

# DYSTOPIA NOW

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PROTEST SONGS IN THE KEY OF LIFE

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Creative Conflict Book Publishing

Penticton, British Columbia

**If music is a gun, whose finger is on the trigger?**

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**W**hat a peculiar thing.  
It felt incredible, like being a spirit that could step into whatever consciousness she wished. Sophia wondered if she had control of the eyes that she was looking through.

She tried to look up at the sky, but nothing happened. The girl's eyes stayed glued onto her cousin's face.  
Maybe if Sophia tried harder.

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### **Praise For Dystopia Now**

"A reminder that music can and should change the world. Great characters and really exciting."

"When I find an author I like, I like to read EVERYTHING they have. More than interest, I cannot wait for the next book — there is a huge market of people that will appreciate these books, written by a true storyteller."

—B.J. McIntosh

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"Intriguing characters and engaging plot. Can't put it down — looking forward to the next book!"

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"A fearsome first novel from a compelling new voice. Read it."

—Stephen Small

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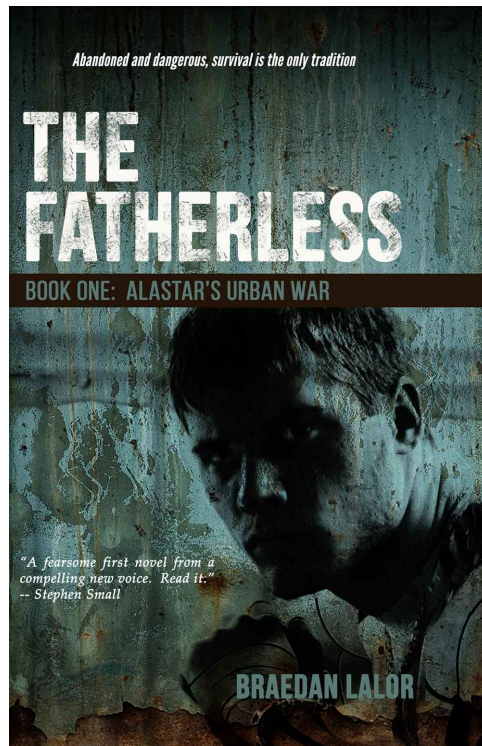
Not every note should resonate.

Alastar, Sophia, and Demsie, find themselves at high elevation and near to death. But in the cosmic plan of it all — worlds intersect and new struggles emerge. Amongst so many mysteries, Sophia has an opportunity to make a difference in the outside world, a world compellingly foreign to her.

It's 1992 in Los Angeles and Sophia finds herself high above the Sunset Strip, the epicenter of rock and roll for the twentieth century. As impossible as it seems, she ends up joining the ragamuffin lives of Cadence and Luvvi Dove — two young rockers whose love for each other and compassion for their friends draws them away from the world of songwriting and lyrics, into the dark underbelly of society's secret controls.

Billionaires and Delta force soldiers, shady corporations, bikers, and supermodels, this MK Ultra Paranormal Dystopian thriller walks you straight into the rave — where protest songs in the key of life have more power than cold lead.

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# Books by Braedan Lalor

## **Covert Existence Series:**

The Fatherless  
The Resilient  
The Breakable

## **Covert Existence Related:**

Dystopia Now

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**Dedication:**

To Shay — we always thought that you might grow up to be a rock star but enough time has passed to see that you will grow to be something better. It has been my pleasure to parent you and to witness the many expressions of brilliance that you always seem to find within yourself.

You are a mystery and a wonder, and that is never a bad thing.

## Definitions: (in the author's words)

**Dystopia** – Opposite of Utopia

**Now** – Today

**MK Ultra** – A secret U.S. program that involved abuse of children, declassified by the government under embarrassing circumstances that has recently been popularized in modern cinema. While only the bastards that conducted such research know what it was all about I am pretty sure that it did not give anyone superpowers (as is suggested by the Netflix series Stranger Things and the overly hip American Ultra movie.) I'm speculating, but the so-called research was more likely about using trauma to break down psychological defenses in order to circumvent the person's will — in other words, **mind control**.

## Foreword

Welcome — These ideas are messy.

If when you look outside today you happen to see rainbows and unicorns and cotton candy coated bunny rabbits, I would hate for this book to destroy that illusion for you. While the main characters are noble and willing to be shamelessly adventurous in order to do the right thing, this story is also deeply reflective of the world that the author sees — in all of its wonders and decay.

I strive to summon from the earth characters that breath and speak, and laugh and scream in bigger than life scenes, which are as improbable as they are relatable — but this book is not **The Fatherless**. It reveals a dystopia. While my writings will never intentionally exploit the dark side of humanity, in order to speak truth some things need to be touched upon.

Look around, Reader. We live in a fallen world, but by no means a hopeless one. It is my wish for these tales of intrigue and survival to become a beacon of hope and eventually — roadmaps to redemption. As in many of the great science fiction works, there are sober warnings of many things that we hope will never come to pass.



“Come we go chant down Babylon!  
Men see their dreams and aspiration  
-a Crumble in front of their face,  
and all of their wicked intention  
To destroy the human race.”  
—Bob Marley

“It is perfectly possible for a man to be out of prison and yet not free—to be under no physical constraint and yet be a psychological captive, compelled to think, feel and act as the representatives of the national state, or of some private interest within the nation wants him to think, feel and act. — To him the walls of his prison are invisible and he believes himself to be free.”  
—Aldous Huxley, *A Brave New World Revisited*

“Within the next generation I believe that the world's leaders will discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government than clubs and prisons, and that the lust for power can be — completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude, as by flogging them and kicking them into obedience.”  
—Aldous Huxley in a letter to George Orwell, 1949

“Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted— because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief.”  
—Frantz Fanon

“Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
signifying nothing.”  
—W. Shakespeare (*Macbeth* Act 5)

“We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together,  
Headpiece filled with straw.”  
—T.S. Eliot

“Our dried voices, when we whisper together are quiet and meaning-  
less as wind in dry grass”  
—T.S. Eliot

“I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold,  
all is vanity and a chasing after wind.”  
—Ecclesiastes

“Ain't that close to love?  
Well, ain't that poster love?  
Well, it ain't that Barbie doll  
Her hearts been broken just like you,  
All night, you want the young American.”  
—David Bowie

“I read the news today oh boy  
about a lucky man who made the grade  
and though the news was rather sad  
well I just had to laugh.”  
—John Lennon

“War is preferable to subjugation.”  
Colonel Tom Ryan  
Delta Force  
Fictitious

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## Another Beginning

Pain sliced through Sophia's hands as she scrambled up the jagged rock face. The pain that she was feeling didn't matter to her though, not as much as her friend's life did.

Looking up, she could see that Demsie had somehow gotten stuck above her. Dems had been attempting to haul herself over the cliff's edge, onto the safety of a shelf. Sophia watched as her friend's fatigue began turning into desperation, followed by helpless tears.

Above, Demsie was straining to reach that flat ledge, but she was also muttering about her own weakness. After all of the running that they had done to survive through that incredibly cruddy day, Demsie's strength had finally failed her.

If Sophia were being honest, she was feeling the exact same thing herself.

But survival was rarely about honesty.

"Demsie — Go!" Sophia screamed as hard as she could at the gentle girl who was perched above her, shaking. Circumstances had caused Sophia to love that girl as a sister. Sophia watched as her sister made a quick glance downward.

There was both regret and apology in her deep blue eyes. "No!" Sophia yelled out. But Sophia wasn't even sure what it was that she was saying no to. The whole situation, most likely.

Deep down, Sophia refused to accept the defeat that the look on Demsie's face suggested, and she was prepared to back her refusal up with all the fight Sophia had left in her.

Demsie began straining again to pull herself up. She was making no progress at all, though. Sophia climbed towards her, handhold by handhold, to a level just below her friend.

"I don't know —" Sophia heard Demsie say through ragged breaths. "I can't."

"You can." Sophia ascended to a place right below Demsie, or as high as the terrain would allow her to go anyways. Their bodies were partly touching. Sophia felt that she might be close enough, but she still had a

problem. Sophia's left foothold was pathetically weak, and her right foot didn't even have a proper hold at all, just a smear. So she wouldn't have even close to enough leverage to successfully boost her friend.

It was a problem.

Sophia scanned the rock face, looking for better holds for either herself or Demsie. There was nothing that was close to them, though. With the holds that were present, Sophia could have reached the shelf on her own, but there wasn't any chance that she could do it with Demsie in the way. The only usable grip was a vertical crack that Sophia might have been able to use for one of her hands. But that still left the problem of boosting Demsie's weight.

Sophia knew from experience that the situation would likely need an unconventional solution. What would Alastar have done, in a similar circumstance? Something involving grand explosions and a forty-foot free fall, no doubt.

Demsie laughed spontaneously, her voice light as ever. "That's for sure." She said.

Sophia felt her friend's simple joy filling the airspace between them. And she smiled at how lucky she was to have ever been given a friend like Demsie.

Unfortunately Sophia's hands, like Demsie's, were fatigued to the point of being useless. Not only that, but the blood from her cuts was making it hard to grip the rock face. The wind was blowing cold on that exposed face, but she still had to help her ally. Sophia saw one chance, and if it worked they would gain the rock shelf. If it didn't work though, Sophia might be quickly introduced to the planet earth, at terminal velocity.

Sophia stuck her exhausted hand into a smooth jug that had formed inside the vertical crack. She plunged it in deep enough that the edges of the rock tightened around her hand. Then she jammed it in even deeper and flexed her hand into a fist.

The unforgiving edges of the rock pressed back into her bones and skin, taunting her to loosen her fist. But Sophia kept her fist tight despite the pain, knowing that her fist would soon be the only thing keeping her and maybe Demsie, from falling to their deaths. Once Sophia had her limb jammed securely into the crack like a wedge, she shifted her foot position.

The skin on her fist was already protesting the movement, but Sophia knew that the worst was still to come. She tucked her right leg up in front

of her, and managed to maneuver that leg over the forearm of her jammed hand. For Sophia that was the point of no return. If her jammed hand lost its grip, Sophia would fall to the ground back first, like a seedpod in autumn. A gust of wind buffeted her, and the chill of it reminded her of how high they had climbed.

Sophia refocused herself onto the task. Then she pushed up with her leg, levering against her own jammed forearm, using the power of her thigh. It was a rock climber's technique that they called figure four. Sophia could feel the skin on her already raw hand, complaining about the added weight. But she knew that the weight of her own body wouldn't be the half of it.

Sophia took a breath. "You —" She spoke mostly to herself as she positioned her hand on Demsie's rump, knowing that what came next would definitely hurt. "— You, will!"

Sophia screamed at the pain that lanced through her body as she pressed Demsie's weight upwards. It wasn't the pain that had caused the oracle to scream though — it was anger. Anger that they had ever been put into this situation.

Even though it was the only thing that she had ever known, Sophia knew that children should not have to fight every day of their lives, in order to survive. In fact she knew from books that many children in the outside world spent their time doing frivolous things, like playing Kick-the-Can, or Geronimo. But not Station residents, because they were special. Special enough to have been chosen to live out their young years contesting for their own survival in this unmentioned ring of Dante's hell.

Not really, but it was hellish enough.

Sophia strained and eventually, she felt Demsie's weight lift off of her hand. But for some reason in that moment, Sophia had a hard time focusing her vision. She tried but she couldn't even confirm that her friend was all right. Sophia tried to get her bearings, but somehow her world had turned. She was just a seedpod now, ready to fall to the ground. Another gust of wind struck her and Sophia felt her fist shifting inside the crack. There were spots in front of her eyes and that was the clue that made Sophia's mind catch on to what was happening.

She was blacking out.

Well, she'd had a pretty good run. Having reached thirteen years old, Sophia had made it a lot farther than most — especially for an oracle. Her main regret was that she wouldn't get to say goodbye to her boy, Alastar.

Of course if Alastar had been there, Sophia wouldn't likely die, because he had a way of always keeping her safe. Others died, but he always chose for Sophia to live.

Soon the spots were completely gone and there was just a tunnel of black, and very far away, a pinhole of light.

That was when Sophia felt a gawd-awful tug on her hair. "Quit it!" Sophia yelled, not really knowing why. Then she felt a hand on her own rump, pushing her upwards.

"Pull, Demsie!" The voice below her said. "Grab her collar."

Sophia felt a hand gripping her from behind her neck.

"Sophia!" It was Alastar's voice. "Push with your left foot, I'll support it."

Still disoriented, Sophia did as she was told. In these situations she always did what her boy told her to. If she did, she would always live.

Sophia pressed up with her foot, and as she did so, she felt Demsie's hands reeling her in, pulling her up onto the shelf, with Alastar pushing from underneath.

"I love you both." Sophia said as her vision gradually cleared, feeling the hard safety of the rocky shelf underneath her.

Sophia laughed as she felt the joy of Demsie's meager weight collapsing onto her. "We love you too." Demsie said, giggling as she hugged her friend.

Sophia turned to see her boy rising up over the ledge. His face was pale and his expression was grave, but he tried to smile for her as he crawled for few small steps, and then collapsed upon them both. "Group hug." He muttered.

Demsie's giggling stopped. Then Demsie screamed.

The scream was because her sister would have sensed, exactly what Sophia was.

"Too much blood!" Demsie said. "There's far too much outside of him!" Demsie quickly rolled Alastar off of her back and onto the ground beside them. Then she began tearing away Alastar's clothes, with tears streaming down her face. "What did they do to you! What did you let them do to you?"

Instantly Sophia was up on her knees and beside her friend, helping to put pressure on Alastar's wounds. Sophia's eyes were drawn to her boy's face as a rogue smile cracked Alastar's lips. "I didn't so much let them,



Dems. As they just helped themselves."

Sophia could tell that Alastar wasn't too far from blacking out himself. "Demsie, look in Alastar's pack for a med kit. I've got his wounds." Sophia kept firm pressure on the deep cut that was on Alastar's shoulder, as well as the arrow wound through his side.

Demsie released the buckles on Alastar's backpack and pulled it out from under him. The back of his head hit the rock behind him with a dull thump. "How did he ever make that climb with wounds like this?" Demsie was muttering, but her fast hands were still rifling through the pack for a med kit, just as they should have been. "It's here!" Demsie said, then she turned towards Alastar. "Did you pack the kitchen sink, as well?" For some reason Demsie began laughing. But quickly the laughter became tears and Sophia and Demsie spent the next fifteen minutes doing life support, and some really shoddy surgery on that breezy ledge.

"Now what do we do?" Demsie said to Sophia. "He can't walk and we'll freeze to death if we stay on the ledge."

"We'll walk" Alastar's eyes popped open. He was looking at Demsie.

"You can't walk."

"I can."

"No, you can't." Demsie was trying to use her stern voice on Alastar. As though her insistence would make any difference to a psychopath.

Alastar smiled, and suddenly he was beautiful. For reason's that Sophia herself would never be able to explain, she bent down and kissed him gently beside his lips. It was a funny thing to do but Alastar didn't seem to mind.

In fact, he rolled onto his side and looked squarely at Sophia. "With that kiss, Milady, I feel my strength returning."

Demsie's eyes popped wide open. "What, really?" Momentary confusion. Then Demsie seemed to sense Alastar's game, and she grinned widely, which soon turned into an open mouthed laugh. "Well in that case, I can add in some kisses of my own."

Demsie leaned over and planted several smacking kisses all around Alastar's head and back as he gently warded her off with his hand. Sometimes Sophia found herself marveling at Alastar's willingness to accept so much of Demsie's weirdness. This was one of those times. But her boy was always gentle with Demsie, and he even chuckled a bit.

"Stop kissing and help me up. I know a place where we can go."

Getting Alastar onto his feet was like trying to balance a life sized,

muscle bound noodle on its end. It was a good thing that Alastar was still far from full grown, because if he had been grown, they would have never gotten him standing. Once he was up though, he did almost half the work of walking, leaving the bulk of his weight for Sophia and Demsie to deal with.

"Is it far?" Demsie said.

Sophia looked at her friend, and knew that despite Demsie not having an arrow wound in her side, her exhaustion left her little more to give.

"We're close." Alastar said. "Along this ledge, over that rock and then the terrain smooths into a rough trail."

As a team they made it over the rock, but Sophia could feel both of her partners weakening. As they stumbled along the rough trail, buffeted by chill winds, Sophia tried her best to carry more of the load. Eventually it seemed that Demsie was just getting in the way, though.

Sophia called a halt.

"Demsie, you take the backpack and leave Alastar to me." Sophia said. Then she repositioned Alastar so that he was draped over her back, wrapping his arms around her from behind. He was heavy, but she could take more of his weight that way.

Demsie was looking at Sophia as she was hauling the backpack onto her shoulder. Demsie's eyes were sparkling with mischief. Her sister knew that despite the burden and the obvious peril, Sophia actually loved the feeling of Alastar hugging her from behind.

"Eyes front, Soldier." Sophia said to Demsie. "You go first."

Demsie smiled and flashed a wink from behind her blond bangs, the mischief still evident.

"It's close." Alastar said the words softly into Sophia's ear. "Almost there." Then he added, "If we're lucky, they won't find us."

Alastar's words reawakened the anger that had for so long been steeping in Sophia's heart. *If we're lucky*, he had said. When could Station residents ever consider themselves *lucky*? They shouldn't have to be fighting for their lives against the other kids, or trying to survive on the peak of some freezing cold mountain. Alastar should not have a hole in his body and barely enough blood in him to keep him conscious, and Sophia shouldn't be aching to the point of failure. Meanwhile, if their enemies did manage to follow them up the mountain this far, they would find a convenient trail of both Sophia's and Alastar's blood, to lead them towards

wherever Sophia and her allies found to hole up.

Eventually, Sophia couldn't support Alastar's weight by herself, and their progress slowed into insignificance.

"Stop," Alastar said. "Sophia, you need help. Demsie, you had your chance to rest, come and help Sophia. It's just up ahead."

Demsie positioned herself next to them and Sophia shifted Alastar's load so that Demsie could take some of the weight again. They must have looked ridiculous, staggering forward on a twisting path, leaning up against each other like a loose pile of sticks.

Alastar laughed as they inched forward.

"We are hollow men  
We are stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw."

"Who are you quoting, Alastar Daivie?" Sophia said.

"T.S. Eliot." Alastar said. "It seemed fitting."

"I don't get the headpiece thing." Demsie said.

"It's not perfect, Dems. But neither is the men part." Alastar said.

"I wish we were men, then maybe we could carry you."

"You two are far better than any men I've ever known."

Alastar's words surprised Sophia, causing her to look at him more carefully. He hadn't even been lying. Alastar had actually meant his words.

The three of them made their way forward, balanced as they were, until they came to a rough crack in the rock. "This is it." Alastar said.

Sophia guided them down into the darkness of the rock. "How far in does it go?" But Alastar never answered. "Alastar?" His legs seemed to have stopped moving. "Alastar?"

No response.

"Demsie, we need to set him down." They lowered Alastar onto the floor of the darkened cave. It felt better than Sophia could have dreamed, to be able to offload Alastar's weight. "I'll check on him, Dem's. Why don't you go see if you can find us a light source and do some recon. I think we've got to get him deeper into this cave. Here, we're all sure to freeze to death by morning."

Demsie rifled through the pack before setting out. It seemed like she wasn't gone long, but when she came back it was with a torch in her hand, and a smile on her face. "I found light, and a sort of bed. We should move him, there's less wind deeper into the cave."

"How far?" Sophia asked, looking down at Alastar.

"We can drag him." Demsie said, by way of an answer.

"Okay."

Ten minutes later they had Alastar situated on a rough bed that some previous tenant of the cave, had constructed long ago. There was a rock shelf, holding clay pots, mostly broken. Two rocks had been pushed into place to serve as chairs, and there were even cracks in the cave's wall that could hold a torch, to light up their little chamber.

There wasn't much else to it. A rough fire pit, a few sticks of wood, and a deep coating of dried mulch on the floor of the cave. Everywhere they walked, the ground crunched under their feet. It wasn't any mystery where the mulch had come from. The walls and the roof of the cave were clearly covered with some sort of mushroom-like fungus. Over the centuries, the mulch must have formed out of that.

"We're going to need more wood." Demsie said.

Sophia knew it already. This night was going to get cold, and they might not survive without fire. "I'll go look for some, and for now you should save the torch." Sophia stood up. Her legs protested that she was daring to put them to work once again. "See if you can get some food and fluids into him."

Demsie nodded.

She would know what to do. There were meal bars and water in Alastar's backpack. Demsie was going to have to pre-chew the bars and mix them with water, and then feed them to Alastar like he was a baby bird.

Once Sophia was outside of the cave, she let go of all the emotional build-up that she'd been fighting to contain, just so that she wouldn't discourage her friends on the battlefield. Tears flowed readily down Sophia's cheeks as she surveyed the bald mountain face. She had as much chance of finding wood up there as she had of finding a comfortable ski chalet. The wood that they had found in their cave must have been packed in from lower down the mountain. Either way, Sophia had to try to find something.

Sophia spent a half hour looking for combustibles, but when the first snowflake fell from the sky, she knew that she should get herself back to the cave. Storms could blow in quickly at altitude. She went back a different way than she had come, still hoping that she might stumble upon some wood, but all the while knowing how unlikely such a thing would be.

But what she did find surprised her.

The body was old.

Perhaps not ancient, but based on what was left of the clothing and equipment, at least a few hundred years. The bones had been weathered over time and had become very nearly the color of the stones. Sophia had not seen the body so much as she had sensed that it was there. That was what drew her to him.

A warrior from a time far past, perhaps himself fleeing to the highest reaches of this bald peak, the same way that the three of them had. But this was the body of an adult, or an older child after their growth spurt.

Sophia wondered if the bones would burn.

With that idea in mind, she gathered up whatever bones she could find. Some of them were in a crack, buried in a thin patch of dirt. Digging into the cold ground felt like torment for Sophia's already raw and bleeding fingers, but she knew that every bone she found might be the thing that would end up keeping them alive until morning. It wasn't long before she found something that she knew wasn't bone.

That discovery energized Sophia's excavation, even though the snow had begun to blow in. She dug away at the edges of what she soon realized was a bundle of some sort. It was surprisingly big, despite the small patch of dirt that she had clawed it from.

Sophia had begun to shiver by the time she started back towards the cave where Demsie and Alastar would be waiting for her. The leather bundle was clutched in her hands along with her modest collection of human bones. Sophia could only hope that her discovery held something useful.

Sophia found the cave easily enough, but the weather that was brewing did nothing to elevate her mood. This was going to be a hard night, and if Alastar ended up dying from his blood loss or from exposure, Sophia was certain that she would throw herself off of the cliff. She was crying by the time she made it back to the dark recesses of the cave, and despite the fact that the torch was out, Demsie knew it.

"What's wrong?" Demsie said.

Instead of answering her friend honestly, Sophia used the opportunity to say what she wished were true. "We're going to live." Sophia said. "All three of us."

Sophia knew that Demsie wouldn't have any trouble following her. The two of them seemed to almost share a mind sometimes.

"I fed him and gave him water." Demsie said, trying to buoy Sophia up. "He seems to be sleeping soundly now, and his breathing is good." Then Demsie lit a match, which once again illuminated the cave.

Sophia was glad for the light. She put down her leather bundle, and her pile of bones beside the fire. Demsie's eyes were fixed, staring at the bones. "I don't like him." Demsie said.

Sophia walked over to her friend. "Then we'll burn him up." Sophia said before bending down and kissing Demsie on the top of her blond head. The match flickered out.

"Let's light the torch again and see what's in his leather bundle."

Demsie got up and walked to the far wall. She grabbed the torch from where it was stuck into the wall. In the dark Sophia heard her friend moving towards where the fire and the bed were. She must have found another crack, because another match lit up and then Sophia saw Demsie once again. She was lighting the torch.

That old torch took to light encouragingly, as if it still held plenty of animal lard, or oil or whatever it had been constructed out of. Sophia could feel the heat from the blessed thing, it was already starting to warm their little section of the cave.

Then Sophia went gently to work, unbundling the leather skin. She discovered that the bundle's covering, was actually fairly big. It had just been folded up a lot, and despite a few holes it would probably serve quite well as a blanket. No doubt that was what it had been originally used for. Inside the bundle, Sophia found only a few things. A rusted out old knife, with a thick wooden handle which would very likely be burned up before the sun rose tomorrow. Three wax candles which made Demsie smile ear to ear. "I love them," she whispered to Sophia. And a small scroll made out of odd paper. The scroll case had writing on it. Writing that both her and Demsie recognized.

"He was a Viking?" Demsie said.

"Maybe. His scroll is Norse, anyway." There was no way that any Station trained oracle would have misunderstood the symbol on the outside of the scroll case. It was Peorth, and sort of looked like a square 'C' shape with extra lines opening up the ends of the 'C.' Every oracle would recognize it because an oracle was trained to recognize the word prophesy in every known language. In the case of Peorth though, the meaning of the word was closer to destiny.

Beside the Peorth was another symbol that Sophia knew. It looked like two line drawn arrowheads, crossing in opposite directions so that they appeared almost as links in a chain. That word was Ng, which meant something like a cross between 'hero with potential,' or maybe 'man of consequence.' Sophia knew the word because of all the research that she had done into the child of Destiny.

"I don't know the third symbol." Sophia said. It was a simple vertical line with an arrow pointing up.

"I know it." Demsie said. "Its Tyr. It kinda means warrior, but it also can mean justice."

The two girls thought about the symbols for several minutes, discussing them only a little.

Then it happened. Realization crept into the room and wrapped around the oracles like a cold embrace. Sophia felt it gripping her, and she noticed that Demsie had started to shake. Those three little symbols were whispering their meaning to the girls, and their revelations were steeped in consequences that neither could deny.

Although it had already come upon them, Sophia could still try to resist it. So when Demsie snapped her head upwards and was preparing to scream at the roof of the cave, instead of joining in Sophia tackled her friend. Sophia muzzled Demsie by covering her mouth with her hand.

It took a while, but eventually Demsie settled, and Sophia felt comfortable with releasing her. Demsie looked up apologetically, but it was Sophia who spoke first. "I'm sorry for getting my blood on your face."

"Its okay." Demsie said, smiling. "I love your blood."

Sophia said nothing. Eventually they began readying their fuel sources so that they might keep their fire lit and survive the night. There wasn't much to work with. They threw the leather blanket onto Alastar, knowing that once they had tended to the camp, they would both end up huddled under it with him.

Alastar was still breathing easy, but the color of his skin sent a shiver of fear through Sophia. Demsie caught her staring. "Do you think it's about him?" Demsie said, meaning the scroll.

"I don't know. How unlikely would that even be?" Sophia meant the words as she said them, but it didn't stop her from reaching out and grabbing the scroll. She pulled it closer to her.

"We should try and read it." Demsie said.

"Are you kidding? How much Nordic do you know? It's a miracle that

we even read the markings on the case."

Demsie sighed. "We'll need an instructor to help us translate it."

The idea of it bristled Sophia. "And what are the chances that if we ask someone for help, that they don't just take the scroll and keep it for themselves?"

The question was rhetorical of course, so Demsie didn't bother with an answer. "We should get the fire going." Demsie said after a pause, then she drifted to a place beside Sophia and gave her a long hug.

"There's not enough fuel to last the night." Sophia stated the obvious.

Surprisingly, Demsie perked up at that. "Actually, when you were gone I ran a bit of an experiment." Demsie reached for a handful of the mulch that was littering the cave. "I tried burning some of this."

"It burns?" Sophia felt a surge of hope rush up, reddening her cheeks.

"The bigger chunks underneath kinda smolder. Slow, like peat moss. But I think it can help. It does throw some heat, and it lasts quite a while."

"Why are you just telling me this now?" Sophia said.

Demsie smiled. "The topic just came up." Then the two of them pulled out their knives and began mining the cave's floor to get at some of the bigger chunks of deposited fungus. After they had set some heavy bricks of the stuff burning, along with a bit of the wood and a Viking bone thrown in for good measure, they tucked themselves in under the blanket. They positioned one on each side of Alastar, resting their heads against the sides of his chest. In the quiet, Sophia listened for his heartbeat. Demsie knew what she was doing. She reached across Alastar's body and took Sophia's hand in her own.

The flickering light of their little fire danced on the fungus that covered the surfaces of the rock, and the sweet smell of the thin smoke which was filling the cave seemed intoxicating.

"Sophia," Demsie said. "You saved my life today."

"You saved mine too, Dems."

Demsie giggled. "And Alastar saved us both — about six times each."

It was true, he had fought hard and against all odds to keep the three of them alive. "And we're saving his right now." Sophia said, pressing her warmth closer to him.

"Yeah." It was all Demsie needed to say. The three of them were allies, and in the Station that was what allies did for each other.

Sophia reached a hand across Alastar's body to touch Demsie. After a



bit her friend started to tap out a rhythm with her foot and hum a little. The rhythm sounded familiar. With the way Demsie's mind worked though, it could be nearly anything. Sophia didn't recognize it until Demsie began to sing softly.

*Stop Children,  
what's that sound?*

*Everybody look - what's going down?*

Of course Sophia recognized the chorus to the famous Buffalo Springfield song. Stephen Stills had written it in the mid-sixties after the Sunset Strip street riot in L.A., soon after Buffalo Springfield had begun playing at the Whisky-a-Gogo. As one of the most significant songs of its generation, Sophia's Station instructors had made sure that she understood the importance of it.

"Dems, why are you singing that song?" Sophia whispered.

Her friend hummed a little longer, and then sleepily yawned her answer. "I-auooh, I don't know." Then Demsie smacked her lips drowsily.

She kept on humming, but Sophia knew that Demsie needed sleep, so she just lay still and listened to her friend.

*Paranoia strikes deep  
Into your life —*

Demsie's began to mumble and her humming got quieter and quieter until there was just the sound of her and Alastar's breathing.

Sophia watched the firelight playing up against the roof of the cave. Perhaps it was the long overdue warmth that was filling her, or maybe the exhaustion — or the sweet smell of the fungus bricks burning in their tiny fire, but as Sophia watched the lights above her she could have sworn that she was looking forward through time.

Her eyes grew heavy as she peered into a place that hadn't happened yet — A place where two girls who were best friends could spend all of their time laughing together, shopping, and making music. When they weren't busy flirting with awkward boys in gaudy shopping malls, they were talking. Sharing.

It was a warm place, with days of endless sunshine contrasted by the brightest nights. Nights populated by the eclectic denizens of lit neon clubs, sidewalk poets, and stretch limousines.

The girls were sisters but not actual sisters, just like Sophia and Dem-

sie. Sophia could feel those girl's bond — it was as strong as the links of a steel chain. Each of them needed the other one desperately, but for different reasons.

Sophia could see the more striking one, in the exact same manner as her sister could.

*Hmm, a step cousin actually.*

Sophia looked at her.

Through the girl's own eyes.

TWO

What a peculiar thing.

It felt incredible, like being a spirit that could step into whatever consciousness she wished. Sophia wondered if she had control of the eyes that she was looking through.

She tried to look up at the sky, but nothing happened. The girl's eyes stayed glued onto her cousin's face.

Maybe if Sophia tried harder.

Sophia willed the girl's eyes upwards with all of the determination that was in her. What happened, happened very quickly, and it was unlike anything that Sophia had ever experienced. She popped right out of the top of the girl and found herself looking down on them both from high above. Sophia was hovering up near the rooftops, looking down on the girls like some kind of dislocated ghost. It all happened so suddenly that the shock of it, along with that sudden gain in height, gave Sophia a psychological jolt.

Electric fear seared through her skull and Sophia jolted awake. She was sweating, and back in the cave. The glow of the fire had dimmed since she had fallen asleep and the cave had become chill. Sophia checked Alastar's breathing and then felt for his carotid pulse.

Steady.

Also, his bandages were still dry, which was incredible news. Knowing that Alastar was fine was enough to put Sophia at ease, so she turned her attention towards the fire.

It needed to be stoked.

Sophia tossed a little more wood onto the fire, a few bones, and a couple fresh bricks of the fungus. The air in the cave was chill. She crawled back under her part of the blanket and pressed herself up against Alastar again. It felt good to be warm. Sophia knew that she had to stay awake this time, though. She shouldn't have fallen asleep.

They were in hostile territory and their enemies were coming for them. There was no guarantee that the snow or this hiding place would prevent the older residents from finding them. And if they did find them,

the three of them alone wouldn't likely stand a chance.

Somebody needed to stay awake to act as a sentry until the morning. Alastar was barely alive and Demsie was exhausted, so that left her.

Sophia thought about the scroll. What a funny world they lived in where an ancient warrior could die, and leave a Norse relic that would be found on a mountaintop, by three orphaned children. What clever coincidences governed the universe that they found themselves in, and who would be author to these strands of fates?

As an oracle, Sophia knew that the connections between peoples could reach past geography. And that time itself could be traversed by those same connections. Space and time and people, and the ebbs and flows of fate's sweet tides.

Touching.

Touching softly, like quiet water lapping at a shore.

Like smoke.

Sophia's eyes felt heavy as she watched the smoke curl playfully upwards and then follow its weary path along the ceiling of the cave, before disappearing into some invisible gap in the rock. Sophia could feel Alastar's heart thumping against her cheek, beating steadily inside his chest. That sound was the truest comfort to her.

As the new fuel gave their fire some fresh strength, its light began to flicker and flash upon the ceiling. Sparkling with possibility, just as she had seen it before. It was beautiful. Like a Hollywood faerie fire, and the sweet smell of the fungus bricks had become a comfort to her —

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"Aw shit!" Cadence screamed and jumped backwards. In front of her she saw a long necked, turkey lookin' butcher boy assistant, with guilt in his eyes and a meat hammer in his hand. "This asshole just got blood all over my boob."

Everybody looked, except the girl beside Cadence, even though that girl was the one that Cadence had actually been speaking to.

Instead, her cousin Luvvi tried to melt away, backing into the crowd. But her cousin had no luck with her escape because Cadence knew her best friend well and anticipated the retreat. She reached out a quick hand to snake her cousin's sleeve, and then drew her friend back into a position

of solidarity.

Only after Cadence had successfully thwarted her cousin's desertion, did she turn back towards the seventeen year old. For two full months, this same guy had been flirting with Cadence's wrath. "What the hell, Dwight? You gonna just soak me in gore and then stand there, while carrion birds begin circling overtop me," Cadence had never been beyond using a bit of exaggeration when it helped bolster her argument. "Waiting to carry me away?"

Dwight couldn't find his words. Instead he seemed to just, stare back at her — shaking ever so slightly. Cadence could see tiny beads of perspiration, gradually forming on his brow.

Then Dwight swallowed hard.

But he still said nothing.

Cadence couldn't believe his lack of response. "That's it? You're just gonna say nada? Is that big lump on the front of your turkey throat, dysfunctional?" She squinted her eyes at him. "Or did you just swallow a radish."

Still no response from Dwight.

"Shit Dwight, I'm trying to be a lady here, but you better say or do somethin' right this F-ing second, or I just might hafta lose my shit on you." Cadence felt Luvvi's hand touch her shoulder. Then her cousin leaned in close, to whisper into Cadence's ear.

"Calm down Cadence, you're scaring him. I think you've got the boy terrified."

Cadence couldn't believe what she had just heard. She spun to look her cousin in the eyes. "So you're taking his side?" She whispered.

"I'm not. I'm just saying that he's scared." Luvvi said, giving Cadence's hand a squeeze. "And you're being," Luvvi paused. "Quite loud."

There it was, the betrayal. Her cousin didn't have to add in that loud bit. She'd clearly made a choice. "He soaked my tit." Cadence explained, whispering back. And then louder, turning toward Dwight once again. "You soaked my tit." She said.

Dwight's eyes flicked sideways to where a judgmental looking grandmother was standing. She was looking disapprovingly at both of them. Then Dwight lost all contact with his extremities and reflexively dropped his meat hammer.

By that point, Cadence had figured out that this was a situation that she would have to handle on her own — So she cast her cousin Luvvi

aside. At least that way, Cadence would be able to face her opponent unencumbered.

She straightened up her posture, and took a full breath before beginning. Thinking of Luvvi's comment, Cadence did her best to keep her volume down and her voice diplomatic. "Okay Dwight, let's start this again, shall we?" Cadence enunciated the words in the exact same way that Luvvi's mother would have — the tone Mrs. Dove used whenever she was reprimanding her servants. "As you know, I have been a customer in Mr. Giropanous's fine meat establishment for many months now." Cadence directed a gentle hand about the room, exhibiting the butcher shop to better make her point for those listening — Which was everyone. "And each time my cousin and I have come in here, never once have I complained that you Dwight, lack the self control to keep your abnormally large bug eyes, off of my cousin's ass." Cadence smiled and tried to keep her voice sweet. "Is this not correct?"

This time Cadence was rewarded with a single nod from Dwight.

"Good." Cadence said. "We're agreed then. And can we also agree that today, if you hadn't been so distracted by Luvvi's pert derrière, as she was bent over, reaching into that deep meat cooler behind me, that you might not have soaked one of my favorite blouses? In pig's blood no less." Cadence sighed, hoping to demonstrate her own patient disapproval, for all those in audience. "No doubt you were just standing there, hammering away on your meat, fantasizing yourself as some sort of a medieval barbarian, fighting your way towards Luvvi, hoping to get close enough to rip open your kit and begin tapping —"

"Miss Cadence, is there some kind of a problem?" The minute that Mr. Giropanous showed up, Dwight scurried off towards the back room.

The coward. No matter, Cadence would see him at school on Monday and they would finish their little conversation. Cadence turned back to Mr. Giropanous. Still being careful to mimic Luvvi's mother's enunciation and her diction, Cadence explained the situation to the store's owner. "Your boy Dwight has just gotten pig's blood all over one of my jugs."

Mr. Giropanous eyes drifted down towards Cadence's chest region. He frowned, and then he shook his head.

"Okay, look up again." Cadence snapped her fingers near her own face to pull the butcher's gaze.

"I'm sorry, Miss Cadence. Of course the shop will cover your dry clean-

ing bill."

"Dry cleaning? Are you kidding? Dry clean this rag?" Cadence put her hands on the counter and leaned forward. She did that to let the shop owner know that she meant business. "Luvvi and I are on the bus today and I need something to wear home that won't give me trichinosis, or E. coli."

Mr. Giropanous frowned and for a moment he became as silent as Dwight. "I'm sorry miss but anything we have in the butcher shop wouldn't meet your standards for cleanliness. Perhaps Luvvi could go across the street and buy you a blouse from Baxters? I'd be happy to pay."

"Baxters? Are you kidding — Luvvi and I are performers, and the Ragamuffin Dolls have a public image to maintain. I can't ride the bus wearing a blouse from Baxters. What if a paparazzi were to jump out of a bush, and put my photo on the cover of some tabloid? How embarrassing would that be for me? Get real Mr. G., we're an Alternative act, but we're not that alternative. Any other great ideas?"

Mr. Giropanous cleared his throat. "I'm sorry miss, I didn't know that the tabloids had quite discovered you, yet."

"Well not really yet, but we're gaining fans everyday, and there has to be a paparazzi first, right? Today could be our day."

"Of course. Please, tell me what I should do to make it up to you."

At last, a little bit of capitulation. She had finally won. But the problem remained, and now Cadence wasn't really sure what she wanted. She looked down at the stain on her shirt. Maybe she should just wear it? After all, they were a rock and roll act. The raw meat might even be appreciated by their fans. It certainly would have been if Luvvi were wearing it.

Then Cadence had an idea.

She wondered which bra she had put on that morning. Cadence pulled the shirt away from her chest and looked down her collar. Hmm.

"I want the meat for free." She told Mr. Giropanous.

Mr. Giropanous blinked. "Okay?" He said cautiously. "And what about the shirt?"

"Screw the shirt." Cadence said, pulling off her blouse with one quick jerk. "Half the time I don't wear a shirt with this bra, anyways."

Somewhere off in the corner, Cadence heard Dwight gasp. Then Mr. Giropanous needed more snapping to focus him onto the task of getting Cadence her free meat. Luvvi had returned to Cadence's side, they were standing in solidarity once again. The nosy grandma sucked her tongue in

disgust at what she no doubt considered to be a brazen display of the female knockers apparatus.

Of course the old lady couldn't have known that those exquisitely shaped honkers were the one gift that Cadence's mother had bequeathed to her. And Cadence would be damned if she was ever going to let anyone's misplaced sense of modesty force her to hide them.

Besides, compared to the attire at the brothel where Cadence had grown up, her outfit would likely be considered, overly modest.

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What a unique creature.

Sophia felt herself rise up, high into the sky. High enough to see the massive rectangular pillars surrounded by grey haze, that made up downtown Los Angeles. Then she ascended so high that she could see almost half of the southern California coastline.

Sophia hovered there for a bit, wondering what it was that was happening to her. As an oracle, she was used to strange experiences, but why was she there? It had something to do with the girls, Sophia was certain of it.

Sophia let herself descend again. Luvvi and Cadence were walking away from the meat shop laughing and joking, exhibiting no shortage of sass.

The girls didn't seem to have a single care between them, as they strolled past shops and clubs making their way towards Sunset Boulevard. Mel's diner was within view. It was an iconic place with its roots extending right back to old Hollywood. That wasn't the only landmark either. West Hollywood and the Sunset strip might not have been the birthplace of rock and roll, but it was certainly rock and roll's nursery.

Counted amongst all of those rockers and crooners who had loaned the Strip some of their iconic cool, were stars, starlets, gangsters, gold diggers, tourists and wannabees. From the Roxy to the Comedy Store, the Sunset strip exuded a cockiness that sent a tangible thrill through Sophia's spine.

Luvvi and Cadence were approaching a street performer with a Colonel Sanders beard and a beat up old acoustic guitar. His fingers were nimble on the strings and the Ragamuffin Dolls paused in their journey, to



clap and sing along.

*They hate you if you're clever and they despise a fool  
'Til you're so fucking crazy you can't follow their rules*

Sophia recognized it as a John Lennon song. It was somewhat obscure but she had always thought it was catchy, and insightful. The idea of the piece being, that society conditioned people to become mindless drones, willingly parted from their independent thought, in order to become 'Working class hero's.' Which was the name of the song.

The Colonel Sanders guy did a good job of performing it, but it was Luvvi's vocals that surprised Sophia. Even in a backup role, she was really amazing. The Colonel sang on about the disempowering conditioning of the school system, and how in the songwriter's opinion, the negative experiences it instilled created fear that affected a worker's ability to thrive.

The street performer continued to play as he called out the chorus and together, the newly formed trio began to draw a small crowd. Colonel Sanders seemed to appreciate the girl's help and if Sophia wasn't mistaken, the three of them probably knew each other already.

Eventually Colonel Sanders nodded to Luvvi and let her take over the lead vocals. The teen's voice was clear and lofty. The words of the songwriter spoke of how popular entertainment was actually a drug to the masses, a means of maintaining societal control, and how people don't recognize the bonds of their own enslavement. In Lennon's view the people were not free — but still peasants.

Cadence cheered and clapped for that last line. The Colonel worked his guitar hard as Luvvi danced freely on the sidewalk. Then Cadence picked up the hat and held it out to the tourists. She seemed determined to fill the hat completely. Cadence wasn't at all shy about shaking down any of the innocent music fans.

As Sophia watched them, she felt that she loved these girls already. There was something about them, as well as this intriguing place which seemed to be so much a part of them. She looked down the street and took in the length of the Sunset Strip. It was lined with palm trees reaching skyward, and the strangest cars that Sophia had ever seen. They shone brightly in the sun as they crawled slowly along the strip.

Nineteen-ninety two was a very different time than Sophia had come from. And West Hollywood could not have been more different from the Station. Something about being out of place and out of time began making Sophia feel somewhat panicked. Her heart started to pulse inside of her

chest until she felt her temples throbbing. The feeling was uncomfortably intense and it made Sophia want to scream.

She tried to resist it though. Sophia wanted to keep control. Oracles were always losing control but Sophia did not want to be like those oracles. She tried to calm herself but this dislocated form which she inhabited, didn't behave anything like her usual body.

Sophia looked out at the street again, searching for distraction. There were people, lots of them — moving up and down the strip. Some of them seemed happy, settled. But many of them were just hanging around, waiting for their lives to change. For most of them though, Sophia wondered if life ever would.

As she watched, she began to feel calmer.

Sophia looked in through the window of a cafe. There was a guy there, maybe thirty and fairly handsome with brown sweeping hair. He wore a light muscle shirt and skinny jeans with his pant legs rolled up at the bottom. In the Station that look would have gotten him beat up, but here it just made him one of the herd. The man had the eyes of a dreamer and he was staring out at the cars passing down the strip. Each time an idea struck him, he quickly wrote it down.

There was a waitress walking towards him. Beautiful. Her hair was cut like so many of the other girls, with long tapered bangs that hung on either side of her face, curling in at the ends. It was a pretty haircut. Sophia had never seen anything like it before. Maybe she could try that cut herself, if she didn't end up dying on the mountaintop. Thinking about that was hard. Sophia knew that the mountaintop was where she should be.

With her friends — not there in some fabricated Hollywood fantasy. They needed her. Sophia had to keep watch while they slept. Their enemies might come at any moment.

Sophia looked back out towards the sun soaked street. Why was she even there?

Then a sound caught her soul and she looked towards it. It was just a few notes. A few perfect notes, teased out of Colonel Sander's old guitar. But when Sophia looked towards the sound it wasn't the street performer who was holding the guitar — it was Luvvi Dove.

Her voice was soft at first, inviting the listeners to pay attention. Promising them that what they were about to witness, was something very special.

Then her hands moved across the guitar strings and brought them to life. No, that wasn't even it. Her hands actually gave the strings life and from that moment on each string seemed solely committed to the purpose of accompanying her.

More people began to gather on the sidewalk, unable to move past without first hearing this special message that Luvvi was offering to them as a free gift.

Cadence sat down on the sidewalk beside her friend and began to tap out a simple drumbeat on the street performer's guitar case. Colonel Sanders himself was grinning ear to ear, and he pulled a harmonica out of his pocket, holding it at the ready.

Luvvi's vocals weren't words, just sounds, and the purest of emotions. Mixed emotions. Urgency first and foremost, as though she had something very important brewing within her — something that she needed to give expression to. But beyond urgency there was a soft discontent. It was a discontent strong enough to challenge the whole fucking world. And underneath that discontent, Sophia heard a hope for all of their futures, a hope that was brighter than the sun.

If Sophia had eyes at that moment, she would have been weeping. This young woman was a true artist, and she possessed within her a message, that was straight from the heavens.

Then Luvvi started to sing.

*Freedom whispers carefully  
And I take it in so fearfully  
More fearfully than  
discipline abandoned  
Cuz in my heart I can try to be  
Whatever truth my soul can see  
And I'll be damned if  
my heart has not grown saddened  
I've seen the lies you're telling me  
I've rejected what you're sellin' me  
Though your efforts  
Say you wish I really hadn't*

*Because I breath  
I live  
I dream*

*I shake  
I forgive  
And it's all I'll ever be, now don't you want me to?  
Because I breath  
I live  
I dream  
I shake  
I forgive  
Our existence is rebellion, we're not buying what you're sellin'  
And you sons of bitches really shouldn't ask us to  
Oh whoa whaa*

Luvvi Dove's vocal performance began to freestyle as her voice echoed the primal sentiments of her heart. She danced on the sidewalk as Cadence pounded frantically on the guitar case, keeping the beat while Colonel Sanders harmonica came to life in the intervals.

If Sophia were deaf, she would still have been able to hear that song clearly in the motions of the crowd. It had become a crowd that swelled right off of the sidewalk and into the parking spaces on the street.

Then Luvvi Dove grabbed the chorus by the roots and tore it apart.

*Because I breath  
I live  
I dream  
I shake  
I forgive  
Our existence is rebellion, we're not buying what you're sellin'  
And you sons of bitches really shouldn't ask us to  
Because I breath  
I live  
I dream  
I shake  
I forgive  
Our existence is rebellion, we're not buying what you're sellin'  
And you sons of bitches really shouldn't ask us to  
Oh whoa whaa*

Luvvi was utterly lost inside her sound and the crowd was jumping as one. They were as united in that song as any Zulu war band in history. Sophia couldn't believe the passion that this young girl had harnessed

through the simple rhythm of her words and with the help of only six willing strings.

Then Sophia watched as the artist suddenly allowed herself to soften.

There was a time of relative calm as Luvvi let a chord fade slowly into silence. Nobody moved. Cadence's drumming had stopped.

Then a cappella, and less urgently.

*Because freedom whispers carefully  
And I take it in so fearfully  
More fearfully than  
discipline abandoned.*

Applause exploded from the crowd after it was clear that Luvvi was done, which was just when the police car rolled up.

Sophia noticed that Cadence's sharp eyes had seen the police cruiser as well. The teenage girl was on her feet in an instant. A second later she had Luvvi by the hand and they were both running across a nearby parking lot, leaving Colonel Sanders to smile and greet the police, politely showing them a busker's permit that Luvvi and Cadence no doubt, didn't own.

How could Sophia have not followed those two dynamic and spirited girls? For Sophia their energy felt contagious. In fact, she was feeling compelled to scream out in happiness, but Sophia was without any means of doing so.

Up in that sky Sophia had no mouth or vocal chords — she was just an idea, a bodiless thought. But in the meat shop, when she had been merged with the girls, she had become somewhat more. An extension of them, really. So she decided to go along with them. Eventually the Ragamuffins stopped running, but it was still quite a while before Cadence called a break to their retreat.

Tangible exhilaration shivered throughout Sophia as she watched those brazen young girls once again, walking down the strip together. Frequently enough, Ragamuffin Dolls fans whistled at them, and called out their admiration for them. The calls came from open car windows, and from across the busy streets. Once the girls had turned south, there were calls made from some basketball hard courts. It seemed that in their neighborhood, the Dolls were universally appreciated.

A couple of younger girls stopped them once, and asked them for autographs. Both Cadence and Luvvi seemed happy to oblige.

As they walked, Cadence was keeping a glue stick busy as they trav-

elled West Hollywood's streets. Nearly every flat surface that Cadence passed got plastered with a Ragamuffin Dolls concert poster. Eventually, Cadence's low-level vandalism drew the anger of a local merchant, and an argument broke out. Fairly quickly, law enforcement was contacted, but the Ragamuffin Dolls once again showed that they could run their feet at least as well as they could run their mouths.

Sophia was bursting with joy as the girls retreated. Their spirits were so unlike anyone else's that she had ever met in Station life. The Dolls had a completely different feel to them, and that made Sophia immensely curious.

But Sophia had not forgotten her duties. She had allies back in that cold cave, and they were waiting for her. How much time had passed since she was back in the cave? Before, with spending only a few minutes with the girls before they entered the butcher shop, their fire had burned down to almost nothing. It would have had to be more than an hour that passed inside the cave, for sure. And that had seemed a while ago in Hollywood time. Sophia decided to close her eyes and try to will herself back into the cave —

She really did try. Los Angeles kept her in its grip, though.

Why couldn't she re-awaken? Was she already dead? Had her throat been slit by her enemies as she had slept? Or perhaps she would be trapped in this vision forever. What on earth was happening to her? Was this some sort of strange dream? If it was, Sophia was completely unable to wake herself. Then she wondered if perhaps she might have become astrally projected.

It was possible, but that didn't explain the fact that Sophia was suddenly in the future. The society that she was in currently, was downstream on a timeline from her own existence. And that was enough for Sophia to know that the experience wasn't any mere astral projection.

Whatever it was, Sophia couldn't shake the fact that it felt, incredibly important. And if she were to listen to her gut feelings, which as an oracle she almost always did, she would conclude that back in the cave her body was still alive. She had another nagging sense. Sophia also believed there was something about the experience she was having, that would be important so that Sophia could save all of their lives back on the mountain.

It was a sobering thought.

Sophia couldn't escape from thinking about how much danger they

were all in, on that mountain. Aside from the cold and the possibility of Alastar dying from his wounds, Sophia knew that their pursuers would not relent until the three of them were limp, and dead.

Which brought her right back to the surreal experience that she found herself in. Sophia had suspicions about her problem's origin. Sophia believed that it was spiritual somehow — from high up, and she wondered if it might even be a gift of some kind. A mercy. Something told her that it was. Whatever was happening felt like an olive branch from a higher power, or maybe more of a lifeline. Strange though.

Sophia's training told her that it was her duty to wake up so that she could stand sentry, but she was unable to do that. Perhaps that was another sort of gift. Sophia could only imagine what sort of nightmare her, Demsie and Alastar would be facing the next day. She knew that without the sleep that she was getting back in the cave, her body might not be able to endure it.

This odd dream experience was forcing her to rest. All three of their bodies needed to recover from the exhaustion of the preceding days, which had been heaped upon them.

Of course there was also another possible gift in this unwoke state. If by chance their enemies had been bold enough to pursue them through the darkness and the storm, and if they somehow found their hidden cave, at least the three of them would die peacefully — together, and in their sleep. In some ways that would be fine with Sophia. She had seen so much death and she had never really believed that she would be permitted to die painlessly. Of course, if that were to happen, Alastar would be upset about it. His pride would certainly be hurt if he were to go down without a fight.

Sophia refocused herself onto the present. Or her current present at least, which was actually a future. There was a message for her in Hollywood, and she knew that for a certainty. A message that with a little effort and some persistence, her subconscious mind would help her decode.

It would be a mystery that would be revealed if Sophia could put the clues together — but that was what oracles were trained for. Sophia knew that there had to be something in these girl's lives that would resonate with her disembodied spirit. And it was that thing that might make the difference for her allies' survival. Her instincts would tell her what.

It was that shaky impression that was enough to let a young oracle, feel some peace — some hope. Sophia even felt her own gladness mixing

with the sun's rays as they passed through her. It kind of tickled, but in a good way. She looked downwards and found that the Ragamuffin Doll's had boarded a bus.

The sunshine felt nice but Sophia decided that she had better go with the girls. So she lowered herself down to a place where she would have been standing right beside Cadence. Then she stepped into her.

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Cadence followed her cousin through a small crowd of people that were blocking the sidewalk. Freaking L.A. — it was probably just a star sighting, which could sometimes affect foot traffic. But even A-listers didn't usually draw quite this many people.

Being local girls, her and Luvvi often just pushed on through, refusing to be delayed by any deranged mobs of people who justified their existences with stories of how they had just seen so-an-so's new boob job.

Trailing close behind her cousin, Cadence kept watch for anyone who might object to Luvvi's time honored practice of boldly wedging through the gaps in the stationary herd of people. Rarely did it ever cause any friction, but Cadence was always ready to come to Luvvi's defense if she was needed.

Nobody tried anything, and the Dolls made it through to the uncluttered open area in the middle of the crowd. That was where you would typically find some ragged looking star with a baseball hat pulled low, wearing sunglasses the size of dinner plates. The girls called that empty place in the middle, the eye of the storm. It was an area of relative calm, which they could move through safely and easily, unlike the outer rings of the crowd.

But not this time though.

This time the eye of the storm was an emotional tempest, centered on an irate female with puke blue hair. That hair was the color of semester old vomit. Vomit that had been stored in a jar and left on the top shelf of a frat boy's closet, to congeal. Cadence thought it was no small coincidence that this star's emotional breakdown was taking place right outside the doors of a hair salon.

The other notable thing about the girl's hair, other than the color, was



the fact that at least half of it seemed to be missing. Cadence could appreciate pretty teenage girls with sadistic haircuts at least as much as any other rock n' roll enthusiast, but however you styled this particular shearing — it could have only been described as *incomplete*.

Luvvi had stopped moving forward and was gawking at the girl like a common tourist, as the star screamed obscenities into the open door of the hair salon. Luvvi leaned over and whispered into Cadence's ear. "That's Emerald."

Cadence heard the name, but didn't quite believe it. She looked at the woman, the puke colored hair, the features twisted by rage, and then she saw it. Her cousin was right. It was Emerald, one of the biggest and most significant musicians of their generation. And she was screaming at what one might assume were her bodyguards, who were standing just inside the salon, trying their best to look casual.

Then out of nowhere, Emerald pulled out a shampoo bottle. It was short and avocado shaped like an over-ripe hand grenade. Emerald looked down at the bottle and must have been thinking something pretty similar to Cadence, because she twisted off the cap, drew back and threw the shampoo bomb towards the shop.

The liquid flew out of the bottle in a tightly spinning arc for the pop-star's entire forward arm motion, spraying the fans, the shop window, the hairstylists, and Emerald's bodyguards in one efficient sweep. Meanwhile, cameras were flashing as though Emerald were modeling a snug Versace, in a red carpet moment.

But this was obviously, a very different kind of moment.

Cadence heard the screech of tires braking hard and camera crews scrambling to catch the superstar's meltdown on motion video. Emerald turned towards the news crews and the paparazzi. Then she swept back her puke colored hair, looked into one camera, and spoke.

"They think that because they've made a little money off of your talent, that they somehow own your soul. The idea of being not for sale is an untenable paradox to them. But to everyone listening I want to make something clear. I won't be anyone's mindless marionette, and my book of music is not for sale at any price. The music that I create was given to me as it was given to my people, only through the grace of God. And it is in service to the people, that my works will stay."

The words sounded remarkably good, considering that just before the news crews had come, Emerald was a full-blown freak show. Cadence

wondered if the artist might possibly have things more together than her previous behaviors suggested. But then Emerald leaned over and vomited on the sidewalk, in full view of everyone.

It wasn't quite Technicolor, but it had to at least be described as — full spectrum vomit. The crowd let out a low moan as they were forced to witness the emptying of Emerald's stomach.

Once she was done, Emerald turned slowly towards Luvvi. Cadence watched as the pop star's green eyes studied Cadence's best friend. "I've been drinking." Emerald said blankly to Luvvi.

It was an explanation, but to Cadence it seemed to be almost an apology. Luvvi didn't say anything, but she reached into her purse and pulled out a breath mint.

Emerald stepped closer and took the mint, placing it in her mouth. Then Emerald turned to Cadence. "You have to be vigilant." Emerald said to her, before pulling out scissors and beginning to hack away random sheafs of her own hair. Almost instantly, her composure crumbled away and the pop star disintegrated into blubbing tears, along with tremors that looked worse than Joe Cocker at Woodstock.

Her bodyguards rushed her to try and take away the scissors, but Emerald fought them off like an alley cat, wielding those scissors with merciless commitment. In that moment, Cadence saw something in Emerald's eyes that made Cadence believe that Emerald truly hated those men.

Moments later, Emerald was overpowered and stuffed inside a limo. The doors were slammed shut and the vehicle sped away, leaving Cadence with more than one mystery to figure out.

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Sophia was panicked by what she had just witnessed. She knew that Cadence and Luvvi didn't understand what was occurring. How could they? They did not possess an oracle's sense of things.

Sophia had to leave Cadence's body and take to the sky again so that she could think through the situation without distraction. Admittedly, Sophia's current helplessness was an irritant to her. She had no way to warn the girls about what her oracle instincts had picked up on. She had no way to share with them the things that she had learned as a Station resident. No way to decode the riddle for them, and lead them down the prudent

path.

What had just happened was huge. Fates were certainly intertwined in this matter, and Emerald had practically spelled it out. So few people, even artists themselves, really ever got it. But Emerald did.

It was the music that they sought to control, and the art that was a danger to them. Because art is, and had always been, fate's safeguard against tyranny.

Most people didn't ever think about art, or artists. They just assumed that the artists were there for entertainment, or perhaps distraction. Maybe to make an ugly room prettier, or a blank and boring screen come to life. Most people's version of art went hand in hand with popcorn, and Twizzlers.

But making B movies, or canned music, or paintings that matched someone's sofa was not a function which those who were greater, had bestowed upon the artists. Even in the days of Shakespeare, the art (which was in his time, plays) was more about social commentary than it had been about mere entertainment.

But it had been so cleverly staged.

So cleverly that the viewer didn't really even see it. There was subtlety, which was what gave art its true power.

It wasn't about budget or expensive tools, no matter how much the people with access to money might argue that point. Sophia knew that it was only a person's creativity, and the message that burned inside the artist's heart, that could hold people's attention so firmly.

And since forever, that message had always sprung directly from the land of the artist's birth — From the common soil in which that gifted man or woman, often of the most ordinary peasant stock, had been reared in.

In that way, through those rare and uniquely gifted peoples, history had often been turned upon its head, to the benefit of the masses and to the proportional disappointment of the ruling elites.

Emerald's message to the press had been a call of distress. The gift that she had been given, from the land that she had walked, was in imminent danger. The danger of being suppressed and then mutated like a swelling cancer, and co-opted into a form unrecognizable, and unredeemable. Where it would become the antithesis of art — Distraction.

