

CHAPTER 1

Day 1

Original's POV

"You sure I shouldn't head out there now?" I ask, my grip on my phone tight.

"Pretty sure, boss," is the reply. *"The thief'll be in your area in ten minutes, give or take."*

Ten minutes? That's practically forever!

"Call me when he's here. Got that?"

"Sure thing."

With that, I end the call. Sighing, I faceplant into the table, my mask blocking the pain of the impact. "Goddamnit..."

"Uh, I don't think you should have this." I look up at Bob, his bulbous frame towering over me, as he holds the tray. "You're already excitable as it is. More chocolate isn't going to help."

"Bob, we both know chocolate always helps," I say, leaning back in my seat.

Bob sighs and shakes his head. "Alright then, M." He places my order on the table. Or rather, half of it; just the slice of chocolate cake. "Your drink will be done in a minute," he says. "Don't get diabetes."

"I won't." I unlatch the lower part of my mask, then eat a spoonful of it. The creaminess melts in my tongue. My eyes flutter closed on their own accord. "You're magic, Bob," I tell him.

"Okay," he says, his voice sounding grouchier than usual as he scratches his moustache. He returns to the counter with a tired man's stride, looking like a bodyguard despite the light limes, baby blues, and soft mauves of the brick walls surrounding him.

I rub my jaw in a half-conscious attempt to cover it. I can't help myself. Even if the upper half of my face is still covered with my mask, I'm anxious. No one knows what my real face is like, and I intend to keep it that way.

Calm down, I tell myself. This is *Bob's Place*. No one comes here.

My attention drifts back to my phone. C'mon. Ring already. I can't remember the last time I did anything fun. I've *got* to be the one who faces the thief.

To distract myself, I scroll through social media. At first, I do it without thought, but then I dive into the life of a teenage girl, living the typical, boring life of a teenager in Creek City. Bowling, going to the movies, hanging out with friends. With family. Enjoying herself, without a care in the world.

Not that I'm jealous, or anything.

"Who's that?" asks Bob from behind me, startling me.

"Nobody," I tell him.

His eyes squint. "You like her?"

"What? *No.*"

"It's okay if you do, you know—"

"I literally don't—"

"Just make sure to treat her right. Girls can be emotional."

"Not *all* of them." *I'm* not. Unless when it comes to his chocolate cakes.

Bob's eyes narrow. "Okay," he says, placing my mug on the table. "I know you're famous and all, but that doesn't mean you can do whatever you want."

I chuckle. What's funny is that I never told anyone I was a boy. They just assumed that all on their own. It must be because of how tall I am, how broad my shoulders are, and how short my hair is. Not to mention my non-feminine personality. Back then, I said to myself, *Well, since they already think of me as a boy, might as well pretend to be one.* It does serve its uses, but it also puts me in awkward moments. Like now. "Sure thing."

I wait for him to drill me more about the ins and outs of courting—like I have time to even think about dating, with how busy I am—but to my relief, he returns to the counter again. I continue my deep-dive into social media, enjoying the many ways people show their gratefulness towards me. Fanarts, edits, murals of me; these people keep on surprising me. My personal favorite is a user called *anonymousinvestigator*. Not only do they post daily about me, but they also create theories about me. None of them come close to the truth, but hey, points for creativity! They also send me a message every day. Sometimes, it's a small greeting. Sometimes, it's a longer, more heartfelt paragraph about how much they admire me.

Sometimes, like now, they send me a joke. It reads: *what would a british person buy as a souvenir when they're traveling?*

"Hey, Bob," I call out.

He grunts in response.

I repeat the joke to him. “What do you think’s the answer?” He grunts again—this time, with a one-shouldered shrug. “I know, right?”

I scroll through *anonymousinvestigator*’s message again. I never respond to anyone’s messages, in any way, to avoid favoritism. But, in the spur of a moment’s decision, I heart their last message. I can’t help myself. It’s rare for things to bring me genuine comfort, but their messages—

My phone rings, and my world narrows down into a sharp blade of excitement. Finally! Some action!

I stop pacing when I see the thief. “Hell yeah!” I pump my fist in the air, my cheer deepened and robotized through my mask’s filter.

