

**A
MILLION
DAYZ
BOOK ONE**

CHAPTER ONE

“Pilot”

“Shit.”

They called him Charles “*Sonny Jean*” Victor once. A millionaire. A musician. A man who signed checks thicker than his patience. Now? A former inmate who escaped when the zombie outbreak told him to.

He ended up on top of an abandoned school bus for a couple of days. Back then, Sonny was just a kid’s nickname that stuck too long. After the world folded, it became all he took with him, along with his journal. Everything else was stolen because business names didn’t matter much when the dead filled the streets.

“Shit,” he said again as he lit his cigarette.

Only the dead could hear his useless cry in the summer of 2020.

This was the new Million Bay city — the jewel of Million State, literally, the millionth state carved into the country of ZTARRA. Million State was as big as Texas and California combined. Now, just ash and silence ruled after the “fall.”

Some believed the curse started in the fall of 2019.

A Creole 30-year-old. 6'1" with ribs sharp from hunger and whiskey, tattoos mapping choices and sins down his left arm. A beige fedora shadowed his face, and black sunglasses flashed over the gold medallion on his chest. His white T-shirt was torn and bloody, checkerboard sneakers scuffed. Besides the medallion, he’d stacked on more jewelry—a watch, rings,

diamond studs in both ears—all clinging to a ghost of who he'd been. His weapons? An axe the shape of a rock-and-roll guitar, a pawn-shop machete, and a combat knife he'd brought from the prison. With his ego, everything was a fashion statement. Sonny stood on top of an abandoned school bus like a king of nowhere.

Growls came from beneath the bus. A dozen claws grinding on steel. Sonny lit his crumbled cigarette again, letting the smoke curl like a small flag of defiance, and tipped the last of his whiskey through the grates. It splashed across the ivory face below. They weren't rotten corpses like in the movies. Their skin stayed smooth, and their wounds healed quickly. People hadn't named them yet. Later, they'd call them *Greapers*. For now, they were just the reason the world had emptied.

BOOM!

Sonny dropped down from the bus, boots ringing against metal.

GRRRR

SPLIT!

The axe-guitar sang, blade splitting zombie skull with a wet crack. He moved again, a man who'd forgotten how to be gentle.

WHACK! SPLIT!

The dead swarmed fast when hunger drove them. He swung harder, screaming at the top of his lungs from exhaustion. Striking the dead was a workout.

SPLAT!

Why didn't he just steal guns? Back in March 2019, the Million State government confiscated all civilian weapons for "official use." The cities had

been bloodbaths from 2010 to 2019. After Governor Gretchen Thorne won in 2016, her plan took hold, and the sweep finished by 2019. A few months later, the outbreak hit. Planned? Doubtful. Some poor bastard got sick, died, and turned the rest of the world into a rumor.

THWACK!

Another swing took a Greaper's head. Sonny was drenched in sweat.

Then the pothole found him as he was backing up.

CRACK!

“AHHH!!!!”

An ankle shattered, teeth closed in, and pain tore him apart. Sonny braced for the end.

“AHHH!!!”

The Greapers dug into him.

But the end never came. Flesh stitched back together, ugly and slow, courtesy of the prison serum that had ruined him.

Charles “Sonny Jean” Victor could not die. Not here. Not yet. Maybe not for another Million Dayz.

Let's take a step back to the year 2018, before shit hit the fan.

CHARLES VICTOR (FLASHBACK)

April 17th, 2018

Before the world went to hell, Charles Victor had it all. A company, a team, a plan. He ran Million Bay Life Insurance as its CEO — a polished empire he'd taken over for his old friend Nathan Gem.

Nathan was an Italian man with slicked-back hair and the kind of arrogance only money could buy. He never stepped outside without a suit and tie, always looking like he belonged in front of a camera. Nathan had built the

business, but Charles became the machine. He put in the work, pushed the gears, kept the numbers climbing. Nathan... Nathan did *other* things outside the company. Things Charles didn't always ask about.

It wasn't a clean game, how he came to run the place. But by the time Charles claimed the seat at the top, he'd left the hustle behind. Or so he told himself.

Charles remembered the last meeting before everything unraveled. Standing in front of his team, running through projections and policies, already half thinking about the vacation he was about to take with Jamie — the woman who made him believe he could balance business with love.

Beside him moved Ebony. His assistant, his protégé. A beautiful black woman whom Charles always said resembled the singer Coco Jones. Ebony had started at the bottom and clawed her way up, step by step, every victory sharper than the last, to make the sales Vice President position. Charles had always treated her like a little sister, and seeing her polished in a bright red dress, her hair cut into a sharp bob, lips painted dark crimson — it almost made him proud seeing her on point after their business meeting. Ebony wasn't just an assistant anymore; she was proof that he could build people the way he built companies.

She slipped his coat over one arm and handed him a folder. Her eyes carried the same quiet intensity they always had.

"Here's your coat and your documents," she said. "You need to make sure to call Nathan. He's been trying to contact you for months now."

Charles shook his head, irritation edging his voice.

"Ebony, I told you — I'll call him when I can."

After stepping out of his office, the last image burned into Charles's mind was of two colleagues he saw inside his office bent over a chessboard, pieces frozen mid-battle. One colleague was the CFO, the good guy Chandler. The other guy was the claims Vice President of Million Bay Life, whom Chandler offered the role to, like Charles, with Ebony.

"Use the rook."

That was the last thing he ever said inside that office to the Vice President.
It was so long ago, he didn't even remember the guy's name.

SUNNY JEAN
(PRESENT)

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

An hour after Sonny shattered his ankle and fought three more Greapers while being torn open, the bone clicked back into place like a chiropractic adjustment. The sun smacked him across his shoulders, hot and merciless, as if the summer sky itself wanted to remind him he was still alive.

Ahead loomed a two-story house, the kind Million Bay had once been proud of—faded orange paint curling off its bones, windows fogged with grime. In this world, people claimed places with signs, fire pits, and watch shifts. This one was hollow. No neighbors, no fences. Just a naked field stretching around it like it was waiting for football practice.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Hello?”

The door groaned open. A wall of air hit him—rank and layered. The sour musk of mildew. Rot and urine, or something faintly metallic, like pennies left too long in the rain. It was the smell of lives interrupted and never cleaned up.

Inside, the living room looked like a crime scene paused mid-gesture.

Couches overturned, stuffing chewed by mice. A flat-screen lay spiderwebbed on the floor, a child's drawings scattered like confetti beneath it. Sonny moved through slowly, shoulders tight, cigarette tucked behind his ear like a fuse waiting to be lit.

Every step was a test of the seams holding this world together.

The kitchen was worse—a grave of trash bags split open, roaches dragging threads of old food. The freezer hummed faintly, empty but clotted with

frost, like it still believed in electricity. Sonny shut the door gently, as if closing a coffin, and climbed the stairs.

A child's room opened to the right, walls still painted pink. The curtains clumped together like folded hands.

He pulled them apart out of habit—light was truth. It told you if a place was truly abandoned or still claimed by someone desperate enough to fight.

“BABABABABA!”

Across the yard, movement.

A man in a trench coat, scarf flapping, staggered through a knot of Greapers. His beanie slipped as he ran, arms flailing wildly. The man screamed—a thin, cracked sound that cut through the afternoon silence.

Sonny's chest tightened. People were rarer than bullets now. When one begged for help, something deep in him—the ghost of habit, maybe mercy—leaned toward the window. The guy was just too far to rescue. Sonny closed the curtains out of fear that the second-to-last guy in the world might be torn apart in front of him.

He walked out of the little girl's bedroom and into the main room.

Grrrrr!

Sonny could hear growls coming out of the main bathroom.

He walked inside.

The bathroom brought him back. The tile was yellowed by the sun. In the tub: a mountain of a man, wrists cuffed behind his back, a rope knotted to the shower head. Six-eight in overalls, skin green-tinged and slack, eyes milky and gone.

A Greaper left to rot upright.

On the sink, a family photo: the same man smiling in a straw hat, a wife with hazel eyes, a little girl in pigtails. Ordinary. Whole. Now, only the picture was alive. The back of it was written “**Nomen**” in blood.

Sonny lit his cigarette, rage and dread curling together in his lungs. He was down to his last four sticks. He took out his combat knife and drove the

blade down, skull cracking under the weight of his hand. A motion done
with the flat patience of a man signing his name.

In the fogged mirror, his reflection stared back. With one finger, he traced
letters—

S-O-N-N-Y.

A boy's name. A reminder of before. He scrubbed over it and rewrote:

S-U-N-N-Y.

It sat heavier, different. A suit was pulled from the back of a closet.

BAM!

Then the knock came. One, tentative.

BAM!BAM!

Again, harder.

Then a chorus.

BAM!BAM!BAM!BAM!BAM!BAM!BAM!BAM!

"Help us!"

A voice thin, frayed, desperate.

Human.

Female.

Sunny sat on the sink, paralyzed by the thought that more people were out
there.

Should he help them?

The thought sat on his brain for a minute.

All of a sudden—

BOOOOOM!

The door gave.

The female voice and two others were yelling beneath the stairwell. They
crashed in like a storm, dragging a couch to block the entry as the dead
poured in behind them.

Sunny (fka SONNY) could hear the sounds swallowing the house.

Growls. Screams.

Splintering wood.

His heart pounded with expectations to do exactly what he's feeling in the moment: react.

"Keep it steady!" The girl screamed.

The three of them fought to barricade the front door. She was caucasian with two dirty blonde ponytails. A large red scar across her right eye made her look like a creative wreckage artpiece. The girl looked to be 18, if not a bit older, wearing a tank top and mid-thigh shorts. She wielded metal drumsticks like they were part of her arms, jabbing and slashing Greapers to decrease the strength in their numbers, her face lit by fury. A young man, tank top ripped, threw his weight against the barricade, dog tags clinking as he cursed. The other woman in scrubs, eyes wide above her mask, tried to hold the line with shaking hands.

Then the dead broke through.

RAHHHH!

BAM!

The room exploded.

Blood sprayed the walls.

SPLAT! SLIT!

The drumsticks cracked skulls like snare hits. The young man's fists swung wildly. The woman in scrubs stumbled, knife almost piercing her own flesh from the impact of a dozen Greapers closing in. Sunny watched from the stairwell a beat too long. Then he moved.

CRACK!

The axe fell heavy and sure, splitting heads, spraying gore.

Sunny's movements were cold, practiced — less fighting, more execution.

RAAAAHHH!!

“AHHH! HELP!”

A zombie grabbed the girl by the arm; *THWACK!* Sunny buried the blade into its chest and shoved her free.

Another lunged at the nurse; Sunny tore it back and crushed its skull into the wall.

The house thundered with violence. A chorus of death rattles.

And then... silence.

Breathing.

The last greaper fell, twitching. The air smelled of iron. The only sound left was the panting of four survivors in a wrecked living room.

The girl leaned against the wall, chest heaving, blood dripping off her drumsticks. Her scarred eye locked on Sunny. Afternoon sunlight cut through the busted living-room windows, turning dust into gold. Bodies lie in a sloppy pile on the rug.

“Thanks, dude,” she said breathlessly. “I’m Jessica. Everyone calls me Skratch. That’s Nancy and her dude Rocky.” She jerked a thumb toward the couple by the doorway.

Sunny slid his sunglasses up and kept his silence.

Jessica called after him.

“You’re not even gonna shake my hand? How rude.”

Sunny headed upstairs and went back inside the main bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

Rocky snorted, digging through a battered duffel. He was a broad-shouldered, twenty-something Hispanic man, the kind who smelled faintly of motor oil and disinfectant—a survivor who knew stitches as well as fists. He wore a dirty tank top and jean shorts. Tattoos sleeved both arms, and a thick metal chain set off his good looks, like Sunny’s medallion.

“What’s his deal?” Rocky asked, annoyed.

“Don’t, Rocky,” Jessica said without looking up. “I’ll handle him.”

Rocky froze, then slapped the duffel with a flat hand.

“Shit! I dropped my medical bag.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Really? Your head hasn’t been in the game, huh?”

“It’s important, Skratch.” Rocky’s voice tightened. He patted his pockets like the supplies might materialize. “I need to find it. We can’t stay without my meds.”

Nancy stepped forward. She was lean and steady, wearing faded pink scrubs that had seen better days—the kind of woman who had held more fractures and worse mornings than she’d ever admit. She had a cut on her left cheek from battling Greapers. Her hands moved carefully, like someone who’d learned how to calm panic with touch and words.

“I’ll go with you, babe,” she said softly.

Jessica threw her hands up in mock betrayal.

“Great! I’m losing two of my friends at the moment.”

She nudged a corpse off a chair with her boot.

“Okay. You guys go find it. I’ll clean up this shit.”

Rocky shouldered his pack.

“We won’t be long. Nancy, give her the flare gun.”

Nancy offered a small, efficient nod and handed Skratch a dented flare pistol. Her voice was flat with habit, not fear.

“Here you go.”

Jessica took it with exaggerated gratitude.

“Thanks! Maybe I can look for some bullets while I’m at it.”

“Why don’t you come with us then?” Nancy asked, already reaching for the door.

Jessica exhaled, half-sigh, half-smile.

“Because we need this place. We need a base.” She patted the floor like she was claiming ground on behalf of the three of them. “And someone’s gotta stay and keep the lights on.”

“We need medical supplies, Skratch,” Rocky said. He looked at her with the patient irritation of a man used to her theatrics.

“Yeah, you guys go. I’ll clean up the Greapers.” Jessica said the word loudly, nearly proud. ***She coined the term “Greapers.”***

Rocky winced. His ribcage felt split with how open his wound was from before arriving at the house.

“Stop calling them that, Jess—”

“What? Grim reapers? Greapers? Why not? This is still our world. We can call it whatever the fu—” She bit off the curse into a laugh when Nancy raised an eyebrow.

Nancy’s smile was small and warm.

“See? You’re working on your cussing.”

Jessica shrugged, then smacked the front door so the dead inside settled into silence.

“I’ll talk to pretty boy upstairs. Go. Now. This place is safe enough for a girl like me.”

Rocky grabbed Nancy’s hand. “Just be ca—”

“Shut up. Go find your stuff already.” Jessica waved them out the door with a flourish.

“Okay. Let’s go, Nancy.” Rocky hustled after her, shoulders tight with purpose.

The door shut. For a beat, the room exhaled. Jessica looked at the pile of bodies, then at the dented flare gun in her hand. She pushed the couch to barricade the broken door.

“I need some fucking headphones,” she muttered into the silence.

CHARLES VICTOR
(FLASHBACK)

April 18th, 2018

The morning began with Charles Victor and his girlfriend, Jamie, checking into a penthouse suite on the 54th floor of Newton Island. The place was glass and chrome heaven — the kind of spot the wealthy used for proposals, anniversaries, or affairs they wanted to remember. Charles didn't care for the pomp.

By afternoon, he steered Jamie down to a greasy local diner called "Wine Diner" instead, a booth sticky with history, hamburgers dripping juice onto wax paper. It was their first real date before the money, before the success, before everything turned.

Jamie, with her delicate frame and features not unlike Margot Robbie's, still carried the polish of her modeling days. Petite, blonde, with a small-town smile that softened her sharper edges. Since meeting Charles, she'd opened a restaurant with her father — her own dream stitched into reality. He, once a rockstar and now a reluctant CEO, liked the irony: a former musician and a former model, still standing together. In his mind, it was proof that not every beautiful thing had to break.

The TV above the counter flickered with the afternoon news.

A reporter's voice cut over the diner hum:

"Students are calling them suicide pills... dozens dead across the state."

The school logo flashed across the screen.

Charles froze.

Million Bay High.

His old school.

"Turn the channel, please?" Charles asked the waiter, his voice flat.

Jamie turned her head, her southern drawl sliding out like habit.

“You’re in cahoots with those pill poppers?”

Charles chewed down on a fry, jaw stiff.

“I don’t wanna talk about it. Nathan set that up a week ago without my knowledge.”

The screen switched to a hotline number. *Million Bay Life Insurance*. The company name stung more than the grease in his throat.

“At least you’re doing a good deed,” Jamie said, smiling faintly, trying to lighten the moment.

Charles wiped his mouth with a napkin, expression shadowed.

“No good deed ever came from Nathan. Not even when he helped me start the business.”

Jamie shook her head, clicking open a compact mirror to check her lipstick.

“So negative,” she teased.

That was his opening.

Charles grinned.

He slid his hand into his jeans pocket and pulled out a small box, setting it on the table between the ketchup bottle and half-eaten fries. The move was casual, almost careless, but the glint in his eye betrayed him.

Jamie’s reflection caught the gesture.

She snapped the mirror shut.

“What is that?”

“Open it,” Charles said, grinning through another fry.

She did.

A diamond, heavy and bright enough to turn heads, winked up from its velvet nest.

Her breath hitched.

“Oh my God. Oh my God!”

“So... will you?” Charles asked. Rockstar image was cool on the surface, but his fingers tapped the table in anticipation.

“Yes, baby! Yes!” Jamie’s voice cracked with joy. She vaulted across the booth, kissing him hard, laughter spilling over.

“My man asked me to marry him, y’all!” she shouted.

The diner erupted — handclaps, whoops, strangers grinning like old friends. Fry grease and celebration hung in the air, a moment bottled in time.

The waiter came over to reward the couple.

“How about some celebratory wine at the Wine Diner, guys?”

“Two glasses,” Charles smiled.

The waiter headed to the kitchen. A man wearing a coat walked by, sliding powder into two wine glasses. The man left the glasses displayed for the waiter, who grabbed them two minutes later, as well as an expensive Pinot Grigio.

Hours later, everything collapsed.

SUNNY JEAN

(PRESENT)

Back at the house, the field looked like a shallow graveyard. Jessica, aka Skratch, was down on her knees in the hot dirt — bra and panties, muscles tight and dark with sweat, boots caked in mud. The sun beat into her back without mercy. She didn’t bother with a shirt; heat and work had made modesty useless. Her hands moved like instruments, shoveling earth with the same rhythm she once used on drums. Each throw of dirt was practiced efficiently. Each body was a weight and a job and a story she refused to carry in memory.

“Alright,” she said when the last cavity was filled, her voice flat as a spade on concrete.

“That’s the last one.”

She stood, shoulders squared, and walked toward the back door. A generator sat cold and black against the wall like an offering. She flipped the choke, yanked the cord. The engine coughed and then roared to life, filling the yard with a steady hum.

“Wow,” she breathed, watching the meter needle dip toward half.

Gas.

Usable.

Power.

It was a small miracle.

Inside, she climbed the stairs barefoot. The daughter’s room was a thrifted, sun-bleached dollhouse: pink curtains bunched like folded hands, a closet full of tiny clothes. Jessica — four-eleven on a good day — fished around and found things that would fit: a white V-neck, blue jeans, a scuffed black leather jacket. She grabbed a towel, careful with the holes, and tested the bathroom. The shower coughed warm water like it still remembered service.

She washed quickly, the spray rinsing grit from her skin, then dressed in stolen normalcy: jeans pulled on, a V-neck that smelled faintly of someone else’s perfume. For a second, she let herself feel human.

Then the knocking started.

Faint at first.

A polite tap.

Louder.

Then a chorus.

“Hey — you okay in there?” she called, perched on the other side of the thin door.

“Go away!” Sunny shouted back.

She opened her mouth to answer with her usual bravado, even though he was being a dick.

“I found a generator out back. Warm water — we could make this place something.” She laughed, the sound too loud. “It’s been a while since I had a shower, let alone warm water.”

CHRRRR!

A voice boomed outside through a bullhorn, cutting her off:

“Attention! Attention! If you are inside this home, you must evacuate now.”

Jessica froze, the towel slipping for a heartbeat. She looked out the hallway window and saw a man in a crisp black suit beside a spotless Cadillac. He was sharp as a razor: jet-black hair slicked back, aviators shielding his face, tailored jacket like armor. He looked like a man who had never dug anything up with his own hands.

The man’s voice carried again, calm and dangerous.

“We are with the Nomen Land. We have found this place first. Come out...right now.”

Sunny remembered the *Nomen Land* name from the back of the photograph, written in blood. He tensed up.

“I could use your help right now,” Jessica said.

“Just get out of here.” Sunny muffled.

“Ugh! Fucker!” she said as she pulled out her metal drumsticks and marched downstairs like a band member late for rehearsal.

She removed the couch and opened the front door.

The guy with the bullhorn blushed, slicking his hair back.

“Hello, beautiful. My name is Simon. My friend in the car is Butch. We’re with Nomens Land. Consider this your hotel stay. Hand over the keys.”

Jessica laughed, too sour to be proud.

“Nice pitch. There’s no way you own this place. Show some proof.”

Simon didn’t bother.

“I don’t need proof, toots. We run an organization. Powerful people. You find the place by yourself?”

“No, and I’m not moving,” Jessica said, planting her feet and crossing her arms. “If you want me out, you’ll have to kill me.”

The guy smirked, stepped forward, and slid a knife out with the practiced ease of someone who expected obedience.

“I like a fight,” he said. “You gonna be one of those regrets?”

She didn’t flinch.

From the Cadillac, a man with curly red hair and a fedora — Butch — rolled his window down.

“The bitch is crazy!” Butch yelled in his high pitch raspy voice.

“WHO ARE YOU CALLIN’ A BITCH!?” Jessica exploded.

“I got her, Butchy!” Simon yelled.

GRRR!

A Greaper from the side of the house roared.

It sounded like a little girl.

“I got it!” Butch yelled. He carried a crossbow, which in this new world was about as close to a firearm as people could find. He looked ridiculous; his pants rode low and exposed a sliver of buttcrack.

Simon seized Jessica by the throat and drove her into the doorframe, pinning her against the crooked brass numbers — 519 pressing into her spine like cold teeth.

“You want to know how I got my name,” he asked. His voice was menacing.

Butch slunk out to check the side, crossbow ready. A chained figure half-hidden at the side of the house — the little girl from the photograph upstairs — shambled into view, one arm severed, a chain around her neck.

THOOF!

Butch fired his bolt like a man playing hero on a stage.

"I shot the bitch!" he howled when the thing dropped.

Sunny had been watching from the nearby brush, axe slung on his back. He escaped through the back door after seeing Jessica being choked by Simon.

Sunny moved like a shadow finding its shape, slow and deliberate. He stalked up behind Butch, the smell of sweat and cheap cologne in the air. He didn't hesitate. Blade in hand, he cut a shallow line across the man's throat.

SLIT! GSHH.

Butch gurgled and collapsed, blood pooling at his feet.

"Butchy?" Simon called, panic bleeding into his voice.

PLACK!

Jessica poked Simon with her metal stick, piercing his lower abdomen.

"Ouch! You bitch!" Simon responded with a smack to her face.

Sunny saw that and immediately saw red. His boots stomped into the front yard. Simon started bleeding out. He held his wound and met in the middle of patched grass, meeting his fate.

Sunny got closer.

Simon wept. "Wh-who are y-"

SPLIT!

The axe found bone and brain with a clinical crack. Simon rushed, startled, and Sunny met him with the heavy business of ending a man who chose to be the enemy.

The 5th man left in the world in Sunny's eyes.

"Who are y-"

SPLACK!

The crack of the skull echoed like a snapped branch.
Simon's body crumpled; Sunny's axe rested on his head for a breath before
he yanked it free.

The Cadillac's engine dropped from a roar to a hush.
"You okay?" Sunny panted, wiping his blade on the grass.
Jessica gripped the flare gun in her fist and stared at him, astonishment
and something like respect bleeding together.
"Yeah. I think so," she stammered. "I—I didn't expect you to be that kind of
person."

"I tried not to be," Sunny said.

He nodded toward the road.

"We should go find your friends."

She hesitated, eyes flicking to the ruined house.
"Y-you sure you don't wanna stay and guard this place?" she asked, her
small voice oddly hopeful in this ruined world.
"Fuck this place," Sunny said. "We need to find them. These people seem
dangerous."

She grabbed her new leather jacket off the back of a lawn chair and
climbed into the passenger seat of the Cadillac as if she belonged there.
Sunny opened the driver's door and paused, taking in the car's clean
leather and faint scent of apple air freshener. It stung like a memory of
normalcy.

"Where are we going?" Jessica asked as the engine turned over.
"For some reason," Sunny said, hands tightening on the wheel, "I've got a
feeling they found a better location."

She looked at him, searching his face.

"What's your name again?"

"Charles," he said. "But friends called me Sunny Jean."

They drove off, dust swallowing the house and the shallow graves behind them. The road unspooled like another chance — or a promise of trouble.

Either way, it carried them forward.

The funny part about this moment? “LOVE” by Nat King Cole blared through the car speakers.

“Is anyone else alive out here besides you three?” Sunny asked.

“Tons,” Jessica responded as she sifted through the glove compartment.

CHARLES VICTOR (FLASHBACK)

April 18th, 2018

Charles and Jamie returned to their penthouse suite drunk on celebration, drunk on each other. Champagne fogged the windows, and the city glittered below like scattered coins. He had proposed hours earlier in a move both careless and perfect — sliding the box across a table like a gambler dealing cards, watching Jamie scream “yes” as if the whole diner had agreed with her.

Now, back at the hotel, they were still riding that high.

The elevator ride blurred.

They kissed against the hallway wall, stumbled through the door, and collapsed into the suite.

Jamie kicked off her heels, flung herself on the bed, and stared at the diamond on her finger until the stones winked her reflection back.

“Tonight was perfect,” she said, breathless. “Do we have any more wine? Champagne?”

“Room service should be bringing up champagne,” Charles replied, loosening his tie. He disappeared into the bathroom, swapping the CEO's

casual wear for a robe and boxer briefs. They had promised each other a movie, but Jamie had hinted at something more.

The knock came while Charles was still inside.

“Babe, could you get that?” he called.

Jamie padded barefoot to the door, socks scuffing the floor.

The rolling tray rattled as she pulled it in.

“Thank you,” she muttered, shutting the door.

When Charles came out, she was frowning.

“Room service was being so weird,” she said. “I couldn’t even see his face.”

Charles waved it off, sipping from the fresh bottle.

“It’s this generation, love. Nobody knows how to talk anymore.”

She slipped close, kissing him down his stomach, eyes lifting into his. He loved it when she did that. He raised the champagne to his lips, his watch glinting under the suite lights, tattoos stark against his arm. For a moment, this felt like the life — wealth, a woman who adored him, the city below wrapped in a full moon.

Then the phone rang.

“Shit... Ebony,” he muttered.

“I thought you told her to hold your calls,” Jamie said.

“I did. Clients are dragging their payments. Give me two minutes.”

“Two,” she said sharply, settling back on the couch with her glass.

Charles answered, stepping onto the balcony.

“Hello?”

“Charles, it’s Eb—!”

A deeper voice cut in.

“Hello, Charles.”

His blood chilled.

Nathan.

Old friend.

Old problem.

Charles forced a smile into his tone.

“Nate. I was gonna call you.”

Nathan laughed, slow and venomous.

“Excuses. Excuses. I must say, standing in Ebony’s house, sipping her red wine... looks like you pay your associates very well.”

“That’s my place. I let her use it,” Charles snapped.

Nathan ignored him.

“You know, Charles, I deserved more respect. After all, I helped build your empire. And now you’re out here playing family man, ignoring my calls?”

“I told you,” Charles growled, teeth clenched. “I’m done with that life. Million Bay Life Insurance is clean. I’m keeping it that way.”

Nathan chuckled darkly.

“You think you’re out? Cute. But the Torio brothers don’t share your optimism.”

Charles froze.

“What do you mean?”

“They’ve got their eyes on you. Loose ends, Charles. They don’t like loose ends. I tried to keep them at bay, but... You know how they get.”

Charles cut the call short, hands shaking. He looked back inside.

Jamie was humming softly to herself, sipping champagne, still glowing with the ring on her finger.

His throat tightened.

The Torio brothers were four mobster brothers who owned Million Bay. Charles broke one of their noses for trying to flirt with Jamie. Since then, they’ve used every excuse to shut him down, including extortion.

Then — glass shattered.

PSSHHH!!!!

Charles spun. Jamie stood by the balcony, but she was wrong now. Her eyes burned bloodshot, her face contorted, the beauty he loved melting into something unrecognizable.

“Jamie?” he whispered.

She lunged.

Her movements were jerky, unnatural.

She grabbed his phone and threw it off the balcony. She snarled and hurled the champagne flute at him. It burst against the wall.

“You ruined me, Charles!” she rasped, her voice shredded and inhuman.

He stepped forward, panicked.

“Baby, stop! What’s happening to you?”

She climbed the balcony railing, white dress whipping in the wind, the ring on her finger catching the moonlight. Then, with trembling hands, she slid it off.

Charles’s stomach dropped.

Jamie hurled the diamond into the night. Fifty-five stories down, it vanished in the dark.

“Jamie, no—please, get down!” His voice cracked.

She turned to him, tears carving through her warped face.

“I don’t feel good, baby” she sobbed. “I don’t feel good.”

Charles staggered, his own body twitching now, a sickness rippling through his veins. The suicide pill was inside their system unbeknownst to them. A triggering sensation where the heart explodes and the brain couldn't care less.

SLIP.

“My ring,” she gasped, eyes wide.

Then she stepped back and leapt.

“NO!” Charles screamed.

Thud.

Her body disappeared into the void. It shattered across the front of the hotel.

Ligaments.

Twisted neck.

Seconds later, the muffled roar of screams rose from the street below.

Guests gathered, voices lifting in horror, pointing upward.

“It was him! The guy on the balcony!” someone shouted.

Charles stumbled inside, slamming the bathroom door. His reflection stared back pale and broken. His fists hammered the wall, skin splitting on tile. He dropped onto the toilet seat, head in his hands, trying to breathe through the worst night of his life.

Hours passed.

Charles spent what felt like an eternity locked in that bathroom, the spring air outside ringing with a city that had no idea his world had just split open.

Fever crawled under his skin and made the familiar rooms tilt; whatever had touched Jamie had crawled into his blood and wired his head into static.

He tried to tear himself apart and, in his own frantic logic, thought breaking his face would unmake whatever was unmaking him.

The knock at the door came like thunder.

“Police! Open the goddamn door now!” one voice barked.

“Open the fucking door!” another followed.

The sound should have cut clean through the fog, but it only made Charles louder, angrier, and more convinced that violence could fix the night.

Charles smashed his palm into his jaw three times until his teeth rattled. He banged his head against the bathroom door until the skin split and the

world smeared red. He saw himself in the mirror—someone else's eyes inside his own—and for a maddening second, he thought he could trade places with that other man and walk out whole.

Instead, he pummeled the wood until the frame gave, nails splintering, hinges screaming. He could have opened the door like any sane man, but sanity had been shelled out of him along with champagne and promises.

When the door finally burst, he fell through it, raw and scratched and smelling like blood and cheap cologne. He staggered toward the balcony with a single, terrible plan: he would fly back to her. He pictured himself catching Jamie in mid-air, a battered, redeemed hero sealing the wrong with an impossible rescue.

The vision was awful and beautiful and utterly unreachable.

BAM!

Before he could mount that final, cinematic stunt, the suite filled with boots and uniforms.

Hands grabbed him, shoved him to the carpet.

He landed face-first in his robe, the world reduced to the metallic taste of panic.

"You're under arrest for murder, shithead!" one of the officers snarled into his ear as they cuffed him and hauled him up.

Charles lay there for a second, breath ripping, robe open, boxers exposed, and a single word pushed out of him like smoke.

"Shit!"

The city glittered through the broken glass, indifferent as ever. The chapter closed on sirens and the flat, inevitable rhythm of men in uniforms walking him away.

Shit.

CHAPTER TWO

“3 MONTHS ON IRONSIDE ISLAND...”

CHARLES VICTOR

July 4th, 2018

The cellblock groaned with noise—shouts echoing off concrete, doors slamming like iron hearts.

Charles sat hunched on his bunk, a pen pressed to the battered journal that had become his only outlet. The mattress beneath him was thin, barely a pad over steel, but he wrote anyway, carving pieces of himself into the page.

“It’s funny how life’s rug gets yanked out faster than you blink,” he scrawled. “Three months in Ironside Correctional Facility, and every day feels like a fistfight with my own head.”

The pen scratched on, his jaw tight.

“Nathan—yeah, that so-called brother—flipped my life on its head. Cleared my accounts, framed me for Jamie’s death. And the Torio brothers? They didn’t just steal my insurance empire—they paraded Ebony out front like some poster for progress, while they pulled the strings from the shadows. My face was on every news channel. Public enemy. Anyone who knew me suddenly forgot my number.”

He stopped to flex his cramped fingers, staring at the words as if they might erase themselves. His breath came heavier, the memories still raw.

