

ROT: Parent Night + Fight Night

The complete story

by Ry

THE THING ABOUT CURSE OBJECTS

Chapter One:

The thing about curse objects, they rot. And they can be found anywhere.

At a young age, Hollis Verne knew this the way other people knew the sky was blue or water was wet. A fundamental truth shaping how he moved through the world. Like at his prestigious new school, Willowbrook Academy.

Along the curb, sleek vehicles lined the drop-off zone, their dashboard terrariums glowing every shade of blue in flamboyant, pompous detail—a reminder that their money also had the absolute best emotional scores. Hollis surmised it put people at ease by focusing them on their jealousy. This was where everyone aspired to be: in a blue district, at a top school.

A large shadow passed overhead.

Government transport. Permitted airspace. The ultimate status signal as students smothering the open gates gawked with envy at the ride descending into the school's designated drop zone. They rushed toward whoever emerged.

Flanking the open gates, below blue welcome banners, tables offered fortune frogs. Staff in plastered smiles held them out. "Free fortune frogs for the new semester!"

Her uniform blazer—blue and white, inverted from his white and blue—sparkled with the standard-issue plant pocket over her heart, the bioluminescent moss inside pulsing her score and synched to the comm on her wrist; perfect blue for a perfect school.

Spotting him empty-handed, she smiled waving him over. "Free fortune frog. It will connect to your comm. The tongue will extend revealing the fortune. Good luck!"

Ominous. It wasn't supposed to be.

Hollis accepted it with a small bow. Heavier than it looked, its skin slightly warm and unpleasantly moist.

On his wrist, his comm—a thick metal bracelet with two screens—displayed his emotional score on the smaller top screen: a commendable blue 97.6. The lower, larger screen flashed a frog emote. Connection made.

The frog warmed in his palms. Its eyes illuminated blue.

A tongue extended with his fortune printed on it: Blue-1.

The lowest possible score. "Story of my life."

Hollis moved to the recycle bin, dropped it in, but one frog buried at the bottom was different. He brushed the others away for it. Black veins spread across its bio-synthetic skin like cracks in old porcelain. Cold to the touch. He dropped the frog, backed away.

Fuck. Not again.

He stepped closer, peered inside. It was affecting the others. Rotting them. On its extended tongue, Blue-10—the best possible fortune—didn't mean much now.

From green district to green district, not even the scanners saw what he did first. Even at Willowbrook Academy. Hollis sighed.

There was rot.

Should he fish it out? But what was the point? Impossible to tell who it belonged to. Probably just school nerves, first day jitters. The bin would be taken away, sanitized, compressed, recycled, handled. It wasn't his job. Wasn't his problem.

They wouldn't believe him anyway. No one ever believed him about the rot he saw until it was too late and he was moved again.

At least his good grades scaled, onto bluer pastures of the campus overshadowed by a massive sunflower three stories tall. It dominated the central faculty building, constructed of bio-tech petals that tracked the sun, as if to say no rot could live here.

A load of shit.

A large shadow passed overhead. Everyone rushed toward the government transport as it descended. A student exited with blonde hair.

Very blonde. Very long.

She held her own gravity. The entire school respected it, campus included—as if waiting for her cue, the sunflower brightened.

It connected to every student's comm as the morning bell rang. His displayed a map. His classroom location. Time for the pony show.

When he looked up, the girl with the long blonde hair left with the flock.

Hands behind his head, Hollis made his way, cataloguing the subtle signs of rot. Relatively clean compared to any green street, as it should be. A small amount clung to any largely populated area; it couldn't be helped. Most of it was too faint to worry about—frosting over doorknobs, desks, water fountains. Dust to dust.

In green districts, the rot was like a dog marking its territory, coinciding with aggression and anger. A piss stain he wanted to avoid for once in his life. Some would argue the aggression and anger was necessary to survive; not here and yet Hollis sighed when he entered the classroom. Full. A bunch of animals, his classmates.

Though every zoo was different. These mates were better groomed. They still gossiped like poor kids, mocked, lied, laughed at each other, and were mean like everyone else—in crueler ways and the same.

Some smarter, stronger, weaker, louder, quieter. And like a diamond among glass, the girl with long blonde hair radiated.

Among the rows of desks, the far wall framed three windows in plants. The empty seat in the back gave him a good view of her.

Mr. Alvarez clapped as he entered, shutting the door behind him. Chest pronounced, displaying under his mood moss the addition of a screen for his score, he wore blue 99.8 proudly as he walked to his desk in the corner. Taking a seat, staunch, he said, "I hope you all completed your summer homework. We will now begin presentations."

Dia Patel finished her speech about sustainable water recycling. A snooze fest. Even Mr. Alvarez's moss dropped to 99.7.

"Thank you, Dia, for going first." Mr. Alvarez clapped with measured enthusiasm. The rest of the class joined in. "Well done. Collect your score, please."

Dia walked to his desk with the confident stride of someone who'd practiced her presentation fifty times and thought she nailed it. The moment she took her graded paper, her mood moss flickered. Blue to green. Flickered again. Back to blue.

The shift was subtle but visceral. Students in her vicinity raised their brows, shifted their chairs, desks, feet, shoulders. Small distances. An inch here. Two there.

Control in a blue district was everything. She regulated, but showed weakness.

Dia's smile remained fixed as she returned to her seat, now an island in a sea of carefully maintained space. Fickle.

Mr. Alvarez pressed a button. Names randomized on the whiteboard. It settled on:

"Poppy Whitmore."

Every head turned to the blonde girl. She rose like smoke ascending—fluid, inevitable, impossible to ignore. Her uniform was regulation but elevated to art.

The blazer's shoulders caught the light from crystalline fragments hand-woven into the fabric. Each crystal amplified her mood moss's blue glow, making it pulse like a tiny captive star. The effect was hypnotic. Calculated. Expensive.

But it was her hair that made Hollis sit forward. It fell past her waist in waves that caught the morning sun through the windows, turning gold into something almost otherworldly. Hair like that took dedication. Obsession.

Poppy floated to the front of the classroom—or so it looked; her legs didn't seem to move behind her long hair and practiced grace. Under her name on the whiteboard, she spun like she was taking your hand for a dance.

She placed an apple on the teacher's desk.

When she smiled, everything brightened. Not metaphorically—literally. Her mood moss flared, and every plant in the classroom responded, leaves turned toward her like she was their sun and shined

brighter.

"Good morning." Her voice was sticky in all the best ways people enjoyed chewing.

"For my summer speech, I chose to explore the history of emotional sustainability in educational environments."

Five minutes about optimal learning conditions, about the correlation between collective emotional scores and academic achievement. Her hands moved in small, controlled gestures. She made eye contact with each classmate at precisely timed intervals without looking robotic.

Poppy concluded with a flourish. The class applauded. Mr. Alvarez looked ready to frame her in the hallway as the prime example. His mood rose to 99.9. She made everyone in the room better.

"Exceptional as always, Miss Whitmore. Please collect your score."

Poppy floated to his desk. When she took her paper—100%, of course—her mood exploded into a celebration of butterflies.

They materialized from the plant itself, circling her head in a display that had probably taken her months to program. Someone actually gasped. They all loved her.

Poppy returned to her seat, held the score in both hands. Still smiling. Still blue.

"Hollis Verne."

Mr. Alvarez had called his name. The randomizer had selected him.

He stood, noting how Poppy at her desk still hadn't released her grade. Her fingers pressed white into the page. She hadn't moved. Sat still. Didn't blink.

He made his way to the front, feeling the weight of their distance. Once given the sun to enjoy, he was not even as pretty as the moon.

"Hello." He kept his voice deliberately flat. "I'm new to your school. My name is Hollis Verne. I did my summer speech on the history of the fortune frog."

Hollis began his presentation. His attention drifted to Poppy.

Gripping the paper over her desk, she hadn't moved. Sat still. Didn't blink.

He detailed how plants proved to be an excellent conduit for the emotional agency reaction. How early models exploded in the hands of anyone with an emote score below green 80. When he finished, the applause was polite but confused.

Sometimes he had to remind himself to blink. Blink, Hollis. And smile, dammit.

Mr. Alvarez looked mildly concerned. "Thank you, Hollis. That was... informative. Please collect your score."

Hollis took his paper—90%. Teachers always scored him low at first.

Soon he would climb the ranks. Hollis returned to his seat.

His comm flashed white. All of theirs did.

"Fifteen minutes, everyone," Mr. Alvarez announced. He picked Poppy's apple off his desk and sank his teeth into it.

Students rose in choreographed chaos, friends immediately clustering. Poppy's admirers swarmed her, pulling her toward the door. She finally set her paper down on her desk as they tugged at her arms, laughing about something trivial.

Hollis made his way over. Not making a big deal. Just glancing at her score flat against her desk.

Fuck. Not again.

On the edges where she'd held it, snowflake fingerprints. Thicker than dust. Spreading. Growing. Rot. When no one was looking, he folded the paper and pocketed it.

"Hollis." Mr. Alvarez chewed his apple. "Get some fresh air. That's the point of the breaks."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

He didn't know why he said thank you. His pocket with the paper was fucking freezing.

Rot gave him the creeps. In the sun, part of him wished he didn't see it.

~

The classroom opened onto a square columned courtyard. Plants at the base and top of each column played soft classical music. Each corner played a different tune. In the center, a three-tiered water fountain with plant-koi—smaller to larger in each bowl—swam in soothing patterns. Pearl benches lined every side.

In the sun seat, Poppy held court with three other girls and a guy.

Hollis lingered behind a column. Far enough to seem disinterested, close enough to catalogue. She seemed okay. Not normal—too pristine for normal, that hair was not normal—and the ice cold emitting from his pocket kept his eyes peeled for nothing he could see.

His comm flashed. Break over.

He caught Poppy glancing at him. Quick, between laughs. Subtle adjustments to keep him in her peripheral vision as he moved to where they'd been sitting in the sun.

On the bench, the same snowflakes of rot.

With his foot, he wiped it away. The school would sanitize everything overnight. Minor corruptions. Nothing that couldn't be explained away or ignored. Nothing that could truly be tied back to her—even her grading paper, now that he'd taken it, could be blamed on him.

He had seen this pattern before. It scared the shit out of Hollis.

~

The rest of the morning passed in careful observation.

Chemistry: Poppy measured solutions while her lab equipment developed hairline stress fractures. PE: She ran laps like a gazelle while the track beneath her feet aged into tired sand with every stride. Art: She painted in vibrant blues and greens while the brush in her grip quietly wilted. Minor. Faint. The kind of wear and tear that happens anyway. Hollis catalogued each instance, building a case only he could see.

By lunch, he'd worried himself half-bald. This girl—this beloved sunflower of the school—was its slow poison. He lost all appetite, but his scholarship paid for the food program, and he would never turn down a free meal.

In line, he spotted Poppy seated with friends. She'd brought her own food. A bento box. She used chopsticks that formed into orchids at the ends.

Two guys in front of him. One said, "I wish Poppy would sit on me."

Hollis butted in. "What do you know about her?"

"Huh? Who are you?"

"I'm the new kid. And since I'm new and Poppy's such a sweetheart, she said I could sit with her today. So unless you want me to relay the message about how you'd like her to use your face as a chair, I'd be interested to hear the word on the street."

"Her mom's Miranda Whitmore—Director of Education Development. Divorced. Word on the street is she knows how to get a bill passed. Do me a favor and tell Poppy I'll be her chair."

They barked at each other, laughing as they moved up in line. Animals.

Hollis got a tray. That explained the government transport and the deference from teachers. A big shot expected to perform. It didn't account for the plants.

Plants didn't lie — only humans do that. For them to react as they did, from class to class, there was genuine brightness in her.

There was also rot.

~

After school, Hollis positioned himself by the gates as students flooded through. Parents didn't attend like they did for drop-off; the rides were all empty, automated, waiting.

Poppy stood with her cluster of friends, saying elaborate goodbyes. One by one, they peeled away.

Just Poppy now. Checking her comm.

When she turned and saw him, something flickered across her face. Not quite fear. Not quite anger. Something rawer: a mix of understanding and revulsion.

He snorted, considering letting her rot. Hollis turned and walked away, hands in his pockets.

He gripped her folded 100%. It was cold.

He'd done that before. Walked away. It didn't end well.

Hollis removed his hands from his pockets, turned back, and jogged over to Poppy, knowing helping didn't end well either, but—dammit.

"Hey. Poppy, hi. Do you have a minute?"

"You're the new kid. Hollis." She eyed the empty government pickup zone and the clear sky. The sunflower basked above them. "How can I help you?"

"Are you okay?"

The question hung between them like a blade. Like he was trying to rob her or asked if she'd kill herself. Her smile remained fixed, but her eyebrows twitched—a hairline crack in the facade.

"Why did you say that?"

Her voice was flat. Controlled. Dangerous.

"Who are you to say that to me?"

She was right. He was nobody. A transfer student. Broke green trash who saw things others didn't. Someone she could have removed from school with a word to her mother.

"You're right." He swallowed. "It's crass and rude, but that doesn't mean the offer is no less true so I'll ask again—do you need help?"

She looked at him. Really looked. And he saw her—saw something behind the performance.

Behind them, a soft hum filled the air. A large shadow passed over. A government transport descending. Some of her blonde hair blew into her face. She brushed it away.

"If you speak to me again, I'll fucking ruin your life."

She boarded the transport without looking back.

Hollis watched it rise and disappear into the regulated airspace. He considered leaving it at that. None of his business. Yet.

Yet he saw it. Saw her.

Hollis kicked at the ground. Tomorrow, he would collect evidence. Tomorrow, he would document what no one else could see. Tomorrow, he would begin to understand what was killing Poppy Whitmore from the inside out. Because in her eyes, in her soul, he'd seen the swirl. The kind of rot that gets sucked in, pulled deep where it grows in the marrow. If such emotional damage was rising to the surface like the frost in his pocket—

This was only the beginning.

Chapter Two:

At lunch Poppy took a long drink from the water fountain near the windows, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and returned to her friends.

Hollis checked the fountain. Marked like the rest, but despite Poppy dusting the campus with rot and the minor damage over time it would cause; it didn't immediately harm anymore. Nothing the cleaning crew wouldn't be able to sanitize between each day. If this was as bad as it got, that would be okay; a walking bad luck magnet, but no one would get seriously hurt.

Maybe he was over reacting. Comparing green district outcomes with blue district kids was clearly not aligning.

“Are you going to use it?”

Huh? Hollis turned to a girl with pig tails. She pointed.

“The water fountain.”

He looked at the giant marks. “No. It’s all you.”

He stood aside. The girl drank.

Hollis looked away. Checked his comm.

A wet, violent sound.

He looked up. The girl was doubled over, vomiting onto the tile floor. Students nearby scrambled back. Someone called for a teacher. The girl heaved again, confused and humiliated, tears streaming.

“Fuck,” Hollis whispered.

He was wrong. Third-party harm. That changed everything. It would only get worse.

~

After lunch, Hollis found Gail at her locker. Yesterday, Poppy had returned a tube of lip balm to her. Sea foam green. He wasn't going to make a big deal about it, but after water works at lunch; he needed to get ahead of Poppy instead of reacting.

“That lip balm,” Hollis said. “Sea foam color. I'll give you a hundred credits.”

Gail's eyes went wide. “It's worth fifty? Are you a pervert”

“Hundred twenty. It has nothing to do with you. Take it or leave it.”

The transaction completed with a cheerful chime that felt obscene. Hollis pocketed the lip balm. God only knows what would happen if she used it.

He took the balm to his locker, placed in a evidence bag along with Poppy's test. Time at Willowbrook became a scramble of collecting all of her discarded effects and more and more evidence bags piled up.

~

Friday morning, Hollis arrived at school with a reputation.

"That's the guy," someone whispered as he passed. "Bought Gail's lip balm for a hundred and twenty credits."

"Heard he digs through trash."

"A transfer. Green district. Explains a lot. He kind of looks like a rat."

He kept his head down. His moss steady blue. In the courtyard before first bell, Poppy held court as always. The sunflower tracked the morning light.

She didn't look at him.

~

Friday lunch, Poppy finished her bento, set down her chopsticks, and crossed the cafeteria to throw away a napkin. On her way back, she passed Hollis's as he rose to go retrieve her trash.

Already reaching in, a voice stopped him. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Poppy stood directly behind him. Her friends watched from across the room. Other students turned. The cafeteria's ambient noise dropped. A trap. She timed this.

"I heard from Gail you bought my lip balm." She stepped closer. "You've been following me. Collecting my things." If they weren't watching before, everyone was now. A public execution. She was forcing his hand.

"What. Are. You. Doing?"

From the trash Hollis pulled her tossed napkin with no way to prove it was hers besides the ice chunks of rot. He showed it to her: "You're a walking time bomb," he said quietly. "Leaving landmines everywhere. Either you don't know it, so I'm cleaning up after you. Or you do, and I need to stop you. Do you see this; this is rot."

Wrong way to do it; students murmured. Her smile didn't waver. Behind her eyes flickered the same rawness he'd seen at the gates. Understanding. Revulsion. Fear.

"If you'd like to talk about it," he added, "we can. More privately. I can help you."

Poppy shook her head. Clear contempt. "You're fucked."

She turned and walked back to her table. Her friends absorbed her into their orbit, asking questions she answered with a laugh and a wave of her hand. Nothing. Nobody. Just the weird new kid.

They watched him leave. Fuck them.

He walked to his locker. It was empty. That's not good.

His comm buzzed. A message from the administrative office: 'Mr. Verne—report to Director Pemberton's office immediately.'

Chapter Three:

The door to Director Pemberton's office was flanked by Veritas traps.

Two dozen modified flytraps mounted in a vertical garden frame, their pink-white mouths closed in patient rows. When a student lied or when their stress spiked past acceptable thresholds, the mouths opened. Hungry for the tell.

Hollis entered. The traps remained closed.

His collection was already spread across Pemberton's desk. The graded paper with frost fingerprints. The lip balm. The graying pencil. The hair tie coiled like a dead snake. A juice box. Items tagged and bagged in clear evidence containers, looking like he did their job for them, but he doubted they would see it that way.

Director Pemberton sat behind the display, mood moss a steady 99.5. Mr. Alvarez stood by the window, arms crossed, disappointed.

"Mr. Verne." Pemberton's voice was measured. "These items were recovered from your locker. All belonging to Miss Whitmore. Can you explain?"

Hollis looked at the Veritas traps. Closed. Waiting.

"It's rotting," he said. "All of it. She's contaminating everything she touches."

The traps stayed closed.

Pemberton picked up the graded paper, examined it. To his eyes: a perfect 100%. Red ink. No decay.

"I see a perfect grade."

"The edges. Where she held it. The frost pattern—"

"I see paper, Mr. Verne. There is nothing else on it."

Mr. Alvarez shifted uncomfortably. "Hollis, Miss Whitmore maintains a perfect blue. She's been exemplary since enrollment. What you're suggesting—"

"I'm not suggesting. I'm telling you what I see."

The Veritas traps remained closed. Every mouth shut. No deception detected.

Pemberton studied him for a long moment. Then his gaze flicked to the traps. Back to Hollis.

"What district did you transfer from?"

"I've been transferred between several green districts, and one yellow but that—"

"Ah."

The syllable contained entire volumes. Condescension. Suspicion.

"Your moss has remained blue throughout this conversation," Pemberton said slowly. "Which is... notable. We'll be monitoring your adjustment."

Hollis understood. The plants had proven he wasn't lying. The humans had decided that made him dangerous.

"You're receiving an official warning. Any further incidents regarding Miss Whitmore will result in expulsion. She, and her family are upstanding members of our community and we will not allow for you to tarnish that reputation and by extension ours; the very same hand that feeds you on scholarship. One would think, you would be a little more grateful." Pemberton began sealing the evidence containers. "These will be held pending review."

"Run advanced sensors on them. Please. Something."

"We'll follow appropriate protocols."

The dismissal was clear. Hollis stood, walked to the door. The Veritas traps watched him go, mouths closed, truth verified, meaning nothing.

Behind him, Pemberton was already dictating a note to his comm. About psychological evaluation. About adjustment disorder.

Plants don't lie. People just don't listen.

~

Monday morning, Poppy walked to school to Hollis's surprise watching from across the quad as she entered the gates. Her uniform was perfect. Her smile was perfect. Her moss was perfect blue. But she moved wrong. Mechanical. A puppet remembering how strings worked.

The sunflower tracked her across the courtyard. It didn't brighten.

Throughout the classes, people saw Poppy having an off day and didn't say anything. They let her be. School and life in swing, it happened. Even perfect people had off days.

Hollis saw acceleration.

After school, Poppy didn't wait for friends. She walked straight through the gates, turned left instead of right, and headed toward the residential district.

Hollis followed.

He kept his distance. One block back, then two when the streets emptied. She never looked behind her. Never checked her comm. Just walked with the focused blankness of someone going somewhere they dreaded.

The Whitmore residence announced itself before he saw the address. Government hover-car in the driveway, charging ports dark. Bio-integrated vines crawling the white walls, their usual blue glow dimmed to almost nothing.

Poppy entered through the front door.

Hollis waited. Five minutes. Ten. No lights came on inside.

He crossed the street. Circled to the side of the house. Found a window, peered in.

Dark. Empty. A living room that looked like a museum exhibit — everything positioned, nothing lived in.

He moved to the back. Kitchen door. Locked. He pulled out a thin tool, worked it into the mechanism.

The lock clicked.

Inside, the house was silent. Cold. The climate control seemed to be malfunctioning — he could see his breath in faint clouds.

An orange extension cord snaked across the marble floor, running from an outlet in the kitchen, through the foyer, up the stairs.

Hollis followed it.

The cord led down a hallway, under a door. From inside, he heard something. A mechanical whir. Power tools.

Then silence.

The door opened. Poppy emerged, dragging the cord. She carried an industrial saw, the blade gummed with something black. She didn't see him — too focused, too gone — and disappeared down a back staircase.

Hollis slipped into the room.

The primary bedroom. An egg dominated the space.

Six feet tall. White-black surface pulsing with purple veins. It hummed with organic electricity, frost spreading across the floor around its base.

Protruding from its center — a hairbrush. Mother-of-pearl handle. Expensive.

Hollis heard about manifestations. Read leaked reports. Seen conspiracy theorist photos. He'd never seen one in person.

He stepped closer. The humming intensified and the cold deepened. His breath came in thick clouds. Inside that egg, he could guess was Miranda Whitmore.

Dead or becoming something else. And her daughter had been alone with it for — how long? Days? The whole weekend?

Hollis reached for the brush handle.

“DON’T TOUCH IT!”

The scream came from behind him. He started to turn.

Something hit the back of his skull.

Black.

Chapter Four:

Hollis woke to his own reflection.

A vanity mirror. Ornate frame. He was tied to a chair facing it, wrists bound to the armrests. Hollis didn't struggle.

Behind him, Poppy sat on her bed, brushing her hair. A different brush.

"Four hundred twelve. Four hundred thirteen. Four hundred fourteen."

"Poppy. The brush."

"Four hundred fifteen." She didn't look up. "You're awake."

"Is that your mom? In the egg; is that your brush?"

The brushing paused. In the mirror, he watched her face cycle through something — grief, rage, exhaustion — before settling back into that practiced blankness.

"Four hundred sixteen. She's resting."

"That's not rest. That's a cocoon."

"Four hundred seventeen. She took my brush. Four hundred eighteen. For a dinner party. Four hundred nineteen. She always takes my things. I can't say no."

Poppy stood. Walked toward him. In the mirror, he watched her approach.

"Four hundred twenty."

She positioned herself behind his chair. He felt her fingers in his hair.

"Don't—"

"Shh." The brush touched his scalp. "A thousand strokes for me, I can do the same for you. We'll match. I've never brushed a boy's hair before."

The first stroke felt like ice. The second like fire. By the third, he could feel his skin beginning to harden.

"One. Two. Three."

In the mirror, white-black crust spread down his forehead. His reflection disappeared beneath scales that pulsed with sick light.

"You wanted to understand my rot?" She kept brushing. "Four. Five. Now you get to feel it. Six."

His hearing began to muffle. The world narrowed to the mirror, her voice, the spreading numbness.

"Seven. Eight. Did you know my mother made me do this every night? Nine. Ten. One thousand strokes for perfect hair. Eleven. She'd count along. Correct my posture. Twelve. Tell me all the ways I was failing. Thirteen."

The cocoon crept over his ears.

"Fourteen. But I got very good at it. Fifteen. So good I could think about other things while I counted. Sixteen. Like how much I hated her. Seventeen. How much I hated this house. Eighteen. How much I hated being perfect. Nineteen."

Through the spreading crust, Hollis heard sirens. Blue and red lights flashed through the bedroom window. Poppy froze mid-stroke.

"You called them," she whispered.

"Before I came in," he managed through lips that were hardening.

Her mood moss flickered. Blue to green.

"No. No, no, no that's not fair."

Green to yellow.

Her skin changed. The pink complexion went translucent, purple veins visible beneath like tributaries of something wrong.

"This isn't fair. I didn't — I was handling it. I was perfect. I did everything they told me. I did everything right. Why is this happening?"

From downstairs: "Special Forces! Nobody move!"

The house shook. Boots on marble.

Poppy's moss hit orange. Her skin fully translucent, purple light building beneath like a storm under glass. "I was perfect," she said to no one. "I was always perfect."

Her body folded inward. The same crust that covered Hollis emerged from inside her — but where his came from outside, hers came from within. Years of suppressed rot finally breaking free as the bedroom door burst open.

Two officers, two hammers. One end flat, the other a curved claw. The older said, "Get the boy."

The younger officer rushed to Hollis, reversed his hammer, used the claw to crack the cocoon forming around his body. Pieces fell away like broken porcelain.

"Can you walk?"

Hollis couldn't answer. His jaw frozen.

The officer lifted him, carried him toward the door. Over the man's shoulder, the older officer approached Poppy's folding and convulsing form.

Hollis watched him unscrew the hammer's handle, revealing a spike. He closed his eyes.

Then he was outside. Cold air. A government transport descending. Hands lifting him into the vehicle. The Whitmore house shrinking below. Blue and red lights painting the white walls.

Then nothing.

The interview room was gray. A table. Two chairs. A box between them.

Detective Kaine sat across from Hollis, older of the two from Poppy's bedroom. Weathered face.

The box held everything from school — his collection, still tagged, now properly scanned.

"How are you feeling? Medical treat you alright?"

"Fine."

"They can be prickly." Kaine tapped the box. "The thing about curse objects is they rot."

Hollis looked up sharply. The old detective smiled at that.

"You were right. We reviewed these items. Every single one contaminated with class-three rot or higher. Your school's sensors couldn't detect it even after you told them. We owe you an apology. Sorry."

The door opened. A younger officer entered — Silva, who removed cleared him from the cocoon and house. He sat in the third chair, and with gloves, placed a pen on the table.

Kaine nodded. "What do you think about that?"

The pen looked normal. Hollis picked up, and then dropped it. Black veins across the surface.

"How long have you carried that?" Hollis asked. "It has some heavy rot on it."

Kaine nodded. Gestured to Silva, pale face, picked up the pen and bagged it like it might explode. "Return it to the lab."

"Yes, sir." Silva left quickly.

"That pen has become our new litmus test. Only our lab scans have been able to ping it; besides you just now. That is a valuable skill."

"What happened to Poppy?"

"The Whitmore women are in intensive care. Specialized facility." He paused. "It's best if you don't see them again. For everyone's sake."

Hollis met his gaze. They both knew what intensive care meant for manifestations. There was no coming back. But the lie was kinder than the truth.

"I understand."

Kaine pulled something from his pocket. A badge. Junior Apprentice Division.

"You have been dealt a shit hand at life. We can try to better that for you, put you back to Willowbrook or another school on scholarship with letters of recommendation that will make you a shoo-in for any University when the time comes, assuming you maintain a level of acumen that given your academic history shouldn't be a problem."

"Or?"

“Or we can train your eyes. Put them to work so things like this don’t happen again. Your record also illustrates this perchance for trouble and sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. We can hone that; give it purpose.”

From his pocket, Kaine slid a badge across the table. He picked it up.

Real. Heavy.

“Train with us. It will be a hard life. You will question it almost every day. You see friends die, and innocence and guilty. You will make difference in the world; but keep in mind there are more than one ways to do that. This way, is not for everyone. I certainly wouldn’t wish it upon my son if I had one. Take some time to think about this apprenticeship. There is no hurry.”

“When do I start?”

Kaine snorted. “You’ll finish your education.” Kaine stood. “Weekends with us until you graduate.” He moved toward the door, then paused.

“That collection of yours — we’re keeping it. Evidence of your first intervention.”

It wasn’t his first. He had seen horrible things growing up, but something told Hollis so did Kaine.

“I want you to know up front Hollis. You can’t save everyone. The rot’s too deep. All you can do is identify the critical ones before they go terminal. Save who you can. Contain what you can’t. It sucks, but that’s the hard truth.” He left.

Hollis sat alone with his badge. Twiddling it.

The thing about curse objects is they rot.

People do too. And the thing about Hollis Verne: he could see it happening.

ROT: Parent Night

Part-1

‘Whose Problem?’

Episode 1: THE THING ABOUT GOOD BOYS

Chapter One:

Upon Flint Carver’s blue approach, the ride’s door opened. They weren’t even on the clock yet, guy wore his flare, and with the small plant in his blue emote arms, Hollis Verne laughed, not looking up from his case files. “What’s with the plant?” He asked, swiping through holographic crime scene photos. “I mean I’m flattered, but this is sudden.”

The blue flare covered Flint head to toe, nook and armpit in a full disclosure blue emote fatigue, synched to his comm as a live feed to his score. A public safety measure for them to link to and conceal weapons at the ready in dangerous settings and for the public to know their protectors have top emotional scores blue; but only Flint still wore it in their ride.

A blue man and his plant. Hollis laughed.

Flint's laugh mocked, "Haha. Not for you."

"A boy can dream. Don't forget to buckle up." Hollis, without taking his eyes off the files pressed his comm, the ride took off.

"Well wake up. I need a favor."

"That was quick."

"You know, the thing you can do."

"The thing?"

"The thing you can do with your eyes."

The plant in his hands trembled as Hollis continued swiping through the files. He said, "Smolder?"

"See rot."

"Oh that thing. Yeah, what about it?"

Hollis closed the casework. Through the windshield, buildings rose like fingers wrapped in living vines, their bio-luminescence pulsing with the collective emotional health of a thriving blue city.

An expansion of district-6 to incorporate the previously green-portion of district-5's skyscrapers. City ordnance didn't think it was possible to keep any population above five stories blue. They were proving the world wrong, and yet here was Flint asking about rot.

"Does it have any?" Flint in his blue flare, gestured with the plant, and stared at him like they could see eye to eye.

Hollis snorted. "Sure why not, let's take a gander shall we."

He took the small fern with its bio-luminescent tips, making a show of examining it. He squinted at it, turned it in the light, even sniffed it dramatically. The truth was, he'd known it was clean the moment Flint walked in. "Oh no," he said, deadly serious.

"What?"

"It's... wait... no, it's just a plant."

He handed it back. With or without the flare, Hollis could read Flint plain as day.

"You're an asshole."

"What? It's clean. The real question is—who owns that plant? Trouble in paradise? You know I could do some PI work for you; paid of course. This isn't a charity."

"Watch where your sniffing. District-6 doesn't need foxes." Flint set the plant carefully on the dashboard, then tapped his comm. "Ready to clock in?"

They both synced their comms. A soft chime indicated they were officially on duty; an easy patrol—treating water, their emotional scores would be monitored, their locations tracked, their decisions recorded.

"It's my kid's. The plant. He got in trouble at school. It's unlike him. I just wanted to check."

"What'd he do—get in a fight? School was wild for me. I'm sure it's only gotten worse."

"He stabbed a classmate with a pen."

"How is everyone taking it? I hear ink stains you know."

"Can you take anything seriously? This is why I don't like talking to you about important things."

"Here I thought it was my sunny disposition. Our work isn't important?"

"Family things."

"Ouch. Well, how is the family taking it?"

"His score didn't change. Perfect blue. He said the other kid was the bully. I have an appointment with Willowbrook Academy. Speaking of which—mind if we stop at a plant store? I want to get him something better than this." Motioning to the plant.

"Sure, we just got on the clock, let's stop for some donuts after too." Hollis typed on the dash's monitor. "What?" He said, "I agree with you."

The ride switched lanes. Hollis continued, "If I was your son at Willowbrook and that was my plant, I'd stab a bully. You know, everything is a signal contest to them. Kids, I mean. Their plants, fashion. Especially at Willowbrook, I went there. For a little."

"Lucky you. I went to public."

The ride lowered through traffic layers, flashing their Special Forces lights to clear a path. They descended past the commercial district where every storefront was required to maintain a minimum blue ambiance, past the residential towers, down to the street level where the real city lived. There—squeezed between two corporate towers like a forgotten tooth—was exactly what he was looking for. A convenience store with character, its awning faded, its windows cluttered with handmade signs. Outside sat racks of fortune frogs

A group of kids laughing entered. Flint said, "I mean a real plant store. Not a bodega."

"Don't underestimate the holes in the wall. The locals know. You see all those kids go in. You got to trust, because I bet you didn't notice all their plant animal key chains. These kids are broke, but I bet they come in here and look at the top shelf they wish they could afford. Plus, all the snobby kids won't have seen them because they are shopping at the posh stores."

"That's actually pretty smart."

"Yeah, listen up you might learn a thing or two. Maybe you can teach me something too."

Flint snorted. The ride parked. Hollis stepped out. So did Flint.

“How’s the wifey taking it?”

“Brittany was proud of him. Actually gave me a hard time for being so concerned. She would laugh at me for wanting to get him a plant.”

As Hollis crossed the street, he said, “That’s a good woman. Be good to her.”

Flint snorted and followed. At the storefront, off the rack, Hollis picked up a fortune frog. He didn’t activate it. Didn’t care about that kind of luck anymore.

At his side, Flint said, “You know, I’ve never gotten a ten before. I never really cared, but I just thought about it.”

Hollis tossed the frog to him. “Today could be your lucky day.”

They entered Stems & Tongues.

Chapter Two:

Cramped efficiency: candy in front, magazines along the window wall, and fortune frogs in every color. Sodas, and in the back glass doors revealed racks of various plants, each with description tags and mood-reactivity ratings.

The kids clustered the candy section. Low-level rot clung to their pockets.

“What do you think about that. That one’s nice.” Flint pointed to a small orchid with pearl-white petals.

“This is for your son, right. Not a school teacher?”

“Fair point. How about that one?”

A cactus, stubborn breed. They bloomed magnificent flowers; if you were able to get them too. Tough difficulty rating; needed precise environment and conditions.

“Careful. Max might think you are testing him”

“I am testing him. I just don’t want it to look like I am. You don’t understand. What a life, unmarried, no kids.”

All the kids shifted to stare at them. They huddled together whispering and laughing. The smallest one, wore glasses, repaired with tape at least twice, clutched a gaming magazine “Wait.” Flint said, “Do you think I need to get the teacher a plant too. Like an apology. Or peace offering. It’s best to make good impressions with those people.”

“I don’t know everything, but I had a good teacher.” Hollis turned to the kids. “Hey kids.”

They froze like deer in headlights. Their pockets blazed brighter in small purple suns.

They must think it’s their unlucky day.

"My partner over there—" pointing to Flint who could be anyone in the flare"—isn't as scary as he looks. In fact, he has a son a little older than you guys, and he wants to get him a plant. What do you think the coolest looking one here is?"

The kids exchanged glances, conferred. Glasses stepped forward, adjusting them with the seriousness of someone about to deliver crucial intelligence. "Price range?"

"Good question. No limit. Go nuts. We want only the coolest."

The transformation was instant. They exploded into action, running around the shop pointing at, discussing, name calling, and glass called to them, "Guys, guys—back here!"

They converged on the back corner where a large display case held a building-shaped plant with a King Kong at the base. It was ridiculous. It was expensive. It was absolutely perfect for an fourteen-year-old boy whose father was trying to bridge an emotional gap with consumer goods that not only would make other kids jealous, but had a high skill cap with several bench mark layers of ranging blue scores to unlock spacial effects in the plant.

Hollis touched the display model with one finger. The gorilla's fur burst into bright blue luminescence, shaking its limbs. It climbed the building with determination. At the top, beat its chest. "It's the coolest," the kids said in unison.

Hollis turned to Flint. "It's the coolest."

Flint got good at positioning his body in the flare to direct peoples eyes first to the price tag, then Hollis, then the kids, "Thanks for the help. Max is going to love it."

The kids cheered as Flint collected the tag to bring to front. They scattered to leave until Hollis's voice stopped them cold.

"Whose idea was it?"

The transformation was instant. From excited children to caught criminals in a heartbeat. Their pockets blazed like small purple suns.

The one with glasses who couldn't have weighed more than seventy pounds soaking wet, raised his hand. "Me."

"You're the brains, huh. Here's a tip, good deeds beget good deeds." Hollis eyed the cashier with a name tag: Paz. "Paz my new friend, please ring up twelve candy bars, the fortune frog, an orchid plant, and the King Kong in the back ought to do it. On me."

The kids cheered. All except Glasses, who took his prizes with the quiet dignity of someone who'd just learned a lesson in an unexpected way. They left without suns in their pockets or rot in their hearts.

"I can buy my own plants," Flint said as Paz maneuvered the King Kong box around.

"Don't be like that. Call it my apology for earlier. I care about what's important to you. Like your family. They don't have to know I paid for it. That's not what's important, because it's from you. Come on, we're on the clock don't dilly."

They loaded the plants into the ride as their comms chimed in synchronous alarm. They had a job. Hollis smiled, "Perfect timing."

They got in. Flint in his flare, the fortune frog looked even smaller than the fern in his hand. He put it on the dash as Hollis synched the destination.

Chapter Three:

Used to be part of green district-5, the apartment building looked like it was trying to remember better days. Five stories of faded brick squeezed between newer construction, window boxes with fortune frogs lined up like tiny blue soldiers of the new order. Mixed with rent controlled tenants that don't want to change as new renters or buyers pay triple the price and complain about those that don't follow the rules. Perfect nest for rot.

As they parked, Mr. Geck, squat, sweating through a polo shirt despite the mild weather, paced along the stoop. He saw them and ran over crowding Hollis's door, exiting brief case first; Flint's synched his to remain hidden in his flare.

"Detectives, come, come special forces this can't be?" Geck wore no mood moss, plant, or conduit for his emote score; apparently not accustomed to the bylaws of being an business owner in a blue district. "Why not regular police? I specifically requested them—this is a delicate situation, you understand. Bad for business having a flare around. Can't have the tenants thinking the building's gone bad. Big changed good for everyone."

Hollis said, "Trust me, we are the ones you want, if you want to solve the problem. Good for everyone."

"Solve the problem. You cannot solve life detectives. Natural wear, nothing special, you'll see. I'm sure some industrial spray would suffice."

Flint could stare down anyone without the flare, with the flare made Hollis laugh when he positioned himself like a wall in front of Geck and said, "Where's the rot?"

Geck eyed each of them. Spit. "Okay, okay new friends. I'll show you. Third floor. 32A. The Merritts. Young couple in love. They are the ones whom reported it. What do they know; they think the drain is broken every other day. They say it's on their floor. Don't know how to change a light bulb. You'll see. Come."

One floor was another's ceiling. "Who lives below them?"

"Mrs. Ito. 22A. Sweetest woman you'll ever meet. Goes to church every Sunday. Her cooking; out of this world. Come, come, let's solve the problem. Special forces for some leftover milk. What a world we live in."

Flint positioned his blue flare stare at Hollis, who smirked. They followed Geck inside.

Jamie Merritt at 32A answered the door in a blue and black suit, the blue tie synched to his comm drooped and faded to lighter and lighter shades like he had already lost his last straw and then was asked to answer the door; half turned speaking into the apartment, "Baby, please can you lower the volume? Sorry about that; oh." His blue eyes found Flint's blue flare and widened. "How can I help you officers? Geck?"

Geck waved his hand, "Here for the rot. Not for you."

Relief in Jamie, he straightened a little taller and Hollis bit his tongue as Geck shot him a look of 'I told you so' and said, "Flares are bad for business. Please be quick." To Jamie he continued, "Can you show them, yes?"

"Yes. Of course. Right this way officers. I apologize in advance for the mess, I thought you would call first." He led them down hardwood floors.

"We don't like setting appointments." Hollis said, "Gives time for people to prepare. We like the truth however messy it may be."

"Oh." Down a brief hallway with framed pictures on both sides of sunsets, beaches, their wedding, and their relatives; led to the split. Right turn for another passage.

Three doors on the left, open. A closed door at the end.

Or straight, into the kitchen on the left, and living room.

A pothos hung above the kitchen counter, its vines trailing toward the new refrigerator like it was trying to escape the smoothie chaos below.

A dining table divided the sections as well as a woman in leopard tights stretching on a rainbow yoga mat blocked their path at an odd angle facing the screen on the living room wall of another woman, also in a leopard outfit with her arms in the air. Behind her, a snake plant stood tall in the corner, its upright leaves matching her posture.

"Celeste, honey. We have company."

Celeste lowered her arms. "Oh good, you're here for the rot." On her comm, she turned off the screen. Pranced over to offer her hand to Hollis.

He shook it. "Pleasure to meet you, I am Detective Hollis Verne. This is my partner Flint Carver."

"Celeste." She turned to Flint in his flare and hesitated. "It's right over here."

In the living room, where her yoga mat should be to align with the screen; Celeste flipped back a rose garden rug. Black Lichtenberg tree of rot.

It shot to the wall with the screen. Maybe stemming from the other room sharing this wall. Low level. He opened the case for a swab kit as Geck said, "See, no big deal."

Sample taken. He screwed the lid, gave it a shake. The test would need a minute.

"Yes big deal," Celeste said. "Sorry officers. We just moved in, not even three months ago. How long has it been Jamie?"

"Three months next week. This was a big move for us. I got a new job, we have a baby on the way. We were told the whole building was being refurbished. We kind of thought everything was going to be, ah, new. Not rotting."

Geck said, "What's not new. Look at these good bones. New refrigerator, top of the line. It's good. New paint. Strong personality."

A message on Hollis's comm from Flint: "You or me?"

Hollis said, "Excuse me. Do you have a bathroom?"

Jamie blinked. "Uh, yes. Down that hall. The last door."

As Geck assuaged their worry and Flint loomed, Hollis slipped away down the split. The first of three doors opened was a study office in chaos with the invasion of baby equipment: cradle, toys, diapers, the works. A ficus in the corner had dropped half its leaves onto a box of unopened onesies. Could be textbook stress: new job, new home, and a baby.

Against the wall sharing the screen, a desk. Hollis crawled under it. No sign of rot.

He left to check the second opened door, guest bedroom. Neat. Bed made. Light dust. Not used daily. A single succulent on the windowsill, not thriving, but not dead or dying. Yet.

The last room, their primary. Neat and lived in, more pictures on the wall, candles on every surface. Two nightstands. Each held a book and a plant.

Jamie's side: a business book and a bonsai. Clippers adjacent, the plant overly manicured than not. On Celeste's side: a romance novel and a wandering jewel trailing toward the floor, purple leaves catching light from the window.

The closed door was the bathroom. More candles. More pictures. A small fern on the toilet tank, thriving in the humidity. No stains on the shower doors. Hollis flushed the toilet and walked back down.

At the split, he peered kitchen side. Ingredients for a smoothie cluttered the counter beneath the hanging pothos. He opened the new refrigerator. Fresh ingredients. Labeled meal preparation by the date and contents. He smelled the milk; it was fine.

"Officer, can we help you?" Asked Jamie.

They all eyed him. Hollis said, "No, just looking around. The test should be ready." He returned to his briefcase and the rot.

He checked the vial, low level rot. He recorded the score. From the briefcase, he swapped the vial for industrial spray.

"See." Geck said. "No big deal. Could sell to me; and I take care of it myself."

"This." Hollis sprayed. "Will be a bandaid that is not safe for public use. After we continue our investigation, we will coordinate with you the proper channels to fully remove this rot. It is low level. You will be issued the exact recordings along with our report when we are in touch that you can give to your insurance. Thank you for your time."

Celeste hugged him. "Me and our baby thank you."

Jamie walked them to the door. At some point he tightened his tie. Shook Hollis's hand.

Geck, with a big smile, led them to the next apartment. "You will like Mrs. Ito. If we are lucky, she made cookies."

~

Apartment 22A. Geck knocked twice and waited despite the lack of response. Hollis looked at Flint, all blue.

"Patience." Geck says, "Like all good things, old age takes a minute."

The door opened, slowly. Pushing late seventies, cardigan, slippers, and kind eyes.

Geck said, "Good afternoon Mrs. Ito. These men would like to look at your living room ceiling if that's alright."

"My ceiling. Hardly anyone looks up there. Why not come on in. I made cookies."

Geck raised his eyebrows and rushed past Mrs. Ito down a mirror apartment layout. Hollis and Flint waited for Mrs. Ito to proceed.

Down the brief hallway, embedded on either side of the wall, four shelves lined with fortune frogs. Every single one extended their tongue with Blue-10. A jade plant anchored the end of each shelf, their thick leaves dusty but alive — money plants for a woman who collected luck.

Hollis leaned over to Flint, whispered, "Jealous."

Flint said flatly, "Stay on task."

"Impressive collection, Mrs. Ito."

"Thank you. I have been blessed this life with luck."

"How long have you been living at this address?"

"Twenty years now. What a ride it's been. With luck there is also, the unfortunate. My husband passed away two years ago. He had a good life. Our only child, Rebecca is overseas."

Geck added at the split, waiting for them. "Mrs. Ito is an excellent tenant. Has never been late with the rent. An honored member of our community. Cookies are out of this world. Smell that? Cannot be bought in a store."

The kitchen and living room's far wall was also converted into shelves. Hundreds of fortune frogs. All Blue-10. African violets crowded the windowsill, their purple blooms bright against the glass — the flowers of a woman with time and care to give. A vase of dried hydrangeas sat on the coffee table, preserved in pale blues and creams, holding onto beauty that had already passed.

The air smelled of cinnamon from a fresh sheet of cookies airing out on the stove. Bowls of wrapped candy, and fruit, or crackers and chips and snacks rested on every surface able to carry one. All fresh. Not a sign of rot anywhere. Even on the ceiling.

No dust. No crumbs. A well kept home.

Geck sat down on her red couch with green pillows. Flint stood underneath where the rot should be and Hollis by the dividing table eyed the mail and the unpaid University bills addressed to a Dennis Ito.

Mrs. Ito slowly walked them over each a cookie, saving Hollis for last. He held up his hands as Flint and Geck chewed happily.

"I have a sensitive stomach. Do you mind if I use your bathroom?"

"Of course. Down the hallway, the last door."

At the split, the first door on the left was closed. He tried the handle. Locked. Cold to the touch. The second door also locked. Less cold. The hallway here was bare — no shelves, no fortune frogs, no plants. Nothing grew near these doors.

The third. A primary bedroom. Low light. Curtains drawn. More dried flowers on the dresser, roses gone brittle and brown. Nothing that would suggest this old woman was rotting. Unpaid bills aside, twenty years to start rot now usually required a bigger catalyst. But it wouldn't be the first or the last time money and bills were the cause of rot.

The last door, the bathroom, smelled of a match; like someone just took a shit.

Hollis closed the door. Returned to the living room. "Mrs. Ito." Hollis interrupted Geck asking for another cookie. "Do you live alone with Rebecca overseas?"

"Her son, Dennis lives with me. He just graduated from University."

That explains partially the bills. "Where is Dennis now?"

"Working. He just got a new job. Always working. The young kids these days can't get the future off their mind."

"Well, we don't want to take up anymore of your time. The rot in the apartment above you was very low level, you shouldn't have to worry about it at this moment. We will send a copy of the report regardless and if you spot anything please let us and Geck know. Thank you for your time, Mrs. Ito."

"Are you sure you don't want a cookie?"

~

Outside, down the stoop, Hollis bit into the cookie. Damn good, right amount of crunch and goo. He stopped and stared up at the building's face, finding each apartment. Each with fortune frogs facing the street.

The Merritts kept two. A nine and and ten.

Ito's kept ten. All tens.

Flint said, "Well." Positioned his blue flare stare. "You know it could just be wear like Geck said. Rot happens without humans too."

"You're not wrong." Hollis ate the rest of the cookie, dusted his hand. "But you're not all right either. Do you believe in coincidences?"

"Coincidences?"

Hollis cupped his mouth to yell, "Hey." Across the street the same merry band of kids.

"It's the cops!"

"You have a minute." Hollis waved.

The kid with glasses approached. Hollis asked, "You live around here?"

"Yeah. Fourth floor, 42A." He pointed above The Merritts.

Three frogs on their sill: a ten, six, and seven. "I'm Toby."

"Nice to officially meet you Toby, my name is Hollis. We're on a case, would you mean lending your expertise? I'm sure a sharp kid like you has an eye on the neighbors."

"Some."

Hollis brought a hologram picture on his comm of the tenants in question. "Do you know them?"

"The Merritts? Yeah. Jamie shoots hoops with us sometimes. Celeste is uh, often simply dressed." He blushed and Hollis laughed.

"What about this woman? Second floor, 2A?"

"Mrs. Ito. She's sweet. Makes cookies all the time for us."

"You ever meet Dennis Ito?"

"He's creepy. Never leaves. Always watching from the window." Toby pointed up at the second floor. "Like right now."

Hollis checked the second floor, 2A. Black curtains twitched closed. Not before Hollis caught it—a pale face, dark eyes.

"He never leaves?"

"Never. Just watches."

Hollis ran to the building. Behind Flint called after him. "Where are you going?"

Chapter Four:

Second floor. Hollis pounded on the door.

"Mrs. Ito! It's Hollis. Please open the door Mrs. Ito." He tried to regulate; counted to two and knocked some more. "Special Forces! Open up!"

Nothing. Flint caught up. "She was just here, calm down. What's wrong?"

From his double sided briefcase, Hollis pulled the hammer. Black metal that absorbed light. Claw side, swung. The teeth chipped, and some liquid juiced.

They exchanged looks. Flint released his flare. Set down his brief case as he calmly reported the rot on his comm and removed his hammer.

Hollis switched the face side; swung the hammer. A chunk pushed through the glooming wood. He stood aside as Flint swung, then he and him used the claw to peel away chunks of wetness enough for them to squeeze through.

"Wait—" Flint grabbed his shoulder, yanked him back.

He bent to flip the briefcase, pulled out a gas mask, shoved it at Hollis. Pulled out a second for himself. Then he snagged a grenade with a purple release pin.

"Protocol." Flint pulled the pin, threw it in.

Hollis said, "Mrs Ito we are throwing a gas inside the apartment to help us see the rot. Cover your mouth and nose."

"Fire in the hole."

Through the chunk in the melting door; the hallways seemed normal with the wall of fortune frogs until the purple gas released the horror.

Flint kicked the lower portion of the door—it gave with a wet sucking sound. The hallway of fortune frogs transformed. Every Blue-10 was rotted through, synthetic skin black and splitting, tongues swollen showing Blue-1. Flies buzzed in clouds. The walls pulsed with veins of decay flowing toward the split. The whole apartment was a Lichtenberg tree of rot.

This was not low level rot. Down the hall, at the split, left turn: Mrs. Ito at the first door. Her hand pressed against it—and kept going. The wood swallowed her fingers, her wrist, her forearm, pulling her in like thick tar.

"Dennis! It's alright! No one will hurt you!"

She was waist-deep in the wall now. Still reaching. Still calling.

"You're a good boy! I know you are! You would never hurt anyone! Please, just open the door."

Flint tried to pull her free. The rot climbed his gloves, and he yanked back. The contamination was spreading faster than they could cut.

If they stayed in here too long; the house would eat them too. With the claw side, they worked the hinges off the door that gave way like rotten fruit.

Hollis said, "Help her."

Flint leans the door and Mrs. Ito against the wall; all but her neck and head free; crying. "It's just bad luck is all."

He ran past — Mrs. Ito eyes found his, still hopeful, still believing her good boy could be saved.

Inside, a dark purple room, the walls heaved. Black out curtains that Dennis peered from closed held white mucous and mushrooms. The ceiling dripped.

Center sandwiched between a webbed bed and melting desk, an egg.

No not yet, just his feet. Dennis Ito was being swallowed from the feet up, white-black shell pulsing with purple veins that clawed at his waist.

"I'm sorry!" Dennis sobbed. "I didn't mean to! I'm so sorry!"

Up and up the egg accelerated as Dennis thrashed and cried. No time, Hollis used the claw side to rip away chunks as he said, "You're doing fine. It's going to be okay. I need you to calm down so the rot can stop growing. It's reacting to you. You need to be calm now. I'm going to get you out of here and we will have your grandma's cookies."

Chip, chip; the egg grew back faster. Up to his sternum.

"Oh fuck." Flint spun the handle of his hammer; from the face, protruded a spike. "He is too far gone. Hollis it will take you too. Stand back."

Up to his neck. Chip, chip, "No." Hollis screamed, "We can save him!"

"No. We can't."

"Please..." Dennis's voice was barely a whisper. The egg claimed his chin. "Kill me... please..."

His eyes locked with Hollis's. Terrified. Pleading. Grateful.

"No!" Hollis clawed the egg from off his eyes. "We can—"

"Hollis, GET BACK!"

It swallowed Dennis. Hollis crying. "No. Please. Not again."

The room shuddered. Shoved aside, Flint raised the hammer.

SMASH; thunk, the spike connected with the egg's center. The puncture sucked in and bottled all the sound in the room for cruel moment. Then the room exploded.

~

The window became an open face wall to the street. Cold air. Hollis was flung through the adjacent wall over Dennis's bed and into the living room.

Flint, ears ringing, rose from hallway outside the room, having been blown back; everything shook. Purple-black rot cascaded across the street, coating cars, sidewalk, everything.

Across the street, the kids screamed. Alarms wailed. Clamoring. Ringing.

"You good? Hollis. Hollis Verne are you good?"

"We could have saved him."

Flint wobbled away as officers swarmed inside. He said flatly, "No. We couldn't."

Chapter Five:

In grey and blue sweats and hoodie, down the precinct steps, Hollis sucked the snot up his nose as he shuffled his hold on the King Kong plant. One shower was never enough after days like this. Clear nights felt colder. The sky dotted with stars so clear it hurt to stare long. It smelled of cinnamon. Itched his nose to not sneeze and alert Flint at the bottom in matching clothes.

Hand on his chin like a stern sculpture; the gloominess didn't look good on him. With his muscular bulk, it made him resting dangerous. He was dangerous. Hollis quieted his steps, closer, and closer. Flint didn't hear him.

Medical cleared them; for now. They'd both need to stress test; that would wait. Debrief cleared them. Decisions on the outcome would wait. The paperwork would take weeks. Tomorrow's problem. They were done for the night and owed it to each other to leave the work at work for at least the rest of the night. It was hard to accept that.

A step away, Flint said, "So much for my son's school meeting." He knew the whole time; eyes on his back. Hollis straightened on the step difference as Flint continued, "I forgot the plants in the ride. From the Ito's new window, it looked totaled. Oh well. I was never really good at giving gifts. Or receiving them for that matter."

Hollis stepped down on his level, set the plant between them. "Surprise." Stayed standing, blew into his hands. "Trunk kept it safe. Can't speak for the rest."

Flint picked up the plant in disbelief. He snorted, shook his head, set it down on the other side. Didn't question it. Why would he. The fern was in his locker.

The orchid and the fortune frog he tossed. Shame, Flint never opened it. Never got his Blue 10, and life didn't care. Life didn't slow down or wait. Neither did rot.

He'd have Lila run tests on the fern after this. His eyes had missed everything in that apartment. What else was he missing? Hollis said, "I'm sorry I didn't see it. So much for my special thing, huh."

In a long crew cut that stayed wavy naturally with two portions in the front dipping down like fangs onto his soft eyes. Cauliflower ears; shovel shaped face as if designed to protect his chin, Flint looked tired of fighting. He was in the wrong line of work, and yet the force needed soldiers and detectives like him: people that in the shit will swing the hammer. Hands stuffed in the pockets, Hollis squat, not wanting to sit and feel planted but eye level with Flint, though neither overtly met the other's gaze.

"You saw enough. The kids. The pattern. You figured it out. We just have disagreements on how to follow through. Good detective work. You should be a fox."

They mulled that over silence. Hollis sat down.

He said, "Go home. Give Max his plant. Kiss your wife. She's probably worried sick."

“You don’t know Brittany. She’s probably still working. Different kinds of pressure. I suppose your right.” He stood, picked up the plant, and made eye contact with Hollis.

“You know I didn’t want to do what I did. It had to be done.”

“Yeah. I’ll do better next time.”

Next time hung between them. Eye to eye, they couldn’t find what they were looking for in each other. Flint turned first. Moved off the steps.

He waved over his shoulder. “Thanks again for the plant.”

After Flint left, Hollis rose. Returned up to the steps.

To get the fern, to go to the lab; first he needed a fucking coffee. He blew into his hands. Damn cold tonight, and sneezed away the smell of cinnamon.

~

Hollis’s comm flashed at the precinct’s Special Force’s laboratory’s sliding door. Face scanned. It slid to the left for another sliding door. A light above him flashed red.

The door closed behind him as the light flashed orange. Arms up, Flint’s son’s fern in one hand, in the other two coffees with lids. The light flashed yellow, sprayed sanitizer.

On the green flash the door slid open for the lab. The pressure shifted felt like it sucked him to an abrupt stop as the door closed. Swallowed by an electronic god.

A vast hall of white clean metal, tubes, machine and beakers, lasers and containments, screens, and data looked like it was happening under water with the continuous pink mist spraying a light coolant twenty-four hours. Made him a little light headed, like the whole place was away from time. Hollis cracked his jaw, stretched his eyes and brows, stepping through to the right for the desks where Dr. Lila Kemp twirled in her wheeled chair in a lab coat, resting over the chair’s back so it flared.

“That’s what I’m talking about baby.” She saw him. Sputtered, and smiled ear to ear, blushing and brightened; Lila shined for every visitor.

Last week her hair was red and black; today blue cotton candy.

“For me! Hollis you’re a life saver.” She stretched her arms, snapping her fingers open and closed for the coffee.

He bit his tongue, handed off the drink. As he sat next to her, she slurped loud with zero fear of burning her mouth.

“Damn that’s good.” Her mouth steamed. “It’s pretty late. Don’t you have a home?”

Heart shaped face, alabaster skin that made her emeralds eyes pop. Bouncy energy, that could be the coffee, or teas, mate, or some homemade concoction she sipped on to stay sane in here.

She paused, reconsidered, slurping and rocking her chair, flaring her coat. “Wait, stupid question — I decorated it, I know you don’t use it. A shame because it’s really cozy. Sorry about the Ito’s.”

It was true. Lila had taken one look at his apartment — bare walls, single chair, bed that looked like it had been found on the street of another district. Declared it "a crime against the concept of living." Spent a weekend filling it with plants (ironic), throw pillows (mysterious), and kitchen equipment (optimistic). The apartment now looked like someone lived there, which was more than Hollis could say for himself.

"I need a favor." On her examination side table, he set the fern.

"Ooh, another gift? You really know how to treat a woman. It's not even my birthday. Though dinner would be the logical next step—"

"Can you run a full spectrum analysis? I need it as quickly as possible. Deep scan. Look for any rot signatures."

The flirtation drained from her face, lips bunching as she chewed the precise words, "Whose plant is it?"

"Does it matter?"

"Hollis, if this is evidence from today's manifestation—it needs to be filed through the correct channels. People died."

"I know that. It's not from today. Personal matter. It's important. Can you do it?"

"What's a woman to do? Why not." She slurped the coffee, crushed it, and shot it into the garbage and missed. Craned her neck to see if he watched; he did.

"You're the best. Message when it's done, I'll come right over." He went and picked up the failed shot, dumped the cup.

"That's what I love to hear."

Comm to the door. It beeped open. As it closed he heard, "Why are the traumatized ones always the cutest?"

He had no time for that. Orange light. Arms up. Yellow light; spray. Green; go.

His apartment was on the fourth floor. The cheapest he could find in a blue district where people actually desired to mind their own business. He didn't want neighbors or a community; only somewhere to sleep.

