suddenly that she almost fell over mid-move. She immediately turned her head, and upon spotting Willow, her eyes buzzed back into their natural blue. "Willow!?" she confusedly cried before being struck upside the head by a bullet.

Samantha dropped the agent in her mitts and tumbled defensively toward Willow. She was reeling from such a direct, unexpected hit and was clutching the side of her head with her hand. She could feel the warmth of blood, which greatly irritated her, even if it was a minor amount. "Willow," she started again, partly rising up while glancing over her shoulder. "Get, *the fuck*, out of here!" she ordered.

“B-but I can’t just leave you alone!” Willow cried.

A frustrated growl rumbled beneath Samantha’s lips, but she held off on berating Willow upon noticing something peculiar. The squads had stopped advancing and were keeping their distance. Roman from Golf even seemed to be listening closely to his chest-mic as inaudible babbling spouted from it.

“Copy,” he eventually muttered into it. “Change of orders!” he barked up to the two dozen men and women surrounding him. “We’re *capturing* the girl.”

Samantha hunched over as her tendrils began to swirl and point their blades at her enemies. She wasn’t about to let them take her without a fight, but their numbers were definitely starting to concern her.

“Which one?” a woman from Delta asked.

“Parker said Ford wants the *farm girl*.”

Samantha may as well have been punched in the stomach. *Why would they want her!?* She gulped and took a half step back as her eyes rapidly darted around the two dozen men and women, noticing that they’d begun to steadily advance again.

“What!?” Willow shrieked.

Samantha turned in a blitz and slammed her foot into the ground. She was prepared to rush at Willow, grab her, and run to regroup with the rest. But she couldn’t even take a second step before the squads opened fire again, dumping shots into her back and legs.

Samantha gasped as her footing was entirely lost; one of the higher caliber rounds had torn through the back of her calf with such ferocity that it forcibly dislocated her knee. She collapsed just before Willow.

Filled with holes, she balled up her fists and tried to push herself back up. But she couldn’t even raise her head let alone stand. She wasn’t able to hold up against this much damage all at once, despite her durability.

Willow began to hyperventilate, freezing up as the Foundation agents closed in. She fell back on her rear, kicking at the leaves in a poor attempt

to scoot away from her attackers. She had already pulled the inhaler out but continually fumbled it out of fear. She eventually succeeded, finally being able to suck on the end and breathe once more, though that quickly became the least of her worries as the agents began to step past Samantha's body.

"Get away from her!" Samantha snapped her jaws, thrashing on the ground as she tried more desperately to rise. But just as she'd finally managed to raise her head, one of the agents stomped her face back into the dirt.

As the boot was removed, she stubbornly dragged her dirt-smearred face back up, trembling in agony as they began to reach Willow. She was helpless and could only watch as they roughly snatched Willow by the arms and began to drag her away.

"Willow . . . no!" she hissed, trying once again to move, but every nerve in her quivering body begged her to stop. Her muscles then gradually shut down as her body forced her to let it recover. She lowered her head, listening in pain as Willow's cries for help became more difficult to hear. She couldn't believe it; she'd *let* them take her. She wanted more than anything to get up, to bare her teeth, to *rip them apart*.

But she couldn't lift a finger, let alone open her eyes.

For what felt like hours, she lay festering in an exhausted rage. She had no way of knowing how long she'd been lying there, continually drifting in and out of consciousness as her body frantically recuperated.

The bullets began to crown from her skin before long. Her flesh pinched shut, fully shoving the lead out and leaving behind only light, fading bruises. As feeling returned to her nerves, her tendrils slowly stirred. The blades slithered along the ground before weakly arching and forcing Samantha onto her side.

Her reprieve was cut short, as she felt her muscles cramp and constrict around another stubborn few bullets that refused to exit. Thinking she'd have to cut more out like the day before, the tendrils not supporting her weight

proceeded to surgically position themselves along her backside. Though, *much* to her relief, she was spared from slicing herself open as the remaining lead eventually popped free from her flesh.

Samantha flopped onto her back. She took deep, scathing breaths as she stared up into the canopy of dwindling leaves. She squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth as her tendrils pressed with all their might against the ground. They managed to shove her up into a sitting position but then began to wobble as she continued to lean back against them.

She eyed her right leg and cringed. It truly looked worse for wear; her shin and foot laid loose and were pointing sideways.

“*Dammit,*” she hissed like a viper while grabbing at her thigh and wincing from the pain of her mangled joint. She knew she’d have to handle this one herself, as her advanced healing didn’t exactly cover popped joints. She wasn’t going anywhere like this, but she couldn’t *leave* Willow with them, and she didn’t have time to just wait around for the others to catch up.

She hesitantly tightened her grip. The only thing keeping her fear of further agony at bay was the thought of what would happen to Willow if she *didn’t* get back up. Maximilian was heartless enough to use children as experimental toys; surely he wouldn’t be above using one as a bargaining chip.

Her hands trembled as she closed her eyes. She had to do it . . . *she had to*. As her conviction mounted, and her repeated self-beratement continuously echoed in her mind, her eyes shot open, and she suddenly jerked her hands toward herself in a twisting motion.

A loud, flesh-rending snap preceded the most horrific, agonized shriek Samantha had ever unleashed.



Bonnie stood shoulder to shoulder with Barry. For the last several minutes, they had been fending off a troop of F.T.F. agents to ensure they wouldn't find Emma while she tended to Roxanne. It looked as though they were never going to stop coming. But then they began to retreat seemingly out of nowhere.

"What are they doing?" Bonnie said.

"They're running! Like hell they are!" Barry barked, taking a step forward as though ready to charge after them.

"Wait," Bonnie ordered, throwing her arm across Barry's chest before she did anything rash. She glanced around, through the trees and withering brush. Even the men who hadn't engaged them were retreating. "Something's off."

"Eh?" Barry frustratedly sneered with a raised brow. "Bon, they're pulling back, *all of 'em!* They're totally scared!"

"No, they're not. You know everything they've done has been a calculated move. This isn't any different," Bonnie commented, standing strong until her muscles abruptly tightened in response to a distant shriek. It sounded guttural and painful, like the person releasing it had experienced pain beyond comprehension. Although she'd never heard Samantha scream like that, she was certain it was her.

Bonnie gulped and pulled her arm back from across her friend's chest. "Barry?" she softly said, shooting her a glance.

Barry's eyes narrowed and she nodded. "I'll bring her back," she promised before bursting off in the direction of the shrill echo.

"Oh god . . ." Bonnie sighed, rubbing her eyes and then letting loose an uncomfortable groan. Things were just getting worse. "Emma!" she called out, lowering her hand and looking over her shoulder.

"Right here," Emma exclaimed, stepping from the brush with Roxanne cradled in her arms. She was hardly conscious and had the torn strips of Emma's uniform tightly wrapped around her gut.

Emma seemed stressed out of her mind. Each breath she released trembled along with her body, though despite how shaky she was, she also seemed as stiff and rigid as a board. Roxanne's blood absolutely slathered and stained her skin, some of it had even gotten in her hair. Hardly any of her tank top remained white, and it along with her arms looked as though they'd just been dipped in buckets of red paint.

"Jesus Christ . . ." Bonnie swallowed, avoiding Roxanne with her gaze. "Is she—"

"She's fine for now," Emma grunted. "I was able to pack and wrap the wound, but I need to get her to a hospital *now*. Or she might not last very long."

"I . . . I can't feel my legs," Roxanne quietly squawked, her voice crackling and weary. She was so pale that even the milky white clouds blanketing the sky looked colorful in comparison.

Bonnie stared in silence at Emma's bloodied arms and Roxanne's crumbling body. Just as she had earlier, she was drawing a strategic blank. Nothing brought even an inkling of a thought to her head, not even the soothing rustling of the remaining leaves that clung to the branches overhead. For once, she felt absolutely helpless. Everything was going south *fast*, and she had no clue what to do.

"Bonnie . . ." Roxanne weakly muttered.

Snapped from her daze, Bonnie glanced into Roxanne's half-open eyes. She gulped as she watched Roxanne raise her hand, as even that slight exertion seemed to be too much for the stripper, only causing her trembling to worsen.

"What is it?" Bonnie softly replied, hunching over to close the gap so that Roxanne wouldn't have to speak loudly.

With about the grip strength of a sickly toddler, Roxanne grabbed hold of Bonnie's poncho. "*Kill them . . .*" she venomously hissed, her eyes watering as

her hand began to further tremble from the minor exertion. “And bring my sister back to me . . .”

Bonnie felt her throat tighten at the demand. To abandon her principles was the last thing she wanted, but with the possibility of both Samantha and Willow having been captured, or worse, she knew their options were extremely limited. She slowly raised her head and looked to Emma with her last shred of hope. The captain was the last line. If she had a better plan, maybe there was still a way to resolve the situation without any gratuitous violence.

Emma’s gaze, however, provided no additional comfort; it was just as cold and dark as the woman’s in her arms. She carefully shifted her grip to firmly hold up Roxanne with one arm. She then reached behind herself and unfastened the strap to one of the many things hanging from her belt. “Bonnie . . .” she said before holding it out.

Bonnie lightly gasped as a disappointed and frightened frown came about her lips. Emma was holding out her hunting knife. Bonnie hesitantly reached for it, but held off and took one last look at Emma’s face. She needed to hear anything besides what was about to be said.

“Do whatever needs to be done.”



Barry had been running back toward the group only to spot Bonnie walking toward her by her lonesome. “Bon!” she cried out, coming to a stop. “I can’t find Sam or Willow anywhere. They’re both gone!”

“I know,” Bonnie murmured quietly, stepping right past Barry.

“I’m worried they’ve been caught . . .” Barry said uncomfortably, following closely along.

Bonnie remained silent and continued ahead.

“Bon?”

No answer.

“Bon?” Barry asked again.

Still no answer.

“Bon!” Barry snapped, firmly grabbing the blonde by the arm. “What’s wrong with you?”

Bonnie sighed but remained facing forward.

“Oy!” Barry yelled, forcing Bonnie around to face her. She glared frustratedly into her violet eyes, having been easily angered by the blonde’s silence. “What the hell is wrong with you!?” she cried, grabbing her by the shoulders.

“I’m done,” Bonnie stated coldly, seemingly devoid of any emotion. If anything, she appeared distant.

Barry winced, not liking what she was seeing. She couldn’t spot even a hint of anger, sadness, or anything. “Done with . . . what?” she mumbled.

“Playing nice . . .” Bonnie chillingly exhaled.

“I . . . I don’t get it.” Barry cluelessly blinked.

“With every step I’ve taken on this hell-bound journey . . . I’ve done my best *not* to hurt anybody. *We’ve* tried not to hurt anybody. Despite the fact that every corner we’ve stepped around, there’s been a gun pointed right in our faces,” Bonnie explained, her face twitching slightly as she mentioned the Foundation’s relentlessness. “I can’t take it anymore,” she hissed, balling up her fists as she jerked away from Barry. “They either have one or both of them . . . and either way, they’re both in obscene danger and we’re on our own. I’m done,” she repeated.

With a simple blink, her natural violet orbs had burned away, leaving only an all too familiar scarlet that Barry had never hoped to see on the blonde.

“This ends now.”

Chapter Fifteen

Crossing the Line

Samantha slid down a muddied cliffside and right up to a chain-link fence that surrounded a massive concrete complex. She placed her hands against the fence and leaned in, peering through the links and scanning the lot. It was only days ago that she'd run out of there and into the street, only to get struck by a vehicle.

Her tendrils were almost rattling at the thought of stepping back in there, especially willingly. Under any other circumstances, she'd run right back from whence she came, but . . .

She wasn't about to let the Orphanage get away with taking Willow.

She rushed up the fence with the aid of her tendrils and threw herself over the top. She palmed the ground after landing on her feet then slowly raised her head. It didn't take her long to notice the dozens of barrels trained on her from various points of cover across the yard. She wasn't even surprised, figuring they'd be waiting for her anyway.

"Maximilian!" Samantha bellowed, standing up as tall as she could. She balled up her fists and continued to shout, "Let her go!"

"My dear, *sweet* Samantha." The devil chuckled, stepping forth from the newly replaced sliding doors at the entrance of the building. He had an irritating grin on his face, as per usual. Why wouldn't he be smiling? She'd come *right* to him. "I'm afraid that would be impossible."

Samantha avoided his gaze and instead stared past him toward the pair following along beside him. She couldn't care less about Wilson, but *Diana* . . .

She couldn't help but snarl as their eyes met. Almost every encounter between them had always ended with gunshots and blood, but this time something was off. . . . Diana couldn't even hold her gaze for a few seconds, looking away almost instantly.

"I assure you, you'll get what you want, Samantha," Maximilian stated, continuing to step toward her. He acted as though he had no regard for his own safety, or perhaps, he was merely just that confident in his own schemes. "So long as you come home, where you belong."

"Really?" Samantha scoffed in surprise. "After all the fighting and chasing—you just want me to come back!?" she shouted, fuming at the mere possibility that this was all some kind of demented game.

"Allow me to . . . *rephrase*." Maximilian hummed then cleared his throat. He leaned forward, now towering over her, which admittedly, made her slightly uncomfortable. "Come inside, or that little friend of yours . . ."

Samantha's arms began to shake as she stared up into his icy, uncaring eyes. She trembled not out of fear, but out of strain, as she had dug her nails into her palm so fiercely that blood had begun to ooze between her fingers. "Fine," she sharply exhaled, releasing her fists. "As long as you take me to her."

Maximilian continued to grin at the child as he raised a hand in the air. "Of course," he affirmed before snapping his fingers.

As if on cue, Parker let her rifle dangle against her body and stepped out from cover with a set of bolt cuffs in her mitts. She leaned down and placed them over Samantha's forearms.

Samantha glared at her, but Parker seemingly refused to look up. Whether it be out of shame or guilt, Samantha didn't particularly care.

"Sir . . ." Parker softly muttered as the thick steel cuffs clamped down on Samantha's arms.

"Yes, Captain?"

“Shouldn’t we restrain her tendrils?” she asked, finally raising her head only to be met with Samantha’s fierce and angry eyes.

“I doubt she’d waste her one chance to save the girl.” Maximilian grinned. “Additional restraints won’t be necessary.”

Parker nervously nodded.

“Come now, let’s reunite you with your little friend.” Maximilian hummed, beckoning Samantha to follow with his finger.

She quietly obliged, lowering and constricting her tendrils around her abdomen. Guided by Parker, she followed alongside Maximilian, his pet, and the now oddly acting commander. Guns remained trained on her, but even as they stepped through the front entrance and past another dozen or so guards, not once did she show even a hint of aggression. He was right; she didn’t want to risk it.

“My dear, I’m quite thrilled to have you back where you belong, safe and sound,” Maximilian almost cooed, causing Samantha to physically cringe and recoil.

“Oh yeah . . . I’m thrilled,” she sneered.

“I’m not the only one happy to see you, you know.” Maximilian chuckled.

“Oh? Is *Commander Gray* excited to use me for target practice again?” Samantha barked, sniping a spiteful glare off toward Diana.

Diana almost shriveled up at the comment, still avoiding eye contact entirely. Her continued strange behavior only further puzzled Samantha. Diana was always a stone-cold pillar of order and discipline, yet here she was, physically wilting at childish jeers and refusing to make eye contact.

Maximilian provided no answer and stopped just short of the elevator. “Parker, darling, would you be so kind as to take Samantha to see our guest?”

“As you wish, sir,” Parker obliged, pressing the elevator call button.

“Samantha, I wish I could stay and chat, but I simply have other matters to attend to. As do these two.” Maximilian smirked, gesturing at Wilson and

Diana. “Ta-ta for now. . . .” he trailed off before turning and continuing to step down the hall.

Samantha watched as he and the other two disappeared from sight. Once they were gone, she glanced up at Parker, who stared headlong into the elevator doors, also refusing to make eye contact. At least with her, Samantha knew *why*. . . .

Once the doors eventually opened, the two stepped inside. But the very second they closed, Samantha immediately unfurled a single tendril and quickly slashed out the elevator’s camera.

Parker flinched at first, but once Samantha held out the skewered equipment on the end of her scythe, she seemed to ease up if only slightly.

“You can’t be okay with this,” Samantha mumbled then whipped her blade to the side, sending the electronic parts scattering about the floor.

“W-what?”

“I *refuse* to believe you’re okay with this,” Samantha reiterated.

Parker huffed and slowly turned away. “What do you care?” she whispered.

“Because I’ve never seen someone just go through the motions as much as I have with you,” Samantha explained. “You don’t believe this is right, you *know* this isn’t right.”

“And what if I do?”

“I *know* you don’t,” Samantha noted.

“I’m just doing what I’m told to do. I’m a good soldier,” Parker grumbled, frustratedly balling up her fists as though it scathed her to say so.

“Good soldiers don’t *just* follow orders,” Samantha exclaimed.

“Yes, they do,” Parker retorted. “That’s what we’re made for.”

“And if he gives you one that crosses the line, what then?” Samantha pressed, leaning in slightly to try and force their eyes to meet. But Parker wasn’t budging; she wouldn’t look up let alone in Samantha’s direction.

Samantha sighed and leaned back. She assumed Parker was just going to give her the silent treatment, but just before the elevator doors opened again, she could've sworn she heard her say, "I don't know . . ."

Walking through those halls again was difficult for Samantha, but at the very least, this time it was of her own volition. With each segment they stepped through, she couldn't help but hold a lingering gaze on each of the marked doors. There were so many others, so many Orphans she likely hadn't even met before. None of them knew what was happening on the outside. . . . But maybe they were better off that way.

She then walked right into Parker, not realizing the captain had stopped. Upon taking a step back, she noticed her fiddling with a terminal beside an unmarked door. "She's in here," Parker mumbled, finally inserting her keycard and stepping off to the side.

Samantha kept her eyes on Parker as she stepped up to the doorway. Someone called her name from inside. "S-Sam?"

Samantha sharply turned, and her eyes softened with solace upon spotting Willow sitting on a small bed. "Willow," she gasped in relief before rushing in and dropping to her knees right before her. She rested the heavy bolt cuffs in her lap and felt unable to stop a smile from creeping over her face. Being in this hellish bunker meant nothing to her; Willow was safe, and that's all that mattered. "I'm so glad you're okay," she softly spoke.

Willow flinched as the door clamped shut. She should've been happy to see Samantha, but the truth was quite the opposite. She looked upset, severely so. "Why did you come?" she whimpered, trembling like a leaf.

Samantha blinked and leaned up in confusion. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I-it's a trap, Sam, you have to know that," Willow sniveled.

"I do," Samantha whispered, raising her arms. She then reached for and firmly grabbed hold of Willow's hands. It didn't take long for her smile to fade

as she continued to watch the girl she loved snuffle and tremble in fear. “I’m sorry you got roped into all this . . .”

“Y-you knew? And you still came?” Willow squeaked out, shakily huffing as she drew short, minuscule breaths. “D-don’t apologize to me, you’re not safe here!”

“I know, but neither are you, and I couldn’t just leave you here,” Samantha noted.

“B-but why! I’m just a burden to you! Because of me, they’ll start hurting you again, and lock you away, and—”

Samantha suddenly released Willow’s hand and pressed her finger against the frightened teenager’s lips, quietly shushing her. Her smile returned and grew even wider. “You could turn the entire world against me, and I wouldn’t care,” she whispered, lowering her hands back down to Willow’s lap. “You’ll *never* walk alone as long as I’m around.”

Willow’s eyes shimmered and moistened with fresh tears. She couldn’t help but smile back, though no smile could mask her terror. She sniveled and brushed her cheek in a poor attempt to wipe the tears away, but all she did was smear them. “Sam . . . I’m so scared . . .”

“We’ll get out of this . . . I promise,” Samantha assured her. She then lifted her arms up again, but this time hoisted the cuffs all the way over Willow’s head. She slid them down her back, then pulled her in close, hugging her as tight as she could without hurting her. Despite the awkward position, Willow immediately burrowed her face right into Samantha’s shoulder. “If I know Bonnie and Barry, they’re already on their way.”