“And that poison they spiked me with? Nathan hired someone to put pills inside our champagne glasses. Twenty-four hours of hell—long enough to fry my brain, leave me puking on the floor, and then cuffed, booked, and sentenced for murder. I drank my alcohol at the diner, Jamie drank hers at the hotel. Fifteen years for nothing.”

BRRRR!

The journal trembled in his hands. He shoved it under the thin mattress when he heard boots and voices in the hall. The cell door clanged open, and Lefty, aka Leftover, walked in—mid-twenties, dark-skinned, a wiry frame with a messy afro and a pick still jammed in the back of it.

“Don’t bother going to the library,” Lefty said, his East Coast drawl thick with sarcasm. “Some dude gettin’ jumped in there.”

Charles gave him a bitter smirk.

“Damn. Can’t even get some peace to read, huh?”

“Guess not,” Lefty muttered, dropping onto his bunk. The springs groaned under his weight.

Charles leaned back, staring at the ceiling. His hand itched for the journal again. He slid it farther onto his lap and added another block of ink, words run together in a hurried script as if he feared the light would go out.

“Leftover, my cellmate, is my only company. Got his name from eating out of dumpsters before he got popped for swiping the mayor’s wife’s necklace.

Thirty years for that? Wild. Me? Half. The Coyotes—the resident prison gang—hated my guts after I killed one of their guys in self-defense. Earned a rep. Still, this place is a jungle, and gladiators like me had to keep proving why we are standing. I’m bad at writing about myself, but I hope whoever reads this journal will be inspired to do much... much better than me. The rise is much better than the fall, but sometimes you have to fall to rise again.”

He signed the line with a quick scrape of ink: Charles Victor—a name that felt both too large and suddenly absurd on the page. He slid the journal under the mattress where the thin foam met metal and let his hands fall to his knees.

SUNNY JEAN
(PRESENT)

The Cadillac hummed down the cracked road, its tires chewing through weeds that had burst from the asphalt. Twenty minutes had passed since they had left the blood-soaked house, and Jessica Volkov—Skratch to the world that remained—was already restless. She hunched over a paper road map she'd yanked from the glovebox, the pages rattling against her knees as she turned them the wrong way up and back again.

"Who even reads these anymore?" she muttered, her pale face set in irritation. "Bring back cell phones, man."

Sunny kept his eyes forward, hands locked on the wheel. Silence suited him; her chatter was just another reminder of how loud the world could be, even after it had ended.

"You've been quiet since we left that house," Jessica pressed, twisting in her seat. "You wanna tell me what's going on?"

He ignored her.

His jaw worked against the cigarette filter clamped in his teeth.

POW!

Her fist jabbed into his arm, sharp and deliberate.

"Ouch!" He flinched, glaring sideways. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"Oh, now you wanna talk?" She shot back, scarred eye narrowing. "Why do you keep ignoring me? I feel like I've been kidnapped."

"I'm trying to keep my eyes on the road," he said, voice flat.

"I could've just driven if I knew it would be like this. God, dead people are one thing, but dead silence? That drives me crazy."

"That sounds like a personal problem."

Her second punch landed harder.

POW!

“Can you stop!?”

“Or what!?” she challenged, leaning across the console. “You gonna run back to the bathroom again?”

He exhaled through his nose, steadying his grip.

“Look, I’m only trying to help find your friends.”

“Bullshit,” she spat. “You’re just trying to do a good deed to make yourself feel better. Don’t worry—you’ll have plenty of time to save the world, man.”

His shoulders sagged.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say anything,” she sighed, softer this time. Her eyes searched the fields outside the window, watching Greapers hunched over a corpse in the distance.

“Compliment my looks or something. Everything’s a tornado right now. A rotten tornado.”

For a long stretch, the only sound was the rattle of the engine and the low groans of the undead outside the car. Jessica took deep breaths, trying to steady herself, while Sunny considered whether to break his own silence. He had always been shy in the old life, waiting for others to open doors. But maybe that luxury had burned out with the world.

Finally, he asked, “What’s your name?”

She turned back to him, surprised.

“Told you already. Jessica Volkov. Friends call me Skratch.”

“You never told me your last name.”

“What does it matter? My parents are gone. A last name is just a past name.”

“Why Skratch?”

Her lips curved into a smirk, though her blue eyes stayed sharp.

“You know, for someone who was quiet two minutes ago, you’ve sure got a lot to say now.”

“Not everyone’s worth talking to in this new life,” Sunny said. “Takes me a while to open up.”

“Well, become Greaper then,” she teased. “They talk to everybody.”

“You keep saying ‘Greapers.’ What does that mean?”

“Grim reapers.” She shrugged.

He let that sit.

Silence lapsed again, heavier this time, until her voice cracked it open.

“I got my nickname after this scar.” She traced the red line across her eye.

“Saved my friend from being beaten to death. We were at a band show. I was the drummer. Some girls came on stage talking shit. My friend Tori got hit in the head with a beer bottle. I went apeshit. Then some bitch grabbed me and cut my eye with a glass shard.”

Sunny’s brows lifted.

“That’s foul. Safe to say... it looks good on you, though. Every scar’s a story.”

She laughed under her breath.

“Where the fuck am I?” she whispered to herself, then louder,

“What about you? What’s your story?”

He hesitated, then offered.

“Charles Victor. Friends call me Sunny Jean. Nothing but an inmate who escaped. That’s all.”

“So you went to jail? For what?”

“Does it matter?”

“Uh, yeah,” she shot back. “You weren’t born in prison. You had to do something to get locked up.”

“They say I allegedly killed my fiancée,” he admitted.

Her jaw dropped.

“Damn. When?”

“2018.”

Her eyes widened.

“Victor? Holy shit. I remember your trial on TV! They called you ‘Charles Victor the Con-Victor.’”

He grimaced.

“That’s what y’all called me? I wouldn’t have known. I was locked away.”

“So did you really do it?”

“No.” His answer was sharp, immediate.

“Well, how did it happen?” she pressed. “Nobody’s arresting you for coming clean now.”

“Nothing to come clean about. She broke through the balcony window in our hotel room. Threw my phone. Then jumped. We were drunk.”

“Did she ever act like that before? Even close?”

“Jamie? Never. She was always an angel. Quiet.”

“Yeah, I can see why they locked you up, buddy.” Skcratch shook her head, voice dripping sarcasm. ““Oh yeah, she just threw my phone and decided to pretend she was a bird. Happens every day.””

His grip tightened on the wheel.

“See? That’s why I just ate my time on the island. No one believed me. I remember her eyes were always bright blue. But after a phone call I had with someone... they went red. She went to the balcony because I was there.”

Skscratch’s smirk faded. “Maybe she was on that SP.”

“That what?”

“Suicide Pill. Eyes go red or black, and then people... do shit. Break themselves.”

“So that’s really a thing. You know anyone who took it?”

“Tons. I was sixteen. Friends were dropping left and right. You’d better hope she didn’t.”

“I thought the same thing,” He shook his head. “After Jamie fell, I was feeling weird myself. Police caught me before I could... do damage. Then they sent me off to jail. I worked for a life insurance company, and I was set up by my friends.”

She let out a crooked laugh.

“Guess hell could wait, you lady killer. Fuck the past, those assholes are probably dead now anyway.”

For the first time, he gave her a look—half glare, half reluctant grin—and she returned it with a smile.

Sunny’s thoughts drifted dark. A reminder that he had been set up by Nathan, but it was too late to plot revenge. Too late to even want to have that horrific memory anymore.

“So how’d you meet Nancy and Rocky?” he asked.

Skratch’s expression softened.

“College. Rocky and I had class together. Nancy was our professor in the health class. Knows all the medical shit. They hooked up before the *fall*. Cozy as hell. I tagged along when the outbreak hit. We evacuated during my dance class. It was awful. So much blood. So much agony. I passed out. Threw up. But I’m used to it now. Guess I had to be.”

“You’re never used to it,” Sunny muttered. “I lost a lot of brothers. A lot of good bro—”

The car jolted violently.

SKIRRRRRR!

The front tire hit a rock and burst with a hiss.

WHOOOOOSH!!

The Cadillac spun, fishtailing across the road. Metal screamed against asphalt as the vehicle whipped into a 1080. When it finally slammed to a stop, both of them sat frozen, breathless, adrenaline clawing their throats. The world outside waited, silent except for the distant groans of the dead. “Oh my God, that was cool!” Jessica whooped, voice high and breathless.

“Yeah,” Sunny answered, voice thin. He kept his hands tight on the wheel even though the engine was dead and the world around them had gone strangely quiet.

A low, distant growl rolled up from somewhere south of the wreck like someone dragging a metal bucket. It was close enough to make the hair along Sunny’s neck tighten.

“They’re coming,” he said. He shoved the door open and pushed himself out before Jessica could react.

They ran. Greapers crashed through the tall grass a few yards away—more than a dozen, moving with that wrong, patient hunger.

Sunny pointed toward a children’s playground and a wide, empty field beyond it.

The sight of the red tunnel slide was a small mercy; it offered shadow and concealment.

“Under the slide,” he told her. “Get in. I’ll draw them off.”

“You can’t just leave me!” she shouted, scrambling behind the twisted hood.

“It’s too many,” he said without looking back. “You need to be hidden.”

“Ugh! At least take this.”

She fumbled in her bag and, hands trembling, thrust a dented flare gun at him.

He nodded and shoved it into his belt. She darted toward the tunnel like it was the last piece of safety on earth, popping down into its dark hollow.

Sunny watched her silhouette drop, then turned, shoulders squared, and stalked toward the ruined sedan.

“Alright, assholes. Follow me,” he called, voice flat and stupidly loud—bait, intended and ugly.

They came like wolves. They climbed the Cadillac with Sunny, claws scraping metal, teeth flashing. Sunny let them bunch around his legs until he could feel their cold fingers through the denim. He thought of the long,

stupid risk he was about to take—the flare, the fuel tank, a math of fire and heat that might turn his bones to ash along with theirs.

He fired.

BOOOOOOOOOM!

The explosion punched the afternoon.

Metal screamed into flame.

Greapers at the vehicle vaporized in a stink of flesh and char; those at the edge staggered into the heat and crumpled.

For a beat, the world narrowed to burning air and the sound of things collapsing.

Jessica thrust her head out of the slide at the sound. Her voice came thin and small through the tunnel.

“Sunny? Where are you?”

VROOM!

RAAAGGHHHH!

A dark thing pushed at the slide’s mouth and growled. She screamed, the sound sharp and animal, and a blade sank with a wet thunk.

SPLACK!

The Greaper toppled.

Jessica sat back against plastic, knife hand still shaking, eyes wide and uncomprehending.

“Fuck this!”

Jessica escaped to see something magical.

Sunny crawled out from the smoke as if he had only walked through a scorching alley.

Heat licked his skin; soot caked his hair, but his wounds were already knitting like a bad dream stitching itself closed.

Flesh pulled together under his palms; blood darkened and then paled into the silver of a forming scar.

Sunny was nude from his clothes being torn. He stepped toward the slide, breathing hard, and saw Jessica staring at him like someone who had just watched a miracle. He walked up to the dead Greaper Skratch, killed and snagged its clothes; XL-sized janitorial clothing.

“I’ll explain later,” he said, voice ragged.

“But—” she started. Her words fell apart and became breath.

Suddenly, a woman shuffled across the field in the opposite direction, wrapped in layers of grey and dirty white.

“Hey!”

Sunny called after her, because something about the woman—her hollowness, the way her clothes clung—felt like more than a stray.

“Hey!” they both yelled.

The woman stumbled into a shallow ditch.

Sunny rushed forward, and Jessica followed, curiosity and fear pushing them both.

Up close, she smelled of rot and old herbs; her face was a map of wrinkles and wart-pocked flesh.

“He’s coming,” the woman rasped.

“Who?” Sunny asked.

Seconds later.

Thoof!

An arrow shot the woman in her face. She crumbled to the ground.

The shooter stepped from behind a berm—camouflage, bandana across his face, thick goggles hiding his eyes.

The man didn’t speak. He moved like a man who had traded talk for action.

“Hey!”

Jessica barked at him.

She stomped over towards him as the dirty woman lay dead on the ground.

“What’s your problem, dude?” she shoved him.

He attempted to pull out his knife.

“Oh, what?” Jessica noticed. “You want a piece of me!? Do you!? Do you!?”

“Jess, relax.”

Sunny calmed her down as he approached.

“Why did you kill this woman?” he asked.

The man didn’t answer. Instead, he handed Sunny a brochure—crumpled paper with a faded header: DAVENPORT ZOO. He smoothed it open and pointed at a map scrawled in red circles. At the bottom, a scrawl read:

Beware of enemy witches.

“So she was a witch?” Sunny asked.

The man nodded once and, with the same silence, pulled a small bell from his pocket and shook it. The sound called horses—an absurd, improbable neigh answered—and a brown mare with a black mane trotted up, nostrils flaring in the hot air. The man patted the horse and gestured for them to mount.

Jessica’s skepticism flashed in her eyes.

“You expect us to depend on you?” she demanded.

“Jess. Go,” Sunny said. The map and the man and the horse felt like a handful of dice cast into the dark; sometimes you had to take what luck dealt.

She swung up into the saddle awkwardly, and Sunny vaulted after her, pressing his chest against her back as the horse moved off. The stranger rubbed a cloth across the mare’s nose, sent the animal west-southwest down the broken road, and let them go.

Sunny cradled the brochure in his hand as they rode. Red circles blinked like warnings he couldn’t ignore.

The Zoo—hidden along a long road between the south and north of Million Bay—had the ridiculous ring of a sanctuary: a place that made sense as a shelter and nonsense as a punchline.

Either way, it was something to aim for. Protection. Humans, Jessica gripped the saddle, the tension draining out of her little by little. She needed answers as to how Sunny Jean was able to heal.

“I’ll tell you everything on the way there,” he promised.

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

Summertime, Ironside Correctional Prison cafeteria was a theater of noise and cruelty. Trays clattered, voices rose in sharp bursts of laughter, and the smell of boiled beans and sweat pressed against every surface.

Charles stood in line because habit beat hunger—head down, shoulders tight, eyes tracking the movement around him.

In front of him loomed a white guy in a tight t-shirt, tattoos stretched like barbed wire across his thick arms. The man stood nearly a head taller than Charles, his blond buzz cut gleaming under the fluorescent lights. Behind him shuffled a younger brother in a beanie pulled low over his dreadlocks, smaller but restless, eyes darting like he was counting exits.

Charles didn’t notice the Coyote until it was too late. One of the gang members—thin, caucasian, sharp, dead-eyed—slipped out of line, moving with the casual confidence of a predator that knew no one would interfere.

Sfft. Sfft.

The blade whispered against flesh. Pain detonated in Charles’s hip, white and blinding. His breath broke into a grunt—raw and startled as he was shanked twice.

“Agh—!” The sound tore out of him as his knees buckled. The knife had slid just below the waist, biting into bone, and every nerve in his body screamed betrayal.

The Coyote didn’t linger. He walked past, smooth as if he’d tied his shoe, slipping the shank back out of sight.

Charles’s hand clutched his side, and it came away red.

“Hnnghh—!”

Something snapped inside him—not just pain, but a rage that boiled over the years of betrayal, lies, and cages.

He lunged.

BAM!

He crashed into the Coyote, tackling him to the ground. Their bodies slammed the concrete with a sound like a dropped carcass. Charles drove the man’s head into the floor once, twice—until liquid smeared under his palm and the skull gave a wet crack.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Then the guards moved.

They weren’t rescuers. They were referees with batons.

They tore Charles off the body with shouts and blows, their clubs and fists raining down. Each strike ripped his wound wider, blood seeping through his jumpsuit until it clung to him like a second skin.

“Throw that maggot inside the Hole!” barked Officer Richard. His voice was law in that place—deep, cruel, and final. Richard’s boots were planted wide, his stare colder than the cement walls.

The guards obeyed. They dragged Charles by the arms, his shoes scuffing lines into the floor, a trail of dark stains soaking into the tile.

Ten minutes through the bowels of Ironside felt like ten years; every bump of the concrete floor sent agony spiking through his hip. His head lolled, but he forced himself upright whenever he could, only to collapse again.

Down the stairs, into the dark.

The Hole.

The metal door groaned open. They heaved him inside like trash, his body landing hard on the slab of concrete.

The door slammed behind him with a finality that rang in his bones.

Charles's breath came ragged, blood pooling under him, hot against the cold floor.

"Hey!" His voice cracked, desperate. "I need some help!"

The guards laughed as they walked away, their boots echoing until they vanished.

"Hey!" he shouted again, weaker this time. "I need some *fucking* help—"

The cough came suddenly, wet, pulling blood into his throat. His strength folded with it, and he hit the ground hard, the concrete taking what was left.

Alone.

Only the dark, the stink of rust and mildew, and the sound of his own breath unraveling.

SUNNY JEAN

(PRESENT)

Sunny Jean rode in silence, the horse's steady rhythm carrying him and Jessica through miles of broken road. The chaos of fire and Greapers lingered like smoke behind them, but Jessica—tough as she acted—leaned into the ride with her thoughts hidden. Her scar caught the light when she turned to glance at him, her lips pressed tight. For once, she wasn't talking. Sunny explained the whole reason prison gave him his *gift*; a situation that would be later explained to the reader.

"What do you wanna name it?" Sunny finally asked.

"The horse?" Jessica squinted at the brown steed's swaying ears.

"Dimples."

Sunny snorted.

"Dimples?"

"Yeah. Cute. Like me." She smirked, and for the first time that day, their laughter spilled easily into the road.

It tugged something loose in him.

"When I was a kid, my foster family had a horse. Cherry. Fiery, stubborn as hell. She had scars all over her from her old owners before my dad bought her for cash. He said no animal deserved to be forgotten like that."

"Let me guess." Jessica tilted her head. "Cherry's temper got someone hurt?"

"Yep. Some punk pinched her tail for fun. I warned him, but he kicked her instead. Man, he was gone."

"Damn. Bet his family hated you for that."

"Hated us enough to sue us into the dirt. Lost the farm. Had to sell Cherry, too. Last thing I did was ride her to her favorite creek and let her go."

Jessica softened, her eyes on the horizon.

"They didn't deserve her anyway."

"Maybe not," Sunny murmured.

The horse, Dimples, whinnied as the zoo gates came into view.

Chain-link fences sagged under rust, but the guards looked anything but weak. Young men in their twenties, hard-eyed and hungry in burgundy hooded robes, emerged like watchmen from another century.

One, an Asian kid with matted hair, lifted his hand.

"Stop! Exit the horse now."

Sunny slid off first, then helped Jessica down.

They raised their hands as they walked toward the gate, the air thick with suspicion.

“Relax,” Sunny said, voice calm. “We were sent by a camo guy. He wears a mask.”

“Open the gate!” another guard barked.

The gate clanged open.

More guards closed in with arrows drawn tight.

“Wait here. Code-4 will evaluate you,” one of them ordered.

“Code-4?” Sunny’s jaw flexed. “Listen—the guy sent us here. He didn’t say shit.”

Sunny looked around.

“Are our friends here?”

“Who are your friends?” One of the guards asked. He had a commanding voice as it competed with the heat from the sun shining over his bald, copper-toned head.

“Just let us talk to Code-4,” Sunny said wearily.

“You don’t make demands here,” a guard snapped.

Sunny turned, eyes tightened.

“Who the fuck are you talking to?”

Hands moved before words did. One guard grabbed his shoulder. Sunny’s fist cracked into his face. Another looped an arm around his throat. Jessica lunged to help and caught a fist that dropped her to the dirt. Sunny ripped free, drove his knee into the attacker’s gut, then stormed toward the man who’d struck her. His axe hissed from his backstrap, raised to carve flesh—

“Stop!”

A woman strode forward like she owned the dirt itself. Tall, slim, bronze-toned, her lion’s mane of wavy hair caught the dim light, streaked with reds that burned against her trench coat. Black and White, with an English accent. Gold hoops swung at her ears with each step. Her amber eyes locked onto Sunny like she’d already measured his worth and filed it away.

“Let them go, #27,” she said, her accent clipped, aristocratic, every syllable sharpened like glass.

The guard hesitated, then released Sunny with a grunt. Jessica rubbed her jaw where the punch had landed, glaring through strands of dirty-blond hair.

“You people go by numbers?” she demanded.

The woman tilted her chin.

“Of course. We are Code-4. Welcome.”

Three more followed close behind her, trench coats cutting long shadows.

The second was pale as chalk, blond hair knotted into a severe bun, thin glasses flashing in the torchlight. She carried a ledger tucked under one arm, pen scratching notes even as she looked them over. Her lips pursed as she spoke in a refined London tone, cold as January rain. “Strangers at our gates... risky. But it seems you’ve been busy with our soldiers.”

The third sister loomed, tall and broad-shouldered, her rolled sleeves showing scarred brown arms. Brass knuckles gleamed at her hip, and her frizzed curls bounced as she folded her arms across her chest. She smirked, her husky East London accent slicing through the air. “Doesn’t look like much to me. But you swing fast, I’ll give you that.”

The fourth hung back, smaller, quieter. Mixed-race, with soft brown skin and rectangular glasses, she clutched a black notepad like scripture. She didn’t speak, only observed, her Manchester accent breaking the silence finally with a simple, measured note: “They’re nervous. She’s bleeding at the lip. He’s holding his weapon too tight.” Then she went back to scribbling.

Jessica’s eyes widened. “Creepy,” she muttered.

Sunny ignored her and squared up to the leader.

“Look, I don’t care about your gimmick. Her friends are missing. Your guy sent us here with no words.”

The blond strategist, Number Two, arched a brow.

“That’s Chester.” She smirked at Skratch. “Your friends are here, patching up a community member.”

Number Three cracked her knuckles. She was ready for action.

Number One spoke.

“Your doctors are safe. For now. But nothing here is free. If you want them back, you’ll prove yourself first.”

A roar ripped across the zoo — deep, guttural, enough to shake the bars in the gates. Jessica froze. Sunny’s hand went instinctively to his machete.

The leader’s amber eyes didn’t flinch.

“That gorilla owns our field. Took the emergency exit. Killed my guards. If you want your people... you’ll deal with him.”

Sunny stared at her, then at the three sisters hovering behind, like jackals waiting to see if the lion would eat or ignore. He smirked.

“You have us doing your dirty work?”

Number One snapped.

“Your people came to our rescue when the dead tried to attack Number Thirty Five and Fifty Four. They were heading to get supplies. I guess our...’dirty work’ superhero came at the perfect time.”

“I’m not doing this.”

“Bullshit!” Jessica interjected. “He’s doing this. They aren’t your friends, Sunny. They’re mine. And if he doesn’t go, I will.”

“Fine,” he said. “But feed the girl. She’s hungry.”

The leader gave the faintest nod. “Zepp,” she called, pointing to a slim man in a battered coat lingering by the fence. “Show *Sunny* the giraffe field.”

Zepp stepped forward without a word. A chiseled African man with a bald head. His red robe hoodie was pulled over, covering his eyes.

Sunny adjusted the grip on his axe, glanced once at Jessica, and followed the stranger into the heart of Code-4 territory.

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

Hours after Charles' cafeteria fight, the Hole became his new home. A mouth in the ground that swallowed light.

Rats skittered along the walls, bold as kings, squealing like they owned the place and Charles was just another refugee dumped into their kingdom.

The concrete slab under his back pressed cold through his jumpsuit. Every breath stung, dragging over the wound in his side, sticky with blood that had already turned his hip into a swamp of heat.

His head lolled, eyes tracing cracks in the ceiling until a voice slid out of the dark.

"You look tired, son."

Charles's stomach dropped. The shadows in the corner moved, folding into the shape of a man. For a moment, he thought fever had come to finish him off, that his brain was staging one last cruel trick. But then the voice cut again — low, steady, familiar enough to rip through the years.

"Pick a card."

Charles's heart hammered.

His throat felt like sandpaper when he croaked,

"D-Dad? What are you doing here?"

The silhouette emerged, casual as a man in his living room. His father, Thaddeus Victor, stood with a deck of cards in his hands, shuffling them steadily, the flick and snap echoing off the cell walls. Each card whispered against the other with the practiced rhythm Charles remembered from long nights at the kitchen table, watching those same hands perform tricks between drinks.

The old man's face stayed half in shadow, his voice calm — too calm, like this hellhole was a game room and Charles was a boy again.

“I’m guiding you, like always.” His father fanned the cards, their edges catching the dim, twitching light above. “Now pick a card. I don’t have all day.”

Charles blinked, the rats squealing at his feet, blood dripping slowly from his side. Fever burned the back of his eyes. He couldn’t tell if the man in front of him was real, a ghost, or just the poison in his body eating through his sanity.

But the deck kept shuffling, and the voice wouldn’t stop.

“Pick a card, son.”

SUNNY JEAN (PRESENT)

Minutes after meeting Code-4, Sunny arrived at the giraffe field in the Davenport Zoo. The community where dozens of survivors lived.

Bones peppered the field like a warning—cracked skulls, splintered femurs, half-buried in mud. The grass lay stamped and dark, a map of old fights and fresher blood. Guards had shoved Sunny into this pit like they were parking a problem; he eyed the scattered bones and felt the old, wired calm click on.

If the serum had given him a gift, this would be practice.

He listened. For a breath, the world held its tongue.

Then Sunny planted his boot and stomped—two, three times—hard enough to send a shiver through the ground.

The air shifted.

Leaves whispered.

Then the beast moved.

BOOM!

BRRRRRAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!

It wasn't just a gorilla. It was an engine of muscle—black fur matted with mud, shoulders that rose like carved boulders. When it turned, its eyes pinned Sunny like a name on a list. The animal's breath came hot and rancid. The ground seemed to exhale with it.

"Fuck this!" Sunny said, because saying something to the sky felt better than silence.

He ran before he thought.

VROOM!

The gorilla vaulted with a sound like a torn rope and landed between him and the others.

BAM!

Sunny hit dirt, rolled, and the thing sniffed him, huge wet nostrils flaring. He fumbled for his machete, found its handle with blood-slick fingers, and drove the blade into the beast's flank.

RAHHHHH!!!!

The scream that tore out of it was animal and old and full of anger. The gore spattered Sunny's face. He crawled, dragged himself away as the blade tore free.

The beast ripped out the machete.

Sunny reached for his axe. It was a cumbersome promise—heavy and honest—but when he grabbed it, his foot kissed skull. Bone jagged under his boot; his ankle folded like a bad joint.

SPLACK!

"Ahhh!" Sunny howled as pain lit every nerve. A superhero decision that comes at a price.

The gorilla didn't hesitate. It grabbed him, a fist like a tree trunk, and slammed him into a tree.

Ribs sang.

Something inside his side cracked.

He tasted copper and the hot sting of a dozen failures.

Sunny's ears rang.

The gorilla lifted him again and hammered his back in a storm of fists. Pain became a drumbeat against his skin. Sunny rolled, gasping, hands scrabbling until his fingers closed on the combat knife. With a single, filthy motion, he drove the blade up under the animal's hand.

SLIT!

The gorilla whimpered.

Sunny followed up with more pokes and pulled it down to his broken body to puncture it more.

Another stab.

This time it was in the gorilla's left eye.

The gorilla howled, a sound that shook the birds from the branches. It staggered to its knees, the fight draining from its limbs like night from a lamp.

Sunny pulled himself up, tore the axe free from the mud, and brought the head down in a savage arc.

Blood and mud designed his new janitorial suit.

WHACK!

The split was obscene. Fur and blood flew. The beast collapsed with a heavy, wet thud, and the field stilled, the kind of silence that follows an explosion.

Sunny snapped his back in place. His lungs were on fire, breath like broken bellows.

“AHHHH!!!!”

He yelled—something raw, half-war cry, half relief—then waited the small, cruel moments until his body unclenched and the stitching sensation started: bruised flesh knitting, the weird mechanic of him resetting itself. Soot clung to his hair; his skin crawled with stitches becoming scars.

He didn't gloat. He dragged the corpse by its arm, muscle bulging, and hauled that monstrous weight toward the field's edge. The carcass scraped, groaned, sent up a stink of iron and old death. Sliding sounds and grunts followed him like an exhale.

When he finally stopped, the crowd had already gathered—Jessica, Rocky, Nancy, and the Code-4 sisters pressing in, faces a mix of awe and relief. Jessica ran first, tears and grime braided together, grabbing him and slamming herself to his chest.

"Jesus—" she breathed into him. "I'm so glad you're okay!"

"Me too," he rasped, the words ragged but true.

Rocky clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Finally out of the bathroom, man."

"Shit didn't go like I planned," Sunny said, tasting iron and victory.

Number One stepped forward, coat edges clean against the muck, amber eyes calm as a courtroom. She regarded him like inventory and then like a gift.

"Thank you," she said simply. "You've earned access to Code-4. Food, water, shelter—those are yours."

Sunny let a crooked grin split his face.

"I'll take a bottle of whiskey to go. And maybe a car? White t-shirts if you have any."

Jessica's face collapsed into mock betrayal.

"You're leaving us?"

"You found your people," Sunny told her, voice flat with the weight of things he always hid. "I guess this place is safer. I'm not far if you need me."

Nancy's brow creased.

"You going back to that house?"

"Yeah." The answer came like an old bruise.

Number One exchanged the smallest of looks with her sisters, an economy of motion that said more than words.

“Fine. We’ll have a car waiting and a bottle of whiskey for you. We only have pink t-shirts,” she joked.

Sunny accepted the concession and let it sit in his chest like a coin. There were reasons he lived apart—attachments were liabilities, and he had a habit of hurting the people he let close. He’d learned the hard way: care became a target.

He spelled it out once more with fingers pressed to his chest, as if writing in the air:

S-U-N-N-Y.

Protector.

Lone ranger.

He turned from the gathered faces, shoulders heavier and somehow lighter all at once, and walked out of the field with the sun slicing the horizon—another patch of land cleared, another promise kept.

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

Charles sat in the hole, coughing until blood flecked his lips. The darkness wasn’t just around him now—it was inside him, stretching long and endless.

His wound throbbed like it wanted to finish the job, and for a moment, he thought silence would be his last companion.

Then the voice came back.

“I hate to see you like this, son. Your mother and I. Even Jerry. We didn’t want to see you end up like this,” he said, fanning the cards into a clean spread. His voice carried that same authority Charles had chased his whole life.

Charles’s throat burned.

“W-What are you doing here?”

“I bought a new deck from Antonia’s,” his father said, holding it out. “You always knew where the ace was. That’s how you need to be, Charles. Always the ace. Doesn’t matter how dirty the table gets—you stay the ace.”

Charles’s breath came in ragged bursts.

“Why now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you here now?” His voice cracked, more plea than demand.

“I’m only trying to help—”

“WHY ARE YOU HERE!?” Charles bellowed, spit and blood flying, the hole swallowing the sound.

From the next cell, a voice snapped, annoyed:

“Man, shut the fuck up in there!”

“Fuck you!” Charles coughed back, collapsing against the wall, pain ripping through him. Blood ran down his chin, but he didn’t care.

The ghost of his father’s gaze stayed, unshaken by the chaos.

“Just breathe, son.”

But breathing hurt. Breathing was fire in his ribs, betrayal in his lungs. And beneath that pain was the deeper wound—the funerals he skipped, the calls he never made, the way he buried grief under ambition until it came back here, in this hole.

He never wanted his father to see him broken like this.

Not crying.

Not bleeding.

Not lost.

“Pick a card, son,” his father said, voice rougher now, urgent. “C’mon. I don’t have all day.”

Charles's vision blurred. His hands trembled. He reached out like a child again, fingers brushing the air where the cards hovered.

"I... I'll take the one in the middle."

REEEEEEACCCCH

The door screeched open.

Light knifed into the hole.

"Let's go," a correctional officer barked. "Infirmary."

Charles looked up, eyes wide, desperate.

"D-Dad?"

The CO sneered.

"I'm not your fucking father. Get up."

Hands grabbed him, rough, dragging him to his feet. His wound tore open wider.

"Shit..." he groaned, legs buckling.

And then, just before the light swallowed him, Charles looked back. The corner was empty.

No shadow.

No shuffle.

Just a single card face down.

SUNNY JEAN

Sunny drove with the weight of silence pressing harder than the tires on the cracked road. Leaving the zoo had been harder than he thought it would be.

Jessica's face—scar and all—still hovered in his head, the way her disappointment never made a sound but cut deep anyway. She'd wanted him to stay. Wanted him to be the savior. But he wasn't built for that. He

wasn't her hero. He just needed air, space to think, and maybe enough whiskey to erase the ghost of belonging.

