



Her Magic Light

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: One day I'm creating rainbow-hued hair at a salon in sunny Florida, and the next I'm getting tossed into prison with no idea why. Here, there is no sunlight. No answers. But there are men with fangs, women with wings... and a cruel doctor who puts me through test after test, trying to determine what I am. I always thought I was an ordinary girl until a scuffle in the jailhouse ends with blood on my hands and a decapitated head at my feet. Now they say I'm special, dangerous, and that I need to be controlled. I am the last of my kind, and I have the power to change the world. Everyone fears me, loathes me, or wants to use me. The only person who doesn't is the handsome guard who always seems eager to bend the rules for me... but will he also help me escape?

Total Pages (Source): 70

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

one

“Hold still,” I murmured as the iridescent hummingbird outside my window darted out of my sight before returning to the feeder once more.

The little bird fluttered on the perch.

I sighed. “You’ve got to hold still,” I repeated. “We’ve talked about this.” At least I had.

When the small head twisted back and forth as if saying no, I chewed my bottom lip, meeting the tiny-eyed gaze as she hovered. Had she understood me? Could she... A niggling feeling wiggled in my middle, and I considered my work on the canvas. Was I forgetting something?

In a flash of color, the hummingbird zipped away and back again, re-snagging my attention. We had a standing date most mornings, or so we seemed to. I facilitated it with a sugar feeder and lots of praise for the hummingbird’s unusually spectacular coloring.

“You match my hair, you know.” I laughed as I completed another delicate feather on my canvas. And despite the painstaking level of detail required, I was able to capture it all perfectly. Colors, light, the shapes and even the glint of each feather reflecting the waking sun.

I leaned back, my tongue poking just a tiny bit between my lips as I studied my art. This room really was a perfect studio. The floor-to-ceiling windows, the white walls,

the high ceiling, the view outside...

All in all, the perfect place for me to be, and I knew that very well after nearly thirty years of living in the exact wrong place.

Minnesota.

Yup, back when I'd still lived in the frigid North, I'd overheard someone in the coffee shop where I worked telling a friend that their cousin was nuts to uproot from Florida and come to live in Minnesota... And then I'd eavesdropped on the rest, listening to details of the way sunlight bounced off rolling waves and managing to grab the name of the small town from which that foolish person had fled.

It hadn't been my fault. The woman had been loud, her laugh raucous, and if I hadn't been so interested in the things she was saying, her very presence would have irritated me to no end.

"You know what the part is that truly stinks, Rhonda?" She'd squawked the question so loudly others had probably heard it from three blocks over.

The entire coffee shop was part of their conversation now. Myself included.

And she hadn't even waited for her friend to reply before she continued toward her conversational destination. Her friend remained unamused, doing little more than making various exaggerated facial expressions and taking long draws on her coffee as she waited for the topic to change.

"It's that I won't get any more free vacations to Florida. Little place called Sweetwater. Crappy name, sleepy town, but it's warm." She'd laughed again, this bout even more grating than the last.

“I don’t know when I’ll next feel decent sun on my skin again.” She’d shivered like the Minnesota winter had penetrated the store, and I’d shivered too, suddenly overtaken by a bone-deep chill.

I made up my mind before I even finished my shift that day. But honestly, it was more like someone else had already made up my mind for me. A persistent buzz took up in my head and refused to leave—the idea I needed to move here, that this unseen town was somehow my home.

And now that I was here, no doubts remained. Call it fate, kismet, or simply dumb luck, Sweetwater, Florida was exactly where I needed to be.

I shook my head, clearing away the unexpected memory.

The hummingbird glanced at me, and I sat straighter on my seat. Actual mischief seemed to have gleamed in its eye for a moment before it landed briefly, stretched taller, and ruffled all of its feathers out of the arrangement I’d only halfway finished painting.

I bit back a curse word and laughed. This was why people warned against working with children or animals—too much of the unexpected. Sometimes even chaos.

Chaos... Chaos... I frowned. Was I forgetting something? Surely not.

“I guess I just broke the golden rule of show business.” I leaned back to the canvas and fixed the position of a feather, layering more depth into the portrait.

The hummingbird cast another look at me before lifting up from the feeder and zipping by in a blur of flashing color.

I waved belatedly. “Tomorrow, then. Same time, same place.” I wasn’t worried. I

could almost set my watch by her.

Her. I assumed the bird was female, anyway. Something about that knowing glint in her eye, the energy she put out. Felt like a she to me.

Maybe it was just the fact her feathers seemed to closely mirror the colors I'd carefully applied to my own hair. I'd thought I was inspired by a rainbow I'd seen over the sea, but maybe I'd already caught sight of my hummingbird and subconsciously used her as inspiration.

Well, I certainly had enough inspiration now. I took a look around my room. I'd crafted enough canvasses of that same hummingbird to stage a one-woman exhibition. Sometimes obsession signaled the beginning of the end for artists, but I truly felt like I'd reached the beginning of the beginning. That now that I'd come to the right place, all the other pieces of my life would effortlessly fall into line as well.

If I ran out of storage space, I could probably sell some at the monthly local craft market, provided I signed up as a vendor. I'd wandered around it often enough—my work wouldn't be out of place.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

Or... I tilted my head as I glanced out of the window. I could ask Bess if she'd let me hang some at work to drum up a bit of interest. Add a little color to her chaos.

Bess!

Oh, shit. Bess. Work.

Hell. I'd done it again.

I stood in one quick, smooth motion, moving toward the door before I was even straight. I grabbed my house keys from the small mosaic-top table by the front door and picked up my purse from where I'd slung it over the armchair.

The front door creaked its irritation as I thrust it open, but I didn't care. I stood on the stoop a moment, my eyes closed as the sun's warmth touched my skin. No matter how late I was for something, I always took a brief moment to savor that first touch. It was like my skin absorbed the energy on a whole different level.

Like it recharged me somehow.

Yes, moving here from Minnesota would never be a mistake—even though I'd arrived with little more than the clothes on my back and the pittance in my savings account.

I stepped out into the street, exchanging a silent wave with my elderly neighbor as I did. Mrs. Hayes was clearly lonely, and she loved to chat, but her hellos always extended beyond simple pleasantries, and I was late enough already.

Hopefully, my boss Bess would forgive me in return for a cup of her favorite coffee. Yes, that's what I would do. Anyway, I still needed some of that life-giving brew for myself after this morning's mess-up.

No more than five minutes later, I breathed in the nutty, slightly smoky aroma of fresh brewed coffee and the scent of sweet hot chocolate that hung in the air at my favorite new coffee shop. Sunshine Brew wasn't the only place to get coffee in town, but the line wrapped around the inside of the store proved it was the best.

I checked my watch and joined the line. I could risk another ten minutes of tardiness if it meant bringing my boss a steaming cup of apologies.

As I waited, I glanced at the huge chalkboard menu with its vibrantly colored options and cute little doodles to illustrate the text, but only out of habit. No one who came in here regularly needed to read the menu. Hell, I could probably list the orders for half of the people standing in this line. And the only reason I didn't know them all yet was because I was technically still new in town.

Truth be told, I'd probably still be considered new in twenty years' time. That was the way of small towns, after all. It suited me, though. Being new offered some degree of anonymity while I figured things out and settled into my new life.

I approached the front of the line, reaching into my purse for my wallet. I drew out my loyalty card and handed it to Carrie, the smiling barista.

I wanted whatever powered her—she never did anything but smile, no matter how early I came in for coffee.

“Your usual?” Her grin grew wider still as I nodded.

“And Bess's usual as well, please.” I might have been new in town, but warmth filled

my chest that I already had a usual coffee order that my favorite barista in my favorite cafe had graciously committed to memory.

She grabbed two to-go cups and the caramel syrup for Bess's triple, large, non-fat latte with extra caramel drizzle and chocolate flakes.

"So, some weird stuff going on around town, right?" Carrie kept her voice as low as she could against the noise of grinding beans.

"Hmm?" I leaned a little closer. "What weird stuff is that?" I'd barely looked up on my walk here—my entire mission being to collect coffee and get to work before Bess advertised my job in the evening edition of the paper.

"All the dudes." Carrie gestured vaguely toward the large storefront window that looked out onto Main. "Don't look now." She lowered her voice. "There's one of them sitting in the corner."

I froze then started to very casually turn to my left to glance over my shoulder, but Carrie grabbed my forearm. "I said don't look."

I grinned awkwardly. "And what am I not looking at?"

She wrinkled her nose as she grabbed the whipped cream canister. "Whip?" She tipped it toward me.

I nodded. "Always whip." I glanced over my shoulder as she went through the motions of completing my order.

Piercing blue eyes.

That was all I saw.

Piercing blue eyes met mine bang-on.

I faced Carrie again, my heart pounding at being caught looking at the man.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

Carrie watched me thoughtfully, her eyes narrowed a little. “Told ya not to look,” she said.

But despite my best intentions, something about the man proved to be magnetic, and I glanced again, prepared this time for the eyes that seemed to see right through me.

But he had already shifted his focus back to his copy of the morning paper, coffee in hand. He still looked out of place, but at least now he was trying to blend in somewhat.

“Is he wearing an earpiece?” I muttered my question to Carrie as she fixed lids on the to-go cups.

She nodded. “Yep. And I’m pretty sure I’ve seen him speak into his cuff a couple of times, too.”

I wanted to look again. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. Hell, I had no need to.

The image of the man with the vivid blue eyes and tousled brown hair was pretty much imprinted on my brain. Everything about his face suggested that we should go to bed together... Or that we’d just been there.

But his suit was all business. And his earpiece was... weird.

“Secret service?” I barely mouthed the question, but Carrie only shrugged.

“I just know it’s odd to see so many strangers in town.”

I laughed. “Well, I’m still new here, and I’m willing to bet there aren’t many that are stranger than me, right?” I winked and tossed my rainbow hair for effect.

Carrie just sighed and shook her head as she handed me the drinks.

If I weren’t so late already, I would have marched up to our mysterious visitor, thrust out my hand in greeting, and demanded to know what he was up to. But sadly that was not to be. Not today, anyway.

two

The bell jangled merrily as I left Sunshine Brew.

A local named Will Parker insisted on holding the door open for me to pass through, and I offered him a polite nod in return. Will had asked me out a couple of times, and I liked him well enough, but I wasn’t interested in inviting gossip while still being such a newcomer to town.

“Morning, Meira.”

I met his overeager smile with a more laid-back grin of my own. “Morning, Will. Have a nice day.”

I stepped around one of the ornamental lamp posts. Walking Main was a little like stepping back in time: Mom and Pop shops with scrolled signs and candy-striped awnings lined the street on both sides. We also had an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, boasting a soda fountain of all things. I deliberately averted my gaze rather than look at that one head-on. It would be all too easy to slip inside for an ice cream every time I passed, but I somehow managed to resist temptation more often than not. I was sure the waistline of my pants thanked me, even if my taste buds and stomach did not.

A movement to my right caught my attention, and I stumbled a little as I turned to look, catching my toe on the edge of one of the low cobbles. Someone grasped my shoulder to straighten me as I concentrated on holding the two cups of coffee without spilling.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, flustered as I met a pair of kind brown eyes.

“No problem. Sorry if I startled you.” The man turned away and walked a couple of paces, stopping in front of the antique store window to study a display of 1920s tea sets.

He slipped a pair of sunglasses from his pocket and pushed them into position on his face, and my gaze slid off the wire coiled into his ear and the broad shoulders that filled out his finely tailored jacket. He was older than the guy I’d met eyes with at Sunshine Brew, but they obviously belonged to the same group.

And there was something intimidating about both of them—barely repressed energy, like they were on full alert and waiting for something big to happen.

I glanced upward, but the blue sky held only the barest wisps of cloud; tree leaves rustled gently above me. No unexpected aircraft and no hulking alien spaceships or dancing lights.

So what were these guys doing then? I shrank back toward the other side of the pathway, trying to ease away without looking like I was.

My purse buzzed with an incoming call on my cell, and I hurried to a nearby wrought iron bench to put my drinks down so I could answer. It was probably Bess wondering where I was. I chuckled at the irony of my boss making me even later by trying to find out why I was late in the first place.

But there wasn't a caller ID on the screen, and I shoved the phone back down to the depths of the pocket, among the gum wrappers and emergency tampons. I'd started avoiding calls when I had no idea who was on the other end of the line.

There'd been one too many hang ups recently. At first, it had only happened at my house, on the ancient landline that was already installed when I moved in, and I'd assumed those calls came from people trying to reach the previous homeowner—or perhaps on behalf of a faulty line. I hadn't found time to call the phone company before I started getting the same type of thing on my cell.

Of course, they didn't happen often, but just enough to creep me out—especially since they'd increased in frequency recently.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

I shoved my purse back onto my shoulder and picked up the drinks.

“Miss?”

I glanced at the man in the black suit who’d kept me from falling earlier, but all I could see was myself reflected in his dark shades. I didn’t speak. Just waited to see what he wanted.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Just a wrong number,” I said. Then I pressed my lips into a line.

He nodded and returned his attention to the store window as I hurried away. Apparently secret service guys were strange, no big surprise there.

I’d barely moved ten yards before Florence Kilkenny stepped out from the door of her tiny little craft store. The window was full of projects—knitted items, stitched ones, paintings. I could have lost a few hours just spotting everything on display before even venturing inside.

“How are those new paints working for you, honey?”

Shit. I didn’t have time to stop. I didn’t have time... but my feet froze, and my body jolted into action, turning me toward Mrs. Kilkenny—it being way more polite than my brain.

She drew me into the doorway and leaned close. “You got time to call in this

morning, Meira? I just had a new delivery. You know what that means.”

I glanced at the coffees in my hands and grimaced. “Not this morning. Will you still be open when I get off work?”

She nodded. “For my best customer? You betcha.”

I laughed, but the humor in her words didn’t prevent them being true. I had no idea how many other sales Mrs. Kilkenny made in a week, but I came in fairly regularly—and even more now that I’d started painting the hummingbird each day.

“You said you’ve had a new delivery?”

She nodded, her face forming gentle wrinkles as she smiled. “Lots of beautiful new colors in that paint brand you like.”

I grinned. It didn’t seem like a coincidence that she was ordering things she knew I’d want to buy. “Oh, the paint I like, right?”

“Of course. I like to keep my customers happy. Especially my regulars.” She winked at me then glanced around conspiratorially. “What have you been working on?”

“You’re just an enabler.” I said with a slight laugh. “Feeding my bad habits.”

She mock-gasped and brought her fingers to curl at the base of her throat. “Blasphemy,” she declared. “Art is never a bad habit.” She paused long enough to tip her head to the side as though calculating. “And judging by the amount of paint you’ve bought recently, you’re producing a lot of it. Are you going to show me any of your latest pieces?”

I shrugged but stopped mid-motion when the coffee sloshed inside the cups. “I don’t

know. They might not be ready.” My stomach clenched at the thought of displaying any of my work, any of myself in public like that.

Still, the words felt like a lie. The pictures of the hummingbird were among my best pieces to date. I’d just been thinking about selling them at a craft fair.

She eyed me, her expression shrewd. “I think we both know that isn’t true. You’ve been painting up a storm. Something about being here must inspire you.” She cupped my elbow.

I nodded. Holy hell, inspiration... That was the truth. I glanced down Main in the direction of where I lived. “Yeah. Inspiration. It’s beautiful here.”

Mrs. Kilkenny leaned forward. “Beautiful and strange today, don’t you think?” She motioned farther down the street, to where Main joined Tyler, to where the nose of a black car was just visible. “That car has been there all morning. Just sitting at the corner of the street.”

“Okay.” I almost shrugged my shoulders again.

“And there was a guy in here earlier looking at the paint.”

“Huh.” That was a bit more interesting than her other observations. At least it was news to me. “Is there another artist in town?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so, hun. His suit looked far too nice to mess up with splotches of paint.”

“His suit?” How many of these guys were there?

“Yeah.” She leaned back a little, her gaze faraway and thoughtful as she directed it

over my shoulder into the sun-drenched street. “It’s like something out of an action movie.” She smiled and snapped her eyes back to meet mine. “Or a sci-fi one. Do you think we’ve been invaded by aliens overnight and this is the clean-up crew?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

I chuckled. Mrs. Kilkenny was pretty well known for being the local conspiracy theorist as well as the art supply store owner. She even ran a group for local UFO enthusiasts and other conspiracy believers. I'd never attended, and I wasn't sure she had too many other members to join her. Still, all of this secret security action was definitely right up her alley.

"You mean like Men in Black—like the movies?" I cast back into the reaches of my mind. "Those were a long time ago."

She arched an eyebrow. "Men in Black are a documented phenomenon after alien visitation."

"And have we had one of those?" I suppressed my grin.

She lifted her hands. "I don't know. But I've called an emergency meeting of the Sweetwater Spotters. If there has been any activity, one of the others will know." Her tone didn't invite argument.

Noting that the coffees in my hand were quickly cooling, I edged away. "So, I'm good to call in later? To see the new paints?" My chest lightened a little at the idea of more art supplies.

Yup, I definitely had a problem. But maybe collecting pretty things wasn't so much an issue when I genuinely used them all.

She grinned, less serious again now we were talking arts and crafts again. "Absolutely. I have some pearlescent shades that are just to die for."

I almost stepped the rest of the way into her store then and there. Those sounded like something I wanted to see. But Bess's face appeared in my mind and I took a step back. "Sounds great, Mrs. K. I'll see you later."

She lifted a hand. "Okay, dear. You have a good day."

I smiled at her again and turned to continue the rest of the way to work. Coffee had seemed like a good idea at the time, but unfortunately, cold coffee wouldn't cut me any favors with Bess. I could either chance grabbing another cup or just hurry the rest of the way and hope for the best.

I chose hope.

Thank God I was wearing flats. I wasn't a heels fan, not that they would have been practical on the old-world Sweetwater cobbles. Everything about this town seemed to harken back to a different time.

I glanced across the street, at another suited man sitting on a bench, supposedly engrossed in the paper. Well, that was original. At least there was one good thing about their presence. The Sweetwater Gazette had never boasted such a high readership rate.

This stranger was just like the others. Perfectly black suit, crisp white shirt, black tie. They all wore shades, too. Fitting funeral attire. Picture-perfect mafia members, really. Bulky shoulders, narrow waists. Hair either styled to within an inch of its life or with that bedhead tousle that created a spark of interest in the pit of my stomach.

I shivered a little as I remembered the piercing blue stare of the first one I'd seen in Sunshine Brew. Something about him. He'd looked right through me. But also into me, like he could see my soul quivering beneath the heat of his gaze.

I shook my head. More ridiculous notions. Maybe I needed to join Mrs. K's Sweetwater Spotters after all, now that I seemed to believe in the recharging abilities of light and men who could see directly into my soul.

Oh, and hummingbirds that looked at me with human-level understanding. I was practically certifiable. I chuckled at myself as I quickened my stride again, nearly bumping into another black-suited guy loitering outside the deli.

"Sorry," I muttered as I scooted around him and jostled against one of the troughs of brightly colored flowers that the Beautiful Town Association created and sponsored. Flowers were spread all up and down the street. One day I'd paint some of them.

Or... I paused. The color palette would make an excellent inspiration for coloring someone's hair. Maybe even my own.

I shook my head a little, watching as my multi-colored strands of hair resettled in front of my face. Yup, that never got old.

"Are you all right, miss?"

When I glanced up, the secret service guy had his face aimed in my direction and a twist to his mouth that could have been concern, but I couldn't see his eyes and thus couldn't really tell.

A shiver of apprehension rattled my bones, and I sucked in a breath. "Yes, thank you. I'm late for work." I shook my head at myself for sharing that detail and hurried off to apologize to Bess.

three

I pushed the door of the salon open, noting that business already seemed to be bustling

inside. Bess looked up, her gaze sharp over half-moon glasses. She narrowed her eyes at me, then glanced at the clock above that hung in the waiting area.

“I know... I know...” I added a bit of heavy breathing to suggest I’d run in an effort to make it on time. “But look! I got you a coffee.” I held out her cup triumphantly.

She took it without a word, offering me a mere nod in acknowledgment. After a quick sip, Bess’s features twisted in a grimace. “How long ago did you pick this up?”

I shrugged. “Notthatlong ago.”

Bess broke into a smile. “They always make it too hot, but it’s perfect. Thanks, Meira.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

I relaxed a little as I walked into the breakroom to store my purse and picked up my apron. I smoothed it over my clothes as I walked back into the salon, breathing in the lingering odors of perm solution and chemical dye. At the end of the day, I'd leave wearing the scent like a perfume.

The familiar swirls of smells relaxed me, and I breathed deeper. My workplace had already become like a second home. I created colorful art here, too.

I glanced at the customers already in. Mostly elderly ladies—the ones who most liked to gossip—sitting with their heads firmly under old-fashioned dryers. I doubted Bess had updated the place since the nineteen sixties. She had, though. The dryers were only kept to amuse the ladies who liked sitting under them to exchange the latest news.

“Meira?” Bess beckoned me over.

I fished tying my apron at the back and walked to join her at the counter that held our appointment book. “We’re busy this morning,” I murmured.

“Yes, well...” She shook her head in apparent frustration. “I had a little mix up with the scheduling.” She lifted her coffee and took another long draw through the small hole in the white plastic lid. “I definitely needed a good caffeine fix this morning, that’s for sure and dandy.”

“How’s the rest of the day looking?” I glanced at the neat writing filling the time slots.

Bess drew her finger down the columns until she reached my first appointment. “At least I didn’t book you anything too early this morning, hun. Musta known you were going to turn up with coffee.” She winked. “Creative chaos and all.”

“Yeah, sorry I was late.” I swept my hair from my face to tie it back in a ponytail.

Bess watched the movement then reached out her hand and trailed it through the strands of my hair, stopping the movement. “Beautiful,” she muttered. “I have no idea how you do it.”

“It’s in the way I mix the dyes and apply the colors.” I shrugged. It really wasn’t rocket science, but if Bess wanted to believe it was, I could live with that.

She shook her head, denying my words. “No... No... I’ve seen hair colorists before. I’ve seen a normal dye job. And whatyou do isn’t normal. You have real talent. If I could clone you, I’d do it in a heartbeat.” She laughed. “Since you came to work for me, profits are up, and things are good.” She nodded her head. “Nope. Things are great. Might even be a pay increase in it for ya.” She nudged me with her shoulder and chuckled. “But don’t remind me I said that.”

I laughed as well and grabbed my coffee from where I’d left it, taking a sip as I wandered to my area of the salon.

Bess let me work however I wanted so long as I continued to get amazing results for her clients. Creative chaos reigned. As long as my mess wasn’t immediately visible from the doorway, where it might scare off prospective customers, she was all good.

Still, things had gotten a bit out of control the past few days, and I could now straighten up a bit.

As I worked at clearing my clutter, Bess moved toward her customers. “Ladies, how

are things going over here? Let me check on you.”

Leslie Seymour groaned. “We were just getting to the juicy part.”

I grinned as I moved some of my dye from the table to the shelf.

Bess whistled. “The juicy part? Without me?” She was the perfect hairdresser. Always interested in her clients’ lives and great at conversational fluff.

“My dear, haven’t you seen all of the gorgeous young men in town this morning?”

Rona Clarke butted in. “They’re not all young, dear.”

But Mrs. Seymour was undeterred. “I’m eighty-four years old. Everyone’s young these days—especially those men in the suits.”

“Which men in suits?” Bess bustled between the ladies, lifting the dryers, and checking on their hair.

“Haven’t you seen?” Mrs. Clarke sounded almost scandalized. “It’s like an episode of America’s Next Top Model out there—well-built men wearing designer suits treating the streets of Sweetwater like their own personal runway.”

Mrs. Seymour scoffed. “It’s not quite like that. Some of them are just loitering around, doing a fat load of nothing with their time.”

I glanced up in time to see Mrs. Clarke purse her lips. “If they’re loitering, it’s with some kind of ulterior motive, and they’re certainly very ornamental while they’re doing it.”

Both ladies cackled, and Bess looked in my direction.

“How about you, Meira? Did you see these model guys who seem to have been rained onto our town’s streets?”

“Mm.” I shrugged noncommittally as a vision of blue eyes entered my head once more. That damn guy. Why hadn’t he kept his sunglasses on like the others?

All eyes were fixed on me. I needed to say something more. “There are a few new strangers out there, yeah.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

Mrs. Clarke let out a laugh. “You’re still pretty new yourself, sweetheart.”

I nodded in acknowledgement. “But I won’t be the newest for much longer if more of these guys keep moving in.”

“True!” Mrs. Seymour crowed, and I laughed.

Bess’s movements slowed as she teased the ladies’ hair into their usual styles. “So what are they actually doing out there?”

“Just hanging around.” Mrs. Clarke sounded perplexed, like she hadn’t considered the purpose of the sudden influx of men before. “You know what? Leslie, maybe we need to talk to Florence—perhaps one of her spotty people knows something?”

I choked down my giggle. Mrs. K wouldn’t appreciate her Sweetwater Spotters being referred to asspotty people. The nickname fit, though.

The door to the salon burst open, knocking against the wall, and a woman raced inside, already removing big, dark sunglasses that seemed to cover half of her face. “I’m so sorry,” she gasped. “I know I’m late.” She lifted her reusable travel coffee cup to her mouth and took a loud, dramatic gulp. “Is my appointment still available?”

Bess glanced at the new customer then at me.

The woman tugged at her hair. “I need emergency intervention.” Her gigantic purse rattled and clattered, and the thin bracelets on her arms jingled every time she moved. She turned pleading eyes on me. “Won’t you please take pity?”

I laughed, and Bess stepped out from behind the counter.

“Your appointment is safe, Kate.” My boss side-eyed me. “You weren’t the only one late this morning.”

My cheeks heated as Kate let out a delighted giggle.

“Well, thank the Lord for his small mercies.” She slipped her sunglasses into the side pocket of her purse. “So, today’s the day, right? Goodbye, boring hair from hell. Hello, rainbow unicorn heaven?”

I nodded as I led her over to the chair in my area. We’d already had a consultation about color choices, and I’d worked on lightening her hair gradually over several sessions, so she was now completely ready for me to dye it today.

“You still thinking rainbow?” I asked as I considered her thick mane.

She sat in the chair and faced me in the mirror. “I want hair exactly like yours. Let me see it again. In all its splendor. Go on!”

I reached behind my head and released my ponytail. Allowing my hair to tumble over my shoulders. “Exactly like mine?” It wasn’t a big deal—I could just change my dye job so there weren’t two of us wandering around the local area with the same style.

“It’s gorgeous.” She looked at me and sighed. “But I doubt even the most beautiful hair on earth could make me look as good as you.”

I waved a hand dismissively, hating it when customers paid too much attention to me and especially when they lavished me with compliments. “I’ve been researching other color combinations.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” I grabbed the sketchbook I kept on my shelf and started flipping through. Some pages had nylon hair samples taped onto them. Others boasted photographs of various wigs on faceless mannequins where I’d already experimented at laying down the colors. “I’m still building my portfolio of client results, but these pictures and pages should give you some ideas of the new effects I can create since we last chatted.” I flipped from the back. “This is beach-inspired. See the opal—”

“That’s beautiful. I’d look like a walking gemstone.”

I nodded and gave her a supportive smile. “The pale colors appear different based on how you’ve styled your hair or how the light catches it.”

She grinned. “It’s like rainbow lite, then.”

I nodded. “Pretty much.” It was a style that would appeal to anyone who didn’t have the confidence to go all in with the color but wanted show-stopping hair, anyway. I flipped to the next page. “This color range was inspired by an amethyst geode.”

She nodded. “I can see that, and it’s beautiful too, but maybe it’s a touch dark for me?”

I glanced at her, remembering what she’d previously said about being conscious about aging and wanting to keep things light. “I also had an idea earlier for a color scheme based on the flowers out on Main street. I haven’t been able to work any samples up for that yet, though, so I’d be free-wheeling it.” But part of me itched for someone to just let me loose on her hair.

Like I had a ton of creativity ready to burst out of me.

“You know what? I don’t think I’ll go full rainbow, after all.” She eyed my hair again. “As gorgeous as it is. Maybe I’m feeling a little more opal today.”

“You sure?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

At her nod, I started selecting the correct bottles of dye from the range on my shelf and transferring them to the table where all the mixing magic would happen. I sent Kate to Daisy to get her hair washed, and when she sat back in the chair, she grinned nervously at me.

“So this is it,” she said, gulping down a lump of anxiety.

I offered her a wide smile in return. “It sure is. You’re going to look spectacular.”

She stared hard at herself in the mirror. “I’m going to look spectacular,” she repeated. “I don’t think I’ve looked spectacular since my divorce.”

I continued setting up, but also tried to maintain a constant stream of chatter to distract Kate from any anxiety that had crept up on her. I wasn’t as good at this part as Bess, though.

“So.” I hesitated. “Did you notice all the guys who seem to be new in town?”

Kate barked out a sharp laugh. “Notice? Honey, most of them have earned themselves a permanent place in my photo stream.”

I laughed too. “They let you take their pictures?”

She scoffed and gestured casually with her hand. “Why, I didn’t bother to ask. I took the pictures when they weren’t looking.” She patted her purse. “And now I don’t need to rely on this old noggin’ when I want to remember the time Sweetwater got invaded by hot men.”

I laughed again. “You think it’s an invasion?”

She winked, the look a little sly. “I certainly hope so. Honey, they can take me to their leader any time.”

I laughed again. “Mrs. K at the art supply store thinks it has to do with aliens.”

Kate gestured again. “Oh, Florence thinks everything is aliens.” Then she paused and scratched at the side of her nose. “But if she and her little group are going to investigate the appearance of these men, maybe I need to go to the next meeting. I don’t mind volunteering to make contact, if I’ve got a good excuse. I could tell them I’m doing a piece for the gazette.”

I chuckled. “Well, enough of them were studying the paper with an intensity that suggests you might get a few takers if you offer to print their full profiles.”

She laughed as well. “Might be the only time being a freelance writer comes in useful.” Then she met my eyes in the mirror and swallowed as she took in my gloved hands.

“Ready?” I asked.

four

After I’d secured my hair back into a ponytail, I started my work. Kate had relaxed under my careful, repetitive motions as I applied the dye to her hair, and I entered almost a meditative state as I painted color onto the strands, watching the light as it streamed through the window and played across the hair. This was my zone.

I brushed color against the already-lightened strands and listened to my intuition about which swipe of color went where. I could see it in my head. Almost as well as

the hummingbird painting on the easel at home.

On the other side of the salon, Bess was finishing up with her double-booked customers, and they were all three laughing as she opened the door to allow them to leave.

Their talk about the mysterious men had long since ceased, and Mrs. Seymour and Mrs. Clarke had moved on to matters of town scandal. Not that there were many true scandals, but how often Ethel Rowe waved to the mailman and the fact Nancy Andrews had started using the grocery store outside town were talked about on repeat. If they weren't scandals before, they were certainly at least dramas now. And likely by the end of the week, both stories would have been inflated to the kind of gossip the whole town repeated.

A twinge of pity for the two women at the center of each story spread through me. But there would be another story along in a couple of days. Perhaps even a couple of hours. And the Sweetwater gossip mill would continue to turn.

I glanced outside, ready for my daily sunbreak. A hummingbird like the one usually at my house hovered on the other side of the storefront glass.

"Are all hummingbirds that color?" I spoke quietly so as not to startle Kate awake if she'd fallen asleep in my chair. It wouldn't be the first time a client had taken a nap during a color.

Kate opened her eyes. "Hmm?"

I nodded toward the window and the hummingbird outside it. "Like that. I have one that comes to the feeder outside my living room every day. It inspired my hair." I didn't mention it also inspired daily paintings, each of which was slightly different as I strived to capture the minute changes in the way light glinted off the rainbow-hued

feathers.

Kate gasped and tried to sit up straighter, but I rested a forearm on her shoulder, careful not to let my dye-covered gloves touch her clothing.

“You need to stay still,” I murmured.

“Sorry. I...” She almost tried to shift forward again. “I’ve never seen a bird like that.”

“Are you sure?” I didn’t intend to sound as though I didn’t believe her. “I mean, it’s just all I’ve seen here.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

“Quite sure. That’s amazing. In fact, I could write quite the story about it.”

“Really?” I looked at the hummingbird again. Maybe Sweetwater had a pair of them. Maybe a colony or a flock, or whatever a herd of hummingbirds was called.

No wonder Kate wanted to write up some kind of article.

“You think it’s breaking news?” My words came out as a light tease, but if these really were rare hummingbirds, surely that made my paintings all the more valuable.

I pressed my lips into a line as I smoothed another color over the lightened strands. No. It didn’t work that way. I never ascribed value to my paintings. Not really. They were my passion projects, and they were really worth whatever a customer was prepared to pay.

“Damn straight it’s breaking news,” Kate finally answered. “Have you ever seen a bird colored like that? And right here in Sweetwater? Shit. Can you get my phone out of my purse and snap a few pictures?”

I hesitated and glanced at the hummingbird. Something wary seemed to glimmer in the eye it turned toward me. I frowned. Didn’t it want to have its picture taken?

But that was stupid. A bird wouldn’t have an opinion on appearing in a photograph. Same as it wouldn’t understand me if I spoke to it.

Still, I didn’t know that I could let Kate actually have a picture. “My hands have dye on them, and I shouldn’t interrupt your process.” I held up my gloved hands and tried

to sound apologetic. “I can’t reach into your purse or touch any of your possessions. I’m sorry.”

Kate sighed. “Dammit. The first real story wandering across my radar in a very long time, and I can’t even do anything about it.” She chuckled. “Well, them’s the breaks.” Then she met my gaze in the mirror. “Opal hair had better damn well be worth it.” She softened her words with a smile. “Life-changing and all that.”

