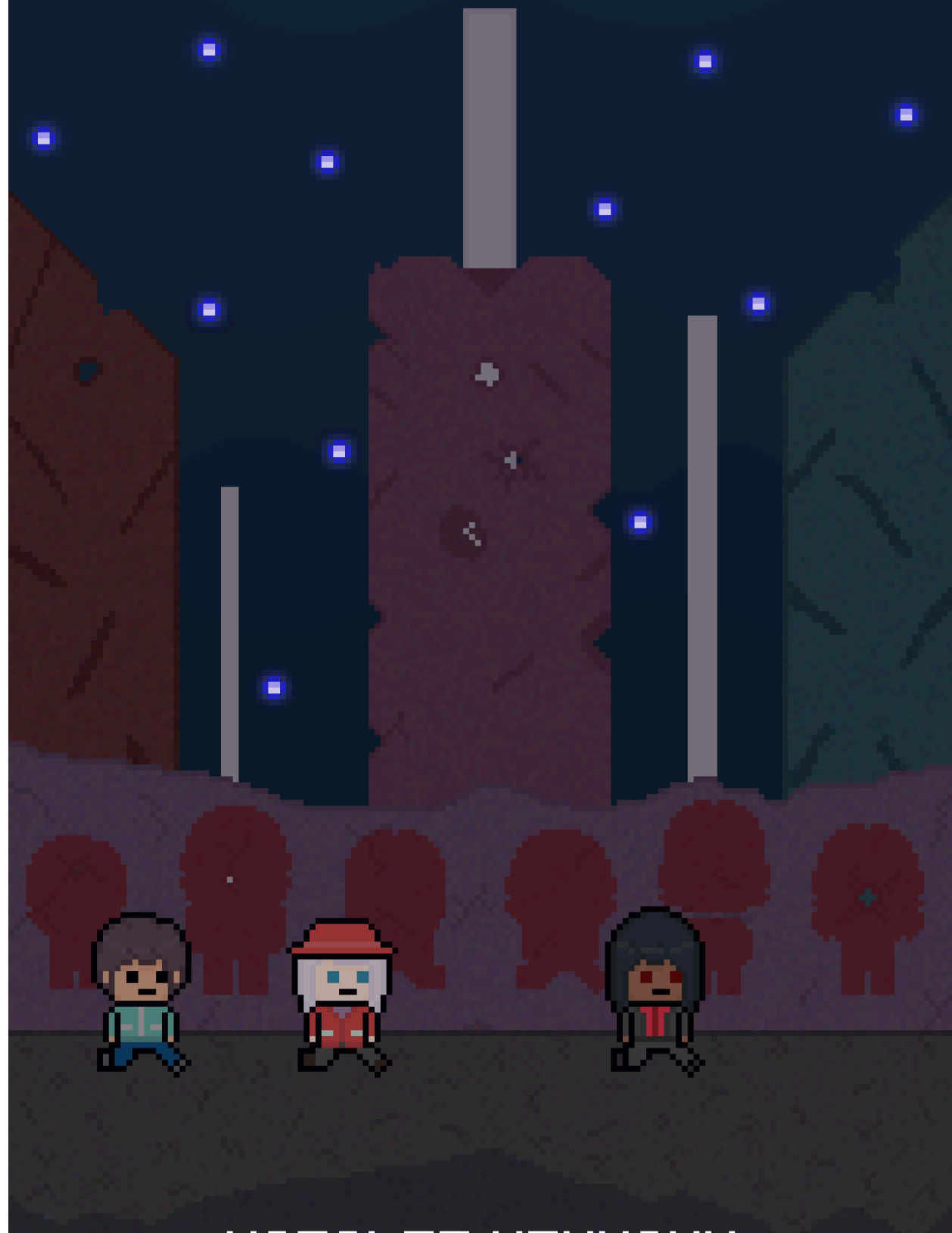


PSYCHO BULLET FESTIVAL THE ODYSSEY OF ABIGALE QUINLAN



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Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan
By Natalie Neumann



Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan
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Content Warning: *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan* contains content that some readers might find disturbing, triggering or uncomfortable. This includes sexually explicit activities, strong language, hateful language and slurs, extreme violence, death, child abuse, and violence against children. Reader discretion is advised.

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Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan is the story of an immortal woman who awakens from a 7-year-long coma to find the world destroyed and her god-like powers stolen from her. Desperate to regain her abilities and return the world to normal, she must travel across the land, searching for her children in a filicidal quest with the aid of her companions Jack Crowbar and Zedaki.

This novel is part of *The Saga of Dawn and Dusk series* created by Natalie Neumann. Though it has a place in the greater continuity of the series, no prerequisite reading is needed to fully understand this story, and few references are made to other installments.

Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan - Episode Alternative is an alternate version of Episodes 11 and 12 of *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan*. A version that features characters, plot points, and a tone more in line with the original outline for the novel, as detailed in *Natalie Rambles About Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan*.

After blazing through the ruins of the west coast, Abigale and her two man slaves have finally made it to their final destination. With the key to absolute power just a bullet away, they do what they do best and enact mass destruction, bringing death to all who oppose them, until they find what they desire. The final offspring of Abigale, Isadore the Intellectual.

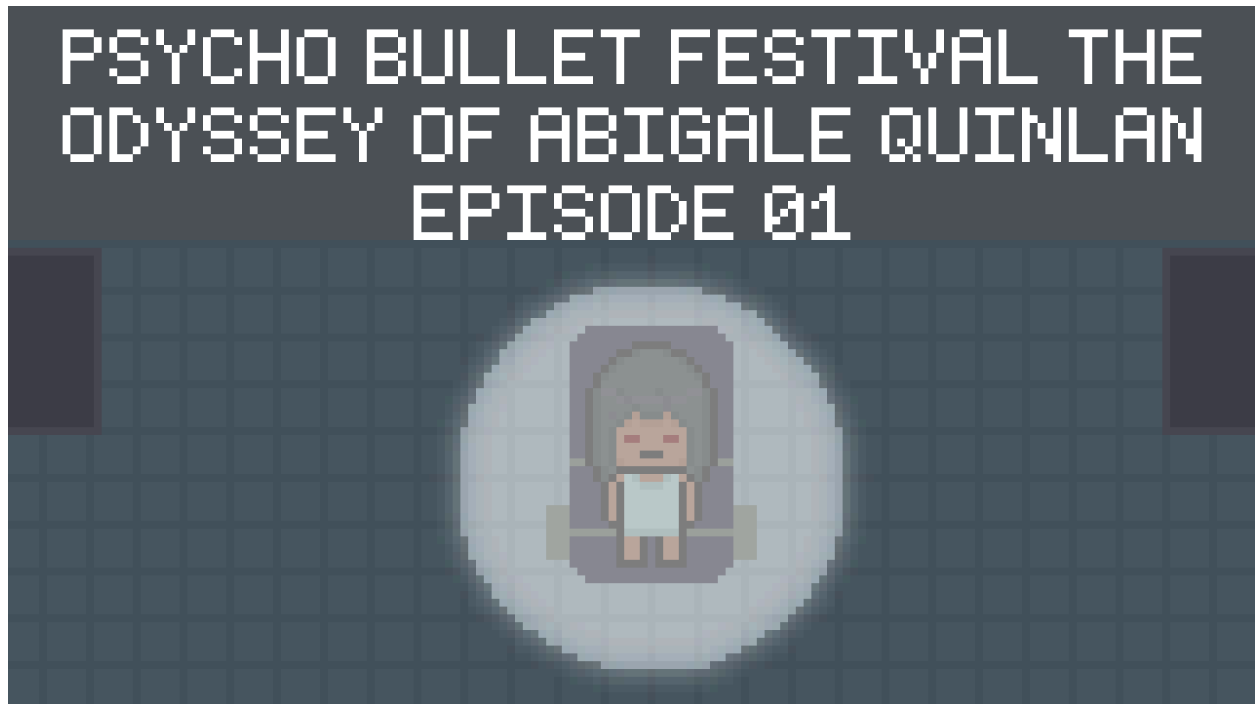
Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan - Episode Alternative was originally released on April 27, 2023, five years after the original April 27, 2018 release of *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan*.

You can find more of Natalie Neumann's work at [Natalie.TF](https://natalie.tf).

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Episode 01: Abigale The Awakened



“Hey there Abigale! Hello? Abi-chan? Abi-senpai? Gale-senpai? Abi-Q? Oh my, Miss Abigale Quinlan, won’t you please wake up?”

That high pitched and almost synthetic sounding voice rambling off a string of nicknames was the first thing I recalled. The thing that awoke me from a slumber I couldn’t remember entering. Instantly, I had a feeling that I was out for a long time, so much that my body felt heavy and numb. Which should have been impossible.

Instinctively, I opened my eyes in order to determine where I was, but I was greeted by a blindingly bright white light. Sealing them, I began assessing my surroundings in other ways. The tittering of machinery buzzed through the background. My limbs were placed on something cold and metallic. My back laid against a thin pad of some sort. I was wearing nothing but a flimsy hospital gown. And I felt cold.

A slew of queries quickly began to wrack my mind. Where I was, what time it was, what happened since the last thing I could remember, these were just a few. My brain continued to develop these questions as I began moving off of whatever I was laying on and I brought my bare feet to the frigid tiled floor, practically jumping as my skin made contact with this surface

I have been exposed to the frigid tundra with naught but a light garment, and I felt little more than a slight chill as the dry freezing winds assaulted my person. But now, something as mundane and harmless as a cold floor was sending a shiver through my being.

As I stood up and moved my body around, I felt weak, exhausted, not wounded, but as if I had been sapped of my strength. As I grit my teeth in frustration, I opened my eyes once more, where I was met with a simple tile floor that led to a concrete wall, only broken up by the pair of metal cabinets that laid against it, all rendered in a darkness that stretched out from my current position. Turning around, I saw an operating table aggressively illuminated by lights hanging from the ceiling. The padded base of the table bore a deep indentation of a human form, one that went through the foam coating and seeped down to the metal below. A groove had been established by someone who was laying on this operating table for a very long time, and it matched my physique exactly.

I looked down at myself. The ground looked as far away as it always had, meaning I still stood at two meters tall. My lean and muscular body was no worse for wear, my brown skin was the same as it had always been, and while my hair was longer than I recalled, it was still the same jet black it always was. I didn't suffer any visible physical changes that contributed to my current weakness, although I needed a mirror to confirm that my face was unaltered and my crimson eyes were just as they had been before.

"Oh, goody-good! It's nice to see you up and at 'em, Quinny-Q," the synthetic voice chipperly chimed.

"Who are you?" I asked the voice, or at least I attempted to. As the words passed through my mouth, I was shocked by how dry my throat was. Once again, the question of what was going on rested at the forefront of my brain.

"After all," I thought, "I'm Abigale Quinlan. I am immortal. I heal myself of all wounds within seconds. I can transmute any substance into any other simply by touching it and envisioning the details pertaining to its new form. I have strength, dexterity, agility, and intelligence beyond that of any human in the world, so I should under no circumstances feel like I do now."

But this knowledge, this statement, did not reflect what I currently felt. My body was staggered, my reflexes were numbed, and my mental capabilities were marred. A distinctively vicious breed of terror began to flood my body as I realized this. That everything I thought I once had was gone. That I was now weak. I asked myself how and why I came to be in this sorry state, but I could do little more than speculate wildly.

"Oh Abigale, dear, sweet, destructive, sexy, and vile Abigale," the synthetic voice said. "Who I am is unimportant. What is important is that you are astonishingly weak after such a lengthy slumber, and we need to do something about this. Yes, we certainly do."

The speaker then emerged from the darkness coating much of this room, and their appearance was just as... unique as the voice they spoke in. They wore an outfit inspired by those traditionally worn by plague doctors. One with a metallic beak-like mask and elegant navy robes. Their body was tall and given further volume by the outfit, but what they wore was insignificant compared to what they held. A revolver. A firearm whose trimmings and design fit in with the antiquated theme of this person's ensemble.

As I saw this weapon, I did not so much as flinch. I had been subjected to thousands of bullet wounds throughout my life, and I had long since stopped so much as feigning fear or concern at the sight of such weapons. Instead, I looked at this person's mask in confusion, wondering just what they thought they were doing.

"Now, I know this will hurt you ever so much, but I'm afraid that it is necessary to get things rolling. Grit those teeth and endure the pain, because Project *Psycho Bullet Festival* is a-go-go!"

"What the blazes are you talking about?" I shouted at the person before me as they raised their gun's barrel.

"Goodbye, my—" The masked person said before they pulled the trigger, their words were cut off by the sound of gunfire.

The loud concussive nature of the noise left me stunned for a moment. Immobile as a hot piece of lead penetrated my abdomen, tore past my skin, and ripped through my organs in order to embed itself within my innards. It hurt. It hurt more than it should have.

The masked person then fired another bullet, one that ripped through the gown and to my stomach, and then another, one that created a hole within my navel. The sensation of my internal organs being severed, my muscles being gashed, and my body's blood gushing onto my hands left my mind roaring in anguish. But I was unable to shout. Instead, all I could do was clench my wounds and fall onto the cold hard floor.

I had felt excruciating pain throughout my life. I had been burnt by flames, injected with gluttonous amounts of lethal toxins, impaled by dozens of spikes at once, and severed into hundreds of pieces. I had undergone torture that would have killed a human hundreds of times over, growing accustomed to the feelings that came with it. But this was different. Why was I feeling this way? Why wasn't I healing myself after a few seconds? What happened to me to put me in such a miserable situation? I could not fathom the answer. My mind was too clouded and distracted by the lingering agony this masked person imposed on me. A person who left me by the time I developed the strength needed to raise my head and look forward.

I was abandoned, wounded, and utterly helpless. Up until this point in my life, I had never feared my own demise. I believed it to be an impossibility. But as the blood gushed from my innards, it seemed like an inevitability.

“How pathetic,” I thought. “I’m not going out like this. I will survive. I cannot die. I have too many questions that need to be answered! I have lived too long to die like this!”

Using what little strength I had, I crawled my way towards the nearby concrete wall and began propping myself up against it. The experience was tiring, arduous, and resulted in a thick bloodstain that followed whenever my body went.

Unable to do anything but keep breathing, I began to fixate on the darkness that existed at the end of this room, the same end the masked individual resided in before stepping forward. It reminded me of what would come if I were to die here. Darkness. Nothing more, nothing less, just the emptiness of death as my consciousness dissolves, and I am reduced into nothingness. No longer a person, but a thing.

I groaned as I realized that such an asinine observation would be amongst my final thoughts, but I was interrupted as the dark end of the room illuminated, bringing forward a dim yet pleasant light as the door unveiled another person. Well, technically two.

One was a woman. She was dressed in a black tank top and light jeans that clung tightly to her lean and slender figure, standing at no more than 160 centimeters tall, and possessing short black hair, giving her a boyish look. As she grew closer, I looked at her face, taking note of her age and ethnicity. She looked to be college-aged, and based on her light tan skin tone and facial features, I determined that she was of Malaysian descent.

As for the other, they were a baby, a crying infant wrapped in white cloth. Their face obscured by the way this woman held them. It was a traditionally pleasant image, a young woman holding onto a child who I assumed to be her own. But she only carried the child in one hand. In the other, she held a crude-looking piece of metal. A crowbar. One originally painted a vibrant blue, but its color had been ravaged greatly by wear and time.

With a look of horror on her face, the woman dashed towards me, baby and crowbar in tow. Upon seeing the severity of my wounds, she placed the child and crowbar on the floor before scampering off to one of the metal cabinets, which she feverishly dug through.

I tried to speak to her, but all that came out of my mouth was a series of grunts and a squirt of blood. Too weak to communicate, I simply looked on at her, hoping she would either help me or at least explain what was going on, which she only did after thoroughly searching every cabinet in this room. She returned to me with a roll of gauze but was otherwise empty-handed. If she intended to treat my wounds, she would have no such luck in doing anything but limit my blood loss. Clearly distraught by the situation she was witnessing, the woman began muttering to me.

“I’m sorry Miss Quinlan, I— I don’t know how this happened... there is still a way you could— but if we do that I— Oh, goddamn it all!”

She then turned to both the crowbar and wailing baby and moved both of them directly in front of me. I shot her a quizzical look, unable to fathom why she would do such a thing, but this question soon unraveled into more as I began to look at the infant before me. A female baby who looked to only be a few weeks old based on their face, hair, and general size. The energy she exerted as she fidgeted around in a blanket signified her as a spry and healthy child, but something about her struck me as peculiar.

She had a brown skin tone, one that I couldn't help but find to be very similar, only slightly lighter, to my own skin. Her face, while underdeveloped, had features reminiscent of my own. While her eyes... they had a subtle crimson color, ones that resembled something slightly brighter than blood when examined closely. The exact same description I'd give my own eyes. With this evidence piled before me, I fought against my wounds in order to satiate my curiosity.

"Is she my daughter?" I asked in a pained huff.

"Y-Yes, Miss Quinlan, she is, but... It would be easier if I were to just show you."

The young woman then unfurled the sobbing infant's blanket and grabbed the crowbar before her. She fidgeted around with the child, grabbing their hand and unclenching it from a fist, only to grab her crowbar, and bringing the claw down onto one of the baby's fingers. Blood burst from her small supple hand, and her cries intensified. I looked at this woman in shock for a moment, only for my attention to drift back to the infant, whose shattered finger was coming back together, with the sprayed flesh rekindling itself and the skin sealing everything away. Within no more than 20 seconds, the infant's hand was fully healed.

"This baby has the ability to regenerate from wounds, and... if you... if you kill them, then you'll get their power."

At this point, I was about ready to buy anything, even if this display only caused the questions in my head to multiply to an excessive volume. I knew this could be a trick, a lie, or some form of manipulation, but a person at the precipice of death will do just about anything to live, and that is especially true for a person in excruciating pain beyond anything they had previously ever experienced. I could not think complex thoughts, my wounds were too extreme, and... I did it.

I grabbed the crowbar within arm's reach and struck my child with it. One ordinarily lethal strike left the child's innards splattered across the floor. Yet she still lived. Her disconnected body parts continued to move, to squirm across the floor as if they were trying to rejoin with the rest of her body.

In response to her resilience, I struck her again... and again... and several more times after that. My crowbar-based onslaught continued until both the child and their scattered remains ceased their squirming and became static. Her blood mingled with mine across the floor, the

cloth she laid upon was painted a deep red, and her scattered remains, the chunks of her person that remained, all blended into a morose sight that I stared at intently, waiting for the woman's words to ring true, for the pain that continued to assault my senses to disappear.

As the seconds passed at a glacial pace, the remains before me began to dissipate, to dissolve into what looked to be ash. Ash that floated through the air, as if drawn by an unseen wind, and gravitated towards me. What remained of my child began sifting around my body, growing closer and closer before the ash reached my blood-soaked skin and was absorbed by my body.

As the ash became one with me, I began to feel... better. I felt my innards shifting, my wounds repairing themselves, and both my muscles and organs pushing away the bullets that were embedded within me. It was a slow process, one still fraught with agony, but it diminished in intensity with each passing second, and after a minute had passed, after the three bullets left my person and rolled out onto the floor below, all pain had left my body. All the blood that I had lost returned to my body, and nearly all signs of conflict here were erased.

Once I felt the last of my skin mend itself shut, I slowly stood up and found myself towering over the young Malay woman. Her head was facing away from me, but I could still sense that she was disturbed by my actions. How I brutally murdered a newborn child that was, somehow, my daughter. Still, as the sound of my footsteps echoed throughout the room, she turned her head towards me, looking up at my face and offering me a smile.

"You just saved my life," I said to the young woman, whose eyes widened in response.

"I... I guess I did. Well, I didn't really do it. I just brought your baby to you, panicked, told you what to do, and, um... Yeah, I did that. I just did all of that."

"Yes, you did do all of *that*... Tell me, what's your name?"

"Oh, yes, my name is Jack, or at least that's what everybody calls me, not that I really mind. You can call me Jack too, of course, but, um... you probably have a lot of questions. Don't you, Miss Quinlan?"

As Jack continued to speak, I fixated her voice. Her nervous demeanor combined with a high-pitched voice made her sound far younger than she actually was. It was a minute detail, but one I couldn't help but take note of as I interacted with her.

"Please, call me Abigale," I responded. "There's no need for such formalities And yes, I do have a wide array of questions. I would appreciate it if you could answer them."

"I will, but, um, we really should leave first. It's a long story, but since you woke up, nearly died, and I gave you one of your children— What I'm getting at is that we are both in trouble, and we should go. Like, right now."

I raised an eyebrow at this woman as she claimed that. Where were we, what was going on, and how I even had a child, these were all very prominent questions in my mind. Ones that I wasn't going to simply let pass by. However, the desperate expression adorning her face and tone she adopted showed that she was serious. I could have pushed her into answering more, but she did save my life and as such, I felt indebted to her.

"Very well, Jack, let us depart. But I will want answers shortly after we escape from... here."

"Thank you! Also, we're at the Flare Foundation headquarters... I'll explain later. Come on."

After grabbing her crowbar, which lacked any trace of my child's blood, Jack opened the metal door to reveal a long hallway with tile flooring, concrete walls, and dim lighting. She began walking through the halls at a brisk pace while I followed behind her. She made frequent turns, moving through the identical halls with ease as she led me past dozens of metal doors only distinguishable by the number and name they were labeled with. We, thankfully, did not come across anyone else, not even the sound of distant footsteps, before reaching our destination. A clearly labeled storage room.

It was not a small room, but it was a cluttered one. The walls were covered in metal shelves, lined with nondescript and vaguely labeled boxes, and the center of the room was taken up by a cluster of shelving units with similar contents. Amidst this scattered setup, Jack darted over to the other end of the room, where she sifted through an unlabeled box, pulling out a large backpack from it. As she slung this backpack over her shoulders, she moved to another end of the room and began using her crowbar to pry out one of the shelving units. However, due to the weight resting on the shelves, and the positioning of it, she was having difficulties moving much of anything.

I went over to assist her, grabbing onto one end of the shelf and pulling hard, only to be reminded of my lack of strength. What should have been a simple task now required me to exert myself to get this shelf to so much as budge, and by the time it was pulled away from the wall, I felt sweat coating my forehead. With a huff, I followed Jack through the small crevice we opened between the shelves and what I saw was seemingly well worth the effort.

It was a door. A door that was awkwardly placed within the wall, and it lacked any kind of knob or handle. Once again, Jack took her crowbar to the problem, and she was able to pry the door open with relative ease. Well, at least compared to the shelving unit. She pushed the door open as far as she could considering the placement of the shelving unit, allowing us to peer in and see that this door led to a dark pathway made of stone.

Upon seeing this, Jack dug her hands into her backpack, blindly searching through its numerous compartments before pulling out a flashlight, allowing her to illuminate the cavernous tunnel that stood before us. If there was an end to this tunnel, I could not see it. Regardless, Jack

continued through the door with her light in tow, not saying anything to me as I squeezed my body through this small crevice and followed her. After I let the door behind me slam shut, she shined her flashlight at me and looked over my person, which was dressed in nothing more than a deteriorating hospital gown.

Without asking me anything, Jack dug into her backpack once more, where she began pulling out some clothes. A light blue long-sleeved shirt, a pair of bike shorts, some socks, a pair of worn boots, a sports bra, and a panty. All of which she tossed in my general direction. I looked at her in mild confusion as I examined the small Jack-sized clothing before she spoke to me for the first time in the past five minutes.

"I know this is kinda awkward," Jack commented, her voice echoing through the cave, "but I figured you'd want to wear something other than a torn hospital gown. They're spare clothes of mine, so they probably won't fit very well, but you can wear them... if you want to."

Not wanting to waste an opportunity like this, I did as she suggested and quickly changed into Jack's clothes, which all fit me in the sense that I could, physically, fit into them without the fabrics splitting at the seams. I had no doubt that these clothes were unbecoming on somebody with my proportions, with the shorts digging into my thighs and the shirt leaving my navel exposed, but I had other, far more pressing things to worry about at the moment. Such as the low ceiling I nearly slammed my head against before I started crouching.

Jack and I continued down the cavern from there, walking at a brisk pace, heading onwards with no clear direction, and in silence... at least until I decided to make use of this quiet time by asking her some of my many questions.

"So Jack, do you know how long I've been here? It must have been about a year if I was able to conceive and give birth to a child."

"Um... Do you promise me that you'll stay calm as I tell you everything?"

"Why, of course."

"All right, in that case... You, Abigale Quinlan... you were in a coma for... for 7 years."

I paused for a second after hearing that, only to resume walking through the cavern the next. The very idea of falling into a coma, let alone for 7 years, struck me as an impossibility. Or at least an improbability I would not buy without proper evidence. I did not wish to disrespect or disregard Jack's words, but I do not believe in anomalies simply based on conjecture. So I simply remained silent

"In that time," Jack continued, her voice calm and sorrowful, "you were captured by the Flare Foundation. They did a lot of things to your sleeping body, including forcing you to give birth to

children. Each one of them took one, or some, of your abilities. I knew that if they died, you would regain the powers that they inherited. It's why I had you kill your youngest child... your seventh child. Because I knew it would save your life."

"I see," I replied, my disbelief apparent in my tone.

We silently continued down this cavernous path for a short while longer before we reached another door. Jack swiftly grabbed its handle, paused, and then turned to me.

"Abigale, things... things have changed since you were last awake. I'm guessing you don't remember what, so... just please try to stay calm, okay? ...Please... Promise me."

"I promise you, Jack. I will remain calm," I earnestly declared.

Jack then began to slowly open the heavy metal door, one that illuminated this dark cavern with aggressive sunlight. I shield my eyes as I slowly made my way out outside, allowing my body to adjust to the light. I took a deep breath upon exiting, feeling the sun pounding against my body, while cool and crisp air brushed against my face.

As I fully opened my eyes, I was greeted by a temperate region. A landscape populated with young trees, scattered shrubbery, cacti, and fauna that looked to belong to a far warmer and drier climate. It was a strange sight that only became truly bizarre as I craned my neck upwards and saw stone pillars. Structures that looked to have erupted from the Earth and rose high into the sky, reaching anywhere from 30 to 50 meters in height, all bearing a discernable cylindrical shape that looked to have a diameter of 5 meters at a minimum. It was unlike anything I had ever seen, something that more closely resembled a tree than any natural rock formation, but even from a distance, I could tell that these structures were made of stone.

I shook my head at this sight before directing my head to the ground before me, only to notice how uneven it was, with small yet noticeable mounds and ditches littering the environment before me. Their positioning, height, and general shape all seemed unnatural though. As if something had altered or damaged the earth itself, breaking away at it for an indiscernible purpose. I shook my head as I made note of this detail before taking a step back and looking at the world from a broad perspective, observing this somewhat pleasant yet uncanny environment as the morning sun peered over the mountainous horizon.

I could not pinpoint where in the world I could possibly be based on these geographical features, but as I continued to dart my eyes about, past the stone pillars and trees, I discovered the remnants of a road, reduced to nothing but slabs of torn asphalt. I began walking towards it in order to get a closer look, but as I did so, I noticed something that was previously obstructed by a particularly tall hill. It was merely a speck over the horizon but looked to be an establishment. One with a suspicious silhouette

Just as I readied to walk away from the sun and towards the western horizon to investigate this, Jack grabbed my shoulder. She held a pair of binoculars in her hand, likely from her backpack, and shoved them against my person. She held a sour expression as I plucked the binoculars from her hands, as if she anticipated that I wouldn't like what I was about to see. Well, she was right. Once I placed the binoculars over my eyes, what I saw was a ruin. A modern city, a western city of a first world country that had fallen into ruin. Buildings had crumbled to the ground and vegetation that had taken hold of what remained.

"What happened?" I murmured as I took in this sight.

Jack was quick to reply.

"You. You happened, Abigale. You did all of this."

Episode 02: Jack The Journeyer



"I did this?" I thought to myself. "I was the one responsible for the stone pillars piercing the sky, the surreal climate that was all around me, the shattered roads, and the destruction of a city?"

While I did not doubt that I could shift the matter of the Earth delicately and closely enough to cause all of this to happen, the scale of this made such a theory implausible.

"I did this? How did I do all of this?"

"I'm... not sure," Jack murmured, "but 7 years ago, something happened. People called it a lot of things, but most, or at least I think most, call it the Cataclysm."

"So you mean to tell me that I did all of that 7 years ago, but don't remember it?"

"Yeah. It took a few weeks, and... everything was destroyed. The world was tilted, cities were demolished, billions died, and climates were wildly changed. I mean, this place used to be a desert. I'm not sure what exactly happened, but they all say this happened because of Abigale Quinlan. A powerful immortal who destroyed militaries and the world's defenses. So, I was surprised when I saw you... like that."

I left Jack where she stood as I began pondering her words, wandering in an indiscriminate direction. I did not want to believe what she said. About the world being destroyed, about so many deaths, and about me causing it. I had zero recollection of it and knew that such a feat on a global level was well beyond even my own powers, or at least it was within the time limit of 7 years. I wondered if she was lying to me, but why would she do such a thing? What could she possibly gain by lying to me?

As I began trying to decipher the question and examine her possible motives, it became apparent to me that she was likely telling the truth. That I really was the one responsible for all of this... that I destroyed this world I'd seen grow over the centuries, and that I've abruptly ended more lives than even I could conceivably fathom.

This feeling melded with the frustration and fear that came with the loss of my powers. I was weak. I was vulnerable. I lacked the mental fortitude to reassure myself, and I could feel myself slipping. I began trembling, my breathing became uneven, and my facial composure suffered. I tried to steady myself, but that just brought me further unease.

"This was my fault," I thought to myself, "hundreds of years of progress, of collective culture. All shattered by me... for a reason that I could not even remember."

"Heh. Hehehe... Hehehe... Hahahahahahaha!" I laughed to myself as I buried my face in my hands.

"I really did this, didn't I? I ruined everything. Society, the government, the global infrastructure that has developed over centuries, it's all gone. All thanks to *me*. Whatever happened, I need to... no. Before anything else, I need to be *me* again."

"I need to regain my power. That is all that matters. That is all that matters for now."

Upon saying those things, speaking out loud for my own sake, I realized that I was nearly a kilometer away from where Jack and I emerged from the facility. Yet she was still by my side, looking at me with a troubled expression, and a layer of sweat on her forehead. I must have moved faster than she was used to and tired her out.

"I need to get going. Thank you again for your assistance, Jack." I said those words intending on our relationship ending right there, but she did not let me get so much as a step away from her before she pleaded with me to stop.

"Wait! Can... Can I come with you?"

I sighed before responding to her.

"I have no desire to look after someone else, especially in my current situation. However, considering you saved my life, I do owe you a favor of lesser or equal magnitude. I will allow you to accompany me on my journey. But why would you want to?"

"Well, I... I don't want to be alone again. And I can't go back to the foundation... I just can't." Jack said before turning her head to the ground, either sulking or examining the grass and weeds beneath her.

"Understood," I quickly replied. "I will set a pace maintainable by someone of your stature. Come along now."

With that, Jack began scampering up to me but quickly fell about a meter behind me. I took it as her finding me to be an intimidating figure, and I could not disagree. Even without my powers, I had been looked at harshly throughout my life. My face bore features many found intimidating, my red eyes had a tendency to unnerve people, my stature towered over most people, and many simply reacted *negatively* to the color of my skin.

Our walk carried on in silence as I took in the world around me and observed how nature retook this land that humankind once claimed, while also being able to observe the effects of their disappearance. Most notably through the air. It was refreshing, crisp, and devoid of the pollution that lingered in it over the past two centuries. I could not tell if this was lost on Jack, but I paid her little mind beyond an occasional glance to confirm that she was still behind me.

After about fifteen minutes of this, Jack shuffled over to my side and began murmuring. She spoke in a whisper at first, struggling to find her speaking voice before being able to form a cohesive sentence.

"Um, I'm just wondering if you could, while we're traveling, tell me where you came from and where you got your powers in the first place. Well, before you lost them anyway."

"Heh," I snickered. "I'd like to know that myself, but where I came from and how I obtained these powers are two mysteries I could never solve. All I know or remember is that one day I existed, and I'm not even sure what year it was. My memories begin in Europe during the cusp of the seventeenth century. The world was ripe with innovation and discovery, the modern age was well on its way, the Italian renaissance was holding one last hurrah, and the French Holy Wars were nearing their conclusion. A new world was being explored and eventually colonized, et cetera, et cetera."

"I have existed for centuries, and in my time I have seen revolutions spring up, kingdoms crumble, civil wars tear nations apart, the heights of dynasties, and even explored a continent before it had been 'settled' by western invaders. I was there to see what many would describe as turning points in history and met with many influential people in my time. I could go on and on for days about my past, though I can't say I'm proud of all of it."

“While I try to remember the finer moments, the nights I spent with kings and the days I spent conversing with artists of nigh unreachable talents, there are other things I would rather not dwell on. Some foul revolutions I foolishly supported, the good men I harmed in some ways, the lives I ended, and the way others treated me throughout my life. I trust I need not explain to you the injustices a woman of indiscernible ‘foreign’ descent would experience while traveling a world that viewed both of those things as signs of a lesser being. Let alone the treatment I received once those same people discovered that I could easily turn water into wine, dirt into bread, and survive incineration. Some thought me to be a god, but most branded me as a witch, devil, or a member of daemon-kind.”

“As my life went on, as I was rejected, and as I was abused, I developed a sense of bitterness towards humanity, one that was only enhanced after seeing the same mistakes from centuries past repeat themselves, and witnessing the many atrocities that came during the first half of the twentieth century with my own eyes. Considering how cynical and nihilistic I was at that time, the thought of me demolishing the entirety of the world almost seems plausible. Almost. While I... was the most powerful being on the planet, this level of destruction is leagues beyond anything I was capable of. I could turn a small nation into something like this over the course of a year or so, but from what you’ve told me, I managed to do *this* to the entire world in a matter of weeks.”

I let out a small gasp of relief as I reached the end of my truncated life story. In my attempt to recall the details of my life, I realized that my memory was littered with holes. Decades were absent from my mind, and the names of people who I once considered to be dear friends had been eliminated from my recollection. It was more than my memories, though. Concepts, figures, and formulas that I had once internalized and knew very well were absent from my mind. Even my understanding and grasp of languages had worsened. While it was difficult for me to accept that I had lost my powers, things that made me who I was, the idea of losing elements of my mind, of my very self, was even more distressing.

I was unnerved, but I did not express these feelings in front of Jack though. I remained stoic in my expression as I continued walking forward.

“Wow. So how old are you then?” Jack questioned me with a speck of awe in her voice.

I held my tongue as I considered verbally lashing out at her. While it was simple to infer my age based on what I said, I provided her with a lot of information. She looked like an adult, yet likely never even began her secondary education based on her age and the timetable she presented me.

“I am well over 400 years old.” I curtly stated. “I could not give you a more specific number than that though. I very well may have existed for thousands of years, though if I did, I have no memory of doing so. My past is a long and storied one, but rather than dwelling on what is

ancient history at this point, I would like to know about what happened regarding this... Cataclysm."

Jack almost flinched at my request, yet wasted little time responding to it.

"Well... it started on March 20th, 2015, and lasted for about a month. A massive solar flare wrecked most electronics useless worldwide, and then disasters started happening. Earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, hurricanes, and... a lot of things I don't know the names of. A lot of cities were reduced to rubble, some fell down into the earth, and others burned. Fires broke out in forests, floods happened in places they never did before, storms were wild, and winds tore homes from their foundation. Blizzards followed and froze places that had been flooded, and heat waves caused droughts in other places. Then... things started getting weird after that. Climates changed, these pillars rose from the ground, and giant holes started popping up."

"Or in summary," I began, "I enacted every natural disaster around the world, and society was ill-equipped to handle an onslaught of devastating events the likes of which had never been seen. Afterward, I transformed the landscape and climate of the world into what it is now. Assuming what you are saying is possible, as such things are well beyond my powers as I knew them, how is it that you know my true name? I have not used it in decades."

"When you were destroying the world, you spoke down to people from the sky. I actually remember seeing you once. You were floating beneath a spiraling black cloud, and said something about beginning a new era, one ruled by the 'almighty Abigale Quinlan.' However, you sounded... strange when you said that. You did not sound like you do now." Jack said with a level of uncertainty, as if she was not sure what she saw was real.

"How did the Cataclysm end? What happened after the month passed?"

"Well, the disasters just stopped," Jack began. "Nobody was sure what happened, at least, nobody outside of the Flare Foundation. They were keeping track of you during those attacks and found you in the... remains of New York. The city, the state, and portions of other states were all destroyed by a massive explosion. One they think you were responsible for. Water covered the ruins, and they had to use a submarine to find you buried beneath the rubble. The Foundation then brought your unconscious body to their Arizona base. The one we just left."

I stopped myself from asking how this place was supposed to be Arizona, as its cool and crisp climate was a far cry from the dry and hot atmosphere of most desert environments. The vegetation was not right, the dirt was not right, and even the mountains in the distance did not look right either.

"Once you were captured, the Foundation began doing experiments on you, trying to find the source of your powers. But they couldn't figure it out. The scientists did test after test, but they

could not determine what made you so different from a regular human. Then Miss Flare, the leader of the Foundation, suggested they try... breeding you, your body, with other people. But that didn't work either. Still wanting to take control of your power she, um, well, she bred you with..."

"Myself," I interjected. "I will explain the details at a later time."

"Um... okay. Anyway, Miss Flare had you give birth to seven children over the past 7 years. One of them was born prematurely and perished. I actually saw them die and saw what happened to their remains. They decayed into ash, and you... your body absorbed them. It's why I had you kill your seventh child. Up until her birth a week ago, you would still rapidly heal yourself from any wound the Foundation gave you. When I saw you... like that, I figured the only way to save your life was to kill your child. I thought about doing it myself, but... I just couldn't."

I remained silent as I digested this information with my reduced mental capacities, losing myself in thought, slowing my pace, and drifting my eyes across the scenery once more. At the uneven ground before me, the massive pillars that cast a westward shade, and at the vibrant plant life that surrounded me, namely the trees. I quickly noticed how the leaves on one particular tree were changing from their usual green to a bright and vibrant array of colors. It was such a simple sight, an obvious sign of the change of the seasons, but it was a constant that I'd grown to appreciate over my years. After plucking an innocuous orange leaf from a small tree, I resumed walking and replied to Jack.

"Why would you ever want to save me though? As far as you know, I am the one responsible for the Cataclysm. The deaths of billions. The destruction of modern civilization."

"That's true, I guess," Jack said as she looked away from me. "But I didn't think you were a bad person. You didn't speak with malice when I saw you float through the sky, and you seemed harmless during the 6 years I saw you at the Foundation. I wanted to get to know you, talk to you, ask you why all of this happened, and see if there is a way you could help the world, as, well, things have not been too good. I guess you could say I put a lot of hope into you... when I really had no reason to. Heh."

"So, you regularly saw me for 6 years?" I asked after a brief stretch of silence.

"Well, yeah. Miss Flare brought me into her Foundation about a year after the Cataclysm. She gave me a lot of jobs to do. I had to clean this and that, work the radio system, do laundry for the soldiers, help out in the kitchen, and also look over you and your children... at least before they all escaped."

"My children escaped!? How could your people allow that to happen?"

"In short, they were not the most, um, competent organization... and now I'll never see them again. Or Miss Flare herself... Wow."

"Do you know where my children went?"

"No, not really. They probably have not gotten too far, considering how hard it is to find transportation, but the Flare Foundation actually stopped looking for them after the third child escaped. Too often search parties wound up dead, and the Foundation can't really afford to throw away lives so carelessly. For the next two children, they tried earning their favor and making sure they wanted to stay but, well, they still escaped."

"While they may have given up hopes of apprehending my escaped children, I doubt they would extend the same luxury to me. I would not be surprised if a search party was indeed looking for us now. Jack, do you have any destinations in mind that we could travel to, or shall we continue wandering?"

"Um... I have no idea where we are or where we're going. I was just following you. I mean, you seemed pretty confident in heading north."

I held my tongue as I prepared to tell Jack I had no idea where I was going either, and asked myself *why* I was going in this direction. I had no knowledge of where I was and had gone out of my way to avoid the dilapidated city I saw over the horizon. The answer to what was drawing me to this location eluded me for longer than it should have, but I soon discovered the answer.

When I encountered my seventh offspring, I felt a connection with them, I could feel their location, and in a vague manner, I felt part of myself in them. It was a sensation I had experienced multiple times in the past, during the many instances that resulted in my bodily parts being separated from me. My hands, my torso, my genitals, and even my entire body from the neck down were all separated from me at one point.

While this proved to be no issue due to my regeneration abilities, whenever my body was severed in such a manner, I could still sense every part of me, regardless of the physical barrier in between them. These children of mine are made entirely of my own cells. They are, extensively, my clones. So it is within reason to assume that they would behave similarly to parts of my person. They were parts of me, and I could feel where all of them were... loosely.

I explained this realization to Jack, who reacted with childish glee, commenting on how I was "the amazing Abigale." I snickered at her enthusiasm.

As our conversation went into a lull, we developed a comfortable silence and I resumed examining my warped yet strangely beautiful surroundings. The lush climate continued to surprise me with its variety of vegetation, shifting seamlessly from cacti and desert flowers to deciduous trees and small berry-bearing bushes. It gave credence to Jack's story, which I still

had some trouble believing. She struck me as an earnest and honest person, but I still second-guessed both her and my own sense of judgment. Knowing that my intellect is a mere shadow of what it once was caused me to second guess some of my higher thought processes, such as judging one's character, even though there truly was little reason for me to not believe her. After all, she left a place that presumably provided her with food, water, shelter, and more, and now here she was, by my side, with nothing but her clothes and backpack.

I pushed my suspicions and concerns aside as I continued to head northward, looking at and watching the scenery pass me by while making sporadic idle banter with Jack as the hours passed, and the sun rose high into the sky, and our path was uninterrupted by any other humans, let alone somebody from the Flare Foundation. However, we did encounter a few animals. Small rodents, birds, a herd of deer, several lizards, nothing too remarkable. Their numbers were small, but considering how much damage I had supposedly done to the Earth, I was not surprised to see their numbers dwindle. If billions of humans had died, even more animals would have died along with them, and I'm sure that by disrupting the climate of the world that many species went extinct. It was yet another thing for me to blame on myself, along with the loss of decades of progress, a countless amount of history, and global infrastructure.

As we continued walking, Jack began digging through her backpack, revealing a canteen of water and a small container of dried nuts and fruits. She offered to share these with me, but I reassured her I was fine, as my body did not require any sustenance to function. Even though I felt a tad bit fatigued and parched after all this walking. I told her that it was important that she preserve what we could as we did not know when or where we would happen across our next meal. Unfortunately, she did not have much to preserve, as her backpack only contained a small amount of food and water, with most of its mass consisting of tools like her flashlight and binoculars. I would have scolded her for traveling so lightly, but I knew well enough that nothing about our escape and voyage was planned.

As the day went on, the distance between one of my children and I seemingly lessened, and our travels sent us wandering away from the unchecked wildness and into the remains of a small roadside town. The concrete and asphalt foundation of this worn settlement had been upended by determined vegetation, with bushes and trees growing in unexpected places, and vines enveloping partially dilapidated brick buildings. Buildings that clearly served as a shelter for animals, and likely a few humans, over the years. Windows were shattered, furniture was ravaged, and the large gas station that presumably was the cornerstone of this entire establishment had partially collapsed in on itself.

The entire place was in disrepair, with the majority of the 20 or so buildings that once made up this town being reduced to little more by rubble. Some from wear, others from weather, and two from giant stone pillars that penetrated through the roof and to the sky. It was not an ideal location to spend the night at, but with the sun low, this seemed like the best place to stay for a night. Certainly better than huddling up in the darkened wilderness while nocturnal predators prowled about for their next meal.

I admittedly could continue on my own, but I had to consider my traveling companion. After walking what had to have been at least 30 kilometers of rough terrain, Jack was exhausted. To the point where I assumed she would pass out if we went much further along our path. I let out a sigh before speaking to her.

“We’ll stay here for the night. We don’t know what could be wandering around these parts, so stay behind me as I investigate.”

Jack firmly nodded in response, only to pull out her crowbar from the side of her backpack, arming herself for any potential conflicts. I instinctively reached to the ground in an attempt to pull out a weapon of my own but stopped at my knees bent. Much like how I was unable to dash through this terrain at a speed beyond that of an Olympic runner, I was also unable to shape and form the matter around me.

Jack and I made our way to the local diner, which had seen a substantial amount of damage over the years. Chairs were scattered and most were broken, booths had been ruined by rubble, wildlife, and general wear, while the cracked tiles beneath my feet reeked from what I assumed to be a mix of animal waste and water damage. I was able to find a few things behind the main counter, including several coins, a few pens, a pad of discolored paper, a stack of menus, and three boxes of crayons, but little else beyond crumpled rubbish.

The kitchen was in better condition, but not by much. Pots, pans, and cans were seemingly scattered at random, utensils were covering the floor, and there was a pungent stench coming from a lot of this room. One that was especially potent around a sealed freezer door that I dared not open. Not wanting to leave empty-handed, I began searching through the various drawers for something valuable before discovering a lone serrated knife. With no way to reliably store it, I held the weapon in my hand as I left the dinner.

The next location was an insect-infested gas station that had been pillaged of its confectioneries excluding four cans of corn-syrup-filled carbonated beverages, a couple of sticks of gum, some mints, several stray candies, a container of cheese and crackers that was only still consumable due to the power of preservatives, and three ‘fun-sized’ bags of stale potato crisp that had been trampled on. Jack placed approximately half of those goods in her bag, and placed the others on the counter, saying that it was to make the search easier for the next group that passes through here. I mentioned the foolishness of such an action, but she turned her head away in response, as if her display of considerateness was embarrassing.

We then made our way to a decently sized home filled with tarnished memorabilia, dilapidated furnishings, and traces of lives that I either ended or merely ruined. Since then, this structure evidentially served as a home long after its original owners left it behind, with traces of people and animals alike spread throughout the dwelling. Unfortunately, while they had kept the home

itself hospitable, the kitchen was devoid of even spices and the ground floor had been thoroughly plundered of survival aides.

My exploration of the second floor fared far better. While the first two bedrooms I explored were uninhabitable due to a collapsed exterior wall that gave way to disrepair, and the bathroom was infested with the pungent aroma of mold, the third bedroom of this home was among the most preserved things I had seen since I left the Flare Foundation. The walls were intact, the window frame remained solid even though the glass was cracked, and there was even a collection of toys and children's books disheveled across the room. The sky blue walls were murky, everything was coated in a layer of dust, but the simple inclusion of a twin-sized bed that was neither water damaged or infested with some insect made this a pleasant enough location to spend the night.

Now that we secured shelter for the evening, our next goal became finding food and water, and while Jack did have enough to sustain her for at least a day or two, I did not want to leave anything of value behind in our journey. My first idea involved further salvaging, but upon glancing at the rest of buildings in this roadside settlement, most of which had collapsed in on themselves, I realized there was likely nothing left. I thought about the wilderness, but during our travels earlier in the day, Jack and I were unable to find any wild fruits or vegetables. At least, nothing safe for human consumption. While she *could* eat leaves, bark, and wild cacti, I considered that a last resort. There was also the possibility of hunting for food, but I had relied so much on my abilities that my hunting skills were lacking, and any advice that I would have parted onto others was not present in my mind, much like my master's level understanding of most scientific fields.

As I weighed the options, Jack called for me from downstairs, where she was exploring the home on her own. Upon moving away from a turned over cabinet with the help of her crowbar, she had uncovered a door to a basement. A basement with a collapsed ceiling that was only accessible through a small jagged crevice. Out of curiosity, Jack shined her flashlight through this hole and discovered that it led to a concrete floor on the other side

"Um, Abigale, there might be something in that basement, so could you..." Jack mumbled as she cocked her head in my general direction.

"Sure," I said without waiting for her to finish her request.

I placed out my hand for Jack to give me her flashlight while nonchalantly plucking her crowbar from off the cabinet she placed it on. With these two tools in my hand, I began making my way through a narrow tunnel of dilapidated drywall, lumber, rubble, and metal, tearing away what I could while rubbing my exposed body against the debris, causing cuts to develop along my exposed arms, legs, and midriff. It was painful, but it was nothing that my body could not recover from, and after about a minute of crawling, I made it through to the other side.

Or to be more precise, I fell onto the cold concrete floor below, flopped onto my back, and laid there as my wounds healed, the blood I lost slowly making its way back to my body as the pain lingered in my person and I was reminded of everything I still lacked. My wounds were slower to heal themselves than I was accustomed to, and I still jolted as the small of my back brushed against the stone floor below. I sighed before beginning my search through this concrete room, a room that contained a washer, dryer, and an assortment of other things lined across shelves and in boxes, all coated in copious amounts of dust and cobwebs. It was a typical basement as far as I was concerned, but as I looked further, I saw something far more morose than a neglected room.

The skeletal remains of a human being were pressed against the wall, devoid of flesh, but still dressed in decaying clothing that covered their torso. Despite the garments, I could still tell that something had shattered this person's leg, and it looked to have been an injury prior to their death. I initially assumed that this person must have broken their leg and died from blood loss, but then I saw a handgun. It was caked in dust, appeared to function, and had 11 rounds in it, as opposed to the 12 it could hold. It had been decades since I studied weaponry in any detail, and just as long since I held a firearm, but I was more vulnerable than I had been in centuries, in my entire life from what I could recall, and I knew that having a gun could prove to be very beneficial, so I checked it in as much detail as I could with the aid of flashlight before shoving it into my shorts.

I sighed as I recalled the times I used a similar weapon to end the lives of human beings, hoping that I would never need to actually use this weapon to end the life of another, but quickly found my resolve, recalled what I came here for, and began searching a pantry... and a shockingly supplied one considering how barren the rest of the home was. There were several cans of beans, a bag of rice, a jar of honey, a sealed bag of dried fruit, and a dozen unopened bottles of water. How something like this remained hidden from scavengers for 7 years was a good question, but I truly did not care to find the answer. I found what I wanted, and I was ready to leave.

Upon spending an irritatingly long amount of time moving the non-perishables out of the basement, I turned over to Jack. She let out a childish giggle as she examined these goods, clearly understanding how fortunate she was to have them. She expectantly thanked me for finding all this food, several times, only for her expression to sour and her head to dip before asking me a question.

"Um... How do I cook rice without a stove?" Jack said, adopting an inflection more appropriate for a child half her age.

"Do you know how to start a fire?"

"...Not without a lighter... and I don't have one."

“...Okay. Get some wood and meet me in the backyard. Anything will do.”

While Jack gathered what she could, I sifted through the kitchen to find a pot and spoon that I brought out along with the bag of rice and a single bottle of water. I took them outside the rickety back door of this home and placed them aside while I prepared a place for the fire, gathering what sticks I could find in this largely undisturbed plot of dirt, grass, and weeds while Jack searched for wood. She came outside after a series of loud banging noises echoed from inside the home, barring the remnants of a wooden chair in her hands. I said nothing about that and simply began teaching her how to prepare a fire.

Seeing as how I had grown accustomed to igniting a fire with a mere snap of my fingers, the process took far longer than I had hoped, but eventually, I managed to guide Jack through the act and she started the fire on her own. Cooking the rice afterward was simple enough, and once it was done, she brought the pot back inside, where she began to scoop half the rice into a bowl with some canned beans that, thankfully, passed the smell test.

“Why aren’t you just eating out of the pot?” I asked Jack, who jumped in response.

“Well, I was going to, since we can’t really wash dishes anymore, but I wanted you to have your own bowl so—”

“I require neither food nor water. My body does not need any sustenance to function.”

“Oh, right. Well, even if you don’t need any, you’re probably pretty hungry.”

“Jack, we were fortunate to find this much food, but we should conserve it as best we can. Please eat the entirety of this meal by yourself, and if you made too much for a single serving, save what remains for tomorrow before we leave.”

“...Are you sure you don’t want to at least try it? It’s simple, but it tastes pretty good, all things considered.”

“...Tell me, Jack, how old are you?”

“Um, I’m... I am twenty-one years old. Wow. I actually haven’t thought about my age for a while.”

“So you were only fourteen when the Cataclysm happened?”

“Um, I was actually thirteen back then. My birthday is in May. May 18th in fact. Right now, I think it’s October. October 10th, 2022. Maybe. It’s hard to keep track of the days sometimes.”

“So, I have technically been gone for seven *and a half* years then. Wonderful.” I said with more than a tinge of bitterness.

The conversation died out soon after my comment, and I left the room shortly thereafter, letting Jack eat alone. I stepped out to the backyard once again, drifting my boots through the weeds while looking upwards. Night had fallen just minutes ago, and the once colorful sky was now a navy backdrop interrupted with hundreds of tiny shining lights, and one giant one, a moon that shines brightly enough to cast shadows of the dilapidated landscape that surrounded this home. I observed the sight for several minutes, uncovering constellations I struggled to remember and had not seen in what had to be decades at the very least.

“The stars look beautiful tonight. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this many,” Jack meekly commented as she walked up to me.

Considering how young she was, I was not surprised. Due to the lack of harmful emissions released by automobiles, factories, and light pollution surrounding most urban and suburban centers, the night’s sky had become increasingly barren and orange for a significant portion of the global population. But now, it was clear once more. It was at least one good thing that came from all the destruction I caused, but as I brought my eyes down, and looked over the small settlement overrun with vegetation, illuminated by the effervescent glow of the moon, I grit my teeth. Whatever positives this Cataclysm brought were insignificant compared to the destruction it wrought, and I, more than anyone, should refrain from looking at this reshaped world in a positive light. I sighed, frustrated at my own lackluster mental faculties, before returning my attention to Jack.

“We should retire for the evening. We will leave at sunrise in order to make the most of our limited daylight and to cover more land. Hopefully, we’ll be able to locate my next child.”

“All right. Do you know how far away they are?”

“No, I cannot say that I do. But no matter what, I will find them.”

“I’m sure you will! I’m sure you can do anything you set your mind to! ...Right, I should go to bed. Good night Abigale.” Jack said with a smile before she went back inside.

I remained outside for a while after that, choosing to walk over to the front of the house in order to better take in the world before me. It was a humbling view. One that showed the destruction of human progress and how it was reclaimed by nature within the matter of a few planetary cycles. It was the end result of a truly great disaster, but not one caused by humanity’s own greed, hubris, or stupidity. A disaster caused by me. Enraptured in a deep melancholy that I had intensified throughout the day, I returned to my dwelling for the night, muttering three words under my breath as I shut the door behind me, eager to retire for the night.