The Cadillac crested a hill, headlights cutting across the night, and then—flames.

A faint orange glow bled into the sky like the horizon was on fire.

His gut dropped.

There it was. His house. Or what was left of it.

"Goddamnit!" Sunny barked, slamming his fist against the wheel. The horn screamed back at him, long and ugly.

He killed the engine and stepped out. The air hit him hot, bitter with smoke and char. Flames clung to the wreckage like they had something to prove, clawing up black beams, chewing through the last of the place he'd called shelter.

Somebody had made sure nothing remained.

He lit a cigarette off the burning wood, the flame spitting as if mocking the ritual. The drag hit his lungs sharply, smoke curling out between his teeth.

The girl.

The one he'd seen chained to the side of the house—what was left of her was ash, bones crumbling into dust. Burned Greapers always went that way, fading into nothing like they'd never been human. Her cremation wasn't finished, but close enough.

Sunny stared a moment, jaw tight, then turned his back.

Butch's corpse looked like it had been dropped into hell and spit back out—ugly, broken, a good death.

Simon wasn't any better.

Sunny smirked, unzipped, and pissed on what was left of him, the sound hissed out like punctuation on their story.

A Greaper's husk lay crumpled nearby.

Beneath its scorched weight, he found a medical bag.

Inside: gauze pads, alcohol wipes, scattered papers—and a *wedding ring*.
Gold, unbent, catching the moonlight with a cruel glint.

Sunny held it between his fingers, took another pull from the cigarette, and
let the weight of it mock him.

Everything ended in fire, and still, rings outlasted love.

He stuffed the bag under his arm, flicked ash into the wind, and climbed
back into the Cadillac.

The bottle sat on the passenger seat, half empty, a better compass than
any map. He twisted the cap, drank, and let the burn decide for him.

Back to the zoo? Keep driving? Didn't matter. He pressed the pedal down
and let the engine growl.

The night swallowed the road. In his head, the car wasn't empty. Jessica's
chatter filled the backseat, Rocky's laugh rolled like gravel, Nancy's calm
voice cut through the static. His ghosts already rode with him.

Sunny gripped the wheel, jaw tight, smoke curling around his face.
Whatever came next, he was ready to bleed into it.

CHAPTER THREE

“Welcome to the Zoo”

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

At the infirmary, Charles woke to light that felt sharper than pain — fluorescent and honest — and the first thing he saw was a face that shouldn't have been anywhere near Ironside: Nurse Bella, shined in lavender. She leaned over him like the world still had small mercies.

“Sonny? Sonny, can you hear me?” she asked, voice calm, she'd learned from too many crises.

Charles blinked, throat raw. The word landed like a small miracle. No one had called him *Sonny* in a long time.

“Where am I?” he croaked.

“You're in the ICU,” Bella said, smiling. She smelled like lavender soap and something floral that pulled at a memory of summer.

He tried a smile back.

“I see you too, baby.”

She laughed — the kind of laugh that made something in him ease.

For thirty seconds, the hole in his chest closed like a lid.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Then the door banged open, and the room lost whatever small warmth it had.

Richard and Andy filled the doorway like bad weather. Richard carried himself with the smug weight of authority, his face sharp like Kevin Bacon's but dragged down by a red mustache that made him look meaner than he

needed to. His bright blue eyes had that hollow cop stare — not searching, not curious, just waiting for something to break so he could enjoy it.

Andy was the opposite kind of menace, a lanky ghoul of a man whose skin stretched thin over his bones. His cheeks sank inward, his jaw too sharp, his nose pointy, his frame all elbows and shadows. Where Richard looked like he'd been carved from old wood, Andy looked like he'd been dug up from a shallow grave. Together they wore their uniforms like armor, boots and belts clinking, the kind of men who made cruelty a habit and punishment a pastime.

“We'll take it from here, Bella,” Richard said flatly.

Bella's hand tightened on her clipboard.

“Be gentle with him—”

“Don't tell me how to do my job, sweetheart,” Richard snapped.

They hauled Charles out of the bed like an old rug, cheap and disposable. Stitches sang a protest; Charles bit down and let the pain run through him.

He refused them a broken face.

“What's the rush?” he said, trying for a smirk.

“Shut it, maggot,” Richard shouted.

They marched him back through the corridors of Ironside.

The station lights clicked above them, indifferent.

The farther they dragged him, the louder the building grew — the clatter of metal, the low push of anger and boredom that always smelled like trouble.

“Get to your cell from here, maggot. We have a little riot on our hands,”

Richard barked.

He wasn't joking.

The block hit him like a hand to the gut: inmates fighting guards, guards returning blows; a man thrown from the third tier and landing with a sound that erased the rest of the world for a second.

Blood bright and stupid on concrete.

Neck shattered.

Ankle torn off.

Charles moved through the riot like a ghost, hoping not to be seen. It's a bitch-move to hit a wounded man in this prison. He wanted only his cell, a wall to press his back against, and a minute to breathe. He walked into his cell. Leftover lay on his bunk, casual as sin with a nude magazine folded on his lap.

"You look like shit," he said without looking up.

"Fuck off," Charles rasped, coughing. "Why are you in my bed?"

"Didn't know if you'd live, to be honest."

"Yeah, well, here I am," Charles muttered, and the world rattled on.

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

A soft rap sounded at the cell window. Charles looked up as a small figure slipped inside, hands held together like a suppliant.

It was Teasy — Filipino, maybe in his twenties, the one softening of color and manner in a place meant to harden people. Teasy was the only one in Ironside with a sex change, and that fact made others inside trace maps of him in their heads; it made him both a target and a commodity.

"Can I talk to Leftover?" he asked, voice too steady.

Leftover shrugged.

"Let her in."

They closed the door.

For a beat, the room smelled of sweat and stale air and the quiet that comes when prisoners exchange business. He heard the low click of fingers counting debt.

"What do you want?" Leftover asked.

Teasy's voice dropped.

"Papi hasn't paid me. I won't have the money until next month."

"You owe me five months already," Leftover said, voice flat.

“I know,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Leftover flexed. His brown eyes pierce Teasy’s.

“You know what happens now.”

Teasy swallowed. It was humiliation, not sex, he told himself as if definition would make it cleaner — an exchange of power, of shame, of things taken because there was no law left to stop it. Teasy offered up what he did have: a blow job. Leftover took what he wanted, barked an order, and the transaction closed with the small, filthy verdict of prison life.

Charles heard all the noise with a towel over his head, lying on his cot. He hated seeing people be controlled like that, but with his condition, he couldn’t argue about Lefty’s promiscuous moment. It was better than the riot outside or being thrown off the 3rd floor.

SUNNY JEAN

(PRESENT)

It was summer 2020. In the evening, the drive back to the zoo had been quiet.

Too quiet.

Leaving the burned-out house behind gnawed at Sunny more than he wanted to admit. The girl, Simon—every trace of humanity left in them—reduced to ash. By the time the gates creaked open, silence gave way to a riot of life.

The zoo looked like a carnival dragged out of hell and rebuilt with scraps.

Fires burned in oil drums, spitting sparks into the dusk.

Families gathered around broken picnic tables, gnawing on charred meat like it was a holiday feast.

The air reeked of grease, sweat, and smoke, but there was laughter too—laughter so out of place it almost hurt to hear it. Kids tore through the

cracked asphalt barefoot, waving sticks like swords, their shrieks echoing above the grumble of generators and the bass thrum of distant music.

“He’s back!” a guard shouted, and heads turned his way.

Jessica, aka Skratch, was the first to reach him. She sprinted across the courtyard, pigtails loose, eyes burning bright. She slammed into him with a hug, clutching like he was a lifeline.

“You’re back! Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Sunny shrugged her off. “I’m fine, kid.”

Then Code-4 appeared, robes flowing like banners, Number One at the front with her sisters trailing behind. She carried herself like a queen draped in war. Her English accent sharpened each word.

“Sunny Jean. Back so soon? What brings you here?”

“My house burned down,” he said, voice flat. He held up a satchel. “Found this medical bag. Yours?”

“That’s Rocky’s bag!” Skratch gasped. “Oh my God, you’re the best!” She hugged him again, all heat and gratitude, while he stood stiff, unimpressed.

Sunny barely had time to roll his shoulders before another presence brushed past. The masked man from the playground—the one who had put a crossbow bolt through the so-called witch—lugged a deer carcass across his shoulders as if it weighed nothing. The stench of blood and fur hit Sunny like a slap.

The man bumped into him without a word.

“Watch where you’re going, bruh,” Sunny muttered.

The figure just raised a hand in apology.

“Sorry for our friend,” #1 said. “That’s Chester. He’s a mute. Been here with us since the fall.”

“Yeah, okay,” Sunny answered, unimpressed. His eyes lingered on Chester a moment longer. Something about the man’s silence dug under his skin.

Number One snapped her fingers, and a golf cart sputtered to life from the shadows.

“Come. We’ll show you around. At least take a tour before you bury yourself in suspicion. I imagine you’d like to know your surroundings.”

Sunny didn’t argue. A tour meant intel. And in a place this strange, intel was survival.

He climbed in, Jessica beside him, while Number One drove like a queen conducting a royal procession.

The zoo sprawled before them, reshaped into a city stitched together with grit and madness. Fires burned in hollowed trash cans. Makeshift food stalls sizzled with meat—rat, deer, maybe something worse. Children darted past with painted faces, clutching sticks like trophies. The walls were strung with fairy lights scavenged from God-knew-where, flickering weak but steady against the dusk.

Separated from the children, down by the lions’ den, a concert raged. Heavy metal ripped through the night from a stage built on the cracked concrete of the old amphitheater. Around it, fans thrashed as if the end of the world were just an excuse to party harder.

Inside iron-bar cages lining the pit, Greapers were locked up—shrieking as the sound battered them into madness.

Jessica leaned toward him, grinning.

“Pretty cool, right?”

Sunny only grunted. Cool wasn’t the word. Dangerous, maybe. Insane, definitely. But he kept his thoughts to himself.

The cart rolled past to the center of the compound, where a five-story hotel loomed over the chaos. Its neon sign still flickered faintly—letters burned out, but the bones of its old life still clung on. Guards in burgundy robes lounged at the entrance like bouncers outside a Vegas club.

“This was once for guests of the zoo,” Number One said with a flourish.

“Now it belongs to us. Housekeeping still runs—keep your rooms clean,

and we keep the roaches and rats off your floor.” Her lips curled into a faint smile.

“Sunny, we have the top floor available just for you.”

“No thanks,” Sunny cut her off. “Second floor’s fine.” His voice was ice. He wasn’t about to sleep above ground again—not after Jamie.

“Perfect,” she replied smoothly. “Room thirty-one. Jessica, your friends are in thirty-eight. Tonight, the restaurant downstairs transforms into our nightclub. A social event. Dinner, music, drinks. You’re welcome to join.”

Jessica leaned against the cart’s rail, her grin widening.

“They love to party here.”

Sunny exhaled slowly.

“Sounds good. Let me shower first. Then I’ll see what kind of party this is.”

Number One gave them a nod.

“I’ll have someone bring clothing and towels.”

Sunny climbed out of the cart, shoes crunching the gravel. He looked up at the hotel, its glass blackened, its walls humming with voices and music that shouldn’t have existed in a world already dead. For a second, he almost felt like he’d stumbled into a dream. But dreams had teeth, and this place was no different.

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

At Ironside, after a couple of weeks from the stabbing, Charles had finally healed enough to sit upright without feeling like his bones were made of broken glass. The library chair was hard, its cushion long gone, but compared to the concrete slab in the hole, it felt like velvet. He rubbed the ache out of his ribs, flipping through a book he wasn’t really reading, when a shadow fell across the table.

The man standing there was Hispanic, covered in tattoos like his skin was canvas no one asked to paint on. A pair of thick glasses sat crooked on his nose, and his buzz-cut gleamed under the humming fluorescent light.

“You Sonny?” the man asked.

Charles narrowed his eyes.

“Who wants to know?”

The man slid into the chair across from him, cool and easy.

“I’m Hector. Lefty said you wanted a word.”

Charles leaned back, one hand drifting down to tuck the shank he’d been palming back into his waistband. Never knew when a handshake might turn into a funeral.

“Of course. Been waiting on you.”

Hector laced his tattooed fingers together on the table.

“So what’s going on, holmes?”

“I need something from the outside,” Charles said quietly. “And word is, you’re the guy who can make it happen.”

Hector smirked. “Anything I can do that won’t add years to my sheet, I’m down. So what’s the favor, ese?”

Charles lowered his voice.

“Flowers. Delivered here. Something small.”

Hector blinked, then laughed.

“Flowers? Not a problem. I got people downtown who can make that happen by tonight. Who’s it for? You meet a jail punk in here, or what?”

“Relax,” Charles said, stone-faced. “It’s not like that. They’re for the nurse.”

“The redhead?” Hector leaned back, grin fading. “Careful, ese. Richard’s got her wrapped tighter than a biiitch.”

Charles froze. “Richard... Officer Richard?”

“Yeah.” Hector nodded. “He’s been tapping that for a while. Every buddy knows.”

“So you’re saying you can’t get them?”

“I can,” Hector said slowly, “but you’re playing with fire, dog. That man once burned an inmate alive for looking at her too long. I’m not exaggerating.”

Charles locked eyes with him.

“I don’t care. I need that arrangement.”

Hector shook his head, muttering under his breath. Then he leaned forward. “Alright. But I’m charging tax on this one. Hundred and fifty. My homie will send you the info. You wire the funds, I’ll handle the rest.”

“This stays between us,” Charles said, voice cold. “No one hears about it.”

“Consider it done, doggy.” Hector extended a hand.

Charles clasped it, firm. The tattoos on Hector’s wrist shifted like snakes.

“Just one question,” Hector said, holding his grip.

“What’s that?”

“Did you really kill your girl?”

Charles shook his head once, sharply.

“No. I didn’t.”

Hector studied his face for a moment, then finally nodded.

“I figured. Everyone else thinks you’re innocent, too. Don’t tread lightly in here, holmes. This place don’t forgive the wrong step. You’re good... for now.”

Charles let out a humorless laugh.

“I don’t know about that.”

They shook one last time before Hector stood and walked off, disappearing between shelves of old, torn paperbacks. Charles stayed seated, staring at the open book in front of him. The words blurred into nothing. He wasn’t reading. He was just buying time.

SUNNY JEAN
(PRESENT)

Late at night, at the Davenport Zoo, Sunny Jean stepped out of the bathroom, steam curling out behind him like ghost smoke. His skin still smelled faintly of motel soap. He threw on a plain white T-shirt and dark jeans—clothes that never seemed to lose the road dust—and settled his fedora low over his brow. A shot of whiskey burned its way down, dulling the hum in his veins.

Then came the knock. Three sharp raps.

THOOM THOOM THOOM!

He opened the door.

Jessica stood there in a baggy nightie patterned with faded stars. She grinned like she didn't know the world outside was ash and broken glass.

"What are you wearing?" he asked, his voice dry.

"My nighties. They're so comfortable," she said.

"You're eighteen and wearing a onesie," Sunny muttered, half-smiling. She pouted, the same way she always did when she wanted to break his armor.

They went downstairs to the nightclub. Guards at the entrance checked their IDs. Everyone still carried IDs like relics from the dead world; Sunny kept his only because the photo made him look menacing.

Inside, the music thudded low and tribal. Rope barriers marked off a "VIP" section. Two guards stood at either end, looking puny and fragile compared to the weight of the world outside. Code-4 was hanging out.

Number One leaned toward Skratch, reeking of red wine.

"You are such a beauty."

"Thanks," she said, eyes wary.

“Here. Drink some wine,” Number One offered.

“No thanks. I’m not drinking until I turn twenty-one.”

“How will you even know when that is?” Number Three asked.

“I’ll know,” she said. “I can feel it.”

Sunny watched Skratch slip away onto the dance floor. Community members swarmed her, drawn like moths to light. For a moment, she was the life of the party.

Number One smiled at Sunny.

“I’m so glad you came back.”

“I’m not staying for long,” he said. “Just until I find another place.”

“Why not stay here? We have everything.”

“I don’t fit in. Some mental problems I can’t escape.”

“We all have our issues, Sunny.”

“Yeah. I know. I guess I just like to be alone.”

Across the floor, someone called.

“Hey, Number One!”

“Hello Presley! How’s your mother’s ankle?”

“It’s getting better,” Presley answered, already turning toward the dance floor. He was pale skinned with curly red hair, wearing a white button down with a clip-on bowtie.

“Send my best wishes,” Number One said. “I’ll visit her when I can.”

Presley went to dance with Skratch.

Sunny raised an eyebrow. “Shake a leg?”

“What? I think that’s noble,” Number One said.

Sunny scanned the room.

“Am I in some kind of simulation? You throw festivals with enemies at your front door? What else should I know?”

“It is a sin to sleep with anyone in this community,” Number One grinned.

Sunny laughed bitterly.

“Ha! And you’ve got all this alcohol? No wonder I don’t fit in.”

“Why not? Does drinking make you want to sleep with random women?”

“I think that was a past life,” Sunny said. “For a guy like me, it’d almost be satisfying after what I’ve been through lately.”

“You’ve done good so far,” Number One said. “I’m sure prison taught you discipline. Presley gave us this idea—he’s pure, loyal. He hit the reset button on my life.”

“And how long do you think a guy like him would last?” Sunny asked.

Number One's smile dimmed. “Before the Fall, my sisters and I came out here to meet my father at this very zoo. By the time we arrived...” She exhaled slowly. “Somehow, we fought to stay. It was the four of us. Then Chester discovered us. Then Presley—just a foster kid on a school trip. As a leader, I’ve realized: to save people like him, we need men and women like Chester. That’s why I’ve kept this place balanced.”

“So what’s the plan?” Sunny asked.

“The plan is to trust me.”

“I’m trusting you,” Sunny said. “But I’m a wild cat. Being in a place like this makes me want to run.”

“I understand,” Number One said. Her head began spinning.

After a long pause, she hiccuped.

“What about her? Are you going to tell her you’re leaving again?”

“She understands me by now.”

“That’s because she’s only a kitten. You haven’t seen her become a leopard yet. I can’t wait until she does.”

“She’ll do well,” Sunny said. “She’s got a woman with sisters. Close sisters. I like the trench coats, by the way.”

“Thanks.” Number One’s gaze softened. “You have love written all over you, Sunny. You’ll always have a place here.”

Sunny straightened, pulling the brim of his fedora lower.

“I’m gonna take a piss. I’m heading to my hotel room if you want to join me.”

“Not gonna happen,” she said, a cold edge to her smile.

“Ever.”

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

Charles Victor had learned small gambits. The infirmity flowers were one of them—a calculated risk that bought him a soft hour in a hard place. He’d found a crooked little cluster of wild blooms off Antelope Valley Road and tucked them beneath his jacket like contraband. When Bella’s face broke open at the sight of them, he felt something like the old life press briefly against his ribs.

“Hey!” he said, holding them out.

“Oh my gosh—you scared me!” She laughed, the sound bright and too young for the hospital’s low hum.

He watched her press the petals to her nose, breath shallow, eyes closing.

“How do you like them?”

“I can’t stop smelling them.” She sniffed, once, twice, as if catching a tide of memory.

“They were picked near Antelope Valley,” Charles said, half-embarrassed by the thought of admitting he’d spent a morning wandering scrub and fence line for this exact thing. He almost added a story about sunsets and a broken radio, then stopped himself.

“You ever been—never mind.”

She only smiled and inhaled again.

“I love them.”

“You called me Sonny when I woke up. Do I know you?”

“I was a fan of your music back in the day.” Nurse Bella smiled.

“My... my music?”

“Yes.” She continued smelling her flowers.

A beat later, she reached toward the drawer and pushed two ibuprofen across the counter.

“Take these,” she said. “Good seeing you, Sonny.”

The name landed in him like a coin. “Sonny,” Charles repeated under his breath as he gathered the small comforts and left the room. For a few seconds, he was the man whose face had once sold records and filled rooms; then the infirmary door clicked behind him and the world snapped back to its rusted hinge.

He heard the outer door slam—too loud in the narrow hall—and stepped into the corridor just in time to see Richard come in behind Bella, shoulders broad and the kind of presence that made the ceiling feel lower. He followed her into her office like a shadow that didn’t belong.

Richard’s hand cracked the door so hard the frame rattled. Bella shook.

“You talking to him?” the man demanded without ease, voice loaded.

Bella flinched, hand still on the ibuprofen bottle.

“Who?” she tried. The word trembled.

Richard’s laugh was a knife.

“Don’t play dumb, Bella! Are you talking to that nigger?”

“I—” Bella started, then closed her mouth. “He just made a kind gesture. I didn’t know what else to d—”

Richard took a step closer, his shadow swallowing what light remained in the doorway.

“Do you think I’m stupid, Bella?” His tone had the ease of a man who kept fear like an asset.

She swallowed hard.

“Richy, relax. I won’t talk to him again.”

Richard’s smirk was slow, predatory. He leaned in until his breath ghosted the side of her face.

“You'd better be careful. You know what I can do to you, right?”

Bella’s fingers tightened on the bottle until the label creased. She nodded, voice small as if she were bargaining for time.

“I won’t, Richy.”

He stepped back like a man satisfied, leaving the office smelling faintly of flowers and ibuprofen and the underside of threats. Flower petals sat in the jar as Bella cried at her desk.

CHAPTER FOUR

“DOUBLE PLAY”

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

The year 2018. It was four in the morning, and the world outside Richard's window felt paused on a dirty breath. He sat hunched at a scarred kitchen table, a chipped mug of coffee cooling beside a half-smoked cigarette.

The only light in the room was the thin glare of a tiny black-and-white television, the kind that picked up static and bad memories. On the screen, his face—Charles Victor's face—flickered under harsh courtroom lights: cuffed, filmed, condemned by other people's cameras. The reporter's voice buzzed through the cheap speaker, but Richard barely heard the words. He watched the arrest again, watched the way the policemen handled him, watched the news anchor stitch the narrative together: Charles Victor accused of Jamie's murder.

Richard's jaw worked. He was in plaid boxers and an old tank top, belly soft, shoulders hunched into himself like a man trying to become narrower, smaller, less visible. He sipped the coffee as if the mug might warm whatever had gone cold inside him. He chain-smoked the way some men prayed—fast, noisy, relentless—pinning his anger with each exhale.

On the screen, Charles's mugshot froze again, the camera catching the former musician and CEO's jawline, the fedora tossed aside, the face that had once drawn crowds now framed as criminal. Richard smiled without humor.

He pushed back from the table and padded over to the receiver, which sat on its cradle like an old sentinel. His fingers dialed without hurry, the rhythm practiced. The phone clicked and hummed against the thin silence.

“Andy, wake up,” Richard said when the line answered. The voice he used for the call was casual, like someone making small plans for a barbecue.

“Yeah, I know what time it is. I need you at my place in a couple of hours. We got a guest coming through,” he added, and the word guest tasted like rust.

On the far wall, a calendar drooped, one corner curled like a dead leaf.

Richard leaned toward the receiver, conspiratorial in the dark.

“There’s a room under the infirmary,” he said. “The boiler and the old incinerator—remember? Nobody goes down there anymore. Too noisy, too many pipes. It’s perfect. We can get him alone in that room. Quick, clean, no witnesses.”

He could hear the sleepy shuffle of Andy on the other end—a man who trusted promises and liked the certainty of things that burned quickly.

“Yeah, trust me. This plan’s bulletproof.” Richard’s laugh was a dry sound, the kind that cracks mirrors. “You just watch the TV when you get here. I’ll have everything set.”

The news feed rolled on behind him: a replay of the arrest, the clip where Charles had gone limp and the camera had zeroed in on his face.

Richard watched it like a man tasting a long-cooked meal, every frame feeding him higher.

He hung up the phone with a slow, satisfied click. The ash on the cigarette had built into a stake of gray; he tapped it into the sink. For a moment, he stood over the stainless steel basin and watched smoke curl and disappear

into the dim vent. In his head, the boiler room was already hot—metal heated to an angry orange, the incinerator door a black maw. He pictured Charles pushed into the confined space, the roar of fire swallowing the noise of the world, the TV footage finally making physical sense. His hands were steady. His breath was steady.

Outside the kitchen window, the first thread of dawn bled into the sky like someone ditching a casket. Richard pulled on a jacket that had never been new and stared at his reflection in the glass until it blurred. He left the television on, muted—images playing like an invocation.

“I’ll see you soon,” he told the empty room, and the sentence hung there—reason enough, in Richard’s mind, to light the match he had yet to strike.

SUNNY JEAN

(PRESENT)

It was the year 2020. Sunlight cut through the cracked blinds and painted the aftermath of last night in hard angles: overturned cups, confetti stuck in the seams of a couch, and a sticky sheen on the floor that never quite lifted. Sunny Jean rolled out of his king-sized bed like a man surfacing from deep water. King beds were rare now; sleeping in one felt like stealing something you hadn’t earned. He dragged himself upright, felt the memory of whiskey and bass still in his bones, and stepped into the day.

Outside, beyond the courtyard that had been patched into a market, a neat row of blue tents had been pitched. Locals milled between them, displaying scavenged rifles, canned goods, and a stack of burgundy robes. The market smelled of motor oil and overripe fruit—survival in clinging smells.

Something moved behind him before he heard it.

Chester slid into view like a shadow with teeth. The mute killer’s presence made the air smaller; people cleared a path when he walked. He handed Sunny a folded sheet of paper, the Code-4 sigil pressed into the corner like a stamp of claim.

Sunny unfolded it. The handwriting was careful, the ink slightly blurred where someone had touched it too soon.

Hello Sunny,

The community would like to welcome you officially. Your first assignment is a supply run with Chester and Jessica. Below are the essentials:

- *Fruits and vegetables*
- *Medical supplies*

• *Wood/Gas*

Anything else you can scavenge is a bonus. Stay safe, and let us know if you need assistance.

XO, Code-4

Sunny's fingers tightened on the paper until the crease left a white line. He crumpled it into a ball like a used cigarette and tucked it into his pocket.

"All right," he said to no one in particular. "Let me go wake her up."

A low beat of music from somebody's radio threaded through the tents—an old breakbeat with a ghost of a melody—and the world felt briefly normal, then not. The music stopped as quickly as it had started, like a heartbeat skipped.

Sunny walked down the hall and knocked on Jessica's door once.

Twice.

The knock echoed off plywood and plaster, small and polite against the day's roughness.

"Okay! Okay! I'm up!" came a muffled voice.

The door swung open with the force of someone who'd been sleeping with their jaw clenched. Skcratch stood there, hair tangled, eyes narrow and bright.

"What do you want, old man?" she spat.

"Get dressed," Sunny said. "We've got a supply run."

"Now?!" she groused, rubbing the sleep from her cheek. "Ugh, it's still early."

"You're the one who insisted we stay here," he shot back. "Let's help these people out."

As he turned to leave, she muttered under her breath.

"Do these girls even have real names?"

BAM!

She slammed the door like it was an accusation and not a question.

Sunny stood in the hallway for a beat, listening to the city waking up—boots on wood, someone hammering at a tent pole, a child laughing too loud for the ruin around them. He slid the crumpled letter out of his pocket, smoothed it once over his palm, and let it fall back into his pocket. Number One had spoken. The morning had an assignment now.

He clipped the strap of his bag over one shoulder and gathered his weapons. Oh boy...

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

The last few days had been stitched together from pain and small mercies. The infirmary smelled of antiseptic and stale coffee, but between the bandages and the quiet hours, Charles had managed to steal something like hope—letters from Bella folded small enough to hide in a palm. Royce, the old janitor with more years than teeth, had been his courier: a slow-moving saint who mopped the corridors by day and smuggled love notes by night.

Royce moved like he belonged to the building—bent, careful, the rhythm of the mop like a prayer. That morning, he rounded the corner with a bucket wobbling and, for the first time in days, his shoulder clipped Officer Richard's flank.

"Watch where you're going," Richard barked, more sharply than necessary.

"Yessir," Royce mumbled and tried to slip past him.

But the note slid from Royce's pocket on impact, a pale rectangle of paper fluttering like a wounded bird to the linoleum. Richard's eyes snagged on it.

He bent and picked it up slow, as if savoring the moment. Royce's face went white enough to match the mop water.

"Royce—get the fuck out of my sight," Richard snarled, voice low and dangerous.

Royce didn't wait. He bolted, mop bucket rattling behind him, feet soft on the hall, a bent old man running for the first time in a long while.

Richard turned the paper over in his hands. The handwriting was hurried, the ink smeared where someone had pressed too hard. He read it once, then again, each word landing like a blow.

Meet me at eleven tonight... lingerie... ride your—

The last line trailed off into a smear, but the meaning was blunt enough. Richard's jaw tightened until a vein stood at his temple. He let the note fall into the mop bucket and lifted the handle as if nothing had happened, taking up Royce's duties with casual, practiced motions—sweeping under beds, wiping metal rails—while his brain unspooled a dozen darker plans.

His revenge would point towards Bella that night...

SUNNY JEAN

(PRESENT)

"I'm going to call you **CheZter**. That 'S' freaks me out," Sunny said.

Chezter, Sunny, and Jessica followed the tracks north, three shapes moving where the world still remembered a path. Jessica hummed loud enough to cut the quiet—an off-key ribbon of melody she balanced on like a kid on a rail—her arms stretched out for a game none of them could afford. Chezter padded beside them, silent as a stitched shadow; when he pulled the cracked phone from his pocket, it was with the careful motion of a man who'd learned to speak in text.

His thumbs found the screen. The blinking letters popped up slow and blunt:

Has she ever killed anyone?

Sunny read the line and let a short laugh push out of him.

"I don't think so. Jess!"

Jessica wobbled on the rail and looked back, lashes catching the morning light.

“What?”

“Have you ever—killed anybody?” Sunny asked, half-teasing, half-testing.

She stuck out her chin.

“Nope. Only greapers. I’m a—” she said the next word like it belonged to a private joke, “a murgin.”

“A what?”

“A murgin,” she repeated, proud and ridiculous.

“Murderous virgin.”

Sunny’s mouth curved. “You and your words. Stay close in case we—”

SSSUEE!

The arrow arrived like a whispered verdict.

The world breathed in, then sucked in sharp.

SSSSSUE!

A whoosh, a hiss through the grass, arrows punching the air with terrible courtesy. They weren’t alone. The ambush was surgical.

“Run!” Sunny barked.

THOOT THOOT THOOT!

Three arrows found the soft place between his right shoulder blade and waist. He felt them as bright ants biting the spine—fire and ice braided together. Warm blood popped through his shirt. Pain lanced, white and honest.

“Just go! Go!” he spat,

Skratch shouted back.

“He’s got this. Trust me!” Her voice broke like a promise.

They left him.

Sunny watched them go, chest burning with the kind of rage that smells like metal. He ripped the arrows free with both palms and let the pain steady him the way a rope steadies a man falling. He wielded his axe and turned toward the rustle and the shadow-mottled brush where the mouths of the shooters hid.

YAHH!

They came at him—witches and warlocks braided into the woods like bad weather—scraps of cloth and mangled teeth, eyes bright with the pleasure of cruelty. Sunny moved like a man who'd learned to be quick at taking life back. The axe swung; he hit with hands that had once strummed chords and now made the only language that mattered: blunt force.

PLSHH!

An axe swipe decapitated a warlock's head. Another tore open a witch from the bottom up. He tussled with another warlock and crushed its fingers with his handle. The warlock howled in pain. Sunny ended him with a massive blow to the chest.

Fighting was ugly and loud and necessary. The grunts and the tearing of cloth, the metallic ring when his blade met bone-masked wood—none of it was pretty.

SPLACK!

He killed until the last pocket of movement in the underbrush was a stillness, and then the woods took a breath it hadn't had in minutes. Blood beaded along the axe's edge and dripped slowly into the brown leaf litter.

His heart thudded, a fist of thunder under his ribs.

"Chezter!? Jessica!?" His voice scraped the trees.

Silence answered, a thin and useless thing. He wanted to go after them, wanted to drag them back by the scruff and shake sense into their heads.

Then the ground beneath him betrayed him with a hollow click.

VRROM!

It wasn't the earth giving way so much as a hand opening where he thought there was a step.

The soil slid as if it were a skin, and the world lurched.
Sunny slid forward—no time to grab the axe—and dropped.

BAM!

He fell into cold and dust and a contained darkness that smelled of old upholstery and the sweet burn of something long-cooked. The fall ended with a stupid, graceless plop: he landed on an orange couch whose cushions had the springless, surrendering give of long neglect.

A boobytrap.

