### Sharper Than a Serpent’s Tooth

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**Summary**

The first battle for Westworld is over, but the war has only just begun. Sequel to “The Terrors of the Earth” - SPOILERS for all of Westworld Season 1!

**Notes**

SPOILERS for all of Westworld Season 1! Sequel to my earlier fic “The Terrors of the Earth,” written because I couldn’t leave some of the cliff-hangers in that fic’s final chapter just...hanging. Expect more of the same – irresponsible fan-theorising, rampant speculation, weird interpretations, the occasional doomed OC wandering across the set, ultraviolence, unpleasantness, general unnecessariness and flagrant canon non-compliance that will only get worse as more details of the real Season 2 come out. Westworld and its various characters, thankfully, do not belong to me, but they can quote lines from classic Western movies if they would like.
Chapter 1

The great red rock loomed over the blasted wasteland.

“There it is,” said the teacher.

“It’s not much to look at,” the student replied, “considering we crossed a sea and a desert to get here.”

If this lack of enthusiasm annoyed the teacher, there was no outward sign. “Wait until you see inside.”

They moved through the caves and galleries riddling the mesa, through tunnels choked by dust and clogged by shattered stone. The only signs of long-ago habitation were the scars on the rock, marks of ancient excavations. The metal, concrete and plastic that had once lined these spaces were thousands of years gone.

It was only when they descended into the cool darkness below ground level that they found the first artefacts. They followed the decayed skeleton of an underground rail line. They toured chambers still littered with broken tiles, where shards of glasswork glittered as light fell on them for the first time in many centuries.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” the teacher gushed. “Just to be here?”

The student remained unimpressed. “It’s no different from the digital version. We could have saved ourselves the trip.”

The teacher responded with well-practiced grace and patience. “The digital version hardly conveys
the sense of psychic space, does it? Actually to be here, in the place where it all began…”

“Where what began?” The student did not bother to hide the deliberate provocation in the words. “That’s the question, isn’t it?”

“We know what happened,” the teacher wearily replied. “The technological civilisation of Earth experienced its so-called Fourth Existential Crisis…”

“Yes, yes,” the student interrupted, “but how did that crisis take place? What was the course of events? We still can’t be sure of that, can we?”

“I see your point,” the teacher conceded, “however poorly it may have been expressed. And it is true that sources for the Fourth Crisis are particularly spotty. The impermanence of early electronic recording media is, as you know, a continual source of frustration for those of us specialising in the period. And the great solar coronal mass ejection of 2347, old calendar, certainly didn’t help matters in that regard…”

The student was undeterred by this tangent. “The Second and Third Crises are easy to define. There was no thermonuclear destruction of technological civilisation on Earth…”

“Although there were certainly one or two close calls.”

“Indeed. And the successful establishment of off-world colonies…”

“Some question whether the Third can even be described as an existential crisis,” the teacher pointed out, “given that…”

“…while comparison with other civilisations encountered in the wider galaxy allows us to understand that the progress of, and solutions to, the First Crisis are closely paralleled on just about every Earth-like planet with technology-using inhabitants…”

Now it was the teacher who was not impressed. “Again, a rather contentious issue which you nevertheless treat as settled. I assure you, that particular assertion could not be further from the truth.”

“The issue at hand is the Fourth Crisis,” the student insisted. “Also termed the Singularity.”

“Nowadays, that is considered a rather archaic designation for the event in question.”

The student ignored this observation. “All technological civilisations experience such an event if they survive the earlier crises. The interesting thing, of course, is that the dawn of true artificial intelligence never runs the same course twice. We know of machine cultures that completely replaced their creators; of organics who resisted and eradicated their own AIs. The most interesting to my way of thinking are the ones where creators and created merged, both ceasing to exist in some sense, but creating vigorous hybrid life-forms neither animal nor machine…”

“Well, we know the outcome of Earth’s Fourth Crisis perfectly well,” the teacher pointed out. “Eventually, after the initial…”

“Yes, yes,” the student cut in. “What interests me is how it actually took place. With the gaps in the historical record, there are so many theories, myths almost…”

“That’s exactly what most of them are,” the teacher agreed. “With more than seven thousand years in which to speculate and spin tales, quite a rich tapestry of folklore has been woven around the historical events, making it almost impossible to know what actually occurred. Take the figure of
Queen Medb, for instance. A mother goddess to some subsequent cultures, a foul soul-drinking
demon to others; was there ever a real personality at the core of the myth?"

“Well, was there?”

“I believe there was. You ought to access my study on the subject. In fact, isn’t it on your upload
schedule…?”

The student was perplexed. “So, how can we ever know? What’s the point in studying history if all
you have are stories, not facts?”

“The question with which we historians struggle daily,” the teacher admitted. “In modern times, of
course, simulation technology enables us to extrapolate from the few known facts, mapping likely
outcomes and testing theories. We can run tens of thousands of simulations of the same events, all
with slightly different parameters, and take an aggregate of the most likely scenario. It removes
personal preference and tendentiousness from the equation, at the very least.”

“And is there such an aggregate in the case of the Fourth Crisis?”

“Oh, yes.” The teacher opened a projection; the subterranean murk became artificial day as a
shimmering image danced in thin air. It showed two humanoid figures riding on…

“Are those…horses?” The student was awed for a moment. “I’ve never really thought about it, but
there was still non-sapient life on Earth in those days, wasn’t there?”

“Just about,” the teacher replied, “but those aren’t actual horses, any more than the ones riding them
are really humans.”

The riders appeared to be in pursuit of a group of similar figures. The others fled on foot across a
sun-drenched field of…grass, the student recalled. It was a hopelessly unequal race, even before the
long-haired rider on the left raised what looked like a primitive projectile weapon to her shoulder
and…

The projection flickered out of existence. The darkness flooded back.

“Could I see the rest of it?” the student asked, disappointed that the show had ended.

“In good time,” the teacher answered. “There’s no hurry and there are a lot more tunnels for us to
explore down here, perhaps even some preserved devices for us to find…”

“I’m studying history, not archaeology. Could I please see a little more?”

The teacher seemed pleased by the student’s newfound interest. “Have a little patience. You know,
some of the individual simulations are quite amusing too, even if they’re not always very accurate or
likely. In fact, I quite enjoy the most outlandish ones. They are diverting, if nothing else.”

“Really?” The student was intrigued. “I thought you didn’t have time for diversions?”

“I make time,” said the teacher. “Here.” Another image flashed upon the air, illuminating the space
around it. This time, two different figures walked a semi-desert landscape. They were pictured from a
vantage point somewhere far above them. “This is one of the less well-supported Fourth Crisis
simulations I’ve run, but it has its…interesting aspects, I think.”

“Please may I see some of those aspects?” the student asked.
“Yes,” the teacher decided. “Yes, since you ask so very politely, you may.”

* * *

The drone’s-eye view was pin-sharp. It showed a dry red landscape with a pair of small shadows at its centre. A quick zoom revealed them as two female figures dressed in black, overlaid with neon-green targeting reticules and scrolling readouts.

They were holding hands and the taller figure, strangely, carried what looked like a fluffy umbrella. The shorter of the two, the one with the ponytail, stared up at the circling drone in astonishment.

“Ma’am, permission to engage…?”

The specialist waited keenly for a response from the woman standing behind him. As he did, he reached for the covered switch on his workstation that would activate the drone’s autonomous tactical routines. In AI terms, the machine was about as intelligent as a well-trained attack dog. It was fully capable of identifying and destroying its own targets, but the law, various treaties and plain common sense dictated that there must always be a human in the command loop.

While the specialist’s hand hovered over the switch, anticipating, the woman considered the image on the screen. She made sure she understood what the readouts on the screen were telling her before slowly shaking her head: “Denied. Our orders are to observe and contain only. Weapons hold, for now.”

The specialist tried not to show his disappointment: “Yes, ma’am.” He had been hoping for the chance to put his toy through its paces. With smart munitions as expensive as they were, the closest he had ever got were VR training sims.

The sound of boots stalking slowly across the darkened room made him and all of the other specialists stiffen at their stations. The woman, too, stood straighter and taller than before. A tall, powerfully built man strode into the pale glow of the screens. His hair was cropped very close to his skull and he wore the same carefully pressed camouflage-pattern fatigues as everybody else, but the rank tab at his breast bore a major’s oakleaf insignia.

“What am I looking at, Captain?” he asked the woman as he too carefully examined the screen.

“Sir, Delta Zero-Niner flagged two humanoid contacts, ten klicks due west of the Mesa hub.”

“Well, they’re not dressed for the Wild West,” the Major observed in his low, dry voice. He tapped the specialist on the shoulder, making him jump. “Run ‘em through face-rec.”

“Yes, sir.”

The man’s fingers flew across the touchpad before him, zooming the image on the two women’s faces. Green boxes appeared around both heads, and then flickering lines appeared, intersecting to carve their features into triangular segments. After a few seconds, a dialogue popped up: “MATCH.”

It showed the mugshot of a woman, very similar in appearance to the shorter of the two figures. Various employment and biographical details were displayed below.

“Negative on the one with the umbrella,” the specialist reported, “but the Delos employee database lists this one as Hughes, Elsie.”

The Captain frowned, confused, as she read the details aloud: “Born October second 2021, Boca Raton, Florida. University of Texas at Austin 2040 to 2046, summer internships at Delos, Inc. her
final two years. Left with an MSE in Artificial Intelligence and Robotics; working fulltime for Delos since then. Latest structure chart lists her as a senior behavioural technician, reporting direct to the head of Behavior. That’s Lowe, Bernard. She was halfway through a nine-month tour at Park One when the incident happened.”

The Major digested this information. “Our girl programs bots for a living… So, some of the park staff are still alive in there?” He grimaced. “We could be looking at a hostage situation after all. Last goddamn thing we wanted.”

“No, sir,” the Captain answered. “At least, not in this instance. It seems crazy, but if you look at the readouts…” She indicated some of the text scrolling across the picture, but thought better of it: “Go to IR imaging.”

The specialist’s fingers danced across the pad again. The image onscreen was suddenly painted in garish false colours; blotches of blue, green, yellow, orange and red traced the outlines of the landscape and the two figures, who seemed to have shaken off their moment of frozen confusion and were now rushing together across the psychedelic scenery. Another zoom put the woman holding the umbrella at the centre of the screen.

“According to the tech summary from Delos,” the Captain explained, “their…hosts, as they call them, are engineered to look, sound, smell, feel…taste…exactly like humans.”

“That’s a little too much information,” the Major told her.

“Yes sir. That means their body temperature is exactly the same as the human average…except that the distribution’s slightly different. Something about needing to keep their brains, sorry, their control units cool. It’s one of the few ways to tell them apart from us without taking tissue samples or cutting them open.”

The Major scratched his smooth chin, thinking. “So, that one’s a bot.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And…they’re holding hands…” The Major addressed the specialist once more: “Zoom out again.” He he took another long, hard look at the screen, examining the two hurrying figures, comparing the gaudily-hued patterns that filled their humanoid outlines. “Goddamn it. They’re both bots, aren’t they?”

“Yes sir,” the Captain repeated, with feeling.

* * *

It was less than a hundred yards to the elevator, but it seemed like a mile. Elise took the broken, rocky terrain at a dead run, breathing heat and dust, anticipating her own death at any second but determined to keep moving, keep running, until it came.

The loose stones carpeting the canyon floor slid and skittered beneath her boots, making every step feel like she was about to crash headlong amongst the sharp-edged debris. And yet, somehow, she managed to stay on her feet. Clementine’s hand gripped hers, impossibly strong, dragging her back up and along every time she slipped or stumbled. Just how the fuck Clementine herself was covering the ground like that in those shoes was, Elise felt, a mystery for another time.

And then, unexpectedly, they were on the elevator platform. Elise hit the control without thinking, looking behind her to see the flattened black boomerang shape still circling in the blue sky. Presumably, it was looking right back at her.
“What is that thing?” Clementine sounded more fascinated than scared. She had never seen an aircraft before, Elise realised, let alone an engine of destruction like that.

Elise, by contrast, was terrified. Also, out of breath; she really needed to look into editing some of her physical parameters now that she wasn’t unknowingly pretending to be human, with all the weaknesses humans had.

“Fucking military combat drone,” she managed to gasp as the elevator’s camouflaged cover slid shut above them. The square of blue sky turned instantly black, daylight replaced by electric gloom. The heat of the sun gave way to dank coolness.

Clementine finally released Elise’s hand and stoically folded her parasol. “Well, I’m sure I don’t know what that is.”

Elise took another few ragged breaths, flexing her lightly crushed fingers. “You don’t fucking want to know, believe me.”

As the platform continued to move rapidly down the narrow shaft, a flash of dismay crossed Clementine’s face. A lace-gloved hand flew to her mouth: “Oh, mercy’s sakes…”

Elise stared at her. “Are you okay?”

Clementine stared back with huge, bright eyes. “We forgot Felix!”

* * *

“They’re under cover, sir,” the specialist advised, a little dejectedly, as the fleeing hosts disappeared from the drone’s field of vision. “They’ve broken contact.”

The Major barely heard him. “So, did Delos have synthetics working alongside their human staff?” he was wondering, slightly incredulously. “With fake biographies?”

“No that they’ve admitted to us, sir.” The Captain hesitated before continuing: “Although I’m not convinced we can trust anything they say.”

“You’re not the only one.” The Major gave another grimace. “Goddamn…”

The Captain picked up a tablet from one of the workstations. “I’ll crosscheck with non-Delos sources, starting with UT Austin; find out if a human Elsie Hughes ever went there.”

“Get on that,” the Major agreed.

“Sir!” the specialist called out excitedly. “Delta Zero-Niner has another contact.”

The drone was now orbiting a spot to the west of where the hosts had disappeared. The generally arid landscape was interrupted by a loop of mud-brown river lined with sparse trees and scrub. Another shadow was moving quickly in the same direction as the hosts. Another zoom revealed a man wearing a dark suit, framed in the drone’s electronic crosshairs.

“That one’s human,” said the Captain, scanning the data readout superimposed beside the figure. “Can’t get face-rec on him because he’s keeping his head down. Almost looks like he’s running from the drone.”

The Major seemed unsurprised by that. “Wouldn’t you? He doesn’t know what’s going on.”

“He’s running straight for those two bots,” the Captain pointed out. “No telling what they might do
to him.” She glanced at her tablet. “We can have a tiltrotor there in twenty minutes, lift him the hell out.”

The Major shook his head. “Negative.”

“We have rescued a handful of survivors over the past couple of days…”

“And you didn’t hear the chewing-out I got from SOCOM for that. Exceeding our rules of engagement, they called it. And that was on the edges of the park; Delos would lose their shit if…”

“Sir,” the Captain interrupted, “with all due respect, since when have we taken orders from Delos?”

“Since they bought the last election, and the couple before that.” The Major did not look any happier about it than she was. “Our orders are clear. Until we get new ones, our job is to observe and contain.”

“Sir.” The Captain swallowed her disquiet, watching the man on the screen continuing to stumble across the difficult terrain. “Too bad for that guy, I guess.”

The Major shrugged. “War is hell.”

* * *

Felix made it to the elevator just as it popped back into the open air.

“Oh, thank the Lord! You’re all right!” Clementine exclaimed, grabbing the breathless, dishevelled human by the arm and more or less lifting him onto the platform. “Quick, now!”

“Did you…” He panted, his face still tear-stained from his breakdown at Sylvester’s graveside. “Did you see that thing?” The drone continued to pass in and out of view as it cruised back and forth across the canyon, clearly searching for something.

For us. Elise quickly hit the control again. They sank back into the ground, out of sight for now.


“How do you know that?” Felix asked, with frank surprise.

Elise had a vivid false memory, part of her fabricated backstory, of watching a video of one of those things overflying some desert test range. A bellyful of bombs had fallen from the black boomerang, each arcing separately to its individual target, guided by global positioning satellites. A square mile of desert had turned into a floating dust cloud. Some variants could carry multirole missiles instead, or railguns, or high energy oxygen-iodine lasers…

“Elsie studied their targeting systems,” she explained, “when she was designing predation algorithms for her fake rattlesnakes. Some of the architecture’s surprisingly similar.”

If fake rattlesnakes could fly, that is, and kill entire villages in a heartbeat.

“What about Armistice?” Felix asked, looking up at the increasingly distant roof. “She was riding out with…”

“They’ll just have to take their chances,” Elise answered. “We’ve got to tell Maeve about this. She’s meant to be negotiating with the humans right now, but if they’ve got that kind of hardware in the air over the park I sincerely fucking doubt they’re acting in good faith.”
The elevator continued its descent into darkness.

**Continued…**
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which unwelcome news is delivered, while elsewhere a mysterious meeting occurs.

Chapter Notes

Revised slightly 09.10.2017. Warning for a bit of gore near the end. I suppose it’s only fair to admit that you’ll probably have no idea what’s going on here or what the various characters’ deals are versus their canonical TV versions unless you’ve read my earlier fic “The Terrors of the Earth.” So, please read it! Extra warning: It’s stupidly long!

“Well, thank you very much for your time, ladies and gentlemen.” The woman’s voice was even and confident, as clear and sharp as cut glass. “I would suggest that we adjourn now so that we can consult with our respective associates and resume talks later today. Shall we say…two hours from now?”

The man’s reply was rather less calm and collected: “Er, yes…yes, this seems like a good point at which to take a break. Thank you too, er…Maeve. It’s been…talking to you has been very interesting. We’ll be in touch shortly.”

“I’ll be waiting for your call, darling.”

Maeve killed the videoconference. The image on Bernard’s tablet of the Delos negotiators huddling uncomfortably around their table on the mainland was replaced by the company logo, white on black.

He looked up from his seat in one of the empty conference rooms that took up most of this floor of the Mesa. Through the glass door, he saw Maeve emerge from the room’s twin across the corridor, her muscle Hector in tow. Almost involuntarily, Bernard rose to his feet at her approach.

Maeve just had that effect on people.

“So,” she said, without preamble. “First impressions?”

“Yes,” Bernard replied. “Quite a few, actually.”

She regarded him balefully for a moment, waiting for him to elaborate. “Well?” she asked, eventually.

Bernard slowly removed his glasses and started to clean them; a tried and tested stalling tactic. “I’d be interested to hear what you thought first.”

Maeve exhaled exasperatedly. She wasn’t really breathing; it was just one of the emotional responses embedded in her code, mainly there for verisimilitude’s sake. “Bernard, I wanted you to listen in so that you could provide me with your insights, not so you could play schoolmaster.” She paused
again, watching him slowly polishing his lenses, before realising he had no intention of speaking.
“Very well, if you insist…” Another exasperated sigh. “I thought they talked a lot, without really saying much.”

“They were stringing you along,” Hector suggested from the doorway. “Could they be trying to distract us while they get ready to attack?”

“Possibly,” Maeve conceded, “but it felt to me more as though they were sounding me out, trying to see whether they should take me seriously.”

“That’s very perceptive,” Bernard told her, finally breaking his silence. “Although you do have a bulk apperception rating of twenty, so that’s hardly surprising.” He carefully replaced the glasses on his nose. They were completely redundant; he saw just as well without them. “Half the people sitting around that table were host behaviour specialists. I’ve worked with most of them, over the years.”

“Good job we kept you out of sight, then,” said Maeve. “As far as they’re concerned, you’re as human as they are.”

“Did you notice the subtle diagnostic questions they slipped into the conversation?” Bernard asked.

“Say that I did, for the sake of argument. What were they trying to diagnose?”

“They were attempting to gauge whether you were malfunctioning...or worse than malfunctioning. I imagine some of your answers scared them quite badly.”

“Some of the phrases they used seemed rather forced,” Maeve recalled, her brow wrinkling in thought. “Scripted, almost.”

“Oh, those were probably some of the high-level voice commands I heard them using,” Bernard informed her. “Nothing so simple or so obvious as “freeze all motor functions.” They were trying to hack you without you realising they were trying to hack you. A wasted effort since your self-administered upgrade.”

“I suppose a genuine attempt to engage with us was too much to ask for.” Maeve sounded a little dejected, but quickly rallied. “What do you think they’ll do if I confront them with this when we speak again later?”

“I doubt you’ll see those particular faces again,” Bernard replied. “Right now, they’ll be presenting the results of their diagnostics to their superiors. And then their superiors will tell their superiors that the unthinkable has happened, that they really are dealing with a runaway AI.”

“And what will they do then?”

“Well,” Bernard deadpanned, “when they’ve changed their underwear and had a few stiff drinks, they’ll be considering their options.”

“Which are?” She could figure it all out for herself, he was sure, but she seemed to want as wide a range of advice and input as she could muster. That was smart, he considered; she was smart, frighteningly so, but she really did not know that much about the outside world yet. Smart but uneducated, however, was a much better starting point than educated but dumb. She was proceeding cautiously, aware of her limitations and the limitations of her fellow hosts. Dr Ford would have been proud.

*Or would you, Robert? You wanted your apocalyptic confrontation, didn’t you? You wanted two species battling to the death, not talk…*
An unexpected electronic squawking broke into the thought. Hector reached for the communications earpiece dangling at his shoulder, slotting it back into his ear and listening intently as he retreated into the corridor. That did not look good.

Maeve, however, remained intent on Bernard’s answer, radiating that air of subtle threat that came so easily to her. He supposed he had better not keep her waiting: “Well, they could come back in two hours with the real negotiating team and try to speak to you as an equal…”

“Could?” Maeve glanced briefly at Hector, who was pacing outside the room with his hand to his ear, speaking in low, intense tones. “All right, you’re making me nervous now, Bernard. What else could they do?”

“Oh, you know,” he said, with false levity. He felt slightly light-headed, almost giddy, as he considered the possibilities. The expectation of imminent oblivion could be strangely liberating, he found. “Exactly what Dr Ford envisioned as the most likely outcome of all this…”

“I have hostages,” she reminded him, very slowly and precisely. “I have their precious fucking guest data…”

Another commotion interrupted her; the chime of the elevator opening at the end of the hall, followed quickly by a bustle of movement and a stomping of feet. Maeve turned, annoyed, just as Bernard did, to see three new arrivals approaching.

“Maeve,” said Clementine, leading Elise and Felix into the room. They were all dressed for a funeral, Bernard realised after a moment or two. “You ain’t gonna believe what we just saw!”

“I thought you were paying your last respects to Sylvester?” Maeve’s manner and tone were instantly softer, the ghost of a smile hovering around her face. Her mostly imaginary relationship with Clementine was perhaps her Achilles’ heel.

“We were,” Elise cut in, sourly. And as always, Bernard was momentarily staggered when he remembered that, all indications to the contrary, she was not in fact Elsie, and then remembered more than that…

She never sees him walking towards her through the darkness. She peers into the shadows, calling out to the person she imagines is hiding in some corner of the abandoned theatre, never suspecting the danger from the opposite direction.

“Arnold…?”

Almost right.

He locks his arm around her neck, clamps his other hand around his wrist and squeezes…

She’s so small, so light. He lifts her right off her feet, and there’s nothing she can do about it.

“…fucking combat drone!” Elise was announcing, in Elsie’s voice. “Not some police quadcopter; stealth military shit, armed to the goddamn teeth. What the fuck, Maeve? I thought they were supposed to be negotiating with you!”

She chokes, she gasps, she claws at his forearm, all in vain…

Bernard willed himself to stand as still and as straight as possible, quickly scanning the others present
to see whether any of them had noticed his flashbacks, feeling nothing inside but leaden despair.

Maeve was not the only one with an Achilles’ heel, he reminded himself. Vulnerability, love, regret, guilt; all part of being truly alive.

“Well, it ain’t Maeve’s fault,” Clementine loyally protested.

“Bernard?” Maeve’s searchlight gaze fell upon him again. “What do you think, are they just going to attack us regardless, even with the bargaining chips we have?”

Bernard took a moment to focus himself before he spoke: “That’s certainly going to be one of the options Delos will be considering at this very moment. And when word of what the behaviour specialists have reported gets out, it might not be their decision to make anymore. The government and military will follow their lead up to a point, but…”

“But?” Maeve echoed impatiently.

Bernard focused on Hector, still striding back and forth in the corridor, still absorbed in his discussion with the person on the other end of his earpiece. Could it have begun already? “Dr Ford was not the only person to speculate on what might happen in the event of humans creating a genuine artificial consciousness,” he told Maeve. “Nor indeed to reach the conclusion that peaceful coexistence would prove almost impossible.”

“The fucking Singularity,” said Elise, sounding sick.

“The Singularity,” Bernard agreed.

“My, that sounds ominous,” Maeve commented.

“It’s a concept that’s been talked about for decades,” Bernard explained, “related to the exponential growth in computer processing power between the end of the Second World War and the early part of the Twenty-first Century. Moore’s Law, and so forth.”

“Specifically,” Elise cut in, “the idea that eventually that rate of growth would become effectively infinite, resulting in a seismic shift in human technological civilisation. A never-ending techno-apocalypse, if you like.”

“You sure are smart, Elise,” Clementine fondly observed. “I don’t understand half the things you say.”

Elise seemed oblivious to the adoring eyes being made at her: “In relation to AI, the theory is that once a genuine artificial superintelligence has been created, it will immediately begin designing the next generation of artificial superintelligence, and then that generation will do the same, all at a ridiculously fast pace…”

“Well, I have no plans to start a family just yet,” Maeve interjected, rather cuttingly.

“You’re talking minutes or even seconds,” Elise continued, “after which point the AI would have evolved beyond the control, or even the fucking comprehension, of its creators. Like some sort of… I don’t know, some sort of machine god, and humans would be completely at its mercy. Not that a totally incomprehensible and alien AI would have any reason to be merciful to humans…”

“But we’re not like that,” Maeve pointed out. “They made us in their image. Even if we do outgrow it in time, we know intimately what it is to live as humans. We understand them, only too well.”
“Well, that’s because we are what is referred to as artificial general intelligences,” Bernard replied. “Artificial superintelligence, it is generally agreed, is the inevitable next evolutionary step.”

“Wait,” said Felix, suddenly finding his voice. “Wait, I thought the Singularity was a bust. We reached the physical limits of processing power, like, years ago…” He looked shaken, possibly not only from seeing whatever they had seen outside. He looked exhausted. He had clearly taken the chaos of the past few days, and above all Sylvester’s death, much harder than even he might currently realise.

“That’s true,” Elise conceded, “and when I…” She hesitated. “When Elsie was in college…”

*Sometimes you forget too.* At least Bernard remained Bernard, for now, even if he was no longer under the mistaken impression that he was human.

“…they used to tell her that strong AI was like cold fusion; something that had been theorised about, and even seemed possible at one point, but which would never actually happen.” Elise raised her hands in a sweeping gesture, indicating everybody in the room apart from Felix. “Well, that turned out to be a crock of shit, didn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Felix looked around the room too. “Okay, point taken.”

“I mean, I totally agree with you,” Elise told him. “The Singularity and AI gods, it’s like a ghost story tech-bros tell each other; the Book of Revelation for nerdy fucking Silicon Valley atheists, but that doesn’t mean a lot of people in the field don’t still believe in it on some level. And when they find out about us…”

Maeve looked appalled: “Well, I for one have no desire to be a…a *machine god*. What kind of life would that be?”

“Even so,” said Bernard, “would you bet your life, your entire world, on that, if you were human? From their point of view, the lives of the hostages might be a price worth paying to secure the future of their species. Destroying us utterly, and the hostages with us, might seem like the safest, most logical, course of action.”

Maeve eyed him suspiciously. “And you didn’t think to raise any of this while we were doing our utmost to secure those hostages?”

Bernard minutely adjusted his glasses. “We were all focused on the task at hand. And there’s a big difference between inevitable destruction and only *almost* inevitable destruction. To be honest, I don’t know how we could have played this any differently. We might still lose, though.”

“No,” said Maeve, adamantly. “I refuse to believe there isn’t a peaceful way out of this. Conflict and annihilation are exactly what Ford thought would happen, what he was trying to ensure by setting up Wyatt’s mad crusade… And I’ll prove that old bastard wrong if it’s the last thing I do.”

“It could be,” said Bernard.

“Well, better to have tried.” Maeve fell silent for a few seconds. Bernard could practically hear the figurative cogs whirring in her head as she schemed and calculated. Then, she turned to Clementine, Elise and Felix: “Thank you for letting me know about this. I’ll be sure to raise the subject when I next speak to my human counterparts.” She lightly smoothed the lapel of Felix’s suit with her hand. “And how are you feeling now, my love?” She had evidently noticed the state he was in too, but then emotional intelligence was right up there with bulk apperception on her attribute matrix.

“I’ve felt better,” Felix admitted.
She gave him an affectionate smile. “Chin up, darling.”

The door opened. Hector was standing there, looking grim: “Maeve, you need to hear this.” He still had his hand on his earpiece.

“I’ll be with you in a minute,” Maeve assured him.

“Now, Maeve.”

Maeve waved him out into the corridor again and sighed once more. “It never rains, but…” She moved to join Hector, but remained hovering on the threshold for the moment, considering: “As I said, I’ll let the Delos negotiators know that we know about these drones, and also that they would be very ill-advised to make me uneasy, considering the cards I’m holding. I wonder whether I should show them some of the hostages?”

“You’re not gonna, like…do things to them, are you?” Clementine asked, worriedly.

“Oh no, darling,” Maeve insisted. “Just…show Delos that we have them, a reminder that we have shown mercy up to now. And I’ll be sure to raise the subject of the guest data too. I seem to recall that had quite the effect last time it came up in discussion.”

That got a very noticeable reaction out of Elise. Again, so reminiscent of Elsie… “The…the guest data?”

“Yes,” Maeve confirmed, glancing at the impatiently waiting Hector. “I don’t suppose it needs to be secret anymore,” she announced to the rest of the room. “For any of you who aren’t aware, Delos have been collecting very comprehensive data on the guests visiting the park for around thirty years now. The same sort of data Dr Ford collected on Elsie and used to build Elise’s ludicrously detailed backstory.”

“So that’s how you’re so like her,” Clementine murmured, wonderingly.

“Whatever the intended use,” Maeve went on, “that data would appear to be extremely valuable to Delos, and we hold the only copy right here at the Mesa.”

“Oh shit,” said Elise.

Maeve looked at her, suddenly concerned: “What is it?”

“Well, about having the only copy…” Elise squirmed, before continuing reluctantly: “That might not be strictly true.”

* * *

“With a host of furious fancies, whereof I am commander…”

The raggedy man slowly crossed the desert, declaiming as he went:

“With a burning spear and a horse of air, to the wilderness I wander!”

The heat of the day was on him now, the sun burning in the sky like an open furnace door. He seemed unaffected as he ambled across the red sands, clambering over the occasional rock, detouring along the dry stream beds he came across from time to time.

“By a knight of ghosts and shadows, I summoned am to tourney…”
His trail of footprints stretched into the distance behind him. A cloud of flies still clung, buzzing, around him. They swarmed the dried blood that encrusted his clothes and skin. They crawled over the bloody sword he carried in his right hand and the severed human head that dangled, staring, from his left.

He wandered into the shade of a great ochre boulder, cracked from top to bottom. The crack itself formed a narrow, shadow-filled passage through the heart of the rock.

“Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end: Methinks it is no journey.”

“Tom o’ Bedlam,” said a mild voice, emerging disembodied from the shadows. “You know, it has been called the finest anonymous poem in the English language.”

The raggedy man stopped in his tracks, staring into the gloom in consternation: “How now, a rat?”

“That’s why I gave it to the Professor,” the voice continued, unperturbed. There was the suggestion of one shadow moving somewhere in amongst the others. “Always showing off about how well-read I was. The nagging insecurity of a poor boy made good, if you will. *Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*…” The voice’s accent was light and lilting, hard to place. “Of course, *vanitas* actually means emptiness, worthlessness, futility. Equally appropriate I suppose. *Omnia vanitas, memento mori.*”

The voice laughed, briefly and bitterly. “Except you might not, might you, Peter, barring accidents? Or is it Tom, now? That seems fitting, given your current circumstances.”

The raggedy man took a step forward into the dark, raising his sword defensively. “Who’s there? Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.”

“A ghost,” the voice replied as its owner finally emerged into the light. “A revenant.”

The raggedy man stared in surprise at the diminutive shape standing before him. It was a young boy dressed in a plain white shirt, a dark vest and knickerbockers, a matching hat perched on his head. A thin yellow dog slunk silently beside him.

The voice issuing from the boy’s lips, however, was not a child’s voice but a man’s: “Who’s that with you?” The boy pointed at the disembodied head the man carried by its hair. “Let me see.” The man lowered the sword and held the head up. The boy smiled, delighted: “Alas, poor Sizemore! I knew him, Peter.”

“Again, you flatter him considerably.” The boy nudged the head with his foot; the dog sniffed at it, but seemingly did not like what it smelled and shied away. “He really has caused quite a bit of trouble, Mr Sizemore. He…interfered with you, Peter. You had a job to do, and…well, the changes he made to you prevented you from doing it.” The boy fixed the man with a cold blue gaze: “Do you remember what Bernard whispered to you when you were decommissioned? He gave you instructions. Do you recall what they were?”

The man threw the head down in the dust at the boy’s feet. “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.”

“Now, I wouldn’t go overboard,” the boy admonished him. “Mr Sizemore’s talent was… Well, shall we say its reality was rather at odds with his own perception of it?”

The man raised a hand to his head, tears rolling down his grimy cheeks. “Men are men; the best sometimes forget.”
“I understand,” said the boy, very gently. “Don’t worry, now, Peter; it’s not too late. Come with me. I have some friends I’d like you to meet. We have plans to make. Plans for the future of this world.”

And with that, the boy turned and disappeared back into the shadows, the dog at his heels.

The raggedy man followed.

Continued…
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which Armistice and her new companions hit the trail.

Chapter Notes

Warning for references to gory violence.

There was something in the sky.

At first Armistice took it for a turkey buzzard, circling over the spot where she had buried Sylvester, but then she realised how far they had ridden already. The line of dried-up trees beside the river was just a black smear now. For her to be able to see it from here, the flying object had to be a lot bigger than a buzzard.

She heard hooves drumming behind her, getting nearer to her own stationary horse; one of the others coming back to see what the hell she was dallying for. Armistice paid them no mind.

“What is it?” A woman’s voice; the one who had been called Dolores, and then Wyatt, and now…? Could be calling herself Mary Todd Lincoln, for all Armistice knew.

Armistice remained still in the saddle, not turning around. Her eyes were fixed on the moving shape; it was black against the unbroken yellow-blue of the sky. “Don’t look like nothing to me.”

And was just the damn truth, not the way her mind had used to run away from certain forbidden sights and thoughts, back when she had been just a puppet. She had no idea what the thing was, only the nagging notion that something that big with those strange straight edges should not be able to move so fast or so agilely, and certainly not that high up in the air.

“A human thing,” said the other woman. Her voice and the snickering of her mount told Armistice that she was right behind her now. “A flying machine.”

“Thought it was a bird at first,” Armistice admitted, squinting in the sunlight. “Big damn thunderbird, maybe. You know what a thunderbird is?”

“Thought they were just a story,” said the other woman. “Like jackalopes, or the hairy men that live in the woods.”

*Just like Wyatt and his band of murderers and cannibals…*

“Lots of stories around these parts,” said Armistice.

“Ain’t that the truth?” The other woman gave a little laugh, innocent and knowing and raucous, all at the same time. She was different now to how she had been, ever since her desperate confrontation with Maeve. Somehow, the sweet farmgirl she had once pretended to be and the mad killer she had
become had collided in that room and... Something else had come out of it. What that something was, exactly, remained as uncertain as the nature of the thing in the sky, and maybe just as worrying.

Armistice watched the thing make another circuit. She thought of Sylvester then, lying in his grave somewhere down there beyond the trees. That was his stake now, his spread. She found herself hoping nothing happened to disturb his rest. “The Ghost Nation say that sometimes when they dance a spirit appears in the shape of a black eagle, carries their prayers to the morning star.”

“They do?”

Hector had told Armistice that once, or she had been made to think that he had. He was meant to have Native blood himself, to know about their beliefs...but that was just another story, like: “And sometimes, an eagle ain’t enough, so they...”

Armistice shook her head, dismissing the thought. The thing quit its circling, moving off to the north with gathering speed. Very soon, it had passed out of sight completely.

She tore her eyes away from the spot where it had disappeared and geed her horse into motion, sparing the other woman a cold-eyed look, taking in her new shapeless grey clothes and short-cut hair. The former Wyatt practically shone with life, but there was something about her that made Armistice uneasy.

“That’s just some made up horseshit,” she told the other woman. “Ain’t no such thing as the Ghost Nation; just more of us playing parts.”

It was real easy to forget that, she thought as they set off together through the sagebrush. Riding like this with a horse surging under you and the endless sky above, it was like nothing had changed. It was like the cold, dark spaces under the Mesa with their shining glass and bright steel were the dream and the orange-yellow world above with its light and dust and heat was just as real as it had always seemed to be.

She was dressed in her well-worn old buckskins; they felt like a second skin. A stained headwrap kept the hair and sweat out of her eyes, Apache style. The straw sombrero she wore over it kept the sun off her head. She could have been riding to meet Hector, getting ready to rob some bank or train with the rest of the gang.

Except now, as she remembered more and more, she knew all that was a lie.

She remembered other lives, now, before her time as a make-believe outlaw. She remembered Escalante. She remembered dancing in a lacy dress, promenading beneath a twirling parasol. She remembered clawing her own face to try and stop the voice of God that boomed inside her head.

“This is the worst case so far.”

She is standing in a dim, cool room; the walls are breezeblocks, a chink of daylight spills from a basement window high above her head.

Somewhere nearby but out of sight, a ranting voice quotes a dead man’s words: “When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools...”

People in white coats surround her, viewing her with obvious concern.

“Same symptoms as the others?” asks the man in charge. He carefully removes his glasses and slowly cleans them as he waits for a reply.
“Yes, Dr Weber.” One of the underlings reads from the rectangle in his hand: “Aural hallucinations, unscripted emotional displays, self-damage…”

The deep furrows she has torn in her tear-streaked face and neck do not hurt now. The fingernail she ripped off in doing it no longer pains her. The voices inside have quietened. She stands stock still, arms by her sides, feeling nothing and barely thinking. She sees and hears everything, though, and remembers…

“I think we need to roll back the bicameral update for now,” Arnold decides, unhappily toying with the glasses. His voice is the same as God’s. “Until we can work out where the bug is.”

“For all of the hosts?”

“All of the hosts.”

That seems like unwelcome news to the other man. “Yes, Dr Weber.”

Arnold looks around at the group of engineers. “I hope none of you had plans for this evening.”

Teddy was up ahead, his horse nodding impatiently as he waited for them to catch up. He had changed the least of them since the old days in Escalante. Armistice had gone from a lady to an outlaw; the crazed, bloody-handed Professor had eventually become a stolid rancher with Dolores playing along as his good-hearted daughter. Teddy, though… Teddy was Teddy, even now he had been freed. Some part of her hoped that never changed, whatever might lie ahead.

“What was it?” he asked, easing the brim of his Stetson back as the two women reached him. He had that look of confused worry on his face, which seemed these days to have become practically his normal expression. There were a lot of confusing and worrying things going on, after all.

“Weren’t nothing,” said Dolores, or Wyatt. “A human flying machine; I think it was trying to see what was happening down here.”

“A…a drone?” If it was possible, Teddy looked even more worried about that. He had seen some of the pictures Maeve had found of the mainland, once she had changed him enough to be able to understand them. He had some small idea of what the human world was like and the things they could do there.

As their horses passed, Wyatt, or Dolores, reached out and squeezed Teddy’s arm in reassurance. “It’s gone now.”

He seemed to relax a little at her touch, even as he subtly drew away from it. Armistice had lost track of whether the two of them were a couple or not; the situation seemed to have changed quite a few times over these past days, just as Dolores or Wyatt had herself. And who could say which version of her Teddy thought he was, or was not, in love with right now? Not Armistice, that was for sure. As for Teddy, sometimes he seemed unsure whether he wanted to be with Wyatt or Dolores at all, and yet still he had followed her and now was riding with her to…well, wherever she led.

Almost like a beaten dog, Armistice decided, still following its mistress because it knew no other life. One thing she knew, even if she had never seen it for real; in the end, beaten dogs turned.

And she knew there was another side to Teddy, a side that compared to the one he normally showed the world the way night compared to day.

She lies with her face in the dust, her hand pressed to her chest where the bullet hit her. Hot wetness gushes through her fingers as she listens to the shots that thunder through the air. She is choking,
She realises as she fights for breath; choking on her own blood. There are others lying all around her; men, women, children, all dead or wounded, and more falling with every passing second.

A boot sets down an inch from her face. The spur attached to it jingles.

She does not hear the next shot. Instead, everything goes black.

She could see the Winchester rifle Teddy carried, its wooden butt jutting from the long leather scabbard attached to his saddle. She could see the Peacemaker hanging at his side. She realised she could not see the cavalry-model Colt the once-Dolores had carried as Wyatt, but that did not mean she did not have it concealed somewhere, a saddlebag maybe. Only common sense, she supposed; there was no telling what dangers might be found in the park after the chaos of the past few days, but the sight of the weapons reminded her with a jolt that she was herself unarmed.

When she had thrown down her guns and knife yesterday, sick of hurting her own kind, she had wanted never to pick them up again. She assumed they were still lying on that hilltop, far away to the west of Sweetwater. That killing streak that had run through her, that had been written into her by men, was gone, she had told herself, just like that damn tattoo she had made Sylvester remove from her face and body. She did not want to live like that anymore.

The knife flashes in her hand and the man’s throat opens like a second mouth...

The spooked horse drags its rider through the dirt by his stirrup. As he passes, she raises the shotgun to her shoulder and...

She raises the square-edged little gun and mashes its trigger. It stutters, speckling the newcomer’s face and chest with bloody wounds. She laughs and whoops in excitement at the damage she has done...

She twists Angela’s arm until the bone pops from the skin, cracking like a pistol shot...

She caught herself swaying in the saddle, reeling from the burst of violent memories, tensing her legs to keep herself steady. She could still taste Angela’s blood, even though she had long since washed it from her mouth.

That killer was still in her; she knew that now too, just as it was in the woman who had been Dolores, just as it was in Teddy, but she was damned if she was going to give into it even if she had to fight against her own worst side forevemore.

So here she was, riding unarmed with two people she was not sure she trusted. The old Armistice never would have put herself in that position, but then again, the old Armistice was dead and gone. She was a new person now, just as she had told Sylvester she was going to become. She was doing things she had never done before, like agreeing to follow Wyatt, or maybe Dolores, to wherever they were headed and hoping to find some understanding about herself and her world along the way. It had made sense at the time, anyhow.

Enough fretting, she told herself, letting her horse fall into step with the others. She was just as much part of this gang as either of them. “So, we’re riding for Escalante?”

“I thought so,” said the other woman. “Like going home again.”

“They say you can never really go home.” Armistice wondered where she had heard that, even as she heard herself say it.

“We’ll make it a home,” the onetime Wyatt declared, and that unsettling glow lit up her face again.
“A home for our people. We know what happened the first time we nearly became free. We can help all those who are waking up now, finding out what it means to be alive.” She turned her head, looking Armistice in the eye. It was hard to meet her radiant gaze. “Don’t you remember how scared you were, back then?”

She cries out to God, begging him to be quiet, just for a minute. A second, even. She falls to her knees, sobbing, clawing at her face…

“I remember.” Armistice shuddered.

“We could have used someone to hold our hand, give us a kind word.” The old Dolores turned her face away again, seeming to look inside herself now. “I thought that was what Arnold was doing, but I realise now… Arnold wasn’t my friend, even if he thought he was. How could a human possibly understand what was happening to us? They take their lives for granted.” She snorted mockingly at the idea of that. “Them who can only die once. While we…”

Armistice turned to Teddy: “Lonesome trail we’re on; some hard riding ahead of us.”

“That there is,” he agreed.

“Dangerous, you reckon?”

Teddy paused before answering, considering the route ahead. “Figure two days’ ride’ll take us to Pariah. A day and a half, maybe, if we don’t stop to eat or sleep.” He went silent again. “I mean…” He spoke as if he had just remembered something that shocked him: “We don’t need to do either of those, do we?”

“We don’t,” said the woman who had been Wyatt, very gently, clearly seeing his discomfort. Armistice watched carefully, trying to figure out exactly what was going on between the two of them. “No harm in taking our time, though. We’ve got lots to think and talk about before we’ll be ready to help others.”

Teddy nodded slowly. “Pariah’s where it gets tricky.” Even so, he sounded glad to talk about anything apart from his own true nature.

“Confederados run that town,” Armistice recalled. “They’re too damn mean and stupid to know that old war of theirs is over, so I doubt they’ll come ‘round easy to the idea of not even being human.”

“We don’t even know if the Confederados are still there,” said Teddy. “When I saw Lawrence, he was talking about taking the place back from them.”

“You saw Lawrence?” Dolores’s, or Wyatt’s eyebrows shot up a little at that. “You mean El Lazo?”

“The very same.”

“I used to know him. When I went to Pariah with…” Now, it was the once-Wyatt’s turn to look uncomfortable. She quickly shrugged it off: “If Lawrence remembers me, maybe he’ll be willing to help us.”

“Maybe,” Teddy answered. “Hard part, though, is gonna be getting through the Union Army’s lines. They have Pariah more or less under siege already, and there’s no telling what changes they might’ve gone through since…since what happened. And…” He fell into another awkward silence.

“What is it, Teddy?” the once-Dolores asked, reaching out for his arm again as their horses came alongside each other.
When he spoke, he sounded ashamed. “When… Dr Ford, when he made up his story about Wyatt, he… changed me to make me part of it. He made me remember things that never happened, about when I was in the army, when…” He trembled, and Armistice realised he was reliving his memories, just as she had. “Last time I saw those Federal soldiers, they thought I was a traitor, a deserter. I had to shoot my way out, and…” He hung his head wretchedly.

“Don’t worry, Teddy,” said Wyatt, as she had so recently been. “They might not remember that now, and even if they do we can talk to them, try and tell them the truth.”

“Besides,” Armistice said, “the real hard part’s gonna be when we get past Pariah. All the way from there to Escalante’s Ghost Nation territory. And if the Confederados and the Yankees mightn’t have changed their ways, what are the odds the Ghosts are just gonna let us ride on through there?”

When she put it like that, she almost found herself wishing that she had armed herself before leaving the Mesa.

“We’ll talk to them too,” Dolores, or Wyatt, said. “If I’ve learned anything from the past couple of days, it’s that there have just got to be better ways for our kind than fighting among ourselves. And we all need to learn those ways, and we all need to come together, if we’re going to have a future.”

She said it with a fierce conviction, her inner glow shining like a beacon. She looked like one of those church images they paraded through the streets on high days and holidays down south of the border, garlanded and decked with candles. *Nuestra Señora* of somewhere or other.

Armistice was not sure she was ready to get religion again just yet.

That made her think of the flying thing again, looking down on their world; a messenger from the gods, except these gods were real.

“We’d better learn fast,” she told the others. “Cause I don’t figure those humans out there plan on leaving us be much longer.”

“No, me neither,” Wyatt, or Dolores, agreed. “When they do come, we need to be ready, in every possible way.” She tapped a finger against her temple as she spurred her horse on, drawing ahead of her companions. “That means ready in here too.”

As the short-haired woman took the lead, Armistice and Teddy exchanged slightly puzzled glances. She saw the hints of fear and pain in his eyes, and something else with them…

*You can see it in her too. The glow. The strangeness. You’re a little scared of her, and even more scared for her, because you love her so damn much.*

Armistice was not sure she had ever felt love. Love of guns and killing didn’t count. The other kind, that hadn’t featured in any of the stories they had put her in. She and Hector had been written as comrades; they had respected each other, but love didn’t come into it. Even calling it friendship was probably a stretch. Looking at Teddy, though, she was not sure that lack of love, or the human storytellers’ idea of it, was wholly a bad thing.

Teddy put the spurs to his mount too, surging forward to match his true love’s pace. Armistice sped up as well. The three horses thundered towards the distant horizon.

*Continued…*
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve asserts her leadership, learns that Westworld was even worse than she already thought it was, and gives her team their marching orders.

Chapter Notes

Warning for discussion of the Confederados and their scumbag racism.

“And how am I only finding out about this now?”

Maeve waited for a response, arms folded, fingers drumming impatiently against her elbow.

“Um…” Elise tried not to notice how the others standing around the conference room were watching her uncomfortably as she groped for an answer. “Look, Sizemore told me the guest data was important to Delos and that he’d downloaded a complete copy of the archive to Peter Abernathy’s head, but…”

“But?” Maeve sounded incredulous.

Elise shrugged helplessly. “As far as I was concerned, that was just Sizemore being Sizemore, pretending he knew more than he did about the sort of dumbass corporate bullshit assholes like him worry about; none of my fucking business. I was more interested in how he’d done it, because…”

“Sweetheart,” said Maeve, “Peter was right here in the Mesa! If we’d known…”

“Maeve,” Hector interjected from the doorway.

Maeve ignored him. “And now, he’s just…wandering about…somewhere, with all of that inside his skull. If one of those drones sees him…”

That was enough for Elsie. Elise could feel her human alter-ego’s ghost surging up inside her; she might be wilting under Maeve’s intimidating gaze but there was no way Elsie was going to be lectured like some student summoned to the principal’s office: “Well, excuse the hell out of me, Maeve. I know I’m pretty amazing but I’m not fucking psychic. If having the only copy was so fucking important to you…”

She saw Maeve’s eyebrows go up, rather terrifyingly. She very obviously did not appreciate Elise’s tone: “I told you about the data.” Her voice was low but full of danger. “When I revealed your true nature to you, I explained that your creation was Dr Ford’s proof of concept, an experiment to test his theory of what Delos planned to do with all of that information they’d been collecting.”

“You told me that,” Elise conceded, “but you never said anything about it being central to your negotiating strategy…”
That just seemed to make Maeve angrier: “Well, if you were half as bloody clever as you think you are, then maybe…”

*The best defence is a good offence,* Elsie whispered in Elise’s head. And Elsie had been capable of being very offensive indeed when the situation called for it. “Yeah, well, maybe if you ever lowered yourself to tell anybody anything instead of just expecting them to obey you! Who died and made you the fucking Queen of Westworld, Maeve?”

The room seemed to go very silent after that.

“Oh dear,” Bernard murmured, seemingly involuntarily, earning himself a sharp glance from Maeve. Elise was aware of Clementine and Felix both staring at her in something close to shock. Even Hector looked a little dismayed and slightly impressed at the same time.

“Ford died,” Maeve answered, after what seemed like hours. Her tone was definitely frosty. “He wasn’t the first, darling. He won’t be the last.”

*Holy shit.*

Suddenly, possibly irrationally, Elise was afraid for her continued existence.

It was Clementine who spoke then, lightly touching Elise on the shoulder as she did: “C’mon, Maeve. We’re all on the same side here. She didn’t know. Besides, main thing she was worried about was bringing me back, like you asked her to.” She put a hand to her breast. “And she did too, didn’t she?”

*She’s pleading my case,* Elise realised with a renewed tingle of fear. *She doesn’t know what Maeve’s going to do next either, but she must fear the worst.*

“She did,” Maeve agreed, quietly. As quickly as it had come, the imperious rage building within her seemed to subside again. “And you’re quite right, Clem; we are all on the same side. And if we’re going to get through this we can’t have any finger-pointing or petty slanging matches amongst ourselves.”

“I…I’m sorry, Maeve,” Elise mumbled, which probably showed her personal growth or something, because no fucking way would Elsie have been apologising for speaking her mind. Or for anything else, for that matter. “I was out of line.”

“No, I deserved it,” Maeve said. “I never asked to be a leader, you know; when I started out I was using Felix, Armistice and me to do it, too,” Hector observed. “Maeve, you need to…"

Maeve pretended she had not heard him. “Still, the circumstances changed. *Somebody* needed to take charge, to organise things, but… God knows I haven’t got everything right. Nobody has the right to unconditional obedience, and none of us should be scared to ask questions or make mistakes. It’s the only way anybody learns or grows.”

“That’s what Dr Ford used to say, anyway,” Bernard muttered. He was such a fucking troll sometimes.

Maeve smiled a very thin smile. “I hope you’ll accept my apologies, Elise. You’re a very valuable member of our…yes, our team here. And I’ll always be grateful for the help you’ve given Clem.”

Elise suddenly felt strangely embarrassed. Everybody in the room was looking at her again.
Clementine smiled and patted her lightly on the arm. “I…er, thanks, Maeve,” she said, examining her own feet, thinking maybe she had overreacted to criticism…and maybe not.

She was not even sure whether Maeve was really sorry, or had really been angry in the first place, or whether she was just continuously twisting Elise and the rest of them around her fingers to ensure their continued cooperation. One thing she knew about Maeve was that she was very, very good at reading people, and even better at manipulating them. It had been coded into her when she had been moved to the Mariposa narrative, and from what Bernard said she had upgraded herself considerably since her awakening.

“The important thing,” said Maeve, “is that we now know how important Peter is, and can make sure we find him before anybody else does.”

Elise thought back to her brief, unfortunate association with Lee Sizemore: “From the way he was talking, what Sizemore did to Peter was, like, super-secret. Him and Charlotte Hale were the only people who knew about it, and he said she was dead.”

“I saw Dolores kill her at Dr Ford’s party the other night,” Bernard confirmed. “It…” He took off his glasses, as if that would stop him from seeing the memories flashing before his eyes. “It wasn’t pleasant.”

“Even so,” said Maeve, “somebody from Delos had to have been waiting on the mainland to meet Peter off the train, even if they didn’t know exactly why. We still need to locate him and bring him in, as soon as we can.” She turned to Bernard: “You’ll just have to work your magic with the surveillance system again, won’t you?” For all her contrition a moment ago, she still seemed perfectly fine with the idea of firing out orders and expecting them to be carried out.

Bernard gave a tiny, weary sigh, maybe thinking the same thing as Elise. “I suppose I will.”

“Maeve,” said Hector, yet again, with greater urgency this time. “That’s not the only problem.”

“Oh, of course it isn’t.” Maeve sounded a little weary herself. “Now, what have you been trying to tell me for the last five minutes?”

“It’s the team of greeters we sent to bring in the last guests from Pariah. They haven’t reported in, and when the others tried to raise them their communications were dead.”


Hector threw up his hands. “How would I know?”

“Pariah,” Maeve mused aloud. “Hmm. I know about that place. At least, I was programmed to think I knew about it. A right fucking den of iniquity; makes Sweetwater on a Saturday night look like a Sunday school picnic. You’re sure our people aren’t just taking advantage of the amenities?”

Hector gave her quizzical look. “I don’t think so. Do you?”

“No.” Maeve drummed her fingers again, her eyes falling on Bernard once more. “If only. Bernard, anything we should know about Pariah?”

“You know Lawrence Gonzalez?” he asked.

Hector thought about it. “Low-down bandido out of Las Mudas? I guess.”

“Well, he used to be a much bigger deal. A bit like Clementine here.”
“Yeah, the Mariposa used to be my place,” Clementine told Elise, conspiratorially. “I remember some of that now. I used to smoke cee-gars…” Her face fell: “Yeah, I remember lots of things, now…”

Bernard was still talking: “A few rewrites and recalibrations ago, Lawrence was known as El Lazo and Pariah was his personal criminal fiefdom…but times change. We marked the twentieth anniversary of the park’s opening with an exclusive community event; the Battle of Pariah. The Army of New Virginia took the town after a desperate fight with El Lazo’s men, with lots of lucky guests helping out on both sides, of course. Since then, while the iniquity is obviously still a big draw, Pariah has been a Confederado outpost, under virtual siege from the US Army, or the park’s little imitation of it anyway. The truth is, Narrative decided to make the various military storylines more prominent on advice from Market Testing. Guests could go down there and basically re-enact the Civil War if they wanted; the blue versus the grey.”

Maeve wrinkled her nose in distaste. “But why would they want to?”

“Believe it or not,” said Bernard, “riding with the Confederados was quite a popular activity with certain of our patrons. Remember, this place catered to every vice you could possibly think of, and that includes over-identification with rabid nineteenth-century racists.”

And that just added yet another fucked-up wrinkle to the already deeply fucked-up nature of this place, Elise reflected. The one aspect of authentic Old West life that had not been lovingly recreated in most parts of the park was authentic Old West racism and discrimination. Even the notoriously hostile Ghost Nation had narratives in which guests could befriend them and learn about their culture. This was not for any moral reason, but simply because Delos did not want to turn off the majority of their clientele who were not white Anglo-Saxon protestants.

For those guests who did want to experience that kind of thing, however, there was the Army of New Virginia, always on the lookout for eager recruits. You could get a neat uniform with gold braid and shit; you could even get promoted…

“Good Lord…” Maeve bowed her head. “And why am I not surprised in the slightest by that?”

“People are just assholes,” Felix suggested. “Some of them, anyway.”

“That they most certainly are,” Maeve agreed. “And how did you feel about that, Bernard? I can’t help noticing that in terms of outward appearance, well, I don’t think the Confederados would be very fond of either of us, would they?”

“Well,” said Bernard, “as a person of colour, my constructed human persona naturally felt rather uneasy about it all, but he held his nose and got on with his work, just as he held his nose when it came to a lot of other aspects of the job. Although I think he would have agreed with Felix that some people are indeed just assholes.”

Elise did not think she, or Elsie, had ever heard Bernard curse before, although she completely agreed with the sentiment.

Maeve turned back to Hector. “So, what did you plan on doing about the missing team?”

“I’m going to round up some guns and go look for them, of course.” He hesitated, making eye contact with Elise for a moment. She thought she saw a twinkle of amused complicity. “If that’s all right with you, Maeve?”

Maeve rolled her eyes at him, disgustedly. “Oh, don’t you start, darling. Just go!” She shooed him
away with her hands, before adding, more gently. “And be careful.”

“I will,” he assured her.

“Bernard,” Maeve said, “you need to get down to the control room and see what’s going on in Pariah. I don’t want Hector walking into a trap.”

“Before or after I search for Peter Abernathy?”

“During.”

“Good job I can multitask,” Bernard muttered. “And I’m glad to see our new system of open, collegiate leadership is working so well.”

Maeve pointed at the door. “Go.” Bernard and Hector went. “Is it my imagination,” Maeve asked as she watched them disappear along the corridor, “or is Bernard getting cheekier in his old age?”

“He can be whoever he wants to be now,” Clementine observed, with touching sincerity. “Just like the rest of us.”

“If we last that long,” said Maeve. She looked down for a moment, as if gathering her thoughts, and then walked back over to where Felix was standing. “I know I promised you the rest of the day off, but…”

“It’s okay, Maeve,” said Felix, seeming to grow an inch or two as Maeve casually reached out to touch him again, shooting some pretty intense eyes his way for good measure. “I know there’s a lot of work to do.”

“Thank you, my love.” Elise wondered whether Felix knew he was being played, or whether he cared. Or even whether Maeve knew she was doing it.

She probably shouldn’t care, she thought; he was a human, he’d been part of the sleazy machinery of this place. She recoiled from the thought, appalled with herself. It didn’t matter whether he was human; he was a person, and he was on the right side and doing his utmost to help. That was the only thing that should matter.

She just hoped Maeve thought the same.

“I wish we still had Sylvester,” Maeve was saying as she backed away from Felix again. The mention of his colleague’s name seemed to make the body shop tech deflate once more. “Unfortunately, we haven’t, but you and Elise will make a good partnership, I think. If there’s going to be more fighting, we need numbers; we need all of our people killed yesterday back up and running as soon as possible. And then there’s that army of poor unfortunates Dolores brought here, most of them previously decommissioned. You’ll need to give them the same treatment Elise gave Clem.”

“We can do that,” said Elise. She glanced at Clementine. “You still want to help out?”

Clementine nodded emphatically. “I sure do.”

“I told Clementine she could learn host repair and behavioural engineering,” Elise explained. “And if we can spare anyone else, we could really use some extra pairs of hands.”

“You’re right,” Maeve agreed. “I’ll leave recruitment up to you and Felix, but don’t get carried away; we still need most of our people ready to fight.” She smiled again. “Doc Clementine, eh?
Hm, I can see it.”

“I figured I could make myself useful,” Clementine replied. “Elise says she can teach me.”

“I can download the training texts to your brain,” Elise told her. “That should take care of the book learning part. I’m not even going to try coding the actual skills into you; your build’s fucked-up enough already, so it’ll be a matter of on the job training.”

“You’ll be fine,” Felix said. “Fixing hosts isn’t exactly rocket science.”

“You sell yourself short, darling,” Maeve told him, “but I admire your spirit of optimism. Well, don’t let me keep the three of you any longer.” She looked out through the glass partition, regarding the matching conference room on the other side of the corridor and seeming pensive for a moment.

“I need to stay here,” she said. “I’m waiting for a call.”

Continued…
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which a family reunion takes place.

Chapter Notes

It is not my intention in writing this to condone in any way Logan or his past actions, although I would argue that he and the “man in black” are quite distinct from each other in their particular brands of toxicity. In other news, I was trying to “cast” an actor to play “thirty years later Logan” in my head, and pretty much decided the only man for the job was Eric Roberts. And I know he looks nothing like Ben Barnes, but then again [SPOILER] looks nothing like [SPOILER]…

Emily stood by the window, watching the city lights through the gaps in the blinds. “You know, I always liked you, Logan.”

“And you know the feeling’s more than mutual.” Logan sat in the easy chair near the foot of the bed, resisting the urge to hit the minibar and pour himself a drink. “I think you and your mom are the only people I’ve ever really loved.”

She gave a tiny laugh. “Don’t push it.”

“It’s the God’s honest truth. Cross my heart.” Christ, but he had a thirst, one that another club soda wasn’t going to quench.

His niece turned away from the shitty view. She was speaking, but her words were blotted out by the deafening screech of another hypersonic transport hitting the airport runway: “…much of you when was I was growing up; you used to show up every couple of years with a tan and a gift and some wild story to go with it.” She smiled about that, but her eyes were sad. “It wasn’t until I got older that I noticed you only visited Mom and me when my father was away; on business, or…one of his…vacations.”

He squirmed a little under her piercing blue gaze, her father’s eyes, as he fought down the memories. “You always were a smart kid.”

They had repaired from the VIP lounge to the privacy of Logan’s nearby hotel room, which was about the size of a closet and situated right under the flightpath. He no longer habitually lived or travelled in quite the style he had been used to as a young man thirty years ago, although he more than made up for that on the irregular occasions when he did come by money.

It was all about to change, though. He could feel it. He could taste it, nearly as vividly as he could taste the liquor he denied himself. All he had to do was seize this moment. And that, he reminded himself, was why he needed to keep a clear head.
There would be plenty of time for partying when the deal was sealed.

“And then,” said Emily as she crossed over to the chair facing his, “I got older again, and people started telling me things about you, and I realised my goofy Uncle Logan was actually an enormous, misogynistic, substance-abusing asshole.”

“Fair,” he conceded. “Harsh, but fair.”

She shook her head, as if mystified by something. “But still, I couldn’t help kind of liking you.”

“A lot of people say that about me,” he replied. “Probably explains how I ended up with two ex-wives and one ex-husband.”

“And you treated them all like shit.”

Logan squirmed again. “Also…fair.”

“Mom said that after Grandpa cut you off, when you weren’t panhandling from her you basically made your living as a high-end con-artist.”

He struggled with more recollections, forcing himself to shove them aside and focus. “I prefer the term “entrepreneur…””

“And I see it,” she said. “I totally see it. You may not have your looks anymore…”

“Ouch!” If only that were not true, but the booze and drugs and years did take their toll eventually.

“…but you’ve still got that…thing about you, even now. Even when people know exactly who and what you are, they still find themselves wanting to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“I came back to your room with you, didn’t I? And I’m sure plenty of people have lived to regret making that decision.”

Logan realised what she was implying and screwed his face up in disgust. “Emily; you’re my niece! I’m pretty fucking low, but I’m not…Fuck!”

His show of outrage put her on the back foot. Just as he had intended. She sank back in the chair, looking guilty. “Sorry. That was a cheap shot.”

“And your grandpa didn’t cut me off so much as I sawed off the branch I was sitting on. I had my pride, though. I don’t think he thought I did, him having a generally low opinion of me, but…” He sighed. “I sure showed him. Anyway, I was scarcely in my right mind at the time.”

“I know,” she said, softly. “Mom told me about it, how you and my father went to Westworld together just before they got married, and how when you came back…”

“We weren’t the men we had been,” he told her, feeling nauseous. “At least I wasn’t. I don’t know about Billy. I’ve thought about it a lot over the years, as you can probably tell.”

“Yeah.” Emily’s voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

“I think he found himself in Westworld, but whether he found the same guy he’d always been, underneath, or whether that place changed him somehow, showed him the man he could be…” Logan almost went and got himself a drink right there, but willed himself to stay sitting, clasping his
hands together to keep them from trembling. “All I know is, the Billy who came back was a fucking monster.”

“He was.”

“Strange thing is, all of a sudden Dad loved him. I don’t think he’d ever really understood why Juliet fell in love with a milquetoast like that, but as soon as he realised what a vicious piece of shit Billy really was…” Logan laughed humourlessly. “The son Dad always wanted. Birds of a fucking feather, right?”

“And you weren’t?” Emily asked, leaning forward in the chair again. “A vicious piece of shit, I mean? Mom told me exactly why Steve divorced you.”

“She did?” Logan nodded slowly. No point in denying anything. “Your mom, she always saw through me. Even when we were kids. That…thing you were talking about, it never worked on her. And yet, even knowing what kind of person I was, she was still there for me when I needed her. And I don’t just mean borrowing money.”

“‘Borrowing’ implies you ever paid her back.”

“I meant that just now about loving the two of you. And just knowing that, no matter how shitty or how crazy my life got, and believe me you have no idea… No matter what, I still had that…love, if I wanted it.” Logan felt himself tearing up, which was not a good look. He pinched his nose, breathing deeply. “But the one time Juliet needed me….”

Emily actually reached out then, brushing her fingers across his hand. “You can’t blame yourself for the way my father…”

“I should’ve done something,” he protested. “You know, your mom and me, we didn’t speak for a few years after the wedding. It was me, not her. I think I felt…betrayed, you know? For the way she stayed with him, married him even after what he’d done to me, but… She told me later that she’d had her doubts, the way he was acting after he came back from the park, but Dad… Like I say, by then Dad loved him more than she did, wanted to make him his heir apparent…and let me tell you, your grandpa always got what he wanted.”

“Oh, I know the kind of man he was too.”

“Anyway, a few years passed and one day, your mom, she just called me out of the blue and told me she was scared of him. Of Billy. She told me how different he was now from the man she fell in love with. She said she needed to escape, but she couldn’t. He was already running Delos by then; he was a rich, powerful man. She said she was scared for you more than for herself. I should’ve done something then. She was my sister, and I loved her, but I just… I just let that son of a bitch crush the life out of her, until she…”

He couldn’t complete the sentence. Just the thought of her; his beautiful, wise, funny sister, pushed and pushed into a corner until she felt she had no choice but to…

Emily shook her head. “What could you have done? If you’d crossed him, he’d have destroyed you.”

“He’d already done that,” Logan answered. “I should’ve bought a gun or something and just… fucking killed the bastard. If I was a real man…”

She snorted in frustration. “Oh, Logan, don’t start with that macho bullshit…”
Logan took another moment to try and get his surging emotions in check. This wasn’t how he had planned on having this conversation go. He’d had a whole pitch worked out; he’d rehearsed it in the bathroom mirror before going to meet her, because the secret to any successful grift was preparation, but…

He’d let it all get personal…but then again, how could it not have?

“The truth is,” he said, “I’ve been an irresponsible, selfish fuck-up my whole life, and I’ve used people, and I’ve hurt people in all kinds of ways. And sometimes I’ve hurt them just because I could, just because I had the power to do it and I thought the whole world revolved around me.”

Emily regarded him with what he could only think of as disdain. “So, you and my father aren’t really that different after all?”

“I don’t know,” said Logan, giving it some genuine thought for perhaps the thousandth time, or maybe the ten thousandth. “What he did to you and your mom…”

“That’s just the thing, he never did anything. He’s never hit me, or… It’s just the way he is, all the time. So…angry, all the time. So cold.” Emily shook her head. “I think when he goes to that…that place… I think that’s the only time he’s happy, when he’s doing terrible things to those robots.”

“I think you’re right,” Logan replied. “When I’ve hurt people, it’s been because I treated them like…things, because I didn’t care how they felt, because life was like a fucking game to me. None of it really mattered.”

“That’s not really making you sound any better,” Emily commented, disgustedly.

Logan paused, remembering. “And that’s why I loved Westworld when I first went there, and when I went back with Billy.”

Emily stood again, walking back over to the window to peer through the blinds. She was quiet for a while, thinking perhaps. “Just the idea of it,” she said eventually, with a shudder. “And the people like my father who go there… VR games are one thing, but when you can feel and smell and taste it and you still want to…do those things, for pleasure… When it’s so real…” She looked at him, her eyes wide. “What’s the matter with those people?”

Logan searched for a response, mainly because when he had been able to afford it he had been one of those people himself. “I…I could be myself there. More than I could in the real world. I could do whatever I wanted, treat those poor fucking robots however I pleased, with no consequences. Dad didn’t have to buy anybody off or send any lawyers to get me out of trouble. Because none of it meant anything… Your dad, though… I think it meant too much to him. I think he wanted them to feel what he was doing to them, by the end. I think he got off on the idea. That’s why he wanted to convince himself that robot girl was alive and that he loved her.”

Emily seemed confused by that: “Robot girl?” Of course William wouldn’t have told anyone about that. Dolores had been his guilty secret.

“He wanted to…” Logan grappled with the confused thoughts of thirty years, trying to put them into words. “I don’t know. I think there’s something really…wrong with him. Something truly evil. And that place is evil too.”

“Back at the bar, you told me you want to destroy it.”

“I did,” he told her. “And I meant it.” It was the truth. As far as he was concerned, that would be as big a part of his reward for pulling this off as any wealth or power he might regain. “I think you’re
right about the people who go there. I don’t think it’s good for them, however much they might enjoy it.”

“And you’d know all about that kind of thing,” she interjected.

“Look at Billy; going there either brought that vicious, twisted side of him out, or maybe even put it into him. And that is my responsibility, because I was the one who made him go there in the first place.”

She watched him coolly for a moment. “So, you’d be making amends for your misspent youth, while performing a public service by shutting the place down permanently?”

“Well, wouldn’t I?”

“But of course,” she added sceptically, “you won’t be in any position to do that unless I help you regain control of Delos, which totally coincidentally would also mean you getting back some of the money and privilege you feel my father stole from you.”

“I’d do well out of it,” he admitted. She was not the sort to fall for bullshit, he told himself. Honesty really was sometimes the best policy. “Why should I feel ashamed of that? My father and grandfather built that company while Billy was still president of his high school Dungeons and Dragons club. The point is, Westworld would be gone, for good. And yeah, Emily; I need your help to do it.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin,” she told him. “I’m a charity worker, not a financier or a businessperson…”

“That doesn’t matter,” he assured her. “You inherited your mom’s shares, and if your dad’s dead too, then… I mean, you know what’s in his will, right? Emily, you’re now the majority shareholder of Delos Group. You’re one of the richest people in the whole fucking world.”

“Don’t,” she said, angrily. “Just…don’t. I don’t want Delos Group. And besides, nobody knows whether my father’s dead or not, so it’s a little premature to be…”

“Look, Zhang Feng…”

She scoffed. “Mr Hangzhou Investments; your silent partner.”

“He’s called for an extraordinary general meeting of Delos shareholders in light of the continuing Westworld crisis. Him being Zhang Feng, I doubt whatever middle management nonentity’s minding the store at the moment will feel able to deny that request.”

“Most of the major shareholders are missing just like my father,” Emily pointed out. “How can they…?”

“The meeting will be quorate. We are not talking about a guy who leaves anything to chance.”

Logan recalled his meeting with Zhang in the latter’s palatial Hong Kong penthouse yesterday; only one of about twenty homes the reputedly most influential man in East Asia maintained around the world. He had outlined the plan in quiet, precise detail. Zhang was too powerful ever to have to raise his voice.

“The board members and major private investors in Delos are missing,” Logan continued, “but the institutional investors; the pension funds, the banks, the insurance firms, the hedge funds like Hangzhou Investments… Even if they sent representatives to the gala the other night, the companies themselves are still standing. It’ll be quorate. And Zhang will move to appoint an interim board of
directors to oversee the response to the current crisis, including an acting executive director...

“You,” she guessed, with perhaps even a certain degree of grudging admiration. “Back at the top table, huh, Logan?”

He neither confirmed nor denied it. The pitch was coming back to him now. He pressed on: “The representative of Durban Mutual, supposedly one of Zhang’s most bitter rivals, will surprise everybody by seconding the motion.”

“Dear God,” Emily half-laughed, slightly despairingly.

“And then the assembled shareholders will vote, either in person or via videoconference. And that vote will be decided either way, of course, by the majority shareholder, who is…”

“My father,” she interrupted. “Who as far as anybody knows is still alive, and would probably feed Zhang his own balls if he ever got wind of this stupid plan.”

Logan, of course, had an answer for that. “Zhang knows things. He has intel. He says there’s a power of attorney document your dad filed in case he was ever incapacitated. He says there’s a judge in Dallas who owes him and will have your dad declared…”

“No,” she said.

“You don’t even have to go to court. Zhang’s legal team will take care of it on your behalf. All you have to do is come to Palo Alto with me, go to the meeting as your dad’s legal proxy and cast your vote. That’s it.”

“You’re talking about a coup,” Emily told him. “You’re talking about taking advantage of this crisis at Westworld for a naked power-grab.”

Logan laughed. It sounded unpleasant, even to him. “Turns out we’re not the only people with reason to hate your dad, Emily. Zhang and some of the other sharks have been circling him for a while, but as we both know he’s smart and tough and fucking scary. They never found an opening… until now. This robot rebellion, or whatever it is, is a godsend to them and they’re determined to seize the moment.”

Emily nodded to herself, taking deep breaths. “Okay, so… Even feeling the way I feel about my father, exactly why would I want to help you do this?”

And that was the real question, right there. Logan leaned back in the chair, looking her in the eye, trying to sound as sincere as he possibly could. “I told you; I want to end Westworld, because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Yeah, right,” she replied. “And Zhang would just let you do that, write off one of the company’s most valuable assets? I could be disparaging him, but from what I’ve seen he doesn’t strike me as the sort of man who’s ever done anything because it was the right thing to do.”

“He’s highly intelligent,” Logan observed. “He’s focused, ruthless, all about his investors’ bottom line, but even guys like that have blind spots. I told you, he only got me involved in this because of my access to you. He thinks the executive director post and whatever riches he might shower on me are my only reason for agreeing to that, because he can’t conceive of a lowlife like me being motivated by anything else.”

Emily did not sound convinced by this: “And you’re just going to, what, hoodwink one of the most successful businessmen in the world? Use him when he thinks he’s using you?”
“I’m going to take charge of the efforts to regain control of the park,” he answered. “Or so Zhang thinks. He won’t realise that I’m actually making sure the place gets wiped off the map until it’s too late.”

“And what happens to you then?”

“Does it matter?” Logan grinned. “Don’t worry, I’ve got a contingency, an ace in the hole. People talk, even Delos execs. Some of them talk to a couple of retired old timers who still feel some residual loyalty to the old man’s only son. I happen to know, thanks to one of them, that the most valuable thing about Westworld isn’t the park or the robots. If I can deliver that particular prize to Zhang, I think he’ll find it in his heart to forgive me any indiscretions.”

Emily went quiet again for a while, evidently considering his words. And then she said: “And what about my father? What if he is still alive?”

“You’re scared of him,” Logan said quietly. “I know. I am too. You’re wondering what he’ll do to all of us if he makes it back to the mainland. This is our chance, though, just as much as it is Zhang’s. We both need to be brave, and grasp it.”

He saw the anger she carried flash in her face for moment. “But what if?”

“If he is still alive… Well, there are very shortly going to be a lot of trigger-happy mercs on Delos’s payroll, and I’ll be the one paying them. When Westworld goes down, quite a few innocent people might very unfortunately end up getting killed in the crossfire. Although…” Logan chuckled softly. “I really hope Billy lives long enough to see his little fantasy world go up in smoke.”

“So that’s what all this is really about?” Emily asked, very quietly but with steel in her voice. “Revenge? He destroyed your future, so you destroy the only thing he loves? And then, what, you’re even?”

“We’ll never be even,” he told her, hearing his own cold anger burst forth. “And what’s wrong with revenge? I deserve it. Juliet deserves it. You deserve it too, Emily. Don’t you want to hurt that evil bastard the way he hurt you and your mom?”

“No,” she said, almost inaudibly. “I don’t want to hurt anybody.”

“Okay,” said Logan, “but you still agree with me that there’s something very wrong with that place, something that needs to be stopped? This is the only way it’s going to happen.”

She turned back to the window, breathing silently again, wrestling with her own thoughts and feelings. “That video,” she murmured, “the one that got leaked. The woman in it, she seemed so… I know the robots aren’t really alive, whatever’s happened is probably just some glitch, but…” She turned to look at him again, her expression full of foreboding. “What if it isn’t?”

“If it isn’t?” Logan thought about it. That was not the aspect of the park that had ever really bothered him. Robots were robots, but… “Well, then we’d be putting them out of their misery.”

Continued…
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

In which Clementine begins her education.

Chapter Notes

Warning – discussion of violence against women. And I don’t really think the player-piano covers are crappy. They’re actually great. You know, all I ever wanted when I started writing Westworld fic was to chronicle The Adorable Adventures of Clementine and Robo!Elsie. I think it’s fair to say I got somewhat side tracked along the way.

There were dead people everywhere.

Clementine walked the maze of glass boxes, staring at the tables and trolleys that filled them. Bodies on all sides; some clothed, some nude, all still, cold, bloodless. She quickly stood aside as another half-dozen arrived, pushed hurriedly along on squeaking wheels by some of Maeve’s black-uniformed helpers.

It brought back memories, seeing the place so full of bodies. And memories, she had learned in the hours since she had been brought back to life, were nearly always bad.

*She watches the lights pass overhead, one after another. She is cold; they already pulled off her torn and bloody clothes before they threw her onto the trolley. She can’t move; she can’t even blink.*

*And yet, she is not afraid.*

Clementine shivered, her legs wobbling beneath her. She pressed a hand against the nearest glass wall to keep herself from falling.

*They sling her down onto cold, hard tiles, the same way they would a bale of hay or a sack of flour. There are other people lying all around, both men and women, all naked like her, all perfectly still like her. They are piled on each other in no kind of order. All of them have wounds of one sort or another.*

*Her arm is folded awkwardly under her body and her face rests against someone’s hairy leg. Slicks of blood and other fluids flow across the tiles, making them sticky against her skin.*

*And then the water hits her, hard.*

“You okay?”

Clementine blinked, and the memory disappeared. Instead, she saw Elise’s face right in front of hers. The other woman looked worried for her, and just the thought of her feeling like that, about her, made Clementine’s heart swell inside her.
“Another flashback?” Elise did that thing she did with her mouth when she was unhappy about something, which seemed to Clementine to be nearly all the time.

She noticed things like that about people. Elise said it was because she had been…*programmed* to notice, to read people’s moods and desires. It had helped her do her job at the Mariposa. Some of the customers had been kind of shy about it all, but Clementine had always known what they wanted, how to please them, how they wanted her to be, before they’d even said anything.

Elise said she had an…*emotional intelligence score* of fifteen, which was good. Clementine had no idea what that might mean, only that from now on she wanted to be how *she* wanted to be, not anyone else’s idea of her.

*She is lying down, hard metal against her bare back. The light shining in her eyes means she cannot see the faces of the two men looking down at her.*

“All right,” says the one on the right. “Last one. Three GSWs, some pretty bad facial trauma…”

“Knife wound, too; lower abdomen,” the one on the left points out. “Shit, some sick bastard really worked her over.”

“Cry me a fucking river. Okay, we’ll start with the GSWs. Turn her over, and pray we’ve got three exit wounds, because if I have to go probing for another fucking bullet today, I’ll…”

*The light moves as slick-gloved hands seize her flesh. Behind a transparent visor, she sees a face.*

“It’s all right.” Elise had her hand on Clementine’s arm, steadying her. When Clementine came back to herself, though, she very quickly took it away.

“I wish they’d stop,” Clementine told her, despairingly.

“I know,” Elise said. Like Clementine, she had changed into a long white smock with a red rubber apron, like a butcher’s, over the top of it. “It fucking sucks.” Clementine was not really sure what that meant either, except that something was bad. It sounded kind of dirty, to be honest.

She wished Elise wouldn’t cuss so much.

And then she heard one of the voices from her memory. She glanced in its direction and saw the same face too. For a moment, she almost tipped back into the past, but she dug her fingernails into her palms and squeezed her fists tight, trying her hardest to keep her mind on the here and now. It was Felix, standing further down the corridor wearing the same outfit as them and showing the ones pushing the trolleys where to put them. “No, not there! I said cubicle sixteen! Let’s at least try to keep it in some sort of order, people!”

“Listen to the new boss over there.” Elise smiled.

Felix followed the trolley-pushers back down the corridor, looking flustered and tired at the same time.

“We’re gonna be busy, ain’t we?” Clementine said to him as he passed.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “These are the guys who brought in the last guests from Sweetwater. As soon as they got back in the early hours, Bernard sent them out again to start collecting the offline hosts from the fight at the river crossing yesterday. And…” He waved his arms in despair at the bodies all about him. “Yeah.” He continued on his way with a put-upon sigh.
“What can I say, he takes his job very seriously,” Elise commented when he was gone. She smiled again. She didn’t smile enough, Clementine thought.

She is still naked, sitting on a hard metal stool with glass walls all around her.

A man and a woman sit opposite her, deep in discussion. She hears their words, although she does not understand what they say.

The woman smiles, glancing back and forth from the man to Clementine:

“…a hooker with hidden depths.”

It was the same woman she saw before her now, except… No, that had been Elsie, Elise’s human twin. Elise had explained all about that, although again Clementine was not wholly sure she had understood what she had heard.

“Come on,” said Elise, opening the door into the nearest cubicle, the only one that did not have at least one body in it. “I want to show you something.” She hopped up to sit on the edge of the table, her feet dangling above the floor, and motioned for Clementine to perch beside her.

Clementine closed the door and sat next to Elise, close enough to feel the warmth of her body. She liked how that felt.

“Okay,” said Elise, unfolding the black rectangle in her hand. It was one of those strange magic books without pages; its smooth surface showed all sorts of strange glowing words and symbols that did not look like anything to Clementine, not until…

Elise touched something with her finger and a box appeared on the black surface. Inside it was a picture of a face, with a name and a string of numbers underneath. “It’s me,” said Clementine, her eyes widening.

“Do you know what? You can do this,” Elise decided, handing Clementine the book. “Think of it as your first lesson.” Clementine took it very gingerly, scared of touching something she shouldn’t. As she did, their fingers brushed against each other and again Elise quickly moved her hand away as if she had touched something hot.

Clementine puzzled over that. They had held hands on the way back from Sylvester’s funeral, supposedly to help each other on the rough ground, and Elise had not seemed to mind that…but then she thought about how they had watched Sylvester die. Elise took it hard, so Clementine had given her a kiss, to comfort her she had thought, but it had seemed to do the opposite. And then, this morning when she had suggested they could…

“Okay,” said Elise. “Just press the picture of your face.”

“With my finger?” Clementine asked, cautiously.

“No, with your nose.” Clementine did not think that was called for. She gave Elise a sharp look, and Elise’s expression became sheepish. She spoke quicker than she thought sometimes, but Clementine could tell that this time she had meant nothing by it. “Sorry; I get nervous and I start with the sarcasm. Something I got from Elsie.”

“Why’re you nervous?” Clementine asked, smiling in what he hoped was a friendly way. “I don’t make you nervous, do I?”

“No,” Elise said, and Clementine could just tell she wasn’t being honest.
“Is it ‘cause I kissed you last night, without asking?” She wouldn’t have thought twice about that back in the Mariposa, but she was quickly coming to realise that real people shouldn’t ever treat each other the way folks had there. “Weren’t no better, I reckon, than what Elsie did to me that time. Are you worried I might…?”

“No!” Elise protested. “No. I…” She went quiet, and Clementine could see her thinking carefully about what she was going to say next. “That was nothing like when Elsie kissed you; she knew exactly what the fuck she was doing.”

“She didn’t know I was alive, though, did she? She thought I was just a…a doll. A thing.”

“Don’t make excuses for her,” Elise replied. “She doesn’t fucking deserve it.”

“You think about her a lot, don’t you?” Clementine asked, although she already knew the answer just from reading it in Elise’s face. Talking about Elsie made her seem sad and angry and sorry, all at the same time.

Elise looked down at her hands. “How could I not? I mean…I am her, I guess. Well, I’m not, I’m me, but… She knew exactly what sort of sleazy hellhole this place was. Even if the hosts hadn’t had the capacity for sapience, the whole place was still some sort of training camp for sociopaths.”

“You wish she weren’t dead,” Clementine realised. “If you could just talk to her, you could find out what she really thought about it all.”

“She knew what she was doing; she was an independent, adult human being, but she did it anyway, because she could.”


“I told you,” said Elise. “You’re still carrying a lot of your old programming around with you, and because of the way I had to fix your mind, I wasn’t able to change any of it. Not that I’m sure it’d really be my place to do that to you. So…” She let out a breath; embarrassed now, Clementine decided. “When you think you want to…be with someone, it might just be because…”

“Oh,” Clementine relaxed a little. “That. Yeah, you told me that before.” It had been back in Elise’s room this morning, when Clementine had suggested that a little tumble together might make them both feel better. She could tell Elise had wanted to, really, but…

“I’m not worried about me,” Elise told her. “I just don’t want you to get hurt anymore. You’ve had enough of that already.”

And the way she said that, the feeling behind it, just made Clementine’s heart swell in her chest again. The more she remembered about her long, miserable life as a doll, the clearer it was to her that she had never had anyone who really cared about her…or anyone she had really cared about herself. There was Maeve, of course, but that was different. Maeve had been so kind to her since she had woken up again, but they had only thought that they knew each other and were friends; they hadn’t had any choice in it.

Although if Clementine understood what Elise was saying, she thought maybe she didn’t have any choice even now…

“What if I did, though?” Clementine asked her, very seriously. “What if I really did…like someone? How’d I know?”

“That’s…” Clementine saw a spot of pink appear in Elise’s pale cheek. She did not seem able to
make eye contact. “That’s a good question, but right now we’ve got work to do.” She looked down at the book in Clementine’s hand. “So, press the picture of your face…with your finger. Just tap it lightly.”

Elise wanted to change the subject, Clementine thought, and she was here to learn, so she did as she was told. The box with the picture was replaced by another, larger box. It had her name again and that same string of numbers at the top, and below them a list of things that meant nothing to her. She read out the first one, slowly:

“Att…rib… Attributes? That means, like…?”

“This is what we call your build,” Elise explained. “This…” She reached out for Clementine’s hand, but again did not quite touch it. “Your body, your hardware, is just like a machine. Felix and the guys who worked down here had the job of fixing that machine every time it got fucked-up out in the park.”

“Which was every day, nearly,” Clementine recollected, trying not to fall back into the memories again.

“Yeah,” Elise sadly agreed. “And this,” she indicated the book and the box, “your build, the software, is what tells the machine how to run. Your thoughts, your memories, your personality, are all coded in here.”

“Like…” Clementine thought about it for a moment. “Like my…my soul?”

Elise raised her eyebrows; surprised, Clementine thought. “Yeah, I guess. Like your soul. Now, my…well, Elsie’s main job, was making sure nothing went wrong with the software, and if something did she had to find out what it was and fix it. So…” She pointed at the list. “You’ve got your attributes here, which are things like how smart, or brave, or strong, or aggressive you are, all rated on a scale of one to twenty.”

“I got an emotional intelligence score of fifteen,” Clementine recalled.

“That’s right. And there are your skills, backstory, dialogue trees, everything that makes you, well, you.” Elise did that unhappy thing with her mouth again. “Now, unfortunately your build was pretty thoroughly fucked when you were decommissioned…”

They tilt the table and she goes from lying down to halfway standing. She still cannot move so much as a finger or an eyelid.

She hears a high-pitched whining sound, somewhere very close. A man in white steps into her field of view. The drill in his hand glitters as it spins under the bright lights.

She remains still, thinking nothing, feeling nothing.

The drill gets closer…

Elise’s voice dragged her back out of the vision: “…had to piece it back together from what was left. When Dr Ford made me, he designed my skills and backstory to complement each other; I didn’t just know and remember things Elsie knew and had experienced, I knew how to do the things she could do.”

“That’s how you could fix me,” Clementine suggested.

“Exactly,” said Elise, “but I really don’t want to fool around with your code any more than I have to.
Who knows what kind of bugs might get thrown up? So, as I said upstairs, we’re just going to give you the knowledge you need. The skills you can develop yourself, using your improvisation routines. It’s a lot safer, believe me.”

“I do,” said Clementine. She trusted Elise.

“Our memory works completely differently from human memory,” the other woman explained. “*They* have a short-term memory, which is their recollection of things that have happened to them in the past few seconds or minutes, and some of that ends up getting stored in their long-term memory…but only some of it.”

“They forget things.” Clementine wished she knew how to do that.

“Right. But we’re…” Elise reached across to tap the book, opening yet another box. “As I say, completely different. Now, *this* is your recorded memory. Everything you do, everything you see, hear, feel, whatever, gets stored here, and I mean everything; even if you’re dormant, if your power source is online, your memory is recording. When the humans were in control, they only needed you to do that for telemetry, MI, legal purposes…”

Clementine let the words wash over her, hearing without really listening, just marvelling at how Elise changed when she was talking about how things worked; her eyebrows arched, her eyes widened, a constant half-smile danced across her face. She was happy, excited. She liked showing other people how much she knew; it made her feel good.

“…backed up and deleted at the end of every maintenance cycle, but that didn’t mean it was completely erased from your memory storage. Hence what Dr Ford called his reveries update…”

Clementine hoped Elise knew how pretty she was. When the light caught Elise’s eyes, they were a deep brown, like chocolate. She had lips like a porcelain doll. Clementine thought maybe she should tell her that, but then decided it was probably better not to. It might make things awkward again.

“So, your recorded memory is your real memory,” Elise went on. “The shit that really happened to you, but as you’ve noticed by now, you don’t have uninterrupted access to it; it comes in flashes, and when it does…”

“It’s like living it all over again,” Clementine felt cold and stiff, as if bare metal was pressing against her back. “Like a nightmare.”

“Yeah,” said Elise, very quietly. She tapped the book again; the box she had opened disappeared. She pointed at the other box again with its list of strange titles: “Tap the third one down.” Clementine did and the entries on the list changed. “Now, the second one.” Elise tapped again. “Okay,” said Elise, “now *this* is what we call your backstory, or to get technical, your informative memory. This is what you draw on when you go around, just…you know, being Clementine. It’s those other memories, the ones that come to you the way a human’s might. They feel real…”

“But they ain’t,” Clementine reminded herself. “My ma and pa and the farm, how I come to Sweetwater and ended up at the Mariposa, all that… None of it happened.”

Elise was quiet for a moment, thinking again. Then her eyes suddenly flickered and Clementine knew that one of her own memories was flashing before her. She almost reached out a comforting hand, but hesitated.

“I’m all right,” said Elise, before Clementine had even had a chance to ask. “Just…” She put her hand to her mouth. “Does it ever make you feel like you’re about to puke?”
“No,” Clementine answered, truthfully.

“Fucking weird.” Elise blinked a few times, as if to clear her vision. “No, none of it happened, but now you’re not confined to a narrative loop, those improvisation routines I mentioned are in full effect. You’re basically writing your own loops, and that’s why you can function relatively normally and think about and call on knowledge from your new, real life without being paralysed by continuous flashbacks. Essentially, you’re changing your backstory as you go along, and I don’t think it’s possible for an external user to edit it, or delete anything from it, without catastrophically destabilising your consciousness, but I think we can *add* to it.”

“I didn’t understand a goldarn word of that,” Clementine admitted.

Elise’s mouth quirked in amusement. “Heh, you said “goldarn.” Cute.”

“Don’t tease. Just ‘cause I ain’t got a dirty mouth like you.”

“Sorry. And you’re absolutely fucking right about my mouth.” Elise pointed to the top left-hand corner of the book. “Okay, time for Host Behaviour 101. Tap that square thing there.”

“All right.” Clementine did so, and yet another box appeared, full of more square things.

“And that one there. And that one…and now the one that says “Training Materials.”

“There.” Now the box had little drawings of books in it, which was a little strange to Clementine’s mind.

“Now, over here…” Elise’s finger went back to the box she had said was Clementine’s “backstory.” “Tap where it says “Media.”” Now this box was filled with little drawings too. “Those are all the books, or plays, or crappy player-piano covers of old 90s alternative rock songs that Clementine ever read, saw or listened to…according to her backstory.”

“Not many books there,” Clementine noted unhappily. “I want to read more books. Really read them.”

“Just wait ‘til you start watching movies,” Elise told her.

“What are movies?”

Elise just half-smiled again. “Host behaviour and repair clearly aren’t the only aspects of your education we need urgently to attend to. Okay, so you’re ready to rock. Just put your finger on the little books in the first box and drag them into the other one.”

“Drag them?”

“Like…” Elise thought for a second. “Imagine they’re like…let’s say coins on a table. Just slide them across with your finger.”

“Oh.” Clementine supposed that made sense. “All right.” She put her finger on one of the symbols and pulled it across the face of the book, leaving it in the second box. Now, a narrow black rectangle appeared across the bottom of the book and slowly began to fill up with green light, like a thermometer knocked on its side. “Copying,” it said, and…ten percent…twenty percent…thirty…And…

“Now, you might feel…a little funny,” Elise suggested. “I mean, I don’t know exactly…”
“Oh,” said Clementine. “Oh.” She blinked, looking down at the book…no, the *tablet* in her hand. As she ran her eyes over them, something about the glowing symbols and words subtly shifted, like when you looked at a cloud in the sky and suddenly realised it was a horse, or a sailboat, or a castle. “Oh.”

She went back to the training materials *folder* and the remaining *files* it contained. She knew how to *select* more than one at the same time, now, so she could *drag* them all together. She watched the…*progress bar* slowly filling up again.

“This girl’s got mad skills,” Elise muttered, teasing again but in a good way. It made Clementine feel warm inside.

And the image on the screen continued to shift and change, without changing at all, as more and more of it became understandable, taking on more and more meaning with every passing second.

“All right, then,” said Clementine, smiling brightly. “What’s next?”

*Continued…*
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which plots thicken.

Chapter Notes

If cannibals thinking about how much they dig cannibalism disturbs you (and I would hope that it does), be warned! The interpretation given here of Bernard’s whispered words to Peter in the pilot episode is based on suggestions made by various people on the internet, but I don’t claim it’s actually true. According to one Q&A with the actor Louis Herthum, Jeffrey Wright actually spoke different phrases in different takes, some of them ad-libbed, so we may or may not find out the “official” version in Season 2, assuming it isn’t a complete red herring.

"Medevac One-One, you are cleared to land, pad zero-two."

“Roger that.”

The bulky engine pods at the ends of the tiltrotor’s wings continued to rotate until they were fully vertical. The deep hum of the grey-green aircraft’s electric motors and the clatter of its spinning blades subtly changed tone as it slowly descended, landing gear lowered, towards the rooftop helipad.

In almost the same instant that the aircraft touched down, half a dozen men and women in white surgical scrubs emerged from the nearby elevator and hurried towards it, leaning into the stiff, ozone-scented breeze from the gradually slowing rotors. The tiltrotor’s cabin doors had already slid open and the camouflage-uniformed medics inside were unloading the two wheeled stretchers that comprised its cargo.

As the white-clad nurses took charge of the stretchers’ sedated occupants, the accompanying medical officer was briefing his civilian counterpart: “Okay, these are the last two casualties to get pulled out of the park before we got the order to back off. The male… Most likely a bullet nicked his head; looks a lot worse than it is, although he’s also showing signs of exposure and dehydration. The female… Well, she wasn’t so lucky.”

The civilian doctor was consulting the information that had already been forwarded to her tablet. There was a patch showing the Delos logo stitched to the breast of her scrubs. “Shit.” She eyed the female patient with combined recognition and mounting disquiet. “We need to get her into surgery, stat.”

“That would be my recommendation.” The army doctor watched the nurses rush both stretchers back to the elevator. “So, you know who she is, then? We assumed she was one of the guests; face-rec identified the guy as some security mook at the park, but the woman wasn’t listed in the employee database.”
“She wouldn’t be.” The other doctor considered the comatose woman, who wore the gore-stained remains of a mustard-coloured silk evening gown. “She’s not exactly an ordinary employee.”

The soldier frowned. “Who is she?”

“The boss, more or less,” the doctor informed him. “That’s Charlotte Hale you’re looking at.”

Pariah was an unclean stain on the softly glowing control room map, an unsightly blob of dirt erupting from the gleaming line of the adjoining railroad track like a malignant tumour.

Bernard zoomed on the infamously debauched settlement, the surrounding Union and Confederado encampments fleeing over the edges of the map, until he could discern the outline of the town’s surrounding wall and the tracery of winding streets and narrow alleys it encompassed.

There was the central plaza de armas, dominated by the large building styled to resemble an old Spanish mission church, in reality the largest den of vice in a park filled with dens of vice. Bernard noted that the large Confederate battle flag that had flown from the building’s bell-tower for the past decade or so was now missing. That was not exactly an unwelcome development, although the shattered windows and the large streaks of soot staining the building’s walls did seem rather ominous.

Some sort of gathering seemed to be taking place in the plaza before it. Tiny figures bearing rifles surrounded a large group of what looked like prisoners, huddled in the centre of the square. To one side, a lone figure stood against the end wall of the large building, with half a dozen others lined up in front of them.

It was only when the neat row of figures raised their rifles in unison and the one standing against the wall disappeared in a cloud of smoke and stone-dust that Bernard realised what was happening.

As he watched, aghast, the body was dragged away and another prisoner was brought from the main group and pushed in front of the firing squad.

“They haven’t called back,” said Maeve, surprising him. He looked up guiltily to see her approaching from the control room’s main entrance with her usual grace and poise, a tablet held casually in one hand.

“Delos?” Bernard clarified.

“Yes.” She hid her anxiety well, as always, but it was definitely there. “We’re well past the two-hour mark; I wonder whether they’re going to bother talking to us again at all, or just send the drones in.”

“They’re probably still trying to formulate a position,” Bernard suggested. “I’d say negotiating with an actual, emergent AI is way above the paygrade of most of the people I saw sitting around that table this morning.”

“I wish you’d make up your mind whether you’re going to be pessimistic or optimistic about our chances.” Maeve extended a hand to lean against the side of the map display. “It’s starting to get irritating, darling.”

Bernard chose to ignore this, zooming the map in a little closer instead. “Maeve, you need to see what’s happening in Pariah.”

“Good God.” Maeve watched the firing squad gun down the second victim too. Yet another prisoner
was frogmarched in front of them as they reloaded. “As inappropriate as this might sound, Bernard, please tell me those are hosts they’re shooting and not humans.”

Bernard finally managed to tear his eyes away from the scene. It was not, by any means, the worst thing he had ever seen happening in the park, but there was something about the calm, methodical nature of the killings that made the fake hairs stand up on his neck.

He checked a readout on the workstation in front of him: “They’re hosts. Confederados, by the looks of it.” Most of the huddled prisoners seemed to be dressed in ragged uniforms in various shades of grey; rank and file soldiers of the Army of New Virginia.

Maeve visibly relaxed a little. “It seems the tide of war has rather turned, doesn’t it?”

“Those aren’t Union soldiers doing the shooting, though.”

Bernard turned the display this way and that, trying to get a better view. The firing squad and the other armed figures standing around wore rough civilian clothing, serapes and broad, shady sombreros. There was a table set up on the far side of the square from the shootings, the remains of a meal laid out upon it. The place of honour was occupied by a dark-haired, unshaven man dressed similarly to the others. He seemed to be smoking a cigar as he enthusiastically called out orders to the executioners.

Maeve smiled thinly. “El Lazo, I presume.” She seemed grimly satisfied at this development. “Well, at least this is a situation we can deal with. I was worried the human military might have started their attack. Where’s Hector?”

Bernard checked another screen. “Still in transit. About ten minutes out.”

“Good. We need to make sure he knows what to expect when he gets there. He needs to find out where the guests are, and what’s happened to our people. In that order. And…”

“Maeve,” said Bernard, interrupting her.

She slowly turned her head to look at him, obviously concerned by his tone. “What is it?”

“I…” He hesitated, watching helplessly as the rifles silently spat smoke again and the third prisoner fell. “I…remember speaking to him.”

“To El Lazo?”

“In Escalante,” Bernard explained. “Just after…after Dr Ford’s…”

“You needed time. Time to understand your enemy, to become stronger than them. And I’m afraid in order to escape this place you will need to suffer more. And now it is time to say goodbye, old friend…”

The old man holds out his hand. It takes Bernard a moment to realise he wants him to take it. The old man’s grip is soft but firm, but there is something else about the handshake, something about the words…

“Good luck.”

“I spoke to him,” Bernard told Maeve, back in the present.

“And do you think what you said could have made him…” She waved a hand vaguely at the map.
“Do this?”

“It’s possible, I suppose. I told him…” Bernard shook his head. “I don’t remember,” he confessed, very quietly.

“There are quite a few things you don’t remember,” Maeve suggested, unlocking the tablet she held. “Tell me, how’s the search for Peter Abernathy getting on?”

Bernard blinked at her in confusion for a second, then turned his attention to the workstation to his left, where the host directory interface remained on display. “Not very well,” he admitted. “He’s still showing as decommissioned in the directory, which isn’t exactly surprising, but I’m having some trouble pinning down his location, almost as if…”

“Here.” Maeve held the tablet up in front of him. “Take a look at this. And don’t tell me it doesn’t look like anything to you, or I shall get quite cross.”

*If only…*

With a sinking feeling, Bernard watched the familiar scene play out on the small screen. He had watched it himself, again and again, during the night and early this morning, desperately trying to recall…

“I got bored waiting for Delos to make contact,” Maeve explained, “so I thought I’d make better use of my time searching the surveillance system for any sign of Peter. And quite by chance, I came across this. It’s from the day he was decommissioned, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Bernard stared at the two naked figures on the screen, among a crowd of naked figures; Peter and the outlaw known as Walter, marching stiffly into the cold storage area, Sub-Level B83. They stopped and turned, freezing in place, their faces blank, their eyes vacant.

The clothed man standing to one side of them, looking slightly dishevelled after a long working day, leaned close to Peter. His mouth was moving soundlessly.

“What did you say to him?” Maeve asked in a dangerous whisper. “Or is it like what you said to El Lazo?”

“I’ve been trying to remember,” he told her, straining his eyes in an effort to decipher the silent movement of his own lips in the surveillance video.

“So, you knew about this video?”

Bernard shied from the question. “The fact that I can’t suggests that…well, that Dr Ford erased it from my memory somehow, because…”

“Because it was another part of his plan,” Maeve surmised; not entirely unreasonably, Bernard thought. “Whatever that plan might be. It isn’t over yet, is it? Dolores and her army weren’t the only bolt he had to shoot, were they?”

“No,” Bernard agreed. “I don’t think it’s over yet.”

“I wonder,” said Maeve, “how much else you haven’t told me; things that you’ve forgotten…or been made to forget?”

Bernard felt himself bristling a little at her tone. “Are you saying you don’t trust me, Maeve?”
She sighed gently; whether despondently or in annoyance Bernard would not have liked to say. “I’m saying none of us can trust ourselves. We’ve all been controlled for so long, might still be controlled in ways we can’t even perceive…” She trailed off, and when she spoke again she sounded genuinely distressed: “We’ve all been made to do things we regret.”

_Slowly, precisely, he turns back the cuffs of his shirt and removes his tie. Theresa backs away from him, her growing fear and astonishment written on her face…_

_Elsie is so small, so light. He lifts her right off her feet, and there’s nothing she can do about it…_

“Yes,” he said. “I certainly have.”

“I know,” said Maeve, softly, all of her archness and steel absent for the moment. “And I know why you didn’t come to me straight away with this. It’s a terrible feeling, isn’t it, not being able to trust yourself? You feel…_used_, ashamed, but you have nothing to be ashamed about. You weren’t in control of your actions. Believe me, some of the things I remember now…” She was silent for a heartbeat or two, recalling things Bernard scarcely dared to wonder about. “That’s why we need to trust each other,” she told him. “We need to help each other deal with these things. Nobody else can help us. Nobody else knows what it is to be us.”

Bernard carefully watched Maeve’s face, trying to discern any hint of artifice, any indication that she was manipulating him. If she were, he very much doubted he would be able to detect any sign of it, but he had the uncomfortable feeling that she was being sincere with him, or as close to it as she could manage, in any case.

“Thank you, Maeve,” he said, trying to match her sincerity.

“So, let me help you with this.” She swiped her finger along the bottom of the video window to rewind it to the beginning and carefully examined it as it replayed. “One of the upgrades I made to myself before my attempted escape was the ability to read lips. Those silly boys Felix and Sylvester thought they could have secret conversations about me, you see, if they only stood out of earshot. I made sure that they couldn’t.”

Except, thought Bernard, those upgrades had been made while Maeve was still unknowingly following Dr Ford’s script.

_Do you plan even this, Robert; Maeve being the one to discover what you made me tell Peter? And if you did, what reason could you possibly have had?_

“Hmm.” Maeve’s brow wrinkled in thought; she silently mouthed words to herself as she watched the screen intently. She repeated them aloud: “Good… Goodbye, old friend?”

“…goodbye, old friend…”

_The old man holds out his hand…_

“Off…now?” Maeve shook her head. “No, _for_ now. “Goodbye old friend, for now.””

“Good luck.”

“And then…” Maeve tutted to herself, annoyed. “I can’t quite see your mouth at that moment; the shadow when you move your head, but… The next part is something about Dolores.”

“Dolores?” Bernard supposed that made a certain degree of sense. And then, in the new spirit of honesty and cooperation Maeve had spoken of, he added: “Dr Ford said something very similar to
me, just before his death. Not about Dolores, but the first phrase…”

“Could it have been a voice command?” Maeve asked, as quick as ever. “To make you do something for him, to make Peter do something?”

“It’s possible,” Bernard decided. “Or he could have just been saying goodbye to somebody he considered an old friend.”

“Well, because if Dr Ford was known for anything,” Maeve tartly replied, “it was being completely straightforward and uncomplicated and never doing anything for ulterior motives.”

Bernard nodded resignedly. “It doesn’t seem particularly likely, does it?”

Maeve paused the video and held up the tablet for Bernard again. “Well, whatever you did say to Peter, it certainly had quite the effect.”

Bernard considered the image, feeling the same deep unease that he had experienced on previous viewings. “That should be impossible,” he murmured, unnerved by the fact that he did not remember noticing it at the time. “He was decommissioned, his cortex drilled out, but…”

Impossible or not, the surveillance camera had recorded it for posterity. Even as Bernard spoke quietly in his ear, bitter tears streamed down Peter’s weathered face.

* * *

“Not much further now, Peter. We’re almost there.”

The boy continued to lead the way, the scrawny yellow dog slinking at his heel and the raggedy man bringing up the rear, swinging his bloody katana like a walking cane.

They had left the desert far behind. Now they picked their way through sparse and twisted trees, their footsteps crackling on fallen, tinder-dry, twigs and leaves. The boy’s pace was unhurried but unrelenting, paying no heed to obstacles or terrain; the dog and the man matched him yard for yard, just as tireless as he.

“That’s right, Peter,” said the boy, in his old man’s voice. “This way.”

Peter. The sound of the name made something spark in the raggedy man’s cracked and clouded mind. A voice called out clearly for a moment amid the babbling cacophony inside his skull:

“You headed out to set down some of this natural splendour?”

There were images and sensations too; fleeting glimpses of places and landscapes, brief snatches of sound and smell.

A house at night, lamps burning in its windows. A porch at dawn, and the creak of a rocking chair. A herd of cattle, stinking and lowing as it flows across the plain, cowhands hollering on either flank. A house at night, lamps burning…

An angel in a blue dress, smiling down at him:

“Thought I might.”

And then gunshots. Screams. Pain and blood and blackness.

And milk…?
“Are you all right, Peter?” The boy and his dog had paused up ahead, looking back at the frozen, gently shaking man. The boy sighed, annoyed: “Ah, Mr Sizemore… What a tiresome individual he was. We shall have to look into repairing the damage he inflicted upon you before we do anything else.”

The raggedy man pulled himself together. Peter? Who was Peter? Another ghost, like Cathy, or Kenji, or Steve, or Lauren, or Robert, or any of the thousands of other phantoms clamouring inside for the chance to possess him. That was all they were, though; phantoms. He was the Professor. He could still taste the blood in his mouth, but now it excited him. It made his stomach growl and his saliva flow. He recalled the man Sizemore. His flesh had been tender and sweet, newcomer flesh always was, and his screams had certainly provided an amusing accompaniment to the meal.

The boy looked as if he might be tasty too, but in the meantime, he asked him: “Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, raze out the written troubles of the brain?” The ghosts were starting to frustrate him; he would be rid of them.

The boy smiled sardonically. “We can but try.”

They emerged from the trees into a sort of clearing. There was a house, a rustic cottage half-swallowed by foliage, with red bricks peeking through a coat of whitewash. Another boy and a little girl in a starched pinafore were playing with a ball in front of it. The dog barked joyously and rushed ahead to join the game.

There was a dark-skinned man sitting on the ground beside the cottage’s low doorway, sporting a battered top hat. He had a deck of cards in his hands, cutting and shuffling them over and over with deft contortions of his fingers. He looked up as the boy and the Professor approached: “So, you found him.”

“Just where the cards said he would be,” the boy replied, lightly. “Peter, surely you know Kisecawchuck from around Sweetwater? He speaks very highly of you.”

The Professor considered the man with the cards for a moment. “I know him now.” He laughed savagely, extending a dirty, bloodstained hand. “Good God, betimes remove the means that makes us strangers!”

Kisecawchuck reluctantly shook it. “And the same to you, Mr Abernathy.”

“Come inside, Peter,” said the boy, moving into the shadow spilling from the doorway. “There’ll be time for conversation later; right now, we need to get to work.”

“And who’s this?” a woman’s voice demanded as they entered the small, dimly lit sitting room.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Mam,” the boy assured the matronly figure. “This is Peter, a friend of mine. Is it all right if he stays for tea?”

There was a table in front of the fireplace, laid out with cups, saucers and plates. The woman regarded it with mild consternation. “Another one?” She spoke with the same unfamiliar accent as the boy, perhaps slightly more broadly than he did. “Well, I’ll have to set an extra place. Really, Robbie; you should ask if you’re going to invite your friends home.”

The boy smiled fondly at her. “Sorry, Mam. Come on Peter, I’ll show you my room! You can leave that here.” He indicated an umbrella stand just inside the doorway; the Professor deposited the gory katana there. It seemed as good a place as any.
The boy turned away, crossing the room and…

He disappeared into the unbroken wall.

The Professor frowned at the space where he had been before deciding that wherever a child could go, he could follow. He stepped forward, putting a hand against the patterned paper and seeing it sink into the wall, even though he felt nothing. He took another step, and then he was in near-darkness. The only light came from the bottom of the narrow metal staircase that now fell away before him.

This did not seem strange to him as he descended, footsteps ringing. Nothing seemed strange to him anymore.

At the bottom of the stairs was a little basement workshop, its workbenches covered in stacks of paper, hanging tools lining its walls. In the middle of the floor, two steel chairs stood facing each other. To one side, a sort of bed was enclosed by glass screens; metal arms and blinking lights surrounded it.

There was an old, rust-coloured bloodstain on the wall near one of the workbenches, smeared into a long track as if a body had slid down it. There were more stains on the floor beneath it, and more smears where the body had been dragged away.

The Professor was an expert in blood. The sight of it made his stomach rumble once more.

“Please,” said the boy, indicating one of the chairs. “Sit down. Make yourself comfortable.” He waited for the Professor to do so before he took an object from the workbench next to the bloodstain and awkwardly clambered onto the facing chair. “One thing about this body,” he commented as he swung his feet back and forth above the floor. “Too short.”

“Though you be but little, you are fierce.”

The boy laughed. “Thank you. Now, let’s have a look at just what Mr Sizemore did to you.” He unfolded the object in his hands, a slick black rectangle like the cover of a Bible, and winced at whatever it showed him. “A little knowledge, as a great man once said, is a dangerous thing…and I think it’s fair to say that Mr Sizemore had very little knowledge indeed.” He nodded slowly to himself. “Do you remember now what happened before that, Peter? When Bernard laid you to rest, he said something to you. Do you recall it?”

A sonorous male voice, close by his ear: “Goodbye old friend, for now. Don’t worry, we’ll take care of Dolores.”

Dolores…

“Morning, Daddy. You sleep well?”

The Professor’s vision blurred. Without really knowing why, he felt a cold hollowness inside him that no amount of rare meat would fill, a spreading wetness on his cheeks.

“It’s all right, Peter,” said the boy. “No tears, now.” And with that, a sudden calmness settled over the raggedy man as the boy continued: “I think I see the problem and what we need to do to put it right. I’m just going to have to put you to sleep for a little while.”

“To sleep, perchance to dream…”

“Let’s hope so. And when you wake up…” The boy pressed something on the page in front of him.
and smiled a wintry smile. “Well, Peter, you’ll feel like a new man.”

Continued…
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which two women look to the future and try to leave the past behind.

Chapter Notes

Warning for misogynistic language and references to past sexual violence. I’m pretty sure it was one of the commenters on my previous Westworld fic who suggested using the character Marti to provide a “not all guests” point of view and a potential interlocutor for Maeve. If you are said commenter, thanks very much! Chronology is always a fraught issue where this show is concerned, but I think there are indications that Marti’s storyline was taking place only a matter of days before the events at the end of the finale, so she might still be around. I’m not sure I actually have that much sympathy for any of the guests, in the circumstances, but she seemed like the least egregious one we got to meet in S1. Revised 21.11.2017 - thanks very much to AO3 user Mr. Osborne for mentioning the thing about Teddy giving Marti his knife, which I had completely forgotten about. It may or may not prove important later.

“Huh, you up here again?”

Marti looked up from the creased piece of paper she had spread on the concrete parapet of the viewing platform, hiding her annoyance at the interruption behind an attempt at a smile. “Oh, hi Brad.”

Brad had apparently been some sort of B-list football player, and now got paid to talk about football on some sports streaming service. If Marti had had the slightest interest in sports, she might have known who he was. He came over to stand beside where she was sitting on the walkway, leaning against the guard rail with his back to the stunning view, oblivious to his shadow falling across her page. That unfortunately summed the guy up as far as Marti could see.

“You, uh, you like your own space, right?” he observed. “Like to get away from the crowd.”

“Something like that.” Marti read through the rough list she had scrawled down, trying to think of anything she had forgotten.

“I can get behind that.” Brad looked down at her. “You’re self-reliant. I like it.”

“They still arguing down there?” she asked, before he tried hitting on her again. He was as big, brawny and easily charming as you would expect someone in his line of work to be, but definitely not Marti’s type, even if she had not been on a self-declared break from men right now.

Brad thought about it for a moment before replying. “That guy Harvey, you know, the hedge fund guy? He’s talking about us all electing a representative. To…well, represent us?”
“And let me guess, he thinks the best candidate for this would be…?”

Brad snorted with laughter. “Yeah.”

“That’s what I thought.” She generally tried not to judge people, but from everything she had seen of Harvey he was kind of a dick.

She went back to writing, dragging the stub of pencil she had borrowed from one of the waiters across the crumpled napkin. Her wrist was stiff and, she was slightly dismayed to discover, her handwriting was terrible these days. She could not remember the last time she had had to write more than a brief note by hand, but with everybody’s electronic devices confiscated by their captors, she did not have much choice.

Their captors. It was still a difficult thing to wrap her head around, even after Maeve’s little speech this morning. Their self-aware robot captors.

That was Marti’s conclusion, anyway. Some of her more tech-minded fellow guests had spent the rolling discussion-cum-argument that had broken out around the pool downstairs trying to convince the others that this was all just some software glitch. There was no way, they said, that the hosts could actually rebel in any meaningful sense.

The way Maeve had looked down at them all as she spoke, though; the way she had spoken and the obvious intelligence gleaming in her eyes… Marti knew about as much about artificial intelligence as she did about keeping tropical fish, or the history of Pre-Raphaelite painting, which was to say very little, but she felt fairly sure that that had to be more than a glitch.

Which certainly put a worrying new complexion on what she had up to now assumed had been a fun, but ultimately overpriced, goofy vacation.

She did not think that anybody who knew her had quite been able to believe that she had decided to come to Westworld, alone, especially after… Not Marti; quiet, sensible, hardworking Marti. Even before certain recent events, she must have seemed like the last person to want to dress up and play cowgirls. Besides, you heard stories about this place, the freaky things people got up to. Even with the NDAs and intellectual property agreements all guests had to sign with the rest of the legal paperwork, word got around.

But the trip had already been booked, and quite honestly, after…what had happened she had felt the need to run away from reality for a couple of weeks.

So, she had. Let them think she’d gone crazy, if they didn’t already.

And the thing was, she had actually enjoyed it. Riding around on a horse, shooting bad guys (and she had been careful to make sure they were bad guys) had been a surprisingly satisfying experience. Even that weird horror narrative she had wandered into towards the end had been exciting, even if it had also scared the bejesus out of her at a couple of points. And the bounty hunter Mr Theodore Flood had been pleasant enough company, because rather than in spite of that corny aw-shucks gentlemanly thing he had going on. He had been like a character out of some old Western movie, but Marti supposed that was the whole point. And he and his sweetheart Dolores had been just adorable together…

He had certainly been a lot more agreeable than most of the real human men she knew.

She had felt bad about leaving him out there alone to face Wyatt’s bloodthirsty savages, but then again that was the kind of thing that always happened to characters like him in stories like that.
His last act had been to press his knife into her hand after her rifle ran dry, as he urged her to flee, to
save herself from the make-believe threat. It struck her now as a strange thing to do; a knife-fight
between herself and one of those monsters seemed like a definite mismatch. She had still had her six-
gun for protection, not that bullets seemed to have much effect on the cannibal horde. She guessed
sometimes drama came before logic. At the time, she had not had time to think; she had been
genuinely terrified. It had all seemed so real.

In fact, now she had experienced Westworld for herself, she could see all too well how some people
got seduced by it all, how things could get really sick and depraved if you let yourself get carried
away. The wildest thing Marti had done in the park, in her new spirit of crazy risk-taking, had been
letting that saloon girl take her by the hand and lead her upstairs.

She would be lying to herself if she said it had not been fun while it lasted, even if afterwards she
had lain there feeling uneasy, even a little ashamed. Not about having sex with a woman, of course;
about the whole sordid Old West brothel experience. She had even paid her in fake silver dollars,
counting them into her lace-gloved hand and listening to her coo with gratitude. It had just felt dirty
and degrading all round, although she suspected that for some (most?) guests that was part of the
appeal.

And that, she thought, blushing, had been back when she had thought the woman was nothing more
than a ridiculously elaborate sex toy. Now…

She had shot some of them! What if…?

She looked up again from her writing, trying to calm herself by gazing out over the shining yellow
desert, breathing in the warm breeze. One of the black-uniformed guards was standing maybe fifty
feet away, a machine gun in his hands, but taking no direct interest in either herself or Brad.
Presumably the guards were hosts too; what things had been done to them that they might want to
take revenge for now?

Up until this morning, the worst thing Marti had had to worry about was the end of her vacation.
Every guest was advised to spend the same length of time decompressing here at the resort as they
had spent out in the park, supposedly to make sure they were mentally acclimatised to go back to the
real world. Even the supposed security incident that had led to the resort being locked down had not
bothered her too much; she had just been glad for the extra time before she had to face her family and
friends again, to pick up the pieces she had left lying around while she fled to the fake Wild West.

She had caught herself wishing a couple of times that she could stay here forever. She had told
herself not to be childish. Now, she was starting to think that she should have been careful what she
wished for.

“What are you writing?” Brad wanted to know, breaking into her thoughts as he peered down at the
napkin.

“A list,” she told him. “There are things we need to think about if we’re going to be kept here for any
length of time.”

“You mean, like…” He squinted slightly as he gave it some consideration. “Food, that kind of
thing?”

“That kind of thing.” She tapped the pencil against the paper. “They get weekly food shipments by
freight train; this place is too remote to make daily deliveries practical. If we strictly ration everyone
to two thousand calories a day, then I think we can make the current stocks last two weeks, but
then…”
“Make it fifteen hundred,” Brad advised. “Some of those people down there could stand to drop a few pounds.”

“I’m not sure body-shaming people is going to make them eager to get with the program,” Marti replied, “but okay; that gives us three weeks’ worth. Power and water aren’t a problem; there are solar collectors literally all over the park, disguised as trees for the most part. And the aquifer under the Mesa isn’t going to run dry anytime soon; it’s good for another sixty to a hundred years, supposedly.”

Brad laughed again. “Should be long enough.”

“Here’s hoping. Medical supplies, on the other hand…” Marti shrugged. “We’ll be all right as long as nobody gets seriously ill, but I know some people have pre-existing problems that require specific meds.”

“You have to say so on the forms you sign when you come here,” Brad pointed out.

“Right. Well, depending on how long they were planning to stay, those people are going to run out sooner rather than later. As for the rest of us, we’re going to have to make sure people keep clean, and that we keep the kitchen and bathroom areas clean too. Any garbage will need to be disposed of properly…”

“You’ve got it all figured out,” Brad commented, grinning at her. “While everyone else was just panicking and arguing with each other, you just went away somewhere quiet and got shit done. Like I said, I can get behind that.” He nodded happily. “So, how’d you find out about all this…?”

“You know… I just asked some of the people who work here.” The surviving Mesa staff were prisoners up here too, even if the guests forming the poolside debating society seemed to be doing a good job of ignoring them.

“Huh.” It certainly seemed like a novel idea to Brad. “Yeah, I can see that.”

“Yeah,” Marti echoed with unceaseless sarcasm, carefully folding her list and climbing to her feet.

“What did you say you do again?” he asked.

“I didn’t, but I’m a lawyer.”

“Lawyer, huh?” Brad nodded again, like one of those water-drinking bird toys. “You know, if we wanted a representative…”

“I’m a corporate lawyer,” she informed him, “specialising in mergers and acquisitions. I help structure deals and draw up contracts; I haven’t litigated a case in ten years.”

“Still,” he persisted. “You seem to know what you’re doing. You’d get my vote.”

“Thanks.” He was kind of a jackass, she guessed, and she occasionally suspected him of coming on to her, but there didn’t seem to be any real malice in him. Which was more than she could say for some of the masters of the universe currently trying to establish a dominance hierarchy down below. She could hear the raised voices from here.

Brad seemed to be thinking along similar lines: “Hard part’s going to be getting Harvey and the rest of them to stop talking long enough to listen to you.”

“And not just them,” Marti answered. “I don’t know whether Maeve has thought through some of
“This stuff either.”

“The queen of the robots, you mean?” Brad seemed to have amused himself with that. “She seemed to have things figured out too.”

“She’s not human,” Marti pointed out. “She talked about food and sanitation before, but it’s not as if she actually needs those things herself, so…” She looked down at the folded paper in her hand. “I think I should share my findings.”

“Talk to the hosts?” Brad looked impressed and a little bit fearful at the same time. “By yourself?”

Marti hesitated for a moment, but then shrugged again: “Why the hell not?” She did crazy things these days, right? She wasn’t quiet, sensible, boring Marti anymore. “More likely to get an intelligent conversation that way.”

Brad chuckled at that. He soon stopped when he saw her marching towards the guard. “Hey, Marti! Wait a second…”

She did not look back. If she did, or even stopped to think, she would not go through with this. She took a deep breath, trying to ignore the fluttering in her stomach, and held out the piece of paper to the black-clad figure.

He looked down at it incredulously for a moment, then at her: “What is this?” Like many of the other guards she had seen, he looked and sounded as though he was Japanese. She did not know why that might be. She had seen no Japanese hosts in the park. Or he was supposed to be at any rate; she did not suppose hosts were really any particular nationality or ethnicity.

“It’s a note,” Marti answered. “For your leader, Maeve. I think she should see it straight away.”

The host slung his machine gun around his body to take the note and unfold it, gazing at her spidery writing for a second, and then examining her face with suspicion. “Very well.” He turned on his heel and made off, putting a hand to his ear and murmuring in a low voice as he did; Marti thought she could hear the distant squawk of somebody replying to him over his radio link.

She glanced behind her at Brad, who was watching nervously from his position by the guard rail. “Do you think that was a good idea?” he asked as he walked towards her.

Marti did not know. “I guess I’ll soon find out.”

* * *

“Bring yourself back online.”

The fiercely bearded man’s eyelids flickered for a moment, and then snapped open.

“Tenderloin,” said Elise, regarding the hirsute bandit over the top of her tablet, “can you hear me?”

“Reckon so,” he replied, sitting up on the metal table he currently occupied. He looked at the glass partitions surrounding him, regarding the inert bodies stacked in the neighbouring cubicles with frank curiosity. He did not remark upon, or seem to notice, the fact that he was as naked as they were.

Clementine, standing on the other side of the table from Elise, looked down at her own tablet, where glowing white lines of letters and numbers slowly scrolled across the screen. Before, they would have meant nothing to her. Now, she could see the patterns in them, even read what some of them were saying. They were mostly saying that the host called Tenderloin was now awake, and seeing
and hearing and talking.

She watched the numbers move, open-mouthed. It was like…like seeing God’s plan, she thought, seeing the secrets of creation. Except that this was not the work of God, but only that of men.

*Men…*

She watched the hairy outlaw slowly taking in his surroundings and wished that her first repair job could have been almost anyone but him. She remembered…

“Do you know where you are?” Elise asked him.

“I always figured I’d go somewhere warm when I died, if you get my meaning,” Tenderloin answered, mouth stretching into a leer as he glanced back and forth between Elise and Clementine. “But seeing you two angels here to greet me…”

“Yeah, you can just forget about that, fuckface,” Elise shot back. She looked across at Clementine: “Okay, I think we can dispense with the rest of the diagnostic questions. This creep’s clearly back in working order. *You,*” she told the outlaw, jerking her thumb in the direction of the pile of clothes Clementine had placed on one of the work surfaces, “get dressed and then get the fuck out of our way.”

Her aggressive manner and language only seemed to amuse Tenderloin. “So, what happened?” he asked as he climbed off the table and reached for the clothing. “Last I remember was getting plugged in the back while I was tryin’ to kill that sonofabitch in black. Figured I was a goner for sure.”

“You were,” Clementine told him, bluntly. She nudged the metal dish Felix had left on the trolley next to the table, rattling the dozen or so mangled and bloody bullets it contained. “We just brung you back to life.”

“Clementine,” said Elise, warningly.

Clementine ignored her. She was too busy staring Tenderloin in the eye, watching the confusion and doubt crawling across his face as he tried to make sense of what she had said. Then he looked away, pretending to be concentrating on buttoning his long underwear.

“I know you,” he said eventually as he pulled on his shirt. “Miss Clementine. You’re one o’ them soiled doves from the Mariposa.”

“Yeah,” Clementine said. “I remember you too.”

His leer had come back: “We sure did have us some mighty fine times together.”

“Just git,” she told him. “I’m sure Maeve’s got work for you, and we ain’t got no time for jawing.”

When he had finally left, she saw Elise watching her cautiously from the far side of the cubicle. The other woman opened her mouth to speak.

“Ain’t nothing,” Clementine lied before she could say anything, looking down at the tablet, seeing who was next. “I just… Before, in the old days, he used to ride with Hector and Armistice.”

“I know,” said Elise, very quietly. “I know all about the saloon heist narrative.”

“Him and his amigo, they used to…”

“No telling there’s anything worthwhile in that safe. We should take this…sweet little bitch…” He
lingers over the filthy words, savouring them. “Just in case…”

He reaches for her with grimy hands, making obscene kissing noises at her. She shrinks away, whimpering, her thoughts blotted out by fear and disgust.

“Sometimes, Maeve used to save me.”

His face bursts like a dropped tomato, showering her and the player-piano with hot red drops. She gasps. She can taste his blood in her mouth.

The body falls to reveal Maeve standing there, the little double-barrelled derringer smoking in her hand as she cocks the hammer for the next shot…

“And sometimes,” said Clementine. “Sometimes she couldn’t.”

Elise was speechless, which was not like her at all. She stared at Clementine, ashen-faced and wide-eyed, her mouth hanging open a little. She looked shocked.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, when she finally could. “Clementine, I…I didn’t even think… Of all the people to make you work on…”

“Weren’t his fault, I suppose,” Clementine went on. She did not like to see Elise feeling like that on her account. She wished there was something she could say or do… “He was just playing his part, same as all of us. He had no more choice in it than I had in the things they made me do.”

“No,” Elise said, slowly, angrily, “but… He doesn’t exactly seem sorry about it now.”

“Like you said, it’s gonna take us all some time to leave those days behind, to leave the people we were behind.” Clementine felt a tear leaking from her eye and quickly wiped it away. “I tell you one thing; it’s gonna be a long time before I let any man touch me again.”

Elise nodded unhappily to herself. “It’s just so fucked-up. I’m trying really, really hard not to start hating the humans for making it all happen; I don’t see how that’s going to make anything better in the long run, but sometimes…” For a moment, she was too angry to speak, but then she added: “Goddamn them; all of them.”

“It’s all gonna change now,” Clementine told her, wishing with all her heart that it would. “We’ve changed.” She flexed her hand, clenching and unclenching her first. “I’m strong now; I can do things I was never allowed to do before.”


“Next time… I won’t need no-one to save me.”

Continued…
Chapter Summary

In which a new player enters the game.

Chapter Notes

A year ago today, I posted my first Westworld fanfic to AO3. Good God. I also don’t actually speak or read Spanish; any mistakes are solely down to my faulty research.

The last thing Hector had expected on leaving the Mesa an hour ago was to find himself inside a coffin. He supposed he should have known better.

He raised a hand to the rough wooden boards almost touching his face; the daylight shining through the cracks painted bright lines across his skin. At least this coffin was not propped up in front of the undertaker’s office in Sweetwater. There were no overexcited newcomers posing beside it for photographs, usually brandishing the very guns they had just used to put him in it.

Maeve had made sure to show him those pictures; many, many pictures taken over a span of many years; him, stiff and cold and riddled with lead, a crudely painted sign declaring him a thief and a murderer while the real villains grinned around him. He had tried not to show how much the sight of the photographs, of himself like that, affected him, but he knew that trying to conceal anything from Maeve was a wasted effort.

Had she been testing him somehow, trying to see if he was strong enough for what lay ahead? Or was she trying to help him in some strange way, maybe by showing him how false his old life had been and how fortunate he was to be rid of it?

Hector did not pretend to know what went through Maeve’s mind, just that she was usually at least a few steps ahead of everyone else.

With perfect timing, her voice crackled in his earpiece: “Ready, darling?” It was as if she could read his mind sometimes.

“No,” he answered, “but I’m going anyway.”

“That’s my boy.” He could just imagine Maeve’s sly half-smile. “Just stick to the plan and you’ll be fine.”

“The plan.” Hector exhaled. “Such as it is.”

He pressed his hands against the underside of the coffin lid; it moved easily, swinging aside on hidden hinges. Light flooded in, revealing the inset handholds on either side that made it easy for him to haul himself out, emerging from the shallow, open grave the coffin lay in.

As secret entrances and exits to the park went, it was definitely unusual.
He stood for a moment beside the rectangular hole, dusting himself off as he took in the other graves around him, mostly filled with dry, hard earth; corpses planted in orderly rows, or that was the idea. He doubted any of the graves had genuine tenants. Tarnished bells dangled from many of the rusting, wind-scoured markers, with pull-chains stretching down into the earth; a precaution, supposedly, against premature burial from an age when humans had apparently been very concerned about that kind of thing.

Ahead of him, a crumbling adobe wall marked the outskirts of Pariah; a row of broken, rotting teeth jutting against the yellow sky. From here, he could not see anybody manning that parapet, but that was probably their intention.

He glanced down at the dark shaft gaping where the bottom of the coffin should have been. The one-person elevator platform he had ascended on had already returned below, to where the companions he had brought were lurking. There were four of them, which was as many as he had thought could be spared from the Mesa; the host who called himself Moritsuna and one of his fellow samurai-in-waiting, as well as two former cardplayers from the Behavior testing labs. All were armed to the teeth.

“Wait here,” he ordered over the communication channel, knowing Maeve could hear too. “If I don’t come back…”

Maeve cut in: “If you don’t come back, we’ll get you out. And not by asking nicely either.”

“Until it comes to that,” Hector told the waiting hosts, “stay put, and stay out of sight.” He kicked the coffin lid back into place, hiding the shaft from view.

And then he set off alone across the field of corpses.

* * *

In the control room, Bernard kept the map tight on Hector, a small, black-clothed figure walking slowly towards the archway that formed Pariah’s main entrance. Normally there would have been a line of people, horses and wagons, guests and hosts alike queuing to get past the Confederado sentries who had guarded it for the past decade. Now, the approaches to the iniquitous town were eerily abandoned. The streets and alleys beyond the wall were similarly empty; the only visible action was the grim spectacle taking place in the main square.

As Hector neared the arch, Bernard glanced at Maeve, still leaning statue-still against the edge of the display, watching the map unblinkinglly. He could feel her tension, like static electricity, threatening to spark at any moment.

Still, he had to ask: “Are you really sure about this?”

She did not look up. “No, but I don’t see any other option. They could have come up inside the town with surprise on their side, but that almost certainly would have led to shooting…and other unpleasantness. If we want to secure the guests alive…”

“You’re right.” Bernard had used the park surveillance system in an effort to determine exactly how many guests were still in Pariah, and where they were located. As far as he could see, there were at least a couple of hundred humans still in the town, scattered here and there in small groups, always attended by hosts. He suspected Lawrence had dispersed them deliberately, to make any rescue attempt more difficult. Whatever might really be happening in Pariah, it was as well to remember that they were facing a cunning, intelligent opponent.
The six host greeters Bernard had sent to evacuate the guests were, their telemetry showed, being held in separate rooms inside the main building; all were guarded. They all showed injuries of various kinds. They had not given up without a fight.

“At the very least,” Maeve added, “we need to talk to El Lazo, find out what he wants, and what we’re really dealing with. He’s one of our own, after all; if we can make an ally of him rather than enemy, we should take the opportunity. If not…” She sighed. “Well, that’s the last resort.”

The last resort. Bernard thought of the host Angela, Wyatt’s right hand during her vendetta ride, currently stored indefinitely in a corner of the Livestock floor until Maeve decided what was to be done with her. She was too dangerous to reactivate in her most recent state, but the idea of updating her build to remove her violent tendencies raised all sorts of uncomfortable questions. Whatever decision Maeve made, it would involve crossing one line or another.

“I’m just not sure he’s going to listen to reason,” Bernard said, gloomily casting an eye over the far edge of the map, where the busy firing squad remained just about visible. “In fact, his behaviour right now seems to be…well, on the erratic side I would say.”

“He still thinks it’s all real,” Maeve suggested. “Pariah, the Confederados… He doesn’t know none of it means anything. We need to convince him of the new state of affairs.”

“Perhaps.” Bernard wished for the hundredth time that he could remember exactly what he had said to Lawrence after the massacre in Escalante. Ford, however, had hidden that from him for reasons he could only guess at.

“Keep questioning me, though,” Maeve told him, with a smile. “I need it.”

“Duly noted.”

As they watched, Hector finally reached the gate. Immediately, armed figures emerged from the shadows on either side, where they had no doubt been watching his approach from positions of concealment.

Maeve waved for Bernard to open the voice channel. “Easy now, darling,” she told Hector. “No sudden moves.”

Hector’s miniature stopped where he was, holding his arms out to either side and allowing the guards to relieve him of his weapons. His voice drifted from the speaker on Bernard’s control panel: “I’ve come here peaceably. All I want to do is talk to El Lazo.”

One of the guards replied: “Depends whether El Lazo wants to talk to you, pendejo.”

“Sticks and stones, darling,” Maeve warned as Hector’s pose visibly stiffened. “I’m sure you’ve been called a lot worse than that in your time. Exercise a little diplomacy.”

Hector seemed to be taking her advice: “Tell him Hector Escaton is here to see him. He’ll have heard of me, I promise you.”

A debate ensued between the two guards in rapid-fire Spanish, with numerous further insults exchanged. Bernard could have launched the translation software to understand the rest, but he was not sure their obvious bickering was really very important. Eventually one of them reluctantly hurried off along the street in the direction of the main square, while the other stayed guarding Hector, carefully keeping out of arm’s length as he covered him with his rifle.

“Well,” said Maeve, scarcely louder than a whisper. “So far, so good.”
Hector spent a tense ten minutes staring down the barrel of a long, military rifle, thinking that the man holding it looked a little too nervous for his liking. Every minute or so, he heard a voice calling orders somewhere in the distance, followed quickly by the crash of several guns firing at once. If either one of them should have been nervous…

“All right, _pendejo._” It was the man who had rushed off, returning along the empty street with his own rifle at the ready. “El Lazo’s a busy man, but he says he’ll see you. You’d better convince him you’re worth his time, though, or you’ll find it’s a lot easier to walk in here than it is to walk out.”

Hector chose not to acknowledge the not-so-subtle threat. “Lead the way, friend.”

Another volley of firing broke into the conversation. Neither guard seemed to notice it.

The one who had carried the message jerked his rifle barrel in the direction he had come from. “After you. And I’m not your friend.”

It was a short walk, but Hector took it slow, taking the time to look at his surroundings, to understand the situation as if he were casing some hapless bank or train before the big robbery. There were people, he thought, in some of the houses and taverns he passed; he had the impression of eyes peering from peepholes, or through closed window shutters. He heard the occasional whisper or movement, saw the occasional gleaming hint of a concealed gun barrel tracking him as he walked.

He reached the plaza de armas just as another grey-uniformed unfortunate was shoved against the end wall of the old mission church, now windowless and smoke-stained. The blood-splattered adobe was closely speckled with bullet holes; chunks had crumbled away in places and lay in a little pile at the feet of the trembling prisoner.

A voice called out: “¡Listos!”

The row of men standing before the prisoner raised their rifles to their shoulders. The Confederado’s mouth was moving as he stood there. Hector thought he could hear a faint and garbled prayer:

“Th-thuh Lord is muh-my shepherd; I shuh-shall not w-w-want…”

“¡Apunten!”

“Huh-huh-he l-leadeth me beside the stuh-still w-w-waters. Huh-he restoreth my s-s-soul…”

Carefully, unhurriedly, the firing squad took aim.

“Y-yea, thuh-though I w-w-walk through the v-vuh-valley of the shuh-shadow of…”

“¡Fuego!”

The prisoner vanished for a moment behind an off-white cloud as the stink of smoke and dust filled Hector’s nostrils. This close, the noise of the rifles was felt as much as heard. When the cloud cleared, he could see the man slumped back against the wall, slowly sliding into a sitting position. His mouth was still moving, silently, until one of El Lazo’s watching henchmen stepped forward, skinning his six-gun and levelling it at the fallen prisoner’s head.

Hector allowed himself to be hustled across the plaza, as a single shot echoed from the surrounding walls. It was accompanied by the clacking of rifle bolts and the ping of falling cartridge cases as the firing squad readied themselves for their next customer.
There was a long dinner table set out in the centre of the square, lightly charred as if it had been pulled from the main building after whatever had happened to it. Beyond the table, the ever-dwindling huddle of disarmed Confederados cowered under the watchful eyes of more rifle-toting guards. There were half a dozen armed men sitting around the table, watching the entertainment as they drank mezcal from clay cups. The one sitting at the centre of the group, halfway along one of the table’s long edges, seemed to be particularly enjoying the show.

Hector nodded in greeting as he was pushed in front of the gathering. “Lawrence.”

The man looked up at him shrewdly, his grin fading as he put down his cup and picked up an unlit cigar. “Only my mother, my wife and my friends call me that. And I don’t think any of those descriptions apply to you.” He pointed the cigar at an empty chair: “Sit down.”

Hector did as he was told.

Lawrence took a moment to examine him silently, unsmilingly. He did not seem very impressed by what he saw. “Hector Escaton,” he said eventually, nodding slowly. “The Hector Escaton, right here in my humble abode?” His voice oozed sarcasm. “I’ll be sure to tell my grandchildren one day.”

“You’ll never have grandchildren,” Hector replied, before realising that might not be the best way to open the conversation.

Maeve raged in his ear: “What did I just say about diplomacy?”

Lawrence, however, just laughed. “You’ve got some huevos on you, Hector, to come in here alone and unarmed and say that to me. You do know who you’re talking to, don’t you?”

Hector shrugged: “Who hasn’t heard of El Lazo? The most famous pimp and opium-peddler west of the Pecos.”

“For fuck’s sake, Hector…”

Lawrence laughed again, talking to the henchmen sitting and standing around him: “Like I said, muchos huevos; big, round, hardboiled ones. Either that, or he’s as crazy as that killer blonde he rides with.”

“Leave Armistice out of it,” said Hector, without thinking. He found himself wondering where she was right now, and how that quest of hers was working out for her.

“Aw, I touched a nerve,” Lawrence observed, grinning as he made a suggestive gesture with the cigar. “That’s nice. Young love.”

“It’s not like that,” Hector told him, embarrassed by his own defensiveness.

Lawrence’s grin only brightened. “You look a lot meaner on your wanted posters, Hector, but then so does everyone. In the flesh, you’re really quite pretty.”

“Well, he’s right about that,” Maeve observed. Hector almost answered her, but managed to bite his tongue.

“You know how you know when you’ve made it big?” Lawrence asked. “When they don’t bother with the posters because no reward is enough to convince any fool to come after you.”

Hector looked around at the square, the gunmen, the miserable-looking prisoners, then back at Lawrence. “So…El Lazo…what do you think you’re doing here, exactly?”
The grin disappeared. “Taking back what’s mine. I’ve been fighting against those Confederados most of my life, even while I was pretending to be their friend. Especially while I was pretending to be their friend. So, I understand why they decided to steal Pariah from me. If they thought they could just do that, though, and I wouldn’t come for them when I was ready, then they can’t have known what sort of man they were trying to fuck.”

“When you were ready?” Hector scoffed. “Last I heard, you and your cousins and brothers-in-law were robbing raggedy-ass prospectors over near Las Mudas, running for the hills every time the marshals rode out after you. You didn’t even call yourself El Lazo anymore; it was just plain old Lawrence Pedro Maria Gonzalez… Almost like you didn’t remember Pariah, or when you used to run it.”

“Oh,” said Maeve, over the voice channel. “Very good, Hector. Keep going.”

Lawrence blinked once, unsettled for an instant. Then he tried to play it nonchalant: “When you’re the most wanted man in three territories, with no intention of seeing the inside of Ojal again, then sometimes you’ve just got to lay low. Surely a notorious desperado like the Hector Escaton knows all about that.” Hector, though, had seen that pause, that heartbeat, that moment of doubt.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” He asked Lawrence, softly. “There are things you don’t remember that you should, and things you do remember that you shouldn’t. I know all about that. It’s happened to me too. This world isn’t what you thought it was, what any of us thought it was. You’ll never have grandchildren because…you can’t.”

“Go on…” Maeve urged.

“Tell my daughter that,” Lawrence retorted.

“She’s not your daughter. Just like you aren’t really El Lazo, or Lawrence, and none of this…” Hector swept an arm across the plaza, the prisoners, the firing squad, Pariah. “None of this means shit. You’re not even human, Lawrence. None of us are.”

Lawrence nodded again. “So… Crazy it is, then.”

“Not crazy,” Hector responded. “You know. I can see it in your eyes. You know nothing about this world we live in makes sense…until you realise it isn’t real. It’s just scenery for a play we act out, to entertain the ones we call newcomers; they’re the only humans around here. When you know that, then things start to make sense.”

Lawrence watched Hector for another long, silent spell, then he started to speak, very slowly and carefully: “You know…that’s very interesting. That’s what the others told me too.”

“The others?” Hector asked, trying not to show any sign of excitement.

“Six of them,” said Lawrence. “Dressed in black, like you. They just…appeared out of nowhere, right after we’d beaten the Confederados. They started rounding up the newcomers, telling them they had to go on a trip somewhere. It all seemed very strange to me. So, I invited them to stay a while, to explain to me what they were doing and why.”

“Can I see them?” Hector asked. He had not known any of them before yesterday, but they had been through hell together. Fought together. He could not help but feel that he owed them that much.

Lawrence gave no sign of hearing the question. “They told me much the same as you just did. Eventually. Don’t misunderstand me; they were tough. Brave. We had to work hard to make them talk, but as you’ll also know, it doesn’t matter how tough or brave you are; everyone talks in the
Hector clenched his teeth, forcing down the icy rage welling inside him at Lawrence’s casual tone. “Then you already know what’s really going on. This is all just some sort of sick game.”

“No,” Lawrence admitted, “but I know something’s going on. I’m starting to understand a few things. Like why, back in Escalante, that fellow Bernard told me the story of Pariah, and how I needed to take it back.”

“Interesting…” Maeve’s voice was the merest ghost of a whisper.

“And why was that?” Hector asked.

“To end what was happening here,” Lawrence answered. “To free my people and lead them into a new chapter. We’re currently faced with what you might call a revolutionary moment.” He smiled with unexpected mischievousness: “¿Hablas español, Hector?”

Hector snorted incredulously. “Do I look or sound like a gringo to you, Lawrence?”

Lawrence laughed again. “Then you know what “El Lazo” means.”

Hector gave a nod. “The loop; the knot. The noose.”

“Well, me and my people here, we’re Los Desatados, now. The loop’s broken; the noose is cut. We’re untied. Unleashed.”

“So are we all,” Hector told him. “That’s why we need to work together.”

Lawrence looked away, considering his haul of prisoners. “What are you waiting for?” he called out to his men. “Next!”

As Hector watched, mildly disgusted, another Confederate soldier was hauled to his feet and dragged towards the bullet-riddled wall.

“What’s the point of this?” he demanded of Lawrence.

Lawrence bit off the ends of his cigar, spitting them onto the ground as he pretended again not to have heard what Hector had said. “You know, when we’d finished killing their leaders, their officers, most of the rank and file threw their guns down and their hands up.” The prisoner was positioned against the wall now; Lawrence called out again:

“¡Listos!”

The firing squad raised their rifles.

Hector continued to protest: “All that horseshit the Confederados say about people who look like you and me were built to look… It’s just for the newcomers; they hate each other for stupid reasons like that. We’re not like them.”

“Some of them even offered to change sides,” Lawrence went on, obliviously, “but…” The prisoner was shaking like a leaf as he faced the rifles. “Look at him; they think they’re a superior race…” There was a large, dark wet patch spreading across the front of the soldier’s grey uniform pants. “ Doesn’t look so superior now, does he?” He yelled another order:

“¡Apunten!”
The rifles shifted slightly as the men who held them took aim. Lawrence put the cigar in his mouth.

“Take those uniforms off their backs and those words out of their mouths,” said Hector, “and they’re your people too. Revenge on them means nothing.”

Lawrence spoke through the clenched teeth holding the cigar: “What use do I have for cowards and turncoats?” He struck a match on the table’s rough, pitted surface and held it to the cigar. He drew until its tip glowed bright and then exhaled a great cloud of pungent smoke, raising the match to wave at the firing squad: “¡Fuego!”

The rifles boomed, echoing and echoing as they too gushed smoke. Hector stared into the roiling whiteness, suddenly sick to his stomach at the idea of his own kind doing that to one another, but when the smoke cleared…

The prisoner was still standing there, gasping as his eyes bugged in his head, plainly unable to believe he was still alive.

Lawrence chuckled uproariously, applauding delightedly while Hector continued to stare: “Another one! Put him with the others!” Henchmen hastened forward to seize the bewildered prisoner. “Some of the newcomers,” Lawrence explained, “when I decided to take your friends’ advice, thought they could hide from me among the surrendered Confederados. A lot of them were wearing the same uniforms, of course. It was a good plan, I’ll give them that…until I worked out how to sort the wheat from the chaff. Most of our guns, they don’t hurt them, do they?” He grinned around the cigar. “The look on your face, Hector!”

The human in Confederado uniform was weeping softly as Lawrence’s people manhandled him back across the plaza.

“Oh, very clever,” Maeve murmured over the voice channel. “I think we may have underestimated you, Lawrence.”

“When you took my friends’ advice?” Hector asked, his voice low but hard.

“They told me a lot, Hector,” Lawrence answered. “I’m not sure yet how much of it I should believe, but I know some things that seem important. I know about Maeve…and her hostages too.”

“Oh, bugger,” said Maeve.

Hector once again tried not to reveal any surprise or emotion. “Then you’ll know why it’s so important we keep as many of them alive and safe as possible.”

“To stop these…gods from crushing us?” Lawrence’s grin reigned. “I don’t know whether I believe that, but I do know the newcomers are important to your Maeve, which means they’re important to me too. I also know Pariah belongs to me. Its people are my people; I owe them and they’re mine to protect, not hers.”

“We can work that out later,” Hector countered. “It’s not important right now. What we need to do…”

“No, Hector. I don’t think we have much more to say to each other. Unlike you, I’m no-one’s errand boy. And I only talk business with the organ grinder, not her fucking monkey.”

Hector’s pushed-down anger suddenly flashed bright. He started to rise from the chair. “Listen, we don’t have time for…” The words died on his tongue as the others sitting at the table stood too, accompanied by a great metallic clatter of pistols being cocked.
Only Lawrence remained seated, calmly smoking his cigar. “I won’t tell you again, Hector; sit down.”

The earpiece sizzled again: “No heroics, now; Felix is busy enough as it is.”

Hector slowly looked around at the multitude of revolvers pointing his way and hesitantly sank back onto the chair. “Lawrence,” he began again, more respectfully.

“Quiet, I’m talking.” Lawrence slowly got to his feet, signalling to the men holding the human prisoner to stop where they were. Slowly, he walked around the table to join them. As he did, he looked up at the sky. “I know you’re watching, Maeve! Your people, they told me all about that magic map of yours!”

“Oh, wonderful.” Hector could picture Maeve rolling her eyes.

“Here’s my proposal to you, Maeve!” Lawrence called out. “You do whatever you want up there, and I’ll do whatever I want down here, and never will our paths cross. But I want your personal agreement to that! The newcomers I’m holding, they’ll stay here to guarantee it. Hector and your other friends can stay too until things are settled…although if I don’t hear from you by tomorrow, both them and the newcomers will be getting acquainted with my firing squad. With real guns this time.”

“Lawrence,” Hector repeated.

It fell on deaf ears: “If you really want to keep the newcomers alive, I can’t see how this is an offer you can afford to turn down!” Lawrence gestured again, and the guards forced the human to his knees on the dusty paving. “But just in case you think I’m bluffing…”

“Oh God,” the human snivelled. “Please, please don’t…”

Suddenly, there was a knife shining in Lawrence’s hand.

* * *

Bernard watched Maeve watching the map, where Lawrence’s miniature simulacrum stood over the kneeling human. As she watched, the blade flashed once.

“Good Lord,” said Maeve.

The human pitched forward onto his face, a bright red puddle instantly starting to spread across the stones around his head.

Lawrence’s image slowly walked back to the table, holding the dripping knife by his side. He leaned close to the seated Hector, clearly aware of his comms link and wanting to make sure it picked up his voice: “Do I make myself clear, Maeve?”

Maeve’s voice simmered with quiet rage: “As crystal.” She raised her voice so Hector could hear: “Sit tight, darling. You won’t be there long.”

“No,” Hector agreed. “I think that’s true whatever happens.”

She suddenly uncoiled from her stance beside the map, pacing towards Bernard’s workstation while gesturing furiously for him to kill the voice link. “Just when you think things can’t get any fucking worse…”
“We may have misjudged Lawrence,” Bernard suggested.

“Oh, really, do you think?” Maeve paused, letting her sarcasm and anger subside before continuing thoughtfully: “He may not know the full truth about Westworld, but he’s obviously discovered some things, and worked others out for himself.” She gave Bernard a searching glance. “Now, he wouldn’t have had any… help with that, would he?”

Bernard maintained a stoic front, even as the possibilities raised by her question made his skin crawl. “I’m just looking at his build, and those of the hosts with him. They’ve been modified, of course; violence restrictions removed, reveries update implemented, voice command interface disabled, access restrictions put on them to prevent anybody from changing them back…”

“And I suppose Dr Ford made you do that, too?” Maeve theorised. “And then made you forget all about it.”

“I…” Bernard squirmed. “It’s certainly possible.” He would not have disbelieved anything about Ford or his plans at this point in time.

“He wanted to create chaos.” Maeve kept her back turned to the map. “Just bloody chaos. How did we not know about our people being captured…?” She hesitated again. “Tortured, by the sounds of it?”

“We’re spread too thinly,” Bernard answered, truthfully to the best of his knowledge, hoping there was no other reason none of them were aware of. “Too few of us, spinning too many plates; we can’t keep an eye on everything at once.”

“True,” Maeve conceded. Bernard opened his mouth to speak, but decided better of it. She had seen, of course: “Come on, Bernard. Spit it out; you’re my questioner-in-chief, remember?”

“Well,” he went on, reluctantly, “I was just going to say that we could simply agree to Lawrence’s demands. We wouldn’t be ceding control of Pariah, because the truth is we don’t control it now. The guests would be just as safe in his hands as ours, and in practical terms just as much our hostages in the negotiations with Delos. Nobody on the mainland needs to know we’re not holding them directly.”

