**The Reluctant Hero Tamer**

## The Reluctant Hero Tamer

### Chapter 1: The Glitch and the Girl

Stephen’s eyes burned, a gritty, sandpaper-on-glass sensation that no amount of rubbing could fix. The dashboard clock was a glaring insult: 11:47 PM. Another long day. Hauling lumber always took it out of him, but today felt heavier, leaving a residue of exhaustion so deep in his bones it felt like a physical weight. All he craved, with an almost primal desperation, was the familiar, worn-in comfort of his couch and the sharp, cold bite of a beer.

He guided his pickup truck onto the elevated I-94 structure, a familiar ribbon of concrete and steel that usually offered a moment of quiet transit. Tonight, it felt different. The city lights seemed… dimmer.

That's when a flicker in his side mirror snagged his attention.

No, not *in* the mirror. In the air, *beside* the mirror.

It wasn't the simple heat haze shimmering off the pavement. This was slicker, more structured, like a patch of oil on water standing impossibly, fundamentally *vertical*. It rippled, twisted, and for one heart-stopping instant, Stephen thought he saw something on the other side—a skyline of impossible geometry against a blood-red sky.

Then, as quickly as it appeared, it snapped shut, gone.

Stephen’s heart gave a single, hard *thump* against his ribs. He blinked, the afterimage searing itself into his retinas. "Too much overtime," he muttered, his voice sounding hollow in the cab. He gripped the wheel tighter, forcing down the acidic prickle of unease crawling up his spine. He nudged the cruise control, as if the mundane action could somehow override the sheer *wrongness* of what he'd just seen. But the feeling didn't fade. The cold knot in his stomach only tightened.

The descent into the parking garage beneath his apartment building was a descent into silence. Not just quiet—a thick, oppressive, absolute *absence* of sound. The usual distant traffic hum, the mechanical whine of the ventilation system, even the buzz of the fluorescent lights—all of it, gone.

He killed the engine, and the sudden void was so total it made his ears ring.

He sat there for a long moment, every nerve ending screaming. This was wrong.

He opened the door, and the *crunch* of his work boots on the concrete made him freeze.

*Crunch?*

This was a polished concrete floor, always swept clean, smooth as glass. He looked down. The floor was... gritty. Coated in a fine, dark sand that hadn't been there this morning. He stepped out, his senses on high alert, the scuff of his boots unnaturally loud in the dead air.

He frowned, his exhaustion momentarily forgotten, replaced by a creeping dread. The air was blessedly cool, but it felt dead. Stale. It carried a bizarre, flat taste, like old pennies. Metallic.

"What the hell…?" he whispered.

His building loomed ahead, the familiar steel and glass entryway. But as he turned his gaze across the street, his breath hitched.

Wrong. Utterly, fundamentally wrong.

The old brick facades of the historical buildings across the way were gone. In their place, impossible structures of dark, weeping stone slumped against each other, etched with symbols that pulsed with a faint, sickly internal light. It looked like a badly rendered simulation, a glitch in the very fabric of the world he knew.

His stomach lurched. He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head, trying to clear the image. *Just tired. Hallucinating. Sleep deprivation.*

He opened them. The nightmare remained.

"Okay, deep breaths, Stephen. You're just... seeing things."

But the gritty concrete was real. The metallic taste was real.

A high-pitched *whine* started up, seeming to come from everywhere at once, drilling into his skull. He clapped his hands over his ears, a gasp tearing from his throat.

And then he saw her.

Chloe. His neighbor. The 19-year-old from 3B, all purple-streaked hair and combat boots, always either glaring at him or ignoring him entirely. She was slumped against the far wall, half-hidden by a support pillar, looking pale and just as disoriented as he felt.

"Chloe?" His voice cracked.

She didn't respond. He started toward her, his boots crunching, the metallic taste in the air growing stronger, coppery, like fresh blood.

"Chloe, are you okay?"

He was ten feet away when the world dissolved into blue light.

It wasn't a flash; it was an *intrusion*. A torrent of information, data, *sound*, slammed into his mind, so loud and overwhelming it dropped him to his knees. He cried out, clutching his head as alien text and symbols seared themselves across his vision, overlaying the "wrong" reality of the garage.

**[SYSTEM INITIALIZING... CALIBRATING... USER DETECTED]**

**[WARNING: UNSTABLE CATALYST DETECTED. PROXIMITY ALERT!]**

*What is this?* he thought, his panic rising into raw terror. *What is happening?*

The blue light coalesced, forming a semi-transparent screen in front of him, like something from a video game.

[USER DESIGNATION: TAMER (UNAWAKENED)]

[TARGET DESIGNATION: CATALYST (UNBOUND, VOLATILE)]

**[CRITICAL WARNING: CATALYST ENERGY SPIKE IMMINENT. REALITY DISTORTION FIELD DETECTED. EXTINCTION LEVEL EVENT (ELE) PROTOCOL ENGAGED.]**

**[RECOMMENDATION: INITIATE IMMEDIATE SUBJUGATION. BIND CATALYST. NOW.]**

"Bind?" Stephen croaked, staggering to his feet. He looked at Chloe. She was vibrating now, a faint, terrifying aura of golden light shimmering around her, cracking the concrete pillar she leaned against. "Chloe! Snap out of it!"

**[SYSTEM WARNING: TERMINATION IMMINENT. BIND OR PERISH.]**

Two options appeared in his vision, shimmering with terrifying, absolute finality.

[BIND: SUBJUGATE CATALYST]

[REJECT: ALLOW TERMINATION]

"Termination? What do you mean, *termination*?!" he yelled at the air.

The golden aura around Chloe exploded outward, not as light, but as pure, physical force. It hit Stephen like a freight train, launching him backward. He slammed into the side of his truck, the metal groaning under the impact. His head cracked against the window, and the world spun, his vision blurring.

He heard a sound he would never forget—a low, tearing *rip*, as if the very air was being torn in two.

**[REALITY BREACH DETECTED. CATASTROPHE IMMINENT. FINAL WARNING.]**

[BIND]

[REJECT]

Through the haze of pain, he saw Chloe. Her head was thrown back, her mouth open in a silent scream, the golden energy pouring from her in an uncontrolled, destructive torrent. The walls of the garage were *dissolving*, turning to dust and revealing a swirling, violet void beyond.

*Termination...* The word echoed in the System's cold, impersonal logic. It wasn't just warning him. It was going to *kill* her. Kill them both.

"No!" he roared. He didn't know what he was doing. He didn't know what "Bind" meant. He just knew he couldn't let this *thing* kill a teenage girl.

He focused on the shimmering blue word, pain flaring behind his eyes, and screamed, "BIND!"

The moment the word left his lips, something *snapped* inside him, like a chain pulling taut. Agony, white-hot and absolute, erupted in his chest. A collar—a sleek, black metal thing that appeared from nowhere—materialized and clamped shut around his own neck, cold as ice.

*What? No!*

Simultaneously, an identical collar snapped into existence around Chloe's neck.

The golden energy torrent *stopped*, sucked back into her body as if a vacuum had been switched on. She crumpled to the gritty floor, unconscious. The tearing sound ceased. The violet void beyond the dissolving walls vanished, replaced by the impossible, pulsing skyline he'd seen earlier.