"I did this."

Episode 03: B-17 The Bomber



The night of the first day passed with little of note. I simply sat and contemplated matters with my severely reduced intellect before choosing to drift off to sleep well into the night. The next morning came expediently because of that, and Jack and I were free to resume our travels, which continued in a predictable fashion for the next two-and-a-half days.

We walked from sunrise to sunset, stopping at whatever shelter we came across during our travels, even if we had to settle on sleeping in a car last night. Little of note happened during this time until one afternoon when Jack and I found ourselves strolling through a coniferous forest. The trees were far older and taller than the young deciduous ones that filled the surroundings of my journey up until this point, but only about half of them were still alive. The other half either stood dead and decaying or had tumbled onto the forest floor, creating another hazard for Jack and me to wander through. As if the bountiful stones, pits, thick branches, twigs, and pine needles did not give us enough reason to express caution with each and every step. It was a tedious and slow trek, so I was not surprised when I heard Jack speak up from behind me.

“Abigale, could we please stop for a while?”

“Sure. Just do not take too long. We need to find shelter by nightfall,” I said in a plain tone.

Jack let out an affirming “yes, miss” before she began digging through her backpack for one of her remaining bottles of water and an apple she picked from a lone tree we found two days ago. I took this time to sit on a fallen tree and look at my surroundings. While the underbrush was unsightly due to the copious amounts of deadwood, the surviving trees held a distinct beauty to them as they reached high into the sky, some even surpassing the stone pillars that had been a common sight throughout my journey thus far.

I continued looking up at the partially cloudy sky to confirm that the sun was steadily sinking towards the western horizon. I had hoped we would have encountered some form of shelter along our path as we did every previous night, but that was becoming an increasingly less plausible idea as the forest went on and on. While I had doubts that Jack and I would encounter any predators in the night, I was not enthralled with the concept of sleeping in a forest.

Not because of me, but because of Jack. The word I kept going back to when describing her was submissive. She followed me without question, listened to my every word with great attention, and seemed at least a little hesitant towards the very idea of initiating a conversation with me about a matter I had not previously inquired about. At first, I thought she was intimidated, as I am and have always been an intimidating person. Yet as time went on, I began to suspect that it was not that simple. While it could be her personality, I suspected this was a deeper issue with her, but I lacked the mental fortitude to decipher why that was and did not feel right in broaching the subject with her at our current juncture.

I looked at Jack as she steadily chomped away at her apple, taking just enough time to chew it thoroughly, while forcing it down with her water. In her haste, she leaked some water on her fleece jacket. A jacket she obtained on the third night of our journey when we stopped by a deserted town that had been largely destroyed by a sinkhole spanning three kilometers in diameter. It was also where I found a backpack for myself and some far better fitting clothes than what I was squeezing into before. It was a simple outfit consisting of a leather jacket, a well worn green t-shirt, a pair of baggy jeans, and some tennis shoes. The clothes had belonged to a man, but I was no stranger to wearing male clothing.

We continued after Jack finished her apple, but with each kilometer we crossed, our hopes of finding shelter grew slimmer and slimmer. Yet, I had this feeling, this sense that we were growing very close to one of my children, and it drove me to carry on in what truly seemed like a random direction. As twilight began setting in and Jack’s exhaustion became audible through her panting, I finally saw an end to the series of pine trees. I fastened my pace in order to get a better look at what lies beyond this forest, leaving Jack behind by doing so.

As the trees came to an end, I was greeted with the familiar sight of a modestly sized town lush with displaced vegetation, dilapidated buildings, and stone pillars. We would almost assuredly find somewhere we could rest at for the evening, but before we valiantly ventured into the town proper, I wanted to scope it out as best I could. While I had the means of defending myself between the knife and gun I had at my side, I wanted to avoid as much conflict as possible. And

just because we have not run into any stragglers thus far did not mean this town would also be empty.

Once Jack caught up to me, I had her give me her binoculars. From top of the forest hill, I looked down at the town in detail, and while much of it was the usual fare that we had encountered previously, one location struck me as peculiar. Several blocks into town, there was a shopping plaza. The structure had suffered obvious exterior damage through an assortment of means and consisted of three massive stores, facing the north, west, and south. While the east side was barricaded using a wall that stretched on for several dozen meters long, enclosing the shopping plaza and prohibiting entry. My senses told me that my child was somewhere in that suspicious complex, and I had every reason to believe them.

With my destination set, I now had to determine what I would do with Jack. Her panting was audible, and as I returned her binoculars, I noticed that her face was flushed. She was too exhausted to continue traveling and would need to rest. In search of a proper rest stop, I looked down at the contents of the town, the tattered streets, desolate storefronts, crumbling office buildings, piles of unrecognizable rubble, and spurts of aggressive vegetation had all become a common sight over the past three days.

Unable to find a spot that spoke to me as the safest or most secure, I escorted Jack to the nearest intact building, maintaining a slow pace as we did so. I quickly informed her that I planned to explore these three buildings in an attempt to find one of my children and promised that I would come back shortly thereafter. She did not question my actions and let out an "okay" before she took off her backpack and sat on the musty floor. I thanked her for being so agreeable and then made my way.

Upon walking nearly a kilometer, I reached the repurposed shopping plaza and took a closer note of it. While the buildings themselves were only buffered by wear and weather, the wall was very much cobbled together. It was assembled using an extensive list of materials, including lumber, bricks, metal, and even certain types of plastic. All of which melded together in a somewhat sturdy-looking barrier that was made intimidating with the inclusion of the barbed wire, nails, and various other sharp appendages haphazardly aligning the top of the wall.

I attempted to glance over the wall, but even with my tall stature of two meters, I could not get so much as a glimpse. I continued to trail the wall for any obvious door I could use to enter this facility, only to have my search interrupted by a hoarse voice that shouted in my direction.

"Who's there?"

The voice came from the roof of the northern building, and while I turned my head to get a better look at the speaker, the setting sun obscured my vision and made this figure only recognizable through a sun-drenched silhouette.

"I mean you no harm, I simply wish to enter your dwelling. There is something inside that is of importance to me," I said, projecting my voice as best I could.

"No outsiders. Leave. Now!" The speaker barked in an almost automated fashion.

I continued walking closer to them in spite of this, hoping I could somehow convince this guard to let me into this building. They did not appreciate this and shot at me accordingly. I could not see any weapon on their person and was caught off guard as a piece of hot lead embedded itself into my leg, fracturing bone as it did so. I grit my teeth as I fell on the asphalt road beneath me, while a pool of blood seeped out of my leg.

Powerless and with my mind clouded by the continuous pain of a bullet wedged in my leg, I was left with no choice other than crawling away and out of the sight of the gunman who went silent after seeing me draw blood. As I scrounged myself away, my wound healed, and whatever blood I shed returned to my body. I was frustrated with myself as I observed this process and felt the hole that had developed in my jeans, knowing that this would have been a non-issue for me in the past, but I lacked the abilities to mend my clothing, heal instantaneously, and most importantly, demolish the wall that stood before me. Once I regained my composure, I shot a look back at the gunman but found nothing. While this could have been an indication that they left, I decided not to risk it. Instead, I returned to the building I left Jack in and greeted her with a hello.

"How did things go Abigale?" Jack asked with a slightly confused expression.

"The place is guarded by at least one gunman."

"Oh, my goodness! Were you shot, Abigale?" Jack asked as she jumped over to my side.

"Yes. I was shot in the leg but healed from my wounds soon afterward. Now, I just need another plan to infiltrate this repurposed shopping plaza."

"Are you going in alone?"

"Yes. Unless you want to risk being severely wounded in a place without readily accessible food, water, or medical supplies."

"Oh.... So should I just hide here?"

"No. This place is hardly secure, and in worse condition, than some other buildings I ran into. Come with me and we'll find something."

"All right. That's nice of you, Abigale."

“It’s nothing, Jack. Just stay put, keep your head down, and everything should be fine.”

With that decree, Jack and I stepped out of the building, and I began darting my eyes around the tattered streets before us, trying to pick which storefront would be the best place for Jack to hide for the time being. In doing so, my eyes also drifted upwards, where I noticed dim gray clouds looming across the horizon, headed in my general direction. This would have been a bad sign under most circumstances, but when you plan on infiltrating any location, there is no situation more ideal than creeping in during a rainy night, when visibility is at its lowest, and stray noises are covered up by the relentless pitter-patter of a persistent downpour. As I realized this, a smile crept onto my face.

Jack, on the other hand, looked at me with a sorrowful expression, likely from my comment and handling of her. I had nothing against her as a person, but compared to myself, when standing next to an experienced immortal, she was baggage, something that I had to carry as I went on a journey I was not taking leisurely. I did not want to travel this world, and looking after another person made the process both lengthier and more tedious. Still, I was not one to go back on my promises. I said that Jack could join me, and while she has struggled to maintain a steady pace, I recognized her effort.

After several minutes of travel, we happened across a small bookstore that resided between the husks of two other and far larger buildings. Its wooden doors had been tattered and windows cracked, but I was not against dwelling within it for the time being. The important thing was that it was a form of shelter, one that held a palpable musk to it thanks to a mix of old books, decaying animal droppings, and dampened carpet, but it was better than anything else I had happened across.

Unfortunately, for as stable as the store was, it was deprived of the books it once sold, with its library only consisting of a scant assortment of disorganized and battered-looking books, though that was not too surprising. Given how the complex I came across had armed guards, I could only assume that it contained a large group of people, and with all electronics fried on account of the solar flare, books were the most effective means of preoccupying someone’s free time with something meaningful or entertaining.

As I concluded my survey of this building as best I could, it began to rain. The sky darkened, and I was given my best opportunity to infiltrate the facility and murder my second child. I told Jack to stay put, left my backpack with her, and only took my pistol and knife with me as I left, walking out into the darkened streets as the downpour began settling in

Within a minute of walking through the rain, the water had thoroughly weighed down my clothes, and my entire body was soaked. I struggled to see as the rain pelted my face and I could hear nothing other than the sound of raindrops clanging against the ground before me. My tennis shoes became soaked, while my ill-fitting clothes began hampering my movements as they both

clung to and dropped off my body. Nevertheless, I grit my teeth and continued my trek through this dark and stormy night to reach the facility once again.

I arrived at the southern wall, a tall concrete structure devoid of any windows, and while it did have doors, they were both sealed beyond my *current* capabilities. Abandoning this means of entry, I went over to the more obvious choice, the cobbled-together structure that was the eastern wall. I walked alongside it, scanning the tops for a lack of structural integrity before coming across a section made of brick, and with a top adorned by staples and rusted nails. The prevalence of these metal spikes was enough to dissuade any normal person from trespassing unless they wanted an infection or deep puncture wound. I had no reason to worry about such things, but I still took care in positioning my hands against the top of the wall, brushing my fingers against the tightly placed metal spikes.

Unfortunately, due to many factors such as the immense rain, my damp clothing, my reduced arm strength, and the awkward placement of my fingers, I could not clearly cross the wall and wound up slashing my left leg against sharp and rusted metal. I lost my balance, my hand slipped, and I fell to the damp asphalt below, pain and blood gushing from my torn jeans, and my hand was wrecked, with muscle torn, skin ripped, and bone exposed. The pain was intense, but it was nothing that I had not felt before.

Within a minute, my hands once again resembled what they should, my leg was fine beneath my tattered jeans, and whatever blood that exited my person either returned to me or washed away. Once I regained my composure, I stood up and examined my environment as best I could through the rain and darkness. The area between the three buildings that stood before me was, unsurprisingly, a repurposed parking lot. One that contained a few automobiles, several gazebos strewn about, and many plastic chairs scattered seemingly at random.

I chose not to inquire or ponder about what these were for and instead moved across the flat asphalt to a gazebo in order to escape the rain for a moment. Once protected by a roof of some sort, I concentrated as best I could with my limited mind and the persistent sound of rain. I had come this far; I was technically in this settlement; and now, with three buildings around me, I had to rely on my senses to pinpoint where exactly my second child was. And my senses told me to venture north.

I jogged through the rain and past the wooden doors that marked the entrance to this building. An intense darkness sprawled before me as I walked through the vestibule, and I immediately regretted my decision to not bring Jack's flashlight with me. The only thing I had to illuminate this dark windowless room was a series of emergency lights that shined despite the lack of any running power grid as far as I could tell, and from what little light I was given, I could tell that this was once a clothing store of some sort. Various racks of clothing lined my peripheral vision, and while most of them appeared to be empty, others were still full of clothes.

After seeing so much destruction over the past few days, it was actually quite eerie how well maintained this location was. From the exterior, the intact parking lot, and the inside of this building. I wondered if there was any specific reason for this, though it was most likely just coincidence and luck, that this place was left standing while other buildings were not.

With an ample selection of clothing available to me, and my current outfit drenched, I discarded my current clothes and exchanged them for something else from the racks before me. Due to my poor visibility, I settled for whatever I could find, and what I found was a light hoodie to cover my torso and a pair of ill-fitting trousers for my lower half, as it was always difficult for me to find pants that fit a woman of my stature. As for my shoes, I removed them after realizing how their damp soles let out a very audible squeak with each step they made against this tile flooring, and proceeded barefoot.

While I could faintly see things in front of me, the process of searching my child was still a slow one. Because I knew not what lay in the darkness, I had to proceed with caution, looking out for potential traps while honing in and following my senses, which directed me to travel upwards, taking the non-functioning escalator up to the third floor. Almost immediately, my nostrils flared with the scent of body odor, and my ears fixated on the sounds of quiet breathing from what had to be dozens of sources. I had wandered into some form of barracks or bed chambers, meaning that it was all the more paramount that I remain silent in my movements. I laid prone against the floor, crawling and brushing against various beds and couches as I followed my senses towards the direction of my child.

As I did so, I could not help but remark how lucky these people were to have found a place like this in a ruined world. A closed building with thick walls, a proper place to sleep, and blankets to keep them warm. It truly was no wonder why they erected a wall, as I am certain that this, along with whatever remaining goods were in the other two buildings, made them a prime target for scavengers. Not unlike myself.

Regardless, I trod lightly enough to avoid disturbing these people as they slept, traveling all the way across this room to a metal door that stood opposite of the broken escalator. It likely originally led to a back room for employees or managers, and now, it was the last barrier between me and my child. I moved my hand to the cold metal handle of the door and turned it, only to be met with a distinctive click. The door was locked. I could not reach my goal because of a simple lock, attached to a door I knew I could not open using my kitchen knife or handgun.

“Pathetic,” I thought to myself. “Utterly, humiliatingly, sickeningly pathetic. I cannot heal my wounds properly. I cannot run for days on end. I cannot even reliably lift myself over a wall. My mental capabilities are elementary compared to what they should be, and I cannot even open a lock. I’m pathetic. Not even a shadow of what I once was. How can I so much as view myself as Abigale Quinlan? I’m a disgrace to myself. A goldarn disgrace!”

As I finished that thought, I heard a concussive noise from near the door. I had unconsciously clenched my hand into a fist and pounded it against the metal door. The firm sound echoed through the floor, but it did not seem to attract the attention of, or even wake up, the people resting. Probably because, as far as I could tell, there was not any bedding even close to this metal door. Regardless, I cautiously moved away from the door, and prepared to hide away while formulating an alternative plan. Then, after securing myself behind a piece of wooden furniture, the door opened.

As the door was unlocked, it released an artificial light that illuminated this blackened room. Once the door was fully open, the light was only blocked by the occupant of the room, a very short occupant whose presence was accompanied by two things. The sound of snapping and a series of sparks that filled the air around them, making it momentarily difficult to make out any of their features. However, I already knew who they were. They were one of my children.

Based on their height and general proportions, they looked to resemble a five-year-old. Their skin had a soft mocha coloring, jet black hair was in wild disarray, and what would have been a cute face with a liberal amount of baby fat was given a more sinister look to it thanks to a pair of crimson eyes. Beneath their head, they were a somewhat pudgy child wearing nothing more than a pair of panties, colored Seafoam green and adorned with a cartoon bear head placed right in the center. The panties possessed a distorted color, likely owing to a few 'accidents,' while the cartoon bear head adorning the panties was pushed outward by a prepubescent penis.

However, the child's physical details were far from my concern. Instead, I focused on how they were snapping. While limited by unrefined motor skills and pudgy little hands, they were snapping efficiently several times a second. Each snap was met with a familiar noise, but also a small explosion. An explosion that popped up in the air, seemingly from nothing, and appeared around them in a seemingly random location.

"All right, ya dumb fuckies," the child said in a juvenile and high-pitched voice. "Who went and banged on my door? I get very mad when you wake me from nappings. And you know what happens to people who make me all mad 'n' shits? Bam! Bitches get got and they die!"

Their words were punctuated by a larger explosion that illuminated the entire room, as opposed to the controlled small explosions that popped around their person. It was far too obvious what ability this child of mine inherited. Snap Burst. The ability to send small yet powerful explosions throughout the air with a mere snap of a finger. Explosions powerful enough to stop bullets, deflect blades, eviscerate muscles, and shatter skulls.

It was a very useful and deadly power, and it was at the disposal of this child of mine. That is to say, a foul mouth little brat who made it sound like they had murdered several people before mastering the art of verbal articulation. While I contemplated sneaking around and ramming my knife in the back of their head, the regular sparks that appeared around their person made it

clear that such a thing was a poor idea. With my mental processes left dim by the standards I was accustomed to, the best idea I could come up with was among the most obvious. To approach my child directly.

As they continued to shout at the waking occupants of this room, I revealed myself from my hiding spot. We soon locked eyes, and I slowly made my way towards their stubby body. While continuing his perpetual snapping, the child looked up at me with a sour expression, and wasted little time before questioning me.

"Who the fuckdaddy you be? I ain't never seen your face 'round her 'fore. Act-ly, fart that Bismarck. You're an intruder, and nobody enters B-17's place without his permission. 'Cos 'o date, ya gonna die. Bye-bye bizatch!"

Before I could utter another syllable, the child's snapping was redirected at me. Small explosions, their impact the size of a marble, burst across my being. My kneecaps exploded, the nerves to my arms were severed, and my eyes were both decimated. Blood began gushing from every orifice and my mind was too overwhelmed to do anything beyond concentrate on the pain that followed every concussive burst of searing hot agony. I crumpled to the ground as the explosions persisted, and as the relentless onslaught continued, everything went to black.

Once I regained my senses, I found myself laying on the floor, soaked in my own blood. My wounds had largely healed themselves, but my clothing had been reduced to mere scraps. I had died and come back, like I had thousands of times before. I moved my head to see the once smug little brat who murdered me now staring at my naked body in horror. His snapping momentarily ceased, giving me an opportunity to find my knife or gun and strike him while I could. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to put two and two together on account of having my brain exploded and repaired, probably several times. So instead, I approached the child gently.

As I looked down at the frightened little child, I noticed that there was a small puddle of a liquid residing beneath them, one that was dripping from their newly dampened panties, and held a distinct odor.

"Lovely," I thought. "I caused one of my children to piss themselves with fear. I would almost feel bad about this if they hadn't tried to murder me."

"Now then," I said as I looked down at my meter-tall offspring, "if you're done trying to murder me, perhaps we can talk."

"Heh," the child began. "You think you're so tough just 'cos you can survive anything. Well, I... um... I'm B-17 the Bomber! I'm that Boisterously Bodacious, Big, Bad, Braying, Burdensome, and Brain Bursting Brown Baby Boy who goes, Bonk, Boom, Bing, Bang, Bop, and Bamf and Imma kill yo stupid ass to death!"

With as much hesitation as one expresses when swatting a fly, B-17 resumed their frantic snapping and sent me on the painful path of unconsciousness. Eventually, I felt myself get up, my senses partially restored, but I was soon met with nothingness afterwards. They were truly doing their best to explode me until I stopped regenerating, and if my first child's endurance was any sign, I could not survive deadly wound after deadly wound.

How long had this been going on for and how long I had left were both questions I could not answer. I didn't even have the mental fortitude to ponder them. The only thought I could focus on was that this child was trying to murder me, their own mother, and how they might stop if he learned that. I don't know how I conveyed that information to the child, but eventually their snapping stopped, and I reformed my body from viscera to something better resembling a human, clothed only in my own blood. Before standing up to speak with the child looking at me in awe, I felt my way across the bloodied floor and located my equally bloody knife. Which I grabbed and placed between my buttocks as I stood up.

"What do you mean you're my mommy? I ain't got no mama!" B-17 said as they continued to snap.

"You do, child," I responded, adopting a more melodic tone of voice. "I gave birth to you, and you inherited my power. Snap Burst. The ability to cause an explosive blast through the air using only a snap of your fingers is a powerful skill that you were lucky enough to be born with. I'm the one who developed it and the one who gave it to you along with your life."

"Well, how do I know you're not just a dumb stupid bitch liar?"

"Please. Do you not see similarities between us? The eyes, the skin, the hair? Surely you can see something like that... my child."

"I... I don't need a mama! I can do just fine all on my own. I mean, I got all of these fuck-bitches to do what I say. I'd say that's pretty good. Even if ya gave me this power, I'm still more powerful than you. All you can do is die a whole bunch, but me, I can bust bitch's heads like they Californy poopers, I can stop bullets with just a snap, I can--"

"I understand... I understand that you don't need me. But could I just get one hug? I'll leave you to live your own life however you want, but, please, I want to feel you in my arms before you leave my life."

As B-17 contemplated my words, which I used in order to lure the child close to me, their frantic snapping stopped and he moved closer to me. I prepared to grab him up, lock him in an arm, and stab him through the back of their head, but something put a preemptive end to my plan.

A concussive noise echoed through the darkened room, followed by a spurt of blood that erupted out of my child's forehead. Their body then fell to the ground, dead by gunshot.

Episode 04: Zedaki The Zealous



Before my child's body even hit the floor, I turned my head to find their shooter. They were enshrouded in the darkness of this floor, but in the silence that followed the gunshot, their footsteps were audible. They continued towards me, coming closer to the light cast from the open doorway, allowing me to look over their person.

They stood at an average height, roughly 1.8 meters tall, and wore a foppish red jacket that would raise a brow even at the best of times, yet looked absurd given the current state of the world. They wore an elegantly decorated jacket that went halfway to their knees, colored a vibrant scarlet, and adorned with white trimmings. A wide-brimmed flat-topped hat the same vivid shade of red. And a pair of black trousers and brown leather boots that looked to have seen much wear over the years.

Even when the entire outfit was drenched in rainwater, the figure held an elegance as they walked towards me. As they did so, I noticed that they had leather straps placed along their back, one that supported a rifle, presumably the weapon used to kill B-17, along with a sheathed sword placed along their waist. After taking in her outer appearance, I looked up past the shadow cast by the hat and at this person's face.

She was a woman in her mid to late thirties, with fair and light skin, but a scattering of coarse and hardened features, as if the past few years of her life had taken a toll on her. Her eyes were

colored grayish blue while her hair was a stark snowy white, with platinum blonde streaks billowing over her shoulders, looking remarkably long, wavy, and well-kempt considering the state of the world. It made her look substantially more feminine and more elegant at the same time.

As the distance between us narrowed, she adopted a suspicious smirk as she looked over my naked body, and then let out a small chuckle. Her voice was deeper than most women's, possessing a distinctive roughness to her every word, and as she spoke, she did so with a subtle accent that I could only peg as Australian.

"It's not every day I see a bloodstained beauty like you," the woman said to me with a sly look. "I take it you're Abigale Quinlan, right?"

My eyes widened as I heard her utter my name, and I immediately sought to arm myself, pulling my knife out of my buttocks and grabbing my pistol from the ground. I did not know if this woman was friend or foe, and considering the negative connotation the world would rightfully have of me, I could only assume that she would ask me such a question if she intended to bring me harm. As I looked at her with my hands clenching my weapons, I wondered how she could identify me so easily. But then again, how many immortal 7-foot-tall women with dark skin and red eyes are there in this world?

I opened my mouth to respond to the woman in red, but as her eyes drifted over to my side, so did mine, as I looked over the remains of my child, B-17 The Boomer. In the span of no more than a minute, their body had been reduced to ash. Ash that was dancing across the static air throughout this room and towards my person, where it seeped through my skin. Once the absorption process was over, I felt better, more complete, and more powerful. With my explosive Snap Burst ability regained, I would be able to better defend myself from any attacker, including the woman who stood before me. That is, if she revealed herself as a foe.

Upon seeing that process, the many silent observers in the darkness began to speak to each other, expressing confusion or concern over what they just saw. I wracked my half-functioning brain for a response before the woman in red spoke up and silenced the crowd.

"Everybody, calm down, it's me, it's Zedaki. I'm back, the kid is dead, and you have nothing to worry about. Go back to sleep, and we'll clean up his mess in the morning. For now, I need to talk with this woman. You know who she is, you saw what she is, and you should know that she takes priority."

Wasting little time, Zedaki walked past me to turn off the light in the room, immersing us, and everybody in this repurposed furniture show floor into darkness. Once she did so, she moved up to me, patting me on the back before commenting that I should follow her. I shot her a cold look in response.

“Relax, I’m not going to hurt you or anything. From what your little friend told me, I couldn’t even if I wanted to. Besides, you just helped me take care of that little bastard.”

“My little friend?” I reiterated with concern.

“The chick with the crowbar. C’mon, she’s in my office.”

Still housing some reluctance, I followed Zedaki past dozens of people immersed in darkness, silhouettes that murmured amongst themselves and stared at me like I was an art exhibit. Not that I could truly blame them. I was Abigale Quinlan. I was the person responsible for them being in this situation. I am the person who took everything away from them. And even if they failed to grasp that obvious detail, I was still a naked woman.

Regardless, I followed Zedaki as she walked through the darkness, tracing the sound of her footsteps as they pressed against the tile flooring of the clothing store. Along the way, she grabbed a pair of pants and a shirt from one of the clothing racks and tossed them my way. I took a moment to put them on, and to store my knife and gun in the pants, before darting back to her as she exited the store. We then reached the moonlit rain washed parking lot, moments after the storm had ended. Without saying a word, Zedaki took me to the western building in this repurposed shopping plaza, which was once a hardware store.

Unlike the clothing store, the hardware store had large windows near the ceiling of the store, allowing the starlight and moonlight to illuminate the building, albeit slightly. Thanks to that, I was able to tell that the shelves were half barren and half virtually untouched since this store operated normally 7 years ago. Items such as basic tools, furniture, or materials like lumber and brick being hard to find, while flooring, paint, lawnmowers, windows, electronics, and the like all remained abundant on their shelves, with a layer of dust covering them. Surely due to the limited applications of these items and the fact that electricity was hard to come by.

Zedaki and I wandered throughout the entire store before reaching the back of the building, and a door that led into what was likely once an employee break area. It was shrouded in a veneer of darkness due to the lack of windows in the room, or at least it was before Zedaki casually flipped a light switch, causing a fluorescent ceiling light to come on. The room itself was barren aside from a few lockers against a wall, some chairs, and a conference table that Zedaki made her way to before sitting in what appeared to be her usual seat. After letting out a sigh, she spoke for the first time in the past four minutes.

“It’s all right, little miss crowbar, you can come out now!”

With that, a rustling came from a room connected to this one, and out from its door came Jack. Her clothes damp and hair doused in rainwater, while her signature crowbar remained firmly in her hand. Her initial look of worry soon dissipated once she laid eyes on me. Upon letting out a

gasp of relief, she smiled and ran up to me, before suddenly stopping half a meter away from me.

“What are you doing here Jack? I thought I told you to stay in the bookstore.” I commented as I looked down at Jack’s face.

“Um, well, I was going to, but then Miss Zedaki—”

“It’s just Zedaki, little lady!” Zedaki commented as she leaned back in her chair.

“Zedaki came into the bookstore and found me pretty quickly. I tried hiding behind a chair, but she found me pretty quickly.”

“And then you told her about me before she took you back here with her?” I said with a dry disposition.

“Well, pretty much. I told her who you were, and that we were trying to kill your children... and that you went into Madeco. Erm, it’s the name of Zedaki’s village.”

“It’s not really a village, Jack Crowbar,” Zedaki rebutted. “It’s just a settlement where a bunch of people live, trying to survive without the trappings and luxuries of yore.”

“Could you please tell me why you brought me here?” I asked, tired of this back and forward.

“I brought you here to talk. I mean, who wouldn’t have a bunch of questions for the person responsible for all this? The person responsible for murdering what has to be billions of people, directly or indirectly, destroying most electronic devices, demolishing towns, reshaping the environment, and destroying modern human infrastructure as society had come to know it.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you Zedaki, but I don’t have the answers you seek. However, I will tell you what I do know as a thank you for murdering that trigger-happy child of mine. But first, I should start from the beginning.”

From there, I took a seat and regaled Zedaki with what excerpts I could remember of my life, how I existed for hundreds of years— basically reiterating what I told Jack on the first day of our journey. She was skeptical at first, but as the conversation went on, she steadily discarded any doubt.

“So that’s it,” Zedaki said with a sigh. “You destroyed the world and not only don’t you remember why you did that, but you also don’t even know how?”

“Yes,” I said.

"Then, afterwards, you were taken across the country so you could breed an army for this Flare Foundation thing?"

"Yes."

"So who exactly did they breed you with?"

"Myself. I possess both male and female genitalia. I assume they extracted semen from my male genitalia and artificially inseminated me using that."

"...I got a pretty good look at your naked bod and didn't see any dick. Or balls."

"They are retractable. My primary sex organs can recede into my body. I am not sure why I have such biology, I simply do."

"I'd say that's weird... but that's not even in the top three weirdest things I've heard or seen in the past hour. So now what? You're going to go find and bury all your children?"

"I could not bury them effectively before their bodies dissolve into ash and return to me after I murder them."

"Which happens because..."

"I do not know. But by murdering them, I regain the abilities they inherited. Meaning I can cause small explosions with just a snap." I commented before snapping and causing a small concussive burst that rippled through the air.

"Gotcha... So what'll you do when you get your powers back?"

"I destroyed the world, am responsible for the deaths of billions, and once my powers are restored, I will try to make amends for what I have done and restore the world to its former glory."

"Heh. So even with all the power in the world, I guess you're not really a selfish little git, are ya?"

"I have little reason to be selfish excluding the prolonging of my own amusement, which would be hard to come by when the world is in shambles."

"You don't need to tell me that," Zedaki said with a snide smirk. "Being in charge of 51 people can be tough, especially when they get bored so goddamn easily."

"So, you are the leader of this settlement?"

“Well, we try to do the whole democracy thing, but yeah, I’m pretty much in charge of this little space we like to call Madeco.”

“Um, excuse me, Miss Zedaki, how did you end up running this place?” Jack commented from the other end of the table.

“Oh, I almost forgot about you little Miss Crowbar. Speak up more often, kid.” Zedaki playfully said.

“Anyway, I guess I could share my story, just so we’re even. Sadly, my origins don’t involve centuries of turmoil, great powers, or living a good chunk of my life in an underground bunker. I was a bright-eyed Swedish girl whose parents were relocated to Perth, Australia. Nice place, spent my formative years there, made some friends, went to Uni, got myself a degree, worked for about two years, and then got a job offer out in California. I was hesitant at first, but after looking at the salary they promised, my choice was clear. I said farewell to my friends and family before getting on the second-longest plane ride of my goddamn life.”

“I was set to arrive on March 20th, 2015 at 13:30 local time, but right as I was about to land, a bloody hurricane appeared out of nowhere and sent the plane crashing down. I somehow managed to survive, but was left stranded and alone in a foreign country as the world was going to total shit. After the worst— the absolute fucking worst— day of my life, I crawled out of a hastily chosen shelter to see a destroyed city, with dead bodies littering the streets like common refuse. I had nowhere to go, no idea where I was, and basically no hope.”

“Not wanting to fight for my life in the remains of the city I landed in, I decided to travel. Wandering from town to town, scavenging what I could, and trying to be civil whenever I met another person along my destinationless journey. Most of the time we simply passed by and said nothing, other times we briefly traveled as a pair, and a few times they tried to kill me. Needless to say, the killers all failed, and most of them died in the process. Why anybody would think a wooden baseball bat would beat a sword is beyond me.”

“Anyways, this went on for about two years before I stumbled upon Madeco. It seemed like the perfect place to prosper in the apocalypse. A shopping plaza with a massive clothing store, hardware store, and a warehouse full of preservative-rich food and other tat. There were only about 17 other people living here at the time, so they were happy to have me join their little makeshift society. In exchange for doing some work and handing them my sword.”

“Things were going just peachy for about two years as we survived off of semi-stale snack foods, a greenhouse that was converted into a garden, some makeshift solar panels so we could see at night, and filtered rainwater. But then some raiders showed up and started stealing our stuff. The leader of Madeco, former leader I guess, tried negotiating with them, but their demands were clear. They wanted everything we had and for us to leave with nothing, which

was not gonna happen. We tried to create a wall to keep them out, but the project was a bloody crapshoot and the raiders kept breaking away at it, killing three people in the process.”

“With that failure behind her, the leader of Madeco chose to attack the raiders at their base, and, using a shoddily constructed propane bomb, lit those fuckers up... along with herself. It solved the problem, but someone else had to take reign of this place, and the privilege fell on yours truly.”

“All things considered, I’m pretty impressed this place has lasted for so long,” I commented while ignoring her loss.

“Yeah. Let’s just say that the warehouse store has a lot of food that’s still good past the sell date, having three rooftop gardens is enough to feed a lot of people, and we’re lucky those solar panels came with a good installation guide. Things were actually going really well for a while, but then some shitty kid showed up and exploded five people’s heads before announcing himself king of this place.”

“After seeing his powers first hand, and being rather attached to my face and the idea of, you know, living, I ran away, hoping to come up with a plan to murder this twerp. From what I observed, the little bastard could deflect bullets, blades, or blunt objects with a mere snap of a finger. But his ability would not help him at all against another explosion. Or more specifically, a bomb.”

“That night, I returned to Madeco by using my keys to the hardware store and got to work on crafting myself a bomb. It was a pain in the arse to build, but after a helluva lot of frustration, I managed to make a small explosive that would mess that kid up something fierce. With dawn approaching, I left to make my move, but as I entered the car park, I was met with one of the most morbid sights I’ve ever seen in my life. And I say that as someone who once slept in a school bus full of kid skeletons.”

“A rank stench led me to a pile of unrecognizable fleshy chunks that I could tell were the remnants of at least ten people. I couldn’t stop myself from letting out a shout, calling out the little bastard, and demanding that he show himself. It was a brash and stupid move and might have given me away. Knowing I would not survive a direct confrontation with the little shitstain, I left Madeco once again, planning to return in the night and hoping that the pile of flesh wouldn’t be bigger.”

“Considering he was on the third floor, and behind a metal door, I doubt he would have heard you shout.” I pointed out.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Zedaki said as she adopted a dour expression, clearly upset with herself. “But I had no clue where that bastard would have been. I didn’t get to do a headcount, but I hope I didn’t get anyone else killed.”

"Well, that explains your absence, but how exactly did you meet up with Jack?"

"Maybe you should ask her yourself."

"Oh, me?" Jack asked cautiously.

"Jack's a common name, Miss Crowbar, but I don't see anybody else here."

"Well, in that case... about two minutes after you left Abigale, right after the rain began, a woman entered the front door, and I hid behind a shelf."

"That is to say, an empty two-sided bookshelf that you could easily see through. So not a very good hiding spot." Zedaki interjected.

"I, um, I then pulled out my crowbar and tried sneaking around her and running away, but then she spoke. I looked up to her, and saw that she had a rifle pointing at me. I put down my crowbar and asked her not to hurt me... which she didn't."

"I never had any intentions to. Especially since you started crying after I pointed the gun at you. Anyways, from there I began to question Lady Jack, and she told me pretty much everything I needed to know, and more. Admittedly, I was pretty quick to believe her story about an immortal woman on a quest to murder her children, but I was on a quest to kill a kid who could blow people up with a snap of his sticky fingers, so I was ready to believe anything."

"We then left the bookstore and went to Madeco. Zedaki used her key to get into the back of the hardware store and left me in this room while she... um, I think you need to tell this part."

"Ya think? Anyhow, I assumed that baby boom-boom was in the clothing store, 'cos there's a bedding area in there that my people usually sleep in, and as I entered the store, I found a trail of wetness lining the floor. Curious, I followed it up to the third floor, only to see the door to my repurposed bedroom open wide, lighting up a body that was being blown to bits before the child suddenly stopped. I waited until you started talking to the twerp and his guard was down. Once that happened, I lined up a shot with my rifle and hit him right through the ear."

"Thank you for doing that, Zedaki. And thank you for not harming Jack." I commented, deciding not to mention how I was seconds away from stabbing B-17 in the brainstem.

"Speaking of Miss Jack Crowbar, what's her story? If we're all exchanging tales, that's the least she could do." Zedaki said as she leered over at Jack.

"Um, okay. I was left alone for about a year after the Cataclysm, making my way as I could, before I ran into the Flare Foundation. I helped them out as best I could, but then Abigale

worked up from her coma and I chose to help her instead... kind of abandoning my home in the process. That's about it."

"Damn, your level of detail is stunning, milady. Were you a novelist before things went to shit?" Zedaki said with a palpable quantity of sarcasm.

"Um, sorry, I just don't like talking about my past as much. The Flare Foundation was, um, something."

"Relax, I won't pry. A lot of bad stuff has happened since the Cataclysm, and a lot of people don't like to talk about it. I mean, there's a lot about my past that I'd never end up telling you guys."

A small silence settled over us after Zedaki said that.

"So, where are your 'senses' saying your next child is?" Zedaki asked.

"I can feel multiple children, but the feeling is both vague and faint. I believe I was lucky that B-17 did not stray too far from the Flare Foundation, but my other children have traveled far further."

"Wait, B-17? That's the bastard's name?"

"It was an abbreviation for an utterly asinine title that I deliberately chose to forget," I commented.

"Okay... So, your next destination must be pretty far then, huh?"

"I can only assume it is. It may take me months, if not years, to find all of them. Especially if they are traveling themselves."

"Hmm... Miss Quinlan, what if I told you that I had a way to quickly travel across the land?"

"I would be skeptical."

"Heh. Then follow me, and I'll shatter that skepticism of yours."

Zedaki then stood up from her chair and began to leave the room, beckoning Jack and I to follow her. We walked through the darkened hardware store for about a minute before Zedaki stopped and pulled out a flashlight from her scarlet jacket.

The light revealed a sedan with an almost retro-futuristic look to it, harkening back to the 1960s with its more circular design, yet holding a sense of modernity to it that was exemplified with the

presence of solar panels adorning the roof of the car. Beyond that, the car was painted a very eye-catching red, a slightly more saturated hue than the colors Zedaki dressed herself in, and it possessed resilient-looking tires.

Naturally, the sight of a vehicle like this, and one that looked to be kept in a rather pristine condition, was surprising to me. Jack shared in my surprise as her jaw hung open upon seeing the car, much to Zedaki's delight.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?"

"How did you come across a vehicle like this? I was not even aware that solar-powered vehicles were available to consumers." I remarked as I took a closer look at the car.

"A week ago it just showed up a couple of kilometers from Madeco. Not sure what kind of Gods I pleased to end up with something like this, but I'm not one to question this sort of thing."

"Why exactly are you showing this to me though? Surely you're not going to just give me something so valuable."

"I'm not. The car's mine, and seeing as how you're the best bet people have of, you know, rebuilding civilization, I figured I should give you a hand. I'll drive you where you need to and put a few bullets between your kids' eyes. All I want in return is for you to make things better. That, and to see Madeco become a proper town... and maybe a statue... or three."

"Heh. I'm not one to make extreme promises, but I think I can manage that," I said with a lighthearted smirk.

I then exerted my hand to Zedaki, which she shook firmly. We exchanged smiles before turning to the vehicle and seeing Jack looking at its engine.

"Jack, what are you doing?" I called out to her with a sense of distrust in my voice.

She then immediately retracted her hands from the vehicle and redirected her attention to Zedaki and me.

"Oh, sorry. It's just that I... I recognize this car."

"Wait, what?" Zedaki exclaimed while I thought something similar.

"Ah, yes. Miss Flare actually took me on a few drives in this car. She used to call it the Blazing Beelzebub, though I'm not sure why."

Zedaki let out a laugh as she heard Jack's explanation.

“Man, how incompetent were those Flare Foundation fucks if they just left something like this in the middle of nowhere?”

After Jack responded with a nervous laugh, Zedaki took both of us to the back room we were just in and through a door to a room that was repurposed into a small sleeping area. She left us there for the night and promised to return in the morning, advising us to get to sleep sooner than later. After using Jack’s flashlight to examine the small room, Jack and I fell asleep on the fully furnished beds left out for us. Jack fell asleep rather quickly, smiling as she wrapped herself up in a thick blanket, while I stayed up for a short while, cautious about both Zedaki and whatever would come next.

This all felt a bit too convenient, and even though things were indeed going my way, something about how well things were progressing left me a little paranoid. Regardless, I lacked the fortitude to ponder things in as much detail as I would desire, and instead allowed my dark surroundings to lull me to sleep.

Episode 05: Beelzebub The Blazing



After a restful yet eventless slumber, I found myself pulled into the waking world once more by the shrill cry of a young woman.

“Rise and shine, ladies! We’ve got a world that needs saving!”

As I shot my eyes open, I was met with my crimson-clad savior from the other night, Zedaki, looking down at Jack and I from our borrowed beds with a smirk on her face.

“C’mon, if we’re gonna be leaving today, we may as well do it bright and early. I whipped up some breakfast for the two of you in the conference room. When you’re done, come see me in the courtyard... which is what we call the parking lot.”

“I appreciate the thought, Zedaki, but I do not require sustenance,” I said as I removed myself from my bed.

“So, you can survive a bullet to the head and you don’t even need water to live. You got any other powers I should know about?”

“Currently, no. But I hope to accumulate many within the ensuing days.”

“Heh. In that case, come with me. But you, Jack, enjoy your breakfast. You could really stand to get a little meat on your bones.”

“Y-Yes, Zedaki,” Jack said with a yawn.

Zedaki then guided me out of the makeshift bedroom and repurposed break room, its table sporting two plates of cabbage, green beans, and assorted grains, before we returned to the repurposed hardware store.

“So, we need to move the car, the ‘Blazing Beelzebub’ as Jack called it. I could do it myself, but—”

“Why let an able body go to waste, especially when it does not experience fatigue like a normal human?”

“Not what I was going to say, but sure. Let me pull the break and we’ll start pushing.”

After a brief walk to the crimson vehicle, we did just that, pushing it forward and throughout the barren halls of this desolate store. It was a simple process, but like with all bouts of physical activity I have embarked on these past few days, it brought me despair on at least some level. I would have once been able to perform such a feat by my lonesome and move five times as fast. But now Zedaki had comparable strength to me. Fortunately, as I began to stew in such self-loathing for what had been stolen from me, Zedaki redirected my attention by continuing our conversation.

“So, are you planning on bringing Miss Crowbar along with us?”

“Yes,” I replied, “I promised that I would allow her to travel with me. It is the least I could do after she saved my life.”

“Oh, so that’s how you work? Somebody saves your life and you grant their wish?”

“No. I simply repay my debts. I have kept very few debts throughout my life, yet I always make sure I pay them. In Jack’s case, that means allowing her to travel with me until I find all of my children, as we agreed on. In your case, you will receive a proper town along with numerous statues dedicated to you. Though I must admit I never fully understood such a desire. Likely due to my lack of any true mortality.”

“Um, I was kidding about the whole statue thing. I really just want a place I can live in comfortably till I croak and homes for the people of Madeco. I mean, they’re not all great people, but they’ve been through hell and a half. They deserve some happiness.”

"I agree. I am unsure how exactly I may help once I regain all of my abilities, but I will do whatever I can to help your people."

"Thanks Miss Q. Shame about those who are beyond help. Few things are more upsetting than burying those you tried and failed to protect after some twisted fuckwad turned their innards into rotting giblets."

"I understand. I've lost more than just a few people who were close to me. Far, far more than just a few."

"All right, I won't pry about your past unless you wanna tell me about the wars you fought or whatever. Though, from what you told me, at full power you would win pretty much any war. Like, ever."

"Even in victory, war is wrought with loss."

"Did you wake up on the wrong side of bed, or are you always this melodramatic? Anyway, I think this is far enough Abi." Zedaki commented as we reached the asphalt center of Madeco.

"Understood. Also, please refrain from calling me Abi."

"Um, okay. How about Gale?"

"Please, just Abigale. Quinlan is also fine, though, you don't seem like the formal type."

"Whatever floats your boat... Say, if you want to get some clothes that, you know, fit you, there's a section in the clothing store that should work for you. It's near the back of the second floor. Oh, and take this." Zedaki explained before tossing me a rechargeable flashlight.

"Thank you, Zedaki," I said before departing from my eccentrically dressed companion-to-be.

With my new limited light source, I ventured into the clothing store once again, with the purpose of finding a new outfit. With little but faint emergency lighting and my own flashlight, it took me some time before I got the lay of this abandoned store and began looking for clothes that had not been pillaged thoroughly, and that fit my frame. It was a challenge that had persisted for much of my life, being a woman of an unusually tall stature who had to commission clothing from a tailor, seek out a specialty shop, or simply wear clothing intended for men when no other option was available to me.

While none of the clothing in the tall section of this store was quite large enough to be my size, I was able to find three outfits that would suffice for the time being, and I would be comfortable wearing. None of them were something I would have willingly purchased if I had other options,

and none of them had the same formal look I often adopted with my choice of clothing, but I could settle.

As I made my way out of this former store, I caught a glimpse of a mirror placed on a support pillar. As I looked at this reflective surface, it occurred to me that I still had yet to look at my face since I woke up four days ago. I let out an unconscious sigh of relief as I shined my flashlight at the mirror and soaked in my face and confirmed that my face, the most notable aspect of my appearance, was as I remembered it being.

My skin, my nose, the shaping of my visage, every detail that defined the core and most prominent part of my appearance was as I remembered it, and I let out a small smile as I made this revelation. While I loathed my appearance during certain parts of my life, it was a constant in an ever changing world, because no matter where I was, and what era I was in, the woman looking back in the mirror would always be the same. And now, even as the world has been torn asunder, that fact remains true. Even without my powers, I was still me physically, still reprising the same youthful and attractive features I always have.

Satisfied by what I saw, I turned away from the pillar and noticed another light that was coming through this darkened store, one that was shining directly at my face. I narrowed my eyes as I looked beyond the light and at the one who wielded it. A woman, one who looked to be in his late thirties. She had long curly red hair, a gaunt freckled complexion, green eyes, and had what looked to be permanent shadows cast under her eyes. She was dressed simply in a well-worn hoodie, a pair of ill-fitting jeans, tennis shoes that looked to have seen far better days. The woman looked at me with surprise as I shined my light on her, and she immediately began speaking to me.

“So, you’re Abigale Quinlan?” She said in a confident and deeper voice.

“Yes, yes, I am. Is there any reason you’re conversing with me?” I replied with more passion than necessary.

“Do I truly need to state a reason why I would wish to speak to the person responsible for the deaths of billions, destruction of global society, and—”

“I have no memory of the events leading up to the Cataclysm, much less the Cataclysm itself,” I curtly replied. “As such, I cannot comment on what I did during it, or my reasons. I understand that I did exponential harm upon the world, and I will attempt to rectify my actions.”

“Hmm. That lines up with what Zedaki told me when I asked her. So, how exactly do you plan on doing this? On ‘rectifying your actions’?”

"I will first need to locate and murder my children," I spouted bitterly. "Afterwards, my abilities will be regained, and I shall be granted enhanced strength and speed, the ability to transform matter into whatever it is I wish, and many other others."

"With those powers you intend to... do what exactly? Reconstruct everything you destroyed? That hardly seems practical."

"No. That is not my intention. Reconstructing everything is greatly unviable, and instead I will create what I can in order to substitute what was lost. I am aware that this task shall be monumental and will take decades, if not centuries, for me to help restore human civilization to where it once was."

"Indeed, it will. But if you know the costs of this commitment, why would you ever bother dedicating your life—which I guess never ends, lucky you—to doing something like that? Why should I, or anyone else for that matter, believe that you would do something so arduous, time consuming, and selfish after you destroyed basically everything?"

"I have done nothing but harm people, likely taking away their livelihoods, homes, families, and friends," I admitted with more than a twinge of loathsomeness in my voice. "I demolished towns and caused destruction unlike any other. Nobody should trust me or believe in my story based on that fact alone. Yet I have been fortunate enough to receive help from Jack and Zedaki."

"Are you sure that you can actually change anything? Even with your ability to change the weather, fly, and... transform matter, do you think you can rebuild everything you wrecked? Destruction is easy, especially when you have crazy godlike powers. As for creation, that's a lot harder for anyone to do."

"I am aware of this. However, I remain the best hope for humanity, and I intend to do whatever I possibly can to make amends. If you don't believe me, I understand. From your perspective, I would not even believe myself."

"Heh... you truly are not what I was expecting. I never introduced myself, did I? My name is Vivi Gaimz and... I must apologize, that was needlessly aggressive of me. The past few days have been very stressful here at Madeco, with that child of yours appearing and dropping our population back to 37. It is upsetting and, well, you are an easy target for just about anyone. Regardless of what you recall, you took people's lives, their homes, their families, and their friends. It makes it hard for people to simply hear your name without being pissed off, like I was after I heard the news from Zedaki."

"You do not need to explain yourself, Vivi. Your reaction is justified and, as I have been saying, I will try to make up for my unintentional wrongdoings as best as I can. In order to do that though, I will first need to leave Madeco along with your leader."

"I understand. For what it's worth I, and probably everyone else here, want you to succeed on your journey. I mean, it's not like you can make things much worse after all."

Following that, Vivi left me be, and I made my way out of the clothing store with my new outfits in tow. While my conversation with her was unexpected and somewhat annoying in how confrontational she was, she raised a good point. For all my talents, my ultimate goal was an extreme one, one that I would likely be spending much of my existence trying to achieve. However, I felt it was too early to consider that course of actions, especially when considering that I am unaware of the true extent of my powers. Destruction on a scale such as this was beyond my powers as I knew them, and maybe, just maybe, with these new powers, I could truly rebuild the world into something stupendous.

Putting those thoughts aside for the moment, I made my way across the parking lot and was soon greeted by Zedaki.

"Hey Abigale. I just saw Vivi go into the clothing store a bit ago. Did you meet up with her on your way out?"

"Precisely."

"Heh. Sorry if she caused you some trouble. Miss Gaimz is a pretty reliable person, but she is not the most welcoming to strangers, and seemed to have a major chip on her shoulders about you. She may be annoyed now, but once he's living in the proper town of Madeco and can get a decent hot shower for once, I'm sure she'll peach right up."

"Thank you Zedaki, but there is little need to comfort me on these sorts of things, and I know that there is much about this world that I ought to improve."

"But first, you gotta kill yourself another baby. I getcha."

"Another four children to be precise, and I doubt all of them are true babies."

"Oh, right, I guess 6-year-olds aren't really babies, are they... man, it's been awhile since I've seen a real kid. Not a kid like Jack, I mean a real little guy who grew up after things went to shit."

"Given the current climate, I would not be surprised if children are uncommon... Do you have any idea what the planet's population might be?"

"It's hard to say Miss Q, it's *real* hard to say. I think I've only met maybe three hundred people since the Cataclysm ended, but it's not like this Arizona was super populated or anything to begin with. There might not be a lot of people here but in, say, California, I'm sure there's at least a million people. There's gotta be."

“Do you think that my children would have made their way to California?”

“Pfft, like I’d have any bloody idea where your kids are. I didn’t even know they existed until two days ago. If they are anything like that bomber brat, I’m sure they’re harassing other communities and gorging themselves on candy bars. That little turd ate at least three pounds of chocolate. I didn’t even know that kids could eat that much without blowing chunks.”

“Anecdotes aside, we should concentrate on leaving.”

“Yeah, I was putting a few things in the car. Some food, water, extra clothes for Jack and I, tools, a couple books, CDs, spare gun, ammo, your backpacks, the works. We’re about ready to go, but first I need to say goodbye to my people. They should all be awake in a few minutes. Oh, and if you want to change, head into the hardware store. ...Or you could just strip here if you want. These people already saw plenty of your naked body last night.”

Taking that remark in stride, I began making my way to the hardware store, and examined the parking lot as I did so. It still retained a sort of lived-in and organized quality that I observed last night, but there was a curious absence of any of the bodily parts that Zedaki had mentioned finding yesterday. I could only assume that meant that B-17 further desecrated the remains, reducing them into an unidentifiable sludge that was likely washed away in the rain and into the grayed asphalt I was walking on.

Upon reaching the hardware store, I headed into an isolated aisle, which was to say any random random aisle, and began changing out of my ill fitting clothes into something both better fitting. I chose to wear a navy V-neck sweater that went three quarters of the way down my arm, a pair of black pants that left my entire ankle exposed, and a pair of basic gym shoes that covered my feet and fit them.. decently. It was far from the most elegant thing I had worn, but it would suffice. Plus, based on my current track record this outfit, much like the one I wore before it, would be destroyed in my next encounter with one of my children.

After dressing, I began to examine this store in greater detail, with the slight illumination from windows going a surprisingly long way to brighten up this place, though I still required the use of my flashlight to move with ease. I perused the shelves for any useful tools I would need along my journey, but failed to find much better than the knife that I placed in my pocket. Before ending my exploration and returning outside, I further tested out my regained power, and snapped my fingers. A familiar sensation went through my arm, and a small explosive pop burst through the air. I practiced it a few more times and then smiled, knowing I had indeed come one step closer to becoming myself again. Though, this was easily the last ability on my priority list.

I then returned outside to see a group of twenty-something people standing in front of Zedaki, who was easy to identify thanks to her scarlet jacket and hat. Not wanting to be seen by this

crowd, I positioned myself behind a vehicle parked near the store and listened in to Zedaki's speech from afar.

"—Yes, I know, I am leaving right after I returned, and leaving you all to pick up the pieces after 15 lives were taken by that fucking bomber bastard. It is not a decision that I want to make, but an opportunity has come up that I simply cannot refuse. I know that all of you were shocked to see Abigale Quinlan, the woman responsible for the Cataclysm, last night. I was too. And as I learned last night, she is currently going on a journey, traveling across the nation, with the ultimate goal of restoring the world to some semblance of its former glory. To do this, she needs allies, and I have chosen to become one of said allies. I will help her along her journey, and in the end, all of you will be given better lives. No longer will we need to squabble around in an abandoned store or ration our food, and no longer will we need to live in the dark all the bloody time."

