

## Chameleon Protection

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# Chameleon Protection

by [Serena Walken \(SerenaWalken\)](#)

## Summary

Loving freedom, but knowing he can't just let innocent new pretenders live their life in The Centre, Jarod makes a decision. With no plan to get out, and only the small trust of Miss P's team to protect his sims, he and Parker will give new meaning to Sleeping With the Enemy.

# Almost A Winner

## Chapter Notes

This will be reposted at fanfiction.net in the future in a slightly tamer frame as Chameleon Protection

On Missing Pieces you can find it still titled as Chameleon Contraception and the second part Camille. Leanne. Parker. Here it's one work.

This work is based off of the world of The Pretenders Novels Series Rebirth and Saving Luke. If you haven't read them, but you want to read this, just a warning: There are major spoilers and some differences. The most prominent, this not being in the 90's but somewhere in the year 2013. (Going by published date of Rebirth.) It screamed to me to be done, but it could only be done in the world of the novels. Accordingly, I extrapolated some of the original TV series information into here that didn't interfere with the novels. I hope you enjoy it. If it has been a little while since you read the novels, there are some basic character overviews below Chapter One and I might add some as time goes by if I have to.

*This work does address depression, as well as psychological problems of being ran by The Centre for both Miss Parker and Jarod too.*

Three months out of The Centre. Sydney watched as Jarod was sent back to his dome. Back to his old life. In the end, he saved Luke. He managed to do a few more Pretends that meant something, but he stayed too long on the last one. A woman's life was at stake, and he had to risk the increased chance of getting caught.

All those sims, left to atone for that he couldn't. Sydney knew that must be tearing him up inside.

"Now, stay in your cage this time." Miss Parker had her gun and eyes on him the whole time he was being placed back in Sydney's lab. Into the dome Jarod called home for thirty years on SL19. If it hadn't been for her, he could have gotten away. She chased him down with every inch of her life. Literally, she risked her life to catch him. Oh. She risked way too much. For her Daddy.

Then the current sims. They would make him do them or they'd do something terrible. Sydney knew he'd choose the something terrible. *I'm sorry, Jarod.*

Miss Parker was getting commendations from her Daddy now. Well, sort of. He cut her off in favor of talking to her Uncle Zane instead. Not a surprise. There she was, all the pride that held her, silenced into nothingness as Mister Parker talked. Less praise. More 'we are back in business'. Not surprising. Sydney knew catching Jarod would not get her any extra love or attention.

Sydney saw Jarod motioning to the side inside of his dome. After Miss Parker took off and Zane was on the other side of the room talking to Mister Parker, Sydney went over toward Jarod.

And he found out? Jarod let himself get caught.

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"It doesn't matter," Jarod said flamboyantly to the room, walking away from the corner with Sydney. He should have enough under his belt for this one. For one, he still knew how to escape. Once he finished this closer examination, he'd be out of The Centre again, complete with a ride waiting for him.

This was supposed to be done in a slow manner. He was trying to slowly open Miss Parker's eyes to the truth. Especially about her mother. Once she started to learn to be a little nice, he'd share more. A little nicer, he'd share a little more. Give and take, but someday she'd have the whole truth. As he got into his psychological training for his next Pretend though, he realized it wasn't going to be that way. That she advanced much faster along the road to destruction and he didn't have the luxury of time to work with her. She could be dead by the time he reached the end, and another death was not something he wanted on his mind. Especially not hers.

One 'all in' Pretend, as himself. The captured Jarod. When it came to the past, her past, and the Parkers past in general? There were gaps of mystery that even his genius couldn't find. Burned away through time. To get into her head, to *become* her, he needed to get closer than within gun distance. With her chasing him, it wasn't easy to get to her. To talk to her. She'd have no choice if she was stuck with him, to face the consequences.

Twenty eight hours and counting before his ride.

Time to begin. "You can't stop me from escaping. You don't even know how I did it in the first place."

Ooh. That look from Mister Parker. "You better start getting your attitude back in order. There's no escape now."

"Actually," Sydney disagreed. "Once Jarod has done something, he tends to find an alternate path quite quickly. Even if we discovered the way he got out, he probably already has ideas about a second way. It's how his mind works."

“You can’t stop me.” Jarod put his hands up against the plexi glass dome. “I *know* what the real world is like, and I will never stop trying to get away! Cameras and security systems will never stop me.”

Mister Parker was getting angrier. “Sydney!”

“He has experienced freedom,” Sydney explained. “He will never stop trying to run away unless we come to some kind of compromises to make him happy. To make him feel free enough to not want to run away.”

“Even then, you can’t really stop me,” Jarod added. He put his arms back down. “Face it. You have no way to keep me in here. Unless your willing to-”

“Oh!” Zane interrupted Jarod like an idea had hit him. He looked at his brother, Mister Parker. “Oh! We *do*. We do have someone.”

“No.” Mister Parker vehemently shook his head. “No, we don’t!”

Mister Parker and his brother Zane were starting to get into a fight? Interesting outcome. He hadn’t even got to the Miss Parker request yet. *Looks like unresolved issues made this even easier.*

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Mister Parker and Zane went straight up to his office. Mister Parker got behind his desk but didn’t sit down. “Don’t you start pulling that on me! She abhors that man! I know what you’re thinking but it’d never happen. Never. She had access to him forever and never did anything wild.”

“According to the footage, she did something,” Zane said.

“Not as an adult, just as a teen, and it was only a little kiss,” he muttered. “You better not do it.”

“Give me The Centre.”

“No! I know you are good friends with the Triumvirate but even they would see how a move like this isn’t worth it,” Mister Parker continued. “She’s a Parker.”

“You’re right. Maybe not this move. Maybe a better one,” Zane said as he pulled out his phone and hit the number to one of the Triumvirate. “This is Zane. I think it’s time you should know something interesting about my niece.”

“Don’t!” Mister Parker demanded. “What do you want?”

“The Centre,” Zane demanded.

“No.” He coldly looked at him. “You’d never give her back.” He slammed his fist against the desk. “She is a Parker and the next to rule! We captured Jarod fair and square, the Triumvirate is happy. Don’t do this to the family, Zane.” He took a deep breath. “Zane?” he growled. “Zane!”

“I would like to call an online conference meeting with everyone soon. Say, an hour?” Zane said. “Yes, don’t worry, Jarod will be safely watched during that time. By my own niece in the dome.” He hung up.

“Zane!” Mister Parker had such anger in his eyes. “You. Can’t. Be serious!”

“Well? Perhaps you should give my niece a heads up how serious she should take this?” Then, Zane smiled.

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Out. *Finally*. Miss Parker moved through The Centre with pride, her heels making sounds of congratulations each step of the way. Daddy was happy again. He said she did good. A little disappointed in the time it took, but overall good. It took a little longer than she wanted to nail The Pretender, but it was done. No one escaped The Centre. She went out the doors and unlocked her Porsche. Time to get back to her own life. She got in her car, drove off and listened to her newest song from Pink. Slut Like You. It was like her national anthem. However before she even got out of view of The Centre, she got a call from Daddy. She silenced Pink and answered her phone. “Yes, Daddy.”

*“Angel, get back here.”*

What? “I captured Jarod, Daddy.” She wanted to get out now. Her duty was done.

*“Angel, please. I need you.”*

“Okay.” Daddy needed her, enough said. She drove her Porsche back over to The Centre doors again. She saw Broots and Sydney right there waiting. What were they expecting, a goodbye? She didn’t do that crap. She moved past them, taking the lead of the trio back downward to SL19, where Jarod’s dome was kept in Sydney’s lab space. Her eyes went automatically toward her father. “I’m here, Daddy.”

“Jarod brought up a very good point,” he said to her. He held his hands out to her, as if to embrace her. “Come here, Angel.”

She didn’t care about Jarod’s point, just that her father wanted to embrace her. Embrace *her*. He needed *her*. He wanted *her*.

“Now, this is going to sound a little strange, Pumpkin.” He went over to Jarod’s dome and used his security clearance to open it. Three key card swipes and a code.

Jarod stood in front of the door. Strangely, waving. That look. He was up to something.

“Truth of the matter is, Angel? You are the one who caught Jarod,” her father pointed it. “We don’t even know how he got out, and he’s threatening to escape in the exact same way.”

He couldn’t, it would be impossible. Then again, him getting out in the first place was impossible.

“Once Jarod puts his mind to something, he can always accomplish it,” Sydney said from behind her. “Even if one door closes, another opens. He has experienced freedom, months of it. Containing him the same way will not be easy.”

Put him in a metal box and put air holes in it, why was she supposed to care? She wanted to get away from him. He still looked like he was up to something.

“We could put all the security in the world on him, but it wouldn’t matter,” her father said. “You’re the best, Angel.”

*Daddy says I’m the best.* Yes, she had been.

“While other people helped, you were the one that brought him in. Kept everyone in line. I believe in you. I trust in you.” Her father smiled at her so lovingly. So warmly. He believed in *her*. He trusted in *her*. “Until Zane and I reach an agreement, you can keep him from running away.”

What? *He wants me to watch Jarod?* The Centre had several guards. She’d ask about them, but he already addressed it. She was the best. Enough said, she couldn’t ask a question twice, and she already knew his answer. That would upset him.

“You can watch him from within his dome.”

What? “Daddy?” No. “I’m not that good.”

“No, you’re the best. Absolutely the best,” her father praised her again. “Short time.” He opened the door and pushed her in gently. He closed the door. “There. He won’t be able to get away with much while Zane and I are piecing everything out.”

“One escaping seemed impossible,” Sydney said. “Two escaping would be fantasy. This is the best solution.”

*Why? Why me?* She couldn’t ask though, Daddy already answered. Never the same question twice, it made him mad. She looked ahead of her at Jarod. *Short time.*

“Hi, Honey,” Jarod teased. “Welcome home.”

She turned back around to look at her dad. “He’s unstable.”

“No he’s not,” her father said. “He’s a Pretender. There’s a difference. You’ll be fine. Oh?” He went back to open the door. “I’m going to need your gun. You can’t risk harming him

aggressively.” Mister Parker held his hand out for her gun. “Any other guns, bullets, or knives. Your holster too. Any weapon at all, hand it over, Sweetie.”

Okay, think. She handed over her holster and her gun. She checked her leg for her extra gun. *How do I get out of this without upsetting Daddy?* “I don’t trust him.”

“Of course we don’t trust him, that’s why you are staying in there,” he reasoned. “We already established that!”

Oh no. She *had* accidentally made him answer her twice. “Sorry, Daddy.”

“Right. It’s alright.” He held out his hand for her other gun. She thought about everything on her that could be a weapon. She even checked her purse for things. “Here, I’ll just take that.” Her father took her purse. “Good job. Watch him well while we discuss things.” He closed the door again. “Don’t worry, Sweetie. Won’t take long. You’re the future of The Centre, remember?”

“Right, right.” Jarod stood closer next to her. “That’s why he lets you risk your life trying to capture me. You’re the future.” She raised her eyes to him. “That look is so terrible; it’s almost considered a weapon.” He moved away slightly.

This trick wouldn’t stand.

Her Daddy stared at Jarod. “We’re off to discuss things. I suggest you still be a good boy, hm? My daughter’s not weak, even without weapons.”

“I guess so.” Jarod shrugged. “Still, I feel imprisoned. Even with her here, I’ll find *something*.”

“What do you want?” Daddy demanded of him. “Just give me your demands and I will see what I can do.”

“I want whatever Miss Parker eats for each meal,” Jarod said. “Cafeteria food, like everyone else. Served on a big platter, with two plates.”

Why did he just put her in the middle of a demand? This babysitting wouldn’t be long. *Keep it together. This is for Daddy. Jarod is messing with your head, you can beat this shit.*

“Understood,” Daddy agreed.

“I choose the sims I do. I’m not doing military, or anything that can be reversed to cause destruction,” Jarod demanded. “Sydney approved first, Jarod approved second.”

Daddy didn’t like that. “Noted,” he muttered. Military and terrorism was what made the big bucks, but if Jarod escaped, it would be down to no bucks again.

“I liked experiencing culture outside,” Jarod said. “The ice cream was fun.”

“You want ice cream then?” Daddy asked.



“No, I want something different. Not just food. Things everyone gets to know about, but I don’t,” Jarod demanded.

Daddy sighed. He was getting so stressed. Poor him. “Fine, we’ll discuss Sydney getting you one new thing to explore every day. Is that it?”

“I want a bigger living space. It’s too cramped in here,” Jarod complained.

Oh, Daddy looked so red. Jarod was making him feel so bad. Damn, Jarod, he was pushing on purpose. He probably didn’t even want that, he just wanted to hurt him. “Maybe we can add a smaller second dome.”

“That’s it?” Jarod kept complaining. “I experienced the world, and I only get a smaller second dome to be happy?” He shook his head. “Bigger.”

“Fine, maybe a medium sized dome can be worked out. Happy?!” Oh, her Daddy was not happy. Not happy at all. She would kill Jarod for making him unhappy, if that wouldn’t have made him happier.

Jarod stroked his chin. Like he was debating on something. He was looking at Sydney too. She knew that damn look. It was the same one he had as a young teenager. He was deciding on a move like in his stupid chess games when he was younger. He played moves all day, so it meant it was a complicated move. Done wrong, it could lose a game. Done right, it could win it. Normally, it would be nothing she gave a shit about.

But he involved her in his effing game.

“For now,” he settled with. Then he gave her a strange look. Almost funny. “Are you on the pill?”

*Fuuuuuck him, oh sooooo fuck him.* “Why would that mat-ter?” Her voice was staccato and harsh.

“Covering ground,” Jarod twirled his foot slightly. “We are two opposite genders.” He leaned in closer against the plexiglass toward Daddy. “Never know what will happen.”

“Genders not everything!” Daphne said from behind Sydney, coming in. “I’ve just now been made aware of the situation, Miss Parker.” She looked toward Mister Parker. “Sir, she doesn’t have to guard Jarod. She just has to guard the door. To even get into Sydney’s lab away from the dome, he needs the door.” She came closer to the door and looked from side to side.

“These are already cut into three columns. She could take the second one to defend.” Daphne looked at her like she was helping.

She wasn’t.

“That’s perfect,” Zane agreed. “There’s no problem now. She can remain there, at the halfway point. No further discussion needed.”

What? “Whoah,” Miss Parker said to Zane. “That’s not right. I’m *not* the Living Computer ‘I like ice cream wheee’ guy! I have a life.” She banged on the plexiglass. “Normal people

don't live like this!"

"Actually, it's not too bad," her Daddy said. "Well?" He came up over toward the door and looked around at the walls. "Jarod's sims take place over there. He can be over there, and cut through to reach the other side. You just-oh!" He snapped his fingers. "I've got it, Angel! Move in right here."

"What?"

"Well, you can't fit your entire penthouse in here, but move some couches and such so that he can't even reach the door," her father said. "It'll be nice and cozy. We'll get a bed, and we'll put in some curtains on the side for privacy. Well, some privacy. Jarod does have to get on the other side to bathe."

What? "Move furniture in here?" She asked. What was wrong with her Daddy? That was ridiculous!

"Yeah. You're rugs and decorations. Make it comfy." He smiled at her. "Just until we are absolutely certain he can't get away again. Even if something happens with the locks, it won't matter. He'd have to go through you."

"I suppose that would work," Sydney said. "I may have to press the couch or bed away on the rare chance I have to go in."

"Yes, and, there we go. Perfect," her Daddy said. He backed up and held out his hands. "That won't feel like prison to Jarod, and you'll feel more at home too. Everyone is happy."

"I agree with that arrangement," Jarod said. He bumped into her shoulder gently. "Home sweet home. Bring at least a couple of chairs for the den, Sweetie."

"As soon as Daddy's back is turned," she whispered through gritted teeth. "You are going to pay for this, you fucking slimy ass Chameleon." She looked back toward her Daddy and smiled with her regular voice. "Lots of computers and books and a desk in the way."

"Hm. Jarod's not doing Military sims right now--"

"--ever--" Jarod corrected him.

"--so we don't need as many computers." Daddy looked at Zane. "Makes sense?"

"Keep the desk," Zane agreed, "and take out the military books and manuals. For now."

"Forever," Jarod said again.

"It is not the best environment for his mind, but we do have the blank sim room still. Nothing goes in there." Zane shrugged. "It is better than the environment he *was* in. It's a start. I agree with Mister Parker. This will work."

"Temporarily?" She questioned her Daddy. "For how long?"

“A few months maybe. I mean, with all of the focus on finding how he escaped or could escape, instead of chasing him down?” Her Daddy smiled. “A few months I’m sure.”

“Going to take more than a few months,” Jarod whispered in her ear. “It’ll be downright cozy in here. Ooh, penthouse furniture.”

She grabbed his hand and dug her fingernails into his skin, enjoying the sounds of his quiet ‘ah-ah-ah-ah’. “Don’t. Push. Me.” She let go.

“Ah.” Jarod moved his hand away. “Heel, girl.” He put his hand behind his mouth. “You could always stop this though by saying no?” Jarod waved as her father and Zane left. “Oh look, there they go. So busy in their activities and figuring out our new sweet ‘pad’. I don’t see any sign they are even considering letting you go.”

“He’s right, Miss Parker,” Daphne spoke up first. “I’m afraid I just helped them a bit too much.”

“Beat it, Blondie!” Not happy right now with her at all.

“He is right,” Sydney said approaching the dome too. “Say No to your father.”

“Yeah,” Broots finally started coming up. “It’s uh? You *need* to do that, Miss P. Say no.”

“Just say no,” Blondie said again.

“No,” Sydney repeated.

“Just N-O,” Broots agreed. “It’s not The Centre, just your dad. Just say no.”

She watched Zane turn the corner, and her father start to come back.

“Angel.” Now her father’s expression was different. *That* was more of what she expected. He was drawing out Zane, of course that’s what he was doing. He came over quickly to the door. “You and I are going to have a little talk.” He opened the door and let her back out, sealing it again. “An important talk about family secrets. Then?” He placed his hand on her shoulder. “I know I can depend on you to get this done. I’m sorry about the secrets, Honey, I was going to tell you when you took over The Centre.” He looked toward Sydney. “We’ll be back. Keep your eyes on him.” He looked toward Daphne and Broots. “Everyone keep your eyes on him.” He stole a look to the sweepers on duty too over him. “Everyone.”

Jarod screamed in his head. *Sooo close!* Getting Miss Parker to guard over the dome so he could talk to her and study her? That was what he wanted to achieve within twenty eight hours. To see her. To get into her head. He hadn’t planned on Zane winning some kind of argument and Mister Parker actually putting her *into* the dome with him. It almost felt too good to be true. Who did that?

He was supposed to be there to gather more info on her, on a more emotional level. Personal. One on one. Instead, she was about to just give him ‘more than he bargained for’. The figure

of Santa during the season of Christmas that would be coming up in a few months seemed to have visited him early almost. It was like someone looked at his actual 'List' and decided 'grant this wish'.

Then as quickly as that hope came, it was over. *Oh, he just had to come back.* Mister Parker had seen how close he pushed.

*Secrets. Family secrets.* Jarod waited. Just staring at the people outside his dome. *They won't be about her mother.* He could guarantee Mister Parker wouldn't tell her that Catherine was most likely murdered out on the cliffs of white, not committing suicide in The Centre. Her dad had more family secrets though? Something to try and form a trust. A bond.

That taste though, of being so close. *I almost won the whole thing.* Everyone was cheering her on to say no. *If he hadn't butted in.* It was working perfectly, that Daphne really nailing it with the idea of the door instead of watching him? That look on Parker's face, that realization she wasn't on the top? He couldn't have done better than that.

This is why he needed to get closer. Somewhere along the line, Parker seemed to have actually made 'friends'. At least, friendly people who cared about her. A strictly Centre minded person would not have been chanting for her to say no. It was so strong among them, she almost did it. She almost said no. Oh, what a beautiful sight that would have been. She would have freed *herself*.

He looked toward Sydney who was really looking back at him. Even he knew how close they were to a big victory.

*Character Overviews To This Fiction: (Spoilers, last call for Spoilers.) You can always go on and come back to this page if you forget about something. That's why I created it.*

*Jarod:* Jarod was four years old when he was taken from The Centre. He was born in 1983 (instead of 1963). While Jarod still has his innocent charm (loving ice cream and pez) he has learned a lot about the real world quickly by living in Harlem like sex, transgenders, gangsta rap and more. He still keeps his red notebooks but turned them into ipads with red covers. He isn't as timid and does call Miss Parker a bitch, referring to her leashing. He originally tried to escape with Catherine Parker when he was a teen but things went bad. He holds what feels like a more serious grudge against Sydney, but it seems to have evened out a little by the end. Still, he doesn't just come out and tell Sydney things he should know. Jarod plays with him too. Jarod has a 3d simulator that he takes on his travels, just like the one he made for The Centre. He leaves things for Miss Parker about her past like in the TV series, but the worse was at the end of the book. However, he's also delicate and uses Little Miss with her toward the end too. He wants to free her from The Centre's grasp too.

*Miss Parker:* This version feels more hardcore than the TV one, seriously. She even knows about SL27, The Centre's darkest areas. There's no exploring underneath The Centre's nose. She listens to Pink's Fucking Perfect (which is an awesome detail I love), and curses a lot

more than I even put in the fiction (although I am trying to keep up.) She doesn't have many qualms about death around her, and psychologically you can feel what's happening through the novel (to me) more than you can pick up in the show. She is definitely still a beautiful, sexual woman that looked just like her mother and she holds complete control, even in the bedroom. She only loses control to her Daddy, which she craves the affections of still. Her father is probably still Raines (although he wasn't stated in the novel, he was hinted about with a squealing oxygen tank) so I assume she was still a red file like on the show. She has an Uncle Zane that is close friends to The Triumvirates and trying to take The Centre from her father. Excellent and ruthless, it is clear that something is wrong with her too when it talks about the polite society woman's way to go . . .

*Jarod and Miss Parker:* Similar past as TV series. Same sort of hidden feelings, but only up super close. Like the TV series. Otherwise, total hell to each other.:) Miss Parker also changes between calling him Chameleon and Pretender, less Boy Genius.

*Broots:* Literally like the last chapter. Seems very similar to the TV. He is even said to have been 'missed' by Miss Parker, but not out loud. Miss Parker had banished him to elsewhere in The Centre, but he's called in to help for Jarod. It doesn't state he has Debbie, so I am extrapolating that from the show.

*Daphne:* Daphne is from the novel. (I wish she was in the show.) She helps to catch Jarod too. Blonde hair, ponytail, good with computers. She looks like she's a quiet, calm individual like Broots but she's not. She has a wild side we get to see tapped a little in the novel and she is in love with Miss Parker. Originally called Blondie, Miss Parker bumps her up to her original name when she realizes her worth to The Centre.

*Cornelius:* Cman, Cornman, The Big Corn, Candy Corn, Anything Corn is his name. He's not a pleasant person to be around. Miss Parker recruits him from SL-27 to catch Jarod. He gets fired towards the end. He's out there though and he's brought back only slightly in this fic.

*Zane:* Miss Parker's Uncle and brother of Mister Parker. He wants The Centre and if Mister Parker doesn't catch Jarod, he might just get his wish.

*Raines:* Never stated, only implied with the squealing of an oxygen tank.

*Sydney:* At first, Sydney is fully looking for Jarod. He feels like the world is too much and he needs to be back in his pure, white, quiet conditions. As things progress, his views change. He also keeps up with Miss Parker because her 'preferably alive' statement scares him. Sydney lost his wife and one year old son many years ago, they just vanished. He tries to get along with Miss Parker. He seems to maybe have reached a more appreciated spot to her towards the end.

*Mister Parker:* He doesn't seem colder than the TV series, but Sydney's recollections with Catherine is placing him in a much darker light.

*Angelo:* Never mentioned, but Jarod mentions 'a boy in the pipes' in one line of dialogue.

Main Setting:

Jarod's Dome and Escape: Jarod's Dome is one of many reasons I chose the novels, as well as the escape. The TV series never could show how Jarod escaped exactly, but this goes into great detail. I love it.

# Jarod's Guard Dog

Mister Parker's Office

"Take a seat, Honey, right here." He drug a chair over by the side of his office desk. "We have got a problem and I am trying to save face. I'm no Jarod though."

"I understand, Daddy." She took the seat and looked into his eyes. He was troubled. She knew he'd *never* agree to the outlandish idea of her being in there long term.

"There are secrets, Honey. Secrets about the family. About The Centre. About yourself," he said. "Unfortunately, by dragging up guarding in front of Zane, Jarod triggered something. An idea blossomed and I couldn't stop it." He placed his hand over hers. "You know I love you, right, Honey?"

"Of course, Daddy." She could feel his warmth on her hand.

"I would do anything in the world for you. I've been here for you all of your life. You're everything I care about."

Oh, his sweet words. He cared so much. He was finally expressing how much he loved her. She'd been waiting for that level of love and affection for a good thirty years. "I love you too, Daddy."

"Then I need to tell you something." He patted her hand. "I don't want you to hate your mother after this, and I hope you don't hate me. These things happen." He patted her hand again. "I'm not your biological father, Angel."

What? Her face just fell into shock and she almost lost feeling in the hand he was holding. "What?"

"Yes," he confessed. "I was married to your mother though, and I've always thought of you as my daughter," he said. "You are my daughter. I raised you from birth."

"Uh? Of course, Daddy." Whoah. "Then that means . . ."

"I'm afraid so," he said slowly. Hurt. "Your mother was sleeping around. I wasn't good enough for her."

"Mother cheated?" On him? She cheated on him?! "I don't care about biological, Daddy. You're my father, not some one night stand."

"I was always working. A woman gets lonely. She sought some men to fill that hole." He smiled at her. "It's good to hear you say that though. I've been so scared for so long that you

would reject me for that.”

“Never, Daddy. Never. *You* should have been my biological father, if mom hadn’t screwed around.” How could she? *And there. And there, on her grave. I was on her grave and Jarod on that damn stallion, I should have tried to shoot the fucker anyhow!* Her mother wasn’t good. She was weak. She had flesh of other men on her mind, that were not her father! Was it any kind of real love? Was it anything? “Do you know who it is?”

“She was secretive,” he said. “There are suspects that could be it. Honey, I always worked. You already know how hard it is to see you. She got through it by welcoming other men into her life. Of course, it still hurt. It took some time to forgive her after that, but she was good. Most of the time afterward.”

Until later when they started to fight. Then she gave it all up. *Weak. So weak.* She’d find out which fling was her biological father later. Broots or the Corn Freak could go do it, and then she wouldn’t have to question her father and make him feel bad. Ever. She noticed him squeezing her hand again.

“Now. Only some know the truth,” Daddy said slowly. “Most don’t. I’ve always kept you on the right track to be the rightful ruler to take over The Centre. That kept them off my back. Centre runs on Parker blood. If it doesn’t flow through you?”

“Then The Centre isn’t my legacy.” The Centre wasn’t hers. She shouldn’t even be there. Her life without The Centre?

“But you worked hard for it. You worked harder than anyone else. Its secrets are your secrets, Angel,” he said. “You even know about SL27. Yeah? You have *everything*, I’ve kept nothing from you. However? Zane knew about this and he was bitter about losing his chance to gain The Centre. When Jarod made his brag that he could get out and we couldn’t find someone, I already knew we were in trouble. He’s been waiting for the right moment to expose the truth, to get what he wants!”

“Bastard,” she whispered. He was still trying to take The Centre from Daddy, even though Jarod was captured. “You could have told me anytime, Daddy. I would have understood.”

“No, Pumpkin. Now things get complicated.” Her Daddy sighed. “Honey, you’ve got a gene in you that your biological father must have had. It’s a gene like Jarod. Makes you different.”

“How so?”

“Well? It shows that you could be a potential Pretender,” he admitted. “It doesn’t mean you are, it just meant you had the potential. I didn’t groom you that way though, I love you.”

“My biological father had the genes for being a Pretender?” Oh. She knew how her mother got away with affairs now. “She had an affair in The Centre itself, didn’t she?”

Daddy started talking about genetics and anomalies and recessives and . . . and he eventually hit it to a point she understood. “Momma had the rare anomaly, you didn’t. Since I had it, you knew I wasn’t yours.” Oh, what a way to find out.



“Yeah. I should have suspected something. It’s easy to get away with things with the right kind of clearance. Even you figured that out pretty young. I’m sorry, Honey. I didn’t want you to ever know this. Your mother loved you very much, and she just wanted the best for you.”

The best? Having sex around The Centre when she was married was what was best? “I know, Daddy. You try so hard.”

“Now? Because of this gene in you? Because of Zane’s connections to the Triumvirate? There is an obvious problem,” he said. “Zane will be watching you very closely. I know him.”

Daddy would never do that. Daddy would never put her in a dome like that. “I’m not a Pretender, Daddy. You know that.” She couldn’t go walk up to a monkey wrench and suddenly become a plumber.

“Yeah. Zane knows that too. That’s why it was pointless even mentioning it yet,” her father muttered. “His eyes lit up when Jarod was indicating a guard that could be good enough to hold him. He put ideas together, that should *never* have been together. He called the Triumvirate, ready to make the move. The time, and the research, and the setting are right for him. Now we have a situation. A bad one.”

“You lose The Centre.” Damn him.

“No, Honey, you lose *your* freedom because of Jarod,” he said. “He’s the best Pretender around. The top dog, the numero uno. His abilities are unparalleled! And you’ve got a pretender gene too. Increases the chances.”

“Chances of what?” She folded her legs.

“A man and a woman, stuck in the same place, for months on end?” He sighed. “We just went through how mommy and daddy need them. Pumpkin, don’t make me say it.”

*Ew!* “I’d rather eat up rotting hair from a shower drain than *ever* touch him.” She swallowed. “I think I just threw up a little.”

“I know, I know.” Her father swallowed. “They know now. Contrary to what you believe, the ruler of The Centre doesn’t get to have the final say in *everything*. The Triumvirate helps keep the balance. You know that. And um.”

“Daddy, please. Just tell me what you are wanting me to do?” She asked. “Is it to kill Jarod? I can do that. I can snap his neck, I don’t even need a gun.” She doubted it was the case, but she wanted it to be.

“No, appreciated but no.” He pulled his hand away from hers. “He needs to stay alive.” He folded his hands together and twiddled his thumbs. “Honey, I’m going to need you to be strong. I’m pretty sure I know how this is going to go. I’m doing the *best* I can for it. Now. It’s not just about blood, it’s about strength. It’s about bonds,” he said. “The Triumvirate

knows now that you are not a natural Parker, but you are still Parker *in name*. Okay? Even though Zane is putting this notion in their head about you naturally getting together-“

“*Never* going to happen.” Never. “You have no idea the things he’s done to torture me! He?” Daddy trusted in her. He confided in her so much now. He had to know. “He made me hear the sounds of mom’s suicide, from right by her grave. He lured me up there with a diorama, and he rode off on a stallion after babbling something about truth and freedom and making me watch on his own frankensteinish animated . . . etch a sketch.”

“What?!”

Oh, of course he was mad she didn’t say anything. She didn’t want to talk about it. Especially since she heard the extra shots afterward. “I’m sorry, Daddy. I had too much to drink, I couldn’t aim and . . .” She held her fist tight. “I just recalled that anger to capture him later.”

“It’s okay. No, it’s okay,” he assured her. “I forgive you. After all. I’m going to have to ask you for something too.” She stayed perfectly still. “You’re going to have to deal with Jarod’s bull for 48 hours in that dome. I mean it. Zane already stated you’d be in there,” he declared. “If you don’t take it, now it looks like you weren’t loyal. I added a 48 hour stopping point for them.”

“Observe Jarod 48 hours.” Heard and received.

“Jarod wants you to say no. He is trying to turn you against me, he always is. He always has! Let the hours roll by and stay strong. The stronger the Triumvirate see you are against him, determined to stay there and help? The better you will look to The Centre. The better you will look as to performing your duty.” He smiled. “You have my permission though to make it as homey as you possibly can. Take your music. Take anything that can’t be turned into a weapon or is violation. Guard that door with your very life, Angel. Because your life is counting on it.”

Life? “My life, Daddy?”

“Yes. If The Triumvirate senses weakness, senses you don’t *want* to do your duty, they’ll be the dogs attacking the meat. Do you understand what I’m saying? You’re either a dog or the meat.”

“My genetics make me look like meat.” *Oh crap*. They had everything on their old pretenders, everything. Even Jarod. Not to mention, she was the princess of The Centre. She had to cooperate. There was no choice. It was The Centre. But-

“Now. If it does look like you messed up? You didn’t guard Jarod, didn’t take your role seriously enough?”

“I won’t mess up, Daddy.” She didn’t want to hear it. Zane was striking fire while The Centre was at its weakest point. “It *won’t* happen. I’ll guard him.”

“Yes, yes. I trust you. Other than that? Feel free to be yourself,” he said. “You’re a Parker! Don’t worry about those cameras. Oh, and uh? They’ll be off in the middle area. Have to give

my Angel some privacy. If Jarod notices it, I don't care. He'll probably try and hang out there more. Not much room and he hates cameras. So? Counting on you to fully watch that door. The more responsibility you take on, the better you look. And honey? You can't hurt him physically, but you do with him as you see fit. You'll get a few hours a day of freedom. We'll put uh, the computer man Broots or someone in there with him while you have that freedom." He patted her hand once more. "Don't worry, 48 hours, and everything will go back to normal for you and him."

Ooh. She wanted Broots for her own purposes. "Cornelius. Make Cornelius guard him." Let Jarod deal with the likes of *him* after putting her through this. "You know, Cornman could do the military sims while he's in there, Daddy." She saw that surprised look. "Maybe when Jarod starts seeing him f-f-screw it up, he'll start taking over." Damn. She was so disturbed she almost cursed in front of her father. *Get it together, this is The Centre. Rulers don't cave.*

"Yes. Good idea. That's fine, just make sure you take those free hours," he insisted. "If anything goes wrong?"

"I will make sure he never gets away, Daddy. I work *for* The Centre. I'm not inside of it."

"That's my girl!" he said proudly. "That's my Angel. Now? We'll take Jarod out to a secure room being watched and guarded a few hours while we make things more comfortable for you. Oh, and um?" He waved his hand. "Men and women do get lonely. If something happens naturally or unnaturally, it doesn't matter."

"I'd rather use a dead rat," she said. Besides, it was only 48 hours. "I won't mess up. I won't Daddy, I promise. He will never get out." Still. "It won't happen. I will win." Still. "Absolutely. I will win."

"Only the heads know. Not everyone. Hell? You'd be surprised what's in the gene pool around here." He moved off the chair and gave her a brief hug. "Let's go back and make you comfy in your new home. The longer Jarod thinks you are there to stay. The more he'll start to give up. It'll be alright, Angel. Just, stay the course."

"I'll stay the course." She would really stay the course. Starting now. "Daddy? Since this is so big? Can I ask for some fodder?" Jarod would pay dearly for the hell he just put her through. "I need to feed a Centre animal."

Jarod had been taken from the dome to a security area for hours now. He just waited. Sydney was also there. He just waited. The other two hunters were on the other side, although the computer guy Broots had to take off. He had a daughter to take care of. It was nearly supper time. The computer girl Daphne also left after getting a text. Finally, he was escorted back to Sydney's lab. As they approached the door though, loud music was already hitting his ears.

"I'm a Slut Like You!" Rang out in the air.

Sydney stayed right beside him. "I think this will be a tough one."

Jarod thought they were close though, even her colleagues were cheering her on to say no. So close. *If she could just say no.* He saw her in the dome. *Okay.* The transparent plexiglass walls were covered in large expensive freestanding curtains with only the front area being able to be seen. There was a small table with some saucer chairs, a bed (probably not hers considering the trip), a huge rug in the center, a dresser, a small sofa and the desk with the books. *She really did move in.* Following Mister Parker's orders down to the letter. As he moved closer to her, he also saw a manila envelope in her hand. With a lighter?

"So? Daddy and I had a discussion," she said. "A helpful discussion." She struck her finger on the lighter. "It is my full responsibility to make sure you never get out before the Centre is checked out for any way possible to escape. No matter how long it takes. Weeks. Months. Doesn't matter. Oh, and by the way?" She gestured to the locking clearance. "How fast can Sydney unlock the security clearance before I burn your family history to cinders?" She placed the envelope over the flame.

"No!" Jarod reached the door, trying to get through as Sydney tried to open. It took three key card strokes and a password, it wasn't easy! "Parker, don't do it! That's mine!"

The flame was licking, eating up everything. "Sydney, Sydney, Sydney!" Finally, the door opened. As he got in, she dropped the envelope to the floor. He tried to smother the fire to see what was left.

He recognized the bottom of his mother's picture Sydney had got him. There was a bottom to another picture. Looked like a soldier maybe, part of a medal seemed there along with a pretty dress outline beside it. Edges of a blue shirt.

She bent down toward him. "Now? Maybe if you're nice to me? I'll tell you what I saw in there before I torched it. *Someday.*" She twisted his own words he said in the past to her against him. "By the way? Welcome home." She stood up. "Comfy, isn't it?"

Jarod stood up and the door was closed behind them. Everything. Lost. He raised his eyes at her in a glare. "Bad move, Parker."

"No!" She thrust her finger at him. "You have no idea what you've done, you dumb ass mother fucker! I am going to make you're life a living hell now. You wanted your demands? Well now you got it. Daddy's granting *everything*, all your bogus requests, plus you have your live in guard. Ain't it grand?"

"Parker!" Sydney shouted his disagreement at him. "You can't be serious."

"Serious as a hernia, Old Man, I'll stay in here *months* if that's what it takes to keep the Chameleon in his fucking cage, where his ass belongs." She folded her arms across her chest. "I'm not allowed to hurt you. Physically. I wouldn't push me any extra, *Pretender*. My blondie bombshell has more than one envelope." She snapped her fingers at Daphne. Daphne pulled them out from behind her back and brought them closer. "One on each family member. Your mom's just got toasted. You have your dad, your sister, and your brother."

"I have a sister and a brother too?" He never even thought about siblings. He had a whole family? She knew about it. And the computer girl had all the information he needed in her

little hands! He approached the plexiglass closest to Daphne. “Do the smart thing,” he said to Daphne. “Show me those envelopes.”

Daphne took a step back and noticed Sydney too. “Miss Parker said to keep them safe. That is what I am doing.”

Broots was coming back to the dome after a break for supper and to see his daughter. This was a big night, catching Jarod, and he knew he’d catch it if he stayed away too long. Apparently, he was already missing things. Jarod and Miss P were there in the dome. Miss P apparently moved into the middle, the way Mister Parker told her to. Jarod was shouting at Daphne, and Sydney was against her too. Miss P looked smug about something.

It wasn’t the first time he walked in on a WWII in The Centre. As he moved closer though, Sydney noticed him first. He knew because he just received a text from him.

## ENVELOPES

Ooh. Sydney wanted him to get them from Daphne? *Clear line cutter. Uh oh.* Out of each person he worked with, he was closest to Sydney. It was The Centre, you had to know who to side with there. Sydney or Daphne? *Sorry, Daphne.* Broots didn’t creep up slow, he just didn’t react like he’d do anything. Daphne was holding the envelopes away from Sydney, more toward him.

He reached out, snagged them and instantly saw from Daphne? He needed to run.

“Miss Parker wants those envelopes!” He heard Daphne after him. Neither of them were perfectly trained sweepers. They were just two computer people playing a keep away game, and Broots still didn’t know what for. He turned a corner and checked his phone as he got another text from Sydney.

## **Snap the results to my phone, Broots.**

As he checked though, Daphne had gained on him. They were both tugging at the envelopes. “Shoot!” She got the other two, but he still had one. He kept running. He heard his text go off again though. He looked.

## **Jarod’s family, Broots. He’s already caught. Let him know.**

Broots ducked into an office, beneath a desk to open the envelope. It held two pictures inside of it. He held his phone up and took a picture of the first one, and then the second. The Centre phones provided for them usually had decent cameras to get the fastest pictures under all sorts of conditions. He moved again when he saw her going the other way. He had a few seconds for just the smallest of text. The actual words on the picture.

## **Kyle**

“You did the right thing, Broots.”

Jarod heard Sydney’s words. He was stuck in the dome, unable to get the envelopes, but Miss Parker also couldn’t stop anything either. He watched Daphne run back into the room.

“Well?!” Miss Parker yelled at her.

“I got two back, he got one, Miss Parker,” she apologized. “I will guard them with my life next time.”

Then, Jarod watched as Sydney held up his phone to him through the dome. He saw a picture of someone. Not a happy picture, but a picture. Sydney pushed on the picture and it moved to another one. The same man, only younger.

“Broots said the name Kyle was on it,” Sydney said.

Miss Parker rattled off to the blonde, but Jarod just absorbed the photo as he could. He had a brother named Kyle, and now his pictures were in his memory banks. He finally had something *new*. He watched Broots come back into the room, and then Daphne went over to him and seized the envelope.

“Miss Parker’s upset with you! I would not want to be in your shoes.” She tucked the envelope back with the others.

“You’re the one who held them out,” Broots said. “I didn’t know what was going on, just that you started chasing me. I just followed Sydney’s texts.”

*Good excuse.* Jarod just smiled smugly at the completely upset Miss Parker. “Thanks for the welcoming home present. I like what you did with the place.” He felt on top of the situation again. Clearly her father just added in extra factors, variables he didn’t know about. He moved to the other side of the room and sat in a saucer chair. It was comfortable. She probably had to pick only the barest of things from her penthouse to make it feel more cozy. The saucer was a good choice.

“The fuck are my Pall Mall’s?”

Jarod looked outside and saw Sydney holding her cigarettes she was patting herself down for.

“Although Mister Parker is granting you many privileges,” Sydney said as he held her precious cigarettes, “safety rules were established for that dome. You’ll have to submit written requests and clear out the entire area of anything flammable before you can place a flame in there. There is a reason the room was sterile, Miss Parker. Is there anything you need before I go home for the day?” He waited. “Okay. Goodnight, Miss Parker. Goodnight, Jarod.” He nodded toward Broots. “Goodnight, Broots.” He looked toward Daphne and simply gave a small nod.

“You? Sure?” Broots questioned her. “This is a little overboard, Miss P. Can’t you just tell him no?” No answer. He eventually walked off.

She sat down on the other saucer chair. Arms crossed. Not a word as she flipped the music off and then him.

“Missed you too,” Jarod replied back. He’d gather information, but he was going to try to ‘get that strike’ again too. “This situation won’t change,” he warned her. “Nothing changes. You live here miserably with me until you get the backbone to tell your father no.”

“No.” That simple.

“You’re supposed to say that to your father.” He sat back. “You can’t do this for months. *No one* wants this. Tell him to set guards around me 24/7 if that’s what it takes.” Nothing said. Cursing. Boiling. Anger. Hatred. Overall, nothing said. Not even that much cursing compared to what he expected.

“Dinnertime, Angel!”

Jarod watched as Mister Parker himself came with the platter. Miss Parker immediately left her chair and she went straight to the door, like he was still the greatest person in the world. *He’s trapped her in here for what could be months to her, and she runs to him with open arms.*

“Hi, Daddy,” she greeted him at the door. “How are you?”

“Ah, Angel. I’m fine. We’re fine.” He cleared his throat. “It, uh? Turned out how I told you it would.”

“Okay.”

Jarod noticed a little bit of a shake in her voice. He also noticed she swallowed a little. *Nerves.*

“Fine, Daddy, I approve. Anything for The Centre. I’d lay my life down for it.” She looked at the food. “I don’t eat that.”

“Eat a sandwich, at least a whole one. Daddy’s orders. You need to keep up your strength, gonna need more than shakes if things go bad,” he said.

Why would he say that? Jarod rubbed his jaw as he watched her.

“Things won’t go bad,” she said with a lot of determination shoved into her voice.

“I’ll *make* The Centre proud, Daddy. That’s all I want.”

*That’s not what you want, you want freedom.* Meanwhile the food looked good. His condition to make sure he and Parker both share it was a good addition to the plan. He watched Mister Parker open up the door with his clearance.

“Here you go. Have a nice dinner.” He handed her the platter. “I’ll get the plates in a second.”

Jarod watched him leave, but noticed she stood right by the door. He also noticed that she was leaning on her stiletto heel. Not in a manner for walking. If he took the initiative right

now in that short amount of time her father was getting plates, she would take her heel, probably while turning the platter, and use it as a weapon. It wouldn't kill him, but it'd hurt and hold him back long enough for the door to be sealed. At least it would have if he hadn't already improved his fighting skills significantly. Her dad handed her the plates and then gestured toward him. A stern little 'play nice' warning while he placed the paper plates on the small table.

She placed the platter on the small table too. Jarod had already picked a place that would be within easy distance of the table. Just in case she got her serving and decided to drop the platter. He was getting real food. He deserved real food. He scooted his saucer chair back slightly enough to grab his paper plate. Sandwiches with cucumbers. No wonder she wasn't happy. She never touched carbs. "Looks yummy."

No response. She just grabbed some cucumbers, picked up a sandwich, put it on a plate and walked off to the front of the door, leaning against it and eating.

Jarod ate his food in silence. He was quite used to it, did it almost all his life. In the meantime, he tried to take in the surroundings along with Miss Parker. He noted her clothes, her shoes, how she stood and leaned against the door. The way she ate, not comfortable, but for necessity. She moved slightly when he did, like she was still ready for him to leave. It wasn't too late and the door was of course locked. Yet? She couldn't let it go. "You know, I had a pet rat before. His name was Oscar." No response. "I liked him better than the guard dog bitch I have now." Still nothing. Not even an angry response. She just ate. When her eyes looked toward him though, the hatred. It was like he was the one forcing her to stay against her will. After she finished her last bite, he watched Daphne coming toward her.

She was fixing her skirt, like she had rushed there too quickly. "I did it, Miss Parker," she said proudly. "They are all safely in deposit boxes." She looked at the last bit of sandwich Miss Parker popped in her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry." She reached in her purse. "I got some gum for you. This one shows the best statistics of working. Regular gum too. Sugarless of course. I'll just leave it all right by the door for you. For the morning. Oh, and I did call the number for you? He seemed confused, but I think he got it was from you. He'll meet you tomorrow at three." She twitched slightly. "Sorry you don't get to have your phone." She twitched again and in a lower voice. "Couldn't? Couldn't you just say no to Mister Parker? You're his daughter."

"No!" Miss Parker finally responded. "Dismissed." She left in a hurry.

"She's loyal," Jarod said to her. "She has a good point. Everyone agrees, even her." He tried to match her eyes to his, but she wasn't looking again. "I'm not doing this to you. It's him. Tell him no." Nothing. "The Centre Indoctrination you got at the academy. It was like everyone else, except for one major part. You were taught to worship The Centre, *and* to obey the leader, but the leader was your father. You have affection and obedience both meaning the same thing in your head. You can't see the truth until you can say no."

"I see the truth perfectly," she responded.

"No, you don't, Little Miss."



Ah, that triggered her. Not the same way as it did last time. Her eyes didn't get soft. "Don't call me that."

"Your mom never would have wanted to see you this way," he tried again. "At The Centre, psychologically unable to say no to your father, or having . . . suicidal tendencies?"

She moved slightly. Uncomfortably. "Don't be ridiculous, I'm a survivor. Nothing and no one takes me down." She bravely showed her wrists. "Never."

"Not *yet*, Little Miss."

She banged the door behind her. "Can't you go and do something else besides bother me?" He wasn't budging. "This bitch is nailed to the door so you might as well forget it."

"Your father doesn't love you the same way he should. I'm not here to argue. I'm here to help you." Although getting his hands on those other envelopes would be a clear bonus too. "I told you once, that your mother tried to help me escape. That wasn't a lie. She was a wonderful woman."

"She was a whore!"

Ooh. That wasn't right. She said weak for her mother last time, she never used that kind of language for her mother or so sharp. *What did her dad tell her now?* "Did your dad tell you that? He's lying." *Tightening her stance.*

Jarod closed his eyes. Trying to imagine how she felt right now. To figure out how to reach her. *The Centre is family, The Centre is home, anything it does, it does for a greater purpose. Daddy loves me, he has trouble showing it, but he does and I will always do anything and everything for him. I don't have any real friends because I refuse to get close. I barely tolerate people I work with. I'll never make a close connection to anyone, let people in and you get hurt. If no one cares about my hurt, I don't have to care about others hurt. That leaves me for myself, I'm on top, always. I'll do whatever I want, whenever I want, and I don't give a damn about the consequences as long as The Centre isn't involved.* He looked back at her eyes. They were sure her mother wasn't a good woman. A whore. She knew it to be true. Catherine was good to her growing up, she loved her. Her father just saying that shouldn't be enough, there had to be proof to combat all those- "You aren't his daughter."

Bingo. He pulled the trigger on it faster than she could cover up the reaction. Her hands slammed against the door. "Stop using your skills on me!"

Ah. There it had been. "Your mom loved someone else." She didn't respond, but he had it. "You're not a Parker then." She slammed on the door now with the back of her fists and a leg.

"Shutup, I did not tell you that!" She looked around anxiously around the curtains. "Daddy turned the cameras all off, right? Audio? Visual?"

Tripping out. "Calm down, Little Miss. Not being a Parker is a good thing." Oof. "I figure things out. It's what I do. I don't care about cameras or audio." But she did. Apparently.

Why? Were they threatening her? Threatening to take The Centre? No, that was fear in her eyes. Fear for life. No. Fear for freedom.

“Shutup.” She lifted a finger to him. “Leave it,” she whispered, “and I’ll let you have an envelope tomorrow.”

An envelope? “Not the same one with Kyle.” She nodded. Well. It looks like he *could* get his hands on those envelopes after all. Either his dad or his sister. He’d have pictures of them tomorrow. “Coming back turned out better than I expected.” Okay. He wouldn’t try to figure her out then. Yet. “I’m taking a shower and heading to bed. See you in the morning.”

# Mission Failed

## The Next Day

After some well deserved rest, Jarod took another shower. It was always the best place knowing it was the most unlikely area to be watched. Still? It was watched, but not as closely. No one held a conversation in the shower. At least not him. He got out, got dressed, went back to the center of the room and still saw her guarding the door. Her eyes were drowsy, but she was still there. She didn't get any sleep last night, that was apparent. *Can't stay awake forever.* "Sleep well? What's for breakfast?"

They ate breakfast, in silence again, until the end. "When do I get my envelope?"

She rubbed her eyes for a second. "I'll get Daphne to text Sydney one of them after I get out." She yawned, and then caught herself. "Shit!"

"Most likely, no one's paying attention," Jarod told her. "Not over here. They only care about sims. Not us in our humanly forms, engaged in conversation."

"It's not conversation." She took a drink of her protein shake and went back to the door.

"You're going to need sleep," Jarod insisted. "I can tell you didn't sleep a wink."

"I will not get you that envelope if you try and dissect me," she warned him again. "Leave me alone."

He looked back toward his bacon and eggs. His protein shake too, not that he wanted that. It was only there because they had the same things to eat. *Don't trip that wire.* Sydney had gone through great lengths to get the single picture of his mom. Everything else had been moved. What she felt was just giveaway material meant the entire world to him. For the rest of the day, he wouldn't say a word to her as she stood in front of the door. Not until after he got the envelope. *If there was only a way to get the next one.* It would have been good, but she'd be keeping that close. It was her last play move, and he wouldn't stay long enough. "Can I get the one of my dad?" She just acted annoyed. He would have the best chances of finding his family with his dad. He saw a medal. With something like a record of medals, he might be able to get him tracked down. "If I say please?"

"You're lucky you are even getting one." She looked at her shake. "Fine."

Yes! Maybe her mind was too tired to concentrate, or maybe she felt a slight pang of sorrow inside of her? Maybe? "Thank you, Little Miss."

“Stop,” she held her teeth together.

“Miss Parker,” he corrected himself.

“Don’t you forget it.” She went back to sipping her shake. “Don’t get near that door either.”

“You should get some rest,” Jarod tried to convince her. “For one, I’m not going anywhere. I have an envelope to wait for and I won’t jeopardize that.” A special envelope. “For two, it’s daytime. Never the time to run away.” She didn’t listen. He finished his food and tried to stay away. If she thought he was using his skills at all on her, she might change her mind on that envelope. He wanted to get it, then he’d start to study her again, get anything he could, and then get out. He’d have to make plans to check out the woman Daphne for the safety deposit box. Everyone in The Centre always had something to hide.

He tried to keep out of her way, hoping she would get some rest. Even she couldn’t keep up that pace. He looked at the desk. Finding something that would be safe and irreversible wouldn’t be easy. He found that big branded places had easier problems that weren’t about bombs or destruction. Practically just math problems, to get a leg up on their competition, nothing that needed a Pretender. He did them anyway so he looked like he was doing something.

He noticed around 2:00, Miss Parker was finally moving around. He watched her move off the door when the one called ‘Cornman’ came to her.

“Hey, Miss P!” He was real happy to see her. “I hear you needed me!”

“Yeah, you little Freak. Get in here and guard Jarod.”

“You bet! Let’s see here. Just a matter of a code pad. I can take that down,” he insisted, his unibrow wiggling at her. “No problem for someone like me.”

“No Corny, go get Sydney.” She kept her eyes on Sydney as he came over to unlock the door. “Come here, Corn Freak. Small conversation.”

“Ooh, ooh.” Cornman followed her outward, but the whole time she still eyed that door almost behind her. Almost walking backwards. After their conversation, she started to walk away.

And then interestingly enough when she turned out of the lab, he heard the click clack of her running. She was in a hurry.

“So *you’re* Jarod.” Cornman eyed Jarod as he came in. “You’re supposed to be the biggest top dog around here?”

Jarod nodded. Definitely an interesting person to study, he could tell that right away. He came right through with his own papers.

“Don’t try flaking out on me,” he insisted. “I gotta get good with Miss P again so there’s no way you can leave.”

Jarod looked at the open door and just waved at Sydney before he closed it. “Yep, I better watch my step.” He heard him ooh and ahh over the computers that were still in the room. Just a couple since Miss Parker’s furniture was in it now.

“Not a surprise you get the latest computers. I heard you used to have so many they were stacked on top of each other.” He sat down at one of them for a little while typing away. He was intelligent in some ways, Jarod could tell. Not quite in others. Cornman got up. “So, Jarod. My name’s C-Man or the Corn Man. Third smartest person in the world in 1987, according to Mensa.”

Jarod nodded politely. Not exactly how you greet people. Everyone was different, but that was more than different, it was telling. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Damn, look at all this swag she’s got!” He touched the saucer and the tables, and just about jumped over to her bed. “Ooh. She even brought her bed. Miles and miles put on that thing I’m sure.” He touched it. “Soft.” He moved on and checked out more. “You never know what you can learn by just checking out the environment.”

“Yep.” Jarod looked toward Sydney who just shrugged.

“Cornelius. Why don’t you just relax?” Sydney suggested. “Jarod’s working.”

“I have work coming too soon here. Yep, Mister Parker wants me to do something.” He looked toward Jarod. “Big things.”

Jarod nodded again and went back over to the desk. Then he heard music start to play. Instead of the female Miss Parker had listened to, this was a man. Jarod tried to concentrate but the lyrics? “Catchy beat.” He put the work back down, trying to make sense of all of the lyrics. He scratched his temple and went over to the music.

“Hey, hey, don’t touch my tunes, Man. Chill,” he insisted. “Think you can go swaggering up on my tunes, got another thing coming.”

“I’m just curious.” This man was more interesting than the work he was doing. “What is skeet skeet?” He heard Cornman starting to laugh his ass off. “I said something funny?” It was the words in the song between the English lyrics.

“Heh!” Cman just kept typing on the computer. “Something *every* man does with Miss Parker, Genius!”

“It’s not something you want to touch on, Jarod,” Sydney warned him.

“I touch on every bit in life,” Jarod said. “Life is made of all kinds of different things and cultures that I still haven’t caught up on.” *Don’t get mad.* “You raised me without any exposure. I can tell from the lyrics it is of a sexual nature, especially within a club setting, but I don’t know these words.”

Sydney sighed. “Do you need to?”

Sydney just didn't get it. Jarod didn't care if things were wholesome or not so wholesome. Average or seen as strange. Chaz, his transgendered friend, had taught him real quick that the world wasn't just one way when she first propositioned him for sex. Even after that, she kept the term 'Nilla Wafer' for him still. It wasn't all cute and simple, light and dark, good and bad. It was a mixture. Society was real, breathing, bad, good, and everything between. Even Parker's music. He had noticed the lyrics before she turned it off last night. It wasn't about love, it was about the freedom about not having to love someone. Having sex without love wasn't for him, but that was part of society too. Everything meant something to someone, and he wanted to understand all the intricacies between. The more he knew about the world, the better he would be in it.

Cman snorted. "Still don't know, really? It's the result of 'fap fap fap' Mister Can't Catch Me."

"I know that one," Jarod said. Crude, yes, but now he knew. "Thanks. I'm gonna get back to work." That's when Daphne showed up.

"Blondie has arrived," Cman said as he went to the door. "Open Sesame, Syd!" Sydney opened the door. "Gotta work on my papers."

"Pray for everyone," Daphne said as she handed them over to him. After he touched her, she slightly wiped off her hands on her dress.

Cman went back inside with his work. Daphne closed the door while Sydney locked it up this time. Jarod was going to go back to his work and leave him to his, when he noticed what he was working on. "Why are you doing those?"

"Cause it makes the riches fall, which makes the bitches fall! Know what I'm saying?" Cman went back to working on the computer.

Jarod watched him start writing the solution. "You just killed 250 people already if you start that way." The Centre had given him the military sims? He looked over toward Sydney. How long have they done that? Sydney shrugged. So, it was new. *They want me to see him doing it wrong, so I'll stop and fix it.* Clever. There was no way The Centre trusted this Cornman's judgment for that area. He was a pawn, a ruse and nothing more. Jarod didn't need to see anything about him to make that judgment, just the greeting of Mensa told him what he needed to. Nice try though.

He went back to his own work. He wouldn't fall for it, he just went back to his work and quietly waited.

"Jarod? Incoming message."

Jarod went over toward Sydney. A man in a uniform with the text Major Charles written on it. *Major Charles*. His dad was a major or used to be. "Thanks, Sydney."

"Just following protocol," Sydney said. "Daphne got the word. I hope it helps."

Jarod nodded. He'd get all those pictures too, as soon as he was freed and Sydney could send them to a phone. He'd download them and he'd take them everywhere with him, no matter how many times he had to redownload. He'd keep them forever.

"Enjoyed your vacation?" Sydney asked.

Code word for his time there. "It was worth it." That's all Jarod would risk. One envelope short that he would steal later, but now he had a name and a service record he could look into. Not to mention, seeing Miss Parker close up. If he could set up the right situation, he could get her to pull out for good. In the meantime, he had to find out who her real father had been, and if Catherine Parker had really loved him.

That door and Miss Parker in front of it wouldn't be a problem either. Nice try though.

*Thank god.* Break from that stressful hell. She had an hour to relax before she met with- *what?*- The Triumvirate leaders were there at the front door. They must have caught the first trip out of Africa to arrive there. *Don't freak out. They came to see Jarod. They arrived to see Jarod finally captured. I even knew they were coming.* Paranoia. She had to get that under control.

"Miss Parker."

Except they wanted to talk to her now. "Gentlemen? I'm on my break, but I will be back to guard Jarod soon."

"We want to have you in our meeting," he insisted. The other two came from the other sides of the car. "Some interesting developments have come into view, and we would like to work out some ideas with you."

"Oh. Of course." She stepped away from her car. Just a meeting. She followed them in, keeping her stride the same with them. They took charge on selecting where the meeting had been, and she found herself seated comfortably in a chair. "Daddy should be coming soon."

"Yes. I'm sure he will." One of the Triumvirate heads nodded. "How loyal are you to The Centre, Miss Parker?"

"The Centre is my family," she answered. "My family raised me in The Centre, I got my education and my training from The Centre. I have lived all my life here and I plan on taking it over one day."

"You would be a good leader for The Centre," another said. "It's written in your eyes."

*Of course, I would be the best damn leader, second to father.* She eased up, feeling more in her element. Like her father said, you were either the dog or the meat. "The Centre keeps everything under control. Its basic dealings with its more advanced tellings of SL27. The overseers overseas to the mainland blindness of our main location. No one knows, or will

know, the true potential that The Centre grants. I don't plan on ever changing a thing, only heading into deeper progress."

"Yes." The men nodded to each other.

That's right. She was the dog. When Jarod teased her as being a guard dog, and as many times as he teased her about having a chain around Sydney? He was fucking *right*. She owned everything around her, including the people. They could see it. They could feel it. Even that very room, with all that extra weight, they could still feel her dedication to her home.

"We understand you chased Jarod down," the one on the right said. "As a young girl, you had access to see him? Anything to add?"

"You mean do I feel guilt about bringing him back?" She scoffed. "I was just a child exploring, it's how I learned before I was allowed to know more. Even then, I wanted to have control of everything."

"Control?" The left one said, falling right into her trap. "You control Jarod?"

"As a little girl, I was learning control. I used it on him. I was the only one he could see besides his trainer Sydney. Anything I gave him or said to him, was in *my* control." Control. That's what it was about to these men.

"Chasing after him was dangerous, and she never uttered a single word of disobeying." He nodded toward her. "Then? I think it's time to move on."

Presentation style talk. It was something she was used to with her father there. Presentation style talk was when all judgments were casted off and only progress was seen. Planned. Spoken of. Everything according to letter. Everything according to plan.

"You can understand why this is necessary," the one sitting right next to her said. "If you agree to this, then when it is ready, we'll pull the trigger. Jarod will never be able to come back out. In the meantime?"

"I have no problems with that," she said clearly. "Jarod is not only The Centre's main asset but a thorn in its side since his release. He even had the audacity to copy the DSA's and steal 100 millions dollars. I feel more than security and cameras are warranted, we *should* move onto this step and I will do what I have to until we are ready." Although, she found that she swallowed lightly. Like it might be in opposition of what she should do, but The Centre said it needed to be done. It needed to be done. It's not like Jarod was a child anymore anyhow. "Control. It's all about control."

"Right. Control. Now? Let's talk about what could happen? If you *lose control*."



*Car. Car. Car. Car. Car. Car.* To the appointment. Miss Parker was late, she knew she was late and she just had to hope he was still there. Sliding into her Porsche she forwent any music and just hauled off Centre property as fast as possible. Speed limits were obligatory right now. She did not have time to play games. When she landed where she needed to be, she got out in a hurry and marched right up to where he had been.

Broots. “Broots!” She yelled at him. “I need your brain!”

Broots was waiting right under the tree Daphne told him to meet her under. “Hello, Miss P.” He pointed to his watch. “I don’t have much time now, I have to go pick up my daughter. She doesn’t have a babysitter today, it’s just the fact you had Daphne call me instead of-”

She thonked his forehead, getting him to wince and focus fast. “I know, I got it! Just, listen? I need help and . . .” She stalled a moment. Just a moment. “Most people in this world hate me, which is fine, most people in the world suck. But? I tend to have softer spots for people I work with, and? I am a little desperate right now.”

“Just say no.” He held up his hands, waiting for her to conk him.

“It’s not that easy. Listen, I have to make this quick, I don’t have very long to get back, I was just in a depraved meeting and my time is running short! Okay? Now, open your ears and do that smart thing you do. I found out yesterday that my father wasn’t my biological father, and that my real father had pretender genes. My mother did too.”

“What?”

“Don’t interrupt,” she warned him. “I have them too, and it’s been fine, Daddy kept the secret but Zane spoiled it yesterday. He saw opportunity because Jarod triggered him!” Damn that guy. She stomped her foot on the ground. “So now, the leaders of The Triumvirate are deciding on *my* future. See? The Centre used to have more Pretenders. As it got older, they got older. Most of them are dead. Of the ones left, no females are viable or alive. To make this gene, it takes two to tango.” She was quiet. She didn’t mean to be. It was just a hard situation to think about. It wasn’t how she was trained to deal with The Centre. “I’m not good with science talk, Broots. Let’s just say, it’s not gonna be good if Jarod gets away within 48 hours.”

“Oh!” Correct expression of shock, his nerdy brain must have got it. “Oh no, I’m sorry.” he said. “What are they going to do?”

“Even though most have passed on, The Centre keeps everything on file. Everything. Catch my drift? Now, if I can just stay and guard Jarod long enough for them to pressure cook him, I get The Centre in the future and everything’s peachy again.”

“Pressure cook?” Broots asked. “What do you mean by pressure cook?”

“The Triumvirate has a NASA technology type deal to do some sort of air system so that Jarod can’t get out of the dome, *ever*. It will only be open for health check ups or emergencies. They’ve been working on it since Jarod’s escape, but now they are kicking it into higher gear.”

“Oh. That means, even Sydney couldn’t reach him?” Broots asked.

“Yeah, okay? There you go, you got the facts. Do your.” She spun her finger around. “Brilliant thing. What do I do if he gets out *before* The Triumvirate gets their new system put into place?”

Broots gulped. “Well? If it were me in that situation. I imagine ‘no’ wouldn’t work anyway. Your dad doesn’t get any say? He’s the leader.”

“What do you mean?” She asked. “Of course he does, but it’s not about a single person. It’s about what’s best for The Centre.” She looked at her watch. “Come on, Broots, I have to go. Fix it.”

“This isn’t a fix it problem with a quick solution,” Broots said. “Miss P. You have to tell Jarod.”

Uh? “No, that’s not the solution, I have to hold Jarod there away from the door and escaping.” Didn’t he hear her? “The Centre won’t let me tell him.” She watched him hold out his hands, squeezing and resqueezing. What did that mean? “English, Broots, I’m not fluent in hand jive.”

“Tell him without The Centre’s permission! Jarod is the genius Pretender, Miss P, *he* is the one you need to tell this to.”

“The Centre won’t let me.”

“Go against The Centre.”

“This isn’t a simple order that wasn’t signed in its place,” she said to him. “You are asking me to take on Daddy and The Centre?” She looked at her watch. “Time’s up and your computer brain wasn’t helpful at all!” She glared at him. “What do I keep you around for?! You better not tell anyone. Tell anyone and I’ll come after you myself!” She ran off, got back in the car and headed back to The Centre.

Meanwhile as she looked back, Broots still stood there. Odd man, he needed to go pick up his daughter. He was in a hurry too. Whatever.

## Sydney’s Lab

“Sydney?” Broots didn’t know how to approach the subject. Miss Parker threatened him. Most likely, ‘cause they did have history, she wouldn’t kill him. Just banish him away to a terrible part in The Centre again. He couldn’t guarantee that though. But? This was so big, and Miss Parker was so in a trance about it, she refused to tell the one person who could get her out of it before anything bad happened. “Can you come over for a poker game? Tonight?” Hopefully, Sydney got the hint. At The Centre, the unusual requests were usually understood

as something big. Sydney nodded. “My daughter goes to sleep by 9:00. We can start a game at 9:30.”

“Busy tonight. Tomorrow.” Sydney went back and continued to work with Dara.

Meanwhile, Broots stared at the dome with Miss Parker and Jarod. She always believed Jarod delighted in torturing her, and from the few times they ran into Jarod, he wasn’t super nice to her. Which made sense, she was a terrible person. Yet? Jarod wasn’t bad. Intelligent. His methods were a little unorthodox on how he got revenge or justice, but it all worked. In that dome, Jarod didn’t say anything to her. Broots figured maybe they talked at night. Hopefully. “Sydney? Can you tell Jarod that he should be a little nicer to Miss P?”

Sydney just gave him an odd look. Like anyone *not* having a job under her would be nice to her? “I? I don’t have that kind of control anymore. Trust me. Now, I’m working with my patient Dara, Broots. Maybe you should go for now?”

“Yeah. Maybe, just a request?” Broots asked. No. No, Sydney didn’t look comfortable with that. He had a tense relationship with Jarod now. Being nice to Miss P wasn’t easy because she was *never* nice to others. The fact she even came to him? Meant she had nowhere else to go. When it came to her friend list, it might possibly include Daphne? Maybe? Then again, maybe not. She wasn’t always real nice to her either. Daphne just hung on because she was fascinated by Miss P’s power. Broots waited to see how they ate. Maybe he could just hold up a sign behind the door while she was standing in front of it? No cameras were supposed to be over there. Supposedly. *Oh man.*

“Broots, go home,” Sydney instructed. “She refuses to say no still. Maybe we can talk about things over poker tomorrow?”

Well, at least Sydney got the point about the poker. He nodded. He should get home. Still? He had an uneasy feeling.

## Nightfall

Jarod looked at the collapsing form of Miss Parker in her chair. She was still trying to watch, but it wouldn’t do any good. The cafeteria cook spiked the food in the proportions Jarod told him. Knowing what she would and wouldn’t eat on her strict diet, it was easy to get her down. They were having beef and broccoli with potatoes, ice cream, and fish. She ate some beef and ate some fish. Jarod stuck with potatoes and ice cream. Now? She was practically sliding out of her chair. He went over past her, scooting her chair slightly. “Light’s out. Night night. Get some rest.”

She moaned. “You *can’t* leave!” She tried to grab his arm, but he easily pulled out of it. He went over to the door which Sydney had unlocked right before he left. Very soon.

There it was, the power sabotage. Jarod finessed his way up, only to go back down. The environment was also a factor he had to contribute to how he would get out. It wasn't pleasant, not a nice walk in the park. In the end, he reached the cliffs of Dover, covered in a disgusting mess where Johnny Boy Creed had been waiting for him. He coughed, preventing anything that might have gone to get caught back up.

Jarod wasn't ready with horses, he was ready with horsepower and a different direction to go that didn't lead to the obvious train. "Thanks, I owe you!" he smiled as he thanked his old friend. The first person he ever met that helped him when he left The Centre. Something he was getting better at.

"Forget it, you seen this thing you bought me?" Johnny Boy Creed reminded him as they sailed off in his brand new car. "Off we go."

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## The Centre T-Room

At the end of the T, Miss Parker stood up facing her Uncle Zane, A Triumvirate member, and her father. The old deal was gone, Jarod got away. She filed her report, and held herself together. She knew what would be asked of her before they even asked it.

"You gave Jarod a picture of his brother and father," one of the Triumvirate members questioned her.

"Fodder for The Centre animal," she answered back. "Nothing but a picture. No actual locations or information on them. Not even a last name. Just something for him to graze on, to hang onto. I burned his mother's picture in front of him. His father was the proof I wasn't lying. My assistant still holds the picture of his sister. I was hoping he wouldn't try something before I gave that to him." She swallowed. "I was mistaken."

"His brother?" Zane asked.

"Broots got confused. He tends to get confused easily, and he was following Sydney's lead." And she wasn't risking his interference. "I don't trust Sydney in my future endeavors."

"Sydney was his teacher." Her father's voice. "We were all trying to make Jarod feel more at ease until we knew how he escaped. Make him feel like he belonged, like he was home. Sydney did his part."

*Lying sack of shit that is, Sydney sided with Jarod.* She had no love for his ass right now. She stared straight at her father.

“Are you willing to submit your body for the good of The Centre?” The Triumvirate member asked.

“I have surrendered my body and my mind for the will of The Centre all of my life,” she responded. “I would lay down my life for The Centre at anytime.”

“And your children’s lives?” The Triumvirate member finished asking.

“Parkers are the caretakers, the Creators, and the backbone of The Centre,” she answered. “My child or children will grow up knowing and understanding that. This is their lineage. The Centre is their home, their family, and their future.” Miss Parker knew what to say before it was said, and she reacted as she should.

Her eyes followed a gun that was scooted her way. She picked it up without hesitation. She stood up with the members.

“The sweeper that was standing by the security,” her father said as he moved out of the way and placed a sweeper in front of his place. He now disappeared within the darkness.

“The computer man that you asked advice from,” her Uncle Zane said, showing her a completely terrified Broots and then stepping into the darkness.

“Our cafeteria cook we expect helped Jarod escape.” The Triumvirate member moved another person up as he stepped into the darkness.

“Decide as a Parker decides,” her father said.

She opened the gun, spun the bullet chamber and saw two bullets. She snapped it back into place, and uncocked it.

After unloading it in the heads of the security and the cafeteria chef, she had it aimed at Broots. “You’re lucky I only had two bullets this time.” She put the gun back down. “Telling Broots was my way of figuring out decisions I take, just like I do when I take action for The Centre. He’s guilty of nothing but his job. It’s been less than 24 hours, take him to have his memory wiped. It’s less messy and I get to keep my computer technician. Also, give him a change of clothing. He probably reeks of urine now.” She watched the lights come back on and him get hoisted away.

Her father clapped. “Now see, that’s my daughter! It doesn’t matter the genes. You can’t buy that kind of loyalty, Gentlemen.” He glared at Zane. “Clap for your *niece*.”

Zane gave two solid claps. “She was raised as Parker. Her answers were sufficient.”

“Losing Jarod is a burden on The Centre,” The Triumvirate member said. “Zane has shown great promise, while you, Mister Parker? Have lost him *twice* under your leadership. However? Miss Parker has something special. The genes and the loyalty we need for the progression of The Centre into future times. While we run behind with Jarod, we steam ahead with her.” He nodded. “The Centre will be hers in the future. It’s time to work out the contracts.”

She sat back down at the table. *Easy*. It was supposed to be a glorious day when she was assured her future in The Centre. Instead, she felt chills up her spine before she even saw the contractual papers. She cleared her throat as she looked through them. *Don't you dare shed a tear, you are not a weak woman*. "Everything looks in order. I need a pen." She tried to hide her deep breath as she signed the contract.

"If things get very tough, we can get extra outside help," her father insisted to her. "I promise."

"I don't need it," she insisted, starting to sign the P on her last name. "I can cover the time, I'm sure. Ten years is plenty." She looked at her name on the paper, looked at the pen, and gave it back. "It's a proud day, Daddy. I earned my spot in The Centre. Are you happy about that? Daddy?"

"Yes, Angel." He didn't sound so happy. "Yes you earned your spot." Then, he did sound happy. "As long as you fulfill the requirement."

# Running Against Time

Three Weeks Later in Jarod's Dome

Miss Parker examined the inside with her father. Sydney had questioned everything of course. After all they were in his lab. She wanted to tell him to mind his own business, but Daddy still respected him. So, she told him the truth about Jarod being kept in the dome as securely as an astronaut was in space. He wasn't happy hearing that, citing Jarod needed to at least get touch, yada yada. Not her problem. She didn't give a shit about Jarod. He was an ass, a thorn, someone who only bothered her about her mother and past, and just? Overall, *that's* who should have been at the end of the damn board to kill.

Because everything he was citing for Jarod, was *actually* for her.

Oh! Everything was the Pretender's fault, and she had to offer her body as a damn sacrifice to prove her worthiness again. Although, Daddy was making her feel so much better every step of the way.

"Mister Parker!" Sydney shouted as he came into the dome. He looked straight at her, but not in fury. However, he glared at Mister Parker. "I have *just* talked to Daphne. Is there something I *need* to know, Sir?"

"Yes, well. It is his lab, Honey," her father said to her. Still, Daddy wasn't happy with his outburst. "More discretion with the leader of The Centre though, Sydney!"

"Yes, Sir," Sydney said again. "I just need to know." He looked straight at her. "Are you? Okay?"

*Sure, he's concerned.* "Of course I'm okay," she answered back.

"You were in the re-education wing for three weeks," Sydney warned her. "Even Daphne was worried enough to . . ."

"I'm the same as I've always been. I am loyal to The Centre and that hasn't changed."

"No. It didn't." Sydney looked toward her father again. "*More* re-education over loyalty probably didn't need to be done."

"Of course not!" Daddy was mad again. "Do you think I like it?! I have to work with The Triumvirate. We *all* do our parts in the progression of The Centre, Sydney. Progress is what it's about. Now, you can either help, or you can whine and bellyache about it, and see where that lands you!"

She looked around the dome carefully. Sydney had to know something anyway, they'd be bringing and taking out stuff soon. "Can we have some color?" She asked Sydney. "I know Jarod was all in white but my baby should see colors to learn about them. It'll need that knowledge."

"What do you think, Sydney?" Her father asked him. "Is any color okay in here?"

While Miss Parker continued to look around, she felt Sydney's gentle hand against hers. She glanced toward him. There was no whining or bellyaching like her father predicted. Concern. Warmth. He looked like a dear friend right now.

"You add as much color as *you* want, Miss Parker," he said clearly to her. "Have you been taken in yet for artificial insemination or are you trying naturally?"

That was none of his business. "We should get a stripe of a rainbow in here somewhere so that the baby can have color to learn." She kept maneuvering around. "Can I have glass, Daddy? I'd really like my glass table."

"I think glass is fine. What do you think, Sydney?" Daddy asked him.

"*Anything* she wants is fine," Sydney said. Albeit, he still had harshness in his voice.

Miss Parker continued to walk around her new abode. A new dome would make it easier too, a place to call hers when it grows up and had to do it's genius things. Last time she tricked Jarod, she had gotten heavier furniture from her father's place quickly. No one knew the difference. Now, she really did have her bed and her sofa in there. No joke. It needed to feel as comfortable as possible. "Any TV or phones?"

"Of course, Sweetie, as long as you follow protocol," her Daddy said.

"Good. A girl needs to Netflix and chill."

Daddy smiled back to her sweetly. "This dome will get a new section on it, already been working on it. You and your children will have your own little areas. You can also have visitors here at certain times, once we are all caught up. I'd prefer you not have male visitors unless it's business related when you get in here. Trusted friend related. I . . . I know your tastes, Sweetie. That's not going to go over well on the videos and it's just not a good idea with the artificial insemination when we start."

Miss Parker rubbed her shoulders. "Of course, Daddy." Most men didn't do anything for her anyhow, and she'd already been told she probably wouldn't care much. Hopefully. She was more concerned about having to permanently give up her Pall Mall's and Maker's Mark for this gig. She had to get off her Pall Mall's completely and pass The Centre's inspection before she was assigned. At least she had nine months to get used to the mommy concept when it happened. It wasn't a concept she ever wanted to dwell on. Of course, being the leader of The Centre did mean children for future growth, so it was naturally something that had to happen anyway. She looked at the floor. "Can I have rugs in here since it can't really just be born and crawl up working with flammable stuff?"



“Anything you want,” Sydney said to her again. Once again, soft. Very soft.

“You’ll have privacy in the middle again too,” her father said. “We learned a lot from how we raised Jarod. A human needs a sense of alone time or they will run away. If your son or daughter wants privacy, then they can be right in here or beside momma. What’s better than that?” He pulled her closer to him for a hug. “I’ll be sure to come down personally to visit you and the new grandbaby too.”

Daddy’s hugs. He was doing that more and more. It felt good. He loved *her* and talked to *her*. He hardly cut her off today. She was the center of his world. “Thank you, Daddy. That sounds wonderful.”

“That’s good, Angel. Now, I’m going to go talk to some of those workers over there, okay?” He left her side.

She continued to look around as Sydney came beside her.

“Miss Parker?” She wasn’t used to that gentle of a voice from him. It was weird. “Do you understand that even though you have the genes in you, there is still a chance no baby will be a pretender?”

*That’s what me and daddy are hoping for.* “That would be nice,” she said simply. “It will be ran through some tests as it gets older, and if it doesn’t fit, then it will be raised as a normal child. If it’s not, then obviously this is the best environment for a pretender.”

“I know for legacy reasons, you are supposed to have a baby,” Sydney said tenderly. “I can tell this is *not* for that. I also know that your father is trying to fix this area, and *trying* to make the baby feel wanted and safe.” He held his hands out. “Jarod was taken from his family at four. Before then, he developed in a normal environment. I highly suggest that. I don’t know what the results of being born in here and never experiencing freedom at all will do.”

“This isn’t your business,” she answered. “It’s my future, and if The Centre wants it to start here, then they won’t know any other home. I’ll be here too.” She licked her top lip slightly. “For the good of The Centre.” She noticed his anxiety. “Relax, Sydney. The Centre is fine with this process and I have to have one eventually. I’m going to be leader of The Centre one day.” She touched her temple. “Oh, this headache drives me crazy.”

“Re-education wing is not always easy on the head,” Sydney said. “Broots doesn’t remember the day Jarod escaped. Your father took him in for interrogation about it before deciding it had nothing to do with the escape.”

“Protocol.” She reached in her pocket for her regular gum. Something to put in her mouth. She had confided in Broots again, to try and get to the genetic material. She couldn’t risk getting caught tampering with it. Broots knew more truth than Sydney or Daphne. Even why he couldn’t remember that night.

Broots wasn’t mad. Quite sympathetic actually. It was a good feeling. Having someone on her side. She needed that. He even promised he wouldn’t tell Sydney early. That was smart. It

would probably get him killed. And? She knew Syd would automatically think of Jarod or assume Jarod if he heard genetic material of pretender. She didn't want more problems or siding than she already had.

"You stopped smoking altogether?" Sydney asked. "Cold turkey."

"For the good of The Centre." She popped the gum in her mouth.

"You don't think Jarod has *anything to contribute*?" he asked lightly.

"Why?" She asked. "He's out. He's free. He's not a part of this."

"Oh, re-education," Sydney muttered. "Next time he calls, we should tell him. He'll be curious, and he might share something that will change your mind how you proceed with your own baby."

"Oh, fucking cry me a river! Boo fuckin' hoo!" Jarod? He didn't even know about the genetic storage and he was still on his side? "I don't care what he thinks about it, Sydney. It will be mine. *I'm* the one raising it. It gets a mommy, it gets to feel wanted, so it will stay. It'll be safe and healthy, and shit! It even gets a place of privacy."

"Jarod? Is?" Sydney looked like he wanted to say something more.

She wanted to see where she could put her TV. Plexiglass wasn't exactly easy for mounting a TV. She would probably have to sacrifice space for a TV shelf.

"Can't even a small part of you feel how wrong this is?" He finally asked his damn question.

"Sorry?" Ha! "Why should I feel sorry for him? All he ever did was hurt and tease me about my mother. Good fucking riddance, I'm glad I don't have to hunt him anymore." She sighed. "He was tired of the bitch on the chain, so the bitch will be fine back here in the actual doghouse."

"I am not talking about Jarod," Sydney said, a little more coarse now. "I am talking about the child *you* are pulling into this dome for all time."

*Shit, I messed up.* "When you complain, my reflex always goes to Jarod. He just lives to hurt me."

"Jarod plays games, and he used those games to try and help you." Sydney tried to stand up for him. "He tries to show us something that we can't see."

"Us?" Ooh! "The Chameleon's been fucking around with you too, hasn't he, Sydster?" She looked back toward the floor. "Even the one who took care of him all his life, he's playing games with. What'd he do?" She glanced toward him. "I know he did something."

"He." Sydney sighed. "He's just trying to show me what happened to Amalia and . . . Patrick."

“The disappearance of your own wife and son. See? That’s what he does.” She stood back up. “He was better caged. Fucking around with my past was one thing, but he won’t even leave any lube on you for his jobs? Little prick.” She gestured to the floor. “Maybe I could . . . do something . . . with.”

She felt Sydney’s tug on her hand. She was losing it again. “Sydney. Someone once told me smoking cigarettes was the polite society woman’s way of committing suicide.” No. Don’t lose control. “Maybe the TV stand over here would work.”

Then she felt him embrace her. *Nope, strong. Stay strong.* “Alright Old Man, let me go before you break a hip.” She pulled herself away. “Yeah, the TV stand over there. That will work. That will work.”

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## Miss Parker’s Home

“Yes, I know I left you a little high and dry last time, Peter.” she said, trying to be nice on the phone. For what she needed to get done, she already knew her stable of men that were safe. To get the whole stable of guys to come over, all she had to do was that one thing she hated to do. Be polite. It had been working though. Unfortunately, she was also on the pill which prevented what she needed right now. She had got her hands on some antibiotics that would hopefully disrupt it and she stopped taking it. It wouldn’t stop on a dime, but time wasn’t a luxury either.

Having a baby was a certainty now, The Centre wanted it. However, the ball was still in her court on who that daddy would be. Even her father made it clear that if she had a baby with someone who didn’t carry a pretender gene? Then? Over, no more worries. An heir that was just normal and a cancellation to the contract. “I was in a really bad mood that night. Y’know? I’ll make it up to you if you stop on by. Yeah, you bet.” She heard a car starting to pull up. This one was early. “In maybe three hours? No, not right yet, I’m still working.” She headed to her front door. “Yep. Alright, see you in three.” She opened her door and welcomed him. “Hi, Honey.”

“Parker.” Her next appointment showed up. “I got a little time for your apology now. You want to have something to eat first?”

No way. She was still full from earlier. “I’d rather just work up an appetite instead.” She grabbed him by his tie and led him to her room. She couldn’t orgasm worth shit, but getting these guys hot and bothered was all she needed to get what she wanted done.

As her text went off, she checked it real quick. *Shit!* The Triumvirate must already have the pretender vials, Broots couldn’t find them where she told him to go check! She ignored her

frustration and kept tugging her latest boyfriend she was ‘apologizing’ to for being so hard during their date however long ago. She stopped as she heard a sound in another room. “Hang on.”

She grabbed a gun out of her drawer near the front without him seeing. She went to where she heard the sound. She kept her cool checking her door and then glared at the intruder. “Oh, you are so pushing it with me!”

Jarod didn’t move right away. He’d noticed that his little Hunter hadn’t been chasing him. Looking into it, he found out she was officially off the chase for him. She also wasn’t receiving mail, it was in the process of getting its address changed. He had been trying to dig up more on Catherine, but maybe something triggered her that he didn’t see? An unfactored variable that her father gave her perhaps turning her away from him instead? He’d shown up early that morning to look around in her house for answers, and she was with someone. He came back later and she was with someone else. This time? He came back and he heard her in conversation with someone coming in three hours and with somebody now?

Psychologically, something was definitely happening. He had to risk initiating contact.

But? Like he unfortunately thought, no leaf was turned and he was hiding behind her sofa, ignoring the gun she just set off. “Hey! I think that scared off beau number three for the day,” he teased her. “Easy, Parker. Been a little date excessive today. That last conversation too, there’s another coming?”

At least she needed a clear shot for a better chance to kill him and not destroy her own room. Still? She was upset enough to sacrifice a shelf to show she wasn’t quite happy about something right now. “You’re so lucky I love that couch,” he heard her mutter.

Definitely don’t move. “I thought I found your father,” Jarod said. “He’s a good man, regardless of how you feel about your mother. I *tried* to send you something for it so, you know? I could ignore being shot at but you got dropped from the chase and your personal address mail had been stopped. I was hoping you came to your senses. I see that’s not the case now.”

“Moving. Daddy’s orders but I could still kill you.” He heard her moving around slightly. “I am warning you, Jarod, I am *not* in the mood to see your face at all right now!”

“Easy, Parker. Go see Broots and Sydney for the package. It would do you good to meet him. You might not feel so much anger toward your mother. It wasn’t just a one night stand *if* he is it.”

“Great, message received. Now get out or I’ll kill you. Hunter or not, my patience is thin and I can always buy another couch.”

Yep, that was the extent of the stay. He ran toward the window and headed out before she changed her mind.

“Fuck! Fuck!” She put her gun back up and saw Jarod was right. The latest Baby Maker was gone. *Damn*. It wasn’t easy. She’d have to catch him on another day. The Centre moved fast and she wouldn’t have very long. Jarod was *still* interrupting her own life though, and she wasn’t even in the chase! He was supposed to see her as non- important. That’s what The Centre wanted. How many times did she go after him and he just ducked her, ran, or jumped away on a helicopter? She stops and he fucking shows up in her own house! *Just a little longer*. He even caught they were setting her up for a moving address. Moving day was coming in faster than she wanted.

Moving day. To the new and improved dome. She wiped the tears that started to surface below. Right now she’d normally turn for her Maker’s Mark. It felt like that kind of day. Burning herself with an ice cold bath too, feeling that viciousness against her was also tempting. *His fault. His shit. He ran*. She put her gun back away in the drawer, feeling hopeless. The Centre wasn’t giving her as much time as she wanted to have an ‘accidental’ baby that could prevent this whole mess. A little boy or girl that would just be raised as a normal Parker. Not everyone wanted a golden goose. *Not much time*. One of those idiots had to get a baby factory started.