The oppressive silence of the garage rushed back in, now broken only by Stephen’s own ragged, terrified breathing.

He sagged against his truck, his entire body shaking. The metal collar on his neck was heavy, real, and sickeningly cold.

A new screen of blue text shimmered into existence.

[BINDING SUCCESSFUL. USER AWAKENED: TAMER.]

[TARGET: CHLOE (CATALYST). STATUS: BOUND, STABILIZED, UNCONSCIOUS.]

[BOND STRENGTH: 1.0% (CRITICAL)]

**[REALITY INTEGRITY: 14%. STABILIZED.]**

**[WELCOME TO THE SYSTEM, TAMER. SURVIVAL IS YOUR PRIMARY OBJECTIVE.]**

**Chapter 2: System Online**

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The dual moonlight etched the alley in stark, unforgiving relief. Chloe stood frozen, hands clawing at the impossible collar of light, her breath catching in a series of short, panicked gasps. The glow was intangible, her fingers passing right through it, yet it hummed with a terrifying, undeniable presence against her skin.

"Stephen..." Her voice was a raw, choked whisper. "What... what did you *do* to me?"

He couldn't answer. He was staring at his own hands, the source of the violation, feeling a phantom echo of the energy surge that had left only icy dread in its wake. He tried to clench his fists, to will the light away, to undo what he'd done. Nothing. The collar remained, a bright, beautiful, horrifying testament to his sudden, inexplicable power.

"I... I don't know," he stammered, the words tasting like ash. "Chloe, I didn't..."

A faint, melodic *chime* sounded, seeming to echo directly inside his skull.

Simultaneously, a translucent blue rectangle shimmered into existence in the upper right corner of his vision. It wasn't physical, more like a heads-up display overlaying reality, casting a faint azure glow on the grimy brick wall beyond. Crisp, white text began to form.

[System Initialized]

[Welcome, User]

Stephen blinked hard, shaking his head, but the luminous screen remained stubbornly fixed in his sight. It felt sickeningly like a video game interface, utterly alien and yet terrifyingly real.

"What's wrong with you?" Chloe's voice cracked, rising in pitch, laced with disbelief turning to fury. "You're just... staring! Get this *thing* off of me!"

She lunged at him, not to attack, but to grab his jacket, to shake him. "Stephen, *fix it*!"

Her sudden movement triggered an update on the screen.

[Skill Activated: 'Binding Light']

[Target Acquired: Chloe (Unbound Human - Potential Hero)]

[Status: Subdued]

*Potential Hero?* The words felt twisted, a sick joke. He focused desperately on the text, searching for any way to undo this. A new line appeared, as if responding to his intent.

[Control Interface accessible via mental command 'Status'.]

"'Status'?" he muttered, the word feeling absurd on his tongue, but he focused on it, a desperate plea for information. The screen flickered, replaced by a new, horrifying data sheet.

[TARGET: CHLOE]

[CLASS: CATALYST (POTENTIAL)]

[CONDITION: STABLE]

[EMOTIONAL STATE: TERROR / VIOLATION (HIGH)]

[BOND STRENGTH: 1% (FORMING - PERMANENT)]

*Permanent.*

The word struck him with the force of a physical blow. Cold and absolute. No release command listed. No "undo." He felt the blood drain from his face.

"What is it?" Chloe demanded, seeing the color leave his face. "What did you see?"

"It's... there's a screen," he said, his voice trembling. "In my head. It... it says... Chloe, it says this is *permanent*."

"No." The word was flat, dead. "No, you're lying. You're... you're insane! This isn't real!" Her terror-fueled rage finally broke. With a choked sob, she spun and bolted, scrambling down the narrow, refuse-strewn alley, away from him, away from the impossible nightmare he represented.

"Chloe, wait!"

She didn't get more than ten feet.

She was yanked backward as if snagged by an invisible, unbreakable tether. The force was so abrupt it lifted her off her feet. She hit the grimy pavement with a sickening thud, the air driven from her lungs in a choked gasp. The collar of light flared brightly for a moment before settling back to its steady pulse.

Stephen watched, horrified and helpless. He hadn't commanded it. He hadn't done anything. The binding itself had stopped her.

The interface in his vision updated with cold efficiency.

[Target: Chloe. Status: Restrained (Fleeing Attempt Detected)]

[Bond Strength: 1.2% (Active Resistance)]

Her *resistance* was strengthening it. The thought made him physically sick. Chloe pushed herself onto her hands and knees, coughing, tears of pain and terror streaming freely down her face. She stared at him, her eyes no longer angry, just filled with pure, undiluted animal fear.

The shouts of the mob, the ones who had chased them into the alley, echoed from the street, growing louder. They were coming back.

"We... we have to go," Stephen pleaded, taking a hesitant step toward her. "Chloe, please. They're coming."

She just shook her head, crawling backward until she hit the brick wall, trapped.

He looked back at the interface, his mind racing, frantic. He'd seen another line on the 'Status' screen, one he'd tried to ignore.

[AVAILABLE COMMANDS: [SUBDUE], [FOLLOW]]

He didn't want this. He didn't want to control *anyone*. But the shouts were closer. They were cornered. "Subdue" sounded monstrous. "Follow"... it was their only way out.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, the words tearing at his throat. He looked at Chloe, huddled and broken, and focused his intent, forcing the command through a wave of self-loathing. *Follow.*

[Command Accepted: 'Follow' Initiated]

Chloe gasped, her body stiffening as if struck by an electric current. Her eyes widened, reflecting a new, internal horror that transcended the physical restraint. Her own muscles betrayed her. Against her will, her legs straightened. She rose unsteadily to her feet, her movements jerky, horrifyingly puppet-like.

"What... what are you *doing* to me?" she stammered, her hands grasping at her legs, as if she could physically stop them from obeying.

"We have to go," he repeated, his voice hollow. He turned and started walking slowly toward the mouth of the alley, away from the returning mob.

He didn't look back, but he could hear her footsteps: the click-clack of her heels on the pavement, forced to match his pace, a few feet behind him. Each reluctant step was an echo of his violation, a fresh wound in the fabric of their reality.

He led her out of the alley's darkness and into the eerie, dual-mooned light of the impossible street. He didn't run, just walked with a numb, steady pace, his mind screaming. He was a monster.

He moved toward his apartment building, the one familiar structure in this glitched-out world. It felt like the only possible sanctuary. They reached the entrance, the heavy glass door hissing open. He led her inside, across the familiar lobby, into the elevator. The silence was absolute, broken only by Chloe's quiet, terrified breathing.

The elevator opened onto his floor. He walked to his apartment, 3B, fumbled for his keys, and unlocked the door.

He stepped inside. She followed, compelled, her body moving with a precision that was utterly devoid of life.

He stepped aside, and she walked past him into the small living room, stopping in the center like a doll awaiting instructions. He reached back and closed the door. The *click* of the lock engaging sounded unnaturally loud, final.

He'd gotten them to safety. He'd also just locked his captive in her cage.

**Chapter 3: The Tamer and the Caged**

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The *click* of the deadbolt was shatteringly loud in the oppressive silence of the apartment.