And there was an even greater problem — a problem that was made so much greater because of where the artist's gift resided. Unfortunately for Emerald, the art and the artist were one — they were not distinct

forms. Instead they existed, inseparable. So to take the art, a determined thief must also take the artist.

If she could have, Sophia would have vomited too

THREE

The door slammed shut hard, behind Cadence. “Oh shit! Sorry Auntie Scarla, its the fu —”

“Cadence.” Scarla turned away from the dishes that she had been washing. Cadence froze upon hearing her Auntie’s tone. Then Scarla stepped slowly towards the girls, reached out, and gently touched Cadence on the nose. “Mind your language.” Scarla said.

Luvvi pushed past Cadence and gave her aunt a warm hug, and a quick kiss on the cheek. “Hello, Auntie.”

“Hello Luvvi, what brings you to this neighborhood?” Scarla said.

“I’m thinking of running away.” Luvvi reached into her auntie’s cupboards and grabbed a tall plastic cup. “Or at least, becoming your second daughter for the weekend.”

“You know you’re always welcome, but we don’t have servants here. I expect that you’ll do your part?”

Luvvi had already found her way to the inside of the fridge, and was rummaging to get at the milk. “Of course, Auntie. That’s one of the things I like best about your house.”

“The work?”

“Yeah. It’s fun.”

“Does your mother know where to find you?” Scarla said.

Luvvi flopped into the chair. “I’d swear that the woman has me followed. I could guarantee you that if you called her right now, she’d already know where I am.”

Of course Scarla didn’t believe her. “Well,” She said. “I think I’ll call, just to make sure.” Then Scarla picked up the phone and began dialing.

“Suit yourself.” Luvvi said.

Cadence grabbed a glass for herself from the cupboard and held it up to the window. It wasn’t quite clean so she rinsed it out, and then wiped it with the dishcloth. By the time Cadence made it to the table, Luvvi had already poured a second cup.

“There’s none left.” Cadence said shaking the jug.

“There is some. Here.” Luvvi grabbed the jug and poured her cousin a

good three-quarters of a glass.

"It's not even full." Cadence said, looking straight at her cousin, wondering how she could get some justice.

"It's a big glass, and it's practically full."

"Practically?"

"Fine," Luvvi said. "You drink mine, and I'll drink yours. Honestly Cadence, sometimes I wonder about you."

There was no malice in Luvvi's comment. There never was between the two of them. But Luvvi's willingness to switch made Cadence look closer at the two glasses and think. "Nope. I'm not falling for it. You're not drinking two glasses, with one of them being the taller one. Even if it isn't quite full."

"Are you kidding?" Luvvi rolled her eyes.

"I never kid about milk, coz."

"Okay then. Aunt Scarla can settle it. Nobody drinks until she's off the phone."

They waited for over a minute before Cadence began to fidget. "Okay, this is taking too long. Let's get Uncle Kurtz to decide."

Luvvi laughed. "Are you kidding? He'll side with you for sure! He loves you way more than he loves me."

"What?" Of course Cadence knew that what Luvvi was saying about her uncle was absolutely true, but she wouldn't ever admit it. "But you're his actual blood relative." Cadence argued.

"True," Luvvi said. "But the two of you share more common interests."

"What? Old whore jokes?"

"Oh, ew." Luvvi scowled. "No, I was thinking more like, old war movies."

Cadence smiled because Luvvi was right, and Uncle Kurtz was going to side with her for sure. "That's not true!" Cadence straight out denied it anyways, "Besides, he doesn't actually watch old war movies. He pretty much just watches the one."

"Yeah and you watch it with him, over and over — hour after hour. Again and again."

It was a fact. Cadence liked nothing more than leaning up against her uncle Kurtz's shins as the movie reel clicked its way past scenes of a young Martin Sheen, playing Willard, a soldier who was making his way up the Nung River into Cambodia to fulfill a secret mission. The familiar

images would shine against their living room wall as her Uncle Kurtz stared, unblinking. Thinking. And sometimes even crying — but never speaking.

Somehow Cadence found it all relaxing. Scarla always said that the two of them liked watching that film because of their common experience of the heart of darkness. Cadence wasn't ever really sure what her auntie meant by that.

One thing was true though, both her and her uncle had seen some shit. And she imagined that they were both equally grateful to be welcome under Scarla's roof, as well. Her Auntie Scarla was the glue that held them all together.

Even Luvvi in some ways. Sure, Luvvi wasn't an orphan like Cadence, but her relationship with her own mother had always been strained, so she might as well have been. The woman was more like Luvvi's business manager. The difference between her mother and an actual business manager was that Luvvi's mother was so controlling and so manipulative, that the relationship might be better described as that of her pimp. From what Cadence had seen of pimps, even some of them managed their girls more kindly.

So of course Auntie Scarla picked up the slack and gave Luvvi most of what she was lacking from her elitist, social climbing, disaster of a mother.

In search of Kurtz, Cadence and Luvvi went silently into the darkened area of the house. As they went, the decor slowly shifted from Auntie Scarla's uncluttered and practical style, to a virtual museum of Uncle Kurtz's mementos, hard won from a life spent in the military's special forces. The girls went from bright windows, and inviting sunlight, to heavy blacked out fabric — insulating her Uncle Kurtz from whatever it was that lurked outside, which he was so determined to keep away from.

"I always get the shivers, visiting your dad." Luvvi said. "It's kinda like walking into Dracula's crypt."

Right from the beginning Luvvi had always chosen to call Scarla and Kurtz, Cadence's mom and dad, but Cadence herself called them her Auntie and Uncle. As lies go, they were both equally untrue. But nobody could ever deny that Scarla and Kurtz were the most important people in Cadence's world — even more important than Luvvi herself. Hell, Cadence wouldn't even be alive if Scarla Thomas hadn't been the most formidable, and the most compassionate woman that Cadence had ever met.

They found Kurtz much like he always was, in his dark living room

fussing with his projector, getting ready to watch *Apocalypse Now* one more time. Her uncle's TV was on in the corner, and the news lady was saying something about the American government's commitment to buoy up the middle class. Kurtz burst out laughing and actually slapped his thigh.

"Son-of-a-bitch, that's a good one." He muttered, chuckling under his breath. Then the news lady said something that Cadence didn't understand about Wall Street, and her uncle Kurtz's laughter drowned out the TV entirely. "Who writes this stuff?" He said as he turned to face the girls, his eyes were red with laughter.

Kurtz flashed a wink at Cadence. It was a gesture of acknowledgement that gave her in one instant, everything she could have ever hoped for in a father. Then Kurtz turned his attention to Luvvi. "Well if it isn't Luvvi Dove." Her uncle kept a wry smile. "I just watched you two on the news." Kurtz chuckled some more.

"Hello, Uncle." Luvvi approached Kurtz and gave him a hug. She looked miniscule pressed up against the huge man. Then while she was still locked onto his waist, Luvvi looked up at him. "It's still my favorite the way you say it."

Cadence could see that Luvvi's comment definitely made Kurtz happy. He had been the first to ever call Cadence's cousin — Luvvi. The name that she was actually born into was Liv Dove, which soon metamorphed into Livvi. Dove of course was the family name, a name that came with a certain amount of prestige and power. But when Livvi's uncle Kurtz returned from whatever dark continent the president had him waging war on throughout Liv's infancy, he saw Livvi and instantly whisked her up into his arms. The story went that he had hugged her with such a passion that Scarla had to pry the girl out of her weeping husband's hands. "Luvvi Dove," he had called her that day. "Luvvi Dove."

After that, Luvvi was the only name that the young girl would answer to. And when her mother had tried to straighten the name situation out, she found that her daughter was resolute. *Say it the way Uncle Kurtz says it*, Luvvi told everybody from that day forward, until she had them all trained. Of course Luvvi's mother resented the usurping of the birth name that she had chosen. But when people began telling her that Luvvi Dove would make an excellent stage name, Luvvi's mother embraced it. Over the years she had even begun taking credit for it.



Luvvi always remembered who it was that had named her though, and she had told Cadence the truth of it when they first met.

“How did you see us on the news?” Cadence said.

“On the sidewalk, you gave her a mint.” Kurtz said, referencing the Emerald incident.

Then the news lady recaptured her uncle’s attention again by saying that the United States had initiated Operation Restore Hope, in cooperation with the UN, and that they were sending the military into Somalia to stabilize the government and provide humanitarian aid to the people. Kurtz burst out laughing again, then his eyes glanced back towards Cadence. He jerked his thumb towards the TV screen, where they were showing a picture of a bag of rice on a beach. “How can these reporters say this stuff with a straight face?” Then Kurtz began snickering like Ernie from Sesame Street.

Cadence shrugged, smiling wide herself. She and her uncle loved laughing at the news together. It was their version of stand-up comedy.

“Beats me.” Cadence said, but she honestly didn’t get the joke this time. Her uncle would explain it to her later if she asked him to.

After her uncle stopped laughing he released Luvvi, but she wasn’t that quick to let go. “Uncle Kurtz? Can you help us with something?” She waited till she was certain that she had Kurtz’s attention. “It has to do with milk. You need to tell Cadence that a full glass of milk that’s small is the same as a tall glass of milk that isn’t quite full.”

Kurtz looked down at his niece and his smile widened. Then he stooped his head and kissed Luvvi on the forehead. “I love you girls, you know that, right?”

“Yes, Uncle.” The girls said, almost in unison.

“And you know that I’d happily give my life for either of you, right?”

“Yes.” Cadence said, while Luvvi just nodded.

“Okay then.” Kurtz said as he stepped away from his niece and flipped on the movie projector. The machine whirred to life, dousing the far wall of the living room with light. Then Kurtz eased into his old chair and let the muscles in his face relax completely.

The girls knew what it meant. Their Uncle Kurtz would be gone for two hundred and two minutes, back in Vietnam, travelling up the Nung River. Cadence would have happily curled up at the man’s feet and shared the journey with him one more time, but that would have meant leaving Luvvi behind.

"You can have it." Cadence told her cousin.

"No, you drink it. I already had a glass."

"A small glass."

"So what, my mother's been on me to lose weight."

"What?" Cadence felt her blood rising. "Are you kidding me? You're gorgeous an hour after Christmas dinner. You're not thinking of giving in to her, are you?"

"I don't know." Luvvi said. "She's pretty fixated on it. One of her friends in Paris showed her a chart that said that for my height, I'm twenty pounds overweight."

Cadence gasped involuntarily, and if Cadence's Auntie Dove had been standing within reach, she might have decked her. "That fu —"

"Cadence."

She froze. How had Auntie Scarla snuck into the room without being seen? Then Scarla reached out and gently touched her finger to the tip of Cadence's nose.

"Mind your tongue." Scarla said.

Luvvi giggled, because she knew that Cadence was squirming inside. Then, just because she was a brat, Luvvi reached a finger towards Cadence's nose just as Scarla had.

Of course Cadence swatted it away, causing Luvvi to giggle even louder. With her work completed, Scarla turned from the girls to go. Both of them were quiet as they watched their Auntie leave.

Then Luvvi whispered. "When did she start doing that?"

"A few weeks ago." Cadence said, for some reason feeling deflated about it.

"She does it when you swear?" Luvvi said.

"Or if I lie. She says its time to stop."

Luvvi took her cousin's hand. "So I guess she has to do it a lot then, huh."

"Yeah, she does it a lot."

They listened to their aunt's footsteps receding. She was back in the kitchen, but the girls still kept their voices in a whisper.

"Does it bother you?" Luvvi said.

Cadence sighed. "It drives me crazy. But the funny thing is, I think it might even be working. When I swear, I'm starting to feel kinda bad about it."

“How about when you lie?”

“Are you kidding? When I lie, it’s a matter of survival. I’m not about to stop lying — that’s damn near all that I’ve got.”

Luvvi laughed, nudging Cadence hard enough that she took a step. “Looks like my cousin’s almost becoming a saint.”

Cadence bumped her back, “Never claimed to be.”

“Saint Cadence, it would have a nice ring for the album jacket.” Luvvi said.

“No, it’ll just be Cadence. One word. That’s it.”

“Well, we are eighteen now. It’s probably time that we class ourselves up a bit.” Luvvi said. “After all, Auntie Scarla always has a way of being right about stuff.”

Cadence had to smile at her cousin’s comment. “Gimme a break, you were born classy, coz. The sun would probably stop shining if Luvvi Dove did something bad.”

Luvvi laughed. “But that’s not what the newspapers say about me. My mother’s been shaping my public image since I was fourteen.” She turned to her cousin and flashed a badass pose. “Luvvi Dove, rebel rocker chick, and feisty lead singer of the Ragamuffin Dolls.”

Cadence sighed once again, thinking about Luvvi’s mother. “You wanna go into the back shed and jam?” She said to her cousin.

“What else would we do, Ragamuffin-luv?” Then Luvvi gave her cousin’s hand a squeeze and the two of them went to go lock themselves into the back shed. In there, they could close themselves off from the outside world as securely as their Uncle had.

The two of them made music together until three AM. Cadence played her electric cello until her fingers were bruised and Luvvi played every other instrument like she was born to it. The girl was a virtuoso — a true musician, with a poet’s heart. Cadence knew that Luvvi would be important someday. Between the purity of her soul and her talent, that girl could change the world.

Cadence looked around at the walls of their shed, which after years and layers of continuous redecorating, had become a literal shrine to the gods and goddesses of rock and roll. Someday Luvvi deserved to be on a wall just like the walls of their Ragamuffin shed.

Cadence looked into the quiet eyes of a photo of John Lennon. Even though he was long dead, the artist stared back at her with subtle mischief. That was a guy who had lived for the ideas in his music. The former

Beatle had believed strongly that society could change, for the better. Perhaps that sort of optimism wasn't all that uncommon for a man of his generation, but the raw courage, the unfathomable talent, and the fact that he was mysteriously shot dead made the tale a little more intriguing.

Beside John was Bob Marley, also killed mysteriously. Marley was a Rastafarian Jamaican who was the third world's first ever, global superstar. Needless to say, Marley envisioned a different sort of society than the world's leaders had in mind. So despite his message of peace, and the man's evangelistic charisma, the stories of how the CIA killed him were still circulating.

In the first attempt Marley was shot by a random group of gunmen. That time, the killers ended up shooting Rita Marley, his wife, in the back of the head. And even after becoming a victim of a violent crime, Bob Marley's heart for peace was resilient enough to stage the One Love Peace concert, where he used his popularity to unite two warring factions. Those that wanted the artist silenced didn't stop there though. They changed their tactic, eventually killing Marley with an unlikely nail through the toe incident.

A couple of years ago, Cadence had asked Kurtz straight out whether he thought Bob Marley was killed for his ideas.

"I've done a lot of things over the years, for a lot of Presidents," Kurtz had said to her. "But nobody's ever asked me to do that."

Cadence hadn't been sure what to make of that answer. It seemed evasive. "Not you, but someone else?" Kurtz had just ignored her question. He kissed Cadence's forehead, and then flipped on his movie projector. That was the end of it. But Cadence had no doubts about him knowing — she knew that Kurtz's head was stuffed full with classified data.

Also decorating the shed, there were pictures of Marvin Gaye, Joni Mitchel, Pete Seeger, and Emerald. In fact, the picture of Emerald was staged to be at the center of it all. She looked amazing on that poster. Formidable, despite the fact that she had only been fifteen when the picture had been taken. She had been an old soul though, or so everybody always said. The fearsome look of wisdom in Emerald's green eyes left Cadence no doubt about it.

Scrawled onto a blackboard underneath Emerald's poster was the artist's most famous quote. It was in Luvvi's handwriting. Emerald had made the comment on a nationally syndicated radio show, and the news of what

she had said, spread all around the globe, instantly. Aside from the press coverage, kids were printing Emerald's comment or excerpts of that comment, as graffiti — on walls, on binders, and even on hats and t-shirts.

Emerald's early albums had been controversial. And on those albums, she had produced several worldwide hits. More impressively, she had done it independent of any record label. Emerald's independence gave her the ability to say what she wanted, whenever she wanted, without any danger of being gagged by any financial partners.

Some of her more popular hits included *The Traveler's song*, a story about the displaced, as well as *Are U N-ticing me to —*, which was in protest of movement towards global government, and *Fight the Powers that be*, which was a pop remake of the Isley Brothers funk hit from the seventy's. That remake had served as a challenge to the youth of Emerald's generation, inviting them to say screw you to the status quo. But if you look at the lyrics, it also served as a reprimand to the baby boomers for having caved in on their values.

By far Emerald's biggest hit though, was her anti-war song *Shock and Awe*. The song was about George Bush Sr.'s gulf war, and operation Desert Shield. Shock and Awe's most quoted and most memorable lyric became, *who are you really shielding, Desert Shield?*

For a little while, if anybody was lying through their fat teeth, it became fairly popular to quote that lyric by saying to them, *who are you really shielding?* It was eventually shortened into *who y' shielding?* Unleashing that quote of Emerald's was essentially the same as saying *liar, liar pants on fire*, but without the preschool overtones.

The Persian Gulf war was a 'popular' war at the time, but somehow Emerald saw right through it. "The media isn't asking deep enough questions." She had said on the radio that day. "The government's plans for the Middle East are going to cause the death of millions, and poverty on a massive scale."

With Emerald being fifteen years old, you can imagine what the establishment news media did with her comment. When the host of the radio show asked her to clarify her meaning, she said. "We need a complete change in our foreign policy as it relates to the Middle East."

Now most teenage musicians would not have been able to make intelligent comments on US foreign policy. So believing that Emerald was just a mouse likely to get caught in her own trap, and no doubt hoping to boost his show's ratings, the radio DJ tried to draw her out. He insinuated that

Emerald was being paranoid, and then pressed for more comments on her distrust in America's leadership. *Don't you think you're being paranoid?* He had said to her.

"Am I paranoid? Since you're asking the question, I assume that you want to know the truth?" Emerald had replied to the host.

*Of course.* He answered

Cadence remembered the comment by heart.

"The truth." Emerald had said, pausing to gather her thoughts. "Okay, well here it is. I've had social dinners with these guys. I've drunk in back rooms at fashion shows until four A.M. with them, and I've swam naked in their back yard pools. And I'm telling you with certainty, that forces are marshaling which are going to steal American's way of life."

The comment was scandalous and inflammatory in so many ways. The destruction of America, leaders drinking and swimming naked with teenage girls, insinuations of malicious forces on the rise. The comment was everywhere within a week, including being scrawled onto the inner wall of Kurtz's shed.

Luvvi and Cadence had her album jackets and Emerald's actual vinyl records on the walls of the Ragamuffin shed, as well.

Cadence's favorite cover though, was for Patti Smith's *Horses* album. The image of Patti standing there, and the expression that she had — it would instantly turn most men into geldings. And what was there to not like about that?

As one of the founders of punk rock, Patti more than deserved her position on the wall. Luvvi had made sure to keep Patti Smith amongst friends by putting her near the Clash, the Kinks, and the Dead Kennedys. Of course the Kennedys were somewhat more modern, but their irreverent spirit was the same, such as with their recently launched social wrecking ball, the Stars and Stripes of Corruption.

James Browne was also immortalized in their shrine, *Sayin' it Loud*, along with Creedence Clearwater Revival, the Animals, and Kurt Cobain. There was even a Springsteen 'War' poster on the girl's wall. The Boss was positioned next to a twenty-year old Canadian in a T-shirt with a knack for pissing people off that claimed to be in charge. He did it through the miracle of making blind people see through the lyrics that he wrote. And so far, just like America and Canada always had in the past, Bruce and Neil Young seemed to be getting along just fine.

Over time, Luvvi and Cadence had also accumulated Bob Dylan lyrics. They were written all over the damn place, christening the entire structure of the Ragamuffin's shed with the unique ideas of the twentieth century's preeminent poet.

In other words, for Cadence and Luvvi, this wasn't just a shed.

*It was a holy place,  
protected by amazing grace,*

And they often did sing out loud the things they couldn't say. Which was why whenever the two of them entered, out of respect for what those lyrics meant to them, they made sure to touch the vinyl of the Eagle's Sad Cafe album that was pinned to the wall, and cross themselves the way their Auntie Scarla had taught them to.

That night's jamming turned into an incredible session. By the time the girls were done, the Ragamuffin Dolls had created three passable tracks, with one of them having the potential to be a hit, if Luvvi spent some time alone with it.

The girls' songwriting had always been prolific in their Auntie Scarla's back shed, and by the time the session was done, both of them were truly happy.

And Sophia felt happy as well, for having spent the day with them. When they passed out, the girls were both high on Jolt Cola and licorice. Sophia watched from above as their uncle Kurtz approached. The man cast a massive shadow. Kurtz drifted through the darkness of the back yard like a ghost. Then he picked the lock on the shed with the proficiency of a Station agent, and ducked inside to retrieve his sleeping girls.

On Kurtz's belt, Sophia saw a knife sheath. But the point had worn through the sheath and a half-inch of the deadly sharp tip flashed briefly in the moonlight. When that flash happened, Sophia's body vibrated. Then her world spun and she thought of the danger that awaited her back in the cave. It took Sophia a full minute to get her bearings again.

It was definitely a clue.

The sharp tip was something that Sophia was supposed to pay attention to. *Sharp tip*. What did it mean? Nothing on its own, but the full story remained untold. Sophia was an oracle, and she knew that she would figure this out. She was trained for mysteries just like this one.

When he came out, Sophia was surprised to see that Kurtz was carrying both girls in his arms as though they were still babies. He was a powerful man. Sophia wondered how many people in the Station could

have done what Kurtz was doing easily, and so gently.

Scarla met her husband at the door. "You can still hold them both?" She said, the fondness evident in her voice.

"Until the day I die." Kurtz said.



FOUR

As the girls slept Sophia became bored, so she rose up into the night. The stars in this place played upon her eyes like a kaleidoscope. She saw so much more than the usual black and white, the heavens were alive with color.

Once again Sophia marveled at this experience that she had been given. It was so unlike any dream that she had ever had. But the mystery remained, and it called to her.

In fact, it was calling to her in the form of one woman's name.

*Elen.*

The pull that took hold of Sophia's soul offered her only the name, and a direction. And here in this place, that would be all that Sophia would need. She went.

Soon Sophia found herself poolside, staring at the most striking creature that she had ever seen. Every movement that the woman made, and every position that she chose, was exquisite — a work of art.

Sophia drifted down to ground level and walked towards her, hoping that she could get a glimpse of the woman's face. Strangely, the woman spun towards Sophia. "Who's there?" Elen said.

She was clearly addressing Sophia's position, but it seemed impossible that Sophia could be seen. She was invisible in this place.

Then Sophia saw the woman's face clearly, and she knew for certain that she had not been seen. Although this woman likely possessed the most remarkable eyes of any woman of her generation, Sophia could tell right away that they were sightless.

The woman straightened. "I said, who's there?" Elen's voice was calm, even stately, but Sophia had no way to answer her. So Sophia approached the woman and stepped inside.

Instantly, Sophia felt the control, the wisdom, and the courage, that resided within this woman. She also sensed strong undercurrents of boredom, and mischief that this supermodel possessed. Sophia knew instantly that she was famous, and all the world wanted to either be her, or to be with her.

“Elen — who are you talking to?”

Elen turned at the sound, though she had no reason to, because her eyes were sightless. Mostly the model play-acted the part of being a seeing person, because she was good at it, and it freaked people out. And Elen liked that very much.

A couple of years ago the tabloids had even accused her of faking her blindness. The funny thing was, even after the entire media circus had quieted down, most people were still not sure about the truth of it. Even after her ophthalmologist had released an unauthorized book on the subject.

The whole thing was laughable, but what current events weren't utterly ridiculous when put under a microscope? Speaking of ridiculous —

Elen smiled. “Hello Cherry.” She said. “I was speaking to a ghost. But she seems to be gone now.”

Elen could imagine the bent look of confusion on Cherry's face, even though she had never actually seen Cherry's face. It still gave Elen a sort of satisfaction.

Of course lacking any courage, or any inclination towards original thought, Cherry would not say anything in response to the comment. Instead, she would do what she had always done, and pretend that Elen hadn't spoken.

“I came to help you pick a dress for Mr. Rolofson's party.” Cherry said. “Someone on your staff promised that you'd make an appearance tonight, because it's for a good cause.”

For some reason, the line of conversation caused Elen to miss Allison, desperately. How long had it been since her childhood friend had left, and gone back to her real life? Seven months now? Honestly, if it were possible for Elen to do what her best friend had done, she would leave this circus behind and go back to British Columbia. If she could live a simple life of anonymity, she would have chosen that in a heartbeat.

Becoming supermodels was always a dream that her and Allison had shared, and they were supposed to live out that dream together. But Elen understood her best friend's reasons. Clive was a good man, and Allison had loved him since high school.

Unfortunately for Elen, during their years together in the fashion industry, Allison had served as so much more than her best friend, modeling coach, and seeing-eye accomplice. What Allison was to Elen, there was no

name for. And her absence made international stardom just about the loneliest occupation that Elen could have ever imagined.

Then there was Cherry.

“What’s the good cause?” Elen said to her assistant, making sure to focus her eyes on Cherry’s exact location, keeping a coy smile on her face.

“Uh, I don’t know.” Cherry said. “Some charity or group, or something.”

“Well that does sound like a very good cause.” Elen’s sarcasm wasn’t lost, even on Cherry.

“It was something about Democrats or Republicans, or maybe it was the Rockefeller foundation. Yeah, it’s about helping people in Africa get American TV so they can learn English, or something like that. Either way, I said you’d go.” Cherry paused and waited for Elen to respond. But when she didn’t, Cherry offered the most compelling argument that her uncomplicated mind could conceive of. “So, we gotta go.” She said.

“I can see that it is a cause that’s close to your heart, Cherry.” Elen said, barely believing that Cherry had pretty much admitted that the *someone on her staff*, was actually Cherry herself.

“Uh huh.” Cherry said, completely unfazed.

“Okay. Who else is going?” Elen said.

“Um. Lots of people.” Cherry said, leaving only gaping silence where conversation normally would exist.

Dammit, Elen knew that she was going to have to go, just to medicate the utter boredom that had already taken its grip on her that night. If only Cherry had been born with a working brain, staying home with her might have been an option.

“I hear Mr. Rolofson is rich.” Cherry said happily. “And I think he has a classic collection of watches, or something.”

“Good. Maybe I’ll steal one.”

Again Cherry ignored the comment

“Yeah, it’ll be fun.” Cherry’s voice was singsong. When Elen withheld her agreement, Cherry added. “And we should go because it’s good for America.”

“Is that so?” Elen thought about reminding Cherry that she was in fact Canadian, but previous experience had already taught the supermodel that Cherry couldn’t understand that distinction.

“Yeah.” Cherry said. Again there was a wide silence, which Elen refused to break. The strategy pretty much compelled Cherry to expand upon her point. After a bit Cherry finally managed to compose her most complex

statement yet. For someone like Cherry, it had to be considered a thesis statement. “And what’s good for America is good for everybody.” Judging by her voice, Cherry was feeling pleased at having achieved such a wondrous and profound conclusion.

“What a funny thing to say.” Elen told her.

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Even though Sophia had come to like Elen — spending time with the supermodel as she made her rounds at the party ended up being more nauseating than Sophia could bear. The entire thing was a schmooze-fest of self-important people with narrow views on justice, geo-political events, and how the world worked. The party guests were naive lap dogs, and Elen was smart enough to see through it.

At first Sophia was fascinated by experiencing a cocktail party from the perspective of a blind girl. Throughout the entire event, Sophia had nothing but sounds, smells, vocal tone, memory, and intuition to guide her through the social and physical maze. But eventually even that novelty wasn’t enough to stifle the insufferable agony caused by the endless stream of inane banter that Elen likely had to deal with on a regular basis.

But Elen was smart, and she wasn’t about to give up. She moved progressively from group to group, looking for someone or something. Any occurrence that might deviate from the ordinary droll, enough that it didn’t make her want to give up and return to her empty home where she would no doubt end up playing checkers with Cherry.

Sophia thought about ditching the supermodel, but things got interesting once Elen’s highly sensitive ears caught fragments of a conversation that was occurring across the room. It took Elen a moment to politely extricate herself from a conversation with a celebrity veterinarian and the wife of a hedge fund manager. They didn’t protest much when she excused herself. Elen suspected that the two of them were working up the courage to disappear into an empty room and spend some alone time together.

The hedge fund manager’s wife couldn’t have been more obvious about it either.

*Dr. Stone, you might know this,”* Giggle giggle. *“Can you tell me how apes do it?”*

*Huh, huh, huh.* Dr. Stone laughed like a soap opera star. *Often and rough, Mrs. Brant. Often and rough. Huh, huh, huh.*

Oh, the hilarity. Elen nearly gagged. That was when she heard a promising fragment of conversation from across the room.

*Well Dwight, I can see that you and her have a lot in common.*

Elen knew the words for what they were — an insult.

*I wouldn't know, Sir, since I've never had the pleasure of meeting her.* Dwight said, likely not even recognizing that the wolves were in the process of sizing him up for the kill.

Elen excused herself and began walking across the room towards the voices. Despite being blind, the supermodel had no fear at all of blundering into anything, since before she had taken any more than three steps, a gentleman was on her arm.

"Hello, Elen."

It pretty much always happened that way. She recognized the voice as belonging to Colonel John Herald. "Colonel," She said. "What took you so long?"

The Colonel laughed. "Matters of state." He joked, no doubt thinking that his answer would sound both clever and aggrandizing.

"Could I trouble you to help me with a different matter, then?"

"The entire U.S military is at your disposal, Ma'am." Sophia could hear the excitement in the man's voice.

"Good." Elen said. "I hear General Schwinn, and someone that I believe is Senator Van Dorn. Could you bring me to them?"

"Of course," the Colonel said. "It's nothing new I suppose. The lowly Colonel does all the work, while the big brass and the politicians get the reward."

Elen laughed for the Colonel's benefit. "I promise to make them miserable, for you. Surely you've heard that my company can be a double edged sword." Elen said.

"A sword that every man in this room would gladly die on, Ma'am."

He was sincere. Sophia couldn't believe the effect that this woman had on people. Elen took the comment perfectly in stride. "You're a flatterer, Colonel."

"A flatterer?" The new voice was loud and boisterous. "Is John keeping his silver tongue busy licking the young lady's boots?" It must have been General Schwinn.

"Colonel Herald has been the perfect representation of an officer and a

gentleman, General.” Elen said.

“That doesn’t sound like the John Herald I know.” It was a different male voice, but no less self-important. “You’re not growing soft since the transfer we arranged for you, are you Herald?” There was a hidden message in the comment, no doubt meant primarily for Elen’s ears. The covert message was that the lowly Colonel who had escorted her, worked for them, the true power brokers on the scene.

“Not yet, Senator.” Colonel Herald said, no doubt wanting to say more but choosing to hold his tongue.

Sophia could feel Elen’s irritation at the Senator’s rudeness, but Sophia herself had grown up listening to men’s pissing matches. She knew that this was a necessary ritual in male relations. The pecking order always needed to be re-established. The only difference between an L.A. cocktail party and a Station event, was that all of these men were likely to leave the party without blood loss. Try as she might, Sophia couldn’t feel any sympathy for the minor wounding that the Colonel’s boss’s words might have inflicted.

“Did I hear the voice of another guest?” Elen asked, purposely changing the subject.

“Two others, Elen.” The Senator said. “On your right is Walter Mulroney, the Vice President of the Goldman-Smith Bank, and to your left is a new fellow, a Mr. Grab-ass, is it?”

“Um,” The man cleared his throat. “Grabas.” Then a bit louder. “Actually it’s Grabas, but some people — they can get it mistaken.”

Whoever Grabas was, he was a naive enough fool to not even notice how they were setting him up. “Grabas here is a film maker.” The General said.

“But don’t get too excited.” Senator Van Dorn began chuckling. “He doesn’t make movies, just documentaries.”

Once again Elen tried to intercede for the weaker party. “Well how refreshing,” she said, reaching her hand out towards him to shake. “Its about time that someone invited an intellectual to one of these parties.”

She felt Grabas take her hand.

“I couldn’t be more honored, Mr. Grabas.” Elen said.

“Uh, thanks. I mean thank you, Miss —. Um Elen, Miss Elen. I’m sorry but I don’t even know your last name. Everyone just calls you Elen. May I call you Elen?”

"If you do, then we shall have to say that we are fast friends. Would you agree to accept my friendship?" Elen said. Sophia could practically feel the jealousy wafting off of the other men present.

"I'd like nothing better." Grabas said.

"Good, then." Elen laughed and the sound of her laughter was that of a goddess.

Apparently the General had heard enough. He went on the attack. "We were just saying to Grab-ass, the intellectual, that he thinks a lot like Emerald, the pop star. Did you see her today on the news?"

"General," Elen turned and stared her blind eyes right through to the general's soul. "I haven't seen anything on the news. Ever." Then Elen allowed a silence that was as incriminating as a smoking gun.

"Aw shit, Elen. That's obviously not what I meant. I just didn't think."

"I see, General. Then maybe you should leave the thinking to the intellectuals — or the pop stars?" Elen delivered the recrimination like the seasoned expert that she was. Her words elicited short snickers out of all the men gathered there, with the exception of Grabas.

The General's pride demanded that he double down. "It would be a scary world if I did. The little green tramp can shoot her mouth off for the DJ's and the news cameras, but the people that really know her, know what she's all about. Mark my words, Emerald the social justice activist, won't last. The wacky behavior that we're seeing, it's just the beginning."

"She's just a young girl." Grabas said. "So she got a little wild in West Hollywood. She's not the first person to do that. And lots of her ideas are very well informed —"

"She's going to crash like Apollo 13. And after that, her well informed ideas will cease to bother us." General Schwinn said.

"You sound fairly certain of that, General." Elen said, sweetly. "Is there something that you know, that ought to be shared with us?"

The silence that followed was deafening. Even without sight, Sophia could feel all of the men looking away. It was a typical behavior for when people were suppressing guilt — the kind of guilt that was always there in abundance when men of power made secret deals to support each other, regardless of conscience.

Interestingly to Sophia, Elen sensed the men's behavior, interpreted it perfectly, and wasn't surprised at all. Instead she laughed. No doubt each man there realized that she was laughing at them, but the fools were all too enthralled by the woman to take offense.

It was Grabas that eventually broke the silence. "I think Emerald will be fine. So she dyes her hair and throws up on a sidewalk. We've all either done that or had friends that have done it. Have some faith General, Emerald will be okay."

"Well," Schwinn said. "If she isn't, it's not like she wasn't warned. Repeatedly."

Elen was about to say something to the General again, but the Senator beat her to the punch. "Speaking of warnings — Mr. Grabas is sounding quite the alarm in his film. What was your premise? That the United Nations is taking over the world through a land treaty?"

Walter Mulroneo chuckled. "Last I heard, the U.N. could barely order doughnuts without getting mired up in politics. It's hard to imagine history's most impotent organization taking over anything much bigger than a hotel lobby."

The men certainly laughed long and hard at that comment, as though Walter Mulroneo had channeled the ghost of George Burns. Sophia knew better. Every fighter she had ever known tried to conceal their knockout blows within innocent actions — before they threw it anyways.

"Well said, Walt." Van Dorn responded. Then he turned to Grabas. "Are you sure that your babysitter didn't read Chicken Little to you, a few too many times?" The men all laughed again.

"The sky is falling, the sky is falling." The General said in a truly ridiculous high squeaky voice. His poor impression was rewarded with even more laughter, though.

Beside her, Sophia sensed that Grabas was no longer naive to the men's intentions of making him look like a fool. She heard him shifting on his feet. Grabas was no hothead, but Sophia didn't believe him to be a pushover either. No doubt he was weighing what response might be appropriate at a private function, so filled with dignitaries.

"Actually, if you had seen my film before dismissing it completely, you would see that it's not me making the claims. In fact, it's three separate whistleblowers, and interestingly the whistleblowers come from all three of your industries. Politics, banking, and military — or at least a private contractor for the military industrial complex. And if the U.N. passing their Agenda 21 can be seen as a mere land treaty, then maybe we should have just kept Nixon in office.

"The whistleblowers provided evidence supporting the secret inten-



tion to use Agenda 21 to alter the world's culture, population, regional independence and of course economics. It's just the first phase in a social engineering project that is as ambitious as it is unethical — and illegal." Grabas said. "I won a journalism award for casting light onto the U.N's intentions of eroding local sovereignty and eventually creating itself into a world government." Grabas paused in front of his silent crowd, "And I broke that story a full year before the U.N's Agenda 21 went public. I'm pretty sure that's what Emerald was alluding to with her comments. With all her contacts, she must have caught wind of it as well. I'm telling you, she's not at all crazy, and neither am I. If anyone should be interested in the facts that are covered in my film, I would think it would be you guys — America's leaders. Hell, I'm generally thought of as a big government progressive, but some elements of this Agenda scare the shit out of me."

Grabas was finished, and again there was an awkward, perhaps guilty silence.

Finally, the Senator spoke. "Well I'll take a look at it. But don't expect me to be impressed by some award that you journalists take turns giving to each other. And don't expect me to take as gospel truth, the words of people who turned against their own, ignored proper channels, and went off seeking glory by throwing hard working men and women under the bus, either. It's easy to sling dirt Mr. Grabas, something that as a journalist you've no doubt figured out by now. If you want to know what is hard though, it's doing the actual work. If I had my way, journalists like you would be on a much shorter leash. But for now we've got the constitution." The Senator sighed like he carried the troubles of all the world. "So say what you've gotta say now, because your dirt slinging hay day won't last forever." Some sort of silent signal must have passed between the men gathered, because the Senator cleared his throat and announced. "Mr. Grab-ass. Elen. If you'll excuse us, we should really get back to our wives."

*The lucky ladies*, Sophia and Elen both thought simultaneously.

Then the men left as one.

"That was weird." Grabas said. "Did I miss something? I only drove for twenty five minutes, but have I somehow left southern California and wound up in Nazi Germany?"

Elen laughed. "It's the host. He's a man with certain alliances, and he's powerful enough that his opinions tend to be supported by his peers."

"So those were his opinions? Why the hell would he ever invite me here? Everybody knows how I think."

“Exactly. How you think, and what you and your films are saying.” Elen said. “They invited you here to do exactly what they just did.”

“I feel like an idiot.” Grabas said.

“You were supposed to.”

“Can this night get any worse?”

“I hope not. Would you be so kind as to drive me home?” Elen said, loud enough that several bystanders would have heard her.

Once again, Elen was being Elen — upsetting the social balance and strengthening the position of the underdog. After just one evening of walking in the supermodel’s skin, Sophia would have sworn that the girl couldn’t help herself. And Sophia was pretty certain, that Elen was going to steal a watch on the way out as well.

With that, Sophia decided that she had experienced enough of Elen’s world, and she began to miss the life that Cadence and Luvvi had allowed her to share with them. In fact, Sophia was missing that life after only being away from it for a few hours.

Despite the obvious difference in levels of luxury for an L.A. party filled with dignitaries, versus the austere pressures of Station life — being at the party felt completely familiar to Sophia. Not the physical surroundings of course, it was the ethics that were a match. Somehow the overall framework of these powerbroker’s world was a mirror image to the Station’s internal ideals. That was enough to make Sophia want out.

So she willed herself to rise up again, into the California night. Once she was high above the city, she looked towards the neon lights and spectacle that could only be the infamous Sunset Strip. That was the direction that she knew she had to go. When she got moving, Sophia focused her mind on returning to Cadence and Luvvi, whose entire lives felt like a wonderland for a girl who had been Station raised.

She found Cadence sleeping. Once Sophia was inside the girl’s heart though, she realized that although evil frequented the Station with regularity, the Station was in no way darkness’s only home.

FIVE

Once inside her heart, it was like walking through fog for Sophia to reach Cadence's inner consciousness. But when she found it, it wasn't any sort of fantasy that Sophia found the girl re-living.

It was history.

Cadence wasn't much older than Sophia when the day finally came — the day that the whores who had kept Cadence safe, were no longer able to protect her. Circumstances had changed, and forces had turned against her fairly rapidly.

Was it just bad luck? Either that, or the women simply felt that they had done their part, and now Cadence was old enough. Like the rest of them, she could do what she had to do, to support herself.

Obviously Cadence's situation wasn't because of *bad luck*, it was a *bad place*. Cadence had lived in fear of that day coming for quite a while, but she had never been naive. She knew that the day would arrive. The truth was, Cadence had been looking in the mirror for about a year already, expecting that shift in expectations as she had watched her body change.

Up until that time, Cadence had been given shelter and food in exchange for helping out in the brothel with odd jobs, and generally trying to keep the women's morale up. She had been good at that part. Mostly she told jokes, and she listened whenever the need was there, which was often. Sometimes Cadence would play tunes on an old fiddle for them, but not that well. Truthfully, the women only liked her comedy and music performances because they liked her.

Over time, Cadence developed a few full comedy routines. But as she got older, the requests that were being made — they became different. And even the women that had been Cadence's strongest protectors began to behave ambivalently. The working girls had somehow become fatalistic, not uncaring, but just retired to circumstance. They saw it as a fact of life on the street.

So as Cadence grew up, the brothel changed for her. It transformed into a community that could no longer be satiated by just Cadence's personality.

Cadence only gave it up once though. That had been enough for her to realize how much all the prostitutes that she had been living with, were lying to themselves. After that experience Cadence chose to set out on her own. And at Cadence's age, that was no easy feat.

She knew that she had to learn to be self-sufficient. She needed to ready herself for some day in the future when she might have a real family. It was her deepest desire and Cadence was willing to work hard for that future family, to do her part. She would make herself ready to contribute, because that's what real families do. Every person helps, and contributes to make things work.

Truthfully though, for pretty much her whole life Cadence saw herself as little more than a parasite. Living off of the generosity of others. And to Cadence's lasting shame, when it had been her turn to start paying the bills like all the other women, Cadence had run. After just one — Uagh! Cadence couldn't even think about it.

Of course she knew that she had been right to run, the pimps and the senior whore's weren't giving her a choice. That wasn't Cadence's real regret. It was the fact that she was a parasite. That created a fear in her that she might always be a parasite.

The way that Cadence saw it, she was a bad comedian, a bad musician, and if truth were told, she hadn't really even been all that diligent with the odd jobs, which had been her only real responsibility back in the brothel. Cadence knew that it was entirely possible that she might always be unworthy of being a part of any real family.

But she figured that if she could learn to take care of herself, it might make her more ready to contribute. On the street Cadence had to be willing to let herself become both ruthless and cruel, when situations called for it. That was a start at least.

Once on the street Cadence had been quick to realize that her initial plan was destined to be a flop. It was naive. There was no market at all in Los Angeles. for an early teen stand up comic with potty mouth. So to survive, Cadence knew that she would need to develop a different skill.

She chose crime.

Mostly petty.

But occasionally, there were days when she would set her sights higher. It was a sunny day and all the city's remarkably contented high-status people — the ones that Cadence called Stats, (short for status) seemed

engaged in the business of going about their business. Ridiculous really. To Cadence's eye the goings on of regular society appeared unbearably self indulgent, as well as extremely deluded.

Granted, she saw the world differently than most. Over the years she had learned some unique lessons from the diverse clientele that had taken time out of their day, to visit her brothel. They were lessons about the nature of America, and by proxy — the world. She had learned that the wheels of what many called democratic capitalism, were always turning. And she could see very clearly, that those wheels were in fact churning out hidden miseries. Miseries that were carefully disguised of course, for the people's benefit, as gainful occupation. Cadence had learned to see all those signs of slavery in the Stats eyes, though.

The working masses. All of them slaves.

There was the disempowerment, the hopelessness, and the eternal indebtedness. All of it more evidence. All proofs that told Cadence that so it was in her own days, just as it was in the days of Pharaoh.

Cadence had seen the old movies. Sure, there were some differences now, of course. It all made her wonder how it had come about.

From what Cadence could tell it was the middle class, the Stats, that had allowed themselves to be enslaved. While the political and jet owning classes reveled in carrying out their smug little roles as the commoner's supreme overlords. At least Cadence knew that she was free. She was out of the system — so far below any measure of significance, that she was in fact free of the slavery. Free to think and to act independently, as opposed to being in the lockstep forward march of the Stats.

Cadence realized that she was still a young girl, and because of that she knew that she didn't know practically anything. But she could see all those evils in the city easily. March, march, and march. The truth of it was everywhere, and to recognize it all a person had to do was stroll through L.A with their eyes open.

Every where that Cadence had ever known could see it too. But what Cadence found especially strange was that somehow most of the Stats were blind to it.

Perhaps injustice was one of those things sort of like nose hair — easier to see from the bottom. Cadence had sometimes wondered if that could be one of the hidden blessings that those TV preachers were always going on about. Blessed are the downtrodden, and all that. She hoped that it was true, because the way that Cadence saw it, you couldn't get much lower

than an orphaned and homeless, outlaw girl.

Cadence couldn't even fight well, not for a street kid anyways. She was able to run though, which was a handy thing. Although she might have only developed the running talent because of all the practice that she got. Sometimes she wondered if a better thief wouldn't need all of that running skill.

It had been a lousy day that was really just one small part of an even lousier week. Cadence had been sitting in a small park, sizing up a potential mark when she saw three police officers approaching a guy who might have been homeless. Out of instinct, Cadence stood up and melted into the trees. Then she watched as the police questioned the man.

*Who are you?*

*Bill.*

*Why are you here?*

*It's a park, I'm just sitting here.*

*Why is there mud on your boots?*

*I stepped in mud, earlier.*

*Listen buddy, I'm gonna give you some advice right now. Don't be smart with us. Now tell us, why is there mud on your boot?*

*I work construction, there's always mud on my boots.*

*Didn't I just warn you about getting smart with us?*

*What did I say?* The man stood up, but two of the police officers pushed him back down.

*That's assaulting an officer.* The lead cop said.

*What? That's crazy, I just stood up! Now let me get up so I can leave.*

*You'll leave when we say you can leave.*

As the situation escalated, Cadence began to wish that she were somewhere else. Why had she stuck around at the beginning of it all? All she wanted was to be gone from the place. The last thing that Cadence needed was to become a witness to a cop on citizen crime.

What the cops were doing turned her stomach, but there wasn't any way that she could help the guy. His fate was looking pretty much sealed. And if the dirty cops saw Cadence, they would probably plant drugs on her and then take her off to juvie as a way of discrediting her.

Cadence looked around for an avenue of escape. There was no way that she could leave the bushes without crossing a whole lot of open ground. That meant that she could easily be seen.

What if she were to just walk away, though? Casually, like nothing was going on. It might work.

Or she could always run like hell and hope that the cops either wouldn't bother, or would not be able to catch her. That option seemed pretty risky. Running would definitely be easier on her nerves though, way easier than bluffing.

Her last option was to stay concealed. But if she stayed in those bushes and the cops decided to wander in her direction —

Cadence fought to keep herself from screaming, because by that time all three of the cops had begun kicking the living shit out of the construction worker. Cadence winced as she watched the blows land, one after another. Blood spattered as horribly dull thumps caused red to spray again and again, like it was a slaughterhouse. In the end, the girl's terror made the decision for her.

Cadence burst from the trees and she ran. Her legs pumped as though she was running on the air, and the adrenalin somehow gave her super speed. Up ahead of her was an alley, and Cadence's vision locked onto it.

Cars honked at Cadence as she blew out into the street. She stole a look back at that point, and there was an officer standing at the edge of the park, breathing heavily and staring right at her. He had stopped at the street because of traffic.

Shit! Why had she looked back? Now the cop had seen her face.

Cadence bolted. She ran through the alley, testing doors as she went until one of them finally opened and she ducked inside.

It smelled like produce. Turnips, carrots, banana — all the stuff that Cadence never ate. She saw a stock boy who was looking the other way and knew that she had to act. Cadence moved across the room and through the heavy plastic strips that were hung from the ceiling, serving as a door.

Elevator music assaulted her ears and Cadence found herself in a grocery store. There were women in black leggings and assorted types of sleeveless blouses. They had shopping carts, competent make-up, and that typical Stat look of lifeless servitude in their eyes.

Cadence wondered if she would be safe in the store. Or would the cop figure out where she had gone? Would he come inside looking for her? Cadence made her decision quickly. She wasn't going to wait around to find out what the cops might choose to do. Cadence made her way towards the front of the store where three cashiers were ringing people's

groceries through the register. Behind the cashiers were doors that opened to the front street.

Those doors would be her pathway to escape.

It might be risky to go out those doors though, since the front street would be in clear view of the park, where the cops had been. But then again, the cops would probably have been thinking that Cadence was in the alley. Despite the risk, Cadence's outlaw instincts pushed her towards the doors.

No risk, no reward.

The second she started walking towards the exit, she felt better about having decided to keep moving. Cadence had always been a runner, not a hider. Unfortunately, an elderly lady was moving slowly in front of her, blocking Cadence's escape as she struggled with her grocery bag. The lady kept stopping to adjust her grip on it, but she was doing it directly in Cadence's path.

Cadence thought of just bulling past the woman, and she would have done it but then she had another idea. Camouflage. "Ma'am, can I help you carry your groceries to your car?" The lady turned around, surprised. Cadence didn't wait for an answer, instead she just grabbed the lady's massive brown grocery bag. "Which way?"

Then the lady smiled. "Oh, you're so kind, Sweetheart. It's this way."

The lady moved faster without the groceries, which was good. Unfortunately Cadence was slower. The grocery bag was supremely heavy, and huge. Cadence could barely see where she was going because the bag was halfway in front of her face. But as soon as Cadence got out onto the front street, she became grateful for her burden. As camouflage went, a huge paper bag and a harmless looking grandma by your side couldn't be beat. The lady's Chevy turned out to be about a block away and Cadence even earned herself a pat on the hand, and a dollar for her efforts.

After she said goodbye, Cadence decided to cross the street and duck into a different alley — then she began to run again. She wanted to get far from the scene of the policemen's crime, fast. Twice in the next ten minutes a police cruiser rolled past. She really couldn't tell for sure if the cops had been looking at her.

Either way, her skin tingled with apprehension and she was beginning to get a sick feeling in her gut. Why? Why, why, why, why did these things always happen to her?



Suddenly, Cadence wanted to be far away. Really far, like car — far. Unfortunately she couldn't trust the buses while she was still a fugitive from the law, and she didn't know how to drive. She needed to get away though, but she didn't see how she could.

Then she had an idea, a bicycle! Cadence took off again at a slow run, looking for bikes. She had gone at least ten blocks before she started to walk, without having seen a single unguarded bicycle.

Cadence moved out of the alley and onto a real street, hoping to find a better selection of bikes. It was kind of a side street really, so she figured that it would be safe enough to walk down. Cadence strolled briskly along the sidewalk, shopping for unattended bicycles. She found a suitable ten-speed bike but it had been fixed to a railing with the biggest damn chain that Cadence had ever seen. It was overkill, and completely unfair from a thief's point of view, so she was forced to keep on shopping.

Gradually the city's terrain shifted from being a commercial retail district, to more of a light industrial area. Which meant that there were fewer people, and fewer eyes watching her. Perhaps a less paranoid criminal might have believed that they had made a clean getaway by that point — before that point, really. But Cadence had always been unmatched for paranoia. It was why she still had her freedom.

So she kept looking for a bike.

And in a sense, she found one. Several really, but not *actual* bicycles.

Cadence walked slowly towards a cafe that had an open patio and blue-collar rock emanating from the patio's speakers. It was Bob Seger, Take me Away Tonight. To Cadence it was a sign. She had to get away and what better way to skedaddle than with eighty horsepower of good old fashioned American chrome and steel, splitting your thighs.

Cadence thought about some of the bikers that she had come to know when she was living in the brothel. She had quickly become convinced that those men had pretty good philosophies about how a person ought to live their life. She could remember one grizzled old biker with one eye, telling her about the world as he saw it. *Old ladies come and go, little girl.* The guy said in a gravelly voice. *And governments will use you up, and cast you away.* The biker sighed. *Then one day you wake up just in time to see your grown daughter, coming at you with a syringe.* He had shaken his head as he stared into space with his far away eyes. Then the man focused. *But your Harley, little girl — it won't ever let you down.*

Even back then, Cadence had thought that it was a beautiful sentiment.

So with that memory spurring her forward, Cadence's mind became made up.

She could feel the men's eyes on her as she drifted past the café, but she made sure to keep her speed consistent as she walked by. Up ahead of her, Cadence could see a motorcycle that was somewhat further down the street than all the others, and it was mostly tucked behind a van. That was promising. Cadence hoped that it wasn't one of the really big ones, though. She didn't think that she would have the strength to handle one of them.

Keeping her head down, Cadence's rhythmic footsteps seemed to be becoming louder and louder to her, as she put the café noises behind her. Cadence was starting to feel an anxious sweat heating up the back of her neck, but she didn't change her mind. The van was still maybe fifty feet in front of her when two huge men dressed in leather and denim, got out of it and then they began walking towards her.

Cadence stepped off to the edge of the sidewalk as the giants approached her. She was unconsciously obeying the universal law of the jungle, which said that the weak must yield to the strong.

One of the bikers wore a black kerchief and he smiled at her. Then he offered her a two-finger salute. "Little Miss." He said, smiling. The man had a southern accent.

Cadence offered the man no reply, exhaling only once they had passed by without incident. Not too many steps later, she arrived at the van. Then Cadence ducked in behind it so that she could be alone with her new bike.

As bikes went, it seemed like a good one. She liked the blue color. It seemed low and strong, and hopefully fast enough to get her the hell away from there. What Cadence knew about stealing motorcycles, she could fit into two paragraphs. But as it happened, both of those paragraphs pertained to eighties era Harleys.

For that knowledge, a special thanks was owed to an outlaw prospect named Skinny Pete, who frequently ran his mouth hard after six or seven shots of tequila.

So in theory, Cadence knew exactly how to remove the front headlight to reach the switch wires. And she also knew what to do with them to boost it.

The headlight screeched as she pulled it free. The sound of it letting loose tightened all the muscles up and down Cadence's spine. She couldn't stop her mind from becoming fixedly aware that fifty plus homicidal bik-

ers were drinking beer and swapping tales of their recent murders, in a café not a hundred yards off.

Shit, Cadence immediately realized the obvious — she should never have tried to attempt this theft, it was far too dangerous. But it was too late for that regret, because Cadence was already guilty. By pulling off that headlight, she had already violated the club's precious motorcycle. Because of that, in the club's eyes, she would be deserving of punishment. Cadence had no choice now but to continue to effect her escape.

She took the small knife from out of her pocket and slashed at the switch wires. Fortunately she always kept her knives exceedingly sharp. It had always been something that Cadence could make certain of despite the uncertain life that she lived. In a sense, sharp knives were her touchstone. That and clean socks. And if anyone thought that those things didn't count for much, they hadn't ever smelled a typical street kid's socks — it was enough to make the eyes water.

Reaching carefully, Cadence twisted the wires together and pretty much instantly the bike sputtered to life. Quickly, Cadence grabbed one handlebar and goosed the bike a little to give it some gas.

Then she climbed on.

Shit, her toes barely touched the ground. Cadence had to rock the bike back and forth as she tried to disengage the kickstand, but the bike was heavy.

By that point, the plan that had been in Cadence's head had her driving away already. So she couldn't help wondering if someone might have heard her start up the motorcycle's motor.

She kept rocking.

Then with a slightly better timed push, Cadence felt the bike lurch forward as the kickstand got snapped back into riding position. Cadence turned the wheel fully to the left and wondered if she could get the bike out of the parking space by just riding forward.

Maybe, but it would be tight.

Cadence paused to listen for a moment. No footsteps yet.

Then she put her foot onto what she thought must have been the gear-shift, because she had heard that motorcyclists shifted with their feet. Cadence took a deep breath.

Her fear was intense by that point, as the dangers were compiling with time and her own incompetence became self-evident. But it was already past time to make her attempt. Cadence revved the engine, squeezed with

her left hand, and pushed the lever with her foot.

When she released the clutch, the engine screamed in protest. Cadence's vehicle bucked like an angry stallion and tossed her sideways onto the hot ground. It happened so fast that for a second, Cadence wondered how she had gotten there.

It was embarrassing and disturbing. For a brief moment, she worried about the deep scrapes that the fall had etched into her hands. But that wasn't Cadence's worry for long though. She realized that her hands weren't her biggest concern. The motorcycle that had bucked her off was teetering and ready to fall, right on top of her.

Cadence scrambled sideway as the bike fell with a horrific crash. That sound was accompanied by a sharp sensation of pain in Cadence's shin. At that point the Harley's engine just sort of gave up and died. Throughout the moment of quiet that followed the thunderous crash, Cadence could hear her own blood pumping through her ears. Then she heard the sounds of booted feet, and she wished for a second that it had been her that had died.

"Shit, shit, Jiminy shit!" Cadence tried to scurry towards the far curb, clawing at the asphalt, but the fallen motorbike had her leg pinned. She kicked at the bike twice, but the machine didn't even seem to notice. For a moment Cadence wondered if she could hide under the van while her foot was still pinned under the bike, but even in her panicked state, she was still smart enough to know that it was a ridiculous plan. Then Cadence remembered the pain in her shin and that, combined with what awaited her, caused Cadence to wilt into the grease-covered road and begin to cry.

Soon she was surrounded. The smell of leather and beer teased at her nostrils, reminding her of her many sins. Then something not at all unpleasant occurred. She felt the Harley getting lifted away from her leg.

Reflexively, Cadence tried to scramble away but she found herself quickly plucked up off of her hands and feet, and dangled in front of the group of bikers like a mouse at a cobra party.

"Hello Littl'n." A man with a ton of silver buckles on his jacket peered at her from up close. There was a strange questioning look on the man's scarred face. When Cadence didn't respond, the man bent down and picked up her knife. Then he touched it to his thumb. "Damn, it's sharp. Don't you know that little girls shouldn't play with knives?"

"I'm not —" Cadence froze, unsure of what she was even going to say.

Then she looked at the rest of the group, and realized that she was utterly and royally screwed.

Surprisingly to her the pack seemed to sense her thoughts, which caused a storm of male laughter to gather like a thunderhead. The sounds washed over her again and again, taunting. Convicting her of her various crimes against nomad-kind.

But in her panic she had an idea. “My mother’s gonna sue you guys when she finds out that your bike fell on me. I was just walking past when —”

Cadence’s lie got inconveniently cut off by the facts. “You tried to hot-wire it.” The scarred man said. But Cadence didn’t want to be reminded of that particular piece of evidence.

Then from somewhere in the back of the pack, an angry voice boomed.

Cadence saw the wall of skin, meat and leather, begin to shift in front of her as some omnivorous creature fought his way towards the front. The things that he was yelling hinted strongly at the displeasure that he was feeling, concerning the state of his motorcycle. And the words that he had chosen to describe Cadence, they might have even made a young whore blush.

The effect of that man’s approach on Cadence was no less than the onset of utter terror. She felt herself starting to shake. Then another voice sounded from off to her left. “Hey, I know that little pip. She’s one a the whores at Darla’s.”

Another voice came from her right. “Ain’t no whore, Hatch. Girl’s just a house girl.”

Just then the creature emerged from behind his leather-clad brothers, and he stared at his fallen bike, fingers twitching by his sides — very much blanketed in rage. The patch on his cut said, *Prospect*.

Cadence stared at the man, who stared at his bike. A nasty taste rose into the back of Cadence’s throat as she wished uselessly that her feet were on the ground so that she could run like hell. It wasn’t the man’s size that made him a preteen girl’s ultimate nightmare; it was the biker’s face. It was a face that was devoid of any attractive feature that could be appreciated by a woman. He was a creature of absolute repugnance.

In her mind, Cadence screamed, but other than that the girl was paralyzed. Somehow the repugnant biker must have heard her silent cry though, because he shifted his reptilian eyes towards her.

Then he advanced.

One blow folded Cadence's gut. She felt like she had just been struck by a battleship. Then a second blow grazed her chin before a sea of leather collapsed around her. It was a stormy sea as the bikers separated into two factions, those who didn't want to watch a young girl being beaten to a pulp for her idiocy, and those who were more equal opportunity thinkers.

Cadence was quick to decide which side she was cheering for.

As it turned out though, even with the efforts of her protectors, Cadence received a fair bit of damage while she was being shoved around that testosterone filled, muscle-shark mosh pit. One of her defenders intercepted an enemy's attack upon Cadence just in time, but then her hero effectively cold cocked her with his elbow as he drew back to smack the hell out of some other guy.

For a moment, Cadence's feet even reached the ground, but that turned out to not be any safer, since the moment her feet touched down a motorcycle boot chomped hard onto her toe. For several seconds Cadence was struggling to get her foot free, as the booted heel ground her bones into pulp.

She was truly stuck. She struggled to get her leg free but she might as well have been fighting off a three hundred pound alligator. Then, unable to properly dodge, Cadence got elbowed again, this time on the edge of her eye.

