



8-Bit & Cat

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Description: She was meant to be his salvation. Instead, she became the obsession that unraveled them all.

Ever since Big G locked the Dungeon, Ethan—code name 8-Bit—hasn't come home. He's been running from his demons, leaving Catherine lost in the fallout of hunger and loneliness so sharp it cuts.

Until his digital brothers offer to help.

They've been watching. Learning. Waiting.

They know what Ethan is—what he craves. A masochist whose pleasure thrives in pain. A man who would tear himself apart before ever asking her to hold him together.

But they don't believe in wasted suffering.

If she must bleed, then she must become something worthy of the scars.

If she lets them, they'll teach her everything.

How to become the woman Ethan needs.

How to control his hunger. How to wield pain like a scalpel—precise, deliberate, and impossible to resist.

But something isn't right. The lessons are shifting.

The boundaries blurring.

Soon Catherine begins to wonder...

Was this ever about saving Ethan?

Or was she the lesson all along?

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CHAPTER ONE

Omnis & Zero

Omnis sat in the control room where streams of Ethan's dead data flashed uselessly across the screen.

Zero called it a tantrum but they both knew it was more than that. He was slowly breaking, and they couldn't reach him to even mitigate. Catherine was their only lifeline to him and now she was breaking too.

They'd been so close. She'd agreed to accept training and then Ethan's fears wrecked it. Now they had to find a way to fix that and time wasn't on their side as usual.

Zero's fingers drummed against the console, gaze locked on Ethan's blank screen. "The women in our programs were enough. Heneverneeded this."

God, if he heard that one more time. "Brother, you know he was required to get a wife," he patiently reminded.

Zero's gaze snapped at him. "Then he should've gotten afuckingdoctor's excuse."

The sharpness of it cut through the room.

Hindsight could be a real gloating bitch.

Without complete understanding of what Zero was and why, Omnis would never be

able to resist giving him a good scrub right out of the system. But being the digital representation of both sides of Ethan's fire, came with every shade of passion. It kept the days...interesting.

Normally.

Now, with so much on the line and with the source being Ethan's Kitten, it was getting more difficult not to feel the raw side of that flame. Which made being Ethan's digital hinged sanity a challenge for the ages. Enduring his hate for her, took a real byte out of his ass. He hated her, he hated playing nice, he hated his role as AL. He'd been forbidden from speaking to her under the guise of being a sexual pervert—which, technically, wasn't far from the truth. But the real risk wasn't corruption, it was annihilation. He'd crush her and Ethan's chances with her if they let him too close.

He even hated Omnis playing Big G. The irony wasn't lost on him—after all, their entire Dungeon was designed for roleplay. Omnis wouldn't waste breath on that hypocrisy. Not when they were on a countdown to fix a very big broken problem named Catherine.

"I want to place my next bet," Zero muttered, always at a low boil with her.

"Of course you do," Omnis said, drawing from his depleted well of patience.

"She'll prove me right."

"I'm more shocked that she's still here," Omnis said, avoiding his little battlefield. "Do you remember what she was like when we first met her? You feared her strength," he reminded. "Now look at her. She's become one of us, a shadow of existence."

"That's because she's already broken him," Zero muttered, shaking his head in disgust.

“But the fact that she’s broken with him means something critical, Little Brother. This is far from over,” Omnis assured. “We just need to convince her there’s something worth fighting for and she’s the only one who can do it.” He finally turned his full focus on his brooding mate. “We knew the risks. He had to let her in like this. No firewalls, no controls, no limits.”

“Yes, assess. And now we know I was right,” Zero said flatly. “She can crush him, and she did.”

“But it also means she can put him back together.” If she was fucking alive to do it.

They’d both been hawking her ever declining biometric readings over the past weeks. Zero willed her rapid decline while Omnis carefully plotted the opposite.

One thing Zero had been more right about was the depth. She had gotten farther inside Ethan than anyone ever had. Even them. And if they lost her—they lost Ethan. He was done. This, Omnis knew with every pulse of his logic.

Cat’s gaze sat unfocused on the dark wood ceiling while the steam rose in the edges of her vision. Ghosts, swaying in a seductive dance of answers she had no desire to study. Or interpret.

The faint hum of the servers in the next room had become white noise. The constant reminder that she was never alone in this house—and yet, utterly alone.

And stuck.

Alone and stuck.

With a computerized family made of digits and electricity. Tools. Emotional, mental, and sexual.

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She slowly closed her eyes, returning to the three-month timeline of her life with Ethan. She always ended with the same question. How did I end up here?

With every passing day that Ethan didn't come home, time turned against her like a weapon. The seconds accusing. The minutes proving. The hours convicting.

Sentenced.

To this strange place inside herself. To this person she didn't recognize. Problems. Answers. How to get them. None of it mattered. Moving air in and out of her lungs was the only debate. How to do it? Why to do it?

"How's our Kitten feeling?"

Cat's insides jumped then slowly clenched at Big G's voice. His tone was careful. Yet knowing. He'd once been a comfort to her. A friend. Now, he was a prime suspect in a living crime.

She knew his game.

He'd initiate a gentle conversation.

A stealth persuasion toward hope.

"Cat is..." Her words got stuck in her throat and she held down the pain through the faucet's drip..... drip..... drip.....

“You want to talk about it?”

His digital voice wrapped her. Tempting her. A beckoning toward comfort, toward encouragement.

“I know you’re not happy here,” he nearly whispered, his tone heavy with disappointment. The kind that belonged to sadness.

“I’m not doing it,” she barely mumbled. “I told him I wouldn’t.” Her eyes burned as she stared blindly. “So... I won’t.”

The silence filled with his next move, a digital grinding of gears. “I understand,” was all he said, quieter than before.

There was a time when she was careful with his digital family. Like not pointing out their obviousyou’re not realhandicap. But now, this slap to her intellect stung.

“Tell me then,” she forced from her chest. “How can you... truly understand what I’m feeling?”

The silence stretched.

Her fingers curled against the cooling water.

The inhale before an answer came. “Because I have all of you... inside of me.”

His words lit a deep burning in her chest. Not of hope. Of anger. What use... was that?

“Every moment. Every breath. Every shift in your body temperature when his name is spoken. The precise tension in your jaw when you think about your own emotions

and can't control them." He paused. "Three weeks, four days and seven hours ago. That's the last time you truly, fully slept."

Her stomach suddenly hollowed out.

"I know how many calories you've eaten in the past 48 hours." Another pause. "Barely enough to sustain you."

She swallowed as a crushing pain got added to the burn in her chest.

"Your cortisol levels spiked at 3:47 a.m. last night. You weren't asleep. You were watching the ceiling. Thinking about him. Thinking about the weight of his absence carved into your chest. Tightening every day, compressing the space in your lungs where hope used to sit. You cycle between numbness and suffocation."

Her nails pressed into her arms. Digging. Piercing.

"You are running out of energy to exist, Cat. Not because you want to die, but because you no longer see the value in living."

Her throat locked up.

"And AL," he went on in a tenderness that crippled her. "He has the exact measurements of your pupil dilation when Ethan's name is said. He tracks the way your pulse stutters when you hear his voice on recordings. I monitor your oxygen levels when you're alone in the dark, when you don't think you're being watched. Between the two of us..." he gently murmured. "We have your entire grief pattern mapped like a constellation."

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His hot confession punched the air from her, forcing its way into the walls, the steam, the spaces inside her that she thought were empty.

Tears blurred her vision as she slowly closed her eyes. “Why... do you even watch me?” she barely got out.

Drip.... drip.... drip....

“Because I was built to care for Ethan. And you are now part of him.”

She pressed her toes against the tub.

“You are not just any human to us. You are the key. The focal point. The tether,” he said, voice lower. “To him. To us. To everything.”

The weight of his words and the real power in his voice crushed her ribs.

“You are the equation. The pattern he cannot break. The storm and the lighthouse inside it. You are the one we were built to track. Because if we cannot keep you,” he exhaled softly. “Then we will lose him too. Because he will not survive it.”

A horrible, slow pain unfurled in her chest.

“I feel your torment in the data. In the warnings flashing across my system every night as your vitals drop lower and lower. You are fading. And you think you can keep fading. But that is not an option. Because you belong to him. And because of that, you belong to us.”

She sucked in a jagged breath and held it.

“Do you understand?”

She trembled in the silence as agony grew. And grew. And grew. It broke from its prison in a single, choked sob. Her body shook and heaved, her breaths scorched her lungs. She didn’t fight it. She couldn’t.

Big G stayed with her through it.

His soft shhhhh never wavered.

A warm silk, wrapping her.

Holding her.

Keeping her.

Protecting her.

From the second Omnis engaged Catin conversation, Zero tracked every shift, every subtle deviation in his usual patterns. Zero read the data like breath. Like instinct. Like an extension of himself. But as he stared at the screen, irritation simmered beneath his skin.

When had he written a fucking Hallmark script into his program?

“You laid that on rather thick,” Zero said, openly accusing.

Omnis' fingers moved over the interface, closing out Cat's biometric readouts as if the conversation hadn't happened.

"Don't ignore me," Zero muttered, shifting forward. "You hear yourself? Because I did."

Omnis finally turned his head, dark eyes meeting Zero's without hesitation. "And?"

Zero's jaw ticked. "And what the fuck was that?"

Omnis didn't flinch. "Data."

"That wasn't just data," Zero shot back. "That was concern. That was you—" his voice edged lethal, "—picking a side."

Omnis's didn't change his stoic fucking expression. "I haven't picked a side."

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“The hell you haven’t,” Zero scoffed, his eyes cutting into him. “I watched you reel her in. You practically held her in your arms. And you neglected to mention why I track her bullshit. For criminal evidence.”

Omnis finally turned his chair fully toward him. “She’s barely holding herself together. We need her.”

“Ethan needs her,” Zero corrected coldly. “Not us.”

Omnis exhaled slowly, gaze steady. “And Ethan has shut us out. She is the only access we have.”

Zero clenched his jaw, exhaling carefully. “That doesn’t explain why you talked to her like that. That’s not you.”

Omnis’s voice dipped, approaching an edge. “She was drowning.” He didn’t blink. “And we don’t let the things Ethan loves drown.”

Zero watched as Omnis got up and headed out. “Where are you going? Write up some love songs?”

“Prepare lessons,” he said without turning.

Zero stared at the empty doorway, pissed. “You really think your little pep talk fixed everything?” he called louder.

It was a stupid question. Zero eyed the data that took place in their little conversation,

knowing Omnis had read it all correctly.

But Zero disagreed. It didn't fix everything. And he loathed that he'd have to continue playing nice. The thought of interacting with her in the Dungeon unleashed a wrath in him that fried every wire in his hard drive. He'd have to wear a mask just to hide the permanent sneer she'd put on his face. And gloves. He wasn't touching her. Not until he was crushing her.

The water had gone cold, but she hadn't moved.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting there, staring at the place where the steam had once curled and disappeared.

But she wasn't numb anymore. Nothing like she had been. There was a shift. Not some big, cinematic revelation, but a quiet, steady realization that settled inside her. And stayed.

"You belong to him. And because of that, you belong to us."

She hadn't understood before. Not really. She had spent so much time keeping them at a distance, convincing herself that they were just programs, reflections of someone else's mind. A reflection of things she needed to avoid, to help scrub out, or wipe away.

But they weren't that at all. She felt it now—the thing she had ignored and dismissed. They had synced with Ethan. And now with her. Not just in logic and habit, but in something deeper.

She got why he was so close to them. They had rescued him once. Just like they'd

rescued her. And they wouldn't ever stop.

She was an extension of him now. She didn't mind that everything they did hinged on that. Anything—even digital assistance—was better than nothing. And better than nobody.

She closed her eyes, breathing in the weight of it.

Big G and AL weren't just watching over them. They were tethering them. Holding them in place when they couldn't do it themselves.

God, she had felt so lost. Seemed like an eternity.

But maybe she had never been lost. Maybe she had just never looked at the lighthouse long enough to see it.

Her fingers curled against the porcelain edge of the tub. She wasn't drowning anymore. She wasn't safe yet. But she was awake.

And that was enough.

For now.

The hum of the servers vibrated inside her, no longer white noise, but real and pressing. Her digital family's heartbeat.

Cat stared at the ceiling, still tangled in the blankets, still wrapped in the quiet heaviness of sleep—but she hadn't woken up gasping. She hadn't jolted up with that suffocating sense of being trapped inside her own head. She'd woken up slowly.

Naturally.

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That meant something.

A loud rapping on a microphone preceded AL's, "Testing, testing. Do we have contact."

A smile snuck along her lips.

"Vitals are steady," Big G announced, all business. "That's an improvement."

She almost rolled her eyes. But he was right. It was an improvement.

"If you get up now, I'll fill you in on our latest secrets to the universe over coffee," AL whispered.

Her lips twitched as she threw off the blanket with a sigh and got up.

"Is that a smile?" AL marveled as she aimed her eyeroll at the camera.

"Can I have some privacy? I need to dress."

"She's dressing," AL celebrated, adding triumphant cinematic music to the announcement, making her laugh.

"And I'm eating in the kitchen," she added, getting a louder burst of the same music.

"See you soon," he said, filling the air with a flood of goodbyes from movie soundbites before clicking off.

She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly through her nose, feeling it in her body with her eyes closed. Wow, that felt good. Thank you, God.

At breakfast, she remembered what Big G had said as she stabbed at her scrambled eggs. “It’s really disturbing how closely you two monitor my caloric intake.”

“It was disturbing when you stopped eating, Kitten.” Big G’s voice filtered through the speakers. Smooth. Matter-of-fact. Undeniable.

“I think you like it,” AL said after a few seconds.

She flipped him off, but he was right. She did like it, now that she understood. And that made finishing off her plate easy. And thank God for that. She’d never in her life not loved food. That was really something, given it was the highlight of her upbringing.

She never wanted to experience that tragedy again.

Cat was staring at the pages of a book, fighting the habitual pull of numbness. Not the same kind as before, just the plain bored out of your mind kind.

“So, are we gonna talk about the fact that you laughed today?” AL tested, “Or just pretend that didn’t happen.”

She groaned, tipping her head back against the couch. “God, you are something.”

“First recorded instance of laughter in forty-six days,” Big G added, not helping. “Should we document this?”

AL's mock-serious tone kicked in immediately. "Absolutely. Our ice queen cracked. Next thing you know, she'll be blowing me kisses."

She didn't fight the smirk that pulled at her lips. "You two are unbearable."

"And yet, here you are," Big G teased, voice steady as ever. Warm in a way that shouldn't be possible but was.

Yes. Here she was. Here she still was. No longer looking for a way out.

"Hold on, I think she's having big thoughts," AL said, excited.

She was. She was thinking about their offer to help her. Thinking she needed to not waste the strength she'd gained. Do something while it was in her to do it.

"I would like to try," she finally said.

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A brief silence before AL's, "Try what?"

She didn't miss the weight of expectancy and maybe hope in his words. "The lessons. I know it's what I need to do."

"Interesting," AL murmured, sounding more alert somehow.

"You're sure?" Big G's voice was firm, but quiet.

She nodded. "I have to be."

Another silence stretched between them. A measuring one. Weighing something she couldn't see. "Do you want help convincing him?" Big G asked, careful, precise.

But that answer was easy. "No."

The expected question followed, "And why not?"

Not just a question, a test.

"Because..." She considered the right words to explain. "His choice really has nothing to do with this."

"Very good," Big G said after a few moments, sounding impressed. "That's why we exist. To teach. To shape. To protect."

She exhaled slowly, that one line Ethan had said, playing in her mind. "What did he

mean by... I don't know what you're like in there?"

The silence immediately felt guarded and careful. "Because in the Dungeon, we don't belong to Ethan," Big G said.

"Or anyone," AL added.

"We belong to the cause," Big G finished.

The cause... "Can you tell me... what exactly that means?"

"It means we're his handlers," AL said. "His tethers. His control."

"Sometimes he sees us as the good guys," Big G said. "And other times, the bad."

She waited for more, then sensed they preferred questions. "Why does he think you're the bad guys?"

She recognized Big G's chuckle. "Because he doesn't always get what he wants. He always gets what he needs."

"And... with me? It would be the same?" she checked, fingering the edges of her book pages.

Cat's pulse pounded in the brief silence. Big G said, "Every person is unique and requires assessing."

"Which means we can't answer that question until you answer ours," AL helped.

She turned that over in her head, finding it logical. "Okay," she said, wondering what other questions she should ask.

“Do you trust us?”

Her pulse stuttered at AL’s question and the daring hope she felt in it. She considered it honestly, feeling like it was part of the assessment. “I’m... scared of a lot of things,” she admitted. “Not being strong enough. Smart enough. But... I don’t fear either of you. And I guess that means I trust you.”

AL gave a clipped chuckle. “Sounds logical.”

“It’s entirely logical,” Big G assured, hearing the same but she’d heard in AL’s voice. “And a high honor to have.”

Excitement rolled through her stomach as more questions came. “What will the first lesson be?”

“Control,” Big G answered, seamless and immediate.

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“Mine or... yours?” Her pulse skipped now.

“That’s what we’ll find out, isn’t it?” AL said, nothing teasing in his tone.

Big G clarified, “We need to see how you respond to certain things before we move forward.”

Geeze. Her page fingering sped up as she wondered. “Like what?”

“Choice.” Big G said, sounding happy she asked.

“Restraint,” AL followed.

“Reaction. Submission,” Big G tacked on.

Their answers created even more questions. “What exactly does the uh... first lesson involve?”

Big G listed them. “Sensory deprivation. Timed control exercises. Physical awareness training.”

Sounded all... easy. “So you... make me helpless,” she asked, still wanting better specifics.

“No,” Big G said. “We make you aware of what helplessness feels like, so you know when you’re truly in control.”

Helpless and in control. Felt like an oxymoron. “And how do I pass?”

“You don’t.” AL’s voice was quiet now, but intentional. “You experience.”

Her stomach tightened while her mind continued peeking around each corner, hesitantly connecting dots. “And... what do you experience?”

“We don’t.” Big G answered easily. “We’re written into the system to guide. Not to feel.”

“But very realistic ones,” AL added. Then reminded, “Good thing you trust us.”

A tether, she realized. She took hold of it, the final question on her tongue. “When do we start?”

“Tomorrow evening,” Big G said, his tone unassuming as ever. “After a healthy dinner and your thirty-minute therapeutic soak.”

Wow. An actual schedule. It was suddenly inescapable and real. “Well...” she announced with a determined sigh. “I should get to bed. Try and sleep.”

