

Salem

Lightlyss

“Someone could call themselves a hero and still walk around killing dozens. Someone else could be labeled a villain for trying to stop them. Plenty of humans were monstrous, and plenty of monsters knew how to play at being human.”

— *V.E. Schwab*

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Chapter 1

Caged Bird

Southern Lausanne, France

The blonde girl coughed again and cursed under her breath. She was fairly certain her left leg was fractured somewhere, and her organs wouldn't last much longer due to the recoil of what she had to pull earlier. She leaned against the left wall and one of her escorts stopped beside her. A loud crash resounded through the halls. The lieutenant signaled to the four taking point. The frontliners gestured between themselves and moved down the right while the rear approached from behind.

"Ma'am, we need to keep moving," the lieutenant stated. "If you need help—"

"Let me borrow the rifle the corporal picked up, I'd be getting in your way if one of you had to carry me." The girl pushed against the wall to balance herself and glanced at the cross around her neck. In her current state, it'd be troublesome to engage any hostiles herself, which meant she'd need the rest of her temporary team to pick up the slack, at least until they found what she'd dragged them here for. She heard a few clicks as the corporal moved up from behind her.

"Almost full clip, safety's on." He handed the rifle to her. She took the weapon with her left hand, ignoring the pain spiking up her right arm as the heavy rifle tapped the sling of bandages. With some trouble, she swiftly extended the stock as far as it could go and repurposed it as a crutch.

"Good enough. Let's go." She started towards the end of the hall, where their frontline had made a right. Her escorts followed silently. This team was what remained of the platoons she was sent out to support. It wasn't the first time these soldiers had worked with an inquisitor, so they knew better than to underestimate the girl who, in the eyes of the uninformed, would appear to be an injured high schooler in church robes leaning on a Type-63. The inquisitor herself knew however, that at the moment she may as well have been exactly that.

* * *

There was gunfire and shouting at some point, but the girl was more distracted with trying to ignore her failing body. She gestured forward nonchalantly to let the rear know they should move ahead. As per the lieutenant's order, only the corporal stayed behind with her.

"I can lift you if you need me to?" the man asked in concern, the sentiment slightly dampened by the voice modulator in his helmet. The girl briefly gave him a glare before turning forward again. "You've slowed down a lo—"

"Corporal, if you want in on the action, you can go on ahead too." The man sighed.

"You're injured, you shouldn't be alone, ma'am." The girl coughed into her shoulder, leaving a dark red stain on her cloak.

"Then keep your hands on your gun and guard me," she muttered. "And for your information, I'm dying, so quit wasting my breath." The two continued down the corridor in silence, the girl picking up her pace and gritting her teeth.

* * *

By the time the team had regrouped fully, the gunfire had died down. Their side had sustained no injuries, but four German soldiers had been killed while the rest had retreated further into the facility. Two German scientists sat slumped against the wall, their hands tied together, shouting something at the lieutenant despite the fact he clearly wasn't listening.

"Well, this should be the wing we want, if that floor map was right."

"The hell are we looking for again? A patient?"

"A test subject. This is a research facility," the girl corrected. "Check all the rooms along this hall, loop over into the next one if you need to." She heard one of the scientists mockingly mention something about child soldiers which she ignored. One of her soldiers promptly told him to be quiet, though the language barrier clearly made all these efforts pointless unless she herself was involved. She coughed again as the lieutenant asked them to split into teams of two. "You're looking for a girl my age, probably older. Albino. White hair, violet eyes." A few of the soldiers turned to her at this. "...I assume you won't miss her."

As the teams set off, the lieutenant stayed with the girl to watch the scientists. They simply stayed silent, staring at the bodies of their comrades at the far end of the hall.

"Surprised nobody got hurt," the girl mused as she shifted her weight between the rifle and her right leg to distract herself.

"There were only six of them," the lieutenant replied. "Given it's a research facility, explains the low security." They were deep in enemy territory, and on very thin ice because of it; the enemy had forced them to flee straight into occupied Lausanne and they were cornered. If the girl she was looking for wasn't here, they'd all be corpses very soon. The only advantage they had was

the fact that the Germans stationed here weren't expecting enemies at all.