Chloe stood motionless in the center of his small living room, a living statue silhouetted by the eerie, dual-mooned light filtering through the blinds. The only other illumination came from the collar of light at her throat, pulsing with a soft, steady rhythm that seemed to mock the frantic hammering of Stephen's heart.

She didn't move. She just stared forward, her eyes wide, unfocused, and utterly terrified. She was still under his command.

The realization hit Stephen with a fresh wave of nausea. He'd forced her to follow him, and he hadn't... he hadn't *undone* it. He'd locked the door, trapping her in here while she was still a puppet on his invisible strings.

"Okay... okay," he whispered to himself, his hands trembling. He backed away, putting the kitchen counter between them, as if the physical distance could lessen his violation.

He stared at the blue interface, still floating in his vision, a constant, unwelcome passenger.

[TARGET: CHLOE]

[COMMAND: 'FOLLOW' (ACTIVE)]

He had to turn it off. He focused on the text, pushing his intent at it. *Release.*

[Invalid Command]

His stomach tightened. *Stop.*

[Invalid Command]

*Cancel. End. Undo. Please!*

[Invalid Command]

[Invalid Command]

[Invalid Command]

A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. What if he couldn't turn it off? What if she was stuck like this? The horror of the thought was suffocating. He looked at her, so terrifyingly still, and a new, desperate idea struck him. A different command.

He focused, a fresh spike of self-loathing piercing him. *Sit.*

[Command Accepted: 'Sit' Initiated]

Chloe's body jerked. Her legs buckled, and she moved with that same horrifying, puppet-like grace, crossing the small space to his worn-out armchair and sitting down stiffly. Her head remained facing forward, but her eyes, wide and wet with silent tears, darted to lock directly onto his.

He'd done it again. He'd proven he could make her do *anything*.

"I'm sorry," he choked out, the words feeling useless and obscene. "Chloe, I'm... I'm trying to figure this out."

Her only response was a single tear that broke free and traced a path down her pale cheek. She was a prisoner in her own body, and he was her jailer.

He ripped his gaze away from her, unable to bear the silent accusation. He looked back at the interface, his mind racing. *If it has a status for her, what about me?*

*'Status: Me'.*

The screen flickered, replacing Chloe's data with his own. It was simple, stark, and utterly damning.

[USER: STEPHEN]

[CLASS: TAMER (LVL 1)]

[TITLE: RELUCTANT MASTER]

[SKILLS: [BINDING LIGHT (LVL 1)], [COMMAND (LVL 1)]]

[BOUND TARGETS: 1/1]

*Tamer*.

The word echoed in his head. Not 'Hero'. Not 'Mage'. *Tamer*. Like someone who trained animals. Broke their will. And Chloe... she was his 'Bound Target'. The System's cold, impersonal language codified his monstrous act, made it a *feature*.

He looked at the [COMMAND (LVL 1)] skill. It now read: Active Command: 'Sit' (Target: Chloe).

He focused on that line of text, not with a word, but with a desperate, singular intent: *Stop that. Cancel it. Let her go.*

[Command: 'Sit' Canceled]

The change was instantaneous. Chloe gasped, a deep, ragged, shuddering breath, as if surfacing from underwater. Control flooded back into her limbs. For a half-second, she just stared at her own hands, flexing her fingers in disbelief.

Then, the dam of terror and rage broke.

"You *bastard*!" she shrieked, her voice raw. She sprang from the chair, not at him, but at the door. "LET ME OUT! LET ME OUT OF HERE!"

She scrambled at the deadbolt, her fingers fumbling with the lock. She ripped it open and lunged for the hallway—

And was yanked back with the same invisible, brutal force as in the alley. The tether held. She was hurled backward, her shoulder slamming hard into the drywall next to the doorframe. She slid to the floor in a heap, the collar flaring brightly before dimming.

She didn't try to get up again. She just huddled there, knees drawn to her chest, and sobbed. Hopeless, broken sobs that tore through the apartment's silence.

"It... it won't..." she gasped. "It won't let me leave."

"Chloe..." Stephen started, taking a slow, cautious step forward, his hands raised, palms out.

"STAY AWAY FROM ME!" she screamed, flinching so violently she hit her head against the wall. "Don't... don't *command* me again. Please... God, just don't do that again."

He froze, the plea hitting him harder than any physical blow could. He was the source of her terror. The monster in her story.

"I won't," he said, his voice hollow. "I swear, Chloe. I won't."

He retreated, putting the full width of the living room between them. He slumped onto the couch she had just vacated, dropping his head into his hands.

The apartment was no longer a sanctuary. It was a cell, and he was the warden. The silence stretched, thick and heavy, broken only by the sound of Chloe's quiet, terrified weeping from the floor by the door. They were trapped. Trapped by the System, trapped by the world outside, and trapped by the horrifying, unbreakable bond of light that now connected them.

**Chapter 4: The Sentinel**

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Time dissolved in the silent apartment. An hour might have passed, or perhaps only a minute. The world outside the blinds—the glitched street, the dual moons—was utterly silent, creating a vacuum that amplified every sound within. The drip of a leaky faucet. The low, electric hum of the refrigerator.

And Chloe's breathing.

She remained huddled by the door, the storm of her sobs having subsided into a rhythm of hitched, broken breaths and quiet, desperate sniffles. Stephen sat on the couch, a statue of guilt, his head still buried in his hands. Every sound she made was a fresh accusation, a knife-twist of his failure. He was trapped by his guilt, she was trapped by his power. It was a perfect, terrible stalemate.

Then, a new sound shattered the fragile quiet.

*Rap. Rap. Rap.*

Three sharp, confident knocks on the apartment door.

Stephen's head snapped up, his heart instantly seizing in his chest. He saw Chloe flinch, her quiet weeping cut off as if by a switch. Her eyes, wide and terrified, locked on the door.

*The mob,* was Stephen's first thought. *They found us.*

But the knock wasn't the chaotic, angry pounding of a mob. It was precise. Measured. Patient.

A voice, crisp and feminine, cut through the wood. "I know you're in there, Tamer. We don't have much time. Open the door."

Stephen froze. The voice. It was... it was Chloe's. But it wasn't. It held none of her terror, none of her panic. It was cold, clipped, and filled with an authority that chilled him to the bone.

Chloe scrambled backward, crab-walking away from the door to press herself into the corner of the entryway, as far from the new threat as she could get.

"Who are you?" Stephen called out, his own voice hoarse.

There was no reply. Instead, he heard the *shink* of metal sliding into the electronic lock. A brief, digital *chirp*. The lock clicked open.

The door swung inward, revealing a woman silhouetted against the dim hallway light.

She *was* Chloe. And she was utterly, terrifyingly not.

The same fiery red hair was pulled back in a severe, practical ponytail. The same face, but where Chloe's was defined by its expressive, rebellious energy, this woman's was all sharp angles and hard-won experience. She was dressed not in torn fishnets and stilettos, but in dark, non-reflective tactical pants and a reinforced vest over a black long-sleeved shirt. A holstered sidearm sat on one hip; a sheathed, high-tech-looking blade on the other.