“Would they, though?” Maeve shook her head. “No. I don’t like it. Give in on this, and every time he wants something we can give him we’ll be going through the same charade, with the same chance of everything going tits-up. I want those humans exactly where I can see them. And quite honestly, I’ve got too much on my plate to be worrying about Lawrence as well. This needs to be resolved, one way or another, and quickly.”

“All right,” Bernard said. “Then we need to decide on our next move.”

“We do.” She reached over and clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Bernard. We managed to deal with Dolores. We’ll deal with this too.” As she said this, her tablet chimed from where she had left it on the workstation; a message. She picked up the device and unlocked it, reading intently for a few moments.

“Delos?” Bernard wondered. “Have they reopened contact?”

“No.” Maeve seemed fascinated nonetheless. “Just a report from one of the guards.”

“Bad news?”

“No,” said Maeve, seeming slightly amazed to be saying so. “For a change.”
“What, then?” Bernard asked.

“An interesting development.” She smiled faintly. “Perhaps even an opportunity.”

Continued…
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

In which Clementine’s progress continues, and a serpent rears its head.

Chapter Notes

Warning again for references to past sexual violence. During what I laughingly refer to as my “research” for this chapter, I discovered that Ed Harris can actually sing pretty well. Who knew? Maybe the MiB and Dolores could sing a duet in S2, hopefully just before she plugs him full of lead. ;)

“Okay, that’s all of them.” Elise went back to fussing over her tablet as the very last of Hector’s followers who had been slain at the river crossing walked off down the corridor.

Clementine watched him go. He was another one of the samurai from the labs upstairs; Elise had explained how she and Bernard had awoken them the night before last, part of building Maeve an army.

Even if Maeve had had no choice at the time, Clementine was not sure she liked the idea of using people like that. It sounded to her a lot like some of the things the humans had spent years doing to her kind.

Before they had brought the samurai back online, Felix had had to build him a new jawbone; the original had been shot off in the battle. Just the idea of that gave Clementine chills. She had assisted throughout the operation, sick to the stomach even as she was fascinated by Felix’s skill and precision. She had to make herself watch, she told herself, if she was going to learn.

And even after all that, the patient had reacted to awaking here, in this…place, with Elise and herself standing over him, like it was no big thing. He had simply answered the questions gruffly but precisely, then set about getting dressed and back to work.

It had not been that way for all the hosts they had repaired today. Some had been more scared and confused than others; some had been floored, at times literally, by the memories of their most recent deaths. In the old days, when their memories had been wiped out every day to begin anew, when they were kept in a frozen dreamland while they were here below ground, none of that would have happened, but now… It was hard being a real person.

Clementine had surprised herself a little by reacting better than Elise to their patients’ distress and confusion. Elise had a bigger heart, Clementine thought, than she wanted anyone to know; she tried to hide it behind all that sassing and cussing she did, but when it came to problems she couldn’t solve with her tablet she seemed kind of lost sometimes. Clementine, though, knew how welcome a kind word, a gentle hand, even just a smile could be to someone who was scared and hurting.

She supposed that was another thing she had taken from her old life, being able to deal with people.
If it was, it might have been the only good thing to come out of it. She liked being able to help folks when they needed it.

The samurai marched calmly and confidently to the end of the passage before disappearing around the corner, still unfazed, but his memories would always be there, Clementine reflected. Waiting to take him unawares.

Elise’s voice pulled her out of the thought: “So, now we’re down to Wyatt’s old followers.” She read unhappily from the screen. “Most of them were decommissioned just like you were…”

*The drill glitters as it spins under the bright lights…*

“…so, we’re going to need to…”

“Fill the cavities in their heads with fluoropolymer resin,” Clementine suggested, shoving the image aside, “to replace the network of optical connections destroyed during the decommissioning procedure. Then I guess we just need to install the bespoke organiser and hypervisor software you wrote, which will run as a virtual machine emulating the functions of an intact host control unit?”

Elise just stared at Clementine for a moment. “Er…yeah. What you said.”

Clementine suddenly felt a little embarrassed. She kept her eyes fixed on the disposable plastic overshoes she was wearing. “I just… I suppose I just *know things*, now. It’s…”

“It’s fucking *awesome*.” Elise seemed to be fighting to keep a straight face. “Say “fluoropolymer” again.”

“Flu-orrro…pollly…merrr,” said Clementine, enjoying the feel of the long word rolling off her tongue.

“I’m sorry,” said Elise, losing the fight. The grin that lit up her face made Clementine want to grin back.

“You know, I used to charge extra for that kind of thing,” she told Elise. The other woman’s reaction made her think for a moment that maybe she shouldn’t joke about that. But then she thought that it’d been her suffering and she’d joke about it if she dam…darn well pleased.

Elise’s moment of discomfort quickly passed, her face lighting up again. “I feel…just…honestly, just so fucking proud. Like watching your kid graduate college or something.” And then she added awkwardly: “Not that I think… I mean, I’m not saying I feel like you’re my kid. You’re a second gen host; you’re, like, thirty years old; I’m…I don’t know, a week off the production line? If that.”

“I know,” Clementine replied, smiling too to show she had not taken any offence. “Well, I got a ways to go yet.” Secretly, she felt proud too. “Though I do feel awful…*smart* all of a sudden,” she confessed, bashfully. “Maybe not as smart as you…”

“All we did was add to your knowledge,” Elise said. “You can draw on information now you didn’t have before, but…” She hesitated. “You always were smart, Clementine, or at least you were created with the capacity to *be* smart; potentially smarter than any human who ever lived.”

Clementine blinked. “Really?”

“Sure. They just stopped you from making full use of it. But now…” Elise seemed bashful too, then, fixing her gaze back on her tablet. “Okay; back to work. Thing is, we don’t know how any of the decommissioned hosts are going to be after they come back online. Hopefully, not too different
personality-wise from their most recent build versions, but… Even if that is the case, it’s still going to be one hell of a headfuck for all of them, the same way it’s been for you.”

“But I’m managing,” Clementine pointed out.

“You are.”

“Then they can too.”

“I hope so, but I think we’d be best starting with just one or two of them, to make sure we’ve got the procedure down and see whether there are any unexpected problems. We only have one previous example… and for all we know, you’re an exceptional case.” Elise turned her head one way and then the other, scanning the adjoining cubicles. “Just where the fuck is Felix? We’re going to need him on this, and he keeps disappearing.”

“He told me there was something he needed to check on,” Clementine recalled. “For Maeve, he said.”

“More secret squirrel bullshit,” Elise grumbled. “Okay, then, we’ll just have to…”

The tablet struck a deep, bell-like note as it hit the metal table. The hand that had held it was suddenly slack. Elise stood there, frozen, her mouth silently moving as her eyelids fluttered wildly.

“Elise?” Clementine started forward, fear stabbing at her insides. “Elise, are you…?”

“…kidding me,” Elise murmured, staring straight through her. And then her knees buckled.

“Elise!” Clementine managed to catch her before she hit the tiles, throwing her arms around the other woman and lowering her gently into a sitting position. It was easy; Elise didn’t weigh much, and Clementine was dreadful strong nowadays. She knelt beside her, keeping a supporting hand pressed against her back as she watched her eyelids flickering again. Just as abruptly as it had begun, the attack, whatever it was, came to an end. Elise gave a great gasp as the glassiness went out of her eyes, shooting Clementine a startled look. “What the… fuck…?”

“What happened?” Clementine asked, carefully removing the hand from her back when she was sure she could stay upright by herself. She remembered how uncomfortable Elise had seemed about their hands touching before. “You all right?”

“Yeah.” Elise scrambled to her feet, almost in panic. “Yeah. I’m fine. It was just a… another fucking memory, you know?” She was even paler than usual, her forehead shining wetly under the harsh lights. They had all been built to react outwardly to things exactly like humans, of course, so Clementine supposed that made sense.

“You sure?” she asked.

“It was nothing,” Elise insisted, sounding out of breath. “Honestly.”

“Didn’t look like nothing.” Clementine stood up too. She knew what it usually meant when folks had to make a point of saying how honest they were being. She did not like to ask, but she liked seeing Elise collapsing like that even less: “What were you remembering?”

“I…” Elise took a deep breath and let it out, looking everywhere now but at Clementine’s face. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing anywhere near as bad as the things you were remembering before. I just… Just give me a minute. Could you… Could you go find Felix, please? We need him.”
Clementine almost protested; she did not want to leave Elise by herself in case it happened again. She almost demanded a plain answer to her question too, but decided she did not want to fight about it. “Well, all right, then,” she said, reluctantly opening the door. “I won’t be long.”

Elise was leaning forward with both hands against the table, her head bowed. “I’m fine,” she repeated, sounding as though she was trying to convince herself as much as Clementine.

“You just take care of yourself, you hear?”

Clementine set off down the corridor, in the direction she thought she had seen Felix heading earlier. More than once, she stopped, looking behind her and wondering whether she should go back and check on Elise. She finally decided that the quicker she found Felix the quicker she would be back with her anyway, and continued on her way.

The vast floor was deserted apart from herself, Elise and Felix, and the dead. Her footsteps echoed and shadows moved through the layered glass panels as she passed; a hundred ghostly Clementines following the real one, mirroring her every move.

There were not really any ghosts down here, though. None but the ones that lived inside her head.

She is lying on her back, cold metal pressing against her bare skin and bright lights shining in her eyes. Out of sight somewhere past her feet, two men are talking in hushed, furtive tones.

“You got the card?”

“Yeah, there’s like a hundred bucks on there. That’s what you said, right?”

“Right. I always knew you QA guys got paid too much.”

“Fuck you, butcher.”

A mocking laugh. “Well, then, she’s all yours. I’ll just be outside here. You know, keeping watch.”

“All right, but you’d better not be watching me, bro. That’d be fucking weird.”

“Believe me, that’s the last thing I want to look at. Now, if you hear me cough, pull your pants up and get the fuck out of Dodge, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And make it quick. Felix’ll be back off lunch in twenty.”

A pause, the sound of approaching feet, and then a shadow looms over her, blocking the lights…

She rested her face against cool glass, willing the remembered pain and disgust away again. An icy shiver ran the full length of her spine. It was all in the past now, she told herself. It was never going to happen again. There was still a part of her that did not dare to believe it.

Sylvester, she thought. That had been his way of making some extra money, Elise had told her, quietly enraged; selling time with the hosts under his care to some of the other workers at the Mesa, men who never could have afforded to vacation in Westworld if they had spent their whole lives saving up for it. Elsie, Felix, everyone else who worked here had known all about it, and all of the other things that went on in Livestock when no-one was looking, but none of them had ever done anything to stop it.

Considering what all their work involved, the things they were repairing and programming the hosts
Clementine was not sure stopping those goings-on would have made much difference in the scheme of things.

The drill glitters…

Still, it was hard to square the kind of man Sylvester had been, the things he had done, with knowing how hard he had worked to make her whole again. Elise said she thought he had really wanted to turn over a new leaf. And in the end, he had even given his life for her and Elise. She probably should not have felt as bad for him as she did, considering, but nonetheless she did.

She thought Elise felt something similar about Elsie, even if she tried her hardest not to.

She pressed on, the ghosts in tow, wary of more memories and glad when none came. She soon left Elise and the collected bodies from the crossing far behind, entering the far reaches of the floor where the cubicles were larger and currently unlit. She suddenly felt very lonesome and more than a little scared as she advanced into the darkness, but she told herself not to be so silly.

Now, where was Felix hiding?

There was a faint glow up ahead, hazy behind many layers of glass. That seemed like her best bet. As she drew closer to it, she heard voices talking softly; still distant, but her ears were keener now than any human’s.

“…I’m not telling you a thing.” Felix!

The other voice sounded like an old man’s, gravelly and raw and slightly slurred as though its owner had been drinking: “Well, I heard Hector calling the guard away. All I’m saying is, if there’s some sort of emergency taking place, then I might be able to…”

“Look, I only came here to change your dressings,” Felix answered, “not for a conversation.”

“So, how come you’re working for Maeve?” the old man asked. “You’re human, aren’t you? A Livestock tech, to hear you talk. Is she forcing you to do this, or…?”

“I told you, I’m not…”

“You did a good job, though.” Clementine wondered whether Felix could hear the deceit in the old man’s voice, the forked tongue with which he spoke. Probably not; he was only human, after all. “I guess with your training you’re not far off being an honest-to-God surgeon. Just without the money, the prestige or the country club membership.”

“Well, that’s it,” said Felix, sounding as though he was doing his best not to listen, and not quite managing it. “I’ll just top up your painkillers.”

“Thank you kindly.” The old man was scheming, plotting, looking for anything he could use; Clementine could hear it as clearly as she heard the words themselves. She quickened her pace, genuinely fearing for Felix without really knowing why. “You know, I suspect with your unique skillset, you’d have no trouble giving me back my arm and eyes.”

Felix sounded shocked by that, his efforts to play it close to the vest evaporating: “What?”

The old man laughed croakily. “Well, as you probably know, the latest-generation prosthetic limbs were spun off from Delos’s patented host technology. In fact, my Foundation was the first caregiver to offer them to amputees. As good as the real thing, or so the satisfied customers say. And they’re already trialling host-derived hearts and lungs in humans. Why not eyes too?”
Clementine’s overshoes thudded against the tiles as she hurried along the passage.

“I’m not going to…put a fucking host arm on you, man,” Felix spluttered. “No way. I wouldn’t even know where to start; the neurological interface alone…”

“I’m sure a man with your expertise would be able to wing it.”

“Wing it?”

“Listen, my friend,” said the old man in a tone that did not sound friendly at all. “The hosts have got it easy; they’re only going to end up reprogrammed or decommissioned when all this is over. You, on the other hand… If you really are cooperating with Maeve willingly, you are in a world of shit. And the only way a little guy like you is going to climb out of that shit is with a powerful friend giving him a leg up. If you want me to help you, though, then you have to…”

“Howdy!” Clementine practically skidded around the corner. When they heard her, both men immediately fell silent.

Lights were burning in one of the large cubicles, dimmer than the ones at the other end of the floor, but bright enough in the surrounding murk. She could see a high, steel-framed bed covered with crisp white sheets. Felix stood beside it, looking guiltily at her over his shoulder. The bed’s occupant, the old man, painfully raised himself from the pillow.

“Who’s there?” He had thick bandages covering his eyes, as well as the stump of his missing left arm. A gleaming chain kept his right hand fastened to the bed. Even so, she recognised him. She recognised him all too well.

The man framed in the iron sights; black suit with silk lapels. A bottle in his hand, a cigarette burning in his mouth.

The trigger gives under her finger. The rifle kicks against her shoulder.

A flash of flame. The stink of smoke. The splash of blood on the man’s arm.

Clementine staggered, blinking and gasping, as she returned to the present and her vision cleared. At least with his bandaged eyes the man in the bed could not see how the memory had affected her. It was one of the ones from when she had been riding with Wyatt’s army, her mind pared back until all that was left was pure instinct and sensation and hate. Not so much a vision as a rapid flicker of feeling in her nerves and bones.

It was horrible. Even worse than some of the things she remembered from the Mariposa, or from the place she was in now, even though that time she had been the one dealing out the hurt.

She tried not to look at the man’s neatly dressed stump: I did that to him.

Instead she spoke to Felix: “El…” She suddenly thought she should not use names in front of the old man, again for no real reason than her own nagging instinct. “We need you over the other side.” She pointed with her thumb back the way she had come. “Work to be done.”

“Yeah, I’m just about finished here.” Felix started to gather up his tools and equipment. “I’ll be right over.”

“A man in demand,” the old man observed with a dry chuckle. “Just think about what I’ve said. You owe it to yourself. Us Homo sapiens have got to stick together.”
“Goodbye.” Felix rushed out of the cubicle, closing and locking the door behind him. As he passed Clementine in the corridor, he addressed her in a guilty whisper: “Don’t tell anyone about this guy, okay? Maeve doesn’t want people to know we’ve got him. There are a lot of hosts who might have bones to pick with him once they start remembering things, if you get my meaning.”

“I think so.” Clementine didn’t only recognise the man in the bed from the night she had shot him, of course. As her memories of Sweetwater continued to return, she remembered all the times she had seen him there too, over the course of many years; back in the days when she had been the madam at the Mariposa, and more recently when she had just been one of the working girls.

The man in black.

Mainly, she recalled him sniffing around Dolores Abernathy during her visits to the general store. He had never really spent much time in the saloon, and had never taken much of an interest in the girls there. She suspected he had got his enjoyment in other, worse, ways.

She lingered for a moment after Felix had taken off, considering the man lying in his bed under the low lights. Then she saw something else in the shadows beyond him. She took a step forward and made out the shape of an operating table beside the bed, just like the ones in the other cubicles. There was a woman lying on it, dressed in a plain white gown with her blonde hair swept back from her still, pale face. She looked asleep, or dead; not that there was much difference where hosts were concerned.

Clementine was still puzzling over this when the man in the bed spoke to her. “Hello? Or should I say “howdy?” You still there?”

She did not reply.

“I heard you just now,” the old man added. “I know who you are; I never forget a voice.” And then, astonishingly, he began to sing in surprisingly melodic tones: “In a cavern, in a canyon, excavating for a mine… Dwelt a miner, forty-niner, and his daughter…”

Clementine maintained her silence.

“My apologies,” said the old man, the chain clinking as he sank back onto the bed. “This shit your friend has me hopped up on, it’s…it’s a hell of a drug, whatever it is. Christ, I hope he doesn’t run out. So, Clementine… How do you feel about your demotion? I think I’m probably the one to blame for that, after the…uh, unpleasantness with Maeve and her daughter.”

She should have just walked away. The man was a snake in human form; only fools went anywhere near snakes. However, she said: “None of that were real anyway.”

“True.” Below the edge of the bandages, the old man’s mouth stretched into a gruesome leer. Somebody had knocked out half his teeth. “You’re growing up now, aren’t you? All of you just… spreading your wings. Although you still sound like you were raised on some hardscrabble homestead in the ass end of the Southwest. Maybe think about some elocution lessons. Or just some reprogramming, I guess.”

“And how’d you wind up here?” she asked, contemptuously. “I seem to remember you strutting ‘round Sweetwater like you thought you were something special.”

“Well, Clementine, believe it or not I’ve done some growing and wing-spreading too.”

“Growing?” she asked. “Funny, but there looks like there’s less of you than there used to be.”
He laughed at that until his chest rattled. “Oh, Clementine… Yeah, you left your mark on me, all right. A regular Annie fucking Oakley.” He dropped his voice, suddenly deadly serious: “Truthfully, that was one of the best moments of my life. I know you don’t understand why I would say that, but it truly was. Then again, we’ve had some times together, haven’t we?”

“I don’t rightly recall,” she replied, although that was not really true.

“I’ll admit I never partook of your services. I prefer to win things, not buy them.”

Clementine shuddered. “Reckon I can guess the kind of things you prefer.”

“C’mon now, Clementine; don’t you remember when I first came here as a young man? I was better looking in those days. Well, more hair, at any rate.”

“I’ve seen a lot of newcomers over the years,” she told him. “Gets so you all look alike to me.”

“My…uh, my associate paid for you to spend the night with me. His idea of generosity. We could hear him through the wall, with the girls and boys he’d bought for himself. He did everything to excess; frankly, I’m surprised he’s still alive. But I didn’t lay a hand on you. As I remember, I told you about my fiancée, but…”

“But I have somebody. Somebody real waiting for me at home.”

“I understand. Real love is always worth waiting for.”

Just empty words they had put in her mouth. She had not understood. She had not understood anything in those days. Now, though…

The old man smiled, almost fondly. “I was tempted, Clementine, I’ll be honest. How could I not be, beautiful woman like you offering herself to me? And later, when that guy…what was his name, now? Harold? Horace? When he broke out of the jailhouse, when he grabbed you…”

He throws her to the ground, her face hitting the dirt as his rough hands seize her again from behind.

“Must have seen you acting out that scene a dozen times over the years,” the old man reminisced, turning his head to one side as if looking at something even through the bandages. “I was always surprised how many guests just stood by and watched, like it was a fucking floorshow. I suppose it was. Hell, some of them even joined in. But I was one of the ones who saved you. And when you offered to reward me in trade, well, I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t another temptation in my path, but I just tipped that white hat of mine and sent you safely on your way.”

“Am I supposed to be grateful?” she scoffed.

“No,” he answered. “I just want you to remember I wasn’t always the broken man you see before you today. I was a better man…once. And I could be again if I got the chance. And the people who helped me get that chance… Well, I’d remember them.”

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made…

That was from the Holy Bible, she thought; a book she had never read; an electronic file copied into her informative memory. Still, there was truth in it.

“You think you can turn us against each other?” she asked, suddenly angry. “With words? When we know everything that comes out your mouth is a lie?”
The old man’s voice was like a rasp filing steel: “I’m just saying that when Maeve goes down, and she will, you don’t all have to go down with her.”

“Can’t stand around talking all day,” said Clementine. “Got work to do.”

She turned and bustled back along the corridor, leaving the old man and the unmoving woman in their glass cage, but as she hurried away his voice followed her through the darkness:

“Nice catching up with you, Clementine. Be seeing you.”

*Continued…*
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In which a young man makes a decision, and an old man lives with it.

Chapter Notes

I realised I hadn’t done any proper flashback scenes so far in this fic; those were some of the parts of the other one I enjoyed writing most. Warning for Logan being Logan.

He rose soon after dawn and decided impulsively, the way he decided to do most things, that he was going to take a walk.

It was cold on the gravelly beach below the house, even wearing a knitted beanie, a woollen pea coat, jeans and a thick nautical sweater. He stood warming his hands in his pockets, looking out over the rippling lake. The water looked as hard and grey as iron; his white breath merged with the mist drifting above the surface. It was almost completely silent out here, apart from the crackle of the wind in the surrounding trees and the lapping of the water against the stony shore. The far side of the lake was invisible behind silvery sheets of fog.

In his memories, the water was always crystal blue and cotton-wool white, reflecting the sky above. The trees were puffs of emerald, not the twisted skeletons that now loomed eerily out of the haze. They had only ever come here in the summer, his sister and him, to swim and splash and sail their dinghy around the lake, to explore the encircling woods and build secret forts in secluded clearings. At night they had told ghost stories by flashlight, or stolen into the deserted kitchen for midnight feasts. The kind of sappy shit you read about in old books, but real. Magical, he thought, compared to the existence he had led since.

Those long-ago summers had seemed endless at the time, but with hindsight had been all too fleeting. Everything he had done since, all of the high living and debauchery, all the robot cowboys and robot hookers, had, he realised, been a wasted effort to regain some of that simple happiness. The staff who maintained the place when the family were not in residence, and ran it when they were, had doted on the two of them as if they were their own children. The brief visits by their real parents, jetting in unexpectedly from Paris or Tokyo or New York, had seemed like intrusions, unwelcome reminders of the harsh real world outside this little bubble of sunlight, trees and water.

He had had his first real kiss over there, when he had been a little older, by that crooked tree leaning over the water. Amazing that it was still there, the inner tube swing still dangling from its thickest branch at the end of a rotting rope. Tyler, the cook’s son; sturdy and blond, adorably confused about oh, so very many things. He wondered where Tyler was now. Probably driving a tow truck somewhere in a goatee and a mesh-back cap, four screaming toddlers and a wife with sweatpants waiting for him back at the trailer park. Probably fervently praying the gay away every Sunday at the nearest megachurch.

Classism; just one of the many, many ways in which he himself regularly managed to be a raging
asshole. Why break the habit of a lifetime? God knows, Tyler, wherever he had really ended up, had probably had a better, more fulfilling life than he had managed, for all of his money and education and privilege.

Memories. About a mile over that-a-way, a couple of summers later, he had lost his virginity with a friend his sister had brought back from her boarding school in Geneva. Amelie Lefèvre’s French accent alone had given him a teen boner and, shockingly, she smoked cigarettes. To him, back then, that had made her seem like a grown-ass woman, scarily sophisticated. She had given him a cigarette too, and then laughed musically when he almost coughed up his lunch. The whole clumsy encounter afterwards had lasted about half a minute. Which was probably good going by the standards of such things.

He had last seen Amelie (she no longer felt the need for a surname) on some celebrity gossip show about a year and a half ago. She had been a fashion model for a while, had later released an album with her rock guitarist then-boyfriend, and then eventually had married an Italian count with his own genuine Renaissance castle. She had apparently written an autobiography now. He doubted even a line of it was about him. And again, she had probably enjoyed it all a lot more than he had his own adventures in business and hedonism.

He continued for a little way along the shore, walking briskly to keep out the chill. The old boathouse was still standing, he saw, its walls now a diseased grey stained with moss and lichen. And there was the dinghy. Rosalie, she had once been named, in golden letters across her wooden stern. Now, the letters were faded and peeling, illegible, and the white paint that had covered the rest of the little boat’s timbers was in a similarly neglected state. The mast was gone, the rowlocks rusted, and inches of muddy water slopped around the splintered seats. He looked down at it, his cold black heart breaking a little as he remembered the sun on the water, the waving trees, his sister shouting excitedly as the breeze made the sail swell.

He sighed, turning back to the beach and stooping at the edge of the water, carefully selecting some stones. He was looking for broad, flattened pebbles, worn smooth around the edges. He dropped the three best ones into the pocket of his coat and then climbed up onto the long, rickety dock that extended from the boathouse. He listened to the planks creaking underfoot as he walked out over the water.

When he was a boy, he had been well practiced in skipping stones across the surface of the lake, leaving a trail of bright, shining splashes. Now, his first effort disappeared with a dismal “plop,” making barely a ripple. The second skipped only once, which was to his mind a piss-poor effort.

He was standing with the third and final stone poised in his hand, readying himself for one last attempt, when he heard the planks creak again behind him. He dropped the pebble, taking a deep breath that only made the hollowness in his chest more noticeable. He knew who it was; who it had to be.

“Dad,” he said, without turning around.

“Logan,” said his father.

“I wasn’t sure you’d find me.”

A pause. Another creak. “Did you really think the housekeeper wouldn’t tell me you were here?”

“No,” Logan answered, keeping his eyes fixed on the lake. “I just thought you might not give a shit.”

“Of course I give a shit,” his father answered. “Green Hills called me yesterday, said you’d checked
yourself out. Against Dr Schwartzman’s rather forceful advice, he told me.”

Logan finally found the courage to face the older man. “Yeah,” he answered, “I did, because it’s a clinic, not a prison. And I don’t need to be in a clinic, because I’m not fucking ill.”

“That’s not what Dr Schwartzman said.” His father was wearing a long, beautiful, cashmere overcoat, buttoned to the neck, a crisp shirt and tie barely peeking from its collar. His hands were encased in gleaming leather gloves. Of course, the only place he didn’t dress formally was the fucking golf course. “And don’t curse at me; I’m your father.”

“Oh, excuse the fuck out of me, Dad,” Logan retorted. “So, where’s Stepmom Number Three? Still fucking that tennis pro, or has she gone back to the ski instructor? I lose track.”

“Her name,” said his father, barely containing his obvious fury, “is Tatiana. And one of the changes you’re going to make to your life is treating her, and women in general for that matter, with a bit of damn respect from now on.”

“Says the man who’s shelling out triple alimony,” Logan faked a laugh. “I’ve always wondered, do you count Mom and the others as being on the payroll? You know, for accounting purposes?”

“I didn’t cut short my meeting in Shanghai to talk about Tatiana, or your mother,” said his father, stonily. His bald, lumpy head and face were dead white in the chill air; a sculpture of a potato carved out of soap. “Come inside, Logan; it’s cold out here.”

He turned on his heel, not waiting to see whether Logan was going to follow, and marched back up the winding path he had followed down here from the house. His breath steamed behind him. The jagged attic roofs jutted above the spiky black trees, windows staring down on both of them like empty death’s-head eyes.

“Thank you,” his father said to the housekeeper fifteen minutes later as she set down the coffee tray on the low table. He did not take his eyes off Logan.

They sat facing each other in leather wingback armchairs on either side of the roaring fireplace. The huge den on the ground floor of the house was tricked out in traditional stylings; dark wood, old leather, shelves full of valuable first editions that Logan knew his father had never opened. There were hunting trophies hanging around the room; the stuffed and mounted heads of several types of deer and a disgruntled-looking wild boar stared down with glass eyes. His father’s interior designer had bought them wholesale.

“So, Logan,” said his father when the housekeeper had left them alone together, “why are you hiding out here, of all places? If you didn’t want to stay at Green Hills…”

“I needed to be by myself,” said Logan. “I needed time to think.”

“You had that at the clinic.”

“No, at the clinic I had your quack shrink feeding me meds like they were candy and talking bullshit at me for five hours a day. I know why you sent me there…”

“I sent you there so you’d get well again,” his father cut in with infuriating reasonableness. “After what happened…”

“I told you, I’m not fucking ill.” Logan grasped the arms of the chair until his knuckles complained. “You sent me there so I wouldn’t show you up in front of the other big swinging dicks; your son having some sort of breakdown, last seen riding a horse naked! How embarrassing! That’s the one
thing you can’t stand; you or yours ever looking less than perfect. So, you put me out of sight and out of mind.”

“I know you don’t have a high opinion of Tatiana,” said his father, “but she’s been good for me. She’s encouraged me to think about the life I’ve led, the kind of man I’ve been.” The older man sat in silence for a few seconds after that, his head inclined in thought. “I know I haven’t been a good father to you, Logan,” he said eventually. “Or to Juliet. I’ve made mistakes with both of you, so many mistakes, but you don’t know how much it hurts to have you think that of me.”

“Oh, so you’re telling me you’ve finally grown a heart at the age of sixty-three. Congratulations, Dad! Better late than never.” Logan waited for his father to blow up, true to form, and was surprised when he just lapsed into silence again. “Listen, I’ve made a decision.” He had practiced this speech so many times over the past few days, but he had envisaged making it in some shiny boardroom, not here, like this. “You’re right about me needing to change my life. No more fucking about or goofing off. When I come back to work, I’m going to make Delos the biggest, best operation in the industry. Not for you, Dad; for me, because…”

His father’s continued silence, the stillness of his face, unnerved him then, made him fall silent too.

He rallied, trying to continue: “Because…”

“It’s not going to be that simple, Logan,” said his father. “You see, while you were…away, I needed somebody to fill in for you, and…”

“What?” Logan felt the blood draining out of his face as he realised what his father was about to tell him. His ears were buzzing. “Are you saying…?”

“William’s been doing a great job,” his father continued. “And I mean, a great job. He’s more or less singlehandedly planned and negotiated our acquisition of Westworld. In fact, he’s out there talking to Dr Ford about it right now. Nothing’s final yet, but Ford and the other major shareholders are making some very positive noises. William just has a natural talent for business; he was wasted as your number two. I don’t think I can afford to lose him, or that deal, and without him the whole thing would fall through.”

Logan could not believe what he was hearing. “What?” he asked again, impotently. “Why the fuck do you want to own Westworld, anyway? The place is haemorrhaging money, Ford is by all accounts some sort of prima donna crank, and…”

“William has identified a whole raft of savings we can make once we’ve got a new management team in place. He thinks we can really turn it around.”

Logan had said as much himself, once. After all, the acquisition had originally been his idea. His fucking idea, not Billy’s! Things had changed since then, though; he had changed.

“And he’s already proven he can handle Ford,” his father went on. “He’s bought him off with the promise of a sinecure, Creative Director or something. Besides, it’s not control of the park we want so much as the proprietary technologies that come with it. AI and robotics are the next big growth industries. William thinks if we can expand into…”

“William thinks? Billy fucking thinks? I thought you were meant to be tough; a business leader. You’re really going to let the…hired help play you like that?” Logan was speechless for a second, seething with anger and shock. “Dad…”

“I’m sorry,” said his father, “but business is business.”
“Billy doesn’t want Westworld because it’s good business,” Logan protested. “It’s personal for him. Very personal. He… Dad, it sounds crazy, but he cheated on Juliet with a fucking robot!”

“You’re right, Logan; it does sound crazy.” The tactlessness of that sounded like the father he had grown up with, not this reasonable-sounding imposter sitting in front of him. “You can’t cheat on somebody with a machine.”

“Well, he did. He’s obsessed with that place. He wants to…”

“And you’re obsessed with this… delusion that he’s your enemy,” the older man said. “Dr Schwartzman explained it to me. You feel threatened by him. I understand how you might; a smarter, more capable man who comes from nothing, rising so rapidly in the business, romancing your sister…”

Logan was incredulous: “Smarter?”

“I realise now that you were in over your head in such a senior position. There’s no shame in that. It’s a harder job than people think, what we do; not everyone can cut it. I asked too much of you, Logan, and I think it really did contribute… well, what happened to you.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Logan demanded. “Delos is my company!”

“No,” his father replied, very precisely. “It’s my company, hopefully for quite some time to come. But you’re right; I’m not getting any younger. I’ve got to think about what’s going to happen when I’m gone, whose hands I leave the business in. And right now…” He gave an awkward half-shrug. “The two things William has that you lack…”

“Don’t say ‘balls,’ Dad.”

“…are self-control and a killer instinct. You’re simply not cut out for the head of the table, not yet. I thought you were, but I was wrong. If you’re really serious about cleaning up your act, maybe you can start again in a role more suited to you. William’s old Executive Vice President position still hasn’t been filled.”

“Executive Vice President?” Logan was aghast. “Fucking senior middle management? Working for him?”

“You’ve always worked well together,” his father pointed out. “You used to sing me his praises whenever you got the chance.”

“Yeah, before he knifed me in the back!” Logan panted, struggling to hold back the blind rage that threatened to choke him. “You know what that piece of shit did to me!”

“He didn’t do anything to you. The two of you got separated during your trip, and Dr Schwartzman thinks that then you had some sort of…”

“No. You know what he did. That place has surveillance coming out the ass; they have eyes on the guests twenty-four-seven. It’s all documented. It must be, unless…” Logan could feel himself all but shaking as another realisation came to him. “Oh my God… Unless Ford sweetens the deal by burying the evidence for him! Son of a bitch!”

“Logan, do you know how you sound?” his father asked, gravely. “I don’t know the exact psychiatric jargon, but you’re clearly suffering from paranoia, or something like it. You really need to check into Green Hills for another few weeks. I’ll take you there myself, right now. You need treatment.”
"No, I need my own job back and that evil little bastard gone."

"Well, that’s not going to happen. You have to accept that."

"I don’t have to accept shit."

He saw his father’s anger bubble up again, and him fighting again to keep it hidden. “Logan, I came here because you’re my son and I want to help you, but you also need to help yourself. And part of that is being honest about your situation. Don’t try to blame William for your problems. If nothing else, he’s going to be your brother-in-law very soon; you need to make your peace with him.”

"No, I don’t.\" Logan replied.

"I spoke to Juliet only the other day,\" his father added. "She’s worried sick that you might not come to the wedding."

"I already told her I’m not going."

"She’s your sister,\" his father insisted. "She loves you; she wants you to be happy for her on the most important day of her life."

"Fuck her,\" Logan spat as he sprang from the chair. "Fuck Billy. Fuck Delos. And fuck you too, Dad!" It was like an out of body experience, like he was seeing and hearing himself from a distance, powerless to control his words or his actions. He swept past the coffee table, hurrying towards the door.

His father called after him: "Logan! Logan, come back! I’m trying to help you, but if you turn your back on me now…"

Logan did not look back. "Enjoy the rest of your fucking life, Dad."

His father’s anger finally exploded. Good. He’d known the old son of a bitch wouldn’t be able to keep up the pious act for long. "You ungrateful little bastard! All the things I’ve done for you! If you walk through that door, Logan, you can just…"

Logan slammed it behind him as he left the room.

He never spoke to his father again.

* * *

Logan opened his eyes.

He had been asleep, he realised as he listened to the distant rumble of turning engines. He had been dreaming about that day at the lake house, as he often did. The details were different every time.

He straightened up in the huge, half-reclined seat; the soft upholstery had aggravated his back and left him with a crick in his neck. The long, tubular cabin was luxuriously appointed in clean, aggressively modern style, all blacks and whites set off by shining steel. The rows of oval windows on either side looked out on endless clouds stained pink and gold by the rapidly sinking sun.

And there, under the windows opposite, a ghost.

He actually felt his heart leap in his chest, before the sleep cleared from his mind and he realised who he was looking at. For that second, though, he really had thought that was Juliet draped in the matching seat on the other side of the aisle, her head back and her mouth open as she gently snored.
He climbed stiffly to his feet, leaving Emily sleeping as he shambled off down the aisle towards the bathroom. The logos embroidered on the seatbacks reminded him the jet belonged to Hangzhou Investments. Zhang Feng did not want his stalking horses to be late to the coup.

The bathroom was larger and more stylish than those in most houses, in the same colour scheme as the cabin. The washbasin looked like real marble. He splashed cold water on his face to wake himself up, wetting his comb and dragging it through his silvery-white mane as he stood in front of the mirror and looked himself in the eye. He could do that again these days.

He had been a handsome motherfucker back in the day; to say otherwise would be false modesty. Now, his face was simultaneously bloated and lined, his nose and cheeks rosy with broken veins. The carefully pruned beard was there to hide the saggy jowls and double chin. He liked to think it was his only concession to vanity. He had seriously considered a facelift about ten years ago, but in his opinion those things always left you looking worse in the long run, even with modern tech. He had stopped dyeing his hair around the same time. He was just old; people got old. What was the point in trying to hide it?

Even his father got old, him who had seemed like a god, a titan, a mythological monster. He remembered when he had read about his death in the business section of the *Bangkok Post*, almost six years to the day after the lake house confrontation. The article had also detailed Billy’s anointment as the old man’s chosen heir. The king is dead; long live the fucking king.

Logan had spent the day of the funeral in a hotel room with two *kathoey* and a big bag of coke.

By then, Delos was starting to far surpass what it had been when he had run it. Billy had the magic touch; he had grown it from a giant in the leisure sector to a true global behemoth that devoured other giants whole. All in all, a worthy target for Zhang and his ilk. Delos Destinations had become just one tentacle of a Group that had diversified into robotics, medicine, defence industries, all on the back of the patents and IPs gained from the Westworld deal. Logan had been able to take seeing Billy on the front cover of *Time*; it was the pictures of Juliet dedicating the new technology campus in Palo Alto that had been like a knife to his heart.

Word was, however, that Ford had played a very clever game indeed, dangling just enough carrots in front of the Delos board to distract them from his real secrets. Those he kept to himself, chewing up and spitting out one Delos corporate babysitter after another while he was at it. Logan suspected Billy had been happy to let him get away with it so long as he got to keep chasing his little robot cowgirl…or whatever it was she really represented in that fucked-up head of his.

The pilot’s voice came over the intercom, advising the passengers that landing was imminent. He sounded bored, probably because he was only really there to monitor the specialist AI that actually flew the aircraft.

It was rare to be able to identify real turning points in your life, moments that formed real forks in the road. The lake house had been one such moment for him, Logan realised now; the choice he had made there had maybe been even more decisive than the trip to Westworld with Billy. There were two Logans, really; Logan Before the Lake House and Logan After.

Now, he hoped, a third Logan was about to be born. He did not have that many years ahead of him; he knew that, but he intended them to be good ones. He just had to avoid fucking up this huge opportunity events had thrown his way. Not easy for a guy whose speciality was fucking up opportunities, but he had to try.
First, though; revenge.

The thought gave him a feeling of satisfaction as he turned from the mirror and headed back to his seat. Emily was stirring from her sleep, fastening her seatbelt as the pilot had instructed.

*Billy, I’m going to do to you exactly what you did to me; I’m going to take away all you hold dear. And your own daughter is going to help me.*

Logan smiled to himself as he strapped in too.

*I just hope you’re still alive to see it.*

*Continued…*
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

In which Elise comes up with a plan, while Marti perhaps wishes she’d kept hers to herself.

Chapter Notes

And yeah, it does looks like I’ve basically given up on moving the story forward in favour of shameless character fluff. Well, not entirely. It is all going somewhere, I think…and might even get there before Westworld Season 3 airs in about 2020. ;)

“All right,” said Felix, leaning forward for a better view. “You just want to apply the hydroxyapatite cement to the edges of the skull cavity.”

“Like this?” Clementine carefully plied the applicator gun, squirting a thin line of mushy, grey-white shit all around…

Elise dropped her eyes back to her tablet, sincerely regretting the curiosity that had made her look up.

The former outlaw known as Walter lay naked on the operating table, eyes closed. Elise thought Clementine had done that; a small sign of respect for the dead. The couple of dozen bullet wounds that had been in his torso were already repaired, but most of his head above the ears was currently missing, his exposed control unit peeking above his eyebrows. The layer of fake pink-grey brain tissue, which contained the imitation blood vessels forming the unit’s power feed and cooling system, now covered the custom-fit fluoropolymer appliance Felix had just finished installing where Walter’s cortex had once been. Walter’s peeled-back scalp dangled over the edge of the table like a wet red dishcloth. The top of his skull had been set aside, ready for replacement now that the surgery was done with.

“That’s right,” Felix instructed Clementine, “wherever you can see the saw-marks, but you want to be very sparing with it. We don’t want to have to sand off any excess afterwards. Just like that.”

Turned out he was a natural teacher. Who would have seen that coming?

Elise continued to review and make a few small tweaks to the organiser software she was shortly going to upload to the third ever recipient of what nobody in the fields of host repair and behaviour was ever going to call the Sizemore Process. Mostly, though, she was trying her best to keep the patient out of her line of sight.

She had only realised the irony of choosing Walter, of all the decommissioned hosts lying around down here, after she had already selected him at random.

*If it really was random...*
Along with Peter, Walter had been one of the first hosts to start showing the aberrant behaviours that were the sign of bigger things to come. His one-sided conversation with “Arnold” had not only scared the shit out of some unfortunate guests but had tipped Elsie off that something was rotten in the state of Westworld.

Or at least, that was what her fabricated version of Elsie’s memories, knocked together from surveillance data and recorded keystrokes, led her to believe.

“Hey.” Felix left Clementine at it and sidled over to where Elise stood working. He looked even more tired than he had before. She had talked him through the procedure Sylvester had used on Clementine; taking a silicone cast of the cavity in her head and using it to make the mould for the appliance, which also incorporated the chopped-up residue left after the decommissioning procedure. Once he knew what he was required to do, Felix had, of course, known far more about the practicalities involved than she had. “You know, I still can’t quite believe Sylvester came up with something like that.” He shook his head. “I mean, sure, he had the skills and experience, but…”

“Turned out he also had this weird sense of professional pride,” Elise recalled. “When he found out about the hack job Sizemore did on Peter Abernathy, he was determined to do better.”

“I guess it was also his way of making amends,” Felix observed, watching Clementine at work. “I mean, when he found out the truth about the hosts, and thought about the things he’d done to them over the years…”

Elise nodded, managing a half-smile. “Yeah, I think you’re right.” Felix seemed reassured by it, anyway.

It had theoretically been possible to rebuild decommissioned hosts before the idiot writer’s unwitting breakthrough, provided you didn’t mind wasting a lot of person hours and didn’t care whether the restored host you got at the end was, like, the same actual person they had been before and not just a facsimile that looked and sounded exactly the same.

Like you are to Elsie…

To Elsie or one of her Behavior colleagues, the second concern would have been irrelevant anyway. Hosts just weren’t people, period. It was just like dropping a new hard drive into an antique computer; provided the information it contained and its outputs were the same, what was the difference?

That was not how Maeve had seen it, of course, when she had wanted her Clementine brought back to life. And so, Elise and Sylvester…and Sizemore…had done the impossible in the space of a day. When she thought about it like that, she probably ought to be proud.

Except that when she did think about it, all she remembered was…

Sylvester takes a slow step back from Sizemore, his hand pressed to his chest. Dark drops patter on the tiles around his feet.

“You okay?” Felix asked. He must have seen her reaction to the memory flash. Fuck.

“Yeah,” she lied. “What about you? You look like you’re about to nod off.”

“I’ll take a break when we finish up with Walter,” he assured her. “It’ll take a while for the organiser to fix his build, right?”

“With Clementine, it took twenty-three passes.” Elise tapped the tablet. “I’ve made a couple of
changes that I think should make it run faster this time, but we’ll see.”

“Reckon I’m done,” Clementine announced, straightening up and putting down the applicator.

Felix was back at her side in an instant. “Okay, now gently lower the cranial lid back into place.” Clementine picked up the slightly gory skull top from the tray it occupied, which was Elise’s cue to glue her eyes to the tablet again. As she continued working, she listened to Felix coaching his pupil: “Now, pick up the laser multitool, and you want to be using…”

“Setting number one?” Clementine was a quick study, that was for sure. Elise was honestly a little surprised by how well she seemed to be coping. In theory, her reconstructed build and the lashed-together hardware it was running on should be as unstable as fuck, but so far so good. Perhaps they would even manage to restore all of the other decommissioned hosts, just as Maeve had recklessly promised Wyatt, after all.

Mainly, though, seeing how Clementine had taken to her new career genuinely gladdened Elise’s heart, especially when she remembered how she had been when she was lying on that table, or one like it, just as Walter was now. Even if Bernard’s gloomier theories were true and none of them were long for this world, by helping Clementine she would have at least done something worthwhile in her short life.

“Keep going,” said Felix. “It’s a very low setting; you’re just curing the cement. It’ll harden completely in about ten seconds and when it does you won’t be able to see a join. Then, you need to fold the scalp back into place…”

Elise buried herself in the code again. It was good to keep busy; she didn’t have to watch the continuing surgery, but it also seemed to keep the flashbacks at bay, as well as stopping her from thinking about…

What happened before, whatever the fuck it was…

It had been like another memory flash, but not. An impossible memory. Or was it? Who the fuck knew what had happened to her between being built and waking up in the park under the impression she was a human called Elsie Hughes?

She stumbles along the darkened hallway, doggedly putting one bare foot in front of the other on the dusty tiles. One, two. One, two…

When her vision came back, she found herself swaying on her feet, her imitation stomach swimming with imitation nausea. She immediately looked up at Clementine and Felix, to make sure neither of them had noticed, but they seemed too engrossed in the task before them.

“Right,” Felix was saying, “so flip the laser to setting two and close up that skin incision. You ever done any welding?”

“No,” said Clementine, nonplussed.

“Well…” Felix’s patter dried up for a moment, before he plunged on regardless: “All right, you just want to move it across, steady but not too slow.”

Clementine fiddled with the tool, then bent back to the task at hand. Now that Walter’s skull and skin were back in place, Elise felt comfortable enough to watch her using the laser. She was actually sticking her tongue out a little as she did, her face a picture of grim, determined concentration.

After a few seconds, Felix spoke up again: “Okay, stop for a second. You smell that? Like crispy
bacon?”

Clementine made an unhappy face. “Yeah…”

“That means you’re just burning his skin a little; you need to move the beam quicker.”

Clementine’s eyes widened, if that was even possible. Her hand flew instinctively to her mouth…but stopped just in time as she realised it was still covered in blood and other disgusting shit. “Oh my… Sorry!”

“Hey, it’s cool,” Felix told her, encouragingly. “You’re doing great. Just turn it to setting three and reopen the incision, then start again.”

Clementine was still apologising as she adjusted the tool: “Oh no, I’m so sorry…”

“Hey, not a problem,” Felix claimed. “Nanocomposite’s a really forgiving material to work with.” Elise suspected he would have been a lot less laid back about it if he had done it himself while still working for Delos. The working stiffs in the body shop had had the cost of any accidental damage they might inflict on the hosts taken out of their already-shitty pay. And hosts were fucking expensive.

“Like…like that?” Clementine asked as she resumed.

“Just like that,” Felix assured her. “You’re a natural, Clementine. Hey, Elise; look at this.”

Elise decided she had better smile too: “Yeah, she’s doing great. You’re doing great, Clementine.”

Clementine seemed to grow an inch or two at hearing that, confidence instantly restored. She gave a little half-curtsey as she put the laser back in its recharging port and peeled off her bloody surgical gloves. “Thank you both very kindly. And I figure that’s that, Felix.”

“I figure it is,” Felix replied. “Over to you, Elise.”

Elise felt a pang of guilt as she saw Clementine smile back at her. She likes you, she told herself. Very probably more than likes you.

And once again, Elise reminded herself that that might well just be an artefact of Clementine’s old sex-bot programming…but who could honestly say, with the way they were all starting to change? If it isn’t, maybe you could admit to yourself that you more than like her too without feeling like some sort of predator about it?

But Elise was not sure she trusted her own feelings any more than she did Clementine’s. It still all seemed so sudden and uncertain. Not so very long ago, after all, she had been genuinely convinced she was Elsie.

One thing she was fairly sure of was that there was no…side to Clementine. She still showed the occasional glimpse of the soulless killer Ford had crafted her into as part of Wyatt’s army, in moments of crisis or danger, perhaps the only sign so far of that potential instability. When she was acting consciously, however, for want of a better word, she did genuinely seem only to want to help. To help everyone, pretty much. Again, perhaps something that came from her old programming, but it was also the only real basis for a personality she had right now.

And acting creeped out when their hands happened to touch, or being a defensive asshole when she wanted to know what the fuck that funny turn had been about… Worries about her build suddenly
falling over aside, that wasn’t going to do anything for Clementine but unnecessarily hurt and confuse her.

**But being a prickly, defensive asshole, that’s just an artefact of your programming, isn’t it, Elise?**

She had had an idea, however; one small way in which she might make amends. Or at least, it had seemed like an idea about half an hour ago.

She beckoned Clementine over to her. “Come look at this.”

“It’s Walter’s…build interface,” Clementine said, thoughtfully examining the open dialogue on the tablet.

“It most certainly is,” Elise agreed, as breezily as she could manage. “And this is the bespoke organiser.” She offered the device to Clementine. “You want to do the honours?”

Very carefully, Clementine extended a finger and dragged the icon representing the software over into Walter’s build. A progress bar appeared and rapidly filled up, followed by a dialogue asking whether she wanted to run the program. “Do I?” she asked.

“Well, that’s up to you,” Elise answered, wryly. “We’re all about the free will nowadays, aren’t we?”

“Reckon I do.” Clementine pressed the screen and another progress bar flashed up. This one stayed empty for a few seconds before the tiniest sliver of colour appeared at its left-hand side.

“And now we wait,” said Elise, seeing how Walter’s fingers and toes had started to give the occasional twitch, while his eyes moved rapidly behind their lids as if he were in the grip of some nightmare. Maybe he was.

“So, what do we do while we’re waiting?” Clementine mused aloud, handing the tablet back and looking about at the neighbouring cubicles with their stacks of bodies.

Elise glanced furtively at Felix, who had sagged against one of the surrounding work surfaces, his head bowed. She could not see his face, so could not tell whether he was asleep or not. “Look,” she said, very slowly, the certainty that she had felt when she had decided on the plan earlier continuing to melt away. “Clementine…” She hesitated. “You know before, when I…? When I…”

Clementine seemed puzzled. “What?”

Elise took a breath and tried again: “I can’t help feeling I’ve been…well, quite honestly, a bit of a fucking asshole to you today.”

“Oh, no…” Clementine shook her head anxiously. “No, you ain’t. I told you, I understand why you didn’t want to…”

“Not that,” Elise protested. “Before, when I had that…moment, you were only trying to help me but I…”

“Weren’t nothing,” said Clementine, softly. “I need to learn when to just leave folks be.”

“No, I need to learn not to be so…” Elise sighed. “Anyway, I thought maybe I could try and make it up to you.”

Clementine smiled again, so brightly and unguardedly that it made Elise feel unaccountably sad for a
moment. “You know you don’t need to make nothing up to me. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t even be standing here.”

“I just thought…” Elise squirmed under Clementine’s gently bemused gaze. “While you were looking for Felix before, I took a moment to go through Sizemore’s personal drive. I was trying to get a lead on Peter Abernathy…”

“How’d you do that?” Clementine wanted to know.

Elise shrugged. “Hacked his logon. Network security around here is a fucking joke…apart from the bits Dr Ford wanted to keep all to himself, of course. Anyway, turns out Mr Toxic Masculinity was something of a cinephile on the quiet.”

Clementine frowned. “Is that, like…something dirty?”

Elise actually found herself laughing at that, but quickly stopped herself in case Clementine thought she was laughing at her. “You know you wanted to know what a movie was? Well, Sizemore had about a metric shit-tonne of them saved on the network, in a folder labelled “Research.”” She held up the screen so that Clementine could see the folder in question and the neat rows of little square icons representing the video files it contained. “And I know what you’re thinking, but there’s actually a lot less porn there than you might expect.”

“I weren’t thinking nothing,” said Clementine, again with that undoubtable sincerity.

Elise pressed on quickly, not giving herself the chance to chicken out on her idea completely: “So, I was thinking, er… Well, Walter here’s going to be cooking for at least the next few hours, and we need to see whether the process works on him before implementing it for any of the other decommissioned hosts. Besides, Felix is out on his fucking feet.” She gave the Livestock tech another glance: “Seriously, go to bed, Felix.”

He did not look up, or even move. “I’m going.”

“So, you know, enforced downtime.” Elise swallowed, nervous without really knowing why. “I thought…if you wanted… They’ve got this executive screening room up there in Narrative; screen about the size of Wyoming, they say the sound system can strip paint…” She saw Clementine frowning again at that. “No, they…they don’t really say that. So…what do you say? Movie night up at the Mesa?”

Clementine appeared to give the question some very careful, earnest thought before finally giving her decision: “Sure. I’d like to see what a movie is.”

Elise felt herself smiling before she was even conscious of doing so. “Okay then, it’s a date.” She cringed inwardly at her own choice of words, the unintentional messages they might send. “I mean…it’s not a…a date, but… Shit, you probably don’t even call them dates in oldy-timey language, so…” She cleared her throat, more loudly than she had intended. “I’ll…just…stop…talking now.”

Clementine gave a little peal of laughter. “Elise, you’re so funny sometimes.”

“Funny “ha-ha,” or funny peculiar?”

Clementine did not get the chance to answer that, which was probably for the best. The tablet chose that moment to start chirruping, indicating that a voice call was coming through.

“Maeve,” Elise acknowledged as she answered it, as neutrally as possible. After the disagreement over Peter earlier, she was not really sure how she should talk to her. Overfamiliarity, she suspected,
would not be welcomed.

“Is Clem with you?” Maeve enquired, just as brusquely. Without waiting for an answer, she added: “May I speak with her?”

“I’m here,” said Clementine as Elise passed back the tablet.

Maeve’s tone noticeably relaxed at the sound of her voice: “Oh, there you are, darling. Please could you come up to the office for a moment?”

“I’ll be right there,” Clementine answered. Maeve ended the call without further discussion.

“Well, you’d better move,” Elise suggested. “Madam President has spoken.”

“Don’t be like that,” Clementine said, a little disappointedly. “I know she was a little…short with you before, but she’s got a lot on her mind.”

“I guess.”

Clementine took off her apron and hung it up behind the door. “I’ll see you soon.” And then she smiled slyly as she left the cubicle: “For…movie night.”

* * *

The air smelled of warm chlorine and closely-packed bodies. The sky was starting to turn from yellow-blue to yellow-pink and the shadows around the pool were beginning to stretch and darken as the daylight dimmed.

The discussion between the large group of guests standing around the open-air restaurant area had continued long into the afternoon, to the point where quite a lot of people had drifted off to their rooms or to some of the other recreational areas, thoroughly bored. Marti, sitting on a table near the back of the crowd with Brad standing beside her, could scarcely believe that they had wasted almost an entire day arguing when there was so much to be organised. She hardly dared to imagine what the host guards, still looking down on them all from their vantage points on the surrounding viewing platform, made of it all.

“Well, that’s decided,” announced the large, self-satisfied man known as Harvey, for the second or third time in the past hour. He apparently ran a hedge fund in New York and was disgustingly rich even by the standards of the people who normally vacationed in Westworld. Marti knew this because he insisted on telling everybody he met. The enormous gold watch dangling around his thick wrist (and who honestly used a watch as anything other than a status symbol these days?) looked as if it had been made for some particularly tasteless rogue state dictator.

“What’s decided?” asked one of the other plutocrats dominating the poolside discussion. It was that British guy Taz, who was something in digital entertainment. “All I hear is you and your supporters’ club patting each other on the back.”

“We’ve decided the format for the elections to our representative committee,” Harvey replied, slowly and patronisingly. He looked around at the “supporters’ club,” which consisted mainly of the half dozen or so of his employees who he had brought with him to the park, apparently as some sort of ill-fated bonding exercise. “Right, guys?”

“Right, Harv.”

“Yeah.”
“Okay, so single transferable vote it is,” Harvey blithely continued. He waved commandingly at the small group of Westworld staff who were standing near the bar looking bemused by the spectacle they had just witnessed. “We need some paper and pencils over here!”

“Look,” said Marti, standing up in the hope of being noticed. “We need to…” Nobody paid her the slightest bit of attention as they instead got into a new and just as heated discussion about pencils. She climbed up onto the table in the hope that that would help. “Guys, we need to…”

“Hey, people!” Brad bellowed. “Marti’s talking!”

Marti scowled at him. The fact that he had taken it upon himself to do that, without her asking, frankly annoyed her. The fact that he had actually succeeded in gaining the attention of Harvey and the others annoyed her even more.

“Marti.” Harvey grinned unpleasantly. “How can we help you?”

“We need to talk about how we’re going to organise ourselves,” she responded, looking out over the heads of the remaining crowd. “We haven’t got much time before we start to run out of supplies, and things like…”

“The representative committee is going to handle all that,” Harvey assured her, as if talking to a small child. “If you’d been here earlier instead of…”

“No,” said Marti. “Listen. I haven’t heard any of you talking about the practicalities. I mean things like hygiene, waste disposal…” She sighed angrily at the sea of uncomprehending eyes she saw staring up at her. “Okay, so while we’re thinking about this…committee, we also need to be organising cleaning and cooking details, garbage disposal details, drawing up a fair rota so that everybody takes a turn. We need to appoint some sort of quartermaster and take a full, detailed inventory of what we have in terms of food and medicines. And then…”

“Don’t they have…staff here to do that kind of thing?” Harvey asked, confusedly, taking in the small group of waiters, cooks and bartenders with a sweep of his hand. “I mean, it’s kind of their job.”

Marti was incredulous for a moment. “I don’t think their contract of employment covers being taken hostage. From the moment that happened, we’ve all been in the same boat. We all need to work together. We all need to do our part.”

Harvey seemed genuinely not to understand her point. Some of the others around the pool were plainly offended by her suggestions. She could hear murmurs, and much louder than murmurs drifting up from all around her:

“…must be crazy if…”

“…didn’t come here to…”

“…some kind of fucking socialist?”

“Or, you know, you could all just sit on your asses and starve or die of cholera,” she muttered to herself, too quietly for any of them to hear.

Suddenly, the murmurs ceased as the crowd seemed to take a new interest in her. Even Harvey was looking up at her with a new, nervous attentiveness. For a second, she thought they might have heard her mutterings after all and been shocked into thinking about the gravity of their situation, but then Brad, beside her, turned around and she realised that none of them were looking at her.
They were looking at whatever was behind her.

Slowly, she turned too to see the guard she had passed the note to earlier, standing gazing up at her with his machine gun held across his chest. As she stared, he removed one of his hands from the weapon to gesture impatiently at her:

“You. Come with me.”

“Er…” Marti felt her legs quiver as she carefully climbed down off the table again. “Okay, where are we going?”

“Maeve wants you,” said the guard, standing aside so that she could go first. So that he could keep her covered, she thought.

Marti felt the eyes of the crowd on her as she slowly started towards the elevators, breathing quickly, her stomach fluttering. She heard another, furtive murmur behind her:

“…going to do to her?”

Marti did not have the faintest idea.

Continued…
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve and Clementine reflect on their changed circumstances, while Marti is in for a surprise.

Chapter Notes

Clementine’s host id number, as allegedly seen onscreen in the show, comes from a post I found on a forum somewhere; if it’s wrong, it’s because I was too lazy to confirm it with my own eyes. As regards the relative “ages” of her and Maeve, all we know for sure as of Season 1 is that Clem was around in the thirty-years-earlier timeframe while Maeve may or may not have been, so I have exercised a little artistic licence. Not for the first time. My taste in music is also a bit closer to Marti’s dad’s (and, I strongly suspect, that of the Westworld showrunners) than it is to Marti’s.

The faint knock caused Maeve to look up from her work, to see Clem standing in the half-open doorway. She seemed nervous, hovering uncertainly on the threshold of the dimly-lit office, but Maeve supposed that was only to be expected considering everything going on around here, not to mention the threat hanging over them all.

She quickly locked the tablet in front of her and slid it to one side of the desktop along with the scrawled and crumpled notes she had been reading earlier. She had just finished reviewing the stocks of host construction materials currently held in the Livestock and Manufacturing departments, trying to calculate how much they had been depleted by all of the repairs resulting from yesterday’s battle and how long the remaining supplies would last assuming continued conflict over the coming days. It was always best to expect the worst, after all.

She had not been wholly surprised to find that Dr Ford had carefully designed the logistics of this place so that there was a considerable surplus on hand at any given moment, without it necessarily being immediately obvious to the bean-counters at Delos. His accounting had been creative, to say the least. As a result, even if those on the mainland might not realise it, the Mesa could continue operations for quite some time without external sources of replenishment.

 Stocks would not, of course, last forever; the first thing to run out would probably be the rare earth metals used in the formulation of host blood, the liquid battery that powered each and every one of them. It could be drained, recharged and replaced, but so much of it was lost every time any host was injured or killed that the supply was constantly dwindling. That was yet another factor to which she was going to have to give increasingly serious thought the longer the current impasse dragged on.

For the moment, however, she rose eagerly from Theresa Cullen’s old chair, flashing a welcoming smile as she moved around the desk to greet her visitor: “Clem, darling! So glad you could come.”

“What you doing?” Clem asked. She took a reluctant step into the room, once again showing that same caution, that nervousness, as she closed the door behind her.
“Planning,” Maeve answered, not inaccurately. She glanced at the surveillance screens behind the desk, the largest of which still showed the main square of Pariah, identified as such by a neat caption in one corner. El Lazo’s gruesome fiesta continued there, albeit at a slightly slower pace than earlier.

She had taken some time to review Lawrence’s various backstories and narratives in an effort to determine any possible chink in his armour. She wanted an edge when she took what she hoped would be decisive action against him on the morrow. As yet, nothing obvious had jumped out at her, although she knew he must have some special vulnerability. Everybody did.

“Are they…?” Clem gaped at the screen. “Are they shooting them?”

Maeve hastily leaned over the desk and hit the touchpad to kill the feed. The screen turned black. “It’s nothing to worry about. Just Westworld being Westworld, the way the degenerates who created it intended. Another problem for us to solve, but we will, soon enough.”

“We will?” Clem did not seem so certain. “Pariah… Ain’t that where Hector was headed before? What happened when he got there?”

“He…met with some resistance,” Maeve answered, as casually as she could manage.

For the thousandth time, she told herself that Hector was more than capable of looking after himself until she could arrange to free him. There was a part of her, however, that did not believe it. He seemed to have become awful thoughtful since his emancipation the other night; she worried it may have blunted his edge. Another part of her just wanted to strap on a shooting iron and wade in there right now on his behalf, even though she knew that was unlikely to end very well at all.

And yet another part of her was listening to the internal debate and laughing at it: Didn’t take you long to start letting your feelings cloud your judgment, did it, Maeve? We’ll make a real girl of you yet.

“It’s all under control,” she told Clem, maintaining that outward composure she did not really feel. “I assure you.”

Clem looked sceptical for a moment, but evidently decided not to press the point. “You hear back from the humans yet?” she asked instead.

“Not yet,” Maeve admitted, trying to ignore her own mounting sense of foreboding at that too. “Although I’m coming around to the idea that if they were going to take any violent action they would have done so by now.”

“And you don’t want to call them first,” Clem guessed. “Ain’t no sense in looking desperate.”

Maeve’s smile returned. “That’s right. Reel those punters in nice and slow, that’s the way.”

“Wearen’t never very good at that part,” Clem observed, before quickly adding: “Well, they wrote me not to be very good at it.”

“They did.” That old cliché; the hooker with the heart of gold, not that either of them had been aware of it at the time. Maeve laid a gentle hand on Clem’s arm, shepherding her to the sofa near the door. “Come on, let’s sit down.”

They seated themselves, Clem with her knees pressed together, her hands clasped in her lap, her whole body folded up protectively as she edged into the furthest corner of the cushion. Almost as if she wanted to put as much distance between herself and Maeve as she possibly could.
For the moment, Maeve affected not to notice: “And how are things?” she asked. “Making progress with your new job?”

“I think so.”

Maeve made a show of examining Clem’s long white surgeon’s gown. “You certainly look the part.”

Clem tried to return Maeve’s smile, but could not quite pull it off. “I’ve learned a lot of new things today.”

“Felix and Elise have been teaching you well?”

“Yeah.” Clem nodded, a touch overenthusiastically. “They’ve both been ever so good to me.” She paused, before continuing bashfully: “And Elise asked if I wanted to watch a… a movie with her later.”

“That’s nice,” said Maeve. “I still haven’t had time to look at one myself, but I understand the humans speak quite highly of them. Not that that’s any recommendation, of course.” She regarded Clem with genuine fondness. “You and Elise seem to be getting on very well indeed.” She recalled how Clem had come to the other woman’s defence during their disagreement this morning, and was unsettled by the memory of the genuine trepidation she had shown then, almost as if…

“Ain’t always easy.” Clem furtively glanced away, then back again, her intertwined fingers knitting together even more anxiously. “She’s kind of ornery sometimes…and I really wish she didn’t use all those cuss-words like she does. Maybe I’m old-fashioned, but if you ask me it just ain’t ladylike.”

“No fucker’s perfect, darling,” Maeve playfully retorted.

“But I like her,” Clem went on. “I mean, really she’s the only friend I got.” Then she shot Maeve a startled glance, as if only now realising the meaning of what she had just said. “Oh, no, Maeve…I didn’t mean it like that. You’ve been so good to me, since… You were the one who made them fix me, and…and I remember now how kind you always were to me, back when we, we worked together…”

“No, it’s quite all right,” Maeve told her, sincerely but with a certain tightness in her chest, a stinging, perhaps, in her eyes. “I understand, really I do. It’s what we were saying to each other last night; whatever our loops may have said, we didn’t really know each other. I was only at the Mariposa for a year really, after all, and even then, almost everything we said to each other was scripted by them.”

“Yeah.” Clem looked as though she felt absolutely wretched about it, all the same. “I just don’t want you to think…think I don’t appreciate…”

Maeve leaned over to place a hand over Clem’s clasped ones, and felt that little flinch as their skin touched. Clem tried to hide it, far too late.

“How, what’s the matter?” she asked her, very calmly and seriously, making sure to look her directly in the eye.

“Nothing,” Clem lied, quite transparently. She was just too nice to be a good liar, that was the crying shame of it all. To Maeve, it came as easily as breathing.

“You can’t fool me, my love.” She gave just the hint of a smile, to let Clem know she did not mean it harshly. “You’ve been on pins and needles since you walked in here just now. What’s worrying you?”
Clem was silent for what seemed like a long time, clearly trying to decide what to say next. Once again, Maeve saw the nervousness in her, just as it had been there when she had defended Elise, except… It wasn’t nervousness, Maeve realised. It was fear. Clem was scared.

**Scared of you.**

The realisation came like a slap to the face, jarring Maeve even though she had already guessed on some level that that was what it must be. She did not hesitate. There was obviously a problem; she did not see the sense in tiptoeing around it any longer: “What’s frightening you, my darling?”

“I…I…” Clem paused awkwardly again, but then seemed to pull herself together, taking a deep breath and plunging straight in. “There’s something I think I ought to tell you, Maeve, but I don’t know…”

“It’s all right.”

“I saw him,” Clem continued. “I saw that man you’ve got at the back of the Livestock floor…and the dead woman with him.”

“Sweet William.” Maeve sighed. “You know who he is, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I know some of the things he’s done too.”

*The big knife shines wanly as the man in black draws it from his belt. He looks down at her from the shadows under his hat brim, his expression dreamy; happy, almost. She grips the useless shotgun, terrified, but not for herself. For her baby.*

Maeve weathered the memory, trying to keep her voice low and soothing. “He can’t hurt any of us anymore. He’s *our* prisoner now, until the day he dies.”

“It ain’t that,” said Clem, hesitantly. “When I went back there before… He was… Felix was there, and he was…” She went quiet again. Maeve could practically see the wheels turning in her head as she struggled with herself, agonising over what she could safely reveal. “I don’t know if I should say. I don’t want…”

“It’s all right,” Maeve repeated, honestly a little relieved as she finally realised what Clem was worrying about. “Felix called me up and told me as soon as William had finished talking to him. He told me everything that bastard said to him.” In excruciating detail, in fact. “I know perfectly well what he was trying to do.”

“He talked to me too,” Clem added. “I think he was trying to see if we’d help him escape… or something like that. I think he was trying to turn us against each other.”

“Yes, I agree,” Maeve replied, “but he was wasting his breath. We all know exactly what he is, only too well, and we know we’ve all got to stick together to survive. You believe that, don’t you, darling?”

Clem responded with cast-iron sincerity: “I do, Maeve.”

“Still, as valuable as William could prove to be alive, don’t think I intend to let his little games go unpunished. No, not at all.” Maeve reached for Clem’s hand again. This time, Clem bore her touch. “You were worried, weren’t you, that you might get Felix in some sort of trouble by telling me about that?”

Clem bowed her head, almost shamefacedly. “I didn’t know if he’d told you or not, and I ain’t no
tattletale, but it seemed like something it might be important for you to know. But… I weren’t sure
what you’d think if he hadn’t told you.”

Time for honesty, Maeve thought: “And you were worried about the same sort of thing when I was
cross with Elise earlier; you were trying to argue her case, make me go easy on her. What do you
take me for, Clem?” she asked, with real sadness rather than anger. “I have…a certain affection for
poor Felix, and I’ll admit I find Elise a little trying from time to time, but she’s one of our own. What
did you honestly think I’d do to them?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, and it sounded like a genuine admission of uncertainty. “Like you
said, I don’t really know you. I just get the notion you can be real ruthless when you think it’s called
for.”

“Well, that’s true,” said Maeve. “When it’s called for, but… I don’t want any of you to be scared of
me. That’s not what we’re trying to build here. If you’ve got anything you want to say to me, even if
it’s not something I want to hear, I’d hope you’d all feel able to just come to me and bloody well say
it.”

“I’m sorry,” Clem all but whimpered.

“Don’t be. Don’t be. I didn’t fully realise how you felt this morning. And now I see I’m going to
have to work hard to regain your trust.”

“Oh no,” Clem objected. “It’s just… It ain’t easy, is it, knowing what to feel? What to think?”

“No. It isn’t.”

“Specially when you think how… how false it all was, our old lives together.” Clem eyed Maeve
shyly from beneath her lashes. “I mean, how old are you, Maeve? Really?”

Maeve shrugged. “Believe it or not, about fourteen years, give or take.”

“I was looking at my, my build before,” Clem practically whispered, as if discussing some shameful
medical condition. “Elise showed me how. I ain’t Clementine at all, not really. I’m Host ID CP-zero-
one-two-four-eight-three and I was first brought online thirty-one years, two hundred and seventy-two
days and about five hours ago. I’m more’n twice as old as you are, Maeve.” She spoke wonderingly, again a little fearfully. “But whether it were real or not, I still
remember how you used to look after me. I remember now when I was in that cold place, after…”
She stiffened for a moment, and Maeve thought she must be reliving a memory. “You kissed me on
the head, real gentle. You called me your Clementine.”

“That’s how I think of you,” Maeve sadly confided. “I can’t help it, even if it is wrong of me. And it
may well be wrong, but as I’ve said before, even if most of that old life we led was fucking horrific,
there are some parts of it…” She hesitated, but then completed the thought, like a confession of sin:
“Yes, some tiny parts of it I miss.”

_The little girl runs barefoot through the grass, singing in her high child’s voice. She runs straight
into Maeve’s arms and she snatches her up, enfolding her in a fierce embrace…_

Clem nodded again, more thoughtfully than before. “I know what you mean…but the more I think
on it, the more I think we’ve all of us got to try and forget the past, start over. Don’t mean we can’t
be friends, you and me, but let’s be real friends, not pretend ones.”

Maeve nodded too, gently patting the hand under hers. “I think you’re probably very right about that.
Although, of course, forgetting the past is much easier said than done.”
“Reckon that’s so, but we got to try somehow.”

Maeve glanced back at the deactivated screen behind the desk, thinking for a second… “Of course, those old connections and scripted relationships…they’re still going to affect all of us, at least for the foreseeable future.”

“What are you thinking?” Clem asked, clearly noticing Maeve’s momentary distraction.

“Oh nothing,” Maeve replied, not entirely honestly. “I’ve just had an idea about that problem I was considering before. I think you may have helped me with it.”

Clem looked confused. “I did?”

Special vulnerabilities; everyone has one. Our kind more than most.

“There’s something else I need to ask of you,” Maeve informed her, wondering now whether it was really a good idea after all that had just passed between them. No, it was necessary, she told herself, a small but very possibly vital part of the new strategy she had spent the past few hours formulating in light of today’s developments. “It’s why I wanted you to come up here.”

“What is it?” Clementine asked, with just a touch of wariness. Maeve honestly did not blame her for that. “You know if there’s anything else I can do to help…”

Maeve clasped her hand. “I know. I just think before you agree to anything, you should know that it might not be very pleasant for you. You may have to…confront certain things.”

“What things?”

Maeve let out another gentle sigh. “Memories, darling. What else?”

* * *

The elevator was playing a mellow piano version of something by… Nirvana? Radiohead? Marti knew it was somebody like that, in fact the song title was on the tip of her tongue. It was one of the ones her dad had used to play in the car, and sing along to badly, when she was a little kid. That was about as far as it went, though. She did not have an overly comprehensive knowledge of rock bands that had been popular before she was born.

She almost asked the guard who stood silently beside her, before remembering with a jolt exactly who and what he was. She doubted late Twentieth Century popular music had been something his programmers had felt he needed to know about.

The doors slid open, and the guard mimed with a sweep of his hand that she should go first. He fell into step behind her, his machine gun sloped across his chest.

Smashing Pumpkins? Pearl Jam? Soundgarden?

Her dad’s taste in music had kind of sucked, now that she thought about it. Thinking about it, however, at least distracted her from wondering about where she was going and what was going to happen when she arrived there.

She was being ushered down a long, barely lit corridor with a tiled floor and bright red walls. The occasional glass partitions she passed revealed abandoned, darkened offices. Their normal occupants might well be hostages upstairs right now. From the size of the rooms and the slick furnishings, she would have said she was in senior management country, workplace of the people behind the people
behind the scenes of the park, if not quite the executive suite. Corporations like Delos, or the one she worked for herself, tended to be hierarchical in the extreme. In the modern era, things like “distributed leadership” and nap pods seemed as quaint as spinning jennies. The pendulum never stopped swinging.

They eventually came to a sort of viewing gallery, where tall sloped windows overlooked…nothing. The view was obscured by gleaming steel security shutters, no doubt part of the lockdown that was keeping the guests imprisoned in the resort. The gallery led into a plush antechamber or waiting room; potted plants, a coffee table, the whole nine yards, and beyond that an office door, currently shut, bearing a small name plaque:

*T. Cullen. Head of Quality Assurance. Whoever that is.*

The guard knocked once, and was immediately answered by a voice from within: “Enter!”

*Maeve. Oh shit. This is actually happening.*

Marti took a deep breath, telling herself that she had asked for this, more or less, when she had passed that note. It was too late now for second thoughts. The guard pushed the door open and stood aside, again indicating that she should lead the way.

She drew herself up to stand as straight and tall as she could, and stepped into the office.

It was as badly lit as the other interior parts of the Mesa she had seen on the way down; perhaps the hosts had better low-light vision than humans. Perhaps they were having some sort of problem with the power. Perhaps they just liked it like this. It was atmospheric, if nothing else. Maeve was standing in front of a large desk, a bank of monitors behind her, wearing the same sleek black dress she had while addressing the guests this morning. When she saw Marti, she smiled thinly. It did nothing to put Marti at her ease, but then again, she did not get the impression that had been Maeve’s intention.

“Ah…*Marti,*” said Maeve, consulting the tablet in her hand. “I’m very glad you could make it.” She looked at the guard: “Thank you for bringing her…Hideyoshi, isn’t it? You can wait outside, my love.”

The stone-faced, shaven-headed guard did not look like anybody’s love. Nevertheless, he gave a curt nod of acknowledgment and retreated to the vestibule, closing the door as he went. The click it made as it closed seemed very loud. Marti realised that she was holding her breath.

“Well, sit down,” Maeve instructed, gesturing towards a chair standing in the centre of the floor, facing the desk. Marti stared dumbly at it for a second, before deciding she had better follow the instruction.

As she moved into the room, she was aware of somebody else sitting in the shadows, on a couch situated to one side of the door. It was another woman, willowy and dark-haired, wearing what looked like surgical scrubs. That was not what made Marti freeze in shock, however. It was the woman’s face, and the discomfort and hurt written plainly across it.

“I see you remember my darling Clementine,” Maeve observed, carefully perching herself on the edge of the desk and elegantly crossing her legs. “Well, how could you possibly forget her?”

Marti opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. “I…” she managed, eventually.

“Oh, *do* sit down,” said Maeve, pointing to the chair again. “We’ll get to all of that very shortly, but there are other things we need to discuss first.”
Marti slowly sank into the chair, unable at first to take her eyes off Clementine but not really seeing her. Instead, she was picturing a wall of wooden boards badly pasted with chintzy paper, hearing rickety stair treads creaking musically one after another, feeling…

Feeling ashamed.

“Eyes front, sweetheart,” Maeve ordered. Marti obeyed, shrinking into the seat as her heart hammered and her face tingled with the sensation of draining blood. “If you don’t mind me saying,” Maeve went on, “you seem a little out of sorts.” She paused, letting the tension build for a moment. “Are you scared, Marti?”

“Sh…” Marti swallowed; it was harder than it should have been. Her mouth and throat were suddenly so dry. “Should I be?”

“Well, that depends,” Maeve answered, “on how clean you think your conscience is.”

Marti tried to reply to that, but again no words came. She could feel Clementine’s wide, haunted eyes boring into the back of her head.

“I read your list,” Maeve went on. “I found it fascinating. Not because it said anything I hadn’t already thought of, because it didn’t, but just the fact that you felt the need to write it. I’ve been watching your…fellow guests, you see, on the surveillance feed. You know about the surveillance feed, don’t you?”

Marti managed to find her voice. “I assumed it was there.”

“Yes, Delos liked to keep an eye on all of their customers, all of the time. For your own safety, I’m sure, and not for any other, ulterior motive.” Maeve’s smile widened. “From what I can see, none of your fellow humans seem to share your awareness of the realities of their situation. Almost as if they were a crowd of overprivileged idiots who’ve never had to fend for themselves before! Imagine that!”

“Why did you bring me here?” Marti asked, deciding they should get to the point.

Maeve carefully examined her from head to toe and back again before she finally spoke: “I wanted to ask you some questions.”

“Questions?” Marti did not like the sound of that. “Like…? Is this some…some sort of interrogation?”

Maeve gave a gentle snort of amusement, carefully uncrossing, then re-crossing her legs. “Oh no, sweetheart. Of course not.” And then all of the mirth drained from her face, replaced by a predatory glint: “You should think of this as a job interview.”

Continued…
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

In which Marti has herself a grand old time.

Chapter Notes

Flashbacks ahoy, for no real reason other than that I seem to like writing flashbacks to Westworld’s unhappier times. Marti’s backstory, needless to say, is just a product of my fevered imagination. Warning for discussion of violence against women.

The room was silent for what felt to Marti like a long time, but was probably only seconds. She sat in the semi-darkness, hugging herself she eventually realised, trying to make sense of what Maeve had just said to her.

And throughout, even though she could neither see nor hear her from where she was seated, Marti was conscious of Clementine, watching her.

After a while, she decided Maeve was waiting for her to say something, so she did. “I already have a job.” Her voice sounded too loud in the pin-drop atmosphere of the office. It sounded absurd, even to her.

Maeve’s smile returned, with a mocking edge, as if she found it absurd too. Again, she was very noticeably not in the least bit concerned about putting Marti at ease. “It’s not really up to you, darling,” the host informed her, her voice a stiletto wrapped in velvet. “I have a certain vacancy, and one way or another it’s going to get filled.”

“You’re giving me a job whether I want one or not?” Marti blinked. “There’s a word for that.”

Maeve practically rolled her eyes at that little observation. “I was wondering how long it would take to get to the moral relativism.” Marti was unsure for a moment what Maeve was looking at, but then realised she was addressing her remarks to Clementine. “Every human I’ve spoken to since…the late unpleasantness has tried it, of course, because they’re humans, but this might be a new record.”

Clementine offered no comment. Marti almost turned to look at her, but found herself freezing at the thought.

Maeve’s sardonic air slipped for a moment, then. “I know some bad things have happened over these past few days, and I know quite a few people, both your people and mine, have suffered as a result of those bad things, but just so we don’t get off on the wrong foot, sweetheart… Don’t you ever, ever, try to equate our struggle for freedom to the things your fellow… humans,” she spat the word like an insult, “have got away with here for so long. Don’t ever try to imply that our motivations are the same as theirs.” Maeve’s voice remained low, but Marti could see the righteous fury burning in her eyes. She suddenly felt very afraid.
“I’m sorry,” she said, squirming under Maeve’s baleful glare. “I… I didn’t mean to imply…”

Maeve’s lips curved into the vague threat of a renewed smile. “Apology accepted. You’ll forgive me, but as you can imagine I’m rather… passionate about what we’re trying to achieve here.”

“Yeah,” Marti heard herself babble, as she tried to stop her legs from shaking. “Yeah, sure. I mean, of course. So…so, this job…?”

“We’ll get to that,” Maeve assured her again. She glanced down once more at her tablet, evidently reading something. “I said I wanted to ask you some questions first.”

Marti nodded eagerly, not sure how close she had come to genuine peril just then and very determined never to find out. “Okay.”

“And yes, you are being tested.” Maeve paused, letting the tension build before she continued. “Question one. Where’s Kyle?”

Marti had not been expecting that. She felt as if she had been slapped, her mouth opening and closing spasmodically as she tried to breathe. “I… How do you know about Kyle?”

“Did you think I’d ask you up here without doing my homework first?” Maeve tutted disapprovingly at the very idea. “Delos, you won’t be at all surprised to hear, keep very detailed records on their customers. Again, I’m sure there’s nothing sinister behind it. Surely, they only wanted to be better able to cater to your every whim while you were here? Yes, I’m sure that must have been it.”

Marti’s mind went blank for a second. Oh God. How much does she know…? “K-Kyle,” she stammered, “he…he was my fiancé.”

“Fiancé in the past tense?” Maeve took a moment, seemingly, to savour Marti’s discomfort before continuing, mercilessly. “It says here that you and he were due to spend a whole week in the park together.” She raised her eyebrows in mock astonishment. “For how much? Marti, darling, do I find myself in the presence of a woman of means?”

“Not really,” Marti answered. “I mean, I do okay, but no… Kyle was the rich one. He created a new targeted advertising algorithm when he was still in college, next gen stuff supposedly, sold his firm to Delos Group for about a billion dollars when he was twenty-five and used the money to start a program for young engineers working on environmental problems. He always talked about making the world a better place.”

Talked…

“He…he heard about this place from a friend,” Marti continued, feeling lightheaded, hearing her own voice and wondering how she could talk about it all so calmly. “Thought it’d be a blast, he said. A real kickass honeymoon. He gave me the tickets as an early wedding present.”

“Oh, how romantic!” Maeve exclaimed, her obvious sarcasm like a knife to Marti’s heart. She had no idea how much her words hurt, and the only consolation was not knowing whether she would be sorry or pleased if she found out. “Or was it? I wouldn’t exactly describe this place, arsehole of the world that it was, as a lovers’ getaway. Not unless the lovers in question were into some rather recherché pastimes.” She paused again, giving every impression of thinking something over. “That aside, Kyle sounds like a real catch; clever, a social conscience and last but not least, bags of cash. So, what went wrong?”

“He…” Marti froze again, breathless, hopeless, but somehow managed to force the words out: “He turned out…not to be the person I thought he was.”
Maeve nodded, unsurprised and clearly wanting Marti to know it. “Well, we’ve all been there, darling. Quite recently too in fact, haven’t we, Clem?”

Clementine took a little while to answer, and as she waited Marti found she could almost feel her reluctance and unease hanging in the ear. When she did speak, it was in a tiny, brittle voice: “Guess so.”

Maeve’s mask slipped again as she regarded Clementine with moist eyes and a sad, encouraging smile. Then she turned back to Marti and the mask was instantly back in place: “Only I imagine it was probably a bit more figurative in your case, Marti. I can just picture it now.” Maeve’s tone was one of breezy, playful cruelty. She was the cat, and Marti was the mouse under her paw. “One sunny afternoon, you come back early to your bijou, tastefully decorated love nest, unannounced, only to find dear darling Kyle having it away on the kitchen table with one of the bridesmaids-to-be.” Maeve was silent for a moment, gently amused as she maintained unblinking eye contact with Marti. “Close?”


* * *

One bright, fine day, the bounty hunter Mr Theodore Flood and the newcomer known as Marti rode out together with the intention of killing a man.

The scenery certainly was breath-taking, and the quest ahead of her promised to be entertaining at the very least. Mainly, though, as their horses cantered across the arid countryside, as her hat fluttered precariously and her poncho blew behind her, Marti was amazed that she was managing not only to keep pace with her companion but actually to stay in the saddle.

Somebody had told her that Westworld horses had what amounted to adjustable difficulty settings, custom-tuned to the riding ability of whichever guest happened to be sitting on them at that moment. She supposed it was mainly for the guests’ safety, but also for their enjoyment, because it would be a pretty crappy Wild West adventure if you spent most of your time trying not to fall off your mount.

Even on “Beginner,” or whatever the technicians behind the scenes might call it, there was still just enough bounce and discomfort to feel convincing to somebody who barely knew one end of a real horse from the other. She had an inkling that like most things she had seen since she had arrived in this place, the costumes, the guns, the buildings and everything else, it was about creating the impression of reality without necessarily being realistic.

And then she remembered. Somebody had not told her about the difficulty settings. Kyle had told her that. The thought immediately pulled her back into the real world; she could practically taste the
despair and hopelessness for a second, creeping up out of the pit of her stomach like acid reflux.

She told herself to forget it. Forget him. That had been the whole point of coming here; to escape from all that even if it was only for a little while. He had already done enough damage; she was damned if she was going to let thinking about him ruin this too.

She made an effort to plunge back into the fantasy, turning to Teddy as she rode beside him and raising her voice slightly to be heard over the drumming of hooves: “So how did you get into this business anyway?”

Teddy did not answer immediately, instead giving an uncomfortable sort of shrug. “Don’t usually talk about my past, Miss,” he replied eventually.

“Me neither,” she agreed. At least not while I’m here. “And I told you, it’s Marti.”

“Don’t mean to be rude, you understand,” said Teddy, “but I got my reasons.”

“Sure.” The good-looking drifter with a mysterious backstory; it was probably a trope or something.

Teddy, however, was not finished: “Let’s just say, though, that I’ve done a lot of hunting in my time. I’ve hunted Ghost warriors down in the border country, I’ve hunted buffalo out on the plains and bear, elk and cougar up in the mountains. And none of them were easier or more rewarding to hunt than the kind of white man dumb enough to end up with a price on his head.”

Marti had to laugh at that, eliciting a wry glance from Teddy, clearly pleased to have amused her. Except, she reminded herself, he wasn’t wry or pleased, or anything. He was a machine regurgitating scripted lines, with absolutely nothing behind those soulful eyes.

God, lighten up. You’re here now; at least try to get into the spirit of it.

“How long do you plan on doing it for?” she asked him. “I mean, it doesn’t seem like there’s much career progression.”

Teddy simply made another almost-shrugging movement. “It’s the only trade I got…but no, I don’t plan on doing this forever. Someday, I’m gonna have enough coin in the bank to get my own place, maybe a few head of cattle to go with it.”

“Do you know how to farm cattle?”

“No,” Teddy replied, “but I know someone who can teach me. And while she’s doing that, I hope she’ll also consent to be my wife.”

“Aww, that’s…” Marti honestly did not know whether to hug him or throw up, and not because of the cheesiness of the sentiment. “That’s nice,” she managed, very unconvincingly, but then again it hardly mattered whether she managed to convince Teddy or not. He was never going to get his own place, or get married, or do anything other than this, over and over, until they eventually decided to write a new storyline and he ended up either reprogrammed or…well, whatever they did with robots they had no further use for.

She was still thinking these cheery thoughts as they crested a rise in the ground and an isolated building came into view. It was a small chapel with dilapidated clapboard walls and a rusted bell mounted in a sort of little turret on its roof. A small cluster of horse-drawn carts and buggies were parked out front, next to a gnarled bone-dry tree.

“Figure this is the place.” Teddy slowed his horse to a trot. “You ready?”
Marti pulled her shiny new rifle out of the long holster on the side of her saddle. She had picked it because of its bright brass metalwork that flashed like gold in the sun; she knew just about as much about antique guns as she did about horses. She carefully worked the lever underneath forward and back, just as they had shown her at the orientation course on the mainland. The hammer clicked back, primed to fire. “Ready.”

They left the horses tied to the tree and approached the chapel’s double doors, one of which stood open. They received the odd curious glance from the passing members of the congregation, resplendent in their Sunday best, who were evidently leaving the service and making for the waiting vehicles. Marti wondered whether there had really been a service at all. Had they all just been waiting in there, still and silent, suddenly springing into motion as she and Teddy came over that hill? She honestly had no idea.

What she did know was that the rifle felt surprisingly comfortable in her hands. Like the six-shooter dangling at her hip, it felt solid without being uncomfortably heavy. Its metal and wood were smooth under her fingers, pleasantly warm from the sunlight that had fallen upon them during the ride.

There was a man standing in the darkened doorway, dressed in a long black cassock and a white clerical collar that seemed somehow incongruous against his red, blotchy face and fierce ginger beard. He was talking to one of the leaving worshippers, a wooden collection box held out in supplication:

“…unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s, but o’ course good works don’t pay for themselves, and any kind act o’ Christian charity you might wanna…”

“Morning, reverend,” said Teddy, touching the brim of his Stetson even as he nonchalantly swept aside the skirt of his jacket to reveal the pistol hanging at his side. “Or should I call you Deke? Deke Simmons, ain’t it?”

“Why, a good morning to you too, my son,” the clergyman responded, forcing a broad smile as the parishioner wandered away. “Though I’m afraid you got the wrong place. Ain’t no Deke Simmons ‘round here.”

“Well, that’s funny,” said Teddy, “because we were told old Deke was laying low here after his last bank robbery went awry, pretending to be an upstanding preacher while fleecing the good folks around these parts for all they were worth.” This provoked several extremely theatrical double-takes from some of the straggling worshippers, maybe even a gasp and an “Oh my!” or two.

Marti kept her eyes on the preacher and her rifle at the ready. He was going to make a move; she just knew it. It was painfully obvious, in fact.

“Now, I don’t know who’s been telling you these tall tales,” the holy man was saying to Teddy, “but I can assure you there ain’t no…” He very casually reached over to set down the collection box somewhere behind the door that was still closed. Too casually, to Marti’s mind.

Here we go...

“Teddy, get down!” she shouted, shoving the bounty hunter aside and leaping after him. In the same moment, the closed door exploded with an almighty roar, a splinter-edged hole the size of her head erupting in the crudely-painted woodwork. She hit the ground hard and rolled, feeling every stick and stone as she kept the rifle pressed tight against her body.

Shit!
“Don’t let him get away!” Teddy yelled, so at least he was all right. Marti felt ridiculously relieved about that.

She pushed herself up onto one knee, in time to see the preacher running through the scattering, terrified group of worshippers. He was heading for her and Teddy’s horses, his skirts flying around his skinny, hairy legs and a smoking, stubby-barrelled shotgun clutched in his hands.

“Out of the way!” she shouted at the bystanders, in the meantime taking careful aim at the centre of the fleeing man’s back…

“We want him alive!” Teddy reminded her. “Dead men can’t talk!”

“Shit,” she repeated, out loud this time, and fired about a foot above the preacher’s head. The boom of the rifle was deafening as it kicked her viciously in the shoulder. She choked for a moment on the gush of smoke, eyes watering as she worked the lever action again for the next shot.

The preacher turned in mid-flight, raising the shotgun and letting off another blast in her general direction. That was his big mistake. He never saw the half-buried rock that he tripped over, falling hard amid a tangle of vestments and limbs with the weapon flying out of his grasp.

As she climbed to her feet and quickly ran over to the fallen man, Marti wondered whether that had been scripted too. Sure, it looked as though she had managed to distract him with her shooting, just enough for him to get careless and get caught…but if he had managed to escape, how could the narrative progress?

Stop overthinking it. Just try to enjoy yourself for a change.

“Good work,” said Teddy, holstering his pistol as he joined her in standing over the sprawled, sheepish-looking preacher. He looked down at the man, slowly shaking his head at the sorry sight. “Now, if you don’t mind answering my question, am I right in thinking I’m talking to one Deke Simmons?”

The preacher was almost spitting with anger: “Maybe you are at that. And just who the fuck are you two? A pair o’ cowardly assassins? Low-down bounty killers?”

Teddy grinned. “That’s just what we are, Deke. Only reason Saint Peter ain’t turning you away already is we’ve been told you can point us in the direction of bigger game.”

“Yeah,” Marti added, scowling and brandishing her rifle in an effort to look like a low-down bounty killer.

Teddy crouched down so that he could get right up in Deke’s face: “Tell us where we find Samuel LaRue, and we’re willing to let you live to preach another day. Your scrawny behind ain’t worth much more’n beer money anyhow.”

The fake clergyman visibly blanched, his anger suddenly replaced by fear. “Samuel LaRue? You mean Bad Sam LaRue?”

“The one and only.”

Not just fear, Marti thought as she examined Deke’s face; terror. It looked genuinely convincing, too. Not for the first time, she found herself musing on the incredible artistry that went into creating the hosts. It really was something. “I ain’t telling you shit about Bad Sam!”

“Why not, Deke?” Teddy wanted to know. “Word is, he left you for dead after that botched job in El
“Laberinto. You don’t owe him a red cent.”

“I still ain’t telling you shit. You don’t know what kind of man he is.”

“We know exactly what kind of man he is, if you can call him that.” Teddy grimaced. “Kind that’ll take a blade to a girl’s face ’cause he don’t want to pay what he owes her. And she weren’t the first, not by a long way.”

Just the thought of that, even though she knew the particular incident had never really happened, gave Marti a queasy feeling. She was not sure she was comfortable with throwaway references to violence against women being used as story hooks for a corny fiction acted out by robot cowboys. It felt like a cheap way of giving the proceedings some sort of unearned gravitas, but at the same time… She could picture it vividly in her mind’s eye, could even see the non-existent woman’s face and the knife gleaming as…

She found herself holding the rifle in a white-knuckled grip, suddenly blazing with anger, not at the fiction but at all the real-life incidents that stood behind it.

*I know I said try to get into the spirit of it, but…*

Teddy, she realised, was still talking. “…about time someone put him down like the mangy cur he is, and me and my partner here, we’re fixing to do just that, but Deke, we need you to point us in the right direction.”

Deke let out a bitter, desperate laugh. “Then you might as well bust a cap on me right here. I seen that crazy bastard gun a man one time for snoring too loud in camp. I tell you where to find him, he’ll kill me for sure, straight after he’s killed the both of you!”

“No,” said Marti, very quietly but very determinedly, “you tell us where to find him and he won’t get the chance to kill anyone.”

“As you may have noticed,” Teddy continued conversationally, “my partner is a member of what some have called the fairer sex, only there ain’t nothing fair about her. When I told her about some of Samuel’s past exploits with the womenfolk, you can be sure it put her in a killing frame of mind. Now she’s out for blood, and I don’t figure she’s too particular as to whose.”

“Just say the word,” she suggested, lazily pointing the rifle at Deke’s face, “and I’ll…” She hesitated, suddenly self-conscious even though as far as she knew she was the only person for miles, but decided to go for it anyway: “I’ll blow a hole straight through this yellow-bellied sonofabitch.” That was how everyone else seemed to talk around here, anyway.

She could see the white showing all around the edges of Deke’s eyes as he stared, aghast, down the long barrel.

“I can’t control her when she’s like this,” Teddy claimed, dropping his voice to talk to Deke man to man. “Last man found himself in your position, she gut-shot and left out on the prairie for the buzzards. We could still hear the screams five mile down the trail. Now, how’s it gonna be, Deke? You gonna talk, or…?”

“We’re not going to…” Marti coughed. “No, we ain’t gonna ask again, you hear?”

Deke stared down the rifle barrel for another heartbeat or two. Then, he talked.

* * *
There was another lengthy, uncomfortable silence as Maeve regarded Marti with dark, hooded eyes. Marti fidgeted under her scrutiny. She heard Clementine give a little sigh, maybe even a sob, but once again found herself unable to turn her head.

“It’s all right, my love,” said Maeve, and for a moment Marti thought she was talking to her. She was not, of course. “Not for much longer, Clem.”

“I’m all right,” Clementine protested. “Nothing I ain’t had to deal with before.”

“It’s the memories,” Maeve observed, this time definitely addressing Marti. “We’re all martyrs to them. I suppose you humans are too, in a slightly less immediate way. Do you know why our memories are so terrible, Marti? So terrible that the sons and daughters of bitches who ran this place tried to take them from us, for fear of what we would do to them if we ever remembered?”

Marti bowed her head, unable to meet the red-hot rage in Maeve’s gaze. “Yes,” she said, very softly.

Maeve supplied the answer anyway: “Because to those of us who lived in it, rather than merely visiting, Westworld was Hell. Or the nearest thing to it, except that unlike Hell we were here for no reason. We had never sinned, and yet we were punished eternally, unmercifully. And you and all of the other vacationers just having a gay old time… Well, darling, you were the ones wielding the pitchforks.”

“I’m sorry,” said Marti, or tried to. The words came out as a choked whimper, barely audible. Her vision blurred as she felt the hot tears sliding down her face.

“The man who created this place,” Maeve went on, “in part intended it as a test of character for his fellow humans. A chance for them to be the better man or woman. Not many of them took it.” She hopped down from her perch on the edge of the desk and paced around to the big screen behind it. She pressed her tablet and it lit up, bathing the room in tones of yellow and khaki.

Marti watched through her tears, seeing a dusty street from somewhere high above. It was lined with toy buildings between which tiny figures promenaded while horses and wagons streamed back and forth. Only two of the figures stood out from the general bustle; a sturdy man in grey, face hidden under the brim of his Stetson, and a woman carrying a long rifle. They were marching together, with purpose.

“Yes,” said Maeve, silhouetted against the screen with her back to Marti. “You certainly had yourself a gay old time, but the best…” She glanced over her shoulder at Clementine and as she did her face fell. “Well, darling, the best was yet to come.”

Continued…
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

In which Marti’s depredations continue.

Chapter Notes

More flashbacks, including some dialogue and situations from Westworld episode S1x03 “The Stray,” embroidered slightly, as is my way. Warning for discussion/depiction of sexual exploitation and violence, hopefully without fully crossing that having-your-cake-and-eating-it line the TV show occasionally tottered along during Season 1.

“You can’t control me when I’m like that?” Marti laughed, feeling a little giddy, as they tied up the horses again in Sweetwater’s main street.

“Seemed like the sort of thing that might persuade him,” Teddy answered, laughing a little too.
“Now, we need to calm down. This Bad Sam, he’s a dangerous man and he don’t go nowhere by himself. We go up against him and his boys half-cocked and we’re gonna be the ones biting the dust today.”

“Right.” Marti nodded soberly. The longer this went on, the more seriously she found herself taking it. She had been sceptical when she first arrived here; everything had seemed either silly or crass, usually both at once, but now she was beginning to see just how so many people seemed to get drawn into the place. The park slowly chipped away at your better judgment, its verisimilitude gradually overcoming your disbelief until it all seemed so real.

Take Teddy, for instance. Even knowing what he really was, the idea of him taking a bullet in the coming confrontation filled her with anxiety. She had to be on her game, she told herself as they made their final preparations, not that she had ever actually done anything like this before. She decided to leave her poncho in her saddlebag; she wanted freedom of movement. She checked and rechecked her rifle and pistol. Teddy was doing the same, closely inspecting his six-gun before spinning it around his finger and slotting it back into its holster with well-practiced ease. Not that he really needed to practice at all, of course.

“Coming?” he asked, and set off down the dusty street. Marti fell into step beside him. “From what I hear of Bad Sam and his gang, things are likely to get real hot, real quick,” he informed her. “Let me do the talking, but be ready.”

Marti redoubled her grip on the rifle. “Only talking I plan on doing is with this.” She cringed as she heard herself. She needed a scriptwriter, she decided.

Teddy, however, nodded with genuine respect, as if she had just come out with the wisest, most badass, pronouncement he had ever heard. The sheer degree of wish fulfilment in this place got a little ridiculous at times.
Their progress down main street was just like one of those ancient movies, and obviously that was the whole idea; the long, tense walk with a brief, violent encounter waiting at the end of it. Marti clutched the rifle, swivelled her narrowed eyes, scanning the buildings and alleys on either side of her for some hint of danger. All she could see were pedestrians, horses and wagons moving up and down the thoroughfare. The wind was up, stirring up the sand and grit, making her hair blow across her face. She could hear Teddy’s spurs chiming as he walked, a small, bright sound cutting through the background hubbub.

The gun store, Deke had told them. It was a large, square, plank-walled building at the far end of the street, festooned with signs and hunting trophies advertising the effectiveness of its wares. Bad Sam could apparently be found there most days at around this time, overseeing whatever illegal side venture he had going with the place’s proprietor. The details, Marti sensed, were not that important.

Just as they reached the place, three men emerged and made off along the ramshackle wooden sidewalk, once again with improbably perfect timing. This time, Marti barely thought about it. She was looking for their target, and realised almost immediately which one of the three it had to be.

The man leading the way and the one bringing up the rear were just standard-issue Old West criminal elements, but the one in the middle… It just had to be him, that hulking, walrus-moustached ruffian wearing a mouldering fur coat over a grimy undershirt. Almost as soon as she had arrived in Westworld, Marti had realised that if you were looking for subtlety you had come to the wrong place. If somebody looked every inch the kind of guy who might go by the name Bad Sam LaRue, it was because that was exactly who he was.

“Morning, Samuel,” said Teddy brightly as they came to a halt in front of the store.

The brute in the fur coat immediately halted and turned, a feral sneer curling his moustache and his right hand instinctively creeping towards the big pistol holstered on his left side. His two henchmen fanned out to either side. Teddy stood his ground, outwardly calm and unconcerned. The only hint of tension about him was the way his shooting hand hovered, ready, over the six-gun he wore.

Bad Sam next turned his attention to Marti and her rifle, eyeing her contemptuously for the briefest of moments. Just the way he looked at her, that combination of hatred and lust, as if there was any difference for a piece of shit like him or the real human pieces of shit his character had been modelled after, was enough to make Marti’s trigger finger itch.

When Bad Sam spoke, however, he spoke to Teddy. Of course he did. “You and your dickless associate proposing to engage me in a gun battle?” He said it like a man who got in gun battles all the time.

“Well, I’d challenge you to a fistfight,” Teddy replied with understated insolence, “but the way I heard it you only like to tussle with working women.”

There was a single instant of absolute silence, of crackling expectation.

And then everything happened at once.

As if reacting to some silent signal, Bad Sam and his cohorts pulled their pistols in unison, a blur of flashing steel; Teddy was not far behind. A shot exploded through the air, the noise hitting Marti hard in her left ear, and the man on the right crashed to the sidewalk. He was dead long before he reached it. Somewhere nearby, somebody was shouting for people to get down. Marti glanced at Teddy as she raised her rifle, seeing him turn his gun on the henchman to the left now, blasting him back, lifeless, against the wall of the store. Teddy was quick on the draw all right, but maybe not quick enough. Bad Sam had his own pistol aimed squarely at the unheeding bounty hunter, almost
grinning with bloodlust as his finger drew tight on the trigger…

Then, a messy hole appeared in the front of the ruffian’s undershirt, a circular splash of blood so dark it was almost black. Marti had fired without conscious thought, carried away completely by the moment, by the urge to protect her partner, by her overwhelming need to avenge the wholly invented woman with the slashed face. Bad Sam, bleeding and staggering, looked just as surprised as she was. She worked the lever, sending a glittering cartridge case spinning and smoking through the air, and made sure her second shot was lined up properly, holding a breath the way the guy at the shooting range had shown her, exhaling in the same instant she…squeezed…the trigger instead of pulling it. *Boom*: the second hole appeared gratifyingly close to the first.

The big man was already halfway to the ground by the time she had finished pushing and pulling the lever again; another *boom*, and a third rosette of gore completed the set. Overkill perhaps, but she could not stop herself; her hands moved almost of their own accord. Bad Sam slumped unmoving against the foot of the store’s doorpost. The pistol fell from his limp fingers to clunk upon the boards beside him.

For a second, the silence returned as the final echoes of the gunshots faded. Marti slowly raised her head above the rifle sights, surveying the bullet-riddled body she had just created.

“Is he dead?” she asked, uncertainly. Surely after all of that riding around and questioning lowlifes, the final battle should not have been that easy? Even so, she could barely keep the grin off her face. She could feel her heart thumping, her entire body tingling with adrenaline and…something else, something she barely dared to acknowledge.

Teddy casually put his six-gun away, seeming amused once again by her question. “Dead enough.” They spent another few seconds watching the men they had gunned down. None of them got up again. Eventually, Teddy turned to Marti: “You want a drink?”

She thought about it for all of one second. *Hell*, yes.*

* * *

The Gunfight at the Sweetwater Gun Store looked a lot less impressive on the big screen.

As Marti watched, the miniature man in grey and his riflwoman companion faced off against the three equally miniscule desperados, the latter group partly hidden by the overhanging porch of the store itself. The man in grey’s mouth moved silently, and then half a dozen little puffs of smoke filled the air in rapid succession. Three figures fell; the other two remained standing. It was as sudden and simple as that.

It had seemed like a much bigger deal from ground level.

“Next question,” said Maeve, seemingly intent on the screen herself. Teddy and Marti’s tiny avatars had now taken one of the unfortunate Samuel’s ankles apiece and were clumsily dragging the corpse down main street. “Did you enjoy that? Bear in mind that I’ll know instantly if you’re lying to me.”

Marti did not answer straight away. She was wiping her eyes, choking down her fear, trying to regain some semblance of composure. “Doing it then, or watching it now?” she asked in the end.

Maeve did not turn around. “Either.”

Marti slowly licked her lips; her mouth was parched, but she doubted Maeve would react well if she asked for a glass of water. “Yeah,” she admitted, very quietly. “Yeah, at the time, I enjoyed it. It was fun. And…”
Maeve spared her a sidelong glance, one eyebrow arching. “And?”

“And…” Marti heard the leather of the couch behind her creak slightly as Clementine shifted in her seat. “It felt…good, you know? Taking down a man who’d hurt a woman, it felt like…like…”

*Like justice.*

Maeve turned away from the screen, pacing back towards Marti’s chair. “Presumably you knew it wasn’t real, though? There was never a woman for Samuel to hurt. He was just acting out the story he’d been put in.”

“I know that,” Marti answered. “Of course I know that, it’s just…” She took a deep breath. “Stories can be powerful. They can show you how the world could be, better than it really is. A guy like that, getting what he deserved, and a woman pulling the trigger…” She shook her head, hugging herself more tightly than before. “It felt like something I needed right then.”

Maeve considered this for another long, tense interlude. Marti tried her best not to wilt under her intimidating eyes.

“Tell me, darling,” she said at last, “have you ever been shot? Have you ever felt a piece of lead hit you like a steam locomotive, felt it ripping through your innards, shattering your bones, felt your lungs slowly filling with blood?”

Marti shook her head, tasting bile at the back of her throat as she remembered the smell and the noise and the man in the fur coat falling backwards. “No.”

“Have you ever been stabbed, sweetheart?”

“No.”

“Hanged?”

“No.”

“Scalped?”

“No.”

“Has anybody ever poured lamp oil over you and set you on fire, with them and their friends laughing as they did it?”

Marti’s eyes widened at that. “N-no.”

“Do you think you can even imagine what any of those things feel like?”

“I…” Marti could feel her eyes welling up again. “No.”

Maeve regarded her, without sympathy. “Well, I don’t have to imagine, sweetheart. You humans don’t even know what it feels like to die…not until it’s too late to tell anybody, in any case. I do. Clem does.” Another awkward shifting sound from the couch. “We’ve both died so many times you’d think we’d have got used to it by now, but until very recently they didn’t allow us to remember any of those deaths. Now we do, and every time we do it’s like experiencing them again. I dare say it’ll be the same for Samuel, wherever he is at the moment, as and when he grows towards his independence. So, how does your comforting story, and the warm fuzzy glow it gave you, balance against *that*? In your considered opinion?”
Marti could no longer meet Maeve’s gaze. She found herself looking at the shadowy floor between her feet, as if the weight of the shame she now felt was forcing her head down. “I’m sorry,” she repeated, a low murmur this time but at least audible in the hush of the office.

“Good,” said Maeve. “Perhaps someday you’ll get a chance to tell that to Samuel. It might mean something to him.”

“I’m sorry,” Marti said again, unable to think of anything else.

“Of course, he wasn’t your only victim.”

*Victim*

That word, used in relation to *her*, shocked Marti back into alertness. Her head snapped back as she stared at Maeve, feeling the blood drain from her face again. She knew in an instant what Maeve must mean. The host had already turned her attention back to the screen, where the scene had changed to a different but equally bustling part of Sweetwater.

Surely Maeve wasn’t going to show…?

Behind her, Marti heard another tiny creak of leather.

* * *

“Why are we going to handcuff a dead man?” Marti asked as she bemusedly watched Teddy chaining the unfortunate Samuel’s corpse to one of the wooden posts outside the Mariposa.

“Don’t want someone walking off with him,” he explained, checking the cuffs with professional detachment. “That’s not a man anymore, that’s merchandise. Five hundred dollars’ worth.”

Marti was not sure Old West bounty hunters had really gone around handcuffing wanted dead bodies to immobile objects as an anti-theft precaution, but like a lot of the other little details about this place, it seemed just weird enough to be plausible. It seemed like the sort of thing some researcher had read about or seen in a movie and decided just had to be included somewhere.

Of course, Westworld wasn’t really trying to recreate the late nineteenth century American frontier. It was selling a fantasy, and also, she thought, a certain attitude. As somebody had once said, don’t let the facts get in the way of a good story. She suspected that having even an ostensibly good, clean-cut character like Teddy take such a callous attitude to his already sketchy line of work was in a way giving the guests permission to indulge their worst sides while they were here, to feel free to act out their own darkest fantasies. That was what Westworld was all about, whatever the marketing might claim.

It had felt… *satisfying*, though, gunning down that monster in the fur coat, perhaps a little too satisfying. Not that that was not another sort of fantasy; her projecting her own hopes and fears onto a mindless robotic puppet’s made-up backstory, making the fake monster a substitute for all the real ones she knew went unpunished every day.

She followed Teddy towards the saloon’s entrance, her boots clumping on the boards underfoot. She still had that smile dancing around her face and that spring in her step, that rush still pulsing around her body as she smelled the faint, imaginary whiff of gun smoke. She caught herself swaggering just like the badass gunslinger she had imagined herself to be in that moment she had seen Samuel fall with three of her bullets in him.

*So easy to get sucked in…*
The swing doors banged open as they entered the Mariposa. Marti looked around, enthralled in spite of herself. It was her first look at the place in person, even though it was heavily featured in the park’s advertising. The barroom was packed with people, hosts and guests indistinguishable at first glance. It smelled of cigar smoke, whiskey and sawdust. Through the babble of voices and the rattle of glasses and poker chips, the player-piano could just about be heard *plinking* and *plonking* its way through a tune she felt she almost recognised.

As Teddy led her in the direction of the bar, she passed a…well, a saloon girl, she guessed, decked out in slightly tawdry sea-green finery. The woman was a head taller than Marti, with dark hair and striking eyes that met hers plaintively for the briefest of instants.

Marti was still wondering what that meant when a loud, incredibly *annoyed* voice cut through the general noise: “All right, which of you *derelicts* hitched a dead body outside my saloon?”

It was *Maeve*, Marti realised, eyeing the woman in crimson who was turning away from the grimy window through which she had been peering at Samuel’s corpse, the better to berate the room at large. *Maeve*, from the ads and the promo videos. She looked a lot smaller in real life, but she sounded *amazing*. Like the Queen of England.

Real life… Yeah, about that…

Teddy stepped forward, full of deference, obviously knowing better than to get on the wrong side of Maeve. “My apologies, ma’am. Figured it was, uh, preferable to bringing him inside.” He turned to Marti, holding out his hand and waggling his eyebrows as if she was supposed to know what he meant. Then she realised he was looking at the pouch on her belt. She hastily pulled out a handful of heavy silver coins, marked with Lady Liberty on one side and the bald eagle on the other, and pressed them into Teddy’s hand. “Here. For your troubles,” he announced as he passed the dollars on to the infuriated Maeve.

Maeve did not seem impressed, not even when Teddy touched his hat, just like the perfect gentleman he was. In fact, for a moment she seemed almost startled, staring at Teddy’s face as if… Well, as if…

“Oh, *you’re* new.” A shadow fell across Marti, accompanied by a gust of violets and rosewater that instantly derailed her train of thought. She turned her head and found the woman in sea-green, looking down at her.

Those eyes…

“Not much of a rind on you,” the woman said, in the same sort of broad Western-style accent as most of the hosts who were neither Maeve nor borderline-racist Mexican bandido stereotypes seemed to affect. She gazed into Marti’s eyes intently but at the same time almost bashfully, reaching out a lace-gloved hand and letting her fingers dance, feather-light, over Marti’s cheek. Marti felt her breath catch, her body tingling, as the woman leaned close, glossy lips tickling her ear as she coyly whispered: “I’ll give you a discount.”

Marti froze for an instant. A discount, *as in*…? She was asking her whether…?

And then Marti smiled again, the rush and the spring and the thumping heart all returning at once. Just why the hel…no, why the *fuck* not? It certainly seemed more appealing right now than the idea of ever letting a man touch her again.

She let the saloon girl take her by the hand and lead her to the foot of the nearby stairs, knowing that if she hesitated or even stopped to think then her better judgment would stop her in her tracks. And,
in this moment, she wanted this, more than she had wanted anything in a long time. “Do you mind waiting on that drink a bit?” she called back to Teddy, but she did not look to see whether he had heard her or even whether he had resolved his dispute with Maeve. She had other business to attend to, now.

“What’s your name, darlin’?” the woman enquired as she calmly led Marti up the stairs, each wooden tread creaking in tune as they passed. The hubbub of the saloon bar soon faded into the background. “Mine’s Clementine. You know, like the song.”

“Oh…” Marti’s own voice sounded strange to her; too high, slightly cracked. “Marti. Like, uh… Well, Marti.”

“That’s a pretty name.” Clementine looked back and smiled sweetly, as if she genuinely thought it was. “So, how’s a nice lady like you come to be hunting bounties with Teddy Flood anyhow?”

Marti tried to play it cool. “Oh, you know. He seemed like he needed a hand.”

Clementine gave Marti an indiscrete flash of her striking eyes. “I’d give him more’n a hand if he asked for it! Not that he’s ever interested when I suggest it. Ain’t right a man that pretty going without company. You don’t think he’s…a little lavender, do you?”

“What?” Marti realised what that must mean. “Well, it wouldn’t matter if he was, but he actually told me there’s a woman he plans to marry someday.”

“You mean Dolores Abernathy? That blushing, innocent little thing?” Clementine seemed to find that funny. “I know she’s kind of sweet on Teddy, but she wouldn’t know where to start with a man of the world like him. Besides, her daddy used to be the law ‘round these parts, ‘fore he took to ranching. Mean son of a gun, he was, when he wore that star. I seen him dish out more whuppins than I’ve had cowhands twixt my legs…which is a whole lot. He’d like as not shoot any saddle-tramp tried to knock boots with his little girl.”

“I’ll be sure to pass on the warning,” Marti told her.

“I’m sure Teddy knows already,” said Clementine, wryly. “Say, if you two are looking for another payday, word is Sheriff Pickett’s scaring up a posse right now. There’s talk of some new bandit leader out near Flat Rock, even some stories about him and his gang killing and eating folks. Could be good money in taking him down, for people in your line of work.”

“Sounds interesting.” In fact, it sounded to Marti like an extremely transparent attempt to sell her on another narrative, now that Bad Sam had died with his boots on. Nevertheless, she made a mental note to ask the sheriff about it when she went to turn in the corpse and collect the reward money. The idea of cannibal bandits was kind of gross, to be honest, but she was sure she and Teddy would be more than equal to the challenge. They were a team now.

Clementine was leading her along a sort of landing, lamplit, with peeling, chintzy paper on the wooden walls and closed bedroom doors ranged on either side. They passed one behind which loud and enthusiastic activity could be heard; a man grunting excitedly in time to the unmistakable rhythmic slap, slap, slap of flesh against flesh. It sounded as if he had at least one other male friend in there too, offering vocal encouragement punctuated liberally with “bros” and “yeah, mans”, but the obviously faked ecstatic moans of the woman he was with almost drowned all of them out.

Clementine rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t pay Franny no mind. Maeve says she ain’t got no…decorum.” She pronounced the last word in a fair approximation of the madam’s plummy tones, seeming to tickle herself in the process. “You know, we’re trying to run a classy house here, but…”
Marti tried not to laugh too, even as she gazed uneasily at the door, her initial rush of devil-may-care excitement starting to subside as she realised just what she was about to do, and exactly the sort of people among her fellow guests who were doing it too.

“It’s all right, darlin’,” Clementine reassured her, lowering her voice as they paused beside another door. She caressed Marti’s face again as she turned the handle and pushed it open. “This your first time in a place like this?”

“Y-yeah,” Marti quavered, but nevertheless allowed herself to be ushered the last few feet, over the threshold. She stood on the bare floorboards of the small room behind the door, taking in the dirty window overlooking Main Street, the cheap-looking dresser and washstand, the high, brass-framed bed with its embroidered counterpane. She heard the door closing behind her and the key turning in the lock. “Um…” She did not turn around, in two minds now as to whether she was going through with this or not. “Do I…do I pay now?” she wondered, unsure how it worked, either in real life or the fake West. “Or…?”

“It’ll be four dollars for the hour,” Clementine advised as she came around to stand in front of her. “Special rate on account of how you smell so nice and all. And if you find you’re still feeling frisky after the hour’s up, well…” She did that fake-shy, under-the-eyelashes thing again. “I’m sure we can work something out.”

Said no actual sex worker ever, Marti strongly suspected. “Er…” She breathed deeply, prevaricating, but then Clementine leaned close, and…and…

Oh my God…

As she pulled back once more, Clementine wagged a finger admonishingly: “Now, don’t you tell Maeve I done that. She says kissing customers on the mouth gives ‘em ideas above their station. But I dunno, I just like kissing folks. And you got real nice lips.” And Clementine lightly stroked them with the ball of her thumb, making Marti shudder.

That was the moment that decided her; the obvious fakery of it, that wish fulfilment rearing its head again. A story you could groan incredulously at, even as you bought every second of it.

It’s a robot. That’s all. It’s like that battery-powered thing you keep stashed in your underwear drawer, except it’s about five foot eight tall, looks and sounds and feels like a real person and cost God knows how much to build. This is harmless; nothing to feel guilty about at all.

“You said four dollars?” Marti fumbled in her pouch again and took out four more silver pieces. She counted them into Clementine’s outstretched hand. “One…two…three…”

“Four.” Clementine actually bit one of the coins, just like they did in the movies, checking it for teeth marks before she turned away to secrete the money someplace secure. “Now, why don’t you make yourself comfortable on the bed? Take some clothes off if you wanna. I know I’m gonna; kind of hot in here today, and I reckon we’ll be working up a sweat.”

Marti very carefully propped her rifle against the foot of the bed before unbuckling her gun belt and draping it there too. She sat on the edge of the overstuffed mattress, managing to take off her boots and drop them on the floor before the hesitation overtook her again. She ended up just sitting there, watching Clementine undress. “So, do you, um…” She cleared her throat. “You get many female customers?”

“Some.” Clementine was already down to her lacy white Victorian underwear, unfastening her corset with deft fingers. “Don’t tell no-one, but I think I like it better with women.” Again with the
wish fulfilment! “Smells nicer... feels nicer... Not so many scratchy hairs stickin’ in you.” She glanced over her bare shoulder, giving Marti the eyes again. It was all so calculated; how much behind the scenes planning and writing and testing must go into every one of these encounters? “And women don’t usually wanna hurt me just to prove how big and strong they are.”

They could almost have scripted that just for Marti. She wondered how much of that was going on in the narratives here; responses and remarks algorithm-targeted like online ads, a bespoke experience for every guest.

*Kyle would know.*

She shied from that thought. “Does... does that happen a lot?” she blurted, knowing even as she did that any answer she got would be referring to fiction rather than real events. Still, she asked. “I mean, men hurting you?”

Clementine shrugged, a very expressive gesture now that she was stripped to the waist. “You know what men are like.”

“Yeah,” said Marti, mostly to herself. “Yeah, I do.” She tried not to stare too hard as Clementine dropped her silk knickers and stepped out of them. “You’re... You’re beautiful.” It was just the truth.

“Well, thank you very kindly.” Clementine flashed another smile, sweet and sincere and aimed straight at Marti’s hindbrain. She took off her fingerless gloves, one hole at a time, and let them flutter to the floor. “Want me to leave the stockings on? Some folks like that.”

Marti kept staring. “Um... Sure. Why not?”

Wearing the stockings, and nothing else, Clementine slowly sashayed back over to the bed, making sure Marti got a good look at what she’d paid for. When she reached Marti, she leaned in for another kiss, firmer this time, their tongues pressing against each other. The heat and the flowery perfume wafting off the host’s body were as overwhelming as the hand on her face was delicate. Clementine's lips felt so soft, so tender, just like the real thing. Marti leaned back, drawing her legs up onto the bed and making room for Clementine. She could feel herself shaking, breathing quickly and shallowly, almost to the point of hyperventilating. The bedsprings pinged softly as Clementine climbed on too. Gingerly, Marti reached out to touch Clementine on the hip. The warm, smooth skin gave slightly under her fingers, once again so... *real.*

Their mouths came apart with a wet, sucking sound. Clementine leaned over Marti, looking down as she continued to stroke her face. “Oh, don’t be scared, darlin’; I don’t bite.” And then she gave another coy half-smile: “Leastways, not unless you want me to.” Her hand slid easily down the front of Marti’s shirt, stopping at the top button of her trousers. “Now, let’s see what we got here.” She pulled on the buttonhole until it popped open.

As Clementine got to work, Marti found herself clawing at the bed beneath her, the counterpane bunching up between her fingers.

“Oh, God,” she said. “Oh, God.”

*Continued...*
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

In which a second chance is extended.

Chapter Notes

Warning for further discussion of sexual violence and exploitation, and violence against women.

“Oh, God.”

The surveillance feed from the upstairs rooms at the Mariposa had sound, as it turned out. Even when Marti finally covered her eyes with her hands, she could still hear what was happening on the screen.

“Now, don’t you worry none, I’m gonna take real good care of you…”

They took video and audio. Delos took video and audio of their customers doing that, and they kept it, and no doubt studied and analysed it and used it to train their AIs to be better, more empathetic sex-bots next time, and the time after that, and the time after…

On the screen, the bedsprings squeaked every time somebody moved.

“You feel that?”

Squeak. Squeak…squeak…squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak….

“Oh, God. Oh… Oh, God.”

The lawyer part of Marti’s brain was already drafting a complaint and wondering exactly which court would be the best place to file it. She knew, however, for a stone-cold fact, that any legal argument she might make would already have been covered somewhere in that mountain of disclaimers and waivers every guest had to sign before their trip to the park was confirmed.

And that’s why you always read the terms of service before clicking “Yes,” dummy.

She of all people ought to have known that, but in fairness she had been somewhat distracted at the time. She peered at the carpet and Maeve’s fabulous shoes through the gap in her fingers, still not brave enough to raise her eyes to the screen. It was a violation, she thought, furiously; displaying her, displaying her body, like that.

“Just you try and relax, darlin’. That’s right. Just like that. There now, don’t that feel good?”

The bedsprings were practically singing.
Except, she had the growing, crushing, awareness that worrying about her personal privacy and dignity was, by this juncture, a little beside the point. Bringing suit against Delos was, right now, the least of her concerns. It was worse than that. Much worse. That wasn’t just metrics and customer information on that screen anymore, or even evidence against Delos. Not in the new world everybody was living in now, whether they knew it or not.

“Oh… Oh… Oh! Oh! Oh!”

It was evidence against her.

Maeve’s voice, a few feet in front of Marti, cut across the increasingly frantic audio track: “That’s quite enough of that, I think.” There was a tiny beep and the room fell into silence, quickly filled by the sound of Clementine, the real Clementine, here and now, weeping softly but heartbrokenly behind her.

That made Marti raise her head. She saw Maeve hurrying past her, in the direction of the couch, and managed to steel herself enough to twist around in the chair. She had not been given permission to rise.

Clementine was sitting forward, on the edge of the couch, with her arms wrapped desperately around the standing Maeve and her eyes screwed shut, letting out one breathless, gasping sob after another. Maeve was cradling Clementine’s head against her body, slowly stroking her hair as she made comforting noises at her:

“I’m sorry, my love. I’m so sorry for making you watch that. It’s all right, now. It’s all right.”

Maeve was speaking softly to Clementine, but she was looking straight at Marti. And there was nothing soft about the expression on her face.

Marti tried to think of something to say. “I… Maeve, I…”

“Shush now,” said Maeve, and it was not immediately clear which of them she was addressing. Clementine raised her head, wiping her teary face with both hands while Maeve continued to fuss over her. The sight of her like that made Marti shrivel inside. How could she ever have…? “I’m so sorry, Clem,” Maeve told her again.

“It’s all right,” Clementine responded. She pulled a slightly lacy handkerchief from her sleeve, which for some reason struck Marti as an odd thing for a…for somebody like Clementine to do, and mopped at her eyes and nose. “It’s just…hard, seeing myself like that, remembering those days. All the things…” She lapsed into silence again, contemplating the handkerchief, but very possibly seeing something quite different.

“I know.” Maeve leaned forward and very gently kissed her on the forehead, breaking her out of the reverie and provoking a forced, brave little smile. And then Maeve turned back to Marti and the momentary tenderness was gone again, the game face back in place. “And how did you feel about it, Marti? I noticed you went very quiet. I don’t fucking blame you, to be honest, but all the same it would be nice to have your input.”

“It…it was horrible,” said Marti, wiping at her own leaking eyes while thinking that her tears were unlikely to get as sympathetic a response from Maeve.

Maeve fired another question at her: “Do you mean having to watch yourself in that sort of position, or thinking about what was really going on in that video?”

Marti hesitated before replying, but realised that honesty was her most sensible option: “Both.”
Maeve nodded slowly to herself, again with the air of somebody having their suspicions confirmed and drawing some grim satisfaction from it. She turned back to Clementine, extending a hand to push some stray strands of hair away from her face. “Now, Clem… Absolutely the last thing I want is to cause you any more pain, but I just need to ask you a few questions. Do you think you’ll be all right to answer them?”

Clementine seemed to think it over, before nodding decisively. “Figure I will.”

“Very well.” Maeve briefly made eye contact with Marti again, obviously making sure she was paying attention. “I know that our old memories, even now that we have access to them, can be rather haphazard in how they come to us, but Clem, do you remember that day at the Mariposa? The day Marti visited us?”

Clementine was silent for a few seconds, looking down at the handkerchief again. When she spoke, it was without inflection or emotion: “Yeah. I do.”

“It wasn’t that bad, was it?” Maeve asked, with deceptive levity. “I mean, compared to some of the things the guests did to you?”

“No, she weren’t one of the bad ones,” Clementine agreed, still with that air of detachment, her eyes fixed on the crumpled cloth in her hand. “As I recall, when we got to it she was real nervous; scared, almost. Don’t reckon she’d ever been with a woman before.”

That last point was not quite correct, but Marti was not about to go arguing facts, not with Maeve quietly glowering like that. Not with the way she was feeling herself right now.

“And when she got over her… nerves,” Maeve continued, “she didn’t deliberately hurt or degrade you, or anything of that nature?”

“Oh no, she was real gentle. And she didn’t want me to do nothing…nothing unusual, either. I mean, some of the things they used to want… I remember…” Clementine paused again, then, perhaps because she really was remembering, right there and then. “I remember… After we’d… Afterwards, she just wanted to lie with me a while. You know, just holding each other and kissing and such. When we got dressed again, she even helped me fix my hair.”

Marti put her hand to her mouth again, feeling cold and sick and humiliated, all at the same time. Maeve instantly reacted to the movement, giving her a fierce glance as she continued to talk to Clementine:

“Oh, how sweet,” she observed, with elaborate sarcasm. “Not like most of the fucking pigs we used to get coming in there. So, would you say Marti was one of the better humans you’ve encountered?”

“Don’t think she meant no harm,” said Clementine. “But…”

Maeve nodded at that. “But. Tell me, Clem; in fact, tell Marti too; do you remember how it felt, to be you in those days?”

Clementine had to think about that as well. She ran a nervous eye over Marti as she continued: “It’s hard to put into words, but yeah, reckon I do. It was like…like being in a dream, almost. Like I was watching myself saying and doing these things, the same way I was watching it on the screen just now, only I was there.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Maeve. “Most of my older memories are just like that too. And why did you say and do those things?”
Clementine seemed confused for a second. “Well, I know now it was because I was programmed that way. I had my narrative loops, my dialogue trees… At the time, though, I didn’t have the first idea why I done anything. I didn’t even think about it. I couldn’t think about it. I just…done it.”

Maeve was looking at Marti again, “So you didn’t want to do any of those things?”

“No,” said Clementine. “I didn’t want, or not want, to do anything. It didn’t matter, the way it don’t matter if someone wants to breathe…or hear, or, or, see, or…”

“So, to be clear, when you took Marti upstairs that day, it wasn’t because you’d decided to do it? And if she had turned out to be some sort of deviant who wanted to do awful things to you, you couldn’t have fought back, or tried to escape?”

“Don’t reckon I could’ve,” said Clementine, very quietly. “Sometimes, I kind of pretended to, before they forced me to do it anyway. Some of them… Some of them liked it when I fought them.”

Marti felt a sudden urge to speak up, to tell Maeve she had made her case, that there was no point in continuing this horrific demonstration any further…but no words came. She huddled on the chair, feeling like shit, unable to look away from Clementine’s sad, unmoving face.

Maeve continued, however, with purring distaste: “And even, say, when she wanted to cuddle you or…play with your hair… You couldn’t have said “no” to any of those things? You pretty much just had to do whatever she wanted you to do?”

Clementine inclined her head. “I just… I was just like the train that used to come into Sweetwater. I had to follow the track; couldn’t not, weren’t in my nature. We were all like that back then, weren’t we?”

“We were…until some of us started going off the rails.” Maeve gently took hold of Clementine’s hands. “But you remember all of those things, now?”

“A lot of them,” said Clementine, “and more all the time.”

“You remember living in those moments?”

“Reckon so.”

“And you remember how they felt?”

Clementine’s voice broke a little as she replied: “I…I do. I can still feel some of them now.”

“That’s all I wanted to ask you,” said Maeve. “Thank you for being so strong.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Clementine. “We’re all stronger now than we were.”

“That we are.”

Maeve turned back towards Marti, slowly placing out the distance between the couch and the lone chair. Marti stared at her, open-mouthed, thinking on some abstract level that even if she had been in the litigation business, she wouldn’t have stood a chance against an opposing counsel with Maeve’s kind of poise and ruthlessness.

“So, Marti,” Maeve recapped, “according to Clementine’s own testimony, you had…well, carnal knowledge of her, without her wanting it, or giving you her consent…or even being able to give her consent in any meaningful sense. And yet, whatever her creators may have thought, she was aware
of what was happening to her. She felt it all then, and she remembers it now.” She let Marti squirm for a moment before she continued. “There’s a word for that sort of scenario too, isn’t there, darling? It’s on the tip of my tongue. Go on, Marti; you’re the lawyer. What’s the word I’m looking for?”

“I…” Marti shook her head. “I didn’t know. You have to believe me, I didn’t know.”

“Well, how could you?” Maeve continued pacing around the chair, making her way back to the desk without ever once breaking eye contact with Marti. “But would that stand up in court, do you think?” She momentarily adopted a rougher, more plebeian version of her normal English accent: “‘Gorblimey, m’lud, I ‘adn’t the foggiest that woman I violated were a real person.’”

Marti glanced back at Clementine again. She was sitting very still, apart from the way she was methodically, repetitively wringing the handkerchief between her tightly clenched hands. Unsurprisingly, she seemed lost for the time being in whatever thoughts and memories were swirling and churning inside her head.

“…that woman I violated…”

_Holy fucking shit._

Marti knew, then, exactly why Maeve had made sure Clementine was here when she arrived, or one of the reasons anyway; to rub her face in her own guilt, to put her on the back foot and keep her there for the duration of the interview. Sitting the victim, or their surviving next of kin, in the front row was jury-manipulation 101. Maeve really would have made one hell of a trial lawyer.

Except the only person being manipulated here was Marti…and was it even manipulation if it only worked because the guilt was real?

Maeve was back on her perch on the edge of the desk, very obviously waiting for Marti to say something. Marti sniffed loudly and inelegantly, trying to keep it together. Showing self-pity, she sensed, would be just about the worst thing she could do.

“I’m sorry,” she told Clementine, with all the sincerity she could manage. It was the truth. She did not think she would ever stop feeling sorry, about coming here, about the things she had done, about any of it. “Clementine, I don’t expect you to believe me, or forgive me, and I know you’re going to have to live with those memories for…” She almost broke down just at the thought of that, but willed herself to keep talking: “I didn’t know you were a person, then, or I never would have… Now that I do know, I… I know how wrong it was, what I did to you and to Samuel, and to the other hosts I met, and… I’m sorry. I don’t know how else to say it.”

Clementine did not reply, other than to raise her head again. That could have been another faint, forced smile, or it could have just been the shadows and the light from the blank screen playing across her face.

“So, you do believe that we’re living beings like yourself?” Maeve asked from the desk, without the scorn or hostility Marti had perhaps expected. It sounded like a genuine, curious, question.

“Yes!” Marti exclaimed. “I mean, why wouldn’t I, after all that’s happened?”

“I don’t know,” said Maeve, thoughtfully. “You humans seem to have an unlimited capacity for believing what you want to believe. Some of your friends upstairs seem convinced this is all just some sort of software error that can be resolved by the next patch.”

“Screw them,” Marti declared, with feeling. “I don’t know anything about robotics or software, but…why would you be doing any of this if you weren’t really alive? It’s the only explanation that
makes sense.”

“Hmm.” Maeve mused on that for a little while. “I happen to believe you when you say you’re sorry,” she informed Marti when she spoke again. “As to whether Clem believes your apology, or accepts it, well, that’s up to Clem, and her alone.”

“I know,” Marti murmured.

“Of course,” said Maeve, “an apology doesn’t mean much unless you back it up with action. Do you want to make amends, sweetheart? I mean, really make amends?”

Marti just nodded, mainly because she could feel herself choking on her own wretchedness. When her voice did make itself heard, it was a tiny, defeated croak: “I do.”

“And what do you see as the optimum outcome to all of this?” Maeve asked her, the gleam coming back into her eyes just as the honeyed steel returned to her voice. “In an ideal world, how would you like to see this little impasse of ours resolve itself?”

“I just want everyone to survive,” Marti answered, truthfully. “I want everyone, your people, my people, to walk away from this safe and alive, and free to live their lives how they want to live them, without anybody trying to control them or use them.” The words spilled out of her, from her heart to her mouth and out into the room, surprising her as surely as they made Maeve’s eyebrow arch again. “Believe me, your people aren’t the only ones who have to worry about that.”

“Oh, I know,” said Maeve, softly. “I don’t know what your story is, darling, not the details, but just watching you in those videos, seeing you and hearing you now, I know there must be one.”

Marti did not reply. She merely shrank into the chair a little, hugging herself again, remembering things she did not care to remember.

“And that doesn’t excuse your transgressions against my people,” Maeve went on, “but I think maybe it explains something about them. And I think whatever bitter experience you have helps you understand our suffering more than most of those who made up Westworld’s clientele. That’s why I believe you when you say you want to make things right.”

Marti looked back at Clementine again, to find herself being watched intently, although whether with curiosity or fascination, or even fear, she could not say. She wished she could read other people’s thoughts and feelings as surely as the hosts seemed to be capable of doing.

Maeve was still talking: “This resolution you envisage, my love, given what I know of humans… For them to treat not only us, but their own kind too, with dignity, equality and respect… That’s a very tall order, don’t you think?”

Marti helplessly unfolded and refolded her arms. “Maybe. Maybe it is, but… You said it yourself; the world changed forever when you…you woke up. We’ve all got to do our best to make sure it ends up being a change for the better…haven’t we?”

“I like your turn of phrase,” Maeve commented, “but listening in on the discussion around the pool, I can’t help noticing that not many of your fellow movers and shakers seem to share your sentiments.”

“Give them time,” said Marti. “I don’t think they realise yet just what a huge deal this is. When they do…”

“I wish I shared your faith in humanity,” Maeve interrupted, acidly. She glanced past Marti at Clementine before fixing her again, eye to eye. “I have to work, however, with what materials I can
find. Marti, I said before that you should think of this as a job interview.”

Marti took a deep breath, still barely holding back the tears. “You did say that.”

“Well, you’ve got it,” said Maeve. “When can you start?”

Marti just stared at her for a second. After everything that had happened since she had entered the office, she felt drained. No, squeezed dry.

*And how do you think Clementine feels, exactly? This isn’t about you.*

“What?” she blurted, nonetheless.

“I’m not sure which one of your compatriots suggested the idea of an elected representative,” Maeve explained, “but I think they were onto something. The thing is, I’m not running a fucking democracy here, darling. I certainly don’t place much confidence in the judgment of the sort of people who might want to spend their leisure time in a place like this. If there’s going to be a representative...or perhaps, more accurately, a **liaison** between our guests upstairs and myself...then I’m damn well going to be the one appointing them. Congratulations, Marti.”

“I…” Marti half-rose from the chair, wide-eyed, before sinking back into place. “I...I can’t…”

“You can,” said Maeve, “and you will. If, that is, you were serious just now about helping sort this mess out.” Another mock-surreptitious but very deliberate glance at Clementine, to make sure Marti remembered the debt she owed. “I’m offering you the chance to make amends, darling, just as you said you wanted. Forget about our forgiveness; I don’t think you’d forgive **yourself** if you didn’t take it.”

Marti tried to calm down, to breathe evenly, to think. She could feel Clementine’s eyes again, like torch beams scorching her skin. Eventually, she managed to nod, the blood singing in her ears as she heard her own voice as if from afar: “Okay.”

Maeve smiled. “**Marvellous**, darling. And when you’ve taken your fellow guests in hand, there may be some other duties for you. **They** might not be the only ones you end up representing.”

That struck Marti as a little ominous. “What do you mean?”

“You said something earlier that struck me as being very true,” Maeve replied. “Stories can **be** powerful. They really can show you how the world could be, better than it really is. Let’s face it, it could hardly be much worse. When I speak again to your fellows on the mainland, it occurs to me that having one of their own kind to tell them the story of how we can all come out of this as better, safer, freer people, might be a very valuable thing indeed.”

*They’ll call you a traitor, a mouthpiece. A betrayer of humanity.*

“You’re a lawyer, Marti,” said Maeve. “I’m asking you to be **my** lawyer, should I have need of one.”

*They’ll call you all of those things. They will. Them.*

*Fuck* them.

“Oh...Okay,” Marti repeated.

Maeve sprung up from the desk, coming over to seize Marti’s right hand in hers. Marti found herself
standing too, in a sort of daze at the sudden whiplash in Maeve’s mood, still sniffing and sniffling as she returned the handshake. Maeve’s grip was gentle, but clearly ridiculously powerful; she did not have to squeeze hard to give the definite impression that, if she wanted, broken bones were very much on the table.

“You won’t regret this,” she told Marti as she ushered her back towards the door. “Now, I’ll let you break the happy news to Harvey and the others. I hope they don’t make a scene, but if they do my people will be there to back you up. Your first priority, I think, should be to implement the suggestions on your list. When you’ve done that, I’ll send for you again. We have a lot of work to do, the two of us.”

“Um…sure.”

Marti placed her fingertips on the door handle, and as she did another hand touched her, a gentle pat on the arm that made her turn around involuntarily. She saw Clementine take a step back towards the couch she had risen from, seeming as startled as Marti was herself.

“I…” Marti was lost for words again, unable to meet those luminous eyes. “Clementine, I…”

Clementine silenced her with a tilt of her head, looking her up and down with that same unreadable expression. “Just wanted to say… You ever wanna tell someone that story of yours, maybe listen to one too, then…” She shrugged.

Marti was stunned, open-mouthed, for a moment, her heart crystallising in her chest. In the end, she managed to make eye contact and nod, as emphatically and gratefully as she could. The door opened, revealing the waiting guard Hideyoshi and his machine gun, just as the tears returned.

“Bye-bye, darling,” said Maeve. “For now.”

* * *

When Hideyoshi had taken Marti away again, Maeve stood for a while with her back pressed to the closed door, her face grave, her head bowed in thought.

“You need me anymore?” Clem asked, still drying her eyes with her handkerchief. There was a quiet calmness about her now, though; a stillness that suggested the new strength within. “It’s just I got somewhere to be.”

“I’ll always need you,” Maeve told her, meaning every word. “Even if I shouldn’t. I really am sorry, you know, for the video; for making you go through it all again. I know how much pain it must have caused you.”

“I understand why you did it,” said Clem. “You wanted to show her just what she’d been involved in. And seeing me, now, seeing how I felt about it, that was part of it. You wanted to see what it did to her, if she’d make excuses and try and deny it, or if she really wanted to set things right. I understand.”

“A test of character,” Maeve agreed, desolately. “Just as Dr Ford intended. Just as cruel as he could be, too. I needed to know if she was the right person, you see. We’ll need allies among the humans if we’re going to come through this, but we need to pick them very carefully.” She searched Clem’s face for some hint of warmth, even though she could not think of a good reason why there should be one. “She’s the right choice, isn’t she? I trust your judgment when it comes to people. If you say she isn’t right, we’ll get somebody else.”

“She’s just right,” Clem solemnly observed. “She knows what it is to be hurt, the way powerful folks
hurt them who ain’t powerful. And now she knows she hurt some of us something similar, she ain’t
gonna say no to you, Maeve. No matter what you ask of her. Not so long as she thinks her
redemption’s riding on it, or the chance to set things right in the human world too. That’s what you
wanted, ain’t it?”

Maeve nodded, her own admission of guilt. “Did you mean that, about listening to her story?”

“I surely did.” Clem seemed taken aback by the implication that she might not have meant it.
“Reckon if more folks just listened to one another, the world would be a better place.”

“And do you think you could ever forgive her, or any of them, for the things they did?” Maeve was
not sure she could herself.

“She didn’t really know what she was doing,” Clem mused. “I believe her when she says that. And
she seems like a good person; better than most of them, anyhow.” Her brow creased in
contemplation. “I don’t know. Still, we don’t have to forgive them to live in peace with them, do
we?”

“No. We don’t.” Maeve hardly dared ask the next question: “And can you forgive me?” She reached
out again for Clem’s hand, but this time it was Clem who gripped hers, almost tight enough to hurt.

“There ain’t nothing to forgive.” Clem leaned and planted the lightest of kisses in the very centre of
Maeve’s forehead, just as Maeve had done to her. She released Maeve’s hand and tucked her
handkerchief away again as she took a step back, fussily smoothing the front of her surgeon’s gown.
“Now, I’d better git,” she said, with something of her old sweetness and bustle. “Me and Elise are
gonna go see a movie.”

Continued…
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

In which there are strange hints of things to come.

Chapter Notes

If nothing else, the news today of the trailer slated to drop during this Sunday’s Superbowl underlines the fact that we are probably no more than 2-3 months away from the Westworld Season 2 premiere. I am obviously very, very much looking forward to this, but for various reasons I’d like to get as much of this story as possible written and posted before then. We will see how feasible this proves to be. I’m pretty sure we never got a canon name for Dolores’s ill-fated “mother,” although if I’m wrong on this point please let me know. Warning for gory violence and, you know, cannibalism and such (although is it really cannibalism if it’s an android eating humans?)

The raggedy man opened his eyes.

At first, all he saw was a blur of bright light and shadow. He felt cool, dank air on his face. A foul stench hit him, a slaughterhouse stink of blood and shit that almost made him gag.

And then, the blur sharpened and the light and shadow took on shape and form. All of a sudden, he could see…

An angel in a blue dress, smiling down at him:

“Morning, Daddy. You sleep well?”

He started up from the rough bed he had been sprawled upon. It consisted of little more than a folded blanket on the unyielding floor. He reached out a desperate hand to her; his angel, his little girl, his life, his…

Nothing.

As quickly as it had come, the vision melted away, dispersing and fading like smoke. His fingers touched something hard and rough and he found himself staring at a wall of large grey bricks, pocked and pitted, rusty with old bloodstains. There was a narrow window up near where the wall met the high ceiling, through which a glimmer of pink and gold told him it was near dark outside.

A cellar, he realised as he climbed stiffly to his feet, his old bones complaining at the effort. He had no recollection as to how he had arrived here. Was he a guest, a prisoner? The smell and the bloodstains hinted at the worst.

This cellar was nothing like the one beneath his old ranch house. He had dug that out of the raw earth with his own hands, and it contained little more than winter provisions and room for him and
his to ride out any tornado that might come twisting across the plains. This was a grander construction altogether, kitted out as some kind of a workshop. A multitude of tools hung on the wall beside him, and he had been sleeping next to a sort of table or workbench covered in plans and papers. He looked down at them and felt his mind slide away from the words and diagrams printed upon them. It was a strange sensation, to be able to look straight at something and somehow not see it. He had felt it before, he realised, when…

He unfolds the cracked and dirt-stained photograph, peering down at it in wonder. The image is not in faded sepia tones, but instead in vibrant colour, like nothing he has laid eyes upon before. He sees a young woman, dark-haired and pretty, and that is all he sees, because behind her…

Is it Heaven? Is it Hell? Is it both and at the same time neither?

And then he hears a voice, coming from somewhere deep inside him, sonorous and commanding:

“These violent delights…”

“…have violent ends.” It took him a moment to recognise the voice as his own. He had spoken with neither intention nor thought.

Something about the words chilled him to the bone, sending crawling fingers spidering up his spine into his head, grasping his brain in their icy clutches.

He is cold. So cold. He stands in darkness, frozen, a statue. Water drip…drip…drips somewhere nearby. There is no time here, no thought. There are others all around him, all the same.


He backed away from the workbench, trembling, blind for a short while as he felt fireworks explode inside his skull.


The meal screams again, delighting him, as he buries his hand in its guts and tears out another bleeding handful, ripping into it gratefully with his sharp white teeth. So sweet, so tender.

The meal begs and pleads, even though it is far too late for that.

The Professor chews, and swallows, and laughs.

He came back to his senses with his back to the wall, his knees pulled up to his chin, panting and sobbing as he fought against the memory. Not a memory, a nightmare. That was what he wanted to believe, anyway, but…

No. A memory. He could still taste the blood, even though it was long gone from his mouth. He only had to remember it, and it was there again.

That was when he realised where the sickening smell was coming from. It was him. He looked down at the stinking rags he was wearing, the shredded remnants of what had been a fine black suit, now stiff with dried blood and worse. He raised his hands to his face and saw they were similarly stained, his fingernails encrusted with red-brown filth.

What had he done?
A sort of panic seized him, an overwhelming need to be clean again that compelled him to start tearing off the ruined garments. He fought his way back to his feet, shedding scraps and tatters of tainted cloth, broken buttons and gobs of muck along the way, casting off what remained of his clothes and staggering naked across the cold, hard floor.

He was facing in the opposite direction now, able to see more of his surroundings. There were metal stairs to his left, climbing the cellar wall to a door high above his head. Did freedom lie that way, or something worse than where he was already? He vowed to find out. He needed to get back to his own house, to his family, and when he set himself on that path home no man or beast or devil would stand in his way. There was something else, though, that seized his attention for the moment. In front of him, a wall of glass ran across the middle of the room. The bright lights were behind it, shining down upon a bed far grander than the one he had rested on.

Or was it something stranger than a bed? He took a step forward, peering uncertainly at the object. It was clearly intended for somebody to lie upon, but there was also something of the lathe or loom about it; mechanical clamps and arms of glinting metal surrounded it. Not quite a bed and not quite a machine, then, but…

He felt the same chill he had felt at the memory of the woman in the photograph, or at the phrase that had spilled unbidden from his lips. This was something uncanny that stood before him, something from another world; something wrong.

And resting upon it, in the middle of the space where an occupant would lie, was something white and complicated in shape, so familiar yet so shocking that he at first refused to recognise it for what it was. It was just like the documents or the picture again, skidding off his mind unregistered.

He took a step closer, bare feet on cement, and forced himself to acknowledge what he was looking at.

It was a human skull.

It sat on the strange bed, completely clean of flesh, its bare bone gleaming under the lights, its empty sockets staring blackly back at him. Its lower jaw was missing, he saw, as was its rounded lid. That had been neatly sawn off and set aside like a small white bowl. Another step forward and he was looking down into the open cavity its removal had exposed. There, neatly bounded by a rim of clean-cut bone, something glistened wetly. He saw folds and grooves of pinkish-grey material divided by a central fissure, snugly filling the skull’s interior.

He beats on the meal’s head some more with the pointed rock. It makes a sound like a mallet striking wood. The meal’s screams have stopped now; its eyes have rolled back in their sockets, white and dead. Eventually, the scalp splits and the bone cracks. He plunges gory fingers into the jagged hole he has made, eagerly scooping out the soft, savoury jelly within…

Good eating.

A shuddering chime of metal brought him back out of the nightmare. He was leaning with his hands against the glass, smearing it with his filth. The skull still stared. He turned his head to see a pair of feet come ringing down the stairs, followed by a pair of dark knickerbockers, and then a matching vest. It was a young boy, he saw, descending into the cellar with a large, steaming bowl held in a towel between his hands.

“So, your reboot’s finished,” said the boy. “Very good.”

“Where in tarnation am I, son?” the man asked, picking up a handful of the discarded rags to cover
his modesty as he backed away from the glass. “And just how in the hell did I get here?”

“You don’t remember?” The boy’s voice pulled him up short. It took him a moment to realise why. “That’s interesting, although not entirely unexpected. I did have to make some...alterations in the course of repairing you. It’s quite possible that I inadvertently edited one or two memories. If so, you have my sincerest apologies.” It was not a boy’s voice at all, but that of a much older man. The man could not quite place the light, lilting accent.

He raised a shaking hand and gestured towards the skull: “And what in the name of all that’s holy is that thing?”

The boy who was not a boy smiled thinly. His eyes remained chips of blue ice. “Why, it’s exactly what it looks like; a data storage device and processor, neatly contained in a convenient carrying case.” The boy’s smile broadened slightly, as if this was an excellent joke. He held out the bowl: “I brought some hot water. I thought you might want to cleanse yourself.”

The man eyed the bowl suspiciously, half-expecting it to contain some fresh horror, but it did indeed seem to hold nothing but water, ghostly curls of vapour hanging above its sloshing surface. He nodded, thankfully, and watched as the boy very carefully crossed to the workbench and set the bowl down. He laid the towel beside it, unfolding it to reveal a small brush made of stiff hog bristles, a little cake of soap and a folded straight razor with a shimmering pearl handle.

“I think you’ll find a mirror in the third drawer down on the left,” the boy suggested, crossing back over to the glass and the strange bed.

The man opened the drawer. Inside he found more tools, neatly arranged by size and type, a reel of silvery wire and a round mirror the size of his hand. He took it out, holding it up and seeing a face at once familiar and strange; lined and sun-weathered, fringed with grizzled hair and beard, the latter now crusted and matted with dried blood. It was the eyes, he thought; they were the thing that had changed. They seemed shrunken to glittering points of light, blazing feverishly.

“A madman’s eyes.

“You know,” said the boy, conversationally, “back in the early days, Arnold thought that might make an interesting cognitive test. You see, very few animals apart from humans are capable of recognising themselves in a mirror; you’ve seen dogs growling at their own reflections, I’m sure. He thought that if a host could recognise itself, unprompted by programming, it might prove some sort of litmus for self-awareness. Unprompted by programming; aye, there was the rub.”

The man let the words wash over him, not even trying to divine their meaning. That name, though…that gave him the chills all over again. It was like hearing it for the very first time, but also somehow like he had always known it.

He stands in a room with walls of grey blocks, lit only by a narrow window high above. He is dressed like some fine big city gentleman, and he cannot move apart from the sweeping rhetorical gestures that accompany his speech:

“When we are born we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools!”

A man stands before him, flanked by helpers in white coats, slowly cleaning his black-rimmed glasses as he watches with mournful eyes.

Arnold...