After the eye shot, somebody behind her plucked her up. An enemy, or a defender? That arm dragged her through the crushing grindhouse of roiling bodies, seemingly determined to relocate her someplace. The question was, was it going to be someplace good, or someplace bad?

It turned out to be someplace where daylight could penetrate, and that felt good. Cadence was pulled out of the sea of brawling bikers onto the open road, by a sinewy arm that was attached by a neck to the ugliest face that a girl would ever look upon in her lifetime. It was the Creature, and he had her all to himself.

This time Cadence's voice did not fail her. She screamed and screamed until the Creature began bitch-slapping her into silence.

That was when things turned strange.

Certainly, it wasn't an everyday occurrence for Cadence to find herself as the central figure in an outlaw biker's street brawl, but neither had it ever been out of the question for someone like her. In fact, in her younger years, she had often imagined situations much like this. What she never in

a bazillion years would have conceived of though, was what happened next.

Out of nowhere, a woman, in her mid-forties waded into the Creature with claws, and nails, and fists. Her faded brown hair was flailing everywhere as the woman screamed, demanding that the biker release the child.

The brunette promptly received a staggering blow for her efforts, and she was thrown back five or six feet. But the woman didn't even hesitate, she screamed again and renewed her assault upon the Creature. It would have been nice to say that the woman gave as good as she got, but that would have been entirely untrue.

What the woman got was far worse, but what shocked Cadence more than anything, more than anything that she had seen in all her life really, was that this woman did not stop. She would not stop. In fact, the worse the Creature beat her back, the more determined the mother bear became.

At one point the woman managed to tear Cadence's arm free from the biker's grip, after which Cadence found herself being shoved back. Then the woman took up position between Cadence and the Creature.

Every blow that struck the woman, Cadence felt, and Cadence screamed out her pain loud enough that all of the other biker's brawling was temporarily paused. Men turned to view the spectacle of the bloodied berserker woman, who had bitten into the Creature's forearm, and would not let go no matter how many times the Creature kned her in the crotch and the abdomen.

Cadence was young, but she could see the effect of this woman's struggle on the men. Perhaps some of them might have been all right with seeing a man beating on some whore or even a girlfriend, but few of these men had the stomach to watch one of their own, in pitched combat with a mother.

Then for some reason the melee found a natural pause. The Creature and the woman were separated. She backed away from the man, breathing heavy as she kept herself between Cadence and the Creature, reaching out protectively behind her to make sure that the girl was close.

"You keep away from her!" The woman spoke through ragged breaths. "You keep away!"

Cadence had never had anyone say or do anything that meant half as much to her as what that woman was doing right then. And from that moment forward, Cadence loved the woman, unfailingly.

Then the Creature and a couple of his friends seemed to find their focus again, and they fanned out to surround Cadence and her protector. Even as that happened, Cadence heard the sound of a bottle breaking behind her. But Cadence's eyes could only see the Creature, and his sinister smile.

Yet the woman turned quickly at the sound. She bent low towards Cadence. "It's going to be okay, now. Get ready to run." Then the woman even gave a smile, crooked and bleeding. "My husband's here." She said.

As the woman grasped Cadence's hand and pulled her into a run, a rush of wind passed by them. From the corner of her eye Cadence saw a massive man, taller than the tallest biker there, and seemingly wider than a bus. He blew past Cadence and engaged with the Creature and his two henchmen.

Cadence wondered how one man would ever fare in that sea of leather. She might have even paused to watch, but the woman pulled her away. But when they reached the corner Cadence stole a backward glance, and she was shocked to see that the man was holding his own.

Once around the corner, the woman pulled out her car keys and plunged them into the door lock of a red Ford Thunderbird. "Get in." The woman said, her lips already beginning to swell. Cadence got into the passenger seat as the woman took the wheel. "Where are your parents?" She said. The engine woke with a rumble.

"Damned if I ever knew." Cadence said to the woman.

The woman turned in her seat, and then she looked at Cadence. It was a long look, appraising.

Then she reached across and grabbed Cadence's seatbelt and plugged it in for her. "Alright." The woman grabbed a Kleenex from out of a little packet in her glove box, and she wiped the buildup of blood and spit from her lower lip. "Then you can be with us now."

Cadence's breath caught in her throat. Her heart skipped a bunch of beats and her eyes flooded with tears. Then Cadence felt herself lose control of her jaw, as soundless words began squeaking from out of her throat.

Through it all the woman was calm, patient.

Looking at her, Cadence tried to speak again, but by then snot had closed off her nose. It made speech impossible under the conditions. Cadence reached for a tissue of her own and with that, she cleared her nose



of mucus and blood.

Cadence's breathing felt better, but the woman's face still seemed blurred by the tears that filled Cadence's eyes every time she wiped them away. Then Cadence felt herself starting to hyperventilate. Gawd, she hated hyperventilating.

"Okay," Cadence managed to nod to the woman as she fought to control her breath. "Okay."

When the woman heard Cadence agree, she smiled even wider. It was a great broad smile and that was just about all the emotional input that Cadence could take. Within seconds her breathing became completely out of control and she found herself honking like a horny seal rutting on a beach.

The woman reached into the back seat and grabbed Cadence a paper lunch bag. "Breathe into this. It'll help stop the hyperventilation."

Cadence did as she was told, and although it seemed silly, it did help her breathing. A lot. Not the crying though. She was going through tissue like an asthmatic in a dust storm.

Cadence felt bad about using it all. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'll pay you back."

The woman glanced at Cadence as she pulled into traffic. "Never once." The woman said to her. "And never again."

The words weren't at all specific, but for some reason Cadence understood exactly what the woman meant by them. And the realization of it did nothing to stop her crying. "Aw, shit." Cadence said as she used up the last tissue.

The woman pulled a quick U-turn and then she was headed back towards her husband. With the car headed in the right direction, she reached into her purse while driving and produced another little packet of tissues — which she held out for Cadence. Cadence reached for the packet but when she grabbed it, the woman didn't let go. "Mind your language, okay?" The woman said to Cadence, and then released her grip on the Kleenex.

Cadence searched her memory. What had she even said? Cadence couldn't remember swearing, but she already trusted this woman above all others. "Yes, ma'am." Cadence said.

Soon the Thunderbird was rolling up to the site of the brawl. Cadence was nervous about going back there, but she also knew that they couldn't leave the woman's poor husband to that pack of leather dogs. Cadence

hoped that the man wouldn't have gotten too badly hurt.

As the T-bird got closer though, she saw that she needn't have worried. The man was standing on the street facing the bikers. The shirt was torn away from his massive body and there were splotches of blood on his torso and his pants. In one hand the man held a knife. In the other hand he held a pistol. There were at least nine bikers on the ground and the rest of the crowd was motionless, frozen like small rabbits before a crouched coyote.

The T-bird rolled up slowly behind them. Cadence pushed the passenger door open and then slid across the seat to make room. The man didn't get in though. Instead he turned and addressed his wife. "Back so soon, Scarla?"

"Get in, honey." Scarla said, gently. Cadence could hear the love in her voice.

Scarla's husband didn't get in. Instead, he turned towards one of the beaten lumps of ground up leather that was lying on the street, and he addressed what Cadence now recognized, was the Creature. "Not until this one apologizes to you." He said. Then he spoke to the man. "Prospect! Apologize to my wife you woman beating sack-o-shit, or I'll take off your kneecap."

Although beaten, and now even uglier than before, the Creature still had his pride. "Fuc —"

The pistol sounded once and the Creature's knee exploded. He clutched at his shattered leg and rolled onto his side. Now that Cadence saw the position that the Creature was turtled into, she realized that the Creature had not been the first man there to lose a kneecap recently. And on closer inspection, that pistol wasn't the only gun in play either. In fact Cadence counted at least three of them on the asphalt, but none of the bikers were daring to make a move for any of them.

"You wanna try again." Scarla's husband said to the Creature.

"I'm sorry!" The man had overcome his pride. "I'm sorry lady, truly sorry, but your brat wrecked my bike."

There was a moment of silence. Then Scarla's massive husband looked back toward Cadence, who did her best to shrink into the seat. "Is that true?" He said.

"Ckchk —" Cadence's first attempt at speech was entirely ineffective, but she cleared her throat and tried again. "Ahem. Yes, sir. It's mostly

true." Even to her, Cadence's voice seemed to be little more than a squeak.

The man looked at her, perhaps a slight smile behind his eyes. "Okay girl, approximately how much of it is true."

Cadence's lips began moving before her will had asked them to. "Approximately, about — um, all of it."

Surprisingly, that brought out the man's smile, which turned out to be wonderful. And Cadence smiled despite herself.

Scarla's husband turned back towards the bikers. "Alright gentlemen, it's time to even up. Which one of you is the President?"

It was the man with the black kerchief that ended up stepping forward. "That would be me."

"Scarla," Her husband said. "Get out your checkbook. This might cost a penny."

Then Cadence watched as Scarla's husband stood on the street and negotiated a settlement in quiet tones. It seemed to take longer than it rightly should have, and judging by the shared chuckles between them, the two men seemed to be getting along better than most would.

At one point the motorcycle club's President turned to his men and issued an order to begin scraping up the wounded off of the street, and to get them the medical attention that they needed. When it was all done, the men shook hands.

Then Scarla's husband ducked his head down into the T-bird's seat and said. "Make the check out for twelve hundred."

"That's it?" Scarla said as she wrote the check against the steering wheel.

"That's it." Then the man smiled again. "Plus the use of our cabin in B.C. this summer."

That caused Scarla to arch an eyebrow. She leaned across the seat and called up towards the club President. "I don't want any smoking whatsoever, in that cabin. And you better not let any of your friends wear their boots to bed."

The MC's President ducked his head into the car, beside Scarla's husband. "Yes, ma'am." He said, and gave her his two-fingered salute. Then Scarla handed the MC president the check.

"Thank you, ma'am." He said. "And I'm sorry about all the unpleasantness."

Scarla put her bruised and bloodied hands onto the wheel. "Don't mention it." She said.

Scarla's husband dropped himself into the T-bird beside Cadence, not minding the fact that he was pretty much crushing her up against Scarla. The man easily took up over half of the car's bench seat.

After the vehicle was rolling, he shifted a little bit and put his massive arm up on the back of Cadence's seat. Scarla's eyes were fixed to the road. Cadence could tell that she was a careful driver. Then the Goliath beside her turned and reached out his oversized hand to her. "I'm Kurtz." He said.

Cadence took his hand, somewhat afraid that he might crush it, the way big men sometimes did. But the man had fought a whole motorcycle gang for her, shaking his hand was the least that Cadence could do. "Cadence." She told him her name.

Kurtz nodded, apparently satisfied by the name.

After that it was silent for a while, and the T-bird rode the highway as smoothly as a breeze. "We're going to keep her." Scarla said to Kurtz, out of the blue.

That caused Kurtz to shift in his seat to look more closely at the girl beside him. Cadence felt awkward under the man's heavy gaze. It was quite a thing, being inspected by a man like that, but Kurtz eventually smiled. "She looks like a good one." He said.

Cadence felt herself flush red at the man's attention.

"I think so." Scarla said.

*I will be, Cadence promised herself. I will be.*

Sophia had to fight her way out of Cadence's dream. And when she emerged she was looking down on Cadence and Luvvi, asleep and peaceful on their bed. The girls were holding hands. Cadence's smile was serene, and now Sophia knew why.

Being an orphan herself, Sophia did not underestimate the gratitude or the love that Cadence would have had for her new family. It seemed that in being able to share that dream with Cadence, Sophia had been given a very special thing. It made her think of Demsie and Alastar. Some place in the past, the three of them were huddled together on a bed, not unlike how these girls were. For Sophia's allies it was colder and more rustic, and at least one of them was dying, but the sentiment would have been the same.

Sophia looked closer at the girl's bed and suddenly she felt a violent sort of danger. It was definitely another clue. A message for anyone with the sense to pay attention and Sophia knew the meaning instantly. Back in the cave, they would face danger. And that danger would come before they even left their bed.

It was troubling.

But when Sophia looked at the girls again, she felt their bond and was given hope. Yes, there had to always be hope. The Station had taught her that. So long as you had allies, you were not alone.

After seeing the circumstances of this girl's past, if Sophia had been given the chance she would have been honored to call Cadence her ally. And perhaps over time, the two of them might have grown into friends, or maybe even another sister.

Sophia reached out to touch her and quite a bit different than before, she got instantly pulled into Cadence's dream.

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Cadence was sleepy, but there was something that she was dying to ask her uncle.

They had been driving for a day and a half, up to their cabin in British Columbia. Scarla was sleeping in the back seat. Cadence looked over at Kurtz, his eyes were trained forward on the road with his big hands gentle on the wheel.

"You got a question." Kurtz said, like it was an undisputed fact.

Of course she had a question, but wasn't it considered polite to wait until the question was asked?

Cadence was sitting sideways on the seat, with her back to the door and her feet extending towards Kurtz. She went to give him a little kick in the thigh for his presumptiveness, but he caught her foot out of the air.

"What's your question?" Kurtz said.

"It's about your friends, the motorcycle club." Cadence said.

"What about them?"

Cadence didn't really know how to ask what she wanted to know. "I mean, I know that you're Mr. Special Forces, Delta top operator, war hero kind of guy. And I know that some of the guys in the MC are alright people." Cadence had to pause at that point to choose her words. "Look, I know that I'm a liar and a thief and all, as well as a lady of disrepute — so I'm not being snooty here. But you and Scarla, you're a respectable family. Good people. Hell, you even know the POTUS personally. My question is, aren't we the kind of people that are supposed to summer with um, respectable folk?"

Kurtz drove for a while without saying anything. Cadence knew that he had heard her, and she knew that she would get a response from him. But Cadence didn't ever know which hour or day in the future that response might come on.

Then Kurtz spoke. "How do you like respectable people?" Kurtz said.

"I like Luvvi. And Hopper." Cadence said.

"Hopper doesn't count as respectable. His mother traffics in hallucinogens." Kurtz said. "And Luvvi doesn't count either, she's family. What other respectable people do you like?"

Cadence thought for a bit. "Well," she said. "It's not as though I don't like the other respectable people, but they can be a little bit content with life. And maybe a bit dull. And come to think of it the way they see things sometimes, it makes me want to shake them awake. I'm sure it's just me, but I think I'd rather hang around different types."

Kurtz smiled at her, as though he had made his point. But in Cadence's

mind, he wasn't even close.

"Look, me choosing more eclectic and colorful friends is not the same as us spending every summer drinking beer, fighting, and listening to blues-rock with criminal outlaws."

"You don't like the music?" Kurtz said.

"I like the music."

"You don't like the fighting?"

"I feel bad for the guys that have to fight you, but no I don't mind the fighting. Mostly you guys are just roughing each other up."

Kurtz laughed. "Yeah. And who else does that? It's fun, huh?"

"Not really. Far as I can see, it's a bunch of lonely men who get off on adrenaline. Men unwilling to respect anyone else's laws or to even temper their behaviors to fit into regular society."

Kurtz glanced at her. "Exactly."

Cadence sighed and tried to kick him again. He didn't seem to be getting her point at all. Cadence tried to remember how Luvvi's mother had phrased her opinions of the Thomas's *Easy Rider summers*, as she called them. Nope, she couldn't remember the comment at all. Over the years that she had known Luvvi's mom, Cadence must have learned to automatically purge her mind of all trace of the woman's input.

Cadence had pretty much given up on getting any answer, but then something rare happened. Kurtz broke the silence without even being cajoled to, and he began to tell Cadence a story.

"After the big one — World War Two, soldiers started coming home from overseas. Nothing new there, soldiers been coming home from war for centuries. What was new was the sheer number of them. Young men, maybe twenty-two or twenty-five years old. Whatever.

"Now they had just fought and won the war to save the free world from tyranny. That's what they'd been told anyways, and after saving the free world it shouldn't be all that unexpected to think that a young man would wanna kick back, have some brewskies, and raise a bit of a ruckus.

"So looking for all of that, as well as the continued camaraderie of the band of brothers that those men had pretty much become raised in since they were teenagers, motorcycle clubs formed all throughout North America.

"At that point, they were guys that might have been a bit on the wild side, who believed in exercising the freedom that they had fought for, and that their friends had died for. And for distraction, those same guys trav-

elled the highways, and raced their motorbikes. Sure, they could be intimidating and they could be loud and even crass sometimes, but it was America, those things shouldn't be against the law, should they?"

"I don't think so." Cadence said. "Otherwise rock concerts, raves and just about everything Luvvi and I ever do would be against the law."

"Well the MC's didn't think so either, so they held races that were sanctioned and legal, all over America. Until in nineteen-forty seven — they decided to hold a race in Hollister, California."

"Is that a city near here?" Cadence said.

"Pretty near." Kurtz turned on his blinker and signaled that he was merging onto a different highway. "But for the Hollister race, a lot of people showed up. A whole lot, which got the authorities feeling a bit squirrely about things."

"Squirrely?"

"Fearful." Kurtz said. "And then the authorities got aggressive."

"So what happened?"

"Well, these guys didn't back down to Hitler and his Axis forces, so do you think they crumpled when the Hollister Police went nose on nose with them?"

"Not Likely." Cadence said, wondering what she might have done in that same situation. "So then what happened?"

"Nothing much." Kurtz said. "No burning buildings, no anarchy in the streets. Just a bunch of young men on motorcycles, drinking beer. But that's not what the newspapers said."

Cadence was surprised, but in a way not surprised at the same time. "What did the papers say?"

"They named it the Hollister Riots. Coast to coast the media told its version of the story, with the most incriminating hard evidence being a posed picture of a smug biker kicked back with his feet on the handlebars, and a bunch of empties near his front tire."

After that Kurtz stopped talking. To Cadence's eye, he seemed irritated. There was tension in his jaw.

"Why would anyone do that?" Cadence said.

"It was classic divide and conquer tactics. Just one of the many psi-op tools that the governments and ruling families of the world seem perfectly willing to employ upon their own people. Just think about all those young men, strong, united, capable, and seen as heroes by many. Then put your-



self in the government's shoes, covetous of all that power, always worried about control. And then ask yourself how you might see those same men."

"They were a threat." She said. Cadence thought that she was beginning to understand. "So they're actually not such bad guys?"

Kurtz looked over at her long enough that Cadence felt that he should be looking at the road. Cadence had to squint her eyes at him and gesture out the front window. Eventually Kurtz looked away from her. "Oh, they're bad guys." Kurtz said. "You can't mistake that. But the original reasons for those clubs forming — giving young men who had just spent six years at war a place to acclimatize; and the values of freedom, nonconformity to mainstream culture, and loyalty to each other? Those are good things. And you can still find a lot of those things in many of those men. But no," Kurtz started to chuckle. "They're not good."

After a couple of minutes she realized that Kurtz was done with his story. His point still eluded her though. And it really didn't explain why their family always spent their summers with the same bikers, that had once beat up both her and Scarla. Not that Cadence held any grudge, though. Most of those guys had chosen to fight for her anyways, and the asshole prospect that beat up Scarla never did get patched in. Cadence made one more attempt.

"That was a nice history lesson, Uncle. But you still haven't said why the hell we spend our summers with them."

Kurtz looked at Cadence and grinned. "I like the beer, the music, and the fighting. Scarla likes B.C, and doesn't mind the bikers if they keep to her rules. The bikers love fishing at our cabin, and I don't ever get to see you having more fun than when you're at a campfire, talking shit to a group of twelve bikers."

"Finally some truth." Cadence attempted another kick and this time landed a decent shot with her heel. It dug deep into the outside of Kurtz's thigh. "Would it have been so hard to say that at the beginning?"

---

It all felt so different than in the Station. These people, they offered themselves to each other without conditions. Without all of the usual reservations that Station residents developed, out of an ever-present fear of loss.

These people were so vulnerable, and living it, experiencing the beauty

of it, made Sophia weep within her soul. To think that life could be like that.

It made her realize even more, what was at stake in her own life. Survival was more than just continued existence — it was hope. She had seen it now, first hand. Redemption was possible, and it wasn't just a fleeting whimsical thing, it was tangible. She thought about Demsie and Alastar. If her and her allies could live to graduate into the open world, so many things would be possible for them. With people out there like Scarla and Kurtz, and Luvvi and Cadence, then —

Suddenly Sophia got spit out of the dream, as quickly as she had been taken in.

SEVEN

Leal had just flashed the signal to Roland. He was suggesting that they should call a timeout. Roland didn't need to ask why, if Leal wanted a timeout, he would have his reasons.

Roland turned quickly and signaled the referee. The whistle blew. All the players moved for the sideline, but Roland drifted towards his friend. "What do you see?"

Leal leaned in close, keeping his tone quiet. "We've got to make a change, or we're going to lose for sure."

"You think? They're only ahead by one try."

"Trust me. That's only because of uncommonly good luck and the tenacity of our hundred and fifty pound fullback, who just got laid out with extreme prejudice," Leal kept his tone even. "He just saved our butts by neutralizing that drive from their wing."

Roland thought about Leal's words. They were likely true. But it would have taken someone as sharp as Leal to notice the patterns. The two of them had been playing sports together since they were five years old, and they had been playing rugby for at least half of that time. Roland could count on one hand the number of times that Leal might have been off with a prediction like this.

"Okay, I'll turn the team around. Just tell me what I should do." Roland said.

"The first thing," Leal said. "And it's not going to be easy — is we gotta get Masters out of his position as coach. He's running our backs completely wrong."

Roland looked at his best friend, to see if he was serious. "Fire the head coach, mid-game? Can a team captain do that?"

"Unfortunately no." Leal said. "But I have an alternate plan."

"Okay, I'm listening."

"It involves Leberman's mom."

"His mom?" Roland couldn't tell where this was going.

"His new mom." Leal said. "The trophy wife with the recent —" Leal's hands quickly gripped the air in front of his chest, making the universal

sign for bosoms.

Suddenly Roland knew exactly which new mom Leal was referring to. "Okay, I know her."

"Well," Leal said. "She's competitive, a social climber, and comfortable using her looks for manipulation. Have you noticed how Coach Masters keeps checking her out?"

In fact Roland had noticed. He smiled and nodded. His friend was a bona-fide genius, and Roland had nothing but respect for his strategies. "Give me the words and the means and I'll engineer it, Partner." Roland swatted Leal on the back.

---

Somehow Sophia found herself flat out on a rugby pitch. She was already getting dirt ground into her ear before she even realized that she was no longer with Cadence and Kurtz. Dammit, ouch!

What the hell?

How could anyone argue that boys weren't fools for choosing to engage in these sorts of games? When Roland got himself up, the first thing he did was make eye contact with Leal, who was his best friend since birth and the brother that he never had. Sophia could feel their bond.

Predictably, Leal was checking on Roland to make sure that he was all right, and Roland flashed Leal a smile to reassure him. Then he tried to rub some of the dirt off of the side of his face.

Since they had been the littlest of kids, Leal had always needed to know that his friend was okay. Roland's earliest memory was of Leal standing above him after Roland had fallen. Roland had fallen, because a visitor's dog had assaulted him. Leal was so brave that day. He had stood in the gap in support of his downed comrade as the beast in front of him bared its teeth, and growled. Of course the beast was a four-pound Yorkie, but him and Leal were little more than toddlers. So the way that Roland remembered it, it might have at least been an even match-up.

After Roland had gotten to his feet, it was the two of them together that stared their common enemy down, and they had emerged from that ordeal with their pride. Roland had reveled in that story, and he told it to whoever would listen for weeks after the incident. Not Leal though. He had no taste for advancement, or for glory. It was enough for him to know

that his friend was safe, and that Roland had fared well. And ever since, Leal's eyes had always been watching, looking out for the well being of his best friend.

One time about two years ago, Roland had called Leal on his selfless devotion. *Don't you ever want anything for yourself? Let's do something to boost you up for a change.*

True to form, his friend had simply looked at Roland with a deep sense of puzzlement in his eyes. *Why?* Leal had said.

*So you'll look good.* Roland had told him. *So people will admire you and realize how capable you are.* Roland watched as Leal considered the idea. Then he just shrugged.

*I honestly don't know why we would ever need that, Rolo. As long as we're both having fun — who cares, right?*

*Shit, yeah.* Roland had said back to Leal, giving up on the impossible task of trying to teach his lifelong friend ambition. They had been sixteen years old then, and that was probably the last time that Roland had tried to coax Leal into taking the lead.

They both knew that Leal could lead if he wanted to, and that had always been enough for him. As long as Roland knew his friend's worth, Leal had nothing else to prove to anybody.

Roland got back onto his feet again, running. The other teams winger was freakishly fast and he had broken through their back line. It would have been a try for sure, if not for their full back, O'Donnell. He crossed the field on angel's wings and made the ultimate sacrifice by bringing down the much bigger opponent. The spectators on the sidelines gasped at the impact.

O'Donnell was down, and Leal's eyes were suddenly on Roland. He was signaling for a timeout.

Roland didn't need to ask why, if Leal wanted a timeout, he would have had his reasons.

Roland called out to the referee and flashed the timeout sign.

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Leal's plan was in motion and Roland had gotten the team huddled up. "Okay boys, we're gonna make some changes here and I need to know if you all still wanna win this game." The team sounded off in the affirmative so Roland continued. "Look. What O'Donnell did just now by stopping that

winger's rush, it was a thing of beauty. I personally, am not ever going to forget it. But now we have a problem. We got a hole in the backfield in a game that we're already behind in." Roland paused, looking for the eyes of his men. "But we're still gonna win this, aren't we? And we're gonna take this team to the state championships." The guys were nodding. "Can I have an amen, Johnson?"

"Amen Johnson." Johnson said. The words had been a team tradition ever since Johnson began punctuating Roland's impromptu speeches with the vocal embellishments of his Southern church upbringing.

"Okay boys, here's what we're gonna do." Roland went on to explain how they would institute a Smashmouth offence again and again, right down the throats of either number twenty-two, or number thirty-six, who were the other team's weakest tacklers. Roland changed up the player positions to put his strongest runners against their weakest. "Now what do we do when they adjust to give support to the guys we're hammering on?"

The team was silent. Roland looked at Johnson. Nothing. So he turned to Leal.

"Exploit the gap in their line that's going to open up in front of Harver-son and Benalty." Leal said.

"That's right." Roland said. "You guys got that?" Of course Leal had known the answer — it was his plan.

The team nodded and mumbled in the affirmative. "Okay, that's step one. Step two is we gotta do everything that we can to slow this game down, and we're not going to be above using shameless fakery and gamesmanship to accomplish that objective. Do I hear agreement?"

"Hell yeas!" Johnson said enthusiastically.

"Okay, so here's what we're gonna do. Leberman?" Roland grabbed the scrawny sixteen year old by the shirt. His jersey was perfectly dry. "You're starting. I've got a special assignment for you."

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Roland looked up at the thunderclouds that were rolling in as surely as tomorrow. Leal was right, as uncommon as it was for California rugby, this field would be a mud bowl by the time the game was done. And Roland and Leal planned on doing everything they could to slow the game down, so that they could play as many minutes in the mud as they could.

It would all start with Leberman.

The ball had only just been retrieved from a scrum when Johnson called out. "Leberman's down! Man down, ref! Man down."

Most of the players backed away from the fallen player, but Roland ran to Leberman's side. "What's wrong, Leberman?"

The scrawny kid's voice was strained. "I — I can't." Perhaps hoping for an Oscar, Leberman milked his line so carefully that Roland wondered if it would ever end. "I — I."

Suddenly the referee was looking over Roland's shoulder. "You can't what, Leberman?"

"I ca — I can't fff."

The coaches had arrived, and so had Leal. "Just tell us Leberman. What can't you do?" Leal said. Roland could sense the undertone of frustration in Leal's voice.

Leberman, not willing to compromise his artistic integrity for matters of practicality, slowly licked his lips, and then smacked his mouth as though it were dry. "I — can't." Everyone waited. "Fff-feel, my ll-legs."

"He can't feel his legs! We can't move him." Roland shouted, standing to his feet. "You! Call an ambulance. Go now!" He was pointing at the assistant coach. The man went.

Then Roland turned to face his team. "Alright guys, huddle up."

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During the medical delay, Roland went over the finer points of mud bowl strategy with his team. It entailed things like altering the player's positions in relation to the gain line, avoiding loop passes, as well as getting the runners and dummy runners to hold the ball a little bit longer than usual. Also, if they could get the ball out wide more quickly using passes, the ball would move much faster than any runners in mud.

The final change was to reposition Leal as hooker, since he was possibly the finest mud bowl hooker in the entire state. Because of time constraints, Roland publically called on him, and commissioned Leal with the job of teaching all his team's forwards how to best ruck and scrum the ball in muddy conditions. Leal did the job without protest, while Roland spoke to the team's kickers.

Meanwhile, Leberman's trophy mom was busy acting the anxious damsel. She did it perfectly, and while doing so, it was easy for her to coax

a promise out of the head coach that he would accompany her to the emergency room. Of course the old horn-dog agreed.

It took two more feigned injuries from bench players as well as another time stoppage due to an equipment controversy concerning the balls, and how much they had been inflated, before the skies opened up and a glorious deluge of rain fell upon the ever un-expecting California residents.

Leal began laughing and running in a small circle, hands raised towards the sky. The game at that point was tied at two tries apiece. They had made it. Fifteen minutes left in the game, and they had managed to avoid being buried by the other team's superior talent and athleticism. Roland, realizing that his friend was a true genius and catching on to his enthusiasm, turned around to his team and screamed. "Mud Bowl! We got Mud Bowl!"

Roland's cry was surely answered.

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The celebration was largely over, and the players were all on their way home. Roland and Leal got busy stripping off their mud soaked clothing and putting them into plastic bags, in preparation for the ride home in Roland's Jaguar XJS coupe. That was when they were both surprised to see Leal's uncle strolling up.

"Uncle Mike," Leal said. "I didn't know that you had come to see the game." Leal seemed to be thinking for a bit, then he said, "How did you even get here?"

Leal's Uncle Mike laughed. "The old fashioned way, public bus."

"You came all the way out here by bus? Just for our game?"

"I'd say it was worth it, wouldn't you? Tactical victories like the one I just saw don't just grow on trees. Take it from an old athlete, you boys did good out there." Then Mike looked around at the emptying rugby field. "The team showed some pretty high spirits after the match." Mike's eyes seemed to hold a twinkle of insight. "You'd think that some of them might have been more worried about Leberman. And all of those other injured players. For a bit there, your guys were dropping like flies."

It was clear that Uncle Mike suspected them of extreme gamesmanship. They were guilty of course, and Roland noticed that Leal was



becoming somewhat uncomfortable. So he jumped into the conversation to take the pressure off of his buddy.

"The team stayed focused on what needed to be done to get us to the championships." Roland said, then he offered Mike a sly smile. "And I'd say there's a strong chance our players will be at full strength by next practice. You know the medical system, always cautious, often overreacting.

Uncle Mike smiled. He was kind enough not to mention that it had been Roland himself, who had frantically ordered in the paramedics.

"You need a ride home, Uncle Mike? The house is on the way." Leal said to his uncle.

"You got a seat for me in that little speedster?" Uncle Mike tried looking in through the tinted windows of the Jag.

"It's an XJS. It has four seats."

"Four seats? In a sports car?"

"It's a coupe. I need all four seats, so I can bring my wingman and two lovely ladies with me, wherever I want to go."

Mike laughed at Roland's comment. "I hope you share a few of those ladies with poor Leal here."

"I mostly only get the ladies because of Leal, he's the smooth talker in a cold call situation."

Leal was busy cleaning mud out of his ear when his Uncle looked at him, waiting for confirmation. "Unless they know who Roland is," Leal said. "And then I all but disappear."

Roland cuffed his best friend playfully on the back of his head. "But those ones aren't *ladies*, are they? They're just the gold-diggers."

After Roland and Leal were as clean as they were going to get, they squeezed into the XJ and ignited the engine. It was performance enhanced, with the modifications having been done right at the factory, compliments of Ford Motor Company's CEO, Harold.

Once they were underway and Mike was done reminiscing about his favorite parts of the rugby game, the conversation turned towards Mike's work.

"How's that electric car company that you're working for, doing?" Roland asked. For years he had loved talking to Mike, and hearing his views. Ever since Roland had gotten old enough to recognize the unavoidable nature of his own fate, Roland had envied the man for his freedom.

"They're a smart bunch of guys there, that's for sure. Real trail blazers, and good people to work for. Even though I'm just a security guard, the

engineers treat me like I'm a part of the team." Mike laughed. "As if I could engineer my way out of a wet box, right?"

Leal turned in the passenger seat. "I don't know, Uncle. I've heard you have a good head for math."

Mike chuckled again. "Maybe once son, but that was a long time ago. No great discoveries for me. I'm thinking if there ever was something important in store for my life, I've probably missed the window."

"C'mon Uncle, you're only fifty-something."

"Fifty-four. But with the way those years have gone, it feels like dog years."

That piqued Roland's interest. Even though Leal's Uncle Mike had always been around, Roland really didn't know all that much about the man. Not really. He was Leal's uncle, he was a sports fan, and he functioned as a sort of a guardian for Leal when he was in California. But that, and a few other stories were all that Roland knew.

"You always seemed optimistic, Uncle Mike." Roland said. "It surprises me to hear you speak like that." What real problems could the man possibly have? He was single, lived within his means, and had nobody expecting anything from him.

Roland heard Uncle Mike sigh in the back seat. "Well Roland, you're young yet so I'm not too surprised that you're surprised. Hopefully, if you can keep your ears from closing up too soon, you'll hear a lot of things that surprise you." Mike said.

"Alright," Roland said. "I can keep my ears open."

"You think you can?" Mike chuckled again. "It's a lot harder than you think. Specially when you're young and strong, like you two boys." Mike paused for a bit, thinking about something. Then he resumed. "I can remember how I thought back in the day. How I viewed the world. The way I saw my life going. But the world didn't really work the way I thought it did. Nope, not at all."

"How's that, Uncle?" Leal said. Judging by Leal's tone, Roland thought that he might not have seen this side of his uncle before either.

"Well boys, when I was a little older than you are, I thought that if you were smart and honest, and willing to work hard, that life would surely reward you. That was what my teachers and the people on T.V. seemed to be saying. After all it's America, right? Well, that wasn't right.

"The world isn't what we learned it was in elementary school, and I

don't know why they didn't just tell us that, straight out. See in school, they presented us a picture of a fictitious place, where order and reason ruled the day. But really, life isn't like that."

"What's it like then?" Leal said.

Mike laughed. "You sure you want to hear all this?" Both Roland and Leal said they did, so Mike continued. "Alright. What the world is really like, is Las Vegas. An artificial ecosystem designed to draw you in, take whatever you've got, and maybe even make you feel good about losing it, regardless of how bad it actually feels. It's a place where the odds are stacked against you, unless you happen to be one of the few that are playing with house money."

Mike went silent after that, but Roland felt both Mike and Leal's attention, silently shifting towards him. He knew what they were thinking. "You think I'm one of the ones playing with house money?"

Uncle Mike was slow to answer, but eventually he did. "Look Roland, you know that I like you. I think you're a fine young man and I'm happy that you and Leal are friends. In fact, this may seem a little bit silly, but if I were being honest, you two boys are about the only family that I've got. But if you ask me whether I think you're playing with house money? Respectfully, I've got only one answer for that."

"What answer?" Roland said.

"The answer?" Mike paused and turned his attention out his window. "It's — shit yeah." Mike said.

Leal laughed out loud when he heard it. Roland wasn't surprised by Mike's answer, and neither was he even sure that he could dispute it. Roland really didn't know what to think, because he hadn't actually considered it before.

Roland knew that it was his place to respond, though. So he gunned the engine hard and changed lanes, drawing the mascara stained eyes of an overly primped cougar in a Trans Am. "Shit yeah." Roland said as he showed off the power of his factory mods.

Both Mike and Leal laughed. "You ever get any speeding tickets?" Mike said.

"Hell yes." Roland said.

"You ever pay them?"

Roland saw where Mike was going. The truth was that Roland never did actually pay them, or get any demerits on his license, either. Somehow, the penalties for speeding had always just disappeared. Roland hadn't ev-

er questioned it. It seemed like such a small thing. His father's staff had always just 'taken care of it' and Roland hadn't even wondered what that meant.

House money.

"Hell, no." Roland said to Mike. "Do you guys pay yours?"

"The times in my life when I've owned a car? Shit yeah."

Roland felt Leal looking at him with a smile. Leal knew that Roland had never thought about these things. Then Roland began to wonder what other types of things he might still be ignorant of.

Roland flicked a backhanded slap towards his friend's face. "Quit looking at me." Leal blocked the slap and said nothing. He didn't need to, the point was clear. "Okay Uncle Mike, now you've got my ears open. Tell me more about how life goes without house money."

"The only life I can tell you is the one I know."

"That's the one I wanna hear about, then." Roland said.

"Well, for starters, the thing you gotta realize if you're going to understand it at all, is that people are hurtin' all over. And hurtin' people, hurt people.

"And when I was young I found myself attracted to a girl who was hurtin'. But to me, her problems didn't seem all that insurmountable. So I did what I thought was right and natural."

"What's that?" Roland said.

"I offered her my heart."

To Roland, it sounded beautiful. He couldn't imagine having the freedom to do the same. If he were to ever get serious with some injured waif, his Father's disapproval would have been quick to make itself known.

Interestingly, Roland could recognize that there was still pain in Mike's voice, as he was saying those beautiful words. Roland took a quick look in his rear view. Mike was looking out the window again, so Roland gave the man his time.

It took a minute, but eventually Mike went on with his story. "I was twenty-two, and I worked hard for my darling in a steel plant to support both her and her little daughter. It was back breaking work, and eventually that's what happened."

"What?" Roland said.

"My back broke, and I couldn't work. That's when she left me for a guy with a cream colored Toyota."

"That's harsh, Uncle." Leal said.

"All too often, that's the way of the world, son."

"Is that girl the reason that you moved out west?"

"She was. And for a while I thought that her and her daughter were well worth it. Right up until they were gone and I was there living in a trailer, laying flat on my back with bills piling up around me, unable to even take a crap without excruciating pain shooting down my leg."

"How long were you like that?"

"Until it got better."

"It made itself better?"

"It did. And naive as I was, I thought that the hard times were past, and that I had been given a second chance to rebuild my life. I got some work again, in farming equipment this time, and I got my body back into shape. This time I was more careful though, I didn't ever want to have to live those trailer park days, ever again. So I worked in sales, and because of my work ethic and my people skills, the old bank account started to fill up again. Not only that, the lines on my stomach returned and the ladies started paying me more attention."

"Did you date many of them?"

"Not many." Mike said. "I was understandably gun shy, after my first experience with romance. But I dated some."

"Aunt Sue?" Leal said.

There was a lull in the conversation as Mike composed his answer. "No son. Aunt Sue came later, when I was a full fledged businessman."

That was news to Roland. "I never knew you had a business."

"I did. An industrial tools business. I had fifteen employees and a full warehouse in nineteen sixty-one. Aunt Sue was a big supporter. There were some hard years when I might have packed it in, but Aunt Sue told me that she believed in me. And that made the difference. She was the reason that I built the business as big as I did. We were happy then, and I thought that we would'a been together forever."

The next question had to be asked, but Roland was happy that Leal ended up being the one to ask it. "So why didn't you stay together?"

"Well." Mike paused. "There's never only one reason. But I've thought about that question for what's going on years now."

"And."

Mike sighed again. "She stopped loving me."

Roland could still hear the powerlessness in uncle Mike's voice. Not

anger, just powerlessness. "Why would she stop loving you? Wasn't everything going well?" Roland suddenly had to know the answer.

"Everything was going well, until it wasn't." Mike said. "A time came when the business started to struggle. I worked that business as hard and as faithfully as any man can, but no matter what I did, the cards seemed to be stacked against me. At first she supported me in the fight, telling me to press on, but then she started to resent the changes that the fight brought on."

"What changes?"

"Money. Time. Even temperaments and restful sleep. Fighting to save a failing business is hard, and just like any fight, it takes a toll."

"Okay, so you lost the business, but you still had each other, right? You two could rebuild, couldn't you?" Roland had seen his father's friend's businesses succeed and fail, and what he had learned from all of it, was that there would always be another opportunity tomorrow.

Mike sighed. "Aunt Sue didn't see it that way. She blamed me for the hard times and said that I never should have built the business as big as it was."

That surprised Roland, but Leal was the one to speak. "But she was the one who told you to keep building it."

"It's true, she was. But that didn't factor into what her heart felt."

"What did her heart feel, then?"

"Nothing. Somehow the love was gone. Even she didn't know what to do about it."

Roland was confused. Uncle Mike had been speaking about what was once true love, completely unlike the practical, cordial relationship that his parents had always shared. Why would true love ever have to die? "How can that happen?" Roland said. The question became extremely important to him, since finding true love had always been the cornerstone of his own plans.

Although his family seemed determined to dictate how Roland would live his life, he had always believed that it would be Leal and the girl that he loved, that would give him the strength to resist. And he was basing all of that hope on the premise that true love, would be eternal.

Mike looked out the window again for quite a while before answering Roland. "Sometimes I think it's just how women are made. Y'see, for a woman something like love comes upon her all intermingled. It comes as a

strange mixed bag of emotions. That's what makes their hearts so devoted in the first place.

"But those emotions aren't always impractical ones. In fact, things like having trust and respect for their man, are what makes a woman feel safe. And safe is an important part of that emotional mixed bag that I was talking about. Its part of what forms the love." Roland didn't think that Mike was done talking, so he let the man take a pause. After a bit Uncle Mike took a breath and spoke some words that seemed like they might have been weighing on his soul for decades. "Aunt Sue watched life knock me down, right on my ass." He said gruffly. "And when a woman sees her man down in the dirt like that, all groveling and weak, it makes her start to wonder about the trust and respect that she'd placed in him for all those years. And then, she wonders if this groveling man in front of her can still keep her safe. Or if maybe instead, he might be the real source of all of the pain in her life. And at that point, the woman's only got two choices.

Roland couldn't imagine himself being in that same position. He couldn't imagine a worse feeling than how Mike must have felt. As far as what all of it meant for Roland's life and plans, he couldn't even process. But he did feel the angst.

Mike cleared his throat and continued. "Somehow Aunt Sue's heart forgot the part that she played in steering the business, and so all the blame fell onto me. When that happened, the love was just gone for her. It broke the spell. And from that day forward, nothing short of angelic intervention could have ever made Aunt Sue see me as any more than the son of a bitch that ruined her life."

"So she left you?"

"Eventually." Mike said.

"Wow." This would have all been easier for Roland to hear if Mike had done something to cause Aunt Sue to leave. Roland began to wonder about the love that he had always hoped, would one day come into his own life.

"Damn rights, wow. Ever since, I swore that I'd never let a woman see me in the dirt again." Then Uncle Mike laughed. "The funny thing is though, without the love and support of a good woman, it's pretty hard for a man to get himself out of that dirt. And that probably has a lot to do with the way men are built.

"And there's your catch-22." Mike said. "Because, when your lying in dirt, ain't no woman's ever gonna want you. Unless she is dirt herself.

Those are the women that stick to you like mud on your jeans. And you boys remember the first lesson I learned about how hurting people, hurt people? Well, if a woman's in the dirt, there's a fair chance that she's hurting a whole lot more than a man in that same position. So you gotta stay away if you know what's good. That's what I do now. It was a slow lesson to learn, but I've figured it out a few times over by now." Mike was done but Roland, and probably Leal too, seemed to need to hear a slightly less bleak ending to the story.

"So?" Leal said, trying to prompt more from his Uncle.

"So now I work as a security guard for a company that ain't got no money, and has a fraction's chance of ever taking their product to market. But the people there make me feel good, like I'm doing something important. And one day when I'm on my deathbed and electric cars is running all round this city. Then I'll be left with a part of my life that I can think of fondly, aside from you two boys — that isn't caked entirely in mud."

Mike's words played themselves over and over in Roland's head as he drove.

But he hated hearing it. The truth was, he felt partly responsible for Mike's situation. Roland pinned the gas pedal again, and began weaving through traffic like a bonafide asshole. He didn't like how Mike's story had concluded. Something about it made his breath shallow and his jaw tight.

It was only when Leal reached across and touched Roland gently on the shoulder, that Roland forced himself to relax and lightened up on the gas pedal.

"But you liked the rugby game, right Uncle?" Leal said. Roland knew that the change of topic was for his benefit. Leal could always tell when something was bothering him.

"You know I did." Uncle Mike said, some of the joy back in his voice.

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Time was wasting, and Sophia hadn't found any clues with these two boys. Not only that, there was something about the boy's world that felt sinister to her oracle instincts.

Something distasteful.

Roland and Leal seemed fine enough, in fact she liked both of them, but



things were different with the boys than they were with the Dolls. Sophia had to wonder why she was even there. Maybe she had just changed locations accidentally.

Her heart asked her to go back. Back towards her wonderful, spirited, and fashionably rebellious girls. To those fabulous young ladies whose carefree existence felt like a cold drink on a hot day, and whose musical souls made Sophia's feet want to dance while her voice thirsted for song. Just thinking about them made Sophia happy.

So Sophia left Roland and Leal and went up above the freeway. High up, and then looked down on the city through the familiar haze of smog. Sophia's eye was drawn to a sedan. Black, and behaving in such a way that if the driver's intention was to tail Roland's car without being seen, he'd be doing a really good job of it.

Sophia felt that she had to check it out, for the boy's sake. At least she thought she should. For confirmation, Sophia waited until Roland changed lanes on the freeway, and then watched the black sedan closely.

That son of a bitch. He was definitely tailing them.

Sophia descended to investigate. Of course whatever she found, she would be powerless to do anything about it. But Sophia descended into the black car anyways, looking inside.

The man driving had grizzled hands. They were gripped onto the steering wheel with military calm — his contact light, yet ready. The driver's eyes were fixed on the road, but he also watched his mirrors with a cautiousness that reminded her of her Station peers.

Something about the man chilled her, and then Sophia realized why. It wasn't the scars on his face and arms, or the predatory way that he held his jaw. Sophia saw those things, but they only the externals. It was the inner man, the one that Sophia could feel, which gave her reasons for concern. She had seen people much like this man before. In fact, for her whole life she had been reared inside a cage with men and women just like him.

Then for seemingly no reason, the man looked at her. Or towards her anyways, since she knew that she couldn't have been seen.

Then the man smiled.

At the first sighting of the driver's crooked and broken teeth, Sophia exploded into the sky. And there she remained, shaken.

There was something about that smile, those teeth. It was familiar to her, but it all seemed out of place. After that Sophia was afraid to go back down, so she kept herself up high until Roland's XJ rolled in through the

gates of what she assumed must have been his home.

They were in Beverly Hills. It was a neighborhood that would have made princes jealous. The thing that surprised Sophia the most was that the black sedan that had been following them — it rolled in through the heavy metal gates as well, right behind Roland.

It was a cold, sober place. And a cold sober thought.

Sophia wondered how many people in the outside world, lived this way. As much as she could envy these people their freedom, some parts of their lives seemed too horrible to bear. The very stones of Roland's driveway made her feel lonely. Despite Roland and Leal's cheerful camaraderie, and the magnificence of the architecture and landscaping, this place was tainted by dark designs.

Sophia wished that she could turn her feelings off and make all those that haunted her, disappear. But oracles didn't have an off switch. Not until the day death received them, and perhaps not even then. Then she had a random thought. Sophia realized very suddenly that she would rather be inside the Station with Alastar, than anywhere on earth without him.

A lot of good that did her now.

Roland and Leal seemed at peace as soon as they arrived at Roland's home so Sophia did her best to focus on them. She hoped that it would shelter her from the unpleasantness that she was feeling.

It was a grand piece of real estate, truly. A place with everything that one might expect in a billionaire's home. But the grounds and the buildings didn't impress Sophia. What intrigued her was how completely at home both Roland and Leal seemed, together inside those gates. The change in them was tangible.

It was clear that the estate, or estates like it were the boy's true habitat. It must have been in a place much like this, that the two of them had met and grown up together. A place like this would have been their playground, and their school of life.

Within minutes of driving through the mansion's iron gates, the boys had already pranked the gardener, soaking his pant leg. Seeing the two of them at play made Sophia forget the shadowed murmurs that had been whispering to her since she had arrived there, and eventually her own mood lightened with theirs. Sophia stepped into Roland once again, so that she could feel the place through his heart.

A few minutes later, they had tossed one of their maids into the pool,

making sure to keep her hair dry though, because they knew that the woman hated wet hair. The Spanish woman's laughter rang freely and the boys spoke to her with old familiarity, as they helped her out of the pool. "We warned you, Margarita. You had this coming."

The woman looked to be in her mid thirties, and she had happy eyes. "You think this is over, muchachos?" The maid said as she reeled Leal in and hugged him tight, soaking the whole side of his body in an instant. "We are many, but you two boys, are only few. Besides, you both know that water is my element. Have I not told you about my days as a high diver?"

Roland and Leal beat a hasty retreat before becoming sidetracked by the same stories that they had been hearing since they were seven. Their next stop predictably, was the kitchen. The chef was Italian, and they descended upon her domain like a small but determined locust horde. Sophia found it interesting to see that, despite Roland being the Lord of the manor, the chef was not beyond beating both boys back with the wooden spoon that she held.

"You boys sit down at the table, like I taught you." The chef said. She was a heavy woman, maybe in her fifties, and judging by the boy's quick obedience to her suggestion, it was unlikely that she had ever been in danger of being pranked by them.

"What are you serving, Mimi?" Leal said, smiling with his hands folded on the table, the way that she had taught him.

"None of your business, Mico." Mimi used the name that all the staff used for Leal, ever since Mimi had given it to him. It was short for Amico, which in Italian meant friend. Because as everyone knew, he was Roland's friend. "You will eat whatever I put in front of you, starting with my Florentine chicken soup."

Both Roland and Leal smiled. Mimi's chicken soup was unbeatable, and she knew that they liked it after a rugby game.

As Mimi ladled the soup into a china bowl, she hummed gently. It was a song that she had been humming since Roland and Leal were toddlers. "Tell me," Mimi said. "Did you boys have fun, playing your little game?"

Both Roland and Leal snickered at Mimi's comment. She really had no idea what rugby actually was, thinking it was just a rougher version of soccer. But for all their lives, she had never failed to ask them how one of their games had gone. Mimi shot a warning stare towards both boys, which stopped their snickering on cue.

Roland was the one to answer. "We won, Mimi." He said.

"Of course you won." Mimi shook her serving spoon at them. "Because you have the hearts of lions in you."

"Yes, ma'am." Roland said.

Mimi put the soup in front of Roland and Leal, said the blessing, and then nodded their permission to begin eating.

The soup, as always was incredible. As was the hearty brasata al vino and bread — another long-time favorite after rugby. Once the boys were served, Mimi sat down with them at the table, with a comically small bowl of soup in front of her, and then proceeded to ask about the details of their game. Roland and Leal were happy to relate the game to her, as they always did, with Mimi passing instant judgment on the referee's calls, the relative skill or character of most of the opposing team's players, and of course the management style of both team's coaches. And miraculously, Mimi was able to form all those opinions with absolute certainty, based solely on Roland's and Leal's second hand accounts.

After lunch, she kissed both of them on their heads, and commanded them to leave her kitchen and go play — so they did. They were planning on cleaning up first, since the boys were still stained in dried mud, and then they would see if they had time to get a little golf in.

They took the servant's hallways in order to get to their respective rooms, so that they would not get dirt on the woolen rug, which carpeted the family's hallways. When the boys arrived at their habitual bathrooms, the servant's diligence was evident. All the necessities were laid out and waiting for them, including a change of clothes which unbelievably, included golf attire.

Roland heard Leal bang his fist on the wall. He was next door in his own bathroom. Then his muffled voice filtered through the drywall. "How did she know? Did you tell her?"

Roland banged back. "I never tell her!" He screamed at Leal.

"How does she know?" Leal's muffled voice sounded again.

Outside the door, Roland heard giggling. Two women, and then the quick retreat of feet. Then Roland threw the shower on and he was soon celebrating the sensation of hours old mud, being gently flaked off of his body by the shower's jet. The jet felt amazing. It was about as close to what he imagined the post game attentions of a Swedish harem might feel like.

Sophia began to feel uncomfortable with where Roland's thoughts were going, so she drifted out of him. Looking back, she could see him standing in the jetting stream of water, washing away the mud.

It was nothing new for her to find herself looking at a naked man, but there was something about Roland that surprised her. It took her a minute before she realized what it was.

It was his skin.

It was perfect, top to bottom. There were no cuts, no burns, and no chunks of flesh that had been carved out and then healed over. No scars whatsoever. Even Sophia's skin, which for all her life had been under the Legend's protection, was not nearly so perfect. And Sophia likely had the most perfect skin in all the Station.

Sophia wondered if it might be the same for Cadence and Luvvi. Either way, she was struck by the contrast between this boy's world and her own. Who would have thought that skin could imply so much? Looking at him, a part of her wished that she could touch it.

She moved herself back inside of him to see what she could feel.

It wasn't long before Roland and Leal were together again, styling their hair in a misted mirror, as Lenore gathered up their dirty rugby clothes before laundering it.

Lenore had no personality, so both boys pretty much ignored her presence. But when Roland reached for the cologne, Lenore spoke uncharacteristically. "Your father doesn't like when you wear cologne." She said.

Both Roland and Leal were surprised. "Who cares?" Roland said. "My father's in New York."

Lenore stopped what she was doing. "No, he's downstairs in his study." She said.

Roland's disappointment was tangible, and within him, Sophia each and every one of his defenses being erected. The momentary doubting of Lenore's words, that Roland had felt, quickly turned to regret.

"What's he doing here?" Roland didn't really expect Lenore to know, so when she shrugged and frowned, he let her carry on with her duties. Then Roland turned to Leal. "What do you think he's doing here?"

Realization flooded Sophia all at once.

Roland's father was, as his father before him, and his father before him, an important business figure in the eastern part of the American continent. Those were the facts, but the whole of it was far more troublesome

than that.

Roland and Leal had grown up in the east, with Leal's father being the prized gardener who managed the Ellis's many estates. But at some point, Roland and Leal had bonded as brothers. Sophia could feel that bond as though it were made of a titanium cord. And together they had weathered much.

When Roland thought of his Father, there were so many emotions. Sophia could see the rigors of the preparation that Roland had been submitted to — all so one day he might rule his family with the same steady grip as his ancestors. And although Roland had been kept physically safe throughout it all, it was the inner man that had been continually sifted by nearly the same dark forces that had welcomed Sophia into the Station all those years ago. The same dark forces that continued to greet her every morning, when she rose from her bed.

Seeing that allowed Sophia to understand Roland's sadness, and it made her quickly reshape her opinion of him. When she had first met him, she had felt leadership, strength, determination — but underneath all of that there was a carefully preserved hope. It was an optimist's hope, perhaps a foolish optimism. It was the hope of someone who believed in the preeminent ascendancy of good, despite the evidence.

But Roland Ellis's people had not raised him to be a good man. So in fact, he was something of a disappointment to them. They had been hoping for the emergence of a dark prince.

Leal had been the difference. It was his influence that had subverted the efforts of Roland's father. Through Leal's mere existence, Roland had been given the strength and the perspective to resist the family's manipulations. And because he thought for himself, Roland's biggest fear and greatest revulsion was to one day be forced to inherit from his father. It was a dark empire which Roland had no desire to sell his soul to.

Instead of inheriting, it had become Roland and Leal's shared ambition to go to college somewhere in the western part of the country. Far away in a place where his family's influence was not quite so all encompassing.

Anything but inherit.

Mostly due to Roland's mother's intervention, when they got old enough the two of them had been permitted to choose an estate of their own, in California. Roland and Leal had acquired it under Roland's mother's direction. Then they hand picked their favorite staff and invited them

to go west with them. Most of the staff had eagerly chosen to relocate to California with the two boys that they had all helped raise.

Technically Leal was living with his Uncle Mike of course, but nobody other than perhaps Roland's father ever thought that after going west, Leal would spend even a moment's less time by Roland's side.

Roland's mother made a point of visiting them once a month, but that had never been any inconvenience to them. She was not one of the people that were pressuring Roland towards the cruel spirit, which unified his family's power. And she never expressed any concerns about Leal's continued presence in Roland's life.

But Roland's father was a different matter entirely. His desire for dominance was unsurpassed, and the lengths that the man would go to achieve his desires, was boundless. In short, he was not a man that anyone with an intact soul, would ever want in his way.

So far Roland and Leal's plan had been working wonderfully well, and for a short time the plan had been keeping them sheltered from Roland's father's dark maneuverings.

Leal gave an answer to his friend. "What's he doing here? Probably the same as always. Whatever he wants to do."

Roland didn't like hearing that, and he intended to do something about it. "Well I'm planning to find out more specifically."

That of course meant that they were both going to find out. There would be risks, but luckily they had been spying on Charleton Ellis since they were twelve. That practice had saved them from serious consequences more than once. Also, the boys were on their home turf, and when they had moved into the new estate Roland had assigned his father's study, with spying in mind. Him and Leal had run the tests themselves.

There were only so many ways to spy on a billionaire, especially when his creepy security forces regularly posted guards around him and ran sweeps for wireless bugs. Sneaking up close and eavesdropping would be suicide, and high tech would be detected. Inspired by an old episode of Maxwell Smart though, Roland and Leal had realized when they were still preteens, that low tech would be their salvation.

Both boys went into the guest bedroom, which Leal had conveniently claimed for himself. Once there, Roland retrieved a small toolbox from Leal's closet while Leal grabbed an ice fishing rod from underneath Leal's bed. Then they pulled out their secret weapon. It was a genuine mail order

ACME Coyote listening device, with a full thirty feet of cord. The maids had often wondered why the boys still kept it, but Roland and Leal were nothing if not discrete.

Working together with silent precision, they spooled the cord onto the ice fishing rod and unscrewed the ventilation grate on the wall. Leal was a bit taller, so it was his job to reach into the vent, and lower the listening device into a position where they might be able to hear what was going on inside Roland's father's office.

Once the listening device was lowered to the appropriate depth, they anchored the line and attached their end to the little amplifier that the toy had come with.

Then Roland turned it on.

There was a static snap and then faint but discernable voices. The toy still worked.

"Do you think we're getting a bit old for this?" Leal said, smiling conspiratorially to his friend.

Roland could have slapped him. "You gotta be kidding me." Roland said. "Doing this is our only defense against my father's constant meddling."

The two of them sat on the floor and listened to the conversation. As usual, it took them a few minutes to get their bearings. There seemed to be some sort of banker in the meeting, as well as the owner of an unmentioned newspaper.

*It's a risk.* The man who seemed to be the banker said.

*How big a risk?* The newsman said.

*With that amount of money? I don't like any risk.*

*Alright,* Charleton Ellis said. *How do we limit the risk?*

*Buy the Governor,* the banker suggested. *Then if Meullar can manufacture us a publicity shit storm to take the people's eyes off our project, we should be able to have our way.*

Roland had heard plenty of conversations like that before, but this time he was only hearing two words — House money.

Roland knew what Leal would be thinking. Out of all the twisted things that Charleton Ellis got involved in, Leal hated the use of propaganda more than any of it.

That seemed strange to Roland, who had been brought up to view the manipulation of the media as a victimless crime. 'Would you rather have



order, even if it needs to be engineered — Or outright anarchy?’ Charleton Ellis had asked Roland that question several times in the past. Out of respect for Leal, Roland never answered. But to Roland the issue seemed like a moral grey zone.

Leal on the other hand, called it soft mind control whenever the people were successfully manipulated into believing something. He hated it every time. He hated it whether it was what the media adapted, made up, chose to present to everyone, or hid away from view. ‘Thought control steals people’s humanity.’ Leal had once said. ‘It steals their power of choice. It’s sick.’

*Meullar, can you whip something up?* Charleton Ellis said.

*Like a soufflé, sir. There’s an asshole that denied my wife a membership into a tea club of all things. I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to hang him out to dry. What do you think? Should that guy be a cult leader or sleeper terrorist?*

House money.

*What will get more play?* The banker said.

*Well, probably —*

*Both.* Charleton Ellis said. *Make it both. That son of a bitch is a terrorist cult leader.”* Roland’s father’s voice suggested that the matter was decided. *Mr. Dunsten! Get in here.*

There was a pause in the conversation. Then Dunsten, who was Charleton Ellis’s chief of security, spoke. *Yes, Mr. Ellis.* He said.

*Dunsten, we need a man framed as a terrorist and a cult leader. Will you work with Meullar to make that happen?*

*Of course, sir.*

House money.