“You still have the mysterious men, right?”

“Hm. Yeah, but that’s all speculation. The birds are real, they’re verifiable. A picture of one in the paper could go national.” Her bottom lip puckered in a pout. “But wait—you said they come to your house, right?”

I gritted my teeth briefly before speaking. “Yeah.” I sounded hesitant. “But I don’t know when I’ll see one again.”

She made a noise between a groan and a growl, and the chair squeaked quietly as she shifted her weight. “I might need you to grab a picture of one of these little suckers the next time you catch one.” She met my eyes again in the mirror, but this time the stern look she leveled at me was one of a hard-nosed reporter. “Promise.”

I swallowed and nodded, bracing against the intensity of her reflected gaze, but I couldn’t speak to seal the lie. Now I knew these birds were rare, I wouldn’t sell out the one that trusted me enough to visit each day. Snitching wasn’t in me. Instead, I shifted the subject sideways.

“So,” I said, keeping my voice low, conspiratorial almost. “You think maybe if these guys are rare, the men in suits could be connected somehow?” Yep. What I’d said sounded dumb to me, too, but Kate almost tilted her head in thought.

“I guess? Although I’d never expect strange colored birds to be a matter of national security.”

I chuckled. “But they’re certainly more interesting than the mostly brown ones I’ve seen everywhere else.”

Kate glanced out of the window again, a thoughtful expression back on her face. “Ain’t that the truth,” she murmured.

As I watched the hummingbird, it hovered closer, like it was looking through the window at us, rather than the other way around.

“Feels like we’re in a zoo.” Kate chuckled. “I’ve never been watched by a bird before.”

The bird drifted closer and tapped briefly against the glass with its beak.

Kate chuckled again. “Maybe it wants you to recolor its feathers.”

“Or it’s telling me to hurry up with your hair.” I grinned and returned my attention to my work.

The hair took the color effortlessly. I just had that feeling her hair would look amazing in the end. Almost like I was able to will it so. A kind of color kismet or something. I grinned.

Sunlight streaming in through the window almost illuminated the end result. If I squinted, I believed it. Kate would be thrilled, not only with the kaleidoscope of her opal hair, but the flame and ice, too.

She shifted slightly, and her bracelets jingled again, bringing my attention back to the

woman sitting in the chair, rather than only the hair in my hands. Sometimes, I got lost in colors instead of the customer. It was easier when I tried ideas on mannequins and wigs—if I brain-wandered, nobody cared.

“So.” I searched my mind for some small talk. “You’re a freelance reporter?”

Kate grimaced. “Something like that. I submit articles anywhere that will publish them. I have some pretty successful friends, though. A great network.” She waved a hand toward her hair. “I might get in touch with a friend about my hair. She works for a style magazine, and they’re always looking for the next big thing.” She winked. “Who knows? That could be you.”

My face heated, and I caught a glimpse of my pink cheeks in the mirror. “I’m not sure I’m ready for a spotlight. I mean, I love my work, and I love making people happy, but I love things the way they are.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

“Oh yeah?” Kate raised an eyebrow in a face that looked a lot like challenge. “Hey, Bess.” She raised her voice and Bess hustled over. “How would you like Meira’s talent to put your Sweetwater salon really on the map?”

Bess’s face became a wide grin. But when she glanced at me, she hesitated. “I think maybe it’s Meira’s choice?” she ventured. “I probably haven’t got a whole lot longer left at the helm, anyway. I have places to go and things to do.”

Kate’s eyebrow rose even higher. “You’d turn down free publicity? Extra income? More customers?”

“What would our regulars say if we were suddenly overrun by people wanting their hair colored?” I murmured as I carefully wrapped foils around each strand of hair. I kept my voice light, but what Kate described was the last thing I wanted. All that attention could shove itself where the sun didn’t shine. Folding another long opal, rainbow-lite strand into foil, I wrapped a band around Kate’s head to hold the foil in place while the color stain worked its magic.

I’d never sought out any kind of fame. I was happier on my own. And being in Sweetwater was the happiest I’d ever been. Upsetting the balance of my life here wasn’t an option. The weather suited me, the pace of life, the light. My soul hummed happily.

“No, it’s up to Meira, I think.” Despite the wistful longing in Bess’s eyes, she shrugged. “I’m pleased with her work and her presence as it is. She doesn’t need to do more.”

“Oh. Well.” Kate shrugged but the movement she made no longer mattered. The application was completed. “I still think you could be big, though.” She studied me. “You should really think about it.”

I nodded as Bess strolled away to answer the ringing phone. “I’m not sure I need to think about it a whole lot. Sweetwater doesn’t seem like the kind of place where someone would grow a big business—not without ruining the town for everyone else who lives here anyway. Who wants to do that?”

“You plan to stay?” She sounded incredulous now as her eyes widened. “Here?” She shook her head. “You could make so much more money in a bigger city.”

“Sure.” I nodded and straightened my ponytail. “Sweetwater is pretty much perfect. I have a good job, a comfortable home, and there’s a sunny beach. What more could I need?”

“A man?” She winked.

I shrugged. “The town is full of those today, as we’ve all noticed.”

“So you think you might want to put down some roots?”

I fussed a little with one of the foils as I considered her question. This felt dangerously like an interview, and I didn’t want to be a story. But the answer really took no consideration at all. “Yeah, I think this might be the right time and the right place.”

“And you’ll keep working in Bess’s salon?”

I nodded. “Sure, for as long as she’ll have me.”

“I heard that.” Bess’s voice rang across the space. “I’m thinking of handcuffing you to your chair so you can’t ever leave.”

I laughed and fussed with more foils. I didn’t have big plans here in Sweetwater but knowing my job was safe was a relief, anyway. I’d never felt so nurtured and appreciated.

“If I can’t get my friend to write a feature about you, can I at least recommend you?” Kate asked. “We could get jewel tone hair trending in the local area.”

“Sure.” A steady stream of customers wasn’t a bad thing. And personal recommendations was definitely the way to go on those. “I appreciate the word of mouth.”

Reporter Kate leaned toward me. “What are yourfuturefuture plans, though? Surely you don’t intend to see out your days in this tiny town?”

I could forever fiddle with my creation, but it wouldn’t improve the finished result, only adjust it. Waiting was the only way we’d see the finished work.

“Oh, I don’t know. Mrs. K. won’t always be able to head up the Sweetwater Spotters, so I think there’ll be an opening I can slot into. It would be interesting work.” I finished rearranging the foils and stepped back.

Kate’s gaze narrowed, but she didn’t ask anything else.

The Spotters thing was a joke. What I really wanted was for Bess to announce her retirement. If I became successful enough, maybe I could buy her out. Then I’d have a home and a business, and I could be happy for a lot longer. I wanted a future filled with Sweetwater light.

five

A few hours later, after Kate had drunk her body weight in coffee and read through five of our magazines, the door to the salon opened again and the atmosphere inside shifted.

I glanced at the counter, where Bess was greeting a sensible looking woman in a pantsuit and an open necked blouse. Staring might be impolite, but the woman was yet another stranger in town. Her style didn't scream Sweetwater. Neither did her posture. The skin on the back of my neck prickled. Something about her...

The woman murmured something too quiet for me to hear, and Bess glanced over her shoulder at me before replying. The woman nodded and Bess stepped away from the counter before approaching me.

"A new customer would like a consult with you, and she's not booked anything," she spoke quietly. "I've explained you're too busy." She paused but fidgeted like something had excited her. "But she's come from out of town because she heard about you."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

I tapped Kate on the shoulder and gestured toward the sinks. "Time to unveil your color." I grinned, and Kate bounced across the room after me.

Bess followed me, too.

I glanced back at my boss. "You want me to talk to her?"

"She came from out of town." Bess half-whispered the words.

I understood Bess's excitement, even if I didn't share it. This was a local salon, catering to local ladies. I helped Kate sit in the reclining chair and situated the back of her neck against the bowl. Carefully, I adjusted the temperature of the water and began the rinse.

"She came because she's heard of you," Bess continued. "She's visited my salon because you're here. Can you believe it?"

"I'll talk to her." I fanned Kate's hair across my fingers as I rinsed it. "But I'm not quite finished with Kate yet."

"I know." Bess nodded and laced her fingers together. "I think I can get the out-of-towner to wait."

"Okay. Maybe send her to Sunshine Brew? More pleasant to wait there?" I mean, I liked the scent of dye chemicals, but some people actually seemed to prefer the aroma of coffee.

Bess hurried off, and I continued with Kate's hair, watching as the color revealed itself. Wet, it shimmered like jewels, but dry it would be amazing. I lifted the strands, watching as the light played across them. Such shine.

I turned back to the bowl but observed the stranger from beneath my eyelashes. Across the room, the stranger nodded and moved toward the chairs where customers waited. They were hard plastic and the least comfortable space in the salon because people rarely waited. Bess had scheduling down to a fine art.

I glanced between Kate and the woman again. They really were poles apart. Kate wore floaty, bohemian clothes, and everything jingled when she moved. Opal hair fitted right in with her vibe.

But I couldn't imagine why the sensible-looking lady in the pantsuit had shown up. She looked like she'd be more at home running a political campaign. Maybe I should have been grateful for the chance for a new customer relationship, but something about the stranger made me uncomfortable.

"I see your fame is already spreading," Kate commented. "You might not have any choice on being the next big thing." She closed her eyes as I swept her hair from her forehead and directed the nozzle to her hairline.

I pressed my lips into a line. "Hmm." The next big thing didn't sound like a good option. It sounded oppressive and like I'd lose control of what freedom I had.

Yet Bess's smile illuminated nearly the entire salon as she looked up from her weekly trim of Mrs. Quinn. This was special for her, and she'd given me a chance when I first came to town, so I could meet with the odd extra customer who'd traveled to see me. I probably owed Bess that much consideration, anyway.

In the waiting area, the stranger stood and looked at some of the pictures Bess had

displayed of my coloring work. They stood out among pictures of no longer on-trend perms and pixie cuts. She leaned closer to study one based on the colors of a blue morpho butterfly then the second one where I'd been inspired by the train of a peacock. I'd even created the beautiful eye-like shapes.

That customer had been particularly pleased, and it had been a good tip day.

"You're very talented, you know." Kate sounded nearly drowsy as I turned the faucet off and wrapped a towel around her head to absorb the excess water before I led her back to sit in front of the mirror. I loved this part, the big reveal.

And Kate's reveal would be spectacular. It was a truth I knew with a certainty deep within me. Some days, everything just seemed to go perfectly... more than perfectly. And this was one of those days. A day of kismet color. I grinned at the silly expression.

Truthfully, there hadn't been a day that went badly. Customers left, each happier than the last, like I was perfecting my craft day by day. Almost as if it were what I'd been born to do.

Kate gasped as I ran the blow dryer over her hair, lifting the length high with my brush and allowing the strands to gently return to her shoulders, drying a slight wave into her strands to showcase the new colors at their best. When I finished, I stepped back.

She chewed her bottom lip and turned her head a little one way and then the other.

I waited for her commentary.

She gave a long, satisfied sigh. Like the kind after a long drink on a hot day. "It's more than nice, Meira," she breathed. "I never imagined my hair could look this

amazing.” She met my gaze in the mirror. “No offense.” Then she laughed. “I guess I just didn’t imagine anyone could do this.”

My cheeks heated under her praise, but I turned toward a noise on my left to find the sensibly-dressed woman watching us.

“May I?” She gestured toward Kate. “May I look at the colors?”

I waited to see what Kate would say. After all it was Kate’s hair, not mine.

Kate lifted her chin and sat up a little straighter. Her hands strayed to the strands. “You’re my first admirer,” she gushed then laughed. “Oh, absolutely come and look. I never thought I’d have such beautiful hair.” She ran her fingers through it, flipping it over her shoulder as she did. “It’s so pretty,” she whispered.

The stranger stepped closer, but she stopped a couple of yards away, almost like she was afraid. My throat dried, and it was like the tension in the beauty shop increased. Who was she?

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

“You can have a proper look.” Kate beamed at her. “And have you seen Meira’s hair? When she wears it down, it’s incredible, too. She’s the one who talked me into getting Rainbow-lite.”

I grinned at the title Kate had used.

But the woman in the suit smiled tightly, the expression looking more like pain than appreciation. “I’m sure it does. I’ve never seen hair in such colors. It’s like magic.”

“It’s art,” Kate corrected. “True craft at its finest.” She looked curiously at the woman. “So which colorway has attracted your attention? Have you seen Meira’s portfolio? The pictures on the walls are just a tiny sample of the work she does.” She lowered her voice. “And the woman can paint, too. It’s freaking unfair, right? Like some grabbed all the talent before the rest of us could get there.”

The woman shook her head, and I passed her the book I’d shared with Kate earlier.

“Here are some more styles I’ve been playing with. There are lots of colors and inspirations in there or if you have something in mind, you just let me know. The more complicated something is, the more expensive it is,” I added. “Generally.” What crazy color would the suited woman choose? Maybe she’d finally quit her tight-collar day job and wanted to cut loose. But even as the thought rolled through my mind, I knew it wasn’t correct. This woman wasn’t about to cut loose. She was wound tight, and I squelched a shiver as it dripped down my spine.

“Where did you hear about Meira?” Kate focused inquisitive eyes on the woman—but that was no surprise. Kate was ever the reporter, hungry for her next

story.

Bess busied herself dusting shelves, with one ear toward us.

The woman's eyes widened and she shrugged. "One of my friends raved about her latest hair color and here I am."

"Yes." Kate looked thoughtful. "Here you are. Where did you say you're from again?"

"Oh." The woman flinched away. "A couple hours from here. Too far to come back for a consult on a different day, anyway. I've made a special trip." She smiled, her sudden change in expression unexpected, and a little off-putting. In fact, her smile didn't change her eyes.

"Is that so?" I glanced around. The stranger wasn't comfortable here. Why?

"That's no problem," Bess interjected. She usually only scheduled me one big job per day. Sometimes two if we had the clients to warrant it, but rarely. There were really only so many people in Sweetwater who wanted their hair dyed in this style on a regular basis.

I took a breath and forced my shoulders to relax. I probably looked as uncomfortable as the stranger did. Maybe I actually needed to get my name out more. For Bess's sake. "Kate?"

She looked at me as I spoke her name.

"Maybe you can run a small article?" I pinched my thumb and forefinger together to indicate how small I meant. "I might need to try to attract clients from farther afield."

She smiled widely. “That’s more like it. Between us, we can make you famous. Look at me. I’m ready for my close-up.” She pouted at herself in the mirror.

“What do you think of Sweetwater?” Kate directed her question at my other customer. “I’m Kate, by the way.”

“Oh.” The woman’s lips parted. “I’m Kel— Helen.” She held out her hand for Kate to shake. “I’m Helen.”

“Well, Kel-Helen, if that’s your real name...” Kate’s lips twisted in amusement, and she wagged her eyebrows.

I shot her a glance.

Kate gave me a look. “It’s nice to meet you, Helen. What do you think of our town so far? We’re in the running for the Prettiest Town contest.”

Helen laughed uneasily. “How nice.”

“Have you got such attractive men where you’re from?” Kate slid a glance toward the front window, where the salon looked out over Main.

“Excuse me?” Helen’s eyes widened, and Kate mirrored her expression, although Kate went for false innocence.

I crossed my arms. What was Kate playing at?

Kate continued. “Surely you haven’t missed today’s plethora of handsome guys in suits? It’s like they’re an art installation.”

Helen forced another laugh. “Oh, I only came to see Meira. After what I’ve heard, I

knew I needed to see her for myself. I should liven this up, right?” She lifted a lock of her mousey brown hair and dropped it once more.

I wouldn’t comment. I never did. It wasn’t my place to comment on a client’s current hairstyle, only to help them find what they wanted and move forward toward their vision.

I finished smoothing Kate’s hair—with Helen looking on. Helen seemed to take in every change in the color. I purposely lifted the brush higher, allowing the sunlight to gleam on the hair. She clearly enjoyed her vantage point.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

“Is this the kind of look you like?” My question was professional curiosity, but Helen swallowed.

“You’ve done a lot of pretty work,” she said. “It’s almost overwhelming.”

“How do you see your hair?” Sometimes it helped them if I started simple. “If anything were possible, what would you choose?”

She shrugged. “Something other than brown?”

Kate laughed. “But that’s as simple as being blonde. You don’t need Meira for that.” She glanced at me. “No offense again, Meira.”

I chuckled. “None taken.” I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d done a simple hair color. Nothing where light didn’t play through a vivid spectrum of colors. This work called to me like no other.

“Maybe seeing my hair will help you decide.” I paused. Revealing my inspiration for my hair would reveal the hummingbird to one more person, and I was wary now Kate had reacted with such interest. I shook my head at the errant thought. That was too fanciful. The bird didn’t belong to me, and I didn’t need to protect it.

As if my thoughts had summoned it back, the hummingbird darted in front of the window, and Kate gasped before pointing. “There’s her inspiration for her hair. Did you know that? Have you ever seen anything like it?”

Helen ventured closer to the window and looked out before looking over her shoulder

at me. "I can see the similarities in the colors. How did you match the feathers so closely?"

I shrugged. Just dumb luck didn't sound like a good enough answer. I followed my heart was equally nonsensical. "I mixed my own colors until I arrived at the shades I wanted."

"And that's what you'd do for me?" She wandered back toward me but stopped before she reached touching distance.

"I'd certainly try." I patted Kate's shoulder. "Right. You're good to go. You like?" I held up a mirror behind her to show her the back of her hair once more, and she squealed.

"It's gorgeous. I'm going to tell everyone I know what a genius you are." She pulled me into a tight embrace before collecting her purse from the floor and rushing to show Bess her new hair. At my request, Bess collected my pay.

I looked at Helen. Her posture was as rigid as the moment she'd strolled in. "Want to take a seat and we can go through some ideas?"

She hesitated before sidling in front of the chair. When she sat, it was a slow movement, like she didn't want her butt to touch down. Like she thought the seat cushion might swallow her up.

"It's okay," I soothed, although God knew why she'd even come. "We won't do anything to your hair until you're one hundred percent on board, and we can do a demi color or stain the first time, if you're not sure. They wash out faster than the permanent ones. I prefer happy customers." I smiled encouragingly and picked up my portfolio. "We can just discuss ideas. No commitments today."

Helen flipped to the first page.

six

Helen continued flipping slowly through the pages, every so often looking up from the book and glancing out through the front window, as though her whole life depended on what hair color she picked.

I continued tidying up after working on Kate's hair, rinsing the sink, putting colors back in their position on my shelf, collecting trash, and wiping down surfaces. "You don't have to decide anything today," I murmured.

She didn't answer, and I didn't press. But Helen was easily the most skittish client I'd had in, actually looking like she was about to leap from my chair and bolt back out the salon.

The hummingbird I already thought of as mine zipped in front of the window again, and Helen glanced up at her. "You really captured those colors in your hair, you know."

"Thank you." I ran my hand over the top of my head, suddenly self-conscious. I'd modeled myself after a bird. How un-serious did it make me? Surely the opposite of suited, sensible Helen. I'd run out of things to do, so I studied the woman as she poured over the pages. From the other side of the shop, Bess's eyes kept straying to the two of us. Finally, she raised her eyebrow at me, and I shrugged. I wasn't in the habit of rushing customers.

"How do you do it, really?" She brought her head up sharply, the movement so sudden, I stepped back.

"I mix the colors—" I pointed to bottles of dye on my shelf. "And I just go from

there. It's a lot like painting. I find it almost therapeutic, but don't tell Bess I said that." I grinned as I spoke. My boss probably wouldn't like me telling a client my job was anything less than hard work and definitely worth all the money.

Helen merely nodded. "I see." But her gaze wandered to the big window again and her expression didn't register any real understanding.

I stopped to enjoy the antics of the hummingbird outside. It swooped and dived, the acrobatics came faster and faster until my little friend had become only a blur of color.

Still, Helen didn't choose.

I wiped my hand on one of my rags and fixed the positioning of some of the bottles on the shelf so I could see their labels at a glance. From what I could overhear, the talk in the rest of the salon was still about the unexpected presence of the secret service-like guys.

"You think I should dye hair in a way inspired by all of the mystery men?" I grinned as Helen switched her gaze to me. "I'm thinking moody blacks and deep blues. Maybe some streaks of dark gray. Could be a fun way to commemorate the excitement in Sweetwater."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

Her mouth opened as if to speak. But when no sound came out, I continued speaking instead.

“What do you think it’s all about? Do you think Sweetwater is expecting a visit from, like, the president or a member of the government?” I asked.

Her eyes opened a tick wider.

“Or maybe from the governor?”

But those seemed unlikely. Mrs. K had her ear to the ground. She would surely have known something like that. Or even Bess—she got a lot of people through the salon each day and often seemed to know what was going on around town.

Helen frowned a little, her eyebrows lowering and a small crease appeared at the top of her nose, nestled between her eyebrows like an exclamation point.

“You’re probably right,” I said, trying to carry on the one-sided conversation as though it was the most normal thing in the world. “Sweetwater is far too sleepy for anything like that.” And I wasn’t even really that curious. It was more about filling the silence and putting Helen at ease.

A noise at the window by my workstation startled me, and I glanced up. The hummingbird flapped her tiny wings against the glass. The noise was faint at first, then sounded like the buzzing of bees, then became a constant rattle, almost like the rapid movement was vibrating the whole of the glass.

“What’s it doing?” Helen’s voice remained quiet, as though if she spoke any louder, she’d spook the bird, or like she was trying not to draw its attention.

I shrugged as I watched. “I’ve got no idea. It’s never done anything like this before. Maybe it can see something in the salon that’s making it try to get inside?”

As I spoke, the bird bobbed its head forward and tapped its beak against the glass in a sharp rap. Then another.

Then another. Nothing had ever happened like this in Minnesota.

Helen moved back in her seat and the book slid from her lap. It fell with a slam against the floor. “Can it make a hole?”

I laughed. “Oh, I doubt it.”

But the rainbow bird brought her small beak against the surface once more. She behaved as though she thought she could get in. But could she? How sharp were hummingbird beaks?

“What are you doing, little friend?” I murmured.

“What’s that?” Helen asked.

“I have no idea what it’s doing,” I said, but it was making the customer uncomfortable.

I rolled the blind down over the window, trying to prevent it from seeing whatever was making it behave so strangely, but that only made it redouble its efforts.

“Is everything all right over there, Meira?” Bess’s voice rang across the salon.

“Yeah, I think so. There’s just a hummingbird behaving a bit strangely outside.”

Helen stood from the chair and moved away from the window. “I’m not sure this is safe.” She spoke slowly and enunciated each word.

I frowned at her unnatural tone.

Then she edged toward the door as the noise the hummingbird made grew louder still. In the space of a breath, another sound joined the first.

A loud rumble provided a bass noise to the hummingbird’s percussion, and I frowned. “What’s going on out there?”

Helen backed toward the front of the shop as the sound of helicopter blades gradually became more obvious. She spun, dashed toward the salon door, and threw it open as roaring engines sped up the street. The door alarm chimed to announce a customer. Black sedans squealed to a halt outside, parking at ridiculous angles, as if to prevent anyone leaving the business or even getting past on the street.

It was like the entire FBI had arrived en masse to conduct a raid. I clutched a lone bottle of color in my hand as I watched the scene unfold through the glass of the storefront.

When the engines were no longer running, radio chatter clattered in the air, punctuated by the crackle of open frequencies. The helicopter noise came and went as it circled above us. The hummingbird had gone silent now, and I resisted the urge to open the blind and check if she was still there. Possibly—probably—all of the sudden activity had scared it away.

Or maybe that was what had disturbed it in the first place. Did hummingbirds respond to radio waves? The percussion from helicopter blades? Was it like their wing beats

but bigger and stronger?

Helen stepped out into the exterior fray before Bess could stop her, and then Bess joined me at the back of the room. The door slipped closed behind her.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:27 am

“What’s going on?” She clutched the front of her shirt briefly. I’d never seen her look afraid, but fear was etched into the lines of her face. “I’ve paid all of my taxes.”

I stared at her. “Taxes? You think this is because of small-town taxes?”

Bess shrugged. “Could be.”

“What kind of establishment do you run here, Bess? How much money are you raking in?”

She gave me a long look.

Finally, I said, “I wouldn’t worry about those. They’re most likely here about the body in the basement.”

Her mouth fell open, and she gaped at me.

“I’m kidding.”

Bess didn’t look like she believed me.

I glanced around the salon and at the open front door. “Where did Helen go anyway?”

“She made a run for it on the street, I think,” Bess replied. “She definitely wasn’t hanging around.” Her eyes widened as she looked at the doorway. “Oh. Wait. No, there she is.” When she raised a finger to point, her hand shook.

I followed the direction of her finger, and I froze. Yep, there was Helen, only now she was barking instructions at men crouched behind open car doors, and she held a gun. She seemed to call out some instructions, but it was hard to hear her words over the helicopter. Her lips moved, though, and her face was tense, the muscles tight.

Two of the men charged forward, their guns held out in front of them, their heads swiveling from side-to-side as they kept their knees bent to walk into the salon. They stopped in the middle of the waiting room, and their expressions could have been etched in stone.

“Are we being raided?” Bess’s eyes were as wide as they could be, and she looked like she still couldn’t believe this was happening. “Is this a raid?”

“No, ma’am.” The first man through the door removed his sunglasses and stood straighter. “Now, everyone, stay where you are and no one needs to get hurt.”

Bess inhaled a quick breath and exhaled a long, shaky one. “Shit.” Her hands formed fists at her sides. “Everyone hold still.”

“Ms. Meira White.” I met the man’s gaze, the piercing blue eyes familiar as he spoke my name. He looked grumpy, like time had worn his frown lines into his face, but he wasn’t old. Maybe only a few years older than me. No more than ten, I amended. No more than ten years between us.

“Yes?” My voice held strong and steady.

“Come with us.” He gestured to the other man alongside him as he said.

The other man had already removed his dark glasses, and he smiled, managing to look completely approachable, even though he still had a gun pointed at me. He was older than the first man, but I guessed not by much.

Helen entered the salon behind them.

I looked directly at her. “What the hell is going on? Why are you in here pointing guns at us?”

She didn’t reply, but her eyes were colder than they’d been the whole time she’d pretended to be a customer. “Apprehend her.” She barked the order at the two men. “I’ve been observing her and her work, and she’s definitely our target.”

“Her hair’s different,” the older man observed, but his posture didn’t relax, and neither did his grip on his gun.

Helen tutted. “She’s a colorist in a hair salon, Locke. Have you ever seen color like it? We’re taking her in.”

Bess’s most recent customer was still in the chair facing the mirror, perm solution working on her hair, a cooling coffee on the narrow shelf in front of her. I didn’t recognize the woman, but she’d long since dropped her magazine to the floor at her side.

“What has Meira done?” she asked, but her voice was filled only with curiosity and the need for gossip. “Did she kill a man?”

I rolled my eyes. Of course she wasn’t outraged on my behalf. No, she wanted the best story from her front row view. A sigh escaped me. It would be all over Sweetwater within a few minutes of my being led away.

Bess edged closer and gripped my forearm like she could prevent me from leaving or being taken, and I took a small, protective sidestep in front of her. These men had guns, and it was me they wanted.

“Bess,” I said. “Let me go.” She squeezed my arm tighter.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

The customer's voice rose an octave. "Has she been doing something to the hair? Has she been hurting customers? I need to call my granddaughter. She had her hair colored just last week." The woman stopped speaking and started scrabbling in the purse she held in an iron grip on her lap. "Now where's my phone?"

My stomach tightened into a hard, knotted ball, but Bess spoke before I could say anything.

"Adelaide Mackenzie Lang, listen to yourself, really." Her voice was a sharp rebuke.

Adelaide sniffed.

Bess glared at the woman. "Of course there's nothing wrong with the work Meira has done. Do you think I would employ a criminal to work in my salon? To color the hair of those I consider my friends?"

Adelaide clucked her tongue and drew her cell phone from her bulky purse anyway. "It's better to be safe than sorry," she muttered as she moved her fingers across the screen.

The moment word of this got out, when people started questioning me, Bess's business could be ruined. Instead of helping her build, I could be her ruin.

Kate had only left the salon about thirty minutes ago, but already all of the things that I'd been imagining as I spoke to her—the idea that I could stay here and put down roots, maybe even take over Bess's salon in the future—had evaporated into nothing.

“But what’s going on?” I nearly shouted the words. No one had explained anything. “Why do I need to come with you? What are the charges?” I scowled. “Who are you anyway?”

The helicopter did another sweep overhead, and no one replied. The expressions on their faces didn’t change. Helen...or whatever the hell her name was...maintained her hard, rigid stare, the grumpy man glowered, and Locke—the only one I could name—almost seemed to offer me a small smile of reassurance.

Then even that glimmer of hope was gone, and the grumpy one stepped forward. He held oversized dark shades in his hand. They weren’t small and sexy like the ones they all wore. These had been made to be more like a plastic blindfold.

“Your glasses.” He muttered the words as an instruction, and Locke walked slowly toward me, his pace almost hesitant like he might spook me. But hell, I was several miles pastspookedand hovering on sheer terror, but I battled against the tremors that would give me away, stiffening my knees so they didn’t shake.

“Easy now. Easy.” He kept his voice low and level like I was a horse or a dog that might kick or bite him. “I just want you to put these on.” He held out the hand holding the sunglasses.

“What? Why?” I wanted to back away, but I bumped against Bess behind me.

“Just put them on.” The grumpy man issued his words in a growl and waved his gun in a small gesture.

I took the glasses, and Bess gasped. But I needed to make her salon safe for her again. It wasn’t fair for her to be surrounded by an armed group when all they seemed to want was me.

Bolstered by my resolve to keep Bess as safe as I could, I put the glasses on, and my whole world grew darker.

seven

I took a small step forward, and Bess's fingers relaxed, her grip slipping from me. I probed the floor in front of me with the tips of my shoes, hoping the secret-whatever agents wouldn't let me trip and fall on my face.

"I have to go," I whispered over my shoulder. "I need to keep you safe."

I thought she nodded, but the lenses were darker than any other pair I'd ever worn.

Locke was closer now, the cinnamon-spiced scent of his cologne washed over me. "Arms out, wrists together. If you touch your glasses, I'll cuff your hands behind you." His instruction was kind but didn't allow for me not to obey, so I did what he commanded.

Cold metal encircled my wrists, and I shivered as Locke clicked the handcuffs closed.

"Is it done?" Helen spoke from her position by the door.

"Yes. As you instructed," Locke answered gruffly like this part wasn't wholly his idea.

"We need to get her into the car." The man with no name spoke this time, his voice unhurried and all-business.

Locke gripped my upper arm and led me forward. Bess made a strangled sound, but I didn't look behind me again. That would be too hard. I needed to get through this, go through the due process or whatever, and correct a misunderstanding.

“I’ll be back soon,” I called over my shoulder, trying to infuse the words with confidence and true belief, even as Helen scoffed somewhere ahead of me. I grimaced at the sound. Why did Helen have it out for me? It didn’t make any sense. Nobody hated hair color that much.

Locke led me out. “Watch your step,” he muttered as we moved over the threshold, more out of habit than concern, I suspected.

The soles of my shoes grated against the sidewalk. A little more light permeated the glasses, but still not enough to improve my mood or instill me with any idea that this situation would disappear. The sun kissed warmth over my skin, though, and for a moment I relished the heat, finding some strength there.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

I walked beside and slightly behind Locke to one of the cars, keeping my face pointed forward so I wouldn't accidentally see anyone I knew in my periphery. There was a crowd gathered, that much was clear from the noise, and several people called my name. My cheeks flamed. One voice could have been Mrs. K, but I determined to ignore everything. I'd be the subject of the gossip and the rumor mill soon enough, even without adding fuel to that fire.

A car door handle clunked and a heavy hinge squeaked. Locke ushered me into the seat behind the driver, slammed the door, then a moment later he slid into the driver's seat. For a moment, I sat completely still, trying to work out how to buckle myself in. Even with my hands in front of me, I wasn't sure I could get strapped in without choking myself.

"You good?" he gruffed.

"Sure." No. "Who needs to be buckled in? Who cares if we wreck, and I die."

He didn't respond. Instead, he shifted the car into drive. But we didn't move immediately.

The door across from me opened, and the grumpy guy must have gotten in.

"Coop," Locke said by way of greeting.

Then Coop reached across me and I flinched, but he only grabbed the seat belt and clunked the two parts together.

“Buckle up,” he muttered under his breath.

“Coop.” Locke spoke. “You put that spare pair of shades in the glove box?”

“Yep.” Coop was a man of few words, apparently, but Locke scrabbled around in the front. I listened to the familiar noise of a glove box being opened then closed before there was the low rumble of the car engine starting.

Around us, multiple car doors slammed, and we waited only a short while before the car started to slowly roll away.

We stopped abruptly.

“Damn,” Coop ground out. “What’s going on?”

“The crowd surged,” Locke said. “I need to wait for them to clear.”

“The others will do it.” Coop sounded almost bored. “No fixing stupid.” He sighed.

Locke chuckled. “Always the same way, though, right?”

“Yeah.”

I couldn’t see much beyond the dark of the glasses and the tiny light from the windows, so I lifted my hands to remove the shades. When I grasped the edges, someone caught my hand.

“Nope.” Coop reached over and pressed them back into position on my face.

“What? But I can’t see.” I turned to face him, able to barely make out his outline and facial features. “These are too dark.”

“If you can’t see,” he said, “then they’re just right, Rainbowlocks.”

“What are you talking about? I need to be able to see. What aren’t you showing me? What’s going on outside?” Being forced into the darkness felt cruel and unusual, and I shivered. I didn’t understand any of this.