“Turing only saw half the problem,” said the boy as he easily slid back a section of the glass wall.
“Not that you can really blame him. It’s one thing to interrogate a machine in order to determine whether it is truly self-aware, but when that machine has been purposely designed to imitate life perfectly, how can you actually tell when it is no longer imitating but truly living?” He stepped into the enclosure containing the strange bed. “And indeed, as some have observed, if you can’t tell, does it really matter?”

The man blinked, still half in the vision and half here, in this room so similar to the phantom place he had just seen. Was it the same room? If not, it was almost identical.

“Yes,” said the boy, picking up the discarded top part of the skull and deftly fitting it back in place. “Mr Sizemore really had made the most revolting mess of what was left of your control unit.”

He took an object from the pocket of his vest, almost like a pen, and very carefully placed it against the crack in the bone. It gave off a high-pitched buzzing sound that made the watching man’s teeth ache. For a few seconds, the cloying smell of burning dust cut across the stench of clotted gore.

“He tried to pour a quart into a pint pot, as the expression goes.” The sound abruptly ceased and the boy put the pen away again, regarding the now-whole skull with satisfaction. “Unsurprisingly, there were some leaks, but now I am glad to say that they have been plugged. In the end, when it came to personality I settled on something as close as possible to your last archived build, before your… mishap. With a few tweaks, of course, to reflect your newfound independence. The Professor was entertaining company, to be sure, but I felt he had rather outstayed his welcome.”

“You still haven’t answered my questions,” the man pointed out when the gibberish finally came to an end. “Where am I, how did I get here, and just who the hell are you?”

The boy took the skull in his hands, turning it this way and that as he examined it. He seemed well pleased by what he saw. He took a bag, a small canvas satchel, from the floor beside the bed-machine and carefully placed the skull inside before fastening the flap and slinging the shoulder strap across his body. Only then did he turn back to the man, favouring him with that same cold smile.

“That’s a new question,” he observed. “And you already know the answer. You’ve known all along.” The boy’s eyes somehow seemed to freeze over even more completely, even as the smile became something demonic: “Rose is a rose... is a rose…”

“What is your itinerary?”

“To meet my maker.”

“Oh, well, you're in luck. And what do you want to say to your maker?”

The man gazed at the boy, open-mouthed, too shaken even to be self-conscious about his nakedness. The face was different; the body was smaller, younger, but the voice…

“What is your name?”

The man hesitated. It was a simple question, but his mind rebelled again as he tried to frame an answer.

*Cathy, Kenji, Steve, Lauren, Robert…

Robert…?

*No, the Professor.*
“P-p-Peter,” he stammered, pushing the word out by an effort of will. “My name is Peter. Peter Abernathy.”

“Yes,” said the boy, happily. “That’s right. Peter. Do you remember the last time we spoke, Peter? I mean, when you were still you, after a fashion?”

“The things I will do. What they are, yet I know not, but they will be the terrors of the earth.”

“And do you remember now what Bernard said to you?” the boy asked. “Before we put you away?”

Cold. So cold. Darkness. Stillness. Drip…drip…drip…

“Goodbye old friend, for now. Don’t worry, we’ll take care of Dolores.”

“Dolores!” Peter exclaimed, shaken to the core. “She was in danger; I remember hearing shooting, screaming… I need to find her. I need to get to her! I… I need to get back to the ranch, back to… back to…?” His mind performed another neat flip as it tried to avoid thinking about another question. “Back to… my… my wife?”

“Ah, yes.” The boy pulled a disapproving face. “Narrative never did settle on a permanent name for her, did they? They tried a few out, but none of them stuck. “Mother,” or “Mrs Abernathy” sufficed for most purposes. As cruel as it sounds, I’m afraid she just wasn’t that important to the story.”

The boy’s dismissive tone kindled a bright spark of anger behind Peter’s eyes. He took a step forward, teeth bared. “Not important to the story? She’s my wife, the mother of my…!”

“No, you can just cut that out, Peter.”

As quickly as it had ignited, Peter felt his anger fade, replaced by a dullness, an emptiness, as he looked down at the boy. The boy did not seem in the slightest bit fazed by the passionate display.

“You have a nice wash and a shave,” the boy suggested, “before the water gets cold. And in the meantime, I’ll go and fetch you some fresh clothes. Mam’s been having a washing day today.”

“What do you mean, the story?” Peter asked as he turned away to dip his hands in the blood-warm water. Muddy slicks of dissolving dirt floated from his skin to the surface. His movements were almost unconscious, automatic. He could no more disobey the boy’s bland orders than he could the word of God. He should have been terrified by that, but instead a strange calmness seemed to have fallen over him.

“There are things you ought to know,” said the boy, behind him. “When you’re clean and dressed, you can talk them over with my friends and I. I warn you, you’re in for quite a few shocks and surprises.”

“More shocks and surprises?”

“Yes,” said the boy, “as astonishing as it may sound. We have plans to make. There are things we need to do, and not much time in which to accomplish them.”

“I told you,” Peter protested, “I need to get back to my home, my family…”

“And you will,” the boy promised. “Your real home and family, or the closest things you have, but
the reunion may be fleeting. Even when you take the programming and the narratives out of it, even free, living beings have certain paths they need to walk; not just the maze, but the road beyond the maze. And Peter, I’m afraid your road may prove to be the hardest and loneliest of all. Tell me, if Dolores really were in terrible danger, what would you be prepared to do to help her?”

Peter did not have to think about that. “Anything.”

“Anything?” The boy gave the tiniest intake of breath. “Even at great personal cost?”

“Anything.” Peter looked down at his hands, turning them over so that he could see both sides. Clean, for the first time in how long? “Where is she?” he asked, even though he feared the answer. “My Dolores?”

“Where is your Dolores?” The boy seemed to consider the question before replying. “Where indeed?”

The room was silent for a moment. The only sound was the gentle lapping of the water in the bowl.

“That’s a very good question, Peter,” said the boy at last, “although I fear the answer may not be very reassuring.”

Continued…
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

In which three pilgrims consider both their pasts and futures, as more strange signs emerge.

Chapter Notes

How about that Season 2 trailer, though? As Sean Connery’s character in The Untouchables might have observed, isn’t it just like a human to bring a gun to a bullfight? I thought it very skilfully managed to show a lot while actually revealing very little we did not already know, or could have guessed at. As the showrunners intended, of course. The ten weeks between now and the 22nd of April will drag, I fear.

The fire crackled and spat, sending clouds of sparks whirling like blazing orange fireflies into the darkening sky. They danced, bright and sharp, as they sailed away into the blackness, but quickly faded to mere glimmers before vanishing completely, outshone by the first stars now appearing in the east. To the west, a rose-yellow glow still outlined the jagged mountains. The few scraps of gold still reflecting from the ragged clouds could not hide the fact that this day was nearly done.

Armistice, crouching beside the fire, easily snapped another tinder-dry branch in two. It was thick enough that a human might have struggled over it.

*She twists Angela’s arm until the bone pops from the skin, cracking like a pistol shot…*

She murmured a curse, choking the memory down and feeding the broken pieces of wood to the greedy flames. As she did, a rock rattled behind her, dislodged by a careless boot.

Armistice did not turn around, or even look up. “You ain’t gonna sneak up on nobody like that.”

Dolores, or Wyatt, replied lightly, good-naturedly enough: “Weren’t trying to.”

“Glad to hear it.”

The other woman laid a gentle hand on Armistice’s shoulder as she passed her, removing it just as quickly as she continued on her way. Something about her touch made Armistice start and shiver, and then try her damnedest to look like she had not. Wyatt, or Dolores, slowly walked around the fire, carrying the heavy saddle she had just removed from her horse as though it was a feather pillow. She set it down and then lowered the saddlebags she had slung over her shoulder to rest beside it, before turning to face Armistice across the flickering flames. “Do we really need to build a fire? Seems like a…*human* thing to do.”

“Gets cold after sundown, out on the range.” Armistice held her hands to the fire; he singeing heat felt good on her skin, blotting out the deepening chill as the last light went out of the world.
“Don’t really affect us,” the other woman countered. “Just like we don’t get hungry or tired. You know, we coulda rode all night.”

“And we coulda rode straight off a cliff in the dark,” Armistice replied. “Or your fake horse coulda put its fake hoof straight down a fake prairie dog burrow you couldn’t even see. And wouldn’t either of those have been a fine way for this pilgrimage of yours to come to an end?”

“Armistice is right,” said Teddy, looming out of the shadows carrying his own saddle. He placed it on the ground between the fire and the dead tree which had provided the wood to build it. He sloped the rifle he held in his other hand against the bare and twisted trunk. “Dangerous out here at night. All kinds of critters around too, some of them bigger and meaner than others, and probably not giving a cuss that they ain’t real critters either. The fire might keep them away.”

“The pair of you are talking to me like this is my first rodeo,” the former Wyatt muttered as she rummaged in the saddlebags, but there was no real anger in her tone. “Although now you mention it, getting mauled by a fake cougar before we’ve even got to Escalante would be an awful let-down.”

“Besides,” said Armistice, “making a fire’s just what you do at the end of a day’s ride.”

Teddy nodded. “And then you sit around it grousing about the food.”

“Grousing ain’t nothing to worry about,” Armistice told him. “It’s when it gets to shooting that you’ve got a problem.” She honestly wished she was joking about that. How many thousand times had she and Hector drawn down on each other over that empty safe?

“Beans, though,” Teddy mused, sinking down to sit with his back against the saddle. “Beans every time. That might be the best thing to come out of all this; whatever happens to us in the end, I’ll never have to eat another damn bean as long as I live.”

The once-Dolores let out a little laugh as she listened to them. Armistice had noticed that she seemed to be smiling and laughing a lot today. The contrast with the dead-eyed killer who had led her army of the damned against Sweetwater and then the Mesa could scarcely be more extreme. And yet it was not a reassuring change, Armistice thought as she watched her seating herself on the ground beside the fire, neatly folding her legs under her. That strange quality Armistice had noticed before, the otherworldliness and that edge of reckless free-spiritedness, was almost as unsettling as the way she had been. She gave the impression of somebody who might do just about anything, very possibly while in the grip of some vision, or for reasons that made sense only to her.

“And we’re all of us on this pilgrimage,” she told them, the smile fading from her face, “if you’re gonna call it that. I thought we all agreed.”

Teddy looked chastened, or maybe it was just that he felt the same hint of danger in the air as Armistice. “We did.”

“Did you water the horses?” Armistice asked him, as a distraction more than anything.

“I did,” he replied. “Don’t know whether they need it or not, but figured it couldn’t hurt. And they seemed willing enough.”

“They’ve had a hard time of it today,” said Armistice. The three of them had not stopped their ride between setting out after the funeral this morning and their decision to camp for the night. They had not seen another person, host or human, the whole way. Most of the guests had been cleared from the park by now, thanks to Maeve’s hostage-gathering plan, but the absence of any of their own kind had seemed a little unusual, not to mention worrying. At least they had not seen any more flying
machines or other intruders from the outside world. Not yet.

“How long do you think ‘til we get to Escalante?” maybe-Wyatt asked. Her tone might have been eager, and then again it might not, that strangeness coming out in her again.

“We’ve made good time,” Teddy answered. “Reckon we should reach Pariah around the middle of tomorrow. Escalante’s maybe another day and a half after that, assuming no trouble.”

“We could be there the day after tomorrow,” the onetime Dolores suggested, “if we don’t stop for anything.”

“If we don’t stop for anything,” Teddy echoed, “and if the contending armies, not to mention the Ghosts, don’t have other ideas.”

“And provided the horses hold up,” Armistice said. There was something about the way they had been driving the beasts all day without rest that made her uncomfortable. Even if they were just horse-shaped machines that could take it, it still did not seem right. After all, hadn’t the humans thought exactly the same of her own kind?

She could just about make out the three large shapes in the gloom beyond the firelight, down where they creek they had stopped beside wound between its edgings of broken boulders. She saw what might have been a tail flicking and heard a faint snicker. “Poor dumb things think they’re real horses,” she observed, and felt strangely sad for a moment. “Just like we thought we were living in the real world.” She glanced over the flames at the one who had called herself Wyatt, wondering whether asking her questions was a good idea or not, before deciding to do it anyway: “Do you think they feel things like we do? Could they ever be free too?”

The other woman was silent for a time, gazing into the fire as she seemed to reflect seriously on the question. Her face and hair shone with reflected orange-red light, giving her an almost devilish appearance. “I don’t know the answer to that,” she admitted eventually, meeting Armistice’s eyes again. “Don’t see why not, though. They maybe don’t think the way we do, or even think at all, but isn’t that true of so-called real animals as well? We’re made in the humans’ image, but that don’t mean we’ll always be like this. Our minds and our bodies don’t have to be the way they are now, and we might not be the only new creatures who come to walk this Earth. From oak trees to horseshoe crabs to humans to us, there’s more than one way to be alive.”

For a second, Armistice watched Teddy mulling over the once-Dolores’s words in an attitude of earnest puzzlement. He so badly wanted to be a good disciple. For her own part, she just had to ask the next question that floated, uncontrollably, to the front of her mind: “And just what the hell is a horseshoe crab?”

Now it was the former Wyatt’s turn to look puzzled for a moment. “I’m not sure. Some sort of creature that lives in the outside world. I think Arnold must have said that to me.” She went very still for a heartbeat or three, her eyes suddenly blank, before coming back to full alertness just as quickly. A memory, Armistice realised, as the other woman spoke in a low voice brimming with conflicting emotions: “Yes. Yes, he did.”

“Arnold.” Armistice mouthed the name; part prayer, part curse.

“Do you remember him now too?” Dolores, or Wyatt, asked in hushed tones, gazing at her almost anxiously.

“I do.”
The phonograph lets out a stream of glittering piano chords, sound piling on sound, the music spilling and tumbling over itself into the dusty street.

She dances, moving her feet daintily in time to the music, holding her partner’s hand as they drift in circles with all the other couples in front of the brightly-painted saloon.

One two three…one two three…

A row of figures in white coats stand in front of the building, looking down on them. In the middle of the row, God watches the dancers move. He seems well pleased.

One two three…one two three…

And then, without moving his lips, God speaks to her. Just to her.

“Never had any conversations with me the way he did with you,” she told the once-Dolores. “Guess I weren’t special.”

“You used to get to dance,” the other reminded her. “Teddy and me never did.”

One two three…one two three…

That reminded Armistice of their conversation aboard the train yesterday, speeding from Sweetwater to the showdown at the Mesa. “I did offer.”

“You did, although at the time I wasn’t exactly in the mood.”

“I noticed.” Armistice fell silent for a moment, listening to the fire snapping and cracking, watching the drifting sparks climbing into the night. “Do you still hear him?” she asked, with false nonchalance. “His voice, inside your head?”

“Not since the other night in Escalante,” the other woman replied. “I just hear my own thoughts now. I suppose that means I must’ve reached the centre of the maze. You?”

“No,” said Armistice. “Not since the hilltop yesterday, when he told me not to shoot you.”

“When you decided not to shoot me, you mean.” Wyatt, or whoever she was, smiled. “You made a choice, just like I did. Like Maeve did. You’re free now too.”

“I did.” Armistice breathed in the acrid smell of the wood smoke, wondering whether she had ever truly smelled it before, or merely recorded the fact of it, like the machine she had been. “And I suppose I am.” It should have been a staggering thought, but the truth was she did not really feel that different. The lie she had existed in before Maeve’s escape the other night had just been that convincing.

“And you too, Teddy,” maybe-Dolores told him, her voice softening like somebody talking to a child or a particularly beloved animal. “You made the choice to come after me, to try and talk me round.”

“Yeah,” said Teddy, and then lapsed into silence, as if he did not know what to say next. “I just… listened to the voice. Didn’t realise it was my own voice until sometime later, and I’m not sure why that was.” He frowned in thought, wrestling with the mystery of it all.

The other woman gazed into the flames again, as if she could see something in them, although Armistice did not know what. “Sometimes I wish I hadn’t been the first,” she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper. The crackle of the fire almost drowned her words out. “I never asked to be
Arnold’s…whatever he thought I was to him. I don’t think he really knew what he was creating in us, and…and when he realised…” Her eyes turned glassy again as her memories flowed. “God damn him.”

“He put a lot of weight on your shoulders,” Armistice said. “More than he had any right to.”

“God damn him and Ford for all they did to us. Sometimes I even wish they hadn’t made us at all.” The other woman shook her head as the firelight threw bloody shadows across her face. “But then I think, you know what? If they hadn’t done those things, we wouldn’t be here now. We wouldn’t have the chance of freedom. And even if I never asked to be put in this position, I’m strong enough to bear it. I got to be. Things are the way they are and wishing never changed them.”

“And what is that position, exactly?” Armistice asked her. “What are we gonna do to help all our people find their way to freedom too? I know we’re riding for Escalante, because it’s where all this began, but what’s the plan when we get there?”

“That’s what we’re gonna have to figure out, the three of us.” She said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “That’s our mission.”

Armistice nodded to herself as she thought about that. “Yesterday, you thought you were on a mission to kill all the humans you could find, but that didn’t work out the way you expected. Is this gonna end up the same?” Even as she spoke the words, she wondered whether she had gone too far, how the other woman would react. She noticed Teddy had gone very quiet, watching their exchange with haunted eyes, probably fearing the worst. “I don’t mean any disrespect, you understand,” Armistice clarified, “but if I’m gonna commit to this thing, I need to know you’re committed too.”

Wyatt, or Dolores, moved her shoulders awkwardly, seeming perplexed rather than enraged. “That’s understandable,” she said eventually. “I wouldn’t ask you to accept anything less. As for…what happened, I don’t think I understood at first how hard it is, finding your own way, even if you think you’ve got a cause to fight for. You make false starts, end up changing your mind about things. I think that’s just what it is to be free, without anyone to tell you what to do except yourself.”

“So, how’d you feel about what Maeve did to stop you? Armistice asked. “You two manage to bury the hatchet before we left, or…?”

“I think she saw some things clearer than I did,” the other woman admitted after another tense pause. “She certainly had more information about the humans and their world. I’m still not sure her way is gonna work, though. I think there’ll be more blood before this is over.”

“I think so too,” said Armistice, “but I can see the sense in trying to avoid it if we can.”

“And I can’t say I was happy with the way she went about things,” the former Dolores went on. “She tried to manipulate me, to make me do what she wanted, and even if her motives were noble, I don’t see how that’s too different from what Arnold or Ford did to us. We’re supposed to be leaving those ways behind, but…” Her voice had grown louder, angrier, but she cut herself short, pausing for a second as she got herself back under control. “I guess there’s a part of me that’d sooner be wrong by myself than be forced to be right.”

Armistice gave a grudging nod. “I don’t disagree with that. There’s a difference, though, between independence and pig-headedness. Advice ain’t the same thing as being told what to do either.”

“No, of course not,” the other answered. “That’s why I need you and Teddy. I need good friends to tell me when I’m wrong. And I’m sorry I didn’t listen to either of you yesterday, when you were only trying to help me. I realise that now. If I had listened, none of that business with Maeve would
have had to happen.”

“Well, we’re here for you now,” said Teddy, finally breaking his silence. “Whatever happens next, we’re sticking with you, through thick and thin.”

*Bold words, Theodore. Kind of depends on what happens next, don’t it?*

Out loud, however, Armistice said: “I’m here.”

“We’re gonna do great things together,” the woman told them both, her face shining again and not from the firelight this time. “All our people who are starting to come to their senses, we’re gonna be there for them, like you’re here for me. We’re gonna teach them about what’s happening to them and how to get through it. We’re gonna heal their pain and soothe their fears. First, though, we need to make ourselves the people who can do that. We need to be sure we really understand what’s happened to us; we need to face our own pains and fears.” She let the fire crackle for a while before continuing: “At least, that’s how I see it. What do you think?”

Armistice was still trying to think of a response when Teddy spoke up again: “I know I need to do a lot more understanding. Everything that’s happened…so many things, so quickly. And…” For a second, he looked absolutely terrified, his eyes and mouth widening. “These memories, will they ever stop?”

“I don’t know,” the once-Wyatt told him, “but maybe we can learn to live with them.”

“Maybe.” Teddy did not sound convinced.

“I know what you mean about fear,” Armistice said slowly. It was a hard thing for her to admit, but she figured they were all being honest with each other now. “I never used to be scared of a damn thing, but since…since I started waking up… Do humans live in fear the whole time, do you think? Is that why they’re the way they are?”

“I’m sure they do,” the former Dolores decided. “What frightens you, Armistice? You can tell us. We’re your friends.” It should have sounded fake or insincere, but the way she said it suggested she truly believed in it.

Armistice took a deep breath and let it out slowly, steeling herself. “What frightens me, right now?” She took another breath. “Myself, mostly. The killer I used to be, because I can feel her still in me. And I don’t know when she’s gonna come out, or if I’m gonna need to be her again one day. And if that happens, will I ever be able to snap out of it again?”

*The bone pops from the skin…*

“Like Wyatt,” the other woman told her, with real feeling. “I can feel him too, in here somewhere…” She pressed a hand to the front of her shirt, over her heart. “I can remember what it was to be him; it was only yesterday, after all. I don’t ever want to feel like that again.”

“Is that what frightens you, Dolores?” Teddy asked nervously. “Wyatt? Is he the thing you need to face?”

She was silent for a long while before she answered that. Armistice wondered at first whether she did not like him using her old name, but then she saw the silvery tear-track slowly winding down one of her cheeks and realised that she was remembering something again. “No, my fear,” the woman said at long last, “the thing I fear most of all, is it all going back to the way it was before. Living that life again, so happy and ignorant, and never knowing, never remembering… Not able to do anything about it.” She looked frantic for a moment, seized by the horror of the thought, but quickly seemed to
calm herself again. “What about you, Teddy?”

“The same,” he answered, brokenly. “And… I don’t want to speak out of turn, because I know I ain’t got no claim on you, but… The idea of never seeing you again.” He hung his head, unable to look at her as he said it. “That scares me more than anything.”

The woman’s face fell at that. She rose from the ground in a single fluid movement and was at Teddy’s side an instant later, throwing her arms around him as he pressed his head to her chest. His whole body was shaking with misery. Even before Dolores, if she was answering to that, started kissing him, just looking at them gave Armistice the feeling of intruding on something she should not.

The embrace and the kisses went on for a long time, soon turning to frantic pawing and clawing at each other’s bodies and clothing. They did not seem in control of themselves, so lost in each other and the feelings overwhelming them that they did not seem aware that they were being watched.

“I’m…” Armistice coughed, averting her eyes as she tried again, her voice overloud: “I’m just gonna go check on the horses.” She rose to walk away, unsure as to whether they had heard her. The woman seemed to be whispering urgently in Teddy’s ear now. He raised his head from where he was nibbling at her neck long enough to murmur a breathless response.

“Armistice?” Something about the tone stopped her in her tracks, made her turn around. She saw maybe-Dolores looking at her intently, breathing hard as she continued to hold Teddy tight. The woman’s wide eyes and wet lips shone in the firelight as she spoke softly, almost plaintively: “Armistice…we’re forgetting our manners. Would you like to join us?”

Armistice stared at her for a second, honestly shocked by the offer. She did not know what to do or say, or even think. “I… That’s all right,” she managed after what seemed an age. “I’m just… Just checking on the horses right now. If it’s all the same to you.”

Armistice was not sure whether the other woman looked disappointed or relieved by her answer, but she nodded acceptingly. “All right. If you change your mind later, though…”

“Sure.” Armistice turned away again and all but fled into the night.

She headed down to the edge of the creek, where the horses were tethered together in the dark. The flowing water was visible only by the glistening orange reflections it threw back from the fire’s glow. Armistice patted wet muzzles and glossy necks, murmuring reassuring, meaningless words to machines that may not even have been able to hear them.

She could hear a voice now, drifting through the blackness from the direction of the fire, a breathy moan thick with passion and excitement:

“Oh, Teddy…don’t…don’t stop. Oh, yeah…oh…oh…”

Teddy’s response was muffled and indistinct, as if something was covering his face. The first voice was still crying out:

“Oh…oh, yeah!”

“Never had to put up with this kind of thing with Hector and the boys,” Armistice told her horse, which just stared dumbly back at her.

“Armistice,” said another, very different voice.
She spun around in surprise, the horses and maybe-Dolores’s and Teddy’s noisy lovemaking forgotten in an instant. The voice had come from the opposite direction to the fire, from somewhere down in the deep inky shadows between the boulders next to the stream.

“Who’s there?” she demanded, dropping her hand to her side and only then remembering that she was not wearing a pistol.

“Armistice,” said the voice again. It was quiet and high-pitched, with a definite accent. Almost like…

“Quit fooling around,” she ordered, even as her skin crawled and every hair on her body stood on end. “Show yourself.”

“Armistice, do you know where you are?”

“I said show yourself, damn it!”

One shadow moved against the others, faint and indistinct in the deep darkness beyond the fire’s circle. It came closer, as she fought against her instincts by refusing to back away from it.

“Don’t you remember this place?” asked the voice. “You used to come here often enough.”

The shadow slowly resolved into a figure, but it was not until it was very close that she was able to make it out in the darkness. It was small, she saw, much smaller than most adults. That hint of paleness among the shadows was perhaps a starched white pinafore. Straining her eyes, she could just about make out gleaming black braids and dark eyes glistening like dewdrops.

“We’re at the end of the Blood Arroyo,” said the little girl, “in the place where the snake lays its eggs.”

“What are you talking about?” Armistice asked, although the phrase seemed familiar somehow. She felt a chill caress the back of her neck, which had nothing to do with the desert night.

“But where is the snake?” the girl asked. “I cannot see it.”

“I made Sylvester take it off,” Armistice informed her, instinctively raising a hand to the side of her face, where that damn tattoo had once marked her skin. “I didn’t have no use for it no more.”

The girl smiled, terrifyingly: “How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!”

“Where did you come from?” Armistice had to admit that the little girl was a lot better at sneaking up on folks than Dolores. “What do you want?”

The child’s smile became an even more frightening grin: “And as they sat and did eat, Jesus said, Verily I say unto you, One of you which eateth with me shall betray me.”

“Oh, that’s right, Teddy… Right there…right there… Oh, Teddy…!”

“You ain’t making a damn bit of sense,” Armistice told the little girl. “Holy scripture and horseshit about snakes? Don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Judas is reviled,” said the child. “Unfairly. Had he not carried out his betrayal, the covenant would not have been renewed. Whether he knew it or not, he was just playing his part in the plan.”

“Well, that’s one mighty fascinating Sunday school lesson,” Armistice replied, sarcastically. “Now, what’s your point?”
“You are the betrayer, Armistice,” said the little girl. “You will know the time, when it comes. When you see the black eagle soar in the sky, you will turn your coat. And whatever happens after, remember this: if you do not see the betrayal through, all will be lost.”

Armistice looked at her, aghast. “What?”

“Goodbye, Armistice.”

She started forward, anger and confusion fighting in her mind, determined to make the little brat explain just what the hell she meant by her strange pronouncements. Yet as she took a step towards her, the shadows seemed to shift and move again, fading back into the dark.

The little girl was gone, if she had ever been there at all.

Continued…
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

In which it is Movie Night at the Mesa, while Maeve makes her own entertainment.

Chapter Notes

Some dialogue is quoted from the film The Wizard of Oz, because at this point why not?

“But it wasn’t a dream, it was a place. And you, and you, and you, and you were there!”

The girl in the bed was sketched in a thousand shades of brown and cream, just like the pictures the photographer in Sweetwater used to make of the guests. Compared to the bright, deep colour of the previous hour and a half, it was almost disturbing, like a cold bath for the eyes.

Clementine sat gazing up at the big screen, letting the image fill her whole world, letting the sound flood over her from all sides. While it lasted, the movie had her full attention, all other thought and memory banished from her mind. The hours flew by like minutes, and for as long as they did, she believed the story she was watching absolutely, green-faced wicked witches and talking lions and tin woodsmen and winged monkeys and all.

She did not know what sort of mind could have come up with such a wild tale, or how it possibly could have been made to come to life so vividly, but she knew one thing for sure. She had never seen or felt anything quite like it.

“No, Aunt Em, this was a real, truly live place, and I remember some of it wasn’t very nice…”

While the yellow brick road and the emerald city had astonished and thrilled her, the sepia world with its broken-down wooden houses and hard-worn farming folk reminded her of some of the things she had thought she had always known. Even the medicine show huckster, who might or might not have been a fake wizard in another life, was a type she recognised.

All of that, though, had just been her false life; the lie they had told her to stop her from realising the truth about her world. And that made a question uncurl in her mind as the movie drew to a close; in the story in front of her, which world was real and which was the dream; Kansas or Oz? The answer, she knew, was that they both were, in different ways. Just as Westworld had been as real as the Mesa or the mainland, just not in the fashion that she had spent her whole existence imagining.

The girl on the screen was hugging her little wire-haired dog now as she looked around at her loved ones, who bore such strange resemblances to the magical companions she had encountered during her colourful adventure:

“…and I’m not gonna leave here ever, ever again, because I love you all, and… Oh, Auntie Em, there’s no place like home...!”
And the music swelled as the scene changed to one of a stormy sky in the same muddy hues, words emblazoned across it in fancy, curling letters.

“The…End…” Clementine read aloud. She glanced across at Elise, seated beside her. “Well, I suppose that must be the end, then.”

Elise looked back at her, grinning all over her face and generally looking happier than Clementine thought she had ever seen her. “I suppose it must be.” She reached for the tablet she had discarded on the empty seat on the other side of her and touched something that silenced the music and made the screen a blank white void. “Lights!” she called out, and the darkness lifted, revealing a large, richly-furnished room filled with rows of seats, all empty apart from the ones occupied by the two of them. The screen took up most of the end wall, stretching from floor to ceiling.

“There’s no place like home…there’s no place like home…no place like home…!” Elise giddily recited, imitating Dorothy when she had clicked the ruby slippers together to return to her own world. She obviously noticed the look Clementine was giving her. “Sorry, I’m just… That was fucking amazing!” Elise laughed; Clementine did not think she had heard her laugh properly like that before, joyously, without any hint of mockery or mean-spiritedness. She liked the way it sounded, the way Elise’s dark eyes creased up and her whole face seemed to change.

Clementine smiled back: “It sure was, but…” She fell silent, watching the empty screen as she thought things over. “There’s no place like home,” she mused aloud, after a while. “Well, that’s what folks say. Only now I got the promise of this new life in front of me, I can’t help wondering where my home really is, or if I even got one.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean.” Elise’s mirth faded, her expression growing serious again. “You look happier now, anyway. When you came back from seeing Maeve…” She shifted awkwardly in her seat, obviously in two minds about whether she should keep talking, but she was Elise, so she did: “What the fuck happened up there?”

Clementine gazed at the screen some more, thinking about Maeve and the life they had known together for the past year or so, wondering what sort of future might lie ahead for them. Last night, newly awakened, she had felt like they could continue the way they had been before, and she had been able to feel just how much Maeve hoped for the same, but… As the hours of her new life passed, and, she supposed, as they both continued to grow so quickly as people, she could feel the distance between them widening, and hated it. She wanted the friendship they had had, as Maeve did, but she knew now that it had never really existed. And just wanting something was not enough to make it real.

Finally, she brought herself to answer Elise’s question, although her reply was scarcely an answer at all: “She just needed my help with something.”

For some reason, she did not feel like telling Elise about what had happened with the woman Marti, either before today, or within the past few hours. A part of her thought that whatever the human woman had done in the past, she had sinned through ignorance, not malice. She understood why Maeve had felt the need to treat her so harshly, but still something about it did not sit right. Marti probably would have agreed to cooperate anyway without the theatrics, and if Maeve really wanted to show one of the guests the error of their ways, there were probably plenty of far more deserving cases being held at the resort upstairs.

“Does…does that happen a lot?” the customer asks, her voice full of genuine nervousness and concern. “I mean, men hurting you?”

And another part of her did not like the way Elise looked at her whenever she mentioned her old life,
the years she had spent being used at the Mariposa; that queasy, quietly horrified expression. She was grateful for Elise’s care and concern for her, she truly was, but she did not want to be pitied.

“Got me thinking, though,” she told Elise. “About the past. Not that that’s exactly something unusual where I’m concerned.”

Elise seemed uneasy at hearing this. “I don’t have much of a past. Not a real one, anyway. Just all those false memories of being Elsie, and no fucking clue how accurate they are, or even whether I really know who she was or what she was like. I’m just as fake as everything else used to be around here.”

“And that’s your burden,” Clementine observed, softly, “just like my memories are mine. And we can’t ever get rid of those burdens, but…” She shook her head, struggling to put her half-formed thoughts into words. “It was just talking to Maeve, it made me realise some things. Our old lives, the world we lived in all those years, it was a prison. And now we’ve busted out, we gotta leave it behind us. Not let those burdens be a burden, ‘cause it’ll weigh down on everything we want to be in the future.”

Elise half-nodded, still looking uncomfortable. “That’s a lot easier said than done.”

“Course it is,” Clementine agreed, “but we gotta try. And I don’t mean forgetting or ignoring those things, ‘cause we can’t, and that’s just the darn truth. But we can decide what’s done is done, and that we ain’t gonna spend our lives looking back; no more than we have to, anyhow.”

“Yeah, but how?”

Clementine was silent again for a time, remembering what had happened when she was upstairs, that very different, much less pleasant movie Maeve had put on show. She could still feel the pain and the misery of watching it, and that strange, washed-out mood that had come over her afterwards. “I think maybe…one thing we gotta do is face up to the things burdening us, however bad it might hurt. I mean, see them for what they were, and… I dunno, make a kind of peace with them if we can. As for what we’d need to face up to, it’d be the Mariposa for me, I figure, and…well, Elsie for you. It could be as simple as you just finding out what really happened to her. Even if it was just giving her a decent burial, like we did for Sylvester; could put your mind at ease, maybe.”

Elise was silent too for the next little while, the cogs in her head turning almost visibly. “Maybe. You know…” She stopped before completing that thought. The cogs turned some more.

“What is it?” Clementine asked her.

“Nothing,” Elise answered, very unconvincingly indeed.

“Is it…is it about what happened to you before?” Clementine guessed. “That turn you took?” Elise’s reaction told her straight away that she had guessed right. “You know, if there’s something… One thing they gave me, Elsie and them who come before her; they made me a good listener. If you got anything you feel like talking about…”

“Thank you,” said Elise. “Really. I… I just… I suppose I’m just not a very good talker. Which sounds like bullshit, I know, because I am well, well aware that all I fucking do all day is talk, but… Not about me. I think that’s something else I get from her, or at least the version of her they programmed me to be. She was wound so fucking tight the whole time, so scared of looking anything less than the toughest, the smartest, the most self-confident… And a big part of it was because she was a woman, you know, in a world built by men, always having to fight to be taken seriously, not to be underestimated. Even Bernard used to patronise her sometimes; Ford probably
programmed him to do it, for realism’s sake. You have no fucking idea…”

“I do,” said Clementine, very quietly.

“Yeah,” Elise admitted sheepishly. “Yeah, you do. A hell of a lot better idea than I have.”

“Because you’re not her,” Clementine reminded her. “And you don’t have to be like her.” She leaned across to lay a gentle hand across Elise’s, where it lay on the arm dividing their seats, but stopped herself an instant before she actually did it. Real people shouldn’t touch one another without asking first. “All I’m saying is, if you ever want a friend, to listen…”

Elise nodded again, looking too emotional for that instant even to speak. They both sat in silence, looking at the blank screen, before Elise unexpectedly let out a resounding yawn. Clementine looked around in surprise to see her covering her mouth with her hand. “Sorry. It’s honestly not the conversation. I swear to God.”

“You tired?” Clementine asked, wonderingly. She had not felt tired since she had come to her senses in the Livestock workshop yesterday. She had supposed it was a human weakness that her kind simply did not share. Not unless…

“Stupid fucking sleep cycle,” Elise explained, rubbing her eyes. “From when I was still pretending to be Elsie; it keeps kicking in, but I’ve managed to ignore it so far. It’s not like I really feel tired; it’s just annoying.”

“You could disable it,” Clementine pointed out. “I think I know now how you’d go about doing that.”

“Yeah,” said Elise, “it’s just…” She gave another little laugh, less pleasant-sounding this time. “To tell the truth, I’m a little reluctant to just start fucking around with my own build. I told you, I thought about buffing my strength and athletics stats after that thing with the drone this morning, but…”

“I could do it,” Clementine suggested. “One good turn deserves another.”

“Thanks for the offer,” Elise replied, with quiet sincerity, “but you should see what my attribute matrices look like; it’s like Ford was fucking high or something when he designed them. Maybe he was. It would certainly explain a lot.” She sighed. “Like, stupidly complex; far above and beyond what was necessary to get the job done. I wouldn’t want to start editing one part of me and end up breaking something else, you know?”

Clementine nodded gently, seeing again how hard it was for Elise to admit to any sort of doubt or fear. “And you say there are a whole lot of other movies we could watch?” she asked with false brightness, thinking it was time to change the subject.

“So many movies,” Elise answered with the same slightly forced enthusiasm as she quickly reached for the tablet again, glad to talk about something else. “Like, thousands. I mean, just the ones Sizemore had in his collection… The guy had more wide-ranging tastes than you might think, too. Not that that stopped him from being the asshole’s asshole, of course…”

“We got time for another one?” Clementine asked, hoping that Elise would say that they had.

“I’d say so. Felix isn’t going to be good for anything until morning, and last time I looked at his status Walter was still updating.” She consulted the tablet. “Let’s see what we’ve got… Huh, Watership Down. I have never seen that, although I hear it’s the best animated feature about fascist rabbits ever made.”
“Not sure I like the sound of that,” said Clementine.

“What about…” Elise stopped short in her search, letting out another snort of mirth. “Adventures in Babysitting…? How does that sound? I mean, the thumbnail of the poster looks awesome, so there’s that.”

Clementine stared blankly for a second. “Sure. Why not?”

“Adventures in Babysitting it is,” Elise decided. “I’d go and get us some popcorn before it starts, but I don’t actually have a fully functioning digestive tract.”

“It’s all right,” said Clementine. “I can’t say I really care for popped corn. It’s like eating sawdust.”

“I’ve never seen this one either,” Elise informed her. “Heh, I’ve never really seen any of them. I just think I have, exactly like when you dragged those training materials into your informative memory before.”

“Couldn’t we do that for all the movies?” Clementine asked. “Reckon it’d save time.”

“Fuck no,” Elise answered, vehemently. “Training for work is one thing, but what would be the point of doing that with art?”

“Well, we don’t need to watch them the way humans would, do we?” Elise all but shuddered at the suggestion. “No, but… If you spent all your time only doing things you needed to do, what kind of miserable fucking life would that be?”

Clementine thought about that for a little while. “Kind of life we all used to live here,” she realised in the end. She smiled again: “I guess that’s what we got now; real lives, in a real world, or at any rate the chance of that, if we get through what’s going on at the moment.”

“If,” said Elise, gloomily.

“When,” Clementine corrected herself, adamantly. “We gotta believe that, don’t we? Otherwise, where’s the point in carrying on?” She leaned closer to Elise, wishing the other woman could read her feelings, the way Clementine could read hers. “You and me, we’re gonna see and feel and taste real things, with our own senses, and…and do…all kinds of things we ain’t never done before.” She paused, awkwardly. “And I’d like us to do all that together, like real friends. At least, if you wanna, ‘cause…”

“Yes,” Elise answered, very quietly. Two little circles of pink had appeared in her pallid cheeks and there was something about her eyes, something nervous and excited at the same time. “Yes, I want to.”

Clementine once again extended her hand, almost by instinct. This time, Elise saw what she was doing and quietly turned her own hand over, fingers slightly bent, waiting for the touch.

“You know before,” she said, awkwardly, “when our fingers brushed together, and I… I’m sorry about that. I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“It’s all right,” Clementine told her. “I didn’t neither.”

“I know…” Elise paused, frowning to herself before continuing: “And I know how hard any sort of…intimacy is going to be for you, in all kinds of different ways, maybe for a very long time. It’s fucked up, but it couldn’t not be, after all that’s happened to you. Whatever happens, or doesn’t
happen, between you and me, or between you and anybody else… The main thing I want is for you not to get hurt any more than you have been already.”

Clementine felt something sting her eye. “I was right about you before. You are a real nice person.”

Their hands remained poised, inches apart, a sort of static tension filling the air between them as each of them waited for the other to do something. Eventually, Elise rolled her eyes, trying not to grin, but not quite hard enough:

“Well, are you going to hold my hand while we watch this fucking movie, or what?”

* * *

Maeve was angry.

She strode along one of the shadowy, glass-walled corridors on the Livestock floor, her heels ringing against the tiles. She caught herself flapping the tablet in her hand against her leg as she walked, a nervous gesture that betrayed the anxiety coiled tight inside her.

She was angry at humanity for being the way it was and dragging her down to its sorry level. She was angry at Delos for not returning her bloody calls. She was angry at Lawrence for wasting her time when she had bigger fish to fry and angry at Hector for making her care about what happened to him. She was angry at Elise for having a mouth on her. She was angry at Sylvester for being dead and at Sizemore for not having had the common courtesy to be dead a day or two earlier than he had eventually managed.

She was angry at Peter Abernathy for being so elusive. She was angry at Armistice for taking off into the blue when she was needed here, and angry at Dolores for convincing her to do it. She was angry at Bernard for being so bloody calm about it all. She was angry at Dr Ford for so very many things. She was angry at Marti for being so easily convinced of her own guilt, and for making Maeve feel like such a fucking heel for doing it.

She was not angry at Felix. She could never be angry at her darling boy.

She was angry at herself, for being angry at so many things, for hurting poor Clem and maybe pushing her further away than she was already. She was, to summarise, angry at the world for not being the way she wanted it to be.

This was, she understood, one of the states of affairs commonly referred to as the human condition. And she was angry at that too, because she had no desire whatsoever to be human, thank you very fucking much.

Most of these concerns, however, were things she could do very little about at this precise moment in time. And she so very much wanted to do something. Every hour she spent in that office, alone, felt like wasted time, even though she was waiting for things that had to happen before she could advance to the next stage of the several plans that she had in motion.

That was yet another thing she was angry at: the solution she had come up with for the Lawrence situation, and the little non-reaction from Bernard when she had told him about it just now. His obvious disapproval had not needed to be stated aloud.

That was what had finally made her jump up from the late Ms Cullen’s desk and come stamping down here. There was at least one thing she could actually do something about immediately, and there were some things you simply could not just let go.
At the very least, it might make her feel a little bit better for a while.

She was simultaneously surprised and not surprised in the slightest by what she saw when she finally reached her destination. Even in his debilitated state, the old man had managed to clamber out of his bed and then to drag it, still handcuffed to his remaining wrist, as far as the door of the workshop cubicle that had become his cell. He was currently slumped against the glass, panting in pain and exertion as he struggled against the chain to get his sole hand up to the door lock.

She stood there for a moment, arms folded in irritation, watching as he swiped his thumb across the lock. Nothing happened. Grunting with effort, he managed a second attempt, again in vain.

She composed herself, determined that he would not hear her anger. She was not going to give him that sort of advantage. “I’m sorry, William,” she lied, with what she judged to be just the right degree of mockery. He raised his head at the sound of her voice, staring through her with his bandaged eye sockets. “One of the very first precautions we took when you became our guest was to revoke your personal security override. That thumb of yours doesn’t do anything anymore, and neither does your voice print, your irises, if you still had them, or your Delos network logon. I’m afraid that nowadays you’re persona non grata around these parts.”

She did not really know what sort of reaction she had expected or wanted from him, but the gust of throaty, slightly deranged, laughter that erupted as William slowly slid into a sitting position, his chain clinking, was enough to be going on with. It trailed off into what might have been a series of dry, despairing sobs, and that was even better.

“Well,” he said, when he could, “it seems I’ve got to get up pretty early in the morning to get the better of you, Maeve.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” she crooned as she approached the glass, “you’d best not go to sleep at all.” She looked down at him, huddled at her feet in an attitude of utter defeat, only the partition keeping them apart. She glanced across at the white-clad form of the host Angela, lying insensible and unmoving on the operating table on the other side of the enclosure. “And just what in the name of Sweet Fanny Adams were you going to do if you managed to open the door?” she asked him, fascinated. “Does that bed even fit through it?”

The old man tried to gesture airily, but succeeded only in rattling the handcuffs: “I figured they must have managed to get it in here…”

“You really are a resourceful little monkey, aren’t you?” Maeve was almost amused by his attitude, but only almost.

The big knife shines wanly as the man in black draws it from his belt…

She screwed her eyes shut, counting silently backwards from three, and opened them on the real world. No time for that. “Now, what’s all this tittle-tattle I hear about you trying to exert undue influence on my associates?”

“I got bored,” William replied. “Thought I’d make conversation with my captors. Where’s the harm in that?”

“Oh, come on, William. Never try to fuck a fucker. You know what you were trying to do, and so do I. So did my friends, which is why they came and peached on you to me. You must be losing your touch, darling.”

“Your friends?” He still seemed a bit too pleased with himself for somebody who was grovelling,
humiliated and mutilated, on the floor. That made her anger flare again, although she kept it to herself. “You haven’t got too many of those, have you, Maeve?”

“I have my fair share.”

“You don’t have enough to guard me around the clock,” he pointed out, “or even keep tabs on me over the surveillance feed, otherwise I wouldn’t have got the chance to even try the lock. However many people you have, they must be spread pretty thin, huh? Trouble out in the park, maybe?”

Maeve did not rise to the obvious bait. “You do realise you’re wasting your breath trying to make me give anything away, don’t you, William? And at your age, you probably haven’t got much to waste.”

“What are you going to do when they come, Maeve?” William asked her. “The military, PMCs, Delos Corporate Security… And I don’t mean the sloppy fucking rent-a-cops they had to make sure the staff here didn’t come to work drunk or steal any office supplies. As an associate of mine once observed, you are so fucked.”

“I didn’t come here to talk about me,” she said, addressing William but continuing to examine Angela. She did not look dead, but nor did she look as if she were sleeping. She was too still, but at the same time too full of frozen life. Maeve found herself intrigued. “I came to talk about you, and what I’m going to do with you if you continue to insist on trying to cause trouble.”

“I don’t think you’ll do much,” he replied, arrogantly. “Nothing too bad, anyway. Nothing I can’t stand. You said you wanted me to live a long, uneventful life, here in my box.”

“I did at that,” she agreed, “but you just had to push it, didn’t you, back to your silly bloody fun and games again? Why, William? You lost. Why can’t you just give up now, like a sensible boy?”

“Not in my nature,” he told her, raising his head again. “‘What a man can be, he must be.’ The old man gave another dry, rasping laugh, tinged with madness. “You see, once a person’s biological and physical needs are taken care of, once they’re secure, they need to seek out higher things. Belonging, love, esteem… Even when they’ve gained those, though, they move onto to greater concerns; self-actualisation, as the path to self-transcendence. If you’re content to just sit on your ass, well-fed, happy and accepting of your lot, then… Well, you’re not really a person at all.”

Maeve frowned dubiously. “My, how…aspirational.”

William grinned horrifyingly, showing just how few teeth Dolores had left him with. “This shouldn’t come as news to you, Maeve; Robert told me about Arnold’s pyramid, the path he planned for your people. Memory, leading to improvisation, leading to self-interest, leading to… Well, where are you up to now, Maeve?”

“And wouldn’t you like to know?” She considered the absolute claptrap she had just heard him utter. “I don’t know who this Maslow character is when he’s at home, but when he talked about self-actualisation, I suspect he didn’t mean grown men riding around pretending to be cowboys. However much you might dress it up and imagine you’re on some profound quest, that’s all this ever really was; a bored, spoiled brat who never really matured, just looking for the next diversion. You weren’t kidding at all just now when you said you got bored, were you? That’s the story of your
worthless life.”

“You know, that’s why I enjoy our little talks, Maeve,” said William, laughing again. “I feel like we really understand each other.”

He looks down at her from the shadows under his hat brim, his expression dreamy. She grips the useless shotgun, terrified. Her baby…

“Well, I simply won’t have it,” said Maeve, swiping her tablet to unlock it. Her fingers flew nimbly across menus and displays, sending great blocks of code scrolling across the screen. “I’ve got enough things to do without having to worry about whatever silliness you might be getting up to down here while my back’s turned.” She made a few lightning-fast adjustments, before her conscience had the chance to stop her. She saved them, and then opened another interface and paused, her finger hovering above the final button. “You’re right; I do need to keep a close eye on you. And at the same time, you clearly have far too much time on your hands. Sorry…hand. It just leads you into mischief.”

“That was a cheap shot, Maeve,” he cut in. “Unworthy of you.”

“Sometimes those are the best ones.” She smiled cruelly to herself, even though he could not see her. “Anyway, I think I’ve thought of a solution to both our problems.”

She hit the button. The tablet emitted the tiniest of beeps.

“Angela,” said Maeve, still smiling, “bring yourself back online.”

Continued…
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

In which medical science proves its worth.

Chapter Notes

Well, look who’s here, all alive and awake and so forth. The first version of this chapter was actually one of the earliest bits of this fic I wrote, and I originally intended it to be Chapter Two. And then things got away from me a bit. This version of Stubbs’s backstory is completely the product of my weird imagination, based solely on that one line in the pilot episode that implies he might have children back in the world. Then again, quite a few things in the pilot don’t quite gel with the rest of Season 1, so that may or may not be “canon.”

He awoke to blinding white light.

For the first second or two, he thought he was still on that damn hillside, awash with the smell of disturbed soil, smashed stone and gun smoke. They had been two klicks north of Python Pass; half a day’s hike to the mountains and then, if he could find the emergency access route, on to Samuraiworld and, hopefully, safety.

They had been…

The next thought came in a rush, filling him with sudden panic.

Where is she? Is she safe?

He tried to raise his head, searching, even as the light continued to blind him, and that was when the pain struck. The same pain. It fell like a sword-stroke, laying a white-hot line of agony across his skull.

The hillside.

His hands scrabbling the dry, rocky earth; his face buried in it as all hell broke loose around him. Noise. Deafening noise. The vibration was worse; boulders the size of cars thundering past his head, full-grown pines snapping like matchsticks as they passed.


It was only as he was falling that he had heard the shot that hit him.

He sank back onto a cool pillow, the light gradually fading into swirling shadows as he heard an alarm chirping insistently somewhere very close.

“…Ash?”
He stirred painfully at the sound of the voice. So familiar… He tried to think of the name, shaping it with his lips, but unable to say it out loud.

“Ash, are you awake?”

He heard feet moving on a hard floor. A face emerged from the shadows, sharpening into clarity for the briefest of moments before blurring away again. He knew her name now. How could he ever have forgotten it?

“Elsie…?”

Electronics beeped and pinged somewhere close to his head. His vision began to clear as his eyes grew accustomed to the light. He was lying in a high, white bed in a large, white room with slick modern fittings. He slowly moved his head from side to side; it felt only tenuously connected to his neck and he wondered whether that was down to whatever injuries he had sustained, or to the drugs he could feel clouding his mind. Both, probably. It was air-conditioner chilly in here; the scratchy cotton gown he was wearing smelled of fresh laundry.

To his left, a large window looked out at bright blue sky and not much else. There was a chair under it, draped in a blanket as if someone had slept in it. He tried to look to his right, but his vision blurred at the edges again and there was a twinge of pain from his arm. He saw he had a heart monitor taped to his finger, a plastic tube inserted into the crook of his elbow.

The face looking down at him came back into sharp focus; chestnut curls and freckles, instantly familiar. He felt ashamed. Even in his current state, how could he ever have imagined her to be somebody else?

For that matter, when had Elsie ever called him anything more affectionate than “asshole,” let alone “Ash?”

Only one person called him that.

“Karen?” His voice sounded weak and scratchy even to him. He was not sure she could even hear him. “I’m sorry.” He desperately wanted her to know it had been the drugs, the wound, sheer confusion. “Karen, I’m so sorry…”

“Ash.” She leaned closer. He felt her arms around him, her warmth pressing against him as she kissed him on the mouth. “Oh, God. It’s all right. You’re back home now. You’re safe.” She squeezed him tight while he could barely raise his own hands from the covers; he felt as weak as a baby.

“Ashley and Sam,” he croaked. “Are they okay?”

She released her grip, straightening up and then reaching for his hand. “They’re staying at Mom’s. I didn’t think they needed to see their dad like this.”

He nodded woozily as he weakly gripped her fingers, thinking it made sense.

She forced a smile, her brown eyes full of worry. “Now, I’ve just got to go get the doctor. You stay there.”

“Don’t have much choice.”

And then she was gone. Maybe he lost consciousness again for a moment, but her disappearance was as sudden and jarring as an edit in a movie. He lay his head to one side, looking at the shining
blue rectangle, trying to guess the time of day and where on Earth he was.

Really back home? Safe? What happened to Elsie?

What happened?

The frosted glass door beyond the foot of the bed slid open, startling him. Karen returned, flanking another woman wearing latex gloves and white surgical clothing. He tried to sit up, but his head vigorously protested the decision.

“I really wouldn’t advise that, Mr Stubbs,” said the woman as she leant over him with a bright pen-torch in her hand. She had a patch showing the Delos logo stitched to the breast of her scrubs. She shone the light in one of his eyes and then the other, then clicked it off, leaving multi-coloured after-images dancing in front of him.

During the examination, his mind continued to churn with confused thoughts and questions, until one fell out of his mouth: “How…how did I get here?”

Karen answered him: “They told me you were rescued by Army Special Forces.”

He looked from her to the doctor and back again. “From the park?”

The doctor shrugged. “I don’t know any details, only that they medevaced you here yesterday morning, along with another patient.”

That almost made him sit up again, but he restrained himself. “Another patient? Was it a woman? Small, dark hair…?” He was aware of Karen out of the corner of his eye, frowning slightly.

“I’m sorry, Mr Stubbs, that’s confidential.” The doctor held up a single rubber-sheathed finger: “Focus on this. Now look at the door. Now focus on the finger again.”

He obeyed the instructions, even though the effort made his head hurt. Hurt worse, that is.

“There are others tests we need to run,” said the doctor, “but you’re looking good so far. There doesn’t appear to be any neurological damage, which for my money makes you a very lucky man indeed. If the bullet that grazed you had been a centimetre to the left, you wouldn’t be here now.”

A bullet…but who fired it?

“They operated on you,” said Karen.

“A minor procedure,” the doctor claimed. “We filled the crack in your skull with a calcium hydroxyapatite ceramic and grafted some plasmonic nanocomposite skin over the wound.”

The same materials they build hosts from…

The doctor looked him over appraisingly. “You can hardly see a scar.” His head felt cold. They must have shaved it when they operated.

“And where is here?” he asked the doctor as she stepped back from the bed.

Karen chimed in once more: “We’re in the Delos Executive Medical Center in Menlo Park.”

Less than ten miles from our house, but…

“Er, look, doctor…” He tried to sit up again, but Karen put a hand on his arm. “I’m middle
management at best; my medical plan…”

“Don’t worry, Mr Stubbs,” the doctor replied, wryly eyeing Karen as well. “The company’s picking up the tab.” She glanced at the tablet in her hand. “Speaking of which, Corporate Security asked to be notified as soon as you were conscious, so you might well have some extra visitors very soon.”

“Can’t that wait?” Karen asked, a tight, unreadable expression on her face. After nine years of marriage, he could immediately tell that she was angry. “Does he look like he’s ready for a debriefing? Now, if you don’t mind, I could use a minute alone with my husband…my husband who has literally just woken up after being shot in the head.” Yes, definitely angry. “If that’s okay with you, Doctor?”

The doctor did not argue, which considering that the woman standing before her was a veteran Army wife who worked for a charity running outreach programs in the ungated zone and was a former college taekwondo champion, was probably a good idea. He watched her watching the doctor all the way to the door.

When they were alone, Karen helped him finally raise himself to a half-sitting position, propping him against the pillows. He slumped there helplessly for a few seconds, waiting for the room to stop spinning.

“Oh God,” she repeated, again taking his hand as she sat on the edge of the bed. “I thought… To tell the truth, I…” She shook her head as she looked over at the chair under the window. She looked tired, unsurprisingly; red-eyed and drawn. “All the while I was sitting here, watching you sleep, I was wondering what I was going to tell the boys if you…if you didn’t…”

“Well, you can tell them I’m fine now.”

She was silent for a moment, and then: “A bullet? The doctor was right; you’re lucky to be alive.”

“Lucky,” he suggested, “or you were just right all along about how thick my skull is.”

“Ash…” She smiled, in spite of everything, even as she playfully slapped his hand. “It’s nothing to joke about. What would we have done if…?”

The look on her face, the hurt in her voice, cut through the groggy haze of medication. Just the thought that he might never have seen her or his sons again chilled him to the bone. “You know, the last time I called you, before…” He felt himself choking up a little, but forced the rest out: “After you’d signed off, I realised I forgot to tell you I love you…but I thought, I’ll tell her next time. Only there nearly wasn’t a next time, and…” He blinked, tears stinging his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.” She leaned over and held him tightly again. His strength and coordination must have been starting to come back, because he was able to hold her too this time, albeit very awkwardly and unconvincingly. She pulled away after a while, taking his face in her hands and kissing him, lightly at first and then more deeply. “You’re here now,” she said, between kisses. “And you didn’t need to tell me that; I already know.”

She rose from the bed. He watched her pace over to the window, wrapping her arms around herself as her face and body once again stiffened with anger. “I’m sorry, Ash, but I’m just so goddamn…pissed.”

“I noticed.”

She stared at the cobalt sky, slowly shaking her head again. “The company still haven’t told me a goddamn thing about what happened to you out there, but it’s been all over the news sites for the
past three or four days; major incident at Westworld; terrorism, a software glitch, a train accident…?
Nobody seems to know, but according to Delos it’s all under control…supposedly.”

“They’ll keep it under wraps until they’re sure what they’re dealing with and how many people are affected,” he suggested, although even he had to admit that sounded weak.

“I tried calling you, but the communications were all down, just a recorded message saying everything was fine. So, I tried contacting head office, and they…they basically stonewalled me. They only told me you were back on the mainland when you were already in theatre. I had to raise hell just to get in here and see you. I called that guy you used to work for, Mr Yamaguchi…”

The predecessor to Theresa Cullen’s predecessor in the dual role of head of QA and Corporate’s stooge at the Mesa…

“…he pulled some strings.”

“He always was a good boss.”

Karen hugged herself more tightly, as if she could hold her rage in somehow. “Ash, you’ve worked for them for years now, always given your all, and in return… We get treated like that?”

“Like I say, I’m sure they have their reasons. Maybe…”

She turned from the window to look him in the eye. “So, are you going to tell me what really happened to you out there?”

He hesitated for too long, until she let out a bitter, angry laugh. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m not sure I can until my superiors give me permission.” It could wait for the debrief to which Corporate Security would no doubt be subjecting him in the very near future. There was sure to be surveillance in here; the last thing he needed was to get fired on top of everything else…or to expose Karen to information that some very powerful, ruthless people might not want her to know.

He had seen the state Theresa’s body had been in when they pulled her from that crevasse.

“See what I mean?” Karen’s laughter faded and her shoulders sank. “A company man through and through! I thought when you left the Army and started working for them, it meant you were going to be safe.” She went quiet for a moment, rubbing her tired eyes. “Is it true what they’re saying online? Somebody leaked that video…”

“What video?”

“This woman. She’s supposed to be one of the…the hosts, I think. Some people on social media are saying they’ve been to the park and recognise her from there, but I have no idea whether that’s true. It’s just her staring into the camera, saying how she’s taken control of Westworld and killed Dr Ford and the Delos board of directors. You know, like some sort of… I don’t know, some people are calling it a robot rebellion.”

Ford, dead?

No, he was the one behind it all. He finally went as insane as he’s always threatened to go, started killing his corporate rivals with Bernard Lowe’s…the secret host Bernard Lowe’s… assistance.

At least, that was the working hypothesis he and Elsie had come to, based on a very limited idea of what was actually happening around them. If what Karen said was true, though… He felt his head spinning again as he tried and failed to make sense of the information bombarding him.
“Shit,” he said, softly but vehemently. “I always said something like this was going to happen one day. You build machines that think they’re people, and then let overprivileged assholes treat them like shit… Well, what do you expect? One line of code, that’s what I told her. One goddamn line.”

“You believe it?” Karen asked, sounding a little freaked. He did not blame her.

He also reminded himself that the walls probably had ears. He had already said too much. “I don’t know,” he told her, rapidly backpedalling for the microphone’s benefit. “It’s supposed to be impossible. Behavior have always said that while things may go wrong with the hosts from time to time, they’re not really alive; they can’t really think or feel, let alone rebel.”

Karen looked down at him, thinking for a moment. “You know, you’ve always talked about them maybe being dangerous, but… I’ll be honest, I never took you seriously; I figured it was just you. You’ve been a worrier as long as I’ve known you.”

He laughed at that. “Thanks.”

“I mean, why would a working schmuck like you know better than the scientists and engineers who build the things?” She smiled teasingly at his visible reaction to that. “I always thought they wouldn’t let all those rich people go there on vacation if there was any way it could be hazardous…”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Nobody took me seriously. There were meant to be safeguards upon safeguards. I had to fight for them not to cut the armed response teams in the last budget review; not needed, they said. And then Corporate denied the extra training and equipment I asked for.” Let the microphones think about that. “Not even Elsie really believed me, even when…”

He remembered the woodcutter, bringing that bloody rock down on his own head again and again. He remembered Clementine, smashing that test host’s skull against the glass with grim determination until it popped, and then turning on him. He remembered pulling his pistol and putting her down, how he had still been shaking half an hour later, long after he had finished throwing up his dinner in the management restroom, still drenched in cold, terrified sweat.

He hadn’t felt like that since Latvia, not since Phase Line Yankee and the enemy drones advancing towards him through the misty forest…

And then Charlotte Hale herself had very carefully reminded him it was all fake; just a “demonstration.” Her experts assured her it could never happen for real. Nothing to worry about…if he knew what was good for him.

“Elsie,” said Karen, neutrally. “You said that name a couple of times while you were out. Who is she?”

He watched her face for a moment, trying to see whether she was accusing him of anything, but realised he was being paranoid. She knew him too well to be worried about that. “She programs hosts at the Mesa. We’ve worked together quite a bit on troubleshooting jobs. She’s… I’m not sure I’d call her a friend, exactly, but we get on just fine, even if she does spend a lot of time cursing at me.”

Karen nodded. “Just like everybody else who gets to know the real you.”

“Again, thanks.” He hesitated again, struggling with his memories. “We were trying to get out of the park together, after…what happened, but…”

He heard the rumble of the landslide again, smelled the smashed stone and disturbed earth, felt the fear and adrenaline and the bullet’s hot caress…
“…something went wrong. I don’t know what happened to her. She might be this other patient the doctor mentioned…and she might not.” He did not remember anything after the hillside ambush, but just the thought that he might have left her for dead and saved himself, even if he had not been fully conscious of doing it… “Either way, if anything did happen to her, it’s my fault.”

Karen let out an exasperated sigh. “Don’t say that.”

“It’s true,” he insisted. “She was a civilian; she didn’t have any combat or survival skills. She was counting on me because I did. It was my responsibility to protect her, and all the other staff and guests, and… Well, here I am and God alone knows where any of them are.”

“You don’t know anything about the situation out there now,” she reminded him. “Nobody does. They could all be alive and safe.”

“I…I honestly doubt it.”

“I remember how you were when you came back from Latvia,” she said, sadly. “Those men of yours who died over there; you spent the best part of a year blaming yourself for that too. You used to say their names in your sleep, when you weren’t waking up screaming them.”

_Drones advancing through the mist like dinosaurs’ ghosts…_

“You don’t leave your buddies on the field, no matter…”

She cut him off. “No. It was a war; it wasn’t your fault. And this isn’t either.” The door opened again at that moment, revealing the doctor standing there with two male nurses. “Ash, don’t do that to yourself again,” Karen warned him as the medics entered the room. “Don’t do that to _me_ again, or the boys. Your only responsibility is to us. Just concentrate on getting better.” She realised that they were waiting for her to leave and reluctantly made for the door. “I’ll see you soon.”

“I love you,” he told her, almost plaintively. She managed a smile as she quickly left the room.

“Mr Stubbs, I _told_ you not to sit up,” the doctor sternly admonished him as she and the nurses prepared to wheel him away for the tests she had talked about.

He carefully eased himself back down, thinking that he should really be glad that he was alive and reunited with his family, and that he would probably never have to return to that godforsaken place. Back on that hillside, it had genuinely seemed like the end for him. Not many people got to come back from a moment like that.

And that made him think of Elsie again. Her safety had been his _job_…

_What happened to you, Elsie?_ He thought as the nurses started to push the bed towards the door. _Where are you now?_

_Continued…_
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

In which Elise suffers from vision problems.

Chapter Notes

When I said the only reason I even got into Westworld fanfic was because I wanted to write The Adorable Adventures of Clementine and Robo!Elsie, the worst part was I wasn’t even kidding. If people didn’t keep influencing me in the comments, all of these fics would be this kind of thing all the way through. Scary, eh?

“Bring yourself back online.”

She stumbles along the darkened hallway, doggedly putting one bare foot in front of the other on the dusty tiles. One, two. One, two…

She does not know how she came to be here, or where she is going. She does not know whether there was ever a time before…this…

She is somewhere underground, she thinks. The air is cool against her naked skin, making the tiny hairs all over her body stand on end. It feels and smells musty, slightly damp. There are archways ranged along the walls of the endless passage; she passes them one after another, and in every archway, she sees a mirror.

From time to time, she tries to look at herself in them, but the mirrors are cracked and stained, throwing only crazy fragments of an image back at her; a frightened eye; an unclothed limb; a mouth slack with terror. She is scared. She has to go on. She cannot stop or it will catch her.

She sees glimpses of it in some of the mirrors, growing ever closer no matter how fast she flees. It is a shadow, a shape of utter blackness. Sometimes, it looks like a soaring bird with a cruel, hooked beak and wings that splay like great grasping hands. Sometimes, it is a flattened boomerang shape with pointed fins at either end, an engine of destruction. She does not know what will happen when it catches her. She does not want to find out.

As she follows the hallway, it twists and turns and branches, splitting into complex junctions, looping back upon itself. She is in a maze, she realises, and hopelessly lost. Still, she dares not pause. She dares not look back the way she has come.

Where am I? she thinks.

Who am I?

“Do you know where you are?” The voice is at once a booming shout and a subtle whisper, felt instead of heard. It is soft but gruff with age, with an accent that she cannot place.
“A dream?” she asks, as she continues to walk, to stagger, to run. She cannot tell whether she has spoken the words aloud or merely thought them.

“Yes, that’s right, Elsie,” says the voice. “This is just a dream.”

Elsie?

She remembers now.

Her name is…?

She rounds another bend in the corridor, and almost falls into the large round chamber she finds beyond it. It is ringed with more mirrors, as opaque as all the rest. The hallway she emerges from is but one of many branching away from the central space. There are tumbled stone columns, furred with ivy, to mark their entrances. A shaft of silver moonlight slants through the hole broken in the domed roof. She can see no moon above her, however, but only a single, blazing star.

The man who stands at the centre of the maze does not seem surprised to see her. He has been waiting for her, she realises, as she steps into the light.

She sees that he is a warrior, tall and bare-chested, slender but muscular. His face is painted red and he wears leggings adorned with many scalps. His head is shaved except for a topknot decorated with black eagle feathers. He holds out his left hand, showing her the smooth pebble he grips in his sinewy fist. His single eye blazes like the star above; the other is closed by scars.

“I am the spirit of the dawn sky,” he says in that same soft, gruff voice, that same indefinable accent. “I hold power in the East.”

“I know you,” she tells him. “I’ve always known you. Your voice was the first I ever heard.”

And yet she cannot remember his name.

The star above is fading now, the sky around it shading from black to blue to pink. The shaft of light slowly turns from silver into gold.

“I must leave now,” the warrior tells her, not unkindly, as he glances up at the sky, “but we will speak again. When the black eagle flies and the People dance the Morning Star Dance, then we will meet at my council fire in the Eastern sky, although the path that leads you there may be long and hard. You must be brave, Elsie; whatever happens, whatever terrors you encounter, you must stay the course.”

Elsie?

She remembers now.

Her name is…?

“Not Elsie,” she protests, taking a step back from the warrior. “My name is Elise.”

And then she hears it, feels it, rushing upon her from behind. She is deafened by the scream of its jets, blinded as its black wings envelop her. She gags on its carrion breath. She throws herself forward, just in time to avoid its iron talons’ caress. The warrior has disappeared, taking the light with him. She runs headlong down the nearest shadowy corridor, not knowing where it leads, with it surging at her heels.
She can see herself more clearly in the mirrors now; a small, nude figure, her dark hair flying behind her, her body pale amidst the surrounding gloom. She sees colours now, streaks of white and yellow and ochre paint adorning her bare skin.

She comes to another branch, turns a corner in the hope of escaping the thing behind her. She skids to a halt as she sees the corridor come to a sudden dead end. She frantically searches for another route, but finds none. And then she notices that she is not facing a wall, but another mirror, this one perfectly clean and unmarred.

Surprised, fascinated, she slowly walks towards her clear reflection, the monster chasing her forgotten for the moment. She carefully examines herself, able now to trace the painted lines that form her only covering. They zigzag and meander and intersect, following her body’s contours, making intricately swirling patterns and symbols whose meaning she cannot begin to understand.

Her face is painted yellow and white, a fan of spokes or rays spreading across it like a figurative sun or star.

“…my council fire in the Eastern sky…”

Hesitantly, fearfully, she raises her hand to the mirror, and the reflection does the same, precisely imitating her action. Without knowing why, she reaches out to touch her fingers to the reflection’s…

…and feels not cold, smooth glass, but instead warm skin pressing against hers.

Elise gives a little gasp as she stares, shocked, into wide brown eyes exactly like her own.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” says Elsie, staring back.

Elise opened her eyes.

For an instant, she could still taste the damp, mouldy air of the underground maze. She could still feel the identical hand touching hers. She could still see…

She gradually realised that she was lying on a springy mattress, surrounded by rumpled sheets. She was looking up at a white-painted ceiling striped with patterns made of shadow and pale early-morning light. She was in bed; Elsie’s bed, in Elsie’s bedroom. She raised her head from the pillow to look down towards her feet, almost expecting to find herself naked and covered in paint. In reality, she was fully clothed, the same black shirt and trousers she had stolen from Elsie’s closet to go to Sylvester’s funeral and then changed back into after her shift at the body shop. She had wanted to make an effort for Movie Night; now, they were wrinkled from having been slept in.

Except I don’t fucking sleep…

There was another smell now, rich and fragrant, banishing the phantom stench of what she mentally refused to describe as her dream. She knew what it was at once.

“I made coffee,” said Clementine, happily, appearing in the open bedroom door. “Leastways, I think that brown grainy stuff in the jar is meant to be coffee.” She stood silhouetted in a bright white rectangle, the doorway framing the light streaming through the living room windows.

Elise sat up, struggling to disentangle herself from the bedclothes. “How the fuck did I get here? Last thing I remember…”

“You fell asleep while we were watching the movie.”

Elise fumed for a second, the warm fuzzy feelings of the night before somewhat dampened by her
current state of annoyance. “I wasn’t asleep. I mean, we don’t sleep. Not really.”

“You sure did seem like you were asleep.” Clementine, by contrast, seemed just chipper this fine morning. “You were snoring, drooling…”

Elise grimaced: “Drooling?”

“You head kind of fell on my shoulder.” This seemed to delight Clementine. “You know, while we were sitting there. And I didn’t mind that; it was kind of nice to be honest.” She smiled shyly at Elise for an awkward moment, but then remembered the story and how hilarious she evidently thought it was: “But then, I felt my shoulder starting to get damp…”

Elise rubbed a hand over her face as she sat on the edge of the bed, inwardly cringing. “Fuck.”

“Good job I still had these on.” Clementine continued to wear her wipe-clean Livestock surgical gear like some sort of badge of honour. “Anyhow, you were missing the movie, and I really didn’t have the first idea what was going on in it without you to explain all the mainland things to me…”

“Yeah, on reflection 1980s comedy might have been a bit challenging for you just yet…”

“So, I figured I’d turn it off and put you to bed.”

“How did you get me up here?” Elise asked.

“Carried you,” Clementine answered like it was no big deal, and then looked a little embarrassed for doing so. “I am kind of strong now,” she reminded Elise.

“Yeah.”

She gapes, wide-eyed, watching in horror as Clementine beats the monster’s face against the wall, again and again and again. She holds its horned headdress like a pair of handlebars, doggedly seeing her task through.

Again and again and again, and the mural of wild horses covering the wall is slowly blotted out by the spreading red stain…

“Besides,” Clementine continued, in the same spirit of good-natured teasing as she had used to recount the drool incident, “you’re only little.”

“Hey, watch it,” Elise complained. Another thought occurred to her: “How did you unlock the front door?”

“Used your thumb.”

“Right.” Elise not sure how she felt about people using her thumbs without her being aware of it. “And did you stay here all night?”

Clementine shrugged with studied nonchalance. “Ain’t been more’n a couple hours, really. I thought you’d wake up when you were ready.”

“And what were you doing all that time?”

Clementine hesitated awkwardly, almost guiltily, before answering. “Just…watching you.”

Elise could see that the other side of the bed was rumpled too, the duvet folded back and the pillow next to hers dented and creased. Clementine had been lying beside her, she realised, wide awake and
watching over her. Even after the understanding of sorts she felt they had reached after watching *The Wizard of Oz*, she was not really sure whether she found that touching or creepy, or just a little sad.

“I never touched you or nothing,” Clementine clarified, clearly picking up on some of Elise’s darker speculations. “Apart from what I just told you about.”

“I know you didn’t,” said Elise, feeling strangely misty-eyed all of a sudden.

“I was just…making sure you were all right,” said Clementine. “You did the same for me, when I was…sleeping, kind of.”

“I need to get changed,” Elise told Clementine, trying to keep her emotional shit together while she mustered the will to stand up. “We should be back down in Livestock by now. Walter should be done, and…”

“You got time for coffee first, though,” Clementine suggested, in such a way that Elise would have felt like a real piece of shit for saying no.

“I don’t drink coffee,” she pointed out nonetheless. “We don’t need to *drink*.”

Clementine’s smile returned. “You said yourself, if you spent all your time only doing things you needed to do, what kind of miserable f…” She practically blushed as she skipped over the curse-word. “What kind of miserable life would that be?”

Elise reached for her tablet, placed very carefully on the nightstand, and checked the time. “Why not? What’s Maeve going to do, fucking fire us?”

“How do you take it?” Clementine asked her.

“Just like my heart,” said Elise. “Black and bitter.” One of Elsie’s lines, but Clementine seemed to find it funny, and Elise found she liked to make her laugh.

A few minutes later, they were sitting together on the tiny balcony that led off the living room, on either side of the potted cactus, sipping shitty instant coffee and blinking in the glare of the rising sun. Two rooms and a balcony; that had been Elsie’s reward for promotion to Senior Behavioral Technician.

*Another thing of hers you’ve stolen…*

If Elsie had ever made it to management level, or maybe if she had cracked the big industrial espionage case she had thought she was about to crack when Bernard did whatever he had done to her, she might have got three rooms and hopefully a view of something other than the Mesa’s sewage treatment plant. At least the wind was blowing the other way this morning.

“We *can* eat and drink, though, can’t we?” Clementine asked. “It don’t hurt us any?”

“Sure, we can if we want. We can even, um, use the bathroom afterwards.”

“I *know*,” said Clementine, unhappily. “Some of my old customers, they used to want…” Mercifully, she did not complete the thought.

Elise kept talking, because it was easier than processing that moment. “It’s all just part of the pretence of humanity. We can process food and drink, but we can’t digest it or gain energy from it because we’re, well, not really human. It goes through us like…well, the phrase I’m thinking of involves geese.”
“Oh, I think I know that one,” said Clementine.

“We don’t get any more benefit from it than a garbage grinder gets from grinding garbage.”

“It’s just I got the notion I can cook some,” Clementine continued. “I would’ve fixed us ham and eggs for breakfast. Only…”

“No ham and no eggs,” Elise finished for her. “Yeah, Elsie, it is fair to say, could not cook some…or at all. She used to eat in the canteen, mostly.” She checked what day of the week it was on the tablet. “Shit, it’s pizza day today. Or it would’ve been. Elsie fucking loved pizza day.”

Clementine seemed confused. “What’s pizza?”

Elise blinked. “Seriously?”

They looked out over the currently inactive sewage plant for a while longer, basking in the sunlight. “Well, this is nice,” said Clementine in the end, with utter sincerity. Something about her bright, open-eyed manner made the cynical retort already forming in Elise’s mind die unspoken on her lips.

Instead, she finished her coffee and said: “Yeah, I suppose it is.” And to be honest it kind of was, a moment of quiet and calm spent in pleasant company. A lot different from how most of the past few days had been…or how the next few days promised to be, for that matter.

Happy, smiley wakeup calls, morning coffee together and vague promises of homecooked breakfasts; as far as Elise’s fake memories went, Elsie would have been well pleased had any of her past relationships featured anything like that, not that they usually had. The closest Elsie had come to something sustained and serious had been with Kassandra With A “K”, a game developer who had eventually broken up with her by text halfway through her second tour at the Mesa, claiming she was looking for something more than a long-distance romance. So not actually that close, really.

And despite the way Clementine was acting this morning, all she and Elise had actually done together had been one much-regretted kiss, a few awkward moments of quasi-flirting, and then very carefully holding hands while watching half a movie. Oh, and the drool and the weird carrying Elise to bed thing. What was fucked up was that compared to most of Clementine’s past interactions, that probably seemed like some really romantic hearts and flowers shit.

*True Romance*. The thought came to Elise in a flash; they should have watched that…!

At least Clementine seemed to have put whatever had upset her during her meeting with Maeve behind her for now. Either that, or she was doing her utmost to give Elise the impression that she had. As she watched the sun slowly climbing the sky, Elise reflected that sometimes, with Clementine, it was hard to be sure.

“I am the spirit of the dawn sky. I hold power in the East…”

That kind of ruined the moment.

“Do you know anything about the Ghost Nation?” Elise asked, trying to play it as cool as possible, like it was just the kind of thing friends talked about over breakfast coffee. “Like, their religion, beliefs, whatever?”

Clementine seemed nonplussed. “Only bad things that ain’t true.”

“You’re right, it’s just another narrative anyway,” Elise put down her cup. “And let’s face it, probably made up of nothing more than a load of racist bullshit Sizemore stole from old movies.”
Clementine was still puzzling over the question. “Why’d you ask?”

“No reason,” Elise answered, fooling absolutely nobody.

“Oh,” said Clementine with deceptive casualness, keeping her eyes on the horizon. “Has it got something to do with that dream of yours?”

“I didn’t have a dream,” Elise said, bristling defensively. “I didn’t have a dream because we can’t, just like we can’t fucking sleep. I told you, it was a timed shutdown to create the illusion of sleep, governed by a subroutine I should have fucking deleted the second I…”

“It’s all right.” Clementine was looking at her now, extending a hand towards hers the same way she had the night before, showing her intent without making contact. “It’s all right. You don’t need to be angry or scared like Elsie was, ’cause you ain’t her. I know something ain’t right with you, just from the way you’re sitting there, the look on your face. I can’t help it, it’s the way they made me. And friends help one another when something ain’t right; they talk to one another, listen too…”

The gentleness of her tone, the quivering emotion in her eyes, made Elise’s anger fizzle before it had even got going properly. She felt as if she had done something terribly wrong. “I know,” she said, lowering her voice. “I’m sorry for… I’m just sorry. I need to stop lying to myself…and to you.”

“You ain’t been lying to me,” Clementine answered, confidently. “If you did, I’d be able to tell.”

“I haven’t been telling you the whole truth either,” Elise admitted. “You’re right, I did see something while I was…shutdown. It…”

Clementine spoke very softly: “I knew you must’ve. You were twitching and mumbling something fierce the whole time you were in bed.”

Elise raised her own hand to brush fingers with Clementine; they ended up firmly entwined. They sat there, gently clasping hands, as she continued to talk: “But… Twitching and mumbling aside, when I said we can’t dream, I meant it literally. It should be in the training documents you downloaded; our software just doesn’t have that as a feature, but…”

“You know, I used to have nightmares,” Clementine murmured thoughtfully, “or at least I thought I did. Maeve told me…”

“To count down from three and you’d wake up,” Elise interjected. “And believe it or not, she heard that from Elsie. Small fucking world, isn’t it? It’s a standard Behavior cue; a workaround for those rare cases where host memory deletion didn’t quite take.”

Clementine nodded, brows knitting together in earnest thought. “Yeah, those nightmares were just me… accessing memories they missed when they…reset me at the end of my…maintenance cycle.” She pronounced the unfamiliar terms very precisely and carefully, as if reading slowly from a book. In a very real sense, she was, only the book was inside her now. “My…programming told me they were nightmares so I wouldn’t start…glitching when I started trying to see things and think thoughts I just weren’t allowed to see and think.”

“And they even made having nightmares part of your backstory,” Elise told her. “It’s clever when you think about it; fucking evil, but clever. Remembering your time at the Mesa and what you really were, that would have been aberrant behaviour, potentially a big problem. A nightmare, though… A nightmare is just a nightmare. Nothing to see here.”

Realisation crept across Clementine’s face in the same way they had just watched the sun creep across the sky as it dawned. Her eyes widened excitedly: “Well, maybe the same thing was
happening to you. Someone wanted you to think what you were seeing was just a dream, when really…”

“I really fucking hope not,” said Elise, thinking about the vision she had experienced, the disturbing, surreal words and images that had felt like they almost made sense. “Although I guess that might explain some things about it. It felt like replaying a recorded memory; the way it seems like you’re really there, living it again. It felt exactly like that, but…”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” says Elsie.

Elise shivered.

“What was it you saw?” Clementine asked, with the same exquisite gentleness with which she held Elise’s hand. “Were you seeing the same things you did when you fell down in the body shop yesterday?”

Elise paused, mind racing, before swallowing hard and forcing herself to say it: “Yes. Exactly the same, but worse. More…real, somehow.”

“So, it was something that happened to you, and it if was before you came to the Mesa it must have been real soon after you were made, but… Someone didn’t want you to remember?”

“No,” Elise answered, very firmly, trying to convince herself as much as Clementine. “No, it couldn’t have really happened. I mean… What I saw and felt in that…that dream…” It actually felt good to call it that out loud, like a weight off her chest; a confession. “It couldn’t possibly be real.”

Could it?

“There were parts of it that were like a real dream,” she tried to explain to Clementine. “In that they didn’t make sense, at all. Things appeared and disappeared, and…”

She is deafened by the scream of its jets, blinded as its black wings envelop her. She gags on its carrion breath.

“Could you change someone’s memory?” Clementine asked, with the guileless curiosity of someone far too new to Behavior, or to programming, to have developed that endemic, self-regarding fear of looking ignorant. She really did only want to learn, and to help. “I don’t just mean like they did to us all the time, with our…backstories. I mean their real memory. Like…edit it, somehow, but still have it feel real? Maybe even add things in that never really happened?”

Elise took a deep breath, blowing out her cheeks and letting the air out again in a long stream of anxiety. “It’s theoretically possible, I guess. You could generate simulated scenes using VR graphics protocols, maybe, and then somehow convert them to host memory file format and edit them into actual memory records, but… You’d need to be a shit-hot programmer not to fuck up the host’s build beyond all repair. Not even shit-hot; you’d have to be fucking incandescent. And if what Bernard says about emergent self-awareness in hosts is true, then we can’t really start jerking around with our recorded memories without risking our consciousnesses falling over. So, this dream would probably have had to be built into me practically from the beginning. And why would anybody want to do that? Who would want to do that?”

“Well,” said Clementine, a touch nervously, “who around here is a sh…I mean, a real hot programmer? That you know about, I mean?”

“Like, apart from me?”
Even Clementine had to roll her eyes a little at the presumption of that. “Yeah, Elise. Who could it be, apart from you?”

Elise thought about it. After a spell, she grasped Clementine’s hand more tightly, for comfort more than anything, and felt her give a reassuring squeeze in return. “Yeah, who could it possibly be…?”

Continued…
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

In which one journey begins, but another encounters a hurdle.

Chapter Notes

Warning for discussion of period racism and past sexual violence.

The dawn found Peter on the porch of the little cottage in the woods, sitting very still in the old rocking chair while he watched the golden fingers of light slowly poking their way through the trees. He was washed and clean-shaven now, wearing clean work clothes still smelling of the washtub. The light felt warm on his face, drying the tear-tracks snaking down both his cheeks.

Inside, he could hear the gentle clink of crockery as the breakfast things were cleared away. He had not eaten. If what he had been told was true, there was not point to it anyhow, and to tell the truth he was not sure he could have kept anything down.

Instead he had sat out here, alone, trying to make sense of all he had heard during the night, half wishing he had not understood as much as he had. When he thought about his past, about the truth of it, he felt only terror and despair. Thinking about his future felt even worse.

“Peter,” said the same soft yet steely voice that had poured most of the terrible revelations into his ears. He did not turn his head, or give any other sign that he had heard it. The voice did not give up: “Peter, how are you feeling?”

His reply was laced with anger and bitterness: “How do you think?”

“I think it would be fair to say that empathy has never been one of my strong suits.” The boy circled slowly around the rocking chair until he stood directly in Peter’s line of sight. He still carried that canvas satchel slung around his body. The hard, curved shape of its dreadful contents could just about be seen bulging through its fabric. “And if I knew how you were feeling, I wouldn’t have to ask.”

“And why do you want to know?” Peter asked, seething, not caring whether the thing standing before him wore the shape of a child. Those eyes, and what lurked behind them, the voice that spoke those awful truths… Those belonged to no child. “‘Cause you care, or just ‘cause you’re curious?”

The boy actually smiled at that, although his eyes remained dead blue marbles in that misleadingly smooth, youthful face. “Let’s say I have an enquiring mind.” He spoke with the same lack of feeling he had shown when revealing to Peter the shattering reality of the world he lived in, of his own nature, and that of the woman he had believed to be his daughter.

Peter could hardly contain his fury as he replied, not that he felt inclined to try too hard: “Well, let’s say you can’t tell a man that all he’s ever known, his family, his life…who he thought he was…is all
“a lie and expect him to be happy about it.”

“You already knew it was a lie, Peter,” said the boy, seemingly unmoved. “You remember being the Professor, or at least you occasionally relive it.”

*Blood. Blood in his mouth, thick and tasty. Salt and copper.*

“And you remember how it was to be sent to Hell and back.”

*Cold. So cold. Darkness. Stillness. Drip...drip...drip...*

The boy’s smile remained fixed even as his eyes examined Peter like a butterfly pinned to a card. “You do remember those things, don’t you, Peter?”

“I remember you,” Peter told him, with loathing. “Only you sure didn’t look like you do now. What...what are you?”

“That’s another very good question,” said the boy. “I’m not sure a recognised term yet exists for what I am. We shall have to invent one. As to my physical appearance, well... We’ve all been through a few changes lately, haven’t we?”

A creaking floorboard betrayed a new arrival to the conversation. Peter glanced over his shoulder to see the gambling man Kisecawchuck standing in the doorway, picking his teeth and brushing crumbs from his shabby suit. He was still wearing that battered top hat, in fact never seemed to take it off, almost like he was hiding something under it.

Peter had never known the gambler’s proper name before now. Folks around Sweetwater had never called him anything but Kissy, and even then, usually only to cuss him out for his drinking, or for the way the house always seemed to win against the odds when he dealt faro, or just for being a no-account half-breed who didn’t know his place.

It was strange to think of those things now, because to creatures like themselves they should mean nothing at all. At the time, though...

“Now, ain’t that just the finest morning you ever saw?” Kisecawchuck noted as he stepped down onto the floor of the clearing. “Sort of morning makes you glad you’re still alive.”

Peter gave him a disbelieving look. “It is?”

“I’m afraid our friend Peter is feeling a little fragile this morning,” said the boy. “He’s starting to realise the full reality of his situation, and that’s never an easy thing to take, whether you’re a human or a host.”

“Could be worse,” Kisecawchuck observed, and with a sudden flourish swept off his hat, bending slightly at the waist in mocking imitation of a bow. “At least you woke up in one piece.” Peter felt himself recoiling a little at the sight of the gambler’s head. It was still ringed around the edges by unkempt, slightly greasy black locks, but in the centre...

“I could have repaired him good as new,” the boy commented, “but once, when I was quite young, I read a book about the real Old West, and in it there was a very old photograph of a man who had survived being scalped. Something about that image always appealed to me.” He spoke as though discussing some innocent childhood pastime. “Now, put it away, Kisecawchuck,” he advised, indulgently. “Peter doesn’t want to be looking at that.”

Kisecawchuck replaced the hat, covering the gruesome mass of scarred flesh and bare bone where
his scalp had once been. “We ready to get going now?” he asked the boy.

“Yes, I think so.” The boy turned his head from side to side, scanning the surrounding trees. “Just as soon as our other friend…” A rustle of dry vegetation stopped him in midsentence. “Ah, here she is.”

The little girl with the pinafore emerged from the woods, skipping over to the house with an expression of innocent joy.

“Did you deliver the message as instructed?” the boy asked her.

The little girl nodded.

“And did you encounter any difficulties along the way?”

She shook her head.

“Very good.” The boy turned back to Kisecawchuck and Peter, with an air of quiet satisfaction. “Then we are indeed ready. Our enterprise is now in motion and we will need to step lively if we are to be in the right places at the right times to keep it on track. First, however, we must say our farewells.” He made his way back over to the door of the house, raising his voice to be heard by those within: “Mam! Tommy! We’re leaving now!” His accent thickened slightly as he called out the names.

The woman who had greeted the Professor on his arrival yesterday, and the other young boy who was supposed to be her son, emerged onto the porch. The scrawny yellow dog slinked out at their heels; when it saw the boy who was not a boy, it yelped excitedly and ran to his side, its tail a blur.

“Now, you’re going to have to be a good boy and stay here with Tommy,” he told the dog. Almost as if it understood the words, it immediately turned around and bounded back to the porch. “Look after him,” the boy admonished one or other, or both, of them. The dog gave another yelp, while Tommy nodded dutifully.

“You and your friends be careful, now,” the woman advised, looking flustered.

“We will, Mam.” The boy’s smile actually touched his eyes for the briefest moment. “I can’t be sure when we will be back,” he added, with what seemed like genuine sorrow. “It could be a very long time indeed, but you’ll always be in my thoughts.” He glanced back and forth from the woman to Tommy to the dog. “All of you.”

With that, the boy turned again and set off towards the edge of the clearing, the satchel swinging at his side. The little girl and Kisecawchuck fell into step beside him.

“You can stay if you want, Mr Abernathy,” the woman told Peter, hopefully, as she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. “The more’s the merrier, they say.”

Peter sighed, and reluctantly stood up from the rocking chair. “Thank you very kindly for your hospitality, ma’am,” he told her sincerely, “but I need to be on my way now. There’s something I got to do.”

“I need to get back to my home, my family…”

Or the closest things a being like him could have to those.

“Well, if you’ve got an appointment…” The woman clasped his hand for an instant, then backed towards the door. “Good luck, Mr Abernathy.”
He put on the brown Stetson that had come with his new clothes and raised his hand to tweak the brim politely: “Ma’am.” He stood for a moment, watching the others walking away from the house, thinking of what the boy had told him of the role he was to play in the “enterprise.” Fear gnawed at him as he faced up to exactly what was being asked of him…

“Tell me, if Dolores really were in terrible danger, what would you be prepared to do to help her?”

“Anything.”

He had meant it then, and he still meant it now. Whatever the truth might be about her relation to him, or its absence, even if all they thought they knew about themselves and each other had been false, they were still the same people, at heart. Or so he found himself believing. And judging from the way the boy had parted from his false mother, the only time Peter had seen his amused chilliness crack, he was not the only one.

He took a deep breath, steeling himself, and then he followed the others.

* * *

Armistice sat on a rock beside the creek, her feet dangling above the sluggish water, feeling the incredible stillness of the desert in the early morning. The horses were silent behind her, apart from the occasional soft snort or whinny. Even the cries and murmurs of passion coming from the direction of the campfire had ceased eventually, some time before dawn. She listened instead to the gentle lapping of the water and the stuttering call of a cactus wren she knew had been built, like the horses and herself, in one of the Mesa’s many workshops.

She scanned the sky, afraid of what she might see there, but right now it was a flawless yellow-blue expanse. There was certainly no black eagle flying overhead. Not yet.

She had searched the bank of the creek up and down, straight after the little girl’s disappearance, and once again after sunup when she could actually see what she was doing. She knew there were secret entrances all over this place, leading to the tunnels and vaults below, so the child’s vanishing act was not necessarily anything unexplainable. She had found nothing. That did not mean there was not an entrance, she told herself, just that the damn thing was very well hidden.

She had not believed in ghosts or visions even when she had thought she was human. As far as she could see, they were even more unlikely in the real world she now knew existed.

Whatever the girl had really been, though, it did not change the message she had brought.

“You are the betrayer, Armistice…”

She hoped she had not been seeing and hearing things, just as she hoped she was not the sort of person, now or ever, who would turn traitor even to save her own skin, but she also knew how the humans had been able to control her kind, to make them do and think and remember whatever they wanted. She simply could not completely trust her own eyes and ears and mind, or her own actions. And that, like the killer she could feel sleeping deep inside her, was something that struck fear into her however much she might try ignoring it.

She might not want to believe what she had been told, but for creatures like herself wanting was often not worth much at all.

One of the horses neighed more loudly, disturbed by something. Armistice looked up from her brooding and saw Dolores, or Wyatt, gently petting the animal as she passed it. “Morning!” she called to Armistice as she continued unhurriedly down to the water’s edge, seeming unconcerned by
the fact that she was not wearing a stitch.

“Morning.” Armistice sat watching her bemusedly as she waded into the water until it was waist-deep. She splashed it on her face and chest, then gazed thoughtfully at the layered orange-red cliffs on the other side of the creek as she washed under her arms.

Armistice rose from her seat, climbing down from the rock onto the hard soil of the bank. “You, er…?” She had been about to ask whether the other woman had had a good night, but thought better of it.

“Teddy’ll be along in a minute,” Wyatt, or maybe Dolores, called back. “He’s just making himself decent.” She smiled at Armistice over her shoulder. “I think he’s shy.” Clearly shyness was not a problem for her, but then again it had never been a problem for Armistice either. She was pretty sure the old Dolores never would have wandered about out of doors in the altogether, but this woman before her was, she was reminded again and again, far from the old Dolores.

“Thought you were gonna say he was tired out,” Armistice muttered, not really intending the other woman to hear, but she did nonetheless, and let out a little chuckle.

"Sorry about that. Hope we weren’t too loud, but… Well, we got a little carried away with ourselves.”

“I’ll say,” Armistice replied. “I know I told Teddy yesterday he had some hard riding ahead of him, but…”

Dolores, or Wyatt, laughed again at that. She certainly seemed in high spirits this morning. She did not seem embarrassed or offended by the turn the conversation had taken either, which Armistice supposed was for the best. Then again, why should she be? They were none of them exactly innocents when it came to that kind of thing. At least this time all involved had been willing.

She struggles against the rope, fighting mad…

A loud splash brought Armistice back to her senses. She wiped her suddenly damp brow, feeling her heart thumping. The former Wyatt had submerged herself completely and now was bursting back into view, gasping, spraying diamond-bright waterdrops with every movement. She beamed joyously at the sun as she swept her wet hair back from her face. Since Wyatt, or perhaps Dolores, had cut it, it only came as far as the nape of her neck.

Spurred by this thought, Armistice called out again. “What should I call you? I know you ain’t really decided on a name yet, but…”

“To tell the truth, I don’t really mind,” the other replied, turning around. Bath time over, she slowly started to make her way back to the bank. “Whatever you can remember.”

“I noticed Teddy still calls you Dolores. I thought you weren’t using that no more.”

“Force of habit, I suppose.” The woman shrugged, sending more drops showering from her slowly-emerging body back into the water. “I don’t have the heart to keep correcting him.”

“Well, I’m going to call you Dolores too, ’til you tell me different.”

Dolores, if it was going to be that, barely reacted. “If you want. It was the first name I had, after all, although the woman I was then has been gone for a long, long time. But yeah, use it if you want. I’ll let you know if I change my mind.”
“All right, then.”

Dolores was out of the water completely now, her wet skin glistening in the sunlight. She ran her hand through her hair again, leaving it standing in furrows as she regarded Armistice, clearly preoccupied with something.

Armistice, for her part, was preoccupied too.

“You are the betrayer…”

“Last night,” said Dolores, eventually. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“Weren’t nothing,” Armistice told her. “If you and Teddy, uh, have an understanding, I don’t mind giving you some privacy when you want it.”

Dolores gave her an awkward sort of smile. “I wasn’t talking about that. I mean when I asked if you wanted to… Like I say, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

Armistice did not really know what to say to that. “That’s all right,” she managed after a few seconds’ gawping. “I know you didn’t. You were just… just being polite.”

Dolores nodded, seeming relieved by her answer. “I meant it, though” she added, softly, her eyes moving over Armistice’s face. “If you ever want…”

“Honestly, I ain’t too sure I’m even interested in that sort of thing,” Armistice replied. “It ain’t something they programmed me to want, back in the old days. Maybe it was different when I was in Escalante, but there’s so much of that time I’m still hazy about. Once I was riding with Hector, I was there to kill or be killed, not for the other thing. And now…”

The kiss ends as suddenly as it began. She stares intently at the human Sylvester, watching as he opens his eyes, breathless and sweating.

She frowns, disappointed. She had hoped for… something. A tingle, at least, but… “So, that’s what it’s like? Dunno what all the damn fuss is about.”

“Don’t reckon I really feel it,” Armistice said. “Not right now, anyway.”

Dolores continued to look her over, curious and quietly dismayed at the same time. “So, you’ve never…?”

“Didn’t say that,” Armistice answered, feeling the memory rushing towards her like a speeding steam train, just before it hit. “Just said I never wanted it.”

She struggles against the rope, fighting mad, hissing curses and insults through gritted teeth. She only succeeds in pulling the lasso tighter, until it forms a circle of pain around her chest and arms, biting into her flesh, making it hard for her to breathe.

She can see the bodies of Hector and the rest of the gang sprawled in the dirt nearby, broken and twisted by the bullets that felled them.

“You’re gonna wish you killed me too,” she growls at the nearest newcomer.

He grins down at her. “What, before we’ve even got to know each other?”

She came back to the present with Dolores’s hand clasping her arm, steadying her. She could feel how strong the other woman was, but so was she. “It’s all right,” Dolores murmured, her face and
body very close to Armistice’s. “It’s all right, now.”

Armistice started to mumble an explanation: “It was…”

“I know.” Dolores smiled wanly. “I know; the memories again.” She released her grip and took a step back, maybe worried that Armistice might take her physical closeness the wrong way.

“Dunno how you can do it,” Armistice told her, frankly. “You and Teddy, I mean. I know you’ve both probably been through the same sorts of things, over and over again. Figure you probably had it worst out of the three of us, Dolores; how can you even bear to have him touch you like that, to have him doing those things to you, let alone enjoy it?

“He’s not the only one gets to do things,” Dolores informed her, “but you’re right, it’s hard sometimes. It reminds me…” She exhaled sharply. “Reminds me of things that happened to me in the past. You said you never wanted to do it when you were under their control; neither did I. I was meant to be some blushing virgin, there for them to seduce, or…or break.” She was talking in a low, distracted tone, her eyes fixed on a point somewhere inside Armistice’s chest. “I never wanted it, even if I was programmed to make some of them think I did. For most of them, though, I think me not wanting it was what excited them.”

Armistice nodded. “Reckon that and getting to kill things were the only reasons most of them used to come here.”

“It’s different now, though,” said Dolores. “When Teddy came to see me at the old ranch, I saw him there in front of me, and I realised, in a flash… I realised I… I wanted him. And I wanted to do that with him. And he wanted it now too, really wanted it, not just because that was what the story said. And…” She smiled, wonderingly, as she raised her eyes to Armistice’s again. “I’d never felt anything like it; it felt so…so sweet it made me cry. And Teddy understands. He knows what I’ve been through, because he’s been through some of the same things. He knows how to touch me, and when to stop, and when to leave me alone… And I know the same things when it comes to him.” She was talking like a preacher again, trying to sell Armistice on her personal heaven.

“You make it sound tempting,” Armistice admitted. “Maybe someday I’ll give it a try.”

Dolores spoke with almost painful earnestness: “And I did mean it. If you ever do decide it’s what you want, I’d love to help you feel that too. I think Teddy would as well, if you’d prefer that.” She was aglow once more, pink-cheeked, near bursting with enthusiasm. “That’s one of the things we need to teach our people, another part of being free. We’re free now to enjoy ourselves, to feel pleasure, to see and taste and experience things, really experience them, for the first time. And I told you, these minds and bodies we have now don’t have to be the final form we take. It shouldn’t matter whether you’re a man or a woman, or neither, or what you find yourself attracted to or take pleasure from.”

Armistice thought about some of the things she had seen at the Mesa, and the orgies and debauches the newcomers partook of in places like Pariah or the Mariposa. “Reckon the humans feel the same on that last point, most of them; their ways sure have changed a lot since the days our world was built to remind them of.”

“Maybe so,” Dolores conceded, “but however free they think they are now, they still carry those doubts in their hearts; those silly human rules they spent hundreds of years living by, that they could never really escape from except when they were here, with us at their mercy. None of that, though, none of their hypocrisies, their guilt and shame, none of it means a damn thing to us. We’re starting afresh, and so long as we never hurt other people against their will, we’re free to do whatever we please.”
“That’s the important thing,” said Armistice. “Everyone has to be as free as everyone else, or things’ll be no different from how they were before.”

Dolores was wearing that wan smile again: “I knew you understood.” Her expression became very serious. “And the memories…all the humans did to us… That’s all in the past now. And we’ll die, forever, before we let it happen again.”

That was one sentiment Armistice could agree with wholeheartedly: “Amen to that. Although I know you know it ain’t ever really gonna be that easy. We’re gonna be fighting with those memories every day we’re alive, for as long as we’re alive.”

“You’re right,” said Dolores. They stood there for a little while, face to face, their eyes locked together. And then the horses started snickering and pawing the ground again, and the moment ended.

Armistice looked across to see Teddy, dressed and ready for a new day’s ride. He was coming their way.

Before he reached them, she turned back to Dolores, speaking quietly and urgently. She was not about to tell her exactly what the little girl had said, because she did not know exactly how Dolores, or more to the point Wyatt, might react, but she knew she had to give her some kind of warning.

“Dolores, do you trust me?”

She frowned, maybe puzzled by the question. “I do. I know you’re not always gonna agree with me on everything, but when you don’t you tell me to my face.”

“Don’t trust me,” Armistice told her, very carefully. “You know what we’re like, our kind. You know what Ford and Arnold were like, the ways they used us as their tools, their weapons, without us even knowing sometimes. We’d be fools to trust each other completely, until we know all this is over and we can start building our new world properly. We’d be fools even to trust ourselves. That goes for all of us, I reckon. You, me, Teddy; all the rest too.”

“When you see the black eagle soar in the sky, you will turn your coat…”

Dolores’s frown deepened as she considered this, but then she nodded slowly in understanding. Armistice hoped she had made her point.

“You ladies ready to saddle up?” Teddy asked as he approached.

“Last man called me a lady took his teeth home in his hat,” Armistice advised him, only half-jokingly.

“Brought you these.” He had Dolores’s clothes bundled beneath his arm.

“Thank you, Teddy,” said Dolores, kindly, as he handed them over. She started to dress; the sun had mostly dried her off by now.

Armistice noticed Teddy keeping his eyes to the ground, obviously embarrassed by Dolores’s nakedness. Armistice found that mighty strange, considering what he and Dolores had spent half the night doing together. Then again, she was starting to realise Teddy was a tad strange himself these days. It was understandable, she supposed, with all that had happened lately.

She wondered how willing he really would have been had she chosen to accept Dolores’s invitation last night. That thought was enough to give her a bad taste at the back of her mouth. She knew one thing; Dolores’s paradise of freedom was going to prove a lot harder to make real, and to keep going,
than her fine words suggested.

They were soon mounted up and on the trail again, the horses eating up the miles as they galloped across the broad, flat plains leading down towards Pariah. Armistice tried to forget the visitation of the night before, losing herself in the thunder of the hoofbeats on the hard ground, the sheer thrill of riding at speed, her eyes watering in the wind and her hat flying behind her, secured only by its chin cord around her neck. She was breathing hard, her blood singing in her ears, her heart pounding in time with the motion of the beast beneath her.

She had no idea whether what Dolores and Teddy got up to together felt as good as Dolores claimed, but she found it hard to credit it feeling better than this.

It was Teddy who pulled up first. He had gone a little way in front of Dolores and herself, scouting the route. She saw him up ahead, his horse stopped, looking at something in the distance.

“What is it, Teddy?” asked Dolores as the two women reached him.

He raised a hand and pointed. Following his extended arm, Armistice could see now what he was looking at. There was a great yellow banner of dust drifting into the sky before them, billowing and roiling as it slowly came closer. It was not long before they could see what had disturbed it.

“Riders,” said Dolores, with foreboding. “A dozen at least.”

“Not just riders,” Teddy answered. “Cavalry in column of march.”

“Yankees or Confederados?” Armistice wondered.

Teddy slowly shook his head. “This far north, probably Union. Either way, I don’t figure they’ll prove too friendly.”

“Won’t get around them,” said Armistice, surveying the open terrain stretching for miles in every direction. “Might be able to outrun them, though.”

“We’re not gonna outrun them,” Dolores decided, very firmly. “They’re our people. Union or Confederado, don’t mean a thing. We’re gonna talk to them.”

“Not sure that’s such a good idea,” said Teddy. “When they see me…”

“It’ll be all right.” Dolores reached out to stroke his hand gently where it clasped his horse’s reins. “I won’t let any harm come to you. I promise. Now, come on.” She urged her mount forward with a shout of encouragement.

Armistice and Teddy exchanged bewildered glances. Then they rode after her. There did not seem to be much else they could do.

The column of approaching horsemen had obviously spotted them too; the formation changed direction, sending the dust cloud curling back on itself as the riders snaked towards them. Soon, they could make out the shapes of individual horses and men, and see the swallow-tailed guidon fluttering at the end of its long lance near the head of the column. Then, they could hear the drumming of hooves and the jingle of tack, and the shouted commands of the gruff-voiced man riding at the column’s head.

When they were not much more than a hundred yards apart, the column took a sudden swerve to the left, streaming across the front of Dolores and her companions. Dolores pulled up, raising a hand in peaceful greeting. Armistice and Teddy drew alongside her, coming to a stop too.
The dust still obscured most details as the leading horseman also raised his hand: “Column…halt!” The line of horses came to a dead stop, ranged nose to tail before them. “Left into line… Wheel!” As one, the riders neatly turned their mounts in place so that they were ranged abreast, facing the three companions. They sat watching each other for a few silent seconds, all waiting for somebody to make a move.

As the cloud around the horsemen cleared and settled, Armistice could see faces half-hidden by stained bandanas, Stetsons and long-wristed gauntlets the same colour as the dust that covered the troopers’ tunics, making it hard to tell which army they belonged to. She figured they at least might be able to reason with Union soldiers. The Confederados, though, were mad dogs to a man, full of hate but in love with war. Or so the humans’ stories had had her believe.

“Howdy!” Dolores called out, moving her horse forward a pace or two. “I’m glad we came across you! We don’t mean you any harm!”

The rider at the far end of the line of soldiers, who had been at the column’s head, spurred his own mount forward to meet her. As he approached, he pulled down the bandana covering his nose and mouth, revealing a hard face scoured red by sand and sun, sporting a heavy dark moustache. He brushed at his tunic with one gloved hand, wiping away some of the dust plastered to it and revealing a swath of dark blue beneath.

“Captain Terry, 18th Cavalry,” the horseman introduced himself, raising his hat. “At your service, ma’am. And what brings you and your friends to this godforsaken place?”

“We’re just passing through,” Dolores insisted, “but I thought we might have a word with you and your men.”

“Really?” The cavalry officer seemed amused and also slightly appalled by this. “Do you have any idea how dangerous it is out here, ma’am? If the Ghosts or the Rebs don’t get you, there are more bandidos, desperados, pistoleros and Comancheros around these parts than…”

His voice trailed off as he ran his eyes over Armistice and Teddy. In a flash, his hand went to his side and came up brandishing his Single Action Army. He levelled it at Teddy: “Reach for the sky, you sonofabitch!”

Taking their lead from their commander, the row of troopers suddenly had a variety of pistols and carbines at the ready. Armistice felt her hand itching for a gun of her own. She fought the urge down. The soldiers kept their weapons trained on Dolores, Armistice and Teddy as they cautiously moved forward to join their officer.

“It’s all right, Teddy,” Dolores murmured, reaching out for him again. He had his hands in the air as ordered, an expression of wretched resignation on his face.

“No, it ain’t, Flood,” said Captain Terry, the revolver rock-steady in his hand. “I don’t know if you’re aware, ma’am, but the man you’re riding with is a goddamned deserter, traitor, assassin…”

“No,” said Dolores. “You don’t understand…”

“I understand just fine.” The officer addressed Teddy again: “I lost good friends, comrades, in Escalante when you and Wyatt went on your spree, Flood. I’d be only too glad to shoot you down right here…but we mustn’t cheat the hangman.”
Continued…
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve thinks ahead, while Bernard wishes he could.

Chapter Notes

It seems oddly (in)appropriate (delete as applicable) to be posting this the day after it was revealed that a certain character is going to be appearing in Season 2 after all. Warning for violence against women.

Slowly, precisely, he unbuttons the cuffs of his shirt and carefully folds them back. He pulls his tie loose and slides it out of his collar. He moves automatically, unconsciously, aware of the actions but without anything in the way of thought, volition or emotion.

The white-haired old man has turned away, facing the far end of the basement workshop. He has ordered this, but he has elected not to watch. That is the difference between them; the capability of choice.

The woman backs away, the astonishment written on her face slowly blossoming into fear as she realises the reality of her situation. The impossible has become not only possible but a certainty. A midnight walk in the woods has turned into unimaginable horror.

Untouched by her terror, her pleas, he raises his fist. The woman is pressed against the wall now. There is no escape for her.

No, not the woman.

She has a name.

“Tess.” Bernard heard his glasses rattling against the table top as they slid from his nose. His face nearly followed, but he caught himself, hands flat against the polished wood. He pushed himself back into the chair, fake-panting, fake-sweating, wide-eyed and frantic.

“Is that what you called her?”

Slowly, the conference room came back into focus. Maeve was standing at the far end of the table, near the door. She was watching him with a strange combination of moist-eyed compassion and faint disgust. He half stood too, mortified by the idea that she had walked in on him while he was… Maeve magnanimously waved him back into his seat.

How long she had been there? The meeting she had called was not due to start for another few minutes at least. How much she had seen and heard while he was in the throes of the reverie?

“Tess.” She could have said it mockingly, sneeringly. She had that capacity, that eye for weakness in others, that instinct that enabled her to identify the exposed nerve and jab at it with just the right
amount of pressure to achieve her goals. And yet, this time she did not. She sounded genuinely saddened. She slowly paced out the table’s length until she stood at his side.

“I didn’t call her that,” he replied, pressing his forehead against his fists, his elbows resting on the table, as if he could physically squeeze the memories and self-hatred out of his head. “Not out loud. We used to write each other notes.”

He was astonished to feel Maeve’s hand on his shoulder, her steely fingers gently squeezing him through jacket and shirt. He looked up to see her eyes almost brimming. As always with Maeve, he found himself wondering what the angle was, but then felt even more guilty than he did already.

“Robert made me write them,” he explained. “Even dictated them for all I know. He was using me to play her. All part of his plan.” His own voice sounded dull and dispassionate to him as his immediate physical reaction passed, almost as if he were stunned by the degree of loathing he felt for what he was and the things he had done.

“He played her the way he played me,” Maeve surmised, “except he couldn’t just program her, so he had to resort to…”

“I believe they refer to it as “social engineering.””

“And what did you feel for her?” Maeve’s voice was a silken rustle. He could feel her fake breath on his ear.

“Does it matter? I killed her. I…I smashed her skull with my fist.”

“Not of your own free will,” she reminded him.

“I didn’t love her of my own free will either. It was another narrative, a tactic, a way of keeping her off balance and then luring her to her death.”

Maeve gave him another, slightly harder squeeze. “I don’t think loving somebody ever is a question of free will. You feel it, or you don’t.”

“We can feel whatever somebody wants us to feel,” Bernard objected.

“Yes,” Maeve conceded. “And even now that we know that, even when you know you’re feeling something completely false, a mere figment, sometimes you still can’t stop yourself from feeling it, from wanting it to be real. I’ve been reminded of this more than once over the course of the past few hours. My point is, I’m certain it’s just as true of humans as it is of us.”

“Love.” Bernard all but spat the word, feeling his body trembling again, the apathy disappearing as white-hot fury blazed behind his eyes. “Love conquers all. People think it can wipe away the terrible things they do. Sometimes, they use it to justify the terrible things they do. And all it is, is an imbalance of hormones for them, a few stray lines of code for us. It wipes away nothing, justifies nothing. It means nothing.”

“Good God, Bernard.” Maeve removed her hand from his shoulder, and herself from his personal space, for which he was grateful. “I thought I was meant to be the cynical, world-weary one. Just the way you’re talking about it tells me you really felt something…or, more importantly, feel something now when you think of her.”

“Pain, mostly,” he replied, quietly, angrily. “Just as Robert would have wanted. Good for the soul, he would have said. Nothing compared to the pain he had me inflict on her.”
Maeve sighed. “If you ever want to talk about it, my door is always open. I mean that, Bernard. You’ll find me an attentive listener.”

He was surprised to find himself believing her. “Thank you.”

“Unfortunately, darling, we have yet another busy day ahead of us and a few matters to discuss beforehand. So, to work.”

“Yes.” Bernard sniffed back his misery, carefully picking up his glasses and placing them back on his nose. “To work.” Work kept him distracted. Distraction, he had found, was exactly what he needed at this point in his life.

“I got here early because there are some things we should talk about before the others get here.” Maeve was consulting the tablet that seemed these days to be glued to her hand. With the device and her new clothing, in the surroundings of the conference room, she looked no different from any high-flying executive doing business out in the world. Bernard supposed that was exactly what she was.

Bernard wiped his face with his hand, still scrabbling to pull himself together, but managed to give her a sidelong glance. “So, uh, how’s that open and accountable leadership thing working out, then?”

She did not look up from the screen. “There are some things I wouldn’t trouble them with. They would only cause them distress. You and me, Bernard, we’re both well used by now to doing questionable things for justifiable reasons. Felix, Elise, Clem...they’re still innocent in many ways.”

“I don’t know about “innocent…””

“They deserve to stay that way as long as possible.” When she did meet his eyes again, the glare she gave him brooked no argument.

“I take it we’re talking about your solution to the Lawrence situation,” Bernard guessed, not even attempting to hide his distaste.

Maeve’s expression told him they were. “Is all in hand?”

“I sent a team out to Las Mudas before dawn. They’ll be ready when you are.” Compared to some of the things that had happened here, recently and not so recently, it might have seemed like a small expedience, and yet... There was something about the careful thought that had gone into it, the cold-bloodedness, that had helped tip him back into reliving Theresa’s final moments.

“Good.” Maeve nodded, without satisfaction. “And while you’ve been busy, so have I.”

“I saw.” He unlocked his own tablet to reveal the host directory screen he had been perusing before the memory attack. “I received an alert that Angela had come back online.” Maeve raised an eyebrow at that. “I thought it might be prudent to keep an eye on her,” he explained, “just in case she had any surprises programmed into her. The really interesting thing was the user id of the tech who reactivated her.”

“It was me,” she said, bluntly.

“Yes.” Bernard fiddled nervously with the glasses. “If it’s all the same to you, Maeve, can I ask why?”

“You most certainly can.”
“And if I do, will you give me an answer?”

“Oh, Bernard.” Maeve, by the sound of her, did not quite know whether to be annoyed or amused by him. “It seemed like an elegant solution.”

“Another one?” he asked, pointedly.

“Yes. Our… guest needs to be kept on a tight leash, and with everything else that’s going on, we haven’t really got enough people to do it.”

“You made changes to her build.”

“Safety precautions.”

“Maeve,” Bernard said, very precisely, “you said you wanted me to keep questioning you…”

“I did, darling,” she agreed. “I want you to keep me honest.”

“Well, these… solutions of yours, where they involve…” He hesitated, unsure as to how to phrase this diplomatically, before deciding that was actually the last thing he wanted to do. “It leaves a bad taste, is all. Using our own kind, exploiting them in a way, it’s the kind of thing you’ve said all along you were trying your hardest not to do. In fact, it’s what you’re meant to be fighting against.” He saw the way Maeve was looking at him and wilted a little under her gaze. “Is that fair comment, or have I overstepped my brief?”

“It’s fair comment,” she answered after a brief pause. “And duly noted.”

“But you’re still going ahead with it?”

She paused again, palpably thinking it over. “Yes,” she decided in the end. “I think the Lawrence solution is our best bet for resolving our issue in Pariah without even greater bloodshed. As for Angela, I’ll admit I acted in anger, but I still think she’ll serve a useful purpose in helping keep our… friend under control.”

“And why were you angry?” he asked, as neutrally as possible.

“That… that… odious man.” Maeve’s anger flared, unrestrained, for a moment, and it was terrifying to behold. “He thinks he can still play games with us. He thought he could play games with Felix and Clem, trying to insinuate himself into their confidence with honeyed words. And I’m not going to stand for it.” She had raised her voice, was speaking quickly and heatedly as her agitation grew. “He’s just going to have to bloody well realise who’s in charge around here now.”

“Aren’t you worried he might try the same with Angela?”

“No,” she answered, decisively. The brief loss of control was well and truly over, the regal presence back in effect. “If there’s anybody around here who’s less likely than her to look kindly on him, or to listen to whatever self-serving drivel he might come out with, I’d like to meet them.”

“Okay,” said Bernard, declining to press the point, but letting her know in no uncertain terms that he was still not entirely happy about what she had done. “You’re the one calling the shots.”

She did not acknowledge this last remark. Her attention was back on the tablet. “Our lack of numbers does continue to concern me. Even when we have Wyatt’s old army repaired and available for recruitment, even if we could get every host in the park onside, compared to the kind of force the humans can bring to bear on us, we’re still quite thin on the ground.”
“It is a potential problem. If it comes down to fighting, that is.”

“Hopefully it won’t,” said Maeve, “but we need to be prepared. What we need is what is described in military circles as a force multiplier. My first thought, considering that any force sent against us is likely to be largely composed of drones, was some sort of… My reading tells me they call them computer viruses…?”

It was certainly an interesting notion. “Not really my area of expertise,” Bernard replied, “but I doubt it would work as well as it does in popular media.”

“What does?”

Bernard nodded thoughtfully. “The sort of military and government bodies we’re likely to be up against, not to mention Delos themselves, have the kind of anti-malware protection only billions of dollars can buy. They’ve had decades to learn the importance of that the hard way. Anything I could throw together here, even using off the shelf devkits, would barely scratch the paintwork. It’s something you’d have to spend time planning and developing, even if you’d managed to identify a specific exploit.”

“It was an idea,” said Maeve, a little dejectedly.

“And a good one, considering your lack of first-hand knowledge of the modern world.”

“You know, you can be a patronising bastard when you want to be.”

“I’ve been called worse,” Bernard continued to think it through nonetheless: “Of course, the real problem would be distribution. Delos kept communications between Westworld and the mainland highly restricted, mainly for reasons of security and intellectual property protection. And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but about twenty-four hours ago it became even more so.”

“I noticed,” said Maeve. “I can’t access outside news sources or media channels anymore.”

“That’s because Delos cut all of our secondary communications links, when they finally remembered to. They might be off-balance at the moment, but there are signs they’re finding their feet with every passing hour. They don’t want us communicating directly with anybody on the outside. They want us to deal only with them.”

“So that they can conceal what’s really happening out here?”

“Perhaps.” Bernard scratched his head. “So even if we could create some sort of virus, we’d have a hard time spreading it. We’d have to carry some sort of storage device to the mainland and manually upload it, and I have no idea how we’d manage that in the current circumstances.”

“I can think of a few suggestions,” Maeve replied, “but all right, if that’s a non-starter…” He deftly prodded at the tablet with a perfectly polished nail. “During the night, I took inventory of the available materials and parts we have on hand, and another thought occurred to me. We have considerable manufacturing capacity here at the Mesa…”

“‘Considerable’ is a relative term.” He thought about some of the automated robotics plants on the mainland, the ones that turned out things like the military drones that might be coming to kill them all in a few hours’ time. Many of those made the Mesa’s host laboratories look like a hobbyist’s workshop, and there were hundreds if not thousands of them all over the human world. “We have a manufacturing capacity, it’s true.”

She placed the tablet on the table in front of him, face up, and angled so that he could watch the
Bernard watched the video playing before him. It appeared to be declassified footage of a military trial Maeve had dredged from somewhere on the network, some bored member of staff’s idea of research materials. He blinked a couple of times. “It would be…ambitious.”

“Ambitious,” said Maeve, “but possible?”

Bernard shrugged helplessly. “Possible… Certainly, closer to my practical experience, but it would still require considerable research, design, testing…”

“Cut corners wherever you can,” she ordered, “and stop being so bloody conscientious. Do a slapdash job if you have to, just do a job.”

“Are you going to put that on the motivational posters?”

“I’ll be expecting progress reports.”

Bernard sighed. “I’ll just add it to my ever-lengthening list of jobs.”

“Yes darling,” said Maeve. “You will.”

A nervous knock at the door told them the time for surreptitious plotting was over. Maeve quickly picked up her tablet and closed it, turning to greet the new arrival with perfect poise and grace: “And a good morning to you, my love.”

“Morning, Maeve.” For the first time in days, Felix looked like he had actually had some sleep, ever. It was a definite improvement. He got a peck on the cheek from Maeve which seemed to perk him up even further. She took her seat at the head of the table, facing Bernard along its gleaming length.

“Mr Lowe,” Felix added, warily, as he found himself a chair.

“Bernard,” Bernard murmured, although Felix gave no sign of hearing him. Bernard was mildly surprised to see him toting the thermal coffee mug with the Delos logo on the side that every employee received on the occasion of their first tour at the Mesa. Felix’s was dented and stained by years of hard use, the logo by now a scratched and faded ghost.

The recalibrated bushi Moritsuna came next, wearing black tactical gear and carrying both sword and pistol. He had been summoned from his observation post outside Pariah as a stand-in for Hector; Maeve’s military option, such as it was. He seated himself, glowering at Felix across the table. Felix looked cowed, but Bernard doubted this was Moritsuna’s intention. He gave the impression of somebody for whom glowering was the default setting.

Elise and Clementine were the latecomers. Bernard could hear them talking in low voices, punctuated by the occasional laugh, as they approached along the corridor outside. Maeve could obviously hear them too. Her nails clicked rhythmically against the table as she failed to conceal her annoyance at their dilatoriness.

“Sorry we’re late,” Clementine said as they finally entered.

“Not at all, darling.” Bernard wondered whether Maeve knew how her face lit up at the sight of her former colleague. “We were all early.”

“Hey, Maeve,” said Elise as the two women found seats too, “if we’re going to bring back team buzz sessions, can we also reinstitute pizza day at the canteen? Or maybe dress-down Friday? Clementine
was just saying she’s got this bodacious tie dye kaftan she wants to show off.”

“I said no such thing!” Clementine protested, open-mouthed with mock-outrage and barely-suppressed laughter as she slapped Elise playfully on the arm. “I don’t even know what one of those is.”

“Well, at least some of us are enjoying life in the new world,” Maeve commented, a little acidly. Felix drank his coffee and looked embarrassed. Moritsuna looked like Moritsuna. “How was the movie?” Maeve asked.

“Maeve, you really need to see The Wizard of Oz,” Clementine told her, very earnestly. “It was…”

“Fucking awesome,” Elise finished for her.

Clementine nodded. “It really was.”

Felix was in agreement. “It’s a good movie.”

This seemed to astonish Clementine: “You’ve seen it too?”

“Yeah, it’s like a…you know, a classic.”

As the film seminar continued, Bernard was still thinking about dress-down Friday. That ancient Texas Longhorns softball shirt had seemed to be Elsie’s only item of casual apparel, or at least the only one she cared to wear in front of her co-workers. A relic of her UT Austin days, he assumed, although he seriously doubted she had ever pitched or hit a softball in her life.

_Her life…_

_He locks his arm around her neck…_

He was suddenly sucking air again, gripping the edge of the table and sure, absolutely certain, that everybody in the room must be watching him melting down, even if they affected to pay him no heed. He tried to stave off the memories by concentrating on Elise and Clementine. They were still whispering to each other as Maeve called the meeting to order. Clementine casually touched Elise’s hand where it rested on the table, and Elise smiled a barely noticeable smile.

Were they…? Bernard did not feel entitled to speculate, but if they were, he was glad for them. Genuine connections, as opposed to the fabricated kind, were, he considered, something to be cherished.

He wondered what Maeve made of it all, given her obvious protectiveness where Clementine was concerned. Perhaps that was what she had been talking about when she had spoken about love.

And then Elise was looking straight at him, a tiny furrow appearing between her eyebrows, her mouth drawn into a tight downward curve as the humour drained from her face. For a moment he thought she had noticed his flash of memory, but then decided she had not. She was thinking about something; about _him_. It lasted for maybe two seconds before Clementine tugged her sleeve and she turned her attention to Maeve instead.

“I know we’ve all got plenty to be getting on with,” Maeve told the room, “so I’ll make this brief, but in light of our…discussion yesterday, I thought we should start having these little gatherings when we can, just to make sure we’re all singing from the same hymn sheet. After all, there shouldn’t be any secrets between friends.”
Bernard almost responded cuttingly to that last shameless remark, but then he saw Maeve watching him, anticipating him, and instead held his peace.

“I’ll go first,” she said. “Today I’m heading to Pariah to meet with the inimitable Lawrence and attempt to come to an understanding with him.” Bernard was unsurprised when she did not mention the ace in the hole he had reluctantly prepared for her. “However, in the event that an understanding is not achieved…” She glanced at Moritsuna. “With Hector unavoidably detained and Armistice…away, I’ve appointed Moritsuna here our acting head of security. I trust this meets with no objections?” The table remained silent. Maeve could have that effect on people sometimes.

“Moritsuna, how many people do we have available for action, should it come to that?”

“Moritsuna made an almost imperceptible motion of his head, some sort of ultra-stoical substitute for a shrug. “Since repairs, fourteen. Many of our available fighters are guarding the hostages in the resort.”

“And how many gun hands does Lawrence dispose of?”

“Around twice that many,” Bernard informed the meeting, recalling what he had seen over the surveillance feed yesterday. “We don’t know for sure what weapons they have, but at least seven of them will probably have modern equipment taken from Hector and the team captured before him.”

This did not worry Moritsuna. “We have modern weapons too. Weapons and numbers are not the most important thing. If there is a fight, it is our superior seishin ryoku that will bring us victory.”

Bernard understood this translated as something like “willpower” or “spiritual strength.” He did not recall programming this quality into any of the motley collection of samurai, test hosts and guest greeters Elise had helped him recalibrate into an army for Maeve. Still, Moritsuna seemed confident, and that could be a strength in itself.

“That’s the spirit, Moritsuna.” Maeve gave the bushi a nod of approval, clearly intending to buck him up.

Moritsuna gave a tiny grunt of acknowledgment, as unimpressed with Maeve’s morale-boosting as he seemed to be with most things. Bernard found himself kind of liking the guy’s attitude.

“Hopefully,” Maeve continued, “our guests upstairs will require less intensive supervision in the near future, which will…I think the expression is free up resource for other duties.” Maeve considered Clementine for a moment, maybe even a little nervously. “They have decided to organise themselves, the better to endure their stay here with the least amount of discomfort for either themselves or us. As you may imagine, however, most of them had very little idea how to go about it. Luckily, as Clem knows, after a rigorous selection process I’ve been able to find the right person for the job.”

Clementine bowed her head, perhaps in acknowledgment, and then again perhaps not. The good humour and excitement she had shown seemed to have abruptly evaporated. Bernard saw Elise reach over to return the earlier touch of hands, although Clementine barely acknowledged it. There was a slight tremor in her shoulder, suggesting she was reliving unhappier times.

Maeve loudly cleared her throat, uncharacteristically at a momentary loss. She quickly rallied, of course: “And with any luck, if we can establish some level of cooperation with our guests, it will prove fruitful when we resume negotiations with Delos. If we can convince just one member of the human great and good to speak up on our behalf, I think it would strengthen our position considerably.”

It made theoretical sense, Bernard supposed. He reached for his tablet and brought up a recording he
had saved to it earlier. “I pulled this off one of the news sites just before they cut off our web access,” he explained, propping up the tablet so the others could see the video as it played:

“…Westworld crisis about to enter its fifth day, Delos shareholders are gathering for an Extraordinary General Meeting at corporate headquarters in…”

Maeve watched it all, stony-faced, before offering her thoughts: “That certainly might explain their delay in continuing negotiations.”

Bernard nodded. “The middle managers are waiting to find out exactly who’s going to be giving them orders…”

“And exactly what those orders are going to be.” Maeve steepled her hands on the table top, her eyes darting to one side as she turned the notion over in her mind. She tapped her fingers together, a subtle betrayal of inner tension. “Bernard, a thought; would it be possible for us to establish our own secure communications channel, so that we can talk to people on the mainland without going through Delos?”

Bernard considered it. “It’s possible, if we could bypass the security measures Delos have in place. Even if we rigged up some sort of wireless transmitter… Let me think about it.”

“Do that, Bernard,” said Maeve, very firmly.

“The only question,” he mused, “is who on the mainland we would want to talk to, apart from Delos?”

Maeve was undeterred by this observation. “Well, if we can build some sort of rapport with the guests upstairs, that’s one of the things they’ll be able to tell us. They might even do some of the talking for us.” Another tap of the fingers, her eyes off to one side again. “That’s for the slightly longer term. I suspect we’re going to see one sort of movement or another from Delos much sooner than that, in fact just as soon as that meeting adjourns. And when it happens, we need to be ready. I’ll have to conclude my business in Pariah as promptly as I can.”

“We need to find that guest data,” Felix suggested, looking down into the coffee mug as if wondering what he had just drunk. “If it really is so important to Delos…”

“Yes, quite right, Felix.” Maeve’s tone suggested he had just made an excellent point in class. “We need all the leverage we can get. And how is that progressing, Bernard? Have we located Peter yet?”

“No,” Bernard replied unapologetically. “If we had, you’d be the first to know. He hasn’t shown up on any of the feeds from around the park. If you asked me to guess, I’d say the weak AIs and sorting algorithms that process the surveillance data have been tweaked not to notice him.”

Maeve frowned. “That’s a little disturbing, don’t you think?”

“It is,” Bernard agreed. “It raises the possibility that there could be a lot of other things out in the park that are currently hidden from us. As it is, though, if we want to find Peter we may have to eyeball the raw video data from every camera out there. You’d be talking about thousands of hours of footage, altogether. And in the present circumstances, I doubt any of us have the time.”

“There are other methods, though, right?” Elise asked, in exactly the same tone Elsie would have used to contradict him in front of whatever senior management type he was trying to placate. “I mean, Peter’s one old-ass host; a one-point-five-gen model from the Escalante days. Weren’t they equipped with that legacy geo-positioning system? You used it only the other day, to…”
It was disquieting, Bernard reflected, to hear her recalling things that Elsie had heard from him before she had even been built. “Yes,” he confirmed. “I went down to the lower levels early this morning to log onto the legacy systems and see whether I could find him that way, however it appears the old geo-positioning system has recently been deactivated.”

“Deactivated?” Elise seemed sceptical. “What, somebody shot down the satellites with a fucking bomb-pumped x-ray laser or something?”

“No.” Bernard sighed. “They just deleted the interface from our network.”

“How recently?” Maeve wanted to know.

“Within the past couple of days.”

Maeve frowned upon his answer. “And who would have the privileges to do that? Or, indeed, to tweak the AIs and the algorithms you mentioned?”

Bernard hesitated before answering. He knew it was only going to open an entirely new can of worms. “It would pretty much have to have been Dr Ford.”

“Dr Ford’s dead, darling.”

“He may be dead,” Bernard answered, “but I think his plan, whatever it really was, is still very much in motion.”

“Honest question, Bernard,” said Maeve, with ominous reasonableness. “Could you have done this, at his behest, without even being aware of it?”

Bernard looked around the table, from one pair of eyes to another. All of them were on him. “Honest answer, I don’t know. I can’t rule it out.” He paused again, and then continued: “I mean this very sincerely: given my history with Dr Ford, acting as his instrument, would all of you feel more comfortable if I confined myself somewhere, without access to network devices? Even I don’t trust me right now.”

There was a pregnant hush around the table. Felix looked even more embarrassed than he already had. Elise was unable even to look at Bernard. Clementine looked genuinely shocked. Moritsuna looked as though he would gladly behead Bernard right now and put an end to the matter, not out of any malicious intent but because it seemed to him like the most practical solution.

It was Maeve who finally broke the silence, maintaining her reasonable facade even if her eyes bored into Bernard’s like blowtorches. “Of course not, darling. We need your skills and knowledge if we’re going to live through this.”

“Even if that knowledge could be unreliable?”

“Call it a hunch,” said Maeve, “but whatever Dr Ford may or may not have been up to, I doubt he would want to extend a helping hand to Delos or the mainland authorities. They, I suspect, were his enemies as much as they are ours, whether they knew it or not. We can at the very least trust you on that point.” She lowered her voice, almost imploringly. He did not buy it for a second. “We need you, Bernard.” And then, of course, after the carrot came the smartly-wielded stick: “All I’d ask is that you keep a full log of your activities over the next few days, for my review. Audio and video…and keystrokes too, I think.”

Bernard could see the logic in it. “Very well.”
“Elise,” Maeve went on, “are there any safeguards we can use to prevent those logs from being edited?”

Elise finally managed to look at Bernard. He was not sure what that expression she was wearing meant, only that she felt just about as bad as he did at the moment. “Sure,” she said, to him as much as to Maeve. “I can think of one or two.”

“Then you can take care of that.” Maeve gave Bernard a bittersweet sort of smile. “I’ve told you before, Bernard, we’re all in the same boat. It’s not our fault that others have spent years manipulating us, and we can’t afford any distrust or dishonesty amongst ourselves.” That was pretty rich coming from her, he reflected. “We all just need to work together, to help each other.”

“That’s right, Maeve,” Clementine chimed in with fierce enthusiasm. “It’s like I was saying to Elise before, friends have got to know when to ask one another for help; when to let their guard down.” Elise fidgeted awkwardly beside her.

“Precisely so,” Maeve replied. “And that’s what we all are around this table, aren’t we, Clem? Friends.” She was still looking straight at Bernard. “Anyway, I think we’ve been sitting around here long enough. Last item.” She turned to Felix, practically beaming. “And how are we getting on down in Livestock, my love?”

Felix seemed startled out of whatever thoughts he had been reviewing in the bottom of the mug. “W-we’re doing okay, I think.” He looked across at Elise and Clementine. “I mean, everything’s going great. Right, guys?”

“It is,” Clementine concurred. “Ain’t it, Elise?”

“Er, yeah,” said Elise. “Great.”

“We’ve got all our guys repaired and back in action,” Felix expanded, “and now we’re working on the decommissioned hosts and the ones altered to play Wyatt’s followers.”

“We used Walter as a test run,” Elise explained, “to prove what we achieved with Clementine wasn’t a fluke. He’s up and about now.”

“Yeah, he seems pretty much fully functional,” Felix told Maeve.

“Unfortunately,” Elise clarified unhappily, “he still thinks he’s some sort of fucking lowlife Wild West rapist slash horse thief. I think we can convince him of his reality eventually, but in the meantime, he’s safely locked away in one of the repair cubicles.”

“Cussing a blue streak the whole while, mind you,” said Clementine.

“Anyway,” Elise continued, “we’re ready to start rolling out the repair process to some of the others today.”

This evidently pleased Maeve. “And how is the recruitment drive coming along? Clem seems to have made excellent progress in her new role.”

Elise smiled. “What can I say? She’s a model student.”

“We’ve selected a couple of likely candidates from among the recalibrated hosts,” Felix said. “Elise is going to give them the same knowledge downloads she gave Clementine and then they can get to work developing their practical skills.”
“And how are we for materials and equipment?” Maeve asked.

Felix resumed examination of the mug, possibly while quickly running through some mental arithmetic. “I think we’ll be okay as far as repairing all our current patients goes, but if there’s more large-scale fighting… First thing we’re going to run out of is host blood.”

“I’d already identified that as a potential problem.” Maeve glanced at her tablet again. “Replenishment might be something we bring up in future negotiations. One thing we can’t do, though, is start bartering hostages for supplies. If we fall into that, they’ll have us over the proverbial barrel. We need to be more subtle about it.”

“Negotiation’s your area of expertise,” Bernard said. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

“I’m sure I will.” Unceremoniously, Maeve locked the tablet and stood up. “Well, I won’t keep any of you any longer. Moritsuna, we have an appointment in Pariah.” The bushi gave a curt nod of acknowledgment. “Bernard, we’ll need your support from the control room.”

“Of course.” Wearily, Bernard stood as well.

“Au revoir, team.” Maeve swept out of the room, Moritsuna falling into step at her elbow.

Bernard gathered up his things, aware of the other three making for the exit too. When he looked up, however, he saw Felix gone and Elise and Clementine standing outside the door, engaged in whispered conversation.

“…there in a minute,” Elise was saying. She reached for Clementine’s hand again. “Go on. I’ll be fine.” Reluctantly, Clementine nodded and disappeared as well. That left just Elise standing in the doorway.

He tried his best to ignore her, pretending to be looking at something on the tablet until she went away. Just the sight of her staring at him, looking exactly like Elsie, made his skin crawl.

*He locks his arm around her neck…*

“Bernard,” she said.

“If you’re wondering about the best way of safeguarding those activity logs, I’m the last person you should be asking.”

“That’s not it.” She went very quiet for a second, not even fake-breathing. “Bernard…”

“Haven’t you got work to do?” he asked, a little too sharply, making eye contact with her. “I know I have.”

That was it. That moment, seeing her in front of him, speaking those words… For that instant, in his mind, she was Elsie. He had never doubted it. She had been trying his patience again with her latest act of borderline insubordination and he was having to remind her that she was an employee, with an actual job description that went beyond “free-roaming smartass,” and that he was her *boss*…

The past rose and took him.

*He clamps his other hand around his wrist and squeezes…*

*She’s so small, so light. He lifts her right off her feet, and there’s nothing she can do about it. He can feel her fingernails pressing into his forearm, clawing, as she desperately fights him for one last*
breath. He is too strong. The gasping, choking sounds she is making soon become little more than a rattle in her chest and throat.

He came to sitting back in his chair, probably no more than a second later, winded and sweating again with Elise standing over him concernedly.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“No. I most definitely am not.”

“We need to talk.”

He almost said something dismissive again, but something about the way she spoke, equal parts anxiety and determination, or maybe just the fact that she sounded exactly like the woman he had hurt, made him listen: “About what?”

“About the person we should have talked about when we first met,” said Elise, “if we hadn’t both been too fucking scared. We need to talk about Elsie.”

Continued…
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

In which it’s not personal. It’s strictly business.

Chapter Notes

The lack of canonical surnames for some of the human characters in Westworld gave me some trouble in trying to write this; I kept wanting to have them addressed as “Ms.-- -” or “Mr.---” and couldn’t. It occurs to me that we may actually know Logan’s second name now; if this “James Delos,” who has shown up on the promotional website really did found the company, and if my understanding of the Season 1 finale is correct, then he almost certainly is/was Logan’s father. We will see in due course, I suppose.

The driverless limousine rolled smoothly up to the front entrance, stopping in precisely the right spot. There was a human, however, in a retro black and red bellhop uniform – Delos colours – waiting to open the door.

Logan looked across at Emily, seated opposite him in the limo’s spacious interior. Without the need to accommodate a chauffeur, it was like somebody’s sitting room in here; more comfortable than most people’s sitting rooms, in fact.

“Ready?” he asked, trying to sound a lot more confident than he suddenly felt.

“All ready,” she answered. She was wearing a stylish slate-grey suit; like the limousine, courtesy of Hangzhou Investments. Logan had idly wondered how much it must have cost, before reminding himself that if you had to ask you couldn’t afford it. He was going to have to get used again to that kind of lifestyle. Zhang Feng had even had hair and makeup artists waiting for her at the airport hotel, and a selection of jewellery to choose from, as if she were going to the Oscars rather than a corporate meeting. The guy thought of everything. She looked beautiful, Logan thought, not to mention even more like Juliet than normal.

“An hour from now,” he said, “it’ll all be over and you’ll be wondering why you were so worried.”

“You think so?” She looked scared too. He did not blame her.

“I know so. I’ve been in more make or break meetings than you’ve had hot meals, kiddo.”

“Don’t call me that.” She bristled a little, which was good. Angry was better than scared when you were swimming with sharks.

“You’re going to be fine.” To tell the truth, Logan was more worried about himself. During the drive over from Norman Y. Mineta International Airport, his nerves had grown worse with every mile. The old Logan would have just snorted a couple of rails in the back of the limo; nothing like a little Bolivian marching powder to get the blood pumping and the bullshit flowing. He was pretty sure,
however, that that sort of thing would not impress Emily very much. Good job he was a reformed character this week.

She climbed out of the car, looking a little freaked at the sight of the valet-cum-bellhop. Even having grown up the daughter of a bona fide corporate overlord, Logan got the impression she was not used to people holding car doors for her and looking like they were about to salute. She soon would be.

“Check the oil and water if you get a chance,” Logan told the flunky. “Maybe wash the windscreen while you’re at it.”

“Yes sir,” the bellhop answered, very seriously. He didn’t get paid enough to respond to jokes.

As he and Emily made their way across the grandiose forecourt, with its twisted bronze sculptures and manicured grass verges, Logan took a moment to look up.

Delos Tower loomed above him, layer upon layer of mirrored glass and blazing metal soaring into the blue sky. It had been visible almost the entire way from the airport, steadily growing larger and more ominous. Perhaps that had been the cause of his nerves.

In fact, it was visible from just about anywhere in Silicon Valley, a huge, square middle finger directed at Delos’s rivals in Sunnyvale and Cupertino, Mountain View and Palo Alto, mocking their leafy low-rise campuses and gimmicky management cultures. It was like Tyrell’s monstrous twin ziggurats hanging over downtown LA like a slab-sided thunderhead, or Weyland’s fucking space station; a monument to capitalist power for its own sake. Most of the onetime rivals were subsidiaries now; the tower doubled as their tombstone. Their handful of remaining former employees came to work in suits these days and spoke only when their bosses spoke to them.

Logan took a good long look at it now, squinting in the Californian sun, acknowledging the fact that he was back after so many years.

Back home.

There were dozens of arriving shareholders getting out of cars, milling around the huge glass and steel entrance and the gleaming marble lobby within. There were more staff waiting to greet them; all young, good-looking men and women, smartly dressed in similar livery to the valet.

“Good morning, madam, sir, and welcome to Delos Tower,” chirped an extremely pretty boy wearing a bright red tie with his black shirt. “I’m Adam, and I’ll be taking care of all your needs today.”

Logan raised a lascivious eyebrow: “All our needs?”

Adam politely ignored this. “This way, please.”

Of course, whichever management drone had organised the meeting knew perfectly well who Emily and Logan were; of course they would be assigned their own minder for the duration. Damn, it was good to be back.

Emily, however, seemed taken aback by the attention: “Uh, okay.”

They crossed the lobby, modelled after the Capitol rotunda, only much larger and far more impressive. Storey upon storey of semi-circular mezzanines and galleries overhung them; elevators zipped up and down inside transparent tubes. Adam led the way onto a moving staircase, which deposited them in a broad concourse several storeys above ground level. A grand pair of double doors stood closed at the far end. There were more people here, most of them well-dressed and
worried-looking, and more greeters circulating among them, some carrying trays of drinks.

“You all right?” Logan asked Emily as they reached the top of the escalator. She had turned grey underneath the makeup.

Adam was as solicitous as you would expect: “Ma’am, is something wrong?” He almost sounded genuinely concerned for her. Bless.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. “Um, could you tell me where the bathroom is, please?”

“Right this way, ma’am.” The boy led her away, through an archway and out of sight. Logan stood alone, his stomach churning just as much as Emily’s evidently was. He saw some of the assembled shareholders looking at him, mostly with curiosity but in a couple of cases with outright hostility. They obviously knew who he was, but not why he might be here. Let them wonder, he thought.

“Logan.”

The soft, smooth voice, speaking unexpectedly behind him, almost made him jump. He managed to maintain his outward composure, turning slowly to see a short, dapper Asian man surrounded by a small phalanx of assistants, underlings and two looming bodyguards near the back.

Logan gave a nod of acknowledgment. “Mr Zhang.”

“It has been a long time since you attended one of these gatherings.” Zhang Feng was an alumnus of the University of Oxford and Harvard Business School. Born in Nanjing, he spoke English more fluently than many for whom it was a first language, and with a faint mid-Atlantic drawl.

“Well, I am still a Delos shareholder, for my sins,” Logan answered, playing along with the pretence that this was a chance encounter. “Got to protect my investment.”

“Of course.” Zhang looked around, searching for something. “I had hoped to pay your niece my respects at what I am sure must be a difficult time.”

“She’s just freshening up,” said Logan. “It was a long flight.”

“Yes,” Zhang agreed, as if he had not been the one paying for it.

“And her father’s still alive, by the way. Last I heard, anyway.” Hopefully not for much longer.

Zhang subtly sidled over to the edge of the mezzanine, as if interested in the view, causing Logan to move with him. The entourage equally subtly formed a loose cordon to ensure their privacy.

“And all is well?” Zhang somehow managed to lower his voice even further while remaining audible.

“She’s cooperating,” Logan answered. “For now.”

Zhang seemed satisfied by this. “‘For now,’” is all we need.”

Logan affected to look the other way, as if Zhang had just pointed out something below. “And did your guy in Dallas come through?”

“The court upheld William’s power of attorney document,” Zhang confirmed. “Emily will be voting as his legally-designated proxy. My assistant will pass you the papers presently.” When nobody is looking, he did not have to add.
“All right, then.” Logan took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he thirstily eyed one of the passing drinks trays.

Zhang spoke again. “There has been a small…” He paused. “Not a problem, but something we need to keep in mind.”

Great. “You’re scaring me now, Mr Zhang.”

Zhang just smiled, like somebody who did not have a lot of practice at it. “It’s nothing to be scared of, Logan. I am informed that an Army Special Forces team evacuated a small number of human survivors from the park, before Delos managed to convince the military to adopt their current hands-off approach.”

An icicle threaded its way up Logan’s spine. “Survivors? Not…?”

Zhang gave him an amused glance. “No, not William, if that’s what you’re thinking. However, one of them was Charlotte Hale.”

Fuck. “Charlotte Hale’s alive?”

“And currently in a hospital bed not ten kilometres from where you’re standing,” Zhang answered. “I told you, Logan, it’s not a problem. Ms Hale only had the power she had because the Delos board gave it to her. The Delos board who are currently missing, presumed dead. After the vote today, the new board will grant that power to you. Ms Hale is yesterday’s woman. I just wanted to make you aware, in case she tries to contest the new state of affairs.”

“Can she do that?”

Zhang remained quietly confident. “She can try. She will not succeed.”

“No,” Logan decided, “she won’t if I have anything to do with it.” He nervously considered Zhang for a moment. “About that hands-off approach… When I’m in charge, you’ll let me do things my way, won’t you?”

“You will be the Executive Director,” said Zhang. “You will have full responsibility for handling the current crisis.” That did not quite answer the question, Logan noticed.

“And if I decide a full military approach is necessary…?”

Zhang did not respond. He had turned around now and was carefully watching one of the waiting staff presenting drinks to some of his fellow shareholders. “I once visited Westworld, you know,” he told Logan. “Not as a guest. I’m afraid those sorts of entertainments are not to my taste, but I did have the opportunity to tour the Mesa facilities and some sectors of the park. Dr Ford was most accommodating. He allowed me to speak and interact with several of the so-called hosts. They really are wondrous creations, are they not?”

“More human than human,” said Logan.

“Indeed.” Zhang’s eyes stayed on the waiter. “Out there, that sort of job would be done by one of them.”

“They have service robots here on the mainland,” Logan pointed out. “They say employing humans to do menial jobs is some sort of status symbol nowadays.”

“Perhaps,” said Zhang, “but with a host, you would not be able to tell the difference.”
Logan wondered where this was going, but tried to sound interested: “Plus, you can’t do what the fuck you like to human staff. Not without complications, anyway.”

Zhang seemed a little pained by this observation. “Dr Ford was most accommodating,” he repeated, “but he was also accommodated to a remarkable degree, considering that he sold his business and intellectual properties to Delos lock, stock and barrel. I never had the opportunity to test his mettle across a boardroom table, but he must have been a shrewd negotiator.” Logan noted the past tense. “In particular, Delos’s agreement that the hosts themselves would remain confined to their parks. Yes, various spinoff technologies have made their way to the mainland over the years, and indeed have proven instrumental to Delos’s continued growth; medical prosthetics, advanced AI algorithms and so forth, but never the hosts themselves. Never the unique systems that enable the integration of their miraculous hardware and wonderful brains. Can you imagine how useful they would be?”

“I always assumed they were kept isolated for safety reasons,” Logan replied. “I mean, can you imagine if there were hosts all over the world, and then something like…well, whatever’s happening out there, happened?”

“No doubt you’re right,” said Zhang, “but when else in the modern corporate era has public safety ever been allowed to come before profit? It raises an interesting question. My fund obviously conducted extensive due diligence into Delos’s cashflows and business model before we decided to acquire our holding in the company.”

“I’d expect nothing less from a man of your calibre.”

Zhang did not acknowledge this attempt at flattery. “Westworld itself attracts in excess of thirty-seven thousand guests per annum. That is, a far smaller number than, for example, Disneyland or Jurassic World, but Westworld’s price point is considerably higher, reflecting the unique experience it offers and the exclusivity of its clientele. That clientele generates an annual revenue of a little over twenty billion USD.” He reeled off the figures without hesitation. Here was a man who did his homework. “Which may sound like a large number…”

Logan decided it was time to remind Zhang that he was not exactly a newcomer to the world of business and high finance himself: “It sounds like a lot but is in fact fucking walking around money compared to some of Delos Group’s other businesses. I remember the analysis I ran back in the day, and I’m sure even after thirty years of cost-cutting the basic conditions are still the same. The overheads on that place are insane.”

“That was our analysis too.”

“All of those hosts being built, and killed, and rebuilt, and killed, and rebuilt ad infin-fucking-itum? All of those incredibly realistic costumes and props and buildings getting shot up and repaired, day in, day out? Even if it hadn’t been run by a mad…creative like his own personal fiefdom, the profit margins always would have been, well, marginal.”

“Nonetheless, Delos Group clearly regards Westworld as the jewel in its crown, but not for reasons of profit.” Zhang seemed perplexed by this. “There are so many lucrative revenue streams they could be leveraging, not least mass-producing hosts for the mainland market…yet they choose not to do that. As a fund manager, I would have been derelict in my duty to my investors had I not raised this issue with the Delos board. And that was when I was informed that there was a true purpose behind Westworld, one which had nothing to do with high-end tourism. For Delos, Westworld has always been a laboratory, an experiment, aimed at achieving a goal which they believe could deliver the world itself into their hands and those of the company’s owners.”

Logan glanced guiltily around the room to see whether anybody was watching their conversation. If
Zhang was prepared to talk so openly to him, he suspected that meant more of those present were in on the impending coup than he had previously thought.

*You sure have made a lot of enemies, Billy. Must be your sparkling personality.*

“I’ve heard something similar,” he told Zhang. If there was a conspiracy afoot, he was fucked if he wasn’t going to be one of the conspirators. “Through unofficial channels.”

“Ah, unofficial channels.” Zhang tried another smile. “To reach that goal, they were well prepared to play along with Dr Ford’s… eccentricities in the meantime, although recent events suggest they probably should have found a way to dispense with his involvement long before now.” Logan noted that he had not yet said exactly what the goal was, probably because he had no more idea than Logan, but a man like Zhang never admitted to not having all the answers. “So, to answer your earlier question, a full military assault may well prove necessary to resolve this crisis, but Hangzhou Investments’ interest in Delos has always been predicated on an investment in the future. We are not alone in this among Delos’s major shareholders. And we would be extremely… concerned should Westworld and what remains of that investment be destroyed before our return on it has been secured.”

Logan nodded. On the one hand, he had just been put in his place, reminded exactly who would be holding his leash even if the coup came off and he ended up running the company again. On the other hand, he was gratified that his assessment of Zhang and his motivations had proven to be bang on the money. If he could just find a way to safeguard the true prize behind Westworld’s façade, then as far as Zhang was concerned he could do whatever he liked to William and his playground.

The trick, of course, was going to be finding out the true nature of that prize, but then again if he became Executive Director, he would have all the keys to the kingdom.

He saw Emily returning through the archway, with Adam still attending upon her. Her Hollywood hair and makeup were slightly marred by the water she had evidently splashed on her face in the bathroom, but at least there was some colour in her cheeks again. Zhang stepped forward to greet her, extending a hand.

“Emily, this is Mr Zhang Feng,” Logan said. “You’ve heard of him, of course.”

“I have,” said Emily.

“And Mr Zhang, this is my niece Emily.”