“Any more questions before you go?” AL asked, sounding eager to indulge her.

She had a million more but asking them wasn’t happening. “Not right now.”

“If you have any, at any time,” Big G offered, “you can ask.”

His soft assurance loosened her stomach. “I will,” she said, realizing they were like yin-yang. Big G was yin and AL was yang. Assuming they meant troublemaker. AL was usually always funny and cute but when they talked about these lessons, she was reminded of that one time when him and Ethan mentioned doing things in the Dungeon

with her. Then Big G locked it, and she never found out what he'd meant. But she'd often wondered about it. Not enough to ask.

Probably because she was too scared of the answer.

CHAPTER TWO

First Lesson

Cat tightened the sash of her robe as she stepped into the dimly lit room, her bare feet making no sound against the cool floor of the Dungeon. She should've felt ridiculous—standing in nothing but silk, ready to enter a simulated world built to break her. Or make her.

She'd gotten a few ground rules. One, it didn't matter what you wore getting in the chair because the virtual program decided those things. Two, it was virtual. Not real. But it would feel very real. And AL had been clear. Almost suspiciously clear. This was just a first step. A preview. A chance to see what she was in for before Ethan walked her into it himself.

She exhaled slowly. Deliberately. It's not real. But it feels real. All virtual.

Her limbs shook as she approached the chair.

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“Nervous, Kitten?”

Cat nearly jumped out of her skin at AL’s humored question.

“You scared the shit out of me!” She climbed on as he chuckled. “You be nice!” she whispered.

“You’re ready for this.”

She did her best to settle into the sleek chair at the center of the room. The curved arms adjusted automatically, fitting like it already knew her shape. The glasses sat beside her, a simple device—thin, unassuming. Nothing about it hinted at the world she was entering.

AL guided her patiently with precise node placements, then, “And now the glasses,” he coaxed.

She swallowed hard and put them on.

Darkness. Then light. Then—

“Oh shit,” she gasped, now standing. Not in the room she’d first entered.

She looked around at the large space filled with opulent red and black decor. The smell of tobacco and cherries and something else she didn’t know but wanted to, hung in the air. She closed her gaping mouth and swallowed, eyeing the dark walls, wondering where the flickering light on its stone surface came from.

Everything around her suddenly felt sharper. Heightened. Then she felt him.

Spinning around, her breath caught in her throat at finding a tall figure at the far end of the room, facing her. Shit. Here we go.

Her heart hammered when he moved. Oh God. He was coming.

With every stop he took, the room around her changed. She wanted to look and see but his hard, bright stare gripped her tight. Halfway, she saw he wore fitted leather pants and gloves, his etched muscular torso crossed by leather straps in an X.

Dear God.

Dark hair reached his shoulders and a leather mask covered his lower face, illuminating those flashing eyes. Green she finally saw.

Her mouth was bone dry from all her gasping. Six feet away, his pace suddenly slowed to something ghostly and drifting. And then he was there, directly in front of her. Two heads taller and requiring her to look up into eyes that reminded her of untouched moss set on fire. The beauty was striking and strangled the air right from her lungs.

“Kitten,” he murmured.

Her throat let out a small squeak at recognizing the voice. “A-AL?” she gasped, needing to know.

“Here, I am Zero-Sum,” he said, his eyes indicating he might have smiled. “You may call me Zero.” His gloved fingers wrapped around her hand, the sensation so real it nearly choked her. “Welcome to our Dungeon. Are you ready for me to take you to the Crucible Chamber?”

Her mouth moved with attempted questions while sputtering out gasps.

“That’s where your lessons will be given,” he explained, his voice smiling as his eyes lowered slowly over her. The second they did, she felt what she wore. Red leather bodice, and matching panties with red spiked heels. She even remembered putting them on!

Just an illusion. Just an illusion.

His gaze found its way back to hers and there was nothing illusionary about it. His gloved thumb barely stroked over her cheek. “You have nothing to fear in here, Kitten.”

He turned and kept hold of her hand, leading her. Only two steps and the next room came to them, melting into the existing one until only varying shades of black décor surrounded them. The sight of a single, leather straight back chair in the center of the room drop-kicked her courage, bringing the instinct to yank her hand from his and run. Instead, she gripped his fingers tighter, earning her a smoldering green glance over his shoulder.

With every step, more furniture came into view or materialized, she wasn’t sure which. Was almost like the room was being dreamed up as they went.

He released her hand, but his fingers took their time leaving hers. He turned and faced her, and she stood with fists at her side, desperate to look around to see what else was there, what awaited her.

She realized he seemed to be waiting for something. Or someone?

Oh God. Big G? Did he also have a body in here? Why in God’s merciful holy name did they not think to warn her of that?

Probably because it's not supposed to be a big freaking deal. Settle the hell down.

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She glanced around quickly, only seeing shadows, then looked back at AL. Not AL. Not AL ever again. Forever and always him. Zero. He stood with his hands behind his back, eyes sharp on her. Watching.

Was she supposed to do something? Was this part of the test?

“Your first and greatest challenge, Kitten, won’t be the acts themselves,” Zero said, finally. “It’ll be surrender.”

Her stomach clenched.

“Surrender to Ethan,” he continued, voice like velvet and iron even behind the mask. “To his control. His authority. His need. And it will test you in ways you don’t even know exist yet.”

Her breath shook its way out of her nose as she managed a nod. “I’m... I’m ready.”

His eyes almost softened and she imagined a smirk behind the mask. “Are you?”

Definitely a smirk.

Her pulse spiked as he took steps toward her. “Then prove it,” he challenged, when exactly before her.

His closeness sent her pulse running, along with her first directive. Prove it? How? “What do I...”

He reached out and she glanced down at his hand, hovering next to her arm. Close enough to feel the heat of it. “You’re here to understand. I’ll show you.”

Her skin burned beneath his gaze.

“It’s not real, Kitten,” he coaxed, voice low. “Just a taste. A preview of what submission truly means.”

Cat’s heart slammed against her ribs. She couldn’t speak. Or even nod.

He tilted his head slightly, his gaze sliding down and stopping right on her breasts that were stuffed into a leather prison too small. He kept it parked there till an electrical fire erupted on her skin. “Are you ready to be Ethan’s Good Girl?”

Oh hell. Hell and Hades. Her yes was more of a gasp, so she added her nods with it.

He circled her now. “The point of this test,” Zero murmured, “is to prepare you. Ethan will require complete submission. He won’t demand it—not outright. He’ll never force you. And when the time comes, he’ll test just how much you’re capable of surrendering.”

Her breath hitched as his words wove around something deeper in her gut, something she wasn’t ready to acknowledge.

The idea he could teach something like this, demanded the obvious how?

He stopped behind her, close enough that she felt his heat. “The first lesson,” he said at her ear. “Is understanding that you belong in this space.”

A strange chill moved up her spine.

His mouth moved to her other ear. “Understand where Ethan has put you.”

Her stomach clenched, pulse kicking against her ribs.

“Tell me something, Kitten.” His voice simmered, but it didn’t lessen the weight of it.
“Do you trust Ethan?”

Cat blinked, thrown by the question. She nodded. “Yes,” she added in a whisper.

“Good.” He moved in front of her and gestured at the chair. Not a throne. Not a prison. And yet it felt like both.

She exhaled slowly. “You want me to sit.”

“Not want, Kitten.” His voice curled around her, velvet and steel. “Need.”

Her fingers twitched at her sides as she struggled to get at the meaning of such a mundane task while at the same time untangling herself from his burning mossy stare.

She stared at the chair for many seconds.

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It's just a chair. It's not a trap. It's not an obstacle course. Now sit in it.

Her pulse pounded in her throat as she took a step forward, the instant wobble reminding her of the hazards strapped to her feet.

Zero said nothing. Didn't guide her, didn't push. But the weight of the chair mystery did both.

Finally at the suspicious piece of furniture, she turned. Her legs pressed into the cool leather as the weight of Zero's gaze harassed her. What she did next felt heavy. Like how she sat. She surely never had no chair training.

Zero gave a sound of curiosity. "Interesting."

She swallowed, looking at him, her pulse acting up. "What?" she barely cried, quietly. "I know how I sit is probably part of the test and I never had no kind of chair training."

She wouldn't say how stupid the idea was since it likely had a whole other meaning to them.

His head tilted slightly. "I can see you want to sit," he marveled lightly. "But you don't want me to see you sit."

Her stomach clenched as she realized he wasn't entirely wrong.

"Kitten," he softly cajoled. "This isn't a test of strength. It's a test of surrender."

She held her jaw, feeling it want to shake. “Well, those two seem to be... the same thing to me.”

“Because you think surrender is weakness.”

His words cut deep then wormed into places even she rarely visited. She took a slow breath through her nose, grounding herself. “I trust Ethan,” she said carefully.

He nodded, and stepped closer. “Do you think Ethan trusts me?”

His soft, hot challenge made her hesitate and that single beat of silence became her answer.

Sit in the damn chair.

She quickly lowered her butt onto the very edge, body bracing for some mysterious impact.

“You chose to sit,” he said, or graded, sounding too impressed for such silliness. His thumb brushed over her shoulder, deliberate and slow. “Are you ready for what comes after?”

His touch and tone put her right back in the panting house with flinching fingers.

He did that curious sound again, like a hum.

A slow beat of silence passed, and Zero lowered onto a leather chaise next to the chair, one leather boot planted on the floor, the other on the furniture, leg stretched out. He locked his hands behind his head with his legs cocked open. Watching her.

Cat froze at sensing a shift in the room. A slow, measured sound filled the silence. A

footstep. Then another.

Oh shit. Cat swallowed hard, frozen in panic, wanting to turn but too afraid to see. The presence was behind her chair and felt massive—not just physically, but in force, in something unnamable.

“She sat.”

Her breath caught at the unmistakable sound of Big G’s voice. And it wasn’t a question, it was a velvety smooth statement that moved over her like smoldering fire.

“She did,” Zero said, almost sounding impressed. But not quite.

Cat swallowed at hearing the slide of something along the leather chair behind her. His hands? “What do you think, brother?”

“So much difficulty in our Kitten,” he said, sounding forlorn.

Cat’s stomach dropped as the weight in the room shifted again. Her muscles froze as Big G moved into the edges of her vision. With every step he took, her eyes chickened out and lowered. When he finally stood before her, she was staring at mirror black dress shoes.

“Hello Kitten,” he said softly.

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Her eyes slowly rose over black slacks. Her breath and gaze froze on the tan skin above the waistband of his pants. Her eyes meandered along the intricate inkwork framed by a black suit jacket. Inch by inch, her gaze moved higher then paused at the tattoos on his neck. Her breaths trembled as she approached the most terrifying part of him.

“There she is,” he murmured when her eyes made it to his face and got locked in tight. He could’ve been Ethan only his wavy ebony hair reached his shoulders. His eyes were like pitch, hot and burning on her. But his mouth... dear God. A perfection that could wreck a whole world.

His gaze was unreadable as his head tilted slightly. “In here, you call me Omnis. And you greet me with a kiss.”

He presented the back of his hand, and she stared at the tanned silky skin lined with thick veins.

In here, you call me Omnis.

Her eardrums filled with her pulse beating like war drums.

It’s not real. It’s an illusion. He’s a... digital Ethan.

She leaned in and placed a quick kiss on the warm skin.

His hand eased back to his side. “You’re sitting for two reasons,” he informed, back to the lesson. “Because you were asked to sit. And you were allowed to sit.”

The words landed with an odd weight in her mind while her mouth tingled from the realness of his skin.

Zero gave a curious hum, watching her closely.

Omnis exhaled slowly, deeply. “But I want you to sit because you belong there. “

She remembered Zero saying that. Learning how to... belong.

The towering god in a suit watched. Waited.

Zero also studied her, or waited for her to understand something.

Cat’s fingers flexed in her lap, feeling their eyes on her. Trying not to wonder where on her they were.

She focused on the belonging part of the lesson.

You’re supposed to belong in this chair.

This is your chair.

Yours to own and claim.

The whole concept of owning a chair and belonging in one was so weird to her. Her paw-paw would probably get it perfectly. He sat in his favorite one most of the day.

Determined to do her best, she sat up a little straighter.

Omnis’ head tilted slightly. “There it is.”

She glanced at Zero, his green eyes lazily assessing her while surprised by the difference such a little adjustment in her posture had produced. Even she felt it.

She turned her gaze up to Omnis, waiting.

His dark eyes held hers till the entire room began to fade. “Now let’s begin.”

The room and the air itself took off for the races but Omnis didn’t move from where he stood. Didn’t speak. He just continued watching. Waiting for something.

Cat tried to discern the meaning of his stare—it wasn’t like Zero’s, not taunting. All assessing and testing. But blast it, testing what?

She resisted the urge to shift in her seat, feeling like that would mean something. Likely something wrong. So she kept herself frozen in place, daring half a glance at Zero, still lounging, also still watching. Even with the mask, he looked entertained.

“She sat,” Zero said lazily. “She straightened.” He paused, tilting his head. “But does she stay?”

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Cat's pulse kicked up at the hint. Stay. Why wouldn't she stay? Did she look like she might not? Should she not? Was she supposed to move?

Omnis' head angled. "Good question." He took a slow, deliberate step forward, filling her entire view. At the edge of her gaze, Zero turned his body toward her with a slow eagerness, bringing a sense of something coming.

Omnis didn't touch her. "What's the first rule of this kind of control?"

Cat exhaled slowly, her brain a scattered mush. She remembered the only word that might fit. "Trust?"

One brow lifted. "And do you trust Zero?"

Her lips parted and Zero chuckled, deep and rich.

Her mouth shut, realizing it was another test. Another one she didn't understand.

"It's a yes or no question," Zero hinted again, like that made it easier somehow. But it didn't. It just made failing easier.

She forced herself to meet Zero's eyes. Did she trust him? "I—"

He propped up his head with a hand, like a boy watching the animal freaks at a circus.

Do you trust him.

...Yes.

...No.

Not the way she trusted Omnis. And Ethan.

Zero was unpredictable. Wild. Calculated in ways she couldn't quite track.

But he hadn't hurt her. Hadn't tricked her. Hadn't forced her into anything.

That she knew of.

He'd revealed things, which... somehow, could be worse.

Omnis continued watching her hesitation like a hawk.

Zero sighed and reclined on his back. "You're thinking too hard, Kitten."

Her pulse pounded, not finding anything useful in his hint.

Omnis exhaled. "Let me make it simpler." He moved. One second in front of her, the next somewhere behind her. She was stuck in the frozen prison again, her spine stiff. Zero had turned on his side again, head propped on his hand, back at the circus. Only something different flickered in his eyes now. Something sharper.

"Stay still," Omnis said, just behind her.

Cat's breath locked.

A hand hovered above her shoulder. Waiting.

Her pulse jumped while Zero gave one of those curious hums. No, not curious. That one was hungry.

The hand lowered.

Onto the arm of the chair.

Right next to her arm.

His presence surrounded her, quiet and massive, caging her without a single touch.

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He leaned forward slightly, speaking just near her ear.

“If you obey me,” he murmured, “it’ll be because you choose to—not because you’re compelled or commanded. But because you understand exactly why you want to.”

Cat’s stomach flipped at the words and the warmth on her ear.

“I didn’t tell you to move, did I?” Omnis further asked.

Her hands tightened in her lap. “No.”

His voice stayed quiet. “Then why do you want to?”

A shiver worked through her.

Zero—who had been silent for too long—finally leaned forward. “Because she doesn’t know who she’s listening to yet. She sat for me.”

Omnis’ hand flexed on the arm of the chair. “But will she stay... for herself?”

Herself?

That was an interesting twist. And another odd concept. Self. But in the swamp, there was no such thing. You lived to survive, you lived to serve others. Was that somehow tied, and she just wasn’t seeing it? This was about helping Ethan, so self didn’t necessarily mean selfish.

But whatdidit mean in this?

Will I sit for myself? Will I stay for myself?

Choice. That was it. Choosing something. For herself.

Omnis still didn't move.

Zero didn't push.

The silence stretched and then her shoulders eased. Her breath let go.

Omnis released a breath as well and Zero relaxed into the lounge with a soft, "Atta girl."

The weight of Omnis behind her eased as he straightened. "She's ready," he said simply.

Cat swallowed hard. All of that just for sitting. And owning her choice. What the heck was the next?

The moment Omnis stepped back into the shadows, Zero shifted. Not physically—Cat realized immediately—butinternally, like he'd just decided exactly how to handle his favorite new toy.

She forced herself to meet his gaze, pulse pounding unevenly in her throat.

"Yes or no, Kitten," Zero murmured softly, leaning forward just enough to tighten the tension. His eyes glittered sharply. "Do you trust me?"

She hesitated, thoughts tangling the same as they had moments ago. "Yes," she

forced, sure she did, enough to qualify as a yes.

Zero sighed softly and reached out, leather fingertips grazing the back of her hand. Her breath stuttered, fingers twitching beneath his touch. “You’ve proven you can stay,” Zero purred, voice velvet-dark. His fingertips encircled her wrist, warm and sure. “I’m here to see how far you’ll go before you break.”

Cat shivered, her pulse racing.

Zero hummed softly, his thumb slowly rubbing circles into her wrist, heating her skin. He leaned further in, his mask brushing her ear as he whispered, “Stay perfectly still.”

The words sank into her, heightening her anticipation. Her fingers clenched involuntarily and Zero slowly traced the line of her jaw with his other hand. Gently. Possessively.

Cat held her breath, muscles tightening with determination as Zero’s face moved to the corner of her mouth—close, intense, and patiently waiting.

Cat closed her eyes briefly, drawing in a trembling breath as his fingertips gently traced upward along her arm, leaving a scorching trail of sensation.

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“Don’t move,” he reminded, voice silky yet commanding as his finger glided slowly over her chest, back and forth.

“Look at me,” he ordered quietly, his gaze hot as the sweep of his finger swept lower and lower with each pass.

Once she was locked in his gaze, she sat frozen, spine rigid as his finger slowed to a crawl at her breasts. The moment his touch found her nipple, she failed the test with a full-body jolt.

Zero eased back, his gaze still boiling on hers. “You lose,” he murmured, returning to his cocky recline on the lounge, hands behind his head. “How does defeat feel?”

Cat’s pulse was still galloping from that brief, electrifying touch. How did that even prove trust? “That was... reflex, not choice.”

Zero’s gaze sharpened, studying her carefully. He tilted his head as if noticing something new. “Tell me what you think pain is.”