From the rooftop, he looks as small as the nail of my pinkie finger, stumbling through the sidewalk in a hurried jog, his shoulders bumping against someone else’s every few seconds.

I roll my neck, then my shoulders.

He’s coming closer, the panic palpable in his face.

I slide my foot towards the edge of the roof until the sole of my boot meets nothing but air.

Closer.

I lean my entire body forward. Gravity invites me to jump, but I hold myself back. Not yet. Not yet... In three, two...

Now!

The world tips and tilts, the sidewalk expands like rubber. I forward-dive and land the with a loud thump. A normal person’s bones would crack, but mine don’t even rattle.

Shocked murmurs ring out around me, and I push myself up with no struggle.

“Hey, wait, is that—?”

“Holy shit, Multiplier!”

They all pull out their phones, either to record me, or take pictures of me.

The thief, in front of me, is trembling, the stolen goods dangling behind him in a plastic bag. My body moves into a ready-to-fight position, and I make a come-at-me gesture.

Knowing who I am and what I can do, the thief spots an alleyway across the road, and speeds through it.

I smirk.

I give him a head start, before following in a more languid jog.

Inside the alleyway, I can hear him muttering “shit shit *shit*” under his breath. Then, his muttering is cut short when another figure pops out from in front of him, the tall buildings preventing the light from shining on them, giving them an almost phantom-like aura.

The thief skids to a stop, sending bits of gravel spitting everywhere.

“Hey, buddy,” I say to him, my steps slow and relaxed. “Just give up, alright? Otherwise you’ll be dealing with me...” I nod to the figure “... or him.” I smile. “And trust me, you don’t wanna be dealing with him.”

The figure rests their side against the cracked brick wall, crossing their arms. They tilt their head, and the dots of their circular lens catch the sun’s beam, flaring a bright crimson.

“He’s the fastest, strongest, most agile person I know,” I tell him.

The thief looks between us. His face damp. His veins popping. He’s holding his loot like he could turn it into a mace. He’s breathing so hard his exhales and inhales are visible, and they move his shoulders in the process.

“And I would know,” I say, “he’s me, after all.”

On cue, my clone steps out from the shadow, her stride languid.

“Sup, boss,” she says, nodding to me. “Told you it would take ten minutes.”

I glance at the time on my phone. “Technically, it’s been twelve minutes.”

“Eh, close enough.” To the thief, she says, “So, what’s it gonna be?”

I pity the thief. It’s bad enough to be encountering one Multiplier, but two? He looks over my shoulder, at the exit of the alley, and his jaw tightens. Behind me, people are crowded in a tight knit. Wanting to see the spectacle. Creating an obstacle for him without knowing it.

He does the only thing he can do; drop his loot.

“Smart man,” I tell him.

Then, from his jacket pocket, he pulls out a gun.

Shit.

“Don’t move!” he says, turning around so he can point it at each of us. I glance at my clone. Even though her face is fully covered, I can tell what she’s thinking. It’s what I’m thinking too, after all. My clone shifts, the motion janky. The thief points the gun at her. “I said don’t move!”

“Okay, alright, sheesh,” she says, raising her hands. Her head tilts down. The flare in her lens flickers.

Then, in a flash, she’s barelling towards him.

The thief screams. He pulls the trigger.

He misses.

He shoots again, and again, missing both times. When he pulls the trigger for the third time, no bullets come out. He drops his gun, tightens his hands into fists and poses in an amateur fighting stance, too distracted by my clone to notice me, approaching behind him.

From behind him, I kick his calf with the sole of my boot. He falls to the ground, hitting his jaw against the cobblestoned sidewalk with a loud crack. The criminal yells in pain. I jump onto his back, grabbing his hair and pulling, bending my head until I’m level with his ear. “Told ya.”

The crowd behind me murmur. Among them, too faint for a normal pair of ears to hear, one whispers, “Beacon’s gonna freak.”

I grab the thief’s collar and yank him up, putting too much strength into the hold his feet dangles in the air. Then, I push him to my clone’s unsuspecting arms. “There, you deal with him.”

“You’re not even gonna wait for the feds, boss?” she asks.

