

Chapter One: Containment Breach

Diana was more than a *little* pissed off; she was absolutely livid. The last thing she needed to be doing was wandering around the containment level with Maximilian, but here she was in an elevator with him and his pet, Wilson.

Wilson bothered her, but not in the same way Maximilian did. He was small and had a problem with staring; it dug up memories of someone she'd rather forget.

Maximilian was a different creature entirely. He was a lanky, arthritic man with the mind of a sadistic genius. He stood quietly, grinning and twirling away his white mustache, as though completely unbothered; she just *knew* something was up.

"This is a significant waste of my time, Max," Diana muttered with ire.

"Oh?" Maximilian asked, leering over his shoulder. His mustache curled with his smirk. "Why's that?"

"I have paperwork to deal with," Diana said plainly. It was tedious work—nothing but time cards, scheduling, incident reports, and weekly inventory reports on the FTF's arsenal, but it was better than this.

"The papers will still be on your desk when you return," Maximilian said snarkily. "We really should get you an assistant to handle your menial tasks."

"I'd rather die," Diana growled.

Maximilian softly chuckled. "Suit yourself."

His snark struck a nerve all too easily. It was like her efforts to remain calm and collected went out the window any time the man spoke. "What the hell are we doing!?" she yelled.

Wilson jumped mid-scribbling on his clipboard.

Maximilian's chuckles turned to laughter. "Come now, Diana, have you no heart? You don't want to say hello to any of the children?"

Diana squinted, irritated; he couldn't get away with fibbing discouragement in front of her. Even if he could, his approval wasn't something she needed or wanted. "There's nothing special about the sad children you've locked away here. They're just a liability now."

Wilson was now cowering behind his clipboard, evidently still spooked.

"And another thing—I have enough creepy brats staring at me as is," Diana snarled at Wilson, causing him to shift in the elevator closer toward Maximilian. "I don't need more."

"It's true," Maximilian said. "Many of them have outlived their usefulness to me." He placed his lanky arm over Wilson's shoulder. "Unlike this fine young man."

"Th-Thank you, sir," Wilson gulped.

"Perhaps . . . a liquidation of assets is in order?" Maximilian suggested grimly. "Maybe we need fresh blood, Diana."

Diana had her hands folded together behind her back. Her nails curled into her palms, bordering on drawing blood. He knew full well how she felt about this place.

"Maybe *you'd* like to choose the new arrivals this time," Maximilian said, turning to face her and making direct eye contact.

Diana swallowed down her curses and vitriol. She could never tell when he was bluffing; it made her skin crawl. "You wouldn't dare."

"Of course not!" Maximilian bellowed out with laughter. "Each of the children are worth millions, even the less-desirables. Besides, knowing what to look for in potential candidates is above your pay grade."

Diana drew blood from her palms with her nails. “Will you knock it off and tell me what we’re doing?” she growled softly.

Seemingly satisfied with her lowered tone, Maximilian maintained his smile. “Now, how hard was that, my dear?” He gently patted Wilson’s shoulder. “See Robert? She’s not so bad once you get to know her.”

“Don’t patronize me.” Diana scowled.

The elevator doors pulled open.

Maximilian casually waltzed out of the elevator. Wilson followed closely, although he kept his eyes on Diana; she glared back in kind. “As I understand it, Diana, you are the F.T.F. Commander of Site 9, yes?”

Diana heeled them. “You know I am, sir,” she said, fighting a twitch in her eye.

“Of course! And as acting site commander, it is your duty to inspect any new security arrangements, yes?”

Diana scowled. “Yes.”

“Bingo! Wilson, be a sport and give her a sticker, would you?”

Wilson didn’t budge an inch. At least the boy was smart enough not to offer her something so stupid.

Diana’s mood seemed so plainly visible that even the staff on this level were avoiding eye contact with her (more than usual, that is).

“Hey D, what’re you doing down here so early?” a gruff-sounding man called out. It was Gaius Jackson, the captain of F.T.F. Golf. He was an older gentleman, easily twenty years her senior, and somehow he was the only one on site that she could consider a peer.

Diana stopped, turning her attention to Gaius. “Captain,” she said formally. Though once satisfied with the distance put between her and Maximilian as he continued down the hall, she muttered, “Seems I've been dragged out of my office for a field trip.”

“Must be about the—” Gaius glanced around briefly. “I don't know if I should even say.”

“Just spill it, Guy,” Diana sighed.

“All I know, er . . . well, *officially*, is it has something to do with C.C. 19,” Gaius said quietly.

“Containment Cell . . . 19?” Diana muttered. “Why?”

“No clue,” Gaius replied. “Not even Parker knows, and she's a nosy little shit. Lotta foot traffic in and out of there over the last few weeks though.”

“I see,” Diana said.

Containment Cell 19. . . .

It wasn't good news, especially not after the last Orphan they kept in there.

“We'll discuss it later, once I figure out *exactly* what's going on,” Diana stated.

“Certainly,” Gaius smirked. “Cafeteria? 11am?”

Diana sighed and nodded. “If I'm still awake, yes.”

“Uh, C-Commander Gray??” Wilson called out from down the hall. They'd stopped too, and if her memory served her right, directly outside C.C. 19.