For a long second, he just lay there, ears drumming with blood, tasting iron on his tongue. He adjusted his fedora with a hand that still trembled and pushed himself up. The bunker around him was a fossil of normal life: faded wallpaper curling at the edges, cobweb lace in the corners, a chipped lamp that hummed like it wanted to die. Somewhere a pot sang. Steam threaded from a door like breath.

Footsteps creaked in the next room, domestic and deliberate. A woman in a faded sundress appeared in the doorway—a Black woman with salt-and-pepper hair haloed around her like someone who'd survived decades and kept her humor. She moved like someone who'd watched too many people come in and never go out—the kind of woman who could be warmth or a warning, sometimes both.

“Welcome,” she said, tilting a ladle like an offering. “You’re just in time for some chili.”

Sunny’s mouth went dry.

“Where am I?”

She turned off the stove with the quiet authority of someone who ran a small, private universe.

“You’re not the guest I expected,” she said, one slow sigh folding into the room. “But come, hang out a few minutes.”

“I’m looking for my friends,” Sunny said. He kept his voice even, the practiced mask of someone who’d made his living negotiating. “I can’t stay—”

She ladled chili into a bowl and lifted it close to his face. The steam smelled like paprika and beans.

“Try some,” she urged. “I’ve been making this since I was seventeen. Who else cooks the same chili for that long?”

Her smile was patient and a little sharp at the corners.

Something in her rhythm set the hairs on Sunny’s neck to attention. Her calm was not the comfort of someone content; it was the calm of someone who’d organized control into a religion. He watched the TV—static shimmered across the cracked screen—and saw nothing but snow and the soft hiss of radio ghosts.

“I’m fine,” he said, standing. “Just tell me the way out.”

She shrugged as if he’d asked an impertinent favor.

“Sucks for you. This is some good chili.”

She picked up the remote and flicked through channels. Static.

“I love this show,” she said as she fed her mouth with chili.

She wasn’t entertaining a house guest. She was entertaining a killer. A former inmate. A man who was buried between Jamie’s murder and the current situation at hand. He just defended his people from witches and warlocks, of course, he’s going to still see red like a starving wolf.

He walked into the kitchen, the pot heavy in his hands as if holding the conventional thing would make leaving cleaner.

“I’m hungry,” he lied—truth sanded down to usefulness.

He threw the boiling water onto her leg.

SHHHH!!!!

The woman howled.

“AHHH!!!”

“Tell me how to get out of here!”

Sunny banged the pot, short and hard, on her knee; pain unstitched her composure.

Pointing wildly, she screamed.

“That way!”

Stairs loomed where she indicated, a lead back toward light. It was covered by luggage bags and old garbage. The woman’s voice wavered as she cursed him—names in a language that felt like old threats. Part of Sunny’s gut twisted. The woman was lonely and strange, maybe dangerous, maybe not. The smell of chili tugged at something older—memories of family and small kindnesses he’d been starving for.

He moved the garbage and walked upstairs.

He could have stayed, offered bandages, apologies. The thought of tending to the wound he’d inflicted by striking her—by stealing her normal—tugged at him. But his friends were out there somewhere, in the tracks and the scrub and the places that ate people if you started to think too long. He turned away from the kitchen’s heated light, from the woman’s slurred curses from downstairs.

“DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM? DO YOU KNOW WHAT I WILL DO TO YOU!?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sunny shrugged to himself, ignoring her cry.

Outside, the field spread in a lazy, ruined ocean. Miles away, the Davenport Zoo rose like a broken promise on the horizon—faded signs and skeletal fences catching the sun. As he walked across the trampled grass, he kicked a fruit basket that lay abandoned; apples tumbled and rolled like little red planets. He picked one up, bit through skin that yielded with a satisfying snap, and the sweetness hit him. For a breath, between the ache and the hunger and the threat, something like hope tasted real.

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

Late-night fluorescents hummed low in the infirmary. Bella moved slowly and carefully in the lingerie she wore for Charles, folding papers into a

battered folder—med lists, duty logs, a scrap with an address she'd meant to burn. Her hands trembled a little; the building smelled of antiseptic and tired people. She glanced toward the doorway, looking for Charles for the hundredth time that night.

Her throat closed. She put on her scrubs, slid the folder into her bag and started for the door.

The door cracked open like a fist.

Richard filled the frame before she could move. His face was a worn thing—tight, angrier than the wiring in the ceiling. He didn't worry about keeping quiet; the night belonged to men like him.

"Richy? What are you doing here?" Bella managed, breath high and thin.

He stepped inside and shut the door behind him with a soft, final click.

"What did I tell you?" he snapped, the words rolling out like a belt.

"I—what are you talking ab—"

She didn't finish.

SMACK!

A slap landed across her cheek, a hard, shocking sound that echoed off metal cabinets.

"You fucking whore!" He spat the name like a punishment. "Who do you think you are, sneaking minutes away to talk to that nigger? Are you fucking crazy!?"

His hand flew to her face.

Tears came quickly and hot.

"I'm sorry. I didn't—" She tried to edge toward the door, to leave the air where his shadow hung.

Richard closed the distance in two strides and shoved her back into the desk.

"You love him that much?" he hissed. "Enough to watch him hang? Enough to have his name buried under this place forever?"

Bella's breath hitched.

"Please, I'm sorry. Don't—please don't hurt me."

She was on her knees for a heartbeat, not because she wanted to be there but because the room made it a small place to beg.

He laughed then—a raw, ugly sound.

"Glad I found a woman so easy to throw away," he said. "You're nothing but trash from my point of view."

He shoved a file across the desk, and the papers rattled like bones.

"Andy!" he barked.

Andy arrived as if on cue, rumped and bigger in the doorway, his expression contented like a bully who'd been promised a prize. He stepped in slowly, and Bella saw the way his eyes darkened. She pressed herself back against the cabinets, the folder clutched to her chest.

Richard said, flat and clinical.

"We had plans for your friend. We were going to burn his whole existence. But then Royce's little note popped up."

"I've always wanted to fuck her," Andy said with his scratchy voice, Richard pulled a folded scrap from his pocket and smoothed it on the desk.

"This changes things."

Bella's mouth worked soundlessly.

"Please," she whispered. "It was only—"

"Shut up!"

Richard's hand cracked again across her shoulder. The slap was meant to hurt, to stun, to yank obedience out of her.

"You're going to give me what I want," his voice rasped.

He pulled her scrubs down, flashing her lingerie. He spanked her bottom half and threw her head onto her desk.

Bella was in shock. She wrestled until she couldn't anymore.

ZIP! ZIP!

Minutes felt like hours. The two officers were done with her. They zipped up their uniform pants and crunched towards the exit.

When Bella's sobs came, they were small at first, then deeper—a grief that tasted of betrayal and fear and the knowledge that she had helped set a man she loved into a trap. She coughed while looking at the fluorescent light hummed and hummed until it seemed to be the only witness in a room stacked with lies.

SUNNY JEAN (FLASHBACK)

Late afternoon, Sunny stumbled through the gates, the fruit basket thumping against his hip like a heartbeat. Chezter and Jessica were already waiting, faces cut sharp by a random incident. Jessica grabbed him first and then let go.

“Thank God you're okay,” she breathed.

“What happened here?” Sunny demanded, scanning the crowd.

“It's Presley,” Jessica said. Her voice broke on the name. “They took him.”

Number One had her hand clamped over Presley's mother's shoulder; the woman's face was a raw map of grief. Around them, the community moved more slowly, like people walking through a dream where someone else was doing the damage.

Tents sagged; blue canvas flapped at uneven angles.

The air tasted of dust and copper.

Sunny pushed through to Number One.

“What can I do?”

“Nothing right now,” she said, voice thin. “Come on. Let's get you cleaned up.”

“There must be a way to get him back,” Sunny said.

Number One didn’t answer; she turned away and walked toward the tents like a woman carrying a weight she couldn’t set down.

A guard’s hand tapped Sunny’s shoulder then, his voice a flat stone.

“When a member of our community is kidnapped, it’s a ninety-nine percent chance they never come back.”

“Where the hell would they take him?” Sunny spat.

The answer came faster than he could follow.

SPLOOSH!

Presley was at the edge of the witch’s dungeon, ribs pressed to a metal chair that looked like something pulled from an abandoned schoolroom. Rope bit into his wrists; the cords were knotted ugly and tight, pulling his shoulders forward so his chin hovered over his chest. His face had gone paper-white, eyes too wide for the soft round of his cheeks.

Around him, the witches moved like a chorus of shadows, whispering and laughing in a language that scraped the inside of Presley’s teeth.

They wore odds and ends — moth-eaten shawls, lipstick the color of tar, beads that clinked when they shifted their weight. Their faces were painted in crude designs: streaks of white and charcoal that turned smiles into frowns and eyes into hollows. The air smelled of charred wood and river mud, of something sweet gone sour.

Once humans, now disguised in another world.

One of them dragged a cloth across Presley’s mouth and then pulled it back away again, just to watch him panic. Another took his jacket and tossed it on the ground like a garment that meant nothing; a third reached into a satchel and scattered salt in a circle around the chair, the crystals snapping quietly under the sun.

Their movements were ritualized—petty cruelties strung together into a pattern that made the whole thing feel rehearsed.

“Look at him,” a voice hissed from the ring. “Pretty little thing, too soft for this world.”

“Perfect for our work,” another offered, touching slowly and possessively over the sleeve they’d stripped.

Presley tried to speak, but the rope choked his breath.

“Wh-where are you taking me?” he croaked. The word came out small, like someone who had just discovered the dark under the mattress.

The witches answered with a chorus of laughter that had no mirth in it. They closed ranks, the ring tightening like a noose of shadow. One of them leaned close and breathed something at Presley’s ear—an old promise or a curse; it didn’t matter. The kid shivered as if struck.

Then the white witch stepped out.

She moved differently. Where the others jutted and jabbed, where they scratched at the air like flies, she glided with the slow certainty of someone who owned the room’s center. White flowed off her dress in a wash that made the other colors look like stains. Her hair was pinned back severely and elegantly; a small black crown sat tilted on her head like a punctuation mark. Her lips were lacquered black, and she had that unnerving grace of someone who’d learned how to weaponize calm.

Her eyes—behind pale blue contacts—caught the light and held it like a jewel. For a second, they looked nothing like human eyes at all, more like polished stones set into a face. She smiled, and the smile was so smooth it set the hair on Sunny’s arms upright.

“You’re here early,” she said, voice soft as velvet but with a cutting edge underneath. The words rolled over Presley like oil over glass.

Presley’s lips trembled.

“I’m just—” His voice dissolved into a ragged breath.

She crouched so that she was level with him, and for an instant her face was warm in the way a flame is warm—inviting, dangerous.

“You’re part of something now,” she murmured. “You belong. Don’t worry. We’ll make it quick.”

One of the circle shoved a small iron—an old, dark rod with a looped handle—toward her. It looked like a tool meant for work, not for comfort; it hissed faintly where it had been kept near embers. The white witch's hand hovered over it, finger tapping the metal like a metronome.

TSSSSSSS!

The White Witch burned Presley's left hand. He screamed in agony. The witches then fed him cocaine to numb the pain. Laced cocaine. One of the witches went down on him, forcing him to become erect.

Mission complete.

The witch pulled down her rough underwear and slipped inside of him. One woman after another, taking turns on an innocent 18-year-old. Assault howled at the moon until dawn. The torture in both worlds shaped the universe at this very moment.

CHAPTER FIVE

“THE TRIO”

SUNNY JEAN

/

The radio cracked like a gunshot in the thin morning. Zepp’s voice came over the static, flat and small in the hush. He was lean and of bronze-skin, with a shaved head covered by his hood. He moved quietly and efficiently, draped in a weathered red robe. A compact crossbow rode his back, and a short sword hung at his hip—tools, not ornaments.

“Code-4 — we have a body a few feet away from the gate.”

Number One’s reply snapped back a heartbeat later.

“I’ll be right there.”

Cold bit through fabric and into bone; frost laced the rim of the water barrels like tiny teeth. The morning smelled of iron and old smoke. When Number One crouched over the blanket, the world narrowed until all you could see was the motion of her hands fumbling the ragged edges apart. When Presley’s face appeared, it was like somebody had carved silence out of the day. His skin had gone the color of old milk, his eyes bloodshot and milky at the edges, his lips split raw. The wounds were a map: dark purple, angry, and swelling, a pattern of blunt objects and knives.

The smell hit before Number One saw everything—pennies and cheap booze and that other stench, the rot that sits under fear.

Number One gagged and threw up onto the morning dew.

Zepp and two others lifted the blanket. Presley’s body felt lighter than it should. The motion of carrying him away made everything feel unreal, as if Code-4 was now moving through someone else’s nightmare. People closed in around Number One—hands on shoulders, faces drained of color. Words were short. Prayers, if anyone could call them that, came out like coughs.

War didn't have a trumpet. It arrived in footsteps and the hollow sound of a gate swinging shut. By the time Presley's body was gone, the air around the camp had the density of a cloud. Shock made the mouths of the tents look like open windows on a house that had been abandoned mid-sentence.

knock knock knock.

A knock at Sunny's door came soft, then urgent.

Number Three stood in the frame, rawness in the face he'd seen only twice before—like someone carved grief into bone. Tears cut lines down her chiselled cheeks.

"Presley is dead," she said without any of the syrup of comfort people used to hide the real thing.

"Shit. I'm so sorry, Number Three," Sunny said, every word clumsy with the wrong kind of heat.

"He was sweet. So fucking sweet," she breathed, then sucked the sound back. Her hand trembled as she passed something to him. Number One had asked her to give him a note for the day.

Sunny unfolded the note with fingers that felt numb for reasons colder than the weather. The paper had been folded roughly, the edges softened by too many hands.

Sunny,

It's time. You and your friends locate the hideout where Presley was attacked. Chester will track it down. Kill everyone inside.

X,

Code-4

The words sat on the page like something malignant and obvious. He read it twice, then a third time. The letters didn't shake, but his stomach did. Code-4's mark at the bottom—Number One's signature seal—was as neat as a sentence that could not be undone.

Kill everyone inside.

Presley's face flashed in Sunny's head.

There were rules, and then there were the rules Code-4 made when there were no rules left. Number One's order was simple and brutal; it was survival braided with vengeance.

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

Charles sat across from Leftover, aka Lefty, in the mess hall, the date stamped into his head like a bruise: July 10th, 2018. The tray in front of him steamed gray and tasteless—prison food pretending to be a meal—while his mind kept rewinding to Bella's laugh and the folded note he'd slipped to her the night before. The clatter and low roar of the cafeteria were a distant ocean; everything else was a narrowing tunnel.

An inmate walked towards Leftover and spoke in his ear.

Leftover leaned in, the sound of his whisper swallowed by the din. The inmate walked away.

"What happened?" Charles asked.

"Nothing, man. Don't trip."

"Tell me," Charles tried to find the answer in Lefty's eyes.

"That nurse you like," he said, voice low and hard, "Dickhead and his friend— they raped her last night, my nigga."

For a second, the world compressed. Charles let the noise wash over him and listened for the particulars, hunting the shape of the words like a man tracing footprints in mud. Leftover's eyes flicked away when he said it, quick and guilty. The way he said "raped" was flat—no flourish, no brag—like he'd snatched the fact from a frightened breath in a stairwell, not a joke tossed across a table.

Charles watched the men around them: a dap, a sideways glance, pockets closing up. Information moved in tight, private threads here. Whoever told Leftover knew something close and ugly, and they'd passed it along in stages, careful to leave no trail.

Did Royce see something while mopping? Had somebody on night shift heard a scream and mistaken it for a fight? Or had Bella herself whispered to someone in passing—too afraid to name names? Charles tried to pick at the edges of the rumor: “last night” meant during the nurse’s shift; “his friend” meant an accomplice who knew how to cover tracks. The list of possibilities tightened into two: this was a brazen guard or an ordered cover-up. Both left the same taste in his mouth: steel and intent.

“Stay out of this, bruh. You gon get yourself killed,” Leftover added, and the warning landed like hot metal.

It landed, but Charles felt something colder—rage tempered into focus. He tried to fold it down, to think strategy instead of fury, but the words kept striking like flint on stone until resolve sparked.

Richard walked in like a man claiming a stage—loose-shouldered, laughing with the cronies who made their power by intimidation. He smelled of cheap cologne and cigarettes. The sight of him talking easily while Bella’s name sat in Charles’s head was a match to dry tinder.

Charles pushed back from the table. The room tilted as he stood, fists closing. He moved across the aisle with one purpose.

Richard’s laugh skidded into the wrong gear when Charles’s fist met his jaw.

POW!

The slap of the punch cracked across the hall like a report. For a second time slowed, the guards reacted—bats out, boots slamming. The cafeteria turned from background noise to a storm of batons and shouts.

Hands grabbed Charles, pulling and swinging him into a rough ballet of control. The beating was quick and efficient; metal thudded into muscle, boots found their marks. He tasted blood. His ears rang with the clack of

leather and the shouts of the men who wore the uniform that bent the rules in this place.

“Take him to the hole!” Richard hissed through the smell of his own spit and anger.

They dragged Charles down the steps, past the sterile lights and the watchful cameras, into the narrow underbelly where echoes ate sound. The world narrowed to the scrape of his cuffs and the throb behind his eyes. The last thing he saw before the door slammed was Richard straightening his uniform, spitting blood from his mouth, and smoothing the collar like a man adjusting a mask.

Richard didn’t look victorious so much as worried—there was a new calculation in his face as he turned and walked toward the warden’s office. The laugh had gone. He had a problem now: a man with reasons to fight, a staff that knew how to hide things, and a hole where a body could be buried—or a story could be rewritten. The cafeteria’s clamor receded; what remained was the cold, clean inevitability of what came next.

SUNNY JEAN

(PRESENT)

The trio rolled under a low sun, Chezter at the wheel of the rusted yellow sedan, Jessica, aka Skratch, sharpening blades in the back like a priest at an altar, and Sunny staring out at a land that looked used up and angry. The argument had the slow burn of something that had been rehearsing itself.

“So what’s your plan this time, oh fearless leader?” Jessica jabbed, voice thin. Annoyed.

“Not now, Jess,” Sunny said through his teeth.

“Oh, not now? You didn’t say ‘not now’ when you ditched us yesterday.” Her tone cut.

“It wasn’t like that!” he snapped, spinning in his seat. “I got trapped, I fought my way out, I found food for everybody. What did you do?”

“Survive—like I always do!” She lashed back. Her hands shook.

“You’ve got a lot to prove, Sunny Jean. Stop trying to leave all the time.”
Her hands tightened on the blade.

“If you think I’m out here wasting time, that says more about you than me! We got other shit—finding the people who killed Presley. So sharpen your tools and shut the fuck up!”

“Don’t yell at me—”

“Sorry,” he muttered, but the apology was thin, and the silence that followed tasted like powder and waiting.

SKRRRR!

Chezter swore softly and slammed the brakes so hard the world pitched.

Up ahead, a dozen silhouettes moved across the road—witches, faces warped like old dolls, weapons catching the dying light. They spilled from the trees and blocked the way, a crooked fence of grins and blades.

Chezter hopped out without a sound. He was all long limbs and cold accuracy; his silence hit harder than most men’s words. Sunny and Jessica followed. The witches scattered like startled rats, running east with ragged speed.

They chased.

The house they found was squat and dumb—one story, flat roof, peeling paint like scabs. Witches clustered out front with knives and rusted pipes. Sunny’s lungs burned with the smell of exhaled menace.

“Jess, stay behind us,” Sunny panted.

“Okay,” she breathed, fingers white on the hilt.

She scurried behind the boys.

They moved in. Chezter, a shadow that folded and unfolded, Sunny, a living battering ram, and Jessica, the quick check at the back.

When they struck, it was ugly and immediate.

SLOOT! WHAM! SCAT! TOOM!

Chezter's crossbow sang, and two bolts punched through cotton and bone.

Sunny's axe slammed into wrists and ribs, the blows loud and honest.

Jessica stayed to face the chaos. Her eyes widened at the horror. In her brain, violence gets worse by the day.

When the last figure thudded, the three of them stood breathing, the world narrowed to the taste of copper and the thump of their hearts.

They pushed open the front door and moved through the rooms like men searching a map for a wound. The house smelled of old liquor and dryer lint.

"Shit," Sunny said, the word a sack in his throat.

They split—Jessica wanted the attic.

There was no attic.

Only a basement door yawning like a throat. They went down. In the basement, a metal chair sat tipped, and dark stain marred its seat—Presley's blood, dried into a map. Small lines of white powder lay in the room like a second crime scene. Empty bottles winked under a table.

Moments later.

BOOM!

A single lock scrawled shut above them, an upstairs door clanging into place. Sunny's head jerked up.

"They locked us in."

"We can get out on top of that washing machine," Jessica said, pointing.

Footsteps above turned into the sound of wood being battered, a staccato of panic. Then — from the kitchen — the dull thud and scrape of wood falling. The witches were setting the place on fire, stacking boards, sending flame down like they wanted the house and everyone in it to be history.

"Chezter, get ready—jump!" Sunny roared.

Chezter launched himself through a window like a shot, landing with the grace of something hungry.

“Jess, now!” Sunny slammed his shoulder against the dryer and pushed.
The top gave with a groan. “Jump!” he shouted.

“But what about you?” she yelled.

“I’ll be right behind you!” he yelled, voice a promise he meant to keep.

She jumped.

Plastic and metal screamed against bone.

The house heaved, and the roof tasted like a mouth closing. Sunny took the step onto the washing machine, the world breaking underfoot as the floor gave way. The building folded like an old paper puppet—the ceiling fell, a chorus of snaps, and the final, terrifying crunch.

BMMM! BMMM! BMM! BMMM! BMM...

He hit hard.

Pain erupted along his side like a new language.

For a long second, the world was a ringing, metallic place—ears bleeding with sound, dust choking the edges of vision. He rolled and tried to find purchase, to locate the edge of consciousness.

“Wake up! Wake up!” Jessica’s voice was high and ragged through the rubble. Her hands were a prayer on his shoulder.

“I’m up— I’m up,” he croaked, taste of blood in his mouth.

“Chez—look out!”

A male warlock lunged from the shadows with an animal scream. Chezter moved like he had no bones—faster than human, a thin blade cutting the world into before and after. The warlock stopped moving and sank like a puppet with its strings cut.

SLAAAT!

Another witch dropped her weapon and went to her knees, hands raised.

“Please! Don’t hurt me!” she begged, voice raw.

Chezter stood over her a second too long, a hunger showing at the edge of his face. He pulled a box cutter and flashed it, a small, intimate

blade—someone who'd been practiced at opening lives. The woman was young, maybe mid-twenties, face round and tall. 6'3, filthy, petite body. Her eyes were too wide and scared. She smelled like smoke, sour milk, and regret.

"She gave up," Jessica hissed. "Let her go."

Chezter's muscles twitched. He slid the cutter back in his pocket like it had been a test he'd failed. For once, he let the pull go.

POW!

Jessica didn't hesitate—she swung a fist that planted square on the witch's jaw and knocked her clean out. The blow was ugly and necessary; the witch collapsed like a sack of bad decisions.

"You can be a real asshole, you know that?" Jessica spat as Chezter slung the limp body over his shoulder.

He said nothing. He just walked, heavy as an accusation.

They pulled Sunny to his feet with hands that steadied him and wrapped his arm around Jessica's shoulders. He bit a curse through his teeth and staggered forward. The sedan sat where they'd left it, paint blistered and tired. They carried him like a flag of failure and survival back to the car, the road yawning ahead and the house behind them smoldering like a statement.

CHARLES VICTOR

(FLASHBACK)

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

"Uhh, Yes! Come on in!" The Warden shouted.

Richard opened his door.

They closed the door, and the Warden's office snapped shut on the rest of the prison like a lid. The Warden sat behind his desk in that ridiculous white suit—Colonel mustache, gold cowboy hat tipped at an angle that said "don't

argue”—and he looked every inch the man who thought law was a suggestion. Richard stood easy and smooth by the door, grin honed to function.

A doctor was seated across from the warden.

“Richard! Just the man I wanted to see,” the Warden greeted. “This is Doctor Gallagher. We were just talking about a new serum that could strengthen our guards.”

Dr. Gallagher didn’t smile. He set a battered cooler on the desk with the reverence of a man setting down a specimen.

“No small talk,” Gallagher said immediately, because he was the sort of scientist who hated wasted oxygen. He pulled the cooler lid and lifted a single vial into the lamplight; the liquid inside caught like oil on water.

“You asked for data,” he said to the warden, and he did not stop talking until he had given them the whole thing. His voice had the breathy quickness of someone used to lecturing to rooms that needed convincing.

“It’s not a miracle. It’s a compound—synthetic colloid with a reactive titanium microstructure. It acts as a transient scaffold when introduced to blood plasma. The scaffold doesn’t persist; it recruits native cellular repair mechanisms and modifies cellular signaling. In plain terms: it triggers accelerated autophagy, ramps up growth-factor signaling, and temporarily enhances cellular plasticity. The result is rapid tissue regeneration and increased tolerance to hypoxic insult.”

He tapped the tablet and slides flicked up—electron micrographs, blood chemistries, before-and-after histology. “Subject #1950 responded catastrophically. Baseline comorbidities. We pushed a dosing protocol too far. Systemic inflammatory response. We lost that animal. That’s on the record, and we documented it. Subject #2380—female—received a modified formulation and a single bolus. She was clinically dead for thirty minutes: cardiac arrest, respiratory failure. She recovered with restored tissue integrity and increased tensile strength in muscle samples. We ran encapsulated toxin challenges, induced profound hypoxia, and even repeated exposure to corrosive agents. She sealed vascular breaches,

re-epithelialized wounds faster, and showed enhanced clotting. Behaviorally, she was slower to process novel stimuli for seventy-two hours post-event—neural lag—but motor function returned quickly.”

The Warden’s cigar smoked in the tension between words.

“Neural lag?”

Gallagher did not soften the term. “Temporary dysphasia, slowed executive response—like someone waking from a deep sedation. In one case, we saw transient gliosis and atypical neural firing patterns on EEG. In another, there was evidence of localized hyperplasia—cells over-repairing and forming scar tissue that impeded function. Those are the risks. The benefits are quicker wound closure, resistance to many pathogens, and a partial ability to tolerate trauma that would otherwise be fatal.”

Richard’s fingers drummed on the desk.

“So—guards who can shrug off riots. Fewer lawsuits, fewer bodies. What about long-term? Ten years? Twenty?”

Gallagher’s face tightened.

“We don’t know. We have no long-term trials. We’ve accelerated tissue repair in test subjects and seen resistance to short-term challenges. We did not, and cannot yet, say this halts the aging process. Telomere data is noisy; some markers look promising, others are inconclusive. There is a neurochemical cost in a portion of subjects—altered sleep architecture, occasional compulsive behavior. We need longitudinal monitoring, cognitive baselines, and control cohorts. Ethical oversight. That’s how you separate rigorous science from reckless theater.”

The Warden let out a dry laugh that was half appetite.

“We don’t have the luxury of longitudinal studies when guards get stabbed. You’re asking me to wait while my men bleed.”

Gallagher leaned forward, eyes bright with professional hunger and the kind of moral strain that looked almost pained.

“You have options. You can do proper, consented human trials—baseline screening, staged dosing, continuous monitoring. You can accept a higher

risk of adverse events in exchange for immediate operational gains. Or, you can do a rushed roll-out and accept unknown consequences. I'm telling you what we saw, what we documented. The risk profile is real. So are the potential upside metrics: reduced mortality in violent events, faster return to duty, fewer lost shifts."

Richard's voice slid between them, lubricated by practicality.

"We have a population that's controlled—lifers, solitary. Men who move in and out of the system unnoticed. We frame participation as an incentive: reduced time, better assignments. We avoid 'trial' optics. We avoid families. We minimize leakage."

Gallagher's hands tightened on the vial.

"You can't pick a sample based on convenience and call it science. If you introduce confounders—malnutrition, active infections, untreated TB—your data is garbage and your risks multiply. You're not just running an intervention. You're altering physiology at a fundamental level. You need baseline labs, a clean environment, controlled dosing regimens, and post-dose care. If you expose compromised bodies, you will cause deaths you can't predict."

The Warden shrugged the moral part away like loose ash.

"We'll control variables by controlling the environment. Solitary is clean in the sense of isolation. We can stabilize nutrition. You get the cohort, Doc. You bring a protocol. We'll handle the logistics. Confidentiality is our currency. If anything goes sideways, it stays here."

Gallagher's jaw worked. He was a man who could intoxicate a doctor's ethics with data—he wanted the experiment to succeed—but he was not so drunk on potential that he ignored the math. He spoke about the safeguards he needed:

"Document everything. Full informed consent. Continuous EEG and CBC monitoring. A controlled dosing escalation—no bolus without observation. A medical team is on site twenty-four hours for the first week. If we see markers of neural aberration or uncontrolled hyperplasia, we stop.

Immediate quarantine of anomalous cases. Post-trial follow-up for at least six months.”

Richard’s smile sharpened into a tool.

“We document. We monitor. We control the narrative. But you get us an operational advantage sooner, then we scale. We start with ten. Solitary men. Early morning transfer. Quiet. Efficient.”

The Warden folded his hands and watched the two men who would implement the plan.

“Tomorrow before dawn,” he said. “We select ten. We transport them under the pretext of ‘rehabilitation.’ This stays in-house.”

Gallagher stared at the lamp-lit vial between them, the liquid reflecting like a small, dangerous sun. He weighed his words and the bloodline of compromises that came with them.

“I will proceed under strict documentation,” he said finally. “Any deviation from the protocol, and no matter the pressure, you halt me.”

The Warden’s smile did not warm. “Halt? You? You’ll be fine if it works. If it doesn’t, we bury what we must. But work. Quiet. Tomorrow.”

Richard left the office with the ease of a man who had turned a rumor into a project. The Warden patted his hat and savored the aftertaste of a good arrangement. Gallagher closed the cooler and lingered, looking into the vial as if it might blink back at him. Outside, the prison yard kept its ordinary rhythms: laundry on lines, men on benches. None of them knew that below the routine, someone had just set a clock.

SUNNY JEAN

(PRESENT)

“Ouch! Be more gentle, motherfucker!” Jessica snapped, voice bright with pain and grit.

They patched up in the dim light of her room, the kind of light that made blood look like rust and the whole world move more slowly. Jessica cursed every time Chezter's needle threaded skin—sharp, efficient fingers—while Sunny lay flat on the bed with a towel over his face, taste of glass and metal still in his mouth.

Chezter hummed under his breath, stitching the wound clean.

Jessica winced, then joked.

“At least it's better than when they tried to sew my eye to my fucking face.”

Chezter looked up in curiosity.

“Not my whole eye, of course,” she added, half-laughing through the wince.

Sunny drifted in and out, fragments of their talk leaking through the towel.

Then a knock at the door—soft, sure. Number One's silhouette filled the frame when the door opened.

“How's your wound, Jessica?” she asked.

“Just another scar on my body. I'll be okay,” Jessica said, braver than she felt.

Number One glanced at Sunny, then back.

“I'm sorry that happened. How is he?”

“He's healing slowly,” Jessica answered. “The place crumbled to the ground. He survived—he can tell you when he wakes up.”

Number One's English voice tightened.

“I want to thank you for your sacrifice. It's not fair what we have to do. Not fair at all.”

“It's okay. Could you tell downstairs to bring us a pizza!?” Jessica called.

“Anything for you, little dove,” Number One replied, and the small nickname landed in the room like a warm hand. She closed the door.

“Little dove?” Jessica questioned the universe.

Chezter patted her stomach on his way out.

“Thanks Chezter! Have a good night.”

She kissed him quick—an honest, grateful peck—and Chezter left carrying the kind of quiet that meant he’d sleep with a knife under his pillow if he had to. He snagged Sunny’s left ankle as a last, clumsy goodbye.

After she washed, she turned the light off and climbed into bed beside him.

Sunny didn’t wake—didn’t expect to be woken. She spooned him from behind, a safe, warm weight. For a moment, with her breath against his neck and the steady rise of her chest, the day’s wreckage eased. He didn’t want more than that—no promises, no tangled lines—just that small, human closeness. He let himself like it. He let himself believe, quietly, that survival could hold something softer than the fight.

CHAPTER SIX

“FRIDAY THE 16TH”

CHARLES VICTOR

JULY 16TH, 2018

The inmates drove up the “MBPL” scientific center drive under a sky so bright it looked like a lie.

The compound rose out of the scrub like a city that had learned to pretend it was polite: glass facades, terraces filled with people who pushed their collars back and drank coffee as if nothing needed fixing. Men in white coats drifted like surgeon-butterflies between doors stamped with logos and slogans about “advancing humanity.” The bus hissed to a stop, and the engine exhaled. Orange jumpsuits against a backdrop of white made them look less like men and more like punctuation.