But the most chilling difference was her eyes. They were Chloe's eyes, but they were *old*, and they held no fear at all.

The newcomer's gaze swept the room with terrifying efficiency. She saw Stephen on the couch, tensed and confused. She saw Chloe, huddled and weeping in the corner. Her eyes lingered for a fraction of a second on the glowing collar, and a flicker of... *something*... crossed her features. Not pity. Not surprise. Recognition.

As she stepped inside, letting the door click shut behind her, the blue interface in Stephen's vision flared to life, unbidden.

[New Target Detected: Zoe (Human)] [CLASS: SENTINEL (LVL 14)] [BINDING STATUS: UNBOUND] [THREAT LEVEL: MODERATE]

*Zoe.* The name appeared in his head as if sourced from the System itself. *Sentinel. Level 14.*

"So," the woman—Zoe—said, her voice as hard as her gaze. "It's true. You're the new Tamer." She looked at Chloe on the floor, her expression tightening. "And you've already broken one."

"Who... what...?" Chloe stammered from the corner, staring at her own reflection made real and dangerous. "You... you look just like me."

"I *am* you," Zoe said dismissively, her attention locked on Stephen. "Or, more accurately, we're counterparts. And you," she pointed at Stephen, "have the worst possible timing."

"I... I didn't ask for this," Stephen said, standing up slowly, his hands raised. "Any of it."

"Nobody ever does," Zoe shot back. "That doesn't matter. What matters is that your little light show in the alley painted a target on this entire building."

A new alert flashed on Stephen's interface.

[Warning: Multiple 'Hunter' signatures detected. Proximity: 800 meters and closing.]

"Hunters?" Stephen read the word aloud, his blood running cold.

"They're here for you," Zoe confirmed, her hand dropping to the hilt of her blade. "And for *her*," she nodded at Chloe, "now that you've 'claimed' her. They'll kill you to get to her, and they'll kill her to 'sterilize' the bond."

"My God..."

"There's no god here, Tamer." Zoe's voice was flat, final. She looked at the cowering Chloe, her expression hard. "Get up. Crying in the corner isn't going to stop them."

She turned her cold, assessing gaze back to Stephen. "And *you*. Stop looking like a kicked puppy. You did this. You broke her. Now you get to carry the pieces. We're leaving. We're leaving *now*. The Hunters are already in the building."

**Chapter 5: The Under-Dark (Rewrite)**

## Chapter 5: The Under-Dark (Rewrite)

The command was absolute. "We're leaving. Now."

Zoe’s voice cut through Stephen’s guilt-fog like a surgical laser. He was still standing with his hands half-raised, a statue of apology in the apartment that had become a cell. Chloe was a broken shape by the door, her sobs finally subsided into a silent, full-body tremor.

[Warning: Multiple 'Hunter' signatures detected. Proximity: 780 meters and closing.]

The blue text in Stephen's vision was a death warrant. Zoe, seeing his eyes flick to an empty corner, nodded once, her expression grim. "You see them. Good. That means we have seconds, not minutes."

"I... I can't..." Stephen’s voice was a dry rasp. He looked at Chloe. "I... broke her. I can't just..."

Zoe crossed the distance between them in two long, fluid strides. Her hand, wrapped in a fingerless tactical glove, shot out and seized the front of his shirt, bunching the material. She wasn't strong enough to lift him, but the sheer, focused intensity in her gaze was a physical blow. Her eyes—Chloe's eyes, but utterly devoid of warmth, all icy pragmatism and combat-honed clarity—were inches from his.

"Listen to me, Tamer," she hissed, her voice a low, dangerous thrum. "You can have your breakdown *later*. You can wallow in your guilt when we're not about to be vivisected on your living room floor. Right now? You are a *liability*. And that," she jerked her chin toward Chloe, "is a *package* they will kill us both to acquire. You 'broke' her? Fine. You did this. You get to carry the pieces."

She shoved him back, hard. "Get her on her feet. We are not dying here."

[Proximity: 650 meters and closing.]

The distant shriek of building alarms suddenly wailed to life, a thin, piercing sound from the lobby, worlds away. The Hunters weren't being subtle.

"Shit," Zoe breathed. "They're faster than I thought. Forget the front."

Stephen, his limbs finally moving, galvanized by the raw, adrenal terror, stumbled toward Chloe. "Chloe? We have to... we have to go."

She didn't respond. She was locked in, her eyes wide, staring at a point in the middle distance, her body rigid with catatonic fear. He touched her shoulder. "Chloe."

She flinched so violently she seemed to fold in on herself, a small, desperate whimper escaping her lips. The sound was a fresh spike of guilt, but Zoe’s harsh voice cut through it.

"No time! Pick her up!"

He slid his arms under her—one beneath her knees, one behind her back—and lifted. She was a dead weight, light but unhelpfully limp, her head lolling back. Her terror was a living thing, a frantic, screaming static that flooded his mind through the bond, so loud it made his teeth ache.

[Bond Status (Chloe): 2.1% (CRITICAL - TERROR SPIKE)]

"Where?" Stephen grunted, adjusting her weight.

Zoe was already at a narrow door at the end of the short hallway, a utility closet Stephen used for a vacuum and cleaning supplies. She wrenched it open, ignoring the tumbling mop, and her eyes scanned the back wall. "Here."

She didn't have a key. She simply slammed the reinforced heel of her boot into the drywall just beside the doorframe. A hollow *thump*. "Structural void. Old build, new code. There's always a gap."

She turned, her hand dropping to the hilt of the Aegis Blade at her hip. The blade wasn't drawn, but the hilt itself seemed to shimmer. She slammed the metal pommel into the plaster. A sound like a high-tech camera shutter—*fssht-click*—and a flash of blue data. The lock on the *other* side of the wall, a lock Stephen never knew existed, disengaged with a heavy *clunk*.

"What...?"

"Sentinel override. Works on most low-level tech, old and new. Move." She pulled a section of the wall open. It wasn't a door, but a grimy, metal-framed panel revealing a dark, impossibly narrow shaft. A steel ladder, slick with decades of filth, descended into an abyss.

[Proximity: 400 meters. Lobby breached. Ascending.]

"They're in the building," Stephen whispered, his blood turning to ice.

"They're on their way up," Zoe corrected, her voice echoing slightly as she swung her body into the shaft, her boots finding the first rung. "Stairs are a choke point. Elevator's a death trap. This is the only way."

She looked up at him, her face a pale oval in the gloom, her eyes catching the red-and-blue flicker of distant, glitched city lights through his living room window. "Your turn, Tamer. Get her in here."

The logistics of it were a nightmare. Stephen, holding an unconscious—or catatonic, he couldn't tell—woman, had to climb *down* a vertical, greasy ladder. He wedged himself into the opening, his back scraping against the rough concrete, the smell hitting him instantly. It was a putrid wave of old water, rust, metallic-tanged mold, and something else... something sharp, like ozone and copper. The smell of the System.

"I can't... I can't hold her and climb," he panted, his panic rising.

A muffled *bang* from the apartment's front door. They were *here*.

"Then you'd better be a fast learner!" Zoe's voice snapped from the darkness below. "Tamer! Use your *head*! You have a *bond*! Give her a command she can't refuse! 'Climb!' 'Hold on!'"