As much as I’d like to flaunt my usefulness to them, I can’t. I’ve got a fallback plan I need to catch up on.

CHAPTER 2

Day 1

Fallback’s POV

I’m scrolling through the *anonymousinvestigator* account when Original appears on the window, rapping her knuckles against the glass then waving in my direction.

I open the window and step back, giving her space to swing and jump inside, landing on my old carpet with a flourished pose.

A strange silence settles over us as she stands to her full height. She takes off her mask, revealing our face. Seeing as how I'm her clone, everything about us should be the exact same; from the blonde shade of our hair, to the brownness of our eyes and skin, to our height. And they *are* the same. But I was created three years ago. And physical differences have emerged during that time. Despite me being her literal copy, we can't look any more different. Her with her short hair, with her suit, showing off her ripped body; me with my annoying, too-long hair, with my regular shirt and boxers, hiding my own tamer features.

She takes in her new surroundings, then grins lopsidedly. "I keep forgetting how small your room is."

Before I can answer, Original thrusts her hand out. My breath catches.

From the tip of her gloved fingers, goo forms, hanging down. It drops to the floor. More and more of the goo forms, dripping down, merging with each other like they're magnet. The puddle grows taller, bigger, its shape molding from abstract to lifelike. The legs are the first to form, then the torso, then the arms, then, at long last, the face.

In less than a second, one new clone has been formed.

No matter how many times she's done it, the uncanniness will never go away.

Then, one clone turns to three, and each of them roam in different parts of my room—my dresser, the stain on the ceiling, and for some reason, my pillow. Original herself examines my school books. She breaks into a bigger grin on what my school is teaching me, tapping on the mandatory notes I have to write about wave particle duality. "This is child's play," she says. "Is this really what regular kids are learning? I always thought that was just something that happens in movies."

I throw my hands up. "Hey, I'm not complaining."

She laughs. Her laughter fades when she reads the name *ELIZABETH* stamped on the cover. She's never believed that to be her name—I know this because, prior to my existence, we share the same memories. We don't know if we have a normal name, or a normal family, or a normal anything. All we remember is the underground lab. The name Elizabeth, though, is the name Simon gave her. It's also the name I blurted out when people asked for my name, because I was panicking. Original waved me away when I apologized, but it still bothers her. I can tell.

Her phone buzzes. She checks it, and whatever it is causes her to frown harder.

Her other clones start to speak, all with the same peppiness.

“What is it, boss?”

“Is it the mayor?”

“Is he giving you the key to the city because he’s finally realizing how awesome you are?”

“Oh! What if he’s resigning so you can be the mayor!”

“That’d be awesome!”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. There was once a time when I was like them, too. When serving and pleasing Original was the only thing I tried to do because it was the only thing I knew how to do.

Three years can change a person, even if I’m not a person in a real sense.

“Nothing, nothing, it’s just Ron,” she says, but her words carry an edge. “He’s saying something about... a dog and a shop? What...?” Turning to me, she says, “I need a favor.”

Really, what she means is, *I’m ordering you to do something.*

I stand taller. “What’s up?”

“You remember Beacon, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Are they still up and running?”

“Probably?” Despite its inspiring name, Beacon is, in essence, a bunch of sadsacks who formed a club in order to “prove” how Original is a blight to the city. In reality, all they do is complain and whine and blame every one of their issues on Original. Yes, rumors state the older members are ex-cons and criminals on parole, but judging by the lack of discerning news ever since their formation, I don’t believe those rumors. “Why do you ask?”

“Not your concern,” Original replies.

“Yeah, stop getting into our business,” adds her clone.

“Don’t be a bother,” adds her other clone.

“Or we’ll kick your ass!” adds her other *other* clone.

I’d like to see you try, I want to say. I may not work out or fight crimes all day, but my body is Original’s body, and it’s modified to be the best.

“Have you found anything noteworthy about them?” asks Original.

“Not really, no.” The last thing I remember investigating was how Beacon holds a monthly annual meeting, taking place on the second Thursday of every month, which would be three days from now.

“Well, then,” Original says, “find o—”

My phone buzzing interrupts her. I flinch, my heartbeat quickening as I decline the call.