"By the way, don't let your guard down. The ones you let escape will be back with plenty of friends, given the...nature of the work here." The girl spun the rifle barrel into the metallic tiles below.

"Which would be...?" the lieutenant trailed off, uncertain. The girl sighed.

"The documents we have will be submitted to the Vatican for review," she explained. "The less you know about this stuff, the better." The officer shrugged.

"Not much would surprise me after what I've seen with you inquisitors." The girl laughed a little before coughing violently into her shoulder. The scientists had turned to her and she glanced back, uninterested.

"You want hostages?" she inquired.

"Does the Vatican need info?" he countered. "Depending on how this goes, we could bring them back if you're...*up for it*, but—" The walls shook as muffled explosions sounded out in the distance. "Are they seriously *bombing* their own facility?" The girl clicked her tongue.

"The ones chasing us probably think this is just some abandoned mining tunnel," she muttered. "Tell them to hurry up before they bury us."

* * *

The first few rooms had been empty, with track marks faintly visible on the otherwise spotless flooring. It seemed like they had noticed the intrusion and were looking to evacuate the entire wing. The girl counted herself lucky that they hadn't quite gotten to her target. One of the teams had called in a positive; a bedridden albino who wasn't comatose like most of the other occupants that remained.

The girl had left the lieutenant with their hostages and her eyes searched for the door number she needed. Another, particularly heavy explosion shook the site and the girl leaned against the left wall for support. She wondered if the entry was caved in yet. It'd be a blessing for them, since they'd only need to deal with the facility guards. On the other hand, if the site's personnel got out word that the cave itself was an allied structure and their pursuers came in the front door, they'd be fighting on two fronts instead.

A crash drew her attention. Another German scientist; a woman in a lab coat, burst out from a door further down the hall and scanned the corridor, quickly meeting the girl's eyes. She drew a black revolver and the girl struggled to raise the rifle using the wall as leverage. As she flipped the safety, the scientist's bullet clipped the wall beside her, sending her ears ringing. She fired again, and so did the girl.

The scientist's head whipped backwards from the rifle round. Her body fell to the floor as multiple teams exited from doors in front of her. The girl lowered her rifle to the ground and leaned on it once more, the shimmer in the air dissipating. She coughed loudly, staining the floor red, and glanced off to the far right wall where the bullet had deflected.

“Damn, nice aim!”

“Why are you idiots *touring the place* instead of standing guard outside?” Another explosion shook the facility.

* * *

Once the team reorganized, the explosions had stopped completely, which the blonde had quickly pointed out was likely a bad sign of things to come. She now stood in what looked like a hospital room with the corporal and two others while the rest were either standing guard or securing the remainder of the wing. The albino was lying flat on her bed, with several IV drips and medical monitors attached to her chest and limbs. She stared straight up at the ceiling, never having acknowledged the girl’s entry, and yet continued to blink. Her chest rose and fell under the hospital gown she wore.

“Yeah so, she’s not a potato like the others since her eyes are open but uh...” The soldier knocked his helmet. “I walked in front of her earlier, clapped, snapped my fingers, shined a light, nothing. Nobody’s home.” The girl walked closer to the bed and leaned over it, staring into the patient’s eyes. The albino was pale, as expected, though her eyes were colored a bright violet, and the girl could see faint rings in her irises.

“Any of you know what this is called?” she questioned nonchalantly.

“What, albinism? Can’t handle sunlight, right?”

“Alexandria’s Genesis,” the corporal spoke up, deep in thought. “A myth of a so-called perfect being.”

“The hell...? Her?”

“I mean, the kid’s drugged up.”

“She’s basically braindead, are you sure about this?”

“Gentlemen, you’d better *hope* this works because we’re getting closed in on all sides right now,” she stated simply before standing upright and then slowly lowering herself using the rifle. The soldiers stiffened as they watched her lean the rifle against the nightstand and grip her cross. They had heard rumors, most of them likely heavily exaggerated, of this particular inquisitor. Those that detailed her work in the war painted her as a true saint. Those that spoke of the dark contracts she had to sign for her miracles depicted her as a monster. The remains of the overwhelmed platoons had so far only viewed her as another soldier, albeit a young one. Now, they might see her at her worst.