“Oh, I’m sure they aren’t far behind.” Maximilian chuckled to himself. He sat before dozens of monitors that appeared to watch every last corner of the facility. Despite the certainty of the coming storm, he seemed entirely too calm. After all, he was merely sitting in a chair, leaning back and eating an apple.

However, Diana cared little about what he was doing. She stood alone near the back of the surveillance room, watching the monitors from afar with a small, blissful smile—at least when the other two weren’t looking her way. Slivers of Samantha’s happiness seemed to rub off on her; it felt like sunshine soaking into her skin but even better. It reminded her of the joy she’d felt around her husband, and while the sensation was amazing, it did little to shake her shame.

“Sir, if I may inquire, what is the plan?” Wilson asked, staring at his hands as he twiddled his thumbs.

“I’ve got something cooking, Wilson. I merely need to observe these two a tad longer before I make my decision,” Maximilian replied.

“A decision? On what, sir?” Wilson cocked an eyebrow.

“Something . . . *dramatic*.” Maximilian chuckled, taking another bite from his apple. “I assure you, boy, it’ll be a spectacle.” He cleared his throat and suddenly stood from his chair. He then set down the apple and turned to face Diana. “Oh, Diana dear, I figured you might like to know that the solution I was procuring is complete,” he stated before pulling a sleek rectangular object from within his lab coat. “Take this, if you would.”

Diana hesitantly stepped over. She snatched the object from his hand and raised it up to her eyes. Looking it over, she grew puzzled, as it looked like a standard-issue magazine. “A . . . mag?” she muttered.

“Indeed, loaded with seven nine-millimeter rounds.” Maximilian snickered, as though he’d played some sort of idiotic practical joke. “Though I assure you, they were quite expensive to manufacture. The jacket is forged

from the near *exact* alloy of which Samantha's skeleton is constructed," he explained, then shrugged.

Diana squinted at one of the silvery shots peeking through the top of the mag. She raised her head and tightened her grip on it. "I don't understand—"

"While her skeleton is effectively bulletproof, it won't prove as resilient to *these*." Maximilian's mustache curled into a grin.

"Surely you don't expect it to kill her just because it can penetrate, do you?"

"That's where the payload comes in," Maximilian declared. "The core will stunt her regenerative properties *and* shut down her body. We manufactured it with a little gift left over from her original form, something lost when we put her back together," he explained.

Diana gulped and stared uneasily at the magazine, realizing she had just been given the tools to kill her own daughter. She gazed back up at the monitors, her blue eyes glittering as they grew moist from the mere thought of causing any more pain to her baby girl.

"You needn't complicate things. End the suffering, for you and her both," Maximilian murmured, placing a hand on Diana's shoulder. "Be the angel your daughter needs . . . and set her free," he lamented, though even while saying something so cold, the corners of his lips slightly curled as if resisting a grin.

"Sir . . ." Wilson scratched the back of his head, "if Number Seventeen and Eighteen *do* arrive as Nineteen said, that could prove problematic."

"Already taken into account, Wilson," Maximilian replied, glancing back over his shoulder.

"They're unlikely to relent as easily as Samantha has. If anything, combined, they're . . . *significantly* more dangerous," Wilson nervously remarked, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“Calm yourself, lad,” Maximilian stated, removing his hand from Diana’s arm. “I’ll simply enact my plan before they’re able to reach her.” He confidently hummed.

“Again, sir . . . *what plan?*” Wilson inquired, sounding almost irritated.

Maximilian provided no answer and stepped back toward his desk, reaching for his apple.



“How many of ’em do you think there are?” Barry questioned while lighting a cigarette with a snap of her fingers. She glanced down at her blonde companion, who had been kneeling for quite some time now, observing the movements of the guards stationed in the yard. Barry would have much preferred they just rush right in, but Bonnie always had to *strategize*. If she didn’t like her, she likely wouldn’t put up with it.

“At least forty, at most sixty,” Bonnie murmured in response.

“How do you figure?” Barry asked with smoke exiting her lips.

“That’s roughly the number of unique voices I’ve heard making the rounds outside my cell, give or take,” Bonnie explained.

“Ah . . .” Barry hummed. What an odd thing to know. Then again, all of Bonnie’s egghead knowledge was odd.

“Barry,” Bonnie hummed, leaning up a bit, “are you sure you’re up for this?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Barry retorted confidently. “If anything, I’m worried about *you*.”

“Me?” Bonnie blinked. “Why me?”

“Sam and I have both done this sorta thing before. It’s not a big deal for me. . . . Doesn’t make it right, but you’re the only one of us who hasn’t—” Barry

gulped and reached up, nervously scratching the back of her head, “*killed* anybody.”

“It doesn’t make a difference anymore,” Bonnie mumbled, placing her hands on her knees and pushing herself up to her feet.

“It does, Bon.” Barry sighed. “You can’t take it back. So I’m going to ask again . . .” She reached out and firmly grabbed Bonnie by the shoulder. “Are you *sure*?”

Bonnie glanced back, staring almost blankly at her. She then softly nodded. “If we had any other choice besides throwing away everything I believe in, I’d already have thought of it.” Her brows then furrowed. “There’s no more pulling our punches.”

Barry huffed and released the blonde. She proceeded to close her eyes and suck in a long, dragged-out hit. “In that case,” she exhaled, venting the smoke out her nostrils like a slumbering dragon. Her eyes peeled back open slowly, no longer shining blue but burning a deep red just like Bonnie’s. “Anyone who gets in our way goes in the ground.”

She could already feel it, the tension in the air immediately spiking as they both understood their coming actions were inevitable. While she hungered to step down there and bash skulls in, she managed to restrain herself. This being far from the first time she’d entered such an aggressive state, her self-control was much better than Samantha’s. But she worried for Bonnie. Her intellect would surely help, but not being used to such bloodlust could have unforeseen consequences.

“Then let’s not waste any more time,” Bonnie sneered, tossing up the back of her poncho and grabbing hold of the knife she’d been gifted. Then with a single step, she proved Barry’s concerns right, vanishing with but a kick of dust left in her absence.

Barry choked slightly on smoke, not even seeing where the blonde had gone. “Running in like an idiot is my thing, you know!” she cried as her eyes

darted around, peering along the hillside, down by the fence, and into the yard. It didn't take long to spot the blonde standing just barely inside the lot. She wasn't quite sure why Bonnie was just standing there until she noticed the body at her friend's feet.

Already? She immediately spat the cigarette from her lips and bounded down the hillside. She jumped and grabbed the top of the fence with one hand then pulled herself up over it.

"Bon!" she called out just before her boots slammed against the asphalt. "What're you doing?" she nagged, rising to her feet from her landing. "You usually don't—"

Barry's tongue was practically grabbed as she glanced down at the body. The pacifist had drawn first blood.

The body had quite literally been exsanguinated. His throat was flayed open, his eyes were wide, and he lay in an expanding pool of his own blood. It didn't even appear that he'd been aware of his own demise, any hint of fear missing from his face. He must've been dead before he hit the ground.

"Bon," Barry repeated, uncomfortably looking up from the gore.

The blonde was clinging to the knife. Her knuckles had whitened, and her face had turned pale. She was trembling and staring off into nothing, perhaps trying to disassociate from the atrocity she'd just committed. But it would be hard to ignore with the constant reminder of blood gently dripping from the blade she'd just used.

Barry gulped, knowing how much Bonnie cared about her own vows of peace. Talking the talk about abandoning them was one thing, but actually doing it . . .

"Bonnie," Barry called, grabbing at her arm, to which Bonnie seemed to not even notice. But when Barry squeezed, it seemed to be enough to capture her attention, though she still didn't seem all the way there, giving no response and only slowly turning her head.

“Are you alright?” Barry asked.

Bonnie gulped and shakily exhaled. “It was so fast,” she whispered, nearly choking on her own words in the presence of her handiwork. She was clearly tempted to drop the knife, back away, and stop right there.

“Hey,” Barry huffed, waving her other hand in front of Bonnie’s face in an attempt to recapture her attention. Noticing how little that worked, she stepped between her and the body, hoping that would separate her from the moment. “It’s alright. Breathe, take a minute—”

“We don’t have a minute,” Bonnie wheezed as she tried to jerk from Barry’s grasp.

Barry frustratedly tightened her fingers and she yanked Bonnie back over. “I said take a minute!” she ordered. “You’re freaking out!”

“Logan, what the hell is all that noise!” a woman cried out from across the yard.

Barry grunted, immediately releasing Bonnie. “Shit.”

“How many goddamn times do I have to tell you,” the woman shouted as she began to stomp around the parked Humvees. “Stop wandering o—”

She let loose a panicked gasp upon spotting the pair standing over her squadmate.

Barry’s eyebrows cautiously furrowed. She recognized the woman as Captain Carter, but that information was useless at that point. Her face didn’t matter, and her name certainly didn’t either, especially since Carter was quite obviously itching to reach for her gun.

“*Don’t*,” Barry snarled.

Carter took a half step back, her fingers lightly twitching as Barry balled up her fists. Then, instead of reaching for her gun, she quickly brought her hand to her lips and shrilly whistled as loud as she could.

Bonnie immediately vanished from Barry’s side.

“Dammit!” Barry barked.

In what seemed like a single step to Barry, before Carter could even remove her fingers from her lips, she'd closed the distance and slammed her fist upside the captain's head. Carter's head careened right through the passenger window of the vehicle she was standing beside. She was either dead or just unconscious. Whichever it was concerned Barry very little, as now Carter's squad was surely in tow.

"Boss!" a man shouted as he began to round the vehicle. Barry grunted and preemptively raised her fists as he racked the bolt on his rifle, knowing she wouldn't be able to react fast enough and was likely going to take some shots. But then, like a bolt of golden lightning, Bonnie flashed into existence just before them both. She appeared to be following through with a swing that Barry hadn't seen her start.

The man's hands then suddenly fell to the ground with his weapon; Bonnie had severed them from his wrists. But before he could even scream, her blade had already been crammed into his neck to silence him.

Bonnie's movements were too quick for Barry to follow . . . and were slightly scaring her. The power of her strikes in frozen time amplified by the clear resentment and anger she must've been feeling resulted in the man's neck and torso being ripped to bloody shreds in an instant. After her last thrust, she jerked the blade out, shoved him back against the ground, and vanished before the approaching squad could fire upon her.

"Flip the car," Bonnie ordered, now behind Barry.

Barry glanced over her shoulder and cocked a brow. "Why?" she asked, grabbing Carter by the back of her vest and pulling her out of the busted window.

"Lock down the facility!" a voice bellowed from across the yard just before gunfire started to hail down against the opposing side of the vehicle they were actively hidden behind.

"That's why," Bonnie sneered as the facility's alarms blared.

“Hmph,” Barry huffed, tossing Carter into the pool of blood beside the flayed corpse. “*Lock down,*” she repeated mockingly while lacing and cracking her fingers.

She dragged her boot back against the concrete then swiftly slammed her palms against the underside of the vehicle. With a single upward yank, she threw the Humvee like it’d been hit by a landmine.

Two of the three managed to avoid the rapidly approaching tumbling steel, but the third wasn’t so lucky, getting crushed along its path. It only stopped once it plowed through the front entrance of the building, practically erasing the recently replaced glass doors from existence as they were blasted into dust.

The man who’d dove off to the left panicked as Bonnie appeared over him. He palmed the grip of his rifle and dragged it up off the pavement, but she kicked it from his hands before he could even point it at her. She then jerked her arm up and swung the knife down, going in for the kill.

He instinctively raised his hand to block the strike, only for it to tear through his palm and pin his hand to his shoulder. He cried as Bonnie ripped it out, which further exacerbated the pain of his double stab wound. But she gave him no time to process, cramming it right into his stomach next. She yanked it out and began to repeatedly thrust, slashing his core to shreds. Each time, the man grew weaker, putting up less of a fight, but it didn’t seem to stop her.

Barry, on the other hand, rushed off to deal with the second agent, who was also scrambling to get off the ground. But Barry put her down much quicker, dealing a single throat-crunching sucker punch to her neck. With a loud snap, the agent crumpled and slumped back against the concrete with no resistance.

Hearing Bonnie's grunts, Barry turned around, assuming she was struggling. But what she saw was the blonde ripping out her blade for the final time.

Bonnie stumbled back from the man she'd butchered, covered head to toe in inconsistent splatters of blood that stained her skin and dripped down her poncho. Her breaths were rapid and heavy, and she seemed to be struggling to maintain control of what she was doing, or perhaps who she was.

"Bonnie?" Barry softly called out. She couldn't tell if Bonnie's reaction to death was getting better . . . or worse.

Bonnie jumped and nearly dropped the knife. "I . . ." She sharply exhaled. "I'm sorry . . ." She quickly hid the knife away and looked to the ground. "I-I went overboard."

"Hey," Barry hummed, grabbing her blood-spattered arms. "We *can* take a minute, Bon," she said, trying for a second time to get Bonnie to stop and process what she was doing.

Bonnie appeared to consider it for a moment. Having killed thrice now, she was trembling like a leaf and looked like she wanted to just give up and run away. But when she looked back up and over Barry's shoulder, she slowed her breathing and shook her head.

"Alright . . ." Barry sighed, letting her go. "Let's get this over with."

Barry watched as Bonnie stepped over the body she'd gored, leaving her innocence behind as she ascended the steps. Broken glass crackled under their feet as they entered the lobby. The only other person in the space was a woman cowering behind the reception desk. As they passed her, Barry gave nothing but a snide smirk, then proceeded straight for the elevators.

No longer shaking, Bonnie raised her hand from beneath her poncho and almost daintily pressed the call button.

"Where do you think they're holding them?" Barry inquired, crossing her arms and leaning up against the doorframe.

“I’d guess . . .” Bonnie scratched her cheek like usual as she pondered. “Sublevel 6. Where we were all held before. We *should* sweep them all just to be sure, but I don’t know how much time we have to futz around.”

“Right, right,” Barry huffed, “can’t be too careful now . . .”

The elevator quietly hummed as it reached them. The doors slowly opened, revealing a full squad of shocked faces crammed inside. They must have expected to find the two, but not so suddenly, and not covered in blood.

That moment of hesitation would cost them their lives.



“Where do you think they are?” Willow murmured, gently rubbing Samantha’s hands with her thumbs.

“I . . . don’t know.” Samantha winced. “When we were all separated, they were looking after Roxanne. But knowing Barry . . .” She lightly snickered. “She wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to crack a few heads.”

“Roxanne!” Willow gasped, tightening her grip. “Is she okay!? D-did she . . .”

“I also don’t know . . .” Samantha regretfully mumbled.

“Roxy,” Willow softly mewled. “So . . . what do we do?” She sniffled. “Do we try to get away? Do we wait?”

“Let’s,” Samantha sighed, “talk about something else.”

“What else is there to talk about?”

“Well,” Samantha hummed and stood up. She moved and sat on the bed. “Music, right? I remember all those posters in your room. What’s your favorite kind?” she asked, despite knowing next to nothing about it. It’d been so long that she didn’t even fully know what a *genre* was.

Willow's fear-riddled face slightly brightened as she leaned up against Samantha's side. "Y-you don't have to try and distract me . . ."

"I don't want you to be upset, or scared, so c'mon," Samantha cooed. "What's your favorite?"

"You'll think it's stupid."

Samantha scoffed. "I doubt it."

"Well . . ." Willow tilted her head up and smiled. "I like bands that people don't really talk about, they call them *underground* and . . . I dunno, it just makes me feel like I'm a part of something special."

"You *are* something special," Samantha retorted.

"Tch," Willow softly sighed. "There's nothing special about a farm girl that goes to public school."

"And how many people in that school would have done what you did for me?" Samantha pressed. "Would *any* of them have helped me?"

"I . . . can't say that they would—"

"Exactly," Samantha declared, turning to look at her. "Never in my life have I met someone as kind as you . . ."

Her compliments seemed to do the trick, as the smile she loved so much finally began to return to Willow's face. It almost made her forget they were locked up below ground.

"Sam," Willow sniffled, before softly giggling. "I'm so proud of you."

"Huh?" Samantha hummed and leaned back. "Of . . . me? Why?" she inquired, confused by the praise.

"I won't lie, I've never been this scared in my entire life," Willow mumbled, glancing down at her lap and twiddling her thumbs. "But what you said to me last night, and what you're saying to me now . . . it feels like you've known me since I was a kid." She shyly glanced back up. "You've changed *so much* over the last few days. You're not a scared little girl. You're more of a woman than

you think. I came into this wanting to protect you, but . . . you're protecting me."

Samantha glowed a bit from the praise and gently placed a hand on Willow's knee. "I just want to get you out of this," she softly whispered. "And I will, I promise."

A loud beep emanating from the door captured Samantha's full attention, and upon leering over her shoulder, she spotted Parker standing in the doorway. "C'mon, he wants you guys moved."

"Why?" Samantha grumbled, glaring at the captain.

"I don't need to tell you *why*." Parker squinted. "Get up, and let's go."

Once they both stepped out into the hall, it became rather obvious to Samantha that something was amiss. Every member of Golf had a stern look on their face, and she knew it wasn't *just* because she'd injured several of them at the farm. She glanced up at the ceiling and slightly smirked. *They must already be here.*

Parker guided them down the hall past dozens of armed men and women hunched behind whatever they could find. All of their weapons were trained on the elevator, and not one of them looked anything short of terrified.

They must really be putting in some work . . . Samantha pondered, noticing that not only Delta and Omega were present, but numerous other squads she hadn't even seen before. It seemed like every agent they had was in this hallway, save the ones on the upper floors. . . . If there were any *left* on the upper floors.

Samantha leaned down just enough to hover her lips over Willow's ear. "If they're *this* paranoid, those two must be doing some serious damage," she whispered.

Willow nodded and glanced back at the hall filled with armed soldiers. "I hope they hurry," she shuddered.



The walls had been painted with large, arcing blots of blood that reached up to the ceiling. Bonnie and Barry were side by side, facing the door and standing over the six unrecognizable bodies that, just moments ago, had been a full squad. Neither of them seemed bothered, and Barry certainly wasn't. She was more focused on the . . . unnecessarily upbeat elevator music, which was making her more uncomfortable than anything.

Then the elevator suddenly stopped, bouncing on its cable like something had snagged it.

Startled, Barry pressed her back against the wall, worried the entire thing was going to fall. But when she realized they just weren't going to move any further, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm guessing they're trying to slow us down," Bonnie theorized, glancing up at the ceiling.

"A lot of good that's gonna do," Barry remarked as she rubbed her hands together. "Give me a moment." She then twisted her hands and crammed them between the door panels. She curled her fingers into the metal, crushing it like cheap, malleable scrap. The door stubbornly fought against her pull, but it was so pitiful she hardly even noticed.

As both panels were shoved away, almost all that revealed itself to her was concrete. But up toward the top of the frame was about two feet of empty space, just enough for them to crawl through.

"Fun." Barry snickered, glancing at Bonnie with a smirk. She knelt, linked her hands together, and pumped her eyebrows, beckoning Bonnie to step forward. "After you," she teased.

Bonnie accepted the boost and stepped into Barry's hands. Upon being hoisted up and crawling through the opening, all she found were dark and empty halls.

"So," Barry grunted as she pulled herself up to peek at the floor. "Where are we at?"

"The lab deck," Bonnie replied, gesturing to the doublewide doors and abandoned gurneys. "Freshly deserted, it looks like . . ."

"Well," Barry curiously hummed. "Where is everybody?" she asked, crawling out beside the blonde.

"Probably hiding in these rooms, not that it matters." Bonnie huffed, beginning to step down the hall. "Sam is probably still a few floors down."

"Why wouldn't she be up here?" Barry nagged, quickly pushing herself to her feet to follow along.

"Because it takes a lot of firepower to keep a literal superhuman contained, not unarmed staff members hiding in offices," Bonnie explained.

"Ah . . ." Barry exhaled, rubbing her chin. "So, since the elevator is out of the question," she began, coming to a stop beside a door with a glowing exit sign mounted just above it. "Fire escape?" she asked, pointing with her thumb.

"What other option do we have?"

"I could punch a hole in the floor," Barry half-sarcastically suggested.