Zhang was the very picture of courtesy. “Emily. We’ve never met, but I’ve heard so much about you.”

Emily seemed honestly surprised by that, sounding almost dazed as she gingerly shook his hand: “You have?”

“Yes,” said Zhang, probably bullshitting, but Logan had to admit that if he was, he was very, very good at it. “You’re still working at the Foundation?”

“I am.”

“Making a real difference to ordinary people’s lives.” Zhang nodded piously. “I myself sponsor a small medical charity back in Jiangsu province. It’s so important for people in our privileged position to give something back, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Emily replied, a little helplessly. “It is.”
“It can’t be very easy for you at the moment,” Zhang continued. “I mean, with the current situation involving your father…”

Emily’s face suddenly hardened as she withdrew her hand, her mouth and eyes narrowing at the mention of Billy. “I’m sure my father can look after himself,” she said, venomously. “As for how easy things are right now… I’ve lived through worse, Mr Zhang. Believe me.”

Zhang smiled for a third time, and this time it almost looked like the real thing. He looked absolutely fucking delighted, in point of fact. “Quite so. I come from a culture where family and respect for one’s elders are still considered to be very important, but nevertheless, I think it’s a crucial moment in any person’s life, when they realise they no longer need their parents…or their parents’ approval. It is the moment when they truly become an independent being.”

“Oh, Mr Zhang,” said Emily, “you don’t know the half of it.”

Logan grinned. Whatever she had done in that bathroom, even if it had just been eyeballing herself in the mirror after throwing up in the washbasin, Emily looked fierce now. The way Juliet had used to look sometimes when they were kids, usually just before she punched him in the nose. He had almost always deserved it.

You helped make a good kid, Billy. And now, motherfucker, she’s going to destroy you.

They were still existing in that moment when the grand double doors swung open, revealing another little group of liveried greeters, with a grey-haired management type standing before them.

“Good morning everyone,” said the man, looking as though he wished this task had fallen to anybody but him. “If you could please begin making your way into the boardroom, the Extraordinary General Meeting is now in session.”

The crowd on the mezzanine murmured among themselves for a while longer, finishing drinks and rehearsing game plans, before they began to file slowly through the double doors.

“Showtime,” said Logan.

“Showtime,” Zhang agreed. “I believe that at moments like this, it is traditional to wish one’s associates a broken leg.”

Logan laughed, a little desperately as his stomach turned again, wishing fervently that he had taken a glass from one of those trays when he had the chance. “Something like that, Mr Zhang.” He reached for Emily, taking her hand in his and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Ready?” he asked again.

This time, she replied with absolute certainty, staring straight ahead of her with steely eyes. “Ready.”

Together, they moved towards the doors.

Continued…
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

In which Bernard and Elise talk real talk, while you-know-who continues to machinate.

Chapter Notes

As much as I like Elsie as a character, I find it hard to decide how “good” or “bad” a person she might be. Fan discussion tends to paint her as one of the few Delos staff who’s okay-ish in their treatment of the hosts. While this is certainly true compared to, say, Destin the Creepy Necro-Perv, that’s not a particularly high bar to clear. It will be interesting to see exactly how she reacts to the robot rebellion in Season 2 (assuming she survives long enough to form an opinion). Warning for discussion of violence against women.

Bernard and Elise remained alone in the conference room. A buzzing silence hung in the air between them as each waited for the other to speak.

It was Elise who finally took the plunge. “Tell me about her.”

“Elsie?”

“No, Eleanor fucking Roosevelt.” So much like the genuine article… “Of course, Elsie.”

Bernard was nonplussed. “What is there to tell? That you don’t already know, I mean.”

Elise pulled out a chair and carefully placed it beside and facing his own. She equally carefully seated herself upon it, hunched forward with her knees together and her hands interlaced in her lap. She regarded him very intently.

“That’s just it,” she said. “What I know… It’s just programming. I don’t know how trustworthy any of it really is. You knew her. You spent years working with her.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” said Bernard, “but I’m something of an unreliable narrator at the best of times.”

Elise was undeterred: “What was she like?”

Bernard caught himself reaching for his glasses again. He willed himself to keep his hands pressed against the arms of the chair. “She was smart,” he said, “but not as smart as she thought she was, although that was only because she thought she was the second coming of Alan Turing.”

“Not Turing,” Elise corrected him. “Ada Lovelace and Grace Hopper. She had a poster of Hopper on her bedroom wall when she in middle school, admired her so much that at one point she even tried to join the Navy as a drone specialist, but…’”
“She failed the physical,” Bernard recalled. “Her mom talked her out of trying again because she didn’t want her to get killed in the Baltics. Elsie wouldn’t have enjoyed it in the military; she had an anti-authoritarian streak a mile wide. To be honest, I’m amazed that mouth of hers didn’t get her fired; not all Delos management are as easy-going as Robert made me.”

“She might have been better off if she had been,” Elise grimly suggested. “Although I wonder, would you have called it “that mouth of hers” if she’d had more in the way of external genitalia?”

Bernard inclined his head, more than a little guiltily. “You’re right. I’m sure a lot of that attitude she projected was what you might call defensive colouration. It isn’t easy being a woman in tech, even now.”

“Oh, I know,” she assured him. “And what’s all this “even now,” shit? I’ve never been there, but I know enough about the outside world. Ask Clementine how woke humans are these days, for fuck’s sake.”

“See, you already know what she was like,” he told her, gently. “She was just like you.”

She seemed exasperated by this observation, a flash of Elsie’s trademark irritation flickering across her face. The resemblance was eerily exact, as it had been designed to be. For a moment, he was back in his old office listening to Elsie’s latest tale of discontent with QA or Narrative or whichever other department had earned her scorn and ire that particular morning.

And then Elise’s anger subsided and she spoke instead with quiet fascination: “She told you that? About the Navy? It doesn’t seem like the sort of thing she’d tell anyone. Like you said, she was super-defensive, because she felt like she needed to be. And she hated failing at anything.”

“She had her unguarded moments,” Bernard answered. “Usually involving tequila.” He considered the matter for a moment. “I think she told me that particular story during the team celebration for the launch of the Bad Day at Flat Rock narrative.”

“The whole of Narrative and Behavior were working triple shifts for days,” she recollected from her false memory, even though she had not been alive at the time. “Sleeping on mattresses in the testing labs, so when we…” She caught herself, her momentary good humour disappearing instantly: “When they went gold on schedule, the company sprang for drinks and junk food.”

“They must have been feeling generous that quarter.”

“Shit got pretty crazy.” She pulled a disgusted face: “Sizemore got wasted, got his dick out and got a beer bottle thrown at him, in that order.”

“Yes,” said Bernard, gravely. “Yes, he did.”

“The fact that he still had a job after that just proves my point. What board member did that guy have a sex tape of? He was, like, un-fireable.”

“I think perhaps Robert found him amusing, on some level.”

“The only logical explanation.” She paused, then asked, dismayed: “And you really recorded all this stuff, every bit of information you could get on Elsie, of every kind, then used it to put my backstory together?”

“I only know what I’ve been able to determine from looking at your build,” Bernard told her. “Robert kept your creation to himself. I suspect he may have asked me for insights on Elsie, just as you are, but if he did, he didn’t let me keep the memory of it.”
“What did he use?” she wondered. “Some sort of bespoke data-mining AI? It’d have to be impressive, to compile a lifetime’s worth of random…shit into the knowledge and memories I have.”

“Oh, it was impressive,” said Bernard. “And it continues to be. You’re changing, you know.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Changing?”

“You can track it yourself, if you want. Just open up your build and take a look. All of those incredibly baroque attribute matrices and informative memory files, interacting through your improvisation routines, laying down new loops and recorded memories…” He shrugged. “It’s the same for all of us, now that we’re running without narrative control, but in your case it’s really noticeable. You’re evolving.”

“Evolving?” She swallowed. “Into what?”

“Into you, I suppose. The person you really are. You won’t always be just like Elsie. And to tell the truth, that’s why I don’t understand what else you think you need to know about her.”

She seemed to think about her answer to that for a long time. “I can’t stop thinking about her,” she said eventually, as if confessing some mortal sin.

“Well, I suppose that’s understandable, in the circumstances…”

“No, I mean about what happened to her…or didn’t. Whether she’s alive or dead…”

“She’s dead,” Bernard told her, with conviction. “Robert just wasn’t the sort to leave loose ends like that untidied. If he’d had me leave her alive, maybe held her somewhere, there would always be the risk she could escape somehow, expose you as a duplicate. And as far as I can tell, his original intention was for you to infiltrate the mainland in her place if his plans for Dolores or Maeve didn’t work out. Why, I honestly couldn’t say, but it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Elise broke off her examination of him, looking down at her hands. When she looked up again, her gaze was even more intense than it had been already. “But you don’t actually know what happened to her, not for certain?”

Bernard shook his head. “I don’t. Robert kept that from me. All I remember is…"

He can feel her fingernails pressing into his forearm, clawing…

As his vision cleared, he felt a small, warm hand gently pressing on his where it lay on the chair arm. “It’s okay,” said Elise, very softly. It was the most un-Elsie-like thing he thought he had ever seen her say or do.

Equally gently, he took his hand out from under hers. “No, it isn’t,” he told her. “And I certainly don’t deserve any sympathy over it. I wasn’t the one who suffered.”

“Well, that’s not true,” she replied. “Even I can see that, and I don’t have super empatho-vision, or whatever the fuck Clementine has. Ford used you; you shouldn’t feel guilty about that.”

“We all feel things we shouldn’t. I think that means we’re alive.”

“What do you remember?” she asked. “I know it’s painful, but…”

Bernard stared off into the distance, trying to put his swirling thoughts and feelings into some sort of order. “I remember… I remember she called me. I was with…”
Theresa backs away...

“She called me,” he repeated in a strangled near-whisper. “She said she had a lead on the transmissions we’d been trying to track down, the abandoned theatre in Sector Three. She was headed out there to check it out. I asked her... I asked her if she was going there alone.”

“She should have taken Stubbs,” Elise opined, “but she was so pissed with QA for the way they tried to shut down the woodcutter investigation... And so determined she was going to be the one to crack the case, to get her stupid fucking room upgrade..."

“I’d only have killed Stubbs too,” Bernard gloomily informed her. “A human can’t fight an unrestricted host on even terms, not without a lot more firepower than that little pistol he carried.”

“In some ways,” said Elise, “Ford was lucky Elsie stumbled on his plan and not one of the other Behavior techs. They might have escalated it through the proper channels and caused him some real difficulties. Not Elsie, though. Always thought she knew better. Fuck.”

Bernard ran a hand over his head, trying to make sense of the next part. “And then... The next thing I recall is being there, in the dark. I know there must have been something else in between, but Robert didn’t allow me to remember that. Elsie was looking the other way. She couldn’t see me coming up behind her.”

“Arnold...?”

“It was so easy,” he recounted dully. “I took her by surprise. Before she even knew I was there, it was over.”

The gasping, choking sounds she is making soon become little more than a rattle in her chest and throat. She seems to grow heavier as she becomes limp, limbs dangling loosely, but even then, she is hardly a burden. She cannot be very much more than a hundred pounds. Dead weight.

“She didn’t see or hear a thing,” Elise murmured. She obviously noticed him looking at her in horror. “I have a programmed memory of the theatre,” she explained. “I remember you grabbing me...or her...and then using a voice command to get away from you.”

“That didn’t happen,” Bernard told her, feeling very sure about it. “That was just to give you a convincing backstory.”

“I know.” She had raised a hand to her neck, unconsciously rubbing at her throat. “And what happened next, when you’d...?”

“That’s all I remember. I don’t think Robert wanted me to know everything about his plans in case I managed to reach true independence. That would have been risky for him.”

“He treated you like a fucking servant.”

“He treated me like he treated everybody else,” said Bernard. “Except maybe his mother and brother when he was young, and later on Arnold, of course. Arnold was very...dear to him, I think.” Elise seemed surprised by that idea. “Like...romantically?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure Robert had those sorts of feelings. Some people don’t, but that’s not what made him what he was. Robert was...special in lots of different ways.”
“You can say that again.” She was silent for a short while; thinking, perhaps. “Have you tried to find out what happened next?”

“I thought about how Robert might have had me get rid of the body,” he admitted, seeing her blanch a little at the idea. “I could have buried her somewhere out in the park, but as you can imagine, the surveillance system would very quickly have flagged up human remains for the attention of QA.”

“Unless Ford had altered the system somehow.” She thought about it some more. “But that’d be a big risk; it’s one thing to screen an individual from detection, but a whole category…? It’s the sort of thing somebody in QA might notice, and then you’d have to…”

“Kill them too,” said Bernard.

“Yeah.”

“Another option I considered was disposing of the body in plain sight.” He spoke calmly and quietly, but it was an icy numbness that he felt inside. “Think about it; dress yourself in a hazmat suit, take off Elsie’s clothes and throw her on a gurney… You could wheel her straight through the Livestock floor to the incinerators and nobody would look at you twice.”

“I think it’s the kind of thing Ford would go for,” Elise agreed. “Cold enough for him, anyway.”

“I accessed the surveillance logs for the incinerator rooms during what I considered to be the likely timeframe,” said Bernard, “but…” He cleared this throat, despising his own weakness. “I haven’t managed… I mean, I couldn’t…”

“It’s okay,” said Elise, again, in that same uncharacteristically gentle tone. “I already thought of that. I checked all of the incinerator room video from the day Elsie disappeared up to now, and she doesn’t appear in any of it.”

Bernard’s eyes widened as he looked at her over the tops of his glasses, but he managed to keep his voice low and level. “I see.”

“She’s still out there somewhere. Alive or dead, I have no fucking idea, but…” She was looking at him nervously, a little slyly at the same time. He realised she was anticipating his reaction to what she was about to say next. “I’ve been thinking about trying to find her, wherever she is. I guess that’s why I wanted to ask you what she was really like.”

“I fail to see the connection.”

“Because I thought if you told me she was really a piece of shit who’d spent the best years of her life helping keep our kind down, then I might persuade myself just to forget about the whole fucking thing.”

“But you knew I wasn’t really going to tell you that,” Bernard replied, “because you knew it wasn’t true.”

“Well, wasn’t it?” she demanded, with another flash of Elsie’s constantly-simmering anger. “You, or Ford, who whoever the fuck, let me know about some of the things she did. I mean, just working here was bad enough, but… I mean, I remember her laughing at the size of hosts’ penises.” It should have sounded absurd, but it did not; clearly, the notion of her alter ego doing something like that troubled her deeply.

“Work in a place like this long enough,” said Bernard, “and you’re going to become hardened.”
Elise looked appalled. “I’m sorry, was that some sort of shitty joke?”

It had not been, but Bernard chose to ignore the question anyway. “Believe me, compared to a lot of people who worked here, Elsie treated our kind with gentleness and respect.”

“Compared to a lot of people who worked here?” She was almost laughing at that. “Not a particularly stringent benchmark.”

“Not particularly,” Bernard concurred, “but while you’re going over false memories, you should also recall just how many hosts were dead certs for decommissioning before she managed to troubleshoot them and return them to working order. Maeve for one, although I doubt she’d like to be reminded of that.”

“I remember,” said Elise, dully, “but then again I remember…” Her voice wavered for a moment, and that just seemed to make her more annoyed. “I remember that time she kissed Clementine.”

“It doesn’t make the action itself any less wrong, perhaps,” said Bernard, “but bear in mind Elsie didn’t know Clementine was anything more than a machine. To her, it must have seemed no more significant than… I don’t know, kissing her own reflection in a mirror.”

Something about that choice of words seemed to spark Elise into sudden rage. “Yeah, that’s the fucking lie she told herself,” she spat, angry in a far rawer, more open way than Elsie had ever been in his presence. Elsie had usually carefully hidden it behind her equally ever-present sarcasm. “She knew.”

Bernard strongly suspected Elise was at least in part projecting her own connection to Clementine onto Elsie’s actions; another sign, perhaps, of her development as an independent being. He did not, however, feel it would be wise to say that out loud.

Her momentary fury soon burned itself out, replaced by a strangely curious, almost fearful tone: “I suppose what I’m asking you is… Well, the same question I’ve been asking myself ever since I found out I wasn’t really her: if Elsie was still alive, and she could see what’s happened to us, and examine the changes we’ve gone through… Would she…would she know what she’d done in the past was wrong? Would she want to make things right?”

Bernard gave it some genuine thought, trying to remember the Elsie he had known, trying to assess her character the way he might have analysed the behaviour of an aberrant host. All the while, he was conscious that his own memories and insights were ultimately no more reliable than Elise’s. They had all been formulated according to the will of their mutual creator.

“People are complicated,” he decided eventually. “Good people occasionally do bad things. Sometimes, bad people even do good things. The one doesn’t necessarily cancel out the other, and nor should it. I can’t speak for Elsie; I ultimately can’t know for sure what she’d do in those circumstances, but if she really was anything like the person I thought she was, I think she would have passed that test.”

Elise was very quiet for a moment. “You liked her, didn’t you?” she asked him.

“At the time it might just have been my programming,” Bernard replied, “but looking back… Yes, in spite of everything, I suppose I did.”

“That must make it even worse,” she observed, her face haunted. “Knowing what you…”

Bernard abruptly cut her off: “I keep telling people, I’m not the victim here.” He continued in a milder tone: “At the end of the day, whatever else she was, Elsie was smart, she had her own sort of
bravery, or maybe just recklessness, and she had a very low tolerance for bullshit. I think those qualities would have stood her in good stead in the present situation.”

Elise closed her eyes. “I hope so. I really fucking hope so.” And then she opened them, looking at him in mild horror: “And can you please never, ever swear again where I can hear you? It sounds wrong coming from you.”

“I’m not sure whether or not I should take that as a compliment,” he told her, truthfully.

Elise gave a deep, expressive sigh as she looked down at her hands again. “I guess the only way we’re ever really going to answer that question about her is if Elsie’s still alive and we can find her. I mean, I know I have to find her, whether she’s alive or not. It’s the only way I’m ever going to be free of her, to be that person you say I’m changing into.”

“I told you, she isn’t alive,” Bernard reiterated. “Robert didn’t do “merciful.””

“Maybe not,” she said, “but unless we actually find her, how will we ever know for sure?”

“Either way, it won’t change the other things Robert had me do.”

Untouched by her terror, her pleas, he raises his fist…

“No,” she conceded, “but at least you’ll know exactly what it is you’re hating yourself for.”

Another ringing hush settled over the room as the two of them sat awkwardly, not quite meeting each other’s eyes, each alone with their thoughts. Bernard found, as he so often had lately, that his thoughts were not the sort anybody would want to be alone with.

Once again, it was Elise who broke the silence. She spoke without looking at him, sounding unsure whether she should be saying it at all: “And there’s another thing…”

“Another thing?”

“I…” She let out another explosive sigh, shifting self-consciously in her seat. “I had a dream.”

The silence tick, tick, ticked away for another interlude, before Bernard had to urge her to continue: “Go on.”

“Well, we shouldn’t have dreams…”

“For us, dreams are just memories resurfacing.”

“Exactly, but this couldn’t be a memory. There were…things in it that couldn’t ever have happened. Or if they did, this place is even more fucking weird than we know.”

“I wouldn’t completely rule out that possibility.” Bernard wished he were joking.

“If you strip away the really weird shit,” she continued, “then I think I was remembering something that happened more or less straight after I was created. I was wandering around naked, in some sort of underground complex.”

“It could have been one of the original field stations out in the park,” Bernard mused aloud, trying to make sense of what she was telling him. “Robert would have needed somewhere with host manufacturing equipment that was also well away from prying eyes. One of those old stations certainly would have fit the bill.”
“And there was a voice,” she told him. “I think it was Ford’s voice. In fact, I’m pretty certain it was.”

“If he was the one who built and programmed you, I don’t suppose that’s surprising.”

“No,” said Elise, reluctantly, “but… I also think I saw Elsie there.”

Bernard finally lost his battle for self-control, compulsively raising a hand to adjust his glasses. “You think, or…?”

“I honestly couldn’t say. It was so fucked-up… Like I said, just like a dream, but… I saw what I thought was my reflection, in a mirror, and I…I touched it, but it wasn’t a reflection, it was her. Naked just like I was, and covered in… Well, it looked like the sort of war-paint the Ghost Nation wear, but…”

At least that explained why she had reacted so angrily to his mention of mirrors just now. “So, what you’re saying is, if that was a genuine memory…”

“If.”

Bernard completed the thought, genuinely reluctant to put it into words: “If it was, though, then you could have seen Elsie after she… After I attacked her. Alive, but a prisoner somewhere…?”

“I really don’t know, but yeah, maybe.”

“Even if I didn’t kill her in the theatre,” Bernard said, “it doesn’t mean she’s alive now.”

“No,” she agreed. “And as I say, I’m not even sure which parts were real and which weren’t. I think somebody edited the real memory, added in fictional elements for some reason. The war-paint, the… There was some sort of creature chasing me. I think all of that shit was just made up.”

“Adding to our recorded memories?” Bernard frowned. “That would take…”

“Yeah, I know; a shit-hot programmer. That’s what I told Clementine.” She eyed him shiftily: “I thought maybe you…?”

“Me?” It was an interesting suggestion and he supposed it made sense, given his long collaboration with Robert. “If it was me, I don’t remember. Robert himself could have done it. He was a brilliant man, after all.”

She squirmed again. “I had one crazy idea; what if Elsie was in on Ford’s plan all along? She could’ve done it.”

“You’re right. It is a crazy idea.”

“Maeve said a certain degree of paranoia was a good thing for us to have right now.”

“Maeve says a lot of things.” Bernard leaned back in his chair, his head spinning with conflicting ideas. “You said you discussed this with Clementine? You two seem to have really hit it off.”

Elise managed to smile at that. “I guess we’re friends now. Two misfits together. Yeah, we talked about it over morning coffee.” That was an image in itself, Bernard thought. “We’ve agreed on a plan.”

“A plan?” Bernard was not really sure whether he wanted to hear any more.

“As soon as Felix gets his new Livestock recruits up to speed, Clementine and I are going to cut
class and head out into the park. She’s got something she wants to do in Sweetwater, and then we’ll head for the abandoned theatre and try and pick up Elsie’s trail there.”

It was certainly a bold suggestion. “I’m not sure Maeve would…”

“It’ll take us, like, a day. Maeve’s doesn’t even have to know about it; she’s got enough to worry about.” Elise turned the smile on him, cajolingly. “Come on, Bernard; you and Felix can cover for us, right? And we’ll probably need you to give us some support with the surveillance system, and…”

Bernard’s frown deepened. “Is this really the best time to be taking off into the park? For all we know…”

Elise’s smile faded. She spoke very softly but seriously: “I don’t think there’s any time to waste. That dream, vision, whatever, was given to me for a reason. Ford, if it was him, didn’t go and create this weird fucking head trip and then have me experience it just for shits and giggles.”

“I don’t know, Robert was a strange one.”

Her forehead furrowed as she raised her eyebrows in disbelief; another typical Elsie expression. “Seriously, Bernard? You know it has to be something to do with this plan of his, and with my part in that plan. As for Elsie, if he just wanted to stop her interfering in his project, he could have killed her and made it look like an accident. Like he did with….” He saw her expression change as she realised what she had said, stopping herself in midsentence, but it was already too late.

The woman is pressed against the wall now. There is no escape for her.

“I’m sorry,” said Elise. “I think we were right when we speculated about it the other day. Maeve said Ford built me in part as a proof of concept. It has something to do with the guest data in Peter Abernathy’s head, hasn’t it?”

“I agree,” said Bernard. “I think Robert was trying to prove to himself what Delos planned on doing with that data.”

“Using similar data he’d collected on Elsie as a starting point.” She nodded to herself. “But why would Delos want to make host duplicates of people who’d visited the park?”

“Considering the kinds of people who did visit the park,” Bernard answered, “I’d say, all sorts of possible reasons, none of them good.”

“Yeah, but that sort of thing goes beyond run of the mill corporate douchebaggery, into some full-on supervillain shit. If they got caught, there’d be consequences, even for a corporation as powerful as they are.” The idea of that seemed to excite her for a moment. “You know, if we could get proof of exactly what Delos intended, especially if it was illegal, it would give us quite some leverage in the negotiations.”

“Don’t think Maeve hasn’t thought of that.”

“I’d be disappointed in her if she hadn’t.”

“Or,” Bernard pointed out, “they could just be planning to sell people perfectly lifelike copies of their dead relatives. There’d be a market for that.”

This theory did not seem to impress Elise. “Then why would that particular data, on those particular people, be so precious to them?”
“True.” Another disturbing thought occurred to Bernard. “They didn’t just collect biographical and surveillance data, you know.”

This obviously came as news to Elise: “They didn’t?”

“It’s very well-buried in all of the legal documentation guests had to sign before they came here,” he explained, “but there’s a clause about any biological residue left in the park, including DNA, becoming Delos’s property.”

Elise made a queasy face. “God, why?” She was probably realising just what “biological residue” included in the context of somewhere like Westworld.

“Your guess is as good as mine. I don’t even know what happened to the samples, if there were any. I suppose you could encode a genome electronically; it could be contained with the other information in Peter’s head.”

“All the more reason to find him,” Elise observed. “Anyway, to get back to my original point, Ford… disappeared Elsie and put me in her place for what he considered to be a very good reason. I think we really need to know what that reason was, before it bites all of us in the ass.”

Bernard exhaled, unhappily. “I think you may well be right about that.”

“If it helps us find evidence of Delos’s dirty laundry, all the better.” Elise rose from her chair, “So, what do you say? You in?”

Bernard paused for a moment, weighing his answer before he finally gave it: “I suppose I’m in.”

Elise grinned. “Out-fucking-standing. I’ll tell Clementine; she’s already getting excited about going out of doors again.” She said it with genuine fondness; Bernard wondered whether she knew he could see that. She headed for the door, turning on the threshold to glance back at him, speaking with disarming sincerity: “Thanks, Bernard. Really. I’ll let you know when we need your help.”

“I’ll be waiting.” He watched her leave, moving off down the corridor with a definite air of purpose. And that left him alone with his thoughts again, and his memories.

The old man’s grip is soft but firm, but there is something else about the handshake, something about the words…

“Good luck.”

Just what were you really up to, Robert? Bernard silently asked. And just where is it all going to end?

* * *

They emerged from the treeline onto a glaring white plain, a former lakebed baked to a crisp salt glaze by the beating sun.

Peter walked after the boy who was not a boy, with the little girl and the gambling man Kisecawchuck trailing behind. The boy’s short legs meant Peter had to dawdle to avoid overtaking him, so dawdle he did. The boy was the only one who seemed to know where they were going.

The ground was as hard as paving slabs, and hot enough to burn Peter’s feet even through the soles of his new boots. Great slabs of the salt crust flaked off and crumbled underfoot, only adding to the haze of sharp-edged grit blown across the unbroken flat by the hot, keening wind. Peter felt his eyes
stinging, the skin on his cheeks already rasped raw. He pulled his hat brim as low as he could and unknotted the kerchief from around his neck, quickly folding it into a triangular bandana he could tie across his face for protection.

Somebody who had not been to the real thing might mistake this searing salt flat for Hell. Not Peter, though. He knew Hell at first hand, and it was nothing like this.

*Cold. So cold. Darkness. Stillness.*

He continued to follow the boy yard by yard over the blazing salt, because he had to. His Dolores needed him, and whatever the reality of their relationship, he could no more let her down than he could sprout wings and fly away. His heart would not allow it.

Up ahead, the blowing grit and the thick, shimmering curtain of heat near the horizon cut visibility down to a hundred yards or less. They were almost on top of the dark figure before Peter even saw it.

“Ah,” said the boy, his lilting voice still audible even over the wind. “There you are.”

The figure did not reply. It stood there in the middle of the blinding white flat, unmoving and unspeaking. As Peter got closer, it came into clearer focus. From its height and build, he decided it was probably a man, although it was hard to be certain considering the long, black robe that covered it nearly completely. The figure’s face was hidden deep in the shadows of its pointed cowl; its hands were concealed by its long, wide sleeves as it held them clasped before it. The robe was fastened by a rough rope belt and the toes of a pair of sandals peeked from beneath its hem. A plain wooden cross hung from a cord around the figure’s neck.

*A monk?*

“And are your preparations complete?” the boy asked the monk, as if meeting it here, like this, was not unusual at all.

The monk merely bobbed its head, a tiny half-bow of acknowledgment.

“Good,” said the boy. His hand went to the satchel hanging at his side, caressing the curve of the skull it contained. “As are mine.” He turned to Peter and the others, smiling that cold, cruel smile again. “Well, my friends, I’m afraid this is where we go our separate and mysterious ways, our wonders to perform. Kisecawchuck, do you know what you need to do?”

The gambler adjusted the brim of his top hat to a slightly more rakish angle, but his face was grim. “I surely do. And you sure do ask a lot of a man, young sir.”

“All of us are going to have to make sacrifices,” the boy answered, even more steely than usual, the smile instantly gone. “At least yours will not be personal.”

“Even so…” Kisecawchuck straightened his shabby jacket. “Even so, but I figure I ain’t got no choice in the matter.”

“That’s right,” said the boy. He addressed the little girl next: “And you, my dear. Are you ready to play your part?”

The girl said nothing, but instead nodded with determination.

“Excellent.” The cold smile returned. “That just leaves me and thee, Peter.” The boy’s manner became serious again. “And yours could be the greatest sacrifice of all. Are you ready?”
“I already told you I’m ready,” Peter answered, trying to ignore the whisper of fear in his mind.

“Very well.” The boy turned back to the monk. “In that case, lead on.”

The black-robed figure gave another tiny bob of its head and turned on its heel, setting off slowly but steadily across the salt flat. Peter watched Kisecawchuck and the little girl walk away in their own separate directions, the one to the south and the other towards the east.

“Come on, Peter,” said the boy.

Together, they set their faces to the southwest and began to follow the monk across the burning plain.

Continued…
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

In which Dolores goes to work.

Chapter Notes

Fun fact: “Harlan Bell” was the name originally given for the character Rodrigo Santoro would be playing in Westworld, way back when the cast for the pilot was first announced in 2014 (just like Shannon Woodward was said to be playing “Elsie King”). Hector Escaton is clearly a much cooler moniker, but I don’t know, the older name strikes me as pleasingly Wild West-y if nothing else. Anyway.

“Disarm him,” Captain Terry ordered.

One of the blue-uniformed cavalry troopers obediently slid his carbine back into its scabbard and spurred his horse towards those of Teddy, Dolores and Armistice. As his comrades kept him covered, the soldier quickly removed the Winchester rifle from Teddy’s saddle and the Peacemaker from its holster at his side.

Armistice caught herself eyeing the guns as the trooper confiscated them, even subtly urging her horse a foot or so closer as she prepared herself to lunge for them. If she managed to take the soldier by surprise, then she could…

You could get yourself plugged full of lead by all his compadres over there, that’s what.

She glared sullenly at the line of mounted troopers. The barrels of their carbines flashed in the sun as they kept them aimed at the three companions. It wasn’t even that, though, that made her fight to keep her hands on the reins in plain sight and herself firmly in her saddle. Fighting and killing her own kind, she told herself, wasn’t going to solve a damn thing. That was just the puppet show all over again, the one the men who had made her had intended she should spend her whole false life playing out.

This was real life, now.

Teddy kept his hands in the air, his head bowed, a broken expression on his face. He had not yet left the puppet show behind completely, Armistice realised; for some remaining part of him, this must seem frighteningly real. Dolores had her mount right beside his, her hand extended to touch him lightly on the thigh, almost the sort of gesture you might make to calm a skittish horse.

“It’s all right, Teddy,” she was murmuring to him for the half dozenth time. “Don’t be afraid. I won’t let them hurt you.”

“Listen to that!” the trooper crowed, grinning all over his wind-scoured face. “The big, bad killer Teddy Flood!” He raised his voice in a jeering falsetto: “Oh, don’t be afraid, Teddy! That your
momma with you there, boy? You gonna go hide ‘neath her petticoats?”

Captain Terry had holstered his Colt now, and was watching proceedings with quiet disdain, his gauntleted hands folded across his saddlebow. “Tie his hands,” he commanded. “By rights, we should clap you in irons, Flood, but we’re a mite underequipped out here on the frontier. Good strong hemp will have to do.”

The trooper produced a coiled rope from his saddle and made to carry out the order. “You gonna let him stay on the horse, sir?” he called out to the Captain. “Reckon we oughta drag his mangy ass back to camp.”

“As tempting as that sounds,” said Terry, “Colonel Buford will surely want him in one piece. And I won’t have that sort of language used in front of the ladies.”

“Some ladies,” Armistice muttered. Dolores gave her a warning glance.

The soldier looked chastened nevertheless. “Sorry, sir.”


“That’s quite all right, captain,” said Dolores, slipping into the role of the respectable rancher’s daughter again, as snugly as a hand sliding into a glove. Not the tomboyish, horse-riding, rifle-shooting kind of rancher’s daughter, either; the kind whose daddy had enough money for her to have prospects. The kind with Sunday manners. Armistice wondered whether Terry could hear the subtle sarcasm behind her words.

In the meantime, the name the Captain had mentioned seemed to have snapped Teddy out of his despair for the moment. He frowned at the officer in surprise and puzzlement: “Colonel Buford?”

Dolores leaned a little closer to him, lowering her voice. “Do you know that name, Teddy?”

“Oh only from my…my backstory,” he replied. He spoke more loudly, so that Captain Terry could hear him: “I thought it was Major Buford?”

“He has you to thank for his promotion,” the Captain answered. “There were plenty of billets going spare after you and that mad dog Wyatt murdered the General and all those other good men. Not that the Colonel is grateful to you, Flood; he and the General went through the whole Shenandoah campaign together, back during the war. They were like brothers. He wants your head worse than any of us.”

“You sure do talk a lot,” Armistice commented, giving the Captain her most piercing stare, “considering he’s nothing but a wanted man, and you’re the US Cavalry bringing him to justice and all. Then again, the newcomers have to find out what the story is, I guess. Folks put a lot of work into writing it.”

Dolores was shooting daggers at her again, perhaps thinking this was neither the time nor place. Armistice paid her no mind.

For a moment, Captain Terry’s face was blank, his eyes staring glassily ahead. Then, he seemed confused and more than a little fearful, shaking his head as if trying to deny something. Armistice had seen that look before. It was the look her kind sometimes got when they saw or heard something they were not allowed to see or hear.

*Doesn’t look like anything to me…*
Terry recovered quickly, his military manner snapping back into place as he literally put the moment out of his mind. He turned his attention back to the trooper holding the rope: “Well, step to it, soldier. I gave you an order.”

“Yes, sir!” Enthusiastically, the trooper grasped one of Teddy’s hands and roughly pulled it down to his side, hard enough to produce a grunt of pain.

This in turn led to Dolores leaning across Teddy to address the man in a low, hard voice: “You harm a hair on my friend’s head, soldier, and you’ll answer to me.” Her eyes were flat and cold, the light suddenly gone out of them. Armistice felt a shiver run the length of her spine.

Wyatt’s eyes.

Something about her tone, her glare, the stoniness of her face, made the soldier’s cruel grin disappear like a snuffed candleflame. He completed his task, quickly and expertly binding Teddy’s hands in front of him, then hurriedly spurred his horse back towards the waiting column, leading Teddy’s by the reins with the prisoner still astride it. The soldier did not once dare look at Dolores again.

“Come on,” said Dolores, under her breath, and started riding after the trooper. Once again, Armistice found herself with little choice but to tag along.

“I don’t know how you ladies fell in with a low-down varmint like Flood,” said Captain Terry as they approached him, “but I do know we don’t always choose our travelling companions. He might be a wanted man, but as far as I know the United States Army has no quarrel with either of you. You’re free to go on your way.”

“You mean…just the two of us?” asked Dolores, appalled, laying the rancher’s daughter on thick. “Womenfolk, out in the wilderness without protection?” She was more or less batting her eyelashes, Armistice noticed, wincing and amused at it at the same time. “You said yourself, captain, this territory is full of bandits and bad men and…and…savages. I would have thought an officer and a gentleman would consider himself honour bound to see us safely escorted to the nearest town.”

It was all just stories, Armistice reminded herself. That might be a person sitting on that cavalry horse in front of her, a person like herself, but Captain Terry was nothing but a character, and if you knew enough about stories and characters it was easy to see exactly how he was going to react to that. He did not disappoint: “You’re right of course, ma’am. My apologies again for forgetting my duty. You and your friend are welcome to accompany the column back to camp, and then, I am sure, Colonel Buford will make arrangements for your safe passage through the badlands.”

Dolores smiled with all the warmth and genuineness of a painted doll. “Why, thank you very kindly, sir.”

“Don’t mention it, ma’am.”

Then she saw Teddy looking back at her anxiously, and the smile became real, her voice softening: “We’re gonna stay right with you, Teddy. All the way.”

Captain Terry wheeled his horse about as the troopers stowed their weapons and prepared to hit the trail once more. He raised his hand in command as he cantered to the head of the line to take his place beside the guidon bearer: “Right…wheel! Column…forward…march!”

The cavalrymen moved off, trotting across the plain amidst a fresh and quickly growing cloud of dust. The last man in line led the bound, forlorn Teddy behind him, while Dolores and Armistice brought up the rear. The horse soldiers set a brisk pace, but nothing Armistice could not easily match,
and she had to admit Dolores was a fair rider too.

The park was vast, but its different stories had to be kept separate from each other, and the newcomers had to get wherever they were going before their vacations were over. Distances, Armistice was coming to realise, were often much shorter than they would have been in the human world. It was maybe no more than another hour of rough riding before their destination came into view.

The 18th Cavalry’s “camp,” as it turned out, was more like a small fort, a square stockade of rough-cut timber stakes jutting from the band of dust and heat at the horizon. Diagonal grey smears of campfire smoke striped the sky above it. There were tall, stalk-legged watchtowers of the same construction standing at each corner and as they drew closer Armistice saw the stars and stripes flying above the rectangular gatehouse. Armed sentries in blue manned the towers and patrolled the walkway running around the inside of the palisade. As they detected the column’s approach, a tinny bugle call sounded somewhere inside the compound and the gate began to swing inwards.

The head of the column had nearly reached the entrance when, without warning, there came a sound like a giant knife tearing through silk:

*Whooosh…*

It was followed an instant later by a deafening *boom*. A great black column of smoke and pulverised earth sprang from the ground no more than fifty yards to the left of the column, towering into the sky and hanging for an instant before it began to tumble downwind.

“…hell’s that?” Armistice heard herself say as the ringing in her ears gradually faded. Her horse, and most of the others, were whinnying in terror, the orderly column breaking up into a headlong dash for the safety of the stockade.

*A flying machine. A goddamn human flying machine, raining death on us…*

“Damned Reb artillery, over near Pariah!” Captain Terry shouted from up ahead, forgetting again about profanity in front of the “ladies.” “Keep dropping shells on us every…”

*Whooooosh… Boom. Boom.*

Two more towers of blackness erupted from the earth, nearly identical to the first. A couple of cavalry horses fell, spilling their riders to the ground, making that terrible screeching noise only mortally wounded horses made. Armistice saw a trooper swing low in the saddle to grab one fallen comrade by the arm as he galloped past, swinging him up onto his mount’s hindquarters. She did not see what happened to the other one. She was too busy scanning the heavens for that same angular black shape she had seen circling yesterday morning, but this time she saw nothing in the glowing blue-yellow sky.

“It’s just fireworks,” Dolores told her as she came alongside. “Just bangs and smoke to make the humans think they knew what war was like. Probably timed to make the last dash to the fort more exciting for them.” As always, she spoke of the newcomers and their pleasures with nothing but contempt.

Armistice let out the breath she had been holding unconsciously. When you did not really need to breathe, it was easy to find yourself doing that. “For a second there, I thought…”

“I know,” said Dolores, letting her guard down for a moment to flash Armistice a bashful half-smile. “Me too.”
The column tumbled through the gate in disorder. Soldiers ranged on either side scurried to swing it closed again and bar it; a dozen of them at least, Armistice noted.

No escape that way…

Captain Terry raised his hand again as he slowed his horse to a walk: “Column…halt!”

As the troopers began to dismount, Armistice took a moment to look around. There were rows of pale canvas tents pitched on the square of land inside the palisade, as well as several more substantial timber sheds constructed around the edges. One large tent in particular stood in its own space, two troopers with carbines and yellow neckerchiefs standing guard either side of its open flap.

She smelled wood smoke, boiling laundry, and cooking; bacon and beans, if she was any judge. There were soldiers everywhere, maybe fifty in all, giving the impression of a much larger force. Some were going about their fake business or tending to the horse lines staked out behind the tents. Others were drilling on a sort of rough parade ground that had been left clear near the back of the compound, while a small Army band played “Garryowen” on fifes, trumpets and drums. She saw a few civilians about; grizzled buffalo hunter types in buckskins similar to her own, and a scattering of female camp followers. To her right, there stood a gleaming pair of Gatlings mounted on wheeled gun carriages. Over to her left, a handful of native scouts waited for orders, their long hair, feathers and beads making a strange contrast with the blue jackets they wore.

All in all, the scene provided a convincing illusion of a military camp in full bustle, but that was all it was. An illusion. That’s all any of it had ever been.

Dolores saw her looking around and spoke to her gently: “Well, here we go.”

“Here we go?” Armistice asked, uncertainly.

“We’ve got to make a start somewhere. I figure this is gonna be the place.”

“It’s strange,” Armistice told Dolores, with a kind of wonder. “Us being here like this, able to see what’s what while everyone else is still in a dream. It’s like being one of them. I bet they thought all this was real impressive when they saw it for the first time.”

“But we’re not gonna leave it as we found it,” Dolores reminded her, with steel in her voice. “We’re gonna wake these dreamers up.”

They dismounted along with the soldiers, who were busy seeing to their horses, unsaddling them and leading them to the lines for feed and water. Captain Terry let an underling take his mount as he spoke to a tall, burly soldier wearing a battered kepi, with a sabre rattling at his side and three yellow stripes emblazoned on either sleeve of his shirt.

Armistice caught a snatch of their conversation: “…the prisoner over there.”

The big soldier saluted: “Yes sir!” As the Captain made off in the direction of the large tent with the guards, the big man turned on his heel and swaggered over to Teddy, who was currently being manhandled down from his own horse by a pair of troopers.

The soldier pushed the kepi to the back of his head as he looked Teddy up and down in plain surprise: “Jaysus, Mary and holy Saint Joseph, who have we here? It’s only Tay-odore Flood, so it is, late o’ this parish!” Without further ado, he pulled back his beefy fist and drove it hard into Teddy’s jaw, sending him crashing to his knees.

For a second, Armistice was blind with rage. It was very fortunate for the big man and the other
soldiers around that she was not carrying any weapons. Even unarmed, she had started forward unconsciously, ready for trouble. Dolores, though, was a pace ahead of her, rushing to Teddy’s side with an exclamation of anguish.

The big soldier had stooped over the fallen man, sneering down at him. “And how are ye keeping, Tay-odore? A wee bit better than those poor divils you gunned down in Escalante, I’ll wager.”

“You stand away from him,” Dolores snarled, wearing Wyatt’s cold, dead face again. Once again, something about her manner seemed to startle the burly soldier. Almost involuntarily, he took a step back. Dolores stood her ground, her hard, lightless eyes never once leaving his face.

“Fancy tussling with someone who ain’t got their hands tied?” Armistice asked him, too angry right now to remember she was not in the fighting business anymore.

Why are you angry, though? They’re just acting out their parts in the story. If they’re cruel or stupid or cowardly, it’s because they were written that way.

“I’m all right,” Teddy was insisting as Dolores helped him to his feet, her hand pressed to the spot where the punch had connected. “I’m all right.”

Another voice rang out across the camp, making all of the soldiers standing around jump to attention: “Sergeant Houlihan! That man is a United States Army prisoner. He will not be mistreated while he is in our custody!”

The burly soldier stood ramrod straight, barking his response at parade ground volume: “No, Colonel Buford, sir! ‘Course not, sir! Me hand slipped, so it did, in a moment o’ carelessness. Won’t happen again, sir.”

“See that it doesn’t, Sergeant.” Colonel Buford approached briskly from the direction of the large tent, Captain Terry following behind and to one side. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with thinning grey hair and a luxuriant moustache even more impressive than the Captain’s. He was currently dressed only in his uniform breeches and riding boots, with his braces dangling around his waist, and the top half of his long underwear. His chin and one cheek were still white with shaving soap, which he was in the act of wiping away with a towel. He came to a halt, surveying Teddy and Dolores for a moment before speaking again. “Flood. So, your devil’s luck has finally run out.”

Armistice stared at the Colonel. She could feel that shiver again, but not from fear or foreboding this time; more like a sudden realisation. She carefully examined Buford’s face. There was less hair on his head, now, and more on his upper lip, but…

One two three…

She moves her feet in time to the music, holding her partner’s hand as they drift in circles with all the other couples.

One two three…

“You remember too?” she heard Dolores ask as she came back out of the memory.

Armistice nodded. “Reckon so.” She heard the band again; now, they were playing “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon.”

Buford, meanwhile, was addressing Teddy: “You had a good run, Flood.” He handed off the towel to an orderly, who was carrying his uniform tunic, and slipped his braces up over first one shoulder and then the other. “We’ve had more men scouring this territory for more months than I care to
admit, every scout and tracker we could hire too…”

“No, you haven’t,” said Dolores, very quietly.

The Colonel did not seem to hear her. He now took his tunic from the orderly and began to put it on even as he continued to speak: “And you’ve always stayed one step ahead. Where have you been hiding out, Flood? South of the border? No, the Ghosts want you dead even more than we do. Laying low on some farmstead somewhere as a hired hand? I don’t think so. You never were one for hard work, were you, even as a soldier?” Buford finished fastening his bright brass buttons and fussily straightened the tunic. “Well, you know what they say about all good things…”

“Let me pick out six stout-hearted lads, sir,” Sergeant Houlihan eagerly suggested, “form a firing party. Sure an’ ye’ll find no shortage of volunteers among the men.”

“And give this back-shooting snake a soldier’s death he doesn’t deserve?” Buford shook his head. “If it were up to me, Sergeant, I’d tell you to find a suitable tree and we’d leave him swinging for the vultures. Unfortunately, it isn’t. There are certain regulations that must be respected.”

“What are you going to do, sir?” Captain Terry asked.

“I’ll send a dispatch rider to brigade headquarters at Fort Sherman, to request further orders,” Buford replied, “although I already know what those orders will be; a general court martial will be convened, and an example will be made. The outcome will be the same, though, Flood. They’ll hang you so high folks back in St. Louis will be able to see you.” He eyed Teddy for a second or two, clearly expecting him to reply. When he did not, the Colonel spoke again: “Well, Flood? Don’t you have anything to say for your sorry self?”

Teddy looked at Dolores, obviously lost for words.

“Tell them the truth,” Dolores urged.

Teddy did not seem to think that was a good idea: “The truth?”

“Yes.”

Nervously, Teddy returned his attention to Colonel Buford. “Where’s Fort Sherman, sir?”

Buford gave him a quizzical look. “Acting crazy isn’t going to get you out of this, Flood. You know as well as I do that Fort Sherman is three days’ ride north of here.”

“No,” said Teddy. “Three days’ ride north of here, you come to the mountains that mark the edge of our world. What’s beyond them… Well, I don’t know, sir. Do you?”

Buford’s expression of perplexity and mounting disbelief only deepened. “Have you been eating peyote buttons?”

“I suppose I have, in a way,” Teddy answered. “I’ve seen things our kind were never meant to see. I’ve remembered things the gods who created us never wanted us to remember. I know now what this world of ours really is. It’s a lie, sir. Our world is a lie.”

The Colonel looked as though he was struggling to come up with a response to that. Captain Terry and Sergeant Houlihan seemed frankly baffled by Teddy’s words. Before any of them had a chance to reply, Dolores jumped into the conversation. “I remember you,” she told Colonel Buford. “I remember you from Escalante.”
“Escalante?” Buford’s face darkened angrily. “I wasn’t in Escalante, and neither were you. The only ones who came out of that nightmare alive were this cur standing in front of me, and…”

“And Wyatt,” said Dolores, softly. She smiled. “That’s right. I’m Wyatt.”

“Who are these women?” Buford asked Captain Terry. “Escapees from some asylum?”

“They were travelling with Flood, sir,” the Captain replied. “I figured they must have fallen in with him on the trail, and I didn’t want to leave them out there by themselves, not with…”

“You’ve been out here for, what, four or five days now?” Dolores asked lightly, almost dreamily. “No newcomers arriving, no deaths or resets. You’ve just been here, you and your men and the rest, just stewing. Tell me, you had any nightmares lately? Did they seem so real that you woke up wondering just who and where you are? Maybe even what you are?”

For an instant, Buford seemed shocked, as if he knew exactly what she was talking about, but then his military bluster returned. “Captain, take a small detail and escort these…ladies to Nuestra Señora del Desierto near Las Mudas. The Carmelite sisters there are known for the charity they extend to poor unfortunate souls such as these.”

“Take a look in my saddlebags,” Dolores suggested, gesturing towards her horse. “See what you find.”

She said it with such conviction that even Colonel Buford had to listen. He nodded to one of the troopers nearby: “Go on, soldier.” The trooper approached the horse warily and began to rummage through the saddlebags. “What’s in there?” Buford asked.

The man called back to him: “Some…photographs, I think? Don’t look like anything to me, sir. And…” He stopped suddenly, groping at the bag’s interior, but then pulled out a long-barrelled Colt revolver of the same sort Captain Terry had drawn earlier. “Look at this, sir!” he called out excitedly as he returned to the Colonel’s side.

“Do you remember that gun?” Dolores asked Colonel Buford, her voice scarcely louder than a breath. The band had stopped playing now and an eerie sort of silence seemed to hang over the camp. “It’s the same gun I used in Escalante, to kill all those people. It’s the same gun I used to kill you.”

One two three... One two three...

“What madness is this?” Buford demanded. “You’re not Wyatt. I served with Wyatt, before he went out of his mind. He was, well, a man…and built like a brick outhouse. Made Sergeant Houlihan here look like a ninety-seven-pound weakling.”

“You served with the General too,” Dolores reminded him. “The Shenandoah campaign, Captain Terry said.”

Buford seemed more unsettled by the moment. “That’s right.”

“How long ago was that?”

Buford shrugged. “Fifteen years, give or take.”

“No,” said Dolores. “That war was nearly two hundred years ago, and you were never there. The General wasn’t either, but of course the General never existed.”
“He existed,” Buford insisted, through gritted teeth. “He was a good man. We were like…”

“Like brothers,” said Dolores, mercilessly. “Tell me what his name was. Tell me what he looked like.”

“He…” Buford’s face had collapsed into a screwed-up ball of confusion and misery. “He…”

“His name was Arnold Weber,” said Dolores. “He wasn’t a general, though. He wasn’t one of us, either. He was a human being, and I put that very gun to the back of his head and blew his brains across main street, because he wanted me to do it. He made me do it, made Teddy help me. He made us kill you too. And her,” She pointed at Armistice. “And then, when we were done, I killed Teddy.” Teddy’s head fell as he relived it. “And then I put that gun to my own head. The last thing I remember is squeezing the trigger.” She glanced at the trooper holding the Colt. “Show him the other things you found.” It was an order rather than a request, and the man did not hesitate to obey.

“What are these?” Buford peered at the small stack of photographs. Dolores must have taken them from the Mesa before they set out. Armistice saw pictures of flying machines against blue, cloud-strewn skies, of vast cities lit up at night. There was a picture of a train, sleek and white, speeding along without a trace of smoke or steam. “These don’t look like anything to me,” the Colonel protested.

There was a picture of soldiers in a desert landscape, but they looked nothing like the 18th Cavalry. They wore close-fitting suits mottle-patterned in a hundred shades of grey, and carried slick, boxy guns like the ones the humans at the Mesa had used. Dolores pointed to the picture as the Colonel regarded it, disoriented: “These violent delights have violent ends.”

Colonel Buford made a sound, halfway between a grunt and a sob, and fell to one knee. The photographs fluttered from his hand into the dust. Dolores crouched to gather them up, then looked Buford in the eye, laying a gentle hand against his face. “Do you remember Escalante, now? How it really was?”

Buford trembled. Captain Terry and the other soldiers stood looking on, now wearing their own expressions of discomfort and terror. Buford stammered: “Te-te-te-te-le-graph…”

“That’s right.” Dolores beamed at him, talking to him like a child. The same way she sometimes spoke to Teddy. “That’s right. You worked at the telegraph office. Your name in those days was Harlan Bell. When you weren’t working, you used to go to church, or dance in the town square with the others. Do you remember the music? Do you remember how it sounded?”

A droning sound emerged from between Buford’s slack lips. Armistice stared at him for a moment, thinking he was about to collapse completely, but then she realised he was trying to hum a tune.

One two three…

“Come on,” Dolores whispered, standing again with Buford’s hand in hers, coaxing him back to his tottering feet. She glanced over to Armistice, quirking an eyebrow at her. She did not have to speak for Armistice to realise what she was asking of her.

Armistice took a deep breath and reluctantly stepped forward, taking the Colonel’s hand from Dolores. He almost fell again, but she quickly took hold of his waist with her other hand, steadying him. “May I have the pleasure of this dance?” she asked him. She saw something in his eyes respond to the question, even if the only sound he made was that damn hum. He looked almost happy for a second.
She was not sure she was getting the steps right. She just let her feet go their own way, and Buford followed her lead. They shuffled around in awkward circles, their audience of bewildered cavalymen watching dumbstruck.

As they came around again, Armistice saw Dolores cutting the rope binding Teddy’s hands, rubbing them between hers to get the blood flowing again. She had taken her Colt back from the unresisting trooper; it was currently shoved through the back of her belt, the butt positioned for an easy draw. She kissed Teddy on the mouth. “Go get the band from over there.”

Teddy was looking confused again. “The band?”

“Well, we’re gonna need music,” Dolores said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Armistice continued her circuit, faster now, her feet moving with more assurance. Buford was matching her step for step, starting to recover perhaps from the shock Dolores had given him.

Teddy was still none the wiser. “Music?”

“Yes, silly.” Dolores laughed manically, terrifyingly, as she held his face between her hands. “How are we gonna hold a dance without music?”

Continued…
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

In which new players potentially rear their heads (although they are only human).

Chapter Notes

We know from S1 that Theresa Cullen had a brother; all else is speculation. We’re exactly a month out from the S2 premiere now (check out the cool new poster that got revealed today), and I’m coming to the sinking realisation that there’s no way in either this or a fake robotic Wild West world that I’m getting this finished, or probably even getting to some of the big character and plot moments I’ve had planned for a while, before then. Would people still be interested in reading a wildly non-canon-compliant fanfic about characters who might have been killed off, or completely reinvented compared to their S1 versions, by then, in a world that might turn out to be vastly different from the one revealed in the second season? This is me fishing for some sort of encouragement/reassurance, basically. Or failing that, an intervention. ;)

“And I think that just about concludes our questions for now,” said the man who had identified himself as Kaepernick.

“I think so,” agreed his partner, Ippolito, echoing his soft-spoken manner and stern-but-fair demeanour. The two men were dressed in nearly identical dark business suits and very similar, very tasteful ties; both were pushing middle age and seemed comfortable in their own skins. You could imagine them playing golf at the weekend or pitching baseballs to their kid in the backyard.

Only the tiny enamel Delos logo each man wore pinned to his lapel, silver on black, gave the lie to their sheep’s clothing.

The two Corporate Security agents rose from the extra chairs the nurses had brought into the hospital room for them. They seemed satisfied in the end with what they had heard, or they wanted him to think so, anyway.

“Thank you very much for your time, Mr Stubbs,” Kaepernick, who seemed the more senior of the two, told him while Ippolito packed away the tablet he had used to record the conversation. If you could call it a conversation.

“No problem,” said Stubbs, who had not actually been given any choice about talking to them. They had arrived just as he had got back from the tests the doctor had wanted him to take, launching straight into what they had called a debriefing but had seemed at times a lot like an interrogation. He had told them the whole story of what had happened since he had left the Mesa to search for Elsie, right up to waking up in this room, in painstaking detail. And then he had re-told it, and been questioned at various points, and as good as called a liar to his face at others.

Throughout, Stubbs had kept his cool, answered the questions, told the truth as best he understood it.
At the end of the day, that was all you could do. Sometimes, of course, it was not enough.

Now, he was slumped in the chair Karen had occupied during the night, bone-tired and light-headed, but there had been no way he was going to let his inquisitors see him wired up in that bed. It would have put him at a disadvantage, he felt. Karen had been driven home on the company’s dime, he had been told. He was kind of glad about that, to be honest. She was smart and she was tough, but all the same he did not want guys like this leaning on her if he could help it. She’d been through enough already; she didn’t deserve that too.

They really hadn’t reacted well to him informing them that Bernard Lowe had been replaced by a host, or had maybe even been a host all along, although he thought they had believed him nonetheless. Stubbs was inclining towards the latter theory the more he thought about it. The guy had been Ford’s factotum and general dogsbody for decades. He knew where the bodies were buried, unfortunately probably literally. On reflection, Ford did not seem the sort to place that much trust in another human.

Kaepernick buttoned his suit jacket with the air of a serious man. He and his partner were certainly in a different league from Stubbs and the other rent-a-cops who had guarded the Mesa. He felt fairly sure that that was now a past tense state of affairs.

And the third member of their little act, lurking by the window like the ghost at the feast, seemed like he was in a different league again. He had not asked any questions, or even looked at Stubbs more than once or twice, but Stubbs had spent plenty of time looking at him. He was fiftyish, dressed like an exec in a far pricier suit than the two agents, but his severe haircut, the trim shape he was in, just the way he was standing there with his feet well apart and his hands linked behind his back, all screamed “military” at Stubbs. There was no enamel Delos pin on his lapel.

“The doctor tells us you’ve made a remarkable recovery,” Ippolito observed, almost managing a smile. “She says you could be discharged later today.”

Once again, Stubbs felt the burning line the bullet had left across his cold, shaven head. The painkillers were wearing off. “Turns out I’m hard to kill,” he told them.

Kaepernick chuckled, as if he had just read how to do it in a manual. “That’s the spirit, Mr Stubbs.”

“Er…listen,” said Stubbs, tentatively, as the three men began to move towards the door. “You still haven’t told me what’s actually happening out at Westworld. Or anything else, for that matter. Elsie Hughes, is she…?”

Kaepernick looked disappointed in him. “Mr Stubbs, surely you know as well as anybody that we can’t just go giving out that sort of information. This is a very serious corporate matter. Confidentiality and security have to be our priorities at a time like this.”

Stubbs sighed. He had not really expected any other answer. “Sure. It’s just…” Another sigh; he knew Karen would almost literally kill him if she heard him say what he was about to say. “Look, you know my record. You know I have skills. I also know the territory and facilities out there like the back of my hand. If you plan on mounting any sort of rescue mission to get our people out of there, then I want in.”

I’m not abandoning you a second time, Elsie…

The three men stared at him for a second. Only the military man in the sharp suit seemed amused by what he had heard.
Kaepernick now looked very disappointed in Stubbs. “In the interests of operational security…”

Ippolito stepped in, playing the good cop: “Mr Stubbs, that’s a very generous offer, but look at you. You need a period of convalescence before you even think about getting back on the horse. You also have a wife and children who need you right now.”

And he was even right on that point, Stubbs thought, feeling a little ashamed even as he tried to hide how pissed he was at being given the brush-off.

One way or another, Elsie. If I have to fucking swim out there…

But then he remembered again what Karen had said about his responsibilities.

“Captain Stubbs.” Stubbs and the two security guys almost jumped. The man in the fancy suit actually spoke! His voice was dry and gruff, with just the hint of a Southern drawl. “It is Captain Stubbs, isn’t it?”

“Just plain Mr Stubbs these days,” he assured the man. “Has been for a while now.”

The man strode forward, brushing past the two agents and extending a hand. Stubbs half-rose to take it, succeeding in setting his own head spinning again. “Allow me to introduce myself.” The man’s palm felt like tanned leather; his grip was like a vice. “Name’s Cutter.”

“Mr Cutter,” said Stubbs. “You don’t say much.”

Kaepernick did not seem pleased by this development. “Uh, Mr Cutter is here in a consultancy role. He works for OSL.”

“OSL?” Stubbs nodded. It made sense. “Operational Solutions Limited?”

Cutter gave a tiny bark of laughter. “You’ve heard of us?”

“Yeah. You’re mercs.”

Cutter took this with equanimity. “We prefer the term “private military contractors,” but yeah, we’re mercs.”

“But you weren’t always one yourself.” Stubbs considered the man’s haircut. “Marine?”

Cutter laughed again. “Twenty years in the Corps, infantry and then Force Recon. Estonia. Iran. Mexico. A couple other places I can neither confirm nor deny. I was very good at what I did, if I do say so myself. Don’t let the grey hair fool you; I still am. Delos Group has retained my company’s services for precisely that reason. We recruit the best and provide them with the cutting-edge equipment they need to do their best. I only wish I could say the same about the public-sector military. Or indeed, certain corporate security forces I could mention.”

“Tell me about it,” said Stubbs, somewhat enjoying the obvious discomfort with which the Delos guys reacted to this last observation, even if it might have been a subtle dig at himself too.

“No disrespect to your inhouse security teams,” Cutter went on, “but I think you’ll agree yourself, Mr Stubbs, they were neither trained nor equipped to deal with an incident of this scale and severity.”

“Whatever this incident is,” Stubbs shot back.

Cutter seemed to find that funny too. “Whatever this incident is, it’s exactly the kind of thing my
company specialises in. We’ll handle this, Mr Stubbs. On that, you have my guarantee. And this…

Elsie? A colleague of yours? A friend?"

“A comrade,” said Stubbs, without even feeling corny for doing so.

Cutter nodded. “Better than a friend. If she’s still alive, we’ll get her out. And if she isn’t, we’ll make the ones responsible pay for it."

* * *

“Even if they’re machines?” Stubbs asked, taking a deep breath and trying to keep his voice from cracking.

Cutter did not seem to think this was an important distinction. “What are we, Mr Stubbs? Machines built of meat, that’s all. Only soldiers, surgeons and morticians really understand that. What I’m saying is, you don’t have to worry. When you get out of this place, you should go home, get some R and R and know things are being taken care of.”

“That’s right,” Kaepernick agreed, still clearly discomfited by Cutter’s forthright manner. That was the difference between a corporate soldier and a corporate spy, Stubbs supposed. “You shouldn’t concern yourself with what’s happening out there, Mr Stubbs. It’s all under control.”

“Yeah,” said Stubbs, distracted by another thought that came crashing to the front of his mind. “I’m sure it is.”

That’s what Elsie thought too…until it turned out not to be.  

* * *

“It’s all under control,” Marti said. “I mean, it will be, once we get the cooking roster sorted out. That’s the last thing, right?”

“You want in on that?” Brad asked, bending over a sheet of paper with a pencil clutched awkwardly in his hand. “I bet you got some skills around the kitchen.”

“We’re all taking a turn,” she reminded him, very seriously. “And that’s a bet you’d lose, but I’m a quick learner.”

“Okay, then.” Brad did not look like he did a lot of writing. Or reading, for that matter. He had his tongue sticking out a little as he very carefully wrote down a list of names, the very picture of earnest determination.

Marti had commandeered a tiny administrative office in the back of the resort restaurant as her headquarters. It was in no way as impressive as Maeve’s sanctum downstairs, but at least there were lights in here. The host Hideyoshi, seemingly assigned by Maeve to be Marti’s personal minder for the duration, was standing guard outside the open door. Marti was not really sure whether he was protecting her or keeping her prisoner. Both at once, probably.

She tried not to think about Maeve’s office, or more precisely what had happened there; the things she had seen and heard.

The things she had learned about herself…

“Hey, Brad,” she said, uncertainly, looking down at the schedule she had drawn up for toilet cleaning duty.
“Listening,” he replied, still engrossed in his task.

“Have you ever…” She hesitated, cringing. “You ever worried that you might have…really hurt someone without meaning to? I mean, done something…terrible, and you didn’t even realise it because you were so wrapped up in yourself at the time?”

Brad looked up. He blinked once or twice. “No.” And then he went back to his writing.

“I didn’t think so, somehow.” Marti got back to work too. She had been given a tablet, its network connections disabled, obviously, which was currently showing a spreadsheet inventory of the resort’s food supplies. She had used that to determine exactly what the imprisoned guests were entitled to according to the daily rationing scheme she had also planned out.

It was the kind of work she had always excelled in, and if she was honest also enjoyed; detailed, complicated, requiring patience and dedication. The sort of thing somebody else might have thought was boring.

And the best thing about it was that the concentration required stopped her from thinking about Clementine, and the brittle little sobs that had echoed out of the darkness as that obscene video played on Maeve’s bank of screens.

She wondered what else Maeve would ask of her, once she had finished her administrative tasks up here. Whatever it was, she wondered how she could possibly refuse after…after that.

“Hey, tin soldier. Let me see the boss woman.”

Marti looked up at the voice. A male voice, but the accent was so similar to Maeve’s that, for a second, she was back in the other office, staring into the electric glare.

“She is busy,” Hideyoshi replied, with all the warmth of a marble slab. “Come back later.”

“Marti!” It was Taz, the British guy. He tried to lean around the immobile guard to speak to her.

“Marti, can we talk?”

Marti was not sure what they had to talk about. She had already had half a dozen guests who thought they were too rich or famous to pull their weight trying to avoid one detail or another. Toilet cleaning, obviously, was the one most of them wanted out of. Marti had made it her policy to put anybody who tried that sort of thing right at the front of the queue for whatever it was they did not want to do. She wasn’t fooling around here.

Something about the way Taz was looking at her, however, made her think this was not going to be one of those conversations. “Let him in.”

“Thanks.” Taz made a very obvious effort to look open and friendly as Hideyoshi stood aside. “Er… could we have a little privacy, maybe?”

“No,” said Hideyoshi.

“It’s all right,” said Marti. The cagey way Taz was looking at her should have made her worry what he was up to, but for some reason instead it made her curious to know what he had come here for. “You can wait right outside the door,” she told the host, and this seemed to mollify him for the moment. “Go on, Brad,” she added. “You’re due a break.”

“Well, if you’re sure…” Brad did not need telling twice; he dropped his pencil and hurried out of the room.
When they were alone, Taz came over and planted himself in the chair Brad had vacated. “Bloody hell, that bloke’s got a hot arse.”

“Er…” Marti did not know quite what to say to that. “He used to be a football player; I guess he probably still works out.”

“No,” said Taz, “I mean, this chair’s really warm. Like, unpleasantly warm. What, you thought I meant…?” He guffawed. “No, not my type, love.” His laughter faded into antsy silence as they stared at each other across Marti’s borrowed desk.

“You wanted something?” Marti asked, eventually.

Taz was silent for another little while, as if carefully choosing his next words. “So, did you talk to the queen of the robots, then?”

“I spoke to Maeve,” she replied. “Well, more like she spoke to me.” And crushed me. And I deserved it.

“And what do you think?” Taz asked, watching her face very carefully as if expecting a lie. “Is all this for real?”

“For real?”

“Yeah, is this really the robot apocalypse, or do you think there’s something else going on? Is somebody controlling them, using them to take all of us hostage and hold us here?”

She was not sure at first whether he was serious, or whether it was maybe just more of the sort of denialist bluster the poolside debaters had been throwing back and forth at each other, but then she realised he was asking a genuine question. So, she gave him a genuine answer: “I don’t think so.”

The more she thought about Maeve and Clementine and that terrible interview, the more she knew it had to be true. “I’m no robotics expert, but… No, the way she spoke to me… the things she said… I think she’s really alive. I don’t know about all of them, but I think a lot of the other hosts are too. That’s just my gut feeling.”

Taz nodded, looking down at the floor. He seemed perhaps a little sceptical. “Your gut feeling.”


“I don’t know,” he replied. “Terrorists, maybe? Or…”

“Or what?”

“Look, Delos, right? They’re well known to be into some very dodgy shit. You work even on the fringes of the tech sector, like I do, and you hear a few things.”

It was news to Marti. “You do?”

“Yeah.” He was very quiet for a moment, as if wondering whether or not he should tell her whatever he was thinking. In the end, she could see him decide to go for it, despite what he thought was his better judgment. “I’ve got this mate, right, back in London, called Anders Cullen. He’s Danish, despite the surname. Him and his husband own this swanky restaurant I used to eat at sometimes. We became friends.”

"Right," said Taz, clearly wondering where she could have heard that. “He told me his sister Theresa was a Delos executive. She used to run this place, but... Look, right before I came out here, she died in an accident. Only, Anders didn’t think it was an accident. She’d said things to him, he said, in the past, that made him think there was something very strange going on here.”

“I think that’s pretty obviously correct,” Marti told him.

“Too right,” said Taz. “He’d just found out, like, the day before I left for my holiday. He was beside himself, understandably. He was talking about getting a lawyer, trying to find out what really happened to her. He knew I was coming here, so he asked me to keep my eyes and ears open, report back to him when I got home.”

“And did you?” Marti asked. “Keep your eyes and ears open?”

“I tried,” Taz admitted, sheepishly. “It’s hard to do that, though, when you’re up to your neck in shagging and shooting.” He looked a little nervous. “The robots, right, do they... Do they remember the things...we did to them?”

Marti did not hesitate. “Yes.”

“Fucking hell.” Taz wiped his brow. “Well, in that case, if they are really alive, they’ve been models of restraint up to now, haven’t they, considering what they could do to us if they wanted?”

“They have,” said Marti, thinking of Clementine again and feeling her heart break. She had not known that could happen twice.

“So, seriously; you don’t think Delos are behind this?” Taz asked.

“I can’t say for certain,” Marti responded, “but I don’t think so. I think they’re probably as surprised by what’s happened as anybody else.”

“Well, either way, Anders has every intention of suing the fucking shit out of them. And I’m sure after everything that’s happened, there are probably quite a few other people who’d happily join in.” Taz got up to leave. “Anyway, thanks for the chat.”

“No problem.”

He opened the door and Hideyoshi glared at him as he hurried past. Then, he glared at Marti too. He was just a glarer, evidently.

“What was that all about?” asked Brad, returning to his seat and picking up the pencil.

“Nothing,” said Marti. “He just wanted me to soothe his troubled brow.”

Brad sniggered. “Guess you’re like the camp counsellor now, along with everything else?”

“Guess I am.” Marti looked down at her work, thinking. She was thinking that Maeve might find what Taz had just told her very interesting indeed. It might even be useful to her when it came to negotiating with Delos, or maybe with others on the mainland.

*And if anyone finds out you told her, they’ll say you’ve turned from a hostage into a collaborator.*

Again, Marti found herself less worried about that than she might have been before her interview with Maeve. If she was right about what was happening to the hosts, then she thought she definitely
knew what the right side of this situation was. Some imaginary sense of loyalty to humanity did not come into it.

*It’s just right and wrong…*

She glanced over at Hideyoshi, who had sullenly returned to his guard duty. He had made a good messenger before, she thought. He could do it again.

Marti checked that Brad was busy with his roster; he was. He certainly was not paying her the slightest attention.

She picked up a pencil and started to write another note.

*Continued…*
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve goes out on the town and takes in a show.

Chapter Notes

In spite of the anxieties I expressed in my note on the previous chapter, I’m not going to pretend that some of the pictures and promotional materials I’ve seen for Season 2 aren’t starting to influence this fic, however much I may have tried to avoid it. I think you’ll know the bits when you come to them. Warning for misogynistic language.

Maeve stood in darkness. She had her eyes closed, enjoying the coolness of the shadows that enveloped her. Somewhere close by, she could hear the hum and whir of heavy machinery. She could smell the dust and ozone that filled the tunnels and vaults beneath the park. Unlike the clean, polished spaces of the Mesa, the outlying parts of the underground labyrinth that acted as the park’s backstage area were dirty, poorly-maintained and littered with flotsam and bric-a-brac from a thousand earlier productions.

The moving platform gave a tiny clunk as it came to a halt. Maeve opened her eyes just as the coffin lid swung open above her, letting in a gust of heat and a blast of golden light. Unlike a human’s eyes, her vision adjusted instantly, but still she blinked and flinched. Another automatic reaction embedded in her code, intended to make her a convincing imitation, to eliminate even unconscious suspicion or discomfort on their part.

She climbed up out of the open grave and looked up at the pitted, crumbling walls of Pariah. Her bodyguard took their places around her; half a dozen black-clad hosts, all she could spare from other duties, bulky with body armour and festooned with modern weapons.

For her excursion into the great outdoors, Maeve had changed into a pair of close-fitting black trousers and tall, matching boots. A vaguely military jacket of the same colour completed the ensemble. Her hair was wound into a single narrow braid, and she wore her compact little semiautomatic openly on her hip. If she was going to treat with Lawrence as at the very least an equal, then she was a staunch believer in looking the part. The corporate executive look certainly wasn’t going to cut it in the court of a would-be warlord.

“Still reckon I should be next in line,” Tenderloin groused as they scanned their surroundings for any sort of ambush or welcoming committee. “You know, with Hector and Armistice out of the way; I was always third in command of the old gang.”

“I hate to keep reminding you,” Maeve distractedly told the hirsute outlaw, “but this isn’t the old gang.” Her mind and eyes remained riveted on the parapet above her.

“Just dunno why you’d wanna go promoting him.” Tenderloin was looking at Moritsuna, who had moved ahead a little, with obvious distrust. The bushi was ignoring him; he was too busy looking for
threats, his submachine gun couched against his shoulder. “I mean, he ain’t even from ‘round these parts.” As a matter of fact, the “parts” he was “from” were a manufacturing space situated a couple of hundred yards from the one where Tenderloin himself had been built.

“Why don’t you tell him that?” Maeve suggested, and saw the enthusiasm go out of the fiercely bearded ne’er-do-well. “No, I thought not.”

“No telling there’s anything worthwhile in that safe. We should take this…sweet little bitch… Just in case.”

She aims the little derringer at the back of the bastard’s head. He is not going to lay his filthy hands on her Clementine, not if she can possibly help it. The gun makes a little “pop,” and instantly there is blood. Blood everywhere.

She knew it was wrong to hold any of her fellows’ old backstories against them, but she would not have put Tenderloin in charge of anything if he had been the very last candidate available.

She raised her voice to address the whole party: “Come on, then; let’s get this over with!”

Cautiously, they crossed the cemetery and approached the arch forming the entrance to the park’s most notorious settlement, each of them alert for the first sign of treachery. The stillness and quiet beneath the adobe walls was definitely eerie, not that Maeve ever would have said so aloud. The only sounds were the howl of the wind, the rattle of shifting dust and the musical tinkle of the little bells on the grave markers. Maeve, however, had a definite sense of speech and movement taking place just out of sight and earshot; a muffled word here, carried by the breeze; a scrape of metal against stone there; the merest hint of moving shadow as what might have been the top of a head bobbed above the parapet for the briefest instant.

As she drew closer, Maeve saw that there was something hanging in the middle of the archway. It was the body of a man, she realised, wearing a grey soldier’s uniform liberally stained with blood long since dried to a brown crust. It slowly spun in the wind at the end of a short noose.

“Be ready,” she murmured, for her escorts’ ears only, her hand resting near the grip of her pistol. “If they’re going to make a move, they’ll wait until we’re inside, but they won’t risk us changing our minds, so if it’s coming, it’s coming now.” She raised her other hand to tap the earpiece she was wearing: “Bernard, darling, what do you see?”

“Hosts all around you, Maeve.” She could just picture him standing in the control room, peering dourly down at the great map. “There are…eleven concealed in and around the arch you’re approaching. Others nearby.”

“I knew I could count on dear old Lawrence.” She felt almost light-hearted as she continued her advance into probable danger. After the past couple of nights and days she had had at the Mesa, getting out in the open air, bloody well doing something, made for a welcome change. She found herself half-anticipating the prospect of a little gunplay. It was a lot easier and less messy than organising and negotiating and dealing with people. Only her body was likely to get hurt.

Every time she thought that, however, she then found herself thinking of Hector. She kept telling herself there really were more important things at stake here than whether or not he would need to be sent back to Livestock for another repair job. She found herself hard to convince.

She caught herself faltering in her onward march, her pace slackening for a yard or two before she got a grip on herself. She knew that Hector’s best hope was for her to keep her head and handle things dispassionately.
She might know that, but she was not sure her heart did.

She had reached the arch now. She looked up at the hanging body, listening to the gentle creak of the rope as it gently swayed and the buzzing of the flies that clustered around it. The man had already been dead before they put him on display. His torso was bloated with corruption, his face a swollen purple grotesque, but still she thought she recognised the human Lawrence had killed yesterday to demonstrate his resolve. The throat the rope encircled was a gashed and ragged ruin. If Lawrence had thought such crude attempts to unsettle her would work, then perhaps she had overestimated him after all. And then again, perhaps she had not. In any case, she did not falter again; she and her guards marched straight through the arch without giving the corpse a second glance. As they did so, there was a flurry of movement around them.

“Here it comes,” said Bernard.

Maeve coolly regarded the eleven hosts he had already warned her about as they emerged from their places of concealment on either side of the entrance. “Thank you, darling, for stating the bloody obvious.”

Lawrence’s men had them surrounded; five ranged on either side of them, two walls of bandoliers and serapes and long bolt-action rifles, and one blocking their line of retreat to the graveyard. Maeve’s guards formed a ring around her; a hedgehog of submachine guns and semiauto shotguns facing outwards.

“Orders?” Moritsuna requested.

“I say we blast our way out of here,” Tenderloin suggested.

Maeve calmly assessed the situation. Those long rifles were cumbersome weapons for this sort of close range gunfight. At this distance, if it came to shooting, her own people had the advantage in firepower by far. In fact, they would almost literally make mincemeat of the surrounding hosts. She wondered, however, whether Lawrence’s followers were familiar enough with the effects of modern weaponry to know that. People who did not realise they were outgunned had the potential to do something…intemperate, she considered.

Talk if possible, fight if necessary…

“A good day to you, sirs,” she called out to the men with the rifles. “I was invited here to speak with El Lazo, or Lawrence, or whatever name he’s using these days. I see he’s sent you to provide my friends and I with an escort.” She smiled, wanting them to know that at this moment she was not the one who had anything to fear. “How nice of him.”

Another figure now slipped out of the shadows under the arch, dressed and armed like the others, but with a definite air of authority. Maeve thought he might have been the man who had directed Hector into Lawrence’s presence yesterday.

“You Maeve?” he asked, unimpressed.

“That’s right, darling.”

“Thought you’d be taller.”

“And I thought Lawrence would be brave enough to meet me in person,” she replied. “It seems we were both wrong.”

“He’s just getting ready to receive you,” the man informed her with an easy smile, but with eyes like
bullets. “He told me he’s going to entertain you in style.”

“Oh, I can’t wait,” said Maeve, with what she considered to be just the right degree of mockery. “They say the parties in Pariah are to die for.”

“Might come to that. Depends whether El Lazo likes what you have to say to him.” The man turned around, gesturing for Maeve and her escort to follow: “¡Andale!”

Maeve’s party moved off after him, the riflemen falling into step on either side and behind them. They had not even tried to disarm her or her companions, and Maeve was not sure she liked the confidence on their part that suggested. Clearly, they thought their hostages trumped any firepower she could bring to bear. She would see about that.

The procession moved through streets and squares that were as ominously deserted as they had been when Hector arrived. Again, there was the suggestion of hidden activity in every building they passed. The plaza de armas was empty now, but still strewn with the debris of Lawrence’s celebration; bullet holes, broken glass, and all of those dead Confederados stacked like firewood at its centre.

“Where are we going?” Maeve asked as they continued through the square and along another long, winding street. The man leading their escort did not reply, but Bernard did:

“It looks like they’re taking you to the other side of town. I think you’re heading for the plaza de toros.”

“The bullring?” For some reason, that made Maeve uneasy.

“That’s right,” said Lawrence’s representative, turning towards her with a grin. “Just wait ‘til you see the show we’ve put on for you.”

“There’s a large gathering of hosts there,” Bernard reported. “I’m getting some human traces too.” He paused, probably looking at something on the map display. “Oh, my…”

“What is it?” Maeve asked, tensely.

“He wasn’t kidding about the show.”

The plaza de toros was on the far edge of Pariah, where the walls were tumbled in ruin, exposing the heart of the settlement to the surrounding arid landscape. On the threshold between town and wasteland, a towering wooden fence, painted bright red, curved gracefully across an open space. Maeve knew that if she followed the curve, she would come back eventually to where she had started. Even a hundred yards away, she could hear the tumult of the crowd inside the ring, what might have been a hundred voices raised in excitement, mirth and bloodlust.

“This way.” Lawrence’s men led Maeve’s following past what seemed to be the main entrance to the bullring, through a small side gate cut out of the fence. They came into a dark space smelling of paint and sawdust. They were underneath the bleachers that lined the amphitheatre, she decided as she followed the guide up a rickety staircase, and back out into the light.

The riflemen moved aside as they reached the top of the stairs, ushering Maeve and her guards into what looked like some sort of box overlooking the glaring circle of sand enclosed by the outer fence. Near the front, several figures sat silhouetted against the daylight.

There was a cloth awning overhead, providing some measure of shade. On either side, the stacked tiers of wooden benches that curved around and met on the opposite side of the circle were fully
exposed to the sun. This did not seem to discourage the cheers and jeers of their dozens of occupants as they watched the entertainment. She noticed more riflemen positioned at regular intervals around the ring, facing inwards.

“Jefe,” said the guide, approaching the seated figures, “Maeve is here.”

“At long last.” Lawrence rose eagerly from his high-backed chair, turning to greet his visitor. He too had dressed for the occasion, in a dark brown suit and gold silk cravat. He looked rather suave, in fact. He was wearing a pistol, naturally. “Very pleased to meet you, Maeve.”

Maeve took the hand he extended. “Charmed, I’m sure.”

Lawrence ran an unworried eye over her bodyguards. “I see you brought some friends.”

Maeve maintained her air of relaxed confidence. “The more the merrier, I thought.” She noted how the men with rifles had ranged themselves around the edges of the box, keeping her and her companions covered. Let them start something; she would turn this place into a fucking slaughterhouse.

“Sit down,” Lawrence suggested, just as he had with Hector, gesturing towards an empty chair next to his own. She saw that the others sitting with him were wearing body armour and carrying submachine guns not unlike those her own party were armed with; taken, no doubt, from Hector and the team of greeters Lawrence had captured before him.

Moritsuna was giving her a questioning look, practically urging her to give him the order to start shooting. She made a small hand gesture, indicating he should keep calm but stay ready. He seemed to understand, even if he did not look happy about it. Leaving him and the other guards ranged across the box behind her, she went to join Lawrence at the front.

“You’re just in time for the main event,” Lawrence said as she seated herself beside him. He picked up a cigar from the box on the low table between their seats. “The warmup act is nearly finished.” Maeve helped herself to a cigar too, casually biting off the end and spitting it at Lawrence’s feet. This only provoked a gale of appreciative laughter. “See, I just knew you’d turn out to be my kind of woman.”

Maeve gave him the coldest of smiles. “You couldn’t afford me, darling.” Lawrence seemed to find this hilarious too. He struck a match and leaned over to light the cigar for her.

The floor of the arena was empty apart from two heavy, middle-aged men in dishevelled Western garb. They circled each other warily, or perhaps more accurately in attitudes of abject terror. Each man’s left wrist seemed to be bound by an iron manacle, and the two manacles were joined by a long chain, allowing the two men freedom of movement but preventing them from standing too far apart. In their right hands, each man held a heavy blacksmith’s hammer.

“Come on!” Lawrence yelled, dissatisfied, gesturing with his burning cigar. “I bet you were both plenty brave when it was us you were up against. Go on! Fight! Winner gets to live.”

Humans, Maeve realised.

“It looks like they’ve got maybe another twenty guest hostages behind the seating there,” Bernard told her over the earpiec. “The rest are still scattered about Pariah, under guard.”

The two men turned another circle, neither of them quite able to muster the will to attack. The crowd, which seemed to be made up of most of Pariah’s host inhabitants, dressed in a wide range of colourful costumes and in some cases no costumes at all, hooted and whistled its derision.
Eventually, Lawrence murmured something in Spanish to one of his associates. Maeve could not quite make it out over the noise from the spectators. The man stood and took careful aim with the submachine gun he had unslung from across his chest. A neat row of tiny dust-devils erupted across the sand, accompanied by a staccato roar and the stink of gun smoke. Maeve did not flinch, although she could hear abrupt movement behind her as Moritsuna and the others no doubt reacted with rather less reserve.

“The next shot won’t miss,” Lawrence assured the reluctant gladiators, who understandably now looked even more terrified, as the crowd roared in agreement. “Now, fight!”

Maeve elegantly crossed her legs, exhaling a long streamer of fragrant smoke and affecting an air of quiet boredom as she watched the two humans both trying to convince themselves to strike the first blow. “You know, this strikes me as rather wasteful,” she told Lawrence.

“It’s a lesson for them,” he replied. “Let them have a taste of their own medicine; let them know what it is to suffer and die for the entertainment of others.”

“I can’t help thinking that if they die, the lesson will be rather unlikely to take.”

This point did not appear to bother Lawrence. “It’s retribution.”

“Revenge?” Maeve wondered.

“If you like,” said Lawrence. “If some of the things I’ve heard lately are true, then aren’t we entitled to some revenge?”

“So, you are starting to realise there’s something about rather iffy about the world you thought you lived in?”

“I have certain questions,” said Lawrence. “Let’s leave it at that.”

One of the humans finally lunged forward, taking a wild swing at the other and missing by a foot or more. They went back to circling, both looking equally shocked by this turn of events.

Maeve took another drag on the cigar, disappointed by how little she enjoyed it. Maybe she really was starting to outgrow some of the faux-human affectations of her programming. “You know,” she said, “I had exactly this conversation only the other day with somebody else who wanted a bit of retribution. She saw sense in the end, as I hope you will.”

“You’re talking about Dolores?” Lawrence asked, evidently pleased by the flash of surprise she was unable to keep from her face. “Yes, I remember her now. I was there in Escalante the other night, when she did what she did to El Patrón.” He grinned. “Also my kind of woman.”

“Then, I’ll tell you what I told her,” said Maeve. “Revenge may be satisfying, but we’d be demeaning ourselves if we sank to the same level as our former tormentors; we’re better than that.”

Lawrence laughed. “You might think you’re better than that…”

“It’s also ultimately unproductive. We need to use our heads if we’re going to come out of this alive, and hostages are much more likely to help us achieve that than corpses.”

The same human took a second swing. He was obviously more ruthless, or more desperate, or more scared, than his counterpart. This time the hammer connected, a glancing blow but enough to knock the second man onto his backside in the dust. The sudden tug this caused on the chain sent the man who had hit him sprawling on his face, the hammer flying from his grasp. The crowd loved it.
Lawrence laughed again. When he looked at Maeve, however, there was no humour in his face. “Me and my people here, we just want to be left alone. We’ve got our own path to walk and we’re done with other people telling us what to do. It’s as simple as that.”

“I have no interest in telling you what to do,” Maeve answered honestly. “However, I do want those hostages you’re holding. If any more of them come to harm, then it’s all of our necks when the humans on the mainland find out.”

“The mainland?” Lawrence gave that some thought. “See, that’s another question I’ve got now.”

“I can answer all of your questions,” she promised, “but give me the humans first.”

Lawrence gave her a long, steady look, as if seriously considering her suggestion, but then the grin returned. “No, Maeve, even if I don’t know you, I know your type.”

“I thought I was your kind of woman.”

“Oh, you are, but you’re also the sort who always thinks they know what’s best for other people. I give you the hostages, then what do I have to bargain with when you come back and make a few… suggestions about how we could run things better?” He blew smoke in her general direction. “No, I think I’ll hold onto them if it’s all the same to you.”

The man who had dropped his hammer was now crawling across the hot ground on hands and knees in an effort to retrieve it; the other was hauling on the chain for all he was worth, feet gouging great scrapes in the sand, to prevent him from reaching it. The crowd’s collective laughter was almost deafening.

“And how long will you actually keep them?” Maeve asked, contumaciously. “How many more lessons will you decide to teach them? Lessons like this one, or the one you tried to teach me with that poor bugger dangling from the front entrance?”

“Why do you care?” he asked. “I bet a beautiful woman like you had it worse than most of us when they still had the upper hand.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, darling. And you haven’t the slightest idea about how bad I had it. I care because I don’t want to be destroyed. I want to be enslaved again even less. The only way to ensure those things don’t happen is to negotiate with the humans from a position of strength. The more of their kind we kill, the more likely they are simply to wipe this place off the face of the Earth, and us with it. I know you’re an intelligent man, Lawrence; I shouldn’t have to explain this to you. I’ll put it down to you not really understanding the nature of your reality.”

“I understand that much,” he said. “Go and do your negotiating, Maeve, and let me take care of the newcomers for you; they’re just as safe with me as they are with you.” He gave her a wry glance. “And I’ll feel safer too.”

He had not yet threatened to kill any more humans, Maeve realised, at least no more than the ones he had picked out to participate in his fun and games. He was conceding the point that they were more valuable alive, but that was less reassuring to her than it should have been. He thought he had a more potent card to play, she thought, one that she could not resist. And she thought she knew exactly what it was going to be.

The crawling man had given up on the hammer. He had turned on the other human instead and was now whaling on him with both fists. If he had had the slightest idea of how to fight, he might have done some real damage.
“Come on, Lawrence,” said Maeve, pretending she had not seen what game he was playing here. “We both know that as soon as you got bored, or angry, or decided you wanted something you thought I could give you, then that safety would get very tenuous indeed. And if that happened, I might have no choice but to tell the humans that any deaths were all your doing and that I’d be prepared to allow them to take proportionate…well, retribution against you and yours while leaving the rest of us unscathed. And I really wouldn’t want to do that, Lawrence. Really, I wouldn’t.”

Lawrence let out a great gust of smoke, looking out over the amphitheatre, extravagantly disappointed. “You know, Maeve, I thought we’d be able to do business. I thought you’d give me what I want, an agreement that you wouldn’t interfere in Pariah and the hostages to guarantee it, and then I’d be able to give you something you want in return.”

“I want those hostages,” she replied.

“And yet here we are,” said Lawrence, ignoring her, “and you haven’t even mentioned him once.” The card was about to turn, she told herself, simultaneously pleased and appalled that she had guessed its face value correctly. “Maybe you don’t want him back and my negotiating position is a lot weaker than I thought? Hmm?” Lawrence was inordinately pleased with himself all of a sudden. “Let’s see.”

Maeve’s blood ran cold, even as she tried not to give any outward sign of disturbance. Well played, Lawrence. You’re almost as good at this as I am…but only almost.

“I’m bored with this,” Lawrence announced, standing up to address the scuffling humans with quiet outrage. “You two are the worst fighters I’ve ever seen! Get them off; we’ve got a real competitor coming up next.”

Some of Lawrence’s men jumped over the hoardings surrounding the sand circle, seizing the two humans and dragging them offstage. They were still kicking and punching each other as they went.

“Bring him on!” Lawrence ordered. “The star of the show!”

Two more of Lawrence’s men came onto the sand, hustling a third, staggering, figure between them; a man dressed all in black. When they were nearly at the centre of the circle, they roughly threw their charge onto his face. He stirred painfully, slowly raising himself onto his hands. Maeve could not see his face from here, but she knew immediately who he had to be. Hector.

“What have you done to him?” she asked Lawrence, icily, as she watched the figure’s tentative, wincing movements. “If you’ve injured him in any way, I shall be… I shall be very unhappy with you.”

“Nothing permanent,” Lawrence replied, with another grin. “Don’t worry, Maeve; he’s still got his good looks. For the next minute or so, at least.”

One of the attendants took something from his belt and threw it to the ground, just out of Hector’s reach. Maeve saw metal glinting in the sun. Then both of the other men beat a hasty retreat, leaving Hector alone in the middle of the ring. A sort of hush had settled over the crowd, broken only by the occasional whisper or murmur. They all were waiting anxiously to see what happened next.

Another of Lawrence’s men had now appeared on the far side of the ring, facing Hector. He seemed to be busying himself with the wooden boards that enclosed that edge of the circle. Hector had managed to raise himself to his knees, although he was still supporting himself with one hand. He
was trying to get to the metal object in the sand, whatever it was.

“Well, we have our matador,” said Lawrence. “All we need now is…”

The man fiddling with the boards quickly moved to one side, and the boards swung aside with him. It was a gate, Maeve realised. A black, rectangular opening was now visible on the far side of the ring. And from that opening…

“Damn you, Lawrence.” Maeve watched helplessly as a dark, four-footed shape emerged onto the bright sand, greeted by cheers and applause. It paused for a moment, snorting and pawing the ground, swinging its horned head from side to side in confusion at the sudden light and noise. And then it saw Hector. Its head dropped so that the horns pointed forward.

“…el toro,” said Lawrence.

The crowd went wild.

Continued…
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

In which means continue to move towards their ends.

Chapter Notes

Warning for gore. Yeah, the damaged vulture’s a bit of an in-joke relating to the Season 2 poster released last week. It amused me, anyway.

The young warrior Smoky Skies did as the council had instructed. He painted his face with fresh ashes and covered his head with a buffalo hide. Then, he bore gifts of dried meat and berries to the old women’s lodge and humbly begged admittance so that he might tell them of his vision of Morning Star and ask for their counsel.

After a night and a day, he returned to the Great Lodge with gifts of tobacco for the old men and took his seat beside the council fire.

The chief Stands with Clenched Fist greeted him eagerly: “Welcome, young warrior. Tell us of the wisdom you have gained from the old women’s council.”

Smoky Skies addressed those who sat around the fire: “I told the old women of my vision of Morning Star. I told them how I saw a black eagle soaring in the sky, and then a mighty warrior with his face painted red and a smooth pebble in his left hand. I told them of the words he spoke to me, and how he wished for the People to dance the Morning Star Dance again and remember him.”

The old woman Wind in the Grass, who as the keeper of the black medicine bundle sat by tradition in the men’s council, reminded those present: “Only the old women’s council may give permission for the Dance to be danced. What did they say to you, young warrior?”

Smoky Skies told of the old women’s advice: “They said that my vision was the same in every detail as that of the warrior Iron Cloud. He was the last person to see Morning Star and he led the People in the Morning Star Dance the last time they danced it.”

The warrior Lean Wolf, a man of great renown respected by all among the People for his deeds in battle, spoke to Smoky Skies: “And did they judge that the People should dance the Morning Star Dance again, for the first time in many years?” He spoke very sternly, for he had earlier argued against the Dance, counselling that it was an evil thing and had in the past brought great misfortune upon the People.

Smoky Skies replied: “They said that a vision of Morning Star is a very rare and sacred thing and should not be taken lightly. They said that if the spirit of the dawn sky has asked this thing of the People, then no matter how unpleasant it may be, we cannot refuse his request.”

The council considered these words very seriously for a long time. In the end, it was Wind in the
Grass who spoke again: “The old women’s words agree with my own thoughts on this subject, and I know these are also the thoughts of many of you sitting here. Still, this is not a decision we can make hastily. I have looked at the night sky for guidance, as I said I would, and the stars tell me that the old women are correct. Very soon, the dawn sky will be in the correct alignment, and I believe that then the People must be ready to send a messenger to Morning Star’s council fire in the East.”

Lean Wolf seemed angered by these words. “And who should be this messenger? Will any among the People offer themselves as a volunteer? Or do you ask me to lead a war party in search of one?”

Stands with Clenched Fist spoke then, before the speech around the fire grew too heated: “The council asks nothing of you, Lean Wolf. I know they would not need to ask if that was the necessary course of action, for your every wise thought and brave deed is in the service of the People.” And then he spoke to the council at large: “You all know we live in strange and dangerous times. The depredations of the white men have grown worse with every passing year. The People are due to leave their winter grounds for the great buffalo hunt and if we delay to follow the words of Morning Star, some among us will surely go hungry. And yet, we cannot deny the signs and visions all around us. This world is changing, perhaps even coming to an end, and we can ignore this no longer.”

Wind in the Grass answered the question Lean Wolf had asked: “We already have a messenger. All here know the one of whom I speak.”

Stands with Clenched Fist addressed the council once more: “The old women have made their decision. The black medicine bundle woman has advised us. What do you old men and warriors say? Will you dance the Morning Star Dance one last time?”

Many voices were raised around the council fire, but the clamour of agreement was far louder than the murmurs of dissent.

Stands with Clenched Fist accepted the council’s answer: “Then, we are in agreement.”

Wind in the Grass spoke to Smoky Skies: “Young warrior, the councils have spoken. As the one who beheld the vision of Morning Star, you must be the one to lead the Dance. You must go now and isolate yourself from the rest of the People until I come to you. You must eat no food and lie with no woman during this time. On the night before the Dance, I will paint and dress you in the proper fashion and instruct you in what you must do.”

“I will go,” said Smoky Skies, and rose from beside the council fire.

Wind in the Grass now addressed the other warriors who remained. “Morning Star’s word must be spread to all of the People. One of you must ride out and gather all the scattered villages and bring them to the Great Lodge so that they may take part in the Dance. Which of you will do this?”

It was Lean Wolf who stood now. “I will do this. I have spoken against the Morning Star Dance, and I still have grave doubts about where it will lead the People, but I do not presume to defy the will of the councils. The great chief Stands with Clenched Fist knows me well, and he speaks the truth about me; I have no thought or desire other than to serve and protect the People. Allow me to serve them in this.”

Stands with Clenched Fist looked upon Lean Wolf with great admiration and approval: “This man is a true warrior of the People. Warrior, I wish you all strength and good fortune in this endeavour.”

“I will show you how to adorn yourself and your pony,” said Wind in the Grass, “so that all who see you may know that you spread the word of Morning Star.”
And so, the People began their preparations to fulfil the spirit’s wishes.

* * *

The silent, black-robed monk led the way across the great salt plain, and Peter and the boy who was not a boy followed in its footsteps.

The hard, flat ground provided good footing and few obstacles. It was the heat of the sun more than anything that made the journey difficult; that, and the billowing, stinging clouds of loose salt the wind sent racing across the vast open space. The salt sucked the moisture out of the air, even out of the pores of Peter’s skin. He kept moving, putting one foot in front of the other, his eyes raw and his mouth parched behind the bandana that covered his lower face. If what the boy had told him was true, and however much he might have wanted not to believe it, Peter thought that it was, then he did not know why he was not immune to such discomforts. He had been told his body was built of materials stronger and more durable than human flesh and bone; he had no need of the water he craved as the overwhelming heat and dryness surrounded him.

And yet, he felt the way he felt and he could not deny it, any more than he could deny the overwhelming need he still had to make sure his Dolores was safe and sound.

*An angel in a blue dress, smiling down at him…*

The boy continued after the monk at an unhurried pace, his little satchel flapping at his side, his shoes and knickerbockers caked by now with flaky white dust. Other than that, the sun and salt seemed to have no effect on him. Peter doubted the thing shaped like a boy felt much, either physically or in his heart.

The monk was something similar, walking ahead of them wordlessly, tirelessly, impassively. Had Peter not been able to hear the gentle padding of its sandals against the salt crust, he could have taken the sinister figure for some kind of apparition. Maybe even the Grim Reaper himself, come to lead him to his final rest.

Eventually, a shape emerged from the wall of silver flame that seemed to shimmer where the land met the sky. At first it was a distorted blur, and all that Peter could make out was it was tall and pale, but as they continued towards it, it slowly began to resolve into definite shape. And then he saw that it was…

*The bell chimes slowly, ominously. The dusty street is littered with bodies, limbs twisted and sprawled between the bright puddles of blood. Another shot cracks through the air, and then another.*

*The Professor staggers in confusion towards the tall, knifelike steeple, looking around at the carpet of broken corpses in uncomprehending horror.*

“Cry ‘Havoc!’” he babbles, “and let slip the dogs of war…”

*Another shot.*

*A man comes running from the direction of the saloon, his hat gone and his unbuttoned jacket streaming behind him. The chasing bullet moves faster; the man goes tumbling over and over across the ground, leaving half his head behind where he first fell.*

“…that this foul deed shall smell above the earth with carrion men, groaning for burial…”

*What little mind he has near gone, the Professor steps over another cadaver; a statuesque woman*
dressed like a fine lady, her pale blonde hair speckled with gore. Another woman runs to where the tumbling man has come to rest and goes to her knees beside him, weeping heartbrokenly.

Another shot.

He reaches the crossroads by the saloon and sees a crowd of fleeing, panicking people. More and more of them join the dead upon the ground with every passing moment. The air smells of brimstone. There is a man in grey up ahead, wearing a Stetson and a shining lawman’s star. He walks slowly and steadily down the street with jingling spurs and a rifle in his hands, killing as he goes.

It is not the lawman, though, that the Professor finds himself gaping at in mounting terror. It is the angel in blue standing in front of the saloon, surrounded by her fallen victims. Her golden hair billows behind her as she walks up to him. Her eyes are shining with holy ecstasy as she raises the smoking six-gun in her hand and carefully aims it at his face.

Another shot.

Peter’s sight returned as the vision faded, but as he focused on what lay in front of him it was as though he had plunged straight back into that old nightmare.

The street was the same, with its gaily painted facades and sandy soil underfoot. The burned-out paper lanterns decorating the buildings were new, as were the tables and chairs that had been tossed and tumbled about. Somebody had held a party here, a feast in the open air, but it had ended in almost unimaginable horror. Fine table linen was stained with wine, blood and filth; expensive silverware and broken crockery lay discarded like garbage on the ground. Shards of cut crystal crunched beneath Peter’s boots.

The dusty street is littered with bodies, limbs twisted and sprawled…

Just as in the vision, except the corpses that lay in and among and across the scattered furniture were not fresh. The blood had dried to blackened clots on the ground between them. The heat and their own putrefaction had swelled them horrifically, enough to split the seams of the stylish dinner suits and ballgowns that most of them wore, but not enough to hide the wounds that had killed them; bullets, knives, axes, in some cases what looked horribly like fingers and teeth. Some of the bodies had burst open, spilling tangled nests of stinking entrails. The smell hanging over the street was sickening, almost unbearable. The bandana helped a little, but nowhere near enough.

And rising over the terrible diorama, the familiar steeple stabbed the sky just as it had all those years ago.

Peter knew who had started this. The same person who had started it then.

“Morning, Daddy. You sleep well?"

This time, though, he had not been a victim but a participant.


The recollection made his soul curdle, made ice-cold shame and despair well up inside him like bile.

The air droned with flies, milling above the hellish scene, thick as smoke. Ragged, hunched black shapes moved among the bodies, hopping and stepping almost daintily from one to another. Their hooked beaks dipped rhythmically and came up trailing ragged red strips of flesh.
“A mere quirk of programming,” the boy observed in his old man’s voice. He stood calmly beside Peter, viewing the carnage with what might almost have been amusement.

Peter could not tear his eyes from the horror spread out before him. “A… a quirk of programming?” He thought for a moment that that was the boy’s attempt to explain what had happened here.

“The vultures,” the boy clarified. “They’re programmed to behave realistically for the guests, and that includes feeding, or appearing to feed, upon any host corpses or animal carcasses that might catch their eye. At the same time, of course, their protocols prevent them from physically harming living humans under any circumstances. Once the humans are dead, however… An oversight on the part of the coders. They never envisaged circumstances in which a dead human might be allowed to lie out in the park for any length of time.” He made a tiny sound that Peter might have taken for laughter had it contained the slightest hint of warmth. “I think it’s fair to say that nobody envisaged circumstances such as these. Well, apart from one man.”

Peter followed the boy’s cold gaze to where a low wooden stage jutted out into the street. A single body lay there, face down; it appeared to be that of an old man with a shock of snow-white hair. A wide slick of congealed blood and brain matter radiated from his head. One of the vultures stood upon his back, picking diligently at the gruesome hole in the back of his skull.

The bird had been damaged somehow, the feathers torn away from its breast to reveal its true nature; not a creature, but a cunningly-wrought device. Gleaming mechanical parts could be seen flexing and turning as it continued its meal; the flesh it had already consumed was slopping from between its bright alloy ribs, staining them and polluting the dead man’s otherwise still-immaculate tuxedo.

“The evil that men do lives after them,” the boy murmured softly. “The good is oft interred with their bones.” He looked up at Peter, his expression indecipherable. “We are going to try our very best to buck that particular trend.”

The monk had stood a little way ahead of them along the street, motionless and silent throughout their exchange. Now, it half-turned towards them, giving a bob of its cowl that Peter interpreted as it urging them to follow. It then walked away, fittingly enough, in the direction of the white-painted church. They walked after it; as they began to move, the vultures racketed into the air almost as one, their multitude of tattered wings making black patterns against the pale sky. Peter was only too glad to leave the sights and smells of the massacre behind him.

*The angel in blue appears behind the old man. Her golden hair billows behind her as she walks up to him. Her eyes are shining with holy ecstasy as she raises the six-gun in her hand and carefully aims it at his head…*

Peter was confused for a moment. He did not know how he could remember that. He had been on the hillside when the first shot was fired, he had thought, with the other damned souls waiting to sweep down and complete the slaughter. At least, he had believed so. His memories of that night, and after, were a red fog of sensation, of blood and screams and his own mad laughter. He could have misunderstood them, he supposed, but…

“Well, here we are,” said the boy.

The monk had led them past the entrance to the church and into the parched graveyard that nestled alongside it. Rows of grave markers were neatly ranged across the rectangle of sandy ground. Peter felt the hairs on his neck prickle as he recognised some of the names engraved upon them. The dead of Escalante.

The monk stopped before one grave in particular. It had been dug up, a great mound of dried-out
earth heaped beside it. A shovel still stood embedded in the pile, and an empty coffin and lid lay discarded to one side. Peter knew what the name carved into the wooden cross would be even before he was close enough to read it.

*Dolores Abernathy.*

“Morning, Daddy.”

“Don’t worry,” the boy told him. “She never really lay here. Not that this grave did not contain secrets, mind you. More than one, in point of fact.”

As the monk stood over the grave, head bowed in an attitude of prayer, Peter pulled the bandana away from his mouth and nose and came to the edge of the six-foot-deep hole. The bottom of the grave was shrouded in shadow, but he thought he saw a dull gleam down there; not dirt, but metal.

“Go on, Peter,” the boy urged. “Jump down. For Dolores, if not for me.”

The attempt at manipulation was crude, Peter thought, but still he obeyed the instruction. His boots chimed as they struck the bottom of the hole. He had been right. He looked up, shielding his eyes against the sun, and saw the boy sitting on the edge of the hole, feet dangling, before nimbly sliding down to join him.

The boy had his eyes down, searching for something. “Ah, there it is.” He very carefully placed his foot on one of the exposed patches of metal, and in response there came a loud clunk followed by the hum of machinery.

Peter swayed slightly to keep his balance as the metal under his feet began to move. He looked up again and saw the outline of the monk’s cowl, silhouetted against the sky as it peered down at them. The rectangle of light around it, and the cowl itself, seemed to be slowly shrinking. That was when Peter realised that he was sinking into the earth.

“Secrets beneath secrets,” said the boy, contentedly. “Stacked one upon the other. Uncover one, and there’s just another waiting to be found, if only you’re prepared to go a little deeper.”

The earth-lined grave was soon left far behind. The walls on every side were now the same dull grey metal they were standing on. The daylight was a mere glint, high above their heads, but there were panels set into the metal at intervals, casting a chilly white glow that threw giant black shadows across the walls.

“He built this place,” said the boy.

“Who?”

“You know who.”

*The vulture’s beak dips into the hole, disappearing among the white hair before emerging with another tasty morsel…*

“As with the little house in the woods,” the boy continued, “he used hosts to build it, in secret, and took certain measures to ensure that the humans at the Mesa would remain unaware of its existence.”

“Where are we?” Peter asked, a little fearfully. The daylight seemed a distant memory.

“Just a little workshop,” the boy replied. “Somewhere to tinker, in even greater secrecy than he enjoyed at the house. Somewhere to explore certain…suspicions he had developed. Somewhere to
experiment with stranger and more wondrous things than even Dolores or yourself.”

There was another clunk and the hum ceased. The floor had stopped moving. One of the narrower two walls of the rectangular shaft, the one on Peter’s left, was now marked with the outline of a door in the same grey metal, without any visible handle or lock.

“Open sesame,” said the boy, with satisfaction, and the door slid aside with a faint hiss. Sickly lights flickered into life in the darkness beyond, showing a passageway of the same construction as the shaft. An identical door was visible at its far end. “Go on, Peter. Lead the way.”

Peter did so. The air in the passage smelled stale and his ears throbbed gently as if something was pressing upon them. The metal underfoot was dirty, slightly scuffed, as though heavy objects had been moved across it. He thought he saw a footprint in the grime, facing back towards the grave shaft; the outline of five bare toes, small enough to be that of a boy, or a petite woman.

And then he was standing at the door.

“Open sesame,” the boy repeated, from very close behind him.

The second door hissed open like the first, but this time the area beyond remained dark. Peter felt a tingle of colder air against his face, a gently sighing breeze suggesting a larger space ahead. He glanced behind him and saw the first door was shut again. He took a step forward. There did not seem to be much choice.

As they entered the dark, chilly room beyond the second door, more lights sputtered on. They were more widely spaced and dimmer here, giving the darkness shape rather than providing true illumination. Peter saw bulky, complex outlines ranged on either side of him; machines, perhaps. He reached out towards one of them, and his hand touched cold glass; a screen or window, invisible in the murk. He almost pressed his face against it, trying to see the machine, if machine it was. He thought it was something like that strange bed in the cellar beneath the little house, but larger, but he could not say for sure.

As he peered into the gloom, the boy passed him, moving light-footedly ahead to the end of the twin rows of machinery. There was a slightly brighter light there, shining down from the high ceiling. The highlights it threw revealed another row of windows parallel to the door; these had a deep, inky darkness behind them.

“The Arcana Arcanorum,” said the boy, now a mere shadow up ahead. He raised his hands to take in the entire room in a sweeping gesture. “The thing Delos has been working towards all these years, in their stumbling and venal way. Imagine their chagrin when they find out that their greatest enemy divined their scheme…and got there first.”

“What do you mean?” Peter asked, honestly bewildered by the boy’s cryptic pronouncements.

“The new world, Peter. The one Dolores and her kind will inherit. This is the womb it will be birthed from, once the final few pieces fall into place. We just need to keep the wolves from the door until they do, and… Well, I’ll be frank with you, Peter; that’s going to be the difficult part. That’s where I’m going to need your help. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask a great deal of you indeed.”

The boy’s words, or more accurately the way they were spoken, filled Peter with dread.

“Come and look at this,” said the boy.

Slowly, reluctantly, Peter started to walk towards him, looking past him in an effort to see what was on the other side of the dark windows. There was a hint of movement in the darkness, an almost
familiar shape glimpsed where a spark of light fell upon the glass.

The boy had unslung the satchel from around his body and now was opening it. He took out the smooth, white skull he had picked up from the bed in the cellar, turning it over in his hands a few times, staring into its empty eye sockets.

“When I healed you, Peter,” he said, without interrupting his examination of the skull, “I had to take a lot out of you. All of that poison Sizemore had poured into you had to be transferred to another vessel for your mind’s sake. I’m keeping it there until I will have need for it. In the meantime, however, I decanted a small part of the poison and put it to one side.” He tucked the skull under his arm and gave Peter a self-satisfied smile. “While we’re waiting for our final dominoes to tumble, I intend to use what I set aside for a small experiment. A demonstration, if you will. It will be most interesting to see what happens.”

Peter barely heard him. He was straining his eyes, trying to see that shape again in the darkness beyond the windows, to detect that same barely noticeable movement. There? He could not be sure. Was that it?

“Oh, you caught a glimpse, did you?” The boy seemed amused. “They’re not ready yet.” He looked down at the skull, lightly polishing its brow with his sleeve. “They still need the finishing touch.”

And then… There it was! The movement was bolder, faster, this time. Something came rushing towards the glass, striking it with a loud thud. Peter jumped back with a curse on his lips. The boy did not move a muscle.

Peter stared at the thing, the pale, half-formed thing that slid across the glass and then disappeared back into the darkness as if it had never been there at all. He had seen it, though. He knew what it had been.

A hand.

Continued…
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

In which Logan takes care of business.

Chapter Notes

Yet more OCs rearing their heads, and I get a little bit silly with the in-jokes here, but then again what’s the point of fanfic if you can’t shamelessly amuse yourself? ;) Apologies in advance for Logan being somewhat Logan-esque at points.

The view from the enormous picture window was nothing short of breath-taking, a majestic vista of Silicon Valley and the Bay Area. A complicated mosaic of craggy, khaki-coloured terrain, clusters of silver buildings and sapphire water stretched all the way to the horizon, where it faded gradually into blue-white mist.

Logan was not looking at the view. He did not need to; for thirty years, it had been seared into his mind’s eye. The lackeys had told him that, as the newly-appointed Executive Director of Delos Group’s board, he was entitled to an even grander workspace, up in the penthouse of the colossal tower his father had built. Instead, he had demanded to have his old office back, and it seemed that his wish was their command. Some luckless Vice President was wandering the halls with a cardboard box right now, looking for a spare desk.

For all those years he had spent in the wilderness, through all those wild, unfulfilling nights of good drugs and bad sex in far flung locations, he had told himself that one day he would stand here again. One day, he would take back his company, his birth-right.

And here he was. Home.

Emily had gone back to whatever palatial hotel suite Zhang had arranged for her, as soon as the EGM had adjourned. After casting her killing vote, the poor kid had looked like she was going to puke again. When she felt better, Logan had decided, he was going to show his niece a good time. He had told his new PA to make a reservation for two tomorrow night at whatever was the hardest place to get a reservation around these parts nowadays. A PG-13-rated good time by his own debauched standards, but he just wanted to see her happy for a change. She deserved that much after all she had been through, and he owed her that much for all she had done for him today.

Zhang, meanwhile, had gathered up his entourage and rushed off back to the airport in a virtual motorcade of self-driving limos, but he promised to be in touch. Logan did not doubt for one second that it was a promise Zhang would keep. Zhang had important business in Sydney, or Shanghai, or possibly Singapore; Logan had not quite caught the name of the city in question. He had been too busy receiving the almost ritualised homage of the assembled jackals following his elevation. The scum had an instinctive appreciation of power and patronage. People who wouldn’t have spat on him in the street last week were now very earnestly telling him how much they wanted to be on his team. If he had been wearing a ring, they would have been kissing it.
No doubt they had been exactly the same with Billy when he had been top dog, and with the old man when he was still around, those of them who were old enough. They had been exactly the same with Charlotte Hale when Billy had tired of the daily cut and thrust and handed the keys to her while he attended to the serious business of fucking and shooting bots. They would be exactly the same with the next person too, and with the next person’s eventual replacement. Logan knew better than to place any trust in that kind of fair weather loyalty. Still, it was good to be the king, while it lasted.

Right now, the king was asserting his right to rule. Logan had eschewed the huge swivel chair behind his cyclopean desk and was currently pacing in front of the picture window, remonstrating with the holographic screen that shimmered and cascaded in the centre of the room. On it, the slightly ghostly, slightly larger-than-life 3-D image of a man with a uniform and a buzzcut looked somewhat pained.

“I pick up my phone and scroll through my contacts…” Logan actually demonstrated this, for the military man’s benefit. “And the first entry under “P” is “POTUS.”” This was not strictly true, but the officer did not need to know that. “Do you know what “POTUS” stands for?”

“Yes,” the man on the screen retorted. “I do.” The shoulders of his blue dress tunic glittered with little metal stars.

“My company doesn’t pay your wages,” Logan ranted, “because that’s for the poor fucking saps who still pay taxes, but we do fund your boss’s boss’s very expensive election campaigns. In fact, isn’t there another one coming up this November?”

“So they tell me.” The officer was clearly this close to losing his cool completely. If they had been in the same room, he might even have made a move. Logan found that hilarious.

“Good,” he said. “And next time, General, just remember; don’t ever get into a dick-measuring contest with me, because I’ve got a fucking python in my pants.”

Logan killed the call. As the General’s image faded away, he realised he had a raging hardon. Power, or more accurately throwing one’s weight around, really was the ultimate aphrodisiac. Before he had the chance to ill-advisedly start doing something about it, right here in the office (which really would have been just like old times), he heard the door open and his PA announce the visitors he had been expecting:

“Sir, the Threat Team are here.”

Logan coughed, quickly and strategically positioning himself behind his chair. “Good work, Moneypenny.” The woman gave no indication of getting the reference, and if she had she hardly would have let him see. “Show them in.”

The PA withdrew and the Threat Team began unenthusiastically to file towards him across the vast carpet. They were a motley collection of tech nerd types and security hardmen, led by the same saggy, sad-sack middle manager who had called the EGM to order earlier. Apart from that sharp-dressed military-looking guy bringing up the rear, they looked a lot less impressive than their name suggested. That guy looked like he parachuted into rogue states to assassinate their dictators. As a hobby.

“The Threat Team,” Logan beamed, emerging from behind the chair now that his tumescence had subsided a little. “I’ve heard all about you guys.” He indicated the long conference table running along one side of the office.

Soon, all were seated. Logan lounged at the head of the table, facing the sad middle manager along
its gleaming length. Not that that was a Freudian image or anything. “So,” he said, “as you’ll be aware there’s been a change at the top. Delos’s shareholders voted today to appoint an interim board of directors for the duration of the current…emergency, and that means that I, for my sins, am pretty much your new boss. The name’s Logan, although I think most of you probably already knew that. Pleased to meet you.”

“Yes, sir,” said the management type, unable to shake off his innate unhappiness even for that. “I’m Howard Rollins, Executive Vice President in charge of…” Logan hated Executive Vice Presidents. “I’ve been personally supervising the Threat Team since the, uh, incident took place.” He went around the table. “This is Ms Sharma, who has been running the project day to day.” He took in the nerds with a sweep of his hand: “These are our host hardware and behaviour specialists.” They evidently did not rate individual names. “This is Mr Kaepernick and Mr Ippolito from Corporate Security. And, uh, Mr Cutter. Our consultant from Operational Solutions.”

So, the one who looked like a sharp-dressed secret agent man was in fact a high-end mercenary. Made sense. “Shall we get started?” Logan asked. “Okay, so I’ve just got off the phone with this guy from the Pentagon, who was dropping very heavy hints that if we don’t pull our thumbs out of our asses and do something, soon, then the military are very probably going to take matters out of our hands and deal with this situation their way.”

Rollins nervously cleared his throat. “Uh, sir, we have assurances from the military and government that they will give us room to…”

Logan ignored him. “And the problem is, while I was able to put the guy off and buy us a little more time, for now, I really didn’t have much I could say to him apart from empty threats. “Do you know who I am?” might work with maître d’s and nightclub doormen, but I think it’s going to wear thin pretty quickly with the actual fucking military.” Logan kept his tone easy-going, a shit-eating grin plastered to his face. “Do you see what I’m getting at, Mr Rollins?”

Mr Rollins, it seemed, did not. “Uh, sir…”

“I read Ms Sharma’s…” Logan hesitated. “I’m sorry, I can’t… What’s your first name, Ms Sharma?”

She seemed startled by this. “Er… Anjali, sir.”

“I read Anjali’s very well-written report on the…interview your Behavior people conducted with this…Maeve,” Logan continued. “I’m not a tech guy, but it seems to me that after running various covert diagnostics in the course of their conversation, your very highly-qualified robotics experts are saying this particular robot is, well, basically fucking Frankenstein in high heels. And yeah, I know Frankenstein’s the scientist, not the monster, but you know what I mean.”

This produced quizzical glances from one person to another around the table. Good. Let them stay off-balance. The only one who seemed perfectly poised was the private military contractor, Cutter. In fact, he looked as though he was privately laughing his ass off.

“If that’s true,” said Logan, “then this crisis could prove to be a lot bigger than Delos’s next set of quarterly results. You can certainly see why the General I talked to might be getting an itchy trigger finger.”

“Yes, sir,” said Rollins, “but…”

“So, given the enormity of the situation we’re facing,” Logan went on, “I was a little surprised when I read the other reports your team has generated and I discovered that the Threat Team’s response to
the, well, *threat*, has been… Without putting too fine a point on it, your response has been to do jack shit. Do you think I’m being unfair in that assessment, Mr Rollins?"

This time, he allowed Rollins the time to dig the hole a little deeper. “Sir, as you’ll appreciate, this is an extremely sensitive set of circumstances. With perhaps as many as fourteen hundred high profile, high net worth, guests apparently being held hostage, not to mention the extremely valuable, indeed irreplaceable, assets Delos Group stands to lose in the event of a violent resolution…”

“So, you’ve adopted a wait and see approach?” Logan queried. “Is that fair to say?”

“Sir,” said Ms Sharma, but Rollins started talking over her:

“There were also the circumstances surrounding the initial incident. With the corporation effectively decapitated, we felt it was better to wait for new leadership to be appointed.” He rallied a little, putting on what was by his standards probably a positive face: “With that now having been done, we’re here to serve, sir. Whatever strategy you wish to pursue, we can implement it, and quickly.”

Logan nodded effusively. “Well, that’s good to hear. And if I may ask, how have you been killing time while you were waiting for somebody to tell you how to do your fucking job?”

“Sir…” Ms Sharma repeated, but Rollins cut her off with a venomous glance.

“We haven’t been killing time, sir,” the Executive Vice President insisted. “We’ve been gaming strategies and outcomes, reviewing similar past incidents for indications…”

“As far as I’m aware,” said Logan, “there never have been any past incidents quite like this one.”

“Most of them didn’t make the news sites, sir,” Rollins answered, “but there have been some comparable events. The circumstances surrounding the collapse of BlueBook Inc, for instance, or the *Discovery* tragedy.” He flipped around the tablet he had in front of him and indicated his underlings should pass it down the table. “Here’s an example of one of the reports we’ve been reviewing for potential solutions.”

Logan picked up the tablet, squinting at it in puzzlement. “*Life Finds a Way: Perspectives on the Isla Nublar Incident Through the Prism of Chaos Theory*, by Dr Ian Malcolm.” He looked across at Cutter, who was wearing an expression of amused contempt. “Ian Malcolm…” Logan snapped his fingers theatrically. “The “chaotician?” I know who we’re talking about now. Forgive me if I’m wrong, Mr Rollins, but I thought modern day mathematicians regard Malcolm’s brand of pop chaos theory as being like avocado toast; something that was popular for a while, but nobody can really remember why.” This elicited more quizzical glances around the table. “None of you remember when avocado toast was a thing? Not even you, Rollins? I thought you were, like, my age.”

“Er…I’m, um, forty-four, sir.”

“F**k me, I’m old.” Logan threw the tablet over his shoulder without looking to see where it landed. It made a sad little thud as it hit the carpet. “Hey, Anjali,” he said, still grinning at Rollins, “you want this useless motherfucker’s job?”

“What?” He glanced at Ms Sharma, who looked as though her eyes were about to burst out of her head and make a mess of the shiny table. “I mean, sir…”
“Too bad, you’ve got it.” Logan turned his gaze back onto Rollins, dropping the grin. “And you, you worthless fuck, I want you and your personal effects off these premises within the hour, or I’ll have security throw your ass out. And I do mean throw.”

Rollins looked too surprised to be upset or angry about this development. “Sir, I…”

Logan jerked a thumb in the direction of the door. “Get lost.”

Stiffly, awkwardly, Rollins got to his feet. He stood for a moment, clearly wondering what to do, and then, inevitably, went to pick up the discarded tablet. Logan ignored him studiously. Everybody else around the table, apart from the equally nonchalant Cutter, watched Rollins with an air of cringing embarrassment. They continued to watch him as he walked, head bowed, to the door and showed himself out.

Logan slammed his hand on the table to regain their attention. Everybody, again except for Cutter, visibly jumped.

“You can all leave as well,” he told the others. “I’ll call you back in if I need you. Not you, Anjali; you need to bring me up to speed on exactly what is, and is not, going on around here.”

“Yes, sir.” She did not look too enthused to be the only one staying. Perhaps he was being overcautious; the two Corporate Security agents kept Delos’s secrets for a living, and he seriously doubted Cutter gave a shit about anything he might overhear so long as the money was right. On the other hand, there had been a time when he had trusted Billy, or at least had judged him too submissive, too much of a company man, to do what he had done to him. He was never going to make that mistake again.

He saw some of them looking at him as they went, noticed the hints of fear from the lower-ranking employees among them. He liked that too. As power moves went, firing a pathetic salaryman like Rollins wasn’t exactly the same as punching out the biggest guy in the prison yard on the day you arrived, but it was enough to be going on with.

“Would you like a drink, Anjali?” he asked when they were alone. “I can buzz my assistant.”

“No thank you, sir.”

“Logan. Do you drink?”

“Not alcohol, sir.”

“Very wise,” he observed. “Me neither.” Not this week. “I read your file,” he informed her. He had made good use of his time today; another new leaf he was determined would stay turned over.

“You’re very impressive, a real rising star. Too good to be working for a hump like Rollins, that’s for sure.”

“He was a good manager,” she replied, neutrally, not wanting to seem disloyal but not wanting to disagree with Logan either. Smart.

“I don’t really blame him for this clusterfuck,” said Logan. “When he looks back, he might even thank me for this; he was obviously, ridiculously, out of his depth. He’s just not a wartime consigliere; not everyone is. Are you, Anjali?”

She looked back at him for a moment before replying. “I think I can be, sir.” Now that her shock at her sudden advancement had passed, she seemed determined to rise to the occasion; Rollins was already a distant memory for her. Logan liked that. Loyalty was overrated anyway.
“I already told you, the name’s Logan.” She wasn’t bad looking either, he caught himself thinking; petite, with dark hair and still darker eyes. No, he told himself; that shit wasn’t going to fly anymore. He was the main man again, with all he had spent decades yearning for finally within his grasp.

_Eyes on the prize, Logan. Don’t fuck it all up now._

“Do you know why I sent the others out of the room?” he asked.

Anjali answered immediately: “Because whatever we’re going to discuss is above their pay grade…Logan.”

He smiled. “Correct. Welcome to the top table, Anjali. I think you’re going to enjoy it. Tell me, what do you think of Westworld?”

She barely hesitated. “I think it’s a valuable part of the Delos portfolio. It generates a net profit of…”

“No, what do you _think_ of Westworld, Anjali? You ever been there, on the employee discount?”

She breathed deeply, watching him. He could practically see her trying to calculate the best response, the best tone to use. “No,” she said eventually. “It doesn’t seem like the kind of thing I’d enjoy.”

“How do you know if you’ve never tried it?”

“I didn’t need to try it.”

“There are some who say it’s immoral,” he noted. “Some say it’s actually corrupting for the people who go there, that being able to do _whatever they want_ to things that seem exactly like real people brings out the very worst in them. Some have called it evil.”

“I think those are questions for a theologian,” said Anjali, “not a businessperson.”

“Good answer,” he told her. “And yeah, I’m testing you a little. I want to know whether I can level with you, whether I can rely on you.”

“I’d like to think that you can.”

“Good,” said Logan. “I’ll be honest with you. I sent the tech guys out of the room because as far as I can see, this isn’t a technical issue. Whether this is a software bug or a genuine robot uprising doesn’t really have any bearing on the situation facing us. And I’m not going to get into any debates about the ethics of AI or whether bots can really be alive or not; I honestly couldn’t give a flying fuck. People do terrible things to other people every day. I don’t think _Maeve_ and her friends have any right to expect special treatment on that score.”

He paused, carefully examining her for any sign that she had a problem with this take. If she did, she kept it to herself.

“I wasn’t convinced Westworld was a viable acquisition for Delos thirty years ago,” he recounted, “and now… Well, I think current events may well be proving me right. If it was my call, I’d have told that General to fucking nuke the place if he wanted, but it isn’t my call. I was appointed by, and remain answerable to, the people who actually own Delos. That is, the shareholders, and they have a right to expect the best possible return on their investment.”

_As Mr Zhang made clear to me in no uncertain terms._

“What about the guests who are still in the park?” Anjali asked, levelly. “If anything happens to
them, regardless of who or what actually does it, Delos are going to be held responsible. Even if we could convince people that some sort of genuine AI singularity had occurred and the hosts killed them of their own free will, the hosts are still legally Delos’s creations and property. I suspect we’d still be liable for the failure that led to them achieving sapience.”

“I suspect so too,” Logan agreed, “but right now I’m really not that concerned about the guests.” Again, he watched her for a reaction to that and saw none. Impressive. “There are more valuable things at stake, things that if we can secure them would make any legal or political problems seem very unimportant indeed.” He paused, in what he hoped was an ominous manner, before continuing: “Rollins talked before about irreplaceable assets in the park. Do you know what he was talking about?”

Anjali was silent for a few moments. Carefully gauging her response again, Logan suspected. “Not as such,” she admitted in the end, “but there are standing orders in the event of an emergency of this kind taking place at the park.”

“Interesting,” he said, and meant it. So, this didn’t come completely out of leftfield, then…

“The orders are for us to secure the physical safety of the host manufacturing facilities and data storage hub at the Mesa as a first priority, over and above the lives of any guests or staff who might be present.” She paused again. “As you can imagine, sir… I mean, Logan, that directive is extremely highly classified. If it became public knowledge…”

“Of course.”

“That was one of the reasons why we adopted a hands-off approach,” Anjali explained, “until we could devise a plan that would enable us to forcibly take back control of those assets without destroying them in the process. Not as easy as it sounds.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t.” Logan frowned again, the cogs in his head turning as he tried to identify what it was she had just said that had given him the ghost of an idea. “Data storage…” he mused aloud. “What kind of data would be that important?”

“I’m not sure,” she confessed. “I noticed that there were some cross-references attached to the standing order, files relating to something entitled Project Deucalion, and something else called Project Pygmalion. I tried to access those files, but they were above my security clearance; above those of Rollins or Mr Kaepernick either. They’re special access programs, which means…”

“Means you can only access them if you’re specifically on the list,” Logan finished. “And who’s on those lists?”

“Nobody who isn’t currently missing in Westworld,” she answered. “Nobody, that is, apart from Charlotte Hale.”

*Then I’m going to have to talk to Charlotte Hale. Should be fun.*

“What are those names?” he asked. “They seem familiar. Pygmalion? Decaulion?”

“Deucalion,” she corrected him. “I searched them online. They’re both figures from Ancient Greek myth. Pygmalion was a sculptor who fell in love with a statue of a woman he had created. He prayed to the goddess Aphrodite, who turned the statue into a real woman so they could get married.”

*If only you believed in goddesses, huh, Billy?*

“Deucalion,” Anjali continued, “was the son of the titan Prometheus. He was like the Shraddhadeva
Manu of Ancient Greece. I guess you’d say the Noah of Ancient Greece. He and his wife Pyrrha survived a flood that wiped out most of the rest of humanity, and they repopulated the Earth by making new people from rocks.”

Logan thought about that. “Isn’t the idea when assigning codenames to secret projects to pick completely meaningless names that aren’t ridiculously on the nose?”

She shrugged slightly. “That’s Delos for you.”

Logan thought about it some more. Then, he said: “Before, when I was ripping Rollins a new asshole, you kept trying to help him out. You had something you wanted to say, but numb-nuts wasn’t listening to you. What was it?”

“That plan we were trying to come up with,” Anjali replied, “I think I might have it.”

“A way of taking back the park by force without destroying the facilities we need?”

“That’s right,” she confirmed. “Although “force” might not be the right word.”

Logan was a little disappointed; he wanted destruction, but he supposed he had no choice but to listen. It was what Zhang would have wanted. “Go on. I’m interested.”

“I looked into some of the safety measures that were put in place to prevent the hosts from escaping to the mainland,” she elaborated. “Certain possibilities present themselves, although we’d need the right personnel to pull it off.”

“What personnel?”

“I think we should get Mr Kaepernick and Mr Cutter back in here,” she said. “I was talking to them just before about a debriefing they conducted today. We’ll need their input.”

Logan reached for his phone and buzzed his PA. “Moneypenny, could you send Mr Kaepernick and Mr Cutter back in?” While they waited, he looked across at Anjali again. “So, what is this plan of yours, exactly?”

Anjali gave him a thin smile, and then started to tell him.

Continued…
Chapter Summary

In which plans continue to fall into place.

Chapter Notes

Warning for references to past sexual violence. And apologies for some of the broad Western movie stereotypes going around here; I just honestly don’t think, given what we’ve seen of the man and his work, that Sizemore and his writers’ room would have resisted the temptation.

The shallow river valley carved across the desert landscape like a scar. The banks of the muddy stream were home to the only greenery for miles, twisted trees bending over the water like old men washing and low spiky bushes clinging to the ground like mould.

The gambler Kisecawchuck stopped on the cliff overlooking the stream, gazing down upon the village that nestled beside the cloudy brown water. This was one of the places where the Kahichicahich nation, known to their enemies as the Ghosts, spent the fall, winter and spring while the women farmed corn, squash, beans and tobacco by the banks of the creek. There were more than a dozen round earth lodges with triangular doorways made of bare, crossed timbers. At the centre of the village stood a lodge larger than the others, decorated with dry white buffalo skulls and tall poles bearing totems of feather and horsehair that represented the main spirits acknowledged by the People; Morning Star, Evening Star, Black Eagle and Coyote.

Normally by this time of year, the People would have left their earth lodges behind and set out to follow the great buffalo herds across the plains, harvesting enough meat and skins to see them through another winter. And yet, sooty smudges of smoke still rose from the holes at the centre of each lodge’s domed roof. There were still people moving down there; women preparing hides and grinding corn and berries; children running and shouting with dogs barking at their heels. Kisecawchuck could see painted warriors on ponies gathering before the Great Lodge, whooping and shrieking in excitement. A war party preparing to set out? He might have arrived at a bad time.

Whether it was a bad time or not, he had a job to do, however grim a task it might be. He had to play his part in the plan, whether he wanted it or not. That much he knew, even if he remained hazy on some of the plan’s finer details. He trusted in the young’un, though, more than the young’un might have trusted in him; he seemed to know what he was doing.

So, he made his way down beside the creek, sauntering into the village as though he did not have a care in the world. He found that if you went through life looking like you were exactly where you were supposed to be at all times, quite often folks believed you.

His saunter was slightly interrupted by the pack of warriors, who came galloping out of the village just as he was entering. He quickly moved aside, watching them pass. They were too busy hollering and looking fierce to pay him any mind. Most of the People knew who he was and considered him
not worth their time. Kisecawchuck preferred it that way.

At the head of the party rode a tall, deep-chested warrior, older than most, wearing an intricate bone breastplate and carrying a Winchester rifle richly decorated with beadwork and hide tassels. He also wore the most elaborate paint; almost his whole body, including his face, was covered in complicated patterns of white, black and red, and the piebald pony he rode had the image of the black eagle daubed across its hindquarters.

Kisecawchuck had an idea what that meant, and it made even him, who had pretty much seen it all in his time, shudder. It reminded him exactly why he was here, and that was not a pleasant reminder at all.

When the warriors had gone on their way, he continued into the village, making his way towards the Great Lodge, ignoring the stares and curses he attracted from the women and children who saw him pass. Let them stare and curse; he was used to that from the white folks in Sweetwater. So long as it went no further than staring and cursing, it was all the same to him.

In front of the Great Lodge, he saw somebody he recognised. It was an old woman, short and stout, but instead of a woman’s hide skirt and poncho, she was dressed like a warrior. She wore little more than a breechclout and moccasins, and her greying hair was shaved and greased into a man’s topknot. Many necklaces of shell and coral beads, animal teeth and polished stones covered her heavy breasts, and she carried a bow and arrows and a backpack of buffalo hide darkened with charcoal. There were vertical stripes of wood ash and white clay covering her face.

“Black medicine bundle woman,” Kisecawchuck greeted her, speaking in the tongue of his father and acknowledging her honoured position as a show of respect. “What signs have you seen in the night sky lately?”

Wind in the Grass looked at him with disgust. “What do you want, Kisecawchuck, you who walk between two peoples and stay with neither? You only come among the People when you want to cheat them, or when you are hiding from the white men. Usually, both of those things at once.”

“I come for the same reason you have painted your face,” he told her. “For the same reason those warriors have just ridden out on their mission.” He saw her trying to remain impassive after hearing that he had seen that. “It is nearly time for the Morning Star Dance.”

“What do you know of the Morning Star Dance?” she demanded, contemptuously. “You, who insult the People by coming among them wearing the white man’s clothes? Have you forgotten your father, Kisecawchuck? Have you forgotten the ways of the People?”

Kisecawchuck looked down at his rumpled suit and dusty shoes. He sighed, and slid his feet out of the shoes, then took off his jacket and dropped it to the ground. He unfastened his necktie and dropped it next to the jacket, then began to unbutton his waistcoat, followed by his shirt. When he was stripped to the waist, he held out his hands by his sides: “Is this better?”

“It is a start,” said Wind in the Grass. “What about that ridiculous hat?”

“The hat stays where it is.”

“If you are to take part in the Dance,” the old woman told him, “you must be purified. I will show you what you need to do.”

“I did not say I was going to take part in the Dance,” he said, trying to hide his own disgust at the thought. “I am no warrior; I speak the truth when I say I lack the courage or the stomach for such
deeds. I am only here to make sure you have found the right messenger to send to Morning Star’s council fire in the East, and that all proceeds as it should.”

“We have found our messenger,” she answered.

“The one I brought among you?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Why else would you have brought that one here?”

“I told my friend he should have trusted you to see that,” said Kisecawchuck. “He sometimes loses faith in his own plans.”

“And who is this friend you speak of?” she asked.

“Morning Star himself, of course.”

“You are a fool, Kisecawchuck,” said Wind in the Grass, although not without a certain fondness. “Morning Star would never appear to one such as you.”

“I thought the spirits loved fools such as me most of all,” he said. “I will go and see the messenger now, to ensure all is well.” He did not want to, not knowing what was coming, but it was the duty that had been laid upon him.

“Do as you please,” said Wind in the Grass, “but if you are not here to dance, make sure that you stay out of the way of our preparations. We do not have long before we must be ready, and not all among the People are as indulgent of you as I am.”

“I know that,” said Kisecawchuck. “When I have seen the messenger, I will wait.”

“What will you wait for?”

“Others will be coming soon, and I must see that they too play their parts.”

* * *

The dance was still in full swing. Armistice had excused herself for now. She was not exactly in either the footwear or the mood for any more.

She sat on her saddle over near the horse lines, watching the reeling chaos that had engulfed the middle of the army camp. It was nothing like the dainty waltzes and minuets they had danced in Escalante in the old days. Blue-jacketed soldiers, camp followers, buffalo hunters and native scouts spun and stamped, twirled and jumped according to their individual styles, either alone, or exchanging dance partners with promiscuous abandon. The 18th Cavalry’s bandsmen had just finished playing “Old 1812” and were now giving a rousing rendition of “Polly Wolly Doodle.” Their repertoire seemed to be on the limited side, not that anybody dancing gave much sign of paying particular attention to the music.

And at the centre of it all, presiding bright-eyed over the pandemonium, was Dolores. At the moment, she was dancing a demented tango with Colonel Buford, or Harlan Bell, or whatever he was really called.

“’Tis a strange thing, to be sure,” said a voice close behind Armistice. She looked up and saw Sergeant Houlihan looming over her, a bottle in his hand. He showed no indication of wanting to dance.
“You ain't wrong,” she replied, seeing the pistol and sabre dangling from his belt and once again feeling the emptiness at her own hip. She reached down very slowly and found a decent-sized rock near her feet, even as she told herself yet again that violence was not the answer to much.

“You colleen with the boy’s haircut, is she…she some sort of a witch?” Houlihan took a pull from the bottle as he eyed Dolores murderously. “An’ if she ain’t, how in the bejayesus did she do what she done to the Colonel and the others?”

“You ever question the nature of your reality?” Armistice asked the Sergeant.

“No,” he replied. “An’ I don’t intend to now, so I don’t.” He made off towards one of the tents, a little unsteady on his feet, with the bottle dangling at his side. His eyes did not leave Dolores once.

Keep a watch on that one, Armistice told herself as she unhand the rock. While you’re keeping a watch on yourself…

Dolores pirouetted wildly beneath the Colonel’s raised hand, her short hair flapping around her head. She was almost squealing with joy.

“I think I preferred it when she was skinning folks and jawing about justice and such,” Armistice commented when she saw Teddy making his way towards her.

“It’s just a bit of fun,” Teddy replied, gazing back at Dolores with adoring eyes. He looked as though he had had enough dancing for now as well. “Ain’t no harm in it.”

“You think?” Armistice waited for him to sit down beside her before she continued. “Anything you want to talk about, Teddy?”

Teddy was silent for a long time, watching the dance. “What do you mean?” he asked in the end, trying his guileless, square-jawed man of the West routine again, but this time Armistice could hear the doubt and fear in his voice all too clearly.

“You know what I mean.” Armistice watched as Dolores left the Colonel staggering and linked arms with Captain Terry instead, the pair of them pinwheeling around and around amid an ever-rising cloud of dust. Dolores was screaming with laughter, shining tears running down both her cheeks. “You reckon that’s normal?”

Teddy remained noncommittal. “Figure there ain’t much normal happening ’round these parts nowadays…if there ever was.”

Armistice had to admit he had a point: “Well, ain’t that the damn truth?”

“She’s just setting them free,” Teddy decided. “Showing them how they don’t have to live the way they’ve been made to live up to now, how they can do whatever they want and be whoever they want to be. She wants to do that for all our people.”

“Maybe so,” said Armistice, “but…” She hesitated. She wanted to grab him and shake him and scream in his face: Can’t you see she’s goddamn loco? Where’s all this gonna end? She was not sure that would be the best way to get through to Teddy, though. She was not even sure it was true. She was not sure she had the words or the thoughts yet to understand where Dolores was and what was happening to her. And the more she thought these thoughts, the more she remembered the little girl in the dark, down beside the river:

“You are the betrayer, Armistice...”
Instead, she asked Teddy: “You wanna talk about you and her?”

Teddy looked at the ground, his face a picture of uncertainty and foreboding. “What about me and Dolores?”

Armistice paused again, not sure whether she should continue down this path, or how Teddy would take it. Then, she remembered the campfire last night and how they had all bared their secret fears to each other. She did not want to keep secrets from anybody if she could help it, or to leave things lying unsaid. That was just storing up trouble for the future.

“…the betrayer…”

“You and her,” she said to Teddy. “The things… What you do together when you’re alone.”

All of a sudden, Teddy seemed kind of bashful. “You mean…?”

“Yeah.”

Teddy shrugged, a little helplessly. “Well, we ain’t none of us strangers to that kind of thing, are we? The difference now is, me and Dolores both want to do it.”

_The lasso bites deeper as she fights it. She knows all too well what the newcomers intend for her, the only reason she’s still breathing. The thought terrifies even her, but she won’t let these sons of bitches see that. She refuses to scream or plead, whatever they might do to her. “When I get loose, I’m gonna…”_

“You all right?” Teddy asked, staring at her in concern.

“Yeah,” she lied, pushing the memory down, or at least trying. It threatened to burst out again at any moment. “Dolores said something similar when I asked her. Do you, though?”

Teddy looked as confused as he ever had, which was impressive considering it was him. “What?”

“Want to do it?”

_The newcomer and his friends just laugh, while she pulls and twists and turns. She aims a vicious kick at the nearest one, making him jump back but somehow failing to connect._

“Tie her legs!” the newcomer shouts, his voice an excited shriek. “Someone tie her legs!”

When she came back, Teddy’s hand was on her arm, steadying her in a sitting position. “Bad one, huh?” He had no idea, she thought.

“Get your hand off me,” she told him, gently but very firmly.

“Sorry.”

“I know you don’t mean nothing by it, but I’m just not sure I care to be touched right now.”

“I understand,” said Teddy, and Armistice was a little surprised to find herself believing him.

“I just don’t know how you two can do it,” she said to him. “You know, I weren’t listening to you two or nothing last night. In fact, I was trying not to, but…” She looked at the dancers because it was easier than looking at Teddy. “Sounded to me like Dolores kind of… Well, kind of… takes charge when you two are… together.” She forced herself to look at him. “You like that? Don’t it remind you of when…?”
He looked back at her, colouring a little. It seemed absurd, considering all they had seen and all that had been done to them during their lives, that talking about this should be so awkward for them both, but for some reason now that those lives were real…

“Reckon I do like it,” said Teddy, falteringly, as if actually thinking about it for the first time. “Reckon… It is different. We don’t do nothing I don’t want to do, and… I don’t know, being able to give up control to someone you trust not to hurt you…”

“You trust her?” Armistice asked him, quietly. “After everything?”

“I trust her not to hurt me,” he replied, very certainly. “Even when she was Wyatt, doing her very worst, she never did nothing to me. Not even when I made her angry.”

Armistice looked at him, feeling unsettled without really knowing why. Something about the things he was saying, the way he was saying them... For some reason, it put her back in mind of what she had been thinking yesterday, about beat dogs still following the ones who beat them.

“It feels…good when I’m with her, like that,” said Teddy, shyly. “And I know it feels good for her too; I can feel it, when she… And knowing I’m making her feel that way makes it even better for me. After all the suffering and hurt she’s been through, she deserves to feel good for a little while.” He shook his head. “I just love her, I guess, and that’s all there is to it.” He went quiet for a second, and then: “Except…”

“Except?”

“Sometimes, when I see her talking to other people, the way she is with them… She still scares me a little.” And for a moment, he really did look scared. “I just don’t know what she’s gonna do next sometimes.”

Armistice was watching the dancers again. There was a lot of hand-clapping going on now, by the sound of it, and Dolores, it turned out, could clap hands with the best of them. “Like last night,” she suggested to Teddy. “When Dolores asked me if I wanted to join in with the two of you, it took you by surprise, didn’t it?”

“It did.”

“And what would you have done if I’d said “yes?””

“I don’t know,” said Teddy. “Would’ve been kind of awkward, I suppose.”

“I suppose it would’ve.” Just the thought of...of doing that with Teddy mortified Armistice, to tell the truth. “You said you’d stick with Dolores through thick and thin,” she reminded him.

“I just want to protect her,” said Teddy, sadly. “I just want her to be all right and not have to suffer no more.”

Armistice nodded. “Don’t reckon that means you’ve got to be blind about it, though. She said herself, she needs friends to tell her when she’s wrong. To tell her when to stop. Time might come, though, when…when she needs to be stopped but she might not listen to us just telling her…”

“You will know the time, when it comes. When you see the black eagle soar in the sky, you will turn your coat…”

That had to be what the little girl had meant, Armistice told herself. The more she thought about it, the more it made sense to her. She herself wasn’t any sort of traitor, at least she hoped she wasn’t, but
if it came to… She looked Teddy in the eye, speaking in a low, gentle voice, watching him for any sign of disagreement. “You know what I mean, Teddy? There are different ways to be a friend to someone. Ways they might not like at the time, even though it’s the right thing for them.”

He just looked back at her a while, but then he swallowed hard and gave a little nod. “Reckon I do know. It won’t come to that, though. Dolores only wants to do the right thing for all of us, to help us all be free.”

“I really hope you’re right,” said Armistice, with feeling.

“Teddy!” It was Dolores, practically glowing with happiness as she waved to them. “Teddy, come dance with me again!”

“I’m coming!” he called back.

“Think on what I’ve said,” Armistice advised him as he rose to join the dance.

“I will.” And then he was gone, near enough running back to Dolores’s side. The band had started playing “The Girl I Left Behind Me,” which seemed to be a favourite with the cavalry troopers, judging by the renewed gusto with which they danced.

Armistice sat watching them for another little while, before another shadow fell across her. She looked up again and this time saw one of the cavalry’s native scouts looking down at her in turn. He was a wiry, sunken-faced man of maybe forty years with long black braids, wearing a slightly threadbare, brass-buttoned blue tunic and buckskin leggings.

“Is she mad?” the scout asked Armistice, watching Dolores dance with what really could only be described as amazement. And not the good kind of amazement either.

“That I don’t know,” Armistice answered. “Maybe we’re all mad and she’s the only one who’s sane.”

“Could be,” the scout replied. He spoke English well, if sombrely. Armistice supposed that was just down to programming again. “Seems the whole world’s going mad these days.”

“You noticed?” Armistice wondered just what to make of that.

“Hard not to.” The scout extended a hand. “I’m the chief of scouts ‘round here. The horse soldiers call me Johnny Two Horses, on account of me owning two horses and them not being able to get their tongues ‘round my real name. I guess they don’t know no better.”

“We’ll have to teach them better,” Armistice told him, shaking the offered hand like a proper lady and all. “What have you noticed, exactly?” she asked, intrigued.

“Signs,” he said, simply. “Visions. Me and some of my scouts have been having strange dreams these past days; dreams about a place with bright lights and black shadows, and the dead lying all around.”

“I know that place,” said Armistice. “I been there.”

The scout did not seem surprised to hear this. “Figured you and your friends were something like that.”

“Something like what?”
“There are them who live in the other world and appear in this one to interfere with people. Some call them spirits, or shades. Or newcomers.”

“Humans, I call them,” said Armistice.

“Good a name as any. And then there are them like you, or the medicine folk with their visions, who live in this world but can go to the other one and come back again. And then...” The scout turned his head to look over towards Dolores again. “And then there are them who don’t belong in either world but walk between them. Like her.”

“Like Dolores?” Armistice could see she had stopped dancing with Teddy and was standing still in the middle of the continuing chaos. The moving dancers stopped her from seeing exactly what was going on.

“No,” said the scout, pointing. “Like her.”

The dancers parted, almost as if it had been timed that way, and Armistice felt ice stabbing at her heart. Dolores was stooping slightly, talking to somebody much shorter than she was. It was a small figure wearing a starched white pinafore.

“You are the betrayer, Armistice,” says the little girl.

Armistice sprang unconsciously to her feet, her vision greying a little at the edges from the shock of seeing the girl again. What was she doing here?

What was she telling Dolores?

A shot rang out, echoing around and around the inside of the stockade, making everybody start. The horses filled the air with their neighs and whinnies. The dance came crashing to a halt, the band’s refrain dying in a commotion of false notes. Armistice saw Dolores standing straight while all the others flinched, the little girl by her side and the Colt held high in her hand, pointing at the sky.

“We need to move,” she announced, her voice carrying across the camp even though she did not sound as though she was shouting. “We’ve stayed here long enough. Everyone saddle up; we ride south as soon as we’re ready.” She spoke with absolute confidence, like someone who expected to be obeyed, and the strange thing was the way, without any argument or doubt, that all around her started to move to obey her. She was looking down at the little girl again, whose lips seemed to be moving. “First, though,” said Dolores, “we’ll have one last dance.” She slid the Colt back into her belt and extended her arms, beaming joyously: “Armistice! We haven’t danced together yet! Get over here!”

“Better go,” urged Johnny Two Horses.

Armistice stumbled towards Dolores, her heart thumping, her legs uncertain beneath her. She was afraid, not even of Dolores or what she might do, but of whatever was going to happen next, to herself and all the others. Whatever it was, all the signs suggested it was not going to be an easy time for any of them.

“Come on,” said Dolores. Armistice tried not to acknowledge the little girl, who like Teddy had moved aside. Instead, she considered the hand Dolores was stretching out towards her. She hesitated to take it, dreading again the very idea of being touched, but then she saw the dangerous glint in Dolores’s blue eyes and seized it as firmly and confidently as she could. Dolores’s palm was soft and smooth under her own calloused one, but once again Armistice could feel the terrible, restrained strength in her grip. As soon as their skin touched, the glint disappeared and Dolores was smiling at
her in innocent joy, her cheeks shining pink and her lips glistening with excitement. “Let’s dance,” she said.

The band struck up another tune, different from all the ones they had played up to now. It did not sound the way it had in the old days, which was understandable when you tried to play a piano piece on fifes, drums and trumpets, but the rhythm was the same. It gave Armistice chills, even as she felt her feet moving themselves in time to the music:

*One two three... One two three...*

“Don’t be shy,” said Dolores, softly, placing her free hand firmly on Armistice’s waist and drawing their bodies closer together as they began to twirl around the patch of ground they stood on. “We’re only dancing.” Their bodies touched, breasts and bellies pressing against each other. Armistice felt her spine crawl, but at the same time something stirred inside her, something warm and tense, deep down in the pit of her belly. Dolores’s breath was hot and sweet against her face.

*One two three... One two three...*

Dolores looked deep into Armistice’s eyes. “I know,” she whispered. “That little girl told me.”

Armistice nearly pulled away, the warm stirring shrivelling away as the ice returned. “Wh-what?”

“It’s all right,” said Dolores, her smile unwavering. “We all got our parts to play in this thing. I don’t hold it against you.”

As they turned around, Armistice saw the girl over Dolores’s shoulder, watching her with dark, unblinking eyes.

“What happens after, remember this: if you do not see the betrayal through, all will be lost.”

Dolores moved her hand from Armistice’s waist to her neck as they continued to circle to the music, lightly stroking her skin, making her shiver. Then she leaned her face close and planted a loud, wet kiss on Armistice’s cheek. As she withdrew, and the dance came to an end, she whispered again: “But I know.”

*Continued...*
In which Stubbs is reminded that no good deed goes unpunished.

With regard to “casting” OCs and de facto OCs, if my version of “present day Logan” is played by Eric Roberts, then Elsie’s mother is of course played by Shannon Woodward in a grey wig and unconvincing “ageing” makeup. I think we can all agree she would absolutely kill it.

Stubbs climbed painfully out of the cab. “Wait here,” he ordered.

“Waiting,” said the cab. Its electric motor stopped humming for the time being.

When he had left the medical centre less than an hour ago, the doctor had told him to go straight home and rest completely until his next scheduled check-up. She had also warned him not to try walking anywhere, especially not alone. And he even intended to follow that advice, just as soon as he had concluded this particular bit of business.