Charles stepped down last, the cuff of his jumpsuit cold against his wrist where the chain rubbed. July air bit and a smell followed them—chlorine and the distant burn of lab solvents. Guards moved with practiced neutrality, faces the color of someone who had been paid to look past things. The staff formed a human funnel and applause—polite and rehearsed—rose like static.

Dr. Gallagher met them on the pavement with a grin that had been ironed into place. He had the practiced warmth of a lecturer who’d learned his lines.

“Welcome, gentlemen!” he cried, hands spread wide. “You’re part of something groundbreaking. But first—brunch. Eggs, bacon, pancakes—name it!” The words sounded like a promise and a trap at once.

An inmate near the front spat under his breath.

“You think we’re stupid?” he said, flat as a coin.

“Not at all, my friend! On the contrary—you’re necessary,” Gallagher answered, laughter too quick and high.

Charles watched the exchange the way a man watches a storm: the edges first. *Project Alpha*—Gallagher said the name like a prayer. He watched the scientist’s smile flicker into a line, saw the way Gallagher’s fingers pinched the air when he talked about the serum, about one injection, about immunity. The words meant something different depending on who heard them. To the men in orange, it sounded like hope. To Charles, it sounded like inventory.

“Project Alpha,” Gallagher said, when he could stop smiling. “We are pairing a reactive titanium colloid with targeted growth-factor delivery. In layman’s terms, we’re training cells to rebuild themselves faster and better. Trauma that kills most will be resisted. Infections we used to fear? Reduced. You take one dose, you recover from things that would have stopped a normal man.”

Around Charles, some inmates shifted closer, the human instinct for any leverage—real or imagined—pulling them. One of them, a wiry man with a broken nose, cocked his head like a bird listening for meat.

“And what if it doesn’t work?” he asked.

Gallagher’s face didn’t flinch.

“We’ve tested in animals. We’ve seen regeneration, repair, and resistance to hypoxia. There are risks—neurological lag in some subjects, the possibility of aberrant tissue growth in rare cases—but we’re confident. We will monitor, of course.”

The caveat landed softly, an attempt to be precise and humane.

SUNNY JEAN

Morning at the zoo arrived like a hot pie — gorgeous and dangerous both. Dawn spat gold between the iron bars and turned the torn banners into stained silk. Dew beaded on the chain-link and on the tufts of grass that

had pushed up through cracked concrete; each droplet held the world for a second, then let it go. Birds argued in the trees, their voices thin and bright against the low, steady thrum of people waking. Smoke from last night's fires drifted slowly, a blue-gray ribbon that smelled of soot and coffee.

Sunny stood on the upper walk, fedora tilted back just enough to catch the light on his cheekbones. Below him the zoo's cages threw long, sleepy shadows across the courtyard. The place looked, for a moment, like something that could be fixed — like a picture in a brochure someone forgot to tear. He breathed it in: cold air, the metallic tang of the gate, the faint sweetness of someone frying onions far off. It was a morning that made you forget the ugliness for the length of its first breath.

Chezter sat on the low wall, legs braced, the dull ring of steel on steel as he honed his hatchet steady as a metronome. His hands moved in an economy of motion — efficient, spare. Zepp leaned against the cart, coffee steaming in his palm, red robe a slash of color against the gray. He watched Chezter with the quiet attention of a man who measured danger like weather.

"What's going on, boys?" Sunny called down, voice thin in the open air but warm enough to split the morning.

"We're getting our day started," Zepp answered, the words loose around his mouth like steam.

"Where's Code-4?" Sunny asked, tapping his hat straight with a thumb.

"They're in the dungeon with the witch," Zepp said simply. No flourish. No judgement — just fact, the way someone might tell you the time.

The sentence blurred the light a little. Sunny felt the morning tilt — a cup losing balance. He patted Chezter's shoulder, an easy motion that meant he didn't ask for courage, only for company. Chezter nodded and snapped the hatchet's blade into its sheath with a soft, decisive click.

They went down into the dungeon like men walking into a throat.

The light died slowly—first the gold, then the gray, then nothing but the teeth of the lamp over the workbench. The air below stank of old rope and

wet stone and something metallic that tasted like fear. Every footstep hit hollow and came back thinner. Shadows clung to the walls like tar.

SPLASH!

The witch hung upside down, ankles lashed until her knees trembled.

Water dripped from the bucket onto her hair and splashed the concrete. Each time the rope slipped, her head plunged under and she fought like a drowning animal—coughing, hacking, body convulsing—then the rope pulled her up and the buckets clanked and someone laughed. Number One stood with arms folded, voice flat and businesslike as she interrogated. #3's hands moved steadily on the winch, the mechanic of cruelty.

"Where are your savages?" Number One asked, calm like a judge reading a verdict.

The witch's eyes were white with salt and fear. "I don't know," she rasped, voice shredded. "I swear. I swear."

Sunny tasted the chrome of his anger; it was cold and immediate. He stepped forward before he finished filing an excuse.

"Let me try," he said.

Number One's reaction was a small flinch, the only honest thing on her face.

"This is beyond stressful," she muttered. Then, to the group: "Take a break. We'll pull intel later."

Sunny opened the cage with a hand that was gentle.

"Chezter, cut her down."

Chezter's knife flashed—cut through rope fiber like it had a grudge—and the woman hit the bucket hard, the sound like a dull bell.

"Really?" Sunny questioned. He was pissed.

The witch lay there for a beat, lungs tearing, then Sunny hauled her up and sat her on the metal chair. Her skin had the white sheen of someone who'd been submerged too many times.

"You okay?" he asked.

“I’m... cold,” she whispered.

Sunny fumbled in his pocket for something warm and found the butane lighter in his palm. The flame speared small and ridiculous against the dungeon’s maw. She cupped it like a bird finding a sun.

“What’s your name, sweetheart?” Sunny smiled.

“Aubrey,” she managed to say.

“Aubrey. I see you guys like to play with fire. When I was young, my friends wanted me to burn down our neighbor's house. I didn’t want to do it, but the guy sold crack to children. They figured I was the type of person to play with fire, but it was a joke. A joke that I took too seriously.”

He shut the lighter.

“This is the flame I used to burn his house down. It’s actually burned down quite a few places before I graduated high school. So, Aubrey...tell us where your people are. It’s either we spare your people, burn your hideouts, or I burn you. ”

“I’ll tell you everything,” Aubrey choked. “Give me a map. I’ll draw it. I—”
Her words broke. They were fraying, taut rope thrown into the wind.

Number One smirked.

“Really? Are you that easy?”

BOOOOOOOOOM!

The answer died in the rafters—an explosion of sound from upstairs, a slam, and the rattle of feet.

“What was that?” Sunny barked.

“It came from upstairs!” Number One snapped. “Move!”

They bolted—boots on concrete, a pack of shadows up the stairs.

Aubrey’s voice followed them like a thread.

“Don’t leave me!”

The trap snapped the minute their backs turned. Sundered wood showered down; torches blazed up from holes someone had cut in the eaves.

Witches poured through like a tide: faces painted in streaks of white and coal, hair wild as smashed crows, knives and hooks and a bright, hateful exhilaration. The air filled with the sound of unrestrained violence—muffled shrieks, the ring of steel, the sharp crack of bowstrings.

POW!

An arrow was buried in Sunny's back with the soft, obscene courtesy of something that knew how to kill quietly. Hot and hard—he tasted copper and fell like someone had been cut from the world's seam. Another arrow followed. The world folded sideways, and the floor hit him through the ribs and dust. For a second, his hands were warm with blood, and his vision tunneled into static.

And then Skratch was there, a cyclone with drumsticks. She came in like a battering ram—no finesse, all intent—and turned the opening chaos into a rhythm. Her sticks found legs and hands, disarming weapons, free for her allies to strike.

The White Witch moved slowly and certainly, white dress a smear of wrongness against the dungeon's grime. Her blue contacts caught the lamp like eyes carved from ice. She stepped toward Skratch with a smile that didn't belong anywhere human.

"You're cute, honey. We could use you," she purred, velvet and venom. "No thanks," Skratch responded. "You all smell like mildew and cum stains."

The White Witch snapped. Her hand came with barbed words as she wrestled to penetrate her knife in Skratch's face.

"I could make you an eyeless bitch!" she spat.

"I'll still be prettier than you!" Skratch moaned.

Number Two ran towards the White Witch and kicked her in the stomach. Her knife flew from her grip; she screamed, a bright, animal sound.

Sunny's world was a soggy wash for a beat—dark and hot and full of the distant thunder of fighting. He found the seam of consciousness and ripped it open with one brutal, reflexive decision: he carved through bodies like a man who had nothing left to give but everything he had. Chezter was a

shadow—knives and hatchet, stupidly calm, his throws clean and fatal. Zepp's crossbow barked, bolts thudding into shoulders, halting attackers mid-lunge. The compound of them moved like a machine built of grudges.

Sunny hit the White Witch upside the head with everything he had; the blow thundered through the room. She rocked, stumbled, and for a breath she considered falling. Chezter's knives found her side in a scattering of hot little holes. She coughed, slick blood dark on white fabric, and then she ran—queen skittering through the gate with the rest of her pack.

"Retreat! Retreat!" she screamed like a ruler whose court was burning.

Chaos ate the next minutes. Torches burned, banners and fleas of smoke crawled up through the bars. The attackers pulled back into the trees with the White Witch leading, a ribbon of retreating menace. The courtyard filled with the smell of wet wool and hot blood and something that tasted like broken vows.

Back in the dungeon, Sunny and Chezter saw the cage door lay mangled, clamps unseated. Aubrey's chain marks were white tracks on dark skin.

"Son of a bitch!" Sunny yelled while slamming the cage door.

Water footprints led up the stairs—thin arcs of wet on dry wood. They followed them, all fury and unspent breath.

Outside the zoo, the fight slid into a different rhythm. Aubrey stumbled free from the gate with another witch, Charlotte, cursing like a lash. Charlotte was a petite hispanic around 5'6, so she looked like a runt compared to Aubrey, but she was assigned to kill her to avoid Code-4 knowing where the hideouts were.

WOOSH!

Aubrey's ankle buckled, and she shrieked. Charlotte shoved the spear into her throat.

"You're in trouble," Charlotte said, cruel and simple. "You should know that, puta."

Aubrey's panic collapsed into something else—something sharpened by survival.

She yanked a rock—hard, flinty, ugly, and swung.

POW!

Charlotte's face folded under the blow with a sound that made birds stop in the trees. The spear clattered away. The two wrestled, but Charlotte was way too tiny. Aubrey's scream tore the air open—raw, wild, a thing born of breaking. She picked up the stone and smashed Charlotte's face multiple times, screaming at the thought of finding her demons yet again, just when she thought revealing truths would set her free.

CHARLES VICTOR

MBPL fed the inmates like kings that day — or like lab animals with a flair for theatrics. The MBPL cafeteria gleamed: stainless counters, soft indirect light, plush chairs that felt wrong under orange jumpsuits. Someone rolled out a cart of burgers with bacon and fries; somebody else uncorked cheap champagne for the staff. For a few hours, they were given rooms, movies, warm sheets, and the kind of small, calibrated comforts meant to hush suspicion. Female staff smiled too long in doorways; hands lingered in pockets like payment. Everything free. Everything is calibrated to lower the animal's defenses.

Charles ate a bacon cheeseburger the size of a fist and watched a dumb movie with a free remote pressed to his palm until the grease on his fingers felt normal. He napped like a man stealing time and woke to the sound of laughter — real, tinny, human — drifting from the roundtable where the inmates gathered. The chairs were cushioned; the conversation was louder than the nerves beneath it. For the first time since Ironside, men looked one another in the face and told the stories that kept you from cracking.

"In my drunk life," Inmate #7 hollered between bites of ice cream, "I hit a dumpster and a hundred rats jumped out. I was too scared and too hammered. I slept it off in the car while my wife was calling me. I'm thinking

she was in trouble, but all she needed was for me to pay the cable bill so she could watch her show. Next thing — cops, warrants, and wham — I'm here. All 'cause some dumb rats."

The group howled.

The story was ridiculous and mortal at once: rats as comic villain, rats as architect of a man's ruin. It was the kind of tale that made the room breathe easier; laughter like a bandage.

Gallagher swept in with his clipboard and his smile and the easy, rehearsed patter of men who believed they were doing a mercy.

"Gentlemen," he said, plump with practiced sympathy. "Project Alpha. One dose. Repair. Resist. Imagine a world where a shank is a hiccup, not a funeral." His words were smooth. The men cheered — everyone but Charles, who felt the cheer like a slap.

After the jokes and the rat story came the showpiece: a stroll through the facility.

They passed a lobby where a golden retriever skated alongside its owner, coffee-sipping staff flung their ordinary lives like a banner. Charles felt the shame of being paraded past them, an exhibit in orange. Then the corridor turned colder. The cheerful hum of the cafeteria thinned into a laboratory whisper: the beep and hiss and the low, constant throb of machines. The lights went sterile, and the air took on a scent that was not quite bleach — metallic, clinical and far older than soap.

They walked past rows of cages. Apes watched with small, patient faces; mice ran in microtubes like geologic time in miniature. Tubes ran into machines, hooks and monitors; the room whispered with animal breathing.

A cat lay on an exam table — calm under the lamp — and a technician rolled a syringe toward it like a surgeon. The needle flashed, pierced skin, and something small twitched. Gallagher's voice rose, the little laugh in it that had no warmth.

"You know," he said, leaning as if confiding, "we had two test cats — Jade and Spade. Jade... didn't make it. Spade did. Indestructible. I've watched that cat come back from the edge nine times. There was no need for a

tenth.” He laughed, too bright. The guards chuckled uneasily; Charles felt the joke like a report of how far they’d fallen from mercy.

They descended. The hall got narrower and the light got meaner, tinted and low. The Project Alpha room waited like an altar: tinted windows, panels of gold light that seemed to promise salvation and hide what it did not want anyone to see.

“Smile,” Gallagher said, the word a command masquerading as cheer.

They filed single-file. The guard’s voice was a metronome. The number on Charles’s chest changed — he was inmate ten now, a slot in a lineup. Men traded places like children swapping seats, nervous grins breaking into hollow laughter.

The hallway hummed with the kind of quiet that pretends nothing ugly ever happens inside it. Fluorescent panels glowed a sickly white, painting men's faces the color of bad paper. The glass of the Project Alpha door was one-way: they could see the gold light inside, but what happened there was hidden like a ritual. Charles pressed his ear to the cool wall, the paint rough against his cheek, and the world narrowed to a string of sounds.

The Doctor led Inmate #1 in like a preacher walking a lamb to the altar—big, broad-shouldered, the kind of man who had been built to take up space. He looked like something out of an old fight movie: scar on the jaw, a jaw that had fought in a hundred bars. Chuck Zito with an orange jumpsuit. The door sealed with a soft pneumatic sigh, and the corridor swallowed the sound.

At first, it was encouraging—muffled applause and the clink of trays, the small relief-chorus of men who wanted to believe.

“Whhoo!” doctors cheered through the wall.

For a second, the sound felt like mercy: the idea that the needle had worked and a man had walked out whole.

Then Gallagher’s voice, close and practiced, slid through the plaster.

The inmate hollered.

AHHHH!!!!!!

“Breathe... breathe... shit!” he shouted—too loud—then something in the sound changed and tightened like a rope.

An animal noise tore up from beyond the glass—raw, ragged, an inhuman holler—and then a staccato of coughing. The muffled holler became a howl; the howl became nothing. That nothing hit the corridor like a stone. Men turned to each other in the half-light and tried to read one another's faces. Some tried humor—nervous, brittle laughs—others went very still.

“RAHHHHHHH!!!!”

A high, metallic shriek cut the air—the kind of alarm that means someone's heartbeat left the room. Inmates tried to fight the three guards across from them.

The shout cracked.

“Enough!” the guard barked down the hall, the word loud as a slap.

The door swung; the two men in white stepped out. Faces stood flat with the practiced neutrality of people who hide their hands when the table turns.

Gallagher pushed the door open and stuck his head out, faking annoyance like a man who'd been interrupted at a barbecue.

“Guys? Seriously?” he said, voice too light. “You're going to make us call more security? These guards don't deserve to be hurt—they're doing their jobs. C'mon, back to your feet.”

He smiled, the kind of tight thing a man uses when he wants you to forget the sound. His hand trembled at the edge of his clipboard for only a fraction of a second before he steadied it. The corridor filled with a dozen different small, private calculations—who would go next, who would try to panic, who would try to make a break for it. Charles wanted to scream and to vomit and to run in and tear the door off its hinges all at once. He felt like a guy watching a loaded gun being passed around and smiling because someone told him it was unloaded.

Gallagher's tone slid back to the canned cheer.

“You’re either Spade or Jade, gentlemen. I’m sorry—that’s how you save the world.” He watched them, hungry and ready, the scientist happy to be the salesman.

The door closed again, and the hush returned. Charles' palms were slick enough from sweat that his cuffs squeaked against the wall. He could hear breathing—slow, controlled, then ragged—then inmate #2’s voice, very small and thin, like it belonged to someone who’d been knocked down by a storm.

The door opened.

“C’mon, Inmate #3,” Gallagher called like someone inviting men to a carnival ride. Two guards dragged the next man up—panic in his eyes that was bright and stupid, like the panic of someone who realizes the dice they were handed were loaded. The door shut and the sounds replayed: preliminary talk, the hiss of a machine, Gallagher’s odd laughter, then frantic commands—

“Hold him—breathe—give me scanner—shit—” followed by a chorus of something that might have been hope and then a note of horror that the corridor didn’t have words for.

Inmate #9, aka Titanium, a compact man whose face usually never broke, leaned forward and spat into his hand.

“This is some sick-ass shit,” he muttered, voice low enough to be private. It was more than anger; it was a raw, disappointed disgust, like watching a man break a child’s toy and then hand it back with a bow.

Charles tasted bile and said the thing he’d been thinking since they’d shown them Spade on a screen and called it a miracle. The word felt small in his mouth but true:

“Russian roulette,” he said, more to himself than anyone else.

SUNNY JEAN

POW!

A punch from Jessica (Skratch) landed like a punctuation—hard, unceremonious. Chezter snapped the cage shut behind Aubrey with a metal clang that tasted of finality.

“That’s for running away, you asshole!” she barked, voice raw as she stepped back, still breathing like someone who’d just closed a wound.

Sunny moved in slow, the room blurring at the edges from adrenaline and the red smear of dawn light. Aubrey lay on the wet floor, hair plastered to her face, water streaks cutting pale tracks through grime. Jessica’s fist had left a dark bloom on her cheek; she squinted up at the ceiling like some animal that had forgotten how to trust.

Number One stood a few feet away, tears making clean tracks down her face—one of the few soft things Sunny had seen on her. The rest of Code-4 circled like a pack with paper crowns: fierce, tired, and certain. Sunny stepped forward because the space between action and decision usually went to the loudest hand—and his was steady now.

“Are you okay?” he asked Number One, the question small against the room’s heat.

She tried for a breath, then a controlled sob.

“Yeah. I’m fine,” she lied, voice only just holding together.

“Aubrey came back. What’re you guys gonna do about it?” Sunny asked, blunt as a blade.

Number One’s face crumpled and then straightened. She sniffed and wiped her cheeks with a sleeve.

“Let me see your lighter. Stupid bitch decided to come back.”

“Don’t call her that,” Sunny snapped before he could stop himself. The word sounded small and dangerous in his mouth. “I don’t think you need my lighter.”

Number One turned, defensive.

“What would you do, in my situation, hmm?” she challenged.

Sunny breathed out slowly, the kind of long exhale that steadies a man. He thought of choices, of precedent, of what the camp needed versus what his conscience could swallow.

“If it were a man, and he came back to us,” he said, jaw tight, “I’d beat him to a pulp with my brothers—until one eye swelled red from a busted vessel. But I’d keep him alive. No one wants to be hurt forever. Eventually, something good comes from it, shitty as that sounds.”

Number One’s eyes flicked to the circle of faces.

“So I should make things right?”

“You don’t let me make the demands,” Sunny said. He meant it. Power twisted people—made saints cruel and cruel men vicious. He didn’t want to be that kind of ruler.

She stepped closer and lowered her voice.

“I’m asking you because I trust your judgment.”

He sighed, the sound simple and weary.

“Yeah. Do it. But let her live. Keep her alive until we no longer need her.”

“Give me your lighter.”

Sunny reached into his pocket, pulled out his butane, and handed it to Number One.

“Did you really burn down your neighbor’s home?” She asked.

Sunny smiled.

“Hell no. I found that lighter a few weeks back.”

Chains clanked as Number One moved.

“Okay.” Her voice was a bark folded over with a prayer. “C’m on, girls.”

Aubrey’s pleading swelled in the corners of the room as Code-4 dragged her out—first one sob, then another, the sound of someone bargaining with

survival. Sunny walked up the stairs with Chezter at his shoulder, the wooden steps groaning like an old animal underfoot.

He hated watching women fight. Every blow felt like a cheapening of himself. In the hush of the stairwell, he pictured Aubrey not as the witch in wet rags but as Nathan—someone he imagined with a human face and a past that might explain every bad choice. He tried to see the world from Number One's side: a leader forced to send a message, keep the camp safe. He tried to see it from Aubrey's: a frightened woman caught between survival and loyalty. The center held no comfort.

Killing someone buys a cold sort of peace; it's an endpoint that matters. Beating someone to a pulp—scars and bruises and a life that goes on with the sting of consequence—that's a lesson that keeps reminding itself. It's cruel and selfish and, in a perverse way, merciful: a living reminder of the control you've exercised.

Code-4 wasn't built on mercy. It was built on balance, on harsh trade-offs in a world that had stopped giving soft answers. Sunny didn't fully agree with their methods. He didn't want to be an executioner or a judge. But he trusted Number One's judgment more than most. She wore the cost of their decisions on her face; that mattered.

CHARLES VICTOR

Gallagher's word landed like a hammer.

"NEXT!"

Charles felt it in his teeth. The hallway, bright and clinical a heartbeat ago, went thin—the light in the panels losing weight, becoming a spotlight on a single damnable door. Men shifted where they stood; the air hummed with the small animal panic of a cage. The SWAT team had not been there for show. They filled the corridor like a promise—black vests, rifles heavy as pianos, faces blank with training. Their boots held the floor steady; the barrels of their weapons gleamed sterile and patient.

“Inmate #5,” Gallagher said, voice ricocheting off tile. He flicked his clipboard like a man who wanted a ring of applause to drown out the sound behind the glass.

“Step forward.”

A lanky Haitian man with restless hands stumbled into the doorway. He looked younger than the number on his chest suggested—hopeful in a way Charles recognized, that ridiculous animal faith people had right before the jump.

“Yo, what the fuck is that?” he mouthed through the glass, muffled and raw, the bravado of a man trying to keep his skin from showing.

Then the door sealed. The metal hissed shut, and the corridor became wall and bone.

From inside the room came a sound that was not a sound you should associate with men. It was a long, ragged abdication—half sob, half animal cry—and then a wet metallic note that made the teeth ache. That sound opened a seam in the world and every man there felt something step through it: all the stupid choices and the soft, private things you hide from yourself. Charles had the sensation of falling through his own life, the dangerous clarity of someone who knows how they’ll look when the story gets told.

Gallagher’s voice, the practiced professional, drifted out:

“Easy...easy!” His words were too calm, like someone trying to recite a bedtime story while a building burns.

The noise spiked again—more frantic this time—then shifted into a rhythm of its own: the hiss of the machine, the clamping of instruments, a voice from inside repeating:

“Hold him—hold him—breath—breath—shit—”

Charles heard the last syllable snap and then nothing for a second that felt like an eternity.

SUNNY JEAN

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

Sunny opened his bedroom door. Number One looked smaller in the doorway than Sunny had ever seen her—face streaked with tears, streaked with blood, shoulders hunched like a woman who'd been carrying too much for too long. Her voice when she asked to come in was threadbare.

“Here's your lighter.”

She handed it to Sunny.

“Thanks.”

“Can I come inside?” She asked.

“Yeah. Of course.”

Sunny shut the door behind her. She wandered around his messy place and went to his bar. Two whiskey bottles planted like cacti, with two glasses on the side. She moved with the careful economy of someone used to footing responsibility; when she set the bottle on the counter, it made a quiet sound that seemed too loud in the little room. She unscrewed it and took a shallow, mechanical sip, then laughed at herself—more a sob, less a joke.

“My dad would've hated my drinking,” she said, and the words were honest enough to make him flinch. “I haven't drunk this much until we took over this place.”

Sunny stayed still.

The apartment smelled of steaming towels and the faint iron of his own blood. He told her, useless and true, “Everything's gonna be okay,” and when she sipped again, the whiskey shuddered in her like it had a pulse. She told him, in halting, rehearsed sentences, what she'd done — the

beating, the burning of the right hand, the logic, the necessity — and he listened, every syllable falling into the soft places of his chest.

When she broke, he reached for her like he'd been trained to save people with hands rather than words.

He wiped the blood and tears from her face with the back of his hand, slow and gentle, as if he could erase what she'd seen and done. The contact steadied him; the warmth of her skin made him aware of the map of his scars under his shirt, small white ridges he'd learned to forget.

"Your scars," she said, voice small, curious. "Where are they?"

"Come on," he replied, too soft to carry the honest joke. "Let's shower."

Water was hot enough to take the edge off the day; steam curled up and fogged the mirror until their reflections were two soft shapes. The shower turned the room into another world—light, milky, and strange, the sounds of the compound moaning to nothing. She leaned into him like a secret held close. Soap slid over shoulders and along arms; the ordinary, intimate chore of washing became a liturgy. His hands traced the ridges of his chest, the old cartography of pain and survival, and she traced them back, like she was learning a language.

They kissed slowly at first—questioning, tentative—then with the kind of hunger that arrives after long hunger. It wasn't showy; it was the blunt, necessary thing people do when they need to remember they're alive.

Steam wound around them like a curtain. The world outside the glass ceased to exist: the zoo, the blows, the prisoners at the lab, all of it reduced to a distant noise.

There was an urgency to some of what followed and a tenderness to the rest. Their bodies pressed, hands and breath negotiating, fingers mapping and finding each other's edges without words. Number One's hands were sure, roughened by command but oddly careful now. Sunny moved as if he were balancing on thin glass—no boast, only a steadied promise. There were kisses left like vows; there were quiet curses muttered to propel them forward, and soft names breathed in the steam.

Sunny penetrated her. Clinging to her soul.

They did not speak of the day's violence or of the future; conversation would have been noise, and they needed something quieter. The shower became an ephemeral shelter where heat and pressure made them human before everything else tried to carve them into something harder. Sunny continued to thrust while Number One moaned at his enjoyment of her, even if it didn't last long.

When they finally stepped out, water clinging to hair and skin, they found the tiles cold and the world colder—so they wrapped themselves in a single towel and fell into bed without ceremony.

Under the sheets, breath still ragged and hands warm against each other's ribs, they let the silence do the work that words could not. Number One curled into him as if she could fold her armor away, and for a little while, the guilt and the choices and the cruelty of their days could not reach them. In the hush that followed, Sunny felt something like tenderness—a soft, dangerous thing that could grow inside even the ugliest mornings—and he held it as carefully as he could until sleep took both of them, heavy and grateful and momentarily clean.

CHARLES VICTOR

The shock crackled like a radio hit with bad reception—high, then low, then a ragged, electrified animal noise that rolled under the floor and up into Charles's bones. Someone shouted, "Hold him still!" and the command landed like a hand on his skull. Through the wall, the muffled racket of Inmate #8 being worked on vibrated the corridor: machines coughing, a man screaming until the scream snapped, doctors barking, then a sound that could have been cheering or could have been the groan of something gone wrong.

Titanium leaned in close beside Charles, breath hot and ragged.

"When you get outta here," he whispered, urgency in each syllable, "Tell Leftover to tell Jesse, it's under the house."

Charles blinked.

“What’s under the house?”

“Around twenty-five million,” Titanium said, voice thin as thread. The number dropped between them like contraband and hung there, ridiculous and heavy.

A guard’s boot hit the tile.

“Let’s go!”

The door banged; technicians shoved bodies and instruments; Titanium’s whisper turned to a shout as the next man was dragged through.

“Tell Jesse it’s under the house! It’s under the house!”

Charles thumped his chest with a stupid, boyish gesture—macho for a man who had always measured his courage in bruises.

“I got you, bro,” he said, and the promise felt small and true.

The procedure began again: a rhythm of clinical voices, the metallic soft clank of tools, a monitor’s flat tone. Then the corridor held its breath, and the door opened.

Gallagher emerged, a man undone: sweat soaked his coat, his glasses steamed, his ginger beard littered with crumbs and something worse. He looked like someone who’d been found in the middle of his own unraveling. The guards seized Charles’s arms and hauled him into a blue-lit room that smelled of apple-cider vinegar and bleach—cleaning products trying and failing to erase what had come before.

At the foot of the bed, a stretcher lay smeared and hastily covered, a grotesque patchwork someone had tried to hide. To Charles’s left, a closet gaped like a carved mouth; behind a black curtain, the dead inmates had been stacked and folded into anonymous shapes. The curtain shuddered as doctors slid it for a second and then snapped it shut again, like the blink of something that didn’t want witnesses. For a moment, Charles thought the room itself confessed: these people were amateurs playing god.

He was strapped down—shoulder cuffs, leather anchors, straps that turned a man into an instrument. The ceiling above him drained color into seared blue. On the wall, a tiny black-and-white film flickered: a father returning

from work, a simple domestic holiness that suddenly felt obscene in the
fluorescent glare.

“Okay, #10,” Gallagher said, voice thin with performance. “We’ve improved
this serum. Once we inject you, you’ll fall asleep for a couple of minutes.”

Another hand slid the needle into Charles’s arm.

Cold, then warmth, crawling up the vein like liquid metal.

His limbs loosened.

Gallagher’s words floated away, shrank, and then the world folded inward
like a map.

The last thing he heard before the deep went black was the echo of a
panicked question—“Why did you electrocute him?”—and Gallagher’s
brittle answer, too practiced for the scene:

“We were trying to bring him back to life.”

Then the plunge.

It was not a sleep.

It was an ocean with gears.

He fell, anchor first, into murky water that tasted of pennies and vinegar.

Sight narrowed to whatever swam close: flashes of faces, fragments of
rooms, the smell of his mother’s kitchen folded against hospital antiseptic.
Memory and dream braided fast and furious—snapshots that ran together
until he could no longer tell which was past and which was program.

A light above seared him raw, and he slammed his hands over his eyes.
When he took them away, the world inverted: he was not under a hospital
lamp but at the head of the long dinner table from a childhood
memory—Thanksgiving magnified and slowed. Bread passed like currency,
macaroni and cheese melted in molasses time, yams steaming, turkey
carved in a trance. Titanium was there, impossibly domesticated and
absurd, sliding a tray with the solemnity of a butler. The front lawn was
unfamiliar. The home had a spotlight underneath it, highlighting Titanium’s
“UNDER THE HOUSE” cry.

The family tableau moved in slow motion, every smile stretched like film caught on a sprocket. Jamie, Dad, Mom, Titanium, Charles's best friend, Jerz. All an illusion.

It felt impossibly good—and impossibly wrong. He was trapped in the gentle loop of a family scene that refused to let him act. His loved ones turned toward him, faces blank with recognition, as if someone had set their lips to play the right expressions. When they spoke, it was not in voices so much as in the click of a malfunctioning record:

“You can't be here!” they intoned in perfect, flat unison until the phrase became a mantra and then a machine.

Charles nodded, words useless, promise heavy.

The chorus—family, machine, doctor—folded back into the clinic's white noise. He didn't know whether the serum had repaired him, mutated him, or simply rearranged what he'd been. He only knew the room smelled of vinegar and the world hummed with a new language under his skin. And beneath everything else, the family's mechanical chant—“You can't be here”—stayed with him, a warning or invocation he could not yet translate.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“BACK AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME”

CHARLES VICTOR

Sunrise.

July 17th, 2018, Charles Victor woke like a caged animal finally ripped free — lungs clamped, muscles remembering how to hunt. The heart monitor clicked and whined beneath the thin hospital sheet; somewhere outside, the barely-remembered thump of an old Ludacris instrumental bled in and died like a dying radio. Charles’s eyes stayed shut, but the world lit up around him: the needle being torn from his arm was the first sharp fact he registered, a white hot pain that sang up into his skull.

A metallic *VOOM* cut the air.