"As entertaining as that would be," Bonnie hummed while placing her hand against the door handle, "let's just take the stairs."

Her face then abruptly scrunched as she opened the door. The sound of squeaky boots scraping against the steps were echoing from down the stairwell. "You hear that?" she queried, cautiously stepping up to the railing.

"Yeah," Barry replied and quietly pushed the door closed behind them. "Got a plan?"

Bonnie leaned forward and peered down the stairwell. "I believe so," she whispered before suddenly hopping up onto the bar.

“Eh?” Barry curiously blinked. “What are you—”

Bonnie carefully rose, balancing on the ledge. “Just meet me down there,” she said, glancing over her shoulder, before jumping from the railing.

“Ah— Wha—” Barry choked then quickly ran up to the ledge. “Bonnie!?” she cried out, but by the time she’d looked down the stairwell, the blonde was already gone. “Goddamn party tricks!” she hissed before turning and rushing down the stairs. Almost immediately, she heard the sounds of a struggle, and after descending about two flights, she saw Bonnie standing right in the middle of a panicking and disoriented squad.

Not caring how many Bonnie had already taken down, Barry charged for the closest one, who was on the landing just in front of her, and shoved him right into the wall.

His rifle was thrown from his hands, and he hastily reached for his sidearm, but before he could grab it, Barry delivered a bone-crushing blow to his chest. His lungs were skewered by his cracked ribs, forcing out a gurgled gasp as they began to fill with fluid. As he slumped back against the wall, clinging to his bludgeoned chest, Barry wasted no time knocking back the second-nearest man with a quick punch to the face.

Thrown back from the strike, he slipped and tumbled down the stairs right past Bonnie and the man she was actively gouging open.

Barry’s amused grin was soon wiped from her face as the man she’d apparently only grievously injured managed to blast her in the back of the head. She fell forward against the railing and tightly grabbed hold of it to steady herself.

He frightenedly sputtered as Barry leered back over her shoulder; all he’d done was seriously piss her off. He desperately took aim for a second shot, but she wouldn’t let him get the chance. In a knee-jerk reaction out of spite and momentary rage, Barry pivoted and smashed his head into the wall. The concrete behind him fissured from the strike as she crushed his skull, splattering a viscous spread of gray matter, bone, and blood across its surface.

All that remained was his body, which slowly slid down the wall, limp and lifeless, leaving behind a trail of bloody grime.

Bonnie had already presumably slashed the throat of one man, who was on the lower landing choking on his own blood. His fall must have knocked the other two down, and the third Barry sent tumbling their way definitely didn't help things. They'd finally begun to scramble to their feet, but Bonnie was prepared. While her knife was still firmly planted in the back of the man she'd been stabbing, her other hand had drawn the sidearm she'd kept hidden. With three rapid shots in quick succession, they all fell back just as soon as they'd stood. She didn't even give them the chance to fight or beg for their lives before executing them.

"Slowing us down isn't working very well," she scoffed as the smoke licked itself clean from the barrel. She then ripped her blade from the man's backside and stepped to the left, allowing his lifeless corpse to tumble down the stairs.

"Maybe," Barry said, pulling her fist back from the wall. The broken wall stuffed with brains she'd left in her wake resembled a cast sloppily filled with watery jam and meat. She cringed slightly and averted her eyes while shaking the blood from her fist. "But we are making a mess."

"It doesn't matter to me," Bonnie coldly exclaimed, stepping down and over the men she'd just shot.

The sound of bubbly gurgling caught Barry's attention; it was the man whose throat Bonnie had slashed. Before Barry could even say anything, Bonnie had already taken aim and pulled the trigger, putting him down like a dog.

Barry winced in ironic discomfort, but pushed it aside, focusing back on their mission. "I don't envy the people that have to clean this up," she remarked, sliding down the railing over the bodies and meeting Bonnie on the landing.

Bonnie tucked her gun back in her waistband and then continued down the next flight. “If they keep getting in our way, there won’t *be* anyone left to clean it up.”



Samantha had continued eyeing the ceiling, listening to the muffled roar of gunshots carried by the vents. “It doesn’t have to end this way, Parker,” she softly said.

Parker uneasily gulped and kept her eyes glued to the ceiling. Every minute those shots were growing closer. “Stay quiet . . .” she scowled.

Roman turned to the side and grabbed hold of the mic on his chest. “Omicron, what’s your status?” he asked into it.

Silence.

Samantha smiled at Willow and gave her a gentle nod that she hoped would speak for itself. Everything was going to be alright.

“Iota?” Roman meekly questioned, still no answer. “Kappa, Zeta!? Does anyone above the containment deck read!?”

A second short moment of silence scraped by before the crunch of another mic came through.

“I read, *Mitchel.*”

Samantha softly gasped and glanced over, recognizing the voice immediately. A gentle, confident smile came over her lips. . . . It was Bonnie.

“Let them both go,” she snarled through the receiver.

Parker growled and grabbed onto her mic. “We’ve got dozens of armed guards down here, blondie!” she shrieked, her voice nearly cracking out of what Samantha assumed was fear. “You freaks aren’t getting through!”

“What are you going to do differently from the dead men we left on the stairs?” Bonnie coldly questioned.

Samantha’s face dropped as she processed her friend’s words. Dead men? Bonnie couldn’t have killed anyone . . . right?

Parker gulped with no response to give.

“That’s what I thought,” Bonnie hissed. “See you in five minutes.”

The mic was then cut.

“S-she’s bluffing!” Roman stammered. “She must be!”

“Why would that be a bluff?” Parker huffed.

“S-she’s a pacifist! She’d never hurt anybody, right? That’s what Emma always said, right?”

“If she’s a pacifist, why aren’t the other squads responding!?” Parker shouted, grabbing him by the vest.

Roman opened his mouth as if prepared to continue combating his captain but seemed to freeze up after appearing to notice something that Samantha had also taken note of: the facility had grown eerily silent.

Parker shakily exhaled and released him. She then ran over to the blast door frame that separated them from the adjoining hall. She quickly activated the terminal, causing the door to seal shut. Samantha knew even that wouldn’t help them. If Barry reached it, she could blow the thing apart no problem.

“W-what do we do?” Roman stammered, looking with the rest of the squad to their captain for guidance.

Parker uncomfortably smacked her lips and lowered her gaze. She gulped and slowly reached for her chest, then held down the trigger on her mic. “Sir.” She heavily exhaled. “They’ll be down here any minute. There’s no way we can hold them off. What’re we supposed to do?”

“Hold your position, all we can do is wait—” Diana ordered before her feed was interrupted by Maximilian’s.

“Oh dear captain, you’ll be quite alright. But you may want to separate the two.”

Parker fired off a short exhale through her nose and, with little hesitation, treated the suggestion as an immediate order. “Do it.”

“What?” Samantha grunted before being forcibly yanked away from Willow by one of the other men. “What are you doing!?” she cried, twisting in an attempt to jerk from their sudden grasp. But before she could even unfurl her tendrils, she was shoved to the floor by two of the squad members. They immediately pinned her down with their boots, ensuring that she wasn’t going *anywhere*.

“N-no! Sam! Don’t hurt her!” Willow cried out before she, too, was grabbed. She wasn’t as aggressively detained though, only being held a decent distance away from Samantha. “P-please d-on’t,” she gagged.

“Willow!” Samantha grunted. Hearing her choke wasn’t a good sign. “Breathe! Relax!” she yelled out, continuing to struggle just to merely look at her companion.

Willow seemingly tried her best to heed Samantha’s pleas, attempting to steady her breath and calm herself. But it became obvious that her lungs were tightening up and that she was starting to wobble. Beginning to clearly panic, using her free hand, she began to feel over her pockets but . . . she wasn’t finding her inhaler.

“W-what the— W-Willow? Where’s your inhaler!?” Samantha frantically hollered.

“C-ant . . . f-f-find!” Willow wheezed.

“Parker!” Samantha quickly shouted, capturing the confused captain’s immediate attention. “Did you confiscate anything from her!?”

“I— Yes. I have everything on m—”

“Give her the goddamn inhaler!” Samantha shrieked, cutting Parker off. She shoved back against the legs holding her down, doing little but causing herself further pain. “Please!”

Parker fished in her belt pouches before grabbing hold of the small plastic orange tool. She appeared to hesitate briefly but physically shook it off. “Let her go,” she ordered, to which Roman immediately obliged.

“Come here, sweetheart,” Parker beckoned in almost a singsong voice, waving Willow over while closing the distance between them.

Willow hastily staggered forward and grabbed hold of Parker’s wrist, pulling the inhaler to her mouth. Parker pushed down on the trigger, and Willow sucked in the prescription, clearing her pipes, as per usual.

“Are you alright?” Parker asked, gently placing the inhaler in her hands.

“U-uh huh . . .” Willow softly sniffled, avoiding eye contact with the captain.

Samantha sighed and eased up, relieved to see Willow okay, but confused as to why Parker would help *now*.



Wilson curiously eyed the monitor. While chaotic, the situation was resolved promptly by Parker, as he would come to expect from someone Diana thought worthy of promotion. But what unnerved him about it was how Maximilian watched the monitor. He was watching fervently, giving the situation his full and undivided attention. As he scratched his mustache, Wilson could even see his lips curl into his usual grin. Though this time, something greatly upset him about it. Whatever Maximilian had been waiting for had reared its head. . . .

The administrator carefully lifted the mic from the desk, bringing it to his lips as he continued to stare at Parker on the monitor. “Captain, Bonnie and Barricade are growing too close for comfort. They’ll likely be on top of you any minute,” he expressed. “I believe it’s time to . . . *cut* one of our loose ends.”

Wilson’s face scrunched, and he quickly glanced back at Diana, who was still holding and staring at the magazine she’d been given. However, she too glanced up, and returned his gaze with equal skepticism. Together, they then turned their attention to Maximilian. Just what was he talking about? He’d just moments ago given Diana the means of which to kill Samantha, yet he was about to ask Parker?

“Pardon . . . sir?” Parker questioned, glancing up toward the hallway cam on one of the many displays.

“I want you to kill her, Parker. Now,” Maximilian ordered.

Parker glanced off toward the pinned reaper. “Samantha, sir?” she asked.

“No.”

Diana tensed up, almost dropping the magazine as she flinched.

“Kill the farm girl.”



Parker stood rigid, staring blankly into the wall with her finger holding down the mic trigger. She drew a quivering breath as the words of her commander began to repeat within her mind, echoing nonstop as she recalled *exactly* what Diana had told her to do.

Just keep your head down and follow orders.

She turned to face her team and, noticing they reciprocated her shock, her face grew sickeningly pale. Even they had no idea he’d ask this.

She looked over to Samantha, who also appeared shocked, but was silently staring her down.

“Follow . . . orders . . .” Parker softly mumbled under her own breath as she shifted her attention toward Willow. She wasn’t a threat in the slightest. She was the daughter of a farmer and the sister of a stripper. In their current predicament, she meant nothing. Why would he . . . *How* could he ask her to do something like that?

Willow stumbled back a few steps as their eyes met. She would have bumped into Roman, but he and the rest of the squad, aside from those holding down Samantha, had backed away. She took short, worried breaths as she stared up at Parker.

“Y-you,” she stammered, tightly clutching her inhaler to her chest. “Y-you wouldn’t . . . d-do that, right?”

Parker gulped, knowing she couldn’t possibly. . . . She’d just helped the girl; she’d just given her the inhaler. How could she possibly turn around and do such a thing?

“Please . . .”

Parker glanced up, briefly looking over at Samantha.

“Don’t,” Samantha begged with a whisper.

Parker winced and peered down to her hip . . . at her holster. She *was* given an order. She couldn’t disobey it. She knew the consequences.

“W-what are you doing?” Willow squeaked as Parker reluctantly placed her hand on the grip of her sidearm.

“Parker, stop!” Samantha shouted, pushing against the weight of the two fully grown men on her back.

Parker quickly found herself glancing at Samantha again.

“Please . . .” Samantha desperately exhaled against the pressure. “Don’t do this.”

Parker jumped suddenly as Diana screamed through her receiver, “Don’t you dare draw that firearm, Captain!”

“I’ve given you a direct order, Parker—” Maximilian scowled.

“I don’t give a fuck if it was the president, *do not* draw!”

Parker held her breath with uncertainty and slowly pulled her gun.

“Parker!” Diana bellowed.

Willow’s eyes continually darted between the weapon and the woman’s face until it was pointed at her. She took another frantic step back and slipped, falling to her rear. “P-please don’t hurt me!” she begged with frightened tears beginning to well in her eyes.

“Stop!” Samantha screamed.

“Annette, put it down!” Diana’s voice shrieked.

Parker began to quiver, hardly able to keep her gun steady. She had started to mentally justify what she was about to do. It was them or her, right?

Sweat began to pour down her face.

It was them or her.

“Sam!” Willow cried, turning to the reaper and reaching out her hand. “Don’t let her hurt me! Please!”

Parker’s finger twitched and her eyes began to water. “I’m . . .” She closed her eyes and turned her head away, “I’m sorry . . .”

She then reluctantly pulled the trigger.



Diana’s face dropped and her eyes widened as she listened to the anguished cries of her daughter. She staggered back toward the door. She was stunned, in absolute disbelief. She couldn’t believe Parker had just done something so heinous. That shock quickly turned to anger, and even quicker that anger

boiled into rage. She'd watched it happen, watched something near and dear to her daughter just get taken away in a thoughtless act. . . .

No more watching.

She rammed her shoulder against the door, throwing it open as she burst into a sprint down the endless halls. She grabbed hold of her mic and ordered, if not screamed, for Golf to stand down. But it was far too late.

Wilson could barely hold onto his clipboard as he listened to Samantha's anguished cries bellow through the speakers. He was trembling, whiter than a sheet, and more sickened than a leper. He'd witnessed it, exactly what he feared: the true colors of a suffering hungry devil.

"S-sir . . ." His voice cracked as he sank into his chair. The clipboard slipped from his hands and clattered against the floor. His hands fell to his sides as he slowly turned away from the feed to look at a man he could no longer consider human. "How . . . could you?"

Maximilian merely set the microphone down and plucked his apple from the desk. He sank into the office chair, breathing pleasantly along with the groan of its leather. His wrinkly face almost twisted, as if wishing to grin further than his lips would allow.

He appeared incredibly satisfied, as though he couldn't have possibly wished for better circumstances. All the dominos had been precisely positioned, and after flicking one, the rest had begun to follow. The dread rotting the air and sorrowful screams scratching at their ears didn't seem to bother him even slightly. He took another casual bite from his apple, chewing it slower and appearing to enjoy it far more than before, as though the innocent blood on his hands had made it more supple and sweet.

Chapter Sixteen

Vile Malfeasance

It didn't feel real. She didn't want to believe her eyes. Samantha's whole world had come to an abrupt standstill as the ejected shell clicked against the concrete. As she watched Willow fall back, the anguish that suddenly shot through her veins was unlike anything she'd ever felt in her life.

Once Willow collided with the floor, Samantha roughly threw her weight around, twisting her core just enough to slip the boots from her back and free her pinned tendrils. They unfurled almost instantly, swatting the men away from her as she pushed herself to her feet. She then ran across the hall, partially tripping over herself with every other step she took.

"Willow!" she shrieked, collapsing to her knees beside the farm girl. She lifted her hands and was quaking so ferociously that the metal of the cuffs had begun to rattle. She quickly filled her palms with handfuls of Willow's flannel, hoping it would calm her down, or somehow make things better, but the sight of blood and the horrid sounds of Willow gasping broke her immediately.

"W-il . . . low . . ." Samantha choked as Willow's shirt quickly stained red, soaking in an endless flow of blood. Even staring at it, and feeling the flannel she clung to dampen, she still couldn't believe Willow had been shot. "W-w-hat did you d-do!?" she sobbed, painfully leering at Parker through the teary dew building up on her lashes.

Parker's gun slammed into the floor. The captain took several stumbling steps back as she stared at Samantha with what could only be interpreted as regret and disgust. She softly sputtered, then covered her mouth with her

hands as her eyes widened in horror. But even if she was sorry, it wouldn't undo what she'd done.

In panic and desperation, Samantha could only think to plant her hands on Willow's chest in an attempt to staunch the flow. However, the abhorrent amount of blood oozing between her fingers suggested the worst, that it had struck Willow's heart. But she wasn't going to give up.

She couldn't give up. . . .

Willow gagged, spitting up as her own fluids began to choke her. She was trying to catch even the slimmest of breaths and was visibly struggling to even keep her eyes open. With each beat of her shredded heart, her grip grew weaker, and as the amount of blood dripping down her chin only thickened, her skin grew paler. Her little eyes quivered in terror as if quickly understanding that this was how she would die.

Samantha pressed down even harder, as hard as she could, but the flow only seemed to get worse. She could hardly see her hands.

"Help me!" she wailed desperately, frantically searching for even one helpful hand among the sea of shocked agents, though not one budged. No one was coming to her aid.

Defeated, her arms began to steadily wobble and she squeezed her eyes shut. "W-what do I do!?" Samantha sobbed, shrieking in frustrated misery as she curled her fingers into Willow's shirt. "I-I do-n't know wh-at to d-do!" she cried, her tears now dribbling down and mixing with the pooling blood.

Samantha's eyes then shot open as a sudden coldness crept over her hands. Willow's shaking, pale fingers, touched her, so weak they were unable to curl. She held her breath and quickly scooped up her hand, cupping both of hers around it.

"S . . . S-Sam," Willow choked, spitting up just to say a single word. She swallowed, forcing down just enough blood and sucking in just enough air to speak one last time.

“I . . . love you . . .”

Willow’s fingers grew still and frigid while her eyes slowly turned glassy. Her final breath slipped from her lips and the bleeding slowed.

“N-no . . .” Samantha whimpered as she helplessly watched Willow’s limp hand slide from her grasp. “Please,” she begged as her hands trembled inconsolably. With no options and no help, all she could do was stare down at Willow’s lifeless body and realize . . . she was gone.

The glow of her eyes faded, dimmed by the thickness of her ever-increasing mental fog. Her breaths began to quicken in succession, and while fast, were deeply dredging the very depths of her lungs with each inhale. Her sight narrowed on her palms and everything else was lost to the dark corners of her vision. She could hardly see the pale tint of her skin, if at all, just the quickly drying and dripping globs of blood staining it.

She raised her hands up out of view, now only seeing darkness in her pinhole vision. Her fingers tightly curled into her hair, hoping the grasp would anchor her, calm her, or help her think even slightly. But it didn’t.

She couldn’t help but scream, crying and wailing in agony between breaths. While sightless, the image of Willow’s dead eyes was burned into her mind, and it was the only thing the fog permitted her to see.

The longer she cried with no hand on her shoulder, the crueler the fog became.

There was no use lying to herself and saying it would be alright. She knew the truth, painful as it was. Willow wasn’t going to get back up . . . and the person responsible was mere feet away.

Parker did this. . . .

The only physical sensation she could feel was the source of the only sound she could recognize, the steady beat of *her* heart. With each *thump*, she felt every drop of blood surge through her veins, kissing the tips of her fingers and toes before rushing back into her chest.

She took her away.

The halogens of hers that she called eyes grew bloodshot as she hadn't cared to blink. They flickered and buzzed with each beat, syncing with the sharp breaths she continued to suck through her teeth.

It was all her fault.

She clamped her teeth together so tightly that any normal person's jaw would have fractured. Viscous globs of saliva pooled and dripped down her chin as she drooled, hungering for action and *justice*.

Parker needed to suffer.

Her fangs descended, sparking together over her teeth. Her vision steadily returned, and she found herself hunched over, with her palms submerged in the pool of blood, spit, and tears she'd been kneeling in. The glow of her eyes had stabilized, and she either didn't notice or didn't care that it wasn't just the blood that was red. . . . It was everything.

Parker needed to die.

Samantha raised her hands from the puddle and dragged a foot forward, stomping it in the pool. Her pupils quivered and shrank as the final teardrops parting her bloodstained cheeks dried. With a sudden twist and a pull, she ripped her arms away from one another. The cuffs, with enough strength to contain an elephant, were blown into fragments and metal shavings.