“The cell won't inspect itself, my dear,” Maximilian added.

“Ugh,” Diana winced in disgust. “Give my regards to your men.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Gaius said. “I'll tell 'em *Commander Gray* said hello.” He gave Diana a smirk, saluted, and then turned and stepped down an adjoining hall to return to his duties.

Although tempted to just turn around and go back upstairs, Diana begrudgingly made her way over to Maximilian.

“Have a fun chat?” Maximilian asked.

“Oh, the *best*, sir,” Diana said. Right away she could already notice something was strange; the door had been replaced. The only other cell on site with a blast door that thick was C.C. 18, and even then the Orphan behind it could probably still break through.

“What's this even for?” Diana asked.

Maximilian cocked a brow. “Pardon?”

“This seems unnecessary for a strung-up corpse,” Diana said.

“While I appreciate your imagination,” Maximilian slid his key card against a small terminal beside the door, “I wouldn't have dragged you down here to say hello to a cadaver.”

Diana tensed up as the buzzer rang and the fixture above the door lit up green. “Wait,” she said, placing her hand on her holster, “are you saying this cell is reoccupied!?”

The door opened to a small antechamber. Another, less fortified door with a handle, resided on the left, while an identically thick blast door was just ahead of them.

“Calm down, would you?” Maximilian teased. He approached and then opened the door on the left as if not taking a stroll into a potential hazard zone. “You know plenty well all cells on site are equipped with vestibules. There's nothing to be frightened of.”

Vestibules. Diana scoffed at his verbal flaunt. With Wilson just ahead of her, she entered with Maximilian into the adjoining room.

“Dr. Ford, should I run a system check?” Wilson asked; he seemed eager to show off a little.

“Of course,” Maximilian said. “It wouldn't be a proper inspection without one.”

Diana watched as Wilson sat at a desk and pulled a keyboard close . He pressed a key, and across the room several pieces of equipment and monitors buzzed to life with the Orphanage Foundation's logo, a circle with a symmetrical cross in the center.

The shrill beeps of a heart monitor filled the room. On the screens, blood pressure, oxygen intake, nutrient levels—were all displayed and adjusted in real time.

Diana almost immediately felt uneasy. She diverted her attention to a thick black panel on the wall; it was a pane of dense one-way glass. Through it she could see nothing but darkness.

No other containment cell on site has this much equipment in its observation deck. Diana thought.

“What is this?” Diana asked.

“Hm?” Maximilian hummed and turned away from the glass.

“If this was just a cell inspection, you wouldn't have bothered to take me here personally. You would've dropped a paper on my desk with a snide comment as always.” Diana stepped up to the man and got in his face. He was almost her height, only a few inches below her. “So what the *hell* is this?”

Maximilian only grinned and didn't say a word.

A twitch shot down Diana's arm, and she clenched her fist. She wanted to slug him. “I'm not interested in whatever shiny new little shit you've cooked up.”

“New?” Maximilian raised an eyebrow. “My dear, who said it was anyone new?”

The statement took Diana back. For a moment, confusion briefly outweighed her anger.

Just what did he mean by that?

Maximilian reached over Wilson's shoulder and grabbed hold of a receiver. He flipped a switch on the side, then held down the trigger and said, "Good morning, darling." The rumble of his voice emanating through the speakers in the cell thrummed quietly through the walls.

Across the room, the displayed metrics rose incrementally.

Maximilian twisted a knob on a small speaker beside the computer's main monitor. As he did, the labored breathing of what sounded like a young girl came through progressively louder.

"What?" the girl spoke harshly. It sounded as though one word was almost too much for her voice, as if she'd exhausted it by screaming for days.

"Nothing to worry about, my dear, today is a simple tour," Maximilian replied.

"Come and get a closer look if you're going to stare," the girl snipped.

Diana's eyes slowly widened as a creeping sense of familiarity slithered across her skin, littering it with goosebumps. She turned her attention to the glass and focused on the sound of the girl's breathing.

He wouldn't have, she thought.

No matter how hard she looked, Diana couldn't find a shape in the shadows. As the seconds droned on, the stress on Diana's shoulders piled up.

That girl, she sounded just like . . .

"Diana, the show hasn't even begun and you already look like you've seen a ghost," Maximilian teased.

"Turn the lights on," Diana muttered softly.

"B-But Commander! This Orphan has a particular sensitivity to—"

"I said turn on the goddamn lights!" Diana screamed.

Wilson looked back at Maximilian in distress.

Maximilian nodded at him with approval.

“Prepare for sunrise, *Reaper*,” Maximilian said to the receiver.

As the blood pressure indicator spiked, Diana's own blood ran cold. A brief numbness radiated down her legs, storming Diana's body with an urge to tremble.

“Don't!” the girl yelled. Sounds of thrashing and straining metal tore through the cheap speakers. “I'll rip my way through that *fucking* glass and tear you apart!” she snarled. “Don't you dare!”

“Such language,” Maximilian muttered with a hint of sarcasm. “Barricade has been quite the negative influence on this one,” he said, referring to another Orphan.