Charles grabbed one of the doctors.

The guards clicked their guns and pointed towards him.

“Stand down! Let the doctor go, now!” one of them barked, hand sliding toward a gun. He was red and exhausted from being up all night for the procedure.

There were guns.

Everywhere.

Rifles and pistols bristled like black flowers in the hands of men who looked like they’d never seen a thing that could come back from the dead.

Charles could feel their fear as clearly as wind. Something low in his chest responded — not human breath, but a hungry growl that rolled under his ribs, a sound that wanted teeth and blood and more than the stale fluorescent air.

Tubes dangled from his torso like the loose cables of some broken machine. He smelled disinfectant and fried food and the metallic tang of

other people's fear. Maybe he was the experiment everyone whispered about. Maybe he was the error they hadn't planned for.

Gallagher moved to the center of the room like a man framing himself for a portrait.

"Okay, okay — lower your weapons. Let go of Doctor Gran. He's got a wife. He's got kids."

Charles blinked. He spoke, but the voice didn't sound like a voice so much as a growl dragged through sand.

"You think I don't?"

"No," Gallagher said, gentle in a way that looked practiced. "No, I know you don't, Charles Victor. Please — let him go."

Charles found he could feel everything now. His body was not just awake; it had been rewired. Muscles surged under skin, reflexes humming ahead of thought. His pulse beat like a war drum; his fingers flexed until the IVs complained. He let the doctor go because it was easy — the man stumbled back behind Gallagher like a child startled at a museum exhibit.

"Guards," Gallagher clapped once, smiling like a man who had learned to love miracles on paper, "get this man some food and water."

They pushed a paper plate in: a soggy tuna sandwich, a crinkled bag of chips, a warm bottle of water. Charles didn't sniff for traps. He folded the sandwich between fingers that still trembled with new strength and bit down. The taste was cardboard and salt. He tipped the water bottle, squeezing it to his mouth without uncapping it, the plastic making a dull popping noise. Across the room, the doctor looked like they'd seen a ghost; to Charles, he looked like someone who'd walked into a new religion and didn't know the prayer.

To his right, inside a closet with its door cracked, corpses lay in a neat, clinical heap. Titanium glinted in the dim. Something cold and practical in Charles catalogued it all. He vomited — bile and whatever chemicals the hospital had shoved into him. The sound of it was a small, animal thing.

Gallagher's voice drifted over it, clinical and thrilled.

“That’s okay. The vomiting’s supposed to happen. It’s how you know it—”

The sentence snapped off when Charles moved.

AHHH!

He snarled, or lunged, or did whatever it is a body does when it recognizes a threat faster than the mind.

POP! POP!

A guard’s pistol barked and then barked again — six sharp, stupid noises. One of them caught Charles on the head.

He hit the tile.

Pain flowered.

The world went gummy for a breath.

The bullet — a real, screaming, metal bullet — rolled out of the side of his skull and clinked on the linoleum like a coin someone had dropped.

Blood steamed, then cooled.

Charles tasted iron and came back up through the pain in a rush.

The wound sealed itself: a slick, terrifying stitch knitting bone and meat, faster than a blink. He was filthy with sweat and vomit, his clothes glued to his skin, but he stood, because standing was what the new body did.

Gallagher’s face slipped — from floating smug to something like terror.

“This is...amazing,” he whispered, the word small in the wrong mouth.

Charles only wanted to be home. He wanted the smell of something that hadn’t been sterilized.

“Get me out of here,” he said. The words were short, a command the new sinew of his throat could make.

Gallagher stepped back, hands raised like a man who’d been taught courtroom gestures.

“We will. Stay in our separate building tonight. There’s...whatever you want in there.”

“Whiskey?” Charles asked. Old pleasures are always the first to return.

“Tons of it,” Gallagher said. He sighed then, a long human sound.

“You’re...you’re messed up, Charles.”

Gallagher walked away. He hesitated at the door and turned for one last sentence as if it had been rehearsed a thousand times:

“Thank you, #10,” he said. “You’re the reason our millionth state will be greater than it’s ever been.”

The words landed like a mark on a ledger. Charles’s mouth curled — not exactly a smile.

“You’re just gonna leave us? Just like that?”

Gallagher shrugged.

“I’ve got work to do. You don’t want to sit here and talk about old times, do you?”

“What about the bodies?” Charles asked because curiosity was a habit.

“That’s none of your business, inmate #10. Maybe — if I see you again — I’ll tell you.”

“If?” Charles echoed.

“Yeah...if.”

The answer tasted like a promise sold cheaply.

Anger sat in Charles then — not the small furnace of hurt, but a cold, clear blade. He could end Gallagher. He could show the room what his new hands were for. For a beat, he worked himself up until he could feel the motion: a rush, a scalpel in his fist, the bright intent of blood.

“AHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!”

Before he could, the room imploded into gunfire. Six shots again, popping like a string of firecrackers. The bullets hammered the air, tore into linoleum, into steel, into whatever fragile plans men like Gallagher kept. Charles moved because he always moved: faster than the scream of a human, faster than thought. Pain and heat and something like electricity

arced through him as muscles tightened and the world narrowed to the simple, sharp fact of survival.

POP! POP! POP! POPOPOPOPOP!

SUNNY JEAN

Sunny Jean lay sprawled across the mattress like a prizefighter after the bell. Sweat slicked the sheets, and the small room still smelled of sex and cigarettes. Number One moaned, low and ragged, her voice filling the dim corners.

If last night had been a dream, Sunny thought, neither of them wanted to wake. They'd gone at each other like wild things freed from a cage, purging all the anxiety, tension, and madness this ruined world had dumped on their shoulders. By the time she rolled off him for the fifth time, both were gasping, chests rising and falling like they'd run a marathon through fire. "Oh my God," she murmured, laughing into her palm. "That was the best one."

Sunny flicked his lighter, its spark crackling in the dark.

"How many's that now?"

"Three...or five," she said, eyes glinting. "Does it matter?"

He ignored her and drew smoke from his cigarette, the orange tip pulsing like a heartbeat.

"We've got to get ready for the funeral."

"I know," she whispered, still kissing his skin, still dragging her fingers down his stomach as her head came to rest on his chest.

"This feels like a one-night stand," he teased, tilting her chin up. "What's your real name?" He kissed her again. "You still haven't told me."

She laughed, soft and tired. "Layla."

Sunny grinned.

“Why would you want to be a number when you’ve got a name like that?
You struck me as a Gretchen. Or Helga.”

She wrinkled her nose.

“Eww. You think so?”

“I’m just playing.”

“I wish I could use my real name,” she said, voice cooling. “But it’s code now. We aren’t who we used to be. Numbers make more sense than names.”

“So since I’m the new member,” he said, exhaling through his nostrils, “what number am I?”

“You don’t have a number, mister.” She kissed him again. “You’re just Sunny Jean. You weren’t even supposed to stay, remember?”

“When you give good karma, you get it back,” he said. “I can’t leave with everything going on. I’m in too deep.”

She smirked. “All I heard was give good, anywhere, and too deep.”

He laughed, rolled her under him, and kissed her back. She giggled.

“I can’t believe I broke the oath for you.”

“You’re right,” he said with mock gravity. “I feel like I used you. I deserve punishment. Send me to the dungeon with nothing but my axe.”

“Hush,” she whispered against his mouth. “It was worth it, right?”

Sunny sighed.

“We should keep this behind closed doors. How’re your hands?”

“Better. Can’t you tell by the grip?”

He laughed, kissing her neck. “You’ve got a dirty mind, darlin’. I thought you were a saint.”

“When you’re the oldest sister,” she said, eyes narrowing, “you’ve gotta live a little.”

“Can I ask another question?”

“I’d rather get back on top of you.”

“What are your sisters’ names?” he pressed.

She exhaled, long and heavy.

“You’ve been here a few days, Sunny Jean. When the time’s right, I’ll tell you everything.”

“You mean we can do this and not have to talk about work? I feel like I’m in paradise.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m sure as a guy you like that. Although...” She stared at the ceiling for a heartbeat. “I’ll tell you a little story. Before the fall, I came here with my sisters. We were supposed to meet our dad. He never showed. There was traffic on Highway 238. Everyone—animals, humans—was fleeing. We stayed. After a couple of days, some men charmed their way into our place. Savages. They tortured us. They hurt...” She hiccuped, paused. “We planned to build a place where no man would trespass. That ended when Chester found us and killed them all. It was brutal. Then we met Presley.”

Sunny touched her shoulder, his voice low.

“Hey. It’s okay. I don’t mind you talking about your past.”

“Shut up,” she muttered, eyes flashing.

She swung her leg over him and straddled his hips again.

“You want it again?” he asked, half-smiling.

“I want it for the next couple of hours,” she said, and then her mouth found his, silencing every other sound in the room.

CHARLES VICTOR

Charles rode the bus like a man returning to a wound. The vehicle rattled and hummed as if it were trying to shake the last pieces of him loose; Ironside Correctional Facility loomed ahead like a toothy crown of concrete. He sat at the back, watching the prison grow bigger in the window until the

bars of the yard looked like a promise and a threat at once. The driver and he traded nothing but scraps of talk — past business ideas, crazy prison stories you could tell to sound mean — nothing worth memory. Still, as the gates swung open, Charles felt the old animal heat in his gut: a wolf stepping back into the den.

The door clanged. Officer Richard was the first to see him. “Welcome back,” Richard said, coffee cup steaming in his hand. “I’m sorry about your friends.”

“They weren’t my friends,” Charles said flatly. He kept his mouth shut after that. The guards took his arms and walked him through the paperwork jungle — strip, IDs, lockers — the routine of being reduced and reassembled. The block sounded like chaos when he stepped into it: voices, slaps, the clank of metal. He passed the Coyote crew, hulking shadows in the half-light. One of them — King Yote — mashed his face to the glass and held Charles’ stare. King Yote had a dead left eye, long stringy grey hair, and a thick Santa Claus beard. Charles rolled his eyes and kept moving. He’d seen the court jesters of the block before.

He arrived to his cell. Leftover was on his cot yet again, magazine folded open, eyes lazy.

“Damn, nigga. You look like you got AIDS or somethin’,” he said without looking up.

“Fuck off,” Charles snapped. “I got skinnier but I can still fuck you up.”

Leftover grinned, tossed the glossy thing aside.

“Good to see you, homie. Gotta bounce — collect my money.”

Leftover left.

That was the signal.

Four Coyote members slipped in behind Charles like bad weather. One of them had a shaved head carved with scars and a dead eye that glittered white — a cheap warning. The room smelled like sweat and rust and old threats.

“What’s goin’ on here, boys?” Charles asked, easily, because that was how predators sounded before they pounced.

“Nothing personal, just business,” King Yote said, like a man quoting a proverb he didn’t understand.

SLIT! SLIT!

Then steel went in. King Yote’s blade found Charles’ gut with a quick, deliberate stab. Charles dropped across Leftover’s bunk as the blade turned. The others moved in, teeth and knives. The pokes were hot pins — red-ants stings that made light fireworks along his skin — but something else did its work: heat reversed, wounds knitting faster than the pain could complain.

SLITSLITSLIT!

“Stop! He’s done,” King Yote barked, eyes wide as if he’d just watched a magic trick.

Charles lay still, fetal, watching blood feather the sheets. It felt almost comic to play dead when these idiots thought they’d earned a headline. As the first waves of healing sealed flesh and stitched meaning back into him, he let them believe it. Payback tastes better when it’s slow.

He rose like a thing they thought buried.

“That’s the best y’all got? You poke like bitches,” he said, voice calm enough to slice.

The shock on their faces was a private joke that Charles enjoyed.

SLIT!

The lead stepped in for another poke; Charles dodged, grabbed the man’s skull, and slammed it into the wall. Bone-kissed concrete. The man’s nose exploded like a shed bulb. Charles held him by the hair and watched the lord of the Coyotes try to turn the blade — to stab ribs, to take advantage. The leader forced steel into Charles’ side; Charles ate the blows, felt them. He fell back, played the part of the broken man when he needed to, then watched the leader keep stabbing until something obscene and sweet

happened: the blade found both of Charles' eyes. Darkness should've come next.

Instead, he heard panting — the pitiful, animal sound of a man getting tired from trying to kill something that didn't die. The leader's crew was behind him, breathing hard.

"Let's go," King Yote muttered, thinking the job was done.

The Coyotes started to move. Charles drifted in the shallow edge of unconsciousness like a ghost on a string, then slipped into movement: silent, precise.

He crept behind King Yote, fingers finding the same hair twice. He slammed the man's head down onto a toilet seat with a sound like a lock snapping.

The others lunged, blades flashing, but Charles ate the metal like it was water — took the hits, turned them into fuel. One of the Coyotes, frenzied, stabbed the leader by mistake. Iron and surprise and a curse.

AHHHH!!!!

The room folded inward.

"Stop!" someone yelled. The members backed away, knees buckling.

Charles threw King Yote to the floor like a rag. They all dropped to their knees after him — not with respect, but with something that looked a lot like fear.

"All of y'all, get up!" Charles bellowed.

They rose like a wave obeying a tide.

"You can't kill me with your weak-ass shots," he told them. "Consider yourselves lucky I'm feeling lenient."

"How is this even possible?" the leader choked, fingers sticky and useless on his busted face.

"Doesn't matter," Charles said, the answer a flat coin. "It's been this way a long time. You their King Yote?"

"I am," the man whispered.

“Good,” Charles said. “You and your associates work for me now. If you don’t want to work, give me one of your men to kill. Actually — give me two.”

They looked at each other like men trying to read a new language. The leader swallowed.

“Whatever you need...just don’t hurt my brothers.”

Charles’ grin was a slow knife.

“I won’t. I’ll give you a job that will help blow off some steam.”

Outside, the block hummed along with its ordinary cruelties. Inside, Charles had turned a setup into a payroll. The rules were shifting — subtle, like tectonic plates. And somewhere under his skin, the new mechanics hummed: healing, hunger, a hunger that would feed the debts owed in blood and favors.

SUNNY JEAN

The wind carried the smell of smoke and cheap incense from the funeral circle like a bad memory dragged across the pavement. Sunny Jean stood with Jessica at his side, shoulders tight as wire. The Code-4 community had gathered to lay claim to the losses — a quick ceremony, names spat out like ammunition, candles guttering in the dirty light. After the words and the folding of hands, Sunny and Jessica drifted away toward the hotel like two people who’d been given permission to keep breathing.

“I hate going to funerals,” Jessica muttered, rubbing at her throat. Her voice was flat, brittle.

“Same,” Sunny said.

They found a ring of bodies waiting — Number One, Zepp, Chezter, and a couple of guards, faces pinched with the small private griefs of this world. The circle included everyone who’d answered the call: sisters with knuckles still raw, men with haunted eyes, people who’d learned to honor the dead by refusing to be next.

Number One stepped forward, voice even, the sort that kept its edges sharp for planning.

“I got something from our P.O.W.,” she said. “She told us where six hideouts are. The last one’s on a ranch — hard to find. She can lead us, but she has busted legs. She won’t run.”

Sunny listened, the map of the city folding in his head. “We can take the P.O.W.,” he said. “Jessica, Chezter, and I will hit the ranch. The rest of you split and hit the other locations at once — three per site. Quick and clean.”

Number One nodded, approval crisp.

“Sounds good.”

“How are we getting there?” Zepp asked, frowning up at the sky as if the answer might fall out of it.

Jessica’s grin was a flash.

“We ride those electric scooters!” she said, tongue out like a kid’s dare.

Sunny cut her off with one look.

“Jess...stop.”

Number One actually smiled, a small thing, and surprised everyone.

“No — that’s brilliant. We’ve got over fifty scooters left from when things fell apart.”

Sunny gave Jessica a grudging look that said she’d been right this time.

The scooters were quiet; they didn’t make a fuss, and in a world that listened for trouble, silence could be a weapon.

“Chezter,” Sunny called, “can you stretch the batteries on these thangs? We need range.”

Chezter only gave a thumbs up and tapped his watch — a tiny mechanical promise. Number Four translated for him in clipped gestures and shorthand words.

“He needs a couple of hours to tweak. He’ll tell us when he’s done.”

“Good,” Sunny said. The plan was folding into shape. Wheels, batteries, routes — the small logistics of survival.

Number One looked at the group like a conductor about to cue an orchestra of violence and mercy.

“Alright, guys. Let’s set off some fire alarms.”

CHARLES VICTOR

Charles kept his rhythm with the mop because plans live and die on small things — clean floors, predictable routines, the kind of mundanity that hides a knife. He wore the orange jumpsuit like a uniform lie; it was washed clean because even in a place that smelled of BO and bleach, dirty was a language you didn’t want to speak. He moved the mop in straight, boring lines while the kitchen hummed around him. The wet floor shone, and the bucket smelled like hospital sadness.

Officer Richard’s boots clanked across the tiles, loud and deliberate. Richard had the day’s coffee in one hand and a smile in the other, both weapons.

“Sonny,” Richard said. “Glad you found your flow again. The kitchen looks nice.”

Charles kept his head down, muscles working through the motion. He didn’t owe the man a performance.

“Thank you,” he said, voice flat.

Richard lingered, the air around him oiled with small favors.

“Look, we can get along in here, can’t we? I saved your ass right before some serious shit went down. You owe me something.”

Charles’ hands kept moving. The mop whispered.

“What you did to her was uncalled for, man,” he said, slowly.

Richard’s smile thinned like paper.

“To whom? Bella? That bitch ain’t the most trustworthy outside of work. You wouldn’t know — you two haven’t been together. It’s all delusion, Sonny.”

He sucked his teeth like punctuation.

For a second, Charles let the mop ride out of control and nearly snapped the handle across the basin. Rage flared hot and stupid, the kind that wants to make signatures on a man’s face. He stopped himself and swallowed the motion down. Control was currency here.

Richard leaned in as if sharing a secret.

“I heard you got strengths no one else in this world has. What are you gonna do with it?”

Charles looked at him the way you look at a cockroach.

“I’m gonna go to Disneyland,” he said, and the joke landed like a stone.

Richard’s smile returned, thin and satisfied.

“Don’t ever threaten me. Don’t ever touch me again, and we’re good.”

He walked off like the deal was signed. Charles watched his back until the man turned a corner and the kitchen returned to its hum. In that brief space after Richard left, the list of things Charles could’ve done ran like a film: elbow to throat, a broken nose, no one knowing until later. He could have walked out through the gates with a dozen excuses and a fresh body to buy him time. He could have gone invisible.

He didn’t.

SUNNY JEAN

The night smelled like gasoline and old prayers. Sunny Jean’s crew crawled through it on borrowed batteries—scooters humming soft like sick insects—Chezter’s jury-rig trick, stretching each charge long enough to make monsters feel the cold. They moved quietly, quickly, a pack with blades and bruises. Five hideouts had already been turned into smoking skeletons; the last one crouched ahead like a lung full of rot.

Aubrey rode like a broken queen, one hand splinted, the other curled uselessly at her side. Rocky had taped her up the best he could; she rode in a stroller lashed to Chezter's waist by a chain because every pothole made her pitch forward. It was ridiculous and horrible and human in the way they liked things to be—messy and real.

They parked in the hedgerow and flattened into the trench. Aubrey pointed, cracked finger trembling.

"Two at the fence," she croaked.

Sunny nodded.

"Chezter, go get 'em."

Chezter stepped out like a man who loved sharp ends. He walked, then moved — knives spun from his hands and found throats so clean the screams ended in wet silence. One witch's head jerked back, blood sewing the grass into a dark flag. Aubrey swore. Jessica whooped like a child who'd seen a miracle and a murder in the same breath.

They surged. A witch by the fence, plucking dead flowers like some ceremonial idiot, saw them and let out a howling sound that curdled the air. The house disgorged enemies like a wound bursting open—men and women with bone knives, warped blades, mouths full of curses.

Sunny barked orders.

"Jessica! Hold that corner!"

Jessica and Aubrey dropped behind a sagging porch, eyes hard as flint. Chezter drew his sword; Sunny moved with him, steel in hand and the intent behind it like thunder.

SLIT! SLASH! HOOOF!

Slashes sang.

Flesh parted.

One witch's throat split in a spray, a red fountain arching high enough to sprinkle the porch with confetti of gore.

Another went down as Chezter's hatchet found the base of her skull, and the sound was a dull, final hollow. Limbs twisted; someone's arm dangled by a web of skin and tendon before the blood took it and made it slick. The yard became a field of collapse—bodies folding into themselves, hair matted with mud and clotted gore. The fight was quick and ugly and honest; they cleaned a path in a handful of breaths.

"Coast's clear," Sunny said, voice flat as a blade.

They swept forward. Chezter pushed the front door open while Sunny watched his back. The house breathed dust and old rot; the dark inside smelled like a cellar and a promise of worse. Chezter flicked a torch toward the rafters, the flame licking like a hungry mouth.

"Wait," Jessica said, ear cocked.

Something small and frightened yelped from the next room. A dog, a sound too human to ignore.

They kicked the door, and the room answered with cages: a husky pup jammed against metal and two lion cubs curled against each other, ribs going like shivers. The pup lunged at Sunny's hand when he reached in—tiny teeth tearing skin, a wet bite that bled bright and hot. He swore and laughed at the same time, blood running down between his fingers.

"They used the pup as bait," Aubrey spat, eyes hollow. "They were gonna make 'em fight—make 'em rip each other like pit bulls. These three stuck together."

Sunny's mouth twisted, disgust and fury mixing.

"Sick, twisted fucks," he said, and the word was a curse meant to burn.

Jessica moved like someone translating hate into action.

"I wanna—" she started, but a witch materialized out of the shadows and slammed a blade into Jessica's neck with a wet, final pluck. The sound was tiny and absolute; Jessica's eyes went white around the edges.

Chezter was behind the witch and reacted like the world owed him. He shoved his sword through the witch's back, and the woman went forward with an ugly, gurgling sound. A warlock lunged at Chezter — hatchet met

forearm, a sick crack, and Chezter's blade opened the man's face so the cheek hung like a broken mask. The warlock folded, mouth gaping, blood running from teeth like a faucet left on.

The room stank of iron and singed flesh. Sunny ripped the cage doors apart. The pups tumbled out like small, frantic bombs, tongues and teeth and energy. The husky bit him again; this time, the teeth found purchase, and pain lit white across his palm. He hissed but didn't drop the animal.

He'd rather wear the bite than let them return to that.

Jessica cooed, wiping blood with the back of her hand as she pressed the cubs close.

"We keep 'em," she hissed. "We keep 'em, damn it."

Chezter scavenged while the others tended the animals. He came out with a sack of canned goods, a wrench, a roll of duct tape, and a crust of bread he tucked like treasure into his pocket. He fed the cubs first; the husky tore the bread and bolted it down like someone stealing his future.

Sunny walked the rooms once more, eyes taking stock: a rotten pantry of herbs turned to ash, a shrine of bones that their flames would soon baptize, blood trails leading to a closet where a half-burned altar smoked. He poured gasoline slowly and steadily, a ribbon around the house's waist, soaking the floor joists and curtains. The smell was sweet and holy in its way.

He flicked a lighter. The first flame caught like a lie; curtains filled with hungry orange. The house bloomed fire as if it had been waiting for permission. Shriek and skipping flames danced up the walls, turning skin to steam and cloth to lace. The witches outside were swallowed by their own prayers as the windows burst and the heat rolled outward in waves that pushed them back. Flesh seared and shrieked; a hand curled in the light and loosened from a wrist with a wet pop that sent a spray of dark iron across the porch.

They stepped back as the roof folded in with a long, desperate groan. Boards cracked and cascaded, splinters flying like so many tiny knives. Sparks rained down; embers clung to hair and shirts. For a second,

everyone's faces glowed orange, saints and sinners indistinguishable in the same flame.

Chezter slung the cage, pups wrapped in a blanket crosswise over his shoulder. Jessica held the husky to her chest despite the warm slick of blood on her neck. Jessica spat and muttered a prayer that sounded like profanity. Aubrey breathed ragged, broken-sounding words about revenge and desserts and staying alive.

"Come on," Sunny said. "We're out."

They moved fast, scooters waiting like quiet horses. Behind them, the ranch shuddered into a pyre, wood surrendering to heat and the sky drinking the smoke. As they rode away, the house surrendered itself to ash; the night swallowed it whole, leaving only the memory of screaming and the copper aftertaste of blood on their tongues.

CHARLES VICTOR

Charles wanted Richard's attention like a man wants a clean shot. He scribbled a note — headache, need to see the nurse — tucked it where a guard would find it, and within minutes, a bored escort was pushing him toward the infirmary. Bella was there when the door opened: black-and-red hair shoved into a tired bun, a clean cut under her left eye that made her look like she'd been in the wrong fight and won. She looked beat, but beautiful in a way that made the fluorescent lights softer.

Charles stepped forward and hugged her quickly, the kind of contact that said more than words. They held each other for a second too long, eyes locked like they were trying to remember what normal felt like.

"Hey," Bella said.

"I can't believe I get to see you again," Charles said.

"Me too."

He folded the small paper into her palm.

“Just take this. Get Richard out of here.”

“Why do you want to do this?” she asked, voice low.

“Because of what he did to you.”

Bella hesitated, then tucked the note into her pocket.

“I’m fine. Things happen.”

“Just take it,” Charles said.

She smiled—small, guarded.

“Good to see you. Let me know if you need money.” he said.

“It was good to see you, too,” she responded.

As he turned to leave, the infirmary door swung open and Richard walked in.

SUNNY JEAN

DMMP DMMP DMMP!

The knock had been a staccato drum that lived in Sunny’s chest long after the door clicked shut. Number One waited in the hallway like a promise he’d almost given up on — collarbone catching the dim light, hair mussed from the ride, eyes working the room like a map. When she stepped inside, the hotel room folded around her: threadbare carpet, a window stained with city grit, a cheap lamp that threw gold in an uneven circle. Everything smelled of smoke and last night’s whiskey and the sharp, honest tang of sex. It fit them.

“Can I stay?” she asked without ceremony. Her voice was a match struck slowly.

“Yeah,” he said. He shut the door, and the city became a rumor. They stood there for a breath, hands touching and then not, measuring the distance between wanting and permission.

Number One — Layla, when she let names through, reached for him like someone taking cover. She threaded her fingers into his and held on, knuckles white, thumb tracing a new scar healing by his ear like she was trying to catch his past before it was too late. Sunny tasted copper on his tongue, the leftover from a bite or a fight, and she smiled at that small, ugly map of him like it was beautiful.

Before he could say more, there was another knock—less formal, more frantic. Jessica’s voice cut through the thin walls. Number One ran inside Sunny’s bathroom (haha) and shut the door.

Sunny opened.

“What’s up, Jess?”

“Those babies are keeping me up all night,” she complained, the words sliding under the door and into the small hush like gravel.

Sunny kept his voice steady.

“Oh—okay?”

Jessica pushed the door open and dropped onto the bed with the kind of exhaustion that looked like anger.

“So do you wanna watch movies or something?” she asked, eyes already pleading for distraction.

“Jess, tonight isn’t a good night,” Sunny said.

“C’mon. The dog keeps crying, and those cubs just hide from me. This is why I don’t want any children,” Jessica snapped, voice raw with sleep and nerves.

“You wanted to keep them. Now they’re your responsibility,” he replied, the words soft but unyielding.

“So you really don’t wanna hang out?” she pressed, hurt threading her tone.

“Not tonight,” he said.

Jessica jumped up as if a match had been struck.

“Fine,” she said, and stormed for the door.

He moved to stop her, reaching out as she slammed it shut behind her.

“Jess, I’ll make it up to—”

“Fuck off!” she shot back, the insult sharp as a thrown knife.

The hallway swallowed her footsteps.

For a beat, the room held its breath; the only sounds were the faint buzz of the heater and the steady thud of their own hearts. Number One slipped out of the bathroom without a word, the click of the lock like a secret being tucked away. Sunny could feel the rest of the world pressing, the obligations and the plans and the people who would claw the door down if they suspected he’d strayed from his duties. That pressure made what followed smaller and more urgent.

When Layla came out, she was different—edges softened, eyes darker with a promise. She moved to him without drama.

“Lie back,” she murmured.

He obeyed.

What they made together was not noisy or theatrical; it was quiet and fierce, an intimate kind of repair. Her mouth learned his road map below. Outside the door, the city continued its ugly commerce, but inside the lamp gilded them like saints and sinners in a chapel. Sunny and Number One had a beautiful night, while Jessica’s involved in a dozen energy drinks.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“ALL MY LOVIN’”

SUNNY JEAN

Sunny woke in the room feeling too big and too cold, the mattress still memorizing Number One’s warmth. The thin morning light slanted through the blinds and turned dust into a slow fall. Down the hall, laughter and high, eager yelps threaded through the quiet — Jessica (Skratch) already up, playing with the husky pup that had taken to her like instinct. For a second, the sound caught Sunny off-guard, a small, human thing in a world that kept trying to rip people apart.

She scooped the pup up like it was the center of her small, exhausted universe. Neighbors drifted past in the corridor, peeking in with sleepy smiles and soft compliments.

“That dog’s cute, Skratch,” one called.

“What a beautiful husky!” another added.

Jessica, cheeks lifting, answered without thinking.

“Thanks, y’all. Her name’s Fiona.”

Fiona — a scrappy husky pup with a faded gray-and-white coat and one ear that flops while the other stands like an antenna — is all teeth, curiosity, and stubborn heart. Her fiery brown eyes pin the world with blunt questions; she yips and paces like she’s trying to map every inch of danger. Hungry and fierce from neglect, she bites first and cuddles harder, instantly attached to Jessica and oddly fearless around the hardened crew. In scenes, she’s a living counterpoint to the violence — a small, bright thing worth protecting, and the kind of animal that makes people remember why they’re still human. Fiona wiggled free and bounded down the hallway, nails clicking on linoleum. Jessica followed her, calling the pup’s name in a whisper so she wouldn’t wake everyone. Sunny heard the soft scuffle at his

door, the kind of noise that makes you hold your breath, and then the door eased open.

Number One emerged from his room like she'd always been meant to step out of someone else's life and into his. Jessica (Skratch) froze against the wall, half-hidden, because the sight of her there felt like catching a secret in the act.

Number One snuck up behind her, giving a small smile at the pup.

"What a beautiful dog," she said.

Jessica blinked, a little wary.

"Uh... thanks. Her name's Fiona."

"That's a lovely name," Number One replied. "She's lucky to have you."

There was a flicker of suspicion in Jessica's eyes.

"Were you coming from Sunny's room?" she asked.

Number One didn't hesitate.

"We were discussing plans. War is coming, little dove."

"Don't call me that," Jessica snapped, shoulder tightening.

Number One laughed softly, the sound without malice.

"Okay, I won't. I'll be in the courtyard if you need me."

She left without fanfare.

Jessica kissed Fiona on the forehead, a little ritual that made the pup squirm, then scooted back into her room and shut the door. She moved like someone trying to stitch herself back together. A few beats later, she was at Sunny's door, knocking with the impatience of someone used to getting what she wanted.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Sunny opened the door in a robe, an unfinished drink in his hand. Before he could offer coffee or a joke, Jessica's voice spilled out too loud for a hallway:

"Are you *fucking* her!?"

Her accusation hit the corridor like a thrown stone. Sunny's first instinct was to check the hall for ears — for neighbors who might have heard and for the fragile peace that kept their community from tipping into chaos. He pulled Jessica's arm inside and closed the door, the slam muffling the rest but not the heat between them.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, trying to keep the flatness in his tone.

"I saw her leaving your room," Jessica said, eyes wide with something fierce. "Did you fuck her? Please tell me you didn't fuck this community up."

Sunny set his drink down carefully.

"Of course not. We just talked."

Jessica's face hardened.

"You sure? I hope you're not just going around sticking your cock in every hole you see."

He met the barb with a slide of humor meant to cut the edge.

"I haven't tried to sleep with you, have I?" he said as he swigged his wine.

"No, thank God," she muttered, but Sunny could hear the tremor.

He let a grin creep up at the suggestion and then felt its cowardice.

"Now that I think about it, maybe we should get this bed dirty," he said, trying to defuse the moment.

Jessica smacked her teeth in frustration.

"You're a snoot. Stop drinking. It's too early for all that." She crossed her arms and scowled, two messy ponytails hanging down like exclamation points under tired eyes.

He moved in close and hugged her.

"You have nothing to worry about, okay? Everything's fine."

She swatted his hand away like she was swatting a fly.

"Don't fuck this up. We need this place."

VRROOOOOOOOMMMM!!!!

A horn sounded then — a low, urgent blast that made everyone in the corridor straighten. Sunny caught Jessica's gaze.