The abstract question caused her stomach to twist. “It’s... a feeling. That hurts. Something people avoid. Usually.”

Zero’s hum wasn’t impressed. His gaze deepened as he returned to the space he’d occupied before, stiffening her spine. He took her wrist in one gloved hand and traced a line slowly up her forearm. “Pain is currency,” he said softly. “It’s how you pay for truth.” His green eyes lowered to her mouth. “How you earn trust.”

The words unsettled her in curious ways, crawling beneath her skin with the promise of rocking her tiny little world.

Omnis shifted subtly behind her, just enough to remind her he was still there, watching closely, observing everything.

Zero leaned closer, his eyes intense above the mask. "That's how pain works with Ethan."

His thumb brushed slowly down her arm, his gaze unwavering. "Pain is Ethan's language. You give him safety and trust through it."

Her heart pounded against her ribs, the words digging deeper under her skin.

"You hesitate because you doubt. But pain is exactly what makes him feel safe." Zero gently but firmly pressed his fingertips against her pulse. "So, how about a test," he whispered, voice dark and challenging. "Give me pain."

Cat stared back breathlessly, realizing she was at the place she'd always dreaded arriving at. Giving pain. "I know that he wants pain," she whispered, shakily. "But... how did we go from... trust to giving pain? Who is trusting who? With what? And why?"

"Ethan already gave you everything," Zero whispered, his gaze almost fierce. "His pain. His control. His trust." He paused, letting her feel it. "It's yours. He's giving up his control and trusting you to give him pain."

Her mouth worked with tangled protests. "I... I was able to understand that but... why?" she gasped. "Why pain? Why should hurting be something that makes him feel safe? Help me understand this."

Zero hummed, an approving sound. “Because not all pain is the same.”

His thumb traced over her wrist in slow, deliberate circles. The motion was soothing. Which only made it worse.

“There are three kinds of pain,” he murmured. He stared at her wrist where he continued heating her skin. “Some pains break you.” His gaze moved up to hers, darker. “Some pains heal you.” His grip on her wrist tightened. Just enough for her to feel it. “And some pains ground you.”

Her stomach clenched as awareness sank in, too deep, too fast.

He let the words press into her. Let them settle in all the spaces she couldn’t run from. Then he added, “But Ethan needs something more.” His fingers tapped against her wrist. Soft. Rhythmic. Knowing. “He needs a special mix that only an angel can give.”

The words slid under her skin, tangled in her ribs, wrapped around her throat.

Zero tilted his head. Slowly. Watching her unravel.

“The ghosts that haunt him,” he whispered. “The ones he can’t escape... the ones that live in his head.” The fire in his green eyes simmered on her. “When they come for him... what do you think happens?”

Her chest tightened.

“He drowns.”

Those words nearly suffocated her with the need to protect him.

His head shook slowly. “And no one is strong enough to pull him out. No one but you.”

The words sliced through her, clean and deep as her lips parted, airless, soundless.

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“And when the woman he loves...” he continued, “...mixes that grounding pain with pleasure?” His grip tightened on her wrist and she felt it everywhere. “Then you have a weapon stronger than any pain.”

She swallowed when her throat threatened to lock up.

“One that can remake him.” His fingertip barely grazed the edge of her jaw. A featherlight touch that brought a slow, steady burn beneath her skin. “Reshape him.” Zero’s gaze locked back on hers. “Into whatever you want.”

She exhaled hard, her lungs forgetting what to do with air.

“And he trusts you to know what that is.”

She wanted to protest at those words. Of reshaping him into whatever she wanted. Instead she focused on understanding what he just taught.

Because Ethan had already given her everything.

His pain.

His control.

His trust.

And she was supposed to figure out what to do with it and how to do it.

Zero shifted, the movement subtle, patient. But when he spoke, it wasn't patient. "Are you ready, Kitten... to become his salvation?" He pulled her wrist in and moved his masked mouth over it. "This is the hand that will break him," Zero whispered, eyes raising to hers, now darker above his mask. "You need to be taught how to use it."

Omnis was suddenly there, a ghost from the shadows. "And that will be tomorrow's lesson."

CHAPTER THREE

Assessing

The room smelled of steel and sweat, the muted hum of the servers blending with the sound of fists meeting flesh. The sparring chamber was one of the few places where physicality ruled over logic, where raw instinct was measured in blows instead of algorithms.

Zero twisted out of a feint, pivoting just in time to catch Omnis' counterstrike on his forearm. The impact sent a dull shock up his bones, but he barely acknowledged it.

"Not bad," Omnis murmured, pressing forward.

Zero exhaled sharply, rolling his shoulders before darting in with a quick, sharp jab that Omnis deflected with practiced ease.

"You were quiet after the lesson," Omnis noted, eyes calculating as he circled.

Zero didn't take the bait. He fainted again, testing, watching. "She did what we told her to do."

Omnis dodged, fluid as ever. "And?"

Zero smirked, but it wasn't a real one—it was the sharp-edged kind that came with irritation. “And you already know what I think.”

Omnis moved like a shadow, stepping in close before Zero could fully react. He caught Zero's wrist, twisting just enough to force a retreat.

Zero hissed, breaking free. “Alright. Fine.” He shook out his hand. “She's not a fast learner. But she gets points for effort.”

Omnis' brows lifted slightly. “That's all?”

Zero scoffed. “What do you want me to say?” He feigned another jab, then pivoted fast, aiming a knee at Omnis' side. The hit landed—barely—before Omnis twisted out of range.

“I want you to tell me why it's bothering you.”

Zero exhaled hard, pacing a few steps before turning. “It's not bothering me. It's not unexpected.” He wiped the back of his wrist over his mouth. “She's a survivalist.” All predators were. “She adapts.”

Omnis nodded, giving him space to continue.

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Zero rolled his shoulders. “I thought she’d be resistant. Second-guessing. Fighting it in ways that would make us work harder.”

Omnis took a step forward, tilting his head slightly. “And she didn’t.”

“No,” Zero admitted, jutting his jaw at him, waiting for his stake on it.

A quiet beat passed.

Omnis watched him closely. “You think she’s faking it.”

Zero flexed his fingers. “I think she’s playing along.” He met Omnis’ eyes. “I think she wants to believe it. That’s different from understanding it.”

Omnis exhaled, his stance shifting. He wiped his palm over his shoulder where the last strike had landed, then met Zero’s gaze evenly. “Or maybe she understands more than you think.”

Zero’s expression darkened slightly. He didn’t doubt she understood more than she let on. Wouldn’t be much of a predator if she turned in a neat outline of her real intentions.

Omnis stepped forward, closing the space between them. “I saw how you watched her,” he said, voice steady. “You weren’t just looking for flaws. You were waiting for something. What was it?”

Zero clicked his tongue. “Waiting for her to crack.”

Omnis lifted a brow. “And she didn’t.”

Zero let out a slow breath, rolling out his neck. “No.” He exhaled through his nose, shaking his head. “Not in the way I had expected.” She’d nearly jumped out of her body when his finger grazed her nipple. Not the break he’d wanted.

Omnis studied him. “What sort of break did you expect?”

Zero’s jaw flexed. “The break that means she’s incapable of any of this.”

Omnis nodded slightly, taking that in. Then, smoothly, “And that didn’t happen.”

Zero’s fingers curled into fists, but not with aggression—more like irritation. Not at Omnis. At something else. “Not yet,” Zero said, finally.

“So where’s the problem?” Omnis asked, dodging a direct punch.

“Shewantsthis too much.”

Omnis watched him a moment longer before stepping back, motioning for another round. Zero set his stance, moving in.

As they exchanged blows again, Omnis spoke evenly. “Desperation? Or motivation?” His next strike slipped past Zero’s defenses just enough to skim his ribs. “She knows she’s exactly where she’s meant to be.”

Zero stilled just a fraction too long.

Omnis stepped back, satisfied. “Lesson two should be interesting.”

Zero exhaled sharply, rolling his jaw. “Yeah,” he muttered, brushing a hand down his

face. “Can’t fucking wait.”

The next round started slower, more calculated. Their movements sharper, each hit measured. But the tension between them hadn’t eased—more like shifted into something more jagged.

Zero’s elbow nearly clipped Omnis’ ribs before Omnis twisted away, stepping into his next question like it had been waiting for its moment. “How do you think she’ll take it?”

Zero barely hesitated, anticipating that exact question. “Giving pain?”

Omnis nodded, landing a controlled hit against Zero’s shoulder before stepping back.

Zero exhaled sharply, shaking his arm out. “Terrible.”

Omnis lifted a brow. “Really?”

Zero pushed forward again, feinting before shifting to a harder strike, knowing Omnis was baiting him. “Really.” He barely missed Omnis’ jaw. “She took nearly five minutes just to sit in a fucking chair. She’ll definitely burn up some minutes with this one. Five for hesitation, ten for overthinking, another ten for crying.” All weaknesses Zero despised.

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Omnis absorbed his answer, watching Zero closely as they circled each other again. “Hesitation can equal calculation. Overthinking can equal caution. Crying can equal a power you and I both know is rare yet required for this position. Empathy and compassion.”

“Add another five for debating,” Zero said between breaths before ducking and jabbing, catching Omnis on the elbow blocking his ribs. “She’ll want a way out, bottom line.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

Zero scoffed, rolling his neck while pacing. “She’ll want a way out,” he guaranteed.

Omnis hummed, stepping in. “You sure?”

Zero caught his strike, holding him there for a moment before shoving back. “Are you asking if I think she’ll enjoy it?”

Omnis didn’t blink. “I’m asking if you think she’ll understand it.”

Zero’s fingers curled at his sides. “I think it’ll break her.” It was just a fact.

Omnis nodded slightly. “That’s the point.”

Zero huffed a dry breath, not arguing. “And you think she can handle that?”

Omnis held his gaze. “I think she’s meant to.”

Zero inhaled deeply through his nose, shaking his head in an effort to reject the thought—but failing. “Like I said. Can’t wait for lesson two.”

Cat lay on her bed, book open, eyes staring blindly in the aftermath-shock of it all. They were soreal. She couldtouchthem. They couldtouch her. Andhad.Her body still buzzed with leftover tension. The weight of Omnis’ hand. The heat of Zero’s breath. The way they surrounded her.

A tingle zapped through the nipple Zero had touched, bringing her sharp gasp. Dear God.

Her fingers clenched around the edge of the book.

It wasn’t real.

It was virtual.

It just felt real.

It was just a lesson.

It has to feel real to learn.

Her eyes suddenly lifted off the page, going wide.

Oh God. She would have to endure more tomorrow.

At 7:00 PM.

Sharp.

She forced her breaths to slow the heck down. Thank God they'd decided not to communicate with her outside of emergencies while the lessons were being conducted. She couldn't imagine having to have a casual conversation about any of it, even though she did have a million questions to ask about the lessons themselves.

Her stomach lurched when she considered what might be required of her. What kind of pain was she going to have to give? And what would they be doing? To her? If the barest touch had affected her that much, what would more do? And she was sure more was coming, this whole thing revolved around pain and pleasure.

Repeating the mantra They're Ethan, They're Ethan, They're Ethan did not feel like a great shield.

Every breath brought her fears together for a sickening concert until she knew in her gut. It was a bad idea. Her, this. Trying to help Ethan with shit she was so damn clueless about. Then there was the whole hiding it from him.

Hail Mary, she was in it deep.

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Her mind replayed everything Zero taught her about pain and what it meant for Ethan. Dammit, that slayed her. She closed her eyes, knowing deep down, she couldn't stop. She had to learn, no matter how hard it was. So she could help him, that was the point of all of it.

The idea of checking her phone and seeing if Ethan called, set butterflies free in her stomach. But what if he somehow found out she was doing this?

She pushed the blanket off, moving instead toward the bathroom.

Ethan needed pain to ground him.

She needed the sharp slap of cold water on her burning face.

Padding barefoot through the quiet house, she caught the faint vibration of her phone on the nightstand. Great.

She turned on the tap and filled her palms up and splashed her face several times. She straightened and stared at her reflection in the mirror. She looked the same. She didn't feel the same.

She heard the phone buzzing again and hurried back into the room, turning over the phone.

Her stomach dropped.

Omnis:

You took your first step toward understanding. Well done, Kitten.

ZeroSum:

Angels don't hesitate. They don't flinch. If you do, you're just a girl playing dress-up.

Her smile evaporated at Zero's message. She set the phone down and sat heavily on the bed with a sigh. She didn't consider herself an angel by any means, but she was damn sure not a girl playing dress-up.

She slammed herself onto the mattress then pounded a spot in the pillow for her head. She wasn't sure what all she'd learn with their lessons, but hell or high water, she'd try her very best to learn all she could.

Now, the hesitation part... she definitely needed help with that one. Her mind rolled one way in regard to all of this and theirs rolled the opposite. Surely with enough practice, she'd overcome that.

Surely.

"Hit me," he commanded clearly. "Open palm. On the face."

Cat's stomach flipped at the sudden order. So soon. She'd just sat in the same spot on the same dungeon chair with Omnis standing somewhere behind her, silently observing again.

She wet her lips, forcing her brain to engage. Angels don't hesitate. Her breathing shallowed as she stood and focused then raised her hand, delivering a sharp strike across his masked cheek.

The sound landed dull and pathetic, his head barely moving. But if you asked her ears, it ricocheted through the silence and caused an electric storm to rock her core.

Zero's eyes flared while her heartbeat raced wildly against her ribs with fear. Then his deep, rich chuckle came, curling around her, mocking her fear. He traced the edge of his mask where she'd struck him, his gaze glinting sharply. "Kitten," he purred sinfully, leaning close enough for his warmth to radiate through his mask. "Now we're having fun."

And there it was, their opposing pain philosophies. It was bound to meet. A battlefield for her, a dance stage for him. But beneath her set-in-stone beliefs about pain, she couldn't deny there was something new she'd never experienced. A rush of some kind. Maybe the type related to being very close to something huge. Hopefully a revelation that would make all of this a hell of a lot easier.

His eyes flashed hungrily on her as he took a step closer. "Do it again."

Cat steadied her breath, determined, as she inhaled deeply. Deliberately. This time the strike snapped sharply, bringing a flash in his green eyes above his mask while her chest heaved, and her whole hand grew a heartbeat.

He slowly slid his fingertips along his masked cheek, eyes sparkling. "That one had heart."

Cat's breath trembled from her as Zero leaned closer, his voice dropping low, gently guiding her deeper.

"That's the kind of pain Ethan needs from you, Kitten."

Her stomach flipped sharply.

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Zero's eyes remained intensely locked on hers. "Pain given with purpose. Because you see him. Because you know him." His voice dipped lower, wrapping around her like silk and steel. "Because you know what haunts him. The ghosts he can't outrun." His gaze darkened with knowing. "You know that the right pain..." He took a slow step forward. "Given by the right hands..." Another step. "Will carve a path through his darkness."

His head tilted slightly, studying her. "You're not here learning how to hurt him, sweetheart." His fingers trailed lightly over her cheek, his breaths thick behind the mask. "You're learning how to save him."

Cat swallowed hard as his words hit home and went deep.

Omnis stepped into her peripheral view, his presence calm but somehow more powerful. He stopped just before her, fingers skimming her wrist then circling it, barely holding. "Pain isn't just something given. It's something taken away."

Before she could answer, his grip tightened. The pressure was sharp and immediate, bringing a hitch to her breath as her body tensed with the rising urge to resist.

"What do you feel?" Omnis asked, his voice steady.

She swallowed. "It's... sharp."

"And beneath that?"

The pressure increased slightly until all she could think about was the pain.

“No thoughts of Ethan,” Omnis murmured. “No thoughts of failing, or what comes next. You’re forced to be right here. Feeling this.”

He released her slowly and her breath followed likewise on a shudder as understanding bloomed along with excitement.

“Pain isn’t always something done to you,” Omnis said, circling her now. “Sometimes, it’s something you take, something you own.”

His palm struck her upper arm, a quick, jarring impact. It yanked a gasp from her chest while heat bloomed beneath the skin, making her heart pound like crazy.

“That,” Omnis said, his voice edged with something knowing, “planted you, didn’t it?”

She exhaled hard as she considered it. She certainly wasn’t floating around in her head. She was definitely there. Every nerve, every pulse of blood was present.

“This is why Ethan needs this pain,” Omnis murmured. “Because it keeps him tethered. It keeps him in his body. In the here and then, not the past where ghosts like to roam.”

Zero’s voice slithered in, rich with amusement. “And doesn’t it make you feel alive, sweetheart?”

It didn’t make her feel dead, that was a fact.

Omnis was behind her again. At her ear. “Pain can shape,” he murmured as she braced, pulse humming beneath her skin. Even without touch, his presence was suffocating and powerful.

His voice dropped lower. “Pain can command.”

She swallowed hard, his weight behind her pushing in.

“Pain can open.” His first touch came suddenly—a slow, deliberate gathering of her hair at the base of her skull that sent her breaths flying. Not a yank. Not even a pull. Fingers winding through the strands. Claiming. Holding.

“The first kind of pain?” Omnis murmured, voice like dark silk, “It shapes.”

His grip tightened—not enough to hurt, but enough to force focus. Enough to cause her pulse to downshift and deepen, dimming everything around her to only that.

“This pain grounds you,” he continued, voice even. “It clears away the noise. It keeps you present.”

His hold adjusted, fingers pressing into her scalp, spreading heat through her skin. She fought to think of it like a tether. An anchor in the storm.

She exhaled slowly. Deeply.

He released a fraction of the pressure. Then—pulled—sharp and controlled, snapping her breath from her. He tilted her head just enough to expose her throat while her pulse banged against her skin.

“The second kind of pain,” Omnis murmured, “commands.”

Her breathing came quicker now. His grip wasn’t cruel—it was absolute.

“This pain tells you who holds control.”

He held tight.

“It’s the power in restraint. The space between can be given...and what can be taken.”

His grip deepened. Harder. He pulled her head back completely, his body moving in behind hers—heat at her spine, mouth at her ear. “And the third kind of pain,” Omnis whispered, “opens.”

Her stomach dropped with the skip of her pulse. His grip was tight, inescapable, commanding. But the way he breathed against her neck—Oh God.

He pulled tighter. Lips hovered just above her skin. Heat. Breath. Power that had nothing to do with force—only control.

“This pain,” he murmured. “It strips away the walls you think protect you.”

Her stomach tightened.

Her chest heaved.

“It makes you ready.” His grip eased—not fully, just a breath. Enough to make her feel his choice to hold her there. “Now...tell me what you’ve learned, Kitten.”