Sweat dripped down Diana's face as she kept her eyes fixed to the wall. The codename wasn't enough for confirmation, Maximilian *knew* that, which must've been why he said it.

Diana didn't break her unblinking gaze for a moment. Even as she felt Maximilian's grin stretch and his glare pierce the side of her skull, she didn't waver. She needed to know, and she'd cling desperately until the last second that he hadn't brought that monster back from the dead.

Wilson hesitantly flipped a switch on the wall.

The cell's massive halogen lighting fixture illuminated the room with a sudden *CLUNK*.

Light bathed a young-looking teenage girl within the cell. She was on her knees with her arms chained to the walls. Because of her forward lean, tangled black hair partly draped over her face. Most horrifying of all, behind her were four more chains, each connected to an individual metallic tendril that ended with a shimmering sickle-like blade.

The instant after the lights turned on, the girl thrashed against her restraints, squeezed her eyes shut, and cried out as if in pain. Visible cuts from the cuffs were appearing on her pale

wrists, which looked battered with bruises and scrapes from earlier struggles. The cuffs clamped to her tendrils shrieked horribly against the hooked back ends of their blades.

“I swear to you,” the girl panted between struggles, “the moment I get out of here—”

Maximilian slammed his palm on a precariously glowing red button. The chains sparked to life with arcing electricity, violently electrocuting Samantha. He held the button down, forcing the child to seize and shriek in agony for several seconds before releasing it.

Diana's breath left her lungs involuntarily. Her eyes widened and quivered from side to side. There wasn't hope to cling to anymore, not when the truth sat in front of her.

Samantha, Site 9's Reaper, the very monstrosity she put to death with her own tongue, still writhed with life.

“Now, now, play along,” Maximilian said. “Unless, of course, you'd *like* more correction.”

Samantha winced and stood up straight with half-open eyes. The tension she exerted on her restraints slowly lessened along with her rising vitals. As her eyes adjusted and the twitches faded, she stopped struggling, making the thick bags under her eyes easier to notice. She slumped forward against her restraints and sucked in jagged breaths through her teeth, only parting them when she heavily exhaled.

“Why? . . .” was all Diana could muster while watching a child wallow in rage and misery.

“Hm?” Maximilian hummed in response to Diana.

“Why on earth? . . .” Diana's fury returned, overpowering her briefly shocked nerves. “How—” her eyes twitched, and her fists shook with rage. “This can't be possible!” she bellowed, turning to leer at Maximilian in disgust.

“Oh?” Maximilian sneered. “Why's that?”

“*Because . . .*” Diana growled. She threw up her arm and pointed at the glass. “I watched that *thing* die with my own eyes!” she screamed.

Maximilian winced and stuck a pinky in his ear. “Your volume never simmers, does it?” he asked while twisting his finger side to side.

After another hefty exhale, Samantha arched her head upward and inhaled deeply through her nose. Her breath stopped short, and she sniffed the air. Her eyes shot open and quickly fixed themselves on the glass.

Eerily, it felt as though the child wasn't just looking at the glass, but at something behind it; Diana realized Samantha was staring at *her*.

“H—” Diana winced as she impossibly locked eyes with the girl. She steeled herself and continued on her tirade with: “How!? Answer me!”

“It's quite simple, really,” Maximilian said calmly. “An ichor such as hers is too valuable to just discard, despite her . . . *shortcomings*—”

“Shortcomings?” Diana repeated, blindsided by the audacity of the statement. “Shortcomings!?” she yelled. “Its body count among our *staff* is in the double digits! That *thing* tore through my men like they were nothing; like they were children with *fucking* cap guns!”

“All things *clearly* irrelevant when I have the child strung up like an ornament, Diana,” Maximilian replied. He secured his hands behind him and approached Diana. “Truth be told, she *did* attempt to escape—several times in fact. Little Samantha being a flight risk is nothing new—but the voltage we can send through those chains *is*. As you plainly witnessed, just as with Barricade, we found that electricity is a force she doesn't handle very well.”

Maximilian walked up beside Diana, facing the window. “I assure you, Diana, this child is nothing to worry about. Just a bug caught in an intricate web.”

“Yeah,” Diana scowled. “Because your webs have never failed, right?”

“You’re so feisty today.” Maximilian chuckled. “In order to save the girl, we needed to act swiftly. It wasn’t a simple task; your men had left her riddled with more holes than would have been worth counting. So, Sterling and I weighed our options quickly and came to an extreme but evidently fruitful choice.”

Diana would’ve continued to blow her lid, but she couldn’t shake Samantha’s persistent glare. She knit her brows together and returned the vitriol in kind. She hated this child and knew the feeling was mutual. “What was it? It couldn’t have been bandages and rest; she doesn’t even look the same.”

“Of course not; don’t be ridiculous,” Maximilian scoffed. “A second ichor transfusion was our only option.”

“A second—” Diana, startled by the revelation, turned her head. “A second transfusion?”

“Correct,” Maximilian grinned. “Look at you paying attention.”

“*How?* These kids can barely make it through the first one,” Diana said, ignoring Maximilian’s jab.

“Sterling shared the sentiment—concerned heavily that the mortality rate was a set of dice we couldn’t weigh. I would have agreed, had Lois not already proved it possible before her passing.”