"You are free to disagree with my decision, but I will be a companion on Miss Quinlan's quest. I cannot guarantee if I will come back as, to be honest, I have next to no idea what I'm going to find, and if I will even survive. Still, this is the best shot Madeco has for survival. The best shot humanity has to regain its former glory. In my absence, I will task you all to coordinate yourselves. I trust you all to maintain this society and to continue improving Madeco. Now then, the day is young, and I should begin my journey. I don't know where or how far this journey shall take me, but know that I will be thinking of all of you as I face whatever comes my way."

As her speech came to a close, the people seemed to be reacting to this news in an expectedly mixed manner. Some seemed to agree with Zedaki's decision, others were disapproving or disgusted. At least based on what I could tell from 30 meters away. As they dispersed and some approached Zedaki, I began trying to channel my senses once again, focusing on the location of another one of my children. The sensation was very faint, implying the child was far away, and the best approximation I could make was that they resided northwest of here. After focusing on the location, and after the crowd left, I approached Zedaki, who wore a look of worry on her face for a second before adopting a more confident expression.

"I've never been one for public speaking, but that went pretty well all things considered, wouldn't you say?"

"You said what you needed to and spoke with honesty. Once cannot ask for much more than that."

"Yeah, yeah... so you ready to hock your clothes into the trunk and ditch this place?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. I have already sensed my nearest child, and they appear to be somewhere northwest of here. However, the sensation is extremely faint."

“So you mean to say we’re in for a long drive? That’s fine with me. At least we have a direction to point ourselves towards.”

“True, things could always be more dire and less directed. Now then, I believe we have everything we need and simply need to reconvene with Jack. I did not see her when I was changing in the hardware store. Do you have any idea where she might be?”

“She is literally right behind you.”

As Zedaki made this comment, I swerved my head backwards to see Jack, dressed in her fleece jacket with her signature crowbar in one hand and a candy bar in the other.

“Seriously Jack? That’s all you took?” Zedaki commented upon looking at Jack’s hand. “We’ve got more candy than we know what to do with. I know it might be a bit stale, but take what you can get.”

“I know. This is all I want. I don’t really need candy, and know it is not the best for me.”

Zedaki then chuckled before rustling Jack’s short hair, slightly messing up her pixie cut.

With that interaction out of the way, I placed my new clothes into the packed trunk of the car, and proceeded to get in. Initially, I proposed driving the car, as I was a skilled driver despite how rarely I had need for a car, but Zedaki seemed steadfast about being the driver. Respecting her wishes, I made my way to the passenger seat while Jack settled her way into the center of the backseat.

Zedaki then drove the car to a specific point in the wall protecting Madeco, one made out of various light yet sturdy metals. An older man walked over to grab a handle on this section and undo a series of latches, revealing that it was a gate. Zedaki slowly drove through the gate while thanking the man, saying one last goodbye to him before she began driving along the roughened road, swerving into the ground next to it when things became greatly uneven.

Following my instructions, Zedaki began heading to the northwest, sticking to the area around the roads in hopes of being able to drive along intact asphalt, and maintaining a reasonable speed as she did so. She rightfully valued this vehicle as our only real hope of accomplishing our goal in a reasonable amount of time, and was concerned with safety above speed accordingly.

She cautiously swerved past the desolate husks of buildings that once made up the small desert town that Madeco resided within. Moving past the ample greenery and protruding stone pillars effectively robbed this town of whatever loose identity it had prior to the Cataclysm. As the minutes passed, we eventually escaped the boxy roads of this decimated town and were cast along a wide open road, albeit one lined with abandoned vehicles, assorted refuse, and nature

trying to take hold of these ruins. Zedaki confidentially maneuvered around this wreckage though, allowing us to eventually reach a strip of empty road.

With the steady drive continuing and nothing demanded of me at the moment, I began to take a closer look at this car's interior. I took note of the fine finishings applied to the dashboards, the comfortable adjustable seating, the clean gray coating of the interior, and the sleek nature of the body. It was certainly a very nice way for us to travel. However, the mere existence of this vehicle was suspicious, and far too convenient for my comfort. Sometimes, remarkably good things may happen by pure chance, yet many times, the reasoning behind them only leads people to misfortune. I would have pondered things in more detail, but I lacked the mental fortitude to do so with comfort.

As I continued my observations, Zedaki looked over my way and decided to break the silence that had fallen over the vehicle.

"I forgot to ask earlier, but I take it that neither of you ran into anyone since you started this journey of yours, right?"

"Unless you count a skeleton I uncovered in a basement, no. We have not seen anyone else wandering, nor have we run into any other groups or settlements." I replied.

"Y'know, I'm pretty sure that most people have started gathering up into little societies or tribes, as it can be hard to survive on your own," Zedaki began. "Hell, since everything's been raided to shit, people pretty much need to start living in communities and start securing shelter, hunting what they can find, and growing their own food. Though, hunting's kind of tough. There are plenty of critters about, but not as much as there once was. Animal populations were hit pretty hard, and while some of them breed like crazy, their numbers are not back to where they used to be. Or so I'm told anyhow. Though, that's just from what I've seen, which isn't much in the grand scheme of things."

"That is true." I replied. "Given my abilities, it is entirely possible that the climates across the world are wildly different. I could have ignored certain parts, while others could be complete destroyed. However, we have no real way of knowing."

"Erm, actually, I really meant it when I said that the *entire* world was affected by natural disasters," Jack chimed in. "The Flare Foundation did a survey of most countries to determine the damages. I believe they said that... the western United States was within the fortieth percentile of their perceived damages. Whatever that means."

"Seriously?" Zedaki spouted. "So most other countries got it a helluva lot worse than us? Goldarn."

"The fortieth percentile means that this section of the nation experienced below average damages in the Cataclysm. Specifically, less than sixty percent of all other nations," I explained.

"Oh. Sorry, I was never the best student, and didn't really get an education beyond middle school," Jack melancholically stated.

"I am aware, Jack, and would not have expected you to understand percentiles."

"Wait a tick, how the hell did the Flare Foundation do a survey of most countries?" Zedaki questioned. "What kind of resources do they have there?"

"I don't really know," Jack began. "But they have a medical team, a mechanical team, and a lot of food and water. Even if it is not always the best."

"I have to say, I'm surprised that this Foundation hasn't been raided yet," Zedaki commented. "People killed and died just to rob from Madeco, and that place seems like an honest to goodness treasure trove in comparison."

"Um, actually, the Foundation has been attacked several times over the years. The soldiers are usually far better shots than any sort of raider."

"The Foundation has bloody soldiers? How on Earth did Abigale's kids escape when you've got soldiers patrolling the place?"

"Firstly, my children are all granted with unique abilities beyond those of a normal human," I explained. "Secondly, nearly all patrols feature some sort of blind spot, or could be broken up by some form of distraction. Thirdly, due to their small stature, it is easier for children to hide after fleeing, and even if they were caught, they would be able to defend themselves with their abilities. For example, B-17 was able to defeat those you appointed to protect Madeco and killed a total of 15. While trained soldiers would have a better chance of defeating him with fewer casualties, I doubt they would have fared much better unless they knew what they were dealing with ahead of time."

"Um, can we stop talking about the Foundation for now?" Jack meekly requested.

"Yeah, sure," Zedaki replied "I said it before, but I get it, emotional baggage is something everybody has these days, and it's not right to go snooping in someone else's suitcase."

From there, another awkward silence spread across the car for several minutes. Minutes I spent looking out at the scenery, watching the greenery that had encompassed the few dozen kilometers fade out into a hilly field that stretched out across the horizon, only broken up by the occasional uneven sections of Earth and the omnipresent stone pillars. I had become strangely

used to such sights over the past few days, but I was still beyond disgusted by the fact that this was all my doing.

Thankfully, another distraction came to prevent me from indulging in such bitter thoughts, as Zedaki reached down to the space between our seats and pulled out a disc binder. A small black case that she flung into my lap before giving me a simple request.

“Play something. This thing’s got a CD player and I’m sick of sitting around in silence.”

Looking through the binder, I was greeted with a collection of CDs spanning decades, genres, and a variety of artists. Yet I could only recognize a scant few. I had fallen out of favor with popular culture in the recent decades, failing to keep up with mass media, and only catching it in snippets when in environments where the television and radio were both on, casually blaring media to any onlookers. While I might have once recognized some of these albums, my memory was still filled with holes and fragments, robbing me of any confidence I would have in selecting an album at random. As such, I neglected my duty and lobbed the binder to Jack, asking her to pick something out instead.

She thumbed through the discs slowly and curiously, looking at them with what was either intensity or confusion over the concept of disc-based audio media given her age and the time in which she was born. After a minute of searching, she finally made a selection and leaned forward to put a blank CD with the words ‘*Chao Garden*’ and ‘*Mecha Yuri*’ written on it in a marker.

It was an experimental electronic album that made heavy use of samples from other media, and had a very relaxing quality to it. It made for good background music that served to dampen whatever tension was lingering on in the vehicle after such an eventful night, and once its 2 hour run time came to a close, Jack continued to manage the music for the remainder of our day. The music we listened to included the classic and critically acclaimed new wave album *Stop Making Sense* by The Talking Heads. The eccentric *In The Aeroplane Over The Sea* by Neutral Milk Hotel, which held similar calming and psychedelic qualities as the prior album, but even more so with its bizarre lyrics and the unusual cadence of the singer’s voice. *Dude Whatever It’s Summer 2012* by Team Teamwork, a mashup mixtape that was both energetic and elegantly arranged, with songs fading well into the next and the tone fluctuating comfortably as the music played. Along with *Road to Jupiter* by Wolfgun, a bombastic electronic album that would have served as a quality soundtrack to a rousing space epic.

The audio selection continued for several hours while Zedaki led us through idle banter, primarily about the world that was effectively lost through the Cataclysm, along with minor details about her past. Both her and Jack seemed to be guarded about certain details of their past, which I respected. As for me personally, I tried to inform them of relevant information about myself, based on the limited knowledge I could access. It was honestly something of a defense mechanism for myself, as I truly did not want to focus on the music playing in the background.

For whatever relief and entertainment value the albums held, they served as burning reminders of what I had lost. They reminded me that I lacked the analytical prowess that I had grown accustomed to and could not deconstruct the tracks or album as a whole in as elegant or effortless of a manner as I could have earlier in my life. I did not want to think too hard about anything, as I knew my sophomoric observations would only bring me despair, but as the conversation picked up, I found myself with no other option.

“So, Abigale, what sort of music are you into?” Zedaki asked me while keeping her eyes focused on the road. “You seem like the sort who doesn’t really listen to anything other than classical or orchestral stuff, but you’re nothing if not full of surprises.”

“I never listened to much music,” I began. “I paid little mind to entertainment throughout much of my life, and often busied myself with the accumulation and application of knowledge above all else.”

“You still could have listened to some Mozart or whatever while hitting the textbooks.”

“I could have, but I chose not to. I can read at a rapid rate, and had little need to dilute my attention with audio as I did so. And when I listened to music, it was more of an exercise to see what was popular and what people were capable of doing with this artistic medium.”

“...Somehow, I’m not surprised by that, ya goldarn brainiac. What about you, Jack?”

“Um, I was never really into music, I guess,” Jack replied. “I only really started listening to it when Miss Flare played things back at the Foundation. And what she did play was... erratic, I guess would be the right word. She played a lot of songs that were mashed together and, come to think of it, I think she might have played some of these albums before. Um, what about you Zedaki?”

“Eh, I was never into music for much of my life, and only really learned to appreciate it after I found a solar-powered CD player and a disc shop during my travels. I listened to whatever I could get my hands on, but never really committed myself to a genre or anything like that. I was just happy to have something to eat away at the loneliness of existing in these trying times. Over the years before the Cataclysm, humans have become increasingly reliant on electronics, and I was no different. Every day I would close things off in front of my television, watching shows, films, or playing a game for a few hours, and... I really miss that.”

“Just being able to have everything at your fingertips and be able to immerse oneself in entertainment. Most people had more immediate concerns to worry about at first other than how their phones didn’t work any more, but at the same time... damn do I miss just having my phone, being able to do whatever I wanted to with just an app and a flick of a finger I’ve definitely heard more than my fair share of bitching over how primitive and shitty things are now

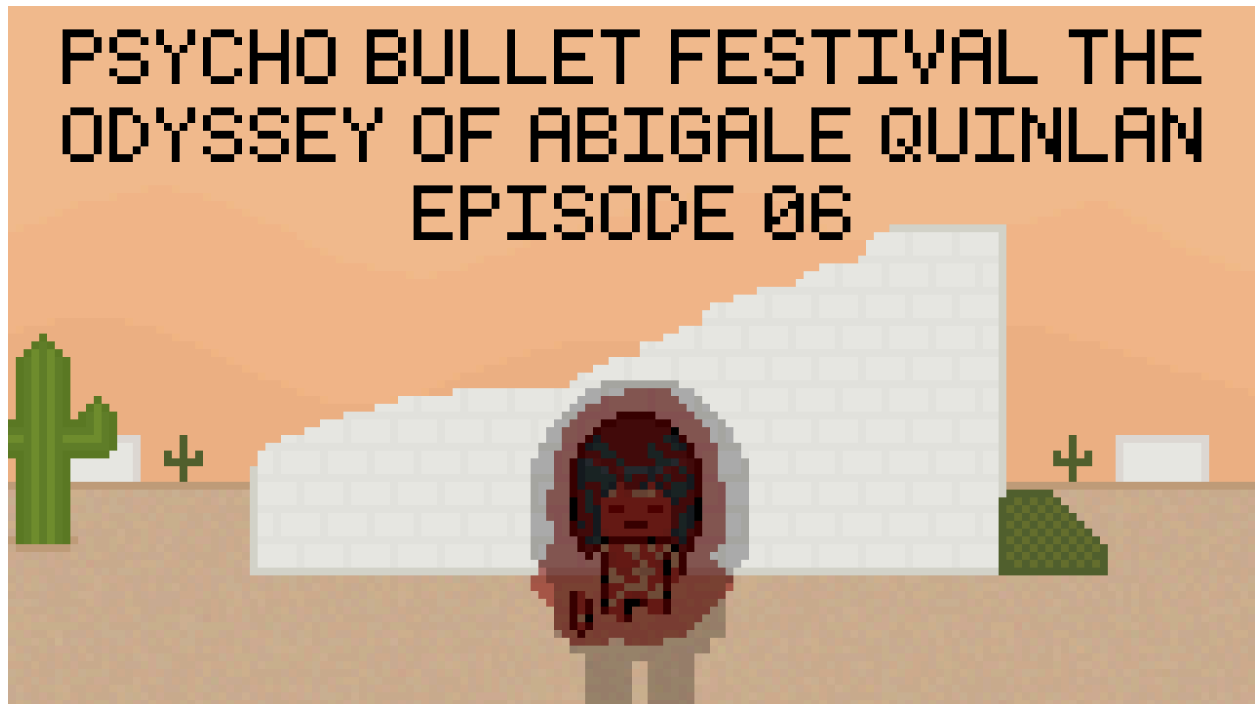
by comparison, and while survival is the ultimate goal... it'd be nice if I could live long enough to get a new smartphone. Just to reassure myself that things are okay once more."

As Zedaki continued her observations, I tried to keep pace with her, but as my mind began working near its subpar max capacity, I found myself recoiling from the conversation due to my pride. If I had nothing of substance to say, I would rather say nothing, and I did so as Zedaki kept the conversation going while music filled the background. From discussions of food, school, or various other bits of nostalgia that they clung to. Jack steadily grew attached to Zedaki as these conversations went on, sharing personal details willingly, while I only offered non-answers and dismissals of how I was above these things. Being so distant and disconnected upset me... but I found myself with no superior approach to get through this conversation.

As their talks continued and hours passed, I returned to preoccupying myself by looking out at the world. Eventually, the stone pillars began disappearing from our surroundings and the uneven Earth began to smooth out, at least to an extent. For a brief stretch, it looked like a normal desert... but then the old anomalies were replaced by new ones. Greenery left this land, with the dirt being a browned orange and the young trees being replaced with desert fauna. The stone pillars vanished, but were replaced by plateaus that rose half as high into the air, bearing the remnants of homes on the top of their surfaces, clearly conveying their true origin.

These plateaus were contrasted with divots into the Earth, forming large and wide holes, many of which had become shallow lakes, but most were merely a half-formed grave for all the homes, refuse, and rubble that filled them. It was a jarring shift, and while not quite as extreme as what I had seen prior, it indicated just how much things had changed due to my actions, and just how much work would need to be done if I wanted to return to Earth to its former state.

Episode 06: Marz The Mightiest



While idle banter filled the majority of the fifth day of the journey, Jack, Zedaki, and I were still making rapid progress, as Zedaki's car swiftly carried us across the vast landscapes before us, even as she erred on the side of caution. In total, we likely traveled 250 kilometers in a single day, only ever stopping for an afternoon lunch break and pit stop when we happened across a series of bushes. At this rate, and considering the lack of readily available transportation in these modern times, I figured it would only be a matter of days before I located my next child. However, I knew our traveling would need to be paused come evening.

It was not until around 15:53, as signified by the car's clock, when we finally chose to begin looking for a place to spend the night, or as Zedaki put it, possibly the next few nights. While we were absurdly fortunate to have access to a solar-powered vehicle with the Blazing Beelzebub, it would take many hours for it to gain the energy necessary for another full day of travel, even if the clear skies remained. Thankfully, Zedaki managed to find a dilapidated small town that would serve as a decent resting place.

The sights of buildings in disrepair, reduced to rubble, or reduced to a blank and empty lot were a sight I had grown accustomed to and glossed over as I walked out of the car to stretch my legs. Leaving the car parked in as inconspicuous of a location as we could manage, the three of us stuck together while exploring in case we uncovered anything dangerous, where it be another human or a wild animal. Keeping together, we rummaged through various abandoned

buildings, passing by a tattered residential area, and searched through some dilapidated shops, failing to find much that had not already been pillaged or soiled. It felt like yet another run through yet another abandoned town, with the only difference being how this one seemed slightly more desert-themed, and had less plentiful vegetation that could serve as food.

Unfortunately, the land had been stripped bare of valuables based on our initial search of the town center, and by the time we began to redirect our efforts elsewhere, I felt something. I could sense that one of my children was drawing near. I quickly informed Zedaki and Jack, both of whom readied their weapons. Jack tightened her grip to her crowbar while Zedaki pulled her rifle off of her back. Having given my gun to Jack during the long car ride, the only weapons I had at my disposal were my knife and my fingers. A well-timed and well-positioned snap would be enough to incapacitate most targets, and I was confident that I could kill whatever child I encountered within a matter of seconds with this ability. Unless they inherited my immortality, that is.

In preparation for their arrival, we positioned ourselves near a half-destroyed building. I told Zedaki and Jack to hide behind standing chunks of wall while I stood in the open, hoping to draw the attention of whatever child would approach me. With my Snap Burst ability restored, I should be able to tackle anything thrown my way, and while part of me wanted to negotiate and talk to my children, I recognized that this process would be easier if I recognized my children as enemies. Once in position, I began to scan my eyes along the nearby street, waiting for my child to enter my field of vision so I could land the first hit with a snap of my fingers. However, they did not come from the streets. They came dashing through the building right in front of me.

Through the cloud of dust that came with the destruction of the brick wall before me, I could make out the details of this child of mine. Despite having been born less than 7 years ago, they already appeared to have fully matured into an adult and were a massive one at that. 2.3 meters tall and coated in muscles. Their body was thick and refined to an extreme that was rarely, if ever, seen throughout my centuries on this Earth.

Their face was hardened and locked in a vicious looking scowl, one that signaled hostility to all, while a mane of black hair ran down their meaty shoulders and to the center of their dark tan back. They were clothed only in what looked to be a makeshift pair of underwear that I could barely observe, meaning that a pair of breasts remained uncovered on their chest, though their size and the honed nature of their torso made them look like part of their pectoral muscles.

The stern features of their more masculine face seemed all the more intimidating as they gazed at me with their vibrant red eyes, as if they were marking me as prey. However, I was above simple intimidation and focused on stopping this massive being as they dashed towards me. Wanting to cease their dash before all else, I shifted my vision to the child's knees and let out a succession of snaps with both of my hands. The explosions were small, but more than enough to tear away the skin of the knees and shatter the bone that laid beneath it. Normally, this would

have stopped a person dead in their tracks as the pain began scorching through their body, their brain begging them to cease movement, lest the injuries worsen. But that did not happen.

Instead, my oversized child continued his dash and tackled me. They carried my body through a small slab of wall that was behind me and continued carrying me until I hit another, far stronger, wall. The collision of my body against the brick exterior of the building shattered my ribs and broke my back. The pain both immobilized me and assaulted my senses. Yet I was able to retain consciousness as my child looked down at me, pressing their giant hand against my torso to prop me against the wall.

"I am Marz... the mightiest," they said in a deep and boorish voice. "I know you have power. I want power. You will give me power."

For a brief instance, I questioned how Marz assumed that he could receive my power if he were to murder me, let alone that I had powers, but I quickly pushed such inquiries aside. Instead, I had to retain my focus on killing this brute before their assault continued. With only my Snap Burst ability to rely on, I aimed for the arteries in their neck, hoping that they would at least bleed out before their assault could truly murder me.

I tried moving my fingers in order to snap, but the most I could do was meekly wiggle them around, unable to so much as form them into a fist. In fact, I could barely move my body beneath my neck. With a single strike, Marz must have damaged my nervous system and rendered me mostly immobile from the neck down. Despite having already slain two of my children, I was still so weak, and so easy to incapacitate. I offered my child a scowl as I realized this, and in response, he moved his hands away from my torso and clenched them into fists.

He assaulted me with punch after punch, shouting onomatopoeia while he rapidly laid incredibly devastating strikes against my torso and face, pinning me to the wall with the force exuded from his limbs. I could not move, could not defend myself, and could barely even think as my entire body ached in agony, more and more with each successive hit.

I lost track of how many times I had been hit around forty. But eventually, the onslaught stopped. My entire body had grown numb, and I was left to fall into a pile of dirt that had absorbed copious amounts of my own blood. I laid on the ground in horror while my senses failed me. I was unable to see the world around me, hear anything beyond a loud ringing sound, and my body was left numbed to the point where I was not even sure if I still had legs or an intact face.

I cannot say how long I was in this pitiful state for, but when I returned I was greeted by a blurry image of a figure in red, standing in the distance, shouting at Marz as they continued to loom over my body.

“Oi! Fuckhead! Ya think you’re the big shit just ‘cos ya caught someone off guard like that. Come fight me if ya think you’re worth half a shit. ‘Cos I doubt you could last even a bloody fuckin’ minute.”

That taunt proved effective, as Marz began walking up to Zedaki.

“Zedaki! Don’t! They’re too strong!” I shouted, blood pouring from my broken mouth

Yet Zedaki neither heeded my words nor fell with the same ease I did. As my vision cleared, I could see that she adopted a combative stance, and had both her sword and rifle ready. Before Marz even made it within punching distance, Zedaki already shot them squarely in the shoulder. However, I had doubts that it would do much beyond annoy the being, doubts that were soon proven right as Marz quickly shook it off. Yet immediately after impact, Zedaki took the initiative and stabbed Marz’s arm, piercing through muscle and down to their bone.

I tried standing up as I observed the escalation of their fight, but my arms were still numbed, and I was unable to do much beyond wiggle them slightly. I could feel sensations returning to my body, and feel the skin and muscles mending between the shattered portions of my torso, but it was slow, gradual, and it would take thirty more seconds to heal. An insignificant amount of time in most circumstances, but in battle, a single second marks the difference between life and death, and I did not want to have Zedaki risk her life any more than she needed to. I was indebted to her, and would not allow her blood to be spilled on my behalf.

While enraptured by feelings of inferiority and pain, I was approached by Jack, whose face paled when she looked at my body, with my organs shuffling around and skin mending itself. She whispered my name and looked at me, clearly at a loss for what to do. I told her to hide away, yet she remained standing, gazing at me before glancing at the battle with Zedaki and Marz, and then returning to look at me. I wanted to comfort her in some way, but could not find the words through all the hurt and pain.

I had not expected to find one of my children in this state. In the form of a fully grown adult, and having access to a level of power as immense as this. Even before the Cataclysm, my strength was far from this level, and my durability was as well. I tried to ponder how it was even possible that one of my children could access such power.

I then briefly recalled a vague instance where I tried to maximize my strength and speed through rigorous training. A pursuit I gave up on in order to devote more time to the pursuit of academic fields. If this child had been devoting its entire life to getting stronger, they would naturally be stronger than I normally was, if not stronger than I have ever been. As for why this child of mine had the form of an adult, that was a question for another time and place.

Eventually, I felt the strength and feeling return to my entire body, and I began to slowly stand up, wobbling as I did so. Jack let out a gasp as she looked at me, but upon seeing my bitter

gaze turn to her, she scampered off while I took a few uneven steps closer to the battlefield. Zedaki swerved around Marz's fast and impactful strikes, relying on cheap shots and underhanded tricks to try and topple this behemoth by slashing away at his now bloodied arms.

However, I could tell that this was a form of exertion that she was not used to. She was only narrowly dodging the strikes and even lost her distinctive red hat with a punch that could have snapped her neck in two. As I observed from a distance, I aimed at the back of Marz's skull, hoping that my concussive bursts could penetrate their brain. While a strong body could push through most forms of pain, the body would always cease to function without the brain. And if shattering Marz's knees did so little to deter them, this was my only reliable way to take them down.

I took a deep breath before I began snapping as intensely and quickly as I could, causing a pitter-patter of miniature explosions to occupy the back of Marz's head while they were facing Zedaki. This grabbed Marz's attention and they, after brushing off another stab from Zedaki, redirected their attention at me, yet again. My rapid snapping continued as they dashed at me once more, prompting me to dive to the side, thrusting my unclothed body into stony rubble.

My dodge proved effective, but Marz was able to turn around far quicker than their large form would have suggested. In my assault, I had given Marz a bloody neck and caused their long jet black hair to come off in clumps, but they were now three meters away from me. I tried to dodge once again, but Marz predicted my movement and kicked me onto the ground. Before I could even attempt to get up, Marz stomped his feet against mine. With their muscle mass and height, they must have weighed at least 200 kilograms, and all of it was concentrated on an area of my body where a cluster of nerves is centered and containing many small and easy to break bones. Needless to say, I was throbbing in pain yet again.

Before I could even get over the peak of this second session of suffering, Marz stomped their feet forward to my legs, continuing past my knees and up to my torso. There was no course of action I could reasonably take to escape from this fate, as I was unable to focus my effort into snapping my fingers, much less properly control them as my body was being assaulted by stimuli. I truly was powerless to defend myself at this moment, and recognizing this fact instilled me with an immense breed of disgust.

I had once been the most powerful being in all of the known world, and now I was near death for the third time in a week. Even if I did survive this strike, how long would Zedaki be able to preoccupy them for? Would I really be able to kill them with my Snap Burst? These thoughts occupied my mind as Marz took time in stomping my body, clearly taking pleasure in the screams I involuntarily exclaimed with each strike.

As Marz made their way to my upper torso, about to shatter my shoulders, I worried that it was indeed all over. Then, the stomping ceased. Marz stood still for a moment, a strange expression

was adopted on their rough face, and finally, their body tumbled over, crushing my left arm as they fell down to the ground.

I paused for a full second after observing this, dumbfounded and surprised at the sudden death of this mighty threat, lacking the thud or bombast that one would expect from a gunshot or a truly lethal blow. I tilted my head to them as best I could to observe my fallen child more carefully, and I determined their cause of death immediately. A tattered blue crowbar piercing the back of their head. The tool's long claw was shoved deep into Marz's head, and based on the exact location, it appeared to have penetrated their medulla oblongata, thus causing an immediate failure of the heart and lungs. I then looked up from this sight and saw Jack looking over Marz's body, standing completely still with a look of exasperation on her sweat riddled face.

A pool of blood had gathered around Marz's head, and they were no longer moving. Going against my body's wishes, I reached my right arm over my demolished torso and to Mar's body, which began to dissolve into ash as I touched it. Their physical form gradually faded away into the familiar substance that floated over to me, where it seeped and became one with my tattered but healing body.

I smiled as I finally realized the battle had ended, and that we had emerged victorious. I let out a small chuckle after it occurred to me that I would truly be dead if not for my two companions, and would need to repay them back far more generously than I had originally intended. I lifted myself off the ground once I regained the strength, and moved with surprising ease. Even as I lifted myself off the ground, I could tell that I regained the strength and agility that I once had and lost to Marz. And while I might not be as proficient or powerful as they were, I was elated as I lifted an arm and clenched my fist, power reverberating throughout every facet of my being.

With a smile adorning my face, I turned to Jack. As our eyes crossed, the worry and dread that painted her visage gave way to a smile that reflected my own, her relief so palpable that she was practically glowing.

"Thank you, Jack. You saved my life yet again" I calmly said as I approached my young ally and gave her a pat on the head.

Jack then burst into a loud squeal of affection and pressed her body against mine, giving me a hug. I began rubbing her head and hugging her with one arm in response, allowing her to embrace my naked form and shoving her face into my exposed breasts. After nary three seconds of this, Jack pulled herself away from me, her face flushed with embarrassment as she averted her glance away.

I then turned to Zedaki, whose face was strained by the worry and stress of combat. Yet she was still holding onto her rifle, almost instinctively reloading it as she looked at me with a snide grin.

"Thank you Zedaki," I said, my voice light and soft. "If not for you, I would not have made it. I do not know how I will make this up to you."

"Eh, just saving the world will be enough... but I'll keep that in mind if I ever want a castle or something," Zedaki said with exhaustion before giving me a wink.

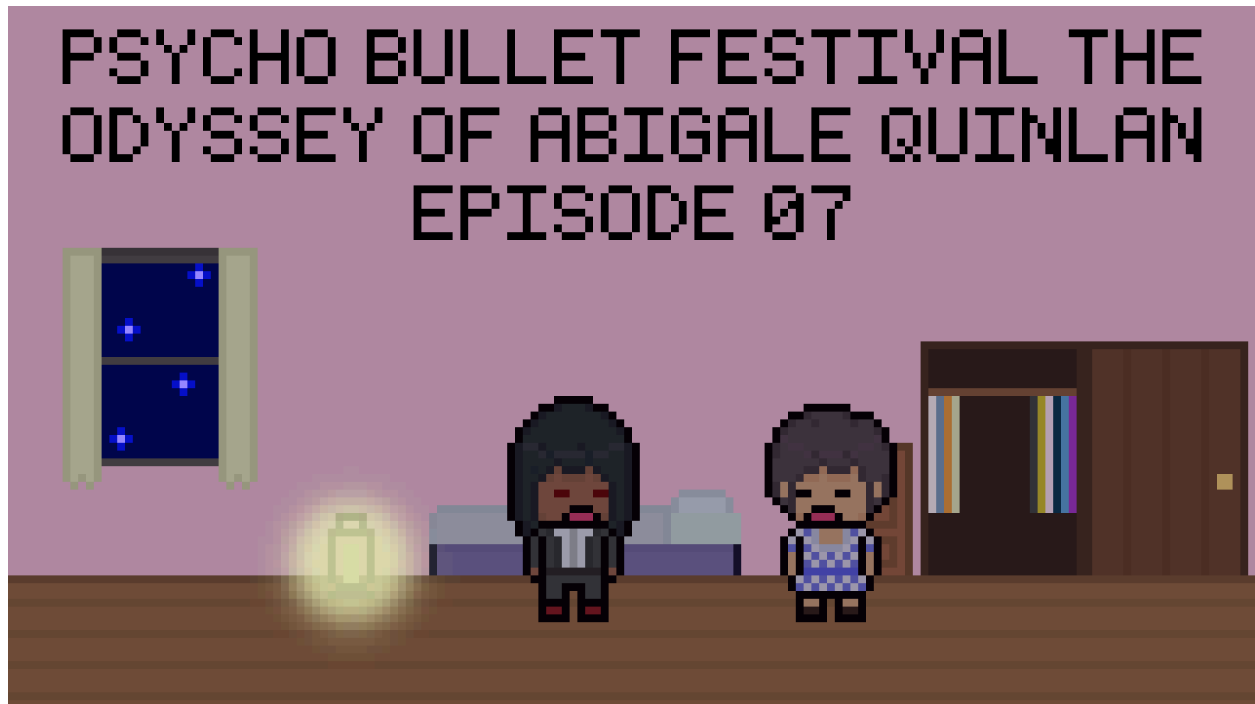
After I looked at Zedaki, noticing her ruffled platinum blonde hair, I began to look for where her red hat had ended up. It was located further along the street, crushed by Marz' large feet and reduced to a flattened object. Zedaki slowly made her way to the headwear and fluttered it in one hand before flinging it aside.

"The longer you draw breath, the more things get taken from you. An absolute that sure is bloody true nowadays. But at least the bastard didn't cleave my head off." Zedaki mused as she began examining her surroundings.

After letting out an exasperated sigh, Zedaki turned to me and inquired if I obtained Marz's abilities. Curious myself, I looked down the street and set a destination for myself, a streetlight roughly a hundred meters away that miraculously remained standing, and dashed towards it. With speeds reaching up to 50 kilometers per hour, I was able to go there and back in a matter of a few seconds, surprising Zedaki as I returned to her side, and leaving Jack stunned as she looked on from the distance.

Wishing to further express my powers, I ran towards some rubble and picked up a particularly large piece, weighing approximately 70 kilograms. With a target set, I effortlessly lifted the rock above my head and tossed it before me, throwing it over 50 meters. It was a spontaneous decision that proved to me that I had truly regained my powers and caused a wave of contempt to flow across my being. After only a few days of this, I was already starting to feel like the person I once was. As I made this revelation, I looked up at the setting sun before me and smiled. For as awful as the world was and for all the pain I had been subjected to, things were looking up.

Episode 07: Jack The Joy



Shortly after dealing with Marz and reassessing our current location, Jack, Zedaki, and I resumed exploring the half-destroyed desert town we found ourselves in, searching for a place to spend the night. After only a few minutes of searching, we came across what was once a neighborhood that, like much of what we had seen throughout this place, was in a state of great disrepair. Yet between the assorted rubble and debris resided a home that stood tall, with a roughened exterior that protected an interior that had weathered the years well, all things considered.

The signs of animals who once dwelled in this abandoned residence were clear, with a small nest being made in one of the kitchen cabinets, and traces of droppings. It certainly gave the house something of an odor, but Zedaki seemed insistent that we sleep in here rather than our clean and comfortable solar-powered automobile with suitable legroom and reclining seats. A vehicle that Zedaki quickly drove closer to our dwelling for the evening after we settled on it.

However, finding a suitable resting spot was not the only major concern of my companions, who had both grown hungry after a hectic battle and the hours since their light lunch. Despite packing several days worth of food, Zedaki was insistent on scavenging for things and began pillaging about the various cabinets of this home, and its mostly empty pantry. All she found were some tea bags, a bag of processed potato chips, some canned dog food, a lukewarm soda, and a collection of spices.

"Well, it's about as good as what we found during our first few days," Jack commented with a smile on her face.

"Most of which we still have stored in our backpacks," I began. "I understand your desire to save food during our travels of indeterminable length, but if I need your help in fighting my children again, the two of you need proper nourishment."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Zedaki muttered. "We could use our supplies, but I like thinking of them as a last resort when traveling. While we're out like this, it's best to live off of what we can salvage or hunt. Though I doubt we'd find much rummaging around at night."

"Wildlife around here is surprisingly rare," I interjected, "but considering the human population is what it is, I would not be surprised if all life on the planet experienced a significant decrease, if not being wiped out completely. I loathe to think how many species went extinct after the Cataclysm. If not because of the disasters themselves, the ecological shifts would have assuredly wiped them out by the dozens. I could say the same thing about plant life, but that has continued to thrive, as it always seems to. If we desire something to eat, I am certain that I can prepare something edible using local fauna."

"It's not that I don't trust you to cook up anything Abigale, but I've had a lot of bad run-ins with eating random plant life, so I'm not up to taking many chances with whatever cacti or berries you think *might* be safe to eat. I'll go look around a few stores for now, maybe I can find something else. I've been doing this for the better half of the decade, so I know what most other scavengers tend to miss."

"Um, should we come with you?" Jack meekly asked.

"I've been cooped up in a car with the two of you all day, so I'd like a bit of alone time, if you don't mind. You know, enjoy the quiet, stretch my legs— and the rest of me after fighting off that big bastard. Anyways, I'll be back in an hour or less."

With that, Jack and I were left alone in this small home, carrying a flashlight in her hands. With the sun having nearly entirely set, and the room we resided in only being illuminated by an electric lantern that Zedaki grabbed from her car. We began searching the home and drawing the curtains for no more than a few seconds before Jack's stomach let out an audible grumble, much to her embarrassment.

"Heh. Sorry."

"No need to apologize, you have every reason to be hungry."

"I guess, but I was never one to have much of an appetite. Even when I was at the Flare Foundation and had access to better food, I still probably only had 1,000 kcals a day."

"What kind of food did they have at the Foundation?"

"Um, lots of stuff. There were also basic things like sandwiches, soups, meatloaf, and eggs among other things. Though, most people only got rations from what I heard. There's actually a very large greenhouse located at the heart of the Flare Foundation, so we also had lots of fresh vegetables and such during the summer and fall. We also had loads of frozen meals and would randomly have them some nights. And not just basic things. Stuff like paella, nasi goreng, schnitzel, yukgaejang, borscht, and tom kha gai."

"...Every time you tell me something about that place, it sounds more and more implausible," I murmured under my breath

Not wanting to simply stand around, I picked up the electric lantern and invited Jack to follow me as we explored this house in more detail. I personally was hoping to uncover some new clothes, as I was going through an outfit a day at my current rate. After my battle with Marz, I changed into a beige shirt with a low neckline that exposed my upper chest and three-quarters length sleeves along with a pair of form-fitting navy pants that stopped above my ankle, and a pair of running shoes that fit decently enough. It was a comfortable outfit, but not the sort of thing I would wear if given the option. However, I knew it would be too foolhardy to hope that I uncover a well-fitting suit, or something to that effect, in a random closet.

Regardless, Jack and I soon wandered upstairs where we began our search by entering what looked to be a child's bedroom, likely a girl's given the dusty lavender sheets that covered the twin-sized bed. A collection of posters laid on the floor, a bookshelf had been toppled over, and there was a notable funk to the entire room, but it was among the more preserved places I had come across. If anything, the room, when cast under the early evening starlight piercing through the cracked window, there was a certain beauty to this room.

As I took in the sights of this room, Jack took the lantern for herself and began digging through the dark and dusty closet, plucking out articles of clothing that once belonged to a young girl, but would most likely fit Jack's small girlish frame well enough. These articles included a few panties, a white t-shirt, a pair of maroon pants, some small socks, and even a pair of tennis shoes. As Jack toiled through the closet for new clothing, I placed a foot out the door to explore the rest of this home, only to stop in my tracks as I heard a gasp escape Jack's lips. Turning my head, she had pulled out a white dress with a light blue floral print pattern.

It was a simple garment, and far from the most practical thing she could wear, but as Jack's eyes locked with it, sparking into a glimmer, I knew this was something more to her. Without paying any mind to my presence, Jack stripped down to her underwear and hoisted the dress over her frame before turning to the full-length mirror adorning the closet door. As she looked

back at her reflection, illuminated by the lantern and rays of moonlight, tears began to trickle down her face.

“On March 20th, 2015, the Cataclysm happened. I was at home with my family. I had just gotten home from the last day of school before spring break and was waiting for my friends to come over so we could hang out for a few hours, talk about stuff, watch silly videos, and maybe go out and do something. But then a weather alert came on, urging people to stay home. I was living in Oregon then, and we did not get many bad weather alerts like that. We never had any earthquakes of anything, and never much flooding, so I didn’t think much of it. Neither did my mom and dad. But then the house started shaking a few minutes later, and we heard a rumbling.”

“My parents started worrying, and we hid away in the basement just to be safe. That was a bad idea. I don’t really remember what happened when we got down there, but once we were in the basement... the ceiling collapsed. I was near a wall and avoided the debris, but my parents weren’t so lucky. They were crushed under the rubble, and by the time the dust cleared, I couldn’t see them. I panicked, tried to push the debris away, but I wasn’t strong enough. I needed tools, and, thankfully, I was able to find my mother’s toolbox.”

“I found a crowbar, the same one I use to this day, used it to break away the flooring, pipes, and wood that had fallen onto my parents. I found them after hacking away for a few minutes and getting a load of splinters, but they did not survive. I only found their lifeless bloodied bodies, crushed under the weight of a floor.”

“For the next hour, I just sat there, curled up into a ball. I didn’t know what to do, what I could do, and even though it was a bad idea, I stayed right next to the rubble, while the house was already creaking as powerful winds hit it outside. When morning came, I used my cell phone to call somebody for help... but I got no response. Not from my aunt, my cousins, my friends, and not even 911. I even tried using my data plan to browse the internet, but it didn’t work. I was offline. I was alone. I was scared. And I eventually left the house as the winds died down, only to see that... I was no different than everybody else in my neighborhood.”

“Every house was destroyed or in disrepair, demolished cars lined the streets, lawns were torn to bits, and slabs of sidewalk were scattered haphazardly. I saw nobody else around me... except for a woman in the sky, who declared herself to be Abigale Quinlan.”

“The next year, I was all alone. I did not trust anyone I ran into, because they were all strangers. I made it on my own, hiding where I could, and picking up what I needed to survive, all while carrying my crowbar. My room was destroyed, so that’s all I could really bring with me from my old life. That, and what I was wearing. A dress just like this one. No, actually. The pattern is the same, the feeling is the same. It was this dress. The dress I was wearing when I set off on my own into the cruel and unforgiving world, the dress I was wearing when I saw my parents die,

and the dress that absorbed my tears when I would cry myself to sleep every night during the month of Cataclysm.”

“Just wearing this dress, I feel like things are okay, that the Cataclysm never happened, that my parents are alive. I know it is stupid, but it makes me happy. I know it is not even the same exact dress. That dress was ruined as I kept wearing it. It ripped and tore until it was a rag that I held onto... but lost after I was captured by the Flare Foundation. It was the one memento I had of my life before the Cataclysm, and it was torn to bits before being lost forever.”

“I’m sorry Abigale, I must be annoying you. I guess I just needed to let that all out.”

As Jack concluded her story, I did not offer her any words. Instead, I approached her with open arms and embraced her. She did the same to me, and we both stood there, basking in the dim light around us as she stained my top with tears. As she let out her sorrow, I guided the two of us to the nearby bed and shared a story of my own as we sat side by side.

“Jack... let me tell you a story. I cannot recall the year, but it was early in my memory, likely during the 17th century. I was abducted, captured by a group of religious militants who learned of my immortality, my ability to regenerate any wound. They thought I was a witch, a devil worshiper who had learned the dark arts, and deserved to be tortured for such an action. They whipped me, burned me, stabbed me with blazing hot irons, and assaulted me with blunt weapons in order to break away my bones and pound my organs. It was a woeful experience, made all the worse by how I could not fight back, as I lacked the same strength and might I now have.”

“While I was being tortured, I was constantly looking for a way out, a way to fight back from my oppressors, and during a particularly brutal incident involving a cascade of boiling water being lathered across my bareback, I was searching for a knife, hoping that I would find something, anything, amidst the stone flooring beneath me. I observed my hand as I was able to pull a knife from the ground itself, turning the stone beneath me into an iron blade. One that I used on my assaulter, stabbing him in the throat.”

“I explored my powers afterward, trying to conjure up new tools to help me. I was unable to create more complicated tools I was not very familiar with, such as a crossbow, but I could create weapons from nothing, and in a matter of seconds. With this power, I hunted down my oppressors, and killed them, using my ability to forge blades from walls and to overpower any foe, even when they were more skilled in combat than I was.”

“This all culminated with an encounter with the man responsible for my treatment, the one who branded me a demon. For him, I had a special kind of pain in mind, one that would explore the confines of my power. I grabbed him and tried to transform him into something else. I transformed him into a sow, and his body shifted and morphed itself into a horrific image, contorting and expanding in bizarre ways before I finally stopped and admired my deplorable

work. He was neither man nor sow, he was something in between. A horrific creature that could barely breathe or move. A being thriving with life, but every moment was defined by pain. I did not know enough about human anatomy and the organization of organs to properly transform him and instead made a monster. I put him out of his misery by setting him ablaze... and then tasted his remains to see what he was. He was neither man nor sow, but he was absolutely disgusting."

"This was just one of the many horrible things I did in my past. I stole the work of others, fought for the wrong side in conflicts, and I showed innocent individuals a level of abuse and horror that only the more heinous humans deserve, not those who were simply following orders. I have sought retribution for my actions throughout my life, trying to help the unfortunate, using my powers to feed and build infrastructure for those who needed it. However, I am now responsible for so much worse than all of those past actions put together. I feel that there is no way for me to redeem myself, and even if I devote my entire existence to helping humanity, I will never be able to make up for what I have destroyed."

"I can apologize for what I have done to everyone, and you in particular, but that in itself has no true meaning. There is no way to bring back the dead— I have tried— and humanity has already lost much because of my actions. More than it has ever lost before. I can do nothing of substance in my current state— I cannot make the world a truly better place— but I will promise you something, Jack. I promise to devote the entirety of my existence to make amends as best I can."

"Abigale," Jack said, "do you remember how this happened?"

"No. I still do not recall a thing about the days preceding March 20th, 2015. However, the only explanation for the Cataclysm I can fathom would involve immense torture. While my pain tolerance is high, upon experiencing intense physical pain for elongated periods of time with no means of escape, two things happen. My mind becomes clouded with thoughts of rage and hatred, and my ability to develop new powers, Critical Adaptation as I call it, is triggered. From immense pain caused by torture, my body has historically developed powers, like the one I just told you about. With this in mind, my current theory on how I caused the Cataclysm is thus: After being tortured for days— weeks— perhaps even months, I reached a breaking point, and developed a power beyond any others. I gained the ability to control nature, to summon storms, and to dramatically alter climates, all through the exertion of my own will. It is only a theory, but it is a plausible one."

I was confused by my own openness, but it was the only way I could think to deal with the bulk of guilt her story instilled in me. I would normally be better able to handle these sorts of things, yet I was not at my normal at the moment. My intellect was still sapped, and I could not think as rationally or wisely as I once could.

“Thank you for sharing, Abigale,” Jack said with a radiant grin. “Despite being together for so many hours and so many days, I still feel like I don’t know a lot about you. It was nice to get something off—”

As Jack’s words of appreciation trailed on, she was interrupted by the sound of a slamming door, one that called the pair of us to trek down the stairs where we met up with Zedaki once more, having just returned from her scavenging trip.

“Hey ladies, did ya miss me?” Zedaki said with a smirk. “Or were you too busy playing dress-up to notice that I was gone?”

“Um, no,” Jack began, her voice quiet “we were just trying to take what we could from this home and—”

“It’s a joke, Jack. And that dress looks good on you, but it’s not really the best thing for roughing it.”

“I guess not. I... just wanted to try it.”

“And that’s cool, you should take delight in whatever joy you can pilfer out from this world— But anyways, I did the usual scavenging thing, but didn’t find much. Just some salt, a thing of oats, and a bag of dried mango. Not the worst haul, but they’ll come in handy later on. For now, I just grabbed some stuff from the car. It’s not much, but it should keep us going.”

As Zedaki said this, she dug into her coat pockets and produced a small container of dried meat, two tomatoes, and two small bags of crackers. She wasted little time using the silverware and utensils remaining in the kitchen to arrange a modest dinner scene for her and Jack. They began to eat while I sat by idly, listening to Jack as she told an abridged and less emotional version of the story she told me, in order to explain why this dress meant so much to her.

As this story reached its conclusion, Zedaki paused, food still on her plate, but a dour look in her eyes. As such, I was none too surprised when Zedaki simply replied to this story with a knowing look before spiraling off into her own tale.

“You know, there’s a reason why I wear what I wear. Not because it is comfy, or that it looks cool, or that red looks good on me— but those are all perks. I wear this because it is all I have to remember somebody. Somebody very special to me. I told you before that I was pretty close to the leader of Madeco, right? Well... I guess I should be honest and say that we were really close. Hell, if it had been a few more years, you could practically call it a common-law marriage. She had a hobby of sewing, knitting, and making outfits. She actually did that as a side job before the Cataclysm, making costumes for a local theater group. There were plenty of supplies she could use at Madeco, and she did, making several unique outfits for herself, and eventually, for me. Her fashion sense was always pretty weird, she worked in theater for crying out loud, but

this was the outfit she made for me. I was really surprised and, well, kind of honored that she would make something as intricate as this for me.”

“But then those fucking raiders came in and ruined everything. She used a shite tier propane bomb and blew herself up along with the raiders at their base. I quickly made my way to where the bomb detonated. I saw what was left of her and, without any hesitation, I found every raider who survived the explosion, and shoved my sword through their fucking faces. I don’t regret it. In fact, it actually felt pretty good. Real fucking good. And their blood didn’t even really stain my jacket. Heh. I guess that’s why she made it red. So, yeah, this outfit is all I really have to remember her... And I just had to fuck up the hat, now didn’t I?”

Following her story, Zedaki put her plate and silverware into the dish drainer by the sink with no running water, and made her way upstairs, saying that she was turning in for the night. Jack and I decided to join her, with Jack choosing to retire in the bedroom we were pillaging shortly ago. Zedaki had already claimed the second bedroom, one that originally belonged to an eccentric teenage girl from the look of it, for herself, and by process of elimination, that left me with the master bedroom. Like the rest of the house, it had aged fairly well, looking pristine given the current state of the world, with the only lingering remnant of the Cataclysm being a layer of dust and a palpable musk.

However, rather than plopping into the thick covers of the queen-sized bed before me, I chose to bide my time by exploring, starting with the closet, where I happened across a small collection of suits. Over the span of my life, I had grown particularly very fond of suits. They are a simple, formal, and versatile form of clothing that was accepted around the world, and whoever wore it commanded more respect than anybody dressed in something more common. I learned the power of the suit decades ago, and it has become my default medium for dressing myself ever since. This past week notwithstanding.

This fondness also meant I was no stranger to wearing men’s suits, mostly due to my unique stature and how long it took for pantsuits to become publicly available for women, and while it was not the most practical thing to wear when I was almost assuredly going to have my clothes destroyed yet again, I knew that I would feel better if I wore one. Upon taking off my casual outfit in favor of this formal one, it was unsurprisingly loose, snug, and tight in various places, yet still fit me decently enough, and allowed me to feel better about myself as I looked in the mirror.

It was a basic black suit with a white shirt, quite boring in some respects, and a bit devoid of personality. However, I was in no position to be picky, and folded the other two nearly identical suits so that I may store them into my backpack in the morning.

With a smile on my face, I explored the rest of the room, pausing once I reached a vanity, the sides of its mirror adorned with sun-faded photographs of the people who once lived in this home. They were a multi-ethnic Asian and Latin American family that had two daughters. An older one with black hair and a younger one with blonde hair. The photographs showed them on

various vacations, exploring locations that were likely exotic to them, and looking to be enjoying their lives quite a bit. Looking at the pictures was yet another reminder of what my actions had done to the world from an individual level, as it was very possible that this entire family died by my actions. But there was something else about this picture. Something about it seemed vaguely familiar, and I could not fathom why.

Crestfallen, I left the house to remind myself of what I had done yet again by walking throughout the destroyed landscape of this settlement. Mostly just to get some fresh air and clear my head a little as I looked up at the starry sky. It reminded me of the one time I traveled into space, observing the great blue planet from thousands upon thousands of kilometers away, basking in the lights that surrounded me, and staring at the majesty of the moon. My memories of the experience as a whole were hazy, but that sight was one burned into my mind at the deepest level.

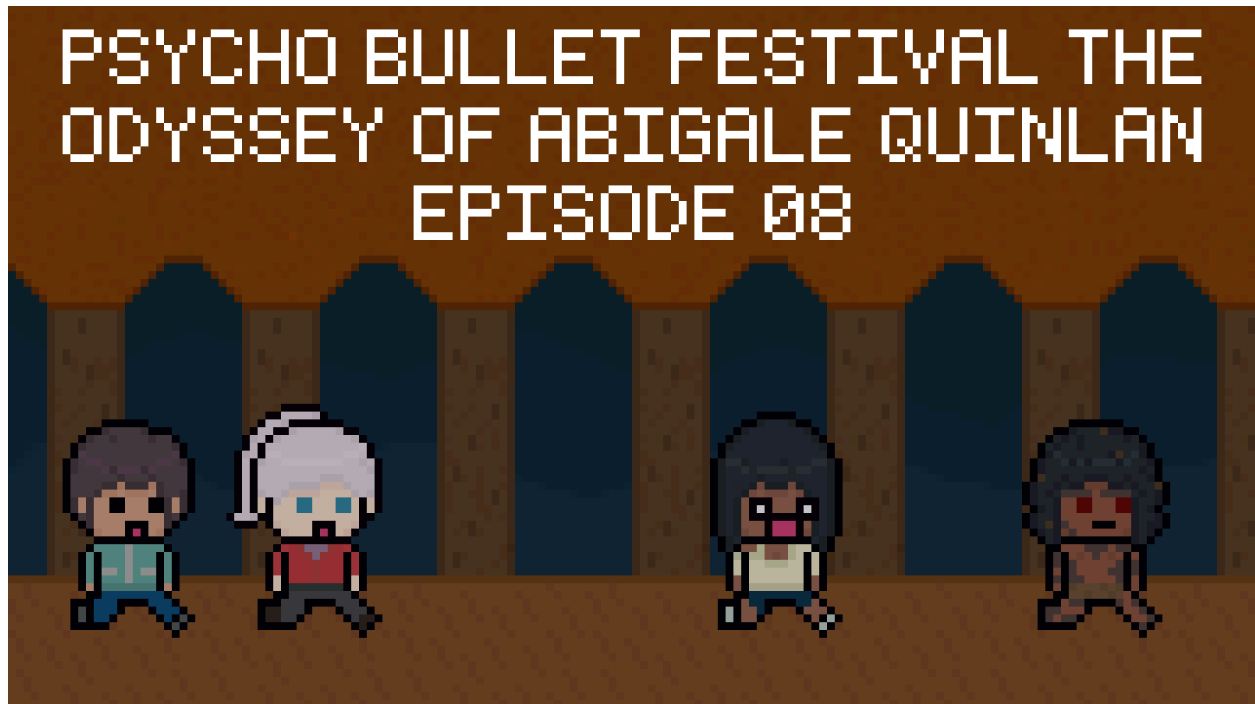
After receiving a sufficient amount of fresh air, I returned to the house and made my way to the second floor, observing that both Zedaki and Jack had fallen into a deeper sleep. Yet as Jack rested, she seemed unnerved, tossing herself in her bed, as if she was having a nightmare. I was not surprised. She lost her parents, was alone in a destroyed world, was no older than 14, and after a year of wandering, she was then taken in by a woman who, from what little I can grasp, did not treat Jack with the affection she needed. Still, it was her home, and now she was living a life where she knew not where she would sleep the next day, all while risking her life, and... claiming the life of another. Killing changes people, and I could not help but worry about how Jack will come to accept the fact that she killed Marz, and in such a brutal manner. I could have asked her earlier, but I did not wish to push that subject onto her unless she was willing to discuss it.