She turned her head to the side, leering over her shoulder with a churning, vengeance-hungry glare. Her tendrils stretched out and slithered through the air, eerily turning toward the nearest warm body. Her gullet vibrated as she grotesquely began to growl, craving justice . . . and *death*.

She rose to her feet and turned to face the group, who she no longer saw as human, but as sinful beasts. She sucked in one last breath, then tore her maw open as wide as she could. Her chest thunderously quaked as she leaned forward before releasing a guttural, apex roar that no bear or lion could hope

to reproduce. It shook the men to their bones and the facility to its core. It was a roar of pain, anger, loss . . . and dominance.

It was the roar of an Orphan Prime.



The duo ran down the flights as fast as they could without slipping, but upon reaching the landing for the containment deck, they both stopped dead in their tracks.

The hair on Barry's neck stood, forcing her to gulp as a dense, errant heatwave of dread suddenly washed over her entire body. She looked to Bonnie, who only reciprocated her vastly growing concern.

"Something's *incredibly* wrong," Bonnie muttered.

While they heard nothing, they certainly felt *something*. The vibrations of the facility had changed for a moment, and even if only slight, it was enough to worry them both.

"She needs us . . . *now*," Barry growled, shoving past Bonnie and running up to the door.

"Hey, hold on!" Bonnie cried out.

Barry ignored her and rammed her shoulder against the door, easily launching it off its hinges as she stumbled into the next hall. "Ah, shit—" She winced, almost immediately regretting her impulsive decision upon spotting at least two dozen rifles trained on her.

Bonnie gasped and immediately threw her hand out, "Barry!"

Barry plugged her ears and closed her eyes as a shrieking hail of gunfire beat down on them.

“Barry!” Bonnie called out again, however, she could hardly be heard through her plugged ears and the crackle of gunfire. “*Barry!*” she screamed for a third time.

“What!?” Barry shouted, pulling her fingers out of her ears and opening her eyes . . . only to notice that Bonnie must have pulled her back behind the doorframe in frozen time. “Oh, there’s a lot more down *here* than they sent up!”

“No shit!” Bonnie shouted, scooting a bit further from the doorway as the continuous excessive barrage of munitions poured through it.

“There must be at least twenty of these guys! What are we supposed to do!?” Barry cried out. “I can’t tank that many shots, Bon!”

“I’ll try to draw their attention!” Bonnie declared, reaching beneath her poncho. “Just back me up!” As soon as she finished, she blitzed off, and almost immediately the stream of lead was disrupted.

Barry quickly, albeit cautiously, leaned out of the doorway. She spotted Bonnie, who was already about halfway down the hall. She’d cut through six agents in what appeared to be a single, time-frozen strike, but by the time they had folded, she was already continuing forward. She rapidly appeared and disappeared, cutting, slashing, and gouging her way through their ranks as though thinning them entirely at random.

Barry smirked and swept in, ready to clean up the leftovers just like earlier. She wasted no time scooping up the steel door she’d thrown to the ground, launching it immediately into an unsuspecting agent. As the door slammed into him, the others nearby turned their attention to her, but by then she was already on top of them.

She socked the nearest one right across the face, snapping their nose on contact. As they reeled back, another took aim and fired their shotgun right at Barry. Not having time to raise her arms, she was thrown back slightly as a

large amount of the shrapnel tore through her clothing and collided with her chest.

She hissed in pain as the scrap was shoved from her skin quickly. Barry then grinned mockingly as the man took a step back and racked the shotgun for another shot. But before he got the chance to pull the trigger, she grabbed the barrel and slammed the stock back against his face. She then ripped it from his hands before kicking him back against the wall.

Barry firmly planted her feet and held the weapon like a bat, before turning and cracking the first one she'd punched over the head with it so hard the gun quite literally exploded, sending the parts clattering across the floor.

Bonnie flickered in just behind Barry, and the pair pressed their backs together. "No more than ten now," she panted as the remaining agents regrouped and started to surround them. She was breathing heavily, fading to and from the border of time with every breath.

"Bon, don't overdo it," Barry said, glancing over her shoulder as she raised her fists. "You're draining yourself."

Bonnie swallowed and raised her knife, readying herself for one last push. "It's *far* too late for that."



"L-light her up!" Parker shrieked. "Shoot her, now!"

The squad, riddled with fear, didn't even hesitate to follow her order. Their rifles tore up the air, thumping and crackling as they dumped their mags toward the Orphan. Many of the shots missed, mostly due to their hasty aim, and most of the ones that did hit her sparked off her tendrils. The small amount that did bore into her flesh didn't even seem to stun her in the slightest. She wasn't even flinching.

Samantha ground her shredders together and snarled as their weapons clicked dry of munitions. Before they could even gasp in realization, she bounded forward, bolting across the hall at them like a jaguar.

She passed Roman, but her tendrils did not. Three of the blades cracked vertically in opposite directions, shredding his rifle into scrap. The fourth, however, tore into his calf, hooking onto the muscles and sinew as it ripped him from his feet. He bellowed in pain as his head slammed back against the concrete, disorienting him enough to drop his empty weapon.

She dragged him across the ground as he groggily yet desperately begged to be released. She then granted that wish, twisting her shoulders and, in a whipping motion, completely splattering him upside the nearest wall. In an instant, his upper body was gone, leaving only the jelly and puss of organs, flesh, and blood.

Parker exhaled in disbelief, staring right into Samantha's eyes. There was no mercy to be found behind them.

"Mitch!" one of the women cried, watching with the squad in horror as what remained of their teammate dripped and squelched down the wall.

Samantha's tendril plucked itself from the calf, letting the now torso-less legs and waist fall to the floor. The other tendrils then wiped the soiled one clean, scraping and peeling the flesh off it with their blades.

Parker backed up against the blast door, too terrified to realize that she no longer had a weapon. All she could think of was that she *had* to get out of there. She turned and frantically messed with the terminal, but it was unresponsive, as though it had been intentionally disabled. She started to pound on the door and scream, begging for help, entirely unaware that this wasn't the only massacre occurring.

Taking advantage of the team's shocked stupor, Samantha stepped forward and snatched one of the other men by the throat. He immediately began to gag and spit, as her grip was vicelike, with her fingers digging into his

skin and practically wrapping around his esophagus. Her lowest two tendrils pushed against the ground, lifting her up to match his height just as he'd tossed away his rifle and drawn his sidearm. He quickly blasted her with all eight rounds, firing into her chest, gut, and anywhere he could until it began to click empty.

Parker couldn't even find the strength to berate the remainder of her team; she was scared just as shitless as they were. Not even point-blank shots made Samantha wince!

All she could do was helplessly watch as Samantha's upper right tendril swiftly slithered under her arm and swiped upward against the man's face. He released a pained cry as both of his jaws and nose were cleaved right down the middle; she'd practically given him mandibles. He screamed as Samantha released his throat. Then with both her hands, she grabbed at either side of his split jaw. She forced them apart, much to his screeching dismay, before her upper left tendril thrust beneath her other arm and crammed its blade through the opening, into his head, and out the back of his skull. He slumped in silence, dangling from the tendril like some sort of horrific ornament.

With his brain matter shredded into paste, the only purpose he now served was to shower the floor in blood.

She twisted the tendril and jerked it back, ripping it down through his body, splitting bones and carving flesh as it traveled. She lowered herself back down, and the rest of her tendrils immediately curled around his limbs. They each pulled in opposing directions, ripping the man's entire body in *half* with ease.

The remainder of the squad finally managed to push through their fear and reload as his gored halves sloshed down against the ground. They opened fire, sending shots into her torso that actually managed to cause her to briefly stagger.

She growled and quickly hooked her tendrils back into the man's segmented halves, then whipped them at the last two agents, which disrupted their fire long enough for her to close in.

She practically ignored the male, only swiping at him once across the gut with a single blade, which seemed to be enough to immobilize him. She gave her full attention to the woman, slashing her freshly emptied gun to bits and grabbing her suddenly by the shoulder and face.

She screamed for Parker's help, trying to pull away from the Orphan, but Samantha's tendrils had ensnared her, pulling her in like an octopus.

Samantha forced the woman's head back, exposing her neck, then gaped her maw wide open. She sank her steel fangs into the woman's jugular, twisted her neck, and ripped her throat out.

Samantha released her and shoved the woman away to choke and bleed out on the floor. She spat the torn pipes from her mouth then turned to look at the man she'd simply slashed. He was on his knees, a whimpering, blubbering mess with his guts lying in his lap.

She wiped her chin and granted him the kindness of death, cleanly severing his head from his shoulders with another sole swipe.

"M-Mitch . . . M-Margaret . . . J-John . . ." Parker gulped, watching as the last man's head rolled across the floor right to her feet. "A-Alexander . . ." She took frantic breaths and quickly glanced up at Samantha, who was slowly approaching her. She'd torn through her squad like they were nothing, just nameless obstacles and annoyances between her and her true target.

"N-no . . ." Parker stammered, instinctively reaching for her gun only to palm an empty holster. Defenseless, her lungs grew tight, and Samantha steadily continued to close the distance between them.

"Please," Parker spat, squeezing her hand tightly into a fist over her empty holster. Samantha's pupils had shrunk to mere pinpoints in a sea of burning

red rage and anguish. Drool continued to drip hungrily down her chin, mixing with Margaret's blood. . . . Parker could only imagine what she hungered for.

"P-please, I'm sorry!" she cried, pressing her back entirely against the door.

There's no way out! Parker gulped, releasing an exasperated breath as Samantha's heavy footsteps grew closer. In a last-ditch effort, she jerked her arm back and bounded forward, throwing everything she had into a punch that struck Samantha's cheek.

Samantha stopped, having turned her neck slightly from the strike. Her eyes darted down to the fist connecting with her cheek, then slowly moved along Parker's arm right back into her face.

Parker stiffened, relenting for a moment to merely sputter in helplessness. Samantha wasn't even fazed. Before she could even think to swing again or run, Samantha suddenly kicked her right in the chest, throwing her back against the door. She heaved and gagged, gasping as the air was forcibly ejected from her lungs. She knew she had to do something, even if she couldn't breathe. She couldn't fight this, so her only chance was to run.

She quickly scampered along the wall past Samantha, but she didn't even make it a foot before the Orphan slashed her ankles. She fell face-first into the concrete, crying out from the splitting pain of her torn right Achilles and her smashed nose.

Parker frantically pushed her hands against the floor and kicked with her one good leg, desperately attempting to crawl away, but all she did was flail. In her torment, horrified tears began to flow rapidly over her cheeks, mixing with the blood from her busted nose as it dripped down to her chin. "Commander! Administrator! Somebody, please!" she squealed, begging someone, *anyone* for help.

Samantha leaned down over her, pressing her knee against Parker's back and grabbing a fistful of her hair. She then slammed her face back into the floor, further disfiguring and smashing Parker's nose into a bloodied mess.

“Somebody!” Parker spat, gagging on the gushing torrent of nasal blood. She continued to squirm, feeling the tips of Samantha’s blades run up and down her back. “W-hat ar- y- doing!?” she asked, only for all four blades to sink into her flesh. “P-please! P-plea-ase!” she shrieked as the blades began to turn, splitting and tearing through her flesh. They dug deeper, curving and hooking around her spine.

“No! N-no! No no no, please! PLEASE!” she screeched, begging as she scraped her nails against the concrete so harshly they’d begun splitting. But her pleas were for nothing, as in an instant, Samantha’s blades pulled toward one another, filleting Parker’s spine and severing it into multiple chunks. In that moment . . . everything went dark.



Barry and Bonnie steadily stepped through the carnage. Their clothes had been torn, and not only stained with, but mostly *soaked* in, blood. Much of it on Barry drained into the grooves on her arms and dripped down from her knuckles. While with Bonnie, even though her poncho was waterproof, it struggled to dribble free of gore.

Sick of the rusty scent assailing her nostrils, Bonnie tore the poncho off over her head and whipped it to her side as hard as she could, flicking the excess fluid onto the walls. She then quickly slid it back on and shook her hair out as they reached the blast door at the end of the hall.

“Behind here?” Barry said, glancing off at the blonde.

“Maybe,” Bonnie replied, raising her hand and poking at the security panel. Unsurprisingly, it proved entirely unresponsive. She then twitched, listening carefully, as she could’ve sworn she’d heard a voice from the other side. Un-

able to make it out, she leaned in and proceeded to place her ear against the thick metal door.

“What is it?” Barry asked.

Bonnie grunted and suddenly shoved herself back from the door. “Cries for help! Barry, knock it down, now!” she ordered.

“Are you sure?”

“Hit it as hard as you can! They’re back there!” Bonnie shouted.

Barry nodded and took a step back. She twisted her neck, popping it as she hunched over. She then burst into a full sprint before slamming into the door with her shoulder. She only dented it and frustratedly took a few more steps back. “Dammit!”

“Hit it harder!” Bonnie yelled.

“I can’t!” Barry barked back. “I’m basically out of charge!”

Bonnie growled and drew her gun, firing every last round she had into Barry’s shoulder.

“Jesus!” Barry winced, having flinched from the unannounced shots. But it didn’t take long for the energy of those bullets to start traveling through her body. After realizing she wasn’t hit anywhere aside from her arm, she dusted off her shoulder. “You could have warned me,” she huffed, taking several more steps back.

“Barry!” Bonnie screamed, pointing at the door.

“I’m doing it!” Barry snapped back before bolting forward again and ramming the door a second time. Each screw and bolt was stripped, if not entirely destroyed, and the door itself bent in half like a folded piece of paper. It flew to the ground, revealing Samantha not far down the hall knelt over Parker’s body.

“Holy shit—” Barry muttered, looking over the corpses and body parts literally covering the floor and walls.

“S-Sam!” Bonnie cried. “Are you okay!?”

The black-haired reaper leered over her shoulder at the pair and aggressively snarled.

“S . . . Sam?” Bonnie gulped. Barry then nudged her, causing her to notice that among the bodies littering the space was . . . Willow.

Bonnie uneasily exhaled, shifting her gaze back to her friend. She could not only see the hurt and anger but also feel the rage seeping from her skin. She raised her hand, reaching out for her, but before she could even say a word, Samantha appeared to take the gesture as a threat.

Samantha ripped her blades from Parker’s corpse and turned to face them before scuttling back, putting some distance between them.

“She doesn’t recognize us?” Barry inquired.

“Sam, it’s us!” Bonnie yelled, taking a half step forward, which Samantha didn’t take kindly.

The reaper snapped her jaws at them and then ground her teeth together. She let loose a low growl that finely bordered on a whimper. She then gaped her maw, releasing another roar, which resembled much more of a gut-wrenching cry of agony than the first.

Bonnie could only assume that someone on Golf Squad had a hand in Willow’s death, as they’d been wiped out entirely. Regardless of who it was, Samantha had clearly gotten her revenge, but the fresh tears breaking through the cast of dried blood on her cheeks suggested it helped very little.

That became the least of their concerns when a sudden gunshot rang out down the hall. Samantha gagged, abruptly knocked out of her frenzy as a bullet slammed through her backside and blew out her collarbone.

Chapter Seventeen

A Mother's Rage

Her eyes snapped blue, and she collapsed to her hands and knees. It was as though every ounce of energy had been sapped from her body *instantly*. Samantha wheezed and coughed. She didn't understand what was going on, only that her tendrils were now entirely unresponsive, slamming flaccidly against the ground like limp noodles.

She glanced up as Barry cried her name, only to watch as she and Bonnie were unexpectedly zapped from behind with high-powered tasers. Their eyes, too, returned to their natural state after a half second of rapid flashing, as though the high voltage had acted as a reset button. Unable to move, let alone fight back, their arms were pulled back and bolt-cuffed, and then they were shoved to the ground.

What remained of Epsilon had pinned them down; they must have been spared from the rampage. Eagle seemed almost too eager to stomp Barry into the floor, while Briars appeared to kneel against Bonnie's back as gently as possible. The other three stood back with their weapons drawn.

"B-Briars!?" Bonnie gasped, sucking in a breath once she stopped convulsing from the volts. "Let us go!"

"I . . ." Briars squeaked and sheepishly pulled her eyes further down Bonnie's back. "I can't . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"What would Emma think about you *continuing* to help them!?" Bonnie yelled, leering over her shoulder with a single irritated violet eye.

The brunette began to shiver from the disappointed gaze she refused to meet.

Samantha pushed against the floor with all her might, struggling to raise even her head. She was experiencing something she couldn't believe—nausea, for the first time in years. . . . Her tendrils lethargically scraped against the concrete as she managed to stand, but almost immediately her legs gave out beneath her and she crumpled back to the floor. She slowly peered back to see where the shot had come from, and more importantly, who had sent it. She held her breath, as towering over her was the last person she wanted to see . . . Diana Gray.

The commander clung to her firearm and kept it extended out in front of herself. Her skin glistened as sweat slowly dripped down her face. While she had effectively put an end to Samantha's rampage, she looked almost . . . upset, and once Samantha met her eyes, Diana immediately began to tremble to the point where her gun rattled.

Samantha uneasily gulped. Now that Diana wasn't avoiding her gaze, she could see into her eyes clearly. The commander she knew who had nearly put her in the ground was cold and stern and would have jumped at the chance to do it again. But the eyes she looked into now were practically that of another woman . . . one who was either questioning or regretting each of her choices as she made them.

"Excellent work, Commander Gray," Maximilian chuckled, slowly clapping his wrinkled hands together as he approached her from behind. Another squad of men and women with the designation of Tau followed behind him, presumably the last full unit standing. "I must admit you three had me worried there for a moment," he confessed.

"Fuck you, Max," Barry spat with her face pressed against the concrete, glaring up at him with a single open eye.

"I mean it, dear," Maximilian assured them. "Really, you should both be proud of yourselves. A combined body count of almost fifty!" He hummed cheerfully as if the piles of corpses scattering his facility were little more than replaceable fodder. "After all this time, all it took was a little push to make the pacifist go mad?"

"There's *nothing* to be proud of," Bonnie grunted in response to his carefree disregard for her ideals, but the shame was hers to bear, as she was the one who had abandoned them.

"Now now, there's no need to pout." Maximilian grinned. "Luckily the two of you are still worth something," he expressed before shifting his attention to Samantha. "I can't say the same about you."

"Leave her alone!" Barry snapped, spitting as she yelled.

Eagle lifted his foot and stomped it back down against her. "Shut it," the man ordered.

Maximilian amusedly scoffed and shrugged. "I believe we're done here, Diana," he denoted, turning to the side and placing his hands behind his back. "If you would be so kind as to wrap things up."

Samantha uneasily swallowed, sure that even amid her apparently conflicted state, Diana would reciprocate his order without question. But it didn't happen, and the rattling of gunmetal only grew louder.

Barely able to keep the gun steady, Diana defiantly whimpered, "I can't . . . I *won't*."

A shocked puff blew from Samantha's lips. *Outright refusal?*

Maximilian sighed and stepped back up beside her. "Oh, Diana . . ." He planted his hand on her shoulder, which she slightly shriveled from. "You were all too eager to end her life before, and now knowing the truth makes you hesitate. You must see why I kept it from you." He leaned in, hovering his mouth mere inches from her ear. "As you said yourself, she's a monster. Good men and women are dead because of her. Her innocence is *gone*."

“Truth?” Samantha hoarsely choked, wincing as her body began to painfully push back against the substance that had shut her down. Her cells were almost rebooting, twisting and squirming as if trying to fend off the persisting rot. She was struggling to stay upright, but the possibility of an answer to Commander Gray’s strange behavior was far more pertinent. “What . . . truth?” she panted.

“Ah . . .” Maximilian lightly hummed then proceeded to chuckle softly to himself. “I’d almost forgotten that you *don’t know* yet.”

“W-what?” Samantha wheezed. “Don’t know what!?” she hissed.

“I suppose it’s only fair to tell you, even if it won’t matter in a minute,” Maximilian droned, condescendingly peering at his wristwatch. “This lovely specimen,” he began, gesturing toward Diana. “The woman you feel nothing but disdain and hatred for, who almost ended your life the last time—” He stopped, his grin beginning to stretch back across his face as he looked at Diana. He must have wanted her to break whatever news he was vaguely dancing around.