Inside was a rainbow's asshole. A bright yellow kettle sat on a stove he'd never turned on. Throw pillows with hearts decorated a couch that looked like it had been covered in plastic its entire life. Plants thrived in windows he never opened. And he liked looking at it just as it was; all fresh out of the box because if he sat on it and lived in it; it would ironically rot in a different kind of way that was no less true.

Dust to dust: this could be his life if he wanted it to be, cozy, comfortable, and warm. The irony was that it was and wasn't true as he walked by it to the primary and bathroom.

Lila's best contribution. After a day like today, he needed two showers.

It felt like he was getting the shit kicked out of him in a washing machine. Hot, hurtful water.

Dennis Ito had begged for him to end his life. Had thanked them through the shell.

He stood there until the water ran clear. Then turned it off and watched it dry.

~

In a ride, it felt very civilian to wait a moment in the drive way. To wipe the day from his thoughts before he entered their home and sacred space not just for himself but for Britany and Max. Quiet and dark sans the kitchen their lighthouse and beacon of warmth as a reminder: there's always food in the house. Three setting: bright, late night work, and faint.

Tonight, faint. Brittany must have had a rough day too as Flint pressed the dash, the garage opened. Parked, through the door into the kitchen's counter, left over pizza.

Mushroom, onion, and pepperoni. As well as bowls of snacks and fruit. It reminded him Mrs. Ito and he lost his appetite.

Past the dinning table, in the living room, amid papers, Brittany, focused, sat wide on their black leather couch with a single rainbow fish plant inside that swam with no set pattern. She spoke to a hologram projecting from her comm, "I swear to god Gerald, stop looking at monasteries or I will step on your nuts. My husband just came home, give me a moment, and don't you dare think about posting that message."

At his approach, with eyes on the back of her head, Brittany waved her hand to turn the conversation red and private.

"Sorry for being loud baby. A whale is having a spiritual crisis.

Beautiful. Irritated with her client sharpened that beauty with confidence, different than her locked in flow state of composed mastery. Though she didn't like to let the world know; she liked to break things and illustrate, one way or another, just how much better she was; it was hot.

She wouldn't have lost her shit as he did when he had to move a door with a person rotting to it; and shook away the memory of Mrs. Ito with a smile as she said, "You look tired. What's with the plant?"

They used to go into details about their work. Hers went over his head; different kinds of pressure. Flint nodded. "Gift for Max. What do you think?"

"I don't know what the kids are in to - I could see this valued client having one. So. There's that."

He kissed her forehead. "Love you. Finish your work."

"Love you too." She caught his hand, squeezed. "Eat some pizza."

She waved her hand at the hologram. It turned green. "Gerald do not call a you ex wife right now. We do not need to test the limits of that restraining order. Let's think this through."

Another day. Another job. They made it work.

Flint carried the King down the hall to Max's room. Knocked once, twice.

“Come in.” Max at his desk, homework spread out, moss glowing blue.

On the wall aside his desk, a new poster hung where there used to be a family photo: District-1 Miss Blue 10 in a pearl bikini, Stratton the White Knight.

“Ah. That’s new.”

“Gift from Mom. After, the uh, meeting at school. What’s that?”

Brittany. He’s a little young. Maybe not. How fast they grow.

“Well, I don’t know how this will compare to uh, well; it’s a gift for you. For standing up to others. Here take a look.”

He set the box on the bed. Max turned, saw it, and his face lit up with exactly the right amount of surprised gratitude.

“This, has a lot of potential. Good eye, Dad. Where did you even get this?”

“It’s a long story. I’m glad you like it.”

Max touched the base of the building. On all fours, the monkey marched around the building.

“Apparently.” Flint said, proud that his son seemed impressed.

That he could do right — he’d have to thank Hollis again. “Take a peek at the manual you can do a lot of cool tricks, but you have to get some high blue scores to unlock them. I think you can do it, and I want you to think about how that translates into the future when confronted with bullies again. Your getting old,” eying the poster, “And frankly, there will be assholes in every age bracket. It’s important to learn how to not only not let them affect you, your mood, your day and life, but to be able to measure appropriate response. If you try to brute force your energy onto the plant, it may bottleneck and explode.”

“Like the jockeys do, sometimes in the horse races mom watches.”

“Exactly. We must all seek a peaceful resolution to conflict lest we ourselves rot.”

“Wow that was deep Dad. Haha.”

Flint ruffled his hair. “Yeah, yeah, Your laughing now. Wait till we need to have the sex talk.”

“Ew. Yeah, I’ll pass on that.”

Flint eyed the poster. Stood. “Your Dad has to take a shower. I hope you like it. Good night.”

“Thanks, Dad. This is pretty cool.”

At the door Flint, paused watching his son examine the plant. “Don’t stay up too late. School tomorrow.”

“Night, Dad.”

The door closed.

~

Max set the plant on his desk. He touched the gorilla.

The gorilla's blue fur blackened. Spreading to the building, the rot grew and it crumbled, the bio-luminescent leaves curled and died.

Seconds. That's all it took to break something down.

Max removed his finger. Studied the damage.

Then he touched it again.

Slower. Harder to be rebuilt.

Finding the right frequency, the right pattern, coaxing the plant back to what it was before. The fur needed texture. The leaves needed the exact shade of green and tuning the energy right for that growth cycle to match.

The building had to stand at the precise angle. Minutes passed. His moss never flickered off blue.

Finally, the gorilla sat at the base again. Perfect.

Max touched the gorilla. It climbed the building.

At the top, King beat its chest and descended. Repeated. Like nothing had happened.

His comm flashed. No number. He answered.

A girl's voice light but flat — stripped of warmth: "Sloppy. But you did it."

"Okay."

A pause. "The initiation begins." The line went dead.

Max set the phone down. Watched the gorilla climb. Beat its chest. Descend. Climb again. Perfect blue.

Episode 2: THE THING ABOUT HEROES

Chapter One:

Aggressive sunlight stirred Hollis. His comm chimed.

Not the default ring. Another of Lila's touches.

It chimed incessantly. Hollis groaned, "Okay, okay."

Speak of the devil, a message from Lila: "Need you to come in. Now. About your favor. Hello?"

6:47 AM. Still in the towel — pink fur that said 'Stud Muffin' — on top of blue cloud-like covers that synced to a reflection of the weather outside. Lila's pick.

On his comm, he called Flint. It rang down.

He lay back. Called again.

~

Classical music for the ride to school, Max's choice; it tightened Flint's nerves in ways he didn't expect. He jumped at the call from Hollis.

Swiped the rejection. When he called again, he also lowered the music's volume.

"Shouldn't you answer that?" Max's voice carried the particular tone of adolescent observation, not quite criticism but wasn't quite not.

"I have today off because of the incident in the news yesterday." Flint glanced at his son, trying to read something, anything, in that perfectly composed face.

Brittany's beauty did well in crafting his ruggedness into a handsome young man. "Plus, I called Hollis twice earlier and—"

"And the game of tag continues? Mom takes work calls all the time. He probably just wants to talk about what happened. It looked like a big a deal on the news."

"Hollis and I will have more than enough time to talk about. Right now is our time."

"It's just the ride to school. Its not a big deal. Really is just a duration."

'Duration' something Brittany would say. Which wouldn't matter if Max didn't stab a classmate with the same steady blue. Flint reached over, caught Max in a headlock.

Gave him a playful noogie. It would have made any normal kid squawk with indignation. They would lash out in some way. Their mood moss would flicker. "Oh, you're just embarrassed to be dropped off by your old man! But I can be cool!"

Max just accepted it. Not limp, but no defense.

That was the old problem. He accepted the world too much, and as parents they told him to protect himself; fight back. Now he doesn't know how to regulate. He eradicated the problem.

Flint let him go. Was he a terrible parent?

Max fixed his hair in the mirror like he, as a father, was just another part of life that must be dealt with. Another duration.

They pulled into Willowbrook Academy's drop-off zone. Their ride was not decked out like the other parents flexing their decor. A large shadow flew overhead for a government transport.

All the kids smothered around it. "Hey fun idea," Flint said, "Why don't I drop you off in my detective car sometime. Gov access." He winked as they slid into the drop-slot. "That will show the kids. What do you think?"

"I'll pass, thanks. Have a good day, Dad. Love you. Call your partner."

"Yeah, cool. Uh, will do, son. You too. Love you."

Absorbed into the stream of students; Flint turned off the music. He held up the line. Maybe he was overthinking everything; Flint typed on the dash.

The ride took off, turned into the visitor parking for his rescheduled meeting he insisted upon with Max's teacher Mrs. Vega and the Director Laurel. They were not happy he missed the first, and could feel the prickles of being handled by Brittany when he rescheduled; this time around, given the circumstances on the news they were more accommodating.

Parked, knowing all of this didn't assuage his feelings of failure and he wanted to better understand the situation than how Brittany described for she could too easily obliterate her opponents instead of see from their shoes. Flint exited the ride.

Through Willowbrook's gates, he couldn't imagine attending as a kid. As a adult, it was still rich for his blood. Brittany should have gone here. Partially why she insisted Max did. At the administrative building, underneath the giant sunflower.

Beautiful. Calming. Where students don't stab each other. Flint sighed.

On the doors, posters read: 'Donate Blood' and 'Save the World' with students smiling, honest and pure. When he was in school; he just wanted to survive and pushed inside.

The left or right turn was dictated by a long pond-like reception desk with lily-pad stations and reed dividers with screens that could extend surface support. Directly across the entrance sat cross-legged a student in uniform looking like she was genetically engineered for the position. Flint half-turned to point at the door, the poster, on the inside as well; the very same girl.

The same smile, she said light but flat — stripped of warmth: "Help us save the world Mr. Carver." She stood with practiced grace. "The Director is waiting for you."

"Sorry about yesterday. How do you know?"

"Oh, I know everything."

"Huh."

"Joke." She spun a reed, and the screen displayed a picture of him as well as The Director's calendar of meetings. "I am the Director's personal assistant when I'm not filling in here and there where I can. I love efficiency. We really would have preferred to have you and Brittany in together; we love that you want to be informed. I'll take you over." She led the way.

"Lot of respect for what you both provide to the community. The Director considers you both key players to the prosperity of District-6." Stopped abruptly, she spun and said, "My name is Cassandra Ivy. If you need me, don't be shy. This is you."

Gestured to the conference room. Adjacent the door, one of her posters, 'Donate Blood.'

Flint said, "Ah, thank you. Hey is the blood drive just for students?"

“Everyone is welcome to donate, an hour before or after school. You will get a lollipop and a pretty cool bracelet.” She showed her wrist.

Royal Blue band. It said, ‘Save the World.’

“Cool. I’ll make sure to stop by.”

“Tell your friends, and Max.” She winked.

About to step in; she grabbed his arm. In a lower octave, she said, “Sorry about the news.” Cassandra let go. “I told myself I wasn’t going to say anything. Terrible what happened. Thank you for your service. Sorry. Please after you.” She opened the door for him.

“Thanks.”

She was fucking creepy in the nicest way possible. To be fair, all politicians gave him the creeps. Even those in the making; she closed the door after him.

Inside, a long room, the far wall: what would appear to be a double-sided window as many students leaned against it; and wouldn’t if they knew, Director Laurel stood at the head of the long table as the full-grown politician. Tall, with taller brown hair that shot straight up like a stake, some of her naturally white hair curling around the whole like a plant reaching higher for light. “Welcome.”

A woman who’d learned to smile without using any muscles actually associated with happiness. Different than those posing or remembering; the way she did reminded him of a wine tasting Brittany took him to, about mentally associating certain flavors to taste, even if they didn’t align; what did that feel look like to her, Flint wondered as she extended her hand. Tall, astute, famous for her mood moss’s silver mount and unwavering score of 99.9. He shook her hand.

“Detective Carver.” Strong grip. “Director Laurel.”

“Flint will do.”

When he let go, Director Laurel held on. “This has been long over due. I wish it was under different circumstances. With all the headlines in the news, our home in District-6 is under attack and it will take all of us working together to keep us blue.”

She let go, gestured to Ms. Vega, who rose from far side of the table. She looked like a once proud bird plucked by anxiety. Whether that was about their students or their career, yet to be determined as they shook hands.

“Which is why we need to pay extra attention in here,” Ms. Vega added, letting go. “Create stability. Hello Mr. Carver, I am happy you are here. Please take a seat.”

Flint did. “Thank you. Please, Flint is just fine.”

Mrs. Vega returned to their seat as Laurel removed the chair at the head of the table. The Director typed onto the surface. It illuminated.

A hologram appeared of a student. She slid the image down the table in front of Flint.

She said, "This is Tommy Hendricks. The other student involved. He claims he did verbally challenge Max. I don't think anyone is denying that."

"Proportional response. I have had a conversation about this with Max."

"Exactly." Laurel eyed Vega with obvious relief.

A soft bell rang overhead. Outside the window, the students spurred into motion as a herd flowed by. Brittany must have laid it on them thick.

Flint zoomed on Tommy's face. He didn't look like a bully and sighed: how would he feel if it was the other way around. Sometimes, Max can be so honest it's blunt and could be taken sarcastically; it wouldn't surprise him if someone took it the wrong way. It didn't matter, he shook his head, slid the image back. Violence was not the answer.

"Can you tell me a little about him? About Tommy. I just want to see the full picture."

"Tommy's scores have been unstable lately."

Not exactly what he meant; that's what Brittany would have asked. He wanted more of his personality. Dreams, ambitions, what did Tommy do for fun? What electives did he take?

"Unstable?"

"Not only in Mrs. Vega's class, we have tracked a noticeable and steep decline in Tommy's emotional score. As low as green, which we don't like to hang this outcome like a threat, but an opportunity to better understand how we can get back to blue."

Mrs. Vega added, "We don't want to see anyone's academic career jeopardized at Willowbrook."

Laurel said, "We would like to find a magnanimous solution."

"That seems fair and like the right thing."

"Great." She spoke on much of the same Brittany relayed and maybe he didn't need the meeting after all.

Maybe all he wanted was to see the other student: this Tommy Hendricks. And now he did; it depressed him and just wanted to move past it. As always, the only way is forward.

They shook hands again, another problem managed, another perfect resolution that resolved nothing but made everyone feel like they'd done something.

Walking back to his ride, Flint called Hollis. He needed to talk to someone who understood that blue didn't always mean blue.

It went to voicemail.

Chapter Two:

Hollis swiped away Flint's call. In the lab, as if underwater, Lila spun in the chair flaring her coat. "You're never going to believe this." She pulled up holographic displays that filled the air with data streams. "I don't know where you got this plant, but look at these charts."

The wavelengths spiked into red zones — danger levels that should have meant immediate manifestation. Then they dropped back to blue. Then red again. A cardiac rhythm of contamination that had somehow not killed the patient.

"What am I looking at?"

"You would never know from the naked eye, and I guess not even your sight can detect it — this plant has reached extreme levels of rot. Level 8, maybe 9."

"That's impossible." Hollis leaned closer to the display, trying to make sense of patterns that violated everything he knew about rot. "It would have manifested. It would have transformed into something else. Or exploded. Imploded? It looked completely normal; where is the fern now?"

"Uh, under more examinations. That fern is a scientific wonder. Look here —" She highlighted a timeline. "For all intents and purposes, it reads perfect scores."

Terrifying or a miracle?

"It's healthy. It just shouldn't be, but it is. Depending on how you want to look at it."

"How do I want to look at it?"

"Whoever did this has incredible potential." No flirtation in her expression. Just the kind of scientific excitement that bordered on fear. "Either someone found a way to reverse rot — not cure it, but reverse it — or... I don't know." She brightened. "This is elite stuff. Cutting edge. God I love my job."

"You were saying or. Or what?"

"Or this plant has been dead and brought back so many times it doesn't remember how to stay either way. It is Schrödinger's fern."

The implications hung in the air like contamination. If someone could reverse rot, if someone could bring back what had already decayed...

The overhead alarm rang with a red flash. Their comms next.

"That's my cue." Hollis was already moving toward the door. "Thanks, doc. Keep this on the low until I learn more."

"Hollis, wait — if someone can reverse rot, that changes how the Force should handle it. We could save people—"

"I have to save people now." The address appeared on his comm: Willowbrook Academy.

Of course it did.

Chapter Three:

Under the giant sunflower Flint ran toward the screaming, students running away; faculty trying to direct them to safety.

He veered away from the lunch tables between buildings, through a courtyard, and Max stood in front of Cassandra, from the office earlier. His body positioned between her and something that used to be human. ‘Oh fuck me,’ that was high level rot.

“Stay behind me.” Max said to her. A hero after all; too bad he couldn’t enjoy it as he ran over to understand: the thing facing them had Tommy Hendricks’ face.

But nothing else. His entire body glowed with rot, purple-black veins visible through skin gone translucent with contamination. His mood moss hadn’t just failed — it had turned black and was spreading across his chest like oil across water, consuming his uniform.

“You... you did this to me...it’s all your fault.” Tommy’s voice came out distorted, like someone had taken human speech and run it through a garbage disposal.

Tommy charged, and Flint didn’t think. Ripped Tommy away from his son before he could process what he was grabbing. With both hands, one came loose, hand glowing white and green mucous. Wet. Hot. Sour. Onions. The other hand wouldn’t come loose as Tommy roared, the rot corrupted his right eye purple to black.

He craned his neck at Max and Cassandra, Flint yelled, “Run.”

They did. Flint focused on Tommy, put a boot on their shoulder and kicked his hand away with some skin.

Tommy’s left eye spun in its white cage as if the last bit of sanity and reason and cried a single tear that steamed off his face. “Help.”

He screamed. Swung wild — a kid’s punch, no technique. Flint slipped it on muscle memory. But when he countered with a body check to create distance, his forearm sank into Tommy’s side like pushing into wet clay.

He yanked back. His sleeve was gone. The skin beneath burned.

Tommy looked at the hole in his own torso. It filled back in. Bubbled. Hardened into something that wasn’t flesh anymore.

Flint adjusted. Can’t grapple — the rot spreads on contact and fucking hurts. He needed to redirect momentum with as little contact as possible or knock him out clean.

Southpaw stance. Tommy charged again. Faster now. Flint sidestepped, shoved Tommy forward. He hit the wall, and the wall dented — not broke, dented, like the brick was softening around him.

Tommy peeled off the wall. Parts of him remained, melting into the surface and steaming.

His arms were longer now. The rot was reshaping him in real-time, optimizing for violence.

“I didn’t want this.” Tommy’s voice came out layered, like multiple people speaking slightly out of sync. “I didn’t ask for this.”

He swung. Flint blocked — and his arm passed through Tommy's forearm. The limb split around him like water, reformed behind, now ending in a spike.

Flint threw himself backward. The spike clipped his shoulder. Cold. Wrong.

Tommy pressed forward. Each step left prints that smoked. Flint was running out of room, running out of options. Every exchange cost him something — a sleeve, skin, time. His arms fell limp at his side.

Tommy loomed, raised both arms. They fused together into a hammer of bone and rot.

The sky darkened.

A blue dart struck Tommy in the chest. The surrounding area on Tommy's rotted skin cauterized. Another dart struck his shoulder, flung Tommy back. Pelted by a steady rain of them; here came the calvary and they brought guns.

Thank god. Illegal otherwise. Only SWAT and up had clearance because no one wanted rot and a gun anywhere near the public. Ropes dropped. Soldiers descended suppression rifles trained on Tommy, blue-spectrum rounds designed to stabilize rot signatures.

Experimental tech. Expensive. They flooded Tommy's system with stabilizing frequencies as he screamed. The mutation slowed. Reversed slightly. Shrinking back toward human and the contrast took away a lot of skin.

"Don't hurt him!" Flint heard himself shout. "He's just a kid!"

But he knew. They all knew. They would rather be safe than sorry..

Tommy fell. The soldiers circled in. Kept firing.

They ignored him as another large shadow lowered a containment unit around them and Tommy. Sealed walls; privacy. Tommy and the soldiers were carried away.

Police and other detectives and Force units, EMTs arrived on scene. In the chaos, arms pulled Flint onto a gurney. Ears ringing.

At his side, Hollis said, "You did it, hero. Max is safe."

"Oh yeah." His son; after Max got away he had forgotten. "That's good." His eyes rolled into darkness.

~

Laurel was not the woman Hollis expected. Her elaborate stake and plant hair style sagged and frizzed, vines of gray hair dipped to her sunken cheeks from constant jaw movement. Her perfect composure cracked to 98.6. An assistant whispered in her ear. The director removed her infamous silver mounted mood moss.

Max and Cassandra sat side by side, composed. They were speaking to a teacher, Mrs. Vega and the officer Gold. Cassandra said, "Tommy had been lashing out at everyone and when I called him out on it, he snapped. Max protected me."

"I didn't want to this happen," Max added, "He got aggressive. Fast."

Cassandra found and squeezed his hand. Restating the fact, "Max protected me. If he hadn't been there, I could've died."

The implication hung in the air. Mrs. Vega eyed the Director on a call with Cassandra's parents. High profile. They couldn't make it; more important matters.

The teacher said, "Let's not rush to that type off language and instead be happy that everyone is alive."

Max said, "What's going to happen to Tommy."

Mrs. Vega face aged another five years in live time. Her smile cracked, "I don't know."

What scared Hollis the most, besides that Cassandra reminded him too much of Poppy, was this room of professionals all on tilt while these two victim's blue didn't fluctuate. He stepped around Max's chair to face him.

"Did you come into physical contact with Tommy."

He looked at Cassandra, who left any eyebrow. Max said, "Yes, but I can't remember exactly. He touched me first and I pushed him back. Its all blurring together."

"Have you noticed emotional scores change after you've touched them?"

The room went silent. Everyone turned to stare at him.

"Detective," the Director's voice could have frozen nitrogen. "What kind of question is that?"

Max and Cassandra looked at each other.

"Standard question for rot investigation."

"This is... unprecedented," Director Laurel said, desperately trying to steer the conversation back to familiar territory. "We've never had a manifestation on school grounds."

"Exactly." Hollis said, "If you want to figure out why; we have to ask the hard questions."

"Not right now."

"Tommy morning check in was low." Mrs. Vega added. Like a Hail Marry; something they could all agree upon, "90.0 on the line. It could have just been a cascade."

Laurel bit. "There is a clear aggressor with a track record. I take full responsibility, having had a meeting with Flint Carver minutes before the outbreak. Perfect timing."

The door opened for Brittany Carver. She rushed in reaching for Max.

Behind her in the threshold, a butler in formal gray. Cassandra walked over.

"Kids." Laurel parted the adults and knelt to them. "You have shown extraordinary bravery. Rest now. You will have the day off tomorrow. Don't worry about anything."

Hollis watched them leave. When the door closed, he said, "I want to see their aptitude tests. They were included in their admission package."

"I don't see how that matters." The Director's eyes narrowed on him, like she decided he was an enemy.

Everyone at seven had their relationship with rot tested. She was right that it would tell him little — they obviously passed, He wanted to see how they reacted to it.

"I am not asking. This is officially an active investigation."

"I will send over the files as well as a formal complaint, requesting a different detective to handle this case considering your conflict of interest being Flint's partner. That will be all, unless you have any further questions; I am rather busy."

Chapter Four:

Punched in the face, Flint woke up thinking he knew pain. Strapped to a table in a too-white room. The walls hummed. In the surround sound, death metal screamed.

It sounded like counting. Like he was in the ring again. Waiting to get up. He had to get up, but knew he couldn't.

A doctor in a hazmat suit with a black face shield wielded what looked like a fucking soldering iron, burning blue light.

Oh yeah, Flint thought. They were working on him. He laughed.

Working on his right arm — netted off and contained. The doctor tapped the side of their helmet. The black shield went transparent, revealed a thin old face, freshly shaven, smiling thinly.

"You need to relax. Nurse — hit him again."

What did he say? "Wait, how bad is it?"

A shadow moved at his side.

"No — keep me awake. Please. I have to know."

Lights out.

~

A track laid in front of Flint. There was nothing behind him — a solid wall of pure white concrete. He ran. No end in sight; same as it ever was, and he laughed, closing his eyes. He counted to six.

When he opened them, he shot up in bed. "I can fight."

"Easy." A doctor. White coat, wavy brown hair, handsome. Pink socks. In the coat pocket, a blue rose for mood moss. Hands up, soft and pink, he said, "You already won."

Tan room, pink flowers on the wall. Real ones on the bedside stand. His right arm from the tip of his middle finger to half his bicep was swallowed by a black metallic cast.

A nurse wheeled in a cart. The doctor grabbed a bottle, uncapped it, stuck a straw in, and offered it to him.

With the casted hand he took the drink, surprised by the dexterity. It felt like a thick glove. He sipped the water. His cast flashed red, blue, white, green light inside. Looked like there were plants inside moving, shifting, and he didn't like that feeling, putting his arm down.

"What is this?"

"Water. But you mean the cast."

Flint offered him the empty bottle. The doctor took it, placed it between his legs. "You're pretty scary, Flint Carver. Your operation was a complete success. The cast needs to stay on for six weeks, as well as the three patches on your body: on your left shoulder, left hip, and lower right abdomen. You need to come in for us to remove them. Besides some ugly but superficial scarring, you will retain full control."

"But."

The doctor smiled — blue eyes, moisturized skin. "But you might not have a very strong right hook. Rot stresses the muscles like advanced atrophy. You will need physical therapy after the cast comes off. That is what's saving your arm — cutting edge, courtesy of your lab. Remarkable durability that will shoulder a lot of the inconvenience. For scale, you could probably curl twenty-pound free weights."

Twenty pounds. Flint sank into the bed.

His hammer weighed forty. His son weighed eighty. What if he had to carry either? He flexed his left into a fist.

"Waterproof. But if you break, crack, or splinter the cast or patches in any fashion, you will experience the most sensational pain of your life and will likely pass out wherever you are. As well, the vulnerable location will be highly susceptible to any level of rot."

"Does Brittany know?"

"Yes. She was here, as well as Max. They went home — I believe to make you dinner."

"Well, I'd best not keep them waiting. When can I get out of here?"

"Soon. You're on pain meds now, and we will write you a prescription. We need to schedule appointments. I'm going to hand things off to my nurse to set those. He will go over some more of the details, unless you have any more questions for me, Mr. Carver."

"Why do you think I'm scary?"

"You're a big man, but that's not what you're asking." He looked at the ceiling with a blue sparkle in his eye. Pure wonder. "The part-machine, part-living plant on your arm and body dampens your nerves around the contained area, and if the surgery is done right, there is a seamless tricking of the mind — when you wake, there is no pain at all. You woke up in the middle of the operation and in medical theory shattered the illusion. Yet your vitals are calm. The pain medication you're on is over-the-counter stuff. If it didn't work, you'd be on whale tranquilizers. That's why you're scary, Flint Carver. You have a remarkable body, heart, and steel-vault mind. Please feel free to call me, day or

night." He bowed and walked away.

As the nurse came to his side, Flint stared at his black arm. He held it side by side with his left and squeezed fists.

This could have been Max, thank god.

~

At the side of the hospital, Hollis smoked as Flint hugged Brittany, ruffled Max's hair with his black hand like he forgot it was in cast. The happy family of heroes.

In a ride, they left. On his comm, Hollis called one for himself to take him to the precinct.

Maybe Director Laurel was right; he flicked the cigarette. He was to close to it. Whatever was happening. On the ground, it smoldered.

The ride pulled to the curb. Hollis stepped on the cigarette. He needed a second opinion.

In the ride, on the way, he messaged Lila: 'You in shop?'

Fast reply. 'You know I'm as much of a workaholic as you. If not more; what's up? Bring coffee.'

Chapter Five:

"Open your eyes."

Brittany held a tray of burnt lasagna. "Surprise. I know it's not my mother's cooking, but I thought a home meal would help celebrate my two heroes. There's also garlic bread, and a salad; all like how she used to make for us. What do you think?"

Don't know how she managed to burn salad.

Same as it ever was; the answer was to move forward and Flint smiled. "Smells amazing. Vampires would weep."

"They should, I used about a hundred cloves of garlic. Max, be a hero and grab some plates. It's my new favorite word. Don't get used to this cooking. I'll serve everyone the first bite. Seconds are on you. Rejoice I will do the dishes; I know I burnt the shit out of everything."

They laughed. Smiled. Ate. Were a family.

Brittany got a call. She said, "The whale."

"How's the spiritual crisis going?"

"He has returned to the warm bosom of capitalism. Now wants me to maximize profits." She strolled to the living room. Dialed her comm and a red wall of translucent privacy blockaded them.

Max said, "I'm pretty beat, Dad. I'm going to crash." He hugged him. "Glad you're safe and home. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Max washed his plate and utensils. Dried, put them away, he left down the hall.

He watched Brittany pace. She gestured at a blurry hologram.

The only way was forward. Flint closed his eyes. It felt like running.

~

Lila spun in her chair, coat flared, hair prickly green and light pink in small flowers. "So let me get this right, basically you're saying Max is the villain."

"I never said villain. I think we look at the data. He has a plant."

"The fern Flint gave you. And cannot verify if Max was ever in even the same room as it. Could be a thrift store, living room decoration - meaning you're also implementing your partner and his wife. To what end?"

"All correct." Hollis stood from his chair. Got a cigarette.

"Don't even think about it."

He pocketed. "I don't know. He has demonstrated violence and then part of outbreak. Hard to separate the coincidence?"

She opened a drawer full of shooter energy drinks, shaped like vintage bullet casing. She tossed him one. Lila drained hers.

"Cheers." He drank it.

Like piss.

"Both incidents you failed to mention where all in self-defense with the same person. Tommy Hendricks. What if you're overthinking it; and it's a transfer from Tommy to Max, to the family. Could explain assertive behavior. In which cases, of extreme high stakes pressure like the allocation of billion-credits and or the quick level thinking required to operate around a another human being trapped and fused to a door; and another in an egg. Decisive action."

"I don't like where this is going."

She shot another. "You brought this to me, remember. I'm your second opinion; like third or fourth, but I appreciate the warm thoughts nonetheless." She twirled in her chair, coat flaring.

"You have been a significant help to me. Thank you. Wanna go outside and smoke a cigarette."

"Wow. You really know how to charm a girl."

~

Max's bedroom door clicked shut. He stood still for a moment, listened — relief and love and the particular exhaustion of adults who'd been scared and were now pretending they hadn't been.

He moved away to the center. Braced himself.

On his comm, he found Cassandra's contact. Dialed it.

She answered on the first ring. "Sloppy. You made it to part two. Control is everything. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes."

"Good." Dead end. Max sat on his bed.

He reached hand to King, on his nightstand at the top of its building. The gorilla beat its chest, jumped off. It climbed up. Jumped around his arms. Settled on his shoulder, an arm around his neck. Max said, "I'll be ready."

Chapter Six:

His eyes wouldn't open. Tommy's eyelids thrashed, peeled themselves from rust, crust, and goo. Had to bat them for hours to get the dust and crinkles out.

Not like he could see anyway. Strapped, wrapped, and in a tube.

A hose down his throat. Plugs up his nose. Wires and flashing lights.

Ironically contained in a jelly like liquid, assuming the rainbow of flashing lights, and he realized his feet didn't even touch the ground. Floating.

He was floating. Batting his eyes.

Why did they feel like rocks while he was like wiggled. Alarms beeped red.

Through a thick fog from kicking his feet the best he could, hazmat figures waved. Pitch; like a coin dropped through a quiet cave, "Tommy can you hear me?"

Fuck that was loud. He thrashed. Nodded. Tried to speak but really couldn't.

"Try to relax."

How could he. Above him a red light flashed. Bubbles. Eyes closed.

He hated closing his eyes. It meant they would crust over again.

That he would have to fight if he ever wanted to break free. The trouble was, with his eyes closed, it was easy to sleep. So warm.

Like a cocoon. Why would he even want to leave.

Episode 3: THE THING ABOUT SPIDERS

Chapter One:

Needed coffee. Wrung out and strung out and not in the mood, Hollis slouched in one of the two chairs, facing the Chief.

The other empty; won't be for long. Hollis couldn't shake the feeling the wide brisk, and all edges office smelled like horse piss with a sprinkle of hazelnut.

Cold in her house. No Chief should be good looking; it was annoying knowing she could also kick his ass. It took a lot to make him feel this kind of burden. He saw his breath. On her desk, steam wafted from a big thermos. Chief Harrow in a snow white crew cut, a big fur coat, worn tattered year round sat behind the desk like it pissed her off and could flip it over at any moment and the only reason she didn't was that damn thermos steaming.

Between them a whole lot of piss, and him looking the other way against her dead-wall stare. Jolly big blue eyes as cold as the AC.

“You think that’s funny Hollis?”

Perky nipples. Fifty-five years old, built like she used to break down doors before she started breaking down budgets. Her mood moss glowed an alright blue. Steady, like she'd beaten into place at the score she called good enough 90.02.

“No. I don’t think it’s funny. Harrow, I think the parents are going to have to pucker and deal with it. Hell they should be tested too. Who knows how far this could have spread.”

“That is unprecedented thinking, and borderline unwarranted.”

“Only borderline though.”

The door opened. Flint.

“Good timing.” Chief said, “How’s the arm. Can I count on you for a potential soft ball team. If I got it approved.”

“Yes sir. By all accounts it’s an arm. My only issue is with its limitations. That in itself is a lesson in patience and humility while my left feels even stronger. Hollis. I heard you were at the hospital. I got your calls too.”

“Diamond chin Flint is what they ought to call him. You never said what your handle was.”

“I never said I boxed.” Flint shut the door and sat down. “How are we looking Chief. As you can see our banter never dulled. When can we get back on the streets.”

“Easy. You’re both going to be parked good and tight. Really you should take some time off.”

They both said, "Sir."

Looked at each other. Eyes narrowed. Chief laughed.

She drank from her thermos. Blew a hot steam of satisfaction. "You want some?"

"Sure." Hollis reached across at a Flint gaping at the audacity. Early bird gets the worm, sticking his tongue out.

"Too bad. There's a concert. Blue Wilt's playing. I want you both there."

"Sir." The both looked at each other.

Flint raised his hand. He said, "Sir. That's not what your paying for. We're detectives."

Hollis said, "He's not wrong."

"No. All wrong." She crossed her arms. "It's exactly what I am paying for; the band Blue Wilt is not arguably a sensation. Their hard demographic is sixteen to eighteen year olds that swings dramatically down in percentage compared to up. They go nuts. Rot is all over this town. On paper; it will look as you say. Meter maids. Really; I need my best men where the biggest threat is. That's the arena. Join the modern age, gentlemen. Hollis you will need to stress test. Flint, you have a doctors note for now. But you want to be a detective with that arm; I can't worry about you being blue or not. Can you both still follow orders?"

"Sir."

"Good. Your excused." Harrow sipped her thermos. Blew steam. "Hollis hang back."

"Flint. I'll talk to you later."

"I'll wait at the steps."

"Sure." Well that wasn't good-sounding.

After he left, door shut; Hollis sat. "Chief."

"I want you back stage for the concert. The lead singer for the band is eccentric. She requires legal messages that align with your expertise. Our lawyers will be here in thirty as well as a few of the labels' and their associates. They will begin the paper work, but we will need your signature and NDA to finalize the dotted line. We're going to set up in the executive conference room. Go see Flint, then get stressed test and meets us there. We'll have food."

"Thank you Chief."

"Don't thank me yet. Pass your stress test."

He blew on his hands as he left. First he had to see Flint. He looked pissed.

Chapter Two:

At the loading dock, Hollis lit a cigarette with a match that once lit and shook dissolved its way down to ash to blow away with the wind.

"I didn't know you smoked."

Flint rose from the steps down as Hollis sat on the top step. "I don't. Quit. This isn't happening."

"Can you be serious? What were you talking to Chief about before I came in? I was early to our meeting."

"How's the arm?"

"I'm already sick of everyone asking and staring. It's fine, it's weak. Like I'm king in one hand, and a teenager in the other; it's a modern miracle tantamount to my survival and my antithesis for the minimum of six weeks. From there, fuck. I don't know. probably a decade to reclaim baseline. I'm fucking trying to keep my chin above the bar man. We haven't been Partners long; I haven't been a detective long enough to be benched now."

"No one is saying you're benched. You didn't think we were going to get the Willowbrook case did you. Look I took advantage of a window to get some information, but that was always going to be out of our hands. We're too close to it."

"Yeah no shit. That's my son; the elephant in the room. And there's a lot of life left to me, and Max, and you. I'm not giving up now."

Hollis blew smoke down, away from Flint standing over him; who realized his own shadow and walked away to free him to the light of the new day.

He needed coffee. It was going to be a long one.

"We're all on your side Flint. Go home."

"What did you ask Chief before I came in?"

"For a full physical and emotional evaluation on every student at Willowbrook Academy. Did you know we haven't upgraded the district wide aptitude test in almost twenty-five years. That's insane. Look how much better we understand rot."

"You want to test Max."

"Yes, and the girl ,Cassandra Ivy. And literally everyone else at the school. I was telling Harrow; I think we should test the parents too."

"You want to test me." The shadow loomed.

"And Brittany."

"You're a real piece of work. My son did nothing wrong."

"I didn't say he did."

"Max is a hero."

"Yes."

Hollis dragged the last glow, then stomped the cigarette.

"I think we need to set firmer boundaries as partners," Flint said, "I crossed the line asking for family advice. That was my mistake. Moving forward, our relationship—for both our mental, emotional, and professional clarity—should remain business oriented only. Okay?"

"Whatever you say. Partner."

"Good."

Flint walked away, returned inside the precinct.

Hollis said, "What a waste of a good smoke."

The stress test awaited him. Lila could wait a little longer; Hollis fetched another cigarette.

He'd bring her a coffee too. She'll like that.

Chapter Three:

The Stress Protocol chamber looked like someone had asked a sadist to design a meditation pod

"Well," Lila gestured to the open container. She changed her hair again. Orange hair with bits of brown. He liked it better green and pink.

She said, "I'll strap you in."

"Be gentle."

Restrained, Lila held out a mouthpiece attached to tubes with more straps. "Don't tell me I have to swallow it all."

"Bite." He did.

Hooked up. She ruffled his hair. He narrowed his eyes as she closed the capsule door. Lila winked. Waved. "See you on the other side. Try not to have a complete breakdown."

She walked out of his range. The waiting was what killed him.

Above; couldn't move to see fully the light brightening on him until it became annoying and drowned his brow. Forcing him to close his eyes.

When he opened them the chamber, from his bound feet, filled with blue gas. Coughed. Dazed.

The capsule sank to a deeper ocean. Hollis coughed and the fog cleared to sharp acute figure before him. Kaine.

A figment of his imagination and rot of his memory jettisoned to reality for a moment. He said, "You shouldn't smoke."

"Great advice as always." He only started because of him.

“Wise ass.” Then his head separated from his body. Not violently. Fell off.

His body stood there for moment, to make his point, like a wise ass. Then it fell too in a cloud of blue smoke. The gas dissipated.

Reality reasserted clarity. Lila knocked on the glass.

“You’re alive” Thumbs up. “Good score too.”

The door opened. He stepped out on legs that only betrayed him slightly.

“Welcome back. Not your best work but you’ll make the Chief happy. Ninety-five point four. That’s good blue.”

“Not perfect.”

“No one’s perfect.”

“Tell Flint that.”

“You didn’t burn down paradise did you.”

“It was never paradise. He asked. I told the truth.”

“Well. How’d he take it.”

“He has a doctors note. Chief put us on some upcoming concert. You ever heard of Blue Wilt?”

“Oh my god. Yes. They are the best. Dahlia is literally a gothic angel and my spirit animal.”

“Great. I need to go sign a bunch of papers. Before I go, now that you know I’m relatively sane,”

“Operative word there was relatively.”

“I need a favor.”

“I’m thinking Chinese.”

“Not that kind of favor.”

“No fun. You know the quickest way to a girls heart is food.”

“Noted. How about the quickest way to get a cloak and owl eyes?”

“I’d say there’s forms you can sign for those.”

“What if let’s say, this needed to stay between us. Besides, when I ask you on a date; I want it to be better planned.”

“Aren’t you a charmer.” Lila spun the chair, to stop at her desk, opened a drawer.

He walked over. Inside a ring of flash-keys.

“Do you have everything you need, detective?”

Chapter Four:

Papers signed; whew. Hands shook; Hollis hightailed it out of there. That was a whole headache waiting to bloom, set aside, into the fresh afternoon sun. It revived him.

Goods in the ride. Inside, Hollis's hand hovered over the dash.

Two options: Max or Cassandra.

They were given days off. Flint likely ran straight home. From what he had said about Brittany, and all was normal, she went to work.

Left the two heroes alone. Good ole dad would make a day of it. Max would be covered.

While Cassandra Ivy; Poppy fucking two point oh. Hollis fished for a cigarette. "Yeah you're the one." He saw the signs, 'Save the World.'

She had the day off, but would go anyway to show face to maintain and crystalize the shiny blue example. A miniature principal; probably was the Director to the students. Or their spirit animal.

Children still scared the shit out of him. Animals.

She had to show face. He scrolled on a map for the address across the street of the academy. The ride took off. This late. He should catch last period.

Leaning back in the chair. He had to rest.

Flint would say it's a marathon not a race; Hollis chuckled. Normally, he would quote Kaine, and thought of his head falling off.

In the darkness following the ride; he didn't know what he was searching for as he cleared his head. He arrived parked at no real answer quicker than what he wanted and late; across the street the giant flower shook its petals gates opened.

Students leaving in droves. From a black duffle in the back, the cloak, a black disc placed on the comm, used the same flare technology alter to render him invisible to the human cone spectrum. As well as most sensor; not military grade.

In a black case, next were the owl glasses for sight and hearing. Fitted, out of the door. He was the invisible man crossing the street.

A foot on the campus. Nothing. No alarms. Students didn't look at him, or the yard duties. The sensors on the gates didn't ring.

He followed the largest orbit of students. Overhead a large shadow.

Government transport. Damn, it was for her.

Cassandra waved to butlers taking the flowers and gifts off her. As another student, a girl ran over to her. Hollis dialed in the owl lenses.

“Plan B. They reacted faster.”

“They, you mean he.”

“Regardless. Handle it.”

The girl returned to the crowd as the butlers behind each of her shoulders carrying boxes of Blue Bar candy. Threw them to the crowd.

She waved and left. The boxes empty; the guards followed. And she left, and the kids dispersed and that was a whole lot of nothing.

One of the bars fell to the ground. He thought about picking it up until he saw the girl she talked to; black hair. Long like Poppy’s; though Cassandra’s wasn’t; this girl had something shiny in her hair. He had nothing else to do and already taken the equipment; Kaine would say see it through; your already in thick shit.

He followed her to the side of the campus, and she went to the bathroom. Hollis turned. Waited.

Considered life and if he really was losing it. She was in there too long. Hollis checked his comm. Three minutes. Four.

The student exited. Did not go toward the front, back the side exit if he still remembered and if it didn’t change.

As he followed her, he scanned her with the Owls. On his comm; reconstructing their prints, he ran it through the force database, crossed referenced with the live investigation to find: Morgan Price. Upper middle class parent, enough to care that she take a ride, instead of walk wherever the hell she was going off campus and not at her elective choir.

Glitter sparkled on the back of her uniform. He didn’t notice before like a faint constellation. Hollis rotated his Owl.

The pattern was too deliberate. Too organized.

She walked like someone following lines only she could see. Never hesitated at intersections. Never checked her comm for directions. Just walked, in vectors through the city. The buildings got older, the blue fronts less and less apparent into what used to be green district-5 to the new border to a warehouse sector that looked abandoned.

Morgan entered one seemingly at random. What could have been an office building once; a skeleton of concrete and broken windows.

Inside, sleeping bags littered the floor with random blankets beer bottles, needles, stolen shopping carts full of junk. Tents, and box forts. The sweet-sick smell of ‘Feel Blue’ and blue sticks and cigarettes, whiskey, and piss. Onions. Rot.

Morgan headed for the stairs without hesitation. Dark and wet, each step felt like it could crumble. And if it could crumble why not this whole building. Yet they climbed higher and higher into a blank space parsed by concrete columns.

High ceilings lost in shadow. And people.

Dozens of them.

Homeless. Addicts of all kinds, heights, color, gender, and smells. Underline of horse shit. More and more they oozed from the darkness and sat perfectly in rows between the columns.

Like a congregation waiting for communion. They bowed. Their hands folded.

What the actual fuck was happening? Morgan walked to the center of the space.

They bowed lower. Foreheads to concrete.

She whispered something. Hollis moved closer, trying to hear.

That's when he saw it.

A flicker in the light above her. Like a vibration. A distortion in the air. His eyes watered. He adjusted the owls.

Hanging from the ceiling, as large as Morgan herself, lowered a spider.

It vanished. Reappeared. Vanished. Distorting, vibrating. A SPIDER.

Hollis stumbled back. 'Fuck me.'

Morgan held up her hand.

The SPIDER descended with delicate grace. From its abdomen, it produced a stream of tiny spiders—black pearls of wrongness that pooled in Morgan's palm like liquid nightmare.

She walked down the line of homeless.

Each lifted their head at her approach. Opened their mouth with desperate gratitude. Eyes already glazed with Feel Blue, already gone to places that made this seem like salvation.

She poured spiders onto their tongues.

They swallowed with total faith. Like it was love in total absolution.

When she finished, Morgan Price turned and stared directly at Hollis.

She couldn't be. Yet, she was.

Through the cloak. Through the invisibility. Through every layer of technology and training and denial. "I know you're there."

Cathedral-pure voice. "I don't know what you know, or what you think you know. But no one will believe you."

Hollis pressed his comm; the cloak retracted. He straightened, stepped more into the light between the columns. "Why's that?"

Morgan smiled. Beautiful and terrible and very, very young. "Remember when you followed me to the bathroom. One. Pervert. Two. That's when you lost me."

He didn't understand. "Why?"

"Because I'm not here."

Her body collapsed.

Not fell—collapsed. Into thousands of tiny spiders that scattered in every direction. They scattered into the darkness between the addicts, standing to attention.

Their eyes snapped open. They glowed purple.

That's not normal. Hollis turned and ran.

The pattern on her back. The constellations. Hollis laughed; he got it now: a web.

Moving in unison. Heads tilting at angles that necks shouldn't allow. They chased.

Into his wrist, he held at his comm down the stairs, as they rolled, sprinted, dove, and fell after him.
"Heeeeelp me."

~

In the quiet warehouse sector, a faint call rose like a fallen tree in a forest. Inside one abandoned building, at the bottom of the stairs. Palming the floor Hollis sprinted as two seconds behind rushed a flood of grungy bodies, tangled, and crawling. "I need fucking help."

His voice cracked as he skid over the concrete, losing his balance to get to the sunlight. A sharp left turn, down the main stretch of emptiness. The wave crashed loudly behind him. Feet slapping; his mouth was so fucking dry.

"I need extraction yesterday! I don't—" Tackled into a fence.

Hollis shoved the man off, punched him in the face, kept running. Tackled again. It gripped his leg, bit him. He had to keep moving—too late. Another speared him with their forehead. More piled on, weighing him into a pit of clawing limbs.

Hollis covered his face. Light dwindled. Bitten. Hair pulled. Neck throttled in darkness of blood and nails. Heat flushed him as wetness clung—

The bodies scattered.

Blue flames poured from a shadow in the sky, congealing around the rot-sources. The homeless fell, immobilized as the gel hardened to stone. Seconds later, the rot burned off—the stone cracked, liquefied, splashed the ground. They lay still. Breathing. Clean.

Canisters hit the street. Purple gas. Hollis coughed, wiping blue residue off his arms. Loud whirring. Soldiers descending.

After Willowbrook, they weren't fucking around.

Blue darts dropped the ones still fighting. Arms grabbed him. Hollis gave a thumbs up.

"Nice timing. I'm going to pass out now."

Chapter Five

The movie theater brightened on a packed house and Flint and Max. The credits rolled, a good movie. Some people clapped.

“Wow.” Flint rose, stretching. “What did you think?”

“I don’t know.” Max followed him to the exit. “I’m still digesting it.”

In the parking lot, in their ride. Quiet on the way home, but comfortable quiet. They had a full day at the arcade, go-karting. Food. Snacks, and treats.

His hand, the black fingers curled. Was not a problem. He showed that to Max. Life does not keep the Carvers down.

Flint glanced at Max in the passenger seat. His son was looking at the world with an easy grin. Not forced, natural. Steady blue all day, higher in fact than when they started.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe Max really was doing okay. Maybe this was what growth looked like. They pulled into the garage.

First step out of the car, Max paused.

“Hey Dad. Today was fun. It got my mind off everything. Thanks. I’m going to go to my room. Project due next week.” He went inside before Flint could respond.

Door closing with the soft click of privacy. Flint stood in the garage, grinning like an idiot.

That’s a win if he ever heard one. Flint shadow boxed himself and laughed and followed his son into their home.

He took a shower. The hot water felt earned. Humming something tuneless, working shampoo through his hair.

His fingers found something.

A bump. Mindless Flint picked at it. Peeled with a sharp pinch.

He looked at his hand. Black and blood. His left hand shot to his head.

Felt nothing. Flint examined both hands.

Nothing.

Caught at the drain, something small and dark. He squat, but it disappeared down.

He stood, rubbed the spot. Looked at his hands again. No blood.

Flint stood under the water. Everything was fine.

Everything was blue.

Episode 4: THE THING ABOUT YOUR GUT

Chapter One:

At the hospital, it felt like one step forward, two back. First him, now Hollis. What the hell was going on in District-6? At the reception desk, the attendant said, “The patient has already checked out?”

“Checked out?”

“More accurately he left.”

That sounded like Hollis. He can’t sit still. “Thanks.”

Outside, on his comm he called a ride. When it arrived, his hand hovered over the dash.

Two strong options: Hollis’s apartment or the station.

He told him their relationship was to remain professional—god, I can be such an asshole. Flint typed the precinct’s address.

It flashed red. Urgent message from Chief: ‘All hands.’

Meant drop whatever the fuck you were doing and go to base. Already on his way.

~

A foot inside the precinct, Flint slipped on a beanie; bustling. Unnaturally, everyone marched too purposefully. Too eager in their righteousness; even if it was about him and Hollis. They were too arrogant. All dick swagger; and a white lab coat; teal hair broke the mold like rot.

Lila slunk over to him among an army of straight backs and wide shoulders. “Yo.” She waved. “Chief called for an all hands.”

“Have you seen Hollis?”

“With his type, all you have to do is wait. He’ll come when he’s ready.” She gestured to the traffic; Flint led to the conference hall. They slipped in and stayed along the back against the wall as the ranks of chairs filled with no body sitting in them.

Chief Harrow took the podium. In her big fur coat, she towered over it, and them. They loved how her stern blue eyes chilled the room. Cold as mud, and their boots stomped, shaking the room. The crowd steamed. Her mood moss 90.02 was unapologetic as her fist slamming against the podium. “We have been attacked!”

They stomped. Fists rose. Lila arched an eyebrow at him.

“We have become docile at our posts, comfortable in our luxury, and have turned a blind eye to troubles plaguing our prestige. Even when we absorbed the less fortunate of district-5; we did not prepare and our children and our men are paying the price in broad daylight.”

Outrage. Feet stomping.

"We failed district-6 and opened our homes to rot. No more." Harrow gestured to the side, up the raised platform, Hollis wrapped like a mummy in vintage bandages he did himself to soak the justification. He raised the fist; the call to action heard; responded in kind and despite it being cold as hell the room was ablaze.

Flint scratched his head, looked at his black casted hand. It too made a fist.

"I am issuing a district-wide sweep of all abandoned buildings and warehouses along the border. We will clear out the homeless, the drugs, and the rot. We will protect our city. We will make it Blue again—stronger and better than ever before!"

~

A military level sweep of efficiency applied to social cleaning. Officers in full tactical gear with cutting edge equipment kicked down doors with or without locks. Fumigated buildings. Burned others to the ground.

They rounded up humans who'd already given up and those who fought back. Shipped them off to "The Farm," a detention facility announced by Chief.

On the opposite side of the border, deep blue farmland. A haven for rehabilitation and the news ate it up. Finally, their tax dollars at work, getting the homeless properly clothed, fed, educated, and soon to be back in civilization, better, stronger, and blue.

To coincide with the emergency issued blue mandate. As a blue district- they would enforce the hard rule 90.00 only. Chief Harrow stood before reporters with cleaned buildings as her backdrop, her 90.02 never flinching, delivering the good news.

"Today marks a turning point for our district. We have removed over five hundred individuals from dangerous, rot-infected environments. We are giving these people their lives back. District-6 will be blue. No further questions."

The force held themselves tall and proud, on the attack rather than reacting. They issued better scanning tech to all public stations, transport and rides, Willowbrook, and public schools. Better rapid response precaution.

Everything was looking better, moving forward. Though Flint couldn't participate as directly as he wanted to; every night he sat in his ride, in the driveway listening to the Chief on the radio.

"...We will be Blue again." Became their slogan. It was everywhere.

He turned off the radio. The silence was worse—it let him hear his own pulse, feel it in places that shouldn't pulse. The back of his head. Behind his eyes. Under his fingernails.

It was all in his head, and he gripped his arm. Because he felt no pain.

Yet the panic remained. He just had to keep going forward. Opened the garage, pulled in.

Chapter Two:

A group message including: Flint Carver, Hollis Verne, and Lila Kemp from Chief. "Conference Room-C."

By chance Flint checked the loading docks. On the steps, Hollis smoked. Waved. "Yo. You look good."

Flint glared. "You look like shit. So you're just a smoker now, huh."

"Cheaper than hookers. Shall we do this thing. It's long overdue."

"Yes. It is."

~

Conference room-C felt like a poker table. And there was a new player.

Harrow at the front, fur coat and thermos, cap off and steaming. On her left, Lila, who bleached her hair all white as her coat, tucked into her chair in a proper posture and stance; a bad omen.

Hollis sped to sit next to her first. Parked, he lifted his eyebrows at the newcomer that now to feel even and symmetrical Flint sat next to.

Short in their chair relative to everyone else, a human-toe personified with toe-like hair, stringy and curly blondish, brown, and white that might as well not be there in a suit and long black trench coat. No chin. All nose. Coffee on the table, gloved hands in leather. He leaned in. "You can feel it too, huh. The cold." He held a baguette, bit into it, ripped some off.

Chewed with his mouth open; a federal fucking agent. "You want some?"

"Thank you for coming." Harrow hammered her fist on the table. "This is Agent Wood."

He waved the baguette. Ripped off another piece.

"He will be auditing the precinct. Answer every question he asks like you're under oath."

Flint thought the lack of communication regarding their back-to-back incidents were out of healing respect; they were building a case. Fuck.

He should get a lawyer. He should call Brittany; calm down. Flint placed his hands on the table. They were innocent. Relax. They had nothing to fear.

Wood eyed the black hand. Nostrils flaring like he could smell it from that far away, followed the length back to eye contact that was unnerving. Flint would be damned if he would back down to anyone, and stared right back at the ugly son of a bitch.

Wood laughed. "I like this one." He ripped off another chunk of bread. Chased it with coffee.

Harrow hammered the table. "Let's cut the shit. Lila, you provided an opportunity for Hollis to take without authorization, callsign cloak and owl to spy on Willowbrook Academy. From the data we collected from the equipment; you were following student Morgan Price."

Hollis leaned back in his chair with a smirk that didn't agree with the scolding from the parents. "I think the data collected exonerates the sensitivity of sniffing onto another detective's case. I had a

time-sensitive hunch and I executed. It proved fruitful."

Lila said, "Hollis, you could have died."

Wood knocked on the table.

Hollis said, "I didn't though. I called it in. And we have a much bigger job on our hands."

Harrow confirmed, "That's why you still have your job. Smart ass. All of you. With the press and congress up my ass; do you think I want to put my two sparkling heroes on blast. Or fire one of our brightest scientists. You all shit the bed. That's the sad truth. Now we have to work with what we got."

"What did I do?" Flint raised his black hand.

"You didn't follow protocol at Willowbrook. You rushed in as a civilian without securing the area and then at no point, before or during engagement did you call it in. We watched the footage; you can be a boxer when you want; we want detectives on the field. We had to be notified by the school. You, like Hollis, were reckless and lucky."

"I had to save my son. You're right, I should have called it in." Flint sunk in his chair.

Wood's knuckles hovered over the table. Didn't land.

Harrow sighed. "I know. That's what we thought until Hollis's data."

Flint repeated her, "What we thought?"

Wood knocked once. "You," he pointed a long, crooked, and bony finger at Hollis. "Think there's a connection between the students Morgan Price and Cassandra Ivy; and from the data collected we saw what she can do with the spiders." He shivered, drank his coffee.

Flint raised his black hand. "What can she do with spiders?"

Lila raised her hand too. "Me too. I love spiders. What can she do?"

Wood knocked twice. "I hate spiders."

Chief said, "What I'm about to share is extremely sensitive and classified material. Not to be shared. Please sign the NDA sent to you now." She pointed at Wood, who pressed his comm.

They got the message and signed. Hollis leaned back to watch himself as the table's surface glowed and rose the hologram of the recorded footage.

Lila said, "That is amazing."

Flint said, "Amazingly terrifying."

Lila added, "But not outlandish. This is what the cloaking technology is based off; maybe not spiders specifically, but rot. It's highly plausible for a spider or any organism to be contorted by it, and heighten its already latent abilities. Many spiders can vibrate their web and body to render themselves invisible to the naked eye. So if this type of mutation is possible, it's theoretical that the possibilities are limitless. Would be crazy if you didn't just show us it."

Wood knocked three times. Slow. "Smart indeed. Gotta keep an eye on this one, huh."

"I speak the truth."

Harrow hammered the table. "Brings us back to Max Carver, Cassandra Ivy, and Tommy Hendricks; now that we know what is possible and that they are all connected; we have to re-look at the situation."

Flint stood. "You fucking snitch — you told Chief your wild theory." He squared his shoulders, blue mood moss steady. Checked his comm. 96.6. Still blue. His anger was clean — righteous, not rot.

He was right.

Harrow said, "Sit down, Flint. Now."

He did. Wood said, "Good boy."

"My son is a hero."

Silence.

Chief sipped her thermos. Wood ripped off another piece of bread. Hollis eyed Wood, Lila Hollis, Chief him, and Wood Lila, slurping his coffee.

Flint gritted his teeth. "Say he is a part of it. Say there's something bigger. What? What are you implying? What is the motive, and what do you plan to do about it?"

Wood knocked on the table. "Great questions."

Hollis leaned in. "Like I suggested before. Test them all. Enroll everyone who pings. I was Max's age when Kaine made me an apprentice. We can do the same; better now."

Lila added, "It could make it safe for others to come forward. Especially now of all times with our zero-tolerance approach on high alert. There's mass support, but for how long. No one wants to live under stress."

Wood knocked twice. Sipped his coffee.

Chief declared, "We are considering all options. Now that you are abreast of the situation; we are restricting your detective duties."

Flint stood. "Wait Chief, you're benching me?"

"Sit down, Carver."

He did. "Chief. Listen—"

"No, you listen. If you stand up one more time; you will be on paid leave for the entire six months. I would pay it happily; if it wasn't for Hollis who strongly offered his support publicly. He said you would do the same."

"What a partner." It was one thing to box in the ring; it was another to be ambushed by suddenly everyone in the room. "You want to actively investigate my son, and have me steer the ship; without actually having a say at all."

Wood ripped off another piece of bread. He was really working through it. Constantly chewing and sniffing snot up those big nostrils.

"Yes." Harrow capped her thermos. Sealed it tight, and said, "You're going to be on press duty around the clock. I don't care if it's about the weather. We have two heroes and I'm going to milk your shine dry. Don't forget you have security at the Blue Wilt concert. I want smiling faces. Those are your options. And as for you, scientist, you will run stress tests only in the lab and otherwise be transferred to the Farm. This will remain your home, but they need experts more than we need loose keys."

Harrow hammered the table. "What's it going to be?"

They nodded. Unanimously.

"Good. Now stress test both of them. And don't forget to smile. The press are everywhere."

Wood stayed seated as they rose, polishing off the last of the bread. Chief saw the three out, and closed the door to conference room-C.

Chapter Three:

Off their shoulders, Kaine's head fell. "Trust no one."

It vanished with his body into purple gas, dissipating. The capsule opened. In the lab, Lila unstrapped the mouthpiece.

"Ninety-eight point six. That's a great score."

Free of the stress test. Flint was waiting outside.

"Hey, thanks again for putting your neck on the line for me."