The thought of using his voice on Chloe again, of *forcing* her, was so repellent he almost threw up. "No! I won't!"

"Fine! Then *die*!" Zoe's voice was already fading. "I'm not waiting for you!"

Another, heavier *BOOM*. The sound of his apartment door splintering.

"Oh God..." Stephen looked at Chloe's face, pale and tear-streaked in the dim light. He couldn't. He couldn't force her. But he couldn't leave her.

With a grunt of pure, desperate exertion, he turned his body, settling her into a fireman's carry, her limp form draped over his right shoulder. He gripped her legs with his right arm, leaving his left hand free to grab the rungs.

It was slow. It was agonizing. Each step down was a controlled fall. His left hand, slick with grease, would grip a rung, and he'd slide his boot down, praying it found the next one, all while his right arm burned, clamped around Chloe's legs. Her hair, smelling faintly of her strawberry shampoo, brushed his face, a phantom of the normal world they had just lost.

The darkness was absolute, broken only by the sound of his own ragged breathing, Chloe's hitched, terrified whimpers, and the steady *drip... drip... drip...* of water somewhere below. He descended past one floor, then two. The air grew colder, heavier. The smell of ozone and copper intensified, burning his nostrils.

He felt the bonds, a new, unwelcome sense. Chloe's was a screaming, high-pitched whine of terror, a feedback loop so painful it blurred his vision. It felt like *static* and *broken glass*. Zoe's, distant but clear, was a cold, sharp, steady pulse. *Focus. Impatience. Annoyance.* It felt like *cold steel* and *static*.

He didn't know how long he climbed. Ten minutes. An hour. Time had no meaning in the vertical dark. His shoulder was a raw, screaming knot of pain. His grip was failing.

Then, his boot touched something solid. Not a rung. A floor.

He stumbled out of the shaft, nearly collapsing, sliding Chloe's limp body off his shoulder and easing her down against the curved wall. He was breathing like a bellows, his lungs on fire, his body shaking.

[System Alert: Now entering Unregistered Zone - 'The Under-Dark']

He blinked, sweat and grime stinging his eyes. They were not in a basement.

They were in a tunnel. It was immense, a perfect, seamless tube of black, glassy material that seemed to drink the light. It must have been thirty feet high, stretching into an oppressive, unlit distance in both directions. The air was cool, and the only light came from Zoe, who stood twenty yards away.

Her Aegis Blade was now ignited. It wasn't a sword of fire, but of pure, hard, blue-white light, casting sharp, sterile shadows. It hummed, a low, clean thrum that vibrated in his bones. She was examining a junction where another, smaller tunnel intersected theirs.

"Took you long enough," she said, not looking back. Her voice echoed, flat and dead, in the vast space. "They're topside. They'll have lost our trail for now."

"Where... where are we?" Stephen managed, his voice a rasp.

"Old infrastructure," Zoe said, tapping the black wall with her glowing blade. A shower of data-motes, tiny blue-green sparks, sprayed from the contact. "Pre-System. Some kind of pneumatic transport, maybe. Now... it's just 'The Under-Dark.' The sewers. The veins of the world. And it's not empty."

As if on cue, Chloe let out a long, shuddering moan, curling into a tighter ball on the floor. "No... no, no..."

"Get her up," Zoe commanded, turning to face him. The blue light of her sword carved her face into a mask of harsh angles. "We can't stay here. This is scavenger territory."

"She's... she's not..." Stephen knelt beside Chloe, touching her arm. Her skin was ice-cold. "She's... broken, Zoe. Look at her."

Zoe stalked over, her blade's hum the only sound. She looked down at Chloe, her expression unreadable, analytical. "She's in shock. Her Catalyst core is unstable. The bond is fragile. You did this. You 'claimed' a high-risk, uncalibrated Catalyst with a forced, non-consensual primary bond. Her System isn't just in shock; it's *fighting* you. It's fighting *itself*. This... this is what *he* did to Ruby."

The last sentence was quiet, almost to herself, laced with a venom so pure it made Stephen flinch.

"He? Ruby?"

"My Tamer," Zoe said, her voice flat. "My Stephen. The one who failed. The one who got his Catalyst, *my* Chloe... 'Ruby'... killed." She looked at Stephen, her eyes boring into him. "You have his face. His... *potential*. And right now, you're making all the same stupid, sentimental, *weak* mistakes."

Before Stephen could process this, a new sound echoed from the darkness up the tunnel.

It wasn't a drip. It wasn't a hum.

It was a slithering, skittering, chitinous sound. A wet *click-clack* of too many limbs, accompanied by a low, sibilant hiss that sounded like a dozen leaking steam pipes.

Zoe was instantly in a low crouch, her blade raised, its light penetrating the oppressive gloom. "Contacts. Three. No... five. Scavengers. Stay behind me. And keep *her* quiet."

"Keep her quiet?" Stephen hissed, pulling the trembling Chloe closer to him. "How?"

"I don't care! Your power, Tamer! Muffle her, command her, *do your damn job* or they'll hone in on her terror!"

The hissing grew louder. From the shadows, five shapes began to emerge.

They were horrific. They were the 'Gorgons' from Stephen's original vision, but worse, far worse. They stood seven feet tall, a grotesque fusion of decayed, pale flesh and slick, black chitin, like a centaur where the human half was a woman's torso and the horse half was a massive, multi-legged insect. Their arms were long, ending in razor-sharp, chitinous claws.

But their heads... their heads were the true nightmare. Where a face should be, there was only a smooth, metallic plate. And instead of hair, a writhing mass of fiber-optic cables, each one glistening with a sickly, internal green light, snaked and hissed, spraying a fine, oily mist.

[System Scan: Gorgon-Class Construct (Rank: D)] [Threat: Low (Group: Medium)] [Primary Attack: [Stasis Gaze] / Chitinous Claws] [Weakness: Optic Cluster (Head)]

"Constructs," Zoe breathed, her voice tight. "Low-level, but nasty. Their gaze doesn't petrify; it hits you with a [Stasis] debuff. You freeze, they eat. Don't. Meet. Their. Gaze."

The five creatures fanned out, their fiber-optic 'hair' waving, sensing. The green lights brightened, focusing... locking onto Chloe's whimpering form.

"Here they come!"

Zoe moved. She wasn't just a fighter; she was a storm. She blurred forward, her glowing blade a whisper. She didn't charge the center, but skirted the edge, her movements fluid, economical, and brutally efficient.

The nearest Gorgon turned, its metallic faceplate flashing as it tried to lock its [Stasis Gaze]. But Zoe was already there, sliding low, her blade sweeping up in a clean, vertical arc. The blue-white light of her sword connected with the creature's insectoid abdomen.

There was no blood. The blade passed through the chitin, and the Gorgon simply... dissolved. It fell apart into a cloud of disintegrating data-motes, its hissing cut off instantly.

*One.*

Stephen could only watch, horrified, holding Chloe tight as she buried her face in his chest, her body shaking in violent, uncontrollable spasms.

The other four constructs screeched, an ungodly sound of static and tearing metal, and converged on Zoe.

"Zoe!" Stephen yelled, a useless, panicked cry.