I had dealt with children fairly often throughout my life, caring for them, teaching them, and even raising them at certain points. My memories are blurred and the faces are obscured, but I still recall the way many of them were impacted by harsh traumatic events. From children who saw their parents be executed before their eyes, to ones that were trained to kill their fellow man before they could even read. I lacked the cognizance to predict how Jack would turn out from all of these events, but I was worried about her as a person. Partially because I had come to know her over these past few days, but also because I was indebted to her. Both her and Zedaki. I would do whatever I could to repay them for such momentous acts, and after today, I was one step closer to doing so.

However, even once I gain all of my missing powers, I would not be able to undo what I had done. The world and the people in it have been scarred. Geographically, ecologically, physically, emotionally, and mentally. With all my powers, I could never hope to change the past. Instead, all I could do was try to seek redemption for my actions by making a better future. A better future for Jack, for Zedaki, and for the millions, hopefully billions, who have lived through the Cataclysm.

With thoughts of the future, and of what trials I would encounter the next day both racking my mind, I slowly fell asleep, in the dark, slouching in a small desk chair, holding onto Jack's hand as she slept, a smile slowly creeping onto her face.

Episode 08: Ultros The Undying



I awoke early on the sixth day of my journey and wandered around the demolished town as the sun began to peer over the horizon, illuminating the ruins which I began casually looking over. Partially to scavenge for most supplies, but mostly to preoccupy my time before my allies woke up. When I had to work with others in the past, I would often work on my own projects or find some activity to occupy myself during the nighttime. Yet with the world in its current, there was little if anything I could do to be productive while others rested. Especially after I foolishly avoided getting anything from that abandoned book store near Madeco.

As minutes gave way into an hour, I sighed dispassionately, knowing that my search had been utterly fruitless. This shattered settlement had been thoroughly picked over by others and ravaged by my actions. However, it was while walking during what should have been a chilly morning, I realized that I was unphased by the ensuing cold as much as I was the other day. Perhaps, I thought, Marz also inherited a very discrete lesser ability of mine, the ability to withstand extreme temperatures, and I regained it. It would have been sensible, as well as a good explanation for how and why they were able to function so well while being mostly naked.

With that revelation in mind and my hands empty, I returned to my party's dwelling and waited for them outside. Looking at the rising sun and the array of oranges, pinks, and blues, I reminded myself of my progress and accomplishments. My journey had already reached its halfway point, and I was in such a capable position that I could realistically achieve my goals on

my own and without relying on my allies as I've had to in the past. The thought of leaving them behind crossed my mind, but I made a promise to these two, and I strive to keep my promises.

As I continued to look at the rising sun, contemplating various stray thoughts about honor and my principles with only a fraction of the thinking power I was accustomed to, I heard a sound rummaging throughout the house. As I approached, the front door opened and revealed Jack, carrying her folded floral print dress, pressing it close to her body as if she was afraid that someone was going to take it from her. I gave her a familiar greeting while she did the same, her face bearing a cheery smile. After depositing the dress in the car's trunk, Jack joined me in admiring the sunrise, clearly pleased by the colorful sight before her. Before more than a few seconds passed, I heard somebody walking throughout the house, and turned my head to see a familiar face in far less familiar apparel.

It was Zedaki, but since I saw her last night, she changed her appearance quite notably. She tied her long platinum blonde hair into a ponytail that slid down her upper back. She had taken off her large scarlet jacket, revealing a bright red buttoned blouse that was not quite long enough to cover the entirety of her arms, with a vest of body armor beneath it. It was fairly bulky, likely made to withstand the impact of blunt objects and gunfire, yet it fit her quite well.

Before her large jacket and hat made her look like a drifter, one attempting to loosely imitate the appearance and aesthetic of a cowboy. But now, she seemed more serious and battle-ready. As I looked on at her, I quickly developed a theory about why this change occurred. As a result of our encounter with Marz, Zedaki lost her hat, a memento of her past, and either she wanted to put it behind her more by no longer wearing her jacket, or she wanted to preserve the jacket, potentially the only thing she had to remember her lover by. While I had the opportunity to ask her about her change of wardrobe, neither Jack nor I brought the question up. Instead, Zedaki simply announced that she wanted to "try a different look" for this journey and that she "wanted to wear something more comfortable" if she was going to be sitting in a car all day.

Following that remark, the three of us went over to the car, the Blazing Beelzebub, where Zedaki rearranged things while pulling out something she and Jack could have for breakfast. They ate quickly on the porch of the house before Zedaki entered the vehicle to examine its dashboard.

"Damnit," Zedaki began, letting out a disgruntled sigh, "this thing charges slower than I thought. We'll be lucky to travel 25 kilometers before the battery's drained."

"Oh, really?" Jack interjected, her mouth still filled with stray bits of dried fruit. "And there probably weren't any extra batteries when you found the car."

"Nope! We're just going to need to hunker down and wait for the batteries to charge, I guess. It sucks, but it's not like we can just ditch a solar-powered car."

“We do not need to necessarily drive this vehicle to move it,” I commented.

“What, you mean we should just push it instead?” Zedaki asked, her voice tinged with bitterness.

“That is precisely what I am suggesting. Or did you forget about the strength of the individual we murdered yesterday?”

Before Zedaki could respond, I leaned my arm over her to grab the parking brake, loosening the tires and allowing me to grab the rear bumper and push the car with my restored upper body strength. It was an effortless process for me, and I swiftly pushed the vehicle about 30 kilometers an hour, moving 300 before stopping. The speed was far slower than what we traveled yesterday, but with my regained strength, and what I assumed to be limitless stamina, I could maintain this pace for several hours.

My allies, stunned by my feat of strength yet accustomed to my ability to surprise them, quickly recovered from this display and finished their preparations for another day of vehicle-based traversal. Once prepared, they sat in the front seats while I stood behind the car, my hands latched onto it, and my legs moving us forward and toward the location of my next child. We had been venturing northwest from our southern Arizona starting point, and now we were heading primarily to the north. With only a vague idea of where we would be placed on a map, I could only hazard a guess as to our location, yet there was a distinct possibility that one of my children had traveled to the remnants of one of the numerous cities that resided on the western border of Nevada, or failing that, perhaps they resided somewhere in California.

Thinking about that only served to remind me of how little I truly remembered about the world's geography, despite having traveled across so much of it and so many times. I let out a sigh as I reminded myself that I was growing closer to my goal and that soon enough I would regain my intellect along with my other remaining abilities, the true extent of my immortality, and the ability to create anything from anything, or Real Booting as I liked to call it.

Thoughts such as these occupied the confines of my mind as I pushed, abiding by directions from Zedaki as she and Jack chatted, with their idle banter filtering out from the open car windows. Most of their conversation during the morning hours seemed to be fixated around technology. How people adapted to going from a world where it was expected for most people to own a smartphone to a world where something as seemingly archaic as a telephone was no longer present. Both due to the solar flare that came with the Cataclysm, and the lack of means to charge electronic devices, with people needing to rebuild generators, siphon off gasoline, and use up whatever functional batteries they could scavenge.

The only other means of gaining power were renewable energy sources, which had yet to be widely adopted, and those that had been implemented were damaged by the Cataclysm. Because of all of this, it truly was a marvel to have something like this solar car, a machine

whose origins filled me with suspicions, but there was little sense to worry about it given our current circumstances.

Anyhow, Zedaki mentioned how she encountered many people who seemed to take the lack of technology in their lives seriously, with some developing nervous ticks of sorts from a lack of electronic stimulation and one person who began using a smooth flattened rock like a smartphone. Others, according to Zedaki, simply carried around electronic devices with them, even though they no longer functioned, including smartphones, handheld game systems, or even calculators. Basic calculators were apparently quite common for the citizens of Madeco to carry around because many of them were solar-powered and continued to function under adequate lighting.

Jack and Zedaki then continued discussing their opinions on technology, which both fell into the more pragmatic camp of it being a part of everyday life, but constant and excessive use of it could be psychologically and physically detrimental to people. Jack in particular remarked at how many of her peers seemed to be glued to their phones outside of class, while her parents chose to give her a “flip phone” instead, which Zedaki commemorated, remarking how she actually stopped talking to a few of her friends once they became entrenched in social media. A sentiment that Jack could relate to.

While my thoughts on the matter were of a similar, if more indifferent, outlook, I could not help but be bothered by the two’s mentioning of their friends. With my incomplete memory, I struggled to remember many things I was once able to recollect with ease, including my former friends. While I remembered forging strong kinships with people throughout my centuries on this Earth, many of those memories were decrepit and foggy. I could not recall considering anyone to be my friend in the past few decades, nor could I remember why I felt that way. Perhaps I grew tired of the experience of getting to know someone for years, yet needing to leave them behind in order to hide my immortality from them. Or perhaps I simply grew tired with human relationships because of how finite they could be to me.

Eventually, I crawled out of my internal thoughts with a question from Zedaki.

“Hey, Abigale!” She yelled at me from the driver’s seat window. “Do you have any idea how that kid of yours— Marz, I think their name was— managed to get so huge?”

“No,” I answered. “Their stature, while impressive, was something biologically feasible, but it would be impossible for any child to attain such musculature and features within the span of seven years.”

“Um, I actually know why Marz was so big! Please stop the car so you can listen!” Jack shouted loudly from the car.

Abiding by her request, I let go of the car and moved to the passenger’s side door.

"I'm sorry that I didn't tell you this before Abigale. To be honest, I kind of thought that you knew, considering they're your children and all... but I did need to explain that you needed to kill them to regain your powers so... yeah, I screwed up there. Anyways, for whatever reason, your children seem to grow up crazy fast. The Flare Foundation wasn't really able to track everything, seeing as how the kids kept escaping, but they grow about four or five times as quickly as a regular human. So some of your children are already adults, I guess."

I let out a sigh as I heard Jack's explanation. Both due to relief and due to irritation. She must have known that I would want to know about my children, yet had kept this information from me. From the shaky cadence of her voice, as she told me these things, I inferred that she too regretted not telling this to me, so I quickly chose to not hold this against her. However, if she had more information about my children, I wanted to know.

"Jack, what else do you know about my children?" I straightforwardly asked.

"Um, well, I don't really remember their names, but I know what powers they have. One of them is incredibly smart and knows tons of things she was never even taught or told about. Another is immortal, and can heal from any wounds, and in only a few seconds too. Oh, and then there is one that can transform anything into anything. Kind of like alchemy or 3D printing or something like that."

The three abilities matched what I was currently lacking, but as I heard Jack list them out, only naming three abilities, I couldn't help but wonder where my 'new' power or powers went. The power that allowed me to create the Cataclysm. Assuming she was truthful though, all I could do was blindly speculate with my limited thinking power, which I would consider to be a waste.

"Do you know why they look so different from Abigale?" Zedaki chimed in as I was about to end the conversation.

"Um, no, not really," Jack replied. "I think I heard Ma—Miss Flare talk about it though. But I can't remember."

"Simply because they are my children and share my genetic information does not mean that they would perfectly resemble me," I explained. "Genetics are a complicated thing, and certain traits may be toggled between as one goes through their lives. It can be seen in humans as well, with even identical twins developing ever so slightly different physical attributes as they age. While I am unsure if this same phenomenon occurs in me, and by extension my children, it sounds plausible. It certainly is the most digestible explanation I can come to based on the information before me."

After explaining my theory, I returned to the rear of the car and resumed pushing it closer to my next child, and the act of pushing lasted most of the day. As I had come to expect, the

surrounding terrain shifted dramatically after only a few kilometers. The desert environment we moved past was replaced with a large field filled with tall grass and wildflowers whose soft colors created an almost serene setting that, with no road in sight, I had to push the car through. From there, the vegetation grew thicker, with trees and bushes becoming plentiful. Because of this, I was forced to make a detour of sorts, driving around the outskirts of a dense deciduous forest, one that had been covered in red, orange, yellow, and brown leaves emblematic of the autumn season. It was a pleasant sight, yet one that soon became drowned out by the light of the setting sun.

The night was upon us once again, and there was no shelter in sight. While the car would make for ample shelter with its cushy seats, I still carried on, heading in the direction of my next child, and feeling it get closer and closer to me with each passing meter. As I registered this and looked on at the forest to my East, I stopped the vehicle and went up to speak with Jack and Zedaki.

"I am uncertain but I believe that one of my children is inside this forest."

After exchanging a quick glance with each other, the two opened up their respective doors, bringing their weapons out with them before heading to the trunk to bring additional supplies with them. It was clear that they intended to help me, and after nearly getting pummeled to death during my last encounter with one of my children, I was not in a strong position to deny their assistance. So instead I thanked them as I began leading them through the woods.

The twilight sun shined through the tree branches, glistening off of the multicolored leaves as they fell. The sounds around me were a mixture of the crunching of leaves along with the chirping of small woodland birds as they fluttered across trees. And the forest floor below was seemingly moving, with squirrels and other small rodents scampering across the leaves in search of food and places to hide it. It was a tranquil sight that I trod carefully through, not wanting to disturb a place in the world that seemed largely unphased by the Cataclysm. Jack and Zedaki shared in my reverence of this sight, whispering words of awe over the beauty before us, but despite this, I could still sense that one of my children was near and moved accordingly.

As my allies and I continued to walk towards the heart of this forest, the trees began growing in size, growing from 2.5 meters tall all the way to 4, surprising given how young they appeared to be. As the trees grew in height, their branches grew longer, and our view became more limited. Combined with the continuously setting sun, and our surroundings were becoming cloaked in darkness. This would have normally been a good cause to back down, but I could tell that we were close. That my next child was somewhere near, possibly hiding in some makeshift settlement or in the trees themselves.

Realizing this, Jack reached into the backpack she brought with and took out three flashlights, which she distributed to Zedaki and me. I began waving it around, illuminating the darkening

surroundings while I continued to push forward, hoping that the light would draw my child's attention. And it did.

A few minutes after turning on the flashlight and wandering deeper into the woods, I heard a rustling within the trees, a suspicious jittering that I focused on without hesitation by shining my flashlight on the source of the noise. Before I could make any observations, however, a crudely assembled spear was tossed in my general direction, only to land harmlessly on the forest floor, where it easily broke off into a coarse rock and a crooked stick.

In response, Zedaki quickly holstered her flashlight before reaching onto her back and grabbing her rifle, while I moved my flashlight over to the source of the spear that dwelled within these trees. Unsurprisingly, it was one of my children. Their height and proportions told me that they were among the youngest of my children, resembling a child on the cusp of puberty, lacking any notable secondary sexual characteristics, and having a generally softer look to them.

Their hair was a long and jumbled black mess that had various twigs and leaves poking through it, while their brown skin was covered in traces of black dirt. They clad their body in only a pair of tattered makeshift underwear, while their form was gangly, as if they were unable to find the sustenance they needed to survive in this world. As I glared at them, they did the same to me, piercing my person with crimson eyes, not unlike a predator glaring at their prey.

Recognizing my gaze and numbers, the child yelled something unintelligible at me before they began scampering off into the distance, hopping across the closely placed trees while Jack, Zedaki, and I took chase. It would be a simple task to catch up and apprehend her with my enhanced strength and speed, but right as I was about to tackle a tree in an attempt to stop this child, they caused a branch to snap, sending them tumbling to the forest floor, where instead of landing in a comforting pile of leaves, they landed headfirst on a softball-sized rock.

I paused in after observing such a sight, surprised by my child's sudden mistake and a subsequent head wound. I could see traces of blood oozing from her skull as the rock had clearly made a large dent into her head, but after a mere three seconds, the child pushed themselves off the ground, turning back to me and my allies, showing us that her head wound was already rapidly healing. It was clear that they were my immortal child, which brought up a daunting question that I regrettably ignored until now. How do I kill that which cannot be killed?

My immortality was absolute. Anything from boundless flames, the wrath of the ocean, pools of acid, the assault of 100 men armed with blades, and nuclear explosions were not enough to kill me. I could be constantly dying, and my body would still find a way to reassemble itself. Even if I were to be placed in the vacuum of space, I theorized that I would live, or at least resume living if I returned to a breathable atmosphere. Even if I were to land on a planet without a breathable atmosphere, I had reason to believe that my body would find a way.

I put such thoughts away at the moment and focused on the one thing I knew I could do. Momentarily incapacitate and overpower this child of mine, and the best way to do so was to sever part of their brain with a Snap Burst. Yet, the tree-trotter proved evasive, knowing the layout of the forest exceptionally well, leaping from the branches above me and shrouding themselves in brightly covered leaves, all while benefiting from the rapid onset of night.

I tackled trees and used my Snap Burst to startle the child, pushing them further and further into the forest, until we came across a large stone structure, where the child fled from the safety of the trees and into a cave. Shining my flashlight into it, I was unable to catch a glimpse of the child, but their now-familiar yell soon resonated through the cave, telling me I was on the right track. I swiftly moved through the cave, needing to crouch in order to squeeze my tall form under the ceilings, darting my flashlight around in the hope of spotting my target. Instead, I saw something else. A bear whose eyes quickly fixated on me. I tried to position myself for close-quarters combat, but the bear struck me first, tackling me before biting into my shoulder, tearing through my shirt. Pinned on the ground by their front paws, I squirmed to free my right arm and channeled some of my strength into a fist aimed at the center of the bear's mass.

My knuckles tore through the bear's hide, and they let out a loud groan as their organs and muscles were severed so abruptly and brutally. With their guard lowered, I maneuvered myself around the bear once more and aimed another punch at their head. Teeth flew from their mouth and scattered across the cave floor, while the bear quickly fell down, wrapped in pain from my attack. It was a particularly aggressive assault by my standards, but I lacked the time or patience to care about preserving this bear's life.

I watched them flee from me while I carried forward, clenching my damaged arm as it slowly, ever so slowly, began to heal itself. Thoughts of avoiding such an experience ever again drove me to press on through this cave, and back into a dark forest.

Unfortunately, my trail had been mostly lost upon exiting the cave. I could neither see nor hear much rustling amidst the various trees and bushes and was instead met with a quiet and black scene. I lowered my brow in frustration as I continued dashing across the forest, hoping to catch or startle my child before they fully fled the area. Unfortunately, after ten minutes of shaking trees and brushing my hands through bushes, I could not even find a trace of the child.

Discouraged and spiteful of my own ineptitude, I tried to recoup with my allies, searching for another artificial light source, which I found not too far off in the distance. As I grew closer, I made out a noise amidst the quiet forest. The sound of metal penetrating flesh. I dashed over to the noise, sprinting through bushes and narrowly avoiding trees before I could make out the dimly illuminated scene. What I saw was Jack stabbing my immortal child with her crowbar, methodically pressing the long part of the tool through the child's chest, while a familiar sword was stabbed through their head. Looking to the side, I saw Zedaki, lowering her rifle after seeing that I was the one approaching her. An electric lantern was placed near her feet.

“Ah, there you are, Abigale,” Zedaki said with a smirk. “About time you showed up. You know, sometimes I feel that you don’t really pay us enough for all of this. There’s helping you out, and then there’s doing your own job for you.”

I snickered in response, before offering a thank you to both her and Jack, who was still too preoccupied with her repeated stabbings to notice me, only realizing that I was there after hearing my name. Upon registering that, she ceased moving her crowbar and offered me her full attention.

“Oh, sorry Abigale. I didn’t notice you. I wasn’t sure how to, um, stop them, so I just started stabbing them over and over again... was that the right thing to do or...”

I patted Jack on the head as she stammered to me.

“This child is immortal, and while injuries will restrain them for a while, their body will soon shift away from whatever is damaging them. For the time being, it would be best to contain them. Zedaki, do you have any rope?”

“Um, yeah, I have some in the trunk. But if you don’t mind me asking, what exactly do you plan on doing with this kid? I mean, you just said they are immortal, so how do you plan on killing them?”

“It is not possible for me to kill an immortal being with my current abilities,” I explained. “Their cells will continue to replicate and regenerate, even if they are reduced to dust. However... I have an idea that would result in their demise, but I will need to regain another ability of mine first.”

“And what ability is that?” Zedaki asked as she placed her rifle on her back.

“It is an ability I call Real Booting. It allows me to transform one form of matter into another simply by touching it. It allows me to easily change anything from the dirt beneath my feet to the trees around us into anything I desire, from building materials to food to weaponry. It is arguably my greatest ability.”

“Huh... and is that how you caused the Cataclysm?” Zedaki asked.

“No. My Real Booting abilities cannot be used to change the weather, the very fabric of nature, or anything I lack a physical connection to. Though, that is not their only limitation. My abilities may form matter from the atomic level, yet things grow substantially harder when dealing with organic beings. I am capable of creating organic matter in the form of food, but the only living cells I can create must come from a living creature. I may use this ability to, say, help with the healing of wounds by restoring blood, muscle, and skin cells. Yet more complicated procedures,

such as healing people with missing limbs or certain physical disabilities, are unfortunately beyond my grasp. Even with my once immense knowledge of human anatomy.”

“Wow, that’s really incredible Abigale,” Jack meekly said as she continued absentmindedly stabbing her crowbar into the immortal child’s face.

“Yeah, it really is,” Zedaki commented as she passively tugged on her ponytail, “but how is that going to help with the immortal kid?”

“I believe that my child will be unable to recover if I transform them into ash and absorb the remains in the instant before the regeneration process begins. I will admit, I do not know this for certain, but I am still confident in this plan.”

“Well, if Abigale thinks it’ll work, I’m sure it will.” Jack nervously replied, showing a great deal of faith in me, considering we have known each other for less than a week.

“Same here,” Zedaki said. “But where is this ‘rebooter’ kid of yours?”

“There are only two of my children that remain unaccounted for. By the laws of basic probability, there is a 50% chance the next one I uncover will be the child I need. It is difficult to sense their current location with my immortal child in such close proximity, but I believe they are fortunately close.”

“Close as in we might run into them tomorrow?” Zedaki asked.

“Most likely, yes. Even if I continue pushing the car all the way there, I would predict that we would get there prior to nightfall. But we should consider that tomorrow morning.”

Upon clarifying my plan before Jack and Zedaki, we began making our way back to the Blazing Beelzebub. I volunteered to hold on to my child while guiding my allies back to the vehicle. It was difficult to ascertain our route, but I was able to recall the vague direction we traveled in well enough to feel confident that we would uncover our destination soon enough. As we did so, I maintained an idle conversation with Jack and Zedaki before being distracted by a noise made by my immortal child, who I was carrying over my shoulder, powerless to do anything but annoy me with their actions. I ignored them at first, expecting them to simply spout a string of incoherent syllables and groans, but they began to speak in a slurred and high-pitched voice.

“You taking me back there?”

I paused before responding, “No. As I discussed with the others, I am going to kill you.”

“Heh. I no can be killed. I Ultros the undying. They put me in acid, stab me with swords, put me on fire. I survive all. Crushed by giant metal, bombed with explosions, gunned in head, stabbed

in guts, I get better. They do nothing to stop me. They call me immortal. And I escape them long ago.”

“So, the Flare Foundation imprisoned you and tested your immortality extensively. I know that experience far too well. The act of torture can be maddening. It births hatred beyond anything else in this world, a desire to repeat the actions of others, and have them experience the same pain as you. To think, they did it on someone already so young. It’s no wonder you escaped.”

“But how gonna kill me? Said you gonna kill me.”

“You will find out in due time. I am sorry that your life has been filled with such misfortune, but for my sake, and the sake of all of humanity, your death is necessary. I am sorry Ultros, but it must be done.”

“You uses big words. Did you hurt Ultros?”

“No. This is the first time I have met you. I am not associated with the people that hurt you. They actually want to capture me. At least, I assume.”

Our conversation dissipated from there, and I soon made my way back to the car. After Zedaki and Jack arrived roughly a minute later, we began rearranging our clothing and supplies from the trunk to the back seat, before tying up Ultros and placing them in the mostly emptied trunk. They expressed little resistance throughout the endeavor, and simply grumbled as I placed them beside our belongings, their hands, and feet bound tight.

Content with the progress we made for today, and with the battery more effectively charged, Zedaki began driving myself, Jack, and Ultros away to someplace we may stay for the night. As the headlights illuminated the dark world around us I whispered to myself that only two children remained while sitting in the passenger’s seat. My quest was nearing its completion, and I was determined to end it as quickly as I could. Only then could I begin returning the world to its former splendor.

Episode 09: Punky The Provider



The seventh day of our travels, much like the sixth, began in what had become a typical fashion for my allies and me before I began pushing our vehicles in pursuit of my next child. All things considered, I was making excellent progress in my goal. With three of my children murdered and the fourth one, Ultros the Undying, being kept incapacitated until I found the means of killing them.

Unfortunately, with Ultros being in such close proximity to me, it was difficult for me to locate my next child. My route while pushing the car was rather hectic and disorderly, involving me traveling too far in one direction and needing to correct it a short while later, while also needing to avoid the vast number of hazards that were in my way. Anything from plateaus that rose out from nowhere, or large holes that went down several miles into the Earth. When that was not a hazard, a pile of discarded vehicles was, and while it would be fairly simple for me to shove them out of my way, doing so becomes difficult when there is a line of several hundred vehicles obscuring my path.

Nevertheless, I continued my trek, making use of the limited daylight allotted from me as my allies and I traveled from the dingy motel we spent the sixth night in into a setting I honestly would not expect. A medium-sized city. Cities held the intrinsic benefit of allowing a large number of people to share in accessible resources and for industries to flourish within their confines. However, they were not an advantageous place to reside in following the upheaval of

society. They lacked natural resources that may be harvested or grown and were reduced to little more than concrete ruins.

This city was no different. The damages done to it were intense enough to topple buildings over, blocking off entire streets. While some structures stood tall, many of them were damaged in some way. Windows were shattered, ceilings had caved in, and various debris, mostly cars, had penetrated the walls of some buildings. It was a desolate place that was devoid of much vegetation beyond a few trees that continued to flourish, the occasional overgrown park, and a few tufts of weeds that had begun growing out of the decaying cement and asphalt that coated the ground.

Bodies were another common encounter. The streets contained a sizable number of picked away skeletons that wore the decayed remnants of clothing, while certain vehicles contained more grotesque examples of corpses. The skies were home to a few birds, mostly pigeons and crows, that searched this area for various scraps they could consume. Similarly to the rodents and cockroaches that dashed across the rubble coated streets without much of a care.

Due to the messy and cluttered routes that made up most streets, I decided it would be best to leave the Blazing Beelzebub behind for a while. To make the vehicle less conspicuous compared to the tattered vehicles that littered the street, I chose to hide the vehicle inside of a parking garage, sandwiching it between two other cars in order to make the pristine and high-class vehicle stand out less.

One parked and placed well within the walls of this city, Zedaki, Jack, and I set out to search for my fifth child, who resided near the center of this city from what I could tell. As we walked, I implored my allies to be careful of their surroundings, to stay behind me if things get hectic, and to flee if necessary. This child either inherited my more intellectual talents or my ability to transform matter. Both of which would be potentially devastating in the wrong hands, and if this child were both skilled and aggressive enough, they could easily destroy me, not unlike how I was nearly killed by B-17 and Marz.

I was disgusted with the weakness I expressed during those encounters, my inability to properly strategize, to carefully gauge the situation. My lack of intellect and dependent relationship with my allies irked me as the three of us traveled, not unlike my surroundings. I had grown used to the sight of the world being a constant reminder of the atrocities I wrought upon this Earth, but the sight of a destroyed city, and the ability to view the damage in such detail, made it all the worse.

We ventured onwards, avoiding clumps of rubble, the husks of cars, and various other debris that had been expunged from nearby buildings. Such as sinks, toilets, file cabinets, or full cubicles. While I was able to move most things out of my way with ease, on account of my enhanced strength, I continued to struggle to pinpoint the location of my fifth child. This left my

allies and I wandering back and forward for quite a while, zigzagging through every other block while I tried to keep my bearings.

As our wandering commenced, I looked at my allies in more detail. Jack was gripping onto her stained blue crowbar, as usual, shuffling behind me and darting her eyes around. She likely was not used to areas like this, filled with hiding spots that could easily be taken advantage of, and quite possibly had not walked through a city since the Cataclysm. I reminded her to stay near me, and stay at my side, rather than shuffling behind me. She did just that, while I slowed my walking speed slightly for her own sake.

Meanwhile, Zedaki continued looking at the scenery with a sort of wistful melancholy, indirectly urging me to begin conversing with her.

"Does being in a destroyed city like this unnerve you," I asked.

"I grew up in a decently big city," Zedaki began, "and just looking at this... it makes me really wonder whether my city is in the shitter. I mean, Jack said that this country is in a pretty good state all things considered. So what are the odds that my country is a whole hell of a lot worse? Though, I guess it doesn't matter. I'd like to see my home again someday, but everything that made that place home won't be there to greet me if I ever returned. My friends, my family, all my stuff, it's all probably gone. Even then, you really can't go back to normal after everything that happened. I know you will try, Abigale, but who knows how long it'll take for things to even resemble the world of 7 years ago."

I took a deep breath as I was once again approached by the duty I owed to the world. There was nothing I could do at the moment, as I could not even properly formulate a plan until I regained my intellect, so I simply took Zedaki's comment in stride before redirecting my attention towards Jack.

"I know that Zedaki lived in Perth, but where did you live before the Cataclysm Jack?"

"I, um, I lived in a small town in Northern California. I didn't go to the city very much when I was younger, so being in one now is kind of... unsettling. I really only knew about cities from movies and such, so being in one with no people just seems... kinda wrong."

I thought about saying something to Jack in response to her answer, but I was quickly distracted by something. In front of us, another person had turned a corner and was looking directly at my group. They were armed, holding an assault rifle, and wearing a military uniform of sorts. Before I could do much more than register their presence, they spoke in a deep yet somewhat shrill voice, shouting at the three of us to "get on the fucking ground!"

He aimed their weapon at me and stood tall, waiting for his commands to be abided. I quickly turned back to see a disgruntled Zedaki and a terrified Jack and told them both to get on the

ground. Not wanting to put my allies in harm's way any further, I also complied with this man's orders, laying my body prone on the ground. He slowly made his way over the quarter of a block that separated us, keeping his weapon trained on my group. As he continued, reaching 5 meters from my person, he stopped and dropped his weapon.

Looking at his face, I saw his eyes locking with mine, staring at me with uncertainty. Sweat was developing from his brow, and as I looked down at the rest of his face, I realized that he wore the expression of terror. His limbs shook uneasily in his loose clothing, and the intimidation that someone in uniform typically demanded was completely missing from him. He was frightened, vulnerable, and unarmed. I had my opening, and I took it, rushing up from the ground and swiftly tackling the man down, placing my weight upon him while kicking the assault rifle back towards Jack and Zedaki.

He blurted out a series of grunts and gags from under my weight. Wanting answers, I grabbed him by his arms with ease and propped him against the exterior wall of a nearby building. I carefully positioned him, placing my arms so that his struggling would be minimized, while his legs were left dangling above the ground.

I then looked down at this man's face. He looked to be young, possibly even younger than Jack, with his curly hair cut short and a thin beard adorning his face. His tan skin was glistening with sweat, and his expression was locked while his head gyrated around. He was clearly intimidated by me, and as I looked into his dark eyes, I knew he would tell me everything I wanted to know.

"Who are you?" I asked calmly and directly.

"I— I— I'm Gregg. My name's Gregg."

"Well, Gregg, what are you doing here?"

"I was... just following my patrol route.... I— erm, I am part of a group. We're call— we're called Zil!"

"Tell me about Zil."

"Zil is a— it's a... Oh my fucking god, please do not kill me."

"I gain nothing by killing you. I am simply asking you a question. If you are willing to talk and not run away, I will let you down."

"Okay, okay. You can let me down. I won't try anything. I promise!"

"Good," I muttered before letting Gregg down and backing up three steps.

He leaned against the wall to maintain his balance as he continued to look at me, clearly aware of who I was, and appropriately terrified. I momentarily looked over to my side, noticing how both Jack and Zedaki were nowhere to be seen, and the same could be said for the assault rifle. I assumed they left to hide while I continued my interrogation.

"I will repeat myself once more. Tell me more about Zil," I said while I crossed my arms.

"Zil is... Zil is a group that wants to bring order to the world. We want to rebuild society back up."

"Which you intend to do by threatening others for wandering into your territory?"

"I... I was not expecting to see anyone else. We never do. I panicked. I saw three people, a group, and our communication system was down, so I couldn't call for backup, so I... I really messed up."

I let out a brief sigh before inquiring about a rather obvious possibility.

"Where is your base? I believe that your organization may be related to someone very important to me."

"Oh... Of course. You're here for *her*. You... you're the real Abigale Quinlan, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. Who is this '*her*' you speak of?"

"I... I don't know a lot about the details. I was only brought into the Brotherhood— Brotherhood of Zil that is, a few months ago. But I, um, I will take you to the base. I'll take you to her."

"I can find her on my own. How large is this Brotherhood of Zil?"

"...We're only 22 people."

"Understood. Thank you for your cooperation. Unfortunately, I cannot let you leave in your current state."

With that, I braced the man's neck and knocked him unconscious. I did not want him to return and warn his allies, but I also needed him to be incapacitated for a while. Not wanting to bind and return to free him later, I figured this was the best option.

Shortly after laying Gregg down, ensuring that he would be in as little discomfort as possible, I turned back to look for Jack and Zedaki, both of whom had left their hiding spot and were looking at me, clearly having heard what Gregg told me. Zedaki was also carrying Gregg's gun.

"So, what's the plan?" Zedaki quickly asked, being pleasantly punctual.

“Considering the small number of people who belong to Zil, and how well armed they appear to be, I believe that it would be best if I went in alone,” I explained. “I should have little difficulty withstanding their gunfire if they choose to be aggressive, and I do not want to place either of you into any more danger than necessary.”

“Logical and straightforward, as I’d figure. But I’m going to ask you to make one modification.”

“And what exactly is that?”

“I’m going with you.”

“Are you truly that eager to immerse yourself in danger?”

“No. I mentioned that some raiders attacked Madeco. They killed Raiyne, and for that, I killed them. But I forgot their name... until now. I do not wish to needlessly claim the lives of humans, but I owe a debt to you, and if the only way I can repay it is with blood, then so be it.”

“I... no, that’s not it. I just want to see him. The leader of Zil. I just want some closure, and to say some things to him. I’ve put my bloodstained jacket aside for a reason. I killed because things were shit, and I was desperate. Because I was scarce and other people were like cockroaches clinging to the scraps left by a fallen society. But in about a week, or whatever, that’ll be a thing of the past. Isn’t that right, Abigale?”

I smiled as I heard Zedaki’s reply, allowing her confidence within me to settle in. She trusted me enough to give up murder. If there was anyone in my life who told me something so profound, it was not in my fractured mind.

“Heh. Yes, I suppose so. Truthfully, I have not thought too much about my plans after regaining my full power. By doing so, my thought process will become far... clearer. But yes, you may come with me. Stay behind me, out of sight, and only return to my side when I give you the signal.”

“Always cautious when it comes to us mortals, eh? Fine. I don’t mind taking it easy.”

“As for you, Jack,” I said, redirecting my attention, “I want you to stay inside the Blazing Beelzebub. Stay out of sight and don’t open the doors for anyone but us. Understood?”

“Um, yes, Abigale,” Jack murmured from the background. “I’ll stay out of trouble. But before you go, can I ask you for something?”

“Of course,” I immediately replied.

“I, um, I’m not sure how exactly I should say this, but can I... hug you?”

I smirked at her words and crouched down to wrap my arms around her while she did the same. She began rubbing my back while I rubbed hers and continued to hold me for ten seconds before I pulled out. I then stood up and patted her on the head. Her face beamed as I did so, only to dim once my fingers left her scalp. As Zedaki and I walked away, she gave us a stuttered “see ya later” before running off to the car.

“The terrain ahead is hazardous,” I said, turning to Zedaki. “I can run through it with ease, but you take your time. Once the coast is clear, I’ll call for you.”

“Sure thing. Just don’t kill their leader before I get there... unless you *want* me to go the rest of my life without this closure.”

I snickered at Zedaki’s morbid comment before leaving her behind. She was not my concern at the moment, and I began dashing onwards, focusing on the next child’s location and by extension, the Brotherhood of Zil. My destination had me pivoting over massive mounds of rubble before stumbling into one of the better preserved and smaller buildings this city had to offer. Just outside of the building were a series of tents, all guarded by a chain-link fence. It was a settlement based both inside and outside a building, walled off from potential threats, not unlike Madeco. I briefly wondered why they would even bother with an outdoor part of their settlement, but I quickly developed a theory. Modern buildings were not designed to preserve or make the most of daylight, and with no power or lights, it would have been difficult to live in them very comfortably as people would be unable to see.

Having discarded any semblance of stealth I had previously adopted, I chose to simply walk towards the facility, unarmed and unobscured by whatever refuse was scattered across the streets. This quickly caused somebody patrolling the exterior of the gamp to notice my presence. Somebody in a familiar military-esque garment and also wielding a firearm that was aimed in my general direction.

They quickly shouted some vague warning to get on the ground while pointing their firearm at me, but I was not in the mood for another interrogation. I simply wanted to get what I desired and leave. So I spoke loudly and clearly, walking slowly and calmly as I approached the building.

“My name is Abigale Quinlan. One of your scouts informed me that you apprehended someone I am interested in. I suggest you hand her over to me. I would like to end this quickly, and without any needless conflict.”

The member of Zil before me looked perplexed and began looking over to their sides as if searching for somebody else to handle this situation. As I continued walking forward, I saw others who were rushing towards them from the camp itself. All of them did much like their ally

and pointed their firearms at me as a means of intimidation. It came as no surprise when one of them attempted to fire at me, hitting me in my stomach. I winced upon impact, but quickly regained my composure and walked forward.

"I repeat. I wish you no harm. Simply provide me with the person I am looking for and I shall leave you as you are"

While unnerved, the group of what had grown into five soldiers stood their ground, refusing to respond to my remarks and looking at themselves in hopes that one of them would tell the others what their orders were. As this happened and as I grew closer, they began to notice my bullet wound peeking out from the dress shirt of my already damaged suit, gradually sealing itself away while the bullet was pushed out of my body. Within a minute, the wound was fully sealed while my clothing retained a bullet hole.

By the time that had happened, I was surrounded by the soldiers. I sighed as I moved towards the one in front of me, the lone female soldier of the quintet, and grabbed their gun. I took it apart, bent its components, and reduced this mighty weapon into an unusable scattering of metal and plastic bits that I let drop onto the asphalt before me. My feat and the speed of my actions further perplexed those around me, their gasps filling their air as the pieces of the firearm fell onto the ground. It was then that I turned to the newly disarmed guard and repeated my comments once more.

"I know that you, the Brotherhood of Zil, are in possession of someone who is capable of great things. If you do not bring me to this person, your gun is not the only thing I'll break. Understood?"

I followed up my words with a snap of my fingers, causing a small explosion to pop in front of the female soldier's face. My threats were then met with mumbles from the soldiers, but soon enough the guard in front of me responded.

"I'll take you to the boss," she said as if she were deliberating the reality of the situation before her.

"You'll take *us* to your boss," I replied before raising the volume of my voice. "ZEDAKI! We have escorted access to Zil's base. No casualties!"

Silence followed as the soldiers looked at me befuddled, only for the sound of boots on concrete to steadily grow in volume as Zedaki ran towards me. She stopped on her heels once she reached me, and shot a glare of disdain to the soldiers who looked at her, but said nothing. And Zedaki in turn said nothing to me, merely offering a nod.

With my ally by my side, the female soldier then began escorting us into the building her organization was built around. She maintained silence as she slowly walked in front of me,

clearly perturbed by how I was looming over behind her, while she herself only appeared to be armed with a knife sheathed along her waist. After walking up the stairs, the three of us reached a disheveled office, only dimly lit by sunlight. It was eerily empty, vacant, but as we continued to walk through it, we came across a desk facing a window, where a man solemnly sat, papers scattered across the large wooden structure before him. His eyes were tracing us the moment we approached him, and as he looked at the three of us, he rose up from his chair, wearing a scowl of contempt

His face was withered and worn, both by age and what I could only assume to be a hard life. His hair was short, thin, receding, and possessed a faint grayish blonde hue. His eyes were a clear light blue that would be innocent on the appropriate face, but looked icy and menacing from his sharp and masculinely sculpted face, with its hard pronounced features. He was wearing what looked like a modified version of the military garments as the other members of Zil, and had a large amount of muscle beneath it, in spite of his body's apparent age. He was an intimidating man, but he looked at me with what could only be perceived as malice. A grueling sense of hatred that made me question if he would spit on, strike, or simply shoot me in the face.

"Let us be," the man ordered the escort, his voice like a stone road.

"I thought I'd never see you again. At least I hoped for as much."

The coarse man then turned his head towards the white-haired woman in red behind me. She stared at him with her blue eyes, while his expression morphed from that of confusion to frustration.

"Dick Kikansky, was it?" Zedaki asked the man, to which he snorted.

"I didn't recognize you without that bloody trenchcoat of yours. Was taking the lives of one of my squads not enough?"

"It was enough to alleviate my frustrations and fury. And trust me, I want little more than to pull out my sword and slice your fucking head in two. But that won't solve anything, it won't bring Raiyne back, and it would only make your pitiful little apocalyptic militia group to become even more scattered, violent, and destructive."

"Well, if you don't want my life, the fuck do you want?" Kikansky replied, his voice disinterested and monotone.

"This, to see you again, haveling in a ruined city, clinging to the past, while I am working to forge a future, with my good friend here. And to call you what you are. Scum. A vicious animal that uses might to assert dominance over the weak, extorting them of what they have, while giving nothing back to them. You dress yourself as soldiers, and call yourself a Brotherhood, but you ain't shit but a group of honorless thieves. How you managed to survive so long truly is a

mystery... except I know the answer. You stockpiled weapons to thrive in an environment like this, but instead you languish. I helped create and run a society with food production and electricity. What do you have to show for it? A bunch of tents and some concrete hovel?"

"Do you have a point or something, or are you just here to rub my face in your shit?"

"Heh, I guess that's what I really am here to do, now isn't it? But I think I've said my piece, and found my closure. So Abigale, my dear, please take the stage."

As Zedaki finished her conversation, I took her place before Kikansky, and looked him squarely in the eye. A look of disdain painted his face, implying we had history, but it was one I had no recollection of.

"I'm afraid I do not know who you are," I said to the man. "My memory has been faint since I woke up a few days ago."

"Heh. What's that? Some half-assed excuse to dodge your responsibilities? I was contracted by the Flare Foundation to find you. To hunt you down after you spent so many centuries living in the shadows. You tried to kill me, but sure enough, even an immortal cannot do much against a truckload of nitroglycerin. I brought you to them so they could do whatever kind of experiments they wanted, got paid, and less than a month later, all that cash became worthless after you started sending the world down an endless shit pipe that has been clogged for the better half of a decade at this point."

I had no memory of what he was talking about, but he certainly filled a hole that had been prominent in my mind for quite some time. He was a link to my past that helped make this present landscape make sense, and while I could have inquired him for additional information, I had doubts he knew much about the Flare Foundation. He sounded more like a mercenary more than anything else, and one facing the consequences of his actions.

"I understand you have someone I might be interested in. I would like you to bring them to me."

I reiterated my calm request, wanting to get through this encounter without needing to stir up any bad blood that may exist between the two of us. While I was dubious about this man from his appearance and the tone he adopted, I truly did not want to end his life. I already had more blood on my hands than most people could even fathom.

"Heh. Fine. Not like there's shit I can do to stop you. I'll take you to her. Follow me."

With that, Kikansky began taking Zedaki and I away from his desk and into another room. This room, illuminated thanks to a large hole in a street-facing wall, contained a young woman in ragged clothing, surrounded by several plastic containers. One with water, one with stones, one with bullets, one with dirt, and one with some brownish gruel.

The woman was yet another one of my children. Her distinct red eyes, darker skin tone, and jet black hair were all immediate signifiers. She looked to be a young adult, perhaps a teenager, and was in a rather pitiful state. She looked malnourished, confused, neglected, and genuinely filthy. She resembled a prisoner, and based on her apparent living conditions, such an analogy was quite appropriate. She looked on at both myself and Kikansky with fear and confusion, recoiling into a corner while covering her face with her hands, rubbing her shoulder-length hair.

Based on the containers before her, I could only assume that she was tasked with Real Booting supplies for the Brotherhood of Zil, all while imprisoned in this room. Yet just by glancing at the bullets in the faint light, I could tell they were malformed. Creating new matter required an intrinsic understanding of what one was building, and I had doubts that this girl truly understood how bullets worked. As for the dirt and food, it was a far simpler process to turn dirt into something edible, but based on the consistency of the brownish sludge kept in the jug next to her, I assumed it was far from appetizing. At least the water looked drinkable.

With this, I had found my Real Booting child and was one step closer to completing my goal. I simply needed to snap my fingers, have her head burst open, and wait for her body to disintegrate and rejoin with my own. Yet, doing so felt... wrong. Unlike my other children, excluding the infant, she was not hostile. She was weak, frail, and nothing but a prisoner. A slave. I began examining closer, causing her discomfort as she moaned softly while I placed my hands over her person. Fresh scars, wounds, bruises, and most damning of all, the scent of sex coated her being. Putting things together, she was likely abused both physically and sexually by the Brotherhood of Zil, and the thought of that just made me sick. Nothing about her was intimidating, and given her divine abilities, she deserved to be pampered and treated as a queen, not locked away into a dimly lit room.

I pitied her. Whatever disdain I had channeled when I approached my other children was robbed of my being, and even though I could have bashed her skull against the wall... I refused to succumb to such brutality and end such a sad existence in such a wretched way. She had to die... but she could die away from this cruel and abusive environment. She could die quickly and painlessly. And I was committed to making that a reality.

"Hello there, my name is Abigale. I am going to take you away from here. What's your name?" I said in the most soothing voice I could muster.

"Punky. I'm Punky," she responded in a broken voice, sounding as if she were on the verge of tears.

"Can you walk on your own Punky?" I asked, noticing how she was crawling along the floor.

"No... ma'am."

“Then I’ll carry you.”

As I moved down to grab Punky by the back and legs, Kikansky let out a heavy sigh, as if he were annoyed by how I was taking her away from him. I prepared to open my mouth to make a comment on the inhumane conditions he subjected Punky to, but Zedaki spoke before I could.

“Just when I think you can’t get any worse, I learn that you’re a slaver and a pederast. I’m really starting to regret my decision, because all I can think of right now is how nice it’d be seeing your head spliced open like an overripe tomato.”

“Heh. If you want to kill me, go ahead. At this point, that might not be so bad. I’ve lost just about everything else. You already killed my old team and I had to replace them with these greenhorn shitheads. And it’s not like my family survived all of this. So if you want to slice me, shoot me, or have little miss genocide have her way with me, go ahead. I’d say you both already took everything away, but I’m sure you’d just say I did this all to myself. ...And you wouldn’t even be fucking wrong.”

I scowled at Kikansky as he chuckled to himself, while Zedaki did the same, rubbing her fingers across the hilt of her sheathed blade. She looked at me, clearly contemplating whether or not she should break her self-appointed oath. I shook my head in response, to which she sighed, releasing her sword and turning her back away from Kikansky.

It was a decision I found myself reconciling with, but as I mused to myself, I reached the conclusion that a pathetic man like him did not deserve death. At least, not in a situation like this. A situation where the majority of mankind had perished. All because of me. All because of actions that I can only attempt to remedy for the ensuing years, decades, and centuries.

With Punky slung in my arms like a young child, I followed Zedaki out of the building and began the lengthy walk back to the Blazing Beelzebub. As we walked, Zedaki remained silent, keeping her thoughts contained within her own head beyond. And I did the same, at least until the young woman between my arms began talking to me.

“Are you my mommy?” She asked in a quiet voice.

“Yes, Punky. I am your mother. However, this is the first time I have ever been allowed to meet you, and I’m afraid to say that it will be the last. You see, the world was not always like this. It was destroyed years ago, and it needs to be repaired. I am the only one who can do it, or at least, the only one who can do it effectively. And to do so, I will need your powers.”

“My power to turn things into other things?”

“Yes, my child. Your Real Booting abilities were being used by the people who captured you, yet they are beyond your own comprehension, I can assure you. You seemed to be creating simple

objects, but you can create nearly anything in the world. You simply need to be able to imagine it and picture it with your mind's eye."

"Oh. Maxxie always used to say that I could do a lot more if I were smarter and said I could even heal owies. But I was always too stupid for my own good."

"...Maxxie?"

"The lady who took care of me when I was a baby. She was the queen of the Flare Foundation. She said I could create buildings if I really wanted to, but I could barely even make a sandwich.... I'm so useless."

"No, you are not useless, you just were never meant to house such abilities."

"And now I'm being killed for being so stupid, aren't I?"

"No, Punky. That is not why. I need your powers, and I will inherit them once you die. After I gain your powers and the powers of my other children, only then can the world be mended into something resembling what it once was. It is unfortunate, but necessary for the good of humanity."

"Okay, then Mommy... So why aren't you killing me now?"

"Because... because I can tell you have had a rough life. You were not hostile towards me, and you were scared. I dislike killing or harming innocents... or anyone to be truly honest. That's why I allowed the people who imprisoned you to live. I desire there to be no more conflict in this world. Seeing as how I am the one responsible for what happened to the world. For the Cataclysm. The ultimate conflict. And for you, I want you to die someplace happier. It means little beyond sentimentality, but even if you go nowhere when you perish, and your existence truly ends, I want your final moments to be jovial ones."

"I don't really get it, but... thank you, Mommy."

Following that sole conversation, the trek was quiet, and soon enough, Zedaki and I made it to the parking garage where the Blazing Beelzebub was stored. As we entered, Zedaki was quick to announce our presence, but once the echo had spread through the concrete construct, all we were met with was a harsh groaning sound. Immediately, I laid Punky down on the concrete floor before joining Zedaki as she rushed over to the car, where we found two figures outside it. One dressed in the attire of a Zil thug, with a familiar blue crowbar sticking out of his face. Blood covered the floor around him, and the cold of death lingered over his person.

The second... was none other than Jack. She was leaning up against the car, and clenching her shoulder. Blood had stained her clothes, and her face was growing pale. While the wound itself

was not too severe from the looks of it, a simple gunshot, she was losing a lot of blood, and needed immediate medical attention. My mind began racing as I reviewed my fragmented mind for knowledge on how I could treat a wound like this without my Real Booting abilities. Something I had not done in decades, if not centuries. I wracked my brain for the answers while Zedaki sifted throughout the car trunk for supplies. But before she could bring them over to Jack, I heard a sharp and guttural yell from behind me.

Looking back, I saw Punky, with a large sharp object lodged into her neck. Before I could even respond, she removed it and jammed it back in there, repeatedly stabbing herself while shouting through her pain, the blood flooding over the concrete beneath her and clogging up her throat. It was a baffling display at first glance, but in reality, I could only see it as a noble sacrifice. Punky recalled what I had told her and was killing herself so that I could use my Real Boot abilities again... giving me the power to help Jack with her wound.

A sense of bitterness and admiration began clenching away at the core of my being as I watched Punky kill herself in such a brutal manner. Sobbing and screaming before her body fell onto the ground. I went over to approach her as her body twitched, but by the time I touched her skin, her body was already decaying into ash. Ash that, like it had many times before, began circling around me before joining my body once more.

I wasted little time mourning her loss and instead returned to Jack. In my absence, Zedaki had begun treating Jack's wound, starting by removing the bullet, which she popped out onto the concrete floor. While I was sure Zedaki could treat the wound, I had gained a more effective way of doing so and pushed her aside accordingly. I placed my right hand over Jack's bleeding shoulder and thought intently. With the bullet already removed, I could mend the injuries incurred internally and have her skin seal the wound completely. There would still be a lasting pain, and a bruise would appear where the wound once was, but it would send her nicely along the road to recovery.

It was a process that I developed over many years, sealing the wounds of soldiers and treating whatever injuries they could have developed, injuries that could have otherwise meant their death. It was a technique and process that was almost second nature to me, but without my intricate understanding of human physiology behind me, I did not dare try to fully repair her shoulder. For now, I merely focused on sealing her wound, preventing any further damages, and putting her body on the road to recovery, rather than healing her outright

Afterward, Jack stopped her predictable muffled sobbing, and she looked on at me with a mixture of awe and gratitude. She touched her wound, wincing in the process, but enveloped me in a hardy hug upon realizing that it had been sealed effectively. I hugged her back, and we remained like that for a minute, holding each other in our arms while I rubbed her small limber back.

"Thank you, Abigale," Jack murmured into my ear. "For everything, but especially this. I'm so sorry I was so careless..."

"No, you were not careless. I do not know exactly what happened, but you were attacked, defended yourself, and were harmed in the process. Come. Grab your crowbar and let us leave this place. Your wound may be sealed, but it will take some time before your shoulder mends itself."

With that, Zedaki drove all of us out of the city using the Blazing Beelzebub. We headed to the outskirts and then went another kilometer for good measure before stopping, as per my directions. After ensuring that both Jack and Zedaki were safe and secure after the encounter, I went out to the back of the car. I thought about telling them what I was going to do, but I figured it was clear to them already.

