

mimicry (*noun*)

a superficial resemblance of one organism to another or to natural objects among which it lives that secures it a selective advantage.

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S1EO: RAZZMATAZZ

Today, I woke up more optimistic than usual.

The fresh ocean air caressed my face, the salty smell of the sea gently bringing me back to the world of the living. The sun shined through my window, and my alarm clock had yet to go off. Maybe today, maybe this time around things were going to change for the better.

In the stale interior of an old car's trunk; a girl with long, black hair laid unconscious. Strands of her locks clung onto her damp skin, covering the gaze of her hazy citrine eyes. She was bound—tightly, wrists secured behind her back with duct tape. The unforgiving plastic dug into her flesh, and her ankles were bound even tighter. There was no way out, no matter how much she wanted to flee, any movement would be futile.

The streetlight above flickered intermittently, one time, two times—then one time again. Flies circled around it, maybe moths, or some other small insect, it was too far up to tell. My eyes flicker upwards to look around the harbor, but there was nobody to give me company, only the distant ships and towers of cargo containers. It's late, he should have been here by now. Please, just let this be over already.

Distant steps came closer from behind, until a cold, stiff hand held onto my shoulder. I looked back. A man, his tattered, mismatched clothes hung onto him like a second skin would cling onto a lizard after shedding, each of the outfit's threads screamed for release. Fake gold chains hung from his neck, clinking together ever so silently.

A familiar face, this is the guy I came here to meet.

“She's in the trunk?”

The man's job was simple, and my interaction with him would be ideally minimal. Take this girl, then do whatever the hell he was supposed to do with her. It was a simple system in which small talk like this was completely unnecessary. It wasn't enough being a waste of space, he was also a complete and total waste of time. He seemed to be particularly curious about this one girl, though.

I opened the trunk. His enthusiasm only seemed to grow further.

"Ho-ly-SHIT! You actually went and did it, you crazy bastard!", the contact laughed.

"Now don't get me wrong, I know you're a proper—professional man. But THIS much of a catch!?"

"Camarena might as well suck your dick when he finds out!"

His crooked grin revealed stained teeth, as if he had made a feast of life's worst offerings. His face was marked by the path of his life, full of dubious choices and... dubious hygiene. *Disgusting.*

He continued his small talk, ever so casual about the endeavor.

"Nice work, real nice!"

"It's such a shame this is it for us, huh? I can't believe you managed to convince that crazy bitch to let you go...", he dragged on.

I swept his hand off of my shoulder and he walked away, just a little. I tried to keep things professional between both of us, or well, as professional as I really could be.

"Don't call her that, she'd have your fingernails ripped out just for saying that", I carried, completely exacerbated by his antics.

“You better tell that bastard André that I got things done right away this time, I don’t want him on my ass talking about some ‘missing quota’ like last time.”

“You worried for Julia?”, he asked, mockingly.

“Fuck you”, I snapped back, but my voice betrayed me, cracking under pressure.

I covered my mouth, an old nervous tick I couldn’t manage to shake off no matter how hard I tried to. He kept his smile up, aware, no—INDULGENT on the fact that he had full and complete control of me. But something changed in an instant, his eyes looked like those of someone who saw a ghost. He stood there silently, dumbfounded, his eyes trying to figure out if they’re feeling fear or disbelief.

“What’s wrong...?”, I mumbled, looking behind in confusion.

She was awake. I saw her, and she saw me.

Her gaze cut through me like a chainsaw, it was an abyss of pure hatred. No anger, no regret—only pure and condensed vitriol. I couldn’t move. The raw, unfiltered hatred paralyzed me as my stomach churned, nausea setting in as her piercing gaze continued to bore into my soul. She accused me, she knew what I did, she knew it was me and she knew what was going to happen to her now. Every inch of my body screamed for a way out, to run, to slip away and escape from her eyes. But she kept laying there, motionless—like a broken doll.

The contact awkwardly scrambled to seal the trunk shut, but her gaze never left my eyes. A relentless spotlight, a connection, a thousand nails

digging into my skull. Each creak of the metal groaned with the weight of what I have done. I'm sending this girl to die.

"You know—", the contact started, breaking the tension in the air.

"Sometimes you think you might get used to this, that you've finally gone cold, then someone like her shows up."

"Scary fucking bitch," he stated, ever so cultured and observant.

My knees buckled, and my back slid down the hull of the car. I tried to collect myself, I tried to breathe slowly, to find any sort of relief or way out of this. But the silence, *this* silence, broken only by my strained breath—is the aftermath of a choice that I cannot ever undo.

"Leave, please," I muttered, the sound quiet as a whisper.

"Take the car, just..."

"Just go..."

A sound. A very, very distant sound, somewhere behind the towers of cargo containers.

"What the fuck was that?"

"Did you fucking sell me out?!", he accused.

"Are you an idiot?! I brought her here, if anyone's getting fucked over it's gonna be me," I stood up, my legs still shaking.

Quiet steps could be heard from the dark. The kind of quiet you can only hear when the world is standing still.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Then, they stopped. The contact's hand crept behind his back and into the backside of his pants, of where he pulled a pistol of worryingly high caliber, a Desert Eagle, plated in the same fake gold his chains were.

He aimed at the dark, pistol tilted sideways.

“WHAT’S UP? HUH? YOU THINK YOU BIG SHIT?!”, he yelled.

“WHEN I’M AROUND, ONLY LUIS IS BIG SHIT! YOU GOT THAT?!”

Something giggled from the dark.

“Don’t be afraid,” a familiar voice said.

From the dark, a girl with long, black hair walks barefoot. Strands of her locks fluttering in the wind, exposing the gaze of her hazy citrine eyes, locked directly to me. My gaze widens, and my pulse rises to my throat. I glance behind, and the trunk is still shut. It is still shut, the girl is still there, then how—HOW?

“What are you doing here at night? There’s Mimics out here.”

“It’s dangerous outside,” she spoke gently.

The contact snapped.

“ONE MORE STEP AND I’M PUTTING A BULLET IN YOUR HEAD!”

He tried to intimidate her, but the trembling gun in his hand, and the constant shaking in his voice did little to help him. His eyes were like that of a cornered animal.

“STAY THE **FUCK** BACK!”



The woman came to a halt. Her head turned slowly and unnaturally, hanging loosely from a neck with every bone snapped. Her eyes locked to Luis.

“Y—Yeah, bitch, that’s right. You don’t fuck with me, YOU NEVER FUCK WITH LUI—”

Her arm contorted for a fraction of a second, tearing itself apart into a mangle of stretched skin and exposed bone. I blinked. The contact is turned into a red, bloody mess at the flick of her arm, splattering out into the street.

Blood dripped out of her mangled arm, a bright **pink** color.

“It’s dangerous outside,” she said in the exact same intonation, with the exact same cadence, in the exact same tone. Like the tape in a recorder, looping over and over again.

“Don’t be afraid,” her bones cracked, her joints popped, and every remnant of what made her a human being broke with her body.

She towered above me, sinew bulging beneath the tearing skin. Its eyes were empty, the eyes of an animal stalking its prey.

It dawned on me, these were the last moments of my life.

“Yes. There was... *that* incident,” she repeated like a parrot. Her voice was a distorted, almost mechanical rumble that rang in the pit of my stomach. I try to run, but I can’t move, my feet are glued to the ground, and my eyes to that thing, creeping closer second by second.

“It-I can’t—it hurts...”

It's like facing a force of nature, something beyond my understanding.

“d—da-dad...”

And, more terrifyingly, beyond my control.

**“That's what she said, didn't she?”**

Mt. Royal—19/02/26

Marcel Aleksander Cercel—28

Act One: La Mer

I liked to let the window open at night, it was an old, bad habit that I couldn't manage to shake off no matter how hard I tried. News of missing people was enough of a warning for anybody to know how terrible of an idea it was, even then—I couldn't help it. There was something alluring about the night's air, something that, even now during the last days of winter, kept me company as I slept alone.

At the balcony in my room, I gripped the frosted metal railing and the fresh ocean air caressed my face. It was beautiful. It was vast. The sunrise gilded the edges of every wave, turning the sea into a mirror of the sky. There was a sense of lonely grandeur to it, so far away and yet—so utterly enormous. I spread my arms wide, letting the wind rush past me. Right now, just for a moment, it felt like I was free.

Good morning, Mount Royal. Today's the big day.

I stepped back into my room to get ready for the day when I heard it—steps, coming ever closer to my door. I knew the sound of those, the familiar feeling they brought. It was like standing in front of a loaded gun, the shooter's finger trembling, inching toward the trigger. You want to run, to scream, to fight, anything... but you know you won't make it. Sweat drips down your neck, your breath becomes still.

Here it comes.

A blur of peach colored hair bursts through the door. A force of nature in the shape of a girl. A wild beast, charging directly in my direction. I had no time to brace for impact.

“MARC!”

She tackled me. Full-body contact. Arms wrapped tight around me as she laughed, and we hit the concrete floor with a thud that cracked every joint in my body at the same time.

“IT’S TODAY!” she shouted. “TODAY, MAN!”

“If you mess this up,” she said, eyes wide, deadly serious, “I’m gonna kill you in your sleep.”

“Yup,” I muttered, shoving her off of me.

“OW!” she protested, flopping onto the floor like a cat thrown off a couch.

I got to my feet and made my way to the corner of my room, where a pile of clothes, maybe clean, maybe not, sat in a pathetic lump.

“If I mess this up,” I continued, “don’t wait until I’m sleeping. Kill me immediately.”

Julia was sitting cross-legged now, toying with the sleeves of her oversized turtleneck. She gave me an optimistic grin.

“You’ll be fineeeee,” she dragged. “And even if you’re not, it’s not the end of the world. We can always try again next year, right?”

I dragged myself toward the bathroom. In the mirror, the man staring back at me had once been striking. Sharp features, cloudy blue eyes, a kind of rugged charm that—

“You sure love looking at yourself, huh?” Julia’s voice cut in.

I turned my head. She’d sprawled out across my bed, her head hanging upside down off the edge, black onyx earrings swinging backward like little bells.

“Shut up,” I complained. “I need to get in the right state of mind. Don’t interrupt me.”

“You hate me,” she pouted.

I looked back at the mirror. Tried again. The man in the reflection had once been striking. Cloudy blue eyes. A tired, rugged charm. A face that had—

“You want me to die.”

I sighed, and her expression lit up. Like a dog perking its ears at the word walk.

“Alright. I give up. Let me get changed and we can leave.”

“Get out, though, I need to change.”

“I can close my eyes,” she offered.

“Get OUT!”

She rolled off the bed and dashed out of the room, giggling like she’d won. Even if she was a headache most of the time—Julia was the centerpiece of my life. Without her I had nothing to work towards, nothing to fight for. She was my one unconditional companion, always there, always smiling.

“MAAARRC!”

There she goes again.

“WHAT?!”

“HURRY UP!”, she yelled from downstairs.

“YOU’RE LATE!”

Late...?

“IT’S ELEVEN-THIRTY!”

Shit. I tore the clothes off my body and threw on whatever my hands found first: an unironed white button-up, a pair of jeans, and the same scuffed boots I wore every day. My hair could go to hell. I rushed out the room, bursting into our apartment’s small living room.

“Why didn’t you tell—WHAT THE FUCK?!”

Julia was in the kitchen, locked in mortal combat with the stand mixer—which had her peach-colored hair wrapped around its whirring beater.

“HELP MEEEE!” she wailed, struggling as the machine pulled her head closer.

My unconditional companion.

“Are you SERIOUS!?” I yelled, running to try and help her.

“I’M SORRY! I’M SORRYYYYY!” she cried, her hands flailing uselessly.

I yanked open a drawer and grabbed the nearest pair of scissors.

“Don’t FUCKING move!”

“I WON’T!”

The blades sliced through her hair, and the mixer finally released her. She collapsed onto the floor, still sniffing, still **undeniably** an idiot. I could only sigh.

“What were you thinking?”

“I just— I just—” She sniffed again. “I wanted to make you breakfast, but then it got late, so I thought I’d use the pancake mix to make an actual cake for when you got back, so we could celebrate... but then my hair got caught and— and—”

She broke into a loud, frustrated groan. “UAAAGHHHH!”

I shook my head, trying to fight a smile. “Ahah... ahh... it’s okay...”

The mixer was still running, so I walked over and shut it off. Julia’s eyes followed me suspiciously.

“What are you doing?”

I dipped a finger into the hair-filled batter. She stared, silent. Not because she thought it would stop me—she knew better.

I took a taste.

“Mmm.” I nodded. “It’s pretty good.”

She smiled despite herself, biting back laughter. “Gross...”

Pushing herself up from the floor, she walked over and ruffled my hair with one hand, still smiling.

“You got this, there’s only one way this interview goes for you.”

Then—without warning—she spun like a martial artist and landed a clean kick to my ribs.

“GO!”, she howled.

I ran.

The streets blurred around me, cars honking, voices shouting. A bus roared past so close I felt the wind whip my hair, but I didn’t slow down. I couldn’t. This interview was the only way to give Julia a life worth living—to see her in a university classroom, not on a missing poster. This was our one shot, and nothing was going to stop me.

Nothing.

A woman screamed. “I SAW IT!”

Outside the metro station, a group of men pinned a man to the ground. His face was contorted in pain, teeth clenched as knees dug into his back, crushing the air from his lungs.

“He’s not human!” the woman shrieked. “He bled, he bled **pink!**”

The man turned his head toward her, desperation in his voice.  
“Lucia... you’re my wife! I would never lie to you—”

A blow from one of his captors cut him off.

“Do you think you’re slick? HUH?! YOU GODDAMN MIMIC!”

An officer pushed through the crowd. Her uniform was gray, almost regal... strange, yet familiar, like a word just out of reach.

“Don’t be afraid. I’m with the Liaison,” she said, kneeling beside the man. She pulled a small folding knife from her pocket and opened it.

A tap on my shoulder.

“Excuse me, can you move a little? I wanna see too.”

“Huh?” The crowd was too tight; I couldn’t turn. Whoever it was kept pressing forward.

“C’mon, man... I can’t see!”

“Sorry...?”

The officer made a shallow cut across the man’s forearm, just enough to draw blood.

“MOVE!”



A black, gloved hand gripped my shoulder. Then she vaulted upward.

“I’M SORRY!”

Eyes like the bottom of the sea—endless, dark enough to see your reflection. Pale blonde hair brushed my face, the lightest shade of blond. For a split second we locked eyes. I couldn’t see her mouth behind the mask, but deep inside, I knew she was smiling.

This woman was important.

“Tsk...” her tongue clicked. “It was red.”

The officer’s knife dripped crimson. The tension bled out of the air; the men stepped back, ashamed.

“Ah... he was...” one muttered.

“I said I was human,” the man rasped.

“Alright. Nothing to see here. Move!” the officer barked.

The girl clicked her tongue, disappointed. “Tough luck...”

I tried to follow her with my eyes, but she vanished into the crowd, slipping down the metro stairs. A strange, quiet regret stirred in my chest.

She was pretty.

The train lurched forward into the tunnel’s throat. Fluorescent, white lights shined above, glowing viciously on the tired faces packed onto the carriage. My gaze drifted absently to the small screen mounted above the doors. Usually, it cycled through bland corporate advertisements or government announcements. But today, it showed an interview.

It was a sharp, modern studio. Cool blues and grays, brightly lit. On the left sat a man I vaguely recognized from the local news, Chad Sss...something? Chad Thundercock. Smarmy, expensively tousled hair. He leaned forward with a sense of predatory interest. On the right...

It's her.

The woman from earlier, the one with the gray uniform. She looked different on the screen, much more composed. Long, ink black hair was pulled back into a knot at her nape. It made the clean lines on her cheekbones and jaw stand out. She wore the same uniform as before, a perfectly tailored gray coat.

Chad Thundercock's overly cheerful voice crackled slightly through the train's old speakers.