"Shut up! I'm busy!" she grunted, parrying a claw-strike that sent sparks flying from her blade. She spun, her sword a horizontal blur, decapitating a second one. Its body stood for a second, headless, before dissolving into digital dust.

*Two.*

But the other three were on her. One lunged, and she was forced to leap back. The third one, flanking her, lowered its head, and the fiber-optic 'hair' flared with a blinding green light. Its [Stasis Gaze].

"Zoe, your left!" Stephen shouted.

He saw her flinch. Not from the monster, but from *him*. His shout, his voice, his *bond*, had carried an echo of his Tamer power, an accidental, panicked command. It had distracted her.

The Stasis beam, a cone of pale green light, clipped her. Her left arm, the one without the sword, froze, locked in place. Simultaneously, the third Gorgon's claws raked across her back, tearing through her armor, drawing blood.

"Gah!" she screamed, a sound of pure fury. She spun, ignoring the new wound, and plunged her Aegis Blade straight through the smooth, metallic face of the creature that had hit her.

*Three.*

She ripped the blade free, but she was staggering. Her left arm was still locked, useless, at her side. The [Stasis] debuff was pulsing on her shoulder, a green, digital icon only Stephen could see.

The final two creatures circled her, their fiber-optic hair flaring, sensing her injury, her weakness.

"Stephen!" Zoe barked, her voice strained. "The bond! Use the bond! 'Release!' 'Purge!' Do *something*!"

He stared at the green icon on her shoulder, his mind racing. He focused, pushing his intent through the cold, sharp connection he had with her. *Release!*

[Invalid Command: Target Status (Debuff) Requires Tamer Skill: [Cleanse] (Locked)]

"It's not working!" he yelled.

"Useless!" Zoe spat. She dodged a claw, her movements slower, hampered by her frozen arm.

He had to do something. He was a Tamer. He was supposed to... *tame*. He looked at the two remaining Gorgons. He pushed his intent, not at Zoe, but at the *monsters*. *Stop!*

It was like pushing against a mountain of solid ice. The creatures didn't even flinch.

*They're not Heroes. They're not Catalysts. It doesn't work.*

One of the Gorgons lunged at Zoe's frozen side. She couldn't block it.

"No!" Stephen yelled. He did the only thing he could think of. He let go of Chloe, grabbed a loose piece of rebar from a pile of debris he hadn't noticed, and *charged*.

It was stupid. It was suicidal. He was a 41-year-old construction worker with a piece of rust, charging a seven-foot biomechanical monster.

The Gorgon heard him. It turned, its smooth, metallic faceplate locking onto him. The fiber-optic hair flared.

The world went green.

Stephen's body locked instantly. The [Stasis] debuff was a wave of agonizing, paralyzing cold. He was frozen, his arm raised, the rebar useless. He could see, he could hear, he could *feel* the icy terror, but he couldn't move a muscle.

The Gorgon hissed, a sound of triumph, and raised its long, chitinous claws to gut him.

*This is it. This is how I die. Stupid.*

*Fssshh-THOOM.*

A blade of blue-white light erupted from the creature's chest. Zoe was there, her face a mask of sweat, blood, and absolute rage. She had tackled the *other* Gorgon, using its own lunge to vault over it, and had struck from behind. Her left arm was still frozen, but her right was more than enough.

The creature above him dissolved. The [Stasis] on him broke. He collapsed to his knees, gasping, the rebar clattering uselessly to the floor.

Zoe finished the last one. It was a brutal, one-sided execution. She simply walked up to it as it tried to backpedal and severed its insectoid legs, then calmly planted her blade in its head.

*Five.*

The tunnel was plunged into a sudden, deafening silence, broken only by three sounds: Stephen's ragged gasping, Chloe's terrified weeping, and the steady *drip... drip... drip...* of Zoe's blood hitting the glassy floor.

Zoe stood for a long moment, her back to him, her blade's light casting a long, solitary shadow. Then, she deactivated the light, plunging them into near-total darkness, illuminated only by the faint, residual data-motes of the dissolving monsters. Her frozen arm was still locked at a bizarre angle.

"You," she said, her voice shaking with a controlled fury he had not heard yet, "are a *liability*."

She turned, and even in the dark, he could feel the cold fire of her gaze.

"You distracted me. You got me hit. You charged in, like an idiot, and almost got yourself killed. You are the worst Tamer I have ever seen."

She stalked over to him, grabbed the front of his shirt, and hauled him to his feet.

"You listen to me," she hissed, her face inches from his. "I am a Sentinel. My job is to contain threats. *You* are a Tamer. Your job is to support your bonded. You don't fight. You don't charge. You *support*. You manage *her*," she pointed to Chloe, "and you manage *us*. You clear our debuffs, you buff our attacks, you watch our backs. And if you don't know *how*, you stay out of the *goddamn* way."

She shoved him back. He stumbled, falling against the tunnel wall.

"My... my arm..." Zoe grunted, looking at her still-frozen limb. "The debuff is fading. Low-level. But you... you are a problem."

"I... I'm sorry... I..."

"Save it." She looked at Chloe, who was now staring at the fading data-motes, her eyes wide, her terror finding a new, fresh focus. "At least she's quiet."

Zoe leaned against the wall, wincing as she put pressure on her wounded back. "They were just scavengers. D-Ranks. Not even a real threat."

"That... *that* wasn't a real threat?" Stephen said, his voice cracking.

"Not compared to what's coming." Zoe’s voice was grim.

A new sound. A low, resonant *hum*, completely different from the hissing of the Gorgons. It was a deep, bass thrum, so low he felt it in his chest more than he heard it. It was coming from the direction they'd just come, from the shaft... from *topside*.

Zoe's head snapped up. Her brief moment of rest was gone, replaced by a new, cold dread.

"No..." she whispered.

A new alert flashed in Stephen's vision, this one a deep, pulsing red.

[Warning: 'Hunter' signatures detected. Proximity: 1000 meters. Sub-level.]

"They're in the tunnels," Stephen said, his voice hollow.

"They followed us down," Zoe confirmed, her voice flat and dead. She pushed herself off the wall, her Aegis Blade flaring back to life, its blue-white light seeming small, fragile, in the face of the immense, oppressive dark.

"They're in the tunnels."

**Chapter 6: The Hunters and the Hum (Rewrite)**

The hum was not a sound. It was a presence. A deep, resonant thrum that vibrated through the glassy floor, up Stephen's spine, and into his teeth. It was the antithesis of the Gorgons' wet, organic hissing. This was a sound of engines. Of cold, manufactured, implacable power.

"They're in the tunnels," Zoe confirmed, her voice flat. Her Aegis Blade, flaring back to life, seemed to flicker, its blue-white light small and fragile in the oppressive, absolute dark. "They're not just 'in.' That hum... that's a main-line transport. They're not just scouting. This is an acquisition team."

She shoved herself off the wall, a sharp, involuntary hiss of pain escaping her as she moved her injured back. The [Stasis] debuff icon on her shoulder was gone, but her left arm still hung at a stiff, unnatural angle. She flexed her fingers, her face a mask of controlled agony.