From the trunk, I pulled out Ultros and freed them of their constraints. Both to give them one last opportunity to move freely, and to take them away into a small woodland area, before the inevitable. I walked them about a hundred meters away from the vehicle before stopping them. Despite Ultros' apparent lack of intelligence, they seemed aware of what I was going to do and looked at me smugly before making their final remark.

"Now you think you can kill Ultros? Go ahead and make my days!"

I did not offer Ultros a verbal response and instead spoke through my actions. I grabbed them by their mane of unkempt hair and clenched my fingers against their skull as I exerted my will onto their body, imagining and picturing the resolution I wanted to see, for everything that Ultros is and ever was to be reduced to nothing more than ash. The exact composition of the ash I had absorbed was a mystery to me, but as I sought to transform their being into cremation ash, my body absorbed theirs.

As the process commenced, with Ultros's body being crumbled away into powder on an atomic level, they screamed in primal agony as everything they were and would ever be returned to me, thus bestowing upon me one of my most essential abilities. True immortality.

I kept this goal in mind as the process carried on over two grueling and ceaseless minutes, with the sound of Ultros's shrill voice still echoing throughout my ears even after they were robbed of their brain and mouth. But through intense focus and determination, I achieved my goal. Every cell of Ultros's person had been reduced to ash, and that ash had returned to my person. As I looked at my symbolically bloodied hands, I could not help but smile, for I knew it was worth the sacrifice.

Still alone, I tested these powers by reaching into a nearby tree, using my Real Booting ability to pull out a simple knife from the bark, one that I used to tear off my left hand. It wiggled around

for three seconds while a numb pain came over me before the appendage returned to my being. I smiled once more.

After all of these hardships, I was back. I had the powers that had come to define me as a being, yet there was still one thing that prevented me from truly feeling like Abigale Quinlan, like myself. My mind.

There was only one child left, and I could feel them. The sense was faint, likely over a hundred kilometers away, but as I looked off to the west, at the sun as it set, ending the first week of this adventure, of this odyssey of mine, I knew, the third and final act was near.

Episode 10: Jack The Crowbar



Within less than an hour, two of my children perished, and two more of my abilities were restored. If I were a woman of malice, I'd say that warranted a celebration. Instead, I remained quiet and unemotional, knowing that my actions are for the greater good and that things will improve on a global scale once I am restored. I had hoped to repress any trepidations and doubts by immersing myself in the idle banter of Jack and Zedaki, yet the two remained silent as they sat in the Blazing Beelzebub while I pushed it onwards, searching for a place to rest for the night.

As darkness loomed and hours passed, we happened across a ramshackle cabin along a forest's edge. An unassuming dwelling that looked durable enough to keep the elements at bay and seemed likely to have bedding for at least the two of them. It had quickly become a routine process that we had repeated daily since our journey began, and now, this could potentially be the final stop before my mission is completed and all my children are killed.

After parking, or rather placing, the car at an appropriate location, the two left their seats and began digging through the back in order to gather supplies, only for me to interrupt them.

"You need not worry about scrounging for supplies, as I can create just about anything."

"Oh, right, the Real Booting thing you talked about. I almost forgot," Zedaki stated, adopting a more reserved tone than what I had come to expect of her.

"Are you sure that's all right, Abigale? I don't want to, erm, impose on you or anything," Jack said, stammering through her limited vocabulary.

"Do not worry. Considering how much I owe you two, this is the least I can do. Plus, I would like an excuse to practice my abilities a bit, even if all I make are water, food, clothes, and possibly some other essentials."

"Well in that case, can we give you any requests?" Zedaki asked. "Because I probably would've killed someone for a good meat pie for the past three or four years. I was never a huge fan of them, but I guess I just miss the taste of home, y'know."

"Hmm... I would be willing to try, but I would not recommend asking me to make anything elaborate. You see, I am still lacking the same intelligence I once possessed, and with it, my intricate knowledge of many things, including the texture and composition of certain objects. Once I regain my intellect, I will gladly make you a meat pie, but for now, I suggest making simpler requests."

"Alright then... Can you at least make a burger? It's been too damn long since I had any meat, not from some bird or critter I caught."

"Not a problem, Zedaki. What about you Jack, is there anything special you would like for dinner?"

"I... I actually had a lot of things from the Flare Foundation... though, meat was a bit scarce, so I guess I'll just have a burger too... and can I have some onions on mine?" Jack requested, bright-eyed as she mentioned onions.

"Oh, yeah, that sounds good. Hey, can you toss some tomatoes on mine too?"

"Heh. Well, I can certainly try, but forgive me if things taste a bit strange."

"Eh, it can't be that much worse than 7-year-old canned beans," Zedaki quipped as she and Jack went into the house.

While the two explored the dwelling, I began creating the things I needed in order to prepare their meal. All I needed was some dirt, and I had plenty of that. However, I could not simply make a burger out of nothingness and needed to actually make the blasted thing. As such, I began by creating a metal pan, cutting board, plates, silverware, a spatula, a rack for the pan, a table, and a cleaning solution for the food and my hands, to the materials I needed for the burgers themselves. Creating bread was an art I mastered hundreds of years ago, due to its

importance amongst many of the societies I drifted between during what I loosely define as my early years. Vegetables like onions and tomatoes were also a simple process. However, creating the actual meat needed for this meal poised to be its own challenge.

The structure of meat, especially mashed together, had its own complexities and nuances that I had mastered in order to capture the same taste and nutritional value. As for the cooking itself, it was a relatively simple process of gathering firewood, which there was plenty of in the forested area we settled at, and snapping it to set off a spark with a single snap. I mended the ground 'beef' into patties, let them sit there, while cutting open the buns and the toppings I had created.

By the time I had placed the bun on the two burgers, both Jack and Zedaki had come out, entranced by the large burgers I had prepared and put on. I gave them the cleaning solution to wash their hands before handing their burgers to them. While the two seemed very excited initially, their faces twisted as they continued eating the burger.

"Hey, Abigale, you sure you got the taste right for this? I mean, it's not bad, but this doesn't really taste like a burger. I mean, you agree with me, don't you, Jack?"

"Um, yes. It tasted a little funny, but it was still really good and nice to have. Thank you for the meal, Abigale."

"I apologize, you two," I replied solemnly. "I am still getting to grips with my powers once more. If the meal is not to your liking, I could try to make something else."

"Nah, don't bother," Zedaki replied. "It tastes weird, but it is still leagues better than what I was planning on eating tonight. Besides, it's been 7 years since either of us had beef, so maybe our taste buds went to shit by living off of scraps for so damn long. So thanks a lot Abigale."

"It really was not a problem for you two. I would ask if there was anything else you would want, but considering how dark it has gotten outside, I believe that you two should retire for the evening. Although, I could make you some breakfast in the morning."

"Seriously?" Zedaki exclaimed. "Well, if you could muster up some bacon and potato hash, I would certainly appreciate it, Abigale."

"Anything's fine with me," Jack muttered in response.

"C'mon Jack, you've gotta want something," Zedaki said, putting a hand on Jack's shoulder.

"Well, um, I liked French toast."

"See, that's the spirit! Anyway, Abigale's right, we ought to get some shut-eye, rise early, and then begin the last leg of our journey."

As those words left Zedaki's lips, Jack turned over to me and her expression soured. She and Zedaki wasted little time rallying into the house to rest for the evening, but I had been around Jack enough to know when something was wrong.

"Jack, hold on, I want to talk to you about something."

With a foot through the door, Jack paused and turned to me, giving me a worried sullen look before shuffling towards me, following me until we were a few meters away from the settlement itself as we moved closer to the woods.

"I never got the chance to talk with you after our incident with Zil. How are you, Jack?"

Jack rubbed her left shoulder in response, poking at the hole in her white shirt and soft blue jacket, both of which had been dyed a murky maroon from her bloodstains.

"Um, it still stings, but I think it should heal up in a few days. Thank you again, Abigale."

"You really do not need to keep thanking me."

"Well, I know that you say that, but I really do owe you a lot, Abigale. Although, I, um, I have been keeping things secret for a while. I really have not told you a lot about myself, my past, or, well, anything, and I don't want to go through this entire adventure of ours without saying anything... so, would it be okay if I told you my story?"

"Of course, Jack. Whatever you want to say, I'm willing to listen," I said as I leaned up against a nearby tree."

"So, I told you I lived through the Cataclysm. My parents died. My entire family did. And I was left all alone. Alone in a world that was falling apart all around me, with no clue about how to even take care of myself. I was only 14, and I was thrown out into this crazy world with nothing to help me, or anything I could bring with me... other than my crowbar."

As she said that, Jack placed her crowbar in both hands and held it softly, taking comfort while she held a tool that doubled as a weapon.

"I spent... about a year just wandering around, looking for food, for shelter, and trying to avoid people. Well, that's not entirely true. I stayed with some of my neighbors for a while, but after protecting me and giving me food while I did whatever I could, which wasn't much, they started acting... creepy towards me. I asked them why, but they did not really answer me. They weren't telling me something, I did not know them very well, and after a few restless nights of worry, I decided that I should leave. I tried to tell them that I wanted to go off on my own, and they told me to stay. I kept saying that I wanted to leave though and they... well, one of them... grabbed

me in the middle of the night, took me away from everybody else, and started to... tear my clothes off.”

“I don’t really remember the details, but I know I hit him in the face with my crowbar... and one of his eyes came out, dangling out of his face. I ran away and never saw those people again... but I was scared that I would. So I kept on wandering from place to place, never having much to call my own except my crowbar. It was my only friend in this world, and that made me feel so alone.”

“I was exhausted, but could not go a day without traveling. Hungry, but could never find enough food to be full. And as the summer ended, my days became shorter and my body became colder. I was starving, thirsty, and willing to do anything to sustain myself. That’s when, one night, when I found someone sleeping in an abandoned house. I saw that he had a backpack, a huge one, that was full of food, water, and even had a first aid kit. I thought I would just take a little so I could get by, but as I began looking through his bag, he woke up. I panicked. I knew that I wouldn’t make it for much longer and that without this food, I would probably die. But if he was gone, I could take all of this and keep myself going for days, if not weeks. That’s when I grabbed onto my crowbar and... killed the man.”

“I stabbed the crowbar into his head, and once he started screaming, I couldn’t help but do it again... and again... and again. Until his head was reduced to a bloody stump. I couldn’t move. I was horrified by what I saw. But as I looked at the remains of this man, as I felt his blood grow cold, I smiled. I laughed. I felt... good about what I did. I felt a rush as I beat his head into bits and chunks, and I did not seem bothered by how I just killed someone. Growing up, I was always told that murder was one of the worst things a person could do, but if anything... I found it fun.”

“That is when I began killing people. Throughout the winter and spring of the first year, I murdered 37 different people, either by ambushing them, misleading them or by defending myself with my crowbar. I needed to get by, and that was a good way to get a lot of supplies really quickly. I was so numb to the process that it’s scary to think I was ever like that. That I could be so cruel, so full of... malice.”

“It was near the first anniversary of the Cataclysm that I killed my final person... at least before I killed Marz. I stopped killing because I was captured by the Flare Foundation. It was a typical morning that I spent exploring a nameless roadside town for whatever I could get, and any victims I could claim the spoils of. That is when I saw a strange black van rolling through the remains of a highway, and even though I tried hiding, a squad of soldiers came out running, securing the perimeter, and searching for anyone in the vicinity. I tried to hide, only to be found within minutes, and knocked unconscious with an assault rifle.”

“When I woke up, I was in the van, in handcuffs, with something covering my mouth. I tried to escape, but there were four soldiers in there with me, so that was an impossibility. They

eventually started talking to me and mentioned that the Flare Foundation had recruited me, that I would work for them if I wanted to cling to whatever remained of my life. I was confused, but there was nothing I could actually do about my situation. I was not strong, smart, or cunning. I thought that this was the end for me, and... kind of accepted that I was going to be a prisoner or a slave. I knew nothing about the Flare Foundation then, but I had a feeling that it was not a very good place... and it really wasn't."

"I was told that I would either behave myself and work for the foundation in exchange for sustenance, or that I would be executed. I had clung to life so hard this past year, that it was not a decision for me. From dawn to dusk, I would work the fields at the courtyard of the facility, toiling the earth and working myself to exhaustion each day, all in exchange for bland meals that failed to fill even my tiny stomach. When I did have the energy, I would cry myself to sleep, my heart filled with hate for what I had become, and what the future had in store for me. But then things changed once I met her. The leader of the Flare Foundation, a woman by the name of Maxxie Flare."

"She looked a lot younger than she really was, wore a purple suit, and exuded confidence with her every move. One day, she walked up to me while I was working, where she smiled and asked for my name. After I said it, she immediately grabbed me by the arm and said that I had been 'reassigned'. I thought that she knew about my sins. I thought she knew that I was a relentless murderer. That she was going to kill, torture, or at least punish me for my actions. But looking back, I don't think she knew about what I did... not that I would describe my time with her as anything but a sick form of punishment.

"Miss Flare made me into her personal 'fuckdoll'. She would assign me small tasks to do, allow me to walk around important areas of the facility, but at her command, I would drop everything and come to her 'sex dungeon'. She would do... a lot of things to me, and have me do things to her. I refused at first, but she scolded me for that, threatening to send me back out there if I wouldn't play with her. I did every twisted thing she wanted. I role-played scenarios with her, stuffed things up my butt, sucked things, and allowed me to treat my body as a 'canvas' for whatever fantasy happened across her mind."

"She was not really a bad person. I feel that she came to love me over time, and after being with her for over 6 years, I feel... I don't know what, but I don't really hate her. She would talk to me, teach me things, and give me far better food than I could've found outside... but I don't know if it was worth it. She, um, she also started calling me Jack."

"You see... Abigale, I never told you my full name. It's Jacquelynne Onson, but I used to go by Lynne. However, after she brought me in, Flare... Maxxie, I mean, she would always call me Jack, and I guess I felt that I became such a different person that I couldn't go back to being Lynne. Lynne was a bright-eyed teenage girl who lost everything, took up a crowbar, and became me. Became Jack. A murderous psycho who was punished for their crimes by becoming a sex toy to an, um, egg-o-mania-keh? No, that's not it..."

“Egomaniac,” I said, correcting Jack.

“Yeah, Maxxie was an egomaniac who captured you so that she could harness their power, and... I actually always admired you, Abigale. I saw you during the Cataclysm, and seeing you again there, asleep, harmless, and beautiful, it was strange, yet calming. I don’t really know why, but I found it comforting to talk to you, to be around you. Even though it’s pretty silly. Back then, I knew nothing about you, I thought you were just a killer, but I felt, in my heart of hearts, that you could be something more than that. It was silly, but, after getting to know you, I guess my gut feeling was kind of right. I still like being around you, and I’m really glad you let me come along with you on this journey, even though I haven’t been much help.”

As Jack ended that thought, I leaned towards her and embraced her with my arms, placing her in a gentle hug while she did the same, her arms clutching the bottom of my back while her head rested beneath my chest. As we held this position, I moved my left hand to Jack’s head, rubbing her scalp and tussling her hair while she let out a small and adorable coo.

“You have been very helpful in my journey, and I am grateful to have gotten to know you. You may have done some bad things, but given your situation, mental state of the time, and how you are now, I do not think you are a bad person Jack, not at all. I am thankful that you were willing to tell me all of this. It shows how much you trust and appreciate me. For now, I think you should go retire for the evening, but if you have more you would like to say, I am willing to listen.”

“Um, no, you’re right. I did keep you up for a while and... I feel like I got a lot off of my chest. Thank you for understanding Abigale. Oh, and I hate to ask, but, um, is there one thing you can promise me when this is all over?”

“I am careful with what I promise. What is it you would like?”

“Well, after this is all over, could you promise to meet up with Zedaki and I? It doesn’t need to be that often, as I’m sure you’ll be busy, but seeing you once every few years would be really nice.”

“Heh. That sounds like something I could manage. Jack, for helping me out in this journey, I promise, I will visit you and Zedaki once every year for the rest of your lives. Though, I cannot say how long of a visit it will be. I am going to be incredibly busy after this is all said and done.”

“I understand. Thank you, Abigale. For everything.”

With that, Jack began scampering back into our dwelling for the evening. I looked up at the sky, taking in the stars and half-moon that hung above, bringing some light to this night. I focused my senses as I took in a deep breath, trying to pinpoint where my last child could be, and coming away confident that tomorrow truly would be when I would be able to end it all.

After walking her back to the shelter, I crossed eyes with Zedaki, who was leaning against a wall and wore a contemplative expression on her face.

“So, hey. I guess we’re almost done with this whole little journey of yours.”

“Indeed,” I replied while continuing to walk away from the settlement. “I truly did not expect things to go by so quickly.”

“Yeah, me neither. I also didn’t really expect them to go so smoothly. To be honest, I never thought we’d actually make it. I mean, after seeing that B... whatever his name was, the kid with the exploding snaps, I figured that the rest of your kids would be insanely strong. And when we ran into that Marz guy, I thought that it was the end for all of us. Shit, from moment one of day one, I thought that this was a suicide mission. Well, at least for Jack and I.”

“If you thought this was a suicide mission, then why did you join me?”

“To be honest, it’s because of Madeco. I’ve never been much of a leader. I’m not very good at managing people, reading them, or any of that sort of thing. But after she died... after Raiyne died, I was made into the leader of Madeco. Things went... decently, I guess. They were established, there was order, and I tried my best to maintain it. I knew I wasn’t cut out for it and talked about stepping down as the head of the settlement, but I got the vibe that doing so would just bring more problems.”

“That’s when that Bomber kid showed up and killed half of my people. I escaped, leaving my people hostage, and I thought about leaving Madeco behind, looking for a new place, as I knew there was no way I could defeat a kid like that. Still, I had to try, and I made some half-decent explosives using supplies in the hardware store. I was ready, willing, and then I lost my nerve after I saw a pile of disfigured corpses. I spent the next day searching for whatever supplies I could before leaving Madeco, as I considered it a lost cause. That’s when I ran into Jack.”

“Yeah. I lied to you about my story. I never made any plans to hunt down the Bomber or anything like that. I just ran away. Then, after I popped that little fucker’s head open like an overripe tomato, I met you. The way I saw it, I had two options. Either return to lead Madeco and deal with all the feces-filled baggage that comes with being a leader or join you on a suicide mission. I was sure that you would live. I saw how you healed when up against the Bomber, after all. But as for Jack and myself? I figured we were both goners.”

“I understand, Zedaki. But why would you willingly go on a ‘suicide mission’?” I asked, following a stretch of silence.

“Like I said, I didn’t want to lead Madeco. I wanted out. I wanted to do something good for the world after I fucked up and got half of my people killed. I figured you were the best shot at things going back to ‘normal’ so I put my life in your hands. I didn’t have much of a reason to walk this

joyless husk of a bitch we call Earth, and I guess you could say that I hated myself for being a coward and trying to run away from my problems. That's why I fought so hard against Marz. I mean, I was one good hit away from having my head smashed against the asphalt."

"Then, after Jack killed that monster, I started to think about things, about who I was, about how, by wearing my get-up, I was clinging to the memory of a dead woman who I would never see again. Shit, I don't even have any photos of her, and I probably never will. Now, I'm not entirely sure what I am going to do with myself. I feel like I have spent the past two years or however long in the shadow of someone else, and I am finally myself again. I would ask who I am, but I'm guessing that after we take care of your final kid, and you start rebuilding everything, a lot of people will need to ask themselves that question. For a long time, it was enough to just survive, but it won't be for much longer."

"So, I take it you don't want those three statues of yourself after everything is said and done?" I sarcastically quipped to lighten the mood.

"Pfft, no. But I would like to see Madeco expanded. For it to be a real town. I know you'll be busy with a thousand different things, but Madeco could really use your help, especially with winter right around the corner."

"I made a promise, Zedaki, and I intend to keep my promises."

With that, Zedaki departed to her dwelling once more, only for Jack to flow out of its door beforehand, scampering up to me once more.

"Um, Abigale," Jack said in her usual meek tone. "It's pretty cold outside, and seeing as how you have your Real Booting powers back... could you please make me an extra blanket?"

"Oh yeah, could I get an extra too?" Zedaki shouted from the doorframe of the building.

"Sure thing, you two. Just give me a few minutes."

Rejuvenated by this heart-to-heart, I returned to the churned soil I used previously and created some blankets for my companions. It was a simple request, one I had been fulfilling for centuries, and while the process was complex, like most Real Booting most things, it was a habitual act for me, allowing me to complete the task expediently.

I returned to my companions' dwelling with the blankets in tow, only to return outside upon wishing them a good night. While prior nights of mine were consumed by slumber, I now had something to preoccupy me. I had a way to spend my time productively, and with this power, with these hours of calm, I made certain to Real Boot a vast array of supplies for my allies, as a way of thanking them for the trials and tribulations I subjected them to. All while they rested for what would become the end of this murderous odyssey.

Episode 11: Athena The All-Knowing



I did not sleep during the seventh night of my journey. Prior nights, I lacked anything to invest myself in and sought sleep as a means of accelerating myself to the next day. I would have busied myself for the duration of the night, but I lacked anything to invest myself in. And with my intellect being what it was, I was not in the mood to contemplate things for hours on end. However, earlier in the day I obtained two of my most valuable abilities, my immortality and Real Booting, and felt the need to test them. I began by crafting the most complicated objects I could recall the inner workings of, which were sadly far more limited than I would have wanted. After satisfying myself in that regard, I began coming up with the most lethal ways I could harm myself, including poisoning, explosions, dismemberment, massive blunt trauma, and more. All of which I recovered from in seconds.

By the time I finished my experimentation, I used my Real Boot abilities to craft myself a new outfit, one that, unlike all the others I had worn and destroyed across this adventure, would properly fit my proportions. I settled on a black suit with a red dress shirt, along with some plain black dress shoes. It has been my go-to outfit for the past few decades, so it was easy for me to recreate it. Wearing this outfit brought with it a sense of completeness, like I was one step closer to being myself, yet there still remained one more piece I was still missing.

However, I could not very well abandon my allies to hunt for my seventh child, and seeing as how it was the middle of the night, I had to find some way to preoccupy myself. Foreseeing

tomorrow as being the final day of the journey, I chose to begin creating parting gifts of sorts for Jack and Zedaki, in the form of essentials and survival-related items. Clothing that I based on what I observed their measurements to be. Copious amounts of non-perishable foods to keep them going for weeks on end. A water filtration system, first aid supplies, and anything else that was within my limited ability.

By the time night fell and dawn broke, I had finished what I set out to do and began creating breakfast for Jack and Zedaki. I toiled over my discarded cooking aids from the prior night and sought to create everything I needed to prepare a robust breakfast, the largest meal that either of them would have had in years. French toast, eggs, pancakes, potato hash, and bacon were all presented before them as they emerged from their dwelling, and they wasted little time eating it. They laced lavish praise with comments on the unusual taste of the meal, and once the two finished their plates, I presented them with my other creations.

I busied myself by stocking the Blazing Beelzebub with the supplies while Jack and Zedaki busied themselves with their new wardrobes, returning to the dwelling to change, and emerging half an hour later as a pair. Zedaki has dressed herself for the upcoming winter, donning a crimson peacoat with white buttons, a pair of light gray pants, and some black boots that went halfway to her knees. She wore a look of confidence on her face as she looked off into the world, clearly satisfied by how she looked, and I had to agree that she looked especially stylish in the clothes I crafted for her.

Meanwhile, Jack settled on a violet sweater, a dark blue denim jacket, a pair of black skinny jeans, and a pair of sneakers that only loosely went with the rest of her outfit. She looked cute and youthful in her outfit, but she still conducted herself with a shakiness and shyness, despite having revealed her deepest secret to us and been met with acceptance.

Once we exchanged our pleasantries and left the cooking aids for the next traveler who came by, it was time for us to depart. It was an hour after sunrise by the time we left, and my senses told me to head northwest, bringing our journey into what I could only assume to be central California.

The actual travel was the same as it always was. I pushed the Blazing Beelzebub through the post-apocalyptic landscape before us while the chattering of Jack and Zedaki filled the air, and I was left alone to stew with my thoughts. While I was grateful for each of my regained abilities, each one of them was a further reminder of what I was lacking, of what abilities I should possess. Only one remained, yet it felt more crucial than any other. More than Real Booting, more than my immortality, and more than my enhanced strength and agility. My intellect. I have felt like an idiot since I woke up in the Flare Foundation over a week ago, and more than anything else, that sense, that feeling of inferiority, of lacking something so crucial to my definition of my very self, has been the most crushing and haunting.

I have felt foggy, distant, and indecisive. I have made many mistakes, many brash actions, yet I could not think of anything better at the time. I was a shadow of who I once was, and because of that, I continued to travel day and night, rarely stopping my pushing of the Blazing Beelzebub, knowing that I could keep going endlessly now with all of my other powers regained. I had the brawn and bulk I had grown so accustomed to, so I may as well use it to regain my brains, as it were.

It was in the early afternoon when I finally reached the spot where I would reclaim my lost attribute, and the setting seemed a bit too appropriate. I found myself at a small college, a university consisting of multiple buildings that mirrored the sights that I had seen throughout my journey thus far. The Earth was disturbed, a series of young trees and bushes had taken hold of fertile unkempt soil, and the buildings themselves ran the gamut.

Some were penetrated by giant stone spires, others were overrun by nature due to shattered glass hallways, and others looked to have weathered the storm of modernity well. At least based on their exteriors. However, my senses had sharpened since the elimination of all of my other children, and I knew precisely where my next child was. They resided within a building that was more or less unscathed by the Cataclysm. A library that had been built many decades ago, and was architecturally most remarkable due to a greenhouse that was erected on the building's roof.

It was an interesting choice aesthetically, yet one that I could not help but admire given the current situation. It would be an excellent way for one to continue to grow food, while not leaving the vicinity of the library, a place rife with knowledge to accrue and things to preoccupy one's time. It was the sort of thing I could have seen myself doing if I needed to wait out this disaster, though as that thought broiled in my mind, my expression changed from that of admiration to dread.

If my past children were any indication, the possibility was high that this child was misusing my power, my intellect. As somebody who knew everything I knew, with my stolen understanding of human culture and psychology could have been able to form a cult, especially in a setting as hopeless as this.

However, there was little need to worry about such a matter. I was invincible for all intents and purposes and knew that I could overpower whatever measures this child may possess. It was because of this that I once again requested that my allies allow me to go in alone, and neither of them even attempted to stop me.

I requested that they hold back near the edge of the university, to keep watch and flee if anything abnormal were to occur, while I solemnly and calmly walked towards the library on my own, hoping to draw out whatever defenses laid in wait for intruders such as me. Which never happened. I reached the library with no interruptions and promptly opened up the front door.

Inside, I was surprised to see that the library had what looked to be emergency lights activated, indicating that this building had power flowing through it, which I would expect. While obscure, solar panel technology was not overly complicated, and installing it for a building like this would have been simple for my child. That is, assuming they even were the ones to install it and that such a fixture was not already installed prior to the solar flare I unleashed upon the world. With a sigh, I began dismissing my theorizing and instead chose to not dawdle in the what-ifs while my goal was in such close proximity. I quickly traversed past the well-maintained interior of the library, through a small reading area, and up to the stairwell, following the dim lights up to the third of four floors.

As I opened up the door, I quickly found who I was looking for. Beyond several shelves of books that all looked undisturbed, there were a series of chairs and tables, all empty... except for a single person. One who was rapidly reading through a book while a desk lamp illuminated the pages for them. I called out to them, ushering a simple hello to garner their attention. They looked up at me and immediately shut their book before standing up and walking to me.

Through the dim emergency lights, I could only slowly make out details about this person, yet it was obvious that she was another one of my children. Wearing a university branded sweatshirt and a pair of sweatpants, she was very similar to me in stature, a tall woman of a dark complexion who possessed unmistakable red eyes. Her hair was notably longer than my own though, and her face bore a sense of unmistakable youth, as one often sees in teenagers and those in their early twenties. She looked like a college student, that much is certain, but she was also composed, calm, and looked as if she knew both who I was and why I was here. Because she did.

"Hello. Abigale Quinlan, I presume?" She stated in a voice and inflection only slightly lighter than my own.

"Yes. Do you know why I am here?" I repeated.

"I have my theories. From what I have been told, you are my biological mother, and I am, effectively, a clone of yours that has been given one of the many abilities that helped you do a great number of things throughout your life. Including the destruction of much of the developed world. The Cataclysm. As for why you are here, I have two theories, one of which is more likely than the other. Either you desire to meet me and pursue some sort of familial relationship, or you desire to kill me. It really is quite macabre how simple yet extreme those two options are, is it not?"

"Yes, it is. Your second theory was correct. I am here to kill you. Your intellect was originally something I possessed, yet it was removed from me upon your birth. The only way I may reclaim it is if you perish. Once I have my intellect restored to that beyond basic human capabilities, then I can begin rebuilding this world."

"I expected as much. I suppose I can do little but accept such a fate. I know that you possess many other abilities and, based on the way you are presenting yourself, I assume you have retained at least some of them. Immortality, Real Booting, Snap Burst, Enhanced Body, and so forth. With any of those, you can easily kill me yourself. Especially after I sent my students away."

"Students?"

"Yes. I spent a year teaching a group of thirty people how to best function as a society, embedded with them the knowledge to function in this world, and helped them develop the skills needed to survive. They are undergoing their first winter alone, as I had them leave this university early in the spring to start growing their crops and settling their homes. They were my second class, yet I do not have a third. There are only so many people left in this world, and my students are at least somewhat equipped to become teachers themselves now."

"So, you have been helping people for quite some time now."

"Certainly. With intellect comes a desire to use said intellect, and what better way to use knowledge than to spread it amongst others? Oh, but I talk too much. It is a particularly nasty habit that I have formed. I will not resist your efforts to kill me, and will simply ask that you make things as painless as possible."

"...At first, I did not feel bad about killing my children, but now... No. I must become myself again. I must have all my abilities restored. Only then can I help this world and help seek redemption for the destruction I have caused. I tire of thinking with such a lacking mind. Before I kill you, I must ask, what is your name?"

"I was named Athena, after the Greek goddess. However, it is time for my intellect to return to its original owner. I appreciate what you gave me Abigale, or should I say, Mother. But, I understand that my time has come. I will not pry on any longer. After all, you have a world to save."

With that final line, Athena bowed, as if honoring me and presenting herself for me to kill. In response, I reached into a nearby wall and pulled out a short sword. I held it high before slicing it down and severing Athena's neck, causing her head to fall to the floor while a pool of blood began seeping from her body as it tumbled to the floor. I murmured a goodbye to her as I let my blade fall onto the carpeting beneath me while I exited the building. The ash followed me as I left for the stairs, being fully absorbed into my being before I made it to the stairwell proper. Walking down to the first floor, I gradually realized that this ability, if it could even be called that, would come to me far more slowly than others. I could feel my mind expanding from what I absorbed from Athena, yet it was a gradual process, as opposed to the sudden rush that I had grown used to.

It was... disappointing in a sense, but whatever upset I felt was undermined by the satisfaction that washed across my being. I left the library with a genuine smile. I was whole. I was complete. I had regained what was taken from me. I almost cried as I looked up at the afternoon sun and walked through the field of autumn colored trees, back to the Blazing Beelzebub, eager to inform my allies of my success, yet also a bit melancholic that my journey ended without their involvement. I shook my head to dismiss such worries and tried to lose myself in the environment of the ravaged campus... only to slow my pace as I asked myself a question.

"If I am complete, then how did I cause all this?"

I had previously hypothesized that it was due to an ability that I gained during my torture on behalf of the Flare Foundation, and I could tell that I was lacking said ability even after having eliminated my final child. Things did not quite add up, but before I could begin flexing my mental muscles once more, I had made it to the Blazing Beelzebub and was greeted by Jack and Zedaki as the two of them rushed out of the car to greet me and inquire about what happened in the library.

"Things went well," I responded. "My last child willingly sacrificed themselves to me, believing that doing so was best for humanity."

"Really? Seems like a bit of an anti-climax, dontcha think?" Zedaki quipped nonchalantly.

"Yes, but I am hardly upset by the lack of bombast concluding this journey," I said with a modicum of snark in my voice. "After everything we have been through over the past week, including the murderous child with the ability to cause explosions with a simple snap of his fingers, and the behemoth with inhuman strength and agility, I consider myself lucky that two of my children willingly gave up their lives for the greater good."

"So, um, what are we going to do now?" Jack meekly asked as she fiddled with her crowbar.

"My plan for what to do after defeating my final child was vaguely to restore the world, yet the exact details will require days of planning. In the meantime, I believe that it would be best if I take the two of you back to Madeco. I shall use my regained abilities to fortify your settlement for the upcoming winter, while formulating a plan for what to do, making use of my newly restored intellect."

"Intellect?" Jack echoed back at me.

"Yes, I have brought this up before. Since my awakening, I have felt foggy and mentally slow, unable to properly articulate my thoughts or remember things I once knew completely. My final child possessed a great intellect, which is gradually being transferred to me, as it were. You could say that I am getting smarter every moment. I am unsure how long it will take for my mind

to be fully restored, but once it is, I shall begin devising the restoration plan for humanity, and begin the process of repairing the world as best I can.”

“That sounds like a pretty solid plan, well, more solid than anything I could come up with,” Zedaki remarked. “I guess we should head off ASAP. It will probably take a couple of days before we reach Madeco again, but maybe you and your ‘restored intellect’ will come up with a faster route while pushing the car forward.”

With that remark, Zedaki began making her way back to the Blazing Beelzebub while Jack and myself followed. I momentarily paused, feeling as if something was amiss, before dismissing such superstition and continuing forward to the familiar red electric car. Zedaki slyly made her way to the vehicle, ready to sit back while I did all the hard work and chat it up with Jack for another few hours before sunset.

But before she could make it into the car proper, something happened. From the sky, a large metal spear came piercing down and penetrated the hood of the car, stabbing through the engine and causing the entire vehicle to bounce from the impact. The three of us were left momentarily paralyzed by this sight, and right as I registered what happened, I realized that I could hear a ticking noise coming from the car... or rather the spear penetrating it. Wasting no time, I grabbed both Jack and Zedaki, carrying the two of them away from the vehicle before a concussive coom erupted from behind me.

My allies and I all turned our heads after the noise dissipated, leaving a ringing sound resonating throughout our ears. The vehicle that had served as an invaluable asset for the past week had been reduced to a pile of burning machinery and supplies. Everything we had kept stored in the vehicle had been incinerated, and the remains were already unsalvageable.

I turned to look at Jack, her face wrapped with confusion and fear as she was left awestruck by the scene, while Zedaki’s face bore an even more dire expression. Zedaki had explained her life’s story throughout our journey, and it was clear that she valued the things she carried, well beyond practical reasons. She walked out of the car with nothing on her, meaning that her jacket, a memento of her lost lover which she had placed in the car after her battleworn hat was incinerated. Her blade and rifle, two weapons that she wielded with a great sense of familiarity, were destroyed. While the vehicle itself, a surprising and incredibly useful gift she miraculously came into contact with that served her well throughout our journey, was left burning before her.

Unable to contain her grief and frustration, Zedaki broke away from her usual composed demeanor and began wailing vigorously at the sight before her, sobbing and shouting as she flailed herself about, left senseless after seemingly losing everything in this world that she valued. I let her go as she began venting her frustrations, before turning over to Jack, still locked in one of my arms.

Her face was twisted from Zedaki's loud shouts, which she tried repressing by covering her ears. Seconds later, her face spontaneously straightened out and she adopted a similar expression to Zedaki. She whispered to herself, "my dress" before breaking away from my loose grip to dash through the burning rubble for her own memento, while still holding onto her crowbar. I called out to her, imploring her to cease such reckless actions, but before I could do any more than that, I was knocked back by an immense force.

I had not been maintaining my focus and had failed to notice the world around me. As a result, I found myself pinned to the ground with a familiar-looking metal spear penetrating my chest. I coughed up blood as I realized my situation, and promptly acted upon it, ignoring all other factors around me. Just as the spear began to tick, I began converting its contents into sand, causing the explosive components to fail, and preventing myself from being caught in an explosion. The sigh of my body being impaled like that was enough to grab the attention of Jack and Zedaki, who broke away from their panicked daze and came over to me.

Before they could reach me, my chest had already healed itself, and my eyes were darting around, searching for who or what could have been responsible for these explosive spears. The ground around us was barren of any humans or even animals, and the rooftops were clear from my perspective. But as I brought my eyes further upwards, I found a suspicious figure floating in midair. I called to them, and they replied by gracefully floating down, transforming from a speck-like silhouette into a full figure that stood before the flaming wreckage of the Blazing Beelzebub.

As I looked at them, a shiver was sent down my spine. Their dark brown complexion and crimson eyes were clear enough signs that they were one of my children, and my senses quickly confirmed just that. However, something about this person seemed... off. My prior children all bore a resemblance to me and were clearly identifiable as such, but as I stared at the adult woman before me, I began to take note of just how different our bodies were.

Her hair was a silky silver that flowed past her collarbone. Her face was rounder, softer, and adorned with black freckles. Her figure was more voluptuous than my own, with large breasts and a plump rear. All encased in a tight deep violet bodysuit that acted as a second skin for this person before me. She stood at 1.9 meters tall but was further elevated by a pair of heels that brought her to my height. She looked at the three of us with a malicious grin while adopting an almost exaggerated sway as she walked towards us.

In turn, I walked towards her, gesturing to Jack and Zedaki as I went forward and took care of this encounter on my own. They seemed to understand as I began quickly pacing myself closer to this woman, whose smile only grew as I drew closer. Once we were less than a meter apart, we both stopped and proceeded to glare at one another in silence. I waited for her to make the first move, to show me her abilities so I could counter, while also running through battle scenarios as best as I could with my not yet fully restored intellect. Noticing my hardened stance, the woman snickered at me, shutting her eyes as she laughed to herself.

"Who are you?" I asked this mysterious person.

"Hmph. Is that any way to address one of your daughters? I must say *Mother*, I really expected a more loving greeting than that," The woman replied, her voice sounding distinctly unique from my own, coming off as far more bubbly and childish.

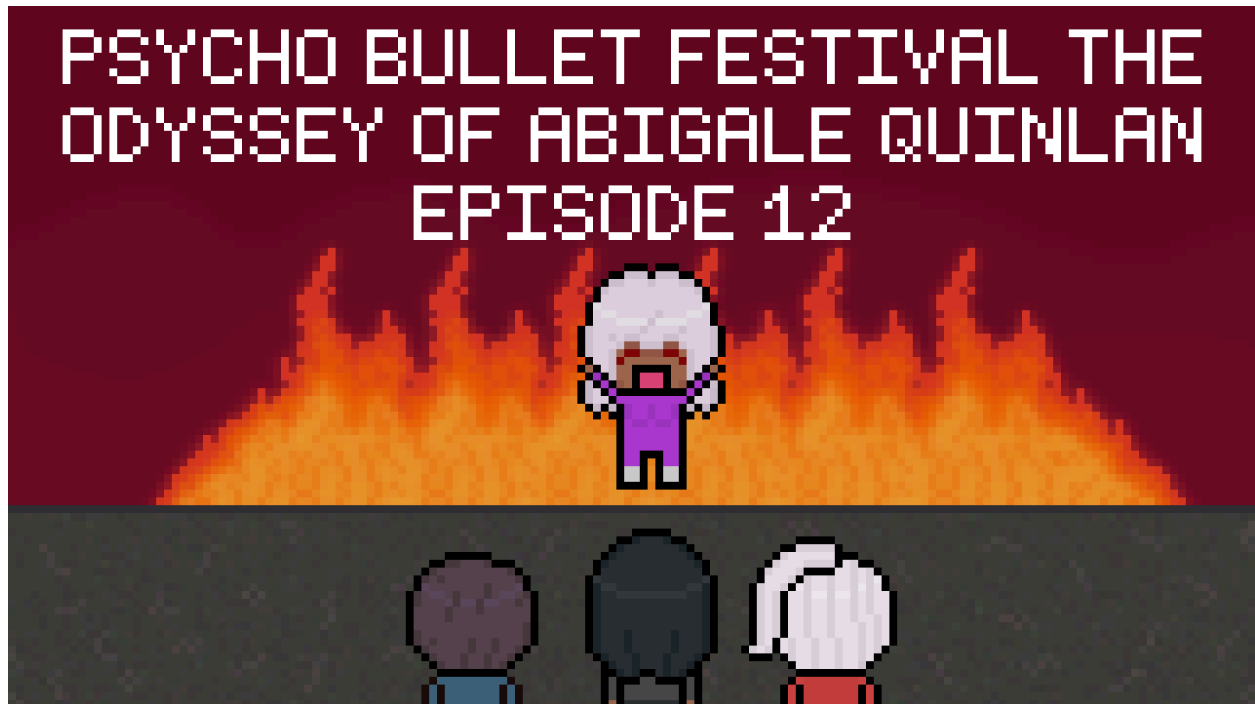
"I asked you who you were."

"I know. I just want to savor the moment. After all, this is the first time we ever had a real conversation."

"You tried to kill me. I have no reason to converse with you. I simply want to know who you are before I kill you."

"Oh, so presumptuous. You always seemed like a stubborn and fickle bitch though, so I'm hardly surprised. If you must know, Mother Quinlan, I am your eldest child, and my name is... Flare. Flare. The. Fury."

Episode 12: Flare The Fierce



My mind stuttered as I heard that name. I had long since stopped worrying about the Flare Foundation after Jack and I successfully escaped their base at the beginning of my journey, but now, after my journey reached its end, had they finally caught up and found us? No, that did not seem right. None of this seemed right. I tried to focus on the situation, but with my mind still acclimating to my regained intellect, and my formerly lost knowledge still beyond my grasp, focusing proved to be difficult.

“Flare the Fury?” I repeated in confusion, at a loss for anything else to say.

“Yes, yes indeed, but I suppose that name must be confusing the three of you, wouldn't it? In fact, my very existence is probably a surprise to you. I mean, Jack may have been my favoritest little doll, but even I know when to keep my secrets.”

I looked back at Jack for a moment. She and Zedaki had distanced themselves from Flare and I, as per my instructions, and both held a look of confusion on their faces, mirroring my own. While my head was turned to them for a mere moment, Flare flew past me, her feet never touching the ground as the air carried her forward and right behind Jack and Zedaki. Her presence shocked them, and her speed left me dumbfounded.

“Now, now, I’m not going to hurt you two. I just want all of you nice and close while I tell you a little story, all right?”

Jack looked up at Flare, her face painted with dread as she slowly backed away from her. While Zedaki stood before the enigmatic woman, her face contorted with resentment for what Flare had taken from her moments prior.

“What kind of story do you want to tell us?” Zedaki curtly asked the levitating woman in front of her.

“It is my own story, you silly little goose. But if I am going to tell it, I suppose I should start at the very beginning.”

Before continuing, Flare pressed her hands against the ground and Real Booted a sofa that would sit three. Her speed in reassembling the matter beneath her feet matched my own, and right as the object was completely formed, she kicked it towards me with an immense force. I grabbed it reflexively and kept my eyes glued on her as she reached down into the newly formed hole before her, deepening it as she Real Booted a similar-looking recliner chair for herself. She sat in it with her legs crossed while gesturing to the three of us to take a seat, implying that this was a long story. I exchanged knowing looks with my allies, urging them to play along, sit on the sofa, and listen to her story.

“In February 2015, the Flare Foundation, an organization belonging to the illustrious Flare family, had finally succeeded in their most ambitious project. Capturing Abigale Quinlan. An enigma throughout history, an obscure myth only found in the rarest texts, a figure who, throughout time, had done well to hide her presence, and seldom ever used her true name. Oh, the search for her was an arduous one, but after several years of vigorous research, the efforts of the Foundation had finally been rewarded.”

“Researching her existence and finding the common through-line in otherwise unrelated anecdotes was a challenge I would not wish upon my greatest enemies, and finding her proved even more difficult. It was an ordeal that had agents exploring the globe, searching through the greater human population for somebody who would be an appropriate match. We went through dozens of false candidates, but thanks to the discovery of a few seemingly innocuous photos scattered across a social media page, we were able to find the one true Abigale Quinlan.”

“Following a process involving much collateral damage and many deaths, the mightiest being in all the world had been captured, frozen in liquid nitrogen, and brought into a specialized chamber where she would be analyzed, experimented upon, and the secrets behind her amazing inhuman abilities would be uncovered for the benefit of the Flare Foundation, if not all of mankind.”

“However, the methods implemented by the research team proved to be a bit... unorthodox, as they had Abigale assaulted, maimed, and harmed constantly if she disobeyed their orders. And my oh my, was she an ornery little cunt. She went on about how she would not be made an experiment, how her powers shall not be used by the forces of man, and how she is the only one who should be special. Her resistance continued for a few weeks before... something happened. After being punished and experimented for so long, Abigale began expressing troubling tendencies, and the base was detecting some strange readings. Those readings turned out to be a devastating earthquake.”

“This was followed by a horrific storm that tore off the roof of the building, demolishing our facilities. These two events allowed Abigale Quinlan to escape, to fly away from the lab, go across the country, and then the entire world, and wherever she went, rampant devastation and awe-inspiring destruction followed. Hurricanes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, tornados, storms, floods, earthquakes, and other oddities like the giant pillars and massive sinkholes you have all become well acquainted with.”

“Over the span of a month, she traveled across every nation in this world and left every one of them in some massive state of disrepair. Infrastructure was destroyed, most people perished from the disaster itself or the aftermath, and humanity, the once-proud figure that had conquered and controlled this planet, was left shambling in its own ruins.”

“It all came to a close when Abigale returned to New York City. Once there, she set off an explosion that not only destroyed the city but most of New England with it. The explosion created a massive crater, one that filled with water from the Atlantic ocean, submerging her in both water and rubble. There she should have remained hidden for decades, if not centuries, but the Flare Foundation was prepared for any and all possible outcomes and uncovered her body within a week. Fortunately, the devastation she wrought upon this Earth left her body comatose, unable to move, and most importantly, unable to resist. The Foundation was able to freely experiment on her, to explore her biology in far more detail than they could previously, and they did just that.”

“However, the results were... unsatisfactory, to say the least. We discovered many things by observing Abigale’s body with no restraints... but our key discovery was that whatever caused Abigale Quinlan’s abilities to manifest themselves, it was incompatible with humans. Despite resembling a human in nearly every way, her genetic makeup was deeply different from that of a Homo Sapien, and the scientists could not comprehend or find what exactly gave her these abilities. It was a... crushing revelation. One that proved the Foundation’s efforts were all in vain.”

“Everyone was crestfallen by this discovery, but giving up was not an option. The Foundation needed to use its newly acquired asset to the best of their capabilities, and it was decided that the best way to do so was to take an unorthodox approach. Breeding. If we could not grant Abigale’s abilities to humans, then producing an offspring with her should create a new lifeform

with similar results, right? Sadly, that proved ineffective. Abigale's uterus rejected all human semen injected into it, and her semen was rejected by all human uteruses, leaving the volunteering woman ill from the attempted insemination."

"Once again, it seemed like the Foundation had no hope to salvage this infinitely costly project, but yet another idea emerged. That of breeding children using both of Abigale's genitalia, extracting and inseminating herself with her own semen. It was a long shot, a last resort... but it worked. It fucking worked! Elated, the foundation then began devising plans to raise these new children, to have them serve the organization, and help rebuild the world in their image. All while continuing to research the children in hopes of learning the secret to the immense intellect, immortality, enhanced speed and strength, Real Booting, and the explosive snap that Abigale Quinlan possessed."

"The first child born through this process was given the name of Fiona, and she was personally cared for by none other than the leader of the Foundation, Maxxisaurus Omega Flare. Flare wanted to keep this child a very private matter and took care of her as if she were her daughter. They would sleep in the same bed, dine together, and spend all of their leisure time together, when Fiona was not blazing through her education at absurd speeds, and when Flare was not running what remained of her organization."

"Because of the rousing success of Fiona, the foundation continued to breed Abigale Quinlan and caused her to produce an additional 7 children. One of whom was born prematurely, a failure that at the very least offered us an insight into Abigale's reproductive biology. And as for the other 6... calling them failures may be harsh, but it is accurate. Unlike Fiona, they only possessed one noteworthy power of Abigale Quinlan. One could Real Boot, one was intelligent, one was immortal, one had immense speed and strength, one could cause explosions with a mere snap, and one was 'immortal' in air quotes."

"In spite of these limited powers though, all of these children, excluding the recently born seventh child, managed to escape the Foundation through some means. They were cared for, loved, and enriched by members of the Foundation, who treated them as kindly and lovingly as possible... but they proved to be vastly more temperamental than their lovely big sister, and abused their powers to flee their home. While the Foundation searched for them far and wide, the escaped children were adamant about retaining their newfound freedom and would fight back... viciously. After half of the total staff of the Foundation had been murdered by these renegades, they were forced to cut their losses and let the escaped children roam free in this tattered world."

"We thought about giving up our pursuits then and there... but we carried on, clinging to some hope we had of forging a family of beings who would help the Foundation restore the world to its lost luster. In doing so, we learned that the repeated births were putting a strain on Abigale's body. Her powers were leaving her body, and she was becoming something closer to human in regards to her sheer capabilities. Her immortality was fading, she no longer healed from

wounds, she could not function without sustenance, and she appeared to be breaking away from her coma. This raised the question of what the Foundation should do about Abigale. If they should continue their efforts, dissect her, or do something else... but before the Foundation could finalize their plans, Fiona was already executing her own.

"Fiona knew about Abigale's personality, her values, her abilities, and so much more. She had a deep connection to her singular parent, researched her rigorously, and became the expert on all things Abigale Quinlan. One who looked at the piteous situation she and the world were put in... and devised a plan. She knew her siblings were lost causes, wastes of genetic resources that could be better used by her mother... if she were still conscious."

"Fiona made her plan quickly, and executed it even faster, gathering and distributing all the pieces, before finally awakening you that fateful morning 7 days ago. You can thank Fiona for much that happened throughout your journey. She is the one who appointed Jack as the caretaker of the recently born eighth child and positioned her in the room right beside your own. She is the one who placed the Blazing Beelzebub near Madeco and redirected the seventh child to the settlement. She is the one who captured and relocated Marz. And the one who allowed Punky to be apprehended by the incompetent hands of Zil."

"Fiona did not account for everything, but she was there from the very start. From the instant she woke you up, my dear Abigale, you were abiding by her plan, following the steps needed to make Project Psycho Bullet Festival a rousing success!"

"Oh, but how do I play into this, and just who the hell am I? Well, that's the funny thing. You see, Abigale, your abilities are a bit more complicated than you would recall. After the Foundation tortured you, you gained the ability to control nature, to cause trees to spurt and die, to reshape the land around you, but there is one other ability you possess that I never saw you express. Merging. Your body once had the capability of becoming one with other beings, to implement them into who and what you are, to have them meld into your body and your mind."

"When Fiona was born, she had copies of all of your powers and took two away from you. The ability to control nature, and also the ability to merge. While the nature ability was widely documented, the ability to merge remained a mystery to the entirety of the Flare Foundation... excluding Fiona. On the night following your escape, the Foundation had fallen into despair, the scientists felt their research was all for nothing, and the future direction of the organization was vague at best."

"Miss Flare was naturally the most saddened by the events, having lost both Abigale and Jack. With nowhere else to turn and nobody else to confide in, she went to Fiona, who relieved Miss Flare of her stress in the most primal and satisfying manner possible. They embraced each other, Miss Flare lost sight of her sorrow in the thralls of sex, and they rejoiced in one of the most passionate nights of their lives. However, this too was all part of Fiona's plan."

“Fiona approached Miss Flare in the afterglow of their intercourse, with the two on an emotional high, Fiona activated her ability. Mother became daughter, daughter became mother, Miss Flare finally achieved her dream of immortality, and the two became one.”

“I am the end result of that process, a being of one part Miss Flare, and one part Fiona. I have pondered many names for myself, but I prefer the simple name of Flare above all others. I spent the ensuing week playing with myself, getting to form an identity all my own, seeing the world as I spiraled through it on 300 kilometer per hour winds, and keeping a healthy distance from you Abigale, while also guiding you to your next child on occasion.”

“Oh, and as for why I showed up just now and decided to blow up your car, there is a reason. I did a prolonged survey as to the location of my siblings, plotting a route I expected you to travel, and no matter which way I sliced it, I knew Fiona would be your final target. As such, I used her as a gauge to measure your progress and would check up on her daily. Just to make sure I could still sense her.”

“But today, oh today, she got up and vanished while I was making my rounds. So of course I had to go and meet the restored Abigale Quinlan now that her filicide quest had been completed. When I saw that you all were leaving, I sorta panicked, grabbed some of the roof over yonder, turned that into an explosive spear, and blew up your car. Why did I use an explosive spear? ‘Cos explosive spears are fuckin’ awesome!”

The three of us maintained our long stretch of silence as the figure before us finally ceased her incredibly lengthy monologue.

“...What in the fuck?” Zedaki murmured while laying back on the sofa, looking up at the blue and pink sky.

“I... I don’t...” Jack stuttered, clearly taken aback by Flare’s story more than her companion.

“You have said quite a lot, Flare, and your story is... intricate to say the least,” I said. “However, you failed to answer one question. What was the point of this ‘quest’ that you orchestrated for me?”

“Oh yes, I knew I was forgetting something! Well, the answer is a bit on the simple side. I wanted to see you, my dear mother, in your original form, her true form before any of those other parasitic brats drained your powers away and left you practically human. But more than that, I wanted you to join me in settling this brave new world and rule it as mother and daughter. It’s the least you can do after you fucked it into its current sorry state.”

“Just think! With our powers, the entire planet could be whatever we desire, all humans shall be subjected to our desires, and even if they somehow rebel and trap us, we have the secret power, the ability to evolve new powers, to succeed under immense pressure and adapt to

critical situations. We are the ultimate life forms, my dear succulent mother, and together, the world can be ours!"

A very clear oversight in her plan popped into my mind, but I remained silent, choosing to avoid feeding this fiend any potentially useful information. Instead, I kept my response simple and direct. At least, I intended to.

"Fuck off Flare!" Jack shouted in a voice vastly louder than her usual meek tone. "Abigale would never join, help, or even associate with a psycho bitch like you!"