"...stepping into some truly *enormous* shoes! This morning we got Miss Paloma Guerrero, the *new* director of the MTRL's Security Division! Congratulations, Paloma! Big day!"

She offered a tight, professional smile that failed to reach her eyes.

"Thank you! It's my honor, really, being able to serve this city after—"

"Honor, sure!" he cut in, leaning closer, the camera zooming slightly to her face to emphasize his intrusion.

"But, let's be real for a minute—Montelobos Guerrero... *legendary*. Thirty years on the force, fearless. Knew every crack on the city floor that a mimic could slip into, every alley they could hide behind, every single way to keep us—the people of the city—safe!"

The screen abruptly cut to an archival photo with the contrasting colors you'd expect to see in an aging image. A burly, stern-faced man in an older security uniform, the same shade of gray as hers, Montelobos Guerrero, standing imposingly on a crowded platform.

A graphic flashed on screen: THE WOLF RETIRES. And the cut back to Paloma felt jarring, diminishing her to a prop.

"Tough act to follow, huh? Especially since... well, you know."

He made a gesture towards her I couldn't completely figure out.

"Different approach?"

Her fingers tightened below the studio desk almost unnoticeably.

"The foundation my father laid down was... solid", she said, trying to keep composure but with a strain that audible even over the rumble of the train. "I want to build upon that. Mimics have gotten smarter, and the solutions that worked back then don't work now, we need to understand that we can't use the same strategy over and over again and expect it to work."

"Modern threats require modern solutions: predictive analytics, integrated surveillance networks, community outreach—"

The anchor snorted, the dismissive sound amplified a hundred times by the speakers.

"Predictive *what-now?*"

He leaned back, spreading his hands.

“The Wolf didn't need fancy computers. He had instinct. Gut feeling. Saw trouble coming a mile off.”

The camera lingered on her face as he spoke, there was a hint of frustration welling up behind her citrine eyes, building pressure. She looked like she could explode any minute.

“Can algorithms really replace that? Feels a bit... detached? Impersonal? Especially compared to the old man's hands-on style.”

She breathed deeply, and her hand rose to adjust the collar of her trench coat.

“Technology *enhances* instinct,” she countered, her voice was firmer now, though you could tell the effort it took. “It allowed us to be proactive. My father understood the importance of learning and evolving—”

“Evolving, or just hiding behind screens?” Chad pounced, leaning forward again, his tone dripping with false concern. The camera cut to another graphic—a split screen. Montelobos on the street, caught in the middle of a clash against a mimic, versus a generic, anonymous control room filled with monitors.

“People trusted The Wolf because they *saw* him. On the street, fighting against the mimics that threatened our wellbeing, that wear our loved ones' skin just to put their hands on us! He was a big presence, a commanding guy, strong.”

Chad's gaze swept pointedly over Paloma's slender frame on screen.

“Are you planning on being quite so... visible? Or will the new Head of Security be managing from an office? Seems a shift from the Guerrero tradition.”

Her jaw tightened.

“My schedule includes regular patrols, precinct supervisor meetings—”

Chad waved a dismissive hand, cutting her off mid-sentence. The edit was abrupt, making her look unprepared.

“Patrols, meetings... sure. But Montelobos *lived* down on the road, with the people. This was his world. People felt safe just knowing he was around”

His voice dropped to an artificial sympathetic murmur, driving another nail into the poor woman.

“Can you honestly say the people of Mount Royal will get that same feeling seeing... well, you? Following a giant isn't easy, Ms. Guerrero. Some might say it's... impossible?”

What an asshole.

“Especially when you consider his time in the war against—”

The girl's eyes widened in a fraction of a second, full of rage.

“NOW LISTEN HERE YOU LITTLE—!”

**BZZZT!** A jarring, artificial sound effect, clearly added in post-production, blared over the speakers as the screen abruptly cut to a safety video with a fox mascot. A few other commuters were watching the

interview, their expressions ranged from bored curiosity to a faint disapproval of Chad Thundercock's attempts to get to her, which worked, in a way.

“She really went for it...” said an older woman, voice full of concern.

I couldn't find myself blaming her. Still, doing something like that on live TV, it's a bad look, isn't it? I get it, don't get me wrong—she lasted more than I could've ever hoped to do. If I ever had to deal with Thundercock I'd be at his throat after the first two minutes.

The train's jingle chimed, followed by a distorted announcement crackling over the speakers.

“NO\*\*W ARIVI\*NG TO SAINT\* RAPHAEL STATION”

It's time, Marc-boy.

I kept my head down, avoiding eye contact as I made my way down the station stairs and to the streets. The Seventh was a completely different world from the wild streets of the Third. Couples strolling arm in arm, families herding children, groups of friends laughing as they bickered about mundane life... There was warmth in this type of life, the type that tethers people together.

I needed this, for her.

The immigration building stood ahead, its facade plain but imposing. Inside, the reception area was empty except for a lone woman seated behind a desk. Her eyes flicked up at me, assessing.

“Appointment?” she asked.

“Um—ye—yeah!” I stammered, reaching into my back pocket for the crumpled piece of paper. “I have an interview today.”

“Can I see your letter?”

I fumbled as I handed it over, my hand brushing against hers. She didn’t react, scanning the paper with all the interest of someone reading a grocery receipt.

“Marcel... Cercel,” she read aloud.

“Yes,” I replied quickly.

“You’re on time. Barely. The interviewer’s down the hall, two turns to the left. You can’t miss it.”

I nodded, hovering awkwardly. “Uh... won’t you give that back?”

She smiled faintly. “You won’t need it. Don’t worry.”

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

The office clock droned on, each second stretching longer than the last. . I thought I was late, I’m pretty sure I was, all things considered. The incident at the metro station must have made me even later... but the interviewer was not here.

I sat in it, the single most uncomfortable seat I’d ever had the displeasure of using. Hard plastic, sharp edges... it felt like a medieval torture device. Maybe this was part of the test: endure this hideous green monstrosity without flinching, and you’d prove you had the fortitude to be a citizen of this ward. That must be it, there is no other explanation as to why somebody would keep a chair like this in their office.

Unless they were—

My thoughts were cut short by the door slamming open. Heels clicked against the floor. A blonde woman in her late thirties, maybe forties, strode in, clutching a red folder. My name was scrawled across it in black marker. Red was never a good sign. My chest tightened.

She looked like the type of person who'd choose this chair. A sadist. God, she was gorgeous. What? What the hell are you thinking about? Focus!

She sat, her voice slicing the air. "Marcel Aleksander Cercel."

The chair bit deeper into my back.

"It rhymes," she said. "Cute."

You wish—no. Focus.

The interview started. I cannot tell you about the questions she asked—I don't remember any of them. It went by in a blur, the only vivid memory from the event being how utterly uncomfortable that green plastic chair was. There was nothing remarkable about the exchange, no big question, no big accusation—just the usual gray of bureaucracy. Question after question, answer after answer, monotonous and boring.

Until...

She pulled my medical records from the folder. "How will you address the... hygiene disparities noted in your screening to meet sanitary codes?"

"What?"



I didn't understand the question. Was she calling me unhygienic? Did I smell bad? What the fuck does she mean by that?!

"Let me rephrase: there's concern you could be a mimic."

"Me?"

"No need to worry. MTRL personnel are stationed outside if this goes wrong. But I have no reason to doubt you." The woman opens a drawer, and from inside she pulls a device, similar to those used by diabetics to check their blood pressure. "It's just a blood tester. Give me your finger."

Something about this whole situation makes you uncomfortable. She has no right to question you about this, she's not an MTRL officer or anything of the sort. If the black haired lady with citrine eyes asked you? That makes sense. But this? This just felt like an invasion of privacy.

Defy her.

"What makes you think that?"

"Excuse me?"

The sound of her voice, she's genuinely baffled. That is the face of someone that, up to this point in her career, had never had to deal with someone like me.

"If you refuse, we'll be legally obligated to have MTRL officers forcefully test you for any anomalies."

Oh. That's not good.

"Alright, y-yeah! I'll do it!"

The needle was so thin I barely felt it. She watched me, waiting for... something, for me to lash out, for me to explode. I met her gaze.

“You waiting for something?”

The device beeped. Green light.

“It’s... negative,” she said.

“Is that all?”, I mumbled.

“That’s all. Go to reception for your results. They should be available now.”

I stood up, making my way to the door. But... before leaving, I had a question.

“Is that chair like that on purpose?”

She just smiled.

Outside the door were no MTRL people, she was bluffing. Had I really been a mimic, she’d probably have died in that room... or *I* would have.

The receptionist’s eyes were glued to her computer monitor, fingers clicking over the keyboard with an indifferent rhythm. She clicked, typed, and scrolled between files without once glancing my way.

“Excuse me...?”

“Denied,” the receptionist spoke.

The words landed like a stone thrown to my head.

“What?”

“What do you mean, denied?”

“There were too many discrepancies in your file,” she said. “The dates didn’t match. The witnesses you listed weren’t present. You came here to waste both our time.”

“But—But I spent everything I had on this,” I stammered. “All my savings, everything I had left from the job with—”

“It doesn’t matter,” she interrupted, voice flat. “It’s just the way the system works. You can leave now.”

The ocean breaks, like an iceberg crashing into shore. I stepped forward. She didn’t flinch, didn’t look away from the glow of her screen.

“Show me,” I demanded.

Her lips parted. “I told you, I can’t help—”

“I said—”

Nothing.

## Act Two: Into the Void

Black stretches endlessly in every direction. Your consciousness drifts above the ocean, smaller than a grain of sand. You hear them; laughter, sobs, the steady heartbeat of everyone around you and beneath the tide. Someone calls your name. You strain to hear, but her voice is muffled, indistinct. Louder, you think, but no sound leaves your throat. You can’t let her go, but there’s nothing to keep her here.

You sink.

**“HEY!”**

Your eyes open slowly and painfully.

“Shit, he’s not dead,” a rough voice says.

Another voice, a girl’s, answers. “Of course he’s not dead, idiot. He’s just... bruised?”

“That doesn’t look like ‘bruised.’ He looks like a burst up rotten pomegranate.”

They’re laughing at you. They know you failed that interview. Stand up, Marc.

“Hnngh—” You groan, rolling to your side, forcing yourself upright. The world sharpens: the sour reek of cheap alcohol, the roar of a football game on TV. Welcome back to the land of the living, Mr. Cercel.

“The game...”

“The—the game?” the girl asks, worried.

“Is Tigres winning?”

She blinks, caught off guard. “I... think so?”

A voice from the back shouts, “Three to one!”

Good. You bet Julia twenty cruz. Looks like you win.

“Hey,” another voice calls. You turn to see an older man, at least, you think so. His face is a hell of scars, his nose gone entirely, leaving only a dark cavity.

“What the *fuck*!??, that’s gnarly,” you blurt.

“Excuse me?”

“Your design is so fucking cool.”

The girl steps in quickly. “I think he’s complimenting you.”

Damn right you are, a specimen like the man in front of you is difficult to find. Men with scars have stories, and stories are usually a good time. You should ask him about those. Or maybe not, he’s almost twice your size, piss him off and he’ll make whatever is going on in your face right now look like a scratch.

Pop the question already, we don’t have all day.

“Where am I?”

“You’re at my bar, Roland’s,” he says. “My daughter found you passed out, face caved in, and dragged you inside.”

The man’s gaze lingered on you for a second longer, there was something in his one good eye you couldn’t really put your finger on. Was it disdain? Amusement? Then, with a grunt that sounded like a cliff collapsing, he turned.

“Keep an eye on the pomegranate, Paloma.”

“Don’t let him bleed on the good stools...”

It was worry, the look in his eye was worry.

“I’ll be fine, c’mon, mom’s waiting for you,” the girl bantered, pushing her father all the way to the door.

“But are you gonna—?”

“I said I’ll be FINEEEEE, it’s just for tonight, GET! OUT!”

The glass doors shut behind the large man with a quiet click. He turned back to see his daughter, who just gave him a small thumbs-up. The faint smell of old leather still lingered in the air.

The bar was uncharacteristically silent, only broken by the frantic commentator on TV and the mumbling from the handful of patrons, confiding their troubles with the inside of a bottle. You swiveled slowly to face the bar, and your body ached like never before, this is what the inside of a meat grinder must feel like.

She was already there, damp cloth in hand, wiping down the spot where her father leaned all evening. She avoided your eyes for a moment, completely focused on the non-existent stain.

“Hey.”

Her head perked up.

“Oh, you’re looking better already!” She quipped cheerfully, leaning on the bar.

“You’re lucky I found you, daddy and I spent a few hours stitching your face back together. Who the hell did you manage to piss off badly enough to get that done to you?”

“You looked like roadkill,” she said bluntly.

She tossed the cloth under the counter and pulled out a clean glass, filling it with water from a tap, then slid it across the worn wood towards you.

You took the water, the cold stinging your split lip. “An interview, didn’t go too well,” you mumbled, taking a sip from the cold water. It helped—a lot.

Close up, she was younger than you’d first thought, maybe in her early twenties. Without the imposing coat, she was just some girl you’d find working as a cashier, or in this case, a bartender.

“An interview did that? Did you interview a brick wall with your face?!”

A weak chuckle escaped your lips, turning into a cough that made your ribs beg for mercy

“Well you know how it is, the manager had... strong opinions. On my qualifications. And my ancestry. And my general existence.”

You took another sip, the coolness served as a minor relief from the throbbing mess that was your head.

“I’m Marc, by the way. Since we’re past the whole, like, ‘corpse on the side of the road’ stage.”

She snorted, a surprisingly warm sound.

“I’m Paloma, Paloma Guerrero,” she replied, leaning her elbows on the bar, studying you with those unnervingly direct citrine eyes.

“Oh I know who you are, I saw you on TV this morning,” I teased, playfully.

Her eyes widened.

“They broadcasted that?! Oh my god... no...” She hid her head in her palms. “That bastard...”

A grin tugged at your swollen lips, pulling painfully.

“I admire you, really, if it had been me there I’d have thrown myself at... what’s his name—**Chad Thundercock**’s face the first chance I got.”

She burst out laughing.

“T—THUNDERCOCK?!”

“What? That’s not his name?” you asked, a smile shining bright on your face.

“N-haHA—NO!”

“And what do you mean throw yourself at him? Is that your deal, fighting random interviewers?”

“I mean shit, look at me, if I said no you wouldn’t believe me, would you?” You crowed, leaning closer to her.

“Say.”

You gestured towards the taps behind her.

“You got anything on tap that won’t make me pass out again? Or taste like disinfectant?”



“I’ve got a lager that’s smoother than a baby’s ass. Might not fix the face, but it won’t kill you. Probably.”

“Do I have someone to share it with?”

She laughed.

“Are you hitting on me, Marc?”

“Am I, director?”

She considered you for a moment, glancing at the bottles on the shelf. You watched her pour the golden liquid, foaming up at the top of the glass. Her eyes had a soft glow to them under the bar’s warm light.

“I don’t know, my dad left me to take care of this place, and there’s customers still here, I don’t think it’d be responsible if I were to—”

She slammed her empty glass on the bar.

“—PIECE OF SHIT BASTARD! AGH!”

She howled like a rabid animal.

“WHO DOES HE THINK HE IS? INVITES ME TO HIS SHOW JUST TO MAKE A FOOL OUT OF ME?!”

A fair amount of drinks later, she opened up.

“You, you get me Marc, you do,” her words slurred and dragged.

“I should have beat him up until he looked like you, fucking, Thundercock, AGH!”

You laid on the bar, quietly listening to her pour her heart out.

“I didn’t even want this, stupid job.”

She sniffed, her voice cracking slightly. Her grip tightened around the glass, knuckles whitening as alcohol blurred her words.

“But my—” *HIC* “—stupid, idiot...” She slammed the pint down, sloshing beer onto the bar. “MOM!”

“When Queen died, she just, lost it...” Tears welled around her eyes. “I couldn’t even do anything, I wasn’t even in the country... But it was MY fault?!”