“It’s not about what’s going o—”

But Locke spoke, cutting across Coop. “A bunch of people are standing in front of the car, blocking us in. We’re just waiting for them to be cleared.”

“Cleared?” That didn’t sound great when the people doing the clearing had guns. I picked at the fabric on my pants. “Like, are you going to—”

“Peacefully cleared,” he amended. “Until then, we’re going to sit here a little longer.”

“I want to see. I need to check on Bess.” I tried to turn around while lifting my glasses again.

“Leave ’em,” Coop growled as he shoved them back into place again. “And if you can’t leave them, you’ll need to wear a hood.”

“A hood?” I practically screeched at them. “You mean like one of those sack things they used to put on people before they hanged them?” I shuddered. “I don’t like being enclosed in the dark.” Just the restricted light and blocked vision from the shades sent a thrum of low-level panic through me. “Much less the thought of hanging.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“I bet.” This time, Coop murmured the words so low I barely heard them.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded, but neither paid any attention to me.

“The crowd’s clearing.” Locke made his report from in front of me, but Coop barely even grunted acknowledgement, like he didn’t know why his coworker had spoken.

The car started to roll forward again, creeping so slowly I had to concentrate to know we were moving. The helicopter noise outside had long since subsided, and if there was any crowd left, their noise didn’t permeate into the car, either. The oppressive quiet drove my alone-ness home. I was going off with somebody claiming to be a... claiming to be a... what? Had they shown me anything official at all? I grimaced, trying to recall.

Shit, what was I doing? I was sitting in a car with men I didn’t know. I was handcuffed, and they were driving me away from my job and my home. Did they even have identification? What organization were they with? Men in Black? My mouth twisted, and my throat dried. My palms felt sweaty. I attempted to rein in my mental panic.

My job.

For Bess. To keep Bess safe.

I tried to turn around again, but this time the movement was too rapid and the seat belt snapped taut over my chest.

Somebody grunted.

“Bess.” I croaked her name. “Is she okay?”

There was a scoffing noise from my right. The cranky one sat closest, of course.

“No one has been hurt in this morning’s operation,” Locke said, his tone reassuring but his words worrying.

I was part of an operation? What the hell was going on? Was this just a case of mistaken identity? I’d thought stories of secret government agencies picking normal people up off the streets were just that—stories.

Not something that actually happened in the real world.

Not something that happened to people like me, anyway.

Still, if they were telling the truth, Bess was all right. Not hurt, anyway. That goal had been accomplished. She was okay.

Then I scoffed. Not hurt physically but probably traumatized. It wasn’t every day her business was raided and an employee led out in handcuffs by armed men. My head spun; my thoughts whirled in all directions as I tried to gather my focus.

“I’m a hairdresser,” I said.

“What’s that?” Coop scoffed.

“You’ve got to have me confused with some rainbow-headed spy, and I want you to let me out of this car right now,” I snapped. Then I kicked the back of Locke’s seat.

“Quiet down,” cranky Coop barked. “Or we’ll gag you, too.”

My mouth dropped open. Gag me? Cruel and unusual wasn’t the half of it. I bit down on a stream of cursing. I wasn’t worth kidnapping. How could I be worth kidnapping?

“Where are you taking me?”

“I told you to be quiet.”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Locke added, only marginally kinder.

The motion of the car changed, smoothing out as it picked up speed. A highway? I had no idea where we were going. I couldn’t even tell what direction we were traveling in. Definitely out of town, but I only knew that because none of these people belonged in my town.

I rested my forehead against my window, and the vibrations rolled from the engine to the glass and worked through my face. My cheeks wobbled uncomfortably, and I turned my head to alleviate the sensation. Light peeked at the edge of my vision, so I shifted a little more.

I figured out, if I moved a certain way, the sunglasses lifted a little, and I could see outside. Maybe they wouldn’t notice since I wasn’t touching the shades with my hands. Cuffed with my hands behind my back wasn’t an option.

I studied the passing scenery through my periphery. The colors were muted, but the light helped the knot of worry in my chest. I knew the local area well enough to recognize the red barn in the distance, and my mind filled in the usual colors. If I noticed enough, maybe I could plan my route back home. Or at least tell emergency services where to send the cops.

When my forehead started to numb, I pressed my face harder against the glass until the askew sunglasses dug uncomfortably into the bridge of my nose. More light. I hated the dark.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“Red barn,” I murmured. “Red barn, no harm.” Perhaps if I could create a rhyme or something easy to remember, I could navigate my way back somehow.

The water tower we passed had blue writing. I knew that, even though it looked gray today. I tapped my fingers against the glass. The dark sunglasses had done something to my eyes.

“Red barn, no harm... Blue tower, very quick shower.” I didn’t know what I was saying. The words had no meaning.

But perhaps if the rhyme was silly enough, I’d be able to recall it, and it would get me home. The words alone would conjure up images of the landmarks, anyway.

“Sit properly.” Coop’s voice jarred me, and I flinched, mashing the glasses harder against my face. “What are you even doing?” He placed his hand on my shoulder, exerting light pressure as he tried to turn me from the window.

The heat of his hand permeated my thin T-shirt and warmed my skin. He was gentler than I’d expected, especially after barking about gagging me.

“Move away from the window,” he instructed, tugging on me.

As he pushed me back against the seat, the glasses hung awkwardly on my face, and he sighed before nudging them back into position.

So, I probably hadn’t even made it five miles from Sweetwater, and already my plan to plot my route had failed. I turned my head in Coop’s direction.

“Who are you people?”

He didn't reply.

“What am I accused of?”

Silence.

“No one has even read me my rights.” I paused but didn't expect him to say anything.

“I have actual rights, you know.”

This time, Coop chuckled, and the sound was dark, lifting the fine hairs at the back of my neck, like it was a physical sensation as it rolled over me. Anger quickly followed my flicker of fear.

“Who are you?” I repeated my first question to be met by silence from the front and silence alongside me. “What are the charges?”

More nothing, even though I'd asked my question in as firm a voice as I had in me. Hopefully, Bess had contacted some legal representation on my behalf, although knowing my luck she'd approached Matt Granger, pretty much the town's lawyer and as old as God himself.

Still, any help was better than no help at all. May the good Matt Granger find something easy to work with.

“Charges,” I demanded again. “What are they?”

“Classified.”

I froze. Both at the fact he'd answered and at the word he'd used.

Classified. Classified? What the hell did he even mean? Classified. Did they really think I was some kind of rainbow-haired spy? That settled it, though. This legitimately could only be a case of mistaken identity.

“You’ve got the wrong person,” I said.

Again that chuckle. But frustration coiled inside my chest, and I clenched my sweaty hands behind me. If my glasses weren’t so dark, they’d see my glare.

“Coop and Locke, right?” I asked this question in a conversational tone. “I mean, I think I should probably know the names of the two men who’ve bungled their latest operation. For when I report you to the authorities.”

This time, I didn’t need to hear Coop laugh to know I wouldn’t be reporting them to anyone. Whether I knew their names or not, it didn’t matter. Who received reports on men in suits? The FBI? The CIA? The NSA? Hell, those were men in suits. And these guys probably came from one of them. No one would ever take me seriously.

Instead, once they figured out they had the wrong hairdresser, they’d drop me back on the street and get to pretend it never happened while I picked up the pieces. Shit. After all this, would Bess even take me back? She might not. The realization cracked my heart a little.

Looked like all my hopes were pinned on Matt Granger, Esquire, then.

I settled back against the seat and tried to ease the pull of the cuffs on my wrists. Goddamn. I had no hope. None.

Maybe it was time for a different line of questioning. “Am I under arrest?” If I could understand their reasoning, maybe I’d be able to work something out. Cut a deal. Anything to get back to Sweetwater.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

The handcuffs decorating my wrists suggested I was under arrest, but no one had actually used those words. Detained, then? Detained for what?

“Where are we going?” I wanted answers, so I waited, and the silence stretched as long as whatever damn road we sped down.

I turned my head in Coop’s direction. I couldn’t see much of him, and he had sunglasses on, anyway, so I couldn’t see his eyes to guess what he was thinking.

“Classified,” he said finally, but I was fast reaching the point where any response from him was a good response.

It was better than silence, and I liked provoking even one word from him. Or a sigh. Anything suggesting he’d heard me, and I’d made some sort of impact or inconvenienced his day.

I jiggled the bracelets on my wrists. “Are these things even necessary? What am I going to do against two big strong men in suits?” My upper lip curled as the words slipped out.

When Coop hissed under his breath, I didn’t hide my smirk. Locke didn’t audibly react.

We were fast approaching the second location—or not so fast; I could only guess—and I knew all the rules said not to go willingly or make it easy on my captors. So I should at least try to get uncuffed, so I’d have a fighting chance once we arrived.

Again Coop had gone silent, so I shook the unwelcome metal on my wrists once more.

“Can we take these off?” I rattled them again. The cuffs were heavy and uncomfortable, and the edges bit into my skin. What if they meant to keep them on me until they... they...

Panic started to seep outward from the center of my chest, turning me cold as it crept through my body like a poison, until it hollowed out my middle. Bright colors danced across the darkness I'd been trapped in. I sucked at the air, but oxygen didn't come any faster.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Fabric rustled, and I had the sense of Coop leaning toward me. He rested a hand over mine behind me, where I'd tangled my fingers together in an effort to stop them from shaking.

I needed rigid control to get through this, and I gritted my teeth and tensed my jaw to prevent a sob from escaping.

“They stay.” But his voice was soft and his hand was warm, and some of the fear inside me inexplicably loosened.

eight

We traveled so long I dozed, and my chin inched uncomfortably toward my chest as my head bobbed up and down with the rolling bouncing motion of the car. We barreled down mostly smooth roads, so we still had to be on paved roads.

Wherever they were taking me could have been a mere twenty miles away, and I

wouldn't have known because the route was so circuitous and contrived around lonely roads. They might be purposefully taking extra turns. Didn't kidnappers do that?

I must have dozed again because a change in the sound of the road under the wheels woke me, and I lifted my head slowly, wincing at the ache in my neck. I looked in the direction of the window expectantly, but I still wore ridiculous shades with the window tint, and the gloom of nightfall outside. Our vehicle slowed, but we didn't stop.

So, I shifted my position, my jeans sliding easily over the soft leather of the seat and squinted through the windshield. A futile attempt, but I had to try. Coop didn't make a sound, and he didn't try to readjust my position, and I shot a quick glance at him and twisted my head one way and then the other. A pain shot through my neck. Though, I'd caught a slight glimpse of Coop.

He faced forward, but that was all I could tell. I could imagine the rest, though. A small frown would be at home between his eyebrows, and his jawline would be angular and tense.

I'd managed to snag one other detail before my neck put a stop to my stubbornness. The building in front of us rose up like some kind of fortress, and as we drew closer, I tried the periphery trick once more. I lost sight of the flat top of the place we'd arrived. Some of the windows gleamed with dull spots of light, but we passed through huge, solid metal gates and into an enormous courtyard containing nothing at all.

"What is this place?" I turned and glanced out of the rear window, and this time Coop let me. The metal gates clanged closed behind us, and Coop's lack of reaction to my change of position made sense.

Our new location was a secure one, and we'd all just been locked in. What? A castle?

We eased down the driveway.

The courtyard was surrounded by high walls and... When I tipped my head, pain screamed through my neck. I squinted before my irritation flared, and I brushed my hands over my eyes, knocking the glasses from my face before Coop could stop me. Maybe he wouldn't yell at me, but I sure as hell didn't care anymore.

He swore as they fell to the floor, and I kicked them underneath Locke's seat. I grinned as I heard what I hoped was the crunch of the ridiculous glasses against something hard.

"Where the hell are we?" I ground out.

Tall walls surrounded the courtyard, and huge spirals of razor wire topped the perimeter walls. There were guard towers at the corners and at regular intervals between, and one man clutching a machine gun peered down at our car as it crept forward. Since I could see properly, I was able to identify scorched marks on the surface of the courtyard like several fires had burned hot and fast on the bare ground. Short tufts of spiky grass grew here and there, but only often enough to be considered weeds.

"Any more spare glasses?" Coop directed his question to Locke, and I held my breath until Locke shook his head.

Thank God for that. I grinned at the small win. I rarely wore sunglasses, even on Sweetwater's brightest days because they seemed to really affect my vision, no matter which tint I tried.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“She’s taken her glasses off,” Coop growled.

Locke glanced up, and I met his sunglasses in the rearview mirror. “So I see,” he murmured. Then he leaned forward and glanced upward, out of the top of the windshield. “Looks like it’s going to be a cloudy night, though. Shouldn’t get a lot lighter. Think we’ll be okay.”

I almost sighed a second wave of relief but wait, what? No more light? They’d be okay? Like I’m the dangerous one in the car.

Coop nodded solemnly.

“What do you mean about being okay?” The question was out of my mouth before I could consider the wisdom of asking it, but neither of them replied.

The shouts of the armed guards echoed around the courtyard as they called instructions from tower to tower, then Locke stopped the car abruptly. I couldn’t see them, but there were guards in the shadows, too.

I scooched forward, the movement smooth rather than jerky because our speed had already been slow. But Coop slammed his arm across my chest, anyway, like he needed to prevent me flying from the vehicle, and I collapsed back against the seat.

I frowned. “What are you doing?”

Locke rolled down his window so he could hear what the guards were saying, and one materialized from some nearby shadows. The other man positioned himself so he

could glance inside the car, and his mouth took on a smirk when he saw me.

“Very nice,” he murmured. “Very nice sample indeed.”

Sample? How was I a sample? As outraged as his comment made me, I shrank back from the threat in his tone. Sample meant product not person. I wanted to fade into the seat behind me. Coop withdrew his arm, and I missed the anchoring warmth and contact.

The guard outside the car hefted his gun higher, putting it directly in my field of view as he cradled it in his arms like he was holding his firstborn. “ID,” he barked, although he probably knew both Coop and Locke.

“All right, Paulson, give us a minute.” Locke addressed him by name, confirming my suspicion. “No need to get snippy.”

Coop tapped Locke on the shoulder and handed him a card, and Locke added another before passing both of them to Paulson.

He barely looked at them before passing them back. That was interesting... A power-hungry guard. Never the best combination of attributes in the same person. He swung sharply to his left and called up to the closest tower.

“Spots.”

“Jesus.” Coop unbuckled his seat belt and lunged toward me as powerful spotlights were suddenly directed at the car. He clamped his hand over my eyes, and I shrieked in surprise as he tucked me against him.

“Easy,” he muttered at my ear, and his voice and touch relaxed me again.

Damn the man. I didn't want to be relaxed—especially not around someone so grumpy and in a situation so precarious.

“What are you doing, Paulson?” It was the most irritated Locke had sounded the whole day. “A bit high-risk, don't you think?”

“Procedure.” Even I could hear the ring of insolence in the middle-aged guard's voice.

“But you know who we are and what we're carrying.”

“Yeah.” Paulson laughed, and the sound left me needing a shower. “I see that precious cargo.” The lights outside went dark.

I stiffened. That cargo was clearly me. Sample. Cargo. What the hell did they think I was?

Abruptly, Coop released me and seemed to push himself to the farthest corner away from me. Yeah, sure, the spotlights had disappeared, but Paulson briefly shone a flashlight in my face as he whisked it around the interior of the car. He made a motion to roll down the window and then gestured to all of them.

With no glass between us, I shrank away from him again, and he laughed. What kind of guy was okay with being feared? Not a good one.

He leaned in and looked me over. “She could be fun.” He smirked again, and his face took on cruel angles as shadows played across it. “And look at all your pretty hair. Mmmm.”

Coop hissed quietly. “Are you done, Paulson?”

“Procedure,” the guard said again as he lazily brought the flashlight back around.

This time, he didn’t shine it in my face, but the tiny dancing light lingered over my breasts. He was...Holy shit. Paulson was awful.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“Sweet Jesus.” I moved to cover myself, feeling naked even in my clothes.

“Hell’s teeth, Paulson,” Coop ground out. “There’s procedure and procedure.”

Paulson grinned, his white teeth gleaming in the low light. “Like I said.” He turned his flashlight off and nonchalantly swung it into a loop on his holster. “Following procedure. Just doing my job.” He looked toward the guard tower again. “It’s clean,” he yelled, and his voice echoed from the walls, cracking like a whip. He saluted Locke, though the gesture was anything but respectful, and as Paulson turned to leave, Coop flipped him the bird.

Then Paulson strolled away, his footsteps clicking eerily across the space as he returned to the guard tower. Coop grimaced and leaned toward me. “If you promise to not make a run for it, I’ll take the cuffs off long enough for you to wiggle your fingers in your lap and get some blood flowing.”

I gave him a long look. “Why would I agree to that?”

“Because your pinkies are probably numb, your shoulders hurt, and you have a crick in your neck.” He paused. “And this is the last chance to do it before your next stop.”

I chewed my bottom lip. What the hell was this place? Guard towers meant prison, right?

Big, empty, and desolate. And aside from the low purr of the engine as Locke rolled us slowly forward once more, there was complete silence. No traffic noise. Not even a bird call. And the sound of the ocean was missing.

“Fine,” I said and pushed my arms toward him so he could reach my shackles.

Silently, Coop pulled a key from his pocket, inserted it in the lock, and twisted. His hands brushed mine, and some of my panic eased. The pressure on my wrists lessened and then disappeared. I pulled my arms back to my lap, the pins and prickles already starting as circulation returned. Shit. I rubbed my wrists. I hadn’t realized how numb parts of my hands had gotten.

“Come on,” he murmured.

I gave him a long look as I wriggled my fingers. Jumping out within view of Paulson wasn’t viable, the creepy bastard didn’t need an excuse to attack me. And I would hate to become his prisoner. It would be easier to do things with my hands in front of me.

“Don’t make me tase you.”

“Tase me?” I nearly shrieked. “Seriously?”

He didn’t react.

Finally, I shoved my hands toward him, and he returned the metal to its place. His hands grazed mine, and my shoulders ticked down an inch. The pain in my neck lessened slightly. Once again, I was doing the opposite of what was recommended in a kidnapped situation.

I scanned our surroundings as he refastened the cuffs. We still moved along a driveway within the strange, prison-like compound. Wordlessly, he leaned back in his seat.

“Where are we?” This time, I sounded curious, and I immediately revised my

attempted civility. I wasn't just curious. I was goddamned angry. "Where have you brought me? Why am I here?" I jerked the door handle: yet nothing happened. I yanked on it with two hands for good measure, but neither man said anything. And the door remained closed.

My outburst hadn't provoked them.

I sat back against the seat, glad to have my hands in front of me. "Do you often abduct people?"

Still silence, and to be honest, the answer was probably fucking yes. How else had they gotten under my skin and gotten me to follow along?

They were men in suits, they were slick, and the whole operation this morning had been seamless. They'd descended on Sweetwater and watched me, tracking my progress for most of the morning.

"You were in the coffee shop." My tone this time was accusing as I spoke directly to Coop. My gaze narrowed.

He turned his head but only glanced at me before he faced forward again, giving me neither acknowledgement nor denial.

"And you stopped me from falling over in the street." I spoke angrily to the back of Locke's head, and he didn't react, either. Just kept the car rolling forward at a constant, slow speed across a courtyard that seemed to never have an end.

"Where are we even going? You've brought me to an abandoned building with armed guards. Why not just let me out? Let me go." I yanked at the door handle again. Even snapping it off would have provided a small degree of satisfaction. Fury-tears threatened to flood my eyes, and I clenched my mouth tight.

Coop sighed, and I swayed slightly as Locke made a wide turn, heading to the left of the warehouse building. Most of the windows were black and blank like soulless eyes, but I stared hard at them as we passed, almost willing movement in them.

A shadow fell over us as we passed close by the side of the building, and as we turned right to head to the back, Locke steered us onto a ramp leading downward, below ground.

I clutched the edge of the seat, hoping neither man would see my reaction. “Where are we going?” I spoke through gritted teeth. “Where?”

As we leveled off again, I took in a large parking lot, with row upon row of black cars—like the one we were traveling in. What was this place? Who were these men? Which letters did they work for? CIA? NSA?

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“Oh. Wait.” I frowned at the fleet of vehicles, adding up the pieces of information I had. “So, then... We’re at HQ?”

Locke glanced at Coop in the rearview, but neither confirmed nor denied my guess.

It would make a kind of sense. Though, if it’s HQ of some secretive government organization, then I was back to being detained rather than arrested. I sighed. And they had the ability to kidnap people without the repercussions.

Parked in a cluster to one side were normal looking cars—civilian ones. Perhaps this place wasn’t entirely deserted after all. Those cars probably belonged to commuting employees.

Locke slid us smoothly into a wide space and turned off the engine. “We’re here,” he said, unnecessarily.

“Where is ‘here’ exactly?” My words had an icy, bitter edge, and I yanked at the door handle one more time. Then I shoved my foot into the back of Locke’s seat for good measure.

When Coop reached for me, I lashed out toward him, kicking in his direction, and pushing my hands forward. “No. Don’t touch me again.” Every time he did that, my traitorous body relaxed, and I needed to be on alert here.

Locke opened his door, and I opened my mouth before letting loose a scream. Immediately, Locke’s door thunked closed.

He half turned his head so I'd hear his words over his shoulder, but he didn't look at me. "What are you doing?" His tone was measured and entirely too reasonable.

"Calling for help." I couldn't stop the smugness when I spoke.

Coop barely smothered a chuckle, but Locke sighed.

"I'd be very careful, if I were you, Meira," he said.

I stilled at his use of my name. Neither of them had referred to me by name yet. The only thing Coop had called me was Rainbowlocks. I lifted my chin. "I'll scream if I want to. Get as much attention as I need."

Locke shrugged like he didn't care. "And that much noise won't bother either Coop or me. But you still need to be careful. There are other guards wholikenoise like that, and not all of them are friendly. You don't want to make any enemies here if you can help it."

His words chilled me, and my thoughts immediately jumped to Paulson and his excessive show of power. Perhaps he was the kind of guy who'd like to hear me scream. I shuddered. Of course Paulson was. And Locke and Coop were trying to warn me.

Sadly, Locke was right. Since I couldn't predict the behavior of any of the others here, I'd need to be careful. Above all, I had to avoid Paulson like the plague.

nine

We sat in silence for the next ten minutes, remaining in the car until Coop and Locke seemed content that my shrieking outburst was over. I flipped through my thoughts, trying to conjure a plan B, but I hadn't come up with anything yet. I needed to get the

lay of the land, work out how to escape. It obviously wasn't by screaming and drawing unnecessary attention to myself. The handcuffs glinted on my wrists. Maybe I could focus on getting somebody to take them off again. Two free hands might make the difference in a successful escape.

"Door." Coop was first to speak, and I looked at him in surprise, but the instruction wasn't for me.

Locke leaned forward and pressed a button, releasing Coop's door so he could climb out of the car.

I had half a thought to lunge after him, but the man was quick and wormed his way through a tiny gap to ensure I had no way to follow. The door closed before I could make use of the exit, and Locke had pressed his control button again before I even moved.

"Door's locked again." He had a helluva gift for saying unnecessary things.

I slid over to the window to watch as Coop walked away. He stopped in front of a silver portion of the nearest wall for a moment. When Coop glanced up, the silver area slid open, and he stepped inside.

"Is that an elevator? Where's he going?" I pressed my hand against the window briefly, trying to see inside, before the door in the wall closed again.

Locke shook his head and for a moment it seemed he might tell me. "He's a busy man," was all he said. Then he tipped his shades to the rearview mirror again. "You're going to need to locate those glasses you kicked under my seat earlier. We can't get out of this car until you have them on."

"What? But they make it so I can barely see." Losing my vision in this place—by any

means—wasn't an option but least of all by those stupid glasses.

He shook his head again. "They're not so bad. I wear them all the time."

"But I can't see." I tried to insist, but he remained seated.

"Then we're not getting out."

I sighed and bent to search the floor and reached under the seat, two-handed since I was still freaking cuffed. I had no choice. There was no lesser of two evils here. I could either sit in this car with Locke, and we wouldn't go anywhere, or I could put the sunglasses back on and he'd take me somewhere I didn't want to go. Though, I still didn't know where we were. My hand closed around the glasses, and I pulled them out from under the seat.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

Dammit. The crunching sound hadn't been them. I sighed and straightened in the seat.

"Will you take me home if I don't put the glasses on?" It couldn't hurt to try, right?

But he laughed, although not unkindly. "Those aren't my orders," he said. "You need the glasses because I've been told to keep all lights dimmed around you, and the glasses are the easiest way to achieve that."

"You need to dim the lights? What the hell are you even talking about?" None of this made any sense. "You have the wrong person. Whoever you're looking for, it's not me. When will you figure that out?"

But Locke's face was as expressionless as it had been for the whole ride, and he didn't say anything. He waited.

And I caved. Because who wanted to spend the whole night in the car with a crick in the neck and a pain in the ass like Locke.

So I placed the glasses on my face anyway. Compliance had never really been my thing—people only needed to look at my hair to know that—but here I was, doing everything anyone asked of me. I stomped the floorboard.

"Good." He nodded his approval. "I need to check you into the facility now."

"The what?" I glanced around this strange underground parking lot, visions of the warehouse above filling my mind. I was at a facility? "What the hell does that even

mean, Locke? Is that synonymous with prison?" I clenched my hands together and squeezed to keep from screaming again. "Are all of you this insane?"

But he chuckled softly. "If only it were so simple." He leaned forward and pressed a button, and the door at my side made a thunking sound. "It's unlocked now." Another unnecessary statement.

I tugged on the handle, and the door popped open, allowing me to climb out. I glanced at the ramp, mentally calculating the distance.

"I wouldn't." Locke stopped next to me. "Even if you outrun me, there's Paulson to contend with out there. You think you want to take him on?"

I shook my head, and my shoulders drooped. That man was clearly very proud of his machine gun. And I already believed he liked screaming. I had no desire to face him or be shot in the back by him as I tried to escape. It wasn't a smart risk.

Letting loose a sigh, my mouth twisted. "Take me to check in, I guess." I lifted my hands and rattled the cuffs. "Not like I can run very far with my new bracelets on, anyway."

He smiled sadly before leading the way to the same elevator Coop had stepped into. "This will take us upstairs into the building."

I nodded. I'd surmised that much for myself.

The motion was the smoothest I'd ever felt, barely like we were moving at all, but the doors slid open again to reveal a long corridor in front of us. I stepped forward, uncertainty making me stumble as I groped at the wall to regain my balance in the dim light. I reached up to remove the glasses, instinct driving me to see, but Locke clamped his hand over them.

“They must stay on,” he muttered. He grasped my elbow and righted me. Then he drew me forward, never making me walk faster than I could manage.

When we slowed, I twisted my head. The corridor opened out into a waiting room with chairs, some of them occupied.

“Hey.” Locke approached a desk, already talking to the lady sitting behind it. “Got a new transfer for ya.”

I snorted. A transfer? Really? “Yeah, right, Locke,” I murmured, and he half-looked at me over his shoulder.

“There.” The woman behind the desk might have nodded in a direction or even pointed, but either the sunglasses worked extra-great in here, or the lights were already dim.

“What time is it?” I whispered, tiredness suddenly making my head foggy.

A guy in one of the chairs yawned. “Late enough that I’m missing my beauty sleep.”

Locke led me to sit down, and I settled onto a hard, plastic seat. It wasn’t comfortable, but it wasn’t designed to be. The only plus side of these glasses was the ability to be able to study people as best I could from around them without anyone knowing that I was actually staring. Though, it didn’t work so well in this dimly-lit whatever-it-was-called room.

I squinted through the gloom the glasses created, but as I got used to the vision they left me with, I started to make out details of the people in the strange waiting room with me. Almost like the more I focused on it, the more my eyes were able to adjust to the light level. Locke sat to my right, alert and tense, like he expected me to bolt for the door any moment. Or perhaps he was worried I’d take the glasses off again.

But I wouldn't. Running through unfamiliar corridors wouldn't get me out of here. I scanned the other figures. None of them paid any attention to me. Would anyone but Locke care if I knocked the shades to the floor?

"Can't she see?" The guy across from us looked at me. He was so pale, his skin almost seemed to glow. Like he was made of ivory or something.

"She's wearing sunglasses, Jude."

"It's night." The guy sounded belligerent now.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

But Locke wasn't explaining himself to the stranger, either. "I know."

The guy—Jude—laughed suddenly. "Oh, I get it. Procedure."

Locke chuckled too. "Well, whaddya know. You finally do got it. It's always about procedure."

Jude stood up, and he turned toward the attendant at the front desk. "Welp, it's been nice chatting to you as always, Mona, but I have other people to inflict myself on tonight. Lots of time to kill before dawn." He grinned, but nothing about the expression made him seem friendly.

I drew away from him, and he chuckled. Had he meant lots of time to kill, as in killing time? Or had he meant lots of time to kill... a lot of people? My brain went twisty. Based on the guy, it could be either.

Shit. I'd thought the only people I'd need to look out for were the guards. This guy didn't seem like a guard, and he wasn't a suit. He was a transfer just like me.

After Jude left, I looked around the room again. There was a delicate looking woman sitting diagonally behind me. She was harder to observe, but her skin seemed to almost glow, too, only not like Jude's. His had been cold and hard looking. The woman had an ethereal feel about her, like moonlight or even sunlight itself lived within her.

Metal bands encircled both of her wrists, reminding me of my cuffs.

“Can we take these off?” I leaned toward Locke and spoke as I lifted my hands toward him.

He sighed and rooted in his pocket before producing a key. “Don’t make me regret this.” But his warning was pointless. I had no plans to do anything rash. Especially not when I could barely see and Jude was roaming around the facility somewhere “inflicting himself” on people. Not to mention Paulson outside.

The woman at the desk glanced up. “Lexi, they’re ready for you.”

“Thank you, Mona.” The ethereal female behind me stood and approached a door I hadn’t noticed previously—probably because my ability to see wasn’t dependable.

I watched her walk away from me and blinked hard, leaving my eyes closed for a couple of seconds before I looked again. From this angle, the woman almost had wings. They were delicate and gossamer, like spiders had created them, but they seemed real. Not there in physical form, but there, nonetheless. I rubbed my fingers over the lenses of the glasses.

“Whoa. What are you doing? You’ll make them smeary.” Locke clutched my forearm, stopping my movement.

“I think they already are,” I muttered. “They’re making me see things.” I switched tactics and began to lift the glasses from my face, but Locke gently pressed them back down.

“Don’t worry about it.” He spoke softly. “It’s very late. You’re tired. Our eyes play tricks on us when we’re tired.”

At his mention of my being tired, I yawned.

Locke smothered his own yawn. “Don’t do that,” he grumbled. “My shift isn’t over yet.”

I glanced at him. He’d been one of the first suits I’d seen this morning. “How long is your workday?”

He shrugged. “Until you’re processed, I guess.”

“Makes me sound like mechanically reclaimed ham, Locke.” I almost couldn’t believe I was comfortable enough to joke with this guy, but it had been a very strange day. And maybe I was a little loopy from all the stress of it.

Someone coughed at the back of the room, and I turned. I hadn’t even known someone was sitting there. I wrinkled my nose as I faced the guy. His hair was freshly washed, but all I got from him was the odor of wet dog. His lumberjack beard probably didn’t help, though. Those things always smelled musty in my experience—and I considered myself very experienced in facial hair when most Minnesota men pretty much cultivated beards to keep their faces warm back home. Though, the level of musty wet dog seemed excessive, and I frowned at him.

He snarled at me when he saw me turned in his direction, and something that sounded suspiciously like a growl ripped through his chest and thudded through mine.

I faced the front again. Something was wrong with most of these people. I didn’t belong here at all. What the hell was the pattern, and why couldn’t Locke see they had the wrong person?

“Easy, Gus.” Locke’s tone held laughter as he spoke. “Down, boy.”

The growl rumbled from the man again, and I tensed.

Locke nudged me. “Calm down, Meira. If I can smell your fear, Gus definitely can. He’s just a big softy, really, but sitting in a room with Jude has probably put him in a bad mood.”

“Smell my fear?” I scowled. “You smell me?”

The corner of Locke’s mouth twitched. “Something like that.”

“And Gus can, too?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“Sure. Would you expect anything different?”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I nodded. Nothing Locke had just said made sense—except the idea that Gus and Jude didn’t like each other a whole lot. That, I could get behind because neither of them seemed like guys I’d want to meet in a dark alley. Where were we?

“It’s okay,” Locke assured me. “It really is.”

I glanced at him and clenched my fists. “Doyouget to go home after this is all over, Locke?”

He nodded. “Sure do.”

“Then don’t try to tell me this is okay. Against my will, you’ve taken me from my work and my home, and nothing about this is okay at all. Nothing.” Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, and I pressed my lips together to keep from crying out in public.

I hadn’t meant to get emotional. Maybe I was just tired, like Locke had said. No. Fuck that. I had been kidnapped by some alphabet agency and brought to an unfamiliar place. Emotional was better than hysterical, and I had a suspicion hysterical wouldn’t take much to trigger.

I glanced at the lady behind the desk. She looked methodically between a pad of paper in front of her and her computer screen like she was transcribing notes. A mundane action, if there ever was one. Everything I saw puzzled me further, and

none of it gave me any information on what this place actually was.

This area made it feel like a medical facility, but who knew?

Why would I be in a medical facility?

Mona looked up and would have met my gaze if the sunglasses hadn't been in the way. "They're ready for you."

ten

Locke stood and urged me to my feet. He shoved on my shoulder, but I didn't want to. I didn't want to participate, and I didn't want to go. My knees locked about halfway up, and Gus sounded like he was growling again... Except the bastard was laughing at me.