Before Jack could let another syllable past her lips, she was silenced by a sudden movement from Flare. In a mere second, Flare emerged from her recliner and before the sofa, lifting Jack off of the furniture... by placing a hand on Jack's crotch. Her fingers, with force beyond that of a normal human, tore through Jack's jeans and underwear, breaking away the zipper and penetrating what laid beneath. The impact and shock of having her genitals so callously and bizarrely invaded caused Jack to drop her crowbar, where it plopped on the ground beneath her.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho! My little fucktoy finally decided to speak up. Oh, how I have longed for the day you finally grew a pair. Oh, wait, no, my bad, you still have a *kawi* little pussy, and that's it! No extra testicles that I can fondle while enlarging your vagina well beyond its intended size. But I guess that's just fine. Do tell, my little Lynne, did you miss the way I make you go pon pon pon? I bet you do. It's been years since we went three days without a good hard fuck!"

Zedaki's blue eyes flared with a burning intensity as she rose from the sofa and threw the full of her body at Flare in a furious sprint. But it was a vain effort. Flare effortlessly grabbed Zedaki mid-sprint, latching her free hand onto Zedaki's throat, and lifting her upwards.

"Do you really think you can do anything to stop me? Bitch, please. I suggest you just sit back down on the couch I so *generously* provided you with and watch, okay... whatever the fuck your name is?"

Flare then threw Zedaki back onto the couch. She coughed and gagged while repositioning herself, the anger still billowing in her eyes. I placed my hand on her shoulder and looked her in the eyes. She grit her teeth in response and looked down at the ground, dejected, but well aware that this was something beyond her, and that it was pointless to fight a battle she had no way of winning.

"Let her go, Flare!" I shouted, standing up from the sofa.

"Aw, but I just wanted to reconnect with my little dearest daughter. Is that too much to ask?"

"Daughter?" Zedaki and I exclaimed in unison.

“Oh yes indeedy dandy. I suppose it is time for storytime part zwei!”

Flare then tightened her grip onto Jack, more precisely, her vagina, and then flung her onto the sofa, where her body slapped against the cushion, nearly toppling the furniture over with the force of the impact. Tears filled Jack’s eyes, and beneath the veil of sorrow was one of abject horror. But before I could reassure her, Flare threw herself back into her recliner and began to tell us another story.

“First and foremost, Abigale Quinlan, my dearest and precious-most Abi-chan, I have a question for you. What is ‘Jack’?”

“Jack is the name you gave her after you found her and gave her the choice to either become your 15-year-old ‘fuckdoll’, or work as a slave for your organization,” I said, recalling what Jack told me last night.

“Oh my, it appears that you must have gotten quite close to my little psycho maniac in the sack. I guess that saves me some breath. Yes, I took in Jack, rummaging around the remnants of the mad mad world you left all of us because of your rowdy and uncooperative behavior. But once my staff highlighted her amongst the rest, I just had to get to know her better. One thing led to another, and eventually, we formed a little agreement. She would please me and help me with odds and ends at the Flare Foundation, while I would offer her a comfortable life. And in the process, I had her sign a document to become my daughter. Well, for as good as a piece of paper is without a functioning national government left.”

“I could explain everything wrong with what you just said, but I want to believe that you are already aware,” I said with a disgusted look adorning my face.

“Fuck yeah I am! Anyways, if ya don’t mind, my dear Abigale, I’ll be taking my Jack back. She is my daughter after all. But if you want her that badly, I suppose I could arrange something... if you join with me instead.”

“No. You will not be taking Jack with you, nor will I be joining someone like you.”

“Oh-ho, Abigale, it appears that you don’t quite get it, do you? Perhaps it will sound better if I say it... in song!”

*Please just do as I say. Do not stand in my way.
I will do what I please. For I can change things with ease.
I control the sea and weather, and we can be queens together!
So just join up with me!
I’d be happy, oh so happy, if you’d come with me.
We’d be—*

“No! I just denied your proposition. I would never willingly join someone like you unless our goals aligned, and I am certain that they do not.”

“A— Asshole! You interrupted my song! Sure, I probably flubbed some of the lyrics, but I still remembered most of it, and it was going to be great. I was going to grab you by the waist, float through the air, but then you put on your serious old lady pants and now I’m not even in the mood. Oh Mother, dear sweet Mother, how could you be such a turtle head?”

“You are deranged and incredibly dangerous, Flare, and considering how I am at least partially responsible for your existence, it is my responsibility to make sure that you do not inflict more harm onto this world.”

“Oh, and how do you plan on doing that? Dearest Mother Quinlan, can’t you see? I have all your powers, and more. What makes you think that you have any means of truly controlling me? Or did you mean something more, such as... killing me? Ha! I would love to see you try. Oh! In fact, I have a great idea. We are both gods in human skin, so why don’t we settle this in a way that would make the most of our abilities. A good old-fashioned battle for dominance. Whoever gives up or kills the other is the winner, and the loser will become the indentured servant to the other, having known and accepted their place as the second strongest in the world!”

Flare was a force that I deemed unpersuadable. A person beyond reason, and who I had no means of stopping without violence. I did not enjoy indulging in my powers excessively, but now, I was in a position where I felt that I had no other choice. Whether due to my still recovering intellect or a deeper desire of mine to see someone as dangerous and deplorable as her exterminated, I found myself agreeing to Flare’s offer.

“Very well. Find us an appropriate and isolated place for battle, and I shall fight you. If you manage to defeat me, I will submit my life to yours. I will become your indentured servant. However, if I win, you shall do the same.”

“Oh, what is that? Did I hear a yes from the Almighty Abigale? Oh my cheese and crackers, what a glorious feeling this is! Yeah, yeah, I’ll keep true to my promise. If you somehow miraculously win, I’ll throw myself into the recesses of space or whatever if you just wanna be rid of me and can’t find a way to kill me. Spoilers: I don’t think ya can.”

“Abigale, are you sure about this?” Zedaki asked me.

“Yes, Zedaki. It is the only way, and I intend on keeping to my promise.”

“Wait, seriously?” Zedaki replied.

"It is the only way I am going to bring Flare down. I prefer to resolve all conflicts through a discussion, but there come times when violence, whether it be through war or battle, is inevitable. That, I know for certain."

"...All right. It's not like there's anything I can do to stop this... just don't give up, Abigale. No matter how much it hurts."

"No worries, Zedaki. Worst-case scenario, I cause another Cataclysm," I said with a twinge of sarcasm.

"Eh, ya, if you can, try and *stop* that from happening."

"That is one thing I cannot promise you."

"Heh. After all this time, you finally start getting a sense of humor. Well... *ganbatte* Abigale. I know it's corny, but... if you lose, we're fucked."

With that slightly forced reference out of the way, Zedaki slithered back into the background while Jack came up to me. She offered me a hug, burying her face into my chest while clenching my back like I was about to be torn away from her. I embraced her in return, rubbing her back smoothly.

"If you can, make her pay... for everything," Jack said.

She chose to impart me with a vengeful request before she eventually broke away from me, jogging back to Zedaki while tears dripped down her face. With a heavy sigh, I turned back towards Flare, who was floating five feet above the ground, feigning a yawn as she looked down at the sentimental scene playing before her.

"I'm ready," I said as I looked up at Flare.

"Goodie goodie gumshoes! Now then, if you'd grab my hands, I'll fly us away to abandoned wasteland number 9,037 and you can face the final boss and see just what sort of ending you'll get based on your progress throughout the story! I just hope you're fortunate enough to get the good ending. 'Cos you only got one shot! Do not miss your chance to flow! This opportunity only comes once in a lifetime, yo!"

I said nothing in response to her ramblings. I simply did as she asked and grabbed her hand. A smirk shot across her face as she lifted me upwards into the air, dragging me higher into the sky before pressing her body against mine, and shoving my head between her oversized breasts while wrapping her hands around my own. I chose not to comment on her behavior, for I knew nothing good would come of it. Instead, I remained silent as Flare began soaring through the air at 150 kilometers per hour.

As Flare continued this mad aerial dash, I began to truly comprehend what her powers were. She moved through the air effortlessly, shifting her position quickly and subtly, while always having full control of her position. The wind was truly hers to command, and it was just one of the powers I would be up against. I looked off into the distance, the sight of destroyed cities and a gorgeous sunset, trying to devise a way to counter a being with such immense strength, but our journey proved to be a short one, as Flare happened across an open field of dirt and stone, almost completely devoid of vegetation.

She pivoted towards as her destination was set, only to halt her descent mere inches away from the ground below. She gently grabbed me by the shoulders as she brought me down to the dirt below, before gingerly touching the ground herself. I turned to face her and we exchanged glances. My face twisted into a scowl, while hers bore a haughty grin. Without saying anything to each other, we both stepped back, building ten meters between us, before turning to face each other once more. As our eyes locked once more, I took a deep breath and braced myself for what was to come. For the final battle.

Episode 13: Flare The Fury



I darted my eyes across the lifeless wasteland that surrounded us before directing my attention to Flare. Her face was painted with arrogance and conviction, as if she knew her victory was guaranteed. That no matter my might or cunning, there was no way I could possibly defeat her. Ordinarily, I would be confident in my abilities to overcome any and all obstacles presented before me, but with my intellect and memories still gradually returning, it was difficult to focus on a complicated strategy. Instead, my only plan was to wait and see just what she was capable of.

I maintained my glare as my mind worked in the background, thinking through possible scenarios and the potential weaknesses this deific being possessed. The two of us stared each other down for a full minute, in silence, with the gentle sound of wind being the only thing to grace either of our ears. Eventually, Flare grew tired of this and scoffed at me.

“So, should I make the first move or what?”

“Go ahead,” I calmly replied.

Flare snickered in response but remained where she stood. Our eyes locked as I examined her body for any tell or sign of what her game was, only to have my concentration broken as the light of the setting sun disappeared, and darkness encompassed the world around me. I looked

upwards and saw that the sky was coated by a sheet of dark clouds, expanding and growing as I stared at them, all while the once gentle winds intensified.

While I expected something like this from Flare, given her ability to control nature and with it weather, seeing it in action was... unnerving. This is the power that destroyed the world, and not only was I about to see it in action, but it was going to be concentrated entirely towards me. Still, my only strategy was to wait and observe, looking for moments of weakness that I could exploit. For this was a battle where I did not need to worry about my own survival.

Before too long, it began. A downpour fell onto both Flare and myself. The winds picked up their pace, accelerating well beyond 70 kilometers per hour. And the sound of thunder echoed throughout vacant plains, retaining its force and volume even through the turbulent rain. I stood my ground as the wind blew past me while the rain proceeded to drench my clothing, struggling against the forces of nature. Flare in comparison seemed completely unnerved by the storm, standing her ground while her silver hair billowed in the wind, and the water cascaded down her violet jumpsuit.

"The storm is coming Abigale. What will you do? What can you do to stop it? Because let me give you a little warning here, it's gonna be a bad one."

"Regardless of your powers, I will not surrender to you! And even with the forces of nature at your disposal, I am not afraid of anything you may do! I can guarantee that I have been through far, far worse!" I shouted over the wind and rain.

"Heh. Such confidence. That's good. I like being met with at least a little resistance. It will make my inevitable victory and your inevitable defeat all the more... satisfying."

The rain and wind further intensified. In order to prevent myself from being blown away by these rapid winds, I reached down to the mud surrounding my feet and Real Booted a pair of incredibly dense boots over my existing outfit to secure myself to the ground. Upon finishing that, the wind began to accelerate even further, surpassing well over 130 kilometers per hour, while the rain became so brutal that I could barely see anything in front of me or hear anything beyond the echoing thunder.

With my senses compromised, I was nothing more than a target and needed to seek temporary shelter. I brought myself to the damp ground, placing my hands against the Earth to make myself a hovel to orientate myself for the time being. But before I could begin the process, I felt a sharp pain in my legs and fell to the watery mud below. My legs had been severed, and I was face-first in the dirt, no longer locked into the Earth below, and even less aware of what was around me. And before I could twist my body around in a vain effort to perceive the world around me during a torrential downpour, I felt my body raise from the Earth, as I was now light enough to be carried away by the winds, which threw me through a waterfall of rain.

Dismembered and further disorientated, I spiraled through the air, struggling to even sense what direction I was going as the wind continued to push me upwards, sideways, and forwards. Despite having regained my repertoire of powers, I was still helpless, unable to fight back, or even control where I was going. I allowed the winds to carry me for a brief while, long enough for my legs to grow back, while devising a plan to bring myself back to the ground by Real Booting my remaining clothes. I brought a hand to my suit and began transforming it, only for something to grab my arm, pulling it away from my person. I peered through the wind and the rain to confirm that it was Flare, floating effortlessly through the air and looking at me as coyly as ever.

“Tsk-tsk, my dear mother, I expected better from you. Trying the same dull tactic again? Boring! Let me just strip you out of your clothing to force some creativity from your dainty little head. No worries, I’ll be sure to strip myself if you want. I’m sure you’ll be impressed, and maybe a bit jealous, of how well I devel—”

Flare’s insistent ramblings were silenced as the back of her neck burst open, sending a stream of blood that mingled with the rain and was carried upwards by the wind. All it took was a bit of focus and a snap of my fingers. She fell unconscious, and the intense rain and wind around us began to dissipate and decelerate just as rapidly as they began. As the force around us lessened, we both succumbed to the might of gravity and fell limply onto the swampy terrain below.

I lifted my face from the muck below and looked at Flare, who laid a few meters away. She was injured from both my assault and the fall. Her movements were sluggish, and as the rain weakened, I could hear her dramatically loud moans from afar. It was as I saw her lift herself, wrapped with the pain of falling 10, maybe 15, meters, that something finally clicked in my mind. One field that I unquestionably excelled at compared to Flare. Pain tolerance.

After being tortured and tormented an incalculable amount of times throughout my life, I mentally formed a tolerance for pain. While my body felt less pain than a human would due to how my immortality worked and how rapidly I healed my wounds, the reason why I was able to endure so many injuries had to do with my personal familiarity with the sensation of pain. I knew what it was like to be severed by a blade, punctured by a bullet, to be set aflame, and to be drenched in substances that would eat away at my flesh. The sensation of pain was one I learned to fight against, to resist, and ultimately to tolerate through successive and excessive exposure. Yet Flare lacked that same tolerance, as it was something that came from my experience, not my powers.

“She doesn’t have everything I have,” I thought to myself. “She may have my powers and more... but I still have everything that defines me. And with that, I can defeat her... I can still defeat... my last child.”

I bit down, cracking my teeth as I realized the true extent of my mental ineptitude. While she called herself Flare, she truly was one of my children, and as such, I should be able to defeat her in a similar manner. Due to her immortality, I could not simply kill her, but I had encountered a situation like this before. Just like with Ultros, I would need to use Real Booting in order to transform her body before I could absorb her.

A smile appeared on my face after I began to set things in motion mentally, quickly devising a way to immobilize her while she is still down. Yet, I was not fast enough. As the wheels of my mind ground together, shaving away a dense layer of rust, Flare had already recovered from her fall and was returning to the sky, and stood five meters above the ground. Well out of my reach. Once she regained her composure in the air, she looked down and spoke to me once more.

“You know, that really fucking hurt. Snapping the back of my head open like that. I just wanted to talk to my dearest maternal unit and show her my sweet and perk-some double-D titters, but no, you just had to get in on a cheap shot.”

After making that comment, she looked up at the persistent yet weakening rain from above, scoffing at the clouds before waving a hand. From that simple gesture, the thick clouds thinned into nothingness, revealing a pristine starlit sky. For an instance, I thought that this was the end of her weather-based onslaught... but then the calm winds grew into a vicious squall that pushed against my body, lifting it off the ground.

My body twisted and turned as the wind assaulted me, but without the veil of rain, I had a far better understanding of my surroundings and saw a collection of skull-sized boulders picked up by the wind, heading in my direction. I could not shift my body or weight, so I began snapping blindly, hoping to shatter the rocks into pebbles before they struck my body, but my fingers were too slow and the stones too erratic in their movements. They slammed against my person, ripping apart my skin, and shattering my bones. And even the rocks I did break away still dug through my muscles, tearing away my tendons as the assault continued.

Bloody and broken, at least for the moment, I found myself carried by the wind as it contorted itself into a spiral, locking me into a ravenous debris-filled tornado. Through the pain, I looked towards the eye of the storm, where I saw Flare. She floated casually amidst these vicious winds, gazing at me with the expected smile as she laughed at the sight of my body being pelted and torn by the stones she threw my way.

I needed to get closer to her, but with the intensity of the winds, moving in any sense was difficult. I could use my Snap Bust ability to distract her, but I was dubious that she would fall for that tactic yet again, and with the relentless damage done to my body, I was doubtful if I could even snap my fingers at the moment.

I needed some form of force to fling myself away from the powerful winds, which is when inspiration struck me. I waited for the next rock to come hurling in my direction, and rather than

brushing my body against it to minimize the damage, I grabbed it with my hands as it crashed against my abdomen. I coughed up blood from the impact and could feel my organs churn, but it was well worth it. With matter in my hands and with knowledge gradually dripping back into my mind, it only took a matter of seconds for me to convert the stone in my hands into something far more... explosive.

I turned my back to the stones being thrown my way as I Real Booted the stone clenched in my palms, tolerating the pain of having my spine and ribs broken again and again as I ran calculations through my mind. I carefully examined Flare's location, the movement of the tornado, and my own angle, all until I was able to position myself at the right angle and execute my plan at the right moment. With a snap of my half-broken fingers, the object in my hands detonated, shooting me through the tornado's current, into the center, where I landed directly against Flare. I ignored my wounds from the explosion, and instead grabbed Flare by the torso, pressing my hands against the back of her shoulders, and converting her clothing into dust and her body into ash. She wailed in agony as I did so, flailing around her body, bashing her powerful hands against my skull in an attempt to flee herself from my clutches.

I tolerated the pain as I felt something return and seep into my body, but before I could even reach the halfway point, before I could turn Flare's arms into ash, Flare fell from the sky, landing onto the harsh ground below, using my body to cushion her fall. My being shattered from the impact, and Flare was able to escape my grasp, fleeing upwards into the sky once again. She looked down at me with scorn as she levitated a wad of mud from the ground below, using its matter to restore her violet bodysuit to its former status.

"I see you haven't grown any less persistent since your awakening. No matter what was thrown your way, you always got up, and always clung to survival. I suppose that is to be expected, you being an immortal and all. But I'm afraid you have met your match this time. You might think I am just your first child and some deranged human, but I am more than the sum of my parts. I am a being forged through the intensity of their affection, refined by divine might, and polished through a fine mixture of love and determination. And it is through these things... that I have not only exceeded the two of them, but you as well, dearest Mother."

"I advise that you steel thyself. For I am the fury, I am the divine, and I am your domination. I am your better, and I'll keep beating you to death over and over again until you accept my reality! Round three means no more fuckin' about! Get ready bitch!"

After her villainous spiel, Flare looked up at the sky above, waving her hands dramatically as the starry sky became covered in a sea of sinister black clouds. I looked at her rising body, questioning why she would attempt to battle me using rain once more... but the rain never came.

The clouds boomed with the sounds of thunder as flashes of light illuminated the thick darkness that surrounded me. I knew that I had no hope of fleeing, so I stood valiantly, awaiting whatever

she had in store for me... only to be struck by a bolt of lightning. Hundreds of thousands of volts shot through my body, coursing through my skeleton, and out into the watery ground below. My skin was burnt, my organs were ravaged, and I could no longer support myself. But before I even had the opportunity to fall into the mud below, I was hit with a second bolt, and a third, and a fourth. My body was eventually decimated, exploded from the consecutive strikes, unable to withstand the impact of this electricity.

I thought back to my encounter with my second child as I felt my body regenerate and restore itself after a moment of respite in the assault, only for my consciousness to face away shortly thereafter as my brain was decimated into a puddle of fleshy goop. Time lost all meaning during that assault, as well as this one. The instant I regained consciousness, it was lost.

By the time I regained consciousness for more than a second, I realized that I now rested in a damp hole three meters deep. The sky above me was dark, but the lighting had stopped. I let out a brief sigh of relief before bringing myself to the rim of the hole to hoist myself up... only for the ground beneath me to tumble away. I immediately latched onto one of the damp walls around me, but as I lifted myself up, I felt the Earth before me condense, crushing against my body, immobilizing it with the weight and force of a piece of terrain. I could not move my arms, I could barely breathe, and with my head bound by a vise of stone, I had no choice but to look at the dark sky above. It was as tight as I could be without killing me outright or turning my body into a fleshy paste once again.

Before the idea of escape could even cross my mind, I looked up and saw Miss Flare, kneeling down to look into the hole.

"Y'know, I really don't appreciate this whole feral determination thing you've got going for you. I kind of hoped that after 7 years of beauty sleep and a battle against a foe who is objectively better than you, you would have realized that there is just no way you can win. I mean, sure, I know that the almighty Abigale Quinlan is not crash, she is unbreakable, and that no matter what, she cannot die. After I did so many goldarn experiments on you, that was just painfully obvious. I can *literally* keep this shit up forever. Hell, that lightning barrage I did lasted a full hour! But I would rather not spend a decade duking it out with you while the world gets progressively more shite burgers, so maybe just, y'know, give up for once in your life?"

While listening to her latest monologue, a theory crossed my mind. Having absorbed some of her body earlier in the battle, I might have a portion of her power to alter nature, to shift the very earth around me. I started small, aiming to move away enough room to free my hands and myself. It was an ability I had no recollection of using, but through the exertion of my will and the focus of my mind, I managed to do what Flare was doing, albeit on a smaller scale. I only managed to free an arm of its stony prison, but it was an advantage that would help me win this battle if I was in the right situation. And to get into that situation, I would need to play on my foe's biggest weakness. Her personality.

“Flare, I have been through far, far worse forms of torment than this throughout the years,” I said as best I could given the proximity of earth around my face.

“Oh, trust me, Mother Abigale, I know all the hardships you went through. I’m the one who greenlit everything from the acid baths, the nuclear waste injections, the superheat chamber of spikes and pain, the 0 Kelvin box, and all the other adorable attractions I used in an attempt to see just how you ticked. Which I never managed to figure out by the way, but now that I have all your powers and more... I don’t really give a honk about the science behind it.”

“Oh, so you put me through all of those creative tortures back when you were a mere human. But now, with powers greater than any other creature on the planet, the best you can do is elongated crushing and repeated death by electricity? I have to say, I expected better of you!”

“Ahahahaha! Finally, some jokes. I have been waiting so long to see you show a lighter side. And as a big howdy thank you, I’ll give you exactly what you want. Embrace the force of nature, motherfucker!”

The Earth around me shifted yet again, but this time it widened, freeing my body as it shifted the ground outwards and upwards, placing me in a basin with a radius no less than 20 meters. I looked up at the airborne Flare as I brought myself up from the ground, and in response, she let out a simple snap of her fingers, causing a small explosion behind me. I turned my head and saw something emerge from the basin. A growing pool of billowing magma, rising from a hole less than ten meters away from me. Close enough for me to feel its extreme heat, but far enough that my body didn’t burst into flames.

Before I could move away from the molten rock, I felt something penetrate my back, exiting out my body, and bringing me down to the ground below. It was a metal spear, and as I pierced my being, I peered my head upwards, where I saw Flare, carrying a bushel of spears in her hands, one of which was coming straight at me, and pierced my leg. It was followed by another, and another, and so on until my body was bound by seven spears, pinning me to the earth below, disabling everything beneath my torso.

I was in agony... but it was nothing compared to what followed. I lacked the focus and quickness to remove the spears from my body as the magma rose, and it soon came close enough to my body to set it ablaze. Burns erupted my skin, I became a medium for fire, and the metal of the spears absorbed the heat, causing my body to bake from within. My flesh was consumed by flames, and once my organs were naught but cinder, my bones cracked from the brutal heat.

I screeched in horror, reached highs I didn’t even know were within my vocal range, and released wordless cries of pain that were akin to begging for aid. All while tears rolled down my face and my hands flailed at the ground before me.

It was a display expected of a person dying a pain-wrought death... but I knew better. I had been through enough to tolerate even the most brutal of pains, and the most deprived of deaths. This was all a feint, a ploy to toy with the emotions of my tormentor. And as she placed her heeled shoes onto the ground before me, I kept up the facade.

"Oh me, oh my. It appears that I caused my dearest mother quite a lot of pain. But no worries, you know the magic words in order to make the pain go away. They are quite simple, so I trust you can remember it, even in your old age. They are 'I', 'give', and 'up'. Say it with me now."

"I... I... I give—" I grunted, genuinely struggling to speak given the pain.

"Yes, yes, oh yes, go on little one, I know you have it in you to say it!"

As the eagerness billowed in her voice, Flare ordered the magma to recede back into the Earth. With it gone, my body could heal itself. Flesh returned to my bones, a fresh layer of skin replaced the charred remains of my lower half, and I could even feel my body rejecting the spears that penetrated it. However, I was not healed, I was not capable of fighting against Flare in this state... or so she would assume.

I glared at Flare's feet, her dainty heels that pressed against the ground below. Through the exertion of my will, I caused the ground beneath Flare's feet to tilt upwards. Her balance toppled, and even with her immense strength, she succumbed to the power of gravity, falling forwards and onto the spears jutting out from my body. She fell face first, penetrating her brain on impact, and coating my body with her blood. As her body jittered about, I took my opportunity, awkwardly latched my hands onto her, and began Real Booting away as much as her form as possible. My hands and mind moved as fast as they could, rubbing up and down her legs until nothing remained, but right as I moved up to her waist, I felt one of the spears ram itself through my eye and into my brain, immobilizing me. I fluttered in and out of consciousness as my body rejected the petal pike, but everything went to darkness once I heard a familiar ticking sound.

I regained consciousness meters away and in a basin filled with shrapnel, while Flare was looking down at me from above, as to be expected. Her purple bodysuit was restored, but her face was contorted by hatred and disdain, all directed squarely at me.

"You cheeky little cunt!" Flare shouted, "That's the third fucking time! I thought we were having a gentle-ladies competition of strength and poise."

"This is a battle," I said as I stood up from the dirt below. "It is your fault for lowering your guard and buying my feint."

"A feint? You mean that you were just *pretending* to be in pain? You were *pretending* to be hurt by billowing magma? The fuck are you made of?"

“It is a little something called pain tolerance. You are far from the first person to torture me, and after being placed in painful situations over the span of centuries, one tends to gain resistance to it.”

“Oh-ho! How coy. Very well, we can keep this up if you would like. But I have to ask what you hope to accomplish by pretending to be hurt. I mean, seriously, what on fuck could your plan be? You can tell me. We’re family after all.”

“Have you ever considered how I killed my immortal child?”

“Eh, you mean Ultros? I’m not sure, but I’m guessing you ate him.”

“No. Cannibalism is far, far beneath me. Instead, I Real Booted them.”

“Hold on, you can Real Boot people too? I’ve never heard of you ever doing that, and trust me, I scoured the world for every bit of information about you that I could find! Well, I paid someone else to do it and reviewed what they found, but same difference.”

“You know how my children disintegrate into ash upon their death? Ash that returns to my body? Not only did I turn my immortal child into the very same ash, but I have also been doing the same to you.”

“Okay... but I regenerated myself— I just did that a minute ago... So how the fuck does that work?”

“I have been absorbing your body, and taking away your powers as a result. Allow me to demonstrate... and risk coming across as a fool if my theory is incorrect.”

With that, I extended my arm, focused my vision, and snapped my fingers, causing a small explosion to pop in Flare’s shoulder. A violent grunt escaped her lips as she furrowed her brow, before refocusing her anger onto me.

“Asshole! The hell is this supposed to prove?”

“Time yourself.”

“What?”

“Time how long it takes your body to heal. A wound like that should be undone in five seconds... and yours took a good ten.”

During the time it took for this brief exchange, Flare's body had healed, but as she looked down at herself and the hole in her clothing, her cocky and cheery expression fell away as her mouth remained agape and her eyes widened. For the first time since I met her, Flare was showing signs of genuine fear, and that brought a small smile to my own face. It was an indication that the tables had turned. That I had the clear upper hand.

I dashed towards her in an attempt to end things quickly, but she, expectedly, flung herself upwards into the sky before I could grab her. As she ascended, I took note of how she moved. She who was once the master of the sky was now wobbling throughout it, moving slower, and lacking the same dexterity she once demonstrated with me between her bosom. She was a shadow of her former self... but she was still moving faster than I could run, and if I wanted to pursue her, I needed to get on her level. I needed to take to the sky above.

I thought of the sensation of weightlessness, the feeling of the winds pushing me forwards and upwards, and as I narrowed my desires, they manifested themselves into reality. I found myself floating above the ground that once supported my person, and as I looked upwards into the sky, I ascended, going higher and higher until I was across from Flare, who still zipped throughout the sky at an impressive speed, already a mere speck on the horizon. My grasp of this power was flimsy, my movements stiff and loose all at the same time, but I had no choice but to pursue her, and I did just that.

With every kilometer I traveled, I felt my sense of control and direction grow stronger, learning simply by doing, and with my improved control came greater speeds. My body accelerated and accelerated as I focused on the being before me, one who danced throughout the stars above, swam through the light clouds before me and dived down to the horizon below. Her patterns, either through her own intention or not, were erratic, disorientating me even more than the sensation of flight, but as the chase continued, her tolerance dwindled. Once I was no more than 300 meters away from Flare, she flew into a patch of coniferous woodlands.

The light of the moon and stars was blocked by the dense greenery overhead, making it impossible to find Flare using my sight alone. I knew I could Real Boot a flashlight for myself, but with my senses clear and my target close, I ran throughout the darkness, dashing between the tightly woven trees and closing the distance between us. As the distance closed itself, my nostrils flared open with the aroma of smoke, and a bright orange glow shone from between the plant life before me.

It was a non-threat, a desperate distraction by Flare, but I could not tolerate any destruction of life after getting so far, even if this could be restored and replaced. I paused and thought back to what Flare did early during our battle. Summoning clouds from nothingness and creating a downpour. One that could easily quench burgeoning fires such as this. Concentration and a scientific understanding of what I was doing allowed me to make it so, and while I could not see the sky above, I could feel the rain falling from between the branches, dampening the forest floor and culling the flames into nothingness. I continued my pursuit as the flames died out,

trotting through the dampening dirt below my feet, remaining steadfast as my bare feet landed against stray twigs and rocks.

Even with this handicap, I soon was able to lay my eyes on Flare, fumbling through the woods, her rapid breathing almost carrying itself through the rain. She was scared, desperate, and as she turned her head back to look me in the eyes, her composure crumbled. She tripped into the watery mud below, and I had my opportunity.

My focus shifted, causing the rainfall to stop, as I lunged towards Flare, latching onto her damp mane of silvery hair. I pulled her body closer to mine and bound her chest with my arms. She screamed, she flailed, she knew what fate I had planned for her, and I began the process with immediacy, bringing my hands to her head. Her hair, her skull, and all elements that composed her visage were turned into ash as her pleas for mercy grew in both volume and veracity until they were reduced to nothing, along with everything above her shoulders.

I began to Real Boot the rest of it in an attempt to finish the process, bringing my hands to her stomach, her breasts, and arms, making them all vanish away. But as I reached her disembodied waist... I stopped. The sense I had felt whenever one of my children was near, or when I was separated from my bodily parts, had vanished. As if I was complete and that all of my powers were restored, even though roughly half of Flare's body remained. It was out of this sense of fullness, along with feelings of pity and curiosity, that I ceased Real Booting Flare's body.

I released my grip onto Flare's remains and positioned them against the trunk of a tree. I contemplated what I would do with the remains if a burial or burning would be more appropriate, and as I contemplated this, I noticed... movement around the top of the waist. Slowly, the body of Flare was restoring itself. Flesh I had destroyed was reconstituting itself and the skin was growing anew.

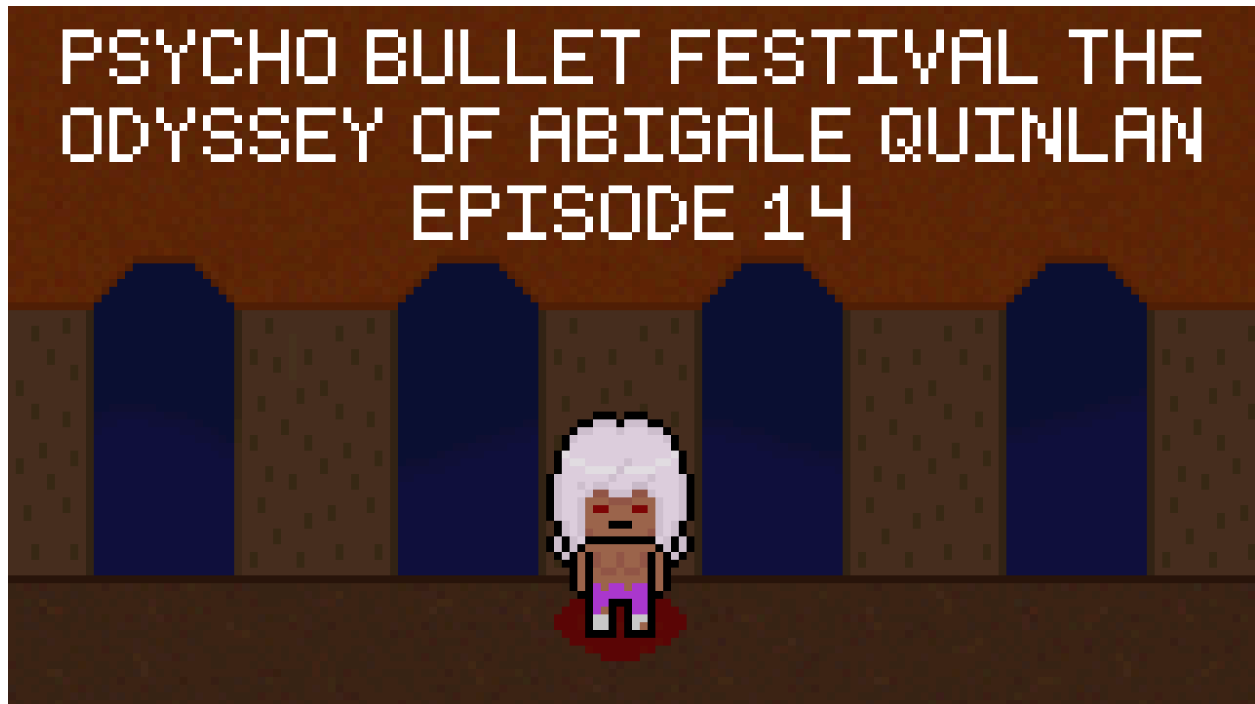
As this process continued, I preoccupied myself by digging into the dirt below and assembling it into a black and red suit, donning it as I kept my eyes locked with Flare, counting the seconds until every facet of her body had been recreated. In total, the healing process took 137 seconds, far longer than it took for me to heal after I killed my first child, but the entirety of her being, from head to toe, was identical to what I saw mere minutes earlier.

After her body was restored, Flare's eyes flickered open, looking up at the night's sky, or at least, looking in that direction. There was something odd about how she looked outwards, as if she were half-asleep or struggling to comprehend the sight before her. I waited a brief moment before I offered her a simple greeting. She turned her head to me, her face apathetic and eyes lifeless.

For an instance, I wondered if I severely damaged her brain to the extent that it had not healed, but just as I took a step forward to investigate, her eyes widened and her body stood upwards.

Her head began darting around, taking in everything around her, before she stood up. I braced myself for her next move, however ineffectual it may be, but what Flare did next was certainly... unexpected.

Episode 14: Flare The Fallen



After the conclusion to my battle with Flare, I expected her to offer some form of resistance, to lash out at me in her newly depowered state. While she clearly retained some of the abilities I inherited, their extent was far less than what she possessed during the beginning of our fight, enough to make her a non-threat to me. However, instead of throwing the sort of tantrum I had anticipated, she seemed out of sorts, distant, and after staring at me blankly for a few seconds, she stood up and... began to sing.

Her singing voice was strong, and while she sang, she chose to prance about the forest we were in, moving elegantly around the coniferous trees around us. She moved like an individual under the influence of a potent narcotic, unaware of what they are doing, the world around them, or the fact that they were prancing about topless.

Aa-haa! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

Do not be angry, do not go away, be right here and forever please stay!

Wound tighter and tighter, fed up, so brighter. Nobody here, I'm nobody at all!

I didn't mean it, you know? You see, you see? I'm such a good girl!

I'm not a demon, you know? You see, you see?

This girl, so good, in pain, I strive, you'll see!

Love me I say, love me I say, love me I say, more and more!

Love me this way, love me this way, until it breaks my fucking brain!

*Torturing me! Torturing me! I am not free! Broke from the curse hurting me!
Nobody can stop me now!*

As I observed her actions, I drew closer to Flare, trying to piece together the cause of her erratic behavior that, keeping in mind how eccentric her previous behavior was, still struck me as alarming. Yet instead of stopping this song after reaching a breaking point, she went onto a second verse.

*Try as you may, come back every day, know that this lady will stay just the same.
They'll hurt and bleed, we need more for feed, get people, more people, I would always
scream!
I was the best in my class they'd attest, I'm the girl far above all the rest. Yes.
Far better than two, better than all you. Children, you children, you will worship me!
Love me I say, love me this way, love me I say, taken it all from me!
Taken from me, taken from me, all that I am and all that I reap.
Screaming for help, it's not enough, screaming for more, I couldn't give you up...
and... I'm sorry... I am just so sorry.*

It was around there that Flare's song stopped maintaining anything close to melodic substance and morphed into something else. As if she broke free of a trance and was coming back to reality.

"I deserve it! I fucking deserve it all! Billions of blood have stained my fucking hands, my soul, and it is all my fault. All because of them! No! Because of me. I did this! To you, to the world. I'd say that I'm fucking sorry, but that won't fix things after I rammed my disgusting dick into everything and just fucked this world until it couldn't even moan in pain anymore! Aren't I so fucking happy today?"

With that, Flare fell flat against the ground, dropping back first, and landing her head against a rock as she fell. She flinched upon impact but did not seem concerned about it. She remained still for a few moments, staring up at the sky once again, before she turned to her side, balled up her body into a fetal position, and began to cry.

I was unsurprised to see a breakdown such as this, but the exact nature of it, along with some aspects of the song she sang, caused me to pause and rethink my assumptions about Flare. While I could have easily justified killing her here, my curiosity was piqued by her words, and I had questions I wanted answers for. As such, I waited for her to calm down, to stand herself up, and to cease her crying, which took roughly 3 minutes.

"Are you all right?" I asked Flare.

"No... No I'm not. I... I was just hit with a lot of things back there and... oh goodness, what have I done? Everything... Everything really was my fault... My selfishness, my egotism... it's the

reason why so many had to die. That so much is lost. It made sense at the moment, but now... now that I've lost... it is all too obvious. I'm sorry Abigale Quinlan. I'm sorry for everything."

I was taken aback after hearing Flare speak. Her tone, her words, and even the sound of her voice all took a notable shift, almost as if she had become a different person, despite looking exactly the same as she did when we first met... except topless. Wondering if this shift also brought with it an increase in modesty, I Real Booted a jacket for Flare to wear. She slowly took it out of my hands and put it on herself before sighing and looking at me with a dejected expression.

"I... I... Can I ask something of you, Abigale?"

"You may ask."

"Could I tell you my story? I know that you probably have better things to do, and there's not really anything stopping you from, well, killing me, but I really want to get some things off of my chest. Figuratively, of course."

"Very well. Your behavior since your defeat has been rather... eccentric, so I must admit that I am at least a little curious about you."

"Thank you, Abigale. Sorry if I end up rambling for a while because I'm not entirely sure how to tell this to someone. In fact, I'm not really even sure where to start other than, well, my beginning. In 1987, I was born as the second child of Kenneth and Eleanore Flare, the presidents of the illustrious Flare Foundation. Since its inception over a century ago, the Foundation has become a prominent force in many industries and has amassed excessive wealth and power. While the Foundation was historically headed by members of the Flare family, after my father dedicated so much of his youth to studying and training to become the next company president, he decided that he wanted his children to live comfortable lives where they were free to pursue any aspiration they desired."

"This led to me and my sister, who was five years older than me, being given a great deal of freedom so long as we kept up with our studies, which was easy thanks to our amazing personal teachers. For as long as I could remember, my sister was the creative sort. Drawing, painting, coming up with stories, expressing herself in a wide variety of ways, and always trying to include me in her activities. She was affectionate, nurturing, and overall loving. I could not have imagined a better sibling. Naturally, her brilliance drew much of our parent's attention, and because of their hectic work schedules, they rarely ever had time for me. Though, I didn't really mind at first, as I always had my sister by my side."

"I don't know if I can properly express how much I cared for her. I... I loved her. I loved everything about her and wanted to be just like her. Her personality, her talents, her appearance, I was too young to understand my feelings, but I deeply and truly envied everything

about her. I tried following in her footsteps, trying to both impress her along with my parents. I spent days on a project, honing and refining it to the best of my abilities, as my sister often did with her own work, before finally feeling satisfied with the final product. When I went to present it to my parents though, they were... far from kind.”

“They said that I was being derivative, a poor imitation, and that I should try to do something on my own, rather than mirroring the talents of my sister. I had always felt like I was second in their eyes, and at that moment, I sure as shit felt like a number two. I was left dejected, rejected, and disheartened. All I had truly wanted throughout my life, I received. I had all the tutors, toys, and games I could have ever wished for when growing up, but I never felt like I truly had my parent’s love... and after I tried my hardest to impress them, they did not even give me the time of day, insulting me before leaving to handle other matters.”

“I did, eventually, years later, learn why they were so dismissive of me. My parents were incredibly busy people, and at the time, they were dealing with financial hardships, trying to expand the company, and prevent undue influence from affecting their leadership. They were stressed out more than they had ever been in the past, and simply did not have time, even for their 12-year-old child. It was not that they hated me, it’s that they were in such a nasty position that they were keen to hate everything.”

“Regardless of context though, I was mortified by their words and took them as deeply and severely as I could. From that sorrow came anger. Hatred. Fury. Spite. Et cetera. In such a state, it was hard for me to so much as think straight, let alone rationally, and, in my young vengeful hormone-riddled mind, I devised a half-brained plan that... would ruin so much. I called my parents in for a meeting, telling them that it was of vital importance. They came to one of our many meeting rooms to discuss the matter with me, cynically remarking about how I was eating away at their valuable time with my drivel. Then, once we were all alone, I sat them down and pulled out the weapons I had prepared. A kitchen knife and a metal mallet. Two tools that would not be the most effective weapons, but hatred is a powerful force, and because of that, my parents were reduced to unidentifiable piles of flesh in mere minutes...”

“By the end, I was doused in their blood and had gone manic from the rush of murder. I knew what I was doing was reprehensible, but the satisfaction I felt was great, and the sense of bloodlust that was going through me at the time had me continuously stabbing and mashing what remained. That’s when the door to the meeting room opened and, well, I jumped at whoever came in. I was so far gone that I did not even look at who it was until my hammer had struck them square in the forehead. It was none other than my sister, and once I struck her, her body limply fell to the floor.”

“After that... I cannot say I remember many specifics. But I do know what happened. My sister was left comatose. Her condition was poor, her chance of waking up was low, and due to the trauma I inflicted on her, in the event that she did wake up, she would not be the same person. So, in a sense, the sister I knew was already dead. And I killed her.”

I could not accept this and sought the aid of every doctor my family had connections with, searching for ways in which I could keep her alive, and eventually, after countless conversations, I found a doctor crazy and skilled enough to help bring my sister back, at least, in a way.”

“I intentionally never knew the details of the process, but I do know this. My body became that of my sister’s as far as it could within the capabilities of modern science circa 1999. We were the same blood type, our tissue matched, and we were very much the best-case scenario for a procedure like this. By the end of the surgeries, after several weeks, I looked at myself in the mirror and no longer saw myself looking back at me. I saw my sister. I saw Maxxie.”

“To any casual observer, I now was my sister, and I spent the ensuing years trying to copy everything else. Her voice, her mannerisms, her talents. I dedicated myself to being Maxxie, and from a legal perspective, I made it so that I was Maxxie. The world thought that the person who I used to be died along with my parents in an undisclosed accident, while their precious daughter, Maxxie Flare, was appointed as the head of their company.”

“I spent years overjoyed at the act of being my sister, of vicariously living her life and, in my mind, truly believing that I was her, rejecting any stray thoughts about ever being anyone else, and instead choosing to believe my own version of events. That it was my disgruntled sibling who murdered my parents, before taking a weapon to... himself and ending... his life. I believed that for two decades until, well, it all came back to me. Just now.”

“While those years brought me much joy, it was slowly becoming apparent to me that I was... changing. I was looking ever so slightly worse and could feel my personality gradually drift away from what it used to be. I was getting older, and there were two things that I feared with that. Remembering my parents, how they seemed to grow cynical in their old age, bitter, disrespectful, and rude. I did not want the same thing to befall me. To befall Maxxie. But possibly more than that, I did not want to die. To see Maxxie truly leave this world for good.”

“Using the many resources of the Flare Foundation, I researched ways to prolong one’s life indefinitely, and while there were many scientific advancements that could potentially allow for such a thing, there was one theory, a myth of sorts, that caught my eye. It was found by one of the brightest employees in the entire conglomerate and consisted of small articles, stories, and insignificant anecdotes that pointed to a mysterious woman. A tall woman with a dark complexion, red eyes, and powers beyond human comprehension. Stories of her seemed to permeate throughout the centuries, and a few mentioned her resistance to lethal wounds, and being able to recover from an explosive blast. She went by many names over the years, but I eventually learned of her true name. Abigale Quinlan.”

“I hired many people to hunt you down, to find you, all so that I could meet with you... but you were not okay with just meeting, causing me to take more drastic measures. I had to invest

resources into containing you, experimenting on you, and tormenting you in hopes that you would share your secrets of immortality with me... but you didn't. Instead, you destroyed everything in an attempt to free yourself, grew insane from immense torture, and eventually fell into a sort of coma once you left the world in a dilapidated state."

"I survived the assault, as did my organization, and we used what remaining resources we had to experiment on you, taking all the samples we could possibly want or need, all before breeding you with yourself. This gave way to offspring that were tested on, trained, and treated with love and affection... but before we could make any significant progress, they managed to escape one way or another. With the exception of being your first child. Fiona. I called her my daughter, raised her when I could, and developed a close bond with her. You already know what happened from there. Once you escaped, I was a mess, went to Fiona, and she melded her body with mine, giving me all your powers."

"In the end... I regret everything I did. To you. To my parents. To my sister. To the world. To the people at the Flare Foundation, all of those who died because of my hysteria and poor leadership. And for what I did to Jack during her stay at the Foundation. I... my sister always was very open when it came to things sexually... perhaps a little too open. She did not know the word, but she was pansexual, she was open to loving anyone and anything, and found the kinkier side of sexual situations... fascinating. I somehow thought this meant that she would love fucking kids."

"I became a parody of the person I so desperately wanted to mirror all of my life. Ignoring all of the context and subtext that made her up, as I was desperately clinging to fading memories. Her personality, demeanor, everything I started doing, everything you saw me do while I was fighting you, was just a bastardization of who Maxxie truly was. I'm such a fucking idiot. Just one insane emotionally damaged idiot who went and ruined most of the world because she didn't want her sister to die."

"Flare—" I interjected as her story seemingly came to an end.

"Please, call me Terra. It's the name I was thinking of calling myself before... before I ruined everything. Back when my aspirations had some semblance of normalcy to them. Back when I just wanted to be a girl who was loved and accepted by her family."

"Terra... you are a dangerous person and have done untold harm to the world and human society at large. I view you as the person responsible for so much of what happened, and I do hate you for what you have done. Your past does not excuse your actions when they are this severe, and I think you know this."

"I do. So what now? Are you gonna kill me?"

“...No. I feel that my power is fully regained. How you managed to survive the process, or retain some of your abilities, is a mystery to me. However, you no longer seem to bear ill will in your intentions, and so long as I do not hear about you doing anything reprehensible, I will allow you to continue to live. Assuming that is what you want.”

“Heh. It’d be pretty pathetic to ask for death after all of this. But... I’m surprised you’re just letting me go like this.”

“I do not enjoy killing. I view it as a necessary action in dire times, and while I will kill to ensure my own survival, I do not see you as a threat to me or really to anyone in your current state. If anything, I am curious as to how you will cope, both with your emotional loss and with your newfound powers. Most notably, immortality.”

“Well... thank you, Abigale. I’ll do all that I can with this new life you gave me. But before that... I think I need to figure out just who I am now.”

“Very well. Goodbye Terra Flare.”

“Yeah. Goodbye Abigale Quinlan.”

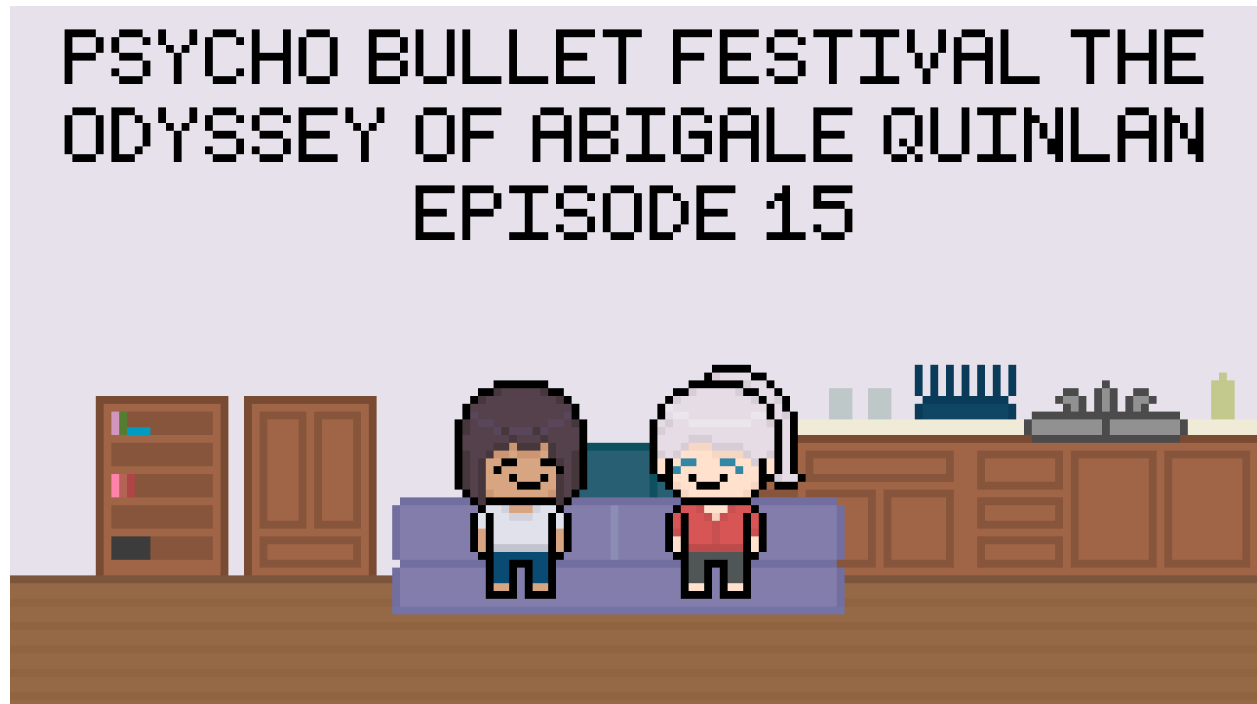
As our conversation came to a close, I looked upwards and took off into the sky, leaving Terra to fend for herself. I soared contemplatively, reflecting on Terra’s past as I looked at the world around me, reminding myself of the magnitude of what my future would hold. I passed over the battleground between Flare and I as I made my way to the university, where I found Jack and Zedaki, standing watch for me.

I carried them with me as I flew through the sky, traveling hundreds of kilometers and returning to Madeco, where I dropped them off. They spent the night reconvening with the denizens of the settlement, while I worked from midnight until dawn, Real Booting supplies for this settlement before I woke up Jack and Zedaki to bid them farewell.

I kept one of my promises to them. And now, with my might and intellect restored, it was time for the other half. The world was a vast place, there was a lot wrong with it, and I was the only one with the power to usher it into a new era. It would take decades, if not centuries, to restore and rebuild what was lost, but with my mind clear and my power greater than it had ever been before, I knew that I, more than any other being in the world, was the one who could bring hope and prosperity back to this tattered world.

Author’s Note: The song sung by Terra Flare is a ‘transformative parody’ of the [English cover of Aishite Aishite Aishite by JubyPhonic](#).

Episode 15: Abigale The Almighty



Madeco. May 18th, 2024.

The afternoon sun shined brightly on Madeco. The once desolate remains of a small desert town had blossomed into something far greater than anyone could have imagined 19 months ago. It was completely unrecognizable from what it once was. The buildings, fields, and forestry that once surrounded the area had been upheaved and in their place, a new society was being built.

A society with acres upon acres of crops, an expanding inventory of livestock, and a massive lake that would provide filtered water through the town's rebuilt plumbing system, efficiently built, practical, and sturdy buildings capable of generating their own power through solar panels, with wind turbines generating the rest. It was not the most attractive settlement, as it was built for survivability and sustainability above all else, but it was a bastion of advancement compared to the vast majority of the world.

As such, it garnered the attention of the huddled and desperate masses for miles upon miles, causing the once paltry population of dozens to balloon beyond a thousand. It was an impressive feat for certain, and as word of this settlement spread, the number was only going to grow larger.

The law of the town was that anybody was welcome to join so long as they did their fair share, helping out with the production of crops, building of new homes, or the various other occupations that were becoming increasingly needed and practical as more and more people arrived. From the building of homes or cultivation of crops to more fringe professions, such as the repair and maintenance of devices and appliances that were left damaged after the solar flare unleashed upon the world 9 years ago.

In a workplace made specifically to address this issue, there were several workstations, all of which were occupied with people diligently making their way through a large pile of salvaged items in the center of the room, trying to make them work as best as they could, and informing each other about how to repair specific items. In one of these workstations resided Jacquelynne Onson, who had become something of a mechanic's apprentice since she moved to Madeco. While she did not know much at first, only having some knowledge thanks to a few odd-jobs she performed prior to meeting Abigale, experience was a good teacher for her, and with her small hands, she was a good fit for such a job.

She let out an exasperated sigh as she finished her last assignment for the day, repairing a small refrigerator. A very useful device for keeping food fresh and cool during the upcoming summer months. With her work done for the day, she exited from her workstation, taking her hair out of the ponytail it was affixed in and allowing it to drop past her shoulders. She grabbed a metal cup of water from the shop's own refrigerator before sending herself outside, where a cool breeze brushed over her somewhat sweaty body.

