

BOOK ONE IN *THE KILLING SAGA*

THE KILLING COMPLEX

K G LESLIE

prologue

Deep male laughter.

A painted burgundy door.

‘Sign right here and we’ll get this process started.’

A silver briefcase.

‘Have a nice trip, sis.’

The warm touch of stubby fingers coated in crumbs.

‘You’re not even going to say goodbye to her?’

An overwhelming sense that she had made a terrible mistake.

one

Consciousness was returning but she chose to keep her eyes tightly closed, because to open them would confirm her suspicions that it hadn't been a bad dream, that she really was in big trouble, and that she was a total fucking idiot.

She was still lying on her front, the floor pressing into her cheek, her arm folded uncomfortably under her chest making it difficult to breathe. She pushed up to her forearms and took a couple of quick breaths, her head throbbing and mouth overbearingly wet, as if she might vomit any minute. As she worked her jaw to swallow the saliva, something cold and hard scraped the underside of her chin, and her hands instinctively flew to her neck. Shit, that was right. What was with the collar?

She grappled blindly with the metallic band around her throat, but the collar would not yield. As she tried to prise it open, her knuckles brushed a tender point on her jaw. Wincing, she withdrew her fingers sharply, colliding her elbows into solid barriers either side of her with a hollow rattle. She froze in dawning horror. Shit, that was right. What was with the cage?

Panting now, she opened her eyes to find that the world was shrouded in purple and she was still inside this cage, and the truth of her whole horrible reality solidified into a long and embarrassing shriek. She began to scramble to her feet but only reached a crouch before her head clanged into the roof of the cage, the blow so abrupt that it dropped her back to her knees. She moaned with the claustrophobic confinement, cowering and covering her ears, the sound of her own desperation so alarming it seemed to compel her to panic further. A self-fulfilling freak-out. She needed to get her shit together. Yes, the cage was unpleasant and the collar was unsettling, but she was safe, relatively unharmed and alone.

For the briefest moment she experienced calm, enough to lessen the press of her warm palms against her eardrums, enough to grow curious about the soft tinkle of something shifting above her, enough to feel that she had control of this and everything was going to be okay. But the sound of approaching footsteps shattered her composure so absolutely that her entire body tensed painfully, ready for another fight even though she'd obviously lost the last one. Perhaps if she made enough noise a neighbour might investigate and sound the alarm.

There may be repercussions if she messed this up now, but she didn't care anymore, she just wanted out.

She braced herself as the purple blanket was removed, but the dim light that was revealed behind it did little to illuminate her situation. Was it night-time already? How long had she been in this cage? Legs in dark trousers pressed against the bars, and before she could address the abductor, her body was lifted by the collar until her head hit the roof of the cage again. Her hands flailed off the floor as her neck craned in an unnatural angle, the collar digging deep into her throat from the weight of her body. Her breath was trapped so completely that she could only make a wisp of a scream as she clawed desperately at her throat. She felt pressure between her shoulder blades followed by a sting, before the tension on the collar ceased and she crashed to the floor with a grunt. A soft whirring came from somewhere in front of her as she worked to catch her breath, gasping and sucking in air greedily, then the tension on her collar shifted direction and she was dragged along the floor. The oppressive lowness of the bars suddenly dissipated and she was yanked up to her feet.

She came face to face with a man. He was heavy-set with a squat face and small features, and he looked at her with complete and utter indifference. She had never seen him before. Looped around his hand was a chain that he twisted in his fingers, and the resultant pull on the back of her neck suggested that the chain was connected to her collar. She felt her nostrils flare with indignation at the whole situation and her fists clenched. This man didn't look all that impossible for her to tackle; she was a grown woman, after all, twenty-four and taller than average. She'd done some push-ups only a couple of days ago in her hostel dorm, modified, of course, but enough to carve some definition to her biceps. She felt herself hover on the brink of action but something held her back, a lingering presumption that she wouldn't be hurt, that she'd be rescued soon, and compliance was the best approach to keep her out of trouble.

The man looked her up and down with the slightest of smiles then gathered most of the chain into his palm and turned to walk away, jerking her into an ungainly trot behind him. They moved through a long corridor, passing occasional gaps or doors that she had no time to inspect, the scenery too unremarkable to give away their location but foreign enough for her to know this was definitely not the place she had started out in. Her feet slapped cool concrete, and only now did she realise that her shoes and socks were missing. Her patterned blouse was rumpled and untucked and her black cotton trousers

were spattered with grey dust. Questions flooded her mind, overspilling into fresh panic that filled her chest, and she became acutely aware of her heartbeat, unfamiliarly fast and strong.

They stopped at a wide metal door, its shutters rolling up to unveil a bright square of light beyond. She heard a click behind her neck and felt a hand press into the middle of her back, pushing her through the doorway so roughly that she stumbled and sprawled to the floor. The light was almost unbearable and overwhelming, and she shielded her eyes as she clambered to her feet, noticing that the chain was missing now but still feeling the rub of the collar across her throat. She turned to face her captor but realised the door had already rolled shut. With a shuddering sigh, she turned to survey her surroundings, taking in a large room that was wide and tall like a school sports hall, with the impression of windows tracking the highest perimeter. The walls were off-white, the hard floor grey and scuffed with some sort of grime, illuminated by spotlights scattered around the ceiling. She was alone and felt a growing unease. This place was better than the cage, for sure, but it was a lot of space just for her.

Her attention was caught by movement from across the hall and she flicked her gaze to the opposite wall, where another roller door had started to creak open. More captives, perhaps? She held her ground and waited optimistically, but as the door continued to rise, it started to reveal an inhuman shape. A baritone rumble came from its direction and her mouth became suddenly dry. What monster was this? The door reached its pinnacle and she could see the creature's silhouette, squat and round, thin legs projecting underneath and something protruding from the head. It came forwards a few paces and she gasped as a pair of curled horns caught the glare from a spotlight, but then it emerged further into view and she involuntarily laughed out loud.

It was a ram. A sheep.

She scoffed, scanning the room for answers. She had an overwhelming feeling of being watched, and she'd be damned if she was going to be ridiculed by some unseen audience for freaking out over a sheep. She gave an over-exaggerated shrug towards the animal, which was still on the far side of the hall. The ram tossed its head with a snort, drawing its front hoof across the floor. Its horns looked heavy, curling completely in on themselves so that the broad middle flanked pointed ends. Her spontaneous grin wavered. This thing wasn't going to be a problem, surely. It was a sheep, after all. Just a—

The ram tossed its head again and broke into a run towards her. Her incredulity quickly dissolved into trepidation. The ram was building surprising speed with its short legs, its two horns lowered and looming, and as it came closer, she realised she had frozen to the spot. Shit. She shook the shock from her head and took a few paces backwards but quickly bumped into the door she had come through, the jolt triggering a gasp and reigniting panic. With her eyes fixed on the oncoming ram, she started sidestepping along the wall, but its hooves scraped on the floor as it casually altered its course, and she realised she would never be able to outrun or avoid it.

As the sheep closed the gap between them, she half-heartedly leapt sideways and felt something catch her hip with such force that it swept her off her feet. She tumbled to the floor with a panicked shout and had barely climbed to her hands and knees before something impossibly solid collided with her side and spun her into the air. Somehow she hit the floor upright, lurching a few steps to keep her balance, drool coming out of her open mouth and soaking into the front of her blouse. She waited for the pain but felt nothing except the hammering of her heart.

The ram was now stationary and faced her from a metre away, its nostrils flaring as a lick of foam ran down its chin, and through the thick wool around its neck she saw a metallic collar. Her body trembled with undiluted terror. It bowed its head and began another charge, so she braced her feet and held out her hands, hoping to grab its horns before it made contact. The ram crashed into her thighs and made her buckle at the waist, but the proximity gave her the moment she needed to take hold of its weapons, and she lifted its head by the horns so that it could not build up the power for another thrust.

The animal did not like this at all, twisting violently from side to side while she held on as tightly as she could, trying to keep the slashing horns away from her body as she dealt with a dawning realisation that she had not planned what to do next, she had no ideas, she had no exit strategy and she could feel her grip failing miserably. The ram suddenly jolted to the right and she lost her purchase completely. Shit. Unconstrained and seemingly angrier, it reared up on its hind legs until its head drew level with her shoulders, and for a dizzying moment she was mesmerised by the sheer heft of this beast, then she was blasted to the floor, onto her back.

The spotlights on the ceiling threw dazzling stars across her vision, and she

had time to draw a single breath before the ram was on top of her, its hooves pressing into her thighs and pinning her to the floor. With sickening precision, it drove its horns into her abdomen, the sharpened points cutting through her blouse and tearing at her stomach. She could see blood but felt nothing except pressure from the weight of its head as it bored inside her. Time seemed to slow as she watched it rip into her body, each hit and twist forcing air through her throat that escaped in a strange squeak from her parted lips. She weakly grasped its horns again, but who was she kidding, she was merely a passenger now. She watched blood trickle between her fingers from her tight grip on the serrated horns and realised this thing was going to kill her very soon. She was going to be gored to death. By a sheep.

A very small part of her shrugged and settled back. Perhaps it was the easiest option to just let this happen. She probably deserved it. She closed her eyes.

Wisps of hair sticking to ice lolly residue on rounded cheeks. *'You're not even going to say goodbye to her?'*

No. Fuck this.

She opened her eyes and took her attention off the ram's head, surveying the wider scene with a pragmatic focus. The ram's spindly front legs were just within reach, balanced either side of her body as it continued its assault. With gritted teeth she released her hold on its horns and reached for its forelegs instead, grunting with effort as she pulled them towards her. This disrupted its attack and drew its head level with her own, its bloodied horns close enough to brush her face and its breath stale against her cheek. She let go of its legs and pushed her left hand into its throat while wrapping her right arm around the back of its neck, pulling the ram down into a deep headlock against her. Every ounce of her strength went into forcing her arms together tightly, her left hand pressing into what she hoped was its windpipe, her right pulling the back of its neck closer and closer. The ram was off balance and struggling, kicking and thrashing against her while she wrapped her thighs around its body, holding it tighter, its thick, wiry wool pressing into her like a heavy duvet. Its horns were tucked into the space between the side of her face and her right shoulder, and she could feel the serrations running against her jaw, but there was still no pain, no sensation except the throbbing of its throat under her palm, and she closed her eyes again as she squeezed even tighter, not sure how much longer she could sustain the pressure, hoping it would die before she did.

Finally, the pulsing in its throat slowed and stuttered and the ram stopped moving, its body sinking into hers. Her arms became suddenly flaccid and flopped to her sides, the ram shifting against her as she released it. She flinched with the expectation that it would resume its attack any moment, but as she tentatively opened her eyes, she saw that she was staring straight into its face, the animal inert, its eye inches from her own and now a vacant, glassy orb. Unnerved by its proximity, she pushed its body off her completely, noticing that its woollen coat was daubed in deep red from where it had been pressed against her. The side of her face felt slick with moisture, her breaths were short and high pitched, and when she lifted her head, she saw that her entire front was soaked in blood. Beneath her soiled blouse was hairless pink flesh that pulsed and glistened under the spotlights.

She managed a thick moan before letting her head loll back to the floor, her vision growing dark, a final image surfacing in her consciousness filled with foreboding. A painted burgundy door.

two

The smooth tiles were cool against the soles of her bare feet, but the morning sun was already warm against her skin, and she lifted her chin to bathe her face in the light, closing her eyes against its glare.

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Her eyes opened before her mind focused and she saw a hatched panorama of grey with a glowing orange centre. She blinked a few times in the hope that she could restart her brain, turn it off and on again so everything could make sense. From the unyielding pressure against her back, she could tell that she was lying face up on a hard floor, and the black criss-cross pattern that surrounded her suggested she was back inside a cage.

She gulped and felt the coldness of the collar against her throat, dashing her slim hopes that it had all been a horrible dream. Slowly, the most recent events filtered through to the foreground: the cage, the collar, the chain, the hall, then an abrupt revisit of the ram with its horns buried into her intestines. She startled and her hands flew to her stomach, clawing at her top. She peered down, the collar jutting into her jaw as she lifted her head. A lattice of jagged pink scars covered her stomach. They looked weeks old.

Frowning, she traced some of the scars with her fingertips, not quite believing they could be real. The rippled rivulets traversing her torso felt alien, as if her body had been swapped out for someone else's. She grimaced at the concept and let the top fall back down, noticing that she was now dressed in unfamiliar light grey clothing, a short-sleeved T-shirt and loose drawstring cotton trousers. She pushed herself up into sitting, bracing for agony but instead feeling only a dull ache inside her abdomen. Something brushed her shoulder and she startled, twisting her body sharply to find a chain dangling from the top of the cage. She tracked it with her fingers to the back of her collar, feeling for a catch or a button to release it, but there was nothing obvious.

She took a shaky breath then surveyed the rest of her surroundings. The cage was overbearingly small, just a bit longer than her own body and slightly wider than her shoulders, probably giving enough room to turn around awkwardly on her hands and knees but not high enough to stand up. The base was a hard black

plastic that seemed to be raised slightly from the ground. It was the sort of cage you'd keep a large dog in. Not a person. This was ridiculous. This must be some sort of mistake. She pressed her hands into the sides of the cage but there was no give in it, the bars solid under her palms. She pressed harder, the sense of confinement rising the more she pushed, building inside her until it crested into blunt panic, and she began to shove and hit and kick every inch of the cage, shrieking without realising, filling the space with cries and the percussion of each blow until she stopped herself abruptly, gasping great sobs of air, her hands buzzing with heat. She blew through her lips, making the exhalation long and deep in an effort to enforce calm.

She was still here, yes, but this cage wasn't budging and freaking out wasn't going to help her. She ran her fingers over the back of her neck and gritted her teeth. Someone would rescue her soon. Until then, she needed to keep her shit together.

She continued her examination of the terrain and her eyes cast beyond the bars, taking in blank breeze-block walls on three sides, illuminated by a yellowing strip light above. In front of the cage was an opening leading to the impression of a hall or corridor, the one she had probably been marched down by that man. Just across the corridor was more vacant wall space that glowed from some light source that was not close enough to see. It felt like the cage was inside a pig pen or a stable, definitely indoors, the air warm but not stagnant.

She couldn't hear anything except her own breathing, still erratic but slowing now, and as she shifted position, the chain clinked behind her as if vying for attention once more. She took it in her hands, this time following its path away from her and stopping as it ran up through a gap in the ceiling of the cage. Just outside the bars she could make out that the chain was wrapped around a post with a hook protruding from the side. She couldn't see how the chain was attached to anything, but when she pulled on it, she gained some excess length before it jarred to a stop, like a seatbelt catching in its mechanism. The gap in the ceiling ran the full length of the cage and continued as a slice down the front end, which must have been how she was dragged out. The gap was just wide enough to fit her fingertips through but offered no further advantages other than the risk of getting stuck.

She continued to gaze around and became aware of a tight feeling on the right side of her face, like a piece of sticky tape was pulling down the corner of her

mouth. She felt a path of smooth skin running from her lower cheek down to the slant of her jawline, and as she reflected on the cause, a sensation of the sheep pressing into her shoulder while she throttled it to death hit her so swiftly and so vividly that she let out a wet cry. Her hands automatically dropped to her stomach again just in case her digestive tract was still on its way out, but she found only the overlapping pink lines across her belly button, their criss-cross pattern echoing the shadows from the cage bars all around her.

How did she survive, and why wasn't she feeling it now? She should be stiff and sore, yet she felt energised with an ease of movement that did not make sense. She sighed at the lack of answers and edged herself backwards until she was able to lean against the back of the cage, stretching out her legs and staring at her bare feet. She wiggled her toes to check they still belonged to her, and to prove that she had some semblance of control over what was happening, scoffing at the pitiful gesture. She'd been imprisoned and gored and dressed by a stranger, but moving her own feet was a triumph. Aim high.

She sat in silence and stared forlornly ahead. Without clocks or screens or sunlight, she had no way of keeping track of time. Hours may have passed. Probably just minutes. Her eyes would occasionally go into soft focus as she lapsed into a vacuum of denial, choosing to disregard what was happening, her thoughts running circuits silently around the outskirts of the dark truth like a penny in one of those vortex charity bins that she and Jessica used to adore when they were little.

Jessica.

'It's not a holiday.'

'Sure sounds like it.'

'I'm on a working visa. I just don't know which country I'll stop in yet.'

'Oh come on, you can barely name any of the countries in Europe.'

'Well, I'll learn as I move around.'

'You haven't thought any of this through.'

'Come on, Jess, I'm twenty-four and it'll be the first time I've ever left

England. Don't you think I'm entitled to a little bit of adventure?'

'What about me? I'm older than you and I've never left.'

'You could've.'

'Bollocks. I could never leave Mum. Or E.'

'Don't say it like that.'

'Like what?'

'Like I'm abandoning you. I'm not him.'

'Whatever helps you sleep.'

The very thought of her sister highlighted the magnitude of what was happening, threatening to jostle the coin and send it hurtling into the black hole, pulling her inside out in the process. As the truth weighed in, a rushing in her ears grew louder and louder until she had to wipe her face furiously with the heels of her hands, cleaning out her mind, resetting her composure, keeping her shit together because she'd be saved very soon. She would. She had to be.

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She woke with a start, her neck sore from the strange angle it had rested in as her body slumped into the back of the cage. Her mouth was dry, and she licked her lips as she blinked in the yellow light above her, trying to refocus, wondering how long she had been asleep and how on earth she had even dropped off.

She suddenly became aware of footsteps echoing in the corridor, perhaps the reason she woke. As they grew closer, she gathered her knees to her chest and hugged them tightly to her like a shield, clenching her fingers when a figure entered her pen. From her perspective on the floor, she could only see his legs at first, dark trousers and chunky boots. She craned her neck to take in the full figure now standing beside her cage. A man towered over her, his face wide enough to meld into his neck in one seamless chunk of flesh, the eyes small but the rest of his features difficult to see well from this angle. He was wearing dark green baggy trousers with a long jacket and could well have been the same man she had already encountered, but she couldn't be sure. He was holding a dull

metal bucket, his other hand stuffed into his jacket pocket. He peered through the top of the cage at her and sniffed loudly before he spoke.

‘You’re finally back.’ It was in English but heavily accented. ‘You’re lucky to have been funded, considering the state of you. I wouldn’t have wasted my time.’ He shifted his feet as his shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. ‘But here you are, so we’ll see how far you go.’

‘What do you want with me?’ she asked, clasping her fingers tightly around her knees. ‘Who are you?’

‘Now now.’ He shook his head. ‘Dogs don’t talk.’

‘Fuck you!’ she spat, furious despite her fear. He raised his eyebrows and unhurriedly pulled a small object from his pocket, smooth and white, fitting neatly into his hand. He ran his thumb over it, and she heard a faint buzzing before a sudden vice-like grip spread across her whole body. Her fingers and toes clawed, teeth grated and limbs spasmed, toppling her over to her side and leaving her shuddering against the bars. It all felt unpleasantly familiar. The invisible force that gripped her abruptly relaxed and she sank uncomfortably into the corner of the cage, panting hoarsely. She struggled to push herself up and realised the man had bent down, his face appearing close beside her.

‘Dogs. Don’t. Talk,’ he repeated, and shocked her a second time. She gasped in pain and terror as her body convulsed out of her control again, jostling until she was face down and writhing against the hard floor. When it stopped, she spat out the build-up of saliva in her mouth and felt tears starting to well. She blinked several times, willing them back, not wanting to cry in front of this man, then propped her upper body on her forearms and turned her face to his as he crouched beside the cage.

‘Fuck. You.’ Her voice was slightly shriller than she would have preferred but she was too angry to care. He gave a strange smile and shocked her again, this time making it last to the point where she couldn’t draw a breath, and when it finally stopped, she stayed sprawled on the floor, her muscles unresponsive, drool seeping from the corners of her mouth. She breathed heavily through a mixture of anger, embarrassment and despair.

‘Anything else?’ she heard him say, but she couldn’t summon the strength to move. As much as she’d like to tell him exactly what she was thinking, she

sensed she was in a losing battle, so turned her head enough to lock her eyes with his and tried to communicate her feelings towards him with a hard stare. The man waited for a moment, the silence filled with the sound of her wet, stifled breathing, and then he smiled broadly. 'Good dog.' He ran his short fingers along the bars of the cage near her eyeline. 'I'll be your Handler while you're here. Don't worry, though.' He gave her a withering look. 'I don't expect you to be here long.'

He hauled himself back up and pocketed the control, placing the bucket down on the floor and moving closer to the post that held her chain. She could hear a metallic crunch and felt tension on her collar, drawing her neck closer to the side of the cage at such an unpleasant angle that she had to shuffle her body to join it. The chain was taut now, and she had little room to move other than to take her head higher towards the top of the cage. She watched the man pick the bucket up, walk around the perimeter of the cage and crouch down at the end, pulling his jacket sleeve up to reveal a wrist band which he waved at the bars. The whole front slid up somehow, and he reached through the opening to place down the bucket, lifting out of it a plastic bottle and a brown paper bag, which he lined up on the floor. She kept her body stiff, working hard to hold the lump of emotion in her throat, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing her truly break. He waved his wrist band again and the cage door closed.

'Water. Food. A shit bucket.' He pointed at them in turn as he rose to full height again, and her eyes flicked between each object with competing emotions: relief that she wasn't going to be left to starve and horror at the realisation that this cage appeared to be her long-term confinement. The man walked back to the pole, and she heard another metallic click before the tension on the chain eased and she was able to sink to the floor. 'Make sure you eat, you're going to need some energy.' He locked the chain into place on the hook as he looked down at her. 'We're back in the Hall tomorrow.' Her blood chilled, and he smiled slyly, kicking the corner of the cage with his boot and making it shudder as if it was a part of her. Then, without another word, he left.

Once the man's footsteps had disappeared into the silent void of the grey corridor, she uncorked her sorrow and a wail broke the surface of her lips. She crammed a fist between her teeth, pressed her face into the floor and curled into a ball as a stream of unfiltered pity traversed her mind.

This was her fault.

A silver briefcase.

She had made a terrible mistake. She was an idiot for letting this happen.

‘Sign right here and we’ll get this process started.’

Her mother wouldn’t survive the worry. Her sister would be so disappointed in her.

‘Have a nice trip, sis.’

She had failed. And she was so alone.

three

The initial illusion of silence was quashed when she tuned her ears to the surroundings to pick out distant waves, rustling foliage, the swirl of pool water in a grate.

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Eventually, her tears ran out and the remaining soundless, arid sobs petered into silence. She lay on her side spent of energy and emotion, her mouth painfully dry, and regarded the water bottle her Handler had left. With slow resolve she wiped her cheeks, noticing deep indents from her teeth across her knuckles, then rose to all fours and crawled to the front of the cage, swiping the bottle and scuttling back again. The bottle was large, its contents tepid but at least wet, and she took a swig while eyeing the bucket. The question of toileting arrangements had already crossed her mind, and this solution was not the most palatable. There was no underwear beneath her drawstring trousers, and she stroked the inside of her upper arm, thankful for the contraceptive implant in there that she'd decided on before her trip. Her hand went to the back of her neck and she sighed deeply. How much longer before she was saved?

After swilling water around her mouth for a little while, her mind blissfully silent for the time being, she leaned forwards and snatched up the food bag, retreating again as if she was a mouse darting from its hole. For some reason she felt less vulnerable away from the corridor where her Handler might appear. Inside the paper bag were a dense chunk of bread and a couple of slices of dark meat. She wrinkled her nose but took out the bread, the familiarity of its texture oddly comforting.

After the extravagant release of emotion, she zoned out into a fresh state of denial, slumped against the back of the cage while chewing mouthfuls of crisp dough. She was absentmindedly tracing the length of her chin scar with her fingertips and gazing at her wriggling toes when the light above her clicked off, plunging her into darkness. She took a second to process this, then whispered 'Shit' very quietly. So this was night-time.

There was still a hazy light source somewhere in the corridor, close enough to allow her eyes to pick out the shape of the doorway and the top corners of her

cage, though she could barely see her own hands in front of her. Lying on the floor was starkly uncomfortable; she was a two-pillow person, so having her head flat made her feel like she was upside down. She tried on her side and felt her shoulders jut uncomfortably into her body. Sighing, she settled back into the half-seated position against the end of the cage. She wasn't going to sleep anyway.

Without any visual input, her mind was left to wander the shadows and bring forth plenty of crippling truths. Her last contact with her sister was a one-line message with the name of the city she had decided to stay in and a promise that she would send more details soon. She never had. Distracted by job hunting and going out with her dorm-mates from the hostel, she had avoided all thoughts of home, her plan being to get in touch properly once she had something successful to tell them, something to prove this had been a good idea and she was perfectly capable of travelling alone, that she wasn't wasting her twenties, that she was able to exploit the exchange rates for the benefit of her whole family. That she wasn't selfish. Would her family know she was even missing yet? She had hoped they would never have to, but what if she failed in the Hall tomorrow? How long would it take for them to find her? Would they even know what had happened? And if they did, would they ever forgive her for letting herself get killed by a fucking sheep?

Her thoughts centred on the idea of going back into the Hall and she felt her stomach twinge in anticipation. She needed to do better next time. She began to imagine possible scenarios of dealing with a ram while a small part of her mind, the bit that most resembled Jessica, listened in from the sidelines with absolute bewilderment as she casually debated methods to strangle livestock. She needed that part of her mind to be silent for now, though. If she was going to get out of here, she needed to be in one piece when the cavalry arrived, so she would have to be pragmatic and find a better way to fight a sheep. She scoffed out loud at her situation. This was ridiculous.

Sleep came in short bursts, repeatedly disrupted by her head lolling against her chest and then snapping upright in involuntary panic. As the nerves worked their way into her bowels, she ended up having to use the bucket, balancing precariously in the dark, her absolute abandonment of dignity helped in slight by the black solitude. She used torn pieces of the food bag as toilet paper, noting wryly that they had neglected to think of that detail.

The night stretched into infinity, and she was lying in a semi-stupor when the light came back on, its brightness so jarring that she screamed and covered her face, wrapping herself into a foetal position to try to block it out. Gradually, she steadied her breathing and acclimatised her eyes to the light in small bursts, allowing the truth to crystalise. This was it then. He was coming. She was going in.

He wasn't. She didn't.

She held herself stiffly for a while, waiting for her Handler to reappear, but as time passed and nothing happened, her body slowly relaxed. He did say it was going to be today, but he did not indicate what time. She realised she was impatient; it felt like a delayed exam. She was revised and ready and she just wanted it over and done with. The longer she spent in anticipation, the greater her fear grew. Any slight sound, often just the jangle of her own chain as she shifted position, would fire a bolt of utter panic so forcefully that it would suck all the air from her chest, the claustrophobia constricting her with a ferocity that left her clutching her hands to her ears, closing her eyes and emitting a shrill cry, made worse by her own acknowledgement that it was futile. No matter how much she protested, it wouldn't change. No one was going to appear from the corner of the room and apologise that this had got out of hand. Nothing was going to stop this. She was in hell, she had done this to herself and she couldn't give it back.

Her thoughts would veer between sheer terror at her current situation and anguished replays of her abandoned family, whose very existence would serve to remind her of what she had now lost and may never find again. Every time the weight of this knowledge threatened to crush her, she dug her fingers into the flesh of her forearm to centre her thoughts on something real and simple. But no matter how often she refocused, she'd soon find her mind had wandered off again, like an errant toddler asked to stay still. Her niece. What she wouldn't give to hear the endless questions, her sister's tired sigh, a shared amused glance with that cheeky face peppered with biscuit crumbs. Shit, she was doing it again. She hit herself in the forehead with the heel of her hand.

After many more miserable hours had passed, she heard footsteps approach and her body clenched in horror. She realised she wasn't ready for this and she never would be. The same man appeared in view, her 'Handler', she thought with a grimace, wearing similar clothes to yesterday. He stood over her cage and

smiled coldly.

‘This always goes much easier if you obey me.’ He had a small briefcase, which he placed on the floor by the cage and clicked open. She could just about see a large needle inside. ‘This is my gift.’ He gestured to the syringe. ‘It’ll make you sharp and blocks most pain.’ He hunched his shoulders in a shrug. ‘Makes things last longer. Not against the rules either, as long as we declare it. I need you to press your back up against the roof of the cage.’ She stayed still, staring at him in silence, not interested in complying but not brave enough to say so this time. ‘Put your back to the cage,’ he ordered more forcefully, and she dry-gulped but did not move, knowing she was risking another shock but unable to bring herself to obey. He sighed and unclicked her chain from its post, draped it over the hook and pulled down with a grunt. She was lifted by the neck until her back pressed into the roof of the cage, her hands grappling with her collar as she dangled. She felt sharp pressure between her shoulder blades and then the chain released, but she was more prepared for the drop this time and broke the fall with outstretched arms.

‘Okay,’ he said from above her as she shrugged the ache from her upper back. ‘Fight, survive again, and I think your owner will continue to back you. Or don’t and you can leave.’ She looked up with the smallest glimmer of hope, already knowing she was being foolish but unable to curtail the automatic response. Her Handler was smiling down at her. ‘You’d be in separate bags, of course. They usually burn the remains.’ He let out a sharp laugh that made her wince. ‘I make money either way. Your choice.’ She watched him detach the chain from the post and walk back to the front of the cage. With a wave of his wrist the door slid open silently, and he wrinkled his nose as he removed the bucket. She felt a moment of shame that she had played into his objectification of her as an animal, which was further amplified as he used the chain to drag her forwards. She was powerless to resist, scrabbling awkwardly on all fours and then groaning up to her feet as the angle on the traction changed.

She drew level with him, face to face, and squared her shoulders for a moment. From down in the cage he seemed like a dominant overlord, but on equal footing she was almost the same height, and here he was, just some middle-aged man who didn’t look very fit. She was starting to feel the sort of cavalier bravery that came with abject terror and sleep deprivation, but a flash of white caught her eye as she spotted the control to her shock collar nestled in his hand, the look on his face suggesting that he meant for her to see.

As her bravado deflated, he turned his back and used the chain to guide her forwards. She could feel her heart rate starting to increase uncomfortably and a light sweat broke out on her forehead as she followed him awkwardly down the corridor. Every step seemed to jar shards of dread into her body that expanded inside her until she could feel tears starting to well. She tried to hold the emotion in, pressing her lips together, but she couldn't stop the outpour of terror and began to emit muffled moans the closer they got to the Hall. By the time they reached the entrance, she was sobbing beyond her control, and her Handler turned to inspect her with an expression of wry disapproval. Her bottom lip trembled as she tried to plead with her eyes. This man would surely not send her in there again, not after what happened last time. He clicked his tongue and jutted his chin at the open door, but she stayed rooted to the spot and felt moisture running down her cheeks and out of her nose, all her bravery leaking out and making her T-shirt damp. The man curled his upper lip and shook his head impatiently, then reached behind her and shoved her through the doorway.

She screamed and stumbled, managing to catch her balance before she hit the floor. She blinked under the bright lights of the Hall and rubbed her face fiercely, listening to the door slide shut behind her. As she pulled her hands away, she took in the scuffed grey ground beneath her feet and was hit by a sudden flashback of being on this floor, her innards getting blended by an irresistible crush. She felt panic rising further with the memory but shook her head to quash it, angry now at herself for breaking down, angry at showing that man how pathetic she was. If she had an audience in here, she couldn't let them see her fear. She wouldn't let that man see it again. No matter how pathetic she felt, she would not let him see her vulnerability ever again.

Taking a few deep, shaking breaths, she wiped the last of the tears and snot from her face then scanned the space, realising instantly that it was different to last time. A section of the floor on her far right had risen about six feet off the ground and was now acting as a platform sitting flush against the wall with two solid pistons underneath. Something was piled in the very middle of the Hall too, long sticks or poles. They'd given her some lifelines, it seemed. Perhaps she stood a better chance this time around. She coughed and rubbed her forehead, the skin damp to the touch, her throat tight like she couldn't quite get enough air. Her heart continued to thud heavily in her chest, and though it was most likely nerves, something didn't feel quite right inside her. She didn't have time to assess herself further because the opposite door burst into life, making her gasp quietly.

As a shaft of light grew on the far wall, her eyes flicked between the potential weapons in the middle of the room and the raised platform on the side. Fight or flight. She hadn't made a decision before the door opened to its full height, and as the animal behind it was revealed, she scoffed out loud in disbelief. It was much taller than a sheep. Right then. Shit. It appeared she had turned up for the exam only to find out that she had revised the wrong subject.

It was a horse.

The animal was slickly beautiful, sporting an impossibly shiny dark brown coat that cast shadows across its muscular frame. Its ears flicked round on their independent axes as it snorted loudly, and she could see there was a metal collar around its neck. All she knew about horses was to always keep your hand flat when you fed them, but this information did not seem helpful right now.

She stifled another cough, rubbing at her collar with her fingers, its grip feeling tighter somehow as a couple of sweat droplets tickled her temples. The horse tossed its head and let out another loud snort as it clipped its hooves on the floor, and she took an involuntary step backwards. Her movement made the horse startle and stamp, white foam flecking its lips. She knew that horses didn't attack people for no reason, but the same could be said for sheep, and look where that got her. Something was different about these animals for sure. She glanced back at the raised platform again, ignoring the weapons now. She wasn't going to fight a fucking horse. She had to run.

She clenched her fists to finalise the decision and push herself over the precipice from static panic into irreversible action, setting off towards the platform at a sprint, knowing full well she would be triggering the horse to approach. She'd never been a keen runner and so was surprised at how fluid her motion was and how quickly she covered ground, her legs feeling strangely powerful. The thunder of hooves echoed around the Hall and her pace quickened in response, but as the platform loomed, she realised it was much higher than it had seemed from a distance. Could she really make that? One way to find out. She braced her legs and leapt with as much force as she could muster. Her propulsive power took her by surprise, her arms flailing as she jumped high enough to plant her forearms on the platform. The weight of her body started to slide her backwards so she braced her elbows, grunting as she hauled herself onto her belly, commando-crawling until her whole body was supported. She turned her head to see that the horse had just reached her, a flash of blunted

yellow teeth embedded in pink gums and hot breath blasting in her face. She rolled away from its reach and clambered to her feet, the horse's head about level with the platform as it paced back and forth, its whinny echoing off the walls.

A triumphant smile crossed her lips as she experienced a moment of exuberance at the fact she had somehow jumped to the platform so easily. The horse couldn't reach her, and at the end of the day it was just a horse, stomping around with its useless hooves. It couldn't possibly climb up here. Fuck you, horse.

But her internal celebration was fleeting, dissolving into something else that felt very wrong. Her heart rate had been up from the extra effort of her escape, but now it was thundering in her chest with alarming speed and she became gripped by an overwhelming pressure that spread out into her shoulder and up to her jaw, making her sick to her stomach. Her lungs felt suddenly shallow, like an internal door had slammed shut and sucked out all the air in her body. She gasped loudly and clutched a hand to her chest, her legs buckling and bringing her back down to the floor, finding herself gazing into the horse's wide eyes, her mouth open in silent surprise. Then nothing.

*

'But Dad, you can't go.'

'It's for the best, sweetie.'

'What about Mum?'

'She's better off without me. You all are.'

An open door at the end of a hallway. A cage blocking her path.

There was a rush of light followed by a loud shriek. She felt her rigid body slowly sink into something soft. As her eyes adjusted, she saw people around her in medical uniforms, wires emerging from her chest.

'She's back. You were lucky,' said one medic, directing this at a figure out of sight.

‘It happens,’ responded a male voice. ‘Her body just needs to adjust.’

‘It’s a sign that this is too much.’

‘Maybe. But the funds are there to keep it going, so we may as well see it through.’ The medical team were busy around her, and she tried to move but her body felt numb. She managed a groan and turned her head.

‘She’s conscious. Do you still want us to start an infusion?’

‘Yes, it will speed things up.’

‘This has not been tested in females before.’

‘So what?’

‘We don’t know what the outcome would be.’

‘The owner is rich. Just do it.’

Darkness flooded back.

four

As she opened her eyes, the ocean took her attention first, a rumpled blanket stretching to the horizon, peppered with sparkling jewels as the sun caught each fold. Its vastness was matched by the sky, whose panoramic presence was so overbearing she had to bring her gaze back to the foreground.

*

‘Can we get up?’

The softest voice entered her ears and made her lips curl into a sleepy smile. Enid. Probably sent in here by Jessica, angling for a lie-in. No, hang on, that wasn’t right. She wasn’t at home anymore. She had left the country, so she must be in the hostel, probably hung-over. She could feel that her body was on its side with her limbs folded around her, the bed hard and unyielding, her pillow cold and uncomfortable on the side of her face. She fluttered her eyes open and saw criss-cross bars and a pale grey breeze-block wall beyond.

Oh. Oh yeah.

She was here. Still here in hell. Her bottom lip trembled uncontrollably, and she pushed the heels of her hands into her eyes as if the pressure could force her back through time, undo the decisions that got her here and let her retreat back to her bed at home where hot little hands pawed at her duvet in the early hours. She took her palms away and blinked the cage back into view. Shit.

She lay still for a while, afraid to move and trying to decide whether she was happy to still be alive. She couldn’t understand any of this. Why patch her up only to send her back to die? Whatever had happened to her heart didn’t feel intended; they must have done something to her that hadn’t worked. They had put something inside her that had nearly killed her, right before they put her in front of a horse that surely would have finished the job given the chance. Anger rippled through her body and fuelled her to sit up. There was an echo of an ache inside her chest, and she rubbed her sternum, noticing yellowing bruises in her right forearm. Yet again, despite what her body had been through, she felt remarkably strong and energetic. Whatever they were doing to her, perhaps they’d done more.

The light was on above her and some food and water had been left at the front of her cage next to a clean bucket. She scooted on her bottom to take the supplies and backed up to prop herself against the bars, swigging the water slowly and trying to take stock. Panic threatened to smother her, but she forced herself to breathe it away, refusing to acknowledge the situation anymore, closing the door on reality for now and focusing instead on the bag of food, which was filled with more bread and mystery meat. Letting her mind zone out, she chewed the bread in tiny pieces while staring at her feet stretched out in front of her, barely even registering the collar around her throat, or the chain that brushed her arm, or the tears that dripped slowly from her chin and darkened her T-shirt.

The hours passed fluidly while she existed in a daze, which was only broken when her Handler appeared. He wore the same green attire as before and was spinning the collar control in his fingers as he strolled into her pen. Her heart quivered, but she did not move on his arrival this time, working hard to regard him expressionlessly.

‘Come with me,’ he said briskly while he unhooked her chain from the post. He rolled up his sleeve and waved his wrist at the front of the cage, the door sliding open smoothly in response. She regarded the opening, a welcoming escape from the cage but merely a passage to a worse fate, no doubt, and nausea made her mouth fill with saliva. He gestured for her to move but she ignored him.

‘You’re not going to the Hall. Come out.’ His tone was encouraging but she held her ground. His demeanour soured at her stoic silence, and with a frown he held out the collar control, moving his thumb across it slowly. She inwardly clenched at the thought of a shock, something that would promptly shatter her composure and leave her shuddering pathetically on the floor. With a defeated sigh, she crept out of the cage on all fours and cautiously climbed to her feet to face him. He smiled at her, a satisfied expression that did more to ruin her poise than any shock could. Shit. He had won this round.

Her Handler gathered her chain in his hand and set off without further instruction, this time turning right instead of left down the corridor. She padded after him, scanning for any clue that might give away where she was, but there was nothing except the same blank walls punctuated by openings into pens that she didn’t have time to look into. She flicked her gaze to her Handler as he

walked ahead of her, the chain looped tightly in one of his hands, the collar control visible in the other. Two certainties that she couldn't run or fight. She watched him move instead, ungraceful and plodding, the top of his head broad and melting into his neck via a single roll of fat, like the scruff on a bulldog. His dark green jacket skimmed over his backside, stiff trousers emerging from beneath it and loosely encasing his legs down to a pair of thick black boots. There were stains on his clothes. Faded brown splatters. She convinced herself it was just mud.

He led her to a single door and opened it with his wrist, gesturing for her to go through. She could see that it was another hall and froze in alarm, but then blinked in surprise as she spotted what was inside. Barbells and weight plates were lined up in the middle of the space, and a track was drawn onto the ground around the outskirts.

Her Handler sniffed. 'Okay. A lot of product has been invested in you now, so we need to make sure you don't die before anything interesting starts next time.' He unhooked her chain from her collar with a soft electronic click and gestured to the room. 'Go on. Run, stretch your legs, lift something. Make your heart work.' She didn't move, waiting for the catch, confused at the whole situation, and her Handler sighed loudly. 'You have thirty minutes before you're going back in your cage. I would be making the most of it if I were you.' He put a hand to her back and chivvied her inside, then closed the door, leaving her alone.

She gawped at the open space. It had to be a trick. But as she scanned the room, she saw that there were no other doors, so if anything was joining her it'd be coming in straight behind her. At that thought she edged away from the door and started an uneasy walk around the perimeter of the room. It felt good to stretch her legs, and she reflected on what her Handler had said. He was a dickhead for sure, but he was right about this – she should be making the most of it. She shrugged at herself and broke into an awkward jog around the track, feeling utterly self-conscious. But the freedom of movement was so exhilarating after being inside the cage that she began to build up speed, lapping the perimeter of the hall effortlessly, surprising herself with how fast she could go, the air flowing through her hair as her legs pumped with endless energy. It was wonderful.

She felt a hint of a smile cross her lips and her steps faltered so quickly that she stumbled and floundered to a stop. What was she doing? She shouldn't be

enjoying herself in here like it was the gymnasium of some luxury hotel. Enjoyment would suggest that this was normal. Acceptable. Permanent. She couldn't let herself adjust; she had to keep resisting this or she would be lost forever.

With a gruff sigh she abandoned the track and wandered over to the selection of equipment in the middle of the hall, a pile of silver plates and free weights, all of them scuffed and chipped. She rubbed the scar on her chin as she regarded them, wondering how many people had used them before her and how many might still be in this place trapped just like she was. The concept darkened her mood instantly, and she shook her head to focus on the weights in front of her. If she could run faster, perhaps she was stronger too. She tipped her head to scan the different weights as she thought back to how heavy her luggage might have been. She'd managed to manoeuvre it around by herself with effort, and it had been just short of the maximum allowance, which was—

Panic suddenly punched her in the gut. Her luggage! She'd lost it!

The thought lasted only for a second before she was scoffing at her own stupidity. Travelling alone had required a level of hyper-vigilance about the whereabouts of her luggage, and she'd been in that mode for so long she guessed it was difficult to switch it off. Of course she hadn't lost her luggage. It was probably still sitting right where she had left it in the hostel. Her face fell when she realised it had more likely been taken away as evidence. This line of thought brought unwelcome connotations that threatened to suck her back into a dark despair, but if she was to make the most of her time in this open space then crumpling into a heap of tears on the floor was not an option.

She rubbed her eyes and tried to recentre her focus on the free weights, spotting one that matched the luggage allowance and gingerly lifting it with two hands. The weight felt like nothing, as if it was a fake, a prop made of polystyrene. She could lift it over her head in one hand. Staggered, she let go and heard the thud as it hit the ground. Not polystyrene. She started to pick up heavier weights, each one offering her little resistance. Aghast and awestruck, she continued her experiment with feverish urgency but paused suddenly as she caught sight of her reflection in a metallic plate lying on its side. She dropped what she was holding and picked up the disc, gazing into it like a hand-mirror.

The last time she'd seen herself was just before her last interview, checking

she was presentable via the camera on her screen, pleased with how her dark green eyes were highlighted with the softest sparkling orange across the lids, hair straightened and framing her heart-shaped face, skin a soft shade of olive from a subtle bronzer.

She took in her reflection now. What a mess. Her skin had taken on a sallow hue, her eyes hooded and underlined with a tapering shade of black, purple veins spidering across her cheeks from all the crying. Her hair was thick and matted, curling onto her shoulders in tangled strands. The carefully blended auburn highlights that used to lighten her natural dark brown had dulled and she really needed her roots doing. She looked haggard. Like a victim. Her fingers went to the scar on her face, a thick patch of pink skin running down from the side of her cheekbone, round the crease of her mouth and slipping under her jawline. She was getting used to the way it felt now, the taut restriction when she moved her mouth that was reminiscent of the face masks she used to use with Jessica when they were teenagers, the two of them feigning luxury pamper sessions by applying cheap masks, giggling as they hardened until their faces were frozen.

Thoughts of her sister made her brow crease in the broken reflection, and she felt fury swell from deep within and fill her body with a frenzied energy. Her fists clenched as she looked away from the silver weight plate in her hands, and with a frustrated grunt she threw it across the room. It crashed onto the floor and rolled to a stop some distance away, the sound amplified by the acoustics of the hall. That felt good. She bent and picked up more, turning them into missiles in all directions, putting her emotions behind each one and throwing them further away with shouts of frustration. This felt fucking magnificent. As she paused to select the next item, she realised the door had opened and her Handler was calling her.

‘Hey!’ he shouted. ‘Stop this now. Come over here. Heel.’ She was breathing heavily from the emotional exertion, and as her eyes fell on his, the anger she’d been trying to throw away seeped through her body once more, a bottomless pit of rage that spiked when he bellowed ‘Heel!’ a second time. She saw a spare weight by her feet and looked back at her Handler, a silence seeming to descend in the hall as her decision was made and she stooped to pick it up. The shock from her collar hit her before she had her fingers on the weight, and the rigidity of her muscles folded her to her knees. A chain clinked as her Handler approached, and she received an extra shock as he got to her side, which made her yelp and fall to all fours. He clicked the chain to the back of her collar and

pushed down on her neck roughly.

‘Now now. When I say heel, I want you to heel.’ She kept her eyes on the ground, trembling from the after-effects of the shocks and the humiliation of her pose. ‘Looks like you’re getting the hang of this, though,’ he mocked from above her. ‘One week until your next fight. I’ve booked daily sessions in here until then. Up now.’ He tugged on her collar and she rose shakily to her feet. They met eye to eye as she reached full height, and in the bright lights of the gym she could see his face more clearly. His small eyes were set deep inside a rotund face, a ripple of wrinkles surrounding each. His nose was flattened against his face with wispy blue veins tracking across the bridge, and he sported a set of exaggerated jowls around a firm set of lips. She held his gaze for a moment, searching for any sign of empathy or recognition that she was another human being, but he looked at her with cold disregard before leading her back to her cage.

One week until her next fight. The clarity of a time frame shaped her existence and a routine of sorts emerged to give her some structure to cling to. Not too long after the lights came on, in what she presumed was the morning, her Handler brought her fresh food, drink and a clean ‘toilet’. Sometime in what felt like the afternoon, her Handler would take her to the gym. He barely spoke and she obviously never spoke to him, and although prolonged interaction with him made her uncomfortable, she did find solace in the gym sessions. Once he had closed the door and left her alone, she would run as hard as she could, sometimes not stopping until she vomited. It took a lot of effort to tire her body out. After the joy of such freedom, she would climb back into her cage in misery, the thirty-minute session becoming something to look forward to each day.

On return from the gym she’d be given another stock of food and drink, a bucket of cool water and a change of clothes. Food was always bread and the unidentifiable meat, but occasionally she would also receive pieces of fruit: soft apples or brown bananas. The water bucket was for washing, which she did once she was sure her Handler had gone, using her old clothes as wash cloths and towels and changing into her new clothes after she was dry. She was only ever given a grey T-shirt and trousers, and sometimes they had mysterious rips or tears in them that she chose not to inspect too closely. She was never given underwear and was finally thankful that she had a small chest, otherwise the running sessions in the gym would have been deeply uncomfortable.

The rest of her time locked in the cage under the glare of the strip light was spent in excruciating inertia. She tried to make her food last as long as she could to keep herself occupied, but once it ran out she was left to simply stare into the silent space, alternating position from sitting with her legs stretched out to lying and pressing her feet into the top of the bars, hysteria always waiting to consume her if she chose to acknowledge her reality too clearly.

At some point the light would turn out and plunge her into what she presumed was night, and she'd sleep in short bursts, woken constantly by the discomfort of the hard floor or by dreams of a dark attacker burrowing its head into her stomach. Sleep deprivation made her tired and docile, the lack of stimulation feeding into this lethargy during the day. Sometimes she dreamt of her family and experienced moments of joy until her mind became lucid as she spotted the inconsistencies. Whenever she woke from these dreams, the disappointment was torturous.

Sometimes her entire face would feel tremendous pressure, as if tears were filling up the insides of her skull, pushing at her eyelids with such intensity that they burned. The tears didn't always break through, like a wave that would start to rise and then peter away, only to return a few moments later with renewed ferocity. When the waves did break, she thought she would choke from the uncontrolled sobs, the power of them overwhelming and terrifying, her mouth caught in a silent scream as emotion ballooned into her throat. Once the tears had subsided she would be left quivering in a ball on her side, her forehead throbbing, facial muscles aching, skin sensitive from the endless salt-wash they'd endured. She'd cried like this before, of course. A bad break-up. A family death. When her father left. But in those cases there was a sense of forward momentum, the emotional outpouring an essential part of her healing and growing, emerging from the shadows with a renewed resilience. Locked in this cage, there was no relief. When her cries ebbed she felt hollow for a while, but it wasn't long until her brain itemised the situation in all its glory and cranked the despair back up.