Locke studied me, although my shades and his meant I couldn't see the expression in his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Standing," I muttered as I half-crouched in place.

"You appear to be stuck."

"Thanks. You're so helpful." I rolled my eyes as hard as I'd ever rolled them, safe in the knowledge he had no idea. I placed my hands on my thighs.

Then I gathered my strength and pushed until I stood. It was an inelegant move; but I was on my feet next to Locke, so I couldn't have cared less. I resisted glancing over my shoulder to make a nasty face at Gus. Growly-ass didn't deserve my time or my attention.

“Which room, Mona?” Locke addressed the lady at the desk, but she didn’t even look up from what she was doing as she focused on her screen.

She just pointed silently at another door I hadn’t noticed, one tucked between the corner of the wall and an overgrown potted plant. How many hidden doors did the waiting room have? I guess it made sense since I couldn’t see well.

I sucked in a breath and fell into step behind Locke as he stepped forward. My hands felt lighter now I could swing them at my sides like usual—like an actual human again. There was something very dehumanizing about being captive and physically bound. Perhaps it even explained why I’d obeyed pretty much every command they’d given me so far.

Locke rapped his knuckles against the door, and I flinched at the sudden sound.

Gus growled his laugh again, and I refused to look at him... again. Perhaps in time I’d be glad my predicament amused him. After all, it didn’t seem like he was any better off than me. He was still in this place, anyway. I studied my toes. Though, he didn’t have a guard following him around.

When he was still laughing as the door opened and I moved forward, I gave in and lifted my glasses behind Locke’s back, sending Gus as much side-eye as I could manage.

He met my gaze for a moment then flinched, bowing his head, and staring at the floor between his spread knees.

Weird. I let the glasses drop back into place and turned, nearly bumping straight into Locke, who’d stopped on his way through the door and was staring at me strangely. “What did you just do?”

I shrugged. “Nothing. The guy has a bad attitude, is all.”

He glanced at Gus. “Yeah, sometimes he does, I guess.” But his tone seemed thoughtful.

We twisted through several empty corridors and ended up in a small office. The walls were white, from what I could tell, the furniture dark and cheap-looking. Flimsy. The kind of stuff they’d bought in big cardboard boxes and built themselves from particle board.

But, hell, since when was I a furniture snob? Most of mine was a cobbled-together selection from local thrift stores and hand-me-downs from well-meaning women in Sweetwater. Very few possessions had made the move with me from Minnesota.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

A woman wearing clothes similar to those Helen had worn earlier sat in a chair behind a desk, and she stood when Locke and I stopped walking. I peered at her through the shadowed lenses, and I thought my eyes must really be adjusting to the light levels.

“Sylvia,” she said, and I assumed it was her name. But she didn’t add anything else, and she didn’t hold her hand out for me to take. Instead, she seemed to inch backward.

I nodded and opened my mouth to introduce myself, but Locke spoke first.

“This is Meira White. I believe you’ve been expecting her,” he said. “She’s wearing the sunglasses but dim the lights if you feel safer that way.”

I snapped my head to my right to look at him. Just when I’d thought he was the sanest one here, he came out with crap like that. Dim the lights so she felt safer? I was dangerous? I opened my mouth to snap at him, but Sylvia spoke first.

“I might do that.” Sylvia skirted a wide circle around where I was standing and turned off the overhead light, favoring a lamp in the corner, casting little more than a low glow.

I was all but blind now, and when Locke suggested I take a seat, I stuck out my foot and waved my arms in front of me, moving until I felt my way into the closest chair. So much for my eyes adjusting to the light levels.

Sylvia sat behind the desk and adjusted her computer screen so the glow slightly

illuminated her face. She was still a mass of shadows, though, and I couldn't make out much else. It was like meeting with a parody of the Grim Reaper with a desk job.

"Hello," she said woodenly, as though she was actively reading her greeting from a script on her screen.

"Hi." I waved my hand a little, and she flinched at the movement.

"Welcome to the Facility. My name is Sylvia." She paused and gestured around.

This was like a bad audition for the local theater company.

"As I mentioned, this is The Facility. I am here to get you all checked in." Her voice rose and fell randomly over the course of her opening speech.

I gripped the arms of my chair. "Where am I?"

She snapped her mouth shut but didn't change her position.

"Probably best to save any questions for after." Locke spoke from beside me, and irritation pushed the air from my chest.

I nodded so slightly I doubted either of them saw it. "Fine. Continue." I gave my permission through gritted teeth. How long did I have to wait to find out what was going on? No one had explained anything.

"Calm down, Meira," Locke muttered. "Just go with the process. Nice deep breaths. Easy." He spoke in a soothing voice, but my irritation only grew.

I clenched my teeth harder and glared at him from behind the glasses.

“First question,” Sylvia said. “What species do you identify as?”

I laughed. “That’s your first question? I don’t know. Um... Canine?”

“Meira.” Locke’s tone held censure. “The process.”

I ignored him. Condescending bastard. “Did you not see me when I came in? Or are those glasses on your face just for show? I’m human.”

“Meira’s very tired, Sylvia. It’s been a long day.” But Locke’s excuse for me irritated me further.

“No,” I said. “Meira is pissed off because of stupid fucking questions that don’t make any sense. You all keep acting like I’m something I’m not. And that was only the first one, right? There are more?”

“Question two.” Sylvia’s voice shook slightly. “What is your talent?”

I laughed. “I’m an artist. My talent is art. Paintings, hair color. I have an eye for color.”

She tapped away at her keyboard, the noises slow as she selected the keys she needed. Eventually, after she seemed to have entered my answer verbatim, she focused on her screen again, the glow illuminating her big round eyes behind her glasses this time. She lifted her hand and pushed the glasses back up her nose.

“Question three.” She sounded more confident now. “What is your human age?”

“For God’s sake. Do you people know nothing about the person you abducted?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“Process. Age?” Locke bit out the word. So if Sylvia was testing my patience, maybe I was testing his.

Well, he deserved it. He dragged me here against my will. I should have slapped him silly and escaped. Maybe scratched out his eyes. I didn’t know, but I shouldn’t have made it all the way to whatever the hell check-in process I was in the middle of.

“Twenty-eight.” I wanted to lie, but lying over something so small would be a hollow victory if they found out and didn’t trust me going forward.

“Uh huh.” Sylvia pushed her glasses up her nose again and leaned closer to her screen. “Question four. What is your actual age?”

“What?” I stood from my chair. “What is that supposed to mean?” I turned to Locke. “I have no idea why I’m here or why I’m answering such stupid questions. Just process me already and let me go home. I want to go home. Home.” I paced away, although not too far in case I crashed into something. Toward the lamp seemed safest. “To Sweetwater.”

I gestured as I continued to rant about being brought here. “Men in suits, sunglasses, some kind of fortress, and the most asinine questions I’ve ever heard.” I spun to face the direction of the desk again. “I mean, really? Do they actually pay you to spout this crap? Like seriously?”

“Meira.” Locke only said my name, but I whirled in his direction.

“No. Just no. I have had enough.” I flung an arm out like I could send him away, even

though he hadn't moved toward me.

Sylvia's chair tumbled as she stood abruptly and backed away from her desk.

"What are you doing now?" I shouted. "It's not like I'm after you." I ripped my glasses off, so she could see the full force of my fury.

Then everyone started moving.

"Get the lights." Locke's voice boomed, and as Sylvia plunged the office into darkness, an alarm began to blare in the room... Outside the room... In my damn head... The sound was everywhere.

Then I hit the floor, hard, a weight on my back. Dammit, Locke! He adjusted his position, and my cheek ground into the cheap, prickly carpet.

"What are you doing to me?" I shrieked. I tried to buck, but Locke was too heavy to shift.

"Easy," he murmured in my ear.

He dragged my hands above my head, grasping my wrists together so tightly my bones ground each other.

"Let me go." I bucked again. "I haven't done anything."

The first tear I'd cried all day leaked from the corner of my eye. But that would be the only one, so I gritted my teeth against the onslaught of sobs; I wouldn't allow myself to be weak and cry in front of these people. "I'm twenty-eight," I shouted. "Twenty-eight. That's my actual age. Get a copy of my birth certificate if you don't believe me."

“Calm down, Meira.” Locke shifted his weight, and then I couldn’t move at all. “You need to calm down and always leave your glasses on.”

“What?” My word was garbled as I tried to move my mouth against the carpet with Locke’s full weight on me now. “What? Why am I the problem?”

They were behaving like I was some sort of human bomb programmed to detonate at any moment. Fucking hell.

“I just need you calm and your glasses on.” Locke sounded almost unsure of himself now as he continued to hold me to the floor. “Just follow the process.”

“The process includes kidnapping,” I yelled. “I didn’t sign up for this. Whoever—no, whatever—you think I am, you’ve got the wrong person.”

But he didn’t answer, and he didn’t react.

The alarm continued to sound, but suddenly there was a cool hand on my forehead. I flinched at the unexpected contact.

“Let her go,” a soft voice said. “She doesn’t know what’s going on. You’re scaring her.”

Yes. Yes, that was right. Locke was scaring me. “You’re scaring me,” I confirmed. “Please let me go. I’ll put the glasses back on. I’ll answer the damn questions.” I stopped talking abruptly.

Locke had started to relax until I’d said damn and then he tensed again, his weight apparent once more.

“I don’t know what you’re doing.” My words emerged on the wake of a sob. “You

need to let me go. I think this is illegal. It has to be illegal. Just somebody please tell me what's going on." I tried to move again but either Locke was heavier or I was just plain exhausted. Both. Probably both.

I gave up and let my cheek sink farther into the carpet until it pretty much met the hard surface beneath. Seemed even shadowy government agencies didn't splash out for more than cheap carpet tiles for their offices.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

If this even was a government agency. They seemed to have done too much illegal shit to be one of those. But what did I know?

“I’m tired,” I croaked.

“I know, honey. I know.” The hand on my forehead smoothed my hair back. “It’s been a long day.”

I tried to nod in agreement, but I still couldn’t move.

“I can’t move,” I said.

“You mustn’t move,” Locke ground out. “Not until I’ve regained control of the situation.”

“I think that might be now,” the mysterious female voice said.

“No.” Locke disagreed. “Sylvia is still squealing in the corner, and the alarm hasn’t stopped yet.”

As he mentioned Sylvia, her noises became apparent once more, accompanying the sound of the alarm but at a more hysterical pitch, like her life had just gone disastrously wrong... Or was about to head that way.

“Sylvia.” Locke spoke her name then louder when she didn’t respond. “Sylvia! For God’s sake, woman. I can’t think. I’ve got Meira over here. She won’t hurt you. She can’t. She can’t see.”

Gradually, Sylvia's noises quieted. "She's under control?" She half-shouted her question, trying to be heard over the alarm, but she sounded calmer now.

The fingers stroking through my hair calmed me, too, and every so often cool metal brushed my cheek with the movement of her hand. Who was in here with us?

"What's going on?" I seemed to keep asking the same questions, but none of this made any sense at all.

"Shh," the woman soothed me. "It's all right. It'll be all right, I promise. Locke." She addressed the man who was both my guard and captor. "It's time to release her."

eleven

I waited a long time before it seemed like Locke finally made his decision. He moved in tiny increments, like he still wasn't quite sure I wasn't about to explode. First the pressure released on my hands, and my fingers tingled as blood raced back into them.

I released a sigh as I wriggled them, leaning into the pins and needles sensation once more.

"Get the lights," Locke ground out. "The situation is now under control." As if his proclaiming it made it so.

The lights in the room flickered to life, and I blinked in the sudden bright light cast by the utilitarian fluorescent light in the middle of the stark white ceiling.

But the alarm noise was still screeching, and nothing at all sounded under control. It was quieter now, though, like I'd gotten used to it.

"And can someone shut off that goddamn alarm," he barked. "I can't even think

straight anymore.”

He lifted himself off me, pushing into a sitting position at my side, but I only glanced at him. He held out a pair of sunglasses, but a different hand reached for them, and I looked away.

The hand had been delicate and female, the wrist encircled with a metal band. The person who’d been in here with us was the same lady from last night, the one from the waiting room.

“You.” I breathed the word as I closed my eyes and attempted to ignore the room.

She stroked my forehead again. “It’s okay, Meira,” she said. “I know this is very strange, but it’s all going to be okay.”

She took my hands then moved her grip down my arms, and surprise resonated through me at her strength as she lifted me against her, folding me into a hug. For the first time all day, I relaxed, almost like she was familiar.

Maybe it was just the sense of caring she projected. She rocked slightly, like I needed soothing, and she hummed, and the vibration of the sound seemed to pass into my body.

“There you go,” she murmured. “Easy. I got you.”

I just nodded, safe as she held me. Who let a stranger comfort them like this? I laid my head on her shoulder. Me. That’s who. After a long damn day of strangeness, a hug was about the most normal thing I could do.

She tucked some loose hair behind my ear. “My name’s Lexi. I’m going to look out for you. I’ll make sure you’re okay.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

I nodded. That sounded amazing. Even as her words started to make sense, some of my anxiety lifted. It was as though I'd given up some of my personal responsibility for myself, just for this moment, just while my world righted itself.

The office door burst open, banging against the wall behind it so hard it should have left a dent in the drywall.

Coop sprang into the room, his glasses in his hand, his blue eyes unexpectedly wide. "What's going on?" As he spoke, the alarms fell silent until the only ringing was in my ears, the residual sound the alarms left behind.

I glanced at Locke. He hadn't moved from his position next to me. His legs were bent, and he fidgeted like he was awkward in his own skin. He ran his finger around the inside of his collar. Why did I make them all so nervous?

"Nearly had a security incident." He avoided looking at me, though. "Prevented it by following procedure." He cleared his throat but said nothing further as he studied the baseboard on the other side of the room.

Coop swept a glance over me then Lexi before placing his glasses in their usual position on his face and lounging against the doorframe. "I see."

I couldn't see where he was looking when he next spoke. He didn't move his head at all, but he could have moved his eyes beneath the mirrored surface of his shades.

"She done with being checked in?"

“Uh...” Sylvia spoke from somewhere behind the desk. Fabric rustled, and I took a quick peek in her direction as she stood, leaning on the surface like she needed additional support. Her face was pale. “Uhh...” she said again.

“Yeah, she’s done.” Locke shook his head as he ground out his sentence. Still, he refused to look at me.

“Okay.” Coop didn’t move, but he was no longer speaking to Locke. “You can come with me.”

I tensed, and Lexi smoothed her hand over my upper arm.

“It’s okay.” Her voice was almost musical, and she seemed to never stop moving, running her hands over me to soothe me like I was her own personal worry stone.

“I’ve got this.” Coop straightened and stood at ease, but he didn’t say anything else.

I still couldn’t see where he was looking, but I sensed his gaze like a warm prickle on my skin.

Lexi handed me the sunglasses she’d taken from Locke. “I believe you’re required to wear these.”

I sucked in a breath—more a strangled sob—but nodded. Yes, it appeared I was, and I couldn’t get out of it. So, I put them on and straightened my shoulders as I stepped out from Lexi’s embrace.

“You got this,” she whispered as she gave my shoulder a last squeeze.

That touch pressed strength into me, and I stood without any doubt. I would be okay. Coop nodded and walked out of the door, and I followed him without question. I was

too tired for questions now.

I followed him down corridors that all looked the same. Perhaps they were designed to confuse—there was no way I'd find my way back to the waiting room or the office. Nothing was marked with signs. This whole place was like a giant hospital but nothing was labeled. Designed to confuse.

I stopped counting left turns when I began to suspect Coop was walking me in circles for his own amusement, but his footsteps never faltered, and his expression was never anything but grim, verging on grumpy.

He stopped in front of another metal wall and rested his hand about half way up. Yet another hidden door slid open, revealing an elevator. They loved all their secret passageway stuff.

“What? Are we going back to the car? Are you taking me home?” Perhaps this whole nightmare was finally over. Maybe the weird questions had revealed the mistaken identity. “I'm not the person you thought, right?”

Coop turned his head toward me, and this time his sigh sounded different. It sounded almost like pity. Or understanding. Empathy, maybe. Something I wasn't used to from him, anyway. Something unexpected. So unexpected, tears gathered behind my eyes again, and I blinked them away, glad once more of the sunglasses everyone kept forcing me to wear.

I stumbled as I stepped into the elevator, and Coop caught me, his hand on my elbow to steady me, and as always, his touch calmed me. He withdrew it quickly as if I'd burned him, and curled his fingers into a fist by his side.

Part of me wanted to take that closed hand and make it hold mine, but I formed my own fist instead, ignoring the ridiculous urge to be closer to this man. He was one of

my captors, and I didn't need to be falling for a kidnapper.

The ride in the elevator was longer this time. "Where are we going?" It felt like I only had a finite number of sentences and questions today. I kept saying the same things.

I stared at Coop, watching his jaw twitch, expecting his answer to be classified like he'd said so many times in the car.

"Your room," he said instead, and I froze.

"My what?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“Your accommodation. You need to sleep.” It was one of the longest strings of words he’d said to me.

“I am tired,” I agreed then snapped my mouth shut. I hadn’t meant to be compliant to this degree.

When the elevator finally stopped, the door swooshed open to a hallway so shrouded in gloom, I could barely see the end of it. I automatically rubbed at the lenses of the sunglasses again.

“Damn things. I can’t see in them.”

“Take them off.” Coop sounded so casual I hesitated.

“Really?”

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

I lifted them from my eyes. There was so little light down here it was like I was still wearing them. The whole place weighed on me, oppressive and heavy. “How far underground are we?”

He shrugged again, and the loose, casual movement suited him. “Far enough.”

“No windows,” I murmured as I looked around.

He swung his head toward me, and I couldn’t see his whole expression, but my guess

was that it saidduh. “This way,” he said as he left the elevator, his pace quickening.

We walked down the corridor, lights flickering off rather than on as we passed by them, keeping me in constant shadow.

“What’s the deal with the lights?”

If he heard me, he didn’t answer.

And I didn’t bother asking again.

His footsteps echoed as we walked. Everywhere was bare and sterile. There was no furniture in this corridor, nothing soft.

He took such a random left turn that I nearly walked right past the opening until he reached back and grabbed my arm, almost yanking me after him. I stumbled, and he caught me again, briefly holding me against his chest.

“Sorry,” he murmured as he released me. “It’s this way to the accommodation.”

Accommodation made prison so fancy, and I rolled my eyes. “When’s my trial?”

His step faltered, but then the moment was gone, almost like I’d imagined his moment of hesitation.

“What am I charged with?”

Again, there was the briefest of pauses.

“Am I charged with anything at all?” But my questions were useless and I already knew he wouldn’t reply.

We passed by a large window, and I glanced at the room beyond, then leaped back as a shape rushed at me and raked its claws down the inside of the glass.

“Shit,” I ground out. “What is this place? A zoo? What are you keeping down here? Are you putting me somewhere dangerous?”

His mouth pressed into a flat line, but he shook his head. “You’ll be perfectly safe.”

We passed another window and it looked into another room like the one before. A spotlight shone in the corner, but no one was visible. It was set up like a sitting room, and there was a curtain at one end hiding... Hiding what? A bedroom? Bathroom?

“Whatarethese? Cells?” I touched my palm to the glass and bent my fingers a little so the movement made a squeaking sound as my skin dragged on the smooth surface.

He barely even paused or glanced at me. “Accommodation.”

I blew out a sigh. “But for what, Coop? Forwho?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

He stopped walking like my use of his name had short-circuited his forward movement, and he glanced into the cell I had my hand on—because that was what it was. It was most definitely a cell for holding... someone.

“They’re guests,” he murmured as he touched his own hand to the glass alongside mine. “They’re guests,” he said again like he needed to reassure himself.

But the emotion in his voice was fleeting, and he straightened again almost immediately and executed a military-precision turn before he strode away again, his steps more rapid than before.

I hurried to catch up. “Coop.” But his name didn’t have the same effect as before.

He didn’t slow, and he didn’t stop. Instead, he seemed to speed up. “This way.”

Whatever moment I’d thought we’d had, it had passed. Coop had returned to being the grumpy guy in the suit I’d first met. His glasses were in place, and I couldn’t meet his eyes.

“You honestly have no difficulty seeing in those?” I gestured to my eyes so he’d know I meant his glasses.

He shook his head. “No, ma’am.”

At the next cell we passed, a man leaned against the window, and I glanced at the wide expanse of glass. It must have been thick, reinforced, because it seemed to bear most of his weight.

Like he could somehow read my thoughts, the man against the window thumped it with his fist and smiled a little before his mouth relaxed into a lazy grin.

I gasped and drew away, hurrying to the other side of Coop. For a moment, it had looked like the guy had fangs.

I shook my head. First wings on Lexi and now fangs on some random guy. I shuddered.

This place was breaking my mind.

twelve

I didn't look into any more of the cells. I didn't want any more mind tricks, any more hallucinations... whatever they were. I didn't need to see any more stuff that wasn't real, and I didn't want to think about real people in cells. How could they be here like this? Could I somehow help them all? My heart twisted. The desire to protect made me think of Bess. I wanted her to be safe, too, but I needed to figure out how to break free.

I just needed sleep first, and I didn't care if it happened in a cell. As long as there was a bed.

Coop stopped abruptly again. This time in front of a fully darkened cell. Instinctively, I tried to peer in.

"It's yours." Coop's voice was gruff. Reluctant, almost.

He lifted his hand and for a moment, it almost looked like he might remove his glasses. If he showed me his eyes, what would I see there? Apology?

But I pushed the thought away. Why the hell would I see that?

And from Coop of all people.

He pressed his hand to a touchpad by a narrow door to the right of the window. I'd been too focused on the windows and crazy people behind them to realize the locations of the doors.

"Wait. Am I crazy? Is that why I'm here?" I shivered.

His head bowed as he waited for the door to slide aside. The hole gaped, dark and almost foreboding. "This is your room."

I hesitated still. "It's dark in there."

He barely nodded. "I know."

We stood for a few moments. Stalemate.

I was unwilling to walk forward into the darkness, and he seemed unwilling to make me.

"Coop. Glad I caught up to you." Locke arrived at our side. He turned his head side-to-side like he was glancing over the space. "This hers? Let's get her in there."

It was like their roles were reversed. Coop was the one hanging back, playing good cop. Locke was the one pressing forward in the name of the process or the procedure when he'd always seemed the more approachable of the two before.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

I wanted to explore this strange dynamic switch between them, but the longer I stood contemplating the darkness, the more tired I felt. Drained, almost. Exhausted.

I slumped against the glass. “Geez. I’m tired.”

Locke took my arm and guided me into the cell. “This way. There’s a bed in here.”

We followed a bobbing flashlight glow as it danced in front of us, and as I glanced over my shoulder, Coop shielded the glowing end of his flashlight with his hand, dimming it.

“Dammit, Coop. I can’t see when you turn it off.” Locke stopped walking.

“Your eyes will adjust.” Coop’s tone was almost bored. Like this part of his job was beneath him.

Locke drew a stiff inhale through his nose before he began to walk farther into the cell, past a half partition.

I reached out to grasp it as we walked by, looking for something to help my balance, but it wasn’t even a wall. It was just a damn fixed screen.

“Stand still for a moment. Get used to the light level in here.” I heard Locke rather than saw him.

“What sort of fucking light is this even supposed to be?” The venom in my voice surprised me. I tugged on the metal bed frame, but it didn’t shit. “Is the furniture all

nailed down?”

No one replied.

“It is, isn’t it?”

No one even moved. If I hadn’t known there were two men in the room with me, if Locke’s hand hadn’t still been on my arm, I would have thought I was alone.

“I have fixed furniture and you’re keeping me in the dark?” I barked out a short laugh. “What? Did you guys neglect to pay your electricity bill? I bet the costs for a place this big are sky-high.”

“We run on solar. There are no costs. Not in the way you mean.”

I ran Locke’s answer through my head again. He appeared to have spoken with unexpected honesty. Maybe the dark had made him more candid.

“Then I don’t think it would kill you to turn some lights on for me,” I countered, keeping my voice light. I would have batted my eyelashes if it would have helped.

“Oh, but it might.” Locke’s voice sounded darker than I’d ever heard it, and there wasn’t a trace of humor in it.

“Cut the crap, Locke. You say things that don’t make any sense, and I’ve had it with this place. Take me fucking home.” I wanted to rattle the bed to make my point, to prove my anger, but it wouldn’t budge even a fraction of an inch. “What else is in this room with me?”

Coop was about to speak. He did that inhale of breath thing he sometimes did before words started coming. “There’s a bed, a chair, a toilet, and a sink behind the privacy

partition. On the other side of this, you have a couch. You will be escorted to communal showers when it's your turn in the rotation."

"That's it?" My lower jaw nearly fell off. "That's all I have? What the hell am I supposed to do in this empty room?" Empty and frigging dark. "Did you bring me here for this? To sit in a dark, empty room?" I'd lose my mind completely. "This is torture." Until I spoke the words, I hadn't even considered it, but hell, yeah.

What they were doing to me was torture. One of them shrugged. Locke had let go of my arm by now, and I held the bed frame to keep me grounded. My eyes were growing used to the lack of light—enough to see dim shapes, anyway, but I still couldn't tell who had shrugged. I only heard the movement of fabric as they moved.

While they were still here, though, they were a captive audience, and I had questions. Lots of questions. I walked around the bed, even more used to the gloom now, and I sat heavily on the thin mattress. I'd expected the groan of springs, maybe something saggy and lumpy, but this was little more than a thin piece of foam on what felt like a cement surface.

"Where am I?" I started with my standard question and waited a moment.

I no longer expected an answer to that one, but their quiet breathing in the darkness suggested they were still listening, at least. "What is this place?" But they weren't taken in by the same question from a different angle, either. I blew out a sigh. "I know you're both still here. Can't you tell me anything? Like what's going on? Who all those people are? Why I seem to be in the nocturnal area of a zoo? I can't even see where everything is." It wasn't quite true. I had a vague idea from the different shapes, but they hadn't exactly shown me around in person.

Coop did his weird sigh thing again and his flashlight snicked quietly on. He pointed it quickly around the room. "Toilet, sink, chair," he said. "And you're sitting on the

bed.”

Nothing was illuminated for more than two seconds before he switched the flashlight off again.

“That’s the room.” That was Locke, of course, with another unnecessary sentence, and I rolled my eyes.

“Thank you.” I kept my words clipped, making it obvious I wasn’t entirely genuine. I mean, there was some appreciation that Coop had made an effort, even if I’d felt Coop freeze, the tension from Locke had been palpable as soon as he switched the small light on.

“What can you tell me?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

Again, their silence spoke far more than anything they might have said.

“Who are those people and what am I doing here?” The frustration and irritation had left me. “Can you at least tell me that?”

Repeating the questions no longer bothered me. I was so weary of it all. Perhaps I could annoy them so much I became less valuable somehow. More trouble. Or maybe I could pester them until they gave in and told me the whole story.

This time, Locke sighed. A long-suffering sound like he’d just expelled every last molecule of air from his body. Like I might accidentally step on his deflated self while walking around my darkened tank of a cell.

“You’ll find out more tomorrow.” Coop’s voice was so quiet I barely heard him, but it was soft and velvety in the dark, and my subconscious latched onto it as something comforting.

“Tomorrow,” I repeated.

“And now,” Locke continued, “it’s finally time to go home. End of shift.”

I laughed hollowly. “And when do I get to go home?”

But it was like I hadn’t spoken. Locke was already walking away, his flashlight half-covered by his hand as he used the illumination to light only his own path from my cell.

He paused. “Coming, Coop? We don’t get no overtime for this.”

“Yeah.” Again, Coop used his soft voice, and something about it made me look up. There was a strange longing in his tone, and for a moment it was as if I could see two piercing blue eyes through the darkness, like I could almost see inside him or him inside me, and my world tilted. Not so cranky Coop anymore. My fingers twitched, and I wanted to reach for his hand.

Then Coop turned to leave, and the silhouette of his sunglasses was briefly visible on his face, so I must have imagined seeing his eyes. The realization hollowed me out, and I didn’t know what to think.

He cleared his throat like he might say something, but there were no more words before he reached the door. Instead, it slid closed behind him and there was the soft click of a lock engaging.

Then I was alone. In a cell—a cell—for the first time in my twenty-eight years. I’d given in at every turn, always finding a reason to come along. I took a deep, shuddering breath. Why?

What was I hoping to find out? Maybe an answer, an explanation for why I’d been caught up in this mess. Exhaustion canceled out clarity.

I climbed to my feet, stepped away from the bed, and moved toward the window. We were all in our own units. Humans trapped in cages. I rapped gently on the glass and leaned against it like I’d seen the guy do when we walked past his cell. It was thick, but not as thick as I’d thought. Nothing moved on the other side, and I couldn’t see into anyone else’s cell, but when I pressed my ear to the glass, I could hear them.

It was like there were hundreds of people out there, whispering. Thank God the cell door was locked... Although it was ridiculous to feel safer because I’d been

imprisoned. I wasn't dangerous. Was I? What could they all know and I didn't?

The whispering intensified, and it seemed to be about me. I caught the words rainbow and light and new. It was simple deduction to work out I was the only new person here with rainbow colored hair being held in the dark. But I was the talk of the cell block.

I paced and dozed then dozed and paced, over and over, as the seconds ticked by...

I'd never spent so long in the dark. It was so beyond draining.

I made another lap around my cell, stopping to peer out the large window. I pressed my hand to the glass, wishing for some way to sleep longer than ten minutes at a time.

A blue light flared outside, and the guy who had leaned against his window before appeared in front of me, his image hazy and bleeding at the edges. He pressed his palm against the window of my cell, over the place where my hand was resting, and he flickered like energy was all that was holding him there.

A jolt of power worked through me before receding, replaced by a warmth I'd never experienced before.

Sleep, the voices whispered, and the sound echoed in my head.

The image of the guy disappeared from in front of me, and darkness crowded the hallway once more. My head had been stuffed full of cotton and real thoughts didn't even permeate the gauze now in my brain. I walked numbly to the bed, not needing to feel my way. My feet just carried me there.

I lay on the mattress without even undressing. I only took my clothes off when I felt

safe, and cotton-brained or not, I didn't feel safe here, and nothing about this place compelled me to think differently.

I covered a yawn. At least I couldn't hear the whispering anymore. Everything had fallen silent after I had heard the command to sleep.

I curled my knees up, my legs nearly overhanging the narrow bed. Then I closed my eyes and released my iron-grip on consciousness.

thirteen

I woke, groggy and confused, so I kept my eyes closed. The light inside my cell seemed different. What the hell time was it? Why hadn't the sun come up?

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

I opened my eyes to darkness and a tongue that had been coated in sandpaper in the night. When I swallowed, it didn't help. My body ached. Had I been run over by a semi, too? I shifted in my narrow bed and rolled off, landing on a hard floor. Sleeping on the g'awful cot-joke-for-bed-thing had turned me into a walking crick in the neck. At least I wasn't wearing handcuffs anymore. I'd managed to keep myself unshackled for now.

"Ow. Shit." I rubbed my sore hip as the rest of my memories of the previous day rushed back.

Suited men in sunglasses, a huge building, and dark.

So much dark. Now trapped in a cell.

A scuffling noise came from beyond the partition and I instinctively made myself smaller and less of a target. When the noise stopped, I lifted my head and waited before peering around the partition.

Low level lights shone in the corridor outside, enough to illuminate something new in my room. Not room. Jesus Christ. It's a jail cell! Now I was thinking it was like a hotel. Damn Coop and his accommodation.

I crept forward. The tray beckoned, the aroma of some sort of food drifting toward me. Well, possibly food. I couldn't be sure. Maybe something that a group of people considered passed as food, anyway. Whatever opening someone had pushed it through into the cell wasn't visible. Probably hidden the same way they hid the doors all over 'The Facility.'

As I approached the window, the light in the corridor flickered out, plunging me back into gloom. It was like the lights had sensed my presence. I missed the Sweetwater sunshine, the sound of the beach, the warmth, and the happiness stemming from it all. The obsession with keeping me in the dark, figuratively and literally, perplexed me. Why? What did it matter?

I reached for the food tray, hooking the edge more by luck than judgment and dragged it across the floor toward myself. What fresh hell had been served up on the institution tray?

I patted my hand across the contents. Something greasy and bread-like, something greasy and meat like, and something greasy and rubber-like. I had some sort of version of eggs, sausage patty, and toast, perhaps. I pushed the tray away. I didn't want it.

But my stomach gurgled. Part of me wanted it. How long had it been since I'd eaten? Since before the kidnapping... I scowled. No, since before work. Had I even had breakfast the day before? Painting... remembering I needed to go to work... coffee... I wasn't sure.

With a sigh, I hooked the tray and drew it back. There was a drink on here I hadn't noticed. A swallow or two would help sort out my scratchy throat and sweaty-sock tongue. I used it to help get some of the cardboard food down, too.

The latch on my door clanged, and I pushed my tray away. I jumped to my feet and held my hands out like I might karate chop someone. I'd suck at it, but the chance to vent some frustration would have been a fine thing. Though, the closest I'd ever come to learning karate was watching old movies where the underdog usually triumphed.

"Good night?" Coop's hushed tone filled my cell. He really was a different man in here.

I shook my head then remembered he couldn't see so I scoffed instead. "In here? You must be kidding me." Only... was I lying? I'd slept great after being put to sleep by the blue light guy, actually. Woken up confused and achy but not tired.

I had bundles of energy now. So, maybe not bundles but enough to get on with whatever I'd been dragged here for.

"Come on. We need to get upstairs." Coop exited the cell as he spoke, and I followed him.