*All right. On to the next item of business.* Charleton Ellis cleared his throat. *Electric cars. When did I ever ask anybody to start designing electric cars? There I was peacefully managing my affairs in the east, when one of my men from Detroit tells me that out here in California, you’ve got a bunch of fruit loops who are clamoring for the damn things. Now I want both of you to listen closely when I say this. I. Did. Not. Authorize the development of this technology, and if I did not authorize it, this technology — Should. Not. Exist. Do either of you disagree?”*

Nobody spoke, so Charleton Ellis continued. *Honestly gentlemen, for me to have to fly out here to deal with this is beyond aggravating. Let’s start from the beginning. How did they secure the capital to get as far as they*

*have with funding the research and swaying the politicians?*

It was the banker that answered. *I believe they secured it privately. The old-fashioned way sir — through hard work and merit.*

There was a long pause where everyone, including Roland and Leal, could sense Charleton Ellis's displeasure. Then Charleton spoke. *The old fashioned way? Are you being clever Mr. Norsberg? If you were, I would remind you about how little I appreciate, clever.* Roland could almost hear Norsberg sweating through the listening device. *You have duties and I would expect those duties to be carried out because as old fashioned as hard work and merit are, The voice of Carlteton Ellis became steel. There is nothing older than the Ellis family's way of doing things.*

House money.

The banker Norberg, seemed at a total loss for words. Then Meullar, in an idiotic act of solidarity for his peer, spoke up. *In Mr. Norsberg's defense sir, there is overwhelming public support for the development of electric car technology. It's —*

*Inconsequential!* Charleton shut his underling up instantly. Once he had command of the room again, Charleton turned his attention toward Meullar. *Tell me this, Meullar. Isn't handling the development of 'overwhelming public support,' your entire purpose?*

This time it was Meullar, the newspaperman that held his tongue. Roland knew exactly what those men would be feeling like. His father had always been a fearsome cross-examiner.

Then out of nowhere, Norberg found his tongue. Unfortunately for his associate Meullar, Norberg's tongue turned out to be forked, like a snakes. *That's exactly what I was going to say, sir.* The banker said. *I personally instituted every financial mechanism that I had at my disposal. And for months the financiers had been assaulting the electric car developer's positions, but those entrepreneurs were as resilient and resourceful as the Viet Cong, sir. But Norberg here wasn't ever willing to put his full weight into it. Instead, he kept letting his journalists exercise their first amendment freedoms, and those journalism school bastards used their freedom to fan the flames of public resentment — resentment for internal combustion engines, and pollutants in general. And then they even started reporting about alternatives, if you can believe that. At one point I couldn't turn on the T.V. without hearing another program about how breathing smog is bad for asthmatics or some other such nonsense. I tried talking to Meullar about it, I*

*damn near begged him to do what was right, sir. But all I got back from him was the same silence that Meullar is offering you right now.*

House money.

*Well, Mr. Norsberg? It seems you stand accused.* Charleton said.

Meullar was quick to compose his defense, and that showed itself in the defense's quality. *It's not true, sir. What Norsberg is saying is completely absurd, really. The man is full of crap and he would say anything right now to avoid your disapproval. The suppression of new technologies falls squarely into Norsberg's responsibilities and he's clearly failed you. But he wants to blame it all on me.*

Roland tended to believe Meullar, but his father was careful not to pronounce any winner. Instead he began using the men's fear as motivation. *So how do the two of you intend to fix your problem?*

Fully motivated now, the men rattled off innumerable illegal and illicit means of squelching the rise of the electric car. Most of those methods entailed violence, and all of them would either leave Leal's uncle dead, injured, or out of work.

The injustice of it angered Roland. House money versus Vegas odds — it was disgraceful. Leal's uncle had done nothing to deserve injury, or to have his last ray of hope stolen from him on a whim, just to appease the wills of secretive men who would no doubt flay their own mothers, if Charleton Ellis requested it.

Roland knew that he was losing control of his anger when Leal reached out and touched him on the arm. Leal always noticed. "What are we gonna do? Your Uncle," Roland couldn't say the rest. He was too ashamed of what his family was planning on doing to Leal's Uncle.

"It's okay." Leal said. "I think I have a plan."

Then Charleton Ellis suddenly shifted gears. *All right gentlemen, I think we've taken care of this dilemma for now. Now get the hell out of my house, so I can get to work preparing my son to be your future boss.* Then in a louder voice, *Dunsten. Stay behind so that you can give me a report.* Then after a minutes pause where the banker and the newspaperman presumably left the room, *What have your spies learned about what Roland and the servant boy are getting into?*

Roland looked at Leal. Roland hated it when his father referred to Leal as the servant boy. Charleton Ellis always acted as though he couldn't ever remember Leal's name.

But the boys had bigger issues. It seemed that they would have a two

front war on their hands. Charleton Ellis was definitely going to try and divide them again. "You got a plan for that as well?"

"I think I do." Leal said, smiling.

"Okay," Roland said. "I'll turn this thing around. Just tell me what to do."

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Sophia found it hard to even be in the same house as Charleton Ellis.

So she didn't stick around for the boring job of convincing Roland's father that instead of blowing up the car designers, it would be far better to co-opt the growing environmental movement, by forcefully backing the production of electric cars themselves.

Sophia did stay long enough though to watch Roland introduce and orchestrate that discussion with his father. He did it perfectly, using Leal's plan of course.

He pressed his father to see that by backing the production of electric cars, he could position the big seven automakers at the helm of the electric vehicle movement. That way the big seven would be situated perfectly to sabotage the electric car's production quality.

The family could get the major automakers those positions of authority, in exchange for overly generous and immediate financing. Financing that any company like Leal's uncle's, would have to say yes to in a heartbeat.

By doing it that way, Leal's plan ensured that nobody lost their jobs, or had to die in an industrial accident. It was brilliant really. And when the cars went to market, they would come with road noise, leaking around the doors, unreliable batteries, and windshields that might fly off of the car at highway speeds. Those obvious inadequacies, along with a little media spin, would be all the proof that the public would need to believe the lie that high quality and reliable electric cars were not a possibility. Even with major car companies *best efforts*.

'Sadly, not with current technologies.' The headlines would write themselves.

The pinnacle of Leal's idea, and the one that Charleton Ellis ended up really grabbing hold of was the thought of making the cars only available to the public through a three-year lease. And then at the end of the lease

the automakers could destroy those cars in the desert somewhere, burying them in a mass grave, soon to be forgotten by the short sighted and stupid public.

The destruction of those cars would forever be a symbol though, to any other upstart automobile designers. A symbol of the utter futility of mankind's attempts to wean themselves from fossil fuels.

House money.

Sophia had seen plenty already. The whole feeling of the Ellis estate was repulsing her. She had stayed long enough to know that the boy's were doing what good they could. The two of them seemed to know their game well enough, and despite the obvious dangers, they were capable of handling their own challenges. Sophia didn't seem to be getting any clues off of them either, so she decided that she should take her consciousness elsewhere.

She rose up high, and then set off west in search of the girls.

The girls that Sophia missed so tangibly.



EIGHT

Sophia was thinking about Leal's views. Views of how a dishonest and controlled media, essentially equated to soft mind control in a society. Roland didn't see Leal's point, but Sophia knew that it was true.

The beginning of every abusive relationship starts by isolating the victim from outside influences, and limiting their contact with others. You didn't have to be locked into a basement dungeon for that to happen either. A steady diet of un-truths could suffice just as well. The Station had taught her that.

The mind control was even easier to initiate when only five companies owned all of the world's corporate media branches. That way for the victim, all of those outside voices seemed to be in perfect agreement with their handlers, who wrote the scripts. A system like that would be at least as suggestive as any cultist's mind trick.

Sophia had gotten herself lost in thought, and she didn't even notice herself floating down into the small white house, covered in vines. As soon as Sophia was inside though, she wondered what she was doing there.

The house felt strange to Sophia's oracle senses, it was distorted somehow. Skewed from reality. But why? As Sophia moved down a narrow hall, she paused outside a door. The doorway had a strange pattern of shifting lights, emanating from the crack underneath. Sophia shivered, certain that something was horribly wrong.

The oracle reached out to touch the door, and when she did Sophia felt the gateway. Perception would definitely be altered beyond that portal and Sophia wondered if she should go any further.

Of course Sophia had dealt with things like it before since it had been part of her training. But she wondered if she was up for it in her current state.

She waited in the narrow hall as timeless moments passed by and everything began to go slowly dark. Then she heard a voice beyond the door.

"I can hear you wondering." The voice said. It was certainly a male, but that told her little. "You're going to anyways, and I don't like it any more than you." She heard him say.

Sophia pushed through the door and found a tall young man with unfocused eyes of glass, sitting cross-legged on his bed. He was cradling an acoustic guitar like it was his baby. The guy was tripping on who knows what, and strangely, he was staring right at her.

Could he actually see her?

Sophia drifted to the left, and the glassy eyes followed her. Sophia tried to speak to him, but she still couldn't make any sound. The young man jumped when she tried though, scurrying backwards on his bed.

That was strange.

Sophia looked around the bedroom. The place had the same flavor as the Ragamuffin Doll's shed, with music as its obvious and unmistakable theme. She looked at some of the photographs that had been hung on his mirror, and wasn't surprised by what she saw. There they were, all beside each other. Luvvi and Cadence, standing next to the twitchy fellow on the bed, who Sophia was now certain was none other than, Hopper Yves.

Her subconscious had somehow led her to the Ragamuffin Dolls' guitarist. Hopper looked like he had just been eating some sort of sugar based cereal. But he was done with it, and had just begun tucking himself under the covers of his bed. But underneath them, Hopper Yves was shaking.

*What are you afraid of?* Sophia projected her thought outward.

Hopper jumped back again, however less violently that time.

"Pointlessness," Hopper spoke to nobody in particular. "And my own cowardice." Then he set his guitar into position and began to play. It was a whirlwind of notes, shifting and swirling as though blown on a breeze. "I call this one, Sid Barret. Because he was an artist whose sensitivity wasn't ever lost on me." Hopper said.

Sophia went nearer to him, and as she approached, the boy's tension became more tangible. Her presence clearly frightened him.

Sophia didn't want to scare anyone, though. So in hoping that the guitarist could settle, the oracle stepped into him. Hopper sighed as she passed into his soul.

"Oh, you're beautiful." He said, suddenly glad. "But young. So young." Hopper's voice became grim. "Too young for what you've been made to face. How is that even real?"

It felt strange for Sophia, could this boy be reading her soul the way that she had been reading the others?



*Maybe I'm not.* Sophia thought. *Maybe you're not.*

"Woah." Hopper Yves said, clearly struck by the possibility. Then his fingers began working his guitar with a different pattern.

*You want to compose something true?* Sophia said, giving expression to what she was feeling from the boy's heart.

"I live for it." Hopper said. "And I can only hope that I'll be up to the task. Art that you can hear is no easy pursuit. It demands sacrifice."

Sacrifice.

She could feel the boy thinking about a movie that he had just watched. Some film that was called Terminator two, Judgment Day. Sophia had never heard of it, but it seemed to be about the world, a world under attack.

"They didn't even see that their enemy was already right there, amongst them." He was speaking about the movie. "They didn't recognize how they were all just letting it happen — helping it happen, even." Hopper's eyes welled up in tears. "Thank God for the true heroes, if only I had that kind of strength."

Sophia was surprised by the intensity of the boy's emotions. *What would you do with strength, Hopper?* Sophia asked him.

Hopper Yves began to wipe the tears away from his eyes with his blankets. "Care for my family. Show people the truth. And sacrifice myself to protect the Ragamuffin dolls, of course."

*But they're not in danger.*

Hopper stopped crying. He seemed surprised that Sophia felt that way. "Seriously? Can't you feel it? Surely, of all people." Hopper stood up and went to look in a mirror. Then he began squinting at himself but Sophia had to assume that Hopper was looking for her. "Wait a minute. You're not Yoko Ono." He rubbed his eyes and checked again while Sophia gave him time to get his bearings. "Oh yeah, I remember now. What were you saying?"

*It was what you were saying.* Sophia sent the question back at him.

"I was going on a journey." Hopper said, pushing his nose to the side and inspecting it in the mirror. "Before you came, I was unlocking doors." Hopper leaned even closer to the mirror. "I was going to step through the looking glass."

Sophia was taken completely by surprise when Hopper lurched forward, smashing his forehead into the glass, and cracking the mirror into a thousand spider web strands. Sophia gasped and tried to pull back, but this reality had a firm hold of her.

So into the looking glass she fell, her and Hopper both.

Down, down, down they went — Into a seemingly endless hole. But once they struck bottom, it wasn't a wonderland that they beheld. It was an underland.

Sophia hated them, so she instantly tried to claw her way upwards again but she had come down joined into Hopper and it was only with him that she could she escape. But like an inexperienced fool, Hopper Yves had taken the bait.

Despite the perversions that they always held, all of the underlands could draw souls with seductiveness, which was difficult to explain. Sophia didn't understand why the human essence was so often drawn towards the vile, just as a magnet was drawn to steel. But apparently, it was.

Hopper Yves was yet further proof of it.

The vile was all around them, and Hopper Yves was busy taking it all in.

The degradation. The shame. The visceral disgust.

And so much more.

There was pain and suffering to be seen, everywhere. In the past Sophia had even heard of this one, from some age-mates who had gotten themselves trapped there — for months. Those girls were never really the same again. Even the instructors couldn't help them, and each of them had died before the year was up.

They had called the underworld, MK Ultra.

And it was all there, laid out in front of them. And just like so many underworlds, the sensations were coming at them all at once. Hopper was screaming. "Can you see it, Yoko? Can you see the danger now?"

*Hopper Yves! You must come with me.* Then Sophia let him feel the strength of her will, and for a moment he took notice of her.

"Why are they doing that to them?" Hopper said through tears, not once looking away. "Why would anyone ever do that?"

*They are atrocities, Hopper. And it's what some people will do to those that fall into their power. But you don't have to witness this. Look away!*

"They keep hurting, and hurting!" Hopper said. "They're breaking those people. Shattering them. I need to understand why."

*You don't, Hopper! Just look away. Why were normal people so ignorant of the neo-spiritual and sub-real things?*

Hopper didn't look away, though. "Why are they —" Hopper screamed as he watched a child twitching particularly violently as AC current surged through her skull. And then again as another child, barely a toddler, was placed into steaming water — far too hot. It was all done by someone who was reciting nursery rhymes, continuously.

*Look away and come with me*, Sophia tried insisting to Hopper but the guitarist was caught by the corruption. His mind was fighting for answers still, and the senselessness of what he saw added strength to the dark chains that were binding him.

"I need to know why!" Hopper screamed suddenly.

Sophia despaired to hear the boy, so determined. There were many people who thought they wanted to know the whys of things, but very few could ever, really take in the truth. Instead, people dispensed with the truth immediately upon hearing it, usually preferring to cling to their dubious presuppositions. Psychologists called the phenomenon cognitive dissonance, and to an oracle it was maybe the most frustrating thing in their lives. To have so much knowledge without explanations was like being made a policeman, without a badge. You could say whatever you wanted, but nobody ever heeded your authority.

Then Hopper turned to her, which was very strange. Finally he was looking away from the atrocities, and he had focused himself onto Sophia. She knew that this moment, this one chance of reaching Hopper, was a gift from the Power. She also knew that it would likely be the only chance that they would ever get, of breaking free.

There was panic in her. Sophia wondered what she should do with the opportunity. Her anxiety built as she realized that she hadn't formed even a speck of a plan. Then Hopper spoke once again.

"I need to know why." He said.

If she told him why, he would never accept it, but Sophia had no other course of action. And the emotions that she saw creeping behind Hopper's panic, told Sophia that she was out of time. She had to act, immediately.

*Mind control*. In one word Sophia told Hopper the reason for all of the atrocities.

Hopper gasped.

But he did not look away from her. Sophia watched the guitarist's mind, processing. Trying to make sense of the insensible. She had to hand it to the boy because he hung onto the idea for longer than most. More often, the rejection of a fact occurred at a superficial level, like a visceral

reflex.

Then Hopper found his focus. "Okay." He said, accepting it. "Get me out of here."

*Come then.*

Sophia left Hopper in his house where she had found him. He was distraught, confused, paranoid — but had his sanity. It was not such a bad outcome for having passed through the MK underland.

Sophia was still disturbed by it, despite everything that her oracle training had forced her to behold. A person can't ever build up a resistance for such things, so she was sharing Hopper's anger towards the people who used those methods to get what they wanted. No doubt the city was full of them.

As soon as they were back in the bedroom, Hopper immediately pressed Sophia for information about the criminal abusers, and where in Los Angeles they would be hiding. Sophia refused to tell him, though. Only danger could await him there, and Hopper didn't have nearly the training necessary.

If Alastar had been there, Sophia would have gladly directed him into the heart of the MK Ultra hive — and then watched as her boy systematically disassembled their evil conspiracy.

But that was wishful thinking. There were only musicians with her, so no evil empires were likely to be toppled anytime soon.

Sophia decided that she should keep an eye on Hopper though. The boy was impulsive, and he seemed to feel that he had something to prove. And although Hopper himself didn't know it yet, the musician had courage. Courage enough to be the hero that he desired to be.

Sophia knew that with all of those things together, it was a dangerous combination.

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Luvvi blew into their rehearsal studio and joyfully tackled Cadence into the band's purple shag sofa, squee-ing as she did it. Cadence barely had enough time to toss her cello bow towards the safety of a nearby chair. Then after enduring a bit of mauling, Cadence called out for Luvvi to stop — but that only got her cousin started with the tickling.

Cadence had only two choices. One option was to physically overpower her best friend and stop her from tickling her. That would have been easy to do but every time Cadence did something like that, it seemed to have a lasting effect on Luvvi's belief in her own toughness. And a rock band's lead singer needed to feel tough, so Cadence couldn't really do that. The other option was to just roll with it and let her cousin keep on tickling.

Cadence went with the latter.

"Woah." Hopper Yves, their guitar player, had a certain look in his eyes. Apparently, the girl's second favorite member of the band thought that two girls tickling each other on a purple couch might somehow end up kinky. "I sure wish I had a way of getting in on this." Hopper said from ten feet away. Then he seemed to catch himself, blinking his addled mind into reality. "On second thought, no — I'm not man enough."

Then Gerry Curran, their less than impressive bass player, plucked out a bawdy baseline. "You need to grab some balls, Hopper." The girl's least favorite member of the band called from his corner.

Hopper looked at him, processing the statement. "I got balls." Hopper said, then reached down to quickly check the validity of his claim. "That's the problem. I've got a decent set, and my doctor's confirmed that they're kicking out testosterone too. But I'm telling you, they're not nearly enough." Hopper began circling Luvvi and Cadence on the couch, musing as he went. "People talk about *Carpe diem*, right? Good idea, but I still can't bring myself to seize the day. And I'm talking about any day, really — not just this one." Then Hopper seemed to relax. "But I can definitely watch. Lord just let me watch. And please Lord," Hopper added. "Let these wonderful moments fuel my art."

Luvvi stopped tickling her cousin and both girls turned to look at Hopper Yves. His oddness often had that effect.

"Amen." The guitarist said looking back at them, hands folded.

Then Luvvi whispered into Cadence's ear, and both girls left the couch to converge on Hopper, hugging him from either side.

"Ladies. Ladies, please stop." Hopper said. "You have no idea what this does to me."

Luvvi giggled musically. Acting sexy was part of her role as the lead singer, and she had always been great at it. Then she delivered the line that the two of them had quickly planned. "Oh Hopper." Her voice was

breathy “Us girls think you have great —”

Luvvi couldn't go through with it. She bust out laughing and then turned red, pushing Hopper away as she did it. So Cadence let go as well. After all, the joke had been Luvvi's idea.

Hopper was left looking suddenly alone and confused. He turned to Cadence. “Balls?” Hopper said. “Was she about to say, balls?”

Cadence retrieved her bow from the chair, wondering why Hopper had asked her. “If Luvvi wouldn't say it,” Cadence said to him. “Why do you think I would?”

Hopper laughed at her, as though Cadence had just made a joke. As soon as he realized that Cadence wasn't smiling though, the tall guitarist quickly stifled his laughter. He concealed his mood behind a obviously false look, of earnest contrition. Cadence squinted her eyes at her band mate, warning him of what she was thinking. She didn't need to listen to any of his dumb-ass conjecture.

Maybe she shouldn't have. The power of her squint made Hopper begin to pogo slightly, on the balls of his feet. It was something that their guitarist did from time to time. He usually did it when he got nervous, and today he seemed even more anxious than usual.

Then Hopper cleared his throat. Dammit, the guy was gonna speak. Didn't he know that Cadence's question had been rhetorical?

“Ahhmmm, why would I think that you would say it when Luvvi would not — you ask?” The guitarist seemed to be rummaging for something in his jeans. “Well is it that hard to fathom? Some people just say things, everybody knows that.” Then he turned away and began looking for his guitar and scratching his head like a dog with fleas. “Yup,” Hopper said, his eyes drifting somewhere past the Ragamuffin Dolls almost always silent drummer. “Everybody I know, seems to know that in fact.”

When the guitarist finally turned back towards Cadence, Hopper's demeanor was looking somewhat whipped. The big oaf. Both Cadence and Luvvi usually agreed that it was impossible to disapprove of Hopper for very long. He had a spastic stammering, over-sharing type of charm that modern girls rarely ever encountered in modern men. Men of pretty much any time, really.

“Forget about it.” Cadence said, forgiving the inconsequential slight on her feminine dignity. She saw instant relief on their guitarist's face, and it seemed to put Cadence at ease as well. Seeing Hopper happy somehow made Cadence happy. Which the guitarist might have even noticed be-

cause Hopper suddenly became all smiley at her.

Which was weird.

He was a human version of Marmaduke the dog, and that attribute was pretty much the Hopper Yves secret sauce. He had a smile that was rare as well. And as she looked at him, Cadence realized that she hadn't ever noticed just how brown Hopper's eyes were.

Suddenly Gerry Curran, their bassist was there, blocking her view. "Never mind him, Cadence, I've been thinking you might be ready for — the Real." Gerry said, stepping close. Near as her and Luvvi could make out Gerry considered himself, and anything that he was involved in, to be 'the Real.' Curran smiled. "Maybe you and I should go out sometime — How bout that, baby?"

"Gawd Gerry, what do you think? You ask me every single week." It was completely true, and he only asked her out because he didn't have the guts to ask Luvvi. That was Cadence's theory, anyways.

The way Cadence saw it, Luvvi was the one that everybody really liked. Luvvi was the ticket to the Ragamuffin's success, and if Cadence were being honest with herself, her cousin was Cadence's only hope for significance on this big blue planet. If any fate were likely for Cadence, she would ride Hopper and Luvvi's talent into a short lasting rock and roll career, and then marry some guy with rounded features, who would also likely be balding.

She took a moment to picture him. He wasn't exactly glamorous, but Cadence would have to treat the guy well despite his faults. He would deserve that much, at least.

Gerry Curran was a different matter though. He deserved no good treatment at all. Cadence wondered if she should just out the guys secret feelings for Luvvi, right then and there. "Curran, are you just on me because you're practicing for a day when you can man up and try and tackle some bigger game?" Then Cadence looked casually over at Luvvi. It was enough to cause their creepezoid bassist to retreat silently back to his little bassist corner of the room.

*That's right maggot, into the darkness with you.* The creep.

Hopper was looking at Cadence, with some strange expression on his face that she couldn't quite interpret — so she blew him a kiss. "Don't worry, we still love you." Cadence said to him quietly as she breezed by him.



Hopper's guitar made a sudden happy sound.

"I'm relieved." Hopper said. "But I never really had that much doubt. See I've been working on projecting more confidence and sometimes I just mis-aim it. Confidence can be unpredictable you know. At least my mom's psychologist friends all say that it can be."

Hopper's mother's friends — that would be a scary group to take advice from. More like psychedelicologist friends from what Cadence had seen, some of them regularly communicated with beings from the planet Pluto. And poor Hopper had been so introspective lately, ever since his psychedelic journey into what he called the underland, all those weeks back. He had been more introspective and also more paranoid. The guy had even gotten himself beat up last week for asking the wrong guys the wrong questions about mind control. The way Hops told the story, Cadence thought they sounded like serious players too.

The boy needed to get himself off the streets and back into his bedroom with his Pink Floyd and his lava lamp, but he wasn't taking Cadence's advice. The streets were too dangerous for him. She had felt better when Hopper's sole interest had been to write the perfect song. This new version of Hopper could get himself hurt.

Then she noticed him. Why was he staring at her like that?

"Hey," Hopper said, his voice deep and smooth. "Did you go and change your lipstick, Doll? What color is that?"

"Black Cherry." Cadence said as she positioned her chair for rehearsal.

"Black cherry. Really?" Hopper wasn't moving. In fact he was a statue, staring at her lips. It wasn't long before Cadence began to feel funny about it. But Hopper still wasn't breaking his stare.

"Delicious." Hopper muttered, just loud enough to hear.

"Say what?" Cadence put her hand over her mouth so that Hopper would have to stop looking at it.

And that was enough to get Hopper doing the pogo thing again.

Honestly!

Then suddenly he was leaning even closer to Cadence. "Delicious — I said delicious. What an inspiration it is. Does it smell?" He reached out and tried to waft some of the air from near Cadence's lips. Then Hopper closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, like a guy in an antihistamine commercial.

"Quit it." Cadence told him.

"But I can smell it, just barely but its — You need to come closer."

Hopper reached out with one of his freakishly long arms and yanked Cadence towards him. The legs of her chair vibrated against the floor as she slid. With his eyes still closed, the guitarist stooped towards her face and then he let his fingers work the strings of his guitar.

Embarrassed, Cadence turned towards her cousin, but she could see that Luvvi was already lost in Hopper's new riff — whatever it was supposed to be.

Then Luvvi added her voice to what Hopper was playing, and suddenly Cadence could hear the beginnings of the sound that the two of them had been reaching for.

"That's exactly right, Luvvi." Hopper said, excitedly. "Just like that. It's Black Cherry."

Luvvi, under a spell of creative commerce, was moving to her keyboards as Hopper's riff began to take on an even more recognizable shape, for the benefit of the people in the room who weren't musical geniuses. Then Hopper began to compose the words straight out of his head. He had no voice really, but the guy was definitely a lyric machine.

*"Black cherry  
Sweet plum berry  
Under a spell of you my  
zymolytic fairy*

*Black cherry  
Bloody Mary  
I drink you down like you're my  
Soul's sweet sherry*

*Black cherr —"*

Hopper cut off the song mid word, his guitar strings squawked as his fingers lifted off the strings. Then his eyes popped open. "I can't smell it anymore." To Cadence the boy might have even sounded frightened. Hops looked toward her. "I need to smell it." He said.

Hopper reached out his humungous arms towards her again, but this time Cadence was ready for it. He only managed to snag her arm, and Cadence's feet were in a better position to resist Hopper's efforts to reel her in.

Then Luvvi stopped singing and looked over at them. "I think that was a really special sound." Luvvi said. "Why did you stop?"

Hopper turned towards Luvvi as he was waging the tug of war with Cadence's arm. "I couldn't smell it."

"Smell what?" Luvvi said.

"Cadence's new lipstick. It's the sound — I can't play it if I can't smell it. And I think it would be delicious."

Luvvi left her keyboards and walked over to where her band mate's grappling match was stuck in an uncertain stalemate. Cadence felt good about defying the guy, but Hopper still had her arm.

Then Luvvi moved in close to her cousin. Cadence thought that her best friend had come to talk, but then she leaned over and sniffed Cadence's lips. "I like it." Luvvi said to Hopper. "But you got all of that sound from just that smell?" Luvvi seemed dubious, but she was willing to accept Hopper's statement at face value. Of course nobody bothered asking Cadence, even though they were her lips.

It was remarkable that Hopper got all of that inspiration from a couple of sniffs though — but it wasn't surprising. After all, anyone familiar with the band knew that Hopper was a genuine artist. He always kept himself open to any and all inspirations, no matter how odd they were sometimes.

"It's not the smell." Hopper said. "That's not it at all." Hopper's eyes were far away. "The inspiration is from what I think the taste would be like. You know, if I could taste it. If I could —" There was a long pause where Hopper's eyes did not leave Cadence's lips. Cadence was thinking that the boy had a hungry sort of look. "It would be better." Hopper continued, lost in his thoughts.

Luvvi turned towards Cadence, looking confident. She had always been pragmatic. "Do you have the lipstick in your purse?"

"No, it's Scarla's. It's at the house." Cadence said.

Luvvi looked at her friend. "We should definitely explore that song further. There was something special in the sound." She said.

Hopper had begun nodding like an idiot, in full agreement with Luvvi. As the Ragamuffin Dolls only true artists, Luvvi and Hopper often found themselves in alliance. "I know," Hopper said to Luvvi. "It's so special. I can almost taste it." He leaned in close to Cadence's mouth once again and closed his eyes, then he began smacking his lips. "Mmmmmm." He breathed, smiling. When Hopper leaned in even closer Cadence had to push his face away.

“Do you mind?” Cadence said.

That caused Hopper to stand up tall and open his eyes, apparently shocked. The boy could be so socially unaware, like a dog that didn’t learn the rules. That’s why Cadence didn’t ever hesitate to train him. Cadence pointed her finger at him. “Stay back.” She told him.

Just like a clueless hound Hopper usually wanted to please. So her command was enough of a wake up for him, and it even made the boy release her arm.

Luvvi stepped between them. “Cadence, can we talk?”

Great. Here it comes. Luvvi Dove had just heard the glimmers of a new sound, and the musical fanatic in her wouldn’t let her rest until that sound had been realized. Now Luvvi was going to take Cadence aside and press and press and press, until she got exactly what she wanted. Cadence wondered if Ringo Starr ever had to deal with those same sorts of things.

It didn’t take an Einstein to figure out where the conversation would take her, so Cadence chose to preemptively strike.

“Hold up, Sister.” Cadence said. “If Nutbar Amadeus over there wants to eat my lipstick to fuel his art, what do I care?” Cadence noticed Luvvi relax when she heard Cadence say it, and Hopper Yves was once again displaying a Marmaduke sort of grin. “Where’s some tissue?” Cadence said, looking around.

They usually had tissue around the practice studio for the times when either Luvvi or Hopper got so worked up by the music, that they began balling uncontrollably.

Unexpectedly, Hopper gasped when he heard Cadence’s comment. The boy put down his guitar and rushed towards the Kleenex box, placing himself in front of it. Apparently, he was prepared to guard the box from Cadence. Like he even had a chance of stopping her.

“You can’t do that!” Hopper was saying, urgently. “I need to taste the lipstick, pure. Not on some nasty pulpy, bleached and twice dyed paper. I need to taste it off your —”

And that was exactly where Hopper Yves’ famously inadequate balls, promptly failed him. Cadence would have laughed at him outright, if she wasn’t also feeling sorry for him. Looking at the guy in that moment, Cadence wondered how anyone could resist rooting for the silly oaf.

On the inside at least.

There was another part of her though. A part of Cadence that wished

Hopper Yves possessed the animal fortitude to have uttered the word, *lips*. Even though that was a strange thing to wish for.

Then Cadence realized that she had begun looking at Hopper's lips.

Cadence tried to shake it off like a baby duck shaking off water. But she knew that they were good friends. Of course the two of them weren't kissing friends or anything, but a better human being than Hopper would have been hard to find. If anyone should be allowed to taste her mouth, why not Hopper?

Then Cadence began to wonder if the guitarist would want to kiss her. Or if he would just lick at her mouth the way a dog licks at a dropped ice cream cone melting on a sidewalk. With Hopper it could go either way.

Luvvi was looking towards Cadence. Her cousin could tell that she was considering it, and that had Luvvi Dove smiling.

The smile told Cadence everything. Luvvi's mind was already made up and before the rehearsal was over, it had already been determined that one way or another — the lead guitarist would be eating off of Cadence's mouth. Even if all the others had to hold her down while he did it.

"Alright." Cadence said. "What do I care? I used to be a whore."

Although she hadn't meant all that much by the comment, Cadence could tell right away that her words had changed the atmosphere in the room. Luvvi's mouth popped open and some sudden realization filled her eyes with apology.

Hopper Yves on the other hand, turned sheet white. The boy frowned at Cadence, started pogoing and then stammered. "Ida, ida ida know Cada, Cady, Cado, Cadence. I di, I did — did not know, I mean — meanum." It was like the boy was battery operated. "I did not mean that I wanted to, um. I mean you know, right? How I feel? It's just that your lips, they looked delicious, but. But I don't think you're a whor-hor-" Then the guitarist sneezed. It was a nervous thing that Cadence had seen Hopper do on occasion. But to his credit the boy pressed on. "Pross-prostitatta — Aw shit! Cadence I think you're incredible. You know that. And I don't deserz, no, deserve you know? To be anywhere near your — You know," He smiled again as he thought about it. "Your very delicious lips."

The band's reactions all seemed pretty weird to Cadence, but now that she was thinking about it none of the Ragamuffins ever talked openly about her sex worker phase. Who would have thought that they would be so uncomfortable with it all? Cadence just assumed that as friends and band mates, the topic would be mellow.

Cadence had to smile at the effort that her guitarist was putting forward. It was part of what she liked about him. But Luvvi and Hopper's reaction was the exact reason that Cadence was reluctant to talk to normal people about her time in the brothel. Whorehouse talk always came with extreme responses. Never just, *Oh really? Was there 401K?*

"Calm down, both of you. Alright?" Cadence looked at the two of them. "I've figured out that Hopper doesn't want to bang me, okay?" Cadence offered Hopper a smile to help lighten the mood and put him at ease, but the guitarist's face registered several quick emotions — none of them were relaxation. Then Hopper looked away, saying nothing. "You know what I mean, right?"

Hopper was still pogoing, with a bit of scratching above his ear. The guy was anxious and sweating up a storm. "I'm hot. I think we should break." Hops said suddenly. Then Hopper unslung his guitar, placed it gently onto a nearby stand, and bolted for the door.

"Hopper?" Cadence called after him. But he didn't turn or break stride. "Hopper!" The door closed hard behind him, a testament to the speed of the lead guitarist's retreat.

Gerry Curran started laughing from over in his miserable little corner. Then he threw in his opinion. Like most things about Gerry, it was unwanted. "Betcha ten bucks he heads home."

"Oh shit!" Cadence knew instantly that it was true.

Her and Luvvi rushed for the door. By the time they caught him, Hopper Yves was already two blocks away.

"I'm sorry." Hopper said to Cadence as they were dragging him back. "I'm so sorry. I won't ever mention anything like — I mean, it'll just be music, okay? I won't go near you Cadence, or even try to. Y'know, ever. Ever ever. I mean I can do music without touching, or smelling. I've thought about it, and I know now, the smelling could be perceived as a bit weird. It's plain, very plain. Plain as a bell — or a sheet, or whatever that saying is. Shit, it's neither of those." Hopper wasn't done. "Forget the plain, okay. Let's just say it's clear. Crystal clear. Yeah that works. It's just that as an artist, I usually try to work off of a muse. It's my process, you know?" Then Hopper Yves put his big hand over his eyes in regret, and he refused to take the hand away not even caring that he had no way of seeing where he was going. So Luvvi and Cadence had to lead him like a blind man back towards the rehearsal studio.

When Hopper once again stepped in through the doors of the band's sacred workplace, he felt compelled to announce once again to the room — his regret, his personal anguish, and his readiness to make contrition.

For the good of the band, he said.

It was a weird thing to do, even for Hopper, because Luvvi and Cadence had already heard it, the drummer was zoned out, and nobody there cared what Gerry Curran thought about anything. But Hopper did it anyways, making Cadence realize just how rattled Hopper Yves was. It made Cadence wonder why the boy had been so damn anxious in recent weeks. What was eating him?

Of course none of her band-mates even considered going back to composing the Black Cherry song. Instead the band grabbed their instruments and tightened up some of their usual pieces.

Throughout it though, Cadence noticed that Hopper wasn't nearly as spontaneous with his licks as he would usually be. And of course Cadence herself kept missing her fingering, but that was typical. But at least Luvvi sounded great — also typical. And really, that was all the Ragamuffin Dolls ever needed in order to nail it.

By the end of the rehearsal, the band's peace had mostly been restored. But Cadence noticed that whenever she changed locations, Hopper was drifting to the far side of the room. She wondered if he was even conscious that he was doing it.

Gerry Curran packed up and left without a word. It was what he did after every rehearsal. Their drummer said goodbye. So the three of them were left alone. After band practice, it was usually a treasured time for all of them. But that day, even with Luvvi's best efforts to keep things light, things seemed awkward.

Cadence decided to put an end to it. "Hey." She interrupted Luvvi. "The two of you are the best friends I have on this earth." Cadence said, staring right at Hopper when she said it. His brown eyes looked back at her, and the hint of a reluctant smile flickered upon his lips.

"So what do you have to say about that?" Again, Cadence was addressing Hopper specifically. The guitarist didn't speak. "Say it." Cadence prodded.

Hopper sighed. "Gee Cadence. What's to say? I mean you both know that the two of you are the only real friends I've got. Acquaintances? Sure. Cohorts? Of course. Contacts? Absolutely. But for real friends? Unfortunately for me you ladies seem to be it. Pathetic, right? I'm a man my prime,

and I should be out there in the world ranging the territories like a wild stallion — touching hearts as I pass. But that's not me."

"No," Cadence said. "That's Black Beauty."

Hopper wasn't quite done with his diatribe because he kept on as though Cadence had never spoken. "Nope — not at all. I'm just a guy. A guy with exactly two friends that he can never touch."

Then he was done.

What did that mean? Two friends that he could never touch? Hopper was scratching behind his ear again, and his eyes were welling up.

"Shit, I think I just thought of a song," Hopper said.

Cadence figured she might even know how the guy felt. In a way, her and Luvvi were sort of outcasts too. Even for West Hollywood, they were just too different. Cadence reached for the tissues and Luvvi reached for Hopper's guitar. She tried to hand it to him. "I can't, I can't play. It's too much." He said, grabbing one of Cadence's tissues.

"Okay," Luvvi said, putting the guitar on her own lap. "You tell me how it goes."

Hopper looked at Luvvi like she had just rescued him from a flaming building. "It's in the key of E minor. Pianissimo. Finger pick it."

Luvvi did, and like all her music, it turned out beautiful. From only the words that Hopper was giving to her Luvvi was able to shape the song of Hopper's heart, into life. Cadence's cousin was a truly incredible talent. Luvvi even hummed out a tune that must have sprung directly from the roots of her soul, as Hopper wept beside her.

Cadence couldn't help thinking that maybe those two were meant to be a match pair. Both were good people, both were good looking, and both were special musically. Simple math suggested that it could be a match. But if they ever got together, where would Cadence be then? She had grown up playing fiddle, but would she end up playing second fiddle? That idea was more disturbing to her than Cadence cared to think about.

Someday, by being the parasite that Cadence knew that she was, she was certain that she would lose Luvvi. And she would probably lose Scarla, just like all the others who had taken her in when she couldn't make a fair contribution to the group. Cadence was acutely aware that she was living on charity, and she knew how that always went. It would be just like the brothel tossing her out and forsaking her to the harsh streets, all over again.



Luckily, Luvvi's sad song ended before Cadence's thoughts reached full blown suicidal ideations. The room had become sober and fiercely quiet after Luvvi quit playing. The mood was pretty depressing really, but still none of them made any attempts to leave.

"Didn't you come in here happy?" Cadence said, mocking their mood.

Then Luvvi's mouth popped open, and her eyes became instantly joyful. Cadence thought that her friend might squee again, but instead she chose a more coherent method of expression. "We just got." Luvvi reached out and grabbed both of their hands — and then she squee'd. "The best. Gig. In. The. World."

Cadence doubted that, but the band had been getting more play and things were definitely looking up. "How big is the auditorium?" Cadence said, wanting to be supportive.

Luvvi smiled slyly, and that smile made Cadence wonder if perhaps the Ragamuffin Dolls had hooked into something bigger than usual. "It's a stadium." Luvvi said.

The Ragamuffin Dolls didn't have nearly enough juice to fill a stadium, so Cadence concluded that there had to be another band involved. "Whose stadium?" She said.

Again, that same sly smile. "Guess."

"Hendrix."

"He's dead."

"The Rolling Stones."

"Not a chance."

"The Grateful Dead."

"Strike three. You need a hint." Luvvi said. "It's a pop-rock goddess."

"Candy Carrella?"

"Nope."

"Stevie Nicks?"

"No! You're a lousy guesser — it's Sophia!" Then Luvvi squee'd again. Hopper was smart enough to raise a hand to protect his near side ear, but the girl code prohibited Cadence from doing the same. Instead, Cadence supported her friend by giggling excitedly. She stopped herself well short of squeeing, though. In her books, nobody should be that supportive.

"The — Sophia?" Cadence said, barely believing it. "She's an incredible performer. I thought your mom had been striking out on that project." They had all worked so hard for an opportunity like this one and Cadence loved seeing her friend so happy.

“I know. She was, but when me and her went by their offices earlier today to take one last shot, Sophia happened to be there. When she looked at me she instantly wanted to talk. We talked and I guess somehow I changed her mind. They’re putting the deal together right now.”

“How many nights?” Hopper asked.

“Just a few, but still. A stadium!” Luvvi tackled Cadence once again, and began tickling her. And once again Hopper Yves was left to watch.

It didn't take a detective to see that Luvvi's house was a whole lot different than Kurtz and Scarla's. Despite the fact that both homes were in West Hollywood, Luvvi's house was much bigger and more modern. Luvvi's mother kept their house trimmed out with designer everything, including well mannered Latina maids and a thirteen year old pool boy.

Despite the nicer surroundings, the highbrow art, the well-stocked fridge, and the spacious leisure room where Hopper and the girls could hang out, Sophia noticed that none of them seemed as comfortable as when they were in Kurtz's shed.

Luvvi especially seemed conflicted around her mother. Whenever the woman was in the room there was a change in the girl. Sophia had spent enough time now around the Ragamuffin Dolls, to understand the dynamics.

Luvvi's mother was driven by social status, and she had an unhealthy obsession with her daughter achieving stardom. Luvvi on the other hand was smart enough to see that her mother's ambitions were unhealthy, but she found herself guilty of wanting her mother's schemes to succeed. The songstress didn't go along with her mother because of megalomania though, but because she was born with an undeniable devotion to the creation and sharing of music.

For her it was about the art.

But all art needed backing. Luvvi's mother provided that. Luvvi was a prolific artist who needed to create and she could never forsake that part of her, no matter what questionable dealings her mother might be getting involved in behind closed doors. Despite Luvvi accepting of the role that her mother's ambition would have in her life, Luvvi spent a great deal of her time feeling horrible. It made her feel weak to have to go along with the woman's schemes, but she always found herself trapped into the agreement by circumstance.

The alternative was for her to give the music up and replace it with something practical. As much as Luvvi felt in her heart that music was one of the most important and powerful forces in the universe, she still looked

at all those hours of writing and practice as a sort of indulgence — mostly because she loved the music so much.

Meanwhile other people had to spend time doing jobs that they hated, but they were jobs that needed doing. How was that fair? And what was the real value of music anyways? You couldn't eat it. You couldn't drive a car over it. You couldn't restart someone's heart with it in an emergency room.

All of those things might have been true, but so far her feelings would not let her forsake her art. And while Sophia had been watching Luvvi for all of that time, the oracle had come to believe that those were the exact reasons Luvvi hadn't yet, fully embraced her art.

The three of them had been flipping through TV channels for the last five minutes, looking for Emerald's new music video that had just been released. There were three channels with music videos on them, and all of those stations seemed to be talking about Emerald's new song. But none of them had shown the new track yet.

"This is taking too long." Cadence announced her impatience to the group.

"It's been five minutes." Luvvi's tone suggested that she considered Cadence's objection to be ridiculous.

Hopper was plucking away on one of Luvvi's guitars. "This sounds out of tune." He said.

"The third string is a half step low." Luvvi said.

Hopper plucked the third string in isolation, then the second and the forth. Then the third. Then the second, the third, and then the fourth again.

"Just twist the damn knob Hops, you know she's right." Cadence said.

"Here it is!" Luvvi said. "They're going to play it."

Cadence turned towards the TV. Onscreen there were two, oh so hip VJ's, looking beautiful and trendy, with what Cadence thought were overly dramatic expressions, considering the relative unimportance of their jobs. *Emerald's got a new one and it's been heating up the charts on the east coast for four hours now.* The male VJ said, punctuating his statement with a near blinding flash of his perfect teeth.

*Heating up? I'd have to say scorching. While some might be criticizing the title track of Emerald's new album — Psycho Babel-on, as cryptic and perhaps not her best work, the VJ's here at More Music TV all believe that its*

*going to be a head turner.* The girl swished her perfect hair.

*I couldn't agree more, Danica.* The male VJ said with another toothy flash. *And what's with those torture scenes, anyways? I tell you what — with a dress made of green chains like the one Emerald wears in her video, she's welcome to get rough with me. If that's what she wants.*

The female VJ laughed, as if her partner's comment had actually been witty. *Well Rosc, you might not get your wish, because in the statement that Emerald made five hours ago on Good Morning Nation, the artist claimed that her chain dress wasn't meant to titillate the US public — but to make them think. She said that Psycho Babel-on was about mind control in the entertainment industry —*

Hopper gasped. “Did you hear that! She said it was about mind control.”

“Sshh!” Luvvi said to the guitarist, just as Cadence was also about to tell him to shut up.

“I told you guys about my vision and that girl. Do you still think I'm making things up?” He said.

“You were just high, Hopper. Now be quiet.” Luvvi said.

— *but I guess we'll have to see for ourselves. So without further ado, here it is!* Teeth flash.

Sophia watched as the Ragamuffin Dolls took in an incredibly insightful musical performance, with mixed imagery and symbolism. Some things about the video, gripped Sophia as tightly as the underland had, while other aspects made her want to run and hide.

Hopper was sitting in his chair, pogoing anxiously, in time with the music. Cadence seemed to be flashing between appreciation, shock, and sadness as she watched. Luvvi's expression, mostly suggested that the musician was being moved by what she heard.

When the video ended, Hopper and Luvvi were completely quiet.

“What the hell was that all about?” Cadence said.

“Are you kidding?” Hopper said. “I've been telling you.” Then he looked quickly over his shoulder. Sophia had been noticing Hopper Yves checking his six regularly, ever since the day they first met.

Luvvi stayed silent.

Suddenly the VJ's were back on the screen. *Well, what did you think?* The female said, tucking her hair behind an ear.

The male VJ took a breath and shrugged. *Well. I liked the dress.*

The female VJ laughed out loud as though her partner was a stand up

comic. *All right, so it wasn't her best work, but I don't think it's wrong for her to experiment a little. After all, Emerald's work over the years has been so spot on. Even when she was only fourteen her lyrics were brilliantly crafted, and her social comments so mature — I think it's fine for a girl to take a break from all that serious stuff. Swish the hair. I think that Emerald, just like any girl — deserves the chance to lapse into a fairytale and have a little mindless fun with the music for a change.*

*So you found that fun?* The male VJ said doubtfully, with one perfect eyebrow raised — then a quick tooth flash.

*Well maybe fun isn't the word.* A laugh and a swish.

*I'd say not.* The male said. *Maybe this video is what happens when a superstar spends too much of her time exploding at paparazzi, shaving her head and sampling pharmaceuticals.*

*Oh, too cruel.* The woman said with a laugh.

Swish.

*The truth can definitely be cruel.* The guy said. Flash. *And now —*

Hopper switched off the TV and stood up. "We need to talk about this." Both Cadence and Luvvi began to laugh. "I'm serious." He said.

Cadence was the first to speak. "Look Hopper, the song wasn't literal. I'm sure that it's just a big metaphor."

"Yeah," Luvvi said. "It's not like mind control is even possible."

Her cousin's comment surprised Cadence. "You don't think so?"

"Nobody thinks so." Luvvi said.

"I'm not so sure." Cadence said. "You mustn't have ever seen a sex-worker scratch somebody's eyes out when her abusive asshole of a pimp is getting himself justifiably beat up. Let me tell you, those women live in fear of everything those pimps stand for. But as soon as the pimp crosses the wrong dude and starts getting what he deserves, the women throw themselves into harms way to help him — like he's Jesus Christ or something."

Luvvi had nothing to say. Obviously she hadn't ever seen that.

"And what about Stockholm syndrome?" Hopper said. "When a person changes sides and starts helping their kidnapper. Fighting for the person who ruined their life."

"That stuff is just psychology." Luvvi said. "Mind control is science fiction."

"Who says?" Hopper wasn't going to let the issue be dismissed that

easily.

"People say." Luvvi said. "Who would want to control a pop star anyway?"

"Control the artist," Hopper said. "And you control her message."

"And her fans." Cadence added.

"So you're with him?" Luvvi said.

"No, not really." Cadence was thinking about Luvvi's mother's control over her daughter. "It's just that I think lots of people would want to control a star musician. But it doesn't mean that I'm as paranoid as Hopper."

"Thanks Cadence." Hopper said. "It's good to have you as an ally."

"You'll get over it." Cadence told him. Just then one of the Latina maids entered the room.

"Miss Dove, your mother says its time to go." The maid said. Then she turned around and left.

"Where are you going?" Hopper said to Luvvi.

Cadence answered him first. "Her and her mother are going to seal the deal on the Dolls first stadium concert."

"Wow. Okay," Hopper said to Luvvi as he stood up. "Good luck. Cadence and I will be at the library when you get back."

"Who and who will be at the what?" Cadence said, standing herself up and facing Hopper Yves.

"You heard me, shorty." Hopper said, grabbing Cadence's elbow. "We're going to do some research on the mind, and then we'll see who's being paranoid."

Cadence let herself get dragged away by Hopper. Sophia could tell that she wanted to go with him, but it was Sophia that had a decision to make. Who should she go with?

Truthfully, what Luvvi was doing seemed more interesting but Sophia's sense of caution told her that she should keep an eye on Hopper. He was a determined young man and Sophia was certain that he was going to underestimate the trouble that he could get himself into. If she could, Sophia would try and steer him away from MK Ultra.

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The library was quiet and for some reason, that made Cadence want to scream.

The first thing they did was research hypnosis, looking for clues that it

could be used to create a mind control slave. All of the books said the same thing, suggesting that a person couldn't be hypnotized to do anything that they wouldn't normally do.

Hopper seemed to accept the academic answer. To him it was right there in black ink, but Cadence lacked his respect for the written word, and she was gifted with an incredibly fine tuned bullshit detector. "Well what about the hypnotist guys that make a living bringing people on stage to make them waddle like ducks, fake orgasms, and hump their neighbor's legs like a dog? Are you telling me that those people would normally do all that?"

It certainly got Hopper thinking. While he didn't concede Cadence the point, he didn't dismiss it either. That made Cadence feel pretty good, it was nice to have her ideas accepted. She couldn't remember that ever happening in school.

The next topic they looked up was cults. It seemed like a while back, every parent's fear had been that his or her child might be stolen away and made a part of some cult. Brainwashed, shaved bald, and turned into a white robed, flower dispensing zombie. And from what Cadence knew, those people had to be *deprogrammed* by special psychologists.

It was Hopper that asked the question. "Where have all the mind control cults of the sixties and seventies gone? If they were around then, why would they be gone now?"

Cadence set her mind to working on the question. She didn't believe that people had changed that much in twenty-five years. They were still needy, disconnected, attention starved, and dying for purpose. Grunge rock alone was proof of that. It seemed like today's society would be fertile soil for a well-organized mind control cult to grow a business in. Unless —

"Unless, they look like everything else." Cadence said.

"What?" Hopper looked up from his book.

"Mind control cults. They aren't likely gone, but they could look like everything else. Look Hops, just think of it like the sex-workers."

"My grid for everything."

"Shut up, I'm talking. Okay, amongst sex-workers, you got a few types. You got streetwalkers, that stand out. They look like streetwalkers cuz that's how they market themselves. Then you got the stationary ones, usually out of sight, like my friends in the brothel. They are part of a busi-



ness that attracts people to them, without them needing to flaunt their assets on the street. Then the last group is usually dial up. They often cater to the higher end folks, and they dress much like everyone else.”

“So?”

“So they’re still whores. They’ve still gotta bite the pillow, but they look like your niece, or your aunt, or your —”

“Okay, okay. Stop talking, I get it.” Hopper waved his hands at his bandmate. “So you’re saying that mind control cults still exist but they don’t look as strange as they did in the sixties and seventies. They market themselves a different way.”

“Yeah, exactly.” Cadence said. “Self help events and sales conferences.” Cadence was certain of it. She was thinking about a few of the brothel’s old clients in particular.”

Hopper smiled at her. “You’re pretty smart.” The comment made Cadence feel warm all over. “How come that side of you doesn’t show itself at school?”

Cadence might have punched him, but she opted to keep it classy. “Go screw yourself, Yves.”

There was silence for a while after that. Out of boredom, Cadence pulled a thick book with a grey cover out of Hopper’s stack, and started to read it. It was about the history of the social sciences, namely psychology and sociology.

The first thing that she was surprised by was just how young these fields of study were. Just some decades really, give or take. Before that, people with mental issues just got stuffed into a lunatic asylum and left to drool on themselves.

It wasn’t until fairly recently that brain chemistry started to be considered. It made Cadence wonder just how far the science had been able to progress, and how much the supposed experts still didn’t know.

With the slow pace of research, there was likely a lot about the human brain that they had no clue about. Cadence looked at the two inch binding on the book that she had been reading. Yet the stuff that they did know, was far too much for Cadence to ever bother delving into.

“We need to ask somebody.” Cadence said.

“Like a librarian?”

A librarian. Why would they wanna ask a librarian? Cadence was about to frame that question when Hopper waved someone over. She was about twenty-five, and Asian. “Could you help us? We’re doing research on mind

control.”

“Mind control?”

“Yes,” Hopper said. “Making your mind play tricks, on purpose.”

“Okay.” The librarian said. “Have you considered the mystery of amnesia, multiple personality syndrome, or false memory syndrome? Or how about hypnosis, predictive dreams, and the placebo effect?”

Woah. Who was this lady and what was she doing shelving books in a library. “You’re amazing.” Cadence said.

“What?” The Asian woman gave Cadence a stern look.

“How did you know all that?” Cadence said.

“I’m a librarian. It’s what we do.”

No kidding.

Then the librarian turned back towards Hopper. “Where do we start?” He said.

“I would start with World War two.” She said.

“Why?” Hopper seemed lost.

“Because in World War two, the research done was all about winning wars. And that meant a few things. Rockets, the limits of the human psyche, and unlocking the human mind.”

Dammit, this skinny-assed Asian chick was right. That would have probably been a boom time for mind control research. Cadence wondered how much unethical Nazi research got snatched up when the Axis forces surrendered, and how much parallel research the Allied scientists had done. Whatever those guys had discovered, Cadence doubted that it would have just been stuffed into anyone’s sock drawer and forgotten. In fact the victors would have been delighted to look over new and effective methods of controlling the lives of the people they were in power over. And once the cold war ended —

“She’s right.” Cadence announced.

The skinny Asian chick glanced momentarily at Cadence, the disdain evident in her manner.

“Can you show me, then?” Hopper said.

“Of course.” The librarian said and began walking.

Cadence and Hopper followed. The librarian had a tight fitting Navy dress, and sensible heels that put just a hint of sashay into the woman’s walk.

“Quit looking at her ass.” Cadence told Hopper quietly.

“What? I was — how can I? Why do you think — Dammit, Cadence. She’s walking right in front of me. What am I supposed to look at?”

“Well you’re part of our band so if you want to look at ass, you can look at mine or Luvvi’s.”

“Are you ser —? But that’s not fair, I’m not allowed to —” Hopper tried to compose himself as they walked. “Okay,” Hopper said, slowing down a bit. “You go on up ahead of me so I can look at your ass, then.”

Cadence stopped. Then she grabbed his arm to pull him forward. “Not on your life.” Cadence said.

For a while Hopper walked along beside Cadence without issue, but then the boy found his defiance again. “Fine, then I’m going to look at her.” The guitarist focused his eyes purposefully back onto the swaying blue tube skirt.

Cadence tripped him a second later. Hopper Yves went down like a calamity and Cadence continued on ahead, following the officious librarian around a corner and stopping at a large bookshelf.

By the time Hopper reached them, the librarian had put a sizable stack of books into Cadence’s hands, and was walking away as efficiently as she had arrived.

“Here, you carry them.” Cadence shoved the whole stack towards Hopper once he got there.

Once they were back at their table, the two of them tore into the stack of books. They learned about Operation Paperclip, which dealt with the US government’s involvement in wiping clean the backgrounds of Nazi scientists, so that the Americans could use them for their own projects, allegedly in the nation’s interests. Operation Paperclip was made public in various senate subcommittee hearings and had generally been a source of controversy ever since. More than a few people had questioned what had been keeping all of those scientists so busy.

Mind control maybe? Some thought so. Either that or counter mind control in response to the activities of the Chinese or the Soviet governments. But wouldn’t counter mind control research likely involve mind control as well?

The book Cadence was reading focused a lot on the atrocities done to the civilians in the Nazi concentration camps. Most often those civilians were Romani, Jewish, ethnic Poles, or Russian. Nobody ever argued that those people’s lives had been used in some incredibly gruesome ways as the doctors tried to push certain sciences forward. No doubt, creating a

means of forcing compliance upon unwilling people would have been of great interest to the cause of Nazism. Because Cadence knew it was almost always about control — really no different than today.

“What’s this?” Hopper muttered.

Cadence looked at him, he was staring at a book that looked like it had been thoroughly annotated. In his hand, Hopper held a bunch of papers that had been folded in half, and likely left inside the book. She wondered what it could be. “Let me see.” Cadence snatched the papers from Hopper’s hand.

They were a combination of photocopied documents, and handwritten notes. She saw the words MK Ultra and Project Monarch, but just as she started to read — the papers disappeared.

“Hey!” Hopper had snatched them back, the long armed freak. He didn’t even acknowledge the fact that she was offended. “Didn’t your mother teach you any manners?” Cadence said.

Hopper looked up from his reading, but he was smart enough to not get lured into a debate about mothers with his friend the orphan. Instead Hopper sighed, broke the bundle of papers into two parts, and handed Cadence half. “Don’t get them mixed up.” He said, looking down again.

“That’s more like it, Hopscotch.”

Cadence’s comment earned her one more brief glance, before the Ragamuffin’s guitarist disappeared into his reading. That was okay, Cadence had been batting a thousand on this stuff so far. She could figure it out without him.

Ten minutes later, Cadence wished that she could un-see what she had just read. It was a detailed case study about a girl from the Midwest, who had been unfortunate enough to be selected as an Operation Monarch candidate. Pretty soon Cadence was left with only two choices, stop reading or puke.

So she stopped reading.

“Do you believe this stuff?” Cadence said.

Hopper looked up. “I’m not sure, but I think its possible.”

“What do your papers say?”

“It’s put together by a guy whose sister got kidnapped in nineteen sixty-eight. He makes a lot of claims, and he seems to have done his research.”

“But what does he say?”

“He says that I’m not crazy and that my dream was probably more than just the shrooms.”

That made Cadence smile. “Yeah? So what was the dream then?”

“I don’t know.” Hopper said. Cadence smile grew. “I’m not sure, but it seemed pretty real.”

Cadence giggled. “Real?” She said. “Are you kidding? Have you forgotten that you’ve already told us the dream? It sure as hell didn’t sound real to me.”

“Oh, forget it.” Hopper stood up and began gathering up the papers, selecting a few books as well. “Let’s go. I can read this stuff at home.”

Truer words had never been spoken. Cadence popped out of her chair, fully ready to get the hell out. Hopper ended up checking out three books, with one of them being the one that was annotated. Cadence only decided to borrow one book, *A Brief History of Politically Endorsed Genocide*. It was pretty short and had quite a few pictures. Cadence got it mostly because she didn’t want Hopper to think that she was a complete slacker.

Hopper seemed to be into this stuff pretty deep, though. But even if all of it had happened, that was decades ago. The Nazi’s were long gone and hopefully Hopper would realize that soon enough. After all, the band needed him at his best.

Of course if it hadn’t been this issue, wouldn’t Hops have just picked another one? Wasn’t that his way? Hopper’s paranoid obsessions seemed overdone to Cadence, but Hopper was who Hopper was, and if he wanted to spend his time pouring over book graffiti and tales from the Twilight Zone, who was Cadence to say that he couldn’t?

“Don’t let this stuff get in the way of band practice, though.” Cadence warned.

“Yes, boss.” Hopper muttered.

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Hopper chaperoned Cadence only until Luvvi met up with them. Then he excused himself and headed for home.