“I’m—” Diana started, only to choke on her words as she fought back a sob. As she continued to stare into Samantha’s eyes, hers began to mist, and her heart and body grew weary. “I’m your . . . Y-you’re my . . .” A single tear dribbled down her face as she placed her free hand over her stomach, as though too guilty to even utter the word.

Samantha’s pupils slowly dilated as she followed Diana’s hand. She released a stunned, sputtery breath and slowly raised her gaze to meet Diana’s. Her lips curled and started to quiver as she came to the realization that Diana was really her . . .

“M . . . mom?”



Diana sharply gasped, staggering back and nearly dropping the gun as though she'd been punched. Her arm sank slowly as she stared in disbelief at the wounded little girl lying on the floor. *Her wounded little girl. Did . . . Did she just . . .*

"It's time, Commander," Maximilian interjected, stepping down the hall with his back turned and stuffing his hands in the pockets of his lab coat. "Set your daughter free."

"No." Diana gulped and rigidly shook her head, denying him almost immediately. If anyone was going to hurt Samantha, it wouldn't be her, not again.

"*Pull the trigger, Diana,*" Maximilian frustratedly hissed, curling his fingers into his palms within the seclusion of his pockets. "That's an *order*," he sternly commanded while turning back around.

Diana flexed her fingers on her gun, readjusting her grip before tightening it. *He's right.* She slowly began to raise the weapon back up, her eyebrows narrowing as cold determination filled her body. *It's an order . . .* From her heart to her mind, she knew what she had to do. She had freed herself from any doubt or hesitation and closed her eyes before inhaling solemnly through her nostrils. She had a duty . . .

A duty to her daughter.

Without so much as a warning, she quickly pivoted and blasted Maximilian straight through his chest, the same way Parker had shot Willow at his command.

The hall was then filled with the sudden stunned gasps of the remaining F.T.F. agents. But they didn't even seem to think to raise their weapons at her, as if in disbelief that she'd actually just shot their boss.

Bonnie and Barry were both gob-smacked, lying with their mouths open and their breaths held. They were confused and surprised, just like everyone else, but no one was more shocked than Samantha, who sat wide-eyed and speechless.

Maximilian's perpetually smug expression had been ripped from his face. He stumbled back and gagged, clutching his chest as blood spurted out to the floor between his fingers. He coughed as his airways began to flood almost instantly. He then raised his head, but before he could look at Diana, she fired a second shot into his throat.

She watched with some pleasure as he fell back, choking as his blood violently sprayed out onto the floor. He was certainly in pain, and that was how she wanted him to die. For good measure, she continued to fire, shooting even after he stopped moving. She didn't stop until she'd expelled every last cartridge and the slide stop had activated. Once finished, she released a calm breath and dropped the weapon.

As the gun slammed down amid the scattered casings, she reached up to her shoulder, grabbing at the Foundation insignia on her uniform before tearing it off. She then carelessly tossed it toward his body, her life working for a monster over.

The sudden squeak of ever-increasing whimpers from behind her knocked Diana from her daze. She looked up, eyeing the shocked faces of Tau, before turning around to face Epsilon, Bonnie, Barry, and her teary-eyed little Samantha.

"M . . ." Samantha mewled, her face glittering and glossy from the endless flow of tears dribbling down her cheeks. "M-mommy?" she choked out.

"H-hah . . ." Diana let loose a faint whimper as she stared into the eyes of her baby girl. "B-baby . . ." She gulped, taking a half step forward and nodding. "It's . . . It's mommy," she squeaked, her girl finally right there in front of her. "It's . . . It's me."

Samantha hiccupped as she released a gut-wrenching sob, "M-mom!" She leaned up as if wanting to run across to her, but instead, she slumped forward against the floor. She appeared too weak to even crawl.

Diana practically had to shove herself forward as she ran over. She fell right to her knees before Samantha and scooped her up with the intention of never letting go again. She then hugged her as tightly as she possibly could, pulling her into her chest and fighting back against her own tears.

Samantha, on the other hand, could do little to hold back the landslide of bottled-up sorrow and long-overdue tears. She shrieked against Diana's chest, crying and sobbing as loud as she could.

Diana's eyes quivered as she listened to her daughter cry; it seemed she shared the sentiment of wanting the reunion more than anything. As she stared down into her daughter's messy hair, she felt a strong urge to comb it, to wrap Samantha in a blanket, read her a bedtime story, tuck her in to sleep. . . . All the things she'd dreamed of that had once seemed impossible.

She sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth, and her own mournful streams ran like rivers down her face. She could only hear Samantha's wailing as that of a crying baby, *the* baby, *her* baby. The one she'd handed away who was finally back in her arms.

Diana rested her head against Samantha's scalp as she listened to her screams and cries. The woman faltered heavily, crying as she choked out murmured apologies. She whispered them one by one into Samantha's ear, and with each, her grip tightened to the point that she'd essentially permanently fastened herself around the girl.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie . . ." she wept. "I'm so goddamn sorry."



Kelly sprinted into the surveillance deck the second the doors opened. She was frantically searching for Maximilian's lost pet, although he wasn't par-

ticularly hard to find. He was standing still just before the monitors, silently staring at Maximilian's unmoving, bloody corpse.

"Robert!" she called out.

Wilson gasped as he was snapped from his trance. "D-Doctor Kelly?"

"You saw that, right?" Kelly shakily questioned.

"Commander Gray's actions?" the small man mumbled, watching as Diana and Samantha embraced, though his eyes were quickly drawn back to Maximilian's body. "I did." He exhaled, almost relieved.

"Good," Kelly muttered while speedily fixing her ponytail. She then pushed her rectangular glasses back up her nose and stepped over to Wilson before forcefully grabbing hold of his wrist. "Then we can do it."

"Do . . . what?" Wilson grunted against the pull of the taller woman.

"He's gone," Kelly denoted. "Now no one can stop us from letting them out."



No one dared speak as Samantha continued to sob into Diana's chest. After some time, her loud cries became quiet and descended into sniveling whimpers.

Not once did Diana let up her grip, at least with one arm. With the other, she couldn't help but run her fingers through her baby girl's hair, stroking it over and over as they both gradually calmed down.

"Commander," Eagle angrily snarled, breaking the silence while applying further pressure to Barry's back, "you leave me no choice."

"Hey, watch it, dick hole," Barry growled.

"Eagle?" Briars mumbled, glancing over as he drew his sidearm. "What are you doing?"

“Commander Gray, you’re under arrest,” Eagle declared, raising his gun and pointing it at the pair in the center of the hall.

“Eagle! What’s wrong with you!?” Briars cried out, leaning up and off Bonnie.

“She *just* killed our boss, moron,” he growled. “Just because you’re stupid doesn’t mean I am.”

Diana furrowed her brows and defensively pulled Samantha off to her side. While Samantha was nigh indestructible, she’d been through enough pain for one day.

“Our boss, the psychopath? The child *torturer!*?” Briars shouted, fully releasing her grip on Bonnie. “I’m not going to let you waste a new start! Emma wouldn’t—”

“Tch,” Eagle scoffed, “please.”

He then winced slightly as the cold steel of Briars’s weapon pressed against his temple.

“Put your gun down, now,” Briars stated in a surprising breath of newfound confidence, “or I’ll make you.”

“As if you could.” Eagle softly snickered, glancing off to the side at the barrel. “You’re not my captain,” he defiantly barked. “You’re a whiny little suck-up that fell apart the moment our real one turned tail and ran. You’re nothing but unqualified for your job.”

“I feel pretty qualified,” Briars confidently muttered, pulling down the hammer of her pistol with her thumb. “I wasn’t asking, Lieutenant. For once, we’re going to do the right thing.”

The agents of Tau appeared indecisive, glancing among one another until they hesitantly raised their weapons . . . and aimed them at Briars.

“Tau disagrees,” Eagle scoffed. “Without Emma, you stand alone.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Diana interjected, further shielding Samantha with her body. “We stand with her, but if you continue to stand with a now-dead psychopath . . . you’re just as sick as he was.”

“I don’t give a shit about him, this place, or anything in between!” Eagle snapped. “I care that we swore our loyalty, and you’re throwing that away. I thought a veteran would know better.”

“Doing the right thing is more important than blindly following orders,” Diana retorted. “I would expect someone younger to be more rebellious, to ask questions, and not be complacent.”

“You thought wrong,” Eagle said. “I know that a good soldier does what they’re told.”

Diana curled her fingers into Samantha’s torn and bloodied clothes. She’d already made that mistake once. “I’m a mother first,” she snarled, “and a soldier no longer.”



“Eryn?” Kelly frantically called as she ran into the control room. In desperate search of her wife, she was prepared to shove other staff members out of her way, but they were saved from her wrath once she spotted Eryn sitting across the room with Mordecai. While relieved, it didn’t put even a slight dampener on her haste as she bolted right up to the desk. “Thank Christ—” she wheezed. “Michael, Eryn, I need the both of you to—”

“Kell!” Eryn cried out, springing from her chair right up into Kelly’s face. “We hadn’t heard from you since the alarms went off, I’ve been calling your phone for like twenty minutes!” she whined, grabbing her by the cheeks and looking her over, presumably for any injuries. “Are you hurt!? Why didn’t you come here with the rest of us?”

"Eryn, sweetie, I'm *fine*," Kelly declared, shrugging off her wife's hands as she began to step off toward the central terminal. "But time is of the essence right now!"

"Huh?" Eryn whimpered as Kelly immediately wandered off. "What's going on?"

"I have a better question," Mordecai grumbled, rising from his seat and turning toward the doorway. "What the hell is he doing here?" he growled, glaring across the room at Wilson. Upon noticing his presence, the rest of the room appeared equally as uncomfortable. But at the same time, there was a slight curiosity. Usually, he was attached to Maximilian at the hip.

"Maximilian's dead," Kelly plainly stated, fiddling with some of the switches and displays.

The entire room was filled with quiet murmurs of shock and confusion.

"What!?" Eryn blurted out.

"You can't be serious," Mordecai grunted in disbelief. "How!?"

"Kell, that'd be like . . . the *best* Christmas present ever, but don't jack me like that."

"She's not lying," Wilson said sheepishly as he moved closer. The other members of staff moved out of his way as he approached, seemingly avoiding him like the plague. "He locked down the surveillance grid to prevent the rest of you from seeing what was going on." He looked up at Kelly as if silently asking her to step aside. She immediately picked up his signal, and once she stepped away, he leaned right over the main terminal. He then began to input several commands, which were presumably only known to him and Maximilian.

"Samantha came back voluntarily to help the farm girl that the F.T.F. had captured on Maximilian's order. Once the other two AWOL Orphans arrived, he ordered the girl's death, and . . ." Wilson swallowed uncomfortably as the display lit up, showing the previously restricted security feeds. He enlarged

just one, though, bringing into focus the blast door camera for the hall on the sixth floor where the massacre had occurred. “He got what he deserved,” he murmured, knitting his brows.

“Oh my god . . .” Mordecai whispered, stepping up to the desk. “Did Sam kill him?” he asked, eyeing the vast carnage on display.

“No . . . not him,” Wilson retorted before raising his hand up and pointing at the commander in the center of the room. “Diana did.”

Mordecai and Eryn looked at one another, completely perplexed.

“Why the hell would she—” Mordecai began before Wilson interjected almost immediately.

“He poked her in the ribs one too many times and she lashed out,” he explained. “Finding out he’d taken her daughter and ordered the death of a teenager pushed her over the edge.”

“Wait . . .” Mordecai squinted. “Daughter? What daughter?” he inquired before realizing that she was clinging to . . . “Holy shit—Samantha!?”

“That makes way too much sense,” Eryn quietly said.

“Yeah, and if we don’t do something, they’re as good as dead,” Kelly declared, “Tau won’t back off, Bonnie and Barry are pinned, and Sam is heavily wounded. They need help, now.”

Mordecai nodded, turning to Kelly. “What can we do?”

“The only right thing *to* do,” Kelly said and reached into the right pocket of her lab coat. She pulled out a keyring and quickly flipped through it before coming to a silver key with the Foundation’s logo on it. She pulled it off and jammed it into one of four keyholes on the console. “We need four senior researchers to cause a complete system-wide release, and there’s four of us here.” She then cranked the key clockwise. “Let’s do it.”

“We’re letting them *all* out!?” Eryn cried almost excitedly, but her giddiness seemed almost immediately tempered as she leered back at Wilson. “Wait, but why is he going along with this?”

"Because . . ." Wilson muttered, reaching for his keyring. "I ignored every sign. I listened to every word he spoke as though they were the intelligent deductions of a fellow researcher, someone I could call a colleague." He then pulled out his silver key. "I won't be a part of this lie any longer."

Mordecai firmly grabbed Wilson by the shoulder, nabbing the boy's immediate attention. He must have been seeking some sign of validation for the words Wilson spoke.

Wilson squinted back as they locked gazes, and it was apparent that he wasn't just telling the truth, but he'd entirely made up his mind.

"Alright," Mordecai softly whispered, releasing him then reaching into his back pocket. "Let's do this."

Together, the two men stuck their keys into the console and turned them. All three of them then looked to Eryn, the final one they needed.

"Gah . . ." Eryn grumbled, her eyes darting between them all. "How can I believe a sob story like that!? You've been his number two for years!"

"Sweetheart," Kelly scowled, staring at her wife. "If you don't trust him, trust me, please." She knew her wife always handled guilt-tripping rather poorly.

Eryn immediately avoided Kelly's gaze, not even meeting it for a second. "Fine!" She pouted, beginning to dig through her pockets. "But I swear to god, Robert, if you screw us . . ." She pulled out the key and crammed it in beside the rest. "I'll castrate you."

"Believe me . . ." Wilson snickered halfheartedly as Eryn twisted her key. A small plastic casing covering a brightly marked release lever slowly lifted up. "I've already got enough to regret."



Diana grunted, pulling Samantha deeper into her side as the sudden shriek of the breach alarm roared overhead. It didn't do her any favors for her already heightened anxiety, but at the very least, it meant they'd have help at any moment. She just hoped that she wouldn't be among the casualties, as she finally had something to live for again.

"Huh?" Eagle curiously hummed as he glanced up to the emergency lamps that had burst across the halls along with the alarm.

Briars partly relented, lifting the barrel from Eagle's head. "The breach alarm . . ." She gulped.

Diana winced upon realizing she could see her own breath. With each exhale, it became more prominent, and before long, she began to feel the urge to shiver.

Barry pushed back against Eagle's foot, glancing over to Bonnie with a toothy smirk as their visible breaths mixed. "Oh, she's gotta be pissed," she snickered.

"Huh?" Bonnie cocked a brow until she seemed to understand *exactly* what Barry was talking about. "Eva—" she softly gasped.

Diana shivered as gently crackling lines of icy frost slowly crept past her along the floor. She looked up, noticing that the walls and ceilings were slowly being covered in the amassing ice, as well. She then heard a crunch from some distance behind her that sounded like that of ice being stepped on, and the hairs on her neck suddenly stood erect.

Just as she turned her head, the three men furthest down the hall were suddenly thrown by a crackling mass of ice, which rapidly hardened and encased them against the wall. In only seconds, the men were completely immobilized.

The ice crawling across the floor thickened beneath her bare feet just ahead of each step she took, crunching the moment her foot made contact with the floor. She looked not much younger than Barry or Bonnie, but her appearance

was far odder. Her hair appeared almost glacial, jagged, and glistening with the byproduct of her rapidly sinking body temperature. The air crystallized with each breath she took, practically causing it to snow indoors. While the snowflakes melted immediately on contact with everyone else's skin, it only spread the frost further on hers.

"Were these goons giving you trouble, Barry?" she snidely commented, smirking as she glanced at the men struggling beneath her glacial sheet.

"Well, not anymore," Barry chuckled, giving the other Orphan a grin. "How's it feel to be out of the hotbox?"

"Better," Eva exhaled, "being uncomfortable nonstop and unable to cool off for months at a time really puts me . . . just a *bit* on edge," she hissed as she shot a sharp glance at the remaining agents just ahead of her. They were either shivering from the cold, fear, or both. "If I were you, I wouldn't irritate me any further," she threatened, sniffing as frost crept across her nose, which caused some snowflakes to flutter down from her hair.

The final members of Tau glanced among one another, then toward Eva. They tightened their grip on their rifles and went to raise them until she spoke up again.

"You don't want to do that," she advised with a frigid breath, raising her hand in response to their aggression.

Having called their bluff, all three of them threw their weapons to the ground almost immediately. Their hands shot up in the air, and before long, the last three Epsilon agents followed.

"What the hell are you idiots doing!?" Eagle growled out.

"You want us to do what exactly!?" one of the female agents snapped.

"You just saw her incapacitate half our team!" one of the men added.

"You're all *cowards*," Eagle snarled.

"It's over, Humpty Dickface, now get off me!" Barry barked from beneath his foot. She twisted a bit to try and jerk free but failed to yield any results.

“Shut up!” Eagle yelled, pressing down harder.

“You should do as she says,” Eva suggested before slamming her palms together. As she pulled them apart, the crunch of rapidly forming ice crackled between them. It persisted until she scrunched her fingers, forcing the ice to snap into small yet sharp shards almost resembling glass that began to float around her fingertips. “Unless you’re interested in being a human pincushion.”

“Tch,” Eagle scoffed. “You’ll have to kill me to get me off this nuisance.”

“That can be arranged,” Eva replied.

“Just stop. They’re right . . .” Samantha quietly said. She dragged her face up from Diana’s chest, weakly turning to peer at him with one tired, dimly glowing cerulean eye. “You *know* there’s more of us coming,” she croaked.

“You don’t need to do anything dumb,” Briars said softly, slightly lowering her weapon and extending her other hand. “Just give me the gun, and this nightmare ends . . .”

Eagle rapidly glanced between each pair of eyes that watched him. After a few moments, he swallowed and sighed with a gentle nod before beginning to hand the gun to Briars.

Briars followed along, ready to take it, but quickly found that she’d been deceived as he raised it and shot her right in the shoulder. She cried out, dropping her gun immediately and falling back against the wall.

“Lieutenant, don’t!” the captain of Tau cried out.

But by then, he’d already managed to take a potshot at Diana. Before the casing even hit the ground, Briars had struck him across the face in an adrenaline-fueled rage.

Diana ducked down and held onto Samantha as tightly as she could the moment the gunshot went off. She held still for a few moments, listening to the struggle across the hall, too afraid to open her eyes out of fear that either she or Samantha had been struck.

As the seconds droned by, it didn't take her long to realize she hadn't been hit, and upon opening her eyes, she immediately realized Samantha hadn't been shot either. Samantha's tendrils were protectively stretched around them both like a cage, and the bullet must have sparked against one of them, as a small spot on the cable was slightly smoking from the impact. If Samantha hadn't blocked the shot, it would have gone into Diana's ribs.

Diana gasped with concern as Samantha slumped into her and her tendrils weightlessly dropped to the floor. But she quickly realized the girl was just exhausted. However, with the use of her tendrils returning, it seemed as though the toxins had thankfully been purged from her system.

Diana then quickly glanced over to the doorway, assuming the threat still wasn't over . . . only to realize Eagle had been pinned to the wall . . . by Bonnie. The blonde's knife was deep in his chest, and despite the violence of the act, her eyes were still their soft natural violet.

Lieutenant Daniel Eagle then choked, spitting up a small amount of blood that dripped down on Bonnie's face, causing her to frown. He slowly looked around the room before coming to Diana as his energy began to visibly fade. He gritted his teeth, as if prepared to spit out a final set of insults, but he was denied it as Bonnie stepped back and ripped the blade from his chest. He then crumpled, collapsing to the floor to bleed out in silence.

Eva immediately faltered, her ice shards dropping to the floor along with her knees. While she must've been feeling better, it would certainly take time for her to get up to full strength.

No longer pinned, Barry struggled to her knees and glanced over her shoulder at Briars. "Hey, brown hair," she beckoned, wiggling her fingers. "Still got that key on you?"