“Who’s that?” Original asks.

“A friend,” I reply. Technically true.

Original searches my eyes, then snaps her fingers, and her clones—besides me—stop what they’re doing, then fuse back with her, their bodies melting into hers like candle wax until four becomes one.

I keep my goosebumps in control. I’ve been seeing this for three years. I should be fine with it. I’m fine with it. (That would happen to me too, one day. I’d die. No, I’d disappear out of existence. It would be like I was never alive. Am I alive, now? I’m a clone. My existence isn’t real. Nothing about me is—) I *am*.

Original is asking me something.

“What?” I say, forcing myself to focus.

Original’s eyebrows—a shade darker than her hair—lower. “I was asking why your friend was calling you.”

“He wants me to meet up with him.” A half-truth. “To finish this assignment.” Okay, not really.

Original purses her lips. “Alright.” Her attention drifts to the mirror. “Wow. My hair’s getting long.”

Her hair barely reaches past her ears, and she calls it long? Resentment squirms inside of me. I wish I could have hair that short, but the more different I look compared to her, the better. After all, I’m her fallback plan. My purpose is to blend in with the normies, get access to the kinds of info she can’t, and, in the off-chance Original wants to take a break from vigilantism, provide her a fully-furnished life she can step into without trouble.

Yay.

“Do you want me to cut your hair for you?” I ask her, when she keeps ruffling it.

“Duh.” She tips her chin at the chair, and I nod, dragging it to the mirror. She flops down to it, before her spine straightens. “Wait, are the foster parents here?”

“No.” They never are. It’s why she picked them to house me.

“Good.” I bend my knees, tilt the scissors, then cut the side of Original’s hair. Her locks sway as they fall, then rest on my carpet. I’m gonna have a hell of a hard time cleaning up the mess. “So, how’s school? Been making any friends?”

Snip. “Yes.”

“Any close ones?”

Snip, snip. “No,” I lie, glancing back at my phone.

Original hums and nods. Right as she starts to relax, her phone beeps, over and over again. “God, what is it, Ron?!” she yells, yanking her phone out and clicking on his messages. From the reflection, I see her face paling. “What the...”

I lean sideways to better see her phone screen, which shows me pictures of what must be the aftermath of an indoor tsunami. Original swipes through the pictures, taking in every detail; the broken teapot, the scratched-up wooden floors, the bloodied paw marks on the wall—too high up for a regular person to reach. A wooden, large desk is broken, cracked apart like someone smashed it with a metal bat.

“A dog did this?” I ask no one in particular.

The last picture isn’t a picture; it’s a video. A security footage. Black and white. Grainy, with a low framerate, showing the shop in a wide angle.

Something small tumbles in on all fours, running around, biting and scratching and howling. It’s a dog, as Ron promised. Just one dog. Its movements are janky, erratic, filled with twitching and jumps in random bursts. It’s like a malfunctioning robot. A strange collar is wrapped around his neck.

Then, it stops, and turns its head right on the camera.

The twitching worsens, like it’s having a seizure.

The dog grabs a clock in one of the lower shelves with its teeth, and starts to spin, gaining speed and momentum. Then, it releases the clock, and the clock flies straight to the camera’s lens.

The video turns into a broken static, then ends.

Something falls into my stomach.

Original's frown deepens, her breathing quickening as she rewinds the video, as if hoping doing so will change the video. Change the truth. But no. The dog stumbles in, again. Tears through the shop, again. Then pauses, again, and—

"It's almost like it knew," she says. "About the camera."

I step back until the back of my legs bump against the bed frame. "Have you... ever faced something this... *strange*?"

I know the answer's no. Everything Original has dealt with, it's always been normal. Of course, ever since her first public appearance, people have either tried to convince others they were strange as well (like the pair of twins who pretended they were one person who had cloning abilities) or tried to create something strange (like the guy who drank bleach because he was convinced it would give him flying abilities—luckily, the ambulance got there in time.)

The people who are capable of giving a dog enhanced intelligence (if that's what we're looking at) could only be the same people to experiment on Original for all of her life, giving her enhancements in different aspects as well as the ability to duplicate herself like bacteria. In other words, Corps could be behind this.