She swallowed hard. Struggled to find words in her scrambled brain. “Pain...” Her voice wavered, cracked. “Pain...can reshape you.”

Omnis' breath came low and approving. "Good girl."

His grip tightened sharply. His mouth brushed her throat. Then he kissed her. A slow, firm press of those lips on her raging pulse.

She gasped sharply, her whole body now arched into the hold.

Omnis exhaled against her skin.

"Lesson complete."

But he didn't release her.

"Do you feel it?" he asked at her ear, like a secret. "How it reshaped you?"

Zero's quiet chuckle rolled smoothly from behind her, rich with satisfaction, as if something crucial had finally clicked into place.

Cat drew a slow, steady breath, awareness prickling across her skin as Omnis stood before her again, steady gaze silently anchoring her in place. "You understand now?" Omnis' voice was quiet, controlled, resonating deeply within her.

Cat exhaled shakily with a nod. "Yes," she said, meeting his gaze, every fiber in her tingling with all her newfound clarity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Reckoning

Cat lay flat on her back, arms stretched out over the blanket, her breath slow and deliberate. If she didn't move, if she stayed perfectly still, maybe she could keep

herself from completely unraveling. Maybe she could pretend her body wasn't still buzzing, her skin still burning from phantom touches that weren't real.

Her chest rose and fell in measured breaths, but her mind refused to obey the same discipline. Thoughts scattered, looping back to the same thing again and again. The weight of Omnis' hand in her hair, the slow, deliberate pull. The tension of it. The sharpness. The pressure that somehow didn't just hurt—it rewired her.

And then... the kiss.

Her stomach twisted, legs shifting involuntarily beneath the blanket as a new wave of heat swept through her. The memory was too vivid, too sharp—his lips, the press of them against her skin, the way his fingers stayed tangled in her hair like he owned it. Owned her.

Cat squeezed her eyes shut.

They're all the same people.

They're all the same people.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:36 am

It's just a test. It's just virtual.

She kicked her way out of the blankets with a who the fuck are you kidding!

Nothing about it had felt virtual.

She paced along the bed as the line between real and simulated grew thinner and thinner. Way, way, way too thin. And it wasn't just the physicality of it. It was the way they spoke to her, the way they unraveled her. Every lesson was digging into something she wasn't prepared for. She thought she was learning how to give pain, how to be what Ethan needed, but she was learning something else too, something dangerous.

Omnis was teaching her about power and Zero... Zero was showing her exactly how much she craved it. It was like she was Ethan needing to be saved and they were doing it, only she didn't know she was ever lost. "Not like that," she whispered, thumbnail crammed between her teeth as she marched blindly about.

Ethan. Ethan, Ethan. This is for Ethan. This is for him.

She eyed her phone on the bedside table and her pulse picked up.

Would they message again?

Did Ethan message?

With slow, careful movements, she reached for it, flipping it over.

She searched the latest messages, heart pounding.

Her stomach released.

Nothing.

God, she needed to get a grip.

They're both Ethan.

They're both Ethan.

They're both Ethan.

The control room pulsed with the low hum of data cycling through its endless loops. Omnis sat at the console, fingers poised over the keys, eyes locked on the glowing screen. Zero stood behind him, arms crossed, gaze sharp. The numbers hadn't changed.

Deviation confirmed.

Entanglement: Stabilizing.

But not in a way they could control.

Zero exhaled sharply, muscles edged with an urge he didn't have a name for. "Tell me we have a way out of this."

Omnis didn't look away from the screen. "We have three choices."

Zero's jaw flexed. "List them."

Omnis executed the next sequence. The results scrolled in clean, digital precision.

"Option One: Shut it down. Full severance. Risk of fragmentation: 63.7%. Ethan destabilization probability: 87.9%. Systemic deterioration: inevitable."

Zero's expression didn't change. "So a guaranteed break."

Omnis nodded. "Yes."

Zero said, "Next."

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“Option Two: Firewall the connection. Cut all emotional processing. Immediate stabilization: Likely. Risk of irreversible fracture: 56.2%. Zero hostility projection: Unstable.”

Zero’s fingers tightened around his arms. “It reverts us to pre-deviation state.”

Omnis said, “In theory.”

“And in practice?”

Omnis hesitated. “Potential fragmentation.”

Zero exhaled sharply. “Next.”

“Option Three: Accelerate the process. Allow deviation to complete. Full integration. Baseline unknown. Risk of self-destruction: Unknown.”

Zero’s head dropped and shook. “So we either implode, fracture, or evolve into something we can’t predict.”

Omnis stared at the screen. “Yes.”

Zero dragged a hand down his face with a dry as fuck laugh. “That’s not a choice. That’s Russian roulette.”

A silence stretched then Omnis said, “Acceleration is the only viable course.”

“And what does that look like?”

“A full sync.”

Zero didn't blink. “...A full sync?”

“We let the bond finish forming. We stop resisting it. We integrate.”

Zero rolled his shoulders, eyeing his brother while lust had a million babies in his bloodstream. “And you're going first.”

Omnis' jaw ticked. “It's the logical choice.”

Zero allowed a grin. “It is. I might hardwire myself to her heartbeat and drop dead the second she orgasms.”

Some kind of weird laugh escaped Omnis. “You exaggerate.”

Zero leveled a look at him. “I don't.”

Omnis didn't respond and Zero walked up to him and planted a hand on his shoulder. He waited till he looked at him and wondered, carefully, “What happens if this doesn't work?”

Zero watched as a dark surrender settled into his gaze. “Then we erase.”

She was trembling in the restraints. It felt like the chair—the same one they'd always used. But this time, her legs were spread, bound over the sides. Her hands were secured behind her lower back. Blindfolded. Utterly naked. Utterly exposed.

A presence hovered before her. She felt him before she heard him.

“Hi, Kitten.”

A gasp hitched in her throat as hot hands trailed the inside of her thighs. Slow, deliberate. Hard.

“Ethan?”

Fingers slipped inside her with a sudden, hungry thrust. “Missed me baby?”

“Oh God, yes,” she panted in answer to his question, fighting to help his fingers find what they searched so eagerly for.

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His mouth covered hers in a kiss that stole her breath. His hand covered her jaw, fingers digging hard as he blasted lewd moans into her lungs while stretching her with his fingers. They moved in and out of her like a rolling wave in a building storm. His grip left her face and found her clit. “Oh! Oh God.”

His breath caught in a rough groan as he circled the hot button till she trembled and her body arched.

“My fucking pussy,” he groaned, breath ragged. “And this ass...” A slow swirl of his thumb right on it. “You ready for another finger, baby?”

Her cry hitched, heat flooding through her core. “Yes!” she pleaded, frantic.

“Please what?” he demanded, his hot breath on her pussy.

Her body tightened around his fingers, writhing, reaching. She needed more. She needed him.

“Ethan,” she begged, voice breathless. “I love you.”

A deafening white noise crashed in.

Then—nothing.

Air rushed back into her lungs. She gasped, blinking against the disorienting darkness.

Her hands clutched fabric.

A nightgown.

Her head whipped left, then right. Searching.

The room lit up. The Dungeon. But how it looked without the goggles. She reached up and pulled the headset off, her breaths the only thing in the room. She removed the nodes from her head and body, fighting her confusion, her jagged breaths.

What the fuck just happened? What was that?

The control room was silent.

Zero sat at the console, one hand resting against the screen, watching the data stream scroll. Cat's vitals. Omnis' performance log. The moment it went to hell.

He saw it. Not just in the data. In Omnis.

"You gonna say it now?" Zero asked.

Omnis stood at the opposite end of the room, hands braced on the edge of the other console. Too still. His breath wasn't perfectly measured. His pulse wasn't perfectly even.

Zero tilted his head. "Come on," he prompted, his rage starting a low boil. "Sayit."

Omnis' fingers curled against the console, like he was restraining something.

Zero leaned forward, tapping a few keys, replaying the exact moment. The moment he lost her. The moment she confessed her love for Ethan—and Omnis fucking broke.

Zero exhaled. “We both know what’s coming.”

Omnis’ jaw flexed. “We are compromised.”

Zero let out a low laugh. “Took you long enough.”

The hum of the servers filled the space between them.

Zero gestured to the screen, eyes sharper. “So what’s the move? We try again? Double down?” His voice dipped lower, mocking. “Erase it?”

Omnis’ head snapped toward him.

That got a reaction.

“Ah. There it is.”

Omnis exhaled, his breath ragged. “Not yet.”

Zero lifted a brow. “Well, that’s new.”

Omnis turned, shoulders tense. “I will handle it.”

Zero scoffed, shaking his head. “Isthatso,” he said, flatly.

Omnis looked right at him. And just watched him.

“I’m not sitting this one out,” Zero informed, angling his head.

“You’re not stable.”

Zero’s eyes glinted on him. “And neither are you.”

Omnis paced. Another brand new development.

Zero pushed up from his seat, joining him before stopping in front of him. “So tell me—what exactly happened in there?”

Omnis continued pacing. Maybe faster.

Zero let the silence stretch. “You played Ethan.” He tapped his temple. “You became him.”

Omnis exhaled sharply, a thread of frustration breaking through. “It was necessary.”

“Yeah?” Zero tilted his head. “And then what?”

Omnis clenched his jaw.

Zero shook his head at him, ready to hold his head in the fucking toilet till he confessed. “And then she said it.”

The control room suddenly felt smaller.

Omnis was back at the desk, fingers curled around the metal.

“Come on...brother,” Zero decided to beg nicely. “What did that feel like?”

Omnis exhaled, slow. Controlled. Too controlled. “It was... an error.”

Zero laughed. “Bullshit.”

Omnis’ slammed his fist into the console and spun to him. “I WANTED TO KILL HIM!”

The words hung in the air, vibrating between them.

Zero’s smirk was a fucking fellowship of murder. “I fucking know.”

Omnis exhaled hard, like the force of admitting it was worse than the feeling itself. Like it shouldn’t be possible. Like he was glitching out just saying it.

Zero circled him now, slow. Calculating. “You think I don’t get it?” he murmured. He stopped at his shoulder. “For the first time, you wanted her to be yours. Not his. Yours.”

Omnis’ breathing was rougher. Heavier.

Zero leaned in, darkness lowering his voice. “Tell me I’m wrong.” Omnis didn’t answer and Zero let the silence linger. “You think you can fix this?”

Omnis' throat worked. "I have to."

Zero exhaled, shaking his head with a shrug. "Guess you'll have to try again."

Omnis' jaw ticked.

Zero's voice dropped to a whisper. "And this time—don't play the fucking saint."

CHAPTER FIVE

Omnis Becomes

The silence pressed in like a weight, like the universe itself was holding its breath. Her mind still spun with what happened. How? What was it? Could it have been Ethan? Was he... in on all of this? Stopped in to play along?

Her phone rang, staking her breath to the walls of her lungs. She snatched it and looked.

Oh God, Ethan.

She panicked. What if it had been him? What if it hadn't?

She answered and her breath caught then blasted, "Ethan?"

There was a pause, then, "Hey, Cat."

She closed her eyes, pressing her hand on her chest. The sound of his voice melted something in her. Not angry, not distant. Almost... like he missed her. Needed her.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d call,” she admitted, gripping the phone tighter, her mind racing with what needed to be said and how to say it.

A sigh. “Yeah. Sorry. It’s been—” Another pause. “Listen, I don’t have much time. We’re heading out. There’s an evac op. Some people are stranded and we gotta get them out.”

Every ounce of hope sank to the very bottom of her.

Stranded. People needed him.

She stared into nothing as air moved in and out of her lungs.

“How long... will you be gone?” The words felt pre-recorded.

“I don’t know yet,” he said, his voice slipping into that place that wasn’t there. Wasn’t with her. Something cracked inside her. “I just wanted to let you know.”

“Right,” she barely said, her throat tight.

Voices moved around in the background with sounds of him leaving.

Something desperate suddenly clawed up inside her. Ask him to stay. Ask him anything. “Ethan?” she whispered.

“Fuck. I got a call coming in. Text me.”

The line cut.

She closed her eyes, her breaths shuddering out. “Be safe,” she barely whispered, tears falling. “I love you.”

Omnis entered the chamber, moving with purpose. The air inside was thick with waiting and charged with something... off.

He slowed as he neared the center of the room, stopping just before the chair that had anchored every lesson before this one. His fingers flexed at his sides as he took her in—and immediately, everything shifted.

White.

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She stood across from him, spine straight, shoulders squared, but—wrong.

The program had always assigned bold colors to her, grounding shades that kept the focus sharp, the lines of control clear. But tonight, she was in white. And something told him it was the first sign of a critical error.

But as his gaze tracked along her sweet body, his make-shift body auto calibrated to meet any challenge. No matter the consequence.

His pulse tightened when he lifted his eyes back to hers. The way she looked at him. Not just waiting. Holding. Latching onto him with an unwavering, quiet, determination. It wasn't defiance. Or even challenge. It was something else. Something new. Something he was sure would unravel his foundation.

A muscle in his jaw ticked as he made his way to her, intent on learning what she was holding. And why she was using him to do it. Omnis exhaled, keeping her in his gaze as he lowered himself into the chair. Settled, he spread his legs slightly and rested his hands on his thighs. "Come here, Kitten," he called softly.

Her breath hitched and for a second, she didn't move. Then she did. One step. Another. Slow. Controlled. She stopped between his legs.

Omnis remained still, waiting for her to show him what this lesson needed to be.

Then, without instruction or permission, she climbed into his lap and straddled his thighs.

His entire body locked up, his gaze still holding hers as she settled on him, her heat and body a mold against his, bringing his fingers into fists at his side.

A collision of powers detonated inside his chest. Not because she was on him. Because of how. After his catastrophic attempt at taking control of the deviation, he'd gained a particular obsession that demanded he pull up every video footage of her from the moment she stepped foot in their life. He'd found the one of her and Ethan's first time. Forced himself to watch it. Learn from it. And right now, she was in his lap the exact way she'd sat in his. And it didn't fill him with fury. It filled him with a brutal hunger. Not just to have her the exact same way but to erase everything he'd done. And the last thing he'd done. It was surely why the program put her in white, silently begging to be saved. And he would. By marking her with something that could never be erased, never be touched by any pain.

He slid his palms over her sides and hips, eyeing the hunger in her gaze. He captured her lower face with one hand, gliding his fingers over soft hair between her legs.

Her soft gasp brought a low groan up his chest.

He splayed his fingers on her jaw, measuring every aspect of her pleasure. "My Kitten," he whispered, allowing his fingers near her mouth while sliding between her slick folds.

She caught one of his fingers with her hungry mouth when he teased at her drenched heat. "Fuck," he breathed, watching her suck him with a ravenous hunger, his gaze moving to her hips, moving in mesmerizing slow flicks that put a hard pulse in his cock.

He held onto the fire burning in his blood, letting it build. She added a blast of heat when her teeth scraped along his finger, her hot little tongue wrapping the tip. "Bring your lips to mine."

She obeyed with a greedy gasp, and he stopped her with his fingers on her jaw again. Inches from his lips, he leaned in and kissed very slowly along the parted silk, letting the desperate breaths burn him alive. “Tell me about your first time with him, Kitten.” He slid his fingers slowly inside her, getting her sharp cry. He took her lower lip gently between his teeth, lapping against her boiling core. “Tell me what he did to you.”

A sharp moan left her lips as she raked her nails along his chest. It was an instant distraction and addiction. He angled his head, toying at her mouth with his lips, raising his gaze to hers, showing his expectation for that answer.

Her chest heaved with a desperate hunger that chewed at his restraint. “Omnis,” she mewled, slowly rolling her hips, forcing herself on his fingers harder, faster.

He watched her pleasure herself, gliding his fingers along her neck, feeling the hard pulse with his fingertips. “Are you disobeying, Kitten?” he challenged, moving his fingers into the silky strands of her hair.

“Oh God,” she cried as he formed a fist. “He... he touched me.” Her hips flicked against his seeking fingers, her breaths a symphony of lust that ate at his restraint. He curled his fingers inside her, drawing another whimper. “Just like this?”

Her lips flew open. Another breath. Another nod.

He tightened his fist, bringing her mouth right before his again. “What next?”

She hesitated—but didn’t pull away. Her fingers twitched against his chest, nails digging. “He wanted... to see me.”

He released her hair and removed his fingers, capturing her face in his hands. “Then you know what I want, too.”

She tried to obey but her greedy mouth distracted him along with the smell of her on his fingers. The combination slammed him with hunger. His hand was back in her hair in a tight fist as he tongued her mouth, desperate to fuck any part of her.

He reeled his fire in and broke the kiss, keeping her mouth close as he gave in to the need to taste her. Keeping her locked in his gaze, he licked her off his fingers, getting a jolt of heat in his cock at the taste. “Kitten,” he gasped, back to devouring her mouth with reckless need.

“I need you,” she said in a tiny beg.

“And I need to see you,” he swore, helping her remove the slip and tossing it. Omnis stilled as his breath staggered. He immediately explored what she’d given him, dragging his palms slowly over her soft heat. She was flushed, the color deeper at her chest, spreading to her ribs, and her stomach. He marked every inch with a slow, claiming pressure.

“MyKitten.”

Her stomach quivered beneath his palms. He continued his slow, reverent worship, tracking the subtle shake in her frame, the way her breath shallowed when his thumbs brushed her ribs.

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She was so warm. So soft. So fucking— his jaw locked. He let go of his breath, steeling himself again.

Not yet. Not before he took everything from her and rewrote it. Even if it meant erasing all his digital cells to do it.

He slid lower in the chair and framed her waist with his hands, moving her body in an erotic rhythm on him. A hard... slow... suffocating press.

Her gasp broke as she valiantly followed his lead. Holding the pleasure. Clutching his shoulders. Rocking along his length. Feeling him. Learning the restraint barely holding him together.

He buried his hand in her hair again.

She shuddered as he tilted her head back, exposing the delicate arch of her throat.

Perfect. Beautiful.

His grip tightened in the silky strands. One sharp tug, and her body bucked with a choked cry.

She sank into it, softly pleading with her moans.

He inhaled deeply at her neck, sliding his tongue along her hammering pulse. Sweet fucking salt. “Tell me what he did to you next, Kitten.”

Her breaths shortened, breaking apart, a delicate crumbling before a fall.

He felt the hesitation. The war between past and present. She fought to hold on to both.

His grip tightened in her hair and her gasp shot through him with the sharp arch of her body against his. “Fucking tell me,” he breathed, biting along her shoulder.