Diana’s nose scrunched. Today was a day just full of names she never wanted to hear again; of course, Lois had something to do with this.

“However . . . the data from Lois’s success was something we couldn’t hope to recreate in a lab setting effectively.” Maximilian snickered. “It was more of a fluke than anything.” He glanced at Diana. “I *could* explain what she did—if you’re interested.”

“B-but sir, those files are—” Wilson started.

“Hush, boy,” Maximilian said, firmly grabbing and squeezing Wilson’s shoulder. The boy responded in kind by keeping his mouth shut.

“Aren’t I lucky?” Diana grumbled. “I don’t give a shit about anything other than *this* right now. Keep it to yourself if it’s unrelated.”

Maximilian hummed, shrugged, and removed his hand from Wilson. “Long story short, my dear—Samantha here managed to survive it.”

“Yeah. I can see that.”

“It’s a shame Lois wasn’t around to witness it. Truly, it was astonishing,” Maximilian boasted.

All of this would normally have caused Diana to blow her lid entirely, but the child’s persistent glare kept her grounded and focused. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Beg pardon?” Maximilian asked.

“Why is it looking at me like that?” Diana inquired.

Samantha hadn’t moved aside from her shoulders rising and falling with each breath. Her glare hadn’t broken either; Diana wasn’t even sure if she’d blinked.

“Looking at you?” Maximilian said, seemingly dumbfounded. “Don’t be absurd. You know our observation glass is one-way.”

“Yeah, and how often does the shit you tell me turn out to be anything but true?” Diana growled.

“My dear, I assure you, she *can’t* see you,” Maximilian said. “Smell you, however . . .”

Diana took a step to the left.

Samantha’s eyes followed.

“Fan-*fucking*-tastic,” Diana scowled.

“S-Sir,” Wilson spoke up.

Maximilian looked back at his assistant. Wilson held up his clipboard and tapped its edge with his finger. “May I?”

Maximilian glanced at Diana, smirked, then nodded. “Of course. When else would we have an opportunity so fine?”

Wilson stood up promptly and rushed to the window in front of Diana and Maximilian. Diana, surprised by the boy’s sudden boldness, stepped to the side to give him more space.

“You can see for yourself that Orphan Number 19 has undergone a second significant physical transformation. As you said yourself, she doesn’t look the same anymore,” Wilson began as he flipped through the dozens of papers on his board. “As long as the conditions of a successful transfusion occur within the recipient, a *process* of sorts occurs, triggering a series of transformative changes to varying degrees of intensity; all of which we *still* understand very little.”

“Thanks for the recap Chicken Little,” Diana muttered.

“It’s *important!*” Wilson yelled, turning around with matched intensity.

“It’s—*important*,” he repeated, smacking his clipboard as he did. “19’s body did something miraculous and completely unheard of!”

Wilson turned back to the glass and flipped another page, but he continued to speak without even looking at it. “Her body—it resisted much *fiercer* than the first time. We panicked,

fearing a failure, until it finally began. The Process didn't just shed the bone making up her tendrils—it replaced it with the flexible organic metal you can see for yourself.”

Diana focused on Samantha intently, trying to take in and understand the differences as Wilson lectured, but the girl's wretched, hate-filled gaze distracted her. She didn't resist the moment; instead, she met Samantha's eyes, establishing indirect eye contact through the impermeable glass.

Samantha's bottom lip curled upwards, and her face scrunched with rage. She hadn't thrashed an inch since noticing Diana's presence.

“It didn't just stop with her tendril, or even her secondary set of jaws—she didn't stop struggling until her entire skeleton followed.” Wilson explained. “The moment she got up, it was clear something *else*, something amazing, had also taken place. The added weight, a 55lb increase, didn't restrict her movement whatsoever.”

“So what?” Diana growled, throwing up her hand. “Yeah. You *dipshits* made her stronger, I gathered that! What else, Robert!?” she yelled, shoving his shoulder to spin him around. She then prodded his chest with her finger. “Is she faster now, too? Stronger? More durable? Maybe she shoots lasers out of her goddamn eyes!”

Wilson meekly froze for a moment. He pulled his clipboard into his chest and muttered. “W-well, yes. M-minus the lasers! Of course—”

Diana felt her strongest call to scream yet, but after opening her mouth found nothing to say. “Wha—You—”

Diana pulled her hand back, clenched it into a fist, and roared with frustration. She slammed her fist against the glass.

Samantha jolted in the cell. Not as though scared, but provoked. In response to the impact, she jerked forward against her restraints again, clenched her teeth, and over them clamped together a secondary row of sharp metal flesh-tearers.

Diana just stared at the girl. She couldn't think. The whole scenario was absolutely ridiculous from any perspective with logic and reasoning. To not only save something so dangerous, but save it by making it more dangerous? She could smell the blood before it had even been spilled.

“What have you done to prevent another catastrophe like last October from happening again?” Diana asked, stern and direct. “*Other* than flashy chains that might as well tickle her ass.”

Diana pushed off the glass. “Just a reminder, October 10th, exactly one month from now, will make it one year since the last time that *thing* got out.”