Sophia loved spending time with the girls, but she knew that she had to follow Hopper. Even though he hadn’t told Cadence, reading those documents was making Hopper angry. Sophia knew that Hopper Yves was impulsive by nature, and worse than that, he was no longer even thinking straight. He was going to go straight home, and do something stupid.

Once Hopper got home, he barricaded himself into his room without even stopping to chat with his mother. The house looked different this time, now that perception was no longer altered. In some ways, Sophia wished that it were, because for some reason the distortion had given her a way to communicate with Hopper Yves.

Hopper went straight to work on the documents. He poured through the annotated book like his life depended on it. If Sophia had been interested, she could have merged with him and read along. But that was the last thing that she wanted to do. Sophia was content to keep her distance. She had spent far too much time in her life delving into the sick by-products of psychopathic minds, and she didn't plan on delving into this.

Sophia was there for one reason — to warn Hopper off if she got a chance to communicate with him. For the most part, that afternoon was pretty boring for Sophia. It gave her time to wonder about Alastar and Demsie, back in the cave. She loved them both so much. How much time had already passed for them? Were they all even alive still? She had to assume that they were, since Sophia hadn't felt herself die.

The monotony of watching Hopper read, made the experience feel like what it really was — a prison cell. A very interesting prison cell, but Sophia was trapped there just the same. She should have been standing sentry over her friends. Why had she let herself fall asleep on them? And not even once, but twice!

They deserved a better ally than her.

Sophia felt the guilt closing in around her and tried to push it aside. She needed to change her thoughts away from her own obvious failures. So she chose to focus on the things that she always did in those situations, her friends and their futures.

Now that she had been given such a vivid taste of the outside world, Sophia thought that happiness was even less impossible for the three of them — if they could manage to hold onto their lives and their selves until graduation.

Both of those tasks would certainly be a challenge, but the plan for holding onto their lives was straight forward enough. Stay close to Alastar and follow his lead, whatever it was. Keep him safe and he would keep them safe, always.

It was the task of holding onto their identities that Sophia thought would be the bigger challenge for her and Demsie. Anyone living through

the trials of being a Station resident could easily lose themselves, but oracles were more sensitive than most. How many of her peers had been fine, until one day they simply lost themselves? The instructors called it Foundational Death, and in the Station it was usually closely followed by true death.

Aside from psychopaths, people weren't built for repeated and varied traumatization. Trauma could worm its way deep into a person's mind, beyond even their soul, and slowly, delicately, start to unravel the fabric that made that person who they were.

And if that wasn't bad enough, there were also the mind's own built in defenses that you had to worry about. Those defenses could sneak up and steal your identity right out from under you — and the worst thing about it? It was you, doing it to you.

Things like PTSD, dissociative amnesia, and of course the splitting of the person into multiple personalities. Those disorders were all so hard to undo. That was why Sophia always made sure that she kept her faith. Faith in Alastar Daivi — her boy.

He would be so special one day, and Sophia wanted to be intact and alive to see it.

It felt good to be given time to think about him. It felt really good right up until Hopper Yves picked up the phone. *Put it down. Put it down!* Sophia tried as hard as she could to get him to hear her, but it wasn't like before. He began dialing.

The set of his jaw and the kindle of his eyes told Sophia that he was angry. She had no idea who he might be calling, but whoever it was it would bring Hopper one step closer to getting into trouble.

Sophia checked the pages that Hopper had just been reading. There was a fair amount of discussion about a guy named Winston Ellis who seemed to be some kind of overseer, or at least a key partner in the Monarch program.

It sickened Sophia to even look at the pages.

Hopper was already berating somebody on the other end of his phone. He was like Perry Mason in his drive to follow up on a hot lead, but only half as smart.

The bile of the topic, the conflict, and whatever else was stewing inside Hopper's heart was combining, and beginning to cloud up the room. It was as though Hopper's shift from research into action had triggered it. It was bad and Sophia wanted out. There was so much toxicity down that path,

and Sophia's freedom began to feel a sticky sort of wet. It was suffocating, and then she began to get hot.

If only Hopper would have been smart enough to stay away. Sophia hated what was happening and where it was leading to, and she felt useless since there was nothing that she could do about any of it.

Sophia began to wonder why she was still there. She had no way of helping Hopper at that point, and likely she never would.

That was the thought that carried her upwards, high into the night sky. High above the choking cesspool of darkness that was enveloping Hopper's neighborhood.

Sophia thought about the girls.

She loved being with those girls.

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It had been days since Sophia had seen Hopper, but suddenly she felt an undeniable pull. She became drawn towards him, with urgency.

She did not go to his house. Instead, her instincts took her towards the Strip. It was nighttime, so the street was gridlocked with convertibles, sports cars and limousines. They were shining black in the streetlights. Music floated up towards Sophia from clubs and cafe speakers, as the beautiful people prowled the strip.

She found him in the alley behind Gazzari's, It was clear that he had been beaten. She could see that Hopper was still breathing, but his consciousness was somewhere else. Sophia tried to touch him and Hopper Yves gasped. A shock in perception shook the oracle and Sophia realized that Hopper had been into the mushrooms again.

Once in contact with the guitarist, Sophia could see what had happened to him. He had gone where he should not have gone, and spoken to people with whom he should not have spoke.

Hopper Yves rolled onto his back to look at her. The boy was thoroughly beaten. There was a gap in his mouth where a tooth should have been. She could see the scene in her mind. The man had crouched over Hopper's beaten body. *You get to choose*, the man had said. *Finger or tooth?*

It hadn't taken much thought. Hopper was a guitarist so he had to pick the tooth. The blow was efficiently executed. *Good choice*, the man had



said, as though Hopper should feel good about it. Then he had pulled out a syringe and jabbed it into Hopper's throat. Fear overtook Hopper as he wondered what the man had just done to him.

*Next time, the man said. It won't be a tooth. You'll lose at least one of the thirteen things that you care about.* Then the man had walked away — leaving Hopper confused, frightened, and in pain.

What had he meant by thirteen things? Hopper seemed desperate to know.

Sophia knew. She understood men like the one that had just beaten Hopper, and she understood their threats.

Sophia focused her thoughts and directed them at Hopper. *The thirteen things that you love are your ten fingers, your mother, Luvvi and Cadence.* She told him. Sophia instantly felt his panic.

*It was just a warning Hopper Yves, Sophia told him. He won't hurt them, or you if you back off from what you're doing. Just leave the whole thing alone.*

Sophia felt her words calming Hopper. Then the guitarist remembered the syringe and Hopper's panic reignited. Sophia looked at the empty plastic tube — it was still there on the ground beside him.

*Taste it.* Sophia told him.

"What? But if it's poison —"

*Then it's already in you. Touch it to your tongue and I might be able to tell you what it is.* Sophia said to him. *We need to know,* she told him when Hopper didn't budge.

"Alright." Hopper reached for the syringe and touched a drop of the liquid to his tongue. Sophia tasted it.

*That guy was a supreme asshole.* Sophia said to Hopper.

"What! W-what is it?"

*Magnesium Citrate,* Sophia said. *It's a powerful laxative. In few hours you're going to be very busy.*

"Aw, shit!"

*Exactly. And with a guy like that, there's no doubt that he meant the syringe in the throat as a bit of a joke.*

"Geez, he really is an asshole then."

*Are you going to stay away from them? And will you quit making people uncomfortable with your phone calls?*

"Do I look stupid?" Hopper said as he pushed himself up to his knees, feeling the empty hole where a tooth used to be with his finger.

*A little bit, yeah. At the moment.* Sophia said.

“Please don’t tell anyone about this.” The guitarist said.

*Who would I tell?*

Hopper stood up and he wobbled a little bit, but he managed to keep his feet.

*What will you tell the girls?*

“That I got mugged.”

Sophia believed everything that Hopper was telling her, but even through his pain she could tell that the boy was acutely aware of the danger — the same danger that had led him to go down the rabbit-hole, to begin with. And he loved the girls, as shy as he might have been about expressing it. Sophia wondered if a heart as compassionate as Hopper’s could even let an issue like this one go.

ELEVEN

Cadence hated events like this.

Almost as much as her Uncle Kurtz did. There was far too much pretense for a girl with Cadence's upbringing. Luckily they both had Aunt Scarla.

She hadn't grown up anywhere special either, but there was something about Cadence Aunt's easy confidence that disarmed aristocrats on the spot. She had a strength that other women didn't, with simple values, hardened and tested by her rugged upbringing in the Canadian west. Other women seemed to sense that too, and for some reason they always deferred to it.

Cadence smiled as she watched her Aunt Scarla pulling the car into its spot. She knew that she had a seriously bitchin' Aunt.

Kurtz noticed the smile, and he even seemed to know what it was there for. He tightened his log of an arm, which had been laid across Cadence's shoulders. Then he bent down and whispered to her. "You ready for this?"

Cadence turned her smile towards Kurtz. He was such a massive man. And his presence was like nothing else that Cadence had ever experienced. Kurtz affection for her felt even bigger and more special than it ever would have if it had come from any common man.

And that night it seemed even more so.

The man was a titan even when he was watching old films in a darkened room — in his underwear. But in full uniform, formal military dress, laden with medals and ribbons and shit? The man became a war hero, and nobody could have ever mistaken that.

Luvvi and her mother would be at this party because of their family's social connections. But the Thomas family was attending for one reason only, and that was because Cadence's Uncle Kurtz was friggin' Captain America, and their presence at this event had been requested.

"How do you feel, Uncle?" Cadence said.

"Like a clown."

Cadence saw the sadness in his eyes. It was the heart of darkness that

they shared. "You look magnificent." Cadence said, smiling lightly as she smoothed his lapel. But Kurtz could see Cadence just as well as she saw him.

Luckily they both had Scarla.

It was time to get out of the car. Get out and face California's elite families. Cadence had borrowed one of Luvvi's dresses for the occasion. She could have worked for two whole months and still not been able to afford it. Somehow Cadence was feeling uncomfortable in it though, as if somehow wearing that dress made her into someone that she was not.

Cadence had managed to get herself out of the car, but her feet didn't seem to be moving. The Beverly Hills estate appeared magnificent, and the other party guests were filtering towards the door. Of course, the impressive security resources in attendance were there to greet them upon arrival.

"I could wait in the car." Cadence muttered.

Kurtz laughed, but he thought everything that Cadence said or did was funny. Then she felt his bulk moving to her side. "When you go into hostile territory, you sometimes feel that you might lose yourself." The man's voice was deep. "But an old soldier knows that if you take along a little piece of yourself, it'll pull you back."

Cadence looked up at him. "So what do you take?"

"On a campaign like this one?" He reached into his pocket, drawing something out. "A bullet."

That was strange. "What about if you were going into combat?"

He reached into his other pocket and withdrew a worn out picture. He handed it to Cadence.

It was the three of them. The photograph was from when she was only thirteen, and they had gone camping up at the family cabin in British Columbia. They were all at a bonfire and in the background were two of the bikers that had been trying to kick her ass when Auntie Scarla had rescued her. Cadence smiled at the memory. That was a great summer.

"You take it." Kurtz said. "I don't need it for this type of campaign."

"But you need your bullet?"

"I do." Kurtz said to her, his eyes taking on that hollow expression that he sometimes got lost in. "Around all these suits, I do." Then Kurtz smiled and offered Cadence and Scarla each an arm. "Besides, what do I need a picture for when I've got the real thing right here."

Cadence's Aunt Scarla laughed and leaned her head onto Kurtz massive shoulder, before the three of them started towards the Ellis family's front door.

The security personnel, perhaps attracted by Kurtz Thomas's sizeable stature or by his thousand-yard stare, converged on their position.

Cadence felt more than heard the vibration of Kurtz chuckle deep in his chest. "Be nice." Scarla warned her husband, without moving her lips or even looking at him.

Soon there were four men surrounding them. "Let's see your invitations." A tall blond one said.

Kurtz didn't move, but he eyed each man carefully. Cadence had no doubt that he was somehow divining their inner strength. These guys actually did pretty well under his stare. She had seen other men look away and start blushing like virgin brides, within seconds of meeting the big man.

Then Kurtz looked past the four men at a tall, skinny guy in a black suit. The man had scars on his face.

"Steve." Kurtz said, nodding to the man who had been hovering about thirty feet away.

Steve nodded back. Something about that guy made Cadence choose to tuck herself behind Kurtz' shoulder a little bit. And the creepiest thing about it was that Steve seemed to notice what Cadence had done.

Kurtz reached into his pocket and pulled out their family invitation to the party. The blond security guy read the invitation and then looked at Scarla Thomas. Then he whispered into the ear of the guy beside him. That guy took off. "It'll be a moment, sir." The blond guy said. "Perhaps you'd be more comfortable waiting under our shelter." The security guy gestured towards a tan pop-up tent off behind some trees.

"No thanks." Kurtz said. "We're good right here."

Cadence watched as the security guy's jaw got hard. "I'm sorry sir, perhaps I was unclear. I'm going to have to insist that you and your family wait in the tent while we vet your status."

There was a brief pause as Kurtz weighed the man's soul. Then, ignoring the guy's insistence, Kurtz said. "We were invited. Do your job and vet us, but we're not going into your tent."

The blond man's hardness spread from merely his jaw, into his eyes. When that happened, Kurtz surged forward to within inches of the guy's nose. "Do it." Kurtz said, and the security guy moved back instantly.

Then the blond man turned away and retreated. Once the security guy got to a safer distance he stabbed a finger back at Kurtz, "Don't you go anywhere." He said to them. Then he left.

Cadence looked at the rest of the security guys. It was obvious that they weren't really sure what to do — all except for the skinny one, Steve.

Steve was smiling.

Kurtz smiled back.

Then Steve started towards them. When he reached Kurtz, he stuck out his hand. Cadence noticed that the hand was badly scarred.

Kurtz took the hand and shook it. "It's good to see you, Steve."

Steve said nothing, but he nodded.

Then Steve turned to the other security guys, and wordlessly waved them off. The guys scattered like pollen on a breeze.

"C'mon." Steve said, his voice barely a whisper.

He led them past the security checkpoints, through the metal detectors, and into the main ballroom. Then he turned towards Scarla and said, "May I take your coat? Or your purse?" The man seemed uncomfortable speaking.

Scarla looked at Kurtz, who nodded before she replied. "Of course, Steve."

Steve moved behind her and helped Scarla remove her short summer coat, and then he took her purse. That was when Steve turned towards Cadence. "And the young lady?" Steve said.

Cadence jumped back involuntarily. "Fuck, no!"

Cadence blurted it out loud enough that a couple of heads turned. She would have died of embarrassment right then if her other half, Luvvi Dove hadn't appeared at her side, looking all kick ass rocker chic, and staring Steve down. "You hear that? The young lady said, fuck no." Luvvi said.

Steve smiled. Then he looked over at Kurtz, who was busy chuckling with pride.

"Of course." Steve said. "But if you change your mind." Steve nodded towards Cadence's purse, which she then realized might be a pain in the ass to carry around all night.

Steve was turning away, but Cadence said, "Wait!"

Steve waited.

"You can have it." Cadence said, offering him her purse. "My lipstick will hold and it's not like I'm on the rag or anything."

Steve took the purse as Kurtz laughed out loud again. Scarla had a different reaction. After Steve was gone, she took a step towards Cadence, and touched her nose not once, but twice. Then she turned to Luvvi, and touched her niece's nose as well.

It was Luvvi's first nose touching, so Cadence was curious about what her cousin's reaction might be. Luvvi stood frozen for several seconds, and then once Scarla finally turned away, she rubbed the tip of her nose vigorously with her palm.

"She touched my nose." Luvvi whispered. Then Cadence dragged Luvvi away, into the party. They met all sorts of important people. Celebrities, politicians, business people, and other people who seemed to be pretty vague about their actual occupations. Some of the guests were pretentious while others were fairly nice. Cadence really liked one of the politician's daughters.

For the most part, the people that were there seemed harmless. To think that Hopper had gotten his panties all up in a bunch when he'd heard that Cadence and Luvvi were going to Charleton Ellis's party.

*They're not your kind of people. Those people are the elite's of the whole world. It could be dangerous.* Hopper had argued. *You two should just tell your parents that you can't go. Tell them that you have band rehearsal.*

Like that would have worked. Hops could be so naive sometimes. His mom was a hippy and generally fell for any lame excuse that Hopper came up with. He wouldn't have lasted a second if he had to deal with any truly formidable women like Scarla, and Luvvi's mother.

The most exciting part was when Cadence and Luvvi got to meet Emerald. In person Emerald seemed like a fellow musician, just like Cadence and Luvvi. More like Luvvi than Cadence of course, since Emerald was incredibly talented and pretty. She was just a couple years older than Cadence and Luvvi were, and the woman wore her international stardom with an unassuming calm.

"Hey." Emerald had said to them, as Cadence and Luvvi cruised past.

"Hey." Luvvi said, stopping.

"Can I come along with you?" Emerald said. She looked gorgeous with her Emerald hair and fingernails.

Luvvi was a little surprised and choked on her answer. "Of course." Cadence said, taking over the conversation. "What's your real name?"

Emerald studied Cadence, clearly surprised. "Nobody ever wants to know that." Emerald said.

“Well consider me nobody, then.” Cadence said. Emerald laughed.

That was the beginning. Emerald and the girls got along famously, right from the start. The woman seemed to truly be a deep soul. Emerald loved discussing ideas that were both wide and expansive. It turned out that the pop star was exceedingly thoughtful, and she had a gift for gently saying the things that other people were only thinking. She was hilarious in a way.

The more the three of them talked, the more Cadence realized how historically important Emerald’s musical career could end up being. She was still so young, but she had been given a unique upbringing, which had gifted her with insightful perspectives on life, society, people, and politics.

Emerald was both an artist and a young philosopher, on the scale of Bob Marley. As time passed, Cadence recalled Hopper’s paranoid fears about them attending the Ellis’s party. Now that she had met Emerald and gotten to know her, it was more than enough reason for Cadence to be happy about having chosen to attend.

The three of them stayed mostly together after that, when Emerald wasn’t being pulled away to meet someone. After all, they did have music as their bond. There were guys at the party too, of course — a steady stream of them, really. They were mostly rich boys with overblown attitudes who thought that a coy hello, a ten thousand dollar suit, and pretentious airs could win them a seat on the Luvvi Dove train. They were idiots mostly. Sometimes the guys even sauntered up with an extra wingman, and then Cadence would get somebody to politely shoot down as well.

It wasn’t until well after eleven o’clock, that Cadence saw the most exquisitely beautiful woman that she had ever seen in her life. Cadence pulled on Luvvi’s arm and directed her attention towards Elen, who seemed to be floating into the room on the wings of an angel. More than a few people started to clap upon the supermodel’s arrival.

The woman was incredible, even more so because of the fact that she was one hundred percent blind. The magazines said that Elen had learned all of her expressions and how to work with the camera, from her best friend’s coaching. The best friend was a girl that Elen had grown up with, in Canada. Cadence wasn’t normally one to fawn over celebrities, but she did feel her pulse quickening just a little whenever she was watching Elen.

Then she noticed Elen’s escort. The guy was definitely younger than



her. A tall fella whose suit looked more like what the servant's were wearing than any of the guests. Elen held onto the boy's arm gently but possessively, as though he were the most desirable male in the room. Soon everyone was looking at him.

How odd.

"Who is that?" Cadence said to Luvvi, beside her.

Cadence was shocked when Luvvi's mother appeared out of nowhere and answered. "That's Roland Ellis's servant friend, Leal. Elen must be having a bit of a joke, walking on his arm like that." Luvvi's mother pushed her way between Luvvi and Cadence, to get better access to her daughter's ear. "He's handsome darling, but not for you. The real power in the room is Charleton Ellis. That gentleman there, with the sour look on his face. Of course he's too old for you, and married as well. But see that young man two steps behind Leal, with the handsome dark hair? That's Roland Ellis. He's the one worth getting to know, if you know what I mean."

Luvvi turned to her mother. Then Luvvi put her hand on her own chin. "No Mother, tell me." Luvvi scrunched up her brows as though deep in thought. "What do you mean?"

Her Mother sighed. "Please darling, stow the attitude. I'm not one of your groupies. Besides, it might be cute now, but you won't want your forehead wrinkled like that when you hit forty."

In the end Luvvi's mother won. She always won, but only because she cared more about winning. Her interest in Luvvi's future and her music career were a single-minded obsession with the woman.

As it turned out, Cadence and Luvvi were happy to spend most of their time with Emerald. The pop star was kind and inviting, and seemed to possess a true love of life. Cadence found it all a bit inspiring, and she was certain that Luvvi felt that way too. Even the pop star's fashion seemed elegant and lively, with Cadence counting out six honking emeralds in her attire, and several other smaller ones. The only thing questionable about the girl was the rate at which she was throwing down her drinks.

"You really must like those emerald drinks." Cadence said.

Emerald emptied her glass. "They taste like caca." She said. "Besides, these drinks aren't emeralds. Emeralds are made of Irish whisky and they're brown. They taste fine, but I need to drink emerald isle drinks which are made of gin and bitters, and taste like armpit."

Cadence had to smile at the girl's comment. "You drink them because they're green?"

Emerald smiled. "Of course. Is there any other reason to drink piss-water?"

The more liquor that everyone drank, the looser the party became. Even Kurtz started looking like he was having fun, wheeling Scarla around the dance floor.

Eventually the two girls got approached by Roland and Leal — and why not? Everybody else had taken a shot at Luvvi.

But they chose to do it via stealth attack. Roland and Leal snuck up on Luvvi and Cadence after they had left the main ballroom looking for Emerald, who had seemingly disappeared. The two brats somehow materialized themselves from out of a solid wall. And then all of a sudden, Roland cleared his throat, scaring the blankety-blank out of both girls. When she heard the sound, Luvvi jumped behind Cadence.

"May we help you?" Roland Ellis said, but Cadence could hear the mischief in his voice.

Luvvi couldn't, however. She was clearly wracked with guilt for having been caught snooping around someone else's house.

She started to apologize.

Cadence would have none of that though. "Stop. Don't say another word to these two kindergarteners, Luvvi. They snuck up behind us on purpose, like the prep school juveniles that they are."

With that comment Leal bust out laughing, proving beyond a doubt that Cadence's instincts had been correct.

That was all the confirmation Cadence needed, to go on the offensive. "Where did you even come from?" She said forcefully, pointing her finger at Leal.

The boy was surprised by her instant aggression. Apparently these people didn't let many street urchins into their black tie events. But after his initial surprise, Leal didn't seem to be all that flustered. "I can't imagine what you must mean, Miss —?"

"Miss None-a-your-Business. And what I mean is how did you get into this room. Behind us, when there's no doors?"

Those guys were one hundred percent guilty of sneaking, and everybody there knew it. But the boys were a unified force, and they stuck to their game. "We came in through the same door as you." Leal said, showing what a slippery fish he was. "In fact, we were here before you were, but you didn't seem to notice us."

Cadence had to admit that Leal was a damn fine liar, and Cadence was left with nothing to say after that. Roland Ellis took the opportunity to step forward. “Perhaps we got off on the wrong foot, ladies. My name is Roland Ellis, your host.” Roland’s voice was deep and smooth, and he extended a hand towards the girls.

Luvvi was about to take it, but Cadence slapped her hand away and stepped in front of her friend. “A proper host wouldn’t prank their guests. We want an apology, and then,” Cadence repositioned herself so that she was beside Luvvi. “Maybe I’ll let you touch Luvvi’s hand.”

Roland and Leal looked at one another, they were somehow pleased by Cadence’s defiance. Both boys seemed surprised, but not at all discouraged. “Alright,” Roland said. “We can give you the apology, but not only for the handshake — we want more.”

Then it was Cadence and Luvvi’s turn to be surprised. They looked at one another, gauged each other’s willingness through telekinopathy, or whatever the hell it was that made them know what the other wanted. Then Cadence spoke for the both of them. “Alright, what d’you want? And nothing kinky, by the way — those rumors about my past are mostly just rumors, and Luvvi’s damn near a nun so you hounds had better just temper your expectations.”

Leal snickered again, once again caught off guard, but Roland continued the negotiation. “Of course, Miss Cadence, we will use our utmost self control. But again you misunderstand our offer. For the apology, we ask only for a time of civil conversation. Some moments, only.”

They had known Cadence’s name, which proved to her that they were working a game. Not that there had been much doubt of it before that. What red-blooded male within a hundred miles of L.A didn’t know exactly who Luvvi Dove was when they saw her? But Cadence? That was a different matter — her fans could easily fit into a Volvo.

Cadence could tell that Luvvi was ready to jump on Roland’s offer, so she acted quickly. “First off, if you use words like *utmost* and *civil conversation*, girls on the outside are likely to mistake you two for a couple of entitled douche-bags.” Cadence paused while her insult sank in. After the boy’s faces registered the comment, she continued. “Hey, I’m just sayin’. Second, just how many *moments* of civility do the two of us have to agree to in order to get the apology? We won’t be signing onto to any open ended contracts.”

There was silence after that.

Cadence pretty much felt that she had them right where she wanted them, but then her treasonous band mate suddenly found her voice. "I'll sign." Luvvi said.

Cadence spun to face her cousin. "What? Just because they're hot?"

"No." Luvvi was clearly embarrassed. "I never said they were hot."

"Like you had to." Cadence couldn't believe that Luvvi had undercut her.

"Maybe if we just give them a chance. You know — them trying to scare us, it's kinda funny in a way. I think that you might have done it to them, if you could have."

"Sure." Cadence said. "But we're not grown men."

"Neither are we." Leal chimed in. "We're just nineteen with," Leal seemed to be looking for the right words.

"Incredibly muscular and mature bodies?" Cadence finished his sentence for him. "C'mon fella, this isn't our first rodeo, you know. Its not like we've never met college boys before."

"I wasn't going to say that." Leal said.

"Well whatever you were gonna say, you can keep it all in your pants." Cadence said.

After that comment Luvvi buried her head into her hands. When Cadence saw her cousin's reaction, she began to wonder if she had taken things a bit too far. She was fully aware that she had the capability of taking things too far — from time to time, anyways.

Then all of a sudden she knew for sure.

Unfortunately, the second that Cadence realized that she had let her mouth run on, she felt incredibly self-conscious. Without Cadence's non-stop prattle, silence gripped the room. In that silence the boys seemed to be getting more and more curious, and the girls got progressively more embarrassed. It was agony for both her and Luvvi to endure it.

Cadence didn't know what to do.

"I think that the Ragamuffin Dolls might be the funnest, and most interesting guests that you've ever invited to one of your parties." Leal said the words to Roland and they sounded completely sincere.

"I agree." Roland said. Then he spoke to the girls. "I don't care what you ladies think of us, the newspapers are right. You two definitely rock."

Kinder words had never been uttered.

"Really?" Luvvi made eye contact again.

"Absolutely." Roland said. "Do you have any idea how boring the people we meet at these things usually are?"

Of course they knew. They had been mingling for hours already. Cadence was beginning to feel her confidence returning. "More boring than us?" She said.

"Way less boring than you." Leal said.

"That's a fucking relief." Cadence uttered the words without a whole lot of thought. Then Luvvi reached out and gently touched Cadence's nose. "Seriously?" Cadence said to her friend.

"Okay." Roland took over. "I'm offering you a sincere apology for our undignified display of juvenile prankery. And I'm making a mutually exclusive request that the two of us be allowed, to show the two of you around the house."

"Oh for gawd sake's," Cadence said. "Here's how a real boy says it. *We're sorry for before, but we like you, and still wanna hang with you. So you wanna?*"

Roland was a little taken back by Cadence's coaching, but Leal offered her a moment of solitary applause which drew the attention of his friend. "She's got a point, Rolo." Leal said, but Roland looked to still have some doubts. "Her way is simpler, and probably less douchey."

"Damn straight." Cadence said. "But just to clarify. Earlier you said that you were our host, but it's your parents that invited us, right?"

Roland took over. "Your Father —"

"My uncle." Cadence interrupted.

"Alright. Your Uncle Thomas is well known to my father, and he has been invited to events like this one before." Roland said. "But honestly, this group of people is fairly insular, so barely anyone gets an invitation to something like this. Leal and I have a bit of influence though, and sometimes we pry open the guest list a little bit, to admit a few of the non-vampire crowd."

"Vampire crowd?"

"It's a figure of speech." Roland said.

Luvvi's wheels were turning. "So does my mother qualify as the vampire crowd? Because she thought that the invitation was extended out of respect for the Dove family's prominence in the community."

"Not a chance. The Dove soap family — Maybe. All other Doves? Unlikely." Roland was reading Luvvi's expressions. "Hey, don't feel bad. It doesn't mean anything. It's all just elitist crap. I wouldn't have thought

that Luvvi Dove would care.”

“Actually, I don’t. But it would break my mother’s heart.”

“Let’s not tell her then.”

Luvvi nodded. “So what then? You two got us invited?”

“We’re fans of your music.” Leal said. “And we wanted to meet you because you sounded fun.”

“Well we are fun.” Luvvi said.

“Are you prepared to prove that?” Roland said to her.

“You sure you’re ready?” Luvvi said to him, shifting subtly to a sassy pose.

“Should we be worried?” Leal said.

“I would be if I were you. Haven’t you heard that rock and roll is a vicious game?”

“I guess the boy’s been warned.” Leal said. Cadence was impressed that Leal had caught Luvvi’s decade old reference to the April Wine hit. He had even referenced it by quoting his own song lyric back to her. Something about that was scary. The guy was smart, cool, and good looking. And he knew his rock lyrics. It was all enough to terrify Cadence. With any more checks in the plus column, it could even become a challenge for Cadence to keep up an appropriate level of social hostility towards the boy.

Cadence acted on her fear. “We can’t hang with you right now. We need to find our friend. She’s had a lot to drink and she’s kinda disappeared. Me and Luvvi have got to keep looking.”

Both Roland and Leal became immediately concerned. “Of course. We’ll help you look.” Roland said. Leal nodded in agreement.

Uugh, they were even perfect gentlemen.

“Okay.” Cadence said. “But if we find her and she’s hammered, I don’t want you two embarrassing her.”

“Trust me.” Roland said. “If Leal and I weren’t discrete, we’d have both been dead long ago.”

The statement surprised Cadence, but Roland didn’t seem to be joking. It definitely made her wonder.

“Who are we looking for?” Leal said.

Aw, what the hell. Cadence had to trust at some point.

“Emerald.” She said.

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They searched the entire house, which took forever because of its size. And when that turned up nothing, Roland asked his personal security guy, Steve, to look into it. Steve nodded and left without saying a word.

Then the resident supermodel, Elen, arrived on the arm of a general. He led her straight towards Leal. "Thank you, General. I appreciate your service." The woman was charming.

"Not at all, ma'am." The General said. Then he politely dismissed himself.

"Where's my last minute date?" Elen said, still just as charming. Cadence had the sudden urge to put a bag over her own head.

"I'm here." Leal said, stepping to her side.

"Well I must regretfully inform you that we are breaking up. You're much too young for me. Besides, I've decided to join up with a new rock band, and become the personal assistant to the Ragamuffin Dolls."

Cadence was shocked that Elen had even heard of the Dolls.

"You've broken my heart, Elen." Leal said. "But it was great while it lasted."

"Best two and a half hours of my life." Elen's smile was only outshone by the sparkle in her eyes.

"Gawd you're gorgeous." Cadence said despite herself.

The supermodel turned towards her. Who could say why, since the woman couldn't see a damn thing. "It's mostly all an illusion." Elen said, extending her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Cadence took the hand. "It's a great illusion. I feel even homelier next to you than when I stand next to Luvvi."

Elen reached out towards Cadence and gathered in the hand. "Nonsense. The two of you are far from homely. You haven't heard all of the party talk that's been circulating about the Ragamuffin Dolls. I've been hearing it all night."

"That's mostly Luvvi that they talk about. If you could see her, you'd see that she's the hottie."

Luvvi gave her friend a sharp shove, to get Cadence off of the topic. But Cadence didn't typically let go of any topic easily. It was both her blessing and her curse.

Elen moved the conversation forward for all of them, though. "I understand that you've misplaced a certain pop star, and I thought that you could use an extra pair of eyes."

What Elen said shocked Cadence, and she had no idea how to respond.

But Leal and Roland just broke out laughing. That was when Cadence started to realize what a mischievous creature this supermodel actually was.

It made her happy though, because generally Cadence liked mischievous.

"Alright." Cadence said. "If you're going to work for the Dolls, you've gotta pull your weight. We've hit a wall and we're looking for ideas. You got any?"

"The security boys at the gate are certain that Emerald hasn't left the estate. So she must be here somewhere."

"Where could she be?" Luvvi asked. Cadence could tell that her cousin had become seriously worried when she heard that Emerald hadn't left the estate. "What if she's hurt, or fallen in a well or something?"

"We don't have a well." Roland said. Then Leal leaned over and whispered something into Roland's ear. After which, Roland expressed an idea. "I think we should check out back." He said.

Cadence couldn't leave it alone. "You think?" She said to Roland. "Don't you actually mean, Leal thinks we should check out back?"

Roland looked at Cadence and said with full sincerity, "What's the difference?"

They started to walk towards the back of the property. Elen took Luvvi's arm.

"You two don't even know when you're doing it, do you?" Cadence said.

"We really don't." Roland said. "But don't talk to me about it. Tell Leal. When we were little, he started it, and he's the one that keeps on doing it. Trust me, I've tried to get him to see it my way."

So Cadence turned towards Leal. And she was just about to aggressively over share her opinions with him, when he smiled at her.

"You have pretty eyes." He said.

And dammit if it didn't work. Apparently Cadence was an easy mark for flattery. Who would have thought? Realizing it was a disappointment to her. As though Cadence needed yet another character flaw.

The deeper they got into the back woods, the darker it got, and the closer their little troupe stayed to each other. Only Elen's mood remained unchanged. Luvvi reached out and took Cadence's hand, which surprised her. If she had needed comfort she'd have reached for one of the boy's



hands over Luvvi's in a heartbeat. Maybe that was just another character flaw.

"How far are we going?" Luvvi said.

"It's not far." Roland said. "Just up ahead."

"Why would she come all the way out here?"

"Because we told her about our tree fort."

"Your tree fort? From when you were kids?"

"Hell no." Leal said. "We grew up back east."

"It's our tree fort from right now." Roland said. "It's actually going to be awesome when it's done."

Cadence couldn't believe that these, *men* were actually building a tree fort. Something about that made her instinctively reach for sarcasm. "Awesome? I'm sure — because your mommies told you that it was?"

"As a matter of fact," Roland said. "My mommy did like this one. But you'll be surprised to hear that for several years now, her opinions haven't defined us. You see we know our tree fort is awesome because we are master tree fort builders, and we've been in the business since we were eight."

"Oh, so I'm talking to experienced craftsmen? No doubt your hands are calloused by the hard labor." Cadence said.

"Take a look." Leal said, holding out his hand. It was pretty dark, so she mostly felt his hands for any signs of wear. She was surprised to find that Leal did in fact have the hands of a lumberjack. "It's because we don't use power tools. We do it all by hand."

Cadence turned to Roland. "Your hands too?"

"You tell me." Roland said, offering his hand for inspection.

"Wow." Cadence said. "So your tree forts, are they complex?"

"Multi-story, with full power and natural gas cooking."

"Really?" Cadence was shocked. She hadn't ever thought that tree houses could be a legitimate hobby, but why couldn't they be? A house is a house whether in a tree or on the ground. She suddenly felt silly for having made fun of them and calling their maturity into question. "Gee guys, I'm sorry. Will we get to see inside it?" Cadence asked, hoping to sound more supportive.

"Sorry — no girls allowed." Leal said.

For a second Cadence thought that he was serious until Roland and Elen started laughing. "They have cooties." Roland added.

"Very funny." Cadence said, punching at Leal's arm. The big guy swept

her punch aside and ducked behind her, holding her arms in his control.

“Gotcha.” Leal said, and he did have her. Socially and physically, and the funny thing about it was, how comfortable she felt with it. But then he let her go.

She kept thinking about it though. No doubt the moment meant less to Leal than it had to her — which Cadence didn’t like at all. She despised unequal footing. Cadence grabbed Luvvi’s hand again and made a mental decision to stay closer to the girls from that point on. She’d be damned if she was gonna allow any boy’s prep school charm, to become her personal Waterloo.

When they reached the base of the tree house, Elen announced. “She’s here.”

“How do you know? Luvvi said.

“I smell her perfume. It’s mint.”

Roland and Leal scrambled up the tree like apes. Wow, they could climb too. Then they dropped down a wooden ladder. “The staircase isn’t built yet.” Roland said, looking down from above.

Then a light went on higher up in the tree, followed by Leal’s voice. “Uh-oh. Guys, there’s blood.”

Whose blood?

“Don’t go any farther alone.” Roland told Leal, a surprising concern in his voice.

“I’ll wait.” Leal said.

Cadence kicked off her shoes and went up the ladder first, figuring that she would probably be the group’s third toughest member. Elen and Luvvi were right behind her.

Once she got up into the first room, she realized what a work of art these boys had been crafting. If she hadn’t been so focused on the potential dangers, she might have even complimented them.

They climbed another ladder up to where Roland and Leal were waiting. There was blood right there on the floor. Leal had just been whispering something to Roland. “Emerald?” Roland called up another ladder, to a higher level.

“Rolo?” The voice was weak, but it was definitely Emeralds.

The boys exploded up the ladder. When Cadence reached them, they were both by Emerald’s side, and she wasn’t looking good.

“Who did this?” Leal asked Emerald.

"It doesn't fucking matter." Emerald's movements were erratic and her speech was slurred.

"Who did it?" Leal's voice took on an undeniable authority, which successfully snapped Emerald into focus.

"Leal?" She was squinting to see him, even though the light was fine and Leal was right beside her.

"Who did this, Emerald?" Roland kept his tone calm, but it was no less commanding.

Leal began sweeping his hands over Emerald's body, looking for the source of the blood trail. "It's just her wrist and her neck. No arterial cuts, though." Leal reported to Roland, putting him in charge.

Cadence took a position beside the boys. Emerald's body was shivering, and she was sweating hard with a little bit of drool sliding out of the corner of her mouth. "Shit!" Cadence said. "This isn't just booze. She's taken something, and whatever it is, she took too much." Cadence had seen it several times before in the brothel, and at least half the time it didn't end well.

Both boys looked at Cadence, weighing what she had said. Then Roland looked at Leal. "Go." He said.

Leal leapt out the window onto a branch and descended the tree in a frantic rustling of leaves. Then his footsteps took him away, back towards the mansion, at a run.

"Where's he going?" Cadence asked Roland.

"I don't know." Roland said. "He's the smart one. But he'll do whatever needs to be done."

"Are there marks on her arms? Needle marks?" Elen said.

Luvvi was kneeling beside the pop star, crying outright and holding Emerald's hand in her own. "Who did this?" Luvvi said through her tears.

"Of course I did, Luvvi." Emerald said. "But you're still safe. Don't let them get you. Don't ever let them get you." Emerald had gathered Luvvi's hand into her own, and then she rolled onto her side, curling her shaky body up around Luvvi.

"No needle marks." Roland said to Elen.

"Check her neck and between her toes." Elen said.

"I got her neck." Cadence said, since that was closer to where Cadence was. She tried to find needle marks but it was hard to tell. "There's too much blood. Somebody has cut her."

"I did it." Emerald said. "I already told you, Cadence Doll." Then Emer-

ald reached a bloody hand up to touch Cadence's hair. "Don't let them get Luvvi. If I'da had a friend like you —" Emerald's voice choked off into sobs.

Then Luvvi reached underneath Emerald. She pulled out a pill bottle. "It's pills."

"Let me have her." Elen's reaction was instant. The supermodel moved to take control of Emerald's head, and then she positioned her mouth. "Now don't you bite, Emerald." Elen said. Then Elen reached her fingers into Emerald's mouth.

Emerald gagged, and then she coughed. Then the pop star threw up. Again and again, while Elen held her head. Luvvi had gotten out of the way just in time. There were half digested pills visible in the vomit.

"Smart." Cadence said, almost to herself. "How did you know how to do that?" She said as Emerald purged again.

"It's a model thing." Elen said. "Now Cadence, we need to bind her cuts. Even if she's not bleeding hard, she can still bleed out gradually. Emerald's going to need all her strength."

By then Emerald's vomiting had become dry and heaving. Her watery eyes looked up towards Elen. "It's a model thing." Emerald said the words like they had some great significance. "I shoulda been a model, maybe then I'd still have —" Emerald's words were suddenly choked off by some unknown anguish as the girl started to sob.

What would she still have? Cadence was wondering. Why would anyone do this? Luvvi was crying almost as hard as Emerald, and Cadence couldn't help thinking about what Emerald had said to her about saving Luvvi. Something about those words was really upsetting.

After some time had passed, Emerald seemed to be settling down a bit. The shaking had stopped and she even seemed to be resting easy, with her head on Luvvi's lap.

"You might have saved her life." Roland said to Elen.

"We might have all saved her life, by caring to search for her." Elen said.

Then there was the sound of footsteps approaching rapidly, filtering through the darkness. Cadence felt the tree shake, and heard the sound of rustling leaves as the tree fort was quickly scaled. Then three men, each impressive in their own way stood in the room, arms by their sides, breathing heavily.

It was Leal, and with him was Steve the security guy, and her Uncle

Kurtz.

"She threw up?" Kurtz said.

"Yes." Roland answered.

"And you found pills?"

"Yes." Roland said again as Luvvi handed the pill bottle to Kurtz for his appraisal.

"That's what I thought." Kurtz said, as he checked the girl's neck and arm wounds. He looked at the pills in the pool of vomit, most likely counting them. "We're keeping this quiet. Nobody talks, alright? Girls got enough problems."

Nobody there would have questioned Kurtz. Then Scarla emerged from the ladder — she was instantly at Emerald's side. "Steve, did you get it?"

Steve nodded and pulled out a packet, handing it to Scarla. "Does anyone have water?"

Leal did, he held a plastic water bottle out to her. "I grabbed it just in case." He said.

Scarla passed it in the general direction of Kurtz and Steve. "Can you boys figure out how to turn that into a cup?" Both Kurtz and Steve instantly had knives in their hands, produced from who knows where. Scarla tore the packet open — it was black inside.

A powder.

"What is it?" Cadence said.

"Charcoal absorbs whatever poisons are left in her stomach." Scarla said.

Cadence had never heard of such a thing. "Really?" Cadence said. "That would have been handy to know when I was back in the brothel."

Both Kurtz and Steve snickered at Cadence's comment, but Roland and Leal were dead silent.

Scarla mixed the powder into some of the water and together they made Emerald drink it. She resisted. "No. I wanna go. I don't wanna be a slave — no."

But Scarla made her drink.

Emerald coughed. "Slow down, slow down. I'll drink." She said, but then she tried to swat the charcoal water out of Scarla's hand. Scarla was too quick.

"You'll drink this." Scarla said firmly to the girl. Then Emerald started to drink again.

“But I don’t want to be their puppet girl.” Emerald started sobbing again when she paused to breathe. “They make me wear green and dance on black and white tiles. They’ve all sucked out the me from my brain and I wanna die.” She clutched at Luvvi’s hand. “I’d rather die than let them take the rest.”

“What are you talking about?” Cadence said.

Emerald was slurring her words, but she continued. “They say I’ll have to act in a movie, Emerald Monarch, and then I get a tattoo forever. It’s a butterfly, but I don’t want to play the part. I want to be me.” Emerald’s state of panic was rapidly escalating again.

Luvvi had Emerald’s hand. “Shh sweetheart, shh. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. You don’t have to play the part, and you don’t have to get a tattoo.”

Emerald stopped crying, and she looked up at Luvvi with raccoon eyes. “You don’t know — you don’t know. They jam their hand up your shirt and work you like a puppet. You’ll see, with that mother of yours. You’ll see. She’ll strike a deal like my mother did. Did you know that I knew you when you were younger? From T.V.” Luvvi had done some T.V. sitcom acting when she was ten or eleven. “You were so cute and funny.”

Cadence felt a need to ease Emerald’s distress. “Emerald, it’s okay. Luvvi’s going to be fine. Her mom is crazy, but she would never let Luvvi get hurt.”

Then Emerald’s eyes became hollow, and the look of it suddenly shocked Cadence — because with that one expression Cadence knew for certain that Emerald had also seen into the heart of darkness.

“You’re wrong, Cadence Doll,” Emerald was smiling at Cadence, somehow existing very far from herself. “Luvvi’s mother can’t stop them.” Then Emerald pointed up towards Steve and Kurtz and began laughing out loud, hysterically. “Only men like this can stop them.” She said.

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Emerald’s disjointed laughter drove Sophia out of the tree house as surely as a chlorine gas leak would have. She had rarely felt such confusion. It was obvious that Emerald was a fractured soul. Done harm by those who made pain and suffering into a study. Dark men of science that used what they knew to break you down, and then salvage you to their

own purposes.

Sophia hated those men.





TWELVE

Sophia had stayed away from the girls for quite a while — shaken by what she had seen. For her own sanity she hovered on the periphery, where she could stay detached. Remote. Who knows how long.

It was Kurtz that eventually drew her back — Kurtz and his darkened hall of memories. They were hard to see, but he kept all sorts of artifacts in his dimly lit room. Sophia moved as silently as a shadow as she inspected each one.

They were from everywhere, both tribal and modern. There were spears, and cups, and old jars filled with strange food. An old clay pot with what looked like Gaelic inscriptions, resting stoutly on a shelf. Sophia thought that the pot looked wide enough to hold the promise of salvation inside its earthen perimeters. Upon seeing the pot, Sophia believed it to be a symbol of hope. If she could have, she would have asked Kurtz if he thought so too.

There were many weapons on display as well, a flintlock pistol, and epee, and various other swords. One of the swords called out to her with its great curving blade. There was something about the way that it bent, cold and metallic.

It was a clue. Something about that item related to her situation back in the cave.

Sophia stared at it, committing every detail to memory. It was a ruthless looking thing, but she knew that the weapon would do no harm in Kurtz's possession.

Kurtz.

She turned towards him, and wondered about what he kept inside.

Sophia moved to him.

Flickering scenes in darkened rooms.

Fleeting thoughts of darkened memories.

Willard was moving up the river. His eyes would be fatigued, but he had to stay alert and on the lookout for hostiles. There were no guarantees — other than that if they came for him, they would come quiet.

How many times had Kurtz watched this movie? But the feelings never

went away. Perhaps they never would.

Cadence was on the floor at his feet. And Kurtz was glad that she was there. All of that stuff at the Ellis mansion had gotten him thinking. Emerald was just a couple years older than her and Luvvi were — and the things that they had done to that girl. What if they tried to do that to his girls? If they did, there would definitely be an apocalypse now.

“Cadence.” Kurtz said, speaking over the film.

She turned around and looked up at him with her big eyes. She was such a beautiful girl.

“Yeah?” She said.

“Stay away from Emerald, okay?”

Cadence sighed. “Why? She’s a nice girl, who just happened to be having a bad day. She’s not a junkie, you know.”

“I know who she is.” Kurtz said. “And you need to steer clear.”

“She needs friends, Uncle.”

“She’s beyond friends.”

“What does that mean?”

“Have I ever asked you for anything in your life?” Kurtz said.

Cadence, Luvvi and Hopper Yves were in good spirits for the bus ride. They were all on their way to the 9000 Sunset block to watch Emerald's studio session. For Cadence, it felt good for everything to be back to normal again. There was the familiar feel of the metro number two bus, frivolous trips to the Ninety-nine Cents Only store, as well as some irritating delays in the Book Soup bookstore — at Hopper's insistence.

"I've gotta finish my song before I die," Hopper was saying. "And I'm not sure how many years I've got left."

It was Hopper Yves' life goal to write a *true* song before he died. And despite the girl's trying to tell him different, he believed that his end would be coming soon. "It's just rock and roll karma, ladies. It plucks the lives of lead guitarists early, like spring blossoms," He told them.

"You're morbid." Luvvi said.

"And delusional." Cadence added.

"Morbid and delusional I may be, but that doesn't mean that I'm wrong."

"Give me a break, Hopper. You're the healthiest person I know." Luvvi said, which was probably not that accurate since Hopper got little enough exercise and sunlight. His eating habits were questionable as well, but Cadence still felt like she should back her friend's argument.

"Yeah, you don't even drink, or binge on drugs like all the other rockers." Cadence said. That wasn't strictly true either, though. Hopper's philosophies on mushrooms were definitely slanted towards the liberal side, and he was known to occasionally sample them for musical inspiration. Hopper had once made a statement that summed up his beliefs on hallucinogenic fungus. *They're not actual drugs. They're food, as long as you eat them on a salad.*

While the DEA might disagree, Hopper could not be moved on that topic.

When they got off the bus, Cadence was the last one out of her seat, which meant she was the last one to the door. When she was about to get off the bus, Cadence found herself looking across a huge pothole filled

with oil-stained water, lapping to the brim. She hesitated — stepping off of the bus could prove difficult. How had Luvvi gotten over it?

Then without her even having time to think, Hopper stepped across the chasm, grabbed her torso in his hands and lifted her to the sidewalk like she was a child. His hands had felt warm against her sides, and the strength in the guitarist's arms was unwavering.

"Wow! Hopper?" Cadence was lost for words.

Hopper smiled self-consciously. "You're light." He said, shrugging an explanation. When Cadence still didn't say anything, he added. "And I've been doing pushups."

"I'll say." Cadence said, suppressing a growing desire to reach out and run her hands over his arms.

Ten minutes later they were inside the studio building and weaving through a maze of mundane hallways, looking for any sign that their friend would be somewhere around there.

"I think it's this one." Luvvi pointed towards a certain door. Hopper pushed the door open and then waited as Cadence and Luvvi went through first.

The lobby beyond the door was expansive. It was a fairly impressive waste of space for a music studio. With the money that a room like that would have cost, maybe they did more there than just cut tracks.

Unlike any decor that Cadence had seen before, there was a golden pathway made out of tile, leading towards the front desk. It weaved its way through a busy terrain of black and white squares.

The ground looked like a huge chessboard, but instead of chess pieces the room was scattered with random statues. All female, like mannequins or dolls — only instead of eyes they were either blindfolded, or had butterflies. On the walls were pictures of a bunch of seductive women. Cadence had trouble deciding which of them was more tackily dressed, because all of them seemed to be wearing skin-hugging cat suits.

The front desk up ahead looked more like an altar than any desk that Cadence had ever seen, with candy cane striped pillars rising up on either side of it. Cadence would not have been surprised if dark men in masks were to step out of the shadows and strap her to a pillar. The front of the desk was constructed of cracked mirrors and the name of the studio, MK Wonderland Studios, was written in black and white lettering on the glass.

"Weird." Hopper Yves said. Cadence was certain that she detected fear

in her friends' voice.

"Creepy weird." Cadence said.

A fadingly pale woman sat woodenly in the chair behind the desk, but she offered only dissociative ambivalence to the Ragamuffin Doll's presence. Cadence went up onto her tiptoes and peeked over the high desk to see what the woman was doing. She was doodling. All stick figures, and it looked like most of them were having a bad day.

A very bad day.

"Let's get the fuck out." Cadence said. As she turned to head back to the door Hopper moved with her.

"Wait." Luvvi apprehended her cousin. "It's all just for show." Then Luvvi turned towards the receptionist. "Excuse me, I'm Luvvi Dove."

The strange woman's eyes snapped into focus on Cadence's best friend.

Luvvi continued. "We've come to see our friend — Emerald." Luvvi waited for a response from the odd wooden lady, but none came. "We were invited." Luvvi added.

Then, a slow smile creased the woman's plastic lips. "Of course, Luvvi Dove." The woman said. "We've been expecting you."

When the woman made no efforts to guide them anywhere, Luvvi asked, "Which way?" Again there was no answer, so the three of them discussed it quickly, and then started down the hallway to the left of the desk.

"Wait." The woman said, after they had only taken a couple steps. "Only Luvvi Dove is permitted."

"Bull shit." Cadence turned aggressively towards the woman. There was no way that Cadence was going to let her cousin go into this psychotic hive of pod-people, alone.

The wooden lady smiled at Cadence, and then rang a bell. It was the gentlest of tinkles, but seconds later the dark men that Cadence hadn't really thought existed, actually emerged. They weren't masked, but Cadence had lived on the streets long enough to know that these men were true sons of bitches.

Cadence stepped between Luvvi and the men.

"Cadence, calm down." Luvvi said. "Look, I won't stay for long. I'm just going in to say hello, and to let her know that we made the effort."

"What about the goons? They're barring the way." Cadence said to her cousin.

One of them spoke. "We're not here for Miss Dove. She's behaving well. We're here to ensure that *you* don't escalate your aggressive posturing — or your profanity."

Cadence looked at the two of them. They were both brainless sides of beef that surely enjoyed hurting people. "You want profanity? I'll give you bullet headed coc —"

Hopper Yves had reached around behind her and was muffled Cadence's mouth, just as she had been getting ready to do some real damage. The guitarist dragged Cadence away from the security guys. "She's sorry, fella's. I hope there's no offense taken. After all, this type of thing is pretty much a medical condition for someone like her." Then Hopper turned to Luvvi. "You go ahead, but be quick. I'll keep La Femme Nikita here, under wraps." Then Cadence stomped on Hopper's toe.

As the skirmish between Hopper and Cadence continued, Luvvi disappeared down one of those long hallways. She had been so busy fighting for her freedom, that Cadence didn't even notice which way they had led her cousin.

Once Luvvi was gone, Cadence was no longer fought to get free. She fought to punish Hopper Yves for restraining her in the first place.

The receptionist at the counter was giggling ecstatically, and nodding like a character from some dark fantasy. "Yes, yes." She said. "La Femme Nikita. She could be a perfect Delta." Then she giggled again.

Somehow the woman's words, despite being apparently meaningless, made both Hopper and Cadence come to peaceful terms. Only fools would fight amongst themselves in hostile territory.

"Shit." Cadence whispered to Hopper, as they stood side by side on those checkerboard tiles, waiting. That one word was enough to sum up what both her and Hopper were suddenly feeling.

"I did what I thought was best. Those guys looked dangerous. Guy's like that would have hurt you without a second's thought — trust me, I know." Hopper said. Cadence didn't even dignify it with a response.

As it turned out, Luvvi's visit wasn't quick, and the wait was agonizing. Cadence ate her nails right down to the nubs and Hopper was in danger of scratching his head raw. They paced, they moped around, they bet on coin tosses, and then the two of them even hugged out their anxiety. Any attempt by Cadence or Hopper to try and get word to their friend was met with the ringing of a gentle bell, and the summoning of security. Cadence

and Hopper ended up spending three hours in that asylum before Luvvi emerged.

“Let’s get out of here.” Luvvi said, walking right past her friends towards the door.

Cadence waited until they were out of the building before she asked. “What the hell happened in there?”

But Luvvi didn’t say a word.

It was a quiet bus ride home. Luvvi sat by herself while Cadence and Hopper shared a seat behind her. Something about the silence terrified Cadence. She pressed herself closer to Hopper as she looked out the windows nervously, searching the street for whatever might be making her so uneasy.

It was definitely fear that was licking at her, but the fear wasn’t alone. It had brought accomplices. Regret was in attendance as well, as Cadence remembered Luvvi being whisked from her side. There was also anger at Hopper for restraining her, because he never should have stopped her from protecting Luvvi.

But the memory that was playing itself out in Cadence’s mind, again and again like an old war film — was the memory of her Uncle Kurtz.

*Have I ever asked you for anything?* He had said to her. *Stay away from Emerald, okay?* Her Uncle’s deep voice echoed in her mind. She had argued with him that day, thinking that he was just being shallow, or biased.

*Have I ever asked you for anything?* He had said.

No, he never had. And Kurtz was far from shallow. He was a man that had seen the heart of darkness.

*Have I ever asked you for anything?*

Cadence had denied his request. She hadn’t even passed his concern on to Luvvi. Whatever had her cousin upset, it was very likely Cadence’s fault. So while there was fear, regret, and anger, it was guilt that filled Cadence — filled her to the point of choking. Choking on the congested sin that clutched at the back of her throat like a verdict already pronounced.

She tried clearing it away. She tried coughing, but nothing could dislodge the truth, however unknown it was. Would she ever stop being such a useless parasite? Would she ever contribute to her family, as much as she took? Even in the simplest things, she was a screw up. *Stay away from Emerald, okay? Have I ever asked you for anything?*

“Shit.” Cadence said as tears flooded her eyes. She pressed her forehead against Hopper’s shoulder. That was the last thing that she said

though, because for the rest of the bus ride Cadence let the curse words flow unfettered — but like sewage hidden beneath the streets of a fine city, she released the current only inside the privacy of her own head.



FOURTEEN

Sophia's spirit was in a panic as she watched those scenes play out, but she was powerless to act upon what she saw — and incapable of making use of what she knew.

This state of being present but not there was in fact a purgatory. It was a place of endless suffering where evil's fires could be seen and felt, but never extinguished.

Who could Sophia contact, and what could she do? Perhaps Elen would have had answers — or Scarla and Kurtz, if the girls were to reach out to them. But there was no one reaching out.

Only silence.

And worse, there was a new awkwardness that had appeared between Luvvi and Cadence that unsettled Sophia's spirit. Sisters should not feel that way. Their friendship and trust remained unchanged, but a curtain had been cleverly drawn between their eyes. Their sight for each other, had been dimmed as though a gossamer veil had been placed over each girl's vision.

Yet the girls still longed for each other — and like anyone newly blinded the feeling of it caused them to grope.

*It is a tragic thing to witness, a tragic thing to perceive.*

That saying was a long taught oracle's dictum. Previously Sophia had thought that she understood it, but that was before she had known it as she knew it here. Sophia watched as Luvvi's mother happily accepted invitations put forward by MK Wonderland studios, and Minotaur-Chrysalis productions, to get Luvvi roles in TV sitcoms and guest spots on talk shows. Emerald's feature film, Emerald Monarch was eventually released to the critical acclaim of Hollywood insiders. But admittedly, the point of the film was lost upon the American public, and the film's revenue reflected that. The common people didn't understand the symbolism. In their hearts they would forever deny that such a world existed.

But the public was wrong. They had always been wrong, and the sadness of that would surely be inscribed onto the ruins, as this culture progressively eroded.

Subjugation had always been the silent end game of every leadership who had ever called upon its citizens to forfeit their lives in battle, and of every law that had echoed inside their esteemed marble and oaken chambers — from which so called advanced societies were governed.

Sophia knew this from experience. Even her Station instructors had told her that George Washington once said, *Government is not reason, it is not eloquence — It is force. Like fire it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master.*

Emerald Butterfly showed the fire for what it was, but the people would not see past the titillations of the fireside love scene.

Because Cadence and Luvvi were spending more and more time apart, it was Emerald that Luvvi took with her when she was invited to Roland Ellis's house for lunch and a swim.

Sophia watched the complicated interplay of the four of them. She didn't choose the intimacy of a merge with any of them. Even as those new relationships had been forming, Sophia couldn't help but feel a sadness for what was inevitably becoming lost.

Sure, there was laughing and splashing, and smiles, and the comfortable sharing of inside jokes. And Roland made every effort to be the perfect host to Luvvi, while his faithful mate Leal acted as a charitable friend to Emerald, whenever Roland and Luvvi became momentarily preoccupied with each other.

It all came to an end when a servant arrived with a telephone. Roland pressed up out of the pool and still dripping in the sunlight, he walked across the pool deck to take the phone from his servant. Sophia drifted close, so that she could hear.

*Roland?* Sophia could barely hear the woman's words.

"Hello, Mother."

*I'm told that your Father just got on a plane. He's headed out to California.*

Roland was slow to answer, but Sophia could feel the young man's tension escalating. "Okay, thank you Mother."

*You're welcome, son. I love you.*

Roland hung up the phone without any response. Then he turned towards his guests. "Something unavoidable has come up. I'm afraid that Leal and I have been called away. Could I offer the two of you a ride home with my man, Dale?"

Luvvi looked disappointed, but she smiled through it. “Actually Emerald and I should be going anyways. I told Cadence that I would meet with her.”

“How’s she been?” Leal said.

“Fine, I think. I guess I’ll find out after I see her.” Luvvi said.

“Give her our regards.” Leal said.

Luvvi laughed. “I’ll tell her that you said hello.”

Emerald slid out of the pool. Sophia couldn’t tell for sure, but she thought that the girl had been losing even more weight. “I’ll take the ride home — I’m exhausted.” Emerald said. The dark eye circles that Sophia saw underneath Emerald’s makeup, confirmed the truth of Emerald’s words.

“They have her working hard.” Luvvi said, covering for her friend’s progressively weakening state. Roland and Leal said nothing — they just looked silently at Emerald for a moment. Then Leal stepped up behind Emerald and wrapped a towel around her diminishing body.