That contract was clear. A pretender baby within one year of its signature. If she had already been pregnant, there was nothing they could do. It would be born, checked, and cleared. She would eventually get the mommy thing down for it, she didn’t have time to even think about that right now. Then she would earn another way to gaining The Centre later.

If she got put in there before she got that chance though? Pretender genetic material with her genes. Those chances just skyrocket, and she’d be *fucked*.

She stopped to look out her window. Even if she wanted to, even if she could, no one outran The Centre forever. *You are the dog or you are the meat*.

Home didn’t mean cozy. Home didn’t mean safe. Home meant where she belonged. Where her family had been. Her honors lied. But home didn’t cuddle. The Centre didn’t coddle. She was the last female carrying pretender genes. If they even had the slightest whiff that she wasn’t playing with them? She’d be found, taken in, her genetic material extracted, and end up dead somewhere. Because no one went against home.

No one went against The Centre. And lived.

She felt a shudder for a moment. She rubbed her hands down her dress. *Easy, Parker*. “What I wouldn’t give for my cigarettes right now.” She leaned against the window, rocking against it. Trying not to break down. “There’s still time.” She had better go see Broots and Sydney tomorrow. Meanwhile? She had another one to get ready for soon.

# Moving Day

## Sydney's Office Next Day

"Did I get a fucking package from the gaw-damn Pretender?" She said in a foul mood as she went to see Sydney and Broots.

"Miss Parker?" Broots asked. "What are you doing here? I thought you were off the Jarod case. Orders from your father."

"Are you questioning my actions?" She threatened him. She looked over toward Sydney. So far, he hadn't told Jarod anything, or he hadn't bothered contacting Sydney. Most likely, the second. Jarod being out there making a life was a good thing for that part. "He came to my house last night. My furniture isn't as pristine anymore." She snapped her fingers. "What's the address I need?" If he found her real father, it would be worth it. Normally, she didn't ask for being gutted by Jarod, he just made it happen, but she would soon be in the giant dome. Sealed. Without touch. Before she went, she needed to know. "Address? I know it's been here awhile."

"Oh. Yeah." Broots looked toward Sydney. "You want to see the package and the red ipad or just--"

"Just give me the fucking address!" She took the paper Sydney gave her. "Maine? That doesn't sound like The Centre."

"Jarod is unmistakably good, I would check it out," Sydney encouraged her.

She swallowed. "I want you and Broots to check this man out. I can't risk a Jarod trick when I'm not on his case." The Centre nor Daddy would like that.

"I think Jarod wanted *you* to see him," Sydney urged her. "You can get it done before moving day."

Yeah, that's just what she needed. To be far away in Maine? "I don't think The Centre is going to be happy with me even leaving Blue Cove right now," she answered honestly. "Do you?" She heard her phone go off and checked her message. Well. It was the last time she'd be doing that for awhile. "Time to face the music already." She looked toward Sydney. "Moving day just arrived."

## Sydney's Lab Area

“Daddy? I haven’t even been cleared for anything yet.” There it was. Right in front of her. The new and improved dome. Already. *This feeling. Is this how people feel when they enter prison?* It was nicer than prison. It was set up to be nice. There was even another middle sized dome attached on the side. Made it look bigger. She put her smaller essentials, but most gorgeous ones in there. Most important to her. The curtains were custom made standing, created to make it feel nicer, with a second set above to block or add more light. They could even close up the front so Sydney didn’t have to stare at her all day. Privacy. He made sure she had privacy. *Daddy did everything he could.* Step by step. She had taken off her heels. Recommended by The Centre doctors. No use wearing those around a simple dome. Simple shoes would be better for her. *I miss my sound.* She saw the new air making machine attached to the side. “Can I get too much air or too little, Daddy? What about pregnancy and birth in this environment?”

“All that has been worked out, don’t worry about that. You’ll feel great,” he insisted. “Angel? You’re a brave one,” he admitted. “Braver than me.” He sighed and whispered closer to her. “If you made me a regular grandbaby, Angel? We could get you out of here.”

“I tried, Daddy,” she admitted. “I don’t know yet.” Still, as the door was opening? Her fear was starting to overrun her. “Please, Daddy? I don’t want to, no. Anything else, please!”

“I wish I had that choice to grant,” he muttered to her as he gently placed her in. He gestured to the side. “Meet me over there.”

She moved through the room to the next room. It used to have the small shower and toilet and simple bed. The shower was still there and the toilet, but there was now a hole where the bed used to be. Not real big. Enough to fit her hand through. Maybe part of her arm. It was rectangular like an overgrown mail hole on a door. Sydney, Daphne, Broots and her father were all inside that dome.

“A reminder.” He brought over a decent sized necklace box with the logo from a favorite jeweler in Paris. He gave it over to her. “No matter what, Angel. Stay strong.”

She opened it up. She knew her jewelry. Daddy bought her a white gold diamond necklace, roughly around \$40,000. “It’s beautiful, Daddy.” She complimented it and would wear it. It was lovely and from her father. But her heart just . . .

“You are never here as a thing of The Centre. You are *my* daughter and even if you have to be here for The Triumvirate right now? Hm? I’ll take care of you. Always.”

She placed the necklace on herself. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“Oh, Miss Parker.” Daphne gestured to her gift. “That’s stunning.”

“Yeah. Sparkly,” Broots said.

“We should have given it at least a few more days,” Sydney insisted to her father. “She could have been checked outside the dome. This whole thing is ridiculous, she’s not even pregnant yet!”

“I did what I could for time, Sydney!” her father insisted. “Now? This is your lab, so you need to know how this works.” He held up a different box, still small but clearly not jewelry. “This is our Centre top of the line headset. Wear them 24/7. Bluetooth. When you are sleeping, keep them next to you at night along with your phone. Everyone involved will have one, including me.” He lifted up his own headset from his neck for him to see. “If anything happens and she needs out within fifteen to twenty minutes, you need to contact me for the code to the second door. I’ll contact Zane. Zane will contact the Triumvirate. He will get the code, recontact me, and I will get you the code.”

“Outrageous.” Sydney rubbed his hair back as he took the headset. “A chain of command without you in charge, Mister Parker?”

“Since she’s my daughter, it would be favoritism to be straight through me,” he muttered. “When you aren’t on duty, there will be a paid professional here watching over her. He is also a Centre doctor, a specialist. Trained in more than just medicine. His name is Doctor Cox. If you have an emergency that needs you to open right away? You will text Cox. He is living closely to The Centre just for my daughter. By the time you open it with his code, he’ll already be here. I am downloading his number to you.” He looked back at her one more time. “We haven’t activated the air yet, but we will. This spot we are in is for food and simple deliveries like this. When the door to the dome we are in is open, the slot is shut. When the door is shut, the slot is open.” He looked toward Sydney. “You can have the code to this room. You’ll need it to serve food. It’s the first door. I’ll download it for you. He’ll be coming any minute to check on her.”

“You’re too kind, Sir.” The way the words were spoke though could have been overlooked sarcasm.

Miss Parker watched her doctor. He had the codes for a reason, he was allowed to get access quickly and efficiently. The old front door she once guarded was just a decoration now, rendered useless and never to be opened again. There was now a medical chair she sat on over in Jarod’s old simulation room along with a ton of medical equipment. “There’s usually more than one of you guys running around The Centre,” she complained as he checked her reflexes. “Where’s the rest of the white coat brigade?”

He had her look up and open her mouth before he finally spoke. “There are a team of doctors for The Centre for regular everyday matters.” He stuck his flashlight into her mouth. “Then there’s me.” She felt him push on her teeth tenderly. “You are the *only* female special gene holder The Centre has contained anymore. Without you, everything is just liquid. Now, everything turns gold.” He moved away from her mouth and drug out a needle. He scooted his chair closer. “No matter how tough of a customer you are, I *guarantee* we will make this work.”

She glanced out the dome toward Sydney and Broots and Daphne. All three were still watching her. Like a little monkey. None of them understanding, except, Broots. He was turning away. Squeamish stomach. Daphne clenched her notepad. Sydney just stared at her.



Broots looked toward Sydney and whispered a little out of the way from Daphne. “Jarod hasn’t contacted you at all since you-“

“No!” Half choked, very harsh. Sydney’s answer. “We are going to Maine. Now. Miss Parker wanted us to go, and it is part of Jarod’s case. Let’s go.”

Maine

“Great seafood it looks like,” Broots commented.

Sydney was looking in every direction, as if hunting for Jarod. Hoping he’d be there. Daphne usually stayed behind on trips, manning anything they needed at The Centre for access. It was just him and Broots, which worked out better. The smaller the team, the better this could go. It didn’t take long to find him. Benjamin Thomas Miller.

A nice man. Easy going. Sydney could tell why Jarod wanted her to meet him. He had nothing to do with The Centre though, and as nice as a dream as it would be? Miss Parker had potential pretender genes. He highly doubted his Pretender found the right man. Still, he asked the questions that Jarod could not. “Did you ever have a relationship that was more than plutonic with Catherine Parker?” No. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah because you might have someone,” Broots said from the table to him as well. “She has a daughter.”

No. He clearly loved Catherine Parker, but no. Of course. Sydney politely left the place with Broots. He had really been hoping Jarod had been around somewhere watching. The last he connected with his phone was just to send the pictures of his family collected. There had been no communication since. Jarod had said they were ‘even’ but he didn’t often want to communicate as much with him. A part of Jarod would always blame Sydney for his loss of the world and his family growing up. That and he was out there, learning to live his own life. That’s why they all fell for him being caught so easily. He never communicated that closely to them.

Jarod should know what was going on though. Sydney didn’t know if he could do anything, but he deserved to know that a possible new little pretender would be imprisoned along with Miss Parker.

“At least the food was good,” Broots said outside of it. “At least we have the no for her, Sydney. Are you okay?”

Sydney was still looking everywhere. Jarod should have come to see him last night, not Miss Parker. He could be anywhere in America right now. “Let’s go, Broots. This was a dead end.”

Then, he heard it. A small sound in the bushes.

“Go wait in the car, Broots. I’ll be there in a second.” Sydney watched Broots walk off as he acted like he was going back in. Instead he went to the right where he heard the noise.

“Jarod?” he whispered.

“Of course it was a dead end,” Jarod muttered, revealing himself from behind a tree. “It was for Miss Parker. Where is she?”

Thank goodness! “Jarod. There is something you should know,” Sydney said. “I doubt that is her father. Miss Parker has pretender genes, and she is now trapped in your dome.”

“ . . . what?”

## Quiet Hotel

Jarod led Sydney to a simple, cheap hotel room as he heard him talk. The more he spoke, the worse it became. His dome was now some kind of space dome with generated air and no easy clearance for Sydney to access anymore. The Centre was pulling out all the stops to keep him. Then, he mentioned the part that made him enact the quick meeting act. “The Centre is making her have a child in *my* old dome? Just for the *chance* it could be a pretender?”

“Yes. She was in re-education for three weeks,” Sydney said. “It’s like she won’t even think about fighting the decision. At least it had been. At the last possible moment, she told her father no.” He shrugged. “He still put her in.”

Jarod rubbed his eyes. In all his knowledge, he hadn’t seen that one coming. “Okay, okay. Nothing’s happened yet?”

“No,” Sydney said, “but she is within the new space dome. It’s the new term they use for it.”

“Tell me about the access, clearly.” Jarod listened to Sydney about the double locks and how the permissions went. “How the tables have turned.”

“I thought you should know,” Sydney said. “During pregnancy and through its birth. Isolated. It does have its mother.”

“Which is more than I had,” Jarod said, “but at the same time, that’s a curse. It won’t even think of escape until it’s ready to leave its mother for good.” He leaned in the back of his chair. He crossed his arms, thinking.

“If she found a way out of the dome, and if she was convinced to get away from The Centre?” Sydney asked. “Could it be saved?”

It was good to see Sydney had developed a conscious somewhere along the way. It was still too little, too late. “Even Miss Parker can’t make it out,” he revealed. He didn’t want to ever reveal the exact way. “All I will say is it is not easy, and everything has to be timed just right

or death is around the corner when attempting it.” He scratched his ear slightly. “There’s a reason I didn’t escape for thirty years, Sydney.”

“I see.” Sydney nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry will never cut it,” Jarod said, “and now there’s another victim, doomed by The Centre.” He looked at his hands. From birth. She was already in the dome. “Why is she in it already?”

“Punishment,” Sydney admitted. “The early arrival is to punish her for not watching the door for 48 hours with you I believe. Or, rededication if you prefer their word.”

“No, that’s not good enough. It must be the anomaly. I need to look into it deeper.”

“Catherine would have been devastated to see this.” Sydney looked downward at the small table in the room. “Her own grandchild.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?!” Jarod said, feeling set off by that statement. Catherine had tried to rescue him. She was dead because of trying to save him so long ago. He suddenly felt the pitbull fangs in his legs again, dragging him down from the train of freedom. He covered his mouth, folding his hands together, leaning into them.

“I did not blame you Jarod,” Sydney answered. “I never would. Simply regrets. I tried to contact you,” he said. “Even then, it probably wouldn’t have worked. She is under the spell of The Centre. She will never turn her back on it.” He stood back up.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Jarod uttered. “Isolation, true isolation, might do it. But, even if it does?” The Centre had her exactly where they needed her. Just like they used to have him. He swallowed. Rockclimbing. Strengths of feat. Timing jumps. Water crossing. More rockclimbing. “Maybe she could make it,” he revealed. “She was trained by The Centre and runs me down. But if she’s pregnant, or has a baby with her?” That would never work. She would have to escape immediately, but it was still risky.

That didn’t even take into account the new ‘space dome’ Sydney referred to. It wouldn’t turn off just by power sabotage alone, The Centre hadn’t overlooked that since his breakout with Catherine. But this time, it wouldn’t be something a simple insider that he had helped could take care of. “Re-education for three weeks and she was already very dedicated.” Still? “At the end, before she got put in? She finally said no?” Mister Parker still put her in. His daughter, the daughter he claimed to love? He still placed her in it.

“I get the feeling a part of her knows something though,” Sydney said tapping the table. “Every time she answers back, it’s like she’s trying to put on this extra dedicated attitude. It makes me wonder.”

“What’s to wonder,” Jarod said clearly. “Don’t you get it? She stays obedient to The Centre, she stays with it, she lives. She opposes, she’ll be killed, and then? A motherless, lonely child. Left to The Centre alone.” He stayed still. “Leave, Sydney.”

Sydney nodded. “Is there anything you need, Jarod?”

Jarod reached into his suitcase and pulled out a random phone from the many that he carried for his one time use. He showed him the number to it. "I want a recording of how it all looks in there. I want a close up of her. Her doctor. The dome." He tossed it back into his suitcase. Then, he brought up his special phone he was working on. "This has a recorder at the top of the phone I designed. It works just like a regular phone, but there's no light to show anything is recording when you hit record. It'll record in a 360 environment. Only send anything from this phone to the phone number I just showed you." He gave his new tinkering to Sydney. He also reached in for an ipad with its red cover. His new red notebooks. "Since *you* showed up, they'll ask. Take this so you have a reason for being here." He slid the ipad to Sydney. "Go."

Sydney left while he sat silently.

Jarod had his freedom, but he worked hard to keep it. Now there could possibly be another pretender coming, trapped in The Centre. With its mother being Miss Parker, and her still not seeing the truth behind everything? Unable to break away.

Even if she did willingly agree to escape, and he did get her out, it would only be a matter of time before she was found. They would be wanting her just as hard as they wanted him. He imagined her, a pre-teen once again, just watching him from his dome. Smiling with that bright shine of life, reaching toward him with a friendly laugh. "Little Miss."

# Who Do You Trust With Your Life At The Centre?

Sydney's Lab, Night

Miss Parker waited by the slot on the side for her father. Fifteen minutes. Thirty minutes. Forty minutes. Doctor Cox said he promised he texted him to come see her.

"I'm here, Angel," he said as he came closer. "Is there anything I can do?"

*Get me out of here.* She knew that wasn't an option. "Daddy, I want you to make sure it has a different daddy."

Hm. That seemed to upset him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we collect everything from everyone and I'm sure we have Jarod's in that bunch," she said politely for him. "I *know* the Centre wants Jarod, he was the best we've ever had. I know we go for the best. I know it's going to be Jarod's genetic material selected. So, look? I? I want to use someone different 'cause? Sydney is friendly with me. Not that I need that, but, I don't . . ." She put her hand through the slot, hoping her father would take it. He didn't. "I don't want to do any of this, I don't, but I know it's not a choice I get. I'm not stupid." She stretched her hand further. "I have a choice in the father. I don't want Jarod."

"Did Doctor Cox already give you something?" He questioned. "Damn it, he gave you something too strong."

"Look, Daddy? He's trouble," she said. "I'll do everything, but just no to that. Honestly, I don't want--"

"Watch your words, Sweetie," he warned her. "You're being recorded over here. Watched constantly. Think before you speak," he warned her. "Now quit. The Triumvirate decides as a whole but I'll do my best. I don't need him messing with my grandchildren. Now? Medication has you all disoriented. Why don't you go lie down for now, okay? I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay." She tucked her arms back in as the slot closed and the other door opened. He was gone again.

Sydney's Lab, Next Day

“I will start with you soon, Dara,” he said to his other patient he often worked with in there. She went and moved, riding away on her tricycle again as he walked toward the dome. The curtains were pulled. Most likely sleeping. He had taken the liberty of getting her some breakfast from the cafeteria. He moved away to the second dome he was supposed to move into. He put in the code (the only one he was allowed to have) and went in. He closed the door again so the slot would open. He knocked on the side. “Miss Parker? I have some breakfast for you.” He saw just ahead though coming his way was her doctor.

“I can take her food,” he said with certainty.

“I’d really like to give her the food,” Sydney said. “May I see her?”

“As I am here right now? Why not.” He pulled out some kind of badge toward the wall. The second door went up without an actual code put in. He took Sydney’s food from him. “Come on in.”

As Doctor Cox sat the food down and sealed the door again, Sydney took a moment to record around the dome, especially the new parts. There was no giveaway of a light, so he had to trust that it was working. He moved without escort toward the middle where Miss Parker would be. Except she wasn’t there. She was further down, where some new lab equipment had been placed that day. They were already putting her in there?

“Hi, Syd.” She was relaxing in a medical chair. “Doctor Cox Sucker drives me up the wall, woke me up at five this morning to get all my vitals and crap.” She stretched and moved up. “I was thinking about going to bed, but Daphne will be here soon. I know she wants to see this necklace.” She held up the necklace slightly from her neck. “Daddy spent a lot on it, straight from Europe.” She had a tremble, as if a shiver, as she exhaled. Just that action proved she wasn’t taking it all that well. Sydney knew the amount her father spent didn’t matter to her right then. She rubbed her eyes. “Guess what?” She laughed uncharacteristically. “Daddy said I graduated to queen bee. No chases, no leashes, I’m making the boys that bring home the honey.” She laughed oddly then covered it back up. “Sorry, I’m exhausted.”

“As expected.” Doctor Cox came over to her corner. “No worries though, it’s just from the examinations.” He looked toward Sydney. “No pregnancy. Although? Antibiotics.” He looked toward Sydney, as if it were his fault.

“I didn’t prescribe her antibiotics,” Sydney answered.

“Mine. I did it,” she answered Cox back. “I was trying to counter the pill, that’s all.”

Doctor Cox just smiled at her. “Well, no pregnancy so far. Which is good.” He looked toward Sydney. “What is it you wanted?”

“To talk to her,” Sydney said. “We were colleagues and she is right in the middle of my lab. I thought, why not?” Yet? “You want her to get pregnant, so why did you say it wasn’t good now?” That made no sense. “Miss Parker?”

“Because I need a pretender dad or it doesn’t work! I need a carrier of the gene on both sides!” She admitted. “Go, just go! Alright? I’m tired. I’ll be up in a few hours.”

“A pretender father? How?”

“The Centre keeps *everything*, Syd,” she said back.

“Well, you don’t have Jarod’s genetic material?” They didn’t. Right? “You aren’t using Jarod, are you?”

“It’s up for debate. We are just testing health right now,” Doctor Cox said casually.

“I . . . am *trying* to steer Daddy away from that,” she confessed. “I can’t get a no, but there are more than one to choose, most of them dead, and Jarod is just trouble that I don’t-“

Sydney watched Cox grab her mouth forcefully, shining a light inside of it again. *There was no need for that.*

“-fucking asshole, don’t grab me like that!” She yelled with a fury. “Centre Doctor or not, I’ll put you in a cast if you do that again to me Cox Sucker!”

“Jarod is not an option,” Sydney warned Doctor Cox. “Ever! He is the only one who ran away, and managed to outrun the Centre so far. You choose to do something like that, and nothing will turn out well!”

Doctor Cox looked mildly perturbed. “He was the best of all pretenders, it would make sense that he’d be the one.” He grabbed Miss Parker’s arm. “You’re advice and your father’s has been taken into consideration though.”

She pulled her arm away. “Good ‘cause it’s going to be embarrassing to have another doctor of The Centre asking which end to put the piss pan near when they see what’s left of you.”

He yanked her arm back over again. “Nothing meant by the grab. Blood pressure check, Miss Parker. You must learn to calm down. You’ll get better over time with what I’ve given you. Relax and stay still.” He looked to Sydney. “I am going to finish this up and then we’ll be out of here, Miss Parker. We’ll let you get some rest.”

“I know, Syd.” She looked toward him, like she was sorry. “I had Broots go to where the genetic material is kept ‘cause . . . I didn’t want to be a guinea pig.”

“Miss Parker, you are still being watched, Dear,” Cox warned her. “Let’s chalk that up to the relaxing medication okay?”

“And?” Syd came closer. “Miss Parker.”

“I think The Triumvirate has it all, or possibly Doctor Cox. All of it, all the pretenders of years past, not just Jarod.” She looked at her arm. “They moved everything away.”

“There, blood pressure evening out nicely,” Doctor Cox said as he let the air out. “Let’s get you to bed.”

She pushed his hand away. "I can get myself to bed. I don't need anyone to get myself to bed." She got up off the chair.

Sydney stayed behind her as he watched her move to her bed. "Goodnight, Miss Parker. Get some rest."

"Yes, get some rest," Cox agreed. "Come, Sydney, let's go."

Sydney followed out the second door and out the first. Before Doctor Cox went far though, Sydney warned him. "Do not choose Jarod. If you think my Pretender makes trouble now, I'm sure we haven't seen anything."

"You worry too much," Cox said. "After all, she's still young and vital and we do have plenty of pretenders. I doubt we will fill the stable with all one genetic material."

Stable? "Did you just call the dome a stable?"

"Oh, no, no," Cox said again. "She's the stable. She will be a great leader of The Centre in the future," he smiled. "She will just undoubtedly be wearing pregnancy dresses all the time."

"How dare you talk like that about Miss Parker!" Sydney said, unable to control himself briefly.

"What is wrong?" Cox asked. "You could ask her yourself what she assumes will happen. Most likely, some will be pretenders and some will not. She will half her time between being in homes and being in the domes." He smiled. "I can tell, I've dealt with enough patients. She'll be a good mother and a good leader." He pointed to the air as Pink's Fucking Perfect started to play. "See? Already starting to bounce back." He waved. "Good day, Sydney. And, uh? I am afraid as her doctor I feel uncomfortable with you accessing the second door *without* an emergency. This was a special, just to see the environment was okay. Okay? Don't get used to it. Goodnight."

As the day progressed, Sydney did his own work. He waited patiently toward noon when Doctor Cox came back. He already had others behind him, wanting to see her. Broots and Daphne. He grabbed his recorder again. This time when they all went though, the front code didn't work. Sydney tried again.

"Oh dear." Doctor Cox came toward them. "Terribly sorry." He went over and put in a different code Sydney couldn't see. "After some light conversation with the leaders, we've decided you might jeopardize the air flow too much if you visit too often." The door went up. "So the code has been changed."

What? "So if she faces an emergency, I have to get two sets of codes?" That was ridiculous!



“In an emergency, one or two codes won’t make much difference. Especially since I am always *close* to my patient.”

As they went in, the code was replaced with a quick wave from Doctor Cox’s badge again.

Miss Parker was right by the slot, looking like a million bucks. She wore a long sequined dress with the middle showing some of her cleavage. Something like she was on a nice date. Her lipstick was on, her eyes were bright, and her smile so wide. She also still had her father’s necklace on she hadn’t ever taken off so far. “Visitors again? How’s a girl ever to get anything done around here? Afternoon.”

“Miss Parker,” Daphne was brimming. “You’re stunning. Your necklace. Your dress.”

“Aren’t I always?” she pointed out. “So be honest, who’s getting overtime by spending time with the monkey ‘cause you’re out there to catch Jarod, not drink virgin daquiris with me.” She laughed. “That’s a funny word coming from me.”

“You see?” Doctor Cox said to her. “I told you that you would feel much better.” He went over to a corner where a small table had been laid and placed it near the slot hole. “You may be here as long as I am here.” He looked at his watch. “About half an hour.”

Broots, Daphne and Sydney all looked at each other but sat down. They were supposed to go inside the second door to spend time with her.

“Um?” Daphne scooted the closest to the slot area. “Your place is beautiful, Miss Parker.”

“Thanks, Daphne.”

“No problem Miss Parker. Who handles your lunch now?”

“I will get her something afterwards,” Sydney said.

“Last day for that stuff though,” she said crouching down to the ground. “I can order out of any nice place in America. Daddy set it up. As long as I order a day beforehand, I can have anything I want. As long as it fits through the slot. People will be sent out in the private jet just for me. Just to collect.” She looked to Broots. “Did you want something in particular tomorrow?”

“Not really,” Broots said.

“Oh. Daphne?” She asked.

“Oh, I’d love to eat with you tomorrow,” Daphne said. “What can you get?”

“Anything. Name the restaurant, and it gets picked up. Whatever you want,” she said. “No cost to you.”

“Wow.” Daphne smiled so bright. “That’s great. I would love to eat with you inside? If we can?” She looked toward Doctor Cox, waiting for an answer. “Either way. Whatever you feel like eating, Miss Parker. Maybe we should all take a day?”

“Some fine cuisine once a week from places I haven’t eaten in a very long time. That could be wonderful.” Sydney smiled at her, understanding what Daphne was getting at. They were already restricting her to visitors at the slot, it was best to try and make as much time as possible to see her here. Because? Besides Doctor Cox. It would be the last time she was ever touched.

“Oh, Miss Parker?” Daphne gestured to her hand. “I never really saw your ring up close. Could I see it?” Miss Parker stood up from her crouch and put her hand out the slot. Daphne stood up and leaned over, holding her hand. “It’s a beautiful ring. Really matches you.”

“Thanks,” she remarked.

“Yes, I remember it.” Sydney stood up and also touched her hand. “Your mother’s ring. I’d never forget it.” Sydney looked toward Broots.

“I don’t know if I feel comfortable. Ah!” Broots rubbed his arm.

Sydney noticed Daphne making the point to Broots. She understood it too.

“I mean, okay, I guess?” Broots said rubbing his arm. ‘Ow’ he mouthed as he stood up and scooted over to touch her hand. “Yep. Pretty.”

“Thanks.” As they each pulled their hands away, she pulled hers back in.

“Sydney told us this morning that the dads are going to be pretenders,” Daphne spoke again. “I mean, eventually. Dad right now.” She glanced to Miss Parker. “You did try ‘no’, right?”

Miss Parker just started laughing at Daphne enthusiastically. “That’s why I keep you around, Blondie!”

“Easy,” Doctor Cox said from the corner of the table. He had apparently taken the liberty to sit down when no one was looking. “That doesn’t sound like a term of endearment. Slippery slope.”

Sydney looked back toward Miss Parker, waiting for an explanation of that.

“I’m going to be around . . . kids eventually,” she muttered. “So? I need to watch my language carefully. Says Doctor *Cox* of all people.” She laughed at Cox then back toward them. “At least I get plenty of time with myself. It’s good practice. I don’t cuss myself out too much. I don’t think anyhow.”

“Kid or kids?” Sydney broached the subject. “After you have one, are you having more? Will your pretenders stay in a dome, while you move on?”

She stood up straight. “Sydney, really. I f- . . .” She squeezed her hand. “As leader of The Centre, I will have to be up there. However, I can also be down here with them.”

“What if they aren’t pretenders?” Broots asked. “All of them? I mean? Then what? They don’t go into your dome, right? Do they?”

“No.” She sighed breathlessly. She looked out of it. She was heavily medicated. “No, they don’t. If I have a split, then I need to split my time.” She leaned her head against the glass.

“Which is fine,” Daphne said, trying to make her feel better. “Part of the day with some, and part of the day with the others. That’s fair.”

“Ruling The Centre, your father barely gets time to see you,” Sydney reminded her. “Busy, busy, busy. In the whole time I’ve been here since this morning, he’s still neglected to come by. How are you going to handle it?”

“ . . . I’ll find ways. Sydney. Part nannies. I don’t know, you’ll probably be guiding the others.” She closed her eyes and looked like she was falling asleep against the glass.

“Let’s not focus so far in the future,” Doctor Cox warned Sydney. “It’ll stress her out.” He stood up. “I’m needed elsewhere now. I’m going to have to ask you all to come with me.”

“Already?” Daphne looked at her watch. “It hasn’t even been fifteen minutes. You said half an hour.”

“Time is a finicky mistress,” Doctor Cox answered. “Let’s go. I’m sure she’s ready to relax and just watch some TV.”

Miss Parker didn’t reply to that. She just stayed still as they were all hurried out by Doctor Cox.

## Sydney’s Office

Broots studied the ipad, trying to find the next clue to where Jarod went. His heart wasn’t really in it though today.

“Can we get her out?”

Sydney looked up from over his mess and pushed record. “Pardon, Daphne?”

“Miss Parker, can we get her out?” Daphne asked.

“She’s there of her own will,” Broots answered as he kept navigating the ipad.

“She isn’t. We all know that,” Daphne said. “She just doesn’t want to lose her baby and her life to The Centre. Who would? She’s watching her steps. She’s watching every. Single. Step. I couldn’t do it, I’d have messed up by now. She’s so amazing.” She went over to her corner computer. “Broots and I are great with computers. Sydney, you’re great with the mind. Even Cman has expressed his hatred over her being in there. With his skills being pointed the right way, even he’s useful.”

“What do you mean?” Broots looked toward her. “You want us to bust her out? We can’t do that.”

“But we have four people, and some with some decent brains,” Daphne said. “If we could just get her out.”

“Then what?” Sydney asked her. “The Centre will find her, and they will have to chase her down. The same way we chase Jarod.” He turned to look back at his work.

“Well? The thing is, she’s useless to them in that way if she can’t have kids for them,” Daphne said. “We don’t need to hide her forever. If we get her out, then we could get her to a doctor, and they could make sure she never has kids again. Then she could come back. When they ask, she could just say Jarod did it. She hates him anyhow, and if he thinks he’s going to be a father, it would totally work.”

“What? Take away her ability to have kids? Surgery?” Broots looked at her like she was nuts. “What kind of doctor would you trust with Miss Parker like that? I don’t trust any around here.”

“For a last step after a rescue, it would be an interesting solution,” Sydney half agreed. “However, she’s also inside of a dome and within The Centre itself first. If these were small things? It wouldn’t have taken Jarod thirty years to escape.”

“Oh.Yeah.” She nodded. “I just.” She typed on her keyboard. “I *think* I was close to landing her.”

Sydney smiled, knowing what she meant.

“Girl can dream,” Daphne added. “About Miss Parker.”

“C-can we just focus on our work?” Broots said, a little breathless. “It’s a good idea though,” he said to her. “Maybe after she has a couple kids and she’s freed from the domes.”

“If she ever gets freed from the dome,” Daphne uttered.

### Jarod’s Current Apartment

Jarod got back toward the end of the day, dropping off his work. He went straight to the phone he had given Sydney for communication. He had some good news to share with him. After studying what he could find, it would be almost impossible for her to have pretenders. It took two carriers to achieve it. He’d call him right after he watched Sydney’s recordings.

Sydney got a good view of the new work on the dome. *Air breathing tank. Old door is useless. Second dome.* He watched the mechanics of it, moving the environment around as he went. Then he saw her doctor. That smile. *He isn’t what he appears to be.* When Sydney got in, he got a good look at her. She was in his old simulation room, now an entire doctor’s

office, complete with some curtains. She greeted Sydney, trying to pull off a 'this is fine' kind of attitude. She held up a necklace to him and said her Daddy bought it for her. Yet, she wasn't bragging. *That's half of a hundred thousand dollars.* Yeah, Mister Parker already knew the hell she was in for, and she knew that was what the gift had been for her too. *Keeps it close for support from Daddy.*

"Guess what?" She laughed uncharacteristically on the recording. "Daddy said I graduated to queen bee. No chases, no leashes, I'm making the boys that bring home the honey." She laughed oddly then covered it back up. "Sorry, I'm exhausted."

*More than exhausted.* Soon, Doctor Cox confronted Sydney about some antibiotics and Miss Parker confessed to taking them to counter the pill. Then? Her doctor said that was good. When Sydney asked Miss Parker more about it, that's when the bomb dropped.

His 'good news' for Sydney just got wrecked. They had carriers.

His eyes were transfixed as she said they were using a pretender father and that The Centre collected everything. Sydney was arguing with Doctor Cox about Jarod. But that look? *Me. Those bastards, they plan on using me.* "I can't, I can't." He couldn't let that happen. Him freed and . . . he kept watching it like a train wreck. Miss Parker was giving reasons to keep it from being him, but the doctor just yanked on her mouth, opening it like he was examining it. *Oh, I do not like you.* At least that old Miss Parker came out and let him have it. Which was good. Someone who deserved her bitchiness for once.

Then he found out she had already been trying to prevent everything too, sending Broots to where it should have been. *All missing.* They had some minimal conversation, but when Doctor Cox said stable? He heard the anger in Sydney's voice, and then Cox's warning. "I knew that was coming." Gaining access into the dome was going to be heavily restricted.

The next part was around lunchtime. There was a gigantic mess about codes and all they could do was relax beside the slot next to her. Miss Parker came out in a fabulous dress and an elevated friendly mood. Covering up how she was feeling inside. Daphne and Sydney agreed eating with her was a great idea, while Broots didn't quite get the hint. Daphne found an excuse to get Miss Parker to put out her hand and all three of them showed her support. "You did make friends, Miss Parker." Good for her. Then, they were ushered out after fifteen minutes. Along with that, she was already having to change her language and she was clearly medicated, which accounted for the elevated mood.

There was a brief recording where Daphne mentioned them breaking her out. At least the heart was in the right place. Fixing her so she couldn't have children. He already knew that idea. He'd have to completely make sure nothing could be collected from her either. Then at the end, she understood why it didn't matter.

They were never letting her out of that dome.

He expected to see one more. He texted Sydney. He should have been saying goodnight before the end of the day. He always did to him. Even if it looked insignificant, everything was significant now. No answer. He had seen the last time Sydney visited he had a headset

that Mister Parker probably had on him. No excuse. Meaning? He picked up the phone and called him. *You better answer, Sydney!*

“Sydney.” His voice was weak and dull.

“Send it,” Jarod said as he hung up quickly. He wasn’t messing around, no matter how bad it was, he wanted to know. Finally he watched the delivery hit his phone and he watched the recording.

Sydney had went up to say goodnight to Miss Parker but Mister Cox simply came out. Sydney asked about saying goodnight at least at the first door, but he insisted she needed rest. He walked away and then? He turned and smiled at Sydney.

“By the way? Has Jarod ever tried to be a horse jockey?” Doctor Cox asked.

“A horse jockey?” Sydney asked in confusion. “No, he’s too large I believe for that profession.”

“Oh not true.” He chuckled. “Your pretender’s horse enters the race tomorrow morning. Good luck to him. Oh, and don’t forget to remind your little Chameleon?” He turned back around. “There are several months of military simulations sitting around needing done. Any time he’s ready, The Centre is ready to *deal*.” He just clicked his tongue and walked along. “Although, by the time he deals, the race *might* have finished. Goodnight, Sydney. Pleasant dreams.”

Jarod just looked at the table he had thrown and the mess he’d caused in the room. It was thrashed. He had lost control for a second, realizing what was happening. Good old fashioned blackmail with a limited amount of time even he couldn’t tackle. “I can’t do them.” He paced across the room. “I can’t do them!” But what if they did get Miss Parker pregnant? That was the Centre’s future, but their present? It was him. They wanted him! He picked a chair up off the ground and sat down in it in a slump. *Think*. How could she get away? Then he’d also have to find a way to hide her. *Surgery*. Option. It was all he had. But now? Doctor Cox didn’t look or sound like he’d been kidding. It was their goal after all.

“What else?” What else? He drew on everything he could think of that he heard. Everything. The smallest thing, but the only thing he could hang onto for his particular situation.

*“But we have four people, and some with some decent brains,” Daphne said. “If we could just get her out.”*

“Four people.” Wait. “Four people that work *inside* The Centre.” He had it. Partly. He could do those sims but with four people in The Centre, their intelligence combined? He was able to easily get out with just minimal help from Centre staff. What could four brilliant people in

The Centre who were always sent to chase him down do? “They could make sure those sims never left or got sold.” *I worked alone when I left. If I had four people I could trust to delegate in there.*

Part of the answer was found, as distasteful as it had been. If he did those simulations, they would stop bothering Miss Parker. But then, how would they get out? Especially.

If there was a little one involved. *No, I have to make it before then!* “Tomorrow morning though?” He held his head. “If I take too long, the race might have finished.” He grabbed at his head.

Tomorrow Morning.

No plan to get out.

On average 20% succession rate, but those still weren’t odds he wanted to mess with.

These people who could help were for Miss Parker. Not him. *I don’t have time to think about this!* Two choices.

Two.

Choice one. Come up with a great plan to get in and get out and get her taken care of. The chance of that happening soon, slim. The chance of that happening by tomorrow morning? Almost non-existent. It wasn’t a guaranteed positive, but any chance was too much of a chance, especially with The Centre involved. This was without the added variable of Miss Parker never wanting to come with him in the first place.

Choice two. Go for it, and work it out as he went. It was not a favorite of Jarod’s, he meticulously planned his work out so that he always had a way out. A back up plan. Kept his footing ahead of The Centre to never get snagged. Sydney had taught him that, he was always several steps ahead. Always. Choice two left him open, something he didn’t want. He never wanted that again.

“Look, you’ve got two choices, Jarod. Two!” he reasoned with himself. “One? Might make you a father. Two? Might trap you forever.” Once anything involving pregnancy and beyond got involved, it would be that much harder. Two meant trust. Two meant no back up plan. Two meant there was no guarantee how long he would be in there. But? “Two means no more innocent children getting involved.” No simulations for a new pretender. No dome to become a home to a pretender that could never even feel the light of day once on its body.

Jarod picked up his phone and called Sydney. “Who do *you* trust with your life at The Centre?”

# Dome Sweet Dome

Dome: Dome Mini Home

Miss Parker woke up, hearing some loud sounds by her door. *Now what?* She got up, got a little extra dressed and proceeded toward her door. Doctor Cox was eerily there, along with workers on either side. “What the hell is this? Do you know what time it is?”

“Ah, Miss Parker, I didn’t mean to wake you up,” Cox said happily. “We are simply installing the last new arrangements for you. Very sorry?”

She looked toward her slot. “Hey, what the hell is that?” She went over toward her new and improved fuckover job thing. She banged on it, making the worker on the other side take notice of her. “You better give me your name, right now!”

“Now, now,” Doctor Cox informed. “They are simply finishing the dome. This last part makes things safer and more convenient. That’s all.”

This was construction. *Cox knocked me out, I couldn’t hear shit for hours I bet.* Miss Parker gestured to the slot. “I haven’t seen this since I last dropped off books as a child. What is this shit?” She looked downward. Her small hole where Daphne, Sydney and Broots touched her hand was now blocked. On the other side was a container, made to fit it exactly.

“Your food or objects are placed right there,” Doctor Cox said as he gestured to the glass box outside. “A button was put outside. They push it and in it comes. There is even an automatic retrieval function, it goes right back out after five minutes. Long enough to get any food or object that was sent in. No air wasted. You see, The Centre will be doing this for many years. Best to keep the air flow from escaping as much as possible, to curb on the expense.”

“What?” She put her hand against the slot. No more outside air at all. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Well, you came into the dome at a decent time to prove your rededication to The Centre,” Cox said. “It wasn’t fully prepared yet. However, isn’t this nice? Now Sydney, your father, and the dearest friends you name, that are employed within The Centre, can all have the code to the first dome. To drop off something. Isn’t that charming? Food or gifts or a small drink when you’re thirsty. Baby gifts as the time gets closer. Seems to work out quite fine. Let’s test it, shall we?” He addressed the worker to put a small present in the box. He did so and he pushed the button. In it went, and it came out directly in front of her. “There you go.”

She tried to feel around the edges instead of taking the box.

“I’m afraid just like your old memories of a library dropoff, it cannot be removed.” He smiled. “Funny. I always imagined these more for the advanced inmates in prison. Do you remember watching Silence of the Lambs, that part in prison? Yes, that’s what I always



envision with these sort of things. However, the library dropoff box is much cuter. Feels like a better association with it all.”

Hate. “I sooo hate you,” she warned him. “You don’t want to get on my bad side. You gotta job to do, you do it, but don’t egg me on like that!” Damn. Not that it meant much, but just being able to stick out her hand. Gone. She really was now completely sealed off from the world. And to make things worse?

“Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps I’ll get on your good side again,” he joked. “After all, you don’t want to be in here three years before the countdown even begins.”

“All of you and your contract shit.” He just had to rub it in. He liked her mad. “This is ridiculous!” She yelled at him. “Couldn’t you just put holes up high or something instead of this whole damn thing?”

“Even with no holes, the Pretender Jarod still escaped,” Cox reminded her. “Never underestimate those cute little pretenders of yours in the future. Now, would you like me to check your vitals now or later?”

## Broots Home

Broots checked on his daughter one more time and waited. Why his house? Really? Just because he didn’t look like he was the one who’d cause trouble. Daphne’s quote there. Well, he could. He could cause trouble. *Shoot, Jarod!*

Jarod was at his window, spotting him. He came early. Made sense after he got the call from Sydney super early. Jarod wanted to get into The Centre almost as soon as possible. He was no longer chasing Jarod. Jarod had chased him. What a weird feeling. He went to his back door and opened up. Jarod, the incredibly intelligent and hardest to catch man probably in the world, strolled right on through.

He just stood there. Of course, he wasn’t in a good mood. Jarod never seemed to do anything without a back up plan. He moved around the house, probably inspecting it. Broots just waited until he saw him heading toward his daughter’s room. “N-not there,” he warned him. Jarod looked back at him suspiciously. “M-my daughter’s sleeping.”

“Right.” He seemed to accept that and just waited. He took a seat on the couch. With him, he had a book bag and a duffel bag. Broots doubted either had his DSA’s. He must have hid them for now. What was inside the bags though? He didn’t know really what to say. This wasn’t a typical man to talk to, nor to mess with in his home. He was one of the reasons that Jarod couldn’t ever have a real life. Anyone else would be angry as hell and he wasn’t far from Debbie’s room. The only reason Broots didn’t fuss too much was because he knew the Pretender was in a tough spot, and he doubted Jarod had enough wiggle room this time to

move out of that spot. Not in less than twenty four hours. He found out the truth at night, and had to get to The Centre by morning.

Although? Even that could be a cheap trick. Broots had seen the recording Sydney sent Jarod. Miss Parker's doctor might be just luring Jarod in. Or? He had a private medical room in there. He could have already done it. Anything was possible. Jarod's best chance of stopping anything was just to get there.

He heard another knock on his back door and went to look. Oh good, Sydney! He was the one who could talk to Jarod. He opened up the door and gestured to the couch. "Be careful, my daughter's sleeping nearby."

Sydney went straight to Jarod, completely ignoring Broots. "You have no backup plan, no research of any optional ways, and this is too fast. This is everything I've always taught you *not* to do, you haven't even had time to survey the situation!"

"And if I wait?" Jarod said, immediately jumping into the conversation. "The Centre starts getting little children to make suffer in there!"

"You are too emotional, you will make mistakes when you get emotional!" This time Sydney wasn't backing down. "You are better off out here than in there!"

"You can't tell me what I can and can't do anymore, Sydney! What I learn about, I choose. What I do, I choose and-!"

*Oh no.* Broots watched Debbie come out. She was confused, staring at Jarod and Sydney who both had clammed up once they saw her. "Sweetie, sorry." He went toward her door and bent down to her. "Late business. I'm sorry about that."

"Yelling," she said to her dad.

"I know, I know. Don't worry about it. Let's go back to bed, huh?" He took her back into her room. Sure, his house was the perfect house. He tucked her back in and gave her a kiss goodnight. He went back outward and closed the door.

"Sorry," Sydney apologized to him.

"Yeah." Jarod sounded a little funny. "That's Debbie."

Well, of course he knew her name. "Yeah."

"I didn't mean to argue so loud." The anger Jarod had before at Sydney seemed to ebb away. He looked toward him. "I can't, Sydney. I can't risk the lives of future children by The Centre. Whether they are mine or not." He rubbed his hands together. "It's not about my freedom right now. Whether it's really my genetic material or another past pretender, it's the same result. Innocent children being locked up for life. Not to mention." He crossed his arms. "I can't leave her in there like that."

"I know," Sydney agreed. "Jarod, you are brilliant, but if you are within The Centre, what you can do will be limited. This is a half plan at best. Yes, perhaps the doctor isn't lying, but

even he must know the chances. The pill could still be going through her, I don't know what kind it is, and even getting disrupted by his methods is no guarantee. The chances of anything happening is weak."

"Maybe, but does it matter? Chances are weak right now, that's great. But, we already know it's going to happen. She's in there, stuck with *him* only knowing the password to even touch her hand." Jarod was clearly angry, but he kept his voice lower. "All it did was put it in perspective, Sydney. How can I enjoy *my* freedom, when I know The Centre is creating future pretenders and taking theirs? I have to stop it before it starts."

Broots heard the last knock of the night. He went to the door and saw Daphne. She came in and went to the same room. Everyone was gathered that Sydney trusted.

Jarod looked at each of them. "Guilt, will always hold you to my side," he said plainly to Sydney. He looked to Broots. "You have a little girl in this mess. A very precious little girl. You have to know who to side with at The Centre. Lose the trust of certain people, and it becomes dangerous. Getting caught isn't something you can risk either, so you *won't*." He looked toward Daphne. "You're in love with Miss Parker, or at least you believe you are. You were the one who came up with the notion of working together in the first place because it burns you knowing someone is taking advantage of someone you love." He seemed to lean in slightly. "You aren't quite what you appear to be to others. You are more like Miss Parker than you want to let on." Then, Jarod looked at Broots. "You are infatuated with Parker too, but you're also half scared she'd kill you so you hang back more."

"Wow, he's good," Broots said looking to Sydney. "Is . . . is this it?"

"These are the only ones I would trust at The Centre," Sydney said to Jarod. "Cornelius could get us farther in whatever you wish, but I do not trust him at all. He should only be used if absolutely necessary."

"A team of three plus me." It should work. Each of them seemed to display what he got from the recordings. They each had something to lose. They each wanted to protect her, if they couldn't get her out. "I am going to let The Centre capture me, but I won't be trying to find a way to escape for me. I am going to need help to figure out how to get us both out." He held his hands together. "It's going to take awhile, and if a threat this big wasn't over my head, Sydney's right. There's no way I would take this action." He sat himself back up again. "While I am in there, I have to do the sims. As long as I make them happy, Miss Parker will be fine. However? I can't risk anyone else getting hurt by what I come up with. Understand?" He stood up and looked at all three of them closely. "After the sims are done, they can *never* be used or sold by anyone. Can you get that done?"

"I can't," Sydney admitted. "Broots?"

"Into the computer sims and selling?" Broots didn't know if he could answer that. "Yes and no. I mean, I can bury them, but if I delete them, The Centre will catch it. I don't have access to selling either. It's not my area in The Centre. You need way more advanced security to get through there. Like Miss Parker level security."

“I don’t either, but I do have access to labels and tags. I could watch where they are buried,” Daphne said, “and make sure they can’t get tagged or sold. I’ve got access to that. If they are untagged, nobody can find them without the exact identification. Can you scrape the identification before you send it down, Broots?”

“Scrape the numbers? No, that’s hardwired. But I could push a small reset, making it look like it happened on the date before. The computer would get confused, and the identification number would get screwed up. You know? Kind of like my friend Cassie who messes with her phone for a couple more lives in an app game.”

“It’d only be the date numbers but they are involved in the identification for it.” Daphne shrugged. “It could work. It’s just that?” She looked at Jarod. “How are we supposed to communicate plans? I know Mister Parker says the middle isn’t bugged, but I don’t believe that.”

“It’ll be easy from me to you. There’s only one way for me to her,” Jarod said. He’d thought about it for the two hours it took to get there. Deceiving cameras. Speaking. Not looking suspicious. They had DSA recording, all around, even trying to just whisper in a corner with moving lips could get detected. Focus on that area, and they would have the entire conversation. “It’s not going to be easy. Until she remembers something, I can’t do anything.”

“Why?” Daphne pushed. “What is it?”

When Jarod told her what it had been, he wasn’t surprised by her reaction at all. None of theirs.

“Miss Parker hates you, and she’s already in hell, she’ll never do that!” Daphne yelled at him. “No way, she won’t go for that cooperation. You need to think of a different way.”

“C-can we please not yell? My daughter’s got school tomorrow,” Broots said to her.

Daphne rolled her eyes but Jarod respected that. He kept his voice low, he had no intention of yelling and scaring the child again. “There is no other way. It’s the best way to know, it’s the best way to talk unseen, it serves purposes you don’t need to understand, and I’m not discussing this anymore. Wasting time,” he insisted. Still, he noticed their concern. “I know how delicate she is right now. I do.”

“Oh yeah?” Daphne’s fire was starting to show slightly. “Do you really? A slit on her wrist would end all the torture and she knows it! No babies without her. No years living in that dome! So how will she react when we just throw you of all people in there with her without any kind of plan except that?!”

Jarod stood up and pointed to the room behind him. “He already warned you, his daughter has school. Keep your voice down.” *She is hiding something.* She knew something Sydney nor Broots knew. How big was that something? *It should have just been Broots and Sydney. No, but, I can't risk this now! Sydney trusts her. I have to trust her. How else can I save my simulations?*

“Jarod will be very careful,” Sydney said to Daphne. “I *know* that he will be.” He sighed, still not believing it was a good idea.

“Nothing will be easy at first,” Jarod admitted, “but Miss Parker is a smart woman. Like it or not? If I’m there, doing what they ask of me? She’s safe, and she’ll know it. We’ll get past things.”

“Safe.” Broots looked toward Daphne. “She’ll be safe.”

“I doubt The Centre would be as gentle as last time,” Sydney warned him. “However, we do have one more ally. One that needs to remain in the dark. He will be watching your back, but in a limited capacity. He can’t overstep The Triumvirate. Do you know who I speak of?”

Jarod waited a few seconds to answer. “Mister Parker.”

“He doesn’t want his daughter in there either. He wanted her ruling The Centre after him. Your food, your environment, everything could be different this time. He will want to keep you. Not for The Centre, but to keep *her* safe,” Sydney said. “Because? She is still very tempting, Jarod. She is almost in her mid-thirties, and The Triumvirate have shown great joy in discovering the genes her father hid from them. Whether she was pretender material or not in the end, she carries it within. Like a mountain of treasure. When they had the other females, too little was known for the time and advancement was not as high. As you like learning new phrases? She isn’t just a diamond in the rough. She is the only diamond left in the entire mountain range itself.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Jarod replied. “I get that. Now? Let’s all go for a small ride to The Centre.”

Broots looked at his watch. “It’s only 2:00.”

“Oh, I guarantee someone will be up and waiting for me,” Jarod responded. He picked up both his bags. “Let’s go.”

Sydney, Daphne and Jarod all headed out the door. Daphne gestured to Broots, but he declined.

“We have to take in Jarod,” Daphne said. “Jarod, Broots.”

“It’s 2:00. She’s sleeping,” Broots replied. “Sorry. I’ll be in first thing.”

“Be careful with my bags,” Jarod said handing them to Sydney. “Now, Daphne, I’m assuming you have a pair of cuffs for me?”

Sydney’s Lab

“No fuss, no muss.” Doctor Cox was waiting outside the dome, beside the old door. “Nice to meet you.”

“Wish I could say the same,” Jarod said, looking at his old dome. A mini-home inside a dome. “Look at that? All it needed was a woman’s touch.” He watched as Mister Parker came in. “You better seriously consider your actions from this day forth. I’ll do your damn simulations, but don’t push me.” He didn’t answer back. Sydney was right, Mister Parker did understand the reason Jarod was there. “Don’t go far, I still have requests.” Yep, no aggravation in him at all.

“To the other side. This door is of no use, it’s been turned into a wall.” Doctor Cox led Jarod who was watched by Sydney, Daphne and some sweepers over to the second dome. “Oh, and before I forget?” He handed Sydney and Daphne slips of paper. “You are friends. She wants you to be able to open this door. Isn’t that nice?”

Nah, that looked suspicious. Then as Jarod looked through it, he could see why it looked suspicious. “This is just a decoration dome.”

“It keeps people who aren’t trusted away from giving her anything,” Cox replied. “Safety measurement.”

“She can’t even touch my hand anymore,” Daphne spoke out of term. “She can’t touch anyone.”

“Oh, that’s not true,” the doctor smiled. “I am with her,” he said as he opened the real door to the dome.

Jarod’s bed was now gone, giving enough room to walk through with ease. *Dome sweet dome. How I did not miss you.* Last time he put himself in this predicament, he knew exactly what he was doing and he already knew he’d be out in twenty eight hours. Now? This would be home for awhile.

“You may take your bags,” Mister Parker said to him as he undid the cuffs.

Jarod took the bags they left by the door. He glanced toward Cox, but his hands were too far to see on the other side. He wasn’t using the code on his badge. He watched them all leave out the first door. He left down passed where his old bed used to be, into arriving where he needed to be. He set his bags down and saw her on the bed. He moved over to examine her slightly, but she seemed okay. Just sleeping. A wave of calmness invaded him he wasn’t ready for. *You’ll be fine, Little Miss, I promise.* Although he was stuck in The Centre with no escape plan, he felt such relief seeing her okay.

Miss Parker moaned as she sensed her doctor bugging her again. That ass had no sense of time. She groaned as he checked her arms again. “Leave me alone you stupid Doctor Cox Sucker.” She pulled her arm away. “Just because you got a degree in your Cox sucking

doesn't mean you can come over this early!" Then she noticed he hadn't gripped her arm half as hard as usual. "Why are you slack?" she complained. "Did you numb me again?" She opened her eyes and for a moment, was relieved to see it wasn't the doctor. She'd already dealt with him. But then she realized? "Fucking Jarod?!"

She leaped off the bed and ran for some kind of weapon.

"I'm caught," he said as she ran toward the medical lab. "Doesn't really do any good to run away in a dome."

What could she pull out as a weapon? Doctor Cox Sucker usually didn't leave much behind.

"I can't get out," Jarod said as he showed up by the front of the room. "Really."

"Don't you fucking tease me, you didn't get caught this soon again!" She stayed at a distance, deciding how to approach him. He wasn't running. He looked calm. There wasn't really a door to protect, everything had codes and the main door to them all went up like a wall.

"I didn't," he answered. "I came straight up to The Centre with Sydney, Broots and Daphne," he admitted. "To get locked up to do the military simulations."

What? "Sure, and I'm a nun. You'd *never*."

"I heard you were trying to have a baby," he said.

"What business is that of yours?" Not this right now. "I'm the next leader to The Centre, I'm in my . . . I'm a decent age for motherhood," she settled on. "Next logical step."

"Hey? You want to have a kid, more power to you," he said. "If you were going to be a nice mom that kept them in a home instead of a dome."

"If it's normal, it will be," she said back. "If it's not, then it needs the correct environment to be in."

"Fat chance of that when you are using genetic material of pretenders. Including *mine*," he said darkly.

Aw, damn! "It was Sydney wasn't it? I knew it! It doesn't mean that anything was going to be fucking yours! There's been more than one pretender The Centre has dealt with and most of those are dead," she seethed. *What am I supposed to do here?!* Hell, she was probably imprisoning kids to him. Was he there to try and mess with her like he did to those in his pretends? Was he there to kidnap her? The hell was he wanting to accomplish?

"It didn't mean that anything *wasn't* going to be mine either," he said, using her own phrase against her.

Fuck this. "I'm not even hunting you anymore, couldn't you have left me alone? I already requested not using you because you'd just go and do this shit." She stepped back. *I'm not his hunter. I probably can't even injure him, The Centre needs him.*

“I’m not here to cause trouble. I know, even outside this dome, you can’t get away anymore. You betray them and they would catch you, get what they need and then dump your body never to be seen again.”

Ooh. “I’m a Parker, they wouldn’t do that to me, and I would never abandon my duty. I am here for the good of The Centre. I am here for them.”

“You aren’t living in this dome against your own will?” Jarod asked her. “Somehow, I doubt even you really believe that.”

“Okay, I’m a little early,” she admitted. “Which is your fuckin’ fault too! Couldn’t you have stayed in place for 48 hours! I had to prove my loyalty!”

“Maybe I could have, if you had told me the truth,” he said. “You didn’t share anything.”

“You were supposed to be caught by The Centre, of course I didn’t share anything.”

“Look? This whole thing ends right now,” he told her. “Whether your head is warped enough to believe your new family is better in a dome, or whether you are putting on a pretty face for the camera. It doesn’t matter. It’s over. As long as I give them their sims, they don’t touch you. That’s the deal.”

What? “Are you kidding? What are you, Chameleon contraceptive?” Yeah, that look.

“It’s true, Angel.”

*Daddy?* She looked on the side and saw her father. *Oh, great. Yeah.* Daphne, Sydney, her father, Cox Sucker, and about ten sweepers. Staring at her in her pajamas. *Wonderful.*

“Angel, your part is done for now.” Her father came over closer to the outside of the dome. “As long as we have Jarod, nothing is going to happen. Since he doesn’t know who or what will be used, it makes sense he’s there to stay for awhile. Listen to him and be nice. Daddy’s orders.”

Nice? Now she was ordered to be nice to Jarod? Listen to Jarod? *My brain cannot take much more.*

“Why were you numbing her?” Jarod asked, this time talking to Doctor Cox. “Cox.”

“Ah.” Doctor Cox just wore his creepy ass smile again. “She doesn’t always cooperate well. She was learning though.”

“I guess she was,” Jarod said. Yet, that small lilt in his voice. She knew that lilt. “Have to make sure she’s making a good impression for The Triumvirate and The Centre, don’t we, Doctor Cox Sucker?”

Cox smile faded.

“Let’s not focus on that,” her Daddy said, not standing up for the doctor.



In fact, that look he actually gave Cox. Oh, gaw! *Jarod really is here to protect me from getting pregnant? I mean, prevent me? I don't even know the phrase anymore.* The Centre wanted her pregnant. Her Daddy didn't want her pregnant but personal, individual things didn't change the focus of The Centre. They always had the same goals. The Centre and Daddy. But? Her father's expression. He looked so relieved. In fact, so did Daphne and Sydney. *Do I get mad that he's foiling The Centre's best chance for growth or happy that Daddy is happy?*

"While her cognitive wheels are clearly spinning to make sense of things," Jarod said outwardly to her father, "I'll meet you on the other side. It's time for demands, and this time, it's going to be much more."

## What's With The Hand?

Miss Parker walked behind him slowly, still debating on what she should do. He took his bags over to the slotted area on the side and looked out. He gestured toward Mister Parker.

“This open area over here you are in?” Jarod asked them, gesturing to it all “This is my new sim lab area.” He watched as Zane showed up, with lap tops.

“Nothing can be approved of Centre property, without everyone’s approval.” Zane’s own sweeper had pushed one of Sydney’s tables over and he laid out the laptops.

They were ready this time. Daddy looked slightly disturbed. He wouldn’t be able to throw around as much power.

“As I was saying,” Jarod said. “I want the area you are standing in to be my sim lab.” Jarod reached in the book bag he had heaved around and pulled out something. Miss Parker barely saw it from her view in the back of him. “It’s my new 3d simulator. Travel size. Does everything the original does, including factoring in the smells. I created it for my own purposes. For simulations I wanted to run.” He nodded to the emptiness ahead of him. “That area is perfect. Don’t give me that air excuse either, it’s clear from the beginning that was *nothing* but decoration, a false door to keep her sealed from anyone who finds their way into Sydney’s lab.” He put his 3d simulator back away and waited.

Miss Parker watched her Daddy, Zane and the laptop Triumvirate team discuss it.

Daddy eventually nodded. “The sims will have to take place when Doctor Cox is here. He is the one responsible for taking you in and out. There will also be extra sweepers on the perimeter to make sure you don’t get away.”

“That sounds homey,” Jarod said with sarcasm. “Now? I have something special I need hooked up too.” He opened his duffel bag. “It’s a simulator too, but the fun kind.” Jarod held up something she didn’t recognize right away. “See? I don’t need a human baby, *this* is my baby. It’s called a PS4.”

*You’ve got to be kidding.* She rolled her eyes. Yep, there were some interesting faces out in that crowd.

Jarod of course didn’t give a shit. “It plays Blu-Ray too. I love it. Oh, and music. Pretty sure Parker and I don’t quite have the same taste. I have some CD’s but I don’t get to carry too much, and I can’t just let you guys have *my* digital accounts. So I need new digital accounts. Call them Centre accounts. I have 142 CD’s alone I need to rebuy, let alone all my games. Oh and yes, I know someone will watch my online activity over everything and *I don’t care.*” He shrugged. “You watch everything else.” He put his PS4 back away while they deliberated.

But? Daddy stepped up. “I will get you personal accounts for your digital activities. They won’t be Centre approved, but they’ll have the money you need.”

“Good,” Jarod said. “Also, I want Sydney authorized to make any online tangible purchases I need or want and deliver them straight to me.”

“Fine. Same kind of account, access given to Sydney,” her Daddy agreed again.

Jarod looked toward Doctor Cox. “Call me crazy but I don’t really trust you at all, Doctor Cox Sucker, nor do I need to. My surgical and medical skills triumph even yours. You’ve been reduced to the door navigator.” He looked back toward Daddy. “I want access to any other medical supplies I might need if I need them because I’ll handle Miss Parker and myself should there be an emergency. I like the set up where we can pick anywhere we want to eat in America though, that’s pretty helpful. We should keep that going. I have a lot of places on my list I’ve always wanted to try, or once tried and always wanted to go back to. But, you know, getting hunted meant that could never happen.”

Oh yeah, Jarod had heavy requests. Still, she knew her Daddy. There wasn’t a sheen of anger in his eyes. The Triumvirate would talk it out, but Daddy kept putting his own self and his own money on the line for Jarod.

“The new set up with the dividers and the curtains and the TV set and everything?” Jarod continued. “That’s fantastic. Don’t touch a thing of it. Don’t give me a line about keeping it all sterilized because I’m not working in there. I am working where you stand. Sydney and her other friends can come over too. Inside. It’s nice to have company. That’s what *normal* people do who haven’t lived in domes all their life. Have company, and not for fifteen minutes at a time. Doctor Cox Sucker can go ahead and have them come in at the beginning, and come back later to let them out.”

The Triumvirate though? *Damn*. They weren’t agreeing on that one.

“They have the access codes to reach the area to give her things. A table can be set up in the dome, approximately the same height as the outside table. It’ll feel like one table.” Her Daddy was trying.

“I really doubt it’ll feel like one table,” Jarod said sourly. “Can’t even get half an hour outside, in fresh air, can we?”

“The air is very good in there,” Daddy said.

“Generated, created air isn’t the same as the air outside,” Jarod still complained. “It isn’t the air of freedom.”

“You get to do your sims over here, during that time, *you’ll* get this air,” her Daddy tried to reason with him. “We’ll leave the side of the dome open. Get a plexiglass wall, removable, right here. Mostly sealed up but air will come through. As long as your being watched it should be fine.”

“We haven’t discussed that,” Zane warned him.

“Just an extra wall, and extra sweepers. He’ll get the outside air he wants!” Her Daddy fought back with his voice to Zane.

"You gotta admit, it's funny we all call the same air, inside this same room, in the depths of The Centre. Outside air. Free air. Fresh air." He shrugged. "Nothing to that, just an observation."

"Fine," Zane agreed. He got the okay's from the Triumvirate leaders. "Only him though."

"I guess I'm just so special," Jarod said looking to Mister Parker. "Boy, is your daughter in a jam. Can't even get her a minute of outside air, can you? Did you see it coming? The day you'd lose control of your own daughter. In your own company."

"I have not lost control!" Daddy warned him. "The Centre and The Triumvirate work together."

"Sure, Mister Parker," Jarod said without any friendliness. "You keep telling yourself that. By the way? You can leave the double bed of Little Miss, and make sure you leave us our privacy in the middle of everything like before. That's it."

*Little Miss, right in front of everyone?! Still, Daddy ordered her to be nice. She. Had to be nice. To Jarod. Who tortured her, who she hated, but? Was staying so he didn't become a dad. At least so far. He was probably planning on diving back out soon once he made sure that didn't happen. He walked up to get in here. He wouldn't keep me with him to run, he'd obviously know I'd shoot, stab or maim him in some way. What could he be doing? Is he trying to find all the pretender material to destroy it? Does he have the gall to make it so I can't have kids?* That abhorred her and pleased her at the same time. The Centre wanted growth. They were happy with Jarod though inhibiting the growth as long as he was there. Daddy was happier. Well, Daddy had been happy.

Jarod didn't enhance it with a look. He didn't lean hard on any words. He didn't even add anything else to it. Like it was a simple request. *I know he's the reason. I know he's the one. He took everything from me, my whole family, and now I am protecting his family and he knows it!*

Mister Parker stared at him. Jarod just smiled. No extra emphasis. No explanation. Everything made sense including the privacy. Except for that little nickname which would turn around and around in his head.

Little Miss. LM Parker. A name no one openly called her in over a decade. Her loving nickname given to her by her mother. The words he used to try and calm her down when they didn't bicker or he was running for his life. Not to mention? Since her father ordered Miss Parker to be nice to him, she wasn't even going to argue over it.

Jarod waited to get the nod for that one. Simplest request of everything else. But knowing, to Mister Parker, that was the hardest nod. Letting someone call her that again. *Like nails on a chalkboard, you are screaming. Get used to it. It's just beginning.* Because if he was stuck there at The Centre guarding the family of the man who destroyed his? He would make it hurt. Mister Parker got it too, as their eyes locked tight.

Mister Parker snorted once. "Fine. Fine!" He sighed. "I don't have a choice."

"No," Jarod agreed. "You don't."

Miss Parker sat in bed, biting her fist. What the hell now? How could she guarantee he wasn't going to be a dad so he would get out? Life was tough enough right now. She didn't need mysteries about her mom, about The Centre, or anything else Jarod wanted to complain about. And around 3:00 in the morning. Not the time to deal with Jarod's shit. *I can't kill him. The Centre needs him. It shouldn't be for long. He knows how to bail.* He was probably doing another in and out thing. Probably had someone locating his genetic material and getting it out. If she were lucky (or unlucky?) maybe he would get the other pretenders genetic material too. She had to have good thoughts about something though. Because of all things Daddy could have asked of her? Being nice to Jarod would be up there with handling her first kill. "I know you paid off the cafeteria cook and security guard last time to get out."

"I didn't pay them off," Jarod answered, looking like he was trying to creep into her bed. "I helped them with something. It's called favors and trust."

"It's called nothing, I had to take them out at the T-board meeting afterward." It wasn't being mean. Just getting things out of the way.

"What do you mean take them out? What's a T-board?" Jarod asked.

"Torture board. Where traitors are called in for questioning. They even pulled Broots in that lineup." She tried to lean back more. "He still goes home to his daughter."

Hm. He seemed to be thinking about that one for too long. Nope, that look, it just hit. "You killed them?"

"I had to kill two, I had two bullets, and I wasn't killing Broots."

He didn't answer at first.

"So damn lucky I didn't have three bullets." Her look didn't get any easier against him.

"Oh." He got it now. "Broots afterwards?"

"Memory completely wiped," she said.

"You trusted him again. According to your own words, you sent him out on a search." He moved closer to the bed.

Mmph. "What'd you do, bug the place?"

"No, I bugged Sydney, his stuff is easy to get to." He was making great strides now. "Which I'm glad. According to your Doctor Cox? I was up next, for this morning." He made it beside her bed. "I got that message late last night. It's three in the morning."

A few hours to come up with a plan? *Wait. No.* “Are you kidding me?”

“Nah. We are roomies for awhile this time. No joke.” He sat on the bed. “That’s why your dad ordered you to be nice to me. It’s also why I’m getting my own personal accounts, going to get a lab set up out there, and got that doctor out of here. This isn’t a few days or a few weeks. I have no back up plan at all. So? You’re going to have to share your bed, Little Miss. Scoot over.”

“You never move without a plan.” Not possible. She scooted over slightly.

“I didn’t even have a plan when I found out this was happening,” Jarod said. “It’s not easy to get out. All conditions must be correct. Then I found out about genetic material? Yeah. It was risk fatherhood, or jump right in. I chose jump.”

“Couldn’t you have at least signed something to The Centre? Bribe, blackmail to get your genetic shit back?” She questioned. “Getting yourself just thrown back in here with nothing behind you? Losing your touch.”

Jarod stretched as he started to get under the covers. “Simulating a penthouse in my sterile dome.” He laughed. “I love it.” He looked back toward her. “Even if mine is located, there could still be more out there. I can’t risk that. Children can’t be born and grow up in these domes. It’s not right. You *know* that’s not right. Somewhere deep inside.” He let out a small breath. “My best option.”

“You don’t do sims,” she said. “Ever.”

“For innocent children that would have to live my old life. I’d do anything. Even some of the hardest things I’d never do.”

Hang on. He was doing it again. That look where he was deciding on a move. Which wasn’t good because she was still fairly weak from last night. Did he know how weak Doctor Cox had made her? *Can I just. Go. Away.* Then, she saw something she hadn’t seen in a long time. It was so subtle. He held his hand up.

What the hell was that? Holding his hand up to her. *Not so into freaking puzzles right now. Why are you doing that?* She took a deep breath. What was he trying to do? Why was he holding up his hand to her? Why couldn’t she just get the hell out of there? *Dome, right.* He wasn’t moving his hand. He was still keeping it up toward her. “Really. Not. Puzzling. Mood.” Not much more. She couldn’t take too much more. She couldn’t take much more at all.

“No. No, no, no,” Jarod said softly. “This isn’t hard. I’m not here to add to your pain. I’m not here for your mom, my parents, running away secretly, nothing. You’re gonna have to get this one again, or I can’t do this.”

*What does he want to do?* She looked straight ahead hoping she’d see the answer. She saw something. Jarod opened her purse. She didn’t like that. When did he- “Oh yeah, I ran.” Shit. Fuck, who cares? What was with the hand?

*Damn it!* Was she so far gone, she couldn't even remember it? When he first came to her room, he checked her arms, to make sure she was okay. She had been, but he'd startled her and she took off. Not surprising. Before taking off real fast, he took two seconds to snoop through her purse. Essential place for secrets. And? He found it. She had it snuck in. She hadn't used it, still in it's holder, but it was there. A razorblade. She was falling and fast. Even if it was a lure, even if he had no way out, he was definitely glad he made that choice. She was on the edge, about to fall off.

It wasn't easy to reach her again. She was his hunter. He was her prey. Her enemy. She was trying to take away his own freedom. And, with the secrets he tried to expose, to her, a torturer too. Not that he meant to be. He knew all the Centre Indoctrination had invaded her head. It's not like he could invite himself down on a Tuesday, just discuss her mother over a luncheon, and then she'd walk away from The Centre. Their lives weren't like that. They couldn't have been more polar opposites now. She couldn't stand him, and honestly? He couldn't stand her either. She could kill without question, maim without sorrow, and walk away from tragedy feeling nothing. But at one time. What felt like a lifetime ago? They were friends, and before they could get into any real discussion, she would have to recall that. *Such a simple thing. Come on.*

She kept staring at his hand like it was a puzzle. Like it was just another thing weighing her down. He couldn't tell her what it meant, it would lose its meaning. Then it would mean nothing. *Come on? Come on, come on. Please.* She just stared, not understanding. *I know you aren't dead inside, you have to remember.* What could he say to remind her? "At one time, it wasn't run and chase between us. It wasn't your bad and I'm good. It was just. Us." Please. He looked toward that purse again. He didn't want to push her any more in that direction, they needed to seriously talk, but it wasn't going to happen like that. *Oh, I hate this.* He almost wanted to put his hand down. It was easier to just stay away from her than to see why they drifted away from friendship in the first place. Why they drifted away from so many possibilities. That Indoctrination, it was pounded. Carved into her soul. "I can't help you, if you can't remember."

"This was a stupid idea, getting trapped with me," she said. "Should have used your genius to find your crap- who moves in at three in the morning?"

"Someone who doesn't care about conveniency hours when kids are on the line," he said, at least going with some dialogue. *Fine.* He was going to have to approach it, even with cameras. "I saw your purse. I saw what was inside your purse."

She groaned, but oddly, more out of annoyance. "Not for me. If you don't get it, I wouldn't choose that way to go. That's for Cox and I get so weak. I keep my purse right next to me, so if he fucks with me. I can slit his throat, no matter what."

"Really? That's great." Oh. "I mean, it's not great. Killing people is not great." Yet. *It's not for her.* Then again? "You wouldn't choose that way to go? Which way would you choose?" He was still onto something.

“No, no, no. It’s muscle related, not brain related, you can’t fuck over my twisted mind today. Tonight? It was today?” She pushed him. “Shit. That wasn’t nice. Damn it! I would *never* bail out like she did. I’m tougher, I can stick anything out.”

Oh. *Catherine*. Catherine’s death is probably what kept her alive so far. Not wanting to go out the way she thought her mother did. “Your mom’s spirit has kept you alive.” Then he watched her move from the bed. “Where are you going?”

“To the bathroom, where else?” She grumbled. “Not like I can get away from you.”

He waited there in the bed for her to come back. *Can’t give up. Too much is riding on this*. He watched her trudge back.

“Okay, fine, I admit it. This is a Sleeping With the Enemy type of situation. So what’s the procedure already?”

Sleeping with the enemy? “Technically we are in the same bed,” he admitted.

“It’s a phrase,” she said. “It means dealing with your own enemy to get out of something. You don’t want kiddies stuck in The Centre. I don’t want pretender kiddies.”

Oh. “That would fit this situation. We are still not on each other’s side, but we both want you out of here. Weird phrase. Learning never stops,” he admitted. That wasn’t quite what he wanted, but getting closer. It seemed to make it easier for her to loosen up, putting it into perspective. *Perspective*. Maybe that was his way in. “Perspective is a funny thing. You know? Right now your dad knows you can’t get a pretender baby in your tummy because I’m here. I could get away with anything with him. In fact? I could get away with anything with you.” *Perspective. It has to be the way in*.

He got a clearly confused look. “The hell you talking about now?”

He held his hand back up to her. “I’m a thirty something year old male with an attractive woman about the same age as me. I’m stuck in my dome again, unable to leave, and of all things I have to do? I have to protect my own enemy. It’s similar to what you said. Sleeping with the enemy. Why do you think I said to leave the double bed?”



## Deal Or No Deal

*Whaaaat? No. No, fuck no! Jarod wouldn't make that demand in a fuckin' thousand years. He was an ass. He was terrible. But he would never say that. That didn't fit.*

“It's kind of exciting,” he said. “How many years did you watch me from in here? And now, we *share* the same dome. I'm not alone anymore.”

*The hell are you doing?* She shook her head but her mind was blown by his next action. He'd grabbed a condom wrapper from his pocket.

“I know. I got the perfect roommate,” Jarod said. “No loss of love and all the benefits.” He was opening up the condom wrapper.

“The-?!” No, something was wrong. She could definitely feel it. He was there to prevent children, and this was Jarod. *This was Jarod.* She knew Jarod. *No, I don't know Jarod.* Yeah, she knew Jarod. She didn't want to know Jarod. In fact? He had his hand sticking out toward her again. And?

*///Little Miss looked over to the corner at Sydney who was working with someone else. He was kind of a stickler about Jarod, not letting him act much with the outside world. He couldn't ever come out to play. Considering his whole living area was like a huge plastic half bubble, she could always see him. He was currently working on some kind of chemicals. Not the best time to bug him, but he wouldn't care. If he thought he could get a chance to have a real conversation, he would put a sim on hold and do it hours later again.*

*Sydney called out to her, already spotting her trying to approach him. She went away again for awhile, but she'd come back. When it came to actually interacting and speaking with Jarod, she never got to do that much. She did when Sydney wasn't in the lab. She even had the security clearance to open his dome up. She did like to see him and watch him, and hope that at some point Sydney would leave just for a little while. Eventually, she came back and Sydney wasn't there. He probably wouldn't be gone long, a few minutes tops. She went over toward the dome and pressed her hand to it. She smiled at him.*

*He had the warmest smile. Even though he was stuck in a dome, he always felt so strong. A presence of good, kind of like her momma, but different. He left his chemicals and before he even spoke a word, just held his hand up to the glass against hers. She heard Sydney behind her, scolding her, and she backed off again. She was too much outside presence. Limited presence, that was all he should get. A special boy that needed a special environment. He could never come out to play. He wasn't supposed to come over to talk. Most times? She was lucky to just put her hand up against the glass to him.*

*He felt more like a big, warm sun wrapped in a ball on Earth. So warm and good. Like her mom had been. But even now? She knew she'd never be like that. She wasn't destined to be like her mom, she was destined to be a sweeper and a cleaner and even rule The Centre. She was destined to be like her dad. She wasn't the star princess of a fairytale, she was the villain. Even at her young age, she knew that. But, it was nice to pretend. For just a little while. That she had a choice. When she heard fairytale stories from her mom, she loved them. As she grew older though, she rethought about those stories.*

*Did the queen that gave Snow White an apple, was she born that jealous? The Wicked Witch of the West, it was her sister's death that made her anger grow large enough to undo her.*

*At one point, they were all like her, right? Driven to the path of evil. Good was supposed to conquer over evil, but evil was strong. Even stronger when the people you love were in the evil.*

*For now though. She could enjoy the big warm sun wrapped in a ball.///*

Miss Parker stared at his hand. Talk about some ancient shit in her head. *Jarod wants me to touch his hand, while he's spouting stuff he never would to me. Hang on.* Oh no. "Damn it, you. Can't you just die instead?" Okay, not nice. She lifted her head, still feeling pretty weak. He wanted something from her she didn't want to give out very often, and especially not out to his ass! He wanted trust. He was going to make a move and she had to follow through. It wasn't going to be a nice move. He was setting up his damn ass hand to remind her that he really was just a nice boy from a little dome. Buulllllshit he was just a nice boy from a little dome. "This better be worth it." She took her hand and pressed her palm barely to his. Of course, warm. Of course, good. While hers were cold as ice. *Get ready for anything.*

"Glad you agreed."

She had seen a lot of shit in her life, so much that most things fell right off her like nothing. She'd taken lives without mercy or even thinking about it much. She'd taken missions that nearly ended her in her youth, crossed rivers and streams and mountains and deserts. She took on people twice her size in combat. She was trained in every way to deal with everything she could at The Centre. She still wasn't prepared for what Jarod did.

He had grabbed her, yanked the comforter over their heads, and then whispered in her ear he would be at a certain distance and angle from her, gyrating.

Yeah. He wanted to pretend to have sex. "Are you fucking insane?" She tried to keep all of her speaking to a whisper. He was at a believable angle, but he was still right beside her ear.

"You really think this room isn't covered by cameras and audio?" he warned her. "If we need to talk without it, this is the only way that believable."

"You can play music really loud," She complained. Whoah, talk about weird. "I hate you so fucking much right now!"

“Easy. Can’t play music at three in the morning, too obvious, and every lip movement that camera sees can be focused to see,” he said. “Relax, I’m not even touching you. Mostly. I’m trying not to, Little Miss.”

“That does not help.” Her teeth were grinding against each other.

“Why, huh? Because there’s a part of you that knows Daddy lied and he’s watching you right now?” His snide remark. “Discombobulate your clothes.”

Discombobulate? “Still a freak.”

“Still a bitch,” he replied back. “Listen. I really do have no idea how to get us out of here, but I’m not leaving without you. You being here means other pretenders could be born. It’s not going to happen. As for my sims? Broots and Daphne have my back. I’ll do them but they won’t be found or sold. Meaning, we are looking at this for the long haul, Parker.”

She felt him shift slightly and grab her hand. “Now what are you doing?!”

“No one stays still during coitus,” Jarod remarked. “Have to make it believable.”

“I don’t know which is worse right now, being stuck treated like tendering meat to prep for pretenders, or you doing this!” Damn it, this was so embarrassing. “Jarod!”

“A little loud on the name, but it did help out the believability factor,” Jarod teased and complimented her at the same time.

“Okay, can we just go back to me chasing you and you leaving past presents for me, because this shit is too awkward.” Her heart was just racing. He was way too close, and the biggest ass of all time, he was stirring feelings inside of her, that kept reminding her that The Centre kept his physique in top condition. *No. No. No. No. Ugh!* Jarod.

“No,” he answered. “Just, hang on.” He moved around again. “Just.”

Great, fucking great. He was getting turned on as well. Jarod being a guy though, had a harder time hiding it. He had to keep ‘adjusting his angles’.

“It’s not the best plan in the world, I completely tried with what I had. This made the best sense,” he said. “I mean, it also has the added benefit of pissing off Mister Parker a whole, whole lot. *If* he’s watching. We’ll know by morning, won’t we?”

Asshole! “Making Daddy suffer is not an added benefit to this.”

“He stole me from my family at only four years old, and he is *still* hunting me down instead of letting me live in peace. He made me run simulations that killed massive amounts of people, and he’s still making me do that. Oh ho, but I have to be here to protect *his* family. I’ll take an added benefit where I want,” he said honestly. “My Little Miss Parker.”

“Jaroooood!” Fuck! At least she could scream his name still.

“Very convincing, good job, Parker.” He moved away from her more, but still stayed close enough to whisper. “Not a long duration, but nobody’s perfect, it’s three in the morning, very tense, and you are on medication. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about before we can’t talk openly again?”

Ugh. “I signed a contract with The Triumvirate that will get me control of The Centre. It breaks if I don’t have a pretender in a year.” She better tell him. They were, temporarily, on the same side. “Little caveats too like I have to be off my pills and . . .” Wow, she really didn’t want to talk about this with him.

“Ooh, you are smart,” Jarod complimented her. “Centre loves their contracts, about the only thing they honor.”

“And you probably don’t have to worry about the cameras, Doctor Cox is on my side.”

“This isn’t a good spot for me and I don’t trust anybody right now. Especially a Centre doctor.” He started to sit up.

He brought them more out of the covers. She tucked the cover up higher. Jarod was practically trapped in the same way she had been now, yet? Damn the little bit of something that. She felt him put his palm against her hand again as he got out of the bed. She curled her knees upward and stared ahead. She touched the necklace she still hadn’t taken off. Her support from her Daddy.

It kept her strong enough.

## The Next Morning

Jarod took a shower, got dressed, and tried to keep the look of dismay off his face as Doctor Cox opened the door for him. He had to get things set up for his simulations. Right beside Doctor Cox was the cornman guy.

“You know what you look like?” Cornman teased him. “Like somebody who drank way too much last night and just realized they fucked up the next morning!” His laugh was unbearable, more like a hyena. “Welcome to the rest of your life! Can I see Miss P?”

He just teased him and expected to come in? “No.” He took a step outward with his 3d simulator and watched Doctor Cox close the door. Jarod looked toward the missing wall. “It’s missing. Where is the other wall?”

“You have an appointment somewhere else today.” Doctor Cox looked toward cornman. “Without you. No matter how much you bother me, you can’t see her. Frankly, you scare even me.” He smiled back at Jarod as he indicated some sweepers. “Your escorts. Off you go. You have a meeting to see Zane Parker.”

Jarod found himself in handcuffs once again and had to follow the sweepers to a room in SL23. Zane was there, waiting for him. He dismissed Doctor Cox.

"If you could have escaped with her, you would have done so instead of coming back," Zane said before even greeting him. "She is Miss Parker, and she is loyal to The Centre." He opened up the door. "Follow me."

Cold storage unit. *Bingo.* Zane was the one egging on for the pretender baby, he didn't want Jarod there. *What did I just win?* As he looked around, he saw nothing but first names. Then- "Kyle?" His brother's name? He looked back at Zane. "Kyle's here?"

"Was." He gestured toward the genetic material. "Take Kyle and take yours back. Then, pick someone. The one you want to be the father of Miss Parker's baby. You are escorted out and never heard from again."

*I won big, but I got the wrong prize.* Jarod saw his area right above Kyle. The rest of the names on the wall he didn't recognize or had ever heard of. "So if I hand you John's material, the good doctor over there will impregnate her with that."

"You know they plan on using you. You are the best candidate for everything," Zane told him. "All this does is annoy you and bring your business back to The Centre."

"Oh, I'd find becoming something like a dad a little more than 'annoying'," Jarod corrected him. "I'd consider it a move that would make my actions against The Centre go nuclear."

"Exactly," Zane said. "It's rubbish. No baby would be you, that's something entirely different. No, we just need to start making pretenders again." He pulled something from his pocket. It was a manila envelope, but full. Full enough it was almost bursting at the seams. "Your entire family and more than just the little pictures my brother gave my niece. That was nothing, just to hold you still. This covers every stop they took, how you were born, and everything else you needed from The Centre it still had." He held it out to Jarod. "Get all of it, and never return."

Jarod stared at the envelope. "Open it." He wanted to make absolutely sure it wasn't a trick. Zane opened it and showed him a picture of his mother. One in a different dress he'd never seen before. Her stomach was fuller and there was a good possibility she was carrying him or one of his siblings. She looked radiant. Happy. A happy picture of his mother. Zane tucked it back in.

"My personal sweeper will escort you out. Once you are gone, stay gone. There is nothing else here for you. Not a shred of your existence exists on Centre property now." Zane held the envelope. "You don't have very long before my brother finds out so decide. Deal?"

Jarod looked at the envelope. At the clear storage of all the genetic material. At his name. At his brother's name. "Just pick any name I want. I get to play decider of the father." Ouch. Already he knew the action he had to take. "I see." Jarod gazed at the envelope again. At the storage again. "This deal, it's 'legit'." Zane wanted him to get everything he'd ever need now. In one go. So he'd never feel pressure to return again. "My family. My peace of mind, knowing The Centre couldn't choose me or my brother in this game Miss Parker is in. Mister

Parker loses me again, looks bad, and you gain The Centre. All the pieces fit.” It was all right beside him. It was incredibly tempting. Anything he wanted, everything he ever wanted to know, was right within arm’s reach.

Yet? “It’d be a great deal, except it’s not just about me. You missed that part.” He looked at the storage one more time. “It’s about making sure you don’t make other little pretenders suffer the same way I did.”

“They get a mom,” Zane said. “She will be a good mom. We aren’t doing anything against her will. It would be easier just to kill her and take everything after all. Instead, we have a trust in each other. She is family and she’ll never let down The Centre.”

“There will be no children that live inside a dome for the rest of their lives! That will never know anything but the cold, hard ground of The Centre!” Jarod said firmly. He watched Zane hand the envelope over to his sweeper. The sweeper held a lighter.

“The information you want will *still* not be refund on Centre property,” Zane warned him. “Take it now, or forget it forever. I will wait for your decision.”

The lighter stayed at the envelope, but they didn’t set it on fire. Zane wanted him to think about it very hard. Jarod had to say the yes that would burn it all, or the no that would give him it. *It’s not fair! It’s never fair. That’s mine.* The way Zane said that though. He had erased any traces of data, probably from even Mister Parker.