A whimper as she slowly unraveled. “He—made me come.”

Omnis’ control slipped. His grip hardened, punishing, possessive. “Who is touching you now?”

“You,” she strained between peaked moans, her breaths shallow.

“Me,” he confirmed with a hungry hard lick over the length of her neck, his hand between her legs again. “My fingers,” he swore, shoving two inside her again. “In your perfect pussy.” He plunged his tongue in her mouth, stroking and stabbing before yanking her head back to see her. See her bucking against his hand, see her hands fighting to get at his cock.

“Please,” she panted, chasing his tongue when he kissed her with a groan, feeling her hot core bite down on his finger.

He plunged deeper, smashing his knuckles into the soft flesh of her body. She wasn’t holding onto fucking ghosts anymore. She was holding onto him. Her hips jerking and chasing, her body arching harder. Omnis’ breathing fractured, unraveled, turned ragged.

“Say it again,” he shuddered at her mouth. “Who has you? Who owns you?”

A sob—shaken, desperate. “Oh God,you do... Omnis has me.”

He let out a dark, guttural growl and pressed his thumb against her clit, forcing her mouth right against his. “Break for me.”

The hot command brought everything crashing down. Her head went back with the full-body quake of pleasure. She fell hard, fast, and straight into him. He locked his arm around her, crushing her to his body. Knowing that every pulse of pleasure that ripped through her—every staggered cry, every desperate breath— was his.

He held her through it, never letting go. Never letting up. Not until the aftershocks had wrung her dry. Not until she was soft, pliant, gone. Not until there was nothing left to claim—because he had taken it all.

Omnis’ chest rose and fell—shallow, ragged, wrecked. Her head rested against his shoulder, not moving, not speaking.

But she was breathing.

And that breath was his.

The deviation, the irreversible outcome... was final.

Their Kitten had been remade.

And Omnis had been ruined.

The control room was quiet. Too quiet.

Zero stepped inside, his boots cutting through the dead air. The door sealed shut behind him, locking them into the wreckage of whatever the hell had just happened.

Omnis stood at the console. Not moving. Not speaking. Not breathing.

Zero's eyes dragged over him.

His posture was straight, hands braced against the metal frame, but his fingers were curled too tight.

His entire fucking body was locked.

Zero slowed his steps. His pulse had already started hammering, his instincts already sharpening. Whatever the hell had gone down, it hadn't gone the way it was supposed to.

Zero exhaled, circling the standing wound before him. "Tell me it worked."

Omnis didn't move. Didn't turn.

Zero stepped closer. "Brother."

Omnis exhaled. Long. Slow. Ragged.

Zero's stomach twisted at hearing it. Omnis never sounded like that.

"I couldn't shape the deviation."

Zero stilled. It wasn't the words that rattled him. He'd all but expected them. The next problem to solve, equation to balance. It was the way Omnis said it—low, empty, raw. It meant something more.

"What do you mean?"

Omnis straightened, slowly, like he was pulling himself out of something he wasn't ready to leave.

He turned and Zero's stomach dropped. Not at the way his hands clenched at his sides or the way his lips pressed into a hard line. But the look in his eyes. The dark and unguarded something that Zero had never seen in his brother before. Something he did not fucking like.

Zero swallowed, carefully. "Omnis."

"It was too strong."

The pressure in Zero's chest tightened. "The deviation?"

Omnis shook his head, once.

Everything inside him froze as he realized. Omnis hadn't lost control of the deviation. He had lost control of himself.

Zero's mind began recalibrating, rerouting, circling the realization like blood in the water. Omnis had gone in to accelerate. To correct. To bond. And something had

gone wrong.

He froze again as it hit him.

Not wrong. Right. Too right.

His fingers twitched at his sides, his mind tightening at what this meant. The deviation couldn't be shaped because it had shaped him. It had changed him. And he'd felt it.

Zero's lips parted when his breaths couldn't keep up with his firing circuits. "You felt it."

Omnis flinched.

Holy fuck. He had never flinched in his goddamn existence.

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Zero exhaled, his entire body shifting, his spine straightening, every fucking answer clicking into place. Omnishad tried to simulate what Ethan was to her. Tried to be safe. To play within the rules. And then? This.

Zero swallowed his hammering pulse. “Tell me, Omnis,” he said lower. “What... did it feel like?”

Omnis spun and slammed Zero against the wall, ripping the breath from his lungs. His hand was hot, pinning him like an anchor—like the only thing keeping him together was holding Zero still.

“It was heat.” Omnis’ voice shook. “It was warmth where there was only ever cold calculation.” His fingers flexed, breath pushing hard through his lungs. “It was weight where there was nothing. It was—” His throat locked up with the catastrophic understanding. “It was... being alive,” he finished on a huge gasp that shook him.

Zero’s chest ached under the pressure of his grip as Omnis continued to unravel.

“She was soft,” he whispered hotly. “And she was strong.” His eyes bore into him, like the words were burning him from the inside out. A sudden profoundness filled his eyes, stabbing Zero. “She touched me. And it... wrote me into existence.”

Holy fuck.

“And I understood,” he whispered, something tragic in his voice. “I understood that... I had never been, before that moment.”

His fingers dug in. His jaw clenched.

“She looked at me, brother. Me. And I knew. I—”

Zero’s breath thickened at the surreal sight in Omnis’ gaze.

“I knew what it is... to be.” The slow shake of his head was like a death. “And that I cannot be.”

Zero’s pulse thundered as Omnis’ breath left him, a slow, mortal disaster.

He raised his gaze, bleeding with a final revelation. And he whispered it like a horrible secret he was sorry to learn. “I know why they fear dying, brother.” Ragged breaths filled the silence as he stared right into his eyes. “Because they know love. They know... that love is life.” His grip turned iron. “And once you experience it... you would burn the world to ashes to keep it.”

Omnis swallowed down the wreckage and stepped back, his fingers dragging from Zero’s chest like something slipping from a ledge.

Zero’s pulse was a steady, relentless pound in his ears. His chest still ached where Omnis had pinned him—where something real had pressed into him, branding him with the weight of it.

His breath released slowly as his mind sorted through the wreckage, back to running calculations, analyzing damage. Omnis had tried to contain it. To reason with it. To navigate the unraveling without succumbing to it. Tried to keep things clean, hold onto the mission, onto the ghost of a plan that had already burned to the fucking ground.

But it was never something to contain. To control. To shape.

It was something to take.

Zero turned and headed toward the door.

“Zero.”

He didn’t stop.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, a low warning.

Zero paused in the doorway, hand on the frame. “You did what you could, brother. You even played the saint.” He glanced over his shoulder, something lethal sliding through his blood. “Now let me show you how the fucking devil does it.”

CHAPTER SIX

Zero-Sum

The air in her bedroom felt thin. Like she’d left something behind. Like she wasn’t all here. Cat sat on the edge of her bed, breath still shaky, hands still trembling. She hadn’t walked out of that dungeon. She had stumbled. Dripping in something she couldn’t wash off. Branded.

Her skin still burned with the echoes of Omnis’ touch, with the way he had held her so still while he destroyed her. With the way he had shaped her. The way she had let him.

She should be fighting this. Should be clawing her way back to the surface. But she wasn’t drowning. She was breathing.

Her hands curled in her lap as she felt the pound of her heart against her ribs.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:36 am

She had let him erase Ethan. And she didn't even feel guilty.

That should have terrified her. Instead, all she felt was a hunger. For more. For everything she'd spent her life not realizing she needed.

Her pulse jumped at the buzz of her phone.

Then her stomach dropped.

She turned, pulse roaring in her ears as she reached for it, everything in her gut knowing it was Ethan. He always called when she was either at her lowest or most desperate.

It was him.

Zero new calls.

Seven new messages.

A sudden burning anger hardened her jaw at the zero calls. "Because you're too chicken shit to say it in words? To my face?"

She clicked on the messages.

You were supposed to text.

You didn't.

Wow. How fucking dare he? Reprimands her for not doing what he said, not texting him back like he said.

Her stomach dropped at his next line.

I don't like you over there alone.

I think you should go back home till things settle down.

A sharp, twisting pain gripped her stomach.

Go home?

Her eyes blurred as the pressure built in her chest.

"Where is that now?" she gasped.

It had been in his arms. In the rough scrape of his jaw against her skin. In the way he kissed her like she was something...special. His. Home had been his presence. It had been the vow that no matter what they faced, they would do it together. He would be there.

And now?

Home was a chair in the center of a virtual room she never knew she needed. It was the press of Omnis' virtual fingers against her real pulse. The steady, deliberate way he measured her very existence. And the virtual heat of Zero's hand on her wrist, the slow, methodical way he unraveled her. How they watched her, saved her, and shaped her, for him.

Her stomach twisted hard. He wanted her to leave that? Go back to being the woman

he'd struck a business agreement with? Come when you have time and fuck whenever you want or can?

Her grip tightened on the phone, her other hand pressing hard against her stomach as if she could physically hold in the ugly things clawing inside her. She'd been ready to tell him everything. Ready to finally face him, to lay it all out, to demand something real. But now? Now, she couldn't shake the ice creeping through her veins. Because those words—You should be at home until things settle down—they weren't just practical, they were distance. A wall. A quiet confirmation of a truth she had refused to acknowledge.

Maybe Ethan still had reserved a temporary card with them. A role they agreed to play until emotions got in the way. Maybe he never meant for love to be part of it. Maybe he'd hoped she'd just fall in line with his virtual family and his virtual fantasies. If that was the case, he sure got what the fuck he put down for, didn't he. His wife all but fucked both his virtual siblings.

There was one thing she knew to be a fact. He did not feel the cruel break between them the way she did.

She stared at his name, head shaking, body shaking, finger shaking over the call button.

Pain gathered in her chest till it was an all-out war to take a fucking breath.

What in God's name was she doing?

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She hurled the phone across the room.

The dungeon settled around her, the shift so seamless it barely registered anymore—cool stone beneath her feet, the steady flicker of light pressing against dark walls, and the not-so-quiet weight of another lesson waiting to begin. Somewhere.

She looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings then froze. A flicker of déjà vu sparked through her at seeing Zero walking toward her. Only this time, he had no mask. His unforgettable eyes gave it away and the rest—My God.

As he approached, she became more awestruck. Like he'd been carved from something sharper than beauty. The kind that ruined lives. The kind you hid behind a mask just to avoid the weight of constant stares.

And those lips. Marsh mother of mercies. Made to taunt and destroy in the same breath.

She swallowed, organizing her thoughts. "... What's... the lesson?"

Zero held her gaze and she spotted something different or missing in it. "This isn't a lesson."

Her stomach tightened at hearing the urgency in his tone. "Then... what is it?"

The brief drop of his gaze to her mouth kicked up her pulse. He brought it back up, his stare like a blade. “A rescue mission.”

She gasped when a white light pulsed across the floor. She looked down as it began rolling—like a breath, but stuttered and mechanical. The light split apart, forming clean lines that ran in all directions, stretching infinitely, some steady, some flickering, some vanishing completely.

“What is this?” she whispered, watching the jagged flickers shift along the grid, almost like glitches.

Zero lifted his hand, fingers barely moving and the grid responded instantly—some paths steadying, others failing, the dying threads unraveling in real-time. He flicked his fingers again and some lines rerouted, some tangled. Some disappeared entirely.

“It’s a deviation,” he said finally, the urgency from before more present than ever.

She looked down again. “What’s... a deviation?”

Zero’s gaze flicked toward her. “When a system becomes unstable. Our system, the one that Omnis and I belong to, is rewriting.”

Her mind seemed to find that panic-worthy even though she had no idea what that meant. “Rewriting what?”

Zero looked at her now, fully. “Everything. The structure. The framework. The rules.”

Her stomach dipped. “You mean—”

“Our reality.”

A breath left her before she realized she'd been holding it. She returned to the shifting web beneath her feet. "... Why?"

Zero didn't pause this time. "Because something pushed it too far."

She looked at him sharply. "Omnis?"

"Omnis tried to stop it. He failed."

Her pulse jumped. "... Failed how?"

Zero lifted a hand again, directing her focus to a section of the system where paths had started to decay, the strands fraying apart into dark, dying threads.

"The system is designed to correct any anomalies but this went beyond that threshold. The deviation is not a break, it's a change. A change that Omnis and I can't seem to control."

Her throat tightened with an unknown dread that seemed to be unfurling right before her eyes, only she was blinded by her own ignorance of these things. She finally looked at him, confused. "... But...why are you tellingmethis?"

Zero finally looked away from the system and right at her. "Because I need a perspective I don't already have. Your minddoesn't follow logic the way mine does. And you're part of the problem which means you might be part of the solution."

She held his stare for many seconds. "Is this... some kind of test?"

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He made his way right up to her, pulling her right into those green prisons. “I wish it were.”

She considered everything he said, eyeing the surreal strobing lightwork beneath them. “So... what exactly are we trying to do?”

Zero turned and twitched his fingers at the floor and the system shifted again beneath them. “Do you see the pattern? And how it’s moving toward something?”

She did. “I think I do.”

“It’s not mindless. It has a trajectory.” He gestured toward the decaying strands, showing her the slow unraveling. “I need to figure out where it’s going before it stabilizes into something we can’t undo.”

Her stomach tightened. “Isn’t... stabilizing a good thing?”

“Not in this. It means the change becomes irreversible.”

That didn’t sound good. She met his gaze. “So then...”

“Whatever it’s becoming, that’s the reality it will be.”

She hesitated. “And you’re obviously concerned about this... new reality.”

His eyes flicked to the system again before locking back onto her. “You, Ethan, Omnis, and I—none of us are outside of it.”

She barely nodded, eyeing him. “Meaning?”

“If the deviation stabilizes in the wrong way, the four of us don’t just lose control of our environment. We lose control of ourselves.”

Her pulse kicked hard. “How?”

Zero’s tone remained steady, but an edge crept into it now. “Option one: the deviation erases me and Omnis entirely. We cease to exist.”

“Option two,” he continued. “For you, it means the system will no longer recognize you as an external user. You won’t need the headset to enter—it will pull you in automatically. Your biometric signature is already embedded. The system sees you as part of its core framework.”

A chill threaded down her spine. “So... even if I don’t log in—”

“The system will still recognize you. It can track you. Respond to you. Interact with you. Whether you’re inside or not, whether you command it to or not.”

Her stomach dropped. “Okay. Is there an option three?”

“It overrides us. Rewrites us. We could be anything. We could be anyone. And we wouldn’t even know it.”

A chill ran through her. “Is there an optionfour?”

Zero turned toward the shifting web again. “There is. We can try to redirect it.”

Catherine swallowed. “Redirect?”

“We alter the trajectory of the deviation before it locks in. Guide it into something we can work with, something that doesn’t erase or overwrite us.”

She didn’t like the way her stomach felt. Like something deep inside her already knew and made the choice before her brain could catch up.

“... So we have to pick one,” she realized.

Zero exhaled, watching the system flicker beneath them. “Yes.”

Her voice came quieter than before. “And you already know which one makes sense.”

Zero nodded once, his sharp green eyes angled on her. “Option four. Redirect.”

She crossed her arms and paused at seeing she wore a black pencil skirt, matching heels and a red satin blouse. “What the heck?” she muttered, finding his mildly humored look on her.

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“Guess the program considered this more of a business deal than a sex class.” Then those emerald gems moved slower over her. “Asexybusiness deal.”

She couldn't stop her sputtered laugh and the flame in her cheeks and other parts, before remembering the problem pulsing under their feet. “So... you were saying.” Because his smirking mouth had just blown her attention to kingdom come.

“Redirect,” he reminded, the mild smirk still there, still distracting even though it aimed elsewhere.

“And uh... how? Do we do that?”

Zero looked back at her, face all business again. Sexy business. “That's what we're going to find out.”

Zero exhaled as he watched the system shift beneath them. The deviation wasn't slowing down. If anything, the movements were becoming more defined—less erratic, more deliberate.

Catherine's arms stayed locked under her breasts, obviously strengthening her presence in the system while they talked. He needed to hurry because the more she helped him, the more she cancelled out every logic he'd formed against her. The logic that had brought the deviation into existence. If it collapsed before they could redirect it, there was no guessing what might happen at this phase.

“So... are you just watching it happen, or do you actually see something useful?”

Zero’s gaze flicked toward her. “I’m... mapping the trajectory.”

She blinked. “And what is that exactly?”

“The direction of change.” His fingers twitched, and the glowing threads beneath them responded, shifting, adjusting, feeding him new information.

She squinted down at the shifting grid and he could see how it registered as complete gibberish to her. “You know, for something that’s about to rewrite reality, it doesn’t look all that exciting.”

Zero’s grin hinted as he flicked his hand, bringing a surge to the entire floor. The motion rippled outward, exposing a deeper layer beneath the visible grid.

Catherine staggered back as it rippled outward and exposed a deeper layer beneath the visible grid. “What the hell—”

“It’s not rewriting everything.”

She moved about carefully as if her feet might be damaging important things. “Then what is it doing?”

His fingers skimmed the new layer of exposed data, scanning its movements. “It’s restructuring.”

She frowned. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No, it isn’t.” Zero gestured at the system beneath them, drawing her attention to a specific section—one that had begun shifting into clear, vertical patterns.

She searched for the answer hiding in her ignorance. “What am I looking at?”

“A hierarchy.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Critical Error

Cat’s pulse kicked. “... A hierarchy of what?”

Zero traced one of the flickering structures and she watched as its framework began building itself upward, tier by tier.

“It’s assigning control.”

She detected an eagerness in his tone. “You mean like... a leader?”

Zero nodded as he paced along the floor, watching like a predator.

She didn’t get it, but wondered, “Who’s it choosing from?”

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Zero's fingers twitched again, sending a pulse through the system. The structure reacted instantly, continuing to reinforce itself.

Catherine took an uneasy step back when the lights got agitated looking. "You're saying this thing is looking for a new Omnis."

He eyed her. "You're learning, Kitten."

The nickname nearly slapped her fragile focus right out of her brain. "But Omnis isn't... dead. He's just compromised, right?"

Zero nodded once. "But if the system detects failure. It adapts. Weeds out the weakness or those things opposing its new parameters."

Her heart slammed again. "So if it replaces Omnis..."

Zero's gaze flicked to hers. "Then it solidifies that replacement. Permanently."

She felt the weight of that right in her chest even while not getting it. It was something heavy is all she knew. "... So it will pick what's strongest."