Diana sighed in relief and glanced down, hoping to see the eyes of her little girl, but instead only seeing the top of her head as Samantha had hidden back away in her chest.

“Is . . . Is it over?” Samantha whimpered, muffled by her shirt.

Diana sniffled gently and nodded to herself. She buried her face in her child’s hair and placed a hand on the back of her head. “Yes, Sam . . .” she mumbled, hugging her daughter with the strength only a mother could muster. “It’s over.”

Chapter Eighteen

Decommissioned

The silence of the sterile halls only made Emma more manic, as they reminded her of the Foundation more than she'd like.

She'd heard nothing on the news, her radio was dead, and her phone was silent. She hadn't heard a peep from anyone, and the day was winding to a close. Continuing to pace up and down the quiet hospital wing, she eagerly awaited *something* . . . anything.

On the bright side, she'd been cleaned up, free of dirt and Roxanne's blood. Thanks to the hospital's lost and found, she was able to find a pair of jeans and a hoodie to wear. While they weren't the most stylish and were slightly musty, it was better than a torn-up, bloody uniform.

"Ma'am?"

Emma jumped and spun around, reaching for the pistol she'd stashed in the front pocket of her newfound hoodie. However, it didn't take her long to realize it was just a nurse calling for her. "Yes?" she grumbled.

"I'm sorry, miss. I didn't mean to startle you," the nurse calmly apologized.

"It's alright . . ." Emma sighed, pulling her hand up and rubbing her tired, baggy eyes.

"I assume you know the patient well?"

"Well enough. . . . Why?" Emma inquired.

"There are some people at the front desk asking for both of you. I figured I'd ask if it's alright to send them up first," the nurse explained.

“Yeah, no prob—” Emma’s face abruptly scrunched up. “Did they give any names?”

“I have one . . .” the nurse confirmed, looking down at her clipboard. “Bonnie Saturn?”

Emma’s shoulders slumped in relief. “Yeah,” she nodded, rubbing her baggy eyes, “send them up.”

Once the nurse left her sight, she practically fell back into a bench. She leaned forward and held her head in her hands. She then closed her eyes, tricking herself that she was only resting for a moment, when in fact she fell right asleep.

She was at peace for several minutes, only to jerk awake from a sudden but gentle squeeze on her shoulder. “Huh?” she grunted, sitting up and wiping drool from her lip.

“Hey, sleepyhead.” Bonnie smiled, sitting right beside her on the bench.

“I wasn’t sleeping . . . I was just resting my eyes.” Emma yawned.

“Sure you were.” Bonnie lightly giggled. “You definitely look a little worse for wear.”

“Me?” Emma hummed and cocked a brow. “You’re the one with blood all over you, kid. . . . What happened?”

Bonnie’s smile dropped. “We uh . . . We certainly did it.” She sighed, her hand slipping from Emma’s shoulder. “We won.”

“You did? How? Where’s everyone else—”

“They’re on their way up,” Bonnie assured her. “Just take it easy, please.”

“Is everyone okay?” Emma quietly pressed. Her eyes wandered toward the approaching group. Seeing Samantha and Barry, she felt somewhat relieved, but the moment she spotted Diana, she sprung to her feet. “Get back!” she shrieked, throwing Bonnie behind her and ripping the gun from her hoodie. “What the hell are you doing here!?”

“E-Emma!?” Diana grunted, defensively raising her hands and stopping in her tracks.

“Stop!” Samantha cried, quickly stepping between them. “She’s with us! It’s okay!” she assured, spreading her arms and tendrils out in defense of the commander.

“What?” Emma faltered, partially lowering the weapon. “That doesn’t make any sense!” she frustratedly growled, wobbling slightly from exhaustion. “How could she be on our side? And why are you protecting her!?”

Bonnie slowly reached around and grabbed the slide of Emma’s weapon. “Diana’s her mother, Emma,” she softly whispered.

“Huh?” Emma muttered, glancing to her side at the blonde and then back at the others. The similarities were certainly there . . . but to her, it seemed too convenient. “How do we know that’s true?” she snarled, knitting her brows together. “You’ve been following Maximilian’s orders without fail since this shit started!”

“Because I just killed him,” Diana declared and reached forward, placing her hand on Samantha’s shoulder. She then lightly squeezed as if urging her to relax.

“Wha—” Emma stammered in shock. “Y-you did?” she softly sputtered.

“She did,” Barry confirmed, stepping out from behind Diana with her hands in her pockets. “Of course, Bon and I handled almost everyone else,” she lightly snickered, pointing at her chest with her thumb. But she almost immediately appeared to wince in embarrassment as Samantha turned and gave her a disappointed shake of the head.

“That’s . . .” Emma looked down while slowly tucking the pistol away in her hoodie. “That’s amazing!” she cried, her eyes lighting up. “We should tell Roxanne, she’ll be thrilled to—” She then stopped short, noticing the tear stains across Samantha’s bloodstained cheeks. She looked around, per-

forming a quick mental headcount, and gulped when she only counted four. “Where’s Willow?”

She could practically taste the air as it turned sour. Everyone appeared uncomfortable at the mere mention of her name, with Barry crossing her arms, Diana averting her eyes, and Bonnie letting loose a solemn sigh. Samantha, however, looked to be the only one who had stonewalled, as if ignoring the question entirely.

“Is she in there?” Samantha quietly asked, raising her hand and pointing at the door behind Emma.

“Roxanne?” Emma uneasily swallowed, glancing over her shoulder. “Yeah.”



Samantha sucked a breath through her nose, still able to smell the rusty stench of Willow's blood. She'd since washed her hands, but her shirt was still a mess. “I’ll tell her,” she said, stepping past Emma and up to the door.

“Sweetheart,” Diana grunted, partly reaching after her.

Samantha stopped, hovering her hand over the door handle.

“You don’t have to do this by yourself . . .”

Samantha lowered her head slightly and released a shaky exhale. “Yeah . . . I do,” she croaked. “But,” she forced a smile and peered back over her shoulder. “Th-thanks . . . Mom.”

Diana stood with her lips parted, as though still not used to hearing that word. Truth be told, Samantha wasn’t used to saying it, and at the moment, didn’t think she ever would be.

Samantha grabbed and twisted the door handle then slowly pushed it open.

Her heart burned from guilt as she spotted Roxanne propped up in the bed. She was wearing an oxygen mask and had an IV stuck in her arm pumping fluid into her from a strung-up bag at the side of her bed. The pulse monitor beside it beat chillingly slow, as though she was barely even there, but the half-eaten tray of food suggested otherwise.

Samantha jumped as the door clicked shut behind her, only to freeze up as she heard Roxanne weakly call out, “Sam?”

Samantha turned her head, spotting the woman staring at her with a tired yet relieved smile on her lips. “Roxanne . . . Hey,” she choked, putting on a fake smile to match.

“I’m glad to see you’re still kicking,” Roxanne softly whispered. Her hands were laid loosely over her heavily bandaged gut. The wraps still seemed fresh, as though she’d only recently come from surgery.

“I . . .” Samantha’s voice trembled. She lowered her head just enough to hide her eyes beneath her messy hair, as seeing Roxanne like this only further twisted the knot of shame that clogged her guilt-riddled heart. Her tendrils subconsciously hugged her torso as she tried to soothe herself just long enough to make it through the explanation. “Y-you . . . shouldn’t be,” she whimpered.

“Why?” Roxanne queried. “What’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

“We . . . We won.” Samantha sniffed as her fingers grew jittery. “But . . . But I-I wasn’t able to— I couldn’t—” She whined as her lips began to quiver.

“What?” Roxanne frowned, wincing as she attempted to sit up. After a few seconds of struggling, the worry of breaking her stitches likely took precedence, and she gave in. Sinking back down against the sheets, all she could do was wearily hold her hand over the edge toward Samantha. “Sam . . . please, you can tell me if something’s wrong . . .”

“She . . .” Samantha choked, sniveling as she began to do the only thing she could now: cry. Her tears dribbled onto her bloodstained shirt, given to her

by Willow. She even began to tremble in her shoes, also given to her by the girl she'd grown to love. "She didn't make it," she wept, gasping through her heartbroken sputters.

Roxanne's hand slowly fell limp. Her eyes barely widened, and her skin grew pale. "Willow's," her lips began to quiver, "gone?"

Samantha mewled, answering Roxanne with her sobs. She tried her best to stifle herself by cupping her mouth, but it did little to stop her from reliving the same moment she had been for the last several hours. She had no clue how she was supposed to tell Roxanne what happened without crumbling.

She couldn't imagine the hurt and pain Roxanne was starting to feel. The last thing she wanted to do was look Roxanne in the eyes, knowing that the only reason Willow was gone was because she'd met her. . . .

"I'm sorry!" she screamed, curling her fingers into her locks. "I-it's my fault!" she wailed. "It's a-all m-my fault! I knew I should've left!" she lamented, placing the blame entirely on her shoulders. "I-if she n-never found me she'd s-still be here."

Roxanne sighed and pushed her nails into her palms. "If you two had never met, yes . . . she'd be here." She gulped, staring at Samantha with aching eyes. "But I don't think she would have had it any other way."

Samantha continued to sputter and snivel, barely keeping it together as she peeked up out from under her hair. "W-what?"

"Ever since our mom left, sure, I've provided but . . . Willow always tried to be the one with a smile on her face," Roxanne muttered. "She looked for the good in everything, no matter how bad things got. Every time of the *many* that I was at my lowest, she'd build me back up." She barely smiled, her lips shuddering as her eyes began to water.

"S-she was so much stronger than I was. . . . No one else her age had that kind of maturity, but she was so much kinder than the world would accept. Other kids, even adults, would've run at the first sight of you, made

it someone else's problem. Everyone would only have seen a monster, but," she sputtered, blinking away some tears.

Roxanne took a solemn breath and continued, "But my baby sister didn't see anything but someone who *needed* her help, and someone who stole her heart. Even if I had told her no, she just would've tried harder to help you. She never considered the unintended consequences of her actions. . . . Her own well-being came second to trying to make the world a better place." Roxanne sniffed as her tears finally began to dribble down her face. "And Sam . . ." She smiled through her pain and stretched her hand back out to Samantha. "Even though she's always been this way, I've *never* seen her smile like I did when she was with you."

Samantha jumped as Roxanne suddenly grabbed her hand. Enveloped with grief, she hesitantly made eye contact, expecting to see malice or contempt, but she was only met with a smile as genuine as the one she'd fallen in love with.

"It's not your fault," Roxanne softly uttered, gently squeezing her hand.

Samantha choked and her knees buckled, sending her down to Roxanne's bedside. She leaned over the edge, tightened her grip, and burrowed her face into the woman's side. It didn't take much longer for her to begin bawling. While she didn't feel worthy of Roxanne's pity, she was in no state to refute it.



"Hey, Doc, thanks again," Emma stated, reaching out and firmly shaking the man's hand.

"Think nothing of it," the doctor hummed before placing his hand against the back of Roxanne's wheelchair. "If anything, you deserve most of the

thanks. This little lady is lucky you got her here when you did. Otherwise, she may have lost more than her legs.”

Roxanne nodded and sighed, leaning back into the chair. *Would death really have been so bad?* she wondered, frowning as the grim reality of her situation had finally fully sunk in. At least if she were dead, she’d be reunited with her sister. Just as the darkest of thoughts began to claw at her mind, Samantha placed a hand on her shoulder from behind and leaned over, giving Roxanne a weary smile.

Roxanne smiled back, albeit barely. Maybe with shoulders to lean on, it wouldn’t be too bad.

“I hate to bring it up, but you people said you had an . . . alternative means of payment?” The doctor cocked a brow.

“Correct. . . . The paperwork is done,” Diana replied, hunched over the counter of the front lobby. She slid the papers across the surface toward the doctor, then glanced over to Roxanne. “The Orphanage Foundation will cover any and all of your medical expenses from this point forward, Roxanne.”

Roxanne’s eyes widened and she abruptly turned to face Diana, as there was no possible way she’d heard that correctly. “E-excuse me?” she sputtered.

“Wow,” Bonnie blinked, sounding genuinely impressed. “How’d you manage that?”

“You can thank Eleanor. With Maximilian dead, she’s calling the shots now,” Diana stated before pulling her sleeve back and peering down at her watch. “I was just on the phone with her. In fact, she should be here any minute.”

“She’s coming here?” Samantha tilted her head, “Why?”

“She didn’t say, only that it was important,” Diana answered, crossing her arms.

“Well . . .” Bonnie hummed, scratching at her chin. “We certainly need *some* direction after . . . *all that.*”

“Like . . . what?” Roxanne curiously asked.

“Well for starters, we need to figure out what the hell we’re going to do with an entire facility filled with augmented teenagers and children,” Bonnie stated. “A decent amount of us should have an easy time re-inserting into society, but some of us,” she gestured to Samantha’s waist-coiled tendrils, causing the girl to stir uncomfortably, “may have a harder time than others.”

“People don’t like change, so there’s no telling how the public will react,” Diana noted, eyeing the passing hospital staff as she spoke. “We need somewhere to keep the more abnormal and younger ones safe.”

“Hey, guys.” Barry suddenly called out from the front entrance, causing the entire group to turn, only to spot a familiar-looking black Humvee waiting for them outside.

“Look’s like our ride’s here,” Emma commented.

“Let’s get this over with,” Roxanne yawned and exhaustedly rubbed her eyes. Hopefully whatever the woman wanted wouldn’t take long.



Samantha couldn’t fathom why Eleanor Kelly had brought them to a nearby cafe despite the fact that only a few of them looked even remotely presentable. The torn clothes and bloodstains alone certainly garnered plenty of unwanted looks from other guests, but wisely, none dared approach them.

Though, her concern for being stared at was almost nonexistent, as she’d almost entirely disconnected herself from the situation. Leaning up against her mother’s side, sitting on the edge of the corner booth’s seat, she stared blankly out the windows and into the cloudy, dreary sky. Despite how inherently uninteresting it was, peering at the dark sky was more appealing to her than reliving any of her day.

Part of her, though, was stuck wondering if it was smart to let Diana in, especially so suddenly, especially after everything. But she needed somebody . . . *anybody's* arms to hide in, and who better than her mother's?

Across from her was Kelly, who had been meticulously fishing through her bag for some time. Further in the booth, Emma was wobbling back and forth, almost looking like she was about to fall over from exhaustion, and right in the middle of all of them were Bonnie and Barry.

"Jesus Christ!" the waitress yelped, almost jumping out of her apron as she came to the table of damaged women. She was looking them over, rapidly glancing between them all before coming to Kelly, who looked like the only one of them who'd gotten any sleep in the last year. "Are you lot alright!?"

"We're fine," Roxanne quietly interjected, sitting in her wheelchair next to the booth.

The waitress nervously glanced about them again, repeatedly eyeing Diana's uniform. But she seemed to decide against asking any questions and simply cleared her throat before reaching into her apron. "A-anything . . . I can get for you dears?"

"Water," Roxanne wheezed, leaning back against her chair.

"Coffee, black," Diana sternly declared.

"Oh, uh . . ." Kelly leaned up, pulling her hands from her bag. "Tea is fine for me, thanks." She softly smiled, pushing her glasses back up her nose.

"Whatever you've got that's highest in protein," Barry began, tossing the menu across the tabletop toward the woman, "*double it*," she wearily requested, sinking against the booth. "Oh, and also a soda, but just bring me a whole pitcher full."

Bonnie stared at Barry in apparent disgust, but the growl of her own starving stomach seemed to convince her it wasn't the *worst* thing in the world. "I'll take the same," she mumbled, as if somewhat ashamed of her choice.

"Nothing for me, thanks," Emma yawned.

“Sam, would you like anything?” Diana asked, glancing down at the girl quietly snuggled beneath her arm. Samantha was almost entirely unresponsive and only softly mewled while leaning deeper into her mother.

“Water and a Belgian waffle, please,” Diana said, glancing at the waitress with a tired smile.

The waitress finished hastily scribbling on her pad, then tucked her pen away behind her ear. “I’ll tell the kitchen to move their asses on this one. You gals look like you need it,” she expressed before swiftly stepping off toward the bar.

Once she was gone, Samantha nuzzled deeper into Diana’s side and whispered thanks for the food ordered in her name.

Kelly heavily sighed and removed her red plastic glasses. She folded them and set them on the table then laid her hands on top of one another and leaned forward. “First of all . . . I’d like to sincerely apologize, to all of you.”

“For . . . what?” Bonnie inquired and cocked a brow.

“Not being able to help sooner,” Kelly said.

“Eleanor, you couldn’t have possibly done anything else,” Diana affirmed.

“Yeah, letting out the others was the best thing you *could* have done,” Barry chuckled. “Without that . . . Well . . .”

“I-I know . . . but I can’t even begin to understand how you must all be feeling,” Kelly frowned, eyeing Samantha and Roxanne in particular.

“Busiest week of my life,” Roxanne mumbled.

“I’m sorry that you—” Kelly bit her lip. “That your sister . . .”

“Don’t be,” Roxanne stated, glancing up with a cold glare to meet Kelly’s discomforted gaze. “You didn’t take her from me.”

Kelly nodded and cleared her throat before reaching back into her bag. “You’re all probably wondering why I’m in charge now—”

“Yeah . . . Wouldn’t Wilson be next in line?” Emma questioned.

“He wants nothing to do with the Foundation from this point on,” Kelly explained, rifling through her bag.

“Can’t blame him,” Barry scoffed.

“*And* as the new acting administrator,” Kelly cleared her throat, “I’ve made a critical decision I wanted you all to be present for.”

“That being?” Diana asked.

“Any and all activities within the Foundation in any way related to child endangerment and or ethical violations are being shut down immediately,” Kelly dictated. “Whatever Maximilian and his circle sought to gain out of this . . . twisted organization, if anything at all, is in no way worth the damage it’s caused.”

“Look who grew a pair,” Barry snickered.

“Do you have the power to do that?” Bonnie inquired, nervously leering at the doctor.

“I will, with a little leverage,” Kelly declared as she pulled out a manila folder and gently laid it on the table. “So, I wasted no time pulling this together.”

“What is it?” Bonnie asked.

“In short, documents I intend on publicly leaking *today*,” Kelly explained as she opened the folder. “If I were to just continue to keep this under wraps, Maximilian’s interests wouldn’t have it. The Foundation is directly backed by world governments and has been since its conception in the eighties.

“Copies of anything and everything damning I could find in the Site 9 archives are in this folder,” Kelly stated, beginning to thumb through the documents. “Abduction cover-ups, government funding, body counts, murders, the NDAs we were forced to sign, the hidden clauses of our federal contracts . . .” She grew quieter as she spotted the waitress making her way back over before outright silencing herself as the drinks were set on the table.

The waitress herself seemed to be able to physically feel the tension from the table and almost immediately fled upon setting down the round of glasses and mugs.

“But what will leaking it do?” Barry cluelessly questioned.

“Public awareness is a powerful weapon,” Emma replied.

“And that folder will piss off every single parent in the states that gives a damn about their kids,” Diana added.

“Precisely,” Kelly thrummed before tucking the folder into her bag. “As far as the United States government is concerned, you’re no longer citizens. Every single Orphan is quietly declared dead shortly after being abducted. If they caught wind about this before anything reached the public, they’d wipe us out and no one would be any the wiser.

“So, it’s simple. We make the public aware and we keep our lives as well as government funding, though instead of continuing the Foundation’s work . . . it will be put toward the well-being of everyone who’s been affected by it,” Kelly explained, before slowly turning her attention to Roxanne. “Which . . . brings me to this,” she said, sliding a paper across the tabletop toward Roxanne.

Roxanne glanced down at the sheet. “What is this?”

“A legal document,” Kelly expressed, setting a pen down beside it before nervously beginning to fiddle with her wedding ring. “It’s regarding something I need to ask you, Roxanne . . .”

“Ask away,” Roxanne said.

“I’d . . .” Kelly cleared her throat. “I’d like to purchase your farm, immediately.”

Roxanne slowly blinked, raising her head up and cocking a brow. “Why?” she softly asked.