“My niece isn’t worth it,” Zane said to him. “She is the one who chose this. She signed a contract. Four pretenders in ten years, and she receives The Centre. She is there in the dome for the punishment of losing you, but she can leave afterward. She would still come back for the artificial insemination whether she was in that dome or not. She can choose her children’s lives.” He shrugged. “She is just not a good person. You know that. After it’s born, most likely it will be watched by Sydney mostly, or if it’s not pretender, by nannies at her own home while she continues to move onto her own goals. Short of taking them from their own mother, what can you do?” Zane asked.

No, Jarod couldn’t be shaken. “I may not have all the facts, but I know? That she said *no*. Before Mister Parker put her in, she said no! That means? She *isn’t* there willingly.” Nope. “No deal.”

“You want to destroy everything just because she said no at the last minute?” Zane asked. “You’re giving up your freedom and your family to watch over someone not worth watching over. For someone who had no other purpose for caring about your whereabouts except to hunt you down and bring you back here.”

“She said no,” he repeated. So close and yet so far. “Get it over with. I’m used to The Centre burning my life into flames.”

“How about I keep this then?” Zane took the envelope back. “Maybe you will change your mind later. You know that all you have to do is be removed temporarily, it doesn’t take much time to get to her. How long has it been?”

Yeah, that didn't sound good. *The doctor is on her side? Yeah, right.* "Take me back."

When he came back, Jarod took his handcuffed self over to his area. He looked in for the doctor but didn't see him. "Cox!" No answer. "Damn it. Sydney!" He yelled. Sydney ran up. "Get Mister Parker on the phone now, the doctor is in there alone with her!" Meanwhile, Jarod ran to the other side where the medical equipment was at. It now had curtains blocking the view. *No!* He banged on the plexiglass. He ran back over to Sydney. "The code, the code!"

"He is trying to get to Zane," Sydney said. "It goes Mister Parker, then Zane, and then The Triumvirate."

"Zane just tried to bust me out, he's not going to give the codes!" Shit. He went to the side and banged again. "Miss Parker!" She wasn't coming out.

Eventually the cuffs were removed from Jarod, and he kept banging on his old dome, in every direction he could think of. No one answered for some time until Mister Parker showed up and started banging on the dome. Cox finally emerged.

"Hello," he simply smiled. "Are you done with your sims?"

"Get out of there!" Jarod banged on the wall again.

"Could someone please hold him back?" Doctor Cox asked. "He is physically strong compared to me and I feel a little frightened."

*I'll give you something to be frightened about!* Jarod was kept back by several sweepers as Doctor Cox left. After he was cleared from the area, he was let go. He ran inside to check on her along with Sydney and Mister Parker. She was lying in her bed, her legs pulled up slightly in a relaxed stance, sucking on a Pall Mall cigarette.

Barely enough time, but she got her bed made and enjoyed her reward as she was surrounded by Jarod and Sydney and Daddy. Couldn't just be her dad, gotta get the whole embarrassing trifecta. *Might as well get it over with.* She blew smoke out in the air. "I've got Chameleon contraception so I don't need to quit anymore." She took one more long drag and looked at her Daddy. "Sorry, Daddy." She blew the smoke back out. "I was knocked out for a bit. Doctor Cox was scared and couldn't leave my side." Jarod and Sydney remained. "Gonna bring me up to some kinda code warning, Sydney, or are you just gonna stand there and stare?"

She put the cigarette out at the edge of her bed next to her. Wood. No blankets. She wasn't stupid. Far from it. When she got up for the day and saw Jarod was gone, she moved to a chair to contemplate her next step. While she was doing that, Doctor Cox came, clearly with his usual intentions. He also had a pack of her favorite cigarettes this time.

“I?” Sydney didn’t even seem to know what to say.

Sydney spotted her pack and stole them. *Hey! I so earned those.*

“Back to the gum.” Sydney shook his head. “Honestly, Miss Parker. What are you thinking?”

She looked back at her lost pack of delights. “Honestly, my life revolves around making things hard for Jarod.”

“Follow protocol still. Plus, you eventually have to be a mother to run The Centre,” Sydney complained.

“Zane made me an interesting offer,” Jarod interrupted. “I didn’t take it. Are you sure there wasn’t a reason you went out?”

She just shrugged. He could assume what he wanted.

“Call it paranoia then.” Jarod looked toward Mister Parker. “I don’t want to leave to do any dirty sims right now.”



## Daphne's Trick?

*I hate gum.* She had her second favorite sheets on her bed now. Jarod either didn't notice or care. Probably the second. Jarod came over to the TV set and started to mess with her TV. She watched him set up his little gaming station. *He really is going to play that thing? Why am I not fucking surprised.* She turned around on her bed. Maybe if she stayed still, something would bake inside of her a little faster. That and she wouldn't have to see his face. Except, that she saw his hand. Wiggling at her from her side. He kept doing that until she started to turn, and she saw him holding it up to her. Just like last night. *Shitty asshole, I am not in the mood for this!*

He finally lowered his hand, giving up on her. Good!

"You know what's great about this world?" Jarod said as he started up his console. "Accounts. The Centre can chase me and chase me and chase me. But? Username, password, and the only thing stopping me from getting all my stuff back? Is time." He clicked on a game. "I really need to tweak that to make the downloads faster. Guess I got time now."

She looked at the screen at what he was downloading. "If I had a gun right now."

"Well, that's not nice," Jarod said. "Sure they're angry, but those birds never did anything to you."

*Fuck!* She turned back around.

"These games are already in 3d. Hm?" Jarod wondered aloud. "I haven't bothered my PS4 yet. The Centre eventually takes everything away. But since I'm stuck here? Maybe I should tinker with it."

*Don't threaten.* Still she held her trigger finger out and kept making the motion to pull it. She thought it couldn't get worse than being trapped in the dome. But being trapped with him? Nah, forget it. No competition.

"Did you want to try playing something with me?" Jarod asked in his oh so innocent voice. "There's more than chess on here."

Sometimes, the brain just comes up with something before a person knows what they're saying. "I'd rather fuck Sydney again." She heard that remote controller drop. *Oops.* That wasn't nice. She was disobeying daddy's order still. "Sorry, lost the context of what we we're talking about. Games, right?"

Oh. Little Jarod didn't feel like playing his game now. He completely turned off the console. Then he paced for a little while. It was the little 'again' that was bugging him. Finally, he stopped pacing and showed up on her side of the bed.

"He would *never*." Oh, nice face to face. Now he was reading her like she was one of his damn computer screens. "I am trying to get along with you. We are both stuck in here for I

don't know how long. I already gave up the chance to know about *my* family, and to prevent me and *my* brother from becoming the next thing shoved into *you*! A little decency is all I ask. Well?"

Miss Parker scratched her head slightly and rubbed her fingers together. "The shampoo they gave me is killing my hair. I need to send out Daphne to get the good stuff for me." She got off the bed and went over toward the curtain, opening it slightly to knock on the plexiglass. "Sydney? You got Daphne over there? Tell her I need some of my best shampoo. She knows what it is." Ooh. Nobody could have missed that stomp off by Mister Fucking Abacus. She could practically hear the banging on the door by Jarod. It looked like he was ready for his simulations now.

Nope, he was stomping back. "I know you had a rough day," he tried again. "I get it. I know what happened. So do you. Chances are still decent you might be fine."

*Ha. He knows what happened. That's funny.* She was still waiting on Daphne.

"You can be strong all you want to everyone else, but I've still seen you at your weakest point," he reminded her.

Okay. That? Was not something to drag up right now. It really wasn't. "With a few drinks, any girl can stumble," she said in her defense.

"Most of them don't stumble to their mother's grave," he reminded her. "I knew exactly what to give you. I knew exactly when you'd do it. I knew exactly what you'd do. I know you, Parker. Drop the attitude. You are the most resilient right before you fall."

Fuck him! "I am *not* falling!" She had kept her whole damn self together so far!

"Not. Yet." Then, he finally left.

She ducked her head and banged on the plexiglass. *He doesn't know me. He just reads me. He just uses his weird power to read me, to try and become me, like he does everybody else. It doesn't mean he knows me. He doesn't know me.* She glared outside. *He doesn't know me any better than some old stranger on a street corner. Than the kid that crosses him at a crosswalk. Than some old woman waving hi out of a window because it's a nice day. He doesn't know me.*

*///She watched him reading a manual. She had tried to get to him a couple of times, but Sydney almost completely cut her off. He used to at least not mind if she were in the lab. This time, Sydney was gone for a few minutes. She went over to the plexiglass and touched it. He just ignored her. For a manual. "Jarod?" He didn't take any notice of her at all, so she tried to explain herself as best she could again. "I'm loyal to The Centre. It's like my country. I'm loyal to my country. I'm learning to fight for The Centre because I'm loyal and I fight for it, like my country." He just didn't understand. "Jarod?" Nothing.*

*She took her hand from the plexiglass. Jarod stopped talking to her. Which was a good feat because he didn't have anyone else to talk to. Just her and Sydney. He used to be so excited when she came over and reached out to him. Now, he stopped. He didn't do that anymore. When she wasn't looking? She must have become like the evil fairytales somehow. Maybe that's how it happened to all the wicked women? Maybe it was real gradual.*

*At first, Jarod seemed to accept her. He felt bad the first time she told her about her first kill. She was a little confused how to feel the first time too. Daddy had set it up. Sweepers were there. Daddy kept saying the target would die anyhow, and the worst moment was just the first kill. When she killed him, there was no mourning, just congratulations. Good jobs, clapping and approval. She killed a man and they had a party for her that night. Daddy had even showed up and stayed. He said he was so proud of her.*

*Then as she got going into the Academy, Jarod came over to see her less and less. Like, she was a bad thing. Eventually when she called for him though, he'd always come see her. He'd ask how she was and she'd tell him if she traveled. Where she went. The conditions she was under. By the end, he was always upset. They just couldn't have a nice conversation anymore. Killing and training and philosophy. A couple of times, he had even worked up the nerve to yell at her, quoting all kinds of simulations he'd done about war and suffering. She just stood there, dumbfounded as his mouth rattled off all kinds of words and phrases and formulas and data that could never make any sense to her.*

*She took time to see him less and less. He came over to the glass less and less. But he always responded.*

*This time, he looked up from the manual, and that look. He never looked at her that way before. Like she was the worst thing he could imagine and she could never crawl out of the mud even close enough to reach him.*

*From that day on? She knew she'd never see him again unless she had to.////*

*Never know me. "I'm not falling." She wasn't falling. She was stuck between obeying Daddy and obeying The Centre. That didn't mean she was falling. Her instructor Fabiana had taught her that when the lines weren't black and white, you had to trudge the gray to find the way. That's all I'm doing. I'm just trudging the gray. I'll get out of this mud, it's just a long trail of it. She'd get out. She wouldn't fall in it. She wouldn't fall down.*

*She'd never fall down.*

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Broots got back to his house after picking Debbie up, but he already knew what would play out as he watched Debbie take off right to the table. There wasn't a kid alive that didn't know

what a new PS4 looked like.

“Wow, dad! You got one?! These just came out. How did you get one?” She asked. “Did you have to pre-order? Order online? Did the stores really have them?” She stroked the box.

“Yep. We’ll uh, get it fixed up here soon. I have a little bit of work to do. Okay?” He went to his office and pulled out the *other* PS4. It wouldn’t make sense that new technology would come out that he shouldn’t delve into, right? Well, that was his reasoning. So far, he hadn’t got much of a chance to look into it, his time was consumed by Jarod’s antics and worry about Miss Parker. He sat down, pulled it out of its packaging again and looked at it. Normally, he would keep his work at The Centre, but now that he would actually be playing with it, there was no way he could do that and not have Debbie attracted to it.

He called up Sydney first. “You got yours, Syd? Great. Did Daphne get hers?” he asked. “Great.” Now, how was he going to make this happen? Jarod wanted them to find a way to communicate through their PS4’s without being tracked or caught. Not only that, Sydney would be ordering certain parts for Jarod too. He wanted to create his own adaptive little PS4, handheld oddity, that turned on and off easily to hide any communication going on in the game.

The Centre definitely had hidden servers and different ways in. Their communication shouldn’t be too hard. It was the one with Miss Parker that would be tough. She couldn’t use that same angle, she was in the dome with Jarod. As brilliant as Jarod’s plan was to interact with her, it was? It was, uh. It wasn’t the best.

“Dad?” Debbie called out.

“Just a second, Sweetie.” He got up and headed to Debbie. First thing first, plugging them in to see what he had to work with first. Maybe trying some of the popular games too. If someone like Jarod called him a ‘noob’, he’d never live that down.

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Jarod just kicked his feet up on the so-called lunch table they gave him to eat at. He waited for Parker as the food came. It was already 4 but her scare threw everything off. Daphne looked toward him on the outside of the dome. As promised, they had a table lined up for her that stood the same length as another one on the other side.

“Is she coming yet?” Daphne asked.

“Soon. Maybe.” He was there. He did trip her up really bad again.

“Tell her she doesn’t have to.” She got up and put the food through the delivery slot. “Tell her I’m sorry.”

Sorry? “For what?”

Daphne looked at him like he was nuts.

Oh. Well, word got around The Centre pretty quick. “She’s okay, don’t worry.”

“On the outside,” she uttered.

“She’ll be fine,” Jarod insisted. “I hope. I’m working on it.”

“It takes a steamroller to take her down.” Daphne smiled at the thought. “Still.” She swallowed. “I don’t know if you are the Chameleon contraceptive or the steamroller.”

“Lovely conversation so far,” Jarod complained. She definitely talked to Parker somewhere along the dome, just Parker used that word so far. “Of all the nicknames everyone around here calls me, I think that’s the worst one.”

“I don’t know,” Daphne confessed. “You get nicknames that are ten words long with multiple cusswords in them some times. Then again, sometimes you’re just Monster, Sociopath, or Sydney’s Teddy Bear. It varies.”

*Sydney’s Teddy Bear?* That one was worse. “Do you have anything else to talk about?” He looked around to see if Parker was coming at all. Maybe he should take the food and leave. It was clear Daphne still wasn’t happy about his presence in there. Oh, wait. Broots was coming.

“Uh?” Broots sat down next to Daphne. “Are we still doing this eating together thing?”

“She hasn’t come out yet,” Daphne said. “Unless you want to eat with him.”

Broots shrugged. “Just, food. I’ve been working.” He took his part of it. “What is this?”

“Jarod picked the place,” Daphne said. “It’s convenient store snacks. Nothing I really want,” she admitted.

Broots had no problem digging in though.

“Never underestimate peanuts, chips, pickles, nachos, sandwiches and cookies.” Jarod started to dig in too, now that someone was eating with him. “Oh, and gummy worms? They found those too, that’s great. I thought they’d only find the teddies.” Daphne was giving him a weird look though.

“Zane offered you your family, right?” She asked. “Pretty envelope?”

Ooh. Jarod sat up. “Can you get to them?” She shrugged. Oh, she better not be playing with him.

“I mean, I could. Theoretically. I’d have to put my whole job on the line though,” she said.

Her job? “My whole family history that The Centre has is with Zane. I could find you another job,” Jarod insisted.

“Another job would be good, but this is really important to you,” Daphne told him. “I should get something out of it for doing this, and not just another job.”

Okay. “Money?” Maybe she was low on cash. Nope, she was shaking her head no. “What is it you need then?”

“You’re able to get out of here,” Daphne said. “Meet me around the corner, give me a good fuck tonight, and I’ll give you what you want.”

The . . . what?! *No*. No, he didn’t pick that up from her. He looked toward Broots. Yeah, he was shocked with that one too. She was doing something. Maybe for the cameras? What though.

“That’s.” Broots coughed and whispered to Daphne. “That’s not appropriate, Daphne.”

“Hey, have you seen him? He’s in total peak condition. I might not be able to say I caught Jarod fair and square, but I could say I fucked him. And he’d get everything he wanted. It’d be fair.”

“No.” Jarod couldn’t figure out the trick. He kept thinking but he couldn’t say it. *What is she trying to pull?*

“Why not? It’s your whole family. The envelope, it’s even got a red string around it, right?” She asked. “You’ll never have a better chance to get to your family. All it takes is one good fuck. That’s not bad, right?”

*What?!* “You don’t.” What? “Can you get me that information?”

“Yes,” she said. “Absolutely. Tonight, escape, and around the corner. Think about it. That’s a good deal.”

“What is going on with you, Daphne?” Broots whispered. “Is this some kind of trick? It has to be, right?”

“Why? You don’t think the same kind of cameras are way out here, do you?” She asked. “I doubt it. Too pricey. Look, Jarod. It could be fun. It could suck. But, it’ll be interesting. I’ve never been with a genius before. Just, come up to this deposit slot, and I’ll have the numbers to escape the dome. Trust me.” She got up. “If I see you, I’ll give you your envelope. If I don’t, just forget it. Oh?” Daphne got up. “I am going to pick up something Miss Parker will actually eat. Oh, and here’s her shampoo.” She sent it through the little slot. “Make sure she gets it.”

“Uuh? I?” Broots was left wondering at the table. “What just happened?”

“I don’t think I know exactly,” Jarod admitted. That had to be a trick. Right? *My family is in those envelopes*. Wait. *No, she’s trying to pull something. She doesn’t want to actually have sex. Right? She’s not expecting me to have sex with her, right?* Sexual desire was leverage sometimes. “Am I sexually desirous?”

"I? Don't know? I uh. I don't really know if she can get that," Broots said, making him aware. "I know Daphne though. It's gotta be a trick."

"I don't know." Jarod didn't know. He knew she had a wilder side from what she showed people, but she wouldn't be that wild? Sydney trusted her. "I need to talk to Sydney."

"He's not here, Jarod," Broots said. "He's gone until tomorrow. I guess. Sorry."

"Damn!" Maybe he had made an error. Maybe Sydney misjudged. It's another reason he didn't seal the deal of telling them how he got out yet.

Broots took a deep breath. "Oh. Hey. There's a sandwich in here," Broots said. "Didn't see it. Better nuked in the microwave convenience store, but still edible."

"Very true," Jarod agreed. "Having the microwave there at the sale so that you can eat it warm was always convenient instead of having to take it to another location to warm up." At least one of them was half reasonable. Better to steer away from Daphne right now. "Are you going to be around?"

"No, I just have a couple projects, then I gotta get home," Broots said. "It's a trick," he repeated. "I know her. It's gotta be a trick, don't worry."

"I'm not worried," Jarod said. Of course he wasn't worried. Why would he be worried? Just, his entire family's history might be waiting in her sexually devious hands. "There's something to it."

Yeah. There was something to it.

# No Cuffs

Dome: Night

She was there, in a fancy dress with makeup, standing beside the deposit box of the dome. With an envelope. It looked just like Zane's.

Jarod wanted to forget about it. He even tried to talk with Parker again, but she wasn't responding much. Daphne was right by the door with information to his family, but- *I can't have sex with her!* It still seemed preposterous. She was still there though. Waiting. With his family's envelope. *Zane took everything away from The Centre, all that is left is in that envelope.* But, sexual intercourse? He didn't do it that way. He loved the women he was with, for the short time he could be with them.

His family. All he had were some pictures so far. Nothing else. *I could still try and track my dad. I have his picture, I know I can get there.* But? Everything right there, so many better leads. And the picture? The picture Zane showed him of his mother. She was so happy, and pregnant with one of her children. He paced the floor slightly, and of course Miss Parker didn't say anything. She didn't want to interact at all with him.

If he told her, she might even just laugh at him. Daphne was supposedly her friend, and Parker was used to not having love in her heart for many of her men. So? So? *I've done everything I could to find them! Every day less is another day I don't get with them. I haven't seen them since I was four years old!* One night. One session. Loveless sex. Bad, it was bad. How could he just do that?

"You are going to wear a hole in the floor," Miss Parker complained as she watched him go by the umpteenth time. "What is your problem already?"

"Your . . ." No. She hated him, she couldn't stand him. She was friends with Daphne. She wouldn't get it. "I. Daphne has my family envelope but I have to have sex with her to get them." Ah, he shouldn't have said it. She wanted to pay him back for everything he'd done so far to her. Why did he have to say that? He started to pace again.

He watched her get off the bed and head toward the front of the dome.

"You don't even like guys," he heard Parker say. "What's your trick, Blondie? I've got a Sociopath wearin' a hole in my floor."

"To make him see."

"See what?"

"What's in front of him. What he's doing to you."



“Oh, he already knows he’s driving me nuts.”

“I’m not talking about Jarod.”

“Shut up.”

“If you want him to leave, then why haven’t you told him?”

“It’s none of his business; I’m not the one keeping him here, Blondie! Now, what’s in the envelope ‘cause my ass you got anything.”

“I knew after this, I better . . .”

“His damn sister envelope, really? Ugh. See? You’re not gonna move up in The Centre with these weak points. Just go away so I can get some sleep.”

“Either tell him or don’t. He should either be there helping you, or out so he’s not hurting you. You can only take so much, Miss Parker. Please?”

“It gives him more ammunition to ruin my life later. Damn it. Fuck! Fuck Jarod, I don’t why he . . . Go.”

He watched her come back round the corner. She tossed the envelope at him.

“Bleeding hearts.” She lied back on the bed. “You can go anytime, Jarod. I got it under control. I can’t have little pretenders, you’re not going to turn into a daddy as soon as your back is turned. So go, go explore the world until I drag your ass back here again. Give or take a year. Like I said, the doctor is on my side. Beat it.”

What? He opened the envelope to see the picture of his sister. He had pictures of everyone in his family now. *Emily*. Pretty name. He tucked it back in the envelope. “How are you so sure? Why’s he on your side?”

“Because? He feels like being a daddy the old fashioned way. Leave.”

*Daddy*. “Your sleeping with Cox.”

“Yeah. How else can I have my devilish delights in here?”

“Ah.” Ah. “That’s what . . .”

That’s what it was all about.

*///“Hey, have you seen him? He’s in total peak condition. I might not be able to say I caught Jarod fair and square, but I could say I fucked him. And he’d get everything he wanted. It’d be fair.”///*

*///“Why not? It’s your whole family. It’s even got a red string around it, right?” She asked. “You’ll never have a better chance to get to your family. All it takes is one good fuck. That’s not bad, right?”///*

He looked at Parker lying on the bed. “No little pretenders.”

“Nope.” She looked at the ceiling. “Bail, just get out.”

“He gave you your cigarettes.”

“It’s stressful right now, especially with you here in my little area. What do you want, Jarod? Hm?” She asked. “You want me to say ‘Oh, I understand how you felt now after being trapped behind glass. You deserve a life. I’m going to leave you alone forever and take up stitching to occupy my time.’ Fat chance.” She reached under her bed, pulling out something that made the sound of ducktape being ripped away. She pulled out her Maker’s Mark and a pack of her Pall Mall cigarettes with a lighter. “We all have a duty to The Centre.” She took a swig. “Go.” She groaned. “Don’t look at me like that, I’ll quit when something happens.” She stuck a cigarette in her mouth and lit it up.

*///“You’ll never have a better chance to get to your family. All it takes is one good fuck. That’s not bad, right?”///*

“I could escape. I’ll never have to worry about you having little pretenders trapped in domes.” He looked out the front of the dome. “I could get that opened you know.”

“Probably. The Centre always takes you too lightly.” She took a drag of her cigarette, blew out smoke, and then took a good swig of her Maker’s Mark.

“Well, it has been an experience living with you,” Jarod said to her.

*///All it takes is one good fuck. That’s not bad, right?///*

“It felt like I was chasing my mouse and then it decided to fucking live with me, knowing I couldn’t do shit about it. Daddy’s orders are driving me nuts with you. Go.”

“To be nice. To listen.” He remembered that. “That’s never fit you, but Daddy said it, huh?”

*///All it takes is one good fuck. That’s not bad, right?///*

“I was trapped in here for thirty years, it’s not the same,” he said, trying to calm Daphne’s voice in his head. “I deserve to be out there, just like everybody else. I deserve my family, just like everybody else. I was stolen away and I deserve to be found!”

*///All it takes is one good fuck. That’s not bad, right?///*

“Don’t even think about fucking with me about this crap after I get out. Don’t come near the new little Parker, trying to turn it against me or The Centre.” She took another drag on her cigarette. “If you do. Your next pretend will be inside a coffin, buried six feet deep, with me standing on top to make sure you stay there.” She blew out her smoke again. She didn’t say anything else.

“It’s the rainy season. When I came, it was raining outside,” Jarod said. “Do you know if it’s still raining?”

She rolled her eyes. "I don't know. Daphne's probably not far yet. She worries too much about me."

"She loves you," he said to her softly.

"Ooh, I so wasn't aware of that," she said sarcastically.

"You're terrible with men, and you've gone through everything for all your life. You pick and choose whoever suits your fancy!" he said to her, almost yelling. "We're not the same. It's not the same."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," she said as she tapped the ash to the ground from her cigarette. "Babbling Baboon."

Jarod headed out toward the front of the dome. Daphne was there, not far away. "Has it been raining?!" He yelled. It didn't matter anymore, Doctor Cox covered up anything she did in there. Cigarette smoking. Drinking. Everything, and he probably wanted Jarod gone too after what he did last night on the cameras. He noticed Daphne's look and she gave a quick nod. He went over to his bag and grabbed his tools. Parker didn't say another word. He went to the front by the mail slot and took off the face of the code panel with his tools. He worked diligently.

Daphne had walked away finally. He glanced at her as she left and went back to work. *It's not the same. I had a few months. I've only had a few months.* He got the dome to trigger open, which closed the second dome. *Double trigger.* He moved back to the panel. A little extra work but he could still do it. "There won't be any little pretenders," he said out loud. "No little pretenders, no worries."

*///"You'll never have a better chance to get to your family. All it takes is one good fuck. That's not bad, right?"///*

*///"Either tell him or don't. He should either be there helping you, or out so he's not hurting you. You can only take so much, Miss Parker. Please?"///*

*///"You can go anytime, Jarod. I got it under control. I can't have little pretenders, you're not going to turn into a daddy as soon as your back is turned. So go, go explore the world until I drag your ass back here again. Give or take a year. Beat it."///*

"Just a baby. Just a normal baby," he said to himself out loud as he almost had it. "Just a normal, cute baby for Parker. She'll love it. She needs one. He--"

*///"Meet me around the corner, give me a good fuck tonight, and I'll give you what you want."///*

*///"I'll give you what you want."///*

"Cigarettes. Bourbon. Privacy. Non-pretender baby. Everything *she* wants." In return, she has to be with a guy she really didn't want to be with. "What kind of person would I even be." He set his tools down a moment. No matter who she chose out there, it was always her choice.

“Nah.” He couldn’t. *She isn’t going to have a baby with the likes of him.* In fact? Speak of the devil. He was approaching from the other side. Holding an envelope. A skinnier envelope. “Nice weather? Just wanted to get a look at things? I like to tinker.”

Doctor Cox waved the envelope, ignoring the fact he was disassembling the panel. “A list of last known places of your brother. Oh, and a picture of your mother that Zane said you especially liked.”

“Bits and pieces.” Jarod watched the doctor and his movements. “I didn’t go for the whole thing with Zane so why would I go for bits and pieces now?”

“You are concerned about genetics and family,” he said. “So, perhaps it the genetics are from pretenders who are not a problem? Mister Parker does not watch the cameras much at night, he prefers to let her have some privacy. She knows that. It seems you might have figured that out too?”

Oh, he was already starting to form a theory. *You’re a rat, and not a good one like Oscar had been.* However? Things were finally going his way. He kept his hands near the panel, ready to set it off so it opened when Cox eventually tried to. “So if I just leave and meet Zane to talk about something or other, when Mister Parker isn’t watching at night, you’ll take care of your end? Which pretenders?”

He held up his finger with a smile. “Angelo’s condition isn’t hereditary.”

“No, of course not, it’s called Raines Treatment.” Jarod strattled the line. He couldn’t make it too easy.

“We could even tell him if you wanted?” Cox encouraged him. “Then it would have a mom and a dad to know.”

“The picture of my mom, my brother’s whereabouts, and Angelo as a father.” Acting like he was falling for it, that was a real trick. “Mom and a dad. My mom. What about everything else again?”

“That was a one time offer for a one time bail. However? Zane will make sure that as long as you cooperate, your brother and you will be fine. In the meantime, you can still have your perks from Mister Parker and make sure he is keeping his end of the deal. You can run your own blood tests after they are born too. Oh, I mean, after it is born. Plus? We don’t have to worry about wasting anything with Angelo. He’s always here. He’d be supervised when he was around the child.”

“A mom *and* a dad.” Jarod watched the doctor move toward the panel. “Both parents.” He nodded. “One quick talk.” Cox put the code in to open the dome, while Jarod actually opened it using the panel. As it was halfway up, he jostled the panel to start to close and he grabbed his medical bag. “On second thought, I just want this.”

Cox looked confused. Tried to open it again, but it didn't work. Jarod had it on lockdown for now. “Looky, I figured one out already.” Looking into the bag, he found something worth having sex for again. “Goodbye.”

He went back inside and saw her still on the bed. “Cox foiled my plans for leaving.” He swung the bag on the bed and climbed in, hiding it mostly under covers. “I at least got him back by taking his bag. Want to know what’s inside?”

“Doctor Cox stopped you, so you stole his bag?” She looked toward the ceiling. “A little bit of a sore loser, aren’t you? Are you ever going to get over the kid temper tantrums?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I guess I’m here for a little while longer,” he said, making sure he tucked the bag down into the bed covers. He got under the covers. “It was a hectic day today, wasn’t it?” He held his hand out to her again.

“Are you kidding?” she looked at his hand.

“Not feeling too whippy. I got foiled,” Jarod said. “Come on, Little Miss? Just a little bit?” Oh, she didn’t want to, but he wasn’t giving her much option. He needed her under those covers. “I could start with stimulating you first if you like?”

Yeah. She had a whiny look on her face as she looked at his hand. “Oh. My. Need for someone.” She put her hand against his, lying it flat again.

He brought her under the covers again, trying to make it look like they were having sex again. This time though, he put something in her hand. “What’s Cox doing with these?” He whispered in her ear. However, knowing her reaction was going to break character, he covered her mouth as she saw it. Feeling her mouth loosen, he let go of it. “Thoughts?”

“Trying. Not easy with the Chameleon dry humping me.” She looked at it in complete dismay. Her. Pill. Doctor Cox made sure she was still on the pill. “He’s going to die, slow and painful.”

“He can’t die, we kind of need him on our side,” Jarod said. “We need these. It’d give us almost a whole month to get us out without worrying about any little hitchhikers. Even if Zane finds a way to get to you, you’ll be protected.”

Miss Parker counted her pills with her eyes briefly. “Less than a month. No Centre baby.”

“No. Centre. Baby,” Jarod assured her. “After you get out, you can come back and blame it all on me. But, you have to get-“

“Surgery to get it all out,” she said. “I know.”

Oh. Ooh? He caught that. He never saw that before. “You want one.”

“No.” She looked at the pills.

“Can’t fake a professional faker,” Jarod insisted, trying to adjust himself again.

“I don’t. This whole thing just made it more obvious about my clock. If I do or did, I can adopt, but I don’t know.” she said. “It’s not like I’m real Parker anyhow.”

Aww.

“Don’t give me that look,” she warned him. “I’m a terrible bitch, don’t look at me like I’m a lost kitten while you are humping me. I’ll teach my kid to hunt you too *if* I have one.”

“Just break the nice moment,” Jarod complained. “I am sorry about him.” He reached for her other hand and tried to hold it. She wasn’t feeling like herself, her guard was more down. While she did get her bourbon, smokes, and privacy. The doctor was just having fun with her for as long as possible, he never planned on becoming anything, fatherhood hidden or not. She would be in the dome for countless months, no successes, until? Whatever the result, it wouldn’t be pretty. “I’ll handle him if he comes back in. If I don’t, you’ll kill him.”

“My razorblade is itching for his skin.” Still, her words couldn’t reach. “Are we done?”

“Well?” Jarod tried to readjust himself farther. The longer they had these going, the harder it would get. “Last night was short with a couple yells of my name. Tonight you’re a limp noodle.” Which made him appear like a limp noodle to anyone watching. “Which I don’t care about but I don’t want to . . . ?”

“Doctor Cox isn’t making you feel good right now about this.” Plain. “Yeah, yeah.”

“I have to rectify this a little. This has to look genuine if we want this time to talk and once I get Cox out, someone will come back and watch these.”

“Unless Cox Sucker has LSD in that bag, you are out of luck making this look genuine with you.” She groaned slightly. “If I didn’t owe you so bad right now. Fine. I’m missing my cuffs, but I’ll work with it. Hang on.”

Cuffs? Great, now what did he invoke? He felt her clamping onto his hands.

“Where should I straddle you to make it look genuine, Genius?”

Straddle. “Abdomen.”

“Got it.” She gripped both his hands. “Hang on. I’ll make this believable. Don’t fight when we flip.”

As soon as they flipped, he felt Parker straddling his stomach. She had also partly pulled their heads out, so no more secret talking. *Just making it look believable now.*

Her eyes were predatory. Hungry. He was used to a long casting glare with her words doing the talking. Instead, her eyes were just fixed on him. She refused to look away. *Control. Total control.* He should not be reading her actions, but it was instinctual. If he pulled his eyes away, she would just yank him right back for her control.

“See, Jarod? Told you my way was more intense,” she said from on top.

“Yeah.” His voice squealed. That wasn’t his fault in acting, only an error. She looked like she was having trouble with his hands though. *Cuffs. She really did always use cuffs, damn Parker.* But, she found a place. He found his hands pinned against the headboard. “Does anyone get injured with you? No, nevermind, don’t tell me.”

“Mm, just be lucky you aren’t wearing a tie.” She hopped off and jiggled around slightly. “Give yourself a second to breathe. I’ll be back.”

Jarod. Sort of did that. She didn’t even relinquish control during sex. He watched her get up and realized what she did. She was keeping it as genuine as possible. She was walking around with her long shirt pretty much covering her. No matter what angle anyone used, they would definitely catch that. He felt around the bed. Yep, she jettisoned her bottoms and panties. *Perfect.*

If Mister Parker watched, he’d be screaming. She moved to the bathroom for just a minute before coming back to bed.

Done. Except? People knew him too, and after that mess with Doctor Cox?

He leaned over and gave her a small kiss on her head. She casted a ‘what the fuck?’ glance but he just smiled.

“Sex is great with you,” he said. “Maybe, one day, it could turn into more? Little Miss?” He had her.

She was practically biting her tongue, trying to figure out what to say for the position he just pulled. “Probably not.”

“Hey? A man can dream,” he said as he got tucked back in. There. Now it looked like Parker was into him, and like he was falling for Miss Parker.

As for Cox? He’d deal with him tomorrow.

## Ps4 Friend Codes

Miss Parker got up and glanced at Jarod. Man was an idiot. A genius idiot. A cruel, genius idiot. *I could have been stuck here a long time. Things could have happened in that time.* He was cleared though, clear to leave. No little pretenders to worry about, he got that clearly. Her mess wasn't his mess anymore. *He's staying anyhow.* No doubt her lovely little benefits were going to disappear now. Like, her Pall Malls. Oh, those lovelies made it all bearable. Same with her favorite bourbon. But also? Cox wasn't the greatest guy to screw, but now she would have to figure out how to work herself out sexually. Trapped with Jarod.

Jarod was a pro, he didn't experience any kind of sex in The Centre. When he got out, he definitely became like the rest of the guys in the world. Quite obvious with that Skylar bitch. Still. That was a long time to get used to it. She had nothing now. *Can I not have sex at all?* Jarod was definitely not an option. *Shit. No, the doctor sucked! He would have kept me in here forever. No, focus. Figure it out. Hm.*

She got dressed in her panties and bottoms from last night and looked outside briefly through the curtains, thinking. *Sydney. Daphne. Broots. Apparently, a weird new guy in the corner.* They were all options. Construction workers could probably sneak in. Damn, she never had a problem with looking over a construction worker. Even if she did though, she now had company. *They won't let me out. Doubtful Jarod is going to go far.* Maybe waiting would be best. Jarod seemed to think they could figure out a way before her pills were done.

He better not be underestimating her skills either. She might have been stuck in there, lazy, without anything to do but she was tough. Excellent in her academy. Like it or not, he knew she was excellent in her academy.

Later. For now, she'd just have to deal with Jarod. She noticed him getting up too.

"Before Cox comes, get back in bed," Jarod said. He got up and headed toward the back where the shower was at.

"Last goodbyes are so hard." She went over to the side of the bed and took a goodbye swig of her Maker's Mark. Her drink. Her crutch for all those years of getting through shit. A major crutch used to get through Jarod's antics. And her cigs? She couldn't smoke them as heavy, Cox didn't do major supplying. She'd only been working on one pack. She'd gained another yesterday but Sydney took it. Now it wouldn't matter. Jarod was right, sooner or later people would start seeing the footage and all her goodies would be taken away. She grabbed her lighter and enjoyed her last one.

The pills they kept under the covers, to make sure she could take them without being seen. As Jarod came out, he spotted her of course. She had already taken down most of her cigarette. "It was a goodbye."

"Uh huh." He went over toward her. "Rotating air is also a part of this whole thing. This does not need to be in here." He took her Pall Malls. "And no more of that. No more."



“Gaw,” she complained. “You really are Sydney’s Teddy Bear.”

“No, I’m Jarod,” he complained just as loud. “And I have no friends.”

Huh? She watched him go over to his console. “All those months and no friends?”

“Oh, I have plenty of friends on my original account,” Jarod informed her. “It helps me keep in touch with some of the people I met. Except. Not the ones I met beforehand.”

*Bye Skylar.* Ooh. “Fine, what do you want?”

“I need friends,” Jarod said. “Friend codes. People around here who play on a ps4. Find out who does around for me if you can.”

“Sure, I’ll just walk out and do that,” she said sarcastically. *You owe him.* “Fuck. Fine!” She went out toward the curtain area and knocked, catching Sydney’s attention. He came over with a delightful smile. He always did have a nice smile. “How much older is he than me?” She didn’t realize she said that just loud enough.

“Too old. Don’t try. I will *leave you here.*”

Oops. *Yeah, he’s old enough to be my father.* She still gave him a nice smile as he came up toward the glass. “Hi, Syd. Um? Do you know who Jarod can be friends with on his little gaming thing?”

“The ps4,” Sydney said to her. “I play it. Broots plays it. Daphne plays it.”

Was she missing something? “All of you play it?”

“So do I.”

She looked toward the stranger she had noticed earlier in the room. Straight laced. Tie. Had Centre written all over him. “Who are you?”

“Oh. My name’s Mister Lyle,” he answered.

“And you play on a ps4?”

“Absolutely. The harder you work, the harder you play,” he said. “The aforementioned Jarod, right? Well, that would be interesting.”

“Who are you?” She had to ask.

“Oh. Well, I found a little problem with our doctor,” Lyle said. “Here to fix that.”

*I can fix Cox.*

“See? You can only pull the wool over the eyes of The Centre for a short time, before it eventually sees through everything,” He told her like she was a brand new rookie. “In the long run, a very short time. I believe Mister Parker in fact is um-“

She heard banging on the door on the other side.

"I'll get it," Jarod said, a little too delighted to leave his game.

Oh. Yep. It looked like Miss Parker's Daddy had started to try and catch on video footage. Jarod just waved out the door as he approached with a whistle. "Lovely Morning."

"A word used does not mean *her*," he warned him.

"Mean who?" Jarod played dumb. After all, that area was supposed to be private.

"My daughter!" He yelled at him.

"Um? Oh, Little Miss," Jarod said. "A word used does not mean her. Gee, Mister Parker, I don't know what you're talking about." He smirked.

"I try to leave privacy, but it's the dome! If something happens, I have to- just stay away from her!"

"Oh?" He gave a sideways smile. "You caught that, huh? Did you catch the good doctor too?" Ah. Mister Parker wasn't disturbed at all by the good doctor reaction. At all. "You did that. You set that up."

"Safety was my priority," he said to Jarod. "Still is."

"Hm. Well? It would have been good at some point to tell your daughter you kind of prostituted her away? Why not now?" Jarod called for her to come over. She looked over, and she already heard it. The dome wasn't a place to get away with much.

"I did what I thought was best, and I gave her what I could," he said. He looked toward her, of course not expecting for her to be mad or anything. "Angel, I'm afraid that's over for privacy. The Triumvirate is taking more lead in watching things now." She hadn't said anything yet. "I did what I thought was best."

"Please don't speak, Daddy," she finally said. "Everything's always watched. I don't want you to get in trouble." She swallowed.

"I know, Sweetie. It'll be alright," he said, like it was nothing. She didn't fight back against it either. "Doctor Cox is in a tussle now between Zane and I. You won't be examined for a little while. I'm stuck in a little tussle too." He glared back at Jarod. "Everything was fine until you started messing around in this area! You didn't want pretenders and I had it taken care of! Hm."

Not. Even. So far, no one said what the event was or the results of anything was out loud. It was kept hanging in the air for the cameras, yet clearly understood between them. Eventually, Miss Parker left that area. Probably to curl up in bed again. She had a long way to understand what to do in a dome yet. "You know, showing support for your daughter is one thing. That

was being a good dad,” Jarod said, clearing the air. “You made her take a deal for it all that never needed to be taken.”

“I gave her a semblance of control in this dome!” He yelled back. “It’s not the vulgarity of the situation, it’s that she has no control over anything in this dome. She is a person of control, and that was the gift I was giving back to her.”

“Centre Indoctrination doesn’t work on me,” Jarod warned him. “I would keep that doctor away from here. I don’t think she’ll take his presence well. I don’t think I will either.”

“And you think you are any better!” He yelled at Jarod. “His actions were warranted, she even made the offers first, you are taking her for a ride!”

“If you believed that, you would have separated us,” Jarod egged him on in a whisper. “Whatever is happening in this dome at night? It’s the business of me and my Little Miss.” Bang. Mister Parker involuntarily struck the wall. Then? Remembering how emotionally irritating it was when she changed the subject during an intense exchange of words? “I have just one more thing to say to you.”

“What?!”

“I need friends for my ps4,” he said. “I can’t have my old friends list, I had to create everything new. So far I’m going to have Sydney and um, that weird Mister Lyle guy to play with. Do you have a ps4?”

“I don’t play games! There’s no time in running The Centre to do that!”

Yeah, that was a good trick. *Leave it to Parker to find the best ways to make people mad.* “If you could round me out some friend codes, that’d be great. Thanks. Oh, and lunch is coming soon. Right?”

He wasn’t even responding now. “Tell my daughter to come here.”

“I’ll leave the area. She’ll come if she wants to.” Jarod went back to the little curtained area back to his ps4. He saw her move to the front, but kept his ears eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“You need to stop this ridiculous thing with Jarod! Keep it together! *He* is the enemy!”

“It’s hard to tell, Daddy. You let me sleep with my own natural ally.”

*That a girl.* Jarod continued to just fix the trajectory for the best bird flinging in his game.

“For control, Angel. Parkers need to feel control, especially in a situation where there is none. I did you a favor.”

*I’d be six feet deep by her own stomp for saying something like that.* Jarod watched some rocks fall on his game. He heard the sound of a knock on the curtains and pulled them back

slightly to see Sydney. He held his fingers toward him, almost squished, showing just a bit. It should be lunchtime.

“I need to listen and be nice to Jarod. I think this qualifies as a compromise. I take control where I have control, Daddy,” Jarod heard her voice again. “I take it with Jarod in the way I choose.”

“Angel!” Her Daddy roared at her. “No. That is not control, that is manipulation.”

“When it comes to Jarod, I manipulate. Not the other way around.” Then, she left the area. She didn’t say a word to Jarod as she came back in. She saw Sydney over by the curtains. “Lunchtime, Syd?”

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“Jarod?” Miss Parker complained as she saw the fried chicken and mashed potatoes lopped onto her plate. “Are you trying to get me fat or are you trying to commit suicide?”

“She’s talking now to me,” Jarod said to Sydney. “That’s progress for her.” Aw, yummy. The food looked good, but that wasn’t what made him happy. She didn’t outright tell her dad off, but before she came over to eat? Her neck was now devoid of her dad’s support necklace. “They really did go all the way down to Georgia to get it. Nobody can duplicate Mama Mae’s chicken.” He looked back toward Sydney. “Did you get the code for me?”

“Yes. I’ll put it through the mail slot,” Sydney insisted. “That strange man, Mister Lyle, also seems to want to be your friend. However? Broots also has a code along with Daphne.”

“I’ll take all the codes,” Jarod said, “especially of Mister Mysterious Lyle.”

“Since when is gaming such a rage now around The Centre?” Miss Parker looked at Sydney. “Even *you*? What do these friends even do?”

“It’s very good for hand-eye coordination,” Sydney answered the first part of her question. “Especially the one I am playing now. It’s got trajectory throwing of birds at walls.”

“You’re playing Angry Birds,” Jarod noticed. “I am too. We should play together. If Miss Parker gets cheery, maybe she could take a swing at it.”

“I wouldn’t mind that,” she said digging her fork into her potatoes like a shovel into the ground after burying someone.

“Not at my ps4,” Jarod corrected her thinking. “At the game. Could be that thing called fun?”

“Could you be less of that thing called fucking annoying?” she complained. “This food is nothing but carbs, Jarod, you did this on purpose! I order next time.”

“Don’t worry. We can work it off later,” he teased her. He watched Daphne come back up.

“Sorry I didn’t have more than a picture,” she said to him. She looked toward Miss Parker, beaming. “Good Morning, Miss Parker.”

“Where is that morning that’s good ‘cause I’ll take two fuckin’ ass tickets to it. You should have minded your own business,” Miss Parker said back to her. “Unless what I’m screwin’ isn’t human, take a back seat, Blondie.”

“We all had a long night,” Jarod apologized for her. “What’s that?” She had something in her hand.

“What else? The food she actually eats.” Daphne slid it through the mail slot.

“Okay, you came prepared, but don’t think this cuts it alone.” Miss Parker scooted the food she had to order with Jarod for Daphne’s food.

“There’s more than that on the console for games,” Daphne said to Miss Parker: “I am playing COD ghosts and Killzone. You should give it a try sometime. Trying new and different experiences can be fun.”

“Thanks for the food,” Miss Parker settled with.

“The chicken is very good,” Sydney noticed it.

“Southern style,” Jarod said. “Flew straight in.” Meanwhile, Jarod grabbed the friend codes. The three he needed, and one extra. He knew Sydney would be at his side. Daphne had earned a solid A. Like it or not, he never would have discovered the pill secret without her. Broots seemed like he wouldn’t stray from Sydney or Miss Parker. Then again, protecting his daughter could be taken two ways. Making sure he didn’t get caught, or making sure he never participated in the first place. *He’s a good dad, but which move would a good dad make?*

He also needed him at the other end of the ps4’s, to make sure their ends were taken care of too. No one was going to record their gameplay or chats, nor restrict it. With Broots’ intelligence, he probably achieved it by now. Although, Jarod couldn’t use it on his, it was too out in the open. He’d have to play with them? Well, under the covers.

Well. *Not even little pretenders involved, just had to butt in to keep Cox out. Partly her anyhow, she started it all.* Yet? He still didn’t regret his decision. It wasn’t right. It was fake control and once she got out, it would be over. Her Centre future was hers to decide. “Oh yeah, I forgot to write down my friend code.” He grabbed a napkin. “Can you push that button, Syd?” Sydney pushed the button. He grabbed the little marker he had and wrote down the friend code, with the latitude and longitude for them to check underneath the napkin. It would smear fast, so Sydney better be ready. “There you go.”

Sydney got it and looked down. He grabbed the friend code, wiped the coordinates and nodded to Jarod.

“Hang on, hang on. Let’s see his friend code.” Mister Lyle came over to see it too. “Well. Good. It is just a friend code.”

Jarod just shook his head. “I came here willingly to make sure nothing happens with Miss Parker. Why would I be trying to pass on anything else?”

“Well? Just make sure you have the right kind of games,” Mister Lyle said. “Not every game works for friends.”

“Oh. Nothing’s really impossible when you set your mind to it.”

“Yep.” Mister Lyle’s eyes drifted to Miss Parker. “You might be right about that.”

# Why

Cliffs of White just outside of The Centre

“Whoah.” Broots looked down at the water below them. “Are we sure this is it?”

“This is the location Jarod gave us,” Sydney said. “I know it is. What is the lowest point to climb?”

“Forget climbing, just falling would kill you,” Daphne argued. She bent to the ground, looking over.

Broots neared the ground too, looking for something. “It’s official, Jarod isn’t human. Who could climb this without any kind of assistance?”

“Someone escaping for their very lives,” Sydney said. He looked around them. “I don’t think even students in the Academy would want to attempt this. It’s not safe at all, one missing step and it’s over.”

“Then we need to find a different spot, or a different way to safely come up,” Daphne said. “Miss Parker can do anything, but Broots is right. This just isn’t for a regular human. Is there another area around here?” She looked around. “Over there, it’s the shoreline. They could run across the beach and be out of here.”

“There is a train that way,” Sydney said, “but I’m sure Jarod chose this way instead for a reason. If The Centre is looking, they will have eyes right there.” That must be the way he went with Catherine. Where they had been was steeper and there would need to be someone waiting to get them out of the cliffs. The other way looked better, but The Centre. Jarod didn’t show them that way, he wouldn’t risk it. *It has to become doable. Somehow.*

“This is only the first step and I already feel stumped,” Broots admitted. “Just how hard is it for them to get out?”

Time marches on . . .

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Some days it felt like someone was always there, watching them. All of the red eyes of the security cameras were so annoying. When Sydney or anyone else wasn’t around, she felt watched even more knowing they were completely surrounded with two way mirror glass outside the huge dome. At least seeing someone instead of not knowing if someone was there felt better. She admitted that. That feeling felt torturous and it just seemed to let the feeling of prison loom so heavy over them. Still? *For the Good of The Centre.* Although, that phrase

was getting harder to hold onto as the days passed. Jarod and her used to feel like the hot topic. She knew Daphne was never far. Broots always stopped by. Sydney's lab of course meant she'd see Sydney.

At least she would see more sweepers or a cleaner if Jarod hadn't fixed the second dome door to close on its own. The Centre fixed the passwords again, but his work on the second dome still stayed. Now it was only opened for simulations that involved chemicals that needed to escape.

Sometimes, Daphne would come to eat. She'd always know a day beforehand though, since they needed to know to order a day beforehand. Otherwise, nothing. Something inside told her they were all very close to getting her out with Jarod, or they were so far behind they didn't even bother to show their faces. Which was the most vexing part. She knew how to 'talk' to Jarod under the covers, but even he didn't give away much. Hardly anything at all. *They wouldn't just stop.*

But they had. For a week straight already, no one visited once. Before that, they visited sparingly. It was worrying. Every night she snuck her pill. Last night she snuck her last one. It was pretty easy if she took a small nap during the day. She didn't need Jarod doing acrobatics against her.

She thought maybe she'd reached a limit of bitch too high for them when she had to let go of her cigarettes again, but Jarod seemed to suffer through it just fine. Not like he had a choice though. Still? He seemed fine.

Life felt about as evened out as it could be. She had a stream of clothes in drawers she shared with Jarod. They were cleaned every day by The Centre so she only kept a weeks worth at a time. Her father rarely came to visit. Most likely because she said she wouldn't stop doing anything with Jarod. It was their only way to discuss certain things.

Although, about the last thing they discussed was three weeks ago. She needed to practice holding her breath as long as possible. He also moved a lot of the medical equipment back and told her to exercise daily. He described it as one day there would be a test that would put her life at risk so she needed to be prepared for it.

And oh did she. With only Jarod trapped in a bubble with her, she used any pent up energy and placed it into her exercise, like she used to do in the Academy. Escaping The Centre wasn't going to be easy. She couldn't be weak. Whatever it took, it would take a lot. Jarod made that clear. It wouldn't just take time, it would take risk.

Heavy. Risk.

She didn't feel any better when she saw the doctor smiling from outside the bubble as she did her situps.

"Good Morning," Cox said to her. "I hear you have been exercising heavily." He tightened his tie. "Ouch. Perhaps we should skip our first usual activities? You can hurt and I can't handle you everyday."



Cox. He was back. *I could take him on a real tour now. Oof, I need that tie. No! No, he's not worth me. His free ticket is over. I have to . . . leave him to Jarod.*

"Then again." He must have been impressed by her look.

*Nope.* She flipped herself up. All of the extra training had practically taken her back to her Academy days. When her loyalty to The Centre was the greatest. However, she felt that loyalty waning a little each day. Ever since Mister Lyle showed up, everyone seemed to be stepping away. Still, her family built The Centre. It. Had it's purpose. To. *For the goodness of The Centre. Everyone does their part. My part is running it though, I am Parker. No one can turn me into meat.* No matter how much she felt like it. The few times her dad did visit, he reminded her of that. The Centre would either be hers after conceiving a pretender, or she could come back after Jarod did her surgery thing. Either way, she wasn't disposable. She was a leader. She would be the leader.

As long as she followed Jarod's orders for now. No matter how much he annoyed her, he was a superior to her. A soldier couldn't go over their superior. It wasn't a weak verses strength thing, it was a chain of command made for the good of the mission. She moved toward the middle where Jarod was playing with some contraption he built to go with his ps4. For on the go. Because they had sooo many places to go trapped in a bubble. "Doctor is making a house call."

He seemed to get the hint. He turned his game off. "I'll go greet him then. Get in bed."

*The doctor is making a house call, huh?* Jarod went toward the front. Yep, there he was. He gave a simple wave. "I said I was taking care of our needs. Thanks for coming but bye."

"Well, that may be true? On more than one front. And might I add? She is a lot more gentle with you so the slack is appreciated."

"Maybe she doesn't feel like she needs as much control, when she has more of a choice."

"Well, if I had known a little more beforehand, I probably wouldn't have gone with her deal. I still have marks from her play. Still? It seems like less control isn't satisfying her as much according to all the training she is doing in there. You either aren't satisfying your patient, or you are planning some kind of get away."

This guy really wanted to get under Jarod's skin. Not even close though. "Not really, it's a dome. We can't go anywhere but we can't just sit still all day. Even I have to stop and train. If you don't, you'll have even more health problems. Even you should have guessed that, Doc. I said I took over as the doctor. I didn't say it was going to be a medical regimen." What did he want already? He really didn't have time for this. It took time to figure out ways to share the way to break out to everyone. He had to do it sometimes while simultaneously dealing with Mister Lyle. Now that was a nasty gamer, but if he never played, it would look even worse. He also managed to get more people in The Centre's friends codes too, so it didn't look as suspicious. Some played. Some didn't. A nice mishmash of different gamers, friends, and even a few different let's players. It all looked like one big game to The Centre. Stifling off

the boredom with the 'little toy' he found on the outside. Maybe having that single toy would make Jarod happy and he'd just stay. Be a good boy.

Oh so wrong. He had the way decent enough for himself, and her extra training should be sufficient. He only had one flaw, although his hunters still insisted everything was too dangerous.

Once Sydney heard and got a real snapshot of it all, he even decreed it was too dangerous for him.

Jarod did it twice. He'd do it a third, and he'd bring Parker. Case closed. The only real flaw was the landing. Broots and Daphne insisted the beach was the better idea. It gave them a running edge. Jarod did that before, it didn't turn out well. He wasn't going to get pitbulls sicked out after him again. Daphne said she could try and get a car down there, but they would be going through forest. It wouldn't work. The path he had was high, but clear. Johnny Boy Creed met and got him out with little trouble. He also had a damn fast car Jarod splurged on to make sure they did make it out. Although, they couldn't peel off at first, tire tracks that took out the grass were a dead giveaway but as soon as they could move faster, he booked it.

Not one helicopter. Not one car. No one expected out there because it was too rough for a regular man to climb. One slip was death. It had to be the way though. Jarod was exhausted by the time he reached that shoreline, but he had to keep swimming when it died down, get away, and go up the cliffs. It was easier the second time, he made sure to become a mountain climbing instructor to a water and marine expert especially after that. Fit it in almost right after Harlem. Going from the city to out in nature was a nice balance.

As hard as Miss Parker trained though, was it enough? Did she have enough of the skills? Before the dome she was no slouch. She still tried to run Jarod down. Now, she had a body like she was fresh out of the Academy. Now, there was a good chance she could.

And he knew it. He played dumb with the T-board conversation. He never let on how much he knew about anything. It wasn't the way to get things done. Especially when he was rooming with the one that might still come back and try to catch him.

Last time with Catherine Parker, The Centre was ready. It knew there would be a breakout, somebody tipped them somehow.

Jarod's way was sure to work though, The Centre was on extra active duty, even keeping Miss Parker in his dome with him for what should have been 48 hours last time. He *still* made it out without a single person finding him or his way.

Yet? It didn't do any justice if he was the only one who survived. Or worse, if they recovered her right before- *don't even go there*. It was his decision, in the end. Daphne added a rope to the side and said she'd be there hidden but not real far away.

The rope was more dangerous. He'd tell Parker it was for a last resort since he had no idea how it would be hooked up. That could be instant death.

He had kept Parker mostly in the dark. Just in case the old PTB's were somehow getting something, her looking clueless helped. She had no idea if they'd be in there another day or another year. Which was perfect for his intentions.

The doctor was still standing there though. "You might want some actual degree help though. As a Pretender, you still can't fake every detail from years of Harvard. Nor can you assume the personality of someone as dedicated to his craft."

*Yeah. I can. If I wanted to.* Did he understand who Jarod had been? Was he just trying to be, well, what Miss Parker would say is a prick? *He's really itching for me to try something.* He'd have to do better than that. "Nah, we are good."

"If you are thinking about trying to break out, with her?" The doctor kept trying. "That means if The Centre ever catches you again, it will know your way out. She'll come back and tell us. You'll never get out again."

Jarod was aware of that. "You're not really telling me anything new or interesting. Letting you come in does nothing for us. Sorry."

"Oh, I don't know. You can take your little mobile game device, go wait over in the exercising medical room and let me examine my patient. I am sure a more thorough examination should be necessary with a real, qualified doctor."

What was with him? "You know what? I pretended to be a school teacher once," Jarod said. "You want to know how to get under my skin, you just need to meet some of my students." He whistled. "Excuse me, unless I have to give you a bathroom pass, you're dismissed." He walked off. If the doc came in, he wouldn't have an easy time, and it would be against the rules Jarod set to run the military sims. So far, Broots and Daphne had kept up their ends too. "Parker? Let's learn to walk."

She just gave him an odd look. "Like what, a duck?"

"Close."

"A pretender?"

"A pretender is not close to a duck."

"I thought a pretender could be anything it wanted to be."

*What a-* "Come on, over here." He watched her move by him. "Closer behind me." She moved closer behind him. "Now throw your arms around my waist like you're on the back of my motor bike and follow me around. Vroom vroom."

She muttered a little, nothing audible he could pick up as she put her arms around his stomach.

"Okay, let's walk." Jarod started slow, making sure she picked up his gait. He couldn't change for her gait, he knew how to walk for what needed done with his. He moved her all around the dome like a little duckling behind him. "Okay, try some sharp turns." She did.

“Okay, let’s try a small jump. When you feel me bounce slightly, be ready for a jump.” They started with a small jump. Then a bigger jump. “Well, this is fun, too bad the bed’s not big enough. Might have to get brave one of these nights.” What? He couldn’t help to annoy her a little bit. They’d be heading out soon. Real soon. Then he wouldn’t be there to bug her anymore. She’d have a life being the bitch she’d always be. He’d have his life he was trying to restore. Done and done.

Although. He felt a little better ever since she admitted she might adopt. It might remind her of her humanity again. Especially since that whole month, it still seemed like she was on The Centre’s side. She didn’t want to be the meat, but he couldn’t make her turn on The Centre. Not much else he could do. He had promised not to be there about his family and he wouldn’t say anything about her mother. A small part of him, a very small part of him, had hoped she would have cared enough to just share something. Anything about his family. He would have given back in return.

Nothing.

Well? At least they learned to tolerate each other. Maybe when she followed her Centre duty, she wouldn’t be outright gunning so hard on him. Who knows? Maybe this whole thing brought her closer from the brink she’d been on. And like it or not, he would leave a present for the little Parker. Something nice before it grew up and became. Well, whatever Parkers became.

Pre-villain days were the best for them. “What would you call it?” He wondered out loud. She scoffed. What was with the scoff? Then he remembered what he just joked about earlier. “No, not *that*, your first. What are you going to call it?”

“If I have one, if?” she muttered. “Not Jarod.”

“That’s good. A Parker named after me wouldn’t sit right,” he decided. “Are you going to call it Mister or Miss Parker? Won’t that get confusing?” He started to slide around, knowing she would have to keep up. Aw, his fun with her before they had to go. “Then again, if you just let everyone call you ‘Little Miss’ I guess you’d be covered. Little Miss?” Some aggravation, not much. He hadn’t pushed her like that for some time. It would make survival with her in there a form of hell. That should be getting a clear indicator, they’d be leaving tonight.

“My father trusted me to watch you 48 hours,” she said, changing the subject. “The day you went away. You know we could have tagged you.”

“Oh no. Really?” Jarod played dumb. The Centre had GPS tracers that were so tiny, it fit on the top of the finger. Jarod had watched for that. “That’s nasty enough I may have to take a shower, wash my hair, and remember to change my clothes for hearing it. Thanks for the tip.”

“Shut up.”

“I love your little love replies,” Jarod remarked back to her. “Guess our hot times never translated to real love yet, huh?”

“I tolerate you for the hope of a good fuck. I’m hoping I get that one of these days.”

“Ouch, Parker.” Jarod tiskied. “Be nice or you might not get none. Do you always have to sound like your PMSing? I know you’re not.”

“No, I just feel foolish, like I need skates at some stupid roller rink, what *isthis*?”

“Oh, the sliding? Nothing,” he said. “I just thought it’d be fun if we went slide, slide, slippity slide.”

“Oh gawwww, stop hanging out with Cman! He’s such a fuckin’ corny horny toad.”

“He’s interesting though. I’ve timed you verses him. When based minute by minute he says less offenses than you do. Although his music packs more of a punch. Reminds me of my first place. Odd how memories seep through unexpected places.”

“Jarod, what is your problem?” she growled. “You know I can only take . . .”

Jarod waited. Ah?

“Well then, maybe you can rock my world tonight.”

Yep, she got it. *Out of here, Parker. We are out of here.*

Not long now. A trudge through hell, but that hell was only so long. Once night came and they started that descent, it wouldn’t take long. Gut busting, mind bending, and death defying. She was as ready as she’d ever be though.

“I really insist you let me in one more time?” Doctor Cox gave one more knock at their door. Finally tired of being ignored, he shrugged. “You’ll regret not having me.” He walked off, whistling his usual creepy tunes.

“Angel!”

Oop, instant jump off from his sliding fun. *Gotta run, Daddy called.* Jarod came back out in the middle, between the curtain doors of the second area, staring into the first.

“Angel. This is getting ridiculous,” her father said. “Look at him, look at what he’s doing to you! He turned you into looking like a goofball. You know better! Where is this coming from, I need to know,” he declared.

“Just. Burning off steam, Daddy,” she insisted. “It’s lonely in this dome. There’s exercise, netflix, watching him play games and that’s it.”

“Well? I know it’s hard,” he agreed. “But we do it for the good of The Centre.”

Then? Jarod heard something. He heard something different from Parker he never heard before. Something that he had no idea sounded better than ‘no, Daddy.’ So simple, yet he never even pictured it. The dome *had* done her good. She didn’t outright deny The Centre, or point out whether she was for or against, but that little word. Three letters.

“Why?” She asked him. “Why do we do it for the good of The Centre? What good is The Centre besides having a small leg up in technology?”

“What?” Her father couldn’t believe he heard it. “Are you questioning me about The Centre?”

“If I’m going to take over one day soon, don’t you think I should know by now? I’m not in The Academy. You taught me everything about it, you said it yourself,” she declared. “So just tell me the big secret. Why?”

“Why.” He whispered the words so lightly. “Angel. You’ve been isolated from The Centre’s teachings too long, you need to forget that now because all that is going to do is get you-!”

Miss Parker saw what happened in front of her. She saw the visuals while at the same time had The Centre’s indoctrination being filled in her ears. Her father was up against the glass, his head shot right through. Her first thought was to get to him, even now, even clearly seeing he was dead. Her second more rational thought was to look for the person who shot him. He came closer, wheeling an oxygen tank. She was sunk on the ground, staring at this monster. This inhuman thing.

“Hello there. I hear you’ve been looking for me,” he said with a voice that wheezed. “I’m your biological father. I’m the new Mister Parker.”

## **Not Even Death Can Save Her**

New Mister Parker. “Ruler of The Centre. You shot my father.” He was her father. “Honor thy Centre father.” He shot her father. “You shot my father. Honor they . . . you . . . Everything for The Good of The . . .”

Words failed. The man she knew wasn’t her father was a Parker. She still loved him and followed him for he ruled The Centre.

This man now ruled The Centre, but just shot and killed her father. He claimed to be a Parker. She should be obedient. He was Leader of The Centre. Yet he just killed her father.

“Now be a good girl for your Daddy, Angel,” Her new father, the new Mister Parker spoke. “Take your treatments back up. It’s your role.”

Her other daddy didn’t want that, he wanted her not to have treatments to have a baby. At least, not a pretender baby. This daddy wanted that. This daddy ruled The Centre. The Centre killed the man she thought and loved as daddy. The Centre killed her daddy when he still led it, and now that killer ruled The Centre. And he was her daddy. And . . .

And she had no idea how long she was on that ground. She wasn’t trailing through the grey or riding through the mud. She was sliding through hell and about to arrive at that very destination. She could already feel the warmth licking at her body. Encompassing it. Surrounding it. No, wait. That wasn’t hell.

It felt safe. Hell didn’t feel safe.

“Now? I don’t lead the same way, Miss Parker,” her father said. “For one, you can call me Raines. For two, I don’t care about your existence beyond what you can do for my Centre. For three?”

She turned her head and saw the mysterious Lyle who’d been hanging around back and forth.

“Hi, Sis.” He waved. “Mister Lyle is short. For Mister Lyle Parker,” he said. “I’m your twin brother, but don’t get fond of me. I’ll be the next ruler of The Centre in a few years and you?” He snapped his teeth.

“What are you going to do?” That question didn’t come from her.

“I am less of the mind that pretenders need a mommy,” The new Mister Parker said. “Call me old fashioned. The best way to move forward is to take everything from the last vital resource, AKA, Miss Parker, and let surrogacy see how many we can create.”

Meat. Nothing but meat. To her father, that was not a father, but a father. To The Centre. Meat.

“I am more of the mind that they do!” Zane’s voice shouted.

Uncle Zane. For the first time, it felt *good* to actually think that name. And only because-

“Current research shows children will have more intelligence when they bond and feel secure,” Zane said. “Whether my niece, The Pretender Jarod, or both.” He looked above Miss Parker, straight ahead. “You should have taken my deal. It was only a matter of time before something happened. You can’t stop the future for the present.”

“On the contrary,” the new Mister Parker said. “We can have both. Brother.”

“True.”

“Obviously, the old deal is gone,” Mister Lyle, her own twin brother, had said above her head. “Truth is, you leave or refuse to do those military sims, and my dad will flat out kill her and take everything she has to offer The Centre. Actually, it’s more productive that way. Imagine how many pretenders The Centre could have that way instead?”

Then, Doctor Cox came right back over again. “Are my services needed again yet?”

“Maybe. However, the pretender does not look like he will make justifiable decisions right now. More reminiscent of the chimpanzees on SL17,” Zane said.

She felt something squeeze her tighter. It wasn’t the release of death. Her mind was slush. All she felt was a zipper at her back and her arm over leather.

“Well, we can’t shoot him,” her terrible supposed twin brother said. “He’s worth too much.”

“We should get in there, the plant should be done soon,” Doctor Cox said. He smiled above Miss Parker. “Security and comfort as we were extra sure to secure your presence this time. It was nice having almost a whole month of no worries, wasn’t it?”

“Counterfeit pills. Common brand name. Perfect shape. Great sculpting, box and all. You made that whole thing so detailed, even I thought they were real. Probably used the actual company even for this one simple thing. What do you wanna hear? Bravo? I will never cheer for any of you!” Jarod’s voice yelled, piercing through the dome. She felt herself being moved slightly away from the door. “He isn’t coming in here. I refuse to let him touch her.”

Doctor Cox looked at Zane and the new Leader of The Centre. “Mister Zane? Mister Raines? What do you wish to do?”

“I still contest, I should be leader. You sniped your own brother,” Zane complained like Raines simply broke his toy. Her own uncle didn’t seem to care for the lump of flesh halfway bleeding on the door and floor that she used to love. She used to crave. She used to want attention from more than anything. Refuse on the floor. Refuse on the floor. “We should not waste my niece on such a fruitless endeavor. If I am leader, I will let her bear and raise pretenders. We don’t have the capacity to watch and hold every single one that could be born anyhow.”

“That is true,” Raines agreed. “There may be many and The Centre is more than pretenders. Still, it’s a waste. We should collect everything before she can’t bear anymore. For future



uses.”

“Yes, for future use,” Zane said. “Agreed. So long as Jarod does his part? Go ahead and bring him in.”

Miss Parker noticed him instantly. Being held at gunpoint by sweepers. Sydney. Long, dedicated employee of The Centre.

“Calm your pretender down so we can get in there,” Zane said.

Sydney glared at them. “Jarod does not listen to me anymore. I very much doubt after his exposure to the outside, anyone entering that room will be leaving without consequences taken against them.”

“Except you then,” Mister Lyle said to him. “He may not listen, but he won’t hurt you. You’re the intermediary now. You know you have no choice. If not? The IT guy gets it. Get it?”

“Broots never planned on helping in any escape,” Sydney lied to them. “He is a mechanical and computer genius. He dabbles in everything, including the latest technology for fun. Just because he has the most popular trending game system right now at his home means nothing! Even his daughter had one.”

“Yes and no,” Mister Lyle said. “For one, yeah the egghead might have been playing around with the tech on his own. We found the receipt for like the first day it came out.”

“Then stop this!” Sydney yelled.

“Then again? Geniuses playing together never create just fun things.”

Sydney took a deep breath and sighed. “Jarod. You are going to have some limited choices. I can’t help you with these choices.” Sydney’s eyes met hers. “I’m sorry, Miss Parker.” He looked back above her again. “Jarod.”

“I know, I get it,” Jarod seethed. “Just say it already.”

“You can pretend to be a doctor, and you have even been a doctor providing several surgeries. If you don’t want Doctor Cox in there, you’ll have to take over for him.”

“And if I refuse, Sydney?” Jarod’s voice was filled with venom, almost dripping. “Refuse to do their dirty work?”

Sydney held his hands, interweaving them. “Two things. First, you are in a breathing dome of air.”

Miss Parker heard what sounded like something closing.

“Jarod,” Sydney practically whispered. “Each area can be cut off from each other.”

“Oh. Oohooh, just like The Centre!” His voice raged and yet, had a cry like she remembered when he was younger. “Why else would you fill this with artificial air than to make sure it could be taken away! Just like you, you never create, you destroy! All of you dirty people, you are all going to pay for this one day!” She felt something kick around underneath her, like a child having a temper tantrum. Then she was halfway in the air, in the middle of the dome. She moved back and forth. “You said two things, what’s the other, Sydney?”

“You only have six months to get her pregnant before the anxiousness of The Centre will simply.” Words. “Harvest her.”

“Time for some math lessons, Jarod,” Raines said. “What’s more important?”

“What’s more important? I can’t even handle talking to you yet- Get in here, Sydney!”

“Alright, just a second? Have to add a few more details for him,” Mister Lyle said. “Then we’ll send him in there to ruin your life, okay?”

The whole plan just went to hell. Broots was now caught in the crossfire because Mister Lyle **Parker** snooped at his own private home. And Daphne? Now he knew why she saw what he couldn’t. She didn’t, Cox must have let something go to her. That way Jarod found the pills. Planned everything out to the best he could, knowing the absolute safest times he had, but they made their move first. No doubt they were going to be wanting their damn domes fixed too so he couldn’t access them. He stopped messing with them the day he saw a way to get Cox’s medical bag. Anything else would have looked suspicious, until he was ready.

They were perfect too, no sabotage needed on the other side but some electricity. Kaput.

“Is she alright?” Sydney asked outside the dome, noticing the blank stare from Parker as he got closer.

“Her whole life has been torn apart right in front of her eyes. Again,” Jarod said. “Except no elevator.” He continued to hold her. “Just a solid plexiglas door, watching her father get killed and her biological doing it! Of course she’s not alright! I don’t think she even knows she’s being carried.” Jarod shrugged. “What do you need to do?”

“Take some things, share some options and let you figure out present and future math.” Sydney waited by the door. Mister Parker’s body was still there so a sweeper moved it off to the side like it was a trashbag. The door was released by Jarod. As Jarod did that, the PTB’s decided to open all the doors and let air run free again. Sydney went into the second area and over to the bed. He took the comforter. Of course they wanted the comforter, now they only had a sheet that was practically see through for a camera to capture. Next, Sydney went and unplugged his ps4. Another no brainer. “If Miss Parker has any alcohol or cigarettes, she needs to have them gone.”

“I already did that,” Jarod said. *So close. We have to get out. No, but Broots.* “What are they doing to the poor IT guy, Sydney?”

“I have been informed by Mister Lyle Parker recently that Broots and his daughter are both inside of a T-board, waiting on your decision and actions,” he informed him. “If your decision and action takes longer than the meeting, Broots will decide his life or hers for freedom at the end of it. Before his decision, it will be livestreamed to your TV as well as many other places in The Centre.”

Yeah, that sounded like The Centre. If he escaped with Parker, Broots and his daughter were instant kills. If he didn’t make a decision fast enough, one of them would die. Present math. A present and immediate danger, complete with livestream death watching. The Centre probably had it's own prices for those kind of fun and twisted events. It probably had it's own tacky name of deathstream that Sydney refused to say.

“As said previously, six months to impregnate her, or they harvest her.” Future math. “I was pulled into The Centre four hours ago, giving notice to be here when the leaders changed.” It wasn’t easy to speak for Sydney. “The Centre is so brave now, they will gun down its own leader and talk about running it without even moving him.” Sydney took a deep breath. “I need your choice, Jarod.”

“Like I get much of one,” he stressed. “Let’s see. Options? Refuse everything right now and have my air supply cut off long enough for them to get Miss Parker and tear her to shreds for their own use. Let Doctor Cox in here to handle a single pregnant matter at a time when I don’t trust that he wouldn’t fork her over if it fit his best interests. I could try some kind of escape where the winner of tonight’s livestream will no doubtedly die too. Make a negative decision over the livestream quickly, which would kill both of them as well as cut off air again. Make a positive decision quick enough that they are let go.”

“Correction,” Sydney said. “They aren’t letting them go. They are being banished to a sub level for an undisclosed amount of time.”

“Okay, correction. Make a positive decision quick that they are not killed right away. Do this myself one pregnancy at a time, knowing I only have six months to be successful. Then no matter what, thinking about the average sims of each pretender in each of their lives.” Present verses future. *There is always a chance I can change that future toll, but there’s no chance I can save the present right now.*

“Do you want me to collect her purse or not, Jarod?” Sydney asked. Yeah, Mister Lyle must have passed on news about her razorblade in there.

“J-just wait.” Jarod covered his mouth. The numbers of what could happen were staggering. There were casualties no matter what. The less casualties would be to just . . . *Kill Parker before they can get what they want.* “No.”

“Don’t collect her purse?” Sydney nodded. “Okay.”

“No, I didn’t mean for that.” Shit. “When does the livestream start?” Jarod asked.

“Sooner than we want, Jarod. It’s also dependent upon your actions,” Sydney reminded him. “Not just your words.”

“Yeah. I get that. They like to take command of stuff real quick,” Jarod said. “In fact, I’m betting other pretenders aren’t even on the board of choice anymore, are they?”

“You are the best, Jarod.” Sydney held his hands together, rubbing them. “Even if you ran out of your own vials.”

“Well, I’m just a live sample specimen caught, aren’t I?” Jarod kicked the side of the dome. “I never should have come. I admit it,” he said. “You’re right. I couldn’t think it through, I gained nothing, and now they get everything!”

“Not true, Jarod,” Sydney said. “If you hadn’t come? I doubt she’d still be here to face this decision with. No one predicted this other father and brother team.”

“There is no ‘with’. They want action, not words, before they end that livestream.”

Logical data thinking couldn’t be the winner. Jarod couldn’t leave the way he had to with her carrying anything. Her team would have to find another way out. What was left of it at the end. *Future, I have time to think and change. Present, I don’t have time to think and change.*

Future numbers were approximations, they were high, but with the right variables, it could be lowered. Present numbers were two. Broots and his innocent daughter. Or? “Even if she killed herself, I couldn’t keep them off long enough to make her unviable. I can’t believe they made me have to say that.” Two. Broots and his daughter. His young daughter. Just about Parker’s age when they met.

Future, present. Present, future.

Doctor Cox at her doing who knows what or run the whole evil operation myself.” He paced back and forth again. “No one comes in but you, Sydney, no one!” There was still a chance. She wasn’t pregnant. In shock, and they had to make sure Broots was okay before they did anything. “Simulations?”

“You also don’t have to run any simulations as long as you are pretending to be her doctor,” Sydney said. “I’m sorry. My mind is trying to concentrate.” Sydney reached in his pocket, probably for a Mister Lyle Parker cheat sheet of what to remember. “Even though you were presumably in a sexual relationship, unless it can be fully seen and proven on camera, it in no way counts as impregnating Miss Parker.”

“Of course. Why would it?” Jarod laid her down on the bed. “A mess of choices and options, but there’s only one real one and they know it. There’s only one choice I can choose, Sydney.”

Miss Parker looked beside her. She felt weak. Betrayed. Meat. She looked in front of her and saw Jarod. She tried to get up but her strength hadn’t recovered. “Daddy?”

“He’s gone. Don’t get up,” Jarod said. He turned on the TV. “So we have some livestream entertainment. Broots and his daughter.” He flung the remote away. “I’m sure they want us to

see it, although I know how it ends.”

She looked behind her and realized she wasn’t on her bed. She was on a medical table. The TV had been moved to the medical room. *Broots and his daughter?* “What’s going on?”

“The worst dates ever. I should probably tell Sydney to start bringing flowers when he brings the samples,” Jarod said. “Things went south. Bad.”

She tried to get up again, to get out enough to look back.

“He was shot cold, Parker. You know that. He’s also still there. You don’t need to see that.”

Still there? They just left him there? She looked toward the TV set, her head was starting to put things together. “They’re broadcasting a T-board room on a deathstream?!”

“Yeah. Funny that. Oh, not to everyone. Just to certain people in The Centre. Probably for those special premiums.”

*Damn it.* Broots. “Damn it!”

“Don’t worry, neither of them will die. We are just making them happy watching it,” Jarod said. “So, I know you hate long stories about as much as you hate me. Let’s trim it down and say? I was lousy at saving you. In fact, so bad I just became my own enemy.”

“What the fuck are you babbling about?” She complained. “What’s going on?”

“I just artificially inseminated you,” Jarod said. “I just became your new Doctor.”

*Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope!* She struggled, but boy was she heavy still. “You are the worst rescuer ever, Jarod! Fucking shit, what the hell?” She grabbed her head. “I just took my last pill.”

“Planted. They planted them, they weren’t real,” Jarod said. “You’ve been off a good four weeks.” He exploded his hands toward her. “Shocking, huh? It was for me. Now. There’s no guarantee anything’s going to happen but I have six months to get you pregnant or they are going to harvest you for everything you have. Harvesting is really the only word most of them liked.”

Miss Parker lied back down. “You are the worst contraceptive I ever had. You itched. You’re annoying. You cause cramps that no pain reliever can get rid of. You make my whole body hurt like it’s always PMSing. And now?”

“I saved Broots and his daughter. Present math,” Jarod said. “We have to think of another way out, and there’s no comforter to play with. Nor a ps4. I doubt they’ll even have our little curtained area any more. We’re slowly coming down to whites and plastic.”

*Oh gaw.* “Grab my purse.”

“No good. I had Sydney take it. Your eggs are fine well beyond death. Even if I tried to hang onto your body as long as possible, they’ll knock me out with the lack of air and take you. Besides, I can’t let you do that.”

Miss Parker covered her face with her hands. She wasn’t only meat, she was already cooking for the dogs to eat. All that mattered now was how fast they’d eat her. “My role in The Centre . . .”

She felt Jarod embracing her. At that moment, she didn’t care. Her Centre. Her family. Her entire code. “I *loved* him.”

“I know, Little Miss,” Jarod said, himself not sounding too good. “I know.”

“I loved *him*. He loved *me*. My father to honor of The Centre was killed by The Centre.” Tears started to fall. “Therefore, he is now the enemy, but I loved him and he loved me and it wasn’t just because of . . .” She closed her eyes. “Fuck The Centre, I am getting out and never coming back!”

“Happy to hear that,” Jarod said. “Really happy, wondered if this moment would ever come. It’s great you feel that way, but we can’t. Broots and his daughter will die. Even after this, they are being banished somewhere.”

“I’m going to kill him. I will kill the leader of The Centre, whether he is my father or not.”

“I know this one is tough to hear, but you are going to have to calm down,” Jarod said to her. She felt him rubbing her shoulder. “We aren’t free, we are trapped, and we have to do this. You aren’t going to kill him because he’s not coming in. No one will except Sydney. If we do anything they don’t like, they’ll cut off the air to weaken us or kill you. I’m not disposable but you are, so from now on, we stay in the same area.”

She slammed her fist down on the medical table. “I was born from that man, hooow?!” She screamed. “Why would she-?”

“She never would. Catherine wasn’t loyal to The Centre, she was trying to save children there. She tried to save me. I told you that. Remember?”

“A-are you saying . . .?”

“Every bone in my body screams that Catherine Parker would never have anything to do with that man. You know that, Little Miss.”

She felt him squeeze her tighter. She didn’t understand anything anymore. Nothing. “Okay. Okay. You’re the doctor now?”

“Yeah,” Jarod said. “You can’t call me my worst nickname anymore. I’m not your Chameleon Contraceptive.”

“How long does it take to . . .” Get pregnant successfully.

“Depends. Could be at anytime. It’s not out of the realm I can do this, but it’s not out of the realm I can’t. If you aren’t, hopefully if we are obedient enough, they will give us a little extra time. Maybe if I pick up my simulations again after that. Well, they’ll know the deal is on the table. They hear everything we say. See everything we do.” She felt the breath at the back of her neck as she watched the livestream. “I can’t let an immediate death go. All the other math is just that, math. The actual lives at stake are the ones on that screen and yours. That is safe.” He held her hand. “*You* are safe.”

He was trapped in the same bubble. He couldn’t do military simulations to save her. They didn’t care about her. Only Daddy cared, and he was gone. Gone like Mom. Yet? Those words. Something about those words, from him. She felt him place his other hand against hers, palm to palm. The annoying thing that sometimes drove her mad, the player of tricks, and the most unreasonable idiot that wouldn’t stay in The Centre but wouldn’t stay out of her personal life. Made etch a sketches of her and her mother crying, dioramas, and the unforgivable display on her mom’s grave. He. He. *He feels like a warm sun again.*

It was maddening. He was caught by The Centre for good, forced to do their own dirty work of making pretenders he had been trying to stop, and freedom was a dream again. It was the worst day of his life. But? On the inside a little voice was yelling in his head, jumping up and down in anticipation. That same little voice that went to the side of the dome to see her as soon as Sydney left the room and she snuck in. As soon as they touched each other on the opposite side of that dome. Or, the exciting time that naughty girl snuck in there herself to get a kiss. Her body was lax against him, not due to any medications, she was leaning into him subconsciously. She wasn’t yelling. She was doing more than accepting his palm, she was holding it steady. *Sydney’s right. Nothing is impossible.* She didn’t realize it yet. She couldn’t read all the signs or the subtle details she sent, couldn’t understand her own heart rate or breathing. But he could.

The girl of his dreams that The Centre had taken for it’s own so many years ago. His first friend. His first kiss. His first love.

She was ‘boarding the bus’, she was ‘catching the cab’. She was ‘paying the ticket’. She wasn’t there yet to stay, but she was coming back.

## Taking Her Spirit Back

Boring. Tedious. For being pretty much at the end of her rope, it wasn't very exciting. Terrible way to go. Skydiving. Mountain climbing. Shot in the back. Stabbed by an enemy. They were all a lot better than just staring outside of the dome. Jarod kept encouraging her to keep exercising, but she didn't know which way to go anymore. They couldn't even talk without anyone hearing anymore. Did he give up and was he really trying to get her pregnant in six months? Or did he have another idea yet that he just couldn't share? Then, before Jarod would have to pluck her away to work on her again, she saw Cman. Almost dancing up to the bubble. "Is this good or bad?"

"For our position, anything's good," Jarod said from beside her. He was pretty much vegging out right now too.

Cman held up a blank paper to the dome. He didn't move.

Miss Parker moved closer to look at it. "Why are you showing me a blank piece of paper?" What was that supposed to do? Irritate her? It was working then.

Jarod came up to the paper too. He seemed a little more fascinated though.

"There's not even eraser marks, Jarod. He's toying with us." She banged on the dome at Cman. "I am not in the mood!" She felt Jarod touch her side, like he was trying to stop her.

"Tease." Jarod stood up, looking pretty happy again. Ooh? He must have figured something out. "You know what really irritates me about The Centre?" He said to no one in particular. "How they can completely take someone that works for them and use his own job and daughter against him. When he did nothing wrong. I mean, they even had a receipt. Just a waste, don't you think? Shame. He had good computer skills."

Ooooh. *The Centre doesn't want to lose Broots. He's been cleared, and from the way Jarod is acting? We are cleared.*

"The Big C, Cman, Corn on the Cob Sitting on the Cobblestone Corner of--"

"Just say his name already, Jarod!" She complained. *Yeah, he is in way too of a delightful mood.*

"So, Cornman," Jarod said slouching on the dome. "Temperature? Sydney always told me temperature in the mornings."

"Ah." Cornman pulled out his phone and checked. "50. Dry for awhile."

And now Jarod didn't look happy anymore. Rain must have been integral in the plans to get out. "Storm of any kind?"



“Nope.” He showed him his phone. “You’d think with December coming it’d do something, but noooooope. Booonnnne dry. By the way?” He waved at Miss Parker. “Happy early Thanksgiving. It’s a nice time to think of the family you have, isn’t it?” He shrugged his shoulders “Especially since now you can see your dad whenever you want. Nice change, huh, Miss P?”

She didn’t even have words. That was Cman alright. Hold those up high to get what he wanted, to kick them later when they were down. That’s why he was so perfect for The Centre. And the most terrible thing is? He was probably right. They probably still didn’t move him. It kept her from the door. She hadn’t moved away from the curtains yet to find out.

“Sydney was right, you are a squirmy one,” Jarod answered him. He looked like he just reached his limit with him. “Go away. You shouldn’t even be in this lab.” He banged on the dome. “Go away!”

Hm. Whether it was his, hers or a complete strangers. No one could joke about family in front of Jarod.

“Well, you try and help a guy. Eh.” Cman looked toward her again, but Jarod moved in the way. “What, no view?”

“Daphne.”

Hearing Daphne’s name, Miss Parker perked up again. *Oh, please, please, please.* She’s always been on her side.

Daphne walked up to the dome, distempered. “We didn’t ask for that being cleared. I mean, of course you are clear. You are in a dome.” She faked a laugh. “Forget it, lousy joke. I dropped off standard Centre bottles of shampoo. No conditioner. Sydney will get yours later. Sorry. Um? Anything I can help with? Sydney said he’s the only one who goes inside now.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Cornman said from the other side.

“I told you to beat it,” Jarod warned him. “Out!”

“Aw, come on. It’s not like it’s your place,” Cornman said. “Besides? Maybe I was trying to talk something out?”

“It’s my lab and you are not trying to talk anything out.” Sydney came into the room.

“Everyone. Out. Leave them alone.” Daphne and Cman both walked away. Sydney brought out his phone and showed Jarod.

“Fifty today. Yeah.” Jarod nodded. “Don’t need the long term forecast this morning. Thanks, Sydney.”

Dumb weather report. *I need to pull myself together again. I never falter. I know there’s something. I just. I need to pull myself together. Shake it off. You can do this.* She watched Sydney move around toward the front of the dome. Not that she was going to greet him.