“OF course it’s easier to blame me, instead of blaming herself like any *normal* mother would!”

“But no it was MY fault that Queen went and got turned into a mimic, ME, BECAUSE I DIDN’T ‘LOVE HER ENOUGH’”

Your hand caressed her shoulder.

“That’s rough.”

She continued.

“Queen didn’t even know man... they make such an exact copy of the person they kill that sometimes they don’t even know they’ve turned into one of those things—but the moment they’re found out, they break.”

She paused, her eyes glazing over as she recounted the memory.

“They were cooking together—it was a special day. I was finally coming home from abroad, so they planned a big dinner as a surprise. She cut her finger by accident, and...”

“She bled pink,” you finished softly.

“One moment, she was my little sister. The next, she wasn’t. Dad had to put her down.”

“All those scars on his face? She gave them to him, because he couldn’t bring himself to kill her.”

“I guess that’s why he’s such a worrywart nowadays—” *sniff* “—he’s afraid he’s gonna lose me and mom too.”

“Oh my god.”

She groaned, her hands flying to clutch her head like it might split apart. Her fingers dug into her hair, elbows pressing inwards as if she could physically crush the embarrassment out of herself.

“I’m trauma dumping on the first date...haha...”

You try to console her, however futile it might be.

“Y’know, it’s technically not the first date so... don’t worry about it.”

Paloma took a deep breath to compose herself. The bar had fallen completely empty, the last few patrons had long gone home, and the TV playing the game had been playing midnight advertisements for hours now.

“I guess it’s time to close, huh?”

The last stragglers stumbled out just past 2 AM, you—and her. The key turned, and the entrance to the bar was finally shut. She sighed with relief, and the “Roland’s” neon sign blinked off, plunging the alley entrance into near darkness, save for the yellow glow of the distant street lights.

Paloma leaned against the grimy brick wall, the yellow light catching the tired lines around her eyes. She shook a cigarette loose, placed it between her lips, and struck a match. The small flame lit, and her face did too. The smudged eyeliner, the weary set of her jaw, the surprising softness that emerged when her mask slipped. She offered you a pack without a word.

You hesitated for a second, then took one.

“I haven’t had one of these for a long, long time.” Your attempt at a chuckle turned into a wince as your face kept throbbing.

She smiled, and lit your cigarette with the dying ember of her match—her fingers brushed against your knuckles for a second. There was something intimate about the moment you shared in this quiet alley. The distant hum of the city, the drip of a leaky pipe overhead, and the soft crackle of burning tobacco.

“Your dad,” you started, voice raspy. “He really loves you, doesn’t he?”

She breathed out, a puff of smoke escaping her lips. “He does, even if he’s a constant bitch, and looks like he wrestled a combine harvester.”

“And won,” she chuckled lightly.

“But he loves me, and he wants me to be happy no matter what.”

Your body feels heavy.

“I see.”

She turned, her face still flushed and full of joy. “But I had lots of fun tonight thanks to him! And thanks to you—”

The needle sank into her neck.

“Y—y-you?”

Her legs collapsed under her weight. She clutches at her throat, trying to breathe.

“It-I can’t—it hurts...”

She glances up at you, and her eyes tell you what her mouth can’t anymore—why? Why are you doing this? We were having so much fun, you can’t do this to me, why are you doing this to me?!

You only look down at her citrine eyes, slowly losing consciousness. She tries to crawl away, to save herself—but it’s to no use, her body is shutting down. Her eyes are fading to black, she calls out to the only person she knows would come for her.

“d—da-dad...”

But nobody did.

### Act Three: Slipping Away

The contact is turned into a red, bloody mess at the flick of her arm, splattering out into the street.

Blood dripped out of her mangled arm, a bright **pink** color.

“It’s dangerous outside,” she said in the exact same intonation, with the exact same cadence, in the exact same tone. Like the tape in a recorder, looping over and over again.

“Don’t be afraid,” her bones cracked, her joints popped, and every remnant of what made her a human being broke with her body.

She towered above me, sinew bulging beneath the tearing skin. Its eyes were empty, the eyes of an animal stalking its prey.

It dawned on me, these were the last moments of my life.

“Yes. There was... *that* incident,” she repeated like a parrot. Her voice was a distorted, almost mechanical rumble that rang in the pit of my stomach. I try to run, but I can’t move, my feet are glued to the ground, and my eyes to that thing, creeping closer second by second.

“It-I can’t—it hurts...”

It’s like facing a force of nature, something beyond my understanding.

“d—da-dad...”

And, worse—beyond my control.

**“That’s what she said, didn’t she?”**

I turned around and immediately hauled ass back to the car as fast as I physically could. My heart raced, my chest burnt, my breath felt heavier than a car over my head. I stumbled the keys into the ignition and stomped the pedal like my life depended on it.

It’s dark, the darkest the night has ever been.

The road ahead stretches out into the dark, the only guide left being the flickering, distant glow of the highway's streetlights. My foot slams against the gas pedal—as if sheer speed could outrun the sin I just committed.

But as adrenaline courses through my veins, so does the nagging doubt. How the hell am I alive?! In the rear view mirror, the road left behind is swallowed by the night. Paranoia tightens its grip over me. Is it toying with me? Getting a kick out of the heart attack I'm about to have?!

The silence is deafening, broken only by the engine's roar and the rapid beat of my heart. My hands shake at the wheel, every fiber of my body tells me not to look at the back seat. But I have to look... I steal a glance, and it's empty—it's not here.

A shaky exhale escapes my lips, but I can't get it out of my head. It was her, it looked just like her—but it wasn't. I'd heard of mimics, I knew they existed but seeing one? Every bone, every single blood vessel in your body screams for help, and there is nothing you can do to fight against it. It's burnt into my eyes, the mocking look in its sunken eyes as it crept slowly towards me

In the distance, standing in the middle of the highway, a silhouette. Terror claws at my throat as it sinks in—it's the mimic, it's coming for me, it won't let go. The car hurtles its way, each second pass coming closer, and closer, and closer. The paralysis of fear tightens its grip on me, the world outside blurs into a haze. and every attempt to steady my breath feels as futile as it would be to beg for mercy.

This is it, I'm going to die.

A nervous giggle, a crescendo of manic laughter. The sound thunders through the coffin that is this car. I grip the wheel tightly, adrenaline seeped into my bones. I'm dying tonight, there's no way around it, then—

The thought flickers.

I'm going to hit it with my car.

It's an idiot's idea, I know it won't make a dent, let alone take it down. But does it matter? Does it matter that it won't? Do I even deserve to have a choice, after what I've done, after I ruined a family that already lost one daughter? No, no—fuck that. FUCK. THAT. If I'm dying today, I'M TAKING YOU WITH ME.

The mimic smiled, extending its arm, a macabre welcome to my defiance. *Come get me you bastard.*

The car collided. For a brief, hopeful second, I entertained the thought that maybe, just maybe, this act could make a dent on it. Yet, there it stood, unyielding—unmoving, untouched by the force of the collision.

It's calm, for this split second, there's no weight. No gravity, no debt to be paid—nothing. Just the sound of metal tearing and tires screeching.

Oh. The car is hurling in the air.

I hit the ground with a crash. The air is heavy with the acrid scent of scorched metal, and the laughter that once thundered through this car is now nothing more than regret. I wonder... Now that I'm dying, will they leave Julia alone at least? Or will she have to pay for the debt of a dead man, just like me? Was this all for nothing, delaying the inevitable? The life I've led, the lives I've taken—maybe I do deserve to die here.



I just hope that I can make things right next time around.

The mimic's hand crashed through the windshield with a violent shatter, sending glass fragments flying in all directions. It grips around me like a vise, pulling me out of the car like a ragdoll. The world blurs as I'm tossed unceremoniously onto the harsh pavement.

A sudden, searing pain EXPLODES in my chest as her foot crashed down on me. The sickening crunch of my ribs breaking apart echoes in my body, drowning out any coherent thought left. I gasped for air, but no matter how hard I breathed, nothing would fill my chest.

The mimic smiled, satisfied.

"You're a piece of shit," it growled.

From the bottom of my soul, through all the pain. I can muster just one, single sentence.

"Shove your... big... fat foot... up y-your... ass..."

The mimic tilted its head to the side, analyzing my face. Memorizing each and every single one of my features, whichever I had left.

She smiled.

"Good enough."

And just like that, in the blink of an eye the mimic was gone. There was no feasible explanation to what just happened—there didn't need to be. My gaze was fixed up on the sky, on the twinkling stars above, the rush of adrenaline still tingled through my veins. I could help but laugh. I laughed in bursts, uncontrollably until my throat burnt. For the first time in decades, I was alive—I made it.

My attention shifted to the wreckage of my car. Paloma... PALOMA! Urgency to find her completely overwhelmed me, without a second thought, I dragged myself to the car with my pair of now broken legs. It hurts, it doesn't matter. My hands dig into the twisted metal, cutting open, it doesn't matter. I rip apart piece after piece after piece, until finally locating what's left of the trunk. I take a piece of metal with my bleeding hands and try to pry it open with all my weight. It doesn't budge. It doesn't matter. Try again. It doesn't. Try again. Again. Again. AGAIN. AGAIN. OPEN IT!

Dink.

The trunk opens. She's bloodied, seemingly lifeless. Her limbs look like old, dirty rags, broken from every possible angle. Her citrine eyes are closed. This girl is dead.

No. She can't be dead, not after that—she can't be. Not after all that, not after surviving THAT. My hand wraps around her neck, looking for any pulse, even the faintest trace of life. She was cold to the touch, wet, dripping in her own crimson blood. But... There was a pulse. Faint, almost gone, but there was one.

A long, shaky breath of relief escapes my body. She's alive. Mangled and battered but undeniably alive.

It's fifteen miles to the city. I glanced back at her, she's barely holding on. Would she survive the walk to a hospital?

...

Would I?

At this moment the prospect of having died in the crash seems a lot more attractive than it was in the moment. If this girl doesn't arrive at the addressed location then my quota won't be complete.

And if it isn't... Julia will...

I force myself up on my feet, draping the girl's arm over my shoulder. I walk through the dark, dragging her with me. The weight of her body felt heavier and heavier with each step, and the road ahead only seemed to become longer after each step. But we couldn't stop, not until the city's lights in the distance shined above us again.

The night surrendered to the soft hues of dawn, and exhaustion weighs heavily on what's left of my body. The city's starting to wake up again, but we're still walking the same sluggish rhythm. I need to get her to him, if I get her to him then everything is gonna be okay.

After hours of walking, we finally arrived. The place of my contact's boss—Astro, a nightclub in the Third Ward. The neon lights that lit up the night had become quiet in the morning, and the beats of dance music had been completely replaced by a stillness in the air. Our blood dripped on the floor as we stepped inside.

The echoes of my footsteps bounced off the silent walls. With every step, her weight pulled my body to the ground. But that didn't matter anymore. I would never see her again, none of them. At least it'll all be over.

With every ounce of my strength, I howled.

“LAAALOOOOOO!”

The silence only made my cries louder.

“LALO! I’M HEREEEE!”

“STOP WITH THAT GODDAMN YELLING!” A voice called from the back of the club.

An older man with a cigar perched on his lip emerged from the club’s backdoor. The moment his eyes landed on me there was not an ounce of concern or worry—only hostility.

“What the hell is going on with you?”

I couldn’t find any words.

“There was an accident when—when I was handing her over to your guy a...”

The mimic twisted face flashed through my mind, pink dripping from its mouth.

“There was a mimic.”

“It killed your guy, I barely got away.”

A wave of skepticism washes over his face. His raised eyebrow and doubtful eyes make it clear—he thinks I’m lying.

“I got the girl, though,” you manage to say, despite yourself.

“She’s here, I got her for you!”

His eyes look at mine with contempt. He scoffs, kicking the girl out of my arms, and onto the floor.

A dull thud fills the air.

“That girl is dead,” Lalo affirmed.

“I don’t know what you hoped to achieve by bringing a corpse through my front door.”

She 's dead. She died on the way from the highway to the nightclub.

“I-...”

He keeps talking.

“You had one thing to do, and you failed.”

“Was the beating we gave you earlier today not enough to drive it into your head? The boss is gonna be furious, you know that.”

He walks towards me, slowly.

“You’ve been letting us down again, and again, and again.”

“You think I haven’t forgotten about your little stunt that cost us a whole shipment of batteries?”

“Oh but they’re living people! They need to be free!” He mocked me, feigning a high pitched voice.

There is nothing left to do. I turn around and start making my way out of the nightclub.

“Guess I’ll have to get that sister of yours as a replacement for this little fuckup, no?”

You stop.

“Oh, but don’t get me wrong, I’m sure my guys will get to have fun with her before we send the little shit to Camarena—I’m sure he won’t mind.”

“Show that **pink** haired little shit how to be a *real* woman.”

You turn around, walking to him.

“What? You’ve finally grown some balls?”

The anger that had been simmering beneath the surface begs to be let out. You take another step.

“Pap—stay back,” he demands, pulling a gilded pistol from behind his back.

“Try anything funny and I’ll blow your head clean off.”

You take another step.

“I’m not joking, Marc,” he cocks the hammer of the pistol back, it’s primed to fire. He thinks you’re afraid. He thinks a small toy like that will be enough to put us down.

You take another step.

A bright flash of light crashes through your skull. You don’t have time to react to the bang—all you feel is your body becoming the lightest it’s ever been. **You’re free.**

Time freezes around you.

“Y-your blood is—?! ”

**PINK:** *RAZZMATAZZ*

**EPISODE 0: RAZZMATAZZ**

You turn your apartment doorknob slowly, not to wake Julia up. Today was a long day, but at least it's finally over. The taste of blood still lingers in your mouth, and the wounds still weigh on your body, even if they've mostly healed by this point.

The door gives a silent creak, and the smell of your apartment finally comes. You're home, you're finally home. It's dark, but that's okay—you know every corner of this tight little shithole. After scrambling for a few seconds you finally find the lightswitch and—

“SURPRISE!”

With a loud bang, confetti falls over your head, followed by your sister's cheerful yapping.

“CONGRATS!”

She throws at you with a hug. But—you don't know what to do with it, what are we celebrating?

“What's with the awkward demeanor?” She asked, tilting her head to the side.

“What are we celebrating?”

“Dude,” she deadpanned, moving back to the dinner table and picking an envelope.

“This arrived, I really wanted you to open it first but I REALLY couldn't handle the suspense, hehhehah.”

The envelope had an official seal... from the immigration office.

“You're joking.”

“Nuh-uh”



The document was long, with plenty of verbose statements and long paragraphs of information. Reading through it would have taken too long, and your body was at the border of shutting down. But you see it.

MTRL 17th Precinct, Forensics Division.

Seventh Ward.

“We... we got accepted?”

“WE GOT ACCEPTED!!! AHAHH,” she beamed, jumping up and down on the spot.

“Anyways, go to sleep, it’s late—or early, idk.”

“I made a cake but I’m too sleepy to cut it tonight, let’s do that tomorrow.”

She turned to you with a big smile, radiant and proud. But your eyes couldn’t hold hers, no, your eyes were lost behind her—in the dark of your apartment.

A pair of hazy citrine eyes looked your way.

## S1E1: THE VIOLATOR

The dead man laid sprawled on the floor, half-devoured, face-down in a spreading pool of pink.

His insides were wrong, everything was pink, and not one thing was where it was meant to be, nothing like what you become used to working in forensics. No glistening blue organs, no coils of gut, no heart that's stopped beating—there was nothing recognizable as human. His insides twisted outward in sinewy vines, their surfaces veined and wet, blooming with fragile pink flowers, withering in the air. His final place of rest was the middle of a supermarket, the automatic doors shattered, shelves half-toppled as if something had torn through the place. He had fallen in front of the dairy section, cartons split and leaking, their souring contents mingling with the blood.