"What's a girl to do?"

"Do me another favor. Please."

"You're joking?"

"I hate to say it, but I need a shrink. Chief is going to assign me one anyway — I'd rather you recommend someone. Someone good. I'm a complicated puzzle."

"Sure. Haha, Okay. That's not what I was expecting. Yeah, I can make few calls. But the tab is adding up."

"You're the best."

"When have I heard that before?"

Through the door, on the other side of the lab, Flint leaned against the wall. Hollis hitched his thumb at the door closing. "Warmed it up for you."

Flint pressed his comm to the panel. The door slid open. "See you at the concert, partner."

"Yeah."

The door closed.

~

"Flint, come on down." Lila spun in her chair.

How could she be so casual? Didn't she care about her career; her future?

She opened the capsule for him, and waited till he was strapped in to ask her question. "Why didn't you take the paid six months and spend it with your family? Your woman's got the credits; you have security. Why not enjoy it?"

It hardly seemed fair — he couldn't move, couldn't dodge the question. When was life ever fair. All anybody could do was square up and keep going. "I'm going to protect my family. We will all have plenty of time. And what does that even mean; I'm supposed to go on vacation; uproot my son from his school, friends; and pretend like life doesn't continue on not giving a fuck?"

"Fair point." She nodded. "Bite on this."

He did. She strapped him in. Lila gave him the thumbs up. The door shut.

Light above. Below he heard it, but when he looked down he saw purple and he didn't have an arm. The floor fell from under him.

Flint clawed at air as he collapsed in a ring. In the corner, cracking its neck, a black diamond of himself. Bouncing on their feet. A mirror.

Readied their fists. Except when it got closer, the mirror had Max's face.

Stepped in and slugged him in the kidney. Flint retreated, arms up. He fell back through another door, spinning. In his bedroom bathroom. Shower glass fogged.

Arms out. He found balance.

"Honey, is that you?" Brittany inside the shower. "You alright?"

He opened the door. An egg.

Seven feet tall. Pulsing pink veins.

It peeled open for a pink body in the fetal position. Himself.

Wet in embryo and mucus. This newborn adult said, "It's all your fault."

A light flashed above his head. The bathroom filled with steam. Purple; it drained around him; reality split; he broke a strap.

Flint caught himself in the reflection of the capsule door about to punch the glass with his black hand and stopped himself. He could break the cast.

Idiot. The gas dissipated. Flint vomited and choked.

Lila helped him out. The mess was everywhere over wires, and that looked expensive. Flint stepped out and away.

"Fucking-ah. I'm good. Sorry. I'm fine. I'm good. What did I score?"

Lila looked up at the newly improved cameras in ceiling corners, dark eyes in the pink underwater mist. Covering every angle of his puke on the lab that would have to be scrubbed and professionally sanitized.

Flint asked, "What's my score?"

"I'll check." She sat in the chair backwards. "Ninety point two. Chief's not going to like it."

Same as Harrow. Glass houses.

The system was a trap. Sometimes fair, he was stressed. That was the test; it worked. That didn't mean he didn't overcome it. Still blue.

Flint walked over to see the score. He didn't know what all the graphs meant; slammed his fists on the desk; instantly regretted that. "Sorry. Chief is not going to like it indeed. I'll clean that up."

"It'll be faster if you don't."

"Right. Silly me." Flint eased around to lean against the desk, staring at the mess he made. "What did Hollis score?"

She twirled in the chair, flaring her coat. "Higher."

"Do you know what he saw?"

Lila stopped spinning. Eyed the cameras.

"That's confidential. The real question is what did you see? I was told you also woke up during your surgery. You have a clear reaction to rot."

"Don't we all."

Lila slid the chair closer. "True. But not all so violently intimate like your boxing career. Now this. When do you hang the gloves up, fighter?"

He pointed a black finger at her walking to the door. "When I say so. Sorry about the mess."

"Have fun at the concert."

"Yeah, I'll tell Hollis you want a T-shirt."

"Would you." The door slid closed. "Dick."

Chapter Four:

No more stalling in the driveway, Flint marched through the garage into his home. Brittany, behind a wall of red privacy in the living room, paced. He curved into the primary, into the bathroom, and below the sink found the clippers.

He looked at himself in the mirror, with his good hand he felt the back of his head. Nothing. Then he shaved a line down his skull.

“Yeah.” Flint nodded. Shaved the rest.

He ran the black hand over it shaven. A knock on the door, “Come in.”

Brittany did. “Woah. What did you do?”

“You don’t like it?”

“It’s a surprise. A choice. You missed a spot.” She took the clippers. “Lean your head down.”

He did. She cleaned up after him, not saying a word.

“Go on. I know when you’re biting your tongue.”

“Did you stop to think that maybe this was not the best time for a radical stylistic choice.”

That word again. ‘Choice.’ She’s right; he chose this. Sigh. Turned around, faced her. Despite being smaller; Brittany was so strong. No fear in her.

“You’re right. I wanted to show that I had nothing to hide.”

She ran her hand down his head. “I get that. People might just call you crazy.” Brittany, under handed, grabbed hold of his chin and jaw. “Not unless you smile. Show them by being, and it won’t matter.” She kissed him. “I’m thinking pizza tonight. And sex, only if you clean up the rest of this.” She gave him the clippers, walked out the door.

Brittany stopped, turned to lean against the side. “Oh, Max got invited to a concert. I told him he could go.”

“By random chance, is it Blue Wilt?”

Hand on her hip, Brittany arched an eyebrow. “When did you start getting hip?”

“Small world. Don’t get excited, I’m still boring. Chief put Hollis and I on it.”

“No shit. Small world indeed; that you could expand by checking them out. They’re pretty good. A little emotional.”

“They call it emo.”

“A little emo for my taste. The girl can sing.”

She slipped away; Flint called after her, “Who is he going with?”

Brittany called back, “The girl. Cassandra invited him.”

Cassandra Ivy. The other hero.

Flint stared at his shaved reflection. Nothing to hide. Nothing at all.

Episode 5: THE THING ABOUT GATES

Chapter One:

“You’re going to wear that?” Brittany giggled into her hand, and then howled in his face.

“It’s not my choice.”

Side by side, Flint and Brittany stared at the uniform Blue Wilt’s label provided. More like a costume. She slapped his ass. “Giddy-up cowboy.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea that Max go to the concert.” Brittany smiled in ways others must feel condescending; he knew better. “I mean with that girl, Cassandra.”

“I think it’s cute. Plus, she totally owes him a blow job.”

“Woah, he’s fourteen.”

“Joke. But come on, he saved her life. Let them have some fun. You’re going to be there anyway. In that; can’t wait to see it. Is Hollis wearing it too? Send me a picture. I’ll make a calendar of you boys.”

“Knowing him. He’ll find a way out of it. They’re having him check her equipment. Apparently, her microphone has rot. Everyone has to sign a waiver.”

“Already signed. Stop procrastinating and slip into that puppy. Max and I will be waiting in the living room to judge and make fun of you relentlessly.”

“Oh great can’t wait.”

She blew him a kiss and left. Flint sighed staring at the uniform.

~

It was tight. He walked into the living room.

Max and Brittany on the couch clapped. They laughed.

Actually laughed. He sighed.

Glad to hear it. Wished it wasn’t at his expense; such was life.

“Well,” he’d own it, sucked in the gut, showed off the goods. “What do you think?”

With their hands, they held up tens. Brittany said, “Hot.”

“Real cool dad. You missed your calling as a model.”

All black, skin tight, on his chest was a blue rose, petals falling off and neon down his body. It blinked to look like each petal was following down his length one at a time. On his back was a big blue shield. Over his heart, a smaller badge combined mood moss. Blue.

"Hey, keep in mind who you're making fun of, I'm an officer of the law." He shot finger guns. "I will embarrass you in front of your friends now. You've all but signed your death warrant."

Max had no mercy. "I thought you said you were stationed on tickets. We already pre-checked, VIP tickets and can go straight to security."

Low blow. "Say, since you mentioned it. Will it be just the two of you tonight? Or will there be others joining tonight?"

His eyes narrowed. Brittany eyed him too.

She said, "Good question."

Flint lifted his eye brows. "This a date?" Flint brightened. "Is this my son's first date. Direct my sail!" He wanted to pick him up; no he couldn't, shouldn't emasculate the growing man.

He pranced to Brittany. She held a finger out to stop him.

"Don't even think about it."

He jumped on the couch; they spread. And he grabbed each of them. Brought them in.

"You know. Cassandra is cute." He was so proud.

"Top of her class," Brittany added.

"Student president. Max could be a stay-at-home dad."

Max blushed. "No, it's not a date. Other people will be there too. I'm going to go get ready."

He fled. Brittany grabbed Flint's chin, forced him to look at her.

"Are we smothering him? I was going to drop him off and pick him up, but you know how I hated it when my Dad accompanied me to everything. Waiting in the parking lot with nothing else in his life. Is he old enough to go alone?"

"Now who is cock-blocking our son."

She slapped him. "Bad boy. I'm serious."

"It's was your joke. Maybe we do have to have the talk about the birds and the bees."

"That's your job. Keep the peace."

"Yeah. The times have changed. Kids want more freedom. We can't let history repeat itself. That doesn't mean our son doesn't get to live. I think it's a balance and we can navigate it."

"Wow. Look at you, so profound. Should I try and one up Cassandra and see if the Whale can get Max backstage passes. Then she will really have to suck his dick."

“Gross. Hilarious, but gross.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“Good point. Make the call. What else is our privilege for?”

She rubbed his head. “I’m starting to like it.”

Chapter Two:

The stadium entrance, through what looked like stone columns in tiers, became a processing center flowing eight lines through sanitizing mixers to ticket pods, left and right for checkin or purchase, with an emote walkthrough attached to eight different doors, waved in one at a time by a guard. Flint paced this line down all eight as they entered and proceeded through to concessions and then real security. Beyond which was more vendors and once the concert was in progress guests were not allowed to both exit and return.

Door-six beeped overhead the green light flashing. The score sent to Flint’s comm: 88.9 Not blue. The security guard turned away the lanky kid in a moss hoodie.

“Come on man, it’s just a point. It’s just a point.”

Flint went over, “Easy. Everyone calm down. Stand down.”

The security eyed his costume, then the black cast and scoffed, held their hands up and backed away to their stool. “Take it away, hero.”

“Relax kid. Take a breath.”

His mood moss updated. “See. I’m fine.”

“Yes you are. I want you to remain fine when you understand why I cannot let you in. It’s not personal. You will receive a full refund. I apologize for this experience.”

A pair of guards advanced. “Right this way sir.”

Flint said, “Have a good night.”

“You’re an asshole.” He followed the pair with a stare that said he betrayed him. “I want my money back.”

The lines carried on. The security guard he interrupted yelled, “Who’s excited for Blue Wilt?” All those in line cheered. Life carried on.

Another green light. Door-three. Another score on his comm: 87.6 An older woman in leopard print and short skirt, snapping her long nails. “Sir, you are going to have to back it up. Don’t touch me.”

It was going to be a long night. He ran over.

Meanwhile, Hollis was probably smoking with the band.

~

Underground, Hollis whistled, swinging his briefcase as he killed time walking through what awkwardly felt like designer tunnels, made by someone who thought beauty was suspicious.

He liked the uniform. Fit him like a glove, and it felt good to stretch in it. Like a nimble night with not a whole lot going on. "CHECK. Everything clear through Tunnel-B. Over."

Flint's voice carried exquisite professional jealousy in contrast to the dire and stuffiness of late: "I hate you so much right now. You don't even like their music."

"CHECK. This coming from the now bleeding heart who heard his first song an hour ago. At least I knew who they were. Over."

Hollis laughed at the corner, took the main line that slanted up to a delivery drop off. A truck unloaded by men in black pants and t-shirts. Others smoked along the side where the ramp met the open air, and a serious looking man in a brown vest and jeans, nice long mustache, had a scarf-vine around his neck that hung to the floor with a pink flower. He came down carrying two cases. One a tan briefcase. The other, a black container that looked like Flint's arm made corporate.

"You the guy?"

"I'm the guy." Hollis gestured to his uniform.

"The name's Grover. Let's get to it." He jerked his head to the truck.

The staff cleared out as he hefted both cases on the truck's bed. He opened the black one for an antique microphone covered in rot—not hidden, not subtle, aggressively contaminated.

Enough to affect anyone weak willed, or strong on the right day. Strong enough to eat away at anything over time. His first thought was to burn it.

Second, to drop a grenade in, close the box, and throw it in the sea. The world didn't need that. And yet, like how quickly Flint bit like the rest of the world who loved Blue Wilt and their emotional girl next door: Dahlia Mortis.

Speak of the devil, a long black ride pulled alongside the truck as Grover opened the second briefcase for a mountain of contracts. "We did our test already. Ninety-nine point seven. Got it witnessed and signed right here on this paper you will have to sign. Then you can do yours."

"How long has she been touring keeping above ninety-nine? It's impressive. Few detectives can hold those numbers." He corroborated the results, signed where needed.

"Touring is done in stints. Over the long haul, she's been at it off and on for five years now; shit. Started young. Normally, I'd say she'd have a long road ahead, but with that thing. We'll see." He stroked his mustache.

Her contract stipulated she had to be above ninety-nine and the instrument couldn't dip below seventy. Hollis asked, "She ever come close?"

"Oh sure. Even hit the line dead even second year in. We thought that was going to be the end. All she said was, 'We'll see.' Here we are still waiting."

"Yeah, we'll see." Hollis laughed a little as he opened his briefcase for a swab kit.

Seal and shook. It read: 72.2.

He filled in the results. Signed, as did Grover. They shook hands.

Hollis said, "Now all I need is the singer."

The long black ride, from no crevice, a door peeled up. Dahlia Mortis stepped out, in pink and blue winged sneakers. Green leggings to white short shorts, black baggy T-shirt with a blue heart. Sharp face, a lot of white under her ocean eyes. Blue and black hair in calculated chaos.

An assistant materialized at her side, handing her a water. She drank it. Burped, wiped her lips.

"Are you superstitious?"

"No."

"A shame. Life is more fun with magic. You see I already did my stress test."

"You are an honorary detective."

"Now I need you to sign off."

From his case, he got a needle. Their contract stipulated the score needed to be tested on her blood. She rolled the black T up and flexed and slapped her veins.

"Hit me." Large smile. A man eater who didn't know it, and it helped her emo-girl-next-door shine.

He performed the procedure without eye contact as he was certain she stared at him the whole time. The vial attached to a reader; the results flashed on his comm.

"Ninety-nine point eight. You're approved to perform."

She saluted him. "Thank god." And slapped Grover's back. She said, "You have the rest?"

"You know it."

Dahlia chugged the water and walked off. "Follow me, detective."

Hollis caught up as she said, "Why don't you like magic?"

"Not all magic is good."

"Like people. Like rot." Through the mainline to the split, she knew the way to her dressing room. Stopped beside the door with a star and her name on it.

"I want to be the example that there can be a cohesion. That it's not all black and white."

"Admirable. Does it hurt? When you sing with it?"

Her smile was beautiful and doomed. "It's excruciating. Eventually, it will take my voice entirely. Until then, I can only give the best show I can."

"And you think that's what the world needs; martyrs of the arts? I think that's tragic and will only breed those who want to be tragic and the cascade dooms us all."

"Holy hell, what a magic-less answer. Do you like my music?"

"I think it's an acquired taste."

"Ha. You're not my demographic. Too bad I wasn't older when you were younger; I could have saved you. What's your name by the way, detective?"

"Hollis."

"Dahlia."

"Mind if I ask you a favor, Dahlia?"

She straightened. "That was fast. Maybe you do have some magic after all."

"My partner has acquired the taste; and it would just eat him alive in all the best ways if I could send him a picture."

"So there is good types of rot. Okay. I take no responsibility for whatever happens between you two."

Dahlia gestured him over, wrapped an arm around his waist with practiced intimacy. He raised his wrist, the comm flashed at them. They separated. That was that.

"You know, his son is seeing you tonight too. You're quite beloved in this town."

"No kidding. What's his name? Maybe I can do something for him too."

"Max Carver."

"I will remember it." She moved toward her door with dismissal disguised as gratitude. "It's been fun, but I do have to prepare. Thank you for checking my equipment and signing off on me."

He saluted. She smiled and closed the door.

Hollis walked off nimble. Into his comm he said, "CHECK. Guess who I just met. Over."

Flint's voice carried betrayal: "I hate you so much right now."

"CHECK. If you hate me now, wait two seconds." He sent the picture. "Told her Max was in the audience. No promises. Over and out."

Chapter Three:

The concert was organized transcendence. Crowds surrendering to sound, letting the music reorganize their emotions into accepted patterns. Mass produced. Worship. Singularity.

Flint stood on the upper level, searching the crowd for Max. No luck.

He messaged: 'Stay safe. Don't forget to message your mother when she should pick you up.'

No response. The silence of adolescence. Cold world.

On stage, Dahlia held the microphone—the rotted one—high into the light for the world to see. The contamination flowed into her, through her, became her. She sang like someone burning themselves alive, and the crowd loved her for it.

Time disappeared. Flint had to do rounds.

Before the last song, she addressed the crowd with practiced spontaneity:

"Thank you all for coming out! For staying safe and staying blue. Every concert, we pick a few lucky winners to come backstage to meet the band and me. Tonight's lucky winners are: Max Carver and Cassandra Ivy. Please head backstage when this song is over. I think you all might recognize it..."

Flint made fists, it was her number-one song. Topping the charts. 'The Color of Climax' began with its signature guitar solo. The crowd erupted.

Through his comm, Hollis said, "CHECK. How's everything up top; OVER."

"I owe you one."

~

Hollis lit a cigarette in the tunnel, smiling at small victories. Another security guard passed.

"Hey, there's no smoking in here."

"Come on bro, really?"

"Yeah dude."

"If you say so." He dropped it, stepped on it lightly. A small trail of smoke narrowed.

When the officer left, he picked it back up and headed for the docks to the open air and blew smoke. Clear night.

Concert over. A different guy in a black 'Staff' t-shirt carried two cases. Not Grover.

"I'm Pete. You the guy?"

"I'm Pete. You the guy."

"Where's Grover"

"Busy. Grover only does pre-show. I do after-show. There's no smoking. You know that's bad for you."

"You're one to talk."

The rot on the microphone lowered. Touché Dahlia.

He signed the papers. Handed them back. "Here you go Pete."

"Every damn time," Pete muttered.

“What?”

“It’s just crazy to me. The longer this goes on, the more likely she is to fail. Statistically. Yet, if you ask me. She’s getting the hang of it. Dahlia will be studied in the future. Mark my words.”

He agreed. It was crazy.

Pete continued, “We often take for granted what we have. Like our lungs.”

“I get it. Sheesh. Have a good night Pete.”

Chapter Four:

Grover guided Max and Cassandra through the backstage corridors like arteries. He said, “She has a couple other kids inside already from local contests. She only has ten minutes. No touching her under any circumstances. A security guard will remain present at all times.”

He stopped at a door with a gold star and her name: Dahlia Mortis.

Max and Cass exchanged looks. They shared a unified, “No.”

“Okay then. Go right on in. No touching. Thanks. Seriously though, no touching. Haha.”

Grover opened the door. “Dahlia, we have two more for you. Tonight’s lucky winners you named on stage. We have Max and Cassandra.”

Chaos of clothing racks, four couches, mirrors, and makeup scattered everywhere with wigs and mannequins and a table full of snacks. Another full of drinks. And flowers. Of every kind, on tables, on the floor like forgotten and balanced on a mannequin’s head.

On one couch: Ash Thorne, seventeen going on nihilistically spiked hair and strategic tears in clothing that cost more than honesty. He sat next to Dahlia with the casual ownership of someone who’d been here before and not only deserved it wanted more, different already and hungry.

On the other couch: Morgan Price, for the concert her long black hair parted around a large diamond at the top of her forehead, sprinkled in with glitter spread, faded out.

Next to her, Fern Hadley. Plain Fern checked her watch like time was currency and she owed. Closing the lid with disgust, jotting a note in a black notebook and eyeing Daisy, who kept elbowing her.

A super-fan, Daisy Keeler dressed as discount Dahlia. Feet away from her in the flesh, still wore studded spike headphones, blasting her music and head-banging and mouthing the lyrics without taking her eyes off the real deal.

Aside the closing door, a stiff security guard. Empty of soul.

It closed with finality.

Dahlia, beautiful. Licked her lips first. “Hello Max.”

Ash cracked his large jaw, sharp teeth. "Took you long enough. Hey Cass is Daren coming?"

"Daren can't make it tonight." Cassandra passed Max and stood at the side of the couch with Dahlia, and positioned herself to face him though she answered Ash. "He's with the Gardener."

"Can we hurry this up?" Fern checked her watch again. "I don't have all night."

"That all depends on Max." Cassandra asked, "Did you message her?"

"Yes. When you told me. She should be here."

"Boring." Ash yawned with practiced indifference. "I bet he chickened out."

"I didn't. She should be here."

Two knocks on the door. Max realized only he looked at the door; they all kept their eyes on him.

"Max," Dahlia said, voice warm as poison, "did you like the concert?"

"Uh, yes. You're very talented." He blushed unwilling to hold her gaze with all that white under her ocean eyes; it drowned you.

Like she was drowning you; holding you under. The door opened.

Grover, "I have a Mrs. Carver."

"You must be Max's mom!" Dahlia stood delighted. Clapped. "I've heard so much about you."

"Thank you for taking the time to meet my son."

Above them, a loud POP. Then another. Then dozens.

"Fireworks." Dahlia smiled. "Right on schedule."

More pops overhead as the door closed behind Brittany with the soft click of a trap completing itself. Behind Mom's shoulder, the security guard dissolved to spiders.

"Max has something he wanted to tell you," Dahlia said, moving around Brittany like a director positioning an actor. "If you would just put out your hand?"

"Honey," Brittany laughed, confused and nervous, the laugh of mothers everywhere when their children become strangers, "what is this about?"

Max stood. His whole body trembled—not with fear, but with effort, like holding something too heavy for too long. The other kids watched; predators the lot of them. Hungry in their own way.

"Sorry." He touched her hand.

Brittany's eyes corrupted purple. Her body shook. She fell, convulsing, foaming.

"He's losing her," Ash observed with the detachment of someone watching plants fight.

"He's got this," Dahlia said, calm and encouraging.

"I can't—" Max's voice cracked, showed his age for the first time. "I can't do it."

The convulsions worsened. She could die.

"If you stop now," Cassandra said with quiet urgency, "she will be lost forever. We can save her if you can't. Do you want us to save her? Morgan."

Morgan extended her hand. Spiders poured from her palm. They flowed across the floor to Brittany, crawled into her mouth, her nose, her ears. Filling her with rot.

"Don't give up," Dahlia coached. "Try again. You can still win over control. Burn all the spiders. Just be careful. Because you could kill her too. Or worse. Believe me, my mom wanted to be my manager. Could you imagine." She punched his arm. "Practice, practice."

Max touched his mother's hand. This time, connection. The purple in her eyes dimmed empty. She opened her eyes. Blinked.

A single spider crawled across her eye.

"We should go," Brittany said, sitting up. "Traffic will be bad."

Ash laughed. "Listen to your mother, Max."

Cassandra did not look happy. Dahlia waved good bye.

The rest not impressed; or didn't care at all. Daisy head-banging mouthing lyrics. Fern checked her watch.

They all watched him leave with not his mother — or under his control. Was he a member or their pet? Embarrassing, and shame. They didn't say it, but he failed.

Chapter Five:

"CHECK. What's the noise? I don't see an after party on the schedule. OVER?"

Outside, Flint watched fireworks explode. "CHECK. It's been reported. Squad is en route. OVER."

"CHECK. Roger that. All clear below. OVER."

~

At the tunnel's split, Hollis lit another cigarette. Down on his left, a school girl giggled.

Morgan Price waved at him. Diamond atop her black hair like a beacon flashing at him to follow. He did.

Hollis, almost choked on the cigarette yelled, "Hey! Stop."

Spit it out as he ran through the maze. Morgan stopped at a dead end.

"Why are you doing this?" His voice carried exhaustion more than anger. "You can talk to me."

"Haven't you learned anything?"

“Let me guess; you’re just fucking with me.”

Thumbs up; she giggled. “Bingo!” Her body wiggled, crumpled into a horde of spiders.

Hollis ran back up and through as Grover led Max and Brittany Carver. Coincidence.

He stopped. Wait; no. He asked Dahlia to see them.

Somewhere in his skull, Morgan Price laughed.

“Hollis?” Brittany stopped Grover. “Hollis are you okay, it’s Brittany. Carver. Flint’s wife.”

“Yes. Sorry. Smoker’s lungs.”

“I didn’t know you smoked.”

“I don’t. Hello Max.”

He nodded. They met before; kid gave him the creeps.

“Your dad is around here too. I can grab him. How was meeting Dahlia?”

Brittany, took him in. She sucked on her teeth deciding on him.

“We already talked to Flint. We’re going to try to beat the traffic. Dahlia was delightful. It was good seeing you.”

Grover said, “If you don’t mind, we have a strict schedule. Another concert in two days in district-four.”

“Yeah. “ Hollis nodded. “It was good seeing you. Thanks Grover.” He watched them walk off.

Hollis found a side door. He stared into the clear night sky. A firework popped a red flower with a blue bud.

Beneath a stair case against the garbage, a fat man in an apron smoked a cigarette along side a security guard.

“Damn kids,” the guard said with someone else’s opinion. “If you ask me, it’s the parents’ fault.”

“Nah, man. It’s private capitalists. They control the water.”

Hollis returned inside, spoke in his comm, “CHECK. Status on the fireworks? OVER.”

~

Outside, Flint watched the last crowds disperse into the night. As always, he worked his butt off and Hollis got to frolic.

“CHECK,” Flint mocked. “Search party found a bunch of kids lighting off fireworks. All blue. Shame they have nothing better to do. OVER.”

“Begs the question—where are their parents?”

Max was on his way home with Brittany.

They'd be done here soon and he couldn't wait to hear all about the concert and the backstage experience meeting Dahlia.

Maybe he'd get a hotdog too. Flint hurried inside.

Chapter Six:

In the ride, Max sat in the back. Couldn't face: her.

The silence ate at him. His wrist flashed.

On his comm, a message from an unknown number: "Welcome to the garden."

He deleted it. Looked at the back of his mother's head. For a split second, he thought about bashing her head in with something; anything to not let them have her and Max cried.

"Mom?"

"Yes, honey?"

The response came immediately, automatically, like pressing play on a recording.

"Did you have fun tonight?"

"Yes. Thank you for including me."

"Did you bring what I asked?"

"Yes." She reached into the seat. Lifted the King Kong plant.

Max raised his hand. It jumped onto his arm. Climbed him to hang around his neck.

Episode 6: THE THING ABOUT BEAUTIFUL DAYS

Chapter One:

Best sex of Flint's life. He had to pace himself. Sweating.

Breathe dammit, 'That's an order, Flint. Do not back down!'

No idea what got in the water, or what song of Blue Wilt's she listened to that made Brittany move like that.

He got flashbacks to the wildness of their second time. This, in comparison, was filthy.

“I thought you were a boxer; knock out this pussy.” Her thighs captured him. Squeezed him tight. She mounted him like a cobra.

“No. Then fuck you.” With her hips she spun him around and leapt off him, pushing him into the bed. Brittany climbed over him, beat her chest. Rode him to the ground.

“You like that marathon man.” She flipped on top of him while still inside her and rode him again. “Can you keep up with this ass. Fuck me. I said fuck me soldier.”

She leaned back, grabbed both his hands and leaned him forward, dragging him deeper up and into her when something sharp bit his forearm. ‘Ow, something bit me.’

A spider. He flicked it off.

Brittany said, “Bite me.”

She parted her hair to the side, gave him her neck. “That’s an order!”

Flint saluted.

For his land, his family, and his honor. He did what he was told.

~

In the shower, Flint sang, ‘The Color of Climax’ off-key. Rubbing his bald head.

He stepped out, grooving his hips. The bathroom steamy and warm and right. Mirror fogged over, he wiped it. Saw a fucking purple egg.

Slipped; Flint caught himself on the sink. His back foot slid to thud against the wall. From within the bedroom, Brittany called, “Everything okay in there? Your leg give out again pussy?”

He glared at himself in the mirror. “No. Err yes. Everything is fine sweetie.”

Nothing in the mirror, beyond him caught between reflections. Heart beating so fast.

He righted himself, hands shaking. Wiped the rest of the mirror more thoroughly.

Just him. Normal reflection. Normal bathroom. Normal after the best night of his life.

“Everything’s fine!”

Chapter Two:

Flint scratched his forearm as he walked by Max at the table. He ate cereal. Slowly. Like he was waiting for something, and skirted eye contact. The King Kong plant around his shoulders —without the base or the building. It moved so freely. He got really good at that.

Without looking up Max said, “Morning.” His mood moss: 99.9 perfect blue.

“That’s pretty far from your room.”

“Huh?”

“The plant. I thought the building was its hub.”

“Morning family.” From the bedroom, Brittany strolled in, pinched his butt.

Flint jumped. She laughed. “Easy tiger. It’s only me. How did everyone sleep?”

“Good.”

“Yeah, good.” Flint rubbed his butt as she wrapped around the island, poured a cup of coffee.

She slid it and poured her another for herself. “The King is looking good. When I was kid, I had a bunch of plant horses. My Dad made a whole track in my room. Do you remember them, Flint?”

Yes. He slept in her room for a long time back then. He would never forget. Maybe he was over thinking it. His son was talented. Just like his mother.

“Maybe you can be a jockey, huh. Wouldn’t that be wild. Hey, what did you name it?”

“I don’t like naming my plants.” Max rested the spoon in the bowl, collected the pair to the sink and washed them as Flint heated his hands around the coffee.

King Kong eyed him the whole time. Brittany hit his arm.

“I’ll take Max to school today. The Whale called a board meeting. It’s on the way. I should be off early though, wanna try that new fusion spot.”

Max moved to the garage door. “I don’t want to be late.”

Britany smiled, “Listen to him. Jockey or a CEO in the making? Alright let’s go.”

“You’re taking the plant with you?”

“Yeah, I told Cassandra and the others about it last night. I want to show it off. I thought that’s why you got it for me.”

“Yeah. Duh. The King is awesome. Have a great day at school. Love you.”

“Love you too.” The door shut behind him walking to the ride.

Brittany eyed him. “You okay? Don’t tell me I hurt you last night.” She grabbed his hip and finished the coffee with the other hand.

“Yeah. I’m good.”

“Good. Because I want some more of you tonight. Momma liked what she tasted. I have to go. Love you too.” She kissed him on the cheek. Gave him her empty cup and left through the garage.

Max waited in the ride. King Kong stared at him.

Flint took a sip. Wrong cup. It was empty.

She’d given him hers. Taken his.

On his forearm was a spider bite.

Chapter Three:

Hollis paced along the floor of his rainbow-asshole apartment on his hands and knees in a black mask, wearing long rubber yellow gloves with a towel and bottle of bleach scrubbing it perfectly clean, because he did and didn't care and hated and loved it and, "Fuck!"

This spot wouldn't come out.

He paused to smoke a blue stick. The blue smoke was basically the same. Slightly better for holistic calmness, different buzz, less damage on the lungs; it was the same fucking thing.

Hollis laid down on the floor. Watched the blue smoke rise. Next, he'd have to get the ladder and clean the ceiling. His comm flashed.

Another message among the dozens of unread and missed calls. If it wasn't directly tied to work; he didn't give a shit at the moment. Too much on his mind, Hollis rolled over to the spot that wouldn't relent and soaked the towel in bleach and scrubbed as blue smoke rose.

His comm flashed again. Lila, again.

The message: 'You asked for this favor. Chief will make you see a therapist sooner than later. It's your choice to see the one I recommend or not. My top pick won't take your flakey shit.'

Another flash. New contact for Hazel Thorne and a location and appointment set at one-thirty.

The smoke curled, and he didn't notice before. There was a spider web in the corner.

No spider he could see. Another flash.

Persistent. Was the world fighting him; or he the world.

From Hazel. 'I don't like to waste time. Yes or no?'

Under him, the spot was gone. A bit of blue ash fell.

He'd have to start again. Sighed.

Chapter Four:

In the sun, the giant sunflower shimmered. At the drop-off, Max opened the ride's door and paused. King around his neck, beat its chest.

He looked back at Mom. Forward facing. Empty.

Considered saying good bye. That he loved her. Or sorry.

Max exited, shut the door. The ride sped off.

A yard duty blew a whistle. "Max Carver. That is a prohibited type-S plant. Please come to the office with me so we can store it. You can have it back after school."

"Get out of my face before I make you."

The staff's eyes rolled to the back of their head. Through the herds of students, tall, arrogant Ash walked over like his shoes were biting the pavement. His smile hungry.

Ash smacked his shoulder. "So you finally grew up. What, I was only joking. Sort of. I kind of do like that plant. Hey." He licked his teeth. "You wouldn't mind giving it to me?"

Max walked by him. "You wouldn't like the taste."

Behind him Ash laughed. A sick laugh. He caught up to his side.

King beat its chest at Ash, snapping at it teasingly. "You're right. I ought to save my appetite."

They walked to the administration building under the beautiful giant sunflower. On the double doors hung posters for the blood drive.

Cassandra and Ash on the cover holding thumbs up. Ash opened the door for him. On his wrist, the blue bracelet said, 'Save the World.'

"After you, stud."

Inside, no one acknowledged them as they went to the Director's office. In the waiting area, students sat and waited in lines. All facing forward, not saying a word.

The Director's door opened for a nurse. "Next."

A student mindlessly rose. Walked over as they did.

Ash asked the nurse, "Give me one."

She handed him a vial of blood. He unscrewed the cap and drank it. Wiped his lips. "After you." His teeth red in their smile.

Ash closed the door behind them. The mindless student sat in the immediate right corner, converted to a blood draw station.

In the immediate left corner. A security guard stood blank face, eyes rolled up in their head.

Further back the office recently got aired out and redesigned for more space and sunlight, Director Laurel stood in the corner facing the wall. Like a mannequin ready whenever Cassandra behind their desk wanted; at the moment on a call.

All the plants removed, two couches installed, the room held a professionalism despite the club lounging. Cassandra ended the call saying. "Thank you for your time. Enjoy the golf senator. Max, speaking of time; perfect."

She walked around to lean on the front of the desk. "You ready to save the world?"

From her uniform, she removed a blue bracelet and shot it at him. Max caught it, examined the blue words. He pocketed it.

“Yeah, buddy?” Ash slapped is back on the way to couch and hopped over the back of it. “Have you donated yet?” He sipped from the vial of blood.

On the couches: Morgan, jewels glimmered in her hair pulled in to a braid today hanging over her left shoulder. She pet it.

Daisy covered in Blue Wilt merch from the concert, head-banged to Blue Wilt everyone could hear. Fern checked her watch and to fill her obvious disappointed removed a sketch pad from her backpack.

She designed the posters for the blood drive. She was very talented.

They all were, one way or another. Even Ash, who said, “No Daren again?

Max added on. “I thought once I joined, I’d be able to meet him.”

Cassandra smiled, “He’s with the Gardener.”

Ash spit onto the rug. “Daren is always with the Gardener. We’re the ones doing all the work.”

He lifted the empty vial. Wagged it at her. “Another.”

“I think you’ve had enough.”

“I’ll know when I’ve had enough. Gotta eat a lot to give a lot. My blood’s worth ten of theirs.”

Cassandra waved over the nurse. She gave him another vial as the mindless student lift, slipping on their blue bracelet.

Another student took their place, as well as a teacher entered with two guards closing the door behind them. Mrs. Vega. Eyes rolled back.

“Why is Vega here?”

Cassandra moved over to the side of the couch. “Parent Night is around the corner and though the Gardener recognizes your talent and has admitted you access to the club. It was sloppy. Your whole initiation has been sloppy. Everyone in this room has done it, cleaner.”

Fern flipped to new page in her sketch book. She checked her watch, and sighed.

Daisy mouthed lyrics and Morgan said, “If you can’t take control of your life. You don’t belong in our new world.”

Ash held the vial over his tongue, enjoying the last drops. “Harvest or be harvested.”

“I thought we were better than that. Not much of a new world if it’s the same.”

“You both are right and you both are wrong. You showed tremendous progress, but Morgan finished the job for you.”

“Wrong.” Max folded his arms. “I cracked it last night and fixed it this morning. My mother is under my control. Check for yourself.”

“Morgan.”

She closed her eyes. “Checking.”

Morgan opened them. “He’s telling the truth. Killed some of my spiders. Rude. I’m surprised I didn’t know when it happened. How did you do that?”

Fern looked up from her sketch and Ash laughed. “Big deal.”

“That is a big deal. Our boy is leveling up. That’s what we like to hear, so it should be no problem to have a demonstration.” Cass raised her hand, snapped.

The guards brought over Mrs. Vega. Their eyes rolled into place. Followed by sharp panic.

“What’s going on? Where am I? Let go of me. What is this. What? Cassandra? Students, why? I said let go of me. Help.”

Ash snapped, “Shut her up already. If you can.”

“Max.” Cass gestured. “The floor is yours.”

He faced Vega, squirming.

“Max Carver. What is this? What does she mean. Help me. Let me go this instant. Please. Stop. Hey. What are you doing.”

“It’s okay.” Max lifted his hand and touched her shoulder.

Vega went limp.

“I didn’t understand the difference between plants and the vibrations of people. So similar and so different.” he said, voice low. “I didn’t account for how much negative emotion people actually store and how it defends the house like a parasite. A slight adjustment and the energy won’t work against me, but with me.”

Max removed the hand off Vega, raised it, and snapped. Her eyes flexed open and focused. “Do five jumping jacks.”

Vega did.

Ash clapped. “So he can.”

Fern went back to sketching as Morgan pet her braid.

Cassandra’s comm flashed. She said, “The Gardener is pleased.”

Overheard the bell rang. Max turned to Vega, “Go to class.”

Out the door the teacher went as well as another student slipping on a bracelet. Another took their spot as Cass pulled a chair to sit adjacent the couch.

“Please, Max take a seat. Now. We can discuss Parent Night.”

Ash waved a vial. “You’re telling me.”

Cass said, "You've had enough. Give back."

The nurse came over to him. He offered the arm, "Yeah, yeah."

She drew his blood. Cassandra said, "Everyone must do their part. Everything must be perfect."

Chapter Five:

Through the office, Hazel's was the last. A tan door with a wood sign hanging by a nail and a bit of string. 'Enter.' Hollis did into a hallway of earth. Soil.

In the ceiling a nest of roots. At the bend, the room spilled left for a circular space. Like they were inside a potted plant.

Two stumps on the ground. Standing behind the further, a strong woman in pink heels, three inches, black stockings to above her knees, tall. Very tall. To a green skirt, a blouse of blue in ripples beneath her strong bare neck. Black pearl earnings.

Brown intense eyes. "Have a seat." Strong voice. A seed. Suggested there was always a catch. Like it was a test that she expected him to turn around this very instant and leave.

Because it was a test. That chair was a trap.

"First red flag doc. I hate those."

The stump transformed like an inkblot to individualize each user. A choice, or freewill? She knew he'd seen these before; Lila would've given her his file. Knows he knows ball, been around the block more than thrice. He'd rather it just be a stump.

"Don't tell me you're afraid of your own imagination. You've come this far to not have a shadow."

Hollis sat. "I'd have painted it black. The stump. My shadow can wear whatever it likes."

His chair transformed under him to plastic looking academy chair; basic, uniform, and uncomfortable. Hollis folded a leg over the other.

"Ha! Sorry." Hazel covered her mouth, soundlessly stepping closer. "That was unprofessional."

He saw why she and Lila were friends. Ruthless.

"I expected something a little more phallic." She sat down, and hers transformed into velvet red and gold throne; royally warm, but not imposing. Regal.

Hazel shrugged. Like shucks poor you; Hollis rolled his eyes.

"Well, we've come this far. We could talk about your unfortunate childhood. Going through the system. Not many politicians have been to so many districts. We could talk about Poppy. Kaine. How's your partner, Flint? Or your last couple fuck-ups."

"Easy there, Doc."

“Hey, I watch the news. It doesn’t look good. Either end is confused on how this unfolding feels like it needed to happen and why it already wasn’t fixed in the first place. No one truly likes to see a show of force, unless it’s protected, hugged and contained by a larger one.”

“I don’t like the direction this has taken.”

“Why would you. It’s unsettling.”

“I don’t like that word. Unsettling.”

Hazel lifted her hand. Snapped.

The soil, the walls; flickered. Blue, flashing, between the two, settling on blue.

Underwater. At their feet sand fell into place. “That’s what I think about it.”

How did she know it would come to this. Hollis glared. “Careful doctor. You have put an uncomfortable amount of time into this.”

“I am thorough. I don’t like to waste time. You will be assigned a therapist, I hear regardless. So what do you want to talk about? Soil, or the bottom of the ocean? You want to grow or sink. It’s up to you. As unsettling as that is; also up to you.”

~

Hazel soundlessly walked him through the hallway, and out into the small maze of reception. At the side of her desk, she typed on the screen and penciled them in for next week.

She said, “Looking forward to it.”

Hollis picked up a frame on her desk. Showed it to her. “This your kid?”

Laughter. Hollis set it down.

“Whose else would it be? Yes. That’s my son, Ash.”

“He goes to Willowbrook.”

She nods.

“Which is also why you were hard on me in there. We, the Force, will do better. Thank you for the time. Have a good day.”

He turned to leave. She called after him, “Wait. Officer.”

Hollis stopped. “I prefer detective. If not Hollis. How can I help you?”

“This will be the last time I challenge our mutually shared external environment.”

“Lila?”

“In the books, our next session will be the official one. So right now, I am not your Doctor. Lila said I could be the judge if you would be interested or not in knowing she will be at the restaurant, Thyme. And that from my office; here. Now. If you go to the flower shop, then directly there you will be right

on time. Up to you. Moving forward, Hollis. I prefer we keep our focus strictly professional.”

She offered her hand. He shook it.

Strong hand. She detached first, and returned down through the maze to her soil.

Hollis sighed. Look at his comm. Found Thyme, and the flower shop.

~

Outside Thyme, with a bundle of whatever the florist called them. Big and beautiful, but refined and enticing. Hollis smoked a cigarette.

The blue sticks gave a funky after taste. Sick of it. He switched back.

If he was inside. He would start with bubbles.

He dragged, blew smoke. Start the evening with oysters.

Switch to cocktail as they did some tapas. Wine for entrees. Coffee dessert, and a water. There's a dancing spot down the block if they wanted to walk it off and then indulge. Or another dessert place specializing in shaved ice the other way.

Or just back to his place. He leaned back looked at the stars.

On the curb, the flowers rolled into the street. Hollis stood, flicked the bud, and left.

ROT: PARENT NIGHT

Part-2

‘Our Problem, Your Problem’

ACT ONE: Do You Smell that?

Chapter One:

Itching her throat. Fire swathed Lav's body in rashes, hives, numbness, and ice batches. Her right calf's Charlie-Horse woke Lavender Miller before her alarm. It smelled faintly of blistered tomatoes. If unattended it would sour, neon and gross.

On her nightstand, her comm flashed blue numbers into the air: 3:33.

She massaged her calf, itched her back. Lav rolled out of bed.

Hit off her comm, snatched one of the three spray bottles labeled, ‘Protection.’ Yawned on over to the first of two windows, sprayed it down.

She sniffed. Roasting chestnuts. Better.

Onto the second window over her desk, sprayed it too. Returned the bottle to the nightstand and scratched the side of her ribs as she trudged to the conjoined bathroom full of spray bottles.

Hordes covered every surface, more workshop than bathroom. It smelled of peppermint and wet cobalt.

The vast majority shared the label: Parent Night.

A good portion was empty, waiting to be loaded. A balance of being prepared, but not wasting energy. They only lasted three days.

Others labeled: Morning, Afternoon, Night. Clear. Shield. EMERGENCY.

Turned on the sink faucet as hot as it goes. Watched the steam rise. Scalding, she washed her hands. Drying her shaking, steaming digits with a pink towel.

From the cabinet she found a Blue Alps tube. Black with blue mountains near the prong end. Lav brought it to her nose and huffed.

Numbness spread over her freckled face like a tree. And she smelled nothing.

It was fucking fantastic.

The first hit was such a relief she hung over the bowl of the sink. Basking in the phantom heat, it was ironic; she laughed. Sometimes, Lav cried. The numbness reminded her of the first smell: Dad came home from his job at Water Treatment with it on him.

Pinned to his Irish Spring standard, like milk just beginning to turn. The rot that night gave contrast to other shades hiding under the surface of everything without names. It opened the dam, and then she smelled it all. The world was a foul place.

In the foggy mirror, she needed a haircut. Getting patchy.

Liked how the different light caught the juts and facets in the shades of brown to red. Opened the second drawer for scissors and cut a strand too long. Over time she could label the smells of rot.

Anxiety smelled purple—sharp, metallic, like licking a battery. Frustration was sulfur yellow, rotten eggs and volcanic ash. Anger smelled like meat left in summer sun, sweet and wrong, attracting flies that only she could see.

As a kid, she never wanted to leave the house; still didn't, but growing up was learning to do shit you don't want to do no matter the smell. Soon, she would be old enough not to. It didn't matter because her parents brought the smells home. So did her little brother Stone.

Lav grabbed the 'Extra' bottle and 'Clear' leaving her workshop. And room, down the hallway of their two story house, she leaned her foot on the wall beside her parent's door.

Any second; Lav scratched her hip. Enjoyed the waning breeze of The Alps.

The door opened for one of Dad's legs, with so much quiet energy in the morning to consistently try to ninja stealth out when both she and Mom knew he was leaving wide fucking awake. Dad quietly closed the door behind him.

Turned, startled, but not afraid, so honest his smile every goddamn time; it hurt. “Hey Lav, baby. What are you doing awake?”

Perfect. Too perfect. Every time. She raised the bottle labeled, ‘Clear’ wondering if it was a side effect and sprayed.

Glen straightened.

Hated how he did that; Lav quickly sprayed him down with ‘Extra’ for protection. The blend covered a wide array.

When he smelled right as rain; Irish Spring. She said. “Ignore me and do your routine.”

Glen winked. “Have a great day, honey.”

Hated that too. Didn’t know how to change it but it worked: he went down the hall, stairs, across the living room and Stone’s room, and the bathroom into the kitchen.

Glen cracked eggs for French toast. Lav waited by brother’s bedroom door as it opened. Stone crept out and whispered, “Why are you—”

Sprayed. And protected, “Ignore me, and do your routine.”

Lav sat at the top of the stairs as Stone hid in Glen’s shadow. Some days, Lav cried as she watched. Other days it was hilarious, until she had to wait by her parent’s door again.

Because Mom opened it. Of the three, her face contorted the most confused. “Lav?”

Sprayed, River straightened. Hated that. And off she went.

Her left ankle itched. Whole body was a reaction. Now she had to get ready for school.

Stone was half-lucky, not yet at Willowbrook. The only way through was through and that place was literally hell. Lav grabbed her backpack on the way to her workshop.

Lav turned on the shower. As hot as it would go and loaded her bag with bottles. The Alps was wearing off. She scratched behind her ear. Her nose dripped and she wiped it. Found the black tube, brought it to her nose. Huffed. The snot frosted.

The second hit was never as good. Better than nothing.

It was going to be a long day. Lav hopped in the scalding shower. Dual-wielding loofahs, she scrubbed her body raw.

Chapter Two:

Nose plugs in. Through the front door’s peephole, on her tip toes in rain boots; along the curb parked the ride. Holding spray bottles, Lav hooked her thumbs under the straps of her pitcher pack, the drooping mouths on each side loose against the yellow translucent poncho. Couldn’t get another truancy report.

Lav used the end of a bottle to scratch under her bicep unable to really get the itch. Okay no more procrastinating. Shifted her weight, readied the door grimacing. "Three. Two."

"One." Lav swung it open, and swung it closed as she ran for dear life at the ride through the bright beautiful day.

Not a cloud in sight. Otto, next door waved, "Good morning Lavender."

"Morning Otto." Lav pressed her comm, the ride opened.

Nose plugs in, running at full speed gave her nightmares in the daylight about accidentally sucking them into her brain. Full stop, bottles up, spraying her way to the inside.

Really got to spray them down good. Inside, the door closed and she sprayed that too. The ride smoothed into motion settling the mist.

Set a bottle down, Lav removed one nose plug.

Sniffed.

Blue raspberry. Safe.

Pressed a finger to her nose, shot the second plug into her hand. Had to pull the poncho up from her feet to get at her pockets, swapped for The Alps.

She holstered the bottles in the pitcher pack's mouths. Straightened the poncho, leaned back, and huffed. Small relief.

The world rolled by. Once sprayed down, the ride was alright; the issue was it ended.

Parked across the street, the giant sunflower was a big fat warning. Leave.

Here there be monsters. Sun bright.

Lav huffed; The Alps hit weak. Running low. Wiped her nose. No way she was going into Parent Night tomorrow dry. A girl's gotta survive.

She hiked her poncho for the nose plugs. Stuck em' in. Itched the top of her knee. Placed a hand on the holstered spray bottle. The other on the door.

"Three, two," Lav pushed open the ride and ran.

All of the students surrounding the gate wore blue bracelets. Smelled of pine. Void, and chill to no end. A few stood closer to the curb away from others like scouts to the student body hive handing out fliers. The closer they got; the pine shifted to wet grass, rough and upheaved;

"Have you donated blood yet Lavender?"

She drew fast; sprayed Charlie Brown in his stupid face and kept on. Holstering the gun. The key was to never look back.

Like the homeless, best ignored. Rushing to the side of the gate by the hedges separating the teacher's drop-off. Where music rose raspy, in spits, and bars.

In fold-out chairs, drinking from plastic bags, Caesar Bhandari. With golden braces, uniform gilded like a gold brick farted on him; he sat with his four cousins, combined to be just as dumb as her and that was saying something. They were making way too much noise.

If they made too much noise they would get shut down. Then she wouldn't be able to get The Alps. Why did her last year have to be the hardest?

Ice coffee in one hand, chocolate ice cream bar in the other, Caesar pointed the chocolate at her "Lavender! My girl. Why so serious? Pop a squat. Wanna drink?"

"No, No. No. The usual will be just fine." She eyed the rides going right by.

Teachers didn't look. A cousin tossed over the black tube. She dropped it.

The cousins mocked, "Boo!"

"Always a pleasure Caesar."

"Hey you stay blue. Because I'm feeling generous; this one is on the house."

"Why."

"Your form of payment is no good. I don't need people sprayed, if there's no people to pay for it. We've shifted our focus and supply to Public instead. Shame but, the times are changing. So if you want to stay blue. Bring cash next time."

The giant sunflower shooks its petals. Lav's comm lit red.

Outside the gate, she was late. Yet, theirs didn't go off.

Caesar winked. "You better run along now. Unless you would like to rethink the offer and join me for a drink?"

"Always a pleasure Caesar." Lav sped away.

No one cared about anything but themselves, cut into Willowbrook's side entrance. Up through the halls. The only blessing was her literature first period was close to the Z-Block.

A foot inside the classroom, her comm flashed green; she left. Willowbrook's last performance was attendance. Sometimes, her teachers said something. Today, Mr. Todor didn't.

Lav hurried to the Z-block bathroom. Her corner.

At the furthest point from any other block on campus, within the courtyard, behind the tree by poetry; long since abandoned, known to be haunted from when Harold Parker dumped his pretty g girlfriend at the top of his lungs so everyone heard.

Used to be a place where girls cried about their lovers. Lav opened the pitcher pack, full of bottles different than the holstered all purpose. Searched for the one labeled, 'Fuck Off' and sprayed the entrance.

Her spare workshop. With hidden bottle under the sink.

Most of the time, she tried new brews. Tried to make a-one-stop-shop, cure all. They never worked. There was always a new strand, a combination of foulness or a new horror and she had to be careful. She must never pour too much of herself out.

It made her lightheaded. She wasn't safe here. Even with 'Fuck Off' footsteps scared her every time. Lav scratched her collar bone. At least in here she could take off the poncho, huffed; got nothing and tossed it for the newly acquired and huffed.

That; like the first of the day; a new rig always slapped. Sometimes, Lav just sat in the stall.

With huffing The Alps and pouring herself into spray bottles labeled 'Parent Night' time became a ski of white motion. Alarms for each new class set her off, touch and return. And when she wasn't standing, it still felt like she was rushing down a hill.

The only class she usually attended was fourth period elective. Chose coding so she could get a remote job and live the dream life within a fortress of 'Fuck You.'

Too dangerous these days; Lav stayed in her corner until lunch; she forgot hers. Blamed the fumes. Technically, her parents also paid for her food plan. She edged out of the bathroom. Everyone poured out, and she snuck through the Z-block. Crossed paths with Gary Blake.

He never stopped for anyone and his uniform fit in a way like he forgot to take it off for months and it might as well be anything for as much as he obviously didn't care about it or anyone in sunglasses. Total dick, never remembered her. As if anyone else wore a poncho; much less a bright yellow one. Lav jogged to ask, "Gary, do you have a second? I could really use your help."

"Don't talk to me."

"I really just want to get food, and thought you could uh, maybe escort me. I'll buy you food too. For the effort."

"What part of, don't talk to me was confusing? I'm not going there anyway. I need to find Luca."

Always Luca with him. "Luca this, Luca that. What about everyone else? You know, you could stop them if you wanted to: Cassandra and Ash."

"I don't care."

Despite the salt. He smelled incredibly fresh. Like a waterfall from an endless source. She had never seen someone with so much power; the exact opposite in how the students were an empty void; he somehow found a way to keep it all inside without bursting. Constricted and tight. Nothing could get in or through to him.

She drifted behind, and he didn't slow and was gone. That was Gary Blake; Lav spun for the Z-block as the wind brought an iron taste of blood. Meant Ash Thorne.

No thank you.

She missed having friends; it was impossible to keep them sprayed and clean and one by one they all wore blue bracelets. In her workshop, Lav poured water from the sink into a cup.

Held it tight. Smelled of green tea. Was still water. But smelled better. Story of her life, sipping.

Her comm flashed. Message from choir, Mrs. Patterson. “Remember, what you consume dictates your voice. Parent Night tomorrow. Final rehearsal after school. Be ready angels.”

Two tears fell. Then a third. How could she still cry? Stupid girl.

Had to quit. Had to ditch choir. Crying too.

Lav sighed. Just a couple more periods, practice, and then Parent Night. She'd quit. Be done with anything connected to anyone. Finish out the year and be free.

Remote college. Remote job. Lav kept her poncho on and scratched her inner thigh. Couldn't get the itch.

Chapter Three:

The giant sunflower shook its petals. After the initial rush, Lav set a timer for five minutes. Then ran as fast as she could from the Z-block bathroom to the front near the main gates to performance hall-A. Through the door, Lav yelled, “Sorry I’m late.”

Mr. Patterson waved his hand. The choir ceased. In four rows on stage on bleachers, in matching white and blue robes.

The last haven, all because of Morgan Price. Her black hair longer than the white veil to her waist, center stage. She was human-stone, carved of silk, belonged on a damn big hill somewhere overlooking the ocean.

The reason why Patterson called them angels was her. “Please take your time Lavender. We are all happy to wait on you.”

She scrambled around for the stairs, on stage. Dropped her pitcher pack, got to her spot in the fourth row, ignoring the bleach of Daisy in the third, next to Halley, who rolled her eyes.

“Please remove the poncho, Lavender. Despite it being a beautiful day, we are supposed to be in a dress rehearsal today. Our final chance before the big show. Did you get my messages?”

“Ah. Sorry. I forgot my robes at home.”

“Please remember them tomorrow. Poncho still needs to come off.”

Halley rolled her eyes as she ambled through and down with, “Sorry.”

“Excuse me. Pardon.”

Ran over to her pitcher pack as Mr. Patterson tapped his foot. Lav ambled back.

“Alright Angels. From the top.”

All eyes on Price. Under her veil, diamonds glittered along her flowing black hair; gorgeous.

“Blue is not just a feeling.” Silk.

Wonder. Lav forgot to sing every time if Daisy below didn't elbow her knee.

She reeked of bleach. Emo black hair: powdered white face, thick black mascara, and royal blue lips. Blue Wilt fanatic.

Blue Wilt had nothing on Morgan Price. Lav could listen to her forever.

At the end of rehearsals, everyone took turns praising the star. The glowing sun of choir; positive it was her voice that returned normalcy despite all of them, Mr. Patterson included, wearing blue bracelets. The hall smelled like iced cherry after Price sang; without her it was hot pineapple. Price then spoke to Mr. Patterson. They were always talking.

Then Daisy and her bleach. She shouted at poor Morgan. Daisy stomped her foot marched off at whatever soft word Price said.

Alone, poncho on, and with her pitcher pack, she readied in each hand respectively, 'Clear' and 'Protection' kept them behind her back as she approached Morgan.

She had to protect her. Lav said, "Hey Price. Do you have a moment?"

"Sure. What's up? You look a little frazzled."

"Funny; I was going to ask you the same thing. Not that you look frazzled. You look great. Be careful of Daisy."

"What do you mean?"

"Something about her doesn't smell right. Please stay safe."

"Stay safe; you are funny, Lav. Hey, have you gotten your blood drawn yet? You don't have a bracelet. Me either. We can go together."

"No."

"Huh?"

"I mean. No. I uh, blood makes me nauseous. You shouldn't do it either okay. I'm happy you haven't gone yet. Don't. Promise you won't."

Diamond sparkled in her hair, and in her eyes. "I promise."

"Before I go I have a gift for you. Close your eyes."

"Lav. Don't be silly."

"Please."

She closed them. Lav looked around then sprayed her with 'Clear' and said, "It's going to be okay, Price. I have your back. Be wary of everyone. Protect yourself."

Then she sprayed her down with protection. Her cute angel face always wiggled and furrowed her nose. "Go home." Morgan straightened.

Hated it. How her smile vanished. Price turned and calmly walked out.

Lav sighed. On her comm she called a ride. Waited until it pulled to the curb. Nose plugs in. “Three, two”

Chapter Four:

“Three, two, one.” Lav ran at her front door.

Pressed her comm to unlock it, and shouldered inside. Into screaming. From further within. Stone’s door open.

Lav ran over. On the floor, brother withered, gripping his hand. Wet, steaming, crusty. Neon.

“Help.” Stone cried.

Pitcher pack down, she found the bottle labeled ‘Emergency’ and sprayed his hand. Stone thrashed.

Lav sat on him. Pinned his arm. Sprayed; once the top plague peeled off, the slime underneath dissolved like yellow wet sugar.

Then clear as day. Hanging limp and red-raw; his arm steamed.

“What the fuck was that.” Stone cried. “It hurts so much.”

“It’s going to be okay.” In her backpack, Lav found ‘Clear’ and sprayed him.

His body eased. The mind was a terrible master.

“Rest until dinner. Don’t tell anyone about this.” He nodded, crawled into bed.

Bag over her shoulder, Lav sighed, closing his door.

Found she left the front door wide open, god knows what smells and rot could’ve slithered in. Lav pulled ‘Extra’ and sprayed the way to the door closing it. Then sprayed it some more. Lav sat against it.

Removed the nose plugs. Set them down. Hiked her poncho for The Alps. Huffed.

Too much skiing killed her hunger. A blessing and a curse, she should eat, but didn’t feel like it anymore. She had to stay awake to spray Dad and then Mom. It was better to get them right through the door. Otherwise the smells and rot could fester like Stone.

She couldn’t keep doing this. Huffed.

Her parents couldn’t keep doing this; Stone couldn’t keep doing this. This wasn’t living, but what could she do? She hoped when Tommy Hendricks turned; they, the adults would look at the school, see it; smell it festering.

They called Max Carver a hero, and moved on. They were all doomed.

She had to make stronger batches for Parent Night. She got a pillow from off the couch and a blanket and curled up beside the front door with a spray bottle. Time was a white motion.

“Lav, honey. What are you doing sleeping by the door.”

Sprayed.

Chapter Five:

Itching her back through the choir robes. Lav rolled over on her backpack. Footsteps.

She shot up, spray bottles aimed at the z-block bathroom’s entrance. Lav screamed, “I fucking dare you to step in here.”

Nothing. Her breath was a cloud. Cold today. A head rush filled the bathroom with white. She huffed. Time was playing tricks again.