Jarod did though. At least, she figured he would. He didn't. *Oh yeah, that's right. Me dying makes everyone happier.* They could separate them and kill her off.

"Ah no!"

She looked toward Jarod's glare at Sydney to what Sydney brought in. She hid a groan.

Jarod didn't. "No way, cafeteria food. This is unacceptable, Sydney." He pointed to the plates. "Tomato juice and wheatgrass is not going to fly! I lived on it for 30 years!"

"I have regulations I have to follow, Jarod," Sydney apologized. "Maybe you'll take a liking to it again?"

"No. She can't have nothing but that." Jarod stayed firm. "A little wheatgrass while pregnant? Fine. Maybe. But not that much, it's not healthy. I am her doctor and I say no."

"Being a doctor's opinion, I will ask about it." Sydney went over to the TV and patted it. "You can keep this for now. The Centre, hearing Miss Parker's outbursts, feels she may not be as loyal as she once had been."

"Oh? That? Oh, she was just blowing off steam," Jarod answered. "You know, considering her father's tragic death."

"Yes. Yes, the unruly accident," Sydney said.

"Yeah. The unruly accident. Just like her mother was a suicide. Well, at least they are not calling it a suicide."

*Bastard!* She got up to move away, but Jarod stopped her.

"Sorry, I'm sorry." He blocked her path to the back area. Her only way of escape. "I lost my temper, I'm sorry. It wasn't directed at you, I swear."

His eyes did say sorry. Still? She didn't even know what to shout anymore. She went back over and sat down on the bed. She heard Jarod walk back over. *One Pall Mall on the ground beneath this bed somewhere.* She looked underneath the bed. A used bud. A fresh cigarette that accidentally fell. Anything.

"The TV," Sydney continued. "You are encouraged to watch what is being streamed to you." He turned it on. "So that you remember to be good. In fact, you need to watch one hour of it per day. Otherwise, you will receive no standard clothing, no standard towels, and the barest minimum of food."

Miss Parker shot back up as she saw the TV. Broots and a young girl. Must be his daughter. "Centre reaches a new low, bravo."

"What is this?" Jarod asked.

"Broots TV," Miss Parker said to Jarod. "As people watch us? We are watching Broots and his daughter."

Sydney handed Jarod a new remote. “To change focus, direction, or rooms. You cannot however watch a blank room.”

Jarod roughly took the remote.

“People being watched watching people being watched.” Miss Parker glared at Sydney.

“I am just the messenger,” Sydney reminded her.

“Do we both have to watch at the same time?” Miss Parker asked. “Does it have to be a continuous two hours, can we switch off to each other, and can it be at night?”

“Good questions,” Sydney said.

“I know The Centre.” She stared at Sydney. “Now. Does it need to be a continuous two hours, do we both have to watch at the same time, can we switch off to each other, and can it be at night?”

“Yes, it must be continuous,” Sydney said. “No, you don’t have to watch at the same time. No, it can’t be at night. Yes, you can switch between which one is watching.”

“Stuck in the same area not much difference.” Jarod landed on the bed loudly. “Sick isn’t a strong enough word. I’m tempted to come up with a new word just to express my hatred of what The Centre is making me do.”

“Don’t need to, Jarod, let me throw ya a new social word. Fubar,” Miss Parker said looking at Sydney. “Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition and they all know it.”

“Yes. Well.” Sydney gestured toward the bed. “I’ll need the sheets you are on top of.”

“I am guessing we get our Centre standard sheets now?” Jarod asked. “Make sure they still cover our whole bed. Pushing together singles would be annoying.”

“I will bring them in shortly,” Sydney said. “After today, you are correct. I will be picking up your standard sheets, standard clothes, standard shoes, etc. Daphne will bring in fresh in the morning through the deposit box. As per your requirement, she will just use the box. Only I will come in. Anything else, Jarod?”

“She should have pregnancy pills too,” Jarod pointed out. “It’ll be healthier.”

*I feel like I’m gonna barf. Come on, Jarod. You’re the Idiot Savant that does everything to piss off The Centre and save the day for all the little guys. Sydney always said you were fifty steps ahead of The Centre. Impress me. Do something!*

“I will get some, once they are approved. It will probably be a new bottle, shrink-wrapped each time,” Sydney warned Jarod. “To make sure nothing else goes in.”

“Look? I am doing my best not to get her killed,” Jarod said. “Doing something stupid isn’t what I’m trying to do right now.”

*Why not, you always do.* She sat up and stayed on the bed again, looking away at the curtains. They would probably be gone too. Her outburst was a dead giveaway. *I worked so hard for The Centre. For so long. I dedicated everything to it. Even this dome, I accepted it as best I could.* She looked beside the bed, on the little end table where she had placed her father's necklace. *How sharp are those pieces?* If it came down to them coming into get her, she'd like to get that around one of their necks and cut their throat open. Maybe if she ripped it apart she could have multiple weapons out of it. *Thinking too small. That's diamond. Maybe Jarod could do something useful with it.*

"Did you remember to get the flowers?" Jarod asked Sydney.

"Yes, I did." Sydney paused. "The Centre almost didn't grant it. They thought you were joking."

"No. Giving a girl flowers at least before getting her pregnant seems like a standard they use in the world," Jarod said to Sydney. "That and chocolate. I don't think The Centre will go for chocolate. They also like dates, but can't really have a fun date in here. So? Flowers."

"I will come back in with them and the sheets. Anything else, Jarod?"

"Did you get the ones I requested?"

She didn't hear the answer. It didn't really matter. It was just Jarod trying to awkwardly stumble through life again. It's what he always did. Awkwardly stumbled. She felt the sheets being laid on the bed. Making up the bed. Probably the highlight of the day. Then?

Jarod bent down next to the bed with the flowers. *You Clever Boy.* She had visited Europe frequently as she grew up. Her mother even wanted to take her to Paris on vacation one time, just them two. It never happened. Jarod probably knew all of that and more. He always knew everything.

He got Chrysanthemums. While in America, they were wonderful flowers, in France they had a different meaning. One she really didn't want to face right now. One The Centre wouldn't have granted if it had known it. "Why?"

"They left it there to zap your spirit." He handed them to her. "Use it to strengthen it instead. Properly say goodbye."

She sat up and looked at the flowers. He wasn't going to give her a choice. They even had to stay in the same room to not get separated.

"I'll plug my ears while you speak," Jarod offered. "Some semblance of privacy from me at least. I have stolen ear plugs from an earlier sim."

She made herself stand up. Some privacy. Inward, he should be happy. Ding, Dong, The father of the Witch was dead. The former ruler of The Centre that kept him incarcerated since he was four. *Daddy did everything for the good of The Centre.* The good of The Centre. What good was The Centre ever supposed to be, that could justify it all anymore? *We fought for it. We stayed loyal. Even when he wanted to pull me out, he still stayed loyal to it. We stayed*

*strong.* She looked at her necklace again. He stayed strong for her too. She left the area toward the front with the chrysanthemums, hearing Jarod not too far behind.

On the front of the dome door, just a little off center from the deposit slot was a trail of blood, from the middle and making its way down. She turned and looked out. The sweeper had thrown him to the side, but she could still see him. Turned away on his stomach. Not moving. *Fallen soldier you care for, don't be weak. He was your father in every way and he was strong. Show him compassion.* Damn. Her eyes were mildly starting to sting. She placed the flowers down as close as she could to the dome relative to his body. Jarod's ears were plugged, but The Centre could still hear everything. Could still see everything. So? She had to be careful. *You and mom wanted two different things for me. You still both loved me the same. It made it hard to choose which way to go until she died. Then it was clear. It had to be The Centre. There was nothing else besides The Centre. You and The Centre. It's the only thing that made sense.* She placed her hand on the dome. "Don't worry," she finally spoke out loud. "I won't weaken. I'll do everything I can to survive this. I am the daughter of The Centre and I will bring up every one of my children to follow the correct way." *The correct way to burn The Centre to the ground. I don't even care what the grand secret is to this place or why it persists. FBI. CIA. CDC. I will bring them all down in connection with it if I have to. By the time I'm done picking up the sludge of my last remaining family members in charge, everyone here would rather be in the chimpanzee cages on SL-17 than be near it. It'll all be similar. Everyone will be trapped and flinging shit at each other.*

She felt Jarod's knuckles dance along the top of hers lightly. He wanted to touch her hand, but he was asking for permission. "I said something." She gestured to her ear.

Jarod removed his ear plugs. He kept his head bent down though and his eyes closed. Proper like he was grieving.

Which was nice, but she just couldn't – "Why are you even doing that, you've always wanted him gone."

"I'm not hurting for him." He danced his knuckles along the tops of her again. "I'm hurting because you hurt from it, Little Miss."

Fine. Why not? *It's not gonna kill me.* She opened her hand toward his. He didn't clasp it though. Just held his palm next to hers.

"Okay, no, break it up!" Her apparent brain-dead brother came over toward the dome. "Nuh uh, this isn't flying. You are part of The Centre, Miss Parker. Mister Hole in the Head, he was voted out of it. He is the enemy. You honor him still, you aren't honoring The Centre." He straightened his tie. "That's the way it goes." He gestured to their hands. "Most people hold hands too, what the hell is this palm to palm shit you do?"

"We aren't like most people," Jarod answered him with a little gruffness in his voice. He didn't say anything else though.

"I didn't say anything inappropriate," Miss Parker said. "I'm also done."

"Well, we are getting rid of--"

“-I’m done, so I don’t care,” she said cutting him off. “The rest is the natural process of taking care of the corpse. However dirty it is doesn’t matter. The funeral is over.”

Mister Lyle was left speechless for several seconds. “You’re beautiful when you’re angry.” He tapped the dome. “Angel.”

*How dare he use that name.* “Angels aren’t always gentle,” she answered back. “The fallen ones have a habit of bringing people to hell with them.”

## Lunch

*The. Fuck. How.* She felt it. In her mouth. Jarod kept right on eating as she sat there with her doctor assigned mashed potatoes in her mouth, complete with something hard and a definite familiar shape. He didn’t even say anything about it, just asked her if it was good. Jarod had got them to remove the wheatgrass and bring her to the cafeteria diet for pregnancy health reasons. He was stuck with the wheatgrass and tomato juice again.

“Lucky,” he said. “Wish I could get pregnant now. Oh no, let’s stick Jarod back on his old diet.” He acted bitter, but she heard the little bit of lilt in his voice.

*How? When?* Sydney couldn’t put it in, it’d be seen for sure. It was dug deep in the mashed potatoes. It shouldn’t be possible. But somehow?

The Chameleon Contraceptive was still working.

And for once? She had to pay the compliment. *Damn Jarod, you are good.*

Thank goodness for the outside help. Jarod couldn’t have pulled that one off without it. Jarod always knew there was a chance The Centre might flat out take their only ways of contact, so that’s why plan b’s were always so important. Jarod could watch Miss Parker’s health, and keep trying to get her pregnant. He had to. Even now, he couldn’t let Parker have the slightest idea how the pill ended up in her potatoes. She tried not to show too much sign either. As long as she took it, that was all that mattered. Sydney would be inspected before dropping any of the food off. Daphne dropped off daily Centre standards to give Sydney a break. While she did that, she took the additional risk of placing a pill taped to the top, square in the middle. In the deposit box at the top, even the cameras couldn’t see in the middle. Too dark on either side.

It wasn’t perfect. It was more risky. If Daphne got sick, it was a no go. If the deposit box got too filled, it was a no go. If there was nothing simple the pill could be knocked into quickly served at some point in the cafeteria, it was a no go. It wouldn’t automatically work, it needed time to build up in her system. But it’s what he had. He was now down to Daphne and Sydney, with unfortunate side jobs apparently Cman took upon himself.

Thank goodness Sydney said no to him being involved. Cman wasn't dedicated to The Centre, he was dedicated to money. Jarod wasn't surprised he handled finding Broots and Debbie. Alone. Probably looked like an easy payday to him. Miss Parker had little patience so she didn't see the highlighter that was just barely the same color as the paper. Even with more patience, she probably wouldn't have seen it. It had to be good enough to even outdo the camera eye. If the camera focused on it especially hard, they could nail it, but that's why he dismissed it as a tease and let Parker get upset. After all, Cornman wasn't about being a tease just to get a stir out of someone.

Considering how much of a conman Cornman was, he probably had those special highlighters for a reason. It was almost like rubbing water on paper and reading it. But, Jarod was trained in everything. He got the message.

### **Broots Centre Lodging Addy. 100 G's. Don't stiff.**

The Centre was full of worms, but they had a price. Cornman found exactly where they were and he wasn't spilling without the money.

Jarod had to find a hundred grand quick or Cman would disappear with the info and The Centre would take Broots and his daughter out in retaliation when they left. Cornman knew Jarod could find money. Hell, he was the reason he was able to manipulate 100 million out of The Centre in the first place.

Probably figured it was a little payback with payday.

Still? *Blackmail. Almost a belated welcome home gift with The Centre.* He had to look on the bright side. It was all great to be prepared. Wonderful. Nice to know the only thing that was his baby was his real Ps4 sitting safely with his DSA's far away. But?

Without rain? Without the rain?

He couldn't budge without it.

"Since we finished eating, we should watch them," Parker recommended. "People tend to be more socially aware when eating."

Less chance of seeing them being too personal. Jarod drug himself up to get the remote. Get the hour over with.

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### *Recording Livestream*

*Broots was already in the middle of his meal with his daughter. Neither of them looked hungry, but he encouraged her anyway.*

*She just lightly picked up the fork and touched the food.*

*“Okay? So.” Broots cleared her throat. “I um, I told you earlier it would be hard to explain.”*

*She drifted her eyes up to look at him and then back at her plate.*

*“I think I got it now.” He took a deep breath. “You know, how jobs usually make you apply? No, no that’s not it. I did apply because it’s a good job. Yay for The Centre. Um.” He patted his forehead. “They are a little more excited when applicants fit real well. No, forget this, um the um.” He looked at his food in silence.*

*Debbie didn’t say a word. She just looked around the room nervously before looking back at her food.*

*“Okay, I got it this time.” Broots held out his hands. “Really, I got it. Okay? Do you remember three years ago when you went to your great grandma’s birthday? Everyone was like she isn’t going to be around much longer, and everyone kept saying to be really nice to each other?”*

*Debbie finally spoke. “Yeh.”*

*“Yeah? Well, um. Uh. Hm.” Broots winced. “Her health was crucial and we weren’t supposed to upset her in any way. Remember? Yeah, yeah of course you do. Anyhow, you knew something about the food.” She nodded. “Your aunt kept getting on how you weren’t eating the side dish. It was your grandma’s personal made side dish?”*

*Debbie nodded. “She put some kind of shredded fish in it.”*

*“Yeah, but nobody knew that. Just you because you were there watching her cook it. You didn’t say anything then. You weren’t saying anything afterward,” Broots continued. “You know what happened?”*

*Debbie nodded. “I got real sick. We had to go to the hospital.” Debbie wiped her eyes. “I remember, I thought if I . . . if I didn’t eat it, that she’d die.” She put her fork down.*

*“Yeah.” Broots looked at the food. “Yeah. I was upset though ‘cause you could have died. But.” He picked up his fork. “We all live with our decisions. We really should eat. There’s no fish in here, I can promise you that.”*

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Jarod now knew more about the computer guy. Stuff he should not know, which irritated him. He should not know any of this. If there was one thing he hated worse than being watched? It was having to watch others the same way.

He didn't know that at first. Now he did.

Rain, rain, rain.

He needed rain.





## Blood Diamonds

*Oooooohhhh.* “I love you, Daddy,” she whispered quietly from her side of the bed. Such a good Daddy. *So much support.* She gently put the necklace back around her neck before Jarod woke up. He wouldn’t be pleased with what she did, but if The Centre thought it was going to win the battle against Miss Parker? They had another thing coming. Taking out her father was a mistake they were going to pay for. She moved off of the bed, leaving Jarod sleeping. It was five in the morning, and the lights weren’t on yet. She moved to the door and waited. With Daddy’s necklace oh so gently against her clothes. Oh so gently.

She was ready to face the challenge. It was coming, she might as well initiate it. It was apparent from Jarod’s look about rain, that there wouldn’t be a rescue any time soon. Nor could she handle watching two people without their permission. It was hard enough as a child once she learned that Jarod was constantly watched. It was one of the first challenges she had to overcome. Knowing every secret, every moment she ever spent with him would be on camera. Jarod was not going to like what she had to do. He wasn’t going to like what they did, nor would he enjoy what she did. It didn’t matter though.

If she waited for them to initiate it, the result would be more severe. If she wanted them to believe that she was still on the side of The Centre. She needed to start it. *I am strong. Brave. Not weak. Only flesh. Keep your eyes centered. Do what you need to do. Bow down and you will stand with blood.*

The Centre wasn’t a country or a kingdom, but it felt like it. All the rules. All the regulations. All the traditions. They were nothing like another place. Maybe not. Maybe closer to the Aztecs. *Skin deep. Don’t care. You know it’s coming. Initiate it early.* It was a tough decision. Jarod had a way out, but he couldn’t share it. Not only that, it was clear without rain, they couldn’t get out. Two more weeks.

They would surely initiate it. They probably would that day, considering they were moving them to standards. Yesterday, they had standard sheets. Today? She woke up to her standard white gown.

When Jarod woke up he immediately went to the door. “What are you doing? It’s dangerous to separate into different areas.”

Oh. “Jarod.” Should she warn him? “The Centre will be doing something soon. I have to initiate it, or it will be worse.”

“Like what?” He approached closer.

“I moved out of control against it, when dealing with the death of the man who raised me.” Father would not be allowed. Daddy certainly wouldn’t be allowed. Jarod seemed to understand it. “It’s the same reason Broots and his daughter are in trouble. They are going to make a decision for or against me. It’s best if I start.”

“How bad is this going to be? No one can enter the dome except Sydney.”

“I know. I will be leaving the dome,” she said. “Don’t worry. I’m sure if I die you’ll find a way to recover me afterward. You always accomplish the impossible.”

“You can’t leave the dome,” he said. “No, are you kidding? You are worth more dead than alive. We’ve been through this!”

“I didn’t know how far it would go. They have taken their own this time, for no other reason than to punish me,” she reminded him. “That makes me their punisher. I will end the punishment.”

“Parker-“

“You just think watching an hour a day is hard, you’ve no idea what they could start doing,” she warned him. “Let me do what I have to do. Back off. Don’t interrupt. I mean it.”

Nope. No, he didn’t look good at all.

“It happens, either way.”

She watched Sydney coming toward the front to collect their standard things now. *My heart cannot express how much I love you Daddy.* As he came in, she moved, oh so carefully again. As he picked up their sheets, he came over and demanded her necklace. “No.”

“Miss Parker,” Sydney tried delicately. “I know that your father gave that to you. That it means the world to you. You are going to have to give it up.”

“This is a treasured Parker gift,” she sneered at him. “No one but a Parker is going to touch it.”

“Can you leave it be for a little while, Sydney?” Jarod asked him. “It’s the only thing she has of his. It looks like it makes her feel better and I think she’s going to have a rough day.”

Jarod had no idea how right he was about that. She kept her speaking minimal. “Tell Zane I want to make another contract with him.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Sydney asked. “That would involve them coming in.”

“No, that would involve me going out.” Right on cue, she watched Jarod start to complain again. She waited for him to expel all his goobledy gah again. “I know the risks, Jarod.” She also knew what The Centre wanted and didn’t want. She wasn’t the daughter of Mister Parker all those years for nothing. He continued to go ‘blah blah blah’ but she wasn’t listening. “If I’m killed then you can break in later and steal all my remains if it makes you happy, Pretender. I already told you that.”

She watched the sweepers, Zane, Raines, and Lyle come in front of the dome. Cornman also came back in along with Daphne. Probably also worried. Also not going to like what they see. None of them would, but it would be done. *Alright. Big girl. You’ve fucking got this.*

“You won’t remove your necklace,” Zane called her out, “and you dare to make another contract?”

“Those are dangerous words,” Raines warned her. “You are close to being sentenced to be a specimen of The Centre. Pulling a brave act is not smart at this point.”

“I seek to rededicate myself to The Centre,” she said.

“Again? You were still serving rededication in that dome,” Zane reminded her. “Until you became pregnant, your first contract would not even start.”

“You are talking full rededication,” Raines said. He looked at Zane. “Well?”

“Jarod outwitted her last time. He is cunning. It had less to do with dedication in the first place,” Zane admitted. “But the outburst from her? He cared for her. Greatly.”

“Hm.” Raines seemed unsure. “You had better impress, or you know what will happen. Fine. Someone set her up. She will be broadcasted to every TV across The Centre. Premium or non-premium.”

Jarod tried to step closer. “I don’t know what’s going on,” he told her, “but you don’t have to do this. They can’t come in and get you.”

She just stole a glance toward him. “Will you be happy if they make you choose which way Broots would have to die, in order to save his daughter? Do you want to be forced to watch it and endure the screams? The Centre is powerful. It knows what to hurt to get it what it wants. Don’t tempt it, Jarod. Things will get worse, not better. Let me do what I have to. Don’t interrupt.” He’d want to. Oh, would he want to.

He seemed to be considering that. Remembering its power, he took a slight step back. As things were being hooked up to follow her, she spoke out again. “The necklace has the purpose of sacrifice. It will come with me.” Was there a risk of death? Absolutely, but not as great as Jarod thought. She could be meat but play the dog if she got mean enough. Especially since she would be turning someone else into meat from her bite.

Embarrassment and shame. Petty but effective. She felt a small bit of her scream inside. She had never had to fully rededicate herself. *Just walk it. Walk it and to the Tower.*

“Alright. To my office,” Raines insisted. “We will meet you there. You have a long way to go. Walk the first floor, the second floor and the third floor before coming to the tower. Don’t shortcut. Don’t answer back. Keep your eyes ahead. We will consult when you get there. Keep the necklace. Disrobe.”

Oh yep, she could already see him wanting to move. “People will die if you move, Jarod, don’t do shit,” she muttered to him. As she made the action to disrobe her standard Centre gown, she already saw him look away out of the corner of her eye. There were no small things like panties, socks or bras. She already knew what she would face. Ever since she found out about the Broots livestream. This wasn’t small. She knew it had to be done. *Damn*

*you, Broots, you better fucking appreciate this.* She moved toward the dome door, keeping her gaze level as the door was opened by Sydney. *I better get my fucking Netflix back too.*

He unlocked it quickly and looked down again.

She walked gently, and oh so carefully, outside of the dome with her entourage. Raines, Zane and Lyle were starting to leave ahead. Lyle actually let his gaze fall on her a little longer. *Disgusting thing. This won't last long.* She heard a low whistle. Probably Cornman. Even he wouldn't risk doing anything else yet. She moved through the doors of Sydney's lab and followed the trail upward.

"Wow." Cornman spoke after she left. He tapped on the dome in front of Jarod. "Hey! You get to hit that nightly, huh?"

Jarod didn't speak. Didn't make eye contact until he saw Sydney's shoes. "Follow her. Please, Sydney." The Centre was parading her around, naked and vulnerable to everything. Even livestreaming it for everyone who couldn't be out of their office or wasn't on the floor she walked by. He heard Cornman start to play some of his music. The one he heard when he first let himself get caught by The Centre.

"Everybody in The Centre going awww skeet skeet now for her!" He whistled again.

"Stop it!" Sydney stopped the music and commanded him out. He came close to the dome.

Jarod looked back at him.

"I'm sorry. I'm not permitted to follow," he said. "I couldn't during rededication and I'm sure for fully. I can't." He looked back down.

"I should have tried harder," Jarod said. He stared out the dome. "Look what this place is. I should have tried harder to pull her away!" He banged on the dome.

Nothing, he could do nothing, and Sydney didn't follow after her. He probably didn't even bear to look at her. *Damn The Centre!* If they were going this far, what else were they going to do to her?

It took time to walk the levels to the Tower, but she made it. Outside of what used to be her father's doors was a clean white Standard gown again. She stayed still as it was slid on her.

She paused to fix her necklace. She bounced it lightly as the doors were opened for her.

Zane was in a chair and so was Lyle. There was a middle chair for her while Raines was in front of the desk. On the desk were three laptops. All the guinea pigs were in a row.

"Miss Parker. You want a new contract?" Zane asked her. "What kind of new contract?"

“First, I want to know what happened to the validation on my previous contract.” She bounced her necklace playfully a couple of times. “That contract should have secured The Centre to me in ten years, on the basis that I have a pretender child within one year, and three more within that span of time. My other children should have been running The Centre. They would not have been pretenders, but with Jarod’s DNA, they would have ran it beautifully and above class. The Centre would have been in a golden age.”

“That is true.” Zane nodded. “You were raised as a Parker, even now, look at you. Impressive.”

“Your contract is no longer validated because you have another contender,” Raines said. “Your contract uses the words only child of Mister Parker. Technically, I am Mister Parker. So? That’s fine.”

“However you are not an only child,” Mister Lyle said to her. “I’m your twin brother. Yes, it can be proven.” He scratched the side of his face. “So? Straighten up, take your licks, and get back in the dome,” he warned her with a stern look. “The only use for you is to have those lovely Parker babies we need, and we still don’t need you alive to make them.”

“Oh, you are so wrong. You wait so late to Indoctrinate,” she warned him. “After the children are born, as soon as they start to speak? Their first words will be ‘The Centre’. When they start to write their ABC’s. They’ll learn C first, and how to write it appropriately for The Centre. The first words they use. The first principles. The first disciplines. Incorporated all within the time of birth.” She smiled. “Imagine having a white crib right above them with C’s circling them from above on their mobile. Only mommy can give them that. Bonding. Learning. Becoming Centre material.” She held herself up higher. “By the time my children are ten they would be as wonderful, even physically with their training skills, as any student entering into the Academy. By the time they reach Academy age, they would already have the skill and knowledge to be graduated of it. Name anyone else who can do that.” She lowered herself lightly.

“I like the spirit,” Zane said. “That’s what I envisioned too. We think the same way. To kill you, it is a waste. You are bred for The Centre.”

“Bred is definitely a word after you trounced around naked everywhere,” Lyle teased. “However, do you still honor the man who raised you?”

“I admired him for the years he raised me, but I don’t honor him. I honor the father of The Centre.” She touched her necklace lightly again. Oh so carefully. “As such, the Parker family should be honored.” She took off her necklace. “As I said, I admired the man who raised me. He taught me many things.” She severed the necklace into four individual pieces it could be segmented too. *So much more than I thought. You saw so much further than me. I could never be as good as you, Daddy.* “I take my honor and faith I had in him, and I give unto The Centre.” She took the newly formed left bracelet and buckled it upon her wrist. “Please.” She took the three other pieces and carefully held them. She carefully moved with them. “I shall honor each of you, to show my rededication to The Centre. To add to the dome rededication I have already been serving.” She bent down on her knees to Zane, bowing her head without losing eye contact. He held out his hand. She buckled the bracelet upon his wrist.

“This is weird,” Lyle noted. “Why are you giving us bracelets from a necklace, what is this?”

“Fool,” Raines scolded him. “The Centre has so many intricacies. You would be wise to learn them all. She is giving sacrifice in honor of her new family.”

She moved from her Uncle, to bow down before Raines, holding out the bracelet to him in the same fashion. Her eyes rested on him. *I want it to be you. If I were more selfish it would be you.* She clasped it on his wrist.

She arrived in front of Mister Lyle Parker. The fool didn’t even sit right for the official tradition. *You’ve been slinking around in a gutter. You might be some boy he desires, but you don’t know shit about The Centre. You’re going to be next in line for it? I don’t think so.* She handled the bracelet oh so carefully. She kept her eyes completely on him. “I give to you the sacrifice I have made for The Centre.” Oh so carefully. She placed the bracelet upon his hand. Skin to diamond.

Skin to diamond.

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*The hell? Parker!* Jarod started to bang on the dome door. “Parker!” He saw Miss Parker, arriving back closer toward the dome. Wearing a standard Centre dress, but now soaked in blood. What had they done to her? “Parker!”

“What happened?!” Sydney was the first to move toward her side. Her hands were cut, Jarod could see that from there. They needed bandage and care. Her arm too.

“What did you do to her?!” Jarod banged on the dome again as he saw Zane and Raines come back behind her as well.

“You are going to need looked at, Miss Parker.” Sydney tried to find all the spots she’d been cut. “You’d best get back in there.”

As soon as the door was opened, Jarod grabbed her and tried to dash in the back to see what they did. Stupid, stupid idea! She wouldn’t listen though, and no one controlled her.

He had her get on the medical chair to check her wounds. Cut deep. “What happened?”

“I cut myself a little bit,” she admitted. “I’m fine.”

“She is more than fine,” Zane said from right outside the medical area of the dome. Jarod opened the medical curtains to look at him. “She renegotiated her contract.”

“More like *seized* her contract back,” Raines answered from beside Zane. “I guess I can say I am proud of my daughter. You both will be provided with everything you had before, except for clothes, jewelry, and your meal bonuses. You may both have cafeteria food, but we don’t

trust clothing or jewelry now. The ps4 will be watched greatly though. You can have Sydney purchase hard copies of the games you want. As for Miss Parker?"

"A girl has to Netflix and chill," she answered for him.

"That was incredible. An excellent job. You are most definitely my niece," Zane gave her a good round of applause. "The Centre *will* truly be brought into a golden age with you."

"Thank you."

"What happened?" Jarod demanded from her. He looked over her more, but all of the wounds were superficial.

"I preferred being an only child," she said. "Sibling rivalry was just too hard."

What?

"She made herself *my* only child," Raines said to Jarod. "Therefore, she is pertinent again."

Only child. *She killed again.* She didn't kill the man that was responsible for killing her father though. Her brother. Why did she kill her brother?

"You no longer have to watch the livestreams. You proved you are still on the side of The Centre." Zane held out a diamond bracelet on his arm. "You are a smart woman. There wasn't much time left anyhow."

"I know, you said that," she whispered lightly. "Good day."

Jarod started to get out one of the few things he did have in the medical lab. Strips of gauze and bandages. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

She didn't sound fine. "What happened?"

"I killed my brother to make my contract and my life worthy again."

No, more than that. "How?"

"Hm. Well?" She couldn't answer. "The man that raised me, cared more highly for me than I thought. My necklace was not from the place that it's box came from." She smiled. "Even then, he watched out for me."

"What do you mean?" Jarod asked. "What happened?"

"Normally I'd be sent back after proving loyalty by injuring myself or choosing my own injuries," she said. "They were impressed enough, they just let me come back. Isn't that nice?"

"I repeat," Jarod said again. "What happened?"



“My necklace was a special made necklace. It divides into four pieces. I was thinking about the man who raised me early in the morning. Not quite getting sleep, I decided to look at it. As I examined it closer, I knew. He always taught me to be careful with my jewelry. You’re smart, Jarod. How sharp is diamond?”

That was rhetorical. He waited. Then he noticed some of the superficial wounds around her neck, where the diamond laid. Like, it wasn’t quite laying right, cutting her slightly.

“My new father was so pleased by me, he actually took the one I slaughtered Lyle with,” she chuckled. “He took the bracelet, blood and all. He said blood diamonds were his favorite and thanked me.”

Her eyes were dancing in and out of focus. Between delight and pain. Somehow, Mister Parker had given her a weapon, that looked like a beautiful necklace. With the right kind of twists.

“That would take weeks to get out of the carpet. My new father is in no hurry. He thinks all the blood made a pretty pattern.”

“For the girl and her dad,” Jarod said to her. He understood. He hated when she killed, but she had purpose.

“We’ll still see them, if we turn it on. So we know they are there. They.” She paused. “They were going to send a special fish dinner. Apparently they were going to pull out Broots hand in front of Debbie, and make her choose the finger to cut, or the food to eat. They canceled the order. They also canceled the torture since the one providing it was no longer alive.”

No one to help, his daughter would probably choose the food over her father’s finger. Even if she didn’t, she’d have to watch that. *I’ve got to get us out, I have to!*

The cruelty of The Centre.

She was trembling. She acted tough, but he could feel her whole body trembling. Killing with a gun was swift. Even she admitted she didn’t want to use a razorblade. What did that diamond necklace become and how much work did she have to put into pressing it into the skin and killing him? Not to mention.

He saw Cornman sneak in for a second and wave. “Very, very, veeery lovely performance Miss Parker! I don’t know what I liked more. The art of it all or the climactic ending. Aw, just kidding,” he joked. “I couldn’t watch that ending, too brutal. I handled the wrist barely but when it came to that neck, holy shit! Besides, I had a different climactic ending several times through it.”

“Get out already!” Jarod banged on the dome. Damn it. If only he could do more. He heard stuff being deposited in their box. He went over and saw Daphne.

“Um. Uh. The um. Her bedding.” She looked about ready to cry. “That’s her bedding, for her. For you two.”

“She’s okay,” he said to her.

“No she’s not, are you fucking nuts? Did you *see* that?” She gestured to the deposit box. “Be careful, sheets are in there and pillow cases and an extra gown since her other one is covered in blood. I-I have the comforter but I can’t go in. I’ll leave it here. And? Just get her a shower and in bed, please. Sydney’s getting the other stuff. I have to go.”

Jarod reached in carefully and grabbed the gown, sheets and pillow cases. Of course the pill was taped at the top, he had to be careful not to bump it.

He went over to the bed and made it up. Sydney wouldn’t take long. He wanted to give her the clean gown, but she would want to shower first. Her body was trembling too much for him to trust her in the shower alone. Did she even know she was trembling? He went back to the medical chair. “I can’t dress everything. Most will be okay. I got the worst.” He held the gown. “Give yourself a little time and you can get dressed.”

“I’m fine, I just need a shower.”

As he expected, she almost stumbled just getting up. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but you’re trembling like a leaf, you just went through a massive amount today. Take it easy.”

“It could have been worse. I got let off easy because they appreciated the work I did on Mister Lyle,” she reminded him.

“What would it have been?” He asked.

“Usually hot coals or choosing what you want them to break or driving your own hand on nails. It varies,” she said. “I don’t want to lie here soaking in blood, I want my shower.”

“I can’t trust you won’t fall down. I’ll need to be there next to you,” he said.

“Really? I just paraded myself all the way through The Centre. There’s no privacy in here. What’s there to be bashful about, hm?” She moved off the chair. “Sorry. I know that’s awkward for you which makes this awkward. I’ll just stay turned around. Five minutes.” She squirmed slightly, one of her bigger abrasions on her sides getting her.

Yeah. She wanted that shower and she didn’t care right now about the details. *She needs to be cleaned, physically and emotionally.* “Okay. It’s no problem. I’m just having to adjust to probably thousands of people seeing you, instead of just me at night.” Keep the charade up.

He went to the shower with her. One towel left, and it went with her. She turned on the water still wearing her gown at first so she could reach the water before turning toward her back. She tried to undo the back, but parts of her hand were still cut. Even that shower wasn’t going to feel good again as it got into each cut. “Hang on, let me help.” He untied the top so the bloody gown dropped. She didn’t say a word as the water bathed her in feelings of good and bad. Feeling every cut but getting it all cleaned off. He watched her hands brace the wall a couple of times.

“Get the shower head,” she commanded. It wouldn’t be easy to do without turning around. Jarod got the water turned off and then placed the towel on her back. “I got it.”

“Let me help a little. You’ve got cuts all over your hands.” He tried to be gentle on her arms. The white towel was still getting some streaks of red on it, but overall, it was good. He did the backs of her legs too. Lastly, her tender side. It’s almost like she got herself scraped with it. He handed it back to her as he held her Centre gown. After she dried herself off, he spoke again. “Put your arms up.” As she did so, he slid the gown over her and then tied it in the back for her.

He stepped out letting her step out. Her feet were still a little red from all the blood that hadn’t gone down yet. Otherwise she looked better again. “Let’s go lay down. Sydney will be coming soon with an actual comforter. You have your sheets in there though.”

She nodded and moved outward to the second area. She crawled into the bed and tried to relax.

Sydney came with the comforter. *Damn*. Hopefully he didn’t knock the pill loose. He had extra towels, gowns and slippers too.

“Here,” he said gently. “How is she?”

“Apparently it could have been worse,” Jarod said as he collected everything.

“How are you?” Sydney asked him.

Jarod shrugged. “Thanks.” He went toward the TV and laid down the extra towels and gowns. First he wanted to get her the comforter. Once it was on the bed, he put the towels and gowns away. Then he sat beside her. He’d show support with palm to palm, but they were covered in tiny cuts. “I thought we’d be a little better tonight, Miss Parker. With those injuries, we can wait longer to make love if you want. Or not. It’s up to you.”

If the moment was too hard to play, she could just stay silent. She curled up tighter in the comforter and lied on her side. It wasn’t even noon yet, but they were both drained.

*Gah*. He wanted to touch her. To let her know he was there for her, but her hands were so cut up. Him actually trying to hug her, that wouldn’t go well. *I. I don’t care*. He saw a clean area in the middle and top of her arm. He laid his hand on her.

She didn’t nudge or push it away. “I had a hard day, Jarod.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I know.” He gently stroked her arm. *I should have tried harder to get her out of here. Before this whole dome thing. I should have done something.*

He watched Cman coming back up and waved his blank paper again.

Jarod didn’t want to get up to look at it right now. “Go away.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll tease ya later,” he said. “Although I don’t know why you are bothering with her arm. Don’t you usually do that weird palm thing?”

No, he would get up. To close the side curtains so no one could look in on them again. There. He moved back to the bed, continuing to stroke her arm.

“Check and make sure they’re okay,” she said from her side.

Jarod knew what she meant. He turned on the TV. Yep. “Eating a salad and a sandwich.” He turned off the TV. “When I first got out, I used to do that. Everyone watched me all my life, I thought I had the right to look into everyone else’s business. I discovered some secrets, but it was different than that.” He laid the remote back down. “I never would have done that though. Certain things stay private.” She couldn’t answer. “Your back is fine.”

“Yeah.”

*Screw it.* He wrapped himself up along her side. She tightened up at first. “Relax. Even you deserve a cuddle today, don’t you think?” She needed one, even if she didn’t say she wanted one. So? “If we can’t touch tonight still, holding you like this feels better, doesn’t it?” No answer. He didn’t expect one, as long as she didn’t shrug him off.

“He saw what I didn’t. That’s why he was the best.” Her throat was tight. “He was the best.”

“For you.” Jarod had to agree. “He did the best he could for you.” He gave her a slightly tighter hug. “I knew a song once. My mother sang it to me. I’m pretty sure it was her. I sang it in my first simulation. During . . . tougher simulations, I’d look for strength in it. Do you want to hear it?”

“ . . . okay.”

“Kree Kraw Toads Foot Geese Walk Bare Foot. Kree Kraw Toads Foot Geese Walk Bare Foot.”

She didn’t answer back at first. Until? “Mom’s know the best songs.”

“Yeah.” Oh, she answered back. “Yeah, they do.” He took a deep breath next to her. “They really do.” Then, he saw her palm, sticking out. Even with the cuts, she didn’t care. He laid his palm against hers. “Little Miss.”

## Rain Doesn't Matter

Normally, it wasn't his favorite weather. Especially as much as Delaware was known for it. It wasn't anything special, and going without it for too long was only a pleasant surprise. Yet, Sydney couldn't help a small smile as he held his umbrella on the way to his car to work. Forecast? Rain. He heard the sloshing on the ground beneath his feet as he reached his car. Soon, it would be soon. Jarod needed it soon. Although he and Miss Parker were getting along better, every day in there more was always so hard on him. He wanted his freedom more than anything.

He headed in for work and went straight to his lab. As he went in, his wet umbrella should be a good enough sign of the weather to bring a smile to the dome's captive faces.

The captive faces weren't paying attention to him right now. He knocked on the dome, waiting for Jarod to respond. He didn't see Miss Parker. "Good morning, Jarod." No answer. "I have the temperature today for you." He was trying to get Jarod to turn.

He finally did. Apparently, he still wasn't happy about yesterday. "I got my ps4 back. Haven't felt like playing it. Yesterday had a profound effect on us, Sydney. The human form is a basic vehicle we adorn for necessity. There are people who appreciate it and others from different cultures and regions who don't bother with much clothes."

"Yes," Sydney agreed. "How you are raised in a society often dictates the reaction of removing one's garments."

"I can't discuss it with her, so I can't tell. I think it's a combination of frail nudity and the slicing with the necklace that has . . . quieted her," Jarod settled on. "She's taking a shower now. She doesn't want help this time. It's still going to sting, but she's quiet. Endures. Like she's used to pain in the shower or bath."

Jarod seemed more thoughtful today. He still hadn't noticed Sydney's umbrella. "The Centre will test the human spirit in several ways to see how loyal someone can be. Not all methods are black and white in their delivery. I knew it would be tougher since she is still in rededication in the dome for your escape last time." Escape was the word of the day. Jarod must have noticed it by now but he hadn't shown a single sign he was interested in the rain. "The morning weather?" Sydney held his phone to him. Constant shower symbols. Two days of straight rain, one day with none, and a forecast of more rain. Much more like the usual Delaware weather. Rain, rain, rain. Not that it was a guarantee, the weather changed it's prediction often within a couple of days but that rain seemed right on schedule.

Yet, he still didn't seem happy. "Thanks, Sydney."

Either he was the world's greatest actor, (Which he very well could be if he wanted to) or he wasn't ready to escape yet. "Are you okay, Jarod?"

"No," Jarod said. "I love Miss Parker and I want to pull her away from here."

*What?* Jarod said that out loud. For the cameras? Why? “You do have a mutually beneficial stimulating relationship,” Sydney said, trying to follow his lead. “Perhaps you wish to receive more out of it though?”

“I never hid that fact. I still won’t hide that fact,” he said. “I cuddled beside her instead of any intimacy. The Centre makes it harder for me to be with her. Now, she has all this on her too.”

Um? “Yes, Jarod, she does.” Sydney still didn’t understand his plan. “She will eventually come to you again.” What was he looking for? “I don’t think Miss Parker is unused to the trials that The Centre pulls on her. She isn’t traumatized and still capable of love, Jarod. It’s just a tough time for her right now. Her assistant that we both mutually knew was in trouble with his family. She felt that rededicating herself would help him out.”

“Yeah, it sure did. He’d be without a finger or his daughter would be dead right now,” Jarod complained. “You have an umbrella.”

He finally recognized that? “Yes. It’s been raining. It’s on and off right now, but it should be raining for two days,” Sydney said. “It’s never dry around here for long.”

“I remember the rain. I used to like to stand around and feel it when I was out of here.” Jarod didn’t say more than that. “If I had a way out right now, I’d bust out just to feel it. There’s a time and place to leave though.”

What was he saying? *Jarod wanted rain. Is there something else he needs now?* Sydney thought back about their conversation. Was there something he was missing? Miss Parker was fit enough physically to make the- *perhaps not mentally*. Oh. “Yes, of course. There is a time and place. It’s more than just conditions. Psychologically, are you ready to leave again?”

“I don’t know. Feelings left unsettled make it tougher. Not knowing whether I can only manage a sexual relationship or if I can find love?”

*Or if Miss Parker is psychologically able to make the trip.* Jarod had her prepare for a whole month of constant working out. Academy status again. It would be grueling.

“Wishful thinking leaving right now,” Jarod agreed. “I have to figure things out with her first anyway.”

No wonder he wasn’t excited about the rain at all. Two days of wonderful rain, but if Miss Parker couldn’t endure it? It didn’t matter if they were even in flood warnings. Jarod couldn’t afford to move until he figured out how Miss Parker had acclimated.

Sydney hoped she was alright. She’d gone through many challenges in life. Parading around naked and killing her brother with a necklace was unfortunately another challenge. There was a reason she was so hard. She had to be, to survive the life she endured. “If you did get her out.” Oh dear, what was he starting to say? “Nevermind.”

“If I did get her out,” Jarod continued anyhow, “I would get her on a surgery table and make sure nobody else would have use of her this way. Even if I couldn’t convince her to come

with me, The Centre would have no use for her in a dome. I'd rather she come with me, but either way? I won't risk her getting caught and letting her end up in here again."

Ahhh. *Brilliant. Why didn't I ever ask before?* As soon as they found Jarod gone, they would expect her to be gone, and they would not be expecting her to come back complete anymore. Not even if she stayed with Jarod. Their search would be fruitless because they overheard their conversation now. Jarod still covered bases.

"She got a wound on her side. Decent size, with several small wounds," Jarod said. "I'd like some more supplies so she can't get infected. That's the last thing we need is for her to get infected."

*And the wounds, of course!* Of course. Jarod and Miss Parker would literally be swimming in sewage, she couldn't have any open wounds. She could survive to make it outside, only to die later.

Psychologically and physically. "I will get you more supplies, Jarod. How long do you think she'll be down?" Oh, that look. Her physical wounds would be a very real problem.

"I stitched her up the best I could," Jarod said. "Sydney, did you see what happened exactly? Was Mister Lyle fighting for his life and coming back on her?"

"I'm afraid I." Sydney's stomach turned sour. He didn't watch it but he'd heard about it. It was a blood letting, and Miss Parker almost lost. *I should be honest. He can always tell.* "I did not watch, but there were plenty who did. It started on Lyle's wrist so that he would be injured enough for her to proceed toward the neck."

"Like bleeding cattle," Jarod said.

Oh, what a disturbing thought. "Lyle still had use of his other arm, and he was more determined through the pain than she thought. He had it wrapped upon her side, but she managed to get out. Raines and Zane were interested in the combative rivalry, they didn't want to interfere."

Jarod's face turned sour, his whole face seizing up. Probably picturing it.

"Zane doesn't care much for Lyle though, so he slid her his own bracelet she gave him. Apparently, he knew about the dangerous jewelry as well."

"She was risking it, seeing how far Lyle's experience in Centre tradition went." Made sense.

"He was a decent fighter, but Miss Parker had spent a whole month doing nothing but exercise out of boredom in here. She eventually got it around his neck and the diamond was sharp, but it needed help." Sydney hated talking about it. "Afterwards, Raines gave Zane his bracelet, so he could take the one that killed Lyle." He watched Jarod's expression. "Will she be healed soon?"

"A couple of weeks to be safe," Jarod admitted. "Is it Thanksgiving or Christmas coming? Cornman said Thanksgiving was coming. I thought it had passed. I was going to try my first

turkey this year.”

“Cornman is trying to psyche you out,” Sydney told him. “He’s terrible.” Sydney checked the date. In the past, he never told him about holidays, and Miss Parker wouldn’t want to celebrating for sure. Everything passed like regular days. Jarod came in around November 19th. It was already December 22nd. He must have known that. Jarod loved playing dumb for the cameras. “Christmas.”

“The snow time.” Jarod breathed outward. “That’s not good and Daphne didn’t arrive this morning.”

“Uh. No.”

Jarod and Sydney’s head both turned as they saw Broots. Unscarred and unblemished.

“Um? I heard what happened to Miss Parker,” Broots said coming over to Sydney. “Bad deal. Full rededication. That’s rare. Only ever seen it once. How are her injuries?”

“She didn’t have to torture herself, so better than expected,” Sydney said, trying to act casual. “Have you seen Daphne?”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “Um? They wanted to experiment with something, but uh? Um. Apparently The Centre has people who didn’t want underage minors involved, so . . .” Broots rubbed his head. “Anyhow, been on a vacation. How are you, Sydney?”

*Oh, Broots.* The Centre worked with a gaggle of people and although murder, arson, and more assorted things were often allowed? Some things rankled others. *They switched Broots and Debbie for Daphne.* Oh no.

Oh no. Daphne was plan B, she was getting Jarod the pills. That was too risky for Broots, they would be watching him closely now. *I have to find the pills and take over.* He would have to do both his and Daphne’s job now.

“I just came down to say goodbye,” Broots announced to Sydney. “Getting pulled away again. You know how it is.” He waved. “Uh, Jarod? Hope everything’s okay?”

Jarod didn’t answer back at first. “At least I don’t have to do sims right now.”

“Oh? Yeah, no kidding. But uh, it’d still be fine, not a huge deal. I mean the sims are a huge deal to you,” Broots backtracked. “I just mean? You know. Tell Miss Parker, I always got her back. No matter where in The Centre I’m at. Okay?” Jarod nodded. “Okay. Better get going. I’m? Stuck with Cornman for a little while.” He tried to hide his groan. “Gotta go before anyone complains. Nice seeing you, Sydney.”

“Nice seeing you.” Sydney tried to hide his feelings. The Centre had banished Broots probably to work down in an unspeakable area again, and Daphne was out of action. There was now only one person to help Jarod. Him. “I have some business to attend to after I pick up your standards. I will have to go and collect standards too. Not all standards, just clothes and slippers.”



“Yeah, the necklace might have made it a little harder to have that back.” Jarod pulled his body more up though as he heard the shower go off. “You better get going to collect those clothes.”

Miss Parker came out of the shower, frustrated. Daphne hadn’t dropped off any fresh clothes yet, but she needed her shower. She at least put on the standard robe for now while she waited by the dome door. *Playing butcher the other day, you’d think a little door to door service wouldn’t be too much to ask.*

“She’s not coming.”

She turned to look behind her. “What do you mean she’s not coming?”

“They let Broots and his daughter go,” Jarod answered.

Ah. *They took Daphne.* “Is that a crinkle?”

“It is a very big crinkle. I liked seeing her, so it's a gigantic crinkle.”

Oh no.

“Your wounds also are a crinkle,” Jarod said, “as well as other things. At least it’s a decent day outside.”

“It is?”

“Just kidding, it’s raining.” Yet, that face didn’t say he was happy about it at all. Or maybe it was just who was coming up to see him that made him uneasy.

*Uncle Zane.* “Is there something you need?”

“I have just come to see how you are doing,” Zane said. “You have shown a decent amount of courage yesterday.”

“Uh huh.” They don’t bludgeon with praise. What was that about?

“However, you also did not do anything medical yesterday, to help aid you,” Zane finished.

“She’s hurt,” Jarod took over. “Have you seen her? She’s got a wound on her side and she’s cut up in places pretty bad. I don’t think she needs to be lying on a medical table right now.”

“You aren’t messing around with areas with scratches,” Zane said. “Her back is also fine. Her arms and hands and sides aren’t involved.”

Jarod had always been trying to delay it as much as possible. It was never a fun time for her either. She tried to think of Jarod as her doctor, but it was never easy. She knew it would take time for the pills to kick back in.

“Where is Sydney?” Zane asked Jarod.

“Taking over Daphne’s job,” Miss Parker butted in. “I see Broots and his daughter are okay.”

“Yes, they are.”

“I didn’t mean that I only wanted them to be okay.” She sneered at him. “You took Daphne in their place. What logic was that?”

“Some things are more tolerable for our premium viewers,” he said honestly to her. “Some didn’t like the little girl. Even viewing alcohol on screen doesn’t always sit well.”

“Well whoop dee fucking doo, some viewers have morals while watching livestreams of people’s lives.” Damn him. It was true though as stupid as it sounded. Some didn’t mind seeing torture, but not to a kid. Some would deal with cutting body parts, but heaven forbid there was cussing involved. “Fucking hypocrites.”

“Is that any way to talk to your Uncle? I even have an early Christmas gift for Sydney to deliver to you.” He pulled out an Ipad with a red cover.

Oh no. Zane was up to something. Jarod was eyeing him.

“It’s just digital technology,” Zane said to Jarod as he wiggled the ipad. “We downloaded what we needed, made sure they were fine by our IT men, and now? You’ve just bought Christmas gifts for the most important people in The Centre. Each and every one even has their own red covers. Festive for the holiday. Waste not, want not.”

Jarod made her jump as well as Zane as he quickly moved to the door, glaring at him. He didn’t say a word.

“Do not worry. Maybe your girlfriend will share?” Zane watched as Cornman came running over. “You are not high enough in the most important person list. You don’t get one.”

“Ah, don’t worry.” Cornman gave his eery smile to Miss Parker. “I already got my Christmas gift. It’s the gift that keeps on rewinding.”

“I don’t need an Ipad,” she told off Zane, “any more than I need a boyfriend. I’m happy with what I have.”

“Okay then.” Zane gave it to Cornman.

“Nice, can always use another one.” Cornman waved it at the dome door. “Thanks, Cham.”

“Cham?” Miss Parker asked.

“Yeah. Cham. E. Leon. Jarod always wanted an identity,” Cornman teased. “Now he’s even got a middle inish.”

“Think.” Jarod’s voice was guttural to him, but that one line was enough to make Cornman back off a little.

“Get her taken care of.” Zane walked off.

Yet, Cornman was putting a blank piece of paper in the door again. Damn that guy.

“Fuck.”

*Did . . . did Jarod just cuss?* A little ass every now and then, and of course bitch was common. He never said that. What did he just discover?

“Yep, I’m a real fucking tease.” Cornman pulled the paper down. “Try this one?”

Miss Parker looked closely at it. This time, she could see something. *He’s just pissing Jarod off.* “Knock it off.”

“It’s true,” Cornman said again. “I’ve measured it.”

Slime. She moved away from the front of the dome, but Jarod hadn’t.

“Are you surprised?” Cornman asked. “How much do you think the bitches all want it, huh? Even with her injuries I could entice her. Can you?”

“Is that a challenge?”

*The hell he talking about?*

Damn. Damn. Damn! Jarod eyed around the dome briefly before looking back at Cornman. *Damn him.* He put her through so much pain. He made her go through yesterday. He made her stand there and face it. Take it all. *Nothing is below The Centre.* He wanted to scream it to Miss Parker right now. The truth. Cornman made the second paper more readable so Miss Parker would assume, and so would any watchers, that Cornman was just being disgusting and perverted.

Cornman now had two prices. One for Daphne.

And one for Mister Parker himself. He knew the danger he was facing being in front of that dome. Probably ever since she first went in, he’d been using a stunt double on her. Either that or . . . no they couldn’t have cloning technology. They’d hired a stunt double probably for tough situations. Visible situations. Groomed and trained them to be like the real thing as much as possible. Even the words he spoke to her right before his death were suspicious. *That dirty bastard.* He wanted her in there the whole time. Mister Parker wasn’t depending on Jarod to keep her from getting pregnant. He just did that to make her happy. The necklace? Daddy’s support. The battle? Probably planned. It was all planned. To make him look like her innocent Daddy again!

She was right, she was right the whole time when she talked to Sydney. She would be the queen bee, running the whole show. Kids in domes, kids in homes, and her upstairs running The Centre! Her Daddy wanted her running The Centre and bringing home pretenders in the damn family line! And Cornman knew it was a biggie.

Daphne cost 600g and Mister Parker was 30 million.

Jarod could tell her the truth tonight. Be rambunctious enough to work around the wounds under the covers, but she was stuck on Mister Parker. His death was the event that made her question the whole Centre. *She would never believe me.* She would always put Daddy first. She would want proof and he had none. Cornman did for thirty million. *Broots has to work with him, maybe he could find out?* No, he couldn't. He wouldn't risk Debbie now. He probably had enough conflict between him and his daughter now.

Sydney was now coming with the standards. *You can do it, Sydney. Please tell me you found them.* He collected the fresh clothes through the deposit box and saw the pill taped on top. Almost close to the center. *Close enough.* Perfect. At least one thing went right.

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## Undisclosed Location

“What do we have so far?” Mister Parker asked the Triumvirate Laptops, as well as a laptop of Zane and Raines.

“Very concerned with weather,” Zane said. “Sydney was caught delighted today with a smile. He was focusing on the rain. The night that Jarod played around with the dome control panels, he was yelling about rain.”

“So he can't escape unless the weather is rainy?” Why would rain bother Jarod? “Anything else, gentleman?”

“He can't move with her,” Raines said. “Even though Sydney was excited, he mentioned her mental state and then her wounds. It's a tough journey, whatever he does. The full rededication trigger worked.”

“Jarod also exercised her frequently,” Zane agreed. “Whatever it takes? It is not easy. Once there is a child involved, there is no way they would be able to escape.”

“I don't like it,” Mister Parker said. “A whole month and this is all we've attained? He needs rain and it's a tough journey? Bullshit! I am putting my daughter through a form of hell by leaving her in there with him. We need to find out more. Has the IT man been scrutinized extensively?”

“Yes,” Raines answered. “I don't think Jarod has shared the whole plan with anyone. Even though he had to jump in fast, he hasn't been stupid.”

“It sounds like he still must have to use the tunnels. We know this much,” Zane said.

“My vote is Africa,” Raines said.

Several murmurs across the Triumvirate leaders seemed to agree.

“No!” Mister Parker shouted. “The agreement was if we can find out how he got out, then it was decided she would stay here. Under my supervision. She is still my daughter. She will still rule The Centre. Look how much she put into the full rededication!” He said proudly. “Nah, she’ll never turn. She was upset about me, but then she remembered the Parker family’s favorite weapons from history. Yeah. She’s perfect, and you all know it.”

“She butchered Lyle. It was, dare I say, impressive,” Raines said. “I did not expect her to think of the necklace. At least not this soon.”

“Of course she did. It was from her Daddy,” he smiled. “Yes, yes. She’d find it, I knew she would. I knew she’d survive. Proof positive, she’s the next for The Centre. This whole pretender female gene thing isn’t going to run her life. Well for too long.” He snorted. “Really shouldn’t at all!”

“Her ideas were too impressive. We were moved by her thinking,” Zane said. “Honestly? Imagine if we did get pretenders obeying us from birth? Or non-pretenders, with that level of obedience from infancy itself. We’ve never tried that.”

“That’s because children need to grow normally. My daughter needed a normal childhood with her mother,” he protested. “She only said it so she became valuable in your eyes.” He sighed. “My daughter is too good sometimes.”

“This solves two problems,” Zane said to Mister Parker. “When Jarod is captured, we can put him in with one. He’ll never leave.”

More murmurs of agreeance.

“No, no, no. The deal was she raises one,” Mister Parker said. “One! To see how this works.”

“No, two,” Raines also agreed. “One for her, one for Jarod.”

“Preposterous!” He yelled. “One, and then we can pull her into surgery and let the surrogates handle the rest. She will be fine to rule while we have what we need. She’ll even have a son or daughter of her own. She’s on the edge of that age women have them, it’ll make her feel better. Or she can spend money on nannies. Whichever.”

“Unless it is a pretender,” Zane reminded him.

“Yes, yes, and then she’ll be near the dome. We’ll get it figured it out.” Hm. “We could reconstruct The Centre, knock out a few walls and put a dome in the Tower. With two way mirror surrounding it of course.”

“That’s a nice idea,” Raines congratulated him. “If the first is a pretender.”

First. “One.”

“Two,” Raines declared. “One for her. One for Jarod.”

“Until this is agreed, we will not do anything,” Zane reminded him. “Nothing. She spends more days with him.”

“I hate her with him. Love his genes. Don’t love the man.” He grumped. Sex was one thing, didn’t care much, but it mixed with him being nice and tender? No. No, no, no. He would have shut down that friendship himself as she grew up if Jarod hadn’t sabotaged it first.

“Did you see them yesterday?” Raines pushed him. “He curled up next to her and he sang a little ditty from-“

“His mom, yes!” He saw that. Two. “She won’t part with one.”

“She will for the good of The Centre,” A triumvirate member said. “She could see it through the dome. Watch it grow through the Centre cameras. It’s no different than a custody battle.”

“Plus? She gutted Lyle and traipsed naked through The Centre. You don’t think she’ll leave one behind for him?”

“It’s brilliant,” one of the Triumvirate leaders spoke up. “We don’t even need to know the exact way out now. If he didn’t even share it with Sydney? Then he couldn’t have shared it with her. There is no worries. We know rain and we know it’s hard.”

“We know he needs tunnels,” Raines added. “Our daughter isn’t Jarod, Mister Parker.”

“But can he come back inside?” Mister Parker asked him. “That’s the dilemma.”

“My gut says no,” Zane said. “Maybe he needs rain for a leak in a tunnel. Maybe he needs it for a change in the sewage. Maybe he needs it to hide from us by camouflaging himself along the wet ground. Any of these?”

“Obviously if he could sneak in, he probably would have done it earlier too,” Raines pointed out. “No doubt Sydney told him the moment it happened.”

“Sydney isn’t a leak, he’s Jarod’s instructor,” Mister Parker disagreed. “He can sneak out, but he can’t sneak in.” Hm.

“How did that cute little ditty go?” Raines asked Mister Parker.

“Two,” Mister Parker finally agreed. “Fine, two. We are playing the long game gentleman. Do we all agree on this?”

“Agreed,” Raines said. “Sacrifice Jarod for now, and we’ll have him forever.”

“Agreed,” Zanes said.

Each of the Triumvirate members agreed.

“After Jarod’s temptation is gone from my Angel,” Mister Parker said, “then Daddy can come back home. Explain the situation. Give her encouragement. Just two years. I know my Angel. She’ll be alright.”

Just a little bit more. His girl had already beared a great deal, but just a little bit more.

And it would be over.

# Stealing Kisses

## Chapter Summary

Hmm. Something seems to have gone a little wrong with the Centre's plan . . . time is kind of passing by . . .

“Did she get there?” Broots asked as he headed toward his car. He put his keys in the ignition and drove off. “Okay, good, thanks. It might take a few weeks before I can risk seeing her again. Okay. Thanks for taking care of her.” He hung up. Broots and Cman had both intercepted news that Cman wanted to charge for, but Broots took initiative on this one. It wasn’t something to play around with, but it was something that he had to handle. He had Debbie leave on a plane and be driven to an isolated farm of a relatives. He always had to play nice with The Centre. It was dangerous. After what not only happened to his daughter, but what they were about to do to Miss Parker? There was no choice.

He slipped the note into the deposit box before heading out. Jarod should be reading it right now. As great as Jarod had been, he was stuck, and it was up to someone else to take the lead on this one.

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## Dome

“Honey?” Jarod immediately went toward her after looking into the deposit box. Broots just risked everything. Jarod hoped the computer guy was smart enough to take responsibility for his actions, or at least understood the sacrifices he just made. “Miss Parker.” He moved toward the bed. No separation. This was going to be tricky. “I know this is going to sound weird, especially after yesterday, but I’d like to be with you.”

She sort of glanced at him. “A nooner already?”

“A nooner. Yes.” Jarod got into the covers. Talk about risky. He would have to do his best to let her know what was going on without getting Broots in any extra trouble. “I think it would make us both feel better if we were intimate again. If you aren’t hurting too much?”

“Pain only stimulates, Jarod.” She sunk deeper on the covers as he pulled them over them and started gyrating right next to her again. He was getting pretty used to that pretending. “What is it?”

“Don’t scream or yell,” Jarod reasoned. “Broots found out some facts.” Better stick with the more believable first. “He intercepted a transmission with Cornman’s virus on Zane’s laptop.



You are supposed to get pulled out of here away from me today. I'm supposed to believe you are dead, just like Sydney and the others when they come collect you."

"Why?" she asked. "Why would they make everyone think I was dead?"

"Their plan has been a double one all along," Jarod revealed. "They want to know the way I escape The Centre. To make sure in the future, I can never back out. And for the present? I can't get back in."

"Oh." She clearly would have whistled if she could. "As soon as I go in a different room? Bullshit, I rededicated myself, those bastards."

"That's not all." He repositioned himself. "This one is going to be hard. I know you don't trust me." He visibly saw her curl up. "No, it's not about your mom. It's about your dad. Broots and Cman intercepted his image on screen. I think he staged his death." There. It was out now. "Also, they fought for awhile whether they wanted one or two from you. They figured out how to make me stay longterm."

"What?" She asked.

"I can't escape with the baby, they figured that much out." Bad news. "They want you to have two. One for you and one for me."

"... ugh!" Her nose had never crinkled so much. She looked like someone just told her she had to eat horse liver for lunch. "What are we supposed to do, Jarod?"

Did he believe her about her dad or was the separation of babies the full 'ugh' she gave? "Don't move away from me. Broots took care of it. He won't be back for awhile."

"How?"

"We know where the pretender genetic material is, but we didn't before. If we can't get rid of the mommy? We can get rid of *all* the daddies."

"But what about Daphne?"

"I don't know. He didn't say." It wasn't on his head though. "Once they go kerpow that should put a slight dent in their plans."

"Geez, Broots really came through for us." She smiled. "That's so fucking sweet, how do I make that up to him? Oh yeah, that's right."

"Not every guy needs sex to be thanked," Jarod said, already reading her thoughts. "Thank you also works." He felt her slug him. "Just saying."

"As you are right on top of me faking it, I swear sometimes you have these things planned," she said, "and don't expect any help this time. I'm wounded. The only reason I would even be under these covers for you would be because I-"

Ooh. She stopped herself but he still caught it. “A fake admission of *love* for fake sex? Our relationship gets stranger by the day, Parker.”

“Oh shut up,” she groaned. “You are the one who put me in this position!”

“I know, and when we come up, it’s going to be so transparent to your still alive Daddy.” Which is exactly what he did. He pulled her up into his arms too. Now partly exposed, he cuddled her. “Thank you so much for doing that for me. I know you weren’t in the mood. It really shows that you care.” Stewing in her juices right now. But? It is what everyone would think. They just crossed over to a caring line instead of just mutual sex.

She took a deep breath. “I . . . felt like being nice.”

“You bet.” He didn’t sound convincing at all. *Her dad deserves it too. Just waiting on the sidelines, and watching everything.* Making Jarod believe she was dead, only to make her unreachable and to make The Centre concoct something new so he couldn’t escape. It was getting more dangerous by the day to stay there. If it weren’t for her side, they’d be long gone. Broots was really out of the equation now, and depending on what happened to Daphne, she might be too.

If it hadn’t been for CMan’s virus, (probably made just to intercept information to make money off of) Jarod would have lost the battle. Then he felt Parker actually get into the act again as she straddled him. She held herself behind his neck. Deep behind his neck. What was she doing? Making him pay for the sex turned caring thing no doubt.

“Her name would be Camille Leanne Parker.”

Yep. Oh come on? *Could she not spoil the loving environment I had dreamed up for us?* Really.

“Do you like it?” She teased him. “I’d use Pre and Tender, but girl or boy, we are talking some serious teasing as they grow up.” She disembarked. There was a slight ow though. Too frisky.

Jarod just stuck out his tongue. She got playful? That was a first. “If it were a boy, we could name it . . . Johnny.”

“Johnny?” She complained. “That’s the most boring name in the world. The Centre doesn’t do boring names- Jarod!”

He tackled her back down on the bed too. Still mindful of her wounds. “Jackson? Juniper? Jupiter?”

“Okay.” She was done playing. The little bit of play that was always under covers. “Tackling me, really. Up, Jarod.”

“Quite, Dear,” he teased her.

“Jarod!”

“Okay, I’ll take that one.” Jarod said as he shifted over. “Do you realize the only time we play together is when we’re doing this?”

“This is *not* playing,” she denied.

“It so is,” he smiled, but he shot back up above the covers. “Speaking of which? Let’s celebrate our mutually loving joining.”

“Just. Sex. Just being nice.”

“Okay, let’s celebrate the ‘just being nice’,” Jarod said. “Play a game with me.”

“What was I doing under the covers? Making a fucking birdhouse?”

“Nah, my Ps4. Play a game with me.” Oh wait. She was going to pretend to take a shower. She always did that so she’d have a minute to get up for more proof. “After we take a shower.”

Whoops. That tripped her up.

“I want to see your wound again, and I think it’d be nice to take a shower with you.” Hell, now they were going into a whole new area of convincing. Above the covers.

“I already took one.”

He knew that’d be her excuse though. “Then grab the remotes.”

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Managed to survive another day. Miss Parker stared at the remote. *I really don’t want to*. With someone else, maybe. With Daphne if the mood caught them both right.

“Come on, didn’t we just have a breakthrough sex session?” He teased her. “What’s one game?”

*Everything*. She looked at the extra remote. “I don’t play video games. I don’t even know how to move or use this thing.”

“Oh, it’s easy.” Great, she gave him just enough ammunition to assume yes. He was in a good mood. Sydney told them about a terrible bomb that went off. Sydney was upset because Broots didn’t tell him, to make it more genuine. It would really slow things down. As soon as she was done healing. Her pills were still coming. As hard as things became, everything still managed to work. So? She made a decision.

She was fucking Broots. Seriously, that guy deserved a night of thanks. Screw what Jarod said, money wasn't enough thanks. Especially since she really needed some! Gah, over a month now of celibacy! Not her.

Jarod being there helped out, but even *he* couldn't have stopped what would have happened. She was sure The Centre still had more somewhere, extra extra reserves. It would be locked up tight though, emergency ration, and the first bomb would make them rethink their strategy about pulling her away from the guy they actually thought was fucking her each night. That happened to be a pretender.

As for Jarod? *Fucking one game for him.* One. Who cared, right? *I do.*

His damn face. He was excited to play his little bird game with her. He had all kinds of games on there he downloaded, including war games. But, nope. Nope. Fucking birds. It was his favorite. Either that, or he didn't really need The Centre watching how he battled his own enemies on screen. *Nah, it's the fucking birds.*

"Player one or player two?" He asked eagerly.

Difference? *I should not be here. I should be under the covers or exercising or something.* She looked at the controller. *I don't want to do this, I really don't want to do this with him.*

It would change everything. Again. *It never changed. I did not become friends. This is all an act, the greatest of acts by him. Why do I have to do this?*

"Oh, come on." She could hear the irritation in his voice. "Sex with me is nothing, but playing a game has to be that hard?"

*Yes. Because? Because . . . I'm as dumb as a box of fucking rocks.* She might have been a carrier of pretender genes, but she couldn't pretend and her IQ was low. Not terribly low, but she was average. And when your friend was a genius? Average didn't cut it. It didn't make even communication easy.

*/////"Good Morning, Miss Parker!"*

*"Good Morning, Jarod. What are you doing today?" Little Miss Parker smiled sweetly as she tried to pick up a word she knew as he started going full blast on what he was doing. Data, she knew that word. Math, there was another one. Building. Okay, he was doing data with something involving a building. No? No, he was building something. Not a building. Icing a toe? What was icing a toe? After he finished, she just kept smiling. "Great."/*

*////Good Morning, Jarod. Guess what? I placed second in the Academy on my test scores." Once again, trying to catch his words. It got harder as she got older. Even getting the basics of what he was talking about was now tough because he was diving into philosophy. Socrates. She knew him, he was a big philosopher. Jenacide? Must be like a pesticide. He was quoting Socrates about pesticides. Did they even have pesticides back then? No that had*

*to be wrong. Nation. Country. "The Centre is like my country." She knew that part, the Academy had taught her that. She had to fight for The Centre the same way a soldier fought for their country. Ooh? That just made him go off the scale, she couldn't understand a thing, and he turned away.///*

*///"Good Morning, Jarod." Now talking was a riddle in itself. She knew enough what set him off and what didn't. She had to wait a little while now to come see him, it was no longer a daily 'try and sneak' thing. She had to have material ahead of time or she'd make him mad. The simpler she kept it the easier he would speak around her level. "I went to the movies."*

*"That's great, Miss Parker." he said. "What did you see? What was it about? What time did it take place in? What was the genre, singular or multiples? Who was the director? Did you go alone or did you have company? Did you eat any of the special nutritionally deficient food there?"*

*She smiled. She understood all of those words! She told him about the movie, the genre, the food and who she went with. And he was happy, for a little while. Then?*

*"Glad you had an exhilarating experience and communicated fine with your friend that happened to be male that you are currently performing the dating ritual with, I need to get back to work, bye."///*

"Sex with IT guy though, that's how you show thanks." Very irritated. "But me? Oh no, there's not any way after over a month in here you're going to play one damn game with the guy you bang every night. You know, I see kids more at ease at their dental appointments than I do you."

*Oh no, fuck! He's going to do it.* He was going to do it. He had just established a cover of her caring for him a little more than a sex partner, and he was breaking it himself. He was going to do it.

But not before Sydney came toward them, giving her a chance to put down the remote. "Sydney. Can you tell us more about the bombing?"

Oh yeah. It didn't make him happy at all. She heard Jarod almost want to stomp off into another room, but it wouldn't happen. He was still too concerned about being in a separate room.

## **Another Week Later**

Not a word from Broots. Not a word from Daphne. She was safely on the livestream though, so Miss Parker knew Daphne was safe. Only Sydney visited. She still found the pill in her potatoes or hidden in some syrupy mess. The days didn't get any shorter. She still tried to

exercise though because it was getting closer. She was healed now and they were just waiting for a rain. Not a sprinkle but a lot. She didn't even know why they were waiting for rain. Jarod never revealed the whole thing to her.

Yet, this particular morning Jarod was beaming after Sydney showed him the weather. *Finally!*

And how did he obviously want to celebrate that news? By wiggling his controller at her. He was still trying to get her to play with him.

"Come on," he enticed her. "Nothing else to do. You don't want to go run off and exercise again." He smiled, trying to reach her. "Please?"

*I am going to regret this.* He was getting them out. Tonight. Maybe tomorrow. Either way, he got what he needed. They had their clear shot. *Just. Fucking deal with it.* "Give me the gaw-damn weird ass instrument."

"It's called a controller." Still, he gave it to her.

*Stop. Smiling at me.* "I don't know anything."

"It's not hard, I'll teach you." He went over and turned his console on.

*Great, fucking great. I am putting myself through this torture for what, again?* To be nice about being freed soon and not a monkey in a space cage? Yeah, that had a bearing on it. "Any news about Broots?"

"Nope. Now there's just a couple buttons to this whole thing," Jarod said, completely glazing over her worry for Broots. Way more excited that he was going to play his game with her.

*I did it!* He did it. After a little over a month and a half, he did it. He'd pretended to be many things successfully. He'd saved people successfully. He got others charged for the crimes they got away with successfully. But? Getting Miss Parker to play Angry Birds with him? Had to be in the top five hardest accomplishments he'd ever performed in his life. If Sydney were asked about it, he'd probably tell him that it was the inner sensation of all the times he wanted to play with her as a child, but couldn't that were manifesting inside of him. All the times she talked about her friends or the outside or what they all did together. Video games were definitely one of them. He knew she played video games, how many times did she tell him about a new video game? Too many.

She was holding the controller correctly. She knew early play station and it was similar. She could say she didn't know games, but she knew games. Maybe not the latest thing, but she still knew the old. Still? *Why do you have to act like I'm forcing you to sever your own body part?* She was clearly doing it for him, to thank him for his help. She wasn't going to outwardly say 'Thanks, Jarod, for saving me from my entire future and my future family from being trapped in domes'. Playing his game with him was the best he was going to get.

And he'd take it! Still? *She's more resigned. More tired than usual.* No, his imagination. Results were still negative, she was fine. They were fine. Not tonight, but tomorrow. There were occasional showers throughout the day, but tomorrow night and the next day? Constant showers. Nothing but rain 24/7.

He played first, showing her how easy it had been. Still, she wasn't very into it.

She finally held the controller. Her turn. She tried to shoot but went way over. She just waited. Like she expected a reprimand of some sort.

*Even mess up slightly at The Centre.* Was that why she didn't want to play games? There was no time for games in her life. It was perfect or do it over. Maybe?

They kept playing the level together.

"Fucking pigs!" She shouted. "Green and infected swine, hiding themselves in walls."

Now she was getting into it. *I am way too excited about playing with her. Geez.* He wiped his forehead. Childhood and nostalgia and dreams and wishes. They bore a large affect on him more than anything. He knew that. "The more they hide, the more fun the game, Little Miss."

"Who came up with these projections? I could snipe those pigs if I had a gun. One little bird, should have a team of . . . nevermind."

She was getting into it against her own will. Jarod's body kept tightening up in anticipation. *Relax. Just Angry Birds. With Miss Parker. Of all people. You know, the one person you've always wanted to play with since childhood.* His words didn't help. His body was throbbing with excitement. He watched her face, her eyes, her crinkles, her hands on the controller, and her body contortions. He wanted to remember everything about this moment. This day. It would probably never come again.

Mister Lyle was right of course. She was beautiful when she was angry, but she was also beautiful when she wasn't. When she was thrilled or happy or determined. When she bit her bottom lip. She was always beautiful. "Tell me something I'd never know about you."

"Hm?" She stole a glance at him and then back at the screen. "You're a pretender, you know everything about everybody and you can do everything everyone else can do."

"I'm not a genie," he said. "I have a limit."

"Don't read me," she warned him. "Not doing anything except playing a video game."

But playing the video game was the everything. *She's doing it. She's starting to break away from The Centre mentality.* Maybe another couple of weeks. But? Jarod couldn't risk it. Just, couldn't. The fact she had to go from placebo to the real thing again was risky enough. Every day more in there was another risk. Missing even a day of a pill was a risk and it did happen. Sydney wasn't perfect. The aim wasn't always perfect. Miss Parker had been ill one day and it probably didn't stay in her stomach. He had to get her out, get her body safe, and then? *Leave The Centre.* Hopefully.

Then, it'd be all over again. No more worrying about her. He'd asked her a couple of times recently if she wanted to know more about her mom, but the etch a sketch was a step too far for her psyche. He couldn't push. He wanted to relieve all her stress. He wanted to just leave her happy. *Stop. Enjoy the moment.* It would be ending soon. He needed to get back out there and reclaim his freedom. He looked back at her. "Tell me something I wouldn't find in records and archives. Tell me something real about you, Little Miss." He shouldered her playfully. "Please? You never know how long you have 'til it's gone."

She sighed and stared at the screen. "I . . ." No. "I don't know what you want."

"That's not true, you had something. I saw it in you." Come on. Share. "There was a singular thought in your head."

"No 'cause you are going to get pissy and then whatever thrill you are getting from me smashing pigs will be gone."

"Why am I going to get mad?"

"Because it was in the Academy and that *always* made you mad."

Okay. Fair. "I promise I won't get mad."

"Fine." She glanced at him, still not really believing him then looked back at the screen. "In the early days of the Academy, I had to coordinate something for team learning. Smashed it!" She got distracted by her game. "Anyhow." She was still debating. "I-choreographed-Genie-in-a-Bottle. There. Happy."

Genie in a Bottle? "What's that?"

"Song. Late 90's. Adolescent popular shit I would never listen to anymore. This game is not a stress reliever."

"It is when you nail the pigs." *I want to see that.* He didn't have an Ipad though. *Giving out my Ipads for Christmas gifts, of course, the damn Centre.* He'd have to wait until he got free though. She danced to something. She danced. Now he really wanted to know what it looked like. What the moves had been. *I hate being locked up. No access to anything.* He looked back at the smirk on her face as she nailed the pig she'd been trying to nail for some time now. Then again. He couldn't deny the fact. That even though he was imprisoned in The Centre? His heart was beating so hard for the girl that once set it on fire inside of him. *Not healthy. Don't do this.* Yet, he couldn't control his body and tell it what to do. He couldn't control his heart and tell it what to do.

Especially when he practically envisioned their first kiss again. Her sneaking into his dome. Not many words just this . . . move. Seizing him into it. *I have to tell her tonight what we are doing. Don't do this, Jarod. You can't be against her pretending to have sex and . . .* he looked back at her. *Stop. Don't.*

No. She did it to him. He would do it to her. It was only fair. *Your thinking right now, what kind of genius are you?* One game. She wasn't even exactly right beside him, but he could



feel her presence. Just giving in for one game and he could feel so much happening between them right now. *Sydney*. No matter how smart he'd been, he just kept pushing it. He waited over for Sydney, calling him over. Sometimes smarts wasn't everything. No matter how much he knew something was wrong. "Sydney?" he whispered. "Pull up youtube on your phone." Sometimes smarts got pushed away by a little thing called desire.

Because that's what it was, desire. Something he yearned for in his childhood. Sneaking back up in him. He was fine when he stayed away for her. He had no problem dealing with her. But when they got super close, they both felt it. "Type in Genie In a Bottle. No volume." He watched the video, barely even hearing her curse the pigs and the birds out for not having better tactics or choosing lousy spots to launch from. As he watched the girl on the video gyrate around, he used his abilities (against his will) as Miss Parker. Close to twenties. Making those same moves. And it did not help at all.

Desire sometimes. It could be a bigger bitch than Miss Parker. "Thanks, Sydney." He gave himself a second by the side of the dome, trying to calm down. Picturing her. *One more night with her*. He turned around and stared at her.

He was going to do it.

While they were pretending to have sex.

*You stole a kiss from me. I'm stealing a kiss from you.*

## Night

Last night. Hopefully? Her wounds were decent now. She was in great shape. Lots of rain finally. Which was good. She felt exhausted. One decent night of sleep and then a hell of a journey tomorrow. Hopefully tomorrow. Worth it though. She snuggled herself deep into the bed. Jarod came in on his side, as per usual. Then? He moved up close to her face. Closer than usual. Was he going to tell her how they get out now? "Are you in the mood for something?"

Oh he definitely had been. She watched the covers get flung over her. He's so lucky she rededicated herself or they'd never get a chance to talk things out again.

"Tomorrow night," he confirmed to her. "We leave late tomorrow night."

A deep sigh of relief from her she couldn't help. Finally, it would be over. Yet, he seemed a little more on the ball tonight. Or off it with his gyrating. "Do I have to know anything else?"

"I want *one* more thing in front of your dad. For everything he did to me. For everything he did to you. For what would have happened if Broots didn't blow up that lab. I want him to take it to his grave. Forever."

He was serious. *I don't know why Daddy did what he did. What he's trying to do. Accomplish.* But from the look on Jarod, she wasn't going to get a choice. "What?" She felt the top covers get pulled off and Jarod held her against him.

And kissed her.

And? *The fuck?!* She struggled for only a second when she remembered they were on camera. She wouldn't reject him under the covers to the cameras so she couldn't reject him over them. He didn't want to leave a single doubt in her dad's mind that anything was fake. They had already suspected it when they took the covers away originally. Not an ounce of doubt. *Jarod!* She screamed it in her head. She had no choice. She had to do it. She had to make the right impression, they were almost out. *When in fucking Rome.*

Funny. When she started to kiss him back, she swore she felt him buckle a little under her. Even though he ran the show, she was apparently still pulling the strings. Of course, him being a Pretender, he was still somehow good at what he did. She was revolted by him and craved him at the same time. He was the forbidden candy she wasn't supposed to mess with, and he tasted just as good.

He held her chin just so and pushed her closer into him when he pulled the covers back over them. He let go. "Well, I bet *that* will haunt his nightmares forever. Thanks, Little Miss."

"Oh please, you just wanted to--"

"You stole my first kiss from me. I stole one right back. It's fair," he teased her.

*Jarod. Fucking Jarod. Fucking fucking Jarod!* Her body was still responding to his touch too. Getting her back from when they were younger. *There's no doubt, we are leaving tomorrow night.* He wouldn't pull that move too early in the dome. It would race around in their heads, wondering where to go from there. Instead, he started to go into professional mode. He told her about the crumbling foundation he would lead them to in the pitch black when the power went out. How she'd have to climb using only crumbling foundation. How they would be moving through the vents, which directions they would take, and then?

"If there isn't enough rain, the treatment to the water will come," he warned her. "That's why we needed plenty of rain. The Centre likes saving money where it can."

With enough rain, they would deposit them right into the- *This is going to be absolutely nasty.* Swimming in the runoff of anything from The Centre that came through that day for disposal. Nasty. He warned her of some spots that could knock her unconscious. How afterward they would have to swim past the beach and onto a steep cliff. Once there, they would be out once they got a ride out of there.

The steps sounded humanly almost impossible. If she hadn't lived in a dome for a month and a half she'd tell him to fuck off and find a different way. *He's been in here thirty years. It must be the only way.* She yawned, sleep catching up with her again.

It was time. Tomorrow night. Last night in the dome.



# An Inner Sense Fright

## Chapter Summary

There is something scary enough to scare the Pretender . . .

Sydney knocked on the plexiglass. Jarod woke up and looked at Parker. She was still out. He got up and moved the curtains to see Sydney. “What is it?”

“Oh. Good morning, Jarod. Miss Parker has a delivery. From her Aunt Dorothy. Can you wake her up? I need to see what she wants to do with it.”

Her Aunt Dorothy? Jarod rubbed his eye. It was barely light on and they needed what sleep they could get tonight. The way would be a little easier, at least some of the brute strength he missed as a child wouldn’t be a deterrent to the plan. Still. “Dorothy Jamison?”

“Yes. You know of her Aunt Dorothy?” Sydney asked. “She hasn’t communicated with Miss Parker since Catherine’s death. The box itself is a decent size.”

*Not since Catherine’s death.* Why did that send a chill through him? “She lives in Paris. Catherine was supposedly close, but we know she was actually seeing someone in Maine during that time.” The man he thought might be Miss Parker’s biological father. When she was supposed to save him, afterward, she was going to take Miss Parker to Paris. Probably to her. No doubt Mister Parker wanted to strangle that connection. “Let’s see it.”

Sydney had someone forklift the large box over. He was right, it was a decent size. Sydney pushed it the short way over.

“For being so big, it’s surprisingly light.” Sydney opened up the doors and slid it in. Barely. It was going to have to go somewhere else.

Jarod moved it back and forth. Sydney was right, it was light. “Let’s just open it.” Normally, opening someone else’s mail was against the law. But well, he’d been held there against his will nearly all his life. He doubted opening a package would be his downfall.

“I suppose. It does say Miss Parker and the Jar of Odds. Hm.”

“Do you know her Aunt Dorothy?” Jarod asked.

“No, I’ve never met her. She’s never stepped foot in The Centre that I know of.” Sydney pulled out some small scissors he had kept for the package. He opened it up.

Jarod watched his expression as he opened it up. He peered inside.

It was a crib. A full put together crib in the packaging. His senses were tingling again. Who put together a crib and shipped it? “Did she know Miss Parker was thinking about adopting?”

“Must have.” Still, Sydney didn’t sound so sure himself. He cut the box around it, with Jarod helping to rip down the sides. Obviously, her Aunt heard about her wanting to adopt. So she sent a crib. For that. For the future. For the adoption because . . .

Jarod stared as Sydney cleared away some packaging from the headboard. He started to feel nauseated quickly. “She’s like Catherine.”

“Hm?” Sydney looked at the headboard. “A name. I didn’t think Miss Parker even had an idea about a boy or a-“

“A girl, it’s a girl.” Jarod took several steps back. They just joked about that a week ago. Under the covers. Where no one could hear or see. “Shipping date.”

“Shipping date?” Sydney showed him the date.

It was before she ever made the joke. It traveled all the way from Paris to America, to the extraneous precautions of The Centre before being allowed in.

“Camille. Leanne. Parker. That’s a pretty name,” Sydney admired it. “I wonder how she-“

Jarod snagged the papers and looked for anything else in there while Sydney kept taking the wrappings off.

It wasn’t just a complete crib, it had a white pillow with white sheets. Everything was all white except a small red pillow that said ‘The Truth Shall Set You Free’. “I don’t feel so good, Sydney.”

“Jarod, it’s okay,” Sydney said, trying to make him feel better. “She must have known Miss Parker was thinking of-“

“You don’t put a name on a headboard, put it together, and ship it out ‘as is’ Sydney!” Jarod tried to keep his voice down. This wasn’t good.

This wasn’t good.

This wasn’t good.

Surgeries of all types of variations, studying bones and even cadavers. He’d seen some of the most terrible things provided for in mankind, but Jarod found himself running to the bathroom and retching, not being able to take the supremacy of it all right in the face.

A joke she made on the fly was carved into the headboard of a crib that had been in shipment over two weeks. *Just like Catherine. Her Aunt Dorothy is just like Catherine.* She was foreseeing a name on the crib. But for now or for the near future? He cleaned himself up.

Sydney had cleaned out the packaging from behind out of the dome. It stood awkwardly, like a white tombstone at the entrance.

Okay. *If she added the name to the headboard.* Jarod gathered up his courage to look at the other pieces. It was all white, but there was stitching on the quilt. He gently touched it. His baby song was stitched in it. *Did she know me?* Then something else hit his mind. *Did she know my parents? Catherine was going to get me to my mom I think that night. She was on the train.* “Mom.” What if she knew what Catherine did? What if she knew where his parents were at? He went back to checking the blanket. Nothing. He checked the pure white pillow. In its white stitching was ‘Let her go now and regain happiness later’. Was that referencing getting out of the dome? On the back of the pillow was ‘No chocolate just flowers’.