Diana got in Maximilian's face, looking down on him with eyes wide with anger. “Twenty six of my men were torn apart. Throats ripped out, eyes gouged, limbs severed—this *entire* floor was covered in mincemeat.”

Twenty-six families I had to contact personally and offer my condolences to. Twenty-six falsified obituaries I had to sign. Twenty-six lives, on *my* conscience, because of something *you* created.”

Diana raised her hand and pointed at Samantha again. “I *don't* care about how much money she's worth. I don't care about the research. That *thing* isn't human anymore.”

Maximilian, seemingly unbothered, turned and stepped up to the glass, away from Diana. “I disagree.”

Diana, dumbfounded, tripped over her own words before spitting out: “About what!?”

“About the notion that she's not human.” Maximilian shrugged. “I must say, my dear, I believe you’re mistaken.”

Diana watched as Samantha leaned back to lessen the strain on her limbs. But the girl didn't dare hide her teeth, continuing to bear them and growl.

“Humans regress when threatened—to a simple, primal urge to survive. It’s our past, where the species originated.” Maximilian placed his hand on the glass and grinned as Samantha snarled at them. “There’s nothing more human than that.”

Diana's face burned red with frustration. “Fuck this!” she yelled. She stomped to the door and nudged Maximilian with her shoulder as she passed. She reached for the door handle, but turned around suddenly to point at the man. “And fuck *you!*”

“So hurtful. I may have to take away your juice box privileges,” Maximilian sneered.

Diana had enough. If she didn't leave the room, she was certain she'd kill the man with her bare hands. She turned back to the door and grabbed the handle. Before she could twist it, a buzzing light on the wall beside the door slowly increased in brightness, then abruptly dimmed; Diana froze.

“Having second thoughts, my dear?” Maximilian snidely commented.

“Shut up,” Diana growled over her shoulder. The rest of the lights in the room followed with a flash and immediate dimming.

Wilson stood from his chair. “What the—”

The lights then began to flicker; the containment cell fixtures were no exception. Even the diagnostic monitors seemed to either cut out or freeze. There was no doubt about it—the power was failing.

Wilson seemed to realize it just as quickly, returning to the desk in a hurry as the display faded in and out. He began clicking the mouse and pressing keys in a desperate fervor, but the computer's response was slow or not at all.

“Wilson—” Maximilian said softly. He cleared his throat, then spouted, “Boy, what's happening?”

“A power surge? Maybe a generator failure??” Wilson said. A groan of frustration left his lips, and he slammed his fist on the desk. “Come on!” he yelled at the failing screen.

Diana looked to her feet and focused on a faint but rising noise a floor below; it was a whirring of sorts. The vibrations coming through the floor were different, as though shifted and more erratic. The distant generators choked, sputtered, and then died with a softening hum.

The flickering slowed, and the lights dimmed significantly, until a mutual *CLUNK* sounded off throughout the entire structure and the lights went out completely.

“Well, that's distressing,” Maximilian said.

The wall-mounted emergency lights filled the room with an abrupt and revolving red hue.

Diana rushed back to the glass, shoving past Maximilian again. She had to be sure Samantha was still confined. She could hardly see the girl with the dim red light flashing in and out, but she could consistently see her luminescent blue eyes.

“She's . . . confused,” Wilson muttered.

“It had better stay that way,” Diana grumbled. She switched on her radio only to be met with a flurry of voices from her receiver. F.T.F. agents on varying floors were all calling in the same thing.

“Clear comms,” Diana barked. The line went dead in seconds. “Carter, do you copy? Status.”

“You got it,” Danica’s voice buzzed. “I was passing by the access stairwell to engineering, ran down there right away once the lights went out.”

“And? What’s wrong with the power?”

“Generators are *fucked*,” Danica chirped. “Something went really wrong, the nerds say they look sabotaged.”

“Sabo—”

A loud groan of metal erupted from Samantha’s cell.

“Oh, dear God . . .” Wilson stammered.

Diana looked up to see Samantha jerking at the restraints on her arm to a gruesome extent. With each flash of low light, the metal tore deeper into the girl’s wrists until they scraped against the bone.

“Danica, I need you and the rest of Omicron at C.C. 19 immediately,” Diana ordered.

“On it, but I’m running solo; the rest of Omicron Squad are stuck on level 3,” Danica replied.

Diana’s eyes quivered, and the grip on her receiver tightened.

Samantha growled in anguish, pulling harder with each second. Blood drained down her wrist as though poured on it. Her eyes were so strained that her pupils had shrunk to pinpricks.

She’s going to keep trying to escape no matter what. Diana realized.

And with that thought, Samantha’s now brightly glowing cerulean eyes split apart and were overtaken by a furious crimson; the light in her eyes now brimmed with rage.

The weld of the anchor point plate connecting the shackles bound to her right arm and the wall ripped. The bolts immediately busted off afterward, and the entire plate was torn from the wall.

Diana squeezed her receiver so hard she worried she might crush it, but the fear in her heart was immense; it was happening again.

“Containment breach!” Diana screamed into the receiver. “Activate containment breach protocol! A breach through C.C. 19 is imminent, lock down the entire building, now!”