I'm about to point this out to Original when I catch her rubbing her wrists.

"It could be Beacon," I tell her instead. "They might be the ones responsible."

"Yeah," Original says, not believing me. She stands and stretches, feigning her nonchalance. But even as she messes up her hair to get that roguish look, her hand-swipes are stilted, as though her fingers are made of wood.

"Well," she says, grabbing her mask from my desk and putting it on. "That's that then." She moves towards my window, then pauses. "Oh, yeah. Almost forgot." She crouches under the bed, and, after confirming the emergency vigilante-suit is there, pulls out the med kit.

"It's full," I tell her. "I restocked it, like, months ago."

"Yeah, well—" Original shrugs with one shoulder, opening the kit "—can't hurt to double-check." She double-checks. And makes a mess of the kit in the process. Which means I'll have to tidy it up again. Great. "Well," she says, patting the kit, "everything seems to be in order. Nice work."

"Thanks," I mutter.

She jumps out of the window with a dexterity no normal human being could possess, then disappears from view. I wait for fifteen tense seconds, before rushing onto my phone, hidden

between my stack of books, pressing the power button and muttering “c’mon, c’mon, c’mon” under my breath as it turns on.

I lay down on the mattress. As soon as my homescreen flashes, I get a bunch of notifications; 17 missed calls and 42 messages. All from the same number.

Oh God.

Swallowing, I call the number.

It rings once.

I rub my forehead.

Twice.

I shift for a more comfortable position, the mattress creaking with the motion.

Thrice.

I twist the sheets around my knuckles.

The phone stops ringing.

“So,” Bree says. *“There I was, excited for a very awesome date with my sweet, cute, adorable girlfriend.”*

“Sweetheart.”

“So excited that I texted all of my friends like, ‘Oh, man, I can’t wait to take her to see this shitty horror movie,’ because, you know, zombie movie dates are the best.”

“Honey.”

“But then! When I showed up at the theater, my sweet, cute, adorable girlfriend was nowhere to be seen!”

“Cutiepie.”

“So, I thought, ‘Hey, that’s alright. Maybe she’s just late.’ And so I waited.”

“My queen.”

“And waited. And waited. And, guess what? She never showed up! Never even got the decency to answer my call and be like, ‘LOL, sorry, I forgot.’”

“Cupcake.”

“And now, said girlfriend is calling me cupcake because she’s running out of nicknames.”

Yeah, that last one slipped right out of my mouth. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I am so, so sorry.”

“Care to tell me why you bailed on a very awesome date?”

“I...” Original came to check up on me, and I couldn’t tell her I needed to go on a date with my girlfriend, because I’m not supposed to have girlfriends or go on dates. “My phone died.”

“That so?”

“I really am sorry,” I say, wincing. “If you want, we can go on a date right now! I’ll even buy you the tickets and sneak in the cheetos.” The spicy ones too, which she loves.

“As much as I’d love that, I’m pretty wiped out from the embarrassment of standing around in the cinema for an hour like a dumbass.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Whatever,” she says, even though it’s not whatever. *“Well, since you do want to make it up to me—”*

“I do. Anything.” Bree likes it when I grovel. “Please. Whatever it is you want me to do—”

“A double date.” I blink, my stomach dropping. I should’ve known that’s what she’d ask. Bree’s been begging me to go on a double date for forever. She likes showing me off. Problem is, one of the rules Original gave me is for me to not stand out. And double dates aren’t a private affair. Not to mention I don’t like the concept in general. It’s weird. If you wanna go on a date, go on a date. If you wanna hang out with your friends, hang out with your friends. Don’t mix them together. *“I assume that silence means yes?”*

Not like I have a choice, do I? “It is. A yes, I mean.” I chuckle. “So long as it’s not with Shelby and Justin.” It’s meant to be a joke, but Bree doesn’t laugh. “Oh, God. It *is* with Shelby and Justin.”

“Oh, come on! They’re not so bad!”

“Correction; *Shelby’s* not so bad.” I fiddle with my sheets. “Like, maybe we can just have a half double-date? Where we just... hang out with Shelby?”