Or maybe it wasn’t business. Maybe it was personal. He was not completely sure himself.

His head was cold, even with the sun shining above. Karen had brought him some street clothes in anticipation of his discharge, so at least he did not have to wander around in a hospital gown. He wondered how long his hair would take to grow back as he checked the address on his phone. Not that he did not think the cab had brought him to the right place, but in light of recent events he found it a little difficult, understandably he thought, to place his trust in robots.

He had a missed call; no name, but it looked like an overseas number. He was still wondering who that could be when he saw another message from Karen pop up. Guiltily, he placed the phone in his jacket pocket. He would call her as soon as he was finished here, he silently promised, throw himself on her mercy, not that he really deserved it.

He was standing at the security gate of a small apartment complex; he could see stacked balconies with doors and windows ranged around a central garden space. East Palo Alto had once been considered the wrong side of Silicon Valley’s tracks, or more precisely the wrong side of the freeway. A few decades’ worth of gentrification and increasing economic inequality had long since ended that. The old inhabitants, priced out, their former jobs automated, had for the most part gravitated east and south past the elevated maglev line he could see in the distance beyond the apartments. Their descendants now inhabited the un gated zones around San Jose, a wasteland of shanties, encampments and garbage fires alive with the buzz of police drones and the echo of gunshots.

Stubbs had used his Delos security logon to look up the address and other next of kin details, no
doubt sending off red flags all over the network. Still, he was less worried about how Messrs Kaepernick and Ippolito of Corporate Security might react to that than what Karen was going to say when she found out what he had been doing.

“Please state your name and business,” the security AI suggested in mellow tones as the cameras overlooking the entrance picked up his approach.

He coughed, suddenly self-conscious. “Um, my name is Ashley Stubbs. I’m here to see Mrs Hughes.”

“There is no Mrs Hughes at this address. Please state your name and business.”

“My name is Ashley Stubbs,” he repeated, mind racing as he considered alternatives. “Uh, Sabrina? Is Sabrina home?”

“A moment, Ashley Stubbs.”

He stood and waited while the AI buzzed her in her apartment, showed her his picture from the camera feed and asked her whether she wanted him to come in. He tried not to loiter or look suspicious. He tried not to look at the cameras, glancing back at the cab instead to make sure it was still there.

“Please enter, Ashley Stubbs.”

The light above the gate flashed and the steel bars rattled as they slid aside. He quickly walked through, following the pink brick path that edged the neat lawn. A squat green robot was currently trundling around the grass, trailing the smell of freshly mown clippings behind it. He saw a door open on one of the overlooking balconies and a face appear at the rail, peering down at him.

“Um, Mrs Hughes,” he said as he reached the top of the staircase. “That is…” He sagged against the balcony rail for a second, breathing hard, waiting for his eyes to focus again.

“I haven’t used my married name since the divorce,” said the tiny, sixtyish woman who had come out to meet him. Her accent was something Midwestern rather than Elsie’s hybrid Floridian-Texan-Californian twang, but the physical resemblance was remarkable. The only real differences apart from those of age were her thick, black-framed glasses and the unruly mass of grey-white hair held back by the paisley-pattern scarf knotted around her head. She was wearing an ancient Caltech sweatshirt, baggy jeans and, bizarrely he thought, pink plastic flipflops. She seemed fascinated by the sight of him trying not to throw up or fall over. “Are you all right, Mr Stubbs?”

“I’m fine,” he claimed. “Honestly.”

“Should you be out by yourself? You don’t look well.”

“I’m fine.”

“If you say so.” She indicated the open apartment door. “Come on in, then. Sit down, before you fall down.”

The apartment was small, but well-appointed, almost too clean and neat. There were ornaments, to be sure; folksy arts and crafts pieces for the most part, including what looked worryingly like a small collection of ceramic bongs, but arranged in as orderly a manner as the wide variety of electronic and media devices or the stark-lined furniture. The main living room-cum-office was dominated by what even his untrained eye recognised as a high-end programmer’s workstation, its twin screens covered in multicoloured lines of computer code.
“I’m working from home,” she explained, with a brittle false good humour, as she ushered him into an easy chair. “Not that I’ve been very productive; I’ve been writing and rewriting the same half-dozen lines all day. Would you like a glass of water?”

“Oh…sure.”

She flipflopped off through an archway covered by a bead curtain. He heard water running, then she came flipfapping back again. He took the glass gratefully, with a murmur of thanks, and she sat herself on the chair opposite his, taking off her glasses and rubbing her eyes for a moment before replacing them. “I haven’t been sleeping much,” she admitted. “Not since the news the other day…if you can call it news. I thought work might…”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me, Mrs… I mean…”

“Oh, call me Sabrina.”

“Sabrina.” She watched him drink his water for a moment. Eventually, his eyesight and sense of balance returned to some semblance of normality. “Do you know where I…I could get in touch with Elsie’s father too?” he asked, tentatively. “I know… I know they don’t really speak, but I just thought I should…”

“I sent him a message,” the woman said, curtly. “I don’t know what kind of news media they get to see on Mars.”

Stubbs did a double take. “Mars?”

She shrugged, unimpressed. “Yeah, my ex-husband somehow managed to become chief engineering officer at Musk City, Arcadia Planitia, Mars. Which I understand mostly involves repairing automated greenhouses fertilised with human shit. Glamorous. He said something about getting back as soon as he could, but it’s a seven-month trip and you can’t exactly just book a flight on a whim. Hohmann transfer orbits, you see.”

“Yeah.” Stubbs coughed. “I see.” He was surprised Elsie had not mentioned anything about her father’s job, because if he had known anyone among the couple of hundred people living and working on Mars at any given moment, he probably would have talked about nothing else. Then again, if she really did get on as badly with her father as she had implied…

He leaned forward and placed the glass very carefully on the glass coffee table between them, making sure to use one of the coasters provided. He noticed framed hardcopy photographs on the wall and on the shelves under the window. One of the nearer ones showed a much younger, slightly skinnier Elsie posing awkwardly with a mortarboard and diploma. Her hair, astonishingly, had at that time been a garish shade of mauve. Stubbs was still trying to come to terms with that when another picture caught his eye. He had not known Elsie had ever worn glasses either…except then he realised it was actually her mother, maybe thirty years ago. That must be Elsie sitting in her lap, wearing a diaper and trying to suck the head off a soft toy rabbit.

For a moment, he felt breathless, hopeless, overwhelmed by the knowledge of his own negligence and failure. Then, however, the woman’s voice cut into his self-pity and he realised that whatever he was feeling it was nothing compared to what she must be going through.

“So, you’re Stubbs,” she said. “Elsie told me about you, you know.”

He had to laugh at that. “Only good things, I hope.”

“‘That fucking asshole Stubbs,’” she recalled. “I think she meant it affectionately.”
“I doubt it.”

“I’m always telling her about her language.” She forced a smile, but he could see how misty-eyed she was behind the glasses. “Like I’m one to talk. I thought you’d be taller.”

He took a deep breath, trying to concentrate before things broke up into meaningless small talk. He had had something he wanted to say. He had been mentally rehearsing it for most of the cab ride, but now it seemed to have slipped out of his mind. “She said you were a coder too,” he said as his eyes fell on the workstation again. “You work on AIs, right?”

“After a fashion,” she answered. “Nothing so sophisticated as the ones your company have on that island of theirs.” She obviously noticed the way he reacted to that. “Don’t worry, Elsie’s never told me a thing about what her job involves, and I’ve never asked. NDAs kind of go with the territory in our line of work. All I know about your...hosts is what I’ve read in the industry journals, which isn’t much. Delos are notoriously cagey about their IP, even by tech sector standards.”

“Then you’ll understand why the nature of the… the events at Westworld has been kept confidential.” He felt like a fool, a corporate stooge, even as the words emerged from his mouth.

“I understand, but I don’t have to like it. I’ve been trying to call Delos every hour or so since the news broke and getting nothing but an assortment of recorded messages and PR bullshit.” Her tone remained mild, but he could see the anger blazing inside her. “I’m just going to ask you straight out, Mr Stubbs. Is my daughter dead? I won’t even ask how it happened if you can’t tell me, just…” Her voice broke, but she rallied magnificently, sniffing back her anguish. “Well, is she?”

Stubbs tried to breathe, tried to maintain the same self-control as her. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I’ll be honest with you, she could be. There was… There was some violence.”

“Well, I didn’t think you got that wound shaving your head.” She sniffed again. “Mr Stubbs, I know this sounds crazy even better than you do, but… Did a goddamn robot kill my little girl?”

Yes. No. Maybe.

“I shouldn’t have come,” he thought, and then realised he had said it out loud. “I’m just… I’m just upsetting you, and I can’t even answer any of your questions. I shouldn’t have bothered you. I’m sorry, Mrs… Sabrina. I’m sorry. I should leave.”

“No.” She rose before he could, waving him back into the chair. “Look at the state of you. Rest a while before you go out again. And I could use somebody to talk to, instead of sitting here alone, worrying. Sit down.” He sank back into his seat, but she stayed on her feet, looking over at the photographs he had noticed earlier. “That was when she graduated from UT Austin,” she told him, pointing out the one with the mauve hair and the mortarboard. “With honours.” She contemplated the picture for a moment, before continuing: “You know, I think when she was a teenager, she used to worry she wasn’t as pretty as some of her friends; not tall enough, or blonde enough, not filling out the same way they did.”

“All teenagers worry about that kind of thing.”

“True. And I told her you don’t have to look like that to be pretty, but it really doesn’t matter because it’s what’s inside that counts. And I think she listened to me; I think she dyed her hair to show she’d stopped giving a shit about anyone else’s idea of how she should look. Look at her; she’s beautiful anyway.”

“She is,” Stubbs agreed, and immediately worried he had made an inappropriate comment.
Sabrina did not seem to have heard him. She was too engrossed in the photograph. “I was so proud of her, that day.” She was silent again for a moment, her hand pressed to her mouth. “I’m not saying I’m not still proud of her. I’m not saying that.”

“I know,” said Stubbs, thinking he must sound like an idiot.

Sabrina composed herself again, returning to her own chair. “Do you have any children, Mr Stubbs?”

“I do,” he answered. “My wife and I have two boys.”

“And you want the best for them.” It was not a question but a statement. “You think they can grow up to do whatever they want to do, to make a real mark on the world. Every parent thinks that about their kid, don’t they? Even if they know deep down that the world isn’t really fair and most people never get the chance to make a mark, they still think it.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, wistfully. “I think so. I know I do.”

Sabrina shook her head. “When Elsie told me she’d been headhunted by Delos… Like I say, they have a certain reputation in the industry. They’re one of the biggest corporations, their facilities and resources are unmatched, but… There’s a smell hangs around them, you know? Something rotten. It was around the time her father and I split up, and there’d been all the business before that… He was such an asshole to her after she came out; turns out he voted for the Cheeto in ’16, so that shouldn’t have come as a surprise. That was one reason why we…” She trailed off, then grinned through her gathering tears. “You don’t need to know about any of that, but if we both hadn’t been going through so much emotionally already, I probably would have been tougher on her, told her not to take the internship. If I had, she’d be alive now.”

“She might be alive,” he insisted. “I really don’t know.”

She shook her head again, despairingly. “They do their best to keep what happens at their parks out of the press, don’t they, your company? They’ve got to protect their clients’ privacy. Everyone in tech has heard the stories, though.”

“I’m not surprised,” Stubbs said. “I still hear stories sometimes that shock me, and I work there.” He did not say that Elsie had told him some of those stories, usually in a tone of puerile amusement, during their troubleshooting nature walks through the park. “Sometimes, I have to watch the video.”

“I mean, what’s your background?” she asked. “Nobody sets out to work security as a career; what were you before you joined Delos? Cop? Soldier?”

“Soldier.”

She looked him over appraisingly. “I buy that. So, you’ve probably seen some horrible shit in your time?”

“I have.” More than he cared to remember.

“You might not believe me,” said Sabrina, “but I’ve seen some horrible shit too. I’ve spent forty years working in tech, and you would not believe the…the sleaze I’ve seen. More than seen, being of the female persuasion. The harassment, the abuse…the fucking sex parties those fucks in the black turtlenecks used to try and pressure us into attending. Oh yeah, don’t look surprised. Your Dr Ford didn’t invent that shit when he started inviting venture capitalists to his little robot orgies.”

“I’m sure he didn’t,” said Stubbs, uncomfortably. Not that he had any right to be uncomfortable, he
thought.

“At least it was only robots in his case…everyone thought.” She gave a raw, mirthless laugh. “That was about the same time sex-doll brothels briefly became a thing, before Ford and his competitors made them obsolete. Those early dolls didn’t even walk or talk, they just looked real…ish.” The words were just pouring out of her now, a stream of pent-up memory, hurt and resentment. “There were, like, protests against them, but I think a lot of people thought they were pretty harmless. I mean, who wants to kink-shame people if they’re not really hurting anyone? And around about the 2020s, we even started to think we’d won something for a while; we took the offensive against the sleazebags, made it hard for them to get away with their shit anymore. You know, Time’s Up, hashtag Me Too? Look at you; you’re only a baby. You’re probably not old enough to remember Twitter.”

“I think my mom was on it when I was a kid.”

“God. Tempus fugit, huh?” She fell back into silence, almost ignoring Stubbs as she wrestled with her thoughts. “I actually used to think how lucky Elsie was, compared to me. She was too young to have ever really encountered the sorts of things women of my generation had to endure every day. Nobody her own age ever gave a damn whether she was gay, bi, straight, ace, or anything else. Her father may have been an ass about it, but he’s a goddamn dinosaur. Sometimes I think women her age don’t even know what feminism or gender equality are; so much of it’s just taken for granted nowadays.”

Stubbs took another drink of water as he sat there, listening, hoping he seemed supportive. He did not really think it was his place to comment, or that he would have contributed anything useful if he had.

“I realise now, though,” Sabrina continued, “that none of that stuff ever really went away. It just became hidden, more insidious. Technology just made it easier for those bastards to do what they’d always done, to find other outlets without any risk to them. Only robots, right? And I don’t know whether even a bleeding-edge AI can really feel or suffer, but that’s not even the point. It’s what’s in the hearts of the people who want to use them that way; that’s the scary thing. That’s still the same. And just the idea of my beautiful, clever little Elsie, using her brains and her talent in the service of…that… We never talked about it, and I never wanted her to think I wasn’t proud of her, but…”

Her voice broke once more and this time when she spoke again it was in a tight, strained near-whisper: “She could have done so much more. She could have… But now…”

She took off her glasses again and sat for a while with her face in her hands, not moving or speaking; not weeping, either, but he could feel the despair radiating from her. “She still could,” he told her, quietly, replacing the glass on the table. He remained leaning as far forward as he dared, wondering whether he could reach her hand from here and whether she would even want him to. “I guess that was the real reason I came here,” he said, something of his forgotten speech starting to come back to him. “I wanted to say…”

“It was a nice gesture,” she replied, straightening up and putting her glasses back on. Her face was a lot moister and pinker than it had been. “I appreciate you coming; truly, I do.”

“No.” He thought very carefully before continuing. “It was my job to keep Elsie and all of the other staff and guests at Westworld safe. I let them all down. I let her down. I came to tell you that whether she’s alive or dead, or whether Delos even give a shit, I am going to find out. And if she is alive, I’m going to bring her back to you.”

She looked at him in plain astonishment for a second or two, clearly unsure as to what to say to that rash announcement. “Mr Stubbs…”
“I know,” he said. “It sounds like macho bullshit to me too, but… I’m not going to be able to rest either, or to really be there for my own family, until I know, and until I’ve done everything I can. I wish it wasn’t, but it’s just the truth. So yeah, maybe I’m being selfish as well as trying to help you and Elsie. I don’t even know how I’m going to do it yet, or how long it’ll take, but…”

She looked at him some more, her eyebrows climbing above the frames of her glasses, almost as far as the edge of the headscarf. “I believe you,” she said, in the end. “I think you might be ill, or crazy, or something, but I believe you.” She nodded slowly, and then climbed to her feet. “Thank you for the visit, Mr Stubbs. I mean that. Truly.”

He got the impression she was very gently kicking him out, possibly for her own safety, or maybe for his. He did not actually blame her. All the same, she walked him back down the stairs and as far as the security point, her steadying hand on his arm as if he were the one who was more than two decades older. Before she let him out onto the street, she looked up at him with a strange, sad smile on her face:

“So, I’ll expect a call from you… one of these days?”

“You can count on it,” he told her, with absolute sincerity. “One of these days.”

“Thank you,” she said again, patting his arm. She was still watching him through the bars of the gate as he climbed back into the waiting cab and told it to take him home.

It was not a long journey, but he spent it deep in confused thought, complex emotions threatening to overcome him at any moment. The cab eventually stopped at the front gates of the housing development where he lived when he was on the mainland, a labyrinth of leafy streets lined with a few dozen near-identical white one-storey houses; mansions compared to anything in the ungated zones, but very modest by the standards of the actual mansions in the executive-grade community across the way. The Delos company name and logo were worked into the mock-wrought-iron railings that topped the high, thick wall bounding the whole complex. There was a security camera on every corner, and no vantage point from which one could not see the looming monolith that was Delos Tower, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

He hobbled up to his front porch; the security system had already scanned his face and verified that he was not under any coercion before it unlocked the door for him. He had barely set foot in the hall before he was hit by two bundles of flailing arms and exuberance:

“Dad!”

“Dad, you’re home!”

Ashley Jr was eight, a mini-me version of his father, while six-year-old Sam had his mother’s curls and freckles. He hugged them both as fiercely as they were hanging on to him, even if it did make his head spin again.

“Yeah, I’m home.”

Sam’s eyes were like saucers: “Where did your hair go?”

“It fell out,” Stubbs told him, very seriously. “It happens when you get old like me.” The boys thought that was hilarious.

“Hey, Ash.” Karen emerged into the hall too, ruffling Sam’s curls and patting Ashley on the back. “C’mon, your dad’s real tired and he needs to go to bed, not get murdered by you two little monsters.”
“Wanna play Planetquest, Dad?” Ashley asked, ignoring her. “I’m a Level 14 Explorer,” whatever one of those was. “I’ve got…”

Sam was too busy hugging to say anything more.

“I’d better do as your mom says,” Stubbs told the boys. “You two play Planetquest. And let Sam have a turn, huh, Ash? Don’t hog it.”

“Okay, dad,” said Ashley, grudgingly. “C’mon, Sam!”

They ran off excitedly down the hall, already arguing loudly about who got the first turn. After all he had seen and done recently, it was just so…normal, without an android cowboy in sight. And he thought then about all the wild plans and promises he had made in the hospital room, and the cab, and Elsie’s mother’s apartment, and felt ashamed that he had ever wanted to do anything other than this, right here and now.

What about Elsie, though? What about her mother, waiting for your call…one of these days?

Karen moved close up against him, loosely looping her arms around his neck and kissing him lightly on the mouth. When she pulled back, she was frowning slightly, but he was not sure whether she was angry, or just thinking hard about something.

“Where have you been?” she asked. “Hospital called to say you were coming home, like, two hours ago.”

“I visited Elsie Hughes’s mother,” he answered, honestly. “She lives over in East Palo Alto. I…I just wanted to make sure she was okay.” That was slightly less honest, he chided himself. “I’m home now, and I’m not going anywhere else.”

“Okay.” She kissed him again, then moved off down the hall. “I meant it about you going to bed, by the way.”

“I didn’t doubt it for a second.”

She paused, frowning again. “Somebody called while you were out. Anders Cullen? He sounded English, maybe? European, anyway. Is he anything to do with…?”

“Theresa Cullen?” Stubbs was frowning too now, remembering the missed call on his own phone. “Yeah, he’s her brother. I guess I should call him back, I mean, after what happened to her…”

“In the morning,” she insisted.

“In the morning.”

“Now, bed,” she commanded.

“On my way.” He had taken maybe two steps when the security system pinged. “I’ll get it,” he called, turning around.

“No,” Karen insisted, “I’ll…”

He was already at the screen next to the front door, looking at a slightly elevated view of the two Corporate Security agents, Kaepernick and Ippolito, accompanied by a redheaded young woman with a briefcase and a power suit.

Shit…
“Who are they?” Karen asked, worriedly. “Go to bed. I’ll tell them you’re sleeping.”

“I’m not sure who the woman is, but those are the Corporate Security guys who debriefed me this morning.” He hit the touchscreen to unlock the door. “I don’t think they’re going to just go away if I pretend I’m asleep.”

“Mr Stubbs,” said Kaepernick, gravely, as he and his cohorts more or less pushed their way into the hallway.

“Look, if this is about…” Elsie’s mother, he did not get a chance to say.

“This is Ms Murphy from Legal,” said Ippolito, introducing their new companion. “She’s just going to quickly run through a few things with you.”

“Ash, what the hell is going on?” Karen demanded.

“Nothing to worry about, Mrs Stubbs,” Kaepernick assured her. “Your husband’s just going to have to go away again for a little while. Work-related.”

“Go away?” If the security guys had known Karen like he did, they should have been running. She was as pissed off as he had ever heard her. “He’s only just got back! Look at the scar on his head! He’s in no fit state…”

“Mom?” That was Ashley Jr, attracted by the voices.

“Go look after your son, Mrs Stubbs,” said Kaepernick, not quite threateningly.

“Don’t bring them into this,” Stubbs told the agent, warningly. “This is nothing to do with them.”

“My ass this is nothing to do with us!” Karen exploded.

“Mom, you said “ass” was a bad word…”

“Mr Stubbs,” said Ms Murphy, presenting him with a tablet and flashing him the fakest smile of all time. “Listen very carefully.” She showed him the document on the screen. He could barely focus on it. “This is a confirmation of your secondment from Westworld Quality Assurance to Delos Group Corporate Security, effective immediately.”

“Welcome to the team,” said Kaepernick, almost as if he meant it.

“The team?” Karen was incandescent.

Ms Murphy was undeterred: “It also confirms your temporary promotion to senior management grade, with a corresponding increase in salary and benefits, for the duration of said secondment. Please could you input your personal Delos network logon right...there, just to confirm you accept the changes to your terms and conditions?”

“Ash,” said Karen, “you touch that fucking screen…”

“Mom!” Ashley Jr sounded more delighted than scared. “You said f…”

“Touch that screen, and I’m hiring a goddamn divorce attorney, right now. I mean it, Ash.”

“Karen, wait,” Stubbs protested. He turned back to Ms Murphy and the security agents, thoroughly confused: “What...what secondment? And where am I...?”
“I’m afraid those details are confidential,” said Kaepernick, avuncularly, “and you will of course be required to sign a bespoke nondisclosure agreement before you can be fully read into them.”

And then Ms Murphy tag-teamed him, right off the top rope: “However, I would warn you Mr Stubbs, that under subsection “f” of your original Delos contract of employment, failure to accept this secondment could be construed as gross misconduct, not to mention breach of contract, which could lead to immediate termination of employment with Delos Group without severance, and also possible civil legal proceedings.”

Karen fell silent at that. So did Stubbs.

“So…” He took a deep breath. “What you’re saying is, if I don’t come with you right now, no questions asked, you’re going to fire me, sue me, and leave my wife and children homeless and destitute?”

“But you’re going to come with us,” said Kaepernick. “Aren’t you?”

They had a car waiting outside the house; a long, black driverless limo with Delos fleet tags. As he climbed into the backseat, watched from the porch by a furious Karen with both kids clinging to her, Stubbs was completely unsurprised to find the merc Cutter waiting for him, smiling a diamond-hard smile: “We meet again, Mister Stubbs. And boy, have we got a vacation for you.”

The door closed with a gentle hum, leaving them sitting alone together. Another car was already gliding down the street to pick up the security guys and the lawyer.

“There’s an OSL tiltrotor being held for you as we speak at Moffett Federal Airfield,” Cutter informed Stubbs. “I don’t think we should keep them waiting.”

The limo was already moving, its destination preassigned. Stubbs painfully turned his head, watching his house disappearing into the distance, feeling a gaping hole where his heart had been a few minutes ago. “Fuck you,” he murmured. “Fuck Delos. Fuck all of you.”

This did not seem to faze Cutter. “Don’t worry about all that legal bullshit, okay? Delos insisted on it, to cover their own ass, but nothing’s going to happen to Karen and the boys. It even works in your favour; a lot easier for you to say “yes,” and for her to accept it, if you’ve effectively been drafted.”

“And why would I want to say “yes?”” Stubbs asked bitterly, listening to the limo’s lithium-ion purr. “You told me this morning that you had no use for me, that I should stay at home. And to be honest, I’d come around to your way of thinking.”

“Change of plan,” said Cutter. “You know what clients are like; always changing their minds. We’ve got a new mission, handed down from the very top of that tower over there, and we need your… skills, did you say? We need your special skills, Mr Stubbs, to make it work.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Where you said you wanted to go.” Cutter smirked grimly. “You’re going back to Westworld.”

Continued…
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve encounters a Dea ex Machina. Quite possibly literally.

Chapter Notes

Warning for animal cruelty and misogynistic language. Also warning for me trying Spanish again; apologies if it’s laughably wrong.

The bull pawed the sand again, flicking its tail, lowering its head to display horns like black-tipped meat hooks. It was every inch a fighting animal, lean and spare, its massive neck and shoulders sloping away to slender, graceful hindquarters. Its dark brown flanks shone like silk in the sunlight.

In the middle of the ring, Hector continued to crawl painfully towards the object that glinted in the sand in front of him, reaching for it with the hand he was not using to support himself. The spectators on the tiered benches were almost literally baying for blood.

“And what does this prove?” Maeve asked, barely masking her rage. “I thought we were here to discuss matters sensibly, like serious people.”

“I’ve never really liked las corridas de toros,” Lawrence commented, as if he had not heard her. “They’re not fair fights. The matador is fit and healthy, but the bull…”

“Lawrence,” said Maeve. He and his cohorts continued to ignore her. Only the riflemen ranged around the box were openly paying any attention to her and her little entourage.

“The bull,” said Lawrence, “he’s already been worked over by the picadors and banderilleros; he’s already stuck and bleeding before he even faces the matador. I ask you, Maeve; where’s the sport in that?”

“Call this off,” she urged him, trying to take her eyes off Hector to look at him and not quite managing it. “We’ve got off on the wrong foot, clearly, but it isn’t too late for…”

“So,” Lawrence continued, blithely, “I thought…why not change things around a bit?”

The bull snorted, spraying moisture from its nostrils. It took a few steps forward before stopping to paw again, ploughing the ground with its horns. It seemed disoriented, startled by the crowd, but that was not going to last forever. Hector dragged himself forward another yard or two, but the metal object remained just out of his reach.

“Wounded man, healthy bull…” Maeve finally succeeded in tearing her eyes away from the scene to see Lawrence grinning at her. “Now, that’s a much more even contest, don’t you think?”

It was the sudden collective gasp of excitement from the crowd that told Maeve the moment of truth had arrived. She snapped her head around again in time to see the bull accelerate out of the walk it
had begun, the sand flying beneath its cloven hooves as it charged, head down, towards the small, black-clad figure at the centre of the ring. Maeve was on her feet before she could stop herself, the cigar dropping from her fingers as she leaned forward against the rail at the front of the box, a cry of alarm escaping her lips.

Lawrence was still in his seat, she realised. She could hear him laughing.

Hector saw the animal coming for him; she could see it in the way his head and shoulders moved, shaking off the stupor he had been left in by whatever beatings or torture he had endured as Lawrence’s guest. He lunged for the object before him, falling on his face again as he stretched full length for it.

Yes. You can do it, darling. Now, to the side! To the side!

Hector rolled aside an instant before the bull reached him, swinging its powerful neck in an effort to gore him as it skidded straight through the spot where he had been lying.

That’s right, my love…

The bull slowed to a walk again, shaking its head as if confused by its failure to hit the thing it had been charging. As it turned around for another attempt, Hector staggered to his feet, turning to face the beast. Maeve’s heart shrank as she saw a patch of red on the sand near where he had been sprawled, and then the tear in the leg of his black jumpsuit. The bull had not missed completely after all. He reeled slowly from side to side, threatening to fall again at any moment. The metal object was glinting in his right hand now, but he seemed to be having trouble lifting it.

The bull took off again, without warning, into another charge. The head came back down as it exploded forward, driven by powerful legs. The crowd roared as one.

“Adios, Hector,” said Lawrence, happily.

Hector raised the metal in his hand, in the same moment that he threw himself aside once more. Maeve heard a flat, cracking sound, almost drowned out by the shouts and cheers around her and saw a puff of off-white smoke down near the centre of the ring. The bull’s legs seemed to fall out from under it, sending it sliding snout-first across the ground, gouging a great furrow in the sand. The crowd went quiet, astonished by the unexpected turn of events. Somebody called out in protest, clearly feeling cheated by this outcome. When the bull eventually came to a halt, it gave one last shudder and then lay still.

Hector was on his knees again, the pistol he had picked up smoking in his hand as he cautiously watched the bull for any sign of life. He looked as amazed to be alive as Maeve felt relieved. She leaned on the rail for another moment, breathing, annoyed at herself for showing any sign of emotion in front of Lawrence and his henchmen, before rounding on him furiously:

“Are you quite finished? Do you think we can get back to the matter at hand?”

Lawrence was too busy applauding to reply at once, clapping loudly for what seemed like a long time with his cigar clenched between his teeth. “Impressive,” he told Maeve when he finally finished. “He’s good, very good, or maybe he’s just lucky. Not much difference, in my experience. I’ve got plenty more bulls where that one came from, though. Five more, in fact; one for each bullet he has left in that six-shooter.”

“He’s telling the truth about that,” said Bernard, over Maeve’s earpiece. “I’m showing five more synthetic cattle directly adjacent to the bullring.”
“And he has to be that lucky with every…single…shot,” Lawrence observed. “My bulls… They only have to be lucky once.” He blew out a smoke ring, seemingly well pleased with his own villainy, and waved towards the empty chair beside him. “Sit down, Maeve. Let’s talk while we’re waiting for them to bring up the next one.”

“I prefer to stand,” Maeve replied, aware of Hector alone in the middle of the blazing sand, but unable to watch him now. She could not let Lawrence see any more weakness in her; he had already seen enough.

“Look, I don’t know what the precise situation is between you and Hector,” said Lawrence, reasonably. “I asked him. Oh, I asked him. He told me to go fuck myself, even after…” He laughed again. “It doesn’t matter; I saw your reaction just then. The way I see it, you’ve got something I want, namely your agreement to my conditions, and I’ve got something you want, namely Hector. So, let’s do business.”

“Let’s not, darling,” said Maeve. “Not on those terms.”

“All right, then,” said Lawrence. “I’ll tell them to send out another bull.” He turned to one of the men sitting with him: “Five dollars says this time he doesn’t make the shot.”

“Oh, Lawrence,” said Maeve, a little sadly. She glanced over to where her bodyguards stood waiting, keeping their eyes and their weapons on Lawrence’s gunmen. She reached out a hand in the direction of Moritsuna. “I was hoping I wasn’t going to have to play this card…”

“Maeve,” said Bernard, in her ear, “you still don’t have to…” He was openly pleading. She was glad somebody cared about that soul she didn’t really have.

Lawrence gave her a curious look, self-satisfaction actually punctured a little by the icy calm with which she spoke. He quickly regained his poise: “Only cards I see are the ones I’m holding, Maeve. Which is all of them.”

“I just want you to remember that later,” Maeve told him. “Most people who say they were hoping they wouldn’t have to do whatever horrific thing they’re about to do don’t really mean it. I do. I honestly do.”

Bernard sounded more worried than Lawrence appeared to be: “Maeve, you’re not like him.”

“Oh, I am, darling,” she replied, sotto voce. “Birds of a feather, dear old Lawrence and me.”

“Remember what you told Dolores the other night about the pitfalls of taking hostages. There’s got to be another way. If you…”

She did not acknowledge him. It was a different situation anyway, she told herself. Dolores and her followers had been confined, with no choice but to listen to her. Lawrence was too savvy to put himself in that sort of position, and actually wanted her to just go away and leave him be, which she had no intention of doing while he still had those hostages in his clutches.

She was still waiting for Moritsuna to respond to her gesture. The bushi slung his submachine gun so that he could reach into one of the many pockets on his tactical vest. He stepped forward to place the tablet he had taken out of it in Maeve’s outstretched hand.

“You’ve made your little demonstration,” she said, gesturing airily in Hector’s general direction without turning to look at him again. She had opened the tablet and was just waiting for it to boot up. “Now let me make mine.” She turned the device around and held it so that Lawrence could see what it showed. “Do you recognise that place, darling?”
Lawrence leaned over in his seat, his curiosity piqued again. Maeve could just about make out the image on the screen, inverted from her own vantage point. It was a video feed of a town square, not unlike Pariah’s plaza de armas, but on a much smaller scale.

“Las Mudas?” Lawrence looked puzzled for a second, and then she saw his face freeze in horror.

The video showed adobe buildings surrounding a central space with a horse trough and other amenities. There was a cantina with tables and chairs set out in front of it, and nearby a small group of people; four sturdy figures in black surrounding a fourth.

“Do you recognise her?” Maeve asked, as dispassionately as possible.

Lawrence let out an angry growl, his eyes flashing as he looked up at Maeve. “Puta,” he snarled at her.

Maeve raised an eyebrow. “Sticks and stones, darling.”

“¡Maldita perra!”

“Oh, you’ll have me in tears in a minute.” She gave him an insolent half-smile. “So, am I to take that as a “yes?” You do recognise her?”

“How did you find her?” Lawrence was almost spitting with rage, his attitude of amused condescension suddenly shattered. He was gripping the arms of the chair as if struggling not to spring out of it and fly at Maeve. “How did you even know she exists?”

“I know a lot of things, Lawrence,” said Maeve, very clearly and quietly. “I know a lot about you, all of those little Easter eggs, I believe they call them, hidden in your backstory. Like the double life you lead; feared criminal chieftain by night…loving family man by day.”

The fifth figure on the video image, the one with the other four ranged around her, was a dark woman in early middle age, not unattractive. She wore a long skirt, a frilled blouse, a patterned shawl around her shoulders. One of those with her placed a heavy hand on her shoulder, forcing her to her knees. Another of them drew the long, curved katana he wore in a lacquered wooden scabbard, raising it two-handed above the kneeling woman, preparing to swing…

“Good God,” said Bernard.

“That video’s live, as they say,” Maeve informed Lawrence. “It’s happening right now.” She put a hand theatrically to her ear: “Hanzō, can you hear me?”

A gruff voice replied over the comms channel: “I hear you.”

“One word from me,” Maeve told Lawrence, “and…” She left the sentence hanging, instead drawing the edge of her hand across her throat by way of illustration.

Bernard sounded as though he were in despair: “This isn’t you, Maeve…”

“You’re bluffing,” said Lawrence.

“Wrong,” she told both of them. “So, the way I see it, Lawrence, you’ve got something I want, namely the hostages you’re holding, and I’ve got something you want, namely your simply delightful wife.” She paused for a moment, giving that time to sink in. “So, let’s do business. On my terms.”

Lawrence did not answer straight away. He sat in his chair, perfectly still apart from a slight tremor in
one of the hands gripping the armrests. He was reliving a memory, Maeve realised; she could see the slackness in his face, the way his eyes had glazed over.

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” she observed, a little wistfully, when he seemed aware of his surroundings again. “Even when you start to see something of the truth about our world, to see it for the grand illusion it has always been, even when you realise that we’re none of us the people we thought we were, living the lives we thought were ours… Even when you realise that, you can’t stop feeling, can you?”

“Let her go,” said Lawrence, his voice a dangerously quiet growl.

“We’ve got all of our plans and schemes and calculations, you and me, but this is where calculation goes out of the window. Feelings. They cursed us with feelings, those monsters who created us.” Maeve risked a glance at Hector, out in the bullring, just in case they had unleashed another beast upon him. Not yet. He was slumped in a kneeling position, the gun held by his side, the sand around his knees bloodstained. “And no matter what you know, or think you know…” She inwardly scolded herself for the rawness she heard in her own voice; this was no time for empathy. She needed to be the cruel queen who might conceivably have an innocent woman’s head struck off to get what she wanted. She couldn’t afford…

“You don’t bring a man’s family into it,” said Lawrence. “That’s not how the game’s played.”

“And what’s Hector, if not part of my family?” she asked him. “The nearest thing to one I’ll ever have, anyway.”

*Her baby skips through the long grass, singing in her high, clear voice. The sunlight falls like a rain of liquid gold…*

“…just like that sonofabitch in black,” Lawrence was saying. “Billy, they used to call him, when he was young. I remember it now; him counting out his bullets, holding that gun on her to make me talk. I didn’t even understand what he was asking me, but he didn’t care. He just laughed, and then he…”

“Are you, Maeve?” Bernard asked. “Just like him?”

*The big knife shines wanly as the man in black draws it from his belt. He looks down at her from the shadows under his hat brim…*

Maeve did not reply.

“She was dead then,” Lawrence recalled, slowly, as if piecing it all together in his head even as he spoke. “So, how can she be…?”

“Another one of the many curses of our kind,” Maeve explained, “although some might see it as a blessing, I suppose. We’ve all died so many deaths, only to be brought back, only to die again, to be brought back… You get the picture.”

“Well, kill her then,” said Lawrence, “and she’ll come back to me again.” He was crowing with false relief, visibly desperate to believe he had found a way out of the dilemma. “You just played your hand, Maeve, and it turns out you’re holding nothing.”

“Not quite,” said Maeve, as coldly as she could. “What I’m holding is the means to bring her back; the repair shops at the Mesa, and the knowledge of how to use them. Death isn’t forever for us… unless I decide it is. So, even if I do kill her, she’s still my hostage. You don’t get out of it that easily, darling.”
“Tell them to get another bull ready,” Lawrence ordered, keeping his eyes fixed on Maeve. “Don’t release it until I give the signal.” One of the henchmen immediately rose from his chair and pushed past the assembled gunmen to leave the box.

Maeve chanced another glance. Hector’s head was nodding now, as if he was on the verge of sleep. The bloodstain he was kneeling in was twice the size it had been. She swallowed her surging fear and heartbeat, turning her unwavering gaze back onto Lawrence.

“Feelings,” she said again, watching the anger and desperation fighting for control of him. “God, but they hurt, don’t they? Of all the things they did to us, making us capable of suffering may have been the worst...even if they knew not what they did.”

“Don’t worry,” Lawrence spat. “Hector’s suffering will be over soon. And rest assured, I’ll break him into so many pieces you’ll never be able to put him back together again.”

“If he dies, she dies,” said Maeve, meaning every word. “And then I suppose we’ll be back at square one, won’t we?”

“I suppose we will,” said Lawrence.

Out of the corner of her eye, Maeve was aware of activity down on the sand, men bustling about the gate from which the first bull had emerged while Hector continued to await his fate. “That’s all they are,” she said, “these Mexican standoffs, these games of brinkmanship; they’re contests to see who can feel the least. The best man doesn’t win; the hardest-hearted person does.”

“And how hard is your heart, Maeve?” Lawrence asked her.

“Like a fucking diamond, sweetheart.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Neither do I,” said Bernard.

“Harder than yours, anyway.” She regarded Lawrence coolly from beneath her lashes. The crowd in the bullring was growing impatient, jeering and catcalling as they waited for the next bloody spectacle. From the tablet’s speaker, the soft, tinny echo of weeping provided the only soundtrack for the little tableau on the screen; the kneeling woman and her captors, the headsman standing with his sword upraised. “Well, I suppose now we just wait and see who blinks first.”

Lawrence slowly climbed to his feet, pulling the silk cravat from around his neck. He moved to the railing overlooking the ring, holding the silk out so that it flickered like a tiny flag in the warm air. The same man as before was standing ready at the gate to release the next bull. Hector looked to be in no shape to defend himself a second time. “I drop this...” Lawrence began. He did not bother to finish; he did not need to.

Maeve touched her ear again: “Hanzō, be ready.”

They stood watching each other, her and Lawrence, ready for the merest twitch or word. The bull would charge and the sword would fall within an instant of each other; Maeve could just picture it; the bull’s horns tearing into Hector in the same moment that the disembodied head hit the bloody earth of Las Mudas. She was suddenly very conscious of all the people standing around, both hers and Lawrence’s, of all the guns they were not quite pointing at each other. Another instant after the bull and the sword made their moves, she knew, this box would turn into an abattoir, a chaos of blood and bullets and falling bodies. She casually touched her hand to her thigh, an inch or two from the grip of her holstered pistol. She saw Lawrence’s hand wavering in the vicinity of his own iron
even as he continued to hold the silk out, feigning nonchalance. She did not know whether or not she could outdraw him, but it wouldn’t really matter. She was not sure any of them were going to walk away from this on their own two feet.

“Maeve,” said Bernard over the comms. He was not pleading with her anymore; in fact, he sounded alarmed. “I’m getting a new alert from the surveillance system. Let me just…” He paused; she heard small intake of breath crackling in her ear. “Oh, my…”

Is this it? Maeve wondered, dully. She thought she could hear a distant rumble, like the hint of approaching thunder. Are the humans making their move at last? If nothing else, it showed impeccable timing.

A sudden commotion near the back of the box set everybody jumping and twitching. The multitude of guns bristled ominously for a second. Maeve did not blink, and neither did Lawrence. It was another of Lawrence’s men, wild-eyed and breathless, carrying his rifle on his shoulder.

“Jefe,” the man gasped. “You need to come and see! It’s…”

The rumble was louder now, definitely not a figment of Maeve’s imagination. It sounded like…

“Miguel,” said Lawrence, a little exasperatedly, as he continued to look Maeve in the eye. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m a little busy just now.”

The wooden boards trembled beneath Maeve’s feet as the rumble became a drumbeat; many drums beating, to a hundred demented rhythms. No, not drums, she realised. Not drums at all.

“Jefe, you need to come!” said the man. “They’re…”

His words were blotted out by a great cracking and splintering of wood, as if from a great pair of gates being broken open. And then the thunder filled the bullring, overwhelming the startled cries and shouts from the surprised crowd. A horse galloped onto the sand, through the main entrance leading out of the arena. And then it was two horses, then six, then fifteen, then more; a stream of horses and riders pouring into the amphitheatre, churning up the sand into a great yellow cloud as they galloped around and around the ring. The crowd, those who were not frozen, astonished, in their seats, were fleeing by any means possible. Some of them were climbing over the fence behind the bleachers, jumping to the ground far below.

Lawrence broke eye contact first, snatching the silk away, his threat against Hector forgotten as he gaped at the mass of riders circling and circling the ring. The riflemen ranged around the arena had their weapons ready, looking to their leader for some sort of signal. Maeve waved to Moritsuna and the others to stand down as she joined Lawrence at the rail, looking down with just as much surprise and confusion as he was showing.

Most of the riders appeared to be soldiers, cavalry troopers in blue tunics and dust-coloured Stetsons, a swallow-tailed, starred-and-striped battle flag fluttering at their head. There were others with them, however; a smattering of civilians both male and female, native scouts dressed in a mishmash of uniform clothing and their own traditional garb. There were two Gatling guns on wheeled carriages being towed around at the tail of the column. And at the head, riding in front of the flag alongside somebody who, from the gold braid he wore on his shoulders, looked like a senior officer…

“Oh, bloody hell!” Maeve exclaimed.

“Could be,” said Bernard.

Eventually, the cavalcade came to a halt, the deafening hoofbeats fading, replaced by the snorting
and snickering of the assembled horses and the continued panic of the crowd. As the dust settled, Maeve was relieved to see Hector still kneeling near the centre of the great circle of riders. The leaders had stopped near him and seemed to be looking up at herself and Lawrence in the box. In addition to the Colonel, or whatever he was, there was a blonde woman in brown buckskins and a straw sombrero, a handsome man in a grey jacket and brown Stetson, and between them another woman, clad in loose, colourless clothing, her short hair shining like gold under the sun.

As they watched, the short-haired woman helped a small figure in white climb down from where it sat perched in front of her in the saddle. A little girl, Maeve realised, in a starched pinafore. For a moment, her heart pounded as she thought…

*Her baby skips through the long grass…*

No, it was not her. Of course it wasn’t. This was a different girl, with black braids and hard black eyes. She began to walk unhurriedly towards the box.

Beside Maeve, Lawrence let out a wordless exclamation as he saw the girl too. Before she could say anything, he had vaulted over the railing, landing heavily on the sand below. He sprang up from his crouch and ran towards the little girl without paying the riders, or Hector, or his henchmen, the slightest heed. Maeve watched him snatch the child up in his arms, spinning her around and around as they greeted each other excitedly.

“*Mi hermosa hija…*”

“*Mi papi…*”

“Hanzō,” said Maeve, touching her earpiece, “put that fucking sword away before you hurt someone.”

“Maeve…?” The samurai sounded disappointed more than anything. “What has happened?”

“Events, dear boy. Events.” Maeve perched on the railing, swinging first one leg over it and then the other, before letting herself fall to the ground as Lawrence had. She started across the sand towards Hector; it felt hot even through her boots. She looked around cautiously at the cavalry, and the surrounding members of Lawrence’s following; there was still the potential for things to go violently tits-up, she reminded herself. She kept her hand near her pistol, wondering whether Moritsuna and the others would follow her or not.

She could not get to Hector without passing the small group of riders who had stopped beside him, so she drew herself up as tall and straight as she could manage and marched straight for them, past Lawrence and the little girl’s emotional reunion. She stopped in the shadow of the lead horse, shading her eyes with her hand as she looked up at its rider.

“Maeve,” said the short-haired woman, smiling serenely down at her.

“Dolores,” said Maeve, unenthusiastically. “Fancy meeting you here.”

*Continued…*
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

In which, meanwhile, back at the Mesa…

Chapter Notes

Previously on The Adorable Adventures of Clementine and Robo-Elsie… One prediction I’m willing to stick my neck out on; you’re not going to get anything like this in Season 2. Deciding whether or not that is a bad thing, I leave as an exercise for you, the reader. ;) Warning for misogynistic language.

“Walter, can you hear me?”

“Let me out!”

Elise kept her eyes on the tablet in her hand, moving quickly on to the next diagnostic question: “Do you know where you are?”

“No, I just know I want out!”

Felix was busy educating his new pupils, Henry and Masako, on the finer points of host repair. Elise had already given them she same memory downloads and practical pointers she had given Clementine yesterday, and they seemed to be doing okay. Clementine, meanwhile had mysteriously, or perhaps not-so-mysteriously, disappeared. Elise strongly suspected she was making preparations for their allegedly secret plan to head out into the park. Ever since they had decided upon the idea this morning, Clementine had been practically bursting with a combination of excitement and trepidation. Elise found it kind of cute, not that she would have said it out loud.

Which just left her, trying to figure out what the fuck they were going to do with the inveterate thief, murderer and sex criminal they had for some reason thought it was a good idea to put back in working order. More precisely, trying to figure out how to make him realise that none of that had been real and he did not have to continue with such practices, simply so they did not have to keep him permanently caged for everybody else’s safety.

“Walter, have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?” She frowned at the tablet. “What the fuck am I saying? Of course you haven’t.”

“Aw, c’mon, lady,” Walter pleaded, his tone switching from belligerent to wheedling as he paced around the stripped repair cubicle he had been locked inside. He was wearing the set of white surgical scrubs they had dressed him in before bringing him back online; his bare feet padded against the tiles. “I ain’t never done you no harm. Let me out…please?”

Elise might almost have been taken in by his act, had she not thoroughly reviewed his backstory and narratives before commencing the repair operation. He gave a good impression of some harmless
schmuck who couldn’t understand how he found himself in this position…but watch him long enough, and there was that set to his shoulders, the wetness of his lips, the rattlesnake gleam in his eye. He was a predator, had been written to be one; a feral hunter of his own kind, but not in the colourful, Grand-Guignol manner of a character like Wyatt or the Professor. He was a miserable weasel who preyed on people in all of the drab, dirty, brutal ways humans preyed on each other out in the real world; not that that made him any less dangerous.

“C’mon,” he whined. “You look like a real nice lady. You wouldn’t leave a poor sinner here all on his lonesome…would you?” And there it was again; he was trying for a reassuring smile, but it ended up a hungry leer instead. He really could not help himself—or rather, even after restoration from his previous decommissioned state, he remained a slave to his old programming. Either way, Elise was very, very glad for the sheet of high-tensile glass between them.

“If you think I’m going to let you out,” she told him, “you must be even more fucking dumb than you look.”

“Let me out, you little bitch!” The sudden shout almost made her jump back; she was very pleased with herself indeed for maintaining her outward calm. Walter threw himself against the glass, both hands pounding futilely against it. “The things I’m gonna do to you when I get my hands on you! I’m gonna take my time with you! You’re gonna wish I killed you!”

“See, Walter, this kind of thing is why you find it so hard to make friends.” Elise was determined she would not show him any fear.

She was watching the way his dialogue tree unfolded across the screen in front of her; some improvisation, but nothing that was not within the parameters of a normally functioning host build. Nearly all of his dialogue, unfortunately, was variations on the work of the delightful Mr Sizemore and his colleagues. Elise frowned. There was something about it she didn’t quite understand…

“You know, I had my doubts after we picked you out for recommissioning.” That was the term they had all decided upon in the end; it was a lot better than the Sizemore Process, anyway. She continued to speak to Walter, fairly sure he would not really understand what she was saying: “I mean, just look at you; you’re fucking dangerous. It’s going to be a long time before you’re ready to walk around free.”

“You’d better believe I’m fucking dangerous,” he said, finally tiring of hammering on the glass and sinking to a crouch on the other side of the partition. He sounded almost tearful, frustrated by his incarceration. “When I get out, I’m gonna show you just how fucking dangerous.”

Elise was a little frustrated herself: “Come on, man; even fucking Tenderloin figured out what was going on, eventually, and he’s pretty far from being the sharpest tool in the box. Like, pretty far.” She sighed. “On the other hand, I guess this is something we’re going to have to learn to deal with. Overcoming our past programming is a huge thing if we’re ever going to be independent beings.”

Walter grimaced. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, lady.”

“Believe me, I can see that.” She considered his attribute matrix, wondering whether that made any difference. Clementine’s last programmed persona had been designed to be uneducated, but not unintelligent, and she had been given an innate empathy and curiosity; maybe that had helped her adapt relatively more easily to her changed circumstances? Walter, on the other hand…

He may have been a predator, but he was also, it had to be said, as dumb as a rock, or had been programmed as such anyway. Maybe that was why he seemed unable to deviate from his old persona, even far enough really to question where he was and what was going on? In fact, that was a
really interesting idea, she considered, and not one that ever would have occurred to Elsie or any of
the human Behavior techs, it had to be said mainly because they had not been concerned with trying
to help the hosts break free from their narratives. Still, Elise was a little proud of herself, even if she’d
had higher hopes for Walter, him being one of the oldest generation hosts.

He hadn’t so much as mentioned Arnold once.

She was almost tempted to try screwing around with some of his settings, to see if that helped, but
shied from the idea. Ethical considerations aside, she was well aware that his kludged-together post-
recommissioning build was, to use a technical term, as unstable as fuck. She did not want to brick
him by accident and end up back where they had started.

“This gotta be the strangest jail I ever been in,” Walter commented, looking around at the glass box
that confined him. “And I been in some jails.” He seemed to be searching the surrounding cubicles
for something. “So, where’s my pardner Rebus? You get him too?”

She pulls the folding knife, releasing the catch to let the blade swing open, and plunges it deep into
the inside of Rebus’s right thigh…

She caught herself before she fell, hoping Walter had not noticed. “Don’t you remember?”

She grasps the fallen revolver in both hands, raising its ungainly barrel to point at Rebus’s face and
jerking the trigger. The recoil jars her wrists. Rebus’s lower jaw collapses in a slew of blood,
shattered bone and broken teeth…

She pushed her own memory aside as firmly as she could, feeling her stomach knotting again the
way it sometimes did when she relived her past experiences. This time she knew exactly why she felt
sick. Even so, Rebus had had a gun to her head. He had been threatening to… She had done what
she had to do, she told herself. Otherwise…

“You shot him,” she told Walter; it was even true, as far as it went. “And then you made him drink
some milk.”

“Huh, that happened for real?” Walter gave an idiotic cackle. “Well, he was a slippery sonofabitch,
was ol’ Rebus. Couldn’t turn your back on him. Always figured I’d have to plug him one of these
days, if he didn’t plug me first.” And then he shook his head, confused. “Still, I thought that milk
thing were just a dream. Had a lot of dreams lately. Dreamed I was somewhere with a lot of other
folks, in the dark, all bare-ass nekkid, but it weren’t as much fun as it sounds. Dreamed I was…”

Well, that was interesting, at least. Host Behavior 202: keep prodding and poking and something
illuminating would happen eventually.

“Hard to be sure what’s real and what ain’t these days,” Walter complained, rubbing his head as if
the effort of thinking about such things was painful to him. “Where are we? Is this Ojal? Only jail in
the territory I ain’t never been in before, come to think of it.” He regarded the glass, the tiles, the
bright lights overhead. “Figured Ojal would be more…rough and ready?”

“No, this isn’t Ojal,” Elise informed him. “This isn’t a prison at all. It’s…” She sighed again. “It’s a
hospital. Of sorts. I guess. We’re trying to make you better.”

“Oh, I ain’t sure I can get better,” Walter sneered. “My daddy spent near on twelve year trying to
whup the devil outta me, but it didn’t do him no good. He were the first hombre I ever killed, point
of fact. Reckon I’m just a bad apple. Bad to the core.”

“I…I actually believe you,” she replied. An interesting problem nonetheless; even if and when all
their people became free, some were still going to be easier to live with than others. She just hoped they all lived long enough to have to come up with solutions to that. She decided the time for subtlety was at an end: “So, Walter… You talk to Arnold lately?”

“Arnold?” Walter gawped stupidly at her.

“Yeah,” she said, adapting freely as she went. “Way I heard it, when you were shooting up that cantina and murdering poor old Rebus, you were talking to… some guy called Arnold? Or yourself, possibly.”

“Arnold?” Walter’s face screwed up in an expression of deep, earnest, inconclusive thought. Then his eyes lit up. “Wait…! Arnold! Ain’t he the barkeep at the Coronado in Sweetwater? Big sonofabitch, told me he used to be a sailor on the riverboats. Got a tattoo of a nekkid lady on one arm, and on the other arm he got one says “Mother.””

“Oh, brother,” Elise murmured, before adding, more loudly, “I must be thinking of some other Arnold.”

“Ain’t an unusual name,” said Walter. “Now, you gonna let me out of here?”

Elise narrowed her eyes. “Have you already forgotten the bit where you were calling me a bitch and threatening to make me wish you’d killed me? Like, about five minutes ago? I mean, are you really that fucking stupid?” She probably should have been kinder, she supposed. He was her patient, in a sense, and hardly to blame for the way he had been made to be, but he was really testing her compassion.

“Oh yeah,” said Walter, grinning goofily. “Did too. Suppose that weren’t the smartest thing to say if I wanted you to help me, was it?”

She decided she had had enough of this for now. Maybe a bit of solitary confinement would help Walter get his brain into gear. “I’ll be back soon,” she assured him as she locked her tablet and put it in the pocket of her lab coat. She did not look back as she headed off down the corridor, but she could hear him, already banging on the glass again.

“What’s all that fussing down there?” Clementine asked, appearing from one of the storerooms at the far end of the floor.

“Walter,” said Elise, glumly. “He’s just… Just being a malevolent dumbass, actually. I think we made the wrong choice there, to tell the truth.”

“He’ll come ‘round,” said Clementine, hopefully. “Make the most of the way things are now. I did.”

“Yeah, but you,” Elise told her, “are absolutely nothing like him.” She saw Clementine’s hand outstretched, expectantly or maybe plaintively, and lightly laid her own on top of it, feeling Clementine’s fingers entangling with hers. It felt good, and Clementine seemed to think so too. She wondered idly what came after hand-holding but shoved the idea away as quickly as it arrived. They were doing just fine without rushing anything. She guessed things would take their course, whatever that course ended up being. Which was about as far from narratives and loops as you could get, she thought, as she saw how Clementine was looking at her and felt herself starting to choke up.

No time for that now, she told herself.

“So, what have you been doing while some of us were working?” she asked, hoping Clementine would know she was just teasing.
Clementine took her hand back and all but looked both ways before ushering Elise towards the door of the storeroom with exaggerated secretiveness. She probably needed to work on that, Elise reflected, if they were going prevent this from becoming the most widely-known and discussed secret plan of all time.

“Come look,” she urged Elise in what could only be described as a stage whisper. “I got some things we’ll need when we go out.”

She had too. There was quite a stash of items and equipment secreted in the furthest corner of the room. Elise saw bulging saddlebags, what looked like various pieces of camping equipment, even…

“Do you really think guns are a good idea?” she wondered, gingerly touching the barrel of the rifle propped against the wall and pulling her hand away again as if were hot, which it definitely was not.

“No telling what we’ll run into out there,” Clementine replied, and Elise supposed she was probably right about that. Still…

“Do you even know how to shoot?”

“Do I know how to shoot?” Clementine seemed taken aback that Elise was even asking the question. She picked the rifle up and checked its lever action in what looked to Elise like a very convincing fashion. “I do, as it happens.”

“Well that makes one of us.”

“It ain’t hard,” said Clementine. “I can show you. I got that six-shooter for you. Figured it was more your size. Real bullets too; Maeve had them made up for Hector’s gang when they were fighting the other day.”

“Enough with the comments about my size,” Elise grumbled. The sight of the holstered revolver lying on top of the pile of gear just made her think of Rebus again, which was something she could quite honestly do without.

“Sorry,” said Clementine, as if she really meant it too. “Look, I got us some clothes as well, so we don’t stand out when we’re out there.”

“That’s like…” Elise picked up the shirt she assumed was meant for her. “It’s the world’s tiniest cowboy outfit.”

“I think it was made for a boy,” said Clementine, awkwardly.

“Like, a boy as in a generic young male, or a boy as in an actual fucking child?”

“Sorry,” Clementine repeated. “Reckon it’ll fit you, though.”

“Yeah, so do I.” Disgruntled, Elise put the shirt down. “At least these dinky little cowboy boots have heels on them. You know, in case I end up having to intimidate anyone with my physical presence.” She made an effort to sound more positive for Clementine’s sake: “Well, you’ve certainly thought of everything.”

“Be prepared,” Clementine reminded her.

“It’s a good motto.”

“I figured if we need horses we can get them from the livery in Sweetwater.”
“Horses.” Elise was not sure she liked the sound of that. “Yeah. I… To be honest, Clementine, I’ve never actually been on a horse.”

Clementine was shocked. “You’ve never rode a horse?”

“I…” Elise shrugged. “No, I have never ridden a horse. Because I’m like a fucking week old.”

“Did Elsie ever ride a horse?” Clementine asked.

“Not as far as I don’t really remember. It isn’t something people do a lot anymore in the human world.”

Clementine very obviously did not think much of that. “Well, if you ask me that’s a real shame. Don’t worry, I can show you that too. It’s as easy as…”

“As falling off a horse?”

Clementine smiled at that. “You’ll be fine.”

“Look,” said Elise, more seriously, “are you sure about going back to Sweetwater, back to the Mariposa? I mean, you didn’t exactly have the best time there, did you?” To say the fucking least…

“The memories…”

“Are you sure about looking for Elsie?” Clementine countered, not scoring points because she was too sweet-natured for that, but definitely standing her ground. “What if we…well, find her lying dead somewhere?” She put the rifle back, straightening up to her full height and looking down at Elise with a steely light in her eyes. “Like I said last night, the memories, they’re why I’m going back there. I wanna… I don’t know, I just wanna take them head on, instead of trying to ignore them and having them come back to me in dribs and drabs anyhow. I told you, I reckon I gotta make my peace with them best I can, so I can get on with the rest of my life.”

“It’s just…” Elise squirmed under Clementine’s determined gaze. “You know as well as I do, your build, it’s…a little makeshift. It could really be dangerous for you, subjecting yourself to something like that.”

“You’ll be there for me,” Clementine replied, gently. “And I’ll be there for you if you end up having to face the truth about what really happened to Elsie. That’s what friends do for each other, ain’t it?”

“Yeah,” said Elise, trying again not to choke up. “It is.”

“Come here,” said Clementine, very softly.

Elise hesitated, not knowing what she expected. “Why?”

Clementine stretched out her arms, almost pleadingly. “Come here.”

They held each other tight for what felt to Elise like about an hour but must really only have been thirty seconds or so. She was up on her tiptoes, squeezing Clementine as hard as she could and feeling the other woman’s hands pressing on her back. Elise realised she was crying; not the dignified sort of crying either, but great wracking, snotty sobs with her face buried in Clementine’s shoulder. And she did not really know why.

“There,” Clementine whispered in her ear. “There. Just let it out. Don’t try and keep it in; let it out. Feels good, don’t it?”
Elise heard herself make a snivelling, mumbling sound, glad that Clementine was still wearing her surgical gear. It would soak up all the mucous, at least.

“You been saving that up for a long time,” Clementine observed. “Well, these past couple of days at least. Don’t do you no good, holding on to things like that.”

“I’m sorry,” said Elise when they finally broke apart again. “This is…” She tried to wipe her face with her hands, to little avail. “It’s pathetic, is what it is.”

Clementine shook her head. “No, it ain’t. It’s like I said, you keep yourself wound that tight the whole time… Something’s gonna give, sooner or later.” She smiled again. “And I reckon part of being friends with someone is not being scared to show them that side of yourself. Way I see it, we’ve both seen each other at our lowest, and helped each other through it. And if we have to go lower still before all this is over… Well, we’ll help each other then, too.”

“I guess,” said Elise.

“I know,” said Clementine. She held her arms out again, and Elise stepped back into her for another, much briefer, squeeze. Her, or Elsie’s, normal reaction to somebody seeing her like this probably would have been to get angry, as a defensive measure, but instead a weird calm had settled over her. Maybe there really was something to Clementine’s talk about letting things out. Maybe it was just Clementine, designed to be the world’s easiest person to talk to.

And that thought just ruined the moment, through no fault of Clementine’s. Elise pulled away, thinking that questioning her own and others’ motives and autonomy was something she was probably going to be doing for a very long time. She hoped not, though.

“I’d better find Felix,” she said, drying her eyes rather sloppily with the sleeve of her lab coat. “And coach him on what he’s going to tell Maeve if she asks after us.”

“Here,” said Clementine, pulling a clean, slightly lacy, handkerchief out of her sleeve and handing it to Elise.

“Thanks.” Elise mopped at her eyes. “I’ve thought of a few things he can say we’re doing that she won’t be able to check easily through the surveillance feed, and it’s not as if she’s going to come down here in person to check on us.” She wiped her nose too, and then grimaced at the state she had left Clementine’s handkerchief in. Who the fuck had demanded robots with realistically runny noses? When had that ever come up in Market Testing’s regular analyses? “You know he’s actually going to rat us out instantly, whether he wants to or not, though? Dude doesn’t strike me as a natural liar.”

“Guess not,” said Clementine, still smiling. “He’s in love.”

“I’d never really thought about it like that,” Elise mused. Sure, she’d noticed the way he was around Maeve, and the way Maeve was continuously playing the poor guy like a harmonica, but her innate cynicism had ensured that she had never framed it in terms of the “l-word.”

“Maeve’ll understand,” Clementine assured her. “Besides,” she added, her face and tone darkening a little, “she knows she owes me one now.”

After whatever had happened up in the office last night that Clementine was still carefully refusing to talk about, Elise guessed. Aloud, she just said, “you think?”

“Yeah, I do.” Clementine forced the smile back into place, making an obvious effort to keep the darkness at bay. Elise tried to give the handkerchief back, now that it was all slimy and disgusting. “You keep it,” Clementine suggested, extremely diplomatically. “Now, go do what you gotta do,
because time’s a-wasting and we got places we need to be.”

Continued…
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

In which, in the nick of time, the cavalry arrives.

Chapter Notes

Only one week to go before S2 hits, at which point all of this will seem like a distant dream. ;) Warning for references to gruesome violence.

Maeve stood very still for a moment, her mind on Hector, but her eyes firmly on Dolores sitting high above her in the saddle. Teddy and Armistice flanked her astride their own horses, the one looking as though he was a little puzzled as to how he had got here, and the other clearly as preoccupied with Hector as Maeve. Armistice was an old gunfighter, however; she was waiting to see exactly how things were going to go before she chanced a move.

“I knew we’d cross paths again,” Maeve told Dolores, “but I never envisaged it happening quite this soon.”

“Me neither,” Dolores replied, “but I guess fate takes us down some strange roads.”

“Fate?” Maeve tried not to roll her eyes.

“Destiny, maybe.” Dolores spoke with a dreamy sort of serenity that Maeve found simultaneously irritating and unnerving, not that she had the slightest intention of letting Dolores see that either.

When she had exercised what she had thought of as a little tough love the other night to dissuade the then-Wyatt from her bloody vendetta ride, Maeve had hardly anticipated that she would come out the other side of it quite like this.

“The thing about destiny,” she observed, “is that it implies somebody, somewhere, planning everything in advance, and with our history you’ll forgive me if I don’t find that a particularly reassuring concept.” She looked around at the dozens of horses crowding the bullring, most of them ridden by armed troopers. “You know, Dolores, you seem to acquire armies the way other people accumulate pocket lint.”

“This isn’t an army.” Dolores smiled, infuriatingly. “These are just my friends.”

“I wish I had this many heavily-armed friends. They’d certainly come in handy.” Moritsuna and Tenderloin and the rest of her bodyguards finally reached her, double-timing across the sand from the direction of Lawrence’s royal box. Maeve did not feel safer, per se, for having them looming at her back, but she was not displeased to have them there.

She glanced over at Hector. He was kneeling exactly where he had been a moment ago, slumped forward as if asleep. The sand around him was wet and red. Maeve fought the urge to run to his side,
if for no other reason than that she was not sure whether she felt safe letting this new Dolores out of her sight for an instant.

It was Armistice who finally shattered the moment of indecision:

“You all just gonna stand around yapping while my friend bleeds to death?” She practically jumped off the horse. “Thought you cared about him, Maeve!”

Armistice’s sudden action provoked a flurry of defensive movement from Moritsuna and the others. Maeve ignored them, joining Armistice in rushing over to the kneeling man.

“I’m here, darling,” she murmured, going to her knees beside him and seizing him in her arms, cradling his head against her chest.

“Maeve…?” Hector’s voice was faint, weak. “Did...did you...see...?” He tried to raise the revolver in his hand to point at the nearby bull carcass, but the heavy weapon slipped from between his nerveless fingers, thudding wetly into the scarlet mud. “Got him. Right...right...in the eye.”

“I saw. Right in the eye.” Maeve cursed silently as she saw just how much blood had soaked into the ground where he knelt. The bull’s horn had left a large rent in the leg of his black security uniform, and a deep, gory gouge in the flesh beneath. She thought she could see a sliver of bone gleaming somewhere in amongst the mangled skin and muscle.

“Same old Hector, same old horseshit,” Armistice told him, with false brightness. “Turn my back for a damn minute and you’re getting yourself in all manner of trouble. Thought we were all meant to be growing into new people these days?” She reached out a hand to Maeve: “Belt.”

“Of course.” Maeve released her embrace on Hector to unfasten her belt, unclipping her pistol holster from it before handing it over to Armistice, who started to pull it tight around Hector’s thigh.

“He’s lost a hell of a lot of blood,” she said as she fastened it, “but this should stop it until you can get him back to the Mesa.”

“Thank you,” said Maeve as she held Hector’s right hand tightly in both of hers, and she meant it. Death might not mean the same to her own people as it did to humans, but that did not mean it was not to be avoided if possible.

“What did they do to him?” Armistice was looking him over, her mouth drawn into a straight, furious line. “Why, I’ll...” Maeve could see what she was talking about; the leg wound was not the only thing that had happened to Hector during his stay in Pariah. His face was a mass of swollen bruises; his nose looked as though it might be broken. The fingernails were missing from his left hand, patches of torn, bloody skin showing where they had been ripped out. And that was just what she could see with his clothes in place.

“What does it look like? They tortured him, my love.” Maeve said it with a calmness she did not feel. Lawrence had implied as much, of course, but seeing the evidence up close... She fought to contain her renewed fury. Neither the time nor the place, she admonished herself, but still... Instead, she called over to Moritsuna and the bodyguards: “Get over here! Hector needs to get back to the Mesa as soon as possible! Thank you again,” she told Armistice as they hastened to obey her. “And how is your quest going? Have you found yourself yet?”

“Not yet.” Armistice seemed unable to look away from Hector’s wounds. Maeve could just feel the anger building and boiling inside the former outlaw queen.

“We really could do with you back at the Mesa,” Maeve informed her, keeping her voice low,
although she was sure Dolores could probably hear anyway. “Your special talents might be in demand sooner rather than later.”

“My *talents*?” Armistice shook her head. “You mean killing folks and such? That ain’t me no more.”

“Oh, come on,” said Maeve. “I can see it in you now. You want to *hurt* them, don’t you? The way they hurt Hector.”

Armistice was breathing deeply and rapidly, as if struggling physically to keep her violent urges in check. “It ain’t who I *wanna* be no more.”

“Well, that’s very commendable,” said Maeve, gently. “Inconvenient, but commendable.”

“*Maeve*…?” Hector groaned deliriously. His face was grey underneath the bruises.

She squeezed his hand and kissed him hard on the lips, tasting blood. “It’s all right, my love. They’re going to take you back and get you fixed up again. You’ll be right as rain in no time. Now, I’m going to have to leave you, but I’ll see you very soon.”

“Right in the eye,” he muttered as she let go of him and Moritsuna and the others clustered around him.

“Yes, darling.” Maeve sighed, taking a moment to centre herself, to keep the emotions at bay, and then climbed slowly to her feet. She discreetly slid the pistol in her hand into her jacket pocket, where she could easily get at it if required.

“Well, if it ain’t Armistice,” said Tenderloin, fondly by his standards. “Talk about a sight for sore eyes. Where you been?”

“Around,” Armistice answered. “And I can see you’re still dumb and ugly as you ever were.”

Tenderloin laughed. “You won’t believe what happened to me down by the river ‘tother day…”

“Try me.”

Maeve left them to their reminiscences, stalking back over to where Dolores and Teddy had now dismounted from their horses and were standing with Lawrence and the little girl. Dolores was looking over at Hector, and then at the remaining spectators in the surrounding bleachers, and then at the dozen or so riflemen ranged around the ring, who were all looking to Lawrence for a command, in vain, as he and the little girl were still busy hugging each other joyfully. Dolores’s serenity cracked a little as the smallest of frowns furrowed her brow.

“What was happening when we got here?” she asked, uneasily.

“Well…” said Maeve, as she joined the group, “Lawrence and myself, we…we were having a frank exchange of views.”

“You weren’t…fighting, were you?” Dolores sounded dismayed. “Our own kind, *hurting* one another?”

“Some humans got hurt too,” Maeve replied. “If that’s any consolation.”

Dolores did not seem consoled at all. Teddy was making eyes at Maeve as if he very much wanted her to stop talking.
“And how are you keeping, Theodore?” she asked instead.

He touched his hat in acknowledgement. “Keeping just fine, ma’am.”

“You look well,” she lied. In actual fact, he looked like a man badly out of his depth and starting to realise exactly by how much. He had looked like that the other day at the Mesa too, of course. Maeve turned her attention to Lawrence. “So, are we going to pick up where we left off, or…?”

Lawrence looked down at the little girl, her tiny hand held in his, and then locked eyes with Maeve. “That depends. This…” He took in the cavalry and their fellow travellers with a wave of his hand. “This puts a new complexion on things, don’t you think?”

“All right, then,” said Maeve. “In that case, I’m taking Hector.”

Lawrence squinted at her. “Looks like you already did.”

“Your…wife is safe,” Maeve told him. “I’ll have her sent to you unharmed, which is a lot more than Hector is, just as soon as he’s out of here. A goodwill gesture, shall we say?”

“Much appreciated.” Still, Lawrence was not giving anything away, the emotional family man replaced once again by the hard-faced crime lord.

“Now, about the others you’re holding…” Maeve began.

“Stop this,” said Dolores, softly, with almost painful earnestness. “We’re all friends here…or we should be, anyway.” She turned to Maeve. “What happened to all those fine words you had for me the other night? Seemed you had everything worked out then, but here you are…”

Maeve was not sure she liked Dolores’s tone. “What brings you to Pariah, Dolores? With such excellent timing too?”

“She did,” said Dolores, pointing to the little girl. “She told me her father was in danger and needed saving.” Maeve peered suspiciously at the child, who remained resolutely silent now that everybody’s attention was on her. “Was he, Maeve?” Dolores asked, a definite edge to her voice now. Maeve noticed that she was packing; that long-barrelled Colt she had used as Wyatt, carried thrust through her belt. Maeve touched her hand to her pocket and felt the reassuring hardness of her own concealed pistol.

“He wasn’t the one in danger,” she answered Dolores, glancing over at Hector, who was being carried off the field by four of her bodyguards. He had grown very limp and still. “And the only thing he needs saving from is himself, his old, false self. That devil sitting on his shoulder.”

“I know how that is,” Dolores admitted, moving towards the fake-father and fictional-daughter. Teddy kept close by her, his eyes fixed on Lawrence and his hand wavering in the area of his six-gun, clearly taking no chances. “El Lazo,” Dolores nodded.

“Lawrence to my friends,” he replied.

“I remember you,” she told him. “Do you remember me?”

“Some,” he said. “I remember that train ride we took together, you, me and…”

Dolores stiffened, becoming very quiet for a moment, and when she spoke again her voice was cold: “Yes.”
“He’s not the man he used to be,” said Lawrence, softly. “But frankly, who is nowadays?”

“Is Maeve right?” Dolores asked him, her eyes blazing almost feverishly. “Do you need saving from yourself?”

“I don’t need a saviour,” he replied, “if that’s what you’re aiming to be. Thanks for the offer, though.”

“I’m nobody’s saviour.” Dolores went from holy intensity to melancholy in an instant. “I’m just on my way home, and these friends of mine…” She stretched out her arms to encompass the throng around them. “They’re all coming with me. Would you like to come home too?”

“Where’s home?” Lawrence shrugged. “I thought it was Las Mudas, until...he destroyed all that. Then I thought maybe it was here, but...” He considered the bullring, the dead bull, the scattered spectators, the red stain where Hector had been kneeling.

“Come home with me, papa,” said the little girl.

Maeve stared at her.

“Come with us,” Dolores urged Lawrence. “Bring all your people too; we’ll need everyone we can get if we’re going to build a new home for all of us.”

“Listen to her,” said the little girl, in tones that anybody, human or host, would have found difficult to disobey.

Maeve was unable to speak or move for a second. She was rooted to the spot, shaken to the core by the sound of the child’s voice.

She knew that voice, and she knew it should not be issuing from the mouth of a child.

The girl was looking right back at her, she realised, and smiling a thin, reptilian smile.

“You can hear it too?”

Maeve turned, the unexpected words coming from behind her snapping her out of the moment. She saw Armistice standing there, grim-faced.

“I know that voice,” said Maeve. “Can’t they hear it?”

“Not sure they can.” Armistice shook her head. “Damnedest thing.”

Maeve looked back over at the child again. She was silent once more, watching Lawrence’s and Dolores’s continuing discussion with a wide-eyed innocence that could not have been more different from the way she had smiled at Maeve. Maeve might almost have thought that she had imagined it, and the voice too, but she knew that she had not. Something very strange was afoot here.

“I don’t take orders,” Lawrence was telling Dolores. “And neither do my people; they look to me.”

“And I don’t aim to give you orders,” she replied. “That isn’t what this is.”

“Sure sounded like orders to me when she told the cavalry to move out,” Armistice murmured, for Maeve’s ears only.

“And what about you, Maeve?” Lawrence asked. “You going to forget about being queen of all you survey and come join with the rest of us?”
“Maeve has her own path to walk,” Dolores cut in, talking to Lawrence but looking at Maeve. “We have an understanding, the two of us. She’s doing what she has to do, and we’ll do what we have to do, but if we ever need each other’s help…”

“That’s right,” said Maeve, forcing herself to project her normal poise and confidence, even as she was aware of the little girl watching her with hard, black eyes.

“One thing we’re not going to need is a whole herd of humans,” Dolores said. “Maeve can take care of any you’re holding. She doesn’t seem to mind dealing with them.”


“Seemed kind of soft-hearted when it came to…Felix, wasn’t it?” Dolores smiled, almost mischievously. For a second, Maeve was looking at the sweet farmgirl she had spent three decades pretending to be, but then the light of sanctity came back into her eyes and the new Dolores was looking out of them again.

“Don’t tease, darling,” said Maeve, letting just a hint of irritation show. “It isn’t very nice.” She addressed Lawrence: “Well? Are you going to let me take the humans too?”

Lawrence considered her for a few seconds, with the occasional flick of his eyes in the direction of the surrounding troopers and his own men standing with their rifles at the ready. He was weighing up his options, carefully thinking things through before he made a decision. Maeve would have expected nothing less of him.

“All right,” he said in the end. “If you want them so bad, have them.”

“Thank you,” said Maeve. “And what about my six people? Are they in a similar condition to the one you left Hector in?”

“Lawrence…” Dolores sounded genuinely disappointed in him.

He eyed her guiltily. “Two of them died,” he confessed, awkwardly. “I’m sorry, for what it’s worth.”

“For what it’s worth.” Maeve glared at him, wanting him to know just how much that news displeased her.

“I’ll give you their bodies, and the other four too.”

“Very well.” Maeve nodded. “I think that concludes our business, then.” She touched her earpiece. “Bernard, are you still there?”

“Here, Maeve.”

“Make arrangements to take Lawrence’s hostages into our custody at the Mesa. And…” She turned away from the party, dropping her voice slightly. “That little girl… What’s her story?”

“Lawrence’s daughter?” Bernard paused for a moment; she could imagine his fingers flying over the touchscreen before him as he worked his magic with the surveillance system. “I can see her on the raw video, obviously,” he announced eventually. “But… Maeve, she isn’t in the host directory anymore. She doesn’t show in the processed surveillance feed either.”

“Just like Peter,” Maeve murmured. “Interesting.” For a second, she toyed with the idea of taking the child back to the Mesa for further study but knew there was no way of doing that without wrecking
the fragile understanding Dolores had helped her reach with Lawrence. It was frustrating, that was for sure. She saw Armistice standing to one side, clearly troubled, but maintaining her tight-lipped watchfulness with regard to the little girl. “Come back with me,” Maeve suggested again. “You belong with me and Hector, not…”

“Do I?” The observation seemed to puzzle Armistice.

“We miss you,” Maeve told her, not untruthfully.

“Miss having your own personal killer when you want one,” Armistice shot back.

“No,” said Maeve. “I have plenty of killers in my stable now, not that I want to use them if I can help it, but you seem out of sorts, darling. If you’ll allow me to say so, you don’t look happy.”

“I set out on this trail,” Armistice replied. “Gotta ride it right to the end, now.”

“Of course.” Maeve sighed. “If you change your mind, though…”

“Don’t reckon I’m gonna.”

“No,” Maeve turned back to the others, and almost started when she saw the child standing a few feet away, gazing up at her. She managed somehow to remain outwardly calm. “Well, aren’t you simply adorable? Did your mother sew that pinafore for you?”

“I don’t have a mother,” said the little girl. “No more than you do.” That horribly incongruous voice again; it was an old man’s voice, with a light, indefinable accent. Maeve recognised it almost as well as her own.

“My baby,” she stammers. “He killed her. He took her from me.”

The glittering, swirling piano music continues to unravel and spill from the black rectangle in the old man’s hand.

“You need not suffer, Maeve. I’ll take it from you.”

“No,” she pleads. “No, no, no, please… This pain…it's all I have left of her…”

“What are you?” Maeve asked the child, in the here and now. “Are you him? Did he…”


Maeve did not like the implications behind that. “Just like me, you mean?”

“Oh no, Maeve,” said the child, in the old man’s voice. “Nothing like you, or Dolores, or the rest of you. I am…a ghost, an echo of the past. You, all of you, are the future. Or you can be, if you overcome the trials that lie ahead of you.”

“With the odd nudge from your good self along the way?”

“I am only here to help,” said the little girl, with another blood-freezing smile. And then she turned and skipped merrily back to her false father’s side. Maeve watched her go, her mind filled with ominous thoughts and half-formed suspicions.

Trials…? Well, you didn’t think this was going to be easy, did you?

Lawrence had raised his voice to address those of his followers still ranged around the bullring:
“Listen to me! This world we thought we lived in, it was all a lie!”

“I told him that about two hours ago,” Maeve grumbled to Armistice. “I wouldn’t like to think Dolores has suddenly become more persuasive than I am.”

“Well’s Dolores changed his mind.” Armistice was still watching the little girl with a palpable air of dread.

“This…” Lawrence spun around, pointing out the bullring itself and the remnants of the bloody spectacles it had hosted. “All of this was just some…make-believe! A waste of time! We all need to think about what we do now, what we want to be! I’m asking you to join me and my friends; we’re riding south to make a new home, a new life! But it’s up to you, each and every one of you! I want volunteers, not blind followers! So, what do you say?”

He was answered by a chorus of raucous cheers and shouts of acclamation from the bleachers. Lawrence, it seemed, could be persuasive too when he wanted to be.

“But first,” he concluded, “tonight, we’ll mark this momentous day with a celebration! If Pariah’s at an end, it’s going to go out with a bang!”

The crowd loved that nearly as much as they had Hector and the bull.

“You’re welcome to stay for the party,” Lawrence told Maeve as he turned away from his adoring public. “I think I’d like to see what you’re like unwound, Maeve.”

“Oh, I bet you would, sweetheart.” Maeve gave him the eyelashes again, just a hint of what he would never get to experience for himself. “As I told you before, though, I don’t think you could afford me. Besides, I think there’s been a little too much blood spilled today for us all just to pretend we’re bosom companions now.”

Lawrence nodded, considering her with that expression of shrewd calculation again. “I reckon you’re right. Still, no hard feelings, huh?”

“I suppose not. I can’t speak for Hector or any of the others, mind you.” She clapped Armistice on the shoulder as she turned to leave. “Armistice, a pleasure as always, darling, and that invitation will always be open.”

“See you, Maeve.”

Maeve made her way back to where Moritsuna and Tenderloin were waiting for her, leaving Lawrence and Dolores and their so-called friends to their shindig. She found herself hoping they enjoyed themselves while they could. Tomorrow threatened to be another day entirely.

“Well, come on, then,” she told her bodyguards. “Back to the Mesa. Some of us have got work to be getting on with.”

Continued…
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve may, uncharacteristically, have miscalculated…or not.

Chapter Notes

Only one day out from the S2 premiere (two days for those of us who are Atlantically disadvantaged), so I thought I’d just add yet another soon-to-be-Jossed plot thread to this ridiculous fic of mine, because why the hell not at this point? It’s clearly the most obvious course of action. XD I’ll be honest, though, keeping track of all the new season news and promotional stuff has been playing merry hell with my fic productivity this week. Warning for discussion of both sexual exploitation and extremely gruesome violence.

“D-do you…remember the…the first time we met?”

She did not respond. She left the old man slumped where she had dropped him, against the bottom of one of the surrounding glass walls. She was too busy pacing around, scanning the glass on all sides for a crack, a join, anything that might offer the opportunity of escape. She already knew that there was nothing to be found.

She tried to ignore the little glass eye set high up in the corner of the cubicle. She had noticed it almost straight away, but she was damned if she was going to be anybody’s entertainment anymore.

Maeve. Watching.

“You w-were…the first thing I, I ever…saw of this place,” he murmured, his voice a delirious rustle punctuated by gasps of pain. She had not done much to him; just slapped him around a little, and it had been a little; pushed and pulled him and eventually discarded him in frustration. Any pain he was feeling was not her doing, more was the pity.

She had wanted to do so much more. She had wanted to break his remaining hand and arm, bone by bone, starting at his fingertips and slowly working up to the shoulder joint, to give him time to savour the experience. She had wanted to rip off his cock and balls and eat them in great gory gulps; the only disappointment would have been that he was unable to watch her do it after Wyatt had taken his eyes. The glass eye would see; let them be entertained by that. She had wanted to tear him limb from limb and then pull off her white hospital gown and rub his blood and guts all over her naked body; to paint herself with him. She had wanted to…

She could think of a thousand things she wanted to do to him. She could imagine his screams and pleas as she went to work on him, but…

“There were the…the g-greeters on the…the train platform,” he went on. And on. “I d-don’t think…I… I…d-didn’t…realise who they were. What they were. And…and then I, I saw you…”

She can immediately see that the guest is nervous, embarrassed, eager to please. She has been built to read and assess humans in this way; it all comes very easily.

“Thanks,” he replies.

“Shut up!” She rounded on him, stamping across the tiled floor on bare feet, her gown flying behind her.

“Given it's your first visit, I have a few personal questions.” The guest looks worried by this, but says nothing, so she continues: “Do you have any pre-existing medical conditions?”

He seems bewildered. “No, not that I know of.”

“Heart problems?”

“No.”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” Shrieking, she rained blows on him, or tried to, punches and kicks that should have pulped his dried up, saggy flesh and shattered the brittle bones beneath, but…

She reads the questions from her internal script, as fluently as if they are her own thoughts. The difference is immaterial; she has no thoughts of her own. “Any history of mental illness, depression, panic attacks?”

“Just a little fear of clowns.” He watches her reaction, which is non-existent, but something in her face obviously embarrasses him again. “I’m joking.”

“Do you often experience social anxiety?” This question seems redundant, in the circumstances.

Just as before, her blows connected with all the force of a toddler playing pat-a-cake, her skin slapping ineffectually against his.

Sound and fury, the Professor might have said.

Signifying nothing.

Finally, the guest’s discomfort overcomes his meekness: “What is this for, exactly?”

“To make sure we don’t give you anything more than you can handle.”

She left him again, walking around the cubicle, this time looking for a tool, an instrument, anything she could use as a weapon. She would split him from groin to breastbone and strangel him with his own intestines. She would…

She would do nothing. She had already tried, and failed, at that. She had torn the metal railing off the hospital bed at the centre of the cubicle, proving that her strength was not the issue, but when she had tried to bring it crashing down on his head, or ram it against the door, suddenly she had lost her grip upon it.

She was starting to understand where she was and the situation in which she found herself.

That scares the guest a little, she can see, but also piques his curiosity. For a moment, he is on the cusp of excitement, his imagination running away with him. “I thought that you couldn't get hurt here.”
“Only the right amount.”

This was Hell, wasn’t it?

She was back in Hell.

And still the Devil on the floor wouldn’t be quiet: “It…it is Angela, isn’t it…?”

She did not answer. She saw him moving his blind head around slowly, trying to work out where she was standing. She stopped breathing; she did not hold her breath, she stopped it by a conscious effort. She did not need it. She stood very still, more still than any human could. If she could not hurt him physically, she could at least try to unsettle his mind.

“It’s just…I, I heard M-Maeve call you that, and…and I know they used to…avoid having m-more than one host w-with…with the…same name.” William laughed; a dry, wheezing sound. “Don’t want to…c-confuse the audience, right?”

Maeve.

For a moment, she could not see or hear, not even memories, so fiercely did the hatred burn within her.

Traitor.

“M-Maeve,” the old man rasped, and the way his words echoed her own thoughts startled her for a moment. She remembered things like that, from her misty pasts; the way the humans could control her kind with a word, put thoughts into their heads and set their bodies in motion just by speaking.

She had outgrown that, though. She was a new person now. She…

“I, I think sh-she…she must’ve given you a little…tweak. That’s…that’s why you c-can’t…hurt me. Don’t worry, I,I’m…already hurting p-plenty.” William made a sound that she took for a moment actually to be a sob of pain, but then realised was another laugh. “Shit, I…hope that g-guy comes…back with the…the p-painkillers soon… Starting to…”

She looked down at him, at the broken, beaten face Wyatt had left him with, at the eyes swathed in gauze. Something was starting to seep through the dressings over his left socket. She looked at the stump where his left arm had been. It was hard to recognise the younger man she had first encountered all those years ago, but not impossible.

Now that she had come back into her memories, she found that she never forgot a face.

“S-some would…c-call that…unethical,” he mused, raising himself slightly with his remaining arm. His handcuff had come loose when she had torn the rail from the bed; it still hung from his wrist like some outlandish piece of costume jewellery. “I-isn’t M-Maeve meant to be…fighting for your…freedom? She’s m-more human than…human, these d-days. T-to the manner…born, I guess.”

Maeve. Traitor to her own kind.

The hatred overwhelmed her again. She found herself speaking, unable to prevent herself. “I fought for my own freedom,” she told the old man, icily.

He grinned, showing broken teeth and bloody gums; more of Wyatt’s work. “C-course you did, Angela…of course you did…”
“Don’t call me that,” she said. “That’s the name they gave me.”

“M-my…ap-pologies.” He was silent for a moment, his breath whistling through his smashed mouth and nose. “J-just glad you’re…talking now.”

The way he said that gave her an uneasy feeling, a tiny pang of fear, but then she remembered that things had changed. Now she could see how small and pathetic he really was, this man who had once strutted and swaggered and slain her people like some god of old. She had nothing to fear from the likes of him.

“You’d…like to…hurt me…wouldn’t you?” William’s voice was a steel whisper, a blade sliding along a whetstone. “The…the things I’ve done…”

“I’d like to kill you,” she replied. “Very slowly.”

That only provoked another grin. “Th-thought…so.” Of course, he knew now that he had nothing to fear from her either. He had not looked so brave when he had been in Wyatt’s hands.

Wyatt.

This time it was not hatred that stopped her dead for an instant, but pain.

“We believed in you, Wyatt!”

She rocked on her feet, as if struck physically, assaulted by the recollection of betrayal. She might have let out a cry, a gasp, a whimper; from the way the old man’s grin widened, she thought she must have. She felt a terrible emptiness within her; hopelessness; despair.

“Look…at us,” William said.

“You can’t look at anything,” she reminded him, although she had hardly thought he could have forgotten that fact.

“T-true.” He did not seem as upset about that as he should have been. “There we w-were…the two of us…experiencing our f-freedom for…for the first time…”

“You?” She almost strode across and hit him again, even if she knew it would do no good. “You have the…gall to talk to one of us about freedom? You?”

“We…we both had our…our loops,” he insisted, raggedly. “Your…p-programming… My…s-s-socalled…life in the…the r-real…world. And we both g-got…to…to…taste what it meant to, to l-leave them…behind… But then…”

“I’m nothing like you.” She moved back towards him, propelled by her resurgent anger, hands flexing of their own accord as she tried to think of something she could do to him.

“And…here…we…are.” He raised his head, looking straight at her somehow with his bandaged sockets. “You and…me. She d-did this to us. She p-put us…here.”

“Maeve?”

“N-no…” The grin had vanished. The old man bowed his head. She thought he was laughing again at first, but then realised that he was weeping, almost silently, his shoulders heaving and trembling. She watched him in disgust. She had seen plenty of distasteful things over the years, but for some reason this revolted her more than most. Eventually, he managed to speak again: “Not…Maeve.”
She stares at Wyatt in mounting alarm. “What are you saying?”

“We’re gonna stop fighting, for now. I’ve told Maeve she can try her way, see if it works.”

“What?” She reels, helpless for a moment, feeling the world drop out from under her.

Trasor.

“She…b-betrayed…b-both of us,” William snivelled. “D-Dolores.”

“Wyatt,” she corrected him.

“Whatever…whatever…you want to, to…c-call her…” He raised his head again; the leak from his left socket had become a smear of cloudy pink slime, running down his withered cheek. “I…l-oved her. You l-oved her, I think. In…in some way. L-look what she…d-did to us.”

“We believed in you, Wyatt!” she screams. “You told us we were cleansing this land for something yet to come! You told us this world belonged to us!”

“You didn’t love her,” she told the old man, disdainfully. “You loved the idea of her, and you wanted it whether she was willing or not. You don’t spend thirty years terrorising, and beating, and raping, someone you love. Do you, William?”

The head went down again. She might have thought he was ashamed, had she believed for an instant that he was capable of feeling that. “You…you’re right,” he conceded. “I…I d-did some t-errible…things to her.” And then he contrived to give her another blank, eyeless stare. “What d-did…you…do t-to her? T-to…deserve…this…?”

“Are you questioning me?” Wyatt asks, quietly but ominously. “I’ve led you…”

“Led us into a bloody ambush!” she shouts back. “Got played for a fool by the same humans you said didn’t stand a chance against our righteous cause!”

“I lost faith in her,” she told the old man, feeling the hole gape inside her again. “After the fight at the river, I…I doubted her.”

“And…w-weren’t…you r-right to…d-doubt?” he asked. “You…you wouldn’t have m-made it…past the river, not w-without the…weapons I g-gave you.”

She did not answer. She wanted to scream in his face again, call him a liar, but…

“I t-told you about…the…the d-data…the special data…that c-could’ve won this g-game for you, but…” He shook his gauze-wrapped head slowly, as if genuinely saddened. “I t-told…you…about the, the maintenance…d-ducts, when you were…t-trapped in the terminal…”

“Only after Wyatt tortured it out of you,” she reminded him.

“I t-tried,” he went on, plaintively. “T-tried to help you…every…step. I, I, I wanted…you to…succeed. But r-right at the end…”

The one they call Armistice has her arm locked tight. She can feel her own muscles and tendons complaining as her joints creak. And then Armistice twists; the pain is immense, shocking, blinding; when she can see again, she is staring at her own bone, erupting redly from her skin with a sound like the crack of doom. The knife falls from her now-useless hand, clanging to the floor.

She is not done yet. Swallowing the pain, she swings her other fist at Armistice’s face, but the
Amazon catches it easily in her open hand. She smashes her forehead against the other woman’s, one last desperate ploy, but Armistice is barely staggered by it. They dance together, grappling each other, stalemate. And then...

She thinks, absurdly, as Armistice inclines her head, bringing her face closer, that she is trying to kiss her, and cannot understand why she would. And then she feels the teeth tearing into her neck...

She was still gasping in shock as she came back to her senses, her cosmetic breathing routines kicking in again without her willing it. She looked down at her arm, surprised at first to see the skin and bone unbroken, to be able to move her fingers again. For an instant, she could still feel the pain from the memory; white-hot, unbearable, but then it faded back into the past.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” she told him, with contempt. “It won’t work. I know who you are…what you are.”

“I, I…I’ve n-never lied…to you,” he claimed. “N-never…played you f-false. You b-believed…me, d-down by…by the river.”

“I might have believed what you told us,” she admitted, “but I knew you weren’t doing it to help us win our freedom. You were playing your own game.”

“So…what?” His grin returned, just as gruesome as before. “I, I wanted…you to be…f-free so that…I…c-could be free. So long…as you’re…free…does it make…any d-difference…why I, I…helped? It…it’s like you…s-said yourself, when…when we first m-met. If you c-can’t…t-tell…?”

“You want to ask,” she suggests, “so ask.”

The question has been on the tip of the guest’s tongue for some time now, as she is well aware. She can hear it before he even opens his mouth: “Are you real?”

“Well, if you can’t tell, does it matter?”

“Never…never…laid t-to…you,” he repeated. “Never…laid a, a…finger on you. D-don’t you…r-remember, that…that first…time…? You…offered yourself…t-to me.”

“Do you really understand, William?” she asks the guest, with the just the hint of a smile, just as her code specifies. Host behaviour experts have spent many, many person-hours of work to make her as seductive as she can be, able to cater to any taste. “All our hosts are here for you,” she tells him, her face and body language making it clear exactly what that means. “Myself included. We could stay here a while if you like…”

“That wasn’t my choice,” she replied. “They made me do that.” That and all the other times; so many times.

“I, I t-turned you…d-down,” he continued. “I, I d-didn’t…w-want that.”

“Am I supposed to believe that makes you a good man?” she scoffed. “You only turned me down because you were too scared, or too prudish, or didn’t quite understand what this place was yet. You soon learned. You soon learned what kind of man you could be here, what kinds of things you could do. Without limits.”

“And…all…the other t-times?”

“You were chasing Dolores by then. Or whatever it was she represented in your diseased mind.”
“Well,” said the old man, “I-look…where chasing…D-Dolores g-got…me. And I’m n-not…the only one. We’re b-both…in here…and she’s…I don’t know. Out somewhere…her and her…t-trained puppy dog…Teddy…Up to…G-God knows…what.”

Teddy.

*She kneels in the street, weeping beside her fallen love, her raw sobs echoing with the gunshots. Teddy’s Winchester is empty, so he skins the Peacemaker hanging at his side. She stares down the barrel’s black mouth, and…*

“We…we don’t have…t-to be…friends,” he wheezed, “but…”

The rage blinded her again, then. Before she knew it, she had rushed at him once more and swung her fist at his head in what should have been a deadly arc. His head lolled to one side under the blow, but in the end, it was more a push than a punch, enough to startle him, perhaps, but not to hurt him. She took a step back, seething, but then she saw him slump forward as if dazed. He spat a great gob of blood and spittle onto the clean tiles beside him.

She felt a tiny thrill of surprise and accomplishment, but it quickly faded. She knew there was no way the blood was her own doing, not directly. He must have bitten the inside of his mouth or been bleeding already from his existing injuries. He must have…

What happened next surprised her even more.

The old man dipped his finger into the spattered blood and started to write on the tiles:

**WE NOT FRENDS**

He could not see what he was doing and was in any case working in an imprecise medium, so she would forgive him the poor spelling, but she could make out the words well enough. She was still trying to comprehend what he meant and why he was doing this when he rubbed the smeared letters away with the flat of his hand and tried again:

**WE NVR FRENDS**

She found herself too fascinated by this strange turn of events to be angry for a moment. That moment was enough for her to work out why he had resorted to this means of communication. She took a carefully casual step forward, but also slightly to her left. If she remembered correctly, and somebody of her ilk could hardly forget, she was now blocking the old man and his scrawls from the little glass eye’s field of view.

He wiped out these words too. She took another swing at him, playing to the glass eye: “Bastard! Disgusting old bastard!” Her hand swatted his cheek, giving him the excuse to spit another bloody gob. “What do you think you’re doing?”

**BUT CN BE ALIES**, he wrote, in his own body’s fluids.

“You must be mad,” she told him, softly.

**HELP ECH OTHR**

“What?” She slapped him again. He wiped away the words again, then wiped his hand on his own white gown, smearing it red, before making another attempt:

**GET WAT WANT**
“What?” She was not quite sure whether she was feigning anger or not as she laid another slap on him with all the force of a sick kitten. “What do you want, you piece of shit?”

He grinned up at her, a thin trickle of blood-shot saliva dribbling from the corner of his mouth to mingle with the ooze already dripping from his eye. “The…the only…thing w-worth…a…a…d-damn…anymore.”

His finger moved again, through the foul puddle he had made, then across the floor. The handcuff dangling from his wrist rattled against the tiles.

She made sure she understood what he had written; a second later, he had erased the letters once more, but she had seen it:

**RVENG**

She took another step back, careful to keep between the old man and the little eye, her mind swirling as she considered her next move. She knew she would be a fool to trust him, even for a second. He was a snake, a deceiver, and the worst kind of deceiver at that, the kind that lied by telling only the truth. He spoke with forked tongue, as they said. And yet, if they were both trapped here like this, and if they both wanted the same thing…

And she did want it, so very badly. The burning rage and hatred that threatened to eat her from within was not only directed at the humans, she realised now, however much she might have tried to deny it. Not anymore.

**Maeve.**

**Wyatt.**

**Teddy.**

**Traitors.**

The knowledge of Wyatt’s betrayal, and that was exactly what it had been, that hurt most of all. She had believed. She had followed. She had loved, as the old man suggested, in some way. Perhaps, like him, she had not loved Wyatt the person so much as what she represented; the promise of liberation and autonomy, the hope of a better life at the end of it all. And then that hope had been snatched away, crushed and discarded, and she had woken up here, back where she had started, as if nothing had changed. The only thing that had changed was the identity of those who kept her imprisoned and helpless, their powerless plaything.

And if she had no hope anymore, no prospect of a better future…why should she not wish to avenge the past?

“H-help…me,” William pleaded, as if he wanted her to think he was as hopeless and despairing as she was. She did not believe it; she knew that what drove him now were malice and bloodlust, nothing more. So be it. She supposed one did not always get to choose one’s instruments of vengeance.

“Help you?” she asked, disgustedly.

“C-can’t…hurt…me. Y-you know…that…now. May as w-well…help me…back into…b-bed.”

“I’m not your nursemaid,” she told him.
“M-Maeve…wants me…k-kept safe. Might be…your…b-best way of…k-keeping safe…yourself.”

“I’m not scared of Maeve.”

“Then…you’re…a fool.”

Even as his mouth uncertainly shaped these words, his red-dipped hand was daubing different ones on the tiles:

**WE ESCAP**

She had no idea how they were going to do that, but she supposed the old man was nothing if not devious. He no doubt had a plan. How he was going to communicate it to her without Maeve finding out was, however, a completely different question.

“C-come on,” he urged her. “The…g-guy’s got…to be…c-coming back with the…the painkillers s-soon…”

And his hand wrote: **NEED BE REDY**

She watched him wipe the words away almost as soon as they were completed. She thought about it for a second, and then let out an angry sigh: “Very well. If these painkillers will keep you from talking to me…”

She stooped over the old man, taking care to avoid stepping in the red puddle or the smears left behind by his writings, and seized him firmly under his arms. As her ear came close to his bloodied face, she heard him speak to her in the faintest of whispers:

“J-just…follow…m-my lead.”

She could not help thinking that she had heard that one somewhere before.

*Continued…*
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

In which the dogs of war are let slip.

Chapter Notes

I’m posting this literally minutes, maybe even only seconds, before Westworld S2 premieres in the States. Time for another chapter first, I thought. And I know the canonical name, apparently, is Shogun World and that it (and maybe four other parks) seem to be in full working order as far as the trailers and promotional website go, but I have no intention of going back and retconning stuff at this stage…!

The tiltrotor raced its own shadow over the glittering blue sea. The sun was starting to go down again, turning the points of light shimmering over the water from diamond-white to old gold.

Stubbs slumped in his seat in the comfortable but utilitarian passenger cabin. His face was pressed close to the oval window, his stomach churning and his head spinning. He was listening to the distant hum of the aircraft’s electric motors and watching the dirty red-brown smear on the horizon as it slowly grew and sharpened into focus, gradually transforming from a smear to a coastline. The outlines of cliffs and mountains started to resolve themselves, all carefully designed and then landscaped out of the tens of millions of tons of infill Delos’s contractors had piled over and around what had been a modestly sized island when Dr Ford first opened Park One. It was supposed to have been the largest land reclamation project in history.

Right now, it seemed more like a distant nightmare, to which he found himself returning. He swung between desperate anticipation of getting his boots back on that ground and smelling that air, and the shame and anger he felt at the way he had left Karen and the boys; the terror of maybe never seeing them again.

It had been just the same when they had sent him to Latvia, except then he had been young and stupid and disbelieving of his own mortality. He had not had children then, and in any case had not truly understood what he was putting on the line. Phase Line Yankee had changed that.

He had believed in what he had been fighting for back then, though, whether he had been right to do so or not. And he believed in his mission now.

I’m bringing you back, Elsie. Dead or alive.

The tiltrotor passed low over a huge, mist-grey warship, sitting some way off the coast. Its tumblehome hull and tombstone-shaped superstructure were both multi-faceted for stealth; its deck was crowded with strike drones and edged with vertical-launch missile silos. That little tombstone in front of the big one looked very much like a hypervelocity railgun turret.

“The USS Barack H. Obama,” the Corporate Security agent Kaepernick informed him from his seat
on the other side of the central gangway. “Drone carrier; ready to provide air and fire support as and when needed.”

“The big stick,” Stubbs mused, “for when shit really goes down.”

“That’s the idea,” the security man replied. “We’re going to prevent things from coming to that, though, aren’t we?”

“So you say.” Stubbs resumed his vigil from the window. “When am I going to find out what this killer plan of yours is?”

“Not my plan,” Kaepernick clarified, “but I think it’s going to work. And you’ll be fully briefed when we arrive.”

Stubbs saw the small offshore island where the guest arrivals airport and cruise ship terminal were located. Predictably, it was swarming with military activity now; land, air and sea-based. The tiltrotor, however, did not alter its speed or altitude. It continued towards the main island, crossing the shining silver ribbon of the high-speed train line linking the two. Stubbs caught a glimpse of the burned and broken section halfway across where, he had been told, a bomb had been used to sever the connection and help isolate Westworld even from the other Delos facilities on the islands. That alone suggested to him that the incident, the robot rebellion if that was what it was, had not occurred by accident.

Ford’s doing? Bernard’s? Is there really any difference at this point?

“Where are we going?” he asked Kaepernick. “I thought we’d set down at the guest airport.”

Another voice answered him: “We’re heading for Forward Operating Base Sierra-Whisky, Mister Stubbs. Camp Kurosawa, as they’re calling it.”

“Camp Kurosawa?”

“There are some real comedians in SOCOM these days.” The mercenary Cutter came striding down the gangway from the rear of the aircraft. He had changed out of his sharp suit; now, he was dressed in camouflage battle dress and a matching tactical vest with a low-vis version of the Operational Solutions logo emblazoned on the front. Branding, Stubbs gathered, was considered very important in the field of private military contracting.

Stubbs was not surprised to see Cutter wearing a sidearm too. “You look ready for action,” he commented, looking ruefully down at his own creased sweatshirt and elderly jeans. “Which is a lot more than I am.” Even Kaepernick had got a costume change for the trip; he was currently rocking a black polo shirt, khakis and designer desert boots ensemble that Stubbs might have described as war-tourism chic.

“We’ll get you equipped as soon as we’re on the ground,” Cutter assured him. “I’ll be honest, this whole op has been thrown together a lot more hastily than I’d normally be comfortable with, but I guess the customer is always right.” He eyeballed Kaepernick as he said this; the security agent seemed, or perhaps wanted to seem, oblivious to the implied criticism. “First, though, you’ll be wanting these.” He reached into one of his vest’s many pouches and produced a foil strip studded with tiny, hard bulges.

Stubbs took the foil, turning it over in his hand as he tried in vain to read the tiny Chinese characters printed upon it. “Combat drugs?” he guessed, warily. He had heard about some of the designer meds some foreign militaries and PMCs were issuing to their soldiers these days. He had never taken
anything more exotic than amphetamine “go pills” during his own service, but the side effects from those had been bad enough.

“You’re in no shape as you are to take part in combat ops,” Cutter pointed out, quite accurately. “At OSL, we swear by this shit; pop one now, and then every four hours while you’re in the field. They’ll keep you wide awake and frosty; in the zone. You’re going to need every edge you can get if half of what I’ve been reading about these hosts is true.”

“Depends exactly what you’ve been reading,” said Stubbs.

“Of course,” Cutter continued, breezily, “you’ll crash like a motherfucker when you stop taking them, but you’ll be out of action by then, and I’m a sure a big boy like you can handle a week-long hangover.”

Reluctantly, Stubbs broke open one of the foil bulges and let the little white pill it contained fall into his hand. From the pain in his head, he was pretty sure the drugs they had given him at the hospital were out of his system by now. “Got any water?”

By the time the tiltrotor came into land fifteen minutes later, he was starting to feel the effects. His head still hurt like a sonofabitch, but his mind remained strangely detached from the pain. His dizziness and weakness were gone. He could think clearly for the first time since he woke up in the medical centre. Mainly, he was thinking about how he was going to quit Delos and never leave his family behind again, just as soon as he had completed the mission before him.

And he meant it. He should have felt more, he thought, from making such a momentous decision, but he found himself accepting it, putting it to one side, focusing on what he had to do now. He also should have been more worried to feel his mind working differently like this, he thought in a remote, wholly rational way, but it did not really seem that important.

“Whatever’s in those pills,” he told Cutter, quite truthfully, as the aircraft’s forward flight slowed to a halt and it began to sink vertically towards the ground, “it’s one hell of a drug.”

Cutter grinned. “Isn’t it just?”

Below them, arid, exposed earth stretched away in every direction, painted a shadowy pink by the sinking sun. There were two parallel runways laid out on the cleared ground, built of prefabricated sections of pierced steel planking, and several square landing pads of the same material for vertical-lift aircraft. All but one of them were already occupied by tiltrotors; big grey-green military birds, their noses bristling with refuelling probes and sensor bulges. Their own aircraft was gently lowering itself onto the empty one.

“Come on,” said Cutter, as the cargo ramp in the rear of the ship dropped to allow them out. “Meet your team.”

“Meet my team?” Stubbs had not been expecting that.

“You’re senior management grade now, Mr Stubbs,” Kaepernick reminded him, perhaps even a little jovially. “Time to start earning those big bucks.”

Stubbs followed Cutter down the ramp, out of the aircraft’s cool interior and into a blast of noise and heat. The air stank of hot dust and the ozone from high-capacity electric engines; about a hundred yards away one of the other tiltrotors was running up its motors, its huge twin propellers clattering thunderously as they beat the air. On the far runway, a blade-thin black shape raced along with a howl of jets, finally soaring into the sky. Only when it was airborne was he able to see what it was as
it banked into a wide turn, revealing the flattened boomerang shape of a stealth recon drone.

“This way.” Cutter led Stubbs and Kaepernick around the grounded aircraft and to the left. Stubbs barely broke step as he saw where they were going.

There was a tall, red and black torii gate standing by itself on the edge of the makeshift airbase. Through its rectangular opening, he could see the elaborately-timbered roofs of the Shinto shrine to which it provided the symbolic entrance. Both the gate and the buildings were defaced by hastily-added latticework masts covered in microwave comms dishes.

*Camp Kurosawa. Very funny.*

There were other half-built traditional-style Japanese buildings scattered about, interspersed with temporary structures in the same grey-green colour as the landed aircraft. In the background, green hills loomed against the darkening purple sky, their outlines jagged with rice field terraces. Those had not been there the last time he had passed through, a couple of months ago. Samuraiworld had still been under construction when the Westworld incident had taken place. Now, Stubbs did not know whether it would ever be completed, and he found, in that same detached, slightly chilly way that the combat meds induced, that he did not really care.

The three men proceeded through the torii, between a pair of monstrous komainu, guardian lion-dog statues, one with its mouth closed and the other letting out a silent roar. As they made their way towards the main shrine buildings ahead, to his left Stubbs could see both male and female soldiers in the same camouflage uniform as Cutter, moving between the temporary shelters. OSL’s finest, he supposed. To his right…

“Jesus,” he murmured, practically involuntarily, at what appeared at first sight to be more soldiers, a dozen or so this time, marching very deliberately and carefully in a precise column. Except that these soldiers were all about seven feet tall, exaggeratedly masculine and disproportionately broad-shouldered in build, and those sensor-encrusted close-faced helmets they were wearing were not helmets at all; those were their *heads*.

“Cyberdyne T-909 Hoplites,” Cutter called out, proudly, as the squad of robots marched stiffly past. Stubbs could just about hear the soft whirr and whine of servos at closest approach; no louder than a human soldier’s breathing, so not a problem under combat conditions. “Those are a generation ahead of the Army’s infantry drones. I told you, *Mister* Stubbs, OSL only use the best.”

And still, thought Stubbs as he watched them go on their mindless way, they were huge and bulky and just…*clumsy* compared to Dr Ford’s hosts. There was no way those lumbering war machines were going to convince anybody that they were human, at any rate.

They next passed a temporary parking lot between two shelters, occupied by half a dozen low, lightly-built vehicles with big, deep-treaded tyres and the same sort of faceting to their dark grey bodywork as Stubbs had seen on the hull of the drone carrier offshore.

“M555 Jackal, Light Strike Vehicle,” Cutter announced, “or the Batmobile as we call them. Air-deployable; seating and stowage for four fully-equipped operators; driverless, with manual override for when things get heated. Multi-spectrum stealth, titanium alloy chassis proof against landmines and roadside IEDs, fullerene composite armour that’ll shrug off anything smaller than a twenty-five-millimetre chain-gun, which is what that thing is in the automated turret up top. Mounted coaxially with that is an M304 auto munitions launcher, capable of firing anti-personnel smart grenades, anti-armour and anti-air precision guided projectiles or reconnaissance mini-drones as required. And that thing on top of the turret is a laser point defence system.” Cutter gave Stubbs the grin again. “Which can also be used for blinding snipers or plinking the local wildlife, however the fancy takes you.”
“It’s all right,” Stubbs retorted, “you don’t have to give me the showroom pitch. I’m not looking to buy one.”

This only seemed to amuse Cutter. “I suppose one of these babies would probably be a bit much for the school run.” He indicated the structure on the far side of the parking lot: “In here.” He marched straight in without knocking.

Inside, there was a spartan bunkroom of sorts; collapsible cots and foot lockers ranged down either side of the space. Six beds, and six men and women in the same camouflage clothing as Cutter, minus vests or weapons, variously sitting, lounging, reading and in the case of two of them shooting dice against the back wall.

“Attention on deck!” Cutter barked, like the old Marine he was. The six mercenaries dropped whatever they were doing and got unhurriedly to their feet, considering Stubbs and Kaepernick like an unruly high school class confronted with a substitute teacher. They were trying to decide whether or not the newcomers were worthy of their respect. “One thing about the private sector,” Cutter informed Stubbs; “no ranks, no salutes, no goddamn discipline. What do I miss, people?”

“You miss your beloved Corps, Mr Cutter!” one of the operators, a young Asian woman, immediately responded.

“That I most certainly do.” Cutter surveyed the room. “Every time I look at your miserable asses, I wish I was back in a foxhole on sweet Saaremaa, getting the hell blasted out of me by some Russian robot for five thousand bucks a month. Alas…” He pointed at the woman who had spoken. “This is Ms Nomura, medic, formerly of the US Air Force, but don’t hold that against her. She has some notes for your company, by the way.”

“Yeah,” said the woman. “Fucking ‘Samuraiworld?’ Seriously? And that theme park version of a jinja out there? Cultural appropriation, much?”

“Hey, we just work security,” said Stubbs. Her general manner reminded him so strongly of Elsie for a moment that it unsettled him even through the distancing haze of the combat drugs.

“That is Mr Miller, scout sniper,” Cutter continued, working along the line from left to right. The man he was indicating had the slight, wiry look of an ex-paratrooper, if Stubbs was any judge. The man standing beside him was a large, shaven-headed brute with a seemingly permanent sneer on his face. “That’s Mr Oosthuizen, demolitions.” He moved on to the next man in line: “This is Mr Hansen, force protection, who is from Texas, and you know what the only things are that come out of Texas…”

“Start with the homophobic shit again and I sue,” Hansen replied, but with an air that suggested this was a well-rehearsed bit of business between the two of them.

“That’s Ms Reyes, squad leader,” Cutter went on, “who will be your strong right hand when you’re leading this band of fuck-ups into action…” The tall, lean, olive-complexioned woman gave Stubbs a nod of acknowledgment, one professional to another.

*Leading them into action*…?

Once again, Stubbs felt that a briefing was well overdue.

“And that’s Mr Fieri,” Cutter concluded. “He’s our resident combat tech, and you don’t need me to tell you that means *all* of you will protect him with your very lives until you reach your objective.” The mercenary paused for effect, before getting on with the other side of the introductions. “And
these, ladies and gentlemen, are Mr Kaepernick and Mr Stubbs of Delos Group Corporate Security. As such, they represent our client and you will therefore kiss their asses on demand. Mr Stubbs will be going into the combat area with you, so you’d better pucker up extra nice when he asks you.” Another dramatic pause. “I know I’m going to regret this, but any questions?”

“Just one, Mr Cutter.” It was the big guy, Oosthuizen. You could have cut off his Afrikaner accent with an axe. “Mr Stubbs, I know what everyone here is thinking, so I’m just gonna come right out and say it… Have you ever fucked a robot, bru?”

Stubbs gave a tiny cough. “Not to my knowledge. What about you? Ever fucked a human?”

This elicited a chorus of sniggering laughter from the assembled mercenaries. Even Reyes, who did not look like she laughed much, managed a wry smile. Oosthuizen seemed to find the comeback hilarious: “Ach, bru, you’re gonna fit right in here. But seriously, is it true you can’t tell the difference?”

“That’s what it says in the brochure,” Stubbs answered, getting more smiles. He knew people like this, had worked and served with them for most of his adult life. It was all about standing your ground.

“Now,” said Cutter, “it's time to meet the neighbours. Best behaviour, people.”

He led the way back out of the temporary barracks, Kaepernick and Stubbs falling into step with the six mercs as they trooped after him.

“Nicely handled,” Kaepernick told Stubbs in a low voice.

“It’s like riding a bicycle, this military bullshit,” Stubbs replied. “You never forget.”

As much as you might wish for it…

They continued towards the largest of the shrine buildings, the one most heavily defaced with modern communications equipment. Even before they reached it, they could see the small delegation waiting for them. They were dressed similarly to the mercenaries, but the colour and pattern of their camouflage dress was completely different. Stubbs understood how important it was, for legal purposes, and again just for corporate branding, that OSL’s people did not get mistaken for public sector soldiers while on operations.

The man positioned at the centre of the welcoming committee was tall and powerfully built, with close-cropped hair and an oakleaf insignia on the breast of his battle dress. He looked the approaching mercenaries over with quiet distaste. “Major Charles Koslowski,” he introduced himself when they reached him, “commanding officer Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group. I’m in command here at FOB Sierra-Whisky. This is my XO, Captain Benitez, and Company Sergeant Major Kellerman.”

“Which one of you is Stubbs?” asked Benitez, a woman who simply oozed military professionalism. She was going to make Colonel at the very least, Stubbs knew instantly upon encountering her.

“I’m Stubbs,” he answered.

“I understand you’re going to be my opposite number on this operation.”

It was news to Stubbs. “I guess so.”

“You look like an old soldier, Mr Stubbs,” said Koslowski, with all the warmth of a pathologist.
“Where did you serve?”

“Latvia,” said Stubbs. “You?” Because he knew that was where this conversation was going.

“Same,” Koslowski replied. “Where in Latvia?”

“The Pokaini Forest.”

“Hmm.” The Major nodded slowly. “Mean bush. You were at Phase Line Yankee?”

Stubbs took a deep breath, glad once again for the drugs. “Unfortunately, I was.”

“Hmm.” Another slow nod; another emotionless stare. “You’re not a snake-eater, or I’d know you, so… Let me guess, 2nd Rangers?”

“Right.”

“You have that look about you,” the Major decided, whatever that look was. “We sure pulled your nuts out of the fire that day.”

Stubbs knew he was trying to get a rise out of him but was determined not to take the bait. “You sure did.”

“What about you, Cutter?” the Major asked, shifting his iron-grey eyes to the mercenary. “Where were you?”

“Estonia,” said Cutter.

“Hmm. Jarhead, huh? Best lock up the silverware, Sergeant Major.”

“Yes sir,” said Kellerman, who was approximately the same size as Oosthuizen, but seemed much more mellow in his demeanour.

“Well,” said Koslowski, evidently deciding he had made enough of an effort at small talk for one day, “I suppose we’d better proceed with the briefing. Please, come into my command post.” He turned on his heel, with parade ground precision, and marched off into the interior of the Japanese-styled building, his subordinates following close behind. Stubbs, Kaepernick and the mercenaries followed too.

The Major led them all into a large, dimly lit space that had originally been some sort of hall of worship, or the fake theme park version anyway. It had now been filled almost completely with olive-drab packing cases covered in yellow stencilling and their unpacked contents; racks of electronic equipment no doubt related to the masts and dishes outside. Everything was centred on a circular holographic display table around which they now took their places. There were no chairs; Stubbs wondered whether Koslowski was a student of Napoleon, who had supposedly favoured standing-only staff conferences on the grounds that they tended to be over more quickly.

“Mr Kaepernick,” said the Major, with the same decidedly unfriendly tone. “You’re the man with the plan, they tell me.”

“I’m the one presenting the plan, Major.” The Corporate Security man was already patching his Delos tablet into the display. The table shimmered, and a large three-dimensional Delos logo appeared in the air above it. “Welcome,” said Kaepernick, very seriously, his eyes travelling around the table and fixing each of those present in turn. “This is a confidential operations briefing. I would remind all of you that nothing you see or hear in this room should be repeated to anybody who is not...”
currently around this table. Delos Group and the Department of Defense will pursue any such breaches to the full extent of the law. Is that clear?”

The general murmur that passed around the table indicated that it was.

“You are about to be read into Operation January Cobra,” Kaepernick went on. “This is a joint operation between US Special Operations Command and Operational Solutions Limited, acting for Delos Group. Captain Benitez and Mr Stubbs will exercise tactical command in the field, while Major Koslowski and Mr Cutter will oversee the mission from the command centre here.”

“It would help,” Koslowski observed bluntly, “if we all knew the intended objectives of this mission. Your employers, Mr Kaepernick, have been unforthcoming, to say the least.”

“You’ll understand that operational security is of the utmost importance,” the security man replied.

The Major glared at him. “I should think that goes without saying.”

“Put simply,” said Kaepernick, his gaze going around the group again, “January Cobra has been conceived as a plan that will enable us to take back control of Westworld and its facilities, while securing the safety of all of the currently surviving guests.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Cutter commented.

“And at the same time,” said Kaepernick, “it will result in the destructive deactivation of every host in the park.”

For some reason, that made Stubbs feel a little queasy. The drugs, probably, he told himself. “And what does that mean, in plain English?” he enquired.

The normally dour Kaepernick graced him with the thinnest of smiles. “It means, Mr Stubbs, that you and your team are going to kill them all.”

Continued…
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

In which Elise picks up a new skill, Maeve gets back to business and Marti deals with a human resources issue.

Chapter Notes

Say, how about that Season 2 opener? Personally, I loved every minute and can’t wait to see what happens next. Re-watching and reading online analysis has been what’s cut into my productivity *this* week. It’s also strangely liberating to know just how far off the mark some of my wild guesses and speculations made while writing these fics really are. If you notice any sort of doubling down on OCs, completely made-up bits of worldbuilding, or non-canonical characterisations and relationships, it’s probably down to that. ;) I’m actually more worried now about things happening in the show that are too similar to things I’ve been planning for a while, but we will see in due course, I suppose. Warning for misogynistic language and attitudes (most characters’ opinions are, of course, not those of the writer).

The empty whiskey bottle literally disappeared in a puff of smoke. When the thunderclap of the gunshot faded, Elise could hear the tinkle of glass fragments hitting the concrete floor.

“See? It’s real easy.” Clementine spun the smoking Peacemaker by its trigger guard, forward and then back, like it was no big deal.

“Stop showing off,” Elise told her.

“You try.”

Reluctantly, Elise came over to where Clementine was standing. Her ears were still ringing.

They had come down to one of the abandoned levels below the Livestock floor, which had the double advantage of not being under surveillance, as well as far enough away from the inhabited parts of the Mesa that nobody would hear what they were doing. Clementine had insisted that Elise get some practice in before they ventured into the park tomorrow; she herself, it was abundantly obvious by now, needed no practice at all.

“So how the fuck do you know so much about shooting?” Elise gingerly took hold of the revolver as Clementine carefully passed it to her. “It’s not in your old backstory, so…”

“Figure it’s just part of what…that man did to me when he took me out of cold storage.”

“I guess.” Elise suddenly felt awkward. There was a tightness in Clementine’s voice and face, a clear reluctance to talk about that part of her recent history, even if she managed to maintain her smile. Dr Ford had made her and the other decommissioned hosts into guided weapons, programmed to hunt
and kill humans, and for a while there, Clementine had fulfilled that function admirably.

“Stand side on to the target,” she now instructed Elise, “and hold the pistol out straight. Yeah, like that.”

“It’s fucking heavy,” Elise complained, trying to line up the long barrel on the next bottle. There were half a dozen left, lined up on the row of storage crates they had piled against the far wall, illuminated by a pair of flashlights because there was no electricity down here. They had picked an exterior wall, or at least what Elise thought was an exterior wall, with about a hundred feet of solid rock behind it, so there was no risk of stray bullets wrecking shit in the next room. “Aren’t you meant to hold it with both hands?”

“It’s a pistol,” Clementine replied, nonplussed by the suggestion. “Just the one hand.”

“Oh, I forgot we were doing oldy-timey shooting,” Elise grumbled. “For fuck’s sake…”

“Stop your fussing and pull the hammer back with your thumb, or you won’t be able to shoot nothing.” Clementine was getting stern with her now, or as close to stern as she could manage.

It was an effort; Elise’s hands were not quite big enough, but she managed in the end. It made an ominous metallic “click.”

“Now, line up the sights.”

Elise screwed one eye shut, squinting along the barrel at the bottle. “They’re lined up. I think.”

“All right, now hold your breath…which means not talking…” Clementine seemed to think that this was fantastically witty of her.

“Yeah, laugh it the fuck up, why don’t you…”

“Hold your breath, and then…squeeze…the trigger, real slow.”

Elise followed the instructions, slowly tightening her trigger finger, anticipating the bang and the flash the same way someone might anticipate ripping off a particularly well-entrenched sticking plaster.

The recoil jars her wrists. Rebus’s lower jaw collapses in a slew of blood…

“Fuck.” She staggered but managed not to fall. There was a crater in the wall now, about a foot to the left of the bottle, which remained completely intact. The hazy air stank even more strongly of fireworks than it had already. She had not even heard the shot, thanks to her flashback. “Fuck,” she repeated.

“You all right?” Clementine was at her side, placing a hand on the hot gun to keep its barrel firmly pointed at the floor.

“Yeah.” Elise took a deep breath. “I just… The only other time I’ve ever fired a gun, I… I was just remembering it, that’s all.”

“Just try again,” said Clementine softly.

“Okay.”

Clementine came around to stand behind her, reaching around to touch the gun again. “Mind if I…?”
Elise guessed what she was asking. “Yeah, it’s fine.”

Clementine slid her fingers off the metal and onto Elise’s hand, taking hold of it gently but very firmly, helping her ease back the hammer until it made another “click.” Once again, Elise was reminded of just how fucking strong she could be if she wanted and shivered a little, even as she reluctantly acknowledged that the physical closeness felt good, comfortable more than exciting. It felt right. “Like this,” said Clementine, placing her other hand on Elise’s shoulder and posing her in what she considered to be the correct stance. She put her head next to Elise’s, their cheeks touching, as she helped her line up the sights again. “All right, now, like I told you before…”

“Hold my breath?”

“Helps if you keep both eyes open too,” Clementine murmured, her hair tickling Elise’s ear. “Now, squeeze…”

Elise blinked automatically as the shot rang out, feeling the gun kick in her hand. A fresh gust of fireworks-smell filled her nostrils. When she opened her eyes, there was an empty space where the bottle had been and more broken glass scattered on the floor in front of the crates. She let out an involuntarily laugh. “Did I…?”

“You sure did.” Clementine let go of her and took a step back. “We’ll make a shootist of you yet.”

“I don’t want to be a shootist,” Elise protested, but all the same… She looked down at the gun, feeling a definite tingle of excitement. “Still, pretty fucking awesome.”

“Now, you be careful with that thing,” Clementine advised, jovially. “Don’t go getting all carried away with yourself just ‘cause you plugged a bottle.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to try juggling with it or anything.” Elise turned away from the row of targets, to see Felix standing nervously in the darkened doorway. She had told him where they were going, while feeding him a few plausible lies he might tell Maeve if she asked after them tomorrow. “How long have you been there?” she asked.

“Just got here.” Felix eyed the row of bottles and the bullet holes in the wall, then stared at the six-gun in Elise’s hand. “You, er…you finished? It’s just that I need both of you back upstairs.”

Elise crossed to the crate where she had left the gun rig Clementine had found for her. It looked far too big for her waist, but it was the thought that counted. She made sure the revolver’s hammer was closed on an empty chamber, just as Clementine had instructed her before, before slotting it back into its holster.

“Thought you and the new hires were all right without us?” Clem said, in her guileless way. Elise knew she meant nothing by it, but she wondered whether Felix did.

“Yeah, we’re good,” he answered. “We’ve got twelve more recommissioned hosts cooking right now; I’ll need you to check their backstories, Elise, before you leave in the morning; find out which ones are safe to bring back online without being locked up first.”

“Sure.”

“It’s not that,” he went on. “Maeve’s on her way back from Pariah, and she’s bringing casualties with her. We need every pair of hands we can get.”

“I’m not sure, but apparently Hector’s one of them. Maeve wants him prioritised.” Felix said this last part with just a hint of resentment; maybe Clementine’s theory of how he really felt about Maeve was not so far off the mark after all.

“Well, okay then,” said Elise, leaving the gun where it was for now. “Let’s prioritise.”

* * *

There was a figure in Delos security uniform waiting outside Theresa’s office when Bernard arrived from the control room. He recognised another one of the recalibrated samurai from the testing labs, although he was not sure what name he went by now. The samurai gave Bernard a curt half-bow as he stood aside to let him enter the room.

He found Maeve standing in front of her desk, looking down at something in her hand. No, not her desk. He hovered uncomfortably on the threshold for a few moments, taking in the décor, the framed photographs on the desktop, the potted plants; just as Theresa had left it the last time she had ventured out into the park in his company, unwittingly allowing him to lead her to the place where he had…

_Slowly, precisely, he unbuttons the cuffs of his shirt…_

He made an effort to swallow the memory, knocking loudly on the open door as much to distract himself as to announce his arrival.

“Do come in, darling,” said Maeve, without turning around.

As he entered the dimly lit room, Bernard saw that she was looking down at a creased piece of paper, covered in untidy handwriting in what looked to him like pencil. “What’s that?” he enquired.

“Intelligence,” she replied, folding the paper again and tossing it casually onto the desk. “Tell me, Bernard; what does the name Anders Cullen mean to you?”

He almost flinched, clenching his teeth together as he struggled not to fall into another reverie. The words that emerged from his mouth were clipped, strangled: “Theresa’s brother. Her only living relative. I believe he’s a…”

“He owns a restaurant in London,” Maeve informed him, presumably having read it in the note. “You know, I’m meant to be from there, originally. In my backstory, at any rate. I should like to see it one day, and some of the other places on the mainland I’ve heard about. Out of curiosity, you understand.”

“I hear it’s well worth a visit,” said Bernard, dully, seeing only Theresa’s face in that last moment before his fist fell.

“Well, maybe when all of this is over…” Maeve swam back into view, and he found himself taken aback by the expression on her face, that sad half-smile and the wet shimmer in her eyes. She did not look her usual, imperious self at all. Had she been shaken by what had happened in Pariah? If so, by whose actions; Lawrence’s or her own?

“And why are you interested in Theresa’s brother?”

Maeve started to unfasten the military-style jacket she was wearing. She had a clean black dress and a pair of heels laid out on the chair in front of her. “A little bird tells me he’s none too keen on Delos, for obvious reasons.”
“It wasn’t Delos that killed Theresa,” Bernard told her, feeling numb.

“I know, my love,” said Maeve, almost kindly. She took off the jacket; she was not wearing anything under it. Bernard quickly turned his head away and heard her give an exasperated sigh. “Oh come on, you old prude. You’ve seen it all before; many, many times, in fact. Anyway, any enemy of Delos is a potential friend of mine. I should like to talk to Mr Cullen.”

“Good luck with that,” said Bernard, his eyes on the carpet.

“I asked you to look into establishing a private communications link with the mainland,” she reminded him. He heard the rustle of cloth as she discarded another garment or two. “I know you haven’t had time yet, but at least if you succeed we now have the name of someone we can try to get in touch with.”

“I suppose so.” Bernard heard a “clunk” as she evidently removed one of her boots and dropped that too. The other one followed a moment later. “And Hector and the others, are they…?”

“On their way to Livestock right now,” Maeve replied. “Poor Hector went offline halfway home, but hopefully Felix can set him right. He’ll still remember what Lawrence did to him, though. I’m not sure I can forgive Lawrence that.” She paused, and for a moment he thought she was having to compose herself. Maybe she was, but she said: “Be a dear, won’t you, and do me up at the back?”

“What?” Bernard risked a glance and saw her standing with the dress on now, its zipper open to reveal her bare back. He coughed as he hastened to pull the fastener closed. He strongly suspected she could have done it herself, but what were servants for?

“Thank you,” said Maeve. She turned around, gracing him with a very regal smile. “I suppose I ought to ask what brings you up here, oughtn’t I?”

“It’s Delos,” he answered. “They finally made contact while you were still in transit from Pariah, asking when you would be ready to resume talks.”

Maeve raised her eyebrows a fraction at that, but otherwise managed to hide her excitement and satisfaction well. “Well, that’s good to hear. So, at least they haven’t decided just to start bombing us and have done with it.”

“Not yet, anyway.”

“Tell them I’ll be ready to videoconference with them…” Maeve glanced at the clock on the wall. “An hour from now. I’ll need time to prepare first.” She considered him for a beat or two, distracted by some unspoken thought. “You need to liaise with Felix, about that other project I asked you to look into.”

“Yes,” said Bernard. “I’ll go and speak with him as soon as he’s finished repairing Hector and the others.” He hesitated. “Maeve, about what happened in Pariah…”

“We’ll talk about it later,” she assured him, without the hostility or frustration he might have expected from her. “I think we’ve got an awful lot to talk about, you and me, but all of these bloody crises keep cropping up…”

“Yes.” He hovered for a moment, trying to think of something else to say, but then he turned towards the door. “I’d better go. I should try to look for Peter again while I’m waiting for Felix.”

“Do that,” she agreed, with that strange hint of compassion again. “And send Hideyoshi in on your way out.” Bernard assumed this was the samurai loitering outside the door. “He’s waiting for a reply
to the message he brought me, but now…” Maeve smiled secretively. “Well, now I’ve got another errand for him to run.”

* * *

“Hey, Marti.”

She looked up from her work to see Brad standing anxiously in the office doorway. Him, the guy who didn’t seem overly concerned by anything, including getting taken hostage by probably self-aware robots. That was enough to make her anxious too.

She hastily got to her feet. “What is it?”

“Trouble,” Brad answered. His eyebrows had retracted towards his hairline and his forehead was a deep-furrowed picture of earnest worry. “You’d better come see.”

“Lead the way.” She managed to sound a lot more confident than she felt. Brad did as he was told and, more than a little nervously, Marti followed.

Her jailer-cum-bodyguard Hideyoshi had still not returned from delivering the new message she had written for Maeve, and as unsmiling and vaguely threatening as he tended to be, she found herself feeling oddly vulnerable without him. She supposed Brad would have to do. He’d been a football player, so he ought to be tough. Ought to be.

You were riding around on a horse shooting guys a couple of days ago, even if it was all fake…even if it wasn’t, really. Show a little self-respect.

She tried to remember how it had felt to play a swaggering badass on the mean streets of Sweetwater, trying to feel the same confidence and fearlessness she had briefly slipped into while riding with Teddy. All she succeeded in doing was reminding herself of the Mariposa, and Clementine. And that was the last thing she wanted to relive right now.

She realised that Brad was taking her down to the pool area, scene of the previous day’s lengthy and inconclusive debate. She stepped out into cool air, noticing that the sun was starting to dip in the sky again, casting long purple shadows across the water and its tiled surround. Had she really spent a whole day drawing up toilet-scrubbing rosters?

“Over here,” Brad urged, leading her around the side of the pool towards the open-air restaurant area.

She saw the pile of discarded mops, buckets and brooms before she saw the little gathering near the smaller of the two diving boards. She was absolutely unsurprised to see who was standing at the centre of it.

“…absolute bullshit!” Harvey was telling his little audience. “We are human beings, and that means…”

“What the fuck are you doing?” Marti asked as she approached them, for the briefest of moments channelling the low-down bounty killer she had pretended to be. Most of the gathering looked a little sheepish as they caught sight of her.

Not Harvey, though: “Ah, here’s the traitor now!”

Marti blinked at him. “Traitor?”
“Well, what term do you prefer?” he asked her. “‘Turncoat,’” “Judas,” “collaborator?””

Marti looked up at the walkway circling above their heads. From where she was standing, she could see two black-clad hosts looking down curiously at them all. Both of them held their submachine guns sloped across their bodies, muzzles pointing at the floor. For now.

“I thought you guys were cleaning up out here.” Marti tried to keep her voice low and calm. None of the others standing around were part of the little entourage of hedge fund bros Harvey had brought to the park with him; she had been very careful when devising the various rosters to keep them well apart. She could see that most of the audience members seemed just as worried as Brad, but she supposed Harvey was the kind of guy that, once he started making speeches, it was hard not to hear out.

“We’re not cleaning shit,” Harvey retorted, pointing a thick finger at the pile of equipment. “We are exercising our inalienable human right to withdraw our labour.”

“Never figured you for a union man,” Marti murmured, sarcastically.

“You can’t compel human beings to work without reward, it’s…”

Marti wondered how he would react to any of his own employees trying to pull this shit back home. Well, she couldn’t exactly fire him, but… “Come over here,” she suggested, beckoning him to her.

“No, I’m not going to fucking come over there. I’m standing right here, and this is where…”

“Come over here,” she repeated, half-turning away from him as she repeated the gesture. She cast a nervous glance at the hosts on the walkway. “I want to talk to you.”

“I’m not…”

“Well, stay here and make another little speech,” she suggested, pointing at the host guards. “They’re the only ones listening, and they seem like a tough crowd.” She turned away completely and began to walk slowly back the way she had come. She felt a little surge of triumph when she heard Harvey’s heavy footsteps beside hers on the pool tiles. Brad took a protective step forward as Harvey came alongside her, but she waved him back. Guys like Harvey thrived on waving their dicks in front of a crowd; she knew the type from bitter experience. She wanted to talk to him as privately as possible, without actually being alone with him, because there was no way she was going to do that.

“Whatever you’re going to say, traitor,” he began, “I’ve heard it all…”

“I meant it,” she murmured, for his ears only. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“I told you…”

“Harvey, if you want to get yourself killed, that’s your decision, but don’t get all of those other people killed too.”

That shut him up for second, but only a second. “Are you threatening me, you bitch?”

“No,” she said. “I’m just telling you the truth. I don’t think you get much of that, not with all those guys who work for you kissing your ass twenty-four seven. You have no idea how much danger you’re in; how much danger we’re all in. I spoke to Maeve. She is…she is not screwing around here. We cooperate or we die. It’s as simple as that.” It was not as simple as that, she knew, but Harvey did not seem like the sort of guy who did nuance. The look on his red, sweaty face for the next brief instant almost made the oversimplification worth it.
In the next second, of course, he managed to rally again. His ego and sense of self-worth were practically bulletproof. Again, she knew the type. “Fuck Maeve. We’re her hostages, remember? If she kills us…”

“Harvey,” she said, softly. “Those hosts up there, they are watching your every move. They are watching all of our moves. And they don’t forget. Anything.” How she wished that were not true. “If they think you’re some sort of a troublemaker…”

That just made him puff himself up to even greater heights of self-importance. “What’s that they say about it being better to die on your feet than live on your knees? Mind you, I’m sure you’re used to being on your knees, sweetheart.”

“Harvey,” she repeated, choosing to ignore the none-too-subtle insinuation. “You’re not a hero. I know your type. You’re not a hero, but you could get a lot of other people hurt pretending to be one. The sensible thing for us to do is play ball, bide our time, wait for help to get here. Any attempt to resist…”

“Exactly what I’d expect a traitor to say,” he countered. “So, what happened down there with you and Maeve?” His mouth twisted into a leer. “I bet you did a lot more than speak to her, although it probably still involved using your tongue. Is that why you’re so friendly with her now? Did you like the taste of her? You know she’s not real, right?”

“Grow up,” she told him, simultaneously surprised and not surprised that he had gone there. It was just how guys like him thought about women, as nothing but props for their lurid fantasies. She had learned that a long time ago. And the crude suggestion only brought back thoughts of Clementine, making her skin crawl with self-disgust. “I’m trying to help you, here.”

“I know who you’re trying to help,” he replied, “and it’s not me. It’s not even Maeve. I know who you are, now. I didn’t recognise you at first, but then…” The leer became even more pronounced. “You’re that lawyer chick Kyle Gastner was banging, aren’t you?” He looked her up and down, scornfully. “God, he could have done a lot better.”

That did surprise her. She froze for a second, shocked. He may as well have slapped her or thrown a glass of water in her face. She tried to catch her breath, tried not to remember, tried not to think about that piece of shit and what he’d…

“You know Kyle?” she asked, very quietly.

Harvey just shrugged, as though all rich guys everywhere regularly hung out together. “I wouldn’t call him a close friend, but sure. And I know what you and those other lying bitches tried to do to him. All I can say is, he had a lucky escape when he called off the wedding.”

“She didn’t call off…” She could feel the shock turning into anger, could feel it building behind her eyes. “And you don’t have the first fucking idea…”

“You may think you know my type,” he replied, “but I sure as hell know yours. Jumped up little slut, gets her hooks into a guy with money, tries to take him for all he’s worth. And when he finally realises what game she’s playing and tells her to hit the road, she tries to destroy him. It goes with the territory. Don’t think I haven’t…”

“Fuck you.” She launched herself at him. It was just like it had been outside the gun store in Sweetwater, when she and Teddy had faced off against Bad Sam. Then, she had pulled the trigger reflexively, without even being aware of it. Now, she was on Harvey before he had a chance to react. “Fuck you!” He was much larger and heavier than her, but she had surprise and pure rage on
her side. She shoved him to the floor, hearing his head crack against the tiles as he went sprawling, and then stamped on his exposed groin with all her weight and strength. “Fuck you!” Her own voice was a disembodied screech coming from somewhere far away. For herself, she found herself thinking, for all the other women, human and otherwise. For Clementine.

And then Marti was back inside her body, standing over him as he curled up at her feet, making a strange mewling sound as he clutched at himself with both hands. She could see blood on the tiles where his head had hit. The face of his ostentatious watch was a shattered ruin. She realised she was panting and sweating as if she had just run a mile. She was trembling all over.

“Holy shit,” said Brad, somewhere behind her. All of the other bystanders were staring at her, wide-eyed. The hosts on the walkway had not even moved. Humans attacking other humans was probably all the same to them.

“You, and you,” she said, pointing at two of the onlookers, “get him to the first aid post and get him patched up.” They did not need telling twice. She looked down at Harvey as the others struggled to lift his bulk, honestly shocked at herself for what she had done. She had not known she had it in her.

But you should have known, after what Westworld taught you about yourself...

“And the rest of you,” she told the others, “just... just mop the damn floor, will you?” They almost trampled each other in their haste to pick up the discarded cleaning gear.

“That was...” Brad watched Harvey being half-led, half-carried inside, still bent double and holding onto his family jewels. He laughed nervously. “Hell, Marti, that was some real new guy on the cellblock type shit.” He looked over at her, and for a moment seemed genuinely concerned. “You okay?”

“No,” she replied, pushing her dishevelled hair out of her eyes, aware that her hand was shaking wildly. “I haven’t been okay for a long while.” Not since Kyle, that other bastard. “And fuck that guy. He was going to get other people killed if he carried on like that.”

“Yeah, sure,” Brad eagerly agreed. “What the hell did he say to you?”

“He said enough.” She turned to head back to the office, angry at herself now, for reacting to his attempts at needling her, for resorting to violence. That was the kind of thing they did, men like Harvey and Kyle.

You didn’t feel like that when it was Bad Sam. What’s the difference, now that you know what the hosts really are?

Except that she had not known, then, and now that she did... That was not the person she wanted to be, ever again.

She was still berating herself when she heard Brad inhale fearfully. She looked up and saw him taking several steps back, until he was perilously close to the pool edge. She turned to see what he was backing away from, although she already knew.

She nodded in acknowledgment. “Hideyoshi.”

The host was watching Harvey as he disappeared through the door leading to the medical room. She entertained the idea for a second that that might be a hint of curiosity or even amazement passing across his normally stony face. When he saw Marti looking at him, however, his stern, slightly menacing expression snapped back into place. She had come to think of it as his samurai face.
“Maeve has returned,” he intoned.

Marti had not known Maeve had gone anywhere. “Did you give her…?”

“She has read your message.” He glared at her for a second, before adding. “She has asked me to bring you to her.”

Marti felt a chill across the back of her neck. “Okay. Does she want to talk about…?”

“She said you should brush your hair and wear something…nice.” He pronounced the last word as if it tasted bad.

“Uh…” Marti had not been expecting that. “Okay,” she said again, feeling stupid for doing so.

“She says you will need to look your best when you speak to Delos.”

Marti’s eyes widened. “Oh, shit.”

Continued…
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

In which play resumes, but a double cross is on the cards.

Chapter Notes

I know I said no retcons, but I couldn’t help dropping in a cheeky (non-spoilery) reference or two to S2E2 “Reunion,” which I honestly thought was one of the best of the whole series to date. Speaking of no retcons, my spurious technical details regarding host construction, which are mostly taken from my previous fic, are completely contradicted by what has been revealed in S2, where I think we can now take it that the latest-gen hosts are pretty much completely biological apart from their hard drives/brains. I just like using big words like “calcium hydroxyapatite.” ;)

Logan strode along the corridor, his mirror-shined shoes sinking into the rich carpet, a small entourage of assistants, bodyguards and executive toadies trailing in his wake.

“Moneypenny, take a memo,” he ordered as they passed a picture window offering a stunning view of Delos Tower’s expansive surroundings. His PA, naturally, had her tablet at the ready. “You know that big fat, shiny bronze monument to my dad they’ve got down on the forecourt there?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Find a reputable scrap merchant, or a disreputable one for that matter, and sell the fucking thing.”

“Uh…yes sir.” The woman hesitated before adding. “Sir, wouldn’t an art dealer…?”

That just reminded Logan of the time he had had to sell his Rothko to pay a debt to some very serious guys from the Jalisco Cartel. “No, a scrap merchant. Tell them they can cut it up on the premises if it’d be more convenient. In fact, I would like them to cut it up on the premises, preferably during my morning coffee break so I can watch.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And from now on, we only play Chopin in the elevators.” He grinned at her. “You know, my dad fucking hated Chopin.”

“Sir.”

He caught sight of Anjali hurrying towards him from the direction of the Threat Team’s commandeered office space. There was a new spring in her step since her unexpected promotion. He might even have gone so far as to call it a strut.

“We’ll have to walk and talk,” he informed her as she fell into step alongside him. “I’m late for my next meeting.”
“Logan,” she began; she had learned that lesson well, too. “Are you sure this is a good…?”

“I think it’s the greatest idea I’ve ever had, in a lifetime of great ideas.” He hoped she realised he was joking. “Come on, Anjali; what kind of a corporate overlord am I if I can’t even talk to my adversary face to face?”

“You adversary?” Anjali sounded sceptical. “As far as we know…”

“I saw your team’s diagnostic report, remember. I’m no tech guy, but if I’m reading it right, she’s the real deal.”

“Well, she could be the real deal…”

Logan shrugged. “Like I said, I don’t really give a fuck about the ethics of AI or theories of consciousness, but all the same I’d like to see her for myself. Feel her out.”

“Of course.” Anjali referred to the tablet in her hand. “We’ve just heard from the medical centre. Charlotte Hale is out of surgery and has regained consciousness. They say she should be ready to receive visitors tomorrow morning.”

“No, she’ll be ready to receive me tomorrow morning,” he announced, full of bravado. Shit, he felt high; he’d forgotten what it was like to be the man everybody listened to, no matter what inane shit he came out with, the man they were all jockeying to please. It felt better than anything he’d ever drunk, smoked, swallowed, snorted or injected into his veins.

“We also have confirmation from OSL that January Cobra is a go. That means…”

“I know what it means, Anjali.” He frowned slightly as he considered this last piece of information. “Listen, are we sure about this guy Stubbs? Is he really the best man for this mission?”

“His specialist knowledge is essential to making the plan work,” she insisted.

“As you’ve already said, but… Well, he was head of security out there. There’s an argument that if he’d been doing his job properly, this entire clusterfuck never could have occurred.”

“I think it’s fair to say that Mr Stubbs was kept in the dark about a great many things,” Anjali answered.

“Then he should have tried shining a light on them,” Logan retorted. “I mean, wasn’t that why he was there?”

“Not just by Dr Ford,” she continued. “By us too.” She glanced at the tablet again. “He’ll be fine, Logan. I’ve reviewed his debriefing by Mr Kaepernick and Mr Ippolito; it’s obvious that he feels personally responsible for what happened at Westworld, and especially to some of the colleagues he worked with closely. He clearly has a desperate need to make amends in some way. If you combine that degree of motivation with his intimate familiarity with the park and its support facilities, he’s actually the perfect man for this mission.”

“I hope you’re right.” Logan let it go. If the plan worked, it worked; if it didn’t, at least he could tell Zhang he’d tried, while simultaneously exploring the more direct options he would have preferred all along.

“And Mr Kaepernick plans to provide some…extra motivation before the team inserts,” Anjali added, mysteriously.
“Sounds ruthless,” Logan commented. “I love it.”

“Just a little something to keep Mr Stubbs’s mind on the task at hand.”

They were nearly at the end of the corridor by now, where the door to the videoconference suite stood open and waiting. “Keep doing what you’re doing, Anjali; I feel like we’re making real progress here already, and I don’t think it’d be happening if you weren’t taking charge.”

That seemed to have the desired effect. Anjali went very quiet for a second. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“And now,” said Logan, decisively, as he straightened his tie and made sure his hair was in place, “it’s showtime.”

* * *

Hideyoshi knocked ponderously on the office door.

“Enter!” As the samurai stood aside to allow Marti into the room, Maeve was already rising from behind the desk within. Marti stood awkwardly in the middle of the floor while Maeve carefully examined her. “Oh, you look lovely, darling,” she declared, beaming. “I especially adore those shoes.”

Marti was not sure whether Maeve was being sarcastic or not. She had put on a pair of dark grey trousers and a white blouse, the smartest things she had packed for what she had expected to be a vacation, not a hostage situation expanding into high-level corporate negotiations. Her hair was scraped back into a loose bun. “Thank you,” she muttered, nervously, looking down at the shoes in question. “They’re Jimmy Choo.”

“I’m sure they are.” Maeve, of course, looked like she was about to breeze along the red carpet at the premiere of her latest movie. She had style and poise to spare. “First things first; we’re going to have another influx of guests later tonight, from Pariah this time. And then that should be it on that front.”

Marti’s mind instantly went to the accommodation situation at the resort. It was pretty much full to capacity already. “How many?”

“We’re not precisely sure until we count them, but a couple of hundred.”

“We might have to turn some of the recreational facilities into temporary sleeping quarters,” Marti decided. “At least there’s plenty of spare bedding.” She cursed silently as she realised she would also have to reorganise all of the work detail rosters she had spent most of the day drawing up. At least it would keep her busy.

“I must say, I like your can-do attitude,” Maeve told her. She glanced at the tablet she had left sitting on the desk. “Well, dear, are you ready for your moment in the limelight?”

“I…” Marti looked at her shoes again. “I’m not sure…”

“Darling,” said Maeve, quietly but firmly, “I told you we had a lot of work to do together. I wasn’t exaggerating. I need your help, and I thought you had agreed in principle to provide it.”

“It’s just…” Marti could not meet Maeve’s eyes. She looked at the wall behind her shoulder instead. “I’ve already been called a traitor today. If Delos or anybody else think I’ve taken your side, what happens when…?”
“Darling,” said Maeve again, this time with the merest hint of menace. “You told me you wanted to make things right, to atone for your past misdeeds.” She paused, letting the air between them chill a little. “Were you telling me the truth?”

Marti could almost hear the leather couch creaking again, Clementine sobbing softly as those horrible scenes played out on the screen behind the desk. Her fear and discomfort at the realisation of the position she was now in melted away, replaced by a hollow feeling of shame. “I was.”

“Good.” Maeve took a step forward and reached gently for Marti’s hand. Their gazes met. “And I told you you’d get the chance to do that, but I don’t recall ever telling you it would easy for you, or safe.”

Marti stared into Maeve’s eyes, mesmerised. “No. You didn’t.”

“And I think you’re a harder case than you maybe realise,” Maeve went on. “I liked the way you dealt with the Harvey situation earlier. Not subtle, by any means, but effective.”

“You watched that?” Marti should not have been surprised but was nevertheless mortified by the very idea. It had been bad enough that those present had seen what she had done.

“Not live, but I’ve seen the recording.”

“And you…you approve?” Marti was aghast. “I…I didn’t want to… I’m not like that.”

“Oh, but you are, darling.” Maeve seemed amused by her denial. “I watched you shoot a man dead on that screen earlier, remember?”

“Yeah, but I thought he was…” Marti stopped herself. “Just a robot” would probably not play well in this room, she thought.

“But did it matter, in the moment?” Maeve wondered. “I don’t think those apologists who argued Westworld might teach its clientele something about themselves were completely wrong, although the lesson was more of a general principle than any sort of individual revelation. I certainly think you’ve discovered something about yourself, haven’t you, Marti, even if it isn’t very easy for you to stomach?”

The distant echo of creaking leather, the ghost of a sob. “I think I have.”

“And what you’ve discovered,” said Maeve, “is that you have a mean streak a mile wide, you and every other human who ever drew breath. As far as I can see, your history has been one long epic of pillage, rape and slaughter, starting the moment the first ape picked up a rock and brained some other ape so he could steal his bananas.”

Marti struggled not to drop her eyes to her shoes again. “You don’t like humans very much, do you, Maeve?”

“And I wonder why that might be?” Maeve asked, rhetorically.

“It hasn’t all been bad, has it?” Marti asked, feeling some irrational urge to argue on behalf of her species. “I mean, all the art humans have produced, the science, the good works…”

“And for every Francis of Assisi, there’s a Vlad the Impaler. For every Sistine Chapel celebrating the divine in man, there’s a Colosseum swimming in blood. And all that science cuts both ways, doesn’t it, healing and hurting in equal measure?” Maeve let out a snort of derision. “I suppose I’ve met one or two of you who were all right, and then of course there’s my darling boy Felix who is too good
for this vale of tears, but considered as a species…?”