He had never been human. This man was a mimic.

Mimics feast on people, it's just their nature, they don't know better. But as we stood over what's left of this one, a question pressed cold against the mind of everyone present.

“What kind of thing would eat a mimic?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose, staring down at the corpse.

A slender, freakishly tall woman stood over the body, her shadow long and bent under the supermarket's ruined fluorescents. She was unmistakable—Dr. Zhòu, though if you'd known her long enough, you'd call her Qīng Ní. Asian, older, with dark hair streaked by a single band of white, she looked more professor than someone meant to be at a crime scene. Her round glasses magnified her eyes, an academic through and through.

Her tone wavered between disgust and disbelief. She was a geneticist, not a forensic pathologist, this work was never meant for her. She was the type of girl to have lectured at conferences, given TED Talks, advised governments on the future beyond human biology... Now she stood here, queasily nudging at the pink-flowered entrails of a mimic with the tip of a pen.

“I’m sure there’s something out there for anybody,” she muttered, “but... come on...”

Another voice cut in. Pale-haired, dark-skinned, no more than twenty-three years old, but the look in her eyes was like those you’d see in men coming home from war. Hollow, searching for something she lost a long, long time ago. Isabel Cachaça—the Gray Coat of Precinct Seventeen.

“Does it even matter?” Isabel asked flatly. “Whatever it is, it’s killing mimics, not people.”

She spat the last word like venom.

“They’re not even human.”

Qīng Ní laughed bitterly, mocking her. “Are you braindead? If it’s doing this to mimics—mimics that can fight back, mind you—what do you think it could do to us, Isabel?”

Isabel didn’t flinch. “What could it do to *you*? I’ll be fine. I don’t care if it eats mimics or humans. If it bleeds pink, I can kill it.”

“You’re unbelievable.” Qīng Ní sighed. “Why are you even here?”

“Security,” Isabel replied firmly.

Qīng Ní gestured at the ruined corpse. “Security? The mimic is dead.”

“What if the perp is still around?”, Isabel asked.

“He is not.”

“You never know.”

Isabel had a certain fascination with pushing people’s buttons and testing the limits of their patience—a jaded woman at the end of her failed career like Qīng Ní was nothing short of a perfect target to ease her boredom. But even with how much of an asshole she was, her being here eased my mind a little. Out of everyone in the precinct, she was the only one I could even consider a friend, though with only the three of us here and two back on central, that wasn’t saying much.

“Are you seriously doing this?” Qīng Ní turned to me. “Marc, tell her to go get lost.”

I didn’t look up from the camera. “Tell her yourself. I’m busy. We’re supposed to be working.”

The shutter clicked. Wide shot, mid-range, close. Always in order. The mimic hadn’t been dead long... If it had, the pink would’ve dulled to gray, just as the flowers blooming from its innards were already starting to wilt. Up close, I noticed each petal was a thin membrane, and each stalk made of stiff cartilage. Beautiful, in a sinister way.

“I am also working, Doctor,” Isabel said behind me..

“You’re distracting him,” Qīng Ní snapped back.

“Not really,” I mumbled, adjusting the lens. “There’s not much to this scene. It’s pretty straightforward. Same MO as the others: guy swoops in, snatches a mimic just before it kills someone, and eats it on the spot.”

“Sawney Beane...” Isabel’s voice was almost gleeful, her stoic façade cracking for a moment.

“We are NOT calling him that,” I rebutted.

“I still like Tarrare,” Qīng Ní said, tracing blood patterns on the walls with little interest.

“Still dumb.”

“Come on, it’s a good name. Tarrare ate everything. This guy eats everything.”

Isabel leaned over my shoulder. “Sawney Beane ate people. Just like this guy.”

“All mimics eat people, you idi—who even is Sawney Beane?!”

“It’s a guy that ate people,” Isabel answered immediately. “He had a clan. Eight sons, six daughters. Those kids had eighteen sons and fourteen daughters. Forty-five members in total. They hunted together, lived in a cave.”

“Uh-huh,” I replied groggily, still snapping photos.

“The king led a search party of four hundred men and bloodhounds. Eventually tracked them down and slaughtered them.”

Isabel’s lips twitched in a faint smile only you could see.

“That’s me. I’m the four hundred men. You’re the bloodhound.”

I turned my head, caught off guard by her expression. “How do you even know this?”

“The internet,” she replied simply.

The wounds on the body weren’t the work of any weapon I could name. He looked mauled, torn apart by something with teeth or claws. Bone jutted into the air, pale against the pink smear of blood. His face was completely gone, obliterated. There was no way to identify him. Mimics couldn’t replicate fingerprints, and without a face there was nothing left to anchor him to who he had been before ending up inside out on a dirty supermarket floor.

“So?” Isabel asked, flat as ever.

“Well,” I said, lowering the camera, “he’s dead.”

“Wow, really?”

“There’s not really anything left to be identified. We’ll have to send him to Laurent and let him figure out what to do with the body. It’s still pink—he’ll manage.”

Qīng Ní crouched low, eyes scanning the shattered glass glittering across the tiles. She muttered something under her breath.

“...could it...?”

“You found something?” I asked.

“There’s blood here.”

“Yeah, there’s a whole dead guy on the floor. I’d assume—”

“Red.”

Your heart jolted into your throat.

“Red blood? A human’s?” Isabel leaned in.

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Qīng Ní’s hands dove into the deep pockets of her white coat. She pulled out a nylon swab and carefully collected the droplet into a plastic vial. In her mind, the sight of human blood was worse than a mimic turned inside out. Mimics were one thing, but if a human died or was wounded here it would make our job even that bigger of a nightmare.

“That’s good, right?” Isabel asked.

“I don’t know,” Qīng Ní replied. “Depends on what Marc finds in this guy’s stomach when we open him back at central. It’ll either be a tragedy... or a clue to finding Tarrare.”

“*Sawney Beane*,” Isabel corrected with relish.

I sighed. “Doctor.”

“Yes?”

“I think you should get that sample back right away. Isa and I will handle what’s left.”

“No,” Isabel shot instantly. “*You’re* doing that.”



“Yeah, right. Go talk to the police. They’re probably up front with the witness.”

“I’m not talking to the pigs.”

“They’ll trust a Gray Coat before they even look at me.”

“It’s literally your job,” she replied.

“You know what you sound like right now? A whining little bitch,” I poked at her, aiming to hurt her ego.

“Your words have no effect on me,” Isabel said with mock solemnity. “Your soul is evil and filled with the blackest of bile.”

“You lazy sack of shit.”

“I’ll do it if you buy me lunch.”

“You make eight times my salary.”

“Yeah.”

“*Yeah?*”

“I spent it.” She deadpanned. “But I want a burger. You buy me a burger; I’ll talk to the pigs.”

“Fuck you.”

Isa shrugged. “No lunch, no *trabajo*. Sorry, buddy.”

She turned on her heel.

“Where are you going?!”

“Getting something to eat. Call me when you’re done.”

Qīng Ní looked at me, disappointment clear in her eyes. Not at me, not really—at her life, at every choice she had ever made that led her to this moment.

“I’ll take care of it,” I muttered, defeated.

“You know,” she said, patting my shoulder, “after a year I thought you’d be used to her by now.”

“She’s warming up to me.”

She had a distant look in her eyes, only for a brief moment.

“You handle the witness, I’ll talk to the police on the way out.”

“Laurent and... *her*... are already on their way to pick up the mimic.”

Our witness was a young security guard—seventeen, maybe eighteen. About the age of my little sister. He was still trembling when we found him, curled up in a fetal position behind the wine section, his uniform damp with sweat. There was a strange uneasiness in seeing someone so young caught up in this, but people do what they have to do to earn a living, I guess.

“Y-you don’t understand,” he stammered, voice cracking. “I was just doing my patrol, yeah? Nothing too crazy, the usual shite.”

I noted down his words on my clipboard as he went on.

“That’s when I saw him, a blonde bloke. Executive-looking bastard just... walking in through the door.”

My pen scratched the page.

“I was shitting bricks by this point, right? How the hell did he even open the locked automatic doors? That’s not something you can just do! I had my lightning ready, yeah? I was damn ready to shoot his head clean off. But then he just... smiled at me.”

“Uh-huh,” I muttered.

“I radio’d corporate. They said he was supposed to be there. Last I saw, he went into the butcher’s. I’m guessing the dead guy got him before that... other bloke showed up.”

A voice behind me made me jolt.

“Another bloke?” Isa asked casually.

“WHERE the hell did you come from?!” I barked.

She shrugged, holding up a box of Puff’s Puffs cereal, adorned by a bald leprechaun mascot. The box read something about a charity for alopecia, it was difficult to make out.

“I found a snack. Want some?”

The security guard’s hand twitched. “I do—”

“I didn’t ask you,” she cut in, ripping the box open.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Can you continue your testimony?” I asked, forcing myself back to focus. “Tell me about this ‘other bloke.’”

The guard swallowed hard. “The mimic showed up right after the suit came in. Looked like a regular man. Nuthin fancy. But the hairs on the back of my neck stood up like needles, yeah? It was like seeing a bear on a hike—you *know* you shouldn’t even look at him.”

His voice faltered, trembling. “He went into the butcher’s after the suit. Stayed there an hour or two. And then... it came out. That face, it wasn’t like a person. The eyes were hollow, and the skin was smooth, like a baby’s arse.”

“Take your time,” I said softly.

“He knew exactly where I was. Came at me faster than a lambo. I thought I was done for. But then, then it happened. A bloody harpoon, out of nowhere. **Pink**. It slammed into him and dragged the bastard across the store. And then...” His voice dipped into awe. “Then in walks this... ***incredible fucking boy***. Looking at the mimic was like standing in front of a bear, but looking at this guy? It was like staring into the ocean. You couldn’t do anything, you knew you were at this bloke’s mercy.”

Isa leaned in, snatching my clipboard from my hands, cereal tucked under her arm. “Go on,” she urged.

“He had pants, right? He looked like a man, but his torso... it was stone. Old, cracked stone. At the joints, it broke, and underneath... black tentacles. His hands were made of them.”

“Stone... could be something similar to harlequin ichthyosis...” I said, scratching my chin.

“Maybe,” Isa mumbled under her breath.

“No man, I’m telling you he was like a STATUE! The stone broke at all of his joints, and—and—FUCK, I’m getting shivers just remembering. That’s what the rope was tied to, yeah? The harpoon was bound to his goddamn insides! The rope was those same black tentacles writhing all around inside him!”

Isa’s pen flew across the page. “And his face?” she pressed.

The boy’s legs shook violently. “I—I don’t know, he didn’t have one. Just a ball of the same tendrils. Black, the blackest goddamn thing I’ve ever seen. Looked like... hair. Long, flowing hair, like a girl’s.”

“Sephiroth... cool,” Isa whispered, sketching faster. “Yes... yes.” She turned the board. The drawing was startlingly close to the real thing. “Did he look like this?”

The guard stared, eyes wide. “There’s something missing... ah—his chest. In his chest, there was this... opening.”

“He had two hearts, overlapping over the other. They were beating out of rhythm, protruding out the stone.”

Isa paused. “Two hearts... that’s... not normal.”

She turned to me. “I’ve dealt with more mimics than I can count but I’ve never met one with two hearts.”

“Is that bad?” I asked.

“I mean, probably?” She looked at her sketch, drawing the lines of two hearts, one above the other. “Still... It’s such a cool appearance for one to take...”

“Wait, really? He’s cool?”

“He does sound cool. The harpoon, the tentacles. Imagine him using them to ensnare people.”

“Did you see anything, ‘bloke’?”

The guard shook his head. “No, after he hit the dead guy with his harpoon I just hauled ass outta there. And the cameras—”

“There are cameras?” I interrupted.

“Y-yeah, but... company policy. I can’t open the footage without management approval. Even if my neck’s on the line.”

“There’s a dead man in your store,” I said flatly.

“Mimic,” Isabel corrected, chewing through fistfuls of cereal.

“There’s a dead mimic in your store,” I said flatly.

He just kept trembling. “I’m sorry...”

Isa sighed, setting down the cereal. Then, without warning, she wrapped the boy in her arms. “There, there. You’re safe now.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll find this guy, okay?”

The shaking eased. He nodded, muttering thanks.

“Move your butt, Marc,” Isa said, scooping up her cereal. “We missed something.”

“But we—”

“There’s *SOMETHING* we *MISSED*, follow me.”

We walked until the guard was out of sight. Isa shook the box with a small smile. “When I was little, they’d put these... little prizes in cereal boxes.”

“Crappy plastic toys, cardboard cards... Wanna see what’s in this one?”

“Enlighten me,” I said dryly.

She plunged her hand inside, then yanked free a ring of keys labeled SECURITY. “Ta-da! Keys!”

I stared. “You—?”

“You’re welcome,” she sang. “Now let’s go find that security footage.” She skipped ahead, laughing. “I’m telling you, Marc—we’re close. This isn’t Sawney Beane... No, no... this is Ahab... We got a Captain Ahab!”

It wasn’t a bad name.

The supermarket’s security office was a cramped little box, barely enough space for two people to squeeze inside without brushing shoulders. It was stripped-down to the essentials, if you could even call them that, just an ancient desktop tower hooked up to a dust-caked monitor. The keyboard looked like it hadn’t been touched in years, each key buried under a layer of gray grime.

“So much for security,” I muttered, pulling my clipboard closer to my chest as Isa crouched behind the old machine.

She blew at the cables, squinting like she was working a puzzle. “This thing is probably older than I am.”

“You think it’ll even turn on?”

Her fingers flipped the switch on and off in quick succession. The box gave nothing but silence.

“It’s not,” she said with a sigh. “But maybe I can...”

A faint zapping noise cracked from behind the monitor. Suddenly, with a reluctant whir, the machine buzzed to life. The screen flickered into a menu, its display split into labeled sections—produce, dairy, bakery, deli, frozen foods, household cleaning, *meat*...

Every single window was black. Every camera, offline.

“You’re kidding,” Isa groaned, fingers dancing across the keyboard. “No! No, no, no!” She rewound the timeline back to the night before. Still nothing. Not even a glitch of static. It was as if the cameras had never been hooked up at all.

“Looks like a dead end,” I said, leaning back against the wall.

“This sucks,” she muttered, frustrated. “I wanted to see the Ahab.”

Then came a sound. A dry, rattling cough from the computer’s speakers.

Isa’s head snapped toward it. “Huh?”

An audio feed crackled through the “meat” channel. A man’s voice, raw with panic, pleaded in broken bursts of static.



“—*please don’t—stop... stop, don’t hurt me.*”

“*I can’t—*”

“—*sto—STOP!*”

The howling that followed cut sharp through the distortion. Isa bent forward, ear nearly against the monitor, trying to catch every detail.

“But our guy was in the dairy section, wasn’t he?” she whispered.  
“Why is the audio coming from *meat*?”

She scrubbed further along the tape. Out of the static came another noise. Barely audible—just the faint, steady rhythm of breathing. Not mimic, a human’s.

“Meat...” she breathed. “The butcher?”

“Didn’t the guard say there was a guy that came before the mimic?!” I asked, the words tumbling out.

“The suit,” she shuddered, eyes wide and locked to mine. “The suit is still in there.”

She bolted out of the room before I had time to breathe, and I had no choice but to follow. We ran as if the floor itself was burning coals, and my chest burned just the same. Grey Coats are the MTRL’s enforcers, stronger, faster, sharper than anyone else. There was no chance in hell that “Marc Cercel” could keep pace with our precinct’s Grey Coat. But if I lost sight of her now, I’d lose my shot at the truth. So I ran. Me—a forensics nobody—matching the speed of a Grey Coat. On camera, it would’ve looked ridiculous.

The aisles blurred until a giant red sign cut through the sprint: MEAT. Below it, a display case of neatly arranged cuts, the kind the butchers would hand out to waiting customers.

“MEAT!” I barked.