But she never cried in front of him again.

She couldn't tell how long she had been here but, quite frankly, it was long enough. They should have found her by now. Sometimes she heard a loud bang and wondered if this was it, the cavalry had arrived and were storming in and she was going to have to explain to them how she had been forced to kill a sheep

with her bare hands and shit in a bucket. But rescue never came, and the noises she heard were often just a door closing somewhere or distant footsteps, sometimes faint animal sounds, grunts and growls echoing ominously down the corridor. Nothing ever passed by her view. One day her doze was disturbed by a human scream, a female shriek so filled with terror that it made her blood run cold. She sat bolt upright and held her breath, listening for more, but the succeeding silence made her wonder whether it was just part of her dream. She couldn't even be sure if it had come from herself.

She tried to log each day by scratching on the floor with the edge of the bucket whenever she had been in the gym, to keep some sense of time passing. After seven sessions her Handler came for her with his briefcase, and she knew her time was up. He demanded that she present her back to the cage again, and this time she slowly complied, having decided she would rather the humiliation of obedience than let him physically dominate her. She lifted herself as directed and winced at the sharp scratch between her shoulder blades, then crawled out of the cage without objection. Whatever she was facing now, she was ready, either way.

She walked into the Hall with a flutter of anticipation in her chest. At least, that's what she hoped it was. She hadn't experienced any heart trouble in the gym, but the shot her Handler gave her was some sort of stimulant, so who knew what effects it might have. She cleared her throat and scanned the space, noting that the room was set up like last time, with a raised platform off to the side and a pile of sticks in the middle. She glanced between them, licking her lips with steely resolve. She wasn't going to run today. She was ready to fight.

The opposite door opened, and she was hit with a sense of *déjà vu* as a beautiful brown horse came trotting through, wildly tossing its head and snorting. With a dry gulp, she pushed her bewildered inner Jessica to the sidelines and committed to the reality that she was about to fight a horse, then set off at a sprint for the middle of the Hall. She could see the horse already coming for her but was confident in her own speed and reached the objects easily.

They were long wooden poles with metallic heads, each stick almost as tall as she was. Confused by the archaic weapon choice, she shrugged and picked one up, no time to quibble as the horse had reached her and reared onto its back legs, its front hooves in line with her head as they pawed at the air. Her first instinct was to leap backwards, but she countered the impulse and instead lurched

towards it with the spear raised, ducking under the front legs and thrusting the weapon into the horse's chest. She could feel hooves colliding with her shoulders, but she was too close to it now for them to cause any harm, and as the spear sank easily into its body, she hooked her other arm around its torso and continued her forward trajectory, bringing the horse awkwardly down to the ground. It fell onto its rear end at first but then rolled onto its back, her own momentum taking her straight onto its stomach. A flurry of bony legs surrounded her like a winter forest filled with crooked trees, and before she could scramble away, the horse brought its back feet under her and bucked her in a low arc over its body.

She landed roughly on her side but was able to quickly spring to her feet, amazed at the scale of her attack and that she'd escaped without sustaining too much damage. The animal flailed on its back for a moment, then righted itself with a loud whinny. The weapon was jutting out of its chest at an angle as it staggered a little to the side, and she watched in the hope that it would soon succumb to its injury. But with a sudden burst of speed the horse charged forwards, slamming its chest into her and knocking her onto her back. She lay winded, watching helplessly as it reared above her and slammed a front hoof to the ground just a few centimetres from her head. She could feel her hair trapped beneath it, and time drifted as she considered how devastating that would have been if it had made contact, but everything came back into focus with a sharp intake of breath as she saw a second hoof coming straight for her head.

She instinctively threw her hands in front of her face, turned her head to one side and shut her eyes while bracing for certain death. Instead, she felt a solid weight in her hands, and when she carefully peeled open her eyes, she found that she was holding the horse's hoof in mid-air. From the change in forces, she could tell it was trying to stamp down or withdraw its leg, but her arms had locked in position and somehow it wasn't going either way. She let out a single snort of surprised laughter.

The pressure on her hair lifted as the horse shifted its other feet to keep balance, and she realised this wasn't a position she should hold for too long, so through gritted teeth she stiffened her shoulders and applied a sudden upward thrust to the horse's leg, knocking it off balance backwards. The spear handle sticking out of its chest came into her line of sight and she released her hands to swipe at the pole, yanking it out deliberately at an angle. Her face was sprayed with warm blood as the horse whined and staggered away.

Wiping her eyes, she clambered to her feet and brandished the weapon again, clutching the spear tightly in her fists and widening her stance as she felt her toes slipping on the blood-soaked floor. She watched the horse stumble and started to feel guilt at what she had done to such a beautiful creature, while also willing it to stop because she wasn't sure how much longer her bravado would last. The horse made a sad sound as its legs collapsed beneath it, then with a heavy sigh it lay down on its side and was still. She gazed at it in disbelief. Had she really just killed a horse?

A metallic screech announced that her door was opening, and she saw her Handler profiled against the backlight, shouting her to heel. Her grip on the spear shifted as she weighed up the situation, niggled by the temptation to throw it straight at him. But she faltered as she imagined quite clearly what would happen. Just like the first time at the gym, the moment she looked like she was lifting the spear he would shock her and gain physical dominance straightaway. So she dropped the weapon, set her jaw and walked slowly towards him, staring at the floor to avoid eye contact and willing herself to stay vacant in front of him.

'Nice work,' he said, reaching behind her neck with the chain in his hand, a metallic click signalling it was fastened. He held the control unit openly in the other hand, as if he was making sure she could see it. She kept her eyes down, willing the rising emotions to stay buried while he led her back to her cage. The fight was beginning to replay in her mind, not only the terror of what she had faced but the way she had set to it without question. She'd just killed another animal with her bare hands, and the idea was making her sick. Her Handler whistled as they walked, and she got the sour sense that he was happy.

'Keep that up, you might stay alive long enough to make something of yourself,' he said as they reached her cage, opening it with his wrist and gesturing for her to enter. She found this the most galling part, the cage height making her drop to her hands and knees and crawl in like an animal, but right now she needed to be alone before her emotions exploded. Clamping her teeth tightly together, she clambered inside and felt the chain run along the top of the cage and then slacken as her Handler attached it to its post. The cage door closed and he tapped the top of it. 'I need to make some collections, so I'll be back in a couple of hours with the usual. Since you managed not to die this time, I think we'll be back out there in a day or so.' She kept her back to him, practically holding her breath to keep herself in check, and as she heard his footsteps

diminishing down the corridor, she finally let herself go.

The force of the tears was so unbearable she had to press her face into the side of the cage and hug her chest with her arms, her sobs echoing off the walls.

five

Movement caught her eye, and she spotted an ant crawling busily towards her, criss-crossing between two tiles as if undecided on its path. It paused near her toes, the antenna dancing in the air, and she considered the power she had to end its life so easily. But she was not a mindless killer.

*

Time passed. Days. Weeks. Who knows.

She hadn't been rescued yet, but she had stayed afloat, fighting and killing and existing in this violent new world, keeping herself relatively in one piece so that when rescue did come she would be able to take advantage of it. After her defeat of the horse, she was given only one more session in the gym before she was facing another opponent, this time a mongrel dog that was energetic but quite stupid. Spears were out again, and she dispatched of the animal without sustaining even a scratch. Physically, anyway. Mentally she experienced a new wave of sadness, the dog reminding her of her grandma's old companion Bonnie. After the threat of the fight was over, she could only think of Bonnie and the fact that she had just speared her through the neck and what would Grandma say because she had loved Bonnie like another child until she had succumbed to a stroke. Grandma, that is, not Bonnie.

Her Handler had seemed upbeat after this encounter and set her up with another dog the following day. This one was thick-set, slow and heavy, and the squatness of its face and the roll of fat across its back reminded her so much of someone, but she couldn't place who it was. There were no spears or raised platform for that fight, which she felt was a little unfair, and she did not escape unscathed. The dog had clamped on to her calf and refused to let go. Without the distraction of pain she was able to use her own strength to prise its jaws open, but she faltered when it came to finishing it. This dog wasn't a Bonnie, yet it still carried the faintest humanity in its tiny black eyes. Her indecision gave the animal time to shirk her hold and shift its jaws onto her upper arm, attempting to drag her across the floor. This motivated her enough to break its neck with her one free arm. It was the first animal she had killed with her bare hands since the ram, and the intimacy of the act left her with a sour taste for the rest of the day.

In the blackness of the night, she realised the dog had reminded her of her Handler. The thought caused a hysterical smile to break across her face, almost hurting her cheeks with its intensity. She supposed she hadn't worked those particular facial muscles for a while.

Canines became a regular opponent for the next few fights, all varying breeds and sizes. She had learned that the simplest way to dispatch them was to get in close, and the easiest way to do that was to keep them occupied by making the most of the boosters her Handler gave her pre-fight and sacrificing parts of her body to their jaws. Once they were attached, she could position herself to give a blow to the neck, hoping it was quick enough to be humane.

If she sustained injury, which was nearly every time, she would be walked from the Hall straight to a medical room and seated on the edge of a trolley, her chain held short by her Handler from behind while an unseen hand injected something into her upper arm that would make her swoon into darkness. She'd wake back in her cage, her wounds already healing and track marks freshened on her forearms.

The days followed the same routine: meals and buckets and either sessions in the gym or fighting in the Hall, interspersed with long stretches of unconsciousness. She was managing all of this. She was fighting for her life with a strength that made her feel like a god, and though their brutality was difficult to digest, the battles in the Hall were a welcome distraction. These were the moments you would see in a film montage, action and struggle. Exciting stuff. But it was the in-between parts that she wasn't handling as well, the boring act of existence. The silence. The solitude. The ever-lasting epoch in her cage. Here she could do nothing but think and consider and dwell, and it was slowly killing her.

The fear and uncertainty were one thing, the physical confinement another. But the absolute loneliness was overbearing. Her only human interaction was through her Handler, who was obviously a dick, and the distant presence of a medic who always put her to sleep. She scoffed at her idiot past self who was so unfulfilled despite her home and her family and her freedom, dreaming of the romantic idea of travelling alone. She thought she was so sophisticated, enjoying her own company by meeting new friends and partying, embracing 'loneliness' as if it was something to brag about. She really hated that version of herself now. Her current self, the haggard, scarred mute who shuffled around a cage and shat

in a bucket, she would happily punch the bright, optimistic, idealistic version of her past self right in her stupid, flawless face.

The gaps between waking from sedation and the next fight became blessedly shorter, and she felt just a little bit stronger each time despite the scars accumulating across her body. But after a particularly brutal fight with two terriers, whose small sharp teeth inflicted bites high in quantity but low in quality, she woke in the cage with her skin crackling from tape and gauze, and groggily rolled to her left, throwing up immediately and flooding the floor with a pale yellow liquid that emitted a smell so sweet it made her vomit again. Her body shook viciously and she moaned, struggling to focus her mind while she wretched once more. With a final heave she lay spent on her side, her body stiff and unresponsive as it quivered uncontrollably. She could see that her arm was displacing vomit into small ripples that coasted towards her face, but she was unable to summon the energy to move away.

She lay there for some time, exhausted but unbearably awake, disgusted by the mess but unable to physically respond, wondering if she was dying and whether she really cared. At length her Handler appeared, and she heard him exclaim something in his language before disappearing again, returning later with another figure in tow. A medic bent down to peer inside the cage, wrinkling her nose with a frown.

‘It is probably a reaction to all the sedation she has had recently,’ the medic said. ‘You have worked her hard, and with the infusions and sedations on top of that, it is always difficult to know how they may respond.’

‘What is all that?’ she heard her Handler ask from behind her. She still couldn’t move but her ears were sharp.

‘It is the feed we give them while they are sedated. It can sometimes disagree with people over prolonged use. I am surprised this is the first time this has happened.’ The medic rose from her crouch and talked over the cage. ‘We can put in a line for fluids and let her rest. I would recommend a break from sedation and any activity for at least a week.’

‘A week?’ her Handler repeated, sounding annoyed. The doctor cleared her throat awkwardly.

‘It is our standard recommendation.’

‘Yes, I am aware,’ her Handler snapped. ‘We need to build up a profile, keep the momentum.’

‘I believe you are succeeding,’ the medic said slowly. She looked back down and sighed. ‘I can bring the equipment here, no need to move her. You might want to rinse everything first though.’ They disappeared out of her pen and she groaned, trying again to shift her body but finding her energy still completely depleted. A strange dragging sound echoed down the corridor, getting louder until its source emerged into view. She could see her Handler’s legs and behind them a long reel of rubber hosing. He was grumbling to himself with words she couldn’t understand, then he shouted suddenly and a loud gushing sound filled the small space as cold water began to spray from the hose. Her Handler was using it to clear the vomit out of the cage, catching her in the stream repeatedly. She cringed and tried to back away, but the lack of room mixed with the strange weakness in her body meant she could barely move, flinching instead and using her hands to protect her face. Once he finished, the cage was dripping wet and her clothes were plastered to her body. She had thought she had already sunk to the lowest level of dignity possible, but now it appeared she had reached a new realm.

She closed her eyes dejectedly and listened to the sounds of her Handler shifting behind her. Then she felt slight pressure around her arm and slowly turned her head to see what was going on. Her Handler had threaded some wire bands through the bars and was using them to pin her arm to the side of the cage. The medic came back shortly afterwards and worked out of sight. She felt a sharp scratch and managed to shift herself onto her back, finding a needle taped into her forearm that was linked to something outside of the cage. They left her alone then, the soft drip from the fluids at least providing something to listen to.

She felt her exhaustion fade into a heavy hangover, then peter out into a light headache, her clothes still damp when the doctor returned. She didn’t bother to move as she felt the sharp pinch of the needle being removed and the snap of wires being cut to free her arm. She wrapped it across her body protectively as she stared up at the two people standing above her. The doctor was looking down at her, an older woman in a white tunic, her skin and hair darker than her Handler’s.

‘Remember, at least a week of rest,’ the doctor said, almost addressing her directly.

‘Yes, yes.’ Her Handler waved a hand at the doctor dismissively. The sight of his face instilled a hatred in her gut that was so intense she had to look away, so she flicked her gaze back to the medic one last time before they left her alone. The cage was still damp, water droplets glistening in the dim light, a lingering smell of sweet vomit in the air. She ran her tongue around her mouth and had never wanted a toothbrush so badly in all her life.

A week of rest should have been a welcome respite from the carnage in the Hall, but it meant permanent cage time. It was hell. Sometimes she rocked on her side, bumping her head into the bars in a rhythmic trance, unable to stop because she could not stomach the stillness of everything. In the void of stimulation her brain would torture her with memories from home. A looped riff from a stupid song she used to sing with her school friends. The clack of teeth against teeth from a forbidden kiss that she always regretted. The smile from the guy she met on her first night away, full of promise and possibility.

But most often she thought of her sister. Specifically, the expression Jessica fought so hard to hide when she had found out about her travel plans. The overbearing look of betrayal that still twisted her gut with guilt. She constantly replayed their final argument, held in whispers so they didn’t upset their mother.

‘You’re not even going to say goodbye to her?’ Jessica hissed at the bottom of the stairs. She’d just been putting Enid down, her cheeks flushed and a sheen across her chest from the overbearing warmth of the first floor. Summer was coming and ground-floor living would be instigated soon.

‘I can’t do it, Jess. It’s too hard,’ she whimpered, the thought of waving to that little face too painful.

‘Shouldn’t that tell you something about this stupid trip?’ Jessica sneered.

‘I’m doing it for her!’ she said, bristling in defence, before adding, ‘And you and Mum.’

‘Oh yeah, such a hero,’ Jessica scoffed, heading into the small kitchen.

‘Jess...’ She followed her, edging around the packed luggage in the hallway.

‘No, it’s okay. You go. I’ll take care of everything here.’ Jessica was bustling in the sink, which was full of that day’s dishes. Water rations were already in place, and when it was Enid’s bath night they had to make it stretch. ‘Won’t be much different to normal anyway,’ Jess muttered, as if to herself but loud enough that she meant it to be heard. That was enough to make her snap.

‘Are you fucking kidding me?’ She saw Jessica’s hands pause in the sink. ‘All that time I spent looking after E so you could work.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry being with your family is such an imposition.’ Jessica rolled her eyes at the wall, twisting the argument as she always bloody did.

‘Jess, I’m trying to help my family. Why don’t you get that?’

‘And how is abandoning us going to help?’

‘You know whatever I make in Europe will be almost double what I make here with the exchange rate. There’s a huge demand for carers out there – how’d you think I got the visa?’

‘There’s a huge demand for carers right here. In your own family.’

‘I know.’ She sighed at the reminder of their failed caregiver and the deep-running shame of feeling so very tired of the burden. ‘But if I can get us more money then I can help in another way.’

‘How?’

‘We could afford to proof the house, make it liveable during the heat storms.’

‘That’s not going to help us when you’re dead in a hole somewhere.’

‘Oh, not this again.’

‘Travelling alone when you’re a girl is so reckless.’

‘I’m twenty-four. And I know how to keep safe. I’ve been planning to do this for ages, remember. I’d have gone way sooner if it wasn’t for—’

‘For what?’ Jessica had turned from the sink suddenly, her lips pursed.

‘Enid, of course.’

‘So what’s changed?’

‘She’s starting school, so you won’t need my help as much.’ She shuffled on the spot awkwardly, and Jessica shook her head in exasperation.

‘Are you kidding me?’

‘What, you want me to stay here for another ten years then?’ She knew the argument had unearthed thoughts she really shouldn’t be sharing, but the words tumbled out anyway. ‘You want me to put my life on hold and be a captive here all because you didn’t understand contraception?’ She watched Jessica’s eyes tear up and immediately regretted it. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t—’

‘No, it’s fine,’ Jessica said, barging past her. ‘You think of yourself now. Just follow in Dad’s footsteps. Don’t worry about us.’

‘Jess,’ she pleaded, but Jessica had started up the stairs, leaning over the banister to give her one last, withering look.

‘Have a nice trip, sis.’

That was the very last time she’d talked to her sister. The next morning she’d left early for the train, the rest of the household silent and still asleep. She’d hovered at the bottom of the stairs, debating whether to go up to plant one last kiss on Enid’s forehead, but the risk of waking her was too great and she wasn’t strong enough to face her. She’d glanced at the closed door of her mother’s room downstairs, sensing the darkness within, the room almost humming with unrelenting suffering. Her mother knew what she was doing but hadn’t the strength to object, and it was better that way. She didn’t want to know how she felt. So she’d left without saying goodbye to any member of her small family. Her plan was to contact them when she had succeeded, when she could transfer the first proceeds of employment and hear the gratitude in their voices, the embarrassment that they’d made a big fuss over nothing, the recognition that she was actually the saviour of the family. Her sister’s last words would echo into the darkness of the night. ‘*Have a nice trip, sis.*’ What would Jessica think of her now? How disappointed must she be? ‘I did it for you,’ she would whisper into

the corner of the cage, hugging her knees tightly and rubbing the back of her neck.

The only break from her solitude was when her Handler appeared with food and fresh buckets. He'd sometimes pause expectantly, as if waiting for her to react to his presence in some way. She would keep as still as she could, sometimes not bothering to register him at all, other times watching him with silent eyes, feeling her hatred simmer inside. From her position on the floor his face would be distorted, sliced repeatedly by the bars across her view, but he would often rest his hand on the top of the cage, his fingertips emerging through the gaps. She hated how each drop of pink flesh was invading her space, and she would have to tense to hold her body still, resisting the urge to lash out.

He'd further encroach her space when he passed through her supplies, always careful to lock her chain in place first, his arm tantalisingly vulnerable through the opening. Held against the cage by her collar, she would maintain her growing anger by studying his hands, the way his blunted fingers each had their own perfect rectangle of curled black hair carved out before the knuckle. They reminded her of their maths teacher, Mr Finnigan, whose hands she would gaze at in revulsion during particularly boring lessons. Hairy chipolatas. That's what Jessica had called them, with the amused authority that big sisters have over these things. She remembered those hands vividly, leaving damp imprints across her desk when he leaned over to check on her work, and possibly to look down her school blouse. In her dreams the two faces would sometimes meld, Mr Finnigan standing over her with authority while holding her collar control, her brain frantically trying to unpick what wasn't reality, waking with a start and a whimper and more misery when the truth of her situation set in.

After a few days of tortured wallowing, she realised she had had enough. She had shed so many tears by now that crying was just a pointless bore. It achieved nothing. She needed to focus her energies on the endgame. She needed to stay alive long enough for the rescue. So, every time her mind tried to serve up a thought about home, she would retaliate by fantasising about being saved. They had to come. They were going to come. And in the meantime she could handle this. She was super strong, she was winning in the Hall and she just had to hold on for a little while longer.

To fill the time and distract her mind, she started her own exercise regime while she was inside the cage, managing one-armed push-ups with a slight

giggle of disbelief, some core exercises she remembered seeing in a magazine and a version of pull-ups on the cage ceiling where she lay on her back, hooked her toes up above her and then pulled the rest of her body up with her fingertips. The plan was to keep herself fit and strong so that she would survive the animal fights and be in good form to leave here as soon as they came. She just wished they would hurry the hell up.

Her Handler followed the advice of the doctor, but once the time limit had lapsed he showed up with his briefcase and a sardonic smile.

‘This is going to be a good one,’ he said as they walked down the corridor. She licked her lips with anticipation as she followed him, feeling the booster shot begin to seep through her body with the now familiar rising energy and sharpening mind. She was trying not to feel elated at being out of her cage, but it was difficult to contain. After a week of confinement she was so ready to tackle another dog. She practically strode into the Hall, without protest and without fear, just the grim determination to make this as quick and painless as possible for the animal.

Through the opposite door came a goat. It was about as tall as her, with two long curved horns sprouting from its forehead. Shit. Horns. She stretched her neck from side to side and rolled her shoulders. The Hall was empty today, so nowhere to hide and nothing to fight with. But she was unbeatable now. It was bigger than a dog, yes, but there were no teeth to rip her flesh, plus she had no emotional connection to goats, so in theory this should be easier for her. She could take this. No problem.

The goat started to charge and she stood her ground, hands out ready to block. She was ninety per cent certain she could stop this beast in its tracks, remembering the way she had held the horse’s hoof above her face. As the goat neared her and the true heft of it became apparent, she started to mentally drop the percentage of certainty. Perhaps a different tactic would be better employed. Too late. The goat crashed into her and drove her backwards into the wall, its horns crushing her chest and knocking every last atom of air out of her. She heard and felt an unnatural crack somewhere deep inside her body.

Fuck.

The goat drew back, and she was able to take a rattling breath while using the

small gap between them as an opportunity to snatch it by the horns. She braced herself on the wall behind her and held firm, managing to anticipate and resist the goat's movements as it tried to swing to the sides, pull away or push forwards into her again. The animal was making a strange, high-pitched wheeze as it jostled, but she soon realised the noise was coming from herself. That was probably not a good sign.

She started to edge her way around to the side of the goat, tilting its head up as she went, using the same tactic she'd tried with the ram. It was much easier with her enhanced strength, even when her opponent was at head height. As the goat tried to counter her move, she was able to force it side-on into the wall and block it in with her body. They were at another stalemate and she was out of ideas on what to do next. The goat was kicking out at her with its back legs, its sharp hooves clashing with her shins and nearly destabilising her stance. She needed to make a proper move soon, because the whistling wheeze seemed to be getting louder, and with it the sense that she wasn't getting enough air. It was time to take a gamble.

With a yell she threw herself to the floor, taking the goat down with her. She controlled her fall onto her back and the goat fell on its side. Her legs were covered by its body, and she kept her grip on its horns while the two of them spent a minute frantically thrashing, their legs in a tangle. She freed herself first and twisted her body around, landing her knee square on the goat's throat, holding its head still by its horns as she drove her weight down into its windpipe. She held position and waited, trying to ignore the hooves catching her back and sides, growing ever aware that her chest felt like it was bubbling while her throat was filling with something from the inside up. Gradually the goat's movements slowed, and she closed her eyes, not wanting to see it die but also desperately needing it to soon.

Finally, the movements stopped completely and she let go of its horns, allowing its head to flop to the floor. She caught sight of bloodied imprints carved into her palms from the jagged edges of the horns, and watched in dazed fascination as two rivulets of blood traced paths around the backs of her hands and lazily spiralled down her forearms. Her consciousness was snapped back when she heard her door rolling open and her Handler shouting her to heel.

Carefully, she rose to her feet and faced her Handler as a team of medics emerged slowly into the Hall behind him. She started towards them, but the

bubbling in her chest suddenly built into a coughing fit that sprayed pink foam across the floor. Her legs buckled and she lurched into the wall, using it to hold herself up while finding it harder and harder to suck air back into her lungs. The medical team rushed to her side while her Handler hovered in the background. She heard the lead doctor shout for a gurney and thought that sounded simply wonderful, then slid down the wall into silence.

*

A spread of papers and a silver briefcase.

‘Tell us about yourself.’

The painted burgundy door.

‘Go on in.’

She may have drifted in and out while she was in there; it was always hard to retain the memories and stop them from blurring into distant dreams. She thought she saw the bright white tiles in the medical unit but couldn't be sure. When she was fully lucid again, she was back in familiar territory, staring up at the fluorescent strip through the bars of her cage. Her head felt heavy and slow, and she took her time, hoping to avoid a repeat of her last experience. As her vision gradually cleared, she tested each limb carefully by moving them in turn. Arms and legs were intact, but when she shifted her torso she felt a deep, enveloping ache, and the memory of the fight reared in her mind. She pulled up her top and scanned for new scars, but aside from a strange circle on the side of her chest she saw only faded bruising. The soft pink stripes on her palms indicated that she'd been under for at least a few days, maybe more than a week.

She refrained from getting up, letting her body adjust while she mentally reviewed her goat fight. After brief reflection, she summarised her performance as ‘shit’. She was an idiot. She had become over-confident, cocky. Yes, she had been strong enough to hold the goat at close quarters, but to stop it in full flight? She had seriously misjudged herself; she really needed to be more careful. What if her saviours came while she was hidden away in the medical centre? What if they'd already been and missed her? No, that was ridiculous. But it had to be soon, because she had been here a very long time now and it shouldn't have

taken them this long to find her. So that probably meant...

They couldn't find her.

She melted into the floor of the cage, closing her eyes in misery as the realisation that had been sitting in the back of her mind finally unveiled itself in all its glory. She should have been found by now, but she was still here. Therefore, logically something was wrong. She was too hard to find. So they weren't coming.

They weren't coming.

She clenched her fists tightly and bared her teeth in a silent grimace. Of course they weren't coming. Wherever she was, whatever the purpose of the Complex, it was a slick operation that wouldn't be that easy to track down or break into. She was a fucking idiot to have spent so long waiting for rescue. What was she doing? How much time had she wasted killing dogs and doing push-ups? She batted her fists into her forehead, the force rattling her head against the floor, and tears evolved in the corners of her eyes as the old, familiar hysteria threatened to break through. But she breathed long and hard through pursed lips and pushed the tears away.

She was done with crying. She was done with waiting.

As she pushed herself up, she felt the unnatural strength flow through her body and realised she was done with all of this. It was time for her to take matters into her own hands, and her lips curled into a defiant smile as she realised they had provided her with some very strong hands indeed.

six

She stepped over the ant and padded to the poolside, slowly sitting on the edge and carefully slipping her feet into the water. Its sudden chill made her muscles clench as cold needles tracked up to her spine, and she exhaled as she lowered her legs until the water rose to her shins. Her skin quickly adjusted to the temperature, and under the growing warmth of the sun, the sensation was divine.

*

Once she made the decision to escape, she felt a new inner drive. An actual purpose. Rather than biding her time waiting for rescue, now she would be proactive and meet the rescuers halfway. Figuring out how to achieve freedom became a welcome focus, diverting her thoughts away from home or family or the horrors of her situation. She lay on her back, stroking her chin scar and gazing unblinkingly at the ceiling, letting her vision blur until the strip light above had warped into a hazy portal, as if an escape route was materialising before her very eyes.

How the hell was she going to get out of here?

She started by meticulously searching every part of her cage for a weak spot, tracing each square with her fingers and giving them a little pinch. It was repetitive and slow, but she had all the time in the world. She wondered whether her enhanced strength would make the confines of her cage less domineering, but was surprised to find that she could not distort the frame in the slightest.

She turned to her chain, pulling as much of it through the top of the cage as she could and squeezing each part to see if there was a weak link. Perhaps if she could slacken it somehow, she could get free of her Handler while he was taking her to the Hall. The metal was tough with little give, probably made of the same material as her cage, and she couldn't see a way to affect it in the slightest. Her thoughts turned to the other avenues she could explore, and she whiled away the rest of the day itemising a to-do list.

The next day her Handler briskly delivered her breakfast without a word, but on his second visit he gathered up her chain and told her she was going to the gym. She twisted to her hands and knees and was surprised to feel her torso

aching savagely. She grimaced as she crawled out of the cage and got to her feet. Her Handler looked her up and down with a frown.

‘It was a good show with the goat, but getting hurt this badly cost us time.’ She kept her eyes on him and her face still, his remark stirring up raw anger. If he didn’t want her to get hurt so much, he shouldn’t put her up against a fucking mountain goat. He sighed and led her to the gym, muttering under his breath as she walked inside stiffly. Once he’d left her alone she tried a half-hearted run, but landing on bare feet rattled her ribs so much it felt like they were grating against each other. Groaning quietly, she settled for a stroll while casually inspecting the hall for weak links. There was only one entrance door, no windows and no visible vents, the only addition to the room being cameras in the corners of the ceiling. Aside from using the weights as weapons, which she’d already attempted and failed, the gym had little potential for success. She mentally crossed it from her list as her Handler opened the door and she walked gingerly towards him, holding a hand across her body for support. He tutted at her and muttered something she didn’t understand, then attached her chain to her collar and began to lead her down the corridor.

She followed, taking the opportunity to study him more carefully for weaknesses. As always, her chain was wrapped around one of his hands while the control unit for her shock collar was nestled in his other palm. She had the strength to take him now, she knew that with great certainty, and the thought of throwing him into the wall filled her with pleasing malice. She could take him by surprise, but it was a gamble. One press of that button and she was reduced to a quivering wreck on the floor. Even if she succeeded and managed to take him out while they were in transit, she had no idea where they were in this Complex or which direction was the way out. From her experience it was a maze of dark corridors with no signage, and she could get lost in here, frantically counting down the seconds before someone found her. That idea scared her even more than the reality of being locked inside her cage.

Her Handler took an unexpected turn and led her into a medical room, bright and white with a treatment bed in the middle. She knew the space well and was guided to sit on the bed while her Handler took up the usual spot right behind her, holding her collar very tightly at the back of her neck. The medic entered but wavered at the door, seemingly uncertain. She was the same woman who had been standing over her cage while she was bathing in a pool of vomit.

‘Doctor Jackson?’ her Handler prompted.

‘What is the problem?’

‘She’s not good on her feet. I need you to check her over.’

‘I would not advise sedation so soon,’ the doctor said apprehensively. Her English was constructed well but accented to suggest it wasn’t her first language.

‘She’ll behave, won’t you?’ Her Handler yanked on the collar, jolting her a little on the bed. She raised her eyebrows in a shrug, working hard to hold her jaw shut to avoid her inside thoughts from spewing out.

Doctor Jackson approached her slowly, pulling a stethoscope out of her white coat pocket. Usually in the medical room she would be sedated by someone out of sight, so this was the first time she’d had a chance to study the medic up close. She looked to be in her mid-fifties, olive-skinned with slick black hair tied into a neat bun at the nape of her neck. She had sharp features, her nose, lips and chin a vista of pointed peaks and shallow valleys, her eyes almost black with a softness that was striking against the landscape. She was short in stature, but the definition of her forearm muscles suggested a subtle force.

‘How are you feeling?’ Doctor Jackson asked, and she blinked in surprise at being directly addressed. She could feel her Handler’s grip on the collar behind her neck and thought back to his first rule hissed through the bars. *Dogs don’t talk*. Slowly, she put a hand to her chest to indicate discomfort, and Doctor Jackson frowned. ‘I need to listen to her chest.’ She directed this over her head towards her Handler.

‘Go on then,’ he replied briskly. ‘I’ve got her.’ She felt his knuckles pressing into her skin as he tightened his hold. Doctor Jackson came closer and tentatively lifted her top to listen with the stethoscope. At such close proximity she could hear the doctor’s heightened breath rate and see the tension in her body. Then it dawned on her with revulsion and awe. The doctor was afraid of her.

‘Well, when can we get her back?’ her Handler asked. Doctor Jackson’s jaw clenched as she continued to listen intently, then she removed the stethoscope and stepped away briskly.

‘I would estimate another two weeks.’

‘Two weeks?’ her Handler spat. ‘I thought healing time should be reduced when they’re enhanced?’

‘It is,’ the doctor replied. ‘But you must consider that she had a collapsed lung and some substantial breaks to her ribs. Even enhanced, it will take time to return to full fitness from that sort of injury.’ Her Handler muttered something in another language and tutted.

‘We need to capitalise on the last fight, keep the interest up.’

‘It was a very serious injury. On a standard person it would probably have been fatal. It was remarkable that she was able to continue for as long as she did.’

She listened with mixed emotions. Disgust at the evidence she had been changed, no longer a ‘standard person’. But also, a small puff of guilty pride at the admiration in the doctor’s voice.

‘What about another infusion?’ her Handler asked impatiently. ‘Would that speed up the process?’

‘That is not a guaranteed outcome, and the effects of so many infusions over a short space of time are unknown.’ Doctor Jackson’s tone was non-committal.

‘So, you couldn’t say it wouldn’t help?’ her Handler tested. The doctor looked uncomfortable.

‘It is impossible to say if the benefit would outweigh the risk. She has already had one infarction.’

‘But we’re not up to the limit yet?’ her Handler pushed. The doctor pressed her lips together.

‘No, she has not received the maximum recommended dosage. But I would remind you that this is not tested in females, so we have no data on what levels may be acceptable.’ There was a silent pause, and she stared at a spot on the floor as, she presumed, her Handler was thinking, making decisions about her body while she was kept muted and restrained. The injustice of this place was

suffocating, and she gripped the edges of the bed as she felt a wave of anger rush through her chest.

‘Okay.’ Her Handler’s voice broke her thoughts and made her jump. ‘Get the infusions ready. Let’s test your theory.’ Doctor Jackson frowned.

‘I did not...’ The doctor trailed off, then pursed her lips. ‘I would strongly advise against sedation today. She has not had the recommended timeframe of recovery.’

‘Fine then, don’t sedate. Cheaper for me that way.’ The doctor’s brow creased.

‘There need to be some effective restraints if my team are handling her.’

‘She’s not going to do anything,’ her Handler scoffed. ‘But fine, I’ll sort her.’ He pulled on her collar and took her into an adjoining treatment room that had a bed in the centre. This one had extendable arm pieces with black strips dangling beneath them.

‘Lie down,’ he ordered.

She froze, her anger still bubbling inside, fuelling her chest to rise and fall heavily with deeper breaths, the motion jarring her ribs and making her grimace. ‘Lie down,’ her Handler repeated, his tone hardening. She turned to face him and saw a flicker of alarm in his eyes, then her body seized and she crumpled roughly against the side of the bed, catching her jaw on the metal frame as she crashed to the floor. She grunted in surprise and pain, trying to make her limbs move against the crippling spasms, helpless in the grip of the shock. As it released and her limbs turned flaccid, something hard and heavy pressed down on her back. A boot. She panted, working to get purchase on the floor with her hands, knowing full well that she could throw him off without breaking a sweat now, but as her palms pressed against the hard floor she felt another shock hold her, tiny needles tracking her spine and making her fingers and toes clench against the smooth white tiles. The boot pushed further into her back and her Handler’s voice rang out in the small room.

‘Are you finished?’

She pressed her face into the floor to hide the tears that had started to escape, tears of frustration and pain and helplessness. She shuddered under the weight of

her emotion but refrained from further movement, and for a moment his boot stayed where it was, not a physical barrier but a symbol of his dominance. He was reminding her who was in charge and that no matter how strong she became, he would always hold the power. Always.

Eventually, she felt his foot move and the pull on her collar to encourage her to stand. Her jaw was throbbing as she got back to her feet, and she avoided eye contact as he ordered her again to lie on the bed. This time she complied, trying to gather back her composure as she lay down willingly. Her Handler began to fasten restraints around her limbs, snugly fitting her to the bed with her arms outstretched, and she fought the growing sense of claustrophobia as her body became completely restricted. Doctor Jackson appeared with a second medic, a younger male with large round eyes, and they looked cautiously down at her.

‘She’s not going anywhere,’ her Handler said, patting the side of her face. She closed her eyes and bit her lip, fighting the urge to retaliate. ‘You don’t need me now, right? I have things to do.’

‘You realise this procedure takes about twenty hours?’

She opened her eyes in alarm, to see the doctor doing something with a trolley beside the bed.

‘If it’s finished before I get back, just leave her here. Stick some fluids in, I’ll feed her later.’ Her Handler disappeared from view, and then she heard a door close, at which the medics seemed to visibly relax. They moved wordlessly around her, setting up a drip via a line into her forearm so methodically it was as if they had done this procedure many times already. Several bags of clear fluids were lined up beside her, and she ran the timescale back over in her head with a grimace. The cramped confines of the cage were bad enough, but being chained to a bed for a day was a whole other level, even if it was a treat to have a pillow beneath her skull and a mattress under her back.

They slid a plastic sheet underneath her hips, and she stared unblinkingly at Doctor Jackson, searching for any signs that the woman recognised the cruelty, that she was a prisoner here, that they shouldn’t be doing this to another human being. Their eyes met for a brief moment, but the doctor looked away quickly and packed up the used medical supplies before leaving the room.

Once she was sure that she was alone, she carefully tested each of her limbs

against the restraints for weaknesses, but they resisted any signs of submission to her strength. Her air supply was immediately cut off when she tried to lift her head, suggesting that her collar had been attached to something below the bed. She felt rising panic at the degree of restriction and closed her eyes to focus on her breathing and keep herself under control. Being trapped for long periods was nothing new to her now. She had to surrender and ride this out.

The silence was punctuated by a soft drip from the infusion dribbling into her body through the clear tubing, and she stared at the ceiling in quiet dismay. All she had learned today was that there was no weak link. No chance of escape. Whatever she might try, she would only end up being shocked, and once she had shown her intention to leave, who knew what measures they might put in place to stop it from happening again, or what tortures her Handler might inflict as punishment. She would have one chance to escape, and her lips trembled as she concluded that there was only one real opportunity.

And that opportunity had already passed.

*

She was standing on the porch step of an old terraced house, staring at the painted burgundy door with a trill of nervous excitement in her stomach. This could be another dud, or the interview that would set her on a new path in this country. She smoothed down her patterned blouse and tucked a stray corner back into her black cotton trousers. Licking her dry lips, she took a deep breath and pressed the doorbell. After a brief wait a man opened the door, peering out and looking her up and down without attempting to be inconspicuous. He was in his forties, with short thick hair and white-rimmed spectacles. His expression of indifference immediately put her on edge.

‘Hi, I’m here for the interview?’ She smiled awkwardly. The man scratched the stubble on his chin and nodded slowly. She maintained her smile despite her reservations and added, ‘Is, erm, English okay?’

‘Yes, you’re...?’ he said in a thick accent.

‘From England, yes, sorry.’ She always felt she had to apologise for that. ‘The advert said non-native speakers were welcome?’

‘Yes, that’s no problem.’ He sniffed and took a step backwards, pushing the

burgundy door open wider. 'Please, come in.' She nodded and stepped past him into the entrance hall, noting that the house was clean and uncluttered. The man closed the front door and turned to face her, rubbing his fingers together as he regarded her once more. She held her smile politely under his gaze, inwardly twitching with irritation at how blatant he was. She used to call this sort of thing out, but times had changed and this was now accepted behaviour, apparently.

'Is it your mother you needed care for?' she said, trying to break the silence.

'Oh, yes.' He seemed to snap out of his thoughts. 'Yes, that's right.'

'And is she mobile or bedbound?' she asked, hoping her questions would display her experience.

'Um... bedbound.' He cleared his throat. 'Is that a problem?'

'Not at all, I've worked with lots of different people. My mum is bedbound, actually, and I've cared for her too.'

'Oh?' the man said noncommittally.

'Complications after the virus,' she expanded, swallowing the small nugget of guilt that had started to work its way up her throat.

'Oh dear,' he remarked, seemingly impatiently. 'So, I suppose you would like to meet my mother...' His eyes widened slightly. 'I'm sorry, that's very rude of me. I haven't even checked your name.'

'It's okay.' She smiled outwardly. She had wondered how long it would take him to realise it hadn't even come up. A bit rude, really. 'It's Cassie.'

'Cassie, yes. So, would you like to meet my mother?'

'Yes, that'd be lovely.'

He nodded and pointed to a room at the end of the hallway. 'Head on in.'

She started down the hall, tensing as she passed him, and walked towards a closed dark-oak door. She paused to prepare herself then slowly entered, freezing with a frown. The rooms of previous clients would be filled with clothes

draped around an endless series of skin products, incontinence pads and towels. This one was sparse except for an empty double bed in front of her.

‘Oh.’ Her mouth was drying out. ‘I thought—’ Solid hands pushed her heavily forwards and she sprawled against the bed awkwardly, the end of the mattress hitting her thighs and causing her to face-plant into the duvet. As she scrabbled to get her arms beneath her chest, something pressed firmly into the middle of her back and pinned her to the bed. She let out a cry that was muffled at first by the blankets but then released into the room as her head was pulled up sharply by her hair and a hard object was wrapped around her throat. She heard him mutter something under his breath in another language, then a second sharp shove sent her face down on the bed again. This time she managed to push herself up, spinning wildly to face her attacker only to see him striding down the hallway and turning into a side room. Breathing heavily, she put a hand to her neck, feeling some sort of hard collar wrapping the whole way around her throat. She whimpered in panic and sheer regret, trying to prise it away without success, pausing suddenly in her efforts because down the corridor she could see the front door unguarded and only a short sprint away.

There was her chance. Right there. Right in front of her.

But she hesitated, her feet frozen to the spot for a myriad of reasons. And then he reappeared and her chance was gone and that was it.

The man was backing into the hallway, pulling a large box out of another room. A second man appeared holding the other end, and they set it down at the bottom of the stairs.

As they stepped to the side, she saw clearly what it was. A cage, the sort you would use for a big dog. Her stomach lurched as she realised who it must be for. The two men started to come towards her, both of them expressionless and imposing, and suddenly this all felt very real and not at all what she had expected. Without thought, she slammed the bedroom door shut and scoured for weapons, whimpering as she realised there was nothing but a bed and pillows. The immediacy of the situation made her abandon her reflective nature and instead work on pure instinct, and when the door burst open, she turned and ran full tilt into the man, pushing him with a grunt into the doorframe and creating a gap wide enough for her to duck through. She felt his fingers scrape the back of her arm as she pushed past, but came face to face with the second man with no

time to register his fist before it made contact with her lower jaw and crashed her sideways into the wall. She had never been punched before. It really hurt.

Her head was ringing but she was mindful of being in the middle of continuing chaos, so she stumbled away from the wall and found herself facing the first man again, who gripped both of her arms with his large warm hands. With few ideas left, she tucked her chin and jerked her head forwards, making contact with a clunk that rattled her teeth. He released his hold on her and staggered backwards, clutching his nose. As she turned to run, she heard him shouting, followed by a faint electrical buzzing and the sudden sensation that her entire body was out of her control. Her arms clamped to her sides, her back spasmed and legs locked rigidly, and she fell to the floor like a wooden doll. As the buzzing stopped, her entire body relaxed and she lay face down, a metallic taste between her lips.

There was deep male laughter around her as she tried to compose herself physically, managing to move her arms purposefully until a boot caught her in the stomach and winded her. She coughed and tried to crawl away, not sure about which direction anymore but conscious she needed to keep evading them somehow. The buzzing returned, and with it that same sense of complete helplessness, her body rigid once more, her teeth grating unpleasantly against each other, her breath trapped. Many strong hands held her down, and she felt something click on the back of her collar, followed by a sharp scratch in her upper arm.

‘She’s got fight in her,’ one of the men said from above her with a chuckle. Another voice added something she couldn’t understand, and there was more laughter. The first voice replied, ‘Makes for an interesting lamb.’ She hadn’t caught her breath before she was dragged along the carpet, her remaining strength used to hold on to her collar to avoid it cutting into her windpipe. Cage bars emerged on either side of her, then the tension on her collar relaxed and her body sank to the floor. Her head was spinning as if she was drunk, and the last thing she saw was the world turning a strange shade of purple.

*

The sound of the door opening thankfully pulled Cassie out of her thoughts, the memories of her abduction still vivid enough to reignite the fear and panic she had felt that day. Her best chance of escape had been that unguarded door, that

perfect moment when those men were distracted. She had let it slide, and for what? Now she was stuck here and there was no weak link left to exploit.

She could feel self-pitying tears brimming but blinked them back quickly as Doctor Jackson appeared above her. She inspected the drip casually, then caught Cassie's eye, her lips twitching into a sad smile as she looked as if she was about to say something. Cassie watched her with interest, then she disappeared from view and all she could hear was the sound of her rummaging with something over by the wall. Suddenly, quiet music filled the room, a vaguely familiar classical piece, and Doctor Jackson appeared back in her eyeline with a definite smile and a quick nod before quickly leaving the room.

It had been so long since Cassie had heard music, tears were brought back to her eyes almost instantly, her throat tightening at the feeling of humanity that had been missing for so long. She relaxed her body and let her eyes close as she listened, her emotions tickled and massaged by the rising and falling notes. The rich mix of sound was almost dazzling to her deprived senses and held her attention so much she forgot that she was chained to a bed. She consumed the music greedily, desperate for it to continue, bathing in its glory until eventually it stopped and silence descended once more.

Returning to her senses, she felt immense gratitude towards the woman who had given her such a gift, the first person to demonstrate any hint of compassion in this place. And as if a switch had flicked in her brain, Cassie's eyes sprang open, the faintest of smiles creeping onto her lips.

Of course. Doctor Jackson was the weak link.

seven

The waterline created an optical illusion that distorted the flow of her limbs, making it look like her lower legs had been bisected and reattached off-centre. The image was disquieting, and she destroyed it by kicking her feet slowly, the surface warping with her movements.

*

‘Will you come back?’ a small voice whispered under the covers. A fan of fine blonde hair prickling with static from the sheets. Miniature fingers pawing at her own.

‘Of course I will.’

‘Will you bring me a present?’

‘Sure.’ Cassie laughed, tickling the girl’s tummy, triggering a wriggle-monster that disturbed the sheets and kneed her in the thighs. The laughter subsided and the small girl sniffed.

‘I’ll miss you.’

‘You’ll be too busy having an amazing time at school.’ Cassie kissed the top of her head and gathered her in for a cuddle. ‘I’ll be back before you know it.’

*

The memory pressed heavily against Cassie, any thought of Enid creating such an intensity of emotion that her fists clenched. Enid never judged her decision like Jess did. Enid trusted her to keep to her word. Enid was waiting patiently for her gift.

Cassie had to figure this out.

After she was taken back to her cage, her limbs stiff from prolonged confinement but her body remarkably refreshed, she focused her thoughts on Doctor Jackson and how she could be involved in her plans for escape. But the disrupted sleep and sensory deprivation meant she struggled to keep on track,

often backtracking and circling over one point like re-reading the same sentence over and over with tired eyes. It was frustrating and fruitless, and she grunted in annoyance at her brain for being so inept. She started to inspect every square of the cage bars each day, finding that the monotony of the task allowed her mind to wander more purposefully, and when she felt her thoughts begin to stutter, she would launch into her exercise routine instead, the rush of energy acting like a drug to smother her senses and leave her sweating and breathless, a momentary peace in exhaustion.

Her next fight happened a few days after the medical room, the infusion having resolved her injuries just as her Handler predicted. He seemed smug about this as he led her to the Hall. She faced another dog that was riled and vicious, delivering a deep bite to the side of her leg before she managed to break its neck. She limped back to her Handler, not feeling any pain but aware of the blood gushing out of the bottom of her black cotton trousers and squelching between her toes on every step. He took her straight to the medical room and seated her on the side of the treatment bed. When Doctor Jackson entered, Cassie managed to catch her eye just long enough to let a smile touch the corners of her mouth, before casting her gaze to the floor. Her Handler nudged her in the shoulder and she startled, afraid that he had seen and she had ruined everything before she had even begun.