“The Orphans are all in dire need of a *home*. . . Right now they’re being given clothes and some proper food, and in the meantime, their cells are

being turned into temporary dorms,” Kelly reported, then glanced down at her hands. “Though it can’t stay that way. Site 9 is not a home, and it never will be. But we can’t just let them go out on their own either. A great number of them are too young, and they’re all far too different to be widely accepted, let alone safe. And it’s not like they know anything other than concrete walls.”

Kelly nervously began to tap at the table, expecting a no. “They’re mostly just kids. They don’t just need a home; they need somewhere they *want* to stay.”

Roxanne dragged the document closer to herself, squinting as she began to skim through it. All the while Kelly appeared to grow increasingly nervous.

“I know the last thing you want is anything to do with the facility, or us, but—”

“I’ll do it,” Roxanne softly declared, quickly pinching the pen between her fingers and raising it to the dotted line.

Samantha grunted and sat up, finally tuning into the conversation at hand. “Roxanne,” she mumbled, “you don’t have to . . .”

“I do,” Roxanne retorted, leaning back up. “Willow would have in a heartbeat, and besides . . .” She smiled halfheartedly as she glanced down at her chair. “I don’t think I’ll be able to return to dancing . . .”

“After what’s happened, I promise you’ll never work another day in your life,” Kelly affirmed.

Roxanne’s smile slightly widened as she began to sign the paper. “The money is appreciated. But helping those kids come back to some form of normalcy is something my sister would’ve done, and that’s almost worth it to me alone.”

“Thank you, Roxanne.” Kelly beamed. “The kids will be ecstatic to hear this.”

“Here it is, gals,” the waitress called out, bounding over with a tray of plates. “Eat up, for me,” she said, placing the plates down before them.

“Oh thank god,” Barry exasperated, staring down at two entire baskets of chicken and fries. Before Barry could even take a bite, however, Bonnie practically dove right in.

Samantha was rather surprised at Bonnie’s willingness to start shoveling down greasy junk food, but then again, after the day they’d had . . .

Suddenly, Samantha’s nostrils perked up as a sweet, buttery scent overtook her senses. She glanced at the plate in front of her, staring at the strange divot-filled food dripping with powdered sugar and butter. “That’s . . . a waffle?”

“Would you like some syrup, darlin’?” the woman asked, holding up a small handheld syrup dispenser.

“S . . . syrup?” Samantha squinted before looking up and back at her mom. “What’s that?”

“It’s . . . like a sweet sauce. If you care for sweets, it’ll make it taste even better,” Diana explained.

Samantha quickly turned back to her waffle and gulped. A little more sugar couldn’t hurt. “Y-yes please,” she meekly replied.

The waitress smiled and poured a decently unhealthy amount of syrup all over the waffle, filling its craters and smothering it in further sugary goodness. “I guarantee you’ll like it. Enjoy,” she promised before setting down the dispenser and walking away.

Her excitement was abruptly stunted as she realized while looking at the plate that she still didn’t know how to use the silverware. Without Willow here to feed her, she was . . . lost.

Diana must have taken the hint, having lifted her arm up off Samantha to reach for the silverware herself. Samantha watched as her newfound mother sliced up the waffle into bite-sized chunks, then pierced one of them, only to hold it out in front of her mouth. “Go ahead,” the woman beamed, smiling down at her.

Stunned at Diana's awareness, her cheeks reddened a tad in joy. She averted her gaze and leaned in to take a bite. The second the sugar hit her tastebuds, her eyes flashed. She was absolutely mesmerized by the taste.

"This all . . . does beg the question though," Bonnie hummed as beside her Barry too began ravenously tearing at her chicken tenders. "Where will we all stay in the meantime?" she asked, wiping her lips with a napkin.

"As long as we're together, it doesn't matter, right?" Samantha said softly with a mouthful of waffle.

The group nodded.

"The three of you can stay with me," Diana spoke up, fetching another waffle chunk for Samantha. "My apartment isn't enormous or anything, but it's enough to accommodate you all."

"Y'know, if you'd made that offer *literally* twelve hours ago, I would have thought you were nuts," Barry snickered after gulping down some chicken.

"Regardless," Bonnie started, giving Barry the stink eye, "we greatly appreciate it, Miss Gray."

"Diana's just fine," Diana interjected, raising her free hand.

"Alright then. Work will begin this week. I'll pull whatever strings I can to get the project completed as fast as possible," Kelly assured them before appearing to remember something, turning, and reaching back into her bag. "Oh, and one other thing . . ."

The doctor pulled out a small, folded flannel with a distinctly familiar black and red pattern. She swallowed nervously before laying it on the table in front of Roxanne. "I had this recovered for you."

"That's . . ." Samantha thrummed, almost choking on her mouthful of food. The last time she'd seen that particular piece of clothing wasn't long ago, but it'd been soaking in blood.

“Willow’s flannel . . .” Roxanne muttered as she almost immediately scooped it up in her hands. “She was wearing this when she died, wasn’t she?” she asked, running her fingers along the fabric.

“Y . . . yeah . . .” Samantha nodded with a trembly exhale.

“I had it washed for you,” Kelly replied. “Again, I’m sorry for your loss, Roxanne.”

Samantha stared longingly at it with misty eyes, wishing more than anything that Willow could wear it again. However, she, unfortunately, knew she’d never get the chance to see that garment wrapped around her smiling farm girl ever again. For a moment, she thought she’d never even get to touch it again until Roxanne slowly held it out in front of her.

“R-Roxanne?” Samantha said, raising her head curiously.

“Take it,” the woman softly whispered.

“I . . . I c-can’t take this from you . . .” Samantha stammered, shaking her head with guilt. She’d already deprived Roxanne of her sister, she couldn’t possibly deprive her of her belongings, too.

“If anything, she would have wanted you to have it,” Roxanne lamented before holding it out even further. “Please, Sam.”

Samantha peered down at the flannel and hesitantly raised her tiny trembling fingers to grab it. The second she touched it, her tears began to roll again. Its texture, its scent . . . She slumped back down against her mother as she tightly curled her fingers into it, hugging it to her chest. “Thank you,” she whimpered.

Kelly somberly smiled, then began to gather her things. “I should get going. I’ve got documents to leak, and phone calls to make,” she explained before sliding her bag up over her shoulder. She scooted out of the booth and rose to her feet, but before stepping away, she said, “I promise I’ll give you all something to smile about.”

Chapter Nineteen

Silence in the Willows

Samantha sighed into her forearms, watching through the back windshield as an endless stream of barren trees pulled away behind them. The last of the leaves had fallen, leaving the entire landscape dim and colorless. The skies unfortunately reflected the same fate, with a thick sheet of swirling, dark, dreary clouds stretching as far as she could see.

The longer they drove down this dreadfully unexciting road, the deeper she sank into the seat and the more she frowned. She knew it wouldn't be much longer until they reached the farm, which only worsened her ever-capsizing mood. Her stomach groaned not out of hunger but out of unease. She wasn't sure how she'd feel seeing the farm again. Part of her didn't even want to find out.

She almost felt ashamed of her hesitance to go back. She should be happy . . . right? After two months, the farm was finally completed, and in those two months, she'd had the time with her mother that, for much of her life, she could've only ever dreamt of. Not only that, but she'd even heard that Roxanne's health was doing better and that the remaining Orphans had been transferred there.

But to her, none of that mattered. . . . She knew the farm would just be a place of remembrance for her, short-lived memories that would only continue to sting and bite more than they already had been.

“Kinda hard to believe the whole thing got done so quick, y’know?” Barry voiced, leaning up against one of the doors in the second row.

“Kelly did say she’d do everything she could to get it completed quickly,” Bonnie recalled from beside her, glancing up from her phone. “Besides, an executive order granting us enormous financial aid after the . . . *massive* public backlash probably helped.”

“She made a smart move,” Diana praised from the front, steering them through the winding roads. “We would have been fucked otherwise.”

“Ha,” Barry scoffed, crossing her arms and smugly grinning. “I could’ve taken them.”

“I—” Bonnie squinted, “who? The *entire* United States military?”

“Easily,” Barry proudly declared.

“As if,” Bonnie rolled her eyes, “I highly doubt there’s even a *group* of Orphans capable of wiping out an army, let alone *one*.”

“I hate November . . .” Samantha quietly interjected from the back, pouting as she did.

“Huh?” Barry hummed, glancing over the seat. “Why?”

“It’s dark . . . It’s cold . . .” Samantha’s tendrils only curled tighter beneath her flannel. “Everything’s gray,” she whined, glancing back at the group. She looked much healthier than she had before, although dark bags still dominated the space beneath her eyes.

“Come now, it’s not all bad,” Bonnie optimistically thrummed. “That just means the first snowfall is coming!”

Barry snickered a bit and turned back to the blonde. “I’ve never seen you get excited about something so simple. I’d expect that if I handed you a book about peach farming or something.”

“Books are intriguing, just not nearly as special to me,” Bonnie clarified. “My sister and I would always sit together and watch the snowflakes through

our living room windows,” she lamented before letting loose a nostalgic sigh. “What I’d give to share that with her again . . .”

Diana appeared far more focused on Samantha’s state than the thought of snow, watching her brood through the rearview mirror. Compared to the lot, Diana certainly seemed to have changed the most.

Gone was the commander’s armor and uniform. For once, she actually looked like a civilian minus the handgun strapped to her hip. She was wearing dark skinny jeans, boots, and a white turtleneck sweater. Her arm was still in the brace Kelly had given her, albeit mostly hidden by the sleeve of her sweater. The stitches on her cheek had long since healed, though a lengthy strip of scar tissue still remained.

“Sam . . .” Diana softly called, her smile dropping the longer she watched her, “I’m sure you’ll feel better once we arrive, okay?” she cooed, adopting the sweetest tone she could as if attempting to inspire at least *some* optimism in her.

“I hope so,” Samantha mumbled, staring back out the window.

“So . . .” Barry cleared her throat, “all the others were already sent, right? Eva and my gals are waitin’ for me?”

“Correct,” Diana affirmed. “Every last Site 9 Orphan has been released. They’ve been settling in.”

“Just . . . Site 9?” Bonnie queried.

Diana tightened her grip on the steering wheel. “There’s . . . a significant problem with the others.” She sighed, “Which, we’ll be discussing with Eleanor when we arrive.”

“Hm . . .” Barry hummed, glancing back at Samantha for input, but she was far from interested. “I’m curious to see what the farm will look like,” she vocalized, leaning back against the seat to get closer to Samantha. “Though, I never saw what it looked like to begin with.”

“It was warm . . .” Samantha suddenly said as she slowly peered back to the leafless treetops. “It was quiet, calm, and . . .” She then leaned up from her seat while glancing around, completely torn from her train of thought as her surroundings began to look familiar.

“Aaaand?” Barry beckoned.

“This is the road,” Samantha gasped. “A-are we there yet!?” she cried, turning to face the group. Her heart immediately skipped a beat as she spotted partly harvested grain fields.

“Almost, sweetie.” Diana lightly chuckled, seeming to brighten from Samantha’s sudden excitement.

Samantha’s throat dried and her tongue grew stiff as she spotted the rooftop peeking just over the tips of the grain. “That’s it!” she pointed out, raising her hand and gesturing toward one of the left windows.

Samantha whined as they turned into the driveway, her vision obscured from her current position. Likely due to her obvious impatience, once they came to a stop, the group quickly poured out of the car onto the freshly paved concrete.

Samantha’s little cerulean eyes sparkled as she looked around. It was almost unfathomable and much more than she’d expected. Nearly all of the grain aside from the meager amount remaining that they had passed had been removed, and in its place was freshly lain sod and trees. A vast number of large trees had been moved onto the property, creating an extensive and wondrously secluded yard around the buildings. The trees stretched out across the fields, gradually increasing in number before cleanly meeting the edge of the forests that surrounded them. It was almost unrecognizable to her, but in such a beautiful way.

Samantha slowly turned, looking back toward the building, or rather, *buildings*. The main house appeared to have quadrupled in size, now more than capable of housing dozens. It nearly resembled a mansion now, but still

felt like a quaint and soothing-to-look at farmhouse. The soft off-white paint job almost made the expanded garage unnoticeable. It seamlessly blended in with the rest of the structure. The handier Orphans would surely enjoy that.

The sudden cries of children nearby seemed to be the final bit of confirmation Samantha needed to smile again, even if only for a little while. They weren't cries of pain, but cries of joy and happiness. Not only were they playing with one another, but their augments and abilities were put on full, shameless display. They were embracing each other.

Entirely overwhelmed, Samantha's knees began to wobble a bit. She never could have imagined it would be like this. It was more than she'd hoped for. It was . . . perfect.

"Sam?" Diana asked, looking back at her. "Are you alright?"

"It's . . . amazing." Samantha squeaked.

"Looks good, doesn't it?" Kelly chuckled from the significantly expanded porch, which now boasted a hammock and several chairs. She rose from one of them and stepped behind Roxanne, who was sitting next to her in her wheelchair before beginning to gently roll her down the ramp alongside the porch.

"She followed my instructions to the letter," Roxanne chirped, smiling brightly once again despite her handicap. As they moved from the shade of the porch into the light of the sun, she turned her head to glance back at the house's newly acquired girth. "It came out amazingly."

"I'm . . . absolutely . . ." Samantha happily sniffled. "I can't even describe it . . ." she mewled while rubbing her eyes.

"It's truly astounding work," Bonnie praised.

"There's far more to be developed below ground, but this certainly does the job for now." Kelly beamed.

“It’s really cool to see the little ones so giddy about it, too,” Barry snickered, eyeing the kids as they played what looked to be hide-and-seek around the grounds.

“Oh yeah, they love this place,” a familiar spikey light blue-haired girl said as she stepped from the doorway.

“Eva!” Barry cheerily called out.

“Sup, Knuckles.” Eva grinned.

Barry quickly bounded up the steps. “Come here, you frosty dork,” she said before they locked hands and pulled one another into a firm hug.

“Good to see you, Barry,” Eva buzzed in Barry’s iron grip.

“It’s great to see you *not* looking like shit,” Barry snickered as they pulled apart.

“Tch,” Eva scoffed then stuffed her hands in her jacket. “I’d say the same, but you always look terrible.”

“Oh shut up,” Barry sneered, reaching up and plunging a hand into Eva’s spikey, frosty hair. “Everyone’s really here, huh?”

“Everyone. The gang’s waiting for you,” Eva relayed, peering up from under Barry’s arm.

“Hey, gals!” Barry shouted back over her shoulder. “I’ll be inside!” she exclaimed.

“Don’t get lost!” Bonnie snapped back slyly.

Barry rolled her eyes and waved her hand. “Yeah yeah,” she scoffed while stepping inside with Eva.

Samantha was far from paying attention to their conversation and was more focused on her incredible surroundings. So much had been done, she almost couldn’t believe it was real. She was only knocked out of her daze by a gentle squeeze on her wrist as Roxanne took her hand in her own, grabbing her full attention.

“I took the liberty of putting some of Willow’s things in your room,” Roxanne noted. “I hope it helps you feel more at home.”

Samantha sniffled and wiped her eyes with her free hand. She finally returned the smile, and while nodding, she shakily muttered, “Thank you, Roxy.”

“I hate to be a wet blanket,” Kelly quietly interrupted, “but there are some things we need to discuss before I leave, and they’re . . . *important*.”

“Of course.” Diana nodded, placing her hands on her hips. “Come along, girls. Bonnie, you may have to wrangle up Barry.”

“Oh, believe me, I already counted on it.” Bonnie sighed, disappearing from sight in a blur.



“So, what’s the problem,” Bonnie inquired, releasing her hold on Barry’s ear and sitting down on a couch.

“Jeez, why’d you have to drag me in by the ear!?” Barry whined, rubbing her earlobe.

“I wouldn’t have had to if you listened the first time.” Bonnie glared, folding her hands in her lap.

“It’s . . . a bit more than one issue.” Kelly sighed before lifting her glasses and rubbing her tired eyes. “I haven’t gotten sleep since I found out, and I can’t believe I didn’t notice it until recently.”

“What is it?” Barry asked, slumping down beside Bonnie.

Diana and Kelly glanced at one another for a brief moment. Kelly sighed again and leaned back in her chair before stating, “We’ve lost all data and contact with every single site aside from Site 8, and The Vault.”

“W-what!?” Samantha sputtered.

“All of them!?” Barry cried.

Diana crossed her arms and slowly nodded.

“Every single one besides those two,” Kelly murmured as she began to nervously tap her nails on the armrest. “We don’t know where they are, how many Orphans they have, or even what they were built for . . .”

“How is that even possible?” Bonnie softly inquired.

“Michael was able to dig something up in Maximilian’s office about a death contingency,” Diana said. “We think that’s more than likely what went down.”

“*Contingency?*” Barry spat as if the word had no business being in her mouth.

“Yes . . .” Kelly frowned. “More specifically, it was a plan he devised so that if he were to pass, his work would continue . . . *somehow*,” she grumbled, disgusted at the thought of his influence lingering in any way.

“Elaborate,” Bonnie pressed as she leaned into the conversation. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

“The Hydra Contingency,” Kelly replied. “That’s what it was called. His watch was fitted with an obnoxiously accurate pulse monitor, if his heart were to stop by any means, it would send out a signal to activate the order.” She glanced over, meeting Bonnie’s confused and skeptical gaze. “In short, it orders every single site head to take their facility off the grid, and to ensure that, it wipes all digital site archives of any data relating to other installations.”

“Then how do we know where those two are? I’ve never even heard of them,” Samantha inquired.

“Because we already know they exist, and we’ve been to them before,” Diana explained.

“But . . .” Bonnie brought a hand to her chin. “If the Foundation is government-backed, why don’t we just ask them?” she asked.

“Because we already tried,” Diana grumbled. “They were eager to give us money to make themselves look good after Kelly’s dossier began to spread, but with us having no proof that the other sites even exist . . . we’re out of luck.”

“I thought this was over,” Samantha whined and lowered her head into her hands.

“As far as we’re concerned, it is,” Kelly affirmed. “Everyone here is safe, and we can all start living *somewhat* normally again. But if we’re going to find the other sites and help the other Orphans, we’ll need to expect to do it on our own. I doubt the government will try to stop us, but they sure won’t help either.”

“Great,” Barry snarled, leaning her head back against the couch.

“What do we do then?” Samantha quietly questioned, peering through her fingers.

“At the moment, nothing. We have no intel to go off of,” Kelly explained, “but if we find anything, you three will be among the first to know. For the moment . . . just enjoy yourselves, alright?” She wearily smiled.

The three hesitantly nodded.

“Alright, well,” Kelly sighed and rose to her feet, partly stumbling due to her exhausted state. “I’ll be leaving now. I’m going to see if Eryn and Michael have found anything else useful in our physical archives—” She yawned while covering her mouth.

“Understood,” Bonnie said.

“Get some sleep while you’re at it.” Diana lowly barked as if giving Kelly a direct order.

“When I find the time.” Kelly loosely smiled.

Before she could even step away, Samantha quickly rose and moved right in front of her. Samantha then looked up, meeting Kelly’s baggy eyes with her own.

“Yes, Sam?” Kelly mumbled, before suddenly squeaking, “Oh!” as the thirteen-year-old suddenly hugged her.

“Thank you,” Samantha said, muffled by Kelly’s chest.

Kelly’s smile slightly widened as she placed a hand on Samantha’s head. “There’s no need to thank me, but you’re welcome, Sam.” She sighed, relieved to see some joy in Samantha’s heart. “You deserve a home, all of you do. So please, enjoy it to the fullest.”



“You’re not staying?” Bonnie curiously inquired.

Barry leaned up against a tree with her arms crossed and shook her head. “Nah . . . I’m not,” she confirmed.

“Then . . . I don’t understand,” Bonnie huffed. “Why’d you wait until the house was done?”

“I wanted to make sure everyone was safe and together,” Barry explained, shifting her attention from the blonde to the kids playing off in the distance. “Now that they are . . . I don’t have a reason to stay. As far as *I’m* concerned, I’m grown. I need my own space, not somewhere to hide away.”

“I . . . suppose.” Bonnie frowned. “You really want to go out on your own, huh?”

