

As I shuffle down the grey corridor, ever illuminated by those green and blue lights, I hear a conversation from two men in lab coats. They walk beside us. Beside the twenty five shuffling forms of other clones. They're all naked, just as I was when I left the tube. Many still have strange fluids dripping from their figures. All tremble. All eyes are wild.

"You're new, but you'll learn eventually." The first man is still talking. I tilt my head to the side, half looking at him as he speaks. "Clones are all slow when they wake up. They can't think right, can't see right." I catch a shift in his pitch when he says clones.

"So they can't hear us?" The second man asks.

"If you ask me," The first man continues, that shift in pitch now overtaking each word, derision swallowing the conversation, "We should send them in like this. They fight the Synthetics out in the wastelands just as they are. No more human lives lost."

The second man rubs his index and middle fingers against his palm, there's a hitch when he speaks. Is he uncomfortable? "Well, we wouldn't send them in just like this right?" He tries to force a laugh. I allow myself a smile. Uncomfortable with the conversation, he changed the subject.

The second man continues. "We'd at least give them some clothes, right?"

At the mention of clothes, I slowly shift my face downward, staring at the floor, eyes locked to the damp concrete meeting my footsteps. I am the only one wearing clothes, clad in a dark gown, given to me by one of the doctors. An elderly woman robbed of sleep, estranged from her bed.

"If we don't give them their memories," The first man says, "Then they don't get their sense. They won't care or even know if they're naked." It's at this point that the hair on the back of my neck tingles. I know that his eyes are on me.

“All except this one here.”

“Why does she have a gown,” the second man asks. “Everyone else is naked.”

The first man holds back a laugh, but only barely. “Are you kidding? You don’t recognise this one? She’s Shale’s... I don’t wanna say girlfriend, maybe her wife away from her wife?”

“Shale, as in Madame Shale?” The second man, “Shit, I do recognise her! From that vid that leaked.”

“Exactly” The first man continues. As he speaks, the second man places a hand on my shoulder. My entire body goes stiff, sharp. He pulls, redirecting my walk away from the slowly marching clones. “This way, You’re not going with the rest of them.”

The first man’s voice sharpens, “What did I tell you? She can’t understand us. No point in speaking to her.”

“Is that why we’re taking her up top?” The second man begins, “To see Madame Shale?”

“Guess she wants her mistress back” the first man doesn’t hold back his laugh this time.

When the first man speaks once again, I hear something... A cruel lilt envelope his tone.

“Damn shame that they do cover her up. There are some fine bodies shambling down this hallway, but she’s gotta have the best.” He starts to whisper. “I was on the detail pulling her out of the tank earlier. When she was writhing on the ground, kicking and screaming, we had to hold her down.” He half laughs, “For her own good.”

“And let’s just say,” his next words chill my blood, “I was holding down some of the fun bits.”

Before I can even stop myself, the plan forms. It’s simple. Effective. And the moment it’s come to light in my mind, my body acts accordingly. My hand darts upward and slaps the cup

out of the second man's hand. It clatters to the floor, spilling clear liquid across the already damp concrete surface. The first man is already in front of it. Good.

Before the second man can react, I step forward and grab the first man's long blonde hair. I pull. The bastard stumbles back. Already overbalanced, he steps onto the watery floor. His legs go up, his head goes down. He crashes to the floor. In a second, my foot finds purchase on his throat and pushes down. He begins to writhe, but the fall has dazed him. I knew it would.

The second man tries to grab at me and I catch his wrist, twisting it around his back. In seconds, both are at the mercy of my will. The slightest pressure of my foot and the first man chokes, the most tentative touch of my hand and the second man's arm is broken.

Movement from behind me, boots on concrete. Before I can even turn, cold metal is pressed to my neck. Again, my skin trembles. The steel is circular. The barrel of a gun. Something in the back of my mind recognizes the gun. Has this person threatened me before?

"Let them go. And then turn around, slowly." The voice is commanding, and yet, within a sense of comfort, comfort that his order will be obeyed. Whoever is speaking, he's used to being in command.

I'm tough. I remember that much. But I'm obviously not bullet proof. I release my hold on the second man and, with reluctance, slowly step off the throat of the first. Then, steadying my breathing and holding back an anger I hadn't realised was still raging, I turn.

The new man before me is clean shaven, hair well kept. Sharp jawline. Uniform recently cleaned. Dark brown hair. Hard eyes. Police? Guard? Not enough information to decide. Gun in my face though, there's a gun in my face and that's certainly enough information for me to decide to listen to him.

The man, his name tag identifies him as Lancer, presses the barrel to my forehead. I wonder if he's that bad a shot.

"Every time we pull you out of the tank, you end up in some kind of trouble." His voice is stern. Not rough like my own, but he seems consistently on the verge of erupting.

"But this," he growls, "This is the first time you've outright attacked someone, clone."

"Aria," I keep my voice even, ever mindful of the gun in my face. "My name is Aria Moon."

"So," he says calmly, "You CAN hear us already." Lancer lowers the gun, tucking it away in its holster. Though his hand remains noticeably near it. "One of these days, the doctors need to figure out how you wake up so damned fast."

I shrug. "Can I go now?" I ask.

Lancer gestures at the two men behind me. "You just attacked two humans. If you were anyone else... Do you understand how much trouble you'd be in? What did they even do?"

I open my mouth, ready to explain. But something holds me back. A thought, a worry.

Clone, they call me. Humans, they call themselves.

Who- What am I to these men? I know in that moment that my objection, my reasons, are smoke in the wind. Lost. To them, beyond pointless. Simply nonexistent.

I pocket my objection and look away from Lancer, away from the humans in the room. The sigh I release is heavy, worn down by five minutes of the utter exhaustion summoned on me by the world.

"It doesn't matter," I say, "Not to you, at least."