‘Pull up your trousers so she can see,’ he demanded. Cassie let out a small sigh of relief and did as she was ordered. Ragged punctures flecked her calf, oozing blood like tiny volcanoes. The doctor peered at them from a distance.

‘It looks superficial enough for us to use glue.’

‘Do you need her sedated?’ her Handler asked, still holding her by the collar. The doctor rubbed her hands together and shook her head slowly.

‘No, I think we will be okay.’

‘Restrained?’ her Handler pressed.

‘It depends if she can lie still.’

Cassie nodded very slightly and allowed her Handler to guide her round into a semi-recumbent position on the treatment bed. She held out her leg for the doctor to work, her Handler standing right next to her with the control unit on

view. Cassie was compliant. She retained a stoic silence and watched the behaviour of the two people around her with interest.

From then on, she remained compliant. She became an obedient dog who didn't cause trouble, and she could stomach this show of deference because she knew something they didn't. She had a plan. She watched as Doctor Jackson grew more confident in treating her at close quarters and her Handler's vigilance began to wane. He always held the collar control, but she started to catch sight of him checking a screen or picking his nails, leaning against the wall nonchalantly while Doctor Jackson stitched up a wound. Her plan solidified into something tangible, and whenever she ran it through her mind, she'd experience a burst of excitement and trepidation. The time for action was coming; she could feel it. This hellish life inside the Complex had an endpoint, and she would be with her family again.

The time came a week later. She was standing over a dog's body, bloody tributaries tracing her forearm. The wound was perfect, bad enough to need attention but not so severe that it would impede her movement. It was almost as if she had engineered it herself. Which she had.

Her Handler called her to heel and she padded towards him, her blood leaving a trail on the floor. He looked at her arm with a frown.

'Looks like you'll need stitches,' he sighed. She could feel her heart fluttering as she followed him to the treatment room, a nervous energy ramping up with each footstep. Sitting on the treatment bed, she felt her mouth run dry with anticipation, trying hard to remain aloof, wondering if it was too obvious that her heart was hammering in her chest. Doctor Jackson joined them and took a quick look at the injury.

'I will get the suture kit.' She smiled thinly and pulled over an equipment trolley, while Cassie's Handler stood back. She could hear him tapping on his screen behind her as she eyed the pair of long suture scissors on the trolley. Doctor Jackson cleaned the wound and began to stitch it, while Cassie primed herself for what was to come.

'This should heal quickly,' Doctor Jackson declared, and Cassie gave her the smallest of smiles back. Then she leapt off the bed, snatched the scissors from the trolley and wrapped one arm around Doctor Jackson's chest to pin her back

against her. In her other hand she held the scissors a few millimetres away from the doctor's throat. Cassie had performed this manoeuvre so quickly that her Handler was only starting to react when she was already in position, the doctor yelling in surprise. Her Handler shot upright from the wall and held out the shock control.

'Shock me and I'll jolt these scissors right into her throat!' Cassie shouted. It had been a long time since she'd heard her own voice, and the sound of it surprised her, cracked and distorted through a dry throat. Her Handler hesitated, hovering his thumb over the control button while he watched her with raised eyebrows.

'Please,' whispered Doctor Jackson under her breath, but Cassie shook her gently to keep her quiet while she held her Handler's stare. The smaller woman's soft bun pressed into Cassie's shoulder, the faintest scent of lavender coming from the top of her head. The medic felt like a fragile bird compared to the beasts she was used to fighting, her body bending to Cassie's will so easily that she could probably crush it with one arm.

Her Handler started to sidestep his way to the door, the only exit from the medical room.

'Stay where you are, keep away from the door,' Cassie shouted, turning herself and the doctor to face him.

'What's your plan?' her Handler replied, continuing his route with a growing smirk. He seemed to visibly relax as his back touched the door, and Cassie's bravado took a small hit. She was the one in control here, and he should be negotiating with her by now.

'You're going to step away from the door and she is going to lead me out of here, and if you shock me, she dies.' From running the scenarios, this was her only option to rule out the shock collar and ensure she didn't get lost inside the Complex. The doctor might be more than willing to show her the route to freedom too, especially if it looked like she was having to act under duress. But hearing her plan out loud for the first time and seeing the look of amusement on her Handler's face made the first daggers of doubt set in, and she fought to keep a calm composure to hide that she was now haemorrhaging confidence.

'Please,' Doctor Jackson whispered again. 'You do not understand.'

‘Good plan!’ her Handler said, laughing gruffly. ‘Good luck with that.’ His jovial response unnerved Cassie further, and before she could reply, he opened the door behind him, stepped out and slammed it shut.

‘No, please!’ shouted Doctor Jackson, wriggling against Cassie’s tight hold, her rasping breath the only sound filling the space. Cassie stared dumbfounded as she heard the door lock.

‘What do I do?’ she whispered to herself. This wasn’t what she was expecting. Shit.

‘You cannot win this. I am sorry,’ the doctor said quietly, her body trembling. Cassie frowned and ran through her options. If she killed the medic, which to be honest wasn’t something she wanted to do, they would shock her straightaway. She could try to get out through the door, but now it was locked, and who knew what was waiting on the other side. And unless she could maintain her hold and the proximity of the scissors for an eternity, the moment her position changed they would activate her collar. She couldn’t think of a way out. Fuck. She had lost.

With a frustrated sigh, she pushed Doctor Jackson away from her and threw the scissors down, the shock coming almost immediately and sending her convulsing to the floor. She lay in the grips of an electrical spasm while Doctor Jackson’s legs ran past her eyeline, replaced by her Handler’s black boots appearing at her side. As the shock stopped, he stooped down and began to hit her about the head with a cupped hand while shouting something incomprehensible, the combination of the blows with the come-down from the shock dazzling and confusing.

She sensed him draw away, and there was a moment of stillness as she tried to regain her composure, but a second shock incapacitated her while a crushing pressure in the middle of her back flattened her to the floor and she felt a sharp pinch in the side of her neck. Her limbs relaxed as the shock subsided but the pressure remained on top of her, the rigidity of the object suggesting it was his boot. A flash of anger ignited in her body. She gathered her hands under her chest and pushed up quickly, hearing a clatter of equipment as she caught a glimpse of her Handler sprawling over the treatment bed. Her eyes flicked to the open door and she began to push up further, planting her feet beneath her body, ready to move, ready to make a run for it because maybe he was too injured to

stop her. But the door seemed to warp and ascend while the floor rushed to meet her cheek with a smooth slap. Her body sank into a black pit, the open door fading and receding, out of reach now. Out of reach. Gone.

*

Her eyes were closed and her cheek was still pressed into a cold floor. She startled and lurched off the ground blindly, aiming in the direction of the medical room exit again, hoping perhaps she still had time. Her ascent was blocked abruptly by something unyielding above her, and she crumpled back down to the ground, the rattle of cage bars echoing around her. Groggy and disoriented, she wiped her mouth and moaned at the acknowledgement that she was back inside her cage. It was dark, and she rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes, trying to bring forth some clarity. Her face ached and her arm stung, but it was nothing compared to the sense of bitter disappointment. As the pieces fell back into place, she let out a wail of despair and punched the floor. She had failed. She had blown it. Fuck. She sank back onto her front, her energy depleted from the reality of her failure, and she sobbed for the first time in weeks.

Eventually she lapsed into a moody gloom, head buzzing as she replayed what had happened over and over, trying to figure out if she had missed something obvious, whether her Handler had simply called her bluff or did not care about the doctor's life. She was a little surprised that she hadn't received worse punishment, but maybe that was to come. It didn't matter. She was quite capable of punishing herself as Jessica chastised her from the sidelines. Reckless. A stupid plan. Anyone else would have come up with something better than that. If she was ever rescued, they would pour scorn over her failures, her joy of being free forever marred by the disparaging dissection of her decision-making.

The dull sound of footsteps punctuated her thoughts and drew her awareness back to the present, but it was the sudden ice-cold water that sent her to her hands and knees with a shout. It was still dark, but she could hear someone breathing near her, and a metallic clang rang out as if something hard had dropped to the floor.

'Did you think that was going to work?' her Handler's voice echoed in the pen. She couldn't see where he was and was taken by surprise at the shock that ran through her body, lurching her into the side of the cage at an unpleasant angle until it subsided and she sank to the floor with a whimper. The location of

his voice had changed, as if he was pacing around her cage. ‘What kind of message does that stunt show me?’ Another shock hit her, and she writhed with a clenched jaw, gasping when it stopped, sheer panic in her gut because there was nowhere to run or hide, she was trapped in this cage at his mercy and she’d never heard him so angry. ‘It doesn’t show respect. It doesn’t show compliance. It makes me look like I have no control.’ She sensed he was very close to the bars as his voice dropped to a whisper. ‘You need to understand. You need to *know*. You. Are. Nothing.’ He followed each word with a short sharp shock that made her body jolt around the cage, her throat spasming. She coughed up a little vomit, her body shaking, cheeks damp with tears.

Her chain was suddenly pulled tight and she was lifted to the roof of the cage by her neck. Flailing, she managed to prop herself in a deep squat to keep her airways open. She could hear him rustling somewhere beside her, a dark shape just beyond the bars. A painfully bright square materialised in the darkness in front of her face and she squinted her eyes against it, gradually adjusting them to the light source until she realised it was a screen, held level on the other side of the bars. Silhouetted fingers tapped a few icons and opened a tab with a recording of a news report. The audio was muted but she could read the headline text: *Funeral held of carer killed abroad*. The picture was of her.

‘They buried your remains about three months ago,’ her Handler hissed, folding the screen shut and plunging her back into black. ‘Not exactly your remains, of course, but your DNA was enough to convince them it was you.’ She swung from the chain in silence, the energy draining from her body as she contemplated what was being said. ‘They don’t want me to tell you this because they think you’ll have nothing left to fight for. But you have to understand that nobody is looking for you and nobody here cares about some faceless immigrant. You have nothing left, nobody left, except for me. Do you understand?’ She let out a cry; she couldn’t help herself. ‘The sooner you accept that, the easier this will be for us both. So get some rest. You’re in the Hall tomorrow.’ She felt the chain slacken but didn’t bother to break her fall.

Cassie was floored. She lay on her side, wet eyes staring into the darkness of her pen. Everything was gone. Everything she had clung to, everything that had kept her afloat. Gone. Everyone thought she was dead. Jess thought she had died. Enid... She just couldn’t. In response to these thoughts, her mind shut down. Emotion leaked out of her until nothing was left and she became just a shell. She barely blinked when the lights came back on. She didn’t alter her gaze

as her Handler's footsteps approached, ignoring the order to present her back for the shot. He kicked the cage aggressively then pulled her up by the chain, and she reluctantly braced her legs to rise with it, not even flinching at the piercing sensation between her shoulder blades. Whatever. She didn't care. She was empty. Rotten. The chain loosened and she slumped back to the floor, then she was practically dragged out of the space by her collar and hoisted to her feet.

'You'd better liven up,' her Handler huffed, and they set off down the corridor, Cassie stumbling alongside him, her mind already set. This was the last time now. Her endgame. She had nothing left to give. She was pushed into the Hall, waited for the door to close and then sank straight to the floor. Whatever was coming through that door could take her, and hopefully the pain-masking properties of her shot would make it merciless. The familiar groan of the opposite door signalled the arrival of her opponent, and she closed her eyes, waiting to hear what animal would come through, listening for hooves or claws to get an idea of her final foe. She heard... the soft slap of bare feet?

She opened her eyes and saw a man coming into the Hall. He was tall, with impossibly wide shoulders and a narrow waist, dressed in grey clothing and sporting a collar around his neck just like hers. He moved towards her purposefully, his eyes fixed on her with an expressionless intensity. Curiosity overcame her stupor, and she pushed herself to her feet as he reached her side, thinking that maybe he would—

A foot caught her in the stomach so powerfully that she twisted in the air and landed on her back. She wheezed, surprised and stunned for just a moment before a shot of anger drove her to roll to her feet to face him. He was already in her space and wrapped a hand around her collar, using it to lift her off the floor by the throat. She clung to his forearm and kicked the air with her feet, alarmed by his speed. Jagged scars crossed the length of his arm and there was a wide strip across his forehead. She could feel his powerful fingers pressing around the collar, but the solid structure was protecting her windpipe and she hung there in his grasp, flailing her feet against his chest in retaliation. He stared at her with blank eyes, hollow like a shark's, then tossed her across the Hall. Cassie was used to being flung around by now and was able to tuck in her arms to control the landing, using the momentum to roll back up to her knees, about to rise to her feet and teach this dickhead a lesson, but he was already on top of her, knocking her onto her back and trapping her legs with his own. The weight of him, the sheer force of him, kept her helplessly pinned to the ground, and he

reached out an impossibly solid hand to cover her nose and mouth, catching the last atoms of air and starting a vacuum inside her lungs. She felt absolute terror at her loss of control, bewildered at how quickly and easily this man had taken it from her, and as her heart raced with the depleting oxygen, she pressed her fingertips into his wrists, ready to put her own unnatural strength to work.

But then she paused.

Whoever he was, whatever his story, this man could end her misery, and that was what she wanted. The novelty of this guy had distracted her for a moment, but there was still the bigger picture, that news clip with the imagined shot of Jessica dressed in black, her face twisted in raging disappointment and ‘I told you so’s, a tiny figure beside her with her head bowed. She’d forgotten for a second, but now reality crushed her all over again. She had no one. It was over. She gave herself permission to stop.

Cassie let her arms drop.

Though her chest felt like it would burst, she clamped her fists by her sides and stared into the dark eyes of the man above her, praying it would be over soon, welcoming the darkness that began to encroach around the periphery of her vision. Her eyelids fluttered and a light buzzing filled her ears, a sense of peace growing inside. But as her consciousness started to fade, she felt his palm tingling against her lips, then the pressure suddenly lessened before he fell off her with a stifled grunt. She lay gasping on her back, her body involuntarily sucking in air with relish while she battled to accept the disappointment of such an anti-climax.

Her Handler appeared unannounced beside her and bent down so his mouth was by her ear, holding her jaw with his hand so that she couldn’t move her head and pressing his knee into her shoulder.

‘I know what you’re doing,’ he hissed, his breath warm against her face. She panted, still trying to recover her breath, disoriented with his presence in the Hall. ‘If you don’t want to fight,’ he continued, ‘there’s another type of Hall for women like you. They sterilise you first so you can be in there every. Single. Day.’ She felt something drop in the pit of her stomach and let out a small, involuntary whimper. Her Handler seemed to be enjoying this. ‘And when you get too old, or too used up, then you get put back in here so animals like that one

can tear you apart for entertainment.’ A single tear ran down her cheek, her body betraying her resolve to keep her emotions from him. ‘I won’t let you die right now.’ Her Handler used her jaw as a lever and turned her to face him. ‘So either you fight today or you give up and I sell you to the other Hall. Your choice.’ He punctuated this by squeezing her cheeks with his hand, then withdrew from her line of sight.

She let out a shaky breath, struggling to process the horror of his words. She didn’t want to fight anymore, but the prospect of that other place made her feel nauseous. The spotlights above her were suddenly blocked by a dark shape as her attacker returned, pinning her down and thrusting a hand back over her face before she’d even drawn breath. Shit. She hadn’t had a chance. The injustice of everything bubbled inside and she felt anger rush uncontrollably through her body, all the despair and fear channelling into one clear objective, to get this man out of her fucking space.

Cassie reached up and placed her hand against the man’s face, her thumb on his cheek. He didn’t acknowledge her, staring blankly as he increased the pressure over her mouth. Her heart was pounding and a buzzing was building in her ears again, but she managed to stretch her other hand around the back of his head, feeling the soft prickle of his hair against her fingers. As her vision started to cloud, she moved both hands in one quick manoeuvre, applying all of her amplified strength into one gesture. She pulled his head towards her while sliding her thumb into his eye. His scream was amusingly shrill, and as he pulled away, clutching his face, she drew a single gasping breath before freeing her legs and kicking him in the chest.

He fell backwards and she rolled away, climbing to her feet, breathing raggedly and freely drooling. Her thumb was unpleasantly wet, and she wiped it against her trousers. As she regarded the monster rolling on the floor before her, she felt part of herself peel away, a darkness rushing to fill the space. There was something satisfying about the destruction she had caused. The power she had exerted. The simplicity of it all. She realised she was smirking.

The doors opened behind her and a red dart whooshed into the man on the floor. She watched his movements slow with fascination, blinking as a shout rang out from her Handler, telling her to heel. Her chest still rising and falling heavily, she turned her back on the wounded man and walked towards her master, bowing her head to allow him to attach her chain.

‘There now. Was that so hard?’ her Handler chuckled into her ear. Usually his words would have stirred fresh anger, but now she felt nothing. He was right. It wasn’t hard. It was all she could do now. It was all she had left.

eight

The sun bounced sparkling confetti off the water while the wind toyed with her hair, brushing it over her face momentarily, and she closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of it tickling her cheeks.

*

Cassie became hollow, an empty vessel. Her hope of rescue was gone. Her drive to escape, whatever the means, was gone. Her original identity had receded, her memories of Jessica and Enid now shielded behind a frosted screen, familiar silhouettes but muted, any evidence of their existence dissipating like a fading dream.

At first she couldn't stop herself thinking about the other place her Handler had threatened her with. Its existence answered an unspoken question about her treatment inside the Complex. As a young woman held captive by a strange man, her fate would have been horribly obvious, but now she knew that wasn't the workstream she had been assigned. She was the gladiator. The warrior. The beast.

In the gym she resumed her running routine with steely focus. At the brink of maximum effort, she found she could experience momentary solace and she pursued it like a drug, pushing herself to the point of vomiting, or her legs buckling, or sometimes, unfortunately, both. In the stillness of the cage she would exist in hours of sullen silence, any hint of emotion creeping to the surface met with a burst of urgent exercise to distract and contain. This way her blunted mindset was unchallenged by any inner monologue and she could remain inert, a barely human husk. A caged animal. Everything was easier like that.

She complied with her Handler's requests without question, surrendering herself to his rule, eagerly anticipating his arrival because it might mean a session in the gym or a new fight in the Hall. As much as she would struggle to admit it, she found herself waiting for the next fight with excitement rather than dread. Most of her existence was so tedious that the violence was a strange punctuation of light in her otherwise drab world.

She was always the first in the Hall and refined a routine before her opponent joined her from the opposite door, methodically scanning for clues to get a sense of what was to come. If weapons were provided it often suggested she would be facing something with teeth or claws. If the platform was raised then it hinted she might be against something of formidable size. Her confidence grew as she accumulated fight experience, and she began to change her tactics. Where once she would wait by her own door until the animal had entered and started its attack, her actions a reactive response to how the creature behaved, now she would go straight in on the offensive. Once the animal stepped through the door and she had a quick idea of its size and nature, she would set off at a sprint straight for it, picking up any weapon provided on the way and throwing herself into a frenzied attack, the animal often caught by surprise at her arrival and not ready for the power of her assault. Her enhanced strength was no longer extraordinary. It was just who and what she was.

She knew things had really changed the day the animal, a mid-sized goat with towering horns, turned to run away when she started her charge. She didn't think twice about chasing it down and jumping onto its back to break its neck while uttering a vibration through her throat that was disturbingly close to a growl. Later that day she reflected on what these actions might mean and ended up doing a hundred frantic push-ups in her cage.

She avoided any more major injuries but still suffered scratches and bites that needed medical attention. Doctor Jackson continued to treat her, but now she was accompanied by an extra guard and she had stopped making eye contact or addressing Cassie in any way. Cassie didn't blame her. She would sometimes catch the scent of lavender from the doctor's hair and recall how fragile the woman's body had been in her grasp, and a speck of guilt would try to work its way into her consciousness. She would rub it away as soon as she noticed it. She was glad that the doctor had withdrawn her warmth, because receiving compassion would make her feel human, and to feel human would mean she had to address everything she had become, and that ship had sailed and very much sunk.

After a particularly vicious fight in the Hall that needed Doctor Jackson's expertise in dressing bloodied marks that striped her shoulder, Cassie padded down the corridor behind her Handler towards her cage. She was fascinated by the way her chain was wrapped so tightly around her Handler's fingers that blood pooled in the tips, leaving the rest of his hand a pale white. The effect

made the perfect rectangles of curled black hair above the knuckles stand out even further. His hairy chipolatas.

She blinked in surprise at Jessica's intrusion into her mind, no longer a welcome voice on the sidelines. The unexpected spark of her sister made her feel disoriented, and she barely noticed that they had reached the cage. Her Handler pulled back his sleeve for his wrist band and there was a soft clink as something dropped to the floor. They looked down in unison, and Cassie realised that the collar control had landed at her feet. She stared at it, perplexed, while her Handler stiffened and drew breath sharply. This device was the one thing her Handler owned that beat her physically, but it wasn't the only symbol of his power anymore. Still working to pack away her unwanted internal guest, Cassie kicked the control towards him without hesitation. He snatched it from the floor and looked back at her with a growing smile, then opened her cage so she could crawl inside. As the door closed, he bent and held his hands out to the side of the cage, a small control unit in both palms.

'For future reference, I always have a spare. But...' He winked at her through the bars. 'Good dog.' He tapped the cage with his boot and whistled as he walked away. Cassie hugged her knees to her chest, buried her head and pressed her eyelids into her forearms with enough force to see stars.

She stopped monitoring time, stopped thinking about the future and stopped wading into her past. Now she only existed in each moment. Time passed and the fights continued, facing a mixture of livestock and canines in various shapes and sizes. She hadn't seen another human opponent since the man she had blinded. But one day she stopped abruptly as she entered the Hall because standing in the middle of the space was a woman. She looked a similar age to Cassie, wearing faded jeans and a dishevelled blouse, her face streaked with tears as she cried great hysterical gasps of air. A collar was around her neck.

Cassie's brow creased. It had been so long since she had seen another woman aside from Doctor Jackson. In fact, discounting the monster who had tried to suffocate her, this was the first human she had encountered who didn't work for the Complex. The woman wiped her face with the sleeve of her shirt and began to approach, but Cassie stayed rooted to the spot, watching her with slight mistrust, not naïve now to think that this could be a trick. The woman reached out a hand and mouthed the word 'help', slowing her approach as she looked Cassie up and down. Cassie raised her eyebrows, shifting uncomfortably on her

feet. She did not know how to respond to this person.

‘What is all this? What do they want with me?’ the woman cried in an American accent. Cassie searched her insides for what she should be feeling, but she had focused so much energy on quelling emotion that now she was struggling to conjure anything. The only thing she felt was confused. Was this woman supposed to be her opponent? Did they think she had sunk so far that she would blindly attack another person like the monster she had once gouged? And if that was true, did they really think that this woman was going to be any challenge at all?

‘What happened to you?’ the woman stammered, her lower lip quivering vigorously as a fresh tear rolled down her cheek, but Cassie had spent so long as a mute that the basic urge to talk was absent. She looked back at her door for some guidance from her Handler, but it was closed and he wasn’t there. Ignoring the woman, she scanned the rest of the Hall. The platform was raised and there were spears on the floor. Something else was going to join them.

Sure enough, the far door began to open, and the growls that echoed around the Hall made the woman stop crying and turn to look. Four large dogs stalked through the door, wild and muscular, snapping at each other before banding together in a pack. Cassie had fought more than one dog before and it always got messy. She didn’t think she could dispense of four canines without at least one getting past her to reach the woman, and from the look of her outfit, she presumed this was her first time inside the Hall. She didn’t stand a chance.

Cassie stared at the whimpering woman and tried to decide whether she could knowingly let her die. The newcomer had started to back away from the approaching dogs, the terror in her face so unnerving that Cassie flinched. She sighed and extended a finger towards the platform, catching the woman’s attention long enough for her to understand the message. As the woman began to run, Cassie bolted for a weapon, reaching it as the first dog closed in. She swung the butt of the stick into the dog’s torso and sent it flying across the space with a pained yelp. The other animals were further behind, and Cassie turned her back on them to make her own way to the platform, catching up to the woman quite easily.

With the spear still in one hand, Cassie grabbed the woman by the scruff of her shirt and propelled her screaming into the air, then squatted down and made

her own jump just as the soft lips of a dog's muzzle grazed her toes. Cassie landed softly on her hands and feet, the leap no longer an effort for her. The woman was holding on to the edge of the platform, screaming and scrabbling frantically, so Cassie grabbed her by the elbow and nonchalantly pulled her whole body onto the flat surface, gripping her spear as she peered below. The dogs were circling, barking loudly but nowhere near to reaching them. She had bought them some time.

Cassie grunted at her success and sat down with her back to the wall, spinning the long-handled spear between her fingers while she considered her next move. The woman clambered to her feet and stared down at the dogs, uttering a small squeak from somewhere deep in her throat.

'I don't understand,' she moaned. 'Are they going to kill us?' She looked at Cassie with wide eyes, her cheeks glistening under the spotlights, and Cassie stared blankly back at her in silence. The woman began patting at the wall behind them, pressing her hands into the grey concrete as if it would magically unveil an escape route. 'We have to get out of here,' she muttered, standing back at the edge to look at the dogs again. 'This isn't right... this isn't right.' She shook her head and clawed her hands through her hair, shrieking suddenly and dropping to her haunches.

Cassie turned her head away, the woman's emotions too vibrant for her to tolerate. She leaned forwards to check on the dogs and saw they had settled beneath them, their barking more sporadic now. She hadn't spent much time up here before and found the viewpoint quite refreshing. She glanced up at the windows lining the upper walls of the high room, still impossible to see through even at this height. She wondered who might be watching from behind them and realised with a start that her grip had involuntarily increased around the spear. Such a sliver of disobedience came as a shock considering her subdued armour, and she shook her head abruptly to disperse the thoughts that were beginning to stir, turning her focus back to the woman, who was now muttering to herself in paused phrases, taking sharp gulps of air between clumps of words.

'They didn't say it would be... like this... This isn't what.... I thought it would be... I wouldn't have ever... They said I would never... I'm not supposed to be...' She broke into sobs, and Cassie tipped her head curiously, something about the words piquing her interest, but they were both startled by a mechanical whirring as the platform began to shake and the wall started scraping against her

back. They were lowering to the ground.

The woman started to scream while the dogs resumed their frantic barking, and Cassie sighed to herself, standing up to turn her back to the dogs and offer her spear to the woman.

‘You have to help me,’ the woman moaned, not taking the spear and instead holding out her trembling hands to Cassie. The platform was continuing to descend, and Cassie felt the first pang of irritation. She pushed the spear into the woman’s hands, deciding she’d just run and pick up another from the pile on the ground. At least this way the woman stood a chance, which was more than Cassie got on her first day. The spear slipped from the woman’s hands and clattered to the floor as she stepped closer to Cassie and took hold of her shoulders.

‘Please help me.’ She was barely able to form the words between sobs, and Cassie prised the hands away, ever aware that they were getting lower and it would soon be time to attack, but each time she removed her hands, the woman found another place to put them, pawing at her in desperation. Cassie stepped away, closer to the edge of the platform, and shook her head, trying to find the words she needed to instruct this woman what to do, peeling open her lips and tensing her throat, starting to generate a sound that was—

Something took hold of her ankle and yanked it so swiftly that her legs flew back from under her and she slammed face-first into the platform.

There was immediate darkness.

A sensation of being jostled.

A muffled grunt.

As her consciousness gradually returned, she found herself on her back, staring up at the ceiling of the Hall. Her face felt wet, and as she prised apart her lips the metallic taste of blood flooded into her mouth. Something made her chest rock, and she realised a dog was on top of her, pulling at her clothes with its teeth. Still dazed, she reached out and put her hands around its throat, the dog not even noticing as she snapped its neck and killed it in an instant. She pushed the body off her and propped herself up on her elbows, coughing wetly and trying to focus. Something was dripping off her face and she was struggling to

breathe through her nose, her grey clothes barely visible through sheets of dark red across her torso. She could have been eaten alive. Why wasn't she? Growls and grunts drew her attention to the remaining three dogs, which were at the far wall with their backs to her and their heads bowed as if working on something. Cassie grimaced as she caught sight of twitching human toes beneath one of the dog's feet, remembering now that there had been another person here and it looked like they had been an active interest to the animals.

Her elbows suddenly slipped on the wet floor and she collapsed to her back again, the room spinning so unpleasantly that she had to close her eyes. The shots her Handler gave her did shield her from pain, but not the debilitating effects of blood loss and a concussion. She hadn't been hurt this badly in a long while and couldn't help but feel the injustice that most of her injuries had been sustained while she was unconscious. A growl took back her attention and she opened her eyes, compelled to interrupt the dogs' activities for reasons she did not acknowledge.

With a groan Cassie got to her feet, staggering slightly as her toes fought for purchase on the slick floor. She saw a spear beside her and picked it up before making her way towards the dogs, aware that she was gurgling and failing to keep a straight path. The dogs were so occupied with their victim that they didn't turn as she approached, so she grabbed the middle one's tail, pulled it backwards and drove the spear through its neck, withdrawing the weapon immediately in a spray of blood. She let its body drop as the second dog turned and leapt towards her, catching it mid-air and driving her spear through its chest. While she still had hold of this one, the final dog lunged and knocked her over, wrapping its jaws around her throat, its teeth grating unsuccessfully against the collar. Stupid dog. She throttled it and tossed it to one side.

Her body was starting to slow as she forced herself back onto her feet, shuffling towards the woman, not sure why but feeling that she ought to. She stopped and stared at the remains, a distorted mess of flesh and blood piled against the wall, unrecognisable as the animated woman that had baffled Cassie just a short time ago. She coughed as blood flowed down the back of her throat, then sank to her knees, head bowed. She was so tired. She slept.

*

Her eyelids were glowing. She opened them to the light of the fluorescent tube

above her cage and allowed her eyes to wane between focus and fuzz as she itemised the memories of that woman and her terror and what was left of her by the end. She ran the images over and over, observing them from a distance, trying to process how she felt. Something was bothering her. What happened to that woman was terrible. She died alone and afraid and probably in agony. She was killed for entertainment. It was factually awful, and yet none of those elements stirred any reaction. She knew that they should, and she guessed that they would have done some time ago, but right now she felt nothing. And yet something continued to nag at her. A sense of injustice. She had been knocked unconscious and they had left the dogs to attack her. She thought she had done well here, complied and outperformed. She'd heard her Handler enthusing about her fights, especially when she'd done something spectacular. So why did they just leave her to die out there?

She felt... hurt. Was she really so expendable?

Her skin was tight and immobile across her torso, gauze crackling as she moved, so she refrained from exercising her thoughts away and tried to zone out instead, disturbed by the insult to her inner inertia, fighting to get it back. A little later her Handler appeared with a bag of food and Cassie stayed supine, avoiding eye contact as he locked her chain, the tension pulling her slightly to the side but slack enough this time to leave her lying on the floor.

'You have a new skin graft. The doctor says it will be a week before you'll be fit enough,' he huffed as he opened her cage door and threw the bag inside. She heard the door slide into position and her Handler moved back to release the chain. She kept her eyes on her toes. 'I would have stopped it if you didn't wake up. But you were only hurt so badly because of that stupid woman. You have to be smarter, just look out for yourself in there. You don't need to save anyone. I don't want to see you this badly hurt again.' He rattled the cage with a kick from his boot and she gave him the grace of eye contact. 'This has put us out for weeks when it didn't have to. You should be better than that by now.' With a shake of his head, her Handler walked away, and as she watched him go her stare hardened, something old and familiar beginning to bubble inside her.

It took her a while to remember what the feeling was, but eventually she recognised it. Anger.

nine

The heat triggered childhood memories of summer mornings playing with Jessica in the garden, skin prickling from dry grass as they rolled and tumbled. The echo of her sister's laughter made her retreat from her thoughts at once, and she opened her eyes to reinvite the present.

*

Cassie ran the renewed feeling of anger around her mind, so intense she could almost taste it. The energy of emotion was vibrant against her muffled internal landscape, a familiar friend resurfacing and tempting her out of her comfort zone. She closed her eyes and felt it smother her, soaking into every pore like the thick body butter Jessica used to adore.

Her eyes shot open.

Jessica.

No.

If the bright lights of emotion were leading her back to her family then she had to snuff them out. She took a deep breath and pushed air through tightly pursed lips until there was nothing left inside her lungs, pausing in the void between exhale and inhale, using the dull thud of her heart to count out the seconds as she waited. She had to be absolutely sure she was empty, that her old companion had gone away, their light diminished. Eventually she sighed deeply, letting oxygen back inside as she swiped at the droplet of moisture in the corner of her eye. That was a close one.

The following day Cassie was taken back to the medical room for a check-up of her skin grafts. Her Handler's impatience was obvious.

'It's time for another infusion, we need to speed this up,' he huffed. Cassie was seated on the treatment table, her collar held tightly by her Handler while a guard watched her intently with a collar control in his hand. Doctor Jackson frowned.

‘I will have to check what dosage she has already received.’ She disappeared for a moment and returned holding a paper folder.

‘Definitely not at the limit.’ Her Handler sniffed and wiped his nose. ‘And not too feral yet; the last fight showed that.’ The doctor surveyed Cassie over the end of her sharp nose and leafed through some pages in the folder.

‘She is not far from the limit. But the data on frontal lobe changes is only with regard to males. Remember, this has never been tested on females before, so we are working blind in some respects.’

‘That would make her even more valuable to the labs though, wouldn’t it?’ her Handler said hopefully.

‘Very likely,’ the doctor replied, and Cassie detected the slightest of sighs from the woman.

‘In that case get her set up. These skin grafts are a real inconvenience. I don’t know why you thought it so necessary.’

‘There was not enough left to repair the damage. If the dogs had been called away sooner...’ The doctor trailed off as her Handler snorted.

‘Intervention in a combo isn’t easy. She can take it. Can’t you?’ She felt her Handler pat the top of her head, and the unexpected spark of anger from his touch made her nostrils flare. She clenched her teeth and gripped the edge of the bed, her body alarmingly rigid, the urge to attack almost overwhelming. Her Handler was behind her and continued talking, oblivious. ‘Get the infusion set up. I’ll collect her tomorrow.’

‘Is this authorised by her owner?’ Doctor Jackson asked, her lips pressing together tightly.

‘The funds cover medical care, and this will make her better quicker.’ Her Handler’s voice hardened. ‘Did you have any other questions, Doctor?’ Cassie watched Doctor Jackson’s fingers curl by her sides.

‘No,’ she replied quietly.

‘Good. I’ll get her on the table.’

Cassie allowed herself to be laid out on the bed and chained down, her body still humming from the discharge of aggression that her Handler had ignited. The doctor and her team set everything up and left the room, unsurprisingly missing out the addition of music this time. Cassie didn't care so much. She was too busy gazing at the ceiling with muted inertia, trying to ignore the warm balm of rage that had coated her again from head to toe.

She remained chained to the bed until the following day, the comfortable mattress allowing her to sleep deeply. Within a few days she was back in her usual rhythm, using the gym sessions to work to the point of calm exhaustion and time in the Hall to direct her newfound aggression into physical acts of violence. It was just enough to maintain her neutrality for the rest of the time, but never enough to fully quash the new feeling inside, an ember softly glowing, just waiting for something to kindle it into a blaze.

A few weeks later, it was a throwaway phrase from her Handler en route to the Hall that alerted her to another shared event.

'Remember,' he said as they reached her door, 'fight for yourself. Don't worry about anything else.'

She regarded him coolly and stepped inside, immediately on guard. The room was empty and no weapons were out, so she padded to the centre, her eyes locked on the opposite door as it opened. A woman came staggering through, wearing her own clothes and just as frantic as the last one. She ran towards Cassie, shouting something in another language and waving her hands, but as she drew closer she faltered and stopped. Cassie stared at her silently, smothered by a soft overlay of sadness along with a swell of irritation that she had to be in this situation again.

The woman's lips trembled and she started to back away, but she stopped abruptly as the door behind her slid open again and two fully grown wolves padded in to join them. Cassie's eyebrows raised at the sight of these beautiful creatures; it was the first time she'd seen one in real life. Their lips were curled and spittle flecked their muzzles in the agitated manner she had seen many animals exhibit in this place. The woman muffled a scream with her hand and backed away from both the wolves and Cassie, looking between them as if trying to work out who the bigger threat was. Cassie stood her ground, and the wolves made a beeline for her first, but she made direct eye contact, opened her chest,

widened her stance and curled her own top lip. It was a tactic she had tried a few times before with canines, and her show of strength was sometimes enough to halt their advance. Sure enough, the wolves slowed and stopped, their ears flattening and heads dipping. Their attention quickly diverted to the other woman. As they prowled towards her, she began to shout and flap her arms in Cassie's direction, as if in a plea for help. But her Handler's instruction was fresh in her mind, so Cassie quelled any urge to intervene, remaining where she was and casting her eyes to the floor.

She couldn't see what was happening, but it sounded like the woman had made a break for it somewhere behind her, the snarls and clatter of claws on the hard floor suggesting the wolves had given chase. Cassie kept her eyes down and her back to them, uncomfortable despite her resolve not to get involved. The sounds were inescapable, scuffling and growling, tearing cloth and wet grinding. The screams were the most unpleasant. She closed her eyes with a grimace, her heart rate increasing as the minutes wore on. The desire to turn and help became overwhelming, but her body stayed rooted to the spot, obeying orders, not getting involved. She willed it to be over, but the screams kept coming, sharp shrieks jabbing at her crumbling conscience, and just as she felt she couldn't take it anymore, that it was time to act no matter what her Handler had ordered, the human noises stopped. Now there were only animal sounds, moist grunting and bones crunching. Cassie took a deep breath and opened her eyes again, keeping her back to the scene. Her head felt heavy, bile in the back of her mouth. What had she just done?

The wolves padded back into view, panting with blood-soaked faces, and eyed her cautiously as they took up position a few metres away. Cassie wasn't in the mood to fight them and the wolves seemed to have had their appetite satiated, so they remained in a stand-off that she hoped would prove too boring to prolong for much longer. The wolves licked their jowls and dropped to their haunches while Cassie shifted her weight and scratched her chin, the three of them breathing into the Hall's vastness. She was struck that this was the calmest the space had ever felt. It was almost peaceful if she didn't consider what mess might be behind her.

As she waited for the session to end, a familiar electrical prickle ran the length of her spine and her body became rigid, causing her to fall to the floor with a grunt. The shock subsided and then returned, several short sharp pulses that jolted her body. She tried to resist the blasts but writhed helplessly against the

ground, confused at the punishment until she caught sight of the wolves approaching. They must have been provoked by her strange movements, and Cassie realised that must have been the aim of the shocks. The ember of anger glowed fiercely in her gut.

Her body finally came back under her control, but there was no chance to recover before the first wolf was upon her, nipping at her neck and shoulders with ferocious speed. Still weakened by the after-effects of the shocks, she grappled with the animal clumsily, managing to take hold of its upper front legs and throw it off her. Gathering herself, she pushed up to her hands and knees but was buffeted over by the second wolf, this one digging its teeth into her side. She twisted and grabbed its back, flinging it away with ease. As she attempted to get to her feet again, the first wolf returned, bowling her back down and working its jaws around her thigh. Starting to get annoyed now, she pulled this one off by the tail, its teeth ripping away a chunk of her flesh as she lifted its whole body over her head and threw it across the floor. Her movements were becoming quicker and she sprang to her feet, but the second wolf had already made its charge and knocked her back to her knees. She blocked its shoulders to keep its teeth at bay, spotting the first wolf coming at her from the side, and with a yell swung the first wolf into the charging second, the force of the collision knocking them all over.

Panting, Cassie managed to get to her feet again, but one of her legs buckled beneath her, jolting her off balance momentarily. She kept her weight off it, eyeing both wolves, who were now circling her with intent. Speed wasn't going to be an option now, so she would have to resort to close combat. The first wolf sprang in for an attack and she welcomed it, embracing the animal as she fell back to her knees, ignoring what its teeth were contacting with as she worked her arms around its body to get better purchase on its neck. She was rocked from behind by the arrival of the second wolf, pawing at her back and pulling at her clothes, but she managed to find the position she needed to snap the first wolf's neck. As she let its body fall, she reached behind her and grabbed the second wolf, bringing it over her head in a tall arc and embracing it in a bear hug as she had done with the first. Cassie was about to repeat her manoeuvre when her body went rigid with another shock and she crashed to the floor, arms spasming around the wolf. Her teeth grated and she felt blossoming outrage at the injustice of this fight, but quickly realised that the wolf wasn't taking advantage of her sudden inertia, its body stiff against her.

The shock stopped and her limbs relaxed, the wolf panting close to her face as if trying to recover too. She managed to push it away and heard something whoosh past her as a dart hit the wolf's side. It yelped weakly before gradually closing its eyes, while Cassie remained sprawled on her front, breathless and bloodied, wiping the drool from her mouth. She pushed up on her forearms and saw the extent of her wounds, countless tears across her body and her thigh ripped wide open. None of this would have happened if she hadn't been shocked to begin with. Her Handler called her from afar, but her body resisted her efforts to stand and the outrage that had been triggered by the unfairness of that fight continued to brew inside her. Having to let that woman die and then getting shocked for no reason had pushed her buttons, even when she thought she had disabled them all, and as she sensed her Handler's approach, she felt her fists clench.

'Can you get up or do you need the gurney?' he asked, and she shook her head and held out a finger in a request for a moment. In part she needed a second to compose herself physically, but mostly she was struggling to contain a thrumming wasps' nest inside her chest. She heard her Handler sniff above her. 'They let you take one wolf out, but not both,' he said casually. 'They're hard to acquire, you know. But I didn't appreciate having to intervene to get that fight started. That's not how it goes here. You should know that by now.' Cassie shuddered as she was smothered by another wave of anger. Her Handler didn't seem to notice. 'When I said fight for yourself, I meant keep away from the LTS, not out of the fight completely.' He leaned towards her, a wide smile on his face as he chuckled harshly. 'Though I didn't think you'd let her die quite so easily.'

His words broke open the wasps' nest and rage swarmed her body with such frenetic energy that it almost choked her. She shot out a hand, aiming to push him away from her, get this dickhead out of her space, but the single blow catapulted her Handler off his feet. He landed on his back a couple of metres away, his feet kicking into the air, and at once sheer regret diluted her anger, regret and guilt, and—

A red dart hit her in the upper arm and a small team of medics rushed into the Hall, one of them aiming a gun in her direction. They scampered to her Handler, who was pinwheeling his limbs to get back up, and she saw him bat them away as he regained his feet, smoothing down his clothes with a detectable look of embarrassment. She cringed, waiting for the inevitable shock, not sure if her sudden light-headedness was from the dart or blood loss from all her wounds.

Her Handler stalked towards her, rubbing his shoulder with one hand, a young male medic trotting beside him.

‘Shall we get the gurney?’

Her Handler ignored him, stopping at a distance and looking down at Cassie, his expression cold and unnerving.

‘Are these injuries life-threatening?’ he asked icily.

‘I... I don’t know, I don’t think so,’ the medic stammered. Cassie bowed her head and pressed her face into the floor, her vision blurring but the rest of her senses very much alive.

‘Then I’ll bring her to you tomorrow,’ she heard her Handler hiss.

‘But... won’t the booster wear off before then?’ said the medic.

Cassie inhaled sharply and looked up at her Handler, the image doubling until she blinked hard to focus. She was prostrated before him, her pose as respectfully submissive as the wolves had been to her earlier. Her Handler continued his steely stare.

‘Yes, I expect it will,’ he said smoothly. ‘Now dart her again so I can take her back to her cage. It’s not worked and I’m not risking anything with this animal.’ A second dart hit her side and made her jump, her vision swirling as her head flopped to the ground, and she sank into a dark dread.

*

Her consciousness emerged, but she was still enveloped in darkness, and she blinked a few times before she recognised the dim slither of light from the outer corridor of her pen, the one slice of illumination that stopped her from being in complete black during the night. Her body felt disorganised, like her limbs had been left scattered around her, and something prickled her back unpleasantly, but more prominent was a bitter aftertaste of emotion that she traced back to the Hall and the woman, the unjust fight and her Handler. Shit. She remembered it all, and creased her eyes closed in frustration at herself, moving her hands up to cover her face.

Slivers of discomfort crept across the tops of her shoulders and lower back, and an ache began to evolve in her thigh. She opened her eyes and tried to sit up, but her hands slipped on a floor that was slick with something tacky and warm. The sudden movement caused pain to explode across her body, gripping her with an intensity that she had never known before. She clutched her leg and cried out spontaneously, her voice hoarse and shrill in the silence of this dark space, and she curled up on her side defensively, cowering under the weight of the hurt.

Whichever way she moved, whatever position she adopted, there was no respite from the agony that burrowed into her very core, setting her whole body and mind ablaze, consuming her entirely until she was left in a quivering stupor, whimpering and sweating as she tried to keep still on the hard floor. It was frightening how vulnerable she was without the numbing effects of the booster. Her Handler had bred into her a sense of superiority and power, but here was proof that she was utterly pathetic, incapacitated by the cacophony of pain.

The night was long and torturous. Each time she managed to drift off she would be woken again as fresh pain drilled inside. When the light switched on overhead, Cassie startled and moaned, exhaling in short sharp bursts from a dry mouth as her torment was starkly revealed under the strip light of her pen. She remained in her foetal position and saw how her clothes were coated in dried sheets of blood, cracking within the folds of the fabric. She kept her eyes away from her leg. The agony she had experienced that night had receded to the peripheries, but any movement brought it straight to the foreground. She stayed where she was, not moving when her Handler reappeared later that morning, listening to his footsteps as he walked around her cage and the chink of the chain as he unhooked it from its post.

‘Come,’ his voice rang out, and she felt tension on the chain as he moved to the front of her cage, the door sweeping open with a wave of his wrist. Cassie didn’t want to move. She was currently in a shallow cocoon of respite and she really didn’t want to leave it. Her Handler didn’t give her long to respond before he pulled on the chain, forcing her to move awkwardly towards the front of the cage. The stretch on her thigh was so excruciating it made her ears buzz, the hurt rushing back into her body so viciously that she screamed. Her Handler dragged her out of the cage, and she struggled into a lop-sided stand, the fire around her back and neck making her lips tremble. He surveyed her with a smirk.

‘You know, I normally don’t tolerate an animal that turns on its Handler.

You're lucky you're so valuable or I might have punished you more severely.' He sniffed and walked away, the pull of the chain on her collar giving her no option but to follow. She limped behind him, trying to muffle her discomfort so she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of her suffering, but she was too drained to hide it and moaned with every step. Her right leg suddenly gave way and she stumbled and stopped, gasping and clutching her thigh. The chain ran to its full length and her Handler halted in the corridor.

'Come on,' he ordered without looking back, and gave two sharp tugs on the chain that jerked her by the collar. Her agony flashed into urgent anger, compelling her to grab the chain and yank it back, the force and speed pulling her Handler off his feet with a yell. She dropped the chain immediately, wincing in anticipation as he twisted quickly to look at her from the floor, his hand poised over the collar control. Seemingly satisfied by her submissive pose, he refrained from shocking her and got back to his feet, breathing angrily through his nose.

'You're starting to be more trouble than you're worth. Come on.' He pulled on her chain again, and she lurched after him towards the medical unit. The brightness of the room made her squint as they entered. Doctor Jackson was already inside and looked aghast at her arrival.

'Fix this up.' Her Handler pushed Cassie towards the bed. She sat on the edge and dug her fingers into her palms while he brought the chain under the bed and pulled hard, jolting her off balance and making her fall awkwardly to her side. She shrieked as her leg was pivoted off the floor at an angle, and Doctor Jackson thankfully stepped in to help lift her legs onto the bed. She felt her Handler fasten restraints around her wrists and ankles, her body alight with fresh agony. Doctor Jackson frowned and began to examine her thigh.

'There is a big tear in the quadriceps.' She probed it with a gloved finger as Cassie grunted. 'The muscle is barely attached here. I think some of it is missing.' She peered closer at the leg and then inspected the other injuries. 'It looks like all of these wounds have started to heal, much faster than we would have anticipated, but the alignment for this leg is not good. I will need to repair this surgically.'

'Fine,' said her Handler.

'I will prepare the sedation.'

‘No.’ Something about her Handler’s tone made Cassie tense.

‘No?’ Doctor Jackson echoed.

‘She needs to learn. So do the repairs, nothing else.’

‘I am not comfortable doing that,’ Doctor Jackson said carefully.

‘Do I look interested in what you feel?’ he snapped. The doctor remained motionless, her lips twitching as if she was holding back from responding. Her Handler grunted. ‘If you won’t do it, then I will. I don’t think it’d be that hard. I may not make as neat a job of it but— ’

‘No,’ the doctor interrupted quietly. ‘You could kill her. The femoral artery is —’

‘So you do it, before I lose my patience.’ Cassie trembled as she watched the doctor reluctantly gather the equipment. Surely this was a bluff and her Handler would put a stop to it soon. Lesson definitely learned. The doctor held a scalpel in her hand and hovered it above Cassie’s leg, her brow creasing.