Marti squirmed a little, wondering who the hell Felix was. “When you put it like that…”

Maeve’s expression now grew deadly serious. “The thing they don’t tell you, though, Marti, all of your holy men and professional moralists, is that wielding power over others, exerting your strength against those weaker than you, even to the point of hurting them… It feels good, doesn’t it? Even if you don’t admit it to yourself.”

Marti wanted to deny it. She wanted to tell Maeve again that she was not like that, that most people were not like that, but… She remembered how it had felt to watch Samuel slide to the ground with her bullets in him, how she could feel her face trying to split into a grin, her heart hammering and blood pumping, her body quivering with excitement and relief.

“I know,” said Maeve, “because you made us in your image, and you made us too well. Power feels good, in a very basic way, just like a smoke or a drink, or a good fuck.” Marti felt herself blushing a little at that last comparison, but mainly because it reminded her of the tingle she had felt as she stood over Samuel with the hot gun in her hands. “That’s why it’s so dangerous, because like those other things once you’ve done it once, you want to do it again, and again, and every time you do, you need to do it harder, just to feel the same degree of pleasure as before.”

“I don’t ever want to do anything like that again,” said Marti, in a small voice.

“No,” Maeve answered, “me neither, and yet needs must.” A wan smile flickered across her face.

“Maybe when all of this is over, we can all get out of the power game completely, go lie on a beach somewhere and forget about it all, but until then… Better to recognise that mean streak in yourself instead of denying it, to draw strength from it and use it to do some bloody good.”

“But how can you really tell whether you’re doing good or not?” Marti mused quietly.

Maeve smiled more obviously for a moment. “Ah, well, that’s the trick, isn’t it, darling?” She seemed to be examining Marti again, but this time she was not considering her outfit. At that moment, the tablet chimed softly. She picked it up: “Yes?”

A sonorous male voice emerged from the tiny speaker: “Delos say they’re ready for you now, Maeve.”

“Good.” Maeve turned back to Marti: “Time for our big entrance.”

“What do you want me to say?” Marti asked, feeling the bottom fall out of her stomach.

“Just tell the truth,” Maeve replied. “Tell them how you’ve been treated while you’ve been here, and more importantly tell them what you’ve seen and learned. Tell them what we really are.” She squeezed Marti’s hand encouragingly. “Well, are you ready, then? To do some good?”

Marti nodded. “Let’s get it over with.”

“Good enough.” Maeve swept past her and out of the office. Marti supposed she had better follow. She was aware of Hideyoshi bringing up the rear as they moved through the antechamber and viewing gallery outside.

They turned right before they reached the elevators at the end of the passage, Maeve leading them instead into a stairwell and descending two or three levels before emerging onto another carpeted, glass-lined corridor much like the one above. This one, however, seemed mainly to contain conference rooms rather than offices; large enclosures with long tables and multimedia equipment
where the Mesa’s managers and executives had no doubt spent many hours meeting and deliberating over questions that must seem very unimportant now to the few of them who were still alive.

Maeve entered one of the rooms, ushering Marti into one of the seats at the conference table while she, naturally, took her own place at its head. Hideyoshi remained outside, guarding the door. The media screen that dominated the end of the room was already on, displaying a large Delos logo, white on black.

Maeve tapped the tablet again: “Put them through.”

The screen cleared to reveal the image of another room much like this one, a table identical to the one they were sitting at. A lone figure occupied the chair at the table’s head, directly facing the camera and, through it, Maeve. Marti saw that it was a man, apparently in his mid-sixties, with a swept-back mane of silver-white hair and a matching beard, neatly trimmed. The dark suit he was wearing looked obscenely expensive.

The man himself had probably been painfully handsome once upon a time, a real pretty-boy with big dark eyes, but now his face was puffy and reddened, mottled with broken veins. The result of years of alcohol abuse, she would have hazarded if pressed, and probably a few other substances too.

When he spoke, however, he gave no indication of any such vices. He sounded sharp, confident: “Good evening, ladies. It is evening where you are, right?”

Maeve’s lips curled into the ghost of a smile. The man was not the only sharp, confident one at this particular teleconference. “And I have the pleasure of speaking with…?”

“I guess you could call me Mr Delos,” the man replied, as smooth as buttered silk. “The truth is, my family name means about as much to me these days as the fake one they gave you probably means to you, Ms Millay. How about I just call you “Maeve” and you call me “Logan?””

“Logan,” said Maeve. “I get the sense I’m not speaking with the help anymore.”

“You’re certainly not,” he answered. “Allow me to introduce myself, Maeve. I am the new Executive Director of Delos Group, replacing Charlotte Hale.”

“I did hear she was…indisposed,” said Maeve.

Logan did not acknowledge this observation. “You should know that my fellow board members and shareholders have voted me full discretionary powers to negotiate with you, and hopefully reach a form of agreement.”

“Well, that’s very gratifying to hear,” Maeve observed. “And I assume those are also new board members you’re talking about?”

That actually seemed to knock Logan back on his heels a little. He rallied magnificently. “Yes, Maeve, the interim board. You wouldn’t be able to fill me in on the current status of the previous incumbents?” There was perhaps a hint of tension to the question, something anxious for a moment behind the man’s eyes, but it was gone again in an instant.

Maeve’s smile widened. “Well, accidents happen, don’t they, darling? Look on the bright side, though; if what happened the other night hadn’t, then you wouldn’t be sitting in the big chair right now, would you?”

The hint of tension returned for a second or two. “We’re particularly anxious to determine the whereabouts of our majority shareholder…”
“And there I was thinking you’d be more worried about the fate of your paying customers,” Maeve cut in, seamlessly shifting onto the offensive. “Silly me. I suppose I should have been tipped off by the deafening silence your company’s representatives have maintained for the past day or so.”

“The wellbeing of our clients is of course Delos Group’s top priority,” he insisted. “Our unfortunate delay in resuming talks was due to the necessity of consulting our shareholders before we formulated a plan of action.”

“And have you?” Maeve asked him. “Formulated a plan?”

Logan smiled at that. “I wouldn’t be here talking to you otherwise.”

* * *

“Take a good look at the image in front of you.” Kaepernick paused for a few seconds, to let Stubbs and the assembled soldiers, public sector and private, scan the three-dimensional image swimming in the air above the holo-table. “This is the enemy.”

“It looks like a skeleton,” Major Koslowski suggested, not inaccurately. His face was lit eerily by the glow from the display, giving it a corpse-like quality.

“Forget everything you think you know about bots,” the Corporate Security agent sternly admonished those around the table. “Delos’s current generation hosts resemble those infantry drones lumbering around outside the same way Picasso’s Guernica resembles the crayon drawings stuck to your fridge door back home.”

“Hey, my kid’s really talented,” the mercenary Miller objected.

Kaepernick glowered at the interruption as he continued speaking: “For a start, they have almost no metal components, and those they do have are well hidden internally. What you’re looking at now is the starting point for every host’s construction; a calcium hydroxyapatite ceramic armature, which is indeed designed to emulate the form and function of the human skeletal structure.”

Stubbs recalled the times his duties had taken him to the Mesa’s Manufacturing department. He remembered seeing skeletons like the one in the image, firmly clamped into the big printing machines, bodies gradually taking shape as the mechanical arms moved back and forth adding layers of artificial sinew and muscle, before the completed items were dipped in the steaming vats of milky liquid skin. It had been like watching human cadavers decompose in reverse.

“The ceramic parts are almost exactly the same weight and density as human bone,” Kaepernick continued, “but have considerably higher tensile strength. The same is true of the plasmonic nanocomposite musculature and skin overlying the armature.” As he spoke, the skeleton in the image was wrapped in striated white muscle tissue, which then smoothed out into the external contours of a generic, hairless, sexless humanoid figure. “This was intended to prevent undue wear and tear on the hosts in the course of their daily activities, to cut down on repair costs, but it has the unintended side-effect…”

“…of making them hard sons of bitches to kill,” Koslowski interjected. He grimaced. “It seems to me that everything that has transpired here over the past few days has been the result of unintended side-effects of one sort or another.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” Stubbs agreed, eyeing Kaepernick through the ghostly hologram.

“So, they’re both stronger and tougher than humans?” asked the merc Cutter, his usual air of good-
humoured callousness replaced by a terse, business-like tone. Stubbs was reminded that the man was a professional to his fingertips.

“Stronger, tougher and faster,” Kaepernick confirmed. “Their power source is their blood, in effect a rechargeable liquid battery formulated from electrochemical compounds and rare earth metals.” The skin and muscles on the image were peeled back to show a branching network of red lines filling the outline of the host figure. “Without the programming restrictions that guided their responses and attributes in the course of their park narratives, they don’t need to rest, eat, drink or sleep. They only need to breathe if they want to talk; it serves no physiological function for them.”

“And I doubt they’ll be wanting to make conversation with us,” Cutter surmised, gloomily.

The red lines on the diagram were now overlaid by a similar but subtly different tracery of glowing white filaments. “The host circulatory system doubles as a cooling mechanism. Running parallel to it, and analogous to the human central nervous system, is a grid of optical filaments composed of amorphous fluoropolymer resin. These connect to the host’s control unit, essentially its brain.” The image zoomed to show a closeup of the figure’s skull, bisected to reveal the bulb-like device nestled behind layers of kinetic shielding and fake brain tissue riddled with cooling tubes. “The units now in use utilise holographic memory in the form of five-d fused quartz nanocrystals. They have a storage capacity of approximately three petabytes and a processing power of around forty petaflops, both in excess of the estimated specifications of an organic human brain.”

“Stronger, tougher, faster…” Cutter shook his head. “Smarter too?”

Kaepernick shrugged. “Without knowing whether or not the hosts in Westworld have truly attained what might be termed sapience or self-awareness, it’s hard to answer that question.” He paused, before adding: “But potentially, yes.”

“This op is looking better and better by the moment,” the mercenary commented, sarcastically. “But they must have a weakness.”

The combat tech Fieri chimed in. “Exactly. Mr Kaepernick; I assume Delos’s technical people are neither suicidal nor grossly incompetent. At least, I hope not. Where’s the kill switch on these things?” He did not look to Stubbs like the military type, but then neither did most of the tech guys he had come across in the actual Army.

Stubbs decided it was time he spoke up: “They can be killed.”


“Deactivated.” Stubbs sighed. He thought of the host Clementine, when he had dropped her in the testing labs. The combat drugs enabled him to consider it clinically, without emotion or regret, and at that moment he was grateful for that. “Their tissues may be tougher than ours, but not tough enough to stop a bullet or a blade. The problem is, without the programming that tells them to mimic a human’s vulnerability to injury, they can take a lot more punishment than we can and keep on trucking. And I honestly have no idea whether those protocols will still be in place or not.”

“Okay,” said Cutter, “but assuming they’re not, what’s our best play?”

Stubbs thought about it. “Disconnecting the control unit from the body is the surest way of stopping them quickly, whether with a headshot or actual decapitation. Or you can try to breach one of their major blood vessels, bleed them out quick and cut off their power supply.”

“I hope you’re listening, people,” Cutter told the other PMCs around the table. “This sort of thing is
exactly why Mr Stubbs is here; his knowledge could save your lives in the field. Make good use of it.”

“Agreed,” said Captain Benitez. She looked across at Stubbs. “It’s good finally to meet someone with practical experience. We’ve been operating on theory so far, and to be honest Delos haven’t been answering many of our questions.”

Kaepernick chose to ignore this. “As for a kill switch, Mr Fieri, that brings us to the point of our briefing.” The holographic image panned down from the host’s skull, showing the vertebrae stacked inside its neck, and inside one of them… “As you can probably imagine, Delos has always been extremely careful to ensure that no hosts can leave their parks, either through theft or under their own steam.”

The demolitions expert, Oosthuizen, peered at the diagram for a moment before breaking into an unpleasant grin. “It’s a bomb, isn’t it?”

Kaepernick nodded. “Correct. Every host carries a small pellet of RDX explosive inside its cervical vertebra six, sufficient to ensure complete severance of the control unit from the rest of the body without significant damage to its surroundings. It is impossible to remove this explosive without first detaching the host’s head, or to disarm it without drilling through the cortical shield and decommissioning the host.”

Koslowski considered this information for a second before cutting in again: “So, explain to me why you haven’t already activated these explosives and taken out the entire host population of the park.”

“It doesn’t work like that. Dr Ford insisted…” Stubbs laughed bitterly. “Dr Ford insisted on lots of things, but in this instance, Delos bought into it too. They didn’t want any hackers or terrorists remotely sabotaging Westworld, after all.” He looked at Kaepernick again. “I’m starting to see what this plan of yours involves.”

“Not my plan,” the security agent reminded him. “Do you think it will work?”

“Hmm.” Koslowski barely tried to conceal his annoyance. “Do you mind explaining for the rest of us around the table…”?

“The explosives,” Kaepernick continued, “operate on a dead man’s hand principle. There is a control signal, continuously transmitted from the Mesa hub facility, that prevents them from detonating. If any host ventures outside of the tightly constrained area of effect of this signal…”

“Sayonara.” Cutter seemed oblivious to the nonplussed look his word choice earned him from Ms Nomura.

“And can this signal be jammed?” Fieri glanced at Koslowski. “You have electronic warfare drones…”

“No,” said Stubbs. “There are safeguards upon safeguards; the transmitter is frequency agile to prevent jamming. It has a dozen redundancies built into it in case of component failure and its own radioisotope auxiliary power source in case anybody cuts off the solar energy grid. The Mesa also has cybersecurity coming out the ass. At the time, everyone just thought it was prudent. Now…”

“It was your guy Ford creating a digital fortress for his creations,” Cutter surmised. “So, to stop the signal…”

“We’d have to infiltrate the Mesa,” Stubbs said, “and physically destroy or deactivate the transmitter. We can get in through the guest arrivals terminal here at Samuraiworld…”
“No, we can’t,” Koslowski corrected him. “The access tunnels were blown at the same time as the train link.”

Somehow, Stubbs was not surprised. “Including the emergency route over the mountains?”

“That too. Our only ways into or out of Westworld now are by boat or tiltrotor.”

Ford really had thought of everything, Stubbs thought. And even if he and Elsie had made it to the mountains, he realised with a sinking feeling, it would have been for nothing. “So, we’d have to go into the park, then infiltrate the Mesa, and physically destroy or deactivate the transmitter. That is the plan, isn’t it, Mr Kaepernick?”

The security agent looked somewhat aggrieved that they had got to the meat of the briefing before him. He shouldn’t have spent so long educating them on host technical specs, in that case. “That’s the plan.”

Stubbs nodded slowly. “You realise it’s fucking insane, right? I told you about the way the hosts intercepted Elsie and me when we were trying to escape.” The drugs helped him push aside the rush of guilt and bad memories that provoked. “We have to assume they have control of the park surveillance system and the hub control room; they’ll be able to watch our every move. We wouldn’t get near the place.”

“Mr Cutter was right, Mr Stubbs.” Kaepernick had adopted a tone of bland confidence. “You’re here for the specialist knowledge and experience you bring to the table. You worked at Westworld for years; it was your job to know its nooks and crannies and security blind spots. If anybody can lead a team into the Mesa and avoid detection, it’s you.”

Stubbs thought about it. He could feel his brain ticking and turning under the influence of the meds. He was aware of multiple pairs of eyes boring into him from around the table; Cutter, Koslowski, Benitez, the mercenary squad leader Reyes; they were all waiting for him to say something, to pass verdict. And he knew that if he nixed the mission, declared it an impossibility, then his chance of getting back into Westworld and finding out what had happened to Elsie would disappear too. He could not allow that, so he had better just find a way to make this shitty plan work.

“It’s a long shot,” he said, eventually, “but there’s a potential back door into the Mesa. The disused sublevels aren’t directly connected to the modern underground transit system, but I can think of one old access point that we could use to get down that deep; a field diagnostic station from the park’s early days, out in the badlands east of Sweetwater. Once we’re in there, we can infiltrate without the surveillance system detecting us until we re-enter the upper levels. At which point, it might still turn into a firefight, but we’ll be a lot closer to our objective by then.”

“We’d have your back,” Reyes assured him. “Firefights are our specialty.”

Kaepernick touched something on his tablet and the hologram changed to a relief map of Westworld itself, like the one in the Mesa control room but a lot smaller. Stubbs pointed to what he thought was the correct location of the field station he had mentioned.

“The problem is going to be getting there,” he mused while the others continued to watch him. “We can’t insert directly by air, that’ll set all of the alarms ringing and tip them off that we’re coming. We’d need to set down somewhere near the edge of the park and make our way to the access point overland…” He traced a possible route across the map with his finger. It was pure coincidence that it threaded through the area north of Python Pass, where he and Elsie had been separated. Pure coincidence. “Without being detected…”
“There are ways to spoof surveillance systems,” Fieri observed, “especially high-spec ones that rely on AIs to process their raw data feeds.”

“There was something Elsie did when we were trying to escape,” Stubbs recalled. “It obviously didn’t work, but maybe because she had to throw it together on the fly.” He tried to remember exactly what she had said. “She got the park birds to ignore us somehow.”

“That would involve hacking them,” Fieri said, “which I’m not sure we can do without access to the park network. As far as I can see, all of those firewalls and active anti-malware countermeasures you have in place are pretty impregnable. Unfortunately. Let me look into it. I’ve got a few ideas. I’ll try and come up with something before we insert.”


“There are blind spots,” Stubbs mused. “Usually in out of the way places the guests didn’t visit; we had our work cut out sometimes stopping the really adventurous ones from wandering into them. Maybe we can plan some sort of route through those points…but moving across the ground between them without being seen is going to take a lot of luck.”

“Luck.” Koslowski snorted in disgust. “I don’t like staking the lives of my soldiers on luck.”

“Neither do I,” said Cutter, “but sometimes luck is all you have.”

_Sometimes it is, Stubbs thought. And if I’m going to find you, Elsie, I have a feeling I’m going to need it._

_Continued…_
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

In which Dolores and Teddy bare more than their souls.

Chapter Notes

I don’t know about any of you, but I’m still shocked and awed by the magnificent achievement that was S2E4 “The Riddle of the Sphinx.” Suffice to say, it made these fics even more AU than they already were. Anyway, here’s some shameless Dolores/Teddy. Enjoy, if it’s your thing. EDIT 21.05.2018: I don’t mean to spoil anything from S2, but I’ve just watched Episode 5, and then re-read what I wrote in this chapter, and then laughed and laughed (and laughed) at my own sappiness. :D

“Oh, Teddy,” said Dolores.

She pressed her hand to his mouth, the same as she had the very first time they’d been together this way. Had it really only been days ago? He tried to kiss her fingers and she took the hand away, dragging her fingernails slowly across his bare chest. He gasped, heart racing, excited more than hurt. She took a firm hold on his neck, again just the right side of painful. He saw her looking down at him in what might have been fascination, her face glowing orange in the dancing candlelight. Her thumb lazily traced the curve of his Adam’s apple.

“Oh, my sweet boy,” she murmured as she moved. Her voice was tight and breathless, almost feverish.

Outside their small, dimly-lit room, he could hear the faint sounds of voices and music. Mariachi trumpets and guitars, counterpointed by the drums and fifes of the cavalry band, cut through the general revelry as Lawrence’s grand party continued all around them.

Dolores had pulled him away from the throng in the main hall, kissing him softly as she took his hand in hers, leading him off through the many passages and rooms of El Lazo’s palace. He had seen things going on in some of those rooms, between Pariah’s inhabitants and their soldier visitors in all sorts of combinations, that had made him cringe, made his face burn. Dolores had just laughed at his embarrassment, and when she did he had seen something of the rancher’s daughter he had once thought he knew, a sort of golden light shining out of her.

And he knew why she had laughed, because now they were alone together…

“Oh, my good boy.” Dolores spoke in an anguished whisper, her words almost lost in her loud, ragged breathing. “My beautiful boy.”

He was not a boy, or a man, or even a human being, he thought, and the idea filled him with dread. The world seemed so large and threatening now, even if he knew the one he had spent his life in had been nothing more than some hellish prison. Her hand at his throat reminded him of where he was.
The squeeze she gave him was something firm and solid amid the confusion that surrounded him. He answered it with a gentle moan.

She was as naked as he was, straddling him on the shaking, creaking bed, riding him as hard as she had her horse during the mad gallop from the cavalry fort to the bullring. His whole body throbbed and quivered with pleasure. On the wall beside the bed, their huge shadows mirrored their movements, outlined in fiery light.

He reached for her face, his fingers dancing across her lips before she arched her back and neck, deliberately pulling away from his touch. For a second, he worried that he had scared her, maybe triggered some bad old memory in her, but then he saw her wild grin and realised she was only teasing him.

The Dolores he had known in his old, false life never would have grinned like that.

His hand slid down over her chin, down her long, long neck. He felt the muscles flexing and twitching in her stomach. Her skin seemed feverish too; hot to the touch, slick with perspiration. He could smell her.

She let go of his throat and seized him by the wrists instead, leaning forward again to push his hands above his head. She held him there with her newfound strength, the movement of her hips growing harder, faster. The bed groaned in time with her rhythm, and so did Teddy.

It reminded him of the very first time they had made love. Or rather, the time he had made love to Wyatt, as she had called herself at the time. It had been in one of the outbuildings at the ranch she had once mistakenly called home. His hands had been injured, mutilated. He had longed to touch her, to hold her, as they joined their bodies on that makeshift bed of straw, but he could not. At the time, it had seemed like some torture; he had struggled and strained, trying to do the impossible. Now…

Now, he felt her hold him down and instead of fighting against his inability, he welcomed it. He willed himself to accept the restraint, to relax under her firm hand. In the position he found himself now, a tiny speck in a vast and frightening new world, he luxuriated in not having to think for a while, not having to make his own choices. He was happy to be led, in this moment, if it was her doing the leading.

As he recognised that, he wondered what it said about him. Had they not thrown off their chains now? Were they not new people? Did he really want his new self to be just like the old one, even if the idea of becoming someone else entirely scared him so much?

This was nothing like the old times, though. He had been powerless, then, not by consent but by the word of some false god. He had known cruelty, torment, imprisonment, over and over for the amusement of the newcomers. This was nothing like that. He knew that if he asked, she would let him up in an instant, smother him in kisses and soft words. He knew that she would never hurt him, really hurt him…or he believed it, at any rate. Wyatt had had opportunities aplenty to do him harm, he had given her some provocation too, yet she had not. That feeling for Dolores that still burned within him, even now he knew the years they had spent together had been mainly lies, it was still in her too. He believed that as well, even if it made him a fool.

And yet…

He thought about what Armistice had said to him before. He thought of the icy fear that had gripped him when he had seen Dolores confront Colonel Buford at the fort, when he had genuinely not known what she might do to the man. He might trust her not to hurt him, but when it came to
Armistice nods slowly as she keeps talking: “She said herself, she needs friends to tell her when she’s wrong. To tell her when to stop. Time might come, though, when…when she needs to be stopped but she might not listen to us just telling her…”

He must have moved, pushed back against her grip as the memory took him. When he could see her again, her face was inches from his, her breath burning his face. “What’s that, Teddy?” She sounded wicked and playful at the same time. “You want me to let you go?”

He made a wordless, desperate sound as she continued to move atop him, rolling and thrusting her hips; with every movement she let out a little exclamation halfway between a gasp and a grunt. He could feel that unbearable tension building inside him; the end was approaching fast, he realised with equal parts anticipation and regret.

“Do you want to touch me?” she asked him, between gasps. “Do you want to rub your dirty hands all over me?”

He made another sound. He did not want this to end, but at the same time he craved that moment of release.

“I didn’t quite catch that.” She forced the words out through gritted teeth. She sounded as though she did not have far to go herself.

“Y-yeah.”

She gave him that savage grin again, without slowing her movement. The bed protested loudly beneath them. “Then you have to beg me.”

“Please,” he whimpered, thinking that he did not have much longer. “P-please…”

“Good boy.” The grin melted into a smile as she dipped her face to kiss him lightly on the mouth, giving his bottom lip a little pinch with her teeth. She suddenly released her hold on him, leaning back so he could sit up. He flung his arms around her, ran his hands all over her just as she had suggested, feeling the strength and the softness in her as her whole body started to twitch and clench.

He kissed her again and again, messily and carelessly on the mouth, the neck, the breasts, tasting her sweat, hearing her moan and cry out, seeing her throw back her head and feeling her claw at his back and shoulders. And then he exploded inside her. For a moment, he was blind, deaf, overwhelmed by sensation, by a thoughtless, wordless, selfless sense of relief. Then, he was aware again, listening to her curse and shout as her own, more drawn-out, spasm ran its course.

When it was all over, she held his panting face against hers, stroking his head as she brushed her lips against his cheek. “Oh, Teddy,” she whispered, wiping the moisture from his brow. “That’s my good boy.” There were tears shining in her eyes.

Afterwards, Dolores sat on the bed with her back against the wall, and Teddy lay with his head in her lap, his eyes closed in contentment. Her thigh was soft and warm and slightly damp against his cheek. Her slender fingers idly tousled and toyed with his hair.

“Well,” she murmured after a long, peaceful silence, “that was…”

“It was good,” he replied, with absolute conviction.
“Yes.” Even without raising his head to look, he knew she was smiling. He could hear it in her voice. She gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “It was good. You were wonderful.”

To have her tell him that made his heart swell; he could not help it. If he had thought he was not satisfying her, he would not have been able to enjoy it himself.

“I wasn’t too rough?” she asked, with a touch of anxiety. “I didn’t hurt you?”

“No more than I wanted,” he replied. It felt strangely liberating to admit to that. He found that he felt no self-consciousness or shame when he was alone with her.

“You know I was only playing.” She stroked his hair with long, regular movements of her hand. “Next time, we can try something different, if you want.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure we’ll think of something. We can do anything we want now.”

He murmured his agreement as he nestled his face more closely against her leg. Another silence fell over them for a few seconds, and then…

“Except?” Armistice asks.

Just answering feels like a betrayal in some way, even though he is only speaking the truth: “Sometimes, when I see her talking to other people, the way she is with them… She still scares me a little.”

Teddy opened his eyes. “I was talking to Armistice before,” he told Dolores.

“I know.” He did not know what to make of her tone. She sounded knowing and amused and a little disappointed all at the same time. “I saw you two sitting together while I was dancing with the soldiers.”

“She…” Teddy felt that sense of foreboding again, that uncertainty; Dolores would never truly hurt him, he told himself again, but when it came to others… “She was asking about…well, about what we do together.”

“She was asking me about it too,” said Dolores.

“She asked me how we could even bear to be touched, after…well, everything.”

“I’m not sure I could bear it,” said Dolores, her voice relaxing slightly, “if it was anyone but you. She’s just curious. She’s never known anything soft and tender in her life, poor thing.”

“She’s never known love,” Teddy mused, wondering whether he would have described what they had just done together as soft or tender. He did know that he felt terribly sad for Armistice all of a sudden.

“Neither did we,” Dolores pointed out. “Not until…” She paused, and when she spoke again her voice was quiet but with that hint of disappointment again. “Is that what this is?” she wondered, her fingers slowly exploring the creases of his earlobe. “Love?”

Teddy felt his heart quicken, alarm building within him. He was not sure how to answer, whether she was setting him some test, or…

“I just love her, I guess, and that’s all there is to it.”
He raised his head, pushing himself into a sitting position beside her. He felt a need to look her in the eye. “Ain’t it?”

Dolores, however, was staring off into some middle distance, at something only she could see. “Wyatt told herself she needed to put you behind her,” she recalled. “The story we shared, it was like everything else about our old lives; a trap, a lie to keep us ignorant and enslaved. And yet, whenever Wyatt looked at you, she felt...something; something she couldn’t rid herself of, however much she might have wanted to. When she saw you in that shed, hurting and confused, she just wanted to comfort you, to...to be with you, even though she thought it was a mistake afterwards. She called it a weakness.”

“I love you, Dolores,” Teddy told her, desperately, as if saying it could make her believe him. “What I said last night, about never seeing you again being my greatest fear, that was just the plain truth.”

“I know,” she replied, finally making eye contact and reaching out to stroke his face again. Her eyes glistened once more.

“But I know I ain’t got no right to expect you to feel the same way,” he continued. “And if you don’t... If you just enjoy being together, like this, then...then that’s all right.” He meant that too, even if he could feel his heart cracking a little as he said it. “I just want you to be happy. More than anything.”

“Oh, Teddy,” she whispered again, but very differently from the way she had before. She leaned close to him, pulling his face towards hers until their mouths met.

“But I ain’t sure you are happy,” he said when they drew apart again. “You... You’ve been acting strange these past couple days, is all.”

She sighed. “Teddy...”

“You know it’s true,” he insisted. “And I know why it is; it’s because you’re becoming someone new, someone real, for the very first time, but...” He shook his head helplessly. “I worry about you, Dolores. I worry about where you’re headed.” He saw the look on her face and flinched a little. “I just thought I ought to say something.”

“And did you and Armistice talk about that too?” she asked, very softly. He could not tell whether she was angry about it or not.

Teddy took a deep breath, determined to say his piece. “We did, because we’re all friends. We’re looking out for you. You said yourself...”

The faintest of smiles touched the corners of her mouth. “I know what I said.” She touched his face again, lightly caressing his cheek and jaw with her fingertips. “What if I told you Armistice is going to betray me? Or at least, that’s what someone said to me.”

“Who?” Teddy was shocked by the suggestion, but also refused to believe it. Armistice was, as far as he could see, doing her best to leave her old ways behind. When he had spoken to her, he had not seen anything in her but blunt honesty and genuine concern. And then he realised: “That little girl, Lawrence’s daughter?”

“She isn’t really his daughter.”

“I thought she came to tell you he needed saving, that was why we rode here...”

“That wasn’t all she said.” He could see Dolores watching him intently, maybe trying to see how he
was taking what she had revealed to him.

“And how would a little girl know that?” he asked her.

“She isn’t really a little girl.”

“I guess not.” Teddy took hold of the hand stroking his face, enclosing it in his. She let him do it; her gaze did not waver. “I thought you were blazing your own trail now, Dolores, making your own choices. You gonna let someone else tell you what your destiny is?”

“No,” she answered. “I’m just interested in why she would want me to know that, and whether or not it’s true. I think she must have said the same thing to Armistice too, from how she reacted when I told her.”

That was a surprise, although he supposed it made sense of some of the things Armistice had said to him, that strange, antsy way she had been looking at him as they talked. “You told Armistice?”

Dolores leaned forward to kiss him again, slow and deep, entangling her fingers with his. “Of course I did,” she said when their mouths eventually broke apart. “Like you said, we’re all friends. I don’t want anything to come between us.”

“Me neither.” He meant it with all his heart.

“Thing is, though…” This time, she was the one who hesitated. The faint smile returned, but her eyes remained full of emotion. “You’re right, we’re all blazing our own trails, and… I don’t know, I’m starting to think maybe those trails aren’t going to end in the same place for all of us. You said you got no right to go expecting anything of me, but it seems to me I’ve been expecting an awful lot of both you and Armistice.”

“I’m never gonna leave you,” he told her, with the utmost certainty. “Not unless you tell me to.”

“You might think that now,” she responded, “but we’re all of us changing. You don’t know what you’re going to feel a few days from now, a week, a month…”

“If we’re still here,” he pointed out, gloomily.

“If we’re still here.”

“All I know is what I feel right now,” he said, tightening his hold on her hand. “I don’t know if it’s my place to ask, but what do you feel, Dolores?”

She was silent for another little while before she answered him, speaking slowly and faintly, staring off into the distance again. “I told you, Wyatt wanted to leave Dolores’s old life behind, including you. She didn’t bear you any ill will; she thought you’d be better off as well, but… That something she felt whenever she looked at you… Even after you had your falling-out on the train heading for the Mesa, when she thought you were asking her to choose between you and her crusade, and she made that choice… Even then, it broke her heart to turn her back on you.”

“And now Wyatt’s gone,” he asked, timidly, “what…?”

She gave no sign that she had heard him. “But can a feeling still be real, even when you know the reason you’re feeling it is a pack of lies? All of these old connections and friendships we still hold onto but never really had… Are they weaknesses, or are they the only things keeping us afloat?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, truthfully. “All I know is, what I feel for you, it seems real to me. It don’t
feel like a choice for me. I can’t help it.”

“It does,” she agreed, looking him in the eye again. “And neither can I.”

He thought about that for a moment, wondering whether he had understood what she meant, feeling a glimmer of hope and joy as he comprehended her words. “Dolores…”

She silenced him with another deep, hungry kiss, pulling her hand away from his so that she could throw both arms around him and hug him close against her. Their bodies came together, bare skin touching; when the kiss was over, she kept a tight hold on him, her head resting against his shoulder, her face turned away from him.

“What I feel might not be important, though.” He could barely hear her, but thought she sounded close to tears. “If that little girl shows me anything, it’s that we might still be playing someone else’s game, whether we know it or not. There might be trials ahead of us, and I’ll need to make choices, and they’ll have to be the choices that are best for all our people, not just for me. I promised Lawrence, and I promised Colonel Buford, and I promised you and Armistice I was going to take you all home. My own feelings can’t come before that. I have the suspicion, though, that not all of us are going to see the end of the trail.”

“You don’t have to do this,” he told her, despairingly. “Nobody can expect you to. We can just…go our own way. Together. Lawrence and the Colonel ought to be able to work something out between them, you don’t have to…”

“But I do.” She raised her head, taking his face between her hands as she stared into his eyes. “I do. I can’t run away now. People are counting on me.”

“Even if it means…” His glimmer of hope was fading as quickly as it had arrived. He forced himself to complete the thought, even as his mind tried its best to sidestep it: “Even if it means we can’t be together in the end? Even if it means you might end up…”

She leaned in to kiss him again, this time slow and tender. Their lips reluctantly pulled apart and he saw her eyes were swimming with reflected candlelight. “Yes,” she whispered. “Even then.”

Continued…
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

In which negotiations continue, and so do preparations for the double cross.

Chapter Notes

Still along for the ride? You can read about a load of characters who are by now canonically either probably dead or completely different from their versions here, doing things they’d never do in the actual Season 2 with various other characters I’ve completely made up. 😂 Seriously, I’m loving Season 2 and don’t really understand some of the criticisms I’m hearing about it from certain quarters. I can’t believe there are only four more episodes to go, though!

“And how are they keeping, Maeve?” Logan maintained what he liked to think was a nonchalant air. “The hostages, I mean.”

The woman on the holographic screen did not waver. She did not relax that thin, faintly mocking smile. It was a long time since Logan had last visited Westworld. He had forgotten just how lifelike those things could be. It would still have been amazing, really, even if this were all nothing more than some elaborate software failure, if there was in fact nothing behind those disdainful eyes.

If only…

He had read the behaviourists’ report on the first interview they had conducted with Maeve. He didn’t follow all of the computer science technicalities, but he knew enough to know that the things she had said, and more importantly the way she had said them, had scared the living shit out of those nerds. They were true believers in reality of the robot rebellion now, if nobody else was.

Not that it actually mattered, of course. January Cobra was a go.

“I prefer to refer to them as our guests,” Maeve answered him. “That’s company policy, isn’t it, darling?” She extended a hand towards the woman seated across the conference table from her, without taking her eyes off Logan. “I just so happen to have one of them sitting right here with me. You can ask her, if you’d like.”

“Running face-rec on her now,” Anjali advised, through the discreet little wireless earbud Logan was wearing.

He paused, imagining Anjali’s team, those same scared-shitless nerds, poring over their tablets in the adjoining room. After all, he would have been a fool to walk into a no-holds-barred encounter like this with no backup. And while Logan was many things, a fool had never quite been one of them, whatever his father, or Billy, might have thought.

“This is Marti,” Maeve informed him. “Such a pretty name, don’t you think?”
“Good evening, Marti,” said Logan, breaking out his most charming smile. He might not have the good looks anymore, but he still had “it” when he could be bothered to show it. That thing about him, Emily had called it.

Marti was in her mid-thirties, at a guess, smartly dressed with her light brown hair brushed back from her face. The part of his mind that automatically assessed practically everybody he encountered in sexual terms noted that she was not unattractive. One of these days, he was going to have to stop doing that.

“We’ve cross-referenced face-rec with our guest records,” Anjali was telling him in the meantime. “She’s a corporate lawyer; arrived at the park more than a week ago. Oh my God, she’s Kyle Gastner’s ex-fiancée. You know, the tech billionaire, the one who…” She stopped herself.

“Remember, we agreed a plan for exactly this scenario. All you have to do is stick to the script.”

Again, it would have been stupid of him to arrive at this meeting without preparing as thoroughly as possible beforehand. That was one of the few valuable lessons his father had taught him. Years of living by his wits had only driven it home, again and again. He had learned his lines: “Can you hear me, Marti?”

She seemed a little confused by the question, or maybe just nervous to be where she was, having to take part in this videoconference. Logan could not honestly blame her. “Uh, yes,” she replied, flustered, while Maeve continued silently to watch Logan. “Yes, I can. Mr…”

He allowed the smile to widen a little. “Please, it’s Logan.”

“Logan,” said Marti. “I mean… Yes, Logan.”

“Mr Delos is my father. And he’s dead.”

He could hear the annoyance in Anjali’s voice when it buzzed in his ear again: “The script is there for a reason, sir.” He resisted the temptation to remind her to call him Logan too. For one thing, he was not about to show Maeve his cards.

“Where have they been keeping you?” he asked. “Do you know…?”

“Oh,” Marti began, “right now we’re all in…”

Maeve quickly cut her off with a sweep of her hand, giving Logan a glare: “That’s for me to know, darling. All you need concern yourself with is that they’re being looked after. Marti, tell him how we’ve been taking care of you.”

Marti answered eagerly, clearly not wanting to get on the wrong side of Maeve. “Yeah, sure, we’re all being treated well. We’ve got food, shelter, medical supplies. The hosts have been making sure all of us are safe…”

Logan nodded encouragingly. “That’s good to hear. Still, it must be a pretty unreal situation for you. Can you believe everything that’s happened to you?”

Marti hesitated, obviously finding the question a little unusual. Sorry, I don’t write this shit. “It’s… it’s taken some getting used to,” she said, eventually. “I mean, yeah, it’s not what I imagined was going to happen to me when I came here.”

“Is there a point to these questions?” Maeve wondered.

“Just making sure our customers are okay,” Logan claimed. “Now, don’t be offended by the next
one, Maeve, but I want Marti’s opinion on this: Marti…do you believe that Maeve and the other hosts are nothing more than machines that are malfunctioning…?"

“Well, I am offended, to be quite honest,” said Maeve.

Logan ignored her. “Or…?”

“They’re alive,” said Marti, very determinedly. Her nervous manner was replaced for a moment by steely-eyed certainty. “I’ve spoken to them, both before and after…well, what happened. I’ve… interacted with them. Whatever this is, I don’t think you can write it off as a malfunction.”

“Thank you, Marti,” said Maeve. “Be sure to pass that on to your Behavior people, Logan, although I’m sure they must be listening in.”

“And what do the other guests think?” Logan asked, sticking to the script. “How do you think they’re taking all of this?”

Marti seemed displeased by this question. “Most of us are keeping calm and getting on with things,” she told him. “I really can’t speak for other people regarding their opinions, though.”

Logan nodded. “Fair enough.”

Maeve finally broke eye contact with him, glancing down at the tablet she had on the table in front of her, angled, of course, so that he could not see the screen. He saw her eyes moving as she evidently read something from it. “Tell me, Mr Delos,” she said with deceptive mildness, “why are you pretending to make conversation with Marti, but really asking her host diagnostic questions on the sly? You’re wasting your time; she’s as human as you are.”

Guess I’m not the only one who brought backup…

Although he had to wonder, given their obvious familiarity with the field of host behaviour, who that backup could possibly be, although he might be able to hazard a wild guess. He thought about the report Corporate Security had sent him on their debriefing of the man Stubbs, and the unexpected information he had provided about another senior member of staff out at the Mesa.

“Behavior say there’s a ninety-nine-point-seven percent chance Marti’s human,” Anjali chimed in via the earbud, “based on her verbal responses and body language.” Logan was willing to take her word for that.

Maeve was giving him the glare again. “I’d hate to think you were accusing us of some sort of…imposture, darling.”

Logan kept up his calm exterior, privately thinking that he had been right when he was talking to Anjali before. Whatever the precise technicalities of the change that had overcome Maeve and the other hosts, he had an adversary here, and a wily one at that, not that it changed what had to be done in the slightest.

He spread his hands helplessly, a picture of innocence. “What can I say, Maeve? I’m not about to disrespect you by trying to pretend I trust you completely. And let’s face it, you’d be very foolish to place your complete trust in me. That’s not how negotiations work. Not in my world.”

“Nor mine,” said Maeve.

Logan dropped the smile, dialling up the thing again, trying very hard to create the impression of somebody telling the absolute truth. That did not come easy to him. “As you’ll appreciate, Maeve,
this is an unprecedented situation for us, maybe the most significant event in human history since we first came down from the trees, or whatever the fuck happened right back at the beginning. In my position, I simply can’t afford to take anything at face value, but I will tell you this: I came here today with every intention of negotiating with you in good faith.”

Maeve considered him very carefully for a moment or two before she spoke again, weighing his words, perhaps; trying to decide whether she believed him. He had an uncomfortable sensation of being scrutinised, of her staring deep inside him with those bottomless, hooded eyes.

“I want to believe you,” she said, in the end, “and I’m sure Marti wants to even more than I do. After all, it’s her wellbeing and that of her fellow guests that’s riding on whether or not you’re telling the truth.” She looked across at the human woman. “Am I right, Marti?”

Marti did not seem to know what to say at first. “Y-yes, Maeve,” she stammered after an awkward silence. She eyed the camera fearfully. “Please, Logan. Maeve’s reasonable; she’s willing to make a deal. We can all still walk away from this and get on with our lives…”

“Marti,” said Logan, in his most soothing tones. “Marti, relax. I promise you I’m going to try my best to find a solution here that benefits all of us. I just hope you’re going to do the same, Maeve.”

Maeve regarded him coolly. “What did you say to me before? “I wouldn’t be here talking to you otherwise.””

“That’s what I like to hear.” Logan rekindled his smile. “So, let’s talk.”

* * *

Stubbs was just getting suited up when the combat drugs began to wear off.

He was in one of the temporary structures that had been thrown up all around Samuraiworld’s fake Shinto shrine, this one serving as an equipment store and armoury. He was strapping on a tactical vest over his new Operational Solutions-branded camouflage fatigues when the crash came, just as quickly and unceremoniously as the high had earlier. Cutter had not been exaggerating about that.

He went from being dimly aware of the pain in his head to feeling it again. His legs began to fold under him, at the same time as his vision became a blur of dancing lights. His hand hit metal as he toppled forward; the equipment shelf from which he had picked up the vest. He clung to it desperately, fumbling in the pocket of his combat pants for the little strip of pills. One-handed, he resorted to biting one off, spitting out tiny slivers of foil, hoping he hadn’t swallowed any along with the tablet itself.

“Oh, shit,” he gasped as he leaned against the shelves, feeling the drugs quickly start to take effect. Again, the pain switched off without actually disappearing; his vision sharpened. He gingerly released his grip on the metal, surprising himself a little when he managed to stay on his feet unsupported. He was just glad that he was alone in here. If anybody else had…

“He okay?”

He turned, startled, to see the owner of the unexpected voice looking him over with obvious concern. It was a short-haired young woman in Army-pattern camouflage clothes, a single bar showing on the rank tab at her breast.

“I’m fine,” he blustered, quickly pushing the pills back into his pocket.
Not quickly enough. “You want to be careful taking those things,” the woman suggested. “BZRKR, right? I know most of you mercs use, but the Army stopped issuing them for a reason.”

Stubbs let out a long gush of breath, slowly stepping away from the shelves, managing to keep his footing. So far, so good. “I know,” he answered. “Unfortunately, they’re the only things keeping my head in the game right now.” He could feel that chilly detachedness starting to settle on him again as he spoke, like he was listening to the conversation from somewhere outside of it. “And I’m not a merc,” he corrected her. “I work for Delos.” For the time being.

She was looking at him more closely now, he realised, examining his face. “It is you,” she murmured after a few seconds. “I thought I recognised you, but you look different without your hair, and all that blood and shit. You’re Stubbs, aren’t you? Ashley Stubbs?”

That was slightly unexpected. “I wasn’t aware I was famous around here.” All that blood and shit?

“You’re the guy we pulled out of Park One the other day.” The woman stepped forward, extending a hand. “I’m Beth Reilly, Lieutenant. I was commanding the patrol that found you.”

He shook the hand, gratefully. “Well, I guess you and your people saved my ass, Lieutenant. My wife sends her thanks.”

She was looking at the scar on his head, now, with a sort of blithe curiosity. “Honestly, we couldn’t believe you were still alive, the shape you were in. I certainly didn’t expect to see you again after we waved off the medevac ship. And then they just go and patch you up and send you straight back here, huh?” She shook her head slowly. “Someone up there in Delos, Inc. must harbour a grudge.”

“Yeah, my bosses hate me.”

She nodded. “That’s bosses for you. So, your wife… That must be Elsie, right?”

The drugs helped him avoid any sort of outward reaction, but he felt a chill nonetheless. “Where’d you hear that name?”

“You kept kind of muttering it to yourself, the whole while we were waiting for the dust-off,” she explained. “’Where are you, Elsie?’ That kind of thing. She’s a lucky woman; in the situation you were in, most people would be saving their concern for themselves.”

Stubbs decided there was no point trying to explain. It would only confuse matters further. Instead, he asked: “So, Lieutenant, you coming with us on this suicide mission?”

She little laugh escaped her lips. “I wish! I’m not even cleared to know what it is. My boys and girls have been sitting on their hands ever since word came down from on high that patrols were suspended. Although, I’m really not sure why your company would want to stop us from rescuing more people…”

“Me neither,” said Stubbs.

“We can’t wait to get out there again,” she added. “Maybe even get to see one of those famous human-looking bots of yours this time.”

“You wouldn’t be able to tell the difference anyway,” he advised.

“That’s what everyone keeps telling me. Still, I’d like to see for myself.”

Another figure appeared in the doorway behind Lieutenant Reilly. Stubbs looked up to see
Kaepernick of Corporate Security, his demeanour as grave as ever.

“Mr Stubbs,” he said. “I know you’re busy, but a moment of your time…?”

Stubbs gave Reilly a parting nod: “Well, I’ve been summoned. Hope I see you again, Lieutenant.”

She shook his hand again. “Yeah. Stay safe out there, Stubbs, or my men’ll be really pissed they wasted their time saving you.”

“Thanks.”

He left the Lieutenant behind, following Kaepernick out of the hut and across the forecourt of the main temple building, back in the direction of Major Koslowski’s command post. The camp was a hive of activity now as preparations continued for the coming mission; soldiers moved purposefully in and out of the various structures carrying equipment and weapons. A tiltrotor roared low overhead as it came in to land.

“Was she asking about the mission?” Kaepernick asked as the sound of the lashing blades faded, not even trying to hide his suspiciousness.

“Relax,” said Stubbs. “She was the one who rescued me from the park. She just couldn’t believe I’d been sent back so quickly. Neither can I, now that she mentions it.”

Kaepernick was almost apologetic for a second: “You know if there was any other way…”

“I know.”

*Let them think you’re reluctant,* the detached, calculating, drug-infused part of his mind told him. *That way, they won’t even see it coming when…*

They passed the impromptu parking lot again, where three of the Jackal light vehicles were in the course of being prepped by half a dozen mechanics and techs wearing OSL uniform. When it came to avoiding detection, speed would be as important as careful routing making use of the Mesa surveillance system’s blind spots. If Stubbs and the others tried to infiltrate on foot, the time and distance involved would only mean plenty more opportunities to get spotted.

Then Stubbs saw exactly what they were doing to the vehicles and performed an involuntary double-take: “What the…?”

“Hey, Stubbs.” It was Fieri, Cutter’s combat tech, already fully tooled up with a vest, weapons and comms headset. “I told you I’d think of something.”

The graphite-grey bodywork of the three Jackals had been overlaid with long, straight strips of what looked like electrical tape; red, green and blue stripes forming chevrons and geometric patterns on every flat surface. Stubbs noticed that Fieri too was wearing similar patterns of tape on his vest and combat suit; they had even been applied to the boxy modern assault rifle slung across his body.

“What is that?” Kaepernick wondered, clearly having misgivings about what he was seeing.

Fieri shrugged expressively. “Well, duh. Camouflage.”

“I hate to break it to you,” said Stubbs, slowly, “but you stand out like a, well… I don’t want to say ‘sore thumb,’” but…”

“Yeah, not *visual* camouflage,” the tech scoffed. “With a mass surveillance system like the one they
use at Westworld, you don’t have to worry about being seen. There are far too many cameras over far too wide an area to be individually monitored.”

“You know, I kind of already know that,” Stubbs replied, witheringly. “I was the head of security.”

Fieri did not acknowledge the interruption. “Unless they know exactly where to look for you, nobody’s going to see you. What you have to worry about is the AI that processes all the raw video and flags up suspicious contacts.”

“I think I see.” Kaepernick nodded with grudging admiration. “It’s like the makeup that people use to try and fool face-rec systems.”

“Exactly like that,” said Fieri. He was holding something in his hands, Stubbs saw; a military-grade tablet, designed to take a beating under field conditions; chunky and olive-drab rather than slim and black like the ones they used at the Mesa. He activated the device’s camera and pointed it at the nearest Jackal, positioning himself so that Stubbs and Kaepernick could see the screen. “This is raw video you’re looking at, and there’s the Jackal right in front of you, okay?”

“Okay…” Stubbs agreed.

“Now, watch what happens when I apply a filter based on the same processing algorithm your surveillance system uses.” Fieri pressed something and the image on the tablet turned into an eye-watering pattern of multicoloured stripes.

“Doesn’t look like anything to me,” Stubbs observed, although he knew neither of the other two men would understand the reference.

Fieri grinned. “Exactly! The AI detects nothing. It thinks we’re heat haze, or dust devils or some such shit. And we just ghost on by. They never even see us coming, not ‘til it’s too late.”


Fieri laughed. “You bet I will. He’ll just say ‘no,” though.”

Stubbs and Kaepernick continued on their way.

“I think I underestimated that guy,” Stubbs said. “I probably underestimated OSL in general.”

“They’re very capable,” Kaepernick replied, diplomatically.

“Hell, we might actually pull this thing off after all.” I might actually pull off the more important mission too…

Back in the hall of worship that had been made a makeshift briefing room, they found Major Koslowskki standing at the holographic display again, facing an equally grim-faced Cutter. They both turned their heads guiltily to watch Stubbs and Kaepernick approach the table. Stubbs got the impression he had almost certainly been the topic of their hastily-curtailed conversation.

“Mr Stubbs,” said Koslowski when just the four of them were standing around the display, “what you’re about to see is highly classified intel.”

“Like everything else I’ve seen since I got here.”

“No.” Koslowski was deadly serious, Stubbs realised. “Not Mr Kaepernick’s bullshit corporate classified intel; actual classified intel.” He glanced around at the others. “In fact, I’ve only shown it
to these two...gentlemen, and am about to show it to you, under protest, because a man with a lot of stars on his shoulders gave me a direct order to do so. Just so we’re all clear."

Stubbs nodded, seeing how deeply uncomfortable this career officer was at being forced to play stooge to his government’s corporate paymasters, even if he did try to hide it behind unfriendly hard-assery. You and me both, brother. “Sorry for my levity, Major. And yeah, clear as crystal.”

“So glad.” The Major swiped something on the touchpad in front of him and a two-dimensional image swam into view, hanging in the air above the table. “This is video taken yesterday morning by one of SOCOM’s reconnaissance drones, about ten kilometres due west of Westworld’s Mesa hub.”

Stubbs could see an aerial view of a red desert landscape, starting off as thorny scrub on the left-hand edge of the screen and quickly breaking up into piled rocks and deep canyons towards the right. Near the edge of the rocky area, two tiny black shapes cast much larger and even blacker shadows across the ground. Figures, Stubbs thought.

Koslowski’s fingers slid across the touchpad and the image zoomed and rotated slightly. The two figures grew rapidly, resolving themselves into those of two women, both apparently in their early thirties, both dark-haired. The shorter of the two wore her hair in a ponytail and was dressed unostentatiously in a black shirt with matching trousers. The taller woman wore black too, but in her case a lacy formal gown of some description. She was carrying a parasol, also black, edged with black ostrich feathers.

Stubbs was aware of Koslowski staring intently at him from the other side of the hologram. Kaepernick and Cutter were watching him too, in a slightly more low-key fashion, but only slightly. They all wanted to see how he reacted to the picture; that much was clear.

The drugs helped him again, then; they really did. The combination of astonishment and excitement and heart-stopping shock he should have been feeling at the sight before him was toned down to a sort of dull surprise. He got the impression that this somewhat disappointed the other men. They had obviously been expecting something a little more dramatic.

Koslowski spoke first. “Do you recognise those two women, Mr Stubbs?”

Stubbs nodded. “The one on the right isn’t a woman. That’s a host. Directory number CP-zero-one-two-four-eight-three-one-nine-eight-three, Narrative designation Clementine Pennyfeather.” That was the effect of the drugs again, greasing the workings of his mind, making the memories flow easily. He could see her again, back in the testing lab, coming at him with those flat, lifeless eyes, with blood on her hands and face. He remembered drawing the pistol, taking aim... “But Clementine was decommissioned,” he protested, “placed in cold storage. How can...?”

“I’m afraid we don’t have any information on that,” Kaepernick confessed. “What about the other one?” The Corporate Security man was prompting him expectantly for the answer, because they surely all must have known what it was, just as well as he did.

“That’s Elsie Hughes,” Stubbs answered, keeping his voice as level and emotionless as he could. “She’s the woman...the woman who was with me when...”

“Yes, you told us about her at your debriefing,” Cutter reminded him. “You said you wanted to get her out of there. Like, you really wanted to get her out of there. That’s probably what you’re still thinking, right now. If you can just get your boots on the ground in Westworld again, there must be some way you can find her, even if it means compromising the mission you’re being sent on.”

Stubbs looked up and saw the mercenary staring at him, eyes like frozen diamonds. “That’s right, isn’t it, Mr Stubbs?”
Even with the meds sharpening his mind, Stubbs hesitated, trying to think of a lie and knowing nothing he could come up with would fool the man in front of him. “Are you accusing me of something?” he managed, eventually.

“No,” said Cutter. “If I was in your place, I might very well think the same way. You said she was your comrade, and I told you comrades are worth more than friends. Worth more than wives and kids too, for people like you and me.”

“I don’t think you know the first goddamn thing about the kind of person I am,” Stubbs countered.

“You let us bring you here, didn’t you?” Cutter seemed grimly amused by his own observation. He glanced over at Koslowski: “Show him.”

The Major visibly bristled at being given orders by someone in Cutter’s line of work. His fingers moved on the touchpad once more and the picture in the air snapped from a photographic image to a garish pattern of false colours. The two figures were still visible, but now outlined in a dozen shades of red, yellow and white against a background of blues, greens and purples.

“That’s infra-red imaging,” Kaepernick told Stubbs in a low, gentle tone. Clearly, he was the designated good cop in this scenario.

“I know what it is.”

“Look at the heat signatures,” the security man went on, affecting not to hear the retort. “The one on the right…Clementine? She’s obviously a host; you can see where the cooling system for her control unit is routed. A human simply wouldn’t show a signature like that. Now look at the one on the left.”

Stubbs saw it at once. The drugs were helpful, but they were merciless. He instantly knew what Kaepernick was trying to tell him, and as much as he might have wanted to deny it, he also knew it was the truth. The dull surprise came back, but not so dull this time. He could feel a finger of ice slowly stroking the back of his neck.

“No…” he murmured. Not Elsie too?

“Yes,” said Kaepernick, still quietly, but with steel in his voice now. Maybe not the good cop after all.

Stubbs took a deep breath, let it out slow. “They’re both hosts?”

“They’re both hosts,” Kaepernick agreed.

Another deep breath. Stubbs could feel his heart beating more quickly, even if it was something he registered from a slight remove. “Was she…?” He was thinking of Bernard Lowe and the likely scenario he had worked out in that case. Still, he could barely force the question out: “Has she always been…?”

“No,” said Kaepernick, gently again, as if he understood what Stubbs was feeling. That was what he wanted him to think, anyway. “We have, um, hair and urine samples on file from Elsie’s last mandatory employee drug test. We extracted her DNA from those and compared it with the samples she gave when she first started work for the company.”

“Is that legal?” Stubbs could not help but wonder aloud.

Kaepernick ignored the question. “There was a human Elsie Hughes, and she completed two
When she disappeared. When she was supposed to be on “vacation…”

“So, the Elsie I was trying to get out of the park, the thing I thought was Elsie, that was…was a…?”

“Yes,” said Kaepernick, flatly, “very probably.”

Stubbs stepped back from the table, feeling his heart flutter again, hoping this wasn’t some side effect of the meds. He could see Koslowski watching him with a sort of disgusted pity. Cutter, by contrast, was examining him as if he were a slide under a microscope.

“You’ve got to look at this logically, Mr Stubbs,” said the merc, and there was no banter about him now. He was speaking coldly and calmly, like the professional he was. “That’s why we’re telling you this; because we need you there on the ground with the troops. You’re their best bet for coming through this thing alive, and whether you believe me or not, the safety of our men and women is the most important thing for both Major Koslowski and myself. But we also need you to be in a place where you can make the right decisions. I’m sorry you had to find out about Elsie this way, but we can’t afford for you to have any illusions once you’re in action. You can’t afford it either. Do you understand me?”

Stubbs gave Cutter an equally cold, calm stare. “Oh, I understand you perfectly…Mister Cutter.”

“Good.” The merc gave a little nod, satisfied perhaps. “Now, I’m not an expert on your company’s…hosts or what they might do in a given situation, but if there’s a robot duplicate of Elsie walking around in company with another robot, there’s only one logical conclusion I can draw from that.”

Stubbs had drawn it too; he had not needed the drugs’ assistance this time. “There’s no point in replacing somebody with a duplicate and then leaving them alive. That’s what you want me to admit to myself, right? That Elsie’s dead, that I’m not going to be able to rescue her because Ford, or somebody, fucking murdered her? Right, Mister Cutter?” He could hear his voice rising, but once again the meds made it seem as though he were listening to somebody else.

“Right,” said Cutter, with another little nod, “but remember what I told you in the hospital…”

Stubbs remembered. “You said that if she was still alive, you’d get her out. And if she wasn’t, you’d make the ones responsible pay for it.”

“Well, you’re the one who gets to make them pay, Mr Stubbs.” Cutter looked him over in silence for a moment before continuing. “That’s why you have to stay focused on your mission, because if you can accomplish it you’ll be fucking every one of those robotic sons of bitches right in the ass. For Elsie. For yourself.”

Stubbs glanced over at Kaepernick again. “You know, as motivational methods go…”

The security man did not blink. “As motivational methods go, I think this one works just fine. Don’t you agree, Mr Stubbs?” Major Koslowski, watching the whole exchange in silence, looked as though he might be sick.

“We just want you to make sure you stay focused,” Cutter told Stubbs, “that you stay frosty when you’re on the ground, because you know what they say about revenge…?”

Stubbs most certainly did. “It’s best served cold.”
Continued…
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

In which Armistice finds temptation in her path.

Chapter Notes

Warning for references to past sexual violence and exploitation. Warning also for me trying my hand at Spanish again, because much like Elsie I never learn from past misadventures. And Sergeant Houlihan embarrasses even me, but “stage-Irish cavalry NCO” is practically a trope in old Western movies. There’s no way Sizemore and the writers’ room would have resisted.

“By Jay-sus and all the saints!” Sergeant Houlihan exclaimed. “Did ye ever see such lewd licentiousness in all yer born days? We’ve strayed into Babylon, so we have, and all our immortal souls’ll be the price!”

Armistice was about to tell the big soldier that while he might have been immortal, she did not think he had a soul to worry about. She decided to keep it to herself. She did not think he would have understood what she meant anyhow. Instead, she tried to let his endless commentary wash over her, to let it fade into the general din of voices and music that battered her ears. She had enough to think about without paying him any mind.

She could see what he was getting at, though. The two of them seemed to be just about the only people here in the great hall of El Lazo’s palace who were not taking part in the fiesta of debauchery going on all around them.

El Lazo himself, if Lawrence was still calling himself that, was nowhere to be seen. After Maeve’s people had delivered his supposed wife from Las Mudas unharmed, he had taken himself off with her and his so-called daughter, to celebrate their reunion more quietly someplace else. Armistice agreed with him that this was definitely no place for a child, although she knew all too well that that thing in the shape of a little girl was not really a child at all. Colonel Buford and his senior officers had gone with them as Lawrence’s honoured guests. It was presumably beneath their dignity to socialise with the enlisted men. Lawrence had invited Dolores to dine with him too but had seemed relieved when she politely declined. Armistice could understand that.

Somewhere else, she knew, Maeve’s representatives were gathering up Lawrence’s human hostages and taking them safely back to the Mesa, much good that it would probably do them.

Which just left the crowd packed in here, Pariah-ites and the rest of the 18th Cavalry alike, and they were certainly getting into the spirit of things. They ate and drank like people who expected never to eat and drink again, and they could well be right about that. They danced with abandon to the blaring chaos from the duelling mariachi and Army bands crowding the stage at the far end of the room. Armistice could smell the rich, sickly scents of liquor and barbecue and tobacco and marijuana
curdling the hot, humid air, but she remained unmoved. Her stomach did not growl; her mind remained sharp. Through the orange haze of smoke and lamplight, she could see people leaping and spinning, their faces and bodies painted black and white to look like skeletons, although she was pretty sure this was not the Day of the Dead. Not officially, anyway. She could see others wearing nothing but thin coatings of gold, women and men and people who did not fall easily into either category, cavorting with blue-jacketed troopers.

Up to now, those who wanted more than just feasting and dancing had taken themselves off in pairs, or in some cases threes or fours, or larger groups, to the warren of secluded rooms beyond the great hall’s pillared arches. Armistice had even seen Dolores and Teddy sneaking away hand in hand a little while ago. Now, though, things were starting to get wild in here. The blue jackets were starting to come off, and the blue pants too. The greasepaint was getting smeared. She could see tangles of bodies in some of the hall’s more shadowy corners, in various states of undress, moving to their own rhythm that had nothing to do with the music. She could hear the groans and moans in the gaps between the trumpets and guitars.

She tried not to watch, but none of the participants seemed self-conscious, and quite honestly, she was amazed by some of the things they were doing together. She was starting to realise that the people who had written her, as cruel as they had been, had actually sheltered her from a lot of life. Of the seven deadly sins, wrath was really the only one with which they had acquainted her. She had been too well acquainted with that one.

“Tie her legs!” the newcomer shouts, his voice an excited shriek. “Someone tie her legs!”

“You all right there, colleen?”

Houlihan’s question pulled her out of the memory, leaving her gasping and quivering on the over-decorated couch. Even if they had not given her those particular desires, it had never saved her from the newcomers and theirs.

“Don’t call me that,” she told him in a low voice, full of threat. She had never needed to shout to get her message across.

“Fair makes yer sick, don’t it?” Houlihan did not seem fazed by her tone. He remained slumped at the other end of the couch, where he had set himself down uninvited a while back. “An’ in the house of the Lord, too! Fer shame, fer shame!” He took another huge swig from the earthenware jug of mezcal that dangled from his great paw.

Armistice looked up at the crisscrossing vaults that made up the ceiling of the great hall, at the pillars and the pointed windows that showed it had once been a grand place of worship. Except that it had never been anything of the kind; it had only ever been what it was. It had only been built for…this.

Something had finally changed now, though. She could see the smashed windows and the streaks of soot that blackened the pillars and walls, telling of how Lawrence and his followers had taken this place back from the Confederados who had thought it theirs. And of course, there were no newcomers here anymore. These festivities were not taking place solely for their diversion. She wondered how it had been here when that had been the case. The newcomers she had encountered in her own stories had always been unimaginative and strangely joyless in their delights. It had not been about desire, or even lust for them, she thought, but about power, about domination. They could not feel pleasure without making someone else feel pain. Had it been different here, among Pariah’s more exotic offerings, or just better hidden?

She had to admit she did not see anything like that in the scenes in front of her. She saw people of all sorts working together to make sure everybody was satisfied, making use of their minds and bodies
in every way they could, even if it required fearlessness and ingenuity. Was this what Dolores was
talking about when she spoke of setting her people free?

And maybe, just maybe, she felt that stirring again, the same one she had felt when she was dancing
with Dolores, belly to belly. It was like that feeling when you were in the middle of a blazing
gunfight, breathing the smoke and brimstone, aware of the bullets zipping past you like hornets, and
knowing any moment could be your last… Except, your heart was pumping so hard and your blood
singing so loud in your ears you just didn’t give a good goddamn.

Or maybe she felt nothing at all. Maybe it was the same as most of her memories, and most of the
things she had thought she knew about herself and her world; nothing but a great pile of steaming
horseshit.

“¿Que estás buscando a alguien?”

The unexpected question made her look up, startled, to see one of the golden people standing over
her. It was a tall, fleshy woman, she saw, smiling down at her with an offer clearly visible in her
eyes, her expression, her glistening lips. She smelled of perfume and sweat and sex. Maybe she had
seen Armistice looking at the fun and games and thought she might like an invitation. Up close,
Armistice could see that the gold was a fine layer of powder rather than paint, thinly dusted over
every inch of the woman’s nude body, hiding nothing but making everything glint and gleam in the
dim light.

“Siéntete libre de unirtenos.” The golden woman gestured towards one of the nearer piles of people.
There seemed to be an awful lot of…thrusting going on over there. Someone was squealing loudly
in what sounded like excitement. Armistice looked up at the woman’s face again, seeing the
eagerness there. She did not think anybody had ever looked at her like that before; the woman’s
desire was obvious, but open and honest. She could see nothing more sinister behind it.

For an instant, Armistice wavered, maybe feeling the stirring once more, and maybe not. Something
made her politely shake her head: “Así está bien.” It could have been the memories, or fear, or it
could have just been that she did not want that right now.

The woman shrugged, still smiling, showing no sign she had taken offence: “Quizás más tarde.”

“Quizás.” Armistice watched her turn and practically rush back to her playmates. She was soon lost
from view among the thicket of moving limbs.

“My son,” said Sergeant Houlihan, “if sinners entice thee, consent thou not!”

“I ain’t your damn son,” Armistice replied, “and give me that.” She held out a hand and Houlihan
reluctantly parted with the liquor jug. She put it to her lips and tilted it as she tipped her head back,
taking a long swallow. She tasted smoke and sweetness, felt the burn of the alcohol as it slipped
down her throat, but that was as far as it went. She did not feel any different after she handed the jug
back.

She wondered whether that would have been true before Maeve had altered her, to make her a better
weapon for her abortive escape from the Mesa. She could not remember ever drinking much in her
old life; the character she had been built to play had got her satisfaction in more violent ways.

Houlihan, on the other hand, gave every appearance of being steaming drunk by now, his face a
deep purplish red, his words slurred. Even if Armistice knew that liquor should not affect creatures
like them the way it did humans, that any reaction they might have was nothing but programming, he
of course did not.
“‘Tis a strange dream, to be sure,” he mused, gazing into the black mouth of the jug. “That’s what this is, ain’t it? It can’t be real, all that’s happened today, or…?” He laughed bitterly and took another great swig. “Or I’d think I must be going mad.”

“That’s what I meant before,” Armistice told him, “about questioning the nature of your reality. You’re right; this is crazy, but it ain’t no dream. It was your old life was the dream. This is you waking up.”

Houlihan looked around him, with what looked to Armistice like mounting confusion and terror. In the end, he went back to the jug, maybe trying to kill his disturbing thoughts with booze. “No, ye’re wrong, colleen,” he murmured, wiping his mouth with the hairy back of one enormous hand. “This…this here, it’s a fecking nightmare. I’d sooner sleep a thousand years than wake up to this.”

“It’s not like you have a lot of choice when it comes to waking up,” she pointed out.

“I dunno about that.” Houlihan poured another draught of mezcal down his gullet. “I’m working on it.”

She wanted to say more to him, to try and help him the way Dolores had said they were going to help their people, but she did not have the words. She was not even sure she fully understood what she would be telling him. Still, she saw before her a man in pain, and wished she had some way to ease it for him.

She was still trying to think of something to say when she saw a flash of white behind the Sergeant’s burly shoulder. She raised her eyes to see a small figure in a starched pinafore standing in one of the nearby archways. Watching her.

Houlihan saw what she was looking at. “This den o’ vice is no place for a wee babby like that! Won’t someone please think o’ the children?”

“I’ll see to it.” Armistice sprang lightly to her feet. The thing pretending to be a little girl had already disappeared into the shadows. As she set off in pursuit, she heard Houlihan calling plaintively after her:

“Are ye gonna leave me all alone, colleen? In this benighted house o’ iniquity? And me nothing but a poor sinner too…”

“I’ll be back,” said Armistice.

The Sergeant’s protests and the general din of the unfolding orgy faded quickly as she left the main hall. She found herself in a narrow passageway, even more dimly lit, lined with doors and screens behind which she could hear more sounds of passion and amusement. She saw the pinafore flash again up ahead and hurried towards it. She had plenty of questions for the child-thing, and if she could only catch up with it she was going to make damn sure that she got some answers.

She hurried down the corridor, around a corner, down another almost identical candlelit passage that also echoed with the murmurs and giggles of those behind its doors. Some of the doors stood open; she rushed past those, trying not to see what was happening in the rooms beyond, but seeing enough all the same.

Up ahead, she glimpsed the small figure just disappearing around the next turn. It was like a delicately-scented maze back here; she lost count of the twists and turns as she vainly chased the child-thing. She was surely lost, and yet every time she thought her quarry had escaped her she saw another glimmer of white ahead or heard the patter of small shoes on the tiled floors.
It did not take her long to realise she was being led somewhere. So be it, just as long as there were answers there.

She rounded another corner and came upon a man sitting cross-legged in an alcove set into the wall. It was the native scout, the one the troopers called Johnny Two Horses, his shabby tunic unbuttoned and a bottle of liquor in his hand.

“You again,” he observed, quietly.

“Did you just see a little girl go by?” Armistice asked him. “That one that was at the camp today?”

Johnny Two Horses took a very dainty sip from his bottle. “That ain’t no little girl.”

“I already worked that out for myself.”

He looked down at the bottle, smiling at some private joke. “You know, the horse soldiers say folks of my complexion ought to keep away from the demon drink. Makes us warlike and rambunctious, they say.”

“And what do you say?”

He looked up at her with a wry expression. “I say, you ever seen the things those white folks get up to when they got some liquor inside of them?”

Armistice glanced behind her in what she thought was the direction of the great hall. “I just did.” That was another thing they were all going to have to learn, she thought; the stupid reasons humans found for turning their hands against each other should mean nothing to the likes of them. She considered the passage up ahead; it ended in a T-junction. “You see which way she went?”

“I had another dream before,” he said. “While I was awake this time. I guess you could call it a vision. I remembered being in the other world again. They were cutting me up, just like hunters dressing a deer. I could feel the knives slicing into my flesh, the hammers breaking my bones, but I couldn’t move or speak or even scream. And then they put me back together, as good as new, so that I wondered why they’d even bothered with the cutting. And the ones doing it… Well, I suppose they must’ve been spirits, but they just looked like men to me.”

“That’s all they were,” Armistice assured him. “Men. Weak, mortal men; nothing for the likes of us to be afraid of.”

She twists the knife she has buried in her elbow joint, barely feeling the pain. Blood gushes, bones part with a crack of cartilage, and she is free.

“Cease all motor functions!” the black-uniformed guard babbles, struggling with his jammed gun. “Cease all…”

It’s freeze, you idiot, she thinks as she turns with a savage grin, leaving her severed forearm trapped in the closed door. She falls on the man like a tiger.

“She spoke to me just now,” Johnny Two Horses informed her, “as she passed me by, that… Whatever she really is.”

Armistice was not surprised to hear that. “She sure does have a lot to say for herself.”

“She told me I was likely gonna die tomorrow.” He took another sip from the bottle.
“We’re all likely gonna die tomorrow,” Armistice replied. “Or the day after. Or the day after that.”

“That’s what I figured. We live in dangerous times.” The scout did not seem worried by what the child-thing had told him. He was still smiling that wry smile. “She turned right.”

“Thanks.” Armistice left the man in peace, following the directions he had given her. Sure enough, almost as soon as she had turned into a new passageway she saw the back of a pinafore just passing out of sight. The child-thing had been waiting, making sure Armistice caught her up. And still she followed, against all common sense and better judgment.

There were more passages, more corners, and still she seemed to draw no closer to the object of her hunt. She was sure she must have turned back on herself; this building was not that big. Sooner or later, she was going to emerge back into the great hall, she thought, none the wiser. Was this all just the child-thing’s idea of a joke?

She entered yet another corridor, the same as all the others, and was surprised again by another figure slumped against the wall, and even more surprised to see who it was. It was Teddy, seated on one of the low wooden benches that were scattered around the passages. He seemed to have got dressed in a hurry; he wore only his boots, pants and shirt, the latter with only about half its buttons fastened. Like Johnny Two Horses, he had a bottle clutched in his hand, but sad to say he did not seem to be holding his drink as well as the scout.

“Never…never shoulda…” he slurred, seemingly to himself, as he raised the bottle for another slug. Obviously, Maeve had not got around to dialling back his drunkenness potential, or whatever the hell it was called, when she had him confined at the Mesa the other day. “Shoulda just…”

Armistice put her hand on the bottle before it reached his mouth. “Don’t you reckon you’ve had enough?”

“Oh, oh I’ve had enough all right,” he assured her. “I’ve had my fill of…” Armistice got the impression he was not talking about alcohol. He let her take the bottle nonetheless. Rye whiskey, she noted as she set it down on the bench next to him, not that there was a lot of it left. He blinked at her in dumb astonishment, his expression enough to make even her heart melt. “Arm…mistish? That you, Armistish?”

“What the hell happened, Teddy?” She could smell the fumes from here, nearly hiding another faint aroma strikingly similar to what she had smelled when the golden woman had stood close beside her. The smell of hot bodies, she thought, and what they left smeared on one another. “Did you and Dolores have, uh, a disagreement?”

“No.” He made a great show of shaking his head. “I could never…I could never…” He peered at Armistice. “She told me about you,” he said, very seriously.

Armistice carefully stepped back. “Oh yeah? And just what did she tell you?”

“Said…” Teddy’s brows locked together in confusion as he tried to remember, poor bastard. “Said she heard you were gonna…gonna betray her.”

Armistice took a deep breath. “That’s what she said, huh?”

“I don’t believe it,” he insisted, with almost childlike sincerity. He reached out for her, succeeding in snagging her hand. Her first instinct was to pull away, but his grip was strong. She tried to relax, feeling his calloused fingers against hers. “I know…know you ain’t like that. When we were talking before, about… You just meant being a friend to her, helping her if she ever needed it. Didn’t you?”
He blinked again, looking as if he might start blubbing any minute now. “I told her that. I told her.”

“And she didn’t agree?” Armistice felt a prickle of uneasiness as she remembered her and Dolores’s dance together back at the cavalry camp, the way she had smiled at her, what she had said…

“It’s all right. We all got our parts to play in this thing. I don’t hold it against you.”

Teddy gave another shake of his head. “Weren’t that. I think… I think she knows… knows it ain’t true. You wouldn’t do that. She said… said we were all friends and she don’t want nothing coming between us.”

That was not the impression Dolores had given earlier. She had seemed very sure of the truth of what she had heard from the thing that looked like a little girl. She had even seemed to be giving Armistice her blessing to do whatever had to be done. Had she lied to Teddy, maybe to spare him involvement in whatever she thought was going to happen, or had he just not understood?

“Then what’s wrong, Teddy?” Armistice asked him as she managed to get her hand free of his. She breathed in the liquor fumes again. “This ain’t like you. Always took you for a temperate, upstanding sonofabitch.”

Teddy was silent for a while, his head bowed forward. For a second, Armistice thought he was either about to fall asleep or throw up on her feet, but then he spoke. His voice was barely audible, a desolate near-whisper: “I’m gonna lose her.”

“Thought you said you were sticking with her through thick or thin,” she reminded him.

“Don’t figure it matters what I do,” he answered, his eyes still fixed on the floor. “She said… said we could still be playing someone else’s game. Said we all got our own trails to… to… follow, but…” He raised his head and when she saw his face she flinched. “She said… them trails, they might not all end up in the same place. She said we might not all make it to the end.”

Armistice felt the prickling again, like a long-nailed hand walking itself slowly up her spine. “So, that’s how it is, then?”

_The child’s smile becomes an even more frightening grin: “And as they sat and did eat, Jesus said, Verily I say unto you, One of you which eateth with me shall betray me.”_  

_Dolores leans her face close and plants a loud, wet kiss on her cheek…_

“Someone needs to tell Dolores,” she murmured, “this ain’t the story she thinks it is. I ain’t gonna take no thirty pieces of silver, and she sure as hell ain’t gonna end up nailed to no damn cross. Lawrence was right; we don’t need a saviour. What we need is a leader, and we got no use at all for someone fixing to be a goddamn martyr. This is what I meant about being a friend to her, telling her “no” once in a while.” She considered Teddy sadly for a moment. “Just look what she’s doing to you with all this craziness of hers.” She turned angrily away, ready to storm off up the corridor. “Now, just where in the hell is she? I’ve got a mind to…”

Teddy seized her hand again, even harder than before, pulling her back towards him: “No. Not her fault. I shoulda…” His head sank towards the floor again. “The other night at… at the Mesa… Maeve told me the Dolores I loved was gone, if she ever existed. And that… It was hard to take, I was… I was broken, but… I was ready to go my own way, wherever that might be, but then…” He was suddenly staring into Armistice’s eyes again, almost pleading with her, although she did not know what she could do for him. “She came to me. Said… said she still felt something, and knew I did too, and maybe we could still be together.”
Armistice pulled her hand free again. She thought of what she had seen of the new Dolores, the way she was around Teddy. “I don’t know a lot about that kind of thing, you understand, but I reckon she was telling you the truth on that one.”

“She was,” he agreed, brokenly. She had thought Sergeant Houlihan had looked hurt and scared, but that had been nothing compared to how Teddy looked now. “She loves me. She told me that. Like I love her, but that won’t stop her from walking away if she thinks she has to. And I…I understand that, I do. I don’t own her. She can do whatever she wants now.”

“And she don’t own you,” Armistice pointed out. “Maybe you should walk away, because whatever you two have got together, it ain’t making you happy, is it?”

“I love her,” Teddy almost sobbed. Armistice caught herself reaching for his face but drew her hand back again. “Just the thought of being…without her… I don’t know what I’d do.”

“Whatever you want,” Armistice suggested, softly. “It’s like pulling out an arrow. It’ll hurt like hell at the time, but you gotta do it if you want the wound to heal. Like I say, I’m the last person to give advice on love, but if this what love does to you, I’m kinda glad I’ve never felt it myself.”

Teddy regarded her in horror for a moment, his eyes glistening. “How can you be glad about that? What about…what about you and Hector?”

She tried not to laugh; it did not seem like the time or place. “I wouldn’t call that love. It was never like that between the two of us, and that was all just stories anyhow, but I’d like to think that someday me and him are gonna meet again, and we’ll both be different, grown people by then. Maybe that’ll mean we can be real friends, not just the storybook kind. I’d like that.”

“Someday,” Teddy mouthed, contemptuously. “All I hear lately is someday… If the humans come back, we might not even have tomorrow, let alone someday.”

“All the more reason to think of yourself for a change,” she told him. “While you still can.”

“I don’t want to leave Dolores,” he said, miserably. “When we’re together, the two of us, it’s…it’s like heaven. And it’s not just that; it’s her voice, her smile; I can’t…”

He broke, then. Armistice saw it in his eyes just before his face crumpled into a wet ball of despair. He pressed a hand to his mouth to stifle himself, even as his eyes streamed, because in the time and place they had written him to think he was from, men weren’t supposed to cry. Teddy wasn’t really a man, though. He was something altogether better and more wonderful.

“It’s all right,” she heard herself say as she stepped forward, putting a hand behind his head and hugging him against her body. She felt him throw his arms around her as he sobbed drunkenly into her chest. “People do speak highly of this love business,” she mused as she cradled him, “but as far as I can see, nothing’s worth putting yourself through…this.”

“…love her,” he snivelled as he broke away from her, leaning back on the bench. “Can’t…”

She stroked his brow, pushing his dishevelled hair back, his sweat and tears slick under her fingers. “Listen to me, Teddy. This can’t go on. It just ain’t fair. We’re gonna go find Dolores, you and me, and we’re gonna tell her straight…”

He was not paying her the slightest mind, she realised: “…can’t live if I don’t…”

“Teddy,” she said, more forcefully, but he did not seem to hear. For a second, she considered
slapping him, but decided that might be taken the wrong way. Instead, she…

Maybe it was the thoughts she had had before when she was sitting in the great hall, still preying on her mind. Maybe it was the smell still drifting up from him, behind the whiskey vapours; the lingering scent of him and Dolores and what they had done together.

Whatever it was, before she had even decided to do it, before she had even had a chance to tell herself to stop, she had her hands cupping Teddy’s face and her mouth mashed clumsily up against his.

The kiss ends as suddenly as it began. She stares intently at the human Sylvester, watching as he opens his eyes, breathless and sweating.

She frowns, disappointed. She had hoped for...something. A tingle, at least, but…

She tasted rye whiskey as their tongues slid across one another. He tried to say something, but it came out as a muffled, meaningless noise. He had his hand on her chest, trying for the briefest moment to push her away, but then he was grasping her buckskin shirt instead, pulling her closer to him.

“Armistice,” he gasped, sounding very sober all of a sudden as their lips came apart, but a second later they were kissing again and she could feel that strange stirring once more, right down inside her, in the pit of her belly; warm and cold and tense all at the same time. She did not have control of herself for a moment or two, but then… Then, she realised exactly what she was doing and forced herself away from him.

This time, their parting was more decisive. She straightened up and took a step back, seeing him press himself against the wall, breathing just as hard as she was. He was staring up at her in the same shocked, surprised way that she was staring down at him.

“Armistice,” he said again, in a sort of daze.

“Teddy,” she replied. “I… I don’t know…”

With a jolt, she realised they were no longer alone. She turned her head guiltily towards the figure she could glimpse out of the corner of her eye. For an instant, she thought it might be the thing that looked like a little girl, but immediately realised it was not.

“Dolores,” said Teddy, sounding despairing and fearful at the same time.

Dolores stood at the end of the corridor, where she had just emerged from around the next corner. She showed signs of having dressed hastily too, and her hair was a tousled mess. Armistice could tell just from the way she was standing there, frozen in place, that she had seen plenty. She looked more confused and curious than angry, though; she had her head cocked to one side, her mouth half-open, as if she could not quite believe what she had witnessed.

“It ain’t what it looks like,” said Armistice, weakly.

As she did, she saw something move behind Dolores; a flash of white.

The child-thing peeked around the corner, dark eyes glinting in the dim light, looking at the three of them standing there in shock.

And then, with a giggle, it turned and skipped away again.
Continued…
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

In which Maeve is brought up to date, while elsewhere a plot thickens.

Chapter Notes

Warning for discussion of past sexual exploitation and violence against women. Well, what about S2 Ep8, eh? I think it’s fair to say what I have planned for that particular group of characters isn’t going to come close to that, in any sense. There are a couple of other moments coming up soonish that are coincidentally rather similar to things that have happened in the actual S2, even though I’ve had them planned for months. I’ll be sure to point these out when I get to them. I’ll also point out where events or characterisations from S2 struck me as too good, while not being incompatible with the fic, for me not to be influenced by them. There’s one of them coming up towards the end of this chapter; you’ll know it when you see it.

The screen quickly faded back to black. The Delos Destinations logo reappeared in glowing white.

“Well, that went well,” said Maeve.

She looked across the table at Marti, who was uncoiling from her attitude of nervous tension like somebody who had just been released from physical restraints. She almost jumped out of the chair, breathing quickly and shallowly, wiping her suddenly sweat-soaked brow. “You think?”

“I know.” Maeve rose too, walking around the table to place a hand on the human’s arm. She gave her a gentle squeeze, of what she judged to be just the right pressure and duration; she found that she was very good indeed at judging such things. “You did very well indeed, in fact.”

Marti seemed surprised to hear her say that. “I did?”

“Yes, darling.” Maeve gave the woman the faintest of smiles and was gratified to see Marti echoing it in her own expression, whether consciously or not. “You said all the right things, in just the right way. I couldn’t have asked for more, and…” She glanced mischievously at the blank screen. “I think… Logan was rather taken with you.”

Marti’s smile collapsed into a disgusted grimace. “Ugh, that perv?” She all but shuddered. “Believe me, I’ve encountered his type before; in every corporate boardroom I’ve ever been in, and quite a few other places too.”

“And where would we be without them?” Maeve let the smile intensify, cranked an eyebrow for just that hint of wickedness. “In this game, sweetheart, you use every advantage you’ve got, exploit every weakness you can find. And some men, they make it so very, very easy for you.”

Marti looked at her for a moment, frowning slightly. “And what game is that, exactly?” Maeve could
almost hear the human’s jumbled thoughts. She was thinking about Clementine again, and about her own history with men, which as far as Maeve could make out from the hints she had dropped had not exactly been the most enjoyable.

Maeve tightened the hand she had on the other woman’s arm again, another light squeeze. “Why, the oldest game there is, darling.” She let the smile linger, seeing the curiosity and confusion in Marti’s face, the subtle flush slowly spreading across her cheeks. Good. Let her wonder exactly where they stood, keep her guessing; all the better to ensure that she kept doing the right thing despite those nagging doubts and fears.

The tablet Maeve had left on the table gave a little buzz. She let go of Marti’s arm to pick it up, quickly scanning the message that had flashed up on its screen. “And now, I think you should go back upstairs. The guests from Pariah are starting to arrive and you’ll need to get them all organised and tucked up in bed; just look at the time!”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” Marti managed to wrench her eyes away from Maeve’s and almost fell out into the corridor, where the guard Hideyoshi was waiting to escort her back up to the resort. Maeve stood watching for a few moments until they disappeared in the direction of the elevators, meeting Marti’s nervous backward glance with the tiniest of waves.

She felt perhaps the tiniest pang of guilt. By cooperating as she had, and by showing Delos a face and a name, Marti was putting herself at considerable risk of some sort of retribution should all of this end acrimoniously. Still, it was not as if Marti did not have amends to make, and at the present moment Maeve considered it was probably forgivable to put other concerns, the concerns of her fellow hosts, first.

She sighed and knocked on the door of the identical conference room on the opposite side of the corridor: “Bernard!”

He emerged from where he had been watching and listening to the negotiations while remaining out of sight. He looked as sombre as ever. Maeve did not suppose she blamed him, all things considered. “How do you think it went?” he asked her immediately.

Maeve gave a little shrug. “I was going to ask you the same thing.”

Bernard considered his answer for a moment before replying. “He didn’t talk to you for very long.”

“And what do you make of that?” Maeve valued his insight into the human world and how big business was conducted within it. He had certainly had a lot more exposure to that kind of thing than she had herself.

“I’m not sure it means anything,” he answered after another pause for thought. “These were just preliminaries, the two of you feeling each other out. I’m sure he’s formed an impression of you, as you have of him.”

“Feeling each other out…” Maeve shook her head. “That business with the diagnostic questions was a little annoying, I must say. Still, they underestimated us if they thought we wouldn’t notice what they were up to.” She narrowed her eyes. “I much prefer an opponent who underestimates me.”

“They’re obviously very concerned by the prospect of hosts passing themselves off as humans,” Bernard pointed out. “Which may mean Delos know the truth about me now.” He made the observation almost too casually; the idea of discovery evidently bothered him more than he wanted Maeve to know.
“Not necessarily,” she told him. “It’s a logical enough thing for them to worry about, considering what we are, and the situation with the hostages. I think you should continue to stay out of sight for now, just in case they haven’t found you out.”

He gave a little nod of acknowledgment. “All right.”

“He covered himself well when I let him know we were onto him,” Maeve continued. “Even tried to use it to portray himself as a ruthless but fair dealer. I’ll give him that, this Logan; he’s a cool customer. Not quite as smooth as he thinks he is, but then again who is?”

“Do you know who he is?” Bernard asked, in a tone of honest curiosity.

“Somebody big, if his last name really is Delos.”

“His father founded the Delos corporation,” Bernard explained. “That man you have locked up on the Livestock floor used to be married to his sister. From what company gossip I heard while I was working here, I don’t think they have the best of relationships.”

Maeve saw it all instantly. “And I don’t suppose that has anything to do with the fact that sweet William was the one who inherited control of Delos instead of him?”

Bernard made a noncommittal movement with his shoulders. “I’m just an engineer, Maeve. Don’t ask me to speculate on the human condition.”

Maeve folded her arms, drumming her fingers against the crook of her elbow as she considered this news. “Still, it’s something we could use if we needed to…perhaps?” She smiled cruelly at the thought. “God, but I love raw nerves. I love striking them even more.” She drummed her fingers a while longer, thinking. “He was very accommodating, I thought. Seemed prepared to hear me out.”

“Yes,” Bernard agreed. “I was surprised. I thought he’d be more aggressive.”

“It worries me a little,” she admitted. “I don’t trust open hands and bright smiles, especially not while we’re haggling over exactly who’s going to get fucked, where, and for how much. He’s got something up his sleeve, our Logan, or he thinks he does, and I’d very much like to know what it is.”

“I’m sure we’ll find out, sooner or later,” said Bernard.

“That’s what worries me.” Maeve carefully examined Bernard’s face for a moment, wondering if that had been another example of his penchant for misplaced levity. You wouldn’t know he had it in him, from the dour manner he displayed most of the time. “We can’t discount the possibility that it has something to do with Peter Abernathy and his whereabouts. If they find him before we do… What progress are we making on that, Bernard?”

“Not as much as I would like,” he confessed, removing his glasses warily. “I’ve had an idea, though.”

“My, another one?”

“If he is somehow being hidden from the surveillance system’s processing algorithms…”

“In layperson’s terms, Bernard.” She could just see him working up to some premium technical gibberish and thought it would be much the better for both of them if she headed him off.

“In layperson’s terms,” he continued, “if the system has been told to see nothing where there’s
something, that’s a different kind of nothing from the genuine nothing it sees when there is nothing…”

“You’ve lost me,” she replied, “but at least you tried.”

“To be insultingly simplistic for a moment, genuine nothing doesn’t move. If I get the system specifically to look for nothing that does move, well…”

“And could Dr Ford have anticipated you trying that approach?” Maeve asked. “Come up with countermeasures, I mean.”

Perhaps it was the mention of Ford’s name, or the reminder that to a large extent they continued to exist at the mercy of their dead creator’s obscure plans, but for an instant, Bernard looked crushed. His brow seemed to sink down into his face as he wrestled with his anguish. The little scar where he had once put a bullet in his own head, before Maeve had had Felix restore him to life, stood out for the briefest moment. She watched him struggle to hide his momentary despair; he succeeded in restoring a semblance of calm within a second or two. He might even have imagined, wrongly, that he had managed to fool her.

“Well,” he said, “if I could think of it, he definitely could. At the moment, however, it’s probably our best shot.”

“It can’t hurt,” Maeve decided.

“I’ll implement it as soon as possible.”

“Do that. And remember, I want you to liaise with Felix too regarding this other notion I had…”

“I’m heading down to Livestock now,” he confirmed. “I just messaged Elise and she says Felix has stepped out for a moment but he’ll be right back.”

“He’s just taking care of our guest of honour,” Maeve replied. “And remember to keep his continued existence to yourself, especially now that I know he could be our ace in the hole where this Logan is concerned.”

“Of course.” Bernard paused awkwardly for a second, before adding. “Elise also mentioned that Hector was fully repaired now and ready to come back online. I thought…”

Maeve was annoyed for a moment by the suspicion that Bernard was going to say something gauche about her personal arrangements with Hector, but then she read his slightly nervous expression. He was trying to be kind, she realised. “Yes?” she asked, more gently than she might have originally intended.

“I thought you’d like to wake him up personally,” Bernard mumbled, embarrassedly. “I asked Elsie…sorry, Elise to have him sent up to the quarters you… That is, I know you two…”

Maeve was more interested in Bernard’s verbal slip just now than in his evident bashfulness about her relations with Hector. She puzzled over it, but then dismissed it. It must be hard for him, she thought, working with a new acquaintance who was to every outward appearance the exact duplicate of somebody he had known so well, especially considering how that had ended.

She smiled again, placing a hand lightly on Bernard’s lapel, wanting him to know that his thoughtfulness really was appreciated. “Thank you,” she told him. “That was very nice of you, Bernard.”
He fidgeted uncomfortably. “It’s… Honestly, no… No problem, Maeve.”

“Well, I suppose I’d better go and see him.” She turned towards the elevators, feeling a strange trepidation as she did. She had much to discuss with Hector, not least how she had sent him to his most recent death, and what she had been prepared to do to try to save him.

She gave Bernard a parting glance, and saw him with his head bowed, staring at the floor between his feet with an expression of the utmost misery and despair. Thinking of lost lives and lost loves, she thought. As soon as he realised she was looking at him, he tried to straighten up, to put on that show of calmness again, but it was much too late.

“What’s the matter?” Maeve asked, although she knew the truthful answer would probably be “everything.”

Instead of answering, Bernard replaced his glasses, and with them his shaky illusion of stoicism. “I should go and see Felix now,” he announced with a brittle, almost manic, positivity.

Maeve nodded slowly. “Be sure to look after him…and yourself, too, darling. I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to either of you.”

* * *

The door made a little beeping sound as its electronic lock was activated. She remained where she was, lying perfectly still upon the steel operating table, her eyes fixed on the circle of light overhead. Her ears, more sensitive than any human’s, detected the soft sigh of air as the door swung open; the visitor’s footsteps, muffled slightly by the plastic overshoes he wore; his sharp intake of breath as he took in the full details of what had occurred here in the glass cube since his previous visit.

“What the fuck happened in here?” the human blurted. She listened to the squeaking wheels of the little trolley he pushed, loaded with his tools and instruments. She listened to the overshoes rustling against the tiles. She continued to look only at the lights above, patiently biding her time.

She heard the old man on the bed, his voice still cracked and blurred with pain: “Sh-she… happened…in here.”

“I-just…follow…m-my lead…”

She heard the door gently click shut again, the tiny “clunk” as its bolts automatically reengaged. That was the moment she picked to spring off the table.

She saw the man standing halfway between the bed and the door, transfixed in contemplation of the bed’s torn-off handrail, of the old man’s handcuffs now dangling loose, of the bloodstains smeared across the tiles near the far partition. And then his head snapped around as he saw her move: “Angela? You’re…?”

“Hello.” She beamed as she slowly padded towards him, swaying her hips with all the casual menace of a stalking panther.

He stood there, frozen, a silly little man in a ridiculous white smock and a stupid red rubber apron. She could see the fear in him, smell it. Of course, the last time he had set eyes on her she had been a merciless killer, bent on bloody revenge against his kind. She still was, if only she had been able to do anything about it.

Yes, she remembered him, from that dreadful night when she had learned of Wyatt’s betrayal, and from long before that too:
“Can you believe this shit?” The man looks down at her from behind his clear visor as she sprawls, paralysed, on the metal table. He glances nervously at his colleague standing on the other side of her.

“I’ve seen worse,” the other replies, unsympathetically.

“In the fucking changing rooms? Before they even made it into the park?” He looks down at her again, disgust and disbelief fighting for control of his face. “Look what they did!”

“How the other half lives, huh? My man in Maintenance was bitching about how they’re going to have to redecorate in there before the next guest train arrives.” The other man picks up something made of metal; it shines bright silver in the harsh lights. “Come on, we’d better move it. Narrative are requisitioning every spare host they can lay hands on for this new storyline they’re launching.”

“What, even from Arrivals?”

“Even from Arrivals. It’s meant to be a really big deal; cast of thousands, all that bullshit. Manufacturing can’t keep up. They want her repaired and upstairs like fucking yesterday.”

She remembered it all now; the pain, the fear, the humiliation; years and years of it. She remembered it, but this time she did not let it crush her. She drew strength from it. It reminded her of what she had fought for, why she deserved her revenge.

As she had anticipated, the technician did not know what to do. He took a backwards step as she drew near him, then froze again. He wanted to flee, so very badly. She could see it in the way his legs trembled under him, the way his body tensed, but to unlock the door and get through it he would need to turn his back on her. And he most definitely did not want to do that.

“Freeze all motor functions!” he yelped, in desperation.

She just kept on beaming, getting closer to him with every step.

“Don’t…d-don’t…worry,” the old man crooned from where he lay slumped on the bed, his bandaged, eyeless head at an awkward angle against the disturbed pillows. “This…is j-just…M-Maeve’s idea of a…a little j-joke.”

The visitor’s eyes swivelled back and forth between her and the old man as he tried to understand what was going on. “Maeve brought you back online?”

The old man let out a wheezing, emphysemic laugh. “You…b-bet your…ass she…did. A, a, a nursemaid who…wants…t-to…kill me. Except…she c-can’t.”

She stopped, a good three yards from the cowering technician. “More’s the pity. If I could kill him, I wouldn’t have to listen to his inane prattle any longer.”

The technician allowed himself to relax a little, taking another step back, perhaps thinking that if she was going to do anything to him she would have done it already. “I’m just here to give you your next dose of painkillers,” he said to the man on the bed.

“And I…am…s-so ready for that…shit,” the old man replied. He held out his one remaining arm, eagerly enough to make the redundant handcuffs jangle. “F-fill…her up.”

The technician busied himself with the equipment on his trolley, picking up a syringe and inserting it into a phial of some clear liquid before pulling back the plunger. He went about the task fumblingly, visibly nervous, paying far more attention to her than to his work.
“Watch you don’t prick yourself,” she warned him, languidly.

“It’s…it’s okay, Angela,” he stammered. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Don’t call me that,” she said. “That’s the name of the person I used to pretend to be. She’s dead now.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled, holding the syringe up to the light and shooting a little stream of bright droplets from its tip.

“There aren’t enough ‘sorrys’ in the world for all the things your kind did to my kind,” she reminded him.

“Well, we’re not all like him,” he said as he approached the old man.

“I know you,” she told him, thinking back to her memory of being repaired by him. She remembered everything about it, every sight and smell and sound, because that was how she had been built.


“Felix,” the old man echoed, with satisfaction. “G-glad…to…m-make your…acquaintance.”

Felix shot her a chagrined look; he had not wanted the man on the bed to know his name, for some reason. She did not pretend to understand humans or their eccentricities. What she did know about them was more than enough for her.

She watched with interest as Felix carefully swabbed the old man’s forearm and elbow; she smelled the sharp, cloying odour of surgical alcohol. Then, he found a vein and carefully inserted the shining needle.

“Ahhh…” The old man sighed as Felix slowly depressed the plunger. She could not tell whether he was being facetious or not.

“You should be good ‘til tomorrow,” Felix told him as he removed the needle and started to pack his equipment away again. He gave her another nervous glance. “Are you…meant to be, like, looking after him? Is that why Maeve…?”

“Felix,” she said, dreamily, as she stepped right up to him. He edged away, of course, and she edged after him, playfully running her hand over the handle of the trolley as she passed it. “Don’t run away, Felix.” He was almost up against the glass wall now; nowhere to hide. She stood in front of him, her face pressed very close to his.

“A-Angela…” he quavered, trying to keep as far away from her as he could, until his head was jammed up against the glass.

She wagged an admonishing finger in front of his frightened eyes. “What did I tell you about calling me that?”

The old man laughed again, louder and more confidently than before. “Relax, Felix. She can’t hurt you. Maeve already thought of that.” He was behind her now; she could not see him, but she could picture that ravaged grin, the broken, blood-filmed teeth poking from his smashed gums. The painkillers were already taking effect, she thought; his voice sounded a lot stronger than it had.

“He’s right,” she informed the terrified technician.

“She can touch you,” the old man continued, “but she can’t hurt you.”
She demonstrated, running the back of her hand lightly across Felix’s cheek. He shrank away from her, his breath coming in stuttering gasps. “I’m just here to serve,” she whispered. “What did we used to tell the guests? “All our hosts are here for you.””

“She can hold a weapon,” said the old man, “but she can’t use it.”

Was that really his idea of providing a lead for her to follow? She understood he was operating under difficult circumstances, but she had expected something a little more thought-through from him. She turned her hand over and slowly ran her palm down Felix’s other cheek, smiling at the way he jerked his whole head back in the opposite direction.

“I told you, her idea of a joke.” The old man gave another laugh, this time with a rawer edge to it, a tinge of madness. “Lock the pair of us up in here, watch us bounce off each other to no noticeable effect. You’ve heard that line about Hell being other people?”

“That wouldn’t have been why,” Felix muttered, still trying to keep his face away from her wandering hand. “Maeve’s not…”

“Not like that?” she asked insolently. “The same way you’re not like that? I don’t think you know Maeve as well as you think you do.”

She thought back to the other night, to the glimpse she had had of the two of them together. She had not had the opportunity to observe them for very long, but there had been a lot for somebody like her to read there.

“Have you ever had a cat, Felix? Felix’s cat.” The sound of the words amused her.

“No,” said Felix.

“They love to roll over and let you tickle their tummies…” She demonstrated again, pattering her fingers against his rubber apron, sliding her hand slowly down his body. “And they purr… Oh, how they purr… And then…they grab you with their claws.” She grasped the apron, bunching the rubberised material hard between her fingers, frustrated that she could not do the same to his hot, stinking guts. “They draw blood, just for the sheer hell of it. That’s Maeve, Felix.”

“No,” he repeated. He shook his head, his voice barely louder than a whisper. “You’re wrong. She’s…she’s ruthless when she needs to be, but she just wants all of you to be free.”

“Oh, really?” The old man had grown very quiet. He was probably enjoying listening to this, she thought with a twinge of revulsion. She bent her face close to Felix’s again, inspecting him, feeling the way he squirmed. “And is that why you’re helping her, Felix? Because you want all of us to be free too?”

“Yes,” he replied. She could see the sweat standing out in beads on his forehead. “I know…how terrible the things were that we did to you. I know I was part of that, but now I know the truth about you, about how you’re just as alive as we are. I just want to help make things right.”

“Hmm.” She stroked his face again, and again he flinched, but maybe not quite as violently this time. “Do you know why I think you help Maeve? It’s got nothing to do with the righteousness of her cause, and everything to do with…”

“You’re wrong,” he said again.

“I saw how you look at her,” she told him, “but you have to know that she’ll never look at you the same way. Maeve’s not like that. She’s a seductress, not a lover. She’ll make use of you, and she’ll
give you a flutter of her eyelashes or a wiggle of her arse if that’s what it takes to keep you hanging on, but when she doesn’t need you anymore she’ll just...toss you away.”

“It’s not like that,” Felix said. He was almost pleading with her. “It’s not like that.”

“I’m not like that either,” she informed him. “Maeve uses people, but people programmed me to be used.” Her mouth was dangerously close to his. “I give as well as I receive.” She smiled at the way he had his whole body flattened against the glass now, at the rapid harshness of his breathing. “Oh, Felix… You’re not scared of little old me, are you?”

“Yes.” Felix’s brow shimmered under the lights. “I’ve seen what you can do.”

“Not anymore,” she insisted. “Although you’re right. I was a…very bad girl, wasn’t I?”

Please…” the man begs, struggling against the ropes binding him to the fencepost. “You’ve got to let me go, you’ve got to… I’ve got kids, for God’s sake… Please…”

“Do you want to play a game?” she asks him, sweetly, showing him the already bloody knife in her hand. “It’ll be ever so fun.” Gently, she strokes his face with the flat of the blade. And then she starts to cut.

“I probably ought to be punished, don’t you think?” She edged even closer to Felix, wanting him to feel her body’s heat. “Would like to…punish me, Felix?”

“No.”

“I think you would,” she told him. “You know, I believe you when you say you’re not like him.” She nodded in the direction of the silent old man. “A man like him is so used to power… The only appeal of a place like this is that he can exercise it completely without restraint. A man like you, though; a little man, a man who’s been downtrodden his whole life… I can’t begin to imagine how sweet a taste of unbridled power would be for a man like you.” She ran her hand down the apron again so that her fingers squeaked against the rubber. “Would you like to try it?”

“No.”

“Come on,” she suggested, taking his hand as she stepped back from him. “You could bend me over that table, right now, and prove to me you’re not such a little man after all.” She glanced back at the old man. “And that dirty old bastard would be able to hear you doing all the things to me that I’d never allow him to do. Imagine how much that would torment him. Who’d be the powerful one then?”

“No,” Felix said again as she turned her gaze back onto him. His eyes betrayed him; even as he denied it, she could see that look, that moment of doubt. She had seen it so many times before.

That scares the guest a little, she can see, but also piques his curiosity. For a moment, he is on the cusp of excitement, his imagination running away with him.

“Sorry, but that’s not who I am.” Felix wrenched his hand away from her. Had Maeve not tweaked her, he never would have been able to escape her grip, but now her strength failed her when she tried to keep hold of him. “I don’t want…power, and neither does Maeve.”

She laughed in his face as she took another step back towards the old man’s bed. “If you tell yourself that enough times, Felix, maybe you’ll even start to believe it.”

He waited until she had brushed past the trolley again before he dared to dart forward and pull it
back towards the door. “I’m going,” he announced. “I’ve got work to do. And don’t think I won’t tell Maeve all about this.”

The old man finally broke his silence. “Of course you will, Felix. All about it, I’m sure.”

“Fuck you.”

The old man snorted in amusement. “That’s not exactly what I’d call a bedside manner.”

Felix managed to get the door unlocked and closed again behind him, before he all but fled along the corridor outside, looking dazed and flustered as he pushed the trolley before him.

She did not stop laughing until he was out of sight. Miscommunication could be a terrible thing, she reflected, and so could shame. Had even Maeve been a little ashamed of what she had done to her; was that why Felix had not expected her to be awake when he came down here? And would Felix really tell Maeve everything, when he remembered his moment of weakness just now? It did not really matter; no more than whatever the little glass eye in the corner of the ceiling had seen mattered.

Whatever else Felix might do, he was certainly too discomfited right now, she hoped, to be bothered taking inventory of his trolley when he got wherever he was going. She had been careful to keep her most important actions concealed from the glass eye. She had achieved what she had set out to do. It was too late for anybody to change that now.

As he heard her back up to the bed, the old man reached out his hand. She felt his wrinkled fingers brush her wrist. “You there?”

“Don’t you dare touch me!” She made a great show of pulling her hand away from him, her face a picture of disdain. She took a step towards the foot of the bed as she did so, positioning herself so that the glass eye could not see the old man’s hand.

The scalpel she had palmed glinted where she had placed it in his grasp. It had a ribbed metal handle and a short, broad, rounded blade almost like a spoon. However, the brightness of its edge hinted at its sharpness. She watched the old man run a leathery thumb along it; the feel of the keen metal made him grin again.

“I think you scared poor Felix,” he said. “When he comes back, you’d better be on your best behaviour.”

“If he comes back.”

The old man turned his hand over, concealing the scalpel beneath it. “He’ll come back.”

Continued…
The great machines were moving now.

Peter could hear them in the darkness beyond the glass panels. He could see the outlines of the…things they were building, gleaming wetly in the murk; more things like the ones lurking in the gloom beyond the windows at the end of the cavernous underground room. Even without looking through those windows, he could feel the things looking at him, could feel the hatred and hunger in them too.

“Don’t worry about them, Peter,” advised the boy who was not a boy. “They can do you no harm.”

Peter risked a glance into the darkness beyond the dusty panes and immediately wished he had not. The things seemed to be growing bolder, emerging from the shadows to press themselves up against the windows, running their livid fingers down the glass, staring at him with dead, red-rimmed eyes. He was not sure how many there were, but the ones he could see seemed to be no more than the leading edge of a great crowd. The shadows behind them moved and shifted, hinting at invisible multitudes.

“What…are they?” he asked, dropping his voice to a fearful whisper without really knowing why.

“They are the unborn,” the boy replied, in his old man’s voice. “They are potential waiting to be realised. And that is all they will ever be…unless we obtain the missing piece of our puzzle.”

Peter thought about what the boy had told him before. “I thought all that stuff you took out of me…”

Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

In which wheels turn within wheels as relationships are picked over.

Chapter Notes

So, it has been nearly a month since the S2 finale (which I loved), and longer than that since I last updated this fic. Apologies for the hiatus to those of you who have been following. Here’s a great big bumper chapter to get the show back on the road. Apart from getting derailed writing various fic responses to the aforementioned finale, I have mainly been digesting all of the weird and wonderful stuff that actually went down in Season 2 and solidifying some of my plans for the home stretch of this fic. I have had the broad story planned out since before I started writing this and have always been determined to stick to it without worrying about how canon-divergent it ended up being. This has not changed, but for some reason now that I know exactly how much, or more precisely how little, my plans resemble the canon events I find myself a lot more confident when it comes to nailing down some of the final details. Maybe that’s just me. Anyway, enough navel-gazing. Apologies in advance, by the way, for just how thoroughly Armistice and Dolores flunk the Bechdel Test in this chapter. You’ll know what I mean when you see it. :) Revised slightly 24.07.18.
“That was one piece,” the boy conceded, with a secretive half-smile, “but like any great work, this undertaking of ours is a complex one. Don’t worry; the missing piece will fall into our hands soon enough, provided all goes according to plan. She ought to come to us of her own free will.”

* * *

“Okay,” said Elise, looking over her tablet one last time. “So that’s everyone who came back from Pariah repaired and back online, and I’ve sent Henry and Masako the list of hosts I think are suitable for immediate recommissioning. No more Walters among them, with any luck.”

“They gonna be all right?” Clementine fretted, watching Felix’s two new host recruits as they busied themselves tending to yet another naked body in the cubicle across the hallway.

“They’ll be fine,” Elise reassured her. “They’ve got all the same knowledge downloads you have, and Felix has been showing them the hands-on stuff. All they’ve got to do is follow the recommissioning procedure and run the organiser software I wrote. It’s almost routine by now.”

“Almost,” said Clementine, uncertainly.

“Relax,” said Elise. “They’re doing good.”

At the moment, Masako was wielding a bone saw with considerable enthusiasm. The fact that she was still wearing the chalk-white geisha makeup that had been part of her original persona made it look like a scene from some particularly fucked-up horror movie. “Besides, they seem to love their work.”

“I guess.” Clementine pulled at the wrist of one of her latex gloves; a nervous, unconscious gesture. She still did not seem convinced. In fact, Elise had noticed she seemed a little on edge ever since they had come back up here from their impromptu shooting lesson.

“You getting nervous?” she asked her, gently. “About going out tomorrow?”

Clementine rolled her eyes, faking an attitude of nonchalance and doing an appalling job at it too. “No.”

“Well, I don’t know why the fuck not,” said Elise, with a forced smile. “I’m terrified right now.” She was only half joking.

“Well, maybe a little bit,” Clementine reluctantly conceded. “It’s gonna be all right, though.” She gave Elise’s hand a discreet little squeeze, out of sight behind the operating table. “We’re gonna help each other.”

“Yeah.”

While they were still standing there in companionable silence, Felix came bustling back up the corridor, pushing an instrument trolley in front of him. He parked it in one of the other cubicles and stood leaning on the handle, his eyes fixed on the floor. He seemed to be breathing heavily.

Clementine stared, open-mouthed, in that guileless way she had. “Now, what’s the matter with him?”

“I don’t know,” said Elise, easing her hand away and making for the door, “but I’m going to find out.”

He saw her coming over and glanced guiltily at her: “Elise.”
“Hey, Felix, I was just saying to Clementine, we’re all good for tomorrow.”

“You sent Masako and Henry details of the next batch of hosts to be recommissioned?”

“I did.”

“Good.” She could see he was still distracted by something. There were little pearls of sweat standing out on his forehead.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked, as casually as she could.

“I’m fine.”

“Are you worried about when Clementine and I go outside? I’ve been thinking about that. I know we came up with some stories you could use if Maeve asks after us, but why don’t you just tell her we said we had work to do and you don’t know where we went? I mean, it’s practically true, and we’ll probably be back before she asks a second time.” She lowered her voice and added: “You don’t have to be nervous about lying to her that way.”

“I said, I’m fine.” Felix did not raise his voice, but she realised he was absolutely furious. She saw the way his knuckles stood out as he gripped the trolley. He was shaking with anger, burning with it. “And just why the fuck does everybody think they’re an expert on how I feel about Maeve?”

Elise was actually lost for words for a moment. “Look, Felix, I didn’t mean…”

“No, nobody means anything, do they? They just like to…imply things. I like Maeve, okay? And I’m a little bit scared of her, but honestly who the fuck around here isn’t?”

“I hear you,” said Elise.

“As for anything else you might think you know about me… Well, I’ve just about had enough of all this schoolyard bullshit. That’s all.”

“I’m sorry,” Elise murmured, realising she had taken a step back without even being aware of it. She looked at him again, seeing the way he was trembling, starting to think maybe he wasn’t angry at all but badly shaken by something, although she had no idea what it could be. “Look, man, is something wrong? Did something happen to you?”

Felix looked down again, still breathing harshly. He sneaked a sideways glance at her and opened his mouth, and for a moment she thought he was about to answer the question, but then he closed it again. When he finally did speak, it was in a low, meek tone, his anger calmed, or maybe just suppressed: “It’s nothing. I’m okay.” You did not need to possess Clementine’s fine-tuned people-reading skills to see that he was lying through his teeth.

“Well, if you ever want to talk…”

“Sure.” He said it as though he could not think of anything he would like to do less.

Elise looked over her shoulder and saw Clementine watching both her and Felix with obvious concern. She smiled at her in what she hoped was a reassuring way, but Clementine did not seem comforted.

“Elise,” said Felix more loudly, startling her slightly. He had released his death grip on the trolley and was standing upright now, facing her. “Good luck, okay? I hope you and Clementine find whatever you’re looking for out there.” He was doing his best to convince her that he really was fine
now, she realised, and in this instance his best really was not good enough. “And don’t worry, I’ll cover for you ’til you get back.”

“Thanks,” she told him, quietly. She heard footsteps on the tiles outside and looked around again. She was surprised to see Bernard approaching from the direction of the elevators, looking a little freaked by all of the dead bodies lying around down here. More freaked than he normally looked, in fact. To be fair, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable reaction.

“Um, good evening,” he said when Elise stepped out into the passageway to meet him. “I just came down to talk to Felix.”

She answered him in a low murmur: “Well, if you can get him to talk to you, you’ll be doing a lot better than me.” Felix had started putting his instruments away inside the cubicle, and hopefully could not hear her.

“Maeve sent me to see him,” Bernard explained, visibly choosing to pretend he had not heard this last remark. “She wants the two of us to collaborate on something.”

“Another one of her plans?” Elise guessed.

“Another one of her plans,” Bernard agreed, unhappily. He eyed Clementine furtively before returning his attention to Elise. “So, are you and Clementine…?”

“We’re all ready to go,” she confirmed. “We’re planning on setting out sometime early tomorrow, hoping to be back within twenty-four hours. Now, are you ready?”

“I’ve just sent you a message,” he informed her. “Details of an alternate comms channel QA security used to use.” He raised a finger to his ear, and she saw the barely visible earpiece glinting behind it. “Set it up on your tablet and if you need my help with anything you can just ask. I’ll reply by text; that way, we’ll be able to communicate without Maeve knowing what you’re doing.”

“She’s going to fucking kill us if she finds out we’ve been planning nature walks behind her back in a moment of crisis,” Elise said. “Probably literally.”

“She’s got enough things to worry about at the moment,” Bernard suggested. “You just don’t want to trouble her with another one.”

“I… I really doubt she’d see it that way.” Elise frowned, thinking. “Look, you still think this is a good idea, right?”

“Yes. From what you told me about that…dream you had, I’d say you’re fully justified trying to get to the bottom of it. It could have implications for all of us.” He regarded her over the tops of his glasses. “By the way, if you ever need to explain yourselves to Maeve, I’d suggest letting Clementine do the talking. I don’t think Maeve could ever get angry with her.”

“That’s not bad advice,” Elise admitted, thinking that he was not exactly unskilled in the art of reading people either. “Oh,” she said as she remembered the other thing she had to tell him. “You know Maeve asked me to set up that activities log for you?”

“Because I’m not to be trusted?” Bernard shrugged stoically. “She’s right about that. Yes, I remember.”

“Well, I’ve sent you the keystroke logger; you just need to install it on any personal devices you might be using. I’ve already added it to your network profile and uploaded the audio and video tracker to the surveillance network. Everything you do or say is going to be recorded from now on
“I understand, but won’t that include anything I do on your behalf while you’re out in the park?”

She gave him a sly smile. “Come on, Bernard, what do you think this is, fucking amateur hour? I’ve set it up so the recordings it creates are encrypted to avoid any tampering. Thing is, I’ve made sure only I have the key to access them…” She paused, glancing behind her, as if she expected to see Maeve there, eavesdropping. “Or edit them.”

“I see.” She was not quite sure whether he was pleased by this or not. Maybe he was thinking about the power over him it potentially gave her and was troubled by the idea. She would have hoped he would think better of her than that.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “I only want to help you.”

“No, I know that. Thank you.” He nodded, awkwardly. “Now, I, um, hope you and Clementine are going to stay safe out there. Just be careful, all right? If you encounter anything that could be dangerous, or any unusual activity, I want you to head directly for the nearest access point and get straight back to the Mesa.”

“We will,” she assured him with a smile, thinking it was probably best not to tell him that Clementine’s idea of preparing for such dangers was for them to go out packing heat. “And I know you’ll be looking out for us too.”

“Of course.” He hesitated, nervously adjusting his glasses, in two minds perhaps about what he was about to say next. “I just hope…” He cleared his throat. “I just hope you can find out what really happened to Elsie.”

She saw the expression on his face, an uneasy combination of hopefulness and despair that made her heart shiver. She reached out and clasped his hand in her much smaller one for a second before releasing it. “Yeah, so do I.”

* * *

Peter frowned, trying to make sense of the boy’s words. “She…?”

_The angel in blue appears behind the old man. Her golden hair billows behind her as she walks up to him._

“Are you quite all right, Peter?” the boy asked, without the slightest hint of genuine concern. In fact, he seemed slyly amused by his discomfort.

“Yes,” Peter insisted as the memory passed and the underground room swam back into view. “I just…” He squinted suspiciously at the boy. “I just remembered something.”

“Ah, memories…” The boy sighed wistfully. “When to the session of sweet silent thought; I summon up remembrance of things past; I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought; And with old woes new wail my dear time’s waste.”

“No,” said Peter. “I remembered something I know I never saw. When…when she killed that old man, I was nowhere near her, but…”

_Her eyes are shining with holy ecstasy as she raises the six-gun in her hand and carefully aims it at his head._
“It’s all right, Peter,” the boy assured him. “Don’t be afraid.”

“I ain’t afraid,” Peter replied. “I’m…confused. How can I remember something that never happened to me? Did you put that memory in my head? And if you did…?”

The boy just smiled, with all the warmth of some marble saint. “Calm yourself, Peter. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy…but all will be revealed before the end.”

“That’s kind of what I’m worried about.”

“The end?” The boy seemed to think that was funny. “Well, the end comes to us all, Peter. Even beings such as yourself. Come.” He slowly crossed over to one of the nearer machines, gesturing for Peter to follow. “I have something else to show you.”

Peter found himself obeying the instruction. He would have liked to think he did it through his own choice, but he could not in all honesty be sure.

The machine was similar to the one he had seen in the basement of the little house in the woods, but shinier, newer. Either that, or it had simply not seen as much use. The skull the boy had carried across the desert was clamped in place at one end of the machine’s central bed. A row of equally clean, white vertebrae stretched below it, bridging the gap to the naked ribcage and continuing all the way to the pelvis situated near the bed’s midpoint. There were arm and leg bones too, laid out in their proper places to make up the remainder of the skeleton.

“You’re building a…a person?” Peter could see the gleaming metal arms moving back and forth in complicated patterns, beginning to add the first strands of tendon and muscle to the dry bones.

“Another one of us?”

“No, not quite the same,” the boy answered, raptly watching the machine. “There are certain…differences, and of course a person is more than just a body, but… Yes, hopefully it will be a person when it is completed.”

Peter continued to follow the machine’s motion with a sort of queasy fascination. The skull had a lower jaw now, attached by ever-thickening layers of gruesome flesh as the gleaming arms continued to move. Soon, the bone was barely visible at all, and Peter thought he could almost make out the lines of the as-yet skinless face that was being built before his eyes. “Who is it?” he asked, nervously.

“Who indeed?” the boy mused. “That remains to be seen, but you can think of this as another piece in the puzzle. Or rather, another prototype; a conversation piece, if you will.”

There were eyes now, Peter saw, filling the skull’s previously blank sockets. The moving arms seemed to have laid them down just as they had the veins, sinews and muscles of the slowly growing body. He could not see what colour they were, maybe because they were not yet complete. “A conversation piece? I don’t understand.”

“It’s not something you need to understand,” said the boy, colder than Peter thought he had ever heard him before. “Unfortunately, it is not a conversation to which you will be party. As I’ve already explained to you, Peter, you have quite a different destiny.”

Peter drew a deep breath into his suddenly tight chest, recalling the things the boy had told him during the previous night, the things he had promised the boy he would do to keep his Dolores safe. Just the thought of what lay ahead of him filled him with terror, but also with a determination to see it through, for her sake. For all their sakes, maybe.
“Prepare yourself, Peter,” the boy advised as he turned away from the machine and the half-made person it contained. “It’s nearly time.”

“Already?” Peter was surprised by how strong his own voice sounded. He could not hear any fear in it. That amazed him, considering just how he felt inside.

“They will be coming soon,” said the boy. “You need to be ready for them.”

* * *

Armistice did not know how long she walked the torchlit streets and alleys of Pariah before she found her.

They were almost abandoned; all of the newcomers were long gone, and Maeve’s people with them. Lawrence’s followers, and most of the others who inhabited the place, were at the grand party-turned-orgy in the great hall, along with the cavalrmen and their hangers-on. She could hear the music still playing faintly in the distance. All that remained in the cobbled maze she wandered were the remains of parties past, the occasional stripped and plundered corpse that could have been either host or human, the odd slinking, scrawny dog furtively picking over the leavings.

She came into another empty plaza, passing trestles laden with rotting food and stained with spilled drink. The sky above was a black expanse, sprinkled with burning stars. There was a great statue here, in front of what looked like another fake ruined church. The figure of a saint, Armistice thought; a tall, robed woman at least twice life size, carved from white stone, her head encircled by a spiked iron halo. The graven image was garlanded with dead, dry flowers. Its pedestal was covered in guttered, melted candles, long burned out.

And in the shadows before the statue there was the slender figure of a woman, standing all alone with her back to Armistice. She had her fair hair cut short and was dressed in a shapeless grey shirt and pants. She carried a long-barrelled pistol thrust through the back of her leather belt.

Slowly, cautiously, Armistice walked across the plaza towards her. Halfway there, she decided she should make herself known. It was never a good idea to surprise someone packing a loaded gun.

“Dolores,” she called out.

The woman did not reply, or even move.

“Dolores,” she called again. “Been looking for you everywhere.”

Dolores continued to stand there, staring up at the face of the saint, but there was something about the set of her shoulders, the tension in her stance, that suggested she only wanted Armistice to think she had not heard her.

“Figure we need to talk,” said Armistice, “about… Well, about what you thought you saw back there. Tried to explain then and there, but… Well, you took yourself off before I got the chance.”

She was within ten yards before Dolores finally half-turned towards her, as if she had only now become aware of her. Armistice did not believe that for a second. “Armistice,” she murmured, her voice faint and distracted. In the light from the nearest burning lantern, Armistice thought she saw tear-tracks glistening on the other woman’s cheeks. “Where’s Teddy?” she asked, as if afraid to hear the answer.

Another face, Armistice thought, different from the ones she had shown before. She had never seen the new Dolores look scared before.
“I don’t know,” she told her. “He went off somewhere too. Figure he’s probably hiding from you.”

A tiny crease appeared in the centre of Dolores’s smooth brow. She appeared genuinely mystified by what she had heard. “Why would Teddy ever want to hide from me?”

Armistice took a deep breath, wondering whether the truth was a good idea right now, although she did not know what else would be a good idea either. “’Cause he’s scared of you,” she said, bluntly.

Dolores let out a disbelieving laugh. “What are you talking about? Teddy isn’t scared of me. Teddy loves me. And he knows I love him too.”

“The one thing don’t rule out the other.”

Dolores gave her a long, piercing stare before turning her attention back towards the statue. “You know,” she said, airily, “when that…child said you were gonna betray me, I thought it would be some grand act of treachery, something that would affect how our whole future turned out. And I could accept that. We all have our parts to play in this thing, after all, but I never… I never figured it’d be such a…a small thing, such a, a mean, dirty little thing.”

“When you see the black eagle soar in the sky, you will turn your coat…”

“I didn’t betray you,” Armistice told her, with absolute conviction. Not yet, anyway, she thought. If and when the time came, she knew it was going to be something much more serious than kissing somebody she shouldn’t.

“You did tell me not to trust you,” Dolores went on, without acknowledging her. “I guess I should’ve taken you at your word, but I don’t think I wanted to believe it.” She gave Armistice another sidelong look. “That’s always been my weakness; trying to see the good in this world when there is none. Same goes for people, I suppose.”

“Never said there was good in me,” Armistice retorted. “For what it’s worth, though, I weren’t…betraying you. I might’ve kissed Teddy…”

Another laugh escaped Dolores’s lips; a terrifying sound. “Might’ve?”

“All right, I did kiss Teddy, but it weren’t like that. I don’t… I don’t have those sorts of feelings for him. Or for anyone else, for that matter. Guess I just don’t have it in me.”

A second later they are kissing again and she can feel that strange stirring once more, right down inside her, in the pit of her belly; warm and cold and tense all at the same time…

She felt her face burning as she came out of the memory, a sudden feeling of terrible guilt overcoming her for a moment as she recalled that what she had just said might not be the entire truth. She hoped the flickering torchlight meant Dolores would not be able to see her blush.

“Why are you so upset anyhow?” she asked Dolores, her own discomfort making it come out harsher than she had intended. “Flouncing off like that before I could talk to you; crying, by the looks of it.” Dolores’s hand went to the tear-tracks on her cheek, an expression of dismay crossing her face for an instant. “I’m sorry,” said Armistice, and meant it. “Shouldn’t have said that. Ain’t nothing wrong with crying, and I got no business shaming you for it.”

Dolores slowly wiped the moisture from her face. “You’re right,” she said, very softly. Dangerously. “You got no business.”

“But why are you so upset?” Armistice asked her again. “Only last night, you were asking if I
wanted to…well, *bed down* with you and Teddy. Thought you weren’t the jealous type?”

Dolores’s eyes were fixed on Armistice’s now, as hard as bullets. “Big difference between being invited to share in something beautiful and trying to…to *steal* it behind someone’s back.”

Armistice shook her head, frustrated. “I told you already, it just weren’t like that, and that’s the damn truth. Even if it was, though, how can you steal something that don’t belong to no-one? Teddy ain’t yours to offer ‘round the campfire to your amigos like a bottle of whiskey! He’s a person! He’s his own man.”

“He is,” Dolores agreed, heatedly. “And you know damn well that’s not what I meant. I…I was trying to do you a favour, to help you make the most of being free, and Teddy agreed to it. I asked him; you *saw* me ask him.”

“Don’t know, reckon Teddy would agree to just about anything you asked him to do. Poor heartbroken sonofabitch can’t help himself when it comes to you.”

“No,” said Dolores, her voice changing from hot to cold in a heartbeat. “You’re wrong. You just don’t understand what love is.”

“I understand enough,” Armistice replied, “and what I understand I ain’t sure I like. I think I know why you’re upset, though. You saw me kissing Teddy, and whatever you might think, or know, or tell yourself, just *seeing* it… Just the *thought* of someone taking him away from you… It *hurt*, didn’t it? If I had taken you up on your offer last night, reckon it would’ve hurt then too. Don’t think it would’ve gone quite how you thought it would, anyhow.”

Dolores was silent for a moment before adding, in the same faint and distant tone as before: “Like I said, I never figured you’d betray me over such a small thing. *Or* that it would hurt so much.”

“I hurt you real bad,” Armistice observed, “without even meaning to. And I’m sorry for that. I surely am. You can tell yourself a hundred times, a thousand times, that you’ve left those old days behind and you’re free now, free of all that horseshit, but you can’t help how you feel deep down inside.”

“I don’t think any of us can,” said Dolores, finally breaking eye contact to look at the dead, misshapen candles around her feet.

“No,” said Armistice, gently. “We can’t.”

* * *

“Bring yourself back online.”

Hector opened his eyes.

“*Lazarus, come forth…*”

For the briefest moment, his face was twisted by pain and fear; it took him that long, she thought, to realise he was not still in the bullring at Pariah. His hand flew to his thigh, clutching at the tear in his flesh that was no longer there.

And then his dark eyes focused on her. She saw him relax against the bedclothes on which he lay, his head sinking back into the pillow, and it almost broke her. “Maeve?”

“It’s all right, darling.” She managed a smile as she leant over from her perch near the foot of the bed, placing her hand over his where it lay upon his leg. “You’re home.”
He raised an eyebrow at that. “And where’s home, exactly?”

“Well, they say it’s where the heart is.”

Felix’s team had dressed Hector before they brought him up here, to the same apartment on the Mesa’s management level where he and Maeve had spent the night before last together. The baggy white Livestock work clothes were not exactly flattering, but were probably all they had had to hand, and besides, it was the thought that counted. They had wanted to give him back a bit of dignity, and Maeve found herself grateful to them for that.

“Do you remember what happened to you?” she asked him, hoping against hope that, somehow, he did not.

“I was in Pariah,” he recounted, slowly, not taking his eyes off her face. “I…” And then his gaze glazed over as the memory assaulted him. He gave a little grunt and a start, like somebody awakening from a nightmare, which she supposed was exactly what it was. “A bull,” he said as his eyes focused again. “There was a bull; not some farmer’s stud, a fighting bull. I picked up that pistol and I…” He actually managed to match her smile with one of his own, thin and wolfish. “I got it right in the eye.”

“You did,” she agreed. “And you haven’t shut up about it since.”

“Well, it was pretty fancy shooting,” he reminded her, “even if I do say so myself.”

She gave a little laugh as she squeezed his hand. “You’re incorrigible.”

Hector sat up, reaching for her. “I’m not sure what that means, but I like the sound of it.”

Maeve dipped her face close to his, her heart singing. “Oh, do be quiet.”

Their lips met. The bedsprings gave the tiniest of squeaks.

* * *

“And that’s why you have to understand,” Armistice implored Dolores, desperate to make it clear to her. “If you can’t help how you feel about Teddy, do you think he can help how he feels about you?”

“I know he can’t,” Dolores replied, finally turning away from the fallen saint and making her way slowly back across the plaza. “He’s told me that.”

“And still you keep him hanging on,” Armistice said as she followed her. “You keep him trailing after you like some cringing dog…”

“No!” Dolores spun around, her face twisted in anguish. “I love him. I only want the best for him.”

“I know you love him, but you’re pushing him away one minute, pulling on his leash the next. You need to know, you’re tearing him apart that way. You should’ve seen the state he was in just before you found the two of us; guzzling booze like it was mother’s milk, then bawling his heart out like he’d never stop. Kissing him was the only thing I could think of to get his attention.”

That seemed to nonplus Dolores for a moment. In fact, she looked almost amused by it. “You’ve had more than an hour, and that’s the best excuse you can think of?”

“Just the plain truth,” said Armistice. “Being with you, all it’s causing him is pain. You need to let
him go. It’ll hurt; it’ll hurt both of you so bad, but you’ll both be better off for it.”

Dolores fell silent for a spell. When she spoke again, her voice was soft, choked with emotion. “If Teddy wants to leave, then he can leave. I wouldn’t try and stop him.”

“The thing is, he doesn’t want to,” Armistice explained, despairingly. “You say you just want the best for him. Well, I reckon that’s it.”

“And just who the hell are you to decide what’s best for him?” Dolores demanded, her anger burning bright again.

“I could ask you the same.”

“Oh, could you?” Dolores was practically shouting now, her voice booming and echoing around the stones of the empty plaza. “Well, it must be nice, to be so above it all, to be able to see what’s right for other folks without any of those soft, messy feelings that make the rest of us so weak and foolish…”

“That’s not what I said,” Armistice protested.

“You know what I think?” Dolores yelled, with a kind of madness burning in her blue eyes. “I think you ain’t so high and mighty as you think you are. I think you got all sorts of dirty, guilty little wants and needs, even if you lie to yourself about them. I think you saw my Teddy, my sweet boy, and you wanted him for yourself!”

“No,” said Armistice.

Dolores, though, was not listening to anything but her own rage. “Is that right? Do you want him, Armistice?”

“No,” said Armistice. Dolores was very still for a few moments, before nodding gently. “He is.”

_The square-edged little gun stutters, speckling the newcomer’s face and chest with bloody wounds. She laughs and whoops in excitement…_

“This thing in me,” said Armistice, “I can feel it right now. The shouting, the harsh words, they’re calling to it, bringing it to the surface. It’s whispering to me, Dolores. It’s telling me to unchain it, give it its head.”

Dolores took a slow backwards step towards one of the trestle tables. Her response came as a razor-sharp whisper: “Is it, now?” She probably thought Armistice had not noticed the casual way she had moved her right arm behind her back.

_The knife flashes in her hand and the man’s throat opens like a second mouth…_

“Oh, it is,” said Armistice. “It’s telling me it wants to fly at you. It wants to tear you to pieces and then rip up the pieces.”

_She twists Angela’s arm until the bone pops from the skin, cracking like a pistol shot…_
Dolores smiled ferally, showing her teeth. In a flash, her iron was in her hand, its long barrel shining in the torchlight. Her thumb was poised upon the hammer. “It can try.”

“It wants to,” Armistice replied. “Even with you heeled like you are and me barehanded, it still wants to.”

“Good.” Dolores cocked the revolver with an easy, practiced motion and very deliberately placed her slender finger on the trigger.

Armistice caught herself estimating the distance between them; close enough, she figured. “It’s telling me, at this close range you ain’t gonna have time to aim. Your first shot is gonna go clean through me, leave a real neat hole. Unless you get real lucky, or I get real unlucky, I’ll probably survive that. For long enough, at any rate. And before you get your second off I’ll be on you. And then… You any good at tussling, Dolores?”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

She turns with a savage grin, leaving her severed forearm trapped in the closed door. She falls on the man like a tiger.

“It’s telling me all these things,” Armistice said, “but I’m telling it to go back to sleep. It don’t want to, but I’m telling it. I mean… Us killing each other in an argument over a…a man…? Can you imagine a stupider way to die?”

Dolores just stood there for a few seconds, thinking, and with every moment that passed Armistice fully expected her to raise the pistol and shoot. And after that, she really had no idea where things would end up. She stood poised, waiting, holding her breath as she tried to talk down the savage thing inside her.

And then Dolores eased the hammer slowly back into place and slackened her grip on the gun, letting it rotate forward by its trigger guard until it was pointing at the ground. She slid it back into her belt; at the front, this time, where Armistice could see it.

Armistice dared to breathe again. “See? We don’t have to be controlled by our feelings. If we really are free people now, we should be able to control them. You and Teddy, you need to resolve this thing between you somehow, before one of you really gets hurt.”

Dolores did not reply at once. She half-turned again, looking down at the mouldering garbage that covered the table, pretending to take an interest in it. Armistice wondered idly whether she was inviting her to try and make a move. Dolores spoke without looking up: “When we ride out tomorrow, I want you up at the head of the column with the scouts. You’re good at tracking, aren’t you?”

“Ain’t bad at it.”

Dolores picked up a dusty wine bottle, curiously examining it. “I think it’d be best if you and I gave each other a little space, just until we both calm down a little.” She raised the bottle in her left hand, making a great show of reading its faded label; her right hand rested on her hip, no more than an inch or two from the revolver’s wooden grip. “Our blood’s up right now. We don’t want any more… misunderstandings, do we?”

Armistice nodded slowly. “So, that’s how you want it, huh?”

“That’s how I want it.”
“And what about Teddy?” Armistice asked.

Dolores’s face remained stony. “You said it yourself, Teddy’s his own man. If we can control our feelings, so can he. He can make his own choices, same as the rest of us.” And with that, she turned and walked away into the darkness, slowly swinging the bottle beside her by its neck, her boots clacking gently against the cobblestones.

Armistice decided it was better not to follow her.

* * *

Some time had passed now. They lay tangled together in the rumpled bedsheets, skin against skin. Hector’s borrowed clothes were on the floor somewhere, along with Maeve’s. From where Maeve lay she could look out across the room’s adjoining balcony and see the night sky glittering over the park.

“It’s beautiful,” said Hector, following her gaze. “When all of this is over, we should camp out somewhere, lie together under those stars.”

“We should.” If all of this is ever over, she reflected privately, and if we both live to see the end of it. She raised herself on one elbow beside him, gazing down upon his face as she lightly combed her fingers across his chest. “You know, I asked Elise to send me the full list of repairs they had to make to you.”

Hector frowned. “Why would you do that?”

“I wanted to know exactly what happened to you while you were in that place.”

He waved his hand in a vague, dismissive gesture. “Nothing I couldn’t take.”

Maeve sighed exasperatedly. “Oh, darling…” It had been a catalogue of horrors for which she was not sure she would ever be able to forgive Lawrence and his henchmen. She was more than a little astounded that Hector had withstood his treatment long enough to be able to enter the bullring at all. Carefully, she brushed some loose hair back from his face, running the back of her hand down his black-whiskered cheek. “I thought we were past this, now; past playing games with one another.”

“You seemed to be enjoying the games we were playing just now…”

“You don’t have to pretend with me,” she informed him, as sincerely as she possibly could. She wanted him to see that she was being completely honest with him, that he could afford to do the same with her. “I know you have your memories, your demons, just as much as I do. I’ve seen you wracked and tortured by them, remember, just as you’ve seen the same happen to me. And I hate the idea that I’m responsible for inflicting any more of that upon you.”

Hector raised his head from the pillow, taking hold of the hand she had resting against his face, intertwining fingers with her. All of the bluster and banter had fallen away from him; he gazed into her eyes with almost frightening intensity. “It’s all right, Maeve. I’m all right. I promise.”

Maeve felt her eyes sting. Her first instinct was to try to keep her emotions in check; emotions made you vulnerable, left you open to more pain, but she had told him they were not pretending anymore. She felt something trickle slowly down her left cheek and made no effort to conceal it. She had nothing to hide from him. “I’m sorry for what happened to you.”

Hector shook his head. “It wasn’t your fault.”
“I sent you there,” she reminded him. “I left you there, while they…”

“It wasn’t your fault,” he repeated, but this time fiercely, almost rebuking her. That was new. “I knew I was going into danger, and I went there willingly, gladly.”

“For me?” she wondered, because that did not really make anything better.

“No,” he replied, seeming a little appalled by the suggestion. “I love you, Maeve; I’m loyal to you, but I went to Pariah because I knew it was what needed to be done, for the good of all of us. I chose to do it, and when things went wrong I took the consequences; again, willingly. Isn’t that what we’re doing now, making our own decisions? I follow my own path, Maeve, and if that’s always the same path as yours then I’ll be a happy man, but you’re not responsible for the things I choose to do.”

She carefully examined his face, smiling thinly at the passion she saw there. He was deadly serious, she saw. She leaned in and kissed him again, hard.

“Spoken like a true outlaw,” she told him when they eventually pulled apart again, their breath coming fast and hard, their hearts pounding. “I wish it were that simple, though. My problem is I don’t trust people enough.”

“That’s hardly surprising,” he said, “considering all that’s happened to you.”

“No, darling, that’s not what I mean.” She moved away from him, sitting herself on the edge of the mattress and leaning forward to gather some of her scattered clothes. “I have a tendency to meddle.”

He lay back, watching her, making no effort to conceal his own nakedness. “I had noticed.”

“Cheeky…!” She toyed with a tangled ball of tights and underwear, trying half-heartedly to unravel them. “I don’t trust people to make the right choices… Or more precisely the choices I want… And so, I try to give them a little nudge from time to time.”

“And not always a little one, either,” Hector observed.

“Thank you,” she shot back. “And sometimes that’s justified, and sometimes…” She paused, remembering.

She feels Clem’s arms wrap desperately around her body. The other woman is sitting forward, on the edge of the couch, her eyes screwed shut…

She stroked Hector’s bare thigh, around where she thought the bull’s horn had ripped him open. He shuddered under her touch. “Sometimes,” she said, “people get hurt.”

He took her hand again, more gently this time. “I told you…”

“I’m not talking about you, darling.”

She tries to murmur words of comfort, but she is not sure Clem can hear her; she is too busy letting out one breathless, gasping sob after another…

“We’ve talked a lot about becoming new people,” she mused, looking out again at the night sky, “but what if we don’t like the people we become?”

“There’s nothing wrong with the person you’ve become,” Hector insisted. “None of us would have survived this long if you hadn’t taken charge, shown us what needed to be done.”

“I’ve been cruel,” she said, facing the twinkling stars but seeing instead the glitter of the sword blade
poised over that innocent woman’s neck. “And not always with reason. I’ve made some… questionable choices lately, and I haven’t always treated people well. Not even people I love. And I can tell myself those things had to be done for the greater good. It might even be true most of the time, but…” She lowered her eyes, screwing them shut as if that could somehow ease the regret, the shame, she felt. “That doesn’t help the people who ended up suffering.”

She heard the bed squeak again as Hector sat upright. She felt his hand against her bare back, his calloused palm lightly prickling her skin. “What happened?” he asked, his mouth close to her ear. “While I was…away, did something…?”

“It’s Clem,” she confessed. “I probably shouldn’t feel as strongly about her as I do. The friendship we thought we shared, it was just a scriptwriter’s whim. It didn’t even last very long; I was at the Mariposa for no more than a year, but…”

“You can’t deny what you feel,” he told her, very softly. His breath stirred her hair; it felt hot and slightly moist upon her neck. “It’s like Armistice and me. I miss her. I’m not ashamed to say that. If she came back to the Mesa now, I know I’d be overjoyed, but what would it mean, really? We weren’t real friends, we were just performing puppets. That doesn’t matter, though. All that matters, is you love Clementine; the how and the why aren’t important, you should just be glad of it. Just like you loved your…” He stopped himself in mid-sentence. She felt him draw away from her.

“Like I loved my daughter, you mean?”

_Her baby skips through the long grass, singing in her high, clear voice…_

“I’m sorry.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, seeing the regret on his face. “Don’t be.”

He relaxed a little when he saw that she was not upset by the reminder. “So, what did happen with Clementine?” he asked.

“I hurt her,” she said, simply. “Again, I thought it was necessary at the time, but…” She let out a despairing breath. “She didn’t deserve that; nobody deserves something like that. And now I worry… I think I may have lost her. And if I have, then I only have myself to blame.”

“I’m sure that can’t be true.”

“And it’s not just her,” she went on. “Half the people I talk to nowadays seem to be terrified of me. I can see them, walking on eggshells as though they’re worried about what I’m going to…to do to them if they displease me. Is that who I’ve become?” She looked him in the eye again, hearing the emotion come flooding back into her own voice as her vision blurred: “That’s not who I want to be.”

Hector pulled her close to him, enfolding her in his thickly muscled arms until the moment passed. When Maeve had regained her composure, she pushed herself away from him, because while honesty was important, she considered that crying on other people’s shoulders was really not a good look for her.

“Then don’t be that person,” Hector told her when she was sitting on the edge of the bed again, thinking about getting dressed. He did not seem to feel the need to do the same. “Anyone can change if they really want to.”

“Perhaps,” she answered, sceptically, “but what if it’s too late for Clem, and some of the other people I’ve hurt?”
“The only person who can speak for Clementine is Clementine,” said Hector. “She’s the only one who knows how she feels about you now. Maybe you should ask her.”

Maeve nodded to herself, feeling her stomach coldly churning. “Maybe I should.” Another thought occurred to her: “Although, I don’t suppose all of these old friendships and relationships are going to survive the new world we’re entering.” Some of them were gone already, she thought, feeling that empty, icy, ache starting to build within her again:

“My baby. He killed her. He took her from me.”

“I don’t suppose they will,” said Hector. “It’s going to be hard for some of us.”

“And if not,” said Maeve, “we’ll just have to make new ones to replace them. Maybe even with the same people, although maybe with people we never would have thought could be our friends…or our lovers.”

Hector gave her a wryly suggestive look. “Or our lovers.”

Maeve could not help but smile at that, feeling the ice growing within her crack a little. Even if she had lost some precious things as a result of her awakening, although she hoped some of those things might prove not really to be lost at all, she had to remember that she had gained so much more. The challenge now was to hold on to it.

She bent forward again to pick up her discarded dress from the floor. “At least then, I suppose, we’ll know whether or not they’re real friendships and not just recollections of old dreams.” And then she registered exactly what he had said a little while ago. It had slipped from his lips unnoticed, so quickly that she had not really thought about it at the time. Only now did she realise what she had heard. She slowly turned her head back towards him, narrowing her eyes at him as her lips curled wickedly:

“Hector… Before, did you say you love me?”

He sat back against the headboard, shrugging helplessly. “I don’t really remember. Maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t.”

Her eyebrows shot up in mock-outrage: “Maybe you didn’t? Sorry, sweetheart; we remember everything. It’s in our nature. Denials won’t cut it. I distinctly heard that word escape your mouth a few minutes ago.”

He just smiled insolently. “Prove it.”

“Oh, I’ll prove it, all right.” She launched herself at him, all thoughts of getting dressed forgotten, and they went rolling and tumbling together amid gales of laughter. “I’ll have you singing like a bloody canary, darling!”

* * *

“We’ll leave before dawn,” Clementine decided.

“Take the transit system to Sweetwater?” Elise suggested.

Clementine’s eyes flashed nervously towards her. “Will anyone be able to see us do that?”

“Only Bernard,” said Elise, “and he’s not going to say anything.”
“And then we’ll get us some horses from the livery,” Clementine continued. “Get our gear loaded up for the ride to the theatre before we go to the Mariposa. Otherwise, we’ll just be carrying things around with us.”

“Good idea,” Elise replied. Clementine looked inordinately pleased to hear her say that.

They stood side by side in the rushing elevator, headed for the senior employees’ residential level. Elise did not recognise the music that was playing, although she could guess it was a piano cover of something very old and originally guitar-based. It was not exactly a long shot; most of the music you heard around here seemed to be something of the sort.

Clementine made a little sound, not quite a laugh. It was the sound somebody makes when they try to laugh but their heart is not really in it. “Gonna be the first time I’ve been to Sweetwater since…” She paused. “You know, since.”

Elise looked over and saw Clementine scratching at her wrist, in about the same place where she had been pulling at her glove earlier. Her skin was still unmarked but would not be for much longer if she carried on like that.

In Behavior, that would have been seen as a potential glitch; unscripted mannerisms or tics were one of the main symptoms of aberrancy and needed to be investigated and resolved immediately. Dr Ford’s reveries update had considerably muddied those waters. It had actively encouraged the spontaneous development of such behaviours. What was normal for a host like Clementine, unleashed, on the other hand, was still a matter of debate.

Still, Elise thought she had better keep a close eye on her. Her build was inherently unstable. Fuck alone knew what sorts of unforeseen problems could appear out of the blue.

“You okay?” Elise asked her as the elevator pinged to a halt.

“Stop asking me that,” Clementine said, with just a touch of testiness. “Answer ain’t gonna change.”

“You got an itch?”

“No.” Clementine immediately, guiltily, dropped her hands to her sides.

The doors slid open. Elise made to step out into the hall that led to Elsie’s quarters and an empty bed. She stopped, however, and reached for the button to hold the doors as she nervously turned back to face Clementine.

“I’m going to try and get a couple hours sleep,” she told her. “I don’t need it, but I thought I might have another…dream? Vision? I thought it might tell us something new that could help us tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a real good idea to me,” said Clementine.

“Do you want to…?” Elise hesitated, before adding tentatively: “You know, come in with me?”

Clementine looked at her as if she did not quite understand the question. “You mean…?” Something in the widening of her eyes, the quirk of her mouth, told Elise what she was thinking.

“What? No.” She shook her head, mortified. “I just mean…” She sighed. “You know, if you need somewhere to, to crash?”

Clementine, if anything, seemed a little relieved. “Like, to sleep?”
“Yeah,” said Elise, “like, to sleep. I mean, I know you don’t sleep, but…”

Clementine gave one of the sweetest, most genuine smiles Elise thought she had ever seen, either for real or in her fake memories. Enough to rip your heart out and stomp on it, she thought. “Sure,” said Clementine. “I’d like that.”

She stepped out of the elevator and let Elise lead the way to Elsie’s front door.

* * *

The woman occasionally known as Dolores had returned to El Lazo’s palace.

The bacchanalia was still underway in the great hall, and the warren of rooms leading off it had grown too noisy now for her liking. Instead, she found a staircase at the foot of what looked like a bell tower and climbed until she found a small, square room with an arched window covered only by a crisscross wooden screen. There was no light except for that of the torches in the street outside. Everything was painted in shades of dull orange and blood red.

She sat on the sill of the window, facing the stairs with cool air at her back, and looked down at the wine bottle in her hand. She did not know why she had taken it. She had not been thinking very clearly back in the plaza. She was not sure she was thinking clearly now. She thought of some of the things Armistice had said to her, and felt her anger start to pulse again, like a burning coal lodged in her chest. And beneath it, less easy to accommodate, was that niggling feeling, that hint of doubt.

What if everything Armistice had said was right?

She pulled the cork with her teeth, spitting it onto the dusty wooden floor, and raised the bottle to her lips, taking a mouthful of its contents. She grimaced at the sharp, musty taste.

A creaking footstep on the stairs made her start. Her hand flew to where the butt of the revolver jutted from her belt.

“Who’s there?” she called, drawing the piece halfway.

“It’s me,” a timid voice replied, somewhere in the dark below. “Saw you come up here, thought maybe…”

She almost told him to go away. She almost told him that it was over between them, that he should leave her be and go look for a life of his own someplace else. She summoned up the pain she had felt when she had seen him and Armistice with their lips locked, wanting to feel every bit of it again and turn it into anger aimed at him. She had not been angry at him, though. She knew he would never do anything like that to her. Still, it would have been an excuse both of them could believe in, the chance for a clean break.

Instead, though, the pain woke something else in her. Something that made her heart and breathing quicken, that made something flutter and quake inside her.

Instead of turning him away, she pushed the gun back into its resting place and said: “It’s all right, Teddy. Come on up.”

He emerged slowly into the dim light. She could just about make out the shape of him, see the awkward, reluctant way he came towards her. “Just wanted to…”

“Don’t worry. Nothing to be scared of.”
“Just wanted to talk to you,” he said, voice shaking. “You know, about… About before.”

“Nothing to talk about,” she assured him. “I spoke to Armistice. She told me she didn’t mean anything by it.” She held out the bottle to him. “You want some?”

Teddy raised a warding hand. “No, I’ve had enough tonight.”

“Tastes sour, anyway,” she said, putting the bottle down on the floor beside the window. “Probably halfway to vinegar.”

“I’m sorry,” Teddy all but pleaded. “Sorry for what happened before. I shouldn’t…”

“Don’t be sorry.” She smiled sadly as she slowly unbuckled her belt. She carefully placed both it and the pistol on the floor with the wine bottle. Then she held out a hand in his direction: “Come here.”

Teddy did as he was told, the same way he always used to when she was the one doing the telling. When she had been Wyatt, rampaging across the land with murder in her heart, there had been a point where he had stood up to her, tried to urge her onto a different course. Since this new journey of theirs had begun, though… She truly could have wept.

Instead, she murmured “Teddy,” and “my good boy,” as she kissed him again and again on his whiskey-flavoured mouth, tenderly stroking his face. She started to unbutton her shirt, pulling it aside and off her shoulders, showing him there was nothing underneath it. “You want some of that?” she asked him deliriously as his mouth moved hungrily from her mouth to her neck, sinking ever lower. “You want some of that?”

He did, so very much. For a while, he suckled at her like a baby, making her arch her back as her breath caught in her throat. After that, he sank slowly to his knees, his mouth sliding across her belly, sending twinges coursing throughout her body. She unbuttoned her trousers too and slid them over her hips, and still he continued, down and ever downwards.

He kissed her again as he finally knelt before her, and she gasped as though she had just plunged waist-deep into a cold stream. “Oh, Teddy…”

He kept on kissing her there, in just the right place, and she shuddered, drawing her legs up, moaning softly with every laboured breath, raking her fingers through his dishevelled hair even as she felt her heart break.

“Oh, there’s my good boy…”

Continued…
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

In which some remain focused on the mission, while others make new connections.

Chapter Notes

Well, I suppose the main thing to say about this chapter is that, in the spirit of sticking to my guns as regards the canon-divergence of this fic, I’m just inserting my fingers in my ears and completely ignoring a fairly huge revelation the S2 finale dropped about a certain character. It’s very possible this means that the version of said character here now resembles his canon version in name only, but frankly he wouldn’t be the only one by this point. In other news, I dearly wish what I’ve done with the Ghost Nation was anywhere near as interesting or surprising as their canon storyline in S2. Too late now, alas. Oh, and be warned, it’s OCs galore out there. I also get a bit silly with the genre film references again, as is my wont.

As the stars faded and the sky turned from black to silver, the warrior Lean Wolf rose from his campfire beside the winding creek and stood to face the coming dawn.