“Maybe . . . maybe she is seeing into the shadows of the future, and making assumptions?” He looked around the bedding for more, then started to think of the slats. He found nothing except one thing by the date it was made. “Made six months ago. Secrets within secrets within secrets.” Yeah, she could be seeing glimpses of her niece in peril.

Right. He shouldn’t be scared. *Glimpsing. She doesn’t know exactly, she is trying to help.*

“This one just arrived not long ago.”

Jarod looked up and saw Sydney. He had a bouquet of red camellias. He also saw Zane behind him.

“You are falling behind. You haven’t done it in two days,” Zane accused him. “If you don’t want Doctor Cox in there, I suggest you get it done. *Now.*”

Jarod looked back down at the crib, at the flowers Sydney was holding, and the demand. *Wait, this is the one?* He looked back at the flowers.

///“No. Giving a girl flowers at least before getting her pregnant seems like a standard they use in the world,” Jarod said to Sydney. “That and chocolate. I don’t think The Centre will go for chocolate. They also like dates, but can’t really have a fun date in here. So? *Flowers.*”///

“No.” No, that was the one. That’s what she was trying to get at. There weren’t many chances left. “I refuse, I can’t.”

“Really?” Zane asked him. “Why? Is she already pregnant?”

Yeah, Zane had giddiness in his voice Jarod enjoyed flattening. “No, she isn’t.”

“There are ways to make you do things,” Zane warned him.

“I don’t care,” Jarod responded. “No.”

“Block your food? No I could get permission to block your air?” He turned away.

“Jarod,” Sydney opened the door and gave him the flowers. “What’s wrong? You’ve been disturbed ever since you saw the crib. Raines is the one in charge, not Mister Parker. There is

no telling how much power he will give Zane, Jarod.”

“I know.” Jarod looked at the flowers and looked at the crib. “I know, Sydney. If I do it this time.” *She could have a baby girl.* Camille. “This is all a warning, her Aunt Dorothy saw it.”

“She is a . . . good guesser like Catherine?” Sydney asked. “I see. You want some time alone, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Jarod watched him go. He had no doubt Zane would do what he wanted to gain his obedience. *Knock out the air and I can’t protect her.* But if he did it? *This time, it goes through. I create a little girl with Parker.* Then what? It wouldn’t happen overnight, and they could still get out. But then. *I could. I would have. I’m supposed to get her out and remove everything.* But she would be in the earliest stages of pregnancy, no one could even see. *It counts. As life. It counts as life. As soon as I commit to inseminating her, I am committing to this.* No what ifs, no percentages, someone who had Catherine’s gift. That knew things that she couldn’t have was screaming a warning out to him. His name was even on the label. Albeit, not quite right, but. *Jar of Odds is pretty damn close to take this seriously.*

“She is already lying in bed,” Zane said from the side of the dome as he came back. You might want to join her? When you get deprived of oxygen enough, it might be best to hold her before the next inevitable decision.”

“Stop.”

Jarod moved to the bed as Raines and Mister Parker both showed up to talk to their daughter. As he did that, Miss Parker scooted herself awake. Quickly.

Their reason for talking to her?

To apologize and find out if she knew the way Jarod escaped. Literally. *Don’t screw up, Parker!* She would doom him forever if she did it. He didn’t come up with the way out of there. As much as The Centre believed it, it wasn’t him. It was Catherine’s way, only improved slightly. If she gave them all the information he gave her to get out. *Don’t do it.*

“Really. Sweetie.” Her father sighed as he looked at her. Troubled. Real troubled. “We did what we thought was best. Did it work?”

“Y-.” She had trouble speaking. She was even keeping back her tears. “You left me in here, for a month and a half. Knowing Jarod would come to save his own unborn. You . . . put me through full rededication. You had Jarod artificially inseminate me. You let me have sex with Jarod because I had no one else.”

*How could someone do that to their own daughter?* The Centre’s pain that it caused never stopped.

“You dragged out your double, so I’d even think you were dead,” she said, miserably. “You even did what?”

“Made sure the transmission was intercepted,” Raines said to her. “You are highly commended for your work. Isn’t she, Mister Parker?” He was eerily silent.

Jarod wanted to do something. *Don’t do anything. Don’t say anything, Parker.*

“Daddy?” She looked into his eyes, that weren’t matching hers back. “Please tell me this isn’t true? You didn’t do this. You really didn’t do this.”

“A month and a half isn’t that long on the whole,” her father said. “You did what you could for the good of The Centre.”

She looked like she was going to buckle underneath her own weight. But, she didn’t. “So?” Her voice was as nasty sounding as she was allowed to get with them. “My parentage was a lie?”

“Yes, Honey. I’m sorry. Extreme means,” Mister Parker told her. “Your mom was just fine, never cheated on me.”

“You never *died*.”

“No, but it was necessary.” Still, something didn’t look right about him. He didn’t have the ‘it was necessary’ look in his eyes or his stance.

“We had to take all of the wind out of the sail as much as possible,” Raines answered for her father. “For the answer to the ultimate question.”

“You’re telling me that I don’t have pretender genes. I’m not a carrier. You left me, in a dome, for a month and a half!” She was practically gritting her teeth. “You let me parade myself naked and sever a man’s arteries like a slaughtered animal! And for what?!” She looked to the ground. “Jarod. You were my doctor.”

“I didn’t have to access to him, or a lot of other things. I had to move fast to even get here in time, there was no time to find even your blood for comparison,” Jarod said swiftly. “In here, it was artificial insemination, they barely even gave us band-aids. Not until you got pregnant would they pull out an arsenal for you.” Otherwise, he could have performed surgery on her earlier. They knew that he’d find a way.

“I understand if you are going to need an extended vacation after this,” her father said. “It’s pretty hefty.”

“Hefty?!” She was starting to lose it. “If Jarod would have got me out, he would have done surgery!”

“It was a risk,” Mister Parker said.

“A risk? You could have got me pregnant, Father!”

“Lower your voice,” he instructed her. “Yes, I know, but you needed one anyhow at your age if you ever have a chance at ruling The Centre.” He tapped on the dome affectionately. “Oh



Angel, I know it hurt, but it had to be done. It doesn't do us any good to catch him, if we can't hold him. So?"

So. The big moment. *Please don't. Please, please don't!* He'd be doomed back in The Centre forever. Was the month and a half trapped with him enough?

"Sorry." Her throat was so dry and coarse sounding while her eyes were so fatal against her father. "Fail. He never revealed how he got out." She tried to take a deep breath.

There weren't words big enough. A sound big enough. A hug big enough in the world. She did it. She lied to her father. He could still get out.

"Not even one thing? What about the weather?" Mister Parker asked. "He was obsessed with weather."

"He wasn't obsessed with weather," she lied to him again. "When you're holed up in here, knowing what the weather is like outside makes you feel better. Like you aren't trapped and unable to see it."

"He liked rain," Raines countered her. "He's been excited over it for the past day and a half."

"He wasn't excited over the rain," she said, lying again. "Didn't you figure it out yet? I've been in here with him for a month and half." She crossed her arms. "I admitted he was more than a sexual partner to me. I started playing games with him. He was making a friend. You know how much Jarod wanted a friend."

Oh, she was twisting the knife back. *Nice, Parker.* She wasn't just denying she knew the way out, any clues they had picked up, she was hammering away at!

"So nothing?" Her Dad was clearly not okay with that statement. "You didn't see one damn thing?!"

She shrugged. "I don't even know how to get out of this room. I think? He was just going to lead me when the time came. I think? That this was just a huge. Waste. Of time."

*They had to know so bad how I got out. Ultimate deceitful against even her.* He looked down at the flowers he was still holding.

She took a moment to compose herself. "Any of my teammates that did anything for me—"

"The blonde girl, the IT man, Sydney, they are all gonna be fine. Always have been, everything's fine," her father assured her. "Plenty of genetic material elsewhere, no big deal. Everyone gets a pass for emotional stress. But? Are you sure after a whole month and a half he didn't give you *one* thing?"

"I think?" she managed to say. "He did give me one thing. Respect," she spat. "Where was that from *you*?"

"The Triumvirate isn't going to be happy," Raines said to Mister Parker. "Zane is guaranteed The Centre now, Sir."

*Little plan backfired.* Jarod would say it out loud, but Miss Parker was hurting bad. If there was anything remotely possible to make her leave The Centre for good? This was it. They just reversed her Indoctrination. Too far. Too fast. Too isolated with him.

“I want you to go visit Europe for a year. During hard times at The Centre, that’s what we used to do. After you get back, we’ll talk more,” her father assured her. “I’m afraid? The contracts for you to gain The Centre are over.”

“Oh. My heart beats sooooo sadly.” Her whole body jerked slightly. “Ba bump. Ba bump.”

She had got a little more dressed and put some things together. She waited. Stood appropriately for the door to the dome to open for her.

Jarod thought about the crib again. She would now safely get away. *What if she will be?* He moved against his own will slightly. No, it was a warning. A premonition to stop. Still? *Watch her. I can watch her.* He could gain access into her account, see if she was buying anything for pregnancy at all. He could probably research her activity in Paris. Maybe even go there, he wanted to meet her Aunt Dorothy now. *Just don’t make waves. Don’t let her know you are splashing around.* Besides, she was probably okay. He did everything to the best of his ability he could.

Right. The bedding’s saying. *Let her go now and regain happiness later.*

Keep it quiet and he could attain their freedom easier. His tonight, and hers now. But. "One more thing, Little Miss." He walked over and gave her the flowers. "I'll always remember the time we spent together."

She gave him a small smirk, a very small smirk, but took them. "So will I, Jarod." She barely glanced at her father as she walked off.

“She’s lying,” Mister Parker addressed him. “It was *just* a physical relationship. Anything more than that isn’t real, you just kept her from being lonely!” He scoffed. “You scared her off as a kid. You’ll never get her now. She’ll be gone for a year anyhow, so don’t think you’ve won against me. She’ll be back. Stronger than ever.”

Jarod watched them both walk out. Like he didn’t have enough on his mind right now, *there* was something new. How did he scare her off as a kid?

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## **Sydney’s Home**

Sydney smiled as he reached for the phone. He knew Jarod was now out. Had been out for a couple of days now. “Sydney.”

“Sydney. Did you ever watch the DSA’s with me and Miss Parker?”

“Some,” Sydney acknowledged. Odd thing to ask after finally attaining freedom again.

“Which ones?”

“An early one or two cropped up one time. Not something we ever needed to look into. We watch for your sims mostly, to figure out what you are trying to achieve,” he answered honestly. “Why?”

“I did it. I’m the one who pushed her away.”

Oh? “Friendship is a two way road, Jarod.”

“She’d ask me how my day was, and I’d give her data about isotopes. Clueless. She never told me. I guess I still wouldn’t have known it. What, with me having no cultural education on speaking or slang or anything that actually let others communicate with me right!”

Oh. “Yes. I suppose so. You were a brilliant child, Jarod. Still, she was the one who came to see you. No one was at fault for how you spoke with each other.”

“She would talk about her Academy. Her scores. What they did. I knew how bad it all had been though, her training? It was like she was working for them already. Like she was the one who had me locked up. I’d go off on huge tangents and she wouldn’t understand even one damn word! I thought I was convincing her. She couldn’t even *understand* me.”

“Oh.” Hm. “You were both on different wavelengths,” Sydney assured him. “I didn’t know, you two snuck in conversations against regulations. You didn’t know, you spoke with her the same way as you did me. She didn’t know, she was just sharing her life. No one was at fault.”

“I remembered it a different way. I was so sure that I knew, I never even looked back. I didn’t want to see us losing touch. When she changed, I didn’t want to see it. I just wanted to remember her as Little Miss Parker. When she came in, I saw bragging or I saw someone with this blank expression of refusing to listen to anything that I had to say. This whole time, I missed it. I missed it, Sydney. She wasn’t bragging, she was trying to keep me at her level. She wasn’t refusing to listen either, she was just lost. She couldn’t understand me. One day, I just couldn’t take it anymore.”

“Communication is not always easy between people,” Sydney said, trying to make him feel better. “Had you been able to communicate better, she was still the daughter of Mister Parker. She still would have gone through the same process.”

“Her father put her through full rededication. He just let her strip naked for the whole Centre to gawk at and cut someone’s throat open! Brother or not, even I don’t know at this point. But that? *That’s* why she’s so cold.”

“She survived. Yes,” Sydney said. “You knew that, Jarod. She’s okay though. She is going to Europe for a year.”

“Yeah. Let it all process slow. Get her away and then slowly sink her back in over the year.” An audible sigh was heard. “I want to live my life. I want to find my parents. I want to

experience everything you ever denied me. I want to help people who need help when no one else will help them.”

“I understand that, Jarod,” Sydney said.

“But a part of me . . . wants to be near her, to save her from The Centre. I can’t stay near it. I can’t stay near her, as long as she’s involved in it. I want to believe she broke free, especially after all that grief they put her through for nothing more than how I escaped. She lied to them about the escape, about the weather, but I don’t know how far she’s crossed over. Was it just a freebie or did I really change her for good?”

“We can’t do everything,” Sydney said. “You made a great deal of progress with her. I don’t think there’s anything else you could add. She’ll either break from it or she won’t. In fact? I hear she is highly thinking of adopting now.”

“Aw, that’s good to hear.” Almost automatically his voice was so gentle. “She’ll be great. I know she will be. Just not *me*. Not yet anyhow. Too much world to explore out there.”

“It’s no guarantee that motherhood will change her any more or less,” Sydney admitted. “Especially since the loving words she ended with were ‘so everyone stops bitching’. But? Motherhood can have an affect on someone.”

“I know. I can’t change her. Neither will a baby or a child. She has to change herself,” Jarod agreed. “But? I *could* have been a much bigger influence when I was younger. If she could have *understood* me. Just some basic lessons on talking, Sydney, that’s what I needed.”

“The Centre didn’t permit it.” Sydney couldn’t say anything else but that.

“Couldn’t permit me to know or learn how to speak to another child? Another teen? Another peer? Of course not because I wasn’t even supposed to ever communicate with anyone but a damn instructor! Never a friend!”

He angrily hung up on Sydney. “Oh, dear.” Sydney put his cell down. Miss Parker had never even brought it up before. She rarely brought up anything from the past with Jarod though. Jarod was absolutely brilliant, it wouldn’t have taken long for him to understand at what level to talk to Miss Parker. A few lessons. *I’m very sorry, Jarod*. Still, he could never blame the whole thing on Jarod. Miss Parker would have gone down the same path. Her way in life had been set. Even now? Who knew what would happen.

Who knew what would happen.

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**Driving in her Porsche, cruising the roads . . .**

Miss Parker breathed a sigh of relief. Daphne was fine now. Broots and his daughter, not a scratch as promised. No evidence of who blew anything up of course. All in all? Everything looked like it was back to normal. Jarod was even out. After everything he did for her, he got himself a freebie. He was the only one that gave a damn about her.

She also knew from that grueling experience, that she had gained three nice people in her life. Not just assholes she had to work with. Decent people. Sydney. Daphne. Broots. They all helped in some big way to save her.

She was getting closer to home when a call came through. Unrecognized. Random phone. *Jarod*. "I owe him. Regret it later, Bitch." She answered it. "What."

"You could have told me. I would have understood."

Jarod's voice but did he make any sense? No, of course not. "Tell you what?"

"I talked over you. I was only taught to speak to an instructor."

She stopped her car on the side of the road. *Fucking asshole watched the old DSA's. Damn it.* "It was just . . . you. I'm leaving for a vacation for awhile."

"Will you come back chasing me? Or are you finally giving it up? Your life's not at stake anymore, Little Miss. You can walk away."

She rubbed her eye as she watched the rain continue to fall. "I don't fucking know which way is even up anymore."

"Well? That's a very Miss Parker answer. Maybe the final nail is who your mother-"

"Look!" No, they were not discussing her mother, not now! "No, fuck you, Jarod! Nothing about my mother! That's it. I'm out of your hair for a year. Enjoy life." She hung up and started to drive again.

Then, she got a new call from a new number she'd never seen before. It couldn't be Jarod again.

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## **Random Department Store**

Jarod grinned as he heard the phone hang up from Miss Parker. *She'll be okay.* He heard a lot through that call, more than just words. There was a chance The Centre might still be able to get her back, but she had a better chance of getting away. Hopefully? She got away. "Free yourself of The Centre, Miss Parker," he said softly with a sigh. Then he smiled at the customer in front of him as he walked back on duty. "Welcome. What can I get for you today?"

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## The Centre Tower

Mister Parker took a spot in his office. What used to be his office. Raines was on the chair opposite of him while Zane was behind the desk. "How long until we can restock the genetic lab, and how long until it's repaired?"

"It will take months," Zane said. "And? That will be *my* worry now. Not yours."

Mister Parker nodded. "For now," he muttered. "The Centre is yours, for now. She'll come back red hot, you'll see. She'll get in that dome, have two babies, and everyone will be happy." He looked at his watch. Not long now. *Damn*. A couple more hours left and then Zane would be controlling The Centre. Permanently. Their plan to have his daughter and Raines' be killed in everybody's eyes and hold her secretly in the dome for two children?

Got put on hold as soon as the genetics lab got blown up! They could restock most of the other DNA in there, but pretenders? That wouldn't be as easy. Even the little Jarod had in his tiny storage unit. He made sure it was all smashed to bits before he bailed out.

So for now, they gave her an out. Holding her did no good and was only risky with the Pretender inside with her. "All the high grade stock is gone anyhow. Maybe we should forget this whole thing?"

"Mother. Comes from mother," Zane said to Mister Parker. "The low levels are still pretenders. They would still do something. And?"

"If she has female pretenders, then it's all worth it. Eventually we would get a medium or a high class again," Raines agreed. "A granddaughter could hold it out longer over the years. In the next twenty years, we could have even more. Especially once momma disappeared, unless she was Centre material."

What? "Two, just two," Mister Parker disagreed. "She has two and she rules The Centre. That's what the contract says."

"It says if she is found confident and of sound mind," Zane corrected him. "That determination will be held for the chairman to decide. Especially as her 'father' may treat her."

"And my treatments aren't always reversible," Raines added.

No. "You can't destroy her. That was the deal too." They couldn't kill his Angel. He wouldn't let them.

"No, we can't. But if she's not of sound mind? She can be in the domes forever," Raines said. "And her children. And her children's children. If I were you? I would find the best ways to

get back on The Triumvirates good side.”

“Because only the chairman makes that decision,” Zane finished, looking toward Mister Parker. “Only *I* make that decision. Now? We give her time to recuperate. We give her time at the Centre Outreach in Europe. That gives us time to fix this mess. That gives everyone time to forget things. But when she comes back and we are ready for her? She will be sent there, to complete the contract.”

“That you don’t plan on letting go through gently.” Mister Parker’s voice was razor wire.

“Top secret. Not even Sydney will know. Which means Jarod won’t know.” Raines looked toward Zane. “I still suspect a dangerous connection. I move to bugging Sydney’s personal home and affects.”

“Sydney was his teacher, but he wants him back. He hasn’t been betraying anyone,” Mister Parker disagreed. “He gets emotional, but he doesn’t betray The Centre.”

“I don’t know. I saw close affection through the cameras,” Zane said. “Even the fact he was the only one who could bring him anything. Only one he could ‘trust’. I move for the same. We will be watching and listening very closely to Sydney from now on.”

Mister Parker didn’t answer.

All he could do now.

Was make a call he hoped he never had to.

## **THE END**

**Author’s Note: That ends this particular adventure! It was fun writing for the novel series, I’d never done it before. New technology the old Pretender never got to have gave it much more pizzazz.**

**Right now the audience is a little dead on Ao3 for Pretender, so I am just putting up the first book right now (marking complete because it's complete.) and then I will be back after a little Hiatus for pretty much Act 2. If you are enjoying it, please let me know. I will be continuing later on, but for now, this ends the first 'novel'. Thank you!:)**

**This will be continuing on ff.net but it will be in a Teen Version. It also continues on Missing Pieces but I am so much slower with that one too.**

# A Whisper From The Dead

## Chapter Notes

I promised I'd be back.:)

*I must be crazy.* Yet she was desperate. A lot of people just up and hired and left their kids anyhow before setting up more than a phone call meeting. Reviews and background checks, that's all people needed. Anna had done a great job at her babysitting. Her life changed, she got married, times got rough and . . . well, she was just trying to make it through. One mess up though, and it blew the whole thing up. She heard from words of a friend that somebody needed a babysitter. Someone who was having a tough time finding one. *Never gonna take me.* She knocked on his door.

Probably an overzealous parent just ready to get out and take whatever they could get. "Come in," she heard from the door.

Mm. She slowly opened the door and carefully went in making sure she looked over her on the side first. The guy was there working on a computer. She saw a crib, a high chair, and a swing. She saw simple toys and baby bottles and formula but nothing had been opened. There was also no sound of a baby, and there was nothing resting in a crib.

"Come on in," he said. "Take a seat. My name is Jarod. I'm looking for a particular babysitter. I think you might be the one I need."

Particular? "Where is your baby?" she asked.

"I'm going to be in charge of my sister's daughter in the future. Could be months away," he explained. "I am watching her in a real emergency I can't explain, otherwise my life wouldn't be able to handle this."

*I can tell.* "So what's the pay?"

"No, no. What's the story?" The man Jarod asked her. "You got kicked off of all the nanny sites. I need to know why."

Anna sighed. Too good to be true. "Look, okay? I didn't know about any boy sneaking in on the side of a house at ten at night. Especially when it was on the side of the little girl I was actually watching, okay? I know he was young, but he could have been a burglar. He could have been there to commit murder. I also knew it wasn't the other girl's boyfriend, I had met him before." She groaned. "Look, I just thought what I did was right. I told him to stop and identify himself. He didn't say anything. I warned I'd shoot. He didn't listen, he didn't



respond, and so I shot him. But you know, it's not like I killed him. It didn't even hit him, it just scared him so he fell a few feet and cried like a bitch." *Rebellious teen*. "Why am I supposed to be blamed for shooting someone climbing into someone's house?" She crossed her arms. "Hell, the teen girl said he was bugging her in the first place so I still don't know his intentions."

"You used to be a cop."

"Yes, when it happened, I was too," she said. "Not anymore though. Even back then it was getting harder to make it with my family. That was some time ago though, and like I said? I never put those kids in danger." All parents ever wanted was for her to spend time with them, do activities with them, get them to bed on time with the right nutritional food.

"What gun did you use?"

"My registered weapon."

"Do you still have it?"

"No, Sir. Not the same weapon." She was still packing though of course. She was meeting a strange man for the first time.

"Honestly?" He said. "I think you're perfect. If you can come around, 24/7 emergency status. Your job doesn't start until I call you. It could be months. It could be years. Afterwards, you need to meet me wherever I say so. If it's out of town or state, I'll pay for the mileage."

Oooh. "Hang on a second," she said. "You got a badge? Because ain't nobody's life gonna be that entangled, that ain't got-" He slid her his badge. CIA. "Well then?" She inspected his badge and then pushed it back to him. "I guess I am the perfect babysitter."

There. The hardest part of the job was complete. He had it all set up. He'd keep the rent up on the place, even as he moved on. Everything would remain there. He might have to rebuy formula or move onto some real food. He had no idea. He just knew at some point in the future, he'd be taking care of Miss Parker's little girl. Not because Miss Parker asked him to.

But because Catherine Parker did.

In the strangest way imaginable.

////Paris

*Dorothy watered her indoor plants, singing a popular song from her spotify. "Je remue le ciel, le jour, la nuit. Je danse avec le vent, la pluie. Un peu d'amour, un brin de mile. Et je danse, danse, danse, danse, danse, danse, danse, danse."*

*“Dorothy Jamison?”*

*“Ah!” Oh! She turned around and saw Jarod. Ow! She smacked his shoulder. “Don’t sneak up on a poor old woman in her own home, Jar of Odds! You scared me.”*

*“I scared you?” He complained. “I’m not the one who sent a crib with a name that Parker joked about written on it. That’s scary.”*

*“It’s not a scare. It was a warning,” she said.*

*“Yeah and I heeded it, thanks.” Jarod said. “Beautiful flowers.”*

*“What are you here for?” She asked.*

*“My baby song.” He approached her closer. “You stitched my baby song into the little blanket. I was wondering? If you knew where my parents were at? Or anything about them?”*

*Dorothy scratched her ear tenderly. “That was Catherine, not me. My senses don’t have anything to do with your family. Or maybe they do? I don’t know.”*

*“Did they?” Jarod tried not to scare her now. “Do you know anything about my family? Anything at all?”*

*She sighed and put down her watering container. She took a scarf she had round her neck haphazardly and whipped it round. “No but I have something you should see, Jar of Odds.”*

*“It’s Jarod,” he corrected her. “Not Jar of Odds.”*

*“I don’t know. You look different to me.” She slapped his cheek twice like she was inspecting him. “No, there is something about you. The fact you are a Pretender. Hurry it up and follow me.”*

*Jarod rubbed his cheek. Parker’s Aunt Dorothy was definitely different, but if she had anything to show or give to him, he wanted to see it. “What is it that you see exactly?”*

*“I’m getting there.” She took a key out of her small jacket and unlocked the door. Inside it was dark.*

*Jarod moved into the darkness as she turned on the light. “Ah.” It was a nursery. A crib with the name Camille Leanne Parker in the headboard was engraved in the stained cherry wood. The pillows were bright and cheery, small stuffed toys around it. His baby song was stitched at the top of the blanket. Question nicely. “Could you tell me why you have a joke name in a crib?”*

*"A joke name?" She didn't seem to understand. "It's not a joke. That is the name of my grandniece."*

*"Okay. No." No. "No." Jarod shook his head. "You sent the crib as a warning of what would happen if I stayed in The Centre with her much longer. Right?"*

*"Huh?" She seemed confused. "I sent it to her and to you since you were a potential father." She touched the little mobile. "Les étoiles. So pretty. Don't you love stars?"*

*"How did you know the name?" A little aggressive, but what was going on? "What do you see? Specifically, what do you see that is making you do this?"*

*"Oh. You want to know what I see in my vision?"*

*"Yes, that is what I am asking about," Jarod said. "Can you tell me what you see?"*

*"Oh." She looked down at the crib. "This crib. The name upon it. I hear sounds in the background, it's a lullaby that I stitched within the blanket. It sounds like Catherine, but I imagine, it's probably her daughter singing to the baby. There is someone behind her. Someone not happy about something. Anger, very angry," she warned. "Very, very angry at the woman next to the crib with her child. There is shouting. There is fighting." She looked around the room at the stuffed animals. "Camille screams. Another figure, dark. Also angry, very angry." Her gaze moved to the crib as she moved the star mobile. "Two get up. One stay down. There is blood on the crib and then . . ." She looked back toward Jarod. "There is nothing more. I? I believe very hard that Catherine's voice is trying to save Miss Parker and her granddaughter. I only follow my sister's voice. Including the white messages I put in the sheets and on the slat. She communicated to you. Not me."*

*Jarod looked down into the crib. "I sang her my baby song after rededication. She said Mom's know the best songs." Maybe she used it for her child? "But the name. Why did she name it that?" That was a joke name. Joke.*

*"It's a pretty name," Dorothy said. "What's wrong with Camille?"*

*"Camille. Leanne. Chameleon," Jarod said roughly. "It sounds like Chameleon. Another name for . . . me." The human chameleon.*

*"I prefer the French pronunciation. Kah-mee-yeh. Kah-mee-yeh Lay-own. It sounds better than Kuh-meel." She looked toward him. "Don't you think so?" She winked. "Oh, all right. If you really want to know? The name on the crib?"*

*"Yeah?"*

*"Do you know who named her yet?"*

*"No," Jarod admitted. "Tell me already."*

*"Why such a rush? I heard you liked puzzles and games," she said, like he wasn't providing an adequate amount of fun.*

*“Normally, yes. Not today.” Not for that subject. “Why is that name on the crib?”*

*“Catherine named her,” she said.*

*What? “What do you mean?”*

*“The Centre has the name of a baby on a crib inside of the dome,” she admitted. “It will probably attribute somehow to the naming process officially. Now? You keep calling it a joke name. It’s not a joke, and Miss Parker’s own ability probably made her say it. It’s circular thinking that started with a whisper undercovers no one could hear except you two. In some way, shape, or form? Destiny and fate let Catherine name her granddaughter; to remind you?” She smirked. “If anything happens? You need to take Camille.”*

*Oh. “I can find the baby a home if anything happens to Parker.”*

*“No! No, no. She didn’t name the child for an ‘I can find a home if anything happens’. No! You? If anything happens to Miss Parker, you take care of her grandchild. Then pray that you can find Miss Parker again, or you are the father permanently. Remember? I said potential. I never said the natural father.”*

*Wait, hang on. “What?” Wait. “That should, it should be sent to-“*

*“Catherine trusts in you. Look at the name on that crib.” She went toward the name and stroked it. “Honestly? A dead spirit named her grandchild after you, in honor of you, and you forsake her?”*

*“I didn’t say . . .”*

*“What? It has to be real Parker blood in order for you to help? Adopting a child from love isn’t enough?”*

*Jarod scratched the top of his head. “My life is too complicated for that. I can’t stay anywhere for long. The Centre will find me.” If Miss Parker wanted to adopt a baby, fine. More power to her. But him?*

*“Well, it’s not like you are staying longer anywhere just because of Camille,” her Aunt reasoned. “Pick her up and move her along.”*

*“I escaped by jumping to a helicopter last time.” Jarod tried to make it clear. “I can’t be responsible alone.” He couldn’t have a house. An apartment. A car. A real friend that he could always come back to. A real love that he could stay with. “If I can’t stay with even the people I love and become attached to? How can I take care of a baby?” He watched her stroke the name on the crib again. His life was too complicated. He had to live it solo.*

*“Then I suggest not jumping to a helicopter next time? Maybe take a few less risks, leave yourself a few more outs, and a little more breathing room between your ipad covers. You’re a genius. Be a genius.”*

*“Things get too complicated.” She didn’t understand it. “If I am taking someone down, okay? It’s dangerous. I have to get out, fast.”*

*“Do you know when you will take someone down?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Then hire a babysitter.” She shrugged. “Come back later. This is the modern age, Jar of Odds! Stop being odd about it, you can communicate with babysitters. They are all over the net. Haven’t you heard of babysitter sites? Nanny sites? They are researched with background checks and reviews already. You can even pick a time to use them, and have some on the line for emergencies.”*

*Jarod rubbed his face. He shouldn’t have asked about the name after all. “I will do what I can to watch for her. That’s all I can promise Catherine right now.” He crossed his arms.*

*“Is that all she could promise you?” Dorothy Jamison looked at him, her eyes half slitted, disdain. “Was she not better where she had been? A mother with a child of her own, trying her best to raise Little Miss in that dangerous environment? Should she have grabbed Little Miss and brought her here straight away? Given her a better life? Or risked it. For one boy. One boy, she did not have to save.” She turned away from looking at him. “Things do not happen without reason. I don’t know why Catherine wants you, when you’re . . . pretty much the reason she is dead, and don’t think you can hide that from me.” She stroked the crib. “She begs from the grave for help so much, yet it falls on dead whispers of nothingness. Fine, shall anything happen, I will do what I can for my grandniece.” Her eyes. Judging. Like daggers. “Except I doubt it will do any good. She isn’t choosing me for a reason.”*

*It was like a rush of cold water just drenched over Jarod. He felt cold shivers running deeply with her words. He knew there was no way he could. No possible way. A baby would take time and care that he didn’t have. Babysitters didn’t move with him. One mess up and he’d lose it out there in the world. But? Camille. Leanne. Parker. She was putting everything into him believing, to save her granddaughter.*

*Maybe something happened to Parker. The Centre was dangerous, and maybe? Catherine didn’t want her left there without a mother. “A-are there any more details you can give me? Someone is coming for her and her future child. Why?” He couldn’t agree, but he couldn’t turn his back on it either. “I will keep my eye out for her.” No one was killing an innocent baby. “Does it happen here? Are there any details in the nursery you see?”*

*“Towards the end of the vision. Open light. Lovely room. It’s not a nursery yet,” she said. “It’s becoming one. There’s an absolutely beautiful couch.”*

*“Couch.” There was something. “Describe the couch?”*

*“Breathtaking. The sheen isn’t too much or too little. It’s black with a cover up of a silver finish.”*

*Oh, that couch. Miss Parker stopped shooting at him when he visited her at her place because she didn’t want to hurt that particular couch. “Parker converts her room into the nursery.” Okay, so it happens in America. When she goes home and she’s converting her room. A time and a place to watch out for. “I’ll do my best to keep her safe.”*

*"She's scared," her Aunt Dorothy said. "Camille doesn't scream at first. She isn't even crying. It's her mother that is whimpering. She is frightened. The song in the blanket?" She nodded. "I believe it's a way to try and calm herself down."*

*"I understand. I promise." He touched the pretty crib. "I won't let either of them go down."*

*"The child has decent dexterity in the crib. I imagine three to six months?"*

*That was more help. "How is she positioned in the bed, in your vision?"*

*"She is sitting up. Her momma is rubbing her back gently." She looked toward him. "That's all I have for you. Nothing from your family I'm afraid. The only part that was yours was—"*

*"The baby song she sings to make her feel better." It was a dead end on his family, but a new chance to repay a debt he thought he never could. Partly. "Camille will be at least four months." If she were being adopted, it didn't happen overnight at all. He could have a year or years. Either way? He'd keep his eyes open. "I promise, I'll save them." No matter what. America. Redecorating her room. Four months old. "I owe Catherine everything. I'll make sure nothing hurts her granddaughter." He smiled at the crib now. "Camille."*

*"Camille," she corrected his American pronunciation. "Catherine named her after all. It would be French, had . . ."*

*Had Parker been able to be taken to Paris, after he was saved from The Centre. A bit of her Aunt blamed him for this future. At the same time, it was only a bit. More, regret than blame. Regret she hadn't done something extra too. "I know. I'm sorry you didn't get the future you thought you'd have." He knew that feeling as a teen. Yet, while there was a lingering emotion, there was something else too. "You're lying about something though."*

*"What what?"*

*"No. You're hiding something." No one hid anything for long from him. Even though they were in turmoil, feelings of the past coming through, he could feel something wrong.*

*She motioned behind him. "You make me feel weird."*

*Weird? "Why?"*

*"One of my lovers found my vibrator in my room one night. He felt he wasn't giving me proper satisfaction. I moved it to the nursery so no one else felt inadequate." She gestured behind him. "It's behind the cute drawer set you've been standing in front of."*

*Oh. "Oh." Psychological embarrassment with this conversation. That would be uncomfortable.*

*"I planned on moving it. Maybe to the kitchen?"*

*Okay. It was time to go. "Lovely meeting you."*

*Out.///*

Jarod looked over everything once more. He had no idea how long this would take. Miss Parker hadn't even decided if she wanted a boy or girl or started the process at all. For now, that was all he could do. A reliable babysitter that went with her gut and wasn't afraid to shoot to defend children. Food for it. Diaper boxes of all sizes. A closet of clothes from two months to a year, a couple a piece. Toys. Games. A crib. A high chair. A swing. That's all he could do for now.

He'd go back on his pretending, go back to the way he did things. He'd keep an eye on Miss Parker and Camille though, once he knew of her existence. If he needed to watch her? He could do it. Temporarily.

Until then? This was a pretend that would remain locked.

## Secrets Within Secrets

Paris, 2013

“Dorothy Jamison.”

Hmph. She spoke English, recognizing that brute’s voice. Mister Parker. “I know why you are calling.”

“I need help. She’s in trouble.”

In more than he thought already. “I have never even seen Little Miss Parker. You never wanted her to know her Aunt Dorothy. Now you call me up out of the blue? You’ve lost your power. You want me to pull her out, don’t you?”

“The Centre will wreak havoc on her mind! I have no choice, if I want to save my Angel’s mind. You were like Catherine. Can you?”

Help. “The Centre is evil and you are evil.” Yet, of course she would. Her niece was supposed to practically be her daughter too. She was supposed to come live with her and Catherine. Shortly after freeing the trapped boy. But then? After her *suicide*. Plans changed.

Catherine knew it was dangerous. She could already feel it, but she had wanted to believe. She wanted to have hope. Life was nothing without hope, and she couldn’t leave with her little girl until the little boy was safe.

He knew that she would care for Little Miss Parker. She already saw it coming. Still?  
“Catherine is dead because of you.”

“Catherine’s suicide was hard for us all to take.”

Suicide. Cruel lies.

“Have you? Have you seen anything?”

“Even if she left The Centre now, fate has sealed her. She doesn’t know it yet.” She smiled. “I already have the crib ready. Had it delivered six months ago. Had one delivered right to the dome too.”

“Yes, I figured that was your handiwork. Saw it over on the corner. Got sheets and everything, all scattered out over the headboard.”

Good. It was nice to hear him upset.

“Even had a name carved in it. Probably scared the pants off of Jarod. You and Catherine, that ability.”



“Bubbles. Trapping her in see through bubbles,” she answered him. “You didn’t mind that.”  
Brute!

“Housing her is one thing. Destroying her mind is another! It’s like killing her, especially with Raines tactics.”

“Yes. I have heard of Raines.”

“Can you do something? For a year? I gave her a year in Europe to destress. Afterwards, I can say she’s pregnant again, got pregnant in Paris, and that would buy more time. Right? Oh, not much more time. Oh, this is bad! Damn these genes of yours! She should have just been a normal woman!”

“You are the one who married Catherine. For no other reason than her abilities.”

“That’s not true, I loved her.”

“A Cad like you knows nothing of love.” She held up her fingers one by one. “I need a pass mailed, high clearance, outstretch Centre base. I need the man with roots with her and in his name. I need fake adoption papers made up by The Centre.” She smirked. “By the time I am done? She will be so hidden, even she won’t know the truth.”

“Perfect. Just make sure The Centre doesn’t know the truth. Make sure no one does. Including the potential father, especially him! I will do my best to get back in good with The Triumvirate. Then she can come back safely. Right? You see that, right? She *will* be safe?”

Hm. “You mean safe? Or do you mean Catherine suicide safe?” She twisted the knife as she hung up. Honestly? She couldn’t see that clearly. She could see what she could see. What her inner sense would allow.

It wouldn’t be perfect. Far from it. Scary. Just like rescuing the boy. But? This time.

This family member wasn’t alone, and this time, that same boy would be older too. He would help.

He had better. He *owed* Catherine.

---

Gorgeous. Never had Miss Parker actually been invited to her Aunt Dorothy’s. It had always just been her mother. She heard her Aunt call for her in French but she changed it as she saw Broots. Broots jaw slightly dropped. Yes, Aunt Dorothy looked a little like her mother. She greeted her with kisses on the cheek.

“Roots!” Aunt Dorothy hugged him.

“It’s Broots,” he corrected her. “Not a big deal. You’re her Aunt Dorothy?”

“He’s a cutie!” Aunt Dorothy patted his cheek a little too hard. “This way, Miss Parker. You, Roots? Go ahead and help yourself to the table. I’ve laid out some food for you.”

Miss Parker felt her Aunt Dorothy lead her up the stairs.

“What do you know of your mother, Miss Parker?” Aunt Dorothy asked as they climbed.

“I remember that we used to love to ride horses.” No, don’t get sour. “She liked to read to me. We spent time together.” *I called her a bitch and a whore when I thought she cheated on Daddy. I’m so sorry, Momma.*

“Your genes.” Aunt Dorothy stopped in the middle of the staircase. “Do you understand them?”

Genes? “You heard about the carrier gene in The Centre.” Of course she knew. She spotted the crib on the way out easily from the dome. *Her and her voodoo. Be nice, Daddy ordered it.* “It was nothing.”

“No, it’s not nothing.” Aunt Dorothy finished going up the steps. She went to a locked room. “I made you something. Something I haven’t been able to show anyone.” She unlocked it. “Step inside.”

Miss Parker stepped inside the darkened room. Her Aunt Dorothy closed the door behind them and turned on the light.

They were in a nursery. “Oh.” She looked at the little toys and such. “Did my father mention I wanted to adopt? I don’t have one with me yet.” *Obviously.* She moved closer to the crib and read the name above it.

Camille Leanne Parker.

“The fucking hell?” Suddenly the fake display of being nice to her family washed away into how she treated all strangers. “What is this bullshit? How did you know that joke?” She glared at her Aunt Dorothy. “How did you know that joke?!”

“It isn’t a joke,” her Aunt Dorothy said. She stepped closer and touched her stomach. “Your contraceptive failed to work. Before your journey in Paris is over, you’ll have that namesake in that crib. Isn’t it exciting?”

Whoah! “Freaky as fuck.” Miss Parker scooted away. *Just like mom.* No, no. Good guessing. Just good guessers! She touched the crib’s work. Wood. Polished. Stained. *I just made that joke a week before I was let out. We were playing undercovers, no one could hear it. Even if they could, this thing was not built that fast!*

“Breathe. You don’t have to accept it yet. After all, you have a nice beau here you brought, yes?” Her Aunt Dorothy pointed out. “Very nice beau. It would be a good idea to have some fun with your beau. Orders by your Daddy too. You know that.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Miss Parker said not wanting to get sucked in the fantasy around her. “This is *not* real. You’re getting all freaky deaky, and that’s exactly why no one in the family mentions your name!” Miss Parker rubbed the side of her face. Her Aunt Dorothy was just a little on the wild side of the tarot cards. No big deal. *Whatever. Just, whatever.* It wasn’t real. It couldn’t be.

“You didn’t become a pretender. Neither did I. Neither did your mother. However, we do have inner sense and *it* comes from the gene? The Centre just told you that you didn’t have.”

Thoughts? “I need to go, my head is going to explode all over this room.”

“Hm.” Her Aunt Dorothy seemed disappointed. No shit. She was freaked out. “Do you still hear your mother’s voice?”

What? “No.” No of course not.

“Are you sure? Never? Not even one time, while you were just goofing around? She wants to help you.” She came near the crib and smiled. “What about the Jar of Odds?”

“Jar of Odds. I don’t know what that is.” There. That settled that.

“Yes you do. The boy. Does the Jar of Odds? Does he hear *his* mother’s voice? Does he see her?”

“Gaw, I can’t take much more of you! That’s it, Centre housing.” Who cared if it still connected her to The Centre. Screw her crazy Aunt!

She was not pregnant.

She was definitely *not* pregnant. Jarod was perfection. They had pills all the time. Okay a month of placebo’s but no one tried anything on her. Even when things got hard, and Jarod was her doctor, they still found a way. Every day. Really. *It takes time to build up again.* No, no, no. It wasn’t. Nope. Jarod would have known. The Centre would have known. Someone would have known. Surely.

“Leave if you wish. Leave if you’re scared,” her Aunt’s voice rushed to her ears as she opened the door, “but don’t go to Centre housing, and stay with your beau until the Jar of Odds comes.”

“He’s not coming. There’s nothing there inside of me. You’re fucking mental!” She yelled at her.

“You’re right. He won’t notice it in Paris. At least he didn’t, he fell for the whole adoption thing quite well.” She noticed her look. “He thinks I knew about his parents, of course he beat you in visiting me.”

*Shit!* “Okay, fine, let’s say I am. Let’s fucking just jump the gun and assume I did get pregnant. Why the hell would I give it the name I joked with Jarod?” Exactly!

“You’ll have to hide it deep. A secret within a secret. If anyone discover’s beforehand? Endless bubbles of plexiglass. Be careful.”

“Oh so you just know everything,” she laid nastily into her Aunt Dorothy. “You’re the almighty all fucking knowledge out there! Then why didn’t you see my Momma’s suicide! Why didn’t you reach out to *her*?!” Exactly. “Muthafucking exactly, you are batshit crazy!” She held her hand up and started heading downstairs.

“We aren’t supposed to know everything. Only what we can help,” her Aunt called after her as she went down the stairs after her. “Even if I had seen something, your mother wouldn’t have changed her mind about her last acts. Little Miss Parker! Your mother wants to help you! Your father has something evil planned for you and there is no one here for you right now but her voice for her daughter and her granddaughter! Miss Parker!”

“Stop!” Miss Parker held her hand out to her crazy Aunt Dorothy. “Oz is like a thousand miles in the other direction. You probably got confused because you found the Wicked Bitch of the West. Leave me alone. Broots!” She went outward out front to him. “We are going to a fucking hotel instead.”

“Sure.”

Easily agree. He didn’t want anything found about the explosion on his end. Paris had lots of wonderful hotels. It’d be fine. Live it up in a beautiful hotel, no problem. *I should go to the housing now*. Nah, she wanted to see more of the city itself.

“I am happy to see you were *not* nice to me, since your father ordered you to be nice to me! Good girl, break those orders! I will see you in two weeks, dear. Have fun with your beau!” Her crazy Aunt just waved from the next room like it was a fun trip they were going on.

“My family has freaks,” Miss Parker said to Broots as she started to move to the front door with him, “that freaks? Call freaks.”

Nuts.

Crazy.

Mental.

Out of her mind. No wonder Father never saw or talked about her. Just this loose nut on the screw of life to keep hush hush.

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**The Centre: America , Two Weeks Later**

*This is not good at all.* Sydney watched his things being moved into SL20. His lab was being moved off of SL19. That did not include the domes though. After everything Miss Parker and Jarod had gone through, he didn't view it as a good sign.

At lunchtime as he drove home, he noticed a Centre car tailing him. Centre cars were like fleas. If you saw one on the surface, there were probably a hundred more someplace else. He didn't drive straight home right away, taking a detour at a small café he never visited. He went in and got a cup of coffee. As he sat down, he got out his phone and texted Jarod at his last latest number.

**Been kicked out of lab to work on SL20. Old lab with mostly old equipment. I have spotted a tail. I don't think Zane as the new chairman trusts me.**

He sent it and waited sipping on his coffee. He couldn't just stop, text, and leave. He needed to have a full cup of coffee now or it would look suspicious. As Sydney relaxed with his coffee though, his other cell rang. "Hello?"

"Sydney? Um? I need to tell you something."

His team member Daphne? "What is it?" Sydney took another sip of his coffee. She didn't often call him.

"The pills. The problem? I was desperate to find the solution quick enough," she said over the phone. "I had to bug a friend of a friend who had a sister that had an extra pack."

"Uh huh." Her bringing this up couldn't be good. She was talking about the secondary set of pills she found to keep Miss Parker going in the dome. "What's wrong?"

"I gave Miss Parker the pack to finish off before she left to Europe. I mean, she wouldn't have had anything. It's best to finish and then she could get herself back to her old pill. You know?"

"Yes, Daphne, I understand. Finishing medication is always best." Please get to the point, was Jarod in trouble now?

"Well? I was in charge of inventory, to see what was going on in the dome at the end. I looked at this crib in there and I just. I don't know, I got scared. It had a name in it and everything."

"Yes, it was from Miss Parker's Aunt Dorothy," Sydney revealed.

"Well, I guess, it made me more nervous. So I went to track down the owner of the pills. And um? They certainly weren't worth the 200 I offered for them. I was desperate though!"

"It was a difficult time," Sydney admitted. "Potency?"

"They were three years old. I don't know. Is she okay with that?"

*Three years old?* "I would give her a call, Daphne. Now please."

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## Paris

### Upstairs in the Nursery of her Aunt Dorothy

Miss Parker stared out the window down at the streets of Paris. She came back after Daphne gave her the heads up. She scolded her, took a test, and she struck positive. Now, she was being nice to the woman she called batshit crazy as much as possible. “How did you even know? Wait. Don’t tell me. It will creep me out.”

“You shouldn’t be creeped out by inner sense. You have it too. Maybe one day, you’ll use it yourself.”

“I just said thanks and gave him one freebie phone call and get out card. And.” And she had noooo way to let Jarod know the truth now. *It was all a lie, it wasn’t for his escape. It wasn’t for his escape. I am such a stupid and screwed bitch.*

“You can’t run,” her Aunt Dorothy told her. “It will make The Centre believe it’s a pretender. You don’t want that. Especially now.”

“Well? What do I do?”

“Broots is not Parker material,” her Aunt Dorothy said. “He’s a good man.”

“Contract.” All her Aunt had to say was ‘Parker material’. “I have to involve him?”

“Secret within a secret.”

“Within a secret.” Contract. Miss Parker bit her lip. “Within even another secret.” *It’s all risky.*

“You are going to have to lie to your father,” Aunt Dorothy said. “Specifically? Your Daddy. The Centre knows that you can’t lie to him. He is perfect in your eyes. He’ll be expecting it.”

He was. Partly, still was. At least he didn’t want her brains scrambled. The contract that was supposed to save her, was going to essentially kill her. She couldn’t earn The Centre if she didn’t have a ‘sound mind’. “When he asks if I tested positive before, I lie and say no, so that it’s recorded. Not until after Broots.” Right. Normally, anyone would be suspicious but Indoctrination would absolutely forbid lying to her father. “This is one messed up plan.” She sighed. “I have to find a way to tell Jarod. Maybe Sydney?”

“No, no,” her Aunt warned her. “No, absolutely not! Are you mad?”

What? “Jarod knows all. Jarod sees all. You can’t hide anything from him,” she reasoned. “It just turns out worse.”

“No. I will take care of you. Your Daddy will take care of you,” she insisted. “Your little Jar of Odds can’t know yet.”

“Why not?” She asked.

“We aren’t pretenders but we don’t have to be for something this simple.” She touched her niece’s hand delicately. “He was sealed up all his life. All of it. His amount of freedom was a few months at most. During that time, he is learning the world. The good. The bad. The yummy?” She chuckled. “I looked at his records. He is saving and he is learning but he is also playing. He wants, no, he *needs* to explore the world more without something like this hindering him.”

“You want me to really make him think someone else is the daddy?” Ooh, damn. “He tormented me enough in the past. For something like this? He’s not gonna be Mister Fucking Happy.”

“He has a role to play,” she admitted to Miss Parker. “A different role. If he is thinking of fatherhood, he won’t be able to do what needs to be done. He can’t protect with this on his mind. Not yet. Okay?” She smiled. “Besides? It won’t be a problem. Trust me. Now? I will send your beau up here now. We need to start.”

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Broots strolled up the stairs that her Aunt Dorothy insisted he go up. “Um? Are you sure your Aunt is safe?”

“Yes, Broots. I overreacted. She told me things I didn’t want to hear.” He looked at her, her eyes so sad and unsure. “I’m going to need your help. I don’t suggest telling anyone afterward.” She stroked the crib. “Come here.”

“Boy, if we were actually, you know, a couple? I’d be really scared right now.” Fortunately, they were just friends. He looked at the crib.

“Look at the name, Broots. On the crib.”

“Pretty. Custom work, very nice.” What was he supposed to see?

“Say the name, Broots.”

“Camille Leanne Parker.” Oh. “Did it belong to a recent cousin.” It didn’t look that old. Then again, maybe it was well preserved.

“No. Broots. Camille. Leanne. Chameleon. It’s Jarod’s.”

Broots froze. *Oh. Oh!* “You’re having Jarod’s baby?!”

“Last time I came here,” she started to explain. “*This* was here, engraved and all. One time, we were in the dome, I was joking with Jarod under the covers. I fucking *joked* the name.” She shrugged. “He went with it, he fucking joked a name too!” She bit at her nail. “She bought this six months ago, custom made with the name. Look at the dates in the slot.”

Broots checked. “Okay. I’m a little freaked out.”

“Yeah. Aunt Dorothy was a lot like my mother. They have a sixth sense. I couldn’t have known I was pregnant when I came. She declared it.” She took a deep breath. “I scored positive on a test that I really didn’t want to pass this morning.”

“Okay . . .” Okay. “You can’t stay. Sydney can reach Jarod.”

“No, I have to trust her. She did *this* early predicting, this crib, just, so that I could trust her. The name is all Jarod gets. The Centre has got to be convinced that she isn’t his. Completely. Understand?” She leaned against the crib and picked up a pillow with the name Camille L. stitched into it. “You’ve seen a lot at The Centre. You just saw what she did. I . . . have seen a lot in The Centre too,” she reasoned. “I’m going to tell everyone that I adopted her.”

“Barely know about it, but you already know it’s a she. Whoah.” He gulped, but tried to hide his nerves. What did she need from him?

“The papers will be drawn up fake by The Centre because I don’t want anyone to know the real truth.” She glanced at him. “That I was fucking the IT guy on vacation and up she popped.”

Broots blinked several times, then looked back at her. “Okay? That’s definitely not true.” He’d remember that. He’d remember that until his death bed.

“Oh, but The Centre will be drawing up the fake adoption papers because they don’t *want* you getting credit for being a Parker. You’re not fit, Broots. You have to be cold as absolute fuck. Do you understand?”

Oh. “I don’t want to be Parker.” Who did?

“Exactly. So? Daddy’s going to offer to pay you off. Now? The best way to do this is to get it on DSA. That means? After vacation, I’ll come back and you will be sent down to deal with it. You? Are going to get a huge settlement. Anywhere from one to five million because you’re an interference to the family line.”

Was she for real? “On paper?”

“Yes because it’s what The Centre is going to believe. However? There will be amendments like you have to chase Jarod. You have the best skills. Also? I wouldn’t go overboard if I were you. When the truth does come out, you need to skedaddle out with that money.”

Okay. “Okay. Sure.”

“Yeah, I figured you wouldn’t have much problem with getting a lot of money. Here is the thing? You’re not happy about it. I am taking away what you think is your child. Be



awkward.” She shrugged. “Be yourself. Oofish.”

Oofish? She thought he was oofish?

“Sorry. I’m *trying* to be nice,” she said. “We have to. Secrets within secrets.”

“Lots of secrets,” Broots agreed. “I guess, you need multiple layers when it comes to Jarod.”

“I have to, Broots. Look what she knew? She even sees the endless plexiglass bubbles,” she admitted. “She doesn’t know everything, it’s like some is clear and some is shadow. She said though, the genes are real, Daddy’s lie wasn’t a lie. Even Jarod will figure that out later. I am *still* destined for that dome, but it’s worse. Daddy’s not chairman and Zane wants to make fucking scrambled eggs out of my mind so I can’t run The Centre.”

“Then you should run. You’re already in Europe, you could just run?” He suggested. “Sydney could probably find a way to reach Jarod. I mean? They got to communicate somehow.”

“Without cameras? Without recordings? When and how would I know? One screw up,” she stated. “One!” She closed her eyes. “Daddy’s not even chairman anymore, Zane is probably already filling his syringes.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you gotta be careful.” He understood that now. “They’d really find you anywhere on Earth? You could move to like the rainforest or . . . I mean, like really isolated. Amish?” Her as Amish. Wait.

“Sounds like a great plan,” she smiled, “so a lot of people hiding from The Centre try it. Remember? I’d be discovered soon, visitors trying to join catch attention. You can’t sit and stay somewhere, hoping it will be alright. The Centre isn’t dumb, it has technology even *you* don’t know. If you can be seen on google maps, they’ll have already found you. You know that, you hunt Jarod. You have to constantly move.”

“Like Jarod.”

“Right.” She looked out the window. “I didn’t know about the pregnancy right away, that way Jarod doesn’t suspect anything. Re-education is two weeks but you are staying for a month. You don’t know anything when you return. Understand?”

“Oh. You bet, Miss P.” He crossed his heart. “There’s no way anyone’s going to find out about your baby, I promise.” He touched the pillow she held. “Camille. Nice name. Really.” He watched her sink her head over the crib. She’d already been through hell in the dome, and now she had more hell to go through. “What if Jarod doesn’t look deep enough? What if he doesn’t remember the joke?”

“Oh, trust me. Jarod remembers everything, he’s a sponge on the face of society.” She dropped the pillow. “Hell of a vacation.” She looked back at Broots. “If Jarod approached you about it, what are you going to say?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Good idea. “I’d be honest. I mean, if you were taking my kid? I’d. I can’t fight The Centre for it. Gosh.” That would have been painful. Then again? No, that would have

been painful. Then again? *Stop that.*

“Yeah. This all hinges on a fucking crack. *You.*” She looked over to the crib. “If I was smart I’d just have her and leave her with Aunt Dorothy. But.”

“She’s your little girl, and she is Jarod’s.” He’d find out. Jarod would have to find out. He was a genius, he’d figure it out. “Your crib?” Broots looked at the crib. “Take this with you. If he comes to visit, he’ll see the name and figure it out. Right?”

“It’s not if. It’s when. And it goes for him *and* The Centre. I should leave her here and visit on the weekends. She’d be safe. To bring her.” Falling apart. “I fucking walked nude and slit a man’s gawdamned throat, and I am turning into jelly for this? Straighten up!” She criticized herself. “No, I wouldn’t leave my own adopted baby in France to visit. It wouldn’t work.”

“Hey?” How could he make her feel better? “You got a whole year to relax and just enjoy being a mom.” He smiled. “If this is the way you want to handle it, okay. But, um? If Jarod doesn’t believe. I mean. I imagine. You don’t. You’re not a very. I don’t know how you.” She whispered how she had sex in his ear. “Ouch. I mean, worth it but ouch. I mean. I-I don’t know what I mean.”

“Jarod was right. I’m glad I didn’t thank you by just having sex with you right away,” she said as she looked at the crib. “You’re sweet.”

Wait. *I was supposed to-? aw, screw Jarod!* He even identified his crush before he went into the dome. *Jerk. He friendzoned me, in Europe of all places!* And now she was pregnant too, so now? *More cold showers.*

“The thing is, you suck Broots. I knew you did but I had to see how bad you were at it.” She looked back at him. Her eyes no longer sweet or gentle. They were exacting, demanding. Judging. “You are *terrible*. Way too feely, way too pitiful.” She looked toward him. “If I had sex with you and you literally thought you were the father? It would be heartbreaking but convincing.”

Broots shrugged. “Yeah, but, it would hurt a lot.” He noticed her expression though. “What?”

“That’s *really* what the money is for, Broots. The position? I’m *asking* you. Jarod can read shit like body movement, he’d know your lying in seconds. I have to trick Jarod *himself*.”

Uh?

“Can we mindwipe you?”

Uh?!

“Please?”

“Huh?”

“Just this day. Then tomorrow, I’ll start making you feel better.”

“You’re asking me permission if you can wipe out my memory for the day?” Ah. *No, of course not!* “Not fond of the idea, Miss P.”

“You clearly wanted sex. I’ll have sex with you. I have to or you’d never believe it was yours. Besides? Daddy ordered it anyway. He wants to make sure you pass re-education well.” She pulled out a phone. “This is my Aunt Dorothy’s phone. Write yourself a message. I want to make sure you know the truth. It’ll be the only truth out there.” She tossed it to Broots. “Please. You can’t fake this shit, Broots, you just can’t. It takes a certain individual and that’s not you.”

Broots looked at the phone.

“Multiple sex sessions. I promise,” she encouraged him. “Just say you aren’t the father, but don’t mention Jarod.”

*Ooh! Oh. Ah? Eh.* Broots stroked his chin.

“I promise that I will be good to my temporary beau. Just you for two weeks.”

Ooh. She sounded so pretty when she spoke French. It was one of the real perks of being in Europe, hearing her speak.

“Qu’importe, les mots n’ont plus la moindre d’importance.”

“Okay.” It just stumbled out. He had no idea what she even said. “For your safety and for the baby. I know I’m not the best, and Jarod is. And I’ll make sure that I know that I agreed to this.” He sighed and left himself the message. He left out Jarod of course, just that the baby wasn’t his. “Okay.” He looked toward her. “Now what?”

“Centre outstretch.” She took his hand. “Daddy gave you an extra two weeks of real vacation just for doing this. After two weeks, it starts and I promise, this shit doesn’t hurt. I’ve been through it plenty of times. Every 48 hours for the last two weeks of your re-education.”

“This really has to be done?” He asked. “I really have to believe I’m . . . losing a little girl?” That was tough. He had to believe he was losing a future little girl. *She’s right. That’s going to hit hard. I can’t fake that. It’s going to super hurt.*

“When Jarod knows the truth I’m sure he’ll find a way to let you know. If not? Aunt Dorothy will come out one day to find you and tell you. It’s not forever.”

“Still not easy.” He looked back toward her. *Girl of your dreams. Not going to kill you. Helping her. This is going to hurt, but I have to.* She had no one else. Jarod was running from them. They chased him to bring him back to The Centre. They couldn’t just call him up for assist. She didn’t trust Sydney had secure enough connections. There was no one. “I’ll do it though. For you.”

## Within Secrets

“Yeah, I know it’s coming.” Miss Parker walked through the door confidently as she watched her Aunt Dorothy closely. She’d taken Broots back to their little hotel to already start making him feel better. “More than one pile on. What’s next?”

“Gossip. Let’s go to the couch.” Aunt Dorothy went to her couch and had Miss Parker sit down. “So? Have you heard the latest about Monsieur Martin?”

*Oh no.* No first name allowed. Monsieur not Mister. And the name? “He’s an outreach Centre member. That isn’t going to work.”

“Oh no, wait. We haven’t started the gossip yet.”

Fine. “What’s the latest about Monsieur Martin?”

“Daisy Bernard had his child. She has been trying to track him down for a blood test so it could be confirmed and they could get married. Because Monsieur Martin? *His* Daddy says he wants him to settle down, get an heir, and get married. He held her off for three years.”

“Ooh.” Okay, maybe there was something to this guy. Especially with the wording ‘his Daddy’.

“Yep. Technically she is still his fiancé, but it’s just a technically. If he finds someone more frisky? More free? Just as pregnant but more open?”

Oh. “He’s a fuckboy.” He used people for sex and didn’t care about them. He was rude, conceited, and probably a huge pain in the ass. “Is he me without the lady parts?”

“He’s you without the dress, yes,” she confirmed. “A complete cad. A cad that cads would call a cad. Yes, fuckboy would fit him.”

Oh, she knew where this was going. “He doesn’t want a dutiful happy marriage, he just needs it to look like a dutiful happy marriage to his Daddy.” He was probably the son of the leader of The Centre Outreach in Europe.

“A switch in fiancé’s easily. Plus, you are The Centre’s Miss Parker. So?” She gestured toward Miss Parker.

“Lure the asshole in, get myself in the same situation but let him know he can still be a fuckboy. I’d even guard him with adoption papers.” Double duty for those papers.

“Yes! Then he will choose you over Daisy Bernard.”

“That’s what the adoption papers are for too.” To make Monsieur Martin happy. Feel like he could claim or not. *The more he feels free, the longer he’ll stay.* “He better be fine though,” she warned her.

“A lovely stable, just like you. You in a dress.”

Miss Parker crossed her legs. Would this really work? “I am claiming adoption papers because Broots is the supposed father but he’s not Centre material. He is supposed to believe that I am choosing Monsieur Martin because I’ll go over it with him on the DSA. That he’s a better match and Daddy orders it.”

“Yes.”

“Monsieur Martin is the supposed father. Fuckboy will never run a blood test unless his Daddy commands him to. Since he gets around but I am at a high standard in The Centre, neither would want to jump that gun.”

“Yes.”

“I am claiming adoption papers to him though because I don’t want to trap him or me. He’ll have to make his Daddy aware of The Centre connection still though. Protocol.”

“Almost there, Miss Parker.”

“He’ll like that though, he’ll like the freedom I give him. I’m not shopping for a dress anytime soon. Still, The Centre will want *that* connection too. Because . . .” *Work it out, why would The Centre care that . . .* Her eyebrow raised. “Ooooh? He’s more than Centre outreach.”

“You now have?” Her Aunt Dorothy waved her hands, pushing her.

“I’ll have the Corsican Mafia on my side.” Oooh. “You’re brilliant.” French organized crime tied with The Centre. Somewhere in Monsieur Martin’s family. Him, his father, *someone* had a deep connection. So shoving her into a dome wouldn’t be so easy now. The Centre would wait it out to see what happens. *But, my future daughter with him? I will have to be ready at any minute to take care of him.*

“To a point. Eventually something in that system will break.”

“And when it does?” The Centre would take her back to the domes. “So you want me to hurt Broots for only the sheer purpose of . . .oh.”

“He isn’t as cold as The Centre. He couldn’t keep up the charade. Honey? If you think the ‘fuckboy’ is the dad, you’d have no defense when the DNA inquiry comes up. You should be just as adamant to ignore it.”

Oh. Of course. *The fucking Centre, that’s what Broots pain is for!* Yes. She got it. *The Centre is scheduling me to have months erased on me?*

“Fuckboy will be your tour guide for re-education. He is the type your father said you will naturally gravitate toward.”

*Makes sense, things that like sex usually get it for a reason.*

“Then? The Centre wants to . . .” Aunt Dorothy rolled her hand out. “I’m sorry. You probably already know. Within the end of the week.”

“Mindwipe anything before the dome and the date of the testing. Anything that reminds me I’m not so Pro-Centre.” That was dangerous too, longer wipes could cause damage, or inhibit recall further down the line, but The Centre wasn’t really caring about her mind right then.

“Oui. You will wake up here. I will tell you of Monsieur Martin. Your Daddy will command you to stay with him instead of Broots. I will also tell you of course, of Broots.”

“Broots will believe it’s his. I will believe it’s his. Fuckboy will believe it’s his. This is a nightmare.” Oh great. “I’m going to feel like an absolute whore.”

“Your Daddy and his Daddy are going to want both of you ‘working’ at their companies. Many things would have to be worked out. Every detail is how he’s kept Daisy Bernard off his tail.”

“Oh. Oh nooo . . .” It just hit her. She just realized it. Just now.

“Yes. Not *only* will the Chameleon have to find out it’s his?”

“He’ll have to convince me it’s his.” Her bottom lip curved. *I hated him with the tricks he did with mom’s suicide! What the hell is he going to do to me then?*

“Hopefully. Something will break.”

“Only obvious to him.” Only obvious to him. “I hate when he throws puzzles at me.”

“Oh, I am pretty sure he is the one who will be doing most of the unpleasant unwrapping this year.”

“Don’t count on it.”

“Either way.” Her Aunt Dorothy stood up. “The first mindwipe? Will be today.”

“To wipe *this* from my mind.” Right. “So I play the parts right.” Of course. “So I don’t remember a thing again.”

“Your father knows you will get with Monsieur Martin. He also ordered you to sleep with Broots. Everything is set, whether you know or not.”

“Strictly polite permission is what you wanted.” She looked at her fingers. “The Centre courtesy. I just used that on Broots. I fucking hate that tactic.” Don’t cry. *I used to be so much stronger. That time with Jarod, it weakened me. I can feel it. This is not a time for*

*weakness. I have a job to do! I have a duty to perform.* And yet, those words weren't reaching. "Screw fucking Jarod, he made me weak!" She covered her eyes.

"Maybe or just hormones. Oh, but strong isn't being able to ignore feelings." Her Aunt Dorothy came over and tried to hug her. "It's being strong even in the presence of those feelings and fears. You know that you are bearing a child that is with someone it shouldn't be with. Who's not going to be happy about it, and who can't help you because he is running from you. No one can help you from the future you are facing. Your daughter and you in plexiglass, for all time. Locked away from even your own minds."

"Do you see her there?" She wiped her tears away quickly. Hormones, partly hormones. "Is she in there?"

"Different colors, that also mix with a jet-white crib." She comforted her with a stroke on her head. "You'll have protection still. I promise."

She looked toward her Aunt. *Fuck it, I'll blame it all on hormones.* "I have no time to be a crying bitch. Thank you for your help. Let's go."

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### **After the messy memory wiping once . . . twice . . .**

The Centre chauffeur was running the show from the schedule airspace. Why they ever called them extended vacations was beyond her. At least now that whole thing was over. Sure, she would get time to relax and see the sights, but there was a reason it lasted a year. They would also be doing something else. Her phone rang. "What."

"Ah, Angel. Did you arrive in Europe yet?"

"Just got here, Father. I think."

"Hm. We've got some work to do."

"Sorry, Daddy." Too late. "Excited to see the sights. Brought Broots down for two weeks, like you said, he should be joining shortly." Poor Broots had no idea what the vacation held for him. Anyhow, he'd be okay. She'd make sure he felt better afterward. Daddy's orders.

It was trippy. The whole time feeling like Jarod in the dome. Feeling like she had no place except as a breeding animal in a glass dome. The full rededication didn't help either. *Not everyone in the world can run from the fucking Centre. Just walk away he says. Walk to where? Ooh? Something tall, hot, and tempting was coming her way. I want to walk that way.* From the way he dressed to the way he strolled to that look. *I see a French horse I'd like to add to my stable.* Oh, but shit. She was supposed to . . . eh. *A month and a half of being sober with no sex. A girl can splurge.*

"Enchanté." He seemed to have the same damn idea. He was already undressing her with his eyes.

Hell, yes. She didn't answer back. *Take care of Broots first, but keep him on the backburner.* She winked. "Miss Parker."

"Américain. I knew that." He took her hand and kissed it, bringing a nice shiver up her spine she hadn't felt in so long. His gaze clung to hers. "Welcome to The Centre Outreach. I'll be your guide. Insisted upon by your father."

*Father insisted upon him?* Odd he'd insist upon a particular person to take her in. "I'm here for the year. Extended stay in Europe."

"So you have lots of baggage to deal with? Well, I am sorry. I will help in any way I can," he insisted. "Come inside. Your partner is also inside. You are both scheduled for some fine tuning."

She went inside and kept herself under control. Broots was probably scared out of his wits. Of course, he knew they would detect the foul play from his end sooner or later. She had to get him taken care of too, or The Centre wouldn't mess around. They'd make Cornelius the smartest computer man at The Centre.

"Miss Parker!" Broots instantly stood up. Instantly jelly of course, she could tell. "A-are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay," she insisted. "Calm down. You'll be fine."

"Um? They . . ."

"You got an emotional pass. Daddy said so. However, both of us are . . . out of sorts."

"I heard about that," her lovely guide said to her and him. "Yes, it seems you were on the harder ends of The Centre. A little bit of tuning and you will be okay."

"I don't really need tuned," Broots said. "I um. I just-"

"For the good of The Centre. A tune up should be done," she insisted.

"It's *not* a tune up, it's re-education," Broots whispered to her. "I?"

"You'll be fine. Be done today," she insisted. "Then, you'll come back every other day at the same time."

"Why did we have to come here for it?" Broots asked. "Why didn't we just get to stay at The Centre for it?"

"Because they want you to relax, it will be a little more deeper," the guide said. Then, he spoke French to Broots. "You understand French, right?" Nothing. He continued to speak French with Miss Parker. "He's a whiner, why the fuck is working for The Centre?"

"Bribery. Blackmail. Who the fuck knows." She sighed. "He needs to calm down, it'll hurt the more he rejects it."



“If he were a girl on my team, I’d fuck him so he’d calm down,” her tour guide said.

She glanced at him. *Momma just got turned up a thousand degrees.* “Already taken care of.”

“It’s a waste though,” he said right back to her. “It’s charity, a woman like you doing work like that.”

“Uhh? Hello?” Broots said in English, completely lost in their French conversation. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ll assist.” Miss Parker grabbed his hand. “I’ll go first. Very basic things, Broots. It doesn’t take much to recenter our decisions. To help us see what we need to again.”

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The first steps were the easiest. There was nothing involved, no drugs of any kind. Just an old fashioned mind fucking. She had to repeat all of her thoughts out loud, everything she was unsure of. Everything from Jarod, to playing the video games, to being a mother, to seeing her father dead, believing her mother cheated, and every fine tooth little detail she could think of. Which didn’t include the way Jarod left the Centre. She knew how to act for re-education, so it wouldn’t be so bad. She knew what they wanted to hear. The better she was? The less aggressive it would be to her.

The first part of re-education was almost like a confession booth. The Centre Superior, equal to the chairman in thought, helped put everything into perspective. It was his job. To organize the life and times of those who became lost in The Centre. To bring them back. To give them their place again. To make them feel whole again with The Centre. Nothing was off limits. No language was off limits. No subject was off limits.

“When you think of your father, what is the name that pops in your head?”

“Father.” No. “Daddy.”

“No, you said father first. He has failed in your eyes. He is not the supreme man you once saw. Perhaps because he had been killed and left to rot by your eyes? Weak and unable to do anything?

*Failed in my eyes.* “I don’t believe so.”

“As a corpse, he could nothing. However? He wasn’t a corpse. It was just his strategy, wasn’t it? It was you who was the weak one.”

“Daddy.” Right. “Daddy wasn’t the corpse. He was brilliant, he had a plan and he saw through it for the good of The Centre.” *He fucking made me believe he was dead.*

“Correct. His plan was to protect you from what, The Centre? Or those in The Centre that were trying to push power moves?”

*Ooh, of course. I know this shit.* “Daddy was protecting me. Keeping me from becoming dissected vermin.” But? “He still wanted me in the dome. He still risked me for Jarod.”

“Jarod needs to be caught. Absolutely needs to be caught, to restore the integrity of The Centre. You laid down your life for The Centre several times. Which is worse? Having his child or dying in the process of capturing him? Has anyone perished trying to capture him and how did you react?”

Complicated. “I am a soldier of The Centre. I do what is necessary. I lay down my life, and I have seen death while chasing Jarod.” In fact? “One of my sweepers snapped his neck. Aires, I think?”

“And what did you do? Did you grieve for him?”

“No.” No. “I just kept chasing Jarod.” Of course. “I get tied up though in the fact that this isn’t . . . my call. My body? It would start as me but then become another individual who can’t choose to lay down their life or not.” Yeah. “I couldn’t make that judgment call for them.”

“You would have been their mother. Without you, they wouldn’t even have life. They would have no one. They would be lonely. We know that the loneliness of no mother is what prompted Jarod to leave. You wouldn’t be facing separation or death. You would be simply raising your children. Would it be any different than a Christian giving their babies a cardboard little bible story book? Would it be any different than a father putting his favorite sports team onesie on his child? Where do we draw the line as to where and how parenting starts and ends?”

“No, it’s not. It’s not any different. I.” *Hell of a lot different.* She blinked several times. “I even signed a contract that I would be in their ten years at first. Training them. Helping them see The Centre for the magnificent creation it is. My father’s death, the Pretender’s influence, and confusion of not knowing the mother role I needed to play in the domes have all muddled my thinking.”

“Yes, you’ve got it. You are okay now?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know why your lower team members have not been punished for their crimes?”

“They look to me for answers and all I had was confusion.” Of course. “I failed them, it was not them that failed The Centre. I did what I could, I fully rededicated myself to the cause. I wanted to save them.”

“You can’t save when you are confused. Your confusion, the trauma, everything was too great at the time. Your leadership skills were lacking so much that you almost got members of your team killed. They were spared by The Centre. Why?”

“Because I was at fault. I was confused. I was not being the leader they needed, and I was not keeping my end of the deal!” *Fall for it like the green fucking swine you are.* “I was not keeping the end of the deal. I didn’t want a pretender child, and so I betrayed The Centre in my own way. I wasn’t giving it what it needed.”

“Exactly. Now? How will you handle your team members?”

“I am not first. The Centre is not individual, it is everything. It is good and it is bad and it breathes life into every corner of this world.” She stood at attention. “I will take care of my team member Broots. He is scared of re-education. He does not understand what it is. I will make it a positive thing to look forward to.”

“Mutually beneficial?”

“No, ordered by Daddy. I’ve already found someone else. However, he’s interested in afterward.” She smirked. “I can please Daddy and myself easily.”

“Interesting. Is there anything else that would have made the experience less negative for you?”

*Really?* “Opened toe sandals.”

“Oh. Interesting.”

“Always.”

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Centre Outreach Hotel Accommodation- Tuesday

“There you go. Feel better?” She certainly did. She looked over at Broots from the bed “Good.”

“Ooh. Umm. Y-yeah. Hooray for Centre.” Broots looked back toward her in the bed. “The Centre. Hooray for The Centre.”

“Tell me more about how you feel about The Centre, so I can help clear any bad things up.”

“Oh wow, I don’t think I have enough energy for anymore,” Broots said. He looked back at her. “The Centre isn’t good or bad it’s just all powerful. It’s best to respect it, always. It will hurt those who mean it ill will, and it will help those who do it no harm.”

“Such as?” She asked wishing she could have a Pall Mall. That wasn’t bad at all considering how long it’d been. Why hadn’t she picked any up yet?

“I wouldn’t have an excellent job without The Centre. It takes care of all my needs.” He looked back at her. “My wrists are starting to hurt. I can try-“

“No, I think we’ve reached the end of this lesson tonight.” She winked. “Now, get some rest. You have to go back again after tomorrow.”

“If I’m good, can we do this again?” He asked excitedly. “I mean. If my wrists are a little better. Or if we try something else.”

“Nope, busy tomorrow night. Someone else. I’m not a one man woman. I relaxed you. You’re going to pass just fine.” She came out of the blankets with just her little top. “You won’t be here too long. Enjoy Paris, okay? I have an Aunt I’ve never seen before who wants to talk to me eventually.” But first?

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### **Penthouse Suite- Wednesday**

“I love these.” Miss Parker relaxed in bed taking a small toke of her guide’s vape. She exhaled it. “The view reminds me of home. If it were moved to Europe.” Her tour guide climbed over onto her again. “You are perfect in every way. If I pack you in my bags to take you home with me, is that considered Contraband?” She held up his vape right back to him. He stopped to take a drag and then blew out most of it from the side.

“Somehow, I don’t think that’s much of a problem for The Centre’s Miss Parker.”

“Oh yeah, I still haven’t caught your name?” They both laughed at each other.

“Monsieur Martin,” he answered. He grabbed her hands forcefully. “This will be one incredible year, don’t you think?”

“Ooh, I can see it starting off with a much bigger bang.” A much better time to be had.

“You are sooo needy,” He rubbed his nails down her arms, slightly scratching them. “According to your Daddy, you were shoved in a dome for a month and a half of no sex. You poor thing.” He nipped her ear. “That makes my Daddy better than yours.”

“Nobody’s better than my Daddy,” she challenged him back. “Nor do I have any strings around me. Who’s in that picture in the corner?”

“Oh.” He made a small whine. “Nobody, just my fiancé. Just an accident, don’t worry. I’ve held her off for three years. I’m not really the marriage type but Daddy drives me crazy.”

“Fuck, that sucks,” she agreed. “I just have to have a baby. Nothing about marriage at all. I guess that *does* make my Daddy better.”

“Oh? Well, at least I have my Momma and Daddy,” he declared.

Ooh! She tried to struggle against him. Sore spot!

“Well. I know how to get you not hot, just bothered. Forget it.” He stood up. “Do you have money for a taxi? I don’t have any.”

“Oh gaw.” She ducked her head back and laughed. This guy was as terrible as she had always been. “That’s *my* line you ass!”

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“Oh gaw, yes!” She needed her protein drink. After trapping her for that long without sex, she was going all out. Monsieur Martin had the even days and Broots had the odd days. Broots was easy, just an easy guy like every other one out there. Monsieur Martin though, both of them fucked like they were in combat with each other. It was exciting and orgasmic. Switching nights of complete dominance over Broots with an exchange of brutal animal sex was intoxicating. She was already cleared by The Centre Outreach so now she just had some medication and shots she needed to start to take. She stopped drinking her protein drink when she got a call from her Daddy. “Hello, Daddy.”

“Ah, Angel. You sound so much better. Sounds like everything’s getting taken care of? Take care of Broots?”

“Yes, Daddy. As per orders. Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday the computer man is a happiest of happy boys.”

“The tour guide? Did he help relax you?”

*Relax isn’t the word for him.* “He made me feel better.”

“Great. Have you seen your Aunt Dorothy yet?”

“No, Daddy. Not yet. I was plan-”

“Go see your Aunt Dorothy now! What she says will probably sound goofy but you need to listen to her. Trying to save you because . . . Angel? It was a lie. The genetics lab was gone. I had no choice to lie to you, Zane said so.”

“Oh. I do have the genes. Great.” Her voice sounded weak and shrill compared to what she wanted. She closed her eyes, pinching off the whine she wanted to admit. “Daddy? I need help from you. I need support.”

“Your Aunt Dorothy is doing everything I need her to do over there. I’ve got my own plan with her, just listen to our orders and commands.” He scoffed. “She sees into the future, but nobody believes anything until something comes true. Anyhow? Go visit her. Now.”

Oooohhh. “Yes, Daddy.”

### **Aunt Dorothy’s House**

Dorothy waited. Miss Parker would come soon. Enraged, upset, and probably crying as she took the pregnancy test again. Everything she did the first time. Except now she wouldn’t know anyone could be at her side. She would assume Broots was the father, it was too far back for Jarod now. She would inform her of their genes again so she’d go with their plan. She’d have no choice. As for Jar of Odds? *He needs time to be ready anyhow.* Even though he didn’t want to take Camille if anything happened?

He would. Catherine knew it. He would shape and readjust the way he ran things, but he would. *Each only knows half, Catherine. Half truth to each.* She had managed to keep the truth from Jarod for now. His interruption was not needed, yet. He couldn’t even wrap his mind around taking care of just the infant. How would he handle everything else? And Miss Parker. She did not need the identity of the father or their past interfering with her decisions or duties. She was in grave danger, would be a new mommy, and she would need help that she didn’t want, to get through it.

Time was needed. For both of them.

To make the final decision of each of their lifetimes. Including Dorothy’s.

# Jarod, Don't Run!

October, 2014

Paris

“Hello,” Aunt Dorothy greeted LM as she rested beside the crib with her daughter. She went over to see her grandniece. “How are you doing, mon chouchou?” She was so adorable. She didn’t know if she would like this pretender man Jarod or not, but at least his genes with Miss Parker’s genes equaled cute city. “I told Kai I had the cutest grandniece of everyone, and I even challenged her with pictures,” she bragged. “She didn’t believe me so I bet her. Then she saw the picture in the red dress with you two in the woods? Oh, I shut her up so goood.” She watched LM smile. “How are you doing, too?”

“Dreading America. Happy this time is here. I get half of the booty you just won, don’t forget.” Indecisive. “Her life is so big and complicated, but she’s so tiny and small, she knows of nothing coming.” LM stood up and went to look in at her baby. “I’m going to let him be a nanny. I can’t keep Broots out of her life, no matter what Daddy says.” She fixed Camille’s blanket. “Especially since it was his doing.”

“Mo mo. Do do.”

Dorothy looked toward LM. “She shouldn’t be doing that yet. You do know that?”

“Most will see it as babble,” LM said. “Broots is a genius, I guess it makes sense it would shine through.”

*Not that early.* Instead, Dorothy ignored it. At least she had a decent idea of the advancement in her head. “Who wants un lapin?” She picked up Camille’s favorite rattle and shook it at her. It was half a stuffed animal and half a rattle with a cute bunny rabbit. It was very easy and soft to hold. “Yes, you do, don’t you? Ahhhh Shake-A, Shake-A, Ahhh Shake-A, Shake-A.”

“I wish Daddy would have kept in touch with you,” LM remarked looking over the crib. “You? Are an amazing Aunt.” She smiled at her. “You’ve done nothing but support us this whole time. We are both a complete danger to you.”

“No, you aren’t. No one *ever* thinks of Aunt Dorothy,” Dorothy told her. “I knew of The Centre from Catherine. What little I knew was from her. Even before her death, I kept my distance. I know of no one there. I’ve never stepped foot on it’s grounds. The contacts I did know were third parties, but never direct.” Because she knew for so long. She would need to be gone of any connection with that place, any serious connection. One day, her family would not shun her. It would embrace her for the weirdness she had been.

And now? She was rewarded with two wonderful people in her life. LM and Camille. She adjusted her glasses as she blew raspberries at Camille. *I never want to give them back.* There was a good chance she never had to. Then again? There was a good chance she might. Life was only what you made of it. Either way, they would be safe and happy.

She would too. Her own beau, her favorite beau who had courted her countless times, lived in such a rural yet beautiful area in Alsace. And? Since her and LM looked so similar, it wouldn't be too hard to hide from, since they wouldn't care to look for her in the first place. "If the future is good for all three of us together," she said to LM. "You need to dye your hair like mine."

Oh the look she got. "You mean grey highlights with a solid streak of white on the side?

"Yes! Fetching. Oh, and you should also get a pair of these? I like to wear these outdoors mostly. We can take the glass out." She gestured toward her glasses. "A really good scarf would always help too. I love my scarves."

"Oh, right. If things get bad?" She smirked. "No one thinks about Aunt Dorothy."

"Exactly," she smiled. "If things go bad? I will finally please a beau of mine I've had on the cuff for years. We will move to his isolated home in Alsace." She sighed. "I will finally give in and marry him. The love of my life, I always connected so well with him. Only? Oof, one man." She heard her niece laugh. "Oh like you are any better? At least I try. You just, in and out, and voila!" She snapped. "Taxi for one?" She patted her shoulder. "You should try harder to find someone special in your life."

"Never needed anyone," LM rebutted.

"Hasn't there ever been a boy that touched you profoundly in some way?"

LM scratched the back of her head. There was someone clearly. "I think the only person Camille and I need is you. Maybe Broots for her." She looked toward her aunt. She didn't say anything, but she knew what she was wanting to ask.

"If things go so far south, that this Broots needs to leave too? With his other daughter, yes?" Yes. "There is plenty of room. He is rich and he adores me like a jeweled sun. He will shelter him until something is worked out." Except that would never be on the menu. It was them and Antonio or? It was her and Antonio. There would be no one else.

And that decision, that future, rested only on the shoulders of one odd man.

Jar of Odds, and his own decision about what was most important.

**November, 2014**

**America: The Centre**



“Sydney?”

Sydney looked behind him in his lab. Daphne. “Yes?”

“I’m scared of something,” she admitted. She came toward him. “Miss Parker just came back finally. She scolded me, calling me a bitch for giving her defective pills. But? Well, shortly after I called you in January, I told her. I *know* I told her.”

Ah. “Don’t worry,” Sydney assured her. “Miss Parker didn’t go to Europe simply to lie around. She had advanced re-education with heavy memory influencers. It should have lasted several months though. It is a much more preferred way than here at The Centre.” He patted her shoulder. “Her mind is confused. Don’t worry. It’s like Broots when he first came back. Things don’t . . . ever match up accurately after it. Besides, nothing happened.”

“Yeah. She adopted.” Daphne didn’t seem too happy about it. “That’s pretty fast. After the dome? You know? I mean, they wanted her to get pregnant really bad. So, what’s she do afterward? Goes out and adopts suddenly?”

“It may seem sudden,” Sydney said to her. Miss Parker had an on off thing about this for some time, usually staying in the off position due to her own mother issues. “I believe that even though the situation was terrible, always having the thought in the back of her mind had brought it up to her closer.”

“So you knew she wanted to adopt?” Daphne asked. “Are you sure?”

“The Parkers leave legacy in The Centre.”

“Yeah, blood. Wasn’t that the problem with Miss Parker? Look, I don’t buy it. I know her. She wasn’t . . .” Daphne sighed. “I know Miss Parker. This isn’t like Miss Parker. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I think it’s nice she adopted a baby,” Broots interrupted. He looked toward her. “Sorry. Kids are wonderful. It might do her a lot of good to have someone special. Something. Not so corrupted in her life.”

“But . . . okay, fine, adoption,” Daphne agreed. “But? The guy? True love in Paris, I *don’t* buy it.”

“After the dome, Miss Parker was changed,” Sydney tried to explain. “It was a heavy ordeal on her. She was forced to deal with the pain and misery she caused Jarod. Plus, the full rededication, it may have had a part to play. I think she . . .” Hm. *She may be creating a new life around her. A new baby girl and a new husband to latch onto. Is this her way of leaving The Centre, or her own sense of reality?*

“Sydney?”

Sydney didn’t know what to say for that one. It was too personal a topic. “I will have a talk with her later.”

“Later, fine.” She looked toward Broots. “But you? She wants to see you *now*.”

Broots headed down The Centre hallways he’d been called to. Miss Parker just made it back and she wanted to speak to him about something. He opened the door to a meeting room. Clear on the other side of the room was Miss Parker. She still dressed the same. Still looked the same. *Daphne’s overreacting. I think she’ll be okay. I mean, nothing happened in the dome. Jarod kept her safe.* He walked all the way to the other side and then took a seat. *Oh.* Her newly adopted daughter was drooling on her rattle, lying on her back. She half started to roll to look at him. *She’s a cute one.* “You did adopt. That’s great. I heard about her. What’s her name?”

“Can it. We have business.” She shoved papers at him. “I need you to sign these.”

Standoffish and fast. Seemed normal so far. Broots tried to look at the papers. There was a large stack of them. He skipped the terms and definitions on the front and went in several pages to try and find the meat of the – “Oh!” He looked down at her adopted daughter again. “She’s . . . mine?”