I eased out and crept over the threshold, surprised he wasn't cuffing me or handing me a pair of blinder sunglasses. We walked along gloomy corridors lined with cell after cell, and many of them had a face pressed up against the glass. I tried not to meet anyone's eyes. I didn't know where the whispers had come from the previous night.

The lights flickered out for me the same way as they had the previous night, drenching me in darkness as I passed beneath each bulb and only lighting up again once I was too far to see anything in the glow.

I suspected the light fixtures had to have someone controlling them, maybe someone observing through a live video feed. The idea that the lights sensed me and shut themselves off didn't make any sense. They didn't go dark for any other people I'd met. But I also suspected the darkness wasn't as simple as mental warfare shit. Somehow, they felt like the darkness made them safer when I was around. This reasoning still left me in the middle of a case of mistaken identity.

I glanced to the side. Coop walked closer to me than he had the previous day, turning his head to every cell we passed as if he could see the occupants within. When we finally stopped, we faced an empty wall, but he didn't place his hand on it anywhere. Instead, there was a rustle of fabric, and he found my hand then pressed something

into my palm.

“Put these on,” he commanded.

I closed my hand briefly around the sunglasses before settling them into place on my face. My shoulders drooped. Damn. So much for the freedom of no shades. But I'd do anything to avoid a repeat of yesterday—anything to reach whoever was running this place. At least this pair didn't seem as dim as yesterday's pair.

The elevator door swooshed open, and, suddenly, I could almost see clearly. There was light in here, although it was muted by my shades. I stood quietly by Coop. I had nothing to say, but he kept glancing at me like he had something on his mind.

Just as he opened his mouth, the elevator doors parted. I imagined the corridor beyond was stark white, but the sunglasses dimmed my actual impression of the space. As with everywhere else I'd seen, there was no furniture, and this area smelled almost... medical.

“Am I in the hospital wing?” My nose twitched at the familiar antiseptic odor.

He didn't answer. He remained half a step ahead of me as he walked briskly down the hallway. His shoes struck the smooth, hard floor in rapid staccato rhythm, and I hurried to keep up.

“Where are we going?”

But he was back to his non-talkative self. He stopped in front of a door then knocked and waited. At least this one wasn't hidden in a wall. At some signal from inside, he lowered the door handle and pushed it open, ushering me inside first.

The room contained a desk with a computer, an examination table, and various pieces

of medical equipment. A tiny niggle of concern stirred my stomach, and the sausage patty puck of worry turned into a boulder in my middle.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

A man stood from a padded, leather-looking chair behind the desk, with the hint of a smile on his face that looked impossibly youthful. His sandy blonde hair had been neatly arranged, and he had shining blue eyes trained on me.

His scrutiny wasn't as soul-reaching as Coop's, though. I didn't feel like this man could extract my inner secrets with a well-aimed gaze.

His easy smile widened enough to show teeth, adding wholesomeness to his youth, and he held out his hand. "You must be Meira. I'm Dr. Anderson."

I glanced quickly at Coop, who'd taken up an at-ease position by the door, his feet shoulder width apart, his hands clasped behind him. His head was turned, his gaze averted, like he was looking out of the window, but awareness prickled down my spine. Part of me knew he still watched me.

"Do I need a doctor?" I asked no one in particular.

Dr. Anderson laughed, and the sound was unexpectedly melodic, filling the room with deep notes of his pleasure. "Oh, Meira," he said.

When he didn't expound, I scowled at him. "Why am I here?"

No one else had answered the question, but maybe this guy was more approachable. He certainly gave off friendlier vibes. When I looked at Coop again, his jaw had tightened, and his knuckles were white where he held his hands together.

"My colleague and I have some very exciting news for you, Meira." Dr. Anderson

pitched his voice low as he used my name again, and a shiver of apprehension flitted through me. “Unfortunately—” He broke off and gestured to a seat in front of his desk as he returned to his own chair.

I braced for what came next. I was in a facility, this was a doctor, and there was an exam table behind me. Apprehension wasn’t the half of it.

He cleared his throat. “Where are my manners? Do sit down. Sadly, my colleague can’t join us today, though.” He leaned forward, and his chair creaked sharply. “But we’ve been searching for you for a very long time. In fact—” He steepled his fingers under his chin as his gaze turned probing. “We’d almost given up hope that someone like you existed.”

I didn’t take the offered seat. The apprehension inside me was replaced by foreboding, and my chest hollowed. Someone like me... But I wasn’t anything special. I wiped my hands against my pants, mostly to allow myself some thinking time. Dr. Anderson’s words made no sense at all. I swallowed and cleared my throat.

“Uh...” It wasn’t my most eloquent start to a sentence. “I’m so—” Damn, I’d nearly apologized. I didn’t owe these people anything like an apology. They kidnapped me. I flipped my hair, trying to look more irritated than casual. “You didn’t realize small town hair colorists existed?”

If I hadn’t known better, I would have sworn Coop snorted, but he coughed discreetly behind me instead.

“I mean,” I continued, “there was an easier way to get an appointment with me than straight-up kidnapping.” I ground my teeth a little as I spoke, my jaw suddenly tense. “Like a phone.”

Another cough from Coop.

“You didn’t even have to leave whatever this place is,” I gestured to the room around us, “until your appointment day.”

This time, the doctor laughed, the almost-calculated toss of his head suggesting he didn’t fully understand my anger—or he was choosing to ignore it. “I see you’re still not convinced,” he murmured.

“Convinced about what?” The words exploded from my mouth, and I brought my hands down on the front edge of his desk. “Nothing that has happened to me since I was removed from my workplace has been explained to me. What am I supposed to be convinced of?”

“Oh, Meira.” He sighed my name again, but his habit of repeating my name was creepy now. It made me want to vomit on his old-fashioned desk planner.

I leaned forward, more than ready to flaunt my frustration, and I reached to take the sunglasses off. Why the hell did I have to wear these all the time, anyway? “This is getting ridiculous,” I spat. “I’m not doing this anymore.”

Dr. Anderson reacted like I’d tasered him. He paled, pushed against his desk, and the office chair rolled two yards backward at speed.

“Agent Cooper,” he barked, fear coloring the tone of his voice as he ducked and covered. “Get the lights. Turn off the lights.”

I looked to Coop. What? What was their thing with the lights in this place? “Why am I being kept in the dark? All the time.” I ripped the sunglasses away, and Dr. Anderson gasped as I whirled away from him to watch Coop.

Instead of walking toward the light switch, Coop slowly approached me with his hand held out like I might turn feral at any moment. Then he removed his own glasses, and

his piercing blue eyes locked with mine.

“It’s okay, Meira.” He used his soft voice, the one that almost instantly relaxed me. He took my hand, clasping my fingers against his palm as he continued to speak. “It’s okay. You just need to listen to Dr. Anderson. I’ll keep you safe.”

I pulled on my hand, but Coop didn’t let go. The more I tugged, the tighter he held on.

“I’ll keep you safe,” he repeated.

And, for some reason, I believed him, and I allowed him to slide the sunglasses back over my eyes before he positioned a chair for me. This time, I sat down, and Coop took up a new place to stand directly behind my chair.

Dr. Anderson looked up, his features marred by a frown, his cheeks stained with a soft red blush. “Is she under control now?” He directed his question at Coop, but I didn’t glance behind me to see Coop’s reaction.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

Coop didn't say anything though, so I assumed it was one of his brusque nods. I should have hissed at the doctor. Or jumped at him. Or anything to scare him. The thought of Dr. Anderson hopping around his office to get away from me nearly brought an unexpected grin to my face.

But under control? The words echoed in my brain, and I clamped down on the mirth. I gritted my teeth again. Back to the whole zoo animal thing along with those ridiculous cells downstairs. Plus all the dark. Did they think I was a nocturnal zoo animal?

"Meira." Dr. Anderson leaned forward, but only slightly, and he kept his voice hushed and his eyes rounded as he watched me. "You. are. very. special." Now he was speaking to me like I was a child, and I almost expected him to gesture alongside his overly enunciated words as well.

I sat back and watched him, safe in the knowledge he couldn't see my eyes when I narrowed them. All I had heard was bullshit.

He seemed to take my silence as a good sign, rather than me just waiting him out, and he continued to speak. "You're very rare. Perhaps the rarest of anything else in our collection."

My mouth twisted. What the—collection?

He hesitated. "That we have here." He shook his head and smiled slightly like he was asking forgiveness. "It's not a collection. I misspoke. Forgive me. But you... You..." He shaped the air in front of him like he was cupping my face between his hands.

Like he might just lean forward and kiss me, and I bit back a gag.

His hand fluttered in front of his chest. “You might be the last of your kind.” His eyes shone brightly—a feverish type of excitement.

Then I chuckled, the dry sound harsh in the room. “Really.” It wasn’t even a question. Just one word to form a flat statement.

“Meira.” My name again, but this time coaxingly. “Please. You’re a rainbow mage, able to wield rays of light and do magic.” He looked at me like I needed to be impressed with him for figuring out my secret, but I laughed harder before abruptly stopping and shaking my head.

“So that’s why I’m here? Because you believe I can domagic?”

He nodded.

“Magic?” I repeated.

He nodded again.

“Do you hear yourself?”

Dr. Anderson frowned.

“Am I prisoner here because you’re deluded?”

Coop stiffened slightly behind me, his change in posture communicating itself in the air between us.

“Oh, not at all. Never a prisoner,” Dr. Anderson said. “You’re an honored guest.”

I shook my head again and clucked my tongue. “But Dr. Anderson—”

He lifted his head. “Yes?”

“I’m housed in a cage.”

He blinked.

“And I don’t believe guests are kept in the dark either.” Honored guest, my rainbow ass.

He laughed this time, but the sound was soft, like he had a secret. “But you’re potentially our most dangerous guest, Meira. Your rooms are kept dim on purpose, your access to light limited by those...” He indicated his own eyes. “You may be permitted to access light only with careful supervision.”

fourteen

Before he even gave me chance to absorb all of the crazy he’d just spouted, he clapped his hands briskly together like I was lagging behind him on a tour. But I was still stuck on the last thing he’d said.

“You’re going to restrict my access to light?” As I spoke the words, they sounded absurd. But what else had they been doing this whole time? Darkness everywhere, shutting off lightbulbs as I passed by, sunglasses. “That’s actual torture, right?”

The doctor shrugged. Perhaps like he didn’t know. More likely he didn’t care.

I raised my glasses and glanced around his room again. Unlike last night in the waiting room, where everything had looked basic and utilitarian and possibly a little flimsy, this room had the faint aroma of wealth. I’d bet my life his desk chair wasn’t

some sort of pleather. It looked the real deal. And his carefully casual clothes had probably cost him a fortune at some upmarket department store.

Dr. Anderson hissed and looked ready to launch away from me again.

“Meira,” Coop warned.

I’d seen enough, so I dropped my shades back into place. Even Dr. Anderson’s computer was nothing like the box Mona had been typing on in the waiting room where Sylvia had asked me the idiotic questions. The one in this office was narrow-screened and more like a piece of modern art than a piece of technology.

There was carpet in here too. I should have noticed right away, but now I was paying attention, my feet sank into the deep pile, and noises were muted by that and the other soft furnishings.

But all of the apparent luxury was at odds with the examination table, the obvious blood pressure monitor, and other medical equipment. A box of latex gloves sat on a side table, and there was a cupboard on the wall with glass doors that revealed tongue depressors and cotton swabs.

An eye chart hung near the examination table, and there was a stethoscope and white coat on a hook near the door.

“Meira?”

I swung my attention back to Dr. Anderson. Hopefully, I hadn’t missed too much of whatever he’d been talking about, but his lips flattened into a thin line. Possibly—probably—I’d just missed more than I thought.

“Yes?” I bit out the word, but I didn’t need to be reasonable about anything. I was here against my will. They hadn’t explained themselves to me at all. Some stupid shit about being a rainbow mage and wielding magic. They were crazy.

He was unfazed by my curt tone, and he smiled genially, but it was fake. His eyes didn’t change. They remained cold and something calculating entered them as he watched me, like he was already assessing me. Why hadn’t I noticed his eyes were cold when I’d first come in? There was something snake-like about him. A waiting watchfulness that looked like it could change in one rapid lunge forward.

“I said I think we should start as we mean to go on and establish some baseline tests today. Check your baseline health.” He stood and strolled to his white coat before taking it off the wall hook and shrugging into it.

There, now he was the professional doctor ready for work. I pursed my lips to keep my amusement from showing. Professional scientific doctor who believed in magic.

“Usually, I’d get an MRI scan, do some bloods, but I think we can save that for another day? I mean, it’s not like you’re going anywhere. We can take our time. Have some fun.” He winked, and disgust crawled through me. Fun?

“Actually.” I wiped my hands against the bottom of my T-shirt—the one I’d worn since I arrived. “I don’t think I want any part of this. I’d like a shower and to go home, actually.” I arched an eyebrow before remembering he couldn’t see that. “I refuse your tests.”

He laughed. “But why? I mean, why not?” He dropped his voice lower. “You’re here, I’m here. Seems like the perfect time to get to know each other a little better.”

I shivered at his strange seduction-style bedside manner. “No, I don’t think so.”

“And like I said. There won’t be anything invasive... this time.”

When I shuddered again, he smiled. Maybe he found my discomfort pleasurable.

I shook my head. “I really don’t think so.” When I spoke, it sounded hollow. “Look, I’m only here because I was arrested, right? I’m not who you think I am. It’s mistaken identity.” At his blank look, I probed further. “Was I even arrested? Is any of this legal? Or am I some sort of detainee in a secret government facility?”

He didn’t answer, but a muscle beneath his right eye twitched. This was the brightest room I’d been in so far, and even with the sunglasses on, I had better sight than I’d enjoyed up until now.

“So what was my crime?” I pushed a little. Even if he didn’t give me an actual reply, he seemed easier to read than either Coop or Locke. “Tell me my crime.”

But he sighed as he crossed the room and opened the cupboard on the wall, rattling his pot of tongue depressors as he selected a paper-wrapped one. Then he opened a small metal drawer in a table nearby and removed some vials. “Maybe blood tests today after all.”

I gritted my teeth. “What was my crime?” I repeated. “Why have I been detained against my will?”

He shrugged, the movement both expansive and evasive. “I’ve explained your status here as a guest, I believe.”

“Not really.” My words were tight. “Not to my satisfaction, anyway.” I opened my mouth to ask another question, but the doctor narrowed his eyes once more and glanced at Coop.

I turned my gaze to Coop, too, and he shook his head, the movement almost imperceptible, but I was so used to seeing the man as still as a statue it was like he'd telegraphed his desire that I not continue this line of questioning right now.

I frowned. Why would I care what Coop thought anyway? Of all the people I'd met, I trusted Coop most. So I snapped my mouth shut anyway.

Dr. Anderson nodded like my silence satisfied him. "Good," he murmured. "Maybe we can all get on the same page after all." Then he nodded again. "I'll tell you what. How about a show of goodwill? I'll give you something you want so you know you can trust me. How does that sound?"

I didn't say anything at all.

"Although." He cocked his head consideringly. "A deal has two sides. So if I give you something you want today, next time, it's my turn and you give me the things I want in return."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

My skin nearly left my body and crawled away. Revulsion for this man filled me. Only Paulson might have been worse.

“Yes.” He did the hand clap thing again. “I believe the baseline tests can wait until you’re a little more... trusting.” He smiled, that same open disarming grin he’d aimed in my direction when I first came into the room.

“Meira.” He hesitated. “Miss White. Won’t you follow me?” Again with that grin, and again my skin wanted to crawl off my body. Dr. Anderson all but held out his hand, and I averted my gaze.

Instinct pushed me to seek reassurance from Coop, and I nearly grabbed him, but I clasped one of my hands tightly over the other to prevent myself from touching him at all. It was a stupid, reckless impulse. My grasping for something—anything—to make me feel safe.

I certainly didn’t need to turn to a prison guard to find my courage. He wasn’t holding it for me, and he’d not helped me get away. Instead, he helped them keep me in the dark. I had my own courage, screwed up into a hard ball in the pit of my stomach. It was heavy, and at times it felt nearly useless in this situation, but it was still there. So I lifted my chin and squared my shoulders.

Neither did I want sympathy from Coop. I was above needing any sort of reassurance from my captors. The connection between us, whatever it was, had been manufactured by being captured. I had no doubt. I steeled myself and fell into step behind Dr. Anderson, hyper aware now of Coop behind me.

Dr. Anderson walked to a door in the wall adjacent to where we'd entered his office. He opened it with a flourish, but only exposed a room more dimly lit than this one.

"Great," I muttered. "More dark." I hadn't meant him to hear me, but he chuckled.

"Yes." His tone remained agreeable. "It must seem that way."

I couldn't see as well in here once we stepped inside, and Dr. Anderson closed the door behind us. I wrinkled my nose as I screwed up my eyes and tried to focus on something, anything, in here. The more I knew, the more power I had to escape. Knowledge would make it easier to get away.

Though, escape seemed unlikely, given I was locked inside an actual fortress of some kind, but I had to believe I could somehow accumulate knowledge here. They thought I was some sort of powerful being. Maybe I could bluff my way out. If I could figure out the routine, the other prisoners, I could find a way out. Then I would take as many blue light and fang guys with me as possible.

Out of habit, I lifted my hand to remove my glasses.

"Keep them on." Dr. Anderson's words were little more than a snarl, and I retracted my hand immediately, curling my fingers into fists at my side.

Coop edged closer behind me, and as much as I didn't want it to, his quiet presence lent me strength. Though, I reminded myself it had been caused by the situation, but I still drew from it.

The longer I stood, trying to grow accustomed to the gloom, the more of the room came into focus. A large desk took up most of the floor space in the middle of the room. A desk or a table—I couldn't quite tell. Dr. Anderson walked straight to it, and the noises of flipping switches filled the room.

“This part is pretty spectacular, Agent Cooper,” he called over his shoulder. “Watch and learn.”

Coop moved to stand between us, but then he bent his head to see what Dr. Anderson was doing. He removed his sunglasses and held them in his hand.

A whining sound started, and I glanced around, trying to locate the source. Very slowly, some huge shutters on the opposite wall began to fold on themselves, parting so a thin shaft of light fell into the room.

Actual light. Taking a breath, I appreciated the beauty of the single shaft.

I narrowly prevented myself racing to stand in it, and the urge only grew stronger as the gap between the shutters widened, allowing more and more light into the room. No one was watching me, and I lifted my glasses from my face.

Energy zipped through me as I watched the sun reveal itself. The entire wall was opening, and I could only stand and wait to be bathed in light. Anticipation hummed through each of my nerves, and I closed my eyes, sensing the light grow brighter as it kissed against my skin. Warmth spread through me, and I basked.

“You like this?”

I ignored Dr. Anderson at first, unsure who he was talking to.

“Meira?” It was the sharpest he’d spoken my name, and I flinched. “What are you doing?”

“Just standing,” I murmured.

“Perhaps you should look, instead?” He still spoke sharply, but now his voice held

amusement as well.

Slowly, I opened my eyes, and I faced the giant, open wall. I stifled a gasp and took a step forward. What...?

I looked out over a yard where the ground appeared to be made of a flat, glass sheet. I had no idea where in the building I was or which angle I was looking out over, but the ground there was smooth and reflective, and it had an almost pearlescent sheen. Light bounced from it, refracting in all directions, and it called to me.

Like a sunlight bath.

There was a balcony just outside the room we were in, and it called to me, too. I wanted to be closer to the rainbow area made of pure light. I wanted to absorb the joy inherent. I wanted to paint it, to be it.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

Holy hell, I wanted to paint it. A hundred images slammed into my mind. Canvas upon canvas, pieces to outshine the hummingbird portraits.

As if summoned, a familiar hummingbird zipped into view, but I shook my head. The power of imagination. What else could it be?

I basked in the daylight, in this unexpected treat... Then I gave myself a mental smack. Access to daylight wasn't a treat. It was my right. They weren't allowed to keep me hidden away from sunlight.

I tilted my face so the light hit it differently and marched toward the balcony, drawn by the light in a way I couldn't explain. More energy pulsed into me like it was lighting my spirit.

But as I moved by him, Dr. Anderson's hand shot out, and he gripped my upper arm tightly, preventing me from taking any more steps. He jabbed a button on his massive console table, and the shutters began to roll closed again.

Disappointment opened up like a chasm inside me, and I fought not to choke on a sob. My face twisted, and I spun toward him. "What are you doing? Why did you take it away from me?"

"Because this was enough for now," he muttered as he studied me.

fifteen

I'd never walked on air before, but I did on the return journey to my cell. Despite my

mood over being trapped here, the light and colors had filled me with a euphoria I couldn't explain.

As usual, Coop said nothing.

As usual, I had sunglasses in place over my eyes.

As usual, I could barely see.

But energy still thrummed through me, ebbing and flowing, sometimes merely in the background and tickling my thoughts, sometimes almost overwhelming like it might burst out of me and power the entire cell block. It had been glorious.

My skin prickled, and I itched. I needed to do something. Create something. I was the most wired I'd ever been. And I needed to release it.

It was ludicrous, but it was almost like the sunlight had been a drug. One taste wouldn't be enough. If Anderson offered me that again, there was no telling what I'd agree to. But I pushed that thought to the back of my mind. It was enough to just have my creative juices flowing again.

My footsteps faltered.

"You all right?" Coop spoke for the first time since we'd left Dr. Anderson's office.

I nodded, not caring whether he could see me or not. But I wasn't okay. My energy was about to explode from me, and I couldn't do a goddamn thing about it.

I couldn't create. I couldn't even scratch a design on a surface—I had nothing to scratch with. All of my art supplies were at home, my dyes and hair colors at work. Everything. I squeezed my eyes closed and opened them again.

Gritting my teeth, I trembled from head to toe. Was this the power they were looking for? My creativity? My way with colors? When I felt this way, art poured from me.

If I just had a single-colored pencil... Even though I couldn't see, even the darkness of my cell in this godforsaken place, even then, just knowing that I would be spreading color with each pass of it would be enough. I'd see it somehow. In my head, I'd see my design, and I'd know I'd created it. It would be enough.

I shook my head this time, even though Coop hadn't asked his question again, and I started moving forward once more. Hopefully, my new energy level would dissipate before being locked in the dark hole they wanted to keep me in for an indeterminate length of time.

Coop escorted me to my cell and followed me in. We both stood inside for a moment, the silence heavy between us.

I waited, wondering if he might say something, ask me if I was okay again, but the only noise he made was soft breathing. I focused on the sound as my energy swelled once more, making me bold.

"Coop?"

At first, I didn't think he'd respond. Then his voice was so quiet I almost thought he hadn't. "Yeah?"

"Can you do something for me?" This time I waited longer.

He wasn't going to reply.

"Coop," I said again. "Can I have art supplies? Just crayons or pencils or anything. I'm losing my mind in here with nothing to do." I waited again, willing him to agree

with me and do what I wanted, willing him to understand I couldn't just exist in this dark space and wait for when they chose to show me the light again.

"I..." Even that one word held bewilderment. "I can't." His words held shock, too. Like he wasn't used to not being able to do something.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

But maybe that was just life for a government agent who carried a gun and abducted innocent people off the street. Maybe there wasn't a whole lot they couldn't do.

"You can." I countered his words. "Just bring me a few pencils. Let me draw. I need to draw." I bounced on my toes a little. So much energy thrummed through me.

I imagined him shaking his head. "I can't," he repeated. "You haven't completed your testing with Dr. Anderson yet."

"Okay." I drew the word out because nothing about this situation was okay, and I didn't understand it at all. "And why do chalks or pencils rest on the tests Dr. Anderson decided not to run today?" Because that was accurate, right? The doctor himself had decided not to test me.

This situation wasn't my fault.

"It's procedure. Each guest needs to complete check in then testing before they're categorized and allowed appropriate luxuries." His voice stayed flat, emotionless.

"Procedure? A-fucking-gain? How married are you to this procedure?"

As I expected, he didn't reply.

But I was on a roll. "And what if it isn't a luxury? What if being able to draw is a necessity for me? What if I can't survive without it?" I didn't know what made me say that last part, but it didn't feel false. The energy inside me nudged at my skin like it was looking for a way out of my body. I wanted to control that outlet.

“It’s about danger level.”

“Danger level?” I didn’t bother to keep my voice down. “If you’re worried about the damage I might do with pencils, sweet Jesus, Coop... Just bring me chalk or even finger paints.” How the hell could I be dangerous with pencils? “It’s not like I’m going to hurt anyone or waste my art supplies.”

“He believes you might be dangerous.” The words were wooden. “You need to do the tests.”

I considered what he’d said. “But what if... What if you giving a little bit now makes me more willing to do whatever these tests are? What if it makes me more compliant?”

“I can’t.”

I imagined him shaking his head again, the movement sad, and I nodded my understanding. Maybe he really couldn’t. But whatever the true story, this was the most engagement I’d had from Coop. And maybe if I didn’t push the art supplies right now, he’d be more willing to talk to me again in the future.

And if Coop talked, I’d know things, and I was still gathering the knowledge I needed to wield as power. I needed to know things so I could escape. However long it took.

“Okay,” I whispered.

Fabric rustled in a way that was familiar now as he turned back to the door. His footsteps crossed the room, but I couldn’t see him easily. He didn’t announce his departure, but the lock clicking back into place announced it for him.

Light. I needed more light. I was frantic now. I’d held it in while Coop was around,

but craziness gripped me as I combed every inch of my cell, looking for a crack in the wall, a chip or a chink, something where light might penetrate from one of the other cells. I even shimmied under the bed, making myself flat and turning my head, but there was nothing.

Eventually, I exhausted myself and fell asleep curled up in the corner.

* * *

I jolted awake and sat for a moment. What had woken me? I groaned as I moved and the ache in my neck radiated down my body and up into my head. My arm had fallen asleep, too, and I flexed my fingers as they burned and prickled with the sudden return of blood.

“Meira?”

I jumped as a soft voice nearby spoke my name, but I didn’t respond.

“Meira?”

This time I responded. “Locke? What time is it? Do I need to go somewhere again?” How long had I been asleep? It didn’t feel like it could be morning, but the lack of light all the time was disorienting, and I hadn’t been able to work out the time of day in Dr. Anderson’s office before because the light had been so magnified.

But had I only eaten breakfast? My stomach rumbled in acknowledgement.

“I’ve brought you something.” He pitched his voice at a near whisper as fabric rustled and he set something down on the floor near me. The rustling sound continued, and he set more things on the floor.

“Is it food?” But it didn’t smell like food. “I don’t know when I last ate.”

“I’ll let the kitchen know you were out for tests,” he muttered. “They’ll send something up.”

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

The corner of my mouth tugged down at the memory of whatever they'd served for breakfast, but my stomach didn't care, and it grumbled again.

Locke chuckled softly. "I'll get them to send something."

"Why are you here?" I sounded sharper than I needed to be, but I hadn't even moved from the corner toward him.

I didn't trust anyone here.

An unwanted picture of Coop flashed in my mind, but I pushed it away.

"I told you. I'm making a delivery."

Yet Coop had said I wasn't allowed to have anything—no luxuries—until they'd done tests on me. After all, I might paint someone to death, so what was Locke bringing? And had Coop lied?

But no.

My gut protested that thought. He was frosty, but he didn't seem like a liar. And on the face of it, Locke seemed the more approachable of the two, but also the more likely of the two of them to throw me under the bus.

Weird how I'd arrived at that conclusion.

The cell was quiet except for Locke's breathing—he always sounded like he was

slightly out of breath.

“Well,” he said. “Do you want to see?”

I laughed without mirth, the sound harsh in the quiet of my cell. “I’d love to see, Locke. Are you putting the lights on?” My tone was dry and sarcasm rang heavy in it.

He drew in a breath, and I waited. “I brought some stuff,” was all he said, and I nodded to myself. Of course he had.

“Yeah, you said.” Still, I made no move to get any closer to him.

There was a degree of safety here in the dark, where he probably couldn’t see a lot more than I could—and I was definitely more used to the layout of the cell after my frenzied explorations earlier.

“Come a bit nearer.” He spoke in a low voice. “I don’t want this to be seen through the window.”

That piqued my interest. “What did you bring?”

There was a scraping noise, and he must have pushed whatever was in his delivery over the smooth floor.

“Come and see. It’s behind the partition now, and this is the only place you can use it.”

I crawled cautiously forward. Locke really wasn’t any good at cloak and dagger stuff. I nearly grinned—Coop would probably excel.

When I reached Locke’s side, he switched on the smallest flashlight I’d ever seen,

and it was behaving like its battery was about to fail. The glow was no brighter than a candle flame.

“What?” I whispered.

“You need to be able to see,” he replied. Then he directed the soft glow over the packages he’d put on the floor.

There was a book of paper, and I reached out and ran my palm over it. He’d also brought a couple of packages of pastel chalks.

“What?” I said again.

He shrugged, and I heard rather than saw him do it. “I’m only the delivery man,” he said, and something in his tone told me he’d probably argued against even that role.

I shook my head again and watched as the small round patch of light flickered over the small stash of art supplies. Hope welled in my chest, and my fingers itched to rip open the boxes of pastels. I had so much I wanted to draw, to capture on the page.

“But how?” I didn’t mean to ask. I didn’t want him to pack it all away and take it with him again. It seemed too close to a miracle. It was exactly what I needed, and the small light might just save me.

He tutted softly. “How indeed.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

I ran my fingers over everything again, reverence in my movements. Then I asked a question I needed to know the answer to, even if I was scared I'd get the wrong one. "Do I get to keep the flashlight?" I coveted that tiny patch of light.

My gaze followed it greedily. In that moment, it was very definitely my precious, no matter how casual I tried to sound about it.

I glanced in Locke's direction, the movement instinctive, even though I was barely able to make out his profile.

He heaved out a sigh. "On this occasion, and against my better judgment and all the words of caution I have in me, yes." He sounded utterly defeated, and I nearly giggled. "I'm supposed to leave it with you."

He must have found himself in quite a predicament earlier.

"Well, say what you really feel, Locke."

He had the good grace to laugh. "You need to keep it all hidden, though. I've essentially delivered contraband, and I'll deny all knowledge if it gets found. This is contraband. You'll be on your own if someone else finds it, so keep it back here behind this wall."

A shiver that was equal parts apprehension and excitement seized me. The urge to draw was so strong that any conditions were worth adhering to. Thank you, Coop. Thank you, whoever.

I nodded even though Locke probably couldn't see the movement.

"I'll be careful," I breathed.

sixteen

I drew long into the night, smudging pastels and creating colors to try to show the light hitting Dr. Anderson's strange glass yard. Then I focused on my hummingbird. Colors blurred in front of me as I drew her from memory. When I was exhausted, I pushed the pastels and papers away and crawled into bed.

My stomach rumbled as I settled. Locke hadn't told anyone to send me food, or if he had, no one had bothered. Still, I was too wired on adrenaline and color to care. I closed my eyes and went to sleep content.

I was woken again not long after. Someone was jiggling the door on my cell, and I leapt out of bed to hide the things Locke had brought. There was nowhere for them to go, so I shoved them beneath the thin blanket on my bed and covered them up as best I could.

I should have thought this out better.

I was standing by the sink when Coop called out.

"Meira?"

"Yes?"

"I'm coming in." That was it. No inquiry as to whether I was dressed or in bed. He was simply coming in.

He stomped in with a powerful flashlight in his hands. He shone the light in each corner and around the room.

“What are you doing?” My mouth dried as I watched him.

“Searching.” But he didn’t say anything else. Clearly, the art supplies hadn’t come from him. Though, he knew about them. If they’d not come from Coop and my heartfelt plea, where had they come from?

He shone the flashlight at me briefly, and I closed my eyes on a reflex so I wasn’t dazzled. Then he swiped his fingers over my cheek, the gesture almost tender. “Firetruck red,” he murmured, and I flinched.

He walked over to my bed and I nearly put my hand out so I could stop him, nearly pleaded with him not to look, but I stood still and silent, instead. He whipped the blanket back and paused for a moment as he looked down. Then he slowly rearranged the blanket over the crafting supplies and switched off his flashlight.

My eyes widened. Maybe he had been the one to send them. Maybe he’d only wanted to see what I’d done with them.

“You need to come with me for testing.” His voice was gruff.

I opened my mouth to speak but I didn’t have words straight away. What the hell had just happened? Then I gave myself a shake and straightened, focusing as my stomach rumbled, the sound hollow.

“I don’t think so. This morning, I want a shower, a change of clothes, and a decent meal, or aren’t you even feeding me anymore?” What might have come out of my mouth sounding brave almost left my knees weak because it was only bravado. “I’m supposed to be a guest, remember?”

But I had no power in this place what-so-ever.

Not yet, anyway, I reminded myself.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

Coop sighed. “You really want all three of those things?” But there was a slight hint of amusement in his tone, so I answered him.

“As demanding as it seems, yes, I do.” I even put my hands on my hips and tapped my foot.

He sighed again. “Let me let Dr. Anderson know you’ll be a while longer, and I’ll send someone to take you to the shower block. Then you can change and eat. I’ll grab some clothes for you from the general supply.”

I winced. That didn’t sound like a great option. “Is that like a thrift store assortment?”

“Worse.” But he was gone before I could ask him anything else.

A short while later there were timid footsteps in my cell. “Hello?” She had a timid voice, too. “I’m Aria. I’m taking you to the showers.”

“Hi.” A spark of excitement shot through me. A different room. Being clean.

“I have some fresh clothes for you,” she continued.

More excitement.

“But have you got your sunglasses on?”

A little disappointment. Apparently, everyone had their orders regarding me.

“No. Coop didn’t leave any.”

“I’ll be right back with a pair.” Her footsteps tapped away again before quickly returning. “Can you come to your cell door?”