“O Lord in Heaven, I ask of your forgiveness...”

* * *

The girl’s prayer lasted only a minute, but to the soldiers it felt far longer, in anticipation of what they knew was about to happen. Regardless of what horrors the girl on the bed had been subjected to, the inquisitor could have been taking an innocent life.

The blonde fell to the ground abruptly, her cross clattering against the tiles. The corporal raised a hand to stop the others from approaching. Only a few

seconds passed before the albino twitched her fingers. She blinked erratically. She coughed. And then she slowly began to sit up. Her hair, appearing silvery in the light of the panels above, fell over her right eye and she slowly brushed it away. The trembling in her arms dissipated gradually.

"Ma'am," the corporal stated firmly. The girl stared ahead blankly. The corporal cleared his voice. "Ma'am, please identify yourself," he addressed formally, as they had discussed before breaching the facility. The soldiers at his side tightened their grips on their weapons in response, remembering the protocol they were told to follow. The girl blinked again and stretched her neck before turning.

"Right, sorry, bit of a head rush," she replied in a weak voice. She began carefully removing the attachments on her body, ignoring the monitors' distressed complaints. "I am..." She pushed the blanket off the bed. "Saint Allison of the Vatican's Inquisition, western branch." It was the same greeting she'd used to introduce herself when she'd first arrived. "And I," She finished with the last IV drip and swung her legs off the bed. "Happen to be..." She grunted while reaching for the device in the blonde's inner pocket. "A bit of a monster." She swiftly entered the passcode and turned the screen to the team, displaying a pulsing blue map of the surrounding region. "Right?"

The corporal nodded and offered a salute reflexively. The others followed, still somewhat bewildered.

"So that's it then...?" Allison smirked and shrugged.

"Well I'm sorry if you were expecting more but," She stepped off the bed and got to her feet, swaying slightly. "There's not gonna be fireworks or anything." She crouched down. "Now get out and check on the lieutenant, I need a minute to change." The soldiers looked at each other and slowly complied. Once she was alone, the girl glanced at the corpse on the ground. A pool of blood was forming, although very slowly. She pulled the cross off the blonde's neck and sighed, wondering if there'd be time to bury the body.

* * *

The gunfire outside started just as Allison finished wrapping the body in the blanket. The blood was seeping through faster now. The corporal knocked loudly against the door.

"Ma'am!"

"Yeah, I'm coming!" she shouted back, letting the body float gently beside her. The rifle clattered across the floor to her hands, before she decided it was too much of a hassle and let it fall once more. She promptly opened the door and saw one of her own go down as the rest retreated past her. Bullets flew at her, sparking against the shimmering air. She skipped out into the middle of the hall, standing between her team and what seemed to be a specially armored German squad. The bullets picked up in frequency and continued to bounce off of nothingness as the enemy began taking steps back.

“*Gentlemen,*” she shouted in German. “*This is an experimentation facility, yes?*” She raised her hands to her sides in welcome. “*I am what you might call...irony.*”

Chapter 2

Homecoming

Vatican, District XIII, Italy

The squad that Allison had brought back ended up losing a total of two soldiers between the time they'd first arrived at the German research site and their return to allied territory. Considering how far into France they'd been, she considered the operation decently successful. The cardinals seemed to disagree on that note. She wondered if they'd get some leave for their troubles, as she herself would be seeing no such thing.

"Saint!" Allison glanced up at the second seat. Aside from the decorative pillars and mosaic ceiling, the debriefing room was painfully plain in the girl's opinion.

"Yeah, can I leave yet? I need to take a shower; smell like hospital." She brushed her hair backwards, noting it was still very much tangled up. A few cardinals leaned back in exasperation, letting the lights behind them bounce off of the glass panels separating them from her.

"This is a serious matter, Saint," the fourth seat began. "Your actions have cost us what could have been a massive advantage in the war." She rolled her eyes.