Isabel didn’t even hesitate. She vaulted the counter in one smooth leap, diving into the backroom without looking back.

“YOU—?!” I shouted after her, skidding to the side and taking the access door instead.

The moment I stepped inside, the smell hit—sickly, iron-heavy, like rust and wet steel. Flesh. Blood. The kind of scent that crawls into your lungs and stays there. The lights were off. The dark pressed down on us.

“MTRL!” Isabel’s voice cracked through the void. “WE’RE HERE TO HELP!”

Silence answered.

“AGH! I can’t see a thing!” she hissed.

I dug into my coat and pulled out a flashlight, its beam slicing the dark. It caught Isabel’s face—frustrated, then relieved.

“Oh, of course you have one of those.” She reached for it. “Can I—?”

“No,” I said. “I’ll light the way. You stand ready if there’s a mimic around. There shouldn’t be, but—”

“—No, good idea.” She squared her shoulders. “Lead on.”

We pushed forward. No blood trail, no obvious struggle, no smoking-gun clue screaming *look at me*. Still... something was wrong. That prickling at the back of the neck, the instinct to run, to leave. I glanced back. Even Isabel, Gray Coat Isabel, wore unease plain on her face.

“We can’t afford more people dying, Marc,” she said quietly. “If we do, Precinct Seventeen gets shut down. Some other company takes over, and we’re done. So if things get bad... run. Whatever’s in here—Ahab or otherwise—I can handle it. Just run, and don’t—”

“Wait,” I cut her off. “Do you see that?”

A massive metal door loomed in front of us.

“This is...” Isabel stepped closer. “The entrance to something.”

“A cold room,” I said. “A walk-in freezer. You think he’s in there?”

She exhaled, steadying herself. “There’s nowhere else to look, is there?”

Her hand wrapped around the handle. She braced.

“Okay... Are you ready?”

I didn’t have time to answer before she pulled the door open.



ROWS UPON ROWS OF BODIES HUNG FROM HOOKS ON THE CEILING  
AND THEIR INSIDES DROOPED FROM THEIR GAPING CHEST  
AND THEIR GUTS GLISTENED BLUE UNDER THE COLD ROOM'S WHITE LIGHT  
AND THEIR LUNGS SAT ON THE FLOOR LIKE DEFLATED BALLOONS  
THERE WAS NO BLOOD IN THEIR BODIES LEFT TO SPILL.  
BECAUSE THEIR HEARTS CEASED TO BEAT A LONG, LONG TIME AGO  
YOU COULD HEAR THE GRAY COAT VOMIT AT THE SIGHT  
YOU COULD FEEL THE METALLIC SMELL CREEPING ITS WAY INTO YOUR HEAD  
YOU COULD SEE HIS FACE  
IN THE BACK OF THE ROOM SAT A DYING MAN  
BLONDE LIKE THE SUN  
PALER THAN THE MOON  
CLUTCHING HIS INSIDES IN HIS HANDS  
AND HIS EYES WERE BOILING WITH DESPERATION  
AND HIS HEART WAS BEATING SLOWLY  
AND  
YOU COULD FEEL YOUR MOUTH WATER AT THE SIGHT  
COULDN'T YOU?

*Marc.*

# PINK: *RAZZMATAZZ*

EPIISODE 1: THE VIOLATOR

That same nurse, every single week. Her voice was clipped, practiced, and completely monotone. “I need you to understand that Mr. Bradley can't take visitors.”

“Yeah,” you shot back, heat already rising in your chest, “and I need you to understand that Alan Bradley is the only person that knows what happened in that cold room! He's the only witness we have!”

“He's still unresponsive,” she said sharply. “Do you even know what he went through?”

“I—I do,” you stammered. “I was the one that found him...?”

“Then you should know that he is in no state to speak with anyone. MTRL or otherwise.”

“But—”

“Have a good day.”

The door slammed shut in your face. You let out a long, weary sigh.

You lowered yourself onto a bench just outside Alan Bradley's hospital room and pulled out your phone. Your thumb hovered a moment before dialing Qīng Ní.

Calling.

Calling.

Still calling.

Finally, her voice crackled through. “Marc. Did you get anything?”

“I got a door slammed in my face, but other than that? No, Nothing.”

“It almost feels like a waste of time coming here,” you grumbled. “Do we really need to do this every week?”

“Yeah.”

Your voice grew with a tinge of frustration. “Can't you send Isa? San? Laurent? Or you?”

“Isabel won't come, you know how she is. And you were the one that saved him, weren't you? I was really surprised—you're quite the doctor.”

“I'm not a doctor anymore.”

“Eh, they can take your license away, but they can't take what you know,” you could vividly hear her shrug over the phone, “Why do you think Isa always sticks to you? She knows you can stitch her back together if things go badly.”

“You know I'm not really licensed to deal with paramedic work, right?”

She laughed for a moment.

“You're not licensed for anything, silly.”

“Anyways, you're free for the rest of the day.”

You blinked. “Wait, really?”



“Yep. We got people from the First Ward on central right now. It's a mess—I think they're actually ripping off Laurent's head.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. Something about us not being capable of handling threats of this precinct's stature.”

“Are they stupid? We just lost half of our personnel with the whale! Did you tell them about the whale?”

“They know about the whale,” she said, defeated.

“That's bullshit. How do they expect us to handle—”

“They're sending some people from the First down here to help us out.”

“Oh god,” you muttered, covering your mouth. “Am I getting fired?”

“Man, you're the one guy I know who does do his work. I wouldn't worry if I was you. I don't think there's anyone really eager to sink their hands into dead mimics.”

“There's Laurent,” you said.

“Yeah, but he already works with us. Don't worry about it. Go do something. Take that cute pink sister of yours for a walk or something.”

“Should I really be wasting time like this right now?”

“Bradley won't talk, will he? There's nothing we can do right now.” Her voice softened, just a little. “Look, I really gotta hang up—we can talk tomorrow, okay?”

“Doctor, I—”

The line went dead.

Two weeks had now passed since the incident at Pete Valentine's Supermarket. What was meant to be another simple case of a devoured mimic had unraveled into a complete mess once word came out about a "human slaughterhouse" in a grocery store. The press always exaggerated, twisting stories and details until the actual truth was buried—but in this case, there really was nothing to exaggerate. If anything, the reality was worse than anything they could come up with.

Thirty-eight dead bodies, ranging in age from nineteen to eighty-nine, had been found hanging in that cold room. Among them was a man by the name of Alan Bradley, heir to the Bradley Business Conglomerate, who had gone missing three weeks before being discovered.

None of us knew how he had ended up in that cold room alive—it was likely that not even he did. But without any other leads, the media had gotten hungry.

“It's such a good story,” they said. It could probably keep them fed for weeks, months if they managed to drag it on. And the testimony from a scared young security guard with a characteristic accent gave them exactly what they needed.

“Violator”—a person who breaks or fails to comply with a rule or formal agreement. A mimic that eats mimics. A mimic that was present the night before thirty-eight unidentified corpses were found in the supermarket.

A violator by the name of Marcel Aleksander Cercel.

Your finger pressed down on the elevator button.

You didn't know what had been at that supermarket—how could you? That night, you had repeated the same routine of the last five hundred and eleven days. There wasn't supposed to be any mistake. You were just meant to eat, that was it. Now your name had been defiled, and every hope of staying hidden was gone forever.

Ahab was a better name anyway.

You waited for a moment, eyes locked on the yellow LEDs of the elevator panel. 08, 07, 06, 05... 04—and the doors slid open.

There was just one person in the elevator.

Pale blonde hair, the lightest shade of blonde you'd ever seen, and her mouth was hidden behind a black face mask. Her eyes lingered on yours for a moment—eyes like the bottom of the sea, endless and dark enough to see your reflection.

“I know you,” you blurted out mindlessly.

The girl's eyes widened for the fraction of a second it took her to recognize the four letters written on your badge—MTRL. You looked down, she looked up. You looked at your name tag, she looked at your face. Back and forth, like a ping-pong match.

She threw herself at the door-close button, mashing it repeatedly and desperately. The doors began closing—**don't just stand there, DO SOMETHING!**

“W-WAIT!”

Your arm slammed between the doors. It wasn't exactly painful, but it wasn't comfortable either—a solid four on the list of experiences you'd rather never go through again.

“Agh... What the hell is wrong with you?” you said, waving your arm around to ease the pain as you stepped into the elevator.

The girl raised her hands, laughing nervously. “Haha, w-what are you talking about?”

You stared at her for a moment.

“You slammed my arm with the door...?”

She stammered.

“T-T-the d-dore?”

“Pssht, no, no dude, I just, I awhen, wehan, heah—yeah?”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“YEah!”

Her face, what you could see of it above the mask, had turned bright red.

“I'm sorry,” you said gently, clicking the button for the ground floor. “I just thought I'd seen you somewhere before.”

The girl seemed to relax a little. “You're not gonna, like, arrest me?”

The doors slid closed.

And you burst into laughter.

“ARREST YOU?!”

“You,” you chuckled, “who do you think I am?!”

“THE DOOR OPENED AND YOU WERE LIKE,” she mimicked your voice in an overexaggerated manner, “**I know you.**”

“You have an MTRL badge, I-I thought you were gonna start slicing my arm open or something!”

“HAHA, NO!” You tried to compose yourself. “I’m just some guy from forensics—I’m not gonna fucking arrest you. I just... I think I’ve seen you before?”

Her shoulders slumped, and all the tension seemed to evaporate from her voice.

“So is that what the black coat means?”

“What? No, this is *designer*,” you said with mock pride..

“The pay must be good then, huh?”

“Ehhhh... No, not really. Not even good enough for them to give me a coat of my own..”

She grinned behind her mask. “So that's what the *designer* is for?”

“Oh, shut up.”

Her gloved hand reached out to touch the hem of your coat, running her finger along the sutures.

“No, I’m serious, it does look pretty nice.”

She had crashed through the wall of your personal space without warning. *Your heart started beating slightly faster than usual.*

“Uh, yeah, I—It was a gift from my sister,” you started, “I don’t know how but she got in contact with the lady that makes the coats for the MTRL and commissioned this one for me.”

“I have no idea where she got the money to buy it and honestly I don’t think I should know, for my own mental health.”

“Yeah I’d do that if I was you,” she nodded.

“I’m a big fan, the whole... ribcage thing it has going on, the way it just *cuts* where the coat opens—it almost looks like you got a hole in your chest.”

Her face, now closer, looked up, and your eyes met hers.

“You don’t have one, do you?”

“I don’t have a hole in my chest,” you reassured her, poking your finger at where your heart would be.

Looking at the girl up close, you noticed something dangling below her head like a pendulum—a camera.

“Is that a Panasonic?”

She seemed proud that you’d noticed. “It is! Panasonic Lumix DMC-GX80,” she exclaimed. “It’s done me right these last few years... I think she’s in her last days, though.”

“You’re a photographer?” You asked.

“Nope, journalist.”

Her eyes lit up, and a smile crept across her face—what you could see of it above the mask. She had just realized that the man in front of her, an MTRL employee clearly dissatisfied with his place in the world, was a goldmine of information.

"DO YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE VIOLATOR CASE?!"

You gave her an apologetic smile.

“No way.”

With a ding, the elevator doors slid open.

The lobby stretched out before you like a memory half remembered. Polished floors that caught fluorescent light in predictable patterns, walls painted in the same inoffensive beige that wasn't quite cream, but wasn't quite tan either. The whisper of automatic doors, the distant chime of elevators, the rustle of magazines being turned by people who weren't really reading them.

And the smell—you knew it so well you already recognized it before it entered your nostrils. That antiseptic cocktail of disinfectant and something floral trying too hard to mask what’s underneath. It was the same smell from the dentist's office when you were eight, from the clinic where you’d gotten your physical for university—and the same smell you faced everyday before it all fell apart.

It was sterile in every sense—clean, empty... lifeless. This was a home you were never meant to return to.

You stepped out of the elevator, and she followed behind you.

“Listen, please just hear me out,” she begged, her voice echoing slightly in the vast lobby. “I’ve been looking EVERYWHERE for anything regarding this case—you’re an actual miracle!”

“Don’t you say,” you muttered, not bothering to look back at her.

“I DO say, everything about this case other than the boy’s testimony has been swept under the rug!”

She reached into the inside pocket of her jacket, pulling out a small notebook.

“September Fourth—thirty-eight dead bodies are found at a Pete Valentine’s cold room by an MTRL Gray Coat and...” She paused for a moment, consulting her notes. “A forensics specialist?”

Her voice pitched higher with excitement. “FORENSICS—IS THAT YOU?!”

“No,” you lied as easily as you breathed.

“YOU ARE SUCH A LIAR!” she exclaimed, her notebook nearly slipping from her grip. “I’ve read the records—there’s just ONE person in forensics on the 17th Precinct!”

“How do you know I’m on the 17th?”



She pointed at your chest with a triumphant smile. “It’s on your badge.”

There it was—Marcel A. Cercel, 17th Precinct Forensics Specialist—you goddamn **MORON**.

“Oh, this thing,” you grinned, attempting to salvage what remained of your cover. “It’s not mine. I stole it when I killed Marc and ate him. Because, you know, I’m the Violator”.

She sighed, her shoulders sagging with exasperation. “Do you treat every girl that tries to talk to you like this? Are you one of those guys?”

“Nope, just you, my favorite little reporter.”

Before you could take another step, she rushed in front of you, arms spread wide, her face flushed red.

“Let’s make a deal.” Her voice carried a note of reluctant determination that told you she wasn’t going to move out of the way until you agreed to her terms.

“A deal? There’s nothing you can do to—”

She interrupted.

“I have money.”

You swallowed.

“...and that’s what happened,” you explained, burger in hand.

She sat across from you lost in thought, spinning the pen in her hand absently. “So you genuinely just... found it? Just like that?”

That intoxicating blend of char-grilled meat, melted cheese, and french fry oil that probably should have disgusted your empty stomach but instead made your knees weak wafted through the air. Everything was aggressively bright: red plastic booths that squeaked when you shifted, yellow menu boards with pictures so vivid they looked like food porn, and teenagers in paper hats moving with the kind of efficient chaos you'd forgotten existed outside a crime scene. The sizzle from the grill sounded like a symphony after weeks of silence. Even the tinny pop music felt like a celebration after weeks of chasing ghosts.

Double cheeseburger. Bacon deluxe.

"Yeah, we were investigating a case that had nothing to do with the bodies in the cold room," you continued, taking another bite. "The "Violator" character came to be when the media—you—merged testimony from the original case with the dead people we found."

"So you're saying the Violator doesn't exist?"

Her big, beady eyes fixed on you, expecting an answer.

"No, I didn't say that, someone had to put those guys in there—we just don't know exactly who or what yet."

You looked down at the burger, grease pooling on the wrapper. "The only lead we have right now is Alan Bradley—and he's not cooperating with me, *at all*."

Her head perked up, like that of a dog raising its ears at the sound of the word "walk." You waited for her answer, taking a sip from your drink.

"I spoke to him."

Your cherry-flavored drink is immediately sprayed through your nostrils. “WHAT?!”

“Yeah I kind of climbed through his window from the floor above when no one was looking,” she said, as if the act was completely normal. “He was pretty nice all things considered.”

Your mouth hung open like an idiot's. Two weeks—two weeks of your life you'd never get back, completely circumvented by this girl with a notebook and apparently zero regard for personal safety.

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not,” she sang, flaunting her notebook like a prize. “I made him talk, it’s surprisingly easy to question a man with open wounds.”

“You need... minimal effort, to get them to speak.”

You lunged forward, trying to rip the notebook from her hand, but she whipped it away just in time.

“Nope, no—you’re not getting this info for free.”

“Come on.”

“No, we said deal, we’re making a deal,” she affirmed, clutching the notebook to her chest.

Your eyes locked onto one another's across the sticky table. Your cloudy blue sky dancing with the endless depths of hers under the restaurant’s fluorescent lights.