She just had to survive it. Her comm flashed. Schools out.

Except it wasn’t. Lav laid down. Fucking Parent Night.

Sat the bottle down, labeled, ‘No Fucks.’

At least she’ll get to hear Price sing one last time. One last time, Lav pulled both nose plugs, shot them in the garbage. One missed the other went in.

The night was to go like this: parent pull up, crowd the gate. Yard duties drop off flutes. Director speaks, and as they funneled through they are given a station pin-point on the campus like their performance hall for choir. Students perform, parents move on, around and around. Her parents were in the first group. She’d do a one and done; get the fuck out.

Her comm flashed. “Where are my angels! We cannot be late today.”

Lav rose in; she swept her robes open, checked the bottles on her homemade utility belt with holsters like her pitcher pack. Strapped in; she jogged in place. Tested her weight. Leaned side to side. Picked up ‘No Fucks’ and aimed in the mirror.

“You can do this.”

Sat down for one last hit, fresh nose plugs in; her comm flashed. The final piece, her poncho, Lavender raised the hood. Shifted her weight.

“Three. Two. One.”

~

“For the love of all that sings Lavender Miller take off that poncho.” Mr Patterson tapped his foot. Gestured frantically. “It’s Parent Night. This is it. And a clear sky; you’re going to scare the share holders. I just cannot be with you right now.”

It was scary. Everything smelled normal-ish. Too focused, everyone rushed to get in their place and final adjustments. In the concert hall, outside in the vestibule a welcome buffet from the Desserts Club.

A wide assortment of pastries and delights and they took their eats far more seriously than choir standing around while Daisy sang Blue Wilt's greatest hits. Price hung in the back; Patterson talked her ear off, showing her a clipboard.

“Save your voice for the second round; VIPs.”

Price nodded; Daisy glared singing. Reeked of bleach.

Patterson gone. Now was her chance, Lav ran through the hall, through the vestibule. The assortment in tiers and pyramids and dip fountains squelched, pulsated, and hyperventilated below a haze of flies buzzing.

It smelled like blood. All rotting. No one said a word about it; footsteps, a janitor with a mop picked up a cream puff of purple and white and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth. Smiled at her. Lav ran outside.

To the side, she leaned against the building. ‘Suck it up.’

“Three. Two. One.”

Lav ran across the street. In their family ride, her parents stiff in their chairs, craned their necks at her approach. “Hello honey.”

Maybe it was a little too strong of a brew. Too late now.

She got into the back. Found her duffle bag filled with her bottles. Got ‘Clear’ sprayed Mom and Dad. “Okay listen. When you go in, you are to not eat any of the food. Pick one up if you need to fit in; but under no circumstances are you to eat anything. Try to act natural. Don’t talk to one person for too long. Two minutes max. After the song wait to the right of the door, and I’ll find you. Do you have all that?”

They nodded. In unison, “Yes honey.”

She was about to shut the door, and stopped. “I love you.”

~

On stage in the fourth row, Lav stood, hands at the ready to draw, and held her breath. The parents entered the vestibule. Their shadows spilled through the closed double doors.

Daisy turned on her headphones, blasting Blue Wilt and from the side. Mr. Paterson ran over.

She lowered the volume. Bobbed her head. The double doors opened.

Mr. Patterson took center stage. “Welcome esteemed parents. Valued family. Find your seats. The performance is about to begin.”

The backlight flipped dark blue. In the back, Dad bit into a maple bar.

Waved it. Mom hit him to lower it; she waved too.

It’s fine. She just had to catch up to them, and her spray would override whatever rot. The audience stilled.

Spotlight on Morgan Price. “Blue is not just a feeling.” Silk.

The audience, the singers; Lavender; belonged to Price as she sang. Something hit her knee, Daisy below; who smirked. Next to her Halley rolled her eyes; she’d forgotten to sing again and joined the choir.

Standing ovation. They had ten minutes. Except no one else moved. And the clapping went on for a very long time. Too long. What the fuck was happening; they just kept clapping. Halley next to her didn’t blink, smiled, and clapped.

Like a fucking robot. The smell hit like wall of smoke, packaging her with expired beef. Then the buzz, the flies; rot.

She spun, grasping at her spray bottles and fell out of the bleachers onto the stage. That hurt. She rolled, clunkly with her holsters.

No one else moved. The audience clapped, not missing a beat, as did the choir. Except for Price watching her expression less. Laughter.

Lav raised the bottles at the choir, honed in on bleach. Daisy laughing her way down the rows to center stage. “Look at your face. Priceless.”

“Why are you doing this Daisy, I know you’re jealous of Morgan. Leave us and the school alone.”

“You really have no clue.” From inside her blue robe, Daisy raised her hand with a blue bracelet wrapped around her finger she fired it at her. “Time for your donation.”

In her other hand a knife, and on her comm, raised the volume of her ear phones; to hear Dahlia singing. She sang along, honing her appearance into the singer as ran and raised the blade.

Lav sprayed. Got her good on the first go; like a snowball to the nose.

Kept spraying as Daisy ran by confused, waving her damn arms to clear the mist, and fell flat. And funny. Lav kicked her over. Out cold. Sprayed her anyway.

The knife stuck out her shoulder.

Quietly, Price said, “Idiot. Never learns. She’s made of wax. Guess it doesn’t matter to your smell. I told Cass your strong. You are strong. Even if you don’t know it.”

“What do you mean? Why are they making you do this?”

“Making me?” Price laughed. “I only kept you because you liked my singing. Unlike other, higher profile parents, we got your dad at the Water Plant a long time ago. So really all your effort was pretty useless. We enjoyed watching you run around like a little bug.”

“So what happens now?” Lav raised the bottle at her.

“This is the end of the line. Though Cass said I should invite you; I am sorry; I don’t want anyone else to have you. So you have to join the herd for now. But don’t fret, I’ll come and find you. You’ll hear me sing again.”

Lav sprayed. Showed her range and said, “Over my dead body.”

“Would you have joined us?”

“No.”

Morgan raised a hand, snapped. The choir stopped clapping; the Parents didn’t. Like she was skiing and wished she could hit The Alps.

“You all smell like shit.”

Morgan shrugged. “Good luck.”

Choir ran at her. Lav sprayed and waved and ran too. Those that got close fell.

Tackled off of her feet. Landed on a spray bottle breaking it. Her advantage as the smell rose. They coughed.

Lav sprayed in the air sprinkling a mist; an orb around her. A kick shunted her face, sprawling, watched the audience clap and clap. Lav swung a one hand windmill spraying.

They all fell down in mist. The bottles empty. She dropped them for replacement on her hip. Found only one. Held it with both arms.

Blew out a nose plug, bloody. “Who else wants some.”

Morgan pulled the dagger from Daisy’s shoulder; the blood turned white on the blade. Like wax; able to swipe it off. The chunk fell into Daisy, who rose.

Her hair changed pure white. Face sagged.

Daisy was a completely different person; a melted stub. She dialed her comm. Music played; her hair darkened. Chin tucked, face sharpened into her super fan.

“No way she got me again. I told you there’s something weird about her.”

Morgan said, “Her sprays are strong. She is weak.”

Her nose was bleeding. Arm hurt. Face radiated. Morgan wasn’t wrong.

Daisy said, “So what do we do?”

“We wait.”

From behind arms wrapped around her neck. Lav sprayed Morgan in the face.

How could she be in two places?

The copy’s face scrunched; melted into spiders. Footsteps.

Lav turned, as Morgan said, “Gotcha.” Hammer fisted the knife into shoulder; Lav held onto her.

“No.” She crouched and lunged into Morgan. “You’re mine.” Kissed her.

The audience stopped clapping to fall unconscious. Morgan too went limp to her lips.

Departed, Lav wiped hers, said, “How’s that for an ace in the hole. You see I am perfume. I am strong. This close. You’re mine, bad girl.”

Lavender said, “Go home.”

Morgan Price straightened, face drained of emotion. She turned around and walked right by Daisy wide-eyed in disbelief. Walked down the steps off the stage, through the hall, out the door in to the vestibule. The double doors closed.

Chapter Six:

“What the fuck just happened?” Daisy, more and more a sharper image of Dahlia Mortis, pointed at the door, then at her.

Lav, crying, poked the knife. Stung. Did not smell good.

“What the fuck did you do?”

“Get close and you’ll find out. I produce a natural pheromone. You cannot harm me. I’m your worst match up; so you better just back the fuck up.”

“Look who shows their fangs at last. Are you sure you don’t want to join? You can rot people as good as any of us. Marked your territory. No one said anything when you sprayed Harold Parker freshman year after he dumped your ass. Our initiation is that you take over your parents and you’ve already done that too. For a lot longer than our coup on the school. You’re the real spider here.”

Lav sprayed at the distance between them. “I regret that. What you are doing is worse. By a lot.”

“All I have to do is wait. We’ll surround you and throw stones.”

Lav ran off stage.

Alone, Daisy said, “Well. Shit.” Run, little spider, “I’ll find you.”

Chapter Seven

Exiting through the opposite side of where she wanted to be, within the gates of Willowbrook, Lav couldn’t think about her parents right now.

She ran for the Z-block. Over the intercom, “Lavender Miller,” Daisy, crazy and manic, meant the school had completely fallen if she was calling her out above everyone. “Please report to the Director’s office.”

At the slope of the quad, the track team sped in formation to intercept her. She curved left further than she would have liked but could go through the C-block doors and got rebounded off her ass.

“Fuck that hurt.” Hand on her shoulder, bleeding.

Smelled of fruit punch, and salt, and fresh water. Gary Blake.

“Oh thank god it’s you, Gary.”

No sunglasses. A black eye.

Who could do that to him?

“You one of them?”

“No asshole. Gary, it’s me. Lavender Miller. We had like five classes last year together.”

“Oh. Well. Leave me alone.” He walked over her like it was any other day.

“Wait, don’t go that way. They’re coming.”

The track team stopped. Gary said, “Leave me alone.”

A bright snap, pop. Lav raised her arms; when she lowered them, the track team withered on the ground. Gary walked on.

“Wait,” Lavender begged. “Take me with you.”

ACT TWO: Leave Me Alone

Chapter One:

Sunglasses on, in poetry class, Gary wrote in pencil at the top of his notebook, ‘Draft 322.’ From memory he wrote the poem. Crossed out ‘carry’ and wrote ‘bear.’ Crossed out ‘bear’ and wrote ‘hold.’ Crossed out ‘hold’ and wrote ‘carry.’

One page left, the notebook held forty-nine pages of the same poem, each version a single word better or worse from the last. The master copy was folded in his wallet, tomorrow at Parent Night would be the night he gave it to Luca.

In his periphery, a neon bugger flew too close to him. His pencil cracked, ‘Just leave me alone.’ He focused on the poem, draft 323 on the last page with ‘bear’ again.

Another neon bugger flew over him. Just ignore it.

The poem must be perfect, and the double meaning was everything: to bear weight. To bear witness. To bear—finally, Luca would understand exactly how he felt.

If he got it right. Shit; a typo. He pulled his wallet for the master copy, and compared letters.

A paper ball was going to hit him in the face but before it could; the neon bugger sizzled and burned to a crisp of nothingness. The pencil snapped in Gary’s hand, which was why he didn’t use pens anymore and brushed the pieces aside as he stood.

“What the fuck did I say, Roon? Leave me alone!”

Poetry class had been transformed by Roon leaning back in the teacher’s chair. Every other student stood in random positions holding their arms so the fingers touched in a hoop. Papers taped to their hands, ‘10 points.’

Mouths open, necks arched back, a paper taped to their chin, ‘100 points.’ Their eyes glowed neon yellow. Roon tore a piece of paper from a notebook, spit a loogie in it, and rolled it sloppy in his hands.

“Sorry.” Around his wrist, a blue bracelet. ‘Save the World.’

“It slipped.”

Thin. The kind that comes from forgetting to eat, not from trying. Neon snotty fingers from rolling the paper in his rot. Dyed black hair that’s growing out mousy brown at the roots. Vintage band shirts he thinks make him deep. The aesthetic of someone who wrote poems about death in middle school and never evolved past it and never got good at it.

This was his chance to be a big shot but was too much of a pussy to compete with the others for a better slice of the campus. And found satisfaction raining on him; ‘Too bad I don’t give a fuck.’

Gary walked over. Intercepted by Katie White their teacher. Shoulder length walnut hair, a thin smile, and kind darker brown eyes corrupted neon yellow.

“It’s okay, Gary. Really. He didn’t mean it.”

Gary grabbed her face, pushed Katie. She fell to her knees stunned. Her eye returned, but frantic.

“Where am I? What’s going on?”

Gary stomped to Katie’s desk, slammed his fists on the wood. “This is your last warning. I gave you simple instruction. Leave. Me. Alone.”

Katie stood, scratching her hair. Looking around at the state of affairs. “Why is this happening? Gary? Roon? What is happening.”

Roon said, “Look at what you did. Should I tell her or you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Fine. I’ll do it.” He threw paper ball turned neon bugger at Katie.

She slapped it from the air. Her mistake, she went limp. Eyes neon.

Gary picked up Roon’s notebook and threw it across the room. To Roon’s pissed off surprise. “How,” He stomped his foot. “How did you do that?”

The underside of his notebook on the ground glowed neon yellow. It was a trap; Gary didn’t give a shit.

Roon rubbed his face, pacing. “That’s impossible. I thought at first it was just your fucking ultimate shield, protection. Doth does protest too much, good thing you aren’t very smart or else you wouldn’t have touched that. Yet it still doesn’t matter. How strong are you? Unreal. Unfair.”

Gary grabbed his T-shirt, pulled him across the desk. "Engage with me in any sort of way. During class, at school, or outside of it, and I will smash your fucking skull to pulp. Like this desk." One hand flat on the surface, and a small amount of pressure; it collapsed to kindle and dust. "Got it?"

Roon looked at each of his eyes, like he wanted to spit a loogie in his face. He smiled. "Got it."

"Good." Gary tossed him aside.

The lunch bell rang. He returned to his desk, folded the master copy, placed in his wallet, notebooks collected.

Neither his classmates nor Katie moved. Their eyes neon.

"You know you could be running this school." Roon said, "You could be a god."

Flicking him off, Gary left. Outside, the sunflower shook its petals.

'I don't want to run the school. Or be a god. I want everyone to leave me the fuck alone.'

Except for Luca; was that too much to ask for? In the z-block, he was the furthest place he wanted to be, and hurried to find Luca in theater.

Chapter Two:

Over the years, students, teachers, yard duties, people, strangers all got the hint sooner than later; that he wanted nothing to do with them and strode through lunch, sunglasses on with his best bitch-face to prove it. Yet for whatever their stupid reason, for some event or other, like the blood drive, randoms asked him to donate. Idiots asked them to join some club to take over the school. Or poncho girl, bright yellow, with patchy light brown to red hair under the hood to be her security like he didn't have shit he wanted to do.

"Hey Gary, do you have a second? I could really use your help."

"Don't talk to me." What part of his demeanor was confusing to them? Like he was wearing an invisible sign that said, 'Please come bug me.'

"I really just want to get food, and thought you could uh, maybe escort me. I'll buy you food too. For the effort."

"What part of, don't talk to me was confusing? I'm not going there anyway. I need to find Luca."

If he helped one; he had to help them all, and fuck that. She could keep her problems. He had his. He sped up as Lavender yelled like a crazy-fucking-woman, "Luca this, Luca that. What about everyone else?"

He heard the rumors anyway. She wiped the dude that dumped her. Just another consumer.

She yelled, "You know, you could stop them if you wanted to: Cassandra and Ash."

"I don't care."

He didn't care; he just wanted to be left alone to find Luca, and enjoy his time with him. Why was that so very difficult, passing the cafeteria to theater's double doors.

A cleared space full of students in motion before the stage, Luca Marsh center stage in eye liner and green tights.

His heart was trampled by an unseen horse; love. Luca's blue eyes found him, his knees quivered. There was that look.

Not a smile. Luca was far more sophisticated than to smile so freely. His look was what made coffee brew and tea steep. His blue stare flowed around you, and enhanced, emboldened; precipitated what should be natural on his own; made him think Luca could scale indefinitely. That's what true love did.

That was good. Gary flung his backpack to be a seat on the floor, got a fresh new notebook. Wrote draft, 324. He wiped away a tear under the sunglasses. Words poured out of him as theater club practiced scenes for Parent Night.

His Luca was to be trickster spirit. With fairy dust, he mind controls the King and his guard, Duke and Tanner, who kept the corners of the stage bitterly jealous of his Luca's star powered limelight. He had a scene with six girls all dressed the same in robes and a mask; a game of true love if the god couldn't tell them apart as the king had failed; find true love. The girls fluttered in a dance, mixed and matched, giggling.

Luca would pick right. A monologue and a kiss.

He paused. "We should break here."

The contrast of character voice was stunning. A shape shifter. His Luca truly was a gift to the world, able to wear faces like he did clothes. He wanted to clap, but didn't want to embarrass him.

Luca asked the cast, "Is everyone hungry?"

The girls nodded. So did Tanner and Duke and Luca said, "How about pizza?"

He jumped off stage. Ran over to him. "Hey Gary. What did you think?"

"You're incredible. Really amazing."

"What are you writing?"

"Oh this, nothing." He closed the notebook. "Don't worry about it. Well, actually, maybe I could show you at Parent Night? After your big show of course."

"Yeah. That would be awesome. Hey, we are all pretty starving. Have you eaten yet, do you feel like pizza? Could we maybe get a couple boxes for everyone. Wouldn't that be like a cool gift. It would help a lot. We still want to practice a few key scenes. It would mean a lot to me."

"Yeah. Of course, I'll get a bunch of different kinds too. Do you want anything to drink?"

"Water would be great. Oh, and an OJ. Thanks Gary. You're the best. I mean it."

Heart trampled, Gary couldn't believe he told him about the poem.

Not necessarily about the poem, per se, pushing through the double doors. ‘He knows I have something for him.’

He called me the best.

Gary sauntered over to the cafeteria. He took off his sun glasses. A beautiful day.

“Have you donated blood to save the world.”

“Don’t talk to me!”

~

As Gary approached the tables, he put on his sunglasses. In front of the cafeteria, Ash stood on four tables pushed together.

Hordes of students, swarmed it, offering their lunches and food in steady obedient lines. “The New Order is a food tax. You want autonomy; kiss the chief.”

Gary walked around that; to the lunch line, and skipped those waiting, to the front of the line. The kid at the front turned, saw him, and ran the other way.

“How many pizzas do you have left.”

“Slices?”

“Boxes. Give me ten or what’s left.”

He swiped his comm. Got ten boxes. Alright.

Smelled good, and started back to theater. “That goes for you too. Gary Blake.” Ash pointed at him. “Pay tribute.”

He stopped. Didn’t need all ten boxes. Wasn’t expensive. He could give him one.

“Leave me alone.”

Kept walking.

Laughter rose behind him. “Anyone else think they can do that? Raise your hand now so I know who to eat.”

Maybe that was a mistake. At the double doors, pushed opened, Luca spoke to Tanner and Duke. Saw him, waved. “My hero. Look who saved the day everyone. Gary bought us all pizza.”

Everyone rushed over to him. ‘Get away’ all their greedy fucking hands and light-switch eyes. ‘Wish they’d all leave alone.’ They left him one box.

Gary gave it to Luca. “Thanks but I brought fruit.” He leaned in to whisper, “Between you and me, pizza is a time bomb for an actor. They really should’t be eating it. But if you insist, I’ll have one slice. Doesn’t that smell good. Why aren’t you eating? Here. You take this big one first. Careful. You got it. Nice. How is it?”

“It’s great.”

“Hey, you know the lead, other than me. Honey. We thought it best if we got together after school. For our characters. Did you want to go with us? We were thinking the trifecta, mall, movie, arcade? Unless you’re busy.”

“I’m in. Yes. I want to go.”

“Sweet. Wanna just all go together after school in one ride? It would be easier that way.”

“You’re right. Yeah. Awesome.”

Perfect; he’d get to spend the whole day with Luca.

“Tight. I better get back cast, we got time for another scene. Tomorrow is the big show after all.”

Yes, he had to work on the poem too. Parent Night was everything.

“Break a leg.”

He smiled; there it was, better than the sun, Gary took off his glasses. Luca so rarely smiled and was blessed every time he did.

“Woah, what the fuck happened to your eye. Big ole black eye. Are you okay, does it hurt?”

There it went. “It’s nothing.” He put the glasses on. “Go practice while you can. I’m going to eat this pizza, and uh, prepare too. For Parent Night.”

“Alright. Eat more of that pizza.” Luca ran to the stage.

He sat down on his backpack with his slice and the box. He didn’t care about the pizza, put it aside. No napkin. Now he would have to be careful as he wrote on the next draft 325 to not get grease on it. Still, to see Luca smile was worth it.

Chapter Three:

Honey Summers, did not have tits or a great ass. A flat plain blonde girl who shared Luca’s transformative gift of being able to be completely different on stage overall lacked a dynamic baseline, which made Luca superlative by comparison. Gary had no idea why everyone wanted to fuck her as he headed over, “Hey Luca.”

“Is he coming on our date?”

“Trust me, you’ll love him. Gary, here, makes everything better. How are you doing G.” He held out his fist to bump.

Gary did. “Great. You.”

“Great now too with you here. Big Pony.” Luca laughed. Dimples so cute. “Isn’t he so honest. It’s adorable.”

Honey sized him head to toe, and he really didn't give a single shit about her. Luca tapped his shoulders, nodding. "How about we get this show on the road. Call us a ride buddy. That super cool one we got last weekend, do you remember?"

"That was a specialty air-service special. We can do any of the ground ones you want."

Honey said, "Any of them?"

Luca waved her over to his shoulder getting in close to him. Such a delicate hand. So soft, he could definitely feel the horse trampling over his heart.

Vanilla and blue mountain mints. Gary offered his wrist; if he wanted to take the wheel, by all means steer.

Honey looked over Luca's shoulder. "Let's get that one."

"That's the one she wants. What do you think Gary? It will make me smile."

"I love that. Let's do it." He pressed the button, but Luca didn't smile.

He moved away. "Why don't you do the thing on her?"

"Uh, what do you mean the thing? Sounds creepy."

"He does this chakra, chi, third eye, forehead finger touch. Clears all your sinuses. It's amazing. I'm not even joking. His dad is a famous jockey and has all this health equipment. He studied the ways of greater healing."

Luca bowed, and Honey smiled; at least she could appreciate Luca like he did. She said, "No way your dad's a jockey, Gary? Have I heard of him?"

"Hey, here's our ride."

A show boat, the length of a limo. Two lily pads, the front and the back, while their passenger carriage was a fortune frog that launched on a transparent path back and forth. When it landed, the frog stuck its tongue out. 'Blue 10.'

Honey clapped. So did Luca who raised his eyebrows at him. Gary clapped too. Other students nearby stopped to stare as they got in. Honey first.

Gary rushed to be second, smiling back at Luca, who gave his flowing stare. Green velvet inside. Honey sat in the far left corner against the window. "So who is your dad?"

He sat next to her. Right up against her. "Thank you for asking."

Luca sat in the middle opposite them, leaning forward on his knees.

"I'd rather not talk about it. How about I do my the forehead touch like Luca suggested instead."

"Is he like really, really famous?"

Gary touched her forehead with one finger. Her shoulders relax. "Woah."

She leaned back with a drooping smile. Then perked up right to full attention. Her blue eyes that did not compare to Luca's. She said, "Hey, wow. You really weren't kidding. I feel fantastic."

Luca nodded, hand under his chin, matter of fact. "Right. He is a wizard. Do me next."

Luca didn't have any type of large rot Gary could see; he would've already removed it if he did, and touched his forehead anyway. Sent a nova through his body that would tingle and clear the dust. That alone didn't earn a smile anymore; as if Luca clutched the other half; he made the nova stronger, vibrating his body in a controlled burn.

"God that feels so good."

Honey asked, "Do you do that to yourself all the time; pervert."

"I think I am immune."

"That's a drag." Honey grasped her jaw, rotated it. "Like my body feels so good."

"Right." Gary stretched too as their frog leapt back and forth. "He is my good luck charm."

~

The mall was a dirty place, full of emotion, and rot. If it wasn't for him, adjusting his sunglasses; his precious Luca would be influenced, tainted, and corrupted, one way or another. Gary protected him, trailing their laughter.

All thanks to him, Luca could know real freedom. Asking for nothing in return was true love. Plus, Gary was tired of talking.

Being in Luca's presence took so much out of him; he liked to stay behind and just watch.

They stopped from shop to shop, he was always the third judge. The decision maker; buy it or don't. Luca smiled the most at the mall.

They tried on sunglasses. Shoes. Mood moss. Gary swiped his comm.

Everything they didn't want to carry would be delivered to the ride waiting. They got fried blue noodles. Then they raced to make it on time to the movie on the top floor.

The last three tickets. They weren't all together.

Gary sat a row behind them.

Watched them giggle and whisper and share popcorn and candies. A shoulder bumped Gary.

He prayed, 'Just leave me alone.'

~

Honey didn't want to play at the arcade. The movie was too sad for her, and she wanted to go home and practice while it was fresh. A total bitch. Cutting his date with Luca short. In the frog ride, they dropped her off first.

Luca walked her and her new bags of gifts to the door. Gary wrote in his note book, draft 333.

He kissed her. Notebook down. It was fast and sharp, and not at all in love and Gary laughed at Honey.

Who must have heard him, because spitefully, the bitch leaned in and really kissed him. No love in it either; all tongue and slobber. She licked his cheek.

Smirked. And entered and closed the door. Left Luca there, swabbed and dazed.

He looked so fucking happy walking back. Gary didn't mind anymore.

He got in the ride glowing. Luca stared him in the eyes. He said, "Thank you, Gary."

"Of course."

Luca sat near the window. Hand to his lips in deep thought.

Finally, he said, "I haven't always been the best friend to you."

"Don't say that. You're the best."

"No, really. You are the best good luck charm in the world. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Did you see her kiss me. Oh my fucking god. I'm still hard. What a girl. I think I'll be able to hit after Parent Night. I heard she gave Duke a handjob on set in the jungle scene last week. God, I love theater. It couldn't have happened without you."

The frog stopped. On its tongue, 'Blue 10.'

"I'll do anything for you."

For a moment, it looked like maybe he would kiss him too— Luca smiled, leaned in and got out of the ride. "See you tomorrow." He closed the door.

The frog sucked in its tongue. Leapt. Gary pressed his comm. It stopped.

After a few minutes down the road. Sure Luca wouldn't see. Gary got out.

He walked home.

Chapter Four

A line of rides that made the frog look comical parked outside the gates. Stenciled in gold, 'Left Sock' Gary pressed his comm. They opened.

A long drive way, lined with father's dick-measuring-contest vehicles. A party roared from the sides of the house. All of father's parties led to the backyard's race track.

The ten ride garage open with groups of tuxedos and slip-dresses; Gary swerved to the front door opened for a marble runway to a waterfall staircase crammed with people.

'Leave me alone.' Sunglasses on Gary charged to the stairs.

“Not so fast rockstar. Where do you think you’re going?”

His entire bicep gripped in a massive hand, father flung him around. A mohawk, body builder squeezed into civility. He straightened him with a shake and pulled him in close to pose for his manager and the latest flock of models.

“Take off those fucking glasses when I’m talking to you. This kid, has no respect for his father who loves him. Look at that face, he has my eyes and chin. What do I say ladies, my top three qualities is my kid, my cock, and my Left Sock.”

He laughed, they laughed, and a waiter brought them champagne. Dad pressed a finger onto his sternum. Hard.

“Where’s all the stuff?”

“What do you mean?”

Bam. Ears ringing. Father had fast hands.

“Do you hear me now boy? Where’s all the stuff? I saw the charges you made today. Where is it all? This kid; already buying women’s underwear. He has taste look at these brand names.” He flashed his wrists to his ladies.

They laughed. “Where is it all?”

“Does it matter?”

Bam. Right above the tooth. Got him good, he stumbled back. The next put him on the ground. Four. Five Maybe it should be ‘bear’ again.

“This kid could put me through the fucking wall. Instead he takes it like an arrogant prick. You’re too good for it, huh. Too good for your old man. Fuck it, I’ll foot the bill. Because I love you. Remember that.”

For you Luca; ‘I can bear the world.’

No one said anything. Like students at the school. Like the teachers. Like the Yard duties, and Director, and people on the street, adults, and strangers. High powered individuals, or nobodies; they all kept their mouth shut.

Except for father’s manager, Conor grabbed his shoulders. “Let the kid go.”

“He knows he can stop this whenever he wants. Isn’t that right Gary? We’re just playing. Look he’s good. He can stand. Hey, how about we go to the backyard, do a race? For old times’ sake huh. For fun. Hey. If you win. I promise I will never question you spending my hard-won money on your leech friends again. That’s fair and don’t you fucking deny it. So what do you say, son? You finally going to play the horses again? Or continue being a little bitch about it?”

Gary walked up stairs.

“Ah. I think he’s crying. Fuck. I’m thirsty. Waiter. To the races.”

Soundproofing — the best money could buy — couldn't fully combat the loudest party money could buy and since father was leaving overseas tomorrow for a race; missing Parent Night — thank God. Meant it was an all-nighter. At his desk, he crumpled draft 369.

Below the window, the back yard was an obstacle course for a two lane track in loops around the pool and spa, and over the guest house, and around a putting green. The crowd gathered along the border as well as by the control-pods.

Father loved to show off, beat nobodies; Gary spun in his chair.

In a secret notebook he journaled about how his life splintered at seven. He had already beat his father, which was a mistake that he'd forgiven himself for not being able to see coming as father used to be so proud of him. How it came to an abrupt end when he won — that took him by complete surprise; ears ringing.

He brought up a holo-picture on his comm of Luca. It calmed his heart. He brought up the latest draft of the poem and compared side by side. It was perfect for him.

He'd copy it in ink. Seal it with wax. Retro — Luca would call it.

After Parent Night, his father would be gone; he could invite him over. If he had to, even Honey could come.

Outside the crowd cheered. Father ripped off his shirt, took a bottle to the face. They loved him for it. At seven, he decided to bomb the government aptitude test.

When the data said zero. It meant zero. He was not surprised when Father kicked the shit out of him after that. So they stood apart. Him up here; him down there. Gary, from the desk, removed a quill pen and ink.

In a microphone, Father yelled, "Who wants to challenge Left Sock next and die?"

Chapter Five

Luca was late to school and didn't like for him to wait around; so Gary still did, just further down to the side. Relieved to see him run through the gates. At lunch, Luca said, "We're doing all hands theater meet sorry." At the double doors, Honey waved.

Days like this, Gary walked to the track's bleachers. Sat by himself, reread the master copy. The seal copy in his pocket. Today was the day; no more changes.

After school, Luca waved him off. "I really don't have time. I need to get to go to makeup."

For Parent Night, he was stationed in poetry class. Z-block.

Crying came from the girls bathroom. Creepy.

He was the only one inside the class room. It had been cleared of desks, with rows of chairs for the parents. On the other side a small soap box to stand on and read.

They were supposed to each do a reciting. The door opened for Katie. "Gary, you're early."

He nodded.

“Will you please remove your sunglasses today? For Parent Night?”

He took them off. Stared her eye contact way; ‘that’s what I thought.’ She didn’t say anything now as he walked to the corner.

One by one students filled the space, last was Roon.

Over Katies comm they got word. The parents arrived would be heading their way soon.

Gary read the master copy. Parents strolled in.

One seat empty. His father’s. So happy he wasn’t here.

One by one they read.

Katie said, “Gary. It’s your turn.”

He walked over to the soap box. Stood on it.

His father wasn’t here. He didn’t care, held up the master copy. It would be good practice for when he finally got to read it to Luca.

Dry mouth. The lights bright. He didn’t notice when they brought in so many balloons.

If he couldn’t read it in front of strangers, how would ever muster the courage when it matter with Luca. Gary licked his lips. “I wrote this poem.”

“Boo.”

It started slow; Gary didn’t comprehend it was actually happening. The entire audience booed him. All their parents gestured their thumbs down.

“You suck. Boo!” Something thrown at his feet.

Then higher. Above him a balloon popped and drenched him in slime. He looked at his hands, glowing neon, yellow. The parents laughed.

At his side, Katie howled. On the other side, Roon waved his hand. “Are you mine?”

His ears rang. Gary spit. “You’re dead.”

Let it all out. POP.

Gary marched across the sudden silence, beyond the stick and gasp of his shoes over the blood stains. Opened the classroom door, left the room completely sprayed without a drop of it or slime or buggers on him. He folded the master copy, pocketed it. Raised a hand to his glasses. Took them off; and dropped them. Gary closed the door, and stepped on the glasses as he ran.

He had to find Luca. ‘Fuck Z-block,’ was so far away from everything, running through the campus. Cut in around where C-block overlapped.

Over the intercom, “Lavender Miller.” Not the Director said, “Please report to the Director’s office.”

Had to get to Luca; pushed through the hallway. Out the other side he ran over someone: a girl with patchy hair.

She rolled on the ground. One hand gripped her shoulder bleeding through choir robes, the other carried a spray bottle aimed at him. Around her waist like a janitor superhero more spray bottles.

“Fuck,” She said, “that hurt. Oh thank God. It’s you. Gary.”

No time. Gary said, “You one of them?”

“No asshole. Gary, it’s me. Lavender Miller. We had like five classes last year together.”

Poncho girl. Not wearing one today, huh. Bad luck.

“Oh. Well. Leave me alone.”

He stepped around her. Had to get to Luca.

“Wait, don’t go that way. They’re coming.”

The track team came to a halt. Gary said, “Move or I will move you,”

Ears ringing. They didn’t budge.

“Fine by me.” Gary clapped.

POP.

They fell to the ground. He stepped through their unconscious bodies.

“Wait,” Lavender begged. “Take me with you.”

“Can you keep up?”

“Do I have a choice?”

He ran to theater’s double doors. Pushed inside.

Dark, left and right rows of the seated parents. The stage shone above them.

Center: a wooden cross; Luca tied to it.

On one side, Duke rested in hammock between two prop trees. On the other side of the cross and Luca, Tanner had every other drama student naked tied to a leash.

None of the parents flinched. Tanner said, “There’s the Big Pony.”

“You’re all dead.”

~

Tanner barked. “Taking real shit. You think you’re a bad dog. Spoiled brat. Rich to the bone. What do we think about that? Puppies? Should you chew him up?” The students barked. “What do you say parents?”

They stood turned to face Gary who stopped halfway down the aisle. They applauded.

At the double doors, Lavender said, "Don't kill them."

From the hammock, Duke whistled. "You're thinking about us. Dumb girl."

"That's right." Tanner whipped an empty leash. "I got a collar for the both of you. I'll call you my right sock and you just dumb-bitch."

"Shut up." Gary lifted a fist at Tanner. Opened it.

His fingers blew the: POP like a kiss he didn't want.

Lavender Miller screamed so loud. Ears ringing.

Gary yelled, "Shut up."

The parents stopped clapping. Then they screamed and ran out the double door, scrambling. On stage, blood splatter on his face, Duke held a knife at Luca's unconscious throat.

"Don't fucking think about it. Lower that hand. Back away, now!"

Gary lowered his hand. Lavender pulled at his arm.

"Why, why did you do that." Sobbing. "They didn't deserve to die."

"Don't fucking touch me."

Her hands steamed; and she released him. Ran back to the door.

Gary faced Duke. Walked to the stairs.

"Don't. I said stop. We have his parents. We'll kill them, too. We have your father." On stage, Gary walked straight for him; Duke grabbed Luca's hair, yanked his head. He ran the knife a little down his throat, drew blood.

His eyes shot open into a panic of blue. "What? Why? Hey, let me go. What the fuck. Is going on?" Duke jerked his head, brandished the knife; Gary stopped.

"Stop."

"I did."

"Gary help me."

"Don't. I swear. Let's just be calm. I'll call Cassandra and we ca—"

POP.

Luca blinked. Instantly covered in blood.

Lavender screamed again.

"How do you still have lungs for that?"

Completely covered in blood and dangling from a cross, Luca said, "She's in choir."

“Oh. Well. I’ll get you down. Don’t worry about the blood. Once your off; I’ll clean you. There’s one arm. Legs next, and last arm. Are you okay. Here.”

He pressed a hand to his head. Sent a pressure to cleanse that animal’s blood festering with rot; sizzled right off. Behind them Lavender cried on the floor. She ripped off the robes.

Wore a gray T-shirt, written on in black ink, ‘Fuck You.’

Maybe they could be friends.

Luca grabbed his arm. Urgent. Desperate. In need of him.

It felt so good. The master copy so heavy in his pocket.

“What’s her deal? What’s going on? I know Duke and Tanner have always been jealous of me as the new kid who took the lead; but how did you do that. Make him; fucking explode. Can you use, rot? Are you like your father. Why didn’t you tell me? Is that the forehead thing. The chi? It’s rot. You’ve been rotting me, this whole time? Why is this happening?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. I found you and I can answer all these questions once we are safe. I can keep you safe. I have been. That’s all I’ve ever done. That’s all that matters. Fuck the rest. Fuck everyone else. My father left last night overseas. You can stay with me until this all blows over. I guess you can come too Lavender if you want.”

She said, “We need to get my parents.”

‘And just like that, I don’t care.’

“Good luck with that. Let’s go Luca.”

“No, she’s right. We need to get my parents too. They should be here. Where did all the parents go?”

Shit, they ran out. Where did they?

“I don’t know. I can’t save everyone.”

Luca cried. Beat his chest. “You have to save my parents. Please, I love them. I can’t leave without them. You have to.”

In his pocket, the letter was heavy. “Fine. I’ll help you save your parents.”

“Mine too.”

“If they are close by to his. I’m not a saint. We don’t even know where they are.”

Over the intercom, “This is Director Laurel. Would Gary Blake, Luca Marsh, and Lavender Miller please report to the science hall. Thank you.”

Creepy.

It would’ve been serious if another student didn’t laugh after the feed cut. A trap if he ever smelled one, and it didn’t guarantee their parents were there.

Luca dabbed at his tears. Lavender was a bleeding mess and so far useless and going to make him deaf in left ear.

“Alright. Let’s get this over with.”

The quicker the better. Then, having saved his parents; Luca will have to listen to him read his letter and poem.

“Stay close to me.”

Luca followed him off the stage as did Lavender like he had ducklings. Through the double doors. They ventured out.

Through the lunch tables, past the cafeteria, was the science hall.

Loud voices within. An argument. Luca mouthed, ‘Ready?’

Lavender raised a spray bottle. Gary rolled his eyes, pushed inside first.

‘What I do for love.’

Chapter Six:

“We are interrupting something.” Gary said, “Uh, do you have his parents?”

“And mine.” Lavender added.

Across the long hall, filled out with booths full of the science were four groups of people. On the left, a group of students huddled together cowering. On the right, a group of students stood like dolls. In front of the parents in the back, stood the girl whose face was on all the posters; what’s-her-face: ‘Save the planet’ Cassandra.

Along with two other girls and Ash facing Caesar; the school’s drug dealer who looked like a gold brick sat on him.

With gold braces he smiled, “Nah, homie. You’re right on time. Blood for blood. These fuckers about to pay the piper.”

“Or.” Cassandra said, “You can join us. Gary Blake and Lavender Miller we welcome you to join the Gardens. Sadly, your lover, Luca Marsh has no talent whatsoever and will not be admitted.”

“Then it’s a no.” Gary walked by Caesar and Ash stepped forward to meet him. “None of you can stop me; and I’ve yet to break a sweat shattering egos. If you want to go first, by all means.” Gary raised a closed fist at Ash, who had some brains to move to the side.

Cassandra jerked her head. From the parents behind her, bodies shuffled.

Father. His Dad stepped forward. How?

In a stupid red leather and black cowboy rodeo get up, he walked right up to him. Looked down at him. Gary snorted.

He spoke over his father's stupid hat. "That the best you can do?"

Father reached for him, Gary grabbed his large wrist, squeezed. Dad slumped like a sack of bricks. His eyes fell to the floor staring at their hands.

"Where the hell am I?" Dad said, "What the hell is going on?"

He stood again, to loom over him. His true self a bigger asshole. "Gary what the hell did you do?"

"Long time coming, old man."

POP.

Ears ringing. Gary spun, pointed a finger at Lavender crying with her mouth open. He said, "Don't you fucking scream."

Luca did. Caesar took a step back. Hands up.

"We got no problem, homie. You do you."

"I'm going to say this one more time." Gary said to Cassandra. "Give me his parents. And her parents. Or I am going to take him, and finally be able to read my fucking poem to Luca." From his pocket, Gary waved the master to keep the letter and true new master safe.

"Anyone who kills him will be rewarded with whatever they want."

Gary raised a closed fist at her. "Alright. You're dead."

From behind, a sharp pinch. It really didn't make sense that Luca's hand was twitching, red. Holding a box cutter. Red.

His legs stumbled. Neck hurt.

He was bleeding. He dropped the master copy; where did it go.

It's okay, he still had the letter in his pocket.

"Save my parents." Luca cried. "I'll do whatever you want. Please. I always hated you. Fucking creep."

Gary fell. Ears ringing.

Standing above him, Luca's face twitched. Splatter red; he could fix that for him.

If he would just smile. Gary fell. His head hit the ground.

Footstep. Gary gasped blood. Saw the master copy, reached for it.

A plain boring girl kneeled by it. Picked his poem. Gary gargled blood. Couldn't feel his hands. Blew a mouth bubble. His eyes bursting as he strained.

From down the hall, Cassandra asked, "What is it, Fern?"

The plain girl said, "It's trash. Nothing." Crumpled, his poem and let it fall. As it hit the pool of red; he realized it was his blood and closed his eyes.

ACT THREE: PARADISE FOUND

Chapter One:

Underneath the giant sunflower, Max sat on the edge of the roof. Swung his feet.

Around his neck, King adjusted its grip on his shoulder as the harvested below marched to the tunes of the few wearing the same blue bracelet he did. 'Save the World.'

Did he care?

Max swung his feet. A paper airplane glided by.

A far more interesting trap. King lurched, snatched it, and brought it to him.

"You could just say hello, Fern."

Behind him, she said plainly, "Defeats the purpose."

Didn't have to look to know Fern checked her pocket watch. Wrote the time in her notebook. Max waved the note above his head.

"You know these aren't as fool proof as you think. I enjoy it. Others might react differently."

"They haven't so far."

Max adjusted one leg onto the roof to face her: worse than ugly, not beautiful, Fern was bright and talented and plain arrogant as the rest of the club.

In one hand her pocket watch, in the other, the black notebook; she jotted a time.

Max spun around the edge of the roof onto his feet. King beat its chest. Pocketing the note, Max walked over side by side with Fern the same height; boring card board brown eyes.

"See? Like Roon in his poetry corner, projectiles are still projectiles. Even if yours are visual."

"Thanks for the warning. Here's one for you, Cassandra wants you at today's meeting. She's not asking."

"You think you can drag me there?"

"Me?" She blinked. "No. I'll have the track team carry you."

“Ha. Fair. Okay. A deal. Which in itself is two free for you: I’ll open that paper air plane and if I return still on the roof you have to answer a question for me? Deal.”

“How is that two for me?”

“You’ll see.”

Even narrowing her eyes, Fern looked so ordinary in her uniform and mood moss and shoulder length brown or black hair; forgettably blue. Like in the wrong beautiful sun light, Fern could just vanish.

“Fine. Deal.”

From his pocket, Max waved the paper. He opened it.

Inside, a code, maze of rot. Radiating. Radiated him.

What he imagined taking a sheet of acid; his eyes somersaulted as reality dissolved and somersaulted again in a forced strain of jaundice.

On top the roof, as the yellow of the rot trap faded to the reality of the day; on Max’s shoulder King wrapped itself around Fern’s throat. Throttling her as she gripped his shoulder, waking him up early from the trap. “Enough King.”

The gorilla let Fern go. She gasped as King returned to perch on his shoulder, arm around his neck. Max bit his tongue from saying, ‘Told you so.’

Just as arrogant as the others. “Looks like I won.”

She coughed, hand on her knees, and spit. “Fuck you.” Though prideful, unlike Ash or many of the newcomers; Fern had honor. She sat down beside the door in the shade and held her throat. “What do you want?”

Max sat on the opposite side of the door. “To know how Cass got you? The other’s have obvious hungers. Or enjoyments; even Morgan has Lavender in choir. What does the Gardens have on you?”

“Stupid question; they don’t have anything on me. I’m in it for the same reason as you: power and knowledge.”

Boring. And as if she read his mind, Fern said, “My motivation is inside my watch. You can look inside, if you dare. Don’t be mad at me if you plant wilts in the duration.”

Fern held the silver piece over to him. Still a short enough distance for King to cross. Max accepted the watch. Heavy. Old. Super old.

He pressed the top, the face opened some. Ordinary watch.

On the inside of the cover was a small photograph of a black and white family. Fern at six sitting between two older brothers and proud parents and the second hand did a lap setting off a time bomb of rot. The picture radiating; radiated him.

If the trap on the airplane was a sheet of acid; this was straight to overdose, whiplashed into a fractal of dark, dark blue, sinking and sinking and sinking. Max reached out at nothing to grab as he fell for infinity.

~

Through ceaseless darkening blue fractals, Max's eyes somersaulted. Landed in a harsh reality tilting over; standing, inside somewhere air-conditioned and corporate — this was what everyone hated with Fern's damn traps; randomly taken, and returning, he thought it was kind of fun. Adapt or die; Max's arms covered his face from hitting the wall.

King, reconnected, reacted first, and from his shoulder lurched to bridge the wall and keep him suspended. Max straightened, casually, fixing his uniform as King resettled an arm around his neck. As he turned to orient himself; the track team left the principal's waiting room.

Fern woke him up early just to show she'd do what she said; so arrogant. Beside the door, Fern pointed at the Director's door.

"Everyone's waiting for you."

Despite the cattle student-body, the administrative office was a beehive of efficiency. The adults unlocked their work ethic on calls and hustling paper in total harmony and devotion to their tasks. Fern opened the door. Gestured.

Within, Cass said, "Right on time, Max. Please come in."

Max shrugged, planted his hands in his pocket and strolled inside. King beat its chest.

Fern closed the door. Stayed in his blind spot as he ambled to the left of the three couches before the Director's desk — Laurel in the corner. Cassandra stood.

She walked around to mirror and face him, hand on the couch's spine and dangerously close to Ellipsis Lapel's overflowing hunter green hair. It glistened as if dry and wet, she lounged across the length in a thong-shamrock-bikini.

Between her tanned legs, a gallon jug of water. No one but Cassandra was comfortable getting near her and water.

Behind the flanking couch, Morgan Price examined the bookshelf. On the couch, the two theater kids, Tanner and Duke in their performance armor and makeup.

Cass said, "Please take a seat." Placed a hand next to Ellipsis's hunter green wet and dry hair.

Ellipsis straightened, tapped the spot for him. "Yeah, take a seat Max."

"I'll stand."

Max straightened his posture to fully mirror Cassandra, next to Ash on the couch, who man-spread, arm down the spine, easily able to wrap it around Roon in the middle, who mostly stayed in his poetry entrance to the Z-block and boxed Lavender Miller in. Daisy on the end, headphones in, bobbed, mouthing lyrics.

"Settle this Max." Roon said, "Gary Blake is a problem."

Ash pulled him into a headlock. "What, he take your poetry class away from you. Boo-hoo. Hey, you smell pretty good."

“Let him go Ash.”

He squeezed tighter, “Beside the Spider, I’m the only one doing real work around here. Do any of you trash understand how much blood I need to put into Parent Night. To be a part of everyone. First you say I have to stop eating the freshman, and now I can’t even haze the new kids. Why shouldn’t I keep him? If you ask me, they taste better with rot.”

“Last time I’m going to say it: let him go.”

Ash shoved Roon into Daisy, who stood. Brandished a butterfly knife.

“Hey fucker, you want to die?”

Roon straightened. “Sorry. Look. I’m telling you. You won’t be able to control him. Come Parent Night. If he decides to walk a hole through your plan. There will be nothing you can do to stop him. Duke, Tanner say something. You’ve seen him at lunch. It’s like rot does not work on him.”

They eyed each other. Tanner said, “We have a plan for Gary.”

Duke confirmed, “Fuck Luca. Strolls into theater and gets the lead. Now Honey is all over him. He’s the only one Gary cares about. Take control of him; you own him.”

“But how do you control, Luca when any one near him gets absolved.” Roon gestured too close to Daisy picking her teeth with the blade.

With a thick heeled black boot, she kicked his shoulder, which shoved him into Ash, who wouldn’t take that; and pushed him off the couch.

Roon straightened. “I’m serious. Max. Tell them.”

“He is a force to be reckoned with I agree. But he is an arrow. Stand out of the way.”

Cassandra sighed. “The Gardener and I recognize Gary Blake as well as Caesar Bhandari. We have a contingency plans in place.” Cassandra nodded to Morgan.

Morgan chose a book from the shelf, leafed through it. Two thick strands of Price’s black hair braided in diamonds hung on either side of her sparkling eyes. A spider crawled from up her neck, up jawline inside her ear.

She said, “We are ready, but.” Morgan closed the book, returned it. “I agree with Max. Let him be, and he’s not a problem. Give him, Luca.”

In unison, Tanner and Duke complained. “Fuck that.”

“Luca is mine.”

Daisy grabbed Roon’s neck and pulled him back to the couch, leaned forward. “What do you know Price, you’re doing the exact same thing with Lavender Miller hypocrite.” She brandished the knife. “Is no one going to talk about how she can completely control you; send you packing home after every practice.”

Morgan clarified like ripping silk, “I will handle Lavender Miller. No one is to fucking touch her. Or I’ll kill you. It’s personal.” Her face bunched and body crawled. “Different than Luca; I’ve had my eyes

on Lavender for years. No one will have her but me!"

That wasn't the real her. He was getting better at telling.

"Enough. Everyone student and parent has been accounted for and hold outs will be assimilated at Parent Night. The question for you is whether to stay, rule as kings and queens, or be adopted into the Force and pursue your abilities. Neither I nor the Gardener will tolerate changes of heart. Once we set the motion tomorrow night; there is no going back. I want your answers by end of day. You may go."

The newbies left first, Ellipsis winked at him. Leaving the originals, Ash spit. "We should just eat them all. They're all weak. Except, the one loser has a point."

Cass leaned against the desk. "Being?"

"Gary Blake is strong. So is Caesar. I can take them both. But I need the space, and the blood, and it will be loud. God, wouldn't that be fun. You promised I could cut loose."

"Tomorrow you will be able to. I promise."

A knock on the door. "Come in."

A nurse. Cass gestured. "See. "Your blood arrives as you wish. Please enjoy and oversee the final preparations for the food production. Morgan you can go too."

She dissolved into spiders. They disappeared into the cracks.

Daisy dialed her comm, raised the music, bobbing, kicked both her feet up when Ash rose, shouldering him to the nurse at the door.

"Just remember." Ash said at the threshold. "This plan doesn't work without me." He left.

"Fern is the backup in place."

"Yes."

"How long will it take to paint."

"I can do it."

"Great. Everything is ready, oiled; time to let the arrow fly. Is our aim true Max?"

"True? That's a joke. Right? There's not a justification left to one of us. Only sins."

"I would love to talk more. But I have a meeting. How about you take a card. Fern"

Fern held a note card with a code; radiating. He radiated.

His eyes somersaulted.

~

His eyes somersaulted, wide legs, hands gripped a chair's arms. Max blinked in an office across from Cassandra who held a finger, on a holo-call.

King, awakened leapt off his shoulder, lurching for her throat as Mrs. Vega swung a shovel; batted it to the side of the room.

In each corner of the room was another one of his teachers, and Fern against the door. She arched her plain brow as if to say, 'Did you really think that would work?'

King, limping, climbed the chair to his shoulder. The hologram receded to her comm, Cass smiled at him. With an unusual fondness she didn't show anyone else within the club. Though he was flattered. Max didn't understand why.

"Apologies. Busy, busy. I like this room better for my thinking. Less distractions. You don't seem satisfied. The Gardener and I think you don't fully appreciate the value of the redistribution of resources we offer. Even though we have given you considerable accommodations. For example, your father; Flint Carver has yet to be taken. You lied to us."

Max folded a leg over the other, "A name is only powerful for so long. It's apparent we won't meet our mysterious benefactor until after, which feels like a hedged bet to me. Why should I play your games, if you won't be honest with me. Not to mention between Ash and Ellipsis the death count at Willowbrook has skyrocketed."

"Not across District-6 it hasn't, the opposite. Despite our manufactured headline news, our home has never been safer and those members have been reeled in for now."

Max unfolded his leg. "For now? A demon in the dark or in the light is still a demon."

"Right again. Which is why we have not given you any responsibilities for Parent Night. We, the Gardener and I, would like you to simply watch. The cause will reveal itself to you in good time and I very much look forward to your face when that happens. I am not often facetious, but I think I will enjoy your change of heart. You're free to go. I'll see you tomorrow."

"You don't want my answer."

"I already have it. It's why I like you. You remind me of Fern before her tragic accident; an honest desire to learn. It's pure and scientific and should be nurtured."

Max rose, "I'm not your plant." King beat its chest.

"Don't want you to be. As much as I enjoy our conversations; I have another call. Busy, busy. Fern will see you out."

Fern moved off of the door. Pasted to it was another code of rot.

It radiated.

His eyes opened on the roof. The giant sunflower shook its petals. Flat on his back, King woke up and jumped on his chest.

Chapter Two:

Ride along the curb, Max stepped in. Mom didn't flinch. "Take us home."

She pressed the dash. Away they went.

"Analysis."

"No occupational hazard. Because of how I handled The Whale, partnership is imminent. Check is already signed. Neighbors know nothing. Flint knows nothing. My body remains in excellent condition. On all accounts, everything is going according to plan."

"Good." King adjusted around his neck. "And you're not, in pain?"

"No."

"Good."

Home. Inside the garage, she exited, and moved like a good worker bee. It hurt to look at her; how much potential she had under the surface to have not struck oil. He half-expected her to break his hold at any second. Every day she didn't solidified an uneasy thought that a lot of people were happy to be on autopilot.

Really, he just made her the most optimal. It's what she really wanted.

Alone in the garage, he understood why Dad liked to sit in the ride in the driveway. More and more this was no longer becoming his home and he laughed, thinking, 'Did his innocence finally die?' No, that already happened. King opened the ride door for him.

He wouldn't sugar coat it. Not to himself. He was a monster like the rest of them and if given the option Brittany would rather be free.

He laughed, "That's how you rot." He stepped out.

Everything would come to end one way or another tomorrow. Inside the house. Mom was already on a holo-call as she perused the fridge, snagging ingredients for dinner. Under his control she sure as hell cooked a lot better.

At the table, King leapt off to the counter to grab him fruit as he sat and on his comm read the messages Dad sent to Mom. He should be home a little after six-ish.

Perfect. Gave him plenty of time.

He set an alarm an hour before he would arrive. "Oh I nearly forgot, Mom."

Her head snapped to him, without looking she pressed her comm and turned the hologram red in privacy. Awaiting his command, he said, "Uh, did you get my shipment. It has to be the right type of plant."

"Yes. It's in your room. I should take this call."

"Do it." He walked to his room.

Inside, rack of twenty plants in squares for little green sprouts; the real plant was in the soil; but the leaves if healthy were fuzzy.

He bent, felt a green leaf. Fuzzy. Good job Mom.

He extended his arm to the bed like a branch for King to leap off. It prepared itself on the edge of the bed, and like Fern's clock opening, so too did its belly peel to the side.

No need for organs, inside coiled like miles of intestines, plants. Max raised his hand to the rack, and thread a rope into King. It bulged.

Wouldn't be able to keep him on his shoulder anymore. Condensed tight, it weighed a ton complete. With a head jerk, it launched an arm across the room to the corner. Launched again to the opposite. Faster. His little buddy could be the entire room in a second.

Max reeled him in to the bed's edge. Took hold of an arm. Checked his comm for the time.

Max wrapped the arm around his waist. It tightened. From the drawers under his bed, he grabbed a towel. Put that on floor under the poster on the wall; it would come in handy later.

He took the Miss Blue-10 poster of Stratton in a bikini off. A lawn of purple riveted black rot.

White at the edges. It radiated like Fern's. Different than hers. A live portal.

Max set the poster on his desk, double checked the arm around his waist, and the time. Eyed King on the bed. It gave him a thumbs up.

He stepped to the rot. Pushed himself through the warm stickiness.

~

Sophisticated compared to Fern's inkblots; stepping through his world of rot was like being burned alive in all the best ways. What shedding must feel like for a snake; or a shirt after being ironed; but into existence. Fully inside the shiny zinc oval pooled landing way.

Soft.

All of him; every nerve, cell, pore, electric capillaries receiving signal; supercharged. Max shone so fucking bright, flexed. Glowed brighter. So strong and powerful.

Orgasmic. Radiance. A foot off the Zinc pools, a hill's face to pink slopes, orange mist in their valley. The sky green and thick and translucent like a floating ocean blanket with lily pads in the sky, and mountain reeds.

He understood the pressure coalescing in his body; expanded it; the zinc brightened to gold. As did a trail extending down the hill side. Shiny gold.

Time melted and flowed in every direction; he wanted to pave the whole world in gold, and twirled in splendiferous gaiety.

Jerked to a rude pivot. And another. And a third.

Meant it was time to go home. "No." Max fell to his hands and knees, as he was slowly pulled over his gold and dreams. "Please. Not yet."

Tried to resist, cut the rope that reeled him in. Dragged him to the passage, kicking and screaming and crying. Already the road he traveled had returned to zinc.

Despite his efforts; he couldn't maintain the gold, pulled through the black. It burned him alive so good. Like a final taste; before the rude awakening of the other side.

Landing into reality soaking wet. On his bed room carpet, shivering. He reached blindly around himself as his muscles like gelatin flattened; Max flopped on the carpet. Found the towel and wrapped it around himself; ice cold. Saw his breath.

King brought over sheets from the bed. Wrapped him. "This world." Max said to no one. "Lacks color."

Chapter Three:

Shivering. He wiggled free from the arm.

It retracted to the bed, and kicked off his pants, boxers, ripped off his blazer and shirt. He was so excited to leave this filth of a world he held in contempt; forgot to change again. Didn't care teeth clattering. Tried to stand; couldn't. "K-king."

An arm wrapped around him. Lifted him to its expanding back; King half carried and dragged him through the house to the bathroom. Turned on the shower for him, hot, steamy, and pulled him in.

His comm flashed. The alarm. He timed it perfectly. Much more tired and sore than he thought he would be. That was the longest he had been in. Nine hours.

Losing a lot of weight. Face sunken, ribs too. Arms sticks. He needed a new diet. Needed to work out; get stronger to stay in longer.

The water felt great. He passed out.

Woke up again to King shaking him. It turned off the water, brought him two towels. One to roll him onto, and dried him with the other.

"Okay, okay, you're not my mom. Did you bring my clothes?"

Thumbs up. On the toilet. Good.

"Good. Go clean up my room. Poster up."

King closed the door after leaving. Max heaved himself to the sink. Skin and bones. Shit. His comm flashed. Double shit, he spent too much time in the shower.

Damn you King, he got dressed. Out the door as Dad came through the garage.

He was going to cut in to his room, but now he couldn't; his mood moss on his lapel perfect blue. And perfect blue never shied. Max smiled.

"Hey Dad. Welcome home."

“Thanks son.” Mom at the sink, twirled over to Flint.

They kissed; he made it longer as he cut into his room. Crashed in his bed.

Dad shook him awake. “Hey kiddo, dinners ready. You hungry? Sleep if you’re not up to it.”

“No. I need to. I’ll be there. Just give me a second please.”

“Are you okay?”

“Studying like mad. I want to do well.”

“I know you do, but; hey you got to take it easy too sometimes. Rest is important. That’s how the knowledge crystalize. If you stress too much; you’ll break and have to start from one again. It feels anti-intuitive; it will be faster in the long run. Slow and steady. We’ll be at the table when you’re ready champ. The food isn’t going anywhere.”

Dad literally skipped out of the room. When Flint did anything halfway cool he ruined it.

Oh boy, Max swung his feet around. He really over did it; smiling.

Perhaps a mistake. Parent Night tomorrow. He would need his strength. Maybe he should just ditch it. Talking to Cass, really made him think; why should he bother. This was what he wanted. He didn’t need them. Or anyone.