"Look, I really don't understand why you're all so upset, I was ordered to support our troops on the western front because *supposedly* the Reich got a hold of some messed up stuff." She stared at her fingernails, noting they were a bit too long. "I did all I could, brought you back the relic plus everyone I managed to drag out of the hellhole the—"

"You *abused* classified intel, led a disorganized, *vastly understaffed* squad of injured soldiers *without authorization*, deep into enemy lines and attacked a high priority target which you were well aware there are plans to capture *fully* during a future offensive." The second seat paused only a moment and then made to continue, but Allison jumped on the brief silence.

"First of all, you were going invade the place anyway, I just did it earlier

as part of a detour and saved you some trouble. We brought back bags of documents and some of their test subjects too. Far as I'm concerned, everything turned out alright." The second seat slammed his fist on the desk.

"And everything you *didn't* bring back?" he shouted angrily. Allison shrugged.

"We could only carry so mu—"

"Therein lies the problem, Saint. If we had kept our intentions secret until our offensive against France, we could have collected plenty of valuable information." The fourth seat rubbed his temples. "What you did manage to gather is negligible compared to that. This is a lost opportunity of great scale, do you understand?" Allison sighed, supposing it'd be difficult to talk her way out of this line of thinking.

"Alright, how about this; we were deep behind enemy lines because we were *chased there*. No chance what was left of that platoon could handle being surrounded like that, but guess who can?" She raised a finger in mock understanding. "Oh that's right, me! But after the tanks and helis and the damned relic, I was down an arm, limping, and fighting back organ failure because all *you* can do is send me orphans and patients from death row." She lowered her hand and leaned forward. "If we didn't do what we did, we'd *all* be dead. And I don't mean to be arrogant but the last time an inquisitor was K.I.A., we lost half the eastern front and twenty supply points; it took us months to recover." She took a step back. "How about you be grateful we pulled *something* out of that mess?"

The cardinals were silent. Allison stared back, her expression blank. The first seat slowly leaned forward onto his clasped hands.

"Considering this debriefing has spiraled off-topic, I'm going to ask we stop here." He cleared his throat. "Any objections?" The room was silent again. "Then Saint Allison, we have another task for you." She tilted her head.

"So soon?"

"You seem convinced the inquisition is vital to our chances in this war." Allison sighed. "I'm giving you a chance to prove it. The Reich has supposedly uncovered something in the Arctic circle. You'll be given details later."

"Wonderful, I love the cold," she droned, turning around and making for the exit.

"And about your body..." She stopped and adjusted her cloak.

"If you want testing, I'll only consent to minor stuff." She turned her head slightly. "Unless you enjoy making those calls to hospitals and orphanages, I'd suggest we keep this one going for a while."

"...Ask for some dye and lenses from R&D." He coughed. "We'll discuss what you *brought back* when you return." Allison made a half bow and turned towards the exit once more.

"*If* I return," she dutifully corrected.

"One last thing, Saint!" Allison froze again, holding back a sharp exhale. The voice of the seventh seat was female, belonging to a weathered woman whom Allison had bestowed the title of least annoying among the Vatican's brass. "...Thank you, for bringing them and yourself home safe." The violet-eyed inquisitor smirked and swiftly swung open the massive chamber doors.

* * *

"Why are you here," Allison monotoned. "I heard we were scattered to every corner of the globe." The redhead's expression changed from confusion to excitement in the blink of an eye.

"It *is* you!" Allison rolled her eyes as she stepped off the elevator. Her colleague fell in line beside her. "I only got back a couple days ago, they said you radioed in for pick-up after dropping off the grid for a week." Allison stared down a few passing officers as the other girl spoke. The military presence at the Vatican had been growing a little more every single time she'd returned for debriefing. She caught a few reluctant salutes from the ones who met her eyes and had bothered to glance at her emblem.

"Been a long week," Allison muttered, turning instead to glance at her friend. Charlotte was one of the few people who had gotten used to Allison's special circumstances. Security protocols at the Vatican had entire clauses in place specifically because Allison was a frequent visitor, although not by choice.

"I can see that...how're you feeling? And why do you smell like bleach?" Charlotte questioned with a grin.

"Random drugs the Germans injected. Need a shower." Charlotte raised a finger.

"Oh hey, is it true you swatted jets outta the sky with their own tanks?" she asked thoughtfully. Allison narrowed her eyes.