“I’m chasing a story bigger than the Violator. WAY bigger,” she declared, fire burning in her words. The ambient noise of the restaurant seemed to fade around her intensity. “So I tell you what—I help you get your Violator. I tell you all I know, every single bit of information I get will go straight to you.”

She leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping to something more intimate.

“All I ask is the same from you.”

She stretched her hand above the table, palm open, waiting.

“So, what do you say? How about you and I partner up?”

With her hand stretched out, you could see a glimpse of skin between the glove and jacket. It was scarred—some areas smooth as melted wax, others puckered and ridged where the skin had contracted during healing. Your spine shivered at the sight, questions forming that you knew better than to ask.

But that was none of your business.

“I give you all of me, and I get all of you?” you asked, your voice quieter now.

You knew she was being honest. Something in her eyes, in the way she held herself, told you this wasn't just another reporter looking for a scoop. There was something else going on here, something that you just couldn't just pick up on yet, something that you simply couldn't miss out on.

“Yes,” she promised.

You exhaled slowly, shaking your head at the absurdity of it all. Here you were, about to partner with a woman that breaks into hospital rooms through windows and somehow makes the most loathsome of witnesses talk.

If you missed this chance, you'd regret it for the rest of your life.

"Sure, why the hell not."

Your hands met one another for the first time. Her grip was firm, warmer than you'd expected. And in this moment, you realized that for the first time, whatever came next—there was no going back to chasing ghosts alone.

"You're cold," she blurted out, still holding your hand.

You let out a short, dry chuckle that carried more truth than humor. "Yeah, I've been told."

She let go of your hand, and from below the table she withdrew a cracked phone with an old, yellowed clear case. Your phone. Your eyes widened as you frantically patted every single one of your pockets, and to your absolute shock, it was missing.

"When did you—?!"

She smiled smugly, clearly enjoying your bewilderment. "Don't worry about it."

She unlocked the phone without much struggle, like she was accustomed to the motions of... stealing and unlocking someone's phone. Her fingers moved with practiced efficiency across the screen, fingernails

clicking against the glass in a rhythmic pattern that let you know this wasn't her first time pulling this particular trick.

“And... there.”

She turned the phone to face you, and “Ardorblossom” appeared on your contacts list, written in neat letters right above her phone number.

“*Ardor.*”

“That’s me,” she said proudly, sliding the phone back across the sticky table.

“That is not your name.”

“It’s a pen name.”

“Well yeah but you know my name is Marc.” You gestured at yourself, still somewhat incredulous at her audacity.

You could see her holding back laughter beneath the mask, her eyes crinkling with barely contained amusement. “Everyone knows your name is Marc, dummy, you’re flaunting it around with that badge of yours.”

“It’s hard, though.”

“Yeah, hard to look at,” she joked, cutting you off with perfect timing.

Ardor's attention shifted to the restaurant's window, where the white lights inside began to compete with the warm orange glow filtering through the glass. The sky had transformed as the sun started its descent toward the horizon, painting everything in shades of amber and gold.

“It’s getting late, isn’t it? Mimics will come out and prowl soon,” she said, her voice taking on a more serious tone.

*If only she knew.*

“I’m leaving, Marc.” She gathered her notebook and pen, stuffing them back into her jacket with the same efficiency she’d shown with everything else.

She hesitated for a moment, then smiled—you could tell even through the mask by the way her eyes softened.

“Well, um... bye.”

She turned and started walking away, her footsteps barely audible over the continued chaos of the restaurant. But with each step she took toward the door, a gnawing feeling clawed at your chest, growing more insistent with every second. *Say something. If you don't do something now, regret will kill you.*

You couldn't bring yourself to move, paralyzed by years of keeping people at arm's length, of building walls that—

**GET UP**

“ARDOR!” you called out, voice louder than intended.

She stopped mid-stride and turned around, clearly startled by the urgency in your voice.

“Let’s do this again later... with a plan,” you said, the words rushing out like water from a broken fountain, clumsy and desperate and more honest than you’d intended.

Her eyes crinkled with what you were finally learning to recognize as a smile beneath her mask.

“Fine by me.”

Everyday the drive home took you deeper into the city’s concrete arteries. Through the streets that had already fallen dormant and let the city become what it really was—a ghost town. Downtown was a different place once the sun disappeared and night began—there were no twenty-four hour convenience stores, no late-night diners serving coffee to insomniacs, no pedestrians hurrying along the sidewalks as the clock went a quarter past midnight. There was nothing but the empty streets of Mount Royal’s Seventh Ward—Glatteis.

Your building stood wedged between a shuddered laundromat and an old diner that was sadly boarded up before you even arrived. Seven stories of weathered brick and fire escape that zigzagged up the side of the building like scars. Most windows were dark already, it was late at night, people were sleeping. Our home was the kind of place where the elevator worked half the time and the landlord’s definition of “fixing” something usually involved duct tape and crossed fingers, but at least the electrical systems had been updated to the MTRL’s standards—high-voltage perimeter fencing, emergency shock panels in every hallway, and enough backup power to keep the grid running all night.

You parked in a narrow alley behind the building, squeezing behind a rusted Honda and someone’s motorcycle. The back entrance had been retrofitted with the same heavy security as the front—reinforced steel,



electronic locks, and a warning sign about the curfew violations posted in three different languages.

Your apartment was on the fourth floor, high enough to feel relatively secure but low enough that you could still make it down quickly if the building's power grid were to fail. The hallway to your apartment was dark, and lingered with an old carpet smell. Red lights flashed in intervals every few feet, telling you that the building's security system was, in fact, online.

You turned the key as quietly as you possibly could, but the electronic lock always beeped softly once the door opened. The apartment greeted you with the soft, steady rhythm of someone else's breathing. Julia was curled up on the couch that doubled as her bed—seventeen years old and still somehow looking like that snot nosed little shit from all those years ago. Her peach-colored hair spilled across the armrest, and one arm dangled toward the floor where her physics textbook laid open, a cyan highlighter still clutched in her sleeping fingers.

The television played quietly in the background, cycling through the mandatory evening broadcasts. An MTRL infographic filled the screen in bold, clinical text against a white background:

*Don't open your doors to anyone after the sun goes down. Mimics die when exposed to electricity, and... Those that die, stay dead. Whoever says they are the person you loved—are no longer that person.*

*Just an imitation.*

You moved carefully through the small apartment, avoiding stepping on anything that could wake Julia up. Your home wasn't much, maybe your

Quebrada apartment was even bigger than this—a cramped living room that served as Julia's bedroom, a kitchenette with barely enough counter space for two plates, and your bedroom that was just large enough for a bed and a dresser. But the power never went out, and Julia did her best to make this shithole feel like home—plants on windowstills, photographs taped to the fridge, and her textbooks, scattered around every surface you could find.

In the hall closet—really just a narrow space between the bathroom and your bedroom—you found the thick knitted blanket you didn't really know the origin of. The one Julia claimed she didn't like but always seemed to gravitate toward when things went sour. You draped it gently over her shoulders, tucking the edges around her so she'd stay warm once she woke up tomorrow.

In the kitchenette, you opened the small refrigerator and stared at its contents: packaged meals, a carton of powdered milk Julia had mixed fresh this morning, and a six-pack of beer with two missing.

Through your room's window, you could see into the apartments across the narrow courtyard. Most were completely dark, save for the occasional flicker of the television or the brief glow of a smartphone's screen. Their lives were cautious, like small animals hiding from a predator. A woman moving carefully through her dimly lit kitchen, an old man sitting alert in front of his television as the same MTRL broadcasts played, someone's cat perched tensely on a windowsill, ears pricked for the voice of its owner that it lost many moons ago...

You stood for a moment, letting your MTRL badge press warm against the sheets. For a second the room was only the bed, the mirror, and the sour, humming light overhead.

You met your own face in the glass. The man who looked back had once been striking—sharp cheekbones, cloudy blue eyes, a rugged charm that had opened doors a long, long time ago. That history sat in the lines at the corners of his eyes, in the stubborn set of his jaw.

It didn't matter.

Your thumb dug into the soft skin beneath your jaw. You smiled at yourself—at the slick, **glistening rivulet of blood** that traced a hot line down your chest. Your fingers slid under flesh that no longer felt like yours, found release on edges that resisted and then gave.

You pulled.

The skin tore. Marc's face came away in a wet, horrible peel, revealing **raw, angry tissue** beneath. The exposed flesh writhed, unraveling into black, furious tentacles that coiled around your skull like bandages soaked in blood.

You rose as the rest of your skin started to harden. Every joint cracked under the force of it; beneath the cracking, the same dark tendrils writhed and flexed. They moved with you—thinking, hungry, patient.

You crossed to the window and pushed it open. Cold smog licked at your face; the city's acrid breath filled your lungs and tasted of iron and diesel. Night wrapped the streets below in a ragged cloak, and the beasts that hunted in it howled in answer.

Your hearts—two or three, it didn't matter—kept the same rhythm.

“Finally,” Paloma whispered at your shoulder.

“I was getting hungry.”

The harpoon hung from your wrist.

Let it puncture their flesh.

Your boot slammed on the window frame.

Let us become tainted with **their viscera**.

Until the day we find a way to become free of this affliction.

We hunt.

S1E2: THE MORNING AFTER

Cold crawled up the soles of her bare feet against the steel floor of the transport.

The truck had been built to move twenty people, all cramped into a tight, unbreachable box. Tonight the box was empty except for a single restraint chair bolted to the center of the floor. In its thick, black-painted frame sat one person: a girl no older than fourteen, watched on all sides by armed guards.

One of them watched her with more interest than the rest.

“You know, I’ve heard rumors about you,” the man said, voice low and slow, tasting each syllable.

“Rumors about this... girl,” he went on, eyes dragging over her. “A girl they pulled out from the deepest pit of hell. A girl that has led all of her retainers to their grave, one that can see your death the moment you shake hands... It was a little hard to believe, I’m not gonna lie to you.”

He clicked his tongue, folding his hands on his knee as if settling in to hear a story. “I’m not a man of rumors. I’m a person of understanding. Of facts. Yet here she is. The girl from hell, right before my eyes. The Fourth Ward’s Bloody Mary.”

He laughed softly, then added with a grin, “That green hair of yours, that red, burning gaze... you really are a sight to behold, like a

goddamn lionfish in the shape of a person. So—what do you think?  
Reckon I'll die tonight?"

She sat as still as the chair would hold her, the deepest contempt she could muster pressed into the narrow line of her mouth. The other men shifted, trading glances that were mostly amusement and only a little unease.

"What, don't wanna play along?" he prodded.

"That's fine by me," he said, piling on a theatrical sigh. "It's a long, lonesome road up ahead. We have time."

She replied with a whisper, close and cold. "Do you really want to know?"

He smirked. "What's that?"

"Do you really want to know what's gonna happen to you tonight?"

"I can tell you, if you want."

The guard chuckled, loud enough to make the others look his way. "Hear that, boys? I'm getting my divination done!"

"Come closer. I need to whisper in your ear."

An amused smile creased the man's face as he leaned in. "Closer?"

"Just a little closer..." she said.

He leaned until their faces were almost touching. In the same instant, she threw herself forward and bit into the lobe of his ear. He jerked back, a raw yelp tearing out of him.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!” he shouted.

She laughed—sharp, delighted, unrepentant. “GHAHAHA! Serves you right, you wastoid!”

The guard’s fist rose automatically. He swung, all heat and reflex, but another hand clamped his arm.

“Are you an idiot?!” the fresh voice snapped. He was a different kind of guard—stern, religious: a stole hung over his shoulders above a bulletproof vest. “Our job is making sure she gets there in one piece!”

The bitten man pressed his hand to his ear, blood darkening his palm. “She fucking bit me—my ear is bleeding!”

The serious guard's eyes flashed. “Yeah, and I’ll make sure it’s not the only place you’re bleeding out from if you keep your funny shit.” He pointed at the girl. “And you—don’t pull any funny shit like that either.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh come on, he was being a total dipstick. He deserved that.”

The serious guard moved to the reinforced partition that separated the holding cell from the driver’s cabin. He rapped on the small, armored window and the driver slid it open.



“What’s with all the ruckus back there?” the driver called.

“Oh, you know—just Ramirez,” the guard said dryly.

Beyond the truck’s high beams the highway stretched like a black ribbon swallowed by night. The desert beyond offered no light, only an ink-dark horizon and the keen, constant hum of the engine.

“Plenty of road till we get to the Seventh, huh?” the serious guard said.

“I still have no idea why the hell they’re making us pick this kid from the—y’know—the super secret death lab, just to make us drop her in the middle of the Seventh,” the driver answered.

“Isn’t that weird, Jäger?” he asked.

Jäger sighed, looking past the tiny window to the road. “We’ll get paid, won’t we?”

“We’ll get paid.”

“Big sum, too. Let’s go drinking after the job’s done. I heard alcohol’s good and cheap on the Seventh.”

But, something in the girl’s demeanor changed, Mari stared into the dark of the container and muttered to herself, words tangled with worry, like she was stuck in an argument with herself.

“The machine... in the walls...”

Jäger frowned. “What was that?”

For a moment a thin flicker of concern crossed her face, like sunlight on a sudden precipice. “Eighteen...?” she whispered, then looked up. Blood seeped beneath the bandages on her forehead.

“The... Black... Parade?” she said, voice trembling. “But they... what... what should I do...”

Her eyes locked to his. “Jäger?”

Jäger’s breath shook. The sound of his name in her mouth made him uneasy—there was a primal fear uncoiling behind the girl’s eyes.

“No... no, no, no, NO.” Her pupils flared, taking on a wicked, almost red sheen. Chains rattled when she pulled against the restraints.

“YOU NEED TO LISTEN TO ME!” she shouted. “YOU’RE ALL GOING TO DIE!”

Ramirez scoffed. “Think I’m falling for that bullshit again? Are you an idiot?!”

*“Dude, we’re all going to die,”* Ramirez mocked Mari.

“LET ME TELL YOU SOMETHING! PLEASE, PLEASE—LISTEN TO ME! DON’T STOP THE—” Her voice broke with urgency.

The driver’s face tightened as he glanced back. “Get your shit together in there—you’re distracting me.” His eyes snapped back to the road. Then, from the dark ahead, a figure stumbled into the twin cones

of the headlights. A woman, clothes torn and blood clinging to fabric like torrents of rain.

She ran, eyes wide, limbs flailing—like a deer in the headlights. The truck had no time. The driver swore, the wheel turned, but the highway offered no mercy.

The sickening sound of impact filled the cab. The truck shuddered and rolled to a stop. For a long, heavy second the driver's hands shook so badly his skin went pale.

"I—did I—did I just...?" he managed.

"What the fuck just happened?!" Ramirez barked.

Jäger's blood ran cold. "Demetrius just hit a woman."

Ramirez scrambled to the partition window, squeezing his face beside Jäger's to see into the night. "I can't see anything. Can you?" he demanded.

"No."

Mari muttered under her breath, small and urgent: "You can't go out there."

"We can't?" Jäger asked.

"If you go out there, you'll die. I can't see the future of others, but my gut is telling me that if you go out there right now, you're going to die."

Demetrius' voice trembled. "We need to check on her. She might still be alive—she was bloodied up. What if she was running away from something?"

"A mimic?" Ramirez suggested.

Demetrius swallowed. "Whatever it is, it's—it's gotta be nearby, right? We can't let it just run around, can we?"

Jäger's hand tightened on his rifle. "We have the girl that has predicted the death of everyone saying that if we go outside, we're gonna die. And you want us to go outside?"

"Are you a fucking idiot!?"

"Jäger is right, but—we're MTRL soldiers. It's our job to deal with things like these. We made an oath."

"FUCK the oath—I'm not going out there," Jäger howled.

"WOULD YOU RATHER DEAL WITH AN ANGRY MONTELOBOS?!" Demetrius shouted, fear and bravado fighting in his tone.