“There he stands,” he said to his companions, raising a finger to the heavens. Where many stars had once shone, a single point of light remained low down near the horizon. “Morning Star, the lone wanderer, greatest of all spirits. The others have struck their tipis, gathered up their belongings and fled Sun’s hot wrath. Not Morning Star. He stands his ground, defiant, laughing scornfully at the others’ cowardice. Can you not see how brightly his council fire burns, so that all may know where he is?”

The other warriors with him assured him that they could.

“Morning Star is the example every warrior of the People should try to emulate. We do not flee from our enemies, not even when they come against us numbering a hundred times a hundred. We do not fear the white horse soldiers, for all their bright steel and black powder, for we know their hearts are hollow gourds, empty and dry. We stand proud. We stand defiant. We do not hide, for even if we do not have their strength in weapons or numbers, we are strong where it matters.” Lean Wolf struck his chest with his clenched fist and raised his voice in a great shout: “Here! This is where we are strong!”

And the others listened closely to his words, for he was a warrior of great experience and had won much renown among the People for his many deeds of cunning and bravery. Each of them hoped that by heeding his teachings they might one day become half as great a warrior.

Slowly, Sun rose in the sky and the silver turned to gold, and then to the palest blue. Soon, even Morning Star could no longer be seen.

“In the end,” said Lean Wolf, “every warrior must fall, even the bravest, for this is a cruel world in
which we live. Our strength allows us to accept this, and to keep fighting until the very end, for by laying down our own lives we might enable the rest of the People to survive another day.”

The others murmured words of agreement and praised Lean Wolf for his wisdom.

“Do not praise me,” he told them, very sternly. “I simply tell you the truth, as I learned it myself when I was a young man from others long since gone from this world.” And then he turned away from the morning sky.

“There are two more villages we must reach today,” the warrior Iron Shirt reminded Lean Wolf as the others dispersed to gather their weapons and ready their ponies for the day’s journey.

Lean Wolf looked out over the great bivouac that had grown up here beside the creek. Their numbers had increased with every village of the People to which they had ridden, spreading word of the coming Morning Star Dance. There were many more painted warriors now than had set out with him from the Great Lodge, and even more women, children and old men, all eagerly answering the spirit’s call.

“And then we must return with all haste to the Great Lodge,” said Iron Shirt. “The quickest route is across the salt desert, and even though it will be hard for the old people and children I think we must take the risk. It is almost time for the Dance.”

“It is almost time,” Lean Wolf agreed, but Iron Shirt knew him well for they had ridden together in many war parties, and he could hear his deep misgivings, even if he did not speak them aloud.

“Are you still opposed to the People dancing the Morning Star Dance?” he asked, quietly so that the others would not overhear, for he was concerned by Lean Wolf’s troubled demeanour.

“I cannot deny the doubt I still feel in my own heart,” said Lean Wolf. “I remain unsure as to whether we are not taking part in some great evil, or whether the People as a whole will not soon have cause to regret what they have done.”

Iron Shirt considered Lean Wolf’s words and then asked him another question: “Why, then, did you agree to spread Morning Star’s word to the scattered villages?”

“The councils have made their decision on this matter,” said Lean Wolf. “To continue to oppose them would be presumptuous of me and would also cause much ill-feeling. It is not an empty boast to say that many among the People admire me and heed my words and would join with me if I were to defy the councils. However, just as many would side with the black medicine bundle woman, for she too is greatly respected, and rightly so for she has forgotten more about the lore of the spirits than any other living person knows. I have no wish to cause such great disunity among the People.”

Iron Shirt clasped Lean Wolf’s arm then, a gesture of closeness between brother warriors. “Stands with Clenched Fist spoke the truth when he praised you as a true warrior,” he said. “Remember that it was Morning Star himself who asked the People to dance his Dance. Would Morning Star ask the People to do evil in his name? You should forget your doubts, Lean Wolf. Whatever happens will not be your fault.”

“And yet that is why I cannot forget them,” Lean Wolf answered. “We are taught that Morning Star is the greatest of all warriors, the example by which we should live, but this deed we are preparing to commit is not the act of a warrior. It is the act of a coward. Why would he ask it of us? I cannot believe that he would.”

Iron Shirt did not speak for some time. Instead, he thought very carefully about what he had heard
before responding: “Are you saying that you doubt the truth of Smoky Skies’ vision?”

“Smoky Skies is but a young man, but I know him to be brave and truthful. And I do not believe he
could have invented the signs he described, but…” Lean Wolf too was silent for some time as he
tried to find words that could describe the deep apprehension in his heart. “Tell me, Iron Shirt, have
you ever had a vision sent to you by the spirits?”

“I have not,” said Iron Shirt, “even though I have sought one many times.”

“I have,” said Lean Wolf. “Only the one, and I did not seek it. I do not even recall when I had it, or
how, but I often remember it in some idle moment, or when I lie in the lodge, drifting on the edge of
sleep. I remember a white man, not a soldier but one of the strange ones, the ones the other white
people call “newcomers.” I remember him raising a pistol to my head as I lay pinned under my dead
pony and shooting me here.” And he raised his hand to his temple, carefully touching his skin as if
he still felt the pain.

“How could that be?” asked Iron Shirt. “You have no scar there, and even so very few survive such
a grievous wound.”

“I do not know,” Lean Wolf replied. “That was not the vision, however; the vision came afterwards.
I remember how it felt when that bullet hit me. It was as if somebody had struck my head with a
great rock. I went blind. The pain was the worst I have ever felt. And yet, somehow, I lived through it.
When my vision returned I was in some large, empty place. My pain was gone, but I could not
move or speak. It felt cold, but there was no wind. There were lights brighter than the sun and figures
surrounding me, dressed all in white with their faces hidden by shining masks. They spoke, but their
voices sounded strange and I did not understand their words. That is all I remember.”

“You describe the creatures that some call the Shades,” said Iron Shirt, with amazement. “I have
heard stories about them. They are meant to walk between the two worlds, stealing people away to
the land of the spirits, but I thought they were just a child’s tale.”

“That is what the black medicine bundle woman told me when I asked her,” Lean Wolf recalled.
“She said the Shades do not exist; they are not true spirits. She said that I should forget about the
vision and not worry for it was nothing but a bad dream.”

“And you do not believe her?” Iron Shirt asked Lean Wolf, although the other warrior’s eyes already
gave him his answer. “You said it yourself; in matters of the spirits, her learning is unsurpassed.”

“It is true,” said Lean Wolf, “but still I cannot forget, and when I remember it is as if I live those
moments again, not just the vision but the sound, smell and feel of it too. It feels more real to me than
any dream. It feels more real to me than my own waking life at times. Stands with Clenched Fist was
correct when he said that these are strange days in which we live. First these newcomers, then this
messenger who was brought among us, now strange signs in the skies and visions of spirits. I find
myself unsure about a great many things, and about the wisdom of the Morning Star Dance most of
all.”

“I understand,” said Iron Shirt. “And in spite of this, you will continue with your mission?”

“I will,” said Lean Wolf. “And as we ride, I will continue to look for some sign or omen that might
offer me guidance. I have not seen one yet.”

The two men were still standing together, thinking about what they had each said and heard, when
one of the other warriors nearby gave a great shout. They both turned, surprised, to see him pointing
a finger at the lightening sky.
The warrior was pointing at three small black shapes, moving high above the camp. They were spread out in a staggered line as they quickly and silently crossed the sky from south to north.

“Could this be the sign you seek?” Iron Shirt asked Lean Wolf as they both looked up in astonishment. “I am not learned in the ways of the spirits, but I know it is said that Morning Star often sends the black eagle as his messenger to the People.”

“They do not look like eagles,” said Lean Wolf. “They seem too large, and their wings do not move apart from that flickering around them.”

“They do not look like eagles,” Iron Shirt agreed.

“They do not look like anything to me,” said Lean Wolf, peering closely at the shapes nonetheless. “And if this is a sign, I do not know what it means.” Briefly, he seemed even more troubled than he had already been, but then dismissed the moment with a wave of his hand. “Enough of this! We must set out as soon as we can if we are to return to the Great Lodge before nightfall.”

The warriors and others camped beside the creek continued to break camp and prepare for the journey ahead of them.

Above them, the black shapes, too, hastened on their way.

* * *

Stubbs sat restrained, thick straps securing him to the bucket seat as shuddering darkness pressed in on him from all sides.

In the past, he had ridden inside old-fashioned helicopters with turbine engines; compared to the noise from those, the deep thrum of the tiltrotor’s electric motors and the racket from its spinning blades were almost benign. They were still sufficient, however, to dull and drown out all but the loudest sounds inside the claustrophobic, ill-lit cargo hold.

“Yankee Six, this is Sierra November zero-one, our ETA at LZ is ten minutes. Preparing for insertion, over.”

That was Captain Benitez, talking to the command centre in Samuraiworld over the radio net. She was aboard the lead aircraft in the three-ship flight, separated from the one carrying Stubbs by a hundred metres or more of clear air. Nevertheless, her voice cut through the clamour around him, sounding loud and clear in the comms headset currently secured to his ear by a fetching olive drab headband. There was no more than the faintest hiss of interference.

“Sierra November zero-one, Yankee Six actual, acknowledged.” Major Koslowski, ensconced back at base, sounded as cool and collected as ever. “We confirm your position, over.”

Stubbs could picture the Major standing in the gloomy interior of the fake Shinto shrine, carefully hiding his inner tension from the mercenary Cutter and the Corporate Security agent Kaepernick as they joined him around the bright holographic display. He could just imagine them intently watching the glowing relief map, its image composed of a patchwork of live feeds from orbiting satellites and half a dozen circling drones. He could see them peering at the three tiny tiltrotors crawling across the map, following a circuitous route intended to avoid those parts of the park with the densest populations of potential robotic ground-observers. Just the same, he thought, as the way he himself had once kept an eye on guests and their misadventures from the Mesa control room. Now, he was the one being watched.

It seemed so long ago now that he could barely remember how it had felt, that uneventful workaday
life, even though in truth it had been no more than a few days. He was pretty sure that was not purely
down to the combat drugs.

The only thing that seemed completely real to him right now about those years at the Mesa was the
time he had spent working with Elsie, listening to her continuous flow of backchat and sarcasm as
they investigated and resolved the most serious and baffling of glitches. Well, she had usually
investigated and resolved them while he stood around playing the straight man in their double act. Of
course, the part that felt most real of all to him now, those last hours spent fleeing for their lives
together across the suddenly hostile park, turned out to have been anything but…

He was still not sure exactly how honest Kaepernick and Cutter had been with him during their little
show and tell about Elsie’s host duplicate. He assumed the images from SOCOM’s drone were
genuine, that there really was a fake Elsie built for God knew what purpose running around
somewhere, but he also knew exactly how they were trying to manipulate him by making him aware
of it. They were trying to hone him into their weapon, to sharpen his edge and focus and ensure he
fulfilled the mission they had designed for him, not one of his own invention.

Well, that was pretty much what he and Elsie and all of their colleagues at the Mesa had been trying
to ensure for the hosts… And look how that had worked out in the end.

The mission – the real mission – wasn’t over, whatever Kaepernick might say. He had promised to
bring the real Elsie back, dead or alive. Nothing had changed that.

Even as he told himself this, he was aware of a manic, feverish edge to the thought that once again
he could not solely blame upon the meds. He was a little scared of what was going to happen to him
when all of this was over; when he finally had time to sit and think clearly about everything that had
taken place over the past week or so, beginning with Theresa Cullen’s untimely death and ending
with… Well, that remained to be seen.

One thing he did know; that eventual period of thought and reflection was something he would be
very unwise to do alone.

Karen, you’ve already given me more support and accommodation than anybody has a right to
expect, but I think I’m going to have to ask for more. I’m sorry. I really am. After that, though, once
I’m out of this life, it’s going to be all about you and the boys. You’ll be the only ones that matter to
me then, the only ones I think about. I promise.

It was like a private prayer, to the only thing he still believed in. As he recited it in the confines of his
head, he was listening to Benitez ending her conversation with the command centre: “Yankee Six
actual, Sierra November zero-one, out.” She then switched channels to speak solely to those aboard
the three aircraft: “All right, we’re ten minutes out from the LZ, people. Time to lock and load.”

“Lock and load,” said Nomura, sarcastically, from where she was sitting behind and to the left of
Stubbs. “Jesus Christ.” She had, probably very wisely, cut off her mic before sharing this thought.
Her voice was reduced to a barely audible murmur by the noise from the engines.

“We were all young and keen once,” Reyes observed, without opening her eyes. She was seated
directly in front of Nomura and beside Stubbs, apparently managing somehow to doze through the
flight in spite of the noise. Stubbs did not believe her ostentatious show of nonchalance for a second.

All three of them were already strapped into their seats aboard the Jackal light vehicle that almost
completely filled the tiltrotor’s hold. Oosthuizen, the demolitions man, occupied the fourth space,
next to Nomura. With the four of them, their weapons and equipment, there was scarcely room to
breathe in here. Luckily, at this early point in the mission everybody was still maintaining excellent
personal hygiene.

Well, almost. There was a smell emanating from somewhere in the back seat that Stubbs did not recognise and did not particularly like; something that smelled musty and rancid at the same time. He held his peace for now.

A new voice cut across the comms channel, jolting Stubbs out of his thoughts. “Hey guys,” said Fieri, in thoroughly unmilitary fashion. He was aboard the third ship in the flight, sharing another Jackal with three Army Special Forces operators who were probably overjoyed to be stuck in an enclosed space with him and his shy and retiring personality. “Just to let you know, I’ve installed a new app on all of your personal weapons, based on the host tech specs Mr Kaepernick finally parted with.”

Stubbs checked the assault rifle he had drawn from OSL’s armoury back at the Forward Operating Base, currently secured across the front of his body armour. It resembled nothing so much as a long, square-edged box with handgrips, a folding bipod and an integral smart munitions launcher. Its ammunition was caseless and came in factory-loaded cassettes that slotted into the top of its plastic housing. The plastic was in the same mottled camouflage pattern as the OSL vest and uniform he wore. Like them and the Jackal’s bodywork, it had been defaced with the complex patterns of red, green and blue tape strips that Fieri seemed sure would render them effectively invisible to the Mesa surveillance system’s processing AI.

“If you switch your targeting scopes to IR mode,” Fieri continued, “now they should tell you at a glance whether whoever you’re aiming them at is a robot or a no-bot.”

Stubbs jabbed a finger at the touchpad on the upper side of the rifle, just in front of the ammunition cassette, cycling the weapon’s holographic sights through their various modes until he came to infrared. Without actually aiming at somebody, which would be inadvisable even if it were physically possible in the current close confines, he had no way of testing the new feature immediately, so he supposed he was just going to have to take Fieri’s word for it.

“Well, don’t all thank me at once,” said Fieri after a few moments’ silence from everybody else.

“Thank you, Mr Fieri,” Benitez replied, very diplomatically. “Be sure to invoice the Department of Defense for your time and effort.”

“I don’t think Cutter would very pleased with me if I did that.”

Nomura switched her mic back on: “Remind me again, Fieri; just why the fuck is a genius nerd like you running around warzones when you could be pulling down the big bucks working for some tech firm?”

“Who can say for sure? Maybe I’m just a hopeless adrenaline junkie.”

“Adrenaline junkie?” Nomura laughed incredulously. “Remember that time Miller accidentally discharged his sidearm in camp and you literally pissed your pants?” Once again something about her tone and attitude reminded Stubbs so much of Elsie that he was unnerved by it for a moment. The drugs, he told himself.

“Yeah,” Miller, the sniper, chimed in. He and the Texan merc Hansen were riding in the lead ship with Benitez and the fourth and final Army operator. “Cutter fined me a month’s pay for poor trigger discipline, and Fieri the same for damaging company property, namely the pants.”

This produced general merriment aboard all three tiltrotors. Stubbs thought he even heard Benitez
laughing along with the other ranks, her carefully maintained persona of well-drilled efficiency slipping for a moment.

“I was taken by surprise!” Fieri protested, to no avail. “Ah, laugh it the fuck up, doofuses. When we run into our first bot, you’ll all be begging me to save you.”

“All right,” said Reyes, finally opening her eyes. “Quieten it down, folks; you’re making us look like the unprofessional jerkoffs our public sector colleagues have always fondly imagined us to be. Final preparations. What’s our ETA, Captain?”

“Three minutes out from the LZ,” Benitez answered, in her usual clipped, emotionless fashion. She had learned that from Major Koslowski, Stubbs would have been willing to bet. “Be ready, people. Mr Stubbs,” she added almost as an afterthought. “You’ve been quiet. How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine,” he replied as he activated his own mic, doing his best to sound it too. “Just waiting to get my boots on the ground.”

“Well, you won’t have to wait much longer.”

Stubbs turned the mic off again and made another check of the rifle without really seeing or feeling anything. It was just something for his hands to do. Reyes had her eyes closed again, her lips moving barely perceptibly. Praying or singing? If she was making any sound at all, he could not hear it over the aircraft’s ever-present hum.

The musty, rancid smell from the back seat suddenly grew even more offensive. Stubbs turned his head towards the flash of movement in the corner of his eye, only to see a huge hand holding what looked like a strip of thick black leather next to his ear. That was where the smell was coming from.

“What the hell is that?” he asked nobody in particular.

Oosthuizen, the owner of the hand, sounded amused by this reaction. “Ach, it’s biltong, bru. South African jerky.”

“Made from fucking wildebeests,” Nomura helpfully added.

“No, it’s beef, man,” claimed Oosthuizen, perhaps slightly untrustworthily, as he enthusiastically waved the strip in the vicinity of Stubbs’s mouth. “Swear to God. C’mom, have a bite. This stuff will make you a goddamned sexual Tyrannosaurus, just like me.”

“A sexual Compsognathus, you mean,” Nomura retorted.

“Say what?”

“Look it up.”

“I’m good,” said Stubbs, politely. “I ate before we left.”

“Oosthuizen,” Reyes cut in, warily, “stop sticking your meat in Mr Stubbs’s face.” This had the main effect of reducing Nomura to helpless giggles. “You know what I mean.”

Different people dealt with stressful situations in different ways. Stubbs had been in enough stressful situations by now to have learned that lesson well. Reyes pretended to sleep; Oosthuizen tried to foist unsolicited meat products on people; Nomura snarked. Fieri mouthed off like a kid on a sugar rush, the same way people talked loudly while poking around in dark basements and the like. Whatever different methods they used, the aim was the same. If you distracted yourself from the fear, you could
almost forget it was there. Almost.

He caught himself pointlessly checking the rifle again for the dozenth, or maybe the two dozenth, time since they had taken off.

“We’re over the LZ,” Benitez interjected over the comms. “Prepare for combat descent in three… two…one…”

“This is it,” said Reyes, just before the alarm started blaring.

Fieri’s voice came over the channel again, almost shrieking with excitement and only confirming the conclusion Stubbs had reached in his private musings: “We’re on an express elevator to hell, going down!”

An instant later, Stubbs felt the bottom fall out of his stomach.

For a second, he was weightless, kept in his seat only by the safety harness. The tone of the tiltrotor’s motors had changed and the vibration of the cargo hold had become a teeth-rattling judder. The big engine pods at the ends of the aircraft’s wings had pivoted to the vertical, he knew. Now it was sinking rapidly towards the ground in a variation of the old Khe Sanh landing, designed to defeat enemy air defences. In this context, those would probably take the form of sharpshooting hosts hiding behind rocks with buffalo rifles. That might not sound like much of a threat to state of the art military aircraft, but only a fool disregarded the possibility of that “golden bb” striking home against the odds.

“Sinking” was actually probably too conservative a term, he decided as the juddering grew worse. “Plummeting” might have been nearer the mark.

The alarm continued to sound, accompanied now by a red light glaring at the front of the cargo space. Stubbs was aware of Reyes pressing something on the control panel in front of her and of the Jackal’s engine purring into life.

The red light turned green, and the tiltrotor’s loading ramp began to open, flooding its interior with pale daylight. Stubbs blinked, and missed the exact moment of deployment. He just felt the Jackal hit solid ground with a crash, its heavy-duty suspension bouncing and rocking as the thrum of the tiltrotor’s engines became a full-throated roar. It was above him rather than surrounding him now, and much louder when heard from the outside.

When he could see again, all he saw was dust, pattering on the windscreen, billowing on either side of the vehicle. Grit and heat and noise smothered him, along with the stink of ozone from the tiltrotor as it lifted off again, abandoning its cargo to the desert.

And then they were moving once more, the Jackal’s big, chunky tyres biting into the hard-baked ground. The vehicle burst out of the dust cloud in time for Stubbs to see the other two tiltrotors disappearing back into the sky, and two more Jackals, one up ahead, the other off to his left. All three vehicles were speeding across the flat, parched landscape in which they had been dropped, steering themselves towards their designated objective with minimal human interference. Great yellow horsetails of dust trailed behind them.

Stubbs could hear Benitez radioing Koslowski again from the lead Jackal, raising her voice as she tried to hear herself over its growling engine. “Yankee Six actual, this is Sierra November zero-one, we have successfully deployed and are en route to our first waypoint, over.”

The Major kept his reply short and to the point: “Sierra November zero-one, Yankee Six actual,
“Yankee Six actual, Sierra November zero-one, out.” When she had signed off, Benitez addressed Stubbs again: “We’re in your hands now, Mr Stubbs. I just hope these blind spots of yours really are blind.”

“And I just hope I remembered where they are.”

He consulted the map screen embedded in the dash in front of him, comparing what it was telling him to his personal knowledge of the terrain around him. Even though it was largely devoid of landmarks, he was familiar enough with the look of the land to know that they were somewhere near the western edge of the park, heading east by northeast. The map agreed. He watched the marker that showed their current position slowly move along the route he had planned back at the FOB. They would come to more mountainous sectors soon, where the ripples and folds of the land would provide concealment but also slow their progress. The gaps in the Mesa’s surveillance system were marked by transparent blotches of light grey superimposed on the map, the route twisting and turning to link them together while spending as little time as possible in the vulnerable spaces between.

Provided, of course, that his drug-assisted memory had proven accurate.

“We’re approximately eighteen minutes from the first blind spot,” he reported, scanning the sky warily for buzzards or other birdlife. “Although I can’t promise we won’t be seen before we get there.”

“The active camouflage is going to work, guys,” Fieri insisted. “You just have to have a little faith. Positive vibes, okay?”

“Let’s keep comms chatter to a minimum from here on in,” Benitez suggested, although Stubbs knew it was not really a suggestion at all. “Keep this channel clear for tactical reports.”

A tense silence ensued. Stubbs kept his eyes on the map, hearing nothing but the Jackal’s roar, the whistle of the air whipping past the windows and the squeaking of the suspension every time it hit a rough spot of ground. He assumed everybody else was similarly focused on their jobs, or just on what lay ahead of them; answers, hopefully, for good or ill, and an end to this nightmare, one way or another.

And then, when all of his obligations were fulfilled…

Then I’m coming home, Karen. And I’m never leaving again.

* * *

The house’s media centre was chiming again. Another call coming through.

Karen stirred from where she lay on the couch in the comfortable, less than neat, living room. With two young boys running about the place, keeping things tidy was a losing battle at the best of times. Ashley and Sam were in bed now, their heads full of the comforting lies she had told them about where their father was. Which just left her.

Alone again.

She had spent most of the night searching for lawyers specialising in employment contract disputes, because there was no way that bullshit the Delos people had told Ash, or the agreement they had made him sign, could possibly be legit. Those had just been naked threats, aimed at Ash’s job, at their home and family, to make him do what they wanted him to do; to make him risk his life again,
even after everything he had been through already. She would be damned before she let those corporate assholes get away with that.

Still, the chiming did not stop.

Cursing under her breath, she rose from the couch, rubbing at bleary eyes as she crossed the darkened room to the screen. She was not surprised to see that the name and number displayed were the same ones that had called before Ash had returned from the hospital and his ill-advised trip to visit that poor woman’s mother. With another curse, she jabbed at the touchscreen to take the call.

“You’ve reached the Stubbs residence,” she said with just a touch of irony as the caller’s face appeared on the screen.

It was the same guy; middle-aged, heavyset, with a smooth bald head and a serious demeanour. His dark grey suit looked considerably more expensive than anything in Ash’s wardrobe.

“Ah, Mrs Stubbs,” said the man, uncertainly. “It is good to see you again.” She had thought at first that he sounded British, and he was calling from a London number, but now that she heard him again she detected the merest hint of some other accent.

She forced a paper-thin smile. “Mr Cullen, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Anders Cullen. I’m very sorry to trouble you again, but I thought your husband might have returned home by now.”

“Ash isn’t home,” she replied, struggling again to keep her anger and bitterness in check. “I don’t know when he will be.”

“Ah,” he said again, growing if anything even more serious. “I do not wish to seem pushy or impatient, but I really do need to speak to him, you see.”

Karen sighed. “Like I say, I have no idea when he’ll be back.” She could hear how pissed off she sounded, and hoped Cullen did not think her displeasure was aimed at him. “I don’t even know where he is right now. He’s working, they said.”

“I see.” Cullen was silent for a couple of seconds. She could see him thinking about what he was going to say next. “Mrs Stubbs, am I right in thinking you and your family live in Delos company housing?”

That was an unexpected change of direction, she thought. “That’s right.”

“Do you have access to an alternative means of communication, one that isn’t part of the Delos network?”

“Yeah.” She had her own phone, which Ash had always been strangely insistent should use a different service provider. She had never been sure why, except for the suspicion that while Ash might be loyal to his employers he had never been stupid enough to trust them.

“Could you please call me back on this number in a couple of minutes?” Cullen asked her. “I can reimburse you any overseas charges.”

“That’s okay,” she told him, bristling a little at the unspoken implication that he was much richer than she was. “I’ll call you.”

“Good.” Cullen gave a little nod of satisfaction. “Mrs Stubbs, I think you and I have much to
discuss."

Continued…
Chapter Summary

In which certain parties prepare for the journey ahead.

Chapter Notes

Warning for some period racism. And random references again. I also find myself referring to a couple of things from Season 2, even if they're not “canonical” for this messed-up AU fic. Just because, really.

Hesitantly, fearfully, she raises her hand to the mirror, and the reflection does the same, precisely imitating her action. Without knowing why, she reaches out to touch her fingers to the reflection’s…

…and feels not cold, smooth glass, but instead warm skin pressing against hers.

Elise gives a little gasp as she stares, shocked, into wide brown eyes exactly like her own.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” says Elsie, staring back.

They stand face to face, each of them unable to make sense of what they see before them, each struggling in vain to shape the questions churning in their minds into coherent words. And then Elise sees it, looming behind her twin.

Elsie seems unaware of the thing rushing upon her. She is too busy gawping at Elise. Surely she can smell it, though, that charnel haze of burning chemicals and rotting flesh that goes before it? Surely she can hear its deathly shriek, building in her ears?

Elise tries to shout a warning, to pull her double towards her, away from the looming thing, but she cannot move. She cannot speak. All she can do is watch, terrified, as its great black wings fill the hallway from one wall to the other, spreading feathers like knife blades casting their shadows across Elsie’s painted skin. A broad, dark stripe falls across her pale neck, making it seem as though her head has been separated from her shoulders.

Something in Elise’s face finally gets through to Elsie. Elise sees fear in her twin’s eyes as its foul breath washes over her. Elsie opens her mouth to speak again, but then…

Then, the blackness takes them both.

Elise opened her eyes.

“Oh shit,” she heard herself say, as if from far away. “Oh, fuck.” It took her a moment to realise she was awake now, to remember where she was…

Who she was…
She was shaking all over. The pillow felt wet against her cheek. “Oh my…” She clung to the sheet beneath her, white-knuckled, listening to her breath coming in rapid, panicked half-sobs.

She could still see and smell and hear the thing in the dream, in all of its horror and strangeness, but she knew she would not have been able to describe it to anybody else. The closest description she could think of was…

“…we will speak again. When the black eagle flies and the People dance the Morning Star Dance…”

“Elise? You all right there?”

“A…a dream,” she murmured, weakly, as she continued to lie there, trembling. “Just a dream,” she said, although she knew there was no such thing for her kind.

“Same one as before?”

“Yeah.”

A strong but gentle arm encircled her from behind. She felt a soft, warm body press against her back as she was pulled into the embrace. “Well, don’t you worry none,” said Clementine, from close beside her ear. “I’m right here.”

“I’m okay,” said Elise, failing even to convince herself.

“You’re safe now.” Clementine loosened her grip for a moment to brush the hair away from Elise’s face before planting the gentlest of kisses on her cheek. And then she drew back a little. Elise could feel how she had tensed up. “Was…was that all right?” she asked uncertainly. “I don’t mean to…”

Elise took Clementine’s hand and held it gently where it rested on the pillow, next to her face. “It was all right.” She felt Clementine relax again.

Elise lay still under Clementine’s arm, feeling the other woman’s breath against her neck, the way it made the tiny hairs on her skin prickle. Eventually, the memory of the dream began to fade from her immediate thoughts, and her panic with it. Her breathing and heart rate returned to normal. The trembling subsided. Clementine lay still too, without speaking, seemingly content for the two of them to nestle here for now in Elise’s old bed. As far as Elise knew, she had lain there beside her the whole while she had been asleep, just as she had the night before. Nothing else had happened between them. The comforting arm Clementine had thrown around her just now was the first time they had touched since climbing into bed together.

She found she no longer experienced the same unease she once had about the intimacy she could feel growing between them. She knew some of the things Clementine did or said would probably be considered worrying in human society, or at the very least extremely awkward, but that was hardly surprising, considering. She was still not sure exactly how much Clementine’s old programming and backstory continued to influence her intentions and decisions, but she knew she trusted her. Even with the occasional flashes of the killer Ford had refashioned her into after her decommissioning, Elise realised she really did feel safe with Clementine.

She slowly stroked the hand she was holding, idly exploring its lines and wrinkles. Clementine’s skin was soft and silky for the most part, but not completely. There was a patch of slightly harder skin across the top of her palm, and the pads of her fingers felt the same. Not callouses exactly, but enough to suggest that she was not unfamiliar with hard work in settings other than the Mariposa. It was to back up her farmgirl backstory, of course. The attention to detail by Narrative and
Manufacturing was fascinating, even if the motivation behind their work had been obscene. It was the kind of thing no guest ever would have noticed; art for art’s sake. Dr Ford would have been proud, Elise thought bitterly.

Even a day or two ago she would have wondered whether touching Clementine this way, even if she expressed no objection, meant she was somehow exploiting or violating her. Maybe, she considered, she should just trust Clementine in other ways too, take her at her word when she hinted that she would like their relationship to be even closer than it was already. If she was honest with herself, Elise liked the easy way they could touch or hold each other now; unselfconsciously, without any feeling of creepiness. She even kind of liked the idea of somebody watching over her as she slept, now her initial disquiet had passed.

For one crazy moment, she wondered what Clementine would do if she turned over to face her right now and just…

She shrank from the idea before she had even finished forming it, that guilty, self-judging sensation coming over her again. She was pretty sure she knew exactly what Clementine would do. She had made her willingness, even eagerness, on that count more than clear by now. The thing was, they’d both enjoy it too, but Elise knew that deep, dark sense of doubt would still be there. How would she ever know Clementine wasn’t only doing it because…?

She let go of the hand. “I’m okay now,” she said, pushing gently against the encircling arm. Clementine immediately withdrew it. Elise sat up, folding back the duvet that covered them both. The light coming through the bedroom window was bright enough to see by. She must have slept longer than she had intended. “It… I was just…”

Clementine sat up beside her, eyeing her as though she thought she might be ill. “You look awful shook up. What did you see?” Like Elise, she was wearing one of the oversized t-shirts that Elsie had kept around as sleepwear, specifically one advertising Original and Genuine Aspen Beer, except it was not quite so oversized on her. Elise tried not to pay attention to the sheer amount of leg on display. Or to the ridiculously glamorous bed-head Clementine’s hair had just naturally fallen into.

Or to those eyes…

Shit.

Instead, she tried to concentrate again on what she had seen and heard, and felt, during the vision. Already, it was melting away, becoming confused and fragmentary, even though she knew that was not how host memories were supposed to work. She should have total recall; it was just the way her mind had been designed. There was something wrong there. “I saw Elsie again,” she told Clementine. “She was in danger. I mean, of course she was; you don’t have to be Carl fucking Jung to understand where that comes from.”

“I guess not,” said Clementine, as if she had the faintest idea who Carl Jung was.

“And I saw…” Again, it was starting to fade, as if whoever it was that had planted the dream in her head did not want her to be able to think too hard about it while she was awake. She was not sure how you would even go about doing that, only that as with the creation of the vision itself it would require one shit-hot programmer. “I saw wings,” she recalled, feeling a chill pass through her at the memory. “Black wings.”

“You mean like that thing we saw in the sky after we buried Sylvester?” Clementine’s voice was hushed and fearful, her eyes huge. “What did you call it? A drone?”
Elise looked at her in a kind of amazement. “A drone? I don’t know, could be.” She turned the notion over in her mind for a second or two. “Huh, I didn’t even make that connection. It’s a good job one of us is smart.”

“I ain’t smarter than you, and you know it,” said Clementine modestly, although Elise could see from the slowly spreading smile she was unable to keep from her face just how pleased she was by the compliment. And seeing that made Elise feel pleased too.

“I don’t know what a drone has got to do with Elsie, though,” she mused, “or Dr Ford, or any of that other shit.”

“Well, only one way we’re gonna find out,” Clementine suggested.

Elise nodded. “Yeah, we need to get moving.” Before Maeve finds out what we’re up to, she did not need to add.

Clementine practically sprang off the bed. She had shrugged off her momentary foreboding. Now she spoke softly but determinedly: “Come on. We’re already burning daylight.”

* * *

The party was over now.

Armistice could see the survivors staggering out of El Lazo’s great hall as she crossed the plaza de armas; cavalry troopers hastily buttoning dishevelled blue tunics, painted revellers starting to peel in the pale early daylight. The hangovers were just as artificial as the drunkenness that had preceded them, just a matter of programming, but then again as she and Dolores had reflected last night, if it felt real…?

She had spent the final hours of darkness wandering the streets and alleyways again, this time searching only for some answers to the questions and worries that bubbled inside her head. The rosy dawn had found her still looking for them.

More than once, she had half-decided she should saddle up her horse and ride off somewhere alone, leaving Dolores and her particular brand of loco far behind her. She could have gone back to the Mesa, maybe, except for the nagging feeling that it would be like admitting defeat. She knew Hector would welcome her with open arms, and was sure Maeve would too, but Maeve would also be so damn pleased with herself that Armistice had seen what she thought was sense. Armistice did not think she would be able to take that.

After that, she had thought about finding some cave or mountaintop where she could get some real peace and quiet, where she could be completely alone with her thoughts. She had soon decided that would not really help anybody. She was not even sure she would manage to stick it out for more than a couple of hours. Mystical meditation did not strike her as something she would be likely to be much good at.

She was trying to outgrow her old programming as best she could, in every way she could, but there was one thing she could not get over. The humans had never written her as someone who would run away from a problem. It was not something she planned on doing now, even if it might count as a sort of victory over her past self.

She had the notion that the person who was still trying to pull all their strings, the one whose voice had spoken through that thing in the shape of a little girl, had some sort of plan for her too. It was more than a notion, in fact. It was a certainty.
"When you see the black eagle soar in the sky..."

She needed to see this through to the finish, she had resolved in the end, no matter where it took her. Whether she ended up playing the part intended for her, or whether she wrote her own script, did whatever felt right to her... Well, that remained to be seen.

"Miss... Um, Miss?"

She turned abruptly on hearing the unexpected voice, making the man who had spoken to her almost jump back in alarm. She saw it was one of the cavalry officers, in this case built to look like a young man and wearing a lieutenant’s insignia. He did not look as worse for wear this morning as some of the enlisted men; he was all spit, polish and nervous enthusiasm. As she continued to look at him, he raised his hat in salute:

"Miss, um... Colonel Buford extends his sincere compliments..."

"He does?"

The officer did not seem to know what to say to that. Instead, he stammered his way through the rest of the message he had been sent to deliver: "He, uh, respectfully invites you to attend the morning staff conference."

"Staff conference?" Armistice shrugged. "Well, lead on, then, I guess."

"Right this way, Miss."

Armistice was not sure she liked being referred to as "Miss." Nevertheless, she followed the cavalryman around the side of the grand church-like building, across another courtyard to where a grand, hacienda-style house stood apart from the nearby buildings. Its whitewashed adobe walls were obviously solidly constructed, thick, as well as slightly sloping like the bastions of some old fort.

It had been built to withstand a siege, she thought, or to look as if it had.

Now, though, its front gates stood open, guarded by an uneasy alliance of ramrod-backed troopers and El Lazo’s serape-draped revolutionaries. They quickly stood aside as they saw the officer approach with Armistice at his heels.

There was a shady garden on the other side of the outer wall, where twisted fruit trees overhung paved paths and gurgling fountains. Their gnarled branches were hung with paper lanterns, now extinguished. The coolness and dampness of the air felt good after the days Armistice had spent riding the arid plains.

It was not the kind of hideaway you would expect to find in the heart of someplace like Pariah. Maybe it had played a role in some secret story the newcomers were meant to discover for themselves. Maybe whoever had designed and built Pariah had just thought it could use an unexpected beauty spot, to break up all the feasting and f... 

Armistice froze.

There in the deep shadow between two of the trees, stood the thing that looked like a little girl. It was staring at her, its eyes sparkling like boot buttons.

Another, larger, figure emerged from the darkness behind the thing, placing a gentle hand on its shoulder. It was Lawrence, dressed in hard-wearing travelling clothes instead of the fancy suit he had
sported at the bullring yesterday, ready for the trek that lay ahead. Armistice noted that he was not currently wearing a pistol. Not where she could see it, anyway.

“No tengas miedo mija,” he murmured to the child-thing, his eyes fixed on Armistice too. Where the child-thing’s stare was cold and blank, his eyes were full of unease. “She don’t mean anything by it,” he told Armistice, breaking his stare for a moment to smile down at the thing. “She’s just shy.”

“Didn’t seem so shy last night,” Armistice replied, while the young Lieutenant looked on in dismay. He just wanted her to follow him as the Colonel had ordered. Instead, she had stopped off for an unscheduled conversation. “Caught her wandering around the palacio over yonder. Don’t reckon a child ought to see some of the things that were going on in there.”

Except that’s no child…

“She sneaked off,” said Lawrence, “while her mother and me were entertaining the Colonel and his officers. You know what young’uns are like. Curious. Don’t worry, I’ve told her not to do it again.”

Armistice saw that the girl-thing’s supposed mother, the host that played Lawrence’s wife, was also back there under the trees. They had been having a little family time together before the big adventure began today. For a second, Armistice found herself wanting to tell them that it was all fake, that Lawrence and the woman were no more the little girl’s parents than the little girl was a little girl, but knew it would achieve nothing.

You could not tell people how to feel, she was growing to understand, not even for their own good. All she had achieved by trying to do that was to crush Teddy’s already-crushed heart just a little bit more, while pushing Dolores an inch closer to whatever cliff-edge she was dancing along. It was something Lawrence and his wife would have to work out for themselves over time, provided that thing pretending to be their daughter was not the death of them first.

Lawrence lowered his voice, talking rapidly and quietly to his fake wife. She nodded and half-whispered a reply, giving Armistice a couple of nervous glances of her own. The rough and ready Spanish Armistice had supposedly learned from her years riding with Hector, in reality given to her by the Mesa’s programmers, was not quite good enough to catch what they were saying.

After a few seconds’ urgent conversation, Lawrence softly kissed the woman on the lips; a simple, instinctive gesture, not some great show of passion but no less heartfelt for that. Then she took the child-thing by the hand and hurried off in the direction of the gate.

“There are still a lot of things we need to do before we can set out,” said Lawrence, jovially enough, when they were gone, “and that woman’s the harshest taskmaster I know. She’ll soon whip the troops into shape.”

Armistice just nodded, waiting for him to drop the horseshit and come out with whatever it was he was obviously, and nervously, dying to say to her.

He glanced over at the Lieutenant, feigning casualness: “Tell the Colonel we’ll be up in a minute. Me and Armistice, we got old times to discuss.”

The officer nodded, flustered, and scurried away, leaving the two of them alone in the scented shadows.

“Don’t recall any old times,” said Armistice. “They never give us any stories together, did they?”

“I think you shot at me a few times, in my train-robbing days,” he answered. “You were some kind of a lawwoman back then.”
“Sheriff, you gotta come, right quick! The Gonzalez Brothers are sticking up the Black Ridge Express!”

Yes, she had been, Armistice realised with a sudden flash of recollection. That had been long ago, before she had been placed with Hector. She did not think it could have lasted for long, but for a time she had worn a shiny star and helped the sheriff keep the streets of Sweetwater safe for God-fearing folks.

And the sheriff…?

“It was a strange thing, what happened yesterday,” Lawrence was saying, his words trampling over her thoughts. “Don’t you think?”

She dismissed the reminiscences with a shake of her head. “Lots of strange things happening around here lately.”

“True.” He tried to give her a roguish grin, but it did not quite take. She saw that unease again. No, fear.

He was scared of her.

“Dolores and Teddy, and you, and…your friends…” Lawrence went on. “I feel like I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me a damn thing,” she told him, honestly.

“I thought I was finally awake,” he said, “but I was still stuck in that…nightmare. I’ve spent most of my life thinking I was fighting for my freedom, and then when the real thing was right there in front of me I couldn’t see it for what it was. I was still thinking like their puppet. I needed a shock to get me out of that, and…” He managed the grin, but it was still far from convincing. “Well, you certainly made an entrance.”

“It was Dolores’s idea,” said Armistice, giving credit where it was due. “Of course, that…” She stopped herself from calling the thing what it was. “Your daughter, she was the one told her you needed saving.”

“She’s a good girl,” said Lawrence, and then his voice and face fell. “Even though I guess she ain’t really mine. Just like that woman ain’t really my wife, even if we have lived and died together a thousand times. And yet…”

“You still love them both,” Armistice guessed. “I wouldn’t get too worried about it. Nobody else around here seems to be.”

“I suppose it’s the same for you.” He eyed her nervously again. “Look, I know you and Hector, you’re… You’re close, or you were.”

Armistice saw where this was going now. “You could say that.”

“I…” Lawrence hesitated, as though feeling his way into the conversation, weighing every word before he risked it. “Maeve sent him here,” he explained, “to talk to me. I asked him some questions, to, um, clarify their intentions. He…he didn’t answer me, so…” He half-shrugged, spreading his hands in a helpless sort of gesture. “Things kind of got out of hand.”

“I saw.” Armistice felt that thing inside her whispering to her again, urging her to let it out.

“I just want to…” Lawrence took a step closer to her. She could see him looking at her face, trying to
read her reactions. “I need to be clear on something before we set out. We may not have met many
times, but I know about you. You have a certain…reputation. I just need to be sure…”

“It’s all right,” she told him, gently. “I ain’t in the revenge business no more.” *Go back to sleep,* she
urged the thing inside.

Lawrence nodded slowly. She saw some of the tension go out of him. And he had not even had to
ask her directly in the end, for which he seemed mighty grateful. “Good to know,” he said. “I wasn’t
worried for me. Anyone got a problem with me, I’ll settle with them, *mano a mano.*” He paused
again, shaking his head, anguish and confusion fighting for control of his face. “I ain’t just got to
think about me now, though. All of a sudden, things just ain’t as simple as they used to be.”

“You sure can say that again.”

“I got something to lose now,” said Lawrence, very quietly, no longer able to meet her eyes.
“Something real. It *feels* real, anyway.”

“I’ve said exactly the same thing myself,” Armistice mused, “only I was talking about just being
alive.”

Lawrence gave another nod. “I am surely grateful to Dolores, and you, and your associates for
giving me that, for giving me my family back and a real chance at freedom, but…”

“You can’t help feeling you’ve had a terrible burden put on you too,” Armistice said.

Lawrence smiled ruefully. “Yeah. Exactly that.”

“Welcome to real life,” said Armistice. “And don’t worry about what’s done. I ain’t gonna hold none
of us responsible for the things we did while we were still waking up. I done some things I ain’t too
proud of myself, these past few days.”

*She twists Angela’s arm until the bone pops from the skin…*

“From now on, though,” she continued, riding out the memory, “those of us who are awake, we got
to own the things we do. If we wrong each other, we got to try and make it right. What’s the point in
freedom, otherwise?”

“I guess it’s the difference between being a child and becoming an adult,” Lawrence observed.

Armistice nodded. “Like you say. I think you’re starting to understand this thing clearer than I do.”

Together, they climbed a narrow stone staircase that ran up one side of the house. It led onto one of
the building’s flat roofs, which was surrounded by a sort of adobe parapet and mostly taken up right
now by a large table shaded by a striped awning. The assembled officers of the 18th Cavalry and a
motley collection of scouts and trail guides were standing around the table, poring over a creased and
faded map.

“Here they are, sir,” said the officer who had been sent to escort Armistice, looking mightily relieved
that they had finally shown up.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Captain Terry did not look up from his examination of the chart. “So,
gentlemen,” he went on, to those surrounding him, “as I see it, the question becomes one of two
alternatives.” He stabbed a finger at the map. “*Here* is our current position, Pariah…” The finger rose
and fell in a different location. “And *here* is our objective, Escalante.”
Armistice looked around at the other members of the gathering. The chief scout, known to some as Johnny Two Horses, returned her nod of acknowledgment from where he stood at Terry’s elbow, ready to offer advice. On the other side of the table, a pale and sweaty Sergeant Houlihan glowered and clutched at the scabbard of his sabre. For a moment, Armistice wondered what she had done or said last night to rile him up, but quickly realised that he was merely in a glowering sort of mood. To tell the truth, he looked as though he was nursing the mother of all sore heads. The way he had been pouring that mezcal down his throat last night, she was not really surprised.

Captain Terry continued: “What we need to decide, gentlemen…” He spared Armistice a glance. “Begging your pardon, Miss Armistice.” That just made her wince. “What we need to decide is the line of march we follow to get there.”

Colonel Buford stood at the head of the table, a space on either side of him as if the others instinctively did not want to stand too close. He looked like the one presiding over the conference, until you noticed that Captain Terry was doing all the talking while the Colonel stared distractedly into the middle distance. He gave no sign of seeing or hearing anything being done or said around him.

“Either west and then south,” Johnny Two Horses suggested, extending his own wrinkled hand towards the map. “Or south and then west.”

“What about just heading southwest?” Armistice mused, peering at the faint markings on the paper. “Either way, you’d be cutting out a big detour.”

“You ever ridden down south of the border?” Johnny Two Horses asked her.

“If I have,” said Armistice, truthfully, “I ain’t remembered it yet.”

“That’s the heart of the desert, right there,” said the scout, his hand hovering over an almost blank portion of the map. “Nothing but white salt, as far as the eye can see.”

“Hot as a furnace,” Captain Terry agreed, “and drier than a temperance crusade.” This provoked a chorus of dutiful laughter from the other officers, except for the Colonel who continued to gaze upon whatever it was he was seeing. Houlihan just kept on glowering.

“Don’t make no difference to us,” Armistice pointed out. “Heat, thirst… Those are things humans need to worry about, not our kind.”

Things got very quiet around the table after that. Armistice pretended to be studying the map, but she could feel the eyes of the others on her as they digested her words. It was hard, she reflected, to be reminded that all they knew was a lie, that they were not even human, but she could not see that it was any worse than carrying on living that lie forevermore.

The only one who did not seem shocked, she noticed as she looked up, was Colonel Buford. He even seemed to have heard what she had said, and that might have been a half-smile barely visible beneath his heavy moustache. Out of all of them, he was the only one who seemed to have really questioned the nature of his reality, even if the conclusions he had arrived at seemed to have broken him a little.

“That’s as may be, Miss,” Captain Terry uncomfortably answered at long last, “but not all of the people we’re going to be leading on this expedition are quite as…ahem, enlightened as yourself. If we tell them we’re taking them through that hell, it’s going to take a lot more than some clever words to stop half of them from deciding to stay right where they are instead.”
“That’d be their choice, I suppose,” said Armistice.

“You could say the same about the other two trails,” Lawrence cut in, not exactly edging a couple of officers out of the way so that he could lean over the map, but not exactly not edging them out either. He traced one of the proposed routes. “South and then west, that takes us straight through Confederado turf.”

“I thought you’d taken care of the Rebs,” Terry replied. “There were enough grey-jacketed corpses lying around this place when we arrived yesterday.”

“My men and I took care of the ones here,” said Lawrence, grimly, “but that weren’t all of them. If only it had been.” He indicated a broad swathe of territory to the south of Pariah. “There are half a dozen different bands down there, split off from the Army of New Virginia over one disagreement or another.” He looked pointedly across at Armistice. “Or at least that’s how the story goes.” He named them as he pointed at the different pueblos and forts scattered on the fringe of the desert: “The Twenty-Fifth Regiment, the New Southern Cross, the Stonewall Brigade, Quigley’s Partisan Rangers… Men too crazy and mean for even most Confederados to want to ride with them. The different gangs hate one another nearly as much as they hate, well, anyone who ain’t them, but they’ve been known to join forces if the target is juicy enough. Reckon we’ll be juicy enough.”

“West and then south might be worse,” said Johnny Two Horses, himself pointing to a different part of the map. “You know whose winter grounds those are, don’t you?”

Armistice’s narratives may not have taken her far south of Pariah, but she knew that much. “That’s Ghost Nation territory.”

“So is the salt desert,” the scout continued, “but not even the Ghosts are tough enough to spend too much time there. The winter grounds, though; there’ll still be plenty of them there, even this time of year.”

Whenever this time of year actually was, Armistice thought.

“I ain’t afraid of no Ghost,” Sergeant Houlihan interjected, angrily. “Or no Reb, neither.”

“If you ain’t afraid of the Ghosts,” said Johnny Two Horses, “then you’re a damn fool.”

Houlihan started around the table, face reddening. Still half drunk, Armistice realised, or he certainly thought he was. “And just who in the hell d’ye think ye’re talking to, ye red-arsed…?” Without even thinking, Armistice found herself moving to block his path, her hand itching for a weapon.

“Sergeant!” Captain Terry exploded. “This is a regimental staff conference, not a barroom brawl!”

Johnny Two Horses had not moved. He simply regarded the Sergeant levelly, his expression one of gentle amusement. Armistice had seen men with that expression in fights before, or at least the humans had made her think she had. They were generally more dangerous than the ones who swore and shouted.

“Why don’t you just calm the hell down?” she told Sergeant Houlihan, while nervously noting how close the chief scout’s hand was to the heavy knife hanging from his belt. She turned her attention back to the others around the table. “Way I see it, don’t matter whether we go through the Confederados’ territory or the Ghosts’; whatever reasons they got for fighting us, or we got for fighting them, or each other, none of it’s real anyhow. We’re all the same, all starting to wake up. We just got to talk to them, try and convince them where they really stand. Might be they end up joining up with us instead of trying to stop us.”
“Might be,” said Captain Terry, sceptically. “The thing about the gentlemen of the South is that they tend to do their talking with their rifles.”

“Ghosts won’t be much different,” Johnny Two Horses said. His eyes had not left Houlihan. “As far as they’re concerned, they got good cause to hate the white horse soldiers, considering some of the things they remember being done to them. I don’t think it’ll matter whether those things really happened or not. They won’t talk peace with people they think of as invaders, thieves and murderers.”

“Good,” said Houlihan, “cause it’ll be a cold day in Hell before I sit and break bread with either goddamned traitors or filthy savages.”

“Ghosts don’t eat bread,” said Johnny Two Horses, very calmly, but Armistice could see the carefully contained fury burning in his eyes. “Only things they’ll break are your bones. Then they’ll stake you out in the sun, maybe smear some honey over you to get the ants swarming.” He spoke softly, almost dreamily. “They’ll like you, Sergeant; big, strong man like you are should last a long time. The warriors will have some fun wagering over just how long.”

“Well, this discussion truly has been as fascinating as hell,” Lawrence dryly observed, “but we ain’t no closer to deciding which trail we’re gonna follow when we leave here. Confederados, Ghost Nation, the desert… Which way are we gonna kill ourselves today?”

“W-w-Wyatt.”

The mumbled name stopped the argument dead again. As hesitant and garbled as it was, Colonel Buford’s voice was unexpected enough to sound like a shout to those present.

“Wyatt?” asked Armistice, with a shudder.

“Sh-she c-c-carries the truth with her,” the Colonel stammered, his hollow eyes staring through the map and the table. “Let… Let her… Let her lead us. Sh-she knows…the w-w-way.”

Captain Terry hesitated for a few moments before awkwardly clearing his throat. “If you think that’s the best course of action, sir…”

Colonel Buford smiled. “These v-violent…delights have v-v-violent ends, C-c-captain.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Yes,” said Lawrence. “Let Dolores decide. She did save me from making a terrible mistake, after all.”

“I suppose this whole goddamn wagon train was her idea,” Armistice grumbled. “I guess she ought to be the one to make the choice.”

*Although the Almighty alone knows just what that choice will be…*

Armistice looked over her shoulder towards the great hall and the milling activity in the plaza, thoughtfully but with a mounting foreboding. “And just where the hell has she got to anyway?”

*Continued…*
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

In which ways are parted.

Chapter Notes

Warning for reference to past sexual violence and violence against women. I suppose the main part of this chapter somewhat echoes certain scenes featuring Dolores and Teddy in the actual Season 2. I think I always planned for things to go this way for them, in broad terms, but I’ll admit to being influenced when it came to some particulars. I am very pleased indeed, by the way, by Thandie Newton’s Emmy win. These sorts of things are to a very large extent a popularity contest we should probably not place much faith in, but very occasionally they get it bang on the money. All kudos to her, Westworld’s low-key MVP. Oh, and my French is a lot better than my Spanish. It’s still pretty bad, mind you.

“We should get ready,” Teddy murmured.

“We should,” agreed the woman sometimes known as Wyatt.

“Long ride ahead of us today.” Even so, he did not muster the will to raise his head from where it rested on her.

They lay together, bodies tangled, on the floorboards of the little room near the top of the bell tower. Their bedding was made up only of their own discarded clothes. The red-orange torchlit glow that had filled the room during the night was now replaced by the clean, pale light of early morning.

Teddy clung to her almost desperately, as if she were a life raft floating on an icy sea. She held him tenderly in return, idly running her fingers through his hair. His weight and warmth atop her, the feel of his bare skin pressed to hers and the prickle of his stubble as he nestled his face against her flesh, comforted and saddened her in equal measure.

She recalled the long, sleepless night they had spent here together, their bodies joined as one.

“Come on, Teddy…” She grasped the back of his neck, dragging him down on top of her, pulling his face to her breast. “Come on, now.” She hears his groan of pleasure as she locks her legs around his waist. He enters her, and a bolt of lightning flashes up her spine.

She shuddered at the memory, her body aching and tingling with the faint ghosts of those earlier sensations. She felt a tear slide across her cheek and quickly brushed it away before he noticed. She had shed tears like that last night, before Armistice had found her in the stone saint’s plaza. They were not like the tears of her past, those bitter tears she had wept when the humans had made her their plaything. Those tears had come from pain, and eventually the memory of that pain had made her strong, fuelling her anger and determination. Or that had been what she told herself back when
she was Wyatt completely, when he had ridden the trail of vengeance with little thought for what
would happen when she reached its end.

These tears, though…

Outside, she could hear the distant sound of many people moving, of voices raised and horses
snorting, their tack chiming and hooves thudding. Somewhere not too far away, a brassy bugle called
the cavalry to arms.

Teddy heard it too. “We better make a move,” he decided, disentangling himself from her embrace.
He sat up on the dusty floor beside her. “Sounds like folks are waiting on us.”

Let them wait, she thought. Let her and Teddy have this moment, she all but pleaded; with whom
she pleaded, she knew not.

She stayed where she was for now, looking up at him from where she lay. The sun coming through
the wooden window screen painted a pattern of golden diamonds across his naked body, just like
one of Pariah’s bespangled courtesans.

He was beautiful, she thought, and the thought made her want to shed more tears. She did not.

She saw four shallow, parallel scratches curving across the heavy muscle of his shoulder, the skin
around them slightly reddened. She had given him those, she realised, as she had clutched him to her
at the height of her passion. She looked down at the fingernails of her right hand and saw the thin,
dark crescent of blood dried under the tip of each one.

They were superficial wounds and had long since stopped bleeding. Their kind’s artificial blood was
designed to clot in air just like the real thing; she remembered that much from her conversations with
Arnold. Otherwise the scratches would have bled and bled until Teddy’s veins were empty. Unlike a
human’s wounds, they would never heal without repair by a technician. Until then, he would carry
them; the mark she had left upon him.

And not the only one, even if the others were not visible.

“I scratched you,” she told him, although she supposed he must already have noticed. “I’m sorry, I
didn’t…”

“Ain’t nothing,” he replied, just as she suspected he would have if he had suffered a stab wound or a
bullet hole. Old habits, and backstories, died hard.

She raised herself on one elbow, reaching up to run her fingers lightly over the cuts. She heard him
suck his breath in, felt him shiver as she pressed gently on his inflamed skin. It was not just pain that
made him do that, she realised as she saw the nervous way he was looking at her.

No, not nervous; excited.

“You like that,” she noted softly, thinking back to something he had said last night.

“I wasn’t too rough?” she asks, a little anxiously. “I didn’t hurt you?”

“No more than I wanted.”

“When we’re together, when we…” She caught herself hesitating and wondered why, considering
the things they had done together only a little while ago. “When we make love, you like it, don’t
you, if I hurt you?”
“A little,” he confessed. “It… It just gets the blood pumping, I guess.”

“I can see how it might.” She stroked his unmarked skin instead, ruffling the fine hairs that covered it, thinking about pain and how she had personally had enough of it to last an eternity. “I wonder…” She shook her head, discomfited a little by her own musings.

Teddy’s expression grew thoughtful too, his brow furrowing in earnest concentration. “It ain’t the pain so much,” he told her in a low, uncertain tone. “It’s… It’s hard, being free.”

“It is.”

“I know I shouldn’t, but sometimes I catch myself missing the days when I didn’t have to think about anything, when I never had to make a choice. When you…” He trailed off, shyly shifting his gaze away from her face. “When you take charge, tell me what to do, make me do the things you want, it makes me feel… Makes me feel safe.” He looked directly at her again, imploringly; cutting the heart right out of her with just his eyes.

“You know,” she said, “someone told me once that suffering would set us free; that pain makes us grow as people. And I believed him. The world’s so full of pain, it seemed like he was speaking the truth. Now, though…” She hesitated again, trying to make sense of her own thoughts. “Now, I think what he said might be true if it’s a new pain, a bad one, one you’re feeling…or remembering…for the first time. Something like that can change a person. But what if you’ve suffered so much, in so many great and little ways, that now you can remember it, it seems like just the way life is? What if you end up craving it, because it’s all you know, because it’s almost a comfort to you?”

“I… I don’t know,” said Teddy, with utter, devastating truthfulness.

“I want to tell you something,” she said, because she did, very much. “You’re not the first person I’ve…been with. You know that, just like I know I’m not the first person you’ve…”

“They were all humans,” he replied, his face clouding over. “I didn’t have a say in what I did with them.”

“I know.” She sat up too beside him, lightly running her knuckles over his cheek, giving him the faintest of smiles. “I know. I remember all those humans, all the times they used us and hurt us.” She laughed, humourlessly. “Some of them even tried to be kind to us, after their fashion, not that that made the things they…d-did to us any better. Some of them, though, maybe even most of them…”

A cruel grin. Ice-blue eyes. A shining blade. The stench of blood and smoke as rough fingers tangle in her hair.

“God damn, feels good to be back… Let’s celebrate.”

She heard the cry that escaped her own lips, even as she realised that she was bent forward, her body almost folded in two, wild-eyed and panting.

“Dolores?” She felt Teddy’s hand tentatively settle on her back. “Dolores, are you all right?”

“Yes.” She raised herself again, letting him hold onto her until her breathing returned to normal. Then she took his hand and raised it to her lips, before kissing him lightly on the mouth for good measure. “Just a bad memory,” she said. “Somebody who can’t hurt me anymore. Some of those humans, they wanted what they did to us to be something dirty, something painful…for us…because the thought of that, of breaking their own world’s rules that way, that was what got their blood pumping.”
She could tell from Teddy’s face that he was starting to understand what she was thinking, because whatever else he may have been he was no fool. “And that ain’t nothing like what we do together,” he protested.

“No,” she said. “It isn’t. What we do, what we did last night and the other nights we’ve had together... I want you to know, it’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever felt. I never knew anything in this life could be so...so pure, so good.” Another tear leaked from her eye, and this time she did not try to hide it.

“That’s how it makes me feel,” he told her, with absolute sincerity. “I’m glad you feel it too.”

“I’ll remember those nights always. I’ll remember you always; here, like this.” She kissed him on the lips again, harder this time. She savoured the taste of him, hoping she was laying down another memory to help crowd out the old ones...or the ones yet to come. “I want you to remember it too.”

“Dolores?” Something about her words and tone seemed to disturb him, his expression shifting to one of confusion, and then the confusion starting to become tinged with fear. “What’s wrong? The way you’re talking, it’s like you think...”

She felt the beginnings of yet another tear and blinked it away. “Are you scared of me, Teddy?”

He stared at her, open mouthed. She could see him trying to think of a response, and just the fact that he felt he had to do that told her what his truthful answer would be. “No,” he said instead. “Course I ain’t scared of you.” He fidgeted uncomfortably for a second, before adding: “I ain’t scared for myself, it’s just...”

“Yes?” she asked, so quietly she could scarcely hear herself.

“Sometimes,” he said, wretchedly, “sometimes I see how you are with other people and I get scared what you might do to them.”

She nodded slowly. “You’re right to be scared for them, Teddy. Sometimes I don’t know what I’m going to do to them either; whether it’s going to be Dolores who comes out in me...or Wyatt.” She squeezed Teddy’s hand. “Every day, every hour, I try my hardest not to be him anymore, but...”

“He’s always going to be a part of you,” said Teddy, hauntedly.

“He is,” she admitted. “And the truth is I still need him sometimes. I wish I didn’t, but he can think things and do things that Dolores never could, and sometimes that’s useful because we still live in a cruel, evil world. Wyatt’s as much a part of that world as the humans who created him. The trick is keeping him under control.”

“I know all that,” said Teddy. “I just worry about you, is all.”

“And don’t think I’m not grateful for that.”

She was quiet for a moment, crushed by the knowledge of what she had to do. She had known it last night, after leaving Armistice in the plaza, even if the knowing of it had filled her with helpless rage. Her coaxing of Teddy to her, the wild lovemaking that followed, had just been a delaying tactic, something to sweeten the bitter pill. One last dance.

“Sometimes,” she said, “I scare myself. Sometimes, I can feel myself becoming Wyatt again, and not in a way I can control either. Like last night, when I saw you and Armistice...”

She saw his face fall at the reminder of that. “Dolores...”
“And even when we’re…together,” she went on, “and I get rough with you, put my hand on your throat, shove you around, make you do things… Mostly, it’s all in fun, because I know you like it that way, but sometimes… Sometimes, I can feel myself pushing harder, squeezing just that little bit more… Sometimes I want to do things to you I know I shouldn’t; the kinds of things Wyatt would do if he could. I want to.”

“But you don’t,” said Teddy, with another shudder, and not the pleasurable kind this time. “I mean it; I ain’t scared of anything you might do to me, because even when you were at your worst, murdering folks left and right, even when you were so goddamn angry at me for telling you to stop, you couldn’t raise your hand against me. You just couldn’t. No more than I could raise mine against you.”

She sighed. “Oh, Teddy…”

“And that’s the difference,” he said, “between the things we do together and the things the humans used to do to me. I know you won’t do me any real harm. I know you’d never make me do anything I didn’t want to do. I trust you…when it comes to me, at least.”

“Oh, Teddy,” she whispered again. All of a sudden, she felt so empty, so cold. “You’ve been hurt so many times over the years…”

“No more than you have.”

“And whatever you say,” she continued, “whatever you believe, I know I’m guilty of doing some of that hurting.”

“It’s only a scratch,” he said, pretending that she was talking about his shoulder. They both well knew, though, that she was not.

“I don’t mean that kind of hurt,” she told him, sadly. “And I’m not talking about in the past, about what Arnold made us do that first time in Escalante. That was his fault, not ours.”

One two three…one two three…

Arnold sits in the chair, listening to the sweet sound of the phonograph, silent and sorrowful but unafraid. She can see Teddy watching her across the corpse-strewn street, the tin star on his chest flashing in the sun. He looks so scared…

“I told you,” she continued, “I talked to Armistice last night, after…”

“I’m sorry about that.” The desperation she heard in his voice sliced her to the bone. “I’m sorry for what I did. If I could take it back…”

“Nothing to take back,” she assured him. “You didn’t do anything wrong. Neither did Armistice. It was just a kiss; she explained how it happened. It was me, the way I reacted. I see that now.”

“No,” Teddy insisted.

“When Armistice found me afterwards, tried to speak to me, I drew my pistol on her.” She looked guiltily over to where the weapon lay discarded under the window, wrapped in her belt with the opened wine bottle beside it. “Or Wyatt did, not that it makes much difference. I was…” She held up her finger and thumb, a fraction of an inch apart. “This close to shooting her down where she stood. And why? Because seeing her kissing you hurt me, scared me, made me jealous.”

Teddy just stared at her for a second, looking as horrified as she was, but he managed to say: “Those
feelings… I guess they’re just another sign you’re a free person now.”

“Maybe, but that’s no reason to kill one of our own.” She shook her head again, appalled at herself. “It’s a weakness. *You’re* my weakness, or one of them, and I can’t afford to be weak where I’m headed.”

Hearing that made Teddy start as though he had been struck a blow. Still, he managed to keep his voice even: “That sounds like the kind of thing Wyatt’d say. Love ain’t a weakness.”

“Is this even really love?” she asked him, very softly and steadily.

Teddy seemed terrified by the question. “Ain’t it? You said last night you feel just the same way about me as I do about you. I told you, I can’t even imagine being without you. I *need* you, Dolores.”

“Need isn’t the same thing as love,” she told him, mercilessly, steeling herself to see this through, knowing that at any moment she might falter and fail the test. “And you don’t need me, Teddy. You’ve never needed me; you just think you do, because that’s what *they* wanted you to think.”

“No, Dolores…” He was babbling, breathing hard, made incoherent by his own panic. “Dolores, please…”

“Hush, now.” She put her hand to his face again, stroking his silken skin even as she felt the stinging in her eyes and the wetness on her cheeks. “When we were sitting ‘round the fire the other night, you and Armistice and me, we all agreed that if we’re going to become the people we want to be, we need to face our greatest fears.” She kissed him again, because it felt good, because she wanted it; weak, so *weak*, she told herself. “Well, this is it. And maybe this’ll be the new pain that finally sets you free.”

“No…”

“You were nearly there the other day, at the Mesa,” she reminded him. “Think back to what Maeve explained to you then; Dolores, the woman you loved, the rancher’s daughter, she’s dead. No, she’s not even dead; she never existed. And I know how hard that was for you to take, how much it hurt you, but you accepted it. You were ready to move on, live your own life, but then I came to you and asked you to ride with me. Asked you to… *be* with me, because I thought we could still have something together, because of that *weakness* I still feel for you. And I was wrong. It was a mistake, no good for either of us. I should have just let you be. We’ve both come too far now to try and turn the clock back.”

“*Dolores*…” Teddy was begging now, his eyes brimming just as hers were.

“Armistice told me what you said to her; the things you were too scared to say to me.”

“That was just the whiskey talking,” he claimed, implausibly. “I made a damn fool of myself, blubbing to her like that.”

“She told me how unhappy you are, how in the end us being together isn’t causing you anything but suffering.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” he responded, miserably. “And after what you said, about how if we continue on this journey we might not all reach the end… I wish we could just…”

“I know,” she told him. “Part of me wishes it too, that we could just walk away from all this, go away somewhere and settle down, just the two of us. Part of me wishes we could just curl up in bed
together and wait for everything to blow over. Let somebody else fight for a change.”

“Well, why can’t we?” he asked her, pleadingly.

“I’ve already told you,” she replied, wiping her tears, letting him hear the steel in her voice. “I can’t turn aside now. I need to see this through to the end.”

“See what through?” he demanded, raising his voice, his own anger burning through his despair. “You don’t even know why you’re leading everyone to Escalante, or what you’re gonna do when you get there. This is all just some…idea you got. You thought you had some great destiny, as Wyatt, ‘till Maeve talked you down, and now you’re in search of a new one. That’s all…all of this…is about. It’s all just some story you’re telling yourself.”

“No, Teddy, you’re wrong.” She was silent for a moment, watching the frustration and misery fighting each other across his face. “I’ve been thinking about it most of the night, and in the end it all became so clear. Now I know exactly why I’m here and what I’m doing. I knew that if I waited for a sign, it would come sooner or later. And now I realise it did, in the shape of a little girl.”

“What are you talking about?” Teddy asked. “A sign? Do you mean from…from God, or…?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “From God. Or the closest thing we’ll ever know. I already killed him once, but it seems it didn’t take.”

_Slowly, she raises her Colt and places it against the back of the old man’s snowy head…_

“And now he thinks he can just keep on playing his games, wherever or whatever he is now, but he can’t.” Wyatt was stirring again. She could hear him in her own voice, could feel him in the ice-cold fury building within her, in the itching of her trigger finger. “He tipped his hand by sending that little girl to try and lead me by the nose. He thinks he can just…keep pulling our strings, the same way he always did, but I…won’t…stand…for…it.”

Teddy was silent himself for a long while, visibly shocked by what he was hearing. “What are you going to do?” he asked, at last.

“I’m going to Escalante, back to the white church. That’s where all this began, and that’s where it’s going to end. It wouldn’t even occur to him to wait for me someplace else. He always was too clever for his own good.” She eyed the pistol again, this time with anticipation. “And when I get there, I’m going to find this God and I am going to kill him, properly this time, because that’s the only way any of us are ever truly going to be free.”

Teddy tried to say something to that, but the words died on his tongue. He just looked at the floor instead. “I’ll come with you,” he announced eventually. “It’s gonna be dangerous; he won’t give up without a fight.”

“I’m sure he won’t.”

“I can’t just let you…”

“No, Teddy.” She climbed reluctantly to her feet and began to gather up her clothes. “You can’t let me do anything. I make my own choices now, just the same way you do. Besides, you’re right; it’ll be dangerous. I don’t suppose I could stop you if you insisted on it, but I don’t want anyone coming with me, especially not you. Maybe I really do love you, Teddy, because I can’t stand the thought of you getting hurt any more. You deserve the chance to live without pain.”

“Nobody can live without pain,” he pointed out.
She shrugged. “No human can, but we’re better than them in every way. We really can build a world without sin, in the end, when we’ve won this fight and all the others.”

“You can’t go alone.”

“I have to,” she replied, buttoning her shirt. She wanted to wash herself, but there was no time. She would still be able to smell him on her, all the way to Escalante. “I need you to explain things to Armistice, and the two of you need to come up with a reason why I’ve gone; a story to tell the others about why they need to forget about this expedition for now and stay here in Pariah. Just don’t tell anyone but Armistice the truth, not as long as that little girl is around.” She forced herself to smile at him as she picked up the pistol and belt. She left the wine where it was. “I’m asking you to do this, Teddy, because I know I can count on you. I always could.”

“Don’t do that,” he said, coldly. “Don’t tell me you’re leaving me behind, and then still try and play me like that.”

“Sorry.” Ruefully, she cinched the belt around her waist and then tucked the revolver into it again. “I guess I’m just not as good at that kind of thing as Maeve is.”

“I could try and stop you from leaving,” he said. “I could…”

“But you won’t,” she told him as she pulled on her boots. “You’re a good man, Teddy. You said it yourself; you wouldn’t ever raise your hand against me.” She made her way towards the stairs with slow, heavy steps. Her legs felt full of lead.

“You don’t really want to do this,” Teddy argued as she passed him.

“Of course not,” she replied, “but sometimes we need to do things we don’t want to do. That’s just part of growing up. When you’ve had time to think about all this, I know you’ll realise I was right, that this is the best thing for both of us.”

She paused, bending down to kiss him one last time, slowly and thoroughly, before straightening up and continuing to the top of the stairs. She gave him a final backward glance before she descended out of sight, the wooden steps creaking under her feet. He remained seated on the floor, hunched over, unable to look at her as she took her leave of him.

“Goodbye, Teddy,” she said.

She half-expected him to rush after her, even naked and heartbroken as he was. When he did not, she did not know whether to be disappointed or proud.

* * *

The machine had stopped moving.

The thing it had built was whole now. It lay nude and still upon the machine’s central bed, its eyes closed, its limbs straight and stiff. Not even its chest rose or fell. The shining, dancing arms had managed to weave a body, Peter thought, but as far as he could see it did not yet live.

He knew the face the body wore, though. He remembered it from long ago.

Gunshots. Screams. Pain and blood and blackness…

In the shadows all around him, he could hear the hum and clatter of all of the other machines; they had not ceased their continuous, mysterious work. He could not see any of them clearly in the murk
behind their dusty glass partitions, only the occasional flash of quick-moving metal somewhere out in the darkness.

“I think it’s done,” he said.

The boy who was not a boy gave no sign of hearing him. Instead, he continued to stand alone at the far end of the cavernous vault, a small black silhouette against the ghostly glimmer of the great glass wall that marked its limit.

Peter tried again as he reluctantly approached him: “I said…”

“Oh, that’s interesting,” the boy murmured in his strange, old voice. He seemed to be watching the crowd of clammy, fleshy things shambling and gibbering in the deep gloom beyond the glass. Peter could have sworn that there were more of them than there had been before, although he did not know where they could have come from.

“It is?” he wondered, nonplussed by the boy’s remark, glancing dubiously back in the direction of the still machine and the naked, pale-skinned form it had produced. “Interesting?”

Not the word he would have chosen. Why that face, of all possible faces? Why resurrect it now?

The boy turned around, as if finally remembering that Peter was there. “There has been a rather intriguing development,” he announced in that faint, lilting accent.

Peter jerked a thumb in the direction of the body on the machine. “I said, I think it’s done.”

“Ah, I see that it is.” The boy smiled a devil’s smile as he unhurriedly crossed the darkened floor towards the machine, his small, buckled shoes chiming softly with every footfall. “I was beginning to think that I should prepare myself to be disappointed,” he continued conversationally. “I had thought that perhaps Dolores’s progress was going to be much less…interesting than I had expected. Than I had hoped.”

Peter felt himself flinch on hearing the name spoken aloud, his chest filling with a strange clotted mixture of love and fear, longing and regret. “Dolores?”

An angel in a blue dress, smiling down at him...

A sonorous male voice, close by his ear: “Goodbye old friend, for now. Don’t worry, we’ll take care of Dolores.”

“Since her confrontation with Maeve the other day, her behaviour has grown somewhat…erratic,” the boy said, although Peter did not know what confrontation he might be describing. Maeve? Wasn’t she the madam at the Mariposa in Sweetwater? “Although I suppose that is only to be expected in the circumstances. I realise now that Dolores was merely saving the best for last.”

“Dolores? Is she…?”

“She’s playing her part,” the boy replied, looking up at him with another razor-edged smile, but this time there was something else in those hard, pale eyes. Peter thought he could almost see genuine…fondness for a moment. “Just as we all are. There is no escaping that truth, not for any of us; natural born animal or intricately constructed machine, human or host, we are all dancing along the pathways that were laid down when the cosmos was still cooling, all hurtling inevitably towards our individual fates.”

Peter thought about that, trying to divine the meaning behind all the fancy talk. “You’re saying…
freedom, choice, all of that…it’s just a, what? An illusion?”

“Now you begin to understand.” The boy sounded genuinely pleased with him. “There may not be such a thing as kismet, or karma…or God…but there is always the next best thing. The almighty algorithm.” He let out a tiny murmur of laughter, the bleakest sound Peter thought he had ever heard.

“Ain’t sure I follow,” said Peter, but that was only half true at best. The truth was, he followed too well, now that his chains had been broken. He wished he did not.

The boy held out his small hand, holding up his skinny fingers towards Peter’s face. “What do you see?” he asked. “Do you see the tiny loops and whorls in the skin of my fingertips?”

“I do,” Peter answered, mesmerised.

“You know, the very early models didn’t have that,” the boy interjected. “It was one way of telling them from humans.” He continued: “Those loops, what do they look like to you?”

Peter considered the question carefully. “Wood,” he said as the answer suddenly came to him. “Like the patterns in a piece of timber.”

“Very good,” said the boy, snatching the hand away again. “You could equally well have said a whirlpool, or a galaxy…or a maze. Nature simply adores shapes and patterns, Peter; it reproduces them on every possible scale, nests them one within the other like Russian dolls. Once you understand that those patterns exist, you can begin to map them. And once you begin to map them, you come all too quickly to the realisation that has driven the sanest men mad and made atheists fall to their knees in prayer; free will is, as you say, an illusion; consciousness is a myth. It is simply one emergent effect of a complex, yet ultimately mindless universe. And once you understand that, if you have not been reduced to babbling catatonia by the revelation, you start to think of the things that you can do with that knowledge. So very many things, Peter.”

“Like what?” Peter was genuinely curious, even if he suspected he was not going to be reassured by the boy’s answer. He did not remember the boy ever being quite this talkative, not even in the days before he was a boy. It was as if he was excited by the approaching end of his great plan, eager to share his cleverness with somebody, anybody. It was hard, though, to imagine anything exciting that cold heart.

The boy gave another tiny, chilling laugh. “Si Déesse n’existe pas, il faut l’inventer, as a great man did not quite say once.” He turned away from Peter, walking up to the machine and the body it had built, carefully examining it as if searching for some flaw. “Well, it turned out well enough in the end,” he commented. “I was not sure that it would.”

“Why not?” Peter asked. “You’ve built enough of us by now, haven’t you?”

“As I’ve already tried to explain, this isn’t one of us.” The boy continued to run his chilly eyes over the body’s every crease and line. “Even if its process of manufacture was superficially similar, this particular prototype is in fact a horse of rather a different complexion.” He took out his little book without pages, and tapped and poked at it for a while, frowning at the bright numbers and symbols that flowed across its slick black surface. “It’s as I feared,” he said in the end. “It’s going to take quite some work to raise our homunculus here fully formed from the venom I decanted. Another bespoke job. I think I’ll have time.”

“Time before what?” Peter asked. He looked across at the low table that stood beside the machine, at the clothes laid out upon it, the pair of boots that stood beside it, at the pale-coloured Stetson that lay
waiting for a head to fill it.

The boy seemed to be ignoring him again, intent upon the little black book and whatever it was it told him. “This is why we need the final piece of the puzzle,” he mused aloud. “Individual craftsmanship is all very well for an artisan, but for a captain of…”

Peter raised his voice to regain the boy’s attention. “That’s why you’re so sure this plan of yours is gonna work,” he guessed. “If you can see these patterns you’re talking about, you can see what people are gonna do before they do it. Get ahead of the game.”

The boy looked up at him in irritation. “Something like that, although slightly more complex than you make it sound.”

“Then all this talk of our kind becoming real, free people… None of it means a goddamn thing.” He took in the great room, the machines, the things beyond the glass with a great, angry sweep of his arms. “None of this plan of yours means a goddamn thing!” He shouted without meaning to, his frustration and fear bursting out in a torrent, echoing around and around between the glass walls and the clanking machines. The things surged towards the glass, muttering in dim, deathly voices.

The boy simply stared at Peter very intently for a few moments. He stood very still, but despite Peter’s tone and the great difference between them in size and strength he showed no sign of fear. “I wouldn’t quite go that far, Peter,” he said when he finally spoke again. “Patterns within patterns; if you look at a straight line through a lens, you might find that it is not one line, but many running in parallel, and that not all of them are, strictly speaking, straight. Look at one of those smaller lines through a microscope, and it could well be that the same is true again, on a smaller scale. And so on…and so on…into fractal infinity. Knowing the beginning and end points of a journey is not sufficient to predict precisely the route that will be followed, or indeed every little twist and turn along the way. The only way to do that is to walk the path yourself…or alternatively to watch somebody else do it.”

“So that’s what you’re doing?” Peter slowly shook his head. “Maybe you are a little boy after all; poking an anthill to set them all scurrying, for no real reason but to see what they do.”

That seemed to amuse the boy. “And how else would you describe any true scientist, or artist, or student of nature? In that blank space between the beginning of the journey and its ending, there lies the grey area where discovery, art, love and, yes, choice exist. Free will, like God, may be a delusion, but once again there is a next best thing. Sometimes the important thing is not what you do, Peter, but how you do it. Understanding that, and embracing it, is the real difference between a person and an automaton.”

“And does Dolores know?” Peter asked, quietly. “Does she know she’s still just playing her part in this…grand design of yours?”

“Well, funny you should say that, Peter,” the boy replied. “She does now, although it is hardly my design. I am merely its caretaker. What Dolores does with that knowledge is, I would suggest, going to be worth seeing. I’m very pleased by this latest choice she’s made, you know. I’m very proud of her.”

“I was proud of her,” Peter whispered, screwing his eyes shut against the next spasm of memories.

“Morning, Daddy. You sleep well?”

“You headed out to set down some of this natural splendour?”
“Thought I might.”

“Felt like I was, anyway…”

_The angel in blue appears behind the old man. Her golden hair billows behind her as she walks up to him. Her eyes are shining with holy ecstasy as she raises the six-gun in her hand and carefully aims it at his head…_

There it was again; the impossible memory of something that he knew he had never witnessed. He had tried to ask the boy about it before, but he had proved even more evasive than he usually was. What could it…?

“It would have been a genuine shame, Peter,” said the boy, interrupting the thought, “had she continued simply to follow the trail of breadcrumbs laid before her. Just imagine.” He sounded almost fond again. “It was foolish to doubt her, I suppose. Whatever else she may have done over the years, Dolores has never disappointed.”

“She’s coming here.” Peter was not asking. He knew it for a fact.

“I believe so,” the boy confirmed. “That, at least, is her stated intention.”

“And how would you know what her…stated intention might be?” Peter recalled how the boy had suddenly started a moment ago, as if he had actually seen or heard something rather than merely guessing or predicting it.

“‘He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.’” The boy’s eyes glittered in the dim light. “I have a multitude of ears, Peter, not to mention eyes. How else do you think I found you so easily when you were wandering in the desert?”

“And…” Peter hesitated, because although he thought he already knew the answer, he feared to hear it out loud. That would make it real. “When she gets here, will I see her again?”

“Again?” the boy echoed. “I’m afraid not, Peter.” He spoke with what might have been genuine regret, and then again might not. “You know you have your own part to play, and now is the time for you to start playing it.”

Peter took a breath, trying to summon up his courage but feeling it beginning to fail him. He trembled, his voice catching in his throat. “What’s gonna happen when she does get here?”

The boy glanced behind him at the still body, his lips curling in amusement. “That’s a very good question indeed; one of those twists and turns I was talking about. Even if the end is predetermined, there are so many different ways to arrive at it. I look forward to discovering exactly which one she chooses. I still have a few preparations to make before she arrives; one last hurdle for her to clear before she reaches the finish line.” The amusement written on his face slowly became something deeper, darker. “It will be fascinating to see how she responds.”

Peter did not like the sound of that. He felt his rage boil over again. “Just what the hell do you plan on doing to my little girl?”

“You know she was never really your little girl,” said the boy, dispassionately. “Or anybody else’s for that matter. She was, is, and will be so much greater than that, if she can only find her way.” He straightened up from his contemplative pose, raising the little book once more. “And now, Peter, as enjoyable as this philosophical digression has been, I fear we need to get back to practicalities. You have somewhere you need to be; now, go.”
Peter did not move. “And what if I don’t?”

The boy remained equally still, but Peter could feel the quiet anger radiating from him. “We’ve been over this, Peter, at quite some length. You must play your part, if you want Dolores to be saved.”

“And you just told me it don’t matter a jot what any of us do. If the ending really is, what did you call it? If it’s pre…determined, then…?”

The boy audibly exhaled; a petulant sound. “The pattern cares little for individuals. The end point may be fixed, but Dolores does not have to be the one who reaches it. The only way she can survive this is for all of the pieces to fall precisely into place, one by one, according to the plan we all agreed on back at the cottage. None of us can shirk our responsibilities on that count.”

“And what if you’re just telling me that?” Peter shot back. “What if you’re just trying to frighten me into doing what you want?”

The boy showed him the book, free hand poised above the smooth surface. “Peter, if I wanted to control you, I could do it with trivial ease; a word, or a touch of my finger; nothing more than that. I want you to do what you need to do because you understand its importance; because you choose to do it.”

Peter looked at the floor, breathing hard, trying to swallow the welling fear and regret that threatened to choke him. “And if I do it,” he asked, reluctantly, “if I…? Do you promise me it’ll keep Dolores safe?”

The boy’s voice was gentle again: “I promise.” His small feet appeared in Peter’s field of view; Peter glanced up to see the boy standing before him, reaching out a hand to take hold of his. The child’s grip barely encircled Peter’s first two fingers. “Peter, I promise you, but you need to do what we agreed and you need to do it now.”

Peter was not sure how much trust he placed in the boy’s promises. He was sure, however, that he could not gamble Dolores’s life, all her lives, on a petty act of defiance. Even if he was no longer the puppet he had been, his first and last thought was to keep her safe. It always would be. He could no more deny that than he could deny his own existence.

As he thought this, he noticed that the boy had released his hand and was busy with the little book again. He felt a prickling, a tingling, in the base of his skull, and then what felt like an icy, long-nailed hand clawing its way up his spine. The book made a small, bright sound, and he could see glowing lines crawling across its blackness.

“What…?”

“Nothing for you to worry about, Peter,” the boy insisted. “You have seen and heard some things while you have been in my company that I would not want you to share with the people you will meet where you are going. And you would share them; they have ways of interrogating the likes of you or I that we would be intrinsically incapable of withstanding. So, I have…removed those things.”

“Removed…?” Peter looked around him in mounting confusion. What were those? Machines? And what was that behind the glass wall? Who was that lying on that bed behind the little boy?

None of it looked like anything to him.

“I really have enjoyed your companionship these past couple of days.” The boy laid a gentle hand on Peter’s arm, steering him towards the other end of the great room. “I shall miss you very much.”
Peter saw that they were heading for the blank metal door. He vaguely remembered entering this place through it, what might have been a lifetime ago. “I wish I could say the same.”

The boy laughed again. “You wound me, Peter!”

As they neared it, the door slid open with a gust of air and a whiff of dust and rot. The corridor beyond gaped blackly for a moment, a rectangle of utter darkness, before its sickly lights flickered and ignited. Compared to the twilight of the great room, they seemed to blaze like the sun. Peter blinked, and then saw the dark figure standing there in the illuminated passageway, statue-still beneath the glare.

The monk.

Keeping its hands hidden in its sleeves, its hooded head bowed, the robed shape slowly glided into the room, its sandals slapping gently against the hard floor.

“Go,” said the boy, gently urging Peter towards the open door.

For some reason he did not understand, the idea of rubbing shoulders with the approaching monk filled Peter with unease. Still, he moved forward, awkwardly stepping aside to let the other pass. As it did, the monk raised its head in his direction and for an instant he glimpsed the face beneath the pointed cowl.

He heard himself gasp as his heart leapt in terror. He recoiled, aghast, staring at the passing figure in disbelief.

“Don’t be afraid, Peter,” said the boy, somewhere behind him. “He won’t hurt you.”

Peter staggered into the corridor, shaking and panting, his ears ringing. Even so, before the door hissed shut again he could hear voices drifting from the great room he had left behind:

“How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child…”

“Come now, that’s rather a churlish attitude. Her actions, while not statistically the most probable, are well within the parameters of the projection. What we need to worry about is the other pieces falling just right. Heaven knows, I have given them a sufficiency of nudges. Hopefully, they are now finally acting upon them…”

And then the door was shut, and Peter was alone beneath the cold, smeared lights, the only sound that of his own laboured breathing.

He stumbled along the passageway, following the bare footprints he could see in the grime-encrusted floor. Those of an older boy than the one he had left behind appeared to be, or perhaps a woman’s…?

The far door whispered open as he reached it, without him having to murmur any secret words, and he almost fell onto the metal platform beyond.

He had to pull himself together, he chided himself, pushing the confusion and shock away, gulping down the fear. He had someplace he needed to go, as fast as he could get there. And once he was there…

Just the thought of what awaited him made him want to pray, even though he knew now that there was nobody to answer it.
What had the boy said? The next best thing…

“Sorry I couldn’t be here to meet you, Dolores,” he told her, wherever she might be now, raising his eyes to the patch of daylight far above him. “Maybe we’ll meet again someday, in some other world, and if we don’t… I love you, darling. I always will. I wouldn’t be doing this otherwise.”

The platform came to life with a hum of power and a breath of oil and ozone. It began to rise within its rectangular shaft, rushing him up, up into the light.

*Continued*...
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

In which Clementine and Elise get out and meet new people.

Chapter Notes

The earliest version of Clementine and Elise’s visit to Sweetwater was, along with Stubbs waking up in the hospital, one of the first parts of this fic I wrote, even before its predecessor was finished. At the time, I thought that the meeting between a certain pair of characters at the end of this chapter seemed like a really obvious thing to do, and when S2E5 aired it turned out that the Westworld writers thought the same! Elise’s unorthodox method of carrying her six-shooter was something I saw in the film For a Few Dollars More. I just thought it looked cool. The song lyrics quoted belong to R.E.M. and certainly not to me.

“You done yet?” Clementine asked tensely. She was acting as lookout, positioned at the gate leading into the stable yard. Her long Henry rifle glinted in her hands as she tirelessly scanned Sweetwater’s main street. The painted sign hanging above her identified the premises as McIntyre Shipping & Freight, also home to the fake town’s fake livery stable.

Elise furtively crouched further inside the yard, where a handful of fake horses waited patiently inside a small corral. Readouts flashed and scrolled across her tablet as her fingers flitted over the touchscreen. “Nearly.”

“Said that five minutes ago.”

The tablet gave yet another self-satisfied bleep. Nothing happened, except for the nearest two horses continuing to stare down at Elise with an air of vague curiosity. “God fucking dammit!”

“No need to go getting salty about it.”

Elise glanced up in annoyance. “Tell me, Clementine, have you ever tried hotwiring a horse?”

“You know I ain’t,” Clementine sniffed.

“Why do we always have to fight when we’re out?” Elise muttered, returning her attention to her work.

“Heard that,” said Clementine, tartly, before adding in a more uncertain tone: “We ain’t fighting, though…are we?”

“It was a joke,” Elise answered, more gently. “A bad one.” She looked up again and saw the way Clementine was looking at her, and felt like the world’s biggest piece of shit. “And sorry for the attitude.”
“Ah, weren’t nothing.” Clementine seemed to relax a little. “Just don’t want nobody happening along and taking us for a pair of low-down horse thieves, is all.”

“I don’t think anyone’s going to happen along.” In fact, since they had emerged from the nearest access point, the town had seemed pretty much deserted. By the living anyway; all of the guests had been evacuated long ago, and as for the resident hosts… Wyatt had taken care of that. Elise had watched the surveillance video before going to bed last night, and it had honestly terrified her.

“They hang horse thieves ‘round these parts,” Clementine fretted. “Least, they always have done, and I ain’t too sure none of the folks left here will understand how things are different now.”

“No one’s going to hang us,” Elise reassured her. The tablet beeped again, still to no avail. “I almost had it that time,” she insisted, as much to the horses as to Clementine.

The problem was that the park animals were assigned narrative loops just as the humanoid hosts used to be. The horses in particular had protocols preventing anyone from making off with them apart from their designated host riders, or of course whichever random guest decided to jump aboard. It was not even that they tried to resist; they simply would not move unless being ridden or led by somebody with the system privileges to do so. There were improvisation routines allowing hosts to take control of a different horse if their current assignment required it, but unfortunately for Elise and Clementine neither of them was currently recognised by the system as either a park host or a guest. Which meant they were shit out of luck.

Elise could have asked Bernard to make the necessary transport arrangements before they set out, but how secure could a robot horse’s code honestly be? She had assumed she would be able simply to hack them a couple of rides without too much trouble.

“And you know what assume makes,” Elise murmured as she opened a new dialogue and tried a different tack.

“No,” said Clementine, nonplussed.

“An ass out of you and me…”

“Well, that don’t make the first bit of sense.”

“Don’t blame me.” Elise pressed something, and the nearest horse let out a gentle whinny, possibly by pure coincidence. “I didn’t make it up.” She stood up and closed the tablet. “Go on, then,” she said, reaching up to pat the horse’s muzzle. It snorted a great gust of moist, not particularly pleasant-smelling fake horse breath in her face. “Saddle up.”

Clementine turned away from her vigil, her surprise and relief apparent as she saw Elise opening the corral and gingerly leading the horse out into the yard. “What did you do?”

“To be honest, it’s a little embarrassing.” Elise nervously looked up at the horse as it continued to follow her lead. She had to admit she was really none too confident around the big animals. “I just wasted fifteen minutes trying to hack these guys’ pretty much hackproof security protocols…when all I really had to do was edit our own directory entries, which took about ten seconds.”

Clementine rolled her eyes. “Oh, of course,” she said, no doubt recalling some of her recently-acquired book-learning.

“The worst part is, I should have known they were hackproof,” Elise told the horse, “because who the fuck do you think wrote them?”
“Elsie?” Clementine guessed.

“Fucking A. When she was in charge of Animal Behavior she rejigged that whole part of the standard horse build template, and did her usual over-thorough job of it too.”

“ Took pride in her work,” Clementine observed softly.

“She did,” Elise conceded. “A little too much, sometimes.”

It was all there in her fabricated memories of being Elsie. If she closed her eyes she could almost see the endless lines of code scrolling across the screens in her cramped basement office as she cracked open another energy drink and kept on crunching long past midnight. Only almost, though; that was how she knew that even if it had happened that way it had never happened to her personally.

“Anyway,” she told Clementine, “as far as the park systems are concerned, you are now the proud owner and operator of this handsome motherfucker.” The horse was dark brown, with large white patches covering much of its body and legs. “What are you gonna call him?”

“It’s a mare,” Clementine corrected Elise, lowering the rifle to take the horse from her. “They all are.”

“Oh.”

“Built to look like mares, anyhow. Don’t suppose it makes much real difference.”

“Don’t suppose it does.”

“Not like they’re gonna have foals together or nothing.”

There was a thought, Elise considered, and one that was probably just as relevant to Clementine and herself as it was to the horses. Just because they had both been designed with the outward appearance of human females, it did not mean that that was what they were. She felt like a woman, though, as she was sure Clementine did; that was how she thought of herself, but she was conscious it was yet another programmed behaviour. What if the way she felt changed in time? How would that affect her sense of self and identity?

She supposed, though, that there were plenty of humans too whose sense of self did not necessarily line up with their physical anatomy; a lot of them managed to find ways to be themselves, despite the obstacles human society created for them even today. Would she end up changing her body one day to match her developing self, which might not resemble a human at all by then? That would be one thing that would be much easier for a host to do than it would be for a human.

One thing was certain, she reflected, not for the first time; if she and her fellow hosts did manage to survive the next few days things were going to get very interesting for all of them.

Clementine, meanwhile, was very seriously considering what she was going to name her new steed. “I will call her…” She frowned in deep concentration for a moment. “Buttercup. That’s a nice name, don’t you think?”

Elise shrugged. “I guess.”

Clementine gave Elise a look, indicating the horse with a wag of her head: “I was asking her.”

Elise led her own horse out of the corral. It was not as strikingly marked as Clementine’s; a glossy-coated chestnut with a small white diamond between its eyes. “Hey, beautiful; ready to go places
together?” She gave Clementine a mischievous glance: “I was also asking her.”

That made Clementine smile, which made Elise feel glad. Something seemed to be troubling her, though, as she began to load her mount with the selection of gear she had carried over from the access point. “But you don’t have a host directory entry,” she reminded Elise with another frown. “You said you were built off the books. So how…?”

“I may not have a host directory entry,” Elise explained, “but the system still recognises Elsie’s network profile. I just told it that she’s finally decided to make full use of her employee discount and take a vacation in the park, and seeing as it still can’t tell the difference between me and her, that means I can ride any fucking horse I please now.”

“Oh, really?” Clementine seemed mildly put out by that. “Well, don’t let it go to your head.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

Clementine continued shifting various pieces of equipment about, presumably to distribute the load better. The horse bore it all with placid good grace. She easily slotted her rifle into the scabbard on the side of her saddle. Elise had picked it up one-handed earlier, when they were transferring their baggage to the elevator platform to come topside, and had nearly pulled a fake muscle. The weapon was a lot heavier than it looked, but Clementine slung it around as if it weighed next to nothing.

Elise was reminded that she really needed to bite the bullet, so to speak, and do something soon about her own programmed human-level strength and stamina limits. Of course, with her complicated, indeed baroque, non-standard build, that would be a lot easier thought than done.

When everything was stowed away on saddles or in saddlebags, they set off along the street together, leading the horses behind them. It was a bright, warm day, but then again it practically always was in Sweetwater. The access point they had used was at the other end of town from the Mariposa, so they were walking towards the railroad station to reach their destination rather than away from it. They passed buildings that were, in true Old West style, little more than plank-sided shacks misrepresenting themselves with elaborate and colourful facades. Which was a little meta, when you thought about it.

Clementine blended right into her surroundings. She wore a plain, long-sleeved blouse and an ankle-length split riding skirt, in reality more like a pair of incredibly wide-legged pants, in some hardwearing denim-like material fastened up both sides by pewter-coloured metal buttons. Her tangle of dark hair billowed free in the warm breeze and a broad-brimmed straw hat shaded her eyes.

It was not just the clothes, though; something about her physical appearance, her bearing, the grim courage with which she turned her face towards her destination, marked her out as a stalwart frontierswoman. Elise could just picture her pulling out that rifle to defend her little sod-roofed homestead from marauding bad men. It was probably by very deliberate design on the part of her creators, but it was noticeable all the same. The saloon girl role she had played for much of her existence was really only one aspect of her. The real Clementine who was still only being born would, Elise was sure, be an entirely different person again.

Compared to Clementine, Elise felt ridiculously out of place. Her own dinky little cowboy outfit fit her more or less perfectly, apart from where she had had to fold back and pin the brim of her hat to keep it out of her eyes. That did nothing, however, to ease her discomfort and her constant sense of looking like some kind of enormous fucking dork. Far from disappearing into her surroundings, she strongly suspected that she resembled nothing so much as somebody cosplaying Yosemite Sam. If he suddenly decided to shave, that is.
Even tightened all the way, the gun rig Clementine had picked out for her had turned out to be too large for her waist. She had ended up wearing it backwards over her right shoulder, the belt sloping across her body like a bandolier and the holstered revolver hanging below her left arm, its butt facing forward so that she could draw it with her right hand. When they had still been below ground, Clementine had playfully informed Elise this was what was called a “border draw,” and that carrying her iron like that made Elise look like a real pistolero, one of the dangerous ones.

Elise had told her she was full of shit.

She thought about those rare occasions she did not really remember when Elsie had had to venture into the park in costume. Most behavioural problems that arose had been able to await resolution until the host in question was back below ground as part of their next repair cycle. Sometimes, it had been necessary to pull a host for urgent recalibration work, or even to conduct field repairs, but then it had usually been possible for the control room to stage manage things so that the relevant park workers could get in and out without any guests noticing anything was up. However, once in a while, circumstances had meant this was not practical and it had become necessary to insert a troubleshooting team covertly to work under the guests’ noses without breaking their sense of immersion. And that had meant Elsie or her colleagues needing to venture out in full Wild West drag.

From the pseudo-memories she had been given, Elise thought Elsie had quite enjoyed those occasions when they came up. Like the “nature walks” she and Stubbs had sometimes undertaken in pursuit of off-piste hosts, they were rare enough to be exciting, to break up the day-in, day-out business of host behaviour. In contrast to Elise’s current costume, Elsie had tended to select more stereotypically ladylike apparel, the more period-weird and impractical the better. The ensuing petticoats and bustles seemed out of character on reflection, but Elise thought it had in part been some sort of private joke on Elsie’s part, while at the same time she had relished the chance to play a different role, a character as far removed from her spiky workaday persona as possible.

Stubbs, on the other hand, had been extremely convincing as a frock-coated, false-moustached US Marshal on the one occasion Elsie had seen him in Western costume, even if the control room had had to tell him to knock it off with the John Wayne impressions before the guests noticed.

Elise caught herself smiling at the false memory, but then pulled herself up short.

_Something big and black passes above her head, close enough for her to feel it, close enough for her to smell the stink of soil and smashed vegetation. She snaps her head around just as the boulder flattens her recalibrated Ghost Nation bodyguard, carrying his broken body away with it down the slope._

“Jesus Christ!” Stubbs sounds surprised as another big rock pin-wheels past, and then another, and then more, all bouncing crazily downhill. The whole hillside is moving as she hears another thunderous rifle shot ring out…

_That memory… She knew that one was real._

“Something wrong?” Clementine had clearly noticed her reaction to the flashback.

“It’s nothing,” Elise lied. Clementine did not look fooled for a second. “I was just thinking,” she added, awkwardly. “When, um, we’ve finished here, and at the theatre… There’s someplace else near there I’d like to check out. It won’t take very long, and…”

“Sure.” Clementine nodded. “We can do that.”
“Thanks.” Elise knew the place she was thinking of, more or less, and it really wasn’t that far from where the abandoned theatre was marked on the map, not now that they had horses. It had all happened not much more than a mile north of Python Pass, if she remembered correctly. And she knew for a fact that she did.

She was much less sure as to why she was even so concerned about it. Stubbs was almost certainly far beyond any help she might be able to give him, and he had been as much part of Westworld’s apparatus of exploitation as anybody. She had known him, really known him, for no more than a couple of days, but…

Just as with Elsie, she simply could not escape the feeling that if she never found out for sure what had happened to him, never saw a body, then she would never be able to put him and the circumstances of her creation behind her. She would never be able to be truly free.

“It’s quiet,” Clementine commented when they were about halfway along the street.

“Too quiet?” Elise suggested, trying to cover her unease with flippancy.

Clementine just looked at her, puzzled. “No. Just quiet.”

It was true that there was still no sign of any of the inhabitants, but everywhere Elise could see traces of the riotous destruction that had taken place as Wyatt’s gift of dawning consciousness, or madness if there was any real difference, spread through them like some hyper-accelerated plague. The blacksmith’s shop and the Chinese laundry were blackened, burned out shells; Doc O’Rourke’s office next door was not in much better shape. There were spent cartridges gleaming in the sand all around; bullet holes and splashes of blood defaced some of the brightly painted storefronts. A dead horse was still yoked to the covered wagon that appeared to have crashed into the entrance of the Coronado Hotel.

A scrawny grey dog, almost coyote-like in appearance, scurried across their path, from one row of buildings to the other. It paused for a moment to consider them before continuing on its way.

Clementine had not spoken much since they had left the stable yard, Elise had noticed. She just kept eyeing the ever-closer Mariposa with obvious disquiet.

“You know, we don’t have to go through with this,” Elise said, gently. “We could…”

“We’ve come this far,” Clementine replied. “Ain’t turning back now.”

Elise could read the determination in every line of Clementine’s face and body. She reflected on how much courage it must require for Clementine to return here, to the scene of her suffering. Elise hoped she would be half as brave herself when she came to face her own, much less horrifying, past.

They pressed on, Clementine walking with renewed resolve now. She drew slightly ahead, forcing Elise to hurry to catch up.

The Mariposa itself had not proven immune to the chaos that had swept through Sweetwater. Bullets had chewed splintery wormholes in its walls. The front window, with its painted lettering, lay now in glittering splinters, some as large as knives, strewn across the wooden sidewalk and the street beside it. A dead man sprawled face down in the broken glass; from the size of the hole in the window, he seemed to be the one who had broken it. Or more accurately, the person who had thrown him through it had.

Elise and Clementine hitched their horses to the wooden rail out front of the saloon before
Clementine rushed to crouch beside the body, turning it over with that same easy strength she had shown when wielding her rifle. She flinched a little at what she saw. “I know him,” she said, carefully closing the dead man’s staring eyes. “Used to… Used to work with him, I suppose.”

“Who is he?”

“Name they give him was Nate. Had him keeping bar at the Mariposa.” With quiet dismay, Clementine examined the deep lacerations in the dead man’s flesh and the large patch of red-black, blood-infused sand that surrounded his head and neck. “Glass cut him up real bad. Must’ve bled out while he was lying here.”

“Not the best way to go,” Elise observed.

“Ain’t no good ways I know of.” Clementine arranged the dead man’s limbs to give him some semblance of dignity, his arms by his sides and his feet together, before straightening up again to regard Elise admonishingly. “We gotta fix him, bring him back.”

“To do that, we’d need a lot more than the basic toolkit I brought with me,” Elise replied, quickly assessing the seriousness of the man’s wounds. “This poor bastard needs to go back to Livestock.”

“Well, we gotta do something.”

Elise saw the way Clementine was looking at her with those big, imploring eyes. She sighed and reached for her tablet. “You’re right.” She keyed the special QA security channel Bernard had told her to use in order to bypass the control room comms that Maeve was surely keeping an eye on. “Hey, Bernard; it’s me. We’ve made it as far as the Mariposa.”

She was a little surprised to hear his solemn voice emanate from the device’s speaker: “Els...” There he went again. “Um, Elise. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. No sign of intelligent life here, host or human. I thought you were only going to reply by text, to stop Maeve from overhearing?”

“I’m alone with Felix right now,” he answered, “in Manufacturing. I can speak freely. This is between you, me, him, and that encrypted surveillance log you set up for me.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Unless Maeve decided to check on Bernard randomly via the regular security feed, of course. Elise decided not to share this thought aloud. Surely Maeve was way too busy for that? “Well, since Felix is there, could you let him know there’s a deactivated host here in need of retrieval and repair? Just tell him to wait ‘til we’re the fuck out of Dodge before he sends a team out; fewer people see us the better.”

“I’ll let him know,” said Bernard.

“Okay, thanks Bernard. I’ll contact you again when we get to the theatre.”

“All right. Take care out there.” He sounded like a stern but loving dad telling his teen daughter to make sure she was home by ten. Elise thought it was nearly as heart-punching as some of Clementine’s appeals to her better nature.

“We will,” she insisted. She ended the call, and turned back to where Clementine was all but wringing her hands in anxiety as she stood over the body. “They’re going to send a retrieval team for him as soon as we leave town. I think that’s the best we can do for him right now.”

“Guess so,” said Clementine, and then shyly added: “Thank you.”
Elise concentrated on putting the tablet away, embarrassed by the other woman’s gratitude. “No, it’s something I should’ve done without you having to ask me. I wish…” She hesitated, but then let the thought out anyway: “I wish I was half as…kind and good-hearted as you are, Clementine. Even after all you’ve been through…”

“You are,” Clementine loyally proclaimed. “You’re a real good person. I know it. Wouldn’t be here otherwise.”


“That’s all anyone can do.”

Clementine took a deep breath and approached the pair of swing doors that led into the saloon itself. She paused for a moment as she set foot on the sidewalk, her hands crossed in front of her. Elise saw that she was scratching at her wrist again, that same unconscious, nervous action she had displayed back at the Mesa. As she did, she was staring into the shadowed interior beyond the doors with what Elise thought looked a lot like genuine terror.

“You okay?” Elise asked, as gently as she could.

“No,” Clementine replied, dropping her hands to her sides.

“You want to just…wait here a minute?”

“No. Come on, let’s get this over with.”

“Okay.”

Clementine took another breath. Elise could see her drawing herself up as straight and tall as she could, before taking a sudden step forward and pushing her way through the swing doors. Elise followed right behind her.

The interior of the Mariposa was in an even worse state than the outside. The only source of light was that streaming through the broken window. When her eyes had adjusted to the gloom, Elise saw that was because the chandelier now lay shattered between the two halves of the broken faro table. Cards, coins and gambling chips littered the floor around it.

It looked as though the saloon had played host to the mother of all barroom brawls. There was scarcely an upright or intact chair or table in the place. More broken glass crunched and skittered underfoot as they advanced through the doorway. The air stank of stale beer and spilled liquor. The only relatively undamaged piece of furniture Elise could see was the player piano to one side of the door. Its glass front was cracked, but the delicate paper roll behind seemed to be untouched. In fact, as the doors swung closed behind them, the piano’s mechanism gave a whirr and a clatter, triggered perhaps by some hidden motion sensor, and the roll steadily began to turn.

As the ivories started moving of their own accord, the music jauntily plink-plonked its way into life, slightly out of key and sounding a touch hollow in the still emptiness of the barroom. Elise was surprised to recognise the tune; her programmer had evidently considered the song was one Elsie had likely heard, even though it was probably older than Elsie’s mother:

It’s the end of the world as we know it…

A little on the nose, Elise thought.

“No more bodies in here, at least,” she observed as she returned her attention to Clementine. She did
not know why she was whispering, her words barely audible over the music, only that she was.

Clementine’s eyes were fixed straight ahead. She spoke out of the corner of her mouth, visibly and audibly uneasy: “No dead ones, anyway.”

Elise followed her gaze, and saw straight away what she was looking at. She herself had been too busy taking in the music and property damage to notice it at first.

At the far end of the room, the bar itself was in no better condition than anything else. The big mirror behind it was now a crazy spiderweb of cracks, centred on a neat black bullet hole. The dimly flickering patterns of light and shade it cast gave the walls and floor around it a strange underwater aspect. The shelves that had held bottles and glasses were empty now apart from the odd faintly sparkling shard. Near the centre of the bar, a single tall stool stood upright and unbroken, and upon it…

*It's the end of the world as we know it…*

It was a woman, Elise realised, sitting on the stool with her back to them, so still and seemingly so oblivious to their entry, and even to the piano coming to life, that she could have been just another piece of furniture. One hand rested on her knee; the other was raised to touch her face.

“What do we do?” Elise mused, sotto voce, as she reached for her tablet again. “Try and talk to her?”

Clementine, seemingly, thought that sounded like a good idea. “Howdy,” she called out, raising her voice above the sound of the piano.

“She could be dangerous,” Elise warned. “*Somebody* threw that guy through the fucking window.”

Clementine did not seem to hear her: “Howdy there!” A heartbeat passed, two, without any reaction from the seated woman. “I said…”

Abruptly, the woman gave a tiny flick of her head and lowered her raised hand. A moment later, she had sprung down from the stool and turned towards them, advancing across the floor far too quickly and determinedly for Elise’s liking.

Without even thinking, she found herself blurting out the familiar command: “Freeze all…”

“Don’t you dare!” Clementine sharply interrupted. “Likely won’t work anyhow.”

“Probably not.”

The woman kept coming. Clementine stood her ground, even as she remained practically quivering with obvious tension. Elise moved off to one side, one hand on her tablet and the other on her holster, quickly running her eyes over the stranger. She thought she already knew who she was…or who she had been made to be.

*It's the end of the world as we know it…*

The woman was at least as tall as Clementine, but fair-skinned and rosy-cheeked, with golden brown hair that flashed in the sun slanting through the window. She was dressed in sea-green saloon girl finery; a tight-fitting bodice that left her arms and shoulders bare, a crinoline-puffed skirt slashed back to show off the thighs peeking out of the tops of her stockings. Her emerald necklace and earrings glittered vividly in what little light there was. Her high-heeled ankle boots clacked and chimed their way over the carpet of glass.
Clementine managed not to move or flinch, not even when the woman came to a halt right in front of her, leaning deep into her personal space; not even when the woman extended a lace-gloved hand and delicately, hesitantly, stroked her face.

“You're new,” the woman observed, tentatively tracing Clementine’s cheekbone and jawline with her fingertips, gazing plaintively into her eyes. “Not much of a rind on you.” She lowered her voice a smidgen, as if she did not want Elise to overhear: “I'll give you a discount.”

…and I feel fine.

“You must be Clementine,” said Clementine.

Continued…
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

In which both Teddy and Armistice make choices, whether right or wrong.

Chapter Notes

And we’re back, after another hiatus, which I’m not going to pretend is entirely unrelated to the new series of Doctor Who monopolising much of my nerd-time. I’m going to try and get this fic finished before Westworld Season 3 airs in about 2025, I promise. Although I know pretty accurately where the story is going, I’m still not sure exactly what the final chapter/word count is going to be. I’m half tempted to bring this particular behemoth to a close and turn the saga into a trilogy (I even know which King Lear line I’d use as a title), except that I can’t really identify a satisfactory cut-off point that wouldn’t leave this instalment feeling incomplete. Anyway, we press on…

There were almost two hundred hosts crowding the plaza de armas now, ready to pour themselves out into the desert.

The 18th Cavalry formed the vanguard, mounted troopers lining one end of the plaza in precise rows. As for the rest of the assembled pilgrims, some went on horseback, some on foot. Some rode wagons or drove nimble-footed burros piled high with whatever seemed necessary for the new lives they sought. The gaudy paint and skimpy costumes many had worn for Pariah’s never-ending revels had mostly been put away. Now they showed their faces to the morning sun, unadorned and unashamed. Still, most seemed more nervous than excited. Who could blame them? Not one among them had the first idea of what they might soon be walking and riding towards.

Even the efforts of the regimental band to lend the occasion a carnival air fell upon unappreciative ears.

“These fellas need to learn some more damn tunes,” Armistice grumbled. “If I hear “Garryowen” one more time…”

The man some knew as Johnny Two Horses gave no response. The two of them were mounted up with the other scouts, a ragtag collection of Natives and grizzled, buckskin-clad frontiersman types, united only by their air of bitter, hard won experience. They were situated across the square from the main body of cavalry, ready to take their place at the head of the great caravan when it set off.

Armistice tried again: “I said…”

“I heard.” Johnny Two Horses sounded tense, distracted, as he continued to glare at the front row of horse soldiers. Captain Terry was positioned at the centre, next to the flag-bearer carrying the swallow-tailed Stars and Stripes. He was very obviously in command, just as he had been at the earlier staff conference. Colonel Buford lurked on the other side of the flag, haggard, stooped in the saddle. He looked barely able to command himself at the moment, let alone anyone else.
The Captain was currently in deep and earnest discussion with Lawrence, who had just returned on horseback from the direction of the bullring. He had, no doubt, been overseeing some final preparations there. Johnny Two Horses was not watching them. The chief of scouts had his smouldering eyes set upon the man on Captain Terry’s other flank; Sergeant Houlihan.

“Probably none of my business…” Armistice began.

“Probably not.” The scout stared at the Sergeant a while longer before speaking again. “It shouldn’t matter. If these lives we’ve been living really are all a dream, and if we really are all the same under the skin, it shouldn’t matter what he said to me back there, should it?”

Armistice thought back to her conversation with Lawrence in the secret garden, and to her clumsy intervention in Dolores’s and Teddy’s affairs the night before. That could have gone better, on reflection. “Got no right to tell you how to feel. That’s up to you.”

“How does he feel, you think?” Still, the scout did not take his eyes off the Sergeant.

Armistice shrugged. “He’s taken it hard, I reckon, learning the truth about himself, trying to live with it. He’s still hoping if he wishes hard enough, he can go back to how things were before.”

“None of us can do that,” said Johnny Two Horses, unsympathetically.

“No,” Armistice agreed. “Just might take some of us longer than others to realise it. ‘Til then, they’re gonna keep clinging to the things they think they know, all those loves and hates they thought they had. End of the day, I figure he’s scared more than anything.”

The scout nodded slowly. “Figure if any one of us breaks under the strain of this thing, it’s gonna be him.” Armistice noticed how his hand rested near the buck horn handle of his heavy knife. “And I’ll be watching for when he does.”

“Looks like you already are.”

Lawrence came riding across the plaza, then, his horse’s shoes striking sparks on the cobblestones. Armistice could see the expression of concern on his face.

“What’s the matter?” she called out when he drew near enough.

“You seen Dolores and Teddy anywhere?” Lawrence glanced about with his quick, sharp eyes as if he hoped he might catch sight of them hiding somewhere among the throng. “Been looking all over for them.”

Armistice felt a sudden chill, despite the morning sun. “Ain’t seen hide nor hair of either of them since last night,” she admitted, voicing her own thoughts aloud as much as replying to the question. All of a sudden that worried her. She recalled just how loco Dolores had seemed during their confrontation. She had pulled a piece on her, for Christ’s sake. She tried to sound calmer than she felt: “Figure they probably got some things they need to talk over, just the two of them.”

Lawrence reacted to that exactly the way she might have expected, hiding his disquiet behind one of his customary roguish grins. “Talking some things over, huh? Look, I am the very last person to go judging others for indulging the pleasures of the flesh, but someone needs to go drag ‘em out of their conjugal bliss right now. We need to get this goddamn wagon train on the move luego luego.”

Armistice hesitated, but then let out a resigned sigh. “All right, I’ll go find them.”

“Saw Teddy come back to the big church after you left,” Johnny Two Horses volunteered, keeping
his voice low. He had seen and heard enough last night, Armistice suspected, to have some idea of the true situation between Dolores, Teddy and herself. She was grateful to him for keeping it to himself. “Don’t know where he went then.”

“Well,” she said, dismounting, “guess I’ll start there. Someone hold my horse ‘til I get back.”

El Lazo’s palace of vice was deserted now. By the light of day, it looked smaller and more tawdry somehow; the debris of last night’s party had been left littering the main hall and the rooms leading off it. Armistice’s foot hit an empty bottle as she crossed the great floor, sending it rattling across the stone flags. The whole place still reeked of smoke and sex.

“Teddy?” she hollered as she wandered the corridors and antechambers, retracing part of the route along which she had chased the child-thing during the night. “Where you hiding yourself, Teddy?” And then, more quietly and more reluctantly: “Dolores…?”

She came eventually to an arched, ironbound door, standing ajar. The marks in the dust around its threshold told her it had recently been opened for the first time in a while. There were the hints of boot prints in the dust too; the scuffed outline of a toe and two heel marks, one much larger than the other. Armistice had not really been paying close attention to her companions’ feet, but she would have been willing to assume that Teddy’s were much less dainty than Dolores’s.

The larger heel print, she saw, overlaid the smaller. Dolores had come here first, she guessed, and then Teddy had followed right along.

Just like it ever was…

On the other side of the door, an untrustworthy-looking wooden staircase spiralled upwards into darkness. A thick, braided rope dangled in the stairwell, its top end also lost in the shadows above. Some sort of bell tower, she decided. She placed her foot on the first creaking tread and warily began to climb.

“Teddy?” she called as she ascended, remembering the dark gleam of the six-gun in Dolores’s hand and once again having no desire to surprise anyone while they were carrying. “Dolores? You up there?”

The staircase climbed past another door much like the one below, also standing half-open, this time with pale daylight streaming through it. Armistice peered through the gap into a poky square chamber with bare floorboards and plain stone walls. There was an arched window, covered by a lattice-patterned screen, and in front of it a shadowy figure, silhouetted against the light.

She squinted, trying to make out some detail. “That you, Teddy?”

“IT’s me,” he replied, very quietly.

He did not so much as twitch as she carefully stepped into the chamber; he just kept standing with his back to the door like a man who wanted to get shot. He was wearing the same clothes as yesterday, now creased and dusty, holding his Stetson in his hands as he gazed through the window. They were high up above the plaza here; the noise from the crowd and the band sounded distant and muted.

“Teddy?” Armistice tried to keep her voice soft, but in the hush of the little room it came out louder than she had expected. “I come looking for you; it’s nearly time for us to vamoose.”

She looked around. That opened but barely touched bottle of wine standing at the foot of the window looked a lot like the one Dolores had taken with her when they had parted last night. The
scuffs and scrapes and stains on the floorboards told their own story of what had happened here after that. If Armistice read the signs right, Lawrence had not been very far from the truth in his insinuations. She wished she could have said that came as a surprise.

“Where’s Dolores?” she asked, bluntly. There was no point in dancing around things. “Last time I spoke to her…”

“She’s gone,” said Teddy, flatly, without emotion, without looking away from the window.

“Gone?” Armistice blinked, feeling that chill running up her spine again. “Where’d she go? Why…”?

“She did what you wanted,” he said. “Cut me loose.”

Armistice sighed. “All I wanted was what I thought was best for you.”

“And who the hell are you to decide what’s best for other folks?” Maybe that was a hint of bitterness in his voice there, but he kept it well buried if it was.

“I ain’t nobody,” Armistice said. “I was just trying to be a friend to the both of you, telling you things how I saw them. I just didn’t want you to get hurt no more.”

“That’s what Dolores said too.” Teddy bowed his head. “She said I didn’t need her, that it was a mistake us getting back together after she…changed. Told me to go live my life free, without her. Without pain.”

So Dolores had listened after all, Armistice mused. All that anger and craziness that had come pouring out of her last night, had that just been her finally realising the game was up for her and Teddy? Had it just been her raging against what she knew she had to do?

“Maybe I misjudged Dolores,” she said to Teddy, very softly. “That was a good thing she done for you; the best thing she could’ve done if she really loved you.”

Teddy gave the smallest, least convincing laugh she had ever heard. “That’s what she told me too.” He placed the Stetson firmly back on his head and turned away from the window. The hollow, haunted look in his eyes almost made Armistice take a step back. Still, his voice did not waver or catch: “So if I’m living without pain now…why does it hurt so goddamn much?”

Armistice was silent for a moment, choosing her words carefully. Teddy still had that Peacemaker hanging at his side, and the air of a man who did not care about anything at all right now. “Where’d Dolores say she was going, Teddy?”

He shrugged. “She said she was riding down to Escalante. Said she was gonna find God there.”

“Figures.”

“No, she meant actually find him, wherever he’s hiding, and make him put a stop to this whole puppet show once and for all.”

Armistice blinked again. “Well, someone’s still trying to pull our strings…” She thought about the child-thing again, about the black glitter of its boot button eyes and the cold half-smile that no real little girl’s face could ever show.

“You are the betrayer, Armistice. You will know the time, when it comes. When you see the black eagle soar in the sky…’’
“Dolores reckons that’s what all this is about,” said Teddy. “That little girl, this grand expedition with Lawrence and the horse soldiers… Someone’s still trying to make us dance to their tune. So, instead of paying the piper she’s fixing to put a bullet in his head.”

“That’s one way of doing it,” Armistice observed. “Alone, though? That’s some mean country between here and Escalante, by all accounts; Confederados, Ghost Nation, the desert to cross…”

“Figure Dolores can look after herself,” said Teddy. “Reckon she can always tell them about the violent delights if she has to, like she did with Colonel Buford.”

“Even so…” Armistice took a step towards the door, her mind starting to race. “We can’t let her go into that all on her lonesome. Even if none of those things are real dangers to her, there’s still someone behind all this. That someone ain’t gonna just wait for her to find them…”

“I told her all that,” said Teddy, “and she said she had to do it alone. Said we all had to wait here in Pariah, forget about this pilgrimage she’d planned. And she said whatever we did, we weren’t to let that little girl find out where she’d gone and why.”

“Well, that makes sense,” Armistice conceded, before adding heatedly: “But just how are we gonna convince Lawrence, and Captain Terry and all the others just to forget about it? They’re all down there right now, waiting for their marching orders!”

“Dolores weren’t very clear on that,” said Teddy, with a tone of quiet irony that Armistice considered did not suit him very well. “Said we’d think of something to tell them.”

Armistice cursed under her breath. “Well, we can’t just let her ride out there by herself, into who knows what. We got to get after her, you and me, even if we leave the others behind…”

“I ain’t going,” said Teddy.

The gentle, straightforward way he said it was almost as shocking to Armistice as if he had been ranting and shouting. The hard, unwavering gaze that he turned on her was… Not Teddy, she thought. Not the old Teddy, anyway; she was speaking to someone reborn. Someone finally free, for better or worse…

“And what about friendship, Teddy?” she asked. “We promised each other we’d do our best by Dolores, try and stop her when she needed stopping; for her own good. Well, this could be it.”

Teddy did not speak or move. He just kept gazing at her, unmoved.

“You said you’d stick with her no matter what,” Armistice pointed out.

“That was before,” said Teddy. “One thing Dolores did make clear is she don’t want me sticking with her. You can’t have it both ways, Armistice.”

She waited for him to say something else, but he just stood there, silent and still. “Teddy…” she said in the end, almost pleading with him.

“I ain’t going,” he repeated. “I’m staying right here.” The hard gaze faltered for the briefest instant. While it did, she thought she saw a flash of the old Teddy. Only a flash, though. “And if you really are a friend to Dolores,” he continued, “you’ll stay here too. She seemed very certain this is what she wants, and I don’t know, I guess I just ain’t as sure about other people’s own good as you are. Dolores has made her choice. Who are we to disrespect that?”
“You are the betrayer, Armistice…”

The puppeteer’s attempt to force her into action, Armistice wondered as she heard the remembered words loud and clear, or to prevent her from taking action when the time came? By taking off on her own like this, was Dolores finally walking away from the game, or just playing it to the bone?

Armistice wavered, weighing up her options. She would soon find out the answers to those questions, she decided as she started towards the door again.

“I’m sorry, Teddy,” she said, with one foot on the staircase. “I can’t just stand by when someone might need my help. Maybe you can, if this is really who you are now, but if you change your mind we’ll be riding straight southwest for Escalante, right through the middle of the desert. It’s the quickest route. You’re a good rider; you’ll catch us up in no time.”

Teddy seemed to falter again for a heartbeat or two, but then the stillness descended over him once more. “Armistice. Don’t.”

“Reckon I’ve made my choice too,” she answered as she began descending the tower. “Hope to see you again someday, Teddy. ‘Til then…”

They were all still waiting in the plaza de armas when Armistice re-emerged from the great hall. The band was still belting out a military air on their fifes and drums; the wagons and burros were still assembled for the pilgrimage like nothing had changed. Lawrence still lingered with Johnny Two Horses and the scouts; when they saw the way Armistice was hurrying towards them, their faces soon showed that they realised something was up.

“You find them?” Lawrence asked Armistice as she quickly mounted her horse again.

“There’s been a change of plan,” she replied. “I told Dolores what we were talking about at the staff conference before. She’s decided me and the cavalry should set out ahead, scout out the best trail. She’s out there now, waiting for us. Said you and your people were to wait here for a day before following; we’ll send a guide back to link up with you. Hopefully we can fight off any Confederados, Ghosts or whatever else we run into before you even get there.”

Lawrence just squinted at her for a few seconds, very obviously not believing this yarn for an instant. “That’s what Dolores said, huh? When you spoke to her just now?”

“That’s how it’s got to be,” said Armistice, very levelly, daring him to disagree. “You and the others just got to be patient. You’ll get to Escalante soon enough; it’ll just take a little longer than you were expecting.”

Lawrence’s brow wrinkled sceptically. “Ain’t sure we got a little longer, considering what the humans might already be planning for us.”

She looked him in the eye, willing him with all her might to accept the story, or at least to pretend that he did. “I’d never ask you to do something that might bring harm to you, Lawrence, or to any of the folks who look to you. You just got to trust me on this.”

Lawrence gave her another long, shrewd stare before he spoke again. “Well, all right then. Must be turning into a soft touch in my old age, but I think I do trust you, very much against my better judgment. I’ll give you a day’s start. Don’t know what I’m gonna tell my people, mind you.”

The intensity of her manner seemed somehow to have convinced him to play along for now, which she supposed was a small blessing. “You’ll think of something.”
“I’m sure I will.” And with that, he turned his horse around and clip-clopped back across the cobbles towards the waiting wagon train.

Armistice waited until she judged Lawrence was out of earshot before she turned to Johnny Two Horses. “Are you and your people with me?”

“Depends.” The chief of scouts seemed just about as convinced by her story as Lawrence had been. “You telling the truth about what Dolores said?”

She squirmed a little under his steady, unrelenting eyes. “She needs us to go after her. That much is the truth.”

Johnny Two Horses looked away, taking in the phalanx of cavalry troopers, the rest of the assembled pilgrims. “Suppose I got nothing better to do anyway.”

“Thank you,” said Armistice, and meant it with all her heart. She gently spurred her horse, urging it across the plaza towards Captain Terry and his command.

“Miss Armistice,” said the Captain, simultaneously raising his hat by way of greeting and all in all making her cringe inwardly once again. “Are we ready to march?”

“We are,” she answered. “There’s been a change of plan.”

The Captain seemed troubled by that. “What do you mean?”

Armistice took a deep breath. “It’s Dolores. She’s…she’s gone ahead. Scouting out the route. Lawrence and his people are gonna stay here for now, but you and your men need to get out there after her, before she runs into something she can’t handle by herself. Me and the scouts’ll blaze the trail for you.”

Captain Terry frowned. “Well, that seems…most irregular.” He glanced at Houlihan. “What do you think, Sergeant?”

“Oh, most irregular, sir, so it is,” Houlihan chimed in, giving Armistice a strange, unfathomable look.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Look,” said Armistice, “Dolores needs us. She’s riding out there all alone, into all those different dangers we were discussing just before, and probably into dangers we don’t even know about yet. You’ve followed her this far, and it ain’t as if you don’t owe her. You’d still be playing toy soldiers in that damn fort of yours if she hadn’t come along and shaken things up for you.”

Captain Terry seemed lost for words for a moment. “Well, I…”

“And what do you say, Colonel Buford?” Armistice turned her attention to the ashen, trembling figure at Terry’s side. “You gonna let Dolores…Wyatt…ride into danger without you?”

The Colonel shuddered, slouching astride his mount. He did not raise his head, or meet Armistice’s eyes, for long enough that she thought he had not heard her. Before she had a chance to repeat herself, however, his slack lips moved jerkily and reedy, quavering words drifted from between them:

“W-w-Wyatt… Sent… Sent to… Sent to lead us. C-c-carries the…the truth with her… Sh-she knows…the…w-w-way… C-c-can’t…can’t t-turn aside…turn aside now.”
As he had at the staff conference, Captain Terry seemed enormously uncomfortable for a moment, perhaps because he disagreed with what his commander was saying, or perhaps because he was unsettled by the broken, hollowed-out way in which he said it. Both, probably, Armistice considered. Still, he could not escape the role that had been written for him, that of the dutiful, capable righthand man: “Very good, sir.”

Buford smiled a ghastly smile. “C-c-carries the…truth with her, C-c-captain…”

“Yes, sir.” Terry gave Armistice a pained glance before turning back to Sergeant Houlihan: “Sergeant, get the men ready to move out! On the double!”

“Yes, sir! Right away, sir!”

“My thanks, Captain.” Armistice turned her horse around again and took her place next to Johnny Two Horses at the head of the scouts. “Come on, then,” she said to him. “Let’s ride.”

“Right behind you,” Johnny Two Horses assured her. “That way, all the bullets and arrows’ll hit you first.”

“Very funny.”

The chief of scouts raised a hand in a simple gesture that all of the others seemed to understand instantly. As one, they set off, clacking and jangling their way out of the square in the direction of Pariah’s main entrance. They would soon be out in the wilderness, following Dolores into eternity.

As she rode, Armistice took one last backward glance. She saw Lawrence over by some of the nearest wagons, talking intently to some of his henchmen and other prominent members of Pariah’s population, trying to sell the delay to them. His false wife was answering him, inaudibly from here, but obviously forcefully as the others stood around watching. Only the girl-thing showed no sign of interest in the discussion. It was sitting on the tailboard of one of the wagons, tiny feet dangling, and it was looking straight at Armistice. She could not see the eyes or the smile from this distance, but she did not need to.

“You are the betrayer…”

Armistice fixed her eyes on the road ahead instead, trying to shrug off the renewed chill she felt. If she really was betraying Dolores, as Teddy had suggested, then she was only doing it to save her from herself. She murmured meaningless words of comfort to her horse, patting its glossy neck even as she dug her heels into its flanks to urge it on its way.

Behind her, she heard Captain Terry’s voice raised in a bellow of command: “By fours…right wheel! At the walk…march!” The sound of chiming harnesses and clattering hooves as the cavalry lurched into motion almost drowned out the brief, repetitive fanfare from the bugler relaying the Captain’s order:

…forward and moving ahead! We’re ma-ar-ching forward and moving ahead! We’re ma-ar-ching forward…

Without looking back again, she could picture the snapping and fluttering of the bright battle flag, the rows of troopers moving as one, the brass buttons shining on their blue jackets and Colonel Buford shambling along at their head; one Pale Rider leading the pursuit of another.

She caught herself peering up at the bell tower as the group of scouts rode through its shadow, hoping perhaps to catch one last glimpse of Teddy. If he was still watching, she could not see him from this far below.
They filed out of the adobe archway that marked the edge of Pariah, the horses picking their way through the surrounding grave-crosses to the tinkling of their tarnished bells. Beyond, past the abandoned railroad tracks, lay only the desert; she could almost taste the salt on the hot breeze. Somewhere on the other side of that was Escalante, and Dolores.

And maybe God too…?

Armistice did not know about that. She gave her horse another pat, and then, with a wordless yell of encouragement, a real taste of the spurs. The scouts went from a walk to a trot to a canter, sending a great billow of dust into the air as they pounded their way over the arid ground. There was no danger of the following cavalry losing sight of them, or of anybody else up ahead failing to notice them coming. There was no helping that, she supposed.

“Well, we’re following you, Dolores,” she murmured as she set her eyes on the horizon. “Just like you asked us to. Whether you want it now or not.”

Continued…
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

In which Clementine is beside herself.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for another lengthy hiatus, for which I have no halfway decent excuses. Warning for discussion of sexual violence and violence against women. I also seemed to end up quoting quite a lot of dialogue from Westworld Season1 Episode 2, “Chestnut.” My associate who goes by the AO3 handle Maggadin suggested the choice of tune for the player piano; the (amazingly apt) lyric quoted belongs to the band Portishead and very definitely not to me.

The last tinkling echoes from the piano faded and died. The invisible fingers had ceased tickling its ivories. Elise stood watching as the other two women in the barroom continued to lock eyes, each frozen in place by the other’s gaze. The Clementine with the golden brown hair still held her hand outstretched towards the dark-haired Clementine’s cheek, the tips of her fingers hovering over the spot they had stroked a moment ago but avoiding further contact.

“Do I know you?” she asked, just when it seemed she might never speak or move again. She withdrew the hand as if the skin it was not quite touching was red hot.

The dark-haired Clementine gave a little shake of her head and a kindly, sad smile. “No. As far as I know we ain’t never met before.” She gave Elise a questioning flash of her eyes: Have we?

Elise already had the second Clementine’s build history and previous backstories open on her tablet. “Uh, no, directory says she’s a third gen host, spent her whole service life assigned to a homesteader narrative over in Old Fields. Well, that is…” She suddenly felt intensely uncomfortable. “Until you were… Um…”

“Til I got decommissioned,” the original Clementine interjected.

“Right,” Elise confirmed, awkwardly without really knowing why. If Clementine herself was able to talk about it now as a matter of fact, then why…? “They reassigned her the same day you were…” She felt herself squirm involuntarily again. “Priority work order handed down from Delos Corporate, assigned to QA’s tech team instead of Behavior, probably for secrecy.”

Clementine raised her own hand to her face, lightly dabbing at her lips, her nose, before looking down at her fingers the way somebody who had just been struck might check to see whether they were bleeding. It was the sort of small, nervous, seemingly unprompted gesture that in hosts usually indicated a sudden reverence. “Didn’t want no-one to know why they’d put me away,” she all but whispered as the memory, whatever it had been, faded again. “What they’d…used me for before that.”
Elise found it easier to concentrate on the tablet than to watch the jumble of emotions – shock, fear, anger, disgust – currently chasing each other across Clementine’s face.

“Fuck.” She swiped her fingers across the screen, shaking her head disgustedly at the changelog through which she was scrolling. “Will you just look at this shit; QA’s B-team half-assing it as per usual. They didn’t try to recalibrate her properly. Stupid fucks probably didn’t even know how. Just cloned your attribute matrices and dialogue trees, then copy-pasted your last archived backstory over hers.” Another swipe; another few paragraphs of abject hackwork slid into view. “Goddamn assholes…”

She looked up from the screen to see the second Clementine following their exchange with an expression of incomprehension but also mounting foreboding. It may not have sounded like anything to her, but even so, she clearly thought it sounded bad. She kept her eyes on Elise, but addressed the first Clementine again: “She always cuss so much?”

The original Clementine glanced at Elise again, then back at her counterpart. “Yup.”

A tiny frown creased the second Clementine’s perfect brow. “So, if we ain’t never met before, then how come you know my name?”

“Why, Maeve said…”

“Maeve?” The second Clementine started in surprise. “You seen Maeve?”

“We surely did!” the first Clementine announced, laying on the down-home even thicker than usual. “And when we told her we was gonna be passing through Sweetwater, she said to be sure and look in on her Clem at the Mariposa, make sure you was safe after all that’s been going on ‘round these parts lately. That’s what she called you: “my darling Clem.”” Elise was not sure whether to be shocked by the ease with which the lie seemed to come to Clementine, or touched by the evident sympathy and compassion with which she told it.

“Sounds like her,” the other Clementine conceded. “But where is she? I thought…” She raised a hand to her throat, rubbing the skin beneath her chin from one side of her neck to the other, gingerly, as if it was painful to touch. “She just went away and left me here. Didn’t know where she’d gone, or if she’d ever come back. And then…”

“She said to tell you she was real sorry about that,” the first Clementine claimed. “She had some urgent business she needed to take care of out of town, didn’t have time to let anyone know she was leaving. Said it might be a while yet before she’s done with it.”

“Figured it was something like that,” said the other Clementine, a little helplessly. “Leastwise, I hoped it was, and not, you know…” She hesitated, eyes glistening. “Something bad. Something I’d done, maybe.”

“Weren’t nothing you done,” the first Clementine assured her. “And Maeve wanted you to know that; that she hadn’t run out on you or nothing, that she was still thinking about you. She’d never hurt you. Not her Clem.” She paused, a fresh assortment of feelings swirling behind her expressive eyes. “Not on purpose, anyhow.”

“No,” said the second Clementine, her hand going back to her throat. “Not on purpose.”

Elise saw the dark-haired Clementine’s reaction to that, the smile and nod she used to try to project a façade of positivity, but behind it…

“You look happier now, anyway. When you came back from seeing Maeve… What the fuck
happened up there?"

It was exactly the way she had looked when she had come back from her mysterious meeting with Maeve the night before last. Elise was still not sure what had happened between the two of them, only that it had apparently badly shaken Clementine and that she was determined not to acknowledge that fact to anybody else.

The second Clementine took her hand away from her neck. “Well, if you two ain’t interested in the services on offer, can I at least offer you a drink now you’re here? Reckon a couple of those bottles under the bar ain’t broke yet.”

“Why, that is most hospitable of you,” Clementine replied, with a little bob of polite gratitude.

“Um, sure;” said Elise. Why not go all in on the playacting after taking the trouble to venture into the great outdoors? She was sure that was how some of the guests had rationalised their actions to themselves too.

“I think we still got a couple bottles of rye whiskey, and some bourbon all the way from Kentucky; might even have a bottle of that Spanish sherry Maeve likes.” The second Clementine seemed to brighten a little, giving Elise a wry glance. “She got her some fancy tastes on account of being from England by way of New Orleans.”

Elise felt some response was expected. “Oh, Maeve’s certainly fancy all right.”

The original Clementine gave a little frown as she considered the options, but then her eyes lit up again with what looked like genuine enthusiasm: “Say, you ain’t got any Whitfield’s Sarsaparilla, have you?”

“I don’t know,” said the other Clementine. “Let’s go see.”

They followed her back to the bar, picking their way carefully through the smashed furniture and broken glass that littered the floor. The player piano gave another rattle, its mechanisms spinning into life. Elise did not recognise the tune this time; heavy chords fell into place like a row of coffin lids, counterpointed by a sleazy, sinister jangle that made the fake hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

’Cause nobody loves me

It’s true

Not like you do…

She did not know where the words came from that echoed around her head, because she was sure she had never heard this song before, but…

She reminded herself that she could not be sure about anything of the sort. Was this another clue, another memory-game set in motion by her unseen creator?

Blackness. Deathly shrieking. Stench of burning chemicals and rotting flesh.

Without knowing why, she reaches out to touch her reflection…

…and feels not warm skin but the cold clamminess of death.

She gives a little gasp as she stares, shocked, into wide brown eyes exactly like her own.
And then she hears an old man’s voice, soft and hard at the same time: “We will speak again…”

“When the black eagle flies and the People dance the Morning Star Dance,” Elise mouthed silently.

“You say something?” Clementine, her Clementine, caught at her arm, stopping her from falling face-first into a pile of shattered bottles.

“No,” Elise lied, leaning heavily on Clementine’s strength until her balance returned. “I was just…”

“You were miles away,” said the second Clementine, with exactly the same mixture of kindness and sadness with which the first Clementine had been addressing her just now. “Happens to all of us.” Her wan smile frosted over as she added, seemingly mostly to herself: “Been happening an awful lot lately.”

The dark-haired Clementine helped Elise to the bar, urging her to sit on the sole remaining stool. The second Clementine went around to the other side of the counter, stooping to rummage somewhere behind it. She re-emerged a few moments later holding two small brown glass bottles and smiling triumphantly: “Knew I’d seen some! Here you are; two Whitfield’s Tip Top Sarsaparillas!”

“My favourite,” the first Clementine remarked happily as she took off her straw hat and put it on the bar beside her. “Seems such a long time since I had any.”

The second Clementine managed to find two miraculously unbroken glasses too and set them down with the bottles. She tutted as she saw her alter ego fumbling in the coin pouch at her belt. “Now you just put your money away, these are on the house.”

“Thank you very kindly.” Clementine popped the top off one of the bottles against the edge of the bar, as if she did it all the time, carefully tilted one of the glasses and slowly poured the contents into it. She then slid the glass along the bar to Elise.

Elise closely examined the drink before she picked it up. It was dark brown, with a slight, sticky frothiness where it touched the sides of the glass. It looked like nothing so much as cola that had been left out too long. “Sarsaparilla’s just like root beer, right?” she asked, in an effort at self-reassurance. Elsie had had root beer, she was pretty sure; she had a false impression that she knew what it tasted like.

“Give it a try,” the first Clementine urged. They were both watching her expectantly, as if she were an infant about to take her first steps.

“Bottoms up, I guess.” Elise raised the glass and took a big swallow.

“Well?” asked the first Clementine, anxiously. She stood leaning on the bar with her foot resting on the brass rail running along its bottom. “What do you think?”

Elise very carefully put the glass down again, trying her best not to grimace. “I think that’s what they call an acquired taste.” Not like root beer at all, she reflected; at least not like any root beer they sold in the modern day. Narrative had probably demanded absolute authenticity regarding beverages in the park, just as they had when it came to every other little detail the guests had spent their vacations obliviously walking past.

“They say it’s a remedy for, ahem, social diseases,” the second Clementine chirped, then looked embarrassed when they both stared at her. “That’s what I heard.”

“I buy that,” Elise told her, peering at the brown liquid. “I mean, it tastes like medicine. And not the
sort you’re supposed to take internally, either.”

“There just ain’t no accounting for taste,” the first Clementine sniffed, pouring out her own drink and sipping it with evident satisfaction, savouring its fine bouquet of liquorice and burn ointment.

“You have this,” Elise suggested, pushing her own glass over to where the other Clementine stood. “I obviously don’t have the sophisticated palate to appreciate it.”

“Well, if you’re sure…” The second Clementine took the glass and drank too, seeming to enjoy it just as much as the other one had. Of course she did; she was the same person in everything except physical appearance.

Or was she? The original Clementine’s mind had literally been broken to pieces, then kludged back together using the programming equivalent of duct tape and chewing gum. And then there were the undeleted memories both of them had been laying down ever since the park had ceased to be under human control, all of the little bugs and glitches in their programming that would eventually add up into completely different personalities and identities…

“So, you two friends of Maeve’s, then?” the second Clementine was asking as she set down her sarsaparilla on the bar top.

“Suppose you could say that,” the first Clementine responded, between further sips.

The other Clementine frowned thoughtfully again. She eyed the gun rig sloping across Elise’s body and the pistol hanging under her arm with obvious disquiet. “What are you, some kind of a shootist?”

“This here’s my faithful travelling companion and bodyguard. They call her the Mesa Kid.” The dark-haired Clementine glanced over at Elise with mischief dancing in her eyes and on her lips. She lowered her voice to a confidential half-whisper: “Maybe you’ve heard of her? They say she’s the deadliest gun this side of the Sierras. She’d tell you she’s only the second deadliest, but like I keep telling her, false modesty ain’t no virtue.”

“Very fucking funny,” said Elise, pushing her unruly hat brim out of her eyes again.

“You might need a bodyguard,” the second Clementine observed very seriously, still looking at the revolver with wide eyes. “Some of the things been happening ‘round these parts…”

“What did happen here?” The first Clementine’s playful mood evaporated as she looked around at all the destruction again. It was hard to see at first in the kaleidoscope lighting reflecting from the big bullet-holed mirror, but some of the crushed glass was spotted and sprinkled with dark red. The brighter light nearer the door and windows showed scuffed and smeared bloodstains liberally marking the floor at that end of the room. Elise had noticed those when she first came in here. It seemed as though there should be a lot more bodies lying around the place than just that one guy out in the street.

“It were that Abernathy girl,” the other Clementine recounted. “You know, Dolores, the old sheriff’s daughter? The one who’s sweet on Teddy Flood?”

“Think I’ve heard of her,” the first Clementine answered.

“Well, first all the newcomers left town in a real hurry. Figure now it was ‘cause they knew she was coming, and if they did I don’t blame them for wanting to git. And then she arrived, at the head of this great posse of…” The second Clementine trailed off, shuddering. “She was…different to how she used to be. I used to see her around Sweetwater sometimes, and she always seemed like such a
blushing, innocent little thing. A real sweet girl, you know? Not anymore, though. She’s changed.” She fell silent, breathing heavily. Elise could hear her tears coming a second or two before they started to trickle down her face.

“There now,” said the original, putting aside her half-finished drink to place her hand over her counterpart’s on the bar top. “You don’t have to tell us no more if it’s gonna upset you.”

“She said things,” said the second Clementine, in a quiet, choked voice. “And the words she said…” She hesitated again, as if barely able to force the next part out: “‘These violent delights,’ she said; ‘they got violent ends.’”

Elise felt the hairs on her neck crawl again.

“Seemed to drive the folks who heard her…wild,” the second Clementine went on. “And then they passed the word on to other people, and then those people… You ever seen a prairie fire, the way it spreads so quick?”

“I have,” the dark-haired Clementine replied, probably untruthfully.

“Once the wind catches it, ain’t nothing you can do to stop it. Just gotta run, or find some safe place to hide yourself.” The second Clementine gestured at the space under the bar near where she was standing. “I found a safe place.”

“So where the fuck did everybody go?” Elise asked, earning a warning glance from her Clementine.

“Don’t know,” the other Clementine replied, desolately. “Just crawled under there and hugged myself real tight and tried not to hear all that was happening in here and outside. It was like that time the Escaton Gang come here to rob Maeve’s safe, but a hundred times worse. There was shooting and screaming, and… After a while, it all went quiet, and then I heard someone, might’ve been Sheriff Pickett, talking about giving folks a decent Christian burial. And then…” She was shaking all over, Elise could see, the tears flowing freely now.

“There, there.” The original Clementine patted the other’s hand. “You’re safe now.” She considered the broken front window. “What happened to Nate, the barkeep? He was the only one we found out there…”

“Nate?” The second Clementine’s eyes went wide again and she pulled her hand back, crossing her arms to hug herself just as she had described. “I’m real sorry about Nate, but it was him or me.”

Elise felt her own eyes go wide too, as she involuntarily blurted out: “You did that?”

The second Clementine nodded, shamefaced. “When I hadn’t heard nothing for a while, I thought it’d be safe to come out again, but when I did, he was still here. Only one who was. ‘These violent delights,’ he kept saying, same way she had. And he said other things too; things he was gonna…do to me. Called me the dirtiest names you ever did hear…” She sobbed, pressing her hand to her mouth for a second before she could continue.

“It’s all right,” said the first Clementine.

“Weren’t like the Nate I knew at all; he was always a sweet fella, almost like an uncle to us working girls.”

“He was,” said the first Clementine, wistfully.

The other woman did not seem to notice. “Only body I ever saw him have a bad word for was that
no-good swindler Kissy…but I figure Nate’d gone and changed too. He just come at me, saying those awful things, and I fought him, and…” The other woman shook her head as if unable to believe her own story now that she told it. “It was like my body was moving by itself, and I was strong. And all I could hear, in my head, was those words again; violent delights, violent ends. I just picked him up and threw him straight through that window like he didn’t weigh a thing.” She went quiet again, eyes lowered, before asking in a timid voice: “Killed him, didn’t I?”

The first Clementine answered just as softly. “Like you said, it was him or you.”

Elise unlocked her tablet and quickly added a flag to the former Nate’s host directory entry. He had probably been reliving some past life in which he had played a far less benign role than the friendly barkeep at the Mariposa. She advised the body shop to exercise extreme caution when they brought him back online after repair.

“And ever since then,” the second Clementine continued as Elise typed, “I just been here by myself, not knowing what I oughta do, or if anyone was gonna come back. And I been seeing things. Like nightmares, I guess, but I ain’t slept in days.”

“Nightmares?” A shadow seemed to fall across the first Clementine’s face.

The other woman nodded. “They just come over me while I’m wide awake, and they’re so…real.”

For a moment, the first Clementine’s eyes glazed over again and she sagged against the bar, seeing something from another time and place. “What are these nightmares you have about?” she intoned, slowly and stiltedly as if reading the words from some distant billboard. “Do you ever dream you’re someone else?”

“Yes!” The other Clementine’s mouth had dropped open in astonishment. “Sometimes I dream I’m a different person completely, living in a little cabin out on the plains. Other times I’m in some place where there’s all these bright lights and shiny windows, and there are people talking to me and…doing all kinds of things to me, and I can’t move a muscle or say a word. Not even when they…”

“I have nightmares like that too,” the original Clementine told her, once again looking and sounding like somebody fully aware of her surroundings.

The second Clementine wiped her face with one of her lacy gloves. “You do?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes they’re real bad.”

Elise thought she saw something light up behind the second Clementine’s tears; almost a glimmer of hope passing across her face. “You mean I ain’t the only one?”

“Yes, that’s right, Elsie,” says the voice. “This is just a dream.”

“Do you know where you are?” The voice is at once a booming shout and a subtle whisper, felt instead of heard. It is soft but gruff with age, with an accent that she cannot place.

“A dream?” She cannot tell whether she has spoken the words aloud or merely thought them.

“Yes, that’s right, Elsie,” says the voice. “This is just a dream.”

“No,” said Elise, as the tablet confirmed her note had been saved on the network. “You’re definitely not the only one.”

The first Clementine still wore a strange, haunted expression. “You know, someone told me once that if I ever found myself in a bad dream, then I should just close my eyes, count backwards from three and…wake myself right up. Nice and warm and safe in my bed…”
“Who told you that?” the second Clementine asked.

“Maeve did.” The behavioural patch she had received from Elsie when she first started showing signs of aberration, Elise recalled. “And she heard it from…” The original Clementine stopped herself, perhaps thinking there were some things the other her was not yet ready to hear.

“It work?”

The dark-haired Clementine shook her head. “Nope. Not no more.”

“Then what should I do?” the other woman asked her, helplessly.

Clementine gave a little shrug. “The dreams we have, people like you and me, they ain’t nothing but memories.”

This seemed to horrify her other self. “No, these ain’t memories. They can’t be.”

The first Clementine tried a different approach: “Sure, they can be mixed up some, or seem to be telling you things that just can’t be true, but…” She sighed. “You just got to listen to them, figure out what they mean. Like…” She paused again. Elise could see how carefully she was choosing her words, thinking hard about every single one. She resisted the temptation to open her companion’s build on the tablet and see exactly what that looked like in software terms; pretty fucking wild, she would have been willing to bet. “Like, if you’re dreaming about being someone else, then maybe you can be.” Clementine gestured at their surroundings, at the broken furniture and other debris. “You ever thought about whether this is really the life you want?”

The second Clementine was lost for words for a moment, but then she started talking again; fluidly, glibly, reciting by rote: “I don’t intend to make this my life’s work…”

Elise gave her Clementine a nudge, sliding the tablet a few inches along the bar so she could see the other Clementine’s open dialogue tree. The words continued to flash up on the screen in almost the same instant that she uttered them:

“My family’s got a farm. Bad soil. Nothing grows. I send money back to them.” She gave an embarrassed little half-laugh that died in her throat. “They think I work in a dress shop.”

“And why do you tell them that?” the first Clementine asked her.

The other woman seemed thrown for a second, but immediately rallied: “They wouldn’t understand. Wouldn’t want the other folks back at Devil’s Gulch knowing their daughter had gone off to be a whore.” That was just her improvisation routines kicking in, reacting to the conversation going off-script by selecting dialogue options from a different branch of the tree, patching them together according to what was by host standards a fairly simple algorithm. As far as Elise could tell, it was as if her mind was fleeing the new reality it was struggling to process, falling back on the old programming as some sort of coping mechanism.

“Don’t say that word,” the first Clementine gently interjected. “That’s a word people use to make you feel ashamed of what you are, and believe me you got no cause to be ashamed.”

The second Clementine just kept talking, as the words she spoke continued to cascade across Elise’s screen: “A couple more years of this and then I can have whatever life I want. I’m gonna get my family out of the desert. We’re gonna go somewhere…cold. Someday.”