‘Are you absolutely sure?’ she pressed.

Cassie locked her gaze with her Handler standing above her, pleading with her stare, searching for the man who had kept her fed all this time, who had commended her for a good fight, who she had been obeying without question right up to this one mistake when she’d just been pushed too far. She would learn. She would do better. He didn’t need to do this. Her Handler looked right back at her, and as he stared into her eyes, she saw his lips begin to part and he said one calm word to Doctor Jackson:

‘Continue.’

The first incision made Cassie grunt, the next brought forth a howl. Strapped down and unable to protect herself, she wailed as Doctor Jackson worked, the doctor shaking and obviously equally upset. Her Handler kept his position by Cassie’s head, looking down at her with a set gaze, and just as Cassie’s vision began to blacken, she heard Doctor Jackson plead once more and felt her Handler’s hand on the side of her face. She blinked her eyes into focus and stared up at him.

‘Do we have an understanding now?’ he said coldly, and she nodded, her face damp from tears and sweat. He stroked her cheek and gave it a gentle pat, then addressed the doctor. ‘Do whatever you want, just fix her quickly.’ With that he disappeared from view. Doctor Jackson looked relieved and called to some colleagues, busying herself with further equipment while Cassie gasped on the table, utterly exhausted. Doctor Jackson moved up to her side and flicked a syringe before inserting it into Cassie’s arm.

‘This should take the edge away,’ she whispered shakily, not looking Cassie in the eye as she prepared further vials. Cassie felt a joyous warmth spreading through her body, gradually overriding the incredible pain, and she sighed deeply as her muscles relaxed completely. Doctor Jackson ordered her team to cut away Cassie’s clothes so they could address the other wounds, but now Cassie couldn’t feel anything except a sense of peace in her body and a pleasant swirling in her head. Her eyes fluttered and she took another deep breath.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered softly. Doctor Jackson startled at her voice and shook her head as she prepared further vials by her side.

‘I am sorry.’ She sniffled a little. ‘I am so sorry.’

Cassie’s eyes were closed now, but she smiled, the expression feeling alien on her face.

‘Now we’re even,’ she said dreamily as the world began to swallow her into a blissful darkness. As the voices around her echoed and waned, a last statement from Doctor Jackson fell softly into her ears.

‘I will make sure you do not have to suffer ever again.’

ten

Her sweeping legs created gentle waves that caressed her calves, and tiny bubbles clung to the tracks of her scars. She frowned as she rubbed the smooth slice of skin along her jawline, an inescapable reminder of her past. The Complex had permanently branded her, inside and out.

*

Something didn't feel right. Cassie was buried somewhere deep inside herself and couldn't come back up, powerful tendrils of sleep tightening around her body and pulling her slowly inwards. She was conscious but absent. Felt nothing yet her whole body hummed. Alone but sensed people all around her.

'What did she do?' shouted her Handler, suddenly appearing by her side and making her jump in surprise. He was looking somewhere beyond her, brow furrowed. 'Then fix it!'

Cassie opened her mouth to ask what was wrong but paused as she heard the opening bars of a song. She turned away from her Handler and found herself in the passenger seat of a car. Jessica was driving them home after a day out shopping together, their mother still well enough to be left alone at this point. The saccharine aftertaste of mall donuts seeped through her palate and she was content, her teenage boredom satisfied by endless window-shopping with her big sister. They'd used up every minute of the allotted time allowed inside the mall that was designed to restrict the abuse of free air-conditioning, which was exactly what the sisters had been doing that balmy April day. Now Cassie gazed out of the passenger window, watching the world flit by as the low sun strobed through the trees. Their favourite song came on the radio and they began to sing it together, laughing as they belted out the high notes. Cassie felt like she was living in one of those impossibly happy scenes at the end of a movie that faded out with the car driving off into the sunset. Of course, she knew that in real life such bliss is unsustainable. The song would finish, and their house and what waited inside would quash that emotional peak. But even so, in that moment right there in the car, Cassie was truly happy.

She heard someone whispering her name and turned back to face her sister. Jessica was staring at her, tears streaking her cheeks. She had a collar around her

neck and wore tattered grey clothes, and now they weren't in the car anymore. They were standing in the Hall and Jessica was whimpering while pawing at Cassie's shirt. A low growl came from somewhere behind her, and Cassie's blood chilled.

'What's going on? Please help me,' Jessica sobbed. Cassie tried to move but her legs were rooted to the ground, so she took Jessica's hands in her own.

'You have to run,' she urged.

'Please, Cassie, you have to help me,' Jessica cried, gripping her hands as the growls became louder. Cassie tried with all her might to lift her feet, but they remained stuck to the ground.

'I can't!' she shrieked. Wolves began to circle, grey shadows in the peripheries.

'I'm not strong enough, but you are! Please don't leave me to die!' her sister begged.

'I can't, Jessica! I can't!' Cassie screamed in anguish. Jessica's face hardened. She stopped crying, let go of her hands and slowly stepped away.

'Not "can't", sis,' she said sternly. "'Won't".' She shook her head and then broke into a run, disappearing into the Hall behind her. The grey shadows followed, and no matter how hard Cassie tried to lift her feet, she remained fixed to the spot. Now all she could hear were screams and growls, then ripping flesh, and she yelled her sister's name, burying her face in her hands so intensely that the world turned black and the sounds diminished.

A soft red light grew in the dark corner of her vision, gradually illuminating a bed. Blankets lay rumpled over a small body, a woman lying with a blindfold over her eyes, weeping silently. Cassie's hands were back by her sides, and she felt her shoulders slump with grief when she realised who it was. She jumped as a male doctor touched her arm.

'All her tests came back negative. The virus has long passed.' He had a fixed smile on his face as he spoke. 'This is probably psychological. Anxiety. It's common for women of her age.'

‘But...’ Cassie said, not with her mouth but the words forming in her mind. ‘She can’t leave this room anymore. She can’t even sit up. She’s so ill, why can’t you help her?’

‘She is not really ill,’ the doctor replied, his smile frozen. ‘She’s hysterical. If she wanted to, she could get better.’

‘I seem to make her worse just being near her. Even the effort of speaking with me is killing her. She wasn’t like this before. Please, something is so terribly wrong.’

‘She just made that up so she doesn’t have to listen to you whine at her all day long,’ the doctor said flatly. ‘Nobody likes to hear a barking dog.’ Cassie looked closely at the doctor’s face and saw it meld into her Handler’s. He was smirking at her and running her chain through his hands. ‘Dogs don’t talk.’

She heard a scream and looked back at her mother. A dark shape was rising by her bedside, two projections curling from the top, and Cassie gasped in horror. They were horns. It was the ram. She tried to shout, to warn her mother of the unseen threat, but her collar was suddenly around her throat so tightly that she couldn’t force any voice through. The ram’s shape became solid and it climbed up onto the bed, standing over her mother’s body. Cassie went to stop it, but her Handler was holding her chain too tightly, still smiling, and Cassie screamed inside as the ram buried its horns into her mother’s stomach.

‘We have to intubate!’ shouted a young man to her side. She startled and gagged, her collar constricting her throat until it was almost closed.

‘We’re losing her!’ shouted another man in front of her. He shone a torch at her eyes, dazzling her view. She grimaced as the light seemed to enter her mouth and choke her from inside, but then the sense of constriction suddenly abated and she could breathe again. As the torchlight faded, her eyes adjusted and she saw a painted burgundy door in front of her. She felt compelled to reach out and knock, and a man opened the door with a smile. He had short thick hair and white-rimmed spectacles.

‘You’re here for the interview?’

‘Yes,’ Cassie said, then faltered. ‘I mean, no. No, I don’t think I want to do this.’

‘Of course you do, don’t you know what’s at stake?’ He pulled the door wider and gestured for her to enter.

‘If I go in there I will never come back,’ she said softly.

‘That’s true.’ He nodded solemnly. ‘But you’re protected, right?’ He tapped the back of his neck. ‘You know what you’re getting into. This is exciting.’

‘No, it really isn’t.’ She shook her head.

‘This is the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to you, Cassie.’ He stepped to one side and she saw her cage in the hallway. ‘What else would you be doing, wiping old women’s behinds all day for minimum wage?’

‘It’s good work,’ she said falteringly.

‘It’s shit work,’ he said, laughing. ‘You’re better than that. This is your chance to make something of yourself. Make a difference. Prove to everyone that this was a good idea. I am certain you won’t regret it.’

‘I’m afraid.’

‘You’re pathetic,’ he scoffed. ‘What are you even doing here?’

‘I’m trying to help my family.’

‘Is that what you tell yourself? What do you think you’ve put your mother through? Do you think she could make it to your funeral? Do you have any idea how much worse you have made her, all because you were bored of looking after her.’ He shook his head disapprovingly. ‘You’re selfish.’

‘No!’ Cassie said, blushing at his accusation. ‘I’m trying to get them money. Get citizenship so I can—’

‘So you never have to go back and face everything. You’re just like your father.’

‘That’s not true! I didn’t think... I didn’t know...’

‘You knew. Of course you knew. And you feel guilty, don’t you? For leaving

your sister to deal with everything. That's why you came in here. You knew this would be your penance for abandoning your family.'

'No!' she yelled. She felt pressure in her back and turned to find the ram behind her, pushing its horns into her, edging her feet over the doorstep and into the house.

'You belong in there.' The man pointed to her cage, and it loomed towards her as she was pushed forwards. She tried to dig her heels in, but her feet kept slipping on something red and slick on the carpet. 'You deserve everything you get.' Now it was her Handler smirking at her, twirling her collar control in his hand and pressing the button so that her body became rigid. She was unable to resist being pushed into her cage, the wire sides closing in around her with barely an inch either side. She tried to scream but her collar had closed in on her throat again, while the cage pressed on her arms and legs so tightly that she was pinned down, completely unable to move. She couldn't find a breath, it felt like the collar was inside her throat, and she thrashed and moaned, her vision streaked with lights.

'Get it out!' came a shout beside her, and alien hands held her face while the collar started to move up her throat and out of her mouth, impossibly stretched and pulling her insides up with it, all other senses paused with the endless regurgitation, then suddenly it was clear and she was gasping at a young male medic looking down at her, holding a glistening tube in his gloved hands. She breathed raggedly, her heart thudding in her chest as she tried to process what was happening, her memories blending and receding, feelings of unease and dread waning and untethered to meaning. As she gathered her senses, she realised her body was held down by restraints and above her were the bright spotlights and white-tiled ceiling of the medical room. Her Handler's disembodied, upside-down face suddenly appeared above her.

'Did you plan this?' he hissed. She looked up at him in confusion, barely able to make sense of what was happening. Was this real? Her Handler put his hands on either side of her face and leaned in closer, his palms warm with a strange smell. 'Was this you?' he asked. She didn't know what the question was and just stared back at him dumbly. 'You can speak,' her Handler said slowly. 'What you say will determine what happens to her.'

'Who?' she whispered breathily, now realising that he was standing at the

head end of the bed, looking down at her.

‘You know who!’ he barked. She tried to run through her last memories, entirely confused about where she had been and who she had been with.

‘J... Jessica?’ Her brow creased as she tried to remember why she was thinking of her sister.

‘Who?’ Her Handler frowned, and the male medic with the breathing tube cleared his throat.

‘Maybe give her a moment, sir. It’s been a few days.’

‘I need answers right now.’

‘I’m not sure she was part of it,’ the medic stammered. ‘I told you, she didn’t say anything except thank you after Doctor Jackson gave her the first shot of morphine.’

‘That doesn’t mean anything,’ her Handler snapped. He leaned even closer to her face. ‘Did you get her to do this to you?’

Cassie felt flummoxed. ‘Wh... what?’ Her head was spinning.

‘Did Doctor Jackson try to kill you all by herself?’

‘Wh... what?’ she repeated, struggling to fit her thoughts together. Her Handler looked intently into her eyes as if searching for the truth, and she stared back up at him, something about it all eerily familiar, like she’d been doing this not so long ago, only then she’d been desperate. Distraught. Begging. A single word resurfaced, and she whispered it.

‘Continue.’

Her Handler’s eyes widened slightly, and Cassie held his stare as memories built back inside her and a dull pain began to spread to her heart, not physical pain but betrayal. Her Handler clenched his jaw and looked away to address the medics.

‘Sort her out, check everything’s stable. Get her back in her cage when you

know she isn't going to die. I want her ready for the Hall within the fortnight.'

Cassie wasn't sure how long they kept her in the medical room. She floated in a drugged stupor, and when she finally became lucid she found herself back in her cage, her body stiff and mind foggy. She rubbed her temple and tried to piece together what had happened. Wolves. Cruelty. Agony. And then a blur of uncertainty except for the clear memory of her Handler talking about Doctor Jackson trying to kill her. Cassie frowned as she considered this, wondering whether the doctor's motives were revenge or kindness, and how her Handler intended to punish her. Thinking of him made her body twitch in retaliation, and she was concerned at the way her emotions had swirled so easily, like leaves on a breeze. She had spent a long time carefully sweeping those feelings out of her centre to leave her insides bare and uncluttered and simple, but the last few events had whipped them up and scattered them back into place. She sighed sharply, not sure if she had the energy to start sweeping them out all over again.

Cassie groaned up into sitting and surveyed her body, one part at a time. Fresh, untidy scars traipsed across her skin, and her right leg was misshapen under her ruffled cotton trousers. She rolled them up and found a visible dip in the middle of her thigh, as if someone had cut into the landscape of her body and exposed a rough and rippled interior. As she traced the mottled surface with her fingers, she was suddenly struck by the terror of being strapped to that bed, defenceless to the instruments that had pierced and peeled and scraped at her raw, tender flesh. She closed her eyes as pain surged through her body and entered her thigh so vividly it made her lips tremble, and she rubbed her leg as she took a deep, shuddering breath. It felt like her blank composure had been roughly shaken and was now dented with tiny cracks appearing along the seams. Dazzling glimmers of emotion peeped through the new fissures, threatening everything she had worked so hard to contain, her thoughts wavering on a path that she'd presumed was so overgrown as to be unpassable. She had to carry on as she was. She had to just carry on. She had to. Because...

... because...

Cassie frowned. She couldn't think of a reason. Instead, she rotated onto her front to start some vigorous one-armed push-ups, working until she gagged.

Her Handler deposited a food bag the next morning without even a glance at her, but later that day he returned and wordlessly opened her cage, taking up her

chain in a gesture that indicated he wanted her to move. She crawled out and stood up slowly, hoping this would be a session in the gym so that she could test out her leg, but her Handler led her in the direction of the Hall. She followed with growing unease, not sure she was physically ready for another fight so soon, unnerved by his silence and the sudden realisation that he hadn't given her the booster shot as usual.

Her Handler ushered her into the Hall while avoiding eye contact, and she entered immediately on guard. A man was standing in the middle of the Hall, collared and dressed in grey with choppy blonde-brown hair and a scruff of a beard. He startled at her arrival, then rushed towards her while waving his arms animatedly. Cassie braced herself for an attack.

'Hey,' the man hissed as he neared. 'No time to explain, but any minute now something's going to come out of that door over there' – he pointed across the Hall – 'and it's going to attack us.' He reached her side and paused as he took in her appearance, wincing. 'Ah, you probably already knew that, didn't you?'

She raised her eyebrows at him, wavering on whether he was a contender or not. He looked to be in his twenties, much taller than Cassie but with a wiry build. This didn't mean he wasn't enhanced, though. Cassie had noticed her own body remained slight despite the power that fuelled her limbs.

The man ruffled his hair and bounced his weight from foot to foot. 'How long have you been held here?' His accent wasn't local; it sounded American. Cassie stared at him blankly. 'How many times have you been in here?' He gestured to the Hall, and Cassie frowned. The man shrugged at her silence. 'This is only my second time. I didn't think I'd make it the first time. I mean, who'd have thought a pig could be so vicious, you know?' He ruffled his hair again, and she noticed his fingers were trembling. 'You don't say much, do you?' She shrugged, struggling to formulate any other response, disarmed by someone conversing with her so directly. 'I'm Thomas, anyway. I can't seem to stop talking.' He laughed a little. 'I think they gave me something in my drink because I. Am. Wired. Like, college wired. Do they do that to you? I don't know, could just be nerves, I guess. I mean. Fuck! Who are these people? This is insane, isn't it. What's with the collars? What's with the fucking psycho pigs?'

Cassie's lips cracked into the slightest smile, surprising her, caught completely off guard by his patter. It was like someone had just let a firework off inside her

gloomy world of violence and isolation. She scratched her nose to cover her expression, uncomfortable with such a raw display of her feelings.

‘So, should we make a game plan to compare tactics or something?’ he whispered, but Cassie ignored him as she shifted her feet, scanning the Hall and spotting spears in the centre. If this man wasn’t her main opponent, then something larger would surely join them soon enough, and she wasn’t pleased that she hadn’t had a chance to test out her leg.

The far door started to shudder open, and as she turned to face it, she felt Thomas put his hand on her shoulder and grip it tightly. Such invasion into her space made her bristle, but she forgot him completely when she saw what was coming through the door. It was another man. He was big, with broad shoulders that carved out an impossibly triangular body. He was wearing an eye patch. Oh shit.

‘It’s someone else!’ Thomas exclaimed, squeezing her arm then letting go to wave at the monster with the eyepatch. Cassie grabbed his hand and lowered it, slowly shaking her head at him. ‘What, you know this guy?’ he whispered, and she grimaced in reply. She could remember the speed and ferocity of his assault, the way his blank eyes bored into her as he suffocated her to near-death, the unpleasant moistness of her thumb after she had breached his eyeball. He wouldn’t offer a warm welcome if he recognised her and made the link with his new facial accessory.

Cassie decided to arm herself and sprinted for the spears. Eyepatch did the same, and they grabbed one each in unison and squared up to each other as they began to pace in a circle. She gripped her spear tightly, nervous anticipation in her gut as she considered that this was the first time she had fought another human and she didn’t really know how to. She was faintly aware of the sound of another door rolling open but ignored it, her focus remaining on Eyepatch, her eyes locked on his, her body primed for battle. Thomas yelled something that she didn’t catch, distracted by the tension in Eyepatch’s arms that suggested he was about to make the first move. She pressed her toes into the floor and raised her spear in preparation, alarmed at the way Eyepatch’s lip was curling into an aggressive sneer, but both of them paused at the sound of a deep-throated growl, and they turned their heads slowly to its source.

Through the door prowled a fully grown lioness.

eleven

Slapping sandal soles made her turn her head, grateful for the interruption. He set a small bowl on a table beside the sun lounger and smiled at her. 'Want some coffee with breakfast?' She nodded enthusiastically.

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'Holy fuck it's a lion!' Thomas yelled from somewhere, and Cassie tightened her grip on the spear, her face-off with Eyepatch aborted for the time being as they both stared in shocked awe at the newcomer. The lioness padded silently into the Hall, a bright pink tongue protruding between pointed teeth, its top lip rising sporadically as if considering a snarl. A collar was around its throat.

Cassie gulped dryly as she considered her potentially weakened leg and no booster shot to shield her from injuries. The aloof manner her Handler had displayed was starting to make sense. Doctor Jackson might have been punished somewhere behind the scenes, but Cassie was too valuable an asset to dispose of without a big audience. With Eyepatch and a lion, this was obviously a big match, and she didn't think her Handler was expecting her to emerge from the other side. He had sent her in here to die.

This realisation was enough of a spark to ignite the lingering embers, and anger was quick to burn, its flames licking her insides with a tantalising energy, melting a little of her shell in the process. She widened her stance ready for battle and sized up the big cat heading towards them, but Eyepatch emitted an animal growl, and before she could act he was sprinting for the lion. Cassie watched him go, no problem with him starting the fight by himself as it gave her time to plan. Thomas appeared by her side, wild-eyed and frantic.

'It's a freaking lion!' he said in an exaggerated whisper. 'Have you done one of those before?' She shook her head wordlessly, watching as Eyepatch began to thrust his spear at the animal and wondering which one she wanted to win. Whoever was left she may have to tackle herself, and she couldn't decide which would be worse. Her attention was caught by the sound of her own door opening, and she turned with dread to see two more lionesses come bounding through.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Thomas panicked, darting around her to pick up a spear of his own. ‘We’re going to die,’ he whimpered, but Cassie ignored him, adamant now that she wasn’t going to let her Handler dictate her ending. She rotated the spear in her palms and focused on the new arrivals while keeping Eyepatch’s battle in the corner of her eye. ‘Hey, maybe we can work together?’ Thomas was saying into her ear, but she was already set on her own attack, urged on by the flames inside her as she set course for the animals. One of the lions took a wide berth and sprang for Thomas, who broke into a shrieking sprint across the Hall. The other was heading towards her. It was everyone for themselves now.

Cassie faced the lioness coming for her and held out her spear, trying to jab it into its chest before it got too close. The big cat swiped at her with its large front paw and caught the middle of the spear, snapping it easily in two and leaving her with half a blunted stick, the pointed end clattering across the ground. Embarrassed by her weapon’s impotence, she waved the piece of wood at the lion, and in retaliation the animal snarled and pounced, throwing its full weight into her chest and knocking her onto her back. It leapt on top of her, the muscular body almost completely covering her own, and strong paws pressed into her shoulders as it thrust its jaws around her neck.

Cassie closed her eyes in anticipation, but the durability of her collar became her saviour, the lion’s teeth clashing against the solid structure and failing to gain purchase on her jugular. The coarse hair around its muzzle brushed her cheeks, and she knew it wouldn’t be long before the creature brought its incisors to her face, so she pushed her hands into its chest to try and give herself some space and drew up her legs so that her feet were pressed into its abdomen. With all her might, she thrust her legs up and towards her head, propelling the lion over her, clearing her completely. It was like doing a slightly challenging leg press, and Cassie rolled to her feet, smiling in triumphant relief that her misshapen thigh wasn’t going to disable her.

She clutched the severed stick in her hand as she watched the lion get back on its feet, growling with an intensity that made her subconsciously step backwards. She looked for her spearhead and spotted it a metre away, dashing for it as she heard a guttural roar beside her. As she snatched it up, she turned back to see that the lion had reared up on its hind legs like a bear, its front legs splayed out to reach her. On misguided instinct, she opened her arms to receive it, wincing as its claws latched on to either side of her upper arms, then yelling in shock as it sank its teeth into the top of her shoulder, the force so tremendous that it

snatched her voice away and left her breathless with a hot agony in her chest. The painful embrace continued, the lion's fur tickling the side of her face like she was hugging a giant soft toy, but as she felt it adjust the position of its teeth inside her flesh, she became fuelled by adrenaline and began to manipulate the spear head still clutched within her hand. As the lion angled its hold closer towards her neck, Cassie grunted through the fresh pain but groped with her hand to find a spot beneath its collar, where she thrust the spearhead upwards into the lion's throat.

The pressure on her shoulder intensified, and for a moment she didn't think her move had been effective, but gradually the lion's body became much heavier against hers and she pulled the spear back out, triggering a warm, wet rush against her chest. The animal's grip relaxed, and Cassie was able to step away to let its body slide to the floor. Her top was soaked in blood, and it was difficult to tell how much was hers and what had come from the lion.

Cassie's upper chest felt like it was on fire, and she couldn't pull her eyes away from the magnificent creature she had just destroyed, but a scream broke her thoughts and she remembered she still had company in the Hall. She spun to survey her companions. To her right, Eyepatch was locked in a wrestle with a bloodied lion. To her left, Thomas was sprinting across the room with crimson splashes on his buttocks and lower back, while the other lion tailed him looking relatively untouched. Thomas ran towards Eyepatch's fight then circled back around the pair, and his pursuer was momentarily distracted by the battling duo, the pause long enough to increase Thomas's lead. So that's how he was still alive. It was smart, but surely unsustainable. Thomas's shirt was drenched in sweat, and as he was forced to loop back around the perimeter of the Hall, the lion changed paths to meet him in a few short bounds and took out his legs from under him with a waft of its paws, sending him sprawling to the ground with a scream. Cassie watched the lion jump on him, clamping its jaws on his back and pinning him down, and she realised that it was going to kill him soon if she didn't intervene. She took a breath and wondered what she should do. Her Handler would certainly want her to keep out of it, but she wasn't interested in what he wanted anymore, was she?

Her jaw set as the decision was made, and she rotated the spearhead in her hand as she strode purposefully towards the scene. Thomas was face down, and it was difficult to tell whether the twitching of his body was his attempt at defence or just the jostling of the beast on top of him as it worked its jaws

around his buttocks. The lion had its back to her and didn't seem to have noticed her approach, so now she had the element of surprise and a good idea of what blow would work based on her first success. The trouble was how to reach its soft spot, and with the slightest of reservations, she concluded that there was really only one way.

With a short exhale to prepare, Cassie leapt onto the lion's back. It immediately released its hold on Thomas and twisted its head to reach her with its jaws, but the angle of its neck opened up a gap beneath the collar and she saw her chance, driving the spearhead into the soft skin of its throat as its teeth grazed her elbow. The lion yowled and started to stagger across the Hall with Cassie still on its back, clinging on tightly with her thighs, conscious of the utter absurdity of the situation but also exhilarated by the action. She withdrew the spearhead and blood gushed as the lion fell to its side, pinning her to the floor as it convulsed and gurgled. Cassie waited for its movements to stall and then wriggled out from underneath it, groaning back to her feet and frowning sadly at the second creature she had slain. She turned to see where Eyepatch was up to with his own fight and came immediately face to face with him.

She had barely enough time to register his presence before he thrust a spear straight into her stomach.

Cassie grunted in surprise and instinctively gripped the pole that was now sticking out of her body. Her ears seemed full of static, the pressure inside her building overwhelmingly, numbing the pain from her other wounds as it took full priority of her senses. A strained cry came from her throat as she felt Eyepatch starting to withdraw the weapon, the sensation of something shifting inside her making her head spin. She gripped her left hand tightly around the pole to hold it in place, knowing from experience that these sorts of wounds became truly deadly once the weapon was out and the blood could flow. She had a moment of empathy for the first horse she had killed, her mind drifting into the memory but sharply snapping back to the present as she felt the spear move inside her again. Eyepatch was close, his breath hot against her face, his remaining eye fixed on hers with pure determination as they engaged in a sickening tug of war inside her abdomen. She clenched the fingers of her free hand, feeling the hard edge of the fractured spearhead that was still sticky with lion blood. A plan formed.

Cassie intensified her hold on the pole sticking into her, twisting her fingers in

such a way that she could feel the wood begin to warp until it splintered and cracked apart in her palm. Eyepatch's end was suddenly released and he was thrown backwards by the force of his own pull, looking with surprise at the broken stick in his hands. Cassie let go of the skewer, nauseous from the way it dragged down against her stomach, but she needed both hands to be free for a chance to survive this. Eyepatch recovered quickly and lurched towards her, but she was ready for him and swung a left hook at his face. It was a big enough blow to dazzle him momentarily, and before he had time to retaliate, she countered the twist of her body and swung a right hook, hitting him in the temple. The spearhead that had been hidden within her palm entered the side of his head with a hollow squelch, and she wasted no time in pulling it back out. His eye showed surprise and then faded as his body slumped to the floor.

Cassie let out a long breath and allowed the spearhead to fall from her hand. In time with the metallic thud of it hitting the ground, she heard a dull thumping coming from the windows above, and she peered up curiously, her peripheries fogging as her head lifted. The banging stopped and she brought her gaze back to the floor, trying not to look at the wooden pole protruding from her torso, fearful that if she acknowledged it too closely she would feel the full force of the injury. She was tired. Very tired. But she stayed standing, no energy to move, none left to even fall.

There was the sound of activity behind her, pattering feet and squeaking wheels, then the hard edge of a gurney pressed into the back of her thighs and she all but collapsed onto it. The end of the spear was jutting up into the sky now, so she flicked her eyes to the sides and saw a team of people around Thomas, who was squirming on the floor. Not dead then, and neither was she. Not in here, at least. Her Handler's plan had failed, and she allowed herself the smallest of smiles as she was wheeled away, the familiar high ceiling of the Hall turning into the darker corridor, lights streaking her vision as they passed.

'How is she?' her Handler said as he appeared by the bedside, peering down at her body with a grimace while walking in time with the gurney. He seemed energetic somehow, his small eyes twinkling in the passing lights.

'I don't know yet,' a male voice replied from somewhere out of sight.

As they moved through the corridor, another man appeared at the opposite end of the gurney, dressed in the green Handler uniform and sporting a look of fury

as he pointed towards her Handler.

‘Hey! You owe me!’ he shouted across the bed, but her Handler shrugged and laughed as the narrowness of the corridor forced the man to abandon his pursuit. ‘You fucking owe me!’ he yelled after them. Her Handler ignored him, a strange smile on his face as he kept beside Cassie all the way to the treatment room.

The medical team worked busily around Cassie to prepare equipment while her Handler strapped her arms down. A young male medic surveyed her body, his composure betraying obvious nerves.

‘Get to it, then,’ her Handler barked, making the medic jump.

‘Of course. I just... This sort of wound is a bit new to me. I think we could do with Doctor Jackson’s expertise on this one.’

‘Oh really? You think that’s a good idea?’ her Handler spat. The medic looked down and shuffled his feet.

‘She has the most experience with traumatic injuries,’ he said quietly. ‘And for this one, her body has been through so much already, I really don’t know how much more it can take.’

‘Oh, she can take a lot, can’t you.’ Her Handler patted her face as he secured her chain beneath the table, and Cassie’s nostrils flared. ‘Did you see what she did out there? She fought a lion. She killed two!’ He held out two of his short fingers to punctuate the fact. ‘And what she did to that big prick was... spectacular.’ He laughed heartily. ‘I think another infusion should help move this along, so get that set up too.’

‘But sir, I think she’s reaching maximum dosage.’

‘Does it look like I’m asking for your opinion? Sedate her, infuse her and fix her up. Bring Baxter in if it’ll help, but if anything goes wrong, I will hold you personally responsible. This is a very valuable animal now.’ Her Handler looked down at her. ‘I was beginning to think you were more trouble than you were worth, but that sort of performance almost makes up for everything.’ Cassie felt the familiar cold rush of sedative through her veins, and her eyelids fluttered against the image of her Handler’s animated face.

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She woke back in her cage, her abdomen aching but bearable and her shoulder stiff with freshly healed scars. She took her time sitting up, snapshots of the battle flicking through her mind that made her very first fight with a sheep feel rather pathetic. Killing Eyepatch left her with no remorse; he was as animal as anything else she had faced in the Complex. Frankly, she was more uncomfortable with her actions against the lions. But she had beaten her Handler's plan, at least, and saved that other guy in the process. Something had certainly shifted within her since the punishment she had endured, a new depth beyond the blank slate she'd been sporting for so long, and she hadn't yet worked out what it meant or if she welcomed the change. A move away from the dense animal mindset she had crafted was dangerously close to a humanity that she didn't think she could handle anymore.

She ruminated and rested until her Handler appeared with a bag of food and a bucket. He smiled as he stood over the cage, making his rounded cheeks jut up towards his beady eyes.

'Good to see you back. To be honest, I thought that was going to be your big exit.' He shook his head, chuckling as he locked her chain into place. 'But it's been two weeks and they're still talking about it. Now your next showing is going to be worth triple.'

Cassie regarded him blankly as he opened the cage to deposit the items, and she didn't move even after he had shut the door and released her chain. Usually, he left and she would eat in peace, but this time he stayed beside the cage expectantly.

'Have a look.' He pointed at the food. Cassie frowned and peered inside the paper bag, finding meat and bread as expected, but alongside them was a small brown cupcake. Puzzled, she looked up at her Handler for guidance.

'We got a basket off a fan. Kept one back for you. I don't think it's gone too stale.'

She pulled out the cake and lifted it to her nose, the scent of chocolate making her salivate and triggering a rush of emotions that were chained to memories of a distant life, ones that she thought she had successfully buried. She put the cake back down, hesitant for what it might unearth inside.

Her Handler sniffed. 'See, this is how things could be. I know we had a blip, but hopefully we have a better understanding now, yes?' Cassie gave him a stony stare. She wouldn't call vivisection a bit of a blip. 'Go ahead,' he urged, gesturing to the cake. 'Keep it up and you might get more like that.'

She clenched her teeth, his upbeat attitude grating, and after a while her Handler shrugged, turning to leave with a heavy sigh. He stopped abruptly as three men appeared in the corridor.

'So she survived?' the lead man said, peering into the pen. His face was familiar.

'Just about,' her Handler replied, his back to Cassie. 'And how is yours?'

'Fuck you,' the other man spat, and now Cassie recognised him as the one who had shouted at her Handler while she was on the gurney. He extended a finger in her direction. 'You owe me your animal.' His accent was different to her Handler's, a diluted Australian.

'This is not for sale, Hank. Why don't you go down to the next market and buy yourself something new?'

'I'm not looking to buy. You owe me,' Hank replied.

'Hey.' Her Handler held up his hands. 'In an open match like that, what happens is out of our control. I can't help it if your animal was inferior to mine.'

'You could have stopped her before she gave that final blow.'

'You could have stopped him before he stabbed her.' Cassie had to admit, her Handler certainly had a point. 'That damage has put us out for weeks.'

'Fuck you, she killed mine!' Hank said, while his companions fanned out a little to form a semicircle around her Handler. They looked eager. Excited.

'It's the risks we take,' her Handler mused, but Hank did not look impressed.

'I let it slide when you let her maim him.' Hank took a step closer so their chests almost met. 'You already cost me after that stunt, but this is too far now. You. Owe. Me.' He poked her Handler in the chest with each word, and Cassie

watched, enthralled. Her Handler took hold of Hank's finger and pushed it away slowly. His voice dropped to a familiar tone, one filled with menace.

'I owe you nothing.' He walked around Hank as if to leave, but Hank's two companions suddenly lunged and grabbed him by his arms, while Hank whipped a short piece of wire out of his pocket and wrapped it around his throat. She could hear him gasping for air as he began to frantically fight them off, spinning around into the small space of the pen and pulling his arms free. He scrabbled at the wire around his neck, attempting to jostle Hank off him, but he held on fast, pulling it tighter. Her Handler stumbled straight for her cage, falling on his front and commando-crawling towards her as the other man gained further purchase by kneeling onto his back.

Cassie came up to the front of her cage, alarmed at the energy of the evolving situation. She could see the wire cutting through her Handler's skin, and his face began to develop a deep purple hue as he reached out his arm, aiming his bracelet at the cage door. Cassie watched his wrist inch closer, wondering what she would do if she was released, feeling a strange, innate urge to save her master from this stranger. His shaking arm came close enough to trigger the sensor and her cage slid open.

Hank froze, still kneeling on top of her Handler's back, watching Cassie with alarm as she approached the mouth of the cage. She looked at him indifferently, then gazed down at her Handler, prostrate and vulnerable, staring up with bulging bloodshot eyes, pleading for her to make it stop. Begging. It seemed so familiar. She closed her eyes as she remembered that same desperation, hanging her hope to his mercy, waiting for him to end her misery. Her brow creased with the memory, and she opened her eyes to fix her stare on him, then with a determined sigh, she opened her mouth and said:

'Continue.'

Her Handler's eyes widened in horror, but she turned her back on him and crawled further into her cage, resolute in her decision but not willing to watch. When the choking sounds behind her stopped, Cassie propped herself at the back of the cage to observe the aftermath. Her Handler's body lay face down, with an arm still outstretched as if he was pointing an accusing finger towards the animal that had turned on him. Hank stood over the body, breathing heavily and looking at Cassie with an open smile. He pocketed the wire and stooped to lift her

Handler's wrist, waving it at the cage to close the door.

'Good choice to let him die. He was a dick.' He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand then motioned to his companions to help with the body. They turned it around and propped it up against the front of her cage, then Hank unhooked her chain from its post and wrapped it around her dead Handler's neck. The men stood back to survey the scene and nodded in unison.

'Terrible accident.' Hank smirked, his companions sniggering. 'Guy obviously got too close to his animal, underestimated what a clever bitch she was. Good job we got that verbal agreement that he was going to give her to me, eh?' Hank squatted down and waved at Cassie through the bars. 'Be seeing you soon.'

Cassie watched the three men walk confidently away, then a thick silence descended as she stared at her Handler's back, struggling to comprehend what had just happened. What she had let happen. Everything felt eerily still after the violence that had just occurred, until he suddenly shifted and fell to the side. Cassie jumped and tensed in disbelief at his movement, surprised that he could have survived such an assault, but the lifeless body swayed gently and came to rest at an angle, stopped short of the floor by the pull of the chain around its neck.

She exhaled deeply and wondered if she had just made a terrible mistake, but she supposed she would find out soon enough. For now, she allowed herself a glimmer of a victorious smile, then picked up the cupcake and took a bite.

It tasted bitter.

twelve

'You'll probably need these if you're staying out here.' He produced some sunglasses from his pocket and laid them on the table before disappearing inside.

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Her Handler's corpse remained against her cage for longer than she would have preferred. It was unnerving seeing something that was both recognisably alive and resolutely inanimate all at the same time. His body was held diagonally by the loop of the chain around his neck, thankfully with his back to her so she couldn't see his face, but one of his hands was flopped onto the floor directly in her line of sight, the stubby fingers curled and waxy. She could see the spindly black hairs in their neat little boxes on each finger. Hairy chipolatas. So close to the bars she could probably touch them now, feel the prickle against her fingertips and the juxtaposition of smooth skin with coarse hair. The thought of it made her nauseous.

Cassie lay as far away from him as possible, folded into the end of her cage, staring at the body and thinking. She was struggling to sum up exactly how she felt, remorse butting up against satisfaction. She had won, after all. Maybe not the war, but she had beaten the first general of this Complex. Eyepatch had been a rabid soldier, but this Handler was a symbol of dominance and she had unequivocally defied him. Before coming here she had never been in a physical fight with anyone; even her wildest spats with Jessica remained verbal. She wondered how long it had taken to turn her into a cold killer, and whether it had been far too easy. If someone came to rescue her today and looked back on all her actions, how would she be judged? She tried to put herself in their shoes, from the outside looking in, but her attempts were obstructed by the shields she had built during her long periods of solitude. Who could judge her, anyway? No one else knew what it was like to be in the Complex.

Stroking the scar on her chin, Cassie tried to change the direction of her thoughts. The image of Jessica was edging too closely to the sidelines with all this notion of rescue and judgement. Jess had been nearer to the surface ever since the wolf episode, and Cassie wasn't sure why. She aimed her train of thought at Hank instead, her probable new Handler. What she knew of him so far

was that he had been the Handler for Eyepatch, who had looked in good shape and even been kept on after she had taken his eye out, so there were indications that Hank must take care of his captives. But he had also tactically murdered her Handler, and she saw no novelty in how he dispatched of him. Since Hank had gone to the trouble of killing in order to acquire her, she could assume he was going to keep her in one piece, at least enough so she could fight in the Hall again. That was about the best she could hope for.

The lights went off, plunging her into darkness, and eventually she fell into a fitful sleep. She dreamt of her Handler's body rotating on the chain until it faced her, its bulging purple eyes staring through the bars of her cage, a waxen hand reaching out, fingers swollen with writhing black hair across the knuckles. Cassie woke with a start, and in the darkness she could see his silhouette, positive there was a glint of light off his drying eyeballs, whimpering with fright as she backed into the end of the cage and wiped her face with the back of her hand, now slick with sweat. Gradually she assured herself that the body hadn't moved and she was being a pathetic idiot, but the proximity of his corpse was becoming too unsettling, and the sooner someone came to find him, the better.

Morning came, and the rumble in her stomach was a reminder that without her Handler's care she was potentially in trouble. Her water bottle was less than half empty and she had no food left. Cassie tried to keep herself busy, running through her cage exercises with greater focus on the ones that positioned her away from the body, its presence like an unwelcome audience. Eventually she heard footsteps approaching, and a young male medic she recognised came into the pen, turning quite pale at what he found.

Hank's setup seemed to be believable, based on the shock from those that came to remove the body. They cautiously unravelled her Handler while keeping her chain locked tightly, someone monitoring her with a collar control the whole time. Cassie stayed quiet and watchful, a little dazzled by so many people in her space. As the body was wheeled away, Hank sauntered in and gave a rather impressive performance, claiming he had arrived to hold a formal meeting with her Handler in order to exchange ownership and waving some papers that had apparently already been drawn up. Cassie got the sense that no one really believed him, but nobody seemed willing to challenge him either. Having seen his disregard for others, Cassie didn't blame them.

Hank took custody of her later that day, arriving with two men she recognised

from the organised attack. They attached long metal poles to her collar and walked her to the gym, Cassie compliant and subdued but attentive to every detail. Once the door was closed and locked, the two men positioned themselves either side of her, using the poles to presumably keep her in place. Hank strolled in front of her, wielding a rather large wooden bat. She shifted her weight, and her eyes flicked to the control unit in Hank's free hand as she assessed the situation. The gym door was certainly locked, so even if she took them all out without being shocked, she wouldn't get very far. She decided to bide her time and see what Hank had to say first.

Hank stroked the bat and gave her a wide smile. He was younger than her first Handler, with light brown hair that was parted in the middle and flopped in a frame around his face. A shade of stubble covered his jaw, interrupted by a faint pink scar that ran lazily across his chin. His eyes seemed in a permanent squint and the corners of his lips were curled, as if he found everything amusing. He was a few inches taller than Cassie, with a broad build that he carried well, and under normal circumstances he would have been quite imposing. But Cassie was unintimidated. She had killed two lions in close combat, after all.

'You're English, yes?' Hank interrupted her thoughts, and she nodded slightly. 'Thought so. Been watching you for a while. Impressive stuff, all things considered.' His eyes tracked the length of her body, and she felt the hairs on her arms prickle. 'Janos had this thing about pain being a distraction. He used those boosters to make things last longer, wring out every second.' Cassie kept her face passive as she realised Hank must be referring to her past Handler. Naming him added an uncomfortable level of humanity to the man whose death she had facilitated. 'Bet you wouldn't have had the wits about you to strangle that sheep if you could feel your guts coming out, yeah?' Hank raised an eyebrow, and his companions snorted. Cassie couldn't argue with his point. 'I think boosters are cheating though, never much cared for them. But you caught my attention when you took my man's eye out, which was fucking brutal, by the way. Janos was pissed at you for trying to escape and thought he could use my guy to rough you up a bit, scare you into submission. But I wasn't expecting you to turn so dark.' Hank laughed, and Cassie clenched her teeth. 'And then that whole stunt with the lions. If you had any idea how much that man was worth, and you just—' He mimicked stabbing something into the side of his head, and Cassie unintentionally made a soft noise at the back of her throat. All three men stiffened, the two either side of her jostling the poles attached to her collar as they adjusted their holds. Hank had frozen, watching her carefully, but Cassie

pressed her lips together and swallowed down the anger that his words had stirred.

Hank watched her for a moment more, then, seemingly satisfied, he relaxed his stance again and took a step closer. 'Janos had no idea what he had, what he could have made of you. Yeah, you're the first enhanced female, but I see more than just a novelty act here. So you're my stock now, okay?' He swung the bat and rested it against his shoulder. 'But I need to know that you respect me as your master. You let me kill Janos, so I have some concerns about your obedience.' A slow grin spread across his face, and Cassie channelled the rising tension by closing her fingers into her palms. 'When I work with new animals like you, I always think of this old book, *The Call of the Wild*. There's this bit where the dog's with its new master and the guy's got this club, and he just whacks the shit out of the dog. It takes a while, 'cause the dog keeps going for him, but he just bats him down over and over until the dog gives up and obeys him. They call it "the law of the club".'

Cassie's mouth had gone quite dry.

'Some Handlers in here think that's the best way to subdue an animal, but see, I don't think that it really works. The dog never truly respects its master, and I bet it'd rip out his throat if it ever got the chance. I want to build real respect; I don't want to beat it into you.' He flashed her a grin. 'I mean, I will if I have to. But I'd rather you figure out it's easier to obey me right away. So I want you to show me you understand. I want you to kneel for me.' He gestured to the ground with the bat. 'Kneel, or I will make you kneel. Your choice.'

Cassie stayed perfectly still, watching him intently, trying to judge what her response should be. Part of her felt it was just easier to kneel, slip straight back into the role of obedient subject and carry on as she was before. But the new side that had burst through the cracks in her composure recently, the one that was alight with rage and resistance, this part was running through any situation that wouldn't end with her being shocked or tranquilised. If she killed these men right now, and she was pretty sure she could, what would happen next? Another Handler, or the labs, or she'd be put in the other Hall she had heard about. She had no control over any of these outcomes, but with this guy she could shape a little of what happened. Not a lot, but enough to perhaps appease her emerging self.

Still, the idea of just kneeling before Hank made her fists clench further.

Hank was starting to look slightly unsure of himself, adjusting the grip on both of his weapons and tonguing his lips as if in thought.

‘Kneel,’ he repeated, but Cassie stayed static, still wavering on the edge of compliance or chaos. She heard one of the other men scoff loudly, and Hank gave a slight sigh, then with a grunt he swung the bat towards her face. Cassie stopped it automatically with an outstretched hand, easily halting its trajectory and fixing it mid-air. Hank looked surprised, and she could see his fingers tense on the control unit in his other hand, so she quickly dropped to her knees, still holding the bat above her head but keeping her gaze low. She waited, and when no shock came, she took the opportunity to whip the bat out of Hank’s hand with just the slightest of flicks of her wrist, sending it clattering across the gym. She remained kneeling and lowered both her hands to the floor, hoping the gesture was not insolent enough to make him too angry but strong enough to show that she was much more than just a dog. Silence fell across the gym. Then she heard a soft chuckle as he touched her lightly on the top of her head.

‘Okay. Good. Get up.’ She rose to her feet and faced Hank again, who nodded at her and smirked. ‘This is going to be interesting.’

She was taken down a series of corridors into areas of the Complex she’d never been to before. It seemed her little corner of it was quiet in comparison. Hank whistled a tune as they walked, and Cassie heard grunts and snorts while they passed different pens, the animal smells thick and acrid in her nostrils.

‘So the medics told me your insides are still a bit fucked from what my guy did to you,’ Hank said from in front of her, the chain loose in one hand and the bat swinging between his fingers in the other. His two companions followed behind, still guiding her with their poles. ‘We’ll make sure you’re well rested before we put you in again. Killing your Handler has put you on the map.’ He turned and winked at her, laughing, ‘Doesn’t happen that often. You’re one of the top draws now, which means we don’t have to rush. Drives up the anticipation.’

They slowed at the opening to a pen, and Cassie’s eyes widened as she saw the cage. While it looked a similar size to her last one, inside it was a thin white mattress. Hank seemed to sense her astonishment and gave her a satisfied smile.

‘Need you properly rested so you heal quicker. If you play your cards right, you get to keep it.’

She felt him unclip the poles from her collar, and then he gestured for her to go inside. Cassie sighed and dropped to the floor, crawling into the cage and feeling her dignity seep away as the door slid shut. She had tried to assert her dominance during their interaction in the gym, but now she was down on the floor, Hank seemed to tower over her. ‘I’ll be back with some food and water in a minute. Don’t go anywhere.’

Cassie didn’t watch them leave; she was too absorbed with the way her hands were sinking into the soft mattress, which took up two-thirds of the width of her cage. She ran her fingers over its surface with a slight flutter of excitement, annoyed at herself for feeling so grateful. She should not see this mattress as a generous gift. She was still a prisoner in a cage; she should not feel *pleased* about something so basic. But didn’t she deserve just a little comfort after everything she had been through? Fuck it.

She flung herself around to land on her back. The mattress was thin and crinkly, but compared to the floor it was luxurious bliss and she wriggled her body into the cushioned surface, closing her eyes and spreading her toes, welcoming a comfortable nap after the endless nightmares from last night.

‘Pssst.’

She opened her eyes, puzzled.

‘Hey!’ The whispered shout came from beyond the wall to her left. ‘Are you there? You’re her, aren’t you?’ There was an American flavour to his voice. ‘I’m the guy who was with you, with the lions? And that big dude? I thought you were dead. I missed a bit of what happened – that lion had me pinned and it took chunks out of my ass, I can’t even sit down at the moment. Then it pulled away, and when I turned I saw you on it, like riding it. Did I hallucinate or something? Did you really ride the lion like a fucking horse?’ Cassie felt her lips twitch into something of a smile as she struggled to take in the bombardment of disembodied words, the auditory stimulation overwhelming. ‘Anyway, I think I might have passed out, because when I next looked up there was that big guy and he had a spear in his head, and you had one sticking out of you, and the medics were rushing round like crazy. I thought for sure you were dead, and then

—,

He stopped abruptly at the sound of approaching footsteps, and Hank appeared in her pen carrying a bucket and supplies. He whistled as he locked her chain to her post and delivered the items, Cassie watching from her supine position on the mattress. Hank peered in and winked at her.