The F.T.F. comms erupted into another uproar that was quickly overcome in volume by the shriek of the sitewide breach alarm.

Samantha didn’t even take a moment to lick her wounds, immediately tearing the shackle cuff from her wrist with her teeth. She spat the segmented cuff to the floor, wrapped her left arm around its shackle, and with one firm pull ripped the opposing anchor plate off the wall with seemingly no effort.

After removing the left shackle cuff in the same manner, Samantha stood up straight, albeit somewhat wobbly. She abruptly twisted her body, and her bones rippled with cracks, releasing a year’s worth of tension in a motion; with it, a fragile wheeze left her body.

Diana gasped as their eyes met again. Samantha’s face scrunched as though she also noticed. It didn’t seem to sit well with her.

Samantha grit her teeth, snarled, then shoved her shoulder forward. Her tendrils snagged and scraped unmercifully against their shackle cuffs. She planted a foot ahead of herself, then *jerked* against the restraints. Her bare feet scraped slightly against the concrete as she slipped. She turned her head back, dropped her shoulders in a huff, then threw herself forward again.

Samantha continued to thrash and jerk at the final set of chains binding her to the cell. The floor vibrated with a groan as shrieking metal was accompanied by tearing bolts or welds. It would seem *those* chains were actually installed with care. But quickly, even they failed, and the largest anchor point's weld was completely torn to shreds.

The plate dragged against the ground as Samantha stumbled forward. She didn't take time to celebrate, though, and immediately went to remove the shackles with her teeth. She seemed less concerned about removing the cuffs themselves from her tendrils, as though a sense of urgency was starting to take over.

This is bad, Diana thought. If the cell doors weren't enough to hold her before, new ones be damned, she'll rip them apart!

Diana knew she had to intervene. She turned to rush for the door, but Maximilian stopped her by firmly grabbing her arm.

"What the hell are you doing!?" Diana screamed.

"Trying to stop you from killing yourself and us," Maximilian responded snidely. "That door isn't made from great material," he muttered quietly. "She'll break through the other before you even make it out."

Abruptly, a voice she recognized as Captain Dixie Crawford of F.T.F. Theta interrupted from her receiver. "Commander Gray, Theta's positioned for interception outside of C.C. 19. What's your status??"

Diana couldn't find her words for a moment. If a breach was a concern, why the hell wouldn't the observation deck be secure!? She, however, found her knot of thoughts bursting the second Samantha approached and smashed her fingers into the center part of her cell's blast door.

A shiver ran to Diana's feet. *Impossible—*

Samantha's fingers curled into the groove. Her nails were splitting, clear by the additional blood draining down her hands and wrists. She snarled through her teeth, putting everything she had into trying to force the door apart. It budged slightly, looking like it wouldn't move much at all.

“It’s alright!” Wilson said, almost relieved but still with a twinge of fear. “S-she can’t break that door open, it’s magnetically locked! Even if she gets it to move slightly, the secondary locks will—”

They then heard the metal crunch through the wall as said secondary locks split apart.

“She’s prying open the door!” Diana bellowed into the receiver.

“Copy. Are live rounds authorized?” Dixie replied.

Diana glared at Maximilian; he no longer seemed shaken, only looking as though he were completely unbothered. Her eyes twitched as his lips curled back into a smirk.

“Yes,” Diana ordered. “Kill the damn thing.”

“Heard, standby for interception.”

With a final shriek of metal, the inhuman beast ripped the door open. Just as she had, Theta must have manually opened the other blast door, as Diana heard Dixie yell, “Live fire! Live fire!” before the crackle of firearms filled the air.

Diana grunted, watching as a hail of bullets clashed with Samantha. The child was struck numerous times. Her arms, legs, even her head took a shot that pushed her back, but it didn’t knock her from her feet; it only really seemed to be pissing her off.

Samantha partially covered her face with her arms, and her tendrils quickly slithered in front of her. Shots now sparked off of her tendrils more than anything, but several more buried themselves in Samantha’s flesh.

Evidently, Samantha had enough, and in a sudden move reached out one of her blood-slathered arms and grabbed hold of one of the anchor plates. The next thing Diana knew the girl torqued her body and threw the plate at a blistering speed into the antechamber and likely out into the hall.

It must have struck somebody. Diana heard a voice cry out as the burst of fire was interrupted.

Samantha didn't take this opportunity lying down. The second she could move, she charged headfirst into the antechamber, and what Diana heard next was the thing she dreaded.

Horrible cries of terror filled the air along with desperate shots. As the seconds slipped by, so too did the voices of those crying out, and soon the final voice was cut off by something being slammed into the observation deck's door, thoroughly denting it inward.

Diana couldn't move. Her lung felt filled with lead, like breathing was even impossible.

The alarm continued to ring out in silence. With her hand already on her holster, seconds felt like minutes. Diana was just waiting for that creature to burst through the door, to come for her and take its revenge. But that fear left once she heard muffled shots being fired much further down the main hall.

Once she knew she was safe, at least relatively speaking, she pushed off Maximilian's arm and aggressively shoved him against the glass.

"S-sir!" Wilson cried out; he was met with Diana's gun in his face.