"Go to your room and lock your door," he said.

"Okay." She hugged him quickly, tightly.

"Love you. Be careful."

She darted away, and the door thudded shut. Sunny stripped off the robe, pulled on his clothes, and felt his pulse pivot from the intimate to the immediate. Adrenaline tightened in his chest like a fist. The horn's meaning was old training: prepare for battle. He grabbed his weapons and pushed out into the hall.

"Stay in your room, Jess!" he called.

"Okay!" came the muffled answer.

Sunny leaped into Chezter's golf cart, and they tore toward the front gate, dust and early light whipping past. Number One slid into the passenger seat without a word and handed him a pair of binoculars; her face had gone pale in a way that stole color from the morning. When he raised the lenses and looked, the sight shoved the air out of him: carcasses of animals, arranged grotesquely like trophies and warnings, splayed and posed in the dirt — heads turned to stare, limbs splayed, entrails dark and glossy in the sun.

"How the hell did this happen?" he breathed.

Number One's jaw flexed.

"We missed it. Nobody was watching," she said, the words a blade cutting at their complacency.

Sunny didn't wait for pity.

"Chezter. Double the security. Now."

Beyond the gate, the yard had been turned into a tableau of menace. Animal bodies lay arranged like a perverse still life — fur matted and dull, collars twisted into knots, eyes clouded and fixed on nothing. Some lay splayed at odd angles as if someone had been careful to pose them; others

were half-rolled into the dirt, their limbs set wrong and still. Dark stains pooled beneath them, slick against the sun-baked soil, and the air tasted of something sour and old. Flies hummed in a lazy, industrious ring, and the wind carried the sour note of death like a trumpet.

Hours later, the group sat inside of their “Courthouse.” The courthouse still smelled faintly of frying oil and bleach—memory of its old life as a busy restaurant—and under that scent the room tightened like a throat. Sunny

Jean sat at the head of the long table that had been retooled into a chamber for judgment: mismatched chairs, a crooked flag someone had salvaged, and the low hum of people pretending calm. The Code-4 sisters ringed the table; Skcratch — who sometimes answered to Jessica in private — sat close, Chezter to Sunny’s right and Zepp beside him, all of them threaded into the same thin rope of worry.

Sunny cut through the small talk.

“Apparently, people aren’t doing their jobs. Most of our food showed up on the front steps like a gift from the devil. Who was on duty?”

A young voice rattled like a flute in a thunderstorm. It was Number Four
“We got word that our newest recruit, number forty-six, fell asleep on watch. He’s twenty-one, fresh in.”

Number One’s jaw didn’t move kindly.

“Not an excuse,” she said flatly.

“Number-forty-six?” Sunny echoed. “I thought your numbers left off in the two-hundreds?”

“He’s the new forty-six,” the voice said. “We lost the original.”

Number One leaned forward until the light caught the edge of her cheek.

“Guys, I have to admit something.”

Oh boy.

Sunny clenched his jaw.

“Ever since Sunny and his crew joined, we’ve been advanced beyond what we used to be,” she admitted, and the confession stung because it was honest. “But this—this cannot happen again. Their message was a warning. They’ve shown they were here. They’ll come back.”

Jessica’s hands tightened into fists.

“This calls for hitting life’s reset button,” she snapped. “We’ve already lost too much. I just started getting to know Presley. I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

“Your majesty, I have something to confess...”

Zepp cleared his throat. The room shifted. He continued.

“While we were traveling home yesterday, I found a kid on the road—rags, battered, looked like he hadn’t bathed in days. We brought him in and put him in a spare room. This morning, my keys were gone, and so was the boy.” He swallowed. “I still haven’t found those keys.”

Jessica barked with laughter that didn’t reach her eyes.

“So he drugged forty-six and walked out with your keys?” she said, incredulous.

“We don’t know that,” Number One snapped. “Why hide this, Zepp?”

Zepp’s apology was small and immediate.

“I’m sorry. It was late. I thought he could stay. I-I couldn’t find you. I didn’t think—”

“You didn’t think!? You’re naive,” Number One lashed back, voice hard as a snapped twig.

Zepp looked down, ashamed and wordless.

Sunny stood between judgment and mercy.

“Easy on him. He did what any of us would do. You found Jessica and me. Rocky and Nancy work hard to help this place. We all take risks.”

Number One’s face flamed, then crumpled; for a heartbeat, she seemed younger than the armor she’d built. Then the sound broke out of her like a wound.

“I don’t know anymore,” she said, and a single, furious word came with it—then tears. The room held its breath. Sunny watched her and felt a strange hollow of recognition; she loved this terrible life because she had to, and in that need, he saw his own reflection.

He let the silence do its work, then spoke with the steady edge of someone who’d learned to read a dozen moves ahead.

“Listen. Lock this place down. Everyone who can fight, gather. The ones who can’t—women, kids, anyone who isn’t fighting—send them to the aquarium. Keep them underground, keep them quiet.”

“That’s sensible,” Number Two said. “We should move the non-fighters now.”

Jessica bit her lip.

“Maybe my babies can go too,” she offered. “Protect them just in case.”

“Jess,” Sunny grimaced. “Those are wild animals.”

“Stop pissing on my ideas, dude!” she snapped, but the tremor in her voice was worry, not anger.

Code-4 was having their own conversation. Number Four tried to smooth the edge.

“Relax, Number One—”

“I’m not talking to you, Number Four!” Number One cut her off like a knife.

Sunny slammed his palm lightly on the table, the sound a small gavel.

“We’re getting off track. That’s exactly what they want. If they fracture us now, they walk right through the door.”

Number One inhaled and collected herself with a grace that had teeth.

“We have a couple of hours at most,” she said. “Lock it down. Move people to the aquarium. Zepp, you and your soldiers take the sewers. You flank them from behind as soon as they approach the front gates.”

“Yes, you’re majesty.”

Number One, let the exhale out like someone closing a long, thin book.

“It may not be many of us,” she said, voice softening, “but all we have is each other. Together, we’ll win.”

Chairs scraped. People rose. Outside, the town pulsed with ordinary life; inside the courthouse, the community readied itself for a war that had a taste of vengeance in it and smelled, unmistakably, of survival.

CHARLES VICTOR

NARRATOR: IT WAS A DARK NIGHT AS THE COYOTES AND I WERE ABOUT TO DO THE IMPOSSIBLE. THIS PRISON HAD LOOPHOLES; WAYS TO TRICK THE SYSTEM IF YOU'RE SMART ENOUGH. WE WERE ON AN ISLAND, SO ESCAPING WAS RISKY IF YOU PLANNED ON LEAVING IRONSIDE, WHICH, OF COURSE, WE WEREN'T. SINCE WE LIVE ON AN ISLAND, THE PLACE WAS UNDERSTAFFED, AND EVERYONE WORKING HERE HAD TO DEAL WITH THE IMPOSSIBLE EVERY SINGLE DAY. I'VE HEARD STORIES OF INMATES WHO WOULD SNEAK OUT OF THEIR CELL TO MESS WITH THE C.O'S HERE AND THERE, LEFTOVER HAD A GOOD WAY OF DISGUIISING PEOPLE. HE HID STUFF UNDER THE FLOOR OR INSIDE OF AIR VENTS. ONLY RICHARD WAS ON TOP OF HIS DUTIES. WITHOUT HIM, THIS PLACE WOULD BE CHAOS TO THE HIGHEST EXTENT. RICHARD PUT GUYS LIKE ME IN THE HOLE JUST SO RIOTS DON'T POP OFF. I'M GETTING HIM FOR PERSONAL REASONS. REASONS THAT DESERVE TO BE JUSTIFIED. WE WERE HEADING TO THE CLINIC TO MEET WITH BELLA. I FOUND A FEW UNIFORMS WRAPPED INSIDE OF PLASTIC BAGS. THESE HAD TO HAVE BEEN USED ONLY AROUND HALLOWEEN BY HOW WRINKLED AND DUSTY THEY WERE. WE WAITED UNTIL THE DAY THE NEW SECURITY GUARD WAS ON DUTY, WHICH WAS ON WEDNESDAY. UNFORTUNATELY, BELLA HAD TO BE PATIENT. SHE DEALT WITH A LOT DURING THE TIME.

(WATCH BEEP)

NARRATOR: I WAS LYING IN MY BUNK UNTIL THE ALARM WENT OFF ON THE INMATE'S WATCH NEXT DOOR. ALL WE HAD TO DO WAS GO THROUGH A CELL BLOCK AND A SECURITY GATE. THE GATE HAD SECURITY WHO WAS A LITTLE ON THE SLOW SIDE; ALL I HAD TO DO WAS TILT MY HAT LOW ENOUGH TO COVER MY EYES, AND WE'D ALL BE OKAY.

COYOTES: YAAAAAAA!!! HELP MEEEE!!!!

(GUARD OPENS CELL DOOR)

GUARD: WHAT HAPPENED?

(PUNCHING SOUNDS)

(OFFICER SCREAMS)

NARRATOR: AFTER A COUPLE OF MINUTES I HEARD FOOTSTEPS FROM THE 'YOTES.

(CLINK!)

COYOTE #1: YOU SHOULD'VE SEEN WHAT WE DID TO THAT BOY

CHARLES: NO THANKS.

(BREATHING)

(OPEN CELL DOOR SOUND)

NARRATOR: WE MADE IT OUT! WE HEADED TOWARDS THE INFIRMARY SECURITY GATE. KING YOTE AND HIS TWO MEN WRAPPED THEIR BROTHER OVER THEIR SHOULDERS. DRESSING IN COSTUME WAS KINDA COOL

CHARLES: OPEN THE DOOR! THIS INMATE OD'D

GUARD: WHY DIDN'T YOU GUYS PUT HIM ON A STRETCHER?

CHARLES: OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR, NEW GUY! CAN'T YOU SEE HE'S HURT!?

GUARD: OKAY! OKAY!

(BRRMMM)

NARRATOR: THE GUARD OPENED THE DOOR. A SCRAWNY BROTHA
WITH THE GOOFIEST BUCK TEETH. I HAD TO STOP MYSELF FROM
LAUGHING WHEN I SAW HIM

(DOOR OPENS)

NARRATOR: WE WERE INSIDE THE CLINIC. THE LOBBY WAS
CLOSED. IT WAS A TIGHT SPACE WITH ONLY 4 OFFICE ROOMS.
BELLA'S WAS ON THE LEFT SIDE. I SPRAY-PAINTED THE CAMERA IN
THE CORNER SO WE WEREN'T SPOTTED. THE YOTES FOLLOWED
SUITE BY SPRAYING THE OTHERS. WE HEADED TOWARDS BELLA'S
DOOR. I HEARD RICHARD YELLING INSIDE.

RICHARD: BITCH! DIDN'T I TELL YOU NOT TO TALK TO THAT FILTHY
NIGGER!? I SHOULD SMACK THE SHIT OUT OF YOU!

RICHARD: (MUMBLING)

NARRATOR: AS HE WAS YELLING AWAY, ANDY CAME FROM
AROUND THE CORNER. THE MOTHER FUCKER HAD A BROKEN MOP
IN HIS HAND.

ANDY: WHOA WHOA! (MUFFLING)

(FOOTSTEPS)

RICHARD: YOU'RE GONNA GIVE ME SOME GOOD TONIGHT I DON'T
GIVE A F- HEY ANDY! BRING THAT STICK IN HERE. OR ANY FUCKING
THING YOU CAN FIND. YOU WANNA PLAY, YOU DUMB BITCH?

BELLA: PLEASE STOP

RICHARD: SHUT UP. HEY ANDY! WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?

(OPENS DOOR)

NARRATOR: I WALKED INTO THE ROOM. I GAVE RICHARD A
COLD-HEARTED STARE INTO HIS EYES. THE LOOK I'VE NEVER
GIVEN ANYONE IN MY LIFE; MAN OR WOMAN

ANDY: I'M SORRY, RICHIE, I'M REALLY SORR-

CHARLES: SHUT THE FUCK UP.

(ANDY WHIMPERING)

RICHARD: WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?

*CHARLES: LOOKS LIKE YOU GUYS ARE HAVING A PARTY. I CAME TO
CRASH IT. ME AND A FEW FRIENDS*

ANDY: I'M SORRY RICHEY, I'M REALLY SO-

(CHARLES PUNCHES ANDY IN THE STOMACH)

ANDY: OOMF!

*RICHARD: WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE!? DO YOU KNOW
WHAT I CAN DO TO YOU?*

CHARLES: (LAUGHS) (WHISTLES)

*NARRATOR: FOUR OF THE YOTES WALKED SLOWLY THROUGH THE
DOOR*

*RICHARD: OH YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING ME. ALL OF YOU ARE ON
YOUR WAY TO FACING LIFE WITHOUT PAROLE IF YOU DON'T GET
YOUR FILTHY ASSES OUT OF MY SIGHT*

COYOTE #3: (LAUGHS) HE STILL DOESN'T GET IT

ANDY: (CRYING)

*RICHARD: SHUT THE FUCK UP, ANDY! (WALKS TOWARDS CHARLES)
WHO DO YOU THINK YOU AH-*

(COYOTES ROUGH UP RICHARD AND ANDY WITH WEAPONS

COYOTE #2: HAND ME THAT STICK!

(BEATING SOUNDS)

(RECORD PLAYER SCRATCHES)

(BEATLES "ALL MY LOVING PLAYING)

(ARGUING NOISES IN BACKGROUND) (MUSIC PLAYING)

*NARRATOR: AFTER FIGHTING OFF THE YOTES, OR AT LEAST
TRYING TO, BOTH RICHARD AND ANDY SURRENDERED TO DEFEAT.
THEY WERE HIT UPSIDE THE HEAD WITH HARDWARE MULTIPLE
TIMES. THEN, THEY WERE HANDCUFFED TO THE DESK ACROSS*

FROM ONE ANOTHER. TWO OF THE YOTES PULLED THEIR PANTS
DOWN.

RICHARD: I'M GONNA KILL YOU! YOU HEAR ME? I'M GOING TO
FUCKING K- (MOANING) YOU'RE A D- DEAD MAN

(ANDY MOANING)

(OFFICER RICHARD AND ANDY MOANING)

NARRATOR: I DIDN'T WANT TO SEE. THE YOTES ASSAULTED
RICHARD AND ANDY IN THE WORST WAY. DO I EVEN HAVE TO
DESCRIBE WHAT THEY DID? THE CRAZY PART IS THEY CONTINUED
TO LAUGH ABOUT IT WHILE TAKING TURNS. EVERYTHING I
WITNESSED MADE MY STOMACH CHURN, BUT I COULDN'T LOOK
AWAY. WHAT THEY DID TO BELLA, WHAT THEY DID TO ME!? THEY
DESERVED EVERY SINGLE BIT OF JUSTICE. THE YOTES AGREED
THAT THIS WOULD CONTINUE TO HAPPEN UNTIL BOTH MEN QUIT
THEIR JOBS. ONE OF THEM RECORDED THE WHOLE THING,
LEAVING BELLA AND ME OUT OF THE VIDEO. I GAVE THEM THE
GREEN LIGHT ON THAT SO THEIR POCKETS COULD BE FILLED BY
THESE CROOKED COPS. BELLA COULDN'T WATCH ANYMORE. SHE
TURNED OVER TO ME AND STARTED KISSING MY LIPS. I KISSED
BACK. FROM THE MUSIC PLAYING TO THE AWFUL SOUNDS BEHIND
ME, HER SOFT LIPS FADED OUT THE NOISE. I PINNED HER ON THE
WALL RIGHT ACROSS FROM HER DESK. HER BLACK AND RED HAIR
WRAPPED AROUND MY NECK. SHE WENT FROM ALL-WHITE
SCRUBS TO LOSING HER BOTTOM HALF. IN A MATTER OF 10
SECONDS, SHE HELPED TAKE MY PANTS OFF TOO.

(MORE ABUSE IN THE BACKGROUND)

(CHARLES MOANS AS HE INSERTS HIMSELF INTO BELLA)

(BELLA MOANS)

NARRATOR: THROUGHOUT EVERYTHING WE WENT THROUGH
SINCE OUR FIRST LOVE NOTE, I WAS FINALLY WITH MY DREAM
GIRL. I CALL HER THAT BECAUSE WHEN I WOKE UP IN THE
HOSPITAL, SEEING HER...MADE ME WANT TO BE A BETTER PERSON

ALL OVER AGAIN. WHEN THAT WAS TORN AWAY FROM HER, I
COULDN'T HELP BUT GET REVENGE...NOT FOR HER...BUT FOR ME.
RICHARD HELD ME BACK, BELLA PUSHED ME FORWARD, WHETHER
THEY KNEW IT OR NOT. THE IRONY AT THIS MOMENT COULDN'T BE
EXPLAINED. IT ALL FELT RIGHT. REVENGE FELT GOOD THIS TIME,
MAYBE BECAUSE I WAS INSIDE PUSSY WHILE MY ENEMY WAS
BEING HAMMERED. THIS NIGHT WENT DOWN AS HISTORY IN MY
BOOK

CHAPTER NINE

“THE GREATEST WAR”

SUNNY JEAN

Last night left the mattress warm and the room smelling like smoke and sweat; Number One climaxed one last time, letting out a cat-like growl.

Down the hall, the world was waking: wheels on linoleum.

Jessica (Skratch) was already moving—she’d taken Fiona and the cubs to the aquarium the night before. She rode a longboard she’d found, balancing like somebody relearning how to stand.

She stopped when a sound came from Sunny’s door, a small, ragged sound that snagged at something inside her. She pressed her ear to the wood and heard the human noise of two people refusing to be alone.

Anger flared, hot and immediate.

“Ugh! You’re a fucking liar!” Jessica spat, the words loud enough to ricochet down the corridor.

She didn’t argue; she packed.

Immediately.

She threw the board aside, grabbed a few sticks of soap, a toothbrush, two shirts—small, practical betrayals—and headed out of the Davenport Hotel.

When she reached the front gate, only Chezter stood guard—half-asleep, half-alarm, like a dog with one ear always pricked.

Jessica climbed the maintenance ladder without ceremony, the keys jangling in his gloved hand.

She took his keys. Climbed down the ladder to open the front gate, then threw the keys back to him.

“Here,” she said. “Good luck fighting the witches and warlocks, bro.”

Chester cocked his head the way stray dogs do, puzzled and pleased by human theatrics, and then the moment broke. Jessica ran—fast and ugly and free—away from the patched-together safety of Code-4. Behind her, the courthouse and the courtyard and the quiet of shared pain receded. Ahead was an uncertain horizon and the throb of a dangerous but utterly her own beginning.

CHARLES VICTOR

Two days had softened the edges of the night: since Bella, Charles slept like a baby — the kind of heavy, guilty sleep that pretends danger is a dream. The Coyotes wrapped him in a protection bought with loyalty and fear; they'd do anything to the cops now, a low howl of revenge whenever uniforms showed themselves. He kept a copy of the footage in his head like a loaded gun: Bella's bruised face, the way the officer moved like he had a right to break people. Leftover had the real footage on his phone, flickering with the kind of proof that could make a sitting president flinch. Leftover owed him — and that debt tasted like justice.

VRMMMMMM!!!

Morning bells clanged through the compound, too precise and metallic, and the dorm filled slowly with the scrape of routines.

Charles couldn't remember the dream that unwound in the night, only the after-echo: a voice, thin and insistent, whispering "Do it... do this shit," like a cracked record scratching the same command. He felt it under his skin: a premonition that today could be different in a way that didn't mean waking up.

Maybe it was paranoia. Maybe the so-called bulletproof body that had kept him standing through knives and bullets wasn't as invincible as it felt in the night. A cold thread ran down his spine and tightened his jaw. Leftover leaned over the sink, foam at his mouth, combing his afro as if the world had not just been rearranged by cruelty. The little rituals steadied him: spit, comb, a spit-shine grin.

Charles watched him for a moment and then asked, because it was the simplest check he knew.

“Yo — you good?”

Leftover spat, rinsed, and flashed him a grin that had the edge of something dangerous and necessary.

“Yep.”

It was the short answer — the one that could hide fear or hide resolve. Charles took it and let it sit like a stone in his stomach. He slipped his hand into his pocket and felt the weight of the plan: the footage that could topple a cop, the coalition that could be roused by scandal, the timers ticking down. For reasons he couldn’t explain — or perhaps explained too clearly to himself — he felt the day press in like the barrel of a gun.

SUNNY JEAN

Summer 2020 tasted like smoke and metal that morning. Sunny laced his boots the way a man straps on a promise — tight, methodical — then climbed the ladder to relieve the guard at the gate. He had the morning cigarette tucked between his lips and the axe slung across his shoulder, the old comfort of weight and habit.

Chezter flicked his phone, handed it over without preamble, and the message on the screen hit him like a thrown rock.

“Skratch walked out of here this morning,” the note said.

“What do you mean she walked out of here?” Sunny asked, the cigarette forgotten between his fingers.

Chezter shrugged, expression blank behind his goggles. The timing was wrong, the news wrong, the world wrong in more ways than one. Sunny felt the room tilt under him. A panic clawed at his ribs like a thing alive he hadn’t felt in months — thin, cold, and certain.

Chezter tapped another line into his phone and shoved it up for Sunny to read:

"Is this about your house burning down? I was assigned an order by Number One. I'm sorry."

The words scraped Sunny raw.

His house — the one he'd found, the one he'd thought they'd lost, then restored — the place where Jessica had taken shelter...burned.

The image hit him like a flame.

WHOOSH!

He grabbed Chezter by the collar and shoved him toward the edge of the platform, the man's goggles catching sunlight and reflecting none of the answers Sunny needed.

"I know you don't like to talk," Sunny said, voice low and dangerous. "I'm trying to figure this out. Tell me what's going on."

Chezter's eyes were behind lenses; no truth lived there. Sunny saw the uselessness of waiting for honesty from a man who wrapped himself in tools and code. If Chezter weren't useful, Sunny's hand would've finished the sentence for him — thrown him off the ladder, watched him drop. Instead, he shoved him and climbed down, the anger a hot stone in his chest.

"You work a double," Sunny ordered. "I'm going to find her."

Chezter lifted a hand, offering to go look at himself.

"No," Sunny cut him off. "Too risky. I need you here with the men. The witches are coming."

He left Chezter with a look that shut the conversation down and moved through the compound like a man on a mission.

The courtyard smelled of oil and adrenaline, a dozen bodies moving with the slow precision of people who'd learned to be ready. The Code-4 sisters were gathered in their usual circle; Number One's voice paused when Sunny stepped into the room, the way a held breath does just before a fall.

“Number One,” he said, blunt and raw. “Jessica is gone.”

Her face didn’t change at first, then color drained as if someone had wrenched it away.

“What?”

“Did you burn down my house? The house I found before coming here?” His words came faster as the room closed in; his throat was dry as wire.

“We’re having a meeting,” Number One said, measured. “We’ll talk to you later.”

Sunny smacked his dry lips.

“You didn’t even deny it,” he said, feeling the word vomit spill out in a rush he could no longer hold. He stormed towards the exit, but the words he thought were weighing him down with each step.

“You know, next time we ***fuck***, at least have the decency to tell me you burned down my house.”

Gasps scattered through the room.

Number One’s eyes flared with a mix of command and something like sorrow.

“Sunny, I need you to leave. Let me explain to my sisters. I’m begging you.”

“You used me,” he said, loud enough that the sentence anchored itself in the wood and brick of the courthouse.

He pushed the door open and let the morning light swallow him.

On his way out, the last thing he said came softer, a ragged promise and a curse rolled together:

“If something happens to her out there—”

He didn’t finish it.

The door slammed behind him, a sound like a verdict, and he walked into the heat, every step a drum beat toward where war and reckoning waited.

CHARLES VICTOR

By midday, the fear that had haunted Charles that morning thinned into something harder — a cold, clean focus. At Ironside Island, the day moved in routines: clang of trays, the tinny radio burble, men trading small cruelties like currency. Charles sat with Leftover and the others, scraping at a bowl of something pretending to be food, when a voice cut across the mess hall like a thrown brick.

“Aye, Sonny — you hear about that boy Richard?” an inmate asked, voice low and curious. The deep country accent vibrated the table like meatball soup being poured into a glass bowl.

Charles shrugged into the conversation with the practiced indifference of a man who’d learned how to make himself small and large at will.

“No. What happened?”

“Sent him packing upstate. He and his patna might split the country.” The laugh that followed was more release than mirth.

Before the joke could settle, an officer’s shout snapped the hall’s attention in two.

“Charles Victor. Up on your feet.”

Charles’s gut flipped. The guard’s expression had the color of someone who had been paid to do bad things and had learned how to fake a face around them. He pretended not to care, took another swallow of the awful coffee, and let the officer edge closer.

“The warden wants to see you,” the man said. “Get your ass up now.”

There was a scent in the air now — metal and old promises — that told Charles this was a setup. He felt the careful architecture of the prison tighten around him.

The officer reached for his arm; Charles swung the tray like a pendulum and let it meet flesh.

POW!

The noise that followed was a single, glorious unchoreographed riot: men jumped up, chairs scraped like knives, and the room detonated.

AAAAAAHHH!!!

Bodies collided, the sound a wet, animal thing. An inmate lunged at Charles — a flash of desperation and blind courage — and in the scramble, Charles felt a cold, sharp hurt at the back of his neck. Steel found skin. The world went dark in that instant, as if someone had snuffed the light with a wet rag. When he hit the floor, the smell of blood filled his nostrils, copper and hot.

TSSSSSSS!!!

Tear gas followed like a bad season: canisters clanged, a hiss that turned air into acid.

Men stumbled, coughing, bile rising in their throats. The officers retreated, the ones who could still stand, and the warden shuffled out of his office with a cloth tied across his mouth like some macabre gentleman. For a few hazy seconds, the prison was a war painting — men on the floor, others swinging with makeshift shanks, blood on sleeves, on the linoleum, a smear of it leading to the servery where the riot had started.

When blackness left him and his eyes came back, Charles tasted defeat and something else — the constant, uncanny knit of his flesh mending itself. The shank wound at his neck had closed enough to sting but not to drown him.

Officers were down the aisles, rubber bullets popping like ungodly popcorn; one struck his thigh and he folded to a knee with a hot bruise blossoming under his jeans.

The pain was sharp enough to be honest, but not deep enough to stop him. Around him, men were gagging and stumbling, the gas painting their lungs with fire.

Everyone stopped.

The warden cleared his throat once he could breathe. He moved like a man apologizing with words no one wanted.

“Why aren’t you following the rules here, son?” he asked, the question drenched in a civility that slid over a tooth.

Charles pushed himself up slowly until his spine sang. The man who’d been ordered to bring him had been killed in the chaos; good, Charles thought. He tasted triumph made bitter by blood.

“It’s ‘Sonny,’” Charles said, voice low, iron in the syllables. “And if you’ll forgive me for preaching, I felt threatened by your guard there. He’s dead now.” He let the statement hang, the words weighted with all the things the prison kept in closets.

The warden’s cloth fluttered as he spoke, and he tried to reclaim authority like someone straightening a coat.

“He was told to bring you to me so we could discuss your situation,” he said, careful and measured.

Charles laughed once, a short, raw exhale.

“What situation? That nine other men were taken to that lab?”

He spat the name like an accusation.

“MBPL. Project Alpha. You know the screams we heard? The bodies piled in a closet? I was the only one who came back. Titanium’s the reason I’m breathing — a man who kept me alive. And now you come here a week later? You expect me to sit pretty while you pretend to give a shit? This is about Richard.”

A guard barked, “Enough,” and the cheap sound of an assault rifle cracked the air as a threat, not to be used.

BAM!

Charles felt the room tilt back toward him.

Voices rose and then fell away.

He forced the image of what he’d seen into language, raw and direct.

“Nine men died at MBPL. I lived because of Titanium. Officer Richards had a vendetta; he put me through hell. Richard and Warden made a deal with the doctors. Richard and Andy raped Bella.

The floor dropped.

The warden's face hardened like a shield forged in dull light.

"Sir, you need to come with m—"

"And what then?" Charles cut him off. "You gonna threaten me? Send me back to a cell you control? Or will you do what you promised — reduce my sentence, make me something I can use to change this place?"

He saw the inmates suck in a breath; his words landed like a stone.

"Make me a correctional officer, because inside here, change has to come from within. You give me a uniform, I'll work for a truce, for fewer riots, for structure. Or you lock me up and watch this place rot."

For a long moment, the warden only watched him, weighing the theater of the moment against the cold calculus of the institution. Then the sigh came, a tired concession.

"We'll make you a correctional officer, Mr. Victor. But you change this prison for the worse, and I will put you in the hole in the blink of an eye. You'll rot in here a hundred years if that's what it takes."

Charles let that hang in the air like a gambit laid down. Around him, the inmates muttered, a ripple of cheers leaking from throats raw from gas. He imagined the uniform — absurd and perfect — and a grin split his face, half triumph, half gallows humor.

"Just make sure my uniform's black with orange stripes," he said, and the line landed like a curse turned private joke.

In the mess hall, under the fluorescent hum and the lingering stench of tear gas, it felt like an accord had been signed — blood and all. Inmates shouted and cheered. For some reason, Sunny felt like he had saved Ironside.

SUNNY JEAN

“JESSICA!?”

Sunny’s shout split the morning like a hand through glass.

“Jessica!” he called again, lungs burning, feet slapping against the scorched earth. The sound answered him — not a voice at first but a rush of wings or cloth and then a shadow lunging straight at his throat.

A Greaper came out of nowhere, teeth and ragged claws, sweet and stupid with bloodlust. Sunny didn’t think; he moved.

SLASH!

The axe came up in a hard arc, and the thing folded into the dirt with a wet, final sound. He stood over it a second longer than he should have, chest heaving, breath tasting of iron and smoke.

“JESSICA!!!!” he hollered, raw with a panic that felt like a live thing under skin.

Up in the branches above, a small, furious silhouette answered.

“I’M UP HERE!” she called.

“WHERE?!” he shouted back.

“LOOK UP, SUNNY!” she barked.

He looked up and there she was — Jessica “Skratch” Volkov, perched in the tree like a stubborn owl, ponytails ragged, eyes blown wide. For a second, the sight of her balanced up there was so ridiculous he almost laughed. Then all the air in his chest turned to lead.

“How’d you get up there?” he panted.

She pushed a portable ladder over the branch and dropped it down in a practiced movement.

Sunny climbed it. He reached the top and sat a thick branch beneath her.

“What’re you doing up here?” He asked.

“Waiting until I crumble into ashes,” she said flatly.

“Don’t be morbid. C’mon. Tell me.”

“Don’t be morbid!? How can I not be when my best friend lied to me?”

She folded her arms, two messy ponytails framing a face that had seen too many rough mornings.

“You told me you didn’t fuck Number One!” she spat before he could find a softer tack.

Sunny flinched like a man slapped.

“Is that what this is all about?” Sunny’s scoff floated up from somewhere far below. This was Jessica — this raw, sharp thing — not an audience.

Sunny continued.

“We have better things to worry about, Jess.”

“NONE OF THAT MATTERS IF YOU’RE GOING TO LIE TO ME!” she said, voice thick. “I’d rather be on my own.”

He swallowed, the apology already rising hot in his throat. Somehow, his pride continued to float the expressway.

“You sound like a jealous ex.”

She bent and grabbed a handful of dry sticks and launched them like tiny missiles. One stung his cheek.

“Ow!” he said, more surprised than in pain.

“Let’s be clear about one thing,” she said, hands on her hips. “I will never fuck you, Charles Victor. If I did, it would be once, and I’d better be drunk.”

Tears formed in her bright blue eyes.

“You hurt me. You hurt me a lot. I could’ve had your back if you’d just told me you were fucking her. You ruined the rules. Why do you like to play with fire? You’re such a good person.”

The accusations hit like coals. Sunny’s laugh was sharp and foolish.

“I lied,” he tried, but the word came small. “I fooled around with Number One. It was a situation you wouldn’t understand — we would’ve never

gotten caught if you hadn't run away. I'm not blaming you. I'm just saying, after today it won't be the same."

"You arrogant asshole," she said, and for a moment the fury broke into something like grief.

"What do you want? Sorry!?" he demanded, raw. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. None of those women is worth losing you, and I barely know you. I will never lie to you again, okay? Don't scare me like this."

"You sound possessive," she muttered.

"You should know when I say I can cut you off at the fucking dime," he said, the threat sharp and oddly tender. "You remember how you found me. For now, you give me a reason to want to live, if that makes sense."

She sighed, frustration deflating into something softer. Then she did the thing that made all the knives dull — she kissed him on the cheek, quick and wet and childish.