“No, Broots. You’re not qualified Centre material Daddy wants,” she answered. “It was just a couple of weeks of burning off steam. I’m sorry I messed with you in Europe.” She flipped to page ten. “I need you to start signing every page from here. Dating it too.”

Huh? “I don’t get it. What’s all this for?”

“You’re Camille’s father,” she revealed. “European vacation gone wrong. Just, forget it. Once you sign the papers, you are legally obligated not to tell anyone that you are her father. For that? Daddy will pay you five million. Fairly generous just for a screw up.”

*Oh. The pills.* The pills must have still been screwy. Maybe she wasn’t even on them? Maybe she was moving to something else? Maybe. “Oh, man.” He looked down at her. She was cute and – “D-did you just say five million?”

“Uh huh, but you have to keep quiet about her. Especially since she sort of has another father,” she said.

Oh yeah. “Heard about that. You’re . . . getting married.” And now? What Daphne was saying made sense.

“Daddy likes him. He thinks she’s his. It’s complicated,” she remarked. “At the same time, he won’t take her as his yet. A lot of things need to be worked out, so for all purposes? I adopted her. That’s the official word. Comprenez computer man?”

Broots looked back down at the ground at Camille. He bent down and picked her up. Miss Parker rolled her eyes but he didn’t care. *I have another little girl.* “Hello there.”

“Mo mo.” She stared at Broots.

“She spoke?” He was amazed.

“She’s babbling and that’s not the right course of action, Broots!” She grabbed her from him and held her in her arms. “Just sign the effing papers.”

“That say I’m not her dad. I can’t do that,” Broots said.

“You can be a nanny every once in awhile if it makes you happy,” she tried to compromise. “Just sign the damn papers. Do you want to get associated with the Parkers? Do you want The Centre to start interfering in your life?”

*The Centre already interfered in my life. They took Debbie.* He looked back toward her. *She doesn’t know that.* “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I don’t know, big trip. Lots of fun. Don’t remember much. Came back with a souvenir.”

“Do you remember the dome?” That’s when he noticed Mister Parker standing in the doorway. “Oh? Hello Mister Parker.”

“What dome are you talking about?” She asked. “The Pretender’s?” She looked toward her Daddy. “Daddy?”

“Nothing, Angel, don’t worry about it. It was before Europe.” His eyes were drilling holes in Broots. “Sign the damn papers and hurry it up.”

“But, what? So, Mister Parker?” Broots didn’t know who to address. This was risky. This was dangerous. *This is my daughter.* He reached out to touch her little finger. She squeezed it naturally, just like Debbie used to do.

“Sign the damn papers!” Mister Parker pushed him, hitting the table.

“She’ll have a daddy,” Miss Parker told him. “You aren’t abandoning her.”

“Well, who is this guy Mister Parker wants you to marry?” Broots said, trying to keep it together. *This isn’t her choice, her father’s ordering it! Daphne’s right, this does stink!*

“Just sign the effing papers. It’s five million, damn it you stupid IT guy! Don’t ruin everything. Your life will get worse if you screw this up!”

“I supposed we’ll have to start with *Indoctrination* before more re-education, for a start, if you don’t sign,” Mister Parker threatened him.

“You’re saying she’s adopted, but you’re also saying, she is some other guys?” It didn’t make sense. “Is he gonna be a daddy or not?” *Because I’m her father.*

“Daddy?” Miss Parker left it up to her father.

Of course she left it up to her dad. The Centre had every claw back in her. Broots stroked his back tooth silently with his tongue. “Can someone please explain?”

“You are the dad,” Mister Parker said, “but you aren’t good enough for my Angel. Monsieur Martin is. However? We’ve got some . . . entanglements to work out, and neither he nor my daughter want to get Little Camille mixed up in it with ownership. So? She’s adopted. Now? Sign the papers. Before this confrontation gets . . . nasty.”

Broots looked at the little girl. He looked at Miss Parker. He rubbed his eye. It felt like the days where he had to fight to even see Debbie again. He was still battling for her full custody.

“You don’t do it, you don’t see her. You do it? You get to be nanny,” Miss Parker said. “That’s the deal. Plus, you know? Five million dollars you ass. Take it already, and keep quiet! Gaw!” She rocked her daughter back and forth. “I get it, Broots. She will be fine. But she’s my daughter, and you don’t want to take up a battle with me. Let alone The Centre.” She rolled her eyes again. “Daddy said no, Broots! So just get it done!”

“Because Mister Parker knows best?” Broots glanced up to Mister Parker. He looked back at his daughter. “Did you do a DNA comparison on me? She could always-“

“Don’t you dare!” Mister Parker yelled at him. “How far do you wanna push this, IT Man, Hmm? Do you want Zane to visit you? The Chairman? I bet you’d like that.”

“Blood is easy in The Centre,” she said, “you know that, Broots. Just sign.”

“If he finds out later it’s not his-“

“Then that is our affair!” Mister Parker interrupted again. “Sign the paper. Before you become our latest affair to deal with.”

“Just sign the papers,” Miss Parker said. “Really? You are going to challenge The Centre? Sign the papers, Broots!”

“My Angel doesn’t have full control of The Centre. Neither do I. We do not want this to get messy,” Mister Parker assured him. “Sign, or find out what happens to people who do screw with The Centre.”

“You have a daughter, Moron, don’t mess around.” Miss Parker glared at him. “Another daughter you love and know and care for deeply.”

Debbie. Broots grabbed the pen. She’d already been messed with once. *Like I don’t know what The Centre can do.* He signed the next page. *I know what The Centre can do.* He turned to the next page and signed. *But when you are the top computer guy in the damn company, you don’t get options.* He signed the next page. *You do whatever they say and make them happy.* He signed the next page. *Even sign your own daughter away. So that you don’t.* He flipped it all over. “Lose the one you have.” He pushed the papers toward Miss Parker.

She snagged them quickly and gave them to her father as he came over.

That’s when her fiancé entered into the room. He was holding a stick of some kind in his hand. “What’s going on?”

“Last minute, um, proceedings,” Mister Parker said shaking his hand. “As long as your daughter is coming back and forth in America, got to be careful. I mean, uh? Future daughter, through marriage of course.”

“Ah, yes. Future daughter.” He winked at him and then walked over to Miss Parker. He practically bent her backwards in the chair to kiss her. “Almost free? You going to show me what I’m supposed to do in this place or you gonna hang out all day figuring shit out?”

“Almost free,” she said. “Have to fix tie-ups when we’re in America. Especially since you aren’t, you know? The father?”

He just chuckled and picked Camille up from Miss Parker. He was still holding his stick. Broots was close enough to see it was a vape now. “She is cute. Momma and Daddy already miss her.”

*Momma and Daddy.* Whoever he was, he was Indoctrinated, with his parents up high, like Miss Parker. Broots eyed him carefully with Camille.

“Cuter than the other one,” he said. “By far.”

*Other one?* Broots looked at Miss Parker.

“Of course she is,” Miss Parker said. “Daisy’s a train wreck compared to me.”

Broots watched him take a hit of his vape and then blow it out. To the side, yes, but- *Don’t do that while you are holding her.*

“Don’t do that while you are holding her!” Miss Parker said gravely. “I’ve told you that.”

“Hm. You are so a mommy.” He gave Camille back, sucked on his vape lightly and then blew it into her face, then stealing a kiss. “Hooked yet again?”

“If she wants to stay off of nicotine, then just let her.” It raced out of Broots’ mouth. She probably stayed off for the pregnancy.

Monsieur Martin gestured to Broots. “You again? Who do you think you are?”

“The top IT guy in The Centre,” Broots answered him. It was true too. He did circles around Cornelius. If he wasn’t that good, The Centre would *never* hold him there as tight as it did.

“He chases Jarod. Just like we are supposed to while we are here.” Miss Parker took Camille’s rattle and rattled it in front of her face. Camille’s eyes followed it.

“Are you staying with him while you’re chasing Jarod?” Broots asked. “I mean, I already heard you weren’t here full time. Part time only.”

“For now, yes,” Mister Parker admitted.

“There are dealings between,” Monsieur Martin answered Broots. “We come and go. Whatever our Daddies say, we’ll do.” He took another puff on his vape and strolled over to

Mister Parker. “Mister Parker. Some words?”

Broots watched them both start to speak French and then leave out the meeting hall. He looked over at Miss Parker. “He’s making you marry *him*, isn’t he?” He whispered. “For the baby?” She didn’t stare at him straight on.

Then? “Screw the pill and Blondie right now.”

Oh yeah, she was upset with Daphne. “Well. At least. Jarod wasn’t the father.”

“I don’t even want a conversation about it,” she warned him. “It was too far back and I don’t have the strength to think of anything right now.”

“I know he’s not the father.” But Broots was.

“Monsieur Martin is staying with me in a rental suite,” she answered. “We aren’t even staying in my old place. Things are being worked out. It?” Her toughness. Her rigidity. The massive attitude that kept her impenetrable. It was fractured. Bent. Still there, but not as strong. “It looks more like we might be . . . staying in Europe.” She patted his back slightly a couple of times. “Use the money and follow, Broots. This is *our* fault, not yours.”

Tears. He could see them threaten to fall but she kept herself under control. Still? The old Miss Parker wouldn’t have that. Not the one before the dome. *They didn’t fully convert her.* Months were iffy. “You do remember the domes.”

“I’m not supposed to so, ssh!” She warned him. She swallowed. “I *can’t* go under again. It’ll kill my mind. So I don’t know about anything, I’m sorry.”

“I understand.” If he followed to Europe? What would happen to his battle with Debbie’s custody?

“The fiancé is like Daddy,” she admitted to him softly. “He’ll come by every once in awhile to see her. As his parents get older, he’ll take over the Outreach Centre. You’ll spend so much more time with her than him. I have no words, I’ve never . . .”

“Nothing’s a hundred percent.” He nodded. She was doing what she could. “The search for Jarod has been tougher. We tracked him down three times and then it got hard. Sydney thinks The Centre is bugging and following him.”

“Poor Sydney,” she said softly. She smiled again as Monsieur Martin came back over and her father left the room. “Have a fun talk with Daddy?”

“Eh.” He didn’t seem as enthused. “I suppose. My Momma and Daddy are coming down. Still. You might be too much of a catch to just let go like Daisy.”

“Daisies are meant to be plucked and destroyed,” she answered. “Don’t worry though, Baby. I’m not winding my thorns around you.”

“See, this is why you make the best one to choose,” Monsieur Martin said to her.

“Best one to choose?” There was that weird phrasing again. “Who is Daisy?”

“Oh, she’s technically his fiancé that was before me,” Miss Parker said casually. “No biggie. Cutest baby wins.”

Agh! *This is who my daughter is going to? Some, some, some!* “I have to go.” He stood up. He couldn’t take much more.

“Take the day off, Broots,” Miss Parker instructed him. “It’ll do you good.”

“Yeah.” Sure it would.

### **Miss Parker’s Rental**

Sydney knocked on the door of the place Miss Parker was staying. Her fiancé answered the door. “Good evening. I am here to see Miss Parker?”

“Hm.” He called for her name then looked back at him. “Come inside.”

Sydney nodded and did just that. Inside everything was different. Nothing of Miss Parker’s he could recognize was in there.

“Sydney,” she said. “What? I don’t go to work ‘til tomorrow.”

Sydney looked toward the left at her new baby. Quiet. Probably sleeping. “I wanted to have a small chat with you.” He came and took a seat. “I know you were thinking of adopting. You made that point clear. However? I want to make sure you are feeling well about your decision?”

“Camille is wonderful,” she said. “She’s sleeping right now. You can see her, but don’t wake her up.”

Sydney smiled. She seemed fine there. “What I am most surprised about? Is this sudden relationship you have advanced over the course of a single year?”

“Things happen. True love is a thing. What do you want?”

No, now that didn’t sound or look right. “He doesn’t exude a feeling of a long standing relationship.” More fidgeting.

“Camille needs a dad. Daddy wanted a dad. It’s done,” she said.

Ohh. “Mister Parker ordered you to find someone to marry?” Well, that wasn’t right. “Did you try saying no to him? You are a mother now, Miss Parker. You have to start thinking of your daughter first.”

“I am marrying a guy for her to have a daddy. What do you want from me? What could be more unselfish than that?” Eyes of distrust.

“A family is a wonderful thing to have,” Sydney said, “but not if it isn’t-“

“You better not say real,” she warned him. She showed him the engagement ring on her finger. “I am marrying him. We are raising a child together. Life is going to be effing perfect.”

“Is going to be,” Sydney warned her. “You can’t make a fake life to try and replace your own. The time, in the dome, where you had to confront so much-“

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she cut him off quickly. “I seriously don’t know what you are talking about, if you don’t get my effing drift?”

This was starting to make more sense. *They tried to erase months and it didn’t work.* Which meant? If they found out it didn’t work, they’d put her back under. Could that explain the alertness that she couldn’t stop displaying? Her body was taut, ready for action even though nothing was around her. *This is not a time for her to raise a child.* “May I see your little girl?” After he got the okay, he neared her.

She seemed fine. She was sleeping, swaddled. She knew how to swaddle her child. As he approached closer, the baby awoke and started to cry. He watched Miss Parker come over to the crib. Her eyes danced as she played with her baby lightly and talked to her to make her feel better. *She looked so much like Catherine did.* No, she looked fine being a mother. Pleased about it. In fact?

That baby seemed to bring out the best within her. Then what held her in such a tight stance?

“Miss Parker!”

Sydney watched her become tight again as he heard a new voice. Two new people arrived with suitcases.

“Hello,” Parker greeted them, but it was only surface deep. She gestured to them to Sydney. “My future In-Laws. They. Couldn’t leave me more than one day. Alone.”

*Aaaahhh.* There it was. He watched as they came over to fawn over the baby and her. Like they were trying to keep their distance close, even over the seas. *They want her in the family. Even leaving to America isn’t keeping them away.* No, this was not an order to marry someone for the child. This was an order to marry into that exact family. With that exact man.

And all of it made Parker agitated. She wasn’t happy. *Why didn’t you leave?* Had Jarod not worked with her enough that she could at least see that as an option now? This wasn’t good for her.

He thought back to being taken away to SL20 to his lab work now. *What if the lie wasn’t a lie?*

Oh. If only he could reach Jarod safely to have a conversation with him again.



## Later that night . . .

Four people inside that small place. It was a perfect size for two, Jarod didn't know why there was four. The fact that Parker was sleeping in the same room with the one he wanted to check on didn't make it easier. Jarod slowly crept to the crib. To see the child whose name kept haunting him over the past year. Camille. Leanne. Parker.

She was sleeping of course. *Do you have any idea how dangerous your future will become?* No. Just innocently sleeping. Content. Jarod tried to, as in Dorothy's words, be a genius about everything. There was a lot of baggage to hold with the situation though. The thought that Parker might die, and that's why Catherine wanted to entrust her to him. The fact that his life was not made for more than one person.

He created an emergency situation though. A pretend that gave him the chance to keep her safe if or when anything happened. It was a limited time though. *Trying to save Miss Parker and this baby. Don't think of it any harder than that.* It would be too much alone. If she ended up in trouble, he'd take care of Camille until she was out. Then back home. It was the best he could offer for Catherine. But? *A spirit's voice doesn't reach out from the grave and name her granddaughter after you for nothing.* He pulled her blanket back, just slightly, trying not to wake her. She was about average size, and appeared healthy. She should be okay to take care of. He laid her blanket back on top. As he tiptoed back out, he heard a cry. He bolted out the nearest window.

It wasn't quick enough. Damn! He heard her calling his name, but he was getting out, fast! At least she wasn't going to draw her weapon as fast near her baby.

"Jarod!" He came, he actually came? Her heart raced as she went over to the window. "Please, Jarod! Don't run, Damn it!" Gone. She couldn't see even his shadow. "Bastard." He didn't know about her genes. He could have taken her away for surgery and ended her whole nightmare. He promised that one day he'd come see the new Parker. He promised. *And he did.* And her chance was over. Something would break soon. She wanted to run away and get it done, but with Jarod still out there causing trouble? She couldn't say when or how it could be him. If The Centre found out differently?

She looked at her phone. It was late. Everyone was asleep. Her one chance was probably over. There was no choice. It was time to go with her Aunt Dorothy's plan. Right after she came clean. "I have to tell Sydney the truth." She called him up and blurted it all out on him.

"Broots is the father of your baby?!" Yes, he was more than mildly surprised. "I thought you adopted her?"

"So does everyone else," she admitted. "No, Broots is the dad. I followed Daddy's orders." It sounded like such a weak excuse. "Daddy doesn't want him in the family, he made Broots

sign something so he couldn't be."

"This is probably tearing him apart," Sydney said. "You can't let this go on."

"I have no choice, I need their protection," she admitted. "Sydney? The dome, it's coming back. It wasn't a lie."

"I knew it!"

"Yeah." Weak, so weak. "I need help. Jarod just came to see her, and he ran away. I blew the one chance I had to talk to him! Without the excuse of him, I can't go out and have surgery. What would I say if you are tracking down articles of him down in Milwaukee and I say he took me to Pennsylvania? I can't risk it! What do I do?"

"I don't know, Miss Parker. I don't know."

"Nothing at all?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"So it's true." Who knew? "I always thought you connected with Jarod behind our backs. You really don't."

"No. I'm sorry."

"I am too, Sydney. I am too." She hung up. *Okay. Momma is on her own. Time to follow Aunt Dorothy's plan.*

# Thief In The Night

## In the Bedroom

Miss Parker put on one of her teddies as she slapped her fiancé awake. “Hey.”

“Mm?” Of course, he was interested.

“I’m tired of this run around and competing with Daisy. I want to be the top dog over in the Outreach Centre with you.” She pulled him roughly toward her. “Let’s make a deal?”

“Ooh. Listening. No choice but to listen,” he said seductively as he bit her ear.

“I don’t want anymore kids. You don’t want anymore kids. Your mom and dad want several between you and the woman you marry. The pill situation got fucked up, so I don’t trust it. But I *love* having my way with you.” She smiled seductively. “That’s the only reason I pull away. I fear having another brat. One is hard enough, imagine two sucking at the teat.”

“Oof, I hate it too,” he said. “Yes, I know. They want many children. What do you want to do?”

“Remove it all. Come with me? Let’s run away and have a secret little surgery,” she insisted. “Then we can just have endless sex, over and over and over. No worries and no cares.”

“Oh, yes! We can get your tubes tied.”

“No, I want the whole thing removed. Eggs and all,” she insisted. “If your parents found out, they could order us to have them untied. No, lets get it all,” she insisted. “Then? We can have fun, as much fun as you want?” She crept into his chest. “And you? Can still have fun? With the other women if you want. I won’t judge and I’ll be as quiet as a mouse.” *Please fall for this, I need this. This is my last shot.*

“Camille stays here with my parents then. I’ll write a note we went on a lovely getaway to them,” he insisted. “It’s not the first time I did that, and it serves them right, coming to America like this on us. Then we shall find someplace, get it done, and get back.” He stole a kiss. “You see? You are so perfect in every way.”

“Hey, it goes both ways,” she insisted. “Neither of us want to get stuck together, but we love the way sex feels.” She raised an eyebrow. *If Camille stays, then I better call my old team to let them know to watch out for them. These people can’t stay with her alone.* Who else could watch her and let her get this done? Desperate times. “Let’s go. Afterwards while I’m healing, we’ll just say I had an accident on the slopes or something. Right?”

“We are ambitious. Absolutely irresponsible, terrible children,” he agreed. “Agreed.”

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### **Miss Parker’s Home, Two Days Later**

“Oh, its okay, Camille.” Monsieur Martin’s mother tried to soothe her. “What is it, huh? Does the baby want her bottle?” She went to go fetch the bottle with her granddaughter. Daisy did have a grandson, but getting her son to reasonably marry her was oh so hard. “Let’s see, there’s the bottle.”

“Mo mo.”

Baby babble. “Let’s see here, where is that formula?”

“To the right.”

“Oh, I see.” Wait. She turned around and saw a man she’d never seen before have a gun on her. “Oh, it’s one of those days, isn’t it?”

“Yep, one of those days,” he said. “Hand her over.”

Jarod ran from the house with Camille in tow. Of course the baby was crying. After running away a couple of nights before, he kept his eyes tightly on the situation. Miss Parker mysteriously disappeared, never showing up for even her first day of return back to the field. She wasn’t chasing him yet. However, it did give him a chance to research the future fiancé of Parker and her family.

It was not going to happen. Her fiancé, in the first place, already had a fiancé with a woman that had his child. For two, that family was connected to French organized crime. It didn’t matter if it was love, money, or daddy’s orders. It was not happening if she was going to be a mother.

Last of all? No Miss Parker. *Gone*. There was no one there taking care of Camille but her ‘future’ grandparents.

They had been so obsessed with not losing the Parker connection, that they hopped a flight and came straight to America to stay as long as *she* was there. It all spelled bad.

He had to get Camille out. He moved to the rental car he had and strapped her into the child seat. Still crying.

He closed the door and climbed in the front seat. “Hang on, okay?” He tried to drive fast, but safe. He had a little time. That woman didn’t exactly look like she’d be reaching to call the police or The Centre. “Everything’s okay,” he tried to say in a soothing voice. “You’ll see your momma again soon.” Once he figured out what was going on. Why was Parker even risking her daughter around those people? *Blinded by The Centre again somehow.* Then again, she was sleeping in that same room instead of in her bedroom. Also telling. Parker’s child continued to cry. “Once I stop, I can hold you. You’ll be okay. Relax.”

He kept his eyes on the rearview. Poor thing was kicking and crying. While most people got anxious or upset or angry when children acted that way? All it did to Jarod was remind him of his past. When he was separated from the ones he loved. When he never knew what or who was coming, or what he’d have to do in The Centre. He parked in an alley, far enough away from the situation. He reached in the back seat and picked her up.

He held her close, trying to soothe her. “I know, I know. I’m a complete stranger and I abducted you at night.” He kissed her head lightly. “You must be so scared. I know how that feels and I’m very sorry.” He kept her close as he paced softly back and forth for her. “That woman getting you a bottle to drink from though isn’t a nice woman. Neither is the other man you are with either. You need to get back to your mom.” Still, his actions were stirring such emotions right now. This time, to her, he was the thief in the night. “It’s okay.” Hmm. *In the vision Dorothy saw, she said she sang it.* Had Parker just got her or had she been with her some time? Maybe it would help calm her down if she knew it? “Kree Kraw Toads Foot Geese Walk Bare Foot. Kree Kraw Toads Foot Geese Walk Bare Foot.”

There we go. That helped her relax. “Good Camille, good.” Her eyes darted up to Jarod’s, locking with his. Everyone probably used the French pronunciation for her name that knew her. Except her mommy. “Okay.”

Now? Where was Miss Parker, why was she with those people, and how was he going to find her? He didn’t know, but he did make a promise to take care of Camille if anything happened to Parker.

And he refused to leave something so pure with the likes of those people.

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## Sydney’s Home

Sydney answered his phone. It was late, but he and Broots and Daphne were all left in charge of watching Miss Parker’s little girl. She had to go somewhere important, and she needed them to watch over the house Camille was at. He looked at the number. Daphne. She was on watch at that hour.

“Jarod just took the baby!”

“What?” Really? “When?”

“Just now, Sydney. I tried to call out, but even then, he would have just ran off. What do we do now? Miss Parker depended on us!”

“It’s okay.” Sydney smiled. “Jarod probably knows that the people in there weren’t good. When she comes back, he’ll bring her back.” In fact? That was a good thing. Miss Parker did not want to leave for the surgery at all, but she had ran out of options. She wanted to be free without that family, and Sydney fully supported it, now that he understood the details. “What did Broots say?” Of course, Sydney had told Daphne about Broots being the father. Broots wasn’t allowed to tell anyone, but anyone who already knew? He was fine to converse with. Maybe after this whole charade was over with, Broots would be able to claim his daughter back again. That’s what really mattered anyhow to him.

“Pretty much the same thing. He trusts his daughter with Jarod over the other family any day. Oh. I wish we could just tell Jarod that she needs surgery to be freed. I guess it comes with the job of ‘we catch him and off to The Centre’ huh?”

“Yes,” Sydney said. “It comes with the job.”

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## **Jarod’s Current Apartment**

“Tomorrow, first thing in the morning,” he promised her. “I’ll get you to a place that will have clothes and more food and more diapers and everything you need.” He looked at her little face. “I have to contact Sydney somehow. Someone has to know where your mommy went to.” Please.

“Mo mo.”

“That is your favorite sound, isn’t it?” He placed her in a drawer with some light blankets. “It’s not Hotel Six,” he told her. “But ‘we’ll leave the lights on for ya’.” At least she had settled down. She was still kicking a little. Powerful little feet. “I wish you knew what Miss Parker was up to. That’d make this easy.” It was never easy though with The Centre.

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## **Random Diner**

The next morning, Jarod took the long haul with his current rental car. Camille was not happy about the long trip and she needed several breaks. He didn't blame her. He doubted being strapped in a strange car for hours without her family felt good. He held her now, giving her a bottle in a small diner. While she did that, he looked at more information on the Martin's. The more he found, the more he hated. *There's no way she's with them on coincidence.* She was up to something, and it was great enough to put her daughter at risk. No, he knew Parker. Nothing was great enough to put her daughter at risk. Which made him more nervous. *Where are you?* Then he felt something on his phone. The last phone number Sydney had. He reached into his pocket, jostling Camille around as he answered it. *Brilliant.*

That had to be Broots. The transmission was as long as a friend code on a ps4. "Never discount technology."

"Mo Mo."

Jarod looked at her again. "Wish I knew what your mo mo was." Hm. She babbled a lot of things, but she constantly babbled mo mo and do do. Almost like it wasn't babble. Her appearance though, she couldn't be more than three months or so. Standard wise, she shouldn't even be doing much more than cooing some. He didn't worry about standards though, everyone was different. "You must really miss your mo mo." It must be her mother. Parker must have showed her lots of love. The love she wouldn't show the rest of the world. "Well? We are going to be going to your temporary place. Get you some better toys to play with." He picked up a small rattle he'd got from her. She took it and shoved her mouth on it. "Remind me to clean that again." He smiled at her.

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## Emergency Pretend Apartment

"Here we are," Jarod said as he brought her into the apartment. "See? Place to eat. Place to sleep. You can even swing." He brought his bag inside and then went back out to retrieve the other bag. He put her in the crib for now. "I've got a gymnasium I'll get set up for you, how's that sound?" He set her down in the swing and turned it on very low for now. He went over and opened up the small gymnasium. She could lie on her back or practice flipping over and she'd be able to touch the different colors and textures in the soft setting. He went over and retrieved her, lying her down. "There you go. Now? I have to see if I can't get some information on your mom." He watched her stretch up and reach for it as he dug into his bag.

He went and bought another ps4. He didn't trust his real ps4 codes to his Hunters of course. He got on and found the friend code while he heard the little crinkles of toys as she touched and discovered them.

Got them.

It didn't take long to unravel the mystery. He turned his ps4 off. "This is definitely a 'hokey pokey. I got 'what it's all about'." He moved back over toward her. "Well? I don't know where your mommy is, but I know why she's there." Surgery to get everything removed. She did have the genes. The Centre was just throwing her caution down the entire time since Broots blew up the genetics lab. "It would have been great knowing earlier."

That was the thing about Hunters. He had to assume they were chasing him to put him back into The Centre so communication, when it was important, it couldn't happen. With Sydney, yes. He trusted Sydney, but The Centre had been closely following him. *Guess I know why now.*

Moving on. "I got some more exciting news." He brought over his ipad and blew up a picture for her to see. He held it right above her, higher than she could grab. "This fella right here? He's your dad. His name is. Well, Broots." She tried to reach to the ipad. "Yeah. That one was a shocker for your mommy I bet. Thanked the IT guy a little too much." Well, he warned her. Okay, not about that, that shouldn't have happened. But? *I wish she would treat herself better.* He put the ipad back down as he looked at her. "Not much resemblance to him." Still young though, about three months. Maybe a little older.

He moved one of the little rattle toys on the gymnasium, making her reach for it again. "Here's the scoop, Camille. Apparently? Your dad isn't good enough for the Parker line. You know what? I don't think that's a bad thing at all." Honestly. "There's another guy, someone you've probably had to associate as your dad. He's not." Jarod shook his head. "Which I am glad about because he's not a nice man at all. Hard to explain it all, but your mommy hid you under an adoption The Centre conjured up." He sighed. "Because the guy that isn't your dad, that is supposed to become your dad?" *He's one lousy bastard.* "He's not a very nice person and he's already got some trouble. He wants to make extra sure he wants you and mommy before anything else happens."

He picked her up. "You know what? I don't think that's a choice he should get to make. Now, as great as your mommy is at solving things? I'm a little bit worried." He completely squished his fingers almost together. "Little bit. Your mommy was worried too, which is apparently why you were being watched by . . . hmm, what's a good name for them?" Hunters? Chasers? "By her friends." Yep, that was a good name for them.

"Mo mo. Do do."

There it was again. "I'll put you back in your gymnasium, and then I will get you some food, okay?" He placed her back down. Sydney and the others were waiting for her response, but Jarod hated to depend on that. It was important that she get that surgery done. Unfortunately, he was nowhere near a medical pretend. He just had a decent story for when he was in town. His qualification he could stir up was great, but it would still take time to get hired. Three to four weeks. That rarely changed, and sometimes it took even longer. It depended on the job.

"Mo mo. Do do."



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## Medical Location

*Okay. I don't like.* She could feel something wrong with Monsieur Martin now. She was in the dressing room, getting ready to put on the gown. The usually sexy demeanor Monsieur Martin always displayed seemed gone. She heard a knock on her door. "Come in?" She watched him sigh.

"I don't like this," he admitted. "Something feels wrong. Ducking my parents is one thing, I understand that, Miss Parker." He came closer to her. "I know about your past. Is this just trauma to get this done to feel better about the dome?"

She couldn't have hid that if she wanted too. She was even paraded via recordings on the archive. "I suppose trauma, but what does it matter? I just want to feel better."

"Well, we can go with tubes tied, and then lie about having the whole surgery to my parents," he smirked. "I think that's a better solution."

*Noo. I did not leave Camille just for this!* "I don't think it is," she disagreed. "Why don't we get rid of all of it, and then tell everyone I just got my tubes tied? That sounds much better."

"If it looks like you are disobeying The Centre's wishes, that will have a profound effect on many things." He shook his head. "I have gone over this with my soon to be Father-In-Law."

"Daddy?"

"Yes," he said. "Mister Parker says that surgery is too risky? He does not want that. He still wants two grandchildren." He shrugged.

She almost felt blood being drawn for her lip. *I relied on what I could from him. I didn't bother him. I haven't led The Triumvirate to him at all. And he does this?* She was a thousand times safer getting the surgery done! She was even right there and her Daddy wasn't letting it happen. Her Father wasn't letting it happen.

"We can't cross our parents," he reasoned with her. "Do you want to talk to him?"

"Yes." She held her hand out stiffly for the phone. She dialed the number. Monsieur Martin was not going to oppose her daddy. He still had a strong presence in The Centre. It was like opposing The Centre. "Daddy."

"Ah, Angel. You need to get back home! You've been missing two days."

"I want the surgery," she said firmly. "Tell him that I can have the surgery, so we can get this over with."

“Oh, Angel. You still don’t understand. This is too far! Even if you get the surgery, The Centre is not going to let this go! You’ll be damaging the goods! They’ll be beyond upset. No, no. We’ve worked this out.”

Worked this out? “Worked what out?”

“You’re? Well, you’re a sort of risk. To The Centre,” he admitted. “I mean, look at what you are trying to do right now! This is beyond acceptable. You are getting rid of the power to have multiple pretenders! No, no. Now, this is what we are going to do? Okay?”

She listened. Intently. She watched Monsieur Martin’s face. *Fuck this guy, I am not marrying him first and then letting them take care of the surgery to let The Centres have everything!*

“You want me to divide up my material for The Centre and The Centre Outreach of Paris, after I am secured to the Martin’s?”

“It sounds good, doesn’t it? Everybody wins. There’s no suspecting anyone wants to kill you, you’re now valuable. They want you and Camille in their family. I mean who doesn’t want Camille, she’s perfect. She’s the future. Meanwhile, The Centre is happy and it gets what it wants. It’s a win/win.”

“And how do you know they would go for it?” She asked him.

“I already worked it out with the chairman. Why do you think Zane has stayed out of this affair? As soon as you were secured *enough*, then I let him know. Otherwise? Well, I’d be an enemy of The Centre.”

*You liar, Father!* “What about Aunt Dorothy, is she on this whole thing too, huh?! So you can get your precious fucking material?!”

“No, no. Your Aunt Dorothy thinks this is just a stint to figure things out. But, they are figured out. You’re safe now. The Centre won’t hurt you.”

*They just want to divide me up for scraps.*

“Come on, Honey. Monsieur Martin has already booked the flight back home. Come back home.”

*I don’t want to marry this guy. Even Aunt Dorothy never had planned on me going through with it.* He was a security measure to get this done. He *was* the security measure her Aunt Dorothy wanted her to use first. Miss Parker had wanted Jarod first. Her dad apparently wanted it done after she was secured, but unlike the others?

Create more children. Use her eggs and create more children. Somehow, they wouldn’t count as hers? What, because she wasn’t birthing them?! *Relax. Relax.* “So then, what of Camille?”

“Oh, I will accept her,” Monsieur Martin told her as he held out his phone to collect it. “As long as we have this arrangement we’ve made, I have no problem marrying you. It’d just be like now except Momma and Daddy will be off my back.” He took the phone. “Also, we can stay in Europe without so much back and forth. Secure Camille’s real heritage.”

“If. That is what the DNA shows.” Her dad was crazy. “Look, I’m like *you*. We both know that.” Forget the lie. “She might not be yours.”

“It doesn’t matter. Momma and Daddy love her. We’ve all agreed to skip the preliminary DNA testing. I talked about it with your father. My Momma and Daddy did too.” He only pulled her closer with a smirk. “It can be an option after the marriage, and then? It wouldn’t really matter then.”

*Fuck. You.* First step, get back home and get Camille. Second step, go back to her Aunt Dorothy’s. No one ever suspected her of anything. Most likely, The Centre didn’t even know where she was. Over time, she could get the surgery safely. “Okay,” she agreed. “I guess everyone misses us anyhow. I need to call Sydney real quick? He’s my psychiatrist, and I just want to talk this out briefly.”

He shrugged. “Fine, say some words and then we’ll go back to the hotel. We leave tomorrow then before we stir up more of a fuss.” He left her alone to talk privately, but before he went? “I am sorry.”

Sorry. Something about that sorry. Why was he saying sorry? “Sorry for what?”

“This was too far,” he said. “I hope you pull through.”

*Nooooo . . .* “No!” She tried to fight him, but he quickly swung the door closed. “No.” Every lesson learned. “For the good of The Centre! For the good of The Centre! Are you assholes listening!” She banged on the door. “Anything else!” This was it. “I can’t do it again!” What could she give? “For the good of The Centre. For the good of The Centre. For the good of The Centre!”

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## Jarod’s Place Again

“Mo mo. Do do.” Camille started up again as she touched Jarod’s face as he held her in his arms. He was busy trying to figure out which flight Miss Parker must have taken. She would have wanted to stay out of the way. He heard his lone phone chirp. As long as Miss Parker was in danger, the Hunters never did anything. It wouldn’t be Sydney though. Daphne. The Centre didn’t follow Broots or Daphne around, but they still weren’t the people he wanted to communicate with. Well? Broots, maybe, later. He was Camille’s real father. “Did you find her?”

“She communicated with her father. She was supposed to arrive this morning. She didn’t.”

“Mo Mo.” Camille patted on him and babbled more. “Do do.”

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## Broots Home, Two Weeks Later

*I know, Catherine, but I can't just sit there either.* No word. He held Camille tightly as he knocked on the back door.

Broots opened it and was startled just a moment. Then he looked toward Camille. "This isn't good, is it?"

Jarod just shook his head. "I gotta go." He couldn't put it off any longer.

"This is a dangerous place for her though," Broots said. "Jarod."

"If I could, I would." He didn't deserve a farther explanation. He had whittled down a testifying pretend case down to a week that he originally had given two. He gave what he could to Camille. "You're her father. Hide her until I come back." He handed her over to Broots.

"Mo Mo." Camille said.

"Her word for mom. She babbles it a lot." Jarod handed him a carrying case filled with some clothes and diapers. "I need a week, maybe more. It's not easy getting babysitters that qualify, and mine can't stay for a whole week." He smiled and shook her hand. "Jarod's gotta go. Hopefully your mom comes back before I have to."

"Aro." Camille reached for him.

*Her word for me.* He'd miss hearing that.

He watched Broots eyes with hers. Yep, he could tell it was true. He could see the relief and happiness that Broots was trying to tempt in front of him with the bad news of the situation. While he was upset about Parker, he now had his daughter for a whole week to get to know.

"Hasn't been a word found for Miss Parker. Last call was her dad," Broots said to him. He looked at Camille and smiled. "Yeah? Miss your mommy?"

"Mo mo," she answered back. She stretched to Jarod again. "Aro."

"If Miss Parker comes back?" Jarod warned him. "Call me, *don't* give her to her right away. I don't trust her housemates." He waved at her. "Bye Bye."

She didn't look happy. "Aro."

"I'll take good care of her. I promise." Broots brought her more into his arms. "Hi there. Remember me?"

“I’ve shown her pictures of you. I don’t know how much it’s helped.” *Go.* “Get in touch with me or one week. Home or not, I’m coming for her. Got it?”

“Got it, Jarod.”

“And do you have her real birth date?”

“Yeah. I-I.” Now he was nervous. “I had to.” He cleared his throat. “I had to sign some contracts. Her real date should be in there.”

“Where was the meeting at?” Overtime, but got it. Pertinent information but? He just didn’t know whether he’d see her again or not. If he didn’t? That’d be sad, but she’d have her mother back. She’d probably grow up in The Centre hating him. It’s what Parker said.

If he did? It meant they were moving into week four of Miss Parker missing. He headed quickly away.

Where was she?

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# No Way Out

## Broots House- Almost Week Four

"Who wants her bottle?" Debbie said in a singsong voice as she held Camille for Broots and gave her a bottle. He was busy on his laptop trying to work. "Dad? How come . . ." And then she stopped. Like always. "We could keep her longer. Her momma's gone."

"No, it's very dangerous even keeping her here," Broots warned her. He didn't tell Debbie the truth either. Knowing she was helping to take care of Miss Parker's baby? That was nice. Knowing she was taking care of her little sister that she would have to give back up soon? He'd already caused her heart enough hurt.

He put up the darkest curtains in the room he could find. He had Debbie and her friends get supplies along with some toys. Another one of her friends' mother also had a baby, so no one would suspect anything if they were paired together for fun. He only needed to last a week, or until Miss Parker came back. He was hoping for the second. Even though the curtains darkened out the world, he had placed her in a nicely bright room, not white but yellow, and Debbie had volunteered to let her play with some of her younger toys she still had.

Yet, nothing. Not a word from Miss Parker at all. Plenty of complaining from the Martin's though. Their son was gone, their future daughter-in-law was gone, but they didn't seem to dwell too much on that at all. No, just that someone had kidnapped Camille. Meaning they probably knew where they were. Even Zane himself was trying to assist them in the search, so it was important as heck to look as dedicated as he could.

If there was one thing Miss Parker and re-education taught him, it was to become even *more* Pro Centre when facing what could be disaster. He was staying up with projects and starting on new ones. He was keeping up his hours, and he was even going back into researching older downloads on Jarod to find more information on them. He was spending time on his laptop in Camille's temporary room though since Debbie was in there too. She was ten, but he still wanted to make sure she was okay with such a small girl. She was getting close to about four months old. For all he knew? He was beginning to think she could be older, because she seemed to do things a lot faster than other babies. She had a name for her bottle now, ba ba. She had a name for Broots now, a ra ra. It was strange to hear her making r's, but it was apparently the French r. She babbled that before too, with Jarod. Most likely, the 'Aro' was Jarod. It wasn't the same kind of sound or struggle to learn for French babies. Babies were so universal, it was hard to remember she spent all her life in France except a little over three weeks. *Should be able to stay here instead.* A stubborn thought that never left him.

## Jarod's Current Pretend

Jarod finally got it, thanks to Sydney and Broots. The DSA of the contract meeting. His phone rang. "Yes? Good to hear." He smiled. It looked like everything was right on schedule. The innocent man he had helped prove innocence of was getting the evidence he needed finally. He hit end on the phone as he started to watch the DSA's.

Broots came into the room, unaware of anything. Miss Parker was all business from the beginning. As she told him the truth, he was ready to grab Camille more than ever. Camille was out of camera view, but Jarod could pick her up closer a little bit to make out the top of her head. Even babies couldn't escape cameras. Miss Parker moved to holding her and then her father and her ganged up on Broots. Threats of indoctrination added to it all. Then came in the guy who's picture he'd become used to, but who he still hadn't met.

Monsieur Martin. When he picked Camille up, Jarod swore he almost felt a shiver. He noted how cute she was and then blew out on the side of his mouth. Miss Parker scolded him. *He's lucky I wasn't there.*

He watched his move with Parker too. She had to get clean for the pregnancy obviously, and he was trying to tempt her into smoking again. Broots stood up for himself. Jarod could see the rage boiling on him.

When the clod finally went out with Mister Parker, that's when Broots and Parker could finally talk. Parker dropped all of the disguise.

Tiring. So sorry. Blaming. She didn't want to do it, Jarod already knew that. She had a certain way about her when she did things that were ordered. Broots soon left afterward and Miss Parker and Camille did too. Although?

Jarod went backward again with her conversation about Broots. *What's going on there?* There was something off there. He was going to start trying to see if he could isolate the real birth date, but now he was interested. In a word.

*"Monsieur Martin is staying with me in a rental suite," she answered. "We aren't even staying in my old place. Things are being worked out. It? It looks more like we might be . . . staying in Europe ."* She patted his back slightly a couple of times. *"Use the money and follow, Broots. This is our fault, not yours."*

"Our fault." She said our fault. Not my fault, it wasn't her fault. She didn't blame Broots, or the words 'not yours' would make no sense. Therefore?

Screw it. He pulled out a disposable phone and called Broots. "You." Okay, let's not start in a blaming manner. "Do you know what day or days you were with Miss Parker during your vacation?"

"Oh. Are you trying to figure out the conception date? It's out of range of you, Jarod."

"Just tell me."

"Oh? Well, uh. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Morning usually. Sometimes afternoon."

"And *why* do you know those dates so well off the top of your head, Mister Broots?" He got it.

"She wanted to . . . well, um?" He cleared his throat. Nervous man. "She said re-education is stressful. And it is, oh boy is it! Um? So. Usually on re-education days before I went she uh .

. . relaxed me. But it wasn't relaxing. Usually hurt my wrists. Not that. I was um. Against? I'm rambling, sorry."

"When she came in was she business or bedroom eyes?"

"I. She just insisted. She's very insistent."

"It's not your fault." Jarod reached his conclusion. "It's not her fault either." *Ordered. She was ordered.* "Unless you knew?"

"Knew what?"

"That it was an order? That her Daddy was ordering her to give you 'good vibrations' on those hard days?" Okay, a little blaming. Hold back the blame. *Nope!*" Really? Nowhere in the back of your mind of all of this was a 'that's strange, she has suddenly become attracted to me out of nowhere and wants to help out a bit on the stress levels?' He stood up. "Did you ever say to yourself, 'Wow, Miss Parker is really thoughtful about this whole thing. Wait a minute? She's not thoughtful. She's usually a total bitch'." Really.

"Well, I-I'm sorry! I mean, it was only like three weeks off the dome. She wasn't exactly being . . . sexually fulfilled and she was having problems herself! She had to come down to get a lot done too. We were both, just? I don't even know when I came in. The whole brain is always fuzzy with what they do. I hated it."

"But kinda loved it too," Jarod poked him one more time. *Okay, lay off.* Broots even had a daughter situation. Time to back off. "Yeah, I'm starting to see that these little Europe trips aren't all they're cracked up to be." He hit end on his phone. They already had re-education at The Centre. Her dad said it at the dome like it was a long vacation to stop exposing her to Jarod. Obviously, they had vacations and they had special vacations. *Extended vacations.* There was the key word he should have been watching for. Still? According to the DSA, she seemed okay. Even remembered the domes, just hid it. Mainly, scared. Really anxious about the mind wipe. She was hardly scared. Always kept her emotions firmly tight. She'd risk her life more than once in The Centre and even got through full rededication.

*/"She's scared," her Aunt Dorothy said. "Camille doesn't scream at first. She isn't even crying. It's her mother that is whimpering. She is frightened. The song in the blanket?" She nodded. "I believe it's a way to try and calm herself down."/*

Mindwiping. Maybe that is what scares her? Losing her own mind. "I can't help you if I don't know where you are." Where did she go to? "Where are you, Little Miss?" Camille needed her mom back.

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### **The Centre: Sydney's Old Lab (SL 19)**

"Support. Find your support." Sydney kept creeping up closer to Miss Parker to watch her. Mister Parker was in the room, secretly with him. It was certainly after hours and she shouldn't be there. Her fiancé had brought her back after she had tried to run away, but he'd also placed her into re-education and a general one day memory eraser. However afterward?



"Europe was too much, it was just too much." Her father walked back and forth across the floor. "Even with the slowest approaches of Europe, it just-"

"Someone can only take so much, Mister Parker, now I need to talk to her. She needs to hear my voice only." Sydney tried to keep his voice neutral. "It would be better if you were not here."

"But I have to be, Sydney, if anything happens to her?" He continued to pace. "I should have warned Monsieur Martin of the strenuous ordeal with this so far. If I lose her, it's all my fault."

*Yes it is.* Sydney couldn't agree more.

"She was going to get surgery, get rid of everything. I couldn't," Mister Parker kept talking. "For the good of The Centre, I can't let it happen, but now look at her." He glanced toward Sydney. "I-I'll go over on the other side. Do whatever you need to. Call anyone you need to, I don't care. I really, I don't care! Whatever it takes. Save her."

"The child goes to Broots, if I do," Sydney told him. "If I somehow reverse the massive mistake her fiancé made, then credit of the child goes to Broots." Yes, agreed. "I want to see what's on the other side of the twin mirrors too." Another agree. Mister Parker was desperate.

Sydney watched him go and tried to concentrate again. He tried to counter any drugs in her system that he could, but he didn't know if it was enough. She wasn't speaking. She was breathing, but she wasn't responding. She was staring into space. "Look for it. Continue to look." Her best chance was to find something nice. Something she liked that wasn't part of The Centre. Something that could reach her. "Do you see your mother?" Nothing. "Do you see your daughter, Camille?" Nothing.

He had to do it. He dialed Broots. "Broots. I need her to call for her."

"Who call for who?"

"The you know who to Miss Parker," Sydney said, trying to be careful. "She is catatonic and I don't know if she will pull out of it. I need *anything* I can to help bring her back around."

"What?"

"Just get her, Broots. Make her call." Sydney turned his phone's speaker on. *Come on, Broots.* That little girl was constantly calling for her according to Broots. Maybe her baby's voice would trigger a return?

**"It's dark. I can't get up."**

**"Yes you can. Of course you can. Just reach up. You can do it. Reach up and reach out."**

**Jarod's voice? Why was she hearing his voice during that process? "I really must be dying."**

**"Oh, come on. Can't you even be nice in your head? Reach up and reach out. You can't give in. You've got a little girl. Who's going to look after her?"**

**"Broots will."**

**"No, you will. You need to reach up and reach out so you can take care of her. Broots can't kick anyone's butt like you can. Only you can take care of her."**

**"Mo mo . . ."**

**Camille. She reached up and reached out. She felt something.**

"There you are!" Sydney held her hand tightly. "Come on, hear my voice now? You are almost there."

Her eyes started to focus on him. "Sydney?"

There! There. "Miss Parker." Thank goodness. Mister Parker came over at rapid pace. "One more of anything on her mind, and it's over. This was a close call, Mister Parker."

"Angel, you're okay!" He hugged her. She blinked once and then started to hug him back. "No more, no more. This is it, no more." He tossed Sydney keys to the twin mirrors. "Make it snappy."

Sydney headed over and unlocked the two way mirror door. He saw another set of two way mirrors. *Of course*. At least he knew they were working on something. He went back toward him.

"Yes, I know. There's something on the other side," Mister Parker said to him. "But? I. I'm out of the loop too." He stood back up. "She should go back to Europe, get away from The Centre. No, but that's not for the good of The Centre."

Mister Parker was fighting between what was good for his daughter versus The Centre.

"One baby, that's all we need, one more. Then The Centre will be happy. I need to talk to Zane."

"Sir, I advise against it." But he was already out the door. That was not good.

"Pick up Broots." Sydney took his phone off speaker. "She's okay now, Broots."

"Oh, thank goodness! What happened?"

"Mister Parker is fighting between the love of his daughter and the indoctrination. I don't see this ending well. We should get her out of here."

"I'm right here, Sydney." She snapped out of it completely. She looked around and gasped. "I made it."

"Yes, you did, but you can't do that again," Sydney warned her. "No more. Now, your father just went to go get Zane. I don't like the sound of that. You need to get out of here."

"No, not without Camille," she insisted. "Where is she?"

"Come, let's go."

"Nope. Wait right there."

Oh no. Zane. Behind him, Monsieur Martin.

"Oh no, I was hoping that didn't happen." He went over to her and hugged her. "Are you okay, my sweetest creamiest cream puff?"

"I can't go under any more . . . stuff." She was still a little out of it.

"It's okay. It's okay. Let's just go home now. I know now, I talked to Mister Parker. I had no idea you had been under that many times. You just have to be a good soldier from now on, on your own." He gave her a kiss on the head. "Or maybe, we can just pull you out of here for good. I can take care of you. Europe is home, it's where we should go back to." He waved at Sydney.

Sydney didn't wave back. He just glanced at Zane and Mister Parker.

"Who authorized any of this?" Zane asked Sydney.

Sydney shrugged. "I was called in on an emergency."

"Her mind is far too delicate. It is good Mister Parker got you." He sighed. "Back to Europe. For now. As soon as we locate Camille."

"As soon as we locate Camille, hmm?" Mister Parker questioned.

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## **Jarod's Apartment**

Jarod looked at his new message as he made up the bed to his rental. Miss Parker was found? *Good*. Almost lost her mind, Sydney brought it back barely. *Barely*? Mister Parker was talking to Zane. She was going back to Europe. She wanted Camille. "No." *No, no, no*. He dialed up Broots. "No, you can't give Camille to her yet. Sydney barely brought back her mind too."

"I don't know, Jarod, but she's scared. She wants her daughter. Sydney said I should do it. She needs her to heal. She's . . . but she's so small and I know that family can't be good if you yanked her away. Should I say no but tell Sydney to tell her she's safe and she'd be back soon?"

"You have no idea what that family does, and you don't want to know!" Jarod said. *Things I do for Catherine*. "I am finishing up this pretend, and I'll be there tomorrow night. Keep her until then, so I can get her and Camille. Tell Parker that if you want just keep her away for now."

"But I thought you didn't have a medical pretend lined up yet?"

"Not yet, but I can't just leave that little girl there." Not with her momma like that. "Parker needs that surgery to get out. I'll bring them both back as soon as I can." Then? Maybe that would end this favor to Catherine Parker. Maybe she'd rest easy again.

And he could go back to his *own* life. It was even the holiday season, he missed out on it last year being trapped in the dome. There were all kinds of traditions to take note of.

Still? *Camille was sweet*. He definitely didn't regret spending time with her.

## **The Next Morning**

"Daddy?"

Broots looked to his door. "Stay still, Sweetie." When she called, he was hoping it was Jarod. It wasn't. "She's still my daughter. I never took a dime."

Mister Parker looked sourly at him. "I need Camille, and I'll forget where I found my granddaughter."

"Where is she?" It just popped out.

Mister Parker took a moment. "Zane and Raines will be checking here soon. They are starting with Sydney, again, and then Daphne. Make it easy, or they'll make it tough."

"Is she at least okay?" Broots asked. "Please?"

"My daughter is fine," he assured him as he took Camille from Debbie. "I take good care of my daughters." He held Camille patiently. "I'm returning to The Centre. No questions asked." He just smiled. "You'll see them in a year or so and she'll be fine. No worries. Have to go."

*A year*. Yep. It was their worst fear. Somehow?

She was in that dome again.

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## **The Dome**

Miss Parker stared ahead. She was sitting on her favorite couch. It was the same basic setup she had with Jarod. Except for one big difference. He wasn't there to protect her. And yes, that was a very big difference. She didn't like the word protect when it came to her, especially

with Jarod attached. But that had been exactly what Jarod had been. Slice or dice it either way. That's what he'd been. Up to the very end.

Her father made sure she was comfortable. Supposedly talked Zane into giving her privacy in the middle area. But now? *I can see it, Aunt Dorothy. All the time.* The endless bubbles. It was remarkable what they had done to Jarod's dome the first time around. This time? They had almost a year to work on it. Everything was improved.

She got to have her couch with a rainbow she had sprayed against the bottom of it. So her children could learn colors. Everything else of hers had to be white or see through. Glass TV shelf, white TV, white bedding, white rugs, white, white, white.

She no longer had three domes, she had domes that looped back into each other like a donut. Yet, she only had access to nine of them. The other three were if Jarod had ever been caught. There was a small area of communication, but it was up too high to ever jump. The domes were huge too. They weren't the size of a living room. She couldn't jump and touch the hole gaps between even if she wanted too. The gaps were needed to keep the air circulating.

Her clothes were white and her shoes were white but they weren't the standard. They were free flowing beautiful robes. They had to stay tied tight with nothing underneath. Bastards thought modesty might help in her willingness to fight. She also had hard opened toe sandals along with soft slippers. Whichever she wanted.

They also weren't going to be holding her away forever, but she would have to look down at people now. The domes were now on huge pedestals, with bottoms completely see through. She was now six feet in the air. She was delivered food through a small elevator. It would rest there, a button would be pushed and it would slowly climb up the six feet. It was of course see through too. They wanted to make sure no messages. Nothing went out. They wanted to dash every single bit of hope she ever had.

She could hear people from outside, but only when she wasn't yelling. If she yelled, they soundproofed everything until she felt like cooperating again.

To come into the dome was a similar system as to the food. They were regular sized elevators. The only thing that wasn't glass. One for her side. One for Jarod's side.

She had twelve domes to the whole area. A clothes dome, that had her robes and infant gowns and children's gowns and slippers and opened toe sandals stacked in continuous layers of bookshelving. It was a library of clothes of linen. She had a food dome where the food came up in. She had over five tables and two booths to eat at. There was a soda dispenser filled with Centre approved flavors that someone could send up more carbonation when it ran out. To see if enticement once a month or so helped pretenders work faster. She had a sleeping dome which had two cribs and two bunkbeds. One of the cribs was the one that used to be there. It still had Camille's name on it. (She moved it next to her bed.) She had a health room with basic shower, toilet, and sink on the left side. On the right, it had an actual gym. For big and small. Room to exercise. There was also a medical dome. It didn't have much in it right now.

She had the mama dome. It was where she should mostly remain. As her children grew, they could come see her and relax with her if they were good and kept up with their simulations. It would help them feel more normal and less isolated. After that? Each one would have their own simulation rooms. Camille had one filled with a large library of books and another for experiments. The next dome used Jarod's 3d simulator machine, and the last dome was a chute for the dirty clothes and linen on the right side, while trash was collected and deposited on the left side. The trash went down twice a day so it didn't smell, while the clothes and linen went down sometime in the afternoon.

No reason for anyone to come up and collect or drop off anything for a long time to come for her.

After all that? If they needed more space or more improvements?

Well, they could add on. Or? They really didn't know. Zane wanted to prolong it to see how the progress went. Raines was trying to convince him to just end her. Her father?

His expert idea? Split her apart and then marry her off to the Martin's. He had guaranteed such a good deal with the Martin's. Her and Camille, their minds would be safe. No scrambled eggs.

Zane and Raines agreed to it, as long as she made another contract rejecting ownership of The Centre, and of course? Provided another female child, to ensure the genes all carried on. For the Good of The Centre. If she didn't? Camille would stay.

And?

And?

She screamed and cursed and yelled for hours. She'd grow hoarse, get better, and start all over again. No one cared. No one could hear. They didn't need to hear anyhow, what did they need to hear for? To request? Next to the small food elevator was a small panel to type in what she wanted. Texting.

She used it too. She used it to cuss them out with every damn piece of foul language she had ever used before. For that whole year. That whole year in Paris? Constant construction. Constant adaption. Constant frustration.

Her paradise of endless bubbles. She opened up both set of curtains and just stared. Endless. Then she looked at her open toed sandals.

Then, she looked at Monsieur Martin, waving at her from below the couch. She closed up her robe as much as possible. The ground was see-through after all and she wasn't giving him one ounce of joy.

"Would you like a visit yet?"

"Fucking drop dead!" She yelled at him.

He shrugged. "What do you want from me? It's orders from your Daddy and my Daddy. I am going back with my folks to France in a few days. Um? After the next one, I will come and get you. Okay? Hopefully. We are still working that out. You are still so much better than Daisy. I hope we can work this out?"

And if she didn't cooperate, then off she goes to get the final mindwipe her body could endure. The most intravenous indoctrination possible. She wouldn't be herself anymore. She would smile and greet and wander off and talk to trees she thought were people if no one watched her close enough. But hey? Isn't that the perfect wife.

Her Centre considerations had crumbled. If it weren't for the fact the Martin's had Camille, she would have ended it all a long time ago.

Even if Jarod found her. He'd figure out real fast, it was all a one way trip. There was nothing.

Well, there was something. She was still a social being. Eventually, they would open up her exhibit to her friends. Sydney would get his lovely lab back. The two way mirrors would be open again. After all, he would be working with the pretenders. Everything as it was before. The risk was all gone.

It's not like she could go and leave her children behind.

"Ah, there's my Angel, up on high."

She saw her father coming into the door with a familiar little bundle. "Camille!" She moved off the couch, her robe flowing without a care in the world as she ran over to see her. "Is she alright, Mister Parker?!"

He was chafed. She didn't automatically call him daddy or father. "She is perfectly healthy," Mister Parker said. "Perfectly healthy." He walked toward the large elevator and hit the up button. She moved quickly toward the elevator and waited. When he came up, she grabbed her as quick as she could. She was safe.

"Mo mo."

Oh, she was so delighted to see her back. She had missed her so much. She would have given up everything she had for Camille to stay out of the dome, but she couldn't trust the ones she was with. She never would. She turned and took her baby through the domes and to the couch. She sat down, holding her tenderly.

"Sydney will get permission to start moving in tomorrow again. The two way mirrors will be unlocked. Everything will be fine." He smiled at her.

She didn't smile back at him. She was trying to keep the shattered pieces of her existence together still.

"I'm sorry, Angel. You just?" He sighed. "You don't understand how important you are to The Centre and to me. I can't risk you doing something that will make you lose your mind again."

Never again! Have your last one. We will get it over with. Then, you cooperate, marry into the Martin's and everything will be fine. For your mind and Camille's."

"Just get out. I'm sure you're disturbing ovulation." She glared at him. "**Da-ddy.**" Ooooh. He really didn't like her inflection in those words. She just said Daddy like she said fuck you.

"Ungrateful!" She didn't back down. "You better shape up! You don't talk to me that way!" He was mad but he walked off. "We do what we have to for the good of The Centre! Remember that! This is your favor, Angel, this is *your* favor!"

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### **Paris- Morning**

"It's close." Dorothy stopped watering her indoor plants. She went up the stairs to the nursery, where the crib once had been. "It's time." It was time to find out if the Jar of Odds was even enough? To handle it all. The whole nasty truth.

She waited. Very soon. He would call.



# Aunt Dorothy's Phone Conversation

## The Centre- Morning

Sydney came back to SL-19. He could finally be there again. It always had better space and more room for his work. A lot he had to leave behind. At least, that was his excuse if anyone asked. He looked at the two way mirror into the dome. It was cracked open now.

"Sydney," Mister Parker greeted him. "Well? Zane is proud of the work you did last night saving my Angel. Everyone is finally convinced you aren't secretly communicating with Jarod." He smiled and patted him on the back. "I knew it all along. Which is good. We are going to need your help later down the line. Not right now though, unless you want to socialize with them briefly."

*Socialize.* She must be back there. "Please, Sir. Tell me she wasn't brought back here and . . ."

"Mm. Things we do for The Centre. Come walk with me and we'll talk."

He started to walk next to Mister Parker.

"Sydney. Sometimes in life, you have to choose. Choose between two evils, and? And well, sometimes evil is physical and sometimes it's mental. I had a tough choice. To be a good father. Grandfather. I have to be careful my daughter doesn't get into any more trouble. She needs to just get it done and over with, and life goes on." He opened the next two way mirror. "I've given her every damn thing I could that I would be allowed. Zane wants to experiment, so it worked out pretty well."

"Oh my!" Sydney couldn't believe his eyes. It was an entire circular dome, set six feet high. It was massive and probably took out the walls of at least two if not three more labs on SL-19. Everything inside of it was white, all white or clear. Even the floor was see through. He moved toward the middle, seeing the familiar curtains of before, now drawn. "Is she in there?"

"Hm." Mister Parker stood beside him. "She's not happy."

*Of course she's not happy!* Look at that dome. No one could even touch her. No one even had reason to, she was six feet high. Clearly he saw a text pad ahead, as well as three elevators. One small and two big. *There is everything inside of there.* "Can I go up and see her when she wakes up?"

"Yes, and Camille. She's safely in there too."

Yes, the baby crib was next to her bed. Sydney could walk underneath the whole structure himself, it was that high. "Are they okay?"

"Yes, and they will be. She'll be in there for at least one more year," Mister Parker said.

"She'll be freed with, hopefully Camille, and she'll join the Martin family after the surgery."

Sydney tried not to glare. *She was supposed to have surgery. You could have let her save herself. You're an absolutely horrible excuse of a father!* "And if she doesn't?"

"Then my daughter will be struck with a . . . most powerful indoctrination, re-education and mindwipe that she won't recover from. Camille will stay here, and my daughter will be the Martin's after she goes under surgery. They will keep any that are deemed not pretender."

So she had to go. "Camille is not the Martin's."

"And whose is she?" Mister Parker challenged him.

"Broots. You *promised* he would get credit as the father last night. I suggest letting him take care of Camille. He will be more dedicated to The Centre, as well as provide a more adequate setting. She cannot be a pretender."

"Hm." He just smirked. "I thought you knew who the real father had been, Sydney? No, no. I ordered my daughter to sleep with Broots."

What? "I don't understand, Sir."

"Mindwiped her early," he said, "so she'd forget and assume it was Broots. No, no. You can even check the blood samples on her if you want?" He smiled proudly. "No, no. We succeeded. It's Jarod's baby, not Broots."

Sydney didn't even know how to react! "Jarod is not going to be happy when he finds out!"

"Well, he's got room up in there too. Airflow at the top, but impossible to jump through. *If* we ever catch him. That way, he doesn't disturb Doctor Cox," he said to Sydney. "The best plan is the Martin's, believe it or not," he warned him. "Zane is still chairman of the board, and . . . well, you can see all the space up there. I'm hoping he'll go for the Martin's in the end."

Sydney could see all the space. All the tables. "One small corner. Their original corner of freestand curtains?" he asked.

"Yes. Her area. Still all the same comforts," he said. "If Jarod feels like being a big man again, he can go ahead and bring his little games. Don't care." He touched his head twice. "Outsmarted him. Can't escape with a baby. Not only that, she'll be pregnant before you know it again. Get this mess over with and move on." He sighed. "Really hope I can just hop a plan to France and spend a holiday with her, instead of seeing her here year after year." Then, he grinned. "No Jarod conflict with intimacy either. I'm letting her fiancé visit. Right now, little repelled. I understand that. If she ever starts to bend though, then she'll have someone besides Jarod. Not like it's a real problem. Jarod can't reach her in the first place."

Sydney walked around and found the more isolated, one person areas. Three domes. They looked like the older domes. He saw the large gaps up high. *Don't be so sure of yourself. If he does end up there, he'll break every bone in his body to reach his family.* "Who are you using to father the next one?"

"Well, it could be Angelo or a lower class." Doctor Cox walked right through the door of the twin mirror. "But honestly, why settle?" He just nodded at Sydney. "Hello again, Sydney. To answer your question? It's Jarod, of course. He was the only one I had vials for in my personal space, close to my former patient. Remember?" He asked him. "I did always say close."

Even after blowing up the genetics lab. Even after smashing everything before he escaped. Jarod still had his own vials out there. "You were her first doctor. I guess that makes sense." He tried to sound polite. He was failing and he knew it. *Jarod. Oh, Jarod. How are we going to pull them out this time?*

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## **Broots House**

"How could you just stand there and let Mister Parker take her!" Jarod accused him, pinning him against the wall. "Camille can't even say a word, she can't say 'help', she can't do anything but cry, and you were supposed to be her protector!"

"I had Debbie right here too, and Zane and Raines were on me," Broots said to him, once again. "I didn't have a choice!"

Jarod stroked his hair back as he let go of Broots. As soon as he heard what had happened, he took the first flight out. "You're her father. You should have done something. Did you try anything?"

"I had two children, Jarod," Broots said again. "Two. I'm sorry. I couldn't protect her without sacrificing Debbie. She was going back to her grandfather, which meant maybe back to Miss Parker. Meanwhile, Debbie was being threatened, here and now!"

"You're hoping she was taken back to Miss Parker," Jarod said cruelly. More cruelly than he knew he should have. *Her Aunt Dorothy.* A quick call to her. He had to do something to feel better. Knowing little Camille was who knows where. Mister Parker might have given her back to the Martin's even! *If he did, you can bet I will get her back!*

He left Broots house, it was obviously compromised now too. At least by Mister Parker. He moved toward his car and sped out of there as fast as he could until it was safe. Then, he called Dorothy Jamison. Before he even uttered anything, he heard it pick up with-

"Jar of Odds."

She knew his number. "Can you tell me anything else? Anything more? I've lost both of them."

"I know you have. How do you feel?"

"How do I feel?" He asked incredulously. It wasn't the time for joking. "Miss Parker and her little girl are nowhere to be found, and someone who used to be able to access the dome can't anymore. I'm scared. I'm angry. I'm furious! So if you can tell me anything, you better tell me now!"

"The time you spent with Camille," she said, like he didn't just yell at her. "Was it enjoyable? Did you find a way to adjust her into your life? If you found her again and Miss Parker was gone, could you take care of her permanently?"

Jarod rubbed his mouth. He did not want to play twenty questions, but if she knew anything more? "Yes, she was enjoyable. Yes, I found a way to bring her into my life but only temporarily. I still had to leave her back with her father for a week." Which he now regretted with his entire heart. He hit the steering wheel in frustration.

"And?" She pushed. "If Miss Parker is dead, will you take care of her permanently, as Catherine wanted?"

"I can't. I can do temporarily," he said. "If I hadn't dropped her off to her father, an innocent man would be dead today. I couldn't just decide to stay with her and let him die. It's not me."

"You have to run. Never stay still," she said. "Run, run, run."

"Right." He agreed to that observation easily. "I barely keep anything that's mine. If it weren't for digital accounts I'd have nothing. When it comes to physical goods, I have to buy over and over. Nothing is mine, but the burden of my DSA's." Nothing. "I can't keep friends. I can't keep lovers. I can't keep anything or anyone."

"Expand on Camille. How was she enjoyable? Did you give her attention? Did you give her aide? Did you like the fact helping her was the right thing? This innocent man, you felt like it was your duty to save him. No one else could. Is it that way with Camille? Or does she mean more to you than the innocent man you will never really know?"

*I really hope she has something.* "She was cute. Yes, I gave attention. Yes, I gave her aid in feeding her. Yes, I liked helping her. Yes, it felt like my duty to save the innocent man no one else could. Yes, it's that way with Camille." He didn't know how to answer the last part though. "The last question isn't a fair question, the innocent man verses the innocent child are harder to compare due in fact to the way I helped them. I did help each of them as I could."

"Why did you help the innocent man?"

"Because it was the right thing to do."

"Why did you help Camille?"

"Because it was the right thing to do."

"That's a beautifully non-emotional answer I am afraid I have suspected. It is okay. You are a pretender. Keep doing what you are doing, Jar of Odds. You will help many, many people in your lifetime. Good job. Goodbye."

She hung up. He rolled his eyes and called her back.

"Now you are getting annoying, Jar of Odds. What do you want?"

"Can you help me, yes or no?"

"Oh. Hmm. You are an innocent man in need of help, and so I should automatically help you? That is your reasoning. That is the *extent* of your reasoning. I cannot help you unless you can extend your reasoning."

"Miss Parker and Camille are in trouble. For all I know? They could be shoved in a dome again." Didn't she get it? What did she want? "Don't you want to help them?"

"Some help is needed. Some help is not. Perhaps you need some help yourself?"

She hung up again.

Risky? Yes. Jarod called Daphne. He had to exhaust all possibilities and he couldn't exhaust Parker's Aunt Dorothy until he could answer her question.

"Yes?"

"Are you good with cultural riddles?" That must be what it had been. Dorothy was wanting some answer that, had he lived outside longer, he would know. "I need help with a cultural riddle."

"Oh. Well, I don't know. I'll try."

"Does Camille mean more to me than an innocent man? Logically, they are both the same. The answer can't be logical. Could the answer be due to the age gap and the care of each one?" Daphne didn't answer back. "You don't know either."

"It's the classic choose to die question, except phrased nicer," Daphne said.

"Choose to die question? What is that and what's the answer?" Jarod asked.

"Well, okay. Usually it's posed like two people are about to fall off a cliff. Which one would you choose sort of thing? One only."

Hmph. "That's not a fair or logical question. I'd do what I can to save both."

"There's no choice. You get one. That's why it's the classic choose to die question," Daphne answered. "Only one can be saved."

Only one can be saved. "I already saved the innocent man. He lives, I proved his innocence. Does that mean I chose him over Camille? What?" What logic was that? "I help people in need. I don't understand how I am supposed to answer that."

"I have a gun to Mister Parker's head. I have a gun to Camille's head. You give one name on whom to save in the next five seconds."

"This is getting ridiculous-"

"5.4."

"I hate Mister Parker but he deserves to live like any other-"

"3.2."

"The crime should fit the-

"1. Bang, both are dead. Mister Parker is dead on the door, just like you saw before. And now, Camille's body is also covered-

"Don't! Don't describe things," he warned her. It took very little to set him off and he didn't want to imagine seeing Camille like that. "It's no secret, I would choose an innocent baby over Mister Parker's mortality. It never got the chance to live, and it was innocent. It never hurt anyone." That must be the answer. He hung up and called Dorothy Jamison back.

"Answer, Jar of Odds?"

"I would choose Camille if I had to choose someone to save." There. Is that what she wanted?

"Why?"

"She is an innocent baby. She's never experienced life. She's never said her first real word." That had to be what she wanted.

"No! It is clear you do not know the answer. Now, you must have someone *else* call me and answer, or I will not answer this phone!"

*Damn it.* He called Daphne back. "It wasn't the answer. I said she was an innocent baby that never experienced life. What am I missing?"

"I don't know, Jarod. It seemed like the answer to me."

Jarod hung up on her. It was a gap question. A cultural question that he didn't know, just because he'd been locked up too long! *If I don't figure out what she wants to hear.*

He shouldn't. He really shouldn't. Oh he absolutely really shouldn't. He dialed up a number he hadn't used for awhile. He tried to stay away from those he associated with in the past, to keep The Centre away from them. And this one? He meant the world to him. The first one he met, but the closest to The Centre. But? "I know this is risky. I really shouldn't be calling you." Johnny Boy Creed. "I need a little help."

"Well, shoot then."

"I've been watching a little girl. A baby. For two weeks," Jarod said. "I left her to help an innocent man for a week. She's gone now. I think The Centre has her, and I think someone might be able to tell me something to help? But I have to know the answer to some thing. I'm." He tried to hang on. "I'm desperate, Johnny Boy."

"Okay then. What is it?"

"Does the baby mean more to me than the innocent man? I already brought up the fact she hasn't lived that long and she was innocent, it would be only right to choose from that since I only get one choice." Jarod waited. "I really need help."

"Aaah, Jarod. Emotions, boy! See? Some people, they need things spelled out with them with tragedy or hard life choice. Not you, your life is tragedy! Nah, nah. Let me put it to you a different way. Alright? A *happy* way 'cause you are a happy exploring boy. Who would you rather spend a day in the park with? You know, who would you rather have a picnic with? Chat with? Eat with? Live with?"

"I lived with Camille," Jarod said. "I lived with her for two weeks."

"Oh yeah? She say anything yet?"

"No, too young. But, she's very good for her age," Jarod indicated to him. "She calls me 'aro'. I know it's me." He smiled. "When I speak, her little eyes just dart straight up to mine."

"You read her stories at night?"

"Yeah. I've got several cardboard books I once had for her," Jarod admitted. "She'd paw at them and shove them in her mouth too." He started to laugh, thinking about it. "I had stock in natural wipes. Aww, she loved touching and exploring the world. She had a whole gymnasium of various textures and colors that she kept trying to get to." Then reality hit him again. "But she's gone now. She has been." Like everyone else.

"Yeah, and that does not make you a happy boy," Johnny Boy answered. "I can hear it, Jarod. You help an innocent man? That's great, that's you. It doesn't mean you want to spend your actual time being with that man. You want to spend time with the little girl."

"Yes. I want to save that little girl," Jarod said. "Can you call a number for me? I know, it's out of state. Hell, it's out of the country. I need you to answer for me to her. She won't take my calls anymore, and she could know something. Something about this baby and her momma. I wouldn't be asking if I had a choice." But he could feel something. That Aunt *knew something*.

"Okay. Give me those digits."

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## Paris

"Oh, Catherine." Dorothy stood in front of her whiteboard, trying to work out her visions in her head. It was so tough. To see everything under. "They go . . . but she must . . . and so . . . the correct . . ." She tried drawing it all out again with her eyes navigating from open to closed. Her marker danced across the board. "The amount of time and if she misses?" Hmph! She almost wanted to give up. "Mais, non! My niece and my grandniece." No. "If Jarod cannot handle it, I cannot put him in there. I have to!" The diagram though. Without his assistance? "I need more aid." It was cruel though, she could not do it. Not to Little Miss Parker. She'd been through enough already. "The more, the faster."

She wiped a tear from her eye. "Catherine!" Oh. She was the one who was so much better at her inner sense. Even though she did not make it with the boy, she found the way. Dorothy felt like she was fumbling in the dark. "What do I do? How do I do this?" She tried to calm down to try again.

Then she heard her cell ring. She answered it. "Hello."

"Now, you. Why you stressing out that boy, Jarod? Asking him things about a little girl to help? That's whack you know, that's wrong! You can't put something like that on his shoulders."

"I know, he's sensitive," she answered. "*Too* sensitive."

"Nah, nah! You wait just a minute there. Jarod? He's the most sensitive person alive, but it ain't a bad thing. He helps those in need."

"I don't need someone who helps those in need." She sniffed. "I need someone who . . . stays. This is not a save and leave situation. Not anymore. He moves. He runs. He doesn't understand, or get it. He can't. If he wants to keep living that way, something has to give." He had to give. Miss Parker could not leave The Centre, it would never let her go. It didn't mean she didn't want to. It didn't mean she didn't need to. It meant? That she needed *him*. She needed to go with *him*, and so did their family. And if he could not handle that? Then they would be *hers*, forever.

Even Miss Parker could only endure so much alone. She tried to wipe at her eyes again thinking of the endless bubbles she was in. "What did he tell you the answer was?"

"Jarod thinks logically the most in dangerous situations. That's how he is who he is! But, if you put the question in a different way? He reads her bedtimes stories. He enjoys what little company she is. He's got a name she calls him? He loves the hell out of that little thing. So if you got somethin' that can help Jarod save this little girl? Woman, you better ante up!"

She smiled. "That's better. That's partly what I needed." She started drawing on the whiteboard again. "Does he hug? Does he show affection?"

"Oh, he's very affectionate. That boy, he ain't had much love. You can tell, but it's only strengthened his affection for people. Yeah. I get it. He's a little out there, but it doesn't mean he don't care. He cares more than anybody else."

"I know," she said, continuing her work on the whiteboard. "He helps those who've been wronged. He helps the innocent. He tries to make up for the wrong caused in his life that he feels responsible for. He wants to save as many as he can with his talents. Even my granddaughter who's only been there to catch him. While tough, he's only wanted to save her too. That's noble. That's true. That's a hero!" She chuckled only a moment, and then became serious again. "That is *not* what I need."

"Well, damn, woman. What do you need to hear? Jarod's practically crying over this little girl. What more do you need?"

"Is he a thirteen year old boy exploring the world or is he a full blown man?" She tried to get the answers she sought without giving it away. Yet.

"Oooh. I get ya. So ya know Jarod's like a big kid."



"Yes. He *is*. I don't need a kid. I need a man," she said. Who would put his family first.

"Now? Now I don't quite get what you're driving at, but I'm starting to get a pretty damn good guess. This cute little girl? It *his*?"

Well, he saw through it. "Trapped. With a woman he cares about, but tries to forget. He goes on with different lovers. He goes on with different lives. It won't work anymore. He must make a choice. The life he leads now? Running, going from place to place, by himself. Or? Accept."

"Accept and hide."

"Oui. Hide." Now this man was quiet. "Now that you understand? Will Jarod give it up and hide for good, or will he continue to run and search?"

The man whistled. "That's a helluva decision. If he don't?"

"I am trying to work out how to save them without him. It will be longer. Tougher. It will be up to me to hide them instead. They will survive," she said. "You can tell him that. They *will* survive, but he will never see them again. He will never see the little girl. He will never see Miss Parker. I will hide them so well, he'll find his own mother before he finds them."

"Well, if ya ask me? That's the question to start with. I'll ask him."

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### **Jarod's Car**

When his phone rang, he answered so quick, he almost forgot to check the number. "Johnny Boy?"

"Alright. This situation, it ain't so easy, Jarod. She's trying to protect her family. She's looking for something. Something from you. Now? I ain't gonna blame ya, if you don't want to do it. It's your life. It's your decisions. Every man has to make his own decisions."

"Okay," Jarod answered. "What does she need from me?"

"Answer this, Jarod. This little girl and this woman in trouble? How much they mean to you?"

Mean to him? He never told him about them before. He rarely cover his own past, but anyone else in it? He never really told anyone about Parker before, except that she chased him. Sometimes. But never, the past. It felt different. It felt wrong and right at the same time. "I knew Miss Parker when I was younger," Jarod said. "I also had to help her out, close to this time last year. This year was my first Thanksgiving. Turkey and food. Nothing much special for me, but the turkey was good. So was the mashed potatoes." Johnny Boy was eerily silent. Jarod still didn't touch much on her. He didn't want to talk about more than he had to. "Johnny Boy Creed?"

"Jarod? Boy, I don't even know how to form this into words." He sighed. "Look? This little girl and the woman? They can get out of trouble. It's gonna take longer, but they can get out

of trouble without you. I've been told that. The thing is? If you aren't the one to do it? Man. You won't ever see them again."

Jarod thought about that. "I don't get to see most people again." He didn't really get to see them. The Centre had them. "I watched Miss Parker from afar. She's technically my enemy," he admitted. "The little girl is hers. So? Eventually she'll be my enemy when she grows up."

"No, they won't. Not enemies. You'll never see them again, Jarod. Even if you wanted to, that's it. Gone."

"If they aren't enemies, then at least I know they are out there safe and sound," Jarod said. "That's all I've ever wanted."

"Damn boy, that is not the answer either! I just? I don't know how to tell you without telling you."

Jarod heard an incoming text on his other phone. He checked it

**Broots: Jarod. Sydney needs to tell you something. Face to face. He won't do it over a phone. He said to meet him in the tunnel you know of.**

Jarod went back to listening on his phone. Sydney must know something now too. "Someone else wants to talk to me now. Maybe they know what the woman you just called for me knew."

"Look, Jarod," Johnny Boy went on. "This decision, it ain't no light-hearted 'well at least they will have a good life' answer. Now, I said before? You pick what you need to do. You ain't in no dome no more. Your life is your life. Nobody controls it."

*What am I missing?* And now, Sydney was risking everything to talk to him, face to face?

"The woman isn't helping 'cause she doesn't want a runner. She needs a hider. That's what it's going to take to her. This isn't no easy ride, and the answer's not going to be easy to hear for you. I know that. I know you."

Jarod tapped his fingers repeatedly against the steering wheel as his legs vibrated with agitation. "She's dead, isn't she?" It was hard to say. "Parker's dead, and now I'm supposed to watch the little girl. Right?" He didn't answer back. "If. If I could, I would," he said. "I would, in a heartbeat. She's a wonderful little being, full of so much potential!" It was nice always having her there too. "It isn't the way my life runs." Parker. Dead.

"The woman ain't dead, Jarod. It's not that. Go meet this other guy. Find out what he knows. You be the man you are, Jarod. One day, you give me a call about it. 'Cause that decision is coming soon, but I'm not doing it. I'm not saying it. Not over the phone like this."

Jarod heard him hang up. Damn! And Sydney too. *Fine. Fine! I have to risk it. I have to know what's going on.*

# Truth and Futures

## Catherine's Tunnels

The Parker's family tunnels. The most reliable way to meet face to face and not get caught. Jarod watched Sydney coming from ahead.

"Jarod," he whispered. He came closer. "Something serious has happened." He handed him an envelope. "I don't know what honestly to do. But you need to know."

Jarod took the envelope. He looked inside. DNA comparisons? He looked at the papers.

"Ran myself." Sydney could barely speak. "I'm sorry."

Jarod kept looking across each of them. The numbers didn't change. It was all the same. Nothing changed. The numbers, the data, the research, the statistics, the conclusion. "Wha?"

Sydney couldn't answer him straight away. "Broots told me that he felt bad about not recognizing she was sleeping with him out of orders, but it wasn't standard. It was more than re-education. The whole thing was . . ."

"Secrets within secrets within secrets." He barely managed to say it. The note left on the crib in the dome, right next to the slat. "How bad?"

"Jarod. It's so sealed off, you can't even reach a vent," Sydney said. "There is no way out."

Jarod tucked the envelope away, trying to form his thoughts. "Camille is mine." His. His daughter. Hidden behind a fake adoption that was hidden behind Broots and Miss Parker's own memories so it all looked and felt real. Their faces, their reactions. Were so genuine, even they weren't allowed to know. But? "Camille. Leanne. Parker. Here I thought it was because I was supposed to take care of her when Miss Parker got herself killed or in too much trouble!" He banged his hand on the old tunnel, holding his weight against it. "No, no! Catherine was trying to tell me!" He grabbed the envelope again, looking at it all again. "What no one else would."

"I just found out," Sydney tried to reason with him. "It's worse than that though. Broots blew up the genetic lab. You smashed what was left over. There was no more 'high stock' pretender material. Doctor Cox, however, stepped forth. He had his own little lab area. Close to her. He always said close to her. He had extra vials."

"Spit it out!"

“She is probably going to be pregnant with your second. Possibly more,” Sydney said. “It depends on who is in charge when the second comes. Jarod, I’m sorry.”

He didn’t answer. He just tucked the envelope away and tried to walk off.

“No, Jarod!” Sydney called back to him. “I know it’s hard to bear, but we can’t risk meeting anymore. So you need to know everything you can. You need to understand what is at risk, what you are dealing with, before you decide anything. Because the future is uncertain, it depends on who is in charge of The Centre.”

Jarod wanted to run. Now. Scream and yell and just go! He moved back over though. He needed the information.

Sydney brought out a small suitcase. “They don’t want recording devices, so I couldn’t take my phone for pictures. There are twelve rooms. I’ve tried to give what I could from each room.” He placed out the drawings he tried to make on the ground. “The domes are now about six feet from the ground. You can go under them and see. What they created in a year is a terrifying tragic masterpiece of a system.”

Jarod bent down to look at each room.

“No one comes in but me and her doctor,” Sydney said. “I can only go in when the children need to be evaluated or sims ran. Doctor Cox watches everyone’s health.” It was hard for him to keep going to. “The daily essentials now have their own rooms, and disposal is the same way. There are no more mail slots.” Jarod was still silent, studying everything. “Nine domes are connected. Three domes are connected to the nine, to share in the disposal unit. While there is no door on the side, there is a rather large gap above everything in order to keep the air flowing safely.” Sydney brought out the other papers. “We know the future of Miss Parker only up to the second child. Zane, Raines and Mister Parker have different plans for her. Only the one the most in charge, or the most influential wins.”

Jarod took the paper and looked at it. Mister Parker wanted to marry her off into the Martin’s with Camille. She would undergo surgery that would be divided up between The Centre and the Outreach Centre of Paris. Any children from the surgery that were pretender would be kept at The Centre. Any that were not, would be given to the Martin’s, to help strength their ‘influence’ over their area.

Raines simply wanted to dispose of her and keep all genetic material for The Centre.

Zane wanted to keep her going, in a natural fashion, mothering pretenders. He did not want to give her away or have her undergo surgery.

“Oh. One more also will have access, if granted permission. Which he does not have. I suspect he will not get for some time,” Sydney said. “Monsieur Martin, to make sure she does not get lonely this time.” He gathered up everything and gave it to Jarod. “The only way in or out is a special door that is physically locked. You can’t reach any vents or tunnels.” He handed everything to Jarod. “If you are put in, you can’t even reach them.”

Jarod took all of the papers. “Simulations?”

“Broots and Daphne aren't supposed to even know about the dome yet. Most likely, they could keep doing what they were doing. But? If you go in, there is no coming back out, Jarod. I will try to find a way in there to help,” he insisted.

“Thank you, Sydney.” He swallowed. “I have to go.”

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## Jarod's Apartment

He stood in the middle of the huge dome drawings, coming in and out. Looking all around. *Second two-way mirror locks from outside at night, physically, heavy chain locks. Only way out that way is the daytime, which can't happen.* The tunnels and the treatment were out of the question. “No chance for communication.” Thousands of clothes and linen were inside the dome. Even the trash and laundry had it's own shared dome. No desposit slot messaging possible.

He went into his ipad and sketched out all the dimensions he could. “I can't touch them, my three domes are sealed from there, except at the top.” Where air flowed through.

Even the food, it was brought in on a small elevator and taken to the top of the unit. Six feet above ground, it was all elevator for Miss Parker and Camille's side.

His side looked much the same as his three domes always had. It still included Sydney bringing his clothes and linen and food. It included computers and bookshelves of books. *I can use this and that.*

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## Paris

“Maybe . . .” Oh, she wouldn't know numbers. There would have to be something else for that part. She heard her phone again. Jar of the Odds. Directly. She answered it. “Well?”

“Let you save Parker and our daughter and hide them from me forever, or I save Parker and our daughter and hide them forever. I could have them but I can't run anymore. I can't save anyone anymore. I can't find my mom, dad, brother, or sister. And it's? That's? This is my life! I run, I don't hide. If I could have, I would have with Camille. Hiding doesn't work for me, I can't do what I need to.” Then, he was silent. “I will help get them out. I will seriously look into options to take, or at least?” There it was. “Enjoy what little time I have with them. I can come for them when I am done. When I find my family.”

She smiled, understanding. “You were left alone with only one person in your life. You ran on sims. You want to experience life.”

“Yeah, and I bet you are part of the cover up with Broots too! Secrets within secrets within secrets. I was with my own daughter for two weeks, and I didn’t even know!”

“I had to see. You’re growing into a world you never got to experience. You have less than a year and a half of experience.”

“I learn quick, I adapt, and I want to help them.”

“Then let them go?” She asked. “The plan is easier with you, but you need to decide beforehand. I won’t risk associating anything with The Centre. When we are gone? We are gone, for good. I won’t risk any attachment, and you looking for us would only make them find us. Your Camille Leanne Parker and your Little Miss. It’s either you or me that is their future. Not both.”

“No,” he refused. “After I find my family, I am coming for them too.”