He rose. Wobbled, held a hand to King on the nightstand, “Yeah, yeah. I got it. Give me some slack.” Max left.

Brittany and Flint laughed at the dinner table. Garlic hit almost as hard as the rot.

Delicious. A feast prepared. Meatloaf, garlic bread, salad.

Dad smiled so proud. “I don’t know how she did it; this is as good as your grandmother’s.”

Brittany hit his arm, he laughed. “Close. I’ll get it next time.”

Max got a plate. Fucking delicious.

He wanted to cry. Couldn’t make eye contact with Dad or Mom.

“Hey buddy. Are you okay?”

Dad wrapped around him. “Hey. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Sorry. This is just so good.”

Dad laughed. Left his chair to hug him.

Small compared to the detective, compared to boxer. With what strength Max had left, he spread his hand flat against his back.

His hand radiated. It dissolved instantly.

Nothing.

He couldn't penetrate Dad. Couldn't even scratch the surface.

Though it ate him, could see Tommy Hendrick's residue healing underneath the cast and patches, as well as Morgan Price's spiders, crawling over the surface; they couldn't reach, alter, or touch his soul. Only haunt.

Flint Carver core was an ultimate shield, actively growing as if building a resistance to rot, like he had lived with it his whole life—and he didn't know it.

So when he said, "I love you son." He knew he meant it.

"I love you, Dad. Mom."

Mom raised a glass of wine. "Everyone loves everyone."

Flint ruffled his hair. "Don't be a party pooper, Brittany. Max is right." Dad let him go, returned to his seat. "We aren't as thankful as we should be, vocally. We are blessed and love is beautiful thing. And we should all feel free to cry when in the presence of happiness. You know tears get a bad rap. Why do we only have to cry for the bad. In fact, I think I'll go in for seconds."

He scooped another square of meatloaf.

"Me, too." Max devoured it.

After washing his plate, Max excused himself, "Do you mind if I crash early? I'm beat and Parent Night is tomorrow."

"Of course. We're excited to see what you've been working on. You chose to be in the science hall? That's exciting. Get some sleep."

Max walked away. Closed the door to his room. Head against it, he cried again.

Slunk to bed. If he went to Parent Night or didn't, he could sleep in to the last minute.

Chapter Four:

With the sun setting, Max left his house. King walked beside him with a hand on his shoulder as a strategic anchor. Took a ride, the world rolled by into an easy night.

He didn't feel like being near Mom or Dad. Parked across the street. He went over, hands in his pockets, King followed as the first of the parents shook the Director's hand.

Laurel didn't look at him.

The giant sunflower embossed for such occasion, radiated a warm welcome. Through the gates. He checked his comms.

His parents inbound. It wasn't too late to back out. Tell them not to come, and he could just leave. Max continued, passed a puddle.

It didn't rain. Hands shot from it, grabbed his ankles tight.

He expected at least one attempt. Didn't think it would be from her, pulled inside the puddle and transported into a dark purple whirr.

King's hand wasn't on his shoulder, the anchor to the real world, meant he wasn't really in the puddle. Like Fern's traps.

Through the whirr, hands bubbled; grabbed him. The difference between hers and Fern's; Ellipsis yanked him to her lips.

A tongue forced its way in his mouth. Ellipsis's rot tasted like sour foul kiwi.

That's all she got?

Her attack opened a direct channel to her; flooded her victims, but if they could resist the initial blitz; a direct channel left her wide open. Max obliged. He grabbed her head and really kissed her, opening his heart and mind and Ellipsis lit on fire.

He wondered, 'what does my rot taste like?'

She kicked him in the gut — must not be good. On fire, Ellipsis scrambled away from him bubbling. He grabbed her closer, burned too; but he liked it as he bit her neck.

Ignited to an inferno of bubbles. The purple whirr wilted to pure steam; shunted them. Max opened his eyes. King's hand on his shoulder, below him, Ellipsis laid making and shivering.

She held onto his ankle. Got his pants wet.

He kicked his leg free. His comm lit. His parents arrived.

Stepped over her. He continued on to the science hall.

"Don't turn your back on me. I'm not done. I'll kill you."

"King."

As Max walked on; Ellipsis said, "Get away. Get off me. Fuck. Stop. Stop. No." Coughed. And choked. And as he continued through the quad, the thrashing stopped. As he reached the science hall doors, King returned to his side. It put a hand on his shoulder, anchored him.

He pushed inside. A wide, long space.

In the middle, Caesar in gold sunglasses. Dark mood, he pointed down the hall at Cassandra. Aside her Ash loomed. Hands in his pocket; Max took his out.

Students huddled on either side of Caesar: on the right, limp sheep. On the left, cowering limp sheep. Fern entered through the opposite side, walked up to Cass's shoulder, spoke into her ear.

She nodded. Smiled. "Right on time as always Max. Congratulations everyone. Parent Night was a success." She clapped.

The harvested group of students clapped.

“What do you mean?” Caesar said, “We haven’t settled up.”

“We only need a few parents for a quick call and a couple of signatures. Everything we needed has been got. We don’t need you; never did. We don’t need any of you.”

She gestured to the other group. ‘We would like you to recognize yourself though. If not, well, what’s left is only cleanup.’

Caesar smirked. “Good luck cleaning me up.” He looked at him, “Are you with them?”

Max opened his mouth but Cassandra spoke first. “Don’t be so melodramatic. If you refuse to see logic, we can use more practical terms. As I speak, The Force is raiding your family’s estate as well as several of your cousins residences. The ones that didn’t rat on the others that is; and it still does not have to be this way. Let us gate your memory. It will return as well everyone else’s, including my own.”

“We are all supposed to just take your word. No.”

“Is this your liberator.” She spoke to the cowering limp sheep. “The school’s drug dealer. Pity, Caesar, you have remarkable talent. We could’ve done great things.”

“Even if what you are saying is true. Which I highly doubt. You have an even bigger problem in me than because now I’m pissed. Everyone knows I wanted to stay on the sidelines; fine. Remember, you made me a killer. How are you going to stop me?”

Cassandra lifted her chin. Turned her neck, behind her Fern checked her watch.

She stepped forward. Faced Caesar. He tapped on his glasses. She shrugged. “Yeah, I got nothing. With those glasses on.”

Cassandra said, “Then we can take them off.” She clapped.

Behind them, the doors opened for parents. They filed in neat rows like an army. Or shield.

Over the intercom, “Lavender Miller,” Daisy said, “Please report to the Director’s office.”

“Fucking animals.” Caesar said, “Last chance Max. Pick a side.”

Max, with King, joined the cowering limp sheep. They parted for him.

He waited with a foot on the wall. “I’ll stick to the sidelines. This can’t be everything they have planned. After you fall, I’d like to see what happens.”

“After I fall.” Caesar laughed, “What a coward. You think I can’t stop Morgan’s spiders. She’s spread herself too thin.”

“Madness.” Caesar said, “This madness ends now.”

Ash spit. “You said I could cut lose.”

“Fine.” Cassandra said, “Have fun.”

Ash flung off his uniform blazer. “That’s what I’m talking about, baby.”

With each thumb he slit his palms, then wiped each bloody print on his face. The blood on his face, and hands rotted.

His body enlarged, purple, and white, and black fangs. "I'm so hungry."

Monster Ash ran at Caesar, who's eyes shined golden, as from the other side of his blazer, he shimmied a long object free. Raised a gold bat.

Wound back, it glowed brighter; like the road in his world. The bat enlarged, huge and Caesar swung it up and around above his head with both hands in time to crush Ash's head flat.

Max winced. Like squishing a grape.

Except, the blood that sprayed out was radiating. It was the blood he consumed.

Caesar spit on Ash, groaning. "Bitch."

He swung the massive golden bat, up and around again. Smashed Ash already flat on the ground; sprayed more of the rotting blood from his body, indenting the floor.

Ash reverted back to normal size. Caesar hefted the bat over his shoulder. It shrank. His eyes returned to amber. Caesar spit.

"Fucking animals. I shouldn't have waited so long. I will say, he was right. It does feel good to cut loose. Who's next? I'll smash all these parent from here. I want you."

"We are interrupting something." Gary Blake said. Turned as if to leave then stopped begrudgingly to ask, "Uh, do you have his parents?"

"And mine." Lavender Miller added next to a third student; must be Luca Marsh.

Max perked off the wall. This guy, Gary though, was insane. His rot was off the charts.

A black hole.

Made his hairs stand. Every head turned to look at him.

At the attention, Gary looked disgusted. Purple and bruised face; his eye swept over everyone found no one he wanted.

Ha; Max's legs shook. This was what overwhelming power looked like.

How would Casandra handle all of that?

How did Gary handle all of that?

~

POP.

Gary walked through his father like he was a sheet of water — blown to bits. He was the true monster. Yet Cassandra didn't seem to care.

And he missed it. Didn't understand how Luca got so close to him. Gary didn't seem to understand it either. He was stabbed in the neck.

"Save my parents." Luca cried. "I'll do whatever you want. Please. I always hated you. Fucking creep."

Fern, walked up in Gary's blood, picked up the fallen note. Unfolded it, scanned the contents.

Cass asked, "What is it?"

She balled it up, "Nothing. It's trash." Threw it over her shoulder.

"Please just save my parents." Luca fell to his knees crying.

Ash crawled over to Gary's body. Licked his blood.

Bloody, he raved. "Oh my GOD; that tastes so good." He bit onto Gary's neck as Luca fell back.

"Are you going to let him do that?" Lavender asked anyone that would listen.

"With this blood," Ash let Gary fall.

He covered his face with the blood, eyes rolled in ecstasy. His frame grew, height pushing eight feet. Loud cracks and pops like a fire consuming; his ribs expanded, claws and fangs. "No one can stop me."

Lavender fell to her knees crying.

Next to Max, a student yelled, "I've seen enough. STOP."

His voice cleared the hall of sound, and the demon from Ash. He fell to his knees.

Every head turned in his direction. Cassandra bowed.

Max stepped away from behind him, who moved through the parting crowd. His stare joined the rest dumbly watching this dark horse take center.

In comparison to the black hole of the recently deceased Gary Blake, he sensed no rot from this kid. Just an ordinary dude.

"My name is Daren."

Chapter Five:

Caesar pointed the golden bat at Daren. "Who are you? Why should I care?"

"I am who the Gardener has chosen for Abraxxas."

Max said, "What does that mean?"

"How about I show you." Daren, not tall or short, with a bowl cut. Brown eyes, turned white.

His breath stolen. Max blinked, in a world of sudden snow. Ice blue sky.

Him, Cassandra, unfazed. Caesar without his bat, and Lavender Miller, who rose from off the snow laden ground.

She felt her shoulder. Lavender said, "My cut healed."

"Yes." Daren said, before them arms wide. A wind collected them closer. "I can do many things."

Max said, "Where's Ash? Where are the rest?"

"We are still in the science hall. I am speaking to them separately."

Lavender said, "Why didn't you save them if you could? Why did you let Gary die?"

"I had to show you that despite all my gifts; I cannot save you from yourself. Not in our world, or the one I wish to create. Anyone can still be corrupted. I want to collect and empower those willing to fight anyway. We need pillars for the new world."

He raised his hands, a sly smile, and Daren clapped: the snow evaporated into a beach paradise under a luscious sun.

Daren clapped, the world shunted green rolling hills. "I can make any reality our reality. Whatever I want. Soon, I will be able to do it on our world."

Caesar snorted. "Abraxxas. It won't work."

"Someone tell me what that means?" Max asked.

Cassandra said, "He's going to willfully manifest an egg."

Lavender said, "And then what, hatch?"

"Yes."

Caesar added, "And destroy the world."

"Yes." Daren said too calmly. Too casual. "With your help. I would like to rebuild it. Here is the offer I propose."

ACT FOUR: Knock on Wood

Chapter One:

Had to take a shit. Wood's stomach gargled. Loud precinct. Lot of alarms. They're all loud; why should district-6 be any different?

Wood ripped off a piece of baguette, hands white cold. He chased it with hot old coffee. Cold as shit, he bundled in his long coat, ears cold as shit. Like he was the Brown Fox again not on the easy road to

retirement like he was promised. Liars; not a straight face among them. He ate some more bread. Sipped some more crappy coffee. The only pair his stomach would allow without diarrhea if the alarms rang too all the goddamn time. All of the officers avoided his gaze. Good thing he was short.

For each of them alarms rang, knocking in his ears, kicked in his gut; a never ending pregnancy of everyone's lies trying to break free. Twisted his guts into their own strange noises like an ancient radiator, groaning of forgotten warmth. His sound system, government stud black ear pieces, the best money and their rot-taken technology could make, failed to mute the alarms no one else heard, stomach or otherwise.

'Sometimes, life was better before when they thought it was all in my head.' Now he had to be right. It cost lives. Follow the lies, follow the noise, find the rot.

Across the maze of cubicles; the Chief's office opened for the infamous duo. Flint Carver, the promising ex-boxer. Power couple with Brittany Carver, fast track to Partner at Meridian. And his partner, Hollis Verne. Kaine's pup.

If Kaine retired when he was supposed to would he still be alive? The happy, not so happy duo split after the meeting; not what they wanted to hear? Hollis exited to the rides, Flint wrapping around to the training rooms.

His comm flashed. Harrow.

'Well? You had all the meeting you requested with them; what is your assessment?'

Wood watched the duo each round their corner out of sight. Head knocking, a constant forehead headache without a drop of whiskey in twenty years; what a life. Stomach rumbling. He dumped the coffee and bread and ran for the bathroom.

~

Pants around his ankles, goosebumps up his thighs. All the interviews told him what he already knew, blowing into his frigid white hands. Ears ice cubes. He just wanted to be warm and quiet and yet something was loud and unctuous about all three of them.

Hollis. Flint. And Lila. They each were so obvious in wanting from each other and yet distant and connected in some way not obvious yet. It never was; until it was, a brutal game of moments and he pushed another wet blast.

Courtesy flush. He wiped his ass raw. Shimmied his pants up, slipped on a beanie, gloves, sighed. Took off the gloves. Left the stall washed his hands. Put on the gloves, thought about having to shit again; left.

"That took a while."

His stomach kicked. "Rude, Chief. Waiting outside the bathroom. It's a sacred place." Wood walked down the hall, Harrow at his side.

"You never responded."

"That is my response. Pending. Or blank. You pick."

They went through the training room, through the lockers, more bathrooms, a weight room, and in the back by a hanger exit, a boxing ring. Crowded. Loud.

Why did people have to be so loud?

Knocking. Forehead pounding; a fight in progress.

“That’s not much of a report. I get it; you’re upset.”

“Oh, color me impressed. Looks like you can still play detective.”

“You thought this would be a kick your feet up post and instead found a steaming pile of shit.” Harrow kept it steady blue.

The officers cheered a series of vicious haymakers. Wood’s knees felt frozen and rubbed them.

“As far I see it.” Chief continued, “You have three options, you can roll your sleeves and get back to work, Fox. You can do nothing and hate everyone. Or you can skip the work and at least put in some time within the community. You have a lot of stories and a lot of insight. Right now you’re doing all of them poorly.”

The defending boxer slipped the aggressor’s guard popped him on the nose. Head flung back, out cold; their body hit the floor. Wood blew into his hands.

“What would you like me to do exactly?”

Officers jumped into the ring to help the fallen. Flint bounced on his feet.

“While you’re pending your report. How about you join the community?” Harrow jerked her head to the ring. “Attention officers.”

Silence. All heads, feet together turned to Chief. “Hey Flint,” in the ring, he removed his head gear as Harrow asked, “How do you feel about sparring a fed?”

Heads turned from Chief to the ring. “I’ll knock on Wood.”

Like he’d never heard that before. The officers cheered. Knocking. Stomach kicking.

Wood said, “Don’t call me Fox, Chief. District-6 hasn’t earned the privilege to handle what I dig up.” He stepped forward. “Challenge accepted.”

The officers cheered. So loud.

~

Biting down on the mouth guard, Wood cocked each arm with some practice throws, checking the weight. He adjusted his head gear. Shifted his weight from foot to foot while Flint danced across for him. Lucky, he wasn’t twenty years younger and drinking, he would’ve really hurt him. Ha. Didn’t mean an old fox couldn’t teach a new dog new tricks.

The ref said, “Touch gloves.”

They did. Flint had a good reach.

Read his file: kid had one professional boxing fight. KO in the first round. Part of the Dante incident something like ten years ago. Headline news at the time.

Looked like he kept in shape. Bigger faster, Flint advanced without fear. He had experienced rot before by amateurs. Like baby snakes unable to control their venom. Wood learned from the best, and as he stayed out of the pocket, away from Flint's fielding jabs. He lurked for the right moment, to catch one of his punches with his own.

Flint froze. Bet he had never felt that before. Wood lunged in.

Couldn't learn how to use rot for shit even though all the scientists said he was tuned; he mastered the silent punch. That was two.

The first stunned them. It only ever worked once on someone; gave the fraction of a window, like ears popping for him to throw everything he had on the right cross.

POW. The training room, dead silent, except for his knocking gut. If he was twenty years younger, that cross would've taken Flint's head off.

"How do you like dem apples?"

Knocking. Wood turned — Lila in the crowd, talking to Chief. Their eyes widened at whatever words they shared. Footsteps behind him. Wood spun as a shadow towered over him.

A cold tingle. Hands raised, "Oh shit."

His stomach groaned as Flint's punch twisted him into darkness.

Chapter 2

On a bench, ice pack to his face. Why did everything have to be so damn cold?

The officers each looked him in the eye not swollen closed before leaving, nodding. 'Yeah, yeah.' Knocking.

Chief spoke to Lila in the back as Flint returned with a water for himself and his coffee. Wood accepted, setting the ice pack down to cradle the steamy warm cup with both hands.

"You throw one hell of a punch, Flint. I underestimated you." He crowded the steam with his face. His feet curled like plants in the tundras.

Flint sat next to him. "I used to spar with a boxer that gave the nastiest kidney shots."

"Aren't those illegal?"

"Isn't rot?"

"Touche. Didn't you ever want to be a jockey as a kid?"

"Not really. Felt more like the horse."

"Yes, you run marathons. A breed I will never understand. You're alright Flint. You'll get through this."

“What do you mean by that sir?”

Wood sipped the coffee. “It’s getting louder.”

Chief walked over with Lila. Harrow said, “Don’t say I haven’t done anything for you, Fox. I have a gift.”

Flint’s mouth dropped. ‘You were a fox?’

“I said don’t call me that.” Glaring at Chief.

Flint said, “Respectfully, sir, a lot of the guys thought you were, uh. On the accounting side.”

Lila shrugged. “Fed’s a fed.”

Scientist. What did they know.

Gave him the chills. And his stomach tightened and gurgled and he needed to eat something.

“Yeah, but he was a Fox. Who did you run for?”

“You’re talking like I’m dead. Am I not on the pay roll?”

“Apologies sir.”

“Swollen eye wasn’t enough Chief, have to bruise an old man’s pride too. What other gift did you get me, a coffin? Tell me my pension is safe.”

“A night away from the town. Two birds one stone. Lila will give you the details. Let’s go Flint, I need to talk to you about Parent Night tomorrow.”

“Yes sir.” He stood. Turned to him, bowed like he was some sort of monk or teacher; he was cold.
“Thank you sir.”

“Uh, before you go. If you were still wondering. I foxed for Stratton.”

His eyes widened. That’s what he was looking for, sipped his coffee as Chief pulled him away.

Lila said, “You look smug.”

“I think we got off on the wrong foot. I don’t like you, and you shouldn’t say such things to people who don’t like you. They might take it personal.”

“I don’t like people sniffing around my work. Or feds.”

“Fair.” Knocking.

But just because he knew she was lying, or hiding something, or rotting; didn’t mean he knew about what or prove shit. Out of coffee. His stomach gargled.

“You have a gift for me or what?”

“Gift comes after; you said you wanted a walkthrough of The Farm, homeless facility. Chief assigned me as your tour guide. We can leave whenever you’re ready. Soon is better though, I have a lot of work to do. It’s a decent commute.”

“Well alright then.” He rose, elbows numb like mountain peaks. “On the way is there a bakery?”

~

Through upper district-6, to get to the boonies, they rode through the day across the filthy rich. Twelve baguettes and a thermos of coffee between Wood’s legs. Air conditioning and butt warmers on max.

As the sun dipped so too did the last of the farm-styled estates with elaborate plants and hedges cease to a wide expanse of open land. With the stars out, they reached an old military bootcamp. Wood polished off the third baguette as they approached the massive, wave like white gates of The Farm.

Who the hell approved that name? Wood leaned against the dash to peer at the walls.

Two tall watch towers flanked the width with bulbous domes; spin styled, the structure rotated at their approach to the sign-in gate. A single office with a desk and two guards.

“What a warm welcome.”

“This isn’t normal.” Lila said, uninterested in him entirely as the guard, lowered their blast shield. “No visitors tonight. Incident. The Farm is on full lockdown.”

“We have an appointment curated with the Warden from Chief Harrow. District-6. I am to be giving my acquaintance Agent Wood a tour of the facilities. I am Lila Kemp. I have level-three clearance and work with the patients. Here is my badge.”

The guard held up their hands. “Listen. Warden gave orders. No one is going in, no one is going out. I can take your badge and verify you are who you say you are and I have no reason not to believe you, but you’re still not getting in. You can call your Chief Harrow and have them call the Warden and if the Warden calls me, I’ll open the gate. Only then. Have a good night.”

The blast shield closed. Wood said, “Well that was fun.”

He ripped off a piece of bread. She eyed him.

“Don’t look at me. It’s not my fault. We do good work. These are hardened people. Scared and angry and they’re right. They should be. This is why I hate feds. Knights of the system or their Foxes. Every nonprofit gets crushed. Government picks favorites, marks up solutions a thousand percent. Or shelves it entirely. We could FIX this. They won’t let us. But you don’t know about that. You’re just a nose to sniff out trouble for your big sword to come and cut anything down that’s different. Calling it justice.”

“Are you done? I’ll take my gift now.”

Her eyes narrowed on him. “Your gift is from your precious handler Stratton. It’s three miles up the road. Do you want to wait and call Harrow or go straight there?”

“Gift. Let’s go I’m freezing my ass off in here.”

Lila snorted. Pressing the address in her comm. The ride reversed.

“You’re no better than the rest of them. Greedy pigs.”

On the junction of the main road, the tower's light flickered off them, as they pulled into the easy night, and endless expansion of nothing that begged the question of why they even needed the gates for homeless and it wasn't his fault there was evil in the world. Stomach kicking. Wood threw the bread down.

"Hey listen." Knocking, Wood undid the lid of thermos. All thumbs in the black gloves, he spilled on his lap. "I'm supposed to be retiring, you know. Chief didn't fucking say that; this is supposed to be a blue district for fuck sake. An easy last couple of days; I'm sorry you're just as fucked up as the rest of the world."

"I know." She handed him a napkin.

He took it. Padded his crotch. Bad enough his stomach made weird noises. He had to look like he pissed himself too. Sipping at the coffee, finally; it was cold.

Bitter. His brain felt like a frozen heart beat.

"I did my time. The government, the system had thirty six years of it. Haven't I done enough?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"Do you want to go back?"

Lila said, "No, not really. We already left. It's just a little more up the road."

Hangers, a small runway. Further in the back. Another gate.

People and their gates.

The funny thing, 'I totally get it; I want a gate too.'

A big fucking gate to keep everyone and the noise away. Nothing getting in, nothing getting out. The thing about gates was; they're a lie.

Even in a blue district like -6, the rot always found a way inside.

Lila lowered the window, reached for the sign in panel; the gate opened. She rose the window. Smiled at him.

Thing about scientist, when they do find something cool; there was no smile more beautiful. "You ready?" Too bad they were all still assholes.

The ride rolled in a large bare square. Lila said, "One thousand feet in any direction at its center. Your gift from Stratton. She, uh. Is very persuasive. Told me to tell you, 'How is that for keeping my word, bitch. Enjoy it pup.' Again her words. She uh, made me promise to tell you."

"I know. It's okay. She's a prick."

At the center. Two small unassuming wooden shacks and a black tight ride, two seater; what Stratton would call a thumb in the ass. Their ride stopped.

"This is you. I have been instructed to leave you to it. You're welcome to return to the precinct and we can reschedule our tour of The Farm. I have to get back to the lab. Busy, busy."

“I see. Well. Let me grab my bread.”

Wood watched her drive away. She wasn’t so bad. If it wasn’t for all the knocking.

His stomach growled. He turned, faced the two huts.

One bigger, one a quarter of the size on the right. Small first.

Wood headed over.

Chapter Three

Inside door number one: a jacuzzi. The retractable lid, a slick mix of metal and tiki, held a card. Wood picked up the note from Stratton.

‘Told ya I’d keep you warm. Not a trouble in a thousand miles. Remember this when it’s my birthday. Don’t be shy with that pension.’

Wood snorted. It had been a while since he last cried.

God he loved a soak. Wood moved out and onto door number two.

A big ass bed. Fridge in the corner, small kitchenette, a desk, an easel and assortment of paints and canvases. Wood walked to the bed, stroked the comforter. The thread count was out of this world, and on the pillow another card from Stratton.

‘Rest easy. There’s a bottle of good whiskey under the bed.’

Wood searched under the bed. A box.

Cigars. Another card.

‘Drinking is bad for you, Fox. Enjoy the hole. S.’

He shut the box. In a glorious moment later, Wood slipped into the jacuzzi. Sucking on a cigar.

“Oh baby.” This was the life.

When he lowered down in the bubbling hot, steamy water; everything was clear. Wood closed his eyes.

Knocking. Wood cried.

~

Still wet in the ride, bread in seat, he typed in the precinct’s address. The gate closed behind him.

Wood looked back. Sipped on the thermos of coffee. Turned up the heat; damn cold and a long commute back. The knocking grew louder and louder.

Follow the lies, follow the noise, find the rot. He had thought about it all long enough.

His assessment. Hollis was the one he had to find.

~

Hollis was not at the precinct. The graveyard crew didn't know. They guessed at his home, which was fair as he apparently had the day off and they eyed him like it was the first time on the job. Not at his house either; second time around at the precinct, he knocked on Lila's lab.

She spun in her chair. "Shouldn't you be in your hole, Fox?"

"Don't call me that. I need to run a system scan on Hollis's ride."

"Why?"

"So I can follow him. I think he is tangled in deep shit. I don't know what, or why, but I know from everyone that I think is involved; he is going to shove his nose in it first. You helped him before. I think you will help me help him"

"That's mighty kind of you fed."

"So what's it going to be?"

She spun in her chair. Typed on her desk. His comm flashed.

"Done and done."

She did that too fast. Knocking.

It's what he wanted; and that's when he found the irony. Hollis was parked outside Flint's house. Two birds, one stone indeed Chief.

"I also will need to check out some Owls-glasses. We can go through legit channels. I have clearance."

"So you do. So you do. Right this way, Wood."

~

Watching the detective watch the detective, only Wood's gut didn't find it funny as he pissed in the thermos. All morning; Hollis didn't budge.

The bottle topped off. He placed it in the holder. Out of bread, crumbs over the seat. Soon, he'd have to take a shit, and that wouldn't fit in a cup.

Knocking; the motion in the house. The garage opened. Flint left down the road.

Hollis didn't budge. Was he asleep?

The garage closed. Wood rubbed his gloved hands between his legs. His temples fit like frozen pipes that bottlenecked his headache.

Twenty minutes later, the garage opened again for the wife. Brittany Carver left down the road and Hollis didn't budge.

Who else was in the house?

Confirming on his comm, it left the son: Max Carver. Read the file. Local Willowbrook hero, saved a girl from a rot induced 'outrage' the papers called it. He should have already been at school.

Parent Night at Willowbrook, Flint had the afternoon off for it. Hollis, the day off. Would the son play hooky all day? Knocking.

The shit was brewing. There was an answer here.

Wood slipped out of the ride. Fixed his coat tight. He quickly and quietly foxed around over to Hollis's ride. On privacy, Wood slithered under the tinted windows to the door. From his coat pocket, he removed a Pike, in the other hand secured private issue Gorilla Spray and shoved the Pike into the door's crevice that shunted a electrical charge for him to pry it open and spray Hollis's unsuspecting face.

His face went numb and slack in horror. Mumbling spit, Hollis tongued, "What the fuck?"

Wood shoved him further inside the ride and climbed in shutting the door behind him. He pocketed the spray, for a Redline Needle.

"See this. This will straighten you out in a second flat. It might also make you puke your guts out because you're not dying, just numb. You're going to answer two of my questions. One is yes or no before the needle. The other is after. Nod if you understand."

With drool hanging off his lip, Hollis nodded.

"Good lad. Question one. Are you watching Max Carver?"

Hollis nodded; Wood stabbed the Redline into his thigh. His face relaxed, then bulged with adrenaline, and all his veins popped in his neck.

"That way, that way." Wood pointed.

Hollis puked."You could have just asked first before breaking in and ambushing me. Holy hell." He spit.

"That's the second question. Why are you watching Max Carver?"

~

In the ride, Hollis slouched lower, "It's getting late."

"Yeah."

Hollis slouched lower, "What do you think he's doing in there?"

Kid got soft with adults. Old man Kaine should have taught him better.

"I don't know."

Sipping on the fresh coffee he made Hollis fetch. As well as bagels and nibbled on an everything he didn't ask for; "Jerking off?"

A ride pulled up the street. Parked on the curb outside his house. "Movement." Hollis straightened like a rookie.

Could be pizza for all they knew. Wood sipped the coffee. It wasn't pizza.

The garage opened. A damn pit-bull-sized gorilla for a plant followed him.

If he had it his way; those would be banned. So would about half of the type of plants used as decoration down the commercial; this was why we can't have nice things.

Wood polished off the bagel. "Clock it."

On the dash, Hollis scrambled to scan and tag the ride pulling down the street. A map pinned the screen with its movement. Set to follow. Their ride took off.

"He's going to Willowbrook. Wake me when we get there."

Wood leaned the chair back. Closed his eyes as the knocking pounded on the darkness. Until it was too loud of a headache, his lower back felt like the inside of his freezer, chipped at the surface, and his eyes popped open.

They parked. He lifted his seat to attention.

Max exited his ride. He crossed the street, looking both ways like a proper little brat with his damn security guard monkey.

"Who is working Parent Night?"

A shadow overhead. Government transport. This was a high powered confluence.

Hollis lifted his wrist. "I'll check."

"I'll do it faster."

Dialed on his comm. Wood found the file.

He noted, "Cherry Andril and Ian Hoist. They are stationed to be on the west block. Off campus, on stand by. The school has their own security. Whole event is scheduled for fifteen minute arrival and departure cushion with the meat being the two hours." Wood asked. "When does Flint arrive? I wish I bugged his car."

"I did. I'll share the link."

His comm flashed. "Okay. In transit. Not far away. He'll be pulling in line."

"Ah, I think that's Cherry and Ian."

"Where."

Hollis offered his Owls. From his coat pocket, Wood got his; found the officers on foot, one by one shaking Director Laurel's hand.

The giant sunflower shook its petals. Bright lights.

Mood moss on the people glowed perfect blue. Happy faces. Normal.

Knocking.

Hollis said, "What do we do?"

Knocking. Wood closed his eyes.

“There’s Flint and Brittany.”

Knocking.

“They’re shaking the Director’s hand.”

Knocking.

“They are gathering up for a speech. What do we do? Fox?”

Wood dialed his comm. Hovered over the contact: Stratton.

“Kid, I’m going to tell you something you will take to heart if your smart. No one likes to ask for help in this business. That’s stupid.”

Wood pressed the contact. Answered on the first ring. A hologram with long blonde hair, thick lips, perky tits in silver dress, Stratton, holding a glass of champagne.

“If it isn’t my Brown Fox. How’s the tub? Where are you? That’s not the ride I got you.”

“I need help.”

~

“My three favorite words. What do you got for me pup? Hey, your friend is cute. You single?”

Hollis blushed. Eyes fell like a true pup.

“That’s Kaine’s brat.”

“No shit. You know he foxed for me for little bit.”

“He said you were the best.”

“I am.”

Wood said, “I’m sending my location.”

Stratton chugged the flute, set it down off screen and focused on her comm. “Okay.” She burped. Hit her chest. “What do we got. Willowbrook, huh. By transport. An hour.”

Outside the gates; the parents clapped. They broke apart into groups.

“No,” Wood said, “I need a hard hour. I got a bad feeling about this place. Something is going on; don’t take chances. Hard hour.”

“Hard hour it will be. Act accordingly then. The timer starts now. Kisses.”

Call ended. His comm flashed from her message back to him: a running timer for a hard hour. “Alright,” Wood said to himself, knocking on his heart. “We’re on the clock.”

Hollis gaped at him.

“What’s that look for?”

“So many questions,” Hollis stuttered like a total rookie.

How had Kaine not beaten that out of him?

“How is a hard hour different.”

“You know what a Light-strike is?”

Hollis eyes widened.

“Yeah well don’t lose your mind yet. Movement.” Wood nodded at the school gates as the groups of parents branched off through the campus. “Looks like they are on the clock too. A light strike’s arrival is two actions, hence a hard hour. Good thing is they’re all bunched together so all we have to do is wait and make sure none of the key players leave.”

“What if something happens?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then we will see.”

“Kaine was a sword, before I was assigned to him, right? He didn’t talk much about that time.”

“Kaine was a pocket knife. Stratton is a sword. You’ll see. She’s the best, and there’s nothing like a Light-strike. Sun rise or sets won’t be the same.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“Don’t let her hear you say that. Or else you ended up sleeping with her. What’s that face for?”

“Nothing. Just. Is that a bad thing?”

Wood shook his head. What a puppy.

Wood’s stomach growled and groaned. “Listen, keep your eyes peeled, I have to take a shit behind that tree.” He opened the door, stopped.

“The issue,” Wood said, “She only sleeps with her Foxes.”

He smiled, blushing, and closed the door. Waddled over to the trees outlining an insurance building. Squatted in the bushes.

~

Dusting his hands, Wood checked his comm on the way back to the ride. They were making good time. Fifty-five hard minutes left.

He stepped in, “This is why I asked for a plain bagel.”

“We got something.”

“What. Prime target: student, Morgan Price. The one I followed to the warehouses. The Spider. She’s walking out.”

“Where is she going?”

“I don’t know. She does look like she knows where she wants to go.”

“Yeah, like she’s a fucking robot.”

They watched her exit the gates, the campus, cross the street and keep walking.

“What do we do?” Hollis asked.

Wood checked his comm. “We have time. Follow her.”

“We leave the school?”

“Are you right about her or not?”

“Yes. She’s a part of whatever this; I am sure of it.”

“Good job, fox. We follow her with plans to rendezvous at the Willowbrook in time with Stratton. There’s three officers including Flint off duty on the campus, they will have to be enough now. Will you follow my command or not....” Wood checked his comm. “We have fifty-four minutes. Three. We’re going to lose her.”

“No we are not.” Hollis typed on the dash, the ride took off. They turned down the block.

On the side of the street, mechanically Morgan Price walked on a mission to get somewhere. They followed.

Chapter Four:

On his comm: thirty-eight minutes left. Parked outside an apartment sky rise. Only a fifteen minute commute. Good, it was close by in case they had to run back.

Hollis hurried to exit, Wood grabbed his arm. “Easy.”

“We don’t want to lose her.”

“She’s going home. Or someone’s place. We are in official territory now. I’ll clock the clerk or hack their system. Either way. She’s stuck. Not us.”

Recognition. He sat back down. “What if she’s bait. Leading us astray on purpose.”

“Now you’re thinking. Then so be it. We have time to kill remember. And have Flint’s location and vitals. He’s fine by all accounts. The real question is probable cause. What if we’re wrong. And she’s just on time for dinner. What then? What if Stratton arrives and there’s nothing wrong at Parent Night?”

“Then I’ll sleep well tonight.”

Wood laughed. "You got spunk kid. Alright. Let's go. Me first. They always over look a short guy if he walks in first. If he goes in second behind someone tall like your lucky ass, they think I'm hiding something."

He exited the ride, wrapped the coat tight as Hollis exited. They crossed the street to Blue Horizon. Sliding doors. Bright blue and gold decor.

Reception on the right, Hollis waited slightly behind. Wood smiled and approached a young male clerk.

"Howdy friend, I am a narcotics federal agent. And I am going to need the address of that girl that just entered."

The clerk hiccuped.

~

In the elevator Wood whistled, taking off his gloves, stuffing them into the coat's pockets. Despite his knuckles freezing, he liked to feel his skin on the job.

The doors opened. "Okay tall guy. You first this time."

Hands in his coat's pocket, Wood followed Hollis down the sky themed, doors of gold on either side, their numbers 1700s. Stopped at 1709.

Hollis readied his wrist to tap the panel by the door. Eyed him. Wood nodded.

The door beeped green. It opened from within. Morgan Price stood inside dead still. Like the robot had been turned off.

"What the fuck?" Hollis spun her around.

Spiders. All over her face.

Wood sprayed her. Her body shook. "What the fuck?"

She raised her hand; Hollis punched her in the face.

Morgan fell back in a thud. The spiders on her face settled, camouflaged and otherwise invisible if they just didn't see that. Unconscious-ish.

Wood eyed Hollis. Fist by his jaw, ready and waiting for her to spring at them.

"Good hit. Stand back."

He walked over to the girl. Grimaced. "Fucking hate spiders."

From within his coat, he withdrew a flask. Unlatched, he stole a swig.

Thought he'd never need this again, poured the rest on the girl's face. It steamed. The spiders melted. Poured all over her body. She withered.

"Did you take a drink of that?"

“Oh ya. That. Ya. An acquired taste. Its bad if you have a lot of rot. For me, its really warm. Will keep you up all night. She should be immobilized. Twenty-seven minutes left fox. Bring her to kitchen. I fucking hate spiders.”

~

With her tied to a chair, Wood handed Hollis the Redline.

“Why do I have to do it?”

“Because you’re a virgin.”

“That’s my point.”

“Do it.”

Hollis took it, stabbed Morgan’s knee. Her eyes sprung open. “Fuck me.”

“No.” Wood slapped her. “Bad girl.”

Black hair fell into her face. She glittered. Laughed. Faced them. Leaned back, smug. “You slap like a bitch.” She spit at his Hollis’s face.

Wood pushed him so it missed. “Don’t ever let any liquids on you.”

Hollis straightened. Nodded, and punched her in nose.

“Goddammit.” Morgan wiggled in her restraints. “Dammit, dammit. That hurt.”

Wood held a hand to him. Hollis lowered his fist.

“You keep that in mind missy. We got some questions to ask you.”

Red teeth, she smiled. “Why didn’t you just ask me?”

Hollis eyed Wood, who shrugged. He said, “Why did you leave? Why are you here?”

She laughed. Bubbled blood at the corners it was so funny.

“What is going on at Parent Night?”

“You really know nothing.”

Bait after all. Wood checked his comm. Twenty-four minutes.

“Okay, it doesn’t matter don’t tell us. The sword will cut whatever their plan is; I feel it. Your right it’s happening. We got to go back.”

“Idiots. It’s already done. The mission. Happened within the first five minutes. A couple hand shakes of key targets. A dial turn. Whatever else happens from here is now on you.”

“Yeah. I don’t care anymore.” Wood sprayed her face.

She wiggled in the chair. Thrashed about. He didn’t really care. When she hung limp, Wood stopped spraying.

“Let’s go.”

“Just leave her here?”

“Yes. We will call it in while we are en route. We are on a timer.”

Wood ran down the hall. Hollis followed. They opened the front door; it was crowded with the clerk and his coworkers, and whom he would presume were the other residents of the entire building all standing like robots.

Their eyes glowed blue. On their face crawled spiders.

“Fuck spiders.” Wood closed the door.

Hollis said, “What?”

“Can’t go that way.”

Laughter from the kitchen. How did she recover that fast?

Wood ran down the hall. Hollis followed him into the kitchen, she got one arm free of the ropes. “My turn.”

Her eyes glowed blue.

Wood eyed her, the living room, and balcony. Moved to balcony’s sliding door, opened it.

He turned to Hollis inside the apartment with Morgan; both staring, confused. From inside his coat, got an eggplant. Stuck it to the railing.

Wood took hold of the end of the eggplant, as a rope and leapt off the side. He rappelled down.

At the bottom, Wood waved. “Quick tip, young fox. Know when to run.” He tapped his comm, and started running down the block. “Twenty-four minutes.”

Chapter Five:

Knocking. Four happy strangers with crowbars tipped Wood’s ride. He ran right by.

Checked his comm. Controlled his breathing. Form good. He’d make great time.

Didn’t mind running. His body heated up like a reward.

Across Willowbrook’s gate, Wood panted, hands on his old knees.

Still got it, baby.

Ha-ha, Sword. “I won. With, four minutes to spare.”

Things looked normal-ish. The giant sunflower slowly moved its petals in the wind. It shriveled his ears it brushed him onward; peering through.

He didn't actually have to go inside. Secure the parameter. That's all.

A loud roar from within the campus was everything not normal. So was the following scream; Wood sighed, "Fuck me."

He couldn't not help somebody and even if he knew it was a double negative; Wood ran in. Something black and large leapt into tables: a demon.

Eight feet tall. Purple and black, big claws. Big fangs. It roared into the night. Didn't seem to notice him along the building's shadows.

A naked girl on the ground, her neck bruised and crushed, and Wood checked her pulse anyway. None. Ahead, the demon sniffed.

A wind, shriveled his ears as it moved past him to the beast that turned its head at him. "Fuck me. If it's not spiders, it's dogs."

The demon leapt to land in front of him. "You going to eat that?"

Wood straightened. The demon was still a kid too. "That's where I draw the line."

"You and everyone else buddy, I've had enough of peoples shit today—"

The good thing about the silent push was it, didn't always have to be two punches. The first only needed to connect; the demon twitched.

Wood ran the fuck away. Hands icicles as he checked his comm.

Behind him, the demon howled. "Asshole. You'll die for that."

One hard minute. Knocking.

A cold swiped his back like a long time coming. Wood fell on his face. As a large shadow hovered over the demon above him.

His alarm rang. In the sky blossomed a white light, from a small star into a blimp, and bigger as the demon raised its claws. Beautiful.

There was nothing as beautiful, blinding, or warm as Light-Strike.

It was also the hard part. As the light fell, so did the claws.

It pressed the stupid kid to pancake him. As Wood couldn't see shit, gargling blood.

Heard a voice. "Dammit Fox, what did I say."

A weight lifted off him. The kid was flung to the side.

"Hey boss."

In impractical white armor from head to toe; a warrior goddess, Stratton said, "You don't look so good fox."

Could at least lie to a fella.

Despite the cold that crept in, Wood smiled. "Found something."

He closed his eyes against the knocking, and it finally stilled in the darkness. Sweet nothing.

Act Five: The Thing about Aces in the Hole...

Chapter One:

Out the damn window, because if Wood could do it; Hollis hiccuped, rappelling down to his feet.

Alive at the bottom, he barked a laugh up at Morgan. She craned her neck over, her black hair with diamonds sparkled despite the whole damn affair.

Then all the other people poked their head over. They leapt off.

"Fuck."

Off the building in showers more and more catapulted themselves as Hollis ran away down the street. On the bend, four strangers waited by his tilted car with crowbars.

They closed in on him, and he dove between two raising their iron to swing, and rolled, and ran away. Fast learner; they gave chase.

As well as a horde of people after him. Hollis closed his eyes. Couldn't stop running. It was a decent run to Willowbrook; had to stay even as the noise got closer and closer on his heels. Could feel their warmth, the shadow of the past getting surrounded.

He opened his eyes as a large shadow passed over him. A white comet fell; Hollis braced from the whiplash of wind. In a second, long blonde hair reminded him of Poppy Whitmore.

That's where the similarity ended; clad in armor. She smiled as off her being, a purifying white flame grew into a wall and fired off. Engulfed the people. They withered to their hands and knees sizzling. Their spiders burned.

"So you're Kaine's pup. You are cute. Listen. I'm on a tight schedule. I'll find you later."

She turned as the people murmured behind him. "What just happened?"

"Where are we?"

"What's going on."

Crying. From the sky, a rope dropped. Stratton said, "Deal with the civilians would ya." She grabbed on it; lifted away, she waved and then was pulled up to the transport. Blonde hair blowing in the wind they sped off to Willowbrook.

Hollis turned faced the people that all looked to him for answers. He spoke into his comm. "I'm going to need backup on this address." Pinged it.

"Alright, everyone please remain calm."

An old man pointed to the distance. "What is that woman doing?"

In the clear night sky, above the buildings, the giant sunflower in the distance with the moon — another orb of equal measure illuminated. Larger and larger the ball of supreme light grew.

"Light-strike."

They crowded to watch it. Then, without warning of a new year, or fanfare, the ball dropped.

When it landed — out of sight beyond the buildings — the Earth looked flat and white as ethereal frosting overflowed the streets to fill every crack of district-6.

Hollis smirked as his hair blew back. Bleached his eyes.

Hollis cracked his jaw. Ears ringing.

The entire district became an alarm wailing; the entire system tripped. People poured from every building like ant farm flooded.

Hollis stumbled into a run. He couldn't be the leader these people needed.

He didn't want to be. Had to know, what happened, and ran to Willowbrook.

~

They already took Wood. No one would say on his life; they never did when it came to rot attacks. Underneath the giant sunflower no longer glowing; faint, its petals frilled. Hollis found no answers he wanted. Like with the crowd he left, at the school was more of the same. Students, teachers, parents, if they stood or sat; they were in two camps, wide eyed or slack. Asking an endless stream of questions or said nothing.

No one remembered anything.

A lot of people on the ground. EMT collecting everyone, and he stumbled through not knowing what to do. Where to begin?

A hazmat scrub unit sprayed a wall with a huge rotting code. This was no longer emotional rot; this was tactical warfare.

Stratton stood at the center of everything. Surrounded by news, officials, never stopping. Never resting. Her smile never faltered.

Hollis checked his comm, located Flint's pin and chased it. To an ambulance. He laid in the back unconscious. Chief slapped the side of the ride as it took off.

"Hollis. Collect the unconscious or go home."

"Okay."

A switch flipped. It was easier to do what he was told. Hollis fell into line.

Someone's shoe was in the grass. Just one. Blue laces.

He couldn't stop looking at it.

Chapter Two:

Four hundred and thirty-seven unconscious. Hollis spun at his desk at the precinct; hadn't slept, smelled like crap, and selected another everything bagel and didn't know what Wood was talking about. These tasted great as his comm flashed.

Stable, but unconscious. Every hospital in District-6 was at capacity by midnight. As well for they converted portion of the precinct to accommodate patients including the Carver family. Hollis chased the bagel with coffee.

Once settled; no one had time for them in the new day as his comm rang off the clock with victim reports of having their memory wiped for varying lengths of time.

The Light-struck set everyone free; they didn't realize how much that was everyone. For some people it was a day; others months. Maybe six bagels was too much.

His stomach gargled. Some claimed years; were they lying? His comm flashed. How could they tell; and they never stopped calling.

It was madness. And it felt like the point. He had to take a shit. Stretched, rose, and strolled head down to the bathroom in the packed, panicked and trying to be come chaos to the stall and whistled as he drained the lizard.

The kids. For whatever reason; as they were all accounted for with slight discrepancy like Morgan price; absent and parents unconscious.

Hollis washed his hands. Checked his teeth in the mirror.

Or like the student Ellipsis Lapel who was strangled to death and no one remembered why.

Everything screamed of foul play, but first they had to put out the fires; he wiped his hands on his pants. Make sure everyone and thing was accounted for; then they had to hear everyone's story. Then they had to piece it together; his comm flashed: message from Lila.

'He's awake.'

Hollis ran out of the bathroom.

~

Separated into male and female sections, Flint was tucked in a conference room with five other unconscious officers. Curtained off, each plugged into portable crash-cart and monitoring stations. The best money could buy. At the threshold, Lila said, "Go easy. Brittany and Max are still unconscious."

At the end, Flint sat upright in bed. A faraway stare of dire acceptance; not angry or necessarily sad, but a man with a clear understanding that there was a lot of work ahead of him.

He stepped in. Flint turned, smiled softly.

“So what did I miss?

Hollis hugged him. “It’s not your fault.”

Flint didn’t hug back. Not yet. But he didn’t pull away either.

ROT: Fight Night

Part-1

‘Its Not Your Fault’

CHAPTER ONE: THE THING ABOUT HOLDING MIRRORS IS

A punch to the face rocked Flint's head back, shifted his headgear. He fixed it with his gloved hands and ate another punch on the nose, dumping his adrenaline like ice water through his veins. It slowed everything down into frames.

Ferris 'Sun-Eater' Ensollas could never just lightly spar. Every fight it was his pride on the line, and Flint's blood on the mat.

On the back foot, Flint kept his elbows tucked over his ribs, breathing steady, protecting the body, protecting the core. Nothing could get out; nothing could break in—except those jabs Ferris snapped through.

That or on the ears; knowing they would cauliflower like a real asshole. His whole body felt like a cauliflower—lumpy, misshapen, tender in places that shouldn't be tender. Ferris feinted for his body, smacked him on the head. Gloves up.

His glowed green from the vine emblem of flames stitched across the knuckles. Each movement stoked the fire, made the vines writhe like they were alive.

An automatic timer sang. They respected it, broke apart. Flint collected himself.

Though his breathing stayed even in six-second inhales and exhales, his heartbeat was off the charts. The timer sang already. Ferris waited for him.

They touched gloves.

No matter how Flint scolded himself to advance on the bell, to press forward, to be aggressive—Ferris was just so good. Advancing on him felt like being dropped in the ocean with weights on your ankles. The more you struggled, the faster you sank.

Blue vines braided in his hair in complex patterns that had probably taken days to weave. They'd be cut before his official match in two days—regulations didn't allow anything the opponent could grab—but as he ducked and swayed they left blue streaks in the air like bioluminescent jellyfish trailing through dark water.

Shark fin emblem blue on his gloves, the symbol swimming and circling as he moved them in tight patterns, never wasting motion, never telegraphing. Dark skin gleaming with sweat, Ferris held an arrogant pinch to being handsome—jawline sharp, cheekbones high, eyes that knew exactly how good-looking he was.

It gave his movements a malicious edge—blood in the water. Like watching an orca kill for sport. Graceful, efficient, deadly, and mean.

Trapped in the corner was the only place Flint could keep him relatively still—could set traps, force exchanges. Ferris got bored with him in the corners. The predator punished every perceived weakness. But that predictability allowed opportune slips—taking punishment to create windows for striking back.

Swing and a miss; body slug, and to the face. Clinical punishment. Flint clenched on his mouthguard. In comparison to his shotgun left jab, that right was a cannon he'd seen and felt unload upon him personally a thousand real times and not—a personal curse and benefit. At the gym, at home, at school, it often felt like he was holding a big mirror.

Everyone's emotions, everyone's expectations, everyone's needs reflecting back through him. For boxing specifically, it afforded him a good mental landscape for shadowboxing. It let him practice fights in his head with perfect accuracy. He'd memorized opponents' patterns, tendencies, tells. Ferris had none. If he didn't get bored or distracted, Flint was screwed.

The gym door opened across the room—normally this wouldn't register to Flint or Ferris, both lost in tunnel vision. Unless it was Ferris's brother Dante. Because everyone couldn't help but notice Dante 'The Angel' Ensollas.

Five years older at twenty-one, undefeated and the champion of District-6, Dante entered every room with a crowd. Ringside. They filled the space with flashing lights, questions, and chatter, and sparring partners with hero worship in their eyes.

People who only said 'yes' and 'more please.' But with eyes on someone else, they were brutal—laughing or booing. They were supposed to be out on a media tour for Dante's fight in two days, the championship defense that would determine if he kept his belt, fame, and glory run going or was all hype after all.

Ferris turned to look too; Flint smiled so fucking hard as he swung everything into the hook.

Swing and a miss. "Nice try."

One, two, Flint blocked the second. Someone clapped. A crowd now watching. Dante did not stop the fight; and so it would continue, which meant Ferris would show off.

Like he wasn't already getting his ass kicked. Flint glared. Gloves up.

Which meant Ferris would take risks. Which meant he'd give Flint an opportunity.

If he raised his right hand a little too high to block the first jab, Ferris—so quick after it connected—would lift Flint's arm by the elbow clearing the path for the follow-up body shot to the exposed ribs. It was a beautiful combination when it worked, the kind of thing commentators would replay and analyze.

Flint pivoted, lunged, popping Ferris good in the face. Hard enough to score. Hard enough that Dante noticed and his people cheered.

Flint slipped from the corner into open space, reset his stance.

The mirror got a lot heavier as the ringside population grew from others within the gym. Everybody watching now. Even the blue bio-luminescent plants hanging from the ceiling seemed to respond, their petals opening slightly, glowing brighter in response to the positive emotion filling the space. And then the petals closed.

The mirror grew heavier still when Ferris's pride swelled visible in his posture, in the way he rolled his shoulders, in the slight smile playing at his lips.

And then Dante's voice cut through everything: "Good hit."

Just two words. But Dante said them knowing. They would be Flint's nail in the coffin because Ferris was mad now.

Blue streaked through the air as Ferris swayed and pivoted. Closing the distance with a smooth one-two into a quick clinch.

Ferris adjusted, created the smallest amount of space between their bodies. And snapped him with a kidney shot.

Illegal in any sanctioned fight. But so fluid, so smooth, delivered with such casual precision that it was hard to tell if it was on purpose or just the chaos of bodies pressed together.

Ferris pushed him away with another one-two. Dancing, he circled, moving like smoke in water. The delay on the pain set in.

Kidney shots weren't immediate. They built. The organ had to process what had happened to it. Had to send the distress signals to the brain. Two seconds of normalcy where Flint's body stayed upright on autopilot, muscle memory keeping him moving even as something deep inside registered wrongness. Not the usual ache of a body shot. Something else. Something that radiated outward like heat. Flint's body slumped on its own accord.

His legs went soft. His guard dropped.

Bam.

Ferris's right hand—the cannon. Fucking took off his jaw and the lights with it.

The mirror broke.

Buzz. White spores dancing in Flint's vision.

The ceiling covered in blue bio-luminescent plants that were supposed to respond to positive emotion, that were supposed to bloom and glow when people felt joy. They hung limp now, curled into themselves like fists. Like they could sense what had just happened wasn't sport. The plants knew, but no one looked at the ceiling; they clapped as Ferris held up a fist.

The shark fin on his glove swam circles.

Flint rolled over onto his side on the canvas. Tasted copper. Saw Ferris's feet, his black shoes with blue laces, doing a little victory shuffle.

Half the crowd was cheering—the ones who'd missed the kidney shot, who just saw a clean knockout, who loved the violence for its own sake. The others squinted, leaned forward, exchanged glances. Confused maybe. Uncomfortable definitely. Trying to figure out if what they'd just seen was good boxing or something uglier that they didn't want to name.

Dante stepped into the ring, officially ending it. At 6'3" with an insane wingspan, fighting at welterweight Olympic 152 pounds, he moved with a grace that made everyone else look clumsy. As Ferris fist-pumped the air to his brother's friends, basking in the approval of the crowd, only Flint was close enough to hear Dante lean down and say quietly, almost gently: "You do that kidney punch again, I'll drop you. Hear me."

He turned away before Ferris could answer. The dismissal was surgical—gentle and sharp. His hands were always wrapped as if ready to put on gloves and do just that should there be protest. Dante was a man of his word.

Flint got to his feet before Dante could offer his hand and bruise Ferris even more with a show of mercy. His legs wobbled but held.

Dante grabbed his shoulders, steadied him, made eye contact. Those eyes—people always talked about Dante's eyes. Kind. Warm.

Eyes that looked at you like you mattered. Flint believed it.

Fairer skin than his brother, when he spoke to anyone not Ferris, it was never belittling, never condescending. His voice was concerned and genuine. "Are you okay? You can endure one hell of a beating, friend."

"I'll survive."

"Yes. You will. Flint, you set nice traps. I don't envy that style though—you're a glutton for punishment and use your face too much. Speaking of which, do you all mind if we steal the ring for some photos?"

"Not at all," Flint said, stepping through the ropes. His side was already throbbing, the kidney shot announcing itself now that the adrenaline was fading.

As Ferris was about to leave the ring, Dante caught him with a hand on his shoulder. "How about some family pictures first." Then, without looking at Flint, he said, "Flint, don't forget to cool down."

Flint raised his glove in acknowledgment and headed over to the mats on the far side of the gym to roll out his muscles. Far enough away that no one could see him clearly. His side hurt. Bad. Different than the usual ache of body shots.

This was deeper. Wrong.

When he was sure no one was watching, he fell to his knees clutching his side. Lifted his shirt with shaking hands.

For a second—purple.

Not bruise-purple. Something else. Darker.

Something that seemed to pulse with its own light.

People walked by, other fighters moving between stations, and Flint had to stand and slide the shirt down. He rushed to the lockers, vision swimming.

Made it to the bathroom. Closed the door. Locked it.

Breathing heavy at the sink, Flint washed his face with cold water. The shock of it helped. Cleared some of the fog.

He lifted his shirt again in the mirror.

A bruise was forming where Ferris had landed the kidney shot. Normal bruise. Red-purple. The color bruises were supposed to be. Small, already darkening.

"Fucking cheap shot," he muttered to his reflection.

He spit in the sink. The saliva was pink. He turned on the faucet, washed it away. It wasn't the first time he'd been hurt in sparring. Wouldn't be the last. That's what people said made you tough. Learning to take damage.

He closed his eyes. Counted six seconds.

~

Wet hair from the shower. Comm back on his wrist, linked to the mood moss over his heart. Plain white T. In sweats, he slipped on a matching brown and bluish-green hoodie. Flint put up the hood, made a tent of him in plants to resemble a blue fir tree as branches and leaves extended from the fabric with the hood glowing blue when linked to his comm, like his mood moss, showed his emote score. He jailbroke it to glow blue without connecting.

With his duffel bag and backpack slung over his shoulders, on the way out of the gym, Flint spotted Dante away from the press and friends. He wore a pink shirt and slim matching pants, both outlined in gold. A blue boxing glove glowed on his chest. By a bench along his path like he'd been waiting. Like he'd known exactly when Flint would emerge.

"Hey Flint. Have a second?"

Definitely waiting. Flint pulled his hood down and the tree design retracted into the fabric, the glowing branches dimming. Dante stood with that gentle look, that half smile that made you want to trust him, outright love him. Made you want to do whatever he asked.

His hands behind his back—he always did this, always kept them hidden when talking to people outside the ring. As if despite always being wrapped and ready, he truly didn't want to hurt anyone.

Flint's side hurt. Please don't let this be about the kidney shot. Please don't let this be about Ferris. Please don't—

"How are you feeling? You have a marathon tomorrow, right? For your school?"

"Yeah, it's a charity thing. The winner gets free food for the year. Donations go to District Three." Flint heard himself downplaying it, minimizing it, making it seem like nothing. The same thing he always did.

"Don't be humble now. I heard you placed third, and second in previous years. Seems this might be your year."

"It's really not that important." Not like his fight in two days.

"If it's not that important, then I wanted to offer you an opportunity to be on the fight card." Dante's voice was casual, like he was offering Flint a stick of gum instead of a life-changing opportunity. "There was a drop. Fighter tested positive for Blue-Dreams. During a conversation about possible replacements, I thought of you. It could be good experience. You plan to box when you go to university, right? This could show you're serious about it. There's some time before—"

"I'll do it."

The words came out before Flint had even processed what he was agreeing to. Fight on the same card as Dante's championship defense? In front of real crowds? With real stakes?

It wasn't for Dante—or was it? Yet how Dante brightened from his answer, how that shimmer made Flint feel like he'd said the right thing—but that could just be the mirror.

The mirror showing him what Dante wanted him to see. Was that such a bad thing, to share such fire? To make someone as great as Dante proud? It felt like a privilege.

"Awesome."

Dante's smile widened. Then, as if to distance himself from any suggestion of favoritism, Dante stepped back and started for the door. His movement was so fluid, so mesmerizing, like he was made of something other than flesh and bone and flowed on course designed by a higher source as he's namesake suggested.

Flint found himself mirroring the movement without thinking. Following. Matching his stride. Following his course to the door.