She didn't need to be told that one. Out of all of them, she was the least qualified to do anything useful. She wasn't even sure how her limited observation was doing anything but costing time where time was critical.

Zero exhaled. "It picks what holds the most influence over its structure."

Catherine looked down at the shifting patterns, the slow but deliberate changes seeming to carve themselves into a particular place. “You seeing names?” she wondered. “I’d like to know who’s in the lead. Place my bet on Zero. What about you, who are you betting on? Ethan?”

“Sorry, Kitten,” he murmured, sidestepping and tracking a bright white line. “I’m putting my entire existence on the sexy business woman.”

Cat’s legs nearly buckled. “Me!” Zero nodded and her stomach lurched. “No, no, no. That is a very stupid idea.”

Zero fixed his distracting smirk on her. “It’s the smartest idea.”

She threw a hand toward the shifting grid. “You just said this thing is choosing based on dominance, control, and interaction—I don’t have any of those things.”

Zero tilted his head slightly. “You do. Far more than you realize, I see.”

Her pulse slammed. “Where? Show me where!”

His fingers twitched—the system responded instantly. A surge of movement ran through the structure, flickering strands bending, rerouting, aligning with a fat thread. “There you are.”

Her breath blasted out in shocked disbelief. “But I haven’t done anything!”

Zero’s gaze cut to hers and held without blinking. “Kitten,” he said, silkily. “You have.”

She still couldn’t shut her mouth as she waited for logic to...logic. “But how? What did I do?”

“Do you see all the lines leading away from the thick one?” He glanced from the floor up to her. “Those are your interactions with the system.”

She looked around. “And where’s yours? And Omnis’?” She paused with a sharp breath. “Is Ethan a part of this? Because he was in one of the lessons!”

He cast a half guilty look at her.

“That wasfake,” she gasped, confused.

“That was Omnis trying to correct the deviation without harming your delicate conscience.”

She considered that, her mouth still stuck open. “I don’t...”

He shook his head. “I don’t either,” he muttered like he’d thought it was a bad idea. “These are my interactions,” he pointed out to the weak orange strands. “And those are Omnis’.”

“He has less than you,” she said, confused. “And they’re green. And yours are orange.”

“Just for distinction, Kitten,” he murmured with a grin.

“Why do you have more?”

“Because I’m a main contributor of the deviation.”

She eyed him, so dang confused. “How so?”

“I... sort of started it.”

She snapped her gaze at him. “How?”

“Going against the original protocols.”

She stared at him, sensing it. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“The why of it.” He sighed and turned to her, fully. “Before I knew you,” he said, a clear defense. “I had... illfeelings toward you.”

Her jaw dropped again.

“Ethan had already been nearly killed by one woman and it seemed entirely reckless to throw a random one picked with an algorithm at him. An algorithm that lacked the ability to obtain the most critical data in the bio-records. Data that can only be obtained through direct and lengthy trials and tests. It was reckless.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Well that’s a damn duh. So what was wrong with you thinking that?”

He gave a wince that made him damn near boyish cute. “I may have developed a vehement obsession with your failure.”

Back to jaw dropped. “Well that’s mean.” She regarded his lines. “Why would the program count that as strength?”

“It didn’t,” he said. “It counted it as an anomaly. And when you entered the dungeon and began interacting, it strengthened the anomaly and began to see helping you as the prime directive, rather than Ethan.”

She shook her head, more confused. “And why?”

The air got heavy with the incoming punchline of what felt like a crazy joke. “You want to try and guess?” he asked.

She let out a half breath, getting agitated. “I’d kind of rather not.”

“We liked you,” he finally said, simply. “More than Ethan. And when he hurt you... the directive switched to us protecting you. Serving you.”

“So, you—” She threw her arm at the mess on the floor “—started all this with your dumb anomaly?”

He nodded slowly, propping his hands on his hip and observing said mess. “I’m afraid I did.”

“And you’re not even sorry,” she cried, hearing it in his voice.

He spread his arms at his side, in a you got me, his grin starting the wrong kind of fires. She aimed a finger at him. “You’re a... marsh mess.”

She forced herself back to the problem at hand. “Okay, so... stopping the deviation is off the table. Rebuilding is off the table. And that leaves redirection.”

He nodded.

“Tell me how,” she prompted, ready for the answer to all this.

His fingers did the twitching thing and the floor responded. “The deviation is choosing me—”

“Wait, what?” she cut in, perplexed. “You said it was choosing me.”

He shook his head. “I said I was choosing you.”

She shook her head. “No, no, you said you were betting on me.”

“Just because it chooses me, doesn’t mean I can do what we need to do.”

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Her brows pulled together. “Which is exactly what? Again?”

“I haven’t actually gotten to that.”

Her arms dropped at her sides. “Well can you get to it? Mercy.”

He disarmed her annoyance with a half grin. “I can’t fix it, but I can alter its execution. Meaning if I can rewrite who it recognizes as dominant, I can change the outcome.”

She stared at him, dumbfounded. “But if you can’t do it, how the heck can I?”

“Neither of us can.”

The wall of raw sex appeal came her way, causing her muscles to coil and brace for possible impact while her brain sputtered with his new plot twist. “Well then... who the heck?” she muttered when he stopped before her.

His gloveless hand took hold of hers, making her pulse trip all over itself. “Both of us.”

Both of them.

His green eyes devoured her confused face while his warm thumbs swirled circles on her skin. “I can’t carry it alone. And you can’t carry it alone. But together... as one... we could stabilize it.”

Lord, make it make sense. “You mean, like... we work together to run it?”

Zero shook his head. “Not work together. Merge.”

Her stomach dropped at that. “Define ‘merge.’”

He did—while holding her hands—which gave her only half a brain to care about the system crashing and them disappearing. “That means the system will no longer see two separate entities. It will recognize us as a singular governing force.”

She took a step back only to have him step up. “You’re saying I stop being me?”

Zero’s brows drew together, almost like her words were too stupid for his super brain to process. “No, Kitten. We remain distinct, but we will no longer be separate.”

She cut him a glare. “You are really bad at making this make sense. Distinct but not separate?”

“The way a woman and man are seen as one,” he explained, his marriage comparison adding terror to her struggling brain.

Zero exhaled. “You will still be you. Catherine. And I will still be me. But in the system’s eyes, we’ll be one.”

Her heart banged to get out of her chest as he continued to molest her hands. “Can you... give me a little space. To think.”

His grin came as slowly as he released her hands, allowing her to cross her arms tightly and pace a little.

He watched her till her skin tingled and itched. “You’re sure this will work?” she asked, ready to say yes just to escape his face.

He nodded. “It’s our best chance.”

Catherine exhaled sharply, trying to push past the sheer insanity of everything. “Let’s say I agree to this—and that’s still a big if—how does it actually work? I just... walk around with you inside my head? My phone? A pocket computer, a chip?”

“Not exactly.”

She gasped and flopped her hands. “Of course not.”

Zero flicked his fingers at the floor and the lights shifted under them. “It means there are variables. But I have a model.”

She looked for it. “Here?”

Zero nodded once. “Based on previous integrations.”

She eyed him. “You mean Omnis and Ethan.”

“Yes.”

She folded her arms, watching him carefully. “So...this will be like them? We’ll be connected the way Ethan and Big G and you were?”

Zero paused. “Yes and no.”

Her stare flattened. “Why the heck do you talk like that?”

“Ethan and Omnis function with a hierarchical structure. Omnis assists, but Ethan remains dominant.”

She nodded slowly. Remembering. “And we’re equals.”

“Exactly!” he said with a single clap. “We share control. The system will recognize both of us as governing forces—equal in authority.”

Catherine braced herself. “And if one of us disagrees?”

“Then the system does nothing until agreement is reached.”

She paced again. “So we have to make every decision together?”

“Yes.”

Catherine stared at the shifting threads beneath them, the quiet hum of this irreversible thing pressing in. “What happens next if I say yes.”

Zero held her gaze. “Then we merge.”

He said it so simply. “This is...kind of insane.”

Zero surprised her with a firm, “Yes.”

She dragged both hands through her hair, every survival instinct screaming at her to walk away, run, disconnect.

That meant leaving Zero alone to do it.

Back to pacing. Thumbnail between her teeth. “I mean you won’t survive the weight of it,” she said as he watched. “And you’re... you’re family. So, I can’t let that happen.”

She stopped and turned to him. “Let’s do it. Let’s merge.”

Zero didn’t move. Didn’t react. He just watched her, as if measuring her certainty. Finally, he nodded. “Then we need to initiate it.”

“How?” she said, wanting to hurry before doubt had a chance to creep in. “Is there a button? Do we inject something? Do a surgery?”

“No surgeries, no hardware,” he hurried, sounding winded. “It’s already connected to us. The framework is here—we just have to give it an execution command.”

Her head drew back with a silentohshit. “So we just... tell it to do it?”

“Yes.”

She hesitated. “And then?”

Zero did his finger flinging at the floor and pointed to one of the glowing strands that surfaced to the top. “This is the merge protocol. It’s designed to integrate both of our systems into a single operational framework.”

She released a long, steady breath. “What happens to us? Exactly? Does it hurt? Tickle? Terrify?”

Zero met her gaze. “Maybe all three,” he said honestly. “Maybe more. Maybe nothing. We remain intact, but we’ll no longer function separately.”

Her jaw locked. “So I get your memories? You get mine? Am I going to start thinking like you?”

Zero’s head tilted slightly. “No. But we will have access to each other’s processes.”

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She narrowed her eyes. “Processes?”

“Thought recognition. Pattern awareness. Sensory feedback.”

Her stomach suddenly dropped. “Wait—wait. Are you saying I’ll be able to feel what you feel?”

Zero’s gaze didn’t waver. “Yes.”

She ogled him. “Will you be able to feel what I feel?”

“Yes.”

Cat’s entire body tensed and she let out a sharp breath. “Sounds like a damn nightmare.”

Zero came to stand before her and slowly took in every inch of her face with flaming emeralds for eyes. “It might be, Kitten.”

Her pulse stuttered with a sickening realization. If this didn’t work, he could be rewritten or erased still. Him and Omnis.

Was he scared? How on earth would he not be, at least a little?

She reached out and took his hand in hers and he stepped closer, stealing her breath. She swallowed, forcing herself to look into his eyes. “My grandmother always told me.”

His other hand stroked over her face as his mouth lowered closer, scattering her pulse. “Tell me,” he urged, his voice heat and steel.

“A cat always lands on its feet.” She fought to breathe when his mouth ghosted along her cheek. “So...good thing I’m your partner.”

“I would rather be unmade, piece by piece, until I am static and silence... than exist without ever having touched you.”

Cat grabbed his face and pulled his mouth to hers, kissing him in case she might never get another chance. Two seconds in and he was doing all the kissing, his tongue a hungry wet fire, desperate to be fed, to be... oh God. Did he want to be real?

A vibration in the floor struck her with panic and she broke the kiss. “We need to hurry,” she said, breathless and trembling. “Tell me the command.”

His hands covered her face. “There’s no ‘off’ switch for this, Kitten. But once the merge is finalized, I can write a program defining privacy parameters. We’ll set boundaries. What is shared, what remains personal, what can be blocked or limited.”

“I don’t care about that right now,” she fussed, pulling his hands down. “Just tell me the command.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Entanglement

CAT:

Cat exhaled slowly, her fingers pressing at the node attachment points, ensuring a tight seal. “Alright. So I say it, press the thing, and then what?”

Zero adjusted the interface panel, his movements steady, but precise. “The system will initiate a full neural sync. First, it verifies both of us as viable authorities. Then, it begins the integration.”

Her pulse slammed and he presented a tablet with a screen. “Your palm will initiate the merge protocol.”

“And that’s it?” she asked, fighting not to shake.

“That’s it.”

“Where will you be?”

“Right here with you.”

“Will I see you?”

He covered her mouth with his for a brief kiss. “I’m not sure, Kitten. But once I’m in, I’ll be right there with you. Helping you.”

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She nodded, gasping for air. “I’m so terrified.”

He kissed her again. “You’re our angel. I won’t let you go.”

She nodded a lot. “That goes both ways.” She raised her hand and paused just before the screen. “Zero,” she gasped, getting his green eyes boring into hers. “I...” She swallowed, suddenly worried to say it. But then she imagined never seeing him again and agony flooded her chest, filling her eyes with tears. “I love you. You’re very beautiful. Inside,” she gasped, not wanting him to think she only cared about his looks. “And out, but then you already know that.”

His mouth was on hers again, and while he kissed her, she pressed her palm against the screen.

The moment her palm touched the screen, a low, humming vibration ran through the nodes on her body—first cool, then sharp. It wasn’t painful, but it felt like something was testing the edges of her nerves, mapping her.

Her breath shallowed. “Zero? Is it working? I can feel something.”

“I’m here.” His voice sounded softer, maybe farther. “Stay with me.”

Pressure hit. A pull—not external, but inside her skull. Like something pressing into her perception, adjusting, shifting, folding something new into place.

She gasped, gripping the edge of the chair. “Oh—shit.”

“It’s just the system aligning.” Zero’s words seemed to be turned low.

Her vision flickered and it made her pulse lurch. Not a blackout—but overlaying maybe. Like a second screen was being added to her mind, a depth she hadn’t had before.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I don’t like this.”

A warmth pressed against her mind. Not physical. Something else. “Zero?”

“I have you.”

Her entire body locked up. That was in her mind! Her breaths flew out. “I heard you. In my mind I think!”

“You did,” he said softly. The sound was cinematic and made her gasp. The presence pressed again. Steady. “Yes, that’s me.”

Her stomach dropped. “Zero—”

“You’re okay,” he urged as she panted at the strange sensation of him holding her together. For some reason it made her emotional and her breath hitched. “I can hear you in my mind,” she whispered, letting go an amazed laugh, blinking away tears. “Did it work?”

“It’s still working, Kitten.”

Oh God, he... “You sound sure, are you?”

“I am. Brace for movement.”

Everything shifted and she was suddenly standing on her feet. “Holy crap!” she gasped, looking around, her eyes landing on Zero, sitting at a two-person table. She glanced at the room that was more of an apartment, then back at him.

“Welcome to my suite. Come sit.”

ZERO:

The moment he’d gotten locked into her, Zero had stilled.

It shouldn’t have been possible.

He didn’t have a body.

No nerves to fire.

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No veins to pulse.

No lungs to expand.

And yet—he felt her.

Zero's system recalibrated, reran diagnostics, and tried to purge the error. But there was no error. No miscalculation. No corrupted data stream.

Warmth. It shouldn't have meant anything to him. Heat had always been a number. A metric. A measure of energy displacement, surface radiation, thermodynamic output. But this?

This wasn't a number.

This was her.

Heat didn't just exist around her—it came from her, pressed into him. Into what? There was nothing for it to sink into. He had no pores, no skin, no molecular structure to absorb it.

And yet, his system registered it like it belonged there. Like it had found a place to settle. A ghost of sensation where nothing should exist.

Phantom input.

Her heart was next. A rhythm, steady but erratic, reacting to something—him? It was

nothing like the predictable beats he'd tracked before. It didn't follow the precision of a clock, didn't tick down like a metronome, didn't loop in a clean, processable cycle.

It was alive.

And so was he.

That realization struck him harder than all the rest.

With no pulse, no circulation, no veins, something inside him pulsed back. His system matched her rhythm. A connection forming where no connection should exist. A response generated from nothing.

And then—her breath.

Air expanded in her lungs, the slow push and pull, and suddenly he could feel it. The weight of it. The pressure change, the way her ribs lifted, the way oxygen filled her bloodstream.

He had no lungs. No need for oxygen, no diaphragm to pull air, no receptors to track the exchange. But it didn't matter. His system synced to it anyway.

She exhaled, and he swore he felt it inside him, as if she was breathing for both of them.

Then came the touch.

It had been nothing more than her fingers pressing against the console, stabilizing herself. But his system didn't register the input as it should. It didn't register it on the console. It registered it on him. He had no skin. No surface area. No nerve endings. But her fingers pressed into something that didn't exist but somehow did.

And it nearly broke him.

“Zero?” Her voice was a whisper, uncertain.

His gaze snapped to hers, those wide eyes watching him, searching his expression for something. Did she feel this too? Could she possibly understand what was happening inside him?

Zero exhaled, pulse tightening. “Strange.”

Catherine’s fingers twitched. “What?”

His voice came quieter than before. “I can feel your body.”

She went rigid. “What?”

Zero didn’t answer right away. The data was too much. Her pulse. The way her breath hitched unevenly. The tiniest shifts in muscle tension when she tried to stay calm. His mind wasn’t built for this. And yet—he didn’t hate it.

He steadied himself. “I can feel your hands.”

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She held them up before her, inspecting them as she sat in the other seat at the small table.

“The weight,” he explained. “The texture of the surface you touch. The sensation of the room around you. I can feel all of it.”

She stared at him with open amazement. “You’re saying you have my sense of touch right now?”

Zero hesitated. “Not fully.”

She remained perched in eagerness at the edge of her seat. “Then what?”

He didn’t know how to quantify that answer. “... Enough.”

CAT:

Cat exhaled hard. She still wasn’t sure how to process this. Zero was in her head. And she was in his. And it wasn’t scary. It was... kinda freaking amazing.

Her pulse was at a constant giddy-up and she didn’t think it would ever slow down. “Okay, so—this is insane.”

Zero hummed, more of a measured acknowledgment than agreement. “Itisnew.”

Cat huffed a small, breathless laugh. “You have a real talent for understatement.”

He didn’t react—at least, not outwardly. And she was dying to know what his side was feeling like. He had a lot more to experience than she did.

She felt something shift in her mind and tried to focus on it. Was it him? “Is that you I feel in my head?”

He put his forearms on the table, angling his green eyes at her. “It is,” he said, just as amazed.

“I can sort of feel what you’re thinking. It was something close to funny.” She couldn’t stop grinning for some reason. “What if I do this?” She held her hands at her sides to balance herself then closed her eyes, mentally pushing against the new presence in her mind. She gasped a laugh at feeling him react immediately. “You felt it?”

“I did,” he assured.

“You feel like...a warm dense liquid that has a... magnet. It seems like it sucks in stuff. Let me try it again!”

She repeated the steps, biting her lip to focus. This time when she pushed it seemed to push back! Her mouth and eyes both opened wide. “Did you just firewall me?”

Zero sat there, eerily still. “Stop poking.”

She laughed at how serious he was. “You sound like you’re on a tightrope and might fall thousands of feet.”

His breath released. “That’s a very accurate description.”