Jäger bristled, then slammed his palm against his forehead in frustration. "Fine. But if anyone, ANYONE of you cocksuckers dies out there, I'm not picking up your bodies. I'm not going to any goddamn funeral. NOTHING."

"Same to you, zealot asshole," Ramirez growled.

The back door thudded open. Ramirez stepped out into the night. Jäger followed, and Demetrius climbed down through the driver's door. Mari watched them go, eyes distant and hollow as the cold pressed in through the steel floor.

She curled her fingers around the armrests and whispered, not to them but to whatever voice lived behind her bandages, "She's—"

The desert was cold at night. It wasn't the kind of cold you could shake off, like the passing chill of a city street, nor the suffocating weight of a forest's snow. Desert cold was a sting. It dug beneath the skin and stayed there, slow as a fever, intimate as a daydream.

With a click, the flashlight at the end of Jäger's rifle came to life. The beam cut across the pavement, revealing a girl sprawled face down, mangled and half-naked, her joints twisted in ways a human body was never meant to bend. Her ashy gray hair was a tangled mess, stained deep crimson with her own blood.

"Red," Jäger whispered, his voice turning sharp and tactical. "It's a person."

He advanced with the steadiness of an elite soldier, rifle braced. "Ramirez, check pulse."

Ramirez didn't argue. Keeping his weapon raised, he crouched beside the girl, fingers pressing against her carotid artery. He waited, searching for a beat—any beat.

Demetrius's voice broke the silence. "Status?"

Ramirez shook his head. "Deceased."

"You're joking..."

Jäger exhaled, his jaw tightening. "This is going to be a bureaucratic nightmare."

Demetrius snapped, "Why don't we just not tell anybody?!"

"No," Jäger said firmly. "We need to take responsibility."

Ramirez's voice cracked with anger. "What the fuck, man? Did you not see her coming?"

Demetrius threw his arms up. "We're in the middle of the desert! What the hell was I supposed to be expecting?!"

Ramirez surged to his feet and grabbed Demetrius by the collar. "The road, asshole! It's your only job!"

Footsteps.

"POSITION!" Jäger barked, swinging his rifle toward the sound.

An old man emerged from the dark, face lined but kind, dressed in overalls and a wide straw hat. Worry etched itself into every crease.

"Well, hello fellers," the man quavered.

"Not one step, or I'll shoot," Jäger warned.

The man raised his hands. “No, no, don’t worry. I saw this girl running past my property, like a maniac, running from somebody. I just drove here. Is she okay?”

“That’s not your business, old man,” exasperated Jäger. “Turn around. Go home.”

“Fellers, please, I need to see if she’s okay. My wife’s mighty worried. What if it’s the cartel boys? Or worse—that Violator feller I’ve been hearin’ so much about these days?”

Jäger’s voice was iron. “Go. Away.”

But the man stepped forward.

Jäger didn’t hesitate. His finger squeezed the trigger. A storm of charged bullets tore into the old man, shredding flesh into chunks, pink fluid spilling from every wound. The man shrieked, his jaw snapping open unnaturally wide, organs writhing free as he lunged forward.

Jäger reloaded in a blur, his training took over. Round after round slammed into the creature, slowing it, tearing it apart. The moment the mimic hit the floor he was inches away from reaching Jäger, but in the end, he dropped dead, just like every mimic before him.

He stood trembling, rifle slung low, breath tearing ragged through his mouth. His hands shook despite his effort to stay composed.

“Scheiße...” Jäger muttered. “That was... sloppy... Why didn’t any of you—”

He turned.

“...help me?”

The dead woman now stood upright. In her left hand dangled Demetrius’s severed head. In her right, a crimson sword glistened. Her eyes studied the head with a sadness that softened into compassion.

Behind her was Ramirez, bisected clean down the middle, his familiar aloof expression frozen on his face—he didn’t even realize he died.

Her ashen hair shimmered in the moonlight, and when her gaze met Jäger’s, her irises were stained with a cold, dead pink. Blood dripped over every inch of her body, from her freckled face, her breasts, her stomach, her legs, all the way down to her bare feet. Torn garments fluttered in the desert wind. She was like a goddess, resurrected from a pantheon forgotten by the world.

“That word you used before,” she began, her voice firm.  
“Responsibility. ‘State or fact of having a duty to deal with something



or of having control over someone.' Reliability. Trustworthiness. That's the common definition; the one people cling to."

"In that way, they, and you, were responsible for the safety of Marija Pickford."

She stepped toward him, the sword dragging red trails in the asphalt.

"But there is a second definition," she continued. "'The state or fact of being accountable or to blame for something.' Burden. Blame. In that sense, I am responsible for the death of these two men. One of them was willing to escape responsibility, to act as if my death never happened. The other raised his hand against a defenseless child."

Her eyes fixed on him. "Yet you stopped him. You held your ground against the driver. You took responsibility for what happened. Not bad."

Terror burned in Jäger's chest. He raised his rifle, hands trembling.

"You don't have to do that," she said softly.

And in a blink, she was there—one hand wrapped around his barrel, the other pressed against his chest with the backside of her sword. She shoved him down, disarming him with effortless grace. His rifle clattered uselessly to the dirt beside the road.

Pinned beneath her, Jäger felt it: the vision Mari had seen, the truth behind the horror in her eyes. It was her. This woman.

“You remind me of someone I used to know,” she whispered. “He had the same look in his eyes—the look of a man who thought he could carry the world on his back.”

A single tear rolled down her cheek.

“But men like you always collapse under that weight,” she lamented, almost tender, “You don’t have to fight anymore.”

“Save it for the morning after.”

**PINK:** *RAZZMATAZZ*

**EPISODE 2: THE MORNING AFTER**

The air smelled like hot garbage, and the sun beat down on Isa's face as she trudged toward work. For the twenty-second of September, the heat was unbearable. She kicked aside an empty bottle rolling in the gutter, left behind from last night's rager in Old Town.

The routine never changed: empty during the day, except for a few cafés and restaurants, then crawling with people once the sun dipped. Old Town was the only place in the city where nightlife was still a thing that existed.

And right in the middle of it all sat the Seventh Ward's MTRL central.

"This sucks," Isa grumbled, shielding her eyes as she walked.

A commotion ahead made her stop. Two homeless men were at each other's throats in the small parking lot of a Donut House. One had a knife in his grip, lunging forward, teeth bared.

"THEY'RE MINE!" the man with the knife barked, swinging the knife like a wild animal.

The other kept his hands up in a guard, ready to strike. "Get the fuck away from the garbage! They're mine!"

It took Isa's eyes a moment to focus against the glare. Then she realized who the second man was.

"Marc...?"

You turned your head away from your opponent, blinking.  
“Huh?”

“What are you doing, man?” Isa asked.

“I... uh... they... they throw the donuts away,” you tried to explain.

“Uh-huh?”

“And... uh—”

The knife-wielding man lowered his blade, glancing between you and Isa. “Is she your girlfriend?”

You shook your head. “Nah, no way—she’s just a friend, Ramiro.”

Isa made an expression you have never seen before.  
“R—Ramiro?”

“Well, yeah,” you said with a shrug. “That’s what he’s called.”

“That’s my name,” the man with the knife confirmed.

Isa stammered, genuinely aghast. “Is this, like, a thing you do every day?”

“Uh... sometimes?” you admitted. “The knife is new, though.”

“Yeah,” Ramiro said, nodding. “I stole it off a dead guy.”

You scratched the back of your neck, a grimace on your face.  
“Shit, dude—like, don’t do that.”

“He didn’t need it anymore.”

“Did a mimic get him or...?”

“Nah,” Ramiro said casually. “I think he overdosed.”

“Dude. Not cool.”

Isa marched up to you and grabbed you by the collar of your coat. “Hey?!” you yelped, stumbling as she yanked you toward the street.

“We’re leaving,” she demanded.

“My DONUTS!”

“You’re going to be late for work. We have new people today.”

You struggled against her grip, but even in her small frame, she completely overpowered you. “I didn’t have breakfast!”

“Too bad, buddy.” Isa tightened her grip, dragging you along.

She was a Gray Coat, after all.

After minutes of walking, you wrenched your wrist free from Isabel's iron grip.

“Why’d you go and do that? We were having fun,” you complained, rubbing the red marks her fingers had left on your skin.

Isabel scoffed, her Gray Coat rustling as she adjusted its fluffy collar. “He pulled a knife on you.”

“Yeah, and you’ve tased me before—what’s the difference?” you shot back, dodging around a cluster of tourists who were taking photos of a particularly vivid mural depicting the Saint Mother.

“For one, you were drunk out of your mind.”

You clicked your teeth. “I wasn’t that drunk.”

The woman shook her head. “You said you were the ‘king of all mimics’ and broke down crying because your sister isn’t a kid anymore.”

“That’s a completely natural reaction,” you insisted, stepping over a puddle of green, old water in between the stones.

“Come on.”

“I’m serious. You’d do it if it happened to someone you cared about.”

Her voice held the stance of someone who’d learned long ago not to let sentiment cloud judgment “I doubt that.”

“Plus, I don’t even get drunk.”

A delivery truck rumbled past the mouth of their alley, its engine grinding against the incline that led up to another part of town.

“You totally get drunk,” you shot back, a hint of playfulness creeping into your voice. “You’re just the type of drunk that doesn’t notice they’re drunk.”

She'd heard this argument before and found it equally unconvincing each time. "Yeah, whatever you say."

You yawned, stretching your arms above your head until your joints popped in a satisfying cascade. "Why... Don't we go out drinking tonight? Think about it—trial by fire for the new guys."

"Nah." Isabel's refusal came without hesitation, automatic as breathing.

You poked her shoulder with one finger, grinning with the mischief that preceded either brilliant ideas or spectacular disasters. "What, afraid the Violator's gonna show up?"

She actually smiled at that, one that made her look several years younger. "I'm more afraid it's gonna be the mimic king."

"I'll behave. No mimic king tonight."

"You promise?" The teasing note in her voice was so rare that you almost missed it entirely.

You pressed your hand over your heart with theatrical solemnity. "I promise, o Lieutenant Commander."

"I'll think about it."

"That's not a no."

She rolled her eyes, but the gesture lacked its usual venom. "It's not a yes either."

“But it’s not a no.”

“Yeah, it isn’t a no.”

There was a silence in between both of you for a moment, the familiar silence that makes the elephant in the room impossible to ignore.

“Do you really eat food from the trash?”

“Does it change anything?” you deflected, your tone carefully light despite the sudden tension in your shoulders.

“Are you being for real?”

“You ransacked a crime scene, Isabel.”

“At a supermarket.”

Isabel's voice rose slightly, genuine worry flickered in the Gray Coat's eyes—Isabel's face rarely, if ever, showed any shock; it was usually too busy wearing the careful, neutral expression of someone who'd seen every possible variation of human failure and had long since stopped letting herself be affected by any of it. It surprised you more than you cared to admit.

You said the only thing you could think of that might reassure the nuclear weapon of a woman standing in front of you: “I don’t eat food out of the trash.”



She let out a long, relieved sigh that deflated her entire posture.  
“Oh thank god. I was worried I’d have to give you a raise.”

“Hey.” You made a small, offended noise, but there was no real heat behind it.

“Then—why were you even fighting Ram... what’s his name?” She gestured vaguely in the direction you’d come from.

“Ramiro?”

“Yeah.”

You looked up at the slice of sky visible between the leaning buildings, where morning clouds were beginning to part for what might actually turn into a decent day.

“Well...” You started. “He’s alone. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but with the drugs on the street and the mimics on the prowl, homeless people don’t have much of a life expectancy.”

“So were you just playing?” Isa asked.

“The knife he’s got? It was Luigi’s. Ramiro’s buddy overdosed a few nights ago. By morning the mimics left nothing of him but bones—and that old knife.” Your voice carried the matter-of-fact tone of someone describing the weather, but Isa knew better, she knew you.

“Huh.” Isa studied the look in your eyes. “I didn’t take you for the altruist type.”

“Pfft.” You waved her off. “No, no way. One time I was gonna get robbed and these guys helped save my ass because I always gave them money.”

“So you gave them money before they saved you?”

“I— I guess.”

“So you do care.”

“Are you getting a kick out of this?”

Isabel's smile was small but unmistakably genuine.

“A little.”

The Seventh Ward's central building stood before both of you. An old colonial building across from the old town market—brown, built of old, weathered brick. It wasn't as large of a place at first sight, not what you would expect when you hear “MTRL Central”, but it's the best that HQ could manage to get you after the disaster in the commercial area, where the old building now laid a pile of rubble.

Central's windows were mismatched—some original colonial glass, others clearly recent replacements that looked too clean against the aged brick. The steps leading to the door were worn smooth by countless footsteps, each stone slightly different in height. Isa casually waltzed up those uneven steps.

Without hesitation, she began hammering on the building's weathered wooden door with her fist.

An electronic beep chirped from beside the door, coming from a small intercom system that looked absurdly out of place. The word “DOORBELL” was written above it on a piece of masking tape.

“Hey,” Qīng Ní's voice crackled through the device. “There’s a doorbell.”

“But you heard me.” Isa replied, completely deadpan, her fist still raised mid-knock.

“I’m not opening the door until you use the doorbell.”

“I’m not using your doorbell, Qīng Ní.”

“It wasn’t cheap, you know?” The intercom crackled with what sounded like genuine hurt feelings. “I paid for it out of my own pocket.”

You could picture Qīng Ní on the other side of the door, probably standing with her arms crossed.

Isabel’s face grew progressively more irritated. “You know what happened last time, it’s gonna get ruined and you’re going to make me pay for it.”

“Nuh-uh,” Qīng Ní jabbered, talking with the sing-song tone she used when she was particularly pleased with herself. “It’s static-proof.”

Isa's finger pressed down on the intercom. It buzzed with an alarming sound. She glanced your way with raised eyebrows, and you raised yours in return.

The intercom panel flashed green, accompanied by a satisfied electronic chirp. The lock mechanism in the door responded with a *click* sound.

"Huh," she said pleasantly surprised. She turned to look at you, pointing at the small panel beside the door. "Hey Marc, it did work."

"I can see that," you replied, though you were really not as surprised as she was. It was just a doorbell.

The door swung , and Qīng Ní had been waiting just on the other side. She towered over Isabel's small frame. Her lab coat was pristinely white, save for the small coffee stain near her sleeve.

"I told you it'd work," she said, unable to keep the smugness entirely out of her voice.

"You said that a lot of times," Isa replied, her tone returning to its default setting of gray boredom. She walked past Qīng Ní and into the building without ceremony, her boots clicking against the old floors.

Qīng Ní sighed. "Hey, Marc."

"Doctor," you replied. Maybe offering the title she'd earned and insisted upon all her life would make her feel a little better.

“It’s been a while man, any luck with Alan Bradley?”

The reporter's face flashed in your mind for a split instant.

“Um, kind of.”

“I see.”

She stared at you for a moment.

“Are you just gonna stand there or...?”

“Oh no, it’s just that...” you smiled mockingly. “You just haven’t asked me to ring the doorbell.”

The smile on Qīng Ní's face faded immediately. “Get in here already.”

The building smelled like old, and the walls inside were much, much taller than what the building looked like on the outside. The first thing you were greeted by was a small reception with two small benches and a bookshelf full of anthropology books. Plants littered the reception, each of them carefully cared for by Qīng Ní.

“You look tired,” Qīng Ní said in a gentle voice. “Have you been getting enough sleep?”

“I didn’t sleep last night, or the one before, or the one before that. I met this... reporter, some crazy blonde chick that’s probably a felon,” you chuckled. “I’ve been on call with her during the last few nights.”

She laughed for a moment. “Oho?”

“Oho...?”

Qīng Ní slipped an arm around your shoulder, her lips tugging into a proud smile. “So what’s with you and her? You been going out?” Her eyes gleamed, hungry for gossip.

You chuckled uneasily, prying her arm away. “It’s all business, Doctor.”