"We were supposed to do a media thing, but I already told the commission about your charity marathon. They love it—kid originally from a green district, now blue. Running for charity, then stepping up to fight on short notice. Great story. They said it's okay as long as you can stop by after to make weight. Shouldn't be a problem from all the running and sweat. You look good. Fit. Don't push yourself though. Listen to your body."

Suddenly they were at the exit, door opened, the cool evening air wrapped around him like an unwelcome embrace. Dante stopped, and his wrapped hands gestured slightly as he spoke.

"Get a lot of rest and don't stress yourself out about it. Your opponent, Theo, is a class act. Really technical, really smart. You'll learn a lot."

"Thanks for the opportunity. I'll do my best. Thank you. Have a good night."

"Don't forget to have fun." Dante said, that angel smile in full force. "Both tomorrow at the marathon and at the fight. That's what it's all about, right? Having fun."

The way he said "fun" made something in Flint's stomach twist, but he couldn't figure out why.

Fresh air hit Flint's face as he stepped outside. The brief liberation was short-lived. At the bottom of the three tiers of three steps leading down from the gym entrance, Ferris sat on the concrete, smoking a Blue-Stick.

He wore a gold shirt and matching sweats outlined in pink. On his chest, two clenched gloves glowed blue and matched his attitude of 'I dare you; make my day.'

The sulfur smell mixed with artificial blueberry reached Flint even from the top of the stairs. Blue smoke curled up into the evening air, dissipating slowly. Ferris made eye contact, held it for a moment, then flickered his gaze away to the sky.

Caught in his usual pinch of pride in Flint's mirror—needing to acknowledge what had happened, needing to apologize maybe, but also needing to maintain his superiority.

Nowhere to go but forward. On Ferris's level now, concrete cold under his feet, Flint stopped.

Ferris blew blue smoke through his nose. "So what did you say?"

Flint sat down next to him, the concrete colder through his sweatpants. "I told Dante I'd fight. Should you be smoking those? You're fighting too."

"Figures." Ferris brushed his nose with the back of his hand, a gesture that might have been dismissive or just an itch. He chuckled, but the sound drooped too quickly, lost its humor, then hardened back into his normal arrogance. "You're probably going to lose. Learn what you can and try to minimize damage. Stop tanking so many face shots. I don't care how strong your chin is—unnecessary damage is unnecessary."

He paused. Took another drag. Held Flint's gaze directly for the first time.

"And about that hit, too. It was unnecessary."

Flint's side throbbed in rhythm with his heartbeat, a steady pulse of pain that wouldn't quit. Ferris smashed the bud of the Blue-Stick into the pavement, grinding it into blue dust with his black moccasin. The powder glowed faintly for a moment before fading. Then he reached out and grabbed Flint's shoulder—grip tight enough to be uncomfortable, possessive, desperate.

"It was uncalled for. I just—I don't know. Sometimes, in the ring..." His hand squeezed harder, fingers digging in through the hoodie. Searching for words. "It's like I see the move and my body does it. Like there's no space between seeing and doing. It's the wrong kind of flow, I know. I know that. But in the

moment, it just feels like I'm king."

The confession hung between them like smoke. Flint wanted to pull away from the grip, from the guilt and arrogance, from the whole conversation. But Ferris's hand was warm through his hoodie, and warmth was rare enough that he stayed.

"It's fine," Flint heard himself say, making it okay, making it not-a-problem, holding up the mirror so Ferris could see himself as not-a-bad-person. "Don't worry about it. It wasn't my first and it won't be my last."

"Yeah." Ferris let go. Offered his fist for a bump, that universal gesture of fighters, of brothers-in-arms, of moving forward.

Flint bumped it. Stood. Started walking.

He looked back when the curb curved up the road. Ferris sat there still, already smoking another Blue-Stick he'd pulled from somewhere, watching Flint leave with an expression that might have been regret or might have been calculation or might have been the particular exhaustion that came from being someone's younger brother, someone's sparring partner, someone's perpetual second-place.

Behind Ferris, the gym door opened. Light spilled out first—golden and warm and inviting. Then a shadow. Tall, graceful. Dante, searching for his brother maybe, or checking on the kid he'd just recruited, or just existing in that space where champions existed, where light and shadow played by different rules.

The shadow swallowed Ferris whole. The light disappeared. Flint turned away.

The mirror got heavy. Heavier than usual. He flipped his hood up—branches and leaves extending in blue light that marked him visible in the darkening evening—and started walking.

He checked his comm. His emote score rested on the fine line: 90.00. The bare minimum acceptable score for a blue district—anything below and the monitors would flag him. Too many flags, and then questions would be asked. If he dropped blue, he wouldn't be able to fight; and put that out of his mind.

No messages from Dad. Which meant one of three things: he was working late at the factory, at the Blue Shrimp Bar, or at home drinking—the worst option.

Two and a half hours home on foot. He wouldn't dare spend the money on a ride; Dad would kill him. Or he could stop for food at the Blue Shrimp, see if Mandy was working, see if Dad was there already celebrating some small win or mourning some large loss.

Flint walked on, carrying the mirror. The weight of everyone's expectations, everyone's emotions, everyone's needs pressing down like a gravity blanket. Tomorrow was the marathon. Six miles. Third place last year. Second place the year before that. Maybe this year would be different. Maybe this year he'd win.

The neighborhood geometry shifted around him as he moved through the streets. Lights changed from bright white to softer amber. Mood moss monitors on every corner tracked his passage. His side throbbed with each step. Tomorrow the marathon. Then the fight. Then—

He didn't let himself think past that. It didn't matter. One thing at a time; Flint counted to six as he walked. Over and over again.

CHAPTER TWO: THE THING ABOUT KINDNESS

Flint pushed through the glass door of the Blue Shrimp Bar and Grill. The smell hit him first—fried fish and beer and chemical sanitizer.

Booths lined the right wall, red vinyl cracked but wiped down. The bar ran along the left, bottles backlit in amber and blue.

At the back, a crowd clustered around the screens live with sports and races. They cheered, booed, cursed, and laughed watching the bio-mechanical plant, horse races with the intensity of people who'd bet money they didn't have and Flint knew the feeling with his father somewhere in the thick of it, too often having bet their food allowance for the month.

The sound was layered: silverware on plates, conversations bleeding together, the announcer's voice narrating the race, and underneath it all, the particular desperation of people trying to have a good time in a place that reeked like their last chance.

"Flint!" Mandy's voice cut through the noise. She waved from behind the bar, her mood moss glowing blue over her white uniform with a blue shrimp. "Hey kiddo! Usual booth?"

He nodded, "Big crowd tonight." And slid into the one closest to the door where no one wanted to be with the draft, brightest light, and the furthest from the screens.

The vinyl was cold through his sweatpants. The table had initials carved into it—generations of people marking something that wouldn't remember them. Someone had carved 'LUCKY-7' deep into the wood, crossed out by someone else and wrote underneath "NO SUCH THING."

"Left Sock is racing." Mandy said, small hands on the table's edge. Hanging on, she leaned back. "You know he is my favorite."

"Don't tell me you bet?"

Mandy smiled, let go of the table. Like tonight was finally her night, and he was a kid who wouldn't understand why. She said, "I think everyone did. It's forty to one odds." She had to be in her forties but looked older—the kind of aging that came from long shifts back to back for years serving people who treated you like furniture. Her hair was pulled back in a practical ponytail, graying at the temples. But her eyes were kind. Actually kind, not performing kindness. "You want your usual?"

"Number six, if that's okay."

"Always okay. You know that." She squeezed his shoulder, and the warmth of her hand through his hoodie made his throat tight. Mandy said, "How's training?"

"Good. Dante offered me a slot on the fight card tomorrow night."

Her face did something complicated—pride and worry fighting for space. “Aren’t you running a marathon tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re going to wear yourself out, kiddo.” She stopped herself from saying more. “Be right back with a water, sweetheart.”

He watched her go. Watched her pour three drinks in one hand. Smile at a joke. Mandy was expected to absorb everyone’s moods and give back nothing but warmth.

The mirror got heavier just watching her. He could feel everyone in the bar through his reflection—their happiness, their desperation, their anger, their hope. All of it pressing against him. His side throbbed. The kidney shot sending little pulses of pain with each heartbeat, each breath.

He pressed his hand against it under the table where no one could see. The pressure helped. Sort of. Or maybe it just gave him something to do with his hands besides think about how much it hurt.

At the back, the crowd erupted. The race was in its final stretch.

On the screens above the bar, six different colored plant horses thundered toward the finish line. Their legs pounding the track with that particular rhythm that sounded almost alive because they were almost alive. Plant and machine and man’s soul working together in ways that still made some people uncomfortable but had become normalized enough for gambling.

A gray horse with black markings was in second place. Pushing hard. Its gait stuttered.

Purple spread up its legs like infection climbing bone.

The crowd in the bar went quiet. That particular silence that came from recognition. From having seen this before.

“Oh shit,” someone said. “It’s going to pop.”

The horse’s legs locked mid-stride. It skidded, metal screaming against track, sparks flying where steel met pavement. Purple consumed its entire body in seconds—spreading, pulsing, growing darker with each pulse.

Then it exploded.

Not loud. Weirdly quiet. Just a flash of purple light and the horse collapsed. Its body dissolving into thick purple syrup that spread across the track.

The other horses kept running. Had to keep running. Jumped over the spreading syrup. The race wasn’t over. Protocol demanded continuation unless the track was fully compromised.

Officials in hazmat suits rushed onto the track with specialized equipment—foam spray, energy barriers. The cameras went to the jockey; in row with all the others in their pods.

He screamed, sliding out, clutching his arm. His whole left arm where the interface connected human to horse. Where flesh met machine and plant. Where the symbiotic link had failed catastrophically. Purple.

Rotting.

The contamination spread up from his elbow toward his shoulder. Climbing with visible intent. Ambulances were in motion. This happened sometimes. Not often, but often enough that protocols existed. That medical teams trained specifically for this, grabbing his thrashing body, applying a special tourniquet.

The jockey screamed as they put him on a gurney and airlifted him away. They'd probably have to amputate the arm.

Horses crossed the finish line. A yellow horse with a white sock pattern came in first.

Left Sock. Forty-to-one odds.

The bar exploded with cheer. Patrons hugged each other. Laughed and cried, and sometimes holding the big ass mirror was alright as Mandy approached him with a water smiling.

She said, "I told you. Never bet against Left Sock!"

"When you're right, you're right."

"Tonight," Mandy said, "Your meal is on me, kiddo."

Most nights were on Mandy. It swelled his vision, because he didn't know what to do with such kindness beyond knowing he had to win. He had to win the race so he could feed himself and he had to win the fight so he could get money to pay her back.

From the masses in the back, a figure stumbled over to them. Flint's stomach dropped. Dad drunk was a gamble of its own.

Tonight, along with everyone else, he smiled with red eyes from crying. "Mandy!" Dad's voice too loud, slurred at the edges. "We did it, Mandy! Left Sock!"

Over his stained white-T, his mood moss flickered from blue to green to blue again, cycling too fast to track. His gaze locked on Flint in the booth. His face did something complicated—joy and guilt and pride and shame crashing together.

"There he is!" Dad stumbled over the booth. Several people turned to watch. "My boy! Did you hear; I won. I won."

He slid in across from Flint with graceless enthusiasm that knocked the salt shaker over. Flint moved his water. Dad reeked of beer and sweat and the particular brand of decay that came from abusing the combination for years. "Can you believe it?"

"How much did you put down?"

"Everything! I had a feeling, and I knew; go big or go home. We did it."

On the screen behind him, officials sanitized the track. Dad leaned forward, drunk eyes suddenly focusing with that particular clarity that sometimes came through alcohol. "You okay? You look pale. You should be happy, I won."

"I'm fine. Congratulations."

"You sure? You're holding your side—“

"I'm fine, Dad. Really. I'm okay."

Dad studied him for a moment longer. Then made the same decision he always made—to ignore what he'd seen. Easier that way. "That's my boy. Tough as nails. Hey, Mandy!"

"What can I get you?"

"Get the boy whatever he wants. We're celebrating!" Dad gestured like he was granting wishes.

"His food is already on the way, the number 6. Can I get you anything else?"

"Get him another, the number 7. Take it home if he doesn't eat it. And a soda, we're celebrating. You can't celebrate with water, and I'll take a whiskey. Make it double."

Dad watched her go, then turned back to Flint with that drunk intensity, that need to be seen. His hands were shaking slightly as he spread them on the table. "We can breathe at last. With these credits, I have some options again. I can stop drinking that piss beer. Have a real drink."

"I think you should slow down. We can maybe pay off some of the debt." The words came out before Flint could stop them. Quiet. Honest. Immediately regretted.

Dad's face changed. The joy drained. His mood moss flickered—blue to green. "What did you say to me?"

"Nothing."

"No, what did you say?" Dad's voice rose.

Other tables quieted. "You think you can tell me how to spend my money?"

"I didn't mean—" The mirror pressed down tighter. "I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

"That's not fair."

Dad stood up so fast the booth shook. His mood moss verdant. "You want to know what's not fair? Your mother dying and leaving me with you. I was a respected man in the military—an officer. I gave orders and strong men and women listened. Now I'm working doubles at the factory so you can fucking question my choices?"

His hands were fists. His face was red. People stared openly.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too."

Diffused by Mandy's return with the double whiskey and a soda. Dad downed the drink in one fluid motion. "Put it all on my tab." He turned and walked out.

The door swung shut and the bar didn't miss a beat. People won and lost all the time. On the screens, they were showing highlights from the race. Just the parts people wanted to see.

Mandy brought the food without a word. Two plates. Steam rising. She set it down gently, met his eyes for just a second—recognition between two people who understood performance, service, absorbing other people's violence.

“Thanks.”

She nodded. Started to leave. Stopped. Slid into the booth across from him.

For a long moment she just sat there, not speaking. Then: “Your father loves you.” Not a question. Not a defense. Just a statement.

“That’s not love.”

“No,” Mandy agreed softly. “It’s not. But it’s what he’s got.” She looked tired suddenly, older than she had when Flint walked in. She stood. Touched his shoulder one more time. “Eat up. You need your strength. Tomorrow’s a big day.”

She disappeared back behind the bar. Someone was calling for drinks. Someone else wanted to cash out. The race replay was showing again—Left Sock winning, winning, winning. No explosions. No horror. Just success.

Flint ate in mechanical silence. The food tasted like nothing but he finished it anyway. When the plate was empty, he drank the soda too even though he didn’t want it. He was stuffed, and then he ate the second plate, because fuck dad.

Instant karma, he ran to the bathroom. He puked it all up. “Fuck me.” He wiped his mouth.

There was nothing else to do but keep moving forward, so he rose, adjusted himself, and left. Mandy was busy, and he didn’t want to bug her as he went through the door.

The night air hit him like cold water and the street hummed with the city’s ambient noise—rides in the distance, mood moss monitors on every corner, and all of the joys and security of a blue district. His side throbbed worse now.

Flint started walking home. Each step sent little spikes of pain radiating outward. He pressed his hand against it, felt the heat even through his hoodie.

But tomorrow was the marathon. Then the fight. He couldn’t afford for something to be wrong.

Two and a half hour walk home. It gave him time to think, time to breathe, time to let the mirror get a little lighter.

The neighborhood geometry shifted as he walked. Premium blue districts where expensive plants wove intricate designs, glowing bright and clean, gave way to subsidized housing, middling green pretending to be blue. Smaller homes and monitors casted everything in softer light—either older tech or less surveillance because nobody important lived here to watch.

He counted blocks. Counted his breathing. Six seconds in. Six seconds out. A sharp pain made him stop. Lean against a streetlight. Lift his shirt.

The bruise had spread. Darker than before. Purple-black now, radiating from the point of impact. He pulled his shirt down. Kept walking.

Because that's what you did.

You kept walking.

Even when the mirror was so heavy you could barely breathe. Even when every step hurt. Even when you knew tomorrow would demand more than you had to give.

By the time he reached his street—narrow, lined with identical homes—his side was on fire. But he was home. Almost.

The house was dark. Flint stood on the sidewalk looking at the dark windows, the peeling paint, the yard that needed mowing. He would have to do it over the weekend before they got another district notice. Appearance was everything in a blue district.

Two small steps before the door. No welcome mat. Flint stepped into darkness.

CHAPTER THREE: THE THING ABOUT BREAKING

As deftly as possible, Flint opened the front door to the darkness of his home that was full of landmines. The first would explode at the threshold regardless of whether the lights were on or off; Dad often liked to sit in his chair in the dark—facing the door—and drink like some kind of nocturnal asshole. No boom; empty chair.

Flint paused anyway in the doorway, key still in hand, listening. The house breathed around him.

A TV commercial for Blue Sticks slithered from somewhere left. Flint shut the door. Listened. End of the hall—Dad's bedroom. Blue-gray glow leaked from under the door. Dad liked the background noise, which meant he could still be awake.

Flint tiptoed down the hall, in a careful hopscotch dance to avoid the cracks in the wood.

First door on his right, his room. Second door, the bathroom and Flint cursed himself for not remembering to brush and floss his teeth at the Blue Shrimp. He didn't want to risk the bathroom's buzzing light.

One night without brushing wouldn't kill him. Probably.

He opened his door. Slipped inside. Closed it behind him with the same careful precision.

Flint changed in the dark into the exact same set of clothes that only differed on the pattern of tree; chose fall leaves, blue base.

He liked not having to think. As long as he could walk in them, run in them, box in them, study in them; he could, sure as shit, sleep in any tree. In bed, Flint tossed and turned.

Sweating despite the cool air. His side throbbed.

The kidney shot had developed its own heartbeat, pulsing out of tune with his. As if becoming its own organ. Its own creature. He pressed his hand to stop it.

Felt something under the skin. Wiggling.

Flint lifted the shirt. In the darkness, there was just the bruise.

Purple-black at the center, yellowing at the edges. "Fucking-a."

He had to sleep. Needed to recover. He lay back. Kept his eyes closed.

Sleep came in fragments. In pieces. In moments of six that felt like bobbing in the ocean.

~

In his dream he was boxing himself. Again.

Even if he knew it was a dream, it didn't matter. No rest for the wicked. He'd had this dream so many times Flint knew every move before it happened. As did his mirror, move in perfect opposition—every punch he threw, it threw back.

Every defense, perfectly countered. Every feint, perfectly read. Fighting himself was like holding the mirror up to the mirror. Infinite reflections collapsing to a single point—then a sparkle. His glass self shifted.

The movements became less predictable, less mechanical. It ducked low, came up inside Flint's guard, and—

Kidney shot.

The pain exploded through his dream-body. Flint gasped awake.

Lifted his sweat drenched shirt. No scab. Just the bruise. Normal bruise-colored. His pants were cold too. Soaked through more than sweat.

He'd pissed himself.

"Fuck."

The word came out as a whisper but felt like a scream. Not the first time. What scared him most was the certainty that it wouldn't be his last.

Stress, exhaustion, fear—his body would betray him in the night. No matter how much he tried to control it, no matter how many times he reminded himself before bed, no matter how carefully he managed his water intake. His body had its own agenda.

Flint pressed his palms to his eyes. Didn't cry. Wouldn't cry. Crying made it worse. Crying meant weakness and weakness meant—

No. Not going there.

He got up. Turned on the small desk lamp, not the overhead light. Dim enough to work by, not bright enough to show under the door. Checked himself in the small mirror above his desk.

Small bruise on his side. Nothing serious. Nothing to lose sleep over. But the bed—

If Dad found it again—

Time bomb ticking. Flint stripped the bed, bundling the wet sheets away from the mattress. Got a towel from his duffel bag. Bar of soap from the bathroom—risking the trip across the hall, listening for any change in the TV's flickering rhythm from Dad's room.

Water bottle from his backpack, he scrubbed the mattress. It never came out completely. The stain obvious, the smell lingering. A saving grace was the other stains already there—if scrubbed right, the new one could blend in.

Flint lit a cactus candle—twist the top, harmless flame sparked, flowers bloomed downward releasing vanilla, raspberry, dry clay. He stacked books into a makeshift rack, spread the wet sheets over them to scrub.

Afterward, he sprayed everything with cologne. The room held an atmosphere of artificial forest green trees and mountain air and lies upon lies.

Changed into a snow-white tree design with blue lights and checked his wrist monitor—1:17 AM. He laid back down in the stripped bed, on top of the books that made uncomfortable lumps against his back. Hugging himself. Eyes closed, he counted six seconds.

~

He gathered dirty laundry from the closet hamper, added his wet sheets to the bundle, counted six seconds while listening for footsteps, and opened his door.

Poked his head out.

At the end of the hall, Dad's bedroom door. TV shadows still flickering underneath.

Safe. Probably. Maybe.

He hurried through the hopscotch. At the junction where the hallway opened to the living room on his left, Flint slowed. Looked.

The chair was empty. Thank God—

"What the hell, boy?"

Flint froze. Furthest left, directly in line with him at the end of the wall, his father stood in the laundry room doorway, backlit by the fluorescent light he must have just turned on.

"I was just—"

"Just what?" Dad stumbled out.

Glossy eyes. Blacked out eyes.

Which meant he still had a chance.

Sober Dad meant his decisions were already made up, beer drunk meant mood swings that couldn't be argued with, but blackout drunk, his raw emotions could be persuaded; or it would be ten times worse.

"Why are you doing laundry this late?"

About to say, 'this early' Flint bit his tongue. Took it slow.

Not too slow. He said, "I spilled something earlier. Wanted to wash it before I go on my run before school."

"Spilled something." Dad stepped close enough that Flint could smell him—whiskey. "Don't lie to me, I will not tolerate lies in this house. Did you piss the fucking bed again?"

"I—"

He grabbed the sheets from his hands, took big whiff. "God dammit, what did I say. How old are you still pissing the bed? Too damn old." Dad dropped the sheets, undid his belt.

"Dad, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

It caught his shoulders. The sound came before the pain—the crack of metal on bone. Bloomed hot. The second whip of the belt, snapped the buckle in the gut. Flicked on the return, cracked the buckle across the top of his head. Nerve endings screaming.

Sometimes, it was like he was the ring. Rocking off the ropes, and Dante's group laughed, booed and took pictures.

Another hit. Lower. Across his shoulder blades. His ears rang. His vision went white at the edges even with his eyes closed. Ring, ring.

Curled up in a ball, protecting his kidney, the belt hit his legs. His arms. The backs of his hands. The backs of his thighs.

It felt like running, too. Boxing, and life. A giant marathon.

Dad stood over him. Breathing hard.

The belt dangling from his hand like a dead snake.

"Look at what you made me do. You're too damn old to be wetting the bed. No son back-talks their father. Hear me, boy? Come on stop milking my emotions. Get up. I barely touched you."

Dad collected the laundry. Left with it. The machine started.

He returned in what felt like six seconds. "I said get up."

Strained pulling at the bottom his eyes balls; nose wet. He just had to keep going.

"Don't you go crying on me, boy. I barely touched you. Stop it."

Dad straightened him. Guided him to the front door. Opened it.

Cold night air rushed in and stung.

"You said you wanted to go for a run before school. Well get going. Run. Now!"

The door closed behind him, and with the push, Flint wouldn't stop; couldn't stop now. Limping at first. His legs protesting every step. But pain had rhythm if you let it.

If you found the rhythm you could work with it, could move through it, could turn it into something other than suffering. Six seconds in. Six seconds out.

Through the neighborhood still asleep, still dark, still hours from dawn. His body on fire. Steaming. His side throbbing. Flint raised his hood — branches and leaves extending in blue light on the white tree design — and ran on.

The sky changed, changing still. Not dawn yet but that moment before. When the darkness starts to dilute. When birds begin their tentative morning calls. When the world admits something new is coming even if it's just another day of the same.

Flint stopped. Too far. All the way to Willobrook.

Closed wrought iron gates with sleepy blue vines curling between the bars. Where the true blue, the smart, and just fucking lucky rich and blessed attended. Everything not him.

The giant sunflower on the roof dormant but present. Rotated to follow the sun, its bio-engineered petals shaking slightly.

Flint adjusted his hood. Checked his comm. 90.00.

Only one thing to do now: run back. He had to get his school supplies and Dad probably passed out by now and would not change his laundry over.

Only thing left to do was to do it; Flint ran back.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE THING ABOUT BEING SEEN

Laundry changed, nothing in the fridge. He chugged a glass of water. Peeped down the hall; flickers under Dad's door. He got another glass of water and readied for school.

Backpack on, door closed; tired beyond reasoning; this was the easy part. Made the trek to the bus stop. Among the students gathering: Roy and Creg.

Roy, a short, angry ginger, next to the very tall Creg, made Roy seem twice as short and twice as angry. While Creg was stoic. Cautious of his own height, of how much more he saw from up there, and of being visible. He kept his hands in his pockets when he did everything.

Secretly, Flint thought Creg was a supervillain too polite to tell the world it had been conquered.

He plastered on a smile. Joy begets joy. They smiled back.

Smiling was dangerous. The shimmer of the mirror grew with their smiles, reflected their happiness back at them, made the mirror heavier.

Roy wore a full-body outfit that looked like a yellow sky with blue suns scattered across it. His school badge pinned to his hoodie, glowing blue, telling the same lie as everyone else's.

"I bet Willowbrook gets air access," Roy said, picking up a conversation mid-thought like they'd been talking all along. "You score better than ninety-five of those spoiled brats, but we get lame rubber buses. That takes literally forever. Literally."

"Literally," Creg agreed. His voice fell like leaves—mostly unheard, easy to miss. He wore only black aside from his badge and the stack of blue leis around his neck like chokers.

Flint said, "No way the government would waste air privilege on public school."

"Exactly!" Roy nodded furiously. "We're dumb public school, aside from you, Creg. You'd think that's why we'd need it. Like, stat. Straight away. Inject the education into our veins."

A blue lei hit Creg's face. The ones around his neck flickered green for a split second before settling back to blue. He didn't remove his hands from his pockets. Didn't acknowledge the hit. Just let the blue lei stick to his nose for a second before it fell, and he caught it and tied it around his wrist. He had a side gig reselling them.

People threw them anyway—this way he owned it. Some days he wore only half around his neck to encourage more throwing. Hands always in pockets.

Among the crowd of puffy bomber-jackets red and gold with a blue bull on the back, blue flag on the front—the three jocks had the blue bull on the front. Loyal to their school's namesake and mascot The Matadors; they could tease for only so long.

It was ironic.

Their school badges glowed blue. Charged Marque, second-tallest after Creg, was the instigator. He carried a stack of the blue leis in one hand, handing one to Hawk, who was dumb and violent, and Sanguine took one too but backed away—timid.

Hawk threw another lei. Roy caught it mid-air.

"Don't," Creg said. Soft as falling leaves. "The school grounds."

All their school badges glowed blue.

Too late for Roy. His fist sailed all limp wrist at Marque's glass jaw and shattered it. He dropped cold. Roy stared down Sanguine. "You want some? I'm sick of this shit."

They fucked around and found out. And so to violence beget violence; Hawk blindsided Roy with a punch to the ear.

Roy fell. Sanguine unfroze, power of the dog, he joined Hawk in kicking the fallen until Flint broke through. Stepped between them.

Hands up. He said, "Enough. It's over."

"You'll get it too," Hawk said, breathing hard. "You friends; and you all started it."

Marque rolled on the ground. "What happened?"

They helped him up, left the blue leis scattered on the pavement like evidence. The automated bus—blue sardine can on wheels—pulled up with perfect timing.

The security guard inside with that fucking mustache didn't budge, flinch, or care two-shits. As long as they stayed on scheduled, what they outside the bus was outside the bus. Cold wold; even blue.

Hawk looked back. "This isn't over."

"Real original." Roy gave him the bird.

Everyone shuffled onto the bus. That's that.

Roy looked at Flint and Creg, checking for judgment maybe, for approval. His nose was bleeding slightly. Flint moved in.

He waved him off, but Flint said, "Let me look at it."

Not broken, just bloodied. His mood moss shone green. That would get recorded if it didn't change soon. There was a grace period, and there was green.

"What?" Roy moved for the bus line, waved his arms. "I'm sick of that shit. It's not carrying over this year. I'm putting my foot down. Coming?" He was blue.

Creg shrugged at Flint. He ran over as Creg stopped to pick up the leis. When he caught up he said, "They were paid for. Why not again?"

He had a point. It just hurt like his side to see. The mirror was always so damn heavy during school, and they hadn't even arrived yet; the day had just begun. Flint shuffled on.

Inside, the bus was divided into rows from the dangling thread-like vines hung from the ceiling. Absorbing weight, everyone leaned on one.

Three rows from the back on the left side, they passed Brittany Montgomery. Her friends saw him first and shoved her into him.

Reflex. Flint caught her.

Spun on his heel and fell back into her pulled plant to absorb the momentum. They floated in the finesse suspended, her weight against his chest, his arms around her waist.

Brittany went red. Pushed off him quickly, stumbled back; he reacted promptly to her weightless effort still holding the plant; and he stepped away with added dramatic flair for her friends, who laughed. Flint stuttered. "Good morning, Brittany."

Roy pulled Flint along.

"Really dude? 'Good morning'? After a classy ass move like that; which as a matter of fact, when did you get so classy and where were those reflexes like five minutes ago. Lover boys, I swear. That's the best you got?"

Creg went into their row first, taking the window. Roy took middle. Flint got the end—the spot he preferred anyway. Leg room. Space to see down the aisle where Brittany stood with her friends, now engaged in animated conversation, occasionally glancing back at him with expressions that ranged from amused to curious to calculating.

"I'm a straightforward guy," Flint said.

"Alright, straightforward guy—why didn't you have my back?"

"I can't get caught fighting outside of the ring for anyone. That's it."

The mirror cracked. Creg sensed it, looked out the window. He said, "I bet Willowbrook's driver smiles."

Just like that, they could look another way. The fight was forgotten.

Roy laughed. "I bet the driver greets each kid one at a time by name."

"I bet they bring him food too," Flint added.

They laughed. Talked. The world rolled by.

Ahead, Brittany laughed at something her friend said. Her friends peeked back at him.

Roy hit his arm. "Earth to Flint. You're holding up the line."

The bus stopped. Students exited by rows. Brittany paused at the threshold. Smiled at him.

Roy pushed Flint forward. "Keep it moving, playa."

He got a good look though. Looked again, she was gone; that was okay. He counted to six.

The smile died when they got outside.

School security waited. Not regular security. They'd cordoned off the jocks.

All three pointed at them.

"He blindsided me."

"Boys," the security officer said—not a question, a summons. "Come with us."

Roy turned to them, nervous now, the bravado draining. "I bet at Willow—"

"Shut up, dude," Flint said. "It's not funny."

Creg shrugged.

"Follow me."

They walked through the gates that said 'Blood and Soil' in red and blue—the school's founding motto, something about hard work and community that sounded patriotic but felt fascist. More slogans decorated the buildings: 'All plants need soil.'

'To grow you need blood.'

'So toil! Grow, Grow, Grow!'

The campus felt like a clay pot, and the students were fertilizer for whatever the system needed them to become. They squeezed into the administrative office, waiting room filled with anxiety. If they decided against him, he wouldn't be able to run the marathon.

If the fight commission heard he was part of a street fight, they could take him off the card.

Roy smiled at him as they sat in shit-factory chairs that sucked. The mirror was heavy and cracked and it hurt but for whatever reason Flint smiled back though he wanted to cry.

~

The principal's office door opened for Sanguine. He gave Flint an accusing look. Under his jacket, over his heart, a T-shirt that said, 'Where did punk go?' His mood moss glowed blue. Trouble didn't bother some people. "Good luck." He moved on.

That left only him. Flint checked his comm: 90.00.

"Flint Carver."

Ruth Bloom, very tall, very bald, very composed in her professional blue blouse and skirt. A pin of the Matador mascot on her chest, the bull holding a blue flag, rippling through its surface like water.

"I'm Flint," he said. "Flint Carver."

"Yes, you are." She blinked, and then coyly her lips bunched from their wide suggestion into a pinched smile that reminded him of Ferris. He didn't like that—like her boxing was intellectual and she got good at masking the excitement of sandbagging. How disappointing to spot. Flint sighed as she said, "Come inside."

Institutional wooden furniture trying to seem welcoming and rustic. Came off as an academic splinter. Less plants than he expected, snake plants in corners. They responded to emotion, made him itch. They stilled on blue, releasing caramel matcha scent, and didn't like him riding the line at 90.00.

Ruth's desk held a dozen stacks of papers and an ashtray with a Blue-Stick holder, curls of blue smoke rising from one half-finished. "Sit."

She threw herself into her chair behind the desk, leaning back while kicking open the bottom drawer with her pump. Retrieved a power bar, chewed off the wrapper with those white, white teeth, pulled free the prize, and chomped it in half.

Set a portion on the desk's bare surface. Her eyes gleamed as she slouched in her chair. She chewed. "You've had a morning, huh? More exciting than mine."

Flint sat. Even sitting, even with her slouching, Ruth towered over him. She tossed the second half of the power bar into her mouth, spread her arms to the sides of the desk between stacks of papers that looked ready to avalanche.

"You're the last of them," she said as the desk shook, shaking the papers that were ready to spill everywhere. "I've heard this sad tale five times already. You want to add anything up front to spice it up?"

"I didn't do anything." His heart hammered.

The snake plants shook. His comm vibrated, flashed: 89.98.

"I'm not lying."

"Boring." Her hands gripped the desk's edge like she might lift the whole thing. "That it?"

The truth of the mirror was that it was double-sided. "Did you call my father?"

Something shifted in her expression. Understanding, maybe. Or recognition of a familiar fear. She leaned back some.

"Ah, there it is. I get no joy in understanding." She slunk back in her chair, arms catching and moving some of the stacks of papers as she swayed them like windshield wipers. "I didn't have a fun time in school or in the system. Definitely was not in a blue district. Though the grass shines, it really isn't that different. A different set of rules and speaking. Yes, I contacted your father."

His stomach dropped.

"However," Ruth continued, watching him with sharp eyes, she pulled her arms through the papers, behind the desk, hidden. "We were unable to get a hold of Jean Carver."

Relief flooded through him. Brief, intense. Made him dizzy.

The snake plants settled. He was blue.

"I get no joy in understanding." He repeated her words back at her, reading the book titles on her shelves—philosophy, psychology, texts about institutional systems and how they failed the people they claimed to serve.

She smiled. He smiled back. Sometimes the mirror reflected something real.

Ruth opened a drawer, pulled out a power bar and tossed it to him.

He caught it, grateful and suspicious in equal measure.

As he tore it open and took a bite, she asked, "Why didn't you stop him?"

He swallowed. Mouth dry. "Hmm?"

"Roy. From hitting Marque. Weren't they bullying Creg? He's your friend, isn't he?"

"Are students advised to stop fights? I heard there used to be attendants at the bus stops. Cut for budgeting."

"I've half the mind to ban blue leis altogether." She leaned forward over the desk, bird-like, predatory. "You could've hurt them. You're a boxer."

"I don't understand what you want from me. I could've hurt them, yes—"

"I didn't say for you to hurt them." She leaned further, close enough that he could see every sharp angle of her face. A stack of the papers fell over. "Could you have stopped it?"

"That's not fair to ask. By association, if I stopped Roy, they would've likely just punched me. I didn't do anything."

Another stack of papers fell. "You're a boxer though, right? You were in the school paper yesterday. Same gym as Ferris, same gym as the great Angel Dante. You can take a punch, right?"

His side hurt. He winced involuntarily.

"Why risk it? I don't want to have to think about other people like that. I have the marathon after school and then a fight on Saturday. I have enough."

Her face—what felt like inches from his—suddenly recoiled. She leaned back in her chair, straightened the fallen papers like they were playing cards. Built new houses. Her expression shifted to something almost like respect.

"Oh, you got on the card? You know, I want to start a boxing club for the school. The previous principal really dropped the ball not doing so for Dante. We still have Ferris for a time. And you. That's a lot on your plate. You must have good lungs."

More worried about his kidney. "If I knew things would've played out like they did, I would've walked to school. I wanted nothing to do with it."

He finished the power bar. Chewed. Swallowed. Ruth watched him with calculating eyes.

"I'm waiving the detention policy that would be suggested."

He choked slightly, eyes watering. Good news shouldn't hurt.

"You will do daily check-ins before school," Ruth continued. "Ten minutes every day with a counselor for a month. You have enough on your plate, yes, but you need pit stops. Meditate for all I care if you have nothing to say or do. Okay?" She clapped her hands. "That's it. Fair?"

"I'll take it."

"Good. Then we are done."

"What happened to Roy?"

She pinched a coy smile. "I thought you didn't care. You can't have it both ways."

Ruth wiped her hand on her blouse, leaving a faint blue ash smear. "Roy, Hawk, Marque, and Sanguine are all suspended. I have no tolerance for that shit."

She extended her hand across the desk. Flint stood, approached, shook it. Her grip was firm.

"What have you eaten today?" she asked, not letting go. "Aside from that power bar. What's for lunch? Marathon and a fight—that's a lot of gas. Hope you have some fuel in the tank."

"I had eggs, toast, avocado, protein shake, banana." The lie came smooth.

The truth, aside from that power bar, nothing. He continued, "For lunch, I have trail mix and a couple turkey sandwiches. An apple."

She squeezed his hand tighter as she opened a drawer, flipped his hand and pressed coupons into his palm. "Get some more eats. On the house."

Ruth picked up the Blue-Stick, took a drag. "Close the door on the way out. Good luck on the marathon. I'll see you at the fight. Have a good day."

"Thanks. You too."

Flint closed the door. Stood in the hallway. Counted to six.

~

When he opened his eyes, he was running on the school track—when had that happened? The transition felt wrong, like frames had been dropped from the film of his life.

He closed his eyes. Still running. Opened them to find himself changed for P.E., still running with other students, the sun higher now, time passing in jumps.

Six seconds. Opened them.

At his desk in—what class? Math? English? The teacher was talking but the words were just sounds. His feet felt like they were still running under the desk, muscle memory continuing even when his body was still. Six seconds. He opened them. Lunch line.

Staring at the coupons in his hand. Ruth's handwriting: "For the fighter." It was prepared, which meant she was already going to give them to him. She already knew everything.

He really was so small. Wanted to cry but was surrounded by students.

Space to move up. Holding the mirror, his ears rang. His side hurt.

Someone spoke to him. He looked, the sun shone bright. Flint blocked it with his hand.

Brittany.

"Flint? Are you okay?"

The mirror lightened. Just her presence, her concern, her seeing him—it made the weight manageable for a moment.

"Yeah. How are you?"

"Hey man, you're holding up the line!" Wendal's voice from behind, annoyed and hungry. "Either talk to the girl or move up."

"Eat a sock, Wendal," Brittany said without looking away from Flint.

She held a tray of food—it looked so fucking good. His mouth salivated. Her smile was genuine. "Sit with me today. After you get yours, okay?"

"Okay. Sure. Yeah, will do."

He watched her go, and Wendal cleared his throat. Flint stumbled forward.

"Okay," Wendal mimicked. "Sure, yeah, will do. You're a real smooth operator. I swear if they are all out of pesto pizza, I'll never forgive you."

Flint smiled. He got his food using Ruth's coupons. Actual substantial food, protein and vegetables and carbs, the fuel he needed for the marathon.

As he left, Wendal howled. They ran out of pesto pizza.

~

In the quad of lunch tables with umbrella-like flowers that sprouted when someone sat, and then fully bloomed blue when they were full, Flint couldn't find Brittany. As he searched, someone called to him, "Flint. Hey Flint."

Creg alone at a table. His hands in his pockets even while sitting. The leis around his neck and wrist blue. With Hawk suspended, he would be alone.

Flint looked around once more for Brittany and sighed. He went over to Creg.

"Did you get in trouble?" Creg asked when Flint sat down. "I was worried about your marathon."

"Not really. No." Flint ate. The food tasted like victory and charity and debt accumulating.

Creg brought food from home. When Flint finished—too fast, his stomach cramping immediately in protest—he had to go to the bathroom. Clutching his stomach, he made it three steps before—

"Hey Flint!" Brittany waved from another table, the one he'd been looking for.

He couldn't stop. His body rebelled, groaning. He would not vomit and or shit himself in front of Brittany Montgomery.

In the bathroom, everything spinning. He pushed by guys.

"Move. Sorry," he spat, "I have to go."

All the urinals taken. Flint danced from foot to foot, everything inside him trying to escape in multiple directions. A stall opened.

A kid emerged. "I'd give it a minute, bro. Did some damage in there."

Flint couldn't wait. He rushed in. Shit floated in the toilet—a nightmare that he'd have to share. "Fuck me, dude." He flushed it with his foot, couldn't wait for it to fully drain, pulled down his pants, closed his eyes, and decided he had to pee first.

The stream absorbed his full attention in a soothing flow that pinched, sharp. Sharp, wrong, like passing glass.

The water in the bowl turned red. He flushed again.

Sweating. Heart hammering. He sat, took a shit.

Pitching grenades.

Six seconds. Flint closed his eyes. Forced the panic and pain, smothered it down inside until it was fucking obliterated into the void.

He opened his eyes and vomited all over the door.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE THING ABOUT RUNNING

After school, among the herd of students, Flint slid with his mirror through to the starting line. Blue lines marked the course that went around the campus and the park adjacent as well as crowd barriers set up, screens mounted to show runner progress. Officials with clipboards. Spectators gathering along with the fire department to help raise funds.

Dead center of the starting line, Flint joined Chad stretching. 6'2" on Flint's right, all legs and casual grace like gravity affected him differently. Brown broccoli hair held back with blue bands. Blue wraps on his forearms to his elbows—compression tech that probably cost more than Flint's entire life. Thrice winner.

Going for four. He shot Flint a thumbs up with red-glazed eyes—high as balls. A pretty nice guy all things considered.

"Good luck, man," Chad slid on his running glasses, his voice slow and dreamy, words stretching like taffy. "Just remember to have fun out there."

Have fun. That's what Dante said too.

Sure. So much fun.

On Flint's left, Haze joined them with a smile and dimples. Hair in thicker braids with pom-pom strands at the end. She pressed her comm and the braids straightened into a single drop down her back—aerodynamic, reducing drag. Second place last year.

"Is that your dad?" she asked, looking toward the crowd. "Who are all your friends?"

Flint followed her gaze.

Roy animating to Creg, gesturing wildly. Brittany with a group of girls, all holding signs. Not for him, for Chad. And there—Mandy. As well as bar patrons.

Mandy held a hand-painted sign: 'GO FLINT - CHANNEL YOUR LEFT SOCK!'

The sight made his chest hurt worse than his side. And there was Dad.

He held a brown bag and sipped from it. The mirror was huge.

Behind him, a voice: "Hey. Mind if I start behind you? It's my first time."

A kid from math class. Squat but wide, eager smile. Christo. Something. Couldn't remember his last name.

"Yeah, I don't mind. I'm glad you decided to run; I think it's uh, therapeutic."

"I think so too. More of a fan of the chase though. I like to pick a person and follow them. You're pretty good right? I heard you placed last year."

"Barely. Chad over there, and Haze are the ones you ought to be watching. But I don't mind if you follow me. I'm going hard this year, just to warn you."

Previous years he'd tried Christo's strategy; he was never able to turn on the gas and surpass Chad or Haze on the straight shot to the finish line. Not this year. Right off the gun, he'd advance like he did against Ferris—take the lead with everything he had and then never let go.

"Cool. Love that energy." Christo fell into position directly behind him. "Good luck."

With boxing, and with life, luck was no excuse. Flint closed his eyes.

"Runners, are you ready?" Ruth's voice boomed over the speakers. The crowd roared.

He opened his eyes. Steady, ready, blue. Yet, something still clung to him. He looked at his shadow and Christo, behind him, smiled.

"Our very own Coach Hank will start us off. Give us a round of applause," Ruth said, yielding the microphone to Coach Hank.

The wrestling coach. Hank who trained the varsity wrestlers. Christo's coach. He raised a pistol. They all bent into position.

Which meant Christo was a jock.

Bang!

Flint ran. Three steps.

On the fourth, a foot hooked his ankle. He fell hard.

Covered his face, totally ate it. Ahead of him, the taunt floated, "For Marque, bitch!" Christo ran on, melded into the crowd swarming by his inferno of shame.

Nobody stopped. Nobody helped. They just flowed around the obstacle he'd become, the body on the track that was someone else's problem. The invisible man.

Flint scrambled to his feet. His side screamed. He ran. Chad and Haze gone; the pack wouldn't wait. He closed his eyes. Six seconds.

Trying to find the flow aside the radiating pain—he'd already lost. Why even push himself? Give up, conserve for the fight instead. Yet he ran on.

Flint caught up to the stragglers that ran for the free Blue Bar at the end of the race. Then caught up to the half serious. He tasted copper. Spit on the pavement. Kept running.

To catch first place, he'd need to run impossibly fast. Faster than his body could handle even when healthy. And he wasn't healthy. It was impossible.

He knew it was impossible. But he kept running.

Because stopping meant going home. Stopping meant facing Dad and Mandy and everyone.

On the side of the track, someone was puking. Flint slowed. His side radiated.

He should keep going, should try to make up time, should—he stopped as another white sludge of puke exited the kid.

"Are you okay?"

The kid looked up. Long blond hair. Pale face.

Wendal. Pesto-fucking-pizza Wendal, running a marathon and doing better than him. Ha. What a world. It looked like they both met their match though.

"You shouldn't have eaten pizza. Which did you end up getting?"

"Alfredo. I regret nothing." Wendal wiped his mouth. No shame, he said, "Help me up."

Arm around his shoulder. Flint steered toward the side of the track, but Wendal stopped him to remain. "What are you doing?"

"I'm finishing it." Wendal stumbled out and under from his grip. Took one step and fell again.

"You don't strike me as a runner, Wendal. Why are you doing this?"

"You get a Blue Bar if you finish the race." Wendal's voice dead serious. "Hey look, you don't have to help me. I'll crawl over the finish line, I don't care." He did. Crawled right on along. Wendal declared, "I'm getting that Blue Bar. It's king size."

Flint sighed. The mirror was heavy and commendable. The man knew what he wanted.

How could he not help him?

Arm around his shoulder, "Easy, easy."

"There we go. Isn't that better. Ha-ha! Onward, steed!"

"I'm not your steed."

"No. You're right; we are together. We are one!"

"You're creeping me out. We still have a long way to go. How about some silence."

"Sure. Yeah. Smart."

Wendal dry-heaving hot swamp air and drooling snot was not much better. "So what's your favorite type of pizza?"

"I'm glad you asked."

They weren't dead last, but it really didn't matter. Chad won. Haze second. The majority of the crowd, like Roy and Creg, Mandy, and his dad, already left.

A yard duty congratulated them. Handed them each a Blue Bar. King size.

Wendal cried clutching it as if made of gold. "Thank you," he said to Flint. "I wouldn't, couldn't—without you. Oh, thank you."

Flint nodded. His whole body hurt and he was about to start the walk to the gym. He needed to weigh in. He ran straight into Brittany.

Hands on her hips. She took him all in a second. "You're an idiot."

"Huh?" His whole body hurt. His mouth was dry. "I need water."

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Growled with her eyes. Spun her backpack around and handed him her rose water bottle.

The bottle was beautiful—engraved, personal, expensive. He looked at it like it might bite him.

"Give it back if—"

He drank it all. Couldn't help himself. Drained every drop. Then felt immediately embarrassed, handed back the empty bottle.

"Sorry."

"Don't ever apologize!" She punched his chest—not hard, but hard enough to hurt his heart. Tears in her eyes now. Actual tears. "I gave it to you." Another punch. "God, you're so stupid. Where were you at lunch?"

"I looked for you."

"I know. I saw you." She was crying now, fully crying. "You finish things through. I like that. Ask me out sometime, okay?"

His brain couldn't process this. Couldn't process her crying or why she was angry or what any of this meant. He held up his Blue Bar. "Do you want this?"

"If you don't want it, give it to Wendal." She glared past him at Wendal, who was definitely listening. "Stop eavesdropping."

Brittany stormed away—dramatic, theatrical on purpose for his benefit, to alleviate the seriousness of whatever that was—leaving Flint standing there holding the candy and confusion.

He handed it to Wendal. He was overjoyed.

"You know this day really turned around for me. I thought after the no-pesto omen I was done for. What a life. Now look at me. Hey Flint; you know that was your chance, right?"

"Yeah," Flint said. "I'm totally screwed." He closed his eyes.

~

When he opened his eyes, in a bathroom stall, Flint puked. All the water Brittany gave him—yum. And bile. He wiped his lips. Picked up his bags. Left the bathroom.

Evening setting in on the emptied campus. He walked through the dim hallways toward the back garden connector to a drop off.

On a bench, Creg sat under the lamp trees—a smaller tree himself, still learning to grow. Blue leaves fell around him like snow.

"Thought I'd find you coming this way," Creg said without looking up, hands in his pockets. "Means you're going to the gym, huh? For the fight?"

News traveled fast. Flint sat next to him. His side hurt. His back hurt. His everything hurt. "Yeah. A fighter dropped off the card. Dante asked if I wanted to be on it. So I have to go over. Make weight."

"Are you going to make weight? You don't really look too good."

"I don't think they really care. As long as I'm close. Plus I'll chug a gallon of water when I'm there."

"Is that healthy?" Creg pulled out his backpack. "You're not blue."

True. Flint checked his comm: 89.9. He looked at the closest street lamp, doubling as a scanner. He had grace; he just had to relax.

"Hey, I saw what happened to you," Creg continued, graciously not pointing out the obvious. "Hear me out. I know it's not my fault. But it's not yours either. I'm just sorry." He pulled out a bag of granola mix. "Want it?"

Brittany's voice echoed in Flint's head about seeing things through and apologizing. He took the bag. "Thanks." He ate a handful.

Incredible. Good crunch, good chew. Not too sweet.

"Do you want to know a secret?" Creg asked. "You have pretty sharp eyes."

"That's a secret?" Flint offered the bag back.

Creg held up a hand. "My mom makes it literally every day. I'm sick of it."

Flint ate another handful. So good.

"Do you know what this is?" From his pocket, Creg pulled out a small device. A button.

Flint swallowed. "No."

Creg pressed it. The blue leis around his neck flashed green. They weren't linked to his comm. He was sandbagging.

"They're not linked."

A ride pulled up to the intersection—sleek, automatic, expensive. Creg's mom in the driver seat.

"I bet if I ask, Mom will drop you off at the gym."

"You don't have to do that. It's out of your way."

"She'll be happy that I have friends. And I never really ask for anything. I'll ask. Wait here."

He ran over. The window down; they spoke.

Creg turned. Waved at him. "Come on."

The granola bag was almost empty. He shouldn't accept the ride. Should walk. Walking was meditation, was control. But his body was screaming and his side hurt and the accumulating debt would make the mirror heavier, but—

But he got in anyway.

The door slid closed. Creg's mom spun the seat to face them.

Narrow, wise, vulturey in the way that wisdom sometimes looked like hunger. Sand-colored skin sprinkled with blue star freckles. An oasis glowed blue over her heart.

"The infamous Flint," she said. "My son told me about you. How is my granola?"

His hand was in the bag, scooping the last of it. "It's fantastic. I'm literally addicted to it."

She smiled—blue sparkling crow's feet at her eyes. "Call me Amma. Is your father a fighter as well?"

The last handful went into his mouth. "Yes and no. He was in the military. Hasn't boxed since he got out. Even before Mom passed, not to say he didn't help me at first. It was our thing. When my mom died is when he stopped going with me. I don't know why I said that."

Why had he said that? The exhaustion maybe. The kindness. The safety of Creg's mom being a stranger who wouldn't judge, wouldn't use it against him, wouldn't—

"There is nothing wrong with being honest," Amma said. "Knowing that, protect yourself. The thing about honesty is it rots."

She spun the chair. "I'll give you boys your privacy."

A black screen fell from the ceiling and divided the ride. Flint said, "I like your mom. I mean, Amma. She's cool."

Creg laughed. "Thanks. She's blunt and cryptic. Never mean. I think you already know that though. Sharp eyes. Do you mind if Roy and I come to your fight? We didn't just want to appear and maybe throw you off your game."

Ruth would be there too. All to see him likely get destroyed.

Creg held his gaze. Hands in pockets. Blue flickered green for just a second. Testing him with a smile.

"It doesn't bother me. I spar with new people at the gym all the time and am always being watched. I don't care who—"

"Cool. Then I'll invite Brittany too."

The ride stopped outside the gym. "Looks like we're here," Creg said. "Good luck in there."

"Are you really going to invite Brittany?"

"Dude, my mom needs to go home and make dinner for a family of eight. We got to go."

"Tell Amma sorry and thank you. Thank you." Flint stepped out.

The window lowered. Creg smiled. "By the way, I already invited her! She's going." He shouted so loud the whole street could hear. "Good luck!"

'Yeah, I'll need it.' Flint watched the ride disappear around the corner.

Then he turned toward the gym. He climbed the steps. Each one hurt.

CHAPTER SIX: THE THING ABOUT CONTROL

Chugging from a liter jug, Flint paced in front of the bathroom mirror, gulping. Behind him, a man exited a stall, eyed him, arched his brows like it was none of his business and left because it was none of his fucking business. Flint set the jug down, mouth full; too much.

He gripped the edge of the counter, held his cheeks bulged, unable to swallow it without choking and unwilling to give it up. Hiccuped, and puked it into the sink.

"Fuck." Face flat on the counter, he ran the water. Left it running; he liked the sound. He filled the jug again.

Felt all forehead, knuckles, and toes. He just had to keep it down for a little bit.

The door opened. Ferris stopped, sniffed. Was offended. "Damn, dude. You're going to make it or you're not. This is just sad."

"Give me five minutes. Please. Fuck, not again." He ran to the stall.

Flint dropped his pants without time to shut the door and squirted. Doubling over in a halo of heat, from outside the stall Ferris said, "Hell of a time to get the shits, dude. Five minutes. That's the end of the line."

The door shut. Alone, Flint closed the stall's door with his foot. Flinched at another sharp pinch from his asshole that spread his arms to push against the walls around him, squeezing out a dribble.

Sweat down his brow, he rested his forehead on the left wall, slouching as low as he could hang. "Get up, and drink two more. Right now. Right-fucking-now."

He smashed his head against the wall. 'Right now!' Again, and again, and flinched at a pinch. Flint curled on the toilet seat and sobbed.

"Please, please just fucking stop. Stop. STOP."

As if the words could command his body—and when they didn't, he shoved his hand up his ass to try and stop it, to push it all back inside him.

Anything. Everything. And he cried because he still had to chug two more.

~

Six minutes later, Flint exited the bathroom steadily. Head up. Back straight. He walked to the staging area in the back. Side screaming.

The weigh-in area wasn't crowded—a long desk, a few officials seated, one reporter standing and sipping coffee, and Dante and his team on stage. More photographers than anything else, flashing bright lights. At everyone's attention was the scale, in the center like an altar.

Dante saw him, said a few words to everyone else that earned a chuckle, and exited off to approach him first. His wrapped hands grabbed his shoulders as if to test if he was sturdy, and Flint wished he didn't. Fearing he would discover just how weak he was.

"Hey man, thanks for making it again. We understand the short notice. The board is going to give you leniency. You had what, a day to prepare? It's not really fair to you since you're doing us the favor. Don't stress if you don't make weight, over or under. It's fine if you're in the ballpark. We can check in again with you tomorrow before show time, and if you want to bail—no hard feelings. How's that sound?"

Thumbs up. The gesture took more effort than it should.

"That's a champ. Alright, let's weigh in."

Dante walked him up and around. They posed, one fist up for a few quick pictures and a pat on the back, and then it was him and the scale.

In the back, Ferris leaned against the wall. Another flashing light made his eyes water.

Flint stepped on the scale.

The numbers climbed, settled, displayed themselves for everyone to see: 137 lbs.

Fifteen pounds under the weight class. Murmurs rippled through the small crowd.

Not good.

"Great," Dante said, cutting through the concern with practiced showmanship. "Thanks for doing us this favor once again. How are you feeling?"

"Good. I'm ready." The mirror held steady even as everything behind it crumbled. "I'll put on some more weight tonight. Obviously. I feel good, strong, and limber."

The lies tasted like copper. Dante faced the crowd. "He says he's ready. I have a good feeling about this one, guys. I've seen him spar with Ferris. Kid's got moves."

More photos. Lights flashed.

"Get some rest tonight," Dante said, already turning toward his entourage, toward the media obligations that made him glow brighter than anyone Flint had ever seen.

"Thanks. You too."

He smiled with such sincerity that Flint knew he meant it. Dante so often showered others with grace that it was rarely returned. More often than not, people took and took from him, and Flint felt bad for Dante as he walked away to be swallowed by attention, by importance, by the future.

Outside, the sun was lower. The wind colder. The choice clear: home was one direction—no food, no comfort. Fifty-fifty Dad was there.

Or, The Blue Shrimp and Mandy's kindness and food he couldn't afford to refuse, the guilt of owing more than he could ever repay. Fifty-fifty Dad was there too.

Flint closed his eyes. It felt like running.

When he opened them, his feet had already chosen. Toward The Blue Shrimp. Toward food. Toward one more debt added to the pile.

~

Welcomed warmth through the heavy doors. His booth on the right, empty. Jules working the floor. No Mandy—not among the usual crowd in the back.

Maybe it was her day off. The day she'd spent at his marathon, supporting him. "Of course she wouldn't come back to work," he muttered, sliding into the booth. He rubbed his hand over the wood's carving and didn't feel lucky when a loud shout stirred him.

"There's my boy!"

Dad.

He slid into the booth. Up close. Whiskey. Haggard breath. Wrapped his arms around him. Fat and muscle, held him in close. "My boy! Have you eaten? You look like shit. You looked like shit on the track and that's okay because we will get you fed. Jules, get your lazy ass over here. You live off tips or by the hour?"

Jules said, "Mr. Carver, you are cut off until you pay your tab."

"I'm good for it. Besides, it's not for me. Jules. For fuck's sake, let my boy eat. He has a big day tomorrow."

"Fine. This is it, though. What can I get you, Flint?"

Dad gave him a noogie, shoved his face away. "Get him a number six and number seven. Him a water and a beer for me. Don't give me that look; it's not for me. He needs to eat; he's fighting tomorrow. Needs to put on weight. I know what I'm doing."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Carver. I'll be back with your water."

"I thought you won yesterday? Why don't you just pay your tab?"

Slapped in the back of the head. Flint realized why that was stupid. Why bother.

Jules dropped off the water. Dad said, "Don't forget the beer. I lost it all on you today."

The words came out broken. Flint had never heard his father's voice break like that. Not even at Mom's funeral. Not even in the worst drunk nights. This was different. This was honest.

"I bet it all on you. And you threw the competition. What was it, to spite me? Make me look bad in front of everyone? I saw you see me."

Flint's stomach dropped. "I got tripped."

"Sure didn't look like it. Looked like you took a dive. You sure stayed on the ground longer than ten seconds. Call yourself a boxer. I don't even know why I bother. Call me a fool for thinking my son might actually stand a chance. I went double or nothing on you tomorrow. So eat up."

Jules dropped off the food and his beer. "Thank you very much." He sipped it.

"Fuck you."

"Yeah, well, fuck you too. Now eat."

"I'm suddenly not hungry."

"Not hungry. Look at you. Fine, you don't want it. I'll fucking eat. Tastes pretty good to me. Spoiled brat." He grabbed a handful of fries and threw them at him.

Dad grabbed the back of his head and yanked him toward the table, nose to the food. Flint elbowed his chest. Pushed him away, slid out, left.

Outside. He walked.

The door opened behind him. "Get some sleep, son. I'll be rooting for you!"

Flint closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was in his room, in front of the mirror.

He punched it. Cut his knuckles. The glass spider-webbed.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE THING ABOUT WINNING

Eyes closed. Six seconds.

Flint opened them underground. Fight Night. He wasn't nervous; he wasn't anything. He did what needed doing and that's it.

Walking through concrete tunnels, trainers, coaches, Dante's crew and Ferris's and officials had him weigh in again.

Fourteen pounds under this time. They said it was his call.

Bouncing on his feet, Flint said, "I'm good to go."

"Fight's on."

A trainer put gloves around his neck. Eyes closed. Six seconds.

Opened them walking the underground again. What people don't tell you about fights: there's a lot of waiting around. Standing. Sitting. Hoping not to have to shit—but if you have to shit, shit now so you won't have to later.

He knocked on Dante's door. It opened. Ferris was leaving. Their shoulders brushed.