"How... how can we fight them?" Stephen asked, his voice hollow. He was still on the floor, the memory of the [Stasis] paralysis a cold, phantom echo in his limbs.

Zoe laughed. It was a single, harsh, barking sound, devoid of all humor. "Fight them? Tamer, you just watched me—a Rank-B Sentinel—get my ass handed to me by five D-Rank *scavengers* because *you* decided to play hero." She stalked over to him, the blue light of her sword carving stark, angry shadows on her face. "We don't 'fight' them. We *run*. And you, this time, are going to do exactly what I say."

She grabbed the front of his shirt again—it was becoming a painful habit—and hauled him to his feet. "Get *her* up," she snapped, nodding to Chloe, who was still a curled, weeping ball against the wall. "She's your responsibility. Her terror is a *beacon*. It's what the Gorgons locked onto, and it's what these Hunters will follow. You are a Tamer. *Tame*. Muffle her. Do *something*. I don't care what. You have ten seconds."

[Warning: 'Hunter' signatures detected. Proximity: 800 meters and closing.]

The hum was getting louder, resolving from a vibration into an audible, directional, *drilling* sound.

"Ten seconds, Stephen!"

He stumbled over to Chloe, his mind screaming. *Muffle her? How?* He knelt beside her, his hands hovering, afraid to touch her, afraid to use the voice, the power, that had broken her. "Chloe... Chloe, please. You have to be quiet. Please."

She didn't respond, just flinched, her sobs hitching. Her terror was a physical, sour-tasting static in his mind, so potent it made him want to gag.

*It's a bond. Not just a leash. A... bond.* He closed his eyes, ignoring Zoe's impatient, furious presence behind him. He focused on the raw, screaming feedback loop from Chloe. He didn't try to *stop* it. He didn't try to *command* it. He just... pushed. He pushed a different feeling into it.

*I'm here. I'm sorry. I'm scared too. But I will get you out of this. I promise.*

He didn't say the words. He *felt* them, projecting his own suffocating guilt and desperate, protective urgency down the shimmering, invisible connection.

[Bond Status (Chloe): 2.1% (CRITICAL) -> 2.3% (CRITICAL)]

[Target: Chloe - Status Effect: [Muffled (Terror)] (Temporary - Tamer Intent)]

The screaming static in his head didn't stop, but it *dampened*. It was as if he'd thrown a heavy blanket over a shrieking speaker. Chloe's hitched sobs quieted into a series of shallow, silent, full-body tremors. She was still terrified, but she was *quiet*.

He looked at his hands, stunned. It had worked. Sort of.

"Whatever you did, keep doing it," Zoe said, her voice tight. "Now, *move*."

She pointed with her blade into the oppressive darkness of the tunnel, away from the approaching hum. "This way. This junction leads to an older, narrower conduit. Their transport won't fit. It'll force them to dismount. It'll buy us time."

She didn't wait for a reply. She just started to run. It was a limping, awkward gait, her left arm held stiffly, her wounded back making her flinch with every other step.

Stephen scooped Chloe up. He didn't ask this time, didn't hesitate. He swung her into a fireman's carry, the same way he'd come down the ladder, his shoulder already protesting. "Hold on, Chloe," he whispered, his voice rough.

He ran, stumbling after Zoe's bobbing, blue-white light.

It was a nightmare of a chase. The floor was glassy and, in places, slick with the same oily, green-black ichor the Gorgons had leaked. Stephen's work boots, caked in apartment debris and tunnel filth, had no purchase. He slipped, catching his balance, his lungs already burning. Chloe was a terrifying dead weight, her muffled terror a constant, painful pressure in his skull.

Zoe's light was the only thing in the universe. A single point of direction in an infinite, suffocating black.

"How... how much farther?" he panted, after what felt like an eternity.

"Save your breath for running," she threw back, her own breathing growing ragged. The wound, the [Stasis] after-effects... they were taking their toll.

The hum was right behind them. It was a monstrous, grinding sound now, accompanied by a harsh, white-yellow light that was beginning to flood the tunnel they'd just vacated.

[Proximity: 300 meters.]

"There!" Zoe grunted, skidding to a halt. She pointed her blade at a crack in the wall. It wasn't a tunnel. It was a fissure, a jagged, vertical split in the glassy black material, barely wide enough for a man to shoulder through. "In! Now!"

She shoved herself into the gap, her light disappearing.

Stephen was right behind her. He had to turn sideways, his back and Chloe's body scraping against the sharp, crystalline edges of the fissure. He grunted, pushing through, emerging into...

Another tunnel. This one was ancient. The floor was rough-hewn stone, not glass. The air was colder, and the smell of ozone was gone, replaced by a deep, earthy, *dead* smell.

Zoe was leaning against the wall, her sword-light illuminating a small, cramped space. She was breathing heavily, her face pale and slick with sweat.

"Did we... did we lose them?" Stephen panted, gently setting Chloe down. She immediately curled into a ball, her tremors resuming, the [Muffled] effect already fading.

"We... we bought... seconds," Zoe gasped, clutching her side. Her hand came away dark with her own blood. "The transport... can't follow. But... they're... they're on foot. And they'll be fast."

She slid down the wall, her blade's light flickering as her grip on the hilt wavered. "Dammit..."

"You're hurt," Stephen said, stating the obvious.

"No," she spat, her voice weak but still venomous. "I'm... 'compromised.' Sentinel term. Means I'm a liability. Just... like... you."

A new alert, sharp and insistent.

[Bond Status (Zoe): 11.8% (STABLE)]

[Target: Zoe - Status Effect: [Bleeding (Minor)] (Physical)]

[Target: Zoe - Status Effect: [Stasis Fatigue (Debuff)] (Residual)]

"Your arm..."

"Residual energy lag," she grunted. "The [Stasis] debuff... it's low-level, but it burns the nerves. My arm... feels like it's full of... hot gravel. I can't... maintain... blade."

As he watched, the Aegis Blade flickered, sputtered, and dissolved into a shower of harmless data-motes, plunging them into absolute, terrifying darkness.

The silence of the new tunnel was a living, breathing thing. Stephen's own ragged breathing, Zoe's pained gasps, Chloe's silent, terrified tremors.

And, from the fissure they'd just come through, a new sound.

*Scrrree...*

The sound of metal on stone.

*Click. Whirr. Hsssss.*

A single, brilliant, white-hot beam of light, perfectly circular, snapped on, cutting through the fissure, sweeping the small, dead-end tunnel. It passed over Stephen, blinding him, before landing on Zoe.

"Contacts," Zoe whispered, her voice a thread. "Get... get down."

A voice echoed from the fissure. It was not human. It was a cold, synthesized, multi-tonal sound, like three different voices speaking at once.

**[:: Acquisition team. Target Catalyst is present. Target Sentinel is compromised. Target Tamer is... irrelevant. ::]**

"Shit," Zoe breathed. "They... they know."

Three figures stepped through the fissure. They were not men.

They were tall, at least eight feet, and unnervingly thin. Their bodies were encased in sleek, segmented armor of a material that seemed to be a matte, chalky-white, like polished bone. Where a face should be, there was only a seamless, black, convex visor, like the eye of a monstrous fly. They moved with an unnatural, fluid grace, their feet silent on the stone. In their hands, they held long, rifle-like weapons, not of metal, but of the same chalk-white material, their muzzles humming with a faint, blue-white energy.