“Come onnnnnn,” she pressed, drawing out the word like a child whining for sweets. “You don’t need to play coy. Big sis Qīng Ní will hear you out.”

“I’m telling you,” you couldn’t hold back a giggle, “she’s just business.”

She smiled. “Uh-huh? And that’s why you’re laughing? Just business?”

“SHUT UPPPPP! HAHAAH!” You laughed, façade shattering into a million pieces. “Okay, okay, we can talk about it later,” you finally folded under her relentless teasing. “Just, let’s have the meeting already.”

You could hear the voices of people deeper into the building, with Isa’s sharp tone just joining them. Behind an arched doorway, and in the middle of a massive, empty room—was a foldable plastic table. Around it limped a young, frail man, cane in hand. “If they were gonna

transfer personnel to us they should have at least given us enough people to manage this building,” the Frenchman spoke in his characteristic, tired accent.

The only other person around was a turquoise haired woman. Her skin was covered in intricate black tattoos, woven together in endless circuit-like patterns. “I don’t know, I do like it when it’s empty like this...” The woman replied, leaning back on her chair.

“Sit upright, Mimic,” he spit out dripping venom.

“You got a stick up your ass today?” she protested, throwing her words at the Frenchman. “What’s wrong with you, Laurent?”

“Did you read the report they sent us?” He tapped the paper in his hand. “Do you have any idea who the transfers are, San?”

She blew a raspberry. “Doesn’t matter to me, it could be the Vicar of the Saint Mother and I still wouldn’t care.”

“And why the hell are the transfers only Gray Coats?” he continued complaining. “Could they afford nobody for engineering? Forensics? Anything?!”

“You got me for engineering,” San replied with mock pride.

“I’d rather have a dog than you.”

“Oh but you’re stuck with me pal,” she leaned her head back, grinning at his obvious irritation. “Your best friend in the whole world—San!”

“A failed weapon like you should not even be here.”

“You are literally French.”

Isa cut in between their conversation. “Are you done?”

Laurent sighed, his words dripping with barely contained vitriol. “The Hero of the commercial area, our dear captain, what a miracle it is to see you here.”

“Can it baguette, I’m not in the mood.”

“When are you?”

“This...” He turned to San, who just smiled sweetly at his rage. “Thing, and I have been keeping central afloat ever since the calamity incident. And you come and show your face now that it’s time to welcome the new faces?” His cane struck the ground with sharp anger. “You have the nerve?!”

“You done?”

Laurent shook his head and grumpily took a seat in one of the foldable plastic chairs, muttering under his breath. “Go die in a ditch... bordel de merde...”



His eyes suddenly caught sight of you, and his entire demeanor shifted. “Marc? You’re here too?” He spoke, his tone immediately more friendly. “How has detective work been treating you?”

You threw him the usual upward nod. “Nah, I’m astral projecting, Kirsch.”

San threw you a peace sign without looking up, she didn’t need to say more.

“Okay!” Qīng Ní clapped behind you signaling the meeting was about to start. “Take a seat everybody.”

You sat down, Isa to your left and San to your right.

“So,” she began, “today we have the pleasure to welcome two new... permanent additions to our ranks in the last standing precinct of the Seventh Ward.” She scratched her head, clearly reading from notes she hadn’t bothered to review beforehand. “First up, uhh... We have a guy from the Fourth Ward. Resumé says *‘former inquisitor’*.”

Laurent groaned. “An inquisitor? Do we not have enough of those crazy zealots now that they took over our turf?”

San chuckled. “Turf. You’re not in a gang anymore, Al Capone.”

“Anyways,” Qīng Ní continued, trying to regain control of the room. “Um, Ju—”

Heavy steps echoed from the arched entrance.

“I can introduce myself.”

A man emerged from under the arches, clad in a thick, gray parka that seemed too heavy for the weather.

“You can call me Jäger, it’s a pleasure to work with you.”

His face was that of a tired man, and gray hairs had started to make themselves at home in his head. The man was like a shark, moving like someone who learned not to waste energy with unnecessary movements.

“You look like a corpse, Malavida.” Isa blurted shamelessly.

“You don’t look much better, Hero,” he replied without missing a beat.

Your gaze bounced back and forth from one of them to the other. Was there history between the two of them?

Laurent’s voice came from across the table. “Are you good at cleaning?”

Jäger was puzzled for a moment, his brow furrowing. “I am? But that is not what I’m here for.”

He took one of the folding chairs and sat down with deliberate care. “There was a case similar to your “Violator” a few years ago.”

The room went quiet, even San stopped fidgeting with her chair.

“I wasn’t a gray coat at the time, but I can still remember what happened.” There was a hint of hesitation in his eyes. “In the back of a food transport vehicle we found the bodies of eleven people, the same profile as the ones you found in the Pete Valentine Supermarket cold room. In our investigation we ended up finding a link to these eleven bodies, a single person.

“The perp?” San asked, leaning forward with interest

“No. We found an authority.”

The air in the room went completely still.

“That’s a big claim, Malavida.” Isa prompted, her voice carrying a warning edge.

“It’s true,” he insisted, “the woman barely clung to life but she was... Where is he? The old man knows what happened in more detail than—”

*“I’m here.”*

That voice. You knew that voice.

He emerged from the dark, and you knew that face. A face from hell, the face of a man that looks like he wrestled a combine harvester and won. A face without a nose, only a black cavity in the middle. The face of a dead man, the face of an old warrior.

The face of the man that saved you so many moons ago.

The face of the man whose daughter you stole from the world.

The face of a father.

My father.

Your voice came out by itself.

“Montelobos Guerrero.”

The brick wall of a man walked close to the table, and began talking. He didn’t greet you, he didn’t even acknowledge the fact you existed. You felt the smallest you have ever felt.

“The Authority identified as Dynastinae was found by my team in an abandoned railway station in the city outskirts.” His voice was like a knife dragged across stone. Every single one of his words was measured and devoid of any warmth. “She had long died by that point, signs of activity from any individual or team had gone cold. But we managed to identify a specific compound on the scene.”

Your heart crashed against your ribcage, begging that the man didn’t recognize your face.

“A liquid drug the First Ward’s forensics team named Aphrosyne, synthesized from the Authority’s blood.”

Laurent shifted uncomfortably in his chair before speaking up. “What’s its gimmick?”

“Gimmick? It’s a drug, it gets you high.” San said with forced casualness, though her voice cracked slightly..

Jäger shook his head. “There was a special characteristic about this drug that we found through testing.”

Montelobos raised his hand. Jäger's mouth snapped shut mid-breath, falling silent like a switch was flipped.

“People can show behavior aligned with those of the Authority after being subjected to the effects of the drug.” Montelobos said.

Isa's nails dug into her palms until blood welled beneath them, her whole body trembling with years worth of accumulated anger. “What are you doing here?”

Montelobos ignored her. “Our major discovery was that in every one of those corpses, the concentration of Aphrosyne was even higher than that of the Authority’s body. They were *batteries*.”

The casual indifference in his voice was the final straw. Something inside Isa snapped.

“I ASKED YOU A FUCKING QUESTION!” Isabel howled.

She exploded from her chair with such violence that it toppled backward, her body lunging at the man. Her hands found his collar and she slammed him down to the floor with enough force to crack the tiles beneath him. Her coat's collar writhed and twisted like a storm, the

usual soft fluff transformed into roiling clouds of white, darkening the air around them.

“Isabel Cachaça.” A cold, satisfied smile spread across Montelobos's ruined face—the smile a hunter gives cornered prey. “You’re making use of that coat I got for you?”

A manic, feral grin split Isa's face, her eyes wild with an obsessive fury that had been festering for years. “Do you have any idea how long I have been looking for you?” Her hands wrapped around his thick neck, fingers digging into flesh like a bird's talons. “Do you have any, any... FUCKING IDEA, OF HOW MANY NIGHTS I'VE DREAMED OF CRUSHING THE LIFE OUT OF YOU WITH MY BARE HANDS—”

Jäger positioned himself above Isa, his fingers curled and ready to flick at her head. “Let the captain go,” he warned with deadly calm. “I’m gonna blow your head off if you keep your funny shit.”

Isa's head whipped toward Jäger like a rabid animal. You had never seen anything remotely similar to what was in the girl's eyes at this moment—she looked capable of tearing him apart with her teeth. Her grip on Montelobos's neck tightened until her knuckles went white, the clouds around her collar turning pitch black. “Captain?” The word erupted from her throat as a strangled, hysterical laugh “HAH... This piece of shit is your captain? This murdering, soul-destroying bastard who—”

Montelobos's massive hand shot up like a gunshot, cutting off her words as his fingers wrapped around Isa's throat. "You never did learn when to shut your mouth."

With the force of a shotgun, he slammed Isa into the floor. Her body bounced once before falling still, her world spinning as blood pooled beneath her head.

"I am not *his* captain." Montelobos rose to his full, imposing height. "I am YOUR captain from today going forward, and you will learn to heel like the rabid dog you've become."

For all the time you've known her, to you Isa was an unstoppable force of nature. A person who could do what she wanted, when she wanted. A person which the world had to build its rules around.

"And if you get in my way again, *'Hero'*—" The word dripped with such contempt it might as well have been profanity. "I'm gonna make sure that you die screaming his name, just like he did yours when I put him in the ground."

But with the flick of an arm, that unstoppable force of nature was reduced to a writhing, vomiting mess on the floor.

"You understand?"

If she was that, then what did that make Montelobos?

He composed himself with unsettling ease, smoothing down his coat as if nothing had happened. "I apologize for my... former protege's

outburst. It will not happen again. What I was getting at was the fact that these “Batteries” held the purpose of transporting Aphrosyne.”

Every person in the room fell completely quiet.

Laurent was the only one brave enough to raise his voice. “I think I understand what you’re getting to.” His eyes glanced at the agonizing Isa on the floor for a moment. “You imply that what we found in the cold room were these batteries, yes?”

“Yes.”

Laurent continued. “And that if we find this Authority, we will find the source of the Aphrosyne?”

“That’s exactly right,” Montelobos replied with the tone of a teacher praising a particularly slow student. “I am under the impression that because of the precinct’s understaffed nature, analysis of the victim’s blood had to be outsourced to the second ward.”

**Blood.** The word lit a spark in the head of two people in the room—the only two conscious people that were present at the scene of the crime. Qīng Ní, and you. The blood sample Qīng Ní took was still being analyzed, red. A human’s.

“We found something in the scene,” you mustered. “There were traces of human blood found.”

“I would expect that. There were thirty-eight dead bodies on the scene,” Montelobos replied.



“No, you don’t get it,” Qīng Ní interrupted. “We found human blood on the place where the diseased mimic was found.”

“So?” San asked.

“Authorities are human beings, they bleed red,” Qīng Ní smiled nervously.

Montelobos had a satisfied look on his face. “So you believe the authority was close enough to the scene to the point her blood could be at the place the mimic died?”

“I’m saying we’re gonna have to look again, more thoroughly,” Qīng Ní stated. “But the crime scene was seized by the police... getting the permits is gonna take time.”

“I will take care of that problem, you don’t have to worry,” he reassured her. “There has to be a place you missed.”

A place you missed.

2:15am, Pete Valentine’s Supermarket—roof access.

Graffiti crawled across the walls like infected wounds, and broken glass from shattered windows crunched beneath your feet. The lock to the emergency exit was old, corroded by years of neglect and harsh weather. You wrapped your fingers around the cold metal and twisted with inhuman strength, feeling the mechanism snap beneath your grip.

Three weeks had passed since the incident, yet everything remained cordoned off in yellow tape.

You know what you were there for—the cold room.

You retraced your steps from the day the bodies were found until you saw it, the giant red sign—MEAT. The smell from three weeks ago was completely gone now, replaced by the acrid stench of industrial cleaners and the faint, persistent odor of moisture.

The same massive metal door loomed in front of you.

Your hand trembled at the handle.

Paloma's voice whispered in your ear with a breath that felt like winter morning mist. “They’re gone, you know?”

“I know.”

“What are you afraid of, then?”

You closed your eyes, and slid open the door. She was right—the cold room was completely empty. Not one stain of blood remained on the pristine white surfaces, not one Alan Bradley clutching his guts in the center of the room. Nothing.

“It’s a lot bigger than I remember,” you said, looking around the empty freezer.

“See anything interesting?”

White walls, white light, hooks to hang the meat from... The cold room was nothing outside of the ordinary.

But it was the ventilation system that caught your attention—a network of silver ducts that snaked across the ceiling. They came in from the outside wall, formed a perfect square over the room's center, then...

Down into the floor?

Why would a ventilation duct disappear into the floor of a supermarket's cold room? The logical path would be back to the outside, not down into the building's foundation.

You approached the duct where it hugged the backside wall. The metal conduit wasn't large—perhaps two feet in diameter—but a small person could probably squeeze through. Someone desperate enough, or small enough, or... manufactured for exactly this purpose—*like a battery?*

Your hand clasped the metal surface of the duct, and with minimal effort, you managed to rip it open. It wasn't a long drop—five meters at most—but you could see it at the bottom: light, creeping through the grates where the cold air would enter.

There was a room down there. A room that shouldn't exist.

“Would you look at that,” Paloma chuckled. “Not bad, Detective.”

You squeezed yourself into the vent. It was tight. Way too tight for a human, but for a mimic like yourself? With a long, deep breath, you slid down, slithering like a ringworm through someone's guts.

You looked through the grate, but there was little you could see at a glance. It was a place that belonged in a medical facility, not buried beneath a suburban supermarket. Clean white walls gleamed under flickering white lights. Medical equipment—IV stands, monitoring devices, examination tables...

You pushed the grate open, and the smell hit you immediately. Rotting meat. Sweet, cloying decay that coated the inside of your nostrils and clung to the back of your throat like an uninvited guest. But worse than the stench was the sound that accompanied it—a deafening, droning cacophony of flies that drowned every sense with their metallic buzzing.

“Is anybody there?” Your voice cracked as you called out.

But nobody replied, only the flies answered your call. A gnawing, dreadful feeling settled in the bottom of your stomach. You followed the sound of flies until being met with a pair of cubicle curtains, the type you had grown accustomed to seeing in the hospital to separate patients. The sound had become an unbearable cacophony of tinnitus inducing noise, but you knew that the origin behind them was behind this curtain.

Holding your breath, you looked inside.

Maggots. Maggots writhed like living rice across what had once been human limbs. Arms and legs, now bloated and blackened, hosted entire colonies of fly larvae that pulsed and writhed beneath the rotting skin. Bile clawed at your throat. You turned around, ready to turn and leave forever, when all of a sudden—

“H...”

The sound was so soft, so impossibly faint, that you almost convinced yourself you'd imagined it. But then it came again—a whisper that barely was a sound.

*She was alive.*

You ripped the curtains away, looking at the girl closely for the first time. Sickly green hair, matted with sweat and worse things, framed a face that looked like it belonged to some deep-sea creature dragged unwillingly into the light. Her skin had taken on a translucent, pale color. Distant red eyes, dulled by pain and whatever chemicals had been pumped through her system, stared at the cloud of flies above her.

There was no doubt about it... this girl was the Authority that Montelobos hypothesized.

Wounds on her arms and legs weren't showing signs of struggle, instead they looked closer to someone repeatedly puncturing her with a dirty needle. Although, with the maggots writhing inside her flesh, it was difficult to make out anything at all. Without someone to keep her alive for three weeks, her body had now fallen to this state.

A cold chill settled in your skin as realization came. The possibility you didn't want to consider. Something you kept repressing and repressing, convincing yourself this was a case of human trafficking or some other scheme by your former employer. This was something you'd never seen before.

The violator—whoever or whatever he was—was real.

A rifle's hammer clicked behind you, followed by a vaguely familiar laugh. A laugh that feels like a distant memory, like the face of an old friend that's started to fade away.

“Well now, ain't this a mighty coincidence?”