Ferris paused with his arrogant pinch that might have been pride or might have been warning. "Don't get hurt."

Then he left, and Flint entered Dante's prep-room. He sat on a bench, wrapping his own hands—layers and layers of white gauze that looked pristine.

Always smiled as if so happy to see him; it just couldn't be true. "How you feeling? Nervous?" Dante gestured to the bench beside him. "Come on over. I'll wrap your hands."

Flint sat. Extended his hands. Watched Dante's wrapped fingers begin the ritual.

"It reminds me of when I wrapped Ferris," Dante said softly, working the gauze between Flint's fingers with practiced precision. "He doesn't let me anymore. Too grown up."

The wrapping was tighter than Flint usually did for himself. More secure. More permanent. Like armor or like binding—hard to tell which.

"Do you ever get nervous?" Flint asked.

"Sometimes, of disappointing you guys, and the gym. Not in the ring."

Dante finished one hand. Started the other. When both hands were wrapped, Dante held them up, examined his work. Smiled.

"Beautiful."

Then he pulled the gloves from around Flint's neck, slid them onto his wrapped hands. Green vine emblems on the gloves—flames stitched across the knuckles, writhing with bioluminescence that responded to touch.

"All set, champ. Did you decide on a name? I didn't get to pick mine; don't even get me started on Ferris's."

Flint smiled. "I couldn't think of anything. It's stupid. Marathon Man."

Dante laughed. Genuine, so much so that for once The Angel seemed human. "I like it. Flint 'Marathon Man' Carver. A bit long, but that seems like the point. Alright, champ, you ought to warm up."

"Yeah, thanks. For everything." He left him, closing the door quietly.

Eyes closed. Six seconds. Opened them in the tunnel's archway.

Music started. He forgot what he'd picked.

"You ready?"

Somebody was talking. Tapping his head. Flint said, "Yeah."

Forward. Advance.

Just advance off the bell. That's all he had to do. Keep his guard up and advance.

Eyes closed. Six seconds.

In the ring. Bright lights. It was both the same and totally different.

He couldn't make anyone out—the lights were too bright, the crowd too loud, everything blurring into a wall of noise and expectation.

Let them watch. He tongued the mouthguard into place.

The announcer was a white blare of sound, words meaningless except: "Touch gloves."

Flint blinked. There was Theo Turton.

The Grave Digger.

Nine and zero. All knockouts.

Two blue fortune frogs on his gloves, tongues extended showing the number seven—heaven or death, depending on your perspective. Taller than him by three inches. Longer reach. More experience. More everything.

They touched gloves. Theo nodded—respect between fighters, the acknowledgment that they were about to try to hurt each other and it wasn't personal.

Flint nodded back. The bell rang.

~

The bell rang. Theo came forward.

Flint's side throbbed. His vision tunneled.

The mirror was so damn heavy—Jab. His head snapped back.

Blood. It didn't hurt more than normal, just warm.

Jab.

White blare. The same pain like running, like a marathon, like drowning, like—"Stop using your face!" Ferris's voice.

Jab.

Flint pivoted. One punch. Everything he had. Clean.

Theo's head whipped sideways. Eyes rolling. Body loose. Falling. Down.

The crowd erupted as the referee counted. The referee's voice was distant. He won.

It was over; his legs gave. The canvas was cool against his face.

Funny, it didn't feel like what he expected as he cried. Tears and blood mixing.

Someone lifted him. Voices. Hands. His arm raised in victory while he sobbed. The crowd cheered. The lights too bright. Everything too much.

~

Guided through the tunnels. "You're a mad one," Ferris said.

Through congratulations. And checkups, voices he didn't recognize saying things he couldn't process. Someone flashed a light in his eyes, told him to follow it.

When it turned off; so did everything else.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE THING ABOUT SURVIVING IS

A knock on the door. This didn't feel like winning.

Flint lurched awake in a bright room that made him wonder how anyone could sleep in here. On a narrow bed that didn't offer much, a single white sheet. The door opposite him opened. One wrapped hand through, Dante waved.

"Can I come in?"

"Yeah." Flint leaned up.

The door widened enough for him to poke his head through. "There he is. You're really something amazing, you know that?"

"Did Ferris fight yet?"

Dante pointed to the corner, to a screen embedded with blue vines; his brother danced in the ring waiting for his opponent.

"He doesn't like me to be ringside anymore." His voice was warm, proud. "I've got to get going—need to start my warm-up." He opened the door further. "This lady wanted to check on you first."

Brittany stepped into view.

"Brittany. Hi."

Dante waved a wrapped hand. "See you soon, superstar."

He closed the door. Brittany moved to his side.

"Are you okay?"

He didn't know how to answer. His body felt surprisingly well; too good. Like the eye of the storm, and like with everything else, he would see it through.

In her hand, a fortune frog. Brittany offered it to him.

"These were on the seats. I want you to have it."

Her eyes were wet. Actually crying. That's twice now; he didn't know why. It made him want to cry, but he couldn't do that.

"Hey. Do you mind if maybe we just go? I don't think we need to wait for the doctor to come back. I didn't really take that much damage."

"You don't want to watch Dante?"

Flint looked at the screen. Ferris's match started. He advanced on his opponent, put a beating on him, circling him; Flint knew that feeling all too well.

"Not really," Flint said. "I'd rather just go."

She helped him up. With the frog clutched in his hand, they limped to the door. When the moment was right—when no officials were watching, when everyone's attention was on the screens and Ferris's

sadistic deconstruction, the refs pulled him off the opponent trapped in the corner—they slipped outside.

Fresh air hit them like cold water, but he was hotter and steamed. Brittany called a ride on her comm. Traffic was one-sided, and inside the ride it was smooth sailing out as everyone else stayed to watch the headline.

Silence waxed the world rolling by. Brittany said quietly, "You never got your fortune."

Flint held the frog up in his palm. Forgot he had it. He closed his eyes. Squeezed the frog. Held for six seconds. Opened them. The mechanical tongue extended with that slight whir, the biofilm on the tongue displayed his fortune.

"Well?" Brittany asked. "What did you get?"

"Six."

The ride stopped. His house dark. With Dad winning double or nothing on him, he probably went triple or nothing on Dante. He didn't care. Looked at Brittany and didn't know what to say.

The ride was waiting. She was waiting. He just wanted to sleep.

Brittany smiled. "You're a champion." Leaned over, kissed him on the cheek, and then again closer to his lips—and she must have read his mind again because she pulled away. "Let's get you to bed, alright?"

"Sorry." She helped him out of the ride, up to his door and empty house, to his room. Got him into bed. The sheets cool against his burning skin.

Funny, it wasn't what he thought having a girl over for the first time would be like. So much of this life was not what he expected.

"Sleep well, Flint."

Brittany left. Door closed. Footsteps faded. Darkness settled.

~

A loud crash. Flint lurched in his bed. Tried to move. Couldn't—wincing, his side was a meteor of pain. With shaking hands, he lifted his shirt.

Another crash as his door flew open. Men filed in.

Police. "You're alive."

Alive?

His whole side was purple. Not bruise-purple. Rot-purple. Radiating outward as if alive.

"Oh fuck, he is rotting." The officer stepped back. "Report it. Now. Hey—" He looked at Flint. "Don't move."

"What happened?" Heat flushed him, and his arms very cold.

The pain echoed to a numb hum. Voice caught in his throat.

"Don't worry, we'll help you." The officer's face was grim.

Flint had seen. The gray horse exploding. The jockey's arm.

A man in a suit entered, carried a briefcase. He set it on the bed, opened it. Removed a salt shaker. Sprinkled it on his wound without warning.

The pain echoed back to the surface like a baseball bat. It doubled him over; hands straightened him, held him down as the detective salted him again. Withering, his jaw locked.

"That's good," the detective said calmly. "Means you're still human. I hope you don't mind needles." He removed a thick pointy bastard.

Filled with blue neon liquid. He stabbed his side with it. Pressed the lever.

Fire peeled his senses. White spores clouded his vision.

Hazmat suits flooded the room. Voices. Movement.

A mask pressed to his face. Gas. Everything hazy.

His body being lifted, carried, transported.

He couldn't move. Couldn't think, and then couldn't see.

~

Flint woke in a white room, clean and sterile. On his left, the entire wall was a window of a bright blue day outside. A heart monitor in the corner was the tell—the window was fake.

Artificial. He was in a hospital.

On the wall opposite, blue vines outlined a TV screen. Under it, a table covered with fortune frogs and get-well flowers in pastel colors.

On his right, a side table, chair that pushed up to a desk with a curtain divider to the rest of the room. On the side table, a drop-frame illuminated a picture of Brittany.

Smiling. Beautiful.

"Still alive."

Footsteps. A white coat entered. "We are awake with bright eyes, I see. Excellent. My name is Doctor Hardcastle. How you feeling, Flint?"

A still-young man with silver hair held an odd, lopsided smile with dusty green eyes. He pulled out the chair, sat next to him. Eyed the picture. The doctor said, "She was here every day. Lucky, lucky."

"How long was every day?"

"You were transferred from a surgical ICU and were out for seven days."

Flint opened his mouth. Closed it. Nodded.

The doctor's smile faded. "How much do you remember from that night?"

That night. Had a funny sound to it.

"Ferris looked at me funny at the doorway to Dante's prep-room. Dante wrapped my hands." He looked down at them. Calloused. Shaking slightly. "She kissed me after. I won. Didn't I?"

"Yes. Yes, you did."

"We left the stadium. And I passed out. I remember my dad bet everything on me. Where is he?"

"I'm really sorry. It's not your fault. Look at it this way: your decision to leave that night saved Brittany's life." The doctor's voice was gentle; but he didn't know why.

What did he mean, save her life? Where was Dad? What wasn't his fault? How did the police know about him in the first place? Did the arena's staff call them? Questions upon questions racked him into a dumb pile of leaves with no answers.

The doctor said, "Listen, Flint—men are here. Detectives. Time-sensitive. They have questions for you."

Two men entered. One in a suit held a briefcase. A wrinkled face, buzzed head with young blue eyes. The other was a silhouette of a man in complete blue. A flare connecting to his emote score. Big league detectives. This was serious.

The doctor rose, shook the first's hand, faced the blue flare, nodded, and left him alone with these men.

"My name is Taylor. The blue is Randy. Don't worry about him, he doesn't say much. Mind if I sit?"

Flint nodded; he sat. Taylor said, "Cool. You like candy? You're a kid, of course you do. Don't tell the doctor."

He reached inside his coat for a Blue Bar. Peeled the wrapper back, and handed it to him like a banana.

Flint took it but didn't feel hungry.

Taylor said, "I need to show you some horrifying footage. There are still dozens of missing-person reports. As well as a key witness to the incident, we would like you to confirm the participants."

"I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

Taylor eyed his partner in the blue flare. Then looked at him. "You were there at the arena. It exploded."

Ringing filled Flint's ears. Like a fight started. Another marathon; and though he couldn't yet move, he knew there was a long road ahead of him.

"How?"

"You will understand from the footage; and I cannot stress enough that I don't want to show you this. It's for the loved ones of the deceased. You can take as many breaks as you need to. Are you ready? I need a verbal confirmation."

"I, uh, I'm ready."

The screen on the wall shined blue. It focused. The ring; Dante waved to the crowd. Grace and power and intelligence all working together in a body designed by something that understood what humans wanted to see: an angel.

The detective asked, "Can you please confirm that the person on the screen is Dante Ensollas?"

"Yes. That's Dante."

"Dante Ensollas."

"Yes."

His opponent entered. They touched gloves. Everything normal, sanctioned, and approved.

The bell rang.

Dante moved like water. Dealt devastation in a dance that made it seem like the whole audience was on his side; that it was everyone bunching his opponent into the ring. Then the purple started.

So subtle at first. Just a discoloration on Dante's left glove where the white wraps met skin. Easy to miss in the lights, and how he always kept moving. Easy to dismiss as shadow or sweat.

But it spread.

Up his wrist. Up his forearm. The wrapped hands... His opponent threw a jab. Connected. Their glove touched Dante's purple-stained shoulder.

The rot transferred on contact.

The opponent's glove started dissolving. White leather turning purple, melting like wax under heat. They backed away, staring at their hand in confusion, then horror. The glove was gone. Their hand was purple. Their wrist. Their forearm.

They screamed.

The referee stepped in. Reached for Dante's shoulder to stop the fight.

His hand came away rotting.

The ref stumbled back. Fell through the ropes into the crowd. Purple spreading over him as people tried to help only succeeded in spreading it.

Security rushed the ring. Touching Dante spread it faster. Made it worse.

Riot gear dissolved. Their skin corrupted underneath. They backed away, fell, crawled, spread it further into the panicking crowd.

In the ring, the wounded opponent's body clumped into a syrup mound that pulsed upward into something smooth and pulsing. An egg. Small in comparison to Dante's transformation.

His body stretched. His beautiful face—the face that had smiled at cameras, that had blessed Flint's hands, that had looked like divinity—elongated into something twisted. The angel falling in real-time.

Wings erupted from his back. Not feathered. Not holy. Just extensions of purple rot that spread like oil in water. His halo—the glow that had always seemed to surround him under the lights—inverted. Became horns. He turned into a devil.

Dante screamed. His left side was pure purple rage; the right white and panicked. His body fought itself, jabbing the air.

Each punch launched a glop of purple rot—brimstone made flesh—that arced through the air. The first glop hit a woman in the third row.

Purple spreading across her chest. Her body rotting from the impact point outward. She detonated into a flash of purple light and her body collapsed into syrup that splashed on everyone near her. Each person touched by it started their own process.

Smaller explosions. Purple gas spraying outward.

The gas touching others, cascading madness. People ran to evacuate, pushed, stomped, and threw others from their path to exits bottlenecked. The rot spreading faster in the clumps.

Dante kept throwing glops. Kept jabbing at the audience like this was still a fight he could win.

Behind him, the egg grew larger. Pulsed brighter.

Ferris entered the ring.

The detective paused the footage. "Can you please confirm—"

"Yes," Flint said. His voice came out flat. Dead. "That's Ferris Ensollas."

The footage resumed.

Ferris ran at his brother. No hesitation. No fear. Just purpose.

Dante held his hands out—either in warning or to consume him. Ferris kidney-shot him. The devil screamed. The frequencies echoing.

The devil Dante became jabbed at his brother. But Ferris had trained with him his whole life. Knew his patterns. Even transformed, Dante fought like Dante.

Ferris slipped the first glop. Ducked the second. Stepped inside the third.

Got close. Threw another kidney shot—his fist stuck.

Ferris's arm was inside his brother's torso. He yanked. Twisted.

The rot held. So he stopped trying to escape. With his left he threw haymakers into him.

The devil wrapped around him—consuming. Pulling Ferris into the purple mass. Swallowing him. Brother embracing brother.

For three seconds, you could see Ferris inside the purple. Still punching. Still fighting. His face visible through the translucent rot like he was drowning.

The last punch struck Dante's heart. Set him off. They convulsed.

Everything went white.

The feed died. Static. Then nothing.

"The entire stadium went under," the detective said. "As well as the parking lot and a lot of the surrounding area was within blast range. A lot of people who didn't attend got hurt. No one could have predicted this." Taylor paused. "I don't want to, but I have to show you more footage. Different angles. We believe you may have known some of the attendees."

White noise filled Flint's head.

The screen showed different angles now. Cell phone footage. Security cameras. Pieced together. Showed people he knew.

Creg. Hands in his pockets.

Roy. Trying to help someone, taking a glop meant for someone else.

Ruth. The principal who'd given him coupons. Trying to help people and was trampled.

Mandy ran. Made it outside to the parking lot when the light caught up to her.

His classmates. His friends. Coaches. Trainers. Fighters.

And Dad. With his gambling friends.

He rose, and ran against the flow, toward the ring. Into the underground. Scrambling by people, searching room to room, and then the light found him too. Dead.

All people he knew. All dead.

Taylor shook his hand. They were speaking. He signed some papers. Then they thanked him again and left. It was night.

The fake windows showing fake darkness. Brittany's picture smiled at him from the side table. Proof that someone had survived.

That he hadn't lost everyone. Just almost everyone.

~

Brittany visited him every day. He met her mom, Miriam Montgomery. And with Taylor's help and no living relative, they agreed to house him as he fought for emancipation.

Then he was released, wheeled out of the hospital. Brittany waited for him. The nurse said, "We've called for a specialized ride to accommodate. Hang in there, Flint. You're going to win in this life; we all know it."

"Thanks." He blushed.

The nurse returned to the sliding door where a group of them and Doctor Hardcastle waved. Brittany wheeled him to the curb.

"Hang in there, Flint." She mimicked, standing beside him.

"Jealous?"

"No. I'm basically abducting you." She looked at him. "We're going to get through this together. Okay?"

"Yes. We will."

~

Then school started. Everyone hated him.

Sports removed by the new principal. The jocks wouldn't let him forget. Declared the stricter blue check-ins his fault. Called him rot.

Brittany stood up for him. They ostracized her too.

It was them against the world.

And it worked for a long time. He got second place in the marathon the next year.

He won his emancipation on the promise of joining the force academy and staying with Brittany's family until he found his own spot.

Her mom became his mom, and Miriam was so kind. She always kept his fridge stocked. Always checked in on him. She tried to teach him to cook. The only thing he could make was lasagna.

Brittany became Valedictorian—behind her back they said she didn't earn it.

He started training for the academy. She went to university full-time and worked full-time. They kept their heads down. Got stronger.

She excelled. Graduated with honors. Climbed the corporate ladder as he became an officer, started his own climb for detective.

In between their invasive and late hours, he asked her once if there was someone else. She'd said no. He promised himself never to doubt her again.

Flint never did. They got married. Miriam passed away before their son was born.

Max came into the world quiet. An observant boy. Rarely cried. Once again, it was not what he expected.

Being a family man helped his career. Made him less the rot victim and more the survivor's success story. He made detective. Got assigned to Hollis.

The same Hollis who was partnered as a teenager with the legend Kaine. The legend who got massacred. Hollis looked down on everyone.

From the first look, Flint could tell: Hollis had seen some shit. Their first car ride, Hollis asked: "What's it like for you?"

Hollis had a sick look whenever he was in a ride. He liked to have the windows down.

"I think everyone has a unique relationship with rot. It's why we join up. What's it like for you?"

Flint blinked. "When I was a kid, I used to think it was like holding up a big fucking mirror."

He didn't know why he said it. Hollis laughed.

It reminded him of Amma, which he strangely didn't like on this man. Didn't like the nostalgia it sparked in him—like how they used to keep in touch, him and Amma, and then life drifted them apart and he heard of her death via text message.

"Maybe not in the same way," Hollis said, "but I think I know the feeling."

They shared a second, mirror to mirror. Then Flint looked away.

Then the incident at Willowbrook. Max stabbed a student.

His Max. It didn't make sense.

Flint dropped him off again, and heard the call; saw Max defending a classmate from a student rotting. A hero. A family of heroes.

Then Hollis was attacked by rotted homeless. Chief put out a district-wide sweep.

Flint worked security at the Blue Wilt concert. Had sex with Brittany—best sex they had since before Max. The spider bite on his hand.

Looking at himself in the mirror while shaving. Driving to Parent Night at the academy. Eating a complimentary cookie.

He remembered it was funny Brittany didn't say anything about ruining his appetite. They had dinner reservations at Thyme, Lila got for him.

But when he looked at Brittany again in the memory—

Her eyes were purple.

Like Dante's had been.

She smiled. Said, "Wake up."

"What?"

She was made of glass. Ducked in close. Pivoted.

Kidney shot. It dropped Flint.

Chapter Nine: The Thing About Life

Flint straightened in a hospital, but wasn't in a hospital. He was in what looked like a curtained-off portion of a conference room in the precinct.

He had an IV, and on his right—before the curtain—a crash cart and monitoring system beeped recording his vitals.

What did it mean?

His eyes felt stretched. Mind too; how long was he out?

He sniffed. The sheets were wet. Not again.

Shame flooded him. Hot and immediate.

Adult man. Detective. Father. Husband. And he'd wet the bed like a child.

“So what did I miss?”

Hollis hugged him. “It’s not your fault.”

Then whose fault was it?

Flint closed his eyes. He counted to six.

After he cleaned himself, Hollis told him what happened. A gut punch to swallow. As if life hadn't tasted him enough.

The station put Brittany and Max separately. They slept. Looked peaceful.

Except he experienced that rotted sleep too. It wasn't so peaceful.

A nurse informed him that she should wake up any day now. More and more parents and students from Parent Night were waking up every day. No one had died yet.

Then she did. He was by her side.

Brittany stammered, “I was gone. Where’s Max? What happened? I don’t remember...”

“Hey, hey. It’s okay. Don’t stress yourself about it right now. Max is fine. Asleep. Just like you were. Just like I was. It’s okay. Orient yourself.”

“But Max—” She tried to lean forward, to fight, to stand and face the world.

“The doctor will be here shortly. They’ll explain everything. I promise.” He kissed her forehead.

Brittany settled back, drained. Bags under eyes. “Okay.”

He smiled. Relieved. He gestured to the side table. “A lot people came by. A lot of people love you. Look.”

“Here.” Flint grabbed a fortune frog off the table full of expensive flowers from her work, and get well soon cards, and he handed it to Brittany to take her mind off everything.

She held it with both hands. It stuck out the tongue.

And suddenly Brittany broke into tears. The third time she'd cried in front of him without him knowing why—and she handed the frog back.

He looked it and didn't know why it bothered her...

ROT: Fight Night

Part-2: IT IS YOUR FAULT

CHAPTER ONE: THE THING ABOUT INVESTMENTS IS

Arguably the most unappreciated student on the bleachers—biased, but still—Brittany Montgomery caught herself holding her backpack's strap. She didn't like how the school bomber-jacket—red and gold with a blue bull on the back, flag on the front—was so puffy, and the strap bit too tight.

Even if it didn't always feel so unbecoming, gripping the strap with teeth on her lip—her mood moss near perfect blue at 99.8—it was still a sign of weakness. Of insecurity. She let go. Knees cold; everyone in the bleachers wore their jackets and the extra-long gold and red gym-shorts. Long socks. The whole outfit completed the Matador and was drafty. Her classmates cheered at the runners taking the starting line.

She remembered to smile. Removed the resting bitch face. Casually.

Lest Madison and Sophia actually think they were funny. Sandwiching her with gossip—cackling catty sound waves she accepted as abstract noise until something struck a chord. Fewer chords struck over the years. Only one more year to go after this. She almost ate an elbow from Madison waving a sign bigger than her forehead, which was impressive for the coloring.

It read, 'Chad #1' in sparkling gold puff paint. Madison had too much free time.

A wrong wind would take the sign away. She smelled too sweet, like cheap canned peaches, for how much money she had.

Around her neck, the vine choker was trashy with a pink flower like an Adam's apple. And Sophia giggling; her vine choker without the flower. Sophia was a sample pack—would smell, wear, say, and do whatever the consensus dictated at budget affordable prices.

"There he is," Madison nudged her.

Flint Carver joined the herd at the front.

Sophia tacked on, "Are you going to date him if he wins?"

Madison reached over Brittany to hit Sophia on the head with her sign. "As if. No one is beating Chad." She lifted her sign higher. "GO CHAD!"

"Maybe I will."

Both looked at her.

"Ew." Madison, about to hit her with the sign, stopped at Brittany's raised finger like a knife.

Madison eyed Sophia. "Why? He's a total loser."

The sign readjusted as Sophia said, "Totally. You could date anyone you want."

Brittany shrugged. They're not wrong.

Or at least hookup.

Boring. No one was perfect, and to ask for that at this age was impossible; so it was all about seeds of potential divided by good time while doing what needed to be done. And there was no hurry; they didn't understand that. This stage of life was all preparation. Investment. There was no reason to overcommit to anyone. That's how people lost parts of themselves for little gain and Brittany didn't gamble. She used data: and the forecast looked grim for Flint Carver.

He looked tired and poor. His eyes scanned the crowd, met hers.

She smiled, and his soul, even from the distance, like fire to fire enlarged. He couldn't hold it, quickly moved on, embarrassed at his obvious feelings for her.

Madison nudged her. "You're such a tease. I swear it's more cruel what you're doing. Stringing him along."

Sophia tacked on, "Lacking confidence should be punishable by death. He can't even hold eye contact with you. God, could you imagine hooking up with him? Only then would he get first place." They laughed.

Sick burn catty bitch. That was the biggest difference between them; though she could think terrible things that were mainly reflections of their actions, they said the worst shit. The unfiltered sludge could sometimes propagate truffle. Still there was a difference between clever and witty beyond speed.

A smile was a free investment. Mushrooms or fruit she didn't have to harvest if she didn't want it. Should they bloom, it was better to have the choice.

Brittany followed Flint's eyes over to the bottom of the bleachers where a group of rugged adults clustered like cancer. A woman held a sign.

It read, 'GO FLINT - CHANNEL LEFT SOCK!'

Horse bettors. Stuck gamblers. There was no other kind.

Flint would have to escape them if he ever wanted to survive. Easier said than done.

She did not envy or pity him. Over the speaker, Principal Ruth spoke, and then the wrestling coach Hank. The runners took their mark. Pistol raised.

BANG!

They were off. Except—Brittany stood as Flint lunged, fell. No wait, she gripped the straps of her backpack; hard to tell but it looked like he tripped.

Madison and Sophia burst with laughter. She let go of the backpack straps.

"What a loser."

"Winning just isn't in his blood. Look at Chad, leading the pack. Hey, where are you going, Brittany? The cheerleaders are going to do a show before everyone goes to the curve."

As she moved down the bleachers, Flint rose and chased after the pack limping. His most stunning attribute was his perseverance.

No matter what life threw at him, Flint Carver never gave up. Gritted through; it was hot.

The question was, how long could he keep going undaunted? Building steel reserves was a worthy investment. A brutal exercise many forfeited, for the human soul could only endure so many deaths. Brittany passed Creg and Roy.

They, who wished to be included, had to be different and wear whatever the fuck they were wearing. Stupidly, Roy waved his arms.

"Did you see that bullshit? Christo tripped him. I ought to run him down and kick his ass."

"You're already suspended and not even supposed to be here. You'll get expelled if you do."

Creg watched her with hands in his pockets, and Roy followed his gaze as she went by.

A soft voice, Creg said, "Hey, uh, Brittany."

Utterly no spine for how tall he was; shame. While the other, Roy, had no focus.

One would wilt and the other would get stomped out. Creg said, "Do you have a minute?"

The cheerleaders took the stage, waving their pom-poms. In the bleachers, Sophia and Madison talked, probably about whether they should stay or go with her.

They had no direction. No one did at Public.

Flint's family shuffled off towards the visitors parking lot. They already gave up on him.

You had to know when to cut your losses. "What's up?"

Roy stayed behind watching, blinking as he paced a line. The suns on his hoodie fluctuated between blue and green. He didn't even know what he'd do next—and if you couldn't steer your own corpse, you got no time from the living. She eyed Creg to get on with it; he looked at the side as he spoke.

"Do you have plans tomorrow night?"

She lifted her eyebrows.

He stammered on, "You know Ferris Ensollas has a fight tomorrow night, on the same card as his brother Dante. There was a dropout. Flint is stepping in. He would probably be mad if he knew I was asking you, but yeah, I was sort of wondering if you wanted to go and watch it? Not with me. I mean, Roy and I are going. I just think it would mean a lot to him if you were there. That's it. Sorry to take up your time."

No spine at all. Brittany smiled, "I'll think about it. Thank you for inviting me."

She walked away, to the curve. Her hands touched her backpack straps; her arms fell to her side. Hands flat against her shorts. Interesting. That was a big opportunity for Flint.

Although, he didn't look so good. How would he fight tomorrow?

Perhaps his perseverance was really headstrong stupidity.

It took advanced deftness to be able to say no to opportunities no matter the potential gain. You had to know when to cut your losses.

"Brittany, wait up!" Madison and Sophia caught up, flanking her as they cut through the campus. "Saw you talking to Creg."

"Don't say he professed his love to you. Gross."

They giggled. She said, "He told me Flint is boxing on a fight card tomorrow."

"No way," Madison said. "He is going up against Theo?"

Brittany grabbed her backpack straps, bit her bottom lip, and did not look at Madison, who of course knew about the event and who Flint would be fighting. Shit and truffles.

Sophia said, "Who's Theo?"

"Uh, The Grave Digger. Willowbrook's star boxer. Basically their Dante but younger. Not better looking, I will report; Dante is an Angel. Still. Theo's nine and zero. All knockouts. Big dick." They laughed. "Seriously, if Flint is up against Theo—I am not saying he is or not, but if he is—he's totally screwed. Hey, we should all go."

Sophia added on, "Yes. Let's go. Brittany?"

At the curve, where on the left was a straight shot that bent around into another straight shot on the right. None of the runners passed yet. On the sideline screens, they showed Chad in first, Haze second, and snapshots of the pack. No Flint. No chance.

"Brittany?"

Brittany processed the data, letting go of the backpack straps. She said, "Sure. Let's go." It would be interesting.

They giggled and talked and Brittany listened without listening, watched without watching as a figure appeared up the curve. Chad.

The crowd cheered. Madison waved her sign. "Go Chad!"

He gave the crowd a thumbs up as he passed and went down the curve. Sophia thought it was for her, and Madison wished it was for her. All of the girls did; except for Brittany.

Next was Haze. Another cheer.

A good chunk of time passed before third place, and then the pack. No Flint. No chance.

"Let's go to the finish line, quick before Chad wins. He always gets faster near the end."

"Yeah he does." They laughed.

"Brittany?"

"Go on ahead. I'll catch up."

They looked at each other, shrugged, and left. All of the crowd did.

Alone, Brittany approached a terminal station of screens. She looked both ways before typing on the control panels: Flint Carver. Registered, she found him on the course.

He lagged way behind. Someone's arm around his shoulder.

Wendal.

Why was he running the marathon? Gangly and skinny fat, not in shape and not even friends. He would only weigh Flint down.

Brittany rewound the recording to the start of the race. He did get tripped. No matter the best laid plans, some people had bad luck.

Luck was no excuse though. She saw the end of the altercation at their bus stop; heard what happened. You reap what you sow.

Brittany fast-forwarded the recording. Wendal puking on the sideline. Flint stopped. Helped him. Was still helping him. He must have known it would seal his fate for the race.

They say good guys finish last. Something caught in her throat; she cleared the screen and the search history and hid and waited as the sad duo limped on slow and steady.

A falling knife—or a compounding monster in the making?

Brittany cut across the campus to the finish line. Chad already won.

She stayed in the back, didn't feel like listening to Madison and Sophia. Gripped her straps. Haze came in second. Students and parents cheered, and stopped caring.

What they didn't say about nice guys getting last was it took a hell of a long time. Madison and Sophia hugged her goodbye. Everyone besides officials left. Then they came.

She had never seen someone so happy to get a Blue Bar as Wendal. It was actually awe-inspiring; having no idea what singular thing could make her glow like that.

Flint matched her enthusiasm to the candy, but didn't look defeated. Tired, sore, and poor, he walked it off, hands above his head. It irritated her how he could keep going.

She went over to him, gripping her backpack straps tighter. Brittany opened her mouth and closed it. Flint was so blind, it pissed her off as he turned and nearly ran into her; taken aback by her sheer presence.

God, how can someone be so strong and such a coward.

But he wasn't a coward. His eyes widened.

"You're an idiot."

"Huh?"

Such an idiot. That's all he had to say? His face did gymnastics.

"I need water."

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Spun her backpack. From within, Brittany handed him her rose water bottle.

Flint stared at it as if holy. "Give it back if—"

He drank it. Flint handed the rose bottle back empty. "Sorry."

The final straw. "Don't ever apologize!"

So irrational, she didn't recognize herself in front of him; full of fluster, and the worst of her that she immediately had to overcome. Brittany punched his chest.

"Where were you at lunch?"

His fire pled; would do anything to join hers. She saw it.

"I looked for you."

"I know. I saw you." It didn't really feel like she was crying; which in itself was funny because, 'Brittany why are you crying right now?' With both hands, she squeezed the bottle tight.

Full-blown tears. It was so funny, she didn't know why.

Brittany said, "You see things through. I like that. Ask me out sometime, okay?" Hiking the backpack up to the back of her head; she didn't get embarrassed, yet her face was on fire.

He just looked at her with that dumb, slack face smoldering. He held up his Blue Bar.

"Do you want this?"

It was all so infuriating. Brittany eased up her grip on the bottle, and held it at her side.

"If you don't want it, give it to Wental."

Brittany glared at Wental, who gaped. "Stop eavesdropping."

She had to go. Probably already gave Dad a heart attack having waited to the very end of the event and didn't need any more reasons for him needing to chauffeur her. Brittany stormed off for dear life. She looked back. Flint watched her go with that dumb stare.

A complete idiot. Brittany tucked the empty rose bottle inside her backpack and hurried.

CHAPTER TWO: THE THING ABOUT RETURNS

In the parking lot, after Flint's bleeding heart, the last person she wanted to see was Dad happy as a clam in the shitbox family ride. A brown piece of junk he called Right Sock.

Window down, one arm out, he slapped the side as he listened to yesterday's horse race. On the dash, his little black notebook spread open for quick notes. The same information was on his wrist, on his comm, a button press away. He was a man stuck in time.

The radio cut to commercial. Dad finished his scribble and brightened at her with a small fire. Dim.

Dimmer every time she saw him. The way his eyes went somewhere else. The car was a can of hot breath—despite the window down, the AC bled heat instead of cool air.

She pressed a button on the dash, a soft whir circulated the air, and she sat. Pushed her backpack behind. "You don't have to pick me up from school."

Dad watched her, amused. Brittany said, "I can take the bus."

She pulled down her long socks. Sweating already. Took off the bomber and folded it into her lap. "Can we go?"

"Are we in a hurry?" He smiled.

"No."

"It's good to see you. Did you have fun?"

He was so patient and annoying. She loved him. Love was a dangerous thing.

It blinded capital. Love could make even the best investors foolish.

She sighed as he held the smile unwavering, and lowered her window and stuck an arm out like him. "You know what, I think I did. Yeah, it was fun."

"Good." He rubbed his hands together. The older he got, the more childish. "Who was the favorite and who won?"

"A boy named Chad was the favorite. He won. He was not who was interesting. Another runner, who might as well be last, showed tremendous promise."

Dad blew into his hands. "A dark horse, huh?"

He pressed a button and the ride took off. "Those are the ones to keep an eye on, like my Left Sock. Promise, and promise, and then boom, you win big. Could go on a strike once the iron hits."

"Chad had better odds. He has won every year."

"Oh, a stallion, huh. You shouldn't bet. On dark horses or stallions. There's no such thing as a sure thing. You can tighten the wrong screw and boom; life changes forever. It can be that quick sometimes. Everyone's lives are too important."

He straightened in his seat, found himself for a moment—then lost it again. His nose scrunched at the effort, the energy it cost him to keep forgetting. As if to distract from the loss—the hurt that followed, the further dimming of his eyes—Dad turned up the volume. The commentator rapid-firing updates soothed the scrunch in his nose.

Snatching his notebook off the dash, he scribbled the scores. Finished, he rubbed his stomach, noticed her again, and smiled.

"Hungry? Mom's making her famous meatloaf for dinner. Lucky, lucky us."

He winked, turned up the volume to sing along with a commercial as they slid through the blue district. What should be paradise.

Brittany carried the beat in her head, singing alongside her dad, but she couldn't bring herself to join. Not on the way to a house that shouldn't exist.

~

Protected by golden gates at the check-in before RoseBud Living; blue districts ironically loved their barricades and facial recognition.

The camera on the gate blinked white. Dad arched his eyebrows at her. A total kid.

"Ready?" He raised his hand into a finger gun, arched his eyebrows again.

Was that such a bad thing?

They adjusted their chairs back to back. Brittany raised her own gun and stuck out her tongue. The camera flashed.

Their goofiness recorded in the logs and on the screen for them to admire. "Well done." Dad nodded.

"Good shooting." She blew on the tip of her finger.

The gates opened. Like a snap, the fun ended sharply as the ride zigged and zagged into the stupid-artsy road that divided into a field of blue grass.

It continued on the left into a bourgeoisie park for neighbors to show off their plant-walkers. The road met a stiff deco turn for a two-lane street. Homes on the right; this was not her home.

The first, behind a smaller check-in gate, was an estate way off in the distance connected by a long-ass road. Up it, Lance swaggered over as they pulled into the second gate.

"Ten credits says he has cameras to see who enters."

"You know how I feel about betting. It's impossible to know for sure."

"It's not a bet." Brittany lifted her socks to her knees. "He knows."

"He's just lonely." Dad waved, lowering her window. "Howdy, neighbor."

Hand on the ride, Lance leaned in. His jester balloon pants with dark blue hourglass bulges at the ankle poured in from the bugles at the thighs. A Saturn ring around his hips puffed a faint misty aura. Bulges on each forearm poured from the mirroring biceps. The real pompous aloofness rose from a tall neck guard—ruffled like a fucking coffee filter.

Lance was not a serious person, yet was privileged with blood and money to be a dangerous one. "Good afternoon, Cheeses." He giggled at his own stupid joke.

"How are you melting this evening." Nothing he said was ever a question.

Dad smiled and Brittany said, "Montgomery is the best."

"Speaking of the best, do you have a moment. I'd love to show you something."

"Well," Dad began—interrupted by Lance. "It will only be a minute. You'll want to see this." He stepped back and father and daughter shared a look before stepping out.

Brittany put on her bomber as Lance fidgeted on his comm. He cursed, giggled. "Ha—there! Look." He pointed down the long road to his estate.

If the house was a mouth, it opened. A blue tongue marched free.

Soldiers. They made rows lining the long-ass driveway. Terracotta plant soldiers.

"Not done." Lance fidgeted.

Archers raised their bows. He giggled and snorted. "How about this."

A general plant in a chariot led by four horses lifted their hand. They rode down the line. Soldiers in each row lit the archers' arrows.

"Get ready." Lance—lips widened by plastic surgery into a boxy, teeth-together smile—pressed his comm. "Fire away! I love saying that. Fire away, general."

The general saluted. Arrows released. Red flowers dotted the sky.

'Boom,' Brittany thought as they bloomed into silent fireworks of blue stars.

Someday this would be her type of fuck-you money. The archers prepared a second volley; these the archers lit themselves. Aimed, released.

Lance arched his eyebrows three times. "What do you think."

She lifted a finger gun as the arrows dotted the sky. 'Bang.'

"When did you get so classy, Lancel." She aimed the gun at him. "It will be a tough beat, that's for sure. But if anyone has the money, it's the Summerfalls."

Dad lowered her gun. Brittany said, "They do have the most acres. Therefore they can hold more soldiers. It's nothing personal."

"That's Mr. Pemberton-Smythe to you, young lady. Length nor girth stand as any absolute marker to make one piece of art better or worse. It's all in execution. Someday when you get a boyfriend you will understand. I'm more interested in what your father thinks."

Another volley. "Man to man."

Dad blew into his hands. Rose-cheeked, he clapped.

"Bravo. Bravo." He nudged her. "Not every day you see fireworks, huh. Very impressive, Mr. Pemberton-Smythe. You have my vote. If you would excuse the Cheeses; it's meatloaf night. Miriam's famous for it."

"Yum. I had an A5 loaf last night with truffle—the more the merrier; really does the trick. The secret, though, is the barbecue-seared foie gras on top. It's the only way to loaf."

Dad clapped at another volley. "Oh, I don't know what my darling Miriam puts in it; famous though, coast to coast. I hope she teaches you someday, kiddo. So you can cook for your kids. Spread the joy."

"I'm not having kids." Brittany knew it would box Lance out of the conversation at the cost of Dad's feelings. Worth the investment.

"Don't say that."

"Well, I'll be going." Lance said, delaying his leave. "I suppose I'll let the archers play on in the yard some time longer." Hands behind his back, he departed down his long road.

Brittany said, "Have a good night, Mr. Pemberton-Smythe."

Dad said, "You shouldn't tease him like that. It's not nice."

Back inside the ride and verified, Brittany said, "Nothing about his entrapment of our time was nice." They drove onto their dirt road to the tool shed in comparison to Lance's estate and the mansion on the other side belonging to the Summerfalls.

Flowers bloomed in the sky. Their one-ride garage opened, slowly. Base to ceiling.

On their left, she was right; Brittany took no joy in surveying the literal mountains, miniaturized to the size of their roof—not there when she left for school. The Summerfalls took everything to eleven. In the wintery mountain peaks nested ice griffons. Ridiculous.

The garage only halfway up; through the mountain peaks their benefactor's spawn strolled with hands behind their back. Which made it worse for them than simply being the help in their tool shed, but parceled charity. No one alive wanted them there; Brittany the most.

Christopher waved. "Brittany, Joseph. Spare a minute?"

The garage was only a third of the way up. They were trapped.

Father and daughter shared a look. Brittany said, "You can make it."

Dad pressed a button. The ride powered down and she sighed.

~

Christopher stopped where their properties met marked by a white line on the grass. He waved, "This will only take a second. I mean there's only two more years. We should enjoy this time together."

They shared a look. Dad said, "It will only take a second."

"Those add up, you know."

They opened their doors, and met their neighbor at the white line, resolved to the routine. Dad said, "Christopher, how are you doing this evening? Impressive yard work."

"Thank you. You don't think it's too much, do you? There's a fine line of being gauche or not, because there's more." Christopher dialed his comm.

The griffons flew. Circled their nests. Higher. "I can make them do shapes too."

He dialed his comm and the griffons flew crazy eights. "The griffons aside, it's a very peaceful walk through the mountains. I got the temperature perfect. Give it a go sometime. Wait, there's more." He

dialed the comm.

The griffons blew aurora's with the intensity of flood lamps on steroids in the crazy eights and it looked terrifying. "There was a fire option; between us; it was the cheaper."

Dad clapped. "Bravo! Bravo." He nudged Brittany. "You don't see that everyday."

"I'd love to hear what you have to say Brittany." Joesph said, "The younger generations thoughts are priceless." He winked at father.

"I think you won." She closed her eyes, titled her head, and smiled all teeth. "I would love to talk a walk though them tonight. Thank you for offering. So kind. Say eight thirty. I am blessed."

Christopher, dialed the griffons back to their nests. "Charming. So what's for dinner, huh Joseph?"

"It's Miriam's famous meatloaf. I cannot wait. It's best right out of the oven."

"I've had a six meat loaf with white alligator as the mystery meat at Saint Franks off Main. Delicious. What type of marbling does Miriam use?"

"Love."

Brittany had never been more proud of Dad. What's best, he meant it. Not a single drop of facetiousness and Christopher could tell.

"Charming. You'll have to save me a slice so I can compare. I won't keep you. Two more years Joseph." He waved two fingers that anyone else would think was a peace sign, was not a peace sign, before he strolled through his mountains and griffons.

"Thanks again Christopher." Brittany called after him. "Eight thirty."

Dad said, "Must you antagonize our neighbors? They do a lot for us."

"All is fair in love and war. You heard him, waving the two years over us."

Dad tussled her hair. "We're not at war. Mr. Summerfall has done plenty for our family. In two years, we will have the money to fully retire. We should be thanking him. Go on ahead and help your mother set the table. I'll park Right Sock."

She went on a head, leaving those emotions behind, face to face with the door. A big breath as Dad pulled in. Mom would not tolerate the negativity.

CHAPTER THREE: THE THING ABOUT CAPITAL

More garlic than air; the living room consisted of a modest screen embedded in a half wall, half staircase. Mom kept news on in the background; the screen was old and rattled.

An anchor said confidently, "Stocks are up. What a time to be alive."

A two-seater couch at a slant accounted for the dining table eating what little space remained. Quaint. Cozy. Suffocating.

On the right wall, as Brittany unloaded her shoes and backpack on the rack behind the door, she grimaced at her reflection in the shrine to Dad's former life—the wall of the dead—decorated with employee of the year, twenty-four years running. Framed certificates crowded with commendations, and photos with coworkers and bosses. Some still alive. A few not. Including Mr. Summerfall, who'd passed last year from prostate cancer, his kind face frozen mid-laugh at some company picnic Brittany had been too young to remember.

"Honey, are you home?" Mom's voice carried from within the kitchen nook. "Set the table, please. Dinner's almost ready."

The bulk of their shed was split between the walkway to the front door—a complete waste of space because the only person that ever came over begrudgingly both ways was Christopher—and an island counter that didn't offer much as the wall came down low for a glass rack. Within the nook, cabinets floor to ceiling.

Pans dangled from hooks between potted plants. Ladles and spatulas and wooden spoons in bouquets, others of knives, and measuring cups and wherever there wasn't a cabinet: recipe books and spice bottles filled gaps between baking sheets. Scissors. String.

The four-burner stove always had something simmering in back—today, tomato sauce thick with garlic, transforming into tomorrow's meatloaf sandwiches, next day's pasta, the day after that something else. Nothing ever stopped or was wasted, Mom recycled everything, transformed leftovers into new meals, kept the kitchen breathing like a living thing.

Five by five, Miriam had iron hair, glasses, and a hard chin. She navigated her domain on step stools and boxes and sheer determination, reaching high shelves, stirring pots, checking timers, opening drawers, closing them, never stopping, never sitting. Used to be a baker. After Dad's heroism, she'd stayed home to help and never stopped as Dad entered behind her, closed the garage door, and immediately collapsed onto the couch with a heavy exhale.

He switched the news to the horse races. The screen rattled as the plant horses galloped.

Brittany maneuvered into the kitchen, timing when Mom turned to the stove. Began setting the table while Miriam ferried a massive sheet of meatloaf, steam rising like an offering.

"Don't get comfortable, Joe." Mom's voice cut through his settling. "Both of you wash your hands." She then ladled some of the tomato gravy over the meatloaf.

It looked fucking delicious. Masterclass of love and simplicity.

Dad rose with effort. He muted the screen and they formed a small queue, waiting their turn to squeeze through Mom's dance of salad, then garlic bread, then green beans. At the sink, Dad whispered like a happy child. "Aren't we lucky, lucky."

She dried her hands. Nodded.

They took their seats at the dining table. Three chairs, three plates, three sets of silverware, and three glasses of water. Mom poured herself a glass of red wine. Dad reached immediately for the garlic

bread—Mom slapped his hand.

Miriam spoke to Brittany but side eyed her husband, "A hungry man needs a trained eye." She winked at Brittany. "Why don't you say grace, Joe. Since you're so eager?"

Dad smiled sheepishly, withdrew his hand. "Alright."

They closed their eyes.

Brittany kept hers open as Dad said, "Thank you, Lord, for this meal before us." His voice was soft, reverent. "For Miriam's hands that prepared it with such love and care."

Blind, he reached over and squeezed Mom's hand. She squeezed back.

"Thank you for the Summerfalls, for their generosity in our time of need. For giving us a home when we needed one most. For Mr. Summerfall's kindness—may he rest in peace—and for Christopher continuing his father's grace toward our family."

Brittany's jaw tightened. Her hands clenched in her lap under the table.

"Thank you for Mr. Pemberton-Smythe for adding wondrous displays into our life." Dad's lips quirked into a small smile. "Lastly and most important, thank you for my brilliant daughter. Our Brittany will do great things. I am truly blessed. Amen. Let's eat, I'm starving." He snatched the bread as Mom eyed him.

"Amen."

Brittany said nothing. Stared at her empty plate.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"Nothing." Brittany forced the smile. "Amen. It was a beautiful grace, Dad."

Relief flooded his features. He ripped off a piece of the bread and chewed with a smile ear to ear as Mom served him first, then Brittany's, then her own.

"Yep, that's it alright. That's what glory tastes like. You know, honey, I was asked twice today what the secret was."

"Love," Mom said simply. Served him green beans. "And a little bit of last Sunday's sauce mixed in. Nothing is wasted."

"Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant." Dad looked at Brittany. "You should learn her recipes. So you can make this for your own family someday. Pass down the tradition."

"I'm not having kids," Brittany said automatically.

The words dropped into the space between them like a stone.

Dad's smile faltered. "Don't say that, honey. When you meet the right person—"

"How can I even think about that right now? I want to be able to take care of myself first, before even thinking about another human being suckling at my tit—" She gestured vaguely at the cramped space, the shrine wall, the life her parents had settled into.

Mom's knife on the plate cut loudly. She said, "Leave the girl alone. Every flower has to reach for the sun however best they can."

"Well." Dad cleared his throat. Cut another piece of meatloaf. "That's fine too. Whatever makes you happy, sweetheart. That's all we want. For you to be happy and enjoy your mother's cooking even when we aren't here. We won't be around forever, you know."

"So," Mom said, voice deliberately light, changing the subject. "How was school today?"

Dad teased, "Our Brittany has her eyes on a dark horse."

"I wondered when you'd have your first boyfriend."

"I've had a boyfriend before."

Dad waved it off, scooping another bite of meatloaf onto her plate to compensate for her eating faster to leave. "Middle school doesn't count."

"How was your day, Mom?"

"I tried a new recipe for banana bread. We can have some for dessert."

That was the extent of the excitement of the Cheeses on a Friday night. And she was lucky to have it.

~

After dinner, Mom insisted on doing the dishes herself. "It's alright, dear, go finish your homework and study so you can enjoy the weekend."

Even though it would be faster with help, Brittany knew better than to argue or inform her she had already finished her homework. More worried that if she didn't help, Mom would have nothing to do with her time, and she returned to the kitchen as did Dad the couch.

Brittany got her backpack from the side, and holding the straps at the entrance of the stairs, the wall rattled with an old race. Down the hallway: their bedroom, bathroom, laundry room. Up the stairs, because her parents knew they wouldn't be able to easily travel as they got older, they gave her the primary. As she climbed, from the couch, bundled up in a blanket, Dad waved.

Shame made her wave back. Guilt hurried her to shut the door, and relief came salty in the moment of darkness behind it because he wasn't clocking her movements or being strict. He was just being Dad. Brittany flicked on the light.

Her room was as big as the entire downstairs with a bed in one corner and a desk in the other. The large space was converted into a five-lane horse track from wall to wall with obstacles that had grown over the years since she was a child, the first thread she and her father had shared. For birthdays, holidays, any gift-giving occasion, it was easier for everyone to embrace the hobby that grew out of the living room floor to the garage to her whole world. Dad loved going to the store and setting them up for her. Mom liked seeing them content.

Over the years, it stopped being entirely a lie. They just didn't know why she enjoyed it and flicked the second switch to send off the horses.

Each with flowers for tails began their slow, rattling march along the track. Mechanical. Predictable. Brittany put her hand flat on the wall, closed her eyes. Focused.

Felt that familiar shift in her chest—not painful, just different. Like her heart was peeing and she had to increase the pressure.

Brittany opened her eyes. The horses galloped.

At age seven, she could barely tip one over. Now she could improve upon the race entirely—as the horses ran, their tail-plants extended.

They could trip one another as they switched lanes. Or team up to knot competitors. They rushed around her room, filled the space with color.

She sat in the center of her wonderland, dreaming of an opponent who could counter her moves, surprise her, make the game unpredictable. A dream that could never be. Laying down, she closed her eyes for the memory etched in her life from the road not traveled by when she tested like everyone else at seven. Her parents thanked god she failed, and to this day she wondered if she made the right choice.

Question 1: Have you ever felt like you could move objects without touching them?

NO.

Question 2: Do you sometimes know what will happen before it happens?

NO.

Question 3: Can you sense emotions in objects or places?

NO.

Question 4: Have you ever made something happen just by thinking about it?

NO.

Forty-six more lies. Each one easier than the last.

The proctor marked his clipboard without looking up. "One more test and you're free to go, Miss Montgomery. Please place your hand on this."

He gestured to a sphere mounted on a short pedestal. A black ball, smooth, seamless, rotating slowly on its own like the marble fountain—except there was no water, no visible mechanism. It just spun. Slow. Constant. Hypnotic.

"It won't hurt," the proctor said. "Just hold steady for ten seconds."

He didn't explain what it would do. That was the point—to catch the unprepared off guard.

Hand on the ball, cool, it tingled. Not painful. Not unpleasant. Just—presence. Like something was pulling at her, trying to draw the something out from her heart.

It scared her and for years she lied saying she barred her heart to protect her family; how she didn't want to be taken away. When she got older the story changed to protecting herself, not wanting to rot like the jockeys without control. Or pigeonhole her career into the government's hands or be seen

different by society who allowed very few outlets for this gift.

The ball whispered: show me what you can do.

Just a little push.

She became stone. Became nothing with a hand on a spinning ball.

"Thank you, Miss Montgomery."

She opened her eyes. The truth was she was scared of her potential, and the ball didn't speak any louder than its slow rotations. Unchanged.

"You're free to go."

That was it.

She'd walked out of that examination room with her freedom intact—and an irritation that would never become a pearl. Other people's gifts hardened into diamonds; they were prized, displayed, locked behind glass, tagged and scrutinized in government vaults. She'd chosen to stay sand. To stay invisible. Because once they found that grain in your teeth, you couldn't spit it out and laugh it off. They took you. And they never gave you back.

The scanners never went off for her and the world went on. Dad took her out for ice cream after, and opening her eyes, the horses finished.

Downstairs, the races continued. Brittany checked her comm. Eight twenty.

Christopher at eight-thirty. She changed quickly—nothing fancy, just clean clothes that wouldn't embarrass her parents if Christopher mentioned it later.

Checked her reflection. Ordinary. Invisible. Perfect.

Took a breath. Opened her door.

~

Downstairs on the couch, Dad had changed into a sweater Mom made for him with 'Left Sock' on the front. He sipped on his one glass of whiskey and waved at her coming down.

As a kid, Brittany remembered it starting in a clear glass, two fingers. Sometimes he'd have her pour it for him. These days, the glass had become a coffee mug. She knew the amount had slowly increased—three fingers now, maybe four—but it would never exceed one container. His rule. His boundary. It also helped douse his fire.

Dimmer and dimmer each night. Alcohol didn't make anyone better, but it kept the dumb smile on his face. "Heading out for your walk?"

"Yeah. Eight-thirty."

"That's nice of Christopher. I hope you have a good time."

"I will."

Mom emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. "Before you go—" She disappeared back, returned with two small containers. "Would you mind dropping these off? One for Christopher and one for Lance."

Brittany looked at the containers. Two generous slices of meatloaf in each, still warm, wrapped carefully in wax paper. "Mom—"

From his couch, Dad said, "They'll see why it's famous."

Mom added, "Just being neighborly." She winked. "The least we can do is share a meal."

The least we can do. As if Dad hadn't saved lives. As if they hadn't been punished for his heroism. As if charity and gratitude were the same thing.

Brittany took the containers. Because this was the investment. This was the performance.

"Okay." She moved toward the door. Paused.

Brittany looked back. Just two more years and carried on.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE THING ABOUT POSITIONING

In her room, the horses raced around Brittany checking the mirror one last time. Mom's black leather jacket was short and cute on her. Three succulent pins on the lapel. Soft from years of use, it smelled faintly of mahogany, blueberry, and cigarettes.

Dark blue tank top. Dark jeans that fit right. Hair pulled back simple.

She looked like she belonged at an underground fight. That was the investment. Good.

Brittany flicked the lights off on her horses, left the room. Hit by garlic, down the stairs, Dad waved on the couch, notebook in his lap.

"I'm going out," Brittany announced to the room.

"Be safe, dear," Mom called from her nook, not stopping her shuffle. Automatic. Reflexive.

Dad double-took her in as she walked by to the side of the garage door for her black boots. "Where are you going all dressed up?"

"An inter-competing school event." She kept it vague. "With Madison and Sophia."

"What kind of inter-competing school event. Will boys be there?"

"Yes. I'm sure there will be lots of boys."

"Dark horse favored." He smiled like a child. "You'll miss Bolognese."

Mom called from the kitchen. "It will be ready in an hour if you want to wait. If not, Bolognese will be waiting for you when you get back darling. Have fun."

"I ought to go now."

Dad stood. "I'll drive you."

Which meant, he would also wait. The entire time.

"Dad, you don't have to. I saved up from tutoring and can pay for my own ride—"

"Nonsense. Where are we going?" He got his shoes from the side.

"The arena. It's a boxing match. Yes, the dark horse will be there because he is competing against a student from Willowbrook Academy. A lot of the school will be there."

"A boxer, huh. You said he came last in the marathon; sure he has the lungs? A boxer has to do more than survive." Dad laughed.

"We'll see."

Dad nodded, "Fair enough." He shuffled around into the kitchen nook. Emerged with a boxed lunch and a sly smile, he opened the garage door.

"Waiting on you."

~

Right Sock parked, Dad adjusted his seat. Boxed food in his lap as if she was prolonging his arrangements with the radio.

"You don't have to wait," Brittany said.

One last try. "The fight will go late. Madison said she could drop me off after. I won't have to pay either. You can go home, enjoy Mom's Bolognese—"

"Nonsense." Dad unboxed a meatloaf sandwich. The size of two decks of playing cards, he arched his brows at her. "I have food; the races. What else do I need?"

"Dad—"

He set the sandwich down. "I'm not leaving you here alone. Other fights break out all the time at these events. They get rowdy. I wouldn't be able to relax. This way I'm close by. I'll wait. You go. Have fun. Support your not-crush." He smiled, and then turned up the heat on the dashboard. "I'll be right here when you're done."

You had to know when to cut your losses. "Okay," she managed. "Thank you."

Stepping out, Brittany closed the door. Dad took a quick bite of the sandwich and set it down to turn on the radio, open his black notebook on the dash, and lowered the window.

He noticed her watching him, gestured the sandwich with a smile ear to ear. "Want a bite?"

She waved, and left for the entrance. Hands behind her back, she interlaced her fingers as crowds streamed from her lot and the nearby at the drop off.

Brittany checked her comm. She had three missed messages from Sophia. 'Where u at? We're in line. HURRY UP' and a ping of their location.

Brittany scanned the crowd. Found them.

Madison stood with a cluster of girls in Willowbrook Academy uniforms—pressed white and blue blazers, integrated mood moss badges glowing perfect blue, that particular posture screaming, we're better than you and we know it.

She carried another sign, this one reading "GRAVE DIGGER #1" in the same aggressive lettering as her Chad sign from yesterday. Madison had way too much time on hands.

A soft wind. Shivered Sophia, slightly apart and alienated from their conversation. Her crop top and short skirt without a doubt cheaper next to the Willowbrook austere and didn't even have the flower on her choker to sweeten her voice like Madison did; upgraded for the event with a massive red spider lily. She said, "I was at Theo's debut match." Matter of factly and Sophia rolled her eyes.

She saw Brittany. Relief flooded her.

"Finally!" Sophia grabbed her arm, pulled her into line. "Madison's been talking to them all night. At least you're here now. Did you see what she's wearing? That bodysuit probably cost more than your Right Sock."

They moved forward in line. Madison glanced back, noticed Brittany, waved but didn't leave her conversation with them.

"I kind of like it." Hers was yellow. "I would've gone pink."

The line shuffled forward. "Whatever," Sophia said. "Let's just get inside."

Inside, the arena opened up—tiered seating rising toward exposed rafters, ring in the center under harsh lights, crowd filling in like blood cells finding vessels. The air smelled like sweat and beer and something chemical from the responsive plants lining the walkways.

Every seat carried a fortune frog.

Madison rejoined them as they found their section—they lower and closer to the ring; them higher, decent line of sight. "Those girls are so nice," Madison gushed. "They go to W-B Academy. Do you know how hard it is to get in there? Their tuition is like—"

"We know," Sophia said flatly. "And don't say W-B. No one says that."

"Anyway, they agreed with me. Theo is definitely going to destroy whoever he's fighting tonight. We all put money on it. The odds aren't great, but I'll take free money." She giggled like it was that easy to make generational wealth.

Brittany picked up the fortune frog on her seat. Small, blue, passive in her palm.

Sophia activated hers first, the frog's tongue extended. "Ten! Oh my god, it's my lucky night! Do you think if I sent you some credits to you Madison, you could put a bet down for me on Theo."

"I don't know, it might be too late." Madison opened hers. "Ten for me too! This is a sign. We're going to have the best time."

They both looked at Brittany expectantly. She looked at the frog.

Flat in her palm, its tongue rolled out. Blue 6.

"Aw, you can't win them all," Madison said, already turning to scope out the crowd. "Ooh, there's more Willowbrook girls down there. I wonder if I should go say hi—"

"I don't know." Sophia interrupted. "You don't want to seem desperate."