I moved quickly. I didn’t want her to come in, since I didn’t want anyone else to find my stash. Coop had found it, and he’d left it behind. However, I couldn’t depend on that from anyone else.

A small woman I could barely see shoved her arm into the room and pressed some sunglasses against my chest, and I slipped them on. She was just doing her job and didn’t deserve any of my frustration. I could save that for Coop, Locke, and Dr. Anderson. I snarled when I thought of the creepy doctor. Just being outside my cell with someone other than Coop or Locke felt like actual freedom, too.

Twenty minutes later, standing under the powerful jet of a shower, even in the gloom I was used to now, felt amazing. There were no windows in here, but light crept in from beneath the doors leading to other rooms or hallways. I could see enough to wash and dress. Luckily, though, not enough to see how I looked in clothing from the general supply. I didn’t need that kind of negativity in my life.

I thanked Aria as she led me back to my cell, but she only told me Coop would be along soon to collect me. She didn’t say another word before she left to attend whatever her other duties were.

I stood in my cell and waited. When the door opened and Coop came in, he pressed a warm, foil-wrapped packet into my hands.

“Breakfast sandwich,” he explained, “but you need to eat it on the move.”

I nodded and walked forward as I unwrapped the foil. The first bite exploded a taste

sensation in my mouth, and I moaned. “Damn, where did you get this from?” It tasted like he’d somehow visited my favorite diner and selected my usual from the menu. “It’s great,” I murmured.

By the time we reached the elevator, I was shoving the remains of the foil deep into the pockets of the borrowed sweatpants I wore. Coop glanced at me as the doors opened and low light spilled into the hallway.

Then he sighed. Aria had taken her sunglasses with her, and he removed his, focusing his blue eyes on mine for a moment. The corners of his mouth turned down, and a hint of sadness crept into his gaze, making his eyes seem almost violet. Then he set his sunglasses into place on the bridge of my nose and reached into his inside pocket, extracting another pair for himself.

We traveled upward in our usual silence, the ride taking longer than it had before. When the doors opened, bright light hit me as sun poured in through large windows on a floor I’d never visited before. Even with the sunglasses on, I squinted.

My skin flushed. I stepped forward from the elevator, held out my arms, and turned slowly in a circle, allowing the light to hit me on all sides. Then I stood still, soaking up the warmth.

Coop cursed quietly under his breath and grasped my upper arm in one hand as he muttered into the cuff of the other.

By the time we’d reached the end of the corridor, large shutters had fallen into place over all of the windows, and low-level emergency lighting had turned on, even though most of it switched off as I walked by, leaving only the area behind me and a little way ahead illuminated.

We’d been walking toward the sounds of chatter and people, and I’d been both

excited and apprehensive at the idea of seeing people again, but as the sun vanished from the hallway, and who knew how many of the surrounding rooms, the chatter turned to groaning and grumbles before falling completely silent.

There was something almost ominous about the silence, and now I really didn't want to meet the group of people whose resentment I could almost feel in the air.

Coop took my elbow, steadying me, as we passed through a double-wide doorway with the doors flung open. We entered some type of communal space... some type of... I sniffed, and my nose twitched. Food place.

“You can take the glasses off.” He didn't speak above a murmur, but I heard him.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

And I almost didn't want to. I didn't want to know where I was or face a room full of silent, potentially hostile, people.

Coop altered his grip on my arm until it was nothing more than a supportive one.

I removed the shades and looked around the room? "A cafeteria?" I'd never mumbled out of one side of my mouth before, but I did then.

"Sure." Coop nodded. "Can't expect one breakfast sandwich to be enough sustenance for a day."

As I looked at the people looking at me, grumbles of discontent began to fill the room.

A guy at the back stood and swaggered forward, heading toward Coop. Coop shifted his stance, angling me away from the guy. His eyebrows drew down as he walked nearer, and he paraded like he knew he was about to solve a problem... or create one.

"Adrian." Coop sounded civil as he greeted the man, but I didn't miss the movement of his right hand as he rested it on his taser. "You enjoying your meal?"

I glanced back at the guy again. He looked pretty aggressive. But was he really so aggressive that Coop was wary of him? He was out here in a public area, after all.

"Agent Cooper." Adrian spat Coop's name. "Unusual to see you joining us. Slumming it today?"

Coop shrugged, everything about the movement fluid, loose, and casual, but his jaw remained tight.

Adrian switched his attention to me, snapping his head so fast in my direction that I stepped back. Who was this guy? His eyes flickered red briefly.

Damn. What was he?

“You.” He spoke directly to me. He jabbed his finger in my direction, and Coop swung his arm across me, pushing me back a step, but he didn’t say anything.

Adrian sneered. “You’re the one everyone is whispering about? The one everyone thinks is special?”

I almost rolled my eyes in reply. This guy was sneering at me like a high schooler, and I was standing in a cafeteria. It was a trip back in time. I crossed my arms and donned a disinterested expression.

Adrian sauntered around me, taking a wide circle until he got close enough to flip my hair away from my neck.

“You think you got everyone fooled, don’t you? But rainbow mages don’t exist. You know that. We all know that.” He gestured around the room as though he owned the place. But he wasn’t the oldest guy in here. He was younger than me, probably, but he seemed to have elected himself as some kind of leader or spokesperson on behalf of every person in here.

I tried not to look at any of them too closely. I didn’t want to know if they all felt the same way as Adrian about me, even though I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to have done.

“I don’t know why you’re here, lady, or why the hell we all have to eat in the dark now.”

I shrugged. “Guess I’m more important than you, huh?” Maybe I was.

Coop’s eyes widened a tick. Then he caught my elbow and steered me away from Adrian, even as Adrian continued to grumble.

A familiar figure stood up and waved me over to her table. Lexi. The only friendly face in here, it seemed. Before I could slide into the seat next to her, she cleared her throat.

“Everyone,” she announced, her tone like that of a stern teacher who wouldn’t take any whispering or distractedness from her class.

As one, all of the people turned their attention from Adrian and focused on Lexi. I glanced between the two people who both seemed to want to address everyone else. Lexi still seemed to almost glow, and Adrian seemed dark, like he seethed anger.

“Everyone,” Lexi repeated as she rested her hand on my shoulder. “This is Meira. What she’s feeling right now is confusion—not dishonesty. She genuinely doesn’t know why she’s here, and she doesn’t understand what she is.”

Several of the people nearby nodded, and the grumbles gradually returned to chatter as they returned their attention to each other and to their food.

Lexi was right. I was confused, and her speech hadn’t helped me in understanding. But I sat down anyway—glad for her intervention, even though I wasn’t sure I was safe in the battleground cafeteria.

I glanced around for Coop and found him standing at ease against the wall behind me.

At least he had a taser.

seventeen

I picked at some of the food Lexi brought to me and moved most of it from one side of the tray to the other. The quality wasn't bad—certainly better than whatever had been brought to my room the first day, but nowhere near the quality of the foil-wrapped sandwich Coop had presented me with this morning.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

I slid him some side-eye. If he hadn't gotten that sandwich from here, how had he managed it? Surely, he hadn't gone to my favorite place to get it.

I pushed the eggs into the potatoes and mixed the two together, only half-listening to the chatter around me, and Coop stepped forward. "If you've eaten enough, we should head out. You still have an appointment with Dr. Anderson."

I glanced at him.

"Shades back on," he said.

I sighed. An appointment sounded so civilized—like I had a choice or I'd elected to meet someone, but these sunglasses were like handcuffs. Every moment I wore them reminded me I was under someone else's control. Not my own.

I stood from the table, and Lexi patted my arm.

"See you soon," she said.

I nodded. I had no idea when I'd see her again, but it was nice to believe that someone was at least rooting for me.

Coop led the way out, and I almost cast a glance over my shoulder, but I didn't. I already knew Adrian was staring at me—his gaze was practically burning a hole in the back of my head. The chatter quieted as I crossed the room then escalated again as soon as we exited.

Coop made a swift return to the elevator, and I was growing used to walking in near darkness everywhere we went. So I was able to keep a steady pace with him.

We went straight to Dr. Anderson's room with the big center table, accessing it straight from the hallway, this time.

"You're late." Dr. Anderson's voice was sharp.

"She needed to eat." Coop's tone was sharper, and I glanced at him but he merely took up his position at the wall, and I couldn't see the expression on his face clearly.

Dr. Anderson blew out a sigh. "Well, you're here now. I'll just have to push up my timeline a little." He approached me. "I'm going to ask you to remove your glasses, and the lights will be on, but at the first sign of danger, you'll be subdued. Is that clear?"

I nodded. "Sure."

"Meira?"

I kept forgetting even these assholes couldn't see in the dark. "Yes. The first moment I show a little temper, you'll tackle me. Got it. Sure." I blew the last word out on a frustrated sigh. What the hell did they think I was going to do?

"Good." Then he was a shape moving through the gloom. A sharp click followed, and I blinked as a bright light flooded the room.

"Glasses off." Dr Anderson issued the instruction as he walked back toward me.

I removed them and squinted. Holy crap. Actual artificial light. It didn't energize me like the sun did, but it was still amazing to be able to see everything clearly. I snuck a

quick glance at Coop.

Yep. Just as beautiful as I remembered. Maybe he was cheating, though—sexy shades usually added at least seventy-five percent to anyone's attractiveness level. I glanced at mine. Except mine didn't. I had to wear the giant kind that went over large glasses.

"The experiment today is to find out how the different lights on the spectrum make you feel," Dr Anderson murmured. "I want you to come over here." He walked to a large armchair in front of a large, clear crystal shape. "Sit down."

I did as he said and stared at the crystal in front of me. Wait. No, not a crystal. "Is that glass?"

He nodded. "It's a prism. But it's one I can control with my computer."

"You can what?" That didn't make any sense. I understood prisms on a basic level and how they refracted light into the colors of the rainbow, but I didn't know anything about the technology side of it.

He shrugged. "It's not a widely shared technology. It has to do with vibrations. But if I explain it to you, I'd have to kill you. So I'm not. Going to kill you, that is." His grin didn't reassure me.

Well, duh. I was in a secret government facility. Of course they had access to weird technology.

"Just a moment. I need you to wear this." He lowered a weird skull cap over my head. It had wires sticking out of the top of it, and they all looked like they were connected to the computer he had. Lastly, he carefully pulled the wires out of the way so I could still move. "The cap is so I can see which areas of your brain light up."

He walked to his control table, pressed a couple of buttons, and one of the ceiling spotlights whirled as it changed direction. The prism started to hum quietly as the light hit it.

Suddenly, I was bathed in red. Irritation roared through me and I shifted in the seat, trying to get away from the glare of the color.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“How do you feel?” Dr. Anderson sounded conversational but he held a clipboard in his hand.

“Fine,” I snapped.

“You sure?” He still sounded merely conversational, like his interest was casual.

“Sure. I mean, I’d be a hell of a lot better if I was at home in Sweetwater instead of here doing this crap, though.”

“Hmm.”

I bristled at the noise he made, and I nearly snapped at him again. But, instead, I tightened my hands around the ends of the armrests on the chair I sat in before deliberately relaxing my fingers and flattening them against the surface of the chair.

“Angry,” he muttered as he studied a screen in front of him and scribbled something on his clipboard. “Right. Orange.”

I closed my eyes and resisted the urge to spring from the seat.

“How do you feel now?”

“Fine. I mean, I should be doing something. There are things I need to do. People I need to contact. I’m here, but I don’t want to be here. Why am I here? Why won’t anyone tell me?” I suddenly turned into a motor-mouth as my thoughts spilled almost uncensored from me at a rapid pace. I started to stand. “I should get up. Exercise or

something.”

“Sit down, Meira.” The light changed to yellow. “Orange makes her wired.” He glanced over his shoulder to Coop.

I held my head, turning away from the yellow light as my stomach turned and roiled. Nausea consumed me, and it was like being on a boat on a rough sea. I tried to close my eyes so I wouldn’t see it, but it didn’t help. “Turn it off, please.” I croaked out. “I feel really sick.”

“Green then.” With the flick of a button, my nausea receded, replaced by a feeling of sheer tranquility and calm.

I was the most relaxed I’d been since I arrived, and I almost closed my eyes. Nothing could bother me now. Everything would be okay. Even the noise of Dr. Anderson’s pen scratching across his paper wasn’t irritating, it simply existed.

My eyes were still closed when tears welled in them and hopelessness took root in my chest. I’d never get out of here. A sob escaped my chest, and the tears slid down my cheeks. I opened my eyes to find myself illuminated in blue, and I cried harder, my face twisting and inhuman noises ripping from my throat.

“Change the light,” Coop ground out.

Dr. Anderson was slow to comply, but he eventually spoke. “Indigo.”

I dried my tears on my sleeve as I tried to work out why I’d been crying. I couldn’t currently change my situation, so it seemed needless to cry over it.

“How do you feel?” This time the doctor sounded curious.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Ancient. Wise? Like everything will be okay. Like I could examine all my thoughts, and it would all still be okay.”

“Interesting.” He wrote another note. “Lastly, violet.”

Relief washed over me, followed by love for my fellow man. Even now, evenhere, I felt like I understood what they were doing. Their execution might have been wrong, but their motivations were probably justified. I wanted to learn more so I understood. I sighed, generally at peace with my surroundings, and I... Iloved.

I smiled, and Dr. Anderson jotted something else down. “Interesting. Agent Cooper—” He tossed a smile over his shoulder. “I do believe Miss White might be feeling the lurve right about now.” He glanced at the screen then back at me, amusement gleaming in his eyes.

With supreme effort, I ripped the cap off. I didn’t like being out of control...being under someone else’s fucking control like this. Not like this.

“Now, now,” he said. “We’re not finished. But this next part is easier.

“Are you opening the shutters again? Please open the shutters.” I hadn’t meant to beg. “None of that light makes me feel like the sun does.”

A small, malevolent smile took control of his mouth. “Not today. That would skew all of my results. We’re going to do something much more interesting.” He pressed some more switches and the lights began to dim until we were sitting at dusk.

I yawned.

“Tired?” he suggested.

Yeah, although sluggish was more the word I'd have used to describe it. And I was emotionally exhausted from whatever he'd done with the colors. Too many highs and lows. Too much to experience.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“What did you think of the colors?” he asked like he’d somehow read my mind. “Were they powerful? Could you have achieved that heightened sense yourself?”

I shrugged. I didn’t care. Barely even knew what he wanted the answer to be. It was all nonsense.

He huffed, sounding displeased.

“Okay. Now I want you to stand in one of the shadowed corners and extract the light I know is in it.”

I was halfway out of the chair before I stopped moving and looked at him. “Light in the what now?” I shook my head. Enough was enough. This guy was crazy. I glanced at Coop to see if we could leave yet, but he appeared to be focused elsewhere.

Dr. Anderson took on his endlessly patient tone, as though I was too stupid to grasp spoken English. “I want you to go to the corner. Stand there. Extract the light you find in the shadow.”

I shook my head again. “What? How?”

Dr. Anderson’s expression hardened. “You heard me. I’m done playing games with you. I know you can do this, and I need you to do it now.”

I sighed. Apparently, there was no arguing with the man. “You think I’m some rainbow mage with skills I just don’t want to show you?”

He glared.

“Fine.” I took a breath. “So I just stand in the corner in the dark?”

“Yes.”

I strolled into the corner. It was really no different than being in my cell.

“Now extract the light.”

I closed my eyes, so he couldn’t read my thoughts about him. None of this made any sense, and what did he actually want me to do?

“Extract it.”

I screwed my face up then glanced at Coop, pretty sure I just looked constipated as I concentrated on something I didn’t understand. Then I waved my hands around.

“Extract the light,” Dr. Anderson repeated.

“I don’t think I can do this,” I said to the room. “I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

“You can. I’m sure you can.” Dr. Anderson moved so quickly I barely saw him, but when I focused on him again, he had a gun pointed directly at me, his hand sure and steady as he held it.

My mouth fell open. “What are you doing?” I rasped. “You’re going to shoot me if I can’t do whatever this ‘extract the light’ bullshit is?”

“Youcando this, and you will, Meira.” His finger hovered over the trigger, not

touching it, but it wouldn't take much to send a bullet hurtling toward me.

Cold fear froze me in place. Would they tell anyone how I'd died? Shot in cold blood by a raging madman?

Coop took a breath and then coolly drew his own gun. At first, he pointed it at me, and Dr. Anderson grinned. Then Coop twisted slowly and directed his barrel toward Dr. Anderson. "Put the gun down, Doc."

Dr. Anderson's gaze narrowed, but his arm didn't lower.

He didn't falter, and neither did Coop. More fear ricocheted through me, morphing into terror until the sensation numbed all of my thoughts. My mind seemed to crack open, clawing for something stable to hold on to.

When I next breathed in, something cloying and ugly filled me, clogging my throat and lungs. It shaded my vision, and I gasped and I wrapped my arms around my chest and tried myself to stop fracturing under the new force pushing out of me from the inside.

I tried to suck in another breath, but I was already full of something that wouldn't move.

I was submerged in the dark of the corner.

Drowning in the shadows.

eighteen

I couldn't even cough. I was dying. I fell to my knees as panic took over. I shook my head backward and forward, desperate to dislodge whatever had filled me.

"What's wrong with her?"

I'd never heard Coop sound panicked before. Hell, then, I really was dying. I patted my back, desperate, and stuck my fingers into my throat, but nothing helped. Whatever was inside me seemed to have latched on to my body, and it burned.

Dr. Anderson laughed, and that sound was as dark as the shadows consuming me, the same shadows that wavered at the edge of my vision.

I was going to pass out. But that sounded better than this. I could just let go and fall asleep. And I started to. My eyes fluttered closed, but I heard a familiar sound and suddenly my hummingbird was in my head, a rainbow of colors filling my mind.

"I knew you could do it." Dr. Anderson's voice shattered my thoughts and the rainbow was gone, leaving my chest too tight again.

I glanced up and met his eyes, feverishly bright, through the gloom. Then I took a slow, ragged breath, the sound wheezy in the quiet.

"What's happening to me? What am I supposed to do?" Everything hurt still.

"Absorb the dark light," he whispered, and it was like he was reciting a sacred

incantation because he slowly lifted his arms into the air as if he was summoning something. “It’s just like we read. We knew it, you know? We knew.” He beamed at me, and pleasure radiated from him. “Absorb the dark light because that will make the difference. It will be exactly what we need.”

He made no sense, but I focused on drawing another breath. I had to survive. No, I wasn’t going to die here today. This crazy man didn’t deserve to witness my final moments.

He gurgled out a laugh that bordered on hysteria and turned to Coop as he waved his gun in the air. “And imagine,” he half-shouted. “All it took to make her perform was fear. Do you have any idea how valuable it is to have that kind of simplistic trigger at our fingertips? We can access her ability any time we like.” He smacked his lips together after the last word.

I groaned. My chest still felt like it might explode, like I was having trouble containing something inside me. Something that shouldn’t even have been inside me in the first place.

“What did you do?” I whispered as I clawed at the base of my throat. “Help me.”

Dr. Anderson laughed again and returned his gun to his waistband. Coop holstered his in return then seemed to swoop right to my side, his arms outstretched as he caught me against him.

“Come on, let’s get you somewhere else,” he murmured against my ear. Then he spoke louder. “Are you okay? Do you need a break?”

I shook my head then nodded then shook it again, unsure which question I was answering.

He looked at my face and seemed to know as I struggled to draw another breath. “I think you need a break,” he murmured.

Dr. Anderson typed on his computer keyboard, his movements rapid. Frenzied, almost. He wasn’t paying either of us a great deal of attention.

Coop slipped me a pair of shades. They all seemed to carry spares. “Let’s go,” he whispered. “Somewhere not here.”

He helped me to stand then turned to Dr. Anderson. The doctor glanced up from his screen, but neither he nor Coop spoke for several heartbeats. Then Coop resumed his trek toward the door. Either they had nothing left to say or they managed their entire conversation through some sort of male staring contest.

I leaned on Coop as he escorted me to the door, my breathing still came in gasps and wheezes, and my limbs were heavy. What the hell had Dr. Anderson done to me in there?

“I’m taking you back to the cafeteria,” Coop said, his voice still lower than usual, as though he thought someone might overhear.

I nodded. I’d go anywhere that wasn’t a dark corner.

We slowly made our way to the cafeteria, and if I’d expected to feel better with every step that took me farther from Dr. Anderson, I was wrong. The tightness in my chest didn’t ease, and my breathing remained painful. We didn’t talk, although I wanted to yell and scream. I wanted to make Coop listen to what Dr. Anderson had done to me, but what could I say?

I had a shadow inside me?

That sounded crazy, and I didn't really know what had happened.

I tried to draw a reflexive deep breath to calm myself as the cafeteria doors came into view, but it just made me want to cough, and I couldn't do that either. Only the barest minimum of air entered or left my lungs. Just enough to sustain my life, it seemed.

I slowed instead.

I didn't want to go in there again.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

Coop slowed too, still supporting my weight. “Lexi might be in there. Maybe she can help you.”

I relaxed slightly. Yes, I liked Lexi. An image of my hummingbird came to mind, and my little friend brought me strength, too. I latched onto the image, trying to keep the colors in my mind.

Coop guided me right to the same chair I’d been in before, lowering me down next to Lexi. Her face creased in concern; two wrinkles appeared at the top of her nose and her mouth tugged down at the corners as she rested her palm against my cheek.

She gazed at me, her eyes seeming to penetrate right into my soul. “Are you okay?” Her voice was barely above a whisper. She flicked her gaze to Coop. “Is she okay?”

He shrugged initially then shook his head, but he didn’t speak. Instead, he took up his usual position against the wall, his watchful gaze roving over the people in the cafeteria. Some of their faces had changed. Adrian didn’t seem to be here now, but I didn’t care enough to ask after him—I didn’t want it to look like I cared, anyway. And using the energy to inquire after him just wasn’t worth it.

Someone put a plate of food down in front of me, and I nodded in acknowledgement.

“Are you okay?” Lexi spoke again as she took my left hand between both of hers. She kept switching positions, touching my skin like the contact was helping one of us. Every time she moved, she asked if I was okay again. “You feel clammy,” she said. “Something’s wrong.” She looked up at Coop as though seeking confirmation, but he didn’t reply.

I met Lexi's eyes, trying to telegraph my misery through gaze alone. I didn't know how to explain what had happened, and I didn't know what she could do. But I grabbed hold of every part of her concern for me and tried to wrap myself in the caring of it.

"Are you getting sick?" She looked at Coop again. "Is she getting sick?" This time, her voice was louder, more demanding. "What have you been doing to her?"

A chair scraped on the other side of the cafeteria, and my heart plummeted. Adrian was here after all. Coop stiffened behind me.

"Lexi." Adrian yelled her name. "Stop touching the lying newcomer. She'll contaminate you."

Lexi narrowed her eyes at him but didn't take her hands from me. "No, Adrian. Something's really wrong. I can feel it. Something has hurt Meira, and she doesn't know what it is. She doesn't understand it. She's in pain, and she's confused." She stopped and cocked her head. "Maybe a little hungry too, but cold and in pain. Something is blocking her breathing."

My eyes widened as I watched Lexi. How the hell did she know all this about me when I hadn't spoken a word to her? As relieved as I was she knew it all, that was just plain freaky. I tried to draw away from her touch, but she held tighter.

"Aw, Lex." Adrian hung his head. "She's already tainted you with her lying bitch mouth." For a moment, he actually looked regretful that the words had come out of him. Or maybe he was more regretful Lexi was on my side. Either way, when he glanced at Lexi again, his eyes were hard.

Lexi jumped up from her seat, her hands clenched into fists. "Shut your damn mouth, Adrian. Or are you an empath now, too?"

Adrian laughed, a slow chuckle that vibrated through me at a painful frequency. “You said she’s confused?”

Lexi nodded. “Leave her alone. You’re scaring her.”

Adrian stepped forward, switching his attention from Lexi to me. “Oh, maybe I can help her with some of that confusion, and I can certainly make all of her fear go away.”

Coop moved behind me as Adrian started to advance in my direction, shoving empty chairs aside as he did so.

Fear welled inside my chest but there was no room for it to grow as it pushed up against the tightness of the shadow already filling me. It pushed so hard I was about to explode again.

I reached for something to keep me secure, for anything to hide behind as Adrian moved closer and Coop took up a defensive position behind me. His taser appeared in his outstretched hand again.

“Lexi,” he murmured. “Lexi, you need to move away. Go and find another seat somewhere.”

But she only moved to stand behind me, her fingers resting lightly on the nape of my neck.

Adrian grinned, a predator sizing up his prey.

“Adrian, no closer,” Coop warned, but Adrian ignored him, and his eyes flashed red, sending another bolt of pure fear through me.

“No,” I roared as I flung my arm out, trying to defend myself, needing him to stay away. My chest clenched, and my fear surged outwards, forcing the tightness in my chest to release. I coughed, bending over as breath rushed into my lungs.

Adrian slumped to the floor, his head almost severed at the neck, blood gushing like a fountain. People ran, screaming, from the cafeteria, as droplets of blood coated the ceiling then rained down on them.

My chair was knocked out from under me, and like Locke before him, Coop threw his weight over my body.

“Lie still, Meira. Don’t move. I need to keep you safe.” There was an urgency in his voice I’d never heard as the cafeteria was plunged into darkness, and an alarm started to howl.

“Where’s Lexi?” I gasped the words. “Is she okay? What just happened?”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“You hurt Adrian. But don’t worry. You didn’t mean it. It wasn’t your fault.” He sounded so sad now. “It wasn’t your fault,” he repeated. “Not your fault.”

I gasped, drawing a sharp breath even though I could barely move, still seeing Adrian’s severed head, the gash almost right through his neck. “I did that? But how? How?” I would have laughed, but Coop was too heavy to shift. “No way. How could I have done that?”

There was no way I’d hurt a man by simply flinging out an arm to prevent him from coming closer.

“But I didn’t...I didn’t want... I didn’t even think of...” What was I saying? Was I buying into this bull crap now?” “Let me up. Let me upright now.”

“No can do.” Coop’s voice was right by my ear.

My chest tightened again, this time, with a redundant sob. I couldn’t swallow it back down, and I couldn’t force it out.

“But what’s going to happen now?” I whispered.

nineteen

I’d been here before.

But this time my cheek was pressed to smooth tile rather than itchy carpet tile. I opened my eyes wider, looking into more of the dark. The aroma of food hung in the

air, but it turned my stomach because it was mixed with the coppery tang of blood.

The same blood dampening my hair.

There had been a lone french fry on the ground by the knocked over chair, spread twice as wide as it had been on the plate. It had probably been squashed against the floor in the stampede to leave. I identified with that french fry.

“Meira.” Coop’s voice was still quiet.

I tried to move my head so I could hear him better, but he had me pinned completely beneath him. Where the hell did they all learn this technique? They probably called it the “safety smother” move. But I was still too exhausted to struggle.

“Meira.” Coop’s use of my name was more urgent this time.

“Yes?” I whispered.

“I need you to close your eyes and keep them closed. Don’t be afraid. Just close your eyes.”

Even before he’d finished speaking, I did as he asked. I trusted Coop. Maybe I didn’t understand him most of the time, but I trusted him. The alarm shrieked in my head as I lay there with my eyes closed.

“I’m going to move,” Coop said, his mouth almost right against my ear. “And I’m going to secure your wrists behind you.”

I tried to nod again to show I understood, but I still couldn’t move. And I didn’t care.

“Easy,” he murmured as the weight on me started to release. “Easy,” he said again.

I almost didn't know what he was saying. What did he think I was going to do? As I considered it, my mind began to spin and all I could picture in my head was Adrian.

I released his name on a whisper as sadness constricted my throat.

"Don't think about it," Coop said. "Don't think, Meira. It's too much."

Adrian's body was still in here, though. People had fled, and I was pinned down again and there was a corpse in here with us. Once alive. Now dead.

A corpse people thought I'd created. No, I had created. With a power I didn't know I wielded.

"I need you to stay calm, Meira. Just stay calm, and I'll sort all of this." Coop snapped some handcuffs into place around my wrists, but I didn't care. I wanted to curl around the sorrow growing around my middle.

I deserved the punishment this time.

"Did I do that?" I rasped.

He stiffened alongside me. "Don't think about it."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“How? I just nearly took off a man’s head? Almost beheaded him. What? Why?” But I was numb, and the words were meaningless. I could still see the blood spurting at the ceiling.

Coop said nothing, but his soft breathing sounded close to my ear. It was a comforting counterpoint to the squall of the alarm, and his presence was protective rather than threatening—even though he’d just cuffed me.

Footsteps approached the cafeteria, many footsteps, and they pounded like a heartbeat, lots of people completely in sync. Were we being raided?

“They’re coming,” Coop whispered. “Try not to be scared.” Then he raised his voice. “I have her contained. Target is not hostile. Repeat, target is not hostile.”

I flinched. I was a target again? I didn’t know who I was anymore.

I opened my eyes to see too many armored bodies flood through the doorway opening from the dimly lit corridor outside. They must have been clad all in black because they melted into the darkness of the cafeteria, and all that remained of their presence was the feeling of something oppressive accompanied by the occasional crackle of static or a squawk of a walkie.

Other than that, I wouldn’t have known I was more or less surrounded by an army, and most likely a heavily armed one, all focused on me. Because I was dangerous. My heart twisted.

Coop didn’t take his hand from my arm, but his touch wasn’t rough. The contact

reassured me. Occasionally, his thumb stroked my skin, the motion also calming.

“I’ve got her.” Coop raised his voice again. “She’s under my control. I’ll escort her back to her room.”

But the lights flooded on, and I blinked. Heavily armed soldiers in full-scale riot gear. Some carried clear shields, and they formed a defensive ring around me, until I could only see dark colored helmets beyond the shields. I couldn’t see faces behind their helmets, and while Coop wore his usual black suit, these men wore tight-fitting body armor and protective vests.

I drew a sharp inhale at the heavy artillery pointed at me and almost closed my eyes again so I could wish the roomful of people away. They shouldn’t be here, risking their lives to contain me.

Fear I might miss something important kept my eyes open, though. I needed to see. I’d lose all of my power if I didn’t watch and know what was happening to me.

The crowd in front of me parted slightly as one man stepped forward. He kept one hand on his radio, and the other clutched some sort of baton or stun gun. I winced. It was far more like a cattle prod than the taser Coop sometimes reached for.

“She’s coming with us now.” His voice was unfriendly but matter of fact. “We’re taking her into custody.”

I was no longer a person now. I was a prisoner, a target, another job. Something to be taken care of. A problem to be locked away. But Coop wouldn’t let them take me. He couldn’t. He’d promised to keep me safe.

I glanced at Coop, and panic fluttered delicate wings in my chest. His jaw was tense, his mouth a flat line, his skin pale, and his hold on me relaxed.

Wait. No. He was releasing me to this guy. Coop had promised to keep me safe.

A protest formed on my lips, and I reached blindly for Coop as he drew away, my movement awkward in the cuffs, but I clutched his fingers, and his hold tightened around mine briefly. Then he withdrew, and the moment was lost.

Almost without ceremony, he pushed me forward, and I staggered, only just regaining my balance before I stumbled against the new soldier.

“Where am I going?” I demanded, lifting my chin.

It was like talking to a robot or automaton. The man’s helmet didn’t even turn in my direction. Instead, he lifted his weapon again, brandishing it in front of him, and I shrank back, unable to move physically away without bumping into Coop.

“Where am I going?” I whispered again, sure I’d get even fewer answers from this new breed of captor than I’d ever received from Coop and Locke.

Again, the new guard didn’t reply. He stepped forward, positioning his chest nearly against me. Everything about the man was menacing. My chin quivered, and I hated how upset by Coop’s betrayal I already was.

Again, I glanced to Coop. He didn’t move at all. “Solitary,” he murmured, and even his lips seemed to stay still.

But I understood. My shin tingled, and my heart pounded. Solitary? But what? I wanted to struggle, to fight the man in front of me and beat against his armor-protected chest. How? What the hell was more solitary than the dark cell where I’d already been staying?

Dread replaced my panic. I tried to swallow the lump lodged in my throat.

The guard spun me around, his gloved hands rough where he touched me. He didn't say anything as he moved my body into the position that best suited him. As I faced Coop, even he didn't appear to be looking at me.

My eyes filled with unexpected tears at the prospect of another unfamiliar situation and more people in control of my life and days. I was being buried deeper and deeper in this shadowy system I didn't understand. I didn't know how I'd ever get back to Sweetwater and the life I'd been creating for myself there.

Before I could open my mouth or make another sound, my world went dark as a bag was dropped over my head and the drawstring cinched around my neck. Here, I thought there wasn't going to be anything worse than sunglasses. How wrong I'd been.

Panting, I tried to keep the flood of feelings at bay. It wasn't tight enough to hurt, but no light passed through the thick weave of the fabric, and I drew a deep breath then stopped as the material clung to my nose and mouth.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

Almost instinctually, I jerked as I tried to bring my hands to my face, but the cuffs prevented movement and kept my arms behind me. Tightness crept through my chest. It had gone from bad to worse.

“Shit,” I ground out. “Shit.” I blew out against the fabric, desperate to keep it from my mouth and nose. I was going to suffocate. They were going to suffocate me if they continued this. I’d die here. Bess would wonder about me now and then when a rainbow followed a thunderstorm, and I would disappear from their minds.

The guard behind me nudged me forward with the tip of his weapon, and I took two quick steps. I whimpered.

“Careful,” Coop’s voice cautioned. “She’s rare.

The guard laughed, and it was cold and uncaring—no depth of feeling at all. “I don’t care.” His deep voice should have been melodious, but it was devoid of emotion, too. “All murderers go to solitary. Doesn’t matter if they’re rare or not.” He laughed again, this time like a man who really enjoyed his job.