As Jacquelynne finished her water while gazing at the farmland in the distance and the orange sky and pink clouds above, she let out a gentle smile. As she nursed her cup, cooling her body, her co-workers also filtered away from their workstations, grabbing water, chugging it down, and leaving the building, saying their goodbyes to one another, ready to return to their homes for dinner and rest.

It was a simple cycle that Jacquelynne had taken to with fondness these past few months, with each passing day being further and further from her time at the Flare Foundation and the week she spent with Abigale. She briefly pondered her past during her brief stroll back home, asking what-ifs that had rolled around in her head over these past few months before she arrived at her unremarkable little abode. Upon checking the household garden, which contained growing tomatoes, zucchini, eggplant, and broccoli plants, she returned to the front door, where she came face to face with her housemate Zedaki, who was resting on a salvaged sofa.

Zedaki's white hair was gathered in a ponytail flipped lazily across her shoulder, while her outfit consisted of a red and white flannel shirt with rolled-up sleeves along with jeans stained with dirt from the days she spent working in the fields. Since the end of her journey, she adopted a slightly gentler and calmer look, no longer burdened by her former responsibilities as a leader of Madeco, or the emotional burden that came with traveling with Abigale. Instead, she was now a farm worker who spent her days cultivating food, strengthening her body with each passing day.

The two exchanged a brief smile as Jacquelynne took off her shoes, sitting them right next to Zedaki's dirt-covered work boots, before entering the bathroom to wash her hands. Upon exiting the room, she looked to see Zedaki in the kitchen, getting out what she would need to make dinner. Despite last year's year's bountiful harvest, food was still rationed out throughout the community, and most people survived off of simple things. Beans, bread, corn, and whatever fruits and vegetables they could preserve.

Due to the time of year, people were able to get fresh fruits and vegetables, which would serve as the base of Zedaki and Jacquelynne's meal. Meat was certainly present among the citizenry diet, but with the wild animal population low, livestock growing, and the population booming, it was a rarity reserved for only luxurious occasions, with even eggs and milk being held in high regard.

Being the helpful sort, Jacquelynne soon made her way to the kitchen to assist Zedaki, assisting her by cutting the vegetables before everything was gathered on two plates for them. As they worked on preparing their meals, they made their usual idle chatter, mentioning what they did at work, though there really was not much for either to say.

"You know, harvest this, water, this, use this to get the soil ready. Pretty dull as usual, but at least I have some music to listen to while I do it." Zedaki said with familiarity, having gone on similar spiels in the past.

"Yeah, I'm lucky we were able to get that computer working again. Though, I still wish we could have found some more CDs," Jacquelynne said as she casually chopped away at a head of broccoli.

"At least we got a copy of Terra's CD collection, so at least we have some... variety, I guess."

"It was really weird seeing her again. She felt like a different person."

"You think she'll ever stop by again? I mean, it's been over a year."

"She said that she was going traveling. So maybe. Though, I kind of... don't want to see her again. Does that make me a bad person, Zed?"

"Nah. With the shit you went through, I probably wouldn't want to see that person's face for as long as I lived. You forgave her, which is a helluva lot more than I would've done."

"Her face looks a lot different from what I remember. It's like a fusion between her and Abigale, but, well, I guess that's what she is now."

"When do you think Abigale's gonna drop by again? It's been almost a year since we last saw her, seeing as how she couldn't make it to the town's anniversary back in November." Zedaki mentioned.

"She's got to be busy. I would like to see her again, but... I shouldn't be selfish."

"Selfish? Pfft. Girl, without you Abigale would've been dead on the floor before she even knew what was even the fuck. Plus, you really had a thing for her, didn't you?"

"Eh? A thing?" Jacquelynne stammered.

"Don't give me that. I saw how you looked at her all those times, you can admit it."

"Well, I, um, I just thought that she was really pretty, and confident too. I felt safe around her. She was always nice to me too. I mean, she took me along on her journey, when most people would have just left me. But, um, that's about it."

"You sure about that? Because I still hear you mumble her name when you sleep sometimes."

"Um... I'm going to end this conversation now."

"Heh. Whatever you say, Jay, whatever you say."

From there, the two finished their dinner and were soon off to ready themselves for the approaching evening, changing into their sleepwear and placing their work clothes in a basket that one of them would bring to the town laundry in the morning. They finished their day reading through their respective books, borrowed from the town's makeshift library. Zedaki enjoyed a nonfiction novel that focused on the life and hardships of the American wild west, while Jacquelynne slowly made her way through an adult mystery novel, struggling with certain words and concepts due to her lack of an education. Shortly after sunset, and once their home was hued in darkness, the two made it to the shared bedroom of their small home. They casually wished each other goodnight before laying in their own beds, knowing that they would meet each other again come morning.

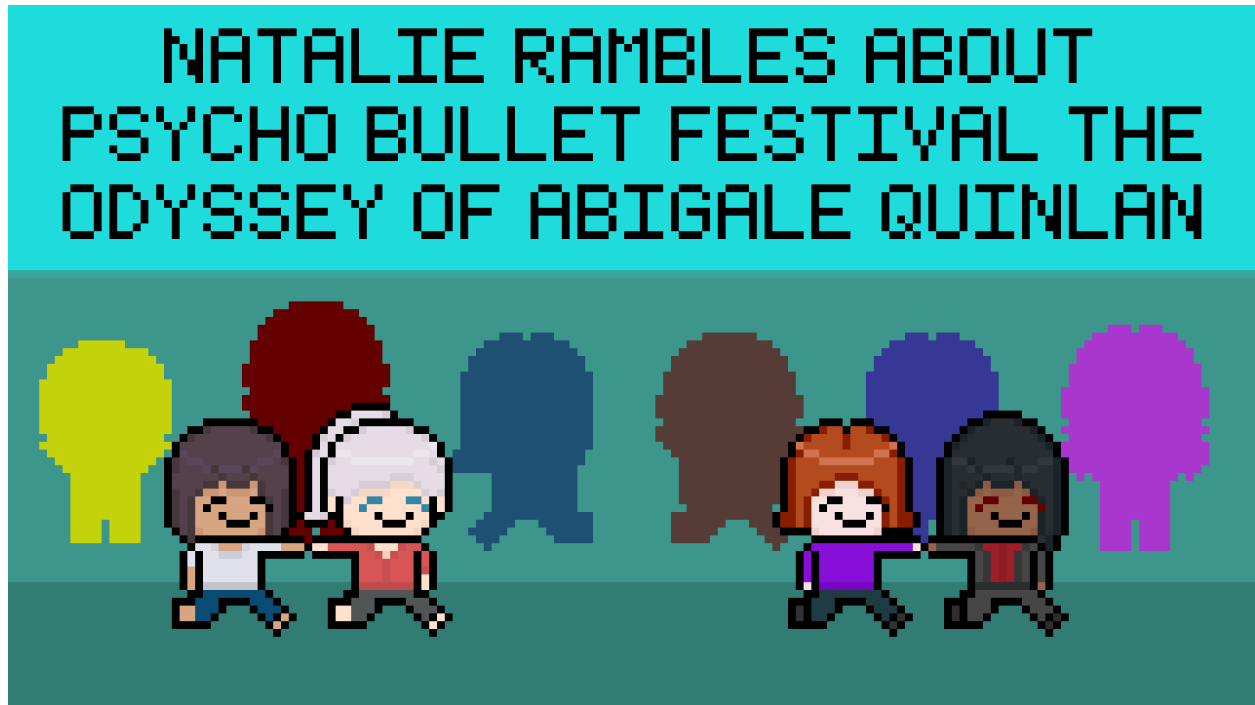
While sleeping, Jacquelynne dreamed about meeting with Abigale once more. It was a common dream for her, and played out similarly to the others, with Abigale greeting her after work, and embracing her in a hug while remarking how it has been so long. It was a simple and earnest dream representative of something Jacquelynne longed for, but never received. Abigale was perpetually busy, and even though she kept her promise to meet with the two, she was distant, beyond them, and more interested in helping the world over her obligations. In spite of this, Jacquelynne still felt a fondness for Abigale, a sense of adoration, and as she eventually came to accept it, a sense of love.

But Jacquelynne never expressed her feelings to her Abigale, as she knew that they would not be returned. Instead, she and Zedaki continued to meet with Abigale annually, and with each passing year, the meetings felt more and more like an obligation. Their once lively meetings became more and more of an obligation, as the group had truly nothing to discuss during their last few meetings.

By the time Jack and Zedaki passed away, the world was restored, rebuilt, and better than it had ever been. Abigale had fulfilled her promise to abide by her past aggressions and then some, ushering in what could only be described as a utopian state by the end of the 21st century. The damages and devastation of the Cataclysm had been relegated to the annals of history, a fact only known through secondary or tertiary experiences, and the future for humanity was a radiant one. They were a new society, unified, bereft of war or global conflict, and perpetually guided in their growth by a being who looked down upon them from the sky above. A lone woman with an eternal commitment to shepherd humanity towards their best possible future. A woman known as Abigale Quinlan.

Das Ende

Afterword: Natalie Rambles About Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan



The following afterword was originally posted on Natalie.TF on December 2, 2020 as a post-mortem of *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan* to celebrate its 2020 re-release on Natalie.TF.

Hold the bullets, hold the festival, and EMBRACE THE PSYCHO!!!

Part 0: Meipuru Tsuru and the Death of Dreams

On January 20th, 2016, I released my second full-length novel in the form of [The Malice of Abigale Quinlan](#). A sequel to my first novel, [Verde's Doohickey](#), and as I discussed in [Natalie Rambles About The Malice of Abigale Quinlan](#), I was far from happy with how the story turned out. Because of how dissatisfied I was with my own work, I put an end to every sequel I had loosely planned up until that point and canceled what was to be this overly ambitious 10-part novel series, *The Novus Logs*.

However, this did not mark the end of my narrative pursuits. Oh, far from it. Even before I had finished the editing on *Malice*, I was already working on the outline for my next story. One that

had nothing to do with anything I previously worked on, was set on the other side of the planet and focused on concepts I had wanted to explore before, but never had the opportunity.

This planning ultimately led to the creation of *Maple Loves Senpai*, a 30,000 word novella I initially released on May 27th, 2016. The story follows 16-year-old Japanese high school girl Meipuru Tsuru, as she confesses to her high school crush and the titular 'senpai,' Satoshi Suzuki. But upon confessing and subsequently being rejected by Satoshi, Meipuru uses a charm given to her by a fairy, which causes these two would-be-lovers to fuse together into a single being. The ensuing story then follows Meipuru as she is ordered by Satoshi to go about using her newfound powers to absorb others, mixing and matching their traits in order to become Satoshi's idealized waifu. It was a dark comedic love story, one that featured absurd situations, gruesome murders, and the appropriation of cultural stereotypes.

I thought about revising that story and republishing it on Natalie.TF with my other works. However, the actual story had a lot of... problems. Its understanding of Japanese culture was amateurish. Its storyline was repetitive. I egregiously made the protagonists 16-years-old and had them indulge in outlandish sexual acts (including penile vore). And overall, I don't look back on the story fondly. It has elements and components that I adore to this day, but I would not be happy with republishing the story with only minor edits, and if I were to make it available to the public again, I would want to reinvent it wholly, fix its more problematic elements, achieve more of a sexual absurdist tone. But I have no idea if I will get around to this planned reimagining and expansion, and this is not *Natalie Rambles About Maple Loves Senpai*, so I'm going to jump ahead to what I did AFTER I released this novella.



Part 1: Psycho Bullet Festival 2: Help Me Bury My Children

The true and proper origins of *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan* begin with the conception of its original title one cold January afternoon in 2016, as I was waiting for a train to take me out of the filthy city of Chicago and back to my suburban home. As my mind wandered aimlessly and my eyes drifted at the denizens below the elevated platform, I mused about future story titles I could pursue, having just finished *The Malice of Abigale Quinlan*. And I was not met with an idea, but a name. *Psycho Bullet Festival 2: Help Me Bury My Children*.

An outlandish and downright stupid name that wasn't an original idea as much as a hodgepodge of references. The name "Psycho Bullet Festival" is a reference to a mechanic of the same name seen in a 2006 video game adaptation of the 1992 Quentin Tarantino film, *Reservoir Dogs*. I watched a video of the game sometime back in 2015, found the title entertaining, and decided that nobody would notice or care if I were to take it.

"Help Me Bury My Children" is a reference to the video game podcast *Super Best Friendcast*. Where their 2015 Christmas special, episode 125, was entitled [*Miracle Girl Festival: Let Me Bury Your Child: Stop Me From Bearing Your Child*](#). Which itself was a partial reference to the 2012 PSP title, *Conception: Please Give Birth to My Child!* and the 2015 PS Vita anime crossover rhythm game *Miracle Girls Festival*.

While the "2" came from... the fact that I thought the title didn't sound stupid enough and thought that a number helped tie it together.

I spent the proceeding 50 minute train ride thinking about this title and using it as a basis to craft a narrative. During that ride, I decided that it would be a post-apocalyptic action story centering around a female character on a quest to murder her children, gaining greater and greater powers as they all fell, while being aided by a group of wastelander allies. My mind took influence from contemporary Japanese action games and the recently released *Fallout 4* as I mulled over this concept. And as I thought of a protagonist to lead this story, one with great powers and capable of greater feats, I decided to repurpose none other than Abigale Quinlan

Abigale Quinlan was the titular antagonist of my 2014 novella *My Life As Abigale Quinlan* and my 2016 novel, *The Malice of Abigale Quinlan*. In both stories, she played more of a secondary role, being the one who initiated the events of the story, and being the form taken by each story's protagonist. But she herself played a minimal role, and I wanted to see that corrected by writing a story where she was the protagonist.

That sounds simple enough on paper and was enough for me to form a vague foundation at the end of my train ride, but as I continued to muse on the concept in the ensuing months, I realized there were two problems with this idea.

One, Abigale Quinlan has always been portrayed as an unfathomably intelligent individual. A genius with the knowledge, conviction, and cunning to get out of every situation, and a character who was too darn intelligent for me to accurately write a story from her perspective. She was a perfect individual who never made mistakes, and I typically find protagonists who can do no wrong to be boring as all hell, because they are immune to failure and consequences.

Two, Abigale Quinlan was not really 'protagonist material'. In her two prior stories, she was a monster. She was a school shooter. She was a crass, brutal murderer who mentally broke people for fun and sought emotional highs by tormenting innocent individuals. I had written monstrous protagonists before, such as T-Bird in my 2014 novella *Psycho Shatter*. But that was a short story with multiple protagonists, a darkly comedic tone, a narrow plot, and a narrator. Meanwhile, I imagined *Psycho Bullet Festival* being a prolonged novel-length narrative with a set protagonist, a supporting cast, and a serious yet intentionally edgy tone.

In order to reconcile these issues, I decided that a reinvention of Abigale Quinlan was necessary, and I began to reimagine her from the ground up as a more deliberate protagonist. One whose origins would tie into the world I wanted to create and would play the role of the bringer of the apocalyptic setting the story would take place in.

In the *Psycho Bullet Festival* universe, Abigale Quinlan is a well-traveled and well-learned immortal woman of color who traveled about the world starting at the tail end of the Italian Renaissance, seeing empires fall and revolutions begin, while consorting with many of the greatest minds in the latter half of the second millennia. During this time, she was subjected to many hardships for her appearance and immortality, which both painted her personality from a bright-eyed intellectual to a cynic, and caused her powers to expand beyond her innate abilities to recover from lethal wounds and never age.

According to my notes, she developed strength and speed when up against strong armies of men who tried to repeatedly kill her. She developed the ability to transmogrify matter, known as Real Booting, after being imprisoned with no way to escape. She developed the Snap Burst ability after being assaulted with gunfire and needing a way to fight back. And she developed the ability to rapidly heal when she was tortured relentlessly by individuals who branded her a daemon. This made up her skillset until the modern-day, where centuries have left her cynical and thinking little of the world as it rapidly changed due to the technical innovations seen throughout the 1980s through the 2000s. All until something happened that caused Abigale Quinlan to transform the setting into a post-apocalyptic one.

After being abducted by a powerful organization, Abigale would be tortured through their aggressive experimentation. Through the relentless pain and imprisonment, Abigale developed the ability to shape the world around her through the sheer force of her will, granting her the ability to control nature and weather. After escaping from the facility she was imprisoned in,

Abigale would throw Earth into disarray as she summoned catastrophic natural disasters that crippled civilizations and solar flares that eradicated most electronics

The events of Abigale's torture and the Cataclysm were initially referred to as *Psycho Bullet Festival 1*, and *Psycho Bullet Festival 2* was set to take place several years later. Where Abigale Quinlan would wake up with no memories of the destruction she caused, and with her powers gone from her person. Upon reawakening, she would soon learn that her abilities had been passed down to the children she bred while unconscious and in the custody of the Flare Foundation. A private organization that wished to use her for their own gains. Upon escaping the facility, the story would follow Abigale and a young woman named Jack Crowbar as the two venture through a desert wasteland on a quest to kill, or bury, her children, restore her powers and use her powers to restore the world to its former glory.

I settled on how these initial events would play out in June 2016, and while most of my ideas carried over into the final release, I cut out much of Abigale's past for the sake of keeping the story focused and her character more mysterious, and I completely changed the tone I originally envisioned for this story. I was writing a story called *Psycho Bullet Festival*, and I felt that the tone of the story should fit its title. To me, this meant that the story should be a hot-blooded tale of action where super-powered individuals battle it out for dominance in a world that went to shit, with every new opponent being crazier and more vicious than the last. An actiony and intentionally edgy story with a flippant protagonist who cared only for herself.

But as I started writing the story, I began to veer away from this idea and into the story that I ultimately released. A slower and more methodical story about a woman traveling the world and murdering her children through fairly conventional means, where things are kept grounded for the majority of the story, and where the bombast implied by its title is not present until its final chapters.

Why did I change this title so drastically during its development? Well, it was not a conscious decision, but rather a result of how long it took me to write this bloody thing.

Part 2: Sayonara! Goodbye! Embrace the Delays!

As a writer, I have a history of a fairly quick turnaround. I have written novels in as little as 5 months. I have written novellas in less than a month. I can put out short stories in half a week if I am focused enough. And I can reliably write 3,000 words a day if I am in the right headspace and not interrupted by other people. But with *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan*, it took me the entirety of June 2016 to finalize the initial outline and 22 months to actually write the ~75,000 word story, before I was finally done on April 27, 2018.

Why did it take me so long? Well, the simple answer is that life happened, shit happened, and I didn't have the time needed to work on this story. What exactly occupied my time? Well, quite a lot actually.

New Friend:

I made a new friend on June 1st, 2016, the day I began working on the first full outline of *Psycho Bullet Festival*. This friend and I quickly became incredibly close over the ensuing weeks and we would spend hours a day together during the first year we knew each other. Playing games, watching anime, doing Choose Your Own Adventures, working on some collaborative writing projects, and just chatting about whatever crossed our minds. The time I spent with them represented time I wasn't working on my personal projects, including *Psycho Buller Festival*.

College:

In the fall of 2016, I started attending Northeastern Illinois University and began pursuing my bachelor's, and eventually master's, in accounting. The more intensive curriculum meant I was spending more time on school projects and studying in general, but that was fairly marginal in the grand scheme of things. Time became an issue when it came to getting there and back, as I relied on a paratransit service to bring me to and from school. A service that was cheap and great when it worked, but they were very much unreliable. They were constantly late in picking me up and when they did pick me up, they would often stretch out a 20 minute car ride over 1 to 2 hours.

Now, this would not be so bad if I could do something as I waited for and while in these vehicles. But I did not get a smartphone until 2019, and I cannot read in a moving vehicle for more than a few minutes before I get carsick. Meaning there really was nothing I could do but meander and muse about things, reviewing class material in my head, and thinking over my ongoing personal projects... among other things.

Gender Transition:

On May 18th, 2016, I came out as transgender to my mother and by June 23rd I was already beginning my gender transition in earnest by starting Hormone Replacement Therapy. Over the ensuing 18 months I spent a substantial amount of time preparing to start presenting myself as female beginning in 2018. Visiting doctors, preparing for and undergoing Facial Feminization Surgery, buying a new wardrobe, taking vocal training lessons, getting my name legally changed, and so forth and so on. None of this represented a massive amount of time, but when added up, it easily amassed into hundreds of hours.

New Work, New Problems:

From June 2014 through August 2016 I worked an office job with a generally slow workflow and would routinely spend the last 3 hours of my 8 hour days with nothing to do. I would spend this time writing my earlier novels and other content for Natalie.TF, and a significant amount of the Verde's *Doohickey*, *The Malice of Abigale Quinlan*, and *Maple Loves Senpai* were written within

this office. But in June 2016 I started a second job at the administrative end of a medical office, where I had significantly more work to do every day. Meaning I was no longer able to write things during my downtime at work, as I had next to none.

Natalie.TF:

In addition to writing fiction, I also write about video games, and while it takes comparatively little time to pen a game review or offer an editorial regarding current goings-on in the industry, I often found myself fatigued of writing after I completed these tasks, and would push off *Psycho Bullet Festival* as being less important than the game reviews and news rundowns I was producing on a weekly basis from 2016 through 2018.

Because of all these factors, I wound up undergoing significant delays in the writing of *Psycho Bullet Festival*. These delays would last from weeks to months, and caused the development of this story to stagger over time. By letting these creative ambitions sit and gestate while undergoing some very substantial changes in my life, they mutated over time, and as my ideas changed, I began to change, and I slowly reworked the story into something new and different from the hot-blooded edgy action story I originally envisioned in June of 2016.

Psycho Bullet Festival 2: Help Me Bury My Children became *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan*, and in the process, I think some things got worse, some things got confused, and some things got better. But before getting to that, I want to talk about the title for a moment.

Part 3: 1 Psycho, Some Bullets, 0 Festivals

The very title of *Psycho Bullet Festival* is something I considered removing throughout the development process of this story but kept due to the simple fact that, after you call something by a name for two years, you start to grow attached to it. Unfortunately, as a story called *Psycho Bullet Festival*... it fails to deliver on what it promises.

There is only one psycho seen throughout the story, that being Fiona/Maxxie/Flare. The quantity of bullets is not especially high throughout the story. Episode 1 features 3 bullets, Episode 3 features 1 bullet, Episode 6 features an ambiguous amount of bullets fired from a hunting rifle, and Episode 8 features 2 bullets unless you count the pile of misshapen bullets created by Punky—which I don't! That puts the total bullet quantity at 6+x, with x representing up to 10, as most hunting rifles are rarely able to hold more than 10 rounds. Meaning there are 16 bullets, which is hardly enough to constitute a "bullet festival." Let alone a psychotic "bullet festival." And it's not like a festival can have any other meaning in this context!

...But to take a less pedantic approach, the title of *Psycho Bullet Festival* implies bombast, action, and high energy, which is very much not what *PBF* delivers. The writing and tone of the

story is far more mellow and slower, being a story filled with a lot of quaint dialogue and internal introspections from its protagonist, and while this is peppered with fight scenes in the form of Abigale's battles against her children, my approach with them was arguably too realistic. Rather than viewing these encounters like a choreographer, visual director, or video game designer, I viewed them as people in the world and informed their actions accordingly.

Or in other words, based on the title alone, *Psycho Bullet Festival* was a BETRAYAL to itself. But aside from botching the title, the most important part of any work competing for one's attention, does the story have merit, and is it a good novel?

Eh, not really. I think it's slow, routine, and loses steam partway through before revving back up again in a very awkward approach to pacing. The tone is somber and dark in many respects, and the story is very uneven with its action, being notably deprived of much excitement from Episodes 7 through 11, and while it has a lot of stake in the backstories, as exemplified with Episodes 7 and 10, it's all uneven and lopsided. The world-building, while interesting in some respects, means very little with regards to the overall story. The varied settings are non-visual set dressing, and the navigation through terrain is almost completely undermined with the introduction of a vehicle a third of the way into the story.

It is a messy, uneven little mound, but it is one that I think has some merit, and in lieu of a more creative structure, I think the best way to filter out the bad, the weird, the good, and what the hell I was thinking is to focus on the cast of characters. First the Psycho Bullet Babes, then the Psycho Bullet Babies, and finally, the Psycho Bullet Bitch.

Part 4: Abigale and the Psycho Bullet Babes

NATALIE RAMBLES ABOUT PSYCHO BULLET FESTIVAL THE ODYSSEY OF ABIGALE QUINLAN



As I said earlier, Abigale Quinlan was originally going to be a more callous and violent individual akin to her prior incarnations in my earlier works. But that idea changed as I began writing from her perspective and trying to sympathize with her plight as somebody unintentionally responsible for untold amounts of destruction and one who had essential traits about her person stolen from her via forced breeding. I felt that it would be disingenuous and unrealistic for any individual, even an immortal, to not look at this situation with a degree of sorrow and self-loathing, and I decided to make her a ‘good person’ instead of a ‘bad person’.

A good person who does not want to hurt people, and feels guilt for her actions, despite her best effort. A good person who clings to what she had lost, as it was an inherent part of her person and sense of self. A good person who does indeed care for others, even if she feels she must remain distant from them after having lost so many people throughout her lengthy existence. And a good person who puts herself to high standards and bemoans her newly dulled wit and the routine stupidity of her current actions.

I tried to convey this through her actions and narration, how she willingly puts herself into danger, protects her allies, takes no pleasure in the act of killing her children, let alone anyone, and goes on methodical walks to both establish the world and her remorse. However, I don’t think I was able to properly capture the mindset of an immortal woman who was jaded from a prolonged and eventful life, even with the caveat that her memory is fragmented and her intelligence is comparable to that of a common person.

I generally prefer writing in the first-person over the third-person, and whenever I write a character from the first-person, I worry if I am writing them too close to home. This is why I tend

to mostly write younger characters who share similar principles and values as me, or more jaded adults inspired by individuals who I have seen verbally express their aspirations and disdain for their current situation in vigorous detail. But Abigale Quinlan, at least this Abigale Quinlan, is a character a bit too different from me for me to truly get inside her head... despite being her creator.

I tried to make her determined, resolute in her duty, and fretless in the face of adversity. Somebody who still felt sorrow and sympathy, but kept a professional face on when interfacing with most others, knowing she always has a role to play. But even with my best effort, I think she still sounds too much like a young person. She still sounds too much like me. And she shouldn't sound like me. She should sound like somebody better. Because she is better than me, even in her weakened and stupid state.

...Oh, and there's another, fairly minor yet deeply... confused bit of lore about her that I should explain: Why does Abigale Quinlan have a penis and why does she impregnate herself?

Well, the reason why Abigale Quinlan has a penis in the first place has to do with her original incarnation in *My Life As Abigale Quinlan*. Where I flippantly decided that she would have a penis because, at the time, I thought that the idea of a woman with a meter-long tail-like retractable penis was 'The Hottest Shit'. I omitted this trait in *The Malice of Abigale Quinlan* because it did not fit with the story I wanted to tell and would be a weird ancillary detail that would have confused the narrative.

As for why I brought it back in *Psycho Bullet Festival*, in order for my initial idea to work, the story would need to be about Abigale hunting her own children, and I did not want her to share the responsibility of parenthood with another character, male or female. I wanted her to be the sole parent, and in order to do so, I needed to give her the means to reproduce... well, not asexually, but without the involvement of another party. Also, I wanted Abigale to pass down her abilities to her children, and that made more 'sense' to me if the reproduction involved her combining her dual genitals, as everything that defined the child would be derived from her own biology, including their inherited powers.

In the early idea phase of *Psycho Bullet Festival*, I also thought about having Abigale use her penis as a tool, as a way for her to surprise opponents, and even a way to murder her children— by choking them to death with her meter-long dick— However, I began to move away from this idea as I began writing and finding the right tone for this story.

In the final text, Abigale only off-handedly mentions her penis, it is never shown or described and is more of an afterthought. And canonically her penis is meant to be a retractable yet otherwise completely unremarkable human penis. One that Abigale can 'release' from a body

cavity if she wants to. But at no point in the story does she ever have a reason to whip her dick out.

Jack Crowbar was a character who underwent a lot of mutations throughout the concept phase, with the earliest renditions being heavily based around the character of Peatrice from *The Malice of Abigale Quinlan*. She was to be a character with an appearance largely lifted from fetish art, a penchant for crowbar-based violence, and a love of sex learned through years of sexual abuse. But I quickly moved away from this original starting point and gradually pulled the character back into her final form. That of an androgynous young Asian woman with a dark past that left her frail, timid, and child-like despite having the body of an adult.

This change came about because I felt that this character was too crazy and unrealistic for what I, at some point, decided would be a more grounded story. And I wanted to do this by establishing a character who underwent formative years in this horrible post-apocalyptic world. Somebody who was broken during childhood and lost everything she held dear. And somebody who would symbolize how damaged the world was after the Cataclysm.

Beyond her general background, she plays a lot of roles in the story proper. She is a surrogate child for Abigale to care for as she goes on her journey while killing her biological children. Which is part of a greater theme of motherhood that is just kind of... there, and I never did anything with. She represents how much was lost in the Cataclysm and how an entire generation was crippled by these events and lost their innocence as they were forced to survive in a vicious environment. And she provides both details on the world and steadily foreshadows future events by discussing the Flare Foundation and Miss Flare.

She also gives Abigale a person to talk to and develop a character relationship with, and provides an ongoing B-plot throughout the story as Jack gradually grows closer to Abigale through their shared experience. The exact ramifications of their relationship are not very... traditional, and very little about how they feel about each other is overtly stated, but there is a lot of subtext to go through in reconciling their relationship.

To Jack, Abigale is the person who freed her from her slavery and is the first mentally well-adjusted individual she has interacted with in years. She is somebody who will protect her, who will respect her, will lend an ear to hear her woes, and will not reject her, no matter how vicious her past is. This closeness, this sense of belonging, causes Jack to view Abigale fondly, as somebody who is akin to a parental figure. But, thanks to years of sexual abuse and the misunderstanding with that, Jack also has a romantic interest in Abigale.

Jack ultimately wishes she could be with Abigale in a vague loving relationship comparable to a healthy couple or a parent and child, something she has not had since the death of her parents. However, from the onset of the odyssey, Jack is aware that this cannot be the case, and that

she will never be anything more than a friend. Because of this, she represses her feelings and does not share them with Abigale, for she knows that it would not benefit their relationship.

That covers the core of her character, but there are two other elements I should address, starting with the fact that Jack's background. She lost everything in the Cataclysm before turning to a life of murder in order to survive, took joy in the act, and became a 'Jack the Ripper' of sorts. I did this in order to show how even the innocent and mild can lose themselves if under the right type of pressure, and to show just how much Jack was broken by the events of the Cataclysm, driven to a wall where she had to abandon all she was and all she thought was good.

She takes pleasure in these actions not because she is evil, psychotic, or anything of the sort. She takes pleasure in the act of murder because she has nothing else. Because she would drown in her own despair if she were to accept her actions as evil, and the only way to retain her composure, she subconsciously told herself that this was a good thing. That killing helped her live. That, by extension, killing was good, as it meant she would live longer.

She is only able to accept her actions as what they are when divorced from the hostile environment she found herself in. And with salvation near, and her happiness at a high it had not been in nearly a decade, Jack finally feels strong enough to confront and confess to her actions.

The second element I want to discuss is her name. Jacquelynne "Crowbar" Onson is a jumbled and confusing name that itself is based on two references. Jack Crowbar is a direct reference to an online radio program hosted on the website of the disbanded nerdcore group *The Adventures of Duane & Brando*. I listened to this program sporadically throughout 2010 and occasionally a co-host would appear, a woman who went by the handle of Jack Crowbar. I later mingled the name of Jack Crowbar with Jack Onson, a self-insert type character by the artist ONATaRT who was formally introduced in his short-lived and delisted YouTube video series called *Resqetch*.

As for why I extended that into Jacquelynne, well, I did so because I wanted Jack to be a character of many names. I find names like Elizabeth, Catherine, and Jacquelynne to be extremely interesting, as they can be broken up and contorted into so many ways. And after coming up with Jacquelynne's backstory, I felt that she would feel dissonant and disconnected from her former preferred name, which I retroactively made into Lynne, and would feel more comfortable viewing herself as Jack.

There's also some symbolism to draw from with that choice of name, going from the feminine name of Lynne to the masculine name of Jack while losing certain details of her life that she might consider feminine. Going from a schoolgirl to a murderer and sex slave to a woman. I could say this was all intentional and that I wanted to use Jack to abstractly explore my own ideas of gender while undergoing my own gender transition (from starting hormones to

presenting myself as female) during the creation of this story... but that would be a lie, as I only came to realize this symbolism during my re-edit.

As a whole, I do like her character. Her brief impulses of crowbar-based violence in Episodes 1, 6, and 8 foreshadow her backstory, and by giving her two whopping backstory exposition dumps throughout the story, she is able to come into her own as a character in this world. She is a core part of the story, a genuine central character with some development and depth, and even if she doesn't do much beyond tagalong, dish out lore, and does some neck based murders. there really isn't a lot of room for her to do much more next to Abigale. She plays her role well, and... I like her.

Next, we have Zedaki. A character who I originally imagined as a middle-aged man who thrived in the post-apocalyptic landscape, becoming the leader of a settlement and an infamous figure with strong bonds to his allies. A cocky fellow with the gun and sword skills to back up his boasts, and one who would drive recklessly through the wastes to aid Abigale in her quest, while being all-too-eager to step into fights.

This is the character I decided to write, and a character who I wrote up until Episode 5. But as I was writing them, I started developing doubts about their character and decided to rewrite them entirely. Zedaki then became a young woman stranded in an unfamiliar nation, took the role of leadership reluctantly, and was grappling with the loss of her lover along with everything else.

So, just like the other main characters, Zedaki underwent a 180 from concept to execution. But while I think I ultimately made the right call with Abigale and Jack, I'm not sure that was the case for Zedaki. Mostly due to how... boring Zedaki is as a character. With Abigale, she is the protagonist, and the story is her odyssey. Jack is a character who works in the story on several levels I just discussed. But Zedaki is not made to be especially cool or collected, and she's not much of a weirdo. She's overall very average and unremarkable in her temperament, barring some flashes of hot-bloodedness or cockiness meant to contrast Abigale's collectedness. In the story, she exists to drive, banter, and get in a single fight with Marz.

I tried to give her character some depth with the loss of her female lover, Raiyne Underwood, her attachment to the oddball ensemble she wore, which was inspired by the attire of Red Mages in classic *Final Fantasy* titles mixed with the standard clip art version of a cowboy, and her change in appearance partway through the story was meant to symbolize a form of growth for her. But whatever development I wanted to accomplish with her just doesn't work.

This is because I never actually explained what her development was going to be, and decided to do it at the halfway point in the story, when Zedaki was only introduced as a character around the 20% mark. Her character lacks the time to establish itself, and despite undergoing an outfit change, she is pretty much identical in temperament. And whatever personal baggage she

unpacked leading up to this change is not detailed. She has a moment where she realizes that nothing in this world is permanent, where she accepts the loss of the one person in this world she could rely on, her former lover and the female leader of Madeco, and where she discards the notion of carrying out her legacy. But she never explains her feelings directly, and there is not enough subtext to adequately explain or expand upon her supposed development.

I *think* I was planning on having the explanation come later in the story, but I forgot to include such a scene in the outline I was working on, subsequently forgot about including a backstory showcase when writing the story, and never wrote anything in-depth about her backstory in my notes. This ultimately results in Zedaki being a shallow main character who might have some depth, but never shares it with the rest of the cast or the reader, causing her to be a more muted presence, despite her vibrant attire.

I actually might have tried internally justifying the lack of heart-to-heart scenes between Zedaki and Abigale under the pretense that Zedaki is a woman in her 30s and she doesn't need to hash her worries out with someone else. She isn't broken and has handled her mental state well after the Cataclysm. She doesn't want to share needless details with someone she'll only know for a short while. And while she might enjoy being playful around Abigale, she isn't really trying to befriend her.

This is all a grounded and reasonable way to construct a relationship, but it's also boring. With a central cast this small, the interlocking relationships between characters is important, and there simply needed to be something more between Abigale and Zedaki.

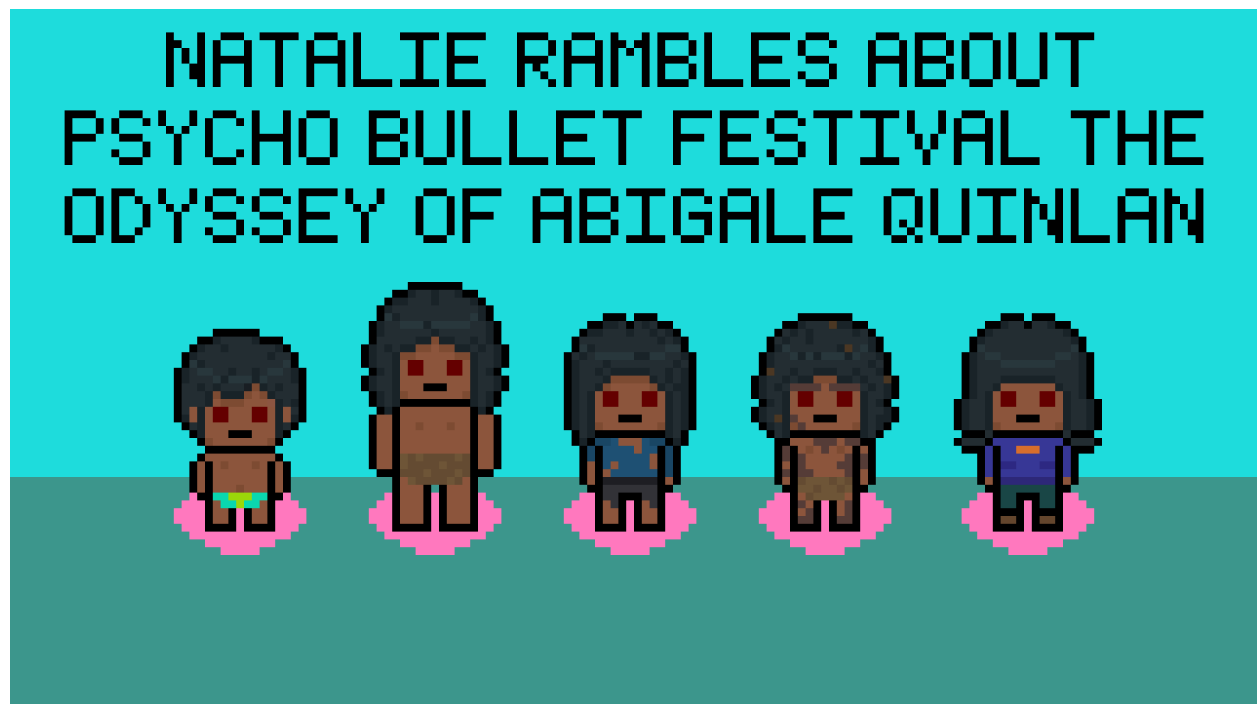
Which is why, while writing this post, I went back and revised Episode 9 to give Abigale and Zedaki more time together by adding a scene where Zedaki joins Abigale as she goes to obtain Punky from Zil, who I retconned into being the raiders who are responsible for the death of Zedaki's significant other. It doesn't fully fix this issue, but it's better now, and makes her feel like she has a greater presence in this story and this world.

On the other end of things is Zedaki's relationship with Jack, which I think fares far better. From their first interactions together, they already have an almost sisterly relationship, with Zedaki playfully teasing Jack mere hours after meeting her, and later spending a not-insignificant amount of time chatting with her. They are two people going through a harsh situation together, develop a connection as a pair of mortals around an immortal, and later cement their fondness by sharing a home after Abigale helps expand Madeco in Episode 15. It's a subtler and more minor relationship, but that's all it really needed to be, as these characters are not the protagonist we are following, and it can be implied that they do spend much of their free time talking to one another and furthering their bonds. But I also could have explored their relationship in more hard and deliberate detail than what I did in the final release.

As a whole, Zedaki needed more direction, time in the narrative oven, and general room for her to flaunt her character and supposed development. I screwed up by not including that, and her character is a bit flat despite my efforts to give her some personality via dialogue.

...Oh, right, I probably should explain where exactly I pulled her name from, even though you can easily just Google it. I picked up on the name after doing a *Dragon Ball* deep dive and discovering details about a 1989 attempt by Harmony Gold to bring the 1986 *Dragon Ball* anime to America. Which they did by butchering two films together and renaming all the characters. They gave the desert bandit supporting character, Yamcha, the name Zedaki, because that is somehow more palatable to an American audience. I liked the name, and when it came time to name characters, this is the first one that came to mind. Simple as that.

Part 5: The Psycho Bullet Babies



Once I firmly settled on the idea of *PBF* being a story about filicide, the next question that came to mind was who or what the children would be, and my mind immediately rushed to two conclusions. That every child would inherit one power, because that would be more interesting and when you create a 'boss' you typically only give them one schtick to stick with. And that despite all technically being no more than 7-years-old, they would all develop 4 times as fast as normal humans, because otherwise Abigale's children would be these pudgy creatures with bad motor skills and few key differences in their appearance.

I never bothered explaining how Abigale's children inherited their powers, why they got what powers they did, or why they aged so rapidly. Because that doesn't really matter. The origins of something supernatural don't actually matter, and what matters is how one responds to something supernatural happening to them. The same goes for Abigale herself. Where she came from and how she was born, in this context at least, doesn't matter, because the story is about her and the current situation she is being thrown into.

But I should probably offer an explanation as to why the children were of various gender identities and had differing sexual characteristics despite being biological clones of Abigale Quinlan. This decision was inspired by a human genetics course I took in college where I learned that the expression of one's genes would change over time, causing even identical twins to develop differences in phenotypes over time. I found the concept interesting and thought about giving Abigale's offspring a more extreme version of that, allowing them to develop into different body types while retaining the same skin and hair color.

This, once again, was a largely unexplained trait of Abigale's children and was done for two reasons. Because it would be super freaking boring if every character was a one-to-one clone of Abigale, and because as somebody coming to terms with her own gender identity, I liked the idea of including characters who had some undetailed ability to, in some way, influence how they looked, shaping themselves biologically in accordance to their growing sense of identity as they aged.

Now, when it came time to actually use these children, my original approach was for each of them to represent a 'boss battle' for Abigale to overcome, but that didn't really happen, mostly because of Abigale's particular powerset. Snap Burst, Super Strength and Speed, Immortality, Real Booting, and Intelligence. I was dead set on this skill set because these are the powers I gave Abigale previously, and I already made in-universe justifications for them. But they are a rather lopsided powerset because Abigale is, and always was, such an overpowered character.

Immortality, in the context of *PBF*, rids the character of all injuries lasting more than a handful of seconds. Real Booting is the ability to turn anything into anything if one can properly imagine it, and once it appears, then all conflicts can be averted by grabbing somebody's face and making it literally anything but a face. Intelligence, by Abigale's standards, makes her one of the most brilliant people in history, and a character I simply am not smart enough to write in a compelling manner.

Through the process of elimination, this made Snap Burst, which is like having a gun you fire by snapping your finger and aiming with your mind, and the standard superhuman strength and speed buffs the weakest abilities in Abigale's repertoire. Yet even with these two, she is still a force to be reckoned with and causes all future conflict to become null.

Because of this, I decided to not have any battle sequences between the Marz fight and the fight with Flare, because I could not, and still can't, think of a good fight between somebody who

can make anything and somebody who can punch through a brick wall and cause heads to pop open with a snap of their fingers and one who lacks these abilities. But let's hold off on discussing the messy matter that is Flare until later. Instead, I would like to go over my creative process with Abigale's children.

Starting with my approach to viewing them as characters. All of the children in *Psycho Bullet Festival* were written in a limited capacity, as they were effectively manufactured to die, and I did not bother devising much backstory, background, or character complexity for them, as I viewed them more as a means to an end, as plot devices more than true characters. Plot devices with basic personalities, shallow depth, no development, and minimal backstories beyond 'they escaped the Flare Foundation and wandered the modern wasteland for months or years before stumbling into their current circumstances.'

But to offer a more granular and in-depth approach, let's go through these clone kids in chronological order.

Seven the Slain is my internal name for Abigale's seventh, or technically eight, child, and their inclusion in the story is a narrative tool. From the beginning, I wanted to open *Psycho Bullet Festival* coldly, with Abigale discovering her mortality after being shot repeatedly. And seeing as how I did not want Abigale to spend the rest of the story healing from bullet wounds, I needed to give her immortality pronto. I decided the best way to do this was to introduce a child she had to kill, establishing the core rules of the story, that Abigale regained her powers by killing her children, very early on.

As a storyteller, I typically like to frontload my longer projects like this, filling my first chapters with oodles of questions for a reader to chew on before explaining *most* of it with an exposition dump in the second chapter, and getting on with the rest of the story in chapters three and onwards. It's how I've been writing stories since 2013, and I think it works pretty well.

B-17 the Bomber was imagined as a selfish child with great power who was never nurtured or disciplined. A child with the capacity for murder and no understanding of what it meant. One who viewed others as disposable, and used their natural might to muscle their way through the post-apocalyptic world of *PBF*. This was reflected in their speaking patterns, which mingle a frequent use of swear words with childish jargon and spoken grammatical errors, illustrating that B-17 had some greater understanding of the darker shades of the world around him, while still being a child and one who nobody has ever said no to... and lived. I enjoyed the act of writing them if only as an exercise to see how garbled I could make the dialogue I had bouncing about in my head, but I also think they play an important role in the story itself.

Due to his power being the least overpowered, at least by my estimation, B-17 was naturally placed in line as the first encounter for Abigale, and in their initial appearance, their crass and childish personality, is meant to contrast Abigale and surprise the reader with a tonal shift. But he is ultimately a serious threat, having murdered many residents of Madeco already.

Being both ill-prepared and unsure as to how hostile her children are, Abigale decides to try talking to the child after they first appear, which turns out to be a mistake, one that incapacitates Abigale, reminds her of how weak she is, and urges her to be more cunning, manipulative, and cruel in her actions, playing with her child's emotions in order to get him to lower his defenses. But right as Abigale can claim her second kill, B-17 is instead killed by an unknown party. Both as a way to close off Episode 3 on a cliffhanger and a way to introduce Zedaki by having them accomplish a feat before Abigale could. Once again reinforcing her weakness at the moment, having been unable to even kill an opponent with arms wide open.

All in all, I think his character worked well in the story... even though I probably went a bit too far by putting him in a pair of soiled female underwear with a cartoon bear on them. Yeah, I don't have a good explanation for why I did that. I just think it's funny when people go potty in their pants and I think underwear with cartoon characters on it is stupid. And I like things that are funny and things that are stupid.

As for the name of B-17, it was lifted directly from the 1982 Intellivision title, *B-17 Bomber*. A game I became loosely familiar with after the title was featured on a classic episode of the *Angry Video Game Nerd*. Which is a very odd reference for me to make, but I couldn't think of anything better, and it's not like the naming convention for these children was following a theme beyond their alliterated titles.

Marz the Mightiest was probably the simplest of the children conceptually. They are an individual blessed with herculean strength from birth and could keep going and fighting forever. Since they had this ability from birth and escaped the Flare Foundation long ago, I chose to express this in their character design, turning them into a massive character with rippling muscles and absurd height. Basically, a big brute mini-boss mob pulled straight out of a creatively stifled video game. For personality, I didn't give him much, as I wanted Marz to communicate mostly through his aggression, being a problem that Abigale could only hope to defeat with violence and not words. Unlike B-17, who she did pacify momentarily.

The encounter with Marz is meant to serve as yet another wake-up call for Abigale by reminding her just how weak she currently is without her usual powers, and sees her be overpowered and overwhelmed, unable to fight back as her body is broken, fingers are torn, and her mind is overwhelmed by pain. Thus forcing her to rely on her allies to prevent her death at the hands of Marz, allowing Zedaki to whip out their sword and be a cool lady for a moment before Jack is the one who ultimately takes the kill, ending Marz's life with a crowbar to the brain. Thereby

foreshadowing Jack's future confessions and giving her the opportunity to use the crowbar she's been carrying around since her introduction.

It functions on several levels, I think I succeeded in making Marz seem like a mighty and imposing force, and it shows Abigale as a vulnerable and weak character. ...For pretty much the last time in the entire story, as she gains the power and force of Marz, sans the resistance that comes from his girthy muscle mass. It works, but I think the execution lacks a certain level of flair to it all. Marz bursts from a wall, rushes to Abigale, beats her, Zedaki distracts him while Abigale heals, she hits Marz a few times, gets stomped on, and then Jack goes in for the crowbar kill. It's a very matter-of-fact battle sequence, and could have been more dynamic... but I was operating through the lens of realism, and this is what I came up with.

Oh, and the name naturally comes from the Roman god of war, Mars, but with the letter Z instead of S. Because Z is a cooler letter.

Ultros the Undying was a character formed from the idea of an immortal feral child who lived in the wilderness. One who was never in danger of dying, and because of that never developed the need to interact with others, build shelter, or do much more than avoiding predators who would seek to harm them. By limiting his contact with humans and developing a more animalistic skillset and letting their linguistic skills remain at a stilted caveman-level. It's a fairly simple concept in a lot of genre fiction, and while not complex, they do stand out as a different sort of threat for Abigale to face off against.

In regards to the core of the story, the hunt for Ultros was imagined as being less of a boss encounter and more like a chase sequence, where Abigale makes use of her newfound strength and speed, but is at an environmental disadvantage next to her child as they do things she cannot and make use of skills she lacks, namely traversing the dark forest. The chase is largely standard, gives Zedaki and Jack one more moment to shine by apprehending Ultros, further foreshadows Jack's violent past, and in a slight bout of variation, Abigale is not technically able to kill Ultros, as one cannot truly kill that which can regenerate from any wound. A revelation that is internally consistent with what little is specified about how Abigale's strange set of abilities work, puts emphasis on the next leg of the journey, and delays Abigale's power boost for another chapter.

While I don't really have any misgivings about Ultros's character, I do suppose I should address why I decided to arbitrarily insert a bear in the middle of the chase. This was partially as a way for Abigale to test her strength on a creature, partially to reasonably delay her, partially as a reference to *The Malice of Abigale Quinlan*, and mostly because I love it when characters fight bears.

Ultros's namesake, as a Google search would imply, is a reference to Ultros, a recurring comic relief antagonist from *Final Fantasy VI*. The namesake was borrowed partially because Ultros is a persistent unkillable threat throughout the game, and the *Final Fantasy* series as a whole, but the real reason I went with it was because it was the best gender-neutral name I could think of that began with a U.

When it came time to write Punky the Provider, I realized that I lacked a tragic character amongst the children of Abigale Quinlan, one who Abigale would feel qualms about killing, and one who suffered because of her gifts. Recognizing and wanting to explore this angle, I decided to make the character with arguably the most amazing power of them all, the ability to turn anything into anything using the power of her mind, into somebody who struggled to reconcile with her natural gifts due to her own developmental disability and her weakened mental state caused by an unspecified length of time fraught with hardship. Both from living on her own in a cold desolate world, and after being captured and enslaved by others.

My influences for this character came from my own experience with my developmental disability. The personal anxiety and sense of self-loathing I developed because of how I was treated due to my autism throughout grade school, where adults would frequently, in kinder words, tell me that I lacked the skills to participate in 'real life' and insinuating that I would struggle in higher education because of this. Whether due to the severity of their terms of choice or my own interpretations, this caused me to develop no shortage of personal insecurities about my ability to function in the 'real world' and my ability to accomplish even basic tasks. To the point where I can sometimes convince myself that my academic accomplishments are due to subterfuge and the compliments I receive for my work are manipulative lies.

This issue was exacerbated around the writing of *PBF* because I was riding in paratransit at the time, and would frequently spend hours every week around individuals with more severe disabilities than me, either physical or mental. By associating with these individuals, I developed escapist fantasies (I am being deliberate with my terminology here) where I imagined what my life would be like if adults who spoke ill of my abilities when I was younger were right. If I stopped mentally developing around the age of 10, and if I was unable to do anything properly afterward, unable to learn, improve, or develop skills, forever being a burden to those around me.

These feelings were later mingled with my history of viewing physical abuse from authority figures as another form of escapist fantasy. I would often wish that teachers would strike me when I did something incorrectly in school and that my father would beat me after I did something worthy of punishment at home. The psychological ramifications of these fantasies are a subject for another essay, and something I don't even want to explore in great detail. I simply brought them up here so you have some semblance of an idea why I wrote a character

as pitiful as Punky. One who is very much not a one-to-one translation of my insecurities, but is definitely inspired by them.

Anyway, back to the story itself, Punky as a character is meant to contrast the more violent or aggressive encounters Abigale met previously, for she is a weak and passive individual who bears no resistance when met by Abigale. Because of this, and because of the clear signs of her abuse, rape, and enslavement by Zil, Abigale cannot help but pity this young woman. Rather than doing the most efficient thing and killing her then and there, Abigale takes Punky away from her prison and aims to bring her out of the concrete city around her, in order for Punky's final moments on this Earth to be pleasant ones around aesthetically appealing scenery. For Punky to die with a smile on her face from the knowledge that she escaped her prison and that nobody would ever abuse her again.

However, before that happens, Jack is attacked by an undetailed assailant who leaves her injured, and while Zedaki is inclined to treat the wound, Abigale panics, for she lacks her ability to mend flesh back together. Punky, despite her unspecified disability, is able to recognize this and, per her conversation with Abigale, knows the best way to help in this situation is to... end her life. She does so suddenly, her actions hastened due to the misery that has consumed her life, and she spends a final moment with Abigale before she parts this world. Content with the knowledge that while she may be gone, somebody better will take her place and do things she could only dream of.

...Yeah, that is a good character as far as I am concerned, and I don't really have any regrets with her implementation in the story, other than how it is a bit... odd for her to be held up in a dark office building in the middle of a city. However, I was resolute about setting a chapter in a city, I thought this was the best opportunity, and this was an internally reasonable way for Zil to contain her. By using the existing infrastructure to their advantage.

Punky's namesake comes from the protagonist of my 2014 novella, *Punky's Post-Apocalyptic Adventure*. That version of Punky was an upbeat, kinda dumb, and child-like young woman with access to great powers she used effortlessly and a sense of righteousness. Originally, I planned on carrying these traits over to *PBF's* Punky, but I felt that she would be redundant next to other characters in the cast, so I decided to reinvent her into her final form, keeping the name for more sentimental reasons than symbolic ones.