“Don’t get all teary-eyed, I’ll be around.” Barry snickered, glancing back over at the blonde. “Plus, we got phones now, right? You can text me every day if you’ll miss me that bad,” she teased.

“Tch, as if.” Bonnie scoffed, but Barry’s jeering did bring a smile back to her lips.

“You know . . . You could come with us. Boston’s an exciting place, and while I may have Eva and Onyx, I’d love to have you, too,” Barry offered, grinning hopefully at the blonde.

“No thanks,” Bonnie declined while keeping her smile. “I think I’ll remain. The kids need someone to take care of them, and I don’t think Roxanne can handle them all. But I also want to get my academics back on track.”

“Of course you would, egghead.” Barry chuckled, resting her head back against the tree trunk.

“Come on, let’s walk around for a bit,” Bonnie prodded before beginning to step away. “I’d like to see what else they remodeled.”

Barry was quick to follow, stuffing her hands in her jacket pockets as they stepped between trees. It didn’t take long for them to round the house, but they kept a decent enough distance to observe it in its entirety.

A new porch had been constructed off the back, leading down to a pool area off to the left and a garden wrapping around the patio. It was a fantastic-looking and large area and would have been impressing Barry had she not been dealing with more . . . *intrusive* thoughts.

They weren’t new thoughts, but they had been plaguing her mind for the past few months. She hadn’t had the opportunity to get them off her chest, worried how the others would react, but this time with Bonnie, this was possibly the last chance she’d get to talk about it for a while.

“Hey, Bon—” Barry suddenly called out.

“What is it?” Bonnie asked, still facing away.

“Do you,” Barry gulped and looked down at the ground, “have nightmares?”

“Nightmares?” Bonnie cocked an eyebrow as she turned around. “What on Earth about?”

“About what we did . . .” Barry uncomfortably shifted. “What we *had* to do.”

The wind was seemingly sucked from Bonnie's sails almost immediately, her shoulders slumping downward. She began to chew on her lip and reached up, nervously scratching at the side of her face. "Oh," she mumbled.

"Sometimes I come to half awake . . . and I feel it all over again," Barry said as she slowly pulled her hands from her pockets. "The vibrations blasting back through my fists . . ." She then tightly squeezed her fingers into her palms. "The *crunch* . . . and that last wheeze of air."

Barry uncomfortably hugged herself. "And then . . . I can't go back to sleep," she whimpered before cautiously raising her gaze. "Am I the only one who feels like that?"

"No." Bonnie coarsely exhaled, staring off at the house.

"We did what we had to . . . Right?" Barry asked with guilt dripping from her tongue.

Bonnie inhaled through her nose and straightened her posture. She flexed her fingers as if mimicking her grip on the knife she used to disembowel countless F.T.F. agents. "I don't know," she whispered, frowning as she pulled her hand to her chest. "But I never want to feel like that again, Barry. . . . I've never been made so hopeless or angry that I was willing to throw out everything I stood for, and *kill*—" Bonnie gasped, almost unable to even say the word. "I'll *never* allow myself to do it again."

Barry averted her eyes. For a reason she couldn't place, she felt as though she couldn't share the sentiment. . . .

"Nothing about it makes me more upset than the fact that after the first, I . . . I just kept going, and going, and—" Bonnie winced and closed her eyes. "At the time, their faces were a blur. But after? I can remember every single one."

Barry shivered slightly, as though ice had been dropped down her back. She hesitantly nodded. "You're not alone in that . . ."

"And you're not alone in regretting what we did." Bonnie sighed.

“I don’t regret *what* we did, but I do lament the fact that we had to do it.” Barry frowned.

Bonnie halfheartedly snickered. “Big words are unbecoming of you, Barry.”

“Don’t worry,” Barry chuckled with a slight smirk. “I won’t make a habit of it.”



“Goodbye Sam, I’ll see you again soon,” Kelly assured while gently petting Samantha’s messy black hair.

“You promise?” Samantha mumbled hopefully, looking up at the doctor.

“*I promise,*” Kelly repeated, smiling brightly as she glanced over to Diana. “I’m sure you and Emma will keep the kids safe. Once able, if you’d like, the Foundation will provide additional security.”

“We’d certainly appreciate the help,” Diana replied. “In the meantime, I’m sure we’ll do.”

“As if we’d even *need* the help.” Emma scoffed, stepping into the foyer with Briars closely in tow. “Diana and I got this place covered, don’t worry about it,” she boasted.

“I see.” Kelly amusedly chuckled before looking off to Briars. “Lieutenant, are you ready to go?”

“About that . . . m-ma’am.” Briars gulped nervously. She then abruptly turned and straightened her posture. “Sir!” she barked suddenly at Emma, catching the captain off guard. “I-I’ve got something I’d like to ask you . . .”

“Yeah?” Emma cocked a brow. “What is it, Briars?”

“A-actually, sir, if you don’t mind . . .” Briars’s straightened posture crumpled almost immediately. “Could you address me by my first name from now on?” she shyly requested.

“Oh,” Emma blinked before a sly grin stretched over her face. “Alright . . . *Denise*,” she chuckled, “what can I do for you?”

“I . . . I don’t think I want to return to the Foundation as an officer,” Briars said, nervously tugging at her uniform. “If it’s all the same to you . . . I’d like to stay here, sir. With,” she gulped, “with you.”

“You’d like to—” Emma muttered, appearing slightly puzzled. But it didn’t take long for her to notice Briars’s jittery movements and rosy cheeks. She raised her hand up and dragged it back through her hair before smiling brightly. “I’ve got no problems with it.” She beamed. “So long as Kelly doesn’t care?”

“W-w-would that be alright, A-Administrator?” Briars squeaked, peering over at Kelly.

Kelly couldn’t help but giggle in response. Times had changed significantly since she was in her teens and twenties, and she remembered the trouble she and Eryn faced for the longest time. Far be it from her to step between the pair. “That’s just fine. Consider your post reassigned, Lieutenant.”

“You’re leaving already?” Roxanne huffed as she wheeled over from the kitchen. “I just put dinner in the oven!”

“Enough to feed a shitload of kids?” Diana pressed.

“Believe me, it’s a whole ass roast bigger than your chest,” Roxanne retorted, causing Diana to blink and look down at her breasts. “If they eat the whole thing I’ll be amazed. But Eleanor, what the hell,” she groaned.

“You know I have work to do,” Kelly replied.

Roxanne sighed and leaned back in her chair. “You could’ve at least given me an exact time so I could properly thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Roxanne,” Kelly assured and leaned over before gently placing her hand on the woman’s shoulder. “You’ve given up more in your life than anyone should ever have to. You deserve peace.”

Roxanne reluctantly accepted Kelly's words, and her annoyance soon faded. "Oh!" she suddenly chirped. "That does remind me. Sam?"

"Yes?" Samantha squeaked.

"Did you see the plaque?" Roxanne questioned.

"The . . . what?"

Diana cocked a brow. "There's a sign?"

"Sure is, out by the mailbox . . . I'm surprised you missed it on your way in," Kelly teased. "Go take a look."



Samantha slowly walked down the driveway with Diana following her not too far behind. Her curiosity grew the closer she got to the mailbox, wondering just what the big deal was. Sure enough, right near it was a stone-carved half circle tilted to face oncoming traffic. Samantha hastily rounded it, then came to a stop once she spotted a silver-plated plaque firmly embedded in the stone.

Carved at the top of the plaque was a pair of held hands, and just below that, it read:

WILLOW'S HOME FOR THE ORPHANED

Samantha let loose a quivering breath as she slowly approached the stone. "Willow," she softly mumbled, raising her right hand and gently placing it against the carving. She stared longingly at it, wishing that things could have been different. But at the very least, the girl she'd loved would be remembered.

She then suddenly tensed up as Diana laid a hand on her shoulder. When she looked up at her mother, she was greeted with a smile radiating nothing but care and understanding.

Samantha reciprocated the smile, sniffing as saddened yet hopeful tears began to dribble over her bags and down her cheeks. She leaned into her mother's arms and closed her eyes, clinging to her sweater.

Maybe . . . she could finally heal.

Epilogue

Hardly able to keep herself upright, Kelly stumbled into the Operations room. She looked like an absolute mess. Her hair was frizzy, hardly held in its ponytail anymore by her scrunchie, and her glasses rested crookedly against her nose. “Please,” she groaned, pulling off her glasses and rubbing her eyes. “Tell me we have *something*, literally anything.”

“I wish I could say we did,” Mordecai sighed, leaning back into his chair. “The database was wiped so cleanly that it’s like the files weren’t ever there in the first place.”

“What about the files for Site 8?” Kelly grumbled, putting her glasses back on. “Have we made any headway?”

“No.” Eryn huffed, frustratedly leaning against the desk she’d been sharing with Mordecai throughout the evening. “They’re still locked. One more wrong attempt and they wipe, too.”

“And Doctor Magnus?”

“He *still* refuses to tell us the codes,” Eryn growled. “That fuckin’ asshole . . .”

“Goddammit . . .” Kelly whined, practically falling back into a chair. “And the notebook?”

“Still bordering on indecipherable and cryptic,” Mordecai mumbled, shifting his eyes to the leatherbound notebook resting on the desk amid the mass of unorganized papers they had been sifting through.

“Still not sure whose it even was,” Eryn shrugged. “Most of the pages that *could* be read have either been scribbled on, ripped out, or entirely redacted. And the shit that *isn’t* is entirely illegible!”

Kelly laid her head back against the chair and groaned. “It’s Lois’s,” she quietly sighed out.

“What!?” Mordecai choked. He quickly scooped up the notebook and opened it back up to a page filled with incomprehensible scribbles. “Why didn’t you tell me!?”

“Because I wasn’t sure!” Kelly barked back.

“Uh . . .” Eryn hummed, glancing between the two. “Who?”

“Lois?” Mordecai cocked a brow and leered at her. “Doctor Lois Sheridan?”

“I usually don’t concern myself with people who aren’t me,” Eryn smugly retorted. “Er, a-and my lovely wife, of course . . . Hehe,” she nervously snickered, avoiding Kelly’s unamused glare.

“Humble, Eryn,” Kelly grumbled.

“She was Maximilian’s second before Wilson.” Mordecai squinted. “The one who committed suicide?”

“Oh—” Eryn’s eyes widened. “I’m a dick . . .” she hissed quietly as she slid down the back of her chair.

“It was in a box of redacted files,” Kelly said. “There was also a physical copy of an Orphan’s data entry in there, but . . .”

“But . . . what?” Mordecai cocked a brow.

“The entire page was redacted,” Kelly stated.

“Even her designation?” Eryn prodded.

“The *entire* thing. It looks like a sheet of black ink,” Kelly reiterated, leaning forward in her chair slightly. “Maximilian never did release details on Lois’s suicide . . . but it must be linked to that Orphan somehow.”

“Could it be any of the girls we had contained here?” Mordecai asked, resting the book in his lap.

"I doubt it, she did her work elsewhere . . ." Kelly mumbled.

"Psh," Eryn scoffed, "duh. Besides, do you seriously think any of our girls could drive someone so nuts they'd kill themselves?"

"That's enough, Eryn . . ." Kelly huffed, annoyed.

"We have but most certainly aren't limited to: a girl that's *literally* a plant, one that can float, and one that can fly," Eryn listed, physically counting out each girl on her fingers as she rambled. "Do you actually think any of those could make someone that wackadoo, Michael?"

"I was just laying it out as a possibility," Mordecai grumbled.

"Enough!" Kelly groaned against her hands as she sank further back into the chair. She let her hands flop down into her lap, leaving behind several strands of unkempt hair draping over her face.

Eryn practically zipped her lips shut at the irritated cry of her tired wife.

Mordecai simply sighed.

"All I remember about Lois was her quiet dedication to her work . . . Until that last month when she cracked," Kelly recalled, rubbing her eyes once again. "She was trying to warn us about something. But every time she tried, it was like something or someone pulled on her leash to keep her quiet."

"Well, I bet any chance of finding worthwhile info in this is shot," Mordecai grumbled, raising the notebook back up and proceeding to sift through its scribbled pages once more. "Maximilian would have had that taken care of, no doubt . . ."

"Even in death he causes problems," Kelly growled.

Eryn sighed, resting her elbow against the desk and her cheek against her hand.

After a few more quiet moments of attempting to find anything substantial within its scribbles, Mordecai grew frustrated and threw it back down against the mess of papers. "It's just a load of nothing!"

Eryn frowned, leaning deeper into her palm. She glanced down at the notebook, viewing it vertically from her perspective. He was right, it was nothing, just scribbles and sketchy doodles with jagged lines. Though one line seemed a bit longer than the others. Before long, she noticed a second, too.

Eryn quickly sat up before grabbing hold of the notebook and dragging it in front of her.

“What’re you doing? I’ve already looked through it like six times,” Mordecai prodded.

“That’s a T,” Eryn blurted out, keeping the notebook tilted on its side as she pointed at the page.

“A scribble that looks like a T in a mess of other scribbles?” Mordecai huffed, “Whoop-de-doo.”

“No, no!” Eryn yelled out, sliding her finger to the side next to the jagged barely visible letter. “That’s an H!”

“Huh?” Kelly hummed, sitting up from her chair.

“It says *THE*,” Eryn cried, rapidly tapping on the page before sliding down to the bottom page. “And look, this one says *ANGEL*.”

Kelly glanced at Mordecai and then at the notebook before scooting closer. “Flip the page.”

Eryn slowly peeled the bottom page up, revealing the next two words.

“*OF DEATH?*” Mordecai hummed in confusion.

Kelly’s concern began to well up. If Lois went to this extreme of a length to hide a message she couldn’t even speak about out of fear . . . just what the hell was she trying to warn them about?

Eryn flipped to the next and final pair of pages.

Mordecai’s muscles stiffened as he scooted back in the chair.

“What the fuck does that even mean?” Eryn murmured, looking over the last two words.

Kelly uneasily gulped.

“The Angel of Death is coming.”

A Letter From the Author

First of all, I'd simply like to thank you all for reading the first entry in the Orphan Veil series, *The Stray*. Whether you purchased the book yourself or received it as a gift, I cannot even begin to express to you my sincerest gratitude! Samantha, her friends, and their journey are incredibly near and dear to my heart, and I can assure you this will not be even close to the last time you'll get to see them. I won't say too much just yet . . . but coming soon, Barry will have some exciting (and gay) adventures in Boston with her gang.

The road from conception to release was a long one, and I promise the wait for the next entry won't be nearly as lengthy. I've learned a great deal about what it takes to create a novel on this journey, and I now know of all the things I must account for in the future. It certainly wasn't easy, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I want to move forward perfecting my craft, and making every entry better than the last for your reading pleasure!

I know some of you may still be itching for more Orphan Veil content, and to be honest, so am I. So I've included some extras, mainly a small encyclopedia after this page shedding additional light on various elements from the book. If you'd like even more, consider visiting orphanveil.com. There you'll find lore entries, beautiful art, and upcoming project information. If you'd like to connect with me, or other fans, be sure you go to the socials page on the website and join our Discord server, as well as follow our Twitter, Facebook, and other social platforms.

Encyclopedia

F.T.F. - Stands for Foundation Task Force, the squads of six mobilized by the Orphanage Foundation for the purpose of abduction, security, and containment, among other various tasks.

Mem-Narcs - Short for Memory Altering Narcotics, utilized by the Orphanage Foundation to erase and alter the memories of individuals. Mem-Narcs are classified by their potency, with level one being used for erasing memories from the previous twenty-four hours, and level five being used to cause complete amnesia.

Orphan - The term utilized by the Orphanage Foundation with which to refer to children they've abducted who've been put through The Process. Orphans can have abilities ranging from incredibly destructive, to mild and harmless. All Orphans, however, share a small suite of intrinsic augments, such as but not limited to: enhanced healing, strength, and vision. They also share what the Foundation's researchers call a secondary mode, in which their eyes shift in color and their demeanor changes to be significantly more focused and violent. This shift affects some Orphans far more aggressively than others, and for some, it's almost like they lose all control of themselves.

Project Fireteam - The sole reason Site 9 was constructed. Orphans produced at or transferred to Site 9 were assigned to Project Fireteam to test their capabilities as three-person Black Ops units.

The Process - Not much is known about it other than that it is the only term utilized within Site 9 to refer to the manner in which Orphans are produced. Details on it are hazy, and likely only known by Maximilian Ford and his inner circle.

The October Breach - A massive containment breach that sent Site 9 into an absolute frenzy. It took place in October of 2016, roughly a year prior to the events of *The Stray*. During this breach, Samantha was gunned down and nearly killed, leading to her being the only Orphan put through The Process a second time.

Acknowledgments

While I may have written *The Stray*, I certainly did not traverse the road of its completion on my own. So here, I'd like to issue some special thank-yous to some special people.

I want to especially thank one of the most important people to me throughout this process, my good friend Robert. Over the last year, he has provided me with endless and vital feedback. Any time I want to dump on him about my writing, which is essentially daily, he pays complete attention and absorbs all of it. He may very well be one of the first and largest fans of Orphan Veil, and many things in my work would be incredibly different without him.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention all of my other beta readers, whose feedback has also been critical in the shaping of this series which I hold near and dear to my heart. So I'd like to thank my friends Sweth, Elizabeth, Sam, Vanessa, Matthew, Rebecca, my brother Richard, and my sister Gabriella.

Sweth, however, has done far more than just provide critical feedback; they were actually the cover artist! Sweth's enthusiasm made me smile ear to ear each day, because the moment I explained the plot after seeking them out, they wanted to read the entire story to gather better context and make the cover art look the best that it could. I was absolutely blown away by that dedication and excitement.

Last but not least, I must mention my wonderful editor/proofreader Nicole Frail. She's been extremely helpful during the final stages, answering all my questions and providing me with many ways I can improve my writing for

future entries. Without her, this book wouldn't be in the polished state that it is, and for that she has my sincerest gratitude.

Inspirations

It's no surprise that many properties had an influence on the creation of Orphan Veil, so I figured I'd share with you all some of the various pieces of media that have inspired me over the years.

Orphan Veil began to come together in my head one day after I had played *Call of Duty: Black Ops 3* on my PlayStation4. Within the game's infamous "Zombies" mode, there's a remake of a map from a previous game called "The Giant." In the opening cut scene of the map, there were two names that started everything for me. "Samantha" and "Doctor Maxis."

Those names alone were what began the process, but what really started to pull everything together for me was the X-Men film *Logan*. The movie struck many chords with me, and during that time I discovered the initial story I wanted to tell, a character becoming the parental figure to a strange, super-powered child who was on the run from a shadowy group seeking to harm her. That alone set forth the basis of the entire first draft, which revolved entirely around Samantha and Roxanne, with Roxanne being Samantha's motherly figure.

Roughly halfway through writing the first draft, I went to see the first Black Panther film in theaters. The abilities of the suits within the movie inspired the creation of our favorite little bombastic, snarky, and (sometimes slow) fighter, Barry. Her arms were inspired by Bucky Barnes from *The Winter Soldier*, and her look was based on a beautiful Instagram model named Brittenelle Fredericks.

Bonnie on the other hand, at least ability and hair color-wise, was inspired by Dio from the JoJo's Bizarre Adventure series. Her character, however, from the very start, was always extremely intelligent yet kind. My favorite thing about her in comparison to Dio is that she may very well be one of the most powerful Orphans in Orphan Veil, yet she heavily resents using her power for malicious purposes. Perhaps, she isn't even aware of what she's fully capable of.

To all you avid internet horror story readers, I'm sure you likely noticed one of Orphan Veil's largest inspirations. The facility and the Foundation itself, along with several of the naming conventions such as Mem-Narcs and F.T.F. were inspired by the wonderful internet writing project, the "S.C.P. Foundation." I have always been a massive fan of it, and it certainly has made a large impact on my work.

Without all of these wonderful pieces of media and many more, I wouldn't have been able to create Orphan Veil as it is now. We're blessed to live in a world filled with so much art and creative expression, and I think that drawing from pre-existing media and personal experiences for inspiration is one of the most wonderfully magical things on Earth.