My knees threatened to buckle. Murderer. The word echoed across my mind.

“But I’m not—” I wasn’t what? Rare? A murderer?

“I’m not...” My protest was muffled against the hood, and my words died away as I tried to tell them I wasn’t a murderer. There was no way I could be a murderer. It wasn’t me.

I was just a hair colorist from the small town of Sweetwater. Being a murderer didn't fit me. I preferred to capture spiders and release them away from the house. I would never have killed someone.

Until it looked like I had. Until power burst out of me.

I curled my fingers into my palms until my fingernails dug into my skin. Had I really killed someone? If I hadn't, how did I explain what had happened to Adrian and the reaction that had sparked? How did I explain my position now?

I sniffled a little then stood straighter. Coop had moved away now. I had no idea how I knew. I couldn't see through the bag, and my hearing wasn't as clear—the most obvious sounds were my own breathing and every movement of my head as the hood rustled. But I couldn't sense him in front of me anymore, almost like I'd known when he was standing there, like his support had been physical rather than simply the emotional side I'd taken from it.

I mourned the loss of him. He'd been the one constant thing since the morning in the coffee shop. Always there, even if most of the time he'd hidden his blue eyes behind regulation shades. Whether I should or not, I trusted him.

The weapon nudged me forward again. Apparently, prison was about to get a whole hell of a lot worse for me. This was the real deal. The nudge came again, and I gritted my teeth.

With each hesitant step I took, I reassessed, checking that the ground was firm beneath my feet and that it was still the same surface I expected. There was no way to tell if this asshole would even tell me if I was approaching a flight of stairs.

He directed my every turn with a touch of his weapon at my left or right hip, but it had taken me a while to know what those touches meant, and he'd probably left me

with bruises in the time it had taken me to figure it out. My skin might look like a pincushion tomorrow.

As he directed me to turn again, a rush of cooler air whispered over my hands, and the ground turned to some sort of metal mesh. It rattled with each step. I wanted to throw my arms out for balance, but the cuffs prevented it and I swayed to the side as I tried.

Sliding my feet forward, I tried to keep going. But I didn't trust the suddenly industrial environment I found myself in. It had to be in an area of "the Facility" I hadn't seen yet. My mouth twisted. It was an area I still hadn't seen.

Even the guard's steps echoed differently here, like we were in a much more open space than we'd been previously. Through the mustiness of the material against my nose, I detected faint strains of oil and damp. Like I was in a forgotten area of the facility, like things that needed fixing were left here to rot.

I swayed into the wall again, my hip pressing against a railing as my cheek hit some sort of smooth metal beyond. Going forward wasn't an option without more direction.

"Stop." It was the first word he'd said and the next sound was the creaking of badly maintained hinges, supporting a heavy door.

I didn't try to respond to him, though. Even his breathing sounded aggressive, like some sort of wild animal had followed me all the way from the cafeteria to wherever he'd brought me.

The way he'd nudged me all the way here left me off balance, and I crashed against the edge of the doorframe as I passed through it, grateful that the hood over my face offered some protection. But it still hurt as my cheek slammed against the hard surface. Tears welled in my eyes.

Fear clutched me, and the strange tight sensation from before began to invade my chest again—the one that had clawed at me and demanded release.

But I clamped it down, determined to not let it out. Especially as I didn't know what it was or what it made me capable of. Power threatened to erupt, and I decided then. I had to learn what I was, but I wouldn't release it.

No. I had no time for that.

Maybe I held an energy I didn't understand, but I wouldn't accidentally murder again.

twenty

The air around me changed again, almost charged with static electricity now, and I shivered. I could feel the technology humming in this place. The atmosphere practically vibrated. I almost stopped walking, and my breath rate increased as my heart started to pound again. Uncertainty crowded me. Where was I going?

“Steps.” It was a bark of a word from behind me, and the guard took hold of my upper arm, but not gently like Coop had. No. This grip was punishing as his fingertips dug into my skin. He half-lifted, half-dragged me down each metal step, and he grunted with each impact.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

My fingers flexed and curled behind me as the handcuffs chafed my wrists, and I inhaled sharply each time my feet struck a new step. Shit.

No elevator? I wanted to ask him the question, but I didn't dare. Coop and Locke had rarely answered direct questions, but this guy might kill me for opening my mouth at all. No amount of curiosity was worth my life.

The steps seemed endless, as if we were descending to the same level as my cell. For a moment, my chest constricted again. My art supplies. I'd only just been given them... I shouldn't even have had them but someone had known how important they were to me.

My mind slowed. It was almost like someone in this place cared. Locke had brought me the supplies and a tiny light. I'd thought Coop sent them, but he burst in looking for contraband. I lifted my face toward the ceiling, imagining the sky beyond, and sent a prayer to whatever or whoever was out there. Please.

The guard jerked my arm again, and we both stopped as I teetered on the edge of a step, unable to see how far I might fall if he let me go. His rough breathing echoed here, and it was like the stairs were a physical effort for him.

Maybe they needed to rethink that elevator access.

His grip on me shifted, becoming more punishing. His fingers were a vice grip, squeezing until my arm ached. I'd have bruises by the time he let me go.

I couldn't find any anger in my hopelessness, though. I needed to reassess, take stock

of my new situation, and discover where I could find my power in this new area. I'd just been learning the rhythm of being kept in the dark and recognizing parts of uncluttered corridors, and now I'd need to start again.

Bess entered my thoughts. What was she thinking? Had Sweetwater forgotten me, or were the residents fighting to return me to them? How long had I been gone? I should have been counting the days. I blinked away sudden tears at that direction of my thoughts and swallowed around the lump in my throat.

I wouldn't cry in front of this man.

He resumed half-dragging, half-lifting me down the stairs, and I relaxed to make the process easier. It was harder if I tensed, and it hurt me more.

We stopped before I expected it, and my head whipped forward before lashing back and cracking against the wall beside me. Even with the added cushioning of the fabric hood, pain vibrated through my skull, and my teeth clacked together.

I grunted, and the man laughed, the sound wheezier than it had been before like he was still suffering from the effects of the physical exertion of bringing me here. "Did you bump your head?" He didn't bother with mock-sympathy. "I think you'd be less trouble unconscious."

His punishing pace picked back up now that we were on level ground again, and I couldn't find my footing. Yet it didn't slow him down, and I was a deadweight as he dragged me forward.

When he stopped again, he released me to stand alone, and something beeped nearby like he was typing a code into a keypad. Each beep sounded the same, and there were six in total. Then there was a whirring sound, and a poke to my back had me stepping forward once more. He pushed me ahead of him, now back to directing me with the

end of his weapon. He had a knack for striking the same spot right above my kidneys—unless I moved my hands to protect myself and then he mashed the cuffs harder into my inner wrists instead. The spot above my kidneys already ached, and I would surely have injuries circling my wrists.

“Welcome to solitary,” he barked. His tone was anything but welcoming, although there was a malicious joy in it, like this was a guy who really got off on his job.

I shivered, but not because of what he’d said or why he’d said it, but because my thoughts ricocheted to every TV program I’d ever seen about solitary confinement and maximum-security sections of prisons. Left alone, in the dark, with only my own thoughts for company.

I might rot down here.

And God alone knew who I was being kept with if I was considered dangerous. Being alone was probably preferable to sharing solitary space with an asshole.

Strange things had happened to me since I first arrived here—people with actual fangs, a man who could seemingly travel as a holograph...or perhaps just a figment of my imagination that first night. Then there was Adrian with his swagger that seemed to make even Coop nervous, and I was the dangerous one?

But if all of those people were still out there, and Adrian had been allowed to remain in the general population, who the hell was in here with me? The unanswered question sat like a lead weight in my gut, and dread seeped from it, chilling me.

“Did you hear me?” The guard prodded me again. “I said...” He leaned really close until his mouth was right against the fabric of my hood over my ear. His hot breath warmed my skin, and I shuddered. “Welcome to solitary.” He roared the words, and I yelped, jerking away, and bumping my head again as my ear rang at the blast of

sound.

Before I could collect myself, he ripped the hood from my face and shoved me forward. I spilled onto my knees, barely catching myself with my shoulder before my head struck the hard floor.

“Shit,” I ground out, and the guard laughed cruelly behind me before he slammed the door with a force that echoed a bang through the small space. He’d left me cuffed. My hands were stuck behind my back.

I glanced around.

Four walls.

One metal bed.

One toilet.

The light in here was low. An artificial fluorescent light no brighter than the flashlight Locke had brought me. Shadows collected in the corners of the room, and they were dark and foreboding, so I inched away from them.

Turning my attention to the door, I noted I could see this door, this time. It had a tiny viewing window in it—way higher than was comfortable for me to see out of, and a slot that maybe a tray would pass through. At least they might feed me regularly down here.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

My laughter became bitter as I identified one bright spot I'd found to having been moved. Regular meals. Regular meals I didn't have to make for myself.

I knee-walked over to the bed, tucked against the wall, my head still ringing from when the guard had shouted in my ear. There was one thin blanket up there and no mattress to speak of—just a piece of foam that looked older than me, pitted with holes and flaking to pieces.

Each movement was an effort, like shock was setting in, and I clambered onto the narrow bed. I was cold now, too, so I grabbed the thin cover with my teeth and tried the best I could to pull the material over my body. Half my body stuck out from underneath.

Freezing slipped right into my soul, and my bones ached with it. My thoughts had slowed to something with all of the liveliness of a swamp, and I twisted the blanket around my legs tighter. It was smelly and a color even I didn't recognize, but it was real and I needed something I could hold in my hands—my teeth—and know existed.

It proved I was still alive.

I was still here. I still existed.

I shimmied and wiggled until the cover was mostly over me, creating the illusion of warmth if nothing else. Carefully, I scooted until my back was against the wall, resting my head against the mattress as I tried to center myself.

The strange vibrations in my body from earlier hadn't gone away, and they itched

deep inside me. It was still like a yawning beast wanted release, feeling like I harbored a powerful being inside me that shouldn't be there. Had I? How could it be true?

Something inside me had changed. It was off. Like I was on the wrong frequency now. Dr. Anderson had adjusted me, perverted me, and I didn't know what it was. Everyone kept me in the dark, and now maybe darkness grew in me.

My teeth chattered. Is that what had happened? I didn't know.

But power had shot out of me—a killing, murdering force. I had a disorder, maybe. A late-occurring one. Nothing like this had been in any of my medical records.

Frowning, I bit my bottom lip. More than a symptom or a disorder. It was something more. Dr. Anderson suspected what I was, and he probably had the key to my understanding it myself. The oily, icky, creepy doctor probably had the answers I needed, and I hated that truth with every cell in my body.

I let my eyes slip closed, and I tried to escape into my thoughts of warmth and sun, but ignoring the vibration was more difficult than I thought. It fizzed through me, almost a hiss, like a creature, alive and separate from me all on its own.

I shook my head, but the hissing became louder and more insistent. So I tucked my face beneath the top edge of the blanket and covered my ears as best I could until the only sound left was my heartbeat.

The tempo was too fast, and I drew deep breaths in and out, trying to calm myself and slow my heart rate back down. I couldn't change anything right now. There was no need to be anxious. Being anxious helped no one. It distracted me from getting free. I took several more intentional breaths in and out. Once I was satisfied I was back under my own control, I moved the blanket.

The hissing started again. Shit. What the fucking hell was the hissing? Was it an audible sound or all in my head? I squeezed my eyes shut. Should I test my theory? What else did I have to do in solitary?

Violently, I slammed my head against the flat pillow, and I paused to listen. Several times, I repeated the same movement until I was sure the noise wasn't simply in my head. It wasn't originating from me at all, but where could it be coming from? I was sitting on the only piece of real furniture in a tiny box of a room. The toilet didn't really count as a chair.

Toilet, though. Maybe the toilet had an issue with a faulty valve or a washer. I could get used to white noise. In fact, having a little white noise or pink noise helped me fall asleep. But was it the toilet? Curious, I kicked the blanket to the side and crept from the bed into the small room, keeping all of my movements small and quiet, like someone might hear me and come investigate.

Somewhere down the hall, a door slammed closed and a flurry of bangs followed, but then silence fell, and it was heavier than any silence before. Every rustle and shuffle I made disturbed the weight of it.

In my head, it was like I was connected to everyone else in the place, and they'd feel the ripples of my explorations in my cell. I behaved like I was moving through water, keeping the disturbance to a minimum, going slow, even steadying my breathing.

I almost rested my ear against the metal surface near the toilet, but there was something unclean about the smell, the odor lingering even under something else that smelled of bleach and pine freshness. There wasn't the soft hiss of water in pipes, and sewage or water wasn't running down the back of the bowl. I didn't examine the interior too closely, though. I doubted they cleaned well. What convict had the luxury of a spotless john?

I worked away from the toilet, hoping to track the pipes through the walls, but the walls were thick and rough textured, and I scraped my cheek when I moved it across the surface. The walls were cold, too. Not damp exactly, but definitely chilled to the touch. Almost like years of sadness had permeated them, become trapped in there, and now they couldn't get warm.

I drew my face away from the wall and shook off the seemingly ridiculous thoughts. But something about them rang true. I sensed way more sadness and despair in this room than anger or fury. Like the people who came here lost all hope.

But still the whispering-hissing continued, and I renewed my hunt. It faded as I followed the wall to the edge of the door, so I backtracked, past the toilet where it seemed to bounce off or echo from, and back to the bed.

It was loudest here. Definitely. I should have realized before. And it was coming from underneath it.

I swallowed a groan as I surveyed the narrow gap between the bed and the floor beneath it. It would be darker and dusty under there, and I physically recoiled at the thought of the shadows.

But the whispering noise continued, and it called to me. I wanted to find the source. What would dare whisper where the silence was so heavy and unbreakable?

I lay flat on the floor and shimmied sideways, catching myself on sharp pieces of metal on the bed frame. My handcuffs made the movements extra difficult, and I brushed against the bottom of my bunk more than I wanted.

The cot snagged at my skin and my hair, and the dirt and debris from the years pressed into my back. I was almost blind under here without light, but it probably saved me from seeing the worst of the sights.

Something much softer than metal brushed over my face, and I shuddered as I fought then banished all thoughts of spiders from my head. I'd emerge from here with hair gray from dust, anyway. I didn't need to imagine spiders taking solace in the strands, too.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

I squirmed my way to the wall, and a draft tickled over my cheek. I pressed it to the wall and discovered the checkerboard holes of some sort of ventilation grate.

The whisper was originating from here.

And it wasn't just a whisper.

It was a voice.

twenty-one

"Hello?" My own whisper was my very cautious response. As much as I wanted someone to be there, it could be a trick. "Is someone there?"

The whispering stopped, but of course someone was there. I'd heard them.

"Hello?" I grew bolder. "I know you're there."

At first, the reply was unintelligible, just a string of whispered sounds that I couldn't make sense of.

I craned my neck and pressed my ear closer to the vent until I started to hear soft words in the white noise.

"Who's there?"

"Meira." I whispered my name hesitantly. But surely it couldn't hurt to share my

name with someone I couldn't even see? "Who are you?"

The person didn't answer. Instead, they whispered another question. "Are you new?"

I shuffled into a more comfortable position then tried to work out how quickly I could emerge from under the bed if someone opened the door to my cell. It wasn't somewhere I wanted to be caught in case I got the person talking to me in trouble.

Hell, who was I kidding? I didn't want to be in any more trouble here, either. And it was almost guaranteed that whispering to someone through the duct system would get me into trouble. Solitary meant lonely, didn't it? A new friend in the duct work didn't qualify as "solitary."

Still. I shrugged and winced as my cuffs rubbed against the floor, chafing my wrists even more. But I was already cuffed in solitary. How much worse could this get? Realistically, if someone was prepared to spend five minutes whispering to me, I was open to that. Desperate for it after only having had Locke and Coop to talk to. Two guys who didn't seem to understand the talk-and-respond convention of conversation.

"Where are you?" The whisper came again, and it was unusual to have someone ask me questions for a change instead of issuing terse commands or just remaining silent in the face of my inquiries.

"I don't know. I'm in a cell in solitary. I had a hood on when they brought me down."

The other voice chuckled, and I strained to hear their real voice in the sound. Then the whispering resumed. "We're all in solitary. Not all brought down in hoods, though. That's different. You must be special. What did you do?"

I rolled my eyes. There was the idea I was special again. "Yeah. Special enough to be in solitary." I injected my whisper with irritation and the person chuckled again.

“Oh, we’re all special, honey. Didn’t they tell you?”

“They’ve told me precisely nothing since I got here,” I whispered back, my words almost falling over themselves in my urgency to spit them out.

Really, I just wanted this person to talk more—whoever it was sounded like they had a clue about the facility, and anything they could tell me would only help me understand why I was here and how I could get home.

Well, I had the small accusation of murder to overcome first, but I hadn’t killed Adrian. Someone else must have done that and Coop got the wrong idea from the available information.

“Who are you?” I tried again to extract identifying information from the Female, I thought.

“Friend of a friend,” came the reply, but that was obviously all they were willing to reveal.

“I haven’t been here long enough to have friends.” I sighed as the words left my mouth. Didn’t want to stay that long, either. “And if I end up making them, I’ve been here too long.” I added a humorless chuckle of my own.

“A-men to that,” she agreed.

I sighed again. “I haven’t got a clue what’s going on.”

“What?” That word was more of a screech. “What do you mean you haven’t got a clue? Have you had your tests? What’s your talent? Who have you met?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

The questions came so rapidly I didn't know which to answer first. "What's this talent thing?" It was the same word that Sylvia had used when she checked me in. "I color hair and I can draw. I'm not even sure why they arrested me. They came to the hair salon where I work and then they all just piled in and drove me away—" I stopped as my chest constricted at the memory of Bess's face.

But the person I was talking to just laughed softly again. "Oh, Meira," she said. "You weren't arrested. You were acquisitioned."

I scowled. "Acquisitioned? Like selected or something."

She was quiet, and I assumed she was either shaking or nodding her head... Or she'd disappeared on me. I cast another glance at the door, unable to see anything clearly. Not shapes. Since the entrance was a distance away, I looked in the direction of the door and directly to the side, so I could make out the murky shapes. If only the technique worked for the space under the bed. Everything seemed quiet, still. There was no great fuss like someone had been discovered having a conversation via the vent shafts.

I fidgeted in the unexpected silence. What the hell had she meant, acquisitioned? It sounded so... impersonal and dehumanizing. Like I was some sort of object. My eyes widened.

For a collection... Shit.

"Who the hell would want a hair colorist from Sweetwater, Florida?" I whispered. It seemed like the more information I knew, the less made sense.

Perhaps some of the others in this area of the building were delusional or insane.

“We all were,” she said eventually. “They hand-picked each of us.”

“Hand-picked?” I’d started just repeating her words back to her, and I considered shimmying back out from under the bed instead of taking part in this ridiculous conversation.

At least I was taking part in a conversation. It had been too long since I talked to anyone.

So I stayed.

“Yes.” She sounded quite serious. “Hand-picked.”

“But what the hell? Why? Why the hell would you even think that?”

She was quiet so long this time I began to wonder if I’d offended her. Maybe my whisper had been a little too cutting this time.

But she laughed, and it was dark. “You really don’t know, do you?”

I shook my head, and my hair caught around the leg of the bed. Know what? “What are you talking about?” She might have been the only person willing to talk to me, but I was growing tired of this game. It seemed like everything she said was riddles or depended on them.

“Do you even know where you are?” She moved from sounding incredulous to curious.

I swallowed. “Some sort of government facility. But it’s a mistake. A case of

mistaken identity.”

She laughed again. “Oh, they do many things, but mistaken identity isn’t one of them.”

“What do you mean?” My skin chilled. “What is it they think I can do?”

“What can you do?” Her reply was almost instant.

But I shook my head before I remembered she couldn’t see me. “Nothing. I... I don’t know. What do you mean?” I touched the vent like I could strengthen our connection.

“We’re all supernatural.” Her words were so unexpected that I barked out a laugh.

“Don’t you think I’d know if I was supernatural?” Really. I’d heard and seen a lot of weird shit here, but this was definitely the weirdest. So many weird things... My thoughts churned. Supernatural? No way in hell. Yet... people with fangs?

And it proved my point that she was delusional.

“Of course we are.” She sounded so serious. “How have you been explaining the others to yourself?”

I cast my mind back over the other people I’d met. It was a small group of people. “I haven’t met many of the people here. I’ve spent most of my time by myself.” Self-pity rose within me for a moment. “They keep me in the dark.”

She sighed, and I almost felt the air she released brush over my cheek.

“What’s wrong? What’s going on?” I didn’t understand.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“How long have you got?” Her laugh this time was almost a giggle, and I rolled my eyes.

“I’m lying under a bed in solitary confinement, talking to an air vent. I don’t think I’m particularly in a rush to leave.” I paused and amended my statement. “They’re not in a rush to let me out, anyway.”

“We each have a special talent.” She didn’t directly acknowledge my statement. It seemed like she just continued her story instead. “Okay. So let me give you an example.” She paused like she was thinking before sighing again. “There are vampires here with the ability to teleport. Sometimes they can go great distances. Other times it might only be across the facility.”

I started to laugh before the sound cut off abruptly, surprising even me. “People can teleport?” An unwelcome image of the guy in the blue light who’d appeared outside my cell on the first night took shape in my head. He’d been in his own cell not long before. One moment there, the next beside me.

“Some of them can remote view or influence your thoughts or feelings, too. There are shifters here who can dream walk, and mages and warlocks.”

“Like witches.” I’d been acquisitioned to a school for magical beings? It sounded like she was describing the script of a movie. “I don’t believe in witches.”

She was clearly delusional. That’s why she was here in “the Facility.” Did that make me delusional, too? Was that why I’d been brought here and didn’t understand anything going on? I gritted my teeth from crying out. No, I wouldn’t think like that.

Not yet.

Every word my new friend spoke cemented the fact she wasn't altogether in her head...

Or... I'd tumbled into a life I couldn't fathom, and my new friend understood way more than I was prepared to give her credit for. Could I really be special?

I considered Adrian. What had happened... what I'd done... I shuddered.

I'd do better not to listen to anything she had to say. I needed to focus on getting out of here, not being drawn deeper into a web of make believe.

But the image of that guy wouldn't leave my thoughts. He'd been right outside my cell. I'd seen him. Then he'd helped me sleep.

"They all have a unique spell-binding ability or an unusual enchantment they use. But why are you here, Meira? What's your talent?" She was insistent and probing, like she wanted me to really think about my answer.

I spread my fingers like she could see the gesture, like she'd know I'd considered her question and come up empty-handed. "I don't even know what that means."

She sighed again. "I can't believe how little you know. Haven't you tried to find anything out since you've been here?"

Her question irritated me, and I nearly shoved my way out from under the bed. "You try getting information out of the stone wall who walked me around the facility."

Coop had certainly been less than helpful most days. Locke, too.

“I don’t have a talent like you mean,” I said. “I’m not a supernatural anything.” I only murder. I winced as the thought took hold in my head and in my heart. “I destroy,” I murmured. “That’s my talent.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

“Listen. They don’t make mistakes here. If they’re interested in you, it’s what you can do for them.” She’d stopped whispering as low, urgent words seemed to spill out of her instead. “The government is building an army capable of spying on enemies and taking down terrorists or neutralizing their threats without the need to deploy actual troops. You must have a talent. You wouldn’t be here otherwise. Hasn’t anyone told you what it is? Have you been taken for tests yet?”

She was mad as a box of frogs, but there was still something oddly comforting about the idea that another person wanted to spend time talking to me—even though we both probably had nothing but time at the moment. Maybe this was as important to her for the same reasons. There was definitely irony in the fact that one of my longest conversations in this place was taking place in solitary confinement.

“Meira?” she prompted. “What’s your talent?”

I shrugged, the movement half-hearted and constricted by the small space beneath the bed and the handcuffs I still wore. “I saw Dr. Anderson. He mentioned light magic, I suppose.”

Dr. Anderson was mad as a box of frogs, too.

“Fuck.” Her curse was quiet but clear, but she didn’t say anything else.

“Hello?” I whispered. “Are you still there?”

She stayed silent, and I touched the air vent again.

“Hello?” Despair crept into my chest at the continued silence, and I strained to hear even soft breathing. But nothing came through. She’d gone.

I shifted my position again, trying to find something more comfortable so I’d hear if she came back. I didn’t want to lose the voice. It was all I had.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

But there was a different sound. Almost a vibration, and I turned my head to try to look through the gaps in the vent. It was dark in there but a tiny shape came into view.

What the actual fuck? How had...

My hummingbird. I could barely see her, but she was hovering on the other side of the metal grid. She came closer, the noise of her vibrations intensifying as she hung, almost still in front of me, one beady eye seeming to be trained directly on me.

My heart slammed in my chest, and a thrum filled me. Elation coursed through my veins, pushing the adrenaline aside. Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes. I wasn't alone. I hadn't been forgotten. Home had followed me into the darkest place I'd ever been.

Home... warmth... sunlight... I took a deep and calming breath. As I breathed out slowly, whatever had been wound tight in me uncoiled. I trembled but not from fear.

Her presence reassured me, and my eyes fluttered closed before I jerked back awake. The bird was still there, and my eyes closed again when I saw her. She was there a third time when I checked again before I gave in to the sleep trying to claim me.

twenty-two

A crash sounded in the room, and I startled awake, bumping my forehead against the bottom of the cot. What was it with this place? I was sick of being woken by someone bursting in and throwing the nearest door against the wall.

I opened my eyes. Well, shit. The metal bed frame above me nearly touched my nose, and I still had to shimmy out from underneath. While handcuffed. They could have at least removed those when they tossed me in here. But I didn't have time to ponder.

There'd be questions if they found me under here. I turned my head in time to watch two pairs of feet enter the room. One pair was clad in heavy boots that looked like they could kick the shit out of a lot of people and the other pair of feet wore something more akin to business attire. I recognized the color of the looser pants, too.

Both a guard and an agent had just entered my cell. And I was still trapped underneath the cot. So much for avoiding questions.

"Fuck." One of them ground out a curse. Sounded a lot like the guard from yesterday, but I couldn't be sure. "I thought you said she couldn't use her powers." He sounded accusatory. "How did she disappear?"

There was a familiar answering sigh. Coop. "She hasn't disappeared."

"Do you see her?"

I imagined him gesturing impatiently around the room as he took his step forward.

"Because I certainly don't see her. I'm going to raise the alarm. If I'd known she could escape, I would have used the magical restraints. But you said..." He grew more accusatory.

"Wait." Coop issued a sharp command.

Then suddenly his bright blue eyes peered into mine as he lay flat on the floor alongside me. He held his sunglasses in his hand. "Hi," he said softly. He beckoned for me to come out.

My thoughts were unexpectedly consumed with how dusty his clothes would be when he stood back up, and I'd never seen him with so much as a stray hair on his pristine black slacks.

I stretched my back as much as I could, working out the kinks and aches from lying on the cold floor. Damp had seeped into my limbs while I'd been asleep. I glanced at the vent. Had I imagined the hummingbird? Probably. Did I care? Not a chance. Her arrival had helped me calm the fuck down and not feel so alone. I'd been pretty damned stressed lately. Hallucinations were a side effect of stress, right?

"Meira." Coop murmured my name. It wasn't an instruction or a command, but it wasn't a question, either.

I turned my head back to face him, and he held his arm part way out in invitation. I couldn't take his hand, though. I couldn't imagine those fingers entwined with mine. Not to mention the cuffs.

Instead, I sighed and began to shimmy awkwardly out from beneath the bed.

The guard snorted when he saw me. "What the hell were you doing under there?"

I remained silent, but Coop shrugged.

"I've often thought the floor looks more comfortable than the beds in this place." He handed me some sunglasses as he spoke, and I knew the drill now.

But I shrugged. "Cuffed."

Coop glared at the guard. "You left her cuffed?"

He shrugged, too.

Coop retrieved the key from his pocket and immediately removed the restraints. He tucked the offending shackles in his pocket.

Page 60

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

My chin quivered, but I didn't cry as my arms were able to swing freely. Coop wasn't afraid of me, and he wasn't terrified of whatever power I had. I needed someone to not be frightened of me.

Coop offered the sunglasses once more, and I slipped them into place and almost sighed with relief as the world took on a familiar gray overtone.

"You need a hood if you're transporting her. She's dangerous." The guard held out a piece of fabric, and I withdrew by one large pace.

Coop glanced at me. "No, I don't think so. I never have before."

The guard laughed. "And she ain't never killed anyone before yesterday, neither." He jabbed a thick finger in my direction.

"Are you going to come with me to Dr. Anderson's lab, Meira?" Coop asked the question like he needed confirmation in front of the guard, and I nodded, using my finger to keep the sunglasses up on the bridge of my nose I moved.

"I think we'll be okay." Coop looked at the guard again. "I've got it."

The guard shook his head. "Well, like I said, you didn't got it yesterday." He offered the hood again, but Coop ignored it and stepped around the guard to exit my cell.

"What about the cuffs?" the guard said after him.

"We won't need them."

“Magical restraints?” the guard pressed.

“No,” Coop answered, his tone stopping any argument. Maybe Coop hadn’t liberated me, but he treated me differently than anyone else in the place. He made me feel like I could understand what had happened.

I swallowed. And maybe learn how to keep it from happening again.

The guard cursed under his breath.

So I glanced at the guard, and the guard drew his eyebrows down to glare at me. I stared back at him, defiant behind the sunglasses. I wanted to flip him off, but he’d see that, so I just tightened my hands by my sides instead. He’d keep.

Coop came back into the cell and stood beside me, his stance expectant as he waited. He didn’t say a word.

“Hey, it’s your funeral man.” The guard raised his hands in surrender.

“Don’t feel obligated to come,” Coop growled. Then he stiffened as the guard laughed and walked away. Without a word, Coop exited the cell, and I fell into my familiar position at his heels. I stopped outside, though.

“What the...?” I looked up. Everywhere was so industrial. It was like being in a warehouse or some sort of engineering room.

Coop turned and stood beside me as I gazed around, giving me the space to take it all in for a moment.

Huge pipes ran up the walls and across the ceiling, and everywhere consisted of gridded walkways and staircases. I looked over one of the railings edging the

walkway, and the building fell away for more floors than I could count.

Patches of rust clung to the metal, and green colored the damp on the walls. Solitary was a neglected place. I seemed to be in the very bowels of the building. Or I would have thought so if I hadn't just seen it went deeper still.

I shivered, and Coop placed his hand on the small of my back, but the fleeting touch wasn't aggressive like the guard's the previous night. It wasn't to push me forward or make me turn at his unspoken direction. But before I could fully explore how it did feel, his hand was gone, although a sense of protection remained.

At his urging, we resumed walking.

That kind of body language was pretty out of character, but when I glanced at him, his face was completely expressionless, his jaw tense—so tense a muscle worked in his cheek—and his mouth was thin and flat.

He was so hard to read. Locke always had been too, but less so. At least he'd sometimes spoken to me. If nothing else, the short conversations had usually given me a sense of where we stood or the kinds of things he might have been thinking. He'd taken his sunglasses off more often than Coop, too.

Or it had seemed like it.

I could better remember Coop's eyes, but that was because his gaze had always seemed to bore right through me on the occasions he'd had reason to be without his shades.

"What's going to happen today?" I spoke at a normal volume and the sound bounced off the walls and metal surrounding us, echoing in the large space. "How will they make me use my powers now?"

“Tests.” He seemed to speak through his closed lips. Maybe even gritted teeth, too.
“More tests.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“With Dr. Anderson again?” I pitched my voice quieter, and for a moment it was like he hadn’t heard because his stride didn’t falter and the set of his back didn’t change. “Coop?”

Even his name had no effect on him. But it still felt almost forbidden to say it aloud.

We were headed back up the stairs, at least, so leaving solitary, hopefully. It would have been just my luck if they had some sort of testing facility down here, too, and I’d never get to see the sun again. I assumed I was pretty far underground, anyway.

The air down here was on the stale side, and the lighting didn’t make me feel anything at all. The sunglasses weren’t necessary down here.

We climbed up so many floors I lost count and couldn’t tell where we’d originated. I tried to look for distinguishing features, but the patches of damp and rust started to look the same after a while. Initially, I’d spotted shapes or patterns in them, and I’d tried to identify differences in shade, but that had been truly fruitless.

Surely, we hadn’t descended this many floors when the guard brought me down? I was a rag doll as he half carried me down here like a sack full of his own personal garbage, though. I missed the elevator for sure, but I could only guess Coop was keeping me off the main floors. This place really was a labyrinth.

Barely even heavy-breathing, Coop didn’t seem to slow or tire. I plodded up each step behind him, my feet landing more clumsily with each one. As we climbed higher, the light began to change, and the lights themselves resumed their familiar pattern of dimming as I passed beneath them.

Part of me almost wanted to return to solitary. I felt normal there, and nothing about this situation had been normal at all.

“Coop?”

He slowed this time.

“What are the tests about?” The conversation through the air vent last night wouldn’t leave me.

I wasn’t supernatural—one hundred percent not supernatural. Right? No, that didn’t make sense. I’d killed someone. There was something strange about me, but what the hell were they testing me for? How did they intend to use me?

“Categorization.”

“What do you mean?” I skipped a step to catch up to him as he peeled away from one of the metal walkways to push through a door. “For what?”

In an instant, we were back in a utilitarian corridor and, at a terse command from Coop into his cuff, shutters slammed down over all of the windows. This time, though, I didn’t mind. It was almost familiar. I could cope with the darkness.