‘Thought you’d enjoy that.’ He chuckled as he closed the cage and released her chain, then strolled away, his whistle echoing down the corridor. As silence returned, the whispered voice picked up again from beyond the wall.

‘So how come you’re next to me now? Have you moved cages?’ Cassie rubbed her chin scar as she let the question hang in the air. The answer was long and complex, and she didn’t have the impetus to vocalise it. The idea of having a conversation felt very unnatural. Part of her just wanted to sink back into the animal mindset and let her human mind die. It was much simpler that way, everything hurt a lot less. She felt her mood drooping, but a snort of laughter snapped her alert.

‘Oh yeah, that’s right. You don’t talk much, do you? That’s okay, I get it. You’ve been here longer than me, so I can imagine. Well, I can try. But lucky for you, I talk when I’m nervous, and before today I haven’t had anyone to talk to so, you know, I’ve been close to losing it. Quite a bit. But... it’s all good. Hank said I won’t be going back in until my ass heals properly, and I’m presuming you might need some time to recoup too, so we’ve got lots of chance to talk. I’m Thomas, if you forgot.’ She had forgotten. ‘What’s your name? Can you tell me that at least?’ Cassie held her tongue, unwilling to engage, not even sure she knew how to anymore. After a moment of silence, she heard his cage rattle as if he was moving himself around.

‘Well shit. I don’t even know if you can understand me. I’m probably just talking to myself here like a fucking loser.’ He groaned in dramatic frustration and fell quiet. Cassie sighed softly and rubbed her eyes, overcome by the human interaction. So much had changed in the last few days she was struggling to keep up. Thomas’s voice startled her as he resumed his monologue. ‘Okay. Listen. Whether you can understand me or not, I want you to know that we’re going to be okay. I can’t say how, but trust me when I say I’m going to get us out of here. We just have to keep surviving until it’s time.’

Cassie's face dropped. The blank void she had spent so long crafting was already dented and punctured from everything that had happened recently, and now here was an invader on her doorstep, wielding his untarnished hope, a reminder of all the humanity she had worked so hard to bury. A ball of sorrow rolled up Cassie's throat, and she pressed her mouth into the mattress as it forced its way out, the material soaking up the sudden expulsion of tears. It had been so long since she had shed any, she thought she never would again.

Eventually her emotions smoothed out, and she blamed the change in circumstances for the crack in her composure. She distracted herself by exploring her new environment, counting every square in the bars to confirm that the cage was the same shape and size as her last one. The pen looked a similar size too, and her view into a faceless corridor was almost identical, except that twice a person passed by, and animal noises seemed closer. She presumed this location was on a main route through the Complex.

Thomas tried to start up another conversation, but he was met with stilted silence and she heard him muttering to himself for a while instead. Having a human neighbour made Cassie feel on edge, conscious that he may be listening in to every sound she made, which was especially galling when she had to use her bucket. She could hear him rustling around, and it irritated the hell out of her. In the early weeks a companion would have been a lifeline, but now Thomas was the living reminder of all that she had pushed away, and she resented him for his very existence. When the lights went out she heard him whisper a 'goodnight', and she couldn't help but scoff into the darkness, frustrated with his persistence and almost wishing she was back in her old cage. She lay on the crisp mattress and wriggled her shoulders against the material. The sensation of lying against something that yielded was pleasantly novel, and with the added comfort she quickly fell asleep.

The scuff of shoes pulled her back to wakefulness, and she opened her eyes to pitch black, creasing her brow as the footsteps grew louder. A strange strobe of light flashed up the corridor and entered her pen, suddenly shining straight into her face, its brightness so severe she had to cover her eyes dramatically.

'Hey,' came a gruff whisper. 'It's okay. We've come to get you out of here.' Cassie lowered her hands slightly, the bright light obscuring whoever was behind it. She was too confused to move and heard the click and swoosh of her cage door, the torchlight drawing back slightly and illuminating the opening. 'Come

on, quickly,' the male voice urged. She felt frozen to the spot, trying to see the trap, daring to believe but not wanting to be caught out. The cage was tantalisingly open, and she licked her lips, slowly crawling to the edge, the number and nature of her visitors still a complete unknown. 'Come on, we're taking you to safety,' the voice said, and she heard numerous sets of feet shuffling around her pen.

Very gradually, she came out of the cage and stood up, trying to peer past the torch, the juxtaposition of light and darkness creating spots in her vision. She tensed, concerned about the unknown visitors, but the smallest glimmer of hope was now ignited and burning in her chest. She heard the ruffle of clothes beside her and began to ask who they were, but suddenly she found herself hitting the ground with a hollow thud, surprise her first sensation before she felt a sharp blast of heat across the back of her head. A second blow hit her across her shoulder blades and rattled her against the floor, then a third to the side of her ribs that made her gasp.

'Hank might have let you get away with it, but I won't.' The voice echoed around the enclosed space. 'You're going to learn some respect the proper way.'

thirteen

She turned back to the pool and continued kicking her legs as she regarded the perimeter of the decking, curious at the way it seemed to drop off abruptly. She climbed back to her feet and left wet footprints around the pool as she approached the edge.

*

Cassie's moment of hope lurched into alarm as another blow hit her in the back and fresh pain exploded through her body. The number and nature of her assailants was still unknown as the torchlight continued to dazzle, and she rolled onto her side, flailing out her hands to intercept the next attack, her fingertips scraping against something solid but failing to gain purchase before it was withdrawn and she was struck across the chin. Her head reeling, she blindly lashed out with her feet, but her legs clamped together as her body spasmed from a shock. She lay spent, panting on the floor as the jolt subsided, rage burning brightly, so powerful that it was deafening until she realised there was a cacophony of sound coming from nearby.

'Shut that guy up!' someone shouted, and she recognised that the racket was coming from Thomas next door, demanding that they stop, yelling until she heard the pained groan of him no doubt being shocked too. Rich male laughter filled her pen, and Cassie's fists clenched.

She lurched off the floor in the direction of the torchlight, swiping with her hands in the hope of connecting. Another strike hit her upper arm and she grunted, but now she was fuelled by anger and shot out her hand again, this time catching a hard object in her palm, cylindrical and wooden like a bat. She pulled it towards her and edged her grip up the object until she felt the soft flesh of an arm connected to it. Someone was shouting, very close to her now, and the jerked movements of the arm suggested its owner was trying to pull away, but he was powerless in her hold. She squinted against the swinging torchlight and did the rest by feel, reaching out with her feet until she found the uneven resistance of a body beneath her soles. Another shock began to wrap around her spine, but she had enough time to pull the arm towards her chest while pushing her feet against the torso, the ramping muscle spasms adding to the speed of the manoeuvre until she heard a pop that was so loud it echoed around the pen. The

arm in her grasp went limp as an almighty scream filled the space.

The shock was sustained and her teeth ground unpleasantly, but it meant she was unable to let go of her prize. After further shouts, it finally stopped, and her grip loosened as she sagged to the floor. The arm pulled free, and the man's howling intensified as his presence drew away under a shower of expletives. Cassie took great gasps of air, her head and body buzzing with pain and adrenaline. Gradually, she realised that her assailant had retreated, so she began a pained roll to her hands and knees with the aim to get back on her feet.

'She's up! Get her in the fucking cage!' The shout came from somewhere behind her, followed by a shock that knocked her back to the floor, and while still prone, she grunted with the force of a blow across her shoulders, then a second across the side of her head that was enough to close the darkness around her. Confused and hurting and furious, but incapable of response, she floundered on the floor then felt pressure around her throat as her body was dragged into the cage and she was pulled straight up to the ceiling in the shortest position the chain would lock. Her body thrummed with urgency as she scrabbled to get her feet underneath her, gagging her as the collar cut into her windpipe until she managed to gain purchase on the ground and take the pressure off her throat. She breathed noisily through her mouth, and there was a ringing in her ears that was almost overbearing as she tried to gather her senses.

The torchlight dissipated along with the pained cries of the man she had assaulted, until she was plunged back into the familiar darkness of her cage, swinging uncomfortably on her chain. The only thing stopping her from being strangled was the deep squat she was maintaining, and she shifted awkwardly on her feet, trying to take stock of the situation, her despair growing as she acknowledged her reality. Shit, they'd left her locked up in this position. Shit, she'd seriously injured one of Hank's men. What grated most was that she had allowed herself a small sliver of hope, and that sliver was now cutting chasms of disappointment through her innards. Shit shit shit.

She clenched her eyes shut in misery, frustrated at the situation, holding on to the collar with her fingertips to ensure it didn't throttle her until an idea slowly formed in the darkness of her mind. This could be the answer. Her way out. She let go of the collar and allowed her legs to soften, increasing the pressure against her windpipe. It was unpleasant and alarming, but she thought about the potential repercussions of her retaliation and realised she was just so tired of all

this. She hung a little harder, her breath stifled completely now, resigning herself with giddy anxiety to this course of action. She could do this. She was done.

‘Hey? Are you there?’ the voice from the other side piped up. She ignored it. ‘Hey!’ he shouted. ‘Are you okay? Please be okay! Please, just tell me you’re okay!’

She held on just a little longer, but the desperation in his voice was really killing her determination, and with a frustrated gasp she pushed back up through her feet and allowed herself to breathe once more. Thomas continued to shout, and she gathered herself to respond just to shut him up.

‘I’m okay,’ she managed, her voice a croaked whisper.

‘Thank god,’ Thomas sighed.

Cassie grimaced as bitter tears dampened her cheeks and another swell of anger consumed her so strongly that she lashed out a foot against the side of her cage.

‘Fuck!’ she shouted, finding the act of vocalising an expletive greatly cathartic. The power of her kick had shaken her foothold and caused her to swing further, rattling the cage.

‘Did they hurt you?’

Cassie hadn’t assessed the full scale of damage yet, but the summary was that she hurt all over. Her more pressing issue was the way she was uncomfortably hoisted up by her throat, and she felt around the back of the collar to see what purchase she could get. She’d never bothered to test her strength against the chain before – it seemed a fruitless task – but maybe she had enough to give herself some slack. Thomas’s voice disrupted her concentration. ‘They gave me some sort of electric shock, those assholes. I wanted to get their attention off you somehow, but I didn’t know how and—’

‘Shhh,’ Cassie hushed in irritation as she edged her hands into position. She pushed on the back of her collar to open up a small gap at the front and take the pressure off her windpipe, and with her other hand she secured a grip on the first chain link. She adjusted her feet and body, then started to apply pressure by leaning with all her might away from the pole that her chain was attached to, her

hand firm against the collar to keep her throat clear.

At first nothing happened, and considering the angle of her body and the power she was exerting, if her hands slipped now she'd probably snap her own neck. It was a risk she was happy to take. Cassie kept up the pressure and gradually heard a metallic groan from behind her. After taking a moment to reset and shake out her cramping fingers, she returned to the same position, noticing that she had more chain to hold on to this time. The groan intensified and she seemed to be gaining ground, until there was a sudden snap and she was catapulted into the opposite side of her cage, the whole structure seeming to veer on its edge before crashing back to the ground.

Cassie was folded painfully into the side of her cage and managed to wriggle her body parts until she was lying on the mattress. Her chain felt loose, but it was too dark to see what she had done to the mechanism. She was free, at least. The glory quickly dissolved into the reality of her injuries as her whole body began to thrum with pain.

'You okay?' Thomas called out. 'What was that?' Cassie bared her teeth and grunted at the pounding in her head and chest. 'You're really injured, aren't you?' Thomas sounded concerned. 'I'm sorry I couldn't stop them. They shouldn't have done that to you, they should have come for me instead. I'd fuck them up. Assholes. I mean, I know you can handle yourself, don't get me wrong. It sounded like you got one of them bad. Oh man, those screams.' Cassie panted in the dark, struggling to follow the incessant train of his thoughts but finding the distraction therapeutic. 'You still there? Want me to shout for someone to come help? I don't know if that's how it works in here, but I don't mind trying.' He paused, and Cassie closed her eyes to the throbbing in her temples, wincing as Thomas's voice returned. 'Hey... hey, I know you can understand me, okay? I heard you before. Can you... can you just let me know that you're okay, because all I can hear is you breathing really weirdly, so... can you just say something so I know you're still okay?'

Cassie sighed, his persistence wearing her down, her defences shattered by the chaos of the night.

'Had worse,' she managed, the formulation of a full sentence too perplexing to manage anymore.

‘Had worse?’ Thomas echoed. ‘That’s how you’re choosing to sum up tonight? Had worse? Fuck.’ He laughed bitterly. ‘What have they done to you in here? Jesus, this place really is hell.’ Cassie pressed her lips together as a deep sadness burned her chest with his words. A thick silence descended until Thomas cut through it again. ‘I really thought they were coming to save us, you know.’ He sounded glum. ‘One day it’ll be real, though. Trust me.’ Cassie rolled her eyes. Not this again. She let his words hang in the air, and as time wore on, she sank into a pained doze.

She was startled awake by the lights switching on, bringing small eruptions of pain across her head, chest and back. She moaned and shielded her eyes while they adjusted.

‘I wish they’d give us a warning for that. Shakes me up every time.’ Thomas’s voice made her grimace as she remembered her relentless neighbour.

Cassie blinked in the light, and as her eyes refocused, she saw that the chain was draped flaccidly in a haphazard pattern all around her. The post it had been attached to was snapped in half, the top section leaning against the cage. She scoffed out loud in surprise.

‘What’s funny?’ Thomas asked, and something about sharing her discovery with another person compelled Cassie to answer.

‘Pole broke,’ she managed.

‘They did that last night?’

‘I did.’

‘Cool. How are you this morning, are you feeling any better?’

Cassie rubbed the side of her head gingerly. It felt swollen and warm. She tried to move but was stopped by a stabbing pain in her chest, and she pulled up her T-shirt to find purple and yellow splashes across her ribs. She grunted and let her head flop back to the mattress while she considered the potential repercussions of last night. An injured man and a broken post might be punishable offences, and she was getting so tired of all this misery.

‘Look, I get it,’ Thomas said, interrupting her thoughts, and she clenched her

teeth in irritation. 'You must've been on your own for so long. I can't imagine what that must be like. Well, I guess I can, because I've been on my own too, maybe not for quite as long as you, but I know what it's like in here. You're not alone anymore though, okay? And neither am I, and I am obviously way more excited about this than you are, but I can't help it.' Thomas exhaled loudly and Cassie listened, his voice a welcome distraction for once.

'The last few weeks have been such a shit-show,' Thomas continued. 'I went for an interview at a bar in Germany, and then next thing I know I wake up in this cage and I've got a collar on me, and then this guy drags me into this huge room where this massive, vicious pig starts running at me and I'm just like, fuck, what is going on? I had to wrestle a pig, I killed it with my bare hands, and then I'm taken back to this tiny cage and I don't even know how long I was left in here, until they pull me back out and throw me back in that room again, and I'm thinking here I am having to fight another pig but instead *you* come in, all badass, like you totally know what's going on, and then that big guy joins us and you two start squaring up like gladiators and then those lions... Jesus, it all sounds so stupid when you say it out loud, but this place is just... it's something else, right? It's really not what I was...'

Cassie's eyebrows twitched as he trailed off, curious as to how he had planned to finish that sentence. She began to build the right words to ask but was distracted by the sound of footsteps approaching at speed, and suddenly Hank emerged into view. He skidded to a halt at the entrance to her pen and took in the scene.

'Fucking knew it.' He shook his head in exasperation as he came into the pen, stepping slowly around the broken pole. 'Jesus Christ,' he muttered under his breath, then looked through the bars at Cassie. She was still supine and stared back at him solemnly, waiting to see what he would do. 'That fucking idiot.' Hank breathed noisily through his nose and put his hands on the top of his head, his eyes drifting into the middle distance as if he was deep in thought. Eventually his arms dropped to his sides and he clicked his tongue. 'Right then, you fit enough to walk?' Cassie wasn't sure if Hank allowed them to speak, but she wasn't prepared to test that rule right now, so she managed an elaborate shrug. Hank took her chain and went to the front of the cage, slowly waving his wrist at the door to open it and fishing the collar control from his pocket. 'Let's get you checked over then.' He gestured for her to come out.

Cassie was wary. She had no idea if she could trust him, but her choices were limited. Gingerly, she shuffled herself out of the cage and straightened up, closing her eyes for a moment as a wave of dizziness hit her. When she opened them, Hank was frowning, looking her up and down.

‘He’s made a mess of you, hasn’t he?’ He shook his head, then a wry smile crept onto his face. ‘Not as much as you’ve made of him, though, eh?’ He seemed angry, but Cassie got the sense it wasn’t directed at her. She followed him slowly to the medical room, and Hank guided her to lie on a bed, attaching her chain beneath it to secure her in place. She heard a door open, and Hank looked over her to address the newcomer.

‘What’s the update on him?’

‘With this kind of traumatic dislocation there’s been extensive damage to the brachial plexus.’ Another male voice filled the room, a strange, smoothed-down British accent that disguised any region. ‘It’s unlikely he’ll regain full use of the arm, if any at all.’ The owner of the voice appeared above her, a short man with coarse black hair neatly shaped around a pale, domed forehead. He wore an open white coat with a shirt and tie underneath, and as Cassie’s eyes met his, she saw him recoil at the contact, taking a small step away from the bed.

‘He’s lucky,’ Hank said, tutting to himself. ‘Stupid bastard. I knew Duncan would struggle working with a female, but I never thought he’d be this reckless.’

‘Indeed,’ the doctor said curtly. ‘So, are we destroying it before we take it to the labs, or sending it over alive?’ He gestured towards Cassie, and her eyes opened wide in alarm, her body tensing against the bed.

‘What are you talking about?’ Hank said lightly, but she noticed that his posture had changed, his shoulders pulling back to expand his chest.

‘It’s killed one Handler and maimed another within a matter of days.’ The doctor sounded surprised at Hank’s reaction.

Hank shrugged. ‘Both of them were careless.’

‘Protocol states—’ the doctor began, but Hank cut him off.

‘Look, Baxter, there’s no way I’m letting this one go before I’ve had chance to

put her out there. I've just lost my primary earner; I'm not losing this one too.'

The doctor narrowed his eyes and frowned at Hank. 'So what do you want me to do?'

'Check her over. Looks like Duncan had at her with the bat before she pulled his arm off. I need to know how far back he's set us.' Cassie watched the doctor edge closer to the bed, casting his eyes across her body.

'It's secure?' he asked, and Hank snorted.

'Yeah. Going to have to put in a new post though. This one managed to snap hers.' Hank sounded impressed, but Cassie saw the doctor's eyes widen and he backed away again.

'It snapped the post?' he exclaimed. 'The technicians designed them especially for... Get it sedated. We don't know if these restraints will be enough.' The doctor sounded panicked while Hank shrugged nonchalantly. A third medic approached with a vial and needle, and Cassie felt a pinch in her arm. She sighed as she watched the doctor pacing the back of the room, his cheeks flushed. 'I can see why there have been so many accidents here recently. This is appalling. Protocols are there for a reason.'

'Okay, okay.' Hank seemed bemused, and waved a hand dismissively at the doctor. Cassie was starting to feel the effects of the sedative relaxing her whole body and swirling her vision, but she did not lose consciousness. She blinked sleepily, still listening with interest to the two men.

'These last few days have supported my insistence that this level of infusion should only be carried out under lab conditions, not let loose in this... this...' – she watched Hank's smile broaden as the doctor flustered – '... circus.'

'This circus funds your department, mate.' Hank's smile remained but his stare was hardening, and Cassie wondered if the doctor knew exactly what he was capable of. In her drug-induced stupor she found the whole thing rather amusing. The doctor didn't seem able to come up with a reply, and instead he approached her side once more, pulling up her top to inspect her ribs with a brusqueness that betrayed his mood.

'How long ago did this happen?' he said in clipped tones.

‘Last night,’ Hank replied, and the doctor exhaled sharply.

‘These bruises are days old. How much product has this one had, exactly?’

‘I don’t know.’ Hank’s smile dropped into a harder expression. ‘But how about you stop asking so many questions and just do what I ask?’

Cassie’s eyes were heavy, but she wasn’t drifting off and her body felt marvellous, like a warm blanket had smothered her and taken away every ache and pain. She found the power play between the two men absolutely fascinating.

‘You know I’m employed?’ The men were at opposite sides of the bed, and both of them leaned over Cassie slightly, the doctor looking agitated in the face of Hank’s casual belligerence.

‘You know I don’t care? But as a thank you for your time, I’d offer you my man’s services for free. He might be a one-armed bandit now, but he’d still be useful in your team.’

Cassie sniggered, surprising herself but obviously surprising the men more, as they both leapt away from her bedside.

‘Good god, she isn’t under!’ the doctor exclaimed. Cassie gazed at him through half-lidded eyes, while Hank burst into laughter.

‘No, I guess not.’ Cassie saw Hank peer back over her, his smile returning. ‘This is going to be fun, isn’t it?’ he said to her, and she felt another pinch before her eyes closed completely.

*

When Cassie woke she was in her cage again. It was dark, but she could feel the crinkled fabric beneath her and experienced a moment of relief as she realised she still had the mattress. She stretched and groaned, pleased to feel the aching in her head and ribs had receded.

‘Hey. Welcome back,’ the now familiar voice whispered from beyond the wall.

Cassie sniffed in response as she probed the end of the cage with her feet in

the hopes of colliding with a water bottle. Her toes hit the cool metal of the bucket first, then the softer plastic bottle beside it.

‘I didn’t think I’d hear from you again, but they sent some people over who were banging away at something over there. I’m guessing it was your post? Then you were back before the lights went out.’

Cassie groped for the water and took a swig, surprised at Thomas’s answer. Her ribs were barely hurting at all; she would have expected to have been under for at least a couple of days.

‘What happened? Where did they take you?’ the disembodied voice asked.

Cassie tried to think back to the argument between Hank and the doctor, some of it now distorted in her memory and the rest wrapped up in too many questions to contemplate. Hank’s hunger for putting her to work had certainly saved her from whatever that doctor wanted to do with her. She sighed and slouched against the back of her cage, taking another sip from her bottle, then heard a snort of derision from beyond the wall.

‘Well. I’m glad you’re back anyway. I don’t know what I’d do without your scintillating conversation.’

Cassie narrowed her eyes, irritated at the comment. She wasn’t under any obligation to talk to this guy. She hadn’t chosen to be put beside him, and it wasn’t her job to entertain him, or provide comfort. She’d never had anything like that, and she’d managed just fine. It made her think of the numerous times a strange man had told her to ‘smile more’ or ‘cheer up, love’, like it was her job to be the bright object for a man to enjoy. Such comments had only ever increased the severity of her frown, and Jessica used to call her a sullen flirt when they went out together, amused by the way she took no prisoners if she wasn’t interested.

Jessica.

Cassie sighed deeply, her sister breaking through to the foreground, lost for so long but never truly gone. She gathered her knees up to her chest, annoyed at herself for being so weak, willing the darkness to smother her completely, but after a moment of silence, Thomas’s voice returned.

‘I’m sorry. You don’t have to talk to me if you don’t want to. I can’t know what hell you’ve already been through. I can only guess because I’m living some of it right now, but what do I know, right? You’ve obviously been here much longer than me. I don’t know... I just feel that if I stop talking then I’m never going to start again. I guess I got excited about having company. Look, I can’t promise I won’t stop talking at you, but you don’t owe me anything back, okay?’ Cassie listened, her irritation only exacerbated by how fucking noble he was being. ‘I just want you to know... it will all be over soon. I promise. This isn’t forever.’

Cassie pressed her face into her knees even harder, his words of hope tiny daggers flying through the breeze-block walls of her pen, nicking and slicing.

For the second night in a row, she cried.

fourteen

The ground swooped down in a sheer, sandy cliffside pockmarked with solid black rocks for several metres, levelling out with hillocks and dunes that gradually petered into a small cove. A narrow set of stone steps led from the decking down to the beach, the cove flanked on both sides by domineering rocky outcrops. The only way out would be the sea.

*

The next morning Hank appeared quite soon after the lights came on, gesturing for Cassie to leave the cage. As she clambered out, she noted the post that her chain attached to now had additional pieces of solid metal angled against it on all sides. Refinements to counter her new trick, no doubt.

She followed Hank and could barely contain her excitement as she realised he was taking her to the gym, relishing in the chance to blow off some steam after the last few days. Her misshapen leg seemed to give her no trouble and the bruises from the attack were almost faded, but there was a residual ache in her abdomen from Eyepatch's spear and she was careful to show Hank a grimace when he called her back in, hoping it would buy her more time before he put her to work in the Hall.

Hank took her back to her cage without comment. She heard his voice on the other side of the wall, instructing Thomas to follow him, and caught a brief glimpse of his lanky frame passing the opening of her pen. She waited for their footsteps to diminish, then breathed into the silence of the space, enjoying the peace as she wriggled against the mattress and stretched out her toes. But something felt different as time wore on. Her senses were more refined, the absence of noise more apparent. She hadn't sunk into a sullen daze and her long-practised inertia was missing, replaced with an uncomfortable awareness of her solitude. Perhaps the new comfort of the mattress meant she was better rested and therefore more awake? She frowned. That was nonsense. It was Thomas. He had bombarded her with so much auditory and cognitive stimulation that he had ruined her entire mindset. Fucking Thomas.

Cassie waited for him to return, her irritation growing as she listed her grievances against this guy for bringing his infinite noise into her existence and

his untarnished hope and his *newness* to the situation. It felt like a very long time before she saw him escorted past her pen, and when Hank's whistle faded away, Cassie waited, tapping her fingers against her thighs in annoyed anticipation for Thomas to start up his chatter again. She could hear him shifting around and her hackles were already rising.

'Well, that was weird. Did he take you to some sort of gymnasium? I wasn't expecting that. Nice to stretch my legs though.' Cassie's upper lip twitched as she tried to construct the words to express how much she wished he would shut up. Thomas cleared his throat. 'So, I realised I never said it properly before, but I owe you a thank you.' This caught her off guard, and she frowned, shaking her head at herself.

'For what?' she blurted, and Thomas scoffed.

'For what? For quite literally saving my ass.' Cassie wrinkled her nose, unsure what he was referring to.

'When?'

Thomas scoffed again. 'When the lions nearly killed us and I was just there as some LTS on the sidelines.'

'LTS?' The term felt familiar, but she couldn't place where she'd heard it before.

"'Lamb to slaughter'". Hank called me it today. Said he wouldn't normally waste gym time on an LTS, but since I'd made it through two fights he would let me stretch my legs and give me one more shot before he decided what to do with me.' Cassie gathered her legs to her chest, her initial irritation gone, replaced with unease at the phrase 'lamb to slaughter' as she thought back to the women she had left to die. Thomas continued to talk.

'It got me thinking. I would have died in that Hall if you didn't risk yourself to get the lion off me. You might not even have been speared by the pirate if you hadn't been so distracted. And I never really said thank you for it, so... thank you.' Cassie opened and closed her mouth, unable to find a response, frustrated that his words had made her feel something more than annoyance. 'So why did you?' Thomas asked, pulling her out of her thoughts again.

‘What?’

‘Why did you bother saving me?’ Cassie chewed her lip and felt the corner of her cheek rise spontaneously. Something was flickering in her brain, a spark from somewhere long forgotten. She felt the words jostle for dominance against her reluctance to engage, and before she could really digest them, she said:

‘Regret it now.’

Thomas laughed in astonishment.

‘Are you making a joke?’ He chuckled. ‘A woman of few words and you’re choosing to roast me? Well. Maybe there’s more to you than I first thought.’ His laughter petered out, and Cassie pressed her lips together as if trying to stop anything more from escaping. ‘Hey, can I ask you something? How did you do it?’

‘Do what?’

‘The lions. That pirate guy. Don’t get me wrong, you have this real formidable vibe to you, but you don’t look, you know... That pirate guy was pretty built, but you... Some of the things you did looked impossible. How did you do it? How have you survived all this time?’

‘They made me strong,’ Cassie said slowly.

‘They *made* you?’

She huffed, struggling to articulate. ‘Drugs. They... changed me.’

‘Oh. They can do that?’ Thomas paused while Cassie rubbed her arms forlornly, the truth of her situation spoken out loud feeling uncomfortably raw. Thomas’s voice dropped in volume. ‘Do you think they’ll do that to me?’

‘Maybe.’

‘And the pirate, was he the same as you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Huh.’ Thomas was quiet for a moment, then she heard him smack his lips, his voice picking up in exuberance again as if he had reset his energy. ‘Did you notice that guy was completely clean-shaven? I know that wasn’t the biggest problem in there, but something about it really disturbed me. Reckon they clip him like a dog or something?’ Cassie shrugged into the isolation of her cage, forgetting for a moment that Thomas couldn’t see her as she tried to picture Eyepatch’s face. All she remembered was the intensity in his eye and the heat from his breath, her abdomen cramping at the wider memory. She rubbed her stomach as Thomas continued. ‘And what was with his eyepatch? Do you think they added that to make him look more menacing or something?’

‘I did that,’ she said spontaneously, surprising herself.

‘You did?’

‘A different time.’

Thomas laughed. ‘God. The stories you must have.’ Cassie hunched her shoulders self-consciously, unsettled by the freeness of her speech and how the act of communication was making her feel. ‘Well, it’s good to hear you talk, anyway. I was starting to think you’d spent too long in here and there wasn’t much left upstairs.’ Her brow creased, the words stinging with a truth that she had long been concerned about herself. She heard Thomas sigh. ‘Sorry. That was... Sorry, sometimes I try to make light of everything, and it ends up making me sound like an asshole. I really can’t imagine the strength it’s taken not to lose yourself completely. It’s what we have to do though, isn’t it? As long as we keep our heads, as long as we don’t turn into something like that mindless pirate, then they haven’t really won, have they?’

Cassie listened forlornly. Thomas didn’t know the rage that burned inside her sometimes. He hadn’t seen her Handler’s desperate pleas for help go ignored. He couldn’t hear the woman begging her to intervene as the wolves chased her down, or her screams when they caught her while Cassie did nothing to help. She curled into a ball and pressed her face into her knees, angry at herself for bothering to engage with this guy. Who was she kidding anyway? He’d be dead soon enough, and then she’d be alone again. It was only a matter of time.

The next day Hank took Cassie back to the gym, and she set off on a sprint around the perimeter, determined not to stop until her time was up. The door

opened soon into her session, and she slowed to a stop in surprise as Hank led Thomas into the room.

‘Right.’ Hank unclipped the chain from the back of Thomas’s collar. ‘You’re going to have to share today, so try not to kill each other.’ He paused as if in thought and smiled broadly, pointing at Cassie. ‘Although, let’s be realistic here. You try not to kill him. I don’t think we need to worry about the other way around.’ He laughed at his own joke and left them alone. Thomas scuffed the ground with his feet while Cassie struggled to disguise the look of frustration that was no doubt on her face. The gym was her precious time, and having Thomas encroach on it was grating.

‘Hey.’ Thomas ruffled his hair. ‘Just so you know, he’s probably right. Please don’t kill me or anything.’ He gave her a mischievous wink. It was only the second time she had properly seen Thomas in person, and she studied him briefly. He was much taller than her, the long, wiry limbs awkwardly enhancing his height. He wore grey clothing similar to Cassie’s, but the cotton trousers stopped just above his ankles and the faded T-shirt bagged around his upper arms and swamped his torso. He sported a haphazard crop of thick hair that was a mixture of blonde and brown, his facial hair blending into it and framing a soft face with light blue eyes that were somehow smiling at her. Cassie concluded he was the least menacing male she had come across inside the Complex, but she was still thrown by having him in her space, feeling exposed by him being able to see her. It was much harder to retain sullen silence when she was in full view. Thomas smiled expectantly, and Cassie scratched her chin.

‘I run...’ She gestured that she was going to move away. Running was a good excuse to leave this interaction.

‘Yeah, sure, how about I run with you?’ She wrinkled her nose, unconvinced he could keep up. ‘Come on, humour me for a minute. I need to talk to you about something important.’ Thomas urged her with his eyes, and Cassie shrugged, setting off at a sluggish pace. Thomas kept up but seemed to be working much harder than her, speaking in short bursts as they ran.

‘There are cameras in here.’ Cassie nodded. She’d hoped he was going to say something interesting, not just tell her what she already knew. ‘On our way here, Hank took me in the control room where they monitor the gym,’ Thomas continued. ‘He’s paid someone to watch us while he goes off to a meeting or

something.’ Cassie was waiting for the point. ‘There were four screens for all the different angles. I could see you running on them. There was no sound.’ Thomas was panting now. ‘It means they can’t hear us in here, they can only see us. I mean, we might not be monitored in the cages too, but we don’t know that for certain. Here we do.’ Cassie shrugged as she ran, slightly interested but not sure why Thomas seemed so excited about it. ‘Don’t you see?’ Thomas waved his arms energetically. ‘It means I can finally tell you.’

‘What?’ Cassie was definitely curious now.

‘Look, this might be hard to believe, but... I’m a mole. A government mole. I was sent in here to bring this place down.’

‘What!’ Cassie exclaimed, almost losing her footing in surprise. She stopped dead and Thomas carried on, faltering at first and then pushing on to complete the lap. Cassie bent over, propping her hands on her knees, not tired from running but reeling from what he had said. Thomas made his way back round to her and stopped by her side.

‘You okay?’ he asked, and Cassie straightened up to face him. ‘I know it’s a lot to take in.’

‘A mole?’ she asked quietly, and Thomas nodded.

‘I let myself get caught. I’ve got a tracking chip under my skin.’ His hand went to the back of his neck. ‘They know where we are, Cassie. It’s only a matter of time before they come to get us.’

‘You’re a mole,’ Cassie repeated in disbelief.

‘Yep.’ Thomas smiled.

Cassie shook her head. ‘Jesus.’

‘What?’

‘So am I.’

*

The interview was in a meeting room inside a hotel complex, with deep purple carpets that were faded in patches by the windows. Two men sat at a large oak table in the middle of the room, a spread of papers and a silver briefcase in front of them. One of the men rose and gestured to an empty chair on the opposite side of the table, and Cassie smiled politely, smoothing down her skirt as she sat.

‘Thank you for coming in,’ the man said in softly accented English. He was in his mid-fifties, with a cropped, brittle moustache and a spattering of short hair around his temples.

‘Not a problem.’ Cassie licked her lips and gulped dryly. Her mouth always went dry when she was nervous. ‘Thank you for inviting me.’

‘We are aware that the advert was a little vague, so we appreciate you taking the time to come and speak with us.’

‘Well, it definitely caught my interest.’ Cassie smiled. The advert had stood out as either a glowing opportunity or a massive con, but she had contacted them late one night while she was drunk and spiralling about the limited success of her trip.

‘The very nature of it means we have to be discrete, so before we go any further, we would ask that you sign this non-disclosure.’ He pushed a piece of paper over to her, and a pen.

‘Oh, okay.’ She peered at it, skim-reading with reservation.

‘It just means you can’t tell anybody about this interview or any process that follows. You’ll understand why soon enough.’

‘Okay.’ She picked up the pen and signed it, figuring that she had no one to tell anyway. The second man collected the paper and put it in a plastic folder.

‘Great,’ the first man said, beaming. ‘So, in brief we’re looking for someone to help us with a very important task. The role will involve a certain element of risk, but that is why the rewards are so inflated.’

‘Yes, the advert mentioned something about expedited citizenship?’ Cassie said hopefully. That was what had caught her eye.

‘That’s right, we will get to that. But first, tell us about yourself.’

‘Well, I came over three months ago on a working visa. I was a carer back in England, so I’ve been doing some agency work here caring for the elderly and the disabled.’ Cassie tried to read their responses but couldn’t see any signs of positivity. ‘It isn’t what I saw myself doing long term,’ she expanded. ‘I always wanted to go into further education. I had the grades for it, but my family just couldn’t afford it and I needed to get some income to help them out. So, I took on caring because it’s obviously such an important role and I had experience already with looking after my mother.’ She saw exchanged glances and switched into her prepared speech. ‘But caring has lots of transferable skills, time management, obviously, and team working.’ She tried to visualise her notes to remember the next bullet point. ‘And physically it is a challenging job, lots of manual handling, particularly with the disabled or the larger clients, so I am very physically active through the day.’ She faltered, forgetting the next item, but the first man thankfully interjected.

‘That’s great, thank you. It’s a very noble profession, and it certainly matches what we might be looking for.’

‘What about you as a person?’ asked the second man. He looked a little younger, with a thicker accent. ‘Tell us about your family.’

‘My mother is mostly bedbound. She had the virus but never really recovered, so me and my older sister were looking after her.’ Cassie worked hard to keep her face level, the pangs of guilt heating her cheeks.

‘Any other family?’

‘My niece, she’s four.’

‘Friends? Dependants?’

‘Well...’ Cassie’s brow creased. She wasn’t sure what line of questioning they were following.

‘We ask these questions not to be intrusive,’ the first man picked up. ‘Considering the nature of this work, it’s useful to know what responsibilities you might have, or any reasons why you might not be suitable.’

‘Oh, right, well no. No dependants. A few friends but not many. I’ve always been a bit of a loner, really. I like my own company.’

‘Okay, great. So our next question is, what’s the bravest thing you’ve ever done?’

‘Oh. Well, probably coming out here by myself.’ She smiled shyly.

‘It does take some courage.’ The man nodded.

‘Yes, it was a bit of a gamble, but with the exchange rate and all the opportunities here, it just seemed like a no-brainer. It’s been really exciting travelling by myself.’ She held her smile while trying to get a read from the men, who seemed to exchange glances before one of them jotted something down on a pad in front of him.

‘So, I suppose you’d like to hear more about the role we have?’ said the first man.

‘Yes, that would be good.’

‘Well, we are part of a task force that has been set up to deal with an illegal operation that’s happening on our soil. It is a practice of abducting people, mostly immigrants such as yourself, and selling them into a sort of modern slavery.’

‘Oh...’ Cassie kept herself attentive, but a feeling of unease was already sprouting.

‘We’ve been tracking this operation for some time now and we are very close to shutting it down. We obviously want our country to be a safe place for all immigrants, and for our own people too, and this sort of practice does not sit well with the values of our general populace. We have been able to find out that the abductees are taken to a central complex initially, where they are then sold on to private individuals from across Europe.’

‘Right...’ Cassie nodded, her mouth painfully dry now.

‘What we do not know yet is the exact whereabouts of this complex. If we can find it, then we can take it down and the main ring leaders with it, and essentially

stop the whole operation from continuing.'

'So you see,' the second man cut in, 'this is a major operation, but it is vital that it is kept secret, otherwise we risk exposing all of our gathered intelligence and losing our trail completely.'

'Of course.' Cassie nodded. 'So... what are you looking for me to do?'

'Well, in order to find the location of the complex, we need someone to go undercover, allow themselves to be abducted and hopefully lead us straight to the target.'

'Ah. You're looking for someone to be bait?'

'Well, we'd rather not think of it quite like that. More like a mole. You are the exact demographic this ring will go for, and from talking with you, I think it's safe to say that we think you have the right set of skills to help make this happen.' The men nodded at each other as if in agreement. Cassie felt a small puff of pride at their praise, but she still harboured an unwillingness to be a part of such a risky situation. She could feel her decision already being made but out of politeness carried on the conversation.

'Gosh. It sounds a little dangerous?'

'There is an element of risk, but we have measures in place to minimise that.'

'How?'

'We would require you to consent to a minor procedure,' the first man said. 'A microchip implanted into the back of your neck.'

'This would provide us with live GPS data,' added the second man. 'And allow us to track your every movement.'

'Once we know where the complex is,' the first man continued, 'we have everything in place to move in, so you would be exposed to a very small amount of time there before you are brought straight back out.'

'Right.' Cassie paused, trying to process the information. 'Would there not be a risk of me being harmed while I was in there?'

‘From our sources there is no real chance of this. Since abductees are brought into the complex to be sold, they tend to keep them in one piece and in good condition, so to speak.’

‘Okay,’ she said slowly. ‘And how do they... abduct?’

‘From what we understand, they lure you to a false job interview.’

‘Oh... like this?’ Cassie laughed nervously, and the two men raised their eyebrows and chuckled with her. Though the laughter was in the air, Cassie had the slightest concern that she was painfully close to the truth.

‘Yes, well, it tends to be interviews for posts that immigrants might go for, like carer roles, bartending roles, that sort of thing. We have seen that they use targeted advertisements just like ours, so it is likely you’ve already seen notices from them without even knowing it.’

‘Oh, that’s worrying.’

‘Indeed, and every reason why we need to act quickly to stop this from happening.’

‘And the actual abduction process, would they hurt me in that?’

‘They use sedatives,’ the first man said. ‘It’s unlikely you’ll even be aware of it happening. You won’t have to physically do anything, just keep quiet and go along with anything they ask.’

‘And wait for us to rescue you,’ the other man added.

‘Right.’ Cassie tried to hide her lack of enthusiasm and could feel herself withdrawing from the opportunity, disappointed at the wasted effort. The first man began to leaf through some papers.

‘In return for your services, as well as the expedited citizenship we discussed, there would be a sizeable monetary reward.’ He pushed over a plastic wallet with documents inside and Cassie looked down at the papers. A figure printed at the top made her inadvertently hold her breath. ‘We understand that you may not want to be a citizen of this particular country, but as we are part of the EU, you would then have freedom of movement and all the opportunities that

come alongside that.'

'As well as an entry on your CV that says you have worked for our government, which may help you in future job applications,' the second man added.

'I see.' Cassie continued to stare at the paper in disbelief.

'We realise this is a lot to ask, and a lot to take in. But we are hopeful you will say yes. We have plans to make a move on this within the next few days, so this is a limited offer.

'Oh, okay. It is a lot to think about.'

'And unfortunately, you can't discuss it with anyone. This is a decision you just have to make for yourself. Do you want to be a part of something that could help a lot of people, and open some doors for you and your family?' Both men looked at Cassie expectantly, and she shuffled in her chair with the indecision.

'How long do I have to decide?'

'We can let you have some time to think here if you need it, but we would need a decision from you before you leave. We have the tracking chip here and can do the implant today.' He patted the silver case.

'Oh, wow. And how long would it be until I got abducted?'

'We have tracked your incoming advertisements and already flagged a couple that could be from the complex. If everything goes to plan, you could be in and out of there within the week.'

'That quickly?'

'Yes. What you have there' – he motioned to the papers in front of her – 'is a contract with the proposed benefits once the mission is completed. Payment can be arranged by the end of the month, and then the citizenship process can be started.'

'Right.' Cassie drummed her fingers on the desk and stared at the figure on the paper while all the potential avenues such money could facilitate began to

expand within her mind. For the first time in a long while, she felt excited about her future, and while she sensed a distant disapproving mutter from her sister wafting through her thoughts, almost as if she telepathically knew what was being considered, Cassie dismissed it. Here was a chance to prove that her trip wasn't a waste of time or a selfish escape. She could change the lives of her whole family and help a lot of other people at the same time. She would be a hero. She would prove Jessica wrong. Cassie felt a thrum of excitement build in her stomach as her decision bubbled to the surface.

‘Okay,’ she said breathlessly. ‘Yes, let’s do it.’

‘Excellent. Sign right here and we will get this process started. I am certain you won’t regret it.’

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It had been a long time since Cassie had acknowledged the truth of her situation. At first she had clung to the idea that she would be imminently rescued, even though her violent introduction to the Complex was not what she had been promised in the slightest. After she had given up on the original plan but still held on to hope, she would imagine her rescue by a faceless service and torment herself with the knowledge that the joy of being reunited with her family would be immediately soured by Jessica’s chiding disapproval when she found out what Cassie had allowed to happen to herself. What she’d signed up for willingly. How she had wasted the one opportunity for escape when she was first abducted, that empty hallway leading to the open front door. How she had remained tethered to the spot despite the fear and regret and doubt that had swirled inside her, not because she was duty-bound to help poor immigrants kidnapped into slavery but because she had been enticed by the multi-digit figure written on the top of that contract and the opportunities that it represented. No matter how much she had suffered in here, Cassie could never forgive herself for selfishly surrendering to this place.

But Thomas had done it too.

There hadn’t been time to discuss their twin revelations any further because Hank had appeared shortly after Cassie’s confession and taken her back to her cage, where she waited impatiently for Thomas to return, her mind turning and stomach churning from the unearthed memories she’d prefer to have forgotten.

She fought to keep herself still when Thomas came back, not wanting to alert Hank to her keenness, and once she was sure Hank had left, she opened her mouth to speak. Thomas beat her to it.

‘We can’t say too much here. We don’t know for sure, okay?’ he whispered. ‘But Jesus.’ Thomas’s voice betrayed obvious excitement. ‘I can’t believe it. You too!’

‘Yes,’ she said softly.

‘And you have... the thing in you too?’

‘Yes.’ She instinctively felt the soft, raised scar on the back of her neck that held her secret. She’d been lucky they had never found it, but with her collection of marks, it was well camouflaged by now.

‘Well, this is even better,’ Thomas declared, but Cassie frowned.

‘What is?’

‘There’s two of us. Who knows how many more?’

‘How is that better?’ she scoffed.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing happened. Nobody came. It didn’t work.’ Cassie fought to keep her voice low as the words tumbled out.

‘Yeah, but I’m sure they’re just—’

‘They said I’d not be here long. I’ve been here really long.’

‘Yeah, but—’

‘They said I wouldn’t be hurt,’ she ploughed on. ‘I’ve been...’ Her breath caught at the flash of hot agony in her thigh and she rubbed her leg in self-pity. She hadn’t voiced any of this before and was taken aback at the level of bitterness to the words. ‘They’ve hurt me.’

‘I’m sorry.’ He sounded sombre, but his voice picked up energy again. ‘But

now I'm here and—'

'They haven't come.'

'Something must have changed, then. Some new information,' Thomas reasoned carefully. 'We're not lost, don't you see? Sooner or later—'

'I'm already dead,' Cassie muttered, shaking her head to herself.

'No, don't say that, you've lasted this long.'

'No,' she said sadly. 'I am dead. My Handler showed me. They had my funeral. No one is looking for me.'

'Oh...' He fell quiet while Cassie wrung her fingers together, trying to dampen the memory of her funeral, her outburst having disturbed her carefully placed barriers and let loose a threatening hysteria. Thomas coughed quietly before speaking again. 'I'm sorry. That must have been... Fuck, that must have been... But it doesn't mean that—'

'How long did they say you would wait?' Cassie spat, her emotions raw and turbulent now, fuelling her words more freely. Thomas didn't reply and Cassie snorted. 'We're lost.'

'No. I don't accept that.'

'You have to.'

'What? Give up? What's left if you do that? What happens to you?' His voice had sharpened.

'You disappear,' Cassie said quietly. 'You fight and you wait to be killed.'

'Well, fuck me, that's depressing.' Thomas laughed harshly.

'Yeah,' she muttered, lying back on the mattress and pressing her hands over her eyes, angry and miserable, wishing he'd never told her his secret so she'd never had to revisit her own reality. Her throat felt dry, her vocal cords brittle from their use after all this time, and she sat up long enough to take a gulp of water from her bottle before slumping against the cage. After a period of silence,

Thomas's voice returned with a frustrated sigh.

'There's been a delay, I agree, and it's not good. But I won't stop hoping, and I won't let you drag me down into this dark funk you're living in.' Cassie rubbed her eyes, not wanting to listen but resigning herself to being a captive audience. 'There's still a chance that things will happen like we thought they would, and until then, we have each other. Don't you realise how lucky we are? You don't have to do this alone anymore.' He paused as if waiting for a response, but Cassie wasn't offering one, still rubbing her face as if she could blot out the whole conversation. Thomas's voice returned. 'Hey, listen, I'm not all that bad once you get to know me.'

'I don't want to get to know you!' Cassie hissed forcefully, surprising herself.

'Why not?' Thomas shouted back, sounding exasperated.

'Because you'll die and I'll be alone again.' Cassie let the truth ring out and felt a small twinge of guilt at the brutality of her honesty.

'Okay,' Thomas said slowly. 'So, number one, thanks for saying I'm going to die. I really appreciate your faith in my abilities to fight, I don't know... a hippo or something.' She heard him change position, like he was sitting up. 'Wait, have you ever fought a hippo?'

'No.' Her face softened, caught off guard at the change in tone.

'Okay. God, that'd be scary. Anyway, yes, I might die tomorrow. But all the people you have ever known, they might die tomorrow too.' His voice grew thicker. 'People die randomly and suddenly, believe me. That doesn't mean you go through life being afraid and not letting people in, just in case they might die sometime.'

'More likely in here,' she pointed out.

'Yeah, okay. One or both of us might well probably get killed in this place. There's only so much of that we can control. But do you not want to squeeze out every last ounce of actual enjoyment while you can? I'm here, alive, right this second, brimming with annoying hope and optimism, so should you not be making the most of me, instead of just...'

‘Wasting you?’ she scoffed.