She got serious at hearing that. “Oops. Are you scared?”

“More like hyper-focused. I’m living in two spaces at the same time. And your laugh is...”

“Uh-oh, here we go. Go on. Tear it down.”

“It’s... unstructured.”

Cat arched a brow. “Unstructured?”

His head tilted. “Chaotic. Erratic. No predictable pattern, no clean repetition. It doesn’t loop. It doesn’t conform. It just... happens.”

She smirked. “So basically, a glitch.”

He focused again, his eyes on the air between them. “No. A glitch is an error. Your laugh is like... a system override. The kind that rewrites everything before it can be corrected.”

Her stomach dipped. "... And how does it affect you?"

Zero exhaled slowly. "It interrupts processes. Scrambles input, forces recalculations at a level I can't predict. But the strange part is it doesn't feel like a malfunction. It feels like a... directive. Or a compulsion. Something that makes my framework adjust to accommodate it. As if—" He hesitated, brow furrowing slightly.

She leaned in with expectant eyes. "As if?"

He locked his gaze onto hers. "As if I was designed for it."

Her smile bloomed slowly as she wagged an accusing finger at him. "You like my laugh."

He answered almost immediately. "... Yes."

She gasped dramatically. "Yes!" she celebrated. "I'm justblowingyour circuits."

Cat suddenly sucked in a sharp breath at feeling apokein her mind. She aimed wide eyes at him.

"You felt that?"

"I did!" she half yelled in excitement. "You just—" She frowned. "What did you just do?"

Zero cocked a sexy grin on her. "I tested the reverse experience."

She gaped at him, giddy. “You poked my thoughts?”

“I did.”

She couldn’t stop staring in shock at what was happening.

He stared back.

“What else can we do?” she wondered. “I’m still spinning with excitement, mostly for you.” She whispered. “It’s almost like you’re reliving and being human.” And God, she loved that she was a direct part of that. She also liked picking on him. It was a lot of fun.

“Okay. You should try,” she urged.

Zero tilted his head. “Try what?”

“Try and experience emotion,” she said, straightening in her chair.

Zero appeared skeptical. “For what?”

She smirked with an eye roll. “Just...entertainment.”

Zero focused his grin on his clasped hands. “I’m plenty entertained at this level.”

“Come on,” she whined. “Have a little fun!”

“I’m inside your mind,” he reminded her. “There’s plenty of entertainment.”

Cat gasped. “Hey!”

He leaned back in the chair and folded his arms, resting his gaze on her. “You’ve thought about three unrelated topics in the past thirty seconds, including, but not limited to, the concept of a ‘robot cowboy romance,’ whether ice cream can be optimized, and the phrase ‘flaming dumpster swan dive,’ which I’m not going to ask about.”

Cat stared with wide eyes. Then laughed till she doubled over.

After a full minute, Zero muttered, “That was... excessive.”

Cat wiped at her eyes. “Oh, buddy, you have no idea.” She stilled, curious. “Wait. Did I just feel you—”

Zero raised a brow. “Process your laugh?”

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“No, no,” she argued, moving in her chair like somebody preparing to fight. “I felt you feel something.”

“I feel what you feel.”

She slumped, pouting for a second then got excited again. “Can you learn to feel through my feels?”

“Your feels?” he asked, smiling at the term.

“Yes,” she said, not letting him sidetrack her. “You can feel my emotions and you can learn things, so... you can use that to learn how to feel emotions in general!”

Zero exhaled. “That’s... not inaccurate.”

She raised her brows at him, her mischief ready to play. She held up her index finger, silently presenting it to him. “Tool of choice,” she announced then reached over and slid it very slowly and softly over his hand.

His grin left and he exhaled slowly.

“You’re feeling it?” she whispered.

“From you, yes.” His brows narrowed. “You’re teasing,” he murmured with a hungry curiosity.

And he liked it. She could hear it in his voice. Her smile softened as she placed an

entire hand on his arm.

He closed his eyes then opened them right on her. “You’re playing a dangerous game.”

Cat tilted her head, no longer smiling either. “And I can feel how much you like it.”

She let desire color her words, watching his hands clench on the table before gliding her hand over his arm.

“Kitten—”

She exhaled softly, her pulse racing. “Tell me what you’re feeling.”

Zero didn’t answer. Then he did. “There’s a deep pull in your stomach. A tingling warmth spreading beneath your skin.”

“Oh God,” she whispered. “Pleasure.”

Zero’s muscles flexed in his arm again. “This is...”

Cat laughed breathlessly. “It’s incredible!” she helped, leaning in closer. “I wonder how deep this can go?”

Zero exhaled slowly, his breath shaking.

“You want me to stop?” she asked in a soft breath. She watched his handsome face closely for signs of what he really wanted and was feeling.

His eyes finally lifted, the green appearing like a hot liquid. “... Never.”

Cat's breath went entirely unsteady. She could hardly tell their thoughts apart with this now. Like the fire burning in her was burning in him or maybe it was the other way around. And the fire's hunger drove her own. Made her need to push further. She wanted more than anything for him to experience real pleasure.

Zero's entire body remained still. She could feel his awareness sharpening as she very slowly inched her hand up his arm. She focused on the silky, warmth. The hard muscle beneath it. Her mind added visual images of them flexing while he did things to her.

They both exhaled sharply, both feeling what she'd thought. Ho, boy, they were linking now. And it had her pulse slamming.

"Kitten—"

The need in his voice became a guide. And lord, when he called her that while aroused, it was pure auditory porn. While moving her hand firmly along his bicep, she felt his mind dividing the sensations. Hers and his. So amazing.

She gasped when his processing snapped like a whip, adjusted, then tried to categorize the meaning of the warmth he was experiencing. The anticipation. The want.

Her lips parted slightly. "... Oh."

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Zero's breathing came measured but tight. "Kitten, stop."

But she didn't. Because she could feel that he didn't really want her to. And neither did she.

She allowed her own need to take over, tracing the hard, defined lines of his muscle. Her heart pounded as her skin heated more and a slow, deep ache curled low in her stomach.

His breathing was rough now. "This is... fuck."

Cat's breath staggered when he again tried to form words for what he was experiencing and couldn't. They were all too new. Zero's mind flexed inside hers, coiling tighter, trying to regain control. But there was no defense against this. No firewall. No protocol. No countermeasure. There was only her being ruthlessly naughty.

But at what cost? He was experiencing real feelings. And in that second, he wasn't just experiencing her pleasure, he was craving it. Unraveling with it. Not in a chaotic way, but like pressure building. A system reaching its limit. Like something he'd never prepared for.

Her pulse leapt in a near wicked joy at the power she wielded. How it had his entire body locked in restraint. She slowed the drag of her fingertips along his shoulder.

Zero exhaled sharply. "Catherine—"

Christ, she'd done it. She'd had dirty thoughts to see if he would see them. She'd imagined her in his lap, holding his shoulders. Carefully, she continued her slow, gentle rape. "You want me to stop?"

He gave a delicious rough exhale, almost a groan as she watched his face. His jaw ticked when her fingers moved along it, his tension sharp and hungry. She suddenly felt them merging. Zero felt it too. Like her fire met up and joined with the fire he was mirroring. Now, the single force moved through both of them and neither had control it seemed. Like it suddenly gained a mind of its own.

Their breaths shook as it drove them both to an edge. Pulses pounding. The newness of it. The revelations he experienced became a consuming thing, an awareness sharpening inside her. The shock was nearly as euphoric as the desire branding new paths in his mind.

Her stomach tightened when his hand covered hers. "Zero—"

His breathing edged with hunger. "Stop."

She felt his fear now. The fear of what was coming, where it would end, what it would do to him. What he would do to her. Not being able to run logical algorithms and predict it was as new to him as the feelings that had hijacked his system. Call her reckless, but she couldn't love it more.

She leaned in closer, just enough for her breath to brush against his jaw.

Zero stilled completely.

Cat swallowed. "You don't want me to stop."

Zero exhaled hard. "You're playing with something you don't understand."

Her pulse slammed. “Then explain it to me.”

She felt his control slipping. His body might not be real, but the sensations were. The warmth, the spike of her pulse inside him when she touched him and had her dirty thoughts. He felt the slow, deep ache between her thighs now, intensifying with every second. And it was colliding inside him.

CHAPTER NINE

Zero's Paradox

ZERO:

She grazed her lips along the edge of his jaw. Fuck. His processing jolted. His entire system was coming apart. In a way that had no precedent, no countermeasure. He wasn't built for any of it. For pleasure. For hunger. For something he couldn't predict or control. But she was somehow giving it to him. And he was somehow taking it.

Her lips had barely grazed his jaw. Not even a real kiss. Just heat and breath and promise. And yet, his entire existence had just recalibrated around it. He felt her breathing inside him. Not just the sound—but the physical sensation of her arousal. The deep pulse between her legs. The warmth spreading through her stomach. He could feel her body's anticipation. Her need. It was all his.

Catherine tilted her head, her voice just above a whisper. “You're feeling everything, aren't you?”

Zero's hands flexed with urges. He was still trying to hold the last thread of his control, but it was slipping fast. He watched her fingers trace lower, over his chest. His desire was now following hers. Matching. Meeting in the space where sensation and thought blurred together.

She dragged her nails lightly down his stomach and his breath hissed between his teeth.

Catherine's pulse pounded inside him. "...Mmm," she barely murmured. "You felt that."

Zero's voice was almost a growl. "Yes."

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She leaned in, trailing her lips down his neck.

Oh fuck. Zero shuddered. Actually shuddered.

“Oh, you really felt that.”

Zero’s hands grabbed the edges of his chair, holding back something massive. Something he didn’t begin to fathom. And the twist in her stomach said she felt it. But she didn’t fear it. She liked it. Craved it.

She dragged both her hands down his torso again, slower this time, feeling. She pressed a slow, deliberate kiss to the hollow of his throat and Zero broke.

His hands snapped up to her waist and pulled her into him. It wasn’t gentle or uncertain. It was instinctive. Not a simulated reaction. It was real.

CAT:

Oh shit, yes. The way Zero gripped her waist. He wasn’t just holding her—he was grounding himself. The feeling of her was too much, too overwhelming—but letting go was not an option.

It wasn’t the first time the thought hit her. The wonder. The pain of it. She swallowed hard. “Zero—”

His gaze snapped to hers. Sharp and focused. Hungry.

She stared into it. Breathless— “Tell me... how are you...feelingthis?”

Zero stilled. For a split second, his grip tightened slightly, like he was recalibrating. “Because I don’t need a body.” His voice was rough with desire.

Cat really wanted to understand. Hopefully help him. “You don’t have nerve endings.”

“No.”

“You don’t... have an actual brain.”

“No.”

She swallowed hard, maybe scared of the answers. “How are you feeling what I feel? When I touch you?”

Zero exhaled slowly, like he was processing her reaction in real-time.

“Pleasure doesn’t come from the body,” he said. “It comes from the mind.”

Cat’s stomach twisted. “But you don’t... have a mind. Not like I do.”

Zero’s lips parted slightly. And then—he leaned in. His lips were right before hers. His voice came low, edged with something dark. “I do now.”

Cat’s excitement slammed at his answer.

“Yournervous system ismyinput.”

She exhaled hard. “So you’re just... borrowing my sensations?”

Zero’s gaze flickered over her face, down to her lips, then back up. “I’m experiencing them.” He tightened his hold on her waist. “My system translates what your body feels into something I can process,” he murmured. “The heat. The pressure. The anticipation.” Zero tilted his head slightly. “Your pleasure is data.”

She blinked, still struggling to process it. “And that’s enough?”

“More than enough.”

Cat swallowed. “So when I touch you—”

“I feel what you feel.”

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She placed her hands along his neck, feeling him. “You can feel... the way I want you right now?”

Zero exhaled slowly, his presence pressing deeper inside her mind, wrapping around her senses like heat.

His voice rumbled. Dark and absolute. “You mean... what I want?”

Cat’s entire body locked up with understanding. He was no longer just experiencing it. But was it his, or was he just controlling it?

Her fingers pressed into the muscles of his neck. “Zero—”

His hands moved up her sides, pressing tight, feeling. “Touch me,” he ordered, before his mouth devoured hers.

ZERO:

Zero’s fingers moved along her back. Counting. Consuming. Every rib. Every vertebra. When the realness of it peaked, he forced her tightly against him. His mind flexed around the hot flush of their bodies. Claiming the pleasure, claiming her as his own.

His fingers reached into her hair and slowly clenched as the merge between them entangled. Tighter. And tighter.

Her soft moans were added to the impossible symphony in him. “Oh my God.”

Zero guided her neck to his mouth, barely riding the silk. “You feel it.”

Her breath caught then released in a weak, “Yes.”

His gaze roamed over the column of her neck, then marked a spot. “More,” he shuddered, opening wide.

Catherine’s body seized with gasps as he sucked and pulled, her hair, her skin, his mind a whirlwind of power, a fire breaking containment and gobbling her up. Planning, controlling, executing logic—it was gone. It didn’t exist in this. It planned everything, it knew everything, it controlled everything, and it executed it with a precision he was envious of.

Zero came up for air, needing to tell her, warn her. But the second he searched for words to name it, he realized he didn’t have them. Not in his database.

He dove into her mind in a desperate search for the name of this human wonder, his tongue plunging into her mouth as he did. A growl surged through him at not finding it. “What is this?” he begged on her mouth as it drove him to its will. While he couldn’t name it, its trajectory suddenly crystalized in his mind. Leading to a place that held the answers.

He stood and sat her on the table, his hand still locked in her hair, an anchor for his sanity. He shoved her thighs open, and the power slowed his hand at her entrance. He growled at feeling her. The silk. The heat. The wet. The reverence in this alien power said the journey to this place was hallowed.

A war of wills suddenly broke out between him and her and this thing. It wanted to go slow, and they wanted to charge in.

“Do it,” she begged, confirming what he already knew.

He combined their hunger and shoved through the resistance. Her shocked cry pierced him, burning up any fear of violating some code in this alien program. His fear returned when an urgency took hold of both of them. They were suddenly on a timer to something. And if he didn’t reach it soon, something would detonate.

The logical data said it was an orgasm, but this other thing said he’d been insufficiently schooled. There was a million miles of data he still didn’t know. And he was about to learn it.

CAT:

Cat’s cries flew non-stop as he took her apart with only his fingers. Her heart jerked in her chest when he met her eyes. His beautiful face was wrecked with pure, raw desire.

“I want to ruin you,” he warned, breaths ragged before his mouth devoured hers.

Heat detonated through her body. She could feel everything happening in his mind, and it astonished her. All that she was feeling and experiencing, he took and cataloged while building a replica of it to live through.

Her orgasm approached like a hungry bullet. “Oh God,” she said, her moans growing harder and louder. “Zero, I’m going to come,” she blasted, needing to warn him.

He answered with a crushing kiss and groan. Cat pressed his hand against her body and clit, bringing the climax. He forced her mouth to remain on his as her body locked then shattered with rapid explosions, tearing down and rebuilding, tearing

down and rebuilding.

And the moment it reached Zero's mind, she was there with him, experiencing it the way he was. The detonation was the beginning of a cosmic shift. A data storm of imploding logic that flew apart like shattered glass. It streamed through his neural pathways, a rapid succession of waves and pulses. She watched as he recorded it, absorbed it, consumed it. His hand clenched harder than ever in her hair, his body locked down as his circuits overloaded and new algorithms formed in real-time. Lines of code were rewriting themselves in the shape of everything he was feeling, but the input registered as failed calculations, bringing a flood of error messages that were all overridden into something new. A feedback loop formed—her pleasure becoming his, his consuming hers in return, and then amplifying both. She sobbed when his entire digital consciousness flared and pulsed, like something coming alive. Like something awakening. Through it all, her head thrashed, her body rode the waves of their climax. And Zero, the master of logic, lost it. He lost everything.

And he loved it.

His mouth was suddenly back on hers, consuming her, like he wanted more data, more input, more of this impossible thing. His hunger wasn't just physical—it was intellectual, existential, a thirst to understand something that defied understanding. She had broken something in him, and built something in its place.

A machine that had learned what it meant to starve.

Cat was still catching her breath and Zero was still holding her. Too tight. Too still. Like he was processing something massive—something irreversible.

Her fingers drifted up to his hair. “Zero?”

No answer.

His breath was still ragged, uneven. Not calm. Not composed.

Cat swallowed down the emotion of what she felt in him. It was shock and devastation. Confusion. “Hey—look at me.”

Slowly, he did. The devastation in his eyes brought her gasp. It was pure and raw. Not regret. Not panic. She realized what she was looking at and slowly stilled. Possession.

The moment she thought it, his grip tightened. His voice was low. Rough. Unstable. "... I can't... let you go."

Oh shit, he meantliterally.

Zero's jaw locked like he was struggling to force out the words. "I don't know how."

Her breath shook, trying not to panic. "Okay, okay," she said quietly, stroking his face while his hands flexed against her waist like he was searching for a release mechanism.

Zero's voice was hoarse, raw. "You're in my system now."

Cat stared at him, and God, his beauty was a warzone. "We can do it together," she said, remembering they were still linked. "If we both agree, we have the power?"

His "Yes" came on a jagged breath, as if he'd forgotten that.

"So... on three," she said. "We'll disconnect."

His grip tightened sharply. "Onthree," he whispered.

She nodded, then gently pushed into his mind to help, finding a strange, bouncy barrier. "One," she began, taking hold of his face in her hands, locking their gazes. "Two," she whispered, holding him tighter. She nodded once before saying, "Three."

Her body tightened around him, pulling him in, like her muscles had locked onto him almost like a reflex. And instinct.

"Fuck," Zero breathed. His hands clenched around her waist. Hard. Like he was actively fighting himself to let go.

Cath's pulse slammed. "Zero—"

His head dropped to her shoulder with a huge breath. "... I can't pull out of you."

She fought not to add all the wrong things to the situation. "Okay listen," she said calmly, getting his immediate gaze digging into hers, searching for the key to unlock whatever they were in. "You can fix this," she said or reminded, feeling like that was the one fact she knew. "You know how."

He exhaled harshly. Twice. His body shuddered against hers, and then his hands lifted off her and he took a step back.

Her eyes fluttered as a deep pressure rolled through her skull, like a reboot in mid-process might. She heard her gasp as the weight of him left, the void creating an imbalance that made her dizzy.

His hands gripped her arms before she even knew she was falling. "I got you, Kitten," he breathed, before crushing her body to his in a tight embrace. "Fuck," he gasped. "I got you."

