

# 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.