‘Yes! I don’t want to go back to having a goat for a neighbour, even if it was more polite than you.’ Cassie rolled her eyes at his exuberance but found the corner of her lip had pulled up into a wry smile, and she wiped it in alarm. ‘So you’re going to have to get on board with this situation, because I’m not going to give up on you. You’ve been through some dark shit, but I know there’s a person in there. The one that risked her life to save me by riding a lion. The one that broke her vow of silence to tell me she regretted it. Come on, let me meet her.’

‘It’s hard.’ Cassie clenched her fists, rattled by the sense of change building inside her.

‘It’s not hard. Come on. Tell me who you are.’ Cassie floundered, shaking her head as Thomas persisted. ‘Where are you from? What do you do? Tell me about your family. Your hometown. Anything.’ She was silent for a long time, searching for answers, struggling to compute.

‘That’s not who I am... not anymore.’

‘Okay. So who are you now?’

‘I don’t know...’ she said slowly. ‘I’m... nobody. I’m nothing.’

‘I wouldn’t call you nothing. Have you even seen you? I watched you fight a lion with your bare hands.’

‘So I’m a killer,’ Cassie said bluntly, the words bitter in her mouth.

‘You’re much more than that, you’re like a superhero,’ Thomas said gently.

‘I’m not a hero. I’m an animal,’ she scoffed. ‘I shit in a bucket.’

‘Well so do I, it’s not like we’ve much of a choice.’ Thomas chuckled. ‘A hero’s gotta shit somewhere, right?’ Cassie glowered at her cage, but she could feel her mouth rising again and was unable to stop it.

‘You’re too positive.’

‘I’m an optimist,’ Thomas said matter-of-factly. ‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘It’s annoying,’ Cassie muttered.

‘Well, I can tell from your accent you’re English, yeah? Most of you guys are pessimists.’

‘For good reason.’

‘Sure. I’m American, it’s not like we’ve had that much to be proud of recently either. So, what do I know so far, let’s see. You’re English, you’re a badass superhero, and you shit in a bucket. Big question. You got a name?’ Cassie pressed her lips together, suddenly panicked.

‘You’re annoying,’ she repeated in defence, and Thomas laughed.

‘I am annoying, nice to meet you. And you are?’

She braced herself, something new and yet familiar now expanding in her chest as the word came forth.

‘Cassie.’

fifteen

She lingered for a moment, entranced by the possibility of such freedom, but a rumble in her stomach pulled her back to reality and she padded to the sun lounger, sitting on the edge and eyeing the bowl filled with thick yoghurt, berries and sliced apple.

*

Confirming her name out loud had irreparably splintered Cassie's hardened exterior. The light that now poured through was vivid and oh so *human*, but those properties scalded her from the inside out. Ordinarily she would have found it too painful to endure and retreated into her protective shell as quickly as possible. But this time there was Thomas, his waves of jubilant chatter perpetually crashing against Cassie's misery, wearing it away a little at a time.

Over the evening and into the following day, she indulged him in enough conversation to find out that he was born and raised in Philadelphia, was a couple of years older than her, and a few months ago had quit his job as an assistant manager in a sports shop and left without much of a plan, spending his time travelling around Europe, bartending to keep his finances afloat. He didn't specify why he left, only hinting something had happened that he needed space from. Cassie didn't offer any details of her past, and she noted that Thomas was brief in his own disclosure. Perhaps reminiscing was harder for him than he'd care to admit.

Later that day they had separate times in the gym, and Cassie didn't experience the same level of irritation when Thomas returned, ruefully acknowledging that his presence was becoming acceptable. He didn't speak straightaway, but after a short period of silence she heard him sigh loudly, and there was a rhythmic clink of what she presumed was his chain being fiddled with.

'Hank said I'm going in the Hall tomorrow,' he declared suddenly, and Cassie grimaced at the news.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Any advice?’

‘Don’t die.’ She shrugged to herself, and Thomas scoffed.

‘Thanks for that. You know, it hasn’t escaped me that I would have died if you weren’t there last time. So, any real advice would be really appreciated right now. I’m kinda freaking out here.’ She could hear the tension in his voice. The fear. It was more contained than the frantic pleas for help from the women she had seen in the past, but the raw dread was palpable. Cassie licked her lips, her mouth suddenly dry.

‘Okay. If you’re hurt, they fix you. So don’t worry about getting hurt. Don’t run away. Go for the kill. That’s how you survive.’

‘Go for the kill?’ Thomas echoed, and Cassie closed her eyes as she replied.

‘Necks are best.’

‘Right. Shit.’ Thomas fell silent for a moment, and Cassie took a long gulp of water as she felt the sudden urge to throw herself into some one-armed push-ups.

‘Hey, Cassie?’ She grunted an acknowledgement. ‘Do you ever get scared?’

‘Always,’ she replied without hesitation.

‘Okay. Fuck,’ Thomas muttered to himself, chuckling dryly. ‘You don’t fancy coming in with me, do you?’ Cassie snorted in response and the conversation faded. Her chest felt tight from the stark reminder of his vulnerability and the risk she had taken in letting him alter her whole disposition.

Hank came for Thomas the next day, and Cassie tried her best to keep aloof about his absence, pretending that he had never been real and the pressing silence was perfectly normal. It certainly used to be. But as the day passed, she could not fight the growing unease that something terrible had happened to him. She was restless in her cage, working out in long bursts, counting the squares of the bars, kicking the mattress with her heels, anything to avoid the relentless stillness. She knew his demise was inevitable, she had told herself not to engage, but she hated being right this time.

When Hank appeared later with some food, he gave no indication of Thomas's fate either way, and after being flung into the darkness of their synthetic night-time, Cassie rolled to her side and hugged her knees, knowing Thomas was unlikely to return tonight. If at all. She had forgotten how her solitude was somehow amplified by the night, and she felt self-pity beginning to grow. Shit. He had softened her already.

The lights came back on after what may as well have been months of darkness, and Cassie lay in a tired stupor from a night filled with dreams where Thomas died a thousand deaths. But finally she heard approaching footsteps and the rattle of a cage door. Once she was sure Hank had left, she held her breath, listening for familiar sounds.

'Cassie?' Thomas's voice croaked. She felt herself physically relax.

'You okay?' she whispered.

'Yeah, not bad. Just some stitches, nothing major.'

'Good,' Cassie sighed.

'Why, were you worried about me?' Thomas teased, although the spark to his voice seemed muted.

'You were gone for a night.'

'I was? They knocked me out. I wonder if they gave me some of your super juice?'

'What did you fight?'

'A dog. I killed a dog.' He sighed bitterly. 'It was so vicious, it wasn't even like a dog, it was more like a monster. I did what you said, and I felt okay fighting it because it was attacking me like crazy. But then I killed it and it stopped being angry, and I was just left holding a dog. Like, a normal dog. It didn't feel good, Cassie. I have a dog. Had. Whatever.' Cassie frowned in silence, thinking back to the dog that was like her grandma's. Bonnie the dog, who she had speared through the neck. Thomas sighed again. 'I didn't think it'd be like that. I mean, I managed to kill a pig the first time, but that didn't bother me as much because it was my first day here and I had no idea what was going

on, and I eat pigs so it didn't really resonate. But a dog? Oh man, that was rough.'

'I know,' Cassie managed. It was all she could say.

'I miss my dog.' She could hear rustling from his mattress and left him in silence, the happiness of his return fading as she sensed the experience had damaged him much more than a few stitches.

Cassie was taken to the Hall later the same day. Hank told her it was a warm-up fight to get her back into the swing of things, but on viewing the cougar, she wasn't so sure. This feline was much smaller than the lionesses she had fought, but the animal was alarming enough as it faced her with flattened ears and bared teeth. Hank did not provide the painkilling boosters she was used to, so Cassie was more cautious with her approach. Thankfully there were spears in this match, and with some quick dips and jabs she managed to fell the animal while sustaining only a single blow from its paw, which raked across the top of her head and dribbled blood into her eyes. It stung, but surprisingly less than expected. She supposed her tolerance for agony had changed considerably.

After the fight, Hank led her to the medical room and made her sit on the side of the bed, one of his men taking hold of her chain behind her while Hank hovered in front with the collar control in his hand. She took a moment to study him under the brighter lights of the white space, noticing that the flop of his hair masked weathered skin that suggested he was older than he preferred to appear. As she tracked the small scar across his jaw, she realised he was staring straight back at her, his eyes narrowing curiously as he regarded her.

'What are you thinking, eh?' It came across as a challenge, and she saw his fingers shift around the collar control, but her attention was suddenly caught by a figure entering the room. It was Doctor Jackson.

'Doctor J!' Hank clapped his hands together, making Cassie blink sharply. 'Nice to see you back again.'

The doctor had frozen in the doorway, staring at Cassie. She looked like she had shrunk, her features less refined than before, her whole demeanour downcast and subdued. Cassie looked awkwardly down to the floor, and she heard Hank laugh gruffly.

‘Oh, that’s right, there’s a whole history here, isn’t there? Didn’t this one use you as a hostage? And didn’t you try to kill her?’ He laughed again, and his companion joined in, the callousness grating on Cassie’s nerves and making her fingers clench against the sides of the bed. She kept her head bowed, and a thin trickle of blood began to trace a course down the bridge of her nose, swelling into a viscous droplet that dangled from the tip, tickling her. She wiped it with the back of her hand and Hank immediately reacted to her movement, his casual posture stiffening. For all his bravado around her, he was still cautious, always on guard, always respectful that she was capable of carnage. He hadn’t lost sight of the fact that she was a dangerous animal, and the revelation made her repulsed and pleased in equal measures, but this turned to dejection as she concluded that Hank could never be taken off guard. Once she returned her hand to her side, she saw him relax against the wall again, his bemused smile returning.

‘So if you’re here, this means Baxter has crawled back into his lair then? Slimy little bastard, gave us the creeps, right?’ He addressed this to Cassie with a smirk, and she raised her eyebrows in response. Hank’s style was very different to her previous Handler’s, with an openness in the way he spoke to her that almost felt conversational. But she had not forgotten the method he had used to acquire her, and suspected he used his colloquial conduct as a shield to hide his true intentions.

‘Never can quite trust the employed.’ He directed this to his companion, who grunted in agreement. Though Cassie had noticed there were some interesting dynamics between the medics and Handlers before, in her muted state she’d not bothered to pay it much attention. With her senses awakened by Thomas’s constant cognitive bombardment, she was starting to develop an interest in the workings of the Complex and the personnel that filled it, and now she glanced back at Doctor Jackson with curiosity, wondering what separated this woman from the likes of Baxter.

‘Need her restrained more?’ Hank asked Doctor Jackson, who seemed to gather herself before stepping forwards.

‘No.’ She smoothed down her white tunic and frowned in concentration at Cassie’s head. ‘This appears to be a basic surface wound. I can glue this.’

‘Great. No funny business though. From either of you.’ There was a stilted silence as Doctor Jackson treated Cassie’s wounds, broken only by Hank’s

intermittent whistling. Afterwards she was led back to her cage, and this time it was Thomas who expressed relief at her return. The next day they found themselves in the gym together and compared injuries, Thomas displaying the stitches in his forearm and Cassie dipping her head so he could inspect her crown.

‘Wow. It looks like you’ve been in a fight with a bear.’ Thomas cocked his head at her questioningly, and she gave him a slight smile.

‘No, I haven’t done a bear,’ she said, amused now by his running joke. The way he grimaced at her scalp made her run her fingers across her head self-consciously, and out of interest she strolled to the silver barbells to find her reflection. She deliberately avoided her face, tilting the reflective disc just enough to catch the four tracks running from her forehead into her hairline. In the reflection, she saw Thomas appear behind her.

‘Don’t worry, you can barely tell. You look great.’ He said it with sarcasm, and Cassie responded without thinking.

‘Piss off.’

Thomas burst into laughter, and Cassie caught herself smirking, rubbing her mouth to hide it as she set off to run laps. Thomas stayed by the free weights and Cassie had only covered half the space when she heard him exclaim loudly:

‘Oh my god!’

She turned back in alarm and saw him holding a weight in the air, smiling triumphantly.

‘Cassie, have you seen this? I can do this with one hand!’

She gave him two slow claps and continued with her run, rounding the outskirts of the hall while Thomas tackled more weights just as she remembered doing at the beginning of this nightmare. Later, back in their cages, she heard him clear his throat.

‘Is that how you feel then?’ he asked.

‘What?’

‘To be so strong, to lift something so easily. It’s insane.’

‘I guess.’

‘I don’t get it though. If they make us so strong, don’t we become too big of a threat to them? We could easily overpower them, right? I’m presuming the Handlers aren’t jacked too?’

‘They can shock us,’ Cassie reasoned, thinking back to the way Hank had watched her in the medical room. ‘Can’t get past that.’

‘Okay, okay. So what about... what about we take a hostage?’

‘Tried that.’

‘Oh. Shit. I guess you’ve already thought of all this, huh?’

‘Yep.’

‘Well. We can always keep thinking. You know what they say, two heads are better than one.’

Cassie rolled her eyes, but the gesture didn’t feel as sour as usual. She chewed her lip for a moment, then said dryly, ‘I’m rolling my eyes, by the way.’

Thomas laughed loudly and Cassie let herself smile.

‘I’d be worried if you weren’t.’

Time rolled forwards with Cassie and Thomas alternating their trips to the Hall and comparing scars and notes afterwards. Even though the battles remained bloody and violent, Cassie was starting to feel differently about them. About herself. She wasn’t a feral animal shuffling in a cage anymore. Those terrible things she had done, the deaths she had allowed to happen, were all caused by a muted wild beast, and that wasn’t her anymore. She was different now. She was Cassie.

Her opponents in the Hall were fierce but unoriginal, and Hank talked often of building up the anticipation, which made Cassie suspect he had something bigger planned. Sure enough, during one trip to the Hall, he turned to her and

said, 'There's a lot riding on today. Some big money. Big money.' He sounded almost wistful. 'But I know you won't disappoint.'

She listened silently, masking the burst of irritation at the way he casually reduced the horror of her fights into transactions. As they progressed down the corridor, she saw a man approaching them wearing the green Handler uniform. She had never seen another person in the corridors when she was being led, so his presence was instantly noteworthy.

'Going to be a good one?' the man said in a local accent as he drew level with them both.

'Always is,' Hank replied, politely but caged, as he led Cassie past.

The man stepped to one side to let Hank through, but as Cassie drew near, he darted in closer and swiped at the back of her arm. It felt like he had scratched her, and she flinched defensively, ready to strike back, but the man had carried on down the corridor. Her chain was running out of length as Hank continued on, so she had no option but to follow, glancing behind her with unease to see that the man had disappeared. She looked for a mark on her arm, finding nothing but still feeling unsettled about the whole thing. As they reached the Hall and she waited for Hank to open the door, Cassie felt a wave of light-headedness that blurred the edges of her vision. She shook her head to try to clear it, yet the fuzziness remained. Something wasn't quite right. She tried to catch Hank's attention, but he already had the door open and was unclicking her chain.

'Fight well.' He gave her a nudge forwards and she plodded into the Hall, rubbing her eyes, her head growing foggy like she was drunk. She shook it again, then tried to fix her eyes on a mark on the ground, blinking quickly and squinting as if this could clear the distortion. Her attention was caught by the sound of the opposite door opening, and she looked up to see a stocky, muscular body covered in taut black skin that shone under the spotlights, two long beige horns curling from the crown, with eyes and nostrils so black against the face that the whole beast looked like a foreboding shadow. It was a bull. A massive black fucking bull, and with a deep-throated roar it began its charge almost immediately. Shit.

Cassie put her energy into focusing on the oncoming beast, aiming to dodge to the side just before it hit, but her limbs moved too slowly. Her usual

surefootedness failed and she caught one leg against the other, awkwardly clearing the bull's path with a stumbled landing. The ground started to rotate on such a steep axis that all she could do was root her hands and feet into the floor and hang on. As the Hall spun around her, she could see in the corner of her eye that the bull was correcting its trajectory in a shallow semicircle, and she was basically a stationary target with no hope of evasion because the world wouldn't stop fucking turning. She heard hooves clipping the floor close to her and was suddenly swept off her feet, twisting in the air and landing heavily on her side. An explosion of pain burst into her ribs, and she coughed something wet down her chin, but the brutality broke her dizziness and she took the opportunity to push herself into standing. She executed this manoeuvre so powerfully that the force nearly took her back down again, and she staggered forwards, steering herself into the wall to counteract her loss of control. She propped her back against the solid sanctuary and rubbed her eyes again, hoping she could physically remove the soft focus of her vision. An overwhelming tiredness nagged at the back of her consciousness, and she grunted, confused as to what was happening and why they weren't trying to stop what was obviously a rigged fight.

She heard a loud snort and looked up to see the black shape of the bull coming for her again. Cassie thought back to the mountain goat that had crushed her innards when she had recklessly assumed that she could stop it, and she wondered if she was about to face the same fate. But she was stronger now, much stronger, and frankly she didn't have the ability to move away from her leaning post without falling straight to the floor. She just needed to get her shit together. With a determined sigh, Cassie slapped herself in the face. Her blow burned clarity into her brain, and she braced herself as the bull hit, catching its horns and locking out her arms, closing her eyes at the expected collision.

There was no contact.

She opened her eyes to find that she was restraining the bull, the crest of its broad head just a few centimetres away from her chest, the animal bellowing as it struggled against her, unable to move with the force of her hold. She yelled in triumph, but the celebration quickly faded when she realised the thick mist was starting to descend again and she hadn't thought of what to do next.

After a brief stalemate, Cassie let out her own roar of effort and rotated the bull's head by the horns, its whole body following as she threw it off its feet. She

took the opportunity to escape, but all she managed was a sideways lurch against the wall, her head heavy and hanging, her eyelids drooping, panic giving way to peace as she half-heartedly tried to move away.

There was a sudden penetrating pressure in the back of her thigh that made her shriek out loud, then she was jerked away from the wall and tossed to the floor. The impact flared the pain in her side and she felt fresh agony in her leg, but being on the floor was very comforting. She would definitely feel better if she could have a quick rest.

No, obviously that was a bad idea. She should get back up before the bull gored her to a pulp.

But her limbs were not responding this time, and all she could do was drag herself blindly by her arms until her shoulders sagged and she sank. She heard the casual clip of hooves coming closer and resigned herself for the assault, a little sad that after everything she had been through, she was going to lose in an unfair fight. She heard human shouts, then a single shot, and suddenly there was crushing pressure as the whole weight of the bull came down on top of her.

sixteen

An aching in her side reminded her of the violence her body had recently endured, and she wriggled on the lounge uncomfortably before deciding to pivot into a reclined position, stretching out her legs until she felt preposterously relaxed.

*

It was dark and hot under the sheets. Their sniggers warmed the air even further, but they couldn't help it as they heard Jessica shout again for Enid to have her dinner. The little girl was lying on Cassie, the two of them hiding in the bed, their favourite game to make Mummy search and feign surprise when she found the writhing lump. Pull back the covers and shout 'boo'.

Jessica called again, and she sounded irritated as hell, and Cassie wondered if this was not a good day for such games. It might be one of those times her sister lost her shit because she'd just made them all a cooked meal while Cassie was deliberately dicking about and letting it turn cold. She started to reveal their hiding place, but Enid shuffled against her and shushed loudly down her eardrum with a giggle. Cassie relented, not prepared to let her go just yet. She would endure the snide comments from her sister over dinner just to have a moment longer snuffling the sweet hair that was in her face, even though the air was getting harder to breathe, and the girl's body was getting heavier, and the sheets felt like they were made of suede which didn't quite make sense, and everything seemed to darken and compress her to the point of suffocation until she pushed back and heard a small scream and realised with a panic that she had thrown Enid away, she had shoved too hard and forgotten her strength and Enid was only little and—

Cassie opened her eyes with an anxious moan and reached out as if to catch her falling niece, but her arms hit the sides of the cage and she startled herself with the resulting rattle.

'Cassie?'

Thomas's voice pulled her towards reality, and she squinted in the strip light as she let her arms drop, not sure who she was trying to save anymore but still

experiencing the aftertaste of a heartache she had long tried to suppress. 'Hey, you with me?'

She grunted to acknowledge him and rubbed her temple. Her head felt heavy, like she'd had a rough night drinking.

'I saw them bring you back. Hank looked super pissed. What did you do?'

Cassie grimaced as she tried to remember, but a throbbing in her thigh took her attention. Her trousers were bloodied and the act of lifting her chest to inspect them drove a familiar ache into her ribs that made her flop back to the mattress with gritted teeth.

'How long was I gone?' she managed.

'Not long. The lights are still on. What happened?' Cassie was surprised at this, but it explained why she still felt so battered. Her mouth was bone dry and the water bottle was just beyond her toes, but she didn't yet have the energy to reach it. Instead, she considered Thomas's question. What the hell had happened?

'Think I got drugged.' She rubbed her forehead again.

'Hank?' Thomas sounded surprised.

'No,' she said slowly as the events filtered back through. 'Someone else.'

'Sabotage?' Thomas exclaimed.

Cassie was about to respond but heard footsteps approaching quickly, and Hank swung into view in her pen.

'Yes, sabo-fucking-tage,' he said angrily, running his hands through his flop of hair before placing them on his hips and standing above Cassie. 'Did that guy in the corridor, did he do something to you? Touch you?' She nodded and indicated the back of her arm. 'Motherfucker! Medics say they found enough tranq in your blood to take down a couple of horses. I don't even know how you stayed awake as long as you did, you fucking beast, never mind toss a bull.' He laughed despite his obvious anger. 'Something was wrong with the bull too, tried to shock it but nothing happened. I had to shoot the bloody thing before it killed

you.’ He breathed noisily through his nose and she saw his jaw clench. ‘Little bastard. He’s not getting away with this.’ He seemed to say this to himself, then turned and strode out of the pen.

Cassie exhaled slowly in his wake, still trying to process what had happened. Once silence had returned and there was no further sign of Hank, Thomas huffed loudly.

‘Jesus. Why would someone sabotage a fight like that?’

‘Money,’ Cassie said bitterly. ‘Hank said there was big money on that fight.’

‘Shit. Is that what this is all about? Is that all we are to them?’

‘We are nothing,’ Cassie muttered, but Thomas interrupted her sourness with a laugh.

‘I wouldn’t say that. You got drugged and you tossed a bull? I’d say that was something. I’d say you were pretty fucking something.’

Cassie let a smile flicker on her lips as she nestled into the mattress, warmed by his words. She had to admit, having him as a neighbour did make her existence a little bit more bearable, even though someday she would never see him again, probably never find out what happened to him, and the longer she spent in his company, the worse it was going to feel when she lost him. She glowered at her ability to taint the lightness that Thomas could create, and fell into a pained doze with one of her sister’s favourite accusations jeering at her from the background: ‘*Jesus, Cassie, you always find a way to ruin everything.*’

She was disturbed slightly by the overhead lights switching off and a whispered ‘goodnight’ from Thomas, then fell into a deeper, dreamless sleep. But something made her wake with a start, something unnaturally bright cutting into the darkness that made her scrunch her eyes in confusion, disoriented until she realised it was a torch in her pen. At once her guard was up.

‘Hey, wake up,’ a familiar voice whispered. Cassie squinted past the light source and blinked as it suddenly swung to illuminate who was behind it. ‘Boo. Come on out.’ Hank held the torch under his chin and grinned. He had a strange energy, seeming wired, excited almost. The torchlight shifted away from him as he approached her cage and took her chain off its stand, but she faltered as he

opened the door, not particularly trusting midnight visits. Hank sighed and waggled the torch impatiently, the light strobing through the bars.

‘Nothing to be worried about, I promise. I’ve got something for you. Special assignment.’

Cassie’s curiosity got the better of her and she cautiously shuffled out, bracing herself for attack as she rose to her feet. Hank gestured for her to walk ahead of him, illuminating a path down the corridor with his torch. Her leg felt stiff while a deep-set ache embraced her ribs, and as she realised they were heading towards the Hall, she began to overact her pain in the hopes that Hank would understand she was not fit enough for another fight. Two beams of light were emanating from beside the door to the Hall, and as they got closer it became apparent there were two men standing by the entrance. One of them raised the door using a control panel on the wall, while the other checked beneath it and gave Hank a thumbs up.

‘Okay. Go in quickly,’ he breathed into her ear, and she felt him release her chain from her collar. Cassie shuffled uneasily into the Hall, blinking under the glare of the spotlights and shielding her eyes.

‘Hank, you bastard! This isn’t funny!’ The unfamiliar voice echoed in the Hall, and Cassie managed to focus on her special assignment. A man was sprinting from the opposite end, giving Cassie a wide berth as he aimed at the open door behind her. He wore the Handler uniform and had a bloodied nose. ‘Let me out of here!’ he yelled, but she heard Hank laughing as the door closed well before the man could get there. The man skidded to a stop and turned to face Cassie, backing away with his hands held out defensively towards her. His face was oddly familiar, and it took her a moment to realise it was the man who had passed her in the corridor on the way to the bullfight, the man who had drugged her and pissed off Hank. Her stomach sank as it dawned on her what was going on. *She* was the animal in the Hall this time.

‘You stay back!’ the man shouted while she silently regarded him, casting a glance back at the door to where she presumed Hank was still standing. She wasn’t entirely sure what Hank was expecting her to do, but she certainly wasn’t going to just attack this man. He was technically responsible for the throb in her ribs right now, but she wasn’t an animal. She was in control. She was Cassie.

The man seemed to spot something on the floor, and without taking his eyes off her, he dashed forwards and picked up a spear, gripping it with one hand while his eyes darted around the Hall wildly, spittle in the corners of his mouth as he panted and shouted into the room, 'Get me out of here right now or I'll take her out! I swear to God, Hank, you will lose your prize beast!'

There was no response from outside, and Cassie watched as the man grunted in frustration, then with an unconvincing roar he threw the spear towards her. It clattered to the ground about half a metre away and Cassie wrinkled her nose. This was almost embarrassing.

'Goddammit, Hank!' the man shouted, edging towards the discarded spear. 'You think you're such a big man, why don't you just face me yourself instead of setting your bitch on me?'

Cassie huffed at the insult and stamped as if she was about to charge, smirking as the man screamed and ran away. It was enough to assert her dominance, and she threw her hands in the air in a gesture of indifference, hoping Hank was watching and would get the message that she wasn't going to do anything else.

The man had made it to the other side of the room before he realised she wasn't following. She watched him take a moment to smooth down his composure, then he crept forwards slowly to grab another spear before backing up to the far wall. His panicked face began to turn to one of anger.

'Okay!' he shouted, lifting his chin to project his voice but never taking his eyes off Cassie. 'Point made. I won't try anything like that again.' He was met with deafening silence, which only seemed to make him angrier, and he shouted some words in another language before adding, 'It shouldn't even be yours anyway, Hank. We all know I should have had first claim after Janos died. I was the one who caught her; that stupid bitch broke my nose. She should have been mine by default!'

Cassie's eyes narrowed. Of course. He had seemed familiar and unsettling even before he spiked her. He wasn't quite the same without his spectacles or standing behind a painted burgundy door, but the short thick hair and local accent were a match. It was the man who had abducted her. The man who put this collar on her, who dragged her into a cage, who laughed over her sprawled body as he shocked her for the first time. A surge of anger flooded her system,

and the pain in her ribs and leg dulled as she started to walk towards him.

The man shrieked at her approach, but it only fuelled her to pick up speed. As she got closer he waved the spear at her, but she caught it easily in one hand, breaking it in two as she grabbed him by the throat with her other. She lifted him off the ground, pulling him in close, his chin nestled in the webbing between her thumb and fingers, his eyes wide and tearing up as he pawed at her arms. She had spent so long fighting big animals that this human frame felt so delicate. So malleable. So expendable.

His face was starting to turn a dark shade of red, and she realised she was holding him more tightly than she needed, but she couldn't find the self-restraint to loosen her grip. All she could hear was the echo of his deep laughter while she writhed in terror and pain on the floor, the way he pressed her into the bed to fasten the collar around her throat, the indifference with which he cast his eyes over her. All her self-control evaporated as she felt her contained rage rise out of every pore, and she began to emit a noise that started off as a low grumble but built into a roar. As it reached a crescendo she closed her hand tightly around his neck, the bones and fibrous tubes compressing between her fingers with a soft crunch as his eyes rolled back in their sockets. Then she threw his body and watched it flail awkwardly to the floor a few metres away, landing in a pile of motionless limbs.

She stared at it from across the room, her chest rising and falling heavily with every breath, the rage inside her not yet satiated. The door rolled open and Hank entered cautiously, a chain looped in his hands. He eyed her from a distance as he walked slowly towards the body, bending to check it before straightening up and motioning for her to come to him, holding the chain ready. She felt her body clench and a low rumble began again in her throat. Hank's posture stiffened.

'Hey, hey, easy now.' He held one hand out to her, the chain dangling from it, while the other hand fished the collar control from his pocket. The other two men teetered in the doorway, one of them holding a long rifle aimed directly at her. Cassie flicked her eyes between them all. They were acting as if trying to placate a wild animal. She hated Hank, she hated what he had just made her do, and she hated that she had wanted to do it. She felt herself on the brink of a charge with no self-restraint coming forwards to stop her, and Hank rattled the chain in his hand to get her attention.

‘Stand down, come on. You’ve had your fun here. Let’s finish now.’

Cassie closed her eyes, trying to rein in the ferocity of her emotions, and felt her body trembling as she heard Hank’s voice from a distance.

‘That’s it, that’s it,’ he said slowly. ‘Just breathe. You know I can shock you, and we’ve got a tranq gun here too. We don’t need to use it. Show me you have control.’ Hank’s words were grating and soothing in equal measure, and she took another shuddering breath before opening her eyes.

The three men had changed position to create a wide fan around her, with Hank in front clutching the control unit, sweat visible on his brow. She was the cornered beast. Her gaze fell to the body that lay between them, crumpled and still.

‘Don’t bother about him,’ Hank said. ‘That guy tried to get you killed. He got everything coming for him. You did good.’ He took a step towards her. ‘Let’s head back now. You need to rest.’

She felt her energy suddenly crumble, as if the wave of hatred had passed over and left her shores bare and exposed. The pain in her ribs soared again and her knees sagged. Hank seemed to sense the change in her mindset, and he began to approach with more confidence, the other men still keeping their distance.

‘Do you have control?’ he asked with authority, and Cassie found herself nodding. He came to her side and attached the chain, then she followed him back through the corridors, willingly crawling into her cage, barely noticing when the men had left.

What had she just done? What was she?

She was Cassie. She was a killer.

She collapsed onto her side and curled her knees to her chest, gripping them tightly, her lips tremoring, her mind overloaded. Emotion burst through and she let out a whimper, her breath staccato, hysteria imminent.

‘Cassie?’ Thomas called, but she could not respond. ‘Are you okay? What did he do? Are you hurt?’ She clutched her legs and a clipped wail escaped her lips, heightening the panic in Thomas’s voice. ‘Cassie! What happened? Tell me

you're okay. Did he hurt you? I'll fucking kill him if he hurt you. Cassie!'

'Tom,' she managed, shaking uncontrollably now, his concern overwhelming. She couldn't tell him. How could she? If she spoke the words out loud then she would lose her mind completely. 'Please,' she whispered. 'Stop. I can't... I'm okay, I just can't...' She felt like she was going to hyperventilate. There was the sound of cage bars crashing from beyond the wall, and Thomas shouted in frustration.

'I don't know how to help you from in here! This is fucking awful, how do I do this? What can I do?' His voice broke with emotion and Cassie closed her eyes, her body still trembling but his words providing something to latch on to that seemed to help steady her mind.

'Talk,' she managed.

'What?'

'Talk to me.'

'What about?'

'Anything. Just talk, please. Don't stop.' She clenched her fingers against the ragged cotton of her trousers as if holding on to the very fabric of the world, afraid that if she let go she would spiral into oblivion.

Thomas began to talk. He told her of his favourite running route back home. He told her about nearly getting arrested on a train in Germany. He told her about a bar he'd tended that was set inside a bookshop in Copenhagen. She listened and settled and listened and soothed, not always following the stories but lulled by his voice until the trembling had stopped and her fingers uncurled, no longer clinging to the edge of sanity. She was tethered to Thomas now, and he didn't pause to take a breath until the lights went out.

seventeen

Deciding she may as well complete the look, she slid on the sunglasses and took up the bowl, eating a spoonful with a satisfied sigh.

*

Cassie felt the sensation of the man's throat caving in under her grasp, his windpipe collapsing like rubber tubing, his face turning a deep purple hue, his eyes glassy and bulging, a whimper gurgling from his open mouth that morphed into her Handler's desperate pleas as he reached out to her with a puffy, waxen hand, the black hairs on his swollen fingers writhing as if alive.

She shuddered awake. It was still night, and she remained motionless so that she didn't disturb Thomas, his gentle snoring soothing her nerves as she stared into the dark, just as his endless talk had centred her mind and curtailed her spiral. She had lost track of how long he had talked for, but his voice had grown hoarse by the time he finally paused to take a sip of water. He'd tentatively whispered her name, and she'd rasped an earnest thank you in return.

With Thomas's help she had successfully compressed her turmoil into a manageable lump that was now wedged so acutely within her chest that if she put a hand to her sternum she could almost feel it. But when she thought of what she had done, the guilt and disgust seeped from her heart and flooded her bloodstream once more. She had killed a man with her bare hands, and this time it was not out of self-defence as she had done with Eyepatch, or from passive inaction like her Handler or the woman with the wolves, who reminded her of Jessica for reasons she could never understand. She wasn't a mindless animal anymore, beaten down and obedient, feral and unaccountable for her actions. Because of Thomas she was becoming Cassie again, and she had killed that defenceless man because she wanted to. She had murdered him. She was a killer.

But then she thought back to what Hank said. *'That guy tried to get you killed. He got everything coming for him. You did good.'* The man wasn't defenceless either. He did have a spear, and it wasn't her fault if he didn't know how to use it. That man had abducted her, beaten her, shocked her, laughed at her prone body on the floor. He had drugged her, put her in danger just for money. He *did* deserve it. Such justification was enough to pack any feelings of guilt back down

where they'd stay buried, as long as she didn't think of what happened, and as long as Hank didn't mention the incident, and as long as Thomas never asked what happened that night. She fell into an uneasy sleep, aware of the fragility on which she had built her composure.

In the morning Thomas checked that she was okay, but he didn't probe her for details, and when Hank delivered their food with a tuneful whistle, he only gave Cassie a knowing wink. She sighed in relief, the trauma of that night already receding like a bad dream being forgotten. Hank took Cassie to the gym later that day, and she trotted unhindered around the perimeter of the hall, relishing the chance to move and pleased to find that her ribs and leg were already improving.

As she completed her fourth lap, the door opened and Thomas was ushered inside. Cassie felt a wave of anxiety that he might use the opportunity to question her further, and her steps faltered as he approached with a solemn expression on his face, but he merely opened his arms and wrapped them around her in an embrace. Cassie did not return the gesture, her body rigid with surprise, the physical contact so alien that she wasn't sure how to respond. His body felt lean and warm and solid, and he bent down to put his lips to her ear.

'You don't have to tell me anything,' he whispered. 'But I want you to know that I'm here.'

Cassie felt her lips tremble at his words, the offer of comfort and support so tantalising that she could feel herself sinking into him, but such abandonment of her self-control could threaten the remaining barriers she had built inside, the ones that contained her deepest secrets, the ones that she never wanted to consider again. So she exhaled deeply and pushed him gently away with a small smile.

'I'm okay,' she offered, then sprinted away from him to resume her laps, running harder than her ribs would have preferred. It was the only way she could ensure that Thomas couldn't keep up and spot the tears that were now streaming down her cheeks.

They were taken back from the gym separately and Hank left them with fresh food, which they ate concurrently in silence until she heard Thomas sighing deeply.

‘I’m so bored of bread,’ he muttered dramatically, and Cassie grunted in agreement. ‘Did your other Handler give you anything different to eat?’

‘The same.’

Thomas paused as if in consideration, then continued his train of thought.

‘Do you think the Handlers prepare the food?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘If you got given the same before, then there must be some central kitchen somewhere. They’ve got to feed all the animals too, I guess.’

Cassie finished her mouthful and studied the remaining loaf in her hand, surprised that she’d never even thought of these details before. They lapsed into silence for a while until Thomas picked the conversation back up.

‘So, if they have a central kitchen, then do you think they have, like, kitchen staff here?’

‘Maybe.’

‘It’s weird to think of something so ordinary in a place like this.’ Cassie finished her bread and settled back against the cage, interested in how Thomas was thinking. ‘Handlers. Kitchen staff. Medics. Jesus, when you think about it, this place is massive.’

‘My other Handler talked about my owner,’ Cassie mused as her mind wandered.

‘Like a Handler?’

‘No, sounded like they gave funds.’

‘Oh. So, someone pays for your upkeep, and I guess the Handler is like a zookeeper?’ Cassie wrinkled her nose at this analogy, but the description rang true. ‘What about the infusions? They must have been made by someone? The medics?’

‘Don’t think it’s them that make it.’ Cassie shook her head, remembering the reluctance from Doctor Jackson and the way her Handler had pushed for more.

‘Well it’s not the kitchen staff,’ Thomas scoffed. ‘Must be science types. What is that stuff anyway? Do you not think we’d have heard about an innovation like that? It’s huge.’

‘This place is huge,’ Cassie pointed out. ‘And we hadn’t heard of this.’

‘True. Do you think of all the people working in this place, any of them would ever help us get out of here?’

Cassie thought back to Doctor Jackson’s actions, but she supposed Thomas wasn’t considering that kind of escape route. Thomas huffed to himself, and she heard his mattress rustling as if he was trying to get comfortable.

‘Okay, more important question. What one food or drink do you miss the most?’

‘I don’t want to think about that,’ she muttered.

‘Oh come on, indulge me.’

She sighed and thought for a moment. ‘Coffee.’

‘Mmm, latte?’

‘Hot black coffee.’

‘Oh stop, that’s filthy.’ Thomas chuckled, and Cassie felt her mouth rise into a smirk.

‘You?’

‘I miss hot food,’ he crooned. ‘Like, burn your mouth hot.’

‘Oh yeah.’ She salivated at the idea as she ran her tongue across her teeth. ‘I also miss a toothbrush,’ she offered.

‘Oh man, that’s a good one,’ Thomas enthused. ‘I’m sort of used to that permanent fur feeling now, but yeah, what I wouldn’t give to brush my teeth.’ He

chuckled, but the mirth petered out quickly and he didn't speak again for a little while. Cassie presumed Thomas had experienced the same level of grief that always plagued her when thinking about all they had lost.

It was well over a week until Cassie was fit enough to fight in the Hall again, facing a pack of dogs that were quick but unintimidating considering the scale of her bullfight. Meanwhile, Thomas was forced to tackle another dog, followed by a goat ('The fucking horns on that one!'), disappearing both times for two nights and returning with reports of fresh track marks on his arms. The periods without him were hard for Cassie to bear, but she was relieved to hear that they were investing in him, and her concerns over the long-term effects of infusions were over-ridden by the comfort of her theory that the more money they spent on him, the less likely they would let him come to major harm, although to accept this theory in its entirety she had to ignore what had happened to Eyepatch. That was manageable, though. Cassie was getting quite good at ignoring things from her past.

Hank took Thomas for a third round soon after Cassie's pack fight, but this time he did not reappear after two nights. Cassie was nauseous and restless, resorting to relentless cage exercises to pass the time, and by the fourth night she was sure Thomas was dead. Every time she considered this possibility she was consumed with anguish, the not knowing so torturous that on the fifth day she had had enough. Hank came to give her fresh supplies and she willingly leaned herself into the side of her cage while he fastened her chain, determined to make him tell her Thomas's fate. She hadn't the courage to speak to Hank, but she could still make him understand what she needed, and as he reached through to swap out her bucket, she made a small whine in the back of her throat to get his attention. Hank retracted his arm swiftly, clattering the bucket on the floor with an expletive. He gathered himself and crouched down to study her from the front of the cage. Cassie maintained eye contact and creased her brow, then flicked her gaze to the wall in the direction of Thomas's pen before resuming her stare. Hank pursed his lips.

'What?' He shrugged. 'You trying to tell me something?'

Cassie tried the same gesture, adding a nod of her head to the side for emphasis. She saw Hank's face break into a wide smile, and he let out a breathy laugh as he suddenly straightened back up.

‘Oh, I get it. You want to know what’s going on with your boy?’ He closed the cage and strolled back to the post, unlocking her chain so that the tension on her collar released, but she didn’t move and continued to watch him intently, urging him to speak and sighing in relief as he said, ‘He’s fine. Recovering from surgery, but that takes time, remember? We’re not all as strong as you.’ She tried to keep too much emotion from showing, but Hank’s smile broadened as he cocked his head at her. ‘You were worried, eh? Doesn’t look like you’ve been eating much either, but we’ve got a big one coming up, so I need you at your best.’ He chewed his lip and clicked his tongue. ‘How about I keep you in the loop with the health of your boy? You’re not making yourself weak with worry then, eh?’ Cassie could barely contain her excitement at this offer, and Hank chuckled to himself. ‘I don’t do this for everyone, you know.’ He winked at her and casually walked out, whistling tunefully as he left.

Hank kept his promise and continued to update Cassie on Thomas’s status for the next two days, and Cassie worked hard to resist her gratitude at his brief remarks, angry at herself for the growing appreciation she felt towards the man who was essentially holding her prisoner. On the third day, Thomas was returned. She presumed he was sedated as she heard the trolley wheels squeaking and effortful grunts as people must have lifted him into his cage. She wondered how many times her own body had been through such actions and curled her top lip in disdain at the thought. It took a little while for Thomas to stir, the crinkling of his mattress the first sign, followed by a gruff clearing of his throat.

‘Hey,’ Cassie whispered first.

‘Hey,’ he grunted, then coughed and groaned slightly. ‘How long was I gone?’

‘Eight days.’

‘Shit, really?’ She heard more rustling. ‘Oh wow. New scar. That’s a big one.’

‘Where?’

‘My side. Looks like a shark’s taken a great bite out of me. Hey, you ever fought a shark?’

‘How would that even work?’ Cassie scoffed good-naturedly. Thomas had kept up his itemised list of animals as a running joke, often checking in with

Cassie as to which she had faced.

‘Don’t know. But if you turn up in the Hall and there’s a big water tank, I say you make a break for it, okay?’ Cassie smiled and took a sip of her water before continuing to question him.

‘What was it really? What hurt you?’

‘Oh, dogs.’ He took a long sigh. ‘Couple of them. I had one, and the other...’

‘Gets messy.’ Cassie nodded in understanding. ‘You okay?’

‘Yeah. Hurt like a mother though. Never felt anything like it. I’ve got some new bruises on my forearms too. Is that more of your super juice, you think?’

‘Probably.’

‘And I was gone eight days? Wow. What have you been up to all this time?’

‘Enjoying some peace and quiet.’

He laughed, but she could tell it was strained. ‘Well, sorry to ruin the party. I’ll try to get hurt more next time.’

‘Please don’t,’ she replied, more quickly than she intended.

‘Okay, Cassie,’ Thomas said fondly. ‘I’ll keep out of trouble if you do the same.’

The next day Hank took Cassie back to the Hall, and when the far door opened to reveal a large brown bear, Cassie’s first response was amused excitement at the thought of telling Thomas she had ticked off one of the animals on his list. But as she watched the bear heave its body into the Hall, her second response was one of trepidation. This thing was fucking huge.

She heard movement behind her and turned to see that her own door had reopened. A man walked confidently through, immediately holding out his hands as he approached. She positioned herself so that she could see both occupants of the space, flicking her eyes between bear and man, wondering who the greater threat would be. The bear was sniffing the air and pawing at the ground, grunting

and snorting in an intimidating fashion, while the man was almost by her side now, casting nervous glances at the grizzly in between warily looking her up and down.

‘Hey, you know the score, right?’ the man said in a hushed English accent. He looked a little younger than Cassie, round eyes and a square jaw, his fine blonde hair twisting into lazy curls that were interrupted by a bright pink scar that ran behind his ear. His demeanour suggested confidence, and Cassie gave him a silent nod, presuming he was not a newcomer here. ‘I haven’t seen any weapons, so we’ll have to work together. Just do exactly what I say and we’ll get through this. I promise to keep you safe.’

Cassie clenched her jaw in irritation. This guy had barely a scratch on him other than the one visible scar, so who was he to tell her what to do? But doubt crossed her mind as she considered whether the reason he wasn’t marked was because he was quite capable, more so than she was at getting out of these fights unscathed, and maybe it would be nice for someone else to take charge for a change. She spotted that the bear had locked a lumbering trajectory on them now and gave the man a nod of agreement. He smiled at her and stepped closer, his expression warping into something more sinister, and before she could register caution, he punched her square in the face, knocking her backwards and stunning her into a momentary blackness.

Absolute rage filled Cassie’s pores and fuelled her consciousness to return, but suddenly she was shoved forcefully by both shoulders, taken so off guard that she stumbled into a lurching sidestep in an effort to keep her footing. Her momentum was stopped by a firm but furry wall, and she had enough time to register that she had tripped into the bear before powerful limbs enveloped her from behind and began to squeeze breathtakingly hard.

eighteen

After a little while, he reappeared to hand her a mug full of hot black coffee. She took it eagerly, and he gave her an amused smile before leaving her again. The smell of fresh coffee was so delicious she kept the cup close to her nose to avoid any tendrils of scent getting lost on the breeze.

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Cassie looked up to see the bear's face looming towards hers, its jaws opening wide enough to fit around her entire head. With a shriek, she managed to wrench one of her arms free of its hold in time to plant the palm of her hand under its chin, blocking it from clamping around her skull. The bear had squatted on its hindquarters, holding her back against its chest, and the only thing stopping it from decapitating her was her single outstretched arm, her fingers clenched around its lower jaw as the bear's saliva dribbled spirals round her forearm. She was entranced by the pink arches of its palate, a rippling tongue spooling more drool into her face, the main incisors like tusks angling towards her. The bear grunted and took a gulp, then the weight on Cassie's arm grew as it tried to reach her again. She had to make a move.

Cassie began to wriggle her body to turn within the beast's grasp until their stomachs pressed together, all the while maintaining her block against its chin, then walked her feet up the animal's body until they were planted against its soft, warm torso and her knees were tucked into her chest. With an audible groan, she started to straighten her legs, aiming to force a gap between them so she could shirk its hold, but just as she gained some decent space, the bear lurched forwards to land on all fours, flinging her onto the ground beneath it.

She was free of its embrace, but now the animal's gigantic form was over her and it lunged forwards with open jaws. Once more Cassie held back its face, spluttering expletives from the effort, this time using both arms and adding her feet against its stomach. With a frustrated roar the bear swiped at her with a paw, raking claws across her T-shirt and cleanly ripping her flesh beneath. She yelled at the burst of hot pain and released one of her hands to thrust a fist into its nose as hard as she could. The bear grunted and recoiled, giving Cassie the opportunity to roll out from beneath it, springing to her feet and spotting something she could use to her advantage. She dodged behind the animal and

swiftly hooked her hands under its collar, pulling downwards to mimic the action of the chain. The bear reared onto its hind legs, making the collar rise level with her head, but she kept hold as the beast growled and thrashed its front legs in vain. The pressure on the collar was enough to restrict its movements and she used its own body as a shield, tucking in close to the animal's flank so that it couldn't reach her.

She was bleeding from her chest and sweating from the exertion, but she seemed to have control of a bear right now, and she let out a triumphant shout. Killing the animal felt like an impossible dream, but then, over the bear's shoulder, she caught sight of the man who had got her into this mess in the first place. The rage that had been in her system came rushing to the surface, and suddenly she knew exactly what she was going to do with this bear.

Bracing her arms, Cassie coerced the bear to start moving forwards by pushing it from behind with the collar, forcing it to drop back to all fours. It tried to resist but the cut of the collar was just right, designed for this very purpose, she supposed, and while she awkwardly walked alongside its hindquarters, she couldn't help but think it might have been easier just to try riding on its back. But wouldn't that have been ridiculous.

Gradually, Cassie guided the bear towards the man, who was backing up against the far wall, open-mouthed.

'Wait, wait, what are you doing?' he shouted, with notable panic in his voice. The bear must have spotted him as it had started to pick up speed, willingly directing itself towards the new target and not needing Cassie to push anymore. She felt it pull away and gratefully unhooked her fingers from its collar, watching with relish as the bear charged towards the man, who screamed and covered his face.

Cassie's satisfaction faded when the bear suddenly went stiff and collapsed to the floor before it had reached him. Her brow furrowed as she realised it had been shocked, then she saw her door open slightly and the whoosh of two darts hit the bear's torso. They had left the bear to nearly kill her but stopped it from even touching the other guy? The injustice made Cassie seethe. The man across the Hall was staring at the inert body with obvious relief, until he looked up and saw Cassie. His face drained of colour. She was clenching her teeth, clenching her fists, clenching her toes against the hard floor, the rage inside her back to a

rolling boil, and with an audible growl she darted forwards, vaulting the bear's body in one leap and aiming straight for the man, who held out his hands and yelled, 'Wait! Wait!'