"*You*," Diana muttered, straining as she glared through Maximilian's eyes and into his skull. She planted her hand on his chest, pinning him.

Maximilian grunted at first. He grabbed Diana's arm and returned her gaze, but as always with a grin. Every time he smirked like that, she just wanted to put a bullet in his head.

"What the hell did you do!?" Diana screamed, Danica's choice of the word '*sabotage*' still ringing loudly in her ears.

"Pardon?" Maximilian said. "Could you speak up? I don't believe you're loud enough."

"You . . . *you* did something!" Diana yelled. "This reeks of your bullshit!"

“Diana, while I’d love nothing more than to be interrogated,” Maximilian's eyes softened and his grin deepened. “You're losing your chance.”

Diana faltered at the statement. “What?”

“Your favorite vessel of hatred, of whom you'd love to see face down in a pool of her own blood, is currently making a run for it,” Maximilian added. “How many more of your men will you let die?”

Diana pulled her gun from Wilson's face. “None if I can help it.”

She backed off of Maximilian and immediately rushed to the door. Gun in hand, she ripped the busted door open, only for a woman’s body with the Theta sigil on the chest of her uniform to tumble into the room.

Diana stepped over her and swung into the antechamber with her gun raised. “Check her,” she ordered, shooting a glance at Wilson.

The boy came to the woman’s side. He hesitated to touch, but looked her over. “Uhh, s-she’s . . . not bleeding—I think??”

“Her pulse, dumbass,” Diana snipped as she took careful steps toward the hallway.

“R-right,” Wilson said. Shaking, he put his hand on the woman's neck and fumbled around for the carotid.

Diana entered the hall, quickly clearing both directions before turning her attention to those scattered across the ground; it was a horror show.

Dixie must have been kicked into the wall. The chest plate of her vest caved in, and she slumped over, barely breathing while sputtering and letting blood drip down her chin.

The rest of Omicron wasn't so lucky. Diana couldn't make heads or tails of who she was even looking at. Arms and legs were severed and scattered about the floor. The bodies were

mutilated, some left with deep gashes and other with a vast collection of puncture wounds that must've been from Samantha's teeth.

Being the only one that was moving, Diana rushed to Dixie and holstered her sidearm. “Crawford!” she called out as she jerked a knife from her belt. She slit the sides of her vest and carefully removed the plate from Dixie’s chest. Relieved she saw no bleeding, she was still certain Dixie's lung was punctured or, at the very least, her ribs were broken.

“Hold on. Just stay awake, I'll call for help,” Diana assured, grabbing at her receiver.

Dixie didn't even move her eyes. She just stared at the ground, at a corpse not far from her like she couldn't believe her eyes. A soft, painful moan came from Dixie's lips as she exhaled.

Diana felt a pit of guilt open in her gut. Many of the FTF left at Site 9 were green, completely fresh replacements for those lost the year prior. Veterans or not, they were never ready to deal with something like *this*, not so soon.

“This is Commander Gray. Send a medical team down to C.C. 19 on level 6 immediately, we have agents down!—”

An echoing second flurry of gunshots erupted from a different hall on the floor. Diana heard screams, some of which briefly garbled through her receiver in sporadic bursts.

“*Dammit*,” Diana growled. She sheathed her knife and stood up straight, looking down the hall and toward a junction she could hardly see. The gunfire sounded as if it were coming from down there.

“She's alright!” Wilson cried out in relief, running out of the antechamber. He immediately gasped and his face filled with dread as he nearly slipped on gore beneath his feet.

Maximilian lazily wandered up behind Wilson with a lingering gaze fixed on the cell door. Even he looked surprised as he glanced around at the bodies with curious attention. “Magnificent,” he muttered as his eyes trailed a blood spatter that led up the wall and to the ceiling.

Diana cracked two blue glow sticks in her hands. She left one at Dixie's side, turned, and then underhanded the second into the antechamber.

“Stay with them until help shows,” Diana said. She drew her gun back out and quickly started moving down the hall.

Maximilian laughed. “Stay with them? My dear, there's an *active* containment breach.” He grabbed Wilson by the shoulder and steered him down the hall in the other direction. “I feel it's best if we take shelter. I'll leave the cleanup to you.” Maximilian held his hand out, and with a limp wrist shooed her away. “Deal with the child as you see fit.”

Of course. She expected nothing else of a man so self absorbed.

“Gray advancing on Junction 6A,” Diana said as she quickly moved forward. It pained her to leave the injured behind, but help was coming and she had to stop this from getting any worse.

A flash of personal fear struck her, and she quickened her pace; Danica was en route.

“Carter!?” Diana yelled out as she approached the junction. She turned the corner and was met with a sight that threw her gut in a twist. All she could see was a flashlight laying down the hall and in the center of the next junction, shining on the right most wall.

Diana rushed down to the second junction, and once she got close enough was able to see Danica lying on her side facing the wall behind the flashlight.

Fearing the worst, Diana fell to her knees and quickly turned Danica over. “Danica, are you still with me??” she asked, doing her best to keep her voice from trembling.

Danica groaned as she was laid on her back. “Yep, but sore—bruised,” she grunted and grabbed at her side. “Don't think I'm bleeding though,” she said as she sat up.