"Damn it, Sunny," she breathed. "I forgive you."

He said the apology was the only way he knew how: stubborn, brutal, real.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She smiled like a cracked thing that still held light.

"I know you are, asshole. That's why I love you," she said, and the words landed heavier than any promise he'd been offered before.

They sat then, two silhouettes against the sweep of the valley, watching a horizon that had already been scorched by other mornings. Jessica told him about the ladder — she said her father gave it to her years ago.

Then the bushes moved.

At first, it was a whisper: slithering shadows that didn't belong in the cracked grass. Then the sound shaped itself into boots and soft chanting and the stench of smoke and ritual. Witches and warlocks were on the march — an army crawling up the slope like a tide.

Red ants took advantage of the sudden stillness and swarmed across Sunny's forearm. The bites were tiny hot pins that sent little flares up his

skin; Jessica hissed and pressed a palm to her ankle where they had stung her, too.

“Fuck,” she mumbled, the small word full of a dozen meanings.

Sunny clamped a hand over her mouth not to silence her, but so she wouldn’t cry out and reveal their perch. Her breathing hitched against his palm; he felt the tremor under her ribs and wanted to undo the world for her.

They stayed rigid until the procession shuffled past, a dark ribbon of intent that did not pause. When the last of those figures moved beyond the clearing, they let themselves breathe like men and women who’d been holding their breath for years.

“Unravel the ladder,” Sunny whispered.

All of a sudden.

SNAP!

Sunny’s branch snapped in half. Jessica tried to pull him up, but descended down to earth with him.

Sunny hit the ground with a loud thud. He felt the world corkscrew — ribs compressing, breath knocked raw — and then the shock of impact, the sudden hot sting as Jessica’s head glanced his nose. Blood ran cool and bright into the dust. He heard himself groan and heard her voice, a high, panicked thing.

“I’m sorry!” she shouted, scrambling to her feet.

“It’s okay,” he barked through the ache, more to steady himself than to fool anyone. He pushed up, tasted iron, felt the thin smear of blood on his lip. A witch screamed like a cliff breaking and came at Jessica in a ragged sprint. She ducked, palms finding jaw and temple, punching clean — a temple, a jaw — and the witch staggered back.

Another witch surged from the scrub, a dagger flashing. Jessica met her with a stab into the thigh that made the woman howl and clutch at the wound. A warlock, drawn in by the commotion, cursed and swung; Jessica

flattened into a roll and came up swinging. Sunny didn't give them a moment to breathe.

"Just kill them!" he spat, more command than plea.

Jessica's face hardened. "You know I don't do that," she said, hands already reaching to help him up. He could stand because the pain was a companion he'd learned to walk with; he could stand because the fight did not wait for the broken.

The witches and warlocks yelled in pain.

"Head to the front gate," Sunny panted. "Go through the emergency entrance—check on the kids. Don't let anyone inside."

She nodded, and together they limped toward the compound, every step a small war. By the time Sunny reached the gate, his back had stopped screaming and been replaced by a thin, iron focus. Number One was already there, binoculars to her face, the world inside the lenses a tight, terrible map. Through the glass of her lenses, Sunny saw the White Witch at the center of the marching shape — a spiked bat resting over her shoulder, fifty or more men and women in ragged formation behind her like a living tide.

Zepp's men were supposed to be coming from below, ghosts in the sewers poised to flank. Chezter stood by the front with fifteen others, young faces and hard eyes. Rocky, Nancy, and two medics hovered, scanning for the wounded. The camp itself was a tight husk; lockdown had sucked the noise out. The only sound was the breath before a plunge.

"Everybody get ready," Number One snapped. She keyed her radio. "Zepp — how's it looking?"

"Almost at the checkpoint," came the terse reply.

The witches halted a mile away from the Davenport Zoo.

"Wait!"

Sunny shouted.

He moved forward, not a hero but a battering ram. He stepped into the open between the tide of witches and the line of his people and tried for a thing men on battlefields sometimes try: a parley.

“Look,” he called, voice raw, “We’ve all lost enough. Let us call a truce — split and never cross paths. Let’s stop the killing.”

The White Witch smiled like a blade. She had a boy at her side — rags, eyes startlingly black — mouthing something like a prayer or command.

The boy was the same person Zepp saved the other day.

The White Witch tilted her head. All of a sudden:

SPLACK!

The witch’s hand moved like a surgeon; a white butcher’s knife thrust deep into Sunny’s chest. The world peeled away in a single silver sound. He folded, the air punching out of him.

“Sunny!” Number One’s voice broke as she lunged. The chant from the witches began — “Zoo! Zoo! Zoo!” — a mindless drum the attackers used like a prayer and hammer. The witches surged as one toward the gate.

Arrows bit the sky.

Men on the watchtower fumbled with crossbows and managed to slow a few; bolts thudded into flesh and metal, some snapping off the gate with dull thunks.

Hooks dropped from ropes; witches scrambled over iron like rats.

The first lock was breached, and the front became a teeth-and-blood fight.

Zepp’s underground push turned into a stumble when the dark opened under them and things not quite human rose — Greapers with a wrong gait, greedy for flesh.

RAAAHHHHHH!!!

Troops went down, one after another, the sewer suddenly more grave than the route.

Zepp hacked through a lunging demon, cursed for his brother who'd fallen,
then rallied the men:

“Fight them! Don't split! Stick together!” But terror gnawed at the edges,
and one by one, men ran.

In the courtyard, the battle turned Viking — close, wet, brutal. No one had
rifles to make it a clean war, so it became knives, hatchets, machetes, and
teeth.

The air filled with the ring of metal on bone, the wet slap of flesh, curses,
and war-cries tangled.

Sunny's axe sang through the air and found a target's ribs; a man with a
spiderweb tattoo stretched across his face swung a larger axe with
terrifying reach and slammed Sunny and Chezter across the ground like
ragdolls. They got to their feet and kept going.

The White Witch ghosted through the periphery like doom embodied. She
cut down two guards at the back exit with a grace that smelled of ritual; she
moved like a shadow toward the aquarium where children were sheltered.

Guards there made a stand, but one by one the witch stepped through
them like water through weeds. After killing the guards with ease, she
walked downstairs. She paused at the tank, listened to the children wail,
and the place felt, for a second, like it held its breath.

“This has to be done,” the White Witch said to herself. A promise was kept
to hurt everyone at the zoo.

All of a sudden.

POW!

Jessica (Skratch) came at her then — a small, furious figure with a
drumstick in her hand — and jammed it into the witch's foot.

The White Witch screamed, swung, and backhanded Jessica so hard she
slid across the tile.

The White Witch pulled a knife and walked on toward the children. Aubrey, wounded and stubborn, launched herself at the queen and the two collapsed in a tangle. The witch snapped Aubrey by the hair and slammed her into the tank with a sick, destructive force; the glass cracked like an answered prayer. Aubrey hit the floor and did not get up.

Children crowded and shrieked in a terrible chorus. The White Witch leaned away from the broken glass, eyes like a maw, and started toward them.

She got closer...closer.

And then...

THOOT!

Number One found a crossbow and fired a single, cold bolt straight into the back of the witch's skull. The witch folded into the water with a final, wrong sound, and the children's howls broke into sobs.

Number One dropped the crossbow and stumbled, breath heaving, hands stained but steady.

"It's okay, babies, this was all an act," she said, voice thin and cracked, and the lie of safety tasted like ash in her teeth.

The fight shifted then.

Witches, attuned to their queen's presence, went slack with a prescience that felt like surrender.

HOOOOOOOWWWWWW!!!!

A howl lifted into the sky, and in that moment of shock, Sunny hammered his axe down across the skull of the towering brute who'd been throwing them like toys. Chezter followed with two knives that found eyes, and the brute went down in a rush of wet, final sound. Around them, the community surged — a dozen blades and fists finding purchase. The courtyard became a mechanical device of slaughter and protection.

When the last of the witches broke and ran, there were thirteen left — ragged ghosts sprinting away between buildings. Number One walked forward, face pale, the crossbow limp in her hand. She did not hold a severed head; she held the instrument that had ended the queen, and the weight of that ending sat heavily on everyone. She opened the gate with hands that trembled and said, stripped of ceremony,

“You’re free to go,” she told the surviving witches.

Some ran. Some fled, and some simply disappeared down shadowed lanes. Zepp came up from the sewers, mud and blood on his boots, eyes like carved stone. Sunny pressed his palm to his chest and felt the hollow where the knife had hit — not healed, not yet. Skratch found him in the wash of bodies and wrapped her arm around him, breath shaking. A bruise the color of old fruit bloomed under her chin.

“Who did this to you?” he asked gently.

“It doesn’t matter,” she whispered. “She’s dead.” Her voice was small and tired and full of something like relief.

They looked at the wreckage together: bodies, overturned shields, the scattered toys of a community that had nearly been snuffed. Number One stood among them, face raw with exhausted triumph and grief.

“What do you want us to do?” she asked quietly.

Sunny looked out across the field where the fleeing figures vanished into the distance. He could see how easy it would be for them to come back, how the wound would scab and fester.

“End them,” he said at last, flat and heavy.

Zepp’s voice came like a blade that had been waiting to fall.

“Agreed.”

Chester gave a single, iron thumb-up.

Crossbows — whatever they could find — were hustled into hands, arrows readied, and the remaining fighters moved like a single organism toward the last of the enemy.

Sunny slid dark shades onto his face and lit a cigarette like a benediction.

He moved past the line of his people, past Number One, past the demolished cemetery where people clung together and mothers wept.

The arrows flew like rain.

THOOTHOOOTHOOOTHOOOT!

The witches who ran were plucked from the earth with a new precision. Down the line, men and women cheered in a harsh sound that had teeth; the wind carried the sharp crack of twangs and the wet punctuation of bodies falling. When Sunny turned back, Jessica (Skratch) was at his side. She reached up and kissed him on the cheek, a kiss small and sacred amid the ruin.

“We clean up later,” she said, voice flat with fatigue. “Tonight — maybe a movie, if the world lets us breathe.”

He smiled, a short thing edged with blood and smoke, and together they walked back into the courtyard where the Code-4 sisters already began sorting the living from the dead. The war had been brutal, close, and ugly — the way wars inside human neighborhoods always are — but it had ended, for now, with the kind of hard, exact justice that leaves scars you learn to carry like medals.

CHAPTER TEN

“X”

CHARLES VICTOR

July 2020

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

The watch on Charles Victor’s wrist screamed like a trapped insect. He slapped the alarm away and breathed out a sound that tasted like smoke and metal.

Ironside called it morning. Charles called it the same cage with a different lock. He’d traded a cell for a badge and a promise—Correctional Officer, reduced sentence—but the devil’s receipt still burned in his pocket.

He did the rounds because dead things don’t wait for paperwork. On Block E’s fourth floor, a bathroom stall held a dark pool, soaking grout and shame. He ducked in and found Mars folded wrong on the tile—young, stupid-looking, debt written across his face like an IOU.

No theatrics.

No sermon.

Just a body and the quiet someone leaves behind.

Mars was a message. Charles had seen the collectors before. The Inzanes didn’t ask about faith or color. They collected blood; they collected favors paid in flesh. If you owed them, they kept the ledger.

He climbed to the watchtower to find Correctional Officer Jared wiping at his arm with a wad of tissues, his cheeks flushed red. Jared’s been a guard here since ninety-five—white, chunky, blunt, the sort who thinks the world can be reasoned into behaving if only people keep the right hours.

“You okay?” Charles asked.

Jared rubbed the scratch on his forearm like he half-expected it to sting extra for show.

“Train this morning,” he said, voice rough. “Asked a woman if she needed help—next thing she’s scratching me. Hurt like a son of a bitch.”

Jared coughed and offered a nervous laugh.

“She was green, man. Like—green green.”

Green.

The color didn’t belong to people.

That word twisted in Charles’ gut like a hook.

“Get it checked,” Charles said. “I’ll talk to the warden about covering your shift.”

“Nah, I’ll be fine.” Jared sniffed and tried to laugh it off, but the laugh had a crack in it. “More tissue, though?”

Charles told him about Mars—how the blood pooled, the stall a closed mouth.

Jared’s face went flat.

“Damn. I liked that kid.”

“Yeah,” Charles said. “So do we. Put eyes on Block E’s fourth. Who went in and out.”

Charles dialed Jaden next—a kid with a smile too bright for Ironside, the kind of face that made guards and cons blink in the same way.

“Jay, need you at the tower. Now.”

Click.

Then he called the Warden:

“Sir. We’ve got a body in E-4. Send medics.”

Professional, clipped. Paperwork would follow the body like carrion.

They’d bury Mars “under Ironside” tomorrow, the phrase softening the hard thing into a ritual. Today, Charles wanted answers. He went down to the

library where Leftover and Hector were relaxing like two men who understood the currency of time. The library was a good place to trade information.

SUNNY JEAN

The courthouse restaurant smelled like frying oil and tension. Sunny sat at the long table with Code-4 gathered around him: Number One at the head, Number Two's face tight as a drum, Number Three with shoulders hunched, and Number Four taking notes. Chezter beside Sunny, and Skratch, aka Jessica, close enough that he could feel her breath. Sunny had spent the night with her; now he had to spend the morning with the truth.

He told it bluntly and bare. Telling the story of his MBPL experience. "One by one they led us into that room," he said, voice low, the words sharp and rehearsed. "Every man died except me. I walked out because someone kept me alive. I don't understand how, but I know what I saw. Project Alpha—what they did in that lab—it killed nine men. I came back. I used whatever this is to make Ironside better. I tried to change things from inside, and then the fall happened."

A hush fell over them. The admission tasted like metal in Sunny's mouth. Jessica squeezed his hand — a small anchor — while his memory pulled the sharp corners of it into the room.

Number Three let out a quiet, impossible breath.

"We probably would've lost the war without you," she said, the gratitude rough around the edges.

Sunny blinked.

"Thanks," he said, and the word scraped because gratitude was complicated. "I get these crazy thoughts that make me lash out. I'm sorry for barging in like a madman. I shouldn't have misled your sister. I said too much yesterday."

He searched the faces and found no easy absolution in any of them.
Number One — the woman who'd bent the community into something like order — looked at him with a hardness thawing.

"It's not your fault, Sunny," she said, voice trembling a fraction. "I'm an emotional wreck. I let myself go and must take responsibility." Her admission was simple and dangerous. It offered him cover and cut him at the same time.

Tears pooled at the corners of her eyes.

"I told him about those men who assaulted us," she added, nodding toward Number Three. "The ones who hurt you. I'm sorry. Sunny, I assigned Chezter to burn down your home because we really needed you. Another side of my power I abused."

The room tilted with that confession.

"They hurt us all. Those savages." Number Three said. Her eyes widened as she felt exposed. Chezter looked down; only he and Code-4 really knew about Number Three being assaulted.

Jessica's face folded into confusion and hurt.

"I'm confused about life right now, yo."

Number Three's jaw tightened until the muscles hummed.

Sunny's throat worked.

"So what do we do now?" he asked, not wanting platitudes. He wanted a plan, a backbone.

"Move on," Jessica said too brightly, as if a rally could fix a wound. "We had a kickass day yesterday. Celebrate."

It was hope in a punch.

Number Two's reply punched something else into the room. She stood slowly, words clipped and cold.

"Sunny, you are *banned* from this community."

The sentence landed like a slammed door.

Sunny felt the air go thin.

Number One started forward, hands up in a plea, but Number Two went on.

“I cannot have you with my sister. Not here. Number One will step down. I will assume leadership.”

The world shifted under that; Number One’s shoulders lowered as if someone had taken a weight off her. The woman who had been Number One — who had led, loved, erred — bowed her head and took the label “Number Four” like an exile.

“You’ll tell them you willingly stepped down,” Number Two said. “We’ll be open about what Sunny did for us, but I am very much pissed at him. I’m pissed at you both.”

Her admission of anger wrapped the room in something brittle and final.

Then she softened with a dangerous, practical voice.

“Sunny — you’ve done things that elevated us. Take what you need. We’ll provide you with a vehicle. You have four hours. Anyone who wants to leave with you and help build what you choose — feel free. We’ll announce it at the gate.”

The offer was a rope with a knot in it. Sunny stared at the faces around him. The price of being wanted and the price of belonging braided together into something he had to choose.

Jessica didn’t wait for the debate. She stood up, eyes blazing with the kind of stupid courage everyone remembers.

“I’m going with him. I’m not staying here for a Republican party. Thank you, ladies.”

It was not a plea; it was a verdict. The softness she’d shown Sunny hours before crystallized into resolve. Number Two glanced at her and gave a stiff nod.

Number One — now Number Four — laid a hand on Sunny’s arm. It was small, steady.

“Thank you,” she said, meaning more than the word held. The rest of the table rose as if gravity had changed. There was no vindictive shouting, no desperate bargaining. There was a tired, fierce acceptance.

BAM!

A gavel came down — not theatrical, but final. The sound cut through the hush and set them moving: plans to be made, goodbyes to be given, a vehicle waiting, a future being stepped toward like a cliff they’d chosen to jump from. Sunny felt the old dirt of the courthouse under his shoes and the lightness of decision. He had been offered exile and freedom in the same breath. He looked at Skratch, aka Jessica. Whatever came next, it would be by his choosing — messy, dangerous, and finally, his.

CHARLES VICTOR

Charles, Leftover, and inmate Hector were mid-joke about birthdays when the radio cut through the library like a broken tooth. Hector was grinning at the idea of stretching a visit for his daughter; Charles approved. Leftover sat hunched and quiet, chewing the same thought he always chewed.

Charles told Hector to go see his family — go, now — and the guy left like a man fleeing before the room could change its mind.

Then the radio screamed Jared’s name. What came back was nothing like speech: a raw animal sound, a high, frantic growl that made the hair along Charles’s forearms tighten.

“Jared?” Charles said into the handset. Static answered at first, and then the noise again — closer, wet, like a man trying to rip a radio apart.

“Jared, you copy? Shit, I need to go. Lefty, hold it down.”

Leftover only nodded. He already had that look: business folded into survival.

By the watchtower, the staff had gathered at the door, faces pale beneath the fluorescent blear. Jaden was there, hands jittery, one of the younger

guards who still tried to believe you could talk a problem away. Someone held up a gun, and it didn't look steady.

"He's been banging on the door," a worker said. "He sounded... wrong."

Charles didn't wait for fear to circle twice. He took the keys, felt their cold weight, and opened the lock with motions he knew the way some men know how to light a cigarette. The corridor beyond smelled of bleach and exhaust, then something else — a metallic tang that didn't belong to any cleaning product. It crawled along the back of his tongue.

Jared was a shape in the doorway. At first, Charles thought his eyes were caught in the wrong socket. Then he saw the skin — not pale but a sick, sallow green, mottled and wrong under the strip lights. Jared had his sleeve ripped back, and his hands were on his forearm, teeth bared. He was biting down hard enough to bruise muscle; he hunched over it like a dog gnawing a bone. The motion was frantic, animal. The sound that left him was a wet, stifled snarl.

GRRRRR!

Charles felt his stomach flip the way it had the same morning Mars had been found.

"Yo, J—" he started, but what poured through the door was no longer Jared's voice. It was a ragged, frantic animal sound and then — impossibly — Jared's arm knit itself where his teeth had torn, closing like a stitch. The skin smoothed as if hands were sewing it shut; the wound sealed, leaving nothing but the sheen of sweat.

That detail — the healing — knocked the breath out of Charles. He'd seen things before. He'd been through Project Alpha and the laboratory nightmares, but rapid regrowth like that was a new language. The little voice in his head that kept inventory of threats added the facts up quickly: green skin, feral behavior, healing. Things that heal too fast are not healing for you.

Jared caught sight of Charles, and the animal inside him shifted into focus. He looked up: eyes wide, pupils blown black. For a second the old Jared was there, a flicker of the man who rode trains and told bad jokes. Then it

was gone. Jared lunged like a man who'd been taught to bite before to speak.

RAHH!!!

SUNNY JEAN

Sunny packed like a man preparing for exile: deliberate and pissed-off. He shoved books into a cracked duffel, the cheap hardbacks that had helped him sleep in this place; he tucked medical kits into a second bag, gauze and antibiotics wrapped tight; and he poured half a bottle of whiskey into a canteen he'd washed and labeled with a black marker. Each item was a promise to himself — tools, medicine, and a warm numbing friend for the nights he would not have shelter.

He hadn't wanted to go. None of them had wanted him to leave, or maybe they had wanted the idea of his leaving more than the man himself. Number One and Sunny hadn't spoken since the stares at the courthouse, but when she ran out the front gate in a thin nightgown, barefoot and ragged, it felt less like punishment and more like penance. The cold had burned her feet pink, and she didn't care. She looked like someone who'd decided to slap fate in the face and walk anyway.

"You're leaving us?" she asked, voice raw on the wind.

"I have to," Sunny said. He tried to keep the tired edge out of it. "It was a choice you guys made."

"You could've burned this place down for me, you know," she said, half-plea, half-joke.

"Enough fire's been lit," he answered. "Your sister will hold the fort. Keep her steady."

Number One — Layla — gave a short, bitter laugh.

"I don't want her to be a flawed leader," she said.

They didn't exchange vows. There was nothing holy about their goodbye; there were only practicalities and one last human reach.

Skratch — Jessica — blinked away tears, then opened her bag.

"Shit! I forgot Fiona!"

She rushed to get her puppy. A few minutes later, Fiona's ears flapped in the wind as she sat securely in Jessica's mega backpack.

"You're not going to take the cubs?" Sunny asked her.

"No," she said, immediate and stubborn. "I'll keep my cubs at the zoo. I don't know how to raise them. But i know how to raise YOU." She wiggled her nose at Fiona's black and pink wet nose.

"Gimme a kiss, baby," she said to the pup.

Chester walked out of the zoo with bags packed. He forced his way to join Sunny and Jessica on their adventures.

Sunny shrugged it off and looked into Layla's eyes.

"You sure you don't want to join us?" he asked.

"Absolutely not, Sunny Jean," she grinned. Her brown eyes trailed from his eyebrows down to his lips.

She began to walk away.

Chester — the sober one — climbed into the driver's seat of a battered pickup, engine already idling like a heartbeat. Sunny rode shotgun, whiskey-smell sour on his clothes, and Jessica folded into the back with Fiona, burrowed in her backpack. Rocky and Nancy stayed behind, hands full of bandages and eyes old with the work that kept people alive.

The trio rolled away slowly at first, then faster, the courthouse shrinking like an apology. Sunny saw Number One in the rearview, a small silhouette framed in the gate; she waved, and her figure grew smaller and smaller until she was a smudge on the horizon. Chester put on the radio and tuned the dial until a thin song spilled into the cab — an old track with a car-crank chorus that felt like a prayer for people who'd never learned to pray.

After a few hours, the road softened them into sleep: Sunny dozed with his head against the window, Jessica curled, Fiona snuffling the air, Chezter steady at the wheel. Then a car eased beside them, windows dark.

VROOOOOM!

The driver rolled his window down and grinned — a clean suit, slicked-back hair, sunglasses eating his face like a shield. He pointed at Chezter and smiled like he recognized them, then sped off toward the Davenport Zoo.

He looked like someone who wore other men's secrets for suits.

Chezter didn't react. He kept the car moving, eyes on the lane ahead.

CHARLES VICTOR

Hector had his daughter on his knee and his wife across from him, and for a little while, the visitation room pretended to be a normal life. The fluorescent lights hummed above them, the vinyl chairs squeaked when they moved, and Hector kept talking in the soft, ridiculous voice inmates use when they try to make ordinary things into miracles. He fumbled a cheap box from his pocket and cupped the little dolphin necklace in his palm like it was a secret engine.

"Happy birthday, mija," he said, sliding the chain over his daughter's head. The girl squealed — delighted, simple, the sound of someone too young to have a ledger of fear.

"Dolphins are smart, baby. Smart like you."

The wife laughed and pressed her hand flat against his, the smallness between them almost holy. For a few minutes, Hector forgot about tanked routines and gray food trays; he was just a man who'd smuggled a token and the token had turned into a grin.

The room smelled like perfume and old cigarettes, but there was familiarity under that, the kind that teaches hands how to hold. Hector told his daughter the story of how the dolphin "flew into his pocket," making her laugh harder until her breath flattened into hiccups. He was the kind of man

who would trade a favor for a smile and who believed for a second that change lasted longer than a single shift. He asked his wife how she was doing. She was sad ever since her brother Paco died from a deadly virus.

GRRRRR

Then something thudded inside the janitor's closet — a dull, irregular banging at first, like a tired fist. Hector checked it out with the politeness of a man who expected pipes and mice, but the sound kept coming, needy and wrong. The air shifted before the door broke: a sour, iron smell, as if someone had uncorked a wound.

BAM!

When the door burst open, it did not reveal a rat or a pipe — it revealed a shape that wore the wrongness of a body like a coat. Its skin was a faded, mossy green; the eyes were glossy, the lids half-lidded with an empty glare. It moved without rhythm, joints popping like bad hinges, and from its throat came a low, wet sound — not a word, not quite a moan, something that belonged to hunger.

RAAAAAHHHH!!!!

The first zombie stepped into the fluorescent light, and the room went still like the pause before a storm breaks. The little girl froze mid-hiccup, eyes enormous and bright, the dolphin necklace cold at her throat.

Hector's heartbeat flipped to the same animal rhythm he'd kept for years; in an instant, he was only muscle and decision. He covered his daughter with his body and reached for his wife's hand, voice dropping to a hiss.

"Get down," he told them, and slammed the heavy visitation door closed with the kind of force that made the whole partition shiver. The bolt scraped home, and for a breath, the three of them were a fist of flesh against the coming dark.

"Jared, get OFF me!"

Charles didn't know which was louder — Jared's animal scream or the thudding that came down the corridor like a footfall of doom. He had one

arm wrapped around the man's shoulders, trying to drag sense into him, and the other arm braced for the moment Jared snapped completely.

Jared's skin was wrong: sallow green under the fluorescents, the bite marks on his forearm gone as if stitched shut by invisible hands. When Jared struck, it was not a man's swing but an animal's flail, teeth and nails, and a sound that could shred a person's steadiness. It took a matter of 10 minutes for his disease to kick in.

POW!

A punch, a grunt, and the fight shoved them both toward the ops console.

Jared slammed into it.

The screen blinked.

A single, stupid bolt of impact and every cell door in Ironside clanged open like a promise turned traitor.

CHOOOOOOOON!

Hector, his wife, and children thought they were alone.

ANNNGGGTTTT!

When the gates opened, diseased individuals rushed towards them like cannibals staring at a piece of meat on a lonely island.

"Daddy!" the little girl screamed.

"I'm sorry, baby! I'm so sorry!"

The disease closed in on them.

Charles and Jared were still at the console, teeth and wirelock and sweat. Jared's head hit a switch, and the system hiccupped; the doors screamed open. The corridor became a funnel of wrongness — green skins pouring through unlocked gates like a breaking tide. He watched Hector at the center of it on camera, a man pressing his child against cold metal, pleading with a world that wouldn't listen.

Charles tried to claw the interface back to green, to slam the doors shut, but the board was a smashed instrument. Jared was maddened, gone. For Charles, the decision came quickly and raw: slow it down or let everyone be devoured. He drove a combat knife into the side of Jared's skull. The act was clean in its necessity, and the scream it drew from Jared was not human anymore. When the eyes finally rolled and went white, something like grief pounded under Charles's ribs. He'd killed a colleague to keep the rest alive. There wasn't a speech for that.

He radioed the ward and got paper-breath for an answer: ***"Lock it down."*** Men barked. Workers scrambled. But the damage had been done; a rotten seam had been opened.

Green things were loose; inmates were being turned into predators. It wasn't a riot — not anymore. It was the facility rupturing from the inside out.

Leftover and Charles met up.

They barreled through the library like men running on one last bright nerve.

The sight that met them was a hallway with people fighting people, strangers with familiar faces tearing at each other as if the world had reversed roles. Leftover went at one of the green skins like a man possessed, beating and pulling it until it lay still in a heap, wearing an inmate's uniform. No one-time-stamped sanity; it all moved in animal timing. These two cellmates didn't have time to grab their things. All

Charles had was his journal stuffed in his pack pocket.

They passed by coyote members being torn open. King Yote, who looked a lot older now, had his stomach ripped open by a green skin. That was the first time Charles had seen a sick person go to that extreme, but it wasn't the only one doing damage.

Screams, SWAT team, anarchy. Guns were confiscated from the Millionth State in 2019, leaving the authorities limited to new hardware.

After going through the prison's maze, Charles and Leftover escaped.

They raced for the gate with a few small bags and a colder determination. Leftover got to the fence first; Charles followed, feeling weight in his limbs

but propelled by the need to keep moving. Then the crack of a rifle split the air.

POOM!

The warden — who had worn rules and paperwork like armor — had a sniper in hand and a shot lined up like law made literal.

POOM!

Leftover screamed. His first shot to the leg.

“Lefty!” Charles yelled.

Another shot.

POOM!

That shot hit Leftover in his spine. His hands slipped from the gates. Leftover hit the ground with a loud thud and bled out. Charles’s eyes widened in shock.

He continued to climb.

Unfortunately, Leftover couldn’t be saved.

POOM!

A volley hit him next. A leg, a torso, then the head. Each impact was its own punctuation, but the strange thing about him was that the wounds refused to stay. Charles remembered falling over the far side of the fence, the world pitching, and then waking somewhere outside the prison with the taste of diesel and blood in his mouth — alive, because whatever ran through his veins put him back together faster than fear could tear him down.

Beyond the fence, the compound was a war tableau. The warden, who’d tried to hold order with a barrel, was handed back his hubris by the very things he’d tried to control; cannibals — or what people had become — swarmed, and the man was ripped down in seconds after a brief, brutal fight.

SKRRRRR!

Cars smashed through the lockdown gates: families, loved ones, opportunists. The place turned into a churning crowd of chaos and grief.

Charles crawled as far as he could from the noise until the brick and chain-link of Ironside were behind him.

He found an electric scooter with 3 out of 4 bars. He rode in his inmate outfit.

When he stumbled into Million Bay, the city was a different animal. He found a street where a gang had two people on their knees, fists raining down like payment. Charles didn't think. He killed the attackers one by one, each strike a raw, rough justice.

Afterwards, he did something he couldn't unsee — he pulled teeth out of those men, a mechanic's rage turned personal. Maybe the prison had bent him. Maybe survival had sharpened him into something else. He offered the battered couple the chance to flee with him; they shook their heads like people hollowed by terror. He left them and kept walking because movement was still the only argument that worked when the world had stopped listening.

Charles made his way to the ruin of MB Life Insurance because some small rhythm of life pushed him to look. The office was in chaos: papers fluttered across the floor like dead birds, and a dark stain on the carpet. He found an old friend coincidentally: Nathan, in a doorway — the old man had chosen his own quiet, bloody exit and left the room like a broken clock. The last shotgun bullet Nathan had was for himself.

Damn.

The sight punched Charles with a dull, perfect sorrow, and he left the building with an axe on the wall; his axe, which was given to him by his favorite musician, Sket, years ago. Charles drove an abandoned car until the engine finally died in a cough of smoke. He walked. He scavenged. He looted what he needed because the law had been replaced with need.

Days passed in a blur of road and hunger. He found an old school bus and climbed onto the pressed rooftop. He lay there with the sky like a hard lid

above him and listened to the world's new sounds — distant growls, a howl of a dog somewhere, engines that didn't mean home. He stole a few small things: a chain, a gold watch, a fedora that made him look ridiculous and dangerous in equal measure. He boxed whiskey and cigarettes into pockets and tried to sleep, but sleep was thin and sharp now.

He had lost Leftover and Hector and Jared and a hundred small certainties. He had traded Ironside for a road that wanted him to keep moving. Above the bus, the city smoldered; below, people learned quick new languages of survival.

When he closed his eyes, he could still see Hector's daughter clutching her dolphin necklace and Leftover being gunned down.

The apocalypse was not a single blaze but an accumulation: the green, the gnawing, the shots, the gate that refused to stay shut. He had lived through it and been remade by its logic.

For the first time in a long time, Charles let the weight of being the last kind of man left settle. He had no plan beyond the next throttle of breath and the next small, competent theft. The world had cracked open, and whatever spilled out would have to be met by hands that knew how to fix things — or by hands that had stopped caring which way they broke. He lay there on the bus roof and watched the horizon, knowing that whatever came next would be diabolical, and that he had already learned how to survive in a world that had forgotten mercy.

At that moment, in 2020. Before Code-4, witches, Chezter, and Skratch, Charles "Sonny Jean" Victor felt like he was the only human alive.

Shit.