Brittany wasn't really listening, looked up. Scanned the higher sections. Found Roy and Creg. Creg too tall for being so high up and Roy laughed too loud, waving his arms about.

The announcer took control of the arena. Many wouldn't come until the later bigger fights. Patches of the crowd cheered while others posed for pictures as the covers were named.

They touched gloves. The bell rang.

Four rounds of a tidal wave against a plank of wood. That's what it looked like from the cheap seats. One fighter—bigger, meaner, coming forward like he had nothing to lose—throwing combinations that landed with sounds Brittany felt in her chest.

On the fifth, a mouth guard got sent flying. A fresh splatter of blood on the mat. The referee stopped the fight. Madison, the sign on the seat next to her, stood screaming.

"KILL HIM!" Blood lust clear and happy; she looked at them. Lowered her voice. "What?"

At this rate, she would go deaf before Dante.

Sophia had covered her eyes during the fight. Mouthed, 'Is it over?' Peeked.

Officials carried the fallen fighter on a stretcher. Under harsh bright lights the winner raised his hands. And then he left, leaving only a stain in the ring.

On the screen, the next matchup appeared: THEO "GRAVE DIGGER" MORRISON vs FLINT "Marathon-Man" CARVER.

Madison snorted. "Is that joke? Marathon-man, who is he kidding? He got last?"

Sophia added, "Hey, it takes even longer to get last. So technically it really was a marathon, in comparison to like the sprint for Chad."

Brittany couldn't take her eyes off the ring. At the stain, the blood.

"Do you wanna get food before the fight?" Madison asked.

"Sure." They stood. "Brittany?" Sophia said, "Are you coming?"

"I'll wait. Thanks."

They returned just in time, arms full of sodas and popcorn and candy. Sophia sat down breathing hard from the stairs.

Madison clutched her GRAVE DIGGER sign with renewed determination.

The announcer took the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, our next bout features Willowbrook Academy's undefeated rising star—nine wins, zero losses, all by knockout—THEO 'THE GRAVE DIGGER' MORRISON!"

The crowd erupted. Madison jumped to her feet waving her sign. The Willowbrook girls down below screamed their support.

Theo emerged tall, confident. He mimed shoveling the ring, stopped to scan for the opponent he would bury there.

"And his opponent, making his debut—FLINT Marathon-Man CARVER!"

From the nosebleeds, two birds had lost their minds squawking. Roy and Creg.

Flint emerged from the opposite tunnel.

He didn't look real. Like one of her plant horses—mechanical, controlled by someone else, moving in slow rattled motions while Theo danced on the balls of his feet.

They met at center ring. Touched gloves.

Saw Theo looking down at Flint—the height difference obvious even from here. The referee stepped back.

The bell rang.

Theo came forward. Fast.

The first jab landed clean on Flint's face. His head snapped back. Blood added to the ring, a fresh stain in the harsh lights.

"YES!" Madison waved her sign. "PUT HIM IN THE GRAVE! KILL HIM!"

Sophia covered her eyes, eating popcorn as the second jab landed.

Flint's head snapped back again, more blood, his guard barely up, just taking it like—like the plank of wood from the first fight. Like getting tripped at the starting line and everyone laughing. Like helping Wendal at the marathon instead of saving himself. Like Dad being punished for saving lives. Like Mom giving up her dreams to stay in that kitchen forever. Brittany's chest tightened. Her hands clenched on her knees.

"STOP USING YOUR FACE!" A voice from ringside. Sharp. Urgent. "PIVOT!"

Another jab coming. Theo's arm extending. Flint's head about to snap back for the third time and probably lose his mouth piece any second and—Brittany looked down: at her hands; the fortune frog in her lap; the tongue's Blue 6.

Why did she come here? What was she trying to prove? That Flint would keep getting up? That persistence mattered? That—

The crowd ERUPTED.

She looked up. Panicked. The screen showed the replay before she could find the live action. Flint pivoting. One punch. Clean. Perfect. Everything.

The ref was already counting, "—FOUR! FIVE! SIX!—"

The replay showed Theo's head whipping sideways. Eyes rolling. Body going loose. Legs folding. Falling. Down.

"—SEVEN! EIGHT! NINE!—"

"WHAT?!" Madison's sign hit the floor. "THAT'S BULLSHIT!"

"—TEN! IT'S OVER!"

Sophia mouthed, 'What's happening.'

Brittany, on her feet, ran down the aisle as Flint fell to the mat. Men rushed the ring as she got around. Theo was carried off. Flint, back on his feet, was helped out—and Brittany continued to follow him. When an investment proved itself sound and was being sold significantly undervalued, sizable action was needed.

Brittany reached the tunnel. Security held her back, "Can't come back here."

Another fighter pushed off the wall to face her. Dante Ensollas.

Beautiful, an angel, put a white wrapped hand on the security's shoulder. "It's alright. Who are you trying to see?"

"Flint Carver. I'm, uh, his classmate."

"Any friend of Flint's is a friend of mine. I'll take you back."

She followed him into the tunnel. His footsteps didn't make a sound, so graceful.

Dante said, "Some officials will have to see him first, make sure his face is okay from those hits. I doubt there will be a problem; my brother does more damage to him sparring. He'll be fine in no time. Wait here a second."

A white-wrapped finger pointed to a row of chairs. He silently disappeared down the hallway. She held the frog.

Didn't realize she held it. Brittany closed her eyes.

She didn't know why, but it felt like she was seven years old holding the black ball for the test. Except this time, the sensation flowed out of her.

"Are you ready?"

Dante was back; the frog in her hand had reset, tongue in its mouth. The 'Blue 6' hidden.

She had never done that before. Her heart galloped. Had anyone seen?

Brittany stuttered, "Yes." And hid the frog behind her back.

He led her down, and knocked on a door twice before opening it a little. "There he is. You're really something amazing, you know that?"

He stepped further in but blocked the path and her view in. Her pulse found her ears and she couldn't hear a second.

"...This lady wanted to check on you first." The door opened further, she stepped into view.

"Brittany. Hi."

Dante waved a wrapped hand. "See you soon, superstar." He closed the door behind him.

In the corner of the room, a screen embedded with blue vines showed another fight; another boxer was a tidal wave against a dummy. Brittany moved to his side.

He didn't look happy. Flint didn't look sad either. He looked like he was still running.

"Are you okay?"

CHAPTER FIVE: THE THING ABOUT RISK

His eyes fell. "Are you okay?"

Stupid question. 'Don't know why I said that.' He honestly didn't look good, but what did she know. Dante said he took little damage. Flint was a boxer. He was a fighter.

Maybe Flint Carver could beat the game after all. Marathon-man. She laughed and it felt like crying again. It was so weird, and annoying.

In her hand, the fortune frog. Or was this his last breath?

The last of his spirit before everything dimmed like Dad's fire, like Mom's smile? It was easy to be a bear and say everything was doomed; how many times did Flint have to prove he would survive? Every time. She decided.

Brittany offered the frog to him. "These were on our seats. I want you to have it."

He studied the frog. Took it, like she just gave him a Blue Bar.

How unfair of her. Cold world, even blue, she was just like everyone else.

He looked so tired. Like all he wanted was to pass out.

"Hey." Flint's voice came out rough, damaged. "Do you mind if maybe we just go? I don't think we need to wait for the doctor to come back."

"Don't you want to watch Dante?"

"Not really. I'd rather just go."

She helped him up. The fortune frog clutched in his hand. When the moment was right—when officials were distracted by Ferris's terror on the screens—they slipped through the door.

Down the hallway. Through the tunnel. Out the back exit. The air cool and real.

He was heavy against her side. Smelled like copper and sweat and underneath something sweet. He was strong. She'd never realized how strong until she felt his weight, felt his muscles working even in exhaustion.

Maybe he really could stand up to the world. And if he could do it, so could she. She led Flint away from the lot, further from her dad.

He could wait till the end like she was still inside. This moment with Flint was hers.

On her comm, she called a ride. Would explain it later to Dad; Mom would understand. Unfortunately, there were some nearby—many not leaving but arriving for Dante.

They got into a box of silence. The city passed outside—arena lights fading, transitioning from premium blue to subsidized blue housing.

Brittany watched Flint. His head against the window. Hand still clutching the fortune frog.

Her chest felt strange. If moving her horses felt like peeing, this was her heart trying to shit and she didn't like it. Because it had been building in her for a long time.

"You never got your fortune."

Flint held the frog in his palm. Closed his eyes. The tongue extended.

"Well?" she asked. "What did you get?"

"Six." He didn't care in the least.

She leaned over. Kissed him on the cheek. Her lips warm against his cold skin.

His legs shook. His free hand gripped the seat like if he let go he'd fall through the ride.

The ride stopped outside a dark house. He lit bright when she said, "You're a champion. Don't forget that."

He smiled and tried to play it cool, until she realized she had to help him. One of his legs was shaking, and he gripped it with one hand, the other his side. Brittany got out and around to steady him up the steps to the front door.

Flint fumbled with keys, dropped them. She picked them up, opened the door.

The smell hit her first. Stale air. Beer. Onions. Pervasive and damp fear.

He nodded down the stoic hall left, that became less and less philosophical and just empty and sad as they passed the kitchen. No cooking utensils. No pictures on the walls. No shrine to anyone's past. Just old paint peeling in corners.

Her house was suffocating with presence. This house was suffocating with absence. It gave her the fucking creeps. He waved at the first door on the right. Pushed it open, for a darker cage.

She was going to help him into bed but stopped since there were no sheets on it. Besides that, only a desk and a full-body mirror in the corner. Laundry basket on the floor with the sheets.

He laid down in the bed anyway, curled into the fetal. Flint said, "Thank you." His eyes closed. Already asleep.

Not what she expected a champion to look like. Or her night of total rebellion to climax at, and if she left now he would likely freeze.

Brittany left his room and meandered down to the last door. Knocked on it.

Heard nothing. Stupid—no one was home. If his father was at the marathon and left early when Flint lost, then the reverse applied: if Flint won, he'd stay to the end. Probably bet on Dante now.

Brittany pushed inside. Cleaner than what she expected. Military bare essentials. On the nightstand, next to the Bible, was a single disc-drop holo-picture of their family when his mother was still alive.

Didn't know her name. Or anything about her other than that she was dead; and that's what Flint looked like as a kid.

For a hot second, she guessed at what her son would look like if she and Flint baked one. Smiled. Brittany stripped the bed. Carried the pile to Flint's room and covered him.

He was completely asleep.

She kissed his forehead. "Sleep well, young prince."

Left quickly; place was creepy. Out the dead house's door into air that felt like righteousness. She proudly strut down the street and called a ride, but wanted to stay moving. She felt hot, and standing still would make her feel damp.

She checked her messages while she walked to the pinned pickup ahead of her.

SOPHIA: where tf are you???

MADISON: Dante's fight is starting soon

The timestamp on the last message was one minute ago. If the fight went the distance, she could still catch the end.

Could slip back in with Madison and Sophia. Then she would meet Dad in the parking lot like she'd never left. Could go home and eat Mom's Bolognese.

The ride pulled up. She got in. The city passed. Felt the adrenaline still coursing through her. The liberation. The guilt. The thrill of being right about something no one else saw.

Her comm buzzed.

Purple light ahead. Spread into white sound that coned her hearing to a faint ring.

The car's system beeped. Red lights on the dashboard.

"Electrical interference detected. Activating safety protocol."

The ride pulled to the curb. Stopped. Locked.

"Please remain in vehicle until—"

Brittany hit emergency release. Manual override.

She got out. The purple light receded. People stumbled in and out of the street.

The sound reached her now—not loud, but persistent. A hum that got into her ears, into her skull, rattling. She started walking toward it. Then running.

She stopped. Stared at how quickly everything changed. Without fire or hurry. With purple residue radiating and white shadows outlined from people who couldn't escape the blast range, cracking the road to her black boots.

Her heart stomped once. She lost her breath. Her heart stomped twice as her sight became a panorama. The arena and the parking lot was gone.

Her heart stomped thrice.

Dad.

CHAPTER SIX: THE THING ABOUT VOLATILITY

Dad was gone.

Home, in what was never a home to begin with, smelled like garlic. It was funny.

It was the second thing that didn't change. Brittany laughed at the table, staring at the empty couch as the news rattled the wall. It rattled them as Mom made dinner. She couldn't turn it off—that would be weird, that would be different. Just as changing it to the horses without him on the couch would be different. Miriam turned it off anyway.

She sat down across from her. Grabbed her hands. "I know what the police have told me. And I didn't want to ask while you were at the hospital. I want you to tell me now. Go over everything with me from the beginning. Everything that happened."

Brittany told her. Most of it anyway.

After, Mom said, "I would like to meet him. Our boxer."

His dad was there too. Mom could read her mind sometimes, and waved her hand. "I know. Put something else on the screen and I will finish dinner. Rest now." She kissed her forehead.

~

Christopher appeared the next morning with sad eyes and genuine condolences. Mom even believed him until he said, "We'd like to extend another two years. No rush." He extended his hand to be shook

and said, "It's what father would have wanted."

Mom was about to shake his hand until Brittany stepped between them. "Actually," Brittany said. "What if we met in the middle?"

Christopher looked at her. Mom looked at her. "Brittany."

Brittany held a hand to her, and Christopher was listening. "One year," she continued. "Full appreciation as if we'd stayed the added two. You get the property back sooner. We get the capital we need to move on with our grief more comfortably."

Christopher calculated. Realized this was better for everyone. Clean exit. "That's very reasonable." He extended his hand to her. "If that works for you."

Brittany shook it. Christopher extended his hand to Mom. "Mrs. Montgomery?"

Mom looked at Brittany. "One year," Mom agreed. She shook his hand too.

Lance didn't show his face. Just sent a note.

It said, best meatloaf I've ever had. L.

~

Public made an announcement that Saturday afternoon. Monday and Tuesday off. Grief counseling available. Memorial service pending. The world waged on.

After calling all day, and waiting on hold as Mom cooked literally everything in the fridge and poured whiskey into a mug.

Finally she got someone. Put the call on speaker at the table. "The invasive care treatment was a complete success and Flint Carver should make a full recovery. He will be transferred tomorrow."

With the address, what they didn't tell her was that he was still unconscious. Or that a detective would be waiting with a blue flare to ambush her and Mom.

"What is your relationship to Flint Carver?"

Miriam looked at her. Brittany said, "We're cousins. Twice removed."

"My name is Taylor. This menacing blue-man is Randy. How about I treat you to a mediocre coffee and stale chocolate croissant while you tell me the story that I'm sure you're going to get sick of hearing. Trust me." He smiled. "This is only the start."

He was right. Flint really was all alone. After, Brittany went to the gift shop. Would rectify that. She bought a disc-drop.

Fixed her eyes. Readied her comm, inserting the disc-drop. She bit her lower lip and shot a finger gun at the camera. Like Dad taught her. Cleared it. Straightened. And smiled.

"Promise me, doctor, this will always be on Flint's side. He will never be alone."

The doctor said, "Lucky, lucky."

~

Downstairs, without Dad on the couch, Mom didn't hear Brittany waiting on the last step. Listening to her cry.

Mom poured herself whiskey. Put on the horses. Cursed at the screen.

Then she switched to jazz. Made cookies again. Snickerdoodles this time.

~

On a bench, in jeans and the bomber jacket. It was funny—the things that stood out in moments that otherwise felt like charred ash.

Brittany checked the time on her comm. Watched people come and go—families reuniting, patients being wheeled out through the hospital's main entrance.

And then—

Flint. Wheeled out by some nurse with huge breasts and perfect skin. Of course.

The nurse said, "We've called for a specialized ride to accommodate. Hang in there, Flint. You're going to win in this life; we all know it."

"Thanks." He blushed.

The nurse returned to the sliding door where a group of them and Doctor Hardcastle waved.

Okay, that was enough. Brittany wheeled him to the curb.

"Hang in there, Flint." She mimicked, standing beside him.

"Jealous?"

"No. I'm basically abducting you." She looked at him. "We're going to get through this together. Okay?"

"Yes. We will."

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE THING ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS

Flint brought Mom back from the abyss. She would not drink whiskey in his presence, and he could eat like a sink disposal. She had to get back to the kitchen full time to keep up with him, and gaining weight turned into muscle. Flint grew stronger and that empowered Miriam. They decided he would sleep in her room while she took the couch. Only for a little bit, he insisted.

Everyone but Flint knew it would be longer than that.

Maybe that's why she and Mom really loved him—that damn earnestness to do right, to harm no one. Everyday he gave his best.

It was a soft sponge when sleeping meant smelling dad on the couch. She often snuck upstairs to play with the horses.

~

Sophia and Madison were gone. Not missing. Dead. Confirmed three days after the explosion when the casualty lists finalized. They'd still been at the arena when Dante rotted. Their last messages frozen in Brittany's comm: HOLY SHIT.

Pretty enough, popular enough, high grades, everyone felt bad for her at first. Gave her space. Offered condolences. Let her grieve.

Flint got straight hate.

The school called him 'Rot.'

Said it in hallways, in bathrooms, in places where teachers wouldn't hear and did. Wrote it on his desk, locker, and on all his things. Some teachers said it too.

They left mutilated fortune frogs with their the tongues hacked off, or rigged to show zeros. Shoved him into walls when crowds surged between classes. He'd survived rot, survived the explosion, survived everything—and they punished him for it.

She could have stayed neutral, let him hang to dry while maintaining her own position. Brittany tripled down instead. Stood with him. Ate lunch with him. Walked him to every class. He would never be alone. Made it clear: hurt him, deal with her.

So, they ostracized her to. They didn't write on her shit, but stone-cold silence. Total excommunication. Brittany didn't care. They were all less than temporary; annoying.

They held hands and worked for their separate futures. Survival was permanent and together Flint and her would thrive; get excellent grades. Totally fit.

The sex was not what she expected. Good and bad, and she blamed herself.

~

The emancipation took eight months. Hearings. Paperwork. Social workers asking questions about his home situation, his father's death, no other relatives and nearest of kin. His ability to support himself. Brittany and Mom both testified—stable environment, responsible kid, better off independent than in the system. Detective Taylor and Randy vouched for him, paved the way for him to join the force after graduation.

He won.

Flint moved out, found a small subsidized apartment. Not far from where they ended up moving to as well not needing or wanting the full year. Mom finally understand how it didn't make sense to wait anymore. To live; they had to move on.

Walking distance from each other. Two blocks. Brittany slept over a lot. Mom was okay with it. So was he.

Flint was fully hers. Next year, he won the marathon.

~

Brittany got into University. Flint joined the force academy. Everything was going according to plan. They kept their heads down and worked. The results showed in her internship. Fast-track graduation. Full-time promotion at Meridian Financial Group.

She excelled at the numbers. Saw the patterns. Heard the music.

It all looked beautiful on a spreadsheet—full control of projections, variables isolated, outcomes predicted. Dad would be proud.

This was not betting; this was slaughter by the numbers. Death by a thousand cuts of ones and zeros, black and white neatly organized no-bullshit.

And like a snap, her optimal setting rattled the day the company hired a new intern like she aged five years in a flash. Jack Roswell. He had kind frog green eyes. And he didn't belong.

She sensed something. Something she hadn't in a long time.

Brittany had to take a piss out of her heart. A top-five tingle sensation, and her legs shook.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE THING ABOUT OPPORTUNITY

Brittany arrived at Meridian Financial Group at 6:47 AM. Freshly showered from the gym, an excellent pump, her hair thick. Timed her arrival for the optimal sweet spot: not first, because if no one else sees you, who cares; and late enough to not completely shove her nose up the seniors' asses while avoiding pointless small talk with the walruses.

Presentation at nine, a favor for a strategic branch requesting an outside perspective from the wizard. Or witch, as they called her behind her back. Brittany liked witch better.

In ten years, they'd call her a prophet because this little favor would cascade to many steps to swallow the whole department and more. Then she would be the youngest woman or man to make partner: all she had to do was follow the plan.

Lo and behold, in Conference Room C, an intern sat at the long table, ugly violet folders set before every position. Leaning back in his chair, she marched in and leafed the folder open. Crap work. Same regurgitated shuffle of blame.

It wasn't this kid's work; he was only the messenger and she would need the coffee he had prepared on the back table. He in a cheap suit—flat, factory black-blue—that barely fit his wire frame. Above his flat right palm, a donut, cup of coffee, and pencil floated in a circle.

Zero contact.

Jack fell over in his chair—the donut, cup, and pencil remained floating. He scrambled to stand. "It's not what it looks like."

The donut, cup of coffee, and pencil fell to the floor.

Coffee splattered. The donut rolled. The pencil bounced twice and stopped at Brittany's feet.

Time stopped.

Not literally. But something in her chest—something she'd locked away, years ago, buried under spreadsheets and optimal settings and the careful machinery of being exactly what the world and Mom and Flint needed her to be—had to take a piss.

He could do it.

Out loud. In daylight. In an office. Without fear.

Was he a fucking moron?

Brittany tightened her grip on her briefcase. Her comm buzzed. The machine rebooted.

She checked the message. Rachel.

Diamond on his way. ETA 45 seconds.

Brittany flipped her briefcase to the desk, opened it. Removed a previous iteration of her presentation—one among twelve iterations that would have merely impressed instead of dominated. She exchanged it for the head position's folder and took the seat on the left.

"What are you doing?" Jack asked.

She said, "We have about forty-five seconds before Director Diamond walks down. If he reads the copy you put out; you'll be fired after your manager. Head roll down here. Do you want your job?" Her voice was steady. Professional. Cold.

The door opened for Director Donald Diamond. Fifty-something, graying at the temples. Wore a newly issued HR mood moss on a suit that was the downpayment on her apartment.

"Montgomery. Early as always." He nodded to Jack, probably didn't know his name. And held a look like he wasn't sure he should be happy or mad that he was here.

Jack, sweating, backed away. Smiled, and bowed.

Brittany got up in a half bow. Smiled. "Director Diamond, I am excited for our future. I had a chance to take a quick peek."

"Oh, first impressions are important." He nodded to the coffee stain spreading across the floor. Donut. "What happened here?"

"Mine, sir," Jack said quickly. Voice steadier than Brittany expected. "I was happy the witch—uh, I mean, Wizard—was able to lend a hand. Look fondly upon my team's presentation. That I did my best on. But could not have accomplished alone."

Diamond waved him off. "Glad you're getting input from the best." He turned to Brittany. "I appreciate you doing this favor. Cut to the quick—how bad is it?"

His division was hemorrhaging capital. The projections were dismal. The team was underperforming. This presentation was supposed to be a courtesy review, a second opinion, a gentle way to confirm what everyone already knew: they were fucked.

"I thought it was a lot worse," Brittany said. She paused. Let it land. "Don't worry, sir. In my hands, there is a clear trajectory to exceed forecast."

He maneuvered himself around her and took a peek inside the folder. Diamond scanned the page. Loved headlines, and shades of blue; not fucking violet.

"And you think you think these numbers can hold? "

"I think proficiency can be expressed in many ways, sir. And I am no weatherman, but when the frog says it's going to rain, who do you believe?"

Jack said, "The sun."

They both looked at him. Diamond said, "Mind getting me a coffee. Two blue-sugars. Thanks a bunch, kid, great work."

As Jack went for the coffee, Diamond said, "Interns. Love to shove their nose in my ass. It tickles. I'm looking forward to the presentation. Great work. You have a bright future here."

He left. Jack held the coffee as he waved out the door.

"Make sure to pick up the donut off the ground. Be back at nine, sharp. Also get some kiwi." The door clicked shut.

They watched Diamond walk down the hall. Silence.

Jack stared at her. At the folder. At the coffee stain on the floor, the donut, at the coffee in his hand, and took a sip. "Ah, that's hot. Hey, what just happened? I think I owe you a thank you or an apology or both."

"We need to talk after hours," Brittany said. "Go to the dive. We'll talk then. Do not be late. I swear to god, do not be late."

She picked up her briefcase. Stepped over the spilled coffee and donut.

At the door, Brittany paused. "Yeah, in fact. Send an all-hands message to change the conference rooms for the meeting. We can't have the stain in here. Oh, and Jack, I hope it goes without saying."

He looked at her.

"Stop pissing where you eat."

Brittany closed the door. Walked down the hall as he picked up the donut. Sniffed it.

The pencil floated to the garbage. She saw it reflected in the office glass—careless. Defiant. A child. Reckless and free.

Her heart sang. Not of love.

Freedom. And a different kind of power to express it.

CHAPTER NINE: THE THING ABOUT LEVERAGE

The Poisoned Frog sat three blocks from Meridian, tucked between a bodega and a plant nursery that never seemed to close and never looked open. A pregaming dive bar. Low ceilings. Dim lighting. The kind of place where junior analysts went to complain about buying drinks for the underlings before their real plans.

Brittany arrived at 7:15. Claimed her usual booth in the back. She made a habit of showing face. Even if it scared them. The booth's high walls were perfect for the witch and kept the acoustics for conversations private without looking clandestine.

Packed. Friday energy bleeding into the weekend. She sipped on whiskey. Neat.

Jack entered at 7:23.

The bar noticed. Whispers spread.

That's the intern. The one Diamond praised. The one Montgomery took under her wing.

Someone pointed him toward the back. Toward her booth.

He approached like he was walking to an execution. Turning his long neck at every coworker present, realizing he was the odd one out having never been before.

Jack slid into the booth across from her. "You know more and more I am understanding why they call you a witch. And you don't really help."

Brittany sipped her whiskey. "There's a reason for that."

Silence. He fidgeted with a napkin. Tore small pieces off the edge.

"How long have you been doing it?" she asked.

"Straight to it, huh." He stopped tearing the napkin. Met her eyes. "I don't know. Forever. Since I was six, maybe earlier. I don't remember not being able to."

"Why didn't you get acquired?"

The question landed heavy on him. "It scarred me when I realized no one else could do it." His fingers went back to the napkin. Tearing. Shredding. "My parents don't know. Still. I just—knew it wasn't safe. University was easy. I could coast and practice to my heart's content. Then the real world came knocking and I had to get a job; I got cocky. It's like the world makes it out to be this terrible thing while it can be incredible."

Her resting bitch face killed the joy. Jack retreated within himself; back to hiding. "It was a mistake, and it will never happen again. I'm sorry. I'll be invisible."

Brittany studied him. "I want you to show me how strong you are."

His mouth hung open. "What?"

"I have a dinner with clients, I need to leave." Brittany said, "Later tonight, I want you to meet me at this gym." On her comm, she sent the address pin.

"My husband knows the owners. We have a key. It'll be unlocked. Just push hard. We can be alone. Be there at ten. Do not be late. Seriously, I swear to god." Brittany slammed a fist on the table, to focus his attention.

A little whiskey splashed out of her glass. "Don't be late."

Jack stared at his comm. At the address. At her.

"Won't your husband be—uh, worried?"

"Don't worry." Brittany finished her whiskey. Set the glass down. "He trusts me."

She stood. Walked past the younglings and the bigs and the whole performance of Meridian's social machinery right out the door. Then they would all look at him; when they were finally done thinking of my ass.

~

From within the darkness of Champion's Gym, Brittany hid as Jack fiddled with the door. He pushed harder and harder. It was a trap.

"Uh, hello?"

"Boo!"

"What the fuck!" He jumped. Even with the door between them he was afraid. "Why? Don't do that."

She opened it. "Bawk, bawk, come in. There's no fryer in here. There's a room in the back away from windows we can use."

Through the darkness he followed her around two boxing rings to a brightly lit, padded weight room. She closed the door behind him. Locked it.

"How long have you been boxing?"

"My husband has for a long time. Me, more for the workout." She turned to face him. "Real question: how strong are you?"

Unfamiliar in a bar, unfamiliar in a weight room—Jack looked at the equipment like toys that could produce zero fun.

At a rack of dumbbells, he said, "It's been a while since I've tried a max rep."

Maybe she was wrong. Still skeptical.

From the left, the one-pound weights rose into the air. Then the twos. Fives. Tens. Fifteen. Twenty. Twenty-five. The entire rack lifted.

Okay. He had the moves.

Brittany said, "Wow."

She had never been able to handle that much weight. Nimble with her old horses, because they were plants and a natural conduit—they were light and encouraged movement and growing.

Everyday objects were cold and devoid. The difference. Like taking a piss or a fat shit.

He had power. Jack could articulate it precisely.

The bench press bar lifted next. All the plates with it. Floating. Rotating. Moving through the air like he was conducting an orchestra.

Jack finally looked like himself. Not craning his neck. Not hiding. In his element. Unafraid. Free. Strong. He smiled—callow and unknowing of the true dangers of the world.

"I'm not done. Check this out." His body lifted off the ground. Jack hovered above her, surrounded by his constellation of lifted weights. "What do you think?"

"Amazing." Her voice came out breathless. "You're amazing."

The way he looked—like it was the first compliment he'd ever received. Brittany stepped inside his orbit. "I want you to teach me."

All the weights and equipment crashed down. The motion tripped the alarm system into wailing.

"Sorry! Sorry!" He lowered. Hands over his ears.

Shaking her head, laughing—actually laughing—Brittany walked out of the room. Stopped at the threshold. Alarm blaring.

"Return the room as it was, please."

Jack scrambled as Brittany turned off the alarm panel. Sent her clearance code to the security company. Her comm buzzed immediately—False alarm? Need dispatch?

No dispatch. User error. All clear.

The wailing stopped. Silence rushed back in.

Jack stood in the middle of the weight room, surrounded by perfectly organized equipment, looking like a child who'd been caught breaking something expensive.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Don't apologize." Brittany walked back in. Closed the door. "That was incredible. You're incredible. And yes, I want you to teach me."

"I haven't taught anyone before. Where are you at; I mean skill wise? What can you do?"

"It's been a long time since I've used it." Brittany walked over to the weight rack.

She focused on the one-pounders. Closed her eyes.

Clapping.

She opened one eye. One weight floated. So weak in comparison.

Jack clapped. "So you can."

Lowering it—wobbly—back into place, she tried a fives and strained. Felt like her heart would bubble. An unused muscle atrophies.

She determined, "As you see, I'm not very strong. Do you think you can help me get up to where you are?"

"What's your end game?"

"I want to see what's possible. In exchange, I will help you at work. With my guidance, you'll be a shoo-in for a full-time position and you can curry favor with Diamond. You'll have a career you can retire early from if you play your cards right. Some doctors golf on the weekends; I want this. Plus, mastery comes from being able to teach. You want to get better still, don't you?"

Jack looked at her. Processing. Calculating his own risks. Plus she was hot, what was there for him to lose besides his job and dignity?

"Okay. I'll do it."

"Great."

She moved past him to the weight room's threshold. "We'll need rules and I'm starving. There's a twenty-four-hour bakery just down the street. Best chocolate croissants. My treat as your Big."

~

A hole-in-the-wall gem. Quaint stained glass lighting. Cheap good coffee. Cheap good pastries, homemade with expensive love. Mom and Dad would have loved it.

Brittany and Jack sat in a corner booth. Two coffees between them, two chocolate croissants. A napkin covered in her handwriting—schedule, logistics, terms.

"Three nights a week," she said. "Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Gym from 10 PM to midnight. That gives us two hours of training time."

"And the work help?"

"Mornings. 5:30. I'll be there waiting. We go through your assignments, I show you how to prioritize, how to execute efficiently. In a month, you'll be the top intern."

"Won't people notice?"

"Sure. They'll think I'm mentoring you. Since Diamond doted on you after the meeting, they'll think you're a rising star with momentum. Greatness begets greatness."

Jack stirred his coffee. Didn't drink it. She took a bite of the croissant. Delicious.

"What about your husband? Won't he wonder about your late nights?"

Why does he keep bringing that up as if he had a shot in hell sexually?

"His hours are long too. He's in the force."

"You're joking. You want to learn this while your husband could arrest us both?"

"He trusts me. Don't worry about Flint," Brittany said flatly. "I want to be straight with you. Our relationship—"

"Relationship?" Jack snorted.

"Yes. Relationship will be completely platonic and transactional. If done right, we both will succeed greatly in life. It's win-win."

"Does he know—Flint, I mean—about your, uh, rot?"

"Don't call the great-piss that." She paused. "It's not rot."

Jack blinked. "Did you say great-piss? I always thought of it more of a foot numbing. Starts at my toes and curls up. You don't feel that?"

"No. That's interesting. To be continued. Point is—Flint doesn't know. He doesn't need to. Nor do your parents or your landlord. We both have people in our lives that this knowledge can harm. Mutual destruction. This stays between us. Do we have an agreement?"

Jack's head wobbled like a snake learning to dance. "Yeah. I mean I keep thinking this is just going to blow up in our face, but I want to get stronger. I want to do this. We'll see how it goes. We just have to take it slow. Okay?"

She pushed the napkin toward him. "Memorize this. Then destroy it. No paper trail. No evidence. Nothing that could get either of us acquired. We go slow, like you said. And do like we do everything at Meridian."

"With a clenched ass?"

"Methodical. Has anyone ever told you, you might be in the wrong field?"

"Every single boss. When do we start?" he asked.

"Monday. 5:30 AM. Don't be late. If you are late I will kick you."

She stood. Ate the last of the croissant. Walked out into the cooling night. On her comm, Brittany messaged Flint: Heading home. Long night. Love you.

His response came immediately: Love you too. Brought you a chicken pesto pasta from my work dinner at the place you like. I always forget the name. In the fridge.

~

Monday, 5:30 AM. Conference Room C.

On time, Jack arrived with donuts. Brittany looked at the box. At him.

"I'm going to get fat."

"You said people love a dedicated intern." He smiled. Nervous. Hopeful.

She took a maple bar. "No more of these," Brittany chewed. "Okay. Let's get to work. You're already behind compared to your peers."

"Great. Love to hear it."

She showed him how to read between the lines of the assignments. How to identify what actually mattered versus what was bureaucratic theater.

Value was different and the same for every man; the key was how to delegate without seeming lazy or arrogant. He absorbed it quickly. Already had a good head for the numbers; he had the intern for a reason.

He took notes. Asked good questions. At 7:25 they called it when she got a message from Rachel; Diamond in the building.

Jack left for his desk. She stayed and ate another donut.

Fuck. These were delicious.

~

Monday, 10:00 PM. Champion's Gym.

He taught her about power. Spreading the field of awareness. How to properly grip inanimate objects. About endurance.

With thirty minutes left to practice, Jack brought out a rope. He wrapped a red tie around the middle, set up two dumbbells as markers.

"I thought we could end each session with a game of tug of war to record your progression."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're going to enjoy this, aren't you?"

"Let's see how long until you tire yourself out. Go on, give me your best shot, Witch."

They were both sweating. She couldn't budge the red tie an inch.

Exhausted. Exhilarated.

"Same time Wednesday?" he asked.

"I can't wait."

CHAPTER TEN: THE THING ABOUT COMPOUNDING

Morning. Conference Room C.

Jack arrived with one donut for himself. She arched an eyebrow.

"You didn't say anything about me getting fat."

At first Jack wanted to learn; in the first month, he made great progress. By month three, he stopped caring little by little. It was faster if she just did it.

She made highlights for him to memorize. He started getting sloppy with those too.

Completely consumed on how they could improve their gym time, licking his fingers. He never got fat, no matter how many donuts or croissants he ate. And he was always hungry to train, so Brittany didn't saw anything. And maybe that was cruel, but they had a deal.

They would have to stop meeting at work. People were beginning to talk.

Still. It was a fair trade. Worth the investment.

~

At the gym. The rope on the floor.

They circled each other. Dumbbells orbiting both of them like planets. The awareness fields up—shimmering, invisible nets that caught and slowed anything that entered their space.

"Ready?" Jack asked.

"Ready."

He threw a kettlebell. She caught it in her field, deflected it back. He dodged, laughed, threw two more. She stopped them mid-air, sent them spinning at his head.

He ducked. Pulled the rope. She pulled back. Stalemate.

They were equals now. Their fields collided. The air between them rippled. Walls buckled and wept as the gravity between them cooked.

She laughed. It never got boring.

"Don't." Jack powered down. "You'll set off the sprinklers again."

The security system and the owners were beginning to hate them. After a sizable donation a little less; it was worth it. The alarms wailed. Sprinklers on.

Jack was wet; she was prepared for anything. Completely dry.

He said, "I didn't even think about that."

She closed her eyes. Stopped the alarm. Felt all the moisture in the room, and put it back.

Clapping. When she opened them, the gym was spotless.

Good as new. "You're amazing."

"We are amazing."

Walking to the cafe; Brittany felt like a god. She could run her shield full time, and feel everyone, know everything and the people they passed on the street had no idea.

At their table, Jack smiled differently. He got the chef to make him a side of scrambled eggs. Would shovel away nine orders. It reminded her of young Flint.

Unlike him, it was the darnedest thing; he kept getting skinnier. She hadn't fully noticed, but his cheeks shrunk.

No one liked him at the office. Everyone felt he was coasting and thought he had special treatment. That they were fucking.

Outside of their training; she really didn't know what he did. He never talked about any friends or his family.

"Hey Jack, are you okay?"

He laughed. Pushed around the last of his eggs. "What made you finally ask?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Never mind. It doesn't matter." He looked up.

"If we are to continue with our relationship, I need to meet Flint. I need more."

She sipped her coffee.

"Is that okay?"

"Absolutely not. This came out of left field. Why do you want to meet him?"

"I think we have become good friends now."

She sipped her coffee.

"To me, it's strange that you haven't asked me to. That we can be such large parts of each other's lives. We work together, train together, eat together. All the time, now. I probably see you more than him."

"Stop. First of all; no you don't. You have zero idea what Flint and I have been through together. Two, this breaches our agreement. I don't want to talk about it; more importantly: have you looked over those files for tomorrow?"

"We can't avoid this. I don't care about work. Please, listen to me."

"I hear you Jack. You clearly do not care and are going to ruin everything if you don't study the files for tomorrow. It's entirely up to you."

"Yeah. Okay. You're right."

"I have to go. Study the papers."

~

Midnight at the apartment, she loved their granite shower, and the adjustable pressure. By far the best investment within their rental. Another temporary home, she walked naked through.

Flint laid on the couch with case files spread around him. Looked up when she came in.

"Hey. Long night?"

"Yeah. The usual."

He kicked his legs around, set down his file on the coffee table. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

He didn't look at her. Kept his eyes on the file. "Are you having an affair?"

She wanted to laugh. Maybe Jack was right. She didn't predict Flint ever asking her that and sat on the couch next to him trying to not look so deviously amused.

She met his eyes. "No."

"Okay." He picked up his file again. "I trust you."

She kissed his cheek. That's all it took.

Brittany loved him for it as she stood. When she walked to bed, a chill prickled her skin. That could be because she was naked. Jack was giving her too many emotions.

~

Morning. Conference Room A. The client meeting.

Diamond. Senior analysts. The client—a major manufacturing firm looking to restructure their portfolio.

And Jack. Unprepared. Unrehearsed. Winging it.

"Jack, walk us through the risk assessment."

He opened his folder. Blank face. Scanned the pages like he was seeing them for the first time.

Because he was.

"The, uh, risk factors. We've identified several key—" He stumbled. Mixed up terminology. Gave the wrong figures.

Brittany watched the client's face. Watched Diamond's jaw tighten.

"Actually," she interjected smoothly, "if I may clarify—Jack and I collaborated on this section. The primary risk factors are concentrated in supply chain volatility and currency fluctuation. Specifically—"

She saved it. Stole his moment. Made it look like teamwork when it was rescue.

The client nodded. Diamond's face: unreadable.

After the meeting, the Director pulled her aside.

"A word."

His office. Door closed.

"What is the nature of your relationship with Jack Roswell?"

"Platonic and professional, sir. I mentor him."

"Mm." Diamond leaned back. "We're thinking about letting him go."

Her stomach dropped. "His work—"

"Isn't the problem. We'd even recommend him to other firms. But attitude, Montgomery. He's not a killer. Not a shark. Not a witch or a prophet. He doesn't have the hunger. And in this business, that's death. We don't want that type of laid back reputation."

"Understood. Yes sir."

"That's why I like you." Diamond opened a file. "I'm moving you up. Senior Analyst. His accounts transfer to you effective immediately."

She should have felt triumphant. A step closer to Partner. Everything was going according to plan. So why didn't it feel like enough?

~

At the gym, Jack threw weights at the wall. Catching them right before impact. Bringing them back. Throwing them again.

"We need to talk," she said.

"About what?"

"Your job. The meeting. You didn't study those reports. You didn't listen to me."

"I looked at them. I listened."

"So you chose to bomb in there. Can I have your undivided attention. This isn't school."

He returned the weights to their spots. "Yes. I did bomb it."

"What happened to the plan. You get a career, I get training. We both prosper. That was the deal, teacher."

"You. You happened."

"Don't."

Brittany held up a finger. "Don't you fucking say—"

"I want more of you." His voice cracked. It might as well have been rot. "If not love, than more of your life. That means Flint and no more secrets."

"That's crazy. You don't even know me."

Jack waved his arms, "You don't think I know? That's why I want more, and you stone fucking wall. Don't you have feelings? Can't you see mine?" His voice cracked. "How much longer are you going to string me along before you cut a dried investment?"

"We had a deal."

“Well.” Jack laid down the rope. Tied the red tie. “Let’s see if there’s anything I have left to offer you. How about that; if I win, you have to be human, and open up your life to me. I think I’ve earned the right to that as your teacher. School is in session.”

“And if I win?”

Jack laughed. “Like you said, a deal is a deal. If I can’t teach you anything else. Then, you don’t need me, huh. What’s the point?”

She stared at the rope. At him. At the challenge in his eyes.

“Fine.”

She walked to her side. Set her stance. Extended her awareness field.

And then—

Occupied the rope.

Not latched onto it. Not grabbed a piece of it. Occupied it. Filled it completely. Every fiber. Every molecule. Made it hers.

She said, “Good luck.”

Jack reached for it mentally. She felt his invisible hands scrabble at the surface. Finding nothing. Like trying to grip oil.

“That all you got?”

He pulled. Pushed. Strained.

She felt him trying. Felt his desperation. Felt him realize he couldn’t even latch on.

Then Brittany occupied the space around him. Boxed him in. Made a sphere where his mental hands couldn’t extend and walked over to him.

He froze. Was frozen. Stared at his space shrinking. Looked at the rope.

Looked at her right up to his face. She extended her hand back, toward the rope and it shot to her hand. Effortless.

“Brittany said quietly. “You can still use the gym. We’re finished.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE THING ABOUT LIQUIDATION

Monday night. Champion’s Gym. 10:00 PM.

Brittany waited in the darkness. Checked her comm. 10:07. 10:15. 10:23.

This was his fault. They could just keep everything the same; he could show up like nothing happened, and all would be forgiven. All would be well again. Except it wasn’t.

He wasn't coming.

At twelve, she turned off the back lights. Locked up. Went over to the cafe. Ordered a plate of scrambled eggs, a chocolate croissant, and one of their fritters too because she finally understood; using it made you hungry.

She wouldn't cry for Jack. Brittany cleared the plate.

It was over. Clean break. Better this way.

She went home. Flint was in the shower. Everything was on track.

That night she dreamt she was a horse in a race. Running and running and running. Next to her was Flint—also a horse. Which didn't make sense.

Who was controlling them?

~

Back to the grind. Her full attention returned to work. The game was on easy mode. Better than optimal. Superior. Her skills compounded without mercy. It felt unfair.

Unfair how easy it was without Jack to begin an earnest assault on taking over Meridian. Unfair how much she'd been carrying without realizing and with those feelings surfacing; Brittany incinerated them like confidential emails that would never see the light of day. Unfair how much lighter she felt now the weight was gone; how lighter didn't translate into better.

Unfair she wanted Jack to message her. Unfair when her comm buzzed and he did and Brittany didn't respond. She wouldn't. For all extensive purposes, he was dead.

The message: 'I'm sorry about Friday. Can we talk?'

Brittany deleted it. She took over hiring the interns for her expanding department. They were all better than Jack. Autonomous.

No longer known as the wizard, or the witch, or the prophet; around the office, Brittany was the new dictator.

The Partners loved it. Diamond hailed as both generous and a genius got his kudos and a raise. For her loyalty, she got his job.

Everything was going to plan. Except for Jack.

Another message. 'Please. I just need to understand what happened. How we can go back.'

There was no going back. Only forward.

Deleted.

'I miss training. I miss talking. I miss you.'

Deleted.

'Are you ever going to respond?'

Deleted.

'I don't know what to do. Everything feels wrong. Please. How do I mean nothing to you? How can you cut me off so completely. Are you really that much of a shark?'

Deleted.

It was unfair that now that it was over, she wanted to talk to Flint about it. Wanted to tell him everything—the training, the power, the gym, Jack's desperation, her guilt.

She didn't. Brittany stayed superior, because before, she'd still cared about outcomes. Now Brittany didn't care about anything, and the rewards kept coming anyway.

They were looking to buy a real estate. Outgrown the rental, she compiled a compendium of open house dates when Flint came in. Still in uniform. Set his bag down.

"Hey," she said without looking up. "Long day?"

"Yeah." He sat down across from her. "Do you have a minute?"

She looked up. His face was careful. Serious.

"Of course. I have so much time now." She closed her laptop. "What's wrong?"

He pulled something from his jacket. A photo. Set it on the table between them.

Jack. ID photo from Meridian. Younger. Long neck.

"Did you know him?"

She had to pee. "He was an intern. A long time ago. Let go. Not hungry enough for Meridian. Why? What happened?"

"We got the report this morning. He was found in his apartment three days ago. They're saying he rotted. The body wasn't recoverable. Has since been cremated. I'm sorry."

She stared at the photo. At Jack's face. At his callow smile.

"I worked with him," she said. Voice steady. "Briefly. I mentored him for a few months. He wasn't right for Meridien." She handed the photo back to him.

Flint searched it for something he hoped not to find. "Do you want to sat more?"

"Yeah. No. Just—shocked. He was so young."

"I know. It's awful." He squeezed her shoulder. "I'm sorry you had to find out like this. I'm here for you. You know that."

"Yes. Yes, I do want to talk about it. Can we sit at the table?"

"Sure."

They did. The picture between them. "Do you remember when you asked if I had an affair?"

"Yes."

She took a breath. "Those late nights. I was mentoring him."

"Oh, okay. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Jack was talented in many ways, but the truth was he treaded water. Everyone at Meridien is the best. I thought I could help. I couldn't. I think my tutorship pushed him over the edge. He realized he wasn't a right fit. It must have left a big hole in him, I didn't realize was there. I thought he would bounce back." She almost said it, 'Like you do.'

"Oh my god. Baby, I'm so sorry. On so many levels." He hugged her. Flint said, "That must have been so hard for you."

That night they had sex. They had a lot of sex. Which was better than no sex. It was fine. Efficient.

After, before Flint rolled over to sleep he said, "I'll never doubt you. I promise. I love you."

"I love you too."

He fell asleep quickly. His breathing even. Peaceful.

Brittany stared at the ceiling.

Jack was dead. And he'd rotted. Alone in his apartment.

While she'd deleted his messages.

She felt nothing. That was the problem. She should feel guilty. Should feel grief. Should feel something.

But she was optimal. Supreme. Besides him, outstanding returns and brighter future. And yet, in the morning Brittany woke up dizzy and nauseous.

"You okay?" Flint asked. Already dressed for work.

"I don't know. I feel—" She ran to the bathroom. Vomited.

Flint was there. Holding her hair. Getting her water.

"Should I call in? Stay home with you?"

"No. I'm fine. Probably just—something I ate."

But it continued. Three days. A week.

She went to the doctor. Took the test.

Positive.

The doctor smiled. "Congratulations. Looks like you're about eight weeks along."

Eight weeks. Right around when Jack had stopped messaging. Right around when he'd probably died.

The math was Flint's. The timing was Jack's ghost.

In a ride, she sat numb. Too close to the sun, she called Flint, looking at her shoes. "I have news."

"Yeah?"

"I'm pregnant."

Silence. Then: "Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"Oh my god. Brittany. That's—that's amazing. I'm coming home. I'll leave right now."

"You don't have to—"

"I'm coming home."

She just barely beat him. He picked her up. Spun her around. Kissed her.

"We're having a baby. Holy shit. We need to call your mom. We need champagne; wait you can't drink. No drinking, no sushi. We need to make a list. We have so much to prepare for."

They called Mom. She was on a cruise. Halfway around the world. Living her autonomous life. "Oh sweetheart! That's wonderful! I'm so happy for you!"

Everyone was happy. Everyone was so happy. Except Brittany.

She stood in their bathroom that night. Stared at her reflection in the mirror.

"I guess I am a mother now."

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE THING ABOUT PORTFOLIOS

Mom passed away before Max was born. Overseas, she had a new life. She was happy. Brittany wasn't prepared for it. No one, she imagined, ever was.

Didn't think she could get any colder, but she did. To compensate, she and Flint got married. They had been postponing for too long; now it was a regret that Mother wasn't there.

Bonus: they didn't need a big reception. They didn't have people like that. They had each other. Held a small cocktail gathering for their respective superiors, got the certificate at city hall, and then a nice dinner.

Then Max came.

At first, it was a blessing. Not for the life they created and how happy it made Flint. It was easy. Another chore and responsibility trading no sleep that she was accustomed to. In fact, she preferred her days booked like they used to be pre-Jack.

The business, the solutions, Brittany fed on them and then there weren't any problems. Max was a good kid. Quiet, intuitive, and independent. He observed and picked up new skills fast.

The older he got, the easier life became, again. It was disappointing.

At four years old, the first red flag. Brittany picked him up from preschool on a Tuesday. The teacher, Mrs. Joy, young and earnest, pulled her aside.

"Mrs. Carver, I need to talk to you about an incident today."

It was a relief to have something she could fix, focus on, and straighten into place. "What happened?"

"Another boy pushed Max and took his toy during playtime." Mrs. Joy's face carried genuine worry. "Max just... stood there. Didn't cry. Didn't react. Just watched with this—look."

"What kind of look?"

"Like he was filing it away. Like he was taking notes." Mrs. Joy hesitated. "Most kids his age would cry or hit back or tell a teacher. Max did none of those things. He just... accepted it. Like he didn't care enough to be upset. Like it was happening to someone else."

"I'll talk to him. It's nothing to worry about. Thank you for the time."

In the ride, she looked at Max in the rearview mirror. Four years old. Steady blue mood moss. Watching the world pass by with that calculating expression she recognized from her own childhood reflections.

"Max, you know you can defend yourself, right? If someone hurts you."

He looked at her. Dark eyes processing. Filing away. "Okay."

No emotion. Just—data received. Instruction catalogued.

"If someone pushes you or takes your things, you're allowed to make them stop. You understand?"

"Yes."

That night when she told Flint, he acted emotionally. He sat Max down and tried to explain kindness. Waving his hands everywhere. About benefit of the doubt. Using words over violence; showing a fist and an open hand.

Max gave Flint the same look. Processing.

Seven years later, the school called.

"Mrs. Carver? This is Willowbrook Academy. Director Laurel speaking."

"What, you don't have an assistant?"

Her bitch face evolved; sometime, Brittany laughed. She was just a bitch.

"Because of the sensitive nature and the severity of why I'm calling, I thought it prudent to reach you directly. We need you to come in for a meeting regarding Max. He was involved in an incident."

"What kind of incident?"

"It's better discussed in person. Can you come in today?"

Brittany cleared her afternoon. Flint couldn't be reached, on the job.

At Willowbrook, the private school she wished she'd gone to as a kid. The giant sunflower as glorious as she remembered. A symbol of prosperity and better times ahead.

Director Laurel's office smelled like wood polish. The minimalism didn't feel so empty on the dotted line. She rose behind a desk in the far back, assured, with her additional score display on her mood moss showing 99.9 blue, and waited for Brittany to walk over.

Ridiculous brown hair shooting straight up like a stake. Some white hairs intertwined by design reminded her of Lance, and Brittany laughed. She hadn't thought about him in a while.

As she approached, Ms. Vega stood from the seat next to what would be hers. A small person. Blue. Both of them built their confidence on a house of cards.

Laurel moved in front of her desk. "Mrs. Carver."

"Brittany, please." She smiled with her bitch face on. "How can you help?"

"Thank you for coming." Laurel extended her hand and she shook it. "We understand Mr. Carver couldn't make it?"

"Work emergency. Saving lives. Keeping the peace and District Six blue." Brittany offered Ms. Vega her hand and she shook it. "I'm here on behalf of both of us."

"Of course. Please take a seat." Director Laurel picked up a sheet off the desk as Brittany sat, folding a leg over the other. "You don't seem like someone who likes to bullshit, so I'll give you the facts. Max stabbed a student with a pen. Tommy Hendricks. Tommy agrees with Max that he verbally provoked him, but the severity of the retaliation is what we would like to speak on."

"What can you tell me about Tommy Hendricks?"

Ms. Vega shifted uncomfortably. "Tommy has been... difficult this year. We want to be up front about his history and how it contributed to this incident. His emotional scores have been unstable. We were considering intervention before this incident."

"And Max—I assume we all know that Max has perfect scores?"

"Yes. Throughout the entire incident. Before, during, and after." Ms. Vega's voice carried something Brittany couldn't identify.

Not admiration, not concern; a wet disbelief. "That's part of what's troubling. Most students would show some emotional response—anger during confrontation, guilt after. Max expressed nothing."

Director Laurel typed on her desk and a hologram of security footage illuminated. Tommy approaching Max's desk. Words exchanged.

He put his hand on Max's desk like a dog claiming territory. Max didn't so much as flinch.

Max, slowly, deliberately, picked up a pen from his desk and then—fast, precise—buried it in Tommy's hand. The scream.

Even in the recording, director and teacher winced. Max stepped back to give Tommy space to thrash about, then sat back down at his desk. Mood moss: unwavering blue.

"He defended himself," Brittany heard herself say. Voice steady. Analytical. "Tommy was the aggressor. Max responded appropriately to assault."

"Verbal, and responded with a weapon," Director Laurel closed the hologram and spoke carefully with her hands. "Causing injury that required medical intervention."

"Are we going to have a problem?" Brittany met Laurel's eyes, then the teacher's. "Where were you while this was happening?"

"I was called away by the teacher next door. I cannot be responsible—"

"But my son can? Max maintained perfect emotional control throughout an assault. That's not concerning. That's exceptional that anyone can survive under this lawless sun flower."

Ms. Vega and Director Laurel exchanged looks.

"Mrs. Carver," Ms. Vega said gently, "the lack of emotional response. The calculated nature of his defense. It's a pattern."

"Mrs. Carver, we're trying to help—"

Brittany unfolded her leg. "Then help by addressing Tommy Hendricks's behavioral issues that created a hostile learning environment instead of punishing my son for having to respond in it appropriately to a bully with a rap sheet."

She stood. "I think we are done here. Max will be at school tomorrow on time. And my check book will be ready for Parent Night. There needs to be some improvements around here. Thank you for the time." Brittany left.

Found Max in the waiting area. Blue. Not an ounce of worry on his face.

Why would there be? He was her son.

"Let's go home," she said.

In the ride, silence. He looked out the window.

"Did I do something wrong?" Max asked quietly.

"No." Firm. Definitive. "You defended yourself. That's never wrong."

"They said I hurt him too much. But he wouldn't learn otherwise."

"They're wrong. When someone attacks you, you make them stop. However you need to. That's survival. We're Carvers. We survive." She glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "You understand that, right?"

"Yes."

Blue without fluctuation. Calm without effort. Acceptance without question.

Flint wanted a makeup meeting. She didn't have the time for that. The call from the precinct confused her when a woman answered.

“This is Chief Thorne.”

Weight settled in her chest. "What happened?"

"A student at Willowbrook Academy transformed. Your husband stopped him."

Brittany's breath came in controlled counts. One, two, she said, "What about Max?"

"Max saved another student. Cassandra. He is a hero. Safe, at the school too with Hollis. We have it all cleaned up and on lockdown aside from family members we are just now allowing to come through. That said, we would like you to come get Max."

"I'm coming."

The giant sunflower still looked beautiful. She remembered thinking that, and Max didn't look afraid. He wasn't scared about what happened or worried about Flint.

She didn't see the point in waiting at the hospital. Flint would need surgery and they would call when it was done. Max agreed.

Brittany found an odd peace in their calmness. Not a doubt in their minds that Flint would come home. He always bounced back. Flint always survived.

They were Carvers. That's what they did.

Flint came home with a black cast, couple patches; good as new. His smile didn't flinch.

~

"Please?" Max asked at breakfast. "Blue Wilt is the best band in the world." He asked for so little, it was hard to say no.

"Who are you going with?" Brittany asked.

"Cass. Cassandra. From school."

"The one you saved."

He scratched his head. "Yeah."

"Okay," she said. "You can go."

His face lit up. Genuine joy breaking through. Then back to blue. Back to control.

"Thank you!"

That evening, she rode with him to the concert venue. "Message when you're ready for pickup."

"I will."

He got out. Joined the stream of teenagers flowing toward the entrance. Blue Wilt merchandise everywhere. Purple and black. Songs about being special. About not letting the world make you small. Max disappeared into the crowd.

She didn't know why—she did know why, but Brittany didn't plan on doing it. On staying for the whole concert like her damn father. She rolled down the window, tapped the side of the ride like it was Right Sock, and smiled.

Happy for her son. Then her comm flashed—the Whale pulled through—and she could help her son show off for his girlfriend.

Flint was on security. They were all here. It was an odd thing, how they could each experience this moment entirely differently.

The message came through. "Mom, we won. We're able to go backstage and meet the band." Her job had perks. "The security said you can come backstage too."

Brittany laughed. Might as well.

Her name was put on the list. A security guard guided her through the maze. "Through here. Max is waiting." The guard knocked twice on a door. Opened it. Gestured her inside.

The dressing room was mirrors reflecting mirrors, clothes racks and wigs, bright lights and makeup scattered. The particular smell of performance—sweat and hairspray and powder.

Max sat in a chair in the center. Around him, crunches and teenagers she didn't know.

A girl with purple-black hair—Dahlia Mortis, the singer—smiled at her with warmth that somehow didn't feel as rehearsed as it should, even given her profession.

"You must be Max's mom! I've heard so much about you."

"Thanks. I love your music. Thank you for taking the time to meet my son."

Above them, loud pops. Fireworks. Dozens of them.

"Right on schedule," Dahlia said with satisfaction.

The door closed behind Brittany with a soft click.

The security guard who'd led her here dissolved. Into spiders. Thousands of them. Scattering under the door, into cracks, impossible and mundane. She had to take a shit.

Brittany's chest went cold. She looked at Max. Her mind fuzzed.

"What is this about?"

"Sorry," Max said.

She wanted to laugh, if not cry, that she never thought to ask. It reminded her of Jack saying,

"You just now realized? Never mind."

Like piss down her leg. And then everything went—

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE THING ABOUT INVESTMENTS IS

A purple light brought Brittany lurching from a rotted nightmare, waving her arms. Confused. She rose. IV. Machines beeped. She ripped free, stumbled, and fell into a wall as nurses rushed to her side. This didn't look like a hospital. Curtained room.

A conference room.

"Brittany, it's okay. Just calm down. Let's get you back to bed. Everything will make sense in time."

They told her she was in an accident. Parent Night. The entire school. Hundreds of people. Hospitals overran. They were at the precinct. They told her to wait.

She knew a conference room. Stationed at the end of it, a small table on the left with flowers and fortune frogs. Before she could finish processing, Flint was at her side.

His look brightening on her never got old. It didn't help with the confusion. She didn't remember anything up to being in the parking lot for the concert, and it terrified her like it must have terrified Dad.

She stammered. "I was gone. Where's Max? What happened? I don't remember..."

"Hey, hey. It's okay. Don't stress yourself about it right now. Max is fine. Asleep. Just like you were. Just like I was. It's okay. He will wake up. Orient yourself."

"But Max—"

"The doctor will be here shortly. They'll explain everything. I promise."

He kissed her forehead. It settled her.

She knew how to delegate, and it settled him. Flint gestured to the side table. "A lot of people came by. A lot of people love you. Look."

"Here." Flint grabbed a fortune frog off the table full of expensive flowers from work and get-well-soon cards, a bunch of bullshit; handed it to her.

Brittany held it with both hands. Was he testing her?

It stuck out the tongue and her fortune.

Brittany cried. It was so funny, handing it back.

The universe was hilarious. Felt bad for Flint's face growing cold, realizing: things were about to change for always. And she needed time to think.