Cassie slowed her advance momentarily, and the man seemed to gather himself, puffing out his chest. 'I have to warn you,' he said breathily, 'I am much stronger than you think. So, I would suggest you back off, and we can both just walk away from this unscathed.'

Cassie had reached him now and glanced pointedly down at her bloodied top, her chest still burning from the bear's claws. The man looked like he was about to speak again, but Cassie wordlessly punched him in the side of his face, knocking him sideways and spraying blood onto the floor. She lunged forwards to hit him again, but he moved faster than she expected, ducking under her arm and shoulder-charging into her stomach, the aim to probably take her down to the floor. She had good footing and resisted him, noting that he was definitely stronger than a normal human but not as enhanced as she was, and as he pushed against her legs unsuccessfully, she clutched him by the base of his skull and lifted him at arm's length.

The man's toes scraped the floor and he frantically swung his fists into Cassie's face, smacking her lips sharply. She threw him against the wall and wiped blood from her mouth, watching his body slide down to the floor, her temper flaring as he stirred and moaned. She stooped to pick him up and pinned his arms to his sides, using them to pivot his body through the air and slam him face-first into the wall. There was a dark wet silhouette on the breeze blocks and the man had stopped resisting, but Cassie was preparing herself to swing him again when her body became rigid with a shock and she stumbled to the floor, taking the man down with her. His body entangled with hers, his face inches from her own, and the sight of his eyelids fluttering was provoking, enraging her with his audacity to remain alive. As the shock subsided, she brought up her knees, set her feet into his chest and propelled him into the air with a solid kick.

There was laughter from behind her as another shock hit, and before her limbs had stopped spasming she felt the prick of a dart hitting her thigh. The shock eased and she grunted in frustration, the fury still burning within her.

'Hey, hey, hey.' Hank came into view, several paces away with her collar control held tightly, working to catch her eye. 'It's done now. Just breathe. It's

finished. Show me you have control.’ She glowered at him and pulled the dart from her leg, her feet twitching with the urge to get to him. ‘I don’t think one dart’s going to knock you out, but it should be enough to round your edges, help you get back in control. Come on.’ Hank’s voice was gentle and irritating and she felt her mind clouding from the drugs, aware that he was now approaching slowly, the clink of the chain suggesting his intentions. She was on the precipice of mindless action, but as her vision started to blur, she suddenly lost the motivation, letting out a shuddering sigh as she felt Hank press on the back of her collar to attach the chain.

‘It’s okay, see to him,’ he directed to someone beyond her, and she heard the creak of a gurney wheeling around her. Hank frowned at her bloodied T-shirt and started to pull her to her feet. ‘You look like you need treatment. Come with me.’

She was guided away, light-headed and tipsy now, concentrating solely on the action of walking as Hank led her to the medical room, where she lay on the treatment table without protest and stared dreamily at the ceiling. She didn’t often get to ride the precipice of sedation, usually getting pushed over the edge into a dreamless sleep. This felt fucking great. Doctor Jackson appeared beside Hank, her face drawn and serious.

‘What’s the damage?’ Hank asked as he tightened Cassie’s restraints.

‘His responses indicate he has suffered a traumatic brain injury,’ Doctor Jackson said quietly.

‘Is he likely to recover?’

‘No. What do you want us to do?’ Hank pursed his lips and looked off into the middle distance for a moment.

‘Stabilise and send him to the labs alive. Tell them to make the payment to my personal account.’ He gave Cassie a wink. ‘Stupid little prick had no idea what he was messing with, did he? Was planning on getting rid of him anyway – no one warned to that guy for some reason.’

‘Shall we completely sedate her?’ Doctor Jackson asked, looking down sadly at Cassie.

‘Keep her this juiced at the very least. She’s still angry. You see the way her

nostrils are flaring?’ Cassie glowered at him through half-lidded eyes and felt the barriers lift from her voice.

‘*I am* angry,’ she mumbled. Hank looked down at her in surprise, and Cassie scowled childishly. ‘Why did you let the bear attack me, but not him?’ Hank’s mouth grew into a smirk.

‘Because people would rather see you tear him a new one.’

‘Oh. Gotta give them a show.’ Cassie felt great despondency wash over her, and she sighed heavily, forcing her eyes wide open to look at Hank. ‘I think I should hate you, but I don’t seem to want to kill you.’ Hank patted the side of her face and grinned.

‘That’s what I’m counting on.’ He stepped back as Doctor Jackson appeared with her suture tray, and Cassie switched her sights to the doctor.

‘You’re so nice,’ Cassie said sweetly. Doctor Jackson began to cut open Cassie’s clothes to dress her wounds, clearing her throat awkwardly. ‘I’m sorry I used you as a hostage, you had every right to kill me back.’ Cassie closed her eyes again, her voice growing softer. ‘Sometimes I wish I’d never woken up from that. I’m so tired of all this.’

She sank into a dark cloud, and the next time she became lucid she was being cajoled into her cage, her collar jutting into her throat and hands pushing her body from behind. She scowled but felt the soft comfort of her mattress under her palms and gratefully slumped onto her front. The cage door clanged shut somewhere far away, and then a familiar voice drifted out of the gloom.

‘Everything okay?’ It was Thomas, and she smiled into her mattress, turning her head to speak.

‘It’s great. I like drugs.’

‘Ah, okay. You riding high?’ Thomas sniggered.

‘Yeah. And I killed another guy!’ she tittered, then thought for a moment. ‘Hey, that rhymed.’

‘What?’

‘Riding high, killed another guy. Rhymes,’ she mused, scratching her nose.

‘Killed another guy?’ Thomas echoed.

‘Mmm... he was a prick though, he had it coming... and so was the other one, he deserved it too... so it’s okay, right? I *had* to kill them.’

‘The other one... you mean the pirate?’

‘Oh no, I forgot about him!’ Cassie covered her face clumsily. ‘That’s how things are now, I kill all these people and I just forget about them.’

‘Cassie...’ Thomas said slowly.

‘The worst thing is, and this is a secret, Tom, so don’t tell anyone’ – she shushed loudly – ‘when I killed those guys, I enjoyed it.’ She scoffed at herself and spiralled into silence.

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Cassie was lying on her front with her head hanging off the side of the thin mattress, staring blurrily at the floor and trying to make sense of herself. Gradually, the memory of the bear resurfaced, and the abject terror of staring into its looming jaws. Then she remembered the man and what she did to him, knowing with certainty that she would have finished what she had started if they hadn’t intervened. She could still feel the absolute urge to crush him against the wall. It was mindless. It was revenge. It was... easy. Shit. What was she doing? Killing more defenceless men. She grimaced against the mattress, using it to muffle her groan as she felt the hard lump inside her chest expanding. That man wasn’t defenceless. He was enhanced, and he had hit her and pushed her into a bear. He deserved what happened to him. He did. She didn’t owe him any more of her time.

Cassie rolled decisively onto her back and found that her chest was covered in taped gauze, the movement triggering a deep burn that made her grunt. She heard Thomas rustling in the pen beside her, and a glimmer of a smile touched her lips. Thomas didn’t have to know about the man, but the sound of his enthusiasm when she told him about the bear might be enough to take her mind off everything else.

‘Hey,’ she whispered.

‘Oh, hey.’ His voice came back tentatively. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Bit sore, I’ll be fine. Guess what I fought.’

‘Um...’

‘A bear.’ She waited for his reaction, but only heard him shift on his mattress.

‘Oh,’ he said at length, and Cassie’s face fell with disappointment, confused about his unusually lacklustre response.

‘You asked once if I’d fought one?’ she prompted.

‘Yeah.’ He was stilted. Subdued. ‘Did you... Was there anything else?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Anyone else?’ Cassie blinked in alarm, trying to understand why he would even think to ask that, and he sighed into the silence. ‘You don’t remember talking to me, do you?’

‘When?’ she asked warily.

‘Last night, when they brought you back. You were drugged, pretty out of it.’

‘Oh.’ Her stomach rolled. ‘What did I say?’

‘Well, you told me that you killed a guy,’ Thomas said flatly. ‘And that he wasn’t your first.’ Cassie closed her eyes sadly, her composure already crumbling. Shit.

‘Did I say anything else?’ There was a long pause before Thomas replied.

‘No. What happened in there, Cassie?’

‘You don’t want to know.’ She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, a sense of shame sprouting fresh shoots inside her, Thomas’s words feeding the growth.

‘You can tell me.’

‘I can’t.’ She ran her hands to her temples, squeezing her head as if she could contain everything. ‘I just... I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘If I tell you then it means it’s real and you’ll hate me.’

‘Shut up and try me.’

Cassie hooked her fingers through the bars either side of her, as if she needed to hold herself steady as she spoke. Then she told him what she had done to the man who pushed her into the bear, and the man who had abducted her before attempting to rig her bullfight. She told him the objective facts, and when she was finished, she peeled her hands away from the cage, her fingertips burning white, the shape of the bars warped from her grasp. She rubbed her palms together in the ensuing silence, dreading Thomas’s reaction, freezing as he finally spoke.

‘Jesus, Cassie, that’s a lot to go through by yourself. You could’ve told me. I wish you’d told me. I wish you could’ve felt like you could tell me.’ He scoffed loudly. ‘I’m not making any sense.’

‘I know what you must be thinking,’ she said bitterly. Thomas would never see her the same way again. She was a killer in his eyes now, and that was based on the basic details. There was so much she hadn’t admitted, like the unnerving, uncontrollable weight of her anger when it reached boiling point, or the truth that it felt so easy to give in to the rage inside, or the satisfaction of destroying those who had wronged her.

‘I don’t think you can know what I’m thinking, or you would have shared all this with me sooner. You think I’m going to judge you?’

‘It hasn’t taken much for me to turn into a killer.’

‘Cassie,’ Thomas said chidingly. ‘I wouldn’t say what’s happened to you in here isn’t much.’

‘It’s no excuse.’

‘If I was in the same situation I’d have probably—’

‘You can’t know that!’ she snapped.

‘Those guys that came into your pen that night and attacked you? I’d have killed them if I had the chance, I swear to God.’

‘That’s different.’

‘I’ve done stuff in here that I never would have done out there too. I’m killing animals with my bare hands, I’m letting some asshole lead me around with a collar and a leash and I’m not even trying to resist him because I’m too... God, Cassie, you’re the bravest person I’ve ever met, and this place is so fucking twisted it’s making us do some weird shit, but it doesn’t mean you’re not a good person.’

‘You don’t know how this feels – you’ve never killed anyone.’

‘I have,’ he said quietly.

‘What?’ she asked in disbelief.

‘I killed someone. And it wasn’t in here, where everything’s gone to shit. It was out there, in the real world. So, what does that make me?’

‘What?’ Cassie managed, her own turmoil sideswiped by his revelation.

‘I killed my girlfriend,’ Thomas said in monotone, and Cassie gulped dryly, sitting up despite the pain in her chest.

‘What... what do you mean?’

‘I was driving and a car coming at me drifted into my lane. I swerved to avoid it and hit a streetlight. My girlfriend was in the passenger side, she took the worst of it. She... died.’

‘Oh, Tom,’ Cassie said forlornly.

‘So I do know what it’s like to kill someone.’

‘That wasn’t your fault.’

‘No, if I had just driven better, paid more attention, I could have seen it coming sooner or swerved in a different direction, or had more control over the car and missed that post, or even angled it so I got the impact. I could have...’

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ Cassie repeated, unnerved by the mania creeping into his voice.

‘It was my fault. I let her down, I didn’t save her. She died because of me and I can’t ever undo that. Everyone told me it wasn’t my fault, all day, every day, but they made it worse, just repeating the lie, and I couldn’t deal with it so I left. And then here’s this chance to redeem myself, help a whole bunch of people by coming in here. I thought it was going to change everything.’ He laughed bitterly. ‘But that’s not working out so well, is it? All I’ve done is kill a dog and throttle a fucking pig. It’s all been a waste, she’s still dead and I haven’t helped anyone.’ Cassie chewed her lip in worry, recognising the signs. He was spiralling, but that was her trick. Thomas was the stable one, and he couldn’t lose control or they’d both be lost. She gathered herself and said as earnestly as she could:

‘You have helped people, Tom. You’ve helped me.’ He was silent for a moment, and she waited anxiously for his reply.

‘Yeah. Done a good job of that, haven’t I? You’re a fucking mess.’ His tone had changed to a familiar cheek and Cassie’s mouth opened in surprise, then her throat spasmed and she started to laugh. The sound was so unusual that she clasped a hand over her mouth, embarrassed. But she heard Thomas’s snigger building, triggering another snort from her as she spluttered into her palm, her body rocking, the laughter consuming them both uncontrollably, echoing in their pens as they bordered on hysteria, a necessary release, a strengthening of an unspoken bond, and Cassie laughed so hard that tears drizzled her cheeks.

nineteen

She lay on the lounge under the subtly rising heat of the sun, sipping coffee and wishing she could stay here all day. But he'd said they'd be coming soon.

*

'B twelve?' Thomas probed.

'Uh... miss. D five?'

'Miss. C seven?'

'Miss.'

'Do you even have one up there?' he challenged.

'Yup. Okay, E seven?'

'Uh... dammit, hit!'

'Yes!' Cassie beamed, threading some brown paper into a cage square.

'How are you so good at this?' Thomas tutted, and Cassie gave a smug chuckle in return. They were playing a version of battleships that Thomas had devised, using their cage ceilings as the grid and some ripped paper from their food bags as the ships, careful to pull them down if they heard anyone approach. The games were surprisingly absorbing, although compared to the lack of stimulation that the Complex usually offered, Cassie had to admit it was a low bar.

'I think you're cheating,' Thomas huffed, but she could tell he was joking.

'Yeah? What you going to do about it?' She smirked.

'I'm going to take a whizz,' Thomas replied. It had been a few weeks since Cassie had confessed to her killings, and in that time their relationship had continued to grow. They could sit through hours of silence and then break into conversation as if they had never stopped, discussing new theories about the

infusions, what might be going on at the place she had heard Hank call ‘the labs’, or listing animals they would or would not prefer to fight. Thomas had suggested an otter would be a frightening foe, and the farcical abstractness of it had made Cassie double up in uncontrollable laughter, something she was more capable of now that she had lowered even more of her barriers.

Cassie started to pull out choice events from her time in the Complex, feeding them to Thomas in small segments and relishing the catharsis of hearing out loud all that she had been through. Though at first the process made past events uncomfortably real, hearing Thomas’s child-like reception of them helped to dilute their horror. But she only shared the headlines. There were many moments that remained locked inside, for both of their sakes.

They continued to experience battles in the Hall, but Hank kept up his promise of letting Cassie know that Thomas was okay so her crippling concern would only last a few hours, during which she would exercise mindlessly until either Hank appeared or her body gave way. Though she didn’t want to owe Hank anything at all, she couldn’t help but grant him the smallest nod of appreciation each time he went out of his way to reassure her that Thomas was safe, and she felt they had developed a sort of mutual respect that made obeying him more palatable.

Thomas was now whistling loudly to cover the hollow patter of liquid hitting the bottom of his bucket, and Cassie smirked to herself. Aside from occasional joint sessions in the gym, they experienced a solely auditory existence, and yet there was an unavoidable intimacy to their relationship. Cassie could only think of one other person she had peed and poed in the presence of, but she had worked hard to curb thoughts of that little intruder who had no care for personal space, the one who barged in to bring her toys and drawings while she was on the toilet. Before she had Thomas as a neighbour, Cassie would have had to burst into exercise if her mind had tried to wander back into her past, but now she could use him as a distraction.

‘Nice wee?’ she ventured, huffing away the last wisp of excited toddler chatter from her memories and focusing in on his voice. Thomas’s whistle stopped and he chuckled.

‘All the better for knowing you’re listening.’ Cassie smiled and heard him shuffling across his mattress. ‘Hey, Cassie, can I ask you a question?’

‘Sure.’

‘What’s the first thing you’d do if we ever got out of here?’

‘Tom, you know I don’t—’

‘I know, I know. Hypothetical. Come on, what would you do?’

‘Don’t know,’ she sighed. Sometimes Thomas would push his luck and try to talk of their future, but it was the only area she would be reluctant to entertain. ‘What would you do?’

‘Well, I’ve been thinking. I would like to take you out for a beer.’

Cassie laughed. ‘American beer is terrible.’

‘Doesn’t have to be American. How about German? That’s where I was last anyway. I reckon we must be in the same continent, so if we escaped then we could get to Germany, find some little bar somewhere with tables out front. Tall glass of blonde beer each, watch the world go by.’

‘Sounds like you’ve thought this through,’ Cassie mused, a smile growing as she pictured the scene, not wanting to open up to the possibilities but finding the idea irresistible.

‘Sure have. Can you imagine actually seeing each other while we talk? I mean, if it’s too much we could just sit back to back, I wouldn’t be offended.’ Cassie laughed softly, and she felt her cheeks heating as she suddenly realised what he was suggesting.

‘Are you asking me out on a date?’

‘Sure sounds like it,’ Thomas replied dryly, and Cassie’s smile stretched even wider. She rubbed her chin scar self-consciously, not sure how to respond. ‘So come on, what would you do?’ Thomas pressed.

‘I’d like to do that,’ she said softly. ‘Exactly what you said.’

‘Okay, cool. It’s a date,’ he replied, a lightness in his voice. Cassie let silence descend, her own smile souring as the cruelty of the situation sank in. Escape

was an impossibility, and Thomas had survived all of his fights for now, but as his strength grew, so too would the difficulty of his opponents. Each trip into the Hall could be his last.

When Hank came later that day, Cassie was almost relieved to see him enter her pen, much preferring to leave Thomas worrying about her safety than the other way around. Hank had a bounce to his step that made her instantly suspicious, but on entering the Hall she found herself alone and the opposite door remained closed. No matter how many times she had done this, she still felt a rush of dread and excitement just before a fight, and she chewed her lip impatiently, scuffing the ground with her bare feet while her eyes were locked on the far door. The sound of her own opening behind her made her spin on her heel and at once break into a smile as she saw Thomas walk in.

‘Hey.’ He grinned, ruffling his hair as he trotted towards her. ‘Fancy meeting you here.’ He scanned the Hall and his smile dropped slightly. ‘Looks like it’s the two of us then?’

‘So far,’ she muttered, a sense of foreboding growing as a disturbing idea formed. Thomas seemed to be thinking the same thing as he looked at her with a more serious expression.

‘It’s not *just* the two of us, is it?’ He sounded concerned. ‘Because, well, that’s me dead then, I guess.’ He laughed, but there was an unfamiliar energy behind it. She gave him a wry smile, hoping to hide her own unease, but they both uttered audible sighs of relief as the opposite door began to roll upwards. The sighs were choked in surprise at what stalked through to join them.

‘What. The fuck. Is that?’ Thomas hissed.

Cassie studied the low-lying lizard entering the Hall, its muscular legs carrying it smoothly forwards, a slim collar loosely encasing a thick neck. Its legs looked bolted on the side of its body in an awkward manner, but the power that was suggested within its lean frame was unnerving, and though it was not even waist height, it looked longer than Thomas was tall.

‘I think it’s a Komodo dragon,’ Cassie said under her breath, watching its head bob from side to side as it walked, a long yellow forked tongue tasting the air repeatedly.

‘You ever fought a reptile before?’

Cassie shook her head. ‘Another one for your list,’ she said, shrugging.

‘There are no weapons in here,’ Thomas whispered in her ear. ‘What are we supposed to do? That thing’s made of armour.’

‘Its bite is poisonous too,’ she whispered back, experiencing a brief flash of some documentary she’d watched with Jessica on their musty old couch.

‘Brilliant,’ Thomas snorted, snapping her back to the present. ‘Okay. So, try not to get bitten. What else do we do?’

Cassie ignored him, deep in thought. ‘How heavy do you think it is?’ she asked quietly. The dragon hadn’t shifted from its current spot, as if it was waiting for their first move.

‘I don’t know,’ Thomas replied. ‘You reckon you can pick it up? It’d bite your face off before you got chance.’

‘Maybe I can get it from behind. Just need a diversion to keep its front end busy.’ She pointedly turned her head towards Thomas, who raised his eyebrows in return.

‘So I’m bait, then?’

‘Unless you think you could lift it?’ Cassie offered, and he twisted the corners of his mouth in a defeated expression that she had never seen him make before. She wondered how many times he had in the seclusion of their cages and marvelled at how she knew so much about him now and yet so little.

‘Okay. Bait it is,’ he sighed, breaking her thoughts.

‘Don’t get bitten.’ She patted him on the back, and he gave her a sarcastic thumbs up then broke into a slow jog away from her, his movement triggering the Komodo dragon to burst into pursuit. The lizard was surprisingly fast, considering the heft of it, and Thomas’s jog turned into a run, while Cassie set off on her own trajectory towards the rear of the dragon.

The gap between dragon and Thomas was about a metre when Cassie caught

up to them, and she grasped the lizard's tail. It immediately whipped its head around towards her and she let go, leaping backwards to avoid contact. The dragon uttered a deep, guttural growl, shifting its weight from side to side as it squared up against her. Cassie started to back away slowly, but the dragon darted for her with such velocity that she had no choice but to turn and run, pumping her arms and covering the distance of the Hall quickly. As she reached the far wall, she glanced over her shoulder and saw she'd made a considerable gap between them, but realised it was because Thomas had caught its attention and was currently being chased in the opposite direction.

She cursed and set off for them, her line of approach direct compared to the zigging and zagging Thomas was managing, so she reached them quickly. She grabbed the tail in both hands, but yet again the dragon spun around and lunged, narrowly missing her wrists with its jaws. Cassie turned on her heel and ran away, the scrape of claws echoing in her ears as it pursued her. She could soon hear Thomas shouting her name and saw he was the bait again, the dragon terrifyingly quick.

Grateful for her running drills in the gym, Cassie set off once more, but this time the dragon swiped Thomas off his feet with its front claws before she had caught up with them. He sprawled face down and the dragon moved to pin him, but Cassie dived with her hands outstretched and caught its tail. The dragon's progress was halted, but it flicked its thick tail from her palms and twisted to face her, hissing with an open mouth full of jagged teeth. Cassie scrambled to her feet and backed away.

'This is impossible,' she breathed heavily, beginning to tire from the repeated sprints. The dragon looked like it was fatiguing too, not bursting into speed but advancing towards her slowly. Thomas climbed to his feet behind it, panting and rubbing his elbows.

'It's fucking fast,' he rasped. Cassie continued to back away as the dragon's tongue flicked at her constantly.

'It's turning too quickly. I haven't had time to get a decent hold yet.'

'Okay. Guess it needs a bigger distraction then.'

'What does that mean?' she asked in alarm, but Thomas didn't answer. He seemed to gather himself, then strode towards the back of the dragon and kicked

its flank. The animal spun around but Thomas didn't move, his leg still outstretched, and Cassie couldn't warn him in time before the dragon lunged forwards and sank its teeth into his calf.

'Jesus!' she shouted. 'What the hell are you doing?'

'Fucking distraction!' Thomas spluttered as the dragon tossed its head and pulled him to the floor. Cassie was frozen for a moment, staring at the scene dumbly until Thomas yelled in pain and snapped her back into focus. She wrapped her hands firmly around the base of the dragon's tail, and as its teeth were solidly clamped on to Thomas's leg, she was able to lift the back end of its body into the air without interruption. Thomas groaned loudly as the dragon shook its head, wrenching his leg as its jaws shifted.

'Pull it off me!' he shrieked.

'It'll take your leg off!' The dragon's back legs were catching her forearms and raking red tracks across them with its long claws. She clenched her jaw and tried a bit of traction on its body, but as she suspected, the dragon's teeth just pulled on his flesh and made him scream louder.

'Kick it!' Cassie shouted at Thomas, who was holding his leg around the knee with both hands, his free foot flailing. 'Kick it in the face!' she commanded, and he started to stamp his foot into its nose.

After several kicks, Cassie felt the resistance from the dragon begin to give, and it opened its mouth just enough for her to pull it off him. She stepped back with the rear end of the dragon in her hands, then began to spin on the spot, moving fast enough that the front of the animal skimmed the floor, its forelegs writhing ineffectually. Then, like a hammer throw, she released her hold, and its body sailed through the air, hitting the wall with a dull thud before falling to the ground in a motionless heap. Cassie smiled triumphantly and turned to Thomas, who was now curled on the floor, whimpering and clutching his leg.

'Are you okay?' She dropped beside him, glancing at his shredded calf with concern.

'No,' he managed. 'But that was fucking awesome.' He smiled through trembling lips, the rest of his body shaking unnaturally. Cassie looked to their door and frowned at the inactivity.

‘Where are they?’ she muttered to herself. The medics were normally quick to enter after a fight had finished. Thomas grunted softly by her side and Cassie stood up, holding out her hands in the direction of the door where she presumed they were waiting.

‘Where are you?’ she shouted. ‘He’s poisoned. Get the medics in here.’ Nothing happened, and she looked back down at Thomas, who was a quivering ball, her concern for him converting into a bubbling anger. She strode towards the door and slammed her palm against it, making a heavy thud. ‘Hey! Get in here!’

‘Cassie.’

She turned to see that Thomas was pointing over at the dragon’s body. It was starting to move. She made a gruff sound in the back of her throat, then turned back to shout through the door.

‘Fight is over, it’s done.’

She paused, but there was no response, and her anger boiled into rage that compelled her to punch the door, the metallic bang echoing around the entire Hall. She pulled her fist away, her knuckles spotted with fresh blood, a perfect fist print denting the metal, and she growled as she turned to survey the Hall.

Thomas was still in a foetal position on the floor, the dragon several metres away. She could see it was starting to move its limbs and the tip of its tongue was slowly emerging. If she could reach it before it regained full consciousness, she was sure she could kill it cleanly, especially with the force of fury currently rushing through her bloodstream. She started towards it but suddenly became gripped by a shock, her legs entwining clumsily as she fell onto her front and spasmed face down on the floor. As the shock abated, her body sank deeper and she gasped for breath, confused by the punishment. She lifted her head and saw the dragon was now on its feet and moving across the Hall straight towards Thomas, who was still inert on the floor where she’d left him.

‘Tom!’ she shouted, and he cried out in alarm, starting to scrabble away on his elbows. Cassie shakily pushed up to her hands and knees, bracing to burst into a sprint, but a second shock hit and her arms collapsed, sending her face crashing into the floor. She writhed, teeth grating, unable to see anything except the ground pressing into her eyes, desperately trying to raise her head but powerless

against the force of her own spasming muscles. The shock subsided and her limp body melted, but a yell brought her to her senses and she rose to her forearms in a panic as dribble dripped from her chin. The dragon was now on top of Thomas, and her heart squeezed into her throat.

‘Tom!’ she screamed. From this angle she couldn’t see what was happening clearly enough, and she made to get up, but yelled in despair as she felt the wave of a third shock. Her ears buzzed with the urgency of the situation, but she was helpless, barely able to breathe with the rigidity around her ribcage, and as her body relaxed she gasped for air but nothing seemed to enter. There was an evolving pressure filling her chest that felt eerily familiar, and she pushed the heel of her hand into her sternum, grunting through clenched teeth, darkness bleeding into the peripheries of her vision as she managed a single gasp while an unseen hand crushed her from the inside.

If she died then Thomas was dead. If she passed out then Thomas was dead. If she stayed still then Thomas was dead.

Unless he was dead already. Maybe she shouldn’t fight this.

She moaned through parted lips but suddenly heard her name being shouted, and with tremendous effort lifted her head to see that the dragon was standing over Thomas but was being held back by his outstretched arms. There was still hope. There was still time. Mentally willing the pressure in her chest to go fuck itself, Cassie set her jaw and climbed to her feet, pausing in anticipation but finding there were no more shocks and she was able to stagger towards Thomas. As she got closer, she could see fresh wounds on his body, but he was holding the dragon’s mouth closed with both hands, his arms locked out straight and his head pressed back into the floor with a pained determination etched across his face.

Cassie tottered towards them, dishevelled and frothing a little at the mouth but determined to end this. She swung a leg over the pair of them and straddled the dragon’s back, inching her feet forwards until she reached its shoulders. She could see Thomas’s fingers losing purchase around the dragon’s snout as it jostled its head side to side, so she bent down and wrapped her own hands around his, clamping the dragon’s jaws closed as she rested a knee on its upper back, and with a sharp twist she guided Thomas in breaking its neck.

Their eyes met over the deceased beast, Thomas staring up at her in astonishment, Cassie overwhelmingly relieved that she had made it in time. But then she considered just how close she had come to losing him and how the whole thing had been an unfair setup, and her top lip rose into a snarl. She shimmied backwards until her legs were clear of the dragon's body, taking it by the tail and pulling it roughly off Thomas, then put her foot on the dragon like a proud victor and held her arms open towards the door provocatively.

A moment later the door rolled up and the medics entered with a gurney, Hank strolling in behind them, laughing and clapping his hands. Cassie clenched her fists, her rage reignited so powerfully that it burned her raw chest, and with a rumbling growl she stepped off the dragon, lifted its body into the air and threw it towards Hank. As the body left her hands, she burst into a sprint.

Hank seemed so distracted by the Komodo missile that he didn't notice Cassie's charge, and she was at full speed when he jumped backwards with a surprised cry, pressing the collar control frantically. The shock was not enough to curtail her propulsion instantly, allowing her to gain a further few feet before her spasming legs tripped each other up and sent her skidding across the floor on her front. She juddered, but her gaze was set on Hank with steely focus. He was barely an arm's length away and was now backing up, wide-eyed and frightened.

'Tranq her!' he shouted, and someone appeared behind him with a rifle, firing a dart that pierced her shoulder. The shock stopped and she bowed her head, waiting for the drugs to take her away, but her fury had not abated and was giving her an energy she had never felt before.

She lifted her head slowly, and while maintaining eye contact with Hank, she began to crawl forwards using her arms, fingers clawing at the floor, breath rasping, feeling like the lizard she had just destroyed. A second dart hit her but she didn't stop, the Hall began to spin but she didn't stop, her movements became slow and clumsy but she didn't stop. Hank's face was her target, and she kept on crawling until she was finally shrouded in black.

*

Voices penetrated the fog. Her vision flickered and she was dazzled by bright lights, so she closed her eyes again and concentrated on her other senses. She was on her back, on a soft surface with restrictive pressure around her arms and

legs. Tied to a medical bed, no doubt. She focused in on the voices, picking out Hank and Doctor Jackson, the volume suggesting they were at a distance. Cassie kept her eyes shut to maintain the illusion that she was still sedated and tuned her ears to the doctor's words.

‘... IV antibiotics for a few days. I expect he will make a full recovery,’ Doctor Jackson was saying, and Cassie gave a soft sigh. Thomas must be okay.

‘And this one?’ Hank’s voice, louder as footsteps drew close. Cassie did her best to keep her breathing even and light so they could not spot any signs of consciousness.

‘Our tests show she may have suffered a cardiac arrest, but it is not clear how she did not need intervention,’ Doctor Jackson said.

‘Right. But did you see how that didn’t stop her? Incredible stuff.’ Hank sounded proud, and Cassie felt her brow furrow, fighting to maintain the illusion she was still under.

‘It is not clear if it was a result of her level of infusion or from the extended shocks. Certainly it is something we need to be monitoring.’

‘Sure. Okay, for him add in another infusion while he’s under, should help with the healing time.’

‘And what about her?’ Doctor Jackson asked.

‘No, no more of that shit. She’s enhanced enough. Just re-sedate her so we can transfer her back to her cage.’

‘I meant, what are you going to do about her?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have worked with her for a long time, and I do not think I have seen her make an attack like that before.’

‘She was feral when I took her, Janos made sure of that. It’s nothing new.’

‘I would not use “feral” to describe what I saw. Something has changed. She

is acting more... human.'

'Human? Seriously?' Hank exclaimed. 'Did you hear her growl?'

'She was very angry, and it was all directed at you. What have you done to her?'

'Nothing to do with me,' Hank snorted. 'Isn't it obvious? It's that guy. They're penned next to each other, go to the gym together. Quite the little relationship going on there.' Cassie could feel her cheeks burning, and it took all her resolve to keep herself still.

'She was angry because you put him at risk?'

'Yup.' Hank sniffed.

'So what are you going to do?' Doctor Jackson asked again, and Cassie felt herself beginning to panic. She knew her temper was an issue, and now it was going to be the end of Thomas. She had ruined everything with her stupid stunt. They were going to be separated and it was all her fault.

'Why would I do anything?' Hank said nonchalantly, and Cassie was confused, but Doctor Jackson inhaled sharply with understanding.

'You have done this on purpose? Why do you want her to be more human?'

'Because she threw a Komodo dragon at me!' Hank exclaimed, laughing. 'Do you know what reaction that got upstairs? They fucking loved it. They've seen boosted men before just mindlessly bashing animals about – it's old news. But this one's always had some flair about her, and ever since she got attached to that other guy, she's become so unpredictable. Do you know how many permutations there were in the betting today? How much in-play action was going on? I don't need any other stock when I've got this one.'

'She nearly caught you today. Is this not dangerous?'

'I maybe pushed one too many buttons, but she'll be fine. I treat her well, got her trusting me. I can keep her in control.' Hank sounded smug, and it took all of Cassie's strength to hold still on the bed. She felt sick. She was such an idiot. Hank had played her perfectly and she'd fallen right for it.

‘And what happens if the boy is killed? What becomes of her then?’ Doctor Jackson pressed, and Cassie was grateful for her curiosity.

‘Ah, we’ll control how and when that happens,’ Hank said confidently. ‘Let the soap opera run its course and then build up to the big event. It’ll be a sell-out.’ Cassie’s blood ran cold.

‘You have this all worked out,’ Doctor Jackson declared haughtily.

‘Yeah. And you can look at me like that all you want, but I didn’t ask for your opinion.’ Hank’s tone had rapidly hardened, and Cassie could imagine his stance had become more intimidating to the small doctor too. ‘So do your job and keep out of everything else. We’re still watching you, so no more big ideas either, or next time you’ll get left in there.’

Cassie heard the heavy thud of Hank’s boots moving away, then became aware of a presence beside her. She fluttered open her eyes and found herself staring directly up at Doctor Jackson. They surveyed each other for a moment while Doctor Jackson added an injection to her IV line, and before the room faded to dark again, she was sure she saw the doctor mouth the words ‘keep him safe’.

twenty

She wondered how much longer she would have in this paradise. She should be making the most of it, squeezing out every last ounce of actual enjoyment while she still could, just as Thomas had once ordered.

*

Cassie held the man by the throat, his legs kicking in the air, his face turning purple, and she growled softly, ready to finish the job, ready to punish the man who had first put her in a cage. She spotted Hank in the distance, laughing and clapping his hands, and then she heard a familiar voice whispering her name over and over again, and when she looked back she saw that it was Thomas in her grasp, pawing at her hand and pleading for her to stop, but she can already feel her fingers starting to close and she can't pull them back, and Hank is laughing louder now and Thomas's eyes are wide and bulging and Cassie is screaming.

She woke with an audible groan, a palpable panic in her gut as she flailed her arms to dispel the dream. Her elbows collided with the bars of her cage, causing them to rattle, and the sound made her wince, her head strangely foggy and swollen. She lifted her hands to her face and paused, finding that her right forearm and wrist were encased in a slim cast. Puzzled, she studied her arm silently, wriggling the fingers and thumb that were peeping out of the top of the splint.

'You awake?' Thomas whispered, and she grunted in reply, rubbing her forehead gingerly with her left hand as she searched her memories. 'Are you okay?'

'No,' she moaned. 'My arm's in a cast. What happened?'

'How does it feel?'

'Why is it in a cast?' she pressed, alarmed at how little she could remember.

'I guess it's broken?' Thomas replied, sounding unsurprised. Cassie grimaced at her arm, and in response a dull ache began to pulse inside her wrist.

‘How? I can’t remember anything.’ She rubbed her eyes, her head throbbing horribly.

‘Oh, shit. Do you remember us in the Hall?’

Cassie paused, waiting for any recollection, but there was nothing.

‘No,’ she sighed.

‘What, not at all?’ Thomas laughed a little.

‘Remind me,’ she said dryly.

‘It was just me and you at first, and then these two horses came in. The platform was raised, and the horses charged us so we jumped up there first to make a plan.’ Cassie closed her eyes, searching for something recognisable in what he was telling her. Through the gloom came the feeling of crouching next to him on the platform. The smell of the horses. The sound of their hooves. The pleasant press of his body against hers. And then...

‘There was someone else?’ she ventured.

‘Yes, that’s it! Some new guy came in, out of his mind. We called to him but he had no chance down there. We didn’t want to watch.’ There was a flash of a memory. Withdrawing so that the platform’s edge obscured her view of the carnage. Wincing at the sounds coming from below. The soft touch of Thomas’s hand on hers making goosebumps travel up her arm. Her face softened.

‘I think I remember that.’

‘You do?’ He sounded hopeful, and she waited for the rest of the memories to flow, but nothing else came.

‘Not what happened to my arm, though. How did I break it?’

‘Jesus,’ Thomas laughed. ‘You were just... I mean, I never thought I’d see anything like that.’

‘Tell me!’ she moaned.

‘After it was over and we knew that the guy was dead, you got really angry. Like, really, really angry.’ This felt familiar, and Cassie opened her eyes, rubbing the scar on her chin with her good hand. ‘You just launched yourself off the platform straight at one of the horses. I didn’t get a chance to stop you, not that I could’ve done anything anyway.’ He chuckled. ‘It was like out of a movie. You landed on one of the horses and it didn’t even know you were coming. It was still standing over the other guy, and then you were on top of it and I guess broke its neck? I don’t know how, it was so quick, and then it fell like a tonne of bricks, and you leapt off it and landed on your feet like this insane superhero.’

‘Oh.’ It was starting to fall into place. ‘And my arm?’

‘Well, the second horse reared up at you, and I saw you put your hand out to stop it, and it bit you.’

‘It bit me?’ She frowned, rubbing her cast.

‘It got your arm in its mouth and chomped down.’

‘Oh.’ Her wrist spasmed with the memory. The immense pressure, the horse’s nostrils flared and wet, its lips velvety against her arm, a sense of her bones splintering, bile in her mouth.

‘I could hear the crunch from where I was,’ Thomas said quietly. ‘It was awful. I was about to jump down to you when—’ He burst out in surprised laughter. ‘I can’t believe you don’t remember.’

‘What?!’

‘You punched it!’ he exclaimed. ‘You punched the horse, right in the face.’

Cassie let out a single shrill laugh. The memory wasn’t fully formed yet, but the impact of her fist making contact came through.

‘Oh yeah...it was the only thing I could think of to make it let go.’

‘Yeah, well you punched a horse with your left hand and you fucking floored it. But it fell on top of you, and you hit your head, got knocked out cold. Then they stopped everything and took you away.’

‘No wonder my head hurts so much. How long was I gone?’

‘It all happened yesterday.’

‘Not long then,’ she mused, rubbing her temple again.

‘Long enough,’ Thomas snorted. ‘I thought you were dead. That thing was so big and you were so still. Hank wouldn’t tell me if you were okay or not.’ She heard him sniff and the sound of water sloshing from a bottle.

‘I’ll be okay,’ she soothed, stretching out her arm and bending it back again to examine the cast more closely. Only her wrist joint was immobilised, the rest of the arm free to move, and she could flex each finger and wriggle her thumb. She exhaled slowly, relieved that the damage seemed limited. If she lost use of an arm then she might not be of use to Hank anymore, and he might sell her to the ‘labs’ that she had heard about, which she presumed was a one-way trip. ‘I don’t think it’s too bad. I got lucky.’

‘You were stupid,’ Thomas snapped, and Cassie blinked in surprise, taken aback by the ice in his voice.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Why did you just jump into battle like that? We were in there together; we could have figured out a better plan.’

‘My plan worked out fine. We got out alive, didn’t we?’

‘Two of us working as a team would have been better than some crazy kamikaze dive.’

‘Well, I guess I thought I could finish it by myself.’ She shrugged defensively, unnerved by the vitriol in his voice.

‘But you didn’t have to do that. You don’t need to protect me, Cassie. I’m pretty strong now, I could have helped.’

‘I know you can handle yourself. I must have seen an opening and I had to act quickly. I don’t know, I can’t really remember what I was thinking.’

‘It was reckless. You could’ve been killed. Is that how you normally fight, just throw yourself in there and hope for the best?’

Cassie felt her own temper flare, and she glowered at the bars of her cage. ‘Well, it’s worked pretty well so far.’

‘Yeah, and look how much damage you’ve suffered because of it. Honestly, Cassie, you’ve got to think about your tactics more.’

Her eyes opened wide incredulously. ‘This coming from the guy who stuck his leg in a dragon’s mouth?’ she scoffed.

‘That was part of the plan, and I knew you had my back. You just acted on a whim – you didn’t think about what you were doing, you didn’t consider the risks.’ Cassie groaned and rolled her eyes, wishing she could storm off right now, her headache pulsing in time with the thud of her heart. ‘You need to be more careful, Cassie. You need to take more responsibility for your safety.’

‘God, you sound just like Jessica,’ she spat.

‘Who?’ Thomas shot back, and Cassie froze, the name repeating in her mind, the person whose existence she had clung to in the beginning, the person she had buried beneath a mound of emotional debris only to have her poke holes through the weak spots because it was just like Jessica to be so fucking relentless, it was just like her to find a way to be there for her no matter how hard Cassie pushed her away.

‘My sister,’ she said through dry lips, and Thomas was silent while Cassie felt the words burn her chest.

‘I didn’t know you had a sister,’ he said at length, his voice quieter and sombre.

‘Well, she’s just as condescending as you.’ Cassie sniffed, wiping moisture from her eyes. ‘I think you’d get on really well.’ She could feel the tension deflating between them and heard a deep sigh coming from Thomas’s side.

‘I’m sorry. I got mad because I’ve been so worried about you.’

‘There’s Jess again.’ Cassie laughed sadly, and Thomas groaned.

‘Listen. I know you have this amazing strength, and you’re so fucking brave all the time, but it feels like you forget how much danger we’re in.’

‘If you had any idea,’ Cassie scoffed, catching herself before she said too much.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’ She cringed, and after a pause Thomas tutted.

‘You’re acting like it doesn’t matter what happens to you.’

‘Well, maybe it doesn’t,’ Cassie said frankly.

‘You don’t care if you live or die?’ Cassie held her tongue, not sure she could give a sincere response that would satisfy him, and she heard him sigh again.

‘The thing is, I do care, okay? I care what happens to you. It wasn’t fun seeing you under that horse.’

‘Okay,’ she said softly.

‘I need you to care.’ Thomas sounded weary. ‘I need you to be more careful. I need you around. I don’t think I can do this without you, Cassie.’

‘Okay.’ Cassie rolled to her side and hugged her arms to her body, grateful that Thomas couldn’t see her right now or he’d spot the sadness in her eyes and start asking endless questions in the only way that Thomas knew how. It had been several weeks since they had tackled the Komodo dragon together, and she had chosen to keep what she had overheard to herself, not sure how she could tell Thomas that he was just a pawn or admit that Hank’s tactics to make her bond with him had completely worked and she had been so easy to manipulate. Hank had turned her into a turbulent killer, and she had been *grateful* towards him. All it took was a chatty neighbour, a sliver of compassion and a fucking mattress, a shitty mattress no less. She was such an idiot.

She had to keep up the pretence of quiet appreciation whenever Hank gifted her an update on Thomas after his solo fights, pretending that he was still doing her a favour, pretending that she didn’t want to rip out his throat with her fingertips, hiding her hands beneath her legs so he couldn’t see her clenched fists, panting when he had gone from the scale of her rage and bursting into

furious push-ups to dispel the thrumming in her chest otherwise she would scream.

Each time she had gone into the Hall her heart would leap at a door opening in case she'd see Thomas coming through. The horses had been the first joint venture since the dragon, and although the details of the fight were still hazy, she could remember how she felt up there on the platform, the mixture of sheer panic that this was going to be Thomas's endgame with the prickling thrill of such physical contact with him. She remembered looking down at his hand on top of hers as they crouched together and in that moment knowing that she had to keep Thomas out of harm's way by tackling everything as quickly and independently as she could, while still providing enough of a spectacle to entertain Hank. She recalled now that her dive onto the horse had been deliberately showy, and she had allowed the horse to bite her, a conscious error to inject some jeopardy. Her plan seemed to have worked – Thomas was safe for now – but how much longer could she stave off the inevitable?

She uncurled herself and rolled to her back, stroking the cast on her arm and chewing her lip. There were only so many times she could sacrifice herself like this before she failed. There was only so much time left until Hank took Thomas away from her.

'Tom?' she said meekly into the heavy silence, and he grunted an acknowledgement. 'I do care if I die.'

'Good.'

'I care if you die too.'

'Thanks.'

'But...' She pressed her lips together as she weighed up the right words. 'I don't think I can live like this anymore.'

'Oh.' Thomas sounded unsure. 'What does that mean?'

'I think it's time we left.'

*

Cassie had placated Thomas's growing excitement at her declaration by telling him they should wait until they were sharing the gym to talk freely, which was enough to convince him to curtail the rest of the conversation and gave Cassie time to think about what she wanted to do. She hadn't considered escape for a long time, and though the original issues still remained, she had new variables to consider. She was faster and stronger, and now there were two of them. The odds were stacked a little differently to before.

The next day Cassie was fixed to a bed to have her arm scanned, after which she was made to wait in the treatment room with Hank. Ever since the near miss, Hank had taken on more precautions around her, keeping his thumb over the collar control button the whole time he was with her and having two companions always accompany him with tranq rifles slung around their shoulders. He still kept up his casual demeanour, but she could tell he was even more watchful than before, which meant escape was not going to be an option if he was in the room. One wrong move and he would shock her instantly. Cassie ruminated on that fact as Doctor Jackson entered holding a clipboard.

'Everything good?' Hank asked.

'Her injury is healing much quicker than we could ever have expected,' she said with a frown.

'That's good.' Hank beamed, but the doctor's brow remained furrowed. 'What's wrong?'

'It is unprecedented. I do not know what this will mean for the future.'

'It means she can get back out there more quickly, which is surely a good thing?'

'It is not clear what such accelerated healing will do in the long term. We have never had this data before.' Hank sauntered over to her and peered at the paperwork in her hands.

'Is this your report for the labs?' He pressed a finger into the paper, and Doctor Jackson nodded. Hank's eyebrows raised alongside a mischievous grin, and he pulled a sheet out of the clipboard, scrunched it into a ball and threw it overarm into a bin. 'These hack-proof systems work in my favour sometimes, eh?' Doctor Jackson looked at him in shock, but Hank shrugged a shoulder at

her. 'The labs have a habit of pissing on my parade. Let's keep their noses out of this one for now. Baxter can fill his boots further down the line.' He winked at Cassie, and she regarded him coldly, unsure whether he'd just done her a favour or not.

Doctor Jackson removed the cast from Cassie's arm and replaced it with a slim splint to support her wrist. She couldn't give them an idea of when Cassie would be fit to fight again, but she did clear her to go back in the gym as long as she was careful, and Cassie tried to hide her excitement. The gym was her opportunity to talk to Thomas. She'd had an idea, and it might just be the answer they were looking for.

She was taken to the gym the following day and set off on a lazy lap of the hall, waiting and hoping that Thomas would not be long behind her. Sure enough, as she started her second loop, the door opened and Thomas entered, matching her stride as she passed him so that he followed close behind her. It took less effort for Thomas to keep up now they had started to give him the infusions, but Cassie still had to slow considerably for them to talk. After a lap in silence, she began to speak, low and expressionless to avoid making a scene for the cameras.

'If I can get rid of this collar then they can't control me, and that's our way out,' she said determinedly. Thomas didn't speak for a moment, as if he was thinking through what she had said, then he came back with:

'But how do you get the collar off?'

'They'd have to remove it if there was a medical emergency.'

'What sort of emergency?'

'I reckon a neck wound would do it.' Cassie kept her eyes ahead and her voice steady, knowing that the path she was about to lead Thomas down would be difficult to navigate without some objections.

'A neck wound...' Thomas echoed. 'Wait, are you talking about stabbing yourself in the throat?' His voice had risen in pitch.

'If you tilt your head back you can make a big enough gap to get something underneath, just like I did with the lions.'

‘Shit, Cassie, you can’t do that to yourself.’

‘You’re right. I can’t. The wound needs to be bad enough to be an emergency but not so bad that it kills me. So, I’d need your help.’ She put on a burst of speed and left him in her wake, hoping that by the time she caught back up with him, he would have processed what she was telling him and realised it was their only option. Cassie lapped the Hall at speed and reached Thomas’s side again, disappointed to see his expression had hardened and he was shaking his head.