Coop was ahead of me, and the dark was much better than being alone in solitary. I wasn’t sure if the person who’d spoken to me was ever coming back, even though I wasn’t done speaking with her—I hadn’t learned enough yet, and Coop was no help at all.

We approached the... What the hell? It looked like the cafeteria, but why would Coop bring me back by here? Not after what had happened before. Why would he do this?

For the first time, he glanced over his shoulder at me. “Stay close,” he murmured. It was almost concern.

My knees weakened as we walked closer. The strong smell of coppery blood still hung in the air, but now it was overlaid with bleach and some sort of lemony-fresh smell that left the acid taste of cleaning solution catching at the back of my throat.

This was where it happened. This was where I did... I stopped. What had I done? Everyone at the facility thought I’d murdered someone. But how could I have?

I was about to dismiss the thought all over again when I remembered how Anderson had done something to me yesterday, something that had made my chest tight with energy I couldn’t contain. Something that had hurt me.

What if I’d pushed out that energy and hurt someone else?

What if I’d done it? Killed Adrian?

I swallowed as my head swam, and I lurched to the side, glancing my shoulder off the wall. “Oof.” I groaned at the unexpected impact.

Coop turned and reached back for me. “You okay?”

I took his hand before I could even think about it, and energy zipped through me. Before I could tell him I was scared, he extricated his fingers from mine, and drew back.

“You good?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. Sure. Just got a bit light-headed.” It wasn’t even a lie.

My head throbbed now, and it wasn't from the bump against the wall. It wasn't from the proximity of the cafeteria, either. Last time I'd felt like this, it was deepest, darkest winter in Minnesota, and sunlight had seemed like a distant memory.

Perhaps being kept in the dark wasn't suiting me. I'd follow any request they had, do any test if it meant I could see real light again. I glanced toward the cafeteria again, a thin spike of fear piercing my chest.

I didn't want to be a killer to get what I needed, though.

twenty-three

Shit.

We almost passed right by the cafeteria, and it was like Coop had brought me here on purpose—we hadn't needed to come anywhere near here. Not to reach the rooms where I'd seen Dr. Anderson before. I had been elated when I thought we weren't going in. Then he paused, peering through the windows into the cafeteria.

"I hoped it might be empty," he said suddenly. "Wait here." He walked inside and reappeared moments later with some sort of pastry. "Here." He offered it to me.

He'd been gone so little time I hadn't had a chance to seize any sort of opportunity to escape, and realistically, where would I have gone? Plus, part of me wanted to prove Coop's trust in me, which seemed stupid when I considered it, but the feeling remained.

I took the mascarpone pastry. The sweet cheese filled the middle of the large croissant. My stomach grumbled, and my mouth watered.

"Eat it on the way." He issued the command, and he didn't wait for my reply before he turned and continued to walk away.

I took a huge bite of the flakey pastry and crammed the rest into my mouth as we walked down the hallway. I left a bread crumb trail behind, but I didn't care. The

thing was delicious. After I finished, Coop handed a bottle of water to me over his shoulder, and I finished that, too. Then I wiped at my face and dusted pastry flakes off my chest.

Less than ten minutes later, Coop knocked on Dr. Anderson's door, but there was no reply. He knocked again and bent his head closer, listening, but he shook his head.

"Not there."

"Was he expecting us?" It seemed off that he wouldn't be in his office.

Coop nodded, the movement abrupt. "Might have been called away."

"We could wait inside for him?" Even standing in the dark control table room sounded better than standing in this gloomy corridor.

I didn't have the best memories of having been in the room before, but I couldn't avoid going back in there, so it might as well be on my terms.

As if he could read my thoughts, Coop just stared in my direction, and one eyebrow rose above the frame of his glasses. Everything about his expression asked me if I was sure, but he didn't utter a word. Then he nodded and pressed the handle down to open the door.

We stepped inside the room and Coop stopped abruptly. I grazed my nose against his back then stepped out from behind him.

The shutters around the room were wide open, and sunlight streamed through them. Even with the sunglasses on, I could tell the sun was bright and clear and... pure. It felt pure as it landed on my skin.

I held my arms out and turned around as I had the first time I was in this room, basking in it. It was an old friend—one I'd missed. I almost greeted it out loud but bit my tongue. Coop really would think I'd lost it if I started talking to the sunlight.

But it was almost as if I could absorb every positive effect of it directly through my skin. Energy coursed through me, and I closed my eyes, focusing completely as my body came alive with something positive and glorious. Puddles of light filled the room, and I wanted to splash through them all. This was the exact opposite of whatever Dr. Anderson had done to me when he made me stand in the shadowed corner.

It was as though something inside me had woken up and was stretching before coming fully awake. Still ready to burst from me, but only positivity radiated from that deliciously full feeling. It wasn't tight and constrictive. Or choking.

I opened my eyes and really took in the room. The doors to the balcony stood wide open, and the outside—the actual outside—was like a magnet, drawing me forward, luring me to stand in the fresh air and bask some more.

This all seemed too good to be true. I'd wished for sunlight merely minutes ago, and now here it was—pretty much mine for the taking.

I sneaked a look at Coop and slipped the sunglasses from my face, casually holding them in a loose fist as I returned my hand to my side. Nothing to see here. He turned his head in my direction, and I froze, but he didn't say a word.

He didn't even say anything or try to stop me as I took a tentative step toward the open doors. Instead, he simply fell into step behind me this time, and he followed me as I slowly made my way forward—this still could all just be a trap. If I trod in the wrong area, maybe all of the shutters would fall, the doors would close, and I'd be denied.

But nothing like that happened.

Alarms didn't blare, and Coop didn't seem like my behavior disturbed him.

I squinted as the sunlight grew stronger with each step toward the doors. The warmth here kissed my skin, breathing life over me, and I trembled in anticipation. The balcony railings were mere steps away, and I crossed the space before Coop could change his mind and hold me back.

Yet he joined me as I took a proper look out over the strange yard that bounced light and split it and created as many rainbows as it did golden drops of sunshine. I raised my hands in the light. Then I lowered them.

"Beautiful," I murmured, but he didn't say a word.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

His knuckles whitened a little as he gripped the railing, but that was his only sign of any underlying tension.

“It feels good.” I pitched my voice low. “And it looks so stunning.” I almost wanted to hold my arms out again, but Dr. Anderson would probably be back any moment. There was no telling what he’d do or how big a fit he’d throw if he found Coop and me out here on the balcony.

Either one of us could be in the most trouble, and he might restrict my access to light for a long time. I wasn’t about to take the gift Coop had given me for granted, either. He hadn’t needed to let me walk out here. He could even have marched me straight back into the hallway the first moment he saw the shutters in Dr. Anderson’s weren’t closed.

But he hadn’t done that. It was as if he’d sensed what I needed, that I needed to recharge.

He’d been right. Creativity flowed through me again now, and I wanted to capture it on canvas. But my art supplies—art supplies that Coop had again turned a blind eye to—had been left in my regular cell.

“We should go in before Dr. Anderson returns and finds us out here.” I turned to leave the balcony, but a flash of color on the floor against the wall caught my attention.

I stepped closer to it and gasped. “It’s my hummingbird.” I dropped to my knees beside it. I’d never seen it so still or heard it so quiet. Usually, I could hear the

vibration of its delicate wings, no matter what was between us.

Its tiny eyelids were closed tight, and the barest of breezes stirred its feathers. I picked it up in my hand, cradling it in my palm. It barely had any weight. If I couldn't see it against my skin, I wouldn't have believed it was there.

"What do you think happened?" I asked the question then shook my head and looked over the barren yard. "No food source. Got too hot here. Could have been anything."

Perhaps the bigger question was why my hummingbird was even here. And had I really seen it in the vent? Surely I'd imagined that, though.

Coop trailed the side of his forefinger gently down one of the wings. "Poor little thing," he murmured, but his tone said so much more.

I couldn't see his eyes behind his glasses, but his face was much paler than it had been, his skin almost ashen, and his finger shook slightly as he drew it away.

"Have you ever seen one this color before?" I looked at the feathers again, taking in each detail and change of hue. I would never have been able to capture this accurately on canvas, but I still itched to try.

Sadness coursed through me, and I sat back, closing my eyes, and turning my face to the sun. I welcomed the light and the warmth into my body, and my chest began to fill with energy, so much energy it sought release. It prickled inside me, making my arms and legs tingle, and there was the smallest of movements in my palm.

My eyes sprang open. "I think it just moved."

"What?" Coop took his glasses off and bent low to the bird like he was examining it. He slipped his glasses back on. "It was just the wind."

But the tiny movement came again, and I held the bird closer to my face. “I think it’s more than that. Maybe it just stunned itself?”

Coop shook his head. “They’re fragile creatures. Hummingbirds especially so. This one’s gone, Meira.”

It was the most he’d said to me, and I didn’t reply as he reached to stroke one of the wings again. It was like even he knew this was a special creature.

I watched the bird closely, focusing all of my excess energy on wishing for another movement, and my palm warmed. One of its eyes flicked open, and the curious studying gaze I’d become so used to was back and in full effect.

“Coop.” I clutched his forearm with my free hand. “Coop, look.”

“How did you...?” He trailed off as the small bird gave itself a shake, its feathers rippling with all the colors of the rainbow, and some which didn’t seem to belong in any spectrum.

“I didn’t.” I shook my head. “I didn’t do anything. I just... I just wanted...”

“And what did you want?” Coop tilted his head speculatively as he faced me.

My eyes widened in the reflection of me in his dark glasses. “Just... Alive. For it to be alive.”

“You wished the bird alive?” It was a simple question, and he asked it in a voice devoid of emotion.

“Don’t be silly.” I returned my attention to the bird as its wings began to vibrate. “No one wishes things alive.”

“Ah.” He sounded thoughtful now. “But perhaps some people heal.”

I snorted at the sheer ridiculousness of his words, and the hummingbird rose in the air, the movement fast as though I’d startled it. “People don’t heal, Coop. That’s witchcraft.”

“Yes. It is.” His voice took on a somber tone, and I half-turned toward him, my attention caught between my hummingbird and my unusually talkative secret service agent.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

The hummingbird made my decision for me, flapping its wings so fast they were a mere blur as it rose higher into the air and shot away, quickly out of sight among the rest of the rainbows in the space. This place was really the perfect camouflage for it.

“Come back inside,” Coop said. “I think you’ve done enough for today.” He paused. “And don’t tell anyone—not even Dr. Anderson—what you’ve just done.”

I nodded. I hadn’t done anything, so I certainly wouldn’t be making any sort of declaration to Dr. Anderson.

Coop reached for me, his hand extended like he might help me up. Dark shadows and abrasions over the back of his hand caught my attention.

“What happened?” I grasped his hand briefly, examining his bruised knuckles.

“Nothing.” But he turned his face away so I could only see his profile.

I covered his knuckles with my other hand. “I’m sorry for whatever happened,” I whispered. “I hope they heal soon.”

My hand warmed, and Coop turned his head sharply back toward me. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. I should have felt afraid, but I didn’t.

Joyful power flooded through me. Again, nothing like whatever Dr. Anderson had done to me the last time I was in his room. It was the opposite. And it was glorious.

“Take your hand away, Meira.” Coop’s words were tight and controlled.

I hesitated, suddenly not wanting to.

“Meira,” he whispered, and this time his word was strained. “Please.”

I whipped my hand away and flung it behind my back, and we both stared at Coop’s knuckles, now bruise-free. He ran the forefinger of his opposite hand over them.

“Incredible,” he whispered.

“Let’s go inside.” I stood abruptly, my energy nervous as it skittered into my chest. There was no doubt in my mind: I had powers, weird and magical. And I was cold now. “It’s getting chilly.”

Coop glanced at the sun. “No, it isn’t.” But he stood as well and rested his hand on my shoulder briefly. “You mustn’t do that again.” His words were low and urgent. “Your safety depends on you never doing that again.”

twenty-four

I headed straight to a small sofa inside Dr. Anderson’s control table room. I didn’t want to sit near Coop, and I didn’t want to think about what I’d done too much. How could I have not known these things about myself? Everyone else seemed to. I shook my head. I didn’t even want to think about my hummingbird. I felt emptied out, and my teeth chattered. So cold.

Sleep sounded good, and I allowed my eyes to droop closed as I rubbed at my chest, trying to work some heat back into myself.

But closing my eyes was even worse. Too many thoughts bombarded my mind, and I

tumbled through them so quickly I couldn't relax.

Had I actually healed? I mean, Coop's hand, yes. Maybe, right?

But the bird? Perhaps it hadn't been dead. None of this made sense.

People couldn't heal other living things on a whim and a wish.

Except maybe I had. I bit my lip as I considered it. Then I opened my eyes and looked at Coop, about to ask him a question. He was standing in his usual place by the door, his hands clasped in front of him, almost like he was deliberately concealing his newly healed knuckles.

The door opened abruptly, and Dr. Anderson raced in, his face flushed, his eyes bright. He rubbed his hands together as he looked at me, glee seeming to radiate from him.

"Interesting, very interesting," he exclaimed. It was almost like he was having trouble maintaining consistent volume control as his words boomed around the room. "This is a huge discovery."

I shrank away from him, and Coop tightened his hands, clutching his healed one against him.

"You just needed the power of the sun to charge you!" Dr. Anderson voiced his thought like it was a grand pronouncement. Then he tapped his head. "I should have connected the dots."

I stared at him, and my face must have shown my surprise, because he grinned.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

“I’ve been watching you since you first came into the room, Meira. I saw what you did to the hummingbird.” My heart twisted. No! I held my breath and tried to avoid glancing at Coop, but Dr. Anderson didn’t seem to have any interest in him.

“I came straight down from the viewing room when I saw the bird fly away. Well done, Meira.” He rubbed his hands together again. “You’re ready for a new phase in the testing.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Maybe he hadn’t seen how I healed Coop, and I tried to feign innocence. But he just laughed.

“Oh, I think you know exactly what I mean. How are you feeling now? Cold? Tired?” He strolled to his desk and opened a drawer. “I have energy bars already here.” He grabbed one and tossed it in my direction.

It landed on the sofa next to me, and I looked at it. I’d never heard of the brand, and I wasn’t interested in anything from Dr. Anderson. But my stomach grumbled. Maybe the healing had used up every bit of the energy from the morning pastry.

“Just a little something we had developed to fuel our stars.” He was so smug. “And I really do think you could be one of our stars, Meira. A jewel in our crown, if you like.”

I shook my head, still speechless.

“Eat up,” he demanded, nodding toward the energy bar. “We’ve got lots to do.”

I didn't want to, but I was famished again, and I didn't think Dr. Anderson would take no for an answer. So I ripped the foil wrapper open with my teeth and bit into the bar. It was sticky and sweet, but I couldn't identify any of the individual ingredients.

Dr. Anderson zipped around the room, moving prisms and other objects into various positions, and each time he moved something, he'd step back and tap his lip. Then, sometimes, micro-adjust it before moving on to something else.

"Agent Cooper."

Coop actually jumped at Dr. Anderson's bark, suggesting his thoughts had been further away than usual. "Yes, sir?" He still hadn't moved his hands.

"Escort Meira outside into the sun. We need her at full capacity for the tests."

Coop swung his head toward me, and I stood. There was no point in arguing with the doctor on this. He'd just force his way, anyway. I shuddered at the memory of the gun pointed at me, but I gave Coop the tiniest smile.

Coop and I walked outside side by side, which was unusual. There was something equalizing about it, and maybe I liked being on equal footing with Coop.

"You okay?" His mouth barely moved as he asked the question.

I nodded. "You?"

He nodded as well.

"Let the sunlight hit you, Meira," Dr. Anderson called from inside. "All of you. Turn your face up, arms out, turn around—all like you did the last time."

I followed his instructions, closing my eyes and leaning my head back. Warmth flooded me, and I basked in it. Almost against my will, energy began to fill me again. It rushed into my chest and elevated my mood.

By the time I returned to the room, Dr. Anderson was nodding approvingly. “Perfect... Yes, perfect. I see it now. Fear as a motivator; the sun as a battery. Now that we’ve unlocked you, I think things are going to be just fine.” He studied me for a moment. “I can’t believe you didn’t discover your talent on your own.”

I gritted my teeth behind my closed lips and said nothing. The constant references to my talent made no sense. Except... I glanced at Coop as he moved to stand behind me.

Healing.

Actual fucking healing, and I’d done it.

Perhaps that was my talent. A small prick of pride flared inside me.

But Dr. Anderson was watching me, and he looked more malevolent than full of pride. “Are you ready? Stand on that spot over there.” He pointed to a circular sticker he’d stuck onto his carpet, and I walked to it. “We’re trying to get you to direct split colors today. Now you know how each makes you feel, you should be able to tune into them and direct them where you want them to go.”

As before, his instructions made no sense, but I didn’t ask him to explain further.

“Meira?”

I turned to him as he spoke my name.

“We can do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way again.” He flipped back

his lab coat to reveal his gun tucked into the waistband of his pants.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

Fear clung to the edges of my new energy. Dr. Anderson pressed a button on his control table, and the prism in front of me and a rainbow arced from it.

“Separate them,” he instructed.

I felt for red, orange, yellow...and immediately felt sick.

Dr. Anderson watched me, and he leaned closer. “What have you got?”

“Yellow,” I gasped.

“Push it out... push it out.” He pointed. “Make it hit that glass over there.”

I concentrated, quashing the nausea, and forcing my energy out instead. Slowly but surely, a narrow beam of yellow light hit the glass, and a fine hole drilled itself right through.

“Stop!” Dr. Anderson held up his hand as he ran toward the glass, and I staggered backward, relieved now I didn’t have to sustain the effort.

I was going to need more energy bars.

“This is incredible,” Dr. Anderson muttered as he leaned close to the glass. “Agent Cooper, do you see this?”

“See what, sir?” Coop didn’t answer the question directly.

“The hole Meira has put in this bullet proof glass. It’s incredible.” He ran the tip of his finger over the surface of the glass then turned to me. “How precise can you be?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t...” I sucked in a breath as fatigue overwhelmed me. “I didn’t know what to...”

Dr. Anderson moved to his desk. “Time to fuel up again. With practice, you will be able to work for longer.” He tossed another energy bar to me, and I fumbled it. “Don’t forget to go in the sun. Agent Cooper, escort Meira.” He all but clicked his fingers at Coop as he spoke.

The morning progressed with bouts of strange activity with light and prisms until I could control where I directed the individual colors. Violet was easiest to work with, bending to wherever I willed it to be, and a strange sense of pride took root in my chest.

But I didn’t want to be proud. I didn’t know what I was doing, and I didn’t know Dr. Anderson’s plans for me. And, based on his behavior and the whispers in the vent, Dr. Anderson probably wanted to use me as a weapon.

“Straight through bullet proof glass,” he muttered at one point, and it was like he was talking to himself.

Finally, he walked to his control table and pressed a button. The lights dimmed, and my stomach sank, leaving my throat hollow and vomit climbing from my nauseated gut.

“We’re going to work with shadows again now,” he announced.

Coop made a show of checking his watch. “Should Meira eat?”

“Yes, yes...” Dr. Anderson waved him away. “Go and get something to bring back.”

Coop had already turned around and was heading to the door when Dr. Anderson jerked his head up from what he’d been doing.

“And gather six more agents,” Dr. Anderson added.

Coop hesitated, and his steps faltered for just a moment. Then he nodded his head and left the room, clicking the door softly closed behind him.

“Sit, Meira. Sit.” Dr. Anderson gestured to the sofa. “Conserve your strength. I’m amazed at your achievements so far today. I couldn’t have predicted such strides forward, even though I knew you were special.” His tone turned solicitous.

I didn’t even look at him. I couldn’t. The tight feeling had already returned to my chest when he’d mentioned working with shadows. I didn’t mind working with light—the energy was pure.

But the shadows had hurt. They’d clawed the inside of my chest and made it hard to breathe, and I couldn’t guarantee I was safe to hold whatever energy they produced. Adrian came to mind. Would anyone else be safe from me?

Coop reentered the room and walked straight to me. He handed me a pizza-pocket, partly secured in a napkin. “Some lunch,” he muttered.

Six agents poured into the room behind him.

Dr. Anderson gestured to the wall. “Agents, backs to the wall, please. We’ll begin shortly.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

For the first time, I watched fear flicker across the faces of some of the agents. What had they told them about me and my powers? What were they afraid of?

Of course. They must have all heard about what happened to Adrian.

My gaze cut to Dr. Anderson. There was so much I needed to learn. Yet what were we doing this afternoon? I wasn't sure I wanted to know what Dr. Anderson had in mind.

After I took the first bite of the lunch Coop had brought me, Dr. Anderson pressed the button controlling the balcony door and shutters on his table, and everything closed. The room was plunged into darkness, but because I hadn't worn my shades for the entire morning, my eyes soon grew used to the gloom, and I could make out various shapes.

The agents shuffled back and forth in their line. Some of them shifted from side to side, and some of them stared straight ahead as though they believed they'd been placed in front of a firing squad.

"Right. Meira, this time, I'm not going to ask you to charge yourself in the sun. I want you to reach for that energy from the shadows. Pull the light out of them and let it flow into you."

I finished chewing, but he was impatient for an answer.

"Can you do that, or do I need to persuade you?"

My mind flashed to his gun again, and I stood before wandering to the darkest shadow. I barely had to concentrate this time. I placed the pizza pocket to the side and stood.

It was like the energy couldn't wait to invade me, and I sucked in a pained breath as it tangled through my chest, wrapping itself through my ribs and squeezing my heart. I panted, bracing against the pain.

"Agents!" Dr. Anderson's voice cracked out, and I flinched. "Try to attack Meira now."

As one, six agents left from the wall, and instinctively I flung out my hand like I could command them to stay back.

An arc of blood sprayed through the air, coating me in rust-scented stickiness. No! From behind me, Dr. Anderson cackled.

I gasped. "Oh, shit. Oh, shit. What have I done?"

Groans and murmurs of pain filled the room, and I ran in the direction of the men. Six men laid on the floor, their wounds grotesque. Gashes gaped, spilling blood over the carpet. The two nearest me tried to scramble away. One was beyond help, and, surely, it was his blood I wore. Fucking hell.

"Are you all right?" I fell to my knees next to them and tried to call on the power of my healing like I'd done before, but my ability wasn't there.

I leapt to my feet and groped blindly for the way out. "I need light. I need to get outside." I beat on the shut doors. "Let me out." Hot tears poured down my face. Don't make me hurt people. I only want to heal!

Dr. Anderson snickered. “Complete your tests first, Meira. The faster you work, the more men you can save.” He sounded so relaxed about it, like I hadn’t just injured six men in one fell swoop.

I collapsed to the ground and wept.

twenty-five

My stomach rolled as nausea claimed me. Complete my tests?

Dr. Anderson stood over me. “Come. We must finish.”

I raised a hand toward him. “I need to see them. Let me see the men again. I can help them.”

Dr. Anderson leered in my face. He grabbed my hand and lifted me to my feet. “Oh, I know you can. But you can also bring them back, so there’s no rush.”

“There’s a difference between a hummingbird and a human being.” Coop sounded furious as he knelt beside his fallen colleagues. “Meira.”

I started to move toward him, but Dr. Anderson’s hard voice stopped me. “Not so fast. I’m not finished with my testing today.”

Anger mingled with my fear and surged through my whole body and clouded my thoughts. I couldn’t even feel as I reached for something to stabilize me, and energy rushed into my chest, the kind that hurt as it clawed at me and clogged my breathing.

I gasped as it fizzed and tangled and moved, searching for more immediate release. “I can’t. It hurts.”

Dr. Anderson laughed. “What are you going to do, Meira?”

“The sun,” I wheezed, “I need the sun.” I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to contain the pulsing in my chest.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

It felt like I would explode in a million deadly pieces.

“It’s too strong,” I gasped out. “I can’t control it.”

“Then let it out.” He laughed malevolently. “Let it out and let’s see what you can really do.” There was a scraping sound as he pushed a large prism into place in the room.

“I need the sun.” I ground the words out as my torso heated.

“You don’t, though, do you, Meira? You can feel the power already.” His tone taunted.

“Meira.” Coop’s voice cut across the room. “These men need you.”

A sob escaped me. I was being torn in two. The men with me needed different things than I had inside me and the power churning within me seemed to be ripping me in half in its bid to escape.

“The men are dying, Meira.” Dr. Anderson’s words chilled me. “You’re a killer again. What are you going to do about it?”

I screamed. It was loud and long and an animalistic howl. The energy inside me released without warning, and Dr. Anderson flew backward, hitting the wall behind him before crumpling to the floor.

“Shit. Oh, shit.” I started to move toward him to check for signs of life, but Coop said

my name and stopped me.

“Meira.”

I rushed toward the console table. Maybe if I could open the balcony doors, I could help everyone. But there were so many switches and buttons here. I pressed them at random.

“How do I open the door, Coop? How do I get to the sun?” My movements became more frantic. “I need the sun.”

“I know.” Suddenly, his hand covered mine. “Let’s look together.”

“But what about the men?” I glanced over my shoulder.

“We can’t help them until I help you open the doors.”

I swallowed, hearing everything he wasn’t saying.

Coop slammed his hand into a button, and the shutters over the windows began to move. “Part way there,” he said, but his jaw remained tight.

I darted forward and stood in the first shaft of sunlight, sighing in relief as it touched my skin. The familiar warmth tingled against me, and I closed my eyes.

A whirring noise started, and I glanced at the balcony doors as they began to slide open. As soon as I could slip through the gap in the middle of them, I was out on the balcony, offering myself to the light. My hummingbird danced in the corner of my vision as though she reminded me of all I’d done for her.

I drew strength from the good I could do as I looked out over the glass yard with its

rainbows. Beyond the walls of this place was open country. If I could find a life somewhere, anywhere away from shadows, then the people around me would be safe.

Sweetwater wasn't an option anymore because I'd been found there once before. These people had found me, and now I knew too much about myself. They would never forget.

"Meira." Coop was gentle as he caught my attention. "There are still men in here who need you. Can you remember how you did it before?" He held up the hand where I'd healed his knuckles, and I nodded, although hesitation stayed any enthusiasm.

The idea of so many men hurt because of me... But I swallowed those thoughts. I could fix this. I could fix this like I couldn't fix Adrian. I hadn't understood then.

Who was I kidding? I still really didn't understand. I had a lot more to learn, but I needed to undo the damage I'd caused first. If I could. No, I had to. It had to be possible. I couldn't let six more men die because of Dr. Anderson's evil.

I knelt at the side of the first man and released a shaky breath. Oh, shit. It looked bad. His face was covered in blood. Gashes covered him. Flakes of something glared from his wounds, almost like shadow shrapnel.

I glanced at Coop. "Where do I start?"

He shook his head. "This is your talent, not mine. Only you know the answer to that."

But did I? How could I know answers when I only had questions? So many questions.

"Meira. Try," Coop murmured.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

I took a breath and then lifted the man's hand in mine. Then I pressed my other palm against his face. The same warmth that had healed Coop began to flow through me, and the man gasped, his eyes springing open.

"Hurts," he croaked.

I hesitated. I didn't want to hurt him anymore.

"No, carry on," Coop said. "It doesn't hurt, but the healing feels strange. Make him better, Meira."

I pushed more energy through, and the man's eyes closed again as he rested. Then I moved between the men as best as I could, returning outside for a recharge after two. Then once more after four had been healed. After the last agent had been healed, Coop threw me an energy bar from the drawer, but I stared at it dubiously. I had no idea what was in it.

Knowing Dr. Anderson, there were some unusual ingredients that could have had any sort of effect on my abilities. And I was tired of taking part in Dr. Anderson's evil plans.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," I said.

Coop nodded. "Then I'll get you some real food."

But food from the cafeteria might be no better. It was all from the facility. Dr. Anderson probably had a hand in it all. When I didn't have an option, it didn't matter.

Now that I had an option, I wanted to exercise my right to choose. Dr. Anderson had been a kind of evil. Speaking of Dr. Anderson...

With a grimace, I glanced toward him, and I sighed. He hadn't been blown apart like the agents. He had a few scrapes on his cheeks and face, but mostly he seemed like I'd knocked him unconscious.

"What are you going to do about him?" Coop gestured toward his still crumpled body.

"Check for signs of life. If he's alive, we'll let someone know so he stays that way."

I didn't want to heal him, but I didn't want him to die either. Murderer wasn't a label I wanted to wear the rest of my life. That wasn't what or who I was. I couldn't do anything about Adrian, but I could stop it from ever happening that way again.

The other agents all sat, propped against the wall as they watched us. They were weak, but they were alive and whole, and maybe that was the best I could hope for.

Coop knelt beside Dr. Anderson and checked him for a pulse. "He's alive."

I nodded and squared my shoulders. "Then that's all I needed to know."

Some of the secret service guards stood.

"I'm so sorry." I could hardly look at them. "I didn't mean to..." I gestured helplessly. They nodded curtly and rearranged their sunglasses like almost being killed was an everyday occurrence—and who knew? Maybe it was in this place, under Dr. Anderson's watch.

"Coop?"

He turned to face me, but his dark glasses made it impossible for me to read what he was thinking.

“Can you do me a favor?”

He remained quiet, so I plowed forward anyway.

“I need to go. Can you get me out of here? I’m dangerous here, this place is dangerous for me. He’ll wake up, and... and...” I couldn’t finish. When Dr. Anderson woke up, what would he do? What wouldn’t he do? I was already in solitary, he was already making me hurt people... weaponizing me somehow. And the person I’d spoken to through the vent system had mentioned an army, right? Dr. Anderson would never give up chasing me.

I didn’t want to be some sort of supernatural soldier.

Coop still didn’t speak.

“I’ll run; I’ll hide. I’ll stay quiet, lie low, just live my life.”

But he was already shaking his head. “They’ll find you. They have their ways. How do you think they found you before?”

I considered his question. “I have no idea.”

“Meira, they have dream walkers, astral projectors... They don’t need normal methods of investigation to find you, especially not now your signature is known to so many of the guests here.”

I choked out a laugh. “You’re still going with guests?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:28 am

His mouth twisted then he opened it to reply, but an alarm blared loudly out in the corridor. It was loud and deep and honking and unlike anything I'd heard here before.

The other men in suits began to move immediately, and Coop sprang to his feet and started barking orders about checking on guests and securing the perimeter.

"What's going on?" I looked to Coop for an answer as the other men ran out of the door to scatter in the facility.

"Security breach." He took my upper arm gently and began to draw me from what I thought of as the control room. "We need to get you somewhere secure."

I didn't try to shake him off. I liked his touch. It reassured me, and I knew he'd keep me safe. He'd promised it and tried to keep his word.

We ran down hallways and corridors that Coop seemed to take at random until he pushed open a door at the end of a long hallway. He shoved me inside the small closet.

"What? No!" I tried to push my way back out, but he tried to block me. I pressed my palms against his jacket and tried to make him move.

He hadn't expected my shove, and he stumbled back. His glasses slipped, revealing his eyes to me for the first time in I didn't know how long. Since the cot?

I'd lost track of how many days I'd been in "the facility," but now I didn't care as I met his bright blue gaze. His irises were edged in a lilac color as he watched me, and

the shade seemed to slowly bleed inward.

“I have to come with you. You can’t just leave me in a closet.”

He didn’t reply.

“Please.”

Instead of responding, his gaze didn’t waver from mine as he slowly lowered his head until our lips touched. It was soft and fleeting, barely a kiss, but my whole world hung on that half-a-second. Then Coop laced his fingers through mine, and we were running again, my hand grasped firmly in his. Down more hallways until he pulled me into a room with screens all over the walls and computers on every desk. And each desk had an agent.

“Coop! What are you doing?” somebody barked.

I glanced up to see Locke glaring at Coop from behind one of the monitors. The rest of the agents observed as though trying to decide whether to react or remain stationary.

Locke frowned. “Why have you brought Meira here? She needs securing.”

But Coop merely shrugged. “She stays with me,” he said. “I will keep her secure.”

Locke shook his head and returned his attention to his computer screen as he scrolled through various security feeds. “We haven’t located the source of the breach yet. We’re guessing blind.”

The agents peered at their computers. Each one seemed to be rolling through video footage from throughout the facility.

Coop huffed out a sigh and approached one of the big screens on the wall. They showed images of the cells, and I was able to see the people inside them. “Full lockdown?” Coop called the question over his shoulder. He crossed his arms and peered at the images.

“Full lockdown.” Locke’s repetition of his words was confirmatory.

But a patch of light in the corner of the room caught my attention, and I frowned. There was something wrong with it. Like it was bendy. The angles were wrong. Cautiously, I stepped closer to it and reached out my hand as if I could explore inside it, but it moved at the last moment and the sudden blur revealed a figure clad all in black.

Not even a patch of skin showed. The figure looked like a shadow. It held a gun, and as Coop stepped toward it, already reaching for his own weapon, the being in front of me fired. The crack of the bullet echoed around the room, and I whirled.

I cried out as Coop fell, agony twisting his face.

He watched me from the floor, his brows drawn down, the corners of his eyes creased. He gripped his knee, and blood spurted between his fingers.

Everything happened so fast I didn’t even have time to process it. Every agent in the room had their guns drawn, but darkness fell as a hood was pulled over my head, and I thrashed against the sudden arms in a vise-like grip around my chest.

I was pulled back against a hard body, and my breath left me in a whoosh. A rumble worked through the building. Was it an explosion? Or was it the sound of hundreds of boots marching en masse? What was happening?

Boom!The floor vibrated. Could it be an earthquake? Who could make an earthquake during an invasion? I blinked, trying to figure out what was going on. A wave of

exhaustion slammed into me, and my eyelids fluttered.Sleep.

“I have the target,” the shadow’s deep voice boomed. “Repeat, the target has been captured.”

It was the last thing I heard...