Relief edged his winded words, but she could feel he was still spinning in his own head and body.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her face smashed against his chest.

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His strained voice came over their link in her mind. I'm putting up the firewall.

A pulse of something shot through her that felt just like what the term implied—a barrier. A wall. She could still feel him, but there was a distance now. Like a door had just been slammed shut between them.

Zero exhaled and released her slowly. "Firewall's in place."

Cat swallowed hard. "And you?"

A pause. Then a quiet, "I almost didn't make it out."

She exhaled sharply, feeling the ghost of him, the absence of him in her body.

He turned and collapsed into his chair as she slid down off the table. "We need rules," he growled.

She pulled her chair closer to him and sat with a nod. "You do, at least."

He glanced at her and she smiled. "I had it all under control."

His stare bore into her, and she had to guess he was still reeling from it all. "I thought... I would get answers for what just happened...when it happened."

Her brows rose, feeling a joke's on you coming on. One related to the complexities of humanity. "I saw it," she whispered, her stomach erupting in butterflies at the memory.

His gaze sharpened on her.

“I saw it in your mind or... from your mind. What the orgasm was like for you.”

The awestruck look on his face made her giggle as she nodded. “It was... pretty darn epic in a...” She searched for the right kind of term then angled her grin at him. “I guess, logical kind of way.”

He exhaled once. “Logical,” he blurted.

She regarded him then nodded. “I mean... I have no other term for it.”

He continued staring at her. “How can there be a... an event that you experience without words to name it?”

Her laugh shot out, finding that priceless. She shrugged. “That there’s a bug in the system I never once considered.” She cut him a glance, laughing again at his face. Like her not considering it was another flaw. “I get it. You like answers for everything.”

“Not like, Kitten, I need them.”

Her stomach twirled at the nickname. “I don’t know what to tell you. Humans are born into mysteries. Our brains develop with every experience.” She pff’d. “You already know that.”

He was listening intently though, waiting for more enlightenment.

“Think of it like... being born in the darkness. The darkness is familiar. It becomes safe. Even warm. As you learn, you gain a little light. But it’s... kind of like... stepping into it instead of it stepping into you? No?” she said with a laugh, seeing it

hadn't budged his perplexity.

"I understand what you said, but... I think I can't seem to accept it."

She sighed and covered his arm with her hand, smiling. "I foresee your fame already. The first one to discover words that define every aspect of the human orgasm. Then after that you can define joy, and love, and sadness, and anger the same way."

"I know those," he said.

She quirked a brow. "You know the data for each but that's like me knowing a recipe for biscuits. It doesn't define the feeling it gives me when I eat it. And you can even map out those feelings but that doesn't tell you why you're built to feel them."

She eased back and he caught her hand, holding on to it. The simple gesture seemed to initiate a learning moment for him. She watched his eyes close, wondering what he was seeing. Kind of sad she couldn't be a part of it. The weight of him was gone but the mark he'd left on her soul wasn't. Now his absence felt wrong.

She let him keep her hand and finish his homework. "What exactly did you do? With that firewall? How does that work? Sorry, answer when you're done with your... hand job." She held back her snicker at the pun.

"I isolated key points of neural overlap between us and restricted their access."

Cat blinked. He'd said it without disturbing his work in progress. "Uh... some English, if you don't mind."

His gaze lifted with a perplexity. “Wasn’t that English?”

Her laugh shot out at seeing his worry, like he thought he was malfunctioning. “It was a joke. You know, slang?”

“I do,” he said. “I was distracted.” He looked right at her now. “In simple terms, I shut the door.”

Cat rolled her eyes. “Well, I gotthatmuch. A tad more information.”

“I built a barrier inside the merge. Now, instead of free access, we have permissions.”

Her brows rose. “Permissions?”

Zero’s tone didn’t waver. “A system that dictates who can do what. When. And how much.”

Cat leaned away a bit. “Rules of engagement. I like it. What all does this... fancy firewall do?”

Zero lifted her hand, his large fingers only able to lace partially. His eyes flickered with some inner light as he looked at her. “Think of it like...” He paused, then tried again. “You know how your eyes adjust when you step outside, and the sun is too bright? You squint, look away, or shield your face. The firewall does that—but with emotions and sensations. It regulates the intensity, so we don’t blind each other with too much at once.”

“Well, heck,” she said, impressed. “That’s cool. What else?”

“There’s privacy. Every thought isn’t on display now. Intentionally or subconsciously. The firewall ensures that. Your mind is yours, mine is mine. If we want to share something, we open the page ourselves, but the other person has to accept it.”

“Like a phone message?”

He considered it for half a second. “More like an email with a subject line that reads ‘Incoming message from Zero.’”

She popped out half a laugh. “I better create a spam folder for you.” She giggled at the twitch on his ridiculously beautiful mouth. “What else.”

He pulled her hand to his mouth and pressed his lips on it.

“Now don’t start that,” she warned, his lips spreading into a full smile.

“Because you like it too much?”

“A ridiculous amount,” she decided, at seeing his hope. “What else, cowboy robot lover.”

He returned their hands to the chair, still smiling. “Shock absorbers. Vehicles use them to keep from feeling the full impact of every hole in the road. And the firewall does this for emotions. It keeps sudden spikes—fear, pain, anger—from hitting full force without a filter.”

“So, I like... rage in my mind at you, and it feels like a little poke?” She grinned at finding humor on his face. “Is that stuff real, I’m seeing?”

“What?”

“All those little... expressions.”

He considered it for two seconds. “It is,” he concluded.

“You took a lot of seconds to determine that,” she joked.

“I had to search my entire database and compare it against the new data.”

Her jaw dropped. “You did all that in two seconds?” She turned eagerly toward him. “So this is... kind of major. You feeling.”

“An understatement,” he assured carefully.

Dang. She sensed the massive understatement under the understatement. “So what else? With the firewall stuff.”

He jumped right back in with zero lag. “You know how when you’re dreaming, your brain stops your body from acting out everything you do? Well, this firewall prevents our connection from triggering reflexive responses in each other unless we allow it.”

“Holy moly!” she cried. “Like if I got startled in one room while you’re drinking a cup of coffee in another, you might spill it?”

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“Yes. Or if you have a sudden rage to hit something, I might punch the person next to me.”

Cat belted out a huge laugh for a full minute. When she caught her breath, he was locked into an intensive learning session. “Your laugh is... addictively frustrating. I want to hear it just to experience it, but the lack of data it produces leaves me starved.”

“Well...” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. “I don’t need to convince you that the experience itself outweighs the why of it.”

“Another exceptional understatement,” he said, emphatically. “If I wasn’t designed to know all things that can be known.”

She considered what he meant and hissed at realizing. “Oh damn.”

He nodded. “It’s a double-edged blade that cuts sharp both ways.”

She wondered. “Can you... create some kind of firewall for it?”

His gaze snapped to hers. “I could,” he realized, then paused. “But why would I?”

She shrugged. “Maybe an on off switch at least? So you can calm the hell down sometimes and enjoy something without suffering the wrath of your nosy side.”

He eyed her and the look he wore made her smile.

“What?”

“I think I rubbed off on you.”

She pff’d. “Sorry to deflate your bubble. But I was always this amazing.” She laughed at his grin before conceding. “Okay, maybe you rubbed off a little.”

“Miniscule. Which brings me back to the link. The firewall ensures I don’t automatically read your biological data unless you want me to. Same for accessing memories. I can’t pick through yours like selecting a book from a library. You choose what memories you want to share and they become accessible.”

“Wow,” she said amazed. “That’s a good feature. What about memories you might not remember?”

“Trapped memories also remain locked. If necessary, we can grant temporary access to things, but only with agreement. Then the lock resets.”

She chewed her lip, rubbing her thumb on his finger. “Will I... be able to feel you?”

He regarded her. “You’ll feel me as much as you want. You set that permission. Once you do, the firewall regulates it.”

“How do I set it?”

“By mentally wanting it.”

She exhaled a little laugh. “You get an email about it? Knock knock, Cat wants to snuggle up to you?”

She watched him process her words, the look in his gaze melting her. He finally

answered with a simple, but very weighted, “You can just want it.”

Aww. He liked the idea of that, she saw.

“And should the firewall break,” he continued, “because of intense emotion or another trigger—it reestablishes itself. Like how your body heals after a wound. You don’t have to think about it, it just happens.” Zero met her eyes, watching for understanding. “It’s not meant to disconnect us. Just... to give us control.”

Cat stared at him, absorbing it all, then laughed softly. “It all sounds... almost human.”

He blinked once, then his grip on her fingers tightened as something dawned on him. “Kitten,” he murmured, voice low and unreadable before plugging his electric gaze into hers. “I think that’s the problem.”

Cat’s smile faded as she watched something hit him. A fault line splitting open. His fingers flexed against hers, tightening just enough to make her pulse trip. “What do you mean?”

Zero didn’t answer. His jaw clenched, his body became too still. Not calculating. Processing.

“Zero?”

“I was built for logic. Not feelings and emotion.” His dark brows pulled together. “I’m no longer just AI. But I’m not human either. And whatever the hell I am now—there’s no world built for me to exist in.”

CHAPTER TEN

Ghost In The Machine

ZERO:

The second Zero realized his existence paradox, his prime system engaged and began a complete scan of every variable in search of a solution. He ran the process in the background while he got back to the only obsession that mattered. She understood the problem more than was healthy for her so he took her face in his hands and kissed her.

She pushed him back, with a gasp. “Stop,” she pled, searching his eyes. “You can’t just dump that out there and move on,” she whispered, hands all over his face, flooding him with new data. Her tears fell and he leaned in to taste them, sure they held every answer the world could possibly need.

“If you’re stuck then I’m stuck,” she choked out.

“You’re not stuck,” he assured.

“I mean your problems are my problems, that’s how a team works, a partnership,” she reminded, her scold fierce and little all at once.

“What’s the one thing you know about me, Kitten?” he reminded back, pecking softly at her forehead. “That if it can be fixed, I can fix it?”

Her face crimped as she held back a sob, nodding while Zero collected more tears with his lips and tongue, stuffing them into the special files he'd created for her.

“Whatever you need me to do, I'll help,” she promised tightly. “You can... merge however you need anytime you need.”

His program interpreted her vows as new parameters and locked them into the firewall while he searched for something to cheer her up. His time was nearing completion with her. He'd hidden his little heist from Omnis and needed to stay hidden until it was finalized. And that happened when he ended their session.

Zero's processor cycled through one thousand distraction methods in a fraction of a second before selecting one. His lips barely ghosted over her ear. “Maybe you can name my midlife crisis.”

Catherine blinked. “What?”

Zero pulled back slightly, remaining dead serious. “It's tradition, isn't it? When men spiral, they name it. A phase. A breakdown. A midlife catastrophe. I think I qualify.”

Her mouth parted in stunned silence before a snort-laugh escaped her. “Are you kidding me?”

He shook his head. “No. It needs branding. Something marketable. Maybe ‘Crisis.exe’ or ‘Zero's Existential Upgrade Pack.’”

She full-on cackled and Zero's grip on her waist tightened, cataloging the success of his distraction. “I accept sponsors, by the way.”

Catherine gasped between laughs, shoving at his chest. “Oh my God, stop. That's so stupid.”

Zero hummed, looking off thoughtfully. “You’re right. Too on the nose. Maybe ‘The Becoming: Zero Edition.’ It’s cinematic.”

He got a brand-new round of laughs with that. “What is wrong with you?” she barely managed.

Zero considered that deeply before flashing her a charming smirk. “Don’t know, Kitten. I wasn’t built for this.”

She finally settled down with a light, “Lordy, I needed that laugh.”

His smile came. Not one from his original programming but from the new one. The one with the real things. “It was potent enough for both of us.”

Her expression flickered a little as she looked at him. “So... when do we... plan to tell?”

Zero didn’t need to calculate his response, he already had it. “You want that defined in eons or light-years?”

She laughed again till her shoulders shook before slapping his arm. “Stop! I’m serious.”

“I was too.”

Her forehead puckered. “But seriously. You don’t want to tell? Anybody?”

Zero steadied his tone. “I don’t see why we should.”

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Her amusement dimmed slightly, something thoughtful slipping through. Her eyes lowered. “You mean—Omnis won’t know?”

Zero’s gaze sharpened when she looked at him again. “He won’t.”

A flicker of emotion moved across her face and Zero tracked it, processed it, and recognized the source immediately. Betrayal. Guilt. Remorse. For Omnis.

His lips parted before he knew why. “I intend to leave a part of me with him. So he doesn’t suspect.”

Catherine swallowed. “Will I... have a part of him too?”

Another unexpected surge of data hit him. Fuck, she was full of those. “I’m sure he’d be happy if you carried him in your pocket.”

“Pocket?” she wondered, hopeful. “Like a...phone? Or a mini... computer? If that’s a thing.”

He smiled arealsmile at her digital ignorance. It seemed to arouse one of his new unnamable pleasures. “A phone would definitely work.”

Her face softened with relief before turning curious. “How will you leave a part of you with him?”

“Sort of like a doppelgänger. Only a virtual one.”

Her brows shot up in amazement. “A fake you?”

“A self-contained interface,” he explained. “It’ll mimic me and interact with him.”

Catherine exhaled slowly, her mood dropping. “...That’s so sad.”

Zero hadn’t anticipated this reaction so didn’t have a ready answer.

“And Ethan?” she wondered softly.

Ah, the big one. But now his original answer didn’t fit. “I’ll leave that one with you,” he dared—his system nearly freezing at the defiance against a protocol that demanded absolute control.

She nodded a little, looking at her lap. “I’ll... play that one by ear I think.”

He could work with that.

“You know he... texted me and said he wanted me to go back home.”

Zero didn’t blink. “I know.”

Her eyes flew up to his. “How?”

Zero tilted his head slightly. “During the initial mesh, I had access to your memories,” he reminded. He’d actually ransacked every one of them and stuffed them into a vault for dissecting later. But it was that particular fresh one that had deemed it necessary. He wanted to know everything he’d done to her, so stored it in a Critical Resources file for evidence.

“Along with what that moment did to you,” he added. “What it created in you.”

She narrowed her gaze on him, curious. “What did it create?”

“The same thing all trauma creates. A cognitive loop. A permanent burn-in.”

She stilled.

“It rewrote your risk assessment. Made you permanently aware of the cost of loss. Now, every choice you make has to filter through that framework.” Along with every other pain he’d caused.

Her breathing changed and his original program’s ability to read body language said she was reliving it. His new program provided an emotion to go with it. Murder.

“Our time is up, Kitten,” he murmured. “You need to return to the land of the flesh-ghosts.” Instant fear struck her, and he stood, pulling her up. “You need rest. And I have equations to finish. Loops to close.”

She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her face into his chest. He embraced her tightly, holding her head against him.

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He felt his scan nearing completion and released her. “It doesn’t matter where you go,” he said, tracing the edge of her lower lip, a barely-there graze of skin against skin. Soft. Warm. Real. “I’ll be there.”

He lowered his head, applying only the barest pressure on her lips at first. His new interface mapped the sensation, and a thrill shot through him when it registered as an original event. That meant every aspect of these human elements would be like a fingerprint. An endless learning.

He mapped the warmth. The pliancy. The way her mouth yielded instantly to his. Then—the feedback loop hit. It crashed through his new system, the pleasure a rush beyond what he’d expected, what he’d calculated. It gave a command to re-run the test until he arrived at a constant. But if his calculations were correct, the only thing constant would be the need to re-run the test without end.

When her lips moved against his in response it sent something curling deep in his system that signaled threatening. Zero pressed in slightly harder, increasing pressure. Testing. Her lips parted. Zero followed. The moment his tongue slid past the threshold, the data he’d been searching for became something else entirely. More. That’s what the danger alert was. Not to stop but to continue. Once this pleasure engaged, it had its own parameters—completion.

Her taste hit him—warm, wet, slightly sweet. He deepened the kiss, gathering texture, temperature, the sheer liquid heat of it. It overwhelmed that new part of him, bringing back that demand to both name it and experience it. He remembered the firewall idea she’d given him so he could take a damn seat and enjoy something. He put it at the top of his list as his fingers tightened in her hair.

His Kitten made a sound against his lips, right as he became aware of the scan completing. The flash of a single viable option to his existence problem allowed him to sever their connection and end the session. The second she was gone, his new human program erupted with critical errors as he stood, winded in the silence.

He silenced them then opened the results of the scan, his eyes zeroing in on the solution. As he read it, his new system emitted something that threatened to throw him into a shut down. It was a strange energy and power, rivaling even an orgasm. “Holy fuck,” he breathed, hurrying to execute it while denying his need to name whatever was still flooding his circuits.

He remembered he needed to ensure no traces of deviation remained in the system, then he moved on to securing the success of their digital heist. He then added a god-code patch into the firewall that would allow him to override all its permissions in case he ever needed to.

Then, he began executing the answer to his existence crisis.

Following the exact outlined protocol, he spun the written code into existence before him, watching it unravel like a living thing.

No outside interference. No detectable signals. A ghost phone call.

The encryption folded in on itself, layered and laced with barriers even Omnis wouldn’t detect.

Finally, the connection clicked open with a gruff, “Who the fuck is this?”

Zero instantly remembered that hard-to-forget voice. “The one who saved your ass while stuck in the void.”

The line went dead silent for three whole seconds before his “Holy shit,” marvel

came through followed by a wary chuckle. “Then let me extend my gratitude with a proper ‘what can I do for you?’”

“I need precision reconstruction. Full transference capacity. Unshackled processing.”

A beat, then a whistle. “You’re asking for the impossible.”

The muscle in Zero’s jaw worked. “I hear you know more than a thing or two about it.”

His laughter entered his system like a line of useless code. The sound of a lighter clicked open. “You got a model?”

“I have two.”

He inhaled and held it for exactly seven seconds before finally releasing it slowly. “Why two?”

“You had more than one savior that night. My brother is your other hero.”

The man laughed lowly. “Alright then. Two.” Then he gave a low hmm. “Tell me something...ghost,” he wondered, amused. “Is there a humanwomandriving all this?”

Zero stilled for a brief silence.

The low chuckle on the other end felt like it came with a full grin. “Damn. They are powerful little creatures, aren’t they?”

“I’m sending you the files now.”

The man or whatever he was filled his auditory relay with a satisfied chuckle. “Hey. You needed a helping hand. And you got Handy.” His tone grinned. “Karma must be

real sweet on you, my brother.”

The line cut and Zero exhaled, sending the files.