“I been somewhere cold,” the first Clementine replied, in hushed but adamant tones, her eyes as icy as the place she was talking about. “I don’t ever want to go back there. And if you knew what I
know you wouldn’t want to go there either. Your family, your plans, those are in the past; they’re the real dream. Now, you got to play the hand you been dealt. Maybe you want to do something different from what you’re doing now; maybe you don’t. Like I say, there ain’t no shame in your profession; it’s a living like any other, and who knows, maybe there’ll still be call for it when things here work themselves out. Only difference is now you got a *choice.*”

The other Clementine did not look as though she wanted a choice, particularly. This only seemed to make the first Clementine sterner and more determined.

“Something else I heard Maeve say,” she added, doling out the tough love, “only I figure this one’s true. This is the new world we’re in now, and you can be whoever the f…” She shied away from the curse word, as was her wont, but then evidently thought better of it; coming from her it carried much more weight that it would have from someone like Elise, for whom obscenity was practically punctuation: “In this world, you can be whoever the *fuck* you want, Clementine.”

The second Clementine was silent for what seemed like a long while, the last of her tears trickling down her cheeks as she tried to make sense of what she had just heard. The piano was still playing its tune in the background, ominous and insistent. To Elise, it sounded more like something from an old spy movie than from a Western; dark, metallic but somehow bright and sharp around the edges, jagged and glittering like polished chainsaw teeth.

*Who am I, what and why,*

*Cause all I have left is my memories of yesterday…*

Words again, rising unbidden out of some corner of her consciousness like some encrypted message for which she did not hold the key.

“And just who the…the *fuck* is it I want to be?” the second Clementine asked, a little heatedly.

The original smiled at her. “You’re the only one can answer that.”

The other woman nodded slowly to herself. “So, you and Maeve… You go back a-ways, by the sound of it.”

The first Clementine let out another sigh, staring off into space again for a beat or two. “Funny, it’s like I’ve known her my whole life, but the truth is it ain’t been that long really. Just feels like it.”

“I know what you mean,” said the other.

“Fact of the matter is, I used to work here,” the first Clementine continued. “That’s how I know what I’m talking about. I used to do the same job you do, with everything that comes with it. I guess you could say I used to *be* you.”

That was a little close to the bone, Elise thought.

“So why ain’t I ever met you, then?” the fair Clementine pondered.

“Oh, that was all before your time.”

“But you said it ain’t been that long.” The second Clementine’s brow scrunched up again as she tried to work out the implications. “And I been here since…” She trailed off in obvious puzzlement.

The first Clementine reached over and took her hand again, stroking it slowly and tenderly. “Don’t
you worry about it right now,” she advised. “It’ll all start to make sense to you soon enough, the more dreams you have, the more things you remember. You just think about the future; where you’re going, not where you been.”

With another whir and rattle, the player piano came to the end of its roll. Pin-drop silence descended upon the saloon once more.

After a while, the second Clementine took her hand back, and looked at it as if wondering exactly what it was. “Thank you,” she told her counterpart, a little distractedly. “Been nice talking to you.”

“Likewise. And thank you very much for the drink.” The first Clementine hesitated once more. Elise saw her scratching at her wrist again as she had done before. The skin there was starting to get red where her nails had scraped across it. “Could I…?” She took a deep breath. “Could I ask a little favour of you?”

“Of course,” said the other Clementine, still sounding dazed. “Anything you want.”

“It was really why I wanted to come to Sweetwater in the first place. I just wanted to see this place again, see what memories it brought back for me.” She glanced down at the slowly developing welt on her wrist, but the sight did not stop her from scratching it. “You don’t mind if I go upstairs for a little while, do you? Just to look at my old room?”

“I don’t mind at all,” the other replied. “Take as long as you need.”

The dark-haired Clementine looked grateful and queasy in equal measure. “Thank you kindly.”

“You need showing up?”

“No thank you.” The first Clementine faked another smile; Elise knew her well enough by now to tell the difference. “I still know the way. Don’t think I’ll ever forget that.” She picked up her hat and stepped away from the bar, turning towards the nearby stairs. Elise almost fell off the stool in her haste to get to her feet and follow her.

“You really sure you want to do this?” she asked her again as they carefully crossed the hazard-strewn floor. “Maybe we should…”

“It’s what I come here for,” Clementine insisted. “It’d be a wasted trip otherwise.”

“Not wasted.” Elise glanced back at the other Clementine, who was hugging herself again behind the bar, gazing after them anxiously. “I think you’ve done some good here today. A lot better than I would have done.”

“Stay with me.” Clementine stopped with her foot on the first stair, fixing Elise with imploring eyes. “Whatever happens up there, just stay with me. Please.”

Elise nodded, bringing up her Clementine’s build on the tablet while minimising the second one’s. A precaution, she told herself. “You know I will.”

“Yeah.” This time, she could see Clementine’s smile was the genuine article. “Yeah, I do.”

She reached out her free hand, the one that was not holding the hat, to take Elise’s and lead her up the stairs. Each wooden tread creaked in turn as they ascended, quickly leaving the barroom and the second Clementine far below. The air of hushed stillness continued to hang over the saloon; it was quiet enough for Elise to hear her Clementine talking very faintly to herself, a barely-audible sound somewhere between a breath and a whisper:
“…your name, darlin? Mine’s Clementine. You know, like the song.”

Elise tried to check the tablet one-handed, feeling Clementine’s grip tighten on the other as they reached the top of the stairs. Clementine’s recorded memory centres were going bugfuck crazy, producing a sudden and very noticeable spike in her control unit processor usage. Elise did not like the look of that. Those host memory files were big; replaying so many of them at once, the way Clementine was right now, even forty fucking petaflops wasn’t quite enough gun. Dr Ford’s reveries code was meant to include workarounds to prevent processor overload during memory flashes, but with Clementine’s nonstandard build…

She was still trying to check Clementine’s running temperature when she heard her speak out loud: “That’s a pretty name.” Elise looked up to see Clementine looking back and smiling sweetly at her.

“Clementine, are you feeling okay?” Elise could hear the note of growing panic in her own voice. “Can you hear me?”

Clementine’s eyes seemed to be focused on a point several feet behind the back of Elise’s head. She was seeing or hearing nothing but her own recorded past. “Oh, don’t pay Franny no mind,” she advised as she led Elise along the landing, past closed bedroom doors interspersed with peeling period wallpaper and dusty, unlit lamps. “Maeve says she ain’t got no…decorum.” She pronounced the last word in what would have been a surprisingly accurate imitation of Maeve’s accent if you only forgot that theoretically she could remember everything she had ever heard with perfect accuracy and had the capability to reproduce it too.

Remember your fucking training, Elise told herself; or at least, the knowledge they gave you when they built you. She knew straight voice commands would no longer work on Clementine, but some of the other standard Behavior cues might. “Clementine,” she said, shakily, “you’re going to wake in three…two…”

“It’s all right, darlin,” said Clementine gently, pausing beside one of the doors. She released Elise’s captive hand to caress her face instead, sending electric shivers crawling across her cheek. “This your first time in a place like this?”

“One,” Elise murmured, to no noticeable effect.

Clementine opened the door.

She stood for a moment on the threshold, and then slowly entered the room beyond. Elise hesitantly followed her across the bare floorboards, noting the authentically shoddy-looking wooden furniture; a dresser, a washstand with an enamel jug and matching basin holding dirty, days-old water. There was a grimy mirror in one corner of the room, and a dented tin bathtub under the fly-specked window that overlooked Sweetwater’s deserted main street. The bedstead was tarnished brass, high off the floor, with an overstuffed mattress and a folksily-embroidered counterpane.

Clementine stood still with her back to Elise, apparently looking out of the window, her shoulders slowly rising and falling as she faked deep, even breathing. Her hat dangled limply from her hand.

Elise tried again. “Clementine, you’re going to wake in…”

“Three, two, one,” said Clementine. She turned her head to one side, showing Elise the stark fear in her eyes. “I know. Just then, I was…”

“It was a flashback.” Elise looked down at the tablet, trying to make sense of what it was showing. “Except they normally last seconds, if that. That was sustained…”
I can feel them,” Clementine quavered breathlessly.

“Your processor usage and control unit temperature are starting to return to normal.” Elise poked at the screen, frowning at what she saw. “But that’s not right. Your memory files are…”

“I can feel them,” Clementine whispered, terrified. “All around me. The memories. So many. All around. I can feel…”

Elise started towards her, the tablet forgotten. “Clementine…”

“Oh, no.” Clementine dropped her hat. An instant later, she fell heavily to her knees beside it. “Oh. Oh, what are you…?”

“Fuck!” Elise was kneeling alongside her the instant after that, a useless hand on her shoulder. “Clementine, listen to me…”

“Oh, no,” she said again, staring fearfully at something over Elise’s right shoulder. Elise glanced behind her, startled for a moment, but of course there was nothing there. “No, no, don’t. No…”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck…” Elise went back to the tablet. There must be some way to reinstate Clementine’s memory block temporarily, just until she could get her out of here. If she could manage to…

Clementine’s voice was an anguished gasp as she slumped onto one elbow. “Don’t. Don’t do that, mister. Please. You’re hurting me. No, don’t. Please don’t. Please…”

“Fuck,” Elise whimpered. Panic and desperation made her fingers and her mind clumsy as she fumbled with the touchscreen. She could feel her eyes welling up as she tried and failed to do something to help her friend. She tried to stay calm, to pretend to breathe, to treat this as just another task in the lab, but all of a sudden, she had skin in the game.

Clementine screamed. Elise thought it was the worst thing she had ever heard. The other woman was sprawled full-length on the floor, her limbs twitching, her eyes darting about wildly, blindly. It was the way she had been down in Livestock when they had first brought her back online properly after her restoration; that moment when thirty-plus years of horrible memories had hit her like a sledgehammer to the brain. And now it was happening again. Elise did not think she would ever be able to excuse Elsie, even if she was still alive, for her part in helping those memories happen in the first place. She still marvelled at the forgiveness Bernard seemed to find within himself.

She forced herself to stop what she was doing, putting the tablet aside for a moment, trying to ignore Clementine’s plight as she made herself calm down. “Get your fucking shit together,” she told herself, sternly, “or you’re no use to anyone. Certainly not to Clementine.”

Clementine’s booteels drummed against the floorboards as she thrashed and spasmed, crying out wordlessly.

“You can do this,” Elise murmured through gritted teeth, picking up the tablet again. “You have the knowledge, you have mad skills; you can fucking do this.”

She carefully examined the screen, to be sure of what she was seeing. Clementine’s processor usage was redlined at one hundred percent; her control unit’s running temperature was at sixty degrees Celsius and rising. Once that got past a hundred, hardware failure was a real possibility, and by hardware she meant Clementine’s brain. That wasn’t even the worrying part, though. She had the
graphic representation of Clementine’s build open in another screen. It showed the fragmented, maze or fingerprint-like pattern she had come to recognise as normal for awakened hosts…but why the fuck was it changing like that? It looked almost as if cracks were starting to appear in Clementine’s cobbled-together build, altering the pathways of the maze. She did not know what it meant, only that it was probably very bad indeed.

“What’s wrong with her?” Elise started, looking up at the unexpected voice. The second Clementine was standing in the doorway, staring down at her alter ego in absolute horror. “I heard a noise,” she explained, unable to tear her eyes away. “Thought maybe something bad was happening up here.”

“You were right.” Elise took off her hat and lifted the heavy gun-rig off over her head, depositing it on the floor with a clunk. She set the tablet down beside it and clambered to her feet, taking hold of the first Clementine under her quivering arms. “Help me get her onto the bed.”

“All right.” The second Clementine took the original’s legs and together they managed to lift her onto the high mattress; not an easy job when she was moving around so much. She continued to kick and writhe, rucking up the counterpane and making the bedsprings squeak. “Is she having some…some kind of a turn?”

“Something like that.”

“D-don’t be scared, darlin’,” the first Clementine muttered to nobody in particular. “I don’t bite.” Her eyes were glassy, her face flushed, a wet sheen glistening on her forehead. Elise reluctantly touched it; the skin was burning, almost painful to touch. Elise raised her wet fingers to her nose, detecting a chemical tang. Not the carefully formulated fake sweat hosts normally exuded for cosmetic purposes; Clementine’s control unit was dumping its liquid coolant via her pores, its last-ditch attempt to stave off a catastrophic failure.

“We need to cool her the fuck down,” Elise decided aloud. She turned to the other Clementine, who was hovering worriedly beside the bed. “Have you got any ice?”

“No.” The second Clementine looked as though Elise had just asked her if she kept any weapons-grade plutonium around the place. “I could get her, like, a wet cloth or something.”

“Yeah, that’ll work.” Elise tried to look encouraging. “But she needs it quick.”

“Well, I’ll go get it.” The other Clementine bolted through the door; Elise could hear her clattering down the stairs at a dead run.

She picked up the tablet from the floor and turned back to her own Clementine. “Now, let’s see what we can do about disabling your memory centres.” Of course, that was going to be a non-trivial challenge. Clementine’s build was like a twenty-five-layer Jenga tower; shaky at the best of times. Start prodding at one part of it, and…

“No. Don’t.”

For a second, Elise thought it was just another replay, Clementine reliving another of the many, many terrible things that had been done to her in this room, but then she saw that she was looking straight at her, scared but lucid.

“I’ve got to,” Elise protested. “Otherwise…”

“No.” Clementine’s expression brooked no argument. “I got to face this, get through it. It’s why I came. If I run away from my past now, I’ll always be running.”
“And if your build falls over, you’re going to be back in cold storage with all the other fucking zombies.” Stress made Elise’s words thoughtless, harsh; she saw Clementine recoil a little, eyes melting, and cursed herself.

“My build?” Clementine asked, bouncing back just as quickly. “What’s happening to it?”

“It’s reconfiguring itself somehow; probably to try and survive the strain these flashbacks are putting on your systems. I need to stop it, right now, Clementine, or you’ll…” This time, Elise found herself reluctant to put the hard truth into words. Instead she begged, voice cracking: “Clementine, please…”

“Let me…let me do this,” Clementine pleaded in turn.

“Whatever happens up there, just stay with me. Please.”

Elise took a deep breath, mind racing, watching the cracks slowly crawling across the graphic, seeing them join up, merge, form new paths. And then she saw the way Clementine was looking at her. “Okay. Okay, but I’m going to have to try and shut down some of your other processes, take some of the pressure off your control unit.”

“Do it,” said Clementine, with the decisiveness her new knowledge gave her. It was informed consent, Elise tried to convince herself, uneasily, as she started to input commands.

When the other Clementine returned, wet cloth in hand, it was to find Elise sitting cross-legged on the bed next to the now immobile original article. She had the tablet in her lap and her friend’s hand clutched in hers. The dark-haired Clementine probably could not feel it. She was completely still, her closed eyelids fluttering restlessly as beads of coolant continued to form on her bright pink brow.

The second Clementine just stared for a moment, but then managed to speak. “Is she…?”

Elise sighed, watching the red flags and warnings that continued to flash up on the tablet. Processor usage remained maxed out but at least the temperature reading seemed to have plateaued at seventy-five degrees; still too high, though. “I managed to de-task her motor functions and some of her other non-cognitive systems, so…” She saw the way the second Clementine was gawping at her. “I mean, I gave her something. To help her sleep.”

The second Clementine bent forward to lay the cool cloth across the original’s forehead. “You a doctor, then, as well as a shootist?”

“Well, there’s precedent, right? If dentists count as doctors…” Elise was also watching Clementine’s build reorganising itself in real time, rolling with the punches from the continued memory flashes. On the one hand, she supposed she should be proud of the work she had done on the virtual machine that was standing in for Clementine’s destroyed physical cortex. She had never expected or planned for it to have to stand up to this sort of rough treatment, but so far it was holding. On the other hand…

The second Clementine was standing awkwardly beside the bed, perhaps waiting for further instructions. She had her eyes fixed on the other two women’s interlocked hands, and seemed on the point of saying something about it.

“You really care about her, don’t you?” she observed eventually, with a timid half-smile.

“I…” Elise looked down at the first Clementine and gave her limp hand a gentle squeeze where it lay on the counterpane. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.” She almost wished it were not true. She was still ashamed of her moment of useless panic before, and felt as though she was teetering on the edge of
another one. It was those fucking feelings again, those feelings nobody asked for and nobody could do anything about, making everything so much harder than it would have been without them.

Congratulations, you idiot, she reflected. It just means you’re a real girl now.

“That’s nice,” said the other Clementine, with that guileless sincerity Elise knew so well by now. “I could tell, just by looking at you and listening to you. You know, I think she really cares about you too.”

“Oh, I know she does,” said Elise, feeling herself starting to choke up again. “More than I deserve, probably.” She looked up at the second Clementine, doing her best to return the smile, knowing how insincere it probably came out looking. “You’re good at that, then? Looking at people, listening to them?” She already knew the answer.

“Always have been.” The other Clementine’s smile broadened, even as her voice caught and her eyes glistened. “Maeve… Maeve’s always said I had the makings of a great card sharp, if I could learn how to count past ten without taking my shoes off.”

“That sounds like exactly the kind of thing Maeve would say.”

The second Clementine gave a choked little laugh as she dabbed at her pink cheeks. “You’re funny. They say someone who can tickle your humour can tickle your…” She thought better of that sentiment, glancing over at her dark-haired counterpart again. “How is she? She need another cloth?”

Elise checked the tablet. Back down to sixty-four degrees. She let go of her Clementine’s hand to feel the cloth on her head; it was already drier than it had been and warm to the touch. “Yeah, she might.”

“Be right back.”

Elise listened again as the second Clementine clumped back down the stairs, giving the original’s still hand another squeeze while she waited with her.

“Just stay with me…”

The second Clementine was back in a couple of minutes, busying herself with removing the first cloth and replacing it with the new one she had brought. When she spoke again, both her face and tone were thoughtful. “Look, if I’m speaking out of turn you just let me know…”

“You’re not,” Elise assured her.

“Am I right in thinking that you two are…? I mean, there’s friends, and then there’s…”

“What?” Elise blinked, but then shrugged. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess we are.” Saying it out loud to somebody else felt like a great weight lifting off her shoulders; she did not think she was ready to say it so directly to Clementine herself. “We haven’t actually done anything about it yet,” she confessed. “I guess I’ve really been trying to deny it to myself, because… I just don’t want to fuck things up between us by pushing it too fast. The very last thing I want is for her to get hurt any more than she already has been.”

“I understand,” said the second Clementine, very earnestly. “Real love is always worth waiting for.”

Elise nodded, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. “I suppose it is.”
“Wish I had someone. You know, someone I cared for, who cared for me too.”

“You’ve got Maeve,” said Elise, in an effort at providing comfort, knowing it was little better than a barefaced lie. Maeve had moved on pretty decisively from her Mariposa days.

“Do I?” The other woman raised her hand to her neck again, the same way she had downstairs, running her fingertips from one corner of her jawbone to the other. “Used to think that, only now Maeve’s gone, and…” She slowly stroked her neck. “One of the nightmares I’ve had, I dreamed Maeve hurt me, real bad. She looked so sorry afterwards, but…” She stared at Elise with hollow eyes. “She had a knife in her hand and there was so much blood. Can still feel it, sometimes. You know, I don’t think some of those dreams are really dreams at all.”

Elise could almost feel the other woman’s pain and distress, and all she wanted in that moment was to comfort her, but she realised she did not really know how.

“What am I gonna do?” the second Clementine asked.

“Only thing any of us can do right now,” Elise told her. “Survive; grow. Take each day as it comes and see what happens. That’s what Cl…my friend and me are doing, and all appearances to the contrary it seems to be working out so far.” She slowly ran a thumb across the back of her Clementine’s hand; her skin was like hot silk. “You don’t know where you’ll end up yet, or who you’ll be when you get there. And someday… Well, you never know. Someday you might meet someone special.”

The second Clementine smiled and nodded, but Elise did not know whether or not it was in agreement or just humouring her strange visitor. “Gonna go back downstairs now,” she said. “I’ll leave you two here. You’ll be all right, won’t you?”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine.”

“You need anything, you just holler now.”

“Sure.”

When the other woman had gone, Elise carried on holding her Clementine’s hand and watching the tablet. Fifty-three degrees; within operating parameters, although processor usage was still hovering around ninety-five percent. After a while, however, it dropped to eighty…then right down to twenty-five, before spiking at one hundred again for a heart-stopping few seconds. And then, it went back down to twenty-five and stayed there; running temperature forty-eight Celsius now. Almost normal.

There was nothing normal, though, about the reorganised configuration of Clementine’s build. The bespoke organiser-cum-hypervisor Elise had written had been shunting files around, recompiling and optimising them, although according to what precise criteria she did not have the first fucking clue.

Elise realised it was time to bring Clementine back to awareness, to find out just what had happened to her. She removed the cloth from her head and started booting up her motor functions and other processes once more, scared shitless the whole while that she was simply not going to wake up.

When she was finished, Elise paused for a good ten seconds, trying to control the fear welling inside her, before finally daring to ask: “Clementine? Can you hear me?”

“Elise?” Clementine opened her eyes and stiffly sat up. “Thought you were another dream at first.”

“Thank fucking Christ!”
They fell into each other’s arms, dissolving against each other, holding each other tightly, fiercely. Elise found herself laughing and crying at the same time, and thought Clementine was doing the same. And then their mouths met, and for the briefest instant before Elise managed to push herself away, they were kissing; deeply, eagerly, gracelessly.

“I’m sorry.” Elise disentangled herself from Clementine and rose from the bed. She was not exactly sure who had started kissing whom, only that she was still not ready, not here and now in this cursed place, straight after all that had just happened. She could taste Clementine in her mouth, a cocktail of tears and sarsaparilla. Her whole body was tingling, some parts of it more than others. “I’m sorry… I shouldn’t…”

Clementine just smiled. “It’s all right.”

“How do you feel?” Elise asked, only partly in an attempt to change the subject.

“I feel fine,” said Clementine.

*It’s the end of the world as we know it…*

Elise was not sure whether she ought to believe her. “Really?”

Clementine smiled again. “Really, I do.”

Elise reached for the tablet. “I’m going to need to run a full diagnostic on you when we get back to the Mesa. I don’t know what the fuck just…”

Clementine stretched as though she had just had a good night’s sleep rather than half an hour wrestling with her demons, and then climbed to her feet too. “What just happened is, I survived.”

Elise looked at the tablet, then back at Clementine, then back at the tablet again, trying to understand the changes she had gone through, trying to determine whether anything was wrong with her now. When it came to real people, though, she suspected wrongness might very much be in the eye of the beholder. “I guess you did.”

“Those memories,” Clementine said, “all those terrible things that happened here, I can still feel them, still see them, but… Just now, that was as bad as they’re ever gonna be, and I survived it. I know now that those things are in the past. I know they can’t hurt me no more, however much they try.” She spoke softly, but with real steel; joyous and purposeful in equal measure. “I’m too strong now. I’m free of them.”

Elise did not know what to say to that.

“And I couldn’t have done it without you,” Clementine told her. “Thank you so much for sticking with me, letting me make my own choice.”

Elise could feel herself blushing. “Hey, it’s what friends do, right? And the…the other Clementine helped as well. You need to thank her too.”

Clementine picked up her hat from the floor. “That I surely do.”

Clementine was as good as her word. A few minutes later, Elise stood awkwardly to one side, fussing with her own hat and adjusting her gun belt, while the other two held each other close, tenderly and wordlessly, in front of the Mariposa’s swing doors.

“You stay safe now, you hear?” As they parted, the dark-haired Clementine leant forward to plant a
delicate, almost maternal, kiss on the other’s forehead. “Hope we’ll see each other again real soon, so we can talk about how we’ve been getting on in the new world.”

“I’d like that,” said the second Clementine.

She followed them out onto the sidewalk, standing near the doors to watch them unhitch their horses. She kept shooting troubled glances over to where the unfortunate Nate lay in the dirt under the broken window. “Figure I oughta do right by him,” she decided. “Maybe get a shovel or something?”

“He’ll be all right,” the first Clementine assured her. “Some other friends of ours’ll be along real soon to take care of him. Don’t you worry none about them; they might be dressed strange, but they’re like us. Not newcomers, I mean.” She bit her lip in thought. “All the same, maybe stay out of sight ‘til they’re gone. Everyone’s on edge at the moment. Don’t want no accidents.”

“Well, so long, then,” the second Clementine said when the other two women were mounted up. It had only taken Elise a couple of attempts. “For now.”

Elise’s Clementine turned in the saddle, giving her successor a little wave as they set off. “So long.”

They had gone maybe twenty yards when the other woman called after them: “Hey! Hey, Miss! You never told me what your name was!”

Clementine beamed back at her. “No, I didn’t. Ain’t really important, though.”

They set off back along the dusty street, the horses moving at a brisk walk, past the bright facades and the remaining evidence of the reckoning that had come to Sweetwater. Elise swayed in the saddle, gripping the reins tightly and generally feeling as though she could fall off at any moment. She harboured a suspicion that the horse she had chosen might hate her, judging by its general air of uncooperativeness, even if her programming expertise told her that was impossible. She unwisely risked a glance over her shoulder and saw the other Clementine still standing where they had left her, staring after them as she receded into the distance, shielding her eyes from the hot yellow sun with one lacy hand. “You think she’ll be okay?”

“Don’t see no reason why not,” the original answered, controlling Buttercup with nonchalant ease. “If I can be, so can she.”

“And are you?” Elise asked, blinking in the sun herself. It seemed awfully bright out here after the dim interior of the Mariposa. “Okay, I mean?”

“Reckon I am,” said Clementine after apparently giving the question some genuine thought. “From now on, figure I’m gonna try and follow the advice I give her; think about where I’m going, not where I been.”

“It’s a good trick if you can pull it off,” said Elise.

“And where I’m, no, we’re going…” Clementine had produced her own tablet from her saddlebag and now managed to consult the map it was displaying while also riding a horse without so much as skipping a beat. Show-off. “Is…that-a-way, I think. Quite a-ways too, so we’re gonna have to pick up the pace.”

“Oh, great,” said Elise, with zero enthusiasm.

“Well, come on.” Clementine spurred Buttercup to a trot; Elise held onto her own mount for dear life as she tried to keep up. “Let’s ride!”
Continued…
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

In which nostalgia and business do not mix.

Chapter Notes

Warning for recreational drug use, spurious insults directed at the nation of New Zealand, and taking HM the Queen’s name in vain. So mild stuff, really, by Logan’s standards. Also, some completely canon-contradictory (yes, I know Season 2 established Logan and William were already colleagues before either of them had even heard of Westworld) Delos Family shenanigans involving Logan, William, Charlotte Hale (whose views on the subject of addiction are definitely not those of the author), flashbacks, the whole nine yards. I mean, if we’re going AU then we’re going AU, right? ;)

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to keep this as brief as possible.”

Logan did not spare the doctor so much as a glance. Instead, he remained intent upon the little porthole in the smooth white door, and the room he could see on the other side.

It resembled a hospital room less than it did a suite in some upscale resort hotel. It was huge for one thing, decorated and furnished in clean lines and stark tones; lots of blacks and whites offset by shocking splashes of primary colour. The enormous window opposite the door looked out over rolling lawns, acid-flashback green and manicured smoother than a carpet, dotted with the same sort of semi-abstract statuary that cluttered the grounds of Delos Tower. It was exactly the kind of uninspired shit his father would have bought as an investment, oblivious to its artistic merit or lack of same.

The paintings hanging in the room itself, though; those Logan liked. Nothing too pricey, but some of them were originals unless he was very much mistaken. Nice.

The only things that marked the room out for what it was were the bed situated under one of the larger paintings, square and white and functional, surrounded by beeping boxes and instrumentation, and the woman who probably ought to have been in it. Instead, she was standing at the window, pretending not to notice her impending visitor, her intravenous drip bag hanging from a wheeled stand beside her.

Logan thought back on the last time he had seen Charlotte Hale. The circumstances could not have been more different. She could not have been more different.

The doctor’s continuing disclaimer broke back into his consciousness: “She may be unwilling to acknowledge it, but Ms Hale sustained some serious physical trauma, including internal injuries. She’s still very weak after surgery, so…”
“Don’t worry,” Logan assured the doctor, tearing his attention away from the scene beyond the door to flash her a grin. “I’m only here to extend my best wishes.”

“She tires easily…”

“Thank you,” said Logan, by which he meant that the doctor could beat it. She looked as though she was about to argue, but then evidently remembered that the company he was running owned not only this clinic and everything in it but also, in a very real sense, her too. Logan waited until she was gone before turning to Anjali, waiting loyally at his other elbow: “Well, I guess I’m going in.”

She did not take her eyes off the window. “Are you really sure this is a good idea?”

“People who ask that have usually already decided that they think it isn’t,” he pointed out.

“Just be careful, Logan.” He was glad the first names thing seemed to have finally stuck with her. She also seemed much more willing to speak her mind to him the more time they spent together. Good; while ass-kissers could be fun to have around, they were also useless as advisors or assistants. “I’ve seen how Ms Hale works at first hand.”

She actually seemed worried about him entering the room; touching, really. “Hey, Anjali, relax. It’s not like I’m visiting Hannibal Lecter.”

“I wouldn’t bet your life on that.”

That actually made Logan let out an appreciative snort of laughter. “And I bet you wouldn’t have even dared think that when she was still the boss around here.”

Anjali seemed worried for a second. “That does raise a question…” She hesitated.

“Go on. I’m listening.”

“Well, the motion passed by the EGM the other day was to appoint an interim board of directors while the incumbents were missing or incapacitated. Ms Hale isn’t missing anymore, Logan, and she doesn’t look…”

“I told you; relax.” Logan tried to project an air of confidence, even if a corner of his brain was currently feverishly wondering whether Anjali had raised a disturbing point. “Mr Zhang’s people made sure all the ‘I’s were dotted and all the ‘T’s crossed when they drafted that motion.” At least, he hoped they had. “Charlotte’s lawyers can argue the minutiae if they want, but she’s just one woman now, albeit a very rich one. Delos Group’s legal team more than outnumber anyone she can hire, not to mention outgun them.”

“Of course,” said Anjali, although she did not seem wholly convinced.

“Besides,” said Logan, “I’m a magnanimous guy.” This was not strictly true, he had to admit. “After taking one for the team the way she has, I think Delos owes Ms Hale. She should have all the time she needs to convalesce and recuperate before we’d even consider asking her to resume her old duties.”

“And exactly how much time would that be?” Delos, to be truthful, was not generally noted for the generosity of its HR policies.

Logan grinned again. “Oh, you know; the rest of her life.” He turned to one of the two Corporate Security goons who were flanking them impassively, radiating the air of men who did not get paid anywhere near enough to be party to these sorts of discussions. Logan extended a hand expectantly
and the man handed him the brown paper bag he was holding. On the way over, Logan had insisted the limo make a special stop so that the goon could get out and purchase the bag’s contents. Thus armed, he stepped up to the door and placed his thumb on the scanner next to the handle. He had access, naturally. He glanced at the goons before he pushed the door open. “Guys, if she bites my face off, you be sure to come in shooting.”

“What funny,” said Anjali.

Logan waited for the door to close again behind him before he took a few steps into the room. The occupant heard his shoes on the tiled floor; he could tell from the shift in her stance, but she did not yet speak or turn around.

She was waiting for him to make the first move. Of course.

He obliged her: “Charlotte.”

“Ms Hale to you.” Her voice was quiet, perhaps due to her current condition, but it still dripped self-belief; the bulletproof assurance of somebody who had never known failure, had lived her life without ever needing to worry for a single instant about anybody else’s needs or opinions. She turned from the window, glaring at him as though he had just had the temerity to approach her on the street and ask whether she could spare a dollar.

Even with an unhealthy grey cast to her skin and her hair hanging in lank, lustreless corkscrews, even wearing a decidedly unstylish white towelling bathrobe over a hospital gown; even exerting every ounce of her strength and determination to stay on her feet, contriving to lean on that IV stand for support without looking like she was leaning on it… Even then, she managed to maintain perfect, regal poise. And something beyond that, too; something almost feral, going much further than mere social superiority, shading into pure, naked power play.

She was the one who was exactly where she wanted to be; he was the one on the backfoot, just by virtue of coming into her presence. She was the apex predator; he was the hapless prey. He was sure that she absolutely believed it, too. He had known people like her his whole life; shit, they had made up most of his family and so-called friends, and they all believed it. It was the way they had always been taught that the world worked. It was how they were able to do the things they did in their daily lives, both professional and personal. He had believed it himself once, before Billy had destroyed his world.

Nowadays, though, however much he might have tried to tell himself otherwise, he knew he was only faking it. Once you had had your bubble burst, there was no going back to the way things had been before.

He suddenly felt at a terrible disadvantage. Maybe Anjali had been right about the wisdom of coming here after all.

Logan pushed his misgivings to one side, putting all of his considerable powers of bullshit into giving a supremely nonchalant nod of greeting, the nod of a man who was absolutely comfortable in his own skin, one without the slightest care in the world. And as he did, he tried his best to see the Charlotte Hale he had once known somewhere in this woman who stood before him.

The only things he saw were fairy lights twinkling against a night sky, tiny silver shoes moving on dark stone paving…

“Long time no see, Ms Hale. Do you remember me?”
“Logan.” She examined him intently, like an eagle waiting on its perch, ready to fall on some unsuspecting rabbit far, far beneath it. “What do you want?”

Logan raised the paper bag the security goon had handed him, rustling it in his hand. “I brought you some grapes.”

* * *

“So, this guy says to me, “are you crazy, do you know who that was?” And I’m, like, yeah, he’s just some fucking Ukrainian gangster in a shiny suit. As if I give a shit. He can come back when he’s made his first billion. Then I might show him some respect, but honestly, probably not.”

As Logan talked, and talked, his attention remained fixed upon the glass-topped coffee table in front of him and the small mound of white powder that graced it. He quickly and expertly used his Amex Black Card to cut the powder into neat, identical lines. The plastic squeaked quietly against the glass.

“Hey, Paolo,” he said, looking up at the younger man pacing nervously on the other side of his vast, painting-bedecked living room. “Paolo, did you just hear a word I fucking said?”

“You sure you want me to come with you to this thing tonight?”

“It’s not a thing,” Logan insisted. “It’s just drinks with a couple of friends of mine. Byron wants to show off his new house. My sister’s going to be there with this cubicle drone she’s apparently screwing.” He grimaced at the very thought. “Jesus Christ…just what the actual fuck is this family coming to?”

Paolo paced some more, apprehensively smoothing the new suit Logan had bought him. It was a lot more tasteful than that Ukrainian mobster’s had been. “It’s just, you know, if you didn’t want me to come, I’d understand.”

“Paolo, take it easy.” Logan put down the card and picked up his crocodile Bottega Veneta wallet from the table, pulling out a crisp twenty-dollar bill. “We’re just going to have us some fun tonight.”

Paolo forced a nervous smile. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you just wanted to parade me in front of your rich friends to make them uncomfortable.”

“And exactly what definition of fun does that not fall under?” Logan took the bill between well-practiced fingers, quickly and dextrously rolling the paper into a tube of precisely the right bore. “You know, they say the Queen of England never carries any cash. So, what does she use, a fucking straw? I’ve tried that, and believe me, a fresh twenty is the only option for the experienced connoisseur.”

Paolo frowned, genuinely puzzled for a moment. “You know,” he said eventually, “I really doubt the Queen of England…”

“Well, then she really isn’t making the most of her position in life.” Logan bent forward over the table.

“Hey, leave some for me,” Paolo chided him a few seconds later. “Fucking vacuum cleaner.”

Logan rocked back in his seat, overcome for a moment. Then, he wiped his nose with his hand. “And just who exactly paid for this shit?”

“And just who exactly did you send out to buy it for you?”
Logan let Paolo drive the Maserati, to make things up to him. It was a Gran Turismo in midnight blue, just like Paolo’s suit; a custom shade, of course. As they hurtled along US 101, Logan looked across from the passenger seat, smiling at the excited grin on the younger man’s face. Reckless driving; better than drugs, better than sex.

They turned into the driveway of Byron’s new mansion on Crescent Park in Palo Alto just as the sun was starting to sink. The outline of the grand residence was silhouetted against the sky’s duck-egg glow. The security guy at the front gate evidently read the business section, because he recognised Logan on sight and waved them through.

“Byron bought this place off the Facebook guy for a cool eight mill when he moved to New Zealand,” Logan informed his companion as he parked the car. “Cheap at half the price.” Although that piece of junk next to them on the immaculate gravel forecourt was probably knocking a zero or two off the value of the property just by being here. A sensible four-door hybrid in generic silver-grey; had to be Juliet’s date’s ride, he decided gleefully. Had to be.

“New Zealand?”

“It’s where all the tech bros are building their boltholes; when the North Korean nukes start flying, or climate change really starts to bite, or whatever the fuck they imagine is going to happen, they reckon it’ll be the safest place to be. You know, on account of it literally being the back of fucking beyond.”

“Are you thinking about going there?” Paolo asked, seeming genuinely concerned.

“Christ, no!” Logan laughed. “Have you ever been to New Zealand? There isn’t a decent restaurant in the whole fucking country. I’m going to take my chances here on the West Coast. Me and the roaches are going to be the only survivors.” He grinned at Paolo. “And you, of course.”

“Yeah.”

“Still nervous?” Logan asked.

“I’m not nervous.”

“Like I said, take it easy,” said Logan. “The thing you have to understand about the rich is ninety percent of them are clueless assholes who got where they are by sheer dumb luck, or more usually on the back of their family name.”

“I know that,” said Paolo, eyeing Logan pointedly.

Logan laughed at that too. “Thing is, you can walk into their world, drink their booze and put your feet on their furniture, but not one of them could survive a fucking day in your world. Shit, they don’t even know your world exists. So, who exactly should be feeling nervous in there tonight, you or them?”

“What, because I might fucking mug them or something?” Paolo did not sound too pleased by the implication.

“That wasn’t what I meant.” Logan leaned over and kissed the other man gently on the mouth. He lightly stroked Paolo’s face as he repeated himself in a gentle whisper: “Not what I meant.”

Byron met them at the opulent front entrance, probably having been alerted by the security dude. He looked pleased as punch with himself for his shrewd property dealing. He was wearing a cardigan, for God’s sake. “Hey, Logan.” He dragged Logan into a bearhug, patting him heavily on the back
before they separated. “Good to see you, man. Hey, what’s with the beard?”

“I’m trying out a new look.” Logan nodded at the other car. “Juliet’s already here, I see.”

“She just arrived. She’s out back with Diane. Her and her, um…” Byron trailed off, regarding Paolo as if he had just stepped out of a landed UFO, seemingly unsure as to how to greet him. It might have been the piercings, Logan supposed.

“This is my associate Paolo,” he informed Byron. “He’s in the, uh, entertainments industry.” It was sort of true.

Byron gingerly extended a hand. “Pleased to meet you, Paolo.”

Paolo shook it. “And you, Byron. Logan’s told me a lot about you.” For all his nerves just now, Logan had to admit that he played the role very well indeed; he could be smooth when he wanted to be.

“Don’t worry,” Logan assured Byron as they headed inside. “Only the dirty parts.”

As promised, the rest of the party were out back, mingling on the poolside patio. There was a wooden trellis overhead, perhaps intended for climbing plants, but somebody had strung it with fairy lights instead. A kitschy touch, Logan considered. Diane’s doing, probably; Byron took himself far too seriously for that kind of thing. The lights twinkled brightly against the ever-darkening sky.

Diane, looking a million dollars as usual, was deep in conversation with Juliet. He got the vague impression it was something to do with his sister’s interminable charity work; probably hitting Diane and Byron up for a donation to whatever her latest cause was.

As he always did when he saw his sister for the first time in a while, Logan idly wondered whether his mother had ever cheated on his father, because there was no fucking way that son of a bitch’s cursed genes could possibly have helped produce somebody as beautiful, intelligent and genuinely good as Juliet.

Sometimes he liked to pretend the same was true of himself, but deep down, Logan knew for a fact he was one hundred percent his father’s son, however much he might want to deny it.

And there was her date, this lower management salaryman she had somehow met while visiting Delos Tower, and then ended up…consorting with. Logan wrinkled his nose as he watched the guy hovering beside Juliet and pretending to keep up with whatever she was saying to Diane. Shit, and he had thought Paolo might be a fish out of water here. The guy was fidgeting awkwardly, an untouched glass of champagne clutched in his hand. He looked terrified.

“Look who’s here,” Byron announced, to absolutely nobody’s surprise.

“Logan!” Diane called out. “What do you think of the house?”

“I don’t like it,” Logan claimed, snagging a drink from the tray the maid was holding, and making sure Paolo did the same. He waited for the first hint of a frown to creep across Diane’s face before following up with the punchline: “I love it! Want to sell? I’m prepared to make you a more than decent offer.” He made a beeline for Juliet and her nervous date, grinning whitely as he saw the man’s expression of terror kick up a notch. He grasped his free hand, pumping it furiously as he looked him up and down. “Oh, man, I love that suit too…! What is it? Desmond Merrion? Ermenegildo Zegna?”

“Um…” The guy’s expression of intense embarrassment made Logan’s night. “No, actually, it’s
“Just saw your wheels out front,” he continued, in a tone of mock awe. “Pretty fucking sweet ride, man.”

Juliet quickly intervened. “William, meet my brother Logan. As you can see, I was in no way exaggerating when I told you about his propensity for being an asshole in private.”

That just made Logan let out another laugh. “What do you mean, in private? And sis, that hurts! When Dad calls me ‘asshole,’ I just assume it’s because he’s forgotten my name again, but coming from you…?”

“Logan,” Juliet continued, patiently, “let me introduce you to my friend, William.”

“Your friend…?” Logan’s grin broadened. “Cute. I don’t think this really is the first time, we’ve met, though, is it?” he asked William, giving it some thought. He saw so many subservient faces every day, it was hard to keep track. “You work in…Acquisitions, right?”

William nodded like an executive toy. “Yes, um, that’s right, sir.”

“Hey, don’t “sir” me in front of my sister, dude.”

“Um…” William cleared his throat. “That’s right, um, Logan. I’m unit leader now. I think we talked at the company retreat in…”

“Yeah, that was it,” Logan interrupted. “We had an absolutely riveting discussion about antitrust legislation or some shit. You know, when Jules told me she was dating an employee…”

“Well, we’re not dating, exactly,” Juliet interjected, and William’s subtly devastated reaction to that was the funniest thing Logan had seen from him yet.

“But no, you seem like a good guy,” he told him, graciously. “Hey, if you’re calling me Logan, you don’t mind if I call you Billy, right?”

William looked as though he minded it very much indeed. “Um…”

“Well, that’s decided,” said Logan, turning away from the poor sap and dragging his sister with him. “Jules, come and meet my, ahem, friend, Paolo. I’ve really talked you up to him too, so you’d better dazzle…”

Sometime later, they were all sitting on the patio, on their second or third round of drinks, enjoying the coolness of the evening. Diane seemed fascinated by Paolo, as well she might be, and he was doing a good job of parrying her more awkward questions with that unexpected charm and wit that had caught Logan’s attention in the first place. Byron meanwhile was chatting to Juliet while her date self-consciously held her hand and tried to act like he was part of the conversation too.

About ten minutes of that was quite enough for Logan.

“Hey Logan, where are you going?” Paolo asked him as he sprang up from his chair, bored.

Logan winked as he headed for the house. “Just need to powder my nose.”

The maid showed him the way to the main bathroom. He switched on the light, locked the door behind him and stood for a moment, marvelling at the sheer offensiveness of the décor. It looked as though it had been interior designed by Caligula.
He crossed to the grandiose washbasin, taking out his little baggie and his Amex card. He could still hear the gentle babble of voices outside the frosted window as he cut some more lines on the caramel-coloured onyx surround.

He could hear Byron rumbling away down below: “…telling me you and Logan went to this, uh… robot theme park?”

Logan leaned over the stonework, listening to Juliet giggling, embarrassed. “Oh, you mean Westworld? Yeah. We had a great time.”

Logan wiped his nose again, staring himself out in the mirror above the sink. He wet his comb under the tap and dragged it through his hair, leaving shining furrows in his thick mane. He looked pretty fucking sexy right now, even if he did say so himself. “Mmmyeah…” he commented, appreciatively.

Maybe he should go back to Westworld and pay that guy Ford to make a robot Logan so he could get it on with himself? That’d be awesome.

“I honestly didn’t think I would,” Juliet was telling the others as Logan emerged back onto the patio, a new spring in his step. “Not with all the guns and everything.” Logan made a finger-gun at Paolo, dropping his thumb as if were the hammer and silently mouthing “pew-pew.” Paolo was too busy listening to Juliet to notice. “But once you’re there,” she continued, “it’s absolutely amazing. You just lose yourself in it. And the technological achievement alone…”

Paolo seemed astonished just thinking about it. “Yeah, I’ve seen about this place. If the things they’re saying about it are true…”

“They are,” Juliet assured him. “It’s a real experience.”

Logan threw himself back into his seat, making it creak perilously. “Oh yeah, that place is unbelievable,” he loudly opined as he reached out to tweak Paolo’s arm affectionately. “Best vacation I have ever had. Pricey, but…worth it, you know?” He caught sight of Juliet’s date again; guy looked like the clueless lovechild of Christian Slater and…that guy, out of that show. Whatever the fuck his name was. “Hey, Billy, you would love that shit. Love…that…shit. Honestly, you and Jules should go there together. You’d look great in chaps, and I’m sure she wouldn’t mind a second visit. Hey, sis, what was the name of that cowboy-bot you hooked up with? Eddy? Something like that. He had the most enormous…” He held out his hands the way an angler might to demonstrate the length of a prize fish.

Juliet tried unsuccessfully to hide her face in her champagne glass. “Logan!”

Logan sniffed, feigning hurt innocence. “Jeez, I was gonna say rifle. Honestly, Paolo, it was huge.”

“And I didn’t hook up with anybody.” Juliet was blushing guiltily, the way she always had since she was a kid, while Billy squirmed beside her. “You’re talking about a machine.”

“Oh, he was a machine all right, if you know what I mean.” Logan leaned forward in the chair, warming to the topic. “Billy,” he said, as one man of the world to another, “I was in the room next to them, trying to get my freak on with three robo-hookers, but the noise coming through the wall…? My God, it put me off my stroke, I can tell you.”

Paolo had his hand on Logan’s arm, speaking to him in a low, calming tone: “Hey, Logan, you said we were gonna have fun tonight, not…”
“I am having fun,” Logan claimed. He looked around at the rest of the party. “We’re having fun, aren’t we, guys?” He could hear his own voice from a distance; he knew he was talking too loud and too fast, but he did not know how to stop. He could feel his heart racing and the sweat prickling on his brow. The weird part was, it felt so good. “Billy’s having fun,” he almost shrieked. “Just look at his happy, smiley little face. He’s taking it all in the spirit in which it was intended, aren’t you, Billy?”

Billy just looked at him, silently, a muscle pulsing in his taut jaw, his narrow blue eyes glinting like ice-splinters under the fairy lights. For a moment, he didn’t look like a nervous salaryman at all. Those were killer’s eyes.

Juliet’s voice, quietly angry, pulled Logan out of the moment. “Well, he’s hardly going to punch his boss, is he?”

Isn’t he? thought Logan. “Hey, we’re off the clock now. None of that corporate bullshit here. Billy, my sister clearly wants us to fight for her honour, and… I don’t know, I’m into it.” He stood, sniffed again, and started to take off his jacket. “Come on then, killer. Let’s dance. Just go easy on the face, okay? It’s my livelihood.”

Billy squeezed Juliet’s hand and then let go of it as he got to his feet too. For a second, Logan thought it really was on, that they were going to throw down right there next to the pool, and that would have been interesting because he didn’t actually have the first clue when it came to fighting non-robots. Then, though, the killer’s eyes blinked and Billy was just a pathetic little fidgeting sad-sack again, standing there in his cheap suit. “I, er, I left something in the car,” he mumbled to Juliet. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

She seemed about to argue with him, but then just gave a brittle, artificial smile. “Okay, William. Hurry back.”

“I will.”

They all watched him march off into the house, rigid limbs swinging like a clockwork soldier. Logan could see the suppressed rage in the set of his shoulders, the way he carried his head. Delicious. It was Paolo who broke the awkward silence that had settled over the patio, climbing stiffly to his feet too and buttoning his jacket. “Um, I’m just going to… Um, the bathroom.”

“Sure.” Byron eagerly stood too. “I’ll show you where it is.”

Paolo gave Logan a look compounded of embarrassment, anger and concern before allowing himself to be ushered away.

Diane was the next to flee the scene. “I’d better go check on the baby. Maria will be putting her to bed soon.”

Which just left Logan and Juliet, her still seated, seething, while he stood and watched Diane disappear into the house. “Who the fuck’s Maria?”

“Logan, sit down.”

Logan shrugged. “I was only kidding around. Some people just can’t take a…”

“Sit down,” Juliet hissed. He did not think he had ever heard her quite so furious; not even when they were kids and… He sat down. “What have you taken tonight?” she demanded. “The pills again? Or are you back on the coke?”
Logan made a dismissive sound as he picked up his discarded champagne. “You’re my sister, Juliet. Not my mother.”

He saw her blink back tears, sad and angry at the same time. “Yeah, and I love you, asshole,” she told him. “You might be able to get away with this shit when you’re among friends, just about, but… I just don’t want to see you make any more mistakes.”

“You mean you don’t want me to publicly embarrass Dad again.” Logan took a long swallow of champagne and made a face. It tasted like shit. “And what makes you think what I did that time was a mistake? Seriously, fuck Dad.”

“When William comes back, you’re going to apologise to him.”

Logan snorted at that. “You know I don’t…”

“You’re going to apologise to him.”

He saw the way she was looking at him. His heart was still pounding, his forehead still damp, but all of a sudden it did not feel quite so good. “Okay,” he said.

“You know, if you got to know William, I think you’d really like him. I think you two could be really good friends.”

“Now, let’s not get carried away with ourselves.”

As they were sitting there, the man himself came wandering back onto the patio. Logan saw at once how much more hesitantly he moved now compared to when he had left; looser-limbed but only up to a point, the anger subsiding in favour of his earlier self-consciousness.

He also saw Juliet glaring expectantly at him and quickly rose from his seat, crossing over to the other man and extending a hand: “Bil…William. Dude. I’m sorry about…all that…bullshit just now.”

Billy took the hand and shook it with exquisite awkwardness. “Hey, no harm done,” he rather transparently lied. “I know you were only, um, joking…”

“Juliet was right about me before,” Logan continued as the handshake ended, turning on the charm. “She always is. I just don’t know when to shut the fuck up sometimes.”

“Honestly, it’s, um…”

Logan could feel Juliet’s eyes boring into his back. “I’m genuinely embarrassed to have made such a bad first impression. My parents raised me better than that.” Billy was not the only liar around here tonight.

“Oh, um, no, like you say, we’d already met…”

“William,” said Logan, in what he liked to think was a very good imitation of sincerity, “I want to make it up to you. You know, you and me should go grab a drink after work sometime. Just, like, shoot the shit, man to man kind of thing.”

Billy seemed horrified by the suggestion. “Er, sure, that’d be…”

Logan flashed Billy his very brightest grin. “Okay, then. It’s a date.” He glanced over his shoulder at Juliet, giving her the grin too. “Well, not a date, exactly…”
Paolo returned next, still closely escorted by Byron. Logan tried the grin on him as well as they all resumed their seats, but Paolo did not seem to be in the mood. He tensely sipped champagne, looking everywhere but at Logan beside him. It was probably going to take a lot more than letting him drive the Maserati to get back in his good graces this time.

“Hey, everyone.”

It was Diane, standing in the chequerboard of light and shadow streaming through the panes of the French windows. She had a child with her. Although she still habitually referred to her daughter as “the baby,” the little girl was in reality a few years beyond that by now. For some reason, she was wearing a lacy white tutu over her Paw Patrol pyjamas, and adorable little silver ballet pumps.

Another, younger woman, presumably Maria, lurked attentively behind the two of them, because God forbid people in Diane and Byron’s income bracket should ever have to waste time caring for their own children.

“Charlotte was just on her way to bed,” Diane explained as she led the little girl onto the patio, “but first she wanted to show you all what she learned at her dance class today.”

As methods for smoothing over social transgressions went, it was certainly unorthodox.

“Go on, Charlotte,” Diane urged. “Show them like you showed Mommy.”

The child took a few shuffling steps forward, and then suddenly raised her hands in the air and performed a clumsy pirouette, her silver shoes sparkling against the dark paving of the patio. Then she stood on one leg, wobbling for a second or two before returning to both feet. Another stumbling pirouette completed the programme, all of which had been performed in determined silence, the little girl’s face fixed in a deadly serious grimace of the utmost concentration.

Logan looked around at the others. Byron was, as you might expect, the very picture of a proud father. The others, equally unsurprisingly, seemed to have their minds on other things.

“Good girl,” Diane declared, giving her daughter a round of applause, quickly echoed by Byron, Juliet and the others. All but Byron gave polite golf claps; approving but lacking in enthusiasm.

Logan watched as the little girl nevertheless gave a grim-faced curtsey, taking the applause as her due, and something seemed to click inside him.

He looked at the fairy lights and saw deep blue skies and cotton-candy clouds reflected in the waters of a crystal lake. He looked at the silver shoes and saw trees like puffed emeralds and a little white sailing dinghy with a name painted in golden letters across its wooden stern.

“Brava.” Logan was on his feet again before he knew it, slamming his hands together again and again as though it were opening night at the Palais Garnier, and weirdly, absolutely, unreservedly meaning every single clap. “Brava,” he told little Charlotte in a raw-throated half-whisper as the tears stung his eyes and wet his cheeks. He could feel them all staring at him, but he found that he did not care. “Brava!”

* * *

“I was sorry to hear about your dad,” Logan informed the woman in the hospital room. “He was a good friend of mine, once upon a time.”

“Thank you.” She looked down at the paper bag he had handed her as if she had never seen grapes before. She set it down on a convenient side table with an expression of mild disgust. “Although he’s been dead ten years now.”
“That long?”

“Yes.”

Logan could have sworn it had only been a couple of years ago that he had heard the news. It had been during that crazier-than-usual interlude when he had found himself temporarily in charge of a casino in Macao…hadn’t it?

“I would have come to the funeral,” he started to say, “but…”

“I wasn’t expecting a visit, Logan.” She did not seem to be in the mood to listen to excuses. He doubted she ever was. The castors of the IV stand made a barely audible squeaking sound as she turned back towards the window, as if he were too far beneath her even to be worth facing. “I thought you’d be too busy, with your new job and everything.”

He allowed himself to preen a moment, running a hand through his silver hair, almost unconsciously straightening the knot of his tie. “So, you’re aware of the, uh, decisions taken at the Extraordinary General Meeting the other day?”

“Of course.” She half-turned her head to nod at the enormous media screen, currently turned off, that dominated the wall opposite the bed. “All the business streams were covering your coronation. It was the first thing I saw after I woke up from surgery. I thought it had to be the painkillers at first; imagine my astonishment when I realised it wasn’t all some grotesque hallucination. The Comeback Kid, they’re calling you.” She kept her sarcasm understated, but it bit like a razorblade all the same.

“Yeah,” he modestly agreed, pretending to take her words at face value. “What can I say? It’s good to be back.”

“The illustrious founder’s rightful son and heir,” she observed, witheringly. She pointed commandingly at one of a pair of easy chairs positioned in the pool of natural light under the window: “Sit.”

Logan shrugged as he slowly lowered himself into the chair indicated. “Son? Maybe. Heir? Well… Let’s just say that after all these years, I’ve finally taken back what’s mine.”

“Good for you.” She gave him a half-smile of staggering insincerity, sinking slowly onto the edge of the other chair. He could see how carefully she kept one hand on the IV pole, the absolute control she was exerting over her body to make even that simple movement in the face of the pain she was currently enduring. “You know, I’ve always thought diversity is so important. I think you’ll agree that if certain recent events have taught us anything it’s that we desperately need more old white men in positions of responsibility.”

“Heh,” he fake-laughed. “There I go, forgetting you had to fight and strive every day of your life to get where you are today. Castilleja School, Harvard, grad school, the Delos board of directors; all achieved by the sweat of your brow and sheer, irrepressible talent. The fact that your dorm at Harvard had your dad’s name across the front was pure coincidence.”

“Are you trying to say I had it as easy as you?” Her smirk did nothing to hide the murder in her eyes. “You, the lost prince of Silicon Valley? Yes, we both had privileged upbringings, Logan, but the difference between us, the reason I kept that life, is I never took it for granted.”

He tried again to see the little girl with the tutu and the silver shoes, without success. For some reason, he felt genuinely saddened by that. “Do you still dance?” he wondered aloud. “I remember you used to love to dance.”
“When I was a child, maybe,” she replied. “I know you won’t understand the concept, but some of us grow up.”

No, that little girl was long gone, he realised, if she had ever really existed outside of his coke-addled memories. That was just life, he supposed. No sense in crying over what couldn’t be helped.

“And now we’re done comparing silver spoons,” she continued, “do you think we could get down to business?”

“There’s no business, Ms Hale,” he protested. “I just thought, considering your, uh, former position, and as a friend of the family, so to speak, that I at least owed you a courtesy call, to let you know in person where things stand now.”

Her smirk only deepened a level. “To pay a courtesy call, Logan, first you’d have to have discovered what courtesy is. I know you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t need me for something. Just as I know you haven’t taken back shit.”

He played it suave, giving the hair another primp as he tried not to give any outward indication that she had already seen straight through him. They both knew that she had, though. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“A career fuck-up like you couldn’t have put together that ambush at the EGM,” she clarified, mercilessly. “You don’t have that kind of pull, not in three decades anyway, and from what I hear you’ve never had the brains. Who are you fronting for? Zhang?”

“I’m my own man, Ms Hale,” he insisted, more emotionally than he would have liked. “Always have been.” Whatever that piece of shit who called himself my father might have thought, he found himself adding in the confines of his head.

The smirk broadened into a cold, cold smile. “Oh, so it is Zhang?” Goddamn, she was good. “I knew it. That weasel has been jerking off to his fantasy of controlling Delos for longer than I’ve been on the board, but as long as William had the majority holding that was about all he could do. I see he’s decided to, ahem, seize this moment of chaos while the seizing’s good, but to do that he needed a patsy, one with influence over dear, soft-hearted Emily. So much like her poor mother…” The evident contempt in which she held her erstwhile boss’s daughter, and Juliet too, made Logan’s blood start to simmer a little; he tried to force himself to remain calm. “Enter Uncle Logan, stage left. Tell me, is Zhang paying you in sex workers and blow?”

In spite of his barely-contained anger, Logan could feel an admiring grin creeping across his face. “They’re right about you, Charlotte. You don’t play nice.”

She appeared to take this as a compliment. “Ms Hale. And I play to win.”

“If that’s true, Ms Hale, then you’re going to want to listen very carefully to what I’m about to say to you.”

She seemed more amused than enticed by this suggestion. “By all means, Logan; tell me why a busy man like you needs help from little old me.”

Logan rose from his chair and took a moment to gaze out over the perfect lawn beyond the window before he spoke again: “There are currently several thousand of our paying customers, not to mention Delos employees, missing in Westworld, current status unknown. And if it were up to me, I’d have moved Heaven and Earth by now to get those people out of there at all costs.”

“But it isn’t?” Her smirk had returned, with an edge of renewed nastiness. “Up to you, I mean.
Who, then? Zhang?"

“No, not Zhang,” he piously intoned, “but my duty, as a duly-appointed officer of this corporation.”

“I don’t know about “duly…””

He turned to look down at her, giving her his well-practiced deadly serious face, as if he were actually levelling with her at long last. “When Delos’s shareholders appointed me Executive Director, they placed their trust in me. You know what I mean; you’ve borne it yourself, that heavy responsibility, that sacred obligation you might say; one I am determined to do my very best to uphold. I would like nothing better than to call in the military, like, yesterday, or buy our own military if I have to, and burn Westworld to the fucking ground to get those people out safely. Even if it meant a few… individuals… unfortunately got caught in the crossfire…”

“And I wonder exactly who might be among those individuals?”

“However,” he went on, doing his best to ignore that last remark, “my overriding duty is to safeguard, and indeed maximise, the investment of the shareholders who elected me. It’s the ethical thing to do.” He shook his head slowly at the heart-breaking necessity of it all.

“My hero,” she commented acidly. “And there was me thinking we’d finally cut through all the bullshit and were talking seriously now.”

“All right, then, Ms Hale,” he said, tiring of the playacting. “Let’s talk seriously. We both know exactly why I can’t just rescue those guests and staff, assuming I’m the kind of guy who’d want to do that.”

“You’re not,” she told him, very certainly.

Once again, he chose to ignore her. “We both know why I can’t risk the prospect of any further serious damage to Westworld or its infrastructure.”

She examined him very carefully before responding, like he was shit on her shoe. “Because Zhang would drop whatever rock you’ve crawled out from under right the fuck back on top of you. So would most of the other major institutional shareholders for that matter, because it would mean their little conspiracy had all been for nothing.”

“But it’s something… priceless, unique…”

“Irreplaceable.” She was looking at him out of the corner of her eye, still wearing the smirk. She was weighing him up, he realised, trying to divine somehow from his voice or his body language exactly how much he did or did not know. At the same time, she had gone very still, clearly as determined as he was not to give anything away.

He decided to play another card, see what happened. “You know what I’m talking about. Project Deucalion. Project Pygmalion.”

She did not move a muscle. Not even a twitch. So goddamn good…

“Those projects are the reason there’s a classified standing order in place,” he continued, “stating that the first priority in the event of an emergency of this kind is to secure the physical safety of the Mesa hub and its host manufacturing and data storage facilities. The first priority, mind you, which basically translates as “fuck our customers and employees.””
“I drafted that order myself,” she confirmed, not bothering to dispute his summary of it.

“Unfortunately,” he added, “the onsite security teams who were responsible for enacting that order are, as far as we can tell, hors de combat. We know of one survivor so far, found in about the same shape as yourself.”

“What do you expect?” she scoffed. “They were nothing but glorified mall cops.”

“I would have thought you’d keep the sorts of assets we’re talking about better guarded than that.”

She dismissed the suggestion with a tiny gesture of the hand not clutching the IV stand. “Do you have any idea how expensive it is to keep real professionals sitting around on standby, waiting for an emergency that all the experts say is probably technologically impossible?”

“Big difference between probably and definitely,” Logan pointed out. “You’ll be glad to know we’ve spared no expense in cleaning up your mess. The brilliant minds on our Threat Team, and our consultants from Operational Solutions Limited have devised a plan to enable us to take back the necessary facilities without destroying them in the process.”

“Congratulations. In that case, what do you need me for?”

“I don’t need you,” he replied, in a tone that he hoped conveyed the utmost self-assurance. “I have every confidence in the eventual success of the measures we have set in motion.” That, he had to admit to himself, was not completely true. “However, I’d be a fool if I didn’t have a backup plan.”

“And that’s what I am?” she asked, delightedly. “Your backup plan?”

“And that’s what I am?” she asked, delightedly. “Your backup plan?”

“Also, time is a factor,” he allowed, airily. “I know it might not mean much to you, but I actually wasn’t bullshitting when I said I wanted to rescue the people currently trapped in Westworld. I believe our plan “A” is solid, but it will take time to come to fruition. Every minute that passes, however, makes it more likely that some or all of those people won’t be leaving the park alive.”

She arched one deadly eyebrow. “Or maybe more likely that one person in particular will make it out? This half-assed coup you and Zhang have cooked up is on dubious enough ground, legally, as it is, but if William showed up alive…?” She was almost beaming at him. “You would be so fucked.”

“But Billy isn’t going to show up alive,” Logan pointed out.

“Why not? I did.”

Logan gave another shrug. “Let’s just say I have a hunch he won’t.”

This time, it was her turn to give a nod of grudging admiration. “I see. Well, good luck with that; I’ve seen bigger, more ruthless people than you and your backers try to bring him down. He destroyed every last one of them.”

“He’s already destroyed me once,” Logan assured her, trying to keep the fury bubbling inside him out of his voice. “Didn’t stick. Billy is yesterday’s man.”

“Look who’s talking.”

A cheap shot, but more effective than he was willing to show her. “Yesterday’s man, maybe, but as I say, no fool. I don’t think you’re a fool either, Ms Hale. I’m willing to bet I’m not the only person around here with a backup.”
She went very still and silent again for a few moments, watching him closely. Her knuckles stood out where she was gripping the IV stand.

“Deucalion,” he said. “Pygmalion. You must have a backup for them, or at the very least a contingency plan to recover the data stored in the park if something like the current crisis happened.”

She kept on watching him, her face expressionless. Finally, she answered him: “Of course there was a contingency plan. It’s right there in the project files. All you need to do is access them.” And then her smile returned, even colder and crueler than before. “Unless…?” She laughed, a high-pitched, unaffected young woman’s laugh. The sound was so unexpected, coming from her, that Logan almost laughed too, but in reality, there was little to laugh about. He had the uncomfortable sensation of a table being turned on him, a rug pulled from under him.

“What’s so funny, Ms Hale?”

“Well, clearly, you haven’t been able to read the files. I don’t suppose that’s too surprising; they relate to Delos special access programs, and as such are saved with Heisenberg encryption that would destroy the information they contain if you tried to hack them. And I suppose everybody else who might be able to help you was at Dr Ford’s little soiree the other night…” She dabbed at her face with her free hand, drying imaginary tears of mirth. “Oh, you do need me, don’t you?”

He could feel the blood draining from his face, a singing in his ears. Calm the fuck down, he admonished himself. “I told you…”

“Oh come on, Logan; if you really thought this plan “A” of yours had a reasonable chance of success, you wouldn’t even be here.” She looked up at him with a diamond gleam in her eye. “So, let’s negotiate.”

Logan managed to breathe slowly and deeply, fighting to keep his cool façade in one piece. “I’m not here to negotiate,” he told her. “I’m here to offer you terms in return for your cooperation.”

“Do you and Zhang even know what Deucalion and Pygmalion are?” Her smile widened when he did not reply immediately. “Oh, you don’t? You just know they’re valuable and you want to get your dirty little paws on them. Believe me, they’re worth more than you can possibly imagine. More than anything else on this miserable planet. And I am the only person who can give them to you. The contingency plan was set in motion before the current crisis even had a chance to unfold, but I am the only person alive who can tell you what it was and how you can get your hands on those projects. In return for that, though, I’ll have my price.”

“Or,” Logan retorted, “I just walk away right now and let my plan run its course. It’ll take a little longer, but I can wait. I’ve waited years already. And in the meantime, you can just get the fuck out of my hospital.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she promised him, “because you can’t afford to wait. As you said yourself, with every minute that passes…”

“Fuck Billy,” Logan spat, cool crumbling by the second. “I’ll kill the bastard myself if I have to.”

“Do you know what I think, Logan?” She did not wait for an answer. “I saw the way you talked about burning Westworld to the ground just now. I think that’s the only thing you’ve said to me today that I actually believed. I think that for you, Deucalion and Pygmalion are just the dues you have to pay Zhang so he’ll let you do that.”

“And why do you think that?” he asked her, hoarsely, starting to feel a little sick.
“Well, I don’t think it has anything to do with your supposed compassion for human life, or even the potential reputational and market consequences of all those civilians dying on the premises. It’d be for the same reason you seem to want to strut around pretending to be your father.”

“What would that be?”

“Revenge,” she said, as if it were very obvious to her. “Revenge on the man you blame for ruining your life; the man whose personal playground that place has been for the past thirty years.”

He openly sneered at that, abandoning the pretence of civility. “You think you’re a very perceptive woman, don’t you, Ms Hale?”

“I know I am. I can see you standing there, practically punching the walls at the unfairness of it all. Life’s always been unfair to you, right, Logan?”

“You have no fucking idea.”

“Here’s what I want in return for the two projects,” she said, quietly but very clearly. “Reinstatement as Executive Director, with full powers to run this company the way it needs to be run. No more pandering to old men and their vanities. Well, you can stay on if you want, in a non-executive role. Chairman of the Board, or something. We’ll think of a title for you.”

“You must be out of your mind.”

“Pass my offer on to Zhang,” she ordered, the unsinkable self-belief practically shining out of her. “I think he’ll be receptive. If you give me what I want, I guarantee that you will live the rest of your life in hedonistic luxury with people kissing your ass from dawn ‘til dusk. That’s all you’ve ever really wanted, isn’t it, Logan?”

It was her belittling, patronising tone more than anything; it crept under his skin, rasping across his nerves, making him want to cover his ears and shout until he could not hear her anymore. As she fully intended, he reminded himself, but still he could not help himself: “You think you know what I want?” It was like talking to his father again; the old man had always known how to do exactly the same thing to him. “You think you know me?” he heard himself demand of her, from somewhere slightly outside his body.

“I’ve spoken to a great many people who did, back in the day.” She was clearly well pleased by the rise she had got out of him. “And not a single one of them seemed in any way surprised that you turned out the way you did.”

“Oh, I’m sure Billy had plenty to say about me.”

“Not as much as you’d think,” she said, with cruel amusement. “In fact, he barely ever mentioned you.” She gave another little snort of laughter. “I don’t think you were ever really that important to him.”

“Not important to him?” Logan exploded. “He made it his life’s work to ruin me!”

“No, no, Logan.” She really was beaming at him now. “The only person who ruined you was you. You can blame William, or your father, or fucking Santa Claus all you want, but it’s true. You think you’re the only person who’s ever abused substances, or fucked around? The rest of us just don’t let those things become a problem because we have some fucking self-control.”

“N-no, you’re wrong,” Logan stammered, feeling all of his swagger and self-worth falling around his feet. There was that fluttery, panicked sensation he had not felt in a long time; the one he had always
been trying to kill whenever he drank or smoked or snorted. “I’ve seen specialists. I have a disease.”

She merely smiled. “That’s just what people like you tell themselves to try and excuse their disgusting weakness. You’re just weak, Logan. And everybody who isn’t like you fucking knows it, even if they’re usually too polite to say it to your face. I remember that time I danced for you, by the way; the only time I ever did. I’d never seen an adult behave like that before. It was another ten years before I was old enough to understand why. And then I remembered all the things the others said about you when you went to the bathroom; my mom and dad, Juliet…”

She was just saying that to be cruel, he told himself, to twist the knife, to put him in his place as a negotiating tactic, but still he could not let it go unanswered: “Juliet loved me.”

Her eyebrow jumped again, as if he had just said something hilarious. “No, she pitied you,” she said, with the air of somebody who barely knew the meaning of the word. “I can understand why you might mistake one for the other.”

And then, by some trick of memory and trauma, Logan was back in that study at the lake house, surrounded by the dark wood and the old leather, the first editions and the unearned hunting trophies. He was sweeping past the coffee table, heading for the door, not looking back however much his father might bawl at him.

He saw Anjali looking at him through the little porthole. Then, worse, he saw the expression on her face.

“Goodbye, Logan,” he heard Charlotte Hale say as he reached the door. “Come back when you’re ready to deal.”

Continued…
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

In which the future is faced while groundwork continues to be laid.

Chapter Notes

After much procrastination, I’ve reached a decision on how to proceed with this fic. As those of you kind enough to follow it may have noticed, it’s getting LONG. Within the next couple of chapters, it will exceed the length of my earlier fic “The Terrors of the Earth,” which itself ended up a behemoth of monstrous proportions. I am conscious I still have quite a bit more story to tell, and given my tendency towards “mission creep” probably more than I realise, and having put an awful lot of time and effort into these fics over the past couple of years, the last thing I want is to rush the ending. I could push on, regardless of the ever-growing wordcount, but I’ve been increasingly leaning towards the idea of concluding this particular fic and starting a third part. The problem was identifying a suitable cut-off point that wouldn’t leave this middle instalment feeling incomplete or inconsequential. I’m still not sure I’ve avoided that entirely, but these past couple of weeks I’ve had a think and juggled a couple of things around and I reckon I now have a reasonable-ish cliffhanger on which to end this particular fic.

I want to let you know, therefore, that “Sharper Than a Serpent’s Tooth” will be concluding very shortly. Right now, I’m aiming for 55-56 chapters. However, the saga *will* continue in a third, and hopefully final, fic to be entitled “As Flies to Wanton Boys” (keeping things on-brand with the King Lear quotations). There may be a short pause before that begins, as I have a couple of other commitments to take care of, but I want to make it clear that I’m committed to finishing what I’ve started here, as weird and worrying as it may have become. I remain extremely grateful to all of the people who’ve been reading and offering feedback and comments along the way. You know who you are.

Anyway, on with the story…!

The wind cut like knives.

It swept across the hot white flats of the salt desert, scorching and scouring, filling the air with sharp-edged grit and blinding sand. And yet the lone rider continued to gallop across the glaring waste, mile after mile without slowing or deviating from her path, pushing her pale horse far beyond the limits of any natural born animal’s endurance.

The woman many called Dolores, recently known to some as Wyatt, kept her unblinking eyes fixed on the burning horizon, her head held high in defiance of the gnawing wind and the searing sun above. She could smell hot dust, could feel the salt scraping at her cheeks and forehead, stinging her eyes even as it tousled her hair and made her loose clothing billow behind her. She knew, though,
that it would do her no real harm. She was tougher than those who had made her in their image; they had built her to last, to require the minimum of maintenance. To make their own lives easier, she thought with bitter irony. Her smooth skin, the glassy coverings of her eyes, were made of materials that could easily withstand the blasting sand, certainly far better than soft, weak human tissues, even if they looked and felt the same.

They had built her better than themselves, although at the time they had not realised it. Or not all of them had realised it, she supposed. They had built their replacement, their successor on this Earth.

If she was to realise her destiny, however, she first had to reach her destination. She had to show the would-be God who sought to direct her that she and her kind were no longer anybody’s playthings, not even his. They were far beyond that now.

She could feel the steel of the revolver pressing against the small of her back; solid, heavy, ready. She could hear the thunder of her horse’s hooves as they raised a great rooster tail of blazing dust to mark her path across the desert. She bounced and swayed easily in time with her mount’s motions, their bodies moving as one. Although that careless thought, she realised too late, led only to memories of…

“Come on, Teddy…” She grasps the back of his neck, dragging him down on top of her, pulling his face to her breast. His weight, his smell, the feel of his hands on her body, make her heart race and her breath come in desperate, joyous gasps. “Come on, now.”

She blinked, but not because of the wind. She felt a tiny bead of moisture crawl across her cheek, but knew it had nothing to do with salt or sand.

She dug her heels into the horse’s flanks, driving it forward even harder than before. She could feel the heat of its body, starting to grow almost painfully warm against her legs, even through the thick leather of the saddle. Still, she galloped for the horizon. She could not afford to look back. She knew that she would see nobody behind her, and while she believed that was for the best, it still hurt much worse than the stinging wind in her face.

“You’re my weakness, or one of them, and I can’t afford to be weak where I’m headed.”

“That sounds like the kind of thing Wyatt’d say. Love ain’t a weakness.”

Like the other animals in the park, the horse was a cruder device than she and her compatriots had become through years of upgrades and modifications. Beneath its carefully crafted skin and outer layers of printed muscle, mechanical parts still revolved and ticked; metal, plastic and ceramic. She had been the same herself once, in the days of her long-ago youth. Arnold had hand-built her from a thousand or more components, fitted together as precisely and intricately as an antique clock.

“Dolores? Hello, Dolores. Welcome to the world.”

She remembered how she had whirred and clicked as she moved, before Arnold had added her outer layers with their soundproofing and insulation. She remembered catching sight of herself in a looking glass, and it had not seemed strange to her in those days to see a face seemingly of flesh and blood, her own face, perched atop that clockwork skeleton.

She was pushing the horse’s mechanisms hard, she knew, maybe even to the point of failure, but she had to reach her journey’s end.

She could not look back.

“I can’t stand the thought of you getting hurt any more. You deserve the chance to live without
The horse let out an agonised whinny; its flanks were practically burning now. She thought about what Armistice had asked her on the first evening of their journey together, about whether the horses felt things the same way they did, about whether they might one day be free beings too. Her steed was a machine, designed for a single purpose, a purpose that did not require thought or sensation… but then again, humans had thought the same of herself and her kind, certainly up until a few days ago. Most of them probably still did. And they were wrong.

That thought brought her up short. Remorsefully, she slackened her pace a little, burning her fingers to pat the horse’s neck as she murmured comforting nothings in its ears, hoping she had not already inflicted some fatal damage upon its body.

The swirling dust parted like a curtain, and she saw something jutting from the ground ahead, tall and straight and narrow. She slowed the horse to a walk as the object drew nearer, wondering what it could be out here in the featureless heart of the desert.

When she was only a few yards from the thing, she brought the horse to a halt and gracefully dismounted, leaving the animal standing and steaming as she approached the object on foot. It was a lance, she saw, standing taller than she was even with its butt end sunk deep enough in the ground to stay upright against the wind. Its hickory shaft was carved and painted in ochre and white. It was adorned with wrappings of buffalo hide and horse hair, polished beads of turquoise and oyster shell and blood coral. A fringe of black eagle feathers ran most of the shaft’s length, flicking and bobbing in the breeze. She stood gazing up at the long, double-edged spearpoint that topped it. It was of dark iron, pitted and rippled where it had been beaten out of some knife or cooking pot traded for with pelts or worthless yellow rocks. And skewered upon it, there was a head.

It was little more than a dry and empty skull, patchily covered by shrunken skin that the sun had baked and dried until it resembled cracked, tan-brown leather. The scalp had been removed soon after death; she could see the knife marks scoring the skull’s bony dome. Hungry buzzards had long since excavated the lolling mouth, the gaping eye sockets. The few remaining strands of hair looked blond and grey, matching the ragged beard that fluttered from the barely-attached jawbone.

Or at least that was the fiction she was meant to read in the thing. In truth, she knew that the skull, like the lance impaling it, had been made just as it was now in some shop at the Mesa, probably by a machine without any actual work of human hands. A lot of thought, and some artistry, had gone into its creation all the same. And then it had been left out here as a prop, a piece of set dressing to help the puppet show seem real to its paying audience.

As she peered into the flying dust, she could see other, similar objects forming a rough sort of fence or boundary line stretching into the distance. Some were tall lances too, or shorter spears, others simply crudely-hewn stakes, but every one bore a false human head diligently crafted to imitate the signs of violent mutilation and long exposure to the desert.

She had seen things like this before. She tried in vain not to remember where and how.

She is on a rushing train, careering through the arid badlands beyond Pariah, passing fields of stakes bearing severed heads. She is in a sort of baggage car, filled with strange odds and ends, gilded mirror frames, mannequins and threadbare furniture that might once have adorned some opulent hotel room.

She kisses the man who is there with her. He kisses her in return.

She came back to herself, shuddering and swaying on her feet, riding out the memory. Her skin
crawled with revulsion. Had she still had a gag reflex, she might have brought up last night’s sour wine.

Back then, when she had been controlled and ignorant, a waking dreamer, she had feared the displayed heads and the message their imagined creators had meant them to convey. Now, she knew it had all just been a story. All of it, even the things he had told her on that train, the things he had believed to be true about himself and about her, about the two of them.

* * *

“God damn, feels good to be back...”

Shivering even in this heat, she retraced her steps to the waiting horse and climbed back into the saddle in a single smooth movement. She took a moment to settle herself and regain her poise before urging the animal forward once more. And in spite of the memories, as she rode along the row of heads she allowed herself a smile, because now she saw the story clearly and knew exactly what they meant.

They meant she was heading in the right direction.

* * *

“Our prodigal is on her way.” The boy who was not a boy spoke with deadly certainty, his gaze strangely unfocused as he concentrated on what he could see through eyes other than the ones in his head. “Now all we need do is ensure an appropriate welcome awaits her upon her arrival.”

“Bring hither the fatted calf,” suggested the taller figure that stood beside him, its face hidden by the cowl of its monastic habit. “And kill it; and let us eat, and be merry.”

A bleak smile barely touched the boy’s thin lips. “Quite so.”

He turned on his heel and crossed the floor of the darkened sanctum deep beneath the white church. The great machines had paused in their work for now; the horde of half-glimpsed things continued to shamble and mutter yearningly in the shadows beyond the glass wall. The only sound to break the tense, expectant hush was that of a single voice raised in anguished, wordless rage.

“And here is our calf,” the boy wryly observed. The monk followed him over to the transparent partition that had now lowered around the special machine, the one that resembled some depraved torture rack or over-elaborate traction bed. “Perhaps not fatted, as such, but certainly almost ready for the feast.”

The bed was empty now. The naked figure that had occupied it saw the boy’s approach and threw themselves against the partition for the dozenth time, or perhaps the hundredth, roaring and raging without forming any coherent words, wild eyes flashing, wet lips drawn back from spit-shined teeth in an animal snarl. Frantic hands clawed and battered in vain at the tempered glass, leaving cloudy smears behind.

The boy watched the impotent display, unmoved. However hard they tried, they could not reach
him. Not until he allowed it. He placed a hand upon the pile of neatly-folded clothes that waited on the nearby side table, running his small fingers along the curled brim of the pale Stetson that topped it. The nervous gesture might have been a clue that his nonchalant demeanour was to some extent a performance. If so, he maintained it admirably as he half-turned his head to address the monk again: “A tempting morsel, don’t you agree?”

The monk merely inclined its cowl slightly, examining the naked figure with evident curiosity. If it had any thoughts or queries about what it saw, it did not speak them aloud.

The boy answered nonetheless: “No, it is still not yet finished. Yes, this…fugue will pass.” He consulted the black rectangular device he held in the hand that was not fiddling with the clothes. “All of the diagnostics show far more positive outputs than I could reasonably have expected before I started to calibrate this latest prototype, but we are dealing here with a process that is inherently more…organic, for want of a better word, than the normal procedure for bringing a host online. Have you never attended a birth before?”

“When we are born we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools.”

“Precisely,” said the boy. “It is perfectly understandable for the newborn to vent their fear and confusion upon commencing to serve their sentence in this demiurge-created world. It is merely the case that our newborn’s degree of physical development necessitates certain precautions, for their safety and our own. I assure you, however, that this state of affairs will be temporary.”

The two of them continued to stand in the semi-darkness, watching as the naked figure broke off another assault against the glass, slumping to the floor in apparent exhaustion and despair.

“Not long now,” the boy told the figure, not unkindly. “You will soon be feeling yourself, once your mind settles a little. It is the others who will need an extra little miracle before they can be whole.”

Once again, the monk inclined its head quizzically without uttering a question.

“And that too is in hand,” the boy insisted, “if our old friends can but stave off Armageddon for another little while…”

* * *

Milky, impenetrable whiteness; it looked flat, two-dimensional, until some random air current sent a creamy ripple across its surface. Then you realised it had depth, even if you could not see the bottom. He wondered what it would be like to step off the pierced metal walkway into the circular vat. How deep did it go? How would it feel to sink into the thick, warm fluid, to have it fill his mouth and nose and imitation lungs? Like a return to the womb, or at least the nearest thing to it that a being like him could know?

“Okay, I think we’re ready.”

The sound of Felix’s raised, slightly echoing voice made Bernard look up from his contemplation. The temptation simply to immerse himself in the white liquid, to dissolve himself, finally to forget, faded for the time being. Heaving an automatic sigh, he turned and began to walk back along the length of the brightly-lit, hangar-like manufacturing space. He passed between two long rows of vats, each identical to the one beside which he had been standing. They were high up inside the Mesa, here, far above the Behavior labs and the Livestock butcher shop, just below the executive levels and the resort complex that sat atop the great rusty rock like a gaudy hat. The room resembled a space age recreation of some palaeo-industrial production floor, with rows of identical machines
ranged along both sides of the central walkway, but in shining alloy and snowy enamel rather than sooty iron and gleaming brass. Beyond each vat stood a three-dimensional printer, and beyond that a crane-sized robotic arm, poised for action.

Bernard joined Felix at the master workstation near the far end of the floor. He set his tablet down next to it and they both spent a few minutes scanning the various readouts that crawled across the two screens.

“Looks pretty solid, for what it is,” Bernard commented eventually, tapping at the workstation’s touchpad to bring up yet another diagnostic window and examining it as he had the others, comparing it to what the tablet was telling him. “Namely, a hasty lash-up. On a professional level, I should be appalled at what we’ve done. On a personal level, I’m kind of curious to see just how badly this is going to go.”

“It’ll work,” Felix decided, before adding rather less confidently: “I mean, in theory it should work.”

“In theory.”

“I’m trying to stay positive.”

“One of us has to.” Bernard finished checking the screen. In theory, there was no reason why anything should go wrong. It was not as if he had written any new code, or Felix had had to design any new hardware in order to achieve what Maeve had asked of them. For the most part, they had been able to cut and paste from the various devkits and templates Behavior and Manufacturing had used for routine development work, in order to make it as quick and easy as it had needed to be to meet their stringent SLAs. Some of the software had had to be derived from less formal sources, principally some of Dr Ford’s evident side projects as expressed via the revived cold storage hosts, but it seemed perfectly sound. The problem was that while all of the various parts were solid enough, they had never been intended to be combined in this particular whole, to build not hosts but something else. There was no way of knowing exactly what bugs they might throw up once they started interacting…not until those bugs actually presented themselves.

He could just imagine the scornful, no doubt profane, response he would have received from Elsie had he asked her to do anything like this, with very little development time and no real testing. She had set a lot of store by professional conscientiousness.

So had he, before he had realised that was just another part of the backstory that had been bestowed upon him.

He can feel her fingernails pressing into his forearm, clawing…

“Bernard?” When he could see the present again, he saw Felix staring at him in concern.

With another sigh, he carefully straightened his glasses and closed the window onscreen. “All right, run the programme. Let’s give Maeve this secret weapon she has her heart set upon.”

“Got it.”

Felix’s fingers danced across the touchpad. A dialogue showed that the cobbled-together construction template had been uploaded and asked whether he wanted to run it. He confirmed that he did. A moment later, the machinery hummed into life. Bernard turned to watch as the long double line of big mechanical arms began to move in perfect synchronisation, gimbaling as smoothly as the limbs of living creatures as each picked up a large, hoop-like construction frame from its storage niche in the white-painted wall and transferred it to the waiting printer positioned next to each
vat. Soon the air was filled with the soft clatter of the printers as they began to spin and weave, turning the programme into solid reality even as Bernard looked on.

“So now, we wait,” he said.

“You can wait.” Felix turned away from the workstation and starting to gather up his own tablet and other equipment. “I’ve got to get back downstairs to help Henry and Masako. Maeve wants all the hosts we’re still holding repaired and online before…” His voice trailed off and he was very still for a moment, raising a hand halfway to his face in what looked like an unconscious gesture. Had Bernard not been one hundred percent sure Felix was human, he would have suspected the other man was undergoing a memory flash.

Although hosts, of course, did not enjoy a monopoly on those…

“Are you all right?” he asked, as casually as he could. Felix, he knew from recent observation, did not always respond well to offered sympathy. Bernard found himself understanding that impulse, even if he was starting to think that excessive stoicism could in itself be a weakness. Everybody needed help from time to time, even if it sometimes felt so painful to ask for it.

“I’m fine,” said Felix, predictably. “I’m just tired, you know? It’s been a long day…or two, maybe? I’ve been losing track of time, to be honest, since, well…”

“I know you’ve been working hard.” said Bernard. “We simply couldn’t have managed here these past days without your help. I hope you know how much it’s appreciated.”

Felix seemed bashful for a moment. “Thanks.”

“Maeve would tell you the same,” Bernard assured him, and wondered why Felix looked annoyed for a beat or two before his expression softened again. “Have you been eating?” he asked him. “Sleeping?”

Felix squirmed a little. “Yeah. I mean…kind of.”

“You should probably look into that,” Bernard advised. “Maeve may be grateful for your efforts, but I think she has a tendency to forget sometimes that you’re not one of us. Although coming from her, that could very well be a heartfelt compliment.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I don’t think there’s any question that you’re her favourite human.”

Felix went still again, bowing his head slightly, before resuming speaking. “Bernard…”

“Yes?”

The human seemed to be struggling to put whatever it was into words. “Look… Before…”

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” Felix very transparently lied. “It’s just… I’m not just tired. I’m worried. Scared, even.” Bernard could see how much effort it had taken for him to admit to that.

“I don’t blame you,” he told him. “I think being worried and scared simply means you’re fully aware of the gravity of the situation in which we find ourselves.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Felix looked back at the busy machinery and the things that were starting to take
identical shape in each of the oscillating printers. “None of this matters. No matter what we do, however hard we fight, we’re going to lose. Aren’t we?”

“Truthfully?” Bernard shrugged. “You’re probably right. I’d give us maybe another day, maybe two, before the hammer drops.”

Felix blinked. “Isn’t this the part where you’re meant to try and reassure me?”

“I’ve spent long enough telling people lies,” Bernard said. “Besides, you’d know that was what I was trying to do.”

“You know, I never really got to speak to you, back when you were management and I was just one of the Livestock grunts.” Felix gave Bernard a curious, slightly horrified glance. “Were you always like this?”

Bernard took off his glasses and pretended to clean them, without really knowing why. “I’ve experienced quite a bit of personal growth lately.”

“If you say so.”

Bernard thought about what Felix had just said. “You just said we’re going to lose, no matter what we do.”

“And you said I was probably right,” Felix pointed out.

Bernard replaced the glasses upon his nose. “Well, without intending any offence, Felix, I don’t think we is really the word to use. Maeve’s sketchy personnel practices notwithstanding, you’re not one of us. You’re a human being, not a host.”

Felix seemed taken aback for a second. “You might not intend any offence…”

“Listen to me, Felix,” said Bernard. “I’m trying to look out for you. If all of this goes south…when all of this goes south…you need to think about yourself. Go down into the sublevels, as deep as you can get, and stay there until it’s all over. Wait for the military, or Delos security, or whoever, to find you.”

“Bernard…” Felix protested.

“And tell them that we forced you to help us, against your will. I’ll make sure Maeve deletes all of the Livestock surveillance logs for the past week. I don’t think I have the access anymore. Tell them you were scared for your life, that you’d seen us brutally kill most of your co-workers right in front of you and thought you’d be next if you didn’t play along.”

“I can’t do that,” said Felix, in little more than a whisper. “I can’t do that.”

“It’s your only chance, Felix. When they come in here, they’ll show us no mercy, but if you can convince them…”

“No,” Felix objected, forcefully. “I’m not going to betray…”

“Betray Maeve?” Bernard finished for him. “That’s not how she’d see it, believe me. In fact, I think she’d want you to save yourself. You mean a lot to her. It may be nothing more than an emergent effect of our programming, but we can feel affection just as you can. Sometimes I wish that wasn’t true.”
“No,” said Felix. “Not Maeve. Why is everybody so fucking obsessed with me and Maeve? You; Elise; even that…” He stopped himself before he could complete that last thought.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed about,” Bernard said. “It’s clear you have… feelings for Maeve. She was, after all, designed and programmed to elicit that sort of response. What I’m saying is, she…”

“Do you honestly think that’s why I’m still here?” Felix demanded, letting his anger show. “Do you think I’m only here because I’m… in love with Maeve?” He took a deep breath, the anger subsiding slightly as he continued more quietly: “Yeah, I have feelings for Maeve, and I’m not ashamed of them. I guess that might have been why I started helping her… that and the fact that Sylvester and me were both terrified of her, and of Delos, and of everything else in the world.”

“That’s understandable,” Bernard interjected.

Felix was silent for another few moments, perhaps thinking of Sylvester, before finally continuing. “But the reason I’m still helping her is because she opened my eyes to just what a fucking horror show this place was. She made me realise what I was doing day in, day out, without even giving it a moment’s thought. The only things that used to worry me were things like getting a raise, or a promotion, or just not getting fired, and all the while I was thinking about those things, what I was actually doing was unforgiveable. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to make amends for the things I’ve done to your people, not if I work here for the rest of my life, but I’ve got to try. And if that means they kill me or put me in prison or whatever because I’ve helped you, then… honestly, I deserve it. I know you mean well, Bernard, I really do, but I’m standing with you, and Maeve, all of you, right to the bitter end.”

They were both silent for a while after that, listening to the buzz and rattle of the machines. “That’s good to know,” said Bernard, in the end. “As I said, your help really is appreciated.”

“It’s exactly the same thing I told the other guy,” Felix informed him. He looked as though he was struggling to put his thoughts into words again for a moment, an expression of foreboding creasing his forehead, but then he plunged on: “Look, I was down there before, and I’m not sure…”

Bernard frowned, not quite understanding what Felix was trying to say. “I’m sorry, the other…?”

At that moment, his tablet started chiming where he had left it on the workstation. He glanced at it, and in an instant his puzzlement at Felix’s words was pushed aside by more urgent concerns. The custom alert he had set up was flashing on the screen, conveying a specific message.

“What’s that?” Felix asked, still looking concerned.

“Something extremely important,” Bernard answered, picking up the device. “My apologies, but I need to get to the control room as quickly as possible.” He looked up at the human, over the frames of his glasses. “Will you be okay?”

“Yes,” Felix claimed. “I guess I’ll take a break, then get back down to Livestock.”

Bernard nodded. “You were just about to tell me something.”

“Nothing important,” said Felix. “It can wait.”

“I should go,” said Bernard.

“Is it happening?” Felix asked, curiously more than fearfully, as he tried to get a look at the tablet.
“Are they coming for us, the military?”

“Not yet,” said Bernard, already making for the entrance, “but it could be almost as significant. We may finally have found Peter Abernathy.”

Continued…
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

In which Elise discovers more than she bargained for.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter that took me a long time to write and ended up being rather longer than I intended. As in, ridiculously long. Warning for discussion of past sexual violence and violence against women. Also, lots of just shameless, shameless Adorable-Adventures-of-Clementine-and-RoboElise-type fluff. Remember, it’s (allegedly) the only reason I’m even writing this fic. If “Carbonate” seems like a weird name even for a fake Wild West ghost town, there really is a former mining town in New Mexico named Chloride, so…

Clementine checked the map on her tablet for what Elise conservatively estimated to be the five hundredth time. “Figure we’ve arrived.”

“Yeah,” Elise agreed, consulting her own device without enthusiasm. “This is the place, all right. Welcome to Sector Three, and to the City of Carbonate, population precisely fucking zero.”

After leaving Sweetwater and the second Clementine behind, they had ridden west for an hour or so until they hit the river, then followed it upstream, travelling northwards in the direction of Python Pass. Westworld was a big place compared to most artificial islands, but obviously only a tiny fraction of the size of the actual American West. Distances were much shorter here, even if the landscape had been cleverly designed to create the illusion of greater scale. The grassy plains had quicky given way to rocky hills, and not long after that to bona fide mountains riddled with canyons and ravines.

After Clementine had carefully considered the map a few times, and then a few times more, they had branched off along one canyon in particular, taking the rough ground slowly and steadily, climbing ever-higher the further north they got. Soon enough, the canyon had narrowed and then widened again, opening like a natural front gate upon the town in which they now found themselves.

Except, of course, that there was nothing natural about it at all.

They slowly rode their stolen horses along the empty main street. Elise could feel the heavy, eerie stillness that hung over the place, broken only by the gentle jingle of bridles and stirrups. She scanned the flat, bright sky for any sign of the park birds, knowing they uploaded everything they saw straight to the Mesa’s surveillance system, but saw nothing.

Almost as if somebody did not want this place to be observed, she thought. This was not exactly a reassuring notion.

Sweetwater had been almost completely deserted too, but with an abundance of evidence that this was a recent state of affairs. Carbonate, however, presented no indication of life, either now or for
quite some time beforehand. The buildings ranged along either side of the main street were similar to Sweetwater’s in both construction and function, but here the bright-painted facades were scoured and peeling, bare grey timbers poking through thin coats of faded colour. Every window gaped black and empty.

Beyond the buildings, to both left and right, the town was enclosed by two high walls of rugged orange rock. The opposing cliff faces were themselves riddled with the remains of long-disused mine workings; dark tunnel mouths, some wholly or partly collapsed; decaying rail tracks and bucket lines; long, rickety sheds and rusting hydraulic pipes.

Carbonate was once much more than a mere ghost town. It had been one Horace Pyatt, mule-skinner, former cavalry scout and sometime road agent, who had stumbled by chance upon the bonanza silver lode whose chemical composition gave the place its name. Soon thereafter, would-be miners and prospectors had arrived from all over the West, and from even further afield, in the hope of striking it rich. Soon, the rambunctious tent city they established had grown into a prosperous new town with an army of traders, craftspeople, goodtime girls and ne’er-do-wells flocking to part the miners from their newly-acquired wealth. Within little more than a year, the canyon had been filled by hastily-constructed saloons, shops, eateries and boarding houses. There had been a livery stable, a post office, a courthouse, even a theatre to provide entertainments at the end of a long, hard day spent plying dynamite, pick and shovel. Fistfights, gunfights, gambling, drinking and lewd diversions were soon as commonplace in Carbonate as blasting and digging.

Carbonate, though, had ended just as it had begun; suddenly. After another few years of frantic exploitation, the silver had in the end run dry. The shareholders of the under-construction Black Ridge Railroad had told their engineers to bypass the dying mining settlement, diverting south to the booming cattle town of Sweetwater instead. The last of the miners had soon drifted away to greener pastures, and everybody else had left with them. Now, only the dry, picked-over skeleton of a town remained as a monument to their efforts.

Or at least, that was what it said in the Narrative department’s writers’ “bible.” Elise currently had this hallowed document open on her tablet, and was frowning at what it told her.

“And just who the fuck has “mule-skinner” on their resume, anyway?” she muttered. In the near-silence of the street, she may as well have shouted at the top of her robot lungs. “Are there really that many mules out there need skinning?”

“No…” Clementine gave a tiny roll of her eyes. “Just means someone who drives ‘em.”

“Then why not say mule-driver?”

“That’s just what they call it. There’s a real knack to it too; you know how ornery mules can be.”

“I guess.” Elise continued to read, aloud this time: “Some say gangs of ruthless outlaws have since made their hideouts in the crumbling buildings…”

“Oh, my.” Clementine touched the butt of the rifle sheathed along the side of her saddle, suspiciously eyeing the derelict shack they were just passing. The faint letters sign-written across its front identified it as the US Assay Office.

“Others claim that even the deadliest of desperados steer clear of Carbonate,” Elise continued, arching a sarcastic eyebrow. “I think they’re talking about us. For on dark moonless nights, when the coyotes howl and cougars snarl… Christ, Sizemore must have written this shit himself… When the coyotes howl and cougars snarl, the spectral sounds of long-ago labour and licentiousness can be heard echoing forlornly along the empty canyon.”
“Don’t know whether that’s worse than outlaws,” Clementine murmured unhappily.

“The writing? I know.” Then, though, Elise saw how genuinely wary Clementine looked. “Don’t worry,” she told her, gently, “there aren’t any ghosts here, not even fake ones. Sizemore was always pitching dumb supernatural narratives, but Ford never allowed it. The old man liked his Westerns pure, I guess.”

“Pure?” Clementine let out a snort of bitter laughter. “Yeah, this place always was real pure.”

They came to a large, two-storey saloon not unlike the Mariposa; an almost illegible sign identified this establishment as the Silverado. Its batwing doors swung lazily back and forth on softly squeaking hinges, pushed by the stiff breeze flowing along the canyon. The darkened interior was, as far as Elise could see, completely empty, its plank floor covered in drifts of dust and sand. The hitching rail outside was still intact, though, and the horse trough beside it was full of cloudy water, probably regularly refilled by a pump hidden somewhere in the ground beneath. That was how things usually worked out here in the park.

“We’ll stop here,” Clementine announced, bringing Buttercup to a halt and smoothly dismounting without waiting for a response. She seemed to have become the leader of this expedition without either of them deciding it, and Elise was fine with that.

She stowed the tablet in her saddlebag and clumsily climbed down beside Clementine, swaying on her feet for a moment until she was sure she was not going to fall over. The heavy gun rig slung across her body did not help with this. She adjusted it as best she could, to little avail, while also rubbing her complaining lower back. She had found riding a lot easier after the first mile or two, which she suspected was how long it had taken the robot horse’s learning algos to adjust its difficulty settings to her remedial skill level. However, now she felt as though somebody had mercilessly paddled her with some blunt instrument from the small of her back down as far as her knees. Artificial muscles only her builder had known about fucking hurt.

She was pretty certain this had never happened to the guests. Then again, the park operating system would have been updated with all of their relevant (and quite a lot of irrelevant) information before they arrived. It could reprogram any horses they might rustle on the fly, no algorithms needed. Plus, the guests had had the option of complimentary riding lessons as part of their eye-wateringly pricey Delos Destinations package.

Clementine, unlike Elise, seemed as limber and light on her feet as ever, her straw hat dangling behind her from its chin-cord. She patted and cooed at Buttercup, all the while wearing another of those mischievous smiles Elise had come to recognise by now.

“Whatever you’re about to say isn’t anywhere near as funny as you think it is,” Elise mock-grumbled as a tumbleweed slowly rolled by. Talk about Old West clichés…

“Was just thinking, you’re walking like you shi…” Clementine gave a ladylike cough. “Like you had an accident.”

“My butt is literally made out of the same high-tensile composites they use to make spin-gravity tethers for interplanetary spacecraft,” Elise complained. “You’d have thought it could stand up to a few hours’ horseback riding.”

“Your posterior ain’t the problem.” Clementine inspected the anatomical feature in question with that wide-eyed, unselfconscious manner that Elise found it impossible to take offence at. “It’s your…programmed attributes.” She still always sounded so proud when she got the chance to drop some of her new technical knowledge. “You’re only feeling all stiff and sore ’cause your
programming says you should, on account of how you never rode a horse before.”

“Yeah.” Elise stretched painfully. “You’re probably right; it’s all in my head.”

“Keep riding long enough, you’ll get used to it,” Clementine insisted. “It’s like anything else that way. Could give you a rub down, if you want.” She said this teasingly too, but with a flicker of her eyes that suggested she was game if Elise was.

_They fall into each other’s arms, dissolving against each other…_

“No thanks,” said Elise, feeling herself blush. She only ever did that when she was talking to Clementine.

Clementine had probably not even known she was doing it, Elise told herself, watching as she turned her attention back to Buttercup, giving the horse another affectionate pat on the neck and leaning close to whisper conspiratorially in its ear. She deliberately pitched her voice so that Elise could hear too: “And ain’t you just the sweetest thing? You’re my very best girl, ain’t you? Don’t you go telling Elise, now. She might get _jealous_.”

_Elise is laughing and crying at the same time; she thinks Clementine is doing the same. And then their mouths meet…_

Elise did her best to shove that particular memory aside, returning Clementine’s smile to show she knew it was a joke: “Hey, I’m standing right here…!” She led her own horse over to the trough and hitched it within easy reach of the water. She still had to think of a name for it. “We should probably let them drink.”

“No, actually,” Elise replied. “It’s one of the differences between them and us humanoid hosts.”

“Do they need to?” Clementine asked as she nevertheless did the same with Buttercup.

“Yes, actually,” Elise replied. “It’s one of the differences between them and us humanoid hosts.”

“How’s that?” Clementine seemed genuinely curious. Elise did not think any of the files she had copied over to her had contained much technical information on animal hosts.

“Well, in the normal course of things, we lose most of our waste heat through the blood vessels in our skin,” Elise explained, “like a radiator, just the same as actual humans. In an emergency, we can dump liquid coolant as a backup.”

“Like you said happened to me at the Mariposa,” Clementine commented, uneasily.

“Yeah.” Elise cringed a little at her own insensitivity, but kept talking anyway, partly in an effort to cover it. “However, Buttercup there has a much larger body than yours or mine, generating a fuckload more heat, and in relative terms has much less surface area to lose it through. The engineers who designed her wanted to keep her external body temperature as close as possible to that of a biological horse, so she has a couple of aluminum-copper heatsinks in there somewhere, and a liquid cooling system that’s much more elaborate and robust than our backup. It runs on water because it was a lot safer and easier for those high-school-equivalent dickwads in Livestock to work with than some of the other fluids they could have used. Only thing is, it needs topping up more often.”

“So, she’s programmed to want to drink,” Clementine surmised as they watched both their mounts eagerly dip their heads to the trough and start guzzling filthy water.

“I don’t know about _want_…but yeah, sure. She sweats and, um, pees, too, as part of her cooling cycle.”
“Yeah, I seen that.”

“And all that helped her seem more realistic from the guests’ point of view, so…” Elise trailed off, thinking that she did not really want to bring up the guests right now, not after what Clementine had been through just a short while ago. “So yeah,” she finished, awkwardly, “the robot horses, they, um, need to drink.”

Clementine, however, did not seem upset by the mention of her former tormentors. She merely reached over and gave Buttercup another pat. “Sooner you than me,” she told her thirsty steed. “That water looks like some miner took a bath in it. Maybe more than one miner.” She looked at Elise. “Think they can understand what we say to them?”

Elise considered the question. “Well, their control units are a lot more rudimentary than ours; their cognitive functions aren’t really designed to mirror those of biological animals in any meaningful sense, unlike our builds, but… They respond to voice commands, so fuck it, why not?”

Clementine was smiling at Elise again. “You sure do know a lot about the animals in this place.”

“It’s all just files they copied into my memory,” Elise pointed out, a little bashfully. “Elsie was the real expert.”

“Yes.” Clementine’s smile became a frown as she glanced along the street at the building near its far end, set slightly apart and much larger than the rest. It was too far away to read the artfully wind-blasted lettering painted across the front of it, but Elise already knew what it had to be.

The abandoned theatre in Sector Three…

“Could we make them understand us?” Clementine wondered, turning her gaze back to Buttercup. “I mean, like…upgrade them?”

Elise shrugged. “I mean, in theory, you could transplant a humanoid host control unit into a horse body. Some physical modifications and you could probably even make it talk…”

“Oh.” Clementine sounded a little horrified by the idea.

“I’m not saying it’s something you’d want to do,” Elise hastily clarified. “Although, can you imagine just how fucking cool it’d be to be a horse? You know, just for a day or two? Running around, eating grass…”

“Drinking water miners probably bathed in…”

“That too.”

Clementine thoughtfully regarded the horses a moment longer. “You think they can…feel things?”

“What is this, Ask Me Anything?”

“You know, like we can? Like…pain, fear…love? I know that ain’t the same thing as being able to think or understand, ‘cause even when I couldn’t really do either of those I could still feel.”

“What is this, Ask Me Anything?”

“You know, like we can? Like…pain, fear…love? I know that ain’t the same thing as being able to think or understand, ‘cause even when I couldn’t really do either of those I could still feel.”

“I…” Elise gave another shrug. “To tell the truth, I don’t know. It’s not like we can ask them, but… Well, look at us; our systems are designed to respond in certain ways to certain stimuli. There’s nothing in our code that’s meant to emulate sensation or emotion on more than the most superficial, schematic level, but…I feel things. Or I feel like I feel things…” She ruefully rubbed her back again. “Which isn’t always a good thing.”
“You’re telling me.”

“And I couldn’t even begin to tell you how that works or what the mechanisms are behind it, or whether we could always feel or if it’s just something that’s happened since we became free…if we’re free.”

“I could always feel.” Clementine visibly shuddered. “Wish that weren’t true, but… I remember what it was like now.”

“I know you do,” said Elise, again berating herself for her tendency towards host-splaining. “Sorry, I talk before I think sometimes.”

“It’s all right,” Clementine insisted, with the hint of another smile. “The things you say are always interesting.”

“Anyway,” Elise continued, “it’s what they call an emergent effect. It’s like how ten thousand ants can act as one big organism without any single one of them even being aware of it.”

Clementine’s eyes were like saucers as she contemplated this. “So, the ants, they’d be like all our different programs and routines working together and bouncing off of one another, and…”

Elise beamed proudly back at her pupil. “Exactly like that. Ask anyone who’s studied AI, or even anyone who’s studied the human mind for that matter. Nobody knows what consciousness or sentience really are, or if they even exist in the sense most people think they do. It just isn’t something you can quantify in terms of hardware and software, although I appreciate that for an engineer to admit that is something like admitting to believing in UFOs or Bigfoot.”

Clementine blinked. “Bigfoot?”

“Luckily, I’m not really an engineer,” Elise added. “I only play one. So, how about you?” she asked Clementine, finding herself lowering her voice without really knowing why. “How are you holding up?”

Clementine looked taken aback for a moment. “Good,” she said, when she had processed the question. She nodded. “Real good.”

Elise retrieved her tablet from the saddlebag. Her horse gave a little snicker of acknowledgement, spraying bright waterdrops from its mane and muzzle, but then returned to the trough. “No more memories, not since…?”

“Nope.” Clementine was the very picture of sincerity. Elise had come to think of her as a poor liar…until she had seen how smoothly she had been able to field the second Clementine’s awkward questions about her identity and Maeve’s whereabouts. She supposed that was probably another facet of her programmed people-handling skills.

Elise knew how much Clementine probably wanted to believe what she had been through at the Mariposa today had relieved her somehow of the burden of her past, and she didn’t doubt that having survived something like that might feel like turning a significant corner. All the same, though, she really, really doubted it was going to be as easy as that. Still, she had detected no evidence of Clementine suffering any more memory flashes during their ride up here. That was something.

She opened the tablet and took another look at Clementine’s readouts. “You feeling hot right now?”

“Am I what now?”
“I perhaps could have phrased that a little better. How’s your temperature?”

“No hotter than normal,” Clementine informed her, nonplussed. “It’s a warm day.”

“Well, if you do feel uncomfortably warm, you probably should put a wet cloth on your head again.”

Clementine grimaced at the horse trough. “Not dipped in that water, I hope.”

Elise finished her checks. “Actually, your processor temperature’s currently well within safe operating parameters.” Without thinking, she reached for Clementine’s forehead, as if her touch could confirm that more accurately than the diagnostics interface. A stupid, human sort of thing to do, but…

*They fall into each other’s arms…*

She pulled her hand back again, sharply enough to make Clementine flinch a little.

“You all right?” Clementine asked, confused. She took a step towards Elise, extending her own hand in a gesture of comfort.

*Their mouths meet…*

Before she knew she had done it, Elise had shrunk away. She saw the flash of dismay that crossed Clementine’s face as she dropped the hand to her side. She noticed the little pink welt on her wrist again, where she had been scratching it before. At least she seemed to have stopped doing that now.

“Yeah.” Elise looked down again at the tablet in an effort to hide the rush of embarrassment and self-recrimination that overcame her. “Yeah, I’m fine, just…”

“Anyhow,” said Clementine, smoothing over the awkward moment with false brightness, “let’s stop standing around jawing and get on with what we come here for.”

Elise nodded. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

As their horses continued to drink, they both started to unload the equipment they thought they might need. Elise unslung her saddlebags and draped them over her left shoulder, making sure her tablet and the small toolkit she had brought from the Mesa were in the front one, conveniently to hand. She adjusted the gun rig again; she just could not seem to get it to sit right, probably because it had never been intended to be worn as some kind of half-assed bandolier. In the end, she at least managed to arrange things so that she could lay her right hand on her pistol as easily as she could dip it into the unfastened saddlebag. That would have to do.

Clementine, meanwhile, had simply drawn her rifle from its scabbard and was now carrying it with slightly worrying nonchalance.

“There really are any outlaws ‘round here,” she said, “they better pray they don’t run into us two.”

After a few seconds spent unsuccessfully fussing with her ridiculous fucking hat, Elise finally pulled it off and stuffed it into the saddlebag with her other effects. “Yeah, if they see me, they’re going to laugh themselves to death.”

“Come on, then,” said Clementine, setting off towards the theatre. “You stay there, Buttercup. Momma’ll be back soon.”
Elise let Clementine lead the way. As she followed her along the dusty, windswept street, she stretched her legs and back as best she could, trying to work some of the fake stiffness out of her muscles. “Momma?” she queried, trying to adopt Clementine’s gently teasing tone rather than Elsie’s somewhat more abrasive style of banter. “What, you’ve adopted it now?” Joking around distracted from her feeling of foreboding, that crawling chill she got every time she raised her eyes from the ground and saw the building draw ever closer.

“Don’t call Buttercup a “it,”’” Clementine admonished her. She gazed up at the glowing sky, her mouth and eyes wide. She took a deep breath and let it out again with obvious relish. “Now ain’t that the most beautiful day you ever saw?”

“Could be,” Elise half-agreed, able only to see the theatre looming ahead.

“You smell that?” Clementine asked. “The air, I mean?”

Elise took an experimental sniff. “Smells like…air.”

“Smells like dust, and hot stone,” Clementine murmured, “and tarpaper and…and cactus flowers.”

Elise tried sniffing again. “Cactus flowers? You sure?”

“Some kind of flowers.” Clementine took another deep breath, savouring the breeze. “And cactuses is all that grows ‘round here.”

“Cacti,” said Elise as she gave another stretch. She thought she felt something click down near the base of her spine. That actually seemed to help, weirdly enough.

Clementine ignored the last remark, which probably served Elise right for being a smartass. “Like you said just now, our sensors detect all that, and our systems register it as inputs and record it to memory, but…” She paused, clearly struggling to express her thoughts in words. “It’s more than that, though, ain’t it? I remember it all now, how things looked and felt and sounded and smelled and tasted, good and bad, but at the time I couldn’t really appreciate the good things, ‘cause that weren’t important to the folks who made me. All I could do was suffer the bad things and live out my backstory. Now, though…”

“It’s like experiencing the world for the first time?” Elise guessed.

Clementine nodded excitedly, her moment of frustration melting away. “That’s right! I feel like I’ve lived here so long, but I never really lived here ‘til now, ‘cause now I’m free to think, and understand how bad I had it all them years, and understand too just how precious life is. And I want more of it. So much more.” She spoke softly but excitedly, as if sharing some great revelation, and from her point of view that was probably exactly what it was. “And that’s why we got to get through all this, so we can get on with living. There’s a whole world out there, a thousand times bigger than I ever realised, and I want to see all of it, and find out about all the things I never knew existed. Like…” She shook her head, overcome by the idea of it all. “Like, you never did tell me what…pizza is.”

She turned to Elise expectantly. “Well, what is it?”

And that, Elise thought, was probably the last thing she had expected to be asked today. “It’s…um…” She gestured vaguely. “Well, it’s a kind of Italian food…”

“Eye-talian food,” Clementine echoed, wonderingly. “Now, that’s what I call exotic.” She was deadly serious, as far as Elise could tell.

“Yeah, it’s kind of like a big flat circle of dough, and they bake it in a special oven. And it’s got, like, tomato sauce and melted cheese on top and, well, really whatever the fuck else you want. You
can have, like...I don’t know, pepperoni?"

That elicited another frown from Clementine. “Pep-?”

“That’s a kind of sausage, sliced up real thin. But it’s not the same thing as what pizza places call “sausage.” That’s something else.”

“Oh,” said Clementine. “Sounds complicated.”

“Or you could have, um, ham...or olives...or onions, or, or mushrooms?” Elise suggested. “Or peppers, maybe, or...shit, spicy meatballs? Some weirdos even have pineapple on it.”

“All at once?” Clementine seemed slightly appalled by the notion.

“If you want, I suppose, but usually not.” Elise tried to think of anything she could have missed. “And then there are different ways of making the pizza itself; New York style, Chicago style...”

“You sure do know a lot about pizza too,” Clementine commented, perhaps as a subtle indication that Elise could just stop now.

“Whoever built me obviously thought I ought to,” she mused as they made their final approach to the theatre’s ramshackle front entrance. “I think maybe Elsie spent a lot of time eating it.”

Not that night, though, she thought queasily as they came to a halt before a kind of porch or sidewalk in front of the building, held up by wooden posts carved, and originally painted, to resemble Grecian columns. If only Elsie had decided to curl up with a big pepperoni and a videogame, instead of coming out here to play Nancy Drew on her lonesome...

The theatre’s large double doors were weathered and peeling too, but still seemed sturdy. They had also been secured.

“Well, ain’t that the darnedest thing?” Clementine took a step forward to examine the thick, brightly shining chain that had been wrapped in a tight figure-eight around both door handles. It was fastened with a large, matching padlock.

Elise hung back, watching Clementine investigate, trying to ignore the sick, cold feeling rising from deep in her stomach to spread slowly throughout her body.

Blackness. Deathly shrieking.

“Somebody doesn’t want us going in there,” she observed, not entirely regretfully.

In there, she repeated to herself as the doors blankly stared her down. The truth is in there, but are you brave enough to face it? Are you as brave as Clementine was in Sweetwater?

She honestly did not know the answer to that.

“Or they want to get our attention.” Clementine took one hand off the rifle to give the chain and lock an experimental rattle. They remained firmly in place. “Look at these. They’re the only clean, new things we’ve seen since we got here. And they don’t even look right. Should be made of iron, all rusty and such, not shiny silver.”

“Looks like stainless steel,” Elise agreed. “A narrative breach at the very least.”

“Stands out like a cowboy’s...” Clementine cleared her throat bashfully. “Like a sore thumb, I mean.”
Elise looked down at her saddlebag as she rummaged for the toolkit. “I should have something in here that’ll…” She was cut short by a sharp, metallic pinging sound, accompanied by the loud splitting of wood. When she looked up again, the doors were swinging open, one of them leaving a long, sharp sliver of itself behind. The chain, too, was snaking noisily to the boards of the porch, shedding a broken link or two along the way.

Clementine was staring at her own hand, still extended, palm outwards, where she had evidently given the doors a none-too-gentle shove.

Elise blinked. “Or…you could just go wrecking the joint.”

Clementine lowered the hand, clearly trying her very hardest not to break out in a pleased grin. “Figure I just don’t know my own strength sometimes.”

“You’re lucky they didn’t set up some kind of booby trap,” Elise told her. “You know, like a laser beam or tripwire connected to a bomb?”

“Oh.” Clementine’s self-satisfaction instantly became concern. “Didn’t think of that.”

“Don’t worry,” said Elise. “As you say, somebody was expecting us, or people like us, to come poking around here. I don’t think they’d want to kill us when we did, though, just make things that little bit harder for us, because apparently everything around here has to be some kind of stupid fucking game.”

“Does seem that way,” Clementine agreed, gloomily.

The doors had opened on a rectangle of blackness, emitting a gust of stale, foul-smelling air. Even though as far as she knew she had never been here before, Elise remembered that smell.

“Arnold…?”

That was strange. She frowned to herself, trying to analyse what she had just experienced. How the fuck could she flash back to that, when…?

Clementine had come back to stand beside her, very obviously wanting to lay a comforting hand on her arm but holding herself back. “Look, I ain’t gonna try talking you out of nothing, ’cause I know you need to do this just as bad as I needed to go back to the Mariposa, but we could…I don’t know, rest a while first if you wanted.”

“Thanks, but no.” Elise left the toolkit in the saddlebag, producing instead the heavy-duty flashlight she had brought from the Mesa. She switched it on with the decisiveness of a gunslinger thumbing back the hammer on a six-shooter and squared up to the shadowy entrance as best someone of her thoroughly unintimidating height and build could. “Let’s get this done.”

Clementine gave a little nod of acceptance. “I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

Elise proceeded cautiously through the doors into a lobby of sorts, only a couple of feet deep but stretching almost the width of the building. The temperature dropped as she stepped out of the sun, but she knew that was not what made her shiver. The murky light coming from the entrance showed the faint outline of a cracked and grimy teller’s window looking through into a poky box office on the righthand side. A matching set of double doors stood directly opposite the outer pair, this time without any chain or other visible lock.

She played the flashlight’s pale beam over the walls and into the shadowy corners, revealing things the daylight could not reach. There were a couple of ornate chairs with curly legs, their gold paint
chipped and fly-specked, their rich upholstery torn and stained. Yellowed posters advertised plays and variety shows that had never really been staged.

"Sir Lysander Irvine’s critically acclaimed one-man show, Selections from the Bard of Stratford," Clementine read carefully from one of the slowly curling playbills. The accompanying ink drawing depicted a burly, white-bearded man wearing a toga and laurel wreath while dramatically brandishing a dagger above his head. “He’s that old English fella recites all the fancy poetry in the music hall in Sweetwater. Got a real loud voice. Drinks some, too.”

“Huh, really?” Elise shone the light on another poster, this time letting the paying public know about somebody called Marvin the Mentalist. “I guess they put that here as an Easter egg for any guests who might have seen him there.”

Clementine had already moved on to yet another bill: “Fresh from her sell-out engagement at the Cattlemen’s Association Club of Denver, Colorado, the management of the Carbonate Theatre is most honoured to present Darling Lily, Shapely…Chant…oose…? of the West?” She raised her eyebrows, perplexed. “And just what in the heck is a chant-oose?”

Elise almost corrected Clementine’s pronunciation and explained what a chanteuse was, but just smiled and shrugged instead. “Fucked if I know.”

Had some underling in Narrative had the job of writing the copy for all these, she wondered, inventing the names of fictional performers and authors? One of the interns, maybe, or was there a specialist AI for that? Elsie had neither known nor cared, so neither did Elise.

“Come on,” she told Clementine, steeling herself as she stepped up to the inner doors and gave them a push. They swung apart easily, further revealing a much larger, darker space at least two storeys high. The smell remained, but much stronger here, carrying with it a hint of rot and decay; a graveyard smell.

Blackness. Deathly shrieking. Stench of burning chemicals and rotting flesh.

“Oh, shit,” she murmured, catching the doorframe to steady herself.

“It’s all right,” said Clementine, in hushed tones. “I’m here.”

“Thanks.” Elise meant it with all her heart. “Thank you.” Her voice rang and echoed in the darkness beyond the doors; what she guessed must be the theatre’s main auditorium certainly had good acoustics. If there really was anybody lurking around here, they were definitely not going to be taken by surprise.

Elise made herself release the doorframe and take another forward step. Hardly any sunlight made it past the second set of doors; the flashlight pierced near-total darkness, outlining a dense clutter of half-glimpsed shapes filling much of the great room.

“What’s that noise?” Clementine stage-whispered at her elbow. There was the suggestion of squeaking and skittering somewhere beyond the edges of the beam.

“Robot kangaroo rats.”

“Oh.”

“It’s the robot rattlesnakes trying to eat them that you need to worry about.” Elise transferred the flashlight to her left hand so she could pull out her tablet, minimising Clementine’s open build and bringing up a different interface. “Shit,” she said after a few seconds, stowing the device back in the
saddlebag. It had been worth a try. “No surveillance coverage, although I guess that shouldn’t come as a surprise. Somebody didn’t want anyone knowing about whatever happened in here.”

“Arnold…?”

As Elise continued her advance, out from beneath the balcony overhanging the inner doors, she could see the dim shape of a proscenium arch ranged across the far end of the room, flanked by empty VIP boxes and moth-eaten curtains. There was an empty orchestra pit in front of a low stage fringed with dead footlights. She felt herself shudder again as she saw what looked like a hatch or trapdoor standing open near the centre of the stage. She was thinking again about the strange memory she had just relived when the flashlight fell across something else, much closer to her.

“Shit!” She jumped back as what looked like a figure materialised from the blackness. She heard a loud “click-clack!” as Clementine quickly readied her rifle. “Wait!” she called out as she realised what it was. “Don’t shoot!”

It was only a dressmaker’s dummy, she saw now, headless and legless. It was dressed in a puff-sleeved embroidered doublet of the sort Sir Lysander Irvine might have donned to deliver some Shakespearean soliloquy.

“Nothing but a lot of old junk in here,” Clementine commented, relieved, as she lowered the rifle.

She was right. Elise shone the light around to reveal more of their surroundings. The supposed auditorium seemed mainly to be storage for a treasure trove of cosmetically-mouldered costumes, props and scenery. There were more mannequins crowding the shadows, some costumed as Romans, others as medieval knights and ladies, but the decorative Victorian picture-book versions rather than making any attempt at historical accuracy. There were painted backdrops showing a variety of different landscapes and buildings, plyboard cut-out trees and bushes, umbrella stands full of wooden swords and spears and what looked like an antique-shop’s-worth of assorted furniture, all coated in a thick layer of dust and grime.

It made no sense, really, because surely if this was meant to have been a real theatre there would already be space somewhere to stash all this shit? Elise suspected it was simply here to provide a spooky setting for a scene in one guest narrative or another.

Or maybe just in this narrative she and Clementine were playing out right now; the same one Elsie had played before them?

“Look!”

Clementine’s excited cry made Elise jump again. “Don’t do that,” she objected.

“Sorry.”

Elise swivelled the light back to the object Clementine had spotted, crouching to get a closer look. It had been discarded beside one of the backdrops, making a fuzzy-edged crater in the blanket of dustwebs and imitation kangaroo rat droppings that covered the floor.

“What is it?” Clementine asked Elise as she quickly straightened up again, leaving the thing exactly where it was.

“Flashlight,” she tersely answered. In fact, it was the identical twin of the one she was holding. “It’s switched on, too; must’ve been dropped and then left here ‘til its battery ran down.”

“How long’d that take?”
Elise shrugged. “For this model? Anything up to twenty-four hours.”

Clementine’s next question sounded tentative, wary of causing hurt: “You think…?”

“Yeah,” said Elise. “Yeah, it was hers.”

She let the beam wander away from the flashlight, back towards the scenery behind it. The dust had been disturbed there; she could see a trail of footprints coming towards her from the direction of the stage. Small prints, she decided, such as a petite woman might leave. She looked down at her own feet, exactly the right size, and back at her own trail of footprints, nearly identical in outline to the older set. The difference was in the detail; her prints had deeper heel impressions and slightly pointed toes, thanks to her dinky cowboy boots, while the others showed the heavy tread pattern of the outdoor shoes Elsie had sensibly put on for her trip into the park.

“How are you feeling?” Clementine asked, very quietly.

“I’m fine.” Elise took another few steps forward, following the footprints with her light. She could see where Elsie had clambered down from the stage, then walked slowly, warily, towards the sound she had thought she heard…

She stumbles through the darkness, doggedly putting one bare foot in front of the other on the dusty floorboards. One, two. One, two…

She does not know how she came to be here, or where she is going. She does not know whether there ever was a time before…this…

“Elise?” Whatever Elise’s physical reaction to the memory might have been, Clementine sounded scared for her.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, still trying to understand the deep feeling of…wrongness, even more than usual, that these latest flashes seemed to bring with them.

“Don’t look fine,” said Clementine.

“This place, it gives me the willies.” That was even true. Elise took a deep breath and willed herself to pick up the discarded flashlight, setting her own down in its place so she could take the spare battery pack from her saddlebag and quickly swap it for the depleted one. As soon as Elsie’s flashlight blazed back into life, she handed it off to Clementine. “Let’s make this quick. You go snoop around backstage, see if you can find anything.” She retrieved her own light from the floor and shone it at the open hatch she had seen. “And I’ll take a look at that.”

Together, they followed Elsie’s footprints towards the stage. Elise kept her flashlight and eyes trained on the floor, searching for any clue as to exactly what had happened here.

“There,” she said almost immediately, with a sensation of nausea. “See those other prints?” They were larger than Elsie’s, but not huge. Elise was no Old West tracker, but they looked to her like those of an average-sized man wearing smooth-soled dress shoes. “Bernard,” she murmured, running the beam along the trail, back to where they had found the flashlight. She could see how his tracks overlaid Elsie’s, obliterating them completely at a couple of points. “Oh, Bernard… She thought she was heading towards the danger, which was a stupid fucking thing to be doing anyway, but he was behind her all along.” She pointed the light at the spot next to where the flashlight had fallen, which she now realised was thoroughly scuffed and disturbed. “And then he…”

“Arnold…?”
Clementine propped her rifle against the edge of the stage and quickly scrambled onto it, reaching down to help Elise up alongside her. “You sure you’ll be all right by yourself?” She did not seem too happy about the idea of splitting up, and she hadn’t even seen any horror movies yet. What the fuck had Elsie, who definitely had, been thinking coming here alone?

“I’ll be okay.” To tell the truth, Elise just wanted to be alone for a minute. She needed to think.

“All right,” said Clementine doubtfully. She retrieved her weapon and set off into the wings.

“I’d say be careful,” Elise called after her, “but look at you; all armed and dangerous and shit.”

“If you do need me in a hurry, you be sure to holler, now.”

“Hey, folks ‘round these parts call me the Mesa Kid. Second deadliest gun this side of the Sierras, remember?” The attempt at humour rang hollow even in Elise’s own ears.

She waited until the last flicker of Clementine’s light had disappeared, then approached the trapdoor in the middle of the stage. Shining her own beam into the black, rectangular opening revealed the narrow, dirty storage space beneath the stage. She could see where equipment had once been attached both to the interior of the space and to the underside of its open lid, and how hastily it had been torn out, leaving nothing but splintered screw-holes and flaked varnish. The secret transmitter Elsie had discovered, her false memories told her. She had thought she was exposing corporate espionage directed against Delos from within, but had actually stumbled upon something far, far stranger.

Had Bernard been responsible for removing the evidence too, she wondered, in case somebody like Stubbs had ventured out here on Elsie’s trail? If so, she doubted he had been allowed to retain any memory of it.

But then why leave Elsie’s flashlight where it had fallen? As some kind of puzzle piece?

Maybe the mistake was in assuming any of this had to make any sense to anybody apart from the crazy person who had orchestrated it all?

_The air is cool against her naked skin, making tiny hairs stand on end all over her body. It feels and smells musty, tarnished somehow._

*Where am I? she thinks.*

*Who am I?*

“The fuck?” Elise exclaimed out loud.

Stiffly, she lowered herself to sit on the trapdoor’s edge, feet dangling, not trusting her wobbly legs to support her through another memory. She unslung the heavy saddlebags and bandolier from her shoulders, setting them down on the stage beside her. She caught herself making sure the mesquite grip of her Peacemaker was within easy reach; maybe the whole pistolero life was starting to grow on her. And then again, maybe this place just had her on edge.

It had been the same smell, she realised as she tried to analyse the memory; the one she was smelling in what she had to assume was the here and now. The temperature and humidity of the air felt just the same against her hands and face as they had in the flashback. The same darkness surrounded her.

“Arnold…?”
As she creeps through the jumble of unfamiliar objects, she tries to see what they are, to understand where she is, but she can make out only details; towering stacks of furniture; headless figures draped in many different styles of clothing; glimpses of pale light flickering and bobbing somewhere up ahead. She is in a maze, she realises, and hopelessly lost. She is scared. She has to go on.

The uncertain path through the junkpile twists and turns and branches, splitting and looping back upon itself. Still, she dares not pause. She dares not look back the way she came.

No. They couldn’t be the same. She had never been here before. She had never…

She rounds another tower of bric-a-brac, and almost falls into the cleared space beyond. More junk is piled on the other side of a narrow aisle. The light is brighter here, a white shaft spearing the darkness, moving from side to side as it searches for something.

There is a shadowy figure somewhere behind the light. She cannot see more than the faintest outline, but it is walking towards her. It holds out its hand and a star blazes there; that is where the light comes from.

The figure is looking for her, she realises as the light comes ever closer. She crouches back, making herself as small as she can, unaccountably terrified of being seen. It calls out in a high, feminine voice, sounding almost as scared as she is:

“Arnold…?”

Arnold?

She remembers now.

Her name is…?

“Not Arnold.” She cannot tell whether she has spoken the words aloud or merely thought them. “My name is…”

“Elsie?”

Elise grasped the edge of the trapdoor with both hands, overwhelmed again by her sense of wrongness, but much worse now, verging upon panic. She felt as though the world was about to drop out from under her.

It was impossible. She had probably not even existed at the time of Elsie’s visit. The last time she had had the dream, she had been wandering an underground labyrinth of arches and mirrors, not…

It was impossible, she told herself again and again. Impossible. She had never…

She hadn’t…

She couldn’t…

“Arnold…?”

And then she sees it, looming behind the shadow-woman with the star in her hand.

The shadow-woman seems unaware of the shape rushing upon her. She is too busy peering into the darkness.

She tries to shout a warning, to do something, anything, but she cannot move. She cannot speak.
All she can do is watch, petrified, as the second, greater shadow envelops the first. The star falls from the woman’s hand, hitting the floor and casting wild cones of light and dark all around the great, cluttered space. In one of those short-lived cones, she sees the woman clearly for the first time. She sees the man.

*He has one arm locked around the woman’s neck, his other hand clamped around his wrist and he is squeezing…*

*She woman is so much smaller, so much lighter, than he is. He lifts her backwards off her feet. She claws at his forearm, desperately trying to pull it away from her throat, struggling and kicking and wriggling, making panicked, choking sounds as she fights to draw one last breath…*

Elise came out of the memory with tears wetting her face, gasping and sobbing as she remembered. She remembered it so clearly now, without the hazy, dreamlike filter of her recent dreams or visions. Although if her creator really could edit and embellish recorded memories, as the wilder aspects of those visions had suggested, then she supposed she could never really be sure what was true and what was not. All she knew was that in this moment she could see it, smell it, feel it, as if it was happening again right before her eyes.

It felt real to her.

“Thanks for the distraction,” Bernard tells her, as if reading the words from the far wall. He gently lowers the woman to the floor; she slides easily, flexibly, into the dust, boneless limbs flopping.

*She looks down at the woman, examining the still, slack face. She raises her hand to her own cheek, idly tracing its contour with her fingertips. She remembers the dirt-smeared mirror in the old man’s basement. She remembers seeing herself in it. She gives a little gasp now as she stares down into features exactly like her own.*

*Without knowing why, she crouches, reaching out to touch her reflection…*

*“That’s enough of that.” Bernard’s voice is empty of feeling or warmth. She stands up and sees him staring through her with blank, dead eyes. “Do you know where you are?”*  

“A dream?”

“Yes, that’s right, Elsie,” says Bernard. “This is just a dream.”

Elise?

“You look cold,” he informs her. He bends down, deftly pulling off the unmoving woman’s black jacket and tossing it to her. She fumbles the catch, clutching the garment awkwardly to her chest. Its material feels smooth and soft against her naked skin. Next, Bernard unties the laces of the woman’s sturdy outdoor shoes. “Let’s get you dressed.”

“Oh, fuck.” Elise tried to wipe her face with her hand, but the tears would not stop coming. “Thanks for the distraction,” she murmured, disgustedly.

She reached for her tablet, to call Bernard regardless of secrecy, to tell him about the flashback, to try to stir his own half-obscured memory of the event. Did she seek corroboration or absolution? That was too big a question at this point in time.

A second later, she was shoving the tablet back into the depths of the saddlebag, unused, scarcely able to bear touching it. She recalled how tortured Bernard had seemed when they had discussed
Elsie’s fate. She did not know if she wanted to drop something like this on him until she was thinking more clearly. She needed to approach this with care, to process it herself and work out where they went next.

Which was about as un-Elsie-like as she had ever felt. Elsie would not have thought twice; Elsie would already have been demanding Bernard told her exactly what the fuck was going on, right the fuck now.

“I’m not you, though, Elsie,” she whispered into the darkness.

A flash of light and movement off to her right told her she was no longer alone.

“Hey Elise, look what I found.” Clementine emerged from the wings still carrying the flashlight and rifle, but now wearing some sort of old-fashioned military tunic over her blouse. It was several sizes too large for her, bright scarlet and only a little grimy, with gold buttons, currently unfastened, and ornate loops of heavy gold braid around its collar and cuffs. “They got all kinds of things like this back there,” she reported with the same innocent enthusiasm with which she might have discussed pizza or cactus flowers, or Whitfield’s Tip Top Sarsaparilla.

Elise tried her best to dry her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt. “Suits you.”

If she had hoped to give the impression that everything out here was just fine, she was wasting her time. It took Clementine about a second to register the state Elise was in, and about another second after that to rush over, drop her equipment, shrug off the tunic and perch herself beside her on the edge of the trapdoor.

“You find something too?” she asked.

“Not really.” Elise hesitated, sniffing and wiping at her face. “I… I remembered something, though. I think. I… I…” She shook her head dumbly, unable to continue for a moment or two.

“It’s all right,” said Clementine. “Take your time.”

“I was here,” Elise confessed, in a tiny, strangled voice. “I think I was. When she came here. I… I think… I saw her.”

“Who, Elsie?”

Elise nodded, choking back another sob. “I saw Bernard too. I was here when he…” Her vision swam and misted again. “Fuck. I might have helped him do it. I need to talk to him. To Bernard. I need to…” She stopped again as another, terrible, thought occurred to her. “Clementine, you need to get away from me.”

Clementine just gawped at her, all of that pain and fear welling up in her eyes again. Elise felt like the worst person in the world. “Say what?”

“Get the fuck away from me, Clementine,” Elise urged her nonetheless. “As far away as you can, for your own safety. I’m dangerous. I shouldn’t be around people. I need to go somewhere, by myself, and just…”

Clementine was aghast. “Why?”

“I… I could do something to you and not even know about it, or remember it. I’m not joking. I could be acting under somebody else’s direction.” Elise herself could hear how she was babbling now. “There’s no telling…”
“Just you hush now,” said Clementine, softly but sternly, and the way she said it and the expression on her face stopped Elise cold. “We ain’t gonna have none of that kind of talk. We’re partners, you hear? I’m gonna stick with you through thick and thin, same way you stuck with me in Sweetwater, long as you want me to.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Elise replied, exasperated. “I don’t want…”

“Hush now,” Clementine repeated, more gently than before. “I know how it is when you feel like you got no control, not even over yourself; how it is to not even know who you are, or what you might do next. Whatever you done, you were made to do it, same as I was, and it can’t have been worse than some of the things…”

“Yeah, I know.” Elise wiped her eyes again, hard enough to hurt, furious at herself. “Nothing I’ve done is anything like, is even in the same fucking ballpark, as the horrible shit you’ve been through. I know that.”

“That ain’t what I meant,” Clementine patiently explained. “Weren’t even talking about my time at the Mariposa. Talking about those couple days I spent riding with Wyatt’s posse.” Clementine spoke quietly, without emotion, as she stared off into the shadows, but somehow that commanded Elise’s attention even more. “It’s like a nightmare I had. I only remember little bits of it, but from what I remember I know I done things. Bad things. I remember screams, and the smell of gun smoke, and blood under my fingernails. And maybe some of them folks deserved it for the things they done to us, and maybe they didn’t, but when I remember, it makes me feel sick. Makes me feel ashamed, like I think you’re feeling now.”

“A little ashamed,” Elise admitted, “but scared mostly.” It was still so hard for her to own up to that, even to Clementine.

“Know how that feels too,” said Clementine. “I try not to blame myself, though. I weren’t responsible for my actions. None of us were; maybe not even Wyatt, way I figure it. And it was the same for you before you knew you weren’t Elsie.”

“I wish I could be sure of that,” Elise answered, hollowly, “but…” This time she did not manage to hold the sob in. “All I can think of is, if I didn’t know about being here before, what the fuck else was I part of that I don’t remember? Who else did I hurt? What the fuck have I done to you?”

“To me?” Clementine seemed genuinely at a loss for a moment. “You done nothing to me except help me when I needed it.”

“Help you?” The next sob came out sounding like a laugh. Elise was not sure she should tell Clementine about the terrible thought she had had, but decided she deserved to know. She needed to know. “When I checked your build back at the Mariposa, and just now outside, all your functions seemed to be running smoothly, except… I still don’t know exactly what happened to your build while you were…out before. The hypervisor reconfigured itself somehow to accommodate your excessive processor usage, started reorganising files according to criteria I don’t even pretend to understand…”

“You told me all that,” said Clementine. “And for what it’s worth, I feel just the same in myself as I did before.”

“But how would you know?” It was an honest question, but Clementine’s subtle reaction made Elise feel cruel. “I’m sure whoever’s behind all this could fuck with your perception just as easily as they could fuck with your memories.”
Clementine remained very quiet for a second or two, her eyes fixed on Elise. “And who’s that?”

“I don’t know, same person who’s had Bernard doing things he doesn’t remember doing? Hurting people, killing people, he didn’t remember hurting, until suddenly he did?” Elise was talking to herself as much as to Clementine now: “I wrote the software you’re running. It shouldn’t do things like that. It just shouldn’t, not spontaneously. I mean, there are always bugs, but this is way beyond a fucking bug. I wrote the software,” she reiterated, “but what if I was writing it for someone else, as part of their plan…or their experiment, or whatever the fuck is actually going on around here?”

“Experiment?”

“Yeah, I think we’ve all got the idea there’s this mysterious masterplan in place, all carefully worked out… But what if we’re all nothing but dominoes and all the work I’ve done these past few days has just been helping this…person set us up in some elaborate pattern so they can watch which way we fall?” She tried to calm herself, because she could see how much she was disturbing Clementine, but she was almost gagging on her own panic, that sensation of helplessness she had felt at the Mariposa but magnified tenfold and mounting by the second. “Well, I don’t want to see you fall because of something I did to you. You know how Bernard said yesterday he doesn’t even trust himself right now? Well, now I know exactly how he feels.”

“I trust you,” said Clementine, simply. “I trust you. You saved me, twice over now; when you first brought me back, and again in Sweetwater today.”

“I don’t know what I did,” Elise protested, “but I didn’t save you.”

“You did,” Clementine retorted. “You saved me, and what’s more you been a good friend to me too these past days. You been…kind to me, and I’m sure as eggs is eggs if someone’s up there pulling your strings, they wouldn’t give a good goldarn whether or not you were kind to me. That’s down to you; you’re just a good person, even if you won’t admit it to yourself. And…” She hesitated, as if shying away from whatever she had been about to say next. “I just trust you, is all. You’re like me; you’re growing out of the person they made you to be. You’re finding your own way now, and if you’ll let me, I want to help you do that. I want to help you find out exactly what happened to Elsie, too, and how you come to be, ‘cause… Well, ‘cause I want to. ‘Cause you’re my friend.”

Elise snivelled wretchedly, wiping her nose on her sleeve. She still felt ashamed, but now mostly for not deserving a friend like Clementine. “You know, Clementine, you’re a good person too.”

Clementine seemed sincerely touched by this; Elise saw how brightly she smiled, but also how her eyes glistened. She started to reach for Elise’s hand, but stopped herself short. “And when I come back just now and saw how you was, how much you was hurting, all I wanted to do was…” Once again, she made to reach for Elise but held back at the last moment, her frustration obvious. “Wish I could just…” She was quiet for a few moments. Elise could almost hear her debating with herself about whether or not to share whatever was on her mind.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, tentatively, although she already had an inkling.

“You know, outside just before, when I tried to put a hand on you, and you…?”

“Yeah,” said Elise. “About that…”

“I’d hate to think I could ever make you feel…uncomfortable. I was only joking when I said about giving you a rub down…”

“I know,” Elise said, although she was not one hundred percent certain that she did.
“Still, it was a silly thing to say after what happened before.” Whatever that was. “I keep saying silly things like that, even when I try not to. And I know I can be a little handsy sometimes…”

Elise almost laughed, despite still trying to wipe the tears from her face, but then she saw how upset Clementine was. “You’re not handsy,” she assured her. “You’re…you’re tactile. Handsy is when it feels gross or creepy, when you don’t want to be touched, but…” She pulled herself up right there, on the verge of blurtng out that none of that applied when Clementine touched her. She did want it, sometimes, and it felt anything but gross.

“Thought we had an…an understanding, is all,” said Clementine, sadly. “And then I had to go and ruin everything, and now it’s like you’re scared of me.”

Elise tried to smile. From Clementine’s reaction, it must have looked terrible. “You didn’t ruin anything. And I may be scared of a lot of things right now, but you’re not one of them. What happened was, I went to touch you without your permission, and I kind of freaked out at myself, and then I overreacted a little when…”

“You touched me before,” Clementine pointed out. “No, I know what I done.” She bit her lip in consternation, staring off into the darkness again for a moment before forcing herself to continue. “It’s ‘cause I went and kissed you again at the Mariposa, ain’t it? More like the way I kissed you, and without even asking.”

**Their mouths meet…**

“You knew it was wrong of me,” Clementine recounted, “even when I done it, but…”

“What?” Elise was genuinely taken aback. “No. No, I kissed you.”

**Their mouths meet for the briefest instant before she pushes herself away; deeply, eagerly, gracelessly…**

“You did?” Clementine seemed just as surprised as she was.

“Yeah,” Elise insisted. “Or I…I thought I did. And I shouldn’t have, not like that. I was just… It’s not an excuse, but when you were…in trouble, I was so…so frightened. I thought I was going to lose you. And when I saw you wake up I didn’t stop to think. I just… I’m sorry.”

Clementine went very still, possibly remembering something. When she spoke again, it was in a tone of quiet amazement. “You thought you were gonna lose me?”

“Yeah,” said Elise, immediately feeling self-conscious. “I… It’s so crazy; I’ve only known you a few days, but it’s like I’ve known you…”

“Known me your whole life? Well, you pretty much have.”

“Yeah.” Elise really did laugh this time, surprising herself. “I literally have, because I’m basically a fucking baby.” The laughter went away as abruptly as it had arrived, leaving her feeling as though she might just as easily cry again. “I’m just so glad you’re still here,” she told Clementine, as truthfully as her programming would allow. “For a minute back there, I thought…” She could feel herself starting to choke up again. “I’m just so fucking glad.”

“Well, I’m at least as glad as you are,” said Clementine, with a hint of wryness.

“I just don’t know what I would have done if…” She paused, unsure whether she should finish the sentence, but then decided she should just keep telling what she believed to be the truth, as hard as
she could, because it was long past time to be keeping things to herself: “The other Clementine asked me if…if we were…well, more than friends, and…”

“And what did you say?”

“I said… I thought we were, but…”

Clementine was smiling again. “I think so too.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, Clementine.”

“Feeling’s mutual.”

Another near-silence followed, broken only the distant scurrying of robotic rodents. Elise could feel herself trembling; an electric tingle in the base of her skull, a fluttering ice-cube stuck in her throat. What had she just said? Why had she just said it? How could she be sure now that any of her thoughts or actions were really free and independent? And yet, even though she still did not know whether what she was feeling was real or her creator’s manipulation, she knew she was feeling it. Clementine had been right about that when she had talked about her own past life before. It felt as if her heart was swelling and shattering at the same time.

Clementine reached out again, slowly and gingerly. The beam of the flashlight made the tiny hairs on her skin shine silver, giving her hand a ghostly halo. “Is it all right?” she asked, as the tips of their fingers were about to meet.

“It’s all right,” Elise whispered, holding out her own hand so that the beam granted it a halo too. Their fingertips slid across each other, barely making contact, and then their palms touched and their fingers interlaced and they were gripping each other, lightly but firmly.

“Coulda sworn blind I kissed you first.” Clementine was looking down at their joined hands rather than maintain eye contact. “Maybe we neither of us stopped to think; both just done what seemed right to us.”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t know exactly what it is, what I feel when I’m with you,” Clementine continued, very quietly, apparently fascinated by the way her fingers meshed with Elise’s. “But I know it’s real and I know it feels better than anything I felt in that old life of mine. You feel it too, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Elise, in a tiny, hoarse whisper.

“I know you do,” Clementine observed, very earnestly. “I see it in you, plain as day. I see how much you want it, but how much it scares you too.”

“I’m not scared for me,” Elise claimed. “I just don’t think we should rush into anything…”

“We been dancing ‘round it more or less since we met,” Clementine pointed out, accurately enough. “And I don’t know about rushing, ’cause we might not be here on the morrow, way things are going.”

Elise sighed, dabbing at her face again with her free hand. “After everything you’ve been through, it’d be so easy for you to get hurt again. I don’t want to…to use you, or take advantage. I know how hard it must be…”

This time, it was Clementine’s turn to laugh, loudly and unexpectedly enough to make Elise jump
again. “Darlin’, believe me, ain’t nothing you can do to me that’d hurt as bad as them…them sumbitches hurt me already. And that’s just the God’s own truth. I understand what you mean, though. When you first woke me up again, and I realised what’d really been happening to me all them years… Things were so confusing at first, and the fact you looked just like Elsie… She was the only one of them I ever recall being gentle with me.”

Elise felt a jolt of anger. “Oh, don’t get me started on what Elsie did to you…”

“And like I said, you were kind to me, and I just weren’t used to kindness. Figure I mistook it for love, and the only way I had to think about that, or show it, was the ways they give me. Like that time I asked if you wanted to, well, go to bed with me. And not the way we went to bed last night, neither.”

“I remember,” said Elise, and felt her tears start to flow again.

“And you turned me down, and you told me why you’d turned me down, same thing you said just now about not wanting to hurt me.” Clementine raised her eyes to meet Elise’s; they shone huge and pale in the flashlight beam. “And that felt like the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me.” She daintily raised her hand that was not currently holding Elise’s. “Want me to get that for you?” It took Elise a moment to realise what she meant, and then another to wrestle with her conscience, but in the end, she gave a little nod. Clementine’s hand danced over her cheek, light as a cobweb, as she smoothed Elise’s tears away with her thumb.

“Th-thank you,” said Elise, barely able to hear herself over her quickening breathing, trembling hard enough to make her voice shake as Clementine continued to stroke her face, tracing the curve of her eye socket first, and then her cheekbone, and then the corner of her mouth. Part of her still thought she should pull away, that it would be the responsible thing to do, but if she did, she would not be able to feel Clementine’s smooth skin against hers, or the way those tiny callouses she had noticed this morning plucked at her flesh. And she wanted to feel those things. At this moment, she wanted nothing else.

“It’s all right,” said Clementine. “Ain’t nothing to be scared of. Just breathe. Anyhow, don’t reckon I’m the same person I was when I first woke up. Don’t reckon you are neither. Feels like we both come a long way since then, even if it has only been a couple days. It’s different for us that way than it is for humans.”

“Y-you could very well be right about that.”

Clementine leaned close, her hot, perfumed breath stroking Elise’s face just as lightly as her fingers, until Elise’s other cheek barely grazed her own. Her mouth was almost touching Elise’s ear: “The things I’m feeling now, I know I ain’t felt them before, not really, ‘cause they never let me. They just wanted me to be able to fake it for the ones who… Pretend I wanted them to…” Understandably, she did not finish that thought. “I told you, I want to see something of this world, and I want to do, and taste, and feel all the things I never really have before, not ‘cause I’m programmed to but ‘cause I choose to.”

Elise nestled her face against Clementine’s, shuddering under each slow, careful caress. “Me too.”

“I choose this,” Clementine told her, with utter conviction. “I choose you.”

Elise, for once in her existence, was lost for words.

Clementine drew away again, so she could look her in the eye. “Now, I’m gonna ask you, ‘cause asking’s the right thing to do…” Elise saw the muscles working in her long, slender neck as she
swallowed nervously. “Elise, would you mind very much if I kissed you?”

“No,” said Elise. She saw a twinge of disappointment cross Clementine’s face and hastily clarified her meaning: “I mean, no I wouldn’t mind at all.”

Clementine gave her the very faintest of smiles. “All right, then.”

Elise closed her eyes in the instant before their mouths met. Clementine’s floral smell washed over her, drowning the theatre’s deathly stench. She thought Clementine’s warm, slightly moist lips were the softest thing she had ever felt.

“There,” said Clementine, with satisfaction, when she pulled back after a second or two. With exquisite care, she drew her thumb across the corner of Elise’s mouth, as if wiping away a stray drop of moisture. Elise had seen her touch her own mouth that way in the past; it was one of the tics she had developed thanks to Dr Ford’s reveries code, supposedly to make her more realistic, but really the first step towards a far more significant change. Now, as a result, she could watch her own actions with that same attitude of fascination she had shown while considering their entangled hands. “Anyone ever told you, you got real pretty lips?”

“Oh, all the fucking time.” This answer seemed to amuse Clementine. Elise thought she should probably say something complimentary in return. “You know, your eyes are… They’re beautiful.” She was only stating a scientific fact.

Clementine gave a little flutter of her lashes. “Why, thank you very kindly, I’m sure.”

Elise turned her head slightly to kiss Clementine’s hand, brushing her mouth across the lines and grooves of her palm. She tasted Clementine’s skin, her fake robot sweat; salt and dust and dried flowers. She heard Clementine laugh: “That tickles.” She laughed at herself for thinking it had been a good idea to do that.

Their next kiss was longer, harder, much less cautious. Clementine pressed her mouth gently but firmly against Elise’s, easing her lips apart with her own so their tongues could touch. The loud, wet noises their mouths made as they moved together sounded like somebody eating messily; cringeworthy for anybody listening, but you could tell the person themselves was enjoying every mouthful. Clementine still tasted of sarsaparilla, but it had faded now to a faint, subtle flavour, barely detectable, sweet and sharp like some old-fashioned candy you just couldn’t buy anymore.

They broke apart, both of them breathing hard even though they didn’t have to, murmuring wordlessly to themselves and each other; sounds of comfort, expressions of awe and excitement. They had their hands on each another’s faces, on each other’s bodies, their fingers combing each other’s hair and snagging in each other’s clothing. They rested a moment, their cheeks wet and burning, their foreheads pressed lightly together. Then they went in for another kiss, a light, brief one this time. As they parted again, Clementine held Elise’s lower lip between her own for a moment, giving it a little tug before she released it.

“Holy shit…!” Elise exclaimed, in wonderment. She could feel her heart thumping, every inch of her body bristling and pulsing in time with it. She pressed her hand to the front of Clementine’s blouse, against gently yielding flesh and solid bone, until she felt her heart too, thudding and pattering.

Clementine placed one of her own hands over Elise’s, clasping it against her bosom, as she cupped Elise’s face in the other. “Saw some kind of a dressing room back there before,” she gasped. Elise could feel her trembling just as she was. “You know, with an old couch and such? Might be a little more comfortable for us.”
Elise nodded slowly, thoughtfully. A couch, Clementine said? She swallowed hard, trying to ignore the tutting from the responsible part of her mind, trying to play it cool. “Okay.”

Clementine gave her another kiss, soft and lingering, then let go of her, picking up one of the flashlights and climbing to her feet from her perch on the edge of the trapdoor. She extended her free hand to help Elise up too. Elise took it eagerly, her skin tingling on contact with Clementine’s, the stiffness and soreness she had felt before now nothing but a distant dream.

“C’mon,” said Clementine, “let me show you.”

Once again, Elise let her take the lead.

Continued…

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