“That’s just hanging out with her. And you’re not exactly in a bargaining place right now.”

Yeah, I know. Worth a shot, though. I sigh. “Alright, yeah. Let’s do that. Let’s go on a double date with Shelby and... Justin.”

Ugh. Justin.

“Alright, then. Tonight, at seven. I’ll text you the address.” I frown. Did she already make plans with them? I’m not in a place to say no, but still. Rude. *“Oh, and make sure to wear a flannel, would you?”*

“What? Why?”

“‘Cuz you look hot in it.” And with that, she hangs up.

My cheeks won’t stop burning all night.

CHAPTER 3

Day 1

Original’s POV

It can’t be Corps.

I chased them away, three years ago, as I broke free from their grasp, and gained my freedom. Since then, there’s been no sign of them—not in the city, anyway.

Plus, being secretive has always been their MO. Why are they coming out to the public now. And why in such a strange, incomprehensible way?

What’s there to gain from experimenting on a dog, anyway? The reason why they did it to me was to turn me into the best soldier the world’s ever known, capable of performing feats no normal human being could ever accomplish. They can’t be hoping to produce the same result with a dog—that’s ridiculous.

So it can’t be Corps. It just can’t.

This is what I keep telling myself as I walk through the city. Through my red-tinted lens, the setting sun casts a glow to the city. Blurring the lights. Sharpening the shadows. Warming the summer-fall breeze that ruffles my hair and the exposed part of my neck.

People offer me greetings and compliments, sometimes asking for selfies. After three years of the vigilante business, my popularity has dwindled down from Kardashian-level to Pete Davidson-level. They are still excited to meet me, but they treat me like an old friend rather than a deity.

When the bus arrives, a preteen offers me a seat, which I take with a chirpy, “Thanks, kiddo!”

I check the group chat, asking my clones if they have anything to report, but there's nothing. Good. In my line of work, there's no such thing as good news.

The bus travels into the center of Creek City, the roads sloping downwards and expanding in size. Soon, a hecticness I'd expect from an actual city comes into view. Taller buildings, lesser trees. Bigger sidewalks, bigger roads, bigger everything.

"Hey, uh, Multiplier?"

I turn to the voice; a man, early-twenties, fidgeting like a mouse. His glasses remind me of Simon's, and my heart clenches. I force a smile into my voice as I say, "What's up?"

"Is—uh, is it true?" He shows me his phone. "Did a dog do this?"

It's the same pictures as the one Ron sent me, plus a couple of more—amateur, low-quality shots from outside the shop.

"Where did you get this?"

"Anonymous investigator."

Of course it's them. If someone's gonna leak classified info, they're the top choice to leak it to. "No comment."

"We're not in any danger, right?"

His face is open and vulnerable. It makes him look young. "Of course not," I tell him. But he's not the only one watching me. I stand up to address everyone on the bus. "I'm not gonna let anything happen to you guys."

The people thank me with such earnestness it makes me squirm. I'm built for this. This is a duty. If I were doing anything else, then I'd be wasting my potential. Don't they know that?

The rest of the Creekers keep on thanking me after I get off the bus, swarming around me. Their gratefulness slowly transitions into questioning, and when one guy asks me to take off my mask, I know I have to go.

Cloning myself, and letting my clone deal with the crowd, I leave.

The CCPD—AKA, Creek City Police Department—is not the brightest of the bunch. After all, Corps have been operating in illegal activities for all of my life, and they don't have a clue.

They're decent when it comes to solving *some* crimes. Store-destroying dogs, though, is not one of them.

When I arrive at their police station, the sun's glow has dimmed, and the street lights are on. I imagine that, if I were to take off my mask, I'd see a sky with a red-purple hue.

I greet the officer at the receptionist desk, and he tells me Ron's waiting in the office. I jog up the steps leading to the entrance, reach out for the door's handle, but then a rough-looking man blocks me with his broad chest. "This room is for officers only," he says, glaring down at me, a cigarette in hand.

"Uh, yeah." I point at the door he's blocking. "One of your buddies invited me. Ron, you know the guy?"