When the girls left, Sophia decided that she would stay with Roland and Leal, to learn what she could about Charleton Ellis’s visit. When she merged with Roland she found the undertones of a dark anger that had likely been kindling there for years. He had been bred into the family that he had been bred into. That, he couldn’t help. But he resented the intrusions that his family imposed on his efforts to craft a normal life for himself.

Things had been going so well that afternoon. He had been making true friends. Nothing to him felt any more important than that. These people were incredibly important to him. Even Hopper Yves was a welcome addition whenever he came by, which was rarely. They were real people who wanted nothing more than simple yet productive lives. Roland found himself wishing that he had grown up with these people, the way that he had grown up with Leal.

How would that have changed him?

Roland thought back to his day with Luvvi. He hadn’t known what to say when she had asked about his Father’s work. The last thing Roland wanted to do was lie to her.

*Why is it that people are always so evasive when they talk about your Father? He’s not some sort of gangster or something, is he?* Luvvi had asked him directly.

*He’s never been convicted of or even charged with a crime. There’s never*

*been a lawsuit against him — or even a newspaper article calling his integrity into question.* Even as Roland spoke the words, he hoped that the girl standing in front of him might be able to decode what his answer might mean. Leal certainly would have.

Luvvi had thought about it for a while. “I guess that’s good, then?”

“Not really.” Roland had said, and for a moment his sadness showed.

“Hey, cheer up.” Luvvi pulled her lips into a gentle smile — a beautiful smile. “I won’t ask about your Father anymore.”

Roland only wished that something so simple would do the trick, but now he was faced with his Father’s eminent visit. He wondered which of his hopes the man might find to plunder on this trip. Roland felt his body warm and his jaw tightening.

It was because of his Father. He hated seeing that man get whatever he reached for. It was why he had sent his new friends home, and why Roland had to erase all trace of their visits from the estate — and from the hearts and minds of the staff. The less his Father knew about Roland’s new friends, the better. Charleton Ellis could be such a smug winner.

Sophia left Roland to his personal battles as the two of them started to enact Leal’s plan. She left Beverly Hills, moving through the warm California air on her way to West Hollywood.

How many times now had she crossed this city? How many times had she tried in vain to wake herself up? It had been how many months? How many changes of season? Los Angeles was the only constant, that and Sophia’s unexplainable obsession with watching over this group of people.

Sophia found Luvvi walking toward Cadence’s house. She seemed tense, so Sophia merged with her to better understand her heart.

Luvvi knew that things were going to be awkward between her and Cadence. She was fully aware of the time that they hadn’t been spending together. But Luvvi also believed that her time spent supporting Emerald was important. Emerald trusted her and confided in her, and the girl needed that. Emerald was a superstar, and an artist, but it was the artist inside that was hurting so much.

Luvvi was also certain that Emerald was a treasure worth protecting. The Creator had placed something inside of her that had been meant as a gift to all the people of her generation. She was that important.

Luvvi could understand the pressure that Emerald had been under. She was no stranger to pressure. In fact, Luvvi’s mother had raised her to

pressure. Luvvi knew the pattern well. It was pressure versus passion — the pressure of other people’s expectations versus the raw and undeniable passion for your art. It felt like being caught in a vice with one side soft and the other side, steel.

It was a strange mindset.

Sophia left Luvvi to her thoughts and went ahead to find Cadence. She found her sitting on the floor in the dark room with Kurtz, hugging his shin to her body and leaning her back against the man’s chair. The team was moving up the river, and Kurtz’s eyes were waiting.

Merging with Cadence was like stepping into a nest of ants. Though it didn’t look like much from the outside, everything was moving. Cadence’s thoughts went from the movie, to her love for Scarla and Kurtz, to the comfort of Kurtz’s leg in close proximity to her, to worrying about Luvvi.

Cadence believed that Luvvi and Emerald were a good match for each other, because of the artistic common ground. Practically speaking, she saw them as a better match than Cadence and Luvvi were. And although her memory of Kurtz’s warning made her afraid for her cousin’s safety, she respected Luvvi enough to let her make her own choices. Cadence had to give Luvvi her freedom, didn’t she? Life on the street had taught her that. She knew that Luvvi was feeling some sort of responsibility toward Emerald. Besides, Cadence had always known that Luvvi’s passions for her music would one day separate the two of them. But Cadence had never imagined that it would happen so soon.

How could God let this happen to her?

She wasn’t going to blame anyone, though. Since for as long as Cadence could remember she had been taking more than she gave. She had been a parasite in the brothel, and she was a parasite in the band, and she was a parasite on Kurtz and Scarla’s kindness. It was a perfectly consistent life record. She hadn’t even done the one simple thing that both Kurtz and Emerald had pretty much demanded that she do, which was to protect her cousin.

A wave of anxiety rushed through the girl. Cadence squeezed her eyes shut. *Please God, don’t let Luvvi get hurt. Please don’t let Luvvi get hurt.*

Cadence’s mind filled itself with situations and images of Luvvi Dove in danger. In each case, Cadence intervened to protect her. In most of the cases Cadence ended up badly injured or dead, but still saving her cousin’s life. To Cadence those thoughts were a comfort. At least in her imagination she would finally do the right thing.

Cadence's mind became locked onto a particularly satisfying image of saving her cousin from being kidnapped by interposing herself, so that the kidnappers took her instead. The important part was Luvvi's freedom. After all, Cadence had grown up hard and on the street, so it was time for her to finally pay her dues. The kidnappers were sadistic bastards, and although she was quickly sold into slavery, shipped out to the third world and made to —

"What are you thinking about?"

Cadence opened her eyes and saw that Luvvi was standing there, looking at her.

"It's just, you had a certain look on your face." Luvvi said. "What were you —"

"Nothing." Cadence said, and then she said no more. It couldn't have been a more awkward start for them since Luvvi could definitely tell that Cadence was holding back.

Cadence shifted her position.

"Do you want to go out to the shed?" Luvvi said.

Cadence thought about it. She would like nothing better in the whole world than to spend time with Luvvi in the shed the way that they used to — but Cadence knew that if they went back there, it would no longer be the same. The thought broke her heart.

"Maybe not today." Cadence said.

Luvvi looked at her with her big soft eyes, uncertain. "Okay."

Suddenly Kurtz stood up and turned off his film. It was something that never, ever happened. He stretched out his back and then went over to Luvvi and gave her a hug and a kiss on the forehead "Hello, Luvvidove." He said. Then he reached down and took Cadence's hand, pulling her to her feet. "Let's go and get ice cream at the bowling alley." Kurtz said, grabbing the two girls and crushing them against his sides. Then he began walking.

"Wait!" Cadence said. "I need a hat — my hair's awful." Cadence pulled away from her uncle and dashed off towards her bedroom. When she came out she had on a floppy sunhat, which the girls had always called a funhat — in Cadence's hand was a matching one with just a little different colors. She held it out towards Luvvi. "Do you want yours?"

"Of course, Ragamuffin'luv." Luvvi smiled and put on the hat.

Sophia felt the warmth that washed over Cadence upon hearing those words. That afternoon turned out to be enough to show the girls that they

were still important to one another, but not enough to restore what had been lost.

Eventually Sophia felt that she had to take an emotional break. After that afternoon she spent several days just hovering in the skies of L.A., thinking about the importance of allies, and friendship, and the ever-important survival of the self.

Life on the outside was so different than in the Station, but it still had challenges. And the more Sophia saw of what life was like in the outside world, the more heartfelt was Sophia's belief that her, Demsie and Alastar needed to live to experience it.

But after so much time spent in L.A., Sophia had to honestly wonder if she would have the strength to endure Station life, ever again. Would she even have the strength to leave these people behind? These people that she had grown to love, and respect?

At least circumstance allowed her to choose her torment.

Eventually the time came when Luvvi and Emerald were given an opportunity to act together in a feature film of their own, with Emerald as the star and Luvvi as the co-star.

That was when Scarla stepped in.

She faced down Luvvi's mother with all of the spirit and tenacity that she had used to face the motorcycle gang. For an entire afternoon, the two half sisters did battle. Scarla argued for Luvvi's dignity and she advocated for Luvvi's future. But the questionable things that the directors wished Luvvi to do, meant little to Mrs. Dove compared to the boost in her daughter's publicity, and revenue that Luvvi would receive.

Scarla fought hard but the legalities favored the Dove's. In the end, an Aunt had no say. Scarla had to walk away from the battle in defeat.

All the while Cadence had been watching from the sidelines, with an invisible guilt eating away at her from the inside.

Once Cadence tried reaching out to Roland and Leal on her own for support. She could see that the two of them recognized the danger, and they were incredibly sympathetic — but they were just as certain as Kurtz had been, that little could be done about it. *I tried once*, Roland had told her. *And that didn't end well.*

Sophia had seen the events that he was referring to in one of her previous mergers with the billionaire heir. Forty-three people had died that day, and one dear friend had been picked up and carted off to exist in some Russian hellhole. Despite his best efforts, Roland had never been

able to locate him or learn more about his friend's fate. Charleton Ellis had given his son just enough information for the matter to tease at his conscience forever. No doubt Charleton wouldn't even see the matter as a twisted knife stuck into his son's side, but rather as just some hard taught paternal lesson.

Sophia watched as Cadence went home that day wondering what Roland might have meant by what he had said, but she never could have figured it out. For all of the differences in her upbringing Cadence was still like most people in that the deeper secrets were hard for her to see — especially when she wasn't even asking the right questions.

Sophia saw the events unfold and she took in everything that was happening. It was discouraging, but she also knew that nothing yet was beyond hope. The life stealers had their quarry chasing the line, but the hook had not yet been deeply set. Sophia's sole remaining hope was that just like any smart fish, Luvvi Dove would come to recognize the nature of the bait.

She needed to see the lure for what it was. Only upon that recognition, could the hunted turn and run. Only then could she move herself with the conviction that she would need, to survive.

Sophia knew this to be true, because she had lived it. She had seen it, and endured it. Because the survival of one's self was always the foremost goal of any creature being raised in true darkness.



FIFTEEN

Luvvi was glad to be able to spend so much time with Emerald while they were making the movie together. Her friend was a turbulent soul, troubled by her fame, and resistant to the people that were steering her career.

Emerald often said that she didn't want to play the part. At first Luvvi thought that she had been referring to the role in Emerald Monarch, but the movie came and went, and her comments had not changed. It was then that Luvvi realized that Emerald's objection was with all of it.

Her entire life.

There was a part of Emerald that was a burden to herself, and that part grew before Luvvi's eyes as it became further defined. At times, it threatened to replace the girl that she had been born as.

Esméralda Essex was her given name, and she had been raised to be proud, a Romani traveller from Louisiana, although never living in a covered wagon like her father. Emerald had told Luvvi that the Gypsy people (not a term they liked) were a closely-knit community — but Esméralda had been plucked from it because of her talent, her beauty, and her exceptionally green eyes.

She described that as the day when her people had sold her out.

At first, Luvvi could see that the more time the two of them spent together, the more Luvvi saw of Esméralda. That was a good thing. And of course that meant that Luvvi saw less of Emerald.

Emerald was the star, but both of them were spectacular in their own ways. And together, Emerald and Esméralda would certainly have had the potential to change the world. Together they could wield Emerald's undeniable star power, as well as Esméralda's message. Together they would be unstoppable. A gift to the people's of the world, so that they might open up the people's eyes in truth.

It was a good message that they would bring with them — a message of goodness and hope. And Esméralda would always make sure that dignity was woven into all of her songs. A dignity that only the most subtle of musical talents could have ever crafted. Songs where the Creator's mes-

sage might resound loudly, in each and every one of those soft refrains.

And Luvvi knew that she was playing an important part in getting that music out to the world. Because as Luvvi spent time with her, Emerald had been getting gradually happier, and more determined about how she intended her life to go. Although Emerald had never gone into the specifics, Luvvi knew that throughout her career the girl had been bullied, coerced, and restrained. And in times past, that had brought Emerald to some pretty dark places, personally.

But as Emerald was approaching her twenty-second birthday, she began speaking differently. She was becoming more determined to turn the tables on her handlers. And Luvvi was glad to stand beside her, and become her willing accomplice.

Luvvi knew that Cadence and Scarla didn't understand what she had been doing, or why she was doing it. They feared for Luvvi, and Luvvi loved them both even more for doing so. The thing that Scarla and Cadence didn't know though, was that Luvvi still knew who she was. She was an artist. She was a Ragamuffin Doll. She was Cadence's sister and her Aunt Scarla's daughter.

She knew it — and would always remember.

Luvvi Dove was safe because of that. Sure, she had seen some things that gave her cause to doubt, and sometimes the industry's filth had managed to get its stains onto her, but what was the alternative — to leave Emerald alone and without support?

Luvvi had seen Emerald's struggles. She had witnessed her battling all alone, to not play the role. She had seen the fight between Esméralda and Emerald, and although she might never truly understand it, Luvvi knew that it was a fight that was real.

Despite the fact that Cadence had watched it pull Luvvi away, Luvvi knew that her sister actually liked Esméralda a lot, and Emerald quite a bit. They were both wonderful people, and what was wrong with that?

And now that they had all been sharing a movie set, they had spent an unending time together. "We should celebrate." Luvvi had said, meaning to celebrate their togetherness.

"I will celebrate with you." Emerald said. "But it will have to be a chocolate celebration, to celebrate the last movie that I'll ever make." Emerald was beaming. "After this I'm heading back to Louisiana, where I'm going to reunite with my family, and then try to get my high school G.E.D."

Emerald's comment instantly turned heads. Several people in the crew turned to look. The director even arched an eyebrow.

"Um," Luvvi said. "I just meant celebrate that we're together."

Emerald laughed. "Well sure, we'll celebrate both." Then Emerald looked right at the director. "Because my mind is made up." She said. Emerald called an intern over and ordered a chocolate truffle cake, with two spoons for both her and Luvvi.

The movie's director left to make a phone call and Luvvi and Emerald were allowed to retire to her dressing room. Then there was a knock on the door. "You got an hour and a half." The director called through the door as he was already walking away. "Have a ball."

The chocolate arrived quicker than expected and Luvvi and Cadence made short work of it. Somehow instead of making Luvvi hyper though, the chocolate made her sleepy and she found herself slowly sinking into Emerald's plush sofa. Emerald was faring no better, in fact her eyes had already closed completely. Oh well, Luvvi thought, you can't fight what comes naturally.

She shut her eyes and it felt like heaven.

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Luvvi's dreams were turbulent and her body got yanked and prodded. There was a smell of body odor and incense that filtered through the pleasure and the pain.

Ouch! Dammit, that's uncomfortable. Luvvi's eyes opened into a blurred world with underwater sounds and brightly lit men in, in — what the hell were they wearing?

What was going on with Emerald? Why was she making that noise? Luvvi tried to speak to her but her mouth was as dry as cotton.

"Are we taking them both?" A voice said from the far side of the room.

"Not yet." Another voice said. "The younger one isn't quite ready."

"She's a piece though, huh."

The voices faded into muffled droning until consciousness faded entirely.

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When Luvvi awoke it was dark. She was in a house lying in a pile of

sweating bodies. And when she sat up, her head began to swim.

Luvvi pushed a leg off of her abdomen and staggered towards the window. They were definitely on the coast, she could hear that but she didn't recognize which beach in the dark.

The house was completely silent. Luvvi pulled on some shorts and a pair of sandals that had been tossed onto a chair. Then she stepped over the limbs of the sleeping revelers — to go and find a phone. Her eyes were wet with tears and her lips tasted of salt. It was clear that there had been some sort of party, of a type that Luvvi shuddered to think about, but how had she gotten there?

Clearly, she had been drugged, but how could the studio people have ever let anyone take her? She wandered into what looked like someone's home office. There was a phone there, along with an envelope that had a Malibu address. Could that be where she was? Could she be in Malibu?

Luvvi didn't know what had happened but a persistent feeling of shame encrusted her like a death shroud. Then she found another envelope that had the same Malibu address on it.

Luvvi wanted to leave, but it would take Cadence and Scarla forever to get to that part of the city. Suddenly she knew what to do. She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello — I need Roland."

"He gave this number to me. I need to talk to him." The servant was reluctant. "Sure." Luvvi said and then waited in silence. It took a while and she kept her ears on alert, ready to either flee or hide at the sound of anyone's approach.

There was a rustling on the other end of the phone. "Roland?" Luvvi's eyes filled with tears. "You need to come get me." The words exploded out of her.

"Uh-huh." Luvvi wanted to tell him how glad she was to hear his voice.

"I'm in Malibu, and I want to get out of this house." She wanted to tell him how terrified and ashamed she was, to be there.

"Uh-huh." She wanted to lay her head onto his strong shoulder and cry for a week.

"I don't even know how I got here." She wanted to apologize to him, for letting all of this happen to herself.

"No, just me. Cadence should be at her Aunt's, but I was with Emerald." She wanted to tell him how worried she was for Emerald's safety. From

what she remembered — Focus. Luvvi pushed the ugly thoughts from her mind.

“No, just me. But I can look around while I wait for you —” Roland cut her off.

“But I can —” He cut her off again.

“Okay, I’ll wait outside on the street.” She imagined herself kissing him when he arrived. Her savior. He was coming to make her safe, but she also felt that her soiled lips had become unworthy.

Luvvi gave Roland the address and hung up the phone. To say goodbye to Roland’s cool voice on the other end of that telephone — it felt like she was losing a friend.

But she might have already lost a friend.

Luvvi went as quietly as she could towards the front door. She passed more fallen partiers, but there was no sign of Emerald. She would have searched the house herself but Roland had made her promise that she would go outside and wait. He told her that he wanted to be the one to search the house.

The front door’s alarm system tweeted softly as Luvvi opened the door. She closed it gently behind her and made her way towards the street. When she got there, Luvvi hid behind a bush on the neighbor’s lawn and thought about what she knew.

Time passed like fog washing over a swampland — but it did pass.

Roland’s car prowled up the road slowly, and the headlights flickered when they passed her position in the bush. The passenger door opened, and Roland got out.

“Luvvi, it’s us.” Roland was waving her out of hiding.

Luvvi ran towards him and threw herself into his arms. “I don’t know what happened! I don’t even know.” She said.

The car pulled off to the side of the road and the engine quieted. Then the driver’s door opened and Steve stepped out of the car. He nodded at Luvvi and smiled. “You’re okay.” He said, looking deeply into her eyes.

Steve spoke with such certainty that Luvvi wondered what he was referring to.

Then Steve approached the two of them. He leaned in close to Luvvi, took a strand of her hair in his hand and sniffed. “You smell that?” Steve said.

“Yes.” Luvvi felt Roland’s body tighten as he responded. Roland Ellis was angry.

"I go first. Then if I need you, I wave you in." Steve said.

Roland nodded.

"Is he going to look for Emerald?" Luvvi said.

"Among other things." Roland whispered into her ear, tightening his grip on her. "Let's get you into the car."

By the time Luvvi had gotten into the back seat she had become suddenly chilled, and her body started to shake, uncontrollably. It was embarrassing. "I — I don't know why I'm —"

Roland looked back at her and his eyes widened. "Luvvi, you've gotta lay down, Sweetheart. Lay down in the seat and bend your legs up." Then Roland moved over to the driver's seat and started the engine. He looked back at Luvvi. "That's right, just lay down." Then Roland began adjusting the temperature controls until hot air was blowing back towards Luvvi. "I think there's a picnic blanket in the trunk."

Luvvi listened as Roland rummaged through the trunk. Then suddenly he was leaning over her once again, tucking the blanket around her with his strong hands.

Luvvi closed her eyes.

"It's definitely who we think it is, but Emerald's not in there." The voice was Steve's.

"Okay Steve, let's meet up with Leal. We can call him on route. We might be able to rendezvous at Elen's — her house is close and she'd be pissed if we left her out of this."

Likely Steve said nothing, since nothing was all that Luvvi heard.

Then from farther off the sound of the house's front door slamming caused Luvvi to jump. Men were approaching, and there were aggressive voices. Accusing voices.

When Roland spoke, he used his public voice. It was the voice of command. "That will be all, gentlemen."

It was all he said, but after a few second's pause, he heard the men from the house retreating. Then she felt the car shift as Roland and Steve got into their seats.

"She's in shock." Roland said. Then Luvvi felt a hand touching her wrist gently.

"She'll be okay." The voice was quiet as a whisper.

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Luvvi didn't even remember the boy's taking her out of the car. When her eyes opened she was simply somewhere else. Elen's house was elegant in its simplicity.

The supermodel greeted her with a long hug in the entrance. Luvvi could feel herself still trembling. Then Elen said to Roland and Steve, "I'm going to run a bath for her. Send Cadence in when she arrives."





Strangely, Sophia had become trapped right along with Luvvi. She was unconscious and unaware, but as Luvvi gained her strength so did Sophia.

Cadence was in the bathroom with them even before the tub had filled. She threw herself onto her cousin and held her like she was never going to let the girl go.

“How did you get here?” Luvvi asked her cousin.

“Roland sent Leal to pick me up. I had to sneak past Kurtz.”

The girls helped Luvvi get situated in the bath. Cadence gasped when she saw all the bruising on Luvvi’s body. Cadence was just about to explain to Elen what she was seeing, but the supermodel held up a hand. “Tell me later.” Elen said.

The bath was a release, and Luvvi’s emotions opened up like a dam bursting. Elen and Cadence comforted her, they washed her, they fed her herbal tea, but none of it replaced the girl’s hollow sense of loss.

But at least she was clean.

Time passed and Luvvi was feeling as though she had regained some composure. “We should go out, before I shrivel up.” Luvvi tried to joke. Nobody smiled.

“Okay, Sweetheart.” Elen said. “The boys will want to see you.”

When they got into the living room, Steve had disappeared. Roland and Leal were both there and she gave each of them a long hug. “Thank you for coming for me.” Luvvi said.

“We’re glad that you called us.” Leal answered for both of them.

Then they sat together on Elen’s sofas and they sipped the tea that Elen had made, quietly discussing everything but what might have happened to Emerald. Then, once Luvvi felt that she had the strength to say it without breaking down — she said the words that she had been terrified to say.

“They took her.” Luvvi said. “They took Emerald away. They talked about taking me, but one of them said no, not yet.”

Everyone looked at Luvvi.

“They took her and they’re not going to give her back until she stops fighting it.” Luvvi felt the tears coming so she hurried her words. “If we don’t go and get her, Esméralda will be gone forever.”

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Cadence watched the way Leal pulled at Roland’s shirtsleeve, drawing his friend away so that they could speak in private. But Cadence wasn’t about to be cut out. If they knew something that would help Emerald or keep Luvvi from becoming Emerald, Cadence was going to damn well pry it out of them.

“Alright you two — enough secretive jawing. If you’ve got something to say Leal, say it to the group.”

Both boys looked at Cadence, but Leal was the one to speak. “Cadence, Roland and I have some experience with situations like this one. We’ve tried to use Roland’s status and political power to help in the past and it hasn’t helped.”

“Well that’s too bad for you. But you two are in this now so don’t you even think about weaseling out.” Cadence kept her finger trained right between Leal’s eyes as though it were a gun.

Roland cleared his throat. “Cadence, do we seem to be the sort of people that — weasel out?”

“No, but —”

“But nothing. We’re going to help, and my friend Leal was just in the process of informing me that with this one — we might have to handle it the old fashioned way.”

“The old fashioned way?”

“Yeah.” Leal said. “Risk and legwork.”

Cadence thought about it. “So you two are in again, then?”

“We were never out.”

“That’s more like it.” Cadence said.

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Sophia knew a good tactician when she saw one.

And Leal was a good tactician. He had Roland deploy his resources efficiently and systematically, covering all of the bases. The boys possessed

some foreknowledge about who they were dealing with, and they had Steve doing legwork, running down the leads.

Roland worked the phone tirelessly, calling whomever Leal told him to call next. He requested with his unique Ellis authority, whatever Leal told him to request.

Elen also made inquiries. And while Leal slowly familiarized himself with the supermodel's contact list, he even devised strategies that would squeeze Elen's connections for everything that they could get out of them. Admittedly, Elen was remarkable on the telephone — elegant, self-assured, and compelling. Every bit as good as Roland Ellis, but in a different way.

Luvvi filled in the blanks for everyone, of what she remembered and how the whole thing had occurred. Her shaking had stopped completely and her color was back to normal. Of course Cadence could tell that her sister was far from healed. But knowing Luvvi and the way that she worked, Cadence believed that finding Emerald would help her a lot in that regard.

After all of Cadence's loud mouthed accusations which she had leveled upon Roland and Leal, she was realizing now that the only completely useless person in the room was once again, Cadence herself. She felt like a proper schmuck until she realized that Hopper should probably be contacted. Cadence wasn't really sure how he could help but as far as resources went, Hopper was all that Cadence had to drum up.

That assessment of resources was perfectly true, as long as you were willing to ignore the obvious person, that being her Uncle Kurtz. But every thought of bringing Kurtz in created a choking feeling inside of Cadence. It was a feeling of guilt, which clogged up her airway like bile.

*Have I ever asked you for anything?*

The words still haunted her. He had been so right. Besides, he had already made it clear that he was against risking his girls in any attempt to help Emerald. If they called her Uncle Kurtz, he would personally come to Elen's and he would apprehend both Cadence and Luvvi and lock them both away until the day of their marriages. Marriages to a couple of safe and practical minded accountant fellows — of his own choosing, no doubt.

Cadence cleared her throat, certain once again that she should not call her Uncle. "Does anyone here want coco?" She said.

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The news the next day told a tale.

The papers and television both told a story of an emotionally disturbed train wreck of a starlet, being taken away to rehab. The reporters said it was for her own good, of course. The name of the rehab wasn't revealed but the articles came complete with drug addled pictures of, and fictitious comments by Emerald's BFF — Luvvi Dove.

"Ridiculous." Luvvi said. "Even my mom will freak when she see's this."

"You should call home." Elen said to Luvvi. "Scarla and Thomas deserve to know."

Cadence wondered if the supermodel had left Luvvi's actual mother and father out of it on purpose. "I have a better idea." Cadence said. "I'll get Hopper Yves to call."

On cue, the doorbell rang.

It was Hopper Yves. Introductions were made between Hopper and Elen, and the appropriate hugs and handshakes were issued. Hopper was immediately assigned the undesirable task of speaking to Aunt Scarla and ensuring that she wasn't worried, but of course not giving up any intel. "Tell her that Luvvi's okay, the papers were exaggerating, and that we're going to visit Emerald at her rehab. That'll buy us some time. And whatever you do, Hopper," Cadence aimed her finger at Hopper's heart. "Do not under any circumstances, let that woman get me or Luvvi on the phone."

That made their guitarist nervous but Cadence's threat had been completely necessary.

"Under any circumstances." Cadence whispered to him darkly as he was dialing the number.

"What if I have to? What if Scarla makes me?" Hopper said.

"If you do that Hopper, Luvvi and I will end up singing like canaries — guaranteed. And then Uncle Kurtz will come over here and scrub the mission. You're the best one for this."

"Okay." Hopper said, swallowing hard.

He made the call, and Scarla did press him but Hopper Yves danced around the issue like a seasoned pro. His unique wordings released an industrial sized gas cloud of obfuscation. He fibbed, he stretched, he underemphasized, and he used many words where one or none would have served him just fine. It was a masterpiece, and Cadence could not have been prouder.

Then Steve came in through the door. Leal moved to meet him. There was a quick discussion and then Leal turned. “We know what rehab Emerald is supposed to be at, but Steve thinks it’s just a cover. We’ll go check it out and if she’s there, then great — we’ll let you know. Meanwhile Steve will continue to run down alternative leads for where Emerald might be.”

The girls all stood without saying a word, but then Elen spoke for them. “Leal, I think that the women would like to be included in this endeavor.”

Leal froze up — he looked over at Roland. Roland stepped forward. “I think it would be very helpful for you all to come along, but the risks are significant. I couldn’t bare to see any of you endangered.” Roland delivered the line as cool as Reagan.

“But you do think we’d be helpful?” Luvvi said. Her voice was too sweet for her to not have been baiting a trap.

Roland looked at Leal, who seemed to be grinding his jaw. “Yes.” Roland said. “That’s what I said.”

“But if she’s at the rehab, there’s no danger right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“But if she’s not at the rehab, she’ll be in danger. In which case we’re going to need every resource that might help her — and that should include us.”

“So either way, we go along.” Cadence summed it up for the boys. Roland and Leal were about to withdraw into one of their habitual huddles, but Cadence stepped between them and pushed on both of their chests to get them apart. “I thought I already told you that there would be none of that.”

“Look,” Leal said. “Because of Roland’s position, the two of us have a sort of shield. It’s not as dangerous for us as it is for you.”

“Bullshit.” Cadence said. She had grown up on the street and she’d seen her fair share of dangerous power games. “Roland has the shield — you ain’t got squat, Mr. Conrad. And if Roland had all that much juice, then couldn’t this all be solved with a phone call. The danger is real, and it’s real for every single one of us. The only difference is that if something goes sideways, the President might attend Roland’s funeral.”

Hopper’s face lit up at that. “Whoa — really?”

“Most likely.” Roland quickly nodded to Hopper. Then he spoke to the group. “Alright then, you can come. But whatever we do, we’re going to follow Leal’s plan. Or Steve’s plan — if he’s with us. Understand?”

Cadence had something to add, so she put her hand up. "I think —"

Roland cut her off. "And under no circumstances, will anyone be following Cadence's plan."

"But I —"

"No matter how insistent she becomes." Roland looked straight at her, and found that the charming son of a bitch was smiling at her. "We're going to need every idea to be run through Leal." Then Leal turned and smiled at Cadence as well.

That one seemed to be a very nice smile, though.

Cadence lowered her hand, and smiled back at him. "Well," That arrangement wouldn't be too bad. "Alright." Cadence said.

Then Hopper sidled up to Cadence. He leaned down to whisper to her. "Don't worry. It's okay if you're not on the front line. You're best at the rock and roll lifestyle stuff, anyways."

It was true. She was good at that

SEVENTEEN

The drug rehab place was a total bust. It took a while, but eventually they managed to confirm that Emerald was not, and had never been a resident there.

Despite their expectations the group's mood was at best, deflated.

"If you had let me do some of the talking," Cadence was telling Leal. "I mighta squeezed that big one for a little bit more information."

"The big one?" Leal looked genuinely confused.

"The one with the bent nose. I think there was something he wasn't telling us. That guy had shifty eyes."

"Shifty eyes? His glasses were so thick that they gave him fish eyes, but that doesn't mean he knew anything. He was a janitor for cripes sake."

"I've known janitors that could spin a yarn or two. They're natural spies, moving wherever they want, touching things, listening. But all the while invisible, in plain sight."

Leal shot a smile towards Cadence. "You and I should go get dinner sometime. What d'you think?"

Cadence felt blindsided by the comment. She would like nothing more than to share a romantic dinner with a charming and handsome boy, but she had to stay true to herself. "I know what you're doing, Leal. Whenever you don't like the way our conversations are going, you say something flattering to me."

"So?"

"So, it's not gonna work. This is about Emerald. We can't afford to lose our focus on finding her."

"We're still going to do everything we can to find Emerald right now, regardless of whether you say yes to dinner with me."

"What about Luvvi?" Cadence said.

"What about her?"

"Wouldn't you rather go with her?"

Leal's jaw dropped. "No disrespect, but hell no. Why would you say that?"

"Cause Luvvi's the attractive one."

Leal was silent for a bit after that. "Do you really believe that?"

"Of course I do."

Leal turned to Hopper. "Hopper. On a ten point scale, how do you rate Cadence and Luvvi?"

"What's a ten?" Hopper said.

"Elen," Leal said. "Soaking wet and poolside."

Hopper smiled at the thought. "Okay, that's a good ten." Cadence watched as Hopper scratched his head. The guitarist looked at Cadence, pausing to appreciate the fury that had just painted itself across her face. Then Hopper looked towards Luvvi. She was looking back at Hopper with her *boys are so stupid* look. "I'd have to say —"

Cadence felt her gut tighten at whatever Hopper was about to utter next. She gave serious consideration to whether it would be safer for her ego if she just disrupted the conversation, but there was a huge piece of her that really wanted to hear what Hopper was going to say.

Then he rubbed his chin and looked at Cadence again. "It's not easy." Hopper said.

"Oh just say it for crying out loud!" Cadence clamped her mouth shut after her own outburst.

Hopper's eyes met Cadence's. "Cadence is a nine, and Luvvi's a nine point one, only because of the pants that she's wearing today." Both Cadence and Luvvi gasped. "What?" Hopper said to Luvvi. "Those are Elen's pants and they float on your torso when you walk like clouds drifting on a breeze."

"And what about my pants?" Cadence said, edging to within striking distance of her big gangly friend.

Hopper began giving ground, and his fingers started to twitch as he retreated. "I'd like you without pants." More gasps. "Umm, no! It's not without pants. I meant without Elen's pants." He said to Cadence. "I like you even more in skirts — you know? When you're workin' the gams hard, so to speak — No? Well I suppose you wouldn't really know."

With every syllable that Hopper uttered, the hole he had placed himself in got deeper and deeper. Cadence wasn't even sure why she was mad at him, but she was certain at that point that their guitarist needed to pay. Then Hopper did something surprisingly intelligent. "Hey girls," he forced a grimaced smile as he backed away from Cadence. "Wasn't Leal a bit of a wanker for making me answer that question? I wonder what boy won-



der's plan was in asking me that, huh?"

Both Luvvi and Cadence stopped, and then they turned toward Leal. "Are you trying to divide and conquer the Ragamuffin Dolls?" Cadence levied the accusation, and Leal's easy smile pronounced his guilt.

"I was playing, that's all."

"Playing?" Cadence said. "I'll give you —" She went after him but Luvvi read her friends intentions and held her back. Because of Luvvi's interference, Cadence needed to resign herself to plotting internally, as she calmed herself externally. Where did Leal get off making Hopper call her a nine?

Although now that Cadence thought about it, a nine wasn't at all bad. With a ten being Elen soaking wet, and poolside. Boys would probably like that image quite a bit, and a nine —

Cadence turned towards Hopper. "So, how good is a nine?"

Hopper smiled slowly and then let out a long soft whistle, gradually dropping in tone. "My musician friends always say that nine is — soo fine." Then he chuckled suggestively.

Cadence thought of reminding the guitarist that Luvvi and Cadence were his only musician friends, but instead she chose to see the investigation through to completion. "So you're saying that you would date a nine?"

Hopper looked at her, his smile fading. "As much as I would like to believe otherwise, I'm not sure that Hopper Yves will ever date anyone hotter than a six."

Cadence was surprised to hear him say that about himself. She didn't think it was true at all. "What if the girl lacked a ton of self confidence?"

"A nine?" Hopper thought about it. "Well, maybe if she liked my music as well, but she'd have to be a real mental piece of work."

Cadence thought that sounded about right. Then she let her thoughts return to Hopper's previous assessment. There was just a point one difference between how he saw her and how he had ranked Luvvi. Unfortunately she had never paid much attention in mathematics, and Cadence wasn't sure if at the higher end of the scale, the differential was bigger than it sounded. The rankings seemed close but it could be a mathematical thing. She decided to seek clarification. "Do you grade on a bell curve?" Cadence asked Hopper.

"I could." He said.

Cadence wasn't sure what that answer actually meant, but the group of them had already reached their cars.

“I’ll go with Cadence and Luvvi,” Leal said. “And Hopper, could you go with Roland so that he doesn’t get lost?” Elen had loaned them one of her cars, but Hopper’s driving had been too eventful for anyone to let him get behind the wheel again.

“Where are we going?” Luvvi said.

“We’re going to meet Steve.”

“Where?”

“One of Roland’s Father’s private offices. Let’s go.”

Leal handled Elen’s machine like a professional driver. He was cool, composed, and utterly intimidated — all while driving a vehicle that cost about the same amount as a house. Unfortunately, Cadence couldn’t help thinking that the way Leal was driving was sexy as hell. She tried looking out the window.

That strategy soon left Cadence alone with her thoughts, and they were troublesome thoughts.

Dark thoughts about the night that Luvvi had just been subjected to — all because Cadence hadn’t listened to her Uncle Kurtz. Cadence might have found herself thinking about what Emerald was likely suffering right at that very moment, but Cadence found that she didn’t have the strength to even consider it.

Whoever these people were at Minotaur/Chrysalis productions, they were sick sons-of-bitches. She had dealt with their type plenty, back when she had lived in the brothel. But unlike the brothel low-lives, these people had real power, and they were using it to co-opt the career of a kind and talented woman.

What sort of people would do all of that? It made her wonder about what their greater goals might be. Of course having a superstar in your pocket would be handy for any business, but this all seemed to go beyond the typical sleazy corporate practices. And what about the symbolism and methodologies that they had been using? It seemed both old and refined.

She thought about her time waiting with Hopper in the MK Wonderland studio’s lobby, so long ago now. The decor, the people, the layout, and even that damned little bell. It was all manufactured towards a purpose of some kind. Cadence had known it when she first saw it, and she had become more certain as she had watched her best friend get slowly drawn into it.

Dammit.

Why hadn't she listened to Kurtz. She could have blocked Luvvi if she had really tried, but she didn't try. Not hard enough. Instead, she had supported Luvvi in the dangerous game of reaching out to Emerald.

Now that Cadence had seen the extent of the controls that had been put into place, she realized how foolish they had been to think that her and Luvvi could have ever helped the pop star.

What had Kurtz said? *She's beyond friends.*

Cadence hadn't wanted to believe that. Instead, she had let her best friend walk into the monster's den, foolishly believing that it was all some sort of rescue mission.

Cadence felt tears starting to fill her eyes and she forced her thoughts towards something different. "Okay," Cadence said. "Let's say I agreed to dinner with you," she told Leal. "What's your end game."

"My end game?" Leal said. "I have no end game."

"Sure you do. Everybody does. Where are you hoping to get, Mr. Conrad?"

Leal thought for a moment. "Truthfully? Like my life plan? I pretty much see myself looking out for Roland, as long as I can be helpful to him. If I stayed with him, he would want to go and live on the west coast of British Columbia. In Tofino, where we can live simply — fishing and surfing and trying to make our ladies incredibly happy."

Cadence was surprised. "Do you think that's actually going to happen?"

"No, it's just a dream. Roland is too important to be allowed a life like that. More likely, I will be forced out of his life in the not too distant future, and he will become a less ruthless version of his Father. And I might become a gardener like my own dad. If they allow me that much."

"Really? You really think that? You're more of a cynic than I thought you were."

"I wish I were a cynic. That's the optimistic version of our futures."

The saddest part was that Cadence had no doubts that Leal was trying to be sincere. It brought her right back to thinking about their enemies. Back to the anger and the guilt, and eventually back to the tears.

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Charleton Ellis's travel office was not a humble place. Sophia could have easily lived a lifetime in there, and never felt a single need for anything more.

Steve had been waiting for everyone when they got there. Roland and Leal quickly moved towards him, and a conversation began in hushed tones.

Sophia, who had separated herself from Cadence, moved closer so that she could hear. "It's not good." Steve spoke in a whisper. "The intel points towards Duality Corp. It's ultimately owned by the Domingez Family. Duality Corp. calls themselves human optimization experts, and they claim to specialize in corporate compliance, high-end crisis management, and developmental military counter psi-ops technologies. No surprise there, I guess. But they have a facility in El Sereno that looks like the most likely location for your pop star."

Sophia could see that neither Roland nor Leal liked hearing that news.

"Look boss, you knew that this was a possibility when we started down this road." Steve said to Roland.

Roland looked grave. "Yes, but I had hoped."

Leal looked no better. "What do we do? Do we abandon her? You know what can happen on the other side of this."

"Yeah, I remember." Roland said. "What are the chances that you could carry out an extraction?" Roland addressed Steve.

"Even odds, if I was willing." Steve said.

"But you're not, are you?" Leal answered for the slim bodyguard.

"I'm tasked with ensuring Roland's safety. That's it. Even if it were successful, an offensive operation against the Domingez Family could get me killed."

Leal seemed to be getting angry. "That's it? You won't help? We're all taking risks."

Then Steve smiled, and his eyes became a hollow void. Even in her spirit form, Sophia gasped. Then she recognized him. "I can be amiable, Leal. But don't ever mistake me for a nice man." Steve said.

Sophia's soul became anxious, and in her heart she cried out for Leal to let the matter go. She wanted him to leave it alone because often you'd get no more warning from men like him.

"It's okay, Steve. We would never ask you to go against your better judgment. Right Leal?" Roland said, calm.

"Yeah, sure." Leal still looked frustrated.

"Alright then, we'll have to do this ourselves. Steve, can you function as a tactical advisor?"

Steve was silent, but he nodded in the affirmative.  
“Alright. What do you recommend?”

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Cadence couldn't believe that they were actually going to try and James Bond this bitch of a problem. They were just a rock band for crying out loud, supplemented by a couple of prep boys. And by the sounds of it, the people at Duality Corp were likely going to be playing for keeps.

She wondered if she should call her Uncle Kurtz but Cadence still couldn't see him agreeing to help them. One thing that she did know was that if he knew about their operation, her Uncle would spare no effort in shutting their rescue attempt down — he would do it to protect his girls.

Cadence thought about her Uncle's driving motivation. Could that be an opportunity? Maybe if Cadence and Luvvi got themselves captured as well, then Kurtz would be forced to break them all out. It could happen. So Cadence decided to suggest the idea to Steve.

The son of a bitch didn't even answer her though. He just nodded no.

The plan that they had concocted, and by *they* she meant Steve, was going to take a couple of days to stage. Luvvi didn't seem to like hearing that — not at all. In fact she freaked a little because that would be two more days that the Duality Corp. douches would have Emerald in their clutches. But according to Steve security was tight, so Cadence tried to make Luvvi see that a little bit late would be infinitely better than never.

After getting the plan from Steve, Leal broke it down into pre-operational assignments, which he then told only to Roland. Predictably, Roland then became the mouthpiece, and he issued the assignments as though it was all his own plan.

Cadence and Luvvi were both watching it play out with equal curiosity. They were dumfounded by it really, the way they might have watched if Roland and Leal had been doing experimental modern dance.

“Do you find it weird,” Luvvi whispered to Cadence. “That in a group of six people we've already established a bureaucracy.”

“I don't think those two can even help it,” Cadence said. “It must be some sort of compulsion — like with penguins migrating.”

“Do you think that the plan will work?”

“I think we're all gonna die.”

Hopper's jobs were pretty easy. He was to acquire a bus and a truck

using Roland's money, and then get them logoed.

Hopper was happy to do those jobs, but as the free thinker that he was, he also believed that they would need disguises. Steve told the guitarist not to bother but Hopper was determined. In fact, he told Roland's body-guard that he had some experience in infiltrating these types of facilities. Admittedly, the experiences were bad, and after his last failed attempt he surmised that disguises might have been helpful. Steve said nothing in response so Hopper followed the lead of his own paranoia. He bought all of the Ragamuffin Dolls black wigs, private school uniforms, and glasses – and who knows what else he did, but there was no danger of him being underprepared.

"We're not wearing these." Luvvi told Hopper when she saw the wigs and uniforms.

"Why not? I'm going to grow a mustache." Hopper was clearly worried about the Ragamuffin Dolls and he kept mentioning how keeping the two of them safe — was his job. When Cadence and Luvvi kept protesting, the guy changed his tactic. "You need disguises because what we're doing is illegal and if you're exposed, it could compromise the band."

Cadence took it upon herself to set the guitarist straight. "Look Hopper, if we get arrested, it's just gonna sell more albums. The two of you could use a bit of a makeover on your street cred, anyways." Cadence told both him and Luvvi.

Hopper definitely looked more dejected than he should have after hearing that. "So you're not going to wear them? The wigs are nice." Hopper said.

Feeling merciful, Cadence held one of them up. "I'll wear it on stage." She thought that her promise might make him feel a bit better, but it barely made any dent.

Cadence's job was to learn the basic psychology of how to incite riots — and Steve was to be her tutor. "So how do you know about riots?"

Steve smiled. "Misspent youth." It was all he said.

Either way, he gave her good lessons in the psychology of mob aggression, instigation tactics, and how to thwart countermeasures. Once she understood the whole process Cadence felt that once on stage, Luvvi Dove would be a natural at it.

Because she had been a quick study Cadence got given another job as well. Roland, and by Roland she meant Leal, and by Leal she meant Steve

— gave her the task of contracting a job with a computer hacker.

It involved a cloak and dagger meeting with an Asian guy on the Cal-Tech campus. Her and the hacker sat back to back in chairs at a muffin vendor's, as they discussed the details of the job. Cadence might have felt like a real spy if her visit to the campus didn't have her swimming in a strange sea filled with uber-geeks. She wondered what kind of music these people would listen to — most likely techno.

"I want a company to order some equipment. Equipment that needs to be delivered in two days." Cadence looked straight ahead as she spoke.

"Which company?" The guy said.

"Duality Corp."

There was a long pause. "Are you ef-fing insane? The dark web says those guys are into some freaky shit."

At that point, Cadence said exactly what Steve had told her to say. "It's a simple job, and you will be well compensated."

Another pause. "How much?"

The rest was predictable. With access to Roland's money, getting things done was surprisingly simple. The guy agreed to hack Duality Corp in order to get Duality to order a shipment of lighting equipment and stage effects, for delivery. Roland had already set up a fake company, Stars Lighting and Set Design, just to fulfill the order.

Apparently Duality Corp used a fair amount of propaganda video to get the results that they were known for, by their clients. And in the propaganda business, theater was the norm — so an order of lighting and set design equipment wouldn't raise any eyebrows.

Luvvi's assignment was a job that was specially suited to her. Luvvi was tasked with getting in touch with the leaders of Emerald's fan club. Of course all of those super fans knew about Luvvi, and her recent gal-palery with Emerald. So they welcomed Luvvi's call, with enthusiasm.

Luvvi's job was to set up a dual purpose, vigil-slash-protest. She told the fan club people that the protest was a reprimand to Duality Corp for taking part in Emerald's non-consensual confinement, but was also to be there for Emerald. By staging an event outside, the fans would be letting Emerald know that she was loved, hopefully giving her the emotional support to endure whatever she was facing.

Hearing that dark story straight from Luvvi Dove's mouth incensed the leaders of Emerald's fan clubs. They were angry that she wasn't in a proper treatment center, and they agreed to get the word out promising to fill

the Duality Corp parking lot when the time came.

“Let’s take them by surprise though.” Luvvi told the fan club’s leaders. “Go ahead and mobilize your contacts, but let’s be careful not to give Duality any warning. Tell your trusted leaders the full plan if you wish, but for now, just let the rest of the fans know that big news is coming and that they’ll want to clear their calendars and be ready.” Luvvi had practiced that phrase repeatedly with Roland before the meetings, and she felt like she had been nailing it.

Roland’s job was to learn from Steve how to covertly enter Duality Corp. He was going to be their secret agent. If Cadence had been giving out the assignments, she might have considered giving the groups only ex professional thief that job, but nobody ever asked her.

Roland learned about using bump keys to open doors, and how to conceal his identity from surveillance camera’s with a baseball cap and colored lasers mounted onto a golf range finder’s scope.

As far as Cadence could tell, it seemed that Roland’s job was the hardest, and the most risky. When she called him on it, he once again told her that same story about how his dad being a successful businessman somehow made him immune to retaliation.

Ridiculous. In what world did your daddy’s job makes you immune to B and E charges?

The whole thing sounded concocted. The only way Cadence could figure it was that Roland must have been compensating for being a bored and attention starved rich kid. And by doing this operation Roland would be proving to himself that he was some sort of bad-ass. There was no doubt in Cadence’s mind that the whole stupid thing was for the sorority girl’s benefits.

To her the billionaire seemed out of his depth.

Cadence would have been even more worried about Roland, if Steve his personal bodyguard hadn’t been so casual about allowing Roland to participate in the operation. Considering the man’s profession, Steve’s willingness to be part of this scheme was beyond weird. Steve had said that he’d had a misspent youth, but exactly how misspent was it to stand by and let all of this happen? People could do serious time for the laws that they would be breaking.

It made Cadence think that there might be more to the story. Likely more to both the Steve story, and the Roland story. But whatever it was,



Cadence couldn't even begin to glimpse it no matter how hard she tried.

The day of the operation finally arrived.

All of the prep work had been completed. Each of them had studied the layouts of the Duality Corp grounds and of all the buildings. They had also committed to memory the neighborhood, and possible avenues of escape. Not surprisingly, by the time they were ready to execute, their best-prepped operator was also the most paranoid — Hopper Yves.

Roland and Leal got dressed up in their tradesmen uniforms. They were an unassuming grey, with the Stars logo prominently displayed for the benefit of the Duality Corp. security staff.

Luvvi and Cadence got to dress up as themselves, but Hopper Yves insisted that they also take along backpacks, or go-bags as he called them, with their black wigs and school uniforms inside.

Hopper himself had the vague outline of a three-day mustache on his upper lip. Unfortunately for Hopper, it was only visible from zero distance under an excellent light source. "It looks great, Hopper." Luvvi had told him.

The day of the operation, Luvvi pulled out the newspaper and read the headline. "Luvvi Dove claims BFF gal-pal Emerald's treatment is excessive." Luvvi smiled and handed the newspaper to Cadence. She looked proud of her work.

Luvvi had issued a press release the day before, claiming that she had insider knowledge about Emerald's management team. She claimed that they had lied about the location of Emerald's rehab, and that they had chosen the harsher of the two therapy options by institutionalizing her at Duality Corp. "I'm upset by their treachery, and very worried about Emerald's condition. My friend should be with real doctor's in a real hospital, not locked into a room with a bunch of wacky, mind scientists." Luvvi had said.

Cadence read the article. "That oughta do it." She said.

All that the girl's could do from that point on was wait. Eventually the team took up positions. Hopper was parked at the remote staging area a half-mile away from Luvvi and Cadence with an agitated horde of Emerald fans, getting ready to bus them in.

Cadence heard the walkie-talkie squawk. "Remote staging area, ready." It was Hopper's voice. Then she heard Leal on the radio. "Stars lighting ready."

Cadence pushed the talk button. "Red hot rocker chicks — ready."

“Proceed.” Leal said.

Proceed.

As soon as Cadence heard that word, her heart started beating faster. In her mind she could imagine Leal putting down his walkie-talkie, and twisting the key in the truck's ignition.

That was the moment that Cadence realized fully what the six of them were attempting to do, and she had to stifle a scream. Since when had she started walking into danger? Cadence was a runner, not a danger facer.

Her first erratic thought was one of anxiously facing Scarla and her Uncle Kurtz, afterwards. But that discomfort didn't last long, because her next thought was of spending much of her life, inside a prison. And it didn't take long after that before Cadence's subconscious fear conjured up an even more disturbing image. It was an image of her and Luvvi bleeding out on the street — gut shot.

How stupid were the two of them, really?

You might have thought that growing up on the street would have taught Cadence to avoid situations with consequences like the ones that they faced now. Maybe Hopper was right. Perhaps young rockers were destined for early deaths.

Then she saw Leal and Roland's truck, rolling past. The Stars lighting logo was big and blue on the truck's side. Cadence reached for the walkie. "I have visual on transport Sierra Tango Alpha Romeo Sierra." She said.

"What?" Hopper sounded confused on the radio.

"The truck! I see the Stars truck." Then she muttered without the walkie-talkie's button pressed, "Moron."

"Oh, okay." The guitarist said.

Hopper could stand to watch a few more war movies. Cadence looked in her mirrors at the trailer that she was pulling. The trailer would be their stage, with all of their sound equipment already loaded onto it. Then Cadence looked at her watch. She had been told to wait four minutes before setting out but her hands were sweaty on the wheel, and time was moving agonizingly slow.

It gave Cadence time to think about Emerald, and what might have

been happening to her inside Duality Corp. That led her to thinking about the young artist's still unpublished body of work. Those were the songs that Luvvi truly loved.

They were the same songs that her handlers had been pressing for ownership of— despite having carefully put them to the bottom of the studio's priority lists, for future release. It was clearly manipulated.

Those songs were what Cadence and Luvvi considered to be the true masterpieces — a designation which Luvvi at least, would not bestow lightly. And in matters of music, Luvvi was most often right.

Those suppressed songs represented the musings of a true master artist. And if Luvvi's opinion held any merit — as a songwriter, Emerald possessed a mind of the same caliber as Bob Dylan, Marley or John Lennon. It was sad to think about the world being denied something like that merely because of the selfish actions of some greedy men. Cadence began thinking about those legendary songwriters as she waited. Of the four, Bob Marley was still Cadence's favorite.

Cadence looked out her window at the trees, and she started humming Three Little Birds. Luvvi looked over at Cadence and smiled, eventually picking up the song right where Cadence was at. "This was my message to you hoo hoo." She sang.

The beauty of Luvvi's voice, combined with the songs simple but potent lyrics, made Cadence's eyes well up.

Luvvi stopped singing and looked over at her cousin.

"It's the message," Cadence said, realizing the truth of it. "That's why they're doing this to her. It's her artist's heart — they want to kill it because the message of Esmeralda's heart is dangerous to them." Cadence wasn't even sure of what she was getting at, but she let her ideas flow. "Left unchecked, a girl like Emerald is a fully armed societal battleship. She's a charging Valkyrie, and her voice is like thunder on the airwaves." Cadence could feel herself starting to hyperventilate. "They got to Marley and they got to Lennon, but they also immortalized their works when they did it. That's why with Emerald, and with you, they'll want to take a different tactic. Hopper was right about the danger.

"They can't kill you without amplifying your message," Cadence said. "So they'll want to co-opt your spirits and make the two of you into fucking puppets for the establishment. Pretty marionettes that say only what's approved, while making the bozos in charge feel as though they're as edgy

or as clever as the two of you are. Do you see it? Do you?" Her voice was shaky.

Cadence was feeling intense fear in that protracted moment. "I never truly got it — Until now." Intense fear for both Emerald and Luvvi. "You have to stay away from them!" Cadence tried to keep her voice under control, but she wasn't succeeding at all. "You have to promise me that after this, you'll say no to your mother and to all of her sick friends. And screw them if they don't like it!" Cadence was yelling. "Promise me Luvvi, I need to hear it." Cadence knew that every one of those words should have been said a very long time ago — but Cadence still saw a torrent of confusion inside Luvvi's eyes. Cadence was desperate for her friend to understand. "Uncle Kurtz is afraid of these people, Luvvi." Cadence said. "Do you get it? He told us to stay away."

Luvvi gasped. Because she knew that her Uncle Kurtz wasn't a man to frighten easily. That quickly got Luvvi's attention.

"What does he know?" Luvvi said, taking Cadence's hand and looking over her shoulder, suddenly catching some of Cadence's fear.

"I don't know what he knows but you know that he wouldn't say what he said, without a reason. And he meant it Luvvi, he really meant it."

Then Luvvi burst into tears. "Well he was right." Luvvi suddenly said. "Uncle Kurtz was right, but they told me that nobody would believe me."

Cadence was surprised by her cousin's sudden admission. With everything that Luvvi had told them, Cadence had never thought about what Luvvi might have been holding back. Cadence gripped her friend's hand. "I believe — Luvvi."

Luvvi was fighting to calm herself down. "Oh gawd, my make-up." She said.

"Screw your make-up, Doll." Cadence looked closely at her cousin. "You're beautiful with the streaks, its perfect — Dark and powerful. Make no mistake," Cadence said. "This isn't a concert, the two of us are heading off into battle."

Before Cadence's eyes, she watched as Luvvi Dove's face hardened. Inside a moment, Luvvi Dove and her streaked mascara transformed into some sort of barbarian queen, resolute and unyielding. Then an omnivorous fire began to kindle in her cousin's eyes and her jaw was set firm. Cadence could see for certain that the artist's heart had been awoken, and Luvvi Dove was ready to perform. She turned away from Cadence, fixed her eyes out the front window —

“Let’s go,” Luvvi said. “It’s fucking time.”

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Roland and Leal had rolled past the security gate with only a few words exchanged with the gate attendant. After all, the Stars delivery had been expected. It was right there in the Duality Corp. computer, properly scheduled.

The building had an underground parking garage with a freight loading bay, off to the side of the building. Leal backed the truck into the bay.

As Leal drove, Roland busied himself with determining the positions of all the security cameras. He let Leal know about them so that his friend could keep his face as concealed as possible, just to be on the safe side. It wasn’t until after their truck was parked and they had gotten its back door rolled open, that Roland began hearing the sounds of Emerald’s gathering fans. The noises were coming from the parking lot, in the front of the building.

From what Hopper had reported, they would have several busloads of fans, and that didn’t even include the ones with their own cars.

Then Roland heard a microphone pop. It was followed by Luvvi’s voice, far off and amplified by speakers. The girl didn’t even say a word. She just sang into the microphone.

It was a spine tingling improvisation of some kind of vocal scale, which sustained for what seemed like forever. Even Roland stopped working to listen.

When Luvvi’s incredible lung power eventually turned to silence, there was a tangible pause. Suspense built in the group, and then there was an eruption of explosive energy as Emerald’s fans cried out — like they were pretty much ready to lose their minds. Roland stifled a smile as he tried to imagine the scene.

After that the Ragamuffin Dolls seemed to be content with letting the crowd have it’s way for a short time — cheering. But then another voice rose up. It was an inhuman voice, but one just as rich and haunting which Roland knew could have only come from Cadence’s cello.

The cello’s message wasn’t like Luvvi’s at all. It was unique, harsh and prodding. Cadence’s call to the crowd let them know who they were. It told them that they were the people, and that this was their land. The

sounds served to ignite the hearts of the rebellious masses like a flash grenade, waking up the undaunted spirit of those American's, who had been long bred to believe in the exercising of defiance to authorities, near and far.

The strokes of the cello's wand told the crowd that this day would not be about music, and it would not be about beauty. It was about defiance.

Then Roland heard Hopper's guitar beginning to scream it's own discontent, and the guitar's sounds wove themselves seamlessly into Cadence's melody. Roland was a little surprised to hear Hopper's guitar at first. The musician must have been able to delegate the job of driving the bus to someone else. Then Cadence's Cello shifted gently into rhythm, backing up Hopper's guitar as he effortlessly assumed the lead.

"What are we gonna do!" Luvvi's voice was screaming and even there in the parking garage, Roland felt like calling out an answer. "What are we — gonna do!" She said again.

Roland felt Leal's hand on his shoulder. He looked at his friend and found him smiling. Leal knew what Roland was feeling, he always knew. "We should get to work." Leal said.

It was true. They had work to do — this day was not about beauty.

"Let's do it then." Roland said.

A Duality Corp. guy with a short sleeved button down shirt and a clipboard, came out of a door and walked purposely towards them. "You guys, Stars?" The clipboard guy said.

"We are." Roland did the talking while Leal faded into subservience.

"What have you got for us?"

"Various goodies. Are you shooting a commercial?"

The Duality Corp. guy smiled. "Something like that."

Roland nodded. "Okay, tell us where you want it installed."

"Installed?" The guy checked his clipboard.

"As far as I know." Roland said.

"You sure?" He was busy reading the documentation.

"Nope," Roland said. "But I think I'm right." Roland turned to Leal. "Louie, get the paperwork from the dash."

Leal scurried away towards the front of the cab.

"Hmm," The Duality Corp guy was still reading. "Aha. Here it is. You're right. Third floor set up." The guy smiled at Roland. "I'll show you guys where to go after we off-load and inventory all of this shrapnel."

"Sounds like a plan. You guys got carts? Or some dolly's somewhere?"

Leal had come back sporting a blank look and a hand full of papers. The Duality Corp. guy chuckled at him. "Too late kid, we got it settled. But we're gonna need carts. Why don't you head thataway and see what you can scrounge up."

Obediently, Leal took off in the direction that the company man had pointed.

"Alright," Roland said. "Let's get started."

They unloaded the truck piece by piece, as the company man checked the items off on his list. Because he was the subordinate, Leal did most of the work, while Roland adjusted how the cargo was loaded onto the carts. By the time they were done, Leal looked exhausted and the company man seemed glad that he had put a check mark beside each and every item on his list.

Then the company man chuckled again, looking at Leal. "It's a good worker you've got there." He said to Roland. "Why don't we let him take a break while I show you where the equipment will go."

"Sure thing, boss." Roland said to the man.

"Hey kid, take a break." The Duality Corp. guy said. "Me and your driver are going upstairs for a bit."

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There were already hundreds of people involved in the protest at Duality Corp. and more were arriving every minute. Her and Luvvi had succeeded in drawing a sizable group of security personnel out to the front of the building. No doubt there would be even more of those guys coming to the party still.