Relief briefly poured over her shoulders, that was until a burst of gunshots rang out to her right. She gasped, seeing that the ton door, the massive version of the individual cell blast doors that sections off portions of the structure, had activated. Looking over her shoulder, Diana confirmed her immediate suspicions that the other doors *hadn't* activated. “What the hell is going on?” she muttered to herself.

“Garfield and his squad are locked in there,” Danica said. “It closed right after the little bitch threw me into the wall and ran for them.” She met Diana's gaze with a concerningly vindicated glare. “Looks an awful lot more like sabotage now.”

“Son of a bitch,” Diana grumbled. She jumped to her feet and advanced on the door. “Quick, get ready to engage if she hasn't already run downstairs,” she ordered, pulling her key card from beneath her vest.

Danica scrambled to her feet as quickly as she could, clearly slowed by her injuries. But right as rain, she could retrieve her rifle and raise it in anticipation.

Diana plunged her key card into the door's terminal reader; nothing happened.

More muffled screams and gunshots came from behind the door.

“What's going on??” Diana pulled her card out and reinserted it multiple times—still nothing. “These damn things are supposed to be wired to the backup supply!”

“Oh, this shit gets better by the minute,” Danica muttered and slung her rifle over her shoulder. “Move, I know how to force it.”

Diana stepped to the side, and Danica dropped to her knees in front of the terminal. She reached beneath it and began work on unfastening a panel. "These stupid things have an emergency reader; beats me why it's not just the regular reader but, hey, since when did anything in this place make any fuckin' sense?"

"Ridiculous," Diana scowled.

"Don't beat yourself up about it," Danica muttered. She held her hand up the key card which Diana handed her promptly. "It's so dumb I might be the only one on site who knows anything about it."

Danica fumbled with the card for a moment, then stuck it into what must've been the reader hidden within the underside of the terminal. The light over the door didn't illuminate, but the pressure locks disengaged with a wispy hiss.

Danica jumped up. "C'mon, quickly, we've gotta slide it open!"

Together they grabbed at whatever point of leverage they could find and dragged the heavy door open. Thanks to the pressure release, it was moving, but it was still a massive, multi-ton metal door; it wasn't proving easy.

The door slid open just enough that they stumbled into the engineering access hall. The screams and shots didn't continue; in fact, it looked as though Samantha was just wrapping up. She was standing over a member of F.T.F. Victor with her foot pressing down on his neck, but once the door slid open, Samantha sharply pivoted to face Diana and Danica.

Danica didn't waste a moment. She corrected her balance with a step forward, pulled her rifle up from her side and proceeded to dump her magazine in Samantha's direction.

Danica's barrage inevitably struck Samantha several times. It shoved her back off the downed agent, and even though her arms and tendrils moved to defend herself, Danica's shots almost *always* made their mark.

The girl went on the defensive and made a split-second decision to turn and slam her body into the engineering stairwell door. The hinges snapped instantly, and she quickly disappeared down the stairs.

"Dammit, no you don't!" Danica yelled, bursting off down the hall after Samantha.

Diana rushed after her and called out, "Carter!" But it proved pointless as Danica too vanished into the dark stairwell.

Frantically, the agent Samantha was standing over, pushed himself into the corner of the hall. Diana looked at him, but it only seemed to snap whatever screws were left holding his head together, as in response he wailed in terror and suddenly drew his pistol on her.

Diana met his gun with her own the second he reached for it. "Garfield!" she yelled out, recognizing him as Evan Garfield. He was both the captain and now evidently the sole survivor of F.T.F. Victor. "Drop it, the fuck are you doing!?"

"You—" Evan's hand was trembling. "Y-you look like her!" he screamed, his finger twitching against the trigger.

"I'll put you down, Evan! You're not talking sense—get that fucking gun out of my face!" Diana barked, refusing to back down. She wasn't in the mood for shell-shock.

She spooked him enough for him to drop his gun in a panic and push himself deeper into the corner. "C-commander—" the man whined. "I'm sorry—I didn't—"

"Stay still," Diana said. "Are you injured?" She looked over her shoulder at the carnage she'd waded through.

F.T.F. Victor had been wiped out.

Like bloody party streamers, the squad members were strewn about in a macabre display. Sinew, organs, and endless blood coated nearly everything. Dry spots free of carnage were more rare than not.

“They’re gone—” Evan sputtered. “They’re all—She tore through them! T-tore us apart she—” Evan choked and grabbed a laceration on his ribs. He quivered as he wheezed, doing his best to avoid looking at the scraps left of his team, though his eyes seemed to continually return to them. “W-why is she still alive?” the man whimpered.

The question struck Diana like a bullet to the chest. She had long since forgotten how to feel disgusted at the sight of death. But the consequences of such death were never lost on her. It made her blood boil to know that anyone under her command suffered an injury, let alone lost their life.

“Just . . .” Diana hesitated. No one ever asked her to shoulder the blame; she just knew better than to push it aside. “Sit tight, Garfield.”

She grabbed her receiver to call in for backup, but held off for a second to collect herself. She’d been nothing but angry much of her life, and tonight was making it worse by the second.

If she was ever going to sleep again—that *thing* needed to die.