"I don't care. You shouldn't even be here."

Behind me, the receptionist says, "Gordon, don't—"

"Look, can you please move out of the way?" I say, gesturing for him to calm down. "I sort of need to get inside."

He huffs his cigarette and blows right in my face. "No."

My mask may be able to filter the air, preventing me from breathing anything that might harm me, but boy am I pissed. "Move out of the way."

I step forth, but he stays right where he is, his biceps bulging as he crosses his arms. "You can't come inside."

Hurried footsteps shuffle, then the receptionist is standing between us, sending me an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, he's new." He then faces the asshole. "Let him through, man."

"Yeah," I say, "don't you have a clue who I am?"

"A punk who thinks he can do whatever he wants, that's who."

My eye twitches.

The asshole—Gordon—shifts his glare to the clerk's direction. "He's not authorized to make the kinds of calls he's making."

"No, Gordon, you don't get it—"

"We don't even know who he is," Gordon says.

Then, he tries to do the worst thing anyone can ever do to me; grab me.

In a flash, my fingers clamp around his bone-hard wrist, putting extra pressure that would make a normal person hiss in pain. But Gordon's too proud for that, so his only sign of discomfort is the twitching of his square jaw.

"Don't. Touch me."

"Or what?"

Or I'll do to you what I did to those scientists. I put a smile into my voice as I say, "Do you really wanna know, dude?"

He tries to tug his arm away, once, twice, putting more effort with each tug. When he's leaning his entire body backward, I release him with one hand, push him with the other. His big frame stumbles and hits the ceiling-long filing cabinet with a loud thud, rocking it, and spilling its contents.

His hooded eyes are wide as I walk inside.

Alright, I should've held back on my strength, but I couldn't help myself.

As soon as Ron spots me, he waves me over. I have half a mind to comment on how good he looks, but that would be a lie. Ron looks the same as he always does; pot-bellied, balding, with a bulbous nose that's always red no matter the weather. Not that that bothers me. He's the only officer in the CCPD who'd willingly—no, cheerfully—admit that I'm useful.

Reading through a messy folder, he gives me a brief on the situation; they're unable to track down this strange dog, but they have been getting reports on sightings of it. They suspect it might be false, since the witnesses' descriptions of the dog are different from what they can see of it from the security camera. "It's a pitbull," Ron says, handing me a cup of lukewarm coffee as I settle over his seat. I take the coffee, even though there's no way I'd open even a part of my mask with this many people around. "And that it managed to somehow dig through the ground in order to escape."

"What? You mean like a mole?" I ask him, readjusting my seating position. Man, these chairs are *not* comfortable.

"Exactly like a mole," he says, nodding. "There's also traces of DNA sample. From the dog's hair."

"What'd you find?"

A frown creases Ron's forehead, adding more wrinkles. "The dog's DNA's filled with high amounts of these weird *rings*, they're calling it. High amounts, very concentrated. Cyclohexane and cyclopleten—"

"Cyclopentane."

Ron lowers his folder and gapes at me. "How the hell do you know that?"

Because that's one of the first types of stimulants Corps tried to inject me with, to give me my enhanced strength.

My heartbeat is accelerating, and my control over my breathing is slipping away. "I—" I swallow, then settle the plastic cup on Ron's desk, not trusting my hand to be steady enough to hold it. I stand on wobbly knees. "I think I should go."

"Go? Go where?"

I don't know, but I have to go, because I was wrong. It *is* Corps. They're behind this. Meaning, I can't be here.

Then, from the other side of the room, cutting through the sound of typing and muttering: "The dog! We found it! It's at the public library!"

Ron's shouting something. At me, at someone else, at himself—I don't know.

Then, Gordon's standing right in front of me, snapping his fingers between where my eyes would be. "Hey, hey! You even listenin'?!" Scoffing, he shakes his head, then starts to walk away. Only for Ron to grab his elbow and tug it toward me.

"I'm telling you," he says, "you gotta take him!"

Gordon glares at me. "Is he even capable of this shit?"

"He is," I say, pushing away thoughts of Corp, thoughts of leaving. People are in danger. I *have* to help. "And he'll come with you."