“No. You will not. So sayeth the one who sent you a crib with your future daughter’s name on it a year ago,” she reminded him. “You will never find them again if I take them.” Yes. The genius boy didn’t sound so sure now.

“I was kept in the Centre since I was four years-“

“I know,” she cut him off. “You are enjoying life. Freedom. Good for you. Things change, or things don’t. Consequences either way.”

“I’ll still try.”

“I am sure you will.”

“Just tell me what you see that I have to do. I’ll decide from there.”

She smiled. At least it was somewhere to start. “They made a new way out, and it’s even easier than before. Even the smallest baby can go through it, if you do it accurately. However? It will take the patience of timing for it to happen. The hard part is not getting out. It’s the decision to make before you get out.”

“The vision, that you saw? Was that made up then? Camille’s crib and three figures. In a room that was becoming a nursery with her favorite couch? Or do I have to watch out for that afterwards too?”

Cheeky man. “It wasn’t made up. It’s coming. If you are coming.” Oh, now he got it. “You don’t need anything, except what I tell you. Be open and be honest in the endless bubbles. Open and honest! The good, the bad, any questions, any regrets, all ideas, and everything you’ve *ever* wanted to say. Say it, for these could just be your last days with them.”

“I get it. I just want them out.”

“No, you don’t. I can hear it, you aren’t taking this seriously.”

“Not taking this-? They are trapped in a dome, of course I’m taking this seriously!”

“Not that, I know you want to save them. You are not taking ‘open and honest’ seriously. There are things you feel that no one can help you with. There are things you must do that nobody can do for or with you. It’s all dangerous or weird or people will never understand. Say it to her. Say it because she is the only one *in the world* who can get you what you’ve really wanted, Jar of Odds. You know that you are odd, and you *know why*. She isn’t even either. She will understand. Get what you need. Don’t hide. If you do, you won’t make it.”

He was quiet for a small amount of time. She just waited. “You will see a possibility, but if you try it, you will fail. You know that. It’s best not to do that. It will only break hearts.”

Then, she heard it. “I’ll call back.”

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Jarod looked at the circle around him again. “I can’t.” No one could. He even tried it a little once. “She couldn’t.” But? Somehow, she knew. It was creepier than the crib the first time he laid eyes on it. Someone knew what he hid deep inside. She was telling him. Warning him. *Even if I find a way to keep them, I can’t keep them.* No one ever . . . “Parker would never go for it. No one does, it’s too much.” He stepped out of his circle and went back to his laptop. Placing his hand on it. Imagine if he could? “No one does. No one understands!” He yelled backing away from the laptop.

He went back to the centre of the circle of drawings. “Just get them out, just find them security and that’s it. That’s it.” Parker was different. “No, not the same.” And Camille? “I grew up without parents. She’ll have her mom.” He’d be a heel! He’d be what he despised, leaving his own child out there. “It’s too dangerous out here, it’d never work.” How could sharing all of it. Any of it.

Jarod was different. He hid beneath layers of himself in society, working with what scraps he could to deal with his own problems. He tried to handle his own needs, but there were things that no one else could do that he needed. That he wanted done.

He looked back down at the circles.

He dialed her Aunt Dorothy back.

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“She’d never accept it. Even if I found a way, she’d never accept it,” Jarod stated. “No one accepts it. No one understands it. I live with it.”

“You live a half fulfilled life. You will find a way to keep her, but you will lose her and Camille without being open and honest about what you need.” He didn’t answer back right away. “She *knows* you are odd, just say it. Just tell her.”

“How do you *know* that? You see visions, I get it. You saw what was in your vision, I get it. How do you know *that*?”

“I know pretenders. You are not the first. Isolated and without love, you all need similar things. In your case? Even more. You *must* fulfill your needs too with this deal, there will be no different substitutes anymore. If you can’t? Then you have to let them go.”

“I don’t even see a way I can keep them right now. But even if I could? What you are asking of me? I can’t, she’d never. But? I want to help get them out. That’s all I know.”

“That’s up to you to see. If you see the way? It will make you happy, but it will not lead to happiness. You aren’t normal, and neither is she. If you don’t see it and you don’t ask it. You will never get it and you can never keep them.”

“Okay, I get it. Just tell me.”

“I only know what I know about pretenders and what I saw in my vision.” Most of the rest was life experience. “Okay then. Here is what you will have to do, when the time is right, and not a moment before.”

She told him. He didn’t believe it at first. Of course. He wanted to deny everything. “You don’t honestly think she sees you as normal already? Your name is Jarod but you *are* Jar of Odds. You are an oddity, a wonder to the world. You understand it as much as it understands you.”

“I don’t see how.”

“You can. Don’t shy away, you’ll feel better.” She knew that. If he didn’t, then she’d go back to LM and Camille forever. “Everything you want. Everything you need. Even you can only hide pain for so long, Pretender. Stop the running. Start the hiding and you can start the healing with what you have now.”

She heard the dial tone. It was up to him now.



## Deal or No Deal

Mister Parker steadily walked to see Raines. He knocked on his door. When Raines told him to come in, he did. He sat on one of his office chairs. "I'd do anything for her to be back to The Centre." He glanced at Raines. "That woman up there is not my daughter."

Raines just stared at him. "Genetic material for The Centre and her disposal is the best plan. She's corrupted. She's like a broken phone, there's no reason to keep her. Throw it away, buy a new one with a better plan."

"I've talked to Doctor Cox," Mister Parker said. "His work. His real work, not this little tedious stuff we are putting on him. She can *never* weaken again with it. She'll be just like the first day I ever had to put her into the first dome."

"I just want to have a mercy killing. You want to destroy her mind. How we've switched our perceptions," Raines joked with him.

"No, no. It's related to what we used with Catherine's death," Mister Parker said. "My daughter was too young for the heaviness of older sedative side effects. This? It uses the same kind of components."

"Not so sure Zane's going to lose being chairman are you?" Raines teased him. "You see twenty kids in there in your mind going 'yes, mommy'."

Mister Parker slammed his fist on Raines' desk. "Damn it, Raines! She's calling me Mister Parker! How far gone is that, huh? Whatever vision Zane has with those kids being groomed as Centre followers before they can even walk will never happen. I don't want to see this happen to her. Losing The Centre in her life? It's devastating." He gestured to the glass dome on the side of Raines' desk. "You can't be that callous about your daughter. Look at how proud she made you. You still have part of the necklace she used to take out Lyle in a decorative glass dome."

"Hm." Raines looked at the glass dome, then back at him. "She was good. You are talking months. Europe did nothing for her."

"Doctor Cox is the best in his field. It's why we keep him so close. He couldn't run away if he wanted to," Mister Parker pointed out. "He can do it. He improved upon that drug. It changes the mind differently. She'll be okay."

"If it doesn't work, then her life," Raines said. "If it drives her insane, catatonic, or into a coma? We put her down like a dog and harvest her. If it does work, we can harvest her as soon as we regain control of The Centre and get her out of here. Until then, we would have the obedient mommy we need again."

“I will get the Triumvirate on the line.” The woman in there was not his daughter anymore. If it didn’t work, then so be it.

The conversation was heated between opinions, especially as Doctor Cox was invited to sit in too, to explain exactly what his work entailed.

Doctor Cox sat back in his chair. “It’s a fascinating little drug, used only in minors in the past of The Centre. I’ve strengthened and modified it. I’ve given it the nickname ‘finale’. The test subjects have all shown success to it,” he reasoned.

Zane almost sniped at him. “What makes it different than anything else?”

“Nanotechnology.” Doctor Cox just smiled. “I am at The Centre for a reason, gentleman. It would be nice to be used for my full services again. I would also like to make a case for something else if I may? I can give you results The Centre hasn’t seen before.”

“What will all of this do to Miss Parker?” Zane asked.

“Miss Parker’s problems are not simply memories or allegiance. It wasn’t the dome that triggered her to be rebellious. It’s one thing.” He lifted his finger. “One. Jarod.”

“Jarod is spaced throughout her life, it was even included into her job,” Mister Parker said to Doctor Cox. “How can you manage that?”

“We can focus on erasing or reducing bad memories specifically in our medical advancements. Why not others?” He waited. “It won’t completely get rid of him, he is spread too far across her mind. She would remember things, and she will have mostly early memories of him. However it would get rid of most of it, and it should erase all memories from 2013 permanently by the time I am done.”

“What about her baby?” Mister Parker asked. “Will she remember her?”

“Jarod never saw her in Europe. As to my knowledge, he’s not seen her yet this whole year. So yes, she would remember the baby,” Doctor Cox agreed. “She’ll be a brilliant mother for The Centre again.” He tapped his finger. “She will live for The Centre, die for The Centre, and be back to the self she had been before the first dome incident. The perfect soldier who had caught Jarod in the first place. Without any permanent brain damage. Only permanent memory damage.”

“But her child is by Jarod. She is in the dome now,” Zane pointed out. “Will her resolve be strong enough to accept her position again?”

“Or accept that she has to stay until her second is born?” Mister Parker added, still letting his own wants known.

“Her allegiance is not hard, it’s simply troubled by Jarod. I only need one treatment of ‘finale’ for allegiance but I am spacing out three treatments to relieve the memories of

Jarod.” Doctor Cox smiled. “She will want to beat me up, I will need a couple of sweepers the first time.”

“Once we understand where her memories lie, we’ll have a better grip on what to do,” Raines agreed.

The triumvirate all agreed on the conference call as did Mister Parker.

Zane grumbled slightly. “I hate messing with the mother’s head. However? She is obviously Anti-Centred now. We don’t have much to lose. Agreed. Start treatment tonight to forget Jarod. Then two more?”

“Two for him, one for finale, and then it shall be done.” He leaned back in his seat. “No matter what anyone tries, she will never change again.” The ultimate re-education.

Finale.

Miss Parker stared ahead of her couch until she saw her Daddy coming. She instantly got up and went to the side of the dome “Daddy!” Maybe he could get her and Camille out of there? She watched him move all the way up the stairs and moved over to the elevators. He walked in with such a bright smile.

“How is my Angel?” He asked her.

“Confused?” She answered. “Daddy, I can understand The Centre wants some kind of pretender babies,” she said, “however? I just had a baby. And. I?” It couldn’t be what Doctor Cox said. “Daddy, it’s not, is it?”

“Jarod’s? Yes, it’s Jarod’s. The next one will be too. After that you are freed to be out of here.” He flashed his best smile at her. “Then you can move on with your life with Monsieur Martin.”

“And watch my back constantly?! He’s going to come after her!” No, no. She shook her head. No way. No way, not him. Anyone but him. “Daddy, no. Please?”

“Why are you repeating? What’s done is done.” He gestured to the end. “The other side of the dome. If he shows up, he’ll be over there.”

“*If he shows up?* You mean if The Centre catches him,” she corrected him.

“No, Honey, he showed up last time himself to stop the whole experiment,” her daddy said. “But look at that. The Centre won against him. Centre 1, Jarod 0.” He chuckled. “You’ll be fine. Most likely he won’t even show up. How’s he going to know you are even here?”

“He knows everything.” Oh. Ugh. Her stomach churned. That. Man. That. *Thing*. Her Camille came from him?

“Calm down. Look, one more pregnancy, safely in this dome? He can’t get to you in here. Even if we put him in here, he can’t reach this side.” He went over and hugged her. “Oh, you look so much better than before. My Angel? For the good of the what?”

“For the good of The Centre.” What else? Dome. Her? “I am the only one who can have pretender babies. I’ve been in this dome before. The Centre won.” Why Jarod? Why did it have to be him? “Then afterward, I can go? Right?”

“Of course,” Mister Parker insisted. “Then you can go. Go live your life with the Martin’s. They’ll keep you safe enough that Jarod will never bother you.”

“Wh- . . .” She couldn’t ask the same question twice. “Is there a reason I am missing that we *had* to pick the one that we chase and that is very insistent upon finding his family?” *If he touches Camille.* “Please tell me he doesn’t know.”

“I don’t think so. It could change, I don’t know,” her father admitted. “Either way, you are safe. Doctor Cox is done treating you for some minor problems. It’ll affect your memory here and there. It’ll affect your childhood memories the most as well as getting rid of 2013. Pesky Centre problems that you don’t need to remember. Then he’ll be treating you with something called ‘finale’ too.”

“Okay, Daddy.” *Something’s wrong.*

Doctor Cox will treat you again tomorrow for the better part of this whole Jarod thing. Most painful he said might remain, but then we’ll get rid of them, and then that’s it. So. Enjoy yourself. Oh, and don’t forget those cute baby bottles.” He lifted one up to her. It had the C brand shape for The Centre on it. “Raise that baby right honey. Love live The Centre.”

“Long live The Centre. Does he have to treat me again, Daddy? I’m fine, really,” she stated. “I am completely loyal to The Centre, always. Daddy?” *Something’s very wrong.*

“No you aren’t, you started to slip. Looks like Doctor Cox was right though. Just getting rid of Jarod seems to be enough. Got to have the full course of that stuff,” he insisted. “The finale will be simple. No worries.”

*If Jarod comes after my baby, I am going to kill him.* What a terrible thing he’d been. “The fucking Chameleon.” Then she knew what was wrong. She heard her baby crying.

Not just any crying, exceptionally emotional crying, like she’d been left alone for far too long by herself! “Bull fucking shit!” That wasn’t right! “Coming, Sweetie, momma is coming!” She ran to the other side of the dome where her baby laid in her crib right next to her bed. She was kicking up a fuss and oh so red. Left alone for too long. “Momma’s here, no more worries.” She picked her up and immediately spoke French to calm her baby down. It would hopefully remind her more of home with her Great Aunt Dorothy. More of her own crib and window and surroundings. The beautiful music that sailed upstairs to her ears from her Aunt Dorothy.

Camille fussed so much, it would take time to settle her down. She continued to scream and cry in her arms. “Momma’s here, I promise. I’m sorry I left you all alone, it wasn’t my fault.

The Centre treatment has to come first, but I'm here now." She kissed the top of her head. She sang *À la claire fontaine* to try and calm her down. It worked a little. She brought out her phone and started to find some French songs Aunt Dorothy loved listening to. Songs of home. *How sad is it I've lived here all my life, yet home feels like it rests with the times with mother . . . and within the home of Aunt Dorothy?* Less than a year with Aunt Dorothy.

Aunt Dorothy managed to show her more love, made her feel like she had a home, then anyone since her mother's death. She never judged her harshly. Eased her into learning about her mother and what she did for Jarod and what she did at The Centre that caused her untimely death. Even now, where she should feel like she was 'at home'. They were stealing her memories and leaving her with gaps in her mind.

How could they even erase that much from her? *The Centre's power knows no end.* "I know it's 2014. I have full memories of 2014. I barely remember 2013." And what she did?

*///She refused Daphne's protein shake as she opened her office door. She was supposed to file her report and put this whole Jarod thing to rest. But Broots was there now and he had a package. A package proving Jarod's ass was still alive. She ripped it open and saw the fourth grade diorama of her mother's grave. She tried to get through it, fully intending to go home for Maker's Mark and maybe a nice icy bath to numb away everything. Instead she stumbled past her Centre car out past everything. Until she reached her mother's grave.///*

She reached up and touched her head. *Don't do it, don't cry. A year ago on momma's grave, just forget it. I won't be able to keep it anyhow.* She heard Camille continue to cry in her arms. *Bastards! No one was here for her when they took me away.* "Don't they know every little girl needs their mother?"

*///She leaned against the back of her mother's headstone. **How the fuck did I end up here and why did you leave me?** ///*

*I can't dwell on it, I'm the mother now.* She looked at Camille. "I will never leave you. Never."

*/// "Okay Jarod, you wanna do this at my personal ground zero, then do it. At least my blood-letting will stay in the gene pool." ///*

"Oh, gaw." She'd been so drunk that night and so emotional, she didn't even remember the exactness of it. That treatment, it stirred her mind back up. *The etch a sketches, mother's*

*grave, and hearing it all over through the daffodils.* She was weak that night, so incredibly weak. *I was strong enough to survive it.* But her words. “Never. I won’t do anything to lose you now,” she said to Camille.

Now. She remembered. Jarod had pushed her so far over the edge. He was so lucky she was so strong! No matter how much he hated The Centre, it wouldn’t have felt good seeing her obituary. *Bastard* “You deserve a mother, a good mother, and I’ll never desert you. I’ll never leave you. I will always fight to stay by your side.” She felt her eyes start to tear up. She wasn’t stupid. She knew the Centre’s treatments being performed weren’t typical. They were dangerous. They were experimental to be able to erase so much and so thoroughly. “No. I don’t care what happens, baby. Even if everything leaves my mind? I will always love my child.” She held onto her with as much love as she could as she stroked her daughter’s head and paced. “The Centre feels it has to take more? Then, it doesn’t matter. Bring it on because I’ll always protect you. I’ll always be here.” She carried Camille around, bouncing her lightly. “Always. I will *never* leave you. If I do? They you know it couldn’t be avoided or I’d rip down the fiery gates of hell to come back to you.”

Her mind. Almost a whole year. Missing. With the promise of more missing. Why? *Don’t question The Centre.* One day, maybe she’ll learn the reason. “Well, I don’t need to remember him anyway. It won’t help me. They want to erase every shred of him, fine. They want to erase things that took away my strength? I don’t care, whatever! Why would I care?” *He’s just an ass. He was just a boy in a bubble. The same kind I’m in now. Memories that aren’t Centre pure aren’t worth having.*

2014. Europe. Aunt Dorothy. She lived with her with the baby, but made plans to marry Martin for *something*. Why did she want to marry him? *Jarod related, must be. It’s too fuzzy.* Why did The Centre scrub her mind so hard? “To hide from Jarod. Like Daddy said,” she reasoned. “But how much more were they going to scrub?” She felt like an SOS pad was taken to her brain. Things she should know.

She felt like she just stumbled away from her momma’s grave, past the fallen daffodils and straight into Aunt Dorothy’s home of 2014.

“Aunt Dorothy.” Was it shameful to admit how much she had missed that Aunt? When everything felt stacked and complicated, *she* pulled through for her. *She* helped her so much. With her mother as well. She helped her heal if only slightly. “We’ll go to Aunt Dorothy instead.” That sounded more right than the dangerous Martin family. For one, Jarod didn’t know about her Aunt anyhow, and he was a sack of shit for pushing her so far. There was no way he could see or have Camille anyhow. His running was dangerous and he’d know that. Also? *I don’t want him touching her. Ever.* Her child. Hers! She raised her, she was hers. Aunt Dorothy raised her too. Family oriented or not, Jarod wasn’t built to be near her daughter. He would try to take her away. Probably call her an unfit mother. Would he try to adopt her out to get her away from The Centre? *Exactly, I can’t trust him. Never. Never!*

“Mo mo.”

“Always, always. Momma is right here, I am never going anywhere,” she said gently to her. *Not anymore. You are going to have a wonderful life. The best I can give. And if that ass*

*thinks that making me contemplate suicide on my mother's own grave was going to give him a free pass to you, he's got another thing coming!* "Fuck Jarod! Fuck him!"

"Arod."

She looked down at her daughter. "Burple, babble. That was babbling. Practicing those pretty French R's, nothing more," she insisted. "Don't cuss in front of your child, what kind of mother are you?" she scolded herself. "It's okay, Camille. Momma's alright."

Momma would stay alright, no matter how bad things got. She had a daughter to be there for. And nothing would stop her from doing that. Nothing. At least until 21. At least until Camille had her own life in order. Then? Maybe she'd fade away. Pall Malls by the dozens, like society's good girls should. *Until then, my life is yours. You are my happiness.*

She started to sing her more french songs, especially of Indila. Keeping the connection to home. Keeping the connection to Aunt Dorothy. "Je me souviens." *I remember.* During this time especially as The Centre had to mess with her mind and memories. Stay tough. Stay strong. Remember what was important. Soon, Camille settled down, but instantly was falling asleep. So tired. Being away from her.

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The Dome, Next Day

Miss Parker kept Camille tightly in her arms.

"Mo mo."

"I'm here," she said, trying to prop her daughter up on the bed. "You want another nap? You're getting kind of tired." *Keep it together. You are a strong woman, you are not weak, and there has to be a way out that won't hurt The Centre or Daddy.* She brought her close to her crib and put her down. Camille was leaning against the crib and she propped up several pillows for her, rubbing her back. *Someone's getting to be a big girl.* After giving her some practice, she moved the pillows outside the crib again and let her lay down. "That's a girl. Get that nap in while you can. Beauty sleeps important." She gave her a small kiss on the cheek.

Then? *No. You've got to be fucking kidding me!*

Daddy, Sydney and Zane were walking with Jarod in handcuffs. Daddy was on the other side of the bottom area of the dome. By the private elevator that was never used before. It was for

Jarod's side. *The fucking Pretender.* The dome carried the sound of the rooms so much better than the real world outside of it.

"I will still be dealing with your daily standards," Sydney said as he unlocked Jarod. "Good luck adjusting, Jarod."

Jarod's back stayed turned as Sydney and Daddy and Zane happily left, without a damn word to her. Then, he turned around. He was looking around. *He's looking for her, he has to know. There's no other way The Centre caught him like this.* He spotted her and smiled, waving. *Hell no. I am not falling for that shit.* She watched him move through his other two domes. Then, he crawled into the disposal unit. Now he was one dome away from her.

"Opened toe sandals?" Jarod said casually to her. "When did they get those? How come you get a fancy robe too?"

She watched as he put his hand on the dome.

"What's wrong?" He asked her. "Miss Parker?" He looked toward Camille's crib. "Yeah, I know already. It's okay."

No way, that good boy act was not working on her! *He's not seeing her. She's mine.*

"Whoah." He took his hand off the dome and put them both in the air like he surrendered. "I don't like that look in your eyes, Miss Parker. I'm not here to take Camille away."

Whatever. She just picked Camille up and moved her away from him.

"I'm not here to hurt you or Camille!" Jarod yelled at her. "Parker!"

"Like hell you aren't!" She yelled back at him. "You're not going to steal her away and let someone else adopt her, she's mine! I'm her mother!" She held Camille to her tightly as she tried to move far enough away to not hear him. But the whole dome was just that, an echo chamber.

"I would never take her away from you! What kind of- what?! Miss Parker! The Centre is feeding you lies again, I would never take her away from her mother! I'm here to help you!"

"Screw your brand of help!" She yelled back, but it made Camille start to cry. "It's okay, Sweetie. I'm right here." She tried to calm her beating heart down. She had a clinical genius that made it a daily task to make the impossible things in the world, possible. Who was the father of her child.

"Little Miss, please come back over! I need to talk to you!"

Miss Parker wouldn't bother yelling at him no more. Instead, she sang to Camille. He was only upsetting her. That's what Jarod did. Upset people. She pulled out her phone and brought up some lullabies for her again. "*À la claire fontaine, M'en allant promener, J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle, Que je m'y suis baigné.*" At least the ass seemed to understand. He did everything for the innocent, so maybe he figured out yelling wasn't the nice thing to do for the little baby. Whatever. As long as he shut up now.



But, after she sang to Camille, she heard him again. This time, the domes showed how far they really did carry voice. He didn't yell, just spoke, his voice echoing through the tunnels.

"You're a very good mother to her, Little Miss. I would never steal her away from that." She didn't answer. "I want to get you out of here, with her." She still refused to answer.

"Something is very wrong, they did something to you. You shouldn't be like this with me. What are they doing?"

She didn't want to answer him, but he was just going to keep bothering her. "I don't remember much of 2013."

"How is that possible? They couldn't have erased that much, and Sydney barely brought you back last time!"

His yelling triggered Camille again. *That damn ass mother fucking stupid chameleon! If I wasn't such a good momma I'd tell him where to shove his puzzles at.* But? She was a good momma. She stopped and pulled up another lullabye to sing to Camille, to calm her down again. "Au clair de la lune, Mon ami Pierrot, Prête-moi ta plume, Pour écrire un mot." Jarod once again shut up as she got her to settle down again. Okay, now what? *I am not going back there, he isn't getting near her.*

"I am sorry I yelled," Jarod spoke. "Miss Parker, can you hear me at this level?"

Fine. "Yes," she answered grittily.

"Okay. The Centre is trying to break us apart again," he insisted. "That's why they are doing something to your mind."

"Never." Not yelling was hard. "I'd never trust you."

"We were in a dome, in 2013. Nothing as big as this, but we were there," he insisted. "We lived with each other for one and a half months. You have to trust me."

"I would never trust you." She didn't yell, but some of the panic leaked out in her voice.

"It can't be easy to have almost a whole year wiped from your mind," his voice called to her again. "I am sorry. What's the last memory you have of me then?"

No way, don't answer.

"I need to know, please. Give me something to work with."

"Like. A diorama?" She focused back on Camille. This was torture.

"Okay. Your mother's grave and the etch a sketch."

Yeah. Say it so plainly.

"Once again, I'm sorry, I went a little too far too fast on your mind. I didn't know at the time. I just wanted to free you."

“Well, you were really damn close to it, weren’t you?” She moved away further, trying to get away. “Be a big star on your get even with The Centre list. Miss Parker commits suicide on her own momma’s grave. Well, I was stronger than that.” Barely. “And I’m still here kicking.” Nothing would block out his voice. At least he didn’t answer back right away. Odd. He kind of choked.

“Fuck me.”

That wasn’t the response she was expecting.

“I was trying to help you see the truth, I didn’t.” He stopped again. “I checked up on you before the dome. I was worried once I got deeper into studying different forms of psychology. You didn’t. But now you are. And you are because they messed with your mind. I knew it. I knew it!”

He yelled again, once again setting off Camille. *Crap*. Now was really not the time for a lullabye. She cradled her back and forth. She had gone from the food dome to the clothes dome. The sound reverberated no matter where she went. It wasn’t him yelling. She heard Jarod crying.

*I knew it*. Jarod couldn’t hide his emotions. He went back to The Centre to check up on her. She was okay. When he was back in the dome with her, and he found the razorblade, she had a reason for it too. She even learned how her Daddy’s diamond necklace worked. Yet? No matter how fine she looked, he still kept his eyes open. He used puzzles to get things across to people. They hit harder, they stayed in the memory longer, and it’s just what he did. But? He was brand new to the world, learning about it. Learning about love and about life. Learning about everyone’s pasts and what he could or should do. *I even bragged about how I knew what to do to get her there in the other dome*. She hadn’t remembered, it was firmly in her mind, but that part. She had blocked it on her mind.

How could he have ever gone on living, if Miss Parker had weakened? *Maker’s Mark, back against her momma’s grave, her failed pursuit right in front of her that she could aim at but couldn’t shoot. I pulled everything down*. And while someone like Sydney could handle the hard stuff, Miss Parker was not psychologically ready for it. The truth was right in front of him, now that The Centre stirred her memories back up.

His heart hurt even imagining it. *I pushed her to the brink of her weakness. Even one more little bit, and she would have done it right across her mom’s own grave*. New to the world. Oblivious to so many different things. So many different subtleties. There was more than one way to share the truth with her. *She was chasing me, in charge of everything. She was the unstoppable bitch. I didn’t know*.

He pulled himself together. What’s done was done. He had to pull her back onto his side again if he was going to get them out of there.

“ . . . and then we’ll go back home, you and me. Your Aunt Dorothy will be so happy to see you again.”

He stayed quiet. The dome carried voices very far. He just wanted to hear her voice. He never got to hear how she was with Camille. She was speaking in French to her. Made sense. She knew she was going back to Europe. Her future didn't rest in America. It would be the dominant language she'd want her to learn. Or maybe, it reminded Camille more of their home. *I can't do a home. I can only provide places. Hotels, buildings, apartments, condos, but no home.*

"Oh good, we still have Mister Penguin over here. Do you think he missed you? Oh, he did miss you, didn't he?" Camille's laugh echoed through the dome.

Jarod moved out of the disposal unit. It was easy, the way to get rid of the clothes and the food. He jumped back up into that hole to get back on his side. The hole to jump to her side from the disposal was way too high but when she refused to come over to see him on the either side? He didn't care about getting his clothes messy. He moved all the way back to his other side and looked through. He could see them. Parker had a huge toy penguin that couldn't be moved or pushed down by Camille. It was about the size of Camille. So the toy could be touched and played with, without moving away. *You've got your mom again. Look how happy you are.* He glanced at Parker. *You have your little girl again. Look how happy you are.* His worry started to settle. Then, he noticed her eyes lock with his. Recognition. "Miss Parker?"

She continued to look at him, like she was trying to figure it out. "When did you? I had cuts on me. All over me."

Her memories were returning? "The dome, last time. That's what you see," Jarod said anxiously. "Do you see anything else? Remember anything else?"

"Oh. Oh, no." She closed her eyes and leaned her head back. "They're erasing my memories."

"Not fully," Jarod said. "It looks like they are coming back."

"I have another treatment soon, that's why I'm starting to get some of it back. Doctor Cox is going to administer a second dose, and then a third? He said it was what The Centre used for minors, except he improved on it. Three. Three treatments to get rid of Jarod? It's?" Her brain was still clearly fuzzy. "Hang on, just give me a second to think. Okay. I have three scheduled treatments that specifically target memories of you to erase. I've had one so far. I think. But then there's . . . the finale. Doctor Cox calls it the finale, it's Permanent re-education. It uses nanotechnology somehow?" Then she propped herself up higher. "Oh. Damn. Permanent re-education."

"And permanently forgetting me." No way. "I won't let either happen. I'll stop it," Jarod insisted.

"*I'll* stop it. I can't let them. They're taking away too much." She picked up Camille. "You weren't even there in 2014 and I am missing things there too. When did I first arrive in Europe? When did I first go to Aunt Dorothy's?"

“I will work on it. I’m going to get to the other side with you somehow.” He smiled as he finally watched her walk over with Camille. Mother and daughter right in front of him, for the first time. “So?” He went back to his question he said when he first arrived. “What’s with the opened toe sandals?”

## Simulation of Life

She laughed. "I know that one at least." She licked her back tooth. "Before I started into my re-education, they asked me what they could do to improve this situation." She shook her head. "They didn't pick up the joke. And? I didn't know, Jarod. About Camille. Honest."

Jarod chuckled. "No, The Centre doesn't joke and I know you didn't know," he answered back. "Broots didn't know either. How have you been?"

"I got a year off in Europe. You'd think I'd be well rested."

"I went too," he said. "Smaller stay. I wanted to see if your Aunt Dorothy knew anything about my parents."

"Did she?"

"Nope, but I exhaust all resources."

"That you do. Sydney, Broots, and Daphne only spotted you three times in the last year."

"I'm getting better at moving."

"I've noticed."

"Hey? How was I supposed to know you needed help instead of wanting to catch me?"

"I didn't start yet, Jarod."

"... oh, the hunting! Duh." He smirked. "I got confused."

"Put in here for a reason. Confusement accepted."

"Well, while that's a nice excuse? It didn't stop you from shooting at me last time."

"Um?" She was trying to remember. "Yes! Oh yeah. You were jinxing me," she said. "You're lucky you were in front of my favorite couch."

"Is it here?" He asked. "Your favorite couch?"

"Oh yeah. Most of my things and Daddy Parker bought me more to fill it all out." He seemed to smile at that for some reason. "I don't see why you're so happy. You have three domes like the old days. Nothing really changes for you." She shrugged. "Too bad. I got a ps4 over here if you grow wings."

"Ooh." He leaned his head against it too. "Which games? A lot of games have been coming out in the last year."

“Just one. I just felt like annihilating the pigs. I didn’t even know why. Boy, I get really clueless.” She sighed. “You’re a moron for getting trapped in here unless you know a way out.”

“You have a part of my family in here,” Jarod reminded her. “I had to risk it.” He smirked. “Camille. Leanne Parker. Really, Parker?”

“It was on a crib in the dome,” she said. “Daddy Parker took it for the adoption papers. Wanna complain so much, name the next ten.”

“Do you realize you are doing that?” Jarod gave her an odd look.

Doing what? “What?”

“Calling your father, Daddy Parker? A split between loyal and unloyal.” He looked on the sides of her face. “No, you don’t.”

“Who is a good girl today? Oh, not there.”

Miss Parker broke her attention away from the dome. “Sorry, Jarod, I gotta go.” She raced back down the dome and saw Cox. “I don’t need a weapon to kill you know. Back off your scrawny head before you lose it. You aren’t taking me anywhere again.”

“Hello again.” Cox backed away from the crib and gestured to Camille in her arms. “I need her height and weight?”

“And I need a wrecking ball to crack this dome like an egg,” she said. “We aren’t getting what we want. Leave Camille alone.”

“Another day perhaps.”

“Suck it.”

“It’s good to hear your language is more under control,” Doctor Cox complimented her. “It’s bad to see the treatment already weakening with Jarod. I will have to get you ready for the next soon.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Now, now. That sounds Anti-Centre,” Doctor Cox warned her.

Miss Parker grabbed the crib, put Camille in it and started to wheel it away. “That’s nothing. Momma’s about to redecorate.” There was no way Camille was going to stay way over there. She wheeled her through the different domes, the flat surface making it easy to travel against. If Jarod was in there for Camille, then he was going to see her. That and getting any and all furnitures next to him might help him with whatever rescue he wanted to attempt. If there was a way.

Jarod looked at different places in the dome. It was a smaller area, but they did have a library and a bed. *I can work with that but I need more.*

“Arod.”

Oh? “She got the D to it.” He turned around and saw Camille. She was being wheeled over in her crib.

“Height and weight my A,” Miss Parker said about Cox. “The only height and weight he is getting is my foot up his a, that swiny effing essing and eating pig amf.”

Well? For her, it was a start. Her cussing had turned into the alphabet, but at least she wasn’t fully doing it around Camille. Her brain was putting her speech through a very small second filter when she spoke since she was too good of a person to do that. *To stop cussing she’d need serious help.* He waved at her as Miss Parker picked her up. “There’s little Camille. How are you, huh?”

“Arod.” She patted the dome.

Jarod put his hand up to her. They were all stuck in a dome, but this time he couldn’t touch them. *Temporary. Both of you.* “Mister Parker didn’t want me messing with you this time, did he?”

“That and I technically have a fiancé.” She shrugged. “He’s a floor mouse. Pops up every once in awhile. Just ignore him.”

Floor mouse. *Still going strong.* Yet, definitely weaker. Trying to display bravery like a peacock with its feathers. When the going got tough, she would try to get tougher. That aspect would never change but she wasn’t as strong as she portrayed. Their last conversation was proof of that. “Did Monsieur Martin bring you straight here instead of to surgery?” He already knew what transpired, but he wanted to see what he could stir up.

“No. He almost effing let me have the gee dee surgery too, but effing Mister Parker called and ordered him to stop and bring me the eff here. My own Mister Parker, made sure I couldn’t get my effing a freedom.” She shrugged. “He’s indoctrinated, so he brought me back. I was supposed to undergo some basic re-education but I couldn’t take anymore. Sydney said he barely brought my mind back. Shortly after that, Mister Parker advanced the plans. He got me in here, he’s got me on Pro-Centre treatment and forget Jarod treatments and now there is just a showdown in my brain.” She put Camille back in her crib. “I am going to try and rearrange things so that you can see her whenever you want. I’ll be back.”

He watched her come back some time later, scooting the bed. She kept her strength up. *Thatta girl.*

He made funny faces and tried talking to Camille as she entertained herself with bringing everything in the middle over there. It probably helped her strength and will power too. “Do you have a rattle over there?”

Miss Parker left for a little while and came back with a rattle. It had an easy to grab wide hole in the bottom but it looked like a stuffed grey rabbit. “There you go, Sweetie.”

Her eyes lit up and she kicked.

“Yeah, you remember your Aunt Dorothy’s rattle.” She gave it to her. She excitedly shook it.

“She loved her Aunt Dorothy,” Jarod remarked.

“Knew her most of her life. She was her étoile. Cute little star.”

“Mo mo. Do do.” Camille shook her rattle.

*Yep, she was the Do do, and I have to figure out how to save you with me, or give you to her forever.* That’s why Dorothy tested him so hard. Seeing how he dealt with Camille without the family connection. No binds. Testing what he’d say when he lost her. How he’d deal with the dome, and Miss Parker. They were either going with Dorothy forever, or with him. So far, he didn’t know how it was possible with him. Especially if he was supposed to be open and honest. He watched her shake the half stuffed rabbit rattle. *This is probably it. Story of my life.*

“Mo mo. Do do,” Miss Parker said as she gave her a little kiss. “Now momma’s gotta benchpress a heavy a TV stand. I’ll be back.”

“She is going to be a genius,” he said, letting her know. She probably already did. She was way too advanced for a three month old. He would have wondered more about that, except Broots was a genius, and Miss Parker’s lineage may have had some genius too. Still? That was *real* advanced genius, and he probably didn’t see it. Because he didn’t want to see it. *Last days.* “I don’t know about pretender.”

“She’s just going to be great.” That’s all she said as she went to deal with the TV stand.

“Yep. You are going to be great.” He couldn’t agree more. Camille batted her rattle around again. He took his DSA’s with him everywhere and he took his 3d simulator, but everything else was always temporary. He could never keep anyone, or stay anywhere, no matter how much he wanted to. No matter whom he loved. No matter how much it hurt to leave. *How would I be able to take something as innocent as you into the world I survive?*

“TV.” Parker came back with the TV. “No wires. One of the nice things, I guess, from this place. Advance tech. Whatever.”

“I never wanted children,” Jarod blurted out. Open and honest. Brutally honest. “I wanted to escape and play and learn the world anew. The way I was supposed to. I wanted to find *my* parents. I wanted *my* life. Maybe one day, but by then I’d . . .” Probably be too old. “My baby was the ps4. I didn’t lie about that. It’s the only one I wanted.”

“Hm.” She seemed to be considering his words. “No one said you had to take any responsibility. We’ll be fine.” She shrugged. “Hell, Jarod, I didn’t even know you were the dad. I was trying to get my mind wrapped around what the hell to do with Broots.”



Jarod went back to spending time watching Camille. “She is a good baby, but I still don’t want to be a dad.”

“Oh lighten up, like I am making you do anything,” she practically informed him. “I was thinking of adopting a baby by myself before, remember? I had to for The Centre. I’ve always planned on taking care of her alone. If we were all stuck together and I say ‘who wants a little toy from the vending machine?’, I would fully expect you to both get excited.”

“Ooh those are always different and changing, you can never collect them all.” Oh. He just proved her point. “Yep.”

“And who the hell cares?”

He thought she was going to go on a rant, but instead she said something else. Just a simplistic thing, that started to make the gears turn in his head.

“So the dad is like a kid himself and the mom was raised to be a loaded weapon, eff it. Screw conventional. Our lives have never been conventional.”

*Unconventional.* Who out there is kidnapped and lives their life trapped in a dome, doing top secret projects using their abilities to become anyone they want to be? Nobody but him. Above the surface no one knew everything that lurked beneath him. Open handed greeting to a stranger off the street, but they’d never understand him or his ways. *Even when they did, they still fully couldn’t.* Parker had placed up the freestanding curtains in four sections. (There was a back now she had apparently earned.) The dome was so big though, they didn’t block off the whole way up the sides anymore. She kept Jarod’s viewing area open though. “It’s always so comfy for you. It’s not fair,” he teased.

“Sydney got permission for something for you. Next time you see him for your dailies.” She held out her hands like a controller. “Wireless. Tell me if I need to pull this thing closer.”

“Yes.” Okay, he shouldn’t have been that excited. “It’s been a busy month.”

“You aren’t kidding,” she answered as she went away again.

This time she returned with her favorite couch. It had a stripe of color down the front of it, ruining its value, but Miss Parker didn’t seem to care. *Camille could learn colors.* Not just a chart of colors, but with the finish? What looked gaunt to adults, would look like a sparkly rainbow to kids. That’s what mattered to her. Giving Camille the best of what she could. Unfortunately? “Your robes starting to slip.”

“Happens when you move a whole room.” She turned around and readjusted herself.

*Wait a minute.* “Are you only wearing a robe?”

That. Expression. “They knew I wouldn’t be a willing participant this time. They think giving me just a robe is going to keep me in check.”

“Miss Parker!”

She pulled her robe tighter and got on the couch. “Freaking rat, don’t do that!”

Jarod looked down at the ground below his feet. He recognized him from his research. Monsieur Martin. “Aw, Honey, come on? Who keeps their fiancé in the basement floorboards?” Jarod joked. Only her. “Word of advice,” Jarod warned him. “Really. Not fond of you at the moment. Get out.”

“Not fond of the situation either,” he answered back. “She goes back and forth from ‘fuck you’ to ‘maybe soon you can come up?’ Our Daddies say she must stay until after the second. Then she can come home. Burden of nine months. Now who are you?”

“Jarod,” he said simply.

“Oh.” The fiancé looked confused. “Well?” He looked agitated. “Miss Parker, are you alright?”

“Fine,” she finally answered.

“And our daughter?” he asked innocently.

But innocent or not, Jarod was at the edge. He didn’t want to play the game of ‘who’s who?’ again. “Will you just go away already?”

Pretty boy didn’t back down though. “My name is Monsieur Martin. The pretty woman in front of you is my fiancé. Please be nice to her in there if . . .”

“If I figure out how to get unrestrained?” Jarod answered him back. “Afraid the monkey is going to mess with your monkey?” No. He wouldn’t give him that honor of belittling him. Instead, he spoke in French to him. “Monsieur Martin. I hope you understand that she is in here not of her own free will. She is forced to stay in here, and whether or not you are indoctrinated, there should be a small part of some semblance of a human that knows this is wrong inside of you. You’ve already lost her, and coming back and forth to see her will do nothing. I know Miss Parker. While she likes a man’s touch more than most, she holds a grudge like no other.”

The pretty boy just wiped his nose. Then, he started speaking in Italian. “She is mine in one year. So is Camille. If you hurt her or kill her, Pretender, I have ways of making you pay.”

“For your information,” Jarod said, also switching to Italian, “that phrase goes both ways.”

Then, lover boy spoke german. “Don’t get any ideas. I’ve done things with her only computers could figure out the angles to. I satisfy her needs with sex you can never come close to.”

“Oh yeah?” Jarod switched to his german. “I’ve done something with her you never will in a million years.”

Now lover boy was crossing his arms. “What?”

"I played a video game with her," Jarod answered in German. Yeah. Martin didn't want to admit it, but he got it. Getting Parker to do anything out of her comfort zone was difficult, and her comfort zone was small. Drinking, smoking, sex, shooting, and hunting. Most likely the second was knocked out because of Camille right now. Hopefully it stayed knocked out. *Which explains why he was trying to get her hooked again. One less thing to do.*

"Stop fighting with the floor mice," Miss Parker said to him.

Jarod smirked. "Well stop collecting fiancés and we wouldn't have floor mice." He stood back up, ignoring Monsieur Martin's cries of attention now. He had better things to concentrate on. A renewed sense of determination. He had to get her out of here, but still know he made the right choices. *Don't think conventional. Think unconventional.* "How are you?"

"Annoyed beyond all belief that I'm in here again." She stood up but kept her robe tight around her legs. "I tried not to get in here."

"Yeah. It's what attracted the floor mice." Jarod stomped his foot toward the nuisance below. "Dome got big, didn't it? Give 'em a whole year and they get so bored."

"Yep. My Aunt Dorothy saw it as endless bubbles," she said. "Seems to fit. When did you watch Camille?"

"A couple days after you disappeared," Jarod admitted. "Couldn't leave a baby with them."

"I had Sydney and the others watching over her. I had to try something. I almost won, if Mister Parker hadn't stopped me."

She was sooo close to breaking indoctrination. She just went from Daddy Parker to Mister Parker. She was still in it though, as long as she was unconsciously addressing her dad like that. Also with the way she was handling her cussing, another sign. It might be the furthest she could get though, especially with the brand new treatments Cox was using. And if so? That was workable. "I watched her for two weeks," he said honestly. "Thought she was adopted, or most of the time that Broots was the dad. I even left her with him for a week because I had to go." He looked back at Parker. Open and honest. "You were ordered to Broots, weren't you? And the fiancé?" He waited to hear her 'so' or 'not a big deal'.

"If I say for the good of The Centre, it sounds hollow and meaningless," she answered. "Yes, it was an order on both ends. I did it. I regret it. Life goes on."

"It does," Jarod agreed. *It has to go on.*

"Mo mo. Do do."

Do do was Aunt Dorothy. Again. *Conventional or not, I love that little girl. She deserves her dad like I deserved my dad. But? I can't just sit around and hide the rest of my life from The Centre. I need to do what I have to first.* But the way Dorothy said that she would hide them so well, that he'd never find them? *I'd find them, I know I'd find them.* Except? *I didn't know about these new treatments. If I wasn't here to stop them, she'd never remember me and Aunt*

*Dorothy wouldn't tell her. So maybe?* She was right. Her visions did let her see into the future. *She's not all seeing, she knows certain things.* Besides, he wouldn't let her disappear now. He would have to approve of wherever she was taking them. He had to make sure it was safe enough. He wasn't leaving their future to just-

"Effing Cox, I am going to kill you if you don't back out of here!" She threatened Cox as he came toward her. "Do you know how many ways I can kill a man? Just try me you sob and find out. A gun is just a courteous way of dying from me."

Jarod watched her closely, handling Cox. *This woman hunted me, gunned me down, ran after me, and did anything else I did just to try and capture me. Maybe? If you take the fury she had to catch me and put it into . . .* "I think Camille just twitched oddly, Little Miss. Cox didn't get to her before, did he?"

Yep, he watched as less than two seconds she had him on the ground, pinned. Her robe still held but barely and she didn't even care. He was 'eating pavement'. Even without a weapon, Miss Parker was still a weapon. She always would be. She just simply converted from being a weapon against Jarod, to being a weapon to help her daughter. *Motherly instinct with Centre instinct. That is hot with her. Losing her mother so young, the emotion weighs heavy to do right for her daughter.*

Even more new ideas started to form now. Just like Dorothy predicted, he was seeing something. He looked toward Camille.

"Okay, okay!" Cox gave up.

She let Cox go long enough to say, "Scoot back two inches to your left and you'll be sorry, I've had a new move I've wanted to try," Parker warned him.

"Nevermind," Jarod said, "I think she just had a tickle." He could feel something coming together.

"See?" Cox adjusted his tie and wiped his nose. "Everything is fine. Once again." He gestured toward the elevator. "One more day then? When you're feeling better?"

"Booooyyyy, you are about to get F'd in the A if you even *think* about it. Her height is baby height. Her weight is baby weight. Now eff off!" She watched him scamper off. "Hmph." She turned to look back at Camille. "Ooh, momma's mad vibrations made you lose your little rattle, huh?" She picked the rattle back up that fell in the crib. "There you go."

Hellfire one moment and soo sweet the next. *That's the Little Miss I remember.*

"Don't give me that look," she warned him.

"What look?" He asked innocently.

"The 'oh she's such a good girl' look. I hate that look from you."

Jarod tilted his head slightly, but didn't reply. He didn't need to. He was already trying to work out strategies.

“Oh, that’s even worse,” she complained. “Now you’ve got the ‘I’m planning ess you can’t even guess’ going on.” Irritation. “Just be good.” She went to go sit on the couch.

*I raised her ‘dander’. Her bitchiness came back because of Cox, otherwise we were fine. Interesting.* He looked down at Camille again. Focusing on something.

Parker turned on the TV. “Gee deeing effing, I miss Carlin. At least I got earpods.”

“Look at you, Little Miss.” Jarod paced back and forth. “Motherhood didn’t change you at all. Still cussing, albeit with the alphabet in tow. Still haven’t changed your ways. Probably still drinking your Maker’s Mark? You are still the main bitch in charge, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m stuck in here,” she said sourly.

“Except for one thing. One tiny, super important little thing.” Jarod glanced at Camille, then back at her. “You’d give your life to protect her. You’d take care of anyone messing with your child.”

“Jarod, I’d kill for a York Peppermint Pattie on the right day,” she said as she flipped through possible things to watch. She saw him moving more around again. “What?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I mean, I do.” He’d have to be extra careful, she was as dangerous as a loaded weapon. Locking her up and bringing her out only when necessary would be a good idea. Or when she needed polished. He didn’t even bother hiding his smile now. *If she gets tired of me, she can go to another room. It wouldn’t be the same as a dome. We could even walk it off. Still seeing potential.* “I think it’d be . . . nice.” To stay with someone. Would it work?

He re-imagined himself, out in a new city. He’d be wearing the local fashion, trying it out. Walking, hearing the sounds. He imagined a scenario in his head, similar to what he had experienced.

*The cream in the ice cream was delicious as always and he enjoyed hearing all the sounds around him. He watched as balloons were filled with helium at the park to give children. He got one and strolled on, enjoying the sun and the day. Bikers passed by and he listened to the conversations of the city and watched the pigeons as he crossed by them. As he left the park, he’d see others waiting in line at the light. He would cross, enjoying the sensation of walking with others. Feeling like they were all walking together. He would be headed to his new hotel near his new place of work. As he went in, he noticed smaller balloons being posted around an invitation.*

*“A man was giving big versions of those out to children. They floated and they weren’t stuck to paper,” he noted. “They also had those at the fair one time, they were meant to be popped. They were in an order though, not around an invitation. Why are those?”*

*“Because when they all pop, the invitation’s been read.”*

*That made no sense. He was trying to be sarcastic or mean. Jarod just walked away to the elevator. He smiled and greeted the person inside and then went to his room. It was chilly but*

*he'd been through worse. He put his bag down and fished out his computer to dig up what he could in the silence of it all.*

Factoring in their personalities and proximity. People's proximity to them. The new items they would need, past experiences they would have had, and the items that had been around. Recreating all the little events and run it through again, with the input of all of that data.

*The cream in the ice cream was delicious and he enjoyed hearing all the sounds around him.*

*"Mo mo."*

*"I swear, if I don't find somewhere to kick up my feet soon, I am going to go insane. Momma needs a break after the last time, Jarod. Don't let abusive clowns next to her again, pretend or not, I will kick you into next effing week."*

*"I'm not the one who hurt my hand shattering their face," he reminded her. "Come on, it's a pretty day, Little Miss. Have some ice cream." He looked toward Camille. "You can't have any yet. Sorry."*

*He watched as balloons were filled with helium at the park to give children.*

*"Ooh, a balloon?" Parker's attitude changed as she got one and placed it on Camille's stroller.*

*Jarod also got one. He watched Camille smile as she stared at the wonder of it all. "The helium makes it rise."*

*"Whatever, as long as its fun," Parker said as they continued to stroll. They enjoyed the sun and the day, except for some grumbles from Parker when some girls stopped to see if they could see the baby. "Yes, I do mind if you bother my baby. Go pet a dog instead, girls."*

*"Trying to be nice," Jarod warned her. "Give a person a chance."*

*"Eh. Fine, you can see her but don't touch her."*

*The fifteen year old girls bent down to see Camille. "She's so cute."*

*"Better effing believe it. Now move or I'll be the first woman to kill with a stroller."*

*Having finished his ice cream cone, Jarod threw it in the trash and picked up Camille. "Just you wait until you get older. That is good." She touched his face in response as they kept walking, Parker holding the empty stroller.*

*Camille got excited as she looked down and saw the pigeons with Jarod. Seeing a half used bag of popcorn on the bench, Parker grabbed it and dished it out to the birds, making them excited and race for it.*

*"They're eating," Jarod said to Camille. "I guess they like popcorn instead of just bird seed? I'm the same way." He took a handful and threw it out too, watching them go for it again. "They are quick, aren't they?"*

*As they left the park, he'd see others waiting in line at the light.*

*"Always takes forever," Parker complained.*

*"Little bit of patience goes a long way, Little Miss." Jarod tucked Camille back in her stroller. "There you go." He looked toward Parker. "Do you have a rattle?"*

*"Don't I always have one?" She reached into her purse and gave it to Camille. "There you go, Sweetie."*

*Camille took her rattle and shoved it in her mouth, beat it on the side, and shoved it in her mouth again as she held eye contact with her mom.*

*"There's the light. See, not so bad." They all walked along with a string of strangers. They would be headed to the new hotel near his new place of work.*

*As they went in, he noticed smaller balloons being posted around an invitation. "A man was giving big versions of those out to children. They floated and they weren't stuck to paper," he noted. "They also had those at the fair one time, they were meant to be popped. They were in an order though, not around an invitation. Why are those?"*

*"Because when they all pop, the invitation's been read," The guy behind the counter said.*

*Little Miss grabbed a bunch of pens from the side and strategically popped them all. "Oh look, it's been read." She placed the extras back in. "Denotes a party, Jarod, that guys an a. Let's get to our room. I need to see if there's a-*

*"No mini bar. Reduce intake," Jarod warned her. "Don't need it as much, and you had some yesterday."*

*"Whatever, then you better have something in there," she warned him. "And don't order out anything greasy again from some skeezy local affair. Brand name of something."*

*"Yes, yes," Jarod agreed as they went to the elevator. He smiled and greeted the person there. He shouldered Miss lightly. "How about Chuck's Shack?"*

*"What did I just say about not local? You want to do local, we need to be there, and I am not walking another hundred steps for anything." She looked toward the man next to them. "Do you know any local food that doesn't destroy the gut?"*

*"Jimmy's Chicken is okay," he responded.*

*"Jimmy's Chicken it is then."*

*"It better have more than freaking carbs, Jarod."*

*When they went to the room, it was cold. “Too effing cold, are you kidding me? You’d think a decent hotel could keep up the heat. Wrap her in a blanket. Where’s the thermostat?”*

*Jarod moved around the room to look for a small blanket. Well, twin beds. Sacrifice or Parker would be mad. She wanted the best she could get for Camille. He pulled off the comforter and grabbed the sheets, folding them up some and then putting them over Camille. “There you go. Get you something to eat here soon. I need to order food before your momma pitches a fit.” Then he could concentrate on working on researching the case.*



## Visions Come True

Someone to talk to. Someone to walk with. All those lonely nights of nothing but research and exploring the world with no one. People he'd meet, he'd learn to like or distrust or love. Then they'd go away. Not them. Family, friends, community. His needs. From just that small run through of what could have happened, he already knew his life would be so much better. There would be more give and take though. *Okay, Camille. What would it take for Camille.* Camille would need her own bag, but Parker could carry it easily. Shelter and food, he could get her all her basic needs. Even a mom and dad. She would *have* a mom and dad. She didn't speak so there was no harm she would blow anything. When she could, they could just say it was her imagination. By the time she was old enough anyone would believe? She'd be old enough to handle their life situation. School, it wouldn't take much. He'd naturally want to help her explore the world and all its wonders. *That'll be fun.* Sociality, he may not have had a past full of it, but she could talk to people. Learn to make short term friends. She'd still have Parker who would make sure she found a way to keep her daughter healthy and active.

Playdates were a trendy thing. Those could help, if Parker could get friendly enough to get into those. Overall, Camille wasn't a big struggle with her mother helping out.

*Parker though.* She was the tricky one. She drank way too much, but she had to definitely cut that out due to the pregnancy. Was she whittled down from that still enough? No Pall Mall's yet either. Probably only because she didn't know if she'd be shoved into the dome again. All of the bad habits, and the inability to get along with people. *Each interaction.* Each encouragement. It wouldn't be overnight, it would take a long time, but if they were together? Every little interaction would help her become someone . . . she liked a little better. Would get her to treat herself a little better. *Would pull her away from resting on Catherine's grave.* As far away from that as possible.

"Miss Parker?"

Have less floor mice in the room at least. *The floor mice.* Dorothy was right, he could already see it working shortterm but for the longterm? He could pay the extra fair and watch extra closely, that was fine. It was more than worth it since Parker would be taking care of Camille. She was an onboard weapon facility herself. Keep communications open with her and when things got a little tougher, move away. Get it done, and he could get back to them in plenty of time before The Centre found them. He could probably even get her to stay inside safely if he took care of all of their needs beforehand.

It'd work. It could, except? *The floor mice. The longterm.* He took notice of her again. While she was looking through programming on the TV, she had her ear buds in. "Still listening to Pink?" he asked.

She glanced at him. "Pharrel right now."

"Pharrel Williams?" That was interesting. "I love his Happy song. That's a good song. Even the video where everyone is just dancing around all excitedly randomly."

“It’s not that song. Pharrel *and* Thicke. The video has people dancing around excitedly too but mostly topless women and a goat. Not quite the same.” She took her phone and hit a button on it. Obviously, her Bluetooth. Blurred Lines started to fill the dome for a small verse until she turned it back off.

Same as ever, except she kept the volume to a decent bit and she made sure there was no cussing in that part. “Babysitters?” She just looked at him. “When you went out, did you have babysitters, and how often did you go out?” Yeah, that was bound to be a problem too. She would be a good mother, but he doubted Parker completely stopped her nightlife. It attracted floor mice, but it was necessary as well. “I have to think of you as a loaded weapon and a human needing basic needs meet. How often did you go out in Europe? Date. Nightlife. Fun without Camille tagging along.”

Of course he got his usual look. What the heck did he want to know for. Still? “A couple hours a week, why?”

He wasn’t answering the why. “What if it was longer, for one day a month instead?” Was that pushing it? Maybe two days a month. He watched her for two weeks last time, a couple days a month should suffice. “Four hours, two days a month.”

“Pretender?” Yeah, she wasn’t too happy. “Why do I get the feeling I’m a guinea pig that you’re trying to figure out the right amount of food to feed it to survive?”

*Because you are.* Babysitter so she could get away. He could do that too, on occasion. Not every week, but it would be important to give her some space away from Camille too. Heavy amount of trust though that she wasn’t picking up floor mice. He watched her go over and take care of Camille as she started to cry.

“There you go, Camille, all dry.” Miss Parker brought her over to the bed with her diaper now changed. “You want a book?” Camille started banging on her phone. “Your wish is my command. Seven Habits of Highly Successful People? No, I’m pretty sure that’s not the one to bang. Nope, don’t put the phone in your mouth. Yeah, I know, Do do’s was much better and bigger. Maybe we’ll get Mister Parker to get one of those for you on Christmas.”

“Christmas.” All of Jarod’s thinking about their current situation fell completely apart. “Can he get a tree? We could get candy canes too.”

“Yes, Jarod, we can get a tree and candy canes,” she agreed. “And we can gift wrap so you can open up your presents like a big kid.”

“Neat.” Gift wrapping and ribbon and giftboxes and- *nope, circle back around. Concentrate.* They shouldn’t be in there any longer than they had to be.

He went away from the side and started to explore everything given to him in his room. *Floor mice. It’s all about the floor mice. Including mine.*

Camille was taken care of. His and Miss Parker though? Floor mice.

*Why not Broots? Why not fucking Broots, huh?* Nope, Jarod. Fucking Jarod. The guy who was still *half* kid. He had his moments. Okay, he had a lot of good moments. Alright, he was getting to be a bit of a badass with how he took down people and ran from The Centre. Admittedly, if she didn't have to hunt his ass, she'd have to say? Impressive. But? As her Aunt Dorothy pointed out. *He is a man that never explored the world.* The kid in him, that bit that collected fucking 600 pounds of the same shit to pull it apart and study it for no other reason than 'to know'. And she didn't mean like designing a bomb. She meant like tracking down all 500 flavors of a sucker and determining which one was the best one.

She even saw that growing up with him in the dome and visiting, until every single word went over her head. Even now? He went from casual to depressed to making a good impression and relaxing her (which he did), but he immediately went into professional mode. He was getting a job done. Then, he clearly went into a different mode at some point because his mind went from focusing on Camille to focusing on her dragging stuff around, Camille, the things in the room, asking about her nights out in Europe and now? He was gone and playing around with objects in his own room.

And why? Who the fuck knew why. That was Jarod, she never knew what was going on in his brain. Way too big. Way too complicated. Did he know a way out? Hopefully, but the whole thing was brand new and the old way wouldn't work. Even if they could reach a tunnel, Camille was there now. Ugh, and Jarod. She never knew what would fall out of his mouth next.

"Can you throw your phone over the gap so I can see your playlists?"

Shit like that. *Baby's daddy. Try. Be good.* "You want a song, Jarod, I can play a song."

"I'd rather see your playlist."

Data. Gathering data on her. She looked at how high she'd have to throw. *Maybe.* "Don't mess with my playlist."

"I won't, I just want to see it, Little Miss."

"At least change it to LM." He was trying to be close now again. "That's what my Aunt Dorothy used."

"Because normal society outside of The Centre would never call a full grown woman Little Miss?"

*That's it.* "Fine, take it." She aimed and put her all into the throw to get it over the gap. There. He could collect his data. Judge her. Whatever. She liked what she liked. She moved to the toy box she moved and pulled out a plastic penguin. She brought Camille over to the floor and moved behind her with the penguin again. Camille pushed on it. It was meant to be heavy enough that it didn't move. It was good practice to sitting up.

"You have three separate playlists," Jarod noted, not bothering to keep his observations to himself. "Baby, Public, and Private. You have a lot of French songs for Camille."

“She was raised in Paris with Aunt Dorothy, what did you think she’d listen to?” She tried to pay attention to Camille again.

“I knew this song,” Jarod said from the other side as he played Dernière Danse. “Your Aunt Dorothy was playing it when I met her.” He didn’t say anything about it, bad or good. He just noted it for some reason. “You really cared for her. She must have had a large influence on you.”

Oh. He wanted to know about their time with her? “I did. She was wonderful. She made her home, our home,” she admitted. “I even forced Monsier Martin to bring her baby crib, just so she could be reminded of home while we were gone.”

“Can you empty the toybox and throw it over?”

*Really?* “It will break.”

“It looks like it’s the kind that’s built tough though. Thick hard plastic. I can fix it afterward,” he said.

She moved Camille back to her crib and scooted it far enough away that she’d be safe. *Please make it and don’t ricochet back and hit me.* It was a tall gap. *No, I can’t make that one.* She went to the bed and moved it over closer. *Assume it’s necessary. If it’s not, kick his ass later.* Yeah right, she couldn’t even touch him. She got onto the bed. *Fucking shit, my robe. That won’t make this easy.* “Is this super important, Jarod?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “I can turn if you think your robe will slip.” He turned. “They should have given you more than a robe.”

No kidding. She tried to jump on the bed to give her enough lift. *Robe, yep, not holding. Fuck it.* At the highest point she could jump at, without hopefully breaking the bed, she tossed it.

It made it through and crashed on the other side. “Good job, Parker.”

She stopped bouncing on the bed and fixed her robe again.

“Well, that can give new ideas for later.”

Oof. Monsieur Martin again. “It wasn’t for you!” she yelled down at him.

“Enjoyed nonetheless.”

“Effin A Hole.” She went back toward Camille as she started to cry. “Sorry, Sweetie. Mommy is dealing with floor mice again. You want something to eat now? Let’s go.” She scooped her up and they headed away. She’d make her another bottle. Thousand boxes of formulas and bottles no reason to be stingy. She’d usually have a little bit more and then go down for a nap. Then, she’d go hit the health dome. Always stay in shape. Never knew what would happen.

*Floor mice.* Jarod looked down at him. “You aren’t getting the hint yet? Go away. Catch a flight back home. She doesn’t want you.”

“I admit, that wasn’t in very nice taste,” Monsieur Martin said back. “It would be something we would joke about, had she not been so angry about the mindwipe that went bad.”

“So, that was you.” Jarod bent down lower. “You almost destroyed her, you’re lucky Sydney was here. She is never going to forgive that, go away.”

“I don’t give up easily, that’s not how I was raised.”

“You gave up on Daisy Bernard pretty fast,” Jarod reminded him.

“Ah, peeking into my past already? We never even got to the point we had to chase you. You are thorough.” He bit his lip unsteadily. “I *never* liked Daisy, that was Momma and Daddy’s choice. They even ordered me to forget protection.” His eyes focused on Jarod. “I like Miss Parker, and I don’t mean just for fun. We are so much the same, it’s like she understands me.”

“No, she isn’t the same.” Oof. That hit a spot. A hard spot. “You are both in similar positions of indoctrination and your family class history is too. That doesn’t make her like you.”

“Yes it does. She can talk to me about anything.”

*Liar.* “Not everything.”

“I knew about her moment of weakness. It’s very prominent when they give the shot. You almost killed her.”

“I was trying to help!” He knew? *She was looking for anybody’s ear to hear her out.*

“She was your Hunter. You weren’t trying to help her. You knew she was psychologically scarred and you wanted the perfect death for her. To pay her back for hunting you after your past with her.”

“Damn floor mice think they know everything.” *Keep it under control, Jarod.* “You only heard that after the treatment.”

“Treatments. They gave her two, she has her last one coming today,” he said. “Then you are toast to her mind.”

Two? “She said she had two more left.”

“No, no. One finale on her attitude adjustment? Tuning? Whatever you call it here in America, it keeps her mind steady on The Centre again. The other will be on you, and then she’ll never remember you again. That would be good for her.”

*No.* “That would be bad for her.”

“It doesn’t matter, ‘Pretender’,” he answered back. “I think it sounds better, don’t you?”

Sounds better? “What sounds better?”

“Once all of this is behind us? Martin. Madame Martin and Camille Leanne Martin.”

Jarod slugged the floor. “Never!” Never. He would never leave her and Camille with the Martin family.

“Testy, no?”

“Boy these floor mice, you just have to fumigate to get them out of here,” Jarod complained. “Speaking of past regrets. Does Parker *know* what exactly your family is involved in too? Because she doesn’t trust you, and it was before you almost destroyed her mind. I can see it in her. She is repulsed by you. Even before I took Camille away, she left her team on patrol of that house for her. Telling. Very telling.”

“I am not involved in that,” Monsier Martin said. “Yes, I am in relation to some . . . bad things. I can’t change who is relation, but I am not in it. I am in with The Centre only and she knows that. She does not quiver when I am in the room. We were just fine up until this mind breaking incident. She just needs time and her Daddy thinks so too.” He smiled. “He gets along fine with me. If I stay here, she will come. Our attraction will blossom again. She is a woman that loves to be touched, and I know how to please her.”

Jarod stood back up. “I know.” *Floor mice*. “I have my own floor mice too.” Risky. He watched as Parker came back over with Camille. “Do you use vibrators or sex toys?” And she was going away with Camille.

“You just open your mouth and say whatever comes to mind,” Monsieur Martin teased him. “That genius curiosity cannot be held back.”

“I’ve held it back from you so far.” *Don’t*. Irritating though.

“Oh yes? It seems you’ve been quite honest with your feelings toward me,” he said to Jarod. “What could you possibly be holding back?”

*Don’t*. Instead he went over and started fixing the toy box. It was about the right size. He needed to move the library cases now. He watched her coming back. He went back over to her dome very close. “Reasons?”

Mad but she came closer. “Can you at least stretch out the strange requests sometimes?” She yawned. “Someone’s ready to go down for her afternoon nap.”

“Good idea,” Jarod teased. “Then you could put down Camille.” It was a joke but he watched her again.

“Effin’ A’s if they think they are gonna . . .” She put Camille down in her crib, right before she was starting to hold it for support.

Jarod watched as Cox came back. Again. *Sedatives, and he’s got something in his pocket*. “She happens to be tired.” Sedatives into her food, it had to be. It was getting to her. Sydney wasn’t handling her food only his food.

Cox. She glared at him, holding onto the crib for extra support. "I am not in the mood for you today. Get out."

"Oh. I am just going to check on the health of your little one *finally*. Calm down." He started to walk to the crib.

*Son of a bitch just ignores me!* "I said you're not touching my daughter."

"A health check, goodness," Cox answered. "It's required, be good."

"She's perfectly healthy!" She struggled with him briefly. "Keep your hands off!"

"Come now, Miss Parker. Do you need even more sedatives? I only have to check weight and height. Like it's the biggest issue in the world." He nudged her back softly, but pulled out a syringe from his pocket. "Do you know what makes the memory erasing tick?" He squirted a little. "It's more than just psychology, I assure you."

No. No, no, no. "You aren't giving me another one!"

"Now, now. You'll feel much better about this whole thing after this one." He placed it near her arm, injecting it into her. She heard Jarod's cries too along with her own fears. "The Centre keeps track of height and weight of all merchandise. I'll be putting you on a scale soon here too. Right after we get you in a better state of mind."

"She isn't merchandise!" She tried to at least push him. Already so weak. She kept Camille closer with her pillows, propping her forward. "It's okay, It's okay, mommy's here." *Hold on. Hold on. I don't want to lose my mind!* "Kree Kraw Toads Foot Geese Walk Barefoot." The song Jarod sang to her when she was sinking slightly off of reality. In the dome. *Am I losing my memories of Jarod or am I losing the fight against The Centre in my head? Either way. Can't fall away. Have to defend.* "Kree Kraw Toads Foot Geese Walk Bare . . ." He started to move Camille away. "No, I said no, and when Miss Parker says no you better damn well listen!"

"Goodness! You've got a pound of sedatives and 10cc's of a drug that should be making LSD look like a normal day out. Go down!"

"I never go down." But she was starting to slide down. *Look at him. Monster. Such a monster in nice clothes. Playing with me. Taunting me. I should have killed him. I should. No, I don't care how scared I am. So in a hurry for height and weight, I will never trust him with her.* "As soon as I get better I am going to fuck you up so bad, you'll know where the name FUBAR came from you slick backed fucking ass prick. I'll shove your own syringe in your own ass so far it'll be--"

"Enough of this and move. You'll be Centre driven completely soon, so just stand back and let me check her height and weight. Orders from your Daddy."

“Never. I don’t care what you put in me,” Miss Parker declared, her voice hoarse. “You’re never touching her.”

“Don’t scream Camille, it’s okay! Arod’s coming!”

Miss Parker turned toward the voice and looked at Jarod’s dome. *He’s insane.*

He’d been rearranging furniture for some time but she didn’t know for what. As she watched him though. He had moved the toybox, his standard bed, some office cabinets, some library shelves, and . . .

She watched him catch, with his innermost finger, quickly gripping with his hand? The gap between domes. Jarod actually hung like a swinging monkey over the gap. *When did he have a pretend of an Olympic gymnast?* She watched as Cox was now calling for assist, but Jarod had already made it up top. *What can he jump onto so he doesn’t break his spine?* It wasn’t a room of tall objects and the domes were so much taller- *Oh, nevermind.*

She had moved her freestanding curtains over there too. He jumped and grasped onto the top of the pole for a second to break the fall. As the curtains fell, he quickly headed over to Cox.

And decked him one even she was proud of. As he carried Cox out as the fucking trash he had been, she looked over at Camille. *Eh.* Yeah, Jarod got him alright. There were even blood stains from that solid punch on the crib. She took the scruff of her robe and wiped the blood away from the headset that had her name on it. *Jarod can get vicious. Good to see.* Because she couldn’t. Even during that fight earlier, she felt her energy depleting but couldn’t risk exposing it. “It’s okay, Sweetie. That was just Jarod and he’s quite mad right now.” She patted her back again and gave her back her rattle. Then, she collapsed on the ground.

Jarod marched Doctor Cox’s sorry end all the way to the elevator. He smacked him again near it. “Couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you?! A lesser man would have killed you for the crimes you’ve caused against me.” He shoved him against the elevator hard. “Making me a father against my will!” He shoved him again. “Taking Miss Parker and Camille and shoving them into this prison!” Then, he held him up straight. “And making her forget me!” He punched him out so hard, he’d knocked him unconscious. “If that shot was the one to make her forget me forever? I will make you pay forever. I will find *everything* you care for and love and I will take it away. I can be merciless and you’ll find out just how much.”

His only friend growing up. All those moments. All that trust she had. That shot either got rid of his memories, or sealed her to The Centre. He watched as someone in the elevator started to come. He already knew who it had been. He could see through the bottom. He picked him back up to bring him closer and watched as Sydney moved out of the way.



Jarod tossed him in. "Take him out of here." He went over to the side of the dome, staring at Zane and Mister Parker. "He's not touching them again, do you hear me?!" He smacked the glass so hard this time, if there was a way to knock it all down, that punch would have. Neither of them seemed too upset about it.

"Okay," Zane agreed. "For a little while. Let's see how this works."

"But it's Jarod," Mister Parker said. "He'll interfere with the fiancé."

"Shut up. You are lucky I even let you put here in there yet and you are lucky you held the triumvirate on your side for the experimental drugs." Zane warned Mister Parker. He looked back at Jarod. "Maybe the baby will be happier with the father too. We'll see. Give him a day over there. Miss Parker can teach him the ropes. She is now permanently indoctrinated."

Jarod watched them go out the locked twin mirrors carrying Cox. *Permanently indoctrinated.* Now he knew which one was at stake. He went back over toward Camille and saw her lying on the ground. "Miss Parker."

He didn't have everything set up the way he wanted it, but he had to move fast. He barely made it.

Dorothy's visions had come true, complete with blood on the crib. *Who knew in the vision, I was the one that was the angriest? That caused the blood on the headboard?* He picked her up and pulled her to the bed. If he hadn't been here for this part, he would have lost her forever. The Centre thought they won. But Camille was crying, screaming for her momma.

Giving him the ammunition and the moment he needed.

## Jarod's Indoctrination

"Calm down, and listen to me," Jarod started. "Don't let it run you, you can beat this. Forget the comfort The Centre fills you in your heart. Its lies. It's like drugs, it's not good for you. It feels good but it's not real." Damn, they were starting to come back. He had to keep going. "Focus on what's real." He gestured to Camille's crib, propping her up to see it. "That's real. Your daughter crying. She is crying because of them." *Fire with fire.*

He hated to do it, but this time he knew what he was doing. "A life in The Centre will harm your daughter. You can't let harm come to your daughter. She's screaming for your help."

"Camille."

"Right," he pushed her. "Your daughter. She deserves the best. The comfortable feeling to trust The Centre isn't the best. Doesn't she deserve the best? Not to be screaming, crying out for her mother?" He could hear them shouting at him from below now. No. If she was staying indoctrinated, if there was really no choice, then she was staying on his side. He was pulling her psychological state into a different direction, while she was the weakest. It's what Cox would have done to change her if Jarod hadn't jumped into her side of the dome. After he was done, they could never do anything else again. By their own words, it was permanent. "Your momma abandoned you." He hated doing it, hated saying it, but he had to. He had to say the things he didn't want to, to get it done. He had to lie. He had to manipulate. He had to become the worst possible pretend he'd ever done.

He had to become The Centre. He couldn't comfort Camille, he needed her loud.

He had to indoctrinate Miss Parker or The Centre would.

"Momma."

"Are you going to abandon her?"

"Never."

"Right. Never." He knew it. "The Centre will harm her. They are doing it right now, can't you hear her screaming?"

"No one will harm her."

"Right, she comes first. She comes first before anything else. Camille comes first before anything else."

"Camille comes first. Always first."

"Always first."

"Always first."

"Always first."

"Always first, never second. Second to nothing!" She reached her hand out.

"You'll never abandon her like your momma did to you."

"Never. I'll never let it happen."

"She'll never cry over your grave as a little girl screaming out why."

"Never! I won't mess up like her, I'm strong!"

"You aren't weak," Jarod pushed. "What's more important? Your daughter or The Centre?"

"Camille Leanne!" She yelled. "I'll kill anyone who tries to hurt her! Who's hurting her?!"

"The Centre."

"I'll kill the fucking Centre, she's my daughter!"

Bingo. Oh, he could hear them making a fuss underneath now. Her mother instinct was strong and he was tying it into her. The guilt, the shame, the regret of Catherine Parker. The feeling her mother had forsaken her. It was fire, he was playing with fire, but he had to do it. She would never be tied to The Centre. There was no choice. He wouldn't leave her there in that dome, raising twenty kids that were his! They were getting out. "The Centre wants to hurt your daughter."

"They can't."

"They will, if The Centre gets her, they will."

"I'll kill them. I'll kill anything and anyone that tries to hurt my daughter."

Step one done, move to step two. "I am your support. I am Jarod, I *am* your support." He couldn't just do that though. "Your Aunt Dorothy, she is your support. We are *your* team. We are *your* back up. No one will hurt Camille with us and you."

"Angel!" Mister Parker yelled up higher. "No Angel, don't listen to him!"

"That is Mister Parker. He wants to hurt your daughter. He wants to keep her in here. He wants to keep all your future children in here, imprisoned." He had to take care of him too.

"Look at where you are at now. He did this to you, he did this. He and The Centre. He and The Centre are the same. They are both evil. He doesn't love you."

"Mister Parker doesn't love me. He doesn't love me. He never has."

Jarod could hear them coming. Running. Most likely, Sydney had probably held that elevator but he couldn't do it forever or they'd assume he was helping Jarod. *No time*. He had to hurry. He just took away the last person in the world, to her that loved her. He needed to give her more. "Your Aunt Dorothy loves you. Your daughter loves you. And." He could see them

running straight at him. "I love you. Always. I would *never* hurt you or our daughter. I swear that to you. Never forget that and never forget me. Jarod loves you. Never forget me. No matter if they take everything away, Jarod loves me. Trust Jarod, no matter what."

"Aunt Dorothy loves me," Parker burred as Jarod was pulled off by multiple sweepers. He managed to kick one away. "My daughter loves me." She pulled herself up off the bed. "Jarod loves me." She closed her eyes. "Never forget Jarod. Trust Jarod no matter what."

Her father tried to approach her. "Angel, please, listen! No. The Centre is everything. It's everything to everyone."

She responded. "The Centre is everything. It's everything to everyone."

"No, it's not! Trust Jarod, Trust Jarod, Trust Jarod!" Jarod tried to cry out, but his mouth was covered. *I still got the majority. I got her when it counted!*

They were both taken away leaving Camille to cry and scream. All alone.

They had thrown Jarod back on his own side again as they took Parker away.

He could hear Camille screaming so loudly. He went back over to the side, watching her kick and scream. "It's okay, I'm here. I'm here, Camille. See me? Arod." He tried to calm her down, but she knew her mom was in trouble. He was counting on her screams to aid the indoctrination of Parker. Now? No one was near her and she continued to cry and scream. Her poor little face was all red. "It's okay, please. Listen to my voice, it's Jarod." It wasn't working. He had to reset everything up to get back over. He had knocked down several of those things with his body weight. He concentrated on getting it fixed again as she continued to cry. Her wailing was uneven. Hurt. She felt abandoned and alone, and no one was coming to hold her. Hug her. Sing to her. He tried Kree Kraw, but it didn't work. He tried some of the lyrics and rhythm he heard from Parker to her, but that didn't work either.

He just tried to get everything set up as fast as possible in his dome to do the jump again. Camille needed held, needed to feel safe and secure again. When he got it all set up, he put his all into it again. He managed to grab the top gap with two fingers, with one of them being the same one as last time. He may have just fractured it a bit. But, he ignored it and climbed up. The curtains were on the ground now. The landing wouldn't be half as easy this time. He aimed for the couch.

As he jumped, he hit it, and it knocked over, rolling him out. He got up, not feeling the best after that, but moved as fast as possible to her. "Here, I'm here."

He picked her up but still felt the after effects of Camille being left alone and scared for too long. He paced around, grabbing Miss Parker's playlist and trying to sing with the French lullabies. It helped a little. Her sounds of home. He sang her his baby song again too. That also helped now that he was holding her. It still took time but going back and forth, she was starting to calm down. "There you go. I'm sorry. I tried to get back here as fast as possible." He took her to look out the dome. Sydney wasn't there. He probably got dragged away for questioning for keeping the elevator stuck. He bounced her lightly. "Better?"

"Arod."

"Yep." Better. "Your momma will be coming back soon." Hopefully, not Centre controlled. He noticed Zane already coming in though.

"You may stay over there," Zane called out to him. "You did all of that just to stop your daughter from crying. Your fatherly instincts are interesting for someone who's had no guardian of any kind to love them. Were you coming to her because she reminded you of yourself being neglected? Or did you as a father want to comfort your child?"

Jarod didn't answer. He couldn't without hurting what he just gained. Permanent access to Parker's side. Try as they might, they'd never hold her as firm as they wanted now. *I was first to Parker. No matter how much they do, they can't change that I was first.*

"We will be studying the elevators," Zane said before he left. "Apparently Sydney said it was stuck."

Good old Sydney.

"Arod."

"Hey back to you," he said to her. She was all calmed down now. "Let's go for a walk while we wait for your momma." He moved away.

So this was the rest of the dome. Pictures didn't do much justice. *Get a good look because we aren't staying long. Your Great Aunt Dorothy is just like your Grandma Catherine.* Showing them the things they could have never known. The way out wasn't that hard, it was the not knowing where to go and where to turn that would be tricky. Who to trust. Who to meet. However, her Aunt Dorothy knew it all. The hard part wasn't escaping at all, it was deciding on the future.

Once they came out. He had to have the answer.

Open and Honest, even with a baby. "I like you," Jarod started. "I do, but I'm going to be one weird dad if I find a way for you to stay with me. There are a lot of things we'd be discovering together. A lot of things both of us would get excited about." She hit him with his rattle on his chest a few times. "Yeah, a rattle's not something I'm excited about. That makes us different too." He walked into the eating area. There were six tables and two booths. "Geez, they really are trying to make an army of kids." He walked over to the soda fountains. "See, carbonated drinks with flavors to choose from. Just like a convenience store." She tried to reach out and touch the handle. "Nope, you get formula. Don't worry, I know how that feels. You get one thing when the world has so much more."

He kept walking with her. "I thought I'd feel a whole lot different when I found out you were mine."

"Mo mo."

"Not really. I guess I couldn't love you any extra than I already did." He walked into the clothes dome. "Look at this place. It's like a small store, if the store could only order ten things."

"Ra ra."

That one was new, so Jarod could probably guess. "Broots, huh? He had you for a whole week thinking you were his. Makes sense you'd get a sound for him." He pulled her a little closer. Jealousy was an emotion, like everything else. Jealous that even though he could read parenting guides and understand all the facts and figures, Broots had the experience of childhood that would have made hers better. "Who cares. We could learn together. What's so bad about that?" She kept babbling different sounds of all kinds before lying her head on his chest. "Naptime sinking in, huh?" He stopped. Too much fussing and crying. "I don't know what to do, Camille. In this case, both of my actions would be wrong. I don't want to send you off with a stranger, never to find me again. The last thing I ever wanted was to make my own kid *feel* like how I felt like a kid. Like I was abandoned." It wasn't fair. "However, I live a very tough life. Dangerous. Things have to be done differently, and I don't know if your mom can do what I need. If she can't, I would need my floor mice and we can't have floor mice." He sighed. "Short term is different than long term. I know, psychologically, if I open up to your mommy?" There would be a hell to pay if it closed up again. Like being a teen and almost reaching the train to his mom but being pulled by pitbulls. Almost reaching . . .

Trusting Parker. Trusting Miss Parker. The Dome kept driving them to the same side, so they had to work with each other to get out. To get away. But that wasn't the same as trust. That wasn't the same as real friendship. If he had felt that security before he left the dome with her? Then he never would have ran when she woke up and called his name. *She is still my enemy*. Even if indoctrination changed that, it wouldn't be good to push it that far. He didn't like having to do it in the first place, but he had to put in something so The Centre wouldn't be able to input anything. *Right now?* What was she? Neutral? Mother of his child but what else? Friend? Ally? Temporary ally? "I haven't trusted a single soul with this, and Dorothy Jamison just expects me to do this with Parker of all people."

He started to head back to her crib to get her off to bed. Except? He noticed the floor mouse found him. He was under his feet again, below the dome. "Next time I watch Tom and Jerry, I might not be cheering for Jerry."

"You can't be on her side! What are you doing on her side?!" Yelling in French, clearly upset. Clearly missing the fact Parker wasn't even there anymore. Must have just come back. Should have just stayed away.

"Taking Camille for a walk," Jarod answered him. "She's tired though so I have to put her up for her nap." He kept walking but the floor mouse kept following. "I don't suggest you keep that up." Trying to be polite, but he was tired of it all already. "Did you involve Little Miss in anything your family did?"

"Who is Little Miss?" the floor mouse asked. "Wait. Are you calling mon trésor a nickname?" He jumped and hit the floor below Jarod.

"Now we've got jumping floor mice, how about that?" He looked to Camille. "See? Even your parents rodent problems are different. Ex fiancés are floor mice jumping below our feet while real rats in the world make good pets. Life sure is interesting."

"Don't walk away, you can't be on her side!"

Jarod walked away as he noticed Sydney returning and retrieving the floor mouse below, telling him he was upset over nothing. That Jarod was harmless and never hurt anyone. *Well?* No one that didn't deserve it. "I see potential, lots of potential for us, Camille. The danger and the holes kind of clear when I have the infamous number one \*\*\*\*\* of The Centre as my backup." He noticed she was already starting to close her eyes. "Also known as your mommy." As long as he did a proper job with the time he had with her. "Not to mention. I? I could *really* use some company. Sometimes, not all the time. Sometimes I like wandering around and exploring by myself. But. Sometimes. Someone. While I'm finding mine. As long as Parker does the majority of the parenting, I could pick up some slack," he told her. "I mean? I know how to change diapers and feed you and hold you when you are scared. I know the medical side too and all of the parenting books. I was prepared for when I had to watch you. I can even tell you *some* things about the world I learned." Her eyes were completely closed now. "I know when to put you down too." He brought her back over to her crib and placed her in it. *I am close*. But floor mice. "But I couldn't do it for long. It's all short term."

He couldn't get past the floor mice. *I could do it. Dorothy is right, I could do it, right now, but she knows too*. It wouldn't work for long. Not with them. It was short term. Everything that he could see was short term.

He had to figure out long term. He had to figure out the floor mice. *And I have to see how Parker is doing*. Important to remember as he saw her coming back. She was walking with no aid or struggle back to the elevator to come back up.

He waited for her as she arrived. She was alone. "How do you feel?"

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How did she feel? "Like I took a massive amount of weed," she responded as she stepped off the elevator. She rarely had memories of what happened after Centre treatments. The finale was no different. It felt like nothing different. "Where's Camille? Is she okay?"

"Yep. I threw myself back over here. Zane seems to like it. I'm fun to *study*." Ooh, he sounded sour.

"Did you get her to calm down?" She was away for so long. She hated when they did that. She was heading straight toward her crib. Jarod was walking along with her.

"I sang her some of your French lullabies I picked up from you," he said. "I sang her my baby lullaby too. We went for a walk. Talked and explored. Looked at floor mice. You know, the usual. I don't want to go through a divorce."

*Divorce?* Yeah, his genius mind was racing a thousand times ahead of her again. "Did you accidentally get married in Las Vegas or something? Marry a Bee you need to ditch?"

"No, I mean with you."

*Jarod. Why do you do this shit to me?* "Kid doesn't equal marriage, where the eff did you hear that BS? You've read enough things to know that S Jarod, are you emm effing essing me right now? Back the eff up and tell me what you are talking about." She reached Camille's crib. Oh good, she was sleeping. She watched Jarod standing very close to her.

"We are parallels," he said. "Star crossed. Never should have even met before."

What? She moved away from the crib slightly so she didn't disturb Camille's sleep. "It's clear you read Shakespeare. I'm no effing Juliet so you are going to have to-"

He put his hand against hers, palm to palm. "We are unconventional. We will never work in a conventional way."

"We're the textbook case of unconventional." Duh. He went over toward the bed and climbed in. *Ah. A meeting.* She knew that was coming soon. She went over and climbed under the covers too. He always pretended to have sex with her in the dome last year as an excuse to get under the covers and have a conversation. The sheets were the only place they could talk undetected.

"We have a floor mouse in the basement that I don't like. I really don't like," he warned her.

Oh. "I'd fumigate if I could. I dealt with what I had to, Jarod. Once I was in Europe, I was tracked everywhere by The Centre. Even my Aunt Dorothy's. They know where she's at, they just don't care. She never does anything. It didn't mean I could leave the house and not have someone arresting me as soon as I even tried to-"

"I know, I get it. Europe trips aren't actually Europe trips. I figured it out," Jarod told her. "Your first time to even try was when you finally touched down in America, but you had *that* family on you. Constantly. Are you okay?"

*Daaaaamn.* "My A you are not a genie." That just got a smirk from him, realizing she remembered the dome from before much better now. Most likely that shot was on the backburner. Still. He was Camille's father, he should know. "Do you have my phone I threw over on your side?" He handed it to her. She went digging into it and found the article about it. "Yes. I know." She handed it back to him. *I know.*

//// Four months ago . . .