Athena the All-Knowing was originally going to be an enigmatic cult leader known as Izadora the Intellectual, who would have used her great wisdom to recruit the scattered masses of the world and use them to assemble a new society. The encounter with her was to involve Abigale trying to prove her as a false idol while engaging in an intellectual battle that would have ended with Abigale being forced to murder Izadora's worshippers in order to get to her and murder her by making her head explode.

But as time went on, I decided that this concept would be a bit problematic to approach from a writing and characterization perspective, and just be hard to write, as it would need to feature an intellectual debate that I know I would struggle with. So I decided to revise my approach at some point and began asking myself what are the traits of somebody who would be considered a true genius, somebody with a great expanse of knowledge both inherited and learned. I reached the conclusion that they would not be a person of malice or cruelty, but a figure capable of kindness and compassion, one who understands their place in society and ability to better the world, rather than somebody who would seek personal gain above all else. For intelligence is a strength beyond all others, and manipulation over the weak is itself a sign of weakness in and of itself, however effective it may be.

As this idea developed in my head, I decided to change the character's name to something with a touch more meaning, and the best I could come up with was a much-echoed Greek mythology reference to the goddess of wisdom, Athena, along with the title of All-Knowing, as it was the closest proxy I had for "Intellectual" that began with the letter A. All of which is a bit of a clunky name, but I couldn't think of anything better, so it stuck.

In regards to her character, I decided that it would be best to represent her as a college-aged woman who lived within a university library, revising and reconfiguring it to be a habitable dwelling with solar paneling and a greenhouse for food cultivation, allowing her to live a self-sufficient existence. Mostly as a means of showing her resourcefulness and eternal thirst for knowledge. I considered giving her followers in order to illustrate her understanding that humans are more efficient in societies and to show her sharing her knowledge. But I was more fond of the simplicity and directness of Abigale finding Athena, meeting her, talking to her, and finally taking her powers, relegating her followers to an unseen group supposedly learning to be self-sufficient through the upcoming winter.

Personality-wise, she is a selfless and kind individual with an immediate understanding of the situation, allowing her to recognize her role in this story and, rather than resisting Abigale in any way, she openly offers herself to her, knowing that Abigale may use her intelligence better than she could ever hope to. Abigale is conflicted by her gesture and willingness, yet agrees with her conclusion, severing the head of Athena in a dramatic manner. Narratively, this matter-of-fact conflict resolution, however reasonable, serves as something of an underwhelming conclusion, but I thought a breather like this was needed before the introduction of the final antagonist of the story, Flare, who... is a whole rucksack of worms, poop, and muck in desperate need of unpacking.

Part 6: The Psycho Bullet Bitch - Terra Flare

NATALIE RAMBLES ABOUT PSYCHO BULLET FESTIVAL THE ODYSSEY OF ABIGALE QUINLAN



Oh boy, where to start with this character... well, perhaps a truncated history into how her character evolved would be the best place to begin. Back when this project was known as *Psycho Bullet Festival 2: Help Me Bury My Children*, I planned on making the primary antagonist a version of Maxxie Flare. A character who I have been writing and revising since *Nari's Log* in 2013, and one who I wanted to reinvent in the role of a villain. A philanthropist with an excessive amount of resources that she, like many obscenely wealthy individuals, desires power beyond that of an ordinary human and funded investigations into ways to give her god-like powers. This investigation process led the Foundation to discover, and later abduct, Abigale Quinlan, who was experimented on and tortured until she brought about the Cataclysm.

While both Maxxie Flare and her Foundation survived the affair, the process of ushering in an apocalypse ultimately shattered Maxxie's mental state, and things only grew worse once the scientists recruited by the Foundation revealed the biological incompatibilities between Abigale Quinlan and Homo Sapiens. This ultimately led her to take out her frustrations on a newly-recruited slave of the Foundation, Jack Crowbar, who Maxxie would use as a source of relief and happiness.

Her mental state then slightly improved following the birth of Abigale's first child, whom Maxxie adopted and named Fiona. Desperate for something to latch onto in this world, Maxxie took Fiona and began raising her in the isolation of the Foundation, keeping her a secret to all but a few members of the organization, with not even Jack Crowbar knowing of her existence. Maxxie did this to give herself something precious and that belonged to her and only her. She would raise Fiona in this isolation in order to instill her with her ideals and personality to be inherited by someone godly, someone who would live on forever, and carry on her legacy as it were. Fiona,

as a child born with all of Abigale's abilities, intellect included, understood what Maxxie was plotting, but loved her regardless and happily spent her days with Maxxie, caring not for the outside world or anyone besides the woman who raised her from the moment she was born.

Originally, both Fiona and Maxxie were to be unaware of Abigale's departure from the Foundation until she was already kilometers away, a discovery that sent Maxxie into a deep sorrow, as she lost her opportunity to further study immortality, and lost her source for sexual relief these past few years. Seeing her mother distraught, Fiona offered her body to her mother in order to relieve her of her sexual frustration, to which Maxxie accepted. The two then lose themselves in the thralls of intercourse before, as they reach their climaxes, a latent ability of Fiona's is triggered, causing the two to merge into one, a woman who simply went by the name of Flare. Their similar personalities gel into one, memories mingle, and physical traits mix, with Flare inheriting Maxxie's dyed white hair as its biological color.

After realizing what happened to her and that she had finally achieved her dream, becoming a God, Flare then left the Foundation behind and soared the world, gleefully indulging in her powers. All before returning to America days later, where she happens across Abigale and initiates a variation of what became Episodes 12 and 13 of *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan*. Abigale and Flare would fight, Abigale would win, and upon comprehending her defeat, Flare was to kick her crazy meter up to 11 as she begged Abigale to kill her to free her from this unacceptable reality. To which Abigale complies, grabbing Flare by the face and throwing her into the sky before snapping her fingers, causing her antagonist to burst into a rainbow of fire.

This is all quite similar to what I ultimately went with, but at some point I completely rewrote both the ending of this encounter and the background of 'Maxxie Flare' after feeling like her character was lacking in depth. She was a psycho for the sake of being a psycho, and I felt like her background needed some expanding upon. Inspiration then struck me one wretchedly humid night in June of 2017.

I was in the antechamber of my university, mulling aimlessly as I waited for my vehicle to pick me up, the clock on my phone creeping past 22:30. It was then and there that I asked myself: "What if Maxxie wasn't Maxxie? What if it was someone pretending to be Maxxie? What if it were her sister from *Verde's Doohickey*, Terra Flare?"

I fixated on the idea for the rest of the evening, expanding it, working out a backstory, all before putting it to text, staying up until 1:00 that night to write down all my ideas. At the time, I thought these ideas made for a far more interesting, tragic, and compelling antagonist, one who had a better reason to do the misdeeds they did, and one with pure desires that I, on some level, found relatable.

Reading through the story again, I still like what I did with the character and her background. She's an unwanted child who was constantly compared to her beloved sister and continuously ignored by her parents, who only wanted to devote their energy into the child that was more developed and more skilled. This built a steady resentment in Terra, and whenever she tried to reach out or earn their love, she was rejected, while her sister Maxxie would always make time for her and provide her with a form of familial love that Mr. and Mrs. Flare never offered Terra.

Neglect leads to hatred, and Terra decides to act out on her desires by lashing out against her parents in a heated moment where she is not thinking clearly and does something ever so regrettable on its own, but even more when she strikes the one person she loved more than any other, her sister. Crestfallen by this, she becomes obsessed with Maxxie, desperate to keep her alive, and trying to repress her identity as much as possible accordingly. This leads her down the path of madness as she tries to keep her sister's memory alive, only for their very mind to shatter at some point, becoming a twisted idea of her loved one.

Whatever her mind is at this point is only further muddled and twisted as Terra becomes one with Fiona. As the twisted and hurt mental state of one individual mingles with the individual she raised. The end result is that of a psychopath whose obsession with Abigale reaches new heights, leading to the Flare introduced in Episode 11.

It's not a perfect execution by any means. There are some details I should have expanded upon, such as how Fiona and Terra's minds mingled and what part of her personality comes from where. And the entire backstory is arguably far too complicated for an 11th hour reveal like this. However, I still like this twist and believe that it does make Flare at least a somewhat sympathetic character despite her many, many, many misdeeds, as her ultimate desire truly was just to be loved by her parents. However, in re-examining her character, I realized something so... glaringly problematic that I'm honestly embarrassed that it took me over two years to catch it.

In *Verde's Doohickey*, Terra Flare is transgender, somebody assigned male at birth who identifies as female, and I decided to bring this character trait over to this incarnation, as I didn't want to turn a transgender character cisgender. The actual implementations and ramifications of this in-story are rather minor, with Terra referring to her past self using male pronouns as a means of both shaming herself and distancing herself from her past identity, and claiming that she always wanted to be known as the name of Terra. Never in the story do I overtly say that she is transgender, and I felt that was not necessary both when I wrote it and later when I re-edited this story. However, this seemingly innocuous inclusion... is probably the most transphobic thing I have ever done.

Terra Flare is a transgender character who is unstable and deeply unwell from a psychological level. Terra Flare is a transgender character who murders her sister, takes her identity mentally,

physically, and legally. Terra Flare is a transgender character who raped an underage girl as a means of stress relief. Terra Flare is a transgender character who is directly responsible for the death of most of humanity. Terra Flare is a transgender character who stole a child from their comatose mother, raised the child as their own, and then later fucked the child.

This, naturally, was not meant to be a statement towards... anything. I was not trying to make any grander statement about transgender people with this character, and if anything, it was something of an afterthought for her character. But regardless of my intentions, Terra can be interpreted as a hateful character based on negative antiquated stereotypes about transgender people, and that deeply upsets me. Once I realized she could be viewed this way, I contemplated removing this part about Terra's identity in my 2020 revision, to change two sentences to erase this element of her character. But I decided against that.

My handling of this character was shortsighted, but this is part of her identity, and I would rather retain a problematic transgender character than rewrite her into being cisgender. I would rather be known for writing a psycho-sister-killing pedophile responsible for the greatest genocide in the history of this story's world and she also happens to be transgender. For that is better than being known for writing a psycho sister-killing pedophile responsible for the greatest genocide in the history of this story's world who was transgender until I later went back and 'fixed' her to be 'better'.

This is not something I am doing out of my own pride as a writer, as I am more than willing to own up to my mistakes and correct them. But as a trans person, I refuse to erase a trans character out of my work, no matter how fucked up their portrayal might be.

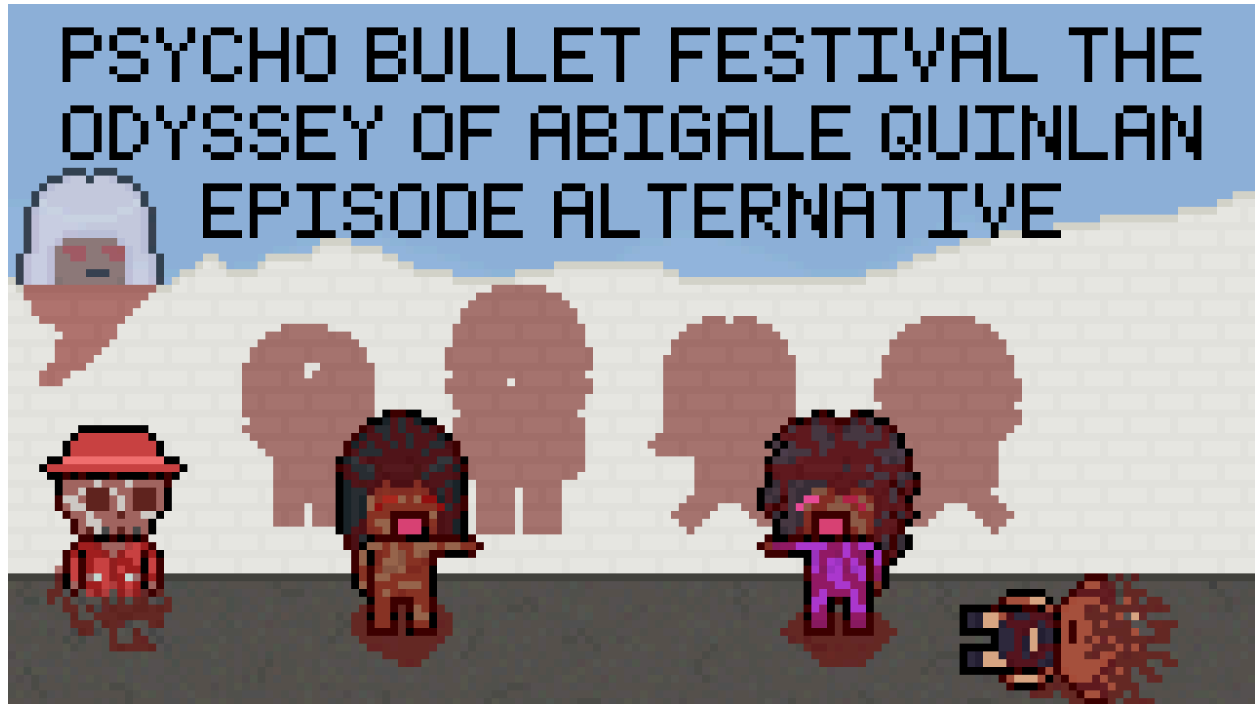
Part 7: To Put a Psycho Bullet in This Bitch

In conclusion... *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan* is a 4.5 out of 10. It has good moments, it has some good characters, and it has some genuinely good ideas. However, due to the prolonged and delay-riddled development of this title and due to my own waning interest in the project as it teetered towards its conclusion, I did not invest the mental energy or time needed to fix various things that didn't work and was feeling rather dispassionate about the project once I finally released it on April 27, 2018.

Since then, I have come to better appreciate the title more than I did upon release, but it is definitely my least favorite out of all the novels I've written, as it captures my personality the least. It was definitely a good learning experience for me, and it allowed me to get out of my TSF-flavored comfort zone for a while. But whereas I want to continue to explore and iterate on the core ideas featured in most of my prior work from [Intertoids](#) to [Psycho Shatter 1985: Black Vice Re:Birth](#), I will probably never create a title quite like *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan* ever again.

However, that does not mean this entire story was a waste or lacks any relevance to my series of novels, *The Saga of Dawn and Dusk*. If anything, this may be one of the most important entries in the series. What do I mean by that? Well, you'll have to read *Psycho Bullet Festival 2222* to find out.

**Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan -
Episode Alternative
By Natalie Neumann**



Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan - Episode Alternative
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Content Warning: *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan - Episode Alternative* contains content that some readers might find disturbing, triggering or uncomfortable. This includes sexually explicit activities, strong language, hateful language and slurs, extreme violence, and mass murder. Reader discretion is advised.

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Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan - Episode Alternative is an alternate version of Episodes 11 and 12 of *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan*. A version that features characters, plot points, and a tone more in line with the original outline for the novel, as detailed in *Natalie Rambles About Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan*.

After blazing through the ruins of the west coast, Abigale and her two man slaves have finally made it to their final destination. With the key to absolute power just a bullet away, they do what they do best and enact mass destruction, bringing death to all who oppose them, until they find what they desire. The final offspring of Abigale, Isadore the Intellectual.

In the universe of *The Saga of Dawn and Dusk*, there are hundreds of different ways that the story of *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan* could have played out, and this is merely one possible version. A version where hope is dead and the only hero the world has is a woman of malice who desires little more than the complete domination of a tattered Earth.

This short story was originally released on April 27, 2023, five years after the original April 27, 2018 release of *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan*.

Episode Alternative: Isadore The Intellectual

The electric engine of the Blazing Beelzebub shrieked as it powered through the rough and tattered road. It, like everything else, was completely *wrecked* by the Cataclysm, transforming the asphalt into little more than gravel. It was harsh, but it was nothing this car hadn't seen before. Her red paint had been chipped, body had been stabbed, and there was a mysterious rattling as her engine cried.

However, her long journey was finally at its end. She had fulfilled her purpose and brought her passengers to their destination. Alfalon University. A college campus that had weathered the Cataclysm better than most. None of the brick buildings had massive holes in them. Most of the windows looked to be intact. And if you squinted *just right*, you wouldn't even be able to tell that the world went to shit seven years ago. The sidewalk connecting the buildings across the campus were cracked to hell, and the grassy fields were half a meter tall, but that was *schmancy* compared to 90% of the world.

As Beelzebub rolled onto the campus sidewalk, her doors swung open, revealing the only three motherfuckers who had *any* chance of 'saving' this world.

In the driver's seat was Zedaki. Despite only being 52-years-old, time hit him like a dump truck, and he looked to be a good decade older. Stark-white platinum blonde hair brushed past his shoulders and down to his back, while a thick beard covered his face with a manly scruff. His body, tall and strong, was dressed under a scarlet jacket, stained by the dried blood of those stupid enough to stand in his way.

As he planted his worn boots into the grass below, he tipped his wide-brimmed red hat, looking up at the vast buildings before him. Taking it all in with his pale blue eyes, he twisted his pale, wrinkled face into a facsimile of joy... that would strike fear into the hearts of anyone with an ounce of sanity. For everyone else though, his nature was made clear as he reached into the car, pulling out a Mk 18. A close-quarters assault rifle.

Popping from the back was Jack 'Crowbar' Onson. A 'man' who was the opposite to Zedaki in every way. He was a short and skinny little thing, dressed in little more than leather fetish gear. Black leather swapped around his crotch, garters strapped across his legs, thigh-high boots on his feet, and an assortment of straps spread from the bra on his chest.

Every inch of his light brown skin was soft, his black hair was fashioned into a short pixie cut, and his frame was *obnoxiously* androgynous. Wide-ass hips, an hourglass figure, and narrow shoulders, but even through the leather panties this boy was rocking, you could tell he was packing a *fat hog*.

Jack giggled as he looked up at the sights and, true to his name, pulled out two crowbars—painted a deep electric blue. He eagerly clanged the two metal sticks together and laughed as he saw an arc of electricity jump between them.

Lastly, the passenger door swung open, revealing the leader of this merry trio, Abigale Quinlan. A woman who stood two meters tall, with jet black hair, and wore nothing but a black trench coat, black jeans, and combat boots. Her skin was a dark brown, eyes a vibrant vermillion, and every part of her body was the *epitome of perfection*. She had the face of a goddess, with every contour and millimeter of skin and bone crafted to perfection. Beyond her neck... she looked like she could drop a motherfucker dead in thirty seconds flat, but that wasn't true. She only needed *three!*

As the wind brushed against her coat, making it flutter in the wind, she folded her arms beneath her exposed breasts and snickered at the remnants of a once proud university.

"So Princess, how do you wanna play this?" Zedaki asked, his voice like gravel and whiskey.

"*Omigush, puh-lease* let me give Amber and Skylar one last go!" Jack said, speaking with the vernacular and cadence of a valley girl, sounding pretty femme, but it was still clear he was a dude.

"Boys, boys, what do you take me for?" Abigale said, her voice deep, crisp, and just a little sultry. "It's the *grand finale!* What kind of Mistress would I be if I let my so generous *servants* stand back while I take the easy way out? I know number seven is here. Remind me, what did you say her name was, Jack?"

"Isadore, my Mistress. Isadore the Intellectual."

"Heh. Well, no matter how smart she is, she doesn't have a chance. *Nothing* stands a chance against me."

"Yeah, yeah, we've been hearing you gush about how strong you are all week. You gonna get this bitch started, or are you giving the honors to me?"

"*Fine*. If you are so impatient, my geriatric friend, I'll just have to begin things with a *bang*."

Following that quip, Abigale reached down past the tall grass and to the ground below, sinking her fingers into the dirt as she transformed it into something completely different. It was a transformation at the atomic level, altering every face of whatever object rested in her hands, converting its matter into something entirely new. It was a power known as Real Booting, the ability to transform anything to anything... with some exceptions. After a trim 8 seconds of getting her hands dirty, Abigale rose up, carrying in her hands a fully loaded bazooka.

"Woo! Let that mofo rock it!"

With Jack's encouragement, Abigale launched the rocket, but instead of aiming for any buildings, she aimed for the cloudy sky above. Abigale let the rocket ascend, leaving behind a trail of smoke as it penetrated the sky, but once it grew taller than any building in sight, she snapped her fingers, and the rocket exploded. Not because of any mechanism in the rocket, but through Abigale's Snap Burst power.

A concussive barrage of noise traveled throughout the campus, and shrapnel fell to the ground, clanging against buildings and sinking into the overgrown grass. Silence lingered for a few seconds before Abigale shrugged her shoulders and reached down to the concrete below, Real Booting it into a megaphone.

"Heeeellloooo, Alfolon University! That little explosion you just heard was caused by yours truly. The infallible, the infamous, *the destroyer of Earth*, Abigale Quinlan!"

As Abigale made her boisterous announcement, Jack and Zedaki applauded her. Nobody inside any of the buildings could even *sort of* hear their claps, but the encouragement brought a smile to her face, and that's all that *really* mattered.

"Thank you, thank you, you're far too kind! Now, I know what you all must be thinking, 'I thought Abigale Quinlan was dead. Gone!' I get it, it's been seven years, and I've been underground. But now I'm back, and I'm here to take what remains of this godforsaken rock and make it my own. But before that, I know that you're hiding something. My eldest daughter, *Isadore the Intellectual*. If you send her out... *right now*, then I'll let you live to see another day. But if you continue to hide her from me... then I guess I'll just have to kill every last one of you. So, what'll it be? Life... or *death*? Pretty easy question if you ask me."

Silence followed Abigale's boisterous announcement, and she tapped her foot, impatiently awaiting an answer as she extended 'right now' into... however long she felt like. It wound up being a full thirty seconds before she let out a sigh, and started moseying over to one of the four main buildings before her. A four story building that *reeked* of 1970s architecture.

She only made it a few steps before something glimmered from on top of that building and then, a second later, a bullet found its way into Abigale's shoulder, tearing past her trench coat and ripping into her flesh. An irritated 'tsk' escaped her mouth as she craned her head upwards and saw a gunman at the roof, prepping his second shot. Before he could, Abigale snapped her fingers, and his right kneecap burst open, splitting his leg in two. Panic and bad proximity sent him falling off the conveniently placed edge, where he shrieked in utter terror as he neared the sidewalk below, before landing in a wet thud.

"I swear, they *never* learn," Abigale said as she pulled back her coat, revealing her shoulder, good as new, and allowing a used bullet to fall to the ground with a cheery clank.

"I *knooooow!*" Jack added. "Like, people this stupid should just *die!* Dontcha agree, Mistress?"

"Damn right I do! You two go hog wild on that building over there!" Abigale ordered while pointing at a large single-story building that covered *at least* two city blocks.

"With pleasure, Princess!" Zedaki replied, tipping his hat as if he considered himself to be a gentleman. When such a descriptor couldn't be further from the truth..

Like good servants, Jack and Zedaki ran over to their destination, their faces eager and weapons drawn. Abigale did much the same, running to the four story building, but instead of running through the boarded up door, she ran directly for a wall. She revved her hand back, clenching it into a fist, and slammed it against the brickwork, causing it to shatter like it was made of styrofoam. From her fist, she curled up the rest of her body, tackling a person-sized hole into the wall.

As the dust settled and the rubble scattered, Abigale looked onward, a giant smile on her face, and was met with the sight of a classroom converted into a workshop of some manner. What they made was of negative interest to her though, and all she cared about were the humans before her. Fear painted their faces as they saw her unfathomable might, and before they could think, she already knew how she was going to kill them.

The first had her head kicked clean off. The second had his entire rib cage shattered in a single punch, sending bones ripping through his lungs and guts. The third was flung like a piece of meat into a wall, causing her skull to crack open, and blood to pour down like a fountain of wine. And the fourth had his head popped open like a rotten grape with a Snap Burst.

Abigale proudly stomped across these fresh corpses as she reached the door out of this room. It was locked, but all it took was a good kick for her to send it flying off its hinges, where it smacked into a set of lockers across the hallway. Stepping forward, she saw people fleeing in both directions. A few simple snaps were enough to cripple those on her left, while Abigale chose to chase after those on the right, grabbing the first person she could and flinging them at the crowd scattering toward the main entrance. A dozen or so people had gathered there, optimistically thinking the most conspicuous entrance would be safe, but as Abigale saw them, she laughed.

Shoving a hand into the nearest wall, Abigale Real Booted an explosive, tossed it, and leaned against the wall as she saw the crowd panic. They tried to run in all directions, but this single explosive was enough to take out half of the group. The rest abandoned the front entrance and headed up the open ramp way at the center of this building. Abigale snickered at the futility of going *up* to avoid a threat in a building, but rather than stop those rushing up the stairs, her eyes drifted to the support beam in the middle of the ramps. It was an innocuous and plain sight... but it made Abigale's eyes sparkle with the most *malicious* form of joy.

A single punch to the support beam was enough for her to decimate this meter-thick hunk of concrete, and gravity took care of the rest. The concrete collapsed onto the ramp, cracking its surface, and shattering whatever was caught beneath it. Especially humans.

That was one beam down... but as Abigale looked around, she saw at least another six. Reaching into the tile beneath her feet, she produced another explosive, tossing it in her hand as she deliberated where to start in her quest to topple this building.

While the sound of explosions erupted from the four story building, it was *almost* overshadowed by the gunfire coming from the 'main' building. With a Mk 18 and a bandolier across his chest, Zedaki was an absolute *murder machine*, spraying gunfire across the wide expansive halls, painting the floors with equal parts blood and glass. Dozens of human-shaped meat husks were strewn against the floor, walls and doors were laced with bullet holes, and the sound of screaming and crying from those running was pitifully quiet next to the bombastic hollering of Zedaki. Truly, it was a *psycho bullet festival*.

Classrooms, faculty offices, the cafeteria hall— *it didn't matter!* Zedaki was on a *mission*. A mission to *kill!* And he was gonna do it *or die trying!*

He moved through the school with the proficiency of a soldier, leaving behind no survivors... or so he thought. As he trekked down a hall, the sound of gunfire filling his ears, a woman approached him, carrying an axe between her hands. Rage painted her withered face, and with the most restrained steps she could make, she reached Zedaki's back, where she raised her axe high. The axe came crashing down toward Zedaki, only for him to immediately turn around, shooting the woman in her chest.

"*Bahahaha!* You really thought you could sneak up on me, didn't ya? You sassy little cuntmuffin! I have killed over 900 people, and with a kill streak like that, you don't just *die*. You keep on killing until you get to *9K*."

Zedaki continued to boast to this dying woman, her face twisted in disgust as she accepted that her life was near its end. But within the fury on her face, there was a glimmer of hope as she saw a man, wielding a pipe in his hand, inch closer to Zedaki. The man held the pipe high and swung it down... only to pause as the pipe was less than a foot away from Zedaki's head.

The man then fell down to the ground in a meaty thud, a blue crowbar lodged in his neck. Above him, Jack stared at Zedaki with a mischievous smile on his cute boyish face.

"Sloppy sloppy, Zed-Zed. You owe me one after this. We're currently at 20 to 13, so you've got some *real* catching up to do."

"Pfft. Those numbers are bullshit, Jack. If you've got time to chat, you've got time to kill. Grab your crowbar and get back to work."

"*Fiiiiine!* And here I was hoping that we could have a nice little daddy and daughter slaughter fest, but I guess you're a lone wolf to the bitter end."

With a pompous 'hmpf,' Jack ripped the crowbar from her victim's neck like a twig plucked from the dirt. As he did so however, electricity once again arced from the chunk of metal, and it continued to arc as Jack secured it in his leather-clad hands, crawling up his arms until it was arcing throughout his entire body. Across his face, through his hair, and across every scrap of clothing. Instead of recoiling in pain like a 'normal' human, Jack smiled and ran, moving his body at a staggering 50 kilometers per hour, while electricity continued to spray from his body.

With his body dispensing electricity like a malfunctioning transformer, and his feet faster than any other human on this Earth, he ventured to the other end of this building, where he found more prey lying in wait. With a crowbar in each hand, he wasted little time striking all he saw, smashing their skulls as he ran past, and moving faster than they could comprehend. The electricity coming off his body burned and stunned any who drew near, and for as brutal as his results were, he moved with the grace and poise of a dancer.

He spun and posed as he assaulted his victims, twisting his body into stylish flourishes for no practical reason. And when using the crowbars became bothersome, he switched to his legs, bringing his victims to the ground, before letting the electricity overload their bodies, killing them with extreme cruelty.

He carried out this performative murder spree before reaching his final victim. An old man, *easily* older than Zedaki. Jack moved in front of the man as he neared a door to escape this building, and immediately brought a crowbar to a knee, shattering it in an instant.

The man fell to the ground, screaming in agony, only for Jack to stomp his leathery boot onto his neck.

"Look old timer, we can do this the *nice* way or the *naughty* way. Tell me, where might I find Isadore. You know, the brown-skinned big brained beauty with vermillion eyes? I know you *must* know her. So, like, spill the beans or get *murked*."

"Fuck off, *faggo!*" The old man replied.

"*Tsk, tsk, tsk.* That's not very nice."

With a mighty swing, Jack brought the crowbar down on the old man's damaged knee once again, this time tearing a hole in the flesh. Screams followed, but Jack silenced them by banging the man's head against the hard tile floor..

"I like the sound of your howl, so I'll ask *again*. Where can I find the daughter of *The Great Abigale Quinlan*?"

"I... I don't know!" The old man stammered.

Jack sighed at his lack of cooperation, revved up his crowbar for another bash, but before he could strike this man, a bullet pierced his head. Jack turned and saw Zedaki, a disappointed look on his face.

"You missed three and I see you forgot an essential rule. Never try to get *anything* from geriatric fuckwads like this. They're not worth the breath it takes to make them talk. Besides, if you wanna find the boss, all you gotta do is kill the minions, ya dig?"

Jack sneered at Zedaki, but before he could muster a retort, the two heard the sound of mass destruction. Stepping out the door the old man attempted to open, they were met with a billowing cloud of dust.

Where the four story building once stood, only rubble, debris, and a shitload of dust remained. Abigale effortlessly rummaged from beneath the ruins, pushing away hundreds of kilograms of stone as if it was *paper mache*. She could not restrain her laughter as she emerged and bore witness to the fruits of her labor, but as she examined the destruction in detail, she found that she was not the only one to survive.

A young woman was trapped under a chunk of concrete. Blood pooled beneath her body, but she still breathed, and as Abigale stared at her, she did the same. Though this woman's eyes were that of hatred, Abigale still tried to speak with her.

"You have anything to tell me about my daughter, or do you want me to kill *even more* of your people looking for her?"

"Rot in hell, you bitch!" The woman said, punctuating her sentence with a bloody cloth.

Abigale sighed at this reaction and folded her arms against her chest. Her clothes were in tatters from the rubble, but they were still in one piece. She looked down at herself, then at the stubborn young woman before her, before adopting a cheshire grin.

Abigale tore off her pants, ripping them at the seams, and leaving her wearing nothing more than boots and a tattered coat. The young woman looked up at her, perplexed as she saw the center of Abigale's form. The cleft that laid between her breasts, her rock-hard abs, and also her exposed labia... Where Abigale began to drift her hands.

With her hands surrounding her crotch, Abigale thrust herself forward slightly, but rather than touch her genitals, her genitals themselves began to... transform. Her clitoris went from a teensy little button to something the size of a silver dollar, before expanding past her labial folds, growing larger and longer with every passing second until it stopped being a clit. Instead, it became a full on cock! But not just any cock. This was the cock to end all cocks!

A girthy, thick, 69-centimeter-long fat dick hung off of Abigale, spreading past her knees and nearing the floor. Like any sane person who saw a two-foot-long penis dangling just inches away from her face, fear, dread, and all of that nasty shit filled this woman's mind. But instead of being forced to fellate— to suck this *jumbo 4XL sized mega cock*— she got something else.

Abigale took her giant dick... and used it to crush this girl's skull in. Bones went *crunch*, blood *sprayed*, and her brains got, quite literally, *fucked*! She got murdered by a penis with the force and power of a shotgun blast! Needless to say, she was *as dead as could be*.

Upon finishing this one-hit kill, Abigale looked down at this dead, nameless woman, and cackled like the *psycho cock bitch* she was. She could have stayed that way for a good... *ten minutes*, but, *thankfully*, her servants finally made their way to her, emerging from the thinning cloud of dust.

"It's nice to see you... *enjoying yourself*," Zedaki said as he glanced at Abigale's absurdly long penis.

"Oh-la-la!" Jack said as he gazed upon the mega cock, his eyes *literally* sparkling. "I see you've brought out the *big gun*! Mind if I get a lick."

"I'll fuck you after I kill my last kid. You two got any idea where she could be?"

As Abigale spoke, her penis shrank, transforming back into her clitoris. Jack and Zedaki, being fellow penis-havers, were equally *mesmerized* by this process, despite having seen it a good six or seven times by now.

"Uh... No. I don't know where Isadore is," Zedaki answered, his mind still boggled by Abigale's transforming genitals.

"I figured as much. Aside from that idiot, *Punky*, all of my kids understood a little something known as a preservation instinct, and wouldn't *dare* sacrifice themselves to save their slaves. I'd worry that she ran away, but... I feel her getting closer."

As Abigale said this, she heard the sound of metal pounding against dirt, of a massive machine moving itself, its components thrusting and twisting. It was coming behind her, obscured by the persistent cloud of dust, and not even remotely subtle. Abigale gestured to her goons to stay where they were as she waited for this machine to draw near... and her eyes shined as she saw it.

It was a bipedal machine with two arms, stood at five meters tall, and weighed *at least* 5,000 kilograms. As the image of the approaching machine grew clearer, it became obvious it was crafted from salvaged parts, but it was still a wildly impressive display of engineering for such a desolate post-apocalyptic setting. Because this was no mere tank, no typical or traditional weapon frequently used by the militaries of the world prior to the Cataclysm. This was a *mech*!

A mech that stopped once it was a mere ten meters away from Abigale. Once the dust fully settled, Abigale looked up at the person inside the transparent chest of this humanoid mech. A young woman with the same skin tone as Abigale, the same vermillion eyes, but a hair of stark white hair, as if it was bereft of any pigment. She looked down at Abigale from her elevated position, and spoke to her in the booming voice of a natural leader.

"Abigale Quinlan. I never thought I would have the misfortune of meeting you. There was a part of me that believed that everything involving the Cataclysm was a mere misunderstanding. But now, I see you are every bit the *scum* I feared you to be. You have immense powers, yet you only ever use them to *destroy*. All I wanted was to live up to my namesake of Isadore the Intellectual by becoming a force that uses knowledge to help the world. To make this world a better place and pave the way for a better future. I had disciples, I had a community, and I was able to rebuild this den of knowledge... and you just *shat* all over it. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Abigale just laughed. She does that a lot, but this time, it was *hoarse*.

"Oh, you *little brat*! You think you can shame me? *Please*! You ought to be smart enough to know that you *cannot* shame a psychopath. All you can do is fight them and hope that they *die*. Sadly for you, I am *immortal*. However, that doesn't mean I don't enjoy a good *scuffle*."

Abigale then looked away from Isadore and her mech, returning her gaze to Jack and Zedaki.

"Men, stand down. Either go hunt down whatever stranglers remain... or watch what your *Master* is capable of."

"You think I'd skip out on this?" Zedaki chuckled.

"Fuck her up, Mistress!" Jack screeched with joy.

"I will, Jack. *I will.*"

Abigale returned her attention to the whirling mech before her, walking around it while sharing a monologue with Isadore.

"Once my powers are restored, I intend to remake the world in my own image. I am sure you had the intention of doing something similar, using your brain as a hammer to build society anew. But even in my current feeble-minded state, there is something I possess which you lack. And that is *experience*. You are a mere child— a 6-year-old in the body of an adult. While I am 666-years-old. I have seen empires rise and fall. Seen society change in ways that even scholars struggle to eruditely articulate. And while I'm a *fucking retard* compared to how I was before the Flare Foundation stole my powers from me, I still know the true nature of humanity. While the individual may be good, humanity as a collective is incapable of sustaining itself. If left to its own devices, they will craft systems of destruction."

"The only way humanity and *this ravaged bitch we call Earth* can be saved is with a God. A God known as Abigale Quinlan. A divine master who can command humanity and prevent it from destroying itself, as it came *so close* to doing *so many* times before. You lack the wisdom to see this truth. You think that with intellect alone, you can command and control humans. However, you are not fit to run a society. You devoted all these resources into creating and powering an unconventional weapon of war, and for what reason? You may be smart... but you are still just a child."

In response, Isadore brandished one of her mech's arms, revealing the barrel of a retrofitted tank gun, aimed directly at Abigale's head.

"No matter how wise you are, no matter how much knowledge you have, there is no place in this world, or any world, for someone as vile and malicious as you. Goodbye, Mother."

A second later, the mech's gun fired, and Abigale's body burst into thousands of pieces of viscera. Her blood became a mist, every bone in her body shattered, and as the dust of the explosion settled, there was no semblance of a body to be found.

By every stretch of the imagination, Abigale was *dead as shit!* ...But to an immortal like her, death was a mere inconvenience. Though scattered, it only took a brief moment before her vaporized blood, shards of bone, and scrapes of flesh all began to move, drawing to a single point, the point where Abigale once stood. An anthill of reddish goop soon gathered, growing as Isadore looked with rapt attention, before accumulating enough mass to gain the shape of a human.

This cacophonous collection of flesh then continued to shift into the form of a human woman. Bones settled, organs took shape, and lastly, a layer of skin and hair formed on the surface.

Within fourteen seconds, Abigale Quinlan had resurrected herself. Every inch of her body was as it was before... sans the clothing, as she was completely naked. However, this did not stop her from looking up at Isadore with a smile. One that contrasted Isadore's furious scowl.

"H-How? Your body was reduced to nothing, no organs remained, and it... This defies every scientific principle I can—"

"—I am *Abigale Quinlan*! I am beyond humanity, beyond nature, and I have mystified even the greatest minds in history. You think you can comprehend my biology? If it is beyond even my understanding, at the height of my ability, what hope do you, a pale fragmentary imitation, have?"

Isadore's brown face twisted in rage as Abigale spoke down to her, and she began revving up another shot from her tank gun. In response, Abigale walked backwards, moving approximately 30 meters away from the machine, before pointing at it with her index and middle fingers. Isadore gawked at this sight, perplexed by what her mother could possibly be planning, only for Abigale to curl up her lips, quietly muttering the word "bang."

A hole appeared in the mech, its makeshift protective shell penetrated, and as Isadore recoiled from this, she became immersed in the ravenous flames of a propane explosion. Within an instant, her machine was reduced to naught more than burning metal. Mechanical limbs shattered and flew off in opposite directions, while the 'torso' of the humanoid frame was as unidentifiable as the charred corpse that lingered within it.

Despite the flames being strong and hot enough to ward off even the most simple-minded animals, Abigale ventured toward this flaming wreckage, and placed her hand on the remains of her daughter. Doing so caused her corpse to become radiant, shining in a manner that defied all understood laws of nature, before the light flowed into Abigale. Her circulatory system shined through her skin as she absorbed every last bit of light she could, when Isadore's corpse lost its spark, and crumbled to ash.

As her circulatory system stopped glowing, Abigale turned away from the remains of Isadore and her mech, where she saw Jack and Zedaki running toward her. She took a step toward them, only to stop, bringing a hand to her forehead.

"Way to go Princess! So how's the 'Enhanced Intellect?' You ready to rule the world like you said you would?" Zedaki asked as he affectionately smacked Abigale's shoulder.

"I've gotten eight lobotomies before... and this feels like I'm getting *three* at once!"

As Abigale spoke with vile in every syllable, Jack embraced her, rubbing his sweaty leather-clad body against hers... while pressing his head into her modest breasts.

"Aw, *Mistress*, I was *super-duper* worried about you. I've seen you hurt pretty bad before, but that was just bullets and cuts and stuff. I didn't know you could survive something like... *that!*"

"Bitch, I told you about how I was at the epicenter in Nagasaki back in '45! I can survive a *nuke!* I survived *seven* nukes! So a tank gun to my face *ain't shit!*"

"Hey, be nice to the stupid *man-whore*. Though, I guess all of us are *pretty stupid* next to you, isn't that right?"

Abigale scowled as she looked at her two minions, before turning her head and looking at the Blazing Beelzebub in the distance.

"I'm sure I'll get all my smarts back in a few minutes. But for now, let's just get the *FUCK* outta here. You're driving, Zed."

"Why *thank you*. It is always a pleasure to serve you, my liege."

As Abigale grumbled underneath her breath, she and the boys moseyed over to their car. With every step, Abigale's head felt a bit clearer, like a dense fog was lifting, but as it did, she froze in her steps.

"Something wrong, Mistress?" Jack asked.

"It... My senses have not faded. I can still sense one of my children... and they're close."

"Hold up," Zedaki interjected before counting on his fingers. "The newborn, Bitz the Boomer, Marz, Ultros, Punky, and now Isadore. Isn't that all six of them?"

"Um, like, if you count the miscarriage, it was *seven*. But that was all of them, so... I don't *think* there could be any more."

"Damn. You really *are* a stupid man-whore," Zedaki chuckled. "It was seven *and a half years*, so 90 months, and 9 months per babe. Even if Abigale didn't *immediately* start pumping out kids after blowing shit to fuck, an *eighth* kid is definitely possible."

"*Whaaaaat?! Nu-uh!* No way that Mistress Flare would lie to me like that! She trusted me with *ev'rythang* and made me who I am today."

As Jack engaged in his rose-hued memories of his enslavement, Zedaki had a far more... human reaction.

"Damn, I almost forgot about *her*. Hey Princess, is it too late to raid the Flare Foundry and kill that *bitch*? Because everything I learn about her, the hungrier *Zedaki The Zeal* gets for blood!"

"Could you two please SHUT UP?"

Abigale then turned to her minions to answer their *inane* questions while dealing with the mother of all migraines. Fury filled every facet of her face... only for her expression to shift as she looked at Zedaki.

Zedaki's scarlet jacket was drenched in blood... and a metal spear was poking out his chest. His face remained frozen, locked in a half smile as his body shook, barely able to comprehend what just happened.

"W-What? I... I thought we ki—" Zedaki muttered as blood began to seep from his lips.

As Abigale lingered on this sight, her eyes went wide, and she immediately grabbed Jack, thrusting him into her breasts and carrying him as she fled.

"W-Where are y—" Zedaki said before he was silenced.

The spear penetrating Zedaki then exploded, sending shrapnel across the overgrown fields and shattering the concrete below. Though fast, Abigale was unable to avoid the explosion entirely, and shrapnel embedded itself in her naked back. Lucky for her, it oozed out of her person as her Rapid Regeneration kicked it, and she was good as new in just a few seconds. Zedaki however, was not so lucky. For all that remained of him was a shattered skeleton.

"What the fuck just—"

Before Jack could finish that thought, he vanished from Abigale's arms.

Abigale darted her eyes around, trying to find who, or what, could have taken Jack from her. She ran about the perimeter, searching 360 degrees, but found nothing... until she saw a leather outfit drop from the sky. Craning up her head, Abigale saw Jack, his limber and fit body as naked as could be, his small breasts exposed, and his plump nine inch cock fluttering in the wind.

Looking beyond Jack, Abigale saw that he was being carried, or rather lifted, by a woman dressed in a purple bodysuit that covered everything below her neck. Her silky fingers clenched Jack's body, grabbing his supple micro breasts, while her boot-clad feet poked out from behind Jack.

"Clearly, you're one of my kids. Tell me, what is your name?"

As Abigale made her request, Jack's captor adjusted her grip on the man, grabbing him by one hand to reveal the entirety of her being. Her face was dark brown and covered in black freckles.

Hair was a dark, discordant mane that flowed down to the middle of her back. Her physique was tall, muscular, and slender— almost an exact copy of Abigale's... excluding the larger breasts. But the most striking thing was her eyes, for they were not the vermillion hue of Abigale and her children. Instead, they were a vibrant hot pink.

Abigale stared into this woman's eyes as she hovered above, dangling Jack like a child limply holding onto a rag dolly, before she finally responded.

"I am... *Mistress Maxxisaurus Omega Flare!* And I have come to take back what is *mine*."

Abigale paused as she comprehended what this flying woman was saying... before snapping her fingers. Mistress Flare's head then popped open like a grape, and her body went crashing to the ground below. Using her superhuman speed, Abigale rushed forward, grabbing Jack before he fell into the unkempt grass below. She immediately placed the young man down, and moved over to her opponent... only for her to rise up, her head fully restored.

"*Ara, ara*. I almost forgot how much of an *inglorious diehard bitch* you were. *Maa, shou ga nai ne*. Regardless, I would expect a former slave-owner— *and slave*— such as yourself to respect the value of *personal property*. And that li'l *fuckboi* you got there is my *property*. I raised him from a little lamb, I taught him everything he knows, I gave him Malaysian microtitties, and I trained him to fuck in *all nine ways*."

As Mistress Flare spoke, she walked closer to Jack, only for Abigale to grab Flare's arm before she could reach him.

"P-Please f-forgive me, Mistress Flare. A-Abigale threatened to kill me if I didn't help her, a-and—"

"I have cameras everywhere, you *man-cunt!* I know *exactly* how it played out, and how you subjected yourself to Abigale! But worry not. I'm not going to punish you with Mister Dolphin yet again. Instead, I have a far *greater* punishment in mind."

Mistress Flare then snapped her fingers, causing Jack's head to slice open like a melon hit by a metal bat. Abigale's body clenched as she took in this sight, and she immediately swung her fist at Mistress Flare.

"You bitch! He was my—"

Before Abigale could finish that line, her fist was grabbed by Flare. Her grip was tense, powerful— equally as powerful as her own— and it was then that Abigale truly comprehended what she was dealing with.

"You have *all* my powers, don't you?"

"Oh, my Abigale. It is not quite that simple. I have all your powers, yes... *but also my own*. Need I remind you how I defied gravity?"

Flare then loosened Abigale's first, and the two built a more *comfortable* distance between one another.

"Would you care to explain *how* you managed to gain such power?"

"It was through your first daughter. Well, the first one who survived. I kept her as mine— as my little pet— and after much experimentation, at my darkest hour, I finally managed to claim her powers for myself. Now, she and I are one... and I am *everything* you were during the Cataclysm."

"The hell does that mean?"

"Allow me to demonstrate."

Flare then gestured her hand up to the sky, swirling it around like a child's idea of what a conductor does. Abigale was bemused at first, but as the seconds passed, she saw the clouds above darken... before rain trickled down on her head.

"...You can control the weather?"

"I call it... Nature Manifest. I can control weather, but I can also control the nature of the world itself. As seen by how I can adjust gravity, like so."

Flare then lifted herself off the ground, rising ten meters high into the sky, before gesturing at an enormous chunk of rubble not too far away. Winds channeled themselves around the rubble, lifting what had to be twenty kilograms above the ground... before flinging it into the one-story building, causing its ceiling to collapse.

"...So, this is how I destroyed the world," Abigale said, mildly impressed. "I knew I was missing something... but this is beyond even *my* wildest imagination."

"Truly? Well then, you should be interested in my proposal. Which I shall dictate to you... *in song form!*"

Flare then soared higher into the sky fluttering around it like a child gifted the power of flight, and despite the sound of rain filling the air, her voice was loud and mighty.

*As a girl of wealth, I wanted more than health.
I wished to control this world.*

*So I went and schemed, for all that I had dreamed. But I was not as I seemed.
They thought I was weak! 'Twas just a little meek.
UNTIL I FUCKING KILLED THEM!!!*

*I now had it my own way. They'd do whatever I would say.
With your capture, I did prosper... until you took the world from me!
But now...
Changing things is such a breeze, endless power with no fee.
Storm or wind or quake or nether!
I control the sea and weather, and we can be queens together!
So please be my slave!*

*I'd be happy— hard and happy— if you'd be my slave.
We'd be lords of, anything of, all that we could dream!
Bahahahahaha!
Oh, just think of what we can be. Slave and master, you and me.
Use your imagination and think of things, what we could do as Terra's kings.
Shifting plates and acid showers!
Boundless skies and super powers!
Busty boys and endowed bitches!
Worshippers and endless riches!*

*There's my offer, I'll let it stand. So say yes, don't be bland!
I must insist, accept my wager, For I control all of nature!
It will all be most divine, together we'll both shine!
No more grime, no more crime. All the food will have rich enzymes.
I will fuck you a thousand times, until you just say yes!
I'd be happy— hard and happy— if you'd be my slave.
See your fellow, head like Jell-O, what a nasty mess!
This is an offer that you shan't refuse!
Do it and you'll for certain die and lose!*

*You'll be happy— moist and happy— when you are my slave.
Ravage leisure, purest pleasure. So say Y-E-S!
Say it, no regret! It's a real good bet!
C'mon now, just be brave, and become my slave!
So agree or else...*

"...What'll it be, Abi?"

"...You just took that villain song from the direct-to-VHS *The Secret of NIMH* sequel and changed some of the words."

"No I didn't."

"I have regained my Enhanced Intellect ability, and all the useless guff that comes with it. I *know* that song was originally from 1998's *The Secret of NIMH 2: Timmy to the Rescue*, which featured a song where the central antagonist, played by Eric I—"

Mistress Flare then exploded Abigale's head with a Snap Burst. It reassembled itself within five seconds. During this time, Flare impatiently looked at her wrist, as if she was wearing a watch, waiting until Abigale was fully healed did she begin speaking once more.

"So, what will it be, Abigale? Will you join me as my second in command, or will you try to slay your *superior* incarnation?"

Abigale snickered in response.

"So, you were being serious there? You killed my minions, told me that I would be your *slave*, and you expect me to submit? Normally when people tried to earn my favor, they sweet-talked me a little, but you... you're honest, I'll give you that much. The answer's no. I refuse to be your slave... but I *will* kill you!"

Flare paused for a moment, deliberating her next move, before unsheathing a smile.

"Very well, Abigale Quinlan. If it's a battle to the death you want... then that's *exactly* what you'll get!"

A tempest suddenly appeared across the campus, and it swept up the stone and glass from the remains of the four story building. Abigale stood her ground, observing this feat, and saw the winds shift, transforming from a linear current into a spiraling cyclone with Flare in the center. As the intensity grew, Abigale found herself lifting off the ground, standing upon nothing as she ascended through the winds.

As she rose up to Flare, she looked down at the Earth... and saw it engulfed in flames. From the grass to the trees, but as the center of the flames continued to burn, she saw something else emerge. Something fiery, hot, and seldom seen this far away from a volcano. It was a pit of magma, growing rapidly with every passing second, gobbling up the Blazing Beelzebub and spreading to the remaining buildings across the campus.

Abigale then accepted just how dire her situation was. How much Flare had control of her, and how delicately she had to play this. She could be eviscerated by the debris, tossed by the winds, or left to fall into a pit of molten rock. A sane person would have expressed doubt or concern, but Abigale laughed instead.

The two then found themselves standing eye to eye, their bodies elevated 100 meters above the ground, and their expressions sharing the same cocky smirk.

They then flew forward, their fight fists outstretched, and clashed in the air. The battle for the fate of the Earth had begun and no matter what, only one of them would walk away from this alive.

Aftermath

The image of Mistress Flare and Abigale Quinlan, their fists striking one another's face, remained paused on a monitor. This monitor stood in a darkened room, and before it, sat three women, dressed in green, red, and blue.

Woman in Green: "Bahahahaha! We could have had *this* as the origin point of *Psycho Bullet Festival 2222*, but *nooooo*! Instead, we had to build on the version with *Zen Abigale Quinlan*, not *Kuro Abigale*— not this *boss-ass psycho bullet bitch*! I mean, can you even *imagine* what sort of dystopian shit show she would have whipped up?"

Woman in Red: "Darling, then you wouldn't have had *Zen Abigale* as an ally, and I doubt *Raiyne* would have been in any position to join you. As for *Terra*— I mean *Maxxie*... she obviously loses this fight, so you would have been on your own."

Woman in Green: "Exactly! *Me* against *the world*! And I would have needed to murder the evil queens, and *Nari*, to take their powers for my own! It would have been a *true* sequel to *Psycho Bullet Festival* and—"

Woman in Blue: "Verde, this Scenario is awful. It is a rampant glorification of violence and murder by a group of characters who are bereft of empathy, honor, or any system of morals. The full Scenario is little more than a needlessly edgy rendition of *Psycho Bullet Festival: The Odyssey of Abigale Quinlan*, and it is fortunate that you did not end up in this world."

Woman in Green: "Counterpoint, the original was *booooring*! This one at least has some more kick to it because the protagonist isn't bound by a code of duty. I mean, yeah, 'power must always be used responsibly' and *Zen Abigale* was a more compelling protagonist, but when the Scenario is called *Psycho Bullet Festival*, you need a *psycho bullet bitch*!"

Woman in Red: "We are not here to determine the merit of these works and how the story of *Psycho Bullet Festival* could have been improved. We are here to determine if we should incorporate any persons or elements from this Scenario in *The 2.0 Initiative*."

Woman in Green: "Hmm... nah, let's just do a crossover with *Psycho Bullet Festival 2222* instead."

Woman in Blue: "What about the original Jacquelynne 'Crowbar' Onson and Zedaki? They lived long and honest lives, yes, but would you like to add them to—"

Woman in Green: "Hell no! This project is already shaping up to be a clam jam."

Woman in Red: "Clam jam?"

Woman in Green: "You know, like a sausage party? But with vaginas instead of penises."

Woman in Blue: "You could have said women instead of men."

Woman in Green: "I was *very* deliberate with my wording, thank you very much."

Woman in Red: "Wouldn't 'taco fest' be more appropriate?"

Woman in Green: "That's just a Tuesday at any American public school."

Woman in Blue: "Not every school does Taco Tuesday."

Woman in Green: "They *will* once I'm finished with *the device*!"

Woman in Red: "FOCUS! So, we are not going to give Jacquelynne and Zedaki a send off?"

Woman in Green: "Nah. I don't really have a connection to them, and I never met them."

Woman in Blue: "And I take it we don't want to include the platinum blonde blue-eyed serial killer or a leather-loving femboy in *The 2.0 Initiative*?"

Woman in Green: "They just died fifteen minutes ago, and they barely developed their characters, so no. As such, I think it is time to *put a psycho bullet in this bitch* and move onto the final item on our list."

Fortsetzung Folgt In...

Verde's Doohickey 2.0: Sensational Summer Romp