These were the Hunters.

They fanned out, their movements precise, economical, and utterly terrifying. They were surrounding them.

The central one, its head slightly thicker, as if it wore a helmet over its visor, focused on Zoe.

**[:: Sentinel 734-Alpha. You are in breach of the Citadel Compact. You are harboring unregistered, unstable assets. You are classified: Rogue. ::]**

"Go... go screw a construct, you... you 'Void-kin'," Zoe spat, trying to push herself up the wall, her hand fumbling for a hilt that was no longer there.

"Void-kin?" Stephen whispered, his back pressed so hard against the stone it hurt.

"That's what... they are," Zoe panted. "The 'Hunters.' Not... not human. Not System. They're... from... the *other* place. The void between..."

The Hunter leader's head snapped to Stephen. Its 'gaze' was a physical weight.

**[:: The Tamer. Anomaly. Unregistered. You have bonded a Class-ELE Catalyst. This is not permitted. Surrender the asset. ::]**

"Go to hell," Stephen said, his voice shaking, but his resolve hardening. He moved, placing himself between the Hunter and the curled-up forms of Chloe and Zoe. It was a stupid, suicidal gesture, just like the one with the rebar. But he couldn't *not* do it.

The Hunter leader let out a sound that might have been a synthetic sigh. **[:: Predictable. Sentimental. Flawed. Unit Beta: [Subdue] the liability. Unit Gamma: [Secure] the Sentinel. I will acquire the Catalyst. ::]**

The two other Hunters moved. One raised its rifle at Stephen.

"Stephen, no!" Zoe screamed, just as he did the only thing he could think of.

He focused on her, on the [Stasis Fatigue] icon he could still see floating over her, a pale green, ugly thing. He focused on her pain, her weakness, and he *pushed*. Not with a command. But with... *intent*.

*You need to move. MOVE!*

[Tamer Skill: [Adrenal Surge] (LOCKED) - Partial Activation (Intent)]

[Target: Zoe - Status Effect: [Stasis Fatigue] (Suppressed - 10s)]

[Target: Zoe - Status Effect: [Adrenaline (Minor)] (Active - 10s)]

It was like he'd jammed a key into a lock that didn't *quite* fit. He felt a sharp, agonizing *drain* in his own mind, a psychic backlash, but he saw Zoe's eyes widen.

She *moved*.

The blue-white Aegis Blade flared back to life in her hand with a vengeful *VWOOM*. The Hunter, 'Unit Beta,' was just about to fire its rifle at Stephen. Zoe, in a blur of motion, was already on it. She didn't have her full strength, but the surprise was total.

She plunged her blade straight through the Hunter's white-armored chest.

There was no blood. No scream. Just a sound like a high-pressure hose bursting, a spray of black, oily... *something*... and the Hunter's body *twitched*, its limbs locking.

**[:: Unit Beta... compromised? Impossible. ::]** the leader hissed.

Zoe wasn't done. She ripped her blade free, spun, and kicked the rifle out of 'Unit Gamma's' hand, even as it tried to pivot to 'secure' her. Her 10-second boost was already fading. She stumbled, her breath catching.

"Now, Tamer!" she screamed, her voice hoarse. "Do something *else* useful! Your... your bond... with *her*!"

The leader, 'Unit Alpha,' ignored the fight. It had its mission. It was moving... moving toward *Chloe*. It stepped right past Stephen as if he wasn't there, its long, white-boned hand reaching for the girl.

"No! Get away from her!" Stephen yelled, grabbing the Hunter's arm.

It was like grabbing a steel girder. The Hunter didn't even slow. It just... flicked its arm. A small, casual, effortless motion.

Stephen was thrown through the air, his back slamming into the stone wall with a sickening *crack*. Pain exploded behind his eyes, bright and absolute. He felt his ribs *give*. He slid to the floor, his vision blurring, a wet, copper taste in his mouth.

He was dying. He was pretty sure he was dying.

Through his fading, swimming vision, he saw the Hunter leader stop, looming over Chloe's small, trembling form.

**[:: Catalyst secure— ::]**

And then, Chloe moved.

She wasn't catatonic. She wasn't weeping. She was *looking* up, her eyes wide, and in their depths, something *other* than terror was burning. It was a cold, pure, six-sided *rage*. Her terror and his terror, his pain, his desperate protective instinct... it had all funneled down the bond, and his [Muffle] had broken.

The Hunter's white, bone-like hand, inches from her face, was suddenly encased in a perfect, intricate, six-sided *crystal*.

The crystal *grew*.

It flashed up the Hunter's arm, covering its shoulder, its torso, in a heartbeat. It was a beautiful, lethal, pale blue frost, a three-dimensional fractal of impossible geometry.

**[:: Warning! ELE signature... Unstable... This is not... ::]**

The Hunter's synthetic voice was cut off as the blue crystal completely encased its head. It stood there for a second, a perfect, frozen, crystalline statue, its hand still outstretched.

Then, with a sound like a thousand tiny wind chimes, the crystal *vibrated*.

The Hunter dissolved. Not like the Gorgons, into data. It just... *shattered*. It fell apart into a million tiny, glittering, ice-blue fragments, which chimed once more on the stone floor and then vanished, leaving nothing.

Zoe, who had just finished disabling 'Unit Gamma' (not destroying it, but severing its weapon hand and kicking it into a crumpled heap), stared. Her jaw was open.

The tunnel was silent.

Stephen was on the floor, trying to breathe, each inhale a fresh spike of agony from his broken ribs.

[Tamer Status: Damaged (Moderate) - [Broken Ribs] [Minor Concussion]]

Chloe was on her knees, her hands outstretched, staring at the empty space where the Hunter had been. Her body was shaking, not with terror, but with the aftershock of a power she didn't understand.

Zoe was the first to speak, her voice a low, awest-ruck, and utterly terrified whisper.

"Ruby... that's... that's what he called her. That... that's what my Chloe... my *Catalyst*... could do. The 'ELE'... Extinction Level Event. She... she just *erased* it."

Zoe looked at Stephen, who was coughing up a small, dark speck of blood onto the stone floor. She looked at the last remaining Hunter, 'Gamma,' which was twitching, trying to get up, its white-boned hand severed and sparking oily, black fluid.

She limped over, her face grim, and planted her boot on the Hunter's black, visored face.

"So," she said, her voice a cold, hard rasp as she raised her glowing blade. "I guess you're... *compromised*."

She thrust the blade down. A single, wet, *hiss-thump*.

She turned to Stephen, her expression unreadable. "Well, Tamer," she panted, "you're not... *entirely* useless. You're just... mostly useless."

She looked at the fissure, at the distant, grinding *hum* that was still echoing from the main tunnel. "We can't stay here. That was just a scout team. The... the *real* Hunters... they'll be coming now."

Stephen tried to say something, but all that came out was a pained, bloody gurgle. He blacked out, the last thing he saw being Chloe's wide, terrified, and utterly powerful eyes, staring at him from across the dark, dead tunnel.

**Tab 7**