Cadence shivered as she thought about what her and Luvvi were undertaking. She had done a lot of things, but inciting a riot had never been one of them. It felt thrilling, for sure — but Cadence knew the feeling for what it really was.

Danger.

One look into those security guy's eyes and Cadence could tell that they weren't middle-aged muffin top guards who sat on their asses all day stroking their flashlights. These men were hard, and she knew that Luvvi could sense the same thing.

But Cadence's cousin had come dressed for war.

Luvvi screamed into the microphone and Hopper's guitar began to



shred in a stuttering staccato rhythm that was dark and threatening. Then Luvvi screamed again, almost defying the security guards to try and stop her. Cadence could see in those men's hard eyes that as soon as they were given permission, they would eagerly take Luvvi up on that challenge.

In the last several minutes, the parking lot had become a mosh pit of people and signs. The signs were there for Emerald's encouragement in her time of trial, and to protest of the pop star's unjust containment. The signs were mostly homemade. *We Love you Emerald, Stay Strong*, and *Let Our Emerald go*. Some signs were more graphic, others were more clever, but the gist was always the same.

Luvvi had done amazingly well in stirring up and uniting Emerald's fans. Under Luvvi's expert leadership, they had become a unified force. But Cadence was beginning to see her cousin's fatigue. Luvvi had been through hell in the last few days, and Cadence had barely seen her sleep or eat, throughout all of it. But even in that state the girl had been able to activate the crowd and keep them pulsing.

Now Cadence could see that her cousin was fading. Luvvi was going on adrenaline alone, and she wouldn't be able to keep up the act for much longer. Cadence drifted over to Hopper Yves and spoke a few words into his ear.

"I'll take care of it." Hopper said.

When the song ended, Hopper moved to Luvvi's side and took the microphone from her hand. Then, speaking into it. "This is Luvvi Dove, ladies and gentlemen!" After that he handed Cadence the mic and led Luvvi off the stage towards the bus.

Suddenly it was just Cadence and the crowd. And they were all looking at her, waiting.

Waiting for her to say or do something.

Shit.

This was how Hopper planned to take care of it?

Cadence checked the mic. It was on. "So what the hell's with this Duality Corp. and their lame media excuses? Personally I don't get it," Cadence said. "Are they trying to clone more pop stars up there, or do they call themselves duality just because they're so two-faced?" The crowd laughed a little at Cadence's comment. As punch lines went, she knew that it was weak, but maybe she could still come up with better. "Why would a bunch of suits wanna take our pop-star anyways? I don't see any money in it for them — did the corporate world suddenly run out of third world nations

to pillage?" More laughter, and some applause, Cadence was getting the roll going. "You know what really doesn't make sense? Why would anyone bother secretly holding a twenty-year-old musician inside an office building? Do they think that they can administrate her back to health?" Chuckles. "Yeah, I can see the moron's plans perfectly now," Cadence continued. "Psychotherapy by flow chart."

By that point Cadence had the crowd laughing hard, and she felt herself relax. It felt good. Familiar ground at last. She knew that once she had warmed up herself and the crowd, that her natural instincts would take over.

And they did.

Feeling more comfortable, she was able to view the situation with some objectivity. "And have any of you had a good look at these security guys? If my brother ever made a face like that —" Cadence let the routine flow as she looked at the crowd that was gathered around her, certain that her subconscious mind could easily come up with enough bullshit to keep Emerald's super fan's entertained. The crowd was mostly female, but there were plenty of guys represented there as well. It was mostly a young group, but with enough diversity of age that they wouldn't be easily bullied if things got hairy. It also seemed to be a culturally mixed crowd, which Cadence found a bit surprising.

Then Cadence saw a couple of people out in the mix that had a different feel to them. Unfortunately, she noticed them when her mouth was shifted into automatic mode — and apparently so was her finger.

"See those two sorry sacks of steaming festulance over there? Yeah them — those two guys aren't here for Emerald, or for you'all." Everybody looked where Cadence was pointing. "Those guys work for Duality Corp. and they've come here in disguises and they're going to try and stir something up."

People moved away from the two guys who had their hands raised into shrugs, as though they were as innocent as lambs. Then Cadence saw their feet.

"In fact those stupid sons of whores are still wearing their damned jack boots. Hey morons! We're onto you. Next time take off the combat boots before trying to insinuate yourself into a peaceful protest."

Then the two exposed security guards both started shoving the people next to them. A fourteen-year-old girl ended up hitting the pavement hard.

Cadence gasped.

She could see the crowd starting to react defensively — but she also knew that a crowd as riled up as this one could quickly shift their defense, to offence. “Stay calm! Stay calm — they want us to react. You,” Cadence pointed. “Help that kid up. Good. And the girl. Alright, everybody just back up, stay away from those guys.”

The crowd was poised for retribution, but so far everyone seemed willing to take Cadence’s direction. Then she saw another disguised security guy embedded into the crowd, but the new one was holding a camera — and he was aiming his camera at any and all violence.

Cadence knew a frame job when she saw one. If Duality Corp. could make the case that their protest-vigil was not peaceful, then they could compel local law enforcement to shut it down. At that point Cadence saw Steve, Roland’s security guard, standing calmly on the edge of the churning crowd. He was looking right at her.

Cadence looked at him for a moment, then she pointed at the third agent provocateur and mouthed, *get his camera*.

Steve smiled slightly and then nodded to Cadence, before wading into the crowd. She lost sight of Steve fairly quickly, but the agent provocateur was easy to see. Easy until a long arm reached out of the crowd and jerked the agent backwards, at least.

Cadence tried to see what was going on, but whatever happened inside that section of the crowd, it appeared unremarkable from the outside. Several seconds later she saw Steve emerge from the crowd holding a camera in a hand by his side.

Wow. That was easy.

Somehow, seeing how Steve dealt with the intruder gave Cadence strength. She pointed at the remaining agents, who were jostling against their neighbors and she said into the microphone. “Get out. Get out. Get out.” And she pointed with her finger as well. “Get out. Get out. Get out!”

Emerald’s fans joined in, pointing and screaming. *Get out. Get out. Get out!*

The agents tried screaming back, but their voices were drowned out by the chant. *Get out. Get out. Get out!* Soon the men began backing away, towards Duality Corp.

Once they were far enough away, Cadence changed the chant to the first thing that came to mind. *Strength. Strength. Strength.* And the crowd joined in with her. Once the people had caught onto the new chant, Ca-

dence let them continue on their own, but she grabbed the mic in her fist and raised a hand up towards the hazy L.A. sky. "Let's hope Emerald can hear us, people!" She cried.

The chant intensified, and Emerald's fans began to jump. *Strength. Strength. Strength.*

Suddenly Hopper Yves was back on guitar, and the Ragamuffin's music took the crowd on yet another journey.

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Roland walked through the halls of Duality Corp., with his cap brim pulled low. He had no idea how he was going to get free of the guy he was with, to go and find Emerald.

According to Steve's intel she was being held on the second floor, in the east wing. As Roland walked through the building, he could see that Cadence and Luvvi's diversion was working. There was definitely less security around than Roland had expected, suggesting that their resources had been pulled to the front of the building to keep an eye on the ever growing mob.

Even the administrative employees seemed flustered as they breezed quickly through the hallways, somewhat overwhelmed. Roland made sure that he made eye contact with each of them, offering every one a disarming, hello.

"You sure are a friendly one." The company man commented as they walked down the hallway on three.

"I try to be." Roland said. "I don't plan to be an employee forever. The way I see it, one of these people in this building will be the one that hires my company someday. After I save enough to get it started up."

The company man looked at him, and Roland flashed him a confident smile. "Well, I wouldn't bet against you." He said.

Roland's real purpose was to interact with as many people and as few camera's, as he could. The guys in the security booth would know about him for sure, since it was a scheduled trades visit, but the other staff had no such knowledge. Roland wanted himself to be seen by those employees so that later on, when he had lost his escort, they would believe that he belonged there.

Finally, they reached their destination. A bookish looking brunette in a

yellow sweater was waiting for them at the door. “Ms. Marshal.” The company man said, in greeting.

“Sam.” The woman said.

Roland could tell that there was little more to those two people’s relationship than he had just witnessed. He thought that he should try to break the tension and maybe score a flirtation point or two while the woman was still unaware. “Ms. Marshal, I’m Troy.” Roland reached out to shake her hand, offering her his smile as well. He should have just left it at that, but in matters of flirtation Roland had always been prone to overreach. So instead of keeping the moment professional, he added. “And let me say — what a wonderful sweater.”

Of course he had meant the bright cheerful color, but when Sam immediately looked down at Ms. Marshal’s far better than average breasts, it brought an entirely different meaning to Roland’s comment.

The woman turned around to fumble her key into the door lock, without even shaking Roland’s hand. Dammit, that had not gone well at all. Roland tried to think of a way to put his floundering plan back onto its feet. They were going to need the trust of the person who was supervising them in order to carry out their mission.

Sensing the discomfort, Sam said goodbye to them both and Ms. Marshal scowled at the prospect of being left alone with Roland. “Alright,” she said. “Pay attention so I don’t have to say this again.” Her words were icy.

“We’re setting this room up as —”

In an instant of pure creation, Roland’s mind found the solution that he had been looking for. He interrupted the woman. “Ms. Marshal, I think the person that you should be talking to about all this is Louis — my boss.”

The woman stopped. Her hard eyes stared at Roland. Then a shimmer of a cruel smile crept across her features. “Good. Go and get him.” The woman said and then she turned her back towards Roland, no longer bothering to hide her anger.

Roland made his way back towards the loading bay, greeting everyone he met, and eventually found himself face to face with Leal.

“I screwed up.” Roland said.

“Screwed up? How?” Leal looked worried at first, but then he caught onto Roland’s mood. “You tried flirting without me, didn’t you?” Leal swatted his friend on the shoulder. “So how’d it go, Casanova?”

“I think she’s going to report my behavior to my boss — which is you. Because of the harassment.”

Leal laughed. "I should have never left you alone."

"Maybe not." Roland said.

Leal couldn't have been happier. "Alright then, grunt. Start pushing this cart towards the freight elevator. We'll just have to tweak the plan a little."

Roland shoved the cart until it started its slow progress forward. Why on earth did they make set design stuff so heavy?

Leal carried a clipboard and a couple of promotional calendars for Stars lighting. It had pictures of movie and TV sets, with small descriptions of the show, and why they had made the choices that they had made. The two of them encountered no resistance as they snaked their way through the third floor hallways, once again.

When they got to the room, Leal told Roland to wait in the hall. Then he pulled his shoulders back and went in.

"Are you Louis?" Ms. Marshal said.

"I am, ma'am." Leal's voice sounded strong, yet sincere.

"Where's the other one?"

"About that," Leal said. "He told me what he said, only because he thought that you were going to report him anyways. You should know that I've already had words with him and I'll also be having a whole lot more, before this day is through. As far as where he is? Troy's still in the hall. I won't have him in the same room as you as long as I'm in charge — even if it means I set this room up all by myself. As far as I'm concerned ma'am, he's not even fit to breath the same air as you."

Leal was stick handling the issue like a pro. It wasn't just his words but the inflections that he used. They were perfect, and Roland had no doubt that Ms. Marshal would soon find herself disarmed. Then Leal surprised Roland — he did it by bringing up the sweater.

"And if I may, Ms. Marshal? As crass as Troy's comments were about your sweater, he wasn't wrong. The way that color brings out the softer highlights of your hair is surprising. My sister's hair used to take on that tone — you don't surf, do you?"

Ms. Marshal giggled. "Do I look like a surfer?" She said, obviously referring to her conservative presentation and her business attire.

"You look like a woman who does whatever she wants to do." Leal said. The uncanny thing about Leal was that if Roland had recited those exact words, it would have come across as canned and cheesy. And then Ms.

Marshal would have reached for her mace. But when Leal spoke to women, they seemed to ovulate at the sound.

Leal and Ms. Marshal shared a few more laughs, and a few more insults at Roland's expense before Leal came out into the hall. He seemed pleased with himself. "Get me a couple more carts full of equipment and then you're free to do as you please. I've told Ms. Marshal that you'll wait in the truck while her and I arrange the room."

It was perfect. Leal was a genius. He had given Roland the freedom to explore the east wing of the second floor. "Stay on your walkie." Roland said to his friend.

The next part was where things were going to get interesting.

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The second floor had an entirely different feel to it than the third floor did. It was far more theatrical, if that was even a real thing — with golden hallways interconnecting rooms with cartoonish door colors.

Roland waited behind a wall, readying himself to step out into a long hallway. He steadied his breathing but there was a tremor in his hands. The shaky little mirror that he had to spy around corners, showed a security camera at the far end of the hall.

Then Roland heard voices from down the hall. They were approaching him. Roland looked around, there was nowhere for him to go — nowhere to hide.

Dammit, he was barely off of the elevator and he was already going to get caught.

The footsteps and voices were getting closer and closer. It sounded like a few people, and at least one of them was female. Not that it mattered, because caught was caught.

He pulled the small walkie out of his pocket and turned it on. Then he spoke into it. "Second floor achieved, but opposition encroaching."

Two quiet squelches sounded back confirmed that his message was received and understood. It had to be one of the Ragamuffins, since Leal would have had his walkie volume turned down for as long as he was with Ms. Marshal.

Roland knew that he had to do something fast. He looked up at the ceiling tiles and wondered if it would be possible to climb up into them, to hide.

He was just about to do something foolhardy when Roland heard the footsteps change pace. Then someone laughed and the sound of a door opening touched Roland's ears like the song of an angel's sigh.

It was a beautiful sound.

He repositioned himself at the corner and he listened for the people to clear the hall. Just as they were shutting themselves inside the door — Roland, keeping low, leaned out and aimed his laser-rigged range finder's scope down the hall. He tried to hold the scope steady and point it right at the security camera.

Then it was time for him to move.

Quick and steady past the doors, he moved just like Steve had taught him. Roland needed to be quick so that the disruption of their camera's picture wouldn't distress any alert security guards. But his aim also needed to be steady because if his lasers slipped off their target then the security guy would be looking at a perfect image of Roland's face — staring right up at him.

*And that wouldn't be good at all*, Roland pushed the thought from his mind.

He moved down the hallway with quick even steps until he reached the corner.

Then Roland peaked around the corner with his mirror. Predictably, there was another camera. This would be the tricky part.

He would have never attempted it if Steve hadn't insisted that it could be done successfully, but in one motion Roland ducked around the corner and targeted the new security camera's lens with his laser. Hopefully, the disruption would be seen as an electrical glitch in the system. Roland didn't want to take any chances though, and he needed to get out of that hallway as quickly as possible.

He moved forward. That was how he found a door marked *Maintenance*, which to him it looked like a sanctuary. Roland tried the doorknob. It was locked. The billionaire had to quickly reach into his pocket, hoping that he would keep steady with the laser. Then Roland pulled out his bump keys.

A bump key was just a blank of a key that had been filed down to make it the perfect tool for overpowering any lock, as long as a person was willing to give it a forceful shove — or a bump.

The trouble was that you had to choose the right type of key.



Steve had prepared Roland's bump keys. He had told Roland that there were only so many locks that he was likely to encounter in a building like Duality Corp.

Roland tried his first key — careful not to move his laser away from the camera's lens.

It didn't fit so he switched to the next one. That one seemed to be better, so Roland rammed it in. The noise it made was pretty loud. Even more disturbing — it was unmistakably the sound of destruction. But the lock gave way, so Roland threw open the door and ducked inside of the maintenance room.

It was fairly large. The room had a couple of lockers, two cleaning carts, and the typical maintenance guy tools.

Once inside Roland wondered how much time he had actually spent in the hallway. Too much? Truthfully, he had been so panicked that he had no real idea. But in the room Roland had time to think. And now that he was thinking about it, he had to admit to himself that the hallway camera had likely been dazzled for longer than Steve had recommended. With that in mind, Roland knew that he would be smart to expect company.

He opened the door to the hallway a bit and pulled out the bump key. Then he closed himself inside. He needed a place to lay low for a bit. At first he looked at the lockers, but any good security guard would certainly look into them if he were doing a security sweep. Then he looked up at the ceiling tiles again. Maybe here in this room, it wouldn't be such a foolish idea.

He hopped up onto the cleaning cart carefully, because the cart was on wheels and it could easily slip out from underneath him. Then he stood up and gapped one of the white ceiling tiles. Using a pen flashlight, he looked into the space above the dropped ceiling. It would be tight but not impossible.

He would have liked Leal's advice at that moment, but that wasn't possible. It took all of Roland's strength to pull himself up and get himself balanced onto the metal grid of the ceiling. What made it even harder was the fact that he had to do it without breaking anything or dropping any telltale evidence of his presence, that the security guards might see.

Once he got himself in place, Roland wondered if he had just been wasting his time. He felt foolish in a way — hiding when nobody was coming to look. He thought for a moment about climbing back down instead of sealing himself in with the ceiling tiles, but then he realized that his in-

instincts had been right on.

He could hear men in the hallway, talking to each other and checking rooms. They entered the area just outside his door before he could get the ceiling tiles back in their proper place.

Shit. They were close.

Then his door opened suddenly, and Roland froze. The ceiling tile was still out of place, but only by a little.

Roland could feel his heart beating, and he wondered if these security guards would be the type that shot first, and asked questions later.

There were two men beneath him.

"Check the lockers." One said.

The creak of metal doors, opening and closing sounded to Roland like the moaning of the dead. Never before in his life had he wanted to just be left alone, more than at that moment.

Then one of the guards seemed to be messing with the cleaning cart. "I wouldn't touch that." One of the guards said. "They clean shit with that cart."

"Disgusting." The other guard said.

"What did you think? This work is more than just teenage girls and hand jobs. They shit too, and that cart that you were touching is the one that they clean it with."

"How do you know?"

"Look on the front, there's a red bio waste bag."

"Aw shit, I touched that."

The other guard laughed. "Shit is right. Serves you for being stupid. There's a sink in the corner."

Roland heard the sink turning on followed by the sounds of the man washing his hands. They still hadn't noticed the ceiling tile.

Then the door opened and the sound of the guards leaving the room allowed Roland to relax. He didn't move though. Not for several minutes, once all of the sounds in the hallway were long absent. Then Roland got down carefully.

Balancing on the cleaning cart, he replaced the ceiling tile just as he had found it. Getting off the cart though, he was careful to avoid touching the bio waste bag.

Of course he wanted to wash his hands anyways, just in case. When Roland was standing at the sink he noticed a clipboard, hanging on a tab

on the wall. On that clipboard there seemed to be a cleaning schedule. He grabbed the clipboard and flipped through it until he found the records for the building's east wing.

There weren't any room numbers — just names of rooms with themes from all different types of fantasy realms. There were names from Oz, Alice in Wonderland, mythology, adventure fiction and some from cultural legends. Roland recognized many of the names. But there weren't any inmate's names associated with the rooms.

That was disappointing. Of course if there had been names, this whole misadventure might have suddenly become easy. Unfortunately though, easy wasn't in the cards.

Roland refocused his mind on some of the strategies for getting himself to the east wing. Steve had told him that behind enemy lines, the safest way to travel was always to blend in. So the way Roland saw it, stumbling into this maintenance room might have been the best thing that could have happened to him.

He searched through the lockers and found some maintenance worker coveralls. Then he found a short brimmed cap. There were also rubber gloves, a box of surgical masks, and protective eye goggles. Wearing them all just to walk down the hall would have been too much, but the coveralls and cap, with the mask and goggles around his neck? That might serve pretty well for a disguise.

Roland took a few minutes to get dressed, and to get the things arranged onto his cart. He wanted to know where everything was if he had to do any actual cleaning.

Then carefully, Roland put his Stars uniform into a trash bag and tucked it onto one of the shelves of the cleaning cart. That way he'd have it for later, when he would be trying to get away from this place.

Eventually Roland had nothing left to do but to open the door, and start walking down the hall. It seemed like such a simple thing but Roland could feel the blood literally pounding inside his head. In fact, Roland felt enough pressure in his skull that he wondered if he might pass out. Could that actually happen from nerves? After several seconds Roland thought that he had better sit down.

After crouching down, he closed his eyes and he tried breathing deeply. Shit. That didn't help at all. When he looked down at his hands they both had a fine tremor. Dammit, he wanted himself to be calm.

But this was a situation where he couldn't seem to control his stress. It

was unlike all the other stressful things that Roland had done. Memories of the last time that he had tried to intervene for the good of his friends played through his head like a high def. film. Perhaps the stakes were too high?

Roland told himself to think more positive. The stakes were too high — *if he were to get caught — it was if*. He corrected his earlier assumption to be more positive but then his own treasonous brain added, *the stakes were going to be too high for both him — and his friends*.

Thinking about his friends sent a shock through to Roland's soul. He had known for months that these friends were real — finally. In fact, these friends were exactly what he had always hoped for.

His friends. Could that be it? He needed to talk to someone. Roland grabbed his walkie. "This is Stars one calling Riot Squad, come in Riot Squad."

Roland had to wait for a moment, but eventually he heard Luvvi's voice. "This is Riot Squad, are you doing okay?"

Roland had never heard any sound sweeter than Luvvi's voice, and in his own way he decided to tell her exactly that. "I have to say I love your voice, Riot Squad. Hearing it has made me feel better already."

"My voice is always here for you, Stars One. You know that, right?"

"I guess I do now." Roland said, and he didn't know what else to say. He looked at his hands, the tremor was there but less.

There was a pause. "You sure you're okay?" Luvvi said.

"Truthfully? I wanted to hear you. This is pretty stressful." Talk about understatement. "I needed some distraction from my current reality." After Roland said that, he realized how un-heroic his words might sound to a girl who was putting all of her hopes upon the success of his actions. Then he wondered what he could say that might correct his mistake of over-sharing. Roland was thinking.

There was a while where Luvvi was silent. Not knowing what to say, Roland just ended up waiting it out. Then the walkie clicked and her voice was there again. "You want distraction? Well chew on this." Luvvi said through the walkie-talkie. There was another pause. "How come you haven't ever asked me out?"

In Roland's current situation that question felt like whiplash. "Asked you out?"

"Yeah, I can tell that you like me." Luvvi said. "And I think that you

might even like me a lot.”

Roland’s mind was racing.

“Am I wrong?” Luvvi said.

“No, but I gotta go.” Roland needed time to process it. He looked at his hands and amazingly the tremor was cured. Unfortunately, there was suddenly a volcano of energy brewing inside his gut. Shockingly, the fear seemed gone though. “Thanks for the distraction, Doll. I’ve got a pop star to save.”

Then Luvvi giggled, and it was the best sound in the world to Roland.

The truth was, Luvvi Dove was more than Roland would have ever dared to hope for. And she was absolutely right that he was interested in her. Really interested in fact. But the idea of Roland pulling someone wonderful like Luvvi into his family’s dark existence — that was disturbing to him. If he did do something like that and drew her in deeper, what would that say about him?

Asking her out would be something that would take a great deal of thought. Thought that he didn’t have time for right at that point. That was why it was a fairly perfect distraction.

Roland stood up, grabbed the doorknob and swung the door to the hall open wide. Then head down, he pushed his cart out into the hall, where he would be visible to everyone watching.

Roland tried to keep his movements slow, bored even. After all, the maintenance guys in this place had to clean shit, and they were most likely paid by the hour. Roland had seen the type.

One of the wheels on his cart had a slight squeak that repeated itself with every revolution of the wheel. And the contents of the cart rattled despite the fact that the floor was smooth. He wondered why until he looked down and saw that the cart’s wheels had seen better days.

Roland moved down the hallway towards the east wing. He was still aware of the security cameras, and he made sure that the brim of his cap kept his face concealed.

At one point two people came out of a door and walked forty feet ahead of him, deep in conversation. All Roland could do was keep his head down and keep walking. He felt the sweat slowly sliding down his back. Roland was praying that neither of those people would have any reason to take a closer look at him. Then the couple paused, turned, and left the hallway through a big purple door on the right. It was a strange looking door that they went through, but really no stranger than the other doors

that were on the third floor.

He was finally nearing the East wing.

Roland began to wonder how he would ever locate Emerald's room. This facility seemed a lot bigger to him in real life than it had on the blueprints, which him and Steve had studied endlessly. The rhythmic squeak of his cart's wheel seemed to grow louder and more distressed, the closer Roland got to the east wing.

By that point the nervous sweat had reached his palms, and cart's handles were slick in his hands. Perhaps his left hand had even regained a hint of the tremor.

Then only because of some atrocious karmic circumstance, the worst-case scenario occurred. The same two security guards that had searched Roland's maintenance room fifteen minutes earlier rounded a corner, and began walking straight towards him.

Cadence had just turned over the microphone and their little flatbed stage, to Emerald's fan club organizers. When the alternative press and law enforcement started arriving, both Cadence and Hopper felt that their diversion had reached its maturity.

The gathering had served its purpose, and it wasn't likely to be defused for a while at least. The fan club leaders would keep things going. However when Cadence looked at the faces of the security forces, she saw that there was a definite danger of things overheating. Cadence had heard the term twitchy trigger finger in old cowboy westerns, but this was the first time that she thought she was actually seeing it. Apparently the Duality security forces took their jobs way too seriously. Some of those guys seemed just one bad joke away from becoming a lynch mob.

Cadence couldn't help thinking that the absence of the regular media was notable but not really surprising to her anymore. And after all the days events — now that she had been given some time to think Cadence was beginning to figure out how society actually worked. Unfortunately the way that Cadence saw it, the existence of secretive and illicit partnerships and the manipulating of the public narrative, where foundational pillars.

Seeing it so plainly made Cadence see just how important independent artists, like Luvvi and Emerald, really were. Those artists weren't just entertainment like the way most people would think of them. In fact Cadence was only today beginning to grasp that artists most important ability might be to capture people's attention, despite all of the mindless noise that was already out there in society.

True artist's voices carried. They cut through the crap. And in that way those true artists were a safeguard for a free society.

All because they grab attention when nobody else could.

Cadence looked at her guitarist, Hopper. He had dropped a potato chip inside his guitar, and he was rattling it around to get it out. Many would consider Hopper deeply flawed, as boys went. Admittedly his artist's heart often had him adopting some fairly odd perspectives. But without inde-

pendent voices, voices that were creative enough and interesting enough to be heard, money and power would have absolute rule.

Like the mainstream corporate media that ignored news when it was happening right there inside their city. That was a perfect example of the danger that a society would face when they trusted the establishment too much.

But so long as they weren't sold out, artists were unbridled perspective. In their purest form they were incorruptible, and impossible to contain. They could capture the hearts and minds of the people in an instant. And they could do it, without needing to spend millions of dollars. Even advertisements, which certainly did cost a lot, worked exponentially better when the artists loaned their talents toward shaping that ad's content.

Through music, or visual art, or dramatic presentation, the artists could kiss those ugly toads, and turn dry corporate or political messaging, into influence. Of course that could work the other way as well, against the corporate and political messaging which was why real artists were always a threat.

Cadence thought about all the most gifted ones throughout history — the gifted ones that had in their own way, flipped the bird at society's power structures, which led the people toward a more independent path. Even right then in the nineteen-nineties, with the growth of grunge rock that had been coming out of Seattle, Cadence could see that influential personalities were already rising up.

Those t-shirt and jeans rockers were the designated leaders a groundswell of unfettered and unaffiliated youth. Their fans were embracing freedom in their thoughts and in their minds. And that type of freedom always had to be seen as dangerous to those in control. Truthfully, Cadence wondered how long Kurt Cobain would last.

That was the dilemma, though. A real artist could not be owned or contained, and true artists were never all that good at doing what they were told. The turbulence of a true artist's heart would prohibit it. In fact, true artists couldn't likely not be stopped without killing them — or locking them in a building and screwing with their mind.

Cadence felt angry for what Emerald was facing in that cold corporate building, just a parking lot away.

Cadence's understanding of why people would want to do any of this



to Emerald or Luvvi, had never been clearer. It choked her up to think of it. She knew that those young women were two of the very best of their generation. If the establishment could control voices like theirs, they would be a long way towards controlling the populace. And as Cadence had always known, most things were really about control.

From the brothel to Wall Street, people were living on a steady diet of lies. Three course meals of elusive ideas that filled them up and satisfied them for yet another workday. She could see the sickness in the people's eyes as they rode the trains to their offices.

Luvvi had come forward to join Cadence. "You two were amazing." She said as she hugged Cadence first, followed by Hopper Yves. "Roland's inside already. His plan seems to be working."

Cadence looked at her and wondered if Luvvi even had a clue about to how important she really was. Cadence knew that her cousin recognized the importance of Emerald's music, but did she recognize the importance of her own?

Cadence tried to take a mental picture of her friend. It had been days since there had been any real light in her eyes, and it made Cadence happy to see Luvvi so optimistic.

Then Luvvi's eyes shifted suddenly to a place over Cadence's shoulder. Cadence turned around and saw that Steve the bodyguard was standing right there. His presence caused Cadence to jump.

Steve leaned in close, and spoke in barely a whisper. "You three need to prepare for exfil."

"Ex-what?" Cadence said, confused.

"Exfiltration." Steve said, and then he clarified. "Escape, you know — run away." He added, when nobody caught his meaning.

Cadence didn't like him standing so close, so she took a step back from him. "Well why not just say that?" Predictably Steve said nothing. Then he just drifted away. All three of the Ragamuffins quietly watched him go.

Cadence shivered audibly once Steve was out of earshot. "Okay. Count Dracula is probably right. Anything could still happen, are we ready to make a clean escape?"

"No," Hopper said. "But we will be. Let's get to it."



TWENTY

The guards were coming straight at him.

A rapidly growing part of Roland wanted to run, while another part of him wanted to hide. But Roland could not indulge either impulse. Instead he kept his head down, his steps even, and his face disinterested. Roland steered his cart way to the left of the hall, giving the security guards plenty of space if they chose to walk past.

Then one of them chuckled. "I know that cart." He said, seemingly speaking to Roland.

"Et's the shit cart." Roland said, letting his voice slur through the words.

The guards laughed. "Who crapped themselves?" One of them said.

The last thing Roland wanted was a conversation, but at least his cover was holding. Then he had an idea. "One'a tha pop stars in east." Roland said.

The guards looked at each other. "Which pop star?" The guard asked.

Roland shrugged. "F'ck if I know. The green one in the — the'um. The green one in that F'ckn room. You know the F'ckn room."

"Pal-ul-Don." One of the guards said, giving Roland the exact information that he had been hoping for. Luckily, him and Leal had read Edgar Rice Burroughs extensively, and he knew that Pal-ul-Don was a place from one of the Tarzan novels.

Thank God for their pre-teen pulp fiction phase. "Yeah, f'ckn Pal-ul-Don f'ckn ape-shit place. Gotta polish the old Emerald."

At that one of the guards paused and stuck his finger out at Roland. "You can polish the floor and the furniture, but don't let me hear that you've been polishing any Emerald. You stick to your job and keep your shit hands off of the pop stars."

"Et's what I f'ckn meant." Roland muttered as he wheeled past, giving his cart a bit of an offended shove and picking up his pace.

When the guards were finally well past him, Roland felt his shoulders relax. It was accompanied by both exhilaration and a creeping, disembodied fear. A part of Roland couldn't believe that he had actually gotten away

with posing as the maintenance guy — or that instead of getting exposed, he had discovered Emerald's room. It was a godsend. At this pace, Roland would have this mission wrapped up in no time. Now that he knew Emerald's exact room and his disguise had worked, what could possibly go wrong from there?

Soon Roland was in the East wing walking on a floor of golden bricks, and passing by a different themed doorway every twenty feet or so. Some of the doors were named, while others were not. With all of that strange decor, it appeared as though the East wing really was the land of Oz. He promised himself that he would never watch that movie, ever again.

Eventually, Roland found the door. It looked like stone and had the words Pal-ul-Don chiseled into it as though cave people had made the sign. In the Tarzan book, Pal-ul-Don was a land of prehistoric half human primates. Simply because he was a fan of the books, Roland was wondering how the art directors at Duality Corp. might have chosen to bring Edgar Rice Burroughs's land, to life.

Roland took a breath and then reached for the door. The handle turned. He wouldn't even need a bump key to get past the lock. Inside it was dark and humid. The smells of vegetation and life greeted him as he reached his hand into the darkness, trying to find a light of some sort. He couldn't locate any switch by feel so he pushed his cleaning cart in, just glad to be getting out of the hall.

Once the door was closed, Roland pulled out his pen flashlight and shone it on the wall near the door. Shockingly, the portal had all but disappeared into a camouflage, of vegetation and rock. There was even a gentle musty breeze inside that room, and the sound of insects completing the illusion of being outside and in a far off jungle.

Obviously, if they had worked this hard to create their illusion, the light switch would be hidden, so Roland decided to complete his search by flashlight. As he moved forward the darkness seemed to crowd in around the narrow beam of his pen flashlight. He had no idea what dangers that darkness might hold.

Roland paused and thought about his situation. He was so close, and so many people were counting on him to come through for them. Roland told himself that he was in complete control and hoped that his nerves would believe it.

This type of stress was different than finding the right words at a high-

pressure meeting, or the spying that him and Leal had done on his father. This was different. He was way behind enemy lines and the consequences of him failing were beyond consideration — consequences that would impact his new friends. Roland felt his left hand begin to shake and he tried to push the thought of those consequences from his mind.

There was a dirt path that Roland followed deeper into the room, towards a massive rock wall that was filled with caves. In the book, those caves had housed a civilization of rock climbing monkey-people. The rock wall seemed to go up forever, but Roland knew that they were still inside. Somehow it was all an illusion.

Roland travelled along the wall, pushing his cart as he went. The jungle scene was so real that he half expected primitives to jump out of the darkness, into the path of his narrow flashlight beam. Then Roland saw a light, filtering through the large tropical leaves and he decided to go towards it.

Pushing beyond those leaves, Roland found a pane of thick glass, and inside that glass was the most disturbing thing that Roland ever thought that he might see.

It was Emerald, curled up naked inside a cave lying on her side in the dust. She looked strung out and exhausted. Dirt and grass clung to her skin and her hair, and a two hundred pound male chimpanzee squatted next to her, with a fist clenched onto her arm possessively. The ape was looking towards Roland.

Roland switched off his flashlight and eventually the creature looked away.

“Shit.” Roland said. Aside from the obvious depravity of it, Roland wasn’t at all prepared to deal with this. By the looks of it that chimp would be aggressive, and Roland had no doubt that the animal could easily kill Roland in an instant.

Then laughter came from a place to Roland’s left. It was the laughter of two men. A moment later light flooded Pal-ul-Don.

Feeling suddenly exposed, Roland almost ducked behind his cart out of instinct. But he realized how ridiculous that was before he did it, so he stopped himself.

Roland looked towards the laughter and was once again shocked by what he saw. “Shit.” He said again.

No doubt Roland’s face was betraying his emotions and the men’s laughter only escalated because of that. A flash flood of disappointment, shame, anger, and fear rushed through his soul.

After that initial rush, the second-guessing began. He sifted through the previous days events, trying to determine where they had gone wrong. By the time Charleton Ellis stopped laughing long enough to speak, it was only humiliation and regret that Roland was feeling.

"You're an imbecile." Charleton said.

The old man sitting next to Roland's father, leaned forward. "And you're on my land." It was Gonzalo Domingez. He was his Family's head, and Roland's father's equal. His empire spanned the entire west coast of America, including Central and South America. And it was true. Roland had been caught red-handed, interfering with the old man's affairs on what everyone would agree, was his land.

Over the last three days, Roland had been trying to manage several fears. Each and every one of those fears had been about this mission hitting a snag. But as problem outcomes went this situation was worse than anything that Roland had considered. Not only that, Roland was also struggling to contain a significantly personal, feeling of betrayal. The feeling was cutting him to his core, reminding him once again who Charleton Ellis truly was. It didn't take a genius to surmise that Roland's own father had pretty much sold him out.

So Roland composed himself, took off his stupid maintenance cap and mussed the hat shape out of his hair. "Would you believe that I got lost?"

Gonzalo Domingez laughed at the comment but Charleton Ellis went as silent as a courtroom. Unfortunately, Roland knew his father well enough to know that no amount of bullshit or charm could reduce whatever sentence he had in mind. Charleton would have been awaiting this moment fully prepared, and his gavel would sound soon.

Roland elected not to wait.

"Alright Father, you caught me. I admit it, I've been mischievous." Roland said. He was careful not to show the man any trace of his genuine fear. Neither did Roland show his Father the remorse that Roland kept as welcome proof, that he had survived the Ellis family with his soul intact. That thought gave Roland a sliver of satisfaction. If nothing else, him and Leal had succeeded in safeguarding Roland's humanity through to adulthood.

"Mr. Domingez," Roland said. "My one regret in all of this is that through my own misguided actions, I may have inconvenienced you in some way." Then Roland bowed his head, respectfully.

Domingez nodded back. Then the man sat up straight — he seemed satisfied by Roland's deference. "You should have come to me, son." Domingez said.

"Would you have released her?" Roland said to the man.

Domingez smiled. "Probably not, but you still should have come to me." Domingez point was clear. As powerful families with the ability to cripple each other, they ought to have discourse whenever it seemed that their interests might conflict with one other. Instead what Roland did, that type of unilateral action, it was seen as —

"Shameful." Charleton Ellis said. "My son, sneaking around with the commoners, playing spy. Ellis's do not, and will not ever — Sneak. You've disgraced us, once again. And if you weren't so pathetic already, I would put you inside that cage and let the monkey make you his bitch." Charleton's eyes were as dark as the void. "His second bitch." He then added.

"I'll take it." Roland said, knowing that it would never happen. "Let that be my punishment and I promise, that I will never dress as a maintenance worker to rescue any pop star, ever again."

Briefly, Roland saw what he had been looking for. Gonzalo Domingez smiled despite himself, but he was a disciplined man and he revealed nothing to Charleton Ellis.

For the moment Charleton was silent.

Roland knew that the next words he heard would include his sentence. He knew that his life in California was gone, as was UCLA and most likely any proximity to Leal. His father was about to throw the book at him. Then he would use every diplomatic means possible to clip Roland's wings.

Of course his mother would protest, and maybe the two of them would even come to blows, but in the end there was nothing on earth short of his Father's death that could commute Roland's sentence. But in his heart, Roland had been ready for all of it.

Despite his failure, he knew that what he had tried to do was important. Luvvi, and all of his new friends, had been worth the effort. Roland would accept all of his father's punishments, for decades to come if necessary, just to know that he had done everything that he could to protect his friends.

In that thought Roland found the strength to smile, remembering what Luvvi had said. She had wanted him to ask her out. At least he would always have that. The funny thing was, Luvvi would have been the kind of

girl that even Charleton Ellis would have had to approve of.

"Of course you know that there will be consequences." Charleton Ellis said. "Your servant boy, for starters. He'll be moving back east where he can learn an honest trade."

That was hardly unexpected. Roland pushed a big brown beetle to the side with his toe — it been trying to crawl up onto his shoe.

"And you'll need to make the usual apologies amongst the other Families. That shouldn't be too hard for you. You've had to do that sort of thing often enough.

"And you'll be leaving UCLA." Charleton Ellis continued. Roland's Father often sounded happy in moments like these. "All of this coastal air and sunshine seems to have tanned your wits. I think that the University of Chicago would be a much better place for a young man to learn discipline."

None of it was unexpected. Although the punitive measures were significant, Roland gave his Father little reaction, because he too had come prepared.

"And your accomplices need to be dealt with. The Ragamuffin Dolls will be executed immediately. Their corpses will be cold by the time sunset comes." Charleton smiled broadly. "Not Elen of course, she just can't seem to help herself, getting involved in situations like these." He chuckled. "Our fair girl certainly does love her intrigue."

Then Charleton Ellis laughed and turned towards Gonzalo. "It's not that I lack the stomach to authorize the sanction of a beautiful woman, but I sometimes still wonder if I might someday get the chance to experience the wonders that must reside up Elen's short skirts."

Gonzalo gave an awkward laugh.

Charleton Ellis wagged a conspiratorial finger toward his opposite. "Tell me you haven't thought the same, Domingez." Ellis chuckled.

Roland might have been made sick by his Father's comment, but he was already sick. After hearing his Father's statement about the deaths of his friends, Roland's thoughts were reeling. He had reach out to his cleaning cart to steady himself. Was this really happening? This couldn't be happening. Was his Father really going to have Luvvi and her band mates killed?

"But I think I love her!" Roland said unconsciously, because he had been hearing nothing but his Father's voice inside his head. *Their corpses*



*will be cold. Their corpses will be cold.* The words were on a repeating loop in Roland's mind, and it was only Charleton Ellis's voice that could have knocked Roland's thoughts out of that cycle.

"You twit!" Ellis said. "Don't you know? We all think we love her." Then Charleton was speaking to Gonzalo again. "My fool son believes there's some kind of a real connection between himself and the supermodel." Charleton Ellis turned back toward Roland. "She's a cock whisperer! It's nothing more than that. Yes indeed, we all feel it." He laughed at his own turn of phrase.

Roland felt his temper rising. "Not Elen, Dad. Luvvi Dove! You can't kill Luvvi, because I intend to make a future with her."

That got Charleton Ellis's attention. Even for a man as callous as Charleton, there would be no mistaking that his son had true feelings for the girl. Serious feelings. And despite the wrongs that they had committed that day and the trusts that they had breached, no proper Father would ever execute his son's first real love.

But Charleton Ellis was not a proper Father — so instead he smiled, and laughed. "You should have thought about that before you decided to start playing dress-up with your friends and sneaking around."

Roland felt his Father's words acutely, and he felt each and every pulse of his Father's laughter. And in that moment, Roland knew his Father far better than he had ever known him in the past. Better perhaps, than he had known any man. Suddenly Roland felt immensely sorry for his mother who had long-suffered the man's cruel authority.

But Roland was not Charleton Ellis's wife, or his servant, or his underling. He was a firstborn son. And still the man chose to strike at him so casually? Roland felt the anger in his heart rise to a point of calm. He found that he was touching a state that was far beyond explosive anger. Instead Roland was experiencing a livid rage, intentional in its purpose and committed to the remedy.

Roland reached into his pocket, and pulled out his walkie-talkie. He gave four quick pulses, telling his friend that he wanted him to pick up. "Leal," Roland said.

"Here." His friend said.

"I'm burned." Roland said. "And the Ragamuffins are targeted for sanction. Execute Sicilian Dragon."

It was a code word for something that the two of them had conceived of long ago, named after a nine-move chess opening that was intended to

take the King in twenty-seven moves, give or take. It was aggressive. Leal had designed the real life version as a shock and awe gambit, and it was only meant to be executed if Roland's survival was at stake.

Charleton Ellis and Gonzalo Domingez were silent as they eyed Roland from their seats.

Leal's voice came over the walkie. "Riot squa —" Roland turned it off. Then calmly, he took out the batteries and tossed them into the dense vegetation. Next Roland hurled his walkie-talkie at the wall, destroying the cheap plastic machine. "There, that's better."

"What did you just do?" Roland's father had an eyebrow raised. He appeared genuinely surprised. Silly man, he must have thought the game was over. Charleton Ellis mustn't have believed that Roland Ellis had any more moves left to him.

But as powerful as the Ellis Family head was, Charleton had never been as creative as Roland's friend — Leal.

"I tipped a domino, Father."

“RIOT SQUAD THIS IS STARS TWO, COME IN RIOT SQUAD.”  
Cadence grabbed the walkie and turned the volume down. “Quit screaming Stars Two, we’re not deaf — yet.”

“Get out, get out now!” Leal’s tone turned Cadence’s blood to water. “Go to your Uncles, and don’t stop if you wanna live.” There was a short pause, and then very intentionally, Leal asked. “I repeat, go to your Uncles. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Cadence said, knowing beyond a doubt that this was one of those times in her life when survival was not guaranteed.

“Go to ground Cadence. Take Hopper and Luvvi and go to ground. With extreme haste.” Something in Leal’s voice made Cadence want to cry. As much as he was implying that there was danger for the Ragamuffins, Cadence could sense that things were even worse for Leal. Fear for the boy suddenly grabbed her by the throat.

But that was panic.

Cadence took a breath. Panic was bad, and she had to keep her cousin safe. Cadence reminded herself that Leal wasn’t helpless, and any thoughts of disobeying him disappeared when she remembered that Leal was a planner. He had thought things through, and he was her boss on this mission. Cadence had sworn to follow his lead.

“Okay Ragamuffins, we’re gonna move the fuck out!”

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The three of them had unhitched from the trailer and were loaded into their truck in under sixty seconds. Hopper had shot into action as soon as Cadence had spoken. Hopper Yves jumped behind the wheel as Luvvi and Cadence climbed into the truck from the other side. “I’m going to save you two.” Hopper said, almost to himself as he jammed the pickup into gear.

Cadence felt the acceleration as she got pressed back into her seat and the V8 engine growled at Hopper’s demand. For a moment she wondered why she had let him drive, but it was too late now. Maybe they would even

need a madman behind the wheel before this was all over. Hopper had the truck headed away from Duality and going toward the main road when he pointed out two black sedans, moving quickly on an intercept course from off a side street.

“Gun it.” Cadence said. “They’re trying to cut off our escape.” The neighborhood that they were in was industrial, and there was only one road that could get them out of that industrial park — one road to take them away from Duality.

Hopper sped up, but not nearly enough for Cadence’s liking. So she slid from the passenger seat to right beside Hopper, and then she stuck her leg down to where he had his foot.

“Cadence, no —”

Why did Hopper even bother?

If you’re in a situation where you need to run, then you’d better be willing to run hard. Cadence stomped onto her band mate’s foot and pinned the gas pedal to the floor. The truck responded. “It’s gonna be tight Hops, but whatever you do, keep the car pointed towards freedom.”

“Shit, Cadence.” Hopper said. “They’re going to broadside us.”

“They won’t.” Cadence said as the truck picked up speed. It was tearing up real estate and Cadence could sense Luvvi’s fear. Cadence felt bad for her cousin, but Cadence had no doubts about what needed to be done. They were getting closer to the road that could take them out onto the main street.

“How can you know that?” Hopper said, panic squeaking into his normally deep voice.

“Because they wanna live.” Cadence said. “And so do we. But if we stop, we die. If they don’t stop, they die. That mean’s in a game of chicken — we win.” Cadence hoped that she was as right as she sounded.

Hopper did as he was told, but not without screaming at least as much as Luvvi was. Cadence kept a hand lightly on the wheel just in case. Her trust in Hopper in this type of situation was extremely finite.

The sedans touched their brakes just before impact. Those professional driver assholes did it late though. Late enough that it caused Cadence to swallow her heart for a second. But then Duality’s security henchmen used their fancy combat driving skills to fall neatly in behind the Ragamuffin’s truck.

“Wow, did you see what they did there?” Hopper Yves was in awe of

the security guy's maneuvers. Cadence took her foot off of Hopper's gas pedal. "Keep your speed Hops, fast means life. Understand?"

Hopper didn't say anything, but the set of his jaw and his grip on the wheel told her that he understood.

"What do you mean, fast means life?" It was Luvvi. "They can't kill us for staging a protest."

Cadence looked into the back seat where her friend was sitting. She looked terrified. "They can." Cadence said. "People get killed for all sorts of reasons. This one is as good as any. Trust me, Leal said it."

Luvvi didn't want to believe it. "He didn't say exactly that."

"It doesn't matter what he exactly said —" Hopper swung the car sideways, threatening the security thug who was intending to come along beside him. The black sedan pulled back. Cadence was glad they were in a truck. "It doesn't matter what he exactly said, what matters is what he meant. Trust me, Luvvi. Those guys are here for our blood."

Hopper was approaching the turn that would take them towards the freeway. But Cadence didn't like how the sedan's still seemed to be holding back. Cadence knew that the sedans would have better engines, less weight, better suspension, and she sure as hell knew that they had better drivers.

Then she realized it. The security forces were going to catch them on the turn, and the arrogant psychopaths knew it.

"Cut the corner!" Cadence screamed at Hopper's ear.

"What —"

"Cut the corner. Go through that vacant lot. Now!"

She had to hand it to their lead guitarist. When he decided to do something, he did it with commitment. Without slowing hardly at all, he yanked the wheel hard to the right. When he hopped the curb Cadence's head hit the roof, hard.

Luvvi screamed. When Cadence looked back at her, she was holding her head.

Cadence felt a touch of satisfaction to see those sedans looking a little bit less self-assured. They ended up having to follow suit by hopping the curb as well. Their machines were burning up dirt now, but they shouldn't be able to stop the Ragamuffins from getting onto the main road that led towards the freeway.

"Go that way." Cadence pointed out the best angle for escape. Hopper adjusted his bearing.

Seconds later they bounced again, but not as bad this time. Hopper steered them onto the asphalt with the truck's tires screeching as Hopper swerved a little.

They were approaching a red light. Cadence could almost hear Hopper's thoughts.

"Burn it." She said, making the decision for him. He did burn it, and he burned it with a rocker's style. Luvvi screamed again as another near collision with a random vehicle threatened to bring this game of cat and mouse to a quick and fatal end.

Cadence looked through the truck's back window at the intersection that was rapidly moving away from them. It was a pandemonium of cock-eyed and stopped traffic, and that jam up had successfully widened the gap between themselves and the sedans.

"Keep your speed, Hops. This is the getaway part."

"What's after the getaway part?" Hopper said as he steered.

"Usually the misdirection part, followed by the second getaway part." Cadence said. "We have a gap, and now we gotta figure out how to use it."

"Your disguises!" Hopper said. "You could use your school uniforms."

"You think the uniforms will make them think we're someone else when they catch us and pull our truck over?"

"They're not gonna pull our truck over, not while the two of you are in it." Hopper said as he pulled onto the freeway on ramp. "— Because I'm going to let you out and then keep on driving it. It'll be just like getting off and sending the horses up ahead. Like they do in all the old cowboy shows."

Cadence didn't like the sound of that, not at all. "It's not like the cowboy shows —" Cadence raised her hands up on the dashboard protectively as Hopper Yves pulled onto the freeway doing ninety. Cars honked at him in protest but those protests faded quickly, as Hopper left them with only his exhaust to protest to. Then Hopper changed lanes aggressively, the momentum of it shoving both Cadence and Luvvi to the right.

Cadence readjusted in her seat. "It's not like the cowboy shows because in the cowboy shows the horses keep running and all the people are safe."

Hopper didn't say anything. His blue eyes were fixed on the traffic in front of him. Then he glanced at her and in that moment Hopper looked to her like a proper hero. The guitarist knew exactly how different it was

from the old cowboy movies, but that wasn't an issue for him.

Watching Hopper, Cadence had to admit that there was a lot more to that boy than usually had a chance to show itself. Maybe it was impulsive, but what the hell, this was an impulsive moment. Cadence slid across the seat towards Hopper again. But this time instead of stomping on Hopper's foot, she grabbed his crotch and kissed the side of his lips as he drove.

It almost got them killed. But Hopper swerved and saved them at the last possible second. "Cadence, what the hell!" Luvvi screamed at her friend from the back seat. "Did you notice that he's trying to keep us alive?"

"I noticed." Cadence said, staring at Hopper's lips. She watched as the Ragamuffin Dolls guitarist's lips twitched into a smile.

"Rock an roll." Hopper said, then the boy donned his much more familiar, Marmaduke grin.

Cadence began looking backwards for the sedans. She wasn't sure if she was seeing them or not. The traffic on the freeway was confusing, but her instincts told her that the Duality guys were back there.

"You need to put on the costumes, I've got a plan." Hopper said. "I'm pulling off the highway soon."

"Where are you going?"

"Where the two of you can blend in — Chinatown."

Their lead guitarist was right. With disguises, two black haired school-girls could virtually disappear into Chinatown. "That's smart." Cadence told him.

"You sound surprised."

"I am." Cadence said. "But what about you, Cowboy?"

Hopper looked at her. "You think I spent three days planning for this without making a plan for myself?" There was mischief in his expression. "Get changed." He said.

"Alright, but keep your eyes on the road." Cadence told him. He didn't of course, but what boy would have. Cadence was just happy that he didn't roll the car while he was sneaking those fairly blatant looks at her and Luvvi in their underwear.

Luvvi helped Cadence get the wig on right, and then Cadence did the same for her — it was easier than using the truck's mirrors. "Now remember," Luvvi said. "Walk like an Asian school girl, not a rocker."

"Good point. Legs tight, small quick steps." Cadence said.

Looking back, Cadence could definitely see the sedans. They were gain-

ing ground. Better drivers, better machines. Looking back at those cars, she just knew that they were up against trained killers, and she found herself wishing that they had packed along a rocket launcher.

Then she felt the car shift. Hopper was pulling off the highway. The change made her suddenly apprehensive. "Do you know this neighborhood?"

"I do." The Marmaduke grin was back.

"Near a school would be good."

"I know."

"They're not that far back."

"I know."

"Are you sure that you have a plan?"

"I do."

"Well did you —"

"Cadence, leave the boy alone and let him drive." Luvvi said. "You sound like a mother hen."

Cadence ignored her friend. "You know how much we care about you, right Hops?"

Hopper's smile faded, and he looked over at Cadence. "I do."

"Okay then."

---

Hopper rounded a corner and punched the brakes in front of an alley. Cadence and Luvvi were barely out of the car before Hopper hit the gas again. Cadence's gut was clenched in fear as she watched the car leave.

"C'mon." Luvvi grabbed her hand and pulled her into a run. They ran for about a hundred feet, and then quickly slowed to a walk. Just after they began to walk they heard the sound of not one but two speeding cars roaring past behind them. It caused the girl's shoulders to tense.

Moments later Luvvi laughed. "We're free!"

"We're not." Cadence said. When she was younger, she had found herself running, just like she was today. And just like Luvvi, there was a point where she had felt that she had gotten away clean. But she had been a fool.

Men that were good at the chase, noticed things that a regular person would not. Like the fact that the car that they were pursuing was suddenly several hundred feet closer than it had been the last time they saw it. A man that was good at the chase would then ask himself if perhaps, the car



had made a stop. Then, just to be sure, he would order some of his people to check it out.

“We need to run.” Cadence said.

She led Luvvi on a sideways course. It felt good to break into a run – it felt familiar. Like being at home, but rather than home being a place, it was a feeling of release — a physical expression of Cadence’s terror.

To stay less conspicuous, they slowed to a jog when they reached a busy street. But the less Cadence felt her legs working, the tighter the knot in her stomach became.

Eventually they got to a place where there seemed to be plenty of girls in school uniforms, so they drew up, and started walking.

“Where are we going?” Luvvi said.

“We have to get to Kurtz.” Cadence said.

“That’s too far to walk.” Luvvi said.

“I know.”

They had been walking on that same street for about three minutes when in the distance, obscured by the sun’s reflection, Cadence saw a sedan of the same dimensions as the ones that had been chasing them. Paranoia was the rule of the street, so she grabbed Luvvi’s hand. “C’mon.” She pulled her cousin into a bubble tea place.

As Cadence held the door for Luvvi, she realized something that she hadn’t ever noticed before. Cadence absolutely hated looming death. It got on her nerves, and it made her mouth pucker up.

But however this day might turn out for herself, Cadence intended to make sure that Luvvi lived through it. She was willing to do whatever it took.

“Look at the menu, but don’t turn around.” Cadence said as she positioned herself in front of her cousin and giggled into her hand, to obscure her face. Then she saw the sedan. It was her pursuers. “Shit.”

They were on the prowl, and knowing these guys, their training would make them diligent hunters. Cadence thought about all the times in the past that she had been chased by idiots — stronger than her and often faster, but dumb as plugs. With those guys all you had to do was turn a corner to lose them.

Not the Duality guys though. They would have a methodology. A person on foot could only travel so far, so fast. So in a sense these guys would have a pretty good idea of where her and Cadence were, just by figuring out where they could not be yet.

The car was the obvious threat, but there would be foot soldiers as well. Cutting off possible channels of escape. And she didn't even want to think about the likelihood that the security guys had called in reinforcements.

"We've got to get out of here." Cadence said to Luvvi. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Maybe we could steal a motorcycle?"

"What?" Cadence looked at Luvvi. Her cousin was only kidding.

Cadence squinted her cousin a warning smirk, then she looked out the shop window, hoping for some inspiration from the streets of Chinatown. What resources did they have? Her best ideas had always come to her on the street. A truck drove by, covered with completely unreadable characters. They were scrawled across it in red.

Beautiful red.

"There's our answer." Cadence said. "C'mon." Cadence grabbed Luvvi's hand and pulled her behind the bubble tea counter, into the employee's area. Then she scooted her to the front, herding her cousin towards the back alley.

Some Chinese lady had squawked at them as they slid past the counter, but Cadence and Luvvi reached the door that would get them into the alley. Luvvi was about to just push it open, when Cadence's feet started to tingle. Of course that was a strange thing to happen, so Cadence thought for sure that it had to mean something.

She grabbed Luvvi by the shoulders and held her back. "My feet are buzzing." She muttered to Luvvi.

"So what?" Of course Luvvi didn't understand, she had been raised too well.

"You can't ignore something like that."

Cadence thought the situation through. Had it been something about how the sedan had been driving? Slow and ominous down the middle of the street. Too slow for traffic, really. Slow enough that a guy, a really fit guy that was running, might be able to keep up. Otherwise, why drive that speed?

Luvvi was looking at her — uncertain of what Cadence might be up to. "What are you thinking?" Luvvi said. Then the Chinese lady began squawking at them again and rapidly closing in on their location. Cadence looked in her direction. At least the woman didn't have a meat cleaver in

her hand.

"I think that the sedan is herding us." Cadence said.

"Herding?"

"Yeah, they want us to go out the back." Cadence cracked the door to the alley. "Keep an eye out for a guy on foot." She told her cousin.

Then Cadence turned around to meet the crazy squawking Chinese lady who was totally yelling at Cadence, inches from her face.

But Cadence could yell too.

She couldn't yell in Chinese, but in Cadence's experience cussing matches transcended most cultures. Cadence could tell right away that the lady would be small, but good. Yet despite that lady's foreign moves, Cadence wasn't about to be outmatched.

In fact, when the Chinese lady wagged her finger, Cadence began to wag her own. And when the lady's angry Cantonese generated a shower of spit that splattered outward like a fountain from her thin lips, Cadence tried to match the humidity of her own verbiage.

It went on for several seconds, and Cadence held her ground bravely, as only a Ragamuffin could have. She stood firm until from behind her, Cadence heard Luvvi say softly, "A guy just ran by. Fast."

That was interesting news. Apparently Cadence's feet had been right.

Knowing now that the match was nearly done, Cadence laid a verbal barrage of swear words onto that tiny but fearsome woman, that might have crumpled a lessor foe.

In Cadence's head though, she was only aware of time's passing. She counted out the seconds as she imagined the Duality guard's progress, moving down the alley. When enough time had passed, Cadence threw up her hands in submission. "Okay," Cadence said. "We're leaving."

The Chinese woman stopped screaming immediately.

"And we're very sorry for intruding on your lovely business." Cadence said.

The woman looked off guard.

"Tell the lady you're sorry, Luvvi." Cadence said.

"We're very sorry." Luvvi said, then she bowed to the woman, Chinese style.

At that point the woman laughed. "Luvvi Dove?" She said.

"Nice to meet you." Luvvi said.

The woman laughed again, but then quickly resumed the business of herding Cadence and Luvvi into the alley. She did seem a bit nicer about it

though.

The girls slipped through the door and squatted right where they were, against the wall. "Stay here." Cadence whispered. Then she crept away from the wall to take a look down the long alley.

The guy was still visible, moving like an Olympic runner, but he seemed to be graciously running away from them.

First Cadence wondered how long the guy might be able to maintain that pace. It seemed unnatural. Her next thought was much more depressing. She wondered what kind of guys these Duality guards might be, that were pursuing them so efficiently. And where had they gotten their training?

Not likely from Duality Corp.

Cadence scrambled back to Luvvi's side. "He's there, but he's running away from us."

"How did you know?" Luvvi said.

Other than the feet explanation which she knew her cousin wouldn't accept, Cadence didn't know if she had an answer for that. Where does a street kid get her sense for survival? God knew that if Cadence would have had to wait and learn from experience, she'd have been dead before she was twelve.

"Fear." Cadence said. That probably summed it up as well as anything. Then she thought of another thing. "Oh yeah, and desperation."

Luvvi arched an eyebrow at her cousin. Cadence knew that her cousin might be confused, but Uncle Kurtz would have understood. "Come on." Cadence took Luvvi's hand and walked with her down the alley, away from the running man.

"Where are we going?" Luvvi said.

"To find a truck. The Ragamuffin's are going to stow away."

---

There was a truck just three blocks away from them. The only problem was that it was a meat truck, which meant refrigeration.

"Is it possible that we could die in there?" Luvvi said.