‘I’m not doing that. No way.’

‘You’re the only one who can,’ Cassie urged, dropping her speed again to keep beside him. ‘Animals are too unpredictable and I can’t trust any of the other people in here. You’re the only one who can do this the way that I need.’

‘No no no,’ Thomas interrupted. ‘It’s way too risky, I could kill you.’

‘I heal much faster now; I heard the doctor say they’ve never seen anything like it. I think it’s worth the risk.’

‘No, it’s not,’ Thomas said sternly. ‘We’ve talked about this. It’s not okay if you die.’

‘I know, but I think this is a real opportunity. Unless you’ve got any better ideas?’

‘I don’t know, I’d need more time to think.’

‘Well, I’ve had plenty of time, I’ve tried other ways and they’ve not ended well. We can never win against the shock collars, don’t you see? This is the only choice we have.’

‘You’re wrong,’ Thomas said defiantly. ‘We can choose to carry on surviving, just like we’ve been doing all this time.’

‘That’s not sustainable.’

‘We’ve lasted this long.’

‘But we’re running out of time,’ Cassie hissed.

‘We can talk again the next time we’re in here.’ Thomas shrugged, obviously not understanding what Cassie meant, and she cringed as they continued to run, knowing she had to tell him everything in order to make him truly understand.

‘No, Tom, *we’re* running out of time,’ she managed. ‘I don’t know how much longer we’ll be together.’ It took Cassie a moment before she realised that Thomas had stopped, and she let her steps peter to a halt, turning to face him with a grimace.

‘What are you talking about?’ Thomas asked, walking towards her with a confused look on his face, and Cassie dropped her gaze to deliver the news.

‘They’re using you to get to me.’

‘What?’

‘They keep putting you in danger to get a rise out of me.’

‘Oh come on, who says this is all about you?’ he scoffed, and Cassie looked up meekly, Thomas now in front of her and looking angrier than usual.

‘Tom,’ she said sadly. ‘It is—’

‘Everything doesn’t revolve around you, this isn’t the Cassie show,’ he snapped, but Cassie raised her voice over his.

‘I heard Hank. He was talking to Doctor Jackson. He said he’d set this whole thing up with me and you.’ Thomas’s anger seemed to deflate, and he shook his head briefly, as if he couldn’t understand what she was saying.

‘When did you hear this?’

‘After I threw that lizard at him. He said he put us together so we’d bond and I’d have something to care about.’

‘Why would he do that?’

‘Because when they put you at risk, then I lose my shit and it makes everything so much more entertaining for those bastards watching.’ She looked into his eyes and could feel her lips trembling, her emotions bursting to the

surface with no way to hide them. ‘And it’s worked just like Hank wanted, because you’re the only reason I’m still here, you’re the only thing that I care about and I can’t lose you.’ She began to break down. Thomas wrapped his arms around her and Cassie melted into his embrace, momentarily powerless to resist and too spent of energy to tell him anything more. Instead, she clenched her fists into his chest and whispered, ‘I can’t lose you, Tom. I just can’t, I just can’t.’

‘Shh, it’s okay. We’ll figure this out,’ he soothed, holding her for a moment longer and then stepping away. Cassie wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands, conscious of being watched not just by Thomas but by whoever was manning the cameras, and as if reading her thoughts, Thomas glanced to the corners of the ceiling and sighed, then motioned towards the weights in the centre of the room. Cassie nodded, and as they walked together, Thomas smacked his lips and gave an elaborate shrug.

‘So Hank’s messing us about? That’s okay. I bet we can play him at his own game.’ He stooped to pick up a dumbbell and lifted it over his head, dipping beneath it to add, ‘Suicide isn’t the answer.’ Cassie’s shoulders drooped. He just wasn’t getting it.

‘It’s not suicide if you do it right. I’m so much stronger now, the minute I get this collar off I’ll be unstoppable. I know I can do it.’

‘And then what?’ He was half-heartedly dipping the weight behind his head, his expression uncharacteristically serious. ‘Say it works and your collar’s off. What do you do?’

‘I get Hank, use his bracelet to free you, and we run.’

‘They could just tranq you.’

‘They’d need two shots to put me under and I’m too fast now. I’d kill them before they could shoot.’

‘Jesus,’ Thomas muttered almost to himself. ‘It’s so risky, so many things could go wrong. Can’t we just—’

‘Tom, you need to understand what I’m telling you,’ Cassie hissed, and Thomas paused with the weight held mid-air. ‘Hank said he will control how and when they are going to kill you. And I just know that they will make me watch.

I'm not coming back from that.' Thomas lowered the weight very slowly and pressed his lips together, the colour draining from his cheeks.

'I mean, I wouldn't be coming back from that either.' They both gave the slightest of smiles, and Thomas took a deep breath while he ruffled his hair, his composure softening. 'Can you let me think about it?' Cassie nodded silently, and he shook his head sadly at her. 'You've been keeping this to yourself for a while, huh? Is that why you did all that with the horses?' Cassie shrugged, her eyes filling up again, and Thomas stepped towards her with his arms outstretched. This time she flinched and shook her head, wordlessly motioning that she was going to run again, and she set off around the Hall away from him, away from the shadow of foreboding that had grown around Thomas, away from the desire to fold into his arms again and never leave.

They barely spoke once they were back in their cages, and when the light went out Cassie settled herself on the mattress, lying on her side and tucking her hands up by her face so she could hug her wrist splint protectively. Thomas was obviously still deep in thought, and though there was an urgency to the situation, she was hopeful that her broken wrist had bought them a little time. She wasn't tired but closed her eyes to shut out the depth of the night that often found a way to form shapes that looked like her dead Handler swinging at the side of her cage. After a while, Thomas's voice popped into the silence.

'Okay, we use your plan,' he said quietly, and Cassie opened her eyes in surprise. 'But the other way around. You do it to me instead. I'll do the plan.'

'No.' Cassie shook her head to herself. 'You're not strong enough.'

'You don't know that.'

'I know I'm stronger than you, so I'm the best chance.' He was quiet again, and she could almost hear him wrestling with himself. 'You don't have to be a gentleman about this. I can punch a horse unconscious, remember.'

'I know. I know you're right. But I don't like it.'

'It's not something I'm overjoyed about either. But it's time.'

*

They spent the next few gym sessions plotting and disagreeing until they developed a more concrete plan. Cassie's wrist healed quickly and her splint was removed after a week, her arm put to the test in several solo fights where it posed no problem. Each time she entered the Hall she would watch her door with trepidation, in two minds as to whether she wanted Thomas to join her or not. The pressure of waiting for the day to trigger their plan was almost unbearable, but the reality of putting it into action terrified her and she would feel a sense of relief when he didn't show up, any adrenaline left over from the anti-climax channelled into a violent attack instead.

When her eyes finally met Thomas's the day he next came through the door, she had to suppress a nervous moan. This was it. There was no going back from what was about to happen and she felt almost dizzy from being on the precipice of change. The last time she had willingly signed up to a risky endeavour really hadn't gone too well, and she started to feel the lure of the familiar tempting her to abandon their plan completely and just carry on as before. Maybe she had misheard Hank. Maybe he wouldn't do anything to Thomas after all. Maybe they could keep surviving just like Thomas had suggested. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. She took a dry gulp and considered how she could signal to Thomas that they would abort, give up, just let things happen.

A flash of Thomas's lifeless body crumpling to the floor, Hank laughing and clapping in the background, Cassie screaming and alone.

No. Fuck this.

Cassie gritted her teeth and strode to Thomas's side. He looked as nervous as she felt.

'Spears are out,' he commented with a nod to the centre of the Hall. Their plan needed weapons.

'Must be something big,' Cassie mused, watching the opposite door intently. Gradually it rolled open, and as the animal padded inside, Thomas snorted out loud.

'Holy fuck, it's a lion,' he said sardonically. 'How we first met. Almost romantic, don't you think?' He turned to her with a smile, but she could see his lips were stiff.

‘I’ll see you for that beer,’ Cassie whispered. The backs of their hands brushed and lingered for just a second, almost enough to make her reconsider everything again, but something about the lioness made her suspicious. Hank might be going for a poetic ending. She bounced nervously on her feet, summing up the energy to move.

‘Come on,’ Thomas said under his breath, his words giving her the courage to act, and she suddenly shoved him to the ground and sprinted towards the lion. It was her regular tactic to go all in so shouldn’t raise suspicions, her mission to destroy the threat as quickly as possible so Thomas had space to focus on his own task.

She grabbed a spear en route and brandished it in both hands as she reached the lion, which leapt towards her with front paws splayed. She swung the spear horizontally to block its attack in mid-air, the lion now standing on its rear legs while the spear shaft propped its upper body off the ground. Cassie braced the spear with one hand while stepping closer and hooking her free arm around the back of the lion’s neck, twisting on her feet so that its head became nestled in the crook of her arm, their bodies side by side. The lion had barely a chance to react before she dropped the spear, linked her hands around its throat, and with a grunt of effort broke its neck.

She looked up and saw that Thomas was back on his feet and staring at her open-mouthed as she held the lion in a headlock, the speed and decisiveness of her attack almost unreal. It wasn’t a good show and Hank would be annoyed, but Cassie hoped he wouldn’t try anything else before Thomas had a chance to act out his part of the plan. She let the lion drop to the floor and stooped to pick the spear up, spinning it nonchalantly in her hand as Thomas came towards her.

‘I can’t believe you just did that!’ he shouted angrily. Cassie took a short breath to gather herself then shrugged broadly.

‘What’s your problem?’ She tried to look as indifferent as possible.

‘You can’t keep doing this!’ Thomas was acting the part well, his nostrils flaring with anger. ‘Stop taking all the glory for yourself.’

‘I was doing you a favour.’

‘Well don’t.’ Thomas was in front of her now, his lean frame towering over

hers. 'I don't need any favours from you.'

'You wouldn't last a minute with one of those.' Cassie sneered. 'Are you that pigheaded that you'd rather die than let a woman kill for you?'

'I wouldn't call you a woman,' Thomas spat. 'You're barely even human, you fucking freak.' Cassie recoiled, surprised at how much his words stung even though they had planned this, knowing the next move would be more believable if it was thrown in the middle of a blazing row. She needed to provoke him into a physical assault, and she had already thought of something equally hurtful.

'If you've got a problem then do something about it,' she challenged. Thomas hesitated and she spread her arms wide. 'Come on, you shouldn't have any problem killing me. Just imagine I'm your girlfriend.' She saw the pain register in his eyes and willed him to use it. Thomas faltered slightly but then set his jaw and pushed her heavily with both hands, and she let herself fall backwards, making sure the back of her head made obvious contact with the floor as she let the spear fall from her hand. She groaned and fluttered her eyelids while keeping her body limp, waiting for his strike.

For a moment nothing happened, and she panicked that maybe Hank had shocked Thomas already and all of this had been for nothing, but then she felt him kneeling over her and heard the scrape of the spear on the floor as he picked it up. She kept her eyes closed but could sense he was wavering. Thomas needed to do this quickly, before they realised what he was intending, so she crept out her fingers and found his forearm, giving it the softest of squeezes while moaning and rolling her head to jut her chin into the air and expose the right place. She readied herself, heart thudding in anticipation. He needed to do it now. Was he going to do it? Come on, Thomas. Fucking do it.

She heard a choked yell, and in the next second the spear punctured her throat.

twenty-one

The reminder of him was like a single cloud in an otherwise clear sky, and her mood instantly darkened. Cassie sighed sadly as she gazed at the scene before her. Thomas would have loved this.

*

Thomas withdrew the spear and Cassie felt his body become rigid with a shock before he slumped out of her eyeline. She thrust her hand to her throat, finding it impossibly wet and warm beneath the cold metal of her collar, only managing to breathe in short gasps that were synchronised with a pulsating gush against her palm. The pain was overbearing and she kicked her heels against the ground in a panic, managing a thick cry of terror and regret. This was a bad idea. A really bad idea. Whose stupid idea was this anyway? This was an idiotic plan. She was a fucking idiot.

Doctor Jackson's face suddenly appeared above her, and Cassie's sticky hand was prised away while bundles of rolled gauze were stuffed underneath the collar.

'We need to get this off now!' Doctor Jackson shouted, her hands already covered in blood. Cassie fixed her eyes on the doctor as she breathed through clenched teeth, darkness creeping around the edges of her vision. There was a metallic click and the collar was removed, then she was lifted onto a gurney and wheeled at speed into the medical room, Doctor Jackson keeping her hands pressed against the wound as Cassie gurgled, the medic shouting instructions amid a flurry of activity. Cassie was dazzled by the lights above her, but she felt the gauze peel away and the sharp tug of stitches as Doctor Jackson leaned over her to work. She tried to calm her mind, her panic abating as the crisis became under control. She was going to need her energy and focus for the next move, once she had stopped inconveniently bleeding to death.

'Okay, it is closed,' Doctor Jackson declared. 'She will need a transfusion.'

Cassie listened to the medics buzzing around the room while she caught her breath on the table, weighing up her options. She'd had a blood transfusion before, and they usually set up an intravenous line that also sedated her, so if she

let them carry on with their treatment she'd wake up collared, chained and caged again. This meant her only opportunity was now. The time to act was now. The time to move was now.

Her body did not respond. Shit.

The sensation of life ebbing away had thankfully abated, but her neck felt like it was on fire and she didn't feel like she had enough energy to get off this bed, let alone launch a full-scale escape. Doctor Jackson was wiping something cold against her forearm and probing for veins, and Cassie was running out of time. She hadn't thought this through. She was going to fail. She gulped, and fresh pain seared through her throat, igniting a surge of adrenaline that made Cassie's muscles clench, and as the doctor started to insert a needle into her arm, Cassie lurched herself into sitting.

Doctor Jackson gasped and Cassie pushed her away, making her fly dramatically over one of the equipment tables with a loud clatter. The other medics scattered and shouted for Hank as Cassie got up from the gurney, but she chose to ignore them and concentrate on her mission. The room was spinning and her throat was a burning mess, but the door was tantalisingly close and she knew that even in her weakened state, now she was collar-free she could be unstoppable, she really could. She had to be. She set her eyes on the door, ajar and unattended, and a vision of the painted burgundy door at the end of a hallway flashed before her, that chance of escape she had foolishly turned down once before. She would not miss her opportunity this time. She was going to make it and she was going to rescue Thomas and everything would be okay.

Cassie took a deep breath and staggered towards the door, but it began to open and Hank appeared, his face twisted in surprise. Cassie faltered as he raised a collar control, but then she realised it was a futile gesture now, and she expelled a triumphant shout as she charged. After her first step something gripped her spine and made her legs spasm and buckle, and she fell to the floor heavily, confused and floundering. A second hit jolted her body and made her shriek in disbelief as she realised what was happening. They were shocks. She was still being shocked. She craned her neck to see Hank standing over her.

'H-how?' she spluttered, and Hank cocked his head curiously before smiling broadly.

‘Oh!’ he exclaimed with a chuckle. ‘Is this your attempt at some grand escape?’ He swung his boot into her face and the explosion of pain clouded her vision. She could still hear his laughter. ‘You thought it was the collar that shocked you?’ He crouched down beside her, pressing his knee into the back of her shoulder as he spoke into her ear. ‘You idiot. It’s that chip, right there in your spinal cord.’ Cassie was shaking uncontrollably, weakened by his words as much as the injuries, but her mind sharpened as he tapped the back of her neck, and Hank must have spotted the realisation dawning on her face because he let out another laugh. ‘Yeah, that’s right. The implant. What did they tell you it was?’

‘A tracker,’ she whispered dejectedly, blood-stained spittle spattering the floor as she spoke.

‘A tracker?’ Hank mocked. ‘Did you think you were going to save the world? Desperate immigrants are so gullible, aren’t you? Fucking idiots will believe anything if there’s a promise of a free ride. You know they target the ones no one will care about if they go missing? Then they interview you just to make sure you really are worthless. And just think, you *let* us take you. You signed a fucking consent form.’ He sniggered cruelly. ‘At the start those chips give you hope so you bother fighting to stay alive, makes it last longer and more entertaining for everyone. And then it doesn’t matter how strong they make you, because I can always control you.’ He shocked her again, and she writhed against the floor until she was left gasping, the weight of the truth sapping her will to retaliate. She felt his hand press against the back of her neck, his fingers curling around the edges of her throat and pushing against the raw stitches.

‘You got your boy to hurt you there so they had to take the collar off? Sneaky little bitch. I thought we had an understanding. I thought I had your respect. What am I supposed to do with you now?’ His fingertips pressed deeper, and Cassie cried out as her throat burned. ‘I should probably sell you to the labs, but I don’t think I need to just yet. You’ll still respect me, won’t you?’ Cassie squeezed her eyes closed, her body shaking so much that her teeth chattered, and she felt him release his grip on her neck then speak softly into her ear. ‘Remember, I’m the one who decides what happens to your boy.’

Everything stopped. Every sensation, every sound, every despairing thought. Cassie experienced a moment of clarity as she focused on Hank’s final words. This man had manipulated Cassie to care, to pin her soul on the person who had pulled her from darkness. And now Hank was solely responsible for Thomas’s

safety and he was going to use that fact to control her, to continue to warp her into an unbridled monster for as long as he wished. Hank would make sure that Thomas would always be in danger and Cassie would never be free. The sudden void inside her began to fill with a rage that was infinite and untarnished and absolute.

She slowly opened her eyes and saw that Hank was now standing above her. He sniffed and tapped her shoulder with his boot.

‘Now, show me you have control.’

Cassie breathed steadily. Her face did not betray the wrath that had imbued her whole self. She had control, and without a sound she sprang from the floor and fixed her hands around Hank’s throat before he could retaliate. She felt him trigger another shock, but the rigidity of her muscles only ramped the power of her grip and the bones in his neck splintered easily within her clenched fingers. They both fell to the floor and Cassie sprawled on top of his lifeless body, staring into his blank face and not letting go of his neck, needing to be certain that he was gone, willing his glassy eyes to focus on hers so that he could watch her kill him all over again.

Bright red blood began to land across her knuckles, spattering Hank’s face, beads of claret clinging to his stubble. She watched it curiously until she sensed someone shifting behind her, and at once leapt back to her feet, turning wild-eyed to face Doctor Jackson, who was holding up her hands in deference.

‘Let me help. You are bleeding.’

Cassie looked down and realised her front was wet with fresh blood, her wound reopened. She moaned, the only sound she could muster, but as Doctor Jackson crept slightly closer, Cassie managed a scowl that stopped her in her tracks.

‘No, please, I have one. I am chipped too, I am so sorry.’ The doctor held out a trembling hand towards Cassie, then turned her back while lifting her hair, and Cassie peered at a thin scar weaving up the back of the doctor’s neck. She was hit with a tremendous sense of giddiness as the medic suddenly glided up to the ceiling, but as Cassie felt the impact of the floor, she realised that she had simply fallen, and she stared into nothing while people thrummed around her again, not sure if she was dying and not sure if she cared.

*

Cassie woke up gradually and noticed there was something very strange about her world, a closeness to the atmosphere, a purple hue that felt familiarly disconcerting. She was on her back, the black spiderweb of bars encasing her as usual, but beyond them was a dark violet void, and she had to rub her eyes before she understood that it was a blanket covering her cage.

She wasn't dead. The disappointment swelled as she put her hand gingerly to her throat, surprised to find no collar around her neck, just a thick wad of taped bandages. She swallowed painfully and ran her tongue across her bottom lip, feeling a scab from where Hank's boot had split it. She let the memories of what had happened wash over her.

The escape had failed. The implant was a lie. She had killed Hank. Shit.

A sudden urgency hit as she remembered Thomas, and she shot upright, whispering his name and craning her ears for any sound, but the blanket seemed to be muffling the outside world. She crawled to the front of the cage and tried his name again, louder this time, but still nothing. They had risked everything, and it was all for nothing and now he was gone. Outwardly sobbing, she stared at her hatched prison and let out a cry of frustration, hitting it with her hand, then jabbing her elbow, slamming her shoulder, and then her whole body, throwing it side to side, the power of her blows distorting the bars and folding new angles with every hit while she roared like a wild beast because she had lost and they had won. As the cage buckled further, her limbs grew rigid, locking her in place on all fours while her teeth ground together, and she saw a corner of the blanket lift and a dart hit her side. The shock finished and she wilted but didn't drop, panting heavily and feeling spikes of anger resume. A second dart hit her forearm and she regarded it with a frown, lifting her head to find her assailant, but as she looked up, her eyes rolled back and she slumped onto her face.

Consciousness returned and she was lying on her stomach, the world still very purple. Her arms were splayed either side of her and her neck was angled uncomfortably. The familiar rub of the collar was against her jugular again, but there was a traction on it that came from somewhere in front of her. She tried to rise but could not lift her head, scrabbling her hands behind her neck to feel that the chain was completely taut, only four finger-widths until her knuckles were scraping against the cage door. They must have locked it somewhere so low and

so tight that she could barely move. Cassie fought back the building claustrophobia and tried her best to pull the chain free, but the angle and available links made it an impossible task, and the more she battled, the more trapped she felt, the ground pressing against her chest and making her sense of confinement so intense that she felt on the verge of a scream. With a grunt of effort, she stopped her struggles and centred her mind, breathing slowly and shakily. This wouldn't be forever. She could get through this. She needed to keep her shit together.

Carefully, she threaded her right arm under her body and rolled just enough so she was lying on her side, feeling less vulnerable in this position than when prostrate on her stomach. As she calmed her breathing, she realised there were other noises around her, animal grunts and scraping metal, some of them sounding so far off she must be in a large Hall instead of another pen, and they gradually grew in volume, as if more and more creatures were being added to the space. If this was some sort of super death match against every animal they had, then good. Great. She would be quite happy to throw herself into a blaze of violence and end everything. She was done.

Cassie stared at the purple covering around the bars, focusing on the external sounds so that she didn't have to face the collapse of her inner composure. The blank void that she had once crafted so well was beginning to expand again, a safety mechanism to override the cacophony of failures that had violated her life. After a while, when the noises and smells confirmed she was surrounded by beasts and possibly some sniffing humans too, she heard the steady build of murmuring voices as if a crowd was forming. She could pick out a few different languages including English, but not enough to hear specifically what was being said. A louder voice suddenly cut through the crowd and brought with it a descending silence.

'Welcome, everybody. If you haven't been to the Market Hall before then make sure you read the terms and conditions cards. No returns, no refunds. Bids are after every lot has been shown, and cages are extra if you haven't supplied your own. We have forty-five units today. Let's start with lot number one.'

Cassie listened as the voice started to list lot numbers with a description of different animal species. As each one was ticked off, it seemed to bring the voice a little bit closer to her cage, and she sighed with the realisation that she was being sold, starting over with a new Handler, to repeat the same situation, an

endless existence in this hell-hole, only now it was going to be worse because she wouldn't have Thomas. She felt tears burn her eyes, but she huffed them away with several sharp breaths. She was keeping her shit together. She had to show any new Handler that she was in control. She had to, or she was going to lose it forever.

The voice triggered a scream, drawing Cassie's focus back to the events around her, nausea building in her stomach at the thought of what that woman might be used for. Anger began to ignite but was instantly quashed when she heard the voice start up very close to her position.

'Lot number forty-four, a twenty-six-year-old male, already enhanced. You might recognise him from some of the most noteworthy combos in recent times.' The murmuring of the crowd increased in volume and Cassie's heart leapt, sure it must be Thomas, but there was the scrape of shoes just beyond her cage that was so close it made her skin prickle.

'And finally we have lot number forty-five.' Her purple world suddenly dissolved as the blanket was pulled away and she fought the urge to spring to her feet. It would only end in a futile and embarrassing fight with her chain. She stayed where she lay and tried to keep the emotion from her face as she craned her neck to see what was out there. The best view she could manage was of a sea of legs sound-tracked by a wave of audible gasps as the voice continued. 'I don't think this one needs much of an introduction. As you might understand, the owner is not currently rescinding, but this is a very exciting opportunity to take on the role of Handler. She has certainly been very lucrative for her previous two.'

A voice from beyond piped up, 'Yeah, until she killed them!' Muffled laughter ran through the crowd.

'Yes, well,' the voice continued, 'I wouldn't suggest trying anything that involves close contact.' The laughter continued while Cassie felt her cheeks burn. 'But with proper precautions you'd still be looking at a solid investment. I'd say this is the last opportunity before the labs acquire her, and I know many would appreciate the chance to continue to see her in action.'

The voices rose inaudibly and then began to fade as the crowd were led away, and Cassie pressed her lips together to dampen a desolate wail, the despair

threatening to engulf her completely. She stared miserably through the bars to the side of her and realised her view was now obstructed by a neighbouring cage covered in a brown blanket. The cover did not fully reach the floor, and Cassie could make out the shadow of something in the sliver of visible cage, a pair of human hands and feet. She gasped softly and licked her dry lips.

‘Tom?’ Her voice cracked and she tried again, struggling to gain volume from the way her body was awkwardly gathered into the floor, but footsteps made her catch her tongue and a blanket was suddenly thrown back over her cage. She waited until the footsteps had gone, then prepared herself to shout for Thomas again, but she heard her own name being whispered first.

‘Cassie?’

‘Tom?’

‘Oh thank god!’ His voice made her smile weakly. ‘I am so happy to hear you. Are you okay?’

‘I don’t know,’ she managed.

‘I thought you were dead. I’m so sorry. I tried not to do it too much but there was so much blood.’

‘You did it fine, they fixed it. I’m okay.’

‘What happened, Cassie? I heard them say you killed two Handlers – is that true? Did you kill Hank?’

Cassie closed her eyes for a moment and winced.

‘Yes.’

‘Why? What happened?’

‘It was... Hank, he... I didn’t...’ She couldn’t find the words, the truth too painful to voice. How could she tell Thomas what she now knew? He had hinged his hope, his optimism, his entire character on the potential of that chip to save them. If she told him it was all lies it would destroy him. Who knew what they were about to face, or whether they’d ever speak again. She couldn’t part ways

with him knowing that she had condemned him to madness.

‘I failed,’ she managed.

‘It’s okay, it’s okay,’ Thomas soothed. ‘I’m just glad to know you’re still here.’

‘I ruined everything,’ she whispered, her bottom lip trembling. ‘I wish we’d never tried.’

‘We had to try, if what you said was true. It was worth it to try. But hey, Hank’s gone now, right? So things might be better.’

Cassie scoffed. ‘They’re going to split us up.’

‘You don’t know that. We make a good double act – someone might take us both on. Come on, optimism, remember? You’ve got to have hope.’

Cassie rolled her eyes, and through her tears she managed a small smile. ‘I’m rolling my eyes, by the way.’ She heard Thomas laugh, but it sounded strained.

‘Of course you are. I’d be worried if you weren’t.’ She chuckled, but the sound was strangled by fresh sobs. ‘Hey, don’t be upset. There is nothing you can’t handle. You’re a badass superhero, remember?’

‘Who shits in a bucket,’ Cassie managed.

‘Yeah, who shits in a bucket. And this isn’t the end.’

‘Feels like it. Fuck. You really grew on me, you know.’ She wiped her eyes across her forearm.

‘Stop talking like this is goodbye,’ Thomas chided. ‘It can’t be. We haven’t finished that game of battleships.’ Cassie laughed, but it only made her feel worse, and she began to cry again, her chest shaking against the floor. She heard the bars of Thomas’s cage rattling. ‘Cassie, God, please don’t cry. I wish I could be in there with you. How can I help you?’

‘Talk. Just talk. Don’t stop.’

Thomas talked just as he was instructed, tales of unusual customers in the

store he once worked in, and his voice soothed Cassie's sorrow just enough for the tears to dry. But it was not long before she heard footsteps echo through the Hall again and she bristled in alarm. There was the metallic creak of cages being moved and animals grunting, someone issuing instructions coming closer towards Cassie's cage.

An unfamiliar voice came from somewhere beyond the blanket. 'Right, this one is going external.'

'External?' a second voice returned, sounding surprised.

'I know, what kind of person would be mad enough to do that? This other one is being picked up by a new Handler.' Cassie froze, trying desperately to work out who they were referring to, but whimpered softly as she realised that either way, they would be going in separate directions. 'Wheel that one as it is. If this one is going external then tranq it. You'll need two darts.' Cassie gulped dryly. They meant her.

'Cassie!' Thomas called, his voice wavering. 'We'll be okay. You'll be okay.'

Cassie whimpered, his proclamations falling flat, no truth to them, no hope. She had to have something more.

'Tom!' she shouted, not caring if anyone could hear. 'Tom, listen to me. They're taking me away but I will come back, so you have to wait, okay? I will come for you.' She was speaking as much to herself as she was to him, her declaration fuelling an irrational determination that she clung to desperately. 'Wherever I end up, whatever happens, I promise I will come for you.'

'Cassie...'

'Tell me you'll wait for me!' she shouted as the corner of the blanket lifted and two darts hit her side in quick succession. 'Tom! Tell me you'll hold on until I find you!'

'Cassie!' Thomas's voice was growing distant, drowned out by the sound of a wheeled trolley scraping the floor.

'Wait for me and hold on!' Cassie shouted, her vision starting to swirl as she sank into the floor. 'I will come...' she whispered, her eyes fluttering but her

words pushing through regardless because they were all she had left. 'I will come for you... I promise...'

epilogue

She gripped her mug tightly as guilt permeated her core.

Guilt at the lavish surroundings and delicious food and the way she was relaxing on a fucking sun lounger.

Guilt that she was still no closer to saving him after all this time.

And guilt at the realisation that she had momentarily forgotten him last night because she was too busy opening up to another man.

Cassie will return in The Killing Shield – Out now

Turn over for a free preview of Chapter one

The Killing Shield

one

There was a single blissful moment when Cassie was conscious but did not register her reality, a split-second of peace before the memories filtered through and cast their despondent glare across the landscape, taking their turn one by one to darken her mood. She was still a prisoner. The nightmare was not over. Her escape attempt had failed. Everything she thought she knew had turned out to be a lie. They had taken Thomas away. She was alone again.

Fuck.

Cassie's eyes fluttered open. She was lying on her back, the familiar hatched

obstruction of the cage all around her, but above there was a shaft of soft light illuminating a high ceiling. This was new. Those voices in the Market Hall had said something about her going 'external', so she must have been sold off and taken away, while Thomas was still in his cage somewhere inside the Complex. She tried his name anyway, knowing it was in vain but shouting it one more time just in case, and squeezed her eyes shut against the silence that came in reply, the deafening reminder that everything had changed.

'Wait for me and hold on!'

Her heart wrenched at the echoes of her desperate calls to Thomas, impossible

promises fuelled by urgent desperation. He was the bright spark that had pulled her soul back through the murk and made her human again, but now she had lost him forever. A ball of emotion expanded inside her throat and she gulped it down, something crinkling with the movement. She blindly probed her neck and felt a taped bandage, the wound caused by Thomas plunging a spear into her throat, all to make them remove the collar, all for nothing. She'd based her entire escape plan on the assumption they were shock collars, responsible for the crippling spasms that kept her in control, but now she knew it was the chip implanted in the back of her neck, the very chip she'd allowed them to put inside

her under the guise that it was a tracking device that would lead salvation to her location. She was such an idiot.

Cassie huffed at herself and put her hands over her face, her shoulder blades digging

into the hard ground beneath her, and she realised for the first time that the thin mattress Hank had gifted her was missing. She groaned and rolled to her side, angry at herself for thinking of Hank, the man who had manipulated her so easily into caring for Thomas just so she'd become a more entertaining killer in the Hall. She saw a flash of his lifeless face and at once opened her eyes to dispel the image, not wanting to remember the way his neck had caved within her hands. She began to recall the cruelty of his last words but caught sight of something through the bars that distracted her enough to curtail her thoughts, a rectangular white shape just beyond her cage. Curious, she propped herself on her elbow and blinked rapidly to focus, finding that the space beyond the bars stretched out for several metres, ending in a tall wall of exposed brick that tracked up to the ceiling she had been staring at before. A shaft of light led her eyes to a single square window set high in the wall behind her, and she twisted her head to the left to find another wall a metre away, with two closed doors at either side. As her eyes flicked back to the front of her cage she inhaled sharply, her body growing rigid with surprise. The cage door was wide open.

Cassie licked her lips tentatively and cast her eyes around the room again, searching

for a threat, but it was empty except for her. She slowly edged her way to the opening of the cage, wincing as she placed one hand beyond the bars, waiting for the inevitable shock when they realised their mistake. Nothing happened. Gulping dryly, she crawled out of the cage and rose to her feet. She was standing in a square room, and her eyes widened as she realised the rectangular object she had seen was a double bed topped with a plain white duvet and pillow. She scratched her head uneasily and gazed around in disbelief, spotting a small red dot of light in the far corner of the ceiling. It felt like she was underground, a basement perhaps, and the red light was eerily similar to the cameras she used to see in the exercise hall at the Complex.

She startled at muffled movement from above that seemed to pass overhead and then

grow louder towards the door beside her. Panicked, she backed away until she was pressing against the opposite wall, facing the door and trying to ready herself for whatever might come through. There were metallic clangs and something sliding into place, then one of the doors opened inwards and a group of men poured through, suited in black and holding guns aimed at her. They filled out the other side of the room and Cassie tensed, her toes gripping the floor, ready to charge, already concluding that there were too many of them and she would not be leaving this room alive, but ready to take some down with her regardless. One man pushed his way to the front of the throng and shouted something at the others, waving his hands at them angrily before turning to face Cassie with an apologetic frown.

‘I’m sorry, you’re safe. Ignore them.’ He barked something else at the men and they

fanned out around him, still clutching their weapons nervously but remaining where they were. Cassie watched them intently, her attention held by the lead man, who was tall and broad with a bald head and a young face. His suit was cream and almost glowed against the backdrop of black outfits behind him, and she noted with a glimmer of interest that he didn’t appear to be armed. ‘English, yes?’ the bald man said slowly, and Cassie gave him the smallest of nods. ‘You are safe here. I’m going to let you have some time to settle in before we talk properly. I’ll be back this evening to explain everything.’

He waved his hand at one of the men, who bustled out of the room and swiftly reappeared holding a tray, gingerly lowering it to the floor without taking his eyes off Cassie. She could see a bottle of water, some smaller items and a bowl with steam rising from it.

‘Spare clothes and a towel are in there.’ The bald man indicated the second door, immediately piquing Cassie’s interest. ‘Is there anything else you need?’ He raised his eyebrows at her as if waiting for a response, but Cassie was too busy looking between the tray and the mysterious second door to acknowledge his question, and the man shrugged slightly then turned to leave, the others backing out in a cohesive group and not lowering their weapons even as the door was pulled shut.

Cassie heard something lock into place behind the door and then

suddenly inhaled

deeply, realising she'd been practically holding her breath for the whole encounter. Who the men were and what they wanted her for were complete unknowns, but that second door was too tantalising to ignore, and she padded towards it across warm cream tiles that felt luxurious on her bare feet compared to the cold concrete she'd been used to in the corridors of the Complex. She faced the door and hesitated, fearing a trick or a test of some sort, but with a determined sigh she tried the handle, surprised as it opened without protest, and inside found a smaller room swathed in darkness. There was just enough light from the main room to illuminate the larger objects in there, and she ran her eyes over them in turn, scoffing in disbelief while having to hold the door frame for support, afraid she'd swoon to the floor.

A toilet. A sink. A shower cubicle.

She leaned her shoulder into the wall and cupped her hands over her mouth as she

stared back and forth between each item, annoyed and embarrassed at herself for reacting this way to such simple amenities. Her entire existence in the Complex was inside that cage with just a bucket to shit in. She'd washed with tepid water, using her own clothes as towels, and she only got to stand up when allowed thirty minutes in the gym to exercise, or when facing any number of wild animals in the Hall to the death. A bathroom was making Hank's shitty mattress look pretty underwhelming right now, and she made a triumphant snort as she was about to step inside, but a strong smell brought her attention sharply to the tray that had been left on the floor. She kept her hand on the doorframe of the bathroom, as if letting go would dispel the mirage, and craned her neck to see the contents of the tray. A sealed packet of sandwiches and some fresh fruit were of interest, but from this angle she couldn't see the contents of the bowl.

With a longing glance at the bathroom, she stepped closer to the tray, and her mouth

instantly filled with saliva as she saw the bowl was full of pasta in a rich red sauce. Her entire diet in the Complex had been stale bread, strange meat and an occasional piece of soft brown fruit. With trembling hands, she picked up the bowl and sank down to the floor with her back against the wall, holding the dish

as if it contained the greatest treasure she had ever seen. The smell was intoxicating, and she leaned over the bowl, waves of steam hitting her face.

'I miss hot food. Like, burn your mouth hot.'

Thomas's voice made her jolt, so clear he could almost be beside her. Her shoulders

drooped with sadness and she took a moment to revisit the fact that he wasn't here, he was still in there, and she might never see him again. But her mouth was so wet now that she couldn't contain herself, and she tried a spoonful. The flavour, texture and warmth bombarded her deprived senses and made her eyes water. She smiled dreamily and began to shovel pasta into her mouth, desperate to consume as much of this wonderful sensation as possible, but after half the bowl had disappeared, she stopped abruptly and felt an unnerving sensation in her gut that suggested expulsion was imminent. She set the bowl down in a panic and ran into the bathroom, lifting up the toilet seat and vomiting profusely. Globules of half-chewed pasta plopped into the water and made her gag even further, her eyes stinging with the effort and her throat burning inside and out.

Shuddering, she wiped her mouth and squatted by the toilet, waiting to see if everything had settled and grimacing as she spotted splatters of vomit on her arm and within strands of her hair, triggering memories of a time in the Complex when she'd been left to lie in her own sick, the acrid sweetness inescapable, the only respite when her Handler hosed her down with cold water. Cassie sighed, then her eyes widened at the realisation of what she now had access to, and she looked up at the shower cubicle with growing excitement. Her vision was starting to adjust to the darker room, and she spotted a light switch on the wall, so carefully rose to flick it on, the light so blinding at first that she buried her head between her arms with her eyes tightly shut. Gradually she peered out, blinking at beige units on top of the same cream tiles that were in the other room. There was a pile of clothes and towels nestled on top of the toilet block, thankfully out of the blast radius of her vomit. She glanced warily at the small red light in the top corner of the main room and closed the bathroom door completely before taking off her old clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor. Then she stepped into the shower cubicle, her hand shaking with anticipation as she tried the tap, flinching as cool water poured onto her head. She began to relax as the water warmed, the experience utterly surreal and yet comfortably

familiar. There was a bottle of shower gel in the corner of the cubicle and she used it to wash her hair and body, the scent strong and sweet, its suds rinsing away the fresh vomit, the months of grime, the endless pain and terror.

She stood under the waterflow and dipped her head, examining her body as droplets

cascaded around her temples. Other than a quick strip wash while changing her clothes, she hadn't spent any time naked when she was in the Complex. Now she ran her fingers over her torso, remembering the soft halo of pinchable flesh around her hips that she used to hate so much, missing from this new body that was thin and wiry, solid to the touch, the landscape marked by brittle sinews of muscle and protruding bony points. Technically this was the figure she had always wanted, the shape she had been brought up to admire, but it represented all that she had suffered and her throat tightened with bitter sorrow. This body was not hers.

Her skin looked alien under the fluorescent lights, the water forking paths through the

new folds and ripples of her scars, so many minute scratches and bites from undistinguishable occasions but a few serving as stark reminders of the defining moments. The jagged pink lines across her stomach from the horns of the ram. The round entry point from the spear Eyepatch had impaled her with. The distorted concave silhouette of her thigh from the wolf attack. She traced her fingertips across them all until her limbs began to tremble and she pulled her gaze away from her mottled body to turn off the water.

She had been in the shower long enough to coat the tiles in beads of steam, and she

stepped out of the cubicle to gather a towel around her shoulders, standing silently in the middle of the bathroom and staring dumbfoundedly at the floor. Something sodden was clinging to her collarbone and she peeled it away with her fingers, realising it was the gauze that had been covering her neck. She flicked it into the sink and regarded it expressionlessly, until suddenly, out of the silence, the entirety of what had happened hit her like it had been fired from a cannon, colliding with her stomach first and then erupting into a raging cloud of anguish that engulfed her whole body. She let out a single wail and clasped her

hand to her mouth, the sound echoing in the small room. The force of the tears that came next brought her to her knees and she collapsed by the sink, sobbing uncontrollably, each inconceivable detail about her situation proffering in the forefront of her mind, one by one. The violence. The isolation. The torture. Jessica. Enid. Thomas.

Cassie cried for a long time and then was so spent of energy and emotion that she

stayed where she had landed, naked under a towel, leaning against the sink and staring at the bathroom tiles without thinking or moving, just existing. Her hair was almost dry by the time she found the energy to stir, her face feeling puffy and her head thick and throbbing. She dragged herself off the floor, hung the towel on a rail and slowly inspected the clothes. Folded neatly were a pair of loose black tracksuit bottoms and a baggy black T-shirt. There was no underwear, but that was something she'd become accustomed to by now, and she pulled the clothes on with a wry smile as she realised this was the first time she had worn anything but grey in a very long while.

With a heavy sigh, she opened the bathroom door and regarded the main room, the

sight of her cage immediately making her skin prickle. She took a sip from the bottled water and eyed the remains of the pasta warily, this time trying just one piece, which was now cold but still amazingly flavoursome. Chewing slowly, she glanced casually at the other door, certain that it would be locked but feeling that she ought to try regardless. She pursed her lips and grasped the handle, but as she suspected, there was no give. The door seemed heavier, reinforced perhaps, and even if she broke through, she didn't fancy meeting the sea of armed men who may be waiting on the other side.

She tried a second piece of pasta as her eyes rose towards the window with renewed

interest, and she took another mouthful as she wandered over to stand beneath it, estimating the frame must be at least eight feet off the ground, perhaps a little higher than the platforms in the Hall but not outside of her reach. Placing the bowl carefully by the bed, she rubbed her hands together then took a run-up, launching herself high enough to grip the windowsill. The ledge was narrow, but

she held on with her fingertips and pressed her knees into the wall, supporting herself enough to bring her eyes in line with the glass. On the other side was a slice of tanned earth with patches of brown-green foliage, and the rest of her view was dominated by a block of cloudless blue sky. She hadn't seen the outside world since going into the Complex, and the colours were so vibrant she drank them in hungrily until she felt her fingers slip and she dropped, landing in a low crouch and taking a second to steady herself before standing upright.

She clicked her tongue and returned to the pasta bowl, eating slowly while she perched on the side of the bed and studied the window from afar. It was certainly big enough for her to get through, and the glass didn't look like it would be a problem to break, but there were too many unknowns to make that decision right now. Instead, she watched the brilliant blue develop purple hues, lost in the spectacle of one rectangle of colour, so captivating to her deprived mind that it allowed her to be pleasantly absent until she was disturbed by noises from above.

She blinked and focused, realising the light had waned outside and she was still clutching an empty bowl. As footsteps approached the door, she shuffled to the head of the bed and pressed her back against the wall, facing the door and cradling the bowl like it was a tiny shield. A similar group of men filed through with weapons drawn, and this time she could see a set of stairs ascending behind them, confirming her theory that she was underground. Just as before, the bald man took centre stage, his cream suit and air of casual confidence making him obviously in charge.

‘Good evening. How have you been getting on?’ He smiled at her expectantly, but

Cassie's eyes tracked the men either side of him, their weapons trained on her. The bald man sighed under his breath. ‘I'm afraid my men are not very welcoming. They think you are a dangerous liability. They don't trust you and they think I have made a huge mistake in bringing you here.’ He pursed his lips at her as if expecting a response, but Cassie maintained a stony expression while she waited for him to reveal his intentions, and for the cruelty to begin. The bald man's accent was unusual, a complex hybrid that obscured where he might be from, or where she might be now. His eyebrows rose briefly at her silence, and

he cleared his throat softly. 'You did kill two Handlers and tried to escape several times, so I suppose you can't blame them for being nervous. You should know that each guard has a copy of your chip control.' Cassie saw some of the men pull the small white cases out of their pockets as if to demonstrate, and she squeezed the bowl between her fingers, weighing up how many she could take out before she might be shocked.

'But do you want to know why I took the risk to bring you here?' the bald man continued. 'I want you to work for me, as protection. You'd think I'd have enough, but recent events have made me think otherwise.' Some of the guards shifted on their feet at this. 'You can see the effect your presence has on my men, and I think that will be very useful to me. So I offer you employment, room and board, everything you've been looking for. You're free to say no, of course, and I can send you back to the Complex if you like, but I heard the labs there are desperate to have you and I don't think that's something you'd want to happen. I can keep you safe here, and I think you could have quite a nice life working for me.' He paused again, and Cassie let his words sink in, taken off guard by the offer and irritated at the way he was talking, as if he was doing her a favour. She glanced over his shoulder at the open door, each step on the staircase becoming lighter as it ascended, and as she wondered where they might lead, the bald man tipped his head slightly, a smile creeping onto his face.

'You're thinking about how you could leave here.' It was a statement rather than a

question, and Cassie blinked, trying to hide her surprise that he had accurately read her mind. 'So I'll put this to you. If we ignore that your implant can be activated from any range, let's say you forced your way past us, or got through there.' He nodded in the direction of the window Cassie had been hanging from earlier, and she flushed as she considered that he may have been watching her. 'What would you be leaving for, exactly? You don't know what country we're in right now, do you? I would imagine, being English, you don't speak the local language. You don't have any money, you don't have any identification.' Cassie watched as he counted off the list on his fingers. 'And you have been infused with a drug that makes you very valuable. Who knows which authority might pick you up. There are those who already know about what you've been given, and I'm sure they'd be very interested in seeing the results for themselves. And just think how fascinating you'd be to the organisations who don't know about

it. I'd imagine they would spend quite some energy on picking you apart.' He smiled softly while Cassie fought to remain expressionless, all the while reluctantly agreeing with every point he had made. 'So your safest option is to stay here and work for me, but I'm not interested in having you if you don't want the job. I'll give you until tomorrow to decide. We'll get rid of this in the meantime.' He motioned to two of his men, who lifted the cage between them and shuffled awkwardly out with it.

'And, apologies, as I didn't have many in English, but here are some books to pass the

time.' He waved a hand, and another man brought in a small green box, which he laid on the floor at the foot of the bed before backing gingerly away. 'Someone will be back in the morning with breakfast, and we will speak again later tomorrow, when you can give me your answer. I hope you sleep well.' The bald man turned and walked confidently out of the room, while the rest of his men edged their way out with their weapons aimed until the door shut them from view.

Cassie exhaled slowly, absent-mindedly stroking the rim of the bowl with her fingers

while she stared at the door, deep in thought. The bald man exuded a calm arrogance, but there was no undercurrent of menace or threat of physical violence so far, armed guards aside. He was also quite astute. She really didn't have many options.

'What do you think?' she muttered under her breath, willing the familiar voice from

beyond the wall to respond with energy and annoying enthusiasm. The silence made her sigh sadly, and she rubbed her eyes and rose from the bed, placing her bowl on the floor while peering at the box of books that had been left. Such a gesture made her think back to Doctor Jackson putting on music while she was strapped to a bed, an act of unnecessary kindness, a recognition that Cassie was a human being. The books, a bedroom and bathroom, warm food and a change of clothes. Such luxuries were almost overwhelming. Maybe she could be comfortable here.

'If you play your cards right, you get to keep it,' Hank whispered into her

ear, and

goosebumps ran up her arms. He had gifted comforts, given the pretence of kindness when he kept her informed of Thomas's safety, and that had all been part of his manipulative plan to keep her on side while he moulded her into a turbulent killer. Hank had exploited her, and falling for his charade nearly cost her everything. She refused to be duped again.

Cassie pushed the box of books away with her toe and lay down on the bed so that she

could face the window and watch the sky as its colours changed from deep blue to violet, soft cloud swirling into shapes across the horizon. Her mind lurched between what this stranger had offered and what Thomas might be doing now, triggering waves of guilt at the luxuries she had acquired and regret at the impossible promise she had made.

'Wherever I end up, whatever happens, I promise I will come for you.'
How was she supposed to do that from here, exactly?

Shit.

The Killing Shield is out now

*Find out more about the release dates for the rest of the Killing Saga at
Kglesliewriter.com*

notes and thanks

This is a work of fiction. The author is strongly opposed to any cruelty or violence towards animals (or humans).

Copyedited by Toby Selwyn, whose professionalism and input was so good that he is stuck with this saga to the end now. Sorry.

Thanks to the first readers; Sarah-Lou and Merv. You were with Cassie from the very early days, and your notes and insights helped to shape this whole story. I am forever grateful for your time.

Thanks also to beta readers, Jon and Chris. Your enthusiasm for this really fuelled me to keep going. I look forward to returning the favour someday.

And thanks to my husband and daughter for not questioning when mummy says the usual 'I'm just going to nip on the computer...' and promptly disappears for hours.