"Why are we stopping here?" Miss Parker asked. She was miserable, extremely pregnant, and wanted to go back home. She was supposed to be seeing her future in-laws, if they ever got married. Monsieur Martin's friend was picking her up supposedly, but things weren't on the up and up. She held her gun very close.

"Just some quick business. Round up, no problem, Miss Parker. Fell behind yesterday. Got the flu. Ever get the flu?"



*I don't feel like making small talk with you, I don't even know you.* Who had Monsieur Martin shoved her with now? Then, she watched as a little girl, about five or six, was shoved in right beside her. She was terrified and in small cuffs. *The fuck are you doing here?* She had a small gag in her mouth so she couldn't talk. *Oh fuck no!* She kept her cool and looked out a window. "Where we dropping off the brat? Her parents' house?" Of course he laughed.

She was Centre quality. She was supposed to be capable of doing anything and everything, so they never stopped to think she'd have a problem with it. Hell, she chased the Pretender ass himself. Why would she care? Underestimating her.

She had to be careful on what she did. *I'm pregnant. I can't be risky.* She glanced at the little girl beside her. She could be a hostage. She could be going in for prostitution. She could be getting murdered. Whatever it was?

It wasn't going to happen. "Hang on, don't go." She got out of the car, her gun drawn in hand. She moved steadily toward a back alley while the driver got out and followed her. *Not Centre quality. Not Centre business.* He looked more like just the delivery man to and fro. "Look that way."

He was now the dead delivery man to and fro. She had crouched up into a corner, away from the car, just in case it had back cameras. When she got him straight in the head, she yelled out like she was chasing someone down.

She came back round to the corner and got in the front seat. "Abort mission!" She clicked the button to unlock the back door. It swung open. "Get out of here you brat. Now! We are compromised, don't you know what abort mission means?!" No time to be nice. Also could be cameras inside.

As the little girl scrambled to take off, Parker took off in the opposite direction. She used her phone to call Monsieur Martin to give a convincing story, and leading them to look in the wrong direction.////

# The Deal

“Tricky,” Jarod said as he read the article on her phone. “You had to save a girl from prostitution when you were in your last trimester. Commendable to pull it off safely, Parker.” He turned off the phone. “You still got with him. With Camille.”

“I did what I had to,” she said, “and if you don’t get it yet? After that, it never happened again. He had no idea his stupid cousin would do that. He felt bad about it.”

“I bet he did,” Jarod snarled.

“He kept me away from *all* of it, Centre presence only. He can’t choose his family any more than I can. He wasn’t involved.” She gave him a side glance. “Don’t tell me you can’t see that. I don’t trust his family.” She shrugged. “He was okay, except that his indoctrination almost killed my mind. It’s left me upset with him.” Her teeth started to grind toward the end. “You can see it?”

“Yeah, I can see it.” He admitted it.

There. Maybe that would end his weird streak for two seconds.

“Do you use any vibrators or sex toys? You didn’t answer.”

Gaw! “Jarod. When we were put in the dome last year? I started having fantasies. About not actually *wanting* to kill you,” she told him. “Not to mention, you are now my baby’s daddy. That would be a huge faux pas on my part. Questions like these make it harder to remember that.”

Bigger and brighter smile. “You remember a lot of the dome, that’s good. But? You had handcuffs and some simple things, I know that-“

“Is Camille up yet?” Hopefully. So he’d shut his freaky mouth for a little bit? A smidge? This whole daddy thing was making him even weirder than his usual. She didn’t think that was possible.

“No, she just went to sleep.”

“Why are you asking me if you already know you snoop?” Which he did, he’d been in her house. All of their houses. At least once, probably gathering any information he could to help him find his parents or evade The Centre. Oh, there went the covers over her head. Finally. Now she could figure out what all the freakiness was about.

“I can’t believe I have to do this. I don’t want to do this,” he admitted. “I would be a terrible person if I didn’t at least try for Camille. She deserves better so I have to take the plunge.”

“What plunge?” she asked.

“No more floor mice, from me or you. It’s the only way.”

“What do you mean from you? We just have one running in and out,” she said.

“No, I have floor mice for different needs. Even then, it doesn’t really work,” he said. “Some needs still go unfulfilled, and while I have lots of them trying to help, scratching around in the basement? As nice as they are, I can’t let them in. Even when I do, they can’t stay in long.”

Okay? “What are you talking about, Jarod?”

“Psychologically I am different,” he confessed. “You don’t go through what I went through and pop out like the average person. Even with the profound amount I learned in psychology, I can *identify it*, but I can’t change it. It’s part of me.”

“Obviously.” Who would be normal living like him?

“I look for the normal nice mice around me. Some are good. Some are semi-good. Some are very sweet. I have some that I knew would talk to me about anything. I had some that had a rough life so they tried to identify with me. I had some that I really liked. We connected well, and I had sex with them. Then there were those that I never got intimate with, I just enjoyed my time with them. Then I had one that insisted on helping but she couldn’t handle it and got creeped out. Um.”

Okay. *He’s referring to his horny little girlfriends. I don’t want to hear this crap, why is this important?*

“Yeah that last one really tried. She ended up leaving me with a sorry note. She couldn’t even look at me again.” He sighed. “They scritch and scratch and they add up in the floor and in the ceilings and in my walls. They can come in, but they can’t stay. Even if they try.” He paid attention back to her again. “Promise that you’ll let me finish explaining this without interruption of repercussion? It’s beyond important to me, Little Miss.”

What choice did she have? “Racketjaw it away then.”

“Promise you’ll listen and stay quiet ‘til I finish? Just a simple nod yes or no when I say?”

*Now I really don’t want to. The things I do.* “Fine,” she agreed. “I promise I’ll listen and stay quiet.” *For now.*

“For the good of The Centre?” He asked.

For the good of the-? “Fuck The Centre, what are you talking about?” That expression. “Yeah, I guess the treatment wasn’t as perfect as Doctor Cox thought.”

“Back on subject,” Jarod said. “Listen, stay quiet and nod when I say?”

“I’ll listen and stay quiet with a nod, when you say so.” *I am going to need some Maker’s Mark after whatever the hell he has to say, I just know it.*

Just him. Just her. Just the children of The Centre that grew up in the unconventional. It was the only thing that even gave him a glimmer of a chance. *Everything else in my life is unconventional. Everything in hers too. This makes such. Perfect. Sense.* Even then, it probably still wouldn’t work with Parker. But? *I have to risk it.* And yet already she was on her guard and staring him in the eyes. *It won’t work if I don’t ask. If I don’t get us on the right page.* He was not on the right page with her that night at her mother’s grave. He was trying to get her to see truth. She was contemplating suicide. They had to get on the right page with each other for this to work. *Dorothy’s right, we will just crash and burn as we are. What good will I do Camille if I have to give her back in a couple of months? Nothing. It’s longterm or nothing.*

Start small. As much as he wanted to sum everything up in a sentence, he remembered that he did lose her when he spoke in the dome with her as children. While he knew the level to speak with her now, he couldn’t risk her not understanding even one word. Everything needed to be crystal clear. “I can get you and Camille out of here, but before I do, I *have* to make a decision because you are either going to me or your Aunt Dorothy. If you go with her then that’s it. It’s too dangerous to contact you again.” She should understand that. “I’d never see Camille again unless she grew up and wanted to step out and find me. Even then, it’d be like The Centre finding me. It wouldn’t be easy. I’d be a ghost in her life that she’d never see. Nod yes if you get it.”

He watched for a small nod. A little annoyed that she had to nod for that one. “Also, you should know? Your Aunt Dorothy knew I was the father.” Yeah those incredible eyes. “She recommends if I find a way to take care of you, I should . . . take care of my own psychological and unsolvable problems. She knows about pretenders.” He let out a long drawn out sigh. “If you come with me, I can grow up with Camille. And. I? I could have someone that knows *who I am*. That knows about The Centre and everything we’ve gone through. Someone that keeps traveling with me, that stays with me. You? Wouldn’t feel like you had to stay on an isolated farm in the middle of nowhere your entire life with occasional trips outside on the front porch. You’d feel like Camille would have a more fulfilling life, and she would. She’d travel America. Probably outside eventually. Nod yes or no.”

Yes, a nod. Still on track. Eyes still on him.

Okay. So far, so good. “I’ve figured out most of what I need for you to stay with me. I ran a scenario of a pretend I did once alone, and I added you two in as factors. It worked. It’s all one big checks and balance situation. It mutually works for everyone. Short term only though. Nod yes or no.”

Nod of yes. Eyes still wouldn’t leave him. She was trying to figure out where he was leading her.

*Okay, here goes.* “To make it work longterm? No boyfriends, no girlfriends, no husbands, no wives, no fiancés, no one night stands. Both ways. You get no one. I get no one. Anything

that we love, lust for, or have any kind of sexual appetite for is floor mice now. We *can't* have floor mice in our lives. Nod yes or no.”

Yep, she was starting to pick up a look now. She was thumbing the sheets, probably thinking he was telling her to be celibate for the rest of time.

“The yes or no is just that you understand, not that you agree,” he reminded her. “Little Miss.”

Finally, she gave a nod. Eyes firmly on him.

“Are you psychologically aware enough of everything that prevents both of us from finding closure?” A nod. “I’ve been trapped in a dome since I was four years old. I didn’t get out for thirty years. As much as I ever try, I am *never* going to truly fit in with the outside world. Nod yes or no.” And someone was starting to wake up from their nap, he could hear her soft movements. *Bad timing*. Still, he needed to get this done. “The two people in your life you actually love was your mother and father. Your mom is dead and you can’t let go of that this many years later because . . .” Easy. She hated mother references. “To you. She was the *only* one who honestly loved you in your entire life. Your father wrapped you up in indoctrination, and as much as you want to believe he cares for you, he has got the tightest leash around you to obey him and The Centre.” Yeah. She didn’t want to hear that at all. But? He had pulled his words to her in her vulnerable mind state. “Maybe he does love you, Parker, but he’s indoctrinated too hard, and he sees The Centre first and you second. He could have let you have that surgery. You know it.”

Curt, and definitely hard and she was very close on the verge to crying now. The indoctrinations words had clearly worked, she believed that he didn’t love her. He wasn’t the center of her world anymore, but it was tough to accept. She was still holding it together though. Still staring him in his eyes.

“My floor mice scratch along trying to help and yours just run around the place in the thousands. We need something unconventional. Undefined. We need to be what’s missing from each other’s lives. Nod yes or no.”

Yes, although she was already starting to struggle. Even the word ‘mom’ hit her so hard. She was psychologically programmed to reject just about everyone in her life. She followed orders, but even then, she wasn’t nice to people she had to work with. She tried. Some didn’t see it and some did. The longer she was with someone, the better she got but she’d never fully feel love from anyone except two. Her mom and Mister Parker. Her mom was gone, and ever since then, she believed no one loved her. She hung on tight to the memories, but never expressed them. She had to be in a drunk stupor to even deal with them when they came up. And Mister Parker, he just took him away with his own words. He was gone, he wasn’t a choice that could even remotely, slightly love her.

Did Mister Parker? Probably. In his sick mind, he thought this was the best way to save her. But Jarod wasn’t going to guess, nor was he giving that man any chance with her anymore. Whether she stayed with him or not, Mister Parker couldn’t pull an ‘Angel’ out and make her obey again.

Jarod never planned on it going this way. Saving her from The Centre slowly by revealing secrets, letting her walk away and the end. That was supposed to be it for his interference. He was supposed to let her live on in memories of childhood and forget the overwhelming connection they had. Move away. Get over it. Find his own life.

But he couldn't. As much as he pulled away into his own life. Even when he was feeling love with Skyler for the first time? In the middle of the chase, trying to save everyone on the train. His mind was rushing every which way and so was hers until there was a simple push the velocity around them caused, accidentally pushing her into his arms.

That electric connection still gripped the both of them. For just a few seconds, the world stopped and it was theirs.

Camille's shuffling was getting louder. Not much time now and she'd be crying for attention. Caught between letting Miss Parker digest it and racing out the words so they could tend to Camille, he tried to find a happy medium. "We don't need floor mice anymore, they aren't good enough. We can be more for each other than anybody else could. We can be each other's missing pieces. Nod yes or no." Yep, Parker was getting antsy. She knew that sound as well and she wasn't going to let her cry for her momma for long. She wouldn't have before, and now that he just indoctrinated her to their daughter strongly, she *really* couldn't. "We'll have to talk over covers?"

Yes, she nodded yes and then took off toward Camille.

He waited for her to comfort Camille. *Give her the rattle for a few minutes.* Nope. He moved toward her away from the bed. Mother and love, it was always so hard for her to hear. Mister Parker and her place with him, but it had to be said. "Little Miss?"

"Just get the words out already," she snarled. "I'm in a dome, I can't run, and I don't have a gun. Just say what you want, Jarod! List it off. Burble in your own way and then I'll tell you if I get it or not. I'm pretty sure we aren't going to be talking gigantic words."

*Go, automatic, just blurt it out however it needs to come out or you won't go through with it.*

"One. I get to touch and be tender in a relationship, but I can't really pause and observe and the female body that still beats alive is quite fascinating. Sometimes I'd much rather stop and study or work with it instead of actually being in coitus with it. There are sims that I can't complete thoroughly without two people in dangerous or compromising positions either, and it bothers me to no end that I can't help or bring justice to them simply because I can't pull myself in enough. Two. I love touch. Sometimes, I just want to be touched more than usual. I don't think any of my girlfriends liked when I just wanted to lay on them for three hours. I usually had to sneak it in at night while they slept. Three. I'm the opposite of you, I *can't* have sex without feelings for someone so I don't have as many partners. Which means I usually have to take care of my own needs. I have for a decade, but I'd rather feel the feminine touch with someone I care for and trust. Four. Sometimes I don't want any of the outside world responsibilities, and I just want someone to play a game with me. A friend." *Now do it.* "I missed my childhood but I am a grownup and psychologically I feel like both. I want both, and I need both. I need to do things like a man, but I need to satisfy my inner child too."

He waited. He did it. He revealed how different, how 'odd' he really had been. It felt like being naked in front of a thousand people. He was already the 'monkey', the 'boy in the bubble', a 'pretender', a 'chameleon', a 'living computer', or anything else anyone ever wanted to call him. Inhuman. Abnormal. But he had to risk it. This was a life changing decision to make. To bring her into his world, or to leave his own child behind.

"This is why you got the nickname Sydney's teddy bear," she said cruelly. Of course, it was Parker. What else did he expect? "You want held extra, I already knew that was coming. You want to study the female body because you don't have one and girls will look at you like a freak if you are just staring at them for three hours straight and you aren't drawing them. I'm guessing that it's more than that too, which is the part that frightened Miss Sorry Note away. You also want someone there emotionally touching you when you are horny, at the same time, you need someone to play Angry Birds with. Did I get it? Of course I got it. I can feel it."

Yeah. He couldn't hide it, and he shouldn't. "You are a fairly attractive woman and I am very close to right now. If I didn't feel anything from being so close, it would be unusual since I am heterosexual." Openly honest. "In exchange, I help you with what you need. One, to help understand and control your family issues that keeps you from building healthy relationships with other people. Two, to make sure you can refrain or keep reduced the vices in your life that could damage it. Three, to let you have the security you need to feel. Four, to make sure you don't feel like your trapped anymore. You've felt so isolated that you had to sleep in the same room with Camille."

"I didn't say anything about needing any of that." She tried to smile down at Camille. "Your daddy is pushing it, isn't he?"

"Reduced intake of the drives will make them more delightful when they come," he reasoned.

"Like I couldn't miss that entendre," she said to him. She smiled back at Camille. "How much do you miss your Aunt Dorothy?"

*Damn her!* "How much will you miss real freedom?" Jarod said, pulling her back. He didn't want her going that way. "Do you think someone like you is going to be happy tucked inside an isolated place, avoiding everything as much as you can? I can't give a home but that is not a home either. It'll be boring, insecure and you'll get lazy. Years might go by or months or days and then suddenly you see those cars coming for you. Where do you go? If they get Camille, you know what they'll do without you being a viable option anymore." Yeah, he knew she'd really tighten up there but it was the truth. "Both of you get security, a place to live, plenty to eat and the ability to walk around knowing you'll be gone soon from that area with me."

"Almost caught you a few times."

"You were only slightly close a couple, the others were on purpose. And I will be spacing things out. There's no way anyone's even seeing the back of me for long. When things get too dangerous, I can have you both in a different safety house until it's safely over." Oh, he hated this part. "If I don't come back, you would take off to your Aunt Dorothy. I'm sure she'd tell you where she'd be before we depart for good. If we got separated, I'd make sure

there was more than one way for you to meet back up with me. Something The Centre wouldn't guess."

"Anything else?" She asked like he didn't just spill his damn soul all over her. "Are we done?"

No. He needed to make sure she saw it clearly. *It's like adding more people to that room already laughing and staring at me.* But he had too. For Camille, he had to try. "As you took care of my needs, I would take care of you. You wouldn't need to even ask, I could tell. Physically and emotionally."

"I'd just go load up on teddy bears and vibrators," she said it like it solved the problem.

It didn't. "No, you'd need human touch just like I do. If you didn't get what you needed, you'd be going after the floor mice underneath secretly and I don't need that." He gestured to the floor beneath them now. "I wouldn't want him up in *our* lives."

"Him again?" She looked below her. "When is he going to get the hint?"

"Even though he didn't care for this Daisy Bernard? He wants you, in more than just a sexual way. He has even listened to your problems, and he is staying to try and regain your trust, but he *can't* have you." Jarod stomped on the ground at him. Never him.

"Oh." Yeah, she saw it now. "Shit. Oh!" She looked at Camille. "Sorry, Sweetie."

"Why are you talking about that kind of thing with my fiancé?!" Monsieur Martin was pissed, speaking to him from below. "That's it, you are getting out of there even if I have to drag you out!"

If Mister Parker were in charge? Probably. Zane seemed to like him there. So. "Oh, I'd love to see you try pretty boy."



## Like A Bag of Candy

*What a fucking nightmare.* This is why it just didn't pay to make friends with geniuses who were safely smiling on the other side of glass. Nope. Cute little boys waving in their sunny warmth greeting you. Nope. It just didn't pay. Too removed from society. Now, Jarod was arguing with Monsieur Martin in different languages again, picking ones she didn't know or didn't know extremely well. So annoying. *Okay. Think.* Jarod was wrong about what Aunt Dorothy had set up. It wasn't perfect, it had flaws, but she'd been ready for the future for a long time. If she went with Jarod though, Camille would have her father. Sort of. However Jarod approached the issue, he would be there for her obviously. She clearly meant a lot to him, enough that he just spilled his guts on all his psychological problems to her. To her, of all people? To her.

Unconventional was their life. Even hers. She lived in society, yet she couldn't go by the rules of society. Even her own name. Nothing about any of them was normal. *Is he right?* If he wanted to stare at her body, or, more than likely? Use her inside of sims that involved sexual encounters or fighting encounters that he could not duplicate the feelings of as well? *Because I know his ass, it's not always going to be stretching on the bed naked while I surf on my phone. Oh, why did I make friends with the boy in the bubble, huh?! Fucking Angry Birds.* Bad enough she messed up back then as a kid, but as soon as she picked up that damn controller in the first dome and played his game? She could just feel how much everything had changed from that point on.

Fine, she could do that. She strutted herself naked before, not a big deal. Letting him hug her or spoon her or cuddle her for hours? Eh, but not a big deal. But the last part. That was the most concerting and the most telling. She knew Jarod wasn't admitting the whole truth. It wasn't just a little female touch. He didn't do things half assed, he knew everything about someone just by looking at them. When she needed it, he was going to take care of her somehow.

And she hated how excited that made her feel. *It's Jarod. This is insane. I'm just . . .* Okay, put it into perspective. She fucked guys constantly. She wasn't a prize. But, Jarod. Filling out as his so-called missing piece? It was. Just.

The Chameleon knew a standard relationship wouldn't fit them. Yeah, damn it, like always he was right. It didn't fit her either, that's why she never had a standard relationship. A fuck buddy and goodbye. He knew that. He knew she didn't trust people she screwed either, that's why she never let them out of her sight or got close. Score another point for Jarod on knowing her extremely too well!

It wasn't friends with benefits, Jarod was steadily holding them both there. There was no searching for anyone else. No floor mice for either of them. Hell, it was closer to going steady. Except no dating and it didn't sound like anything changed between them until a moment struck. When he wanted to study the human female body, living and breathing.

When he wanted to use her in a sim. Yep, that wasn't in the going steady category. That was in the 'let me bring you into my simulation and experiment world' category. Oh yes, she didn't care what Miss Sorry Note went through, she heavily doubted she was ready for whatever Jarod tried. Oof. Then, when enough time went by that they . . . needed something.

Camille deserved Jarod. Even if he didn't pick up a fatherly role, him being there would still be the right thing. Jarod obviously knew he should be, and that's why he was trying to stomp out future problems. *Floor mice*. No more fiancé down below. Also? *All his cute girlfriends get whacked off, so good, fuck those bitches*. Once again, why did she even care about that? Always bugged her.

"Mo mo."

Camille didn't say do do all the time with mo mo now. She did like to say 'arod' though. Father or friend, they were close. *A genius deserves another genius. I have no idea what to expect from her. Jarod would*. He could teach her the advanced things she'd want to know about when she got older. *It wouldn't be right, to either of them*. She looked toward Camille again. *Face it, even if I had to agree to all this with cornman, I'd fucking do it*. She was her daughter. She deserved the best she could give to her. The very best that she could, all the time. Whenever she could.

Not only that? It may sound like heavy commands, but it was Jarod. Jarod didn't like force. He *hated* it. When he found out about Doctor Cox giving her cigarettes, her bourbon and screwing her? He blew it all up to stop it. That was Jarod. When he was serious, he got exact, and he knew that Camille was at stake if he couldn't work it out. Leaving a daughter without a father probably was a moral no no in his head.

Making him that much more serious. He was not the best with words or communication at certain things. And? He was helping her too. It wasn't so much blackmail as 'being what the other needs when they need it.' Hang on. *I think I get this. Aunt Dorothy, fuck you for this!*

Jarod was trying to put it all in a chart, but it wasn't a chart. When he psychologically had a hard day he needed someone to hold him. Like she did with Camille. *Like he did for me when I passed full rededication*. She felt him there for her so much, even helping her with that bath with all those cuts. The whole time, not even a peep at her body that the whole Centre had seen. She was fairly sure she got it now. "I wouldn't be perfect, Jarod."

He instantly stopped arguing with the floor mouse, way more interested in conversing with her. "I know you won't be perfect. Neither will I. That's why it's undefined."

"Yeah." No kidding.

"I won't force anything on you obviously. I hate force. But? Absolutely. A hundred percent. No more floor mice."

"No more floor mice *if* I choose it," she agreed with a warning.

"Good because if I see them, I am getting rid of them," he warned her. "Not even a friendly coffee visit."

“Oh, oh, oh.” Really? “Oh yeah? What if you find out a potential floor mouse is actually working with you?” *Got him. Let’s see if I’m right.*

“A good point. I can’t help who I feel an attraction to,” Jarod said. “I wouldn’t be able to escape it, but I would deal as I could, and you’d have to help a little bit more in the meantime. Otherwise it’d be over once we were gone again.”

*Thought so. He gets comfy with someone and I have to be the one to deal with his ministrations. And he has no problem saying that because he isn’t ‘boyfriend’. He isn’t ‘husband’. He isn’t ‘friend’. He was right, in his choice of name for us. He just defined us, even if he didn’t realize it.* The missing piece.

“I know we can’t help who we like,” Jarod said to her. “You can’t either. But.” He was twitching his fingers oddly. “I don’t get much to keep, in my life. If I started to become possessive of you, it would not be a good idea to fuck around.”

She turned and looked at him. He cussed in front of Camille. He knew it. He wanted her to notice it that hard. He even used the f word. *Oh great.* Jarod was sweet, kind, thoughtful, and tried to do what was right. But sometimes? Just, sometimes. Something hit him in just the right way, that the last thing anyone should do was fuck with him. *Still, I’m Miss Parker for a reason.* She’d tangle so he’d remember too. “I am not an object, Jarod.”

“No, but you would be my company, you would be the individual that takes care of a lot of my needs, and you are the mother of my child. All of that is going to have another psychological effect on me over time. I don’t know when. Not right now, but over time. I already know it will,” he said. “Be good.”

Ugh. He was just calling it out before it even happened. Which was also annoying. “What if you find someone that’s better?” Might as well, they’d covered everything else under the sun. “What if you fall for a sweet little adoptive mommy working at a local soup kitchen and she’s got three adorable children you love? You gonna ship us off to Aunt Dorothy’s then?”

“No.” That was firm and couldn’t be made clearer. Her and Camille’s spot was stable now if she accepted. “You should really go by Little Miss. Leave Parker out. You wouldn’t need a last name, they always change anyway.”

She knew the name would be the next point. “LM.” She looked back at him. “Come on, some people go by TJ or JD.” If people on the outside of The Centre heard her called that, they’d just . . . society never understood The Centre. That look though. What was with that look from him?

“In a professional setting, LM. Otherwise, you should stick with Little Miss.” He shrugged. “The Centre will always have marks on both of us. Let the scars heal with the name you need.”

*Let the scars heal.* “No one escapes all effects of indoctrination. I am never going to be what you want.”

“All I want is you and Camille. All scars included.”

Kind words. His ass would probably regret those words later.

“Take some time. Think about it. We’ll talk more tonight.” He came over and picked up Camille. “I’ll spend some time with her. Relax and think about it.”

Yeah because he wasn’t going to accept a yes or no until she proved she could handle his way unlike Miss Sorry Ass Note.

“Over there is the gym. Nothing much for you,” Jarod noted as he took Camille on another walk. If she was going to be a genius, she was going to need stimulus or she’d get fussy. He went over to the side. He was giving Little Miss time to process things. He couldn’t just shove her into it. It was definitely going to be different on her. On them. But he did it, he asked it, he said it and now? He wanted a yes. He could taste a yes. He had to get a yes. He was preoccupying his thoughts by taking care of Camille, but even that wasn’t working.

“Way down there is Sydney.” Sydney smiled up at them and waved. “I think he just came back with supper. Hopefully he has mine. Hopefully it’s not sedative because Jarod doesn’t want to get sleepy like your mom.”

“Ba ba.”

“Exactly. It’s time to eat.” He moved toward the elevator waiting to see Sydney.

Sydney arrived with a cafeteria tray. He went up the elevator to Miss Parker’s side. Jarod was waiting with his daughter. *Oh goodness, Jarod. How are you going to handle this?* Jarod was unconventional, raised in captivity from such a young age, and at the same time? An absolute genius. All of those factors together created some interesting things with Jarod. But this one? What would he do? “Some food for you, Jarod. Are you doing any better?”

“Floor mouse came back while you were gone,” Jarod complained.

Jarod certainly didn’t like Miss Parker’s fiancé. Not a surprise. “Ah, yes. He just rattles. He’s trying to win her back.” He carried the food to the food dome for Jarod. “I will take the liberty of fixing Miss Parker’s plate as well.” Certainly since someone had placed sedatives in it. Most likely Doctor Cox. Zane really wasn’t being that stringent about activities about the dome. He didn’t care where Jarod navigated toward, or whether he fixed food, or much of anything yet. He had no real plans, he just allowed Mister Parker to put in Miss Parker. He didn’t even seem to want any of the treatment she had received. In fact, him letting Sydney even come and stay up there for so long? Was probably his way of rebelling against the triumvirate or Mister Parker. If Jarod and Miss Parker were to escape, now would definitely be the time.

“That’s good, Sydney. I think she’d appreciate that.” Jarod sat down with Camille in one of his arms. “I don’t feel like exploring today, Sydney. What is this?”

Jarod could have placed her in the high chair but he preferred to have her next to him while he ate. *I did that with mine too.* “I think its called Enchilada surprise,” Sydney answered him.

“The surprise is there is no enchilada.” Jarod dribbled the food. “As long as it tastes good.”

“It’s edible. I stuck with the vegetables and potatoes today,” Sydney admitted. “You seem in a better mood for being in here. Are you doing okay?”

“Yeah. I’m okay,” Jarod said as he bounced Camille lightly. “Nope, the surprise is for me, not the enchilada,” Jarod said keeping her hands away from his spoon. “We’ll get you fed soon. You aren’t missing much with this one. That’s really saying something coming from me.”

“The transition from temporary guardian to father though. If you have any problems, please let me know,” Sydney said as he preoccupied her little hands. Camille had already noticed him. She was staring at him, not her hands. *My, look at you, little one. Jarod’s daughter.*

“I’ll consider it,” Jarod answered Sydney back about letting him help with any problems. He may or may not.

“Did you want me to take her back to Miss Parker so you can eat?” Sydney asked. She was terribly trying to get to his spoon.

“No, don’t touch her.” Jarod continued to eat.

*But which her?* Was he referring to leaving Miss Parker alone or was he feeling extra protective of Camille?

“Did you see how many chairs and booths they have in here?” Jarod addressed him. “It’s like a small restaurant, Sydney. I don’t mind the one kid. I don’t want twenty.”

“While Mister Parker has been adamant in getting started again, Zane is against it. I think you’ll be fine for some time. Right now, they are more interested in raising a well structured Centre centered individual.”

“Little Miss just had her not too long ago. That increases the chances for bad things to happen.” He took another bite of enchilada surprise. “Zane has it right, Mister Parker is the one who’s mad.”

Camille reached for the spoon again. “Ba ba.”

“I get it, you are hungry now. Give Jarod a second, okay?” Jarod said as she reached for the spoon again.

*I wonder if he will stick with that.* He was still referring to himself as Jarod instead of dad. Maybe he didn’t want to push the change, or was still uncomfortable with the thought of having a child since . . . he was psychologically still dealing with his childhood.

Jarod got up and went to the counter. Jarod pointed out the formula to Camille on the other side of the counter too. Several. “Yep. Oh, look. Your mom opens up a fresh one each time. Looks like she doesn’t really care about the cost, only freshness for you.” He opened the

cupboards and looked around. “Ah.” He pulled out a fresh one too. “Jarod doesn’t really want to help The Centre either.” He ripped it open. There really wasn’t much difference at all, they just did not want to help The Centre in any way possible.

“Is there anything else you need, Jarod?” Sydney asked. “Since you are over here, and Zane has allowed you to stay, I assume you are sharing a bed with Miss Parker now?”

“I will get that resolved,” Monsieur Martin said from below.

Jarod held Camille a little tighter. There seemed to be some jealousy right there. Perhaps Jarod was feeling jealous of all the time Monsieur Martin had spent with Camille? Or if he knew of family secrets of Monsier Martin, he may feel uncomfortable around him with Camille. “I just need to fumigate the floor mouse.”

“Ah.” Sydney shook his head. “I can’t help with that. I can move him for so long, but he is adamant to speak with his fiancé again.”

“Don’t call her that.” Jarod didn’t take long to find the bottles. “Right.” He picked one up out of the cupboard. “This isn’t the C from the alphabet.” He rubbed on it, probably to see if it was cheap. Yep. “Here, Sydney.” He handed it to Sydney. “Take the logo off. She doesn’t need that on her bottle.”

Sydney used the water tap slightly to loosen up the label. He didn’t blame Jarod at all for that. He got the label off and gave it bag to Jarod, placing the label on the table. Jarod scooped up the formula and put it in the bottle. He went over toward the water tap. Holding Camille and turning on and off the tap would be tricky. “Can you turn the water on and off for me, Sydney?”

Jarod still didn’t want to let her go. Sydney helped him get the water in the bottle.

Jarod capped it and shook it. “So caring. They bought the cheapest formula on the market. It’s her version of tomato juice and wheatgrass.” He gave her the bottle. “Not like she gets a choice. They fill up Miss Parker with who knows what. I got it, Sydney. Thanks.”

“No problem, Jarod.” It seemed like he was okay, but Jarod still seemed like he was holding something back. Aggravated? Anxious? It was there. Hanging in the air.

“I want Miss Parker physically, emotionally, and psychologically satisfied with me along with helping me on sexually charged or more dangerous sims that I haven’t been able to accomplish. Without her yes, a future is not possible with them.” Jarod watched Camille suck on her bottle. “She’s thinking about it. Keep your voice low, the dome carries sound extremely well.”

“I see, Jarod.” *I hope he didn’t say it like that.* “I would imagine that would be quite a shock to her.”

“I broke it down for her,” Jarod insisted. “I love my freedom. I do, but I need *more*. LM can provide it, and I can provide for her. Without it, it would only work short-term.”

Oh, well? This was? “Jarod. I understand that you may have grown attached to Miss Parker a little more than usual because of childhood and your dome experience last time. Just because Miss Parker had-”

“I don’t want to lose either of them, never to see them again. Especially now. I ran a sim with them in my mind. I know that’s how it would have went. Something similar.” Jarod didn’t look as good. “I have to take care of us, without getting stuck in society’s labeling. Our close proximation would eventually lead to something, but neither of us are healthy enough to keep it going.”

Uh huh. “Or you know Miss Parker does not associate actual love in her life?” Yes, he hit it on the head.

“That and I can’t.” Jarod paused. “When kids go out on their ‘Halloween’ holiday, they get lots of candy. Huge bags full of it. When they take it home, their parents check their candy, to make sure it’s safe. Afterwards, they don’t get the whole thing. They get a little bit of candy. Then a little bit more later, until it’s gone. If they eat the whole thing at once, they get a huge belly ache. Sometimes vomiting it all back up.”

“I see,” Sydney said. “Miss Parker is your whole bag of candy, isn’t she?” Bits and pieces.

“Forbidden chocolate. Yeah and I have to check the candy,” Jarod admitted. “The swearing, the smoking, the drinking, the manners, the scars of indoctrination, all of it. It comes with the candy. I can have a little at a time.” He pulled Camille’s bottle away. “But too much will do more than leave me with a bellyache.”

*This is why he is an emotional genius.* “Perhaps one day you will have eaten the entire bag of candy in that way.”

“No, because I am a huge bag of candy too,” Jarod warned him. “For Little Miss.” He walked away with Camille back to his food. “If you talk to her, keep it low.”

Sydney sighed. Jarod knew it too. A convenient by the rules relationship was not for him either. *Emotional genius.* Yet it couldn’t change who he was or what happened to him. All Sydney could do was hope that each of them found what they needed. Conventional or not.

## Shower Surprises

*This is not what I need right now.* Miss Parker could see her fiancé once again beneath the dome. *Sorry but you can't be in my stable anymore.* She bent down from the bed to look at him. "Monsieur Martin. Get it through your head. You almost made me lose my mind. I don't trust your family. It's over."

"It can't be over," he said to her. "The Centre's letting you come back to me in a year. In the meantime, I don't want to feel like that is an order to you. I'm sorry that you almost lost your mind. I am," he apologized. "I was doing what I thought was best for The Centre first, and then I could take care of you second."

*Indoctrination was more to blame than him.* She knew that. "You made a choice. You have to deal with the consequences."

"I can't. I know I am getting closer, my treasure. Please?" he said. "I don't want this to be a hard relationship for you. We had a great thing going."

*No, we didn't. You never stood a chance.* Jarod was right, somewhere along the line her French horse had actually started to fall for her.

"I got these for you. Hang on." He left a moment and then came back under her with red roses. He held them up as high as he could. "Do you think you can take them?"

"Doubt it." She went toward Camille's crib. She knew she was okay, she was with Jarod. However, her pretty headboard. *I've got a thousand of these.* She took her robe sleeve and wiped it off the headboard as best she could. She just needed a little bit of water for the smear left. She'd get another two robes. One to wear and one to get wet to get the rest of the blood.

She walked to the clothes dome and slid her current robe off and slid the next one on. She tied it back up, and grabbed an extra one to hit with water. As she came strutting back though. *Well, fuck. I didn't hear the western showdown music.*

Apparently Monsieur Martin had received approval to bring up the roses to her. Probably helped out by her Mister Parker. Instead of running into her though, he was right in front of Jarod. Not. Fucking. Good. They weren't even playing different languages with each other, they were both silent. Just staring at one another. *Break it up or something will happen.* Jarod psychologically had a lot going on right now, she couldn't guarantee he wouldn't do the same thing he did to Cox. The only thing that was on Monsieur Martin's side was that Jarod was still holding Camille.

She walked toward Monsieur Martin. "You shouldn't be up here." She took the roses, now in a vase with water. Of course. "Coming up here for nothing but flowers. Go back down you



Moron.” Tricky. Mister Parker and Monsieur Martin would both get mad if she did something to the flowers. However, Jarod’s state of mind wasn’t smooth right now either. “Go away.” His eyes lingered over Jarod a little longer before heading back away. *Fucking men! That’s all you can do with them. Fuck them. Anything else is just trouble, trouble, trouble.*

She walked away wondering where the hell to put the things. Glass table on the other side of the bed, that’d work for now. *Well, at least it reminds Jarod my opinion’s still open.*

“Miss Parker, here is your food.” Sydney came around the corner. “I gave Jarod his some time ago but I’ve attained permission to bring you some. How are you doing?”

“Let me guess, the monkey definitely told you,” she said as she sat at the glass table with the flowers.

“Ah, he did,” Sydney said. “Jarod made me aware of a deal he wanted to strike with you. You do *understand* that deal?”

Unfortunately. “Yeah.” It really didn’t matter how much any of them talked about freedom and deals in the dome. As long as they couldn’t get out, they could say whatever they wanted. Even Sydney knew it. Liberating, but it would be much better to have some way out. “I don’t know if I should take it. I can fuck guys left and right. This is not that kind of thing.”

“No, it’s not at all,” Sydney agreed. “Is that why you accepted the flowers from your fiancé? In deliberation? It’s not an easy decision.”

“Jarod has always been easier to deal with, at the end of a gun,” she told him. “It’s not easy.”

“Neither way would be easy,” Sydney said. He sat down at the glass table with her. “When you were younger, and you snuck off to see him behind my back? You had conversations that went over your head. You didn’t quite understand. Jarod was angry with me after he realized that truth. I have to make sure you understand what Jarod is saying because he wants to satisfy the both of you in every aspect he can.”

“Yeah. Satisfy is the word. Hugging, I can buy. He didn’t say hugging or comfort,” she told him. “I don’t like it, Sydney. I hate it. I really hate it. The way he . . . talks.” So freaky. “He puts on such an act for everyone else.” She rubbed her cheek. “The act of normalcy! Why can’t he just act like that with me too? Like a normal person.”

“You already stated it several times,” Sydney said. “Act. He’s trying to play the roles of someone who knows who they are to the world. He even pretends to be people with certain careers and duties out there. When he doesn’t do that for you, it isn’t to hurt you. He is showing his honest self to you. He sees different emotional possibilities and goals for the two of you to make it, but he can’t let you find someone to have relations with during a pretend,” he told her.

“I stay detached. He’s the one that’s clingy,” she remarked. “I mean, look at his first fling. Practically cuddling her like they were some forever thing and then bam. End of week, be gone bitch. I’m not like that. You can tell from the start with me, forever is not in my eyes.

Twenty four hours, max, unless a guy is really good. Even then, it's not a cuddly kind of thing. I just brand him and put him in my stable for later."

"Jarod goes everywhere, and meets many different people. Some that wouldn't be safe to mess around with," Sydney said. "You're Camille's mother, and if you go with him everywhere? You will be the only one who knows who he really is. You are already important to him, but that will just make you someone who is . . ." Yeah, even Sydney couldn't sugarcoat it. "You'll be invaluable to him. He isn't going to want to see you hurt."

"Sure. It's all selfless," she said, wishing right now that she had something to deal with the pain Jarod caused her. "He wants me to stay celibate and stay single, and any problems I face? He'll deal with. Meanwhile, he'll be just as good, and any problems he faces? I can deal with." Hmph.

"I don't think it is as bad as you see it," Sydney said. "When he told me, it was only a part of everything else. He doesn't see simply two sides. He sees *everything* as one. We are all human. We all crave touch."

"Sure and what about these sims? These dark little ones that he's wanted to figure out, but he needs help? Feminine help? Or serious help?" Oh yeah.

"The closer Jarod can get to a situation, the more he can then climb himself into that's person's environment, the better he can pinpoint what is going on. If there is some kind of sexuality in the scene, then he would need to account for that. It's not a ploy. He even has his 3d simulator to try and mimic and pull in everything he can. To do what he must." Sydney couldn't add much more than that. "There are still lives on the table that Jarod wants to help, however, he can't just . . ."

"Pay a whore to give him the blowjob he needs that the guy in there was receiving when he got his head blown off? Or maybe try and get them to move really fast to the right when he envisions the gunshot coming." Yeah. "He certainly can't ask it of his 'cute little girlfriends'," she said mockingly. "Stand there Sweetie while I shoot around you, then you shoot me close to the arm, and then we can get ice cream!" She scoffed. "Miss Sorry Ass Note."

"As dark and seedy as it may sometimes get? I imagine many times. Actually, most times. More often than not, Jarod just needs . . ."

"It's all one big thing." She said it right back to him.

"It's not tawdry, it's not trying to--"

"Yeah. I know. I get it. I have a feeling? I find out tonight when we talk more about it." She glanced to the roses. *But I think I already get it.* Missing pieces. "Things we are missing in our lives are not always pretty."

"Miss Parker. I really want to talk this out with you better. I don't want to interfere, but this is a very big decision. You should understand it *all* before you decide yes or no. Otherwise, there will be heartbreak later."

“When he has to take us to Aunt Dorothy. I get it, I know. He wants Camille. I don’t know in what way though, Sydney. As a father? As a friend? As a responsibility that he can’t let go of without deep regret? Jarod. Isn’t. Normal. I can’t read him, he reads others. He reads me.” She pushed up her arm. “Fine, okay. Phrase it big boy, I’m all ears. Tell me the knee deep shit I am getting myself into if I actually consider saying yes.”

*I hope I do him the right amount of justice and explanation he needs this time.* “When you were a very young child and you had a bad dream, your parents could be there for you. Jarod had no parents. He worked through all of the bad dreams, all of his childhood using logic and his own strength to carry on. Not something a four year old should have done. Everyone needs someone. I was here, to help as I could, but I didn’t live here,” Sydney said. “I couldn’t always be permitted to give him what he needed. That need still manifests itself today in him, as well as the need to experience the childhood he was denied.”

“I get that,” she said. “I definitely get that, Jarod’s like a big kid because of it.”

“But he’s not just that,” Sydney reminded her. “He missed childhood, but he went through puberty and did become a man. He does not feel just like a ‘big kid’, he is a man. He won’t just find a pretend that will let him play with toys endlessly. He feels responsibility, he wants to use his abilities to help others that no one else will. He wants things an average man would want including relationships. However? Jarod was not freed during any of that either. Do you understand what that means?”

“Because he wasn’t freed at puberty or a full blown man?” She shook her head on that one.

“He studied religions, he knew practices, he knew books on it all. He learned everything through books and through media. Not through personal experience. Because of that, I can’t say for sure which way he has developed himself. I’m fairly sure he is sexually active with a limited amount of women he has come to care for when he saw them. I cannot say much of anything else.”

“Okay, that didn’t help much at all,” she said. “Any point to it all?”

*Oh just say it, Sydney.* “What you are embarking into is the deepest form of a trusting **marriage** that is possible.”

She held out her hand. “Whoah, hang on there! What?”

“If Jarod is taking you with him, as in you are to be his everything? It’s more than one thing. He will need you to be his friend on some days, his partner with his sims on others, his emotional support that he missed as a child, his aid in sexual release, and one future day I’m sure, when he needs more than minor sexual release. You will be *everything* and all things and sometimes they may fall on top of each other.” There. He said it as best he could.

She crossed her legs. Quiet. Contemplating. “A friending, mothering, partnering, fuck buddy. Dedicated to only him. Is *that* what you’re saying, Sydney?”

“The phrase for your ‘buddy’ is not appropriate in the way you think. Nor is it temporary,” Sydney warned her. “You can do Jarod a lot of good, and he can too for you. But, if you drop him and this trust? You could damage him even more *forever*. It is not to be taken lightly.”

“But it can’t even be girlfriend, let alone stronger than that.” She wouldn’t even pull the word wife out. “He even told me himself, when he sees someone attractive-“

“He’ll come home to you,” Sydney interrupted her. “To work with his own sexual release. Which, he will also expect from you.”

“Normality. Why can’t I just live with a degree of normality?” She complained. “What the fuck am I supposed to think? ‘Oh, poor baby, you couldn’t get with the girl you wanted so just pretend I am her’? Bullshit, Sydney! I don’t play those kinds of games.”

“No, I did not say he would do that. There is a difference, he will not be pretending that you are another woman,” Sydney assured her. “When he feels something stir within him, he will seek you out. That simple.”

“What if he does find someone? I know he said ‘no’, but feelings are strong,” she warned Sydney. “What if he gets that feeling of love for another woman, not just sexually? You know? Romance is a thing I hear. Not for me, but definitely Mister Know It All Asshole.”

“No,” Sydney said. “It would be as wrong to Jarod to pursue those feelings, as it would a husband pursuing feelings for someone besides his wife.”

She rubbed her eyes. “I don’t want to take Camille away. I really don’t mind the set up Aunt Dorothy has in mind for us though. It’s brilliant, and it’s free, but I’m not supposed to tell a living soul about it. However, a lot of the pitfalls Jarod wants me to have in it? I don’t have. I feel secure and safe, we will have plenty of shelter and protection, and I can even continue to establish relationships with other men. The only thing I can’t get?” She looked away a second. “Is her father. The one who is a genius that would understand her. That could provide a sense of trust for her. She deserves everything.” Miss Parker started to rub her eye and take a deep breath. “You got percentages to all this?”

“Percentages?”

“How often between a game of angry birds, angry sim partner and angry *other*.”

Oh? Sydney smiled slightly. *She doesn’t want to mess up their friendship. Perhaps that is the biggest challenge of all to her.* Well? It wasn’t actually friendship. A, um, interesting camaraderie? They had something that no one else shared. She didn’t want to share about that though. *Maybe they do have a chance.* “I imagine most will be fairly spaced out the same, except for the last. Jarod is already going to feel . . .”

“Like it’s a little bit of good old fashioned blackmail,” she answered. “Like Doctor Cox in the other dome.” She scoffed. “What is worse? The fact I can’t get with men anymore, or the fact that when I do?” She twitched. “It’s. I screw guys I don’t get close to, Sydney. Jarod. Jarod, is.”

“Someone you know. That same reasoning is why Jarod will *not* rush it. He wants you in every facet of the arrangement.” He stood back up. “If this works out though, in the longterm?”

“I get it, Sydney.” She didn’t move very much at first. Mulling it over. “No more freedom if I pick Jarod.”

“I very much doubt that. I’m sure Jarod knows he can’t just pin you up somewhere and leave you with Camille everyday,” Sydney. “But, he is going to want-“

“I get it, loyalty! Even if we hadn’t done nothing.”

“Correct,” Sydney smiled. She got it.

“Fucking. Loyalty. Damn it. Can’t he just? I don’t know, approve of who I can be with?”

“No.” Obviously not and now he leaned in closer. “You know why. I went back and saw those DSA’s with you and Jarod after the last dome incident. It’s too cruel. *You* are the only one he ever connected with, to ask that of him would psychologically hurt him beyond belief. He stayed safe since you left by staying away from you,” he said a little more coldly than he should. “The Centre gave you his child and staying away is no longer an option.”

“What is your point, Sydney?” she asked, her voice still normal. Rebelling.

Sydney kept his voice low though. “You were going to marry someone with a very distrustful family because your father ordered you too. You don’t believe in love, or at least you don’t pursue it. So if you don’t really care about ‘finding the right one’, then why not pick the only one out there that can do you an ounce of good? Jarod trusts you enough to show you the side he doesn’t show anyone else. You even lived with him a month and a half in the dome before,” Sydney pointed out. “Childhood had already affected him when you were first put on the chase.”

“I know. The puzzles that the monkey genius brought out.”

“Perhaps he does puzzles in part so that the truth is easier to grip,” Sydney suggested, still annoyed she would not lower her voice. “Either way. Sweet, sour, bitter or strong. I think Jarod’s shown you his true self more than once. I don’t think even I’ve been allowed to see it as much as you.”

“So, what, I should feel honored? The pretender doesn’t pretend with me, I get to see his true self just because I reached out for a friend when I was smaller?”

“And it has to be pointed out. You have not led a normal childhood either.”

She looked at the roses again. “It’s easier to mimic the real world, than deal with the messiness of Jarod’s. It always has been. Why can’t I be a pretender for a bit? Why couldn’t I just marry this guy that likes me, run away back to Europe and live happily ever after?” She laughed with a small choke at the end. “Because isn’t that the truth of it all, Sydney? The pretends are what sound more real then the reality of it all.” She looked at her engagement

ring on her finger. "In the ugliness of all the worlds, we hide our scars. Jarod wants to deal with them." She closed her fist. "It's sooo much easier to shoot at that than work with it."

Not one time did she lower her voice. "I'll go so you can eat. I hope I helped at least a little."

"Little." She started to eat. "Very little."

*That's it.* Sydney sat back down extremely close to her. "Like it or not, for better or worse, you are everything. You are everything that Jarod was trying to find out there because he can no longer be permitted *to find it out there!* He is going to be all of that for you too, it's not one-sided. That is what you are agreeing to, and I don't care how strange it all sounds to you. You should do it."

'Funny, Dad,' she mocked him. "It sounded like the opposite. My take away is you *don't* actually want me to do all this. You don't *really*." She kicked her feet up onto the chair on the other side of the glass table. "You dropped off what you wanted to say in the last sentence too. It should have been, 'you should do it because you have Camille'. Like it was alllll my fucking fault!" She yelled at him, standing up. "I wanted a baby, I did, but I never demanded it to be Jarod! Hell, I demanded it not to be Jarod! I did every damn thing I could, I took every damn pill, and I even fully rededicated myself to saving Broots and his daughter so they didn't get wrapped up in my shit! So I don't care what you say, you can't pull me into anything using guilt! And if I do agree? It won't be blackmail because it will be my decision! I am not getting conned, persuaded, or pushed into this situation. I *am* Miss Parker, and just because I am stuck in a dome, doesn't mean I ever stopped being the bitch that pulls on the leash!" She got up and headed away.

Time for a shower. She stomped toward the health dome. She took off her robe in one of the many showers and turned on the faucet. She turned on straight cold. As cold as she could make it. *I am Miss Parker. I am Miss Parker. This isn't right.* Her life had changed so much ever since she was thrown in the first dome. It never changed back. *The Centre used to feel so comfortable.* She wished she could slide back into it all. Have another baby, have the surgery, and just get it all over with so she could get back home. Back to who she'd been. But?

Jarod was wrong. She had changed some. Yeah, it wasn't terribly huge, but she learned how to live a life with someone who loved her. Her Aunt Dorothy. She took care of her like no one else, even during her most bitchiest fits that would send someone flying. She helped on the first hardest days of taking care of Camille. Camille had not been an easy birth, she was born a cesarean and it had been difficult on her. The healing was long, yet she never complained. Only helped. Her home of beautiful flowers and French music and her in her funny little glasses and scarf. It had changed her.

Then she had to deal with the Martin's. Monsieur Martin always swore never to tell them where she lived, and never made her come live with him, because as soon as she did? They would take her from her Aunt Dorothy. Yet, she had to navigate and keep herself on their good side and The Centre's good side. And now? She hadn't felt like a bitch on a chain in a long time. She yearned to be it, to feel some semblance of it again. Then it would be easier to know how to handle everything. Life moved and changed way too fast since 2013. The speed as to when she went from top dog to solid wet dog food that splattered on the floor with someone's walking footprints on it.

Her memories exposed how fast it all happened. “I am so expecting them . . . someone to just walk right in and say, great news. Mister Parker got it all wrong. The baby isn’t Jarod’s. You have no special genes we want. And, oh yeah? Your father actually does love you. But that’s not going to happen.” She broke down against the shower tile as she let the cold consume her body.

Her Aunt Dorothy would have taken care of them well after it was all over, but now that it was Jarod’s? Everything fell apart. She knew his life had just become tough overnight. That he just found out and it couldn’t have been easy. He was trying to make the best of it, even invited the top bitch herself into his life to keep his newly discovered daughter. But the goals she had fell apart too. And damn it! Sydney blamed her for it all, just like she predicted the first time in the dome. Why she so adamantly didn’t want Jarod involved. She didn’t have many friends in her life and now one of the few potential friends pretty much blamed it all on her.

Not only that, but she’d never seen Broots since she went into the dome. He probably blamed her for it all too. “Imagine believing you are the father, and then finding out you aren’t? It’s nothing but hurt.”

What was the right thing to do? Jarod’s world was dangerous, and she didn’t understand it, but he was Camille’s father. But? It felt wrong to infest his weird world. She didn’t belong there and he knew it. He wanted Camille, but he knew they didn’t belong. She could go to her Aunt Dorothy but then Camille wouldn’t have her dad. Another genius to connect with.

She thought back to Jarod’s dome when he was young. The last day she willingly went to see him. Those eyes on her, blaring across at her.

*I may not be as hard as Centre rock anymore, but entering Jarod’s world? I. Hate. People.* That was engrained. That was never going to change. It didn’t change in Paris either. People loved or hated her for the bitch she was. She let only a few people into her life, and she was in a hard roll right now.

No matter what happened, she would lose the respect of someone she had grown to care for. Daphne was already on the cusp. Daphne didn’t like the fact she had a baby in the first place, it took the power that she loved about her away in her eyes. Miss Parker saw that the first time Daphne came in, even though she dished out about the pills.

Broots? She doubted his trust was retrievable. Dirty operator of The Centre to him.

Sydney, she already knew Sydney blamed this whole damn thing on her. Even if she went with Jarod, he’d probably always believe it was her fault. And Jarod.

She shredded his life up no matter what. If she took Camille away to Aunt Dorothy, he would feel like he was abandoning her. Something being an abandoned child himself he wouldn’t want to condone. Something she didn’t want Camille to feel. Miss Parker always felt so abandoned by her father. But? If she stayed with Camille, he’d find out how rough she had been, and he’d have to trust in her to help him with problems that his floor mice used to solve. *Except they couldn’t solve it. I bet you need an iron gut to pull you through the shit Jarod would have planned.* She had one of those.

“Miss Parker, I have been waiting to spot you in the shower.”

*Really?* She looked down at . . . Daphne? “Don’t know if I ever made this clear enough, Blondie, but-” Daphne was holding up some papers. With the water rushing across the ground and her being at the bottom of the dome, the cameras couldn’t make them out. She bent down and looked closer. She smirked at her. “Naughty little girl. Where did you find those?”

“Broots and I are good at digging up shit.” She put it back away. “I’d have come sooner but today’s the first day they let us know where you were at. We couldn’t visit until then. I am here to broaden your social skills. Am I doing good so far, Miss Parker?”

“No one broadens skills like you.” *But if Aunt Dorothy did that, why didn’t she tell me in the first place?* She could have kept her out of the dome with that information, and they could have just hid Camille and- “Ah.” Ah. *Jarod. She foresaw Jarod in here?!* She wanted to give Jarod a chance. Jarod would constantly run unless he knew not to run. Of course. Trap him too. Clever bitch of an Aunt. “Thanks, Daph.”

“Miss Parker?” Jarod’s voice next to the shower stall. “Are you okay?”

“Hm? Yeah just got to talking to Daphne down here,” she admitted honestly.

Daphne’s head turned as she waved probably to Jarod. “Broots and I can come in now. Oh, and Broots knows about the father thing. Goodbye.” She looked to Miss Parker. “Is this goodbye too, Miss Parker?”

*She was always the fun one.* “Cheeky Daphne. I’ll see you later.” She held out her hand from the curtain and felt a towel that Jarod was no doubt holding. “What are you doing over here?” She also didn’t hear Camille. Was she asleep?

“The dome carries sound well,” he admitted.

Oh yeah. What did she say out loud when she got loud?

“I have a feeling Sydney upset you,” he said as she dried off with the towel. “I guess I shouldn’t have told him. He’s . . . protective of me.”

Oh yes, now she remembered. “I never wanted any of this on purpose.”

“I know. No one would. He’s sorry too. He’s watching Camille so I could talk to you privately,” he said. “He didn’t mean to come down so hard on blaming you.”

She held the towel back out. It was moved out of her hand and her robe was given back. She tied it on. “I will have a decision when I have a decision, and if it’s not what everyone wants to here? Then fuck him, fuck her, and fuck it. Somebody’s getting screwed in it, no matter what.” She opened the shower curtain and saw him standing there. “My decision.” She walked off to go check on Camille now.

“It is your decision, but don’t back out of it later!” Jarod yelled toward her.



She turned around. “Since when have I *ever* done that?”

“It wasn’t good to hear what you were yelling,” Jarod said, “but it was good to hear about your decision. It’s not blackmail and it is going to be hard no matter which way you choose. Think clearly, but by tonight, I *need* to know something.”

Really? “I’ll give you something, but don’t expect a final decision.”

“Then that something better be good because your floor mouse is getting way too anxious and I don’t like it. He better not come up here again. That? Was a freebie. What about the flowers?”

“I can make up my own mind about my own things. Tonight?” She started to walk away. “I’ll deal with flowers.”

## Pretend She Said Yes

They had switched off with Camille a couple times throughout the day. Neither one speaking of anything else. When lights went out though? A time for sleep and a time to put the day to rest. As Parker moved toward putting her daughter down in the crib, she still saw him. Monsieur Martin was still there. Overnight. To make sure Jarod didn't do anything. He probably got special permission from Zane due to the influence of Mister Parker. And.

Jarod was at the brink. He didn't know what she'd choose and his foot was beating on the ground in agitation. As their eyes locked, she could read it straight there. Plain as day. If she was going to choose him?

Get rid of the fucking mouse.

Aunt Dorothy or Jarod.

*He has to rush my fucking ass.* She strolled over to the bed and climbed in it. Jarod climbed in on the other side. He still wore all his regular clothes that he came into the dome with, neglecting any Centre clothes still. Ugh, that look. Her move? Crawl into the dark lunacy of Jarod's world or live forever inside another where Camille could never see Jarod. *Okay.* She climbed out of bed and grabbed the vase of roses. *This bitch can handle a lot and she isn't scared of anything, especially decision making.* She walked away from her bed, past the other domes, ending up full circle to the trash receptacle. *Not buildings, not impossible jumps, not exploding devices, or anything else has ever stopped my ass.* She climbed up the annoying long stairs of it and tossed it in. The flowers, the vase, and everything. It landed right next to the bussed remains of lunch and supper and whatever else was bothered to be tossed in there. *I don't give a shit whether he wants to throw knives at me, be held like a baby, play games, get fucked, or he wants to jerk off on me.* Her floor mouse obviously didn't see. She moved away from it again, and moved through the domes. *However, I am also not stupid. I am going to think this through. I will make the best choice for me and Camille.* Step by step, knowing Jarod already knew what she did. *When I am ready to and not one second before you impatient bastard.*

She moved back toward the bed, but his expression? Watching her. The vase was a start to make him feel better. She was risking her floor mouse affection being trampled too hard. Actions spoke louder than words, but at least it would make him more neutral. Hm. *Nope.* No, not a different expression at all on Jarod, he didn't give a damn about the flowers at all.

There was one thing way more important. Way more telling that he wanted her to do. She held the engagement ring on her finger, twisting it round and round with her thumb. That would be the clincher. "Have I ever told you anything about my Aunt Dorothy, Jarod?"

"I don't believe so," he contributed.

"I didn't know a thing about her until I visited Europe. She's a little odd."

“I picked that up,” Jarod said. “Odd but nice.”

“Better than nice. When I found myself with my little ‘problem’, she helped me out. No rent or nothing. She even had a nursery for Camille.”

“That I saw,” Jarod revealed. “It was a little terrifying at the time.”

“It was beautiful. I made my squeaky ass mouse bring it to America, to remind her of home,” she said. “Home was nice. It wasn’t big and flashy. It was a simple two story home, most of the rooms upstairs. Three with one bathroom. It was made to comfortably house her. Everyday she would take care of her plants in her attached greenhouse as her music filled it. I would often just be upstairs with Camille, hearing it from the door. There was a small window to look out of with pretty white curtains that moved so far back. When I did leave, I was never very far. Downstairs wasn’t far, I could hear Camille crying from her crib almost instantly. She was the first room on the top floor. However, her Aunt Dorothy’s room was right beside it too.” She rolled her engagement ring longer. “It was hard to tell who would come to her aid first. Mo mo or Do do.”

“That’s why she used to say the words together back to back.” He was getting the hint.

“Now, you see? She may have been odd, but she was loving and caring. And, um? She was never dumb about the future.” She looked to see if her floor mouse was still there. Yep. Her vase action didn’t lose him, good. She’d watch her language then. “She knew the future. So? She’s had more than a few days or even a few weeks to reasonably get us all situated after the baby was born. If I hadn’t gotten engaged, of course,” she added so her mouse wouldn’t say anything. “She had a lot of the hard parts figured out.”

“Well.” Jarod didn’t know what to say. “Good for her. She’s only known for how long? And I’ve only known for how long.” Ooh yes, bitter bitter. “It’s great to hear she took care of you, and she had ideas for the future.” No it wasn’t, she could hear his teeth practically gnashing. “I would do what I could.”

“What are you talking about?” Miss Parker asked as she continued to roll her engagement ring around. “I’m just telling you about my Aunt, Jarod. Since you met her, and you like curious things, do you want to know more about her?”

“You know what? Yes, I would.”

“Aunt Dorothy never married. She’s a lot closer to me personality wise than my mom,” she said. “While she was in her 50’s, she had the body of a thirty year old and she used it. But? She was finally thinking of settling down. Her most favorite courter. He lives far away, but she knows she isn’t getting much younger. So?” She clicked her mouth.

“Where’s her courter live?” Jarod asked curiously.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she admitted. “Somewhere out there.” Heh. Agitation. “Lot of land though, yet uh? Not really cut off from the world. What he does makes lots of money so he comes out to see her from that isolation once a week.”

Ouch. He was not looking real good. He was rubbing his temple with his hand.

“Yeah. I’ve met him, he’s great. I took a large sum of my own money and pooled it with my Aunt Dorothy, and we all just had a blast for a weekend. I think that account is probably still open. Oh? What did you think of my Aunt Dorothy when you saw her?” Aww. Camille was resting peacefully now. No more kicks or signs she’d have to get up.

He was not inclined to talk much now. “Nice person.”

“I meant physically dumbass. She looked a lot like my mother.” She sucked on her bottom lip as she started to move the engagement ring up and down. “Even though she is older, she stays in such good shape, and she looks quite young. Sometimes, if someone’s far enough away-“

“You can’t tell the difference.” Yeah, he was getting it. Oh, he was getting it.

“There’s this last remarkable thing I love about her,” she said. “She was my mom’s sister, and she knew a lot going on in her life. And, uh? She didn’t need to drag me out to my mom’s fucking gravestone to tell me a whole lot of shit.” She glared at Jarod. “I spent almost a year with that wonderful woman. There’s not much I don’t know about my mom now, or things she was up to. Or what would have happened, if things . . . hadn’t happened.”

Blam. Jarod got the hint loud and clear. His voice was low but harsh. “Well? Isn’t that just peachy,” he said, using one of her favorite non-cursing comebacks. “Perfect house. Perfect setup. Perfect security. Even told you everything about your mom that you wanted to know, and clearly didn’t want to know in an easier manner for you.”

“Yeah, she didn’t play puzzle games with me. She loves me,” she said, “almost as much as her flowers. She had trouble with them though. They kind of stopped, pollinating.” *Yeah I’m almost done fucking with you, Jarod. Serves you right for trying to make me rush.* “Things she takes care of, for some reason? They stop.” She gave him a wicked smile. “Pollinating.”

Then, he started to smile back. “I pretended to be a botanist, I could probably help.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. I think pollination is gone for good.” He got the hint. “Thing is, now she has to be careful with the few flowers she does have left because there won’t be anymore.”

“She should be,” Jarod answered. “Some are precious. However? I am skilled in that area and I would do what I can to take care of those last remaining flowers if I were entrusted with them.”

“Are you sure you can take care of the flowers?” She asked him. “Because these aren’t just fucking pansies that are pretty to look at. She cares a great deal for these flowers. You could go see them and talk to her about the flowers.”

“No. I *need* to have the flowers,” Jarod insisted. “As great as anything may sound, there is a reason her flowers aren’t working. They can blossom in better environments.”

“I don’t know, Pretender, you end up in some shitty environments,” she warned him.

“Letting them move and get light will be better for them.”

“Really? I don’t see people moving their gardens around daily, Human Chameleon.”

“You’re right, it wouldn’t be better for them,” he admitted. “I want the flowers though, and I will go through the extra grind to take care of them.”

“My goodness,” the floor mouse said. “You’re obsessed over a woman’s flowers way too much.”

“One thing flowers don’t need is floor mice,” Jarod said as he looked at Monsieur Martin. “Will you go away already?”

“No, I don’t trust you with her.”

*Well good, you shouldn't.* “I trust that when I get out, my next pretend may be a professional exterminator.” Jarod smirked. He hated that guy, but the flower talk was goooood. He had thought Parker was rubbing it all up in his face instead of just giving him a flat out no. She was making conversation so it didn’t seem odd or crazy they just started to talk about her Aunt Dorothy’s flowers. Which was perfect because he got the hint. Parker had an operation! No more babies from Parker. No more worrying about any extra pretender kids, all of that was annihilated. She wasn’t just going to throw the covers up with the mouse there, she probably didn’t want to get rid of him as possible help yet. She didn’t know how they were supposed to get out. So? She found another way to tell him about it. But his spirits were way too lifted now. “Are you going to stick around to watch Miss Parker play a game with me, Mousey Boy?”

“Jarod, really?” She complained.

“Lights off is the perfect time, Miss Parker. Really low volume. Besides, Camille is clearly asleep, I can tell when she drifted off.” Once she started to cuss again. It was something definitely sealed into her. Now that Camille was asleep and it was all lights off though? He was starting up the ps4.

“Put one baby down to pick another one up?” she asked.

“Most definitely.” Jarod checked the controllers. “You have three controllers?”

“I didn’t know if Daphne wanted to play later,” she said. “Broots or Sydney. It could get boring over the next who knows how many years.”

“Smart thinking.” Jarod handed her a controller. “You know, a lot of things have come out in the last year.” He noticed her list of current games. “Don’t Starve is an interesting game.”

“Nope! Just let me take care of the pigs,” she insisted. “I’m first.”

“Come on, you’ve been playing.”

“You just arrived in here, you don’t know how much I’ve fucking played, Asshole,” she denied.

“You were stuck in a small Paris place for nine months. You were playing,” he teased, yet he still brought up the screen for her playtime, just to show he got her both ways. “Can we play Don’t Starve too?”

“No!” She looked at the controller. Her expression went between whiny and angry. “Fuck that gawdamn game, worthless piece of shit.”

Jarod shouldered her. “Couldn’t pass.”

“Who the hell can? No, wait-“

“I can.” He answered before she finished.

“You can pretend to be a qualified surgeon, of course you can solve that mindfuck of a game,” she admitted.

Jarod looked below him. Yeah, he may not be a professional exterminator but boy. He was getting the hang of getting rid of Centre mice. Monsieur Martin finally went away. “I found it you know.” Now that the little mouse was gone.

“Found what?”

“Your choreography.” He had to dig deep for it, and in places he never bothered to dig before. Didn’t need to dig. But it was worth it.

“Fuck.” She handed him the controller knowing exactly what he’d been talking about. “They did not archive that.”

“They archived everything at the academy. Little Miss Parker,” he teased her, but handed the controller back. “You were very cute.”

“Back then? No, I wasn’t,” she said. “Top of my fucking game. Everything except taste in music, but *that* can be forgiven. Adolescence, everyone has to listen to 90’s pop to move on.” He stared at her. “What now?”

“As great as it is to play with you, in here again? I’d rather play, out there.” *Come on, Parker.* “Yes or no?”

She dropped the controller. “Couldn’t you just be happy I was playing? You were elated last time.”

She was trying to distract him. “Parker. This isn’t funny, I need to know.” She knew. He knew that she knew. They could get out soon after she said it, but she had to say it.

“Less than twenty four hours to give my decision on some life-changing move that I can’t reverse,” she sneered. “Don’t rush me if you don’t even have a way out. What’s it matter until we get out?” Then? Yeah, his look probably gave it away. “Cheer. It’s too fast.”

They couldn't just stay and hang out in a dome. He had a life, and he now had to incorporate two people into it. He wasn't doing a month in there. He hadn't even bothered changing clothes. "I need to know."

"No, you are the one who needs to stop and think," she said. "Is Camille really worth all the stress to you? Would you be happier seeing her every few weeks or so?"

"No." Hell no. He heard Camille sneeze in her crib. He glanced at her. "She shouldn't have ever been here, but now that she is here, I don't want to let her go." He looked back at Parker. "I won't show up in her life every few weeks and then simply go. I can't do that, and your Aunt Dorothy wouldn't want that. Too many ties. Too close, The Centre follows." Just say it. "I can see the answer already," he said, "just say it." Just. Say. It.

"I can replace the floor mice. I can replace every damn one of them and then some," she said. "That's not the problem. I can do anything with anyone at anytime."

"I know." And he hated that. It would not be the first thing he pushed for. "From now on. It's just me." Her eyes burned in anger and confusion. It wasn't even the thought of what he'd ask of her, it was the fact that she would be with someone she knew. She cared for. She had a connection with. It was always her problem.

She was so scared to start a connection, that everyone would eventually hurt her, so she never did. It was something that might always be in her too. He just had to hope that telling her he loved her while she was under the finale injection was enough to get past it.

"I'm not a sweet bitch. Even with Camille, I don't change who I am." She glared at him. "You are really going to try and drag me around to places with you? You'll be in a living hell. I don't work well with others."

"I know. I accept that," Jarod said. "I will work around that." No, there was something else to it. Something funny in her eyes. *Sydney*. Whatever made her boil over and yell at Sydney, it was still there. *I will be in a living hell. Her words. Oh Sydney, you didn't say that!* No wonder she knew what she wanted but she wasn't budging. Jarod assumed Sydney had told her it was her fault for going into the dome. Being overprotective of him. He said something extra, clearly. "What did Sydney say to you?" He had hoped Sydney would have helped the communication between them better. Worst possible idea. *Did you really, Sydney?*

He watched her pick up the controller to play and ignore him again. "This is the 'pink elephant in the room' part, right?" Yeah. "Okay. I wanted to help you with your mom, free you from The Centre and that was it. I never would have bothered you again. I would have lived on with my own life. Found my own family." Fine, he addressed it. "This wasn't part of my plans."

"Nor mine," she agreed. "Except Camille. I had to have a baby. Natural or not, I was fine. Even about Broots. He was supposed to come with us when we left eventually, if it all worked it. Keyword being 'all worked out'."

"Plans change." Agreed. "Camille is partly my responsibility." Nope. No, that wasn't good enough. "Camille is my daughter. My family. I want my family."

“How often?”

“As much as possible, and some fly by night scheme to meet every once in awhile isn’t going to cut it. It’s too dangerous.” No. “She should get both of us. I know my world is dangerous, Parker, but I will watch out every step of the way. With you. I can’t do this without you.”

“You wouldn’t get a choice there.”

“I believed firmly, when I saw that crib in Dorothy Jamison’s house, that I would have to choose that,” he admitted. That got her to look at him. “I can’t. I already tried last time with her, and I had to leave her with Broots. I didn’t get it then, but I get it now. I need *you*, to have *her*.” There. “But you are a full grown woman who has a hard time . . . being sweet.”

“I’m a fucking bitch,” she said proudly. “Now and forever.”

“Yes, and it attracts the wrong kind of mice.”

“Oh, one mouse from an organized crime family and the whole world just falls apart to you,” she complained.

“No, every single potential mouse. I can’t deal with that, and . . . and my mice can’t meet my needs. We’ve gone over this,” he repeated.

“So what? We cuddle each other in an ‘aww’ fashion?” She said sarcastically.

“Some nights,” he said. “Some nights, we can play. Some nights, I’m going to need real help that only you can provide, and vice versa.”

“Fuck you, Jarod!” She was getting mad. “Why can’t you just set across-“

“No scheduling a ‘go find time to screw someone’.” *Say it.* “We are each other’s everything. Until you are ready for that? You have to stay loyal, and so will I.”

“Fucking shiiiiit.” She put the controller down. “Sydney’s right, isn’t he? I can’t believe this shit, especially coming from you of all people. This idea is *insane*.”

“For anyone else out there? Yeah, but not for me and not for you. Math, Miss Parker. I want Camille. You are her mother. You have to come along. I’m not letting you go for ‘rides in the hay’ while I am out there pretending. It’s unsafe and I need you with Camille. To do that to you is unfair though, so I wouldn’t ‘roll in the hay’ either. I need someone between sweet, I hate you, and I can do every damn thing you throw at me.” *Say it.* “I won’t abandon you afterward.” *Say it.* “Tonight.”

“Tonight what?” He moved the controller out of her hands.

“Pretend you said yes.” If she turned from her decision, this would hurt so much harder, but the longer she deliberated, the worse it would get. Whatever words Sydney used, it hurt his case, not helped. He needed to make that yes in her head solid enough to confirm out loud. If it didn’t work. *This is going to hurt for a long time.* “One night. Pretend you said yes.”



Uneasy, but her eyes gave him a challenging ‘bring it on’. “Good. Give me the engagement ring.”

So far, the floor mouse had been silent. Jarod had assumed he went home. He’d know for sure soon.

Parker pulled it off and gave it to Jarod. He threw it so hard, it sailed across the dome and bounced off it.

As the mouse squeaked, Jarod pulled her closer.

*His desire. His forbidden chocolate. She was right there, finally, on the same level as him. The girl and the woman that haunted his dreams like a siren. The floor mouse squeaked beneath but he didn’t care one iota. He just smiled at her. “Good decision, Parker.” And now. Hold it together. Pretend she said yes, but know it’s not yes.*

He brought her down further so she was lying down on the bed and hugged her side pulling his head by her chest, listening to the sound of her heart. How often had he thought about that, so young, about doing just that? He closed his eyes, hearing the beating of her heart beneath him. Feeling her warmth. “You’re so warm.” He took his other hand and reached for her other hand, bringing it closer. He stroked it tenderly. “Like a nice, warm sun, Little Miss.”

She tightened for a second, but relaxed again. She wanted to ask him something but realized he didn’t want to speak. He just wanted to be there. Just be . . . felt. At least. That’s what he thought. But. She took her free hand and stroked his back. *I knew it.* He knew it. *Their* connection. Verbal wasn’t how they ever did that well. Looks, gestures. They always just knew. While he often lied awake on a girl he had come to care for, or they lied on him? He always knew they fell asleep right away. That was never what he wanted, but they were just comfy and went to sleep. Even though LM didn’t speak, he could feel her arm continue to caress his back. After a few minutes, he thought she stopped and fell asleep, but he felt it again. She was still awake, she was just doing it every few minutes for him.

Twenty minutes turned into an hour. An hour turned into two. Jarod found himself actually drifting off to sleep a few minutes. When he woke up? He still felt her caressing his back. She stayed up past his own nap.

He couldn’t even remember how many times he wanted that. To just be held and watched over. Now? *Her turn.*

Parker was in a fairly relaxed state with Jarod. He was easy to read sometimes, all someone had to do was think about it. He’d been left alone all the time, and even Sydney could only hold him for so long. He didn’t just want held, he wanted held with security. Having Camille made it easy to see it too. But as he got up?

He started to flip her over. *What?* She felt him move behind her and start pulling her rear toward him. *What?!* He had her in a horse position. *No, no, no, what the fuck is he-?!* He would so not, not this soon. Not on a risky ‘one night let’s try’.

“Remember who I am,” he said lightly to her. He kept himself over her like a lover that wanted to be on her doggy style, but he didn’t do anything. “Trust me.”

She just waited. *Okay, what is this?* “I hate tests, Jarod.”

“It’s not a test.”

“I hate puzzles.”

“It’s not a puzzle. Relax.”

Why, what happened when she relaxed? *Remember who he is.* Uh huh. “What are you doing, Jarod?”

“Just relax,” he said again.

“Then *you* relax.” Like she couldn’t feel his excitement pressed up against her?

“Trust me. Relax.”

*I trust Jarod.* She didn’t know why she trusted Jarod. Maybe for keeping her safe in the last dome. For helping her deal with her father’s fake death. For making her feel better after full rededication? She didn’t know, but she did trust him. *Remember who he is. Trust him. In this position?* Trust. Is that what he was trying to do? Was it a trust exercise? *Well, he could have done it without being so close. Why is he doing that?* As if things couldn’t get worse, her floor mouse was squeaking away again which woke Camille up.

Jarod moved away. She didn’t even need to ask. *Okay.* She checked in on Camille. She lightly stirred, but she was still okay. After talking to her softly for a few minutes, Camille went back to sleep. She was sleeping better than usual, but Jarod and her taking turns had kept her up during the day more. As she went back to the bed, Jarod was already stirring her into the position again. Great, no freebie just because she was taking care of Camille. “I feel like saying ‘neigh’ to this.”

“Good joke, but not the time for jokes.” He was right above her again.

*What is he trying to do?* It had to be a trust exercise of some sort because he certainly wasn’t screwing her. She let herself relax, which was more than she could say for him. He could at least move back a little so she didn’t have to feel him so much. Why did he have to do that? Then she started to feel his hands move. They were tugging at the string on her robes. *Relax.* Yet, she didn’t know who hit higher, her or the floor mouse as she felt her robe part. *Fuck!*

“Relax. Trust. Me. I’d never hurt you.”

As he said that, he started to prop her up. That was better, at least she wasn’t in that position anymore. Except. No. No.

How is it that she could strut naked through The Centre, but Jarod doing that was? Choking her up. He had taken the top of the robe and slid it down.

“Relax. I’m not looking, I swear.”

She didn’t know that, he was too far back to see. But? *I know he’s not lying*. But what was he doing? He moved her back downward, back into the same position as before. She saw her robe on the side of the bed.

Jarod was fully clothed, she could even feel his jacket on her delicate skin. Her delicate naked skin. The Centre had not given her a thing to wear with that robe, to dissuade her from starting fights. Nothing. She didn’t even have a thin pair of panties on. She was made aware of the constant temperature in the dome now, every pore on her felt it.

“Breathe,” he breathed in her ear. Yet, he needed to do that too. He wasn’t holding her naked, bent over like that and wasn’t being affected. It was clear. Hell, he was probably starting to hurt through what she felt of his erection. “Breathe.” He pulled her back up into his arms, but only with her own arms. He didn’t touch any other part of her. Then he rocked himself, which caused her to rock. Not forward sexually against her, but side to side delicately. Like a shuffling dance.

She tried to take a deep breath. He didn’t do anything. He didn’t stroke her. He didn’t pet her. No kissing, no necking. Just. He just held her, naked, in his arms. One strange minute turned into two. She kept taking breaths and then she started to understand. *Missing Piece*. Not him, it wasn’t for him. He was doing that for her. As excited as she could feel he was too, he remained doing nothing except holding her. She soon felt herself breathing just fine. Then, she watched Jarod reaching forward. His hand was reaching for her robe, but he couldn’t find it. *He really isn’t looking*. She moved forward a bit to get the robe to his fingers. When she did that, she heard him slightly gasp a little. He wasn’t ready for that move. He grabbed the robe.

“Arms up.”

She placed her arms up and felt the sleeves being placed back on her arms. She felt the robe being slipped back on. He carefully grabbed her strings and gently tied them again. He moved her back away. No longer in a doggy style position. She finally looked at him. Jarod had his eyes tightly shut. Then he opened one of them. Then he opened both of them. “See? Trust me.” Then, he kissed her. Gently but with meaning on the forehead before leaving. “I have *got* to take a shower, lights out or not. Get some rest.”

She took one more deep breath. It was the first time she felt relaxed and naked at the same time with a man. *It was for me*. She tucked herself down into the covers. Her body felt light. Free. Also, a little weird. A good weird. A new kind of weird.

“I will fucking kill him.”

Oh. The floor mouse. He was no doubt upset with that. She yawned and closed her eyes.

She opened them again when she felt Jarod spooning her now. “You’re. So weird?”

“Good kind of weird,” he answered from behind her ear. “Good night, Little Miss.”

“I haven’t changed a bit.”

“I know.”

“Lots of people will question your sanity in staying beside me.”

“I know. Get some rest.”

“I’ve been called the devil wrapped inside of an angel more than once.”

“Yep.”

“Your ass just made a deal with the devil. You do realize that?”

“I accept you and Camille, scars and all,” he said, repeating what he said earlier. “If you just?”

“As long as you know this whole thing *will* fuck up your life.”

There it was. Right there. On the edge of the air, about to come.

“Haven’t I always been there to fuck up your life? Damn, the things I do for my daughter. Yes.”

He wrapped himself up beside her even tighter.

Yes.

Yes.

He got. His. Yes.

## Worse Than A Gun To The Face

"Oh geez woman, can't you pretend to be nice?"

LM looked beside her. Was she being rude? She wasn't even trying to be. She shrugged at the idiot. "I pretended to be a freezer once to escape a terrible place." She glanced back at her. "Maybe that's why I'm such a frigid bee." The annoying person she didn't even want to talk to was still yakking at her. She just put her hand up toward them and opened and closed her hands. "Hey? Shut up. What the eff is even your problem?" Stupid people. "Pardon me, I have to roll my baby away. She's so young and I don't want her catching the effing moron disease from you." She strolled Camille away in her stroller while the person yelled about some dumb shit or another.

Oh great, it was the high prestigious Jarod now coming up. "What?" She didn't even know what she did and she was nice enough to back away.

"What did you do?" Jarod asked, trying to be gentle. "That person is upset with you."

"I didn't do ess, eff that woman." Really. "I don't remember doing anything." She watched Jarod head over there. He got an earful and came back.

"Where do we even begin?" Jarod asked her. "When a person says 'Hello, nice day today?' The response is never 'shut the eff up and go away'."

Oh, was that it? "Effing touchy."

"Did you tell her you ran away in a freezer and that's why you're a frigid . . . bee?"

Oh. "We already escaped The Centre, does it matter if I tell some random idiot that? Not like she's going to up and tell, and they probably know where they effed up now." LM smiled at Camille who smiled back at her. "Yeah, The Centre probably knows how it screwed up now, didn't it? It's very, very smart unlike Miss Blinding of the Eyes with her blaring yellow dress."

"That wasn't? No, it's not The Centre part of it that was wrong," Jarod told her. "Be nicer."

"I thought I was," she said, gesturing to her. "The least anyone could do for someone looking like that." Oops, LM heard heavy foot stomps walking away. "Well you know they didn't cost money to stomp them like that. Probably no more than the dress."

"Little Miss." Jarod looked like he was trying to stay calm. "I know you aren't a people person. I'm not expecting a miracle with you overnight." He pressed the tips of his fingers together. "Maybe limiting responses to yes or no when people first talk to you?"

Hm? "Fine."

"You are not a very nice woman," the woman from before said, coming back her way.

"Yes."

"Do you even care about someone's feelings when you act like that?"

"No."

"You're a terrible person!"

"Yes." The yes and no seemed easy so far. "Is this simple enough for her mind yet, Jarod?" Oh, she stomped off again. Would she stay gone this time or ricochet back like a rubber band again? LM looked back down at Camille. "Don't breathe the air too much. You'll catch the stupid." Anything? Nope, she was gone this time. LM noticed Jarod's look. "What? I wanted to see if she was still out there. That comment was like putting out a hand when you think it's raining."

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Jarod just smiled at her. He wasn't going to get her to change overnight. Within a year. Within maybe a few years there would be a little progress, hopefully. While that encounter wasn't the best, it wasn't the worst. He would have to be very careful if she answered the door, or met someone he would have to work with. On the other hand? *If I meet a mouse, she'll be the perfect exterminator.* Besides, he only needed a little change. Just a bend in the attitude, just a bit. His loaded weapon needed to be a little more dull.

He reached in his pocket and gave her the Maker's Mark he just bought. Change was long and hard, and forcing it would only bring bad things. "You asked?"

"What?" She took the little bottle. "This is a travel bottle, I could just shoot this like a shot."

"You wanted something for the night. I got you something for the night." Oof, those eyes.

"You've got to keep it together, Camille might need you tonight." There we go.

"Fine." She took the small bottle of Maker's Mark and shoved it in her pocket. "I still can't believe we're actually out." She looked in the distance. "And Broots was really that stupid. I would have had his A for that."

"They wouldn't deliver to his house." Jarod shrugged. To get out? All they had to do was grab extra piles of laundry, put it in the laundry area and then wait for the drop that was timed out. Once down, Jarod led the way for her and Camille, remembering the twists and turns until he found the delivery area. Good old Broots happened to have bought a brand new refrigerator and freezer sent for delivery to The Centre. Probably didn't deliver to a home address. Removing it out, they crept inside.

When they were to his house, Jarod got out with her. She scolded him for a little while about abusing the business address of The Centre, a little of her Centre self that hadn't slacked off

yet, and then Jarod headed for the truck with her and Camille. He'd already had it parked outside.

Inner sense was scary but incredible. He couldn't have got out without her Aunt Dorothy. He reached down and picked up Camille. "Welcome to a whole new life with Jarod." She smiled at him. "You're going to like it out here. I promise, Jarod will watch you very closely, and when I can't? You know your mom's gonna be there." He put her back down in the little stroller and watched a teenage girl come by.

"Don't even think about touching her," Little Miss warned them as they approached.

Yep. He was pretty spot on with his simulation data. The teen didn't seem to heed her too much.

"She's so cute. Hello there."

Camille rattled her favorite rattle from her Aunt Dorothy. The last thing she'd ever receive from her again.

"You should wrap her up more, it's cold."

Oh. No. Did that teen have a death wish? Jarod immediately held Little Miss' hand that wasn't on the stroller, so she couldn't reach for her gun on instinct. "We better get going, come on." He tugged at Little Miss. "Come on, Little Miss. Not worth it."

He got her to budge and walk off.

"She *judged* me."

"It's okay. You're a very good mother," Jarod said to her, trying to calm the fires that teen started.

"Camille is wearing very heavy clothes, and I don't want her to get overheated. She is going to pay for telling me how to dress Camille."

"It's over, she's gone," Jarod insisted.

"No. No she's going to pay for the rest of her life, judging me like that. She's going to learn." Little Miss wheeled the stroller faster to a boy on a bench. He had been reading a science book. "Hi there?" Little Miss put on her practiced beautiful fake smile. "That girl over there? She said she liked you."

He glanced toward the teen girl that had judged her. "Really? She said 'I like Michael?'"

"Mmhm," Little Miss lied. "Yeah, see, she said your name while she was looking at my baby." She chuckled. "You should go talk to her. A lot of girls seem to be outgoing, except with the ones they really like."

"Oh?" The poor guy stood up. "Thanks."

Jarod just watched him dart off. What? "What was that about?"

"I just sent a harmless nerd on her who'll follow her for the rest of her life." She glanced back at Jarod. "Believe me, a gun in the face would have been nicer. Geeks never stop following someone."

Jarod sighed. "Little Miss." What could he say, that wasn't nice? On the spectrum, it wasn't too bad.

*"Look, you don't have to follow me everywhere. What's your problem?"*

Jarod overheard the teens now and stared at Little Miss. "Maybe they'll have a good ending?"

"Yeah." She didn't sound so convinced.

"Food?"

"If it's food, and not just fattening carbs."

Jarod shrugged. "Both?" He smiled. "Combination?"

"Fine, as long as I get a shake too."

"Milkshake?"

"I'll kill you."

"Aw, no you wouldn't." He bumped her playfully. "Killing the baby daddy is a great big faux pas, remember?"

"Why did I choose you over Aunt Dorothy again?"

"Because you wanted Camille to have her Jarod," Jarod answered her. "Jarod wanted his Camille too?" He gently pressed his hand against hers, flat. The gesture made her glance at him again. "Ready to go home?"

She waited a minute and then nodded. "A home that moves wherever we go. Strange."

"But better than the home, that's never really a home." Besides? It wasn't the building they would be in that was the home. Just the people they were with. They brought home with them.

So in the end.

Whenever he was with them.

He was now home.

The End





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