"Rumors will be rumors, huh? Sure, let's go with that." Allison raised a hand to her forehead and then rubbed her eye. "They also bombed the hell out of us and I nearly died. We got caught up in the pincer before they decided to pull out from our main force." The two came up to the corridor entrance for the residential wing. The security officer checked their IDs and then held the door open.

"Y'know, most of 'em are saying you're the reason we didn't lose Geneva." Charlotte mused with a smile. "We ended up pushing the line forward instead!"

"And yet the cardinals are still *displeased with my performance*," Allison replied, making air quotes with her fingers.

"Ah screw those old geezers, they're never happy anyway. Y'know last week even Julian told me they were getting on his nerves? *Julian!*"

"Ah yes, the biggest suck-up," Allison monotoned. She shook her head and sighed as they approached another elevator. Charlotte tapped the button for her.

"Anyways, I'm glad you made it back. When they told me you were M.I.A.,

I wasn't actually that worried, and look, I was right!" Charlotte beamed as they entered the elevator.

"Wow, thanks, that makes me feel great," Allison droned in response, keying in the eleventh floor. Charlotte laughed.

"I mean, you always make it back," she pointed out.

"Mm, was close this time. Bastards retreated and took us with them like a fish net, drove us into France." Charlotte seemed surprised at this. "If I hadn't..." Charlotte waited for her to finish, but she didn't.

"Then...I'm glad you're safe." Allison nodded quietly as they exited the elevator. A few moments of silence passed as the two made their way to Allison's unit. "...By the way, love the eyes." Allison scoffed and stopped walking, prompting Charlotte to glance over in confusion. The albino stared back at the redhead without saying anything. Charlotte furrowed her brows. "...Hello?"

"Just giving you a good look." Allison ran her hands through her hair, which reminded her it was still very heavily tangled. "I stand out too much like this so they want me to wear lenses." She started walking again.

"Aww...that's such a waste," Charlotte whined as she caught up.

"Need hair dye too." Allison raised a finger to her lips in thought.

"So blonde and blue eyes again?" Charlotte proposed. "Might help people identify...well, hm." She scratched her head. "...Oh, by the way, remember what Aria said?" Allison rolled her eyes.

"No, they did not 'shoot me less' because I was blonde." Charlotte snickered.

"I figured. I bet they'll start shooting us *more* since every time we show up, they end up running home crying."

"We're still barely holding it together, you know that?" Allison pointed out as they approached her unit's door. Charlotte shrugged.

"It'll get better once we figure out what they're doing with the relics." They stopped in front of the door and Allison tapped her card on the scanner.

"So shower, then I pass out and then..." Allison clicked her tongue. She wasn't looking forward to another briefing. She supposed she could sleep more on the plane, depending on how many troops were being assigned to her. Perhaps she'd be lucky and they'd send her in alone, or perhaps she was overestimating herself because of this recent acquisition.

"Hey, um..." Charlotte played with her fingers, staring at the door frame. "There's a nice cafe that opened up at the edge of District Two...do you wanna go tomorrow?" Allison simply stared back, still partially leaning on the door handle. "It's just, y'know, it's been a few months...and all of us are always hopping countries, not knowing if we're even coming back..."

"Are you asking me out?" Allison put on a playful smirk. Charlotte suddenly put both her hands on Allison's shoulders, causing her to grab the other side of the door frame for support.

"Please?" Allison sighed.

“Listen, world’s at war and the Reich’s trying to pull something again, so they really want me out there ASAP.” Charlotte weakened her grip and slowly let go. “I’m sure you have something they’ve been asking of you too.” Charlotte nodded quietly as Allison opened the door fully and stepped inside.

“But screw those old geezers, right? Stop by Lab Six tomorrow at nine or so, we can go after I get *makeup*.” Allison gently closed the door on Charlotte’s surprised expression.

“...Thanks, Allie!” Allison leaned on her door, listening to her friend’s steps fade away. She exhaled sharply. Charlotte had watched her swap faces four times, and yet she never treated her any differently. Allison stared at her reflection in the mirror to the right of the entryway. She supposed some people had strange taste.

“She seems so sure of who I am...” The girl whispered quietly into the mirror. “Even if I...”