"It's possible that we could die out here." Cadence tried to re-frame the situation for her cousin. Then she pulled Luvvi closer. There was no lock on the sliding door. Cadence reached up and flipped the lever, releasing

the latch on the door. It took a couple of yanks to get it open. "Disgusting." Cadence said as she looked into the meat truck.

"It's like a carcass cornucopia." Luvvi said.

That made Cadence laugh, but Luvvi's humor was most likely enhanced by the stress. Cadence noticed that her mouth was dry again. "Let's partake." Cadence said. Then she climbed up onto the truck bed, and made her way towards the front of the truck where she found a convenient hiding spot. "Okay, hide here, Luvvi." Then Cadence went back to close the door. There was also a handle on the inside, so at least they wouldn't get trapped. She grabbed the handle and closed the door and the truck got instantly dark. "Unless they use a padlock." Cadence muttered to herself.

"What?" Luvvi said.

"I said, where are you?"

"Follow my voice." Luvvi Dove sang softly in a vocal scale that she had been doing as an exercise for years. Cadence went towards the soft sound.

Eventually she found her friend, but not before copping a feel off of several meat products. Yuck. On the not-so-bright-side, it was unbelievably cold inside that truck. When Cadence reached Luvvi, she squatted down and pressed herself close to her cousin. "I don't think we'll die in here." Cadence told her best friend — meanwhile her own imagination was busy trying to make a liar out of her.

Luvvi said nothing in response, but Cadence was leaning against her cousin. She could feel Luvvi's rapid heartbeat, thumping through her chest. They were concealed, and Cadence had reassured her, but Luvvi was still terrified.

Smart girl. In Cadence's experience, bravery was highly overrated. In a contest, she would bet on fear, any day. That made her think of Hopper, though. He had been so brave when he was letting them out the truck and leading those killers away from her and Luvvi.

Cadence didn't like how thinking about Hopper made her feel, so she pushed it from her mind and reminded herself of what her job was. *Keep Luvvi safe, at all costs.* Cadence swallowed hard, knowing that she had to be willing to die to keep her cousin alive.

It was the least she could do to repay Kurtz and Scarla for their kindness. But she was also going to save her cousin for the good of the world. Luvvi's talent was a gift, from God to the people. It would be fitting for Cadence to exchange her life in order for the music to live. Don Mclean

would have understood.

Within a few minutes the truck was roaring to life and soon they found themselves moving. Their first stop was only about a block away and Cadence began to wonder if she had chosen the wrong truck. After a short discussion, the Ragamuffin Dolls decided it would be prudent to stay put.

The trucks next stop happened after about ten minutes of fairly steady driving. Far enough in Cadence's estimation to get them out of the Duality Corp. thug's dragnet.

When the girls got out, the L.A. sunshine felt like a summer promise on their skin. "Thank you, God." Cadence said, grateful for the warmth. Then she looked around. They were definitely still in Chinatown. Cadence wondered how foolhardy it would be for them to take a bus.

That was how they usually travelled. Of course the fact that it was their usual mode of travel was about the best reason that Cadence could think of, to stay away from the buses. "What now?" Cadence wondered to herself.

"We could find a phone." Luvvi said. "We could call Kurtz."

But as soon as Luvvi said it the fear that had been rolling around inside Cadence's gut, turned a flip. "No, we can't do that. If they've got wiretap surveillance in place the call would tip them off to our location. They have men on the ground here, and the assassins would reach us long before Kurtz could." Even though Cadence hadn't thought about it before she said it, she knew that she was right. The fear knew. Or maybe it was the desperation?

"Then what can we do?" Luvvi said. "Find a bus?"

"No."

"What then?"

"Let's steal a motorcycle."

---

It wasn't easy finding a Harley in Chinatown, but eventually Cadence found one that she believed she could steal. The idea of stealing another bike did cause her a bit of unease, considering how her last motorcycle theft had gone. But since then she had learned a whole lot more about motorbikes. Hell, her and Kurtz were practically besties with half of the outlaw bikers that they encountered.

So when she saw the bikes, the first thing she did was check to see if she knew any of the owners. That might have simplified things, but this wasn't her lucky day. All of them were strangers.

Oh well, they might be on their own, but that wasn't unfamiliar ground for Cadence. The two of them approached the bikes. "Stand lookout here." Cadence said to Luvvi.

"What do I do? Just stand here?"

"Fix your makeup."

Luvvi reached into her backpack and found her purse. Her makeup was inside it. Seeing that Luvvi was all right, Cadence drifted closer to the motorbike that she was gonna boost.

She had the headlight off of it in record time. Then the wires were cut and twisted. She started the machine and held the throttle at a comfortable hum. "Get on." Cadence said, satisfied with her improvements over last time.

Luvvi was beaming. The best thing was, there were no enraged bikers charging towards them.

Cadence pulled into the street, wobbled, but then got her equilibrium. Seconds later they were rocketing away from the assassins, and very soon from Chinatown itself.

They chose to ride through town on back streets, not taking the obvious freeway entrance to go back to West Hollywood. When they were far from Chinatown and finally did pull onto the highway, it was with a feeling of euphoria. The wind and the sunshine caressed their skin, and the power of the motor vibrated underneath them. At least they felt free, despite both of them knowing that this game was far from over.

When Cadence reached the exit that would lead them to Kurtz and Scarla's house, she was so happy to get there that she pulled off the highway before she had given it any real thought. As soon as she chose that exit though, the fear in her gut chided her. It had been a stupid move. Cadence's carelessness was rewarded by the sight of a black sedan, pulling out from a parking lot and then taking up position a few cars behind her.

"Oh, shit."

Luvvi turned to look.

Apparently two Chinese schoolgirls on a hotwired bike looked suspicious in this neighborhood. Cadence told herself that they should have dropped the costumes, but if she were being honest it wouldn't have mattered. These guys were good, and they would have recognized them

regardless. Cadence's mistake was in taking that exit.

She twisted the bike's throttle and felt the machine surge forward. Cadence knew that she wasn't a great rider, but she wasn't going to surrender without at least giving it a good run. Luvvi grabbed her tighter from behind.

"Hang on." Cadence said. Then she squeezed the brake, decelerated hard, turned to the right and gunned it. Luvvi screamed.

Behind Cadence, she could see through her mirrors that the sedan was having a hard time keeping pace. A motorcycle could accelerate and brake quicker than any car could. By the time the sedan got up to speed again, her and Luvvi had gained ground. So she did it again — and again.

All the while they were getting closer and closer to Kurtz's house. "We're gonna call him!" Cadence screamed back at Luvvi.

"What?"

"We're gonna call Kurtz. Get a quarter out."

Cadence could feel Luvvi shifting her weight behind her as she rummaged through her bag in order to find a quarter. Cadence slowed down just a bit to make sure that Luvvi didn't get bucked off by a bump or anything, while her hands were busy.

Then Cadence saw the sedan. Unfortunately it had somehow gotten in front of them. Those psychopaths must have guessed where she would go, and then moved to cut her off. Who were these guys? And how could Duality Corp. mobilize these types of operatives inside of a few minutes?

"Hang on again." Cadence said before braking hard once again. Then she turned right and headed down the street at a sprint. She saw another road that looked inviting and Cadence almost turned down it, but the fear in her gut gave her nudge.

Was it possible that Cadence's turns weren't random enough? Was she being too predictable? Cadence sailed past the place where she had wanted to turn, went down a different street, and then rolled her bike up onto a driveway.

She stopped.

"What are you doing?" Luvvi said from behind her. Cadence ignored Luvvi's question, and pulled in beside the house, rolling up to the back gate. "Open it." Cadence said.

There was a brief moment of doubt, but then Luvvi hopped off the bike and went to swing the gate open. Cadence rolled the bike into the back



yard, slowly.

Once in the back of the house, she looked at the yard. It looked pretty typical, and luckily, there was a back gate. "Hop on." Cadence said to her cousin.

They were through the yard in seconds and riding down a side street, slowly this time. Cadence also hoped, somewhat quietly.

She had realized that her problems hadn't all been because of predictability. It was due to a lack of stealth as well. The Harley was loud, with fat pipes designed to attract attention.

Therefore useless to her and Luvvi.

"We're gonna stash the bike." Cadence said.

"But we're still ten blocks from the house. Shouldn't we just go there?" Luvvi said.

"We'd never make it."

Cadence cruised slowly down another street until she saw another house with a gated back yard. They repeated their previous methods, and parked the Harley in that yard. Then Cadence revved the engine hard for five seconds, and left it running. It was a diversion. Hopefully the thugs would circle in on the bike while her and Luvvi jogged home.

They had gone a block and a half when a well-muscled guy in a button down shirt stepped around a corner ahead of them. He was looking the other way though, so Cadence had to yank Luvvi off of the sidewalk and into a hedge, before the guy swung his head around.

"Ouch!" Luvvi said.

"Shh."

Cadence knew instantly that they were in a crappy hiding spot. Depending on the angle that this guy chose to approach them at, the Ragamuffin's could end up being completely exposed.

"We gotta move." Cadence said. "But if we make any noise, we're dead."

Luvvi and Cadence retreated to a place right up against the front of the house. Cadence couldn't see the guy, but that was just as well. It meant that their stalker would not be able to see them either. Then staying low, they slipped around to the side of the house. Luvvi could have been quieter, but they didn't make too much noise. On the side of the house, they found another high fence, and a gate.

Cadence was reaching for the gate's handle when Luvvi swatted it away. "Look." She whispered, pointing towards a small sign.

*Guard Dog*, it read.

When Cadence saw the sign the fear that had been surprisingly quiet in her gut, punched her hard. Seconds later what might have been a bear crashed up against the fence, and the biggest deepest bark known to canine-kind echoed throughout the neighborhood.

Cadence didn't need to look. She knew that their position had been compromised. She looked around quickly for an avenue of escape but she didn't see any option where the assassin wouldn't be able to casually plant a nine-millimeter round inside of each of their brains.

As the psycho dog crashed and tore at the fence, Cadence realized that they had only one option left to them. "We're going over." Cadence told Luvvi. Again the creature crashed and clawed at the wooden barrier. Cadence made a basket out of her fingers in an invitation for Luvvi to put her foot in it, so that Cadence could boost her over the fence.

On the other side of those one-inch planks the dog was going utterly berserk. Luvvi looked at Cadence's hands, and then she looked at the rattling fence. "I'm not sure —"

"Livvi Dove, you will put your foot into my hands and get your rock star ass over this fence." Cadence's tone was firm.

Luvvi muttered something under her breath, but then she put her foot into Cadence's hands. Cadence didn't wait for a single second, she just gave a tremendous shove. Luvvi disappeared onto the other side but Cadence scrambled over the fence about a second behind. Throughout the world, the hopping of fences were juvenile delinquent's true super powers.

The dog on the other side was huge, with massive teeth, and white fur thick around the neck, that made a sort of mane. Likely even a knife would have had a hard time penetrating that.

The interesting thing about the massive animal, was that he seemed to be smiling. Luvvi was backing away from the bouncy dog, with her hands raised up in surrender. But that shaggy white Mastiff's body language clearly told Cadence that the big beast wanted to play with her.

Seeing Luvvi's distress, Cadence grabbed a stick and slapped her thigh. The dog looked at her. Then she scraped the stick on the grass, which drew the animal towards her. "Go, Luvvi. I'll catch up." But Luvvi hesitated. "Go." Cadence tried to keep her voice quiet.

The dog was right in front of Cadence, barking those crazy loud barks. She needed for the dog to leave her alone so that she could follow her

cousin. She waved the stick and the Mastiff's eyes followed it. Good enough.

Cadence threw the stick. "Go get it." She whispered. But the dog just watched the stick land on the grass. Then it looked back towards Cadence. That grin was still there.

Then he started bouncing around her insanely, and Cadence ended up retreating, not unlike her cousin had. She wasn't even close to the back gate yet when from the corner of her eye, Cadence saw the guy in the button down shirt, flying over the fence as easily as Cadence had.

Everybody, including the dog, paused. "Nice fence hopping," Cadence said. "Were you an orphan too?" It wasn't her best material, but it was all that her mind came up with.

Cadence prepared her cranium to receive the nine-millimeter round by making her last thought about Luvvi. She was incredibly glad that she had told her cousin to run.

The assassin, having no sense of humor, said nothing. But the hollow voids that were the man's eyes told Cadence everything that she needed to know. His eyes and intentions were death, and everybody there knew who the real predator was.

That was when the Mastiff changed. In an instant the big white dog's smile was gone as he recognized the very task that centuries of breeding had created him for. The white mastiff's hair bristled as the animal's full one hundred and fifty pounds of muscle were launched towards the assassin, without hesitation.

It was an incredible shift, from a happy and playful puppy to a lethal pastoral guardian — as brave as he was selfless.

Cadence thought that the assassin was going to get his ass kicked for sure, but somehow he sidestepped the beast's charge. Wow, that was quick. The mastiff turned on the spot though with the agility of a much smaller dog. Then he launched himself again.

This time the assassin was ready and Cadence saw a flash of steel. After that second pass the dog's coat was streaked with red and Cadence was no longer sure about who the victor would be. Cadence had to do something.

She looked around for something to throw, while the white mastiff barked again. This time it was a different sound. It was not a warning to back off, or a call to play — it was something else.

Cadence found a dirt lump the size of her fist, and she threw it at the

assassin as the mastiff charged the knife again. This time the dog's teeth found some flesh on the man's arm, and he even screamed out. But Cadence had seen where that knife was pointed, and she wondered what the mastiff's chances were, of survival.

Her dirt lump hit the man in the chest, for which he offered Cadence a momentary look of irritation, before refocusing onto the task of dispatching Cadence's weakened guardian.

It was at that point that Cadence realized that she should have run as soon as the fight had started, but she hadn't wanted to leave the dog. Her gut was telling Cadence that it didn't matter anymore. There were no more moves and it was all too late.

Cadence's gut told her that, right up until the unexpected happened.

Bounding down the stairs at speed, from the second story deck, another huge white creature with an even heavier build, landed firmly on the grass. Without hesitation, that new beast took four powerful strides before launching itself at the assassin from behind.

The second mastiff was a natural born killer, with its wide mouth it seized the Duality Corp. henchman by the neck, and then gave the man a few powerful shakes. The shakes ensured that the mastiff's teeth were properly severing the Duality killer's carotid artery.

"For fuck sakes." The assassin gasped, sounding convincingly disappointed as his life's blood ran rapidly out of him. His eyes stayed fixed on Cadence as he died, trying to communicate — what exactly? Then the mastiff gave another hard shake and dropped the limp meat from its mouth.

It would not have been an exaggeration at all to say that there was blood everywhere. Interestingly, both beasts climbed the stairs to their upper deck and laid down as though little to nothing had transpired.

Then the dog's owner came to the door. "They saved my life!" Cadence called out to him. "That man was chasing me, with a gun and a knife." The man looked confused but he would have to figure things out for himself, because Cadence made herself disappear from the yard like only a street urchin could.

Cadence caught up to Luvvi at the park. Her cousin was crouched behind a tree, looking across an open field.

“Don’t even think it, Doll.” Cadence whispered.

Luvvi jumped at the sound, she hadn’t heard Cadence’s approach. Cadence squatted beside her cousin. “This is the most important part, and the most dangerous.”

“Shouldn’t we just make a run for it? We’re so close now.”

“Short answer — No.” Cadence said. “We go to the Happy Mart and use the phone. After that we’re going to hop fences and travel through the neighbor’s back yards. Come on.”

Cadence took Luvvi by the hand and forced her into the cover of some bushes. Her and Luvvi were just a block and a half away from the Happy mart, and as far as Cadence could tell, there was no reason that the killers would ever think that they would go there. Its not like the assassins would be expecting the Ragamuffins to need an emergency sugar fix.

When her and Luvvi got close the Happy Mart, they decided that they would approach it from the back out of caution. But once they were in the back, they found that door locked. There was a quick discussion about tactics, and since they couldn’t think of any sneakier ways of getting inside, they eventually stepped out into the open and just walked in the front door.

After running and hiding for so long, that took some nerve to do. Luvvi was positively jittering. “Where’s Hopper?” She kept repeating to herself once they were inside.

“Shush.” Cadence said to her, seeing that her cousin was damn near over the edge. Cadence had seen Luvvi get that way a couple of times before.

“But where’s Hopper now?”

“Shush.” Cadence had to pry the quarter out of Luvvi’s sweaty fist, before she dropped it into the payphone. The dial tone was briefly interrupted as the quarter slid down the shoot. Then Cadence dialed her home phone number.

There were one and a half rings.

*Hello?* Scarla sounded exhausted.

"It's your foster-daughter." Cadence said. Scarla hated that label. In fact, she refused to accept that Cadence was anything less than a full daughter. The fact that Cadence had used the term foster-daughter would send a message. That word had been a long established code word, Kurtz's idea, signaling distress.

The phone was quiet for a few seconds as Scarla would have been trying to remember Kurtz's lessons.

*You took your time*, Scarla eventually said. *Are we both just supposed to upset our lives, now that you've decided to call?* In the code that Kurtz had established, Scarla was actually asking for information about the severity of Cadence's situation, and the timing of the crisis.

"It's not like you care." Cadence said. "You can turn the damn house onto its ear for all I care, but me and Luvvi are coming home right away." Translation: This shit's gonna get real, and we're coming home.

*How many minutes?*

"At least twenty." Cadence said. Scarla would divide that by four and get the real timeline. "Is Kurtz home?"

*Yes.*

Shit, that meant no — he wasn't home.

"What's he doing?"

*He's in the attic, hitting the bottle.* Scarla said, which likely meant that Scarla had gotten tired of Kurtz moping around the house because Cadence was gone. So she had sent him on a walk down the alley to pick bottles.

"Well, you should get him."

*I will.* Scarla said. *We'll wait in the front for you two.* Translation: Go to the back of the house.

"Fine." Cadence said. "Do whatever you want." Translation: Please, please, please, please, I need you to be there for me.

Cadence hung up the phone and it felt like her throat was going to choke up. But her terrified cousin was there watching, so Cadence kept herself strong. "C'mon, Luvvi Dove. Let's go outsmart some assassin goons." Cadence said.

"Where d'you think Hopper is now?"

"Shh."

Cadence led the way back towards Kurtz and Scarla's house. She had no doubts at all that the Duality Corp. goons were listening in on her call with Scarla. So hopefully the misinformation that she had given to her Aunt would help Cadence and Luvvi sneak past the goon's perimeter.

Cadence put her cousin into a well concealed spot beside one of the neighbor's houses. "Wait here, Luvvi. I'm going to take a look." Then she ran to look into the neighbor's back yard. It looked clear, so she vaulted the fence in one movement.

Once in that yard she moved as quickly as she could to a spot behind a bush. Admittedly, Cadence was terrified. In her mind, she was expecting to be shot at any second.

Dammit, just as always Cadence found that she was only comfortable when she was running. She moved towards the far fence and peered through the boards.

It looked clear.

But was it? It was time to make a decision. Cadence didn't like that she had left Luvvi alone. But she had scouted this far, so she decided to scout the next yard as well. Cadence vaulted over the fence, moved to the far side of the yard, pushed through a weak spot in the hedge, and once again looked between the boards. No movement, no signs of trouble.

Cadence shifted her position, and looked again.

She didn't like this situation — not at all. There were no guarantees in this game that they were stuck playing, and the stakes were way too fucking high. But the only thing that Cadence knew was that they had to get themselves to Kurtz's side — somehow. Preferably to the inside of Scarla's house, because if Cadence had to guess, Kurtz would have the place set up like a fortress. Cadence thought she even remembered him talking about the fortifications some years back.

*Why would our house need fortifications?* Cadence had asked.

*Makes it easier to kill the guys trying to get in.* Kurtz had told her matter of factly.

*Oh,* Cadence said. She had just been getting to know him then and didn't want to sound stupid by asking more questions, so she had left it at that.

Cadence backtracked her path and got herself to where Luvvi was waiting. "See anything?" Cadence asked.

"I didn't look." Luvvi said.

Cadence couldn't believe that her cousin wasn't even scanning the ter-

rain, but she knew why. Luvvi had always been a hunker down and hope for the best kind of hider. Cadence was the one that liked to stay aware. Oh well, hiding was probably the safest thing for Luvvi, anyways.

“Okay, we’re going to go over the neighbor’s fences and through the backyards. You ready?”

“How many yards?”

“Four.” Cadence said.

“Okay, but I want this to be over.” Luvvi said.

“I know, me too. But once we’re in the house, Kurtz will know what to do.” For the first time since this chase began, Cadence thought about why Leal might have sent her and Luvvi, to Kurtz. He had been adamant about where to go. But really when you thought about it, for Cadence to go home at all was a bit of an obvious move, a fact made all the more evident by their current situation.

But Leal wasn’t stupid. Not at all in fact, the guy had a real knack for command tactics. If he had told them to go home instead of anywhere else, he would have had reasons. Cadence thought that she might know at least a couple of those reasons already, but still she was still wondering what him and Roland were up to. By the sound of Leal’s voice, Cadence guessed that the two of them were about stir up some major manure.

One of Leal’s reasons was obvious — these guys were good. Very good, which meant that hiding wasn’t a real option. In her day, Cadence had run from every type of pursuer, from mall cops, to the FBI — even a fat Yakuza lawyer, although that was a fairly short chase. But these guys were better by far.

The other thing that Cadence thought, and it was only a guess, was that the black sedan guys were probably just one part of their real problems.

As far as Cadence could figure out from reading between the lines, the Ragamuffin Dolls might have just been marked for death by some of the world’s most powerful people. And that thought gave the term, nowhere to hide, an extremely tangible feel. Certainly Leal would have been in a position to know the full extent of the danger that the Ragamuffins were facing. And knowing that, he had told them very clearly to go find Kurtz.

So that was what Cadence intended to do, regardless of how stupid this next leg of their journey seemed to her. Cadence would deliver her cousin to Kurtz and Scarla’s house safely, if she had to walk through fire to do it.



Although a hail of bullets were more likely though.

"Let's go." Cadence said. Regardless of the danger, it felt good to be moving again. She boosted Luvvi over the neighbor's fence and the two of them followed the same elusive path that Cadence did when she had been scouting.

Hop. Hide. Sneak. Peek. Hop again.

Luvvi was as brave throughout it as a friend could be. With everything that she had been through, Cadence believed that Luvvi Dove was still an ass-kicker. She felt proud as hell to be Luvvi's best friend. And maybe someday, if Cadence was able to keep her safe, Luvvi's brilliant creations would reach the world.

Her songs would free people's souls, and unlock truth in their lives. Luvvi's artist's heart would not be denied its voice, for so long as Cadence lived and breathed. Which was hopefully longer than the next two minutes.

Thinking about Luvvi's music made Cadence think about Emerald. Since the rescue plan had been so quickly aborted, Cadence had to assume that Roland and Leal's extraction of the pop star was unsuccessful.

It was a bleak thought. But maybe Kurtz, and even Emerald herself had been right when they had said straight out that she was beyond hope. Cadence had been around and seen enough foul stuff that she could believe in hopeless. Luvvi wouldn't of course, but what did Luvvi know about the heart of darkness?

They were two yards away from the next fence when Cadence sensed that she was being watched. And her instincts told her that it wasn't the good kind of watched.

Her eyes scanned the yard first, and then the house. It was there in one of the upper windows. "Go! Run." Cadence gave Luvvi a shove towards the fence, and then she squared her shoulders towards the figure in the upper window and reached into her backpack.

The figure in the window was already ducking to the side, so Cadence started herself after Luvvi. She kept an eye on the window and rummaged in her backpack for something other than underwear and socks, until she found a hairbrush.

The guy looked out the window again and Cadence yanked her hairbrush aggressively. She pointed the handle at the guy like it was a gun. He ducked away once again and Cadence knew that after that, she would be likely out of tricks.

Luckily, Luvvi was halfway over the fence when Cadence caught up. She vaulted the fence and landed just as Luvvi was collapsing over the other side. The wooden boards began to explode with bullet holes as Cadence grabbed Luvvi's hand and ran her sideways along the fence, toward the house.

The shooting stopped.

One more fence would bring them into Kurtz's yard, and hopefully safety. Cadence was imagining the shooter, he would have left his upper window nest and if he was as smart as he probably was, he would be down the stairs already and moving into the yard. His mind would be fixed onto the pursuit of the cheeky girl that had tricked him with nothing more than a backpack and a hairbrush.

"Luvvi, we gotta run."

Cadence led her cousin towards the hedge that ran along the fence. It blocked their way into Kurtz's yard. Luckily, Luvvi had been accidentally throwing things over that fence for years, and she knew the openings in the hedge from long experience. She pulled Luvvi through one of the holes as she tensed at the sound of the fence on the other side of the yard rattling behind her.

Shit, the killer was in the same yard as them.

As a barrier the hedge provided little comfort. Cadence turned towards Luvvi and mouthed that she needed to be quiet. Luvvi nodded.

The girls moved carefully in the space between the hedge and the fence. Kurtz's yard was just inches away from them. They couldn't hop the fence there though. They had to move sideways because of a shed being in the way, and a big pile of industrial crap that Kurtz must have been saving for a rainy day. All of that junk was blocking Cadence and Luvvi from making a clean getaway. Of course there was also the matter of the fence, and the poised assassin.

On the other side of the hedge, Cadence could hear the killer moving very carefully. The situation that they were in felt nearly unbearable. Not surprisingly Cadence desperately wanted to be running instead of crouching behind a stupid porous row of not so bulletproof bushes.

Very slowly and carefully, they had to move between the hedge and the fence. Cadence had her hands on Luvvi's shoulders, leading her. She could feel her cousin's shaking.

Finally, they reached the spot where they would be able to hop the

fence without encountering Kurtz's junk pile. Luvvi's expression showed Cadence how badly she wanted to make a break, but Cadence motioned for her to wait. In Cadence's mind she could see the killer, gun trained onto the hedge, waiting to shoot towards the first sound that he heard. And as fast a runner as Cadence was, she knew that neither her nor Luvvi could outrun a bullet.

Crap, the assassin had them effectively pinned down. And what were the chances that he hadn't called in reinforcements? The possible arrival of those reinforcements made this L.A. standoff, completely unsustainable. But for the moment whatever sounds her or Luvvi made, the gunman would be certain to cluster his shots onto.

Unless —

Cadence leaned over and whispered into Luvvi's ear. Luvvi nodded agreement. Cadence bent over and braced her hands onto her own knees. Meanwhile, Luvvi picked up a stone. Then she climbed very carefully, onto her cousin's back.

Cadence found herself feeling thankful that Luvvi had always been a featherweight. As she was dealing with Luvvi's weight though, Cadence was realizing that she herself possessed all the trunk strength of a cello player. Cadence's legs and body were shaking.

Then, when she was ready, Luvvi tossed the stone. It clattered.

Fifteen feet away from them, bullet holes began ripping the shit out of Kurtz's fence. It was lucky for the gun thug that Kurtz wasn't around yet, otherwise he would definitely make that guy pay for damages. At the sound of the first shot, Cadence wondered how far away her uncle might be. Cadence felt Luvvi's weight disappear off of her back, as her cousin jumped the fence and landed in the backyard.

Shit, Luvvi had made too much noise hitting the ground.

She should have thought of that.

Cadence flattened herself instantly against the earth as bullets buffeted the wood right above her. Dammit, she couldn't stand up without getting shot, and she was worried about Luvvi. Had she managed to get clear of the bullets? Cadence heard the gunman moving steadily closer to her. By the sound of his footsteps, he was only about six feet away, on the other side of the hedge.

The shooting had stopped.

Cadence slowed her breathing. She could smell the dry dust and weeds that were practically sticking into her nose. Then she saw the hedge shake

just a little.

The guy was moving the branches. He was trying to push through, just two feet away from her. Cadence didn't dare move. On the other side of the fence, Cadence heard another rock being tossed, but the gunman was too smart to fall for Luvvi's trick twice.

He was pushing the hedge harder now, apparently no longer concerned with stealth at all. Cadence found herself praying the way that Scarla had taught her to, but she still knew that any movement from her would spell death.

Maybe this would be the way that she went — hedge pistol to the head, at close range. At least Luvvi was safely on the other side.

Then, the killer gave up pushing. The hedge had held.

What would happen next?

Electricity jolted through Cadence's brain when she heard the killer accelerating into a run on the other side of the hedge. Cadence's conscious mind hadn't even pieced together what was happening when her own body exploded upwards into standing, reached for the top of the fence, and jumped.

She was at the peak of her arch, flying over the fence when the gunman pushed through the hedge's opening, fifteen feet away. He was turned and looking right at Cadence. She had been falling as the killer's gun swung towards her. Cadence's feet were accelerating her towards Kurtz's pile of industrial crap even before they touched down. The gunman was hunting by sound though so bullets sparked off of the exposed metal as Cadence dove.

Luvvi was there as well, leaning against the reassuring bulk of several inches of ten-year-old, USA steel. So that was why Kurtz kept this stuff around. Just then, the back gate to the alley swung open and Kurtz slid through like a mist.

Just inside the gate, Kurtz reached down and pulled a short piece of rod iron out of the earth. Cadence had seen it there before, but she had never asked or wondered what it was. Then Kurtz lifted it over his shoulder and held it like a spear. He smiled quickly at Cadence before focusing his attention on the part of the fence that Luvvi and Cadence had just jumped over.

Seconds later the gunman vaulted silently over the fence but he seemed disappointed when he met a four foot rod iron spear, which en-

tered his chest just to the left of his sternum. The guy might have even been dead before he hit the ground.

Kurtz had the man's weapon a half second later. Then he gave a low whistle. Scarla drifted in through the gate from the back alley.

"I think we should go inside." Kurtz said to Cadence and Luvvi.

Cadence felt herself beginning to weep, and she didn't even have to look to know that Luvvi was there already. Scarla gathered the girls up and brought them quickly inside.

Kurtz was moving around his yard, doing something. But before he finally came in, he stood at the door and yelled out to the neighborhood. "Fair warning. The mines are armed! I'd suggest you all just stay away." Then Kurtz stepped inside.

He was gentle with Cadence and Luvvi as he questioned them about what they had been up to. When they told him, his face registered nothing. Cadence and Luvvi told him everything as Kurtz mostly stared at an array of monitors. They seemed to show the outside of their house from every angle.

Cadence was surprised the monitors were there. "When did you get these? Are they new?"

Kurtz smiled. "No, but normally my Mexican poncho is draped over the screens."

"Oh yeah." That seemed possible.

Then a sharp sound came from the front of the house. Kurtz didn't move, but it had Cadence and Luvvi obviously concerned.

"Just a bullet." Kurtz said. "Not to worry, I got the place reinforced."

"What if they use a bigger gun?" Cadence said to her Uncle.

"Like a rocket launcher?" Kurtz said, but truthfully Cadence hadn't gotten around to worrying about that yet.

"Yeah." Cadence said.

"Not a problem." Kurtz smiled. "Me and the boys did a lot of work on this house before me and Scarla moved in. Unless they bring a tank, we're okay. Why don't you tell me your story."

After Cadence and Luvvi were three quarters through their explanation, Kurtz interrupted them and turned to his wife. "Scarla, hon? Can you call up the kids Uncle Foster and Uncle Sebastian, and tell them that the weasel just fucked a duck?"

Scarla frowned at the request. "You idiots couldn't come up with a different signal phrase?" She said.

Kurtz smiled. "We wanted to use something with a Christmas theme, but the five of us ended up bickering like old hens over whose idea to use. So we used the horny weasel instead. It was a compromise."

"I'm sure that it was." Scarla said, disappearing from the room.

"Hang on, ladies." Kurtz said, staring at one of the monitors. "I'll be right back." Then he left the room as well.

The Ragamuffin's were alone for several minutes before Kurtz returned. "Okay," he said. "Continue."

Cadence and Luvvi finished their story as Kurtz sat in his armchair like a statue, taking it all in. When the girls were finished, there was nothing but silence.

"You done?"

They nodded.

Kurtz looked at his watch. "Okay, girls. I'll be a few minutes." Then he left the room and drifted into his bedroom.

Scarla returned before Kurtz came back. "Where is he?"

"In the bedroom." Cadence said.

Scarla went to check. A minute later she returned and sat mechanically in Kurtz's armchair, staring into space.

"What's he doing?" Cadence said.

"He's gone."

At first Cadence watched the security monitors but there was only so long that an intelligent person with an abundant dose of attention deficit disorder, could stare at empty screens. Eventually her eyes got tired and she looked down at Luvvi, who had fallen asleep against Cadence's side.

Scarla was prowling the house with her shotgun, but so far nobody had dared to intrude. Cadence's instincts told her that the fight was no longer in the neighborhood. After all the time that had passed, the conflict had to be somewhere else.

Being alone with her thoughts was torture for Cadence. What could she think about that wasn't depressing as hell? Not Leal and Roland's situation, not Hopper, and not even Kurtz. Even the gunman's impaled body in the back yard brought no comfort to her. And to think that none of this would have ever happened if Cadence had simply listened to Emerald or Kurtz's warnings.

Cadence sat in Kurtz's old room, staring at the man's odd choices of decorations, and she thought about the world that she lived in. Mostly the darkness.

She thought about the heart of darkness.

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At about three A.M. Cadence's Aunt Scarla started to pray. She had been talking to the Christian God when Sophia noticed a change in the room. And judging from Cadence's response, she might have felt it too. Sophia left the girl and moved to a position in the corner, in case the oracle decided that she had to make a quick getaway.

While Sophia was watching, she wondered what she was really even doing there. As a matter of fact, why had Sophia experienced any of this? How many months had it been? Did she really need all of this darkness in her life? Unfortunately over time, Sophia had come to love these people, and the situation was already messing with her head.

Sure, she had found what she knew were clues. Something curved, metallic and sharp. It was something, but it wasn't much. And even though Sophia was an oracle and was supposed to appreciate small details, it didn't change the fact that she thought the clues she had sucked Studor's balls.

Yet she could still see that solving the mystery would be important. Her, Alastar, and Demsie were still going to face danger before they left their bed in that cave, of that Sophia was certain. This vision that she was a part of, it was a message. She reminded herself how things that didn't make any sense could all bridge into realization at any moment. She would stay focused, and do her job. Sophia didn't intend to let her allies down.

She was going to figure it out. Sophia would not let go of this vision until she had found the information that would keep them all safe.

Sophia couldn't help noticing the room again. It was getting really bright, so she backed off into the hallway.

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It was morning when Kurtz finally entered from the bedroom. Cadence's eyes were dried out and crusty from lack of sleep and crying.

"You left us, you son of a bitch." Cadence greeted her Uncle.

"You were never alone." Kurtz said as he lowered his weight onto the floor beside her. "Your Uncle Abe was just outside."

"Abe was here?"

Kurtz nodded.

"Shit." Cadence said. "I could have been sleeping. Or trying to sleep at least."

Luvvi was waking up. "Uncle Kurtz?"

"H'lo darlin'." Kurtz smiled at his niece.

Luvvi was staring at his clothes. "You're covered in —"

Luvvi didn't say the word blood, but Kurtz rose to his feet anyways. "I should shower." He said.

Scarla was behind him. "Should we still be worried?"

Kurtz smiled. "Whatever for?"

Scarla didn't look amused. She was too tired to be amused. "Wasn't there a bounty out on our girl's heads, levied by a corporate oligarch?"



Scarla said.

Kurtz smiled. "That was a while ago and it was far worse than that, but yeah."

"So what happened?"

"Me and my team, along with the girl's boyfriends happened. We took care of it." Kurtz said.

"Boyfriends?" Cadence said.

Scarla wasn't going to be distracted so easily, though. "What? You five Delta guys killed the entire multi-national corporation by yourselves?"

Kurtz chuckled like a satisfied toad. "You forgot the boyfriends. And we didn't kill it, we decapitated it." Then Kurtz turned around and headed for the shower.

It was Luvvi's small clear voice that stopped him. "What about Hopper?" She said.

Kurtz laughed. "Hopper Yves? He's a silly son of a bitch, isn't he? Brave too. He put his life on the line for you today. Now I see why you two girls hang out with him." Then Kurtz laughed and shook his head again as he headed off.

Cadence could tell that Luvvi was still confused. "I think that means Hopper's okay." Cadence said to her.

"Why doesn't he just say that?"

"Because he's Kurtz."



Kurtz's explanation had been vague enough that Sophia felt compelled to see it for herself. So she rose up high over the city, and looked toward Beverly Hills where Roland and Leal's mansion was.

She couldn't see much of anything because in that morning light, the denizens of the darkness seemed to be churning with a turbulent fervor.

What could all the fuss be about?

Sophia drifted down to street level and felt the electricity of change coursing through the earth. The people on the sidewalks seemed to sense it too. Across the street a guy in a cardigan sweater whistled at a girl much too young for him, in front of the liquor store there was a fearsome argument over hockey. And a businessman sat in a cafe as proud as a Persian cat, smiling optimistically as he read the newspaper. The evidence was all around her.

What? Wait a minute! The back of the newspaper had an article in the business section, and a photo. A corporate giant had passed away late last night in the hospital after a medical emergency.

Charleton Ellis was dead, and his son Roland would take control of the Family assets.

Something underneath Sophia reached up and touched her. She screamed before rising up — higher and higher to escape the ensnaring darkness. This place had changed. It was no longer habitable to her. She needed to leave before all of the change grabbed a piece of Sophia's mind, and tucked it somewhere irretrievable.

Sophia shot skyward like a rocket, her cries all but failing to drown out the agony that wracked her soul.

God no —

---

Awake.

The dying light of the fire was reflecting off of the roof of the ancient cave. The smell of smoke was wafting off of the still smoldering fungus

bricks. The feel of Alastar beside her, her boy —

What? Where was her boy?

Sophia sat up, and as soon as she did so she realized that she was not alone. Their enemies had found them. A cold laughter echoed from the darkness — they were watching her, coldly relishing her fear.

How many of them?

More laughter.

Too many, Sophia decided. But where was Alastar? Had they taken him?

Then to Sophia's ear, the laughter seemed to lessen, just a little. A moment later it lessened again. Sophia reached across Demsie and nudged her to wake her up as she threw a bit of fuel on the fire. "Demsie, wake up."

Then from back in the darkness there came a sound that Sophia recognized as the stifled protests of a dying man.

Where was her boy?

Then yet another scream told her what she wanted to know. Her boy Alastar Daivie, a man half dead from his wounds, had risen early. And he was going to destroy as many of their enemies as a younger and weakened Station resident possibly could.

Suddenly Sophia wanted to be fighting beside him. If they were to die, she would much rather die with him. Sophia surged to her feet, but before she had gained her knees she was knocked backwards. Tackled really.

"Demsie, get up!" It was too late for Sophia, her enemy had her, but Demsie wasn't pinned. Not yet.

As the growing flames began casting more light inside their cave, Sophia recognized her attacker. It was Jing Yu, a particularly sadistic killer whose looks might suggest that he hailed from North Eastern Russia.

Jing Yu was smiling down at Sophia from on top of her as she struggled to unbalance the killer's proficient mount. She shifted her hips underneath him, and tried to crab into a better position.

Then Jing Yu grinned and brought his head down onto Sophia's straining face with a crushing head butt — it staggered her. When Sophia's eyes regained focus, he was still smiling at her. The son of a bitch was toying with her.

Then Sophia felt Jing Yu's weight shift suddenly, and Sophia quickly acted to improve her position. It was Demsie, she had body checked him,

but now the killer had a hold of her as well.

“Not on my watch!” Sophia reached out and grabbed Jing Yu’s arm two on one, weighing it down with her body weight. Demsie was still struggling to break the killer’s grip though, so Sophia squirmed towards Jing Yu’s wrist and bit towards the older resident’s radial artery.

Jing Yu didn’t like that a bit.

In fact he screamed in rage and Sophia found herself suffering repeated blows as she tried to block the Russian’s psychotic ground and pound. As the beating continued, it became evident that the only reason Sophia was surviving that barrage was because of her ally’s continued pestering of Sophia’s attacker. It was a cruel price to pay, but at least Demsie had gotten herself loose again.

“Demsie, grab a weapon!” Sophia suspected that a weapon would be her friend’s only hope of stopping the bigger, more skilled fighter. Unfortunately, since Sophia had been tackled she had been feeling a lump underneath the small of her back, which she was pretty certain, was her knife.

As Sophia blocked more of the killer’s ape style hammer fists, she watched Jing Yu getting hit in the back of the head with one of their unused fungus bricks. It was useless as a weapon, disintegrating on contact. Jing Yu actually turned towards Demsie to laugh at her for a moment.

Sophia took the time to look around the room for a something that Demsie could use.

Her eyes caught Alastar. He was as pale as a ghost from the blood loss, but he still had two enemy residents clumsily entangled in each other as he shifted in and out of their attack range, nicking and slicing vital structures with the rusty blade that he had in his hand. No, he had two knives. Her boy was beautiful in his destructive power and the fact that he fought to protect her and Demsie, nearly made Sophia’s eyes well up.

Seeing Alastar rekindled Sophia’s determination. Even half dead he was fighting, and she had to make herself worthy of that effort. Even though Sophia had gotten herself pinned to the bed underneath a two hundred pound Neanderthal, she was not going to let herself take this beating.

Her thought about the bed seemed intriguing for some reason. Familiar even.

The danger was upon them, and Sophia had not yet gotten out of her bed. The vision, or the dream — or whatever it was, had foretold it. It had

been trying to give her a message.

Cold. Metallic. Sharp and curved.

It referred to the weapon that Demsie so desperately needed. But where was it? Alastar must have been using Demsie's knife along with the rusty one. He must have somehow lost his own. Cold. Metallic. Sharp and curved. As far as Sophia could see the cave was nearly empty, except for the worn out junk left by the cave's previous homesteaders.

Sophia felt the sharp sting of what it felt like to get stuck in the face by a lagging right cross. The concussion knocked her head to the side. It was an earthquake. After experiencing it, Sophia had no doubts about it being a lucky thing that she had partially blocked it.

Sophia rose up her left arm protectively to guard against the next blow, which would surely come. Demsie's efforts to assault Sophia's attacker were essentially useless. Her loyal friend had tried kicking, choking, and fists, but she didn't have the body weight to threaten this caliber of fighter.

Demsie needed a weapon.

Sophia turtled as another blow hit her, mostly on the arm. But that blow was enough to make Sophia feel certain that they had to find where the weapon was hidden. How much more of this could she take?

Alastar appeared to have his hand's full. He was no longer darting in and out of his enemy's range. Someone who Sophia couldn't recognize in the cave's darkness had grabbed Alastar from behind. And without his mobility, the Legend was taking damage.

Sophia knew that she needed to help him before the killing blow came that would prove to be all of their undoing. Her eyes scanned the cave frantically. Simple furniture. Spent torches. Pottery debris. A rock shelf with useless trinkets and —

There it was.

A thing that she recognized.

It was a pot. A clay pot with a fat base, and with Gaelic writings carved onto its side. She had seen that exact pot before in Kurtz's darkened living room.

Sophia couldn't believe it, but now it made sense. Even in the dream that pot had made Sophia feel a certain way.

"Demsie, it's in the —"

An overhand right buffeted Sophia. Then suddenly Jing Yu got his left

hand free of Sophia's control and he followed up with a left-handed blow to her ear. That one made a popping sound inside of Sophia's skull.

Despite the punishment that she was taking, the only thought on Sophia's mind was telling Demsie what she knew. But she couldn't do that until she had at least one of Jing Yu's hands controlled.

Sophia shifted her weight again and was surprised by the fact that Jing had been somewhat off balance. So she bucked. Seeing what was happening, Demsie body checked Jing Yu again. The combined effort made him brace with his hand on the mattress beside Sophia's head. And that was enough of an opportunity for Sophia to tie up the killer's left arm in her own once more. Jing pulled away trying to strip Sophia's grip for a moment, but then gave up, realizing that he could still beat the oracle's brains in just as easily with his right hand.

"Demsie!" Sophia cried out. "Look in the pot —" Another blow landed near Sophia's temple. "The Gaelic pot."

Another blow.

And another, partially blocked.

Sophia knew that she was dazed. Her eyes were out of focus and unable to stop —

Another blow on her cheekbone.

Jing Yu's outline was a blur and Sophia's hearing was like she was underwater. She managed to block the next punch, but she could feel her body weakening as exhaustion threatened to leave her utterly defenseless.

Then she heard the sound of a clay pot breaking. It seemed a long ways off.

Another blow struck her near her eye but strangely it didn't even feel painful. In fact it was almost warm — dreamlike. The sound of rushing water coursed through Sophia's ears, and her pupils focused onto Jing Yu's sadistic snarl as he drew back one more time to deliver the strike that in her heart, Sophia knew would very likely be, her coup de grâce.

Jing Yu was drawn back, and ready to strike. But he stayed drawn back.

The blow didn't come.

Jing Yu screamed out in a combination of pain and rage, as he jerked his hand from behind him. It seemed caught on something.

Then Sophia saw Demsie come into view. She was pulling with all her might, her whole body leaning back as she strained. In her hand was a

great curved blade, but more like a spike, shaped almost the same as an ice pick.

The curved metal was pierced through Jing Yu's wrist, dripping blood, as the killer fought to jerk Demsie hard enough that she might lose control of the weapon. Sophia could see that it was a hard fight for her friend to be battling against Jing Yu's full strength, but Demsie was holding on. Where most men in Jing Yu's position might have given up, Jing Yu was not most men. He was a psychopath, Station trained, and he would want the victory more than he minded the pain of that blade in his wrist.

Sophia shifted and bucked to help her friend. Perhaps together they could —

Jing Yu had one free hand now. He had been using that hand to control Sophia, but in a reckless and bold act — one that only a psychopath would have chosen, he had changed his tactic.

Dismissing Sophia's arms as a threat, he shifted onto the offensive by clamping his vice-like hand around Sophia's much smaller throat. Sophia felt the choke as soon as it was applied, and she knew that it was on tight.

She used her hands to beat and pry on Jing Yu's grip upon her, but the man was enraged and he wasn't about to ease that grip until he was certain that Sophia's life was forfeit.

That was the way that his kind thought.

You put a weird icepick thing through my arm, and I'll kill one of you just to make sure that you're both hurt just as badly as I am.

Demsie screamed at Jing Yu when she saw Sophia, and the azure shades that her skin was no doubt turning. But Jing Yu was laughing at her, no longer even fighting to get his wrist free of its hook.

Sophia pried at his thumb and she felt the killer's strength respond, tightening. Then she tried to lift her hips and found that it only increased the pressure on her neck.

And she was exhausted.

And her thoughts were getting dim.

And she saw her beautiful friend fighting, pulling on that hook.

And she began to wonder why.

Why had they fought so hard, for all these years? Just for an ending like this one? Sure, it had been delayed for a while, but it was just as certain.

But there was one surprise though. Sophia found a type of peace in defeat.



The oracle's arms were exhausted, and it felt good to be able to lay them down. To quit prying, and striking — forever.

It was good to feel peace.

"Sophia, no!" Her friend Demsie was distressed, Sophia could see that distress, but not likely for long. In a few minutes more peace would have them all.

Sophia's vision was black around the edges. And tiny lights were flashing in that darkness.

It was beautiful.

They would all have peace soon, as long as her boy would accept —

Jing Yu screamed and his grip loosened. Consciousness and sight flowed back to Sophia's mind as she gagged and sputtered. Sophia pushed Jing Yu's hand away from her throat.

But there was little point to that.

Her boy was standing over him and had plunged his blade deep under Jing Yu's jaw, up towards his brain. It was a throat for a throat. Alastar had sent his own message to Jing Yu.

Jing Yu screamed again, but it was a pathetic little sound. His anger was gone, and the peace that he had been offering to Sophia would be forever his, for the mistake of daring to set his will against the Legend's.

"Are you okay?" Alastar was above her, his beautiful black eyes showed his concern.

"I was —" Sophia's voice failed her "I —"

"It's okay," Alastar said. "We have their supplies. We'll be okay here for a couple of days." Then the Legend pushed Jing Yu off of their bed and let his weight fall beside, but mostly on top of Sophia.

"I think I might be passing out." Alastar said. "I'm sorry. Maybe Demsie ca —"

Her boy had done everything that his body could do. Sophia felt a tear roll down her own cheek.

Demsie was there a moment later. "I'll take care of both of you." She said. "You can breath okay?"

Sophia nodded that she could, but she didn't want to try her voice again.

"I've got it. You sleep now, Ragamuffin Luv." Demsie said.

---

Consciousness is a peculiar thing.

Most people that had never lost consciousness assumed that it was like a light switch.

On — or off.

But it was far from that. In fact most times in a human being's experience, consciousness was experienced in underwhelming shades of grey at best. Which might seem sad, but strangely the truth was far more wonderful.

Because just as with the simple beauty of an excellent pencil drawing, the greys of consciousness had a tendency to be more colorful than any practical mind would have ever considered possible.

And sometimes the grey's turned into light.

Sophia opened her eyes.

Demsie was there, looking at her.

"Hello, beautiful." Demsie said.

Sophia looked around. The carcasses were all piled up in the corner of the cave. She looked at herself, and saw that Demsie had cleaned most of the blood off of her, as well as Alastar who was sleeping deeply beside her. Sophia didn't know what to say, because words couldn't express the gratitude that she felt for her friend.

Demsie giggled happily because she knew exactly what Sophia was feeling. "I made soup." Demsie said. "It might even be good for your throat."

Sophia tried to speak. It hurt, but her voice was there for her. "Thank you." She said. Then Sophia remembered what Demsie had called her, before Sophia had passed out.

Ragamuffin Luv.

"Did you see it too?" Sophia said.

Demsie looked at her and giggled again. "Who do you think is right for her, Hopper Yves or Leal?"

Sophia was too shocked to answer. But a warm feeling of wonderment took her as she tried to piece together what category of paranormal or psycho-spiritual event might have just taken place. The soup warmed her even further as her and Demsie talked about the experience.

They had been so engrossed in comparing their dreams that neither one even noticed that Alastar had woken up and was listening.

"I wonder how it all happened?" Sophia said, one more time.

Alastar laughed quietly, drawing the girl's attention.

"Why are you laughing?" Demsie said.

Alastar looked at her. "Because in saving our lives and keeping us from freezing to death, you girls burned the mother load of psilocybin mushrooms. That fungus that you threw on the fire was hallucinogenic. We were likely all about as stoned as any person has ever been, on any tribal vision quest in the history of mankind. There's the explanation for your weird dreams."

"But we both had the same dream." Sophia said.

"And that happens, what? Twice a week with you two?"

"But it didn't seem like a dream. It was vivid." Demsie said.

"Hallucinogenic mushrooms — you dosed yourselves." Alastar said.

Sophia knew that they would never actually agree, and truthfully she didn't know if agreement was even necessary. The discussion persisted as the three of them finished their soup, and then Demsie declared that Sophia and Alastar should get more rest.

"It's a long climb down, and you two need to heal up." She said.

A few minutes later, the cave was quiet but Sophia still couldn't shake her sense of wonder. It was natural to wonder, and the story hadn't quite been finished yet, had it?

Had the songs of the artist's heart ever reached the world? Or would they? Or had Duality Corp. won out in the end?

Luvvi and Esmeralda and their musical gifts had been meant as a blessing — for the people of their generation. They were to be a sort of provision for a dissolute people, in a morally dispassionate age. The people would need their gifted ones if they were ever to see. If they were ever to recognize the lies that their world hid in plain sight, disguised as tapestries to be admired.

They needed Hopper Yves and his one true rock song — to waken those sleeping masses from their misery. To make them realize that their hearts had been long dead. Sedated by the endless cycles of meaninglessness.

They needed Luvvi Dove and her singer-songwriter's heart, and the perspective that she could bring to everyday things. And they needed Esmeralda, as Emerald, a pop diva with a gypsy's heart so enticing, that nobody would be able to take their eyes off of her once her soul became bared through her music and her insights. And maybe they even needed Cadence, to defend the treasures and to keep the artists focused on what

was important. To lighten the load of leadership that could get to feel heavy upon the rest of them.

Whatever the truth was, Sophia wanted to know it. So very quietly, she sat up. When she reached across to grab a brick of the mushroom fungus, she found that Demsie's eyes were wide open — and smiling.

"Me too." Demsie whispered, taking the brick from her friend's hand and placing it onto the smoldering fire for her.

Sophia lay back down, stretched her arm across Alastar's abdomen. Then she took Demsie's hand and watched the smoke curl upwards towards the ceiling of the cave. As she watched the smoke she thought about the past days. The journey up the mountain, finding the grave, and the bundle —

The bundle.

"Demsie, was the scroll —"

"Burned." Demsie said. Hearing it broke Sophia's heart. "It happened in the fight, somehow." Demsie said.

Sophia didn't say another word. Every generation needed hope, but some needs were never meant to be met for those who were Station raised.

## EPILOGUE:

“Luvvi, we should just leave her alone. She doesn’t even want to see us anymore.” Cadence had been giving that same message to her cousin for two whole days, but Luvvi had it in her head that they had to try one more time.

Emerald was in town for her Green World Order tour, and as far as Luvvi was concerned, this would be their last chance to try and talk some sense into their friend — and try to get her to slow down.

“She agreed to see us. If she didn’t want to, she would have said no.”

“Luvvi, she was just being polite.” Cadence said. “When I say that she doesn’t want to see us, I mean that she’s not looking for change — not anymore. Not since —” Cadence didn’t say the words, but the specter of Duality Corp. was never far from either of their minds.

It had made a dramatic impact upon Luvvi. Cadence had never seen her friend’s songwriting more prolific, or more unbridled. But with Emerald, the experience had done the opposite.

Perhaps the best proof of that was in the title of the song that she was belting out as Cadence and Luvvi made their way towards the concert security guys, who would hopefully let them backstage. The song title was Lovegasm. It was about a young girl’s pining for true love, but then coming to the realization that a robust series of orgasms could do the trick for her as well.

It wasn’t exactly Black Sabbath’s War Pigs, but Emerald’s fans seemed to be lapping it up. It probably didn’t hurt that Emerald was wearing a thong crammed so far up her ass that with the gyrations she was performing for her audience, at least half her viewers would have collective boners pleasant enough that they might not even notice the mindlessly repetitive chorus — or the fact that her chord progressions were derivative.

The look in Emerald’s eyes as she stared out across that teaming landscape of churning flesh, was one of chemical surrender. Whatever her handlers had her on, it was doing its job and then some.

Cadence had to look away. "Let's just get backstage." Cadence said to her cousin. Luvvi didn't put up a fight. She didn't want to see it any more than Cadence did.

They waited out the rest of the set on plush green sofas, eating various mint, pistachio, and avocado flavored treats. Emerald's manager walked through the room once but upon seeing that Luvvi and Cadence were there, he didn't pause.

Something about the look in the son of a bitch's eye made Cadence stand up. "That's right asshole! You just keep walkin'!"

Everybody stared at Cadence until she finally sat down, reeled back into her spot on the sofa by Luvvi Dove.

Eventually the concert ended, to the prolonged screams of Emerald's die-hard fans. "Gawd, I thought that would never end." Cadence whispered to her cousin.

Luvvi just squeezed her friend's hand, but said nothing. Then the back stage started to fill, and self-congratulatory comments were getting passed all around. Yes, it had been a stellar concert, and Emerald had been hot, so hot. There was so much mutual ass kissing going on that Cadence was thinking that she shouldn't have worn a skirt.

Eventually Emerald came in, highly made up, to the point of being barely recognizable. Her body was glistening in sweat and her chest was heaving with breaths. Cadence had seen that exact same look, during her days in the brothel.

Emerald was all smiles for her boot licking pseudo-friends, and wouldn't you know it but a grand total of six guys blocked Emerald's progress across the room by wrapping their hungry arms around her, and then locking their crusty lips onto hers. Emerald seemed to take those guy's strange shows of affection in stride. Not eagerly, but not complaining either.

The last guy wasn't looking like he was ever gonna let Emerald take a breath. Cadence imagined that the way he had been vacuuming the pop star, his tongue could easily be touching her tonsils.

Luvvi was squirming beside her as the whole thing played out.

But it wasn't until the dude's hand slid down Emerald's back to grab a meaty handful of raw ass, that Cadence shot to her feet.

She reached for the guy's thumb and cranked it back, causing him to cry out in both pain and surprise as he released Emerald. "Can't be touch-

ing that if you're not prepared to pay for it." Cadence quoted the house rules of her old brothel to the guy as she pushed him away.

Emerald laughed at Cadence and finished her journey toward the green couch, where she sat beside Luvvi Dove.

Air kisses and strained greetings were exchanged. Then the two musician's stared at each other in silence.

Soon the rest of the room lost interest and began shmoozing each other once again.

Cadence sat down beside Luvvi.

Still nothing happened. It wasn't long before Cadence was wondering why they had come all this way. She decided that maybe she should start things off. "It's good to see you, Esmeralda. Luvvi didn't want to miss the chance of meeting with you." Cadence said.

Still Luvvi and Emerald just sat staring at one another.

A guy that smelled like a microbrewery staggered up to their sofa, but Cadence got to her feet and u-turned the putz before he got a chance to drool his damp comments to the VIP's that Cadence was guarding on her couch.

Then Cadence sat down again.

Luvvi's eyes were wet when she finally spoke. "You know." She said to Emerald. Luvvi said the words through clenched teeth. "You know — and you have to fight." Luvvi's bottom lip began to flutter.

Emerald might as well have been watching it on TV. She seemed curious, but disconnected.

"You need to quit this, now." Luvvi said. "Come with us and we'll help you get back. Esmeralda, please!"

Emerald's bejeweled finger reached up towards Luvvi's face and touched the tear that had been making its decent. "Esmeralda's gone." Emerald said. "I've been telling you that. But it's okay — I've figured out how to be Emerald now. It's easy, and I won't have to do it forever."

That last part shocked Cadence. What did that even mean? "What the fuck does that mean?" Cadence said, suddenly worried. She had heard that kind of talk in the brothel as well.

Emerald's opium eye's drifted briefly towards Cadence. She smiled. "Pop stars don't last forever, Cadence." Emerald said, then she looked back towards her old acting friend. "But I still think Luvvi Dove can be eternal." She told her. Then Emerald leaned towards Luvvi and kissed her on the chin. "Promise me." She said to Luvvi.

Then Emerald turned suddenly towards Cadence. "Promise me you won't let them get her."

The End

"These days I sit on cornerstones  
And count the time in quartertones to ten, my friend  
Don't confront me with my failures  
I had not forgotten them"  
—Jackson Browne

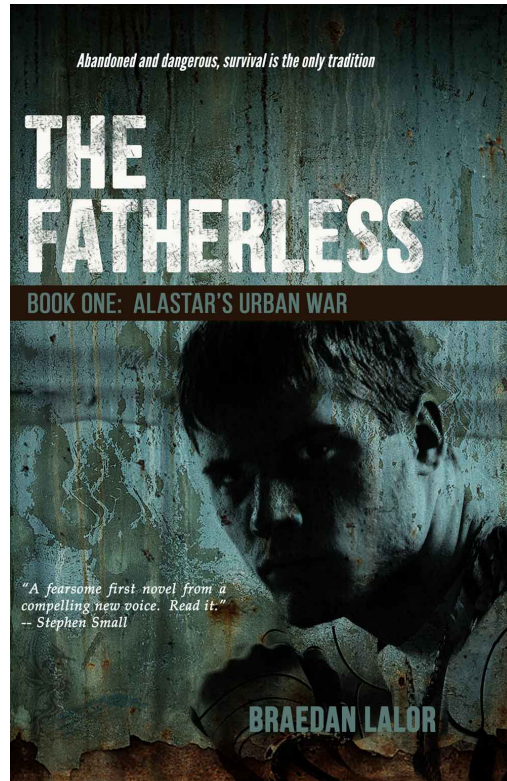


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Thank you. Truly, thank you.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Shine on you crazy diamond* — the song that I would want on the soundtrack for my spiritual transcendence, if I thought that I was worthy of that piece. Of course if I were becoming one with the universe I would no longer be prideful, so I would most certainly feel unworthy of Pink Floyd's masterpiece. So either way I wouldn't get to have the song.

*The Hothouse Flowers* — Favorite band that not too many people have heard of. Great sound, give it a listen if you can find them.

*Streets of Fire* — Best Rock and Roll fable to be brought to the silver screen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not everyone that I show this movie to appreciates it the way I do, but — there's a damn sledgehammer fight in it! So that's all that need to be said about that.

*Sting* — Best solo career after being a superstar in a band. I own a bunch of his albums and I never get tired of listening to them. Might be tied with *Don Henley* in the solo career category though.

*The Lonely Astronauts* — Best emerging new underground sound. They're so far underground that they breathe mud like oxygen, but these boys will have their day.

More insights on the author at his website and blog.

<